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by Philippa Susan Little

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The thesis explores the poetry (and some prose) of Plath, Sexton, Atwood and Rich in terms of the changing constructions of self-image predicated upon the female role between approx. 1950-1980. I am particularly concerned with the question of how the discourses of femininity and feminism contribute to the scope of the images of the self which are presented.

The period was chosen because it involved significant upheaval and change in terms of women's role and gender identity. The four poets' work spans this period of change and appears to some extent generally characteristic of its social, political and cultural contexts in America, Britain and Canada. (Other poets' work, for example Rukeyser, Lorde, Levertov, is included too.) The poets were not chosen to illustrate a pre-feminist vs. feminist opposition since a major concern is to explore what I see to be the symbiotic relation between femininity and feminism (as also between orthodoxy and heresy). However the thesis is organised chronologically because periodisation is important for a consideration of the poetry's social setting.

In wanting to connect the poetry with cultural and political circumstances as much as possible I have taken Edward Said's assertion of a text's position of 'being in the world', its potential as a cultural product to help reshape reality, and its value as a 'powerful weapon of both materialism and consciousness'. This is the starting point for the study which is circular and cumulative in shape, fundamentally thematic, though each chapter is a chronological exploration of the work of one specific poet, beginning with Plath and completing with Rich. A conclusion attempts to pull the strands of each together and consider the implications raised.
The thesis has four general concerns which run through its particular focus on each poet. The first involves the relations between cultural practice and ideology; the second involves the ideology of gender (through exploration of femininity and feminism); the third involves authorial ideology (through the construction of self-image in relation to femininity and feminism) while the fourth involves these concerns in terms of the overall arena of women's struggle for meaning and self-determination in cultural practice.

More specific elements of the study include collating and comparing self-images and attempting to make connections or chart changes where images such as witch, queen, handmaid, shamaness, goddess, earth mother, whore, madwoman, etc., re-occur. Usage of myth (particularly Persephone), the Gothic, and articulation of lesbian desire are also explored. The emergence of a female 'hero' self-image, in opposition to 'victim', seems to be a corollary of the impact of feminism in Rich's poetry particularly, but this tendency can be traced back through Plath. I explore the celebration of nature and the power of essentialism in the construction of heroic female images, particularly in the figure of the mother flowing with milk at the centre of 'écriture feminine'.

The concluding chapter suggests that femininity did not constitute such a repressive constraint on self-image and writing practice for women as perhaps might be supposed; and that feminism, while opening up many empowering changes for women, has raised further disturbing and unresolved questions about identity, and even helped, in some of its aspects, to create a new 'orthodoxy' in which various aspects of experience cannot easily be articulated. My example is Rich's later work where it seems to admit itself limited by its own initially liberating strategies and looks further on towards new 'heresies'.
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(Erratum: There is no page number 43.)
INTRODUCTION: Woman-as-sign: Making sense of the self

This is a study of four women poets whose work and life experiences span the early 1950s to the early 1980s. The study focuses upon their constructions of the female self-image within social, political, historical and literary contexts. I am particularly interested in how the discourses of femininity and feminism contribute to the scope of these images of the self.

Very broadly, I began seeing the poetry of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton in the fifties and early sixties produced as a result of trying to create subversive self-images within a conservative, pre-feminist discourse. The ensuing alienation and frustrations, perceived as 'madness', I imagined as emerging from such an unsympathetic context.

The images of the self which Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich create, in contrast, seemed supported by the feminist discourses of the seventies, and were consequently far less judgemental of the 'subversive' female self. Not mad or bad women, they emerged eventually as self-styled female heroes, voices calling for individual transformations and collective change.

This will sound familiar, since it has become a 'post-feminist' cliche. I am aware now that much of this scenario is myth, created as much by the needs of eighties feminist researchers to divide the past from the present and future. So although I have organised the study chronologically, I am no longer sure that the progress I originally had in mind - the reactionary 1950s leading on to the liberation of the sixties and seventies - can ever be so simplified. I work chronologically because I feel periodisation is important.

For all the gains feminism achieved and continues to achieve, feminist discourse has raised pressing and unresolvable questions for
women poets of this decade. It is fair to say, too, that feminism has raised new constraints upon what can and cannot be said, even as it has helped to do away with older silences and inhibitions. Exploring these questions forms a substantial part of this study.

A central contention here is that femininity (whose characteristic decade is the 1950s) and feminism (whose most influential decade is the 1970s) have a symbiotic relationship. It is one reminiscent of that between heresy and orthodoxy:

A heretic...is not an atheist; rather he [sic] maintains a profound and often fruitful link with the orthodoxy that defines his terms.(1)

Therefore I attempt to draw out the threads of 'feminism', in its period-specific differences, from the fifties and before, while exploring what I see to be elements of classic 'femininity' in the feminist work of Atwood and Rich.

Having said this I want to describe something of the shape of this study. In wanting to connect the poetry with cultural and political circumstances as much as possible, I have taken Edward Said’s assertion of a text's position of 'being in the world', its potential as a cultural product to reshape reality, and its value as a 'powerful weapon of both materialism and consciousness'.(2) Yet the 'fictiveness' of language cannot be over-emphasised, particularly when examining imaginative writing such as poetry - I hope this contradiction will prove a fruitful starting-point for the study which is circular and cumulative in shape, fundamentally thematic, though each chapter is an exploration of the work of one particular poet, beginning with Plath and completing with Rich. (I have also looked at a variety of other poets' work, both male and female.)

The study has four major concerns. The first involves the relations between cultural practice and ideology; the second involves the ideology of gender (through exploration of femininity and feminism); the third
involves authorial ideology (the construction of self-image in relation to femininity and feminism); while the fourth involves these concerns in studying the whole arena of women's struggle for meaning and self-determination in cultural practice.

In the two sections which follow, I first set out the theoretical frameworks I have used and secondly block in the social and literary background to the period, including a review of the main themes I shall concentrate upon in examining the poetry.

1. The Relationship between Cultural Practice and Ideology: Althusser

The period 1950-1980 has been one of significant upheaval in social and cultural attitudes. In poetry, also, there has been a move away from the traditional and the formal to freer forms more concerned with social and psychological subjects. In this study I am most concerned with change in the textual ways women perceive themselves and are perceived, and the relationships between these perceptions. Poetry has been one medium for the articulation and exploration of such change: this has become evident in the previous decade's publishing boom which has pushed 'women's writing' into the literary mainstream.

At a basic level, however, a study of poetry makes possible the connections between social preoccupations of the period, and the pressing individual concerns of the poets themselves. If poetry is shaped by its many contexts, it may also help shape the perceptions of its time.

Yet the relation between a poem and its time and society is not a simple one; poetry cannot be a simple, direct 'reflection' of external events. Neither can it be read as the straightforward testimony of the individual poet. All writing exists as a series of complex interventions within the ideological. Poetry as a form of writing is particularly complex: poet and poem occupy ideological positions consciously and
unconsciously negotiated. Such positions connect with others in a continuous production and reproduction of meaning, rather like the interlocking, fragile structures of a web. Each interstice sparkles, brilliant with potentialities where history, gender, class, race and culture meet. The DNA of this endlessly intricate structure is the concept of writing's ideological dynamic.

In this study I adhere to Althusser's theory of ideology as the site of production of meaning; an area of process in constant conflict between sustaining hegemonic discourse and creating alternative, rebellious discourses. This sense of volatility and dynamism seems particularly relevant when studying writing by women. It is useful here in studying self-image, if the women poets explored have a psychological sense of themselves as belonging to an oppressed or at least marginal group, while also occupying recognised social positions within society as a whole.

I want here to outline Althusser's argument in order to make clear the theoretical underpinning of this thesis. Althusser's belief is that ideology remains 'relatively autonomous' in relation to the economic base of society. His theory distinguishes between what he calls the Repressive State Apparatus, which survives through force (the army, police, government for example), and a plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses, which are predominantly educational, religious, familial, cultural (literature, the arts, sports), which survive through ideology, 'an imaginary relation to real relations'.

Though writing, therefore, becomes a contributing factor in reproducing the social status quo, Althusser gives it, insofar as it operates ideologically, the following elements which I find useful bases for discussion in this study. First, as an ISA, writing becomes the site of struggle. Althusser concentrates on struggle between classes, but I would add gender struggle also. This struggle exists because the extent of control is less here than in the RSAs: the exploited can use these channels to articulate their dissatisfactions.
Secondly Althusser sees ideology as structured like the unconscious, in that it has no history, but is transhistorical. This is another element of potential subversiveness when applied to writing. In its resemblance to the unconscious ideology then becomes a potentially fruitful dynamic in writing, opening up exploration of its fractures, contradictions, slips and silences, its endless interplaying through past, present and future.

But thirdly and most importantly is Althusser's concept of how ideology interpellates the subject in contradictory ways. This contradiction forms the basis for my study of subjectivity's production of self-image. Althusser indicates how ideology constructs the subject as a free agent, an individual responsible for his actions and socially autonomous, while at the same time the very meaning of the 'subject' indicates one who is subjected, submitting to the powers of State. It is the ideological level which camouflages this position from the subject herself, and yet the underlying conflict of this powerful/powerless dichotomy resonates through the work of the poets I have studied.

Althusser's theory gives importance to ideology without detaching it entirely from its material context. It connects the ideological with writing in ways which emphasise writing as the site of struggle, of ongoing attempts at creation of new meaning, but always within a framework of real relations. This fits well my reading of work which includes subversion and acquiescence negotiated from within certain 'given' circumstances of gender, class, race, life experience and occupation.

2. Ideology and Gender

The mechanism by which the subject recognises herself within the social formation appears particularly relevant to this study of what constitutes the 'personal' in poetry (or 'confessional') where the subject and its images of the self become focus for scrutiny by both writer and reader. As Cora Kaplan points out, 'the problem of woman-as-sign has made
the self-definition of women a resonant issue within feminism', (4) but even before contemporary feminism poets such as Plath were looking for definitions of self, in relation to self and to others, as a central preoccupation, focus of a dissatisfaction with the status quo and a desire for change.

The idea of a contradictory and contradicting subjectivity is relevant particularly in the context of my study of identity as gendered subject, 'woman poet', and the positioning of this identity within the discourse of the Romantic subject-artist. It is an important element of this thesis that I look at women poets' responses to Romantic dualism and the ways in which they negotiate traditional oppositions such as nature/culture. Althusser's version of the split subject, like Lacan's, opens up interesting new ground and has contributed to critiques of Romantic subjectivity's quest for wholeness and transcendence (see particularly C. Belsey's *Critical Practice*, London, Methuen, 1980). I am particularly interested in the ways that a consciousness of gender influences response to traditional dualisms, and what impact contemporary feminism has made upon these Romantic discourses.

Althusser's theory, then, is appropriate to this study for two main reasons. It puts forward the importance of the ideological without negating or ignoring the material or social relation as context. (Here I would disagree with the political implications of discourse theory which parts company with Althusser over the question of the existence of any discernible prior reality.) Secondly, Althusser's theory stresses the dynamism of cultural practice and its ability to change, transform itself and its own context. As Michele Barrett puts it, ideology constitutes in this sense:

> the processes by which meaning is produced, challenged, reproduced, transformed...Cultural production provides an important site for the construction of ideological processes. (5)

It is this sense of process which seems particularly useful when studying poetry by women, self-conscious of themselves as gendered
subjects, whose positions vis-a-vis gender, class, history, myth, literature and the basic construction of subjectivity itself, seem most 'fixed' and inescapable but are always shifting, elusive and transformative:

Women still have a problematic place in both social and psychic representation. The problem of women-as-sign...has also determined the restless inability of feminism to settle for humanist definitions of the subject, or for materialism's relegation of the problem to determination of class only.(6)

Though Rich's and Atwood's poetry articulates this dilemma most directly within the terms of feminist discourse, this is what is faced by all female poets in this study who must confront 'at the coal face' the implications of their intimate encounter with the 'problem' of the female self and experience of themselves as 'sign' or 'symbol'. It seems to me that this 'problem' self can be approached fruitfully by looking at the two apparently polar oppositions of femininity and feminism.

Post-Althusserians have, as I have noted, criticised Althusser's Marxist theory of the 'relative autonomy' between economic base and ideological superstructure, arguing that the profession of objectivity, of being able to stand 'beyond' ideology in order to confront it, is false. Discourse theory dislikes what it sees as this static concept of ideology which 'fixes' meaning and its oppositions; and prefers to prioritise, instead, discourses as the prime sites in the production of meaning, claiming that the 'real' can never be known prior to its complex representation in discourse.

I agree with Michele Barrett's criticism of discourse theory as ahistorical, cutting away connection with social conditions. The example she gives, that of female stereotypes which can be said to pre-exist discourse to some extent in that they are instantly recognisable,(7) leads to my own feelings that the poetry I study here can be situated
obviously in prevailing social contexts such as the atmospheres surrounding issues such as Vietnam, the civil rights campaigns, etc..

But in this study I take up Kate Belsey's response to discourse theory in her *Critical Practice*, which does not reject its anti-epistemological position entirely, but concedes that knowledge and meaning are discursively produced. By exploring contradictory discourses (and contradictory elements within discourses) flaws, illusions, compensations can be discovered. In other words, while denying the ultimate implications of meaninglessness, the comparison of different discourses, not as images of reality but as metaphors of consciousness, can open up a series of potential new connections and perceptions, none more privileged or objective than any other.

This is my aim when I explore the discourses of femininity and feminism. I am concerned to concentrate on their psychoanalytical, historical and cultural articulations, in order to examine how they combine and contradict in the construction of subjectivity. (I am also aware of how these discourses can be structured in terms of class, and the implications upon expressions of self-image in the poetry.)

I want here to outline the major points which will shape my analysis of these discourses in the following study. First, we find the tension between feminism and femininity which Cora Kaplan traces back to the eighteenth-century debates of Rousseau and Wollstonecraft, and which she believes still operate in contemporary writing by women.

Femininity in its specifics changes over time, of course, but its general elements involve various acceptances of the dominant discourse. For example, submission to powerful (masculine) authority; adherence to sexual divisions of labour and the public and private division of spheres based upon gender; emphasis upon the family and upon its ethos of individualism, rather than on social or political roles; acceptance of heterosexuality, monogamy, maternity as the parameters of the female experience. In essence, femininity constitutes the experience of the self.
as 'being for others', with the resulting mix of narcissistic self-love and self-loathing.

In one sense the more genteel elements of femininity act as the social policing and self-policing of all women. Rousseau's belief was not unique (but it was influential) that women's unbridled 'natural' sensuality required strict control.

And Anne Foreman (8) sets the emergence of 'modern' femininity in historical context when she notes that the rise of capitalism forced women out of the workplace hitherto shared with men: the emergence of the division between workplace and home as separate, unequal areas, brought with it the need for a 'difference' - 'femininity versus masculinity' which could justify enforced middle-class female leisure. This difference emphasised feminine sensitivity, delicacy, affinity with 'nature' rather than industry, and became the dominant paradigm for all women of all classes. Such a paradigm exists, still, as part of our inherited tradition of experiencing closed, defined, sealed-down sexual difference. The experienced pressure to conform remains as potent as ever even for those such as Rich who are most critical of sexual tradition.

But femininity is not a monolithic discourse; it has progressive as well as reactionary components. We cannot deny its abiding appeal to women. 'Femininity' is not just appealing: it acts as a means of surviving; creating a meaningful identity in a culture based on difference. In the 1950s, as the discourse which epitomised the private power of domesticity, and celebrated security both nationally and domestically, it engaged elements of the progressive ground in what was, overall, a conservative decade, while feminism has had an ambivalent response to tradition, a defensive reaction rather than assertion of new terms, reacting to masculine-oriented paradigms rather than reconstructing terms of reference.

As Mothers and More (9) makes clear, it would be simplistic to reject femininity with the hindsight of the post feminist 80s. In a decade when
the feminism of the pre-war and war period had been discredited (when women still did male jobs, got dirty, were still paid less) femininity seemed infused with the eroticism of emphasising 'difference'. It was far better not to want to be like a man and rather to celebrate the 'essential' qualities of being the 'opposite sex'. In doing this, many women gained positions of (relative) influence and obtained self-esteem. There was, also, a critique of masculine values in an increasingly militarised and technological society. Being feminine meant not subscribing to these values: it was considered 'neurotic' for women to strive for the male sphere when so much could be accomplished, discreetly, in the feminine.

In a sense the feminism of the 1970s and 80s has gone full circle, starting out to denounce femininity and to embrace the 'masculine' in the female as a righting of the balance and a bid for social equality. But more recently there has been a renewed interest in, and desire for, the realms of the feminine, and the feminist movement, radical and cultural feminisms in particular, has tended to reacknowledge elements of feminine discourse: specifically maternalism and the feminine associations with nature.

This must in part be a response to the new wave of conservatism which has emerged in the late 1970s with the New Right in the USA and Thatcherism in Britain. But I also feel that elements of feminism have slipped into the traps of a 1950s type of essentialism because they have not theorised the role of ideology adequately, accepting too unquestioningly the ready-made discourses of deep seated gender 'difference' which makes sexual identity strictly an either/or choice, rather than a possible multitude of subject-positions never completely socially definable.

Though used in the 50s, and subsequently, by the hegemony to keep women in their place, psychoanalytic theory has in its alternative forms been invaluable for the feminist project of exploring how gender is constructed, and looking at the impact of femininity upon subjectivity. I

It is too simplistic to see women as simply 'victims' of men and of masculinity. Freud is valuable because his work allows the exploration of female 'collusion' at unconscious levels; and how satisfying on those levels feminine roles can in fact become, though on other levels of experience they are problematic or damaging.

Freudian theory has also contributed to the huge original achievement of contemporary feminism, namely the idea that masculine and feminine are not biologically innate, but socially and discursively produced. Psychoanalysis becomes useful as part of the attempt to locate sexuality and gender identity in the mental representations of social reality.

I intend to use such a theory of sexual needs, in terms of a process in which the unconscious has a large part to play. As Adrienne Rich writes, 'poems are like dreams: in them you put what you don't know you know' (10), or Anne Sexton: 'The doctors tell me that I understand something in a poem that I haven't integrated into my life...The poetry is often more advanced, in terms of my unconscious'. (11)

Freud's theory of femininity schematises the development of women as a process of repressions and lack in terms of phallocentrism and the overall patriarchal structure. The Oedipus complex is more problematic for the girl than the boy, the girl having to lose the mother as original love-object for ever and turn, mysteriously, to the father, while the boy simply transfers his mother-image to his first love-object at a far later date. Though Freud's work 'slips' back to culturally-validated male-active, female-passive dichotomies at times, his theories do 'give us the beginnings of an explanation of the inferiorized and "alternative"(second sex) psychology of women under patriarchy;' (12) this becomes particularly relevant when we come to look at the poetry of Anne Sexton, whose work shows many of the strains of attempting to come to terms with femininity and internalising these damaging ideas of feminine weakness and 'neuroticism' as a means of constructing a self.
Freud's theories are open to various fruitful interpretations. Laura Mulvey argues that the Oedipal complex offers potentialities for rebellion and transformation, simply because it is so problematic, so unresolved and uncompleted: 'there's some way in which women aren't colonised', having been 'so specifically excluded from culture and language'(13). An example of this could come from Anne Sexton's poetry where it speaks of love for the maternal body; through a series of silences, semi-breached taboos, and omissions, this unsanctioned, potentially devastating incestuous desire re-emerges.

Julia Kristeva and Helene Cixous' work on femininity throws light upon contemporary women's writing, notably Atwood and Rich. Cixous develops the theory of 'feminine writing' which celebrates the maternal body as a fount of creativity, source of 'a new, insurgent writing' in which femininity becomes redefined in positive terms. I see this 'woman-centred' theory of creativity and writing, centred within the physical, material body but embracing a new, subversive female spirit, as very illuminating when exploring Atwood and Rich, partly because of the seemingly inescapable essentialism which such a vision includes (and its effects upon the ranges of self-image open within such a vision).

Julia Kristeva’s position has been, on the other hand, originally, a disbelief in the whole principle of 'femaleness' or 'the feminine' - which she sees as being a phallocentric construct in the first place, always defining women as marginal. Rather she has seen 'women' in terms of several groups in struggle against a centralised power structure: as dissident intellectuals, avant-garde writers, or the working-class.

As Toril Moi writes, Kristeva's belief in 'femininity' as a patriarchal construct, defined as lack, negativity and absence, 'allows us to view this repression of the feminine in terms of positionality rather than of essences',(14) which implies possible process and change, rather than fixed meaning: to 'speak as a woman' would become pointless, since 'woman as such does not exist' - 'I favour an understanding of femininity that would have as many "feminines" as there are women'.(15)
There are, however, important social determinants which construct 'femininity', historically determined, and there can be no feminist or women's movement, no consciousness of gender-oppression, without taking these into account. Kristeva's position is similar to that of discourse theory in which there can be no prior 'reality'. Cixous and Kristeva's theories of the feminine represent the parameters of the debate with which this study is dealing.

On one hand there is the celebration of the feminine in terms of its maternal, biological creativity. This is a direction taken up by some women poets: it is initially appealing, and seems strengthening, but its essentialism contains hidden drawbacks and contradictions. Yet Kristeva's position, itself a step forward out of essentialism, means a denial of 'the feminine' as a starting-point of consciousness of oppression, a starting-point for an important sense of identity as a gendered subject. The spectrum of these views forms the span of this study's underlying preoccupation: what are the implications for self-image when gender is emphasised exclusively, or when it is underplayed or ignored? Feminism, as Cora Kaplan writes, has been shaped by Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication* of 1791, a response to Rousseau's attack on voracious female sensuality. As a sub-culture Feminism has emerged and disappeared continuously (being erased at times so thoroughly by the hegemony that as Dale Spender remarks, each time until recently 'lost' knowledges have had to be struggled for anew). Its relationship with femininity has been an apparent rejection of most of its instances. Feminism's many and complex strands of thought are based on varying social critiques of patriarchy and capitalism. Whether liberal or revolutionary, feminism demands an end to the public/private separation of gendered spheres which would mean women's active and autonomous roles and their liberated sexuality.

But feminism's concerns, like femininity's, cohere around the area of sexuality, specifically female sexuality, and in doing so, prioritise it. Cora Kaplan points out that Wollstonecraft's acceptance of Rousseau's premise that women are sex, even while refuting it, has set a prevailing trend. Feminism has emerged in part to challenge the traditional
argument that men can have both sex and the world, the private and the public, while women are seen to choose either/or, with a corresponding loss. As we have seen, women's movements and organisations have tended to choose either to emulate what is ideologically perceived to be masculine, through equal rights opportunities campaigns, or to celebrate the feminine, the apparently alternative sphere, elevating feminine values and aspirations. This is the 'choice' still operating for women who are seeking answers to their social and sexual identities and one which contemporary feminism has not freed them from having to make.

It is evident when reading Plath's poetry, fiction and non-fiction, how costly this 'choice' was; in constructing a series of self-images, none of which was compatible, the factor of 'choice' becomes ironically illusory. I am chiefly interested here in Plath's work where it celebrates the sexual and maternal self, the home-maker and centre of the family (a socially sanctioned image which pre-dates Cixous' myth of the powerful mother, yet resembles it). This figure jars with other self-images Plath's work explores, such as the intellectual, the rationalist, the lesbian academic, the woman poet.

Like Plath's, Sexton's embrace of the sexual as the predominant female sphere emerges in her writing, and contemporary feminists may well discover there a warning against the limitations this places on other potentialities. Sexton's position is usually that of carrier of the many contradictory myths of female sexuality, in relation to the more powerful, less problematic (therefore more 'normal' and monolithic) masculine other. The price of remaining within the family appears high in terms of self-esteem and autonomy, but Sexton's personae obviously need the family to feed other needs, for security and continuity.

Certainly in Atwood and Rich's poetry, where a distrust of the masculine emerges very strongly as part of the feminist discourse, there is a definitely perceivable movement of 'escape' from the nuclear family, specifically from the role of the sexual, maternal 'heart' of it, as part of a new appraisal of the destructiveness of masculine desire.
Both Atwood and Rich's deliberate 'choice' of identification with the female (which I see as having similarities to the feminine) stem from the radical feminism of the 1970s which prioritised sexuality as the prime factor in patriarchal oppression. A woman's sexuality, within patriarchy, makes her inescapably vulnerable: the project becomes to redefine female sexuality in ways which strengthen women and weaken the oppressive status quo. A celebration of specific female virtues and values, a celebration in effect of the old idea of the separate sphere (now called lesbian separatism) emerges, as part of the overall rejection of traditional familial and heterosexual roles.

An initial impetus of radical feminism, that the categories of masculinity and femininity themselves were socially constructed, and that 'the oppression of women is based on this 'corrupt notion of maleness vs. femaleness and its attendant institutions' (16) gave way to the cultural feminist celebration of an innate, subversive, female spirit.

Though Atwood does not call herself any particular kind of feminist, her poetry takes up arguments and preoccupations of the feminist movement and is female-identified. Rich on the other hand is a leading feminist and has been bound up, as a lesbian, with the emergence of cultural feminism in the 1970s in the USA. Though one shies from a political stance and one makes clear her political and sexual orientation, both attempt in their poetry to create powerful, mythic images of womanhood which break away from the nuclear family.

Both Atwood and Rich seem to want to repudiate, in their constructions of self image, the 'feminine mystique' aura which adheres to those poets of the 1950s for whom home and family were central things. Yet in their retrenchment of gender complexities, they seem to be harking back (albeit from quite a different direction) to the similar masculine and feminine social-sexual divisions. Their celebration of 'female spirit' seems to have something in common with 50s femininity, including all the attendant contradictions. In one sense I feel that this feminist approach has not created underlying change, simply used different terms for the same things.
What has changed is the sense in which, over these three decades, life has become less 'personal': the self has the idea that her own life has social significance, that wider connections can be made beyond the purely personal. This is a radical shift (in the 50s Rukeyser's left politics gave her this viewpoint; it was not specially as a result of her consciousness of her gender).

The self feels more part of a tide of ongoing change, rather than a freak, since politics has extended to gender, and there is less a discourse of self-blame and guilt for women to be susceptible to. The project of self transformation, which in Plath's poetry is such a lonely and painful one, is justified and even celebrated as an important and necessary struggle in Rich's work. In Atwood's, too, there is far less a feeling of how 'selfish' such a project might be - the impetus is that the female self must struggle with its changes in order simply to survive (if haunted by ghosts of such as Plath and Sexton). The feminist project is one of change - through sexuality, through new awareness of social reality, through consciousness - and it is strongly self justifying. The central idea is to 'find oneself'. In the increasingly conservative atmosphere of the eighties, this can sometimes assume individualistic and problematic undertones as the gap between personal awakening and a coherent programme for political and social change widens perceptibly. In this respect I want to explore how those like Rich and Atwood, whose self images reject conventional family roles, manage to cope with the potential vacuum of having reached a new freedom, a new consciousness of self potentiality (untrammeled by family ties) yet without knowing where this leads personally or politically. Leading perhaps to a poetry which has become, paradoxically, static but enriched in this search for change and difference.
3. Authorial Ideology

Authorial ideology, or self image, is of course the main theme of this study. Feminism has indeed constructed images of power for women, which some women poets have taken up, in an attempt to move away from familiar images of women as passive victims. On one level, this has obviously been a step forward, but there appear to be negative as well as positive implications. Rather than articulate the painful and perhaps difficult and frustrating elements of the self, poets desire to put forward a strong, whole, decisive self-image, and this can mean less self-questioning, self-conscious texts, rather than complex, interrogative work. I am thinking here of the contrast between Sexton’s poetry and Rich’s (though this contrast is over-emphasised here and over-simplifies their work). Sexton articulates something of taboo and repressed elements of the self (specifically in her unfeminist expression of a masochistic desire) and Rich deliberately attempts to create/reconstruct a new feminist self, whose fantasies are ideologically correct.

First of all, I want to define as far as possible what I understand by the self. It is more fruitful to speak of the subject which is not the separate, individual, isolated entity implied by self, but is rather part of a process (as Kristeva believes) both social and grammatical between others and other parts of the sentence, a dynamic process between the conscious and unconscious, the material and the psychological. The subject then becomes the ‘space’ where this process takes place, where memory and rationality, the unconscious and emotion, constantly make and re-make the experience of what it is to be ‘I’. (Atwood’s assertion, that the self is the place where experiences intersect, echoes this.)
The concept of the self seems to eradicate possible senses of difference, implying a consensus based on a community of moral, rational, active individuals. This concept immediately closes the circle upon any 'outsiders' who might not fit this concept - the insane, the irrational, marginalised figures. Though this seems to romanticise these 'outsiders' it is worth noting that other groups cut with such a consensus include women, the working-class, the disabled, the ethnic minorities.

As Cora Kaplan has shown, this sense of the autonomous, individual 'I' at the centre of discourse has had far-reaching implications for women and for women writers, because the Romantic poets are good examples of how the 'overlapping Enlightenment and Romantic discourses', emphasising the division between the rational and irrational, still exert great influence today on how we understand the 'psychic economy' of women. The 'irrational' in masculine subjectivity could be put to good use; in producing great art, as artistically-justified aberrations from the 'norm' of the masculine self. For women the irrational and imaginative were 'drenched in an overpowering and subordinating sexuality' (CEp.158). Thus for the female self, her 'otherness', her association with the forces of nature and unreason, became reasons for her exclusion from that historical myth of the (male) active, rational individual.

The response of some feminist critics has been to attempt the integration of the female into this concept of selfhood, to have the female "I" construct itself as a powerful, central, controlling entity, but within a female, rather than a male, tradition.

Other critics have questioned the basic construction of the self as it has been portrayed in the early modern period, using the work of Freud, Lacan and others to assert that the subject is far more complex than the damaging historical myth proposes, that it is this ideological concept of the individual which sustains capitalism and oppression.

Althusser argues that ideology constitutes the individual as independent and autonomous, 'author of and responsible for its actions'.
but he sees the individual as being at the same time subjected, one who submits to authority:

the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the subject, ie, in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection. (18)

Linguistic theories post-Saussure emphasise the importance of language as the basis of subjectivity. It is only through language that the speaker can constitute herself as the subject, the 'I' of her speech. Lacan has developed these implications into a theory of the decentred individual consciousness, 'so that it can no longer be seen as the origin of meaning, knowledge and action' (19)

Instead Lacan charts the pre-linguistic state as one where there is no sense of identity, no feeling of being distinct from what is other. It is only with the mirror-phase, where the child recognises itself in its reflection, and identifies with 'an imaginary, unitary, autonomous self', that the child becomes a full subject. This happens together with the entry into language. She must enter into the symbolic order, the supreme example of which is language, or become silent and 'sick'.

So the self is a learned series of subject-positions, which may be inconsistent with each other, and her subjectivity is discursively and linguistically constructed and displaced across a range of discourses, (20), which echoes Kristeva's point on the positionality of femininity.

What concerns me here is the question, given the previous definition of the subject, of how the four poets' work manage to resolve (or not) the range of contradictory subject-positions experienced? In what way do their poems construct notions of subjectivity through language, notably the discourses of gender? What of the notion of creativity as 'women poets'? What about feminism's creation of further contradictory subject-positions?
Women have been assigned contradictory positions within oppositions which arise as a result of the concept of the rational (male) self. The one which interests me is that of the nature-versus-culture duality, which has contributed to difficulties in the construction of self-image in the poetry of this study.

Ludmilla Jordanova has charted the historical dimensions of the nature/culture, female/male distinctions. During the Enlightenment (when ideas still held today were being formed), women were identified with 'nature' in what might seem incompatible ways.

Firstly, as 'nature' meant wilderness, that which had not 'literally or metaphorically been penetrated', unmediated and dangerous, this corresponded to women's dangerous and uncontrollable passions. (Women's writing has taken on this theme of nature as penetrated/unpenetrated by the male.)

Secondly, though, 'nature' was that part of the world which could be revealed and understood through the exploration of 'natural' laws, could be studied (in the rise of gynaecology as a 'science' and male interventions in midwifery). In this way the 'dangerous potential' of the female could be contained. As Jordanova writes,

\[\text{Nature, culture and gender in the history of our own society were and are concepts which express the desire for clarity in areas of life which appear constantly subject to change. (21)}\]

Thus the construction of sexuality has been to set up 'apparently universal categories... (implying)... the profound similarities of all women, and to a lesser extent, of all men', as a means of social control, and in ways similar to that of the ideological interpellation of the autonomous, rational, active individual.

It is an achievement of feminist scholarship that in works such as *Nature, Culture, Gender*, (eds.) Marilyn Strathern and Carol MacCormack,
Cambridge University Press, 1980, such 'obvious' oppositions are being questioned in their historical and anthropological contexts. I have brought this nature/culture opposition up at this point because it is an important one for all the poets in this study, and is a good example of the creation of the contradictory subject-positions, within contradictory discourses, which their work must negotiate. The troubling situation of the woman poet - who feels uneasy with social or literary pressure to align herself with 'nature' and the 'irrational', yet who feels that the alternative, rationality, the intellect and culture as it is constructed in opposition, becomes inappropriate or limiting because of her experience of her own gender - is exemplified in Plath's work where concepts of what the poet, the woman, and the self, constitute, all clash with each other. Atwood's response is to embrace the irrational as definitively female, and to celebrate it in positive terms, critical of masculine rationality.

Equally, Atwood's concept of the subject looks back to pre-patriarchal, pre-linguistic states of being, rooted in nature, which contradict her desire to be active and dissenting in the 'real' world of consciousness. Her sense of self becomes fragmented and elusive, on the margins of both nature and culture, at home in neither. Both Atwood's and Rich's work shows the problems for women writing from within a Romantic tradition which elevates 'female' nature and is based on contradicting dichotomies which, moreover, continually shift terms. It is hard for the over-defined 'other' to assume the central unequivocal position of poet 'I'.

Rich's poetry is aware of these pitfalls, being highly critical of such tradition, but her response (the vision of a new, powerful, almost utopian female community) sometimes involves sacrificing the complexities of contradiction in its urgent desire for change and progress. Like Atwood, she too wishes to renegotiate the nature/culture opposition to create more positive female images and self-images. And like Plath, Rich tends to discredit rationality as 'sterile and masculine'. Where Plath's poetry tended to fear the unconscious as the
entry-place of madness, however, Rich sees it as a route towards her dream of the new, feminist 'sanity'.

I want to repeat here that I am concerned with the particular material and psychological conditions experienced by women as poets (going back to Edward Said's sense of the text as 'being in the world'). Virginia Woolf in A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas and Tillie Olsen in Silences have charted such conditions - economic, familial, emotional - which have helped shape consciousness of the self and the possibilities for the self to construct itself in self-images which, though bound by the social framework, can also imagine changes to it. For women, being the scrutinised sex, 'woman-as-sign', experienced as both the revealed and saleable commodity and the unknown territory, the self is the starting-point; construction of a sense of self is at once the problem and the solution.

4. Women's Struggle for Meaning in Cultural Practice

Up to this point I have paid very little attention to the fact that this is a study of a particular literary form. I want to lay out the concept of language this study follows in its exploration of literary subjectivity.

If subjectivity lies in the exercise of language, then poetry as a form which depends upon an intense and specific kind of language-use, which is at once rarefied and yet instantly recognisable, precise and exact in meaning and yet utilising the unconscious, dream, memory, imagination, is far from being simply a transparent medium for the creative mind. It is the form of language itself which provides a rich process of exploration.

The post-Saussurean theory of language is that language constitutes a series of signs which do not pre-exist in an ideal state within the mind before expression, but operate as a way of articulating experience in discourses, myth and other ideological forms (though language cannot be
reduced to ideology or vice versa, as Belsey argues, p.42) which are constantly changeable and related to changes in the social formation. Language is then never unmediated, never simply the unique creation of the individual mind, but a process of social construction, even at its most 'private' and elusive, as in poetry. Although, as Lacan argues, language speaks the subject, this doesn't mean that the individual becomes the passive victim of linguistic determinism. Rather, to return to Althusser and his exploration of ideology, language resembles ideology in its dynamism, its productivity, and its potentiality for challenge, for meaning which is always being renegotiated.

This is the approach to language, and to poetic language, that I find most fruitful. The poets whose work I study tend to see language in terms of expressive realism, seeing art as mimetic and expressive, a reflection of life. In keeping with the Romantic concept of 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', as experienced by Wordsworth, their poetry becomes the unique insights of an individual in the grip of the emotional. Atwood's concept of language owes much to Northrop Frye, whose Neoplatonism sees literature as primarily formal, a realm of 'autonomous culture', transcending ideology (in its narrowest sense) and history. Thought happens independently of language: 'discourse is a secondary order which merely "imitates" the world of ideas'. (22)

I find this rather constraining as an approach, but it is fascinating to follow in the work of Plath, for example, where the distinction is made between 'out there', the world of real objects, and 'in here', within the mind, and where the realm of language becomes the inadequate and disturbing channel between the two. Meaning, under these conditions, is always elusive and contradictory. What particularly interests me is the uneasiness experienced in Plath's poetry between the inner sense of the self and the self seen by others. This uneasiness stems partly from this conception of language. Plath's poetry articulates the experience of the decentred subject experiencing it not as a legitimate response but as a source of weakness or madness. This must happen when language is seen as something apart.
Lacan's theory of the subject emphasises how its contradictions stem from the entry into language and the necessary split between the 'I' of discourse, the subject of the énoncé, and the 'I' who speaks, the subject of the enunciation. So there is an immediate contradiction between the conscious self, appearing in its own discourse, and the self which speaks, the self which is only partly represented there. It is into this gap the unconscious is constructed, formed by the division between self and self. (23)

John Goode elaborates on this in his 'Woman and the Literary Text', (24) when he considers the complex and contradictory subject-positions which make up a text; the sequence of relations with ideology; and the unfixity of the subject occupying several different positions such as object, subject and narrator.

I am also interested in Kristeva's theory of the semiotic in language, in opposition to Lacan's symbolic order, which she (provisionally) makes gendered. If the symbolic order is then language as patriarchal, the semiotic is maternal, disruptive, pre-verbal language: the poetic dimension which has access to the unconscious. Then there is Cixous' similar vision of maternal, bodily-inscribed 'feminine' writing. How important has it been, or might it be, for women writers to distinguish a 'female' language in opposition to the dominant discourse perceived as masculine? This has been an important question taken up by much feminist literary criticism. Is it possible, as Atwood and Rich believe, for there to be a female voice, a 'feminine specificity'? (Rich plus Atwood say yes!)

David Brooke in 'Meanjin', has written how he as an editor has revised his opinion of women's writing submitted in the light of Kristeva's works on semiotics. Whereas before he had found women's writing 'inferior' because less linear, less polished than male writing, he now values the very jaggedness and contradictions which once repelled him, as evidence of a type of writing, and a use of language, which seems specific to female experience.
Though on one hand the concept of a female language, or even the potentiality of one, seems attractive, (a way forward from theories of women's lack, their inability to speak in a phallocentric world, their desires being barred in the face of demand), one must ask what are the implications of asserting a gender-specific language? Surely it must be based upon an essentialism which denies the complexities and fragmentation of female existence through class, culture, race and historical context (as Dale Spender's *Man Made Language* does). Spender's feminist critique of language also posited language as a completed system, the result of origins, the tool of patriarchs, which denies language its process and productivity, and hands it over to the 'enemy'. Moreover, as their rightful possession, 'the oppressor's language'.

Surely this risks female silence and marginalisation; but to create a sense of an alternative female language necessitates a defining of gender, a narrowing or closing down of differences and complexities, a rejection of language as a process.

Margaret Homans sees Emily Dickinson's particular poetic achievement in terms of language and its implications for subjectivity as a potential way forward for female poetic identity. She argues that Dickinson's complex, ungendered 'I'/self manages to straddle many dualisms and oppositions, being neither the traditional Romantic poet-centre of consciousness, nor the 'other'/muse, neither absolutely female nor male, but bringing the play of language itself into the foreground as the structure by which (always mysterious) subjectivity emerges.

This is a fascinating and convincing argument, but I feel that as a yardstick for other women poets in the middle to late twentieth century gender must remain at least a starting-point, given the awareness and importance it has assumed. But we need a sense of gender which is seen as being part of an endless system of difference, of ongoing negotiation, rather than one based on fixed, biologically-determined assumptions.
Finally I want to make clear that the theoretical methodology of this
study is an uneasy combination of two approaches to literary criticism. Toril Moi distinguishes them clearly when she outlines the
Anglo/American differences from the French in her Sexual/Textual
Politics. Crudely put, the Anglo/American approach, because of its more
straightforward attitudes as to what a work of literature constitutes,
lays emphasis upon the political and social intervention of such a work:
'the book that can change your life', for example. The French tradition,
working from psychoanalytic and linguistic theory, is more convoluted in
its approach, more concerned with the text and its layers of meaning
than with establishing relations between it and the world.

This thesis is an effort to explore elements of the first approach in
the poetry studied, using the methods of the second. But like femininity
and feminism they do not separate neatly. For example I see writing by
women in terms of Showalter's concept of 'female sub-culture' (25); this
thesis follows her idea when it explores particular interconnecting
threads of common images, concerns, metaphors and themes which are
recognisably shared as 'female'. This is attractive, too, for its sense of
struggle and subversion, conscious or not, against the ramifications of
the dominant discourse. But I do not accept Showalter's connection
between women's writing and an autonomous, fully-developed female
culture, which seems to romanticise an essentialist sense of women's
experience, and to argue for separatist fixities of gender roles.

And while this thesis could be said to adopt her 'gynocriticism' as
its basic approach (the study of women as writers; the 'psychodynamics
of creativity') I shy away from its biographical implications that the
work and the life may be seen as synonymous and from its emphasis on
women-only structures: I think it might be more useful if seen in terms
of gender relations, in terms of social relationships as a whole. This is
why I have tried to explore attitudes towards masculinity here, also
(rather than male attitudes towards women's writing which are already
well-known and have been widely researched by such as Kate Millett).
After all neither femininity nor feminism exist in a vacuum; they are in
relation to masculinity and all its implications.

- 26 -
I disagree with Showalter's anti-male theory and I am suspicious of feminist attempts to create an 'alternative' literary canon of great female writers - 'a new tradition' as Juhasz paradoxically calls it. I think it is only through exploring the structures of language, subjectivity, ideology - and the issues of class, gender, culture inherent in them - that we can become aware of how we intervene in cultural practice as gendered readers, writers and subjects ourselves.
INTRODUCTION: Footnotes


CHAPTER ONE: SYLVIA PLATH

Section 1

This chapter sets out to explore Sylvia Plath's writing, notably her poetry and Journal, from the early 1950s up to her death in 1963. The chapter divides into three chronological, yet overlapping, sections covering the changing ways Plath's writing negotiates often contradictory definitions of femininity.

The first section deals with Plath's earliest work, including Juvenilia, and explores its articulation of deep dislike for contemporary femininity. The poems and Journal entries show a desire to possess and enjoy freedoms—particularly, that of creative autonomy—deemed 'masculine' by both self and society. Throughout the early 1950s the Journal provides us with Plath's acute insight into the sexual double standards upon which masculinity and femininity were predicated. Plath's work is torn between conforming to its own rigid gender divisions, stressing their exclusivity, and the subversive desire to assume the positive elements of both. It is a desire continually thwarted. "Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is impossible for me to be...the universal woman-and-man."(1)

Furthermore Plath's writing sets up an opposition between two extreme ideological representations of women's life-choices in the 1950s: the academic, intellectual, unsexed spinster v. the fecund Venus. Early poems experiment with variations on the female role, such as the adolescent, tomboyish acrobat in the pre-1956 'Aerialist' (CP, Juvenilia, p. 331); yet these quickly give way to a celebration of the Venus model of femininity which was the current ideal. Reading the early poems and particularly the Journal, one has a strong sense of a self-conscious attempt to construct an identity, almost as an artificial process. It could be described as
being an Oedipal-like struggle in reverse: Plath gives up her desire for masculinity; she gives up attempts to integrate the 'masculine' into her socially-perceived self as a young woman. Finally she 'chooses' between what appears to be left to her - the spinster persona or the Venus. The choice made is socially validated, yet Plath's work remains fascinated by those 'outsiders' to the dominant sexual ideology (her focus being spinsters and lesbians).

In the second part of the chapter I explore Plath's writing as it constructs a mythic Great Love between the Venus-self and the Dark Man, through the mid-1950s. Once again this Dark Man embodies idealized contemporary characteristics - he is the 'angry young man' dressed in black, the DH Lawrence hero, the Byronic poet, the anti-hero Heathcliff. The myth celebrates sexual maturity, yet seems predominantly based on literary sources and I see it as an attempt to position the feminine self in a strong (if vicarious) position within the Romantic literary discourse.

Plath's myth of masculinity has changed less, since the Juvenilia, than her constructions of femininity; the key to the Dark Man remains that of power. The feminine Venus self is both muse and handmaid to his role of creator. The particular construction of this 'Great Love' evokes resonant Lawrentian echoes: deeply divided by class and gender, the boundaries between self and other can seem fluid only through transcendent sexual passion. The self can also, according to Plath's myth, appropriate the other's dangerous and forbidden creative power through this sexual merging. In some ways this 'Great Love' seems to heal the disappointment and exclusion felt by Plath's adult experience of her femininity. In others it raises new areas of self-dislike; the Venus-self also experiences guilt and shame as a 'strumpet', even a prostitute.

Questions of agency and passivity become complex; the Dark Man has himself been created by the writing, and could be said
therefore to be the passive embodiment of aspects of the 'forbidden' self, a fantasy alter-ego. (The mythic masculine is made even more potent by its reshaping through the 'real' relationship between Plath and Hughes, who eerily embodies the preceding fantasy – raising the question of who really is the creator of whom? It certainly emphasises the power of literature to shape lived experience!)

The third section looks at Plath's later poetry from 1959 to 1963 and charts growing disillusion with the Dark Man and the increasingly predatory masculinity he signifies. Plath's last work begins to create woman-centred space (often frighteningly empty and barren, yet evoking an important shift in perspective) and angry, autonomous female figures for whom the male is increasingly marginal. There seem to be a number of reasons for this shifting away from an ideal masculinity. The general social atmosphere of the time, with its anxieties over nuclear war, environmental pollution, etc., contributed to a new criticism of masculine-inspired ideologies. For Plath profound change seems to occur through the new psychological and emotional experience of pregnancy, for with Plath's own pregnancy in 1959 her poetry creates a female myth of nature, with the female body as metaphor for growth and development of many complex, interweaving selves – both motherly and embryonic. The self is no longer muse or handmaid but muse/mother to her own growth. It remains a contradiction that within this autonomous, inturned self reside many aggressive drives dubbed 'masculine'; by Plath, which, however, remain unresolved.

To concentrate on the Dark Man so much in this study of women poets may seem a blind alley. But I feel that an understanding of the masculine in Plath's writing is crucial to an interpretation of her own texts' creation of feminine self-image. The Dark Man – the typical and abiding masculine figure throughout Plath's writing, from father to husband - is, as I have said, in some sense a displacement of Plath's own inadmissible 'masculinity'. On another level the Dark Man tells us a great deal about one particular kind
of male identity prevalent in the 1950s: the black-leather-clad Brando, a figure of great power and allure whose sexuality, voracious and destructive as it is, is seen as being unproblematic, 'natural'.

Both Sylvia Plath's work and Anne Sexton's construct similar charismatic masculine figures throughout the 1950s, figures who are rooted into the nuclear family through the role of the father, or father/lover. Femininity is always seen in the context of this powerful other: its meaning is sustained only through the constant deferring to its opposite. (The myth of 'great love', in Plath's writing, is constructed as a union of giants - though the male is still the bigger giant!)

An interesting contradiction emerges in Plath's and Sexton's work where this unequal masculine/feminine opposition is embraced even while it is being rather more coolly evaluated.

I have hated men because I felt them physically necessary: hated them because they would degrade me by their attitude: women shouldn't think, shouldn't be unfaithful (but their husbands may be). (2)

Of course, this evokes the familiar sense of sustaining ideological 'norms' which belie one's own private, rational feelings, and negotiating the tightrope between desires and reason. Yet the effort involved, for Plath, Sexton and countless others, seems to suggest that the effect was a profound de-centring of any stable sense of 'self'.

- 33 -
I look at Plath's *Journals* in relation to her poetry because I find this de-centring of subjectivity emerges vividly when the two kinds of writing are compared. The *Journal* entries of 1953-1959 articulate both celebration and cynicism in equal measure to the poetry of the period; yet the 'private' entries puzzle and argue, often with great acuity, over the contradictions of gender while the poems (often preoccupied with the same questions) tend to attempt to resolve and contain any ambiguity through the poetics of form.

This struggle for resolution and closure is fascinating as much for its failures as for its partial successes; what emerges, when the *Journals* and poetry are read together, is that for Plath's earliest work (1953-1958 at least) poetry constituted a public act, an attempt at shaping and reshaping experience through literary discourse, desiring to 'dominate' that material through literary expertise. (A practice which Plath may have felt emerged from more 'masculine' elements in the self.) This approach to poetry appears to change in the later 1950s: though form is still important it is no longer the strict metrical straitjacket of early 50s literary fashion. Instead Plath explores more apparently 'female' methods of writing (drawing, as I have said, on experiences specific to female biology), looser, more associative, and turning to less traditional literary sources such as surrealism, psychoanalysis, and ethnic folktales. I don't think it is going too far to note that in this way Plath's work looks forward to the 'women's writing' explored by Helene Cixous and Julia Kristeva.

Plath's work retreats from the thrall of masculinity most notably in the key year of 1959, chiefly with 'Poem For A Birthday'. (CE p.131) From this time until her death Plath's work attempted to answer questions on female identity which were at least proto-feminist (infused with the echoes of early anger from
her adolescent *Journal* entries). Plath's work becomes sharply critical of the personal and global destructiveness of what it saw as being masculine values (while staying aware of the self's own private 'masculine' elements). It posited an opposing, subversive maternal life-force which has formed an important influence on those writing later, informed by the organised women's movement, such as Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood. In turning from validating the masculine, Plath's poetry marks a discernible change in direction in poetry written by women, a change which comes to fruition in the 1970s and 1980s. Social forces, including feminism, have influenced women poets now to construct masculine values (those articulated by the power elites who happen to be mainly male) as the problem rather than the ideal. Male figures are virtually absent in Rich's poetry, except where they signify the focus of female disillusion or overt threat. This rejection of a particular construction of masculinity (and its significance and implications for women's writing) forms a central preoccupation of this thesis. Its origins, its first angry signs, become discernible in Plath's poetry.

In conclusion I want to point towards a separate development in Plath's work which I discuss in the chapter, a possible 'way out' from the impossible dilemma of masculinity vs. femininity as constructed here. Plath's work always expressed interest in what it described as the 'unsexed' or 'quasi-masculine' identities assumed by women who chose not to conform to the strict social rules - the 'bogey', the spinsters, lesbians, virgins. Her work shows a continuing fascination with these alternatives to the crippling 'normal' gender roles. While she was at Cambridge in 1956 a conflict of direction emerges in Plath's *Journals* over celebration of the D. H. Lawrence mode of erotic, heterosexual desire and the Woolfian mode of fluid gender boundaries (based on Plath's reading of Woolf's novel *Orlando* with its androgynous heroine/hero). (3) The Lawrence model gains ascendence, but in the 1960s this earlier interest in Woolf's blurring, and confounding of, gender identities, re-emerges in Plath's poetry. In one sense this can be
traced back even earlier to the male/female acrobats of poems in the Juvenilia, and picks up those early echoes of an ideal of ungendered sexuality - the liberation of the 'super-people' for whom femininity and masculinity in their coercive aspects are meaningless.

Critics such as Robin Morgan and Elizabeth Hardwick have tended to concentrate on Plath's angry, avenging female figures, and this kind of focus contributed to the atmosphere (in contemporary terms, completely valid) of anger and recrimination against men and masculinity which emerged with the WLM. Plath's poems, published posthumously, seemed to 'fit' the times so well (as did the publicity regarding her marriage and manner of death) that they have been read 'slant' for some years. But I feel that this now rather cliched figure, of victim or disturbed woman poet badly-used by men, is not useful: what seems far more important to me involves the dilemma Plath's writing faced throughout the 1950s and early 1960s - that of asserting a powerful 'feminine' identity, with all its problems vis-a-vis creativity and self-image, or that of creating a socially unratified, utopian androgyny (probably to be dubbed 'crazy') which raises, again, all kinds of problems to do with creative identity. This dilemma forms the keynote for this study as a whole. Given that the construction of identity becomes paramount, becomes an urgent, self-conscious process, there then arises the question, what do you create as a self-image when you turn away from either the feminine or the masculine? This question is a central one to all the poetry discussed here.
Section 2

The 'Two Sisters of Persephone' (CP p.31), the venus and the virgin, from Plath's 1956 poem of the same name, haunt Plath's poetry and Journals throughout the 1950s. (1) Both are exaggerations of female stereotypes: the somnolent (and unintellectual) bearer of kings, and the clever, but ugly and unloved, spinster, exist in painful antagonism. (2) It seems that one cannot be both figures, yet each is incomplete without the other. To make a choice - to become, to see oneself, as either virgin or venus - means forsaking important elements of the self. This bleak viewpoint, I feel, is the result of Plath's unresolved struggle with gender identity throughout the 1950s.

The fifties were Plath's formative years, spanning adolescence and young adulthood. Certain key life-events occurred; completion of academic study, a teaching career undertaken, then the decision to become a writer and poet full-time. Plath married during these years and gave birth to her first child. The period also includes the well-publicised breakdown and suicide attempt during the early 50s, and Plath's angry rejection of femininity as claustrophobic and trivialising. Her Journals express desire, if not merely for masculinity itself, then also for its freedoms and advantages. In what is partly adolescent bravado (but sets, too, a keynote for much of her later writing) Plath rails against the sexual double standard, experienced so painfully and personally.

Yet by the end of the decade Plath's work seems to have accepted some of the dominant assumptions of femininity; there is, in place of crisis, a tone of calm, and an attempt to assume an acceptable feminine identity. Her Journals and poems celebrate romantic love and a self-image as a desirable 'princess'. And still, however, underlying doubts can be discovered, anxiety that the relationship does not authenticate the self, but merely enmeshes it
in further deceptions. The 'two sisters' duality shows a marked narrowing-down of self-image. Gone are the more adventurous pluralities of acrobats, wanderers, lion-tamers - the performers who in their androgyny appeared as rebellious alternatives to femininity. (CP Juvenilia p.299-339.)

A clue to this process lies in the 1956 poem 'Crystal Gazer' (CP p.54) where Plath's feeling that women, particularly, who want too much are usually punished and left with nothing. This fatalism emerges again in 'Three Women', 1962 (QP p.186), when the new mother says of her baby: 'I do not will him to be exceptional. (It is the exception that interests the devil.)' Therefore to accept one's lot seems to remain the only response. By the end of the 1950s Plath's work appears to embrace some of femininity's most traditional elements. The self-image she constructs is unintellectual, submissive 'helpmeet' to a male counterpart: a role whose sexual elements have tended to erase other aspects of self. In many ways this submergence into conventional 'venus' seems to have constituted a relief: a ready-made and accredited identity allowed Plath breathing-space and a sense of self-worth which could not be ignored or underestimated.

Yet close reading of Plath's poems and Journal (spanning the artistic, potentially 'public', and the unpolished, private discourses) reveals that the original resentment of, and unease with, femininity remains. In 'The Times are Tidy' (1958, CP p.107) the poet expresses dissatisfaction with the mundanities of everyday domestic life:

The last crone got burnt up
More than eight decades back
With the love-hot herb, the talking cat,
But the children are better for it,
The cow milks cream an inch thick.
There seems to be a sense of failure, of loss of direction and purpose in poems of this period - 'Unlucky the hero born/In this province of the stuck record' - a sense that the self cannot explore as she would like. Plath evokes maternal or quasi-maternal images disturbingly; in 'I Want, I Want' (1958, CP p.106) the 'baby god', crying out for the breast, sees only that 'The dry volcanoes cracked and spit', and 'Sand abraded the milkless lip': images of frustration and sterility. Plath's writing tries to contain the contradictory elements of feminine ideology but cannot quite do so: the fairytale, or women's magazine-conception of the young girl-self going out dancing, the silvery princess'(4) contrasts with the claustrophobic

stink of women: Lysol, cologne, rose water and glycerine, cocoa butter on the nipples so they won't crack, lipstick red ... (5)

This entry refers to her mother and grandmother, and is interestingly aggressive and hostile in tone. The two sisters of Persephone are obviously also daughters; and the mother/Demeter presence is an important one. She is a powerful, punishing mother-figure, a goddess, a witch, a hag, crone, Medusa, godmother (all female figures drawn upon by Plath). In some ways this mother-figure can be seen as being the specific character of Aurelia Plath, characterised by the daughter in exaggerated terms (ultra-feminine, sentimental, self-sacrificing to the point of oppressiveness). In others Plath works on mythic levels where mother and self become interchangeable. It seems feasible that the Demeter/Persephone myth is evoked by Plath to explore feelings of loss and betrayal. The powerful mother certainly comes to hold both life-giving and life-denying force, powers viewed by the daughter with extreme ambivalence.

Aurelia Plath writes of the 'psychic osmosis' (Intro to Letters p.32) she felt she shared with her daughter. Plath wrote elsewhere
of the claustrophobic pressure to live in her mother's image or be perceived as 'nothing'. It is clear that much of Plath's rebellion against a particular type of femininity was focused on her mother and her 'heartwarming', feminine personality (Letters). The underside to such sweetness was Plath's sense of her mother as a 'vampire...draining the ego' (L Dec 27 1958 p.279). In the 'two sisters' poem (one of many written on the mother/daughter relationship in the Juvenilia and early 50s) one can sense the spinster cursed by Demeter's disapproval (and punished) while the venus bride is equally cursed through following the mother's directives. (Such intensity placed upon the mother and daughter relationship can be seen in the context of the 1950s ideal of togetherness and maternal bonding advocated by John Bowlby etc.)

Plath's Journal is quite unequivocal at the beginning of the 1950s. Conscious that masculine and feminine worlds are separate, she makes it clear what she'd rather be:

To be a woman is my awful tragedy ... to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity ... my consuming desire is to mingle with road-crews ... I want to be able to sleep in an open field, to travel west, to walk freely at night. (6)

The strength of feeling emerges in the language used: 'awful tragedy', 'inescapable', femininity, contrasts with the vision of the complete freedom of the 'hobo' (a typically masculine dream and one espoused by the 'beats' later in the same decade). As I've said, Plath's poems of this time experiment with tomboyish self-images; the 'daring and debonair' aerialist of 'Circus in Three Rings' (CP, Juvenilia, p.321), the lion-tamer, circus performer, and the acrobat, agile and androgynous, perhaps an early manifestation of the self flying into 'the red eye of morning' with such ferocity in 'Ariel' (CP 1962, p.239).
Tomboyish these self-images may be, and a far cry from either sister of Persephone in that they are trying out their powers, rather than accepting identities already formulated. But at the same time there are elements of constraint, which stop these hoydenish figures from 'travelling west' too far.

First, they are performers, confined by the ring (a symbolic vaginal or womb image? the rings or nooses of the poem 'Rabbit Catcher' are certainly linked with female organs). Secondly, there is usually a powerful masculine presence somewhere in these poems (the ring-master, the miner's boy, the sorcerer, the Demon Lover, the 'demon of doom'), who is always watching. The self is continually observed, the object of a predatory desire. (This dark male watcher prefigures Plath's exploration, later, of the dark hero-lover).

It is interesting that, even here in the tomboyish poems, Plath depicts the female self as a kind of absence or vacuum (even when ostensibly the girl acrobat is the central focus, the active core), made real, good or whole only through the elusive masculine gaze. (The opposite can happen: the female is obliterated by male inattention or hostility). It is as if there can be no strong or alluring enough feminine self-image without this male intervention. Plath's poetry, as well as her journals, compares femininity unfavourably with the 'norm' - masculinity. This is, for Plath, synonymous with the 'active process of creativity' - with freedom of 'thought, action, feeling'. Though trying to write of a young female subject, Plath's work 'de-centres' that self by fracturing it, marginalising it (impossible not to do this when one emphasises the creative force as gendered masculine).

The creative gaze then becomes quasi-male; Plath's Journals worry about her abnormal 'masculine' traits:

I am part man and I notice women's breasts
and thighs with the calculation of a man
choosing a mistress ... but that is the artist ... for I am more a woman; even as I long for full breasts and a beautiful body, so do I abhor the sensuousness which they bring ...(7)

Three conflicting strains of thought are evident here. The first is that the gaze is masculine, and that this seeing is the root of the creative process: to gaze is to have, to control. The second is that Plath 'longs' for the conventional feminine Venus-like body, the object of the gaze. The third is that the 'sensuousness' of the Venus disgusts her, for in a reflexive leap it seems Plath wants the power of the gaze, even while she feels (and desires) to be its object.

The gaze, and power inherent in seeing, is treated as a 'masculine' force in another poem 'Crystal Gazer' 1956 (CP p.54) Gerd, the focal consciousness of the poem, is a clairvoyant who 'had craved/To govern more sight than given to a woman/By wits alone'. For overstepping the mark, becoming quasi-male in her appropriating increasing powers of sight and knowledge, Gerd is punished. (This theme emerges, as analogous with writing, again and again in Plath's work. Another early poem admonishes 'Never know more than you should'. 'Admonitions', CP, Juv. p.319) Yet Gerd's ambitions are conventional, too. Besides desiring a serious, important role in life, she also wants sexual happiness. Punished for wanting too much, 'a flash like doomcrack rent night's black', Gerd has her heart turned to stone by an unnamed but emphatically patriarchal power. From young woman Gerd becomes 'spindle-shanked', a grim warning to others and another version of the wry spinster/virgin.
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As this poem shows, Plath's work at this time seems preoccupied with threats to women testing the boundaries and exploring their potential. Yet there equally emerges resentment and anxiety about assuming the expected 'normality' of feminine behaviour: 'If I am going to be a woman, fine. But I want to experience my femininity to the utmost'(8), she writes in her Journal, almost as if this is a second-best accepted very much under coercion.

So in one sense there is a relief in letting go the obligations and burdens of feminine identity here in the imaginative world of Plath's poems, contrasting with the assumption of young womanhood in her life. Gerd is 'worn down to the knucklebones', not an inch of sensuous flesh left on her. Similarly in 'Spinster' (1956 CP p.49) the young woman walking with her 'latest suitor' suddenly feels the whole burgeoning sensuality of love, spring and surrounding nature to be overwhelmingly repulsive:

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

This repulsion becomes a familiar element in Plath's poetry, evincing itself in desire for distance and dispassion, for the 'clean' and the pure.

So Plath's writing does, I feel, show an identification with the figures of the virgin and the spinster, wholly at odds with the idealised Venus-like epitome of 1950s sexual and social fulfilment. It is an identification which is continually repressed, while curiosity and dislike for the Venus emerge, and Plath's work grapples with these contradictory and disturbing responses.
It is interesting that Plath seems drawn to the 'spinster' figure, characterised in the 1950s by typically academic women whose work was a vocation rather than an interest, and who had no conventional nuclear family to complicate their allegiances. Elizabeth Wilson remarks that women such as these were thought of as being either 'eunuchs or lesbians' in popular 1950s belief. (9)

Certainly Plath's writing returns to the subject of lesbianism, both tacitly and explicitly, throughout this decade. She is fascinated by the 'strong...lesbian women' at Smith (I Nov 7, 1959, p.327), particularly May Swenson; 'freckled, in herself, a tough little nut. I imagined the situation of two lesbians: the one winning a woman with child from an apparently happy marriage' (10)

There is also, in the novel The Bell Jar (written in 1962 but dealing autobiographically with events of the 50s), a treatment of the relationship between Joan, a lesbian, and Esther in the psychiatric hospital, which again evokes a sense of uneasy attraction:

In spite of the creepy feeling...Joan fascinated me. It was like observing a Martian or a particularly warty toad. Her thoughts were not my thought...but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own. (11)

Although the dominant emotion remains one of contemptuous disgust, the novel contains an underlying element constantly subverting it. Esther asks the female doctor what 'a woman can see in a woman that she can't see in a man'. Dr. Nolan replies: 'Tenderness' (12) Compared with the cynical treatment of heterosexual relationships in this novel, this moment seems to offer another direction, a more fulfilling one - one which is quickly shut off, however, by Esther's defensive cruelty towards Joan. (Interestingly, though, Joan remains very much Esther's alter-ego, focus for Esther's self-disgust.) Even so, it is in the relationships
between women in *The Bell Jar* that a tenderness emerges which counterpoints the hostility of the male predators such as Marco. (13)

I think Plath saw the choices open as involving sexual as well as literary and career aspects. For example, becoming a professional academic and teacher could mean becoming like Mary Ellen Chase and other lesbian academics, while writing poetry and short stories, and marrying a poet, involved embracing a life of children and heterosexuality. And from early on it is clear that Plath had decided to explore her sexuality in relation to men.

Yet there is evidence that Plath may have been a little envious of the 'other life' she rejected. A *Journal* entry for Nov 7 1959, p.326 describes her sense of 'Despair. Impasse' aware that she is being swamped by her husband's forceful creativity: 'I have no life separate from his, am likely to become a mere accessory.' The end of this entry muses on the lesbian poet May Swenson; 'Independent, self-possessed M.S. Ageless. Bird-watching before breakfast. What does she find for herself? Chess games. My old admiration...The relief of limitation as a price for balance and surety...' There is a wistful envy for Swenson's independence and self-containment (and the good effects upon her creativity as a poet while Plath admits her own block - 'My poems pall'... 'His vocation of writing is so much stronger than mine'). Yet, like Esther in *The Bell Jar*, Plath must defend herself and her own choices with the condescension of the 'normal'.

Lesbianism was conspicuous by its absence in 1950s debates on sexuality; it formed a 'silence' beneath the general discussion which posed heterosexual relationships as unproblematic. Plath's poems echo a belief that many spinsters were in fact lesbians. Though her poems are sometimes pitying or mocking - poor Miss Drake in the mental hospital ('Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper' 1956 CP p.41) the girl rejecting her lover ('Spinster' 1956 CP p.49), the eccentric Ella Mason ('Ella Mason and her Eleven Cats'1956 CP p.53) - they evoke an independence and singleness of purpose seemingly impossible for women with families. (These women, also, assume greater imaginative space for themselves.)

- 46 -
But there is no feeling of community; these figures exist in isolation, set apart because of their oddness. Although I would say that Plath's work shows it is drawn to the spinster partly because of this 'echo' of lesbianism, there seems to be nowhere a sense that a lesbian (or even a more general, oppositional) identity could prove a real alternative to the dilemma raised by femininity.

Quite apart from the sexual connotations of the spinster, Plath's writing definitely equates the single woman with the intellectual elements of life, and this raises another point of tension. (The longed-for mythic domesticity of 'laundry and lilac' 1956, p.103, becomes the more mundane 'pregnant and in the kitchen' 1958 p.276, in Plath's Journals). (14)

Though Plath's earliest poems pride themselves on their intellectual qualities, and at school, then university, Plath's own orientation appears to be academic, through the 50s her writing shows an increasing anti-intellectualism. It is framed by the idea that the intellect is the province of these 'barren' women. Annette Lavers (15) has noticed Plath's refusal to accept the intellectual as a positive value, while Wendy Martin (16) points out that in The Bell Jar Plath has a ritual for defloration but significantly none for creative or intellectual achievement. These are perceptive comments: Plath's work, in the 50s, belonged to a culture finding it easier to recognise female sexual events than those of the intellect. In spite of her intensely academic family background Plath's writing turns from these areas, showing a particularly acute awareness of the destructive implications of the distinction between feminine 'norms' and the intellect. She wrote to Isis in 1956 complaining about the Cambridge male's inability to accept women as 'not merely feeling, not merely thinking, but... managing a complex, vital, interweaving of both'. (17) Yet this was something she herself found difficult to achieve.

The pressures to be both thinking and feeling were difficult to resolve: in contradiction to Plath's buoyant and defiant tone there is a flat fatalism detectable, a pessimistic sense that the terms of male and
female are immutable; 'the man, by law of kind, always wins'.(18) This is a profound acquiescence to the sexual ideology of the time. Mazzaro's contention is that Plath's poetry, in its use of Greek myth, accepts 'heroic stature': characters accept responsibility for what they have not caused.(19) This idea would certainly seem to hold true regarding Plath's opinions on women taking the blame for men.

So it is not surprising that poems such as 'Virgin in a Tree' 1958, contain an element of mockery for women who 'refuse' their feminine destiny (no matter how unfair it may be) and who, like Ovid's nymphs, transform themselves into rigid, unassailable postures in order to escape male attention. Once again here Plath evokes images of the 'lemon-tasting' sourness involved in such 'wasted' virgins. And yet Plath's contradictory relationship with both Venus and Spinster emerges to complicate the poem.

Though it sets out ostensibly to celebrate the sexually-responsive women and to mock those foolish and self-torturing virgins, there is also underlying anger at the narrow choices apparently open to women. Plath's fiercely dialectical mind raises absolute opposites. The virgins are described as being 'tied up', 'twisted' by their roles, encouraged to damage and confine themselves. The choices are to surrender to rape-like advances, or to transform themselves into self-imprisoning 'virgins'. An indication of Plath's sexual pessimism is the complete absence here of any sense of female sexual desire: responses are entirely defensive.

The women on whose side the poem seems to be, 'Eva, Cleo and Helen of Troy', though sexually attractive, all end up as disastrously as the virgins: their *femme fatale* sexuality is, ultimately, self-destructive. Once again Plath sets up oppositional female identities and both types of women, whether they accept or refuse the onslaught of male desire, end up with their own bodies as the terrain of battle.

The voracious and predatory masculine element, though articulated as distasteful, is nevertheless seen to be 'natural' and unchanging. It is
the feminine (seen in terms, primarily, of the body) and the woman's acceptance or rejection of its implications which continue to trouble, despite the apparently cool, detached and humorous surface of the poem.

Given this very dark view of women's possibilities, it is not really surprising that Plath's writing tends to accord with the contemporary dominant ideology that the truly feminine wife and mother was morally superior to, and 'happier' than, the sallow, lemony spinster; for if not lesbian then the unmarried must be celibate (and celibacy for women was considered a waste, almost a sin). After all, the promise and allure of such strongly-put-forward images offered the best hope: better to become the Venus than the implicit failure of the spinster! It is as if Plath used her early poems to persuade herself to accept the Venus stereotype, even if it is the lesser of two evils.

So, 'Two Sisters of Persephone' seems to evince distaste for the apparently worthless intellectual enterprise upon which the spinster wastes her life (and her sexuality), while celebrating the summation of the other's sexuality in her pregnant languor.

Plath's fatalism must have stemmed largely from the contemporary sense that problems with identity and gender were ultimately rooted in the personal and individual, the result of private circumstances and shortcomings rather than of social pressures. Her very acute perceptions of gender relations were constantly compressed by her concentration on the self as cause of difficulties and unresolved tensions:

The constant struggle in mature life ... is to accept the necessity of ... conflict ... One doesn't get prizes for this increasing awareness, which sometimes comes with an intensity indistinguishable from pain. (20)

This struggle and painful conflict centred on her construction of sexual (and therefore social) identity, led Plath's writing to look for
an alternative femininity - a way out from the seemingly oppressive Venus/spinster trap. Plath's escape from this dilemma focused upon a reworking of the Venus: she now became a muse, a Bohemian 'earth mother' or goddess, rejecting the intellectual for the intuitive and the instinctual, for wisdom of the occult and the tarot - yet somehow still bound up with creative power (though it is now safely in the hands of the male poet). Though unconventional as a self-image, this was not oppositional, but reinforced many of the dominant ideological elements of femininity.

I want not to end this section on a negative note. Plath's writing negotiated with, and submitted to, the dominant ideology; but it remained uneasy over the question of gender, focusing upon this sore point to produce a continuous interrogative element. In her poem, 'Ella Mason', 1956, Ella is a powerful figure who seems to hint at an early version of the goddess or earth mother, able to incorporate aspects of the spinster as well as the Venus. The cats she takes in are 'wild jades', undomesticated spirits who haunt other, conventional women's bridal nights with their dreams of independence and sexual freedom. They are outcasts with subversive powers of agility and intelligence reminiscent of the acrobats and performers of the Juvenilia, but aware now of adult sexuality, so all the more dangerous.

To return again to 'Two Sisters of Persephone', it is Persephone, the absent sister, who seems to offer an alternative to the oppressive either/or of the virgin and the venus. Like Ella Mason and her cats she evokes other, as yet unformulated female identities. Persephone could be said to be the prototype 'female hero' of later poems. (As a symbolic figure she fascinates many women poets, including Atwood, Rich and Ruth Fainlight.) Persephone straddles two worlds, belonging to neither, her own 'space' not yet discovered. Perhaps she holds, for Plath, the promise of, one day, being able to straddle both the intellectual and the feminine, assimilating them into a powerful feminine consciousness. Yet, in the 1950s, Persephone is still 'beyond' the page - a promise of the future.
Section 3: The Dark Man

By 1956 the lion-tamers and acrobats in Plath's earliest poetry are joined by another figure. The female protagonist begins to see herself as handmaid or helpmeet to a powerful, heroic dark man: the younger, paler, weaker counterpart to this literary-based amalgamation of romantic fantasy (a Heathcliff or Don Juan, Bluebeard or Mephistopheles). I believe this construction of a familiar sexual myth, in which gender difference is vividly demarcated and celebrated, makes an effort, nonetheless, to develop an alternative feminine identity. In the beginning there is the promise of embracing both sexual and creative fulfilment as complementary rather than disparate; later, the dream is modified and the self's subordination increases until she has the status of 'muse' rather than confederate.

Plath's dark man, with his exaggerated masculinity, forms a necessary context from within which a femininity can be negotiated which will test conventionality. It is through the idealised bond of hero and heroine, super 'male' and super 'female', that the poems can articulate desire for a larger, freer, more rebellious self-image than that offered by the virgin/venus. The dark man is dangerous, untried; in being with him, the self imagines she can assume something of his qualities.

In constructing such an imaginary relationship, and in speaking of her desire, Plath's strategy seems to be attempting to control the fascinating yet threatening 'otherness' of masculinity, a control constantly thwarted by the unequal power relations between masculine and feminine. (Though there is definitely a desire to assert control, there is also an acceptance of failing, a sense of
the danger in challenging a stronger adversary and a pleasure in submitting.)

The poems articulate a power struggle played out in this area of gender relations which involves constant re-negotiation of dominance and submission. Yet there is no explicit acknowledgement that the area of struggle is based on gender; the heterosexual 'great love' is posited as wholly unproblematical.

What then becomes the focus for uncertainty is not the situation itself but the construction of the feminine self-image in relation to the dark man. Plath's subjectivity is constantly in process, constantly having to redefine, remake itself, to adapt to contradictory and shifting experience, while the masculine, as ideal, remains strong, 'whole', monolithic - qualities validated by Plath above her own.

Yet to a large degree the poet is shaping the scenario: the dark man, however dangerous, is her creation (rather as Atwood creates the threatening other in *Power Politics*). Though the 'great love' is idealised (because such crucial questions of sexual, social and literary identity depend on its outcome) it holds within itself too many unresolvable contradictions to achieve the 'happy ever after'.

There is a strong sense of unease that the female self may well be overwhelmed by the all-consuming passion of the male; Plath's sense of independence and need for detachment emerges too. And in one sense at least the dark man represents her own (rejected and disturbing) masculinity. So what characterises this 'great love' is a struggle for supremacy involving sacrifice, where the two do not complement one another but each struggles with the other in an acknowledgement of 'the survival of the fittest':

The dark man of Plath's poetry, letters and *Journals* is a figure put together from some of the most seductive discourses of
masculinity. He is instantly recognisable as the hero of women's magazines, and of centuries of popular novels; literally, 'tall, dark and handsome' - also a bit of a 'cad'.

The particular influence of women's magazines on Plath's writing is clear. From 1950 (with two prizewinning stories in Seventeen and Mademoiselle) to 1959 she produced and submitted material for Harper's, Ladies Home Journal and McCall's, (while sending poems and more 'serious' fiction to the New Yorker, Christian Science Monitor and Atlantic Monthly). Gail Tuchmann's research(2) on women's magazines of the period shows that they denigrated working women on the whole and focused on women's relationships with men as primary, while Helen Franzwa's survey of LHI, Good Housekeeping and McCalls 1940-1970 in the same volume, found four roles for women portrayed: single, looking for a man; housewife/mother; spinster; or widowed/divorced hoping to remarry. The magazines aimed at younger women, such as Mademoiselle, Glamour, Cosmopolitan, emphasised the achievements of work, but only before marriage. It is not surprising that the hero becomes such a pivotal figure in the development of feminine self-image.

The dark man is a 'giant' ('The Queen's Complaint' 1956 CP p.28), an imposing figure of 'stormy eye' and 'black look' ('Conversation Among the Ruins, 1956 CP p.21), a black marauder ('Pursuit' 1956 CP p.22), a 'Bluebeard' and a 'huge Goliath' (Letters April 29 1956 p.240). Craggily handsome he has voracious sexuality:

He, hunger-stung, hard to slake...
all merit's in being meat
seasoned how he'd most approve ('Glutton', 1956, CP p.40).

Plath read a great deal of D.H. Lawrence's work at this time, and was deeply affected by it.(3) The masculinity her poems celebrate seems recognisably Lawrentian. In the 1950s Lawrence's concept of the 'great love' and his novels' emphasis on sexuality

- 53 -
as a natural force constituted a liberal, rebellious discourse—opposing the prevailing alternatives of 'pin-up and debutante', (4) for women wanting to assert their sexuality.

It is curious how life-experiences and literature combine in Plath's writing. Plath's evocation of her father resembles the mythic dark man; he is described as 'a giant of a man' in an autobiographical story (Among the Bumblebees', in Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams) and seems to form the prototype (distant, menacing, alluring, possessor of arcane knowledge) which is then developed as a fantasy 'demon-lover' and eerily merges in the depiction of Ted Hughes. In many ways the critical relationship of Plath's life seems already to have been formed imaginatively in her writing: the representations of Hughes in poems, letters and journal entries echo the previous 'dark man' as much as they develop it.

Norman Mailer argues (in Prisoner of Sex, Weidenfeld 1971) the links between masculine sexuality and death. This is certainly relevant to Plath's dark man, in his many guises which all emphasise his close, unflinching interest in death: as natural, elemental, animal, death is as present and immediate as life. At first this forms a strong part of his attraction. The female self seems freed, in this context, to express most unladylike violence of feeling:

When he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard
on the cheek... blood was running down his face.
Oh, to give myself crashing, fighting...! (I Feb 26 56 p.113)

(The excerpt comes from Plath's highly-romanticised first meeting with the 'colossal' Hughes at Cambridge.)

What is interesting is Plath's specific construction of this hero in class terms. He is attractive partly because he has alien
working-class or lower middle-class origins. (This again connects with Lawrence's heroes and also to Hughes's own image as 'wide boy' at university.) (5) The feminine self occupies a higher social position; she is the 'princess' while he is 'the miner's boy' ('The Princess and the Goblins', Juv CP p.333), or the 'queen' conquered sexually by the mysterious, uncouth hero 'with hands like derricks' ('The Queen's Complaint' 1956). Yet, though socially superior, strong and self-willed, these figures all submit to his absolute power, as if accepting this was a part of the bargain (ironic, since the initial bond seems to have been predicated upon escape and exploration for the female). There is a great deal of mythmaking going on and the boundaries between fantasy and reality disappear at times - as when Plath describes herself, longing for Hughes, as 'Isis bereaved, Isis in search' - 'There I was in my blackcoat and beret: Isis bereaved, Isis in search, walking a dark barren street' (L March 10 1956 p.132). Like Hughes, who always wore black (the rebel's costume of the 1950s, the existentialist), Plath had taken to wearing dark clothes also, as if becoming his alter-ego. She is fascinated by her perception of his potency on all levels - sexually, creatively, in class terms able to assert his prowess over socially-superior females - while her own sense of self remains much more nebulous. Her role seems to be, increasingly, to reflect this potency rather than to share in it (as was originally expected).

The profound allure seems to depend upon the dream, also, of finding one's lost, complementary 'twin': this is perhaps the most important and enduring of women's fantasies, for by embracing such an archetypal hero the self becomes whole, becomes larger than herself. This is important in connection with Plath's work because it looks for mythic structures to give life-events significance and meaning.

Plath's letters speak of Hughes as her other and better self and imagine him as her twin, (influenced perhaps by their location in Yorkshire, describing him as a Heathcliff kind of hero). Imagining
twinlike intimacy did not, for Plath, rule out the constant presence of violent undertones; the bond she imagined echoes the strange childlike brutality of Catherine and Heathcliff's union in Bronte's novel.

Part of the fascination of the dark man and the handmaid fantasy must have lain in the conflicts between the two figures; though the myth concedes ultimate power there remains a complex shifting of emphasis between the dominant and the submissive which Richard Blessing notes as being a characteristic of Plath's work as a whole, (6) arguing that Plath's sexual myth is fuelled by a 'transference of energy between victim and victimizer that enables each to become the other, at least in imagination'.

An example of this struggle is found in two early poems, 'Bluebeard' (Juv. CP p.305) and 'Sonnet to Satan' (Juv. CP p.323), exploring an important theme for Plath: that of vision. The dark man's gaze can 'turn God's radiant photograph to shade' (Sonnet) and dissect and X-ray his female prey's body (Bluebeard) while female vision, as we saw, is punished: the crystal-gazer Gerd ends up wizened and humbled.

Yet in the poem 'On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover' (Juv. CP p.325) Plath explores the symbiosis between masculine watcher and feminine observed in ways which open up, rather than contain, issues of power and submission. The poem sets up a dialectic; the female subject stares back into the dark eyes of the male. As 'the scrutinised sex' (7) she goes through that familiar process of reification; but if she is dependent upon the 'demon lover' for definition, the process is far from being fixed and static. His 'transforming' gaze and the 'mirrors' created as the self submerges in that gaze, are both fluid in that they burn, are hot as a furnace, and 'inflame to danger/the scarlet wound' - highly sexualised, this is the painful, volatile terrain, in fact,
of gender where everything is unresolved. The two adversaries face each other and their gazes interconnect; yet though 'the world inverts' traditional order is restored in the sense that the self's witch-like face, when reflected in that 'scorching glass' becomes transformed into a 'radiant Venus'.

Though confined by the contemporary ideological dimensions of feminine identity - the delimited choice between witch and Venus echoing our earlier discussion - also, implicitly perhaps other female oppositions such as madonna and whore? and also confined by a Romantic insistence on sexual union as the great, transcendant moment (the moment of connecting vision here paralleling the connection of sexual union) this poem also explores a great many possibilities and potentialities. It begins to imagine what 'facing' the unfaced might lead to or mean: a journey through the overlapping areas of gender difference, out of the fixed mirror-relationship between masculine and feminine. Clearly Plath understood Freud's contention that the gaze is a phallic activity, embodying desire for sadistic mastery of the subject; (8) she is exploring this desire to gaze and obtain mastery within the feminine too. There is also the awareness of the other as double, as doppelganger (a subject Plath explored for a university thesis). Plath moves closer, here, to acknowledge that the self survives through ambiguity and process, and that gender difference can prove elusive and misleading. Yet this train of thought conflicts with other elements of the dark man fantasy which distract Plath from questioning further.

Embracing this fantasy involved rebelling against the anodyne femininity of 1950s middle-class 'nice girls'. The female subject in Plath's poems of the mid fifties is hungry, hungry for more, desperate to be special and unusual. To be different it seems, excitingly, necessary to be bad. The self experiences masculine
power and sexuality vicariously; nevertheless, in contemporary terms, becoming a 'strumpet'.

That Plath's writing feels this to be exciting and freeing is clear. It was a self-image tried on almost like the black clothes. There is an exultation on breaking loose from social restrictions:

brave love, dream
not of staunching such strict flame
but come,
lean to my wound; burn on, burn on. ('Firesong' 1956 CP p.30)

However at the same time there is a sense that any promiscuity of male and female belongs to an older tradition, predating contemporary mores: a Chaucerian pastoral of childlike sexuality. The construction of the poems is neatly, skilfully and conventionally formed, ironically framing and ultimately controlling this rebellious and incendiary desire. In fact, the 'great love' scenario takes different settings, evoking different moods; there is the Gothic, as in Jane Eyre or Rebecca, which produces a dark, passionate and rather forbidding atmosphere (the demon lover and his willing victim). In contrast, the more pastoral poems evoke a more equal-seeming relationship, as, for example, in 'Wreath for a Bridal' (1956, CP p.44), or 'Song for a Summer's Day', 1956 CP, p.30), though even here the masculine dominates:

under yellow willows' hazing
I lay for my love's pleasing. (9)
Thirdly, the representation of women in Plath's poems shows the influence of Robert Graves' work on the female muse, the *White Goddess*. Though apparently powerful the female once again takes the ultimately passive role, her task to encourage the creativity of the male, rather then to assert and explore her own. Graves's idealisation of female nurture depends on a rigidly-enforced essentialism, obscured by his exciting affirmation of female power. The relation between the male poet and his female muse, as put forward by Graves, is yet another version of the 'great love' myth which Plath found alluring. In fact, because of Hughes (who was himself very interested in Graves's work on the occult), this relation may have seemed particularly relevant to her. That she wrote so many versions, covering many aspects of Plath's own life experience, points to how important the 'great love' fantasy was for Plath's self-image.

In the beginning the poems exult in a sense of self-liberation through sex. In terms of contemporary debate and contemporary sexual conservatism, they are a celebration of eroticism which is fairly daring. In accordance with the time, however, female pleasure tends to become subsumed unproblematically within masculine pleasure, desire and fulfilment. It is this potent masculine appetite which 'Pursuit' celebrates (and in her *Journal* Plath calls this a poem 'about the dark forces of lust'; 1956 p.116,).

Despite seeming to accept the primacy of this overweening masculine force, and even find it exciting, the poems convey a pervading sense of disquiet, present from the outset and growing stronger. It is disquiet on two levels. One is that this desire, so voracious, will become destructive, completely out of control (though loss of control forms part of the attraction). The black panther in 'Pursuit' 'compels a total sacrifice' (*CP* p.22).
Similarly in 'Epitaph for Fire and Flower', also 1956, Plath evokes anxiety that the female self will be consumed, plucked bare:

...they ride nightlong
In their heartbeats' blazing wake until red cock
Plucks bare that comet's flowering (CE p.45)

Plath's work has set up intensely oppositional sexual elements, the fierce masculinity of one evoking a passionately antagonistic response of the feminine other. Each is constructed in mythic terms. At the beginning of the relationship with Hughes, Plath's poetry uses the myth of the miraculous 'lost' twins, restored to one another to make the complete soul. Writing of Hughes Plath asserted he was 'the male counterpart of myself' (L. p.154). The powerful male, focus for so many dreams and desires, could be assimilated after all; the young girl Plath had been, wanting to 'travel west' with road crews, might attain her freedom and independence after all, through him. This symbiotic relation, based on dominance and submission, becomes very highly-charged in terms of identity. Who is whom? As I have said before, some of the Dark Man's sexual predatoriness is, or seems to be, displaced, unacknowledged (because too volatile) desire from within Plath. His overbearing appetite and sadistic tendencies come to appear, literally, too close to home, not merely dangerous but self-destructive as well. It is the risk and sense of threat which comes to the forefront in the poems once the pleasure and excitement fades.

Secondly Plath's writing expresses a growing shame and even self-disgust: not surprisingly, given the contemporary sexual ideology and her internalisation of it, even in defiance. While the male remains handsome, in control and unchanged, the self suffers for her 'wanton' desire, her guilt and 'strumpet' status. The female self-images become harsher: 'witch', 'hag', 'fool', 'sloven', 'slouching and rank' (all 1956; Vanity Fair, p.32,
Struumpet Song, p.33, Monologue at 3 am p.40 and The Shrike, p.42 

It becomes increasingly difficult to evoke the celebratory note of handmaid to the dark man or his passionate lover. Instead of hero and heroine the pair turn into devil and the devil's dupe (note that the devil persona is far from damaging to the male's allure; he is still more attractive, the more wild and devilish he becomes).

Plath's writing articulates at this point very clearly the uncertainty and loss of independent identity resulting from transgressing definitions of rightful femininity. The options are 'rosebud' or 'slut', oppositions set out in a contemporary Hughes poem, 'Fallgrief's Girlfriends' (11). The initially liberating relationship becomes confusing and constricting.

Annette Lavers points out that 'sinful' passion is often represented in Plath's poetry by images of 'spotted' creatures or flowers such as orchids (12). The stain or spot is more than a surface emblem of impurity; it goes much deeper than the skin.

In 'Bucolics' (1956 CP p.24) the female subject is 'stained' by nettle-stings which print her sexual impurity upon her pale flesh; punished and branded when rising from a field after lovemaking. The male is untouched. So in counterpoint to the celebratory depiction of this sexually-free self emerges a continued theme of punishment and self-punishment -as in 'Snowman on the Moor', 1957 CP p.58; even if slightly tongue-in-cheek, the poem restates the theme of defiant women 'humbled'- the grisly patriarchal spectre with ladies' sheaved skulls on his belt sends the subject home 'brimful of gentle talk/And mild obeying'.

At the outset Plath's writing connects this relationship, and a newly- liberated sexual identity, with a parallel 'flowering' of literary creativity. 'I shall be one of the few women poets in the
world who is fully a rejoicing woman, not a bitter or frustrated or warped man-imitator'. (Letters)(13) Yet this develops into an uneasy sense of seeing the self as, at least, some kind of 'kept' woman, at worst a prostitute, selling her sexual favours in return for creativity, having struck a sexual 'bargain' with the dark man (as Gerd did in 'Crystal Gazer', in a reworking of the Faust myth). This is inevitable since the creative force remains ultimately and relentlessly masculine for Plath at this point. Hence the images, tinged with self-disgust, of the strumpet and the loose woman. At this point, however, the poetry returns to self-scrutiny, perceiving the self as the cause of the problem. In 'Strumpet Song' the self tries to make sense of that 'foul slut' whose reflected grimace 'Into my most chaste own eyes/looks up' (1956, CP p.33). It is to the conflict between self-perception as 'chaste' and as 'slut' that Plath's attention is directed.

In spite of accepting the sexual double standard implied in such a deliberately idealised construction of the Great Love, Plath's writing speaks of a troubled sense of being exploited and used: a sense of betrayal which cannot be overtly articulated because doing so would undermine the edifice of this romantic discourse. Later, when disillusion and discontent surfaces, the need for such a discourse to sustain purpose and meaning in Plath's life becomes clear through the bleakness which permeates everything, as in 'Berck-Plage' 1962, CP p.196, where 'obscene bikinis hide in the dunes', 'lovers unstick themselves' and 'There is no hope, it is given up'.

The late 1950s bring an increasing sense of creative and sexual stagnation, as if the dark man is in danger of losing his power over the female subject. The poems start to present him more straightforwardly as a construction of the imagination; the illusion starts to falter, as in 'The Colossus', 1959 CP p.129, and 'Soliloquy of the Solipsist', 1956, CP p.37, where he
seems almost to be a sham. There is no recognition of the self's own creative powers; instead great effort goes into trying to recapture the ideal and recuperate it.

For without the frisson of gender difference (based upon the superior power of the super-masculine) the poems express feelings of depression and futility, as in 'The Colossus' when the subject perceives her existence to be tending the meaningless hulk of the ex-hero. Similarly in the story 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams'(14) the illusion fails (perhaps here it is due to the male embodying uncomfortable psychological elements of the self) and the hero is reduced to a brutish, macho hoodlum. The 'darker' elements of the masculine myth, once celebrated, now emerge tinged with the sordid.

'Snowman on the Moor' (1957 CP p.58) deals with power struggles between male and female; the woman summons 'hell to subdue an unruly man' but what she conjures up - an exaggeratedly grotesque patriarchal bogeyman - ends up by subduing her. The tone of this poem - mocking and rather ironic - suggests an emerging detachment from some aspects of idealising the super-male. The excitement of the pursuit and the passion of the great, transcendent, climactic moment at the core of the romantic discourse, by their very nature cannot last indefinitely. She seems preoccupied with the oppressive sense of boredom and entrapment such intimacy brings once the high point of desire is reached.

In contrast to the sizzling energies of the sinuous panther in 'Pursuit', the 'Man in Black' (1959 CP p.119) stands motionless; a rigid and joyless figure he 'rivets' the landscape's component parts together (including, significantly, a prison). And in 'Little Fugue' (1962 CP p.187) the dark man becomes associated with a kind of death-in-life: a loss of the senses, a numbness prevails. The vigorous, virile dark man of earlier poems is succeeded by images of amputation (the lamed memory, the one leg, the lopped sausages), which suggest a buried
sadistic desire to harm, or perhaps a dread of imperfection: at any rate
the once godlike hero is now far from perfect or even complete. He
becomes 'a dark funnel', sucking in life-energies and annihilating them,
repressive and patriarchal.

When the myth loses its power, then Plath sometimes feels she loses
the ability to write; 'these poems do not live; it's a sad diagnosis'
('Stillborn', 1960, CP p.142). The creative force in the feminine,
constructed in terms of poems as children, depends for its survival on
the energising ideal of the masculine. Yet a rigorous self-analysis
still allows Plath to examine the effect of this fantasy upon herself:

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet
...
A vulturcus boredom pinned me in this tree.
If he were I, he would do what I did. ('The Hanging Man' 1960, CP
p.141)

This poem can be read as showing a detachment from the mystique of the
dark man, if only by recalling the force and progress of its desire and
its waning. Similarly in 'Leaving Early' (1960 CP p.145) Plath assumes,
importantly, the masculine voice addressing the woman just seduced. In
its casual, rough cynicism this poem harks back to Plath's earlier, pre-
adolescent dislike for the male. Having taken his pleasure the male
persona finds his partner slightly disgusting. This shift of attitude
and position is important in that it shows Plath's reworking of the
fantasy.

In other poems, for example 'The Jailer', 1962, the struggle between
the male and female becomes far more bloody. In 'I have been drugged
and raped.....lever of his wet dream' (CP p.226) the original sado-
masochistic undertones informing 'Pursuit' become explicit. In the poem
'Daddy' (also 1962 CP p.222), in similar vein, the female subject
emphasises the brutal aspects of the dark man and fantasises about
escape through 'killing' him. The myth still exercises immense power;
detachment is impossible here. The increasingly painful and disturbing elements of the dark man ideal and the fantasy of the 'great love' - both of which had such profound significance for Plath's self-image as a creative and sexual woman - continue to form a central force in her work, while becoming more and more untenable.

I feel that Plath's poetry turned away from the great love scenario to the extent that it tried to create an alternative identity for the self beyond that of the handmaid, as an act of survival; and that Plath turned to the other profound experience in her life, in order to create a mythic identity based upon the transformative powers of the female body through the visionary experience of childbirth. In doing so, I think she turned back to an influence she had ignored, earlier: the work of Virginia Woolf. During Plath's time at Cambridge, the seminal period when she met Hughes and consolidated her writing ambitions, she had been avidly reading Lawrence, but was also fascinated by Woolf. It is probably fair to say that Lawrence and Woolf were Plath's literary giants at this time. Reading them together produced a conflict;

"...I read Woolf, read Lawrence (these two, why? Their vision, so different, is so like mine)." (15)

Why the sense of conflict? Lawrence's influence on Plath we have already discussed; it involved celebration of an earthy, masculine-dominated hetero-sexuality within which the feminine was subsumed, in the process of emphasising gender difference. Although couched in rebellious and anti-establishment terms (chiefly because of Lawrence's frankness) this was nevertheless a recognisable version of the 'great love', and one which Plath found attractive.

Yet at the same time Plath's reading shows she was drawn to the androgynous in Woolf, specifically in her very close reading of Orlando (16), Woolf's transexual fantasy about creative subjectivity (Orlando transforms himself into an equally attractive and intelligent female counterpart in the course of the novel). Woolf had written Orlando for Vita Sackville-West, so the element of intimate female
friendship, implied lesbian desire, contributes to the novel's challenging treatment of sexual identity.

Between 1956 and 1957 Plath had noted in her Journal that she had read all Woolf's novels. Woolf had a profound effect on her preoccupation with herself as a creative woman. Idolising Woolf, Plath even linked their attempts at suicide:

I feel my life linked to her, somehow. I love her - from reading *Mrs. Dalloway*... But her suicide, I felt I was reduplicating in that black summer of 1953. Only I couldn't drown. (17)

Plath's self-identification took the form of an acceptance of the view that exceptional, creative women are somehow doomed to madness and eventual self-destruction as the seal of their genius; in fact, that some of their allure lies in this specifically doom-laden quality.

At this time Plath was herself struggling to write a novel; Woolf's 'making of the moment something permanent' (18) became almost an incantation. Interestingly, she evinces a strong sense of competitiveness with Woolf which is not visible, from her Journals at least, in her relation to the male Lawrence;

That is the lifework...I shall go better than she.
No children until I have done it. (19)

For Plath Woolf represented the childless, committed, ascetic woman writer; Woolf's then unfashionable association with feminism, lesbianism, left politics and androgyny were in direct opposition to Lawrence's robust interests in heterosexual passion and the underlying conservatism of his vision of gender difference. And Lawrence's attraction lay partly in his more sensual alternative to Graves' goddess, adding power all the same to this enticing (and so widely endorsed) image of femininity.
In identifying with Woolf, and at the same time drawn to Lawrence's implications, Plath was well aware of the contradictions these imposed:

I come down to learn of those two — Lawrence because of the rich physical passion...Woolf because of that almost sexless, neurotic luminousness'. (20)

It is important to note the use of 'neurotic' here; the dominant ideology of the time gives this a particular edge. Though to some extent Plath, rebelliously, found neurosis fascinating and alluring, she backed away from 'taking Woolf as a role model by the end of the 1950s because she found the 'normal' sensuality evoked by Lawrence more acceptable. (Woolf would have fitted the 'lemon-wry spinster' tag quite well in terms of the 1950s debate.) Plath's early marriage, her panic at feared childlessness in 1959, barely two years after her assertion of 'no children until I have done it', shows how deeply she was determined not to travel down Woolf's road. She wrote:

Surely this is not life, not even real life...
This is what one misses in Woolf. Her potatoes and sausage. What is her love, her childless life?' (21)

It must have been a devastating combination, that of Woolf and Lawrence; both focusing upon, and helping to shape, great rifts in Plath's life and identity. No wonder that Plath struggled for definitions and certainties. On the one hand was Lawrence; a male writer identifying literary creativity with masculinity and male sexuality; and on the other, Woolf, a female writer whose processes made the sensuous incorporeal and who questioned gender divisions and heterosexuality itself. If it was Woolf's intellectual and spiritual powers which earned her the label of 'neurotic', then Plath's rejection, not only of these but also of her political orientation, is understandable, given the spirit of the times and the pressures to conform to which Plath seemed particularly susceptible. Plath's lack of interest in Woolf's non-fiction, such as
Three Guineas, might imply a rejection of Woolf's feminist and sexual beliefs. (22)

Plath also turned, initially, away from Woolf's complex, fragile, experimental treatments of landscape and perspective in favour of the more robust, masculine-oriented landscapes. In 'Faun' 1956 (CP p.35), the male is the central focus; in 'Firesong' 1956 (CP p.30) it is sexual desire and union. It may have seemed more exciting, more progressive, in the context of the 1950s to become a Lawrentian 'singing woman' rather than a Woolfian 'neurotic'. Therefore, for some years, Plath's work enclosed itself within boundaries which did not encourage her to regard her creativity as an autonomous power; instead it was something to be conferred upon her by the masculine, rather as he conferred sexual identity. Creativity, too, was not seen to be an intellectual process; rather it emerged from the sensual and mystical, almost as a kind of 'possession', in the manner of Robert Graves and Ted Hughes, once again, taking on a masculine-dominated element in that the feminine constituted both the medium and the object of exchange. Plath, whose approach to poetry had previously tended to be cerebral, before the Dark Man poems, seems to have found this new influence exciting yet also rather frustrating at times. In 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather' 1956 (CP p.56) a poem exploring this 'passive' meditative state of awaiting her muse, she complains:

... The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.

Yet, contradictorily, Plath's Journals show that she identified with Woolf in terms of their psychological problems. Having experienced breakdown, suicide attempts and fear of madness, all seem to have helped define Plath to herself as a special or at least distinctive individual. Interestingly, these self-definitions seem to me to provide Plath with a strength and independence which the 'handmaid' image cannot provide, a defiance which emphasises the self's own creativity (even if it is destructive: 'death angel', 'my ... demon self' (23)) in terms of 'genius'
(which Plath felt Woolf to be) and as a specifically 'female' force (though not in terms of the female/male duality of the handmaid and the dark man). This force grows stronger as the dark man myth becomes discredited.

In poems celebrating the Lawrentian view of sexuality, the female subject refers to her own desire only in a shamed, guilty way, 'appalled at her want' ('Pursuit', CP p.22, 1956). Of course, this 'want' remains secret, unexplored. The poem, given its parameters, cannot shift this problematic discourse of desire or focus it so that it can be illuminated; female desire remains alien, disruptive, troubling. While masculine desire is, literally, everywhere - embedded in the landscape, paradigmatic - the subject's own desires represent a painful absence, a vacuum, a silence. This silence becomes ever more uncomfortable and urgent. This, I feel, is the impetus which undermines Plath's adherence to 'the dark man' in her poetry of the later 1950s and early 1960s - simply because the male figure over-defines the female self, finally stifling her.

Though rejecting much of Woolf's work (at some cost, having idolised Woolf as much as Lawrence) Plath goes on to assert elements of Woolf's discourse in the face of her growing dissatisfaction with the Lawrentian fantasy. I want to discuss this point with reference to Plath's evocation of landscape, which is intensely gender-conscious in that it distinguishes between 'masculine' areas where the self feels or becomes marginal (even threatened) and 'feminine' areas where the subject assumes, or attempts to assume, centrality.
In the 'pastoral' landscapes of 'Faun', 'Pursuit' and 'Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows' (1959 CP p.111), just as much as the moors and wilder terrain of 'Blackberrying' and 'Wuthering Heights' (1962 CP pps 167,168), there lies a very virile and ferocious sense of Darwinism, connecting the dark male with his surroundings in an immediate and fundamental way; he is the superior species, the predator, yet his animal origins make him mysterious and strange. Though strongly erotic, these poems evoke the female as passive, a 'foreigner'. Her struggle to assert herself in hostile terrain becomes even more fraught, as the landscape changes, becoming harsher, as in 'Hardcastle Crags' (1957 CP p.62), and increasingly bleak; in this more patriarchal setting the struggle is not so much a romantic one as a bitter tussle between opponents.

Other landscapes evoked by Plath also 'belong' to the dark male force: her father's garden where he kept bees, in 'The Beekeeper's Daughter' (1959 CP p.118); the father's burial place in 'Electra on Azalea Path' (1959 p.116); the ocean (where to join her father would mean relinquishing autonomy completely through death) in 'Full Fathom Five' (1958 CP p.92) or in the bleak terrain of 'I Am Vertical' (1961 CP p.162), where to become an 'insider' would mean submitting to inanimation and death, and where this seems, wearily and hopelessly, desired.

At the same time, Plath's poems begin, in opposition to all this, to explore tentatively what might be called a vaginal discourse, in the spirit of Virginia Woolf. Plath uses images - of pools, cups, bruises, wounds, the moon(24) - to explore, secretively, half known desires and feelings which are definitely feminine. These images are far less linked to realism than those drawn from Lawrence; at times they emerge as bizarre and surreal. They speak of a highly imaginative, intense inner landscape. One example is the use of 'rift' in the poem 'Event' (1962 CP p.194).(25) This poem deals with the ending of a relationship; rather than being the two complementary halves joined in passionate intimacy, the couple turn away in miserable alienation. Here Plath's use of 'rift' works both in terms of the evocation of landscape for a state of mind,
and also to conjure up, for me, a particularly female viewpoint. For once in this landscape it is the female who is completely at home, the male the outsider. The images of 'groove and of 'rift' evoke the vaginal, here vividly in terms of loss and emotional injury and vulnerability; the 'ring' too has its own overlapping echoes:

How the elements solidify!-
The moonlight, that chalk cliff
In whose rift we lie

Back to back
I walk in a ring,
A groove of old faults, deep and bitter.

Rather than celebrating, these specifically feminine images tend to be grieving; as in 'Parliament Hill Fields' (1961 CR p.152), they concentrate on loss, damage and the effort towards healing ('The moon's crook whitens, /Thin as the skin seaming a scar.')

Another image Plath uses is that of the poppy. In two poems on sexual betrayal ('Poppies in July' and 'Poppies in October', both 1962, CR pps. 203, 240) she imagines these flowers as 'mouths'. 'A mouth just bloodied./Little bloody skirts!' (PIJ) evokes both mouth and vagina together, a connection of many interrelated images such as menstruation, loss of virginity (note the dramatic deflowering scene, with much bleeding, in The Bell Jar, written in 1961) and violence. The linking of feminine vulnerability with the rage evident here (in the flaring red, in the tone itself) shows an interesting development in Plath's work, a location of self-awareness in the female body and its powers as well as its fragmentation and weakness: no longer, at any rate, wholly circumscribed by the masculine viewpoint.
Although Woolf might not have chosen menstrual imagery such as this, nor perhaps have written so furiously of sexual betrayal, nevertheless I see a definite connection in Plath's choice of discourse here to that of Woolf's; a decision to articulate the feminine consciousness, however obliquely or problematically, in the face of a destructive masculine ideology.

Section 4: From Handmaid to Queen

The dark man's control of Plath's landscapes forms an important basis for considering Plath's development from handmaid to queen. I want to return to this in more detail here in order to show how the very attraction of the original myth - the overweening power of the male - creates a rebellious and oppositional response, precipitating the overthrow of the dark man and the establishment of the queen-self, partly in his own image.

We have charted already how the celebratory mood changes. In 'Ode for Ted', (1956 CP p.29), the male's powers include inducing fertility (he is the one for whose 'least look, scant acres yield'); this is replaced by a gloomy, far from life-giving force.

The harsh northern moorland in 'Wuthering Heights' (1961 CP p.167) and 'Hardcastle Crags' (1957 CP p.62) seems particularly to suit the increasingly hostile male. The 'steely' streets of the stone town lead only to further elemental and alien landscapes of black stone. This terrain threatens to transform everything - including the female subject, the outsider, the visitor - into granite and quartz. This landscape is definitely gendered: like the dark man himself (and these Yorkshire moors were not only Heathcliff's home, but Ted Hughes's also) the hard, ungiving, gigantic rock-like surroundings become a correspondingly exaggerated evocation of Plath's changing response to the masculine. This is repeated in other poems where the landscape is desolate and
hostile to the feminine: 'Winter Landscape' 1956; 'Dream with Clam Diggers', 1956; 'Bull of Bendylawl', 'Point Shirley', 'Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows' and 'Parliament Hill Fields', for example.

The primal game of 'pursuit' becomes filled with violence and anguish as this masculine/feminine balance veers out of synchronisation. The female is lost from nature, driven out, like Eve after the fall. Where once she was a special figure (though still merely one of those making up, with owl and fox, that 'arena of yellow eyes', the male's audience) she now appears a threat. Her 'otherness' is no longer acceptable, but to be assimilated in this stone-like terrain now means annihilation of the increasingly-rebellious self. The poems have moved from the delight of the garden to the savagery of the moor. The male other becomes elementally oppressive:

The sky leans on me, me, the one upright
Among all the horizontals. ('WH')

Just as the sky becomes an enemy so too has the wind which 'pours by like destiny' trying to funnel away her heat, and in 'Hardcastle Crags' the windy landscape is 'Enough to snuff the quick/Of her small heart out'. Though 'Wuthering Heights' and 'Hardcastle Crags' cover similar ground this threat seems even more desperate in 'Wuthering Heights'. Here the use of the first person suggests an acute sense of self at risk. The dark man and the forces he embodies may seem to control the landscape but Plath's poem shows the subject fighting back, refusing to surrender (to lie down 'among all the horizontals' implies sexual surrender as well as death). As Eileen Aird notes, the moors may have been a source of exultancy for Emily Bronte but for Plath they represented 'the death of the self'.(1)

In 'Wuthering Heights' a distinction emerges in the ways in which landscape is described. I feel this marks a decisive shift in attitude from defensiveness and vulnerability towards the creation of an alternative 'female' landscape. Plath's concept of nature was deeply threatening, because of its masculine, oppressive construction. A threat
to autonomy, it produces conflicting and terrifying sensations of both agoraphobia (the endless, windswept open moors reducing the self to nothing) and claustrophobia (the self entrapped). Eileen Aird sums up: 'she feels effaced, silenced, neutralised'. (2) So while the distant terrain carries such a threat of control, foreboding and punishment, Plath's poem concentrates instead on the intimate details of the self's immediate surroundings.

As Plath's work 'translated' the significances of the dark man's masculinity and physical being into images of landscape, so now it does the same for the self, creating a landscape parallel to female bodily states. The tied, febrile, contained restlessness of the 'incessant seethe of grasses', 'tied at the root' evoke images of a rebellious and repressed femininity recognisable in much of Plath's later work. (The feeling that surrounding non-human elements are as alive and sentient as the self shows the influences of Rilke, and also Theodore Roethke. (3) The female self is full of anger, at war with herself and with her world.)

Plath's use of moon images ('tied at the root'; as in 'Poem for a Birthday', 'It is warm and tolerable/In the bowel of the root./Here's a cuddly mother') and the restless, dissatisfied rhythms of the sea, also continue this tendency to mesh female bodily cycles with an outer landscape, in order to articulate her particular sense of female identity as larger than the purely personal: mythic and mysterious. These images, as well as those of menstruation and bleeding, were unusual at this date, at odds with poetic conventions, perhaps peculiar to Plath. It is through her mythic projection of masculinity upon a particularly emotive series of landscapes (those of childhood; Cambridge meadows; Yorkshire moors) that her writing prepares to make the opposing assertion of an exaggeratedly 'female' landscape, based on similar essentialism.
This gendered landscape - frustrated, angry, constrained - is in overt opposition to that of the dark man and his perceived assaults on the self's integrity. Though the power balance remains (the female is nervy, febrile, vulnerable, while the male is portrayed as monolithic, frighteningly powerful), 'Wuthering Heights' shows a growing sense of a new, potential identity and power.

Plath explores and develops this new direction in the important 'Poem for a Birthday' (1959 CP p.131). In its form, shape and size it parallels her growing interest in alternative female interior landscapes; it is associative, outwardly looser in form than the highly-crafted, shorter poems written up to this time. Its explorations of inner life, in terms of the specifically female body's interior, create a strange terrain which becomes crucial to Plath's later constructions of the self as a woman and a mother who is at the same time a poet.

The catalyst appears to be the experience of pregnancy. It is this which gives Plath's poetry the impetus to create an alternative 'female' space from which she rejects the dark man and all she has made him signify. She also rejects her relation to him as handmaid. Rather than continuing to exist as a watchful observer, a marginal figure within his landscape, the self turns inward, exploring the internal processes of nurture and gestation. This is not an easy, straightforward change of focus. Rather it throws up old pains and insecurities. The poem was written after analysis which raised to consciousness hostile feelings for Plath's own mother, as 'vampire and witch' (4) as well as, pertinent here (for the poem uses such imagery) 'the image of the eating mother, all mouth.' (5)

'Poem for a Birthday' is also a myth of nature which for the first time focuses on female experience rather than identification with the masculine. This nature myth which Plath is evolving owes much to Roethke's poetry (which Plath was reading at Yaddo in 1959). It empathises with small animals and flowers under threat (as in

Roethke's vision of art was Jungian in that it constituted an inner journey downwards 'in that dark pond, the unconscious'. (He also wrote that the poem was to be 'in a sense a slow spiritual progress; an effort to be born, and later, to become something more.'(6)

Clearly this sense of an inner searching towards birth proved an important and relevant influence for Plath, receptive now. Equally, the emphasis put on the vegetal by Roethke - the particular concept that life and death form a complete cycle, involving vegetal growth, harvest and rebirth, and that the root-life of plants (death) becomes merely the complementary underside of 'everything blooming above me',(7) forms a strong basis for Plath's own meditations on her pregnancy. But Roethke's influence forms only a starting-point for the development of Plath's own particular myths. As we have seen, her responses to 'Nature' were complex and contradictory; the place of the self within nature was never straightforward or certain.

Though Plath's work chooses to create a female space, an inner landscape based upon the 'natural', biological workings of the female body, it is not enough to say that this resolved problems raised for her self-image and identity in relation to outward landscapes, or her struggles with the dark man's representation of masculine dominance.

In focusing upon the female body as a metaphor for creativity and self-knowledge, new areas of difficulty emerge. Plath's writing depends upon the female body as the locus for transformation (this is particularly so in the late poems such as 'Ariel', 'Purdah', 'Fever 107' (all 1962, CP pps. 239,242,231)). This is innovative and daring; it represents an important change in her work (from celebrating male creativity as paramount to seeing it as a force derived from the original power of the woman's body with its capacity for creating life)

- 76 -
and predates much feminist writing of the 1970s on this theme. And
yet placing so much emphasis on the essential and therefore
ultimately mysterious powers of the body, raises new questions
relating to identity.

The self is portrayed as a container, 'a dark house', inside
which another embryonic self, very small, hides away for safety
because of its highly vulnerable state. Along with images of
growth, change and potentiality, contradictory elements emerge; the
boredom and tension of this (different) symbiotic relationship,
which yet appears to echo that of the self and the dark man in
eerie ways (now it is the self and embryo self competing for
existence).

There are, too, disturbing images of oral fantasies in which one
self feels itself 'swallowed up' by the other. The small self is
'all mouth' (1.'Who') but demands of the protective self, 'Mother of
otherness', to 'Eat me'. In the poem's second section the
'motherly' self describes having made herself the large shape she
is by eating 'cell by cell' substances such as 'gray paper' and
creating a bizarre, womb-like or tunnel/burrow/even grave shape
(perhaps looking ahead to the casing round the queen in the bee
poems?) from all this chewing and regurgitating. The effect is
spooky and claustrophobic - 'such eelish delvings!' - particularly
as it seems that this self is equally consuming her own
construction as she creates it. 'These marrowy tunnels!/Moley-
handed, I eat my way.'

Images of orally-focused desire verge on the destructive as if
the 'mother' and 'embryo' self are both so hungry and needy that
they will end by devouring each other. As with the earlier struggle
between the feminine self and the dark man, there emerge elements
of savage Darwinism; fighting to the death for survival of the
stronger.
What is interesting is that although the locus of the struggle has changed dramatically, the elements of conflict have not been discharged; they re-emerge just as troublingly. Perhaps they are even more disturbing because the focus now is so strongly upon the self; the poem explores not only the present but also the past, the 'mother' self's own past mothering and loss of identity, and also the present terror of loss of self as the embryonic 'intruder' grows and gains ground. Plath explores this continual struggling between aspects of self in 'Face Lift' (1961 CE p.155) and 'The Lady & the Earthenware Head' (1957, CE p.69). The 'Birthday' poem evokes both delight (a childlike delight, as in the enjoyment of handling mud and 'forbidden' substances) and a more adult disgust at the physicality of this inner landscape. It is a contradiction which produces another level of unease (a similar fascination for, yet revulsion with interiors can be seen in Plath's 'Surgeon at 2 a.m.', 1961 CE p.170).

The self's attitude towards the dark man is quite changed in 'Poem for a Birthday'. He is showered with abuse, reduced to 'Mumblepaws, teary and sorry, /Fido Little soul, the bowel's familiar, /A dustbin's good enough for him.' Though on one level the male's diminishment relates to the new access to power by the female self, Plath's subject somehow feels, too, that she herself has become diminished through her disillusion: 'I've married a cupboard of rubbish', 'Duchess of nothing'. (4 The Beast) The man has become 'The hairy spirit'; and the self looks back with detachment on the days she 'coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone'. The eroticism of their previous encounters has now paled in comparison with the terrifying yet exhilarating experience of pregnancy and inner growth, upon which the fragmented and jarring elements of the self now focus.
In Section 6, 'Witch Burning', Plath explores themes she will return to and develop in later work, themes which are peculiarly her own in intensity and yet belong to the continuum of preoccupations recognisable in women's writing. These are personal growth and self-transformation, portrayed in urgent and dramatic forms by Plath - half victim, half transcendent heroine.

'Growth', in this section, is painful and purifying: the flames of the witch's pyre are the 'red tongues' which 'will teach the truth'. Fire is the overwhelming experience; dangerous, erotic and all-transforming. As a metaphor for a female condition it has particular resonance, with its echoes of martyrdom, oppression, and exultation. Here it seems welcomed because of its dangerous, volatile energies. Once again the self is encased in the repressive shell, in conflict and stasis: 'I inhabit/The wax image of myself, a doll's body.' The fire can melt this false covering and free the 'true' or 'real' self beneath. Yet the wishful naivety of this desire is undercut always by an awareness of the complexity of the self, its jagged edges and confusing elements, though these are experienced as a failure, a weakness and inability to remain whole or comprehensible.

The tension of this raises strange self-images. The self becomes 'inert as a rice grain', trying to be quiet and 'knock nothing over'. But the heat forces change: 'It hurts at first'. And the quiet, repressed self begins, together with others, to grow, to enlarge physically from within as in a pregnancy, rather than shedding from without. These images of changing appearance, of waxing and waning, are particularly female. And Plath uses a connecting thread - of fire, and its specifically feminine significances (the burning of witches or female martyrs; the
preparing of food) - in order to assert her focus upon the woman's experience.

In 'Fever 103' and 'Ariel' Plath returns to this theme. The self suffers violent transformation through fire or fever. As in 'Witch Burning' there are elements of ritual, of masochism and exultation. 'I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth.' Here there is optimism that the process will not be harmful (the wings 'singeless'). This optimism is tempered in later poems such as 'Ariel', where the cost of being the 'arrow', the 'dew that flies/Suicidal, at one with the drive/Into the red/Eye, the cauldron of morning' is keenly felt. What is important here is that Plath's image - the witch - resembles those in earlier poems (such as Gerd or the Venus/witch) and yet she has changed the context completely. The witch is no longer in thrall to the powerful male or subject to pejorative social judgements. She is simply a figure on a violent journey of self-discovery.

This fierce dynamic is thwarted, however, by opposing forces, which work to 'swaddle' the body, control, medicate and silence it. 'Poem for a Birthday' ends having moved from an exploration of rich 'inner' terrain to oppressive surfaces. The self's body is now being rehabilitated while she lies passive. Rather as if the opposite of an 'out of the body' experience had taken place - the journey being an inward one - the self now returns to consciousness but retains the feeling of distance or detachment from her own body, watching it being tended by others. For Plath, the physical body seems the definitive context.

The self is returned to its conventional state by the end of the poem (in opposition to the malleable and potentially rich 'wax body') and the speaker seems to accept fatalistically the status quo of inner/outer states in the closing lines:
The vase, reconstructed, houses
the elusive rose.

And:

...There is nothing to do.
I shall be good as new.

Still, this effort towards closure is not completed. If the self seems to step back from the implications raised, as after a nightmare one wakes and shakes the memory away, then there remains the ambiguity of the final image. Has the body (seen as the definitive articulation and focus of consciousness, not the mind) simply been reduced once more to a vase or container? If so, the fact that it is 'reconstructed' raises interesting implications of change. Or has it been shattered only to be patched-up exactly the same as before (the irony of 'good as new')?

As early as 1956 a poem, 'Tale of a Tub' (CP p.24), explores a moment of crisis when the naked self of image and reflection confronts itself, showing Plath's focus on relationships between self and self, her awareness of the self's multiplicity. Plath uses 'we' and 'our' throughout to describe the self in a limbo of sterility, stripped of all protective fantasies (even those which scared her in childhood), like those of clothes. When there exists no imaginative ordering, no creative interpretation, the meaningless surfaces of life become terrifying; the self, no less a part of this, with its mere 'photographic chamber of the eye', becomes trapped within superficial boundaries - the controlling machine which no longer functions adequately.

The poem conveys this feeling of entrapment through the setting of a bathroom, contrasting the sterile, oppressive surfaces of bare walls, mirrors, pipes and ceiling with the underwater imagery of the bath into which the self sinks. Once again strong oppositions define the poem: the terrifying banality of surfaces and the
attempts to escape into the aqueous fantasies of the past, into visions of madness. The pressure remains upon subjectivity as source of meaning. Yet the body is distanced, split off from the mind. The mind's machinations continue, noting 'the ridiculous nude flanks', 'two knees [which] jut up/like icebergs'. The self wants her unconscious, her 'lost' creativity, to free her from the limits of recognising this body:

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can our dreams
ever blur the intransigent lines which draw
the shape that shuts us in?
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Rebelling against the fragmentation and oppression of the socialised self, she creates her own mythic space, which necessarily it seems must concern itself with madness and death:

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...in faith
we shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail
among sacred islands of the mad till death
shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real.
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Here, as also in the conclusion of 'Poem for a Birthday' it seems as if Plath's view of health contrasts totally with convention. To be 'healthy' is to be normal, to accept unquestioningly the accepted division between body and mind. To be 'ill' it seems, or perhaps 'mad' (Plath called 'PFAB' 'first of a series of madness poems'), (8) is to risk and to challenge, to want to 'become' in some way the body. This is a journey deep into the labyrinths of 'self', unfixing and questioning the limits.

So the focal point here is that the poem creates a particularly disturbing personal myth based upon a sense of the reflexive relation of mother self and embryonic self fighting for life within the 'turnip chambers' (2. Dark House) of the pregnant body. It is not merely body/mind in opposition but conflicting elements of the self which nurture and destroy. The poem deals with much painful
'unfinished business', raising questions about identity and creativity which seem unresolvable.

Plath's Freudian analysis is relevant here, with her resulting separation and distancing from her mother.

I have been feeling like a new person... I am alive and so-there. Better than shock treatment: 'I give you permission to hate your mother.' (9)

Freudianism of the 1950s was not critical of existing social and ideological structures in general. Its project was to transform the misfitting individual rather than the system. Solutions were to be found in the personal and private areas of family life; mothers often bore the brunt of responsibility for their children's difficulties. It was not merely sons who were encouraged in analysis to distrust the intimacy of the 50s 'mother bond', as Judith Arcana found in Every Mother's Son (Virago 1983). Freud's essay on female sexuality, published in 1931, was tentative; the female represented a problem in his organisation of the oedipus complex. (Female sexuality was perceived in the 1950s as disruptive if not controlled and channelled within marriage; it was also firmly controlled within the mother/child relationship, 'smother love' being suspected and disapproved of.)

Freud admitted in some surprise(10) that for small girls there might exist a submerged, pre-oedipal phase. This he described as being like the matriarchal Minoan-Mycenean civilisation obscured by its successor: that of patriarchal Greece, metaphor for the oedipal phase. During pre-oedipus the girl's attachment to her mother is intense, before she falls in love with the father.
Freud's question is how the girl relinquishes her mother in order to attach herself to the father, so making the transition to the oedipal phase. In exploring how she makes this step, Freud goes on to question: "What does the girl want from her mother?" His conclusions are once again tentative. Yet in recognising that for a daughter the move from loving the mother as primary to love of the father (the achieving of true femininity, within Freud's terms) is problematic, more disruptive a process than for the son (who moves from mother to alternative female love-object), Freud raises very interesting questions about the construction of femininity. These are questions relevant to all the women poets studied here but particularly to Plath.

A Lacanian reading of Freud's work opens out the area of debate by considering both phallicism and language. Freud's question of what a girl wants from her mother remains unanswered, but Lacan sees a way forward through looking at the wording of the question itself. The girl has no lack of words to ask the mother; therefore there must be a separation of demand on two planes, that of the (everyday) demands effectively spoken... and that of Demand (with a capital D) which subsists within and beyond these very demands and which, because it remains resistant to articulation, incites the little girl to make those demands at the same time as rendering them futile. (12)

The question of what she wants is also asked of herself, there being no sense of distance between herself and her beloved mother. Of course she finds herself barred in the face of Demand and so constitutes herself as not-knowing. This is where the phallic
function steps in; it acts (for both girls and boys) as an arbitrary, validating 'stamp', meaningless in itself.

Following the daughter's failure to Demand of her mother, she turns to the phallus, to patriarchal structures (of which the formation of femininity plays its part) as an alternative source of meaning - yet not without deeply-buried feelings of loss, betrayal and rage towards the mother who could provide no answers.

Language played an important role in Plath's development. In their family discussions Plath's mother stressed that 'we were critical of our verbal and written expression for we shared a love of words and considered them a tool used to achieve precise expression.' (13) Was it vital to make oneself understood, not to be singled out as the German-speaking immigrant? Language was a source of division, Aurelia's fluent German and imperfect English contrasting with Sylvia's gifted use of English and strange inability ever to learn her parents' native tongue.

Plath's use of language in her poetry could be seen as an attempt to utter Demand and therefore 'reach' and impress her mother (with public success) and also to articulate elements on the margins of consciousness which can never be fully expressed. Her use of dream material and surreal fantasy draw on the boundaries between conscious and unconscious, searching for private meaning rooted in the Freudian scenario; such meaning which may once have existed has been lost in the chasm between self and mother. In crucial ways the mother is part of the self; she is also alien, and rejected.

One cause of hostility lies in the mother's femininity, perceived by Plath (in Journals, letters, poems, stories) as sickly, hypocritical and confining. Yet the ideological impact of this 'feminine mystique' is such that for Plath the rejection of femininity, and its loss, entails a subsequent exclusion from meaning. If not feminine, what can the self be? Yet for Plath, as
for many others, femininity possessed no intrinsic meaning in itself; and living by its precepts seemed suspect and dishonest.

It is useful to consider 'Poem for a Birthday' in this context. Plath was aware of difficult contradictions inherent in her relationship with her mother:

One reason I could keep up such a satisfactory letter-relationship with her while in England was we could both verbalize our desired image of ourselves in relation to each other... and never feel the emotional currents at war with those verbally-expressed feelings... I wish... I could be sure of what I am: so I could know that what feelings I have, even though some resemble hers, are really my own. Now I find it hard to distinguish between the semblance and the reality. (14)

I must emphasise again how important to Plath's construction of the self are the oppositions to which she returns continually - self and other, escape and confinement, power and helplessness, sanity and madness. Though Plath's work creates a strongly original mythos, obviously it also draws upon the social context of the time. The dilemma she experienced was shared by those women novelists of the 50s whose theme, as Elizabeth Wilson notes, was madness, because:

in the modern world it was not possible to suggest that a woman's normal lot was dependence and captivity, sexual frustration and the battle with patriarchal authority. It seemed as if many women were so bemused by the prevailing ideology of emancipation achieved that the actual, contemporary female predicament had to be described in terms of insanity. (15)
For Plath, also, as for graduate wives interviewed by Judith Hubback (in *Wives Who Went to College* 1957), "the themes of escape and imprisonment were...the dominant metaphors used...to describe their condition." (16) Plath's writing, predating the resurgence of feminism and so therefore unsupported by it, faced these issues more squarely than many.

So 'Poem for a Birthday' marks an important development in Plath's construction of subjectivity. The emphasis has shifted from self in relation to the other, the powerful male. Now the poem explores aspects of the self; exterior relationships are muted except for that of mother and daughter, which resonates so urgently through the self's own reappraisal of her pregnant state. 'Female' space becomes central, and power issues over dominance, control and dependence are now related chiefly to this space.

In its direct tone, associative and seemingly spontaneous imagery it marks a break from earlier, highly-crafted work. Anne Sexton's influence is discernible here, I feel, in several respects. (Plath and Sexton met while joining a poetry class taken by Robert Lowell in 1959.) Firstly, Plath explores a new frankness; her work shows a change of interest from the father/daughter to mother/daughter relationship, a greater awareness of psychological states of mind, and an evocation, through a new rich vein of psychoanalytically-inspired surrealism, of women's intimate experience which begins, partially, to articulate the repressed: a fascination with the body rather than the cerebral, as definitive articulation of experience.
Masculine figures come increasingly to signify oppressiveness. While earlier poems dealt with the male other through strategies of romanticism, later work suggests more and more that such union means annihilation of the self, instead of the once desired assimilation. In this Plath's approaches to gender remain strongly essentialist: male and female qualities stay just as polarised, only now the female role is to create and protect new life while the male remains outside the experience, dangerously careless and unknowing.

'The Surgeon at 2am' (1961, CP, p. 170) develops themes first explored in 'Poem for a Birthday'. The embattled interior landscape, seen in terms of the inside of the body (in wonderful imagery - the heart 'a red bell bloom', its surroundings 'a garden' whose 'orchids' 'spot and coil like snakes') is a reminder of the underwater landscapes of escape and 'madness' in 'Tale of a Tub'. Present, too, is the struggle between inner and outer forces. Though it is over-simplifying to see them as merely feminine versus masculine, I focus on this aspect here because of its importance in the context of this discussion.

In 'Surgeon' the body lies beneath the hands of the surgeon, whose controlling consciousness dominates the poem. The soul is active: 'Tonight it has receded like a ship's light' while the body itself is passive. 'A lump of Chinese white/With seven holes thumbed in.' Yet such apparently stiff categories of passivity/activity, body and spirit, inner and outer (the body itself is being 'opened out') are all called into question. The surgeon, however, remains separate, monolithic - 'I am the sun, in my white coat' - undoubtedly male. He retains the power: the relation between himself and the body on his slab seems quasi-sexual.

What distinguishes this poem from 'PFAB' is its introduction of this outer eye looking in. 'PFAB' was claustrophobically centred on
the consciousness of the subject as the entire landscape. Here there is an interplay between negotiated space and identity, in terms of inner and outer, which is worked out in explicit ways. It is almost as if Plath is exploring the relationship between body and mind once again (her work returns again and again to this opposition: see 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head' 1957, CP p. 69). It seems, too, that for Plath the mind appears to possess definite 'masculine' characteristics.

The mind, like the surgeon, confronts and ultimately controls the body. Here the body is portrayed as 'a purple wilderness', a miraculous, 'uncivilised' place where 'tubers and fruits/oozing their jammy substances' evoke both fertility and decay. It is full of an apparently natural energy, half seductive in its fecundity and also repelling; its 'stenches and colours' assail the senses.

The body, then, an anarchic, sensual space, its images of 'snakes' and 'spots' evoking undertones of Eden and a shameful female desire (reminiscent of earlier images of signs 'imprinted' on the body and signifying shame, or a fall from grace). Though inarticulate and defined by the controlling perception of the surgeon, the body still struggles to speak, and to be heard; the very blood itself is 'red and squeaking'. Of course this is not a language understood by the surgeon. In saving the body his masculine 'Midas touch' is double-edged. The body becomes 'perfected', 'a statue the orderlies are wheeling off'. No longer vibrant with energy, it has been controlled, contained, silenced: in effect, murdered. (Compare this with Plath's chilling final poem 'Edge', (1963 CP p. 272), which begins 'The woman is perfected' and describes how 'Her dead/Body wears the smile of accomplishment'. Here the body, dressed metaphorically and significantly in the patriarchal garb of a Greek toga, has been reduced to an inanimate object bearing a most ambiguous and particularly female expression. Perfection here, too, means the end of process: a kind of masculinity equated with death.)

- 89 -
'Poem for a Birthday' gives an uneasy sense that its myth, in which the subject becomes central, whole, the domain of the embryo, cannot be sustained. This sense of the self as all-embracing, with powers to create and destroy, is simply too overwhelming. Plath's work returns to consider the masculine again and again. This has the greatest significance for her poetry, as it represents key aspects of her subjectivity - aspects which she is coming to see as alien, her enemy. Yet Plath's continuous search for the true 'centre' of self - in the body, in the womb, as definitively female - reveals absences; the 'true' self is of course always elusive, tainted with perceptions of the masculine.

So once again the surgeon and the patient, the male and female, are intimately connected; the mind silences, 'perfects', the much-repressed cries of the body. Raw material is transformed into art. And this process poses a much more fundamental problem than being a threatened figure in a masculine landscape, as we saw in 'Vuthering Heights' for example. The masculine in this instance is right inside, has entered the feminine domain of the body and wielded its deadly 'perfecting' touch. Certainly the male figures in Plath's poetry of this time (1961, 1962) become increasingly rarefied and symbolic, seen in terms of their functions (which in 'perfecting' oppress and deny their less powerful victims, as do the jailer, the zookeeper and the rabbit catcher). The female other in these poems struggles to differentiate herself from them as much as possible, as if the intimate connection explored in 'Surgeon' were just too endangering. Margaret Atwood's 'Frankenstein' poems evoke a very similar perspective on the power struggle between masculine and feminine, the ultra-rational male here trying to pin down, dissect and turn this fluid feminine element into 'frozen' art. (17) They evidently share an unease that the taproot of creativity may be, as culture insists, masculine after all.
For Plath, however, turning more and more towards creating a 'female' (rather than feminine) creative and physical identity, the message that much of the dynamic power and impetus for creativity lay within the so-called 'masculine' was a source of anger. In attempting to create a mythic female subjectivity, the masculine could have to place.

In 'Cut' (1962, CP p.235) Plath seems to explore a kind of self-willed castration, an attempt to excise those elements deemed unacceptably masculine. The phallic 'thumb stump' is assaulted. What happens, though, is simply a continuing alienation, rather than the relief of resolution. The self simply feels queasy, again, at the strange division between inner and outer revealed by a deep cut. It is not possible to find the 'true' self, either inside the body (deep within the cut) or on the body's surface. The mystery remains, despite the violent attempt to resolve, finally, the disjunction between inner and outer, female and male within the self.

This growing dislike for the masculine element in the self seems connected to a socially-based disillusion with male hero figures of father, lover and husband. Plath picked up early the growing distrust of 'masculine' interventions in polluting the atmosphere through the 'macho' workings of heavy industry and nuclear power:

The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and... the terrifying and omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America. (18)

She was also concerned about effects of drugs developed by large chemical companies such as thalidomide, and the repercussions for babies of Strontium 90 discovered in milk. On the other hand,
Plath also sets out what she feels to be 'the real issues of every time', which include loving and making children, bread, paintings, and the 'conservation of life of all people...the jeopardizing of which no abstract doubletalk...can excuse'. (19) These are defiantly 'female' values emphasised in the face of a perceived threat to them.

Although in one sense Plath's statements place her, along with others of her generation and period, as part of a changing consciousness - 'an emergence from silence into an era of political and social activism...[requiring]...new attitudes towards both her surroundings and herself' (20) - it can equally be said that her embrace of such 'female values' also echoes the progressive ground taken up by femininity in the 1950s, the belief that it would be women, and women's sensibility as nurturing mothers and makers, who would save the world from man-made destruction. (21) I think it can be argued that Plath's stance develops this rather idealistic 1950s faith in the centrality of the female role, infusing it with the new militancy of the early 60s and their increasingly urgent problems and dilemmas.

Correspondingly, then, her poems evoke the masculine as more and more deadly: the landscapes, originally of looming moorland, become increasingly hostile. The cliffs and narrow path of 'Blackberrying', the 'malignity' of the heath, that 'place of force' in 'Rabbit Catcher', both 'funnel' the self towards a point of no return. This sense of force creates a stifling claustrophobia; there seems to exist no choice for the female self except submission. Yet the dark man's sexual predatorinesss, so connected here with 'his' landscapes, comes to be described as explicitly disgusting: 'How they excited him, those little deaths! They waited like sweethearts.' ('Rabbit Catcher'). Note here the play on meaning; 'little death' being a French euphemism for orgasm. Despite the implication that, now, identifying with the victims of this hunter is not in the self's interests ('The
constriction killing me also') there is still an implicit frisson of pleasure in this sadistic sexuality. 'Rabbit Catcher' echoes an old rural saying of 'mole catcher-body snatcher', describing the midwife and layer-out of the dead; also many folksongs use the image of the rabbit or 'bonny brown hare' for female genitalia. I think it not far-fetched to see Plath playing with allusions here which connect the small creatures preyed upon by the catcher with female sex organs.

'Rabbit Catcher' is an interesting poem because it juxtaposes an outer masculine landscape of traps, snares, the 'black spikes' of gorse, with images which imply the female body at a specific time when inner and outer divisions can come into crisis: at childbirth. Yet of course this divide between male outer landscape and female inner landscape is much too simple. The landscape becomes suffused with exaggerated and powerfully-gendered imagery. For example the cliff top, 'Simmering, perfumed./The paths narrowed into the hollow', suggests the sloping planes of the vagina and the vulva. The snares, 'zeros, shutting on nothing', suggest the cervix and the neck of the womb, the os; a suggestion strengthened by the following line: 'set close, like birth pangs'. Plath's experiences -of pregnancy and childbirth have given her a powerful and authoritative vocabulary in which to explore states of mind, closed off from the male and judgemental of it.

This poem embodies a tremendous effort to wrest these life-giving openings and closings, moving towards birth, away from their destructive context. The effort appears to fail because of the connection between the self and the dark man, the rabbit catcher; the 'snares' cannot be transformed into the birth-rich female force but remain themselves, mechanisms of death, simply because of the triumph of the deadly in the male and female's union: 'And we, too, had a relationship - /Tight wires between us'. The affair may be over but the ensnarement remains.

With Plath's growing suspicion of this kind of masculinity (as in 'Death & Co' 1962 CP p.254) her writing focuses increasingly on
exploring an identity as mother rather than as sexual partner. The life-force definitely becomes maternal and embraces both private and public worlds in association and imagery. She prays to potentially destructive 'male' forces to 'leave/this one/Mirror safe', setting against them her own endurance ('And I, nearly extinct,/His three teeth cutting/Them selves on my thumb') and her elemental status ('Red earth, motherly blood'). ('Brasilia, 1962 CP p.258)

In Plath's work of the late 1950s and early 1960s a growing awareness of the links between private and public issues informs the wider range of her subjects. As Jeremy Hawthorn points out, (22) her political acuity is usually ignored by literary critics, but her perception of sexuality as rooted in relationship with class and power bears him out. On a more practical note, Plath was also, as we know from her Journals and Letters, interested in the CND and Aldermaston campaigns of the time.

In this spirit appears her real anger at the corruption of landscape, which is seen as correlative to a corrupted consciousness. In 'Suicide off Egg Rock' (1959 CP p.115) the tainted coastline of 'ochreous salt flats,/Gas tanks, factory stacks' seems so unpleasant and degrading ('Sun struck the water like a damnation./No pit of shadow to crawl into') that the persona's suicidal plunge appears, in a strange manner, to be a life-affirming action. He is choosing purity and forgetfulness, even innocence, in preference to the unbearable clamour of life, 'that landscape/of imperfections his bowels were part of'.

This distaste emerges in later poems in more personal and oblique ways. The tainted atmosphere has become a bruise within the body, a contusion: it has become a fever, a hatred. Purifying it means burning, being consumed, transformed, reduced to ash, to something 'clean', scentless and weightless. It is interesting to note how the committed, socially-aware and passionate desire to change or improve life meets this conflicting discourse where it is only the individual body which can achieve change, through a metaphysical return to 'innocence'. The latter seems to hold out the only hope as exterior conditions become
more and more threatening. These clashing discourses make Plath's poetry edgy and fascinating.

If the surrounding landscape seems increasingly alien and toxic (even the moon has 'her cancerous pallors' and drags trees, 'little bushy polyps' in her wake, in 'Purdah' 1962 CP p.242) it is Plath's children which seem most innocent and pure, as if they hold out hope denied elsewhere. From the moment of their birth when Plath imagines the newborn in the maternity ward as 'showering like stars on to the world', she invests them with such immense mystery and significance as to become almost inhuman: 'Their footsoles are untouched. They are walkers of air.' She has the new mother say:

What did my heart do, with its love?
I have never seen a thing so clear.
His lids are like the lilac-flower
And soft as a moth, his breath.
I shall not let go. ('Three Women', 1962 CP p.176)

In one sense I feel that for Plath mothering was the closest experience of achieved perfection. When so much else was bound by limits, constraints and disillusion, the potentiality of children appeared limitless. The anger which fuels other poems never emerges in poems on her children. The baby is 'A clean slate, with your own face on' ('You're', 1960 CP p.141) and in 'Child' (1963 CP p.265) she writes that 'Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.' In 'Balloons' (1963) the baby sits back, '...Fat jug,/Contemplating a world clear as water' and in 'Morning Song' 1961 '...now you try/Your handful of notes,/The clear vowels rise like balloons'. Clean and clear, airy and light: these are the words Plath uses to write of her children when for her own state she uses tears, bleeding, bruising, numbness, anger and confusion.

Of course this idealizing fits in with the predominant mythology of motherhood in which every mother is in love with her child and therefore a 'perfect' mother. I think it is fair to say that Plath's
Letters (most of the Journals beyond 1959 have been destroyed, leaving little or nothing relevant here) do show that she acknowledged the power of the maternal myth, and fostered it herself, wanting to be a 'good' mother. This would feed her romanticising of motherhood and childhood. Therefore I do not agree with Al Alvarez’s belief that 'The real poems began in 1960 with the birth of...Frieda. It is as though the child...liberated her into her real self'. (23) Motherhood enriched and complicated an already complex subjectivity.

Plath’s poems show great anxiety that the destructive outer world will injure children (not just her own but all the new 'innocent souls' holding the future in their hands). In 'Mary's Song' (1962) the fire is not cleansing but tainted with the gas chambers and war. Loving is an ordeal because the child, like the sacrificial lamb, is doomed: 'O golden child the world will kill and eat.'

This identity of mother seems to provide a tentative sense of possible wholeness and redemption for the self. Even when the mother-role seems a threat to identity - when the mother responds to the child in the vacuum of night and feels 'I'm no more your mother/Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow/ Effacement at the wind's hand' ('Morning Song' 1961 CE p.156) - there remains the assurance at the end of the poem that the mother is needed by the child, that her place in the 'museum' of blank night walls is important and necessary.

This selfless giving contrasts with a poem such as 'Face Lift' (1961, CE, p.155) where the imagery of maternity is used to explore a self-indulgent, even selfishly self-indulgent persona. Though the irony is heavy and the self's own quest for clarity and a fresh beginning through a 'new' face is treated with mockery, the underlying mood is sombre. The self seems already too tainted by life: 'fizzy with sedatives', she lies passively, 'growing backward' in an unnatural manner. The final
mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,
Pink and smooth as a baby,

celebrate caustically the demise of 'old sock face', but somehow there seems to be an acceptance of a cause lost, of superficial change rather than a deep self-transformation. The self-mothering is inadequate and comfortless.

It is as if, for Plath, the clarity of the young child can never be recaptured in the self, or in others, in any real sense. Only in the dream of a perfect mother-love can it be glimpsed; this is the ideal bond, as unrealisable in its intensity as that with the dark man. If Plath's work constructs a more independent identity through mothering than that experienced as 'handmaid' to the male, it does not amount to that of 'earth mother' - strong, rooted in her surroundings and relaxed in her physicality. Plath's poetry is never at ease with landscapes, which never seem really to 'belong' to her except when they fuse with states of mind: grief for example (bleakness after miscarriage in 'Parliament Hill Fields'), or anger ('Poppies in July'). She does not write of being one with the earth: it is too tainted, too damaged. Her perception seems to be, always, that of the outsider; even a poem on returning to childhood coastlines, 'Green Rock, Winthrop Bay' (1958, CP p.104) stresses her alienation - due, in part, perhaps to her travelling, unsettled life.

Plath's identity as a mother survives despite these problems, in spite, too, of some deeply ambivalent feelings about mothering. The recurring moon imagery for which Plath's work is well-known stresses the judgemental and distant mother. In poems such as 'Moonrise' (1958 CP p.98), 'Edge' (1963 CP p.272) and 'Jilted' Juv.
it is the mothering moon's cold efficiency, sterility of affection or even sickness which creates such a chilling picture.

M. L. Broe argues that both Plath and her own mother were 'handmaidens', 'muses' to the men in their lives, 'wasting time on tasks for others, confusing creative identity with romantic involvement'. (24) Certainly both were involved in secretarial help with their husbands' writing: a classic division of labour. Plath's rejection of this role, and her mother's continued validation of it, must have created a difference in perspective between mother and daughter.

Plath's poetry does show the influence of Robert Graves's female spiritual and physical power, the White Goddess (25), the all-generating ruler of life and death. Graves' book 'was an important influence on Plath's work' (26); Ted Hughes' initial enthusiasm, creating to what amounted to a 'White Goddess' cult while at Cambridge, drew Plath and other writers in. (27) Graves saw matriarchal myth as 'the language of true poetry'. (28)

Though seemingly empowering, this presentation of the self as matriarchal goddess raises different problems for self-image. Potentially a release from conventional images of femininity - Graves's book is excitingly charged with imagery of female godhood - there is no simple, straightforward translation of this into a powerful earth mother's elemental womanliness (problematic in itself!) because of its relation to creativity.

The White Goddess is the poetic Muse while 'the Poet' is always described as being male. Graves stresses their heterosexual relation:

a poet cannot continue to be a poet if he feels that he has made a permanent conquest of the Muse, that she is always his for the asking. (29)
He also declares that

Woman is not a poet: she is either a Muse or she is nothing. This is not to say that a woman should refrain from writing poems: only that she should write like a woman, not as if she were an honorary man.

(30)

These dictats are self-contradictory and more than puzzling for women poets. Whereas the male poet's relation to creative inspiration is unproblematic (unless of course he is gay), the woman cannot be Muse-to-herself. It is almost a restatement of the oedipal complex, where the transferring of male desire from mother to wife is so simple compared with the girl's detachment from the mother in order to desire the father.

Perceived as embodiments of creativity rather than active creators, this praise of women in matriarchal terms, which appears so empowering, actually entraps us into rigid ideological preconceptions of all a woman 'must' be to a man. Placed in the context of 1950s Cambridge, and linked with Lawrence's attitudes towards women, Graves's work, apparently so progressive, hammers another nail in the coffin of Plath's attempts to assert a strong, creatively and sexually fulfilled self-image.

Graves's work on myth cannot be treated, as it is by Judith Kroll, (31) as timeless; it is rooted, in its interpretations of ancient stories, in its own specific ideological context of the late 1940s. Graves conforms to the post-war belief that women had achieved emancipation and the struggle was over. His writing signals the true impossibility of the female equality he claims society had now brought about; therefore the ironies are many and the White Goddess is an enticing yet dangerous figure for women poets. This may be why Plath's uses of the White Goddess are not always positive. She occurs as the distant, cold, judging moon-mother, wearily bound up with the stages of the female
biological cycle and yet fundamentally patriarchal in outlook. As a mother she is no illuminator, no source of knowledge or progress for her daughter.

For Plath it seems the Muse is either herself, in which case subject and object become perilously conjoined (as in 'Thalidomide' 1962 CP p.252), or 'Poem for a Birthday' 1959 CP p.131), or else it is this moon-mother figure. Then the gulf between the moon-self and the writing-self becomes irreparable, aching with isolation.

There is certainly little sense that for Plath the 'earth mother' aspect of the White Goddess provides a strong support or makes her feel grounded and powerful among her own surrounding landscapes. What mothering happens in her poems - of herself, of her poems, of children - happens painfully from inner resources, beyond Graves.

Another problem to be tackled was that of Graves's doctrine that the Muse should never be a domesticated entity, that this inevitably tarnishes and trivialises the creative. As Plath's early romanticisation of the dark man and handmaid relationship owes a great deal to Graves, so her later celebrations of the domestic and the private, of her children and her own motherhood, show most clearly her rejection of much of the White Goddess mythology.

So the experience of 'real', lived motherhood, in contrast to immersion in matriarchal myth, proved an important development for Plath's poetry. The role of Muse and handmaiden to the dark man evidently seemed far less satisfying than formerly, even if, as J. Feit-Diehl suggests, the male may in turn have been muse to the woman poet (a relation fraught with distrust, rebellion and anxiety given that the male muse is linked with the patriarchal father and is therefore more of an adversary than a helpmeet). (32)
Even if becoming one's own Muse seemed impossible, maternal relationships offered Plath's writing some outlets for these complex issues of testing and consolidating identity. It is always as a fertile, nurturing woman that Plath's self-image returns, and childless women are seen as freakish: 'naked and bald in their furs,/Orange lollies on silver sticks.' ('The Munich Mannequins'. 1963, CP, p. 252)

She also used the White Goddess in her destructive guise. The mother could become a destroying Kali, as in 'Burning the Letters' (1962, CP, p. 262).

In her sequence of 'bee' poems, written the same year, Plath does not shrink from dealing with destructive and violent emotional forces. These poems construct a realised myth of female space. (Their definite, enclosed area of the beehive, recalls the interiors of 'Poem for a Birthday'.) (The sequence comprises 'The Bee Meeting' (CP p. 211) 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' (CP p. 212) 'Stings' (CP p. 214)) 'The Swarm' (CP p. 215) and 'Wintering' (CP p. 217).

She seized on the beehive, as 'a perfect prototype of the first human society, based upon the gynocracy of motherhood' as Neumann wrote in The Great Mother. (33) Bachofen, also, considered the beehive an important element of matriarchal myth, where the bee goddesses symbolised transformation. (34)

The hive, as metaphor for the maternal body, is supremely self-sufficient. In its many guises - 'Snug as a virgin' (TBX), a dangerous, windowless 'coffin' (ABB) or '...a teacup./With excessive love I enamelled it,/Thinking 'sweetness, sweetness' (S) - it looks inward, inside itself, not outwards.
Like 'Poem for a Birthday', these poems contain at least two selves: the hive, snug and 'virgin', is the body able to create life parthogenetically without the males, 'the blunt clumsy stumblers, the boors' (W) (importantly then, it is a symbol of innocence and 'purity'), there is also the 'queen' self (developed from the tiny embryo in the 'fusty mummy's stomach' of PFAB).

Plath's poems explore a mythos of her own, using figures recognisable from earlier phases, for example the 'magician's girl' and the surgeon (TBM), the bride and the virgin. The queen self is supreme emblem of female fertility and power with strong echoes of Emily Dickinson's 'queens'. (35) Yet in their energy and furious, aggressive drives these queen-selves seem phallic, too.

The hive is the 'womb' from which the queen ascends in her flight of transformation and regeneration. This queen self gives birth to herself in a wholly female, self-centred ritual, unlike Graves's muse or a handmaid facilitating birth and renewal for others. She has a priestess-like quality, a murderously matriarchal element which has proved disturbing yet compelling for others, such as Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich, also searching for powerful self-images. (36)

Triumphant though the queen is, she is also extremely vulnerable. Her outburst of energy, 'The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her' (BM), the dramatics of 'Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/And I eat men like air' ('Lady Lazarus' 1962 CP p.244), exposes the contradiction of dramatic self-expression, where the gesture is all, incorporating within itself its own ultimate pointlessness. The self only becomes an object to be viewed: the gesture leads to no escape or resolution but becomes, as in 'Lady Lazarus', a narcissistic spectacle for voyeurs, degrading on all sides. (This dynamic of exposure and self-revelation is readily visible in Anne Sexton's poetry.) (37)
Another contradiction is that while Plath's queen shows a triumphant femininity, she is recognisably created from the same materials as the dark man. The queen is ruthless, predatory, destructive and a loner. Her powers of revenge co-exist uneasily with self-exploitation, but she is also determined to wreak revenge on her enemies. These characteristics Plath has unrelentingly dubbed 'masculine' in earlier work.

These poems express a tremendous need for the self to rise above the mothering 'womb' of the hive and achieve a miraculous transformation into avenging female spirit, the personification of the 'red tongues' in 'PFAB'; avenging in the name of womankind in general, wrongs done to the self. The hive is also described as the 'coffin' of 'a square baby' ('ABB'): in an important sense these 'bee' poems must be seen as exploring the significance of death, the hive equally vivid as an image for the mothering body as a tomb, a prison from which the self must break free.

Yet the identity of the mother remains inescapable. The transcendent female power of the red tongues, glimpsed yet unrealised, becomes contained (like the child-self or sacrificial victim in the care of the powerful mother in 'Mary's Song' 1962 CP p.257). The formless or abstract energy becomes more and more urgent as its survival is put to question. The queen bee self is so fascinating because, fuelled by this power and desire for escape, revenge, and formlessness, it is full of contradictions. On one level it is supremely androgynous, because, as Carole Ferrier points out, the queen bee carries within herself after union the dismembered male organ: 'From that moment, possessed of a dual sex, she begins her veritable life.' (38) This element of androgy (as we saw earlier in Plath's response to Woolf's Orlando) emerges once again, to run through her work at times of particular stress over identity and gender.
Yet it cannot prevent the queen bee remaining almost despite herself, still a maternal being: the phallus within resembling the embryo child. and the female again taking responsibility, albeit in brutal terms, for the male. Freud's idea of the phallus-baby connection is obviously also relevant here. (39) Once again the impetus is Plath's desire for completeness, for wholeness, which is what by (literally) assimilating the phallus, the queen achieves.

Though ambiguous over matters like these, Plath's poems, 'Ariel' (1962 CP p.239) in particular, remain extremely sexual. The self's release is figured in orgasmic terms. In 'The Other' (1962 CP p.201) this resolution is shown as a coming together of gendered oppositions: 'the arrow' of the self flies 'Into the red/Eye, cauldron of morning.' Other poems evoke images of phallus confronting vagina. In 'Electra on Azalea Path' (1959 CP p.116) Plath writes '...at my birth-cry/A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing.' The 'cry', like the arrow, seems to suggest a phallic power carrying implications of both attack and flight; while the circular eye, described as 'cauldron' (an ancient occult female image) and scorpion, contain within themselves a repressed power to harm, a self-reflexive circling within which 'freedom' seems impossible.

This sexual tension, imposed upon severe psychological questions of identity and existence, gives Plath's late poetry its peculiar cutting edge. There appears to be no relief in the 'union' between the 'red eye' (such a needy and fierce female image!) and 'arrow'; there remains only the unresolved desire created at the moment when the arrow escapes into the air.

That some relief is needed urgently emerges from poems such as 'Lesbos' (1962 CP p.230) and 'Kindness' (1963 CP p.269), where Plath's original hostility to feminine attitudes and roles reappears. Her tone is angry and contemptuous towards other women's
compromises, as if her self-image is now moving away, aligning itself consciously and aggressively with the spinsters, lesbians and eccentrics of whom she was once wary (such as 'Ellen Mason'). The queen bee is far from domesticated; she is actually as much a threat to other females as to other males.

It is as if the urge to escape a narrowing and oppressive choice of ideological possibilities becomes overwhelming; the mythic level tries to compete with the reality, as in 'Lesbos', of depressing relationships ('the doggy husband') and empty friendships ('viciousness in the kitchen'). The achievement of Plath's poems here is their angry myth-making. Yet though they can articulate the 'upflight', the impetus towards change, they cannot articulate the result of this change itself, once the violent transformation has taken place.

Conclusion

In discussing 'The Disquieting Muses' Mary Lynn Broe writes that while Plath 'dwells on the very energy of growth or change, she lacks the guidance or experience to define this process...to put her image, quite simply, into words. In the excitement of self-metamorphosis, Sylvia...exposes to us the candour of her formlessness. the risk of non-definition'. (1)

I would say that Plath's poetry does indeed expose a risk of formlessness. but that this is quite distinct from a failure to find form or definition, as Broe suggests. Instead Plath's work stares fearlessly into an existential vacuum. The energies and desires of the writing are so fierce that the concept of possessing a central, whole self must be thrown constantly into jeopardy. I wonder if this could be controlled, anyway, by 'guidance or experience'. It seems to me that Plath's writing meets head on and fearlessly the 'risk of formlessness' - the vision of a self non-
existent except in terms of fragments endlessly flying away from each other.

The power of Plath's poetry derives from its number of contradictory elements held in tension. As indicated above, these include disillusionment with a previously idealised great love; negotiations of feminine identity; rage at a sense of 'female' creativity thwarted and contained; and attempts to incorporate constructions of masculinity and femininity which involve ambiguous and deeply contradicting relationships with each other. It expresses, too, an urgent sense of betrayal and bitterness over the sexual role 'con trick' increasingly after mid-1962, when poems shift their focus from the self as woman, with ambiguities and ambivalences, to a rage against the male and a corresponding feeling of the self's loss of bearings. All these elements create upheaval and continual disequilibrium.

Plath's work struggles through a series of repressive feminine identities too, from the spinster and Venus opposition to the rosebud and slut of the 1950s; from the happy housewife and mother to the avenging angel of the 1960s. It is a remarkable aspect of her poetry that it operates within such exaggerated either/or scenarios, evidence of a mind which works in a fierce and absolute dialectic. It is interesting that in Plath's earliest work such oppositional figures recur, and in such heightened form, signifying that for her these conflicting identities were all there was on offer, even for an intelligent and privileged daughter of a working mother. (2)

Yet the force of the poems themselves as they develop constitutes an important element of challenge through their barely-articulated desires. The writing's continual assault upon meaning at its fundamental level, exploring its very underlying acceptance of rigid gender divisions, creates an untenable imbalance when those demarcations are evoked, and the writing struggles to reassert them.

- 106 -
This conception of rigid and ultimately immutable gender divisions forms the basis for the writing's proto-feminism. I use this term although Plath was not calling for any collective female action, and a reader sometimes suspects that she didn't actually much like women! 'Proto-feminist', tentatively used, is valid because of Plath's angry rebellion against masculine culture and values, though it can not be denied that her writing depicts women as second best, that she wanted to be male, or that however much she came to despise masculinity she recognised it as still dominant! It could be argued that her myths emerged from attempts to glorify and valorize a negative self-image.

I find it interesting that Plath's work concentrates so much on issues of gender and sexuality. There is, in comparison, little contemplation of religious elements, except in relation to sex. Metaphysical and philosophical questions become couched in this debate too. Although later poems evince a cynicism about much of the 'male' world and masculine approaches to meaning, and conventional female roles filled Plath with scorn and despair, she continues to seek for possibility in areas which have yielded only frustration.

It is this voice of disillusionment and anger which I hear most clearly in Plath's poetry. The world has failed to come up with answers, escapes, room for herself as a woman to move and to grow. The great anger in Plath's work is not lost on Elizabeth Hardwick, who describes the poetry as 'brutal, like the smash of a fist' and talks of 'the exceptional rasp of her nature', going on to conclude that through Plath's 'fascination with death and pain she brings a sense of combat and brute force new in women writers.' (3)

Plath's work has, like Sexton's, been seen as emerging from its period (that of, predominantly, the 'feminine mystique') and raising questions as part of a process of change. Feminist critics writing in the 1970s saw the 1950s and early 60s as a time firmly separated from contemporary events, as if divided into an ideological 'before' and 'after'. Writing in the late 1980s, however, matters seem less clear-
Plath's rage and disillusion at her limited choices seem to be so familiar, typifying female frustrations.

Yet we must also see the work in terms of its own specific time, as witness to the phenomenon that Elizabeth Wilson noted in *Halfway to Paradise* (4); the 'proletarianisation' of middle-class, graduate women after World War Two. Plath's writing, in which dreams of glory and success figure so urgently, is produced from within a material condition - responsibility for childcare, housework - which cannot help but contribute to disillusion. In Plath's case, her commitment to marriage, motherhood and home-making, at some cost to ambition, came to nothing through divorce. To have settled so much on personal relationships and then have them fail must have been overwhelming. Plath's poetry concentrates almost entirely on aspects of the personal life and upon relationships. Even the widest subjects which concerned her, such as catastrophe and genocide, she saw in terms of these immediate concerns. Such an important element of her self-image was the wife and mother that to lose this must have been devastating. Other roles, such as femme fatale ('I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair. / I should wear tiger pants. I should have an affair.' 'Lesbos' 1962, CP p.227) sit uneasily and seem superficial, unsatisfying in comparison.

Juhasz has seen Plath's life and work in terms of a 'split' between two conflicting identities - that of 'poet' (quasi-male, in Graves's terms) and 'woman'. (5) This split, seen in terms of an inability to achieve a whole and integrated subjectivity, has been mythologised, partly because of the way Plath's life ended.

I hesitate to accept Juhasz's 'split', which seems to me to be based upon the same rigid gender dualism of exclusive categories as that criticized in Plath's own work by Joyce Carol Oates. (6) Though Plath's work itself articulates strong ideas on what is masculine.
and feminine, I feel it also explores these, develops and attempts to accommodate them in new ways within her self-image. Therefore the interplay and volatility of gender (however painful) in Plath's writing, rather than an unhealable and rigidly-demarcated 'split', is what I would like to emphasise.

Returning to M. L. Broe's point about Plath's desire for 'formlessness', I feel that this desire is both an individual response and also part of a general trend of contemporary poetry, to move beyond the personal, to escape from the straitjacket of the self (as Alan Williamson says, Plath's poetry 'often expresses a desire to leave the personal sense of self behind, to attain some mode of being that is conscious, yet impersonal...to realize and inhabit a larger than personal...mode of selfhood'). (7) There existed no discourse in the 1950s and 60s to voice such disillusionment with specifically female existence. The discourse of mental illness was becoming fashionable as a means of explaining alienated creativity: it may be that Plath's work accepted this (even though it tended to be distorting) since it could help to explain disgust, despair and a sense of life melting away into meaninglessness. The 'formlessness' of states of mental vulnerability may have offered relief and escape from the over-restricted forms and codes of domestic and social existence.

Plath's work depended on myth to mask and give meaning to the depressing realities of life. The withdrawal and cold fatalism of her last poems are often read in the light of her subsequent suicide. Of course the poems show despair and hopelessness. But importantly they also indicate isolation, not only in personal terms but in a far wider sense too; an isolation from the mainstream, of the world of ideas, the literary arguments and cultural establishment which her work had outstripped. Plath's writing is at the fulcrum, ushering in feminism and the emerging fragmentation of interest-groups in society such as women, Blacks, American Indians, etc., from post-modernism: her proto-feminism is
suffused with an angry individualism and a profound sense of existential loneliness.

The poetry feels the injustices of gender; yet can see no way forwards, no sense of collective identity. While acceptance of the discourse of madness or breakdown is in one sense a rebellion against society, it is also, as Elizabeth Wilson points out, a depoliticisation of the political, a flight back into defensive individuality. (8)

Plath's 'queen' was ultimately her body: her work treats it as a fetish, and is ultimately self-reflexive, turning back to what can (perhaps) be controlled, in a world where everything else seems out of control and uncertain (and where one feels powerless). The female body is also constructed as a landscape, a place of 'nature' - a valuable visionary space, but of necessity becoming a place of exile from the 'real' world out there. (9)

The queen bee explodes from the hive into self-destruction; the woman in 'Edze' lies completed, a still life, her body her final accomplishment. Plath's dilemma in 1963 was a similar one to that experienced by feminist writers a decade later, who asked 'After anger, what is to be our subject?' - a question even more pointed if, as for Plath, neither the masculine nor the feminine seemed enough and gender identity, or sexuality, seemed the elusive key to comprehending the self.
CHAPTER ONE: Footnotes

Section 1


Section 2

1. Journals, Feb. 25, p. 110, 1956: 'My God, I'd like to cook and make a house, and surge force into a man's dreams ... I can't bear to think of this potential for loving and giving going brown and sere in me.'

2. The spinster has 'rat-shrewd' and 'squint' eyes; 'bitter/and sallow as any lemon', she's opposed to 'the sun's bride', who lies 'lulled' near poppies, passive. 'Lemons', and 'poppies' are images Plath uses continuously later to evoke distinct types of women and their experiences as female.


4. Journals, 1953, March 1, p. 75: 'Silver high heels are the next purchase - symbolising my emancipation from walking flat-footed ... Silver-winged bodice of strapless floating-net gown.' Similarly, in early letters to her mother, Plath's vantage-point required them both to 'see' the spectacle of Sylvia as if this radiant princess were a creation produced between them: 'you would have been supremely happy if you had seen me. I know I looked beautiful ... Imagine ... to have a handsome ... male kiss your hand ... ' Letters Home, p. 78; October 8, 1951, 'To have had you see me! I'm sure you would have cried for joy.' Letters Home p. 79, October 8, 1951.

Letter to Mother, March 3, 1953, p. 105. 'The dress is hanging up ... in all its silvery glory ... I got ... the most classic pair of silver pumps ... I should look like a silver princess - or feel like one anyway.'
Section 3

1. Examples of the Dark Man, 1956:

   **Journals**, Jan 20, 1958, p.186: 'I see the back of the black head of a stranger, dark against the light ... black sweater, black trousers and shoes ... This one I have chosen and am forever wedded to him.'

   (Ted Hughes is referred to continually in the **Journals** as wearing black clothes and jackets.)

   The Demon lover's 'moons of black' ("On looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover", **CE**, p.325, Juvenilia); the 'Miner's boy', hero


In this context, it is not difficult to see how important the 'hero' becomes for the self, in terms of defining one's femininity, not that Plath obviously wrote from within this romantic tradition.


Plath read Lady Chatterley's Lover, Sons and Lovers, Women in Love all day: 'Love, Love: Why do I feel I would have known and loved Lawrence ... This is the stuff of my life.'

4. E. Wilson, Halfway to Paradise, p.135.

5. Note Hughes's working class background. Father was a carpenter, then owner of tobacconist's. Hughes's grammar school and Cambridge scholarship, 1948, after two years in RAF.

Sylvia Plath's mythic picture contrasts with that of his tutor, Miss Burton, who described TH as 'a slightly gangling, not altogether couth type, who was certainly tough.' Butscher, p. 198, Method and Madness.


Blessing states that Plath's sexual myth, of dominance and submission ('complementary strategies for survival') is fuelled by a 'transference of energy between victim and victimiser that enables each to become the other, at least in the imagination.'


Plath's unpublished Smith College Honours Thesis, The Magic Mirror (1955) was a study of the double in two Dostoyevsky novels, The Double and The Brothers Karamazov. She read articles by Otto Rank (but not his definitive The Double, translated only in 1971), Dorian Gray, Jekyll and Hyde; Poe; Freud; Jung; - 'all
very participal in the deadly, sterile, quantities, in
various times in The Devil's Harvest, 1965, p. 193. It also seems
25. Funnel, as also an image with resonance in Pather's poems. A
24. As in The Kindness, 1963, CF. p. 262; Children's Woman,
18. A. Voil, To the Lighthouse, 1927.
12. Annette Lavers, The World as Icon: On Syntia Patrick,

Insects couple as they murder each other.

devising, falling, her sexuality and murders, where the
another blue escape. Like the physical sense of Beat love as all-
marking to better the self-image, falling from one escape and
are extra, for the sake of, thinking this much of existence, and
life. For love, the world, getting the world's experience, and
11. Red Hughes, Falling, s, cribbed, p. 21, Selected Poems.


the poem in Letters, Home (in a letter to her mother).

This stanza not in Collected Poems. It is quoted with

4.1 to 4.3.

Far, B. Butcher (ed.), The Woman and the Work, 1977, Peter Owen.
1.4.160; also, A. Laver, The Doubt, in Syntia Patrick's Belt
the power of death (e.g., cruelty, the idea of the soul as the
mortal body), letters, Oct. 15, 1944.

Noting stuff about the ego as symbolized in reflections
Section 4

1. E. Aird, Sylvia Plath, 1974, Barnes and Noble, N.Y., p.44.


15. E. Wilson, Halfway to Paradise, p.151.

16. Quoted in E. Wilson, p.57.


- 115 -
21. 'American Women', Mothers and More, p.30-35. Also Mary Beard's thesis is that 'Women steadily maintained civilisation in the face of male barbarism' through social work; apolitical and voluntary, but 1950s women became 'a force rather than a statistic', (p.31), Mary R. Beard, Woman as Force in History, N.Y., 1946.


36. The investigative self of Rich's poem, 'Diving into the Wreck'; the vengeful, angry (if more repressed) female self in Atwood's sequence, Power Politics.

38. C. Ferrier, 'The beekeeper's apprentice', p.209, from (ed.)
       G. Lane, *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, Johns Hopkins

39. Freud, 'On Transformations of Instinct as Exemplified in Anal

Conclusion

1. M.L. Br-ee, 'A Subtle Psychic Bond: The Mother Figure in
       Sylvia Plath's Poetry', p.255, in *The Lost Tradition: Mothers
       and Daughters in Literature*, (eds.) C. Davidson and E. Broner, Fred

2. *As Mothers and More* shows, 1950s females increasingly worked
       outside the home in many fields.

       No.2, on Sylvia Plath, p.3 and p.6.

4. E. Wilson, *Halfway to Paradise*, p.55, Chapter 3, 'Right to
       Work'.

       *Naked and Fiery Forms*.

6. J.C. Oates, 'The Death-Throes of Romanticism', in E. Butscher,
       *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*, Peter Owen, 1977,
       p.206.

       University Press, 'Real and Numinous Selves: A Reading of

8. E. Wilson, *Halfway to Paradise*, Ch. 6, 'Sanity and Madness'.

9. 'A Kingdom and a Place of Exile': Women Writers and the World
       of Nature', Dorothy Jones, p.257; in *World Literature Written
CHAPTER TWO: ANNE SEXTON

Section 1

Anne Sexton's writing spans the middle 1950s (her first poem was 'You, Doctor Martin', written in 1956, CP p.3) to her death in 1974. The late fifties and early sixties, as we have seen in the discussion of Plath's work, formed a period when the disjunction between ideology and women's lived experience was becoming increasingly visible, and the consensus was being tested on many fronts. Sexton's poetry accordingly articulates some of this contemporary atmosphere of rawness, urgency and uncertainty over change.

Sexton's writing begins from quite different premises from those of Plath's. Sexton wrote her first poems during convalescence after a post-partum breakdown, encouraged to write as a form of therapy. (1) She wrote as a beginner, an outsider to any literary circle, and as a self-styled 'primitive'. These initial self-images shaped Sexton's identity as poet significantly and lastingly. She had no literary, studious or graduate background, instead a past of non-academic interests, a youthful marriage to a wealthy businessman, and the traumatic experience of childbirth with a subsequent breakdown.

The poems did begin, however, formally and carefully-crafted, with attention given to rhyme and metre in the style of the 1950s. They deal (as with 'You, Doctor Martin') with mental distress and upheaval; their tensions between the form and the content are worth noticing from the start. Fairly quickly they become more experimental and associative in imagery (for example, 'Funnel', from Sexton's first collection, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, 1960, in CP p.20). They begin to test taboos and become more deliberately outspoken, even provocative. Their immediacy and directness
certainly influenced Plath's work when the two met in 1959. (2) This openness was not always unproblematic for Sexton, as Maxine Kumin points out:

Accused of exhibitionism, she was determined only to be more flamboyant; nevertheless the strict Puritan hiding inside her suffered and grieved over the label of 'confessional poet'. (3)

This dialectic of exposure and desire for concealment becomes evident in other poetry of the 1960s with liberalising of taboos and new uncertainties over where sexual, cultural and political boundaries be drawn. (4) Sexton is perhaps one of the best known of the 'confessional' poets; she is certainly the most prominent woman of the grouping. (Plath's work was linked with them, for instance, by such as Al Alvarez in his *The Savage God* [1971] where he connected creativity with testing one's madness and self-destruction to the limits. But Plath's isolation in England, and death in 1963, effectively preclude her from really being part of this nebulous 'group' of other vulnerable poets such as Robert Lowell and John Berryman.) Sexton's consciousness of her gender gives her writing its unmistakable edge; it also gives it a particular vulnerability.

In American late 1950s society with its general sense of 'debasement' of language through the mass media's promulgation of consumerist ethics, poetry's retreat from the debased public sphere to the private and subjective began. In this context 'confessional' poetry not only emerged as part of the vogue for the ultra-personal, but as a particular kind of writing which focussed on self-analysis and a public process of self-display. 'The creative mind becomes the supreme object of poetic contemplation',

- 119 -
as Ehrenpreis points out. (5) Its concerns tended to centre on mental breakdown and the self's slow return from illness, as in Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* (1956) or on marital breakdown, as in W.D. Snodgrass' *Heart's Needle* (also 1956).

Confessional poetry, Geoffrey Thurley believes, (6) achieves no connection between the self and the world, and cannot foster 'the self becoming visible to itself', because the 1950s Freudian self (the lynch-pin of 'confessional' poetry) is too passive; the potential confrontation with the self is avoided since the analyst fills in the gap as mother or father substitute. Although this is rather harsh, it has some relevance to Sexton's poetry. The self-image remains always that of the daughter and wife, subordinate to others and dependent upon them for approval. Though it expresses something of Plath's defiant loneliness at the casting-off of others (Sexton also divorced) and of Rich and Atwood's painfully-acquired independence, it always returns to the sense of vulnerability and inability to survive alone.

Yet Sexton's poetry does achieve a connection with its context: it speaks to its time, particularly in the sense that it articulates a female subjectivity struggling to define itself and to survive on something like its own terms.

The radical impetus of 'confessional' poetry was soon lost when the shock of its assault on the taboo faded and it became the victim of a publicity blitz, feted by the media and encouraged in its more sensational aspects. Criticism also turned against it. Mazzaro felt that the poetry of the 50s, with Lowell its new Auden figure, tended to be conservative, involving a 'cult of the self'. Thurley considered the school encouraged 'reification of the self' and C. Molesworth declared that, dislocated from an audience and social values, these poets became 'caretakers of their own obsessions'. (7) Sexton's work shows signs of this pressure to go further and say more, in the wild, disjointed poems of the early
1970s when confessional poetry had lost its power to shock and was considered a little out of date.

After a comparatively late start, Sexton's first poems were published quickly. Her mentors were all male 'father' figures - W.D. Snodgrass, John Holmes, Robert Lowell - and her career speedily gathered impetus. Her first collection was published in 1960, a year before Plath's; she achieved far greater fame in her lifetime than did Plath. Their work was of great importance to one another. Sexton's looser, more directly-expressed poems helped Plath to explore hitherto unused areas of experience in a more freely-emotional way. Sexton, on the other hand, drew deeply upon the power and rage of Plath's poems, the acerbity and brevity of their expression and their vivid images of oppressor and oppressed.

Both poets presented themselves as set apart from others because of their psychiatric histories. Elizabeth Wilson points out that the post-political quest of the 1950s was to explore individuality; 'but this uncovered a recognition of existential loneliness' which was fearful: remedies lay, then, in psychiatry with its comforting emphasis on control, on social adjustment and resumption of the status quo. Sexton's problems have been exaggerated by some critics, who have focussed on her supposed mental instability, imbuing it with a sickly 'glamour' as if it proved her status as an artist.
It is, however, significant that this belief (that breakdown somehow validates the self and makes it 'real') should form such a central part of the poet's subjectivity. Both Sexton and Plath saw themselves as outsiders, pretenders: to a large extent victims of their mental states. It is interesting that Atwood's and Rich's poetry, equally intense, often painful and dealing with painful subjects, constructs a series of self-images which do not accept or admit notions of 'madness', even though the female selves described are also outsiders to society and often experiencing extreme psychological tension.

The psychiatric discourse was very modern and beguiling in the 1950s. It explained away social problems in terms of the disturbed individual. As for Sexton's post-partum illness, it is pointed out in Mothers and More that hospitalisation for 'baby blues' was then standard, and the labelling of psychiatric intervention indelible. While analysis for middle-class women tended to bolster low self-esteem, Eugenia Kaledin goes on to argue that the psychiatric profession ultimately 'reinforced rather than dispelled women's lack of self-esteem', by encouraging patients' dependence. (9) It is worth also noting that popular culture of the 50s tended to define independent women as 'neurotic' and sick for wanting more than the domestic sphere. It tended to suppose that women's mental health would be improved by remaining in the home. (10) What is relevant here, however, is the effect this early medicalisation had upon Sexton's self-image and how this self-image is explored in the poems.

Being 'ill' and/or 'insane' quickly became integral to Sexton's identity as a poet, states of crisis and writing being connected closely together in her life. Although her poems evince a courageous struggle against severe depression and a recurring death-wish, they also reflect a very tangible sense of passivity, an acceptance of illness, of being flawed and unhealable.
On the one hand this 'mad' identity offers a release from constricting social and gender definitions: Sexton's self-images include witch, wisewoman, God-woman, even a quasi Christ figure. On the other it dislocates Sexton from any sense of social or historical purpose. As marginal and strange the self goes into freefall, floating away from moral, historical or social responsibility and sense of place or importance.

Deeply Freudian in its outlook, Sexton's poetry explores the socialisation into femininity of the little girl self within the family. Though her work seems to test and challenge gender divisions, deep down it accepts the status quo; all the manoeuvrings are undertaken within this acceptance. Sexton's self-images never long for masculine attributes at any time; they celebrate their femininity in many of the guises so offensive to Plath - the housewife, for example, made-up and entertaining. Sexton's rebellion lies partly in dislike for the self: its shortcomings in the feminine role, its ugliness or madness. In rebelliousness, too, she turns constantly to masculine authority for reassurance, reproducing the dominant discourse of the deep-seated inferiority of the feminine.

Sexton's poems challenge because they demand: the feminine self takes central stage and demands that her needs be recognised, even if they cannot be understood or acted upon. Crucially, her self-images exist in conscious conflict with one another, one negating or highly critical of the other: the woman poet/businessman's wife; the conformist/witch; the conservative's wife/the radical, etc.
wife/the radical, etc. It is, for Sexton, the act of poetry that makes this assumption of centrality possible: and this, rather than her outrageous subject-matter, is her true rebellion.

This chapter explores Sexton's concern with the nuclear family of the American Dream, and the place of the self, growing up within it as daughter, then in adult life as mother and wife. Sexton's connection of early childhood traumas with adult female sexuality is intimate, vivid and unrestrained: her poems deal with the infantilising of the feminine. As in Plath's work, myth-making is a powerful element: Sexton's poetry mythologises the family and the Freudian Family Romance.

There is a continual tension between the desire to remain safe and protected within the mythic family, and the need to escape and be free of its repression. (This echoes a contemporary tension between the theory of behaviourism, popular in the 1950s, which emphasises the self as passively conditioned by environment, and the impetus towards freedom and leaving heredity behind.) Even Sexton's final poems, which deal with a religious crisis, frame this within recognisably familial parameters: the cyclical struggle begins again as the child of powerful elders struggles with her mutually impossible goals to escape and yet to win approval.
Section 2: The Family: Daughter and Witch

The family is central to Sexton's poetry. The self's Alice-like figure exists within its vicelike grip, prey to its adults' giant needs and whims; haunted by dreams of escape and threats of imprisonment. The poems mythologise the family to emphasise its repressiveness and its suppressed emotional and sexual desires, using folklore and themes of the occult. In fact, with its imagery of darkness and entrapment, the scenario is a typically Gothic one. In this context, Karen Stein sees every choice made by a woman (to assume roles of daughter, wife, mother, carer) involving 'a painful renunciation', a splitting process in which one loses parts of the self. Given such violence, madness can emerge as 'the means of an inner journey out of deadlock.' (1)

At the centre of the family is the small daughter; she inhabits, as central, controlling consciousness, its innermost space, the rooms of which are menacing, full of 'big black' darkness ('Hurry Up Please It's Time' CP p. 390 1974) seen from a child's perspective as enormous and yet somehow claustrophobic. This childlike self is the 'eye' of the family, all-seeing (both as child and, with hindsight, as an adult writing of the past), its victim and master.

Elizabeth Wilson argues that the family is the site of deep-set contradictions, particularly in the area of sexuality. It is the place where sex is most forbidden and taboo; yet the place where, socially, the only legitimate sexual activity can occur. (2) Sexton's poetry plays on these contradictions, testing and exploring the boundaries between the sanctioned and the unsanctioned - in terms of desire, violence and struggle over power. As the protagonist at the heart of this grim scenario the child-self experiences 'little childhood cruelties', 'locked in my room all day' ('Those Times' CP p. 118, 1963), yet can also punish and wound those around her: 'I have pushed you in and out like a
needle. /Funny digits, I have danced upon your trunk/and I have knelt on your torso' ('KE 6-8018' CP p.141 1966).

The poems set out to articulate a sealed-off family world of mutual anxiety and guilt. In such an atmosphere any personal development, social or sexual, becomes hard to imagine: the figures appear stunted and distorted, unable to change or grow from their limited reflexive role-playing. Secrets play an important role, as if there is always a confusing sub-text which distorts meaning. A crucial theme is failure to love; the parents cannot love the child as she needs in order to experience the self as important, valid and safe. The parents cannot love one another, and cannot be loved enough by their child in return. What connects them is depicted as dependence and neediness rather than anything positive. This view of intimacy - as weakening rather than empowering - remains throughout Sexton's entire work.

A weary boredom is also expressed within the atmosphere of women left at home with children, a boredom which breeds cruelty and malice on both sides. Sexton's poems explore the antithesis of the public image of the 1950s full-time mother, with the mother's energies warped into mistreating the child, and the daughter's developing powers distorted, made ugly and turned against her:

I was ...
the one ...
with an old red hook in her mouth,
the mouth that kept bleeding. ('Love Song' 1966 CP p.115, LoD)
(This is reminiscent of one of Plath's images when describing the
self as a daughter - 'My own blue razor rusting in my throat'. (3)
Each focuses the imagery of self-mutilation on the mouth and
throat: the channels of speech.)

There rarely emerges any idea of alternatives to this seemingly
unbearable family existence. Beyond its restrictive embrace lie
loneliness and complete loss of identity. The family is so crucial
precisely because it is the lynch-pin of Sexton's dark mythic
representation of origins, of her poetry's exploration of personal
history. Even at its most rebellious, her poetry constructs the
self wholly in terms of its family context.

Sexton's work is fascinated by authority and power. (Maxine
Kumin writes that Sexton's quest was, ultimately, for 'the
patriarchal final arbiter' (4) - God, father, lover all in one.) The
father is a charismatic, glamorous and successful figure. In
comparison with Plath's much more distant and chilly evocations of
the father, he is a strong physical presence. With this potent,
dominant masculinity the daughter first flirts:

Father...
we were conspirators,
secret actors,
and I kissed you ('Santa' from 'The Death of the
Fathers', 1972, CP p.327
from Bk of Folly)

Yet this power is ambiguous. The father seems also subject to
manipulation by the daughter who
mussed his curly black hair
and touched his ten tar-fingers
and swallowed down his whiskey-breath ('Begat' from DOTF
1972, CP p.327)

It is almost, in a sinister sense, that the daughter's affection
involves a desire to 'ingest' the father, to swallow him and erase
the boundaries of their separate identities. A similar desire
emerges in other poems where intimacy invokes images of eating and
being eaten, like 'I am your daughter, your sweetmeat', ('The Sun'
1964 LoD CP p.97).

The daughter's desire for such intimacy is fraught with
uncertainty: the father is unpredictable, his authority oppressive
as well as benign. He, too, oversteps the line:

drunkenly bent over my bed,
circling the abyss like a shark,
my father thick upon me
like some sleeping jellyfish. ('Briar Rose' 1971 T
CP p.294)

In this and many other poems, the father's attentions are sexual,
and carry with them a confusing blend of obligation with desire,
excitement with dread. See, for example, 'Father I'm thirty-
six/yet I lie here in your crib,/I'm getting born again, Adam,/as
you prod me with your rib ...' ('Cripples and other Stories' 1966
LoD CP p.163) and 'we danced, Father, we orbited/We moved like two
birds on fire', ('How We Danced' from TDOF Bk of Folly 1972 CP
p.323.)
For Sexton, material possessions are vital as signifiers of existence and meaning. The poems concentrate on the father's belongings as the illusory sources of his status and identity. His masculinity is predicated upon his material possessions. In the process he becomes merely another Gatsby, betrayed by the American Dream, a catalogue of 'tickets', 'maps', 'reservations', 'complex itineraries', 'matched luggage' and a 'Cadillac': a hollow man made real only through the wealth he brings home - 'the man who filled my plate.' ('And One For My Dame' LoD CP p.95 1966) There is a curious and unresolved tension here. Sexton's poems indicate that this kind of masculinity is, in the end, a sham - based on status symbols - and yet they still validate it as a source of authority. It is the active, worldly masculinity the daughter-self desires. When the father is presented, on his 'monthly bender', showing his secret, needy, vulnerable and above all home-based self, face 'bloated and pink', his opulent trappings (the 'custom-made pyjamas') simply make him seem absurd and pitiful, as if an imposter were wearing them. ('The Horse' AMPO 1962 CP p.72) It is as if he has forfeited his super-masculinity and become quasi-feminine. The daughter's role is confused; she is both accomplice and judge. Nothing is as it seems. The masculinity presented here is as inflexible (and as unforgivingly perceived) as that in Plath's poems on the dark man. Sexton explores her loss of innocence and coming to see the father as merely human in the long sequence 'Death of The Fathers' (BOF 1972).

Sexton's poetry explores the family by opposing two worlds. The outside world is where appearances can and must be maintained: the other world of home is where those appearances crumble. Neither world is experienced as 'true' or real so that there is as a constant shifting of allegiance. For the daughter-self, neither offers safety or authenticity; each illuminates the other's failings.

The confusion articulated here contributes to an abiding uncertainty over who the self can or might be, either at home or outside. Sexton's work is preoccupied with details of appearance, as if putting together a
sustained image or a smooth surface could in itself create an identity within. Underlying the details is the implication that the effort is futile, only adding to further illusion.

Sexton's Freudian approach to the family and its taboos attempts to recall the deepest psychological elements of early life. I suspect her own experience of analysis may have contributed to her poetry's particular concentration on the family and the Freudian 'family romance'.

There is also a strong element of fatalism, as if nothing can ever change (Sexton used, for her Love Poems, WB Yeats's words: 'Everything that has been shall be again.') Accordingly the father's power seems unassailable. 'For here is my father ... larger than God or the Devil./He is my history.' (5)

The mother is equally important for her effects on the daughter's self-esteem and internalising of feminine identity. Sexton portrays the mother as a rival therefore the battle-lines are drawn from the start between mother and daughter. Sexton's letters describe how her mother aspired to a literary career but married instead. She herself had written poems at school but when she showed them to her mother was hurt enough by the negative reaction to stop writing. (6). This incident is described in an interview with Barbara Kevles in 1968: 'My mother said ... I had plagiarised Sara Teasdale ... I had been writing a poem a day for 3 months, but when she said that, I stopped ... My mother was top billing in our house.' (7)
The most important point here is that for Sexton the mother is basically unloving. The father's love may be flawed, myopic and oppressing but at least it is felt. In a poem mourning her mother's death, 'Christmas Eve' (1966 LoD CP p.139) the images describing her are cold: 'oh sharp diamond, my mother!' she is 'jewel-fingered', her face 'calm as the moon'. When the daughter tries to summon back her mother's memory she feels only a sense of distance and dislocation:

The smile that gathered me in, all wit,
All charm, was invincible.
Hour after hour I looked at your face,
but I could not pull the roots out of it.

Not only are the images cold, they are all also of the surface - the diamonds, the jewels, the charm of the smile - all mechanisms which seem deliberately to have kept the daughter at a distance. Like the father's, the mother's material possessions are emphasised - the fur coats, jewels, eyeglasses and shoes - all the accoutrements of an affluent femininity. In Sexton's many poems of mourning and reminiscence about her parents, the edge of anger is more apparent when dealing with her mother. In wanting to 'pull the roots out' Sexton wants to get beneath the masks and the protective surfaces and reach the authentic mother, of whose unconditional love she can only fantasise, and for whom she has such confused and complex feelings. 'What do we do with our old hate?' she asked, writing of her guilt over her mother.(8)

For the daughter the mother represents a figure of frightening importance, whose approval is crucial. She is also the embodiment of a fully-developed femininity, giving rise to jealousy: 'She is like a
star ... everything MUST center around her.' (9) Her cold, punitive, forbidding characteristics form a threat to the daughter's emerging identity (with its desire for the waywardness which seems so attractive in the father) and once again the poems return to a fatalistic acceptance that the daughter's future is an inescapable repetition of her mother's:

A woman is her mother.
That's the main thing. ('Housewife' AMPO 1962 CP p. 77)

Sexton's parents died within three months of each other in 1959. The double shock seems to have imprinted itself on Sexton indelibly. In 'For The Year of the Insane' (LoD 1966 CP p. 131) she dreams of healing and being healed through an idealised version of her mother (playing on her mother's name, Mary, while also invoking the Virgin Mary) and using the image of the other as a 'window' for release, new vision. But the mother stays blind and the self cannot escape from her own suffering. 'I am in my own mind. / I am locked in the wrong house.' Any imaginary merging with this perfect mother, and fleeing their respective traps, becomes impossible. The (real) mother simply becomes a grim spectre of the poet's own destiny.

The daughter follows the mother into the world of the medical institution and the helpless female patient, 'hung up like a saddle' in 'The Operation' (AMPO 1962 CP p. 56). This becomes a twisted initiation into an adult femininity already validated by the mother. It is also a defiant assertion of central space: it is the daughter, not the mother, who now undergoes the ritual, and celebrates herself: 'Pale as an angel I float out over my own skin'. But childhood needs and terrors emerge: three times in the poem she calls for her mother as a child might. The push-pull dynamic of rejection and need emerges vividly here, and the difficulty, as Carol Pearson argues, 'for a woman to distinguish her mother's attributes from her own feelings about herself' (10) in the process of differentiation.
In writing so frankly and directly about this typically female experience of illness ('I, who must, allow the oily rape' of vaginal examination is a particularly vivid example) Sexton contributed to a new agenda in women's poetry. Yet there is something disturbing in her fascination with illness, which her writing definitely connects with femininity. It is as if illness were the typical feminine state. Feelings of rage and helplessness, desire and need, employ physical and psychological symptoms as their conductive 'language'. (Interestingly the poems tend to divide the parental roles, with mother as patient and father-figure as doctor. The 'Letters to Dr Y' sequence (1960-1970, CP p. 561) constructs the psychiatrist as the loving fatherly listener.)

Sexton's recurring image for her mother's cancer is that of a pregnancy, in a sombre inversion of images dealing with life and dying. Even worse, she equates her own conception with her mother's later illness:

It grew in her
as simply as a child would grow
as simply as she housed me once, fat and female

and:

Her belly was big with another child,
cancer's baby, big as a football ('The Death Baby' 1974 DN CP p. 356)

Though this poem evokes powerful and moving images of the mother's death as a kind of labour, towards the release of death rather than the production of new life, there remains, for me, a sense of unease on reading it: a sense that for Sexton, suffering, illness and death all seem intrinsic to womanhood, valorised in feminine terms rather as battle-wounds and glorious deaths are glorified by masculine discourse.
A complicated personal element of guilt emerges clearly in 'The Double Image' (1960, TBAF WB, CP p.35) where the mother's illness becomes the 'fault' of the daughter (through her breakdown).

'I cannot forgive your suicide,
My mother said.

... my mother grew ill.
She turned from me, as if death were catching,
as if death transferred,
as if my dying had eaten inside of her.

...........

On the first of September she looked at me
and said I gave her cancer.'

The daughter-self's guilt is suffused with rage, too, at the mother's passive shifting of responsibility on to her daughter, though this is faintly and obliquely expressed. Conflict emerges more clearly between the 'active' sense of self as daughter - (whether trying to kill herself, or setting off the mother's cancer, or having babies and giving them up) and the passivity of the mother who merely 'is' her illness, a sign or symbol, unanswerable in her powerful, godlike state.

For the daughter the mother becomes 'sweet girl, my deathbed' ('Christmas Eve' LoD 1966 CP p.139); much of her power resides in the daughter's fatalistic awareness that she, too, must come to a similar end:

you come, a brave ghost, to fix
in my mind without praise
or paradise

-134-
to make me your inheritor. (‘The Division of Parts’ TB 1960, CP p.46)

Sexton's idea of the mother sets the agenda for many of the poems which explore adult womanhood. It is the illness itself, not the mother's stoicism or courage, which gives her the iconic quality which fascinates Sexton. It seems that the daughter-self wishes for this kind of quality to assume centre stage herself and step inside the identity which seems to bring not merely wholeness and resolution, but also exterior concern, love and attention.

In 'The Addict' (LoD, 1966, CP p.165) Sexton's writing links her desire for suicide with an affirmation of her femininity: asserting she is 'the queen of this condition', she lies on her 'altar/elevated by the eight chemical kisses' and says, 'The pills are a mother, but better'.

There are no flirtatious or even affectionate undertones in the daughter's relationship with the mother, as there were with the father. Instead the mother's everyday care is harsh, and over-controlling. Linda Mizejewski notes the desire in Sexton's poems to escape containment (as in 'The Starry Night', AMPO 1962, CP p.53) and places this desire in a tradition of 'uncontained women' - the 'flying hurricane' rather than the procreative 'vessel'. (11) If the mother represents, traditionally, social and sexual containment for the daughter, then the desire to escape must be fraught with guilt and the tensions of differentiation. Sexton's poems do show an exaggerated dichotomy between images of the mother (highly controlled, repressed and judgemental) and the self (abandoned, volatile). In many ways this representation of the mother (highly conventional, and then, dying, attaining a kind of 'true' femininity through passivity) is the 'good girl' other against
which Sexton's self-image as 'rat Anne', the bad girl, measures herself.

As with the father and daughter relationship, Sexton's poems concentrate on the dark side of the mother/daughter bond. The mother's care involves a sado-masochistic element (in contrast to poems dealing with later life, the mother is the active agent here and the daughter is passive). In fact the self's portrayal is that of survivor, looking back at her victimized childhood: 'I will speak...'she says in 'Those Times' (LoD 1966 CR p.118) '...of the nightly humiliations when Mother undressed me' and goes on, 'I did not question the bedtime ritual,/where, on the cold bathroom tiles,/I was spread out daily and examined for flaws'.

Having endured such handling, the adult self feels some relief at having escaped. But even the assertion of survival at the end of 'Those Times' - 'I did not know that my life, in the end,/Would run over my mother's like a truck' - sounds a desolate note: in this grim relationship, one must die so that the other might survive.

The definitive experiences of daughter and mother, daughter and father, recur again and again, setting patterns for all her poems on adult relationships. In one sense the self constructed by Sexton never wholly grows into an adult but expresses the little girl in the grown woman, needy, demanding and vulnerable. This is a theme which later proved important to feminism, explored in such works as Orbach and Eisenbaum's What Do Women Want? (1984) (12) Sexton's unflinching directness in articulating hitherto shadowy aspects of feminine desire certainly contributed to opening up the question.

Yet to describe the self as portrayed in Sexton's poetry simply as a little girl is to do the work a great injustice. Though the images are vivid and startling in a childlike manner, Sexton captures the frankness of the child's viewpoint. The poems themselves are shaped by an acute and intelligent adult
consciousness. She speaks of the intensely private elements of the 
construction of femininity, but is not unaware that this process 
has wider resonances:

The trouble with being a woman....
is being a little girl in the first place
('Hurry Up Please It's Time'
DN 1974, CP p.385)

When critics such as Charles Molesworth complain of Sexton's
'hypnotic childlike patter' (The Fierce Embrace)(13) they miss much 
of the impact gained by her deliberate usage of a specific kind of 
language for a particular purpose. Nor is Ben Howard's a fair 
description(14) when he writes of Sexton's 'limited idiom' of the 
'verbal cartoon'. In fact it is the marvellous contemporary 
vibrancy and richness of her language which strikes the reader: but 
the sharply-gendered subjects and outlook she adopts may militate 
against its being taken seriously by some.

Sexton's strategy seems to be to give her poems the immediacy 
and honesty of a childlike response, together with a child's 
emotional spontaneity. Yet to read them as 'word association' or 
verbal cartoons is to ignore her careful and professionally 
painstaking revisions of each poem. It is a tribute to her that she 
achieved such apparently effortless spontaneous effect. Her 
exuberant images ('the ice in your drink is senile,/your smile will 
develop a boil') is interestingly at odds with her subject of a 
repressive and joyless childhood.
Sexton's work accepts, finally, the socially sanctioned value-judgements of this loveless family background. The desire to be flamboyant, wild and undisciplined becomes linked to being creative: both are disobediences. 'Rat Anne', the bad girl of the family, becomes filled with self-loathing. Of course the child-self is romanticized; yet it is worth stressing that any assertion of self is won from conflict with the self-absorbed others of the family. The Anne Sexton who could write 'For she is a magnitude, she is a many' in the Whitmanesque 'O Ye Tongues' (DN 1974 CP p.408) also experienced herself as a freak, a grotesque, when she asserted space for herself within the family. The long poem 'O Ye Tongues' creates an 'imaginary brother', Christopher, with whom the child Anne can invent fantasies absurd, scatological and liberating:

For I was swaddled in grease wool from my father's company and could not move
or ask the time;

For Anne and Christopher were born in my head;

For I became a we and this imaginary we became a kind company when the big balloons did not bend over us.

('Fourth Psalm' OYT CP p.401)

Without any 'real' counterpart to match this imaginary twin Christopher, Sexton used her creativity as a form of rebellion. Using its own private language, the speech of childhood with its brutal openness. Sexton's work describes her experience of being unmothered and unfathered in the ways she needed:

For I am an orphan with two death masks on the mantel and came from the grave

- 138 -
of my mother's belly...

As well as her imaginary male other half, Sexton creates female identities whose existences defy propriety and the family; who are not, strictly speaking, 'feminine'. One of these is the witch, who is free to go out 'haunting the black air' 'over the plain houses, light by light.' ("Her Kind" TB 1960 CP p.15). The 'God-woman' of the African jungle is part of a group of female alter-egos 'of some virtue/and wild breasts,...excellent, unbruised and chaste' ('Somewhere in Africa' LoD 66 CP p.107) including the wisewoman and Storyteller 'Dame Sexton' ('White Snake' T 1971 CP p.229) and the defiant 'Ms Dog' who goes out 'fighting the dollars,/rolling in a field of bucks' ('Hurry Up Please It's Time' DN 74 CP p.336). Maxine Kumin notes that this appellation was 'ironic in two contexts' - one that it signalled a recognition of feminism's intervention in language, and two that 'Dog, of course, is God in reverse' - a significant fact for Sexton who loved palindromes. (Intro to CP p.xxx) It is also relevant that 'dog' is a common derogatory term for an undesirable or unattractive woman in American culture.

Yet these figures are seen by Sexton herself as not being quite right - not good enough as daughters? The witch is 'a lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind', and 'not a woman, quite' ("Her Kind" CP p.15). These imaginary escapes from the roles 'allowed' seem to end in madness, loneliness or at the least embarrassing indecorousness; they are all seen to be defeats. Even the lesbian 'Mother Gothel' who protects and then tyrannies Rapunzel (T, 1971 CP p. 244) appears sad and pathetic in her neediness. 'Real' success, it is implied, still lies within the family, resolving its contradictions and being the impossibly perfect daughter.
Therefore the poetry returns again and again to the family past, searching for authenticity there. Perhaps this is partly due to the grieving process undergone after her parents' deaths in 1959, and the inevitable sorting-through of belongings afterwards. Sexton concentrates on material objects which silently, elusively (and in the end, hollowly) seem to hold out promised answers: the 'twenty suits from Dunnes', 'boxes of pictures of people I do not know', old dresses, jewels, diaries. ('All My Pretty Ones' AMPO 1962 CP p.50). The past holds a wealth of meaning, a glamour which the present cannot match or sustain. Horizons for the self accordingly seem closed and rather bleak, for what can follow such a fascinating past? 'Mother, Father, /I hold this snapshot of you/taken, it says, in 1929,/on the deck of the yawl./Mother, Father,/So young, so hot, so jazzy,/So like Zelda and Scott.' ('The Money Swing' 1976 CP p.488)

Though there is an element of mockery, it is also obvious that this romantic, ultra-affluent past contrasts with the endless, meaningless, declasse present inhabited by the self. Even when the exotic, golden memories turn out to be just another illusion, the self still prefers the past, and its neatly-ordered compartments, to the messiness of everyday existence. The past in Sexton's poetry exists as a superior reality.

So Sexton's work charts the potent, semi-repressed sexualities of the nuclear family and their ever-present ghosts, in adult identities. Her representations of the white, American, middle-class family are of grotesques in a grotesque society, affluent and respectable but experiencing disruptive and disturbing emotions beneath the facade of 'civilised' behaviour. Like Plath, Sexton explores the power dynamics in intimate relationships unflinchingly and with acute perception. (As we have seen, incestuous desire forms the core of the Family Romance for her.) Her poems are particularly interesting in charting the socialisation of the
little girl into femininity, with the family as the catalyst: a process which involves distortion and repression, limiting the self's potential for autonomy and independence. Yet the writing itself - often aggressive in its wish to shock or disturb - is far from being submissive.

The poetry explores a dialectic of recurring rebellion and submission (of self to family, of child to adult): 'I run around begging everyone to approve and like me and then sneak back to my desk and write this stuff that people either adore or detest. It doesn't make sense.' (16) Though she became critical of the way her femininity had emerged, part of a swelling tide of women in the 1970s critical of marriage and the family, she felt that only within the family's intimate relationships could she discover her identity and reveal the secrets of the past.

Even in her final poems, when Sexton had found the courage to end her marriage and was living out the dream of the independent family-less woman celebrated in that decade of emerging feminism, her poems returned to her enigmatic parents and her relationship to them ('March 4th' CP p.610; 'In Excelsis' CP p.608; 'Uses' CP p.610). Maxine Kumin writes in 'How it Was' that after Sexton's divorce 'living alone created an unbearable level of anxiety' (17) for her; it was impossible for her to develop or explore new, strong and independent selves when experiencing this level of vulnerability. It seems that, however repressive her childhood and marriage had seemed, their intimate structures had supported her. Without their limits, the options were huge enough to be frightening:

I am alone here in my own mind.
There is no map
and there is no road. ('January 24th' WDY 1978 CP p.594)
Section 3: The Feminine Mystique

More than any other poet's in this study, Sexton's subject is the lifestyle and outlook dubbed 'the feminine mystique' by Betty Friedan in her book of that name, published in 1963. (1) Friedan writes that the origin of her book came from experiencing:

a strange discrepancy between the reality of our lives as women and the image to which we were trying to conform, the image that I came to call the feminine mystique. I wondered if other women faced this schizophrenic split, and what it meant. (2)

Friedan's book, and the way of life it condemns (the affluent yet aimless existence of the American middle-class housewife) could be read as a blueprint for Sexton's ouevre - particularly when this lifestyle is considered in terms of Friedan's 'schizophrenic split'. This book is important to any exploration of Sexton's construction of femininity in self-images, since its influence has marked out parameters of debate and, to some extent, already set the agenda; therefore anything it omits and ignores is equally important here.

Sandra Dijkstra has called The Feminine Mystique the 'illegitimate offspring' of de Beauvoir's The Second Sex, arguing that it is a depoliticised version, pragmatic and reformist, putting forward a facile and individualised heroine. I agree with this analysis, and feel that Friedan's ideas have some problematic implications which can be seen emerging in Sexton's work. (3)

In this section I want to explore Anne Sexton's construction of subjectivity within the context of Friedan's book and its contemporary influence on the ways women perceived themselves in
society. How did the generally influential ideas of Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* contain and limit, as well as nurture Sexton's conceptions of the self - feminine, and yet moving towards feminism?

In a memorial address for Anne Sexton in 1974(4) Adrienne Rich seemed concerned to create an evident divide between her own work and that of her contemporary's. She therefore described Sexton's poetry as 'a guide to the ruins, from which we learn what women have lived and what we must refuse to live any longer.'(5)

Rich desired distance from Sexton's intimacy with this well-known mode of existence named the feminine mystique, characterised by dependency upon a husband, and a home-centred life. Adrienne Rich has documented her own attempt to live this kind of life and her rejection of it, at some cost, for a life of academic and political activism.(6)

The fact that Sexton chose to continue in such a lifestyle, while achieving great success as a poet, seems to Rich to mark her out as a victim of circumstance - to mean that her poetry was produced in spite of her environment, rather than because of it. In this Rich echoes Friedan's theme of the housewife as helpless and trapped. I think this oversimplifies: the woman at the centre of her household has some degree of power and freedom. It interests me that Rich finds no similarities between the domesticated life of Emily Dickinson and that of the housewife in Friedan's book: why should one way of life allow creativity and not the other, very similar to it? Sexton's poetry emerges from a narrow way of life - but no narrower than that of many other situations or professions.

Certainly, though Sexton's poetry explores her life in its isolated and oppressive aspects, it also affirms and celebrates much (the close relationship with her daughters for example), or simply life itself:
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live.
Hello spirit, hello cup.
Fasten cover. Cover, that does contain.
Hello to the soil of the fields.
Welcome, roots. ('In Celebration of my Uterus'
CE, p.181)

Friedan was influential particularly because she spoke to emerging feminists: those women who were most familiar with the background she described, for whom 'the problem with no name', the depression and malaise brought on by ideological expectations and narrow horizons had been a factor in their rebellion. The Feminine Mystique helped to focus and fuel dissatisfaction already stirring. Sexton's poems vividly explore this restless, unsatisfied feeling.

Friedan's book presents evidence of women's frustration in many areas of their lives. It offers them the promise of change and fulfilment. Though it exposed 'the feminine mystique' as built upon sham expectations, the book offered no analysis of social forces and gave no real alternative visions of the future. Therefore it can be argued that the book sowed seeds of discontent without providing the radical shift in perspective necessary to act positively upon such dissatisfaction. This is particularly relevant to Sexton, whose struggles to change fell back time and time again upon harmfully individualistic concepts which attributed self-blame. (7) Michele Barrett notes how feminism has centralised the role of ideology without theorising it adequately, and how this has led to the prominence of concepts such as 'consciousness' - rather nebulous without any connecting theory of history or of material conditions. The pressure remains (as with Friedan's book) on the individual and her subjectivity.

- 144 -
Sexton writes of the world she knows, which is a particularly 'feminine' world of housework and a lifestyle of apparent 'leisure'. Her poems evoke the intimacy of the 'private' world of the home, yet connect it with the advertising discourse of the 'public' media, bombarding the housewife with products and injunctions: they are full of brand names - Daz, Kleenex, Kotex, Chlorox - and items necessary to sustain the lifestyle: peroxide, martinis, barbecues, Cadillacs, lobster meals, swimming pools, holidays, even the psychoanalyst.

The self's role remains empty because even that experience which she hopes will confirm, and authenticate, an inner self - sex - turns out to be merely another item in this trivial list:

All that summer I
.....
...answered the phone, served cocktails, as a wife should,
made love among my petticoats
and August tan ("Double Image" 1960 TB CP, p. 39)

In this way, aspects of life which impinge profoundly on identity - such as sexuality, religious and spiritual belief, feelings relating to the self and the self's relation to others - become entangled with more superficial elements of existence, to do with the influence of advertising, women's magazines, etc; the two levels are in conflict. The superficial role conflicts with the deeply personal and painful experiences such as breakdown and the temporary loss of her daughters as a result. Sexton 'learned life back into my own seven rooms' while coping with these deeper sorrows. ("The Double Image" CP, p. 39)
Insofar as sexuality is concerned, Sexton's poetry articulates much of the contemporary atmosphere which Friedan's book describes but without the book's Puritanical approach. Sexton's desire is for a fulfilment through sex which overloads it—a vision of sex as 'the only frontier open' beyond the tedium and vacuum of everyday life, (8) but one which constantly disappoints.

Friedan's book openly disapproves of what it calls 'the mounting sex-hunger of American women.' (9) She sees this desire as empty in itself and leading only to divorce and joyless boredom. Friedan dislikes female aggression and 'the new image of women lusting after men'. (10) It is important to note her unease over female sexuality, particularly active desire. Lesbianism is omitted from the discussion completely.

Sexton's poetry is often deliberately sexually explicit, evoking a need and hunger for sex; but beyond the bravado there emerges a contradictory passivity. The subject experiences herself as that which is done to by the male other. It is he who possesses, he who is described actively:

Loving me with my shoes off
means loving my long brown legs,
sweet dears, as good as spoons;
and my feet, those two children
let out to play naked.  ('Barefoot' LP 1969 CP p. 199)

Now you work your way up the legs
And come to pierce me at my hunger mark
('Barefoot')

Sexton's work articulates the underlying contradictions in Friedan's approach to sexuality; while it seems to overturn
conventional sexual mores by articulating female sexual desire, its idea of sexuality itself remains a narrow and traditional one, in which heterosexual relations are rigidly differentiated. The masculine and feminine roles remain separate. Sexton's work plays with the allure of this kind of conservative fantasy, exploring its promises of satisfaction:

I was wrapped in black fur and white fur and you undid me and then you placed me in gold light and then you crowned me ('Us' LP 1969 CP p.203)

In circumstances such as these, where the self expresses her femininity in the most extreme terms (the passive body offering itself like a parcel to be undone) there can be limited scope for release and transformation. In fact Sexton's work reflects acute awareness of the underlying danger, the underlying violence in such a rigidly-demarcated sexual encounter: '...our bed, a forest of skin/where seeds burst like bullets' ('Now' LP 1969 CP p.202). A similar scenario reoccurs in many poems exploring sexual intimacy. Friedan highlights this unsatisfactory state very accurately but does not analyse why it occurs or why it becomes so meaningless and damaging to women. She simply sidesteps into disapproval which raises guilt rather than further enquiry and exploration.

If sexuality becomes simply another item of consumption in an affluent lifestyle (the marriage, and later the affair) then the self in turn becomes another object of consumption:

'I have been momentary. A luxury.'

Sexton writes in 'For My Lover Returning to his Wife' (LP 1969 CP p.188), and 'I burn the way money burns'. ('The Breast' LP CP
p.176). Part of the process is seeing the self as an object, as if through the lover's eyes. Sometimes this self-objectification is benign (as with the 'long brown legs/sweet dears'). At others, such narcissism turns into self-loathing, (11) as in 'Self In 1958' (LoD 1966 QP p.155) where Sexton looks back ostensibly at an earlier part of her life, yet the tone is that of an endless, entrapping present moment. (The poem is dated June 1958-June 1965) It speaks very vividly of the 'schizophrenic split' between the outer and inner experience. The self experiences life as a Barbie doll in a doll's house.

This frozen zombie is the other side of the accommodating, elegant and sexy housewife and hostess, isolated within a nightmarishly ordinary family setting. Appearances deceive: there is a 'counterfeit' table 'on a cardboard floor'. Everything is menacing.

The self's desperate sense of alienation erupts in her cry 'They think I am me!' about the 'someone' who plays and pretends with her. Though the self is central to the poem she is unable to move or change, even though aware of her own pain. Conscious that there is an outside world - 'windows that flash open on someone's city' - and able to feel that she is not entirely alone - 'Many have come to such a small crossroad' - she can find no relief from the wretchedness of existence. Her only desire is a return to the womb, to imaginary release which is beyond her reach. This, it seems, is Sexton's response to the feminine mystique in all its most negative aspects. Did reading Friedan's book 'focus' many aspects of experience for Sexton?
Other poems, however, speak of the pleasures of life, of those
times when the self feels itself the vital and controlling centre
of a small domestic universe:

There is joy in all:
in the hair I brush each morning,
in the Cannon towel, newly washed,
that I rub my body with each morning,
in the outcry from the kettle
that heats my coffee

(‘Welcome Morning’ TARTG 1975
(CP 455)

There is contentment even in household chores:

I am happy today with the sheets of life
I washed out the bedsheets.
I hung out the bedsheets and watched them
slap and lift like gulls.
When they were dry I unfastened them
and buried my head in them.
All the feet of the babies of the world were in them.
So this is happiness,
that journeyman.

(‘Nov 9 1970’ WDY 1978 CP 579)

Sexton can bring to life such small domestic details with great
tenderness. Her poetry shines with its carefully-observed detail of
this intimate life. Its vision of feminine experience includes
pleasure, autonomy, independence and time for reflection: elements
not apparent in the version of feminine life observed by Friedan.
Sexton's poetry often shows the self at her happiest when staying at home (as an adult, at any rate). It is safe and familiar:

I have forgotten the names of the literary critics.
I know what I know.
I am the child I was,
living the life that was mine.
I am young and half asleep.
It is a time of water, a time of trees.

('Three Green Windows' LoD 1966
CP 106)

Poems such as these must dispute Rich's description of Sexton's work as being 'a guide to the ruins'. For Sexton the home and her conventional role in it offered support and stability, even if it also frustrated her. It gave her an understandable self-image, against which she could play her more adventurous identities, such as poet and creator of witch-like alter egos.

Horizons widened for Sexton's poetry during the 1960s and early 70s, however, perhaps owing to changes in her life brought about by success as a poet and subsequent travelling, and public appearances. These wider horizons contributed to the retrospective sense of claustrophobia evident in 'Self in 1958', as if the old boundaries became chafing on exposure to different ways of life. Sexton certainly came to approach conventions more critically. Her 1971 collection, *Transformations*, could be said to form an oblique comment on the feminine mystique. Based on Grimms' fairy tales, it 'focuses on women cast in a variety of fictive roles; the dutiful princess daughter, the wicked witch, the stepmother' - all with 'a society-mocking overlay'. (12) These sardonic observations of the feminine role are equal in their bite to the work of Margaret
Atwood, as Sexton, like Atwood, becomes critical of feminine self-sacrifice. The poems encapsulate the contradiction that, as fairytales, they are 'quests' for the justice of the happy ending, yet, too 'in the folk tale, as in the Greek epic and tragedy, situation and character are hardly separable and so there emerges a fatalistic lack of hope'. (13)

Marie von Franz argues that fairytales 'give us more information about what is going on in the compensatory function of the unconscious than myths do', (14). In Transformations the female characters who are freakish, ugly and angry draw power from their rejection of femininity. The foolish and innocent young woman, embodiment of social norms, is no match for the queen with the 'brown spots on her hand/and four whiskers on her lip' ('Snow White' T CP p.225); even though, ultimately, society sees the beautiful girl triumph, the victory of her vacuous 'china-blue doll eyes' is an empty one. The poems recognise, without accepting them, the ideological pressures placed upon women. Yet the 'quest' for justice is contradicted by an underlying meshing of character and situation - a repressive kind of functionalism.

There is an element of fairytale in Sexton's poem 'Walking in Paris', which imagines a dream journey to Europe with Nana (Sexton's aunt) (LoD 1966 CP p.135). There they will live a happy, independent (and highly romanticized) life:

I take your arms boldly
each day a new excursion.
Come, my sister,
we are two virgins,
our lives once more perfected
and unused.

Like poems which evoke Sexton's close relationship with her daughters, this breathes a sense of excitement and equality. In
poems evoking heterosexual bonds, undertones of pessimism and foreclosure tend to be heard. With Nana, it seems as if anything could happen: the world is theirs for the taking. (But the poem rests on the moment they are about to take without chronicling, how they do so.)

Sexton associates 'use' with wear, ageing and obsolescence. The poem's imaginary alternative is where people or objects never wear out, as they do in the 'real' existence of everyday matters, rejected in the poem:

I have deserted my husband and my children.
The Negro issue, the late news
And the hot baths.

This vision of casting off the shell of the shattered self for a joyous, pristine expectation of 'perfection', recalls the identity described in The Feminine Mystique - a selfhood as material as any Barbie doll. (Sexton's use of such examples as 'the Negro issue' points acutely at the ways in which the process of other people's lives becomes commodified for cocooned middle-class voyeurs who want to 'see' such life - but cannot connect with it.) To fantasise such rejection is to reapply the terms of the dominant ideology; simply reversing, rather than restating it. Margaret Atwood described Sexton's letters as her 'monument to a dead self' - a means to 'stop time'. (15) As if some final, polished version can work a transformation over the endless flux of living.
This poem articulates a dominant ideological assumption, that the feminine self is merely an object, a 'thing', a possession of others or component of a lifestyle. 'Usage' can, then, never mean process, growth or profound change; only the wearing out of looks, health, sanity (Nana's elderly spectre looms here, 'withered and constipated, howling into your own earphone' - an ominously self-reflexive image of the ultimate achieved by such destructive narcissism).

The sense of self as a 'thing' in Sexton's poetry is borne out further by the specific reference to the 'two virgins'. Only by being 'virginal' can one avoid the buying/selling nexus which reduces the self to object status and assert sexual independence. Of course this has heavily ironic undertones for Sexton, the wife and mother, and Nana the unmarried aunt: and contradictory implications for each. The wife cannot really become virgin once again; for a spinster virginity might be an unwanted burden. Sexton suggests a need to become almost childlike again in order to recapture something of a self-confidence and autonomy (lost together with virginity).

The stress falls firmly upon the sexual and personal aspects of womanhood. Sexton situates the two women's autonomy of imagination outside 'history' and 'time', those public spheres involving wars and societies. It could be seen as a deliberately naive attitude, echoing Sexton's rejection of adult femininity and its co-option. Her poem imagines an undivided 'woman's time', which flows synchronically (prefiguring Kristeva!), to which conventional histories (like 'The Negro issue') are irrelevant.
In Paris 1890 was yesterday
and 1940 never happened -

To be occupied, conquered is nothing -
to remain is all!

Even for a fantasy, 'Walking in Paris' shows a disturbing casualness about dealing with externals; where consciousness is all-important, the perspective becomes distorted, with the two women's experiences towering over the events which happened on a wider scale and which appear, as a result, completely insignificant. By stepping so firmly beyond 'history' Sexton's poem implies the impossibility of her struggle for self-definition rather than asserting it.

In its rejection of 'husband and... children' for a dream of living a free life as companion of another woman, this poem evidently draws upon feminist influences: it also vividly evokes the rebellion against the family experienced by women, partly as a result of Friedan's book. Yet its construction of self-image, as I've tried to show, relies on traditional assumptions (also held by Betty Friedan) about female identity being dependent and reified as a matter of 'nature'. Though the poem is evidence of the tide of discontent building up in Sexton's life (along with the lives of many others) and the desire to explore different ways of living, its impetus is contained by difficulties which emerge from Sexton's view of feminine subjectivity. One either becomes 'used up' or made obsolete (like any last year's car), or else, fantastically, 'virgin' again, unused and brimming with potential. (Interesting echoes of Plath emerge: the virgin is a powerful image in her bee poems where she too, turning from the male and the family, seeks to discover alternative identities half-forgotten which did not rely on heterosexual relationships for definition.)
Yet the 'virgin' concept, highly-charged as it is with implications of female autonomy and independence, is also contradictory since the state of virginity is meaningful only in terms of its opposite. The virgin state is not wholly independent itself; the virgin is one only until she chooses a male partner or has one chosen for her. This gives Sexton's use of the image a rather closed, cyclical, claustropobia.

There is also much irony in 'Walking in Paris', as in many other poems by Sexton: in a very real way the dreaded future has already happened, neither of the two protagonists is really young any more and the dream is tinged with mockery. It may well be that 'home', with its hot baths, papers, husband and children, is preferable in the end to this rootless independence (or the dream is attractive only because it is impossible.)

This poem also expresses Sexton's need to forge links between herself and older women, to create a sense of continuity which seems lacking in her troubled relations with her mother. The aunt figure, 'Nana'/Anna, appears as an alternative mother-figure, non-judgemental and sympathetic; yet at the same time she poses a warning about implacable futures. Her senile death in Sexton's early adulthood is something Sexton's letters and poems prefigure for herself. These older role-models are almost always sources of pain - fear, regret - but they offer new reflections and comparisons with the self. In Sexton's loving and tender considerations of female ageing ('Woman with Girdle' AM 1962 pp. 70 is a good example) her work also belongs to the burgeoning feminist movement.

A radicalisation occurs in the late 1960s when the urgency of 'outside' events became impossible to ignore, even within the enclosed surroundings of suburbia. In Sexton's life this caused tensions with her husband, as other aspects of Sexton's identity came to the fore through her poetry and public speaking. In her poetry political issues emerge more strongly as political.

- 155 -
discourses impinge more on personal life. In a letter about her reading at an anti-Vietnam event, Sexton wrote of a clash between herself and her husband, 'the republican who hates my pink - he calls it - politics'. (16)

She styled herself 'a secret beatnik hiding in the suburbs in my square house on a dull street'. (17) It is evident that she clung to this clashing of identities - 'beatnik', poet, political activist, housewife, mother - rather than jettison any of them. Widening gaps between 'home' and 'outside' made for discomfort, particularly within Sexton's marriage. She wrote of her husband: 'He is...politically repulsive. Last year he had a sign in his car that said "Register Communists, Not Firearms". I didn't say much, but I was ashamed.' (18)

She wrote to a friend that 'he loathes poetry and does not care too much (at all) about his wife being this poet-person.' (19) Sexton's letters depict her life as a confused jarring of very separate spheres: that of home, where her husband called her a 'god damned liberal' (20) over both sexual and political issues: that of literary academia where she stood up to be counted, increasingly, on questions involving feminism and politics; and that of the psychiatric institutions and clinics where she returned periodically. Sexton's experience of juggling many discourses relating to the self (one far from unique to her) shows how Friedan's book tended to over-simplify the complexities of women's lives - even those women apparently following the conventional role of home-maker. Of course Sexton's experience cannot be said to be typical, but the strains and anxieties of coping with the 'split' between home life and working life, which emerge vividly in her letters and poems, are fairly common among women. The stress of juggling separate commitments and priorities is something Friedan's
book does not confront when encouraging women back into the workplace. This was an effect many women came to feel, for 'In 1960 twice as many women were at work as in 1940... Female employment was increasing at a rate four times faster than that of men.' (21)

Sexton's letters make clear again and again that the personal ties with family and friends, and her home environment, came first. Her way of life remained firmly defined by her husband's, despite her continual challenges to its narrow boundaries.

Two poems show strategies Sexton explored in order to deal with this fragmented existence. Both see personal relations as rooted in the context of wider social relationships; they exemplify Sexton's widening consciousness that 'the personal is political'. The first, 'I'm Dreaming the My Lai Soldier Again' (VDY 1978 CE p. 575), written in 1969, superimposes personal sexuality upon the arena of the Vietnam war in a shockingly intimate manner. Sexton's use of the dream as structure for the poem works, also, to blur the distinctions between fantasy and reality, and to impart a feeling of urgency: 'I'm dreaming the My Lai soldier night after night'. In 'telling' the dream to the analyst, 'Dr Y', for whom this collection was written, the poem works to create a sense of intimacy and honesty about the disturbing effects of the 'collective unconscious', as experienced by the individual.

One of the worst recorded events of the war, the My Lai massacre of women and children by US troops, enters a suburban house through an individual act of rape. The poem is immediate and blunt, using surrealist juxtaposition of the mundane and the nightmarish to achieve its grotesque effect. The housewife-persona lets the soldier in, for he's as pushy as 'the Fuller Brush man'; she shakes hands out of unwilling politeness. But his hands are foul with blood and her own become covered with the gore of the
massacred: this symbol of guilty collusion, Lady Macbeth-like, will not 'come off'. In the course of the poem the housewife becomes a victim herself as she ends up merely one of a heap of dying women and babies while the soldier repeats apologetically 'It's my job. It's my job. 'The 'dream' ends with the soldier pointing his red penis right at me and saying Don't take this personally.

The equation of a militarised, and brutal, manifestation of masculinity (embodifying state power), with oppressive male sexuality discharged upon women (in heterosexual relations, as rape) is one made by radical feminism initially in the 1970s, partly as a result of the Vietnam war. Sexton has 'seized the time' and its concerns and produced a polemical poem extraordinarily effective in its outrage and clarity.

The second poem, 'Loving the Killer' (LP 1969 CP p. 185), written in the same year, explores a similar theme of collaboration and betrayal within a sexual relationship, as a metaphor for wider social forces of corruption. In loving the man whose masculinity can be proved only through aggression - through quarrels, and in particular through the hunting and killing of wild animals - the self becomes, by her own belief, guilty through association. Sexton's poem sees the female self quite explicitly as a guilty collaborator, and the image she uses for the aggressive, death-dealing husband is that of a Nazi:
...Oh my Nazi,  
with your S.S. sky-blue eye -  
I am no different from Emily Goering.  
Emily Goering recently said she  
thought the concentration camps  
were for the re-education of Jews  
and Communists. She thought!

This use of 'Nazi' raises interesting issues. Immediately we remember Plath's poems, whose tone 'Loving the Killer' echoes at times. Plath's work saw powerful patriarchal figures as unquestionably fascist; she, too, considered the implications for the self of finding this kind of masculinity attractive (there seemed to be no other). Susan Sontag argues that

Fascist aesthetics...flow from (and justify) a preoccupation with situations of control, submissive behaviour, and extravagant effort; they exalt two seemingly opposite states, egomania and servitude. The relationships of domination and enslavement take the form of a grouping...around an all-powerful...leader figure...Fascist art glorifies surrender; it glamorizes death.' (22)

Both Plath's and Sexton's work shows fascination with the sexual dimension of this Fascistic dynamic, focused on the whirlpool of 'egomania and servitude'. And after all 'surrender' and 'domination' are inscribed at the heart of romantic discourse; these are key aspects of feminine sexuality. For both poets, too, death has a fascination: in this they share the preoccupation with many other writers, living through a period of mass destruction on unparalleled scale. (23) What links Plath and Sexton, however, is that they see death in almost sexual terms. Part of Sexton's unease in 'Loving the Killer' comes, I think, from the awareness that the male's ability to deal out death contributes
profundely to his attractiveness.

Sexton's attitude towards men in her poems veers from desire and envy for their power and authority, and need for love and approval, to a straightforward dislike of their violence and self-delusion. Father and brother are both 'Mr Gunman' in 'The Papa and Mama Dance' (1969 LP CP p.602): 'Death' is always male, 'in his fat red suit and his ho-ho baritone', half desirable, half despicable.

Sexton admitted that Plath's first collection had not interested her at all, but after Plath's death she was influenced by her later work: 'she had dared to write hate poems, the one thing I had never dared to write. I'd always been afraid, in my life, to express anger.' (24) Robert Mazzocco agrees, having compared Plath's poetry with Sexton's and come to the conclusion that 'violence seems never to have enhanced [Sexton's] work as it did...Plath's...The murderous impulses that lie buried in her work always verge on the lurid or the awkward.' (25)

Plath's use of the 'Nazi' figure is an example of the differences in tone which emerge. However disturbing it is, Plath's work sets up its own internal momentum, dealing with family roots in Germany and Austria. Sexton's rather indiscriminate usage seems less effective in comparison, using 'the Nazi' as shorthand for the fascist and chauvinist masculinity increasingly reviled by the women's movement and the New Left. There is a sense of strain and awkwardness in a poem beginning
My breast waited
shy as a clam
until you came
Mr Firecracker,
Mr Panzer-man ('The Wedlock', 45MS 1976
CP p.510)

where she seems to attempt to superimpose the image of the 'hated'
upon that of the once beloved, as if going through the motions of
denunciation.

Sexton's strength is her exploration of the link between madness
and her definition of 'evil' within the self as a result of this
madness: 'the black look I do not/like' ('Again and Again and
Again' LP 1969 CP p.195), the mask of the other self, the
doppelganger and enemy. Poems dealing with this are far better than
others such as 'After Auschwitz' (TARTG 1975 CP p.432) which seems
to strive for effect. As Greg Johnson says, Sexton's writing could
be said to form an attempt to break away from the impasse of 'the
double', to replace self-loathing with an open acceptance of evil
in the self. (26)

This rather grim sense of sustaining a hostile 'other self' is
something Sexton's work also shares with Plath's. (Plath stuck a
photograph of herself in her journal and wrote beneath: 'Look at
that ugly dead mask here...It is a chalk mask with dead dry poison
behind it, like the death angel'. (27)) Both seem to write from
deeply-felt experience; Sexton's imagery is recognisably similar to
Plath's but still somehow her own, not 'borrowed' or added
extraneously for effect, like the Nazi and holocaust imagery.

'Loving the Killer' superimposes the 'Nazi' reference on a poem
reflecting on a marriage full of contradictions, including
competitiveness and need; the suddenly emerging 'Nazi' stanza
overshadows the poem's delicate awareness of power negotiations,
and sets up, instead, a brutal dialectic of predator and victim
which does justice to neither partner. Sexton's use of such imagery seems almost a means of avoiding the painful emotional core, a deflection based on bravado.

It may be that over-exposure to images and information on the Second World War's atrocities blunted sensitivity. Such trivialisation can be seen in Friedan's comparison of those 'dehumanized' in Nazi camps with the loss of sense of self experienced by the housewife. She calls the home 'a comfortable concentration camp'. (28)

Sexton's poems, however, can never quite make up their mind to hate the male, no matter how 'fascist'. In 'Loving the Killer' the wife finds pleasure and pride in the 'masculine' baggage of crates containing skins, boots and other hunting paraphernalia, which evoke memories of their trip together. The predominant emotion is sexual; she desires him all the more because of his predatory inclinations. Their union is portrayed as a kind of sexual fight to the death between natural enemies, reminiscent of that in some of Plath's poems: 'And tonight our skins, our bones.../will meet.../fastened together in an intricate lock'; then

I will eat you slowly with kisses
even though the killer in you
has gotten out.

Sexton's poems go further in accepting responsibility for the destructiveness of the male (because the self finds it so alluring) than Plath's. Plath opened up a vein of aggression against a particular type of masculinity which was developed by later poets,
including Sexton. But in Sexton it is dislike of the self, rather than dislike for the male, which predominates. The focus for this self-hate is that of madness. The abiding self-image is that of the mad woman; to WD Snodgrass she wrote: 'I am going to a mental institution today...I am never sane, you know - I pretended to be for your visit'. (29) Ben Howard's description of 'the Mad Housewife' persona (30) has some truth, though it rather belittles Sexton's struggles to keep functioning.

Interestingly The Feminine Mystique avoids any references to mental illness or breakdown, beyond the 'schizoid' dilemma of work/home. It steps back from its own implication - that mental ill-health may well result. Sexton's self-image as mad, then, tests the 'feminine mystique' scenario, and takes it beyond the home into the mental institution. She evokes her problems always in terms of personal idiosyncracy, an individual aberration, something in herself which makes full independence impossible. The 'craziness' is jealously guarded as a personal attribute, one which makes the self special.

Masculine figures, doctors and psychiatrists such as 'Dr Y' assume great power; they are the 'hunters' of the mind just as the husband is a hunter of animals. Though much of Sexton's poetry struggles to speak of the flaws, splits, and contradictions of her subjectivity ('It's a little mad, but I believe I am many people' (31)) the thrust of analysis and treatment is, in contrast, an attempt to create unity, wholeness and stability. In the face of this pressure Sexton's work expresses guilt and feelings of inadequacy when this unity remains inevitably elusive.

Rather like the martinis and the lobsters, analysis too seems to become another accoutrement of suburban life; the liberal, progressive wing of the psychiatric profession in the 1950s and 60s, the 'talking cure' rather than ECT, tended all the same to
sustain rather than challenge the status quo. (At one stage every member of Sexton's family -- she, her husband, and two daughters -- were 'in analysis.' (32))

This commitment to analysis has left its mark on the poems. They show the influence of its approach to experience; they move easily between past and present, going over memories, attempting, in Juhasz's words, 'to name, define, exorcise'. (33) They are also concerned primarily with interpersonal relationships. Sexton's poetry constructs the self as living within a Friedan-defined 'feminine' situation: her writing attempts to explore its parameters through the identities of deviance -- the madwoman, the witch, the evil doppelganger, the Nazi-lover -- and yet her poems evoke, also, a wider range of possibilities, only barely sensed, of other ways of living, and of unratified desires.

Section 4: Female Desire

Sexton's work longs for the maternal body; it also articulates a motherly hunger for the bodies of her growing daughters, moving away from her into separate womanhood. In these ways, Sexton's poetry creates an emphasis on a female sexuality which is not narrowly genital or heterosexual, but a fluid, polymorphous complex of desires which constitute a subversion of the 'normal'. At the same time the work celebrates and affirms a sense of continuity between women which is cross-generational, a theme celebrated in many contemporary poets such as Rich, as source of support and strength.

To some extent Sexton's poems of desire evoke Rich's 'lesbian continuum', (1) a seamless love between women embracing the sexual and non-sexual alike. Sexton's poems on such desire between mother and daughter predate Rich's use of such a concept, and I believe Rich's work owes an unacknowledged debt to Sexton's treatment of sensuality and erotic friendship. While Rich's concept is
constructed as a viable and ultimately political means of communication. However, Sexton's is a very private dream, emerging from urgent longing and need for intimacy (rather than the achieving of it). This longing for intimacy distinguishes Sexton's poems from Plath's, who seems in comparison to accept separateness, even to desire it - particularly from her mother.

Sexton's poems, such as 'Mothers' (TARTG 1975 CP p.464), speak of desire for the huge, elemental body of the mother, from the viewpoint of a small, dependent child.

Here in your lap
as good as a bowlful of clouds
I your greedy child
am given your breast,
the sea wrapped in skin.

Her vision of maternal plenitude and its effects predates Helene Cixous' critique of phallocentric language - that it portrays the female as 'other' in the face of the unified (male) identity. Cixous calls for a union of sexual and creative capacities to explore previously unimagined consciousness. For Cixous the speaking woman 'physically materialises what she's thinking; she signifies it with her body' (2) and the 'Voice is inexhaustible milk. She has been found again. The lost mother.' Therefore maternity and creativity merge and produce the text-as-process, as succour: 'My breasts overflow! Milk. Ink. The moment of suckling. And I? I too am hungry. The taste of milk, of ink!' (3)

So for both Cixous and Sexton the imaginary body of the mother overflows with plenty, and the child desires that nourishing, oceanic plenitude which releases the ability to speak and to write: 'I want mother's milk, / That good sour soup' ('Food' 45MS 1976 CP p.488). Meanwhile the self's own female body feels, in contrast, quite empty, hungry and barren; it is through desire for the other
that she hopes for a sense of being 'filled up' and replete. She herself is not the oceanic mother-figure; even towards her daughters she comes needy and hopeful.

Sexton isolates the decisive moment between mother and child as that of breastfeeding, creating it as an attempt to reclaim a lost sensuality and comfort, a feeling of safety and wholeness:

breasts singing like eggplants
and a mouth above making kisses.
I want nipples like shy strawberries
for I need to suck the sky. ('Food' 45xS 1976 CP p.488)

She seldom writes of herself breastfeeding as a mother. In 'Double Image' (TBAF/WB 1960 CP p.41) Sexton is tentative and unsure:

You came like an awkward guest
that first time, all wrapped and moist
and strange at my heavy breast

but the poem is quite clear about the transferences of identity involved in such frightening intimacy:

I, who was never quite sure
about being a girl, needed another
life, another image to remind me.
And this was my worst guilt: you could not cure
nor soothe it. I made you to find me.

These images of closeness evoke pain. The self's difficult and contradictory relation with the mother is replicated in the relationship with her daughters. The child's desire for intimacy is often met with rejection; the mythic vision of plenitude cannot be sustained:
...you pour salt into my mouth.
Your nipples are stitched up like sutures
and although I suck
I suck air. ('Food')

Another poem repeatedly cries out: 'O my hunger! My hunger!'
despairing of life and the waste of it: 'It is hardly a feast'
('Flee on your Donkey' LoD 1966 CP p.97). Spiritual need aches for
nourishment, not only physical but emotional too; underlying loss
and frustration is experienced as hunger, which dreams of maternal
love cannot dispel.

These images of the breast, and evocations of food, evoke a
struggle within the self to differentiate from the mother and
create an identity as separate: a struggle which is undermined by
an infantile refusal or inability to recognise the mother as
separate, with other needs, as someone who cannot (as Sexton's
maternal persona cannot) rather than will not, 'fill up' the child
with selfhood.

Sexton's poems struggle with questions raised later by Kim
Chernin in her book The Hungry Self:

Why does a woman in an identity crisis, caught in
a mother-separation struggle, express her turmoil
through food?...For the mother is indeed, as Elias
Canetti has pointed out, "the one who gives her own
body to be eaten."...Resonating from the deepest
layers of meaning, the mother is always conjured up
and made present by the presence of food.(4)

It is the connections between motherhood and the symbolic 'powerful
resonances' of food (on all levels) which concern Sexton. Her work
attacks these troubling areas directly and powerfully, since they have almost overwhelming significance in the construction of her own subjectivity.

In 'Song for a Lady' (LP 1969 CP p.204) she evokes an encounter between adult women, in similar images of oral nurturance and sensuality:

On the day of breasts and small hips
...we coupled...
...you knead me and I rise like bread.

But this female plenitude again depends on the passivity of the subject who is 'mothered' by her lover (and 'filled-out', made large as in the image of the breadmaking - brought to full selfhood, perhaps). In some ways the scenario here is similar to that which the poetry evokes in heterosexual encounters with husband or a male lover. In these too the self is passive and childlike, the object of another's attention, but the emphasis falls on appearance and 'image' than on inner transformations: the 'bread' changes from within while the 'princess' changes only superficially:

you undid me and then
you placed me in gold light
and then you crowned me ('Us' LP 1969 CP p.202)

Such passivity leads to self-alienation, as Sexton shows in the imagery of other associated poems: 'As for me, I am a watercolor./I wash off...' ('For My Lover', LP 1969 CP p.190).

What distinguishes Sexton's 'mother' poems is the way they articulate active desire and hunger - no matter how passive the self's position, she speaks decisively of her needs. None of her
other poems do this; even *Love Poems* (1969) does not evoke desire for the male lover in such terms. Most focus on the self as the other's object of desire, watching her own responses - the mouth that 'blooms like a cut' in 'The Kiss' (*CE* p.174), the hand 'sealed off' and brought back to life in 'The Touch' (*CE* p.173), even the breast, which loses its significance to become simply 'an offering' (*CE* p.175). Though the poem titled 'The Breast', begins 'This is the key to'. /This is the key to everything', it moves quickly to construct the self as an object of diverse parts for the lover's pleasure.

For Sexton the focus of the most profound desire is the female body, and the type of desire which the maternal body engenders is portrayed as far more active and engulfing than that produced by the male. Where the maternal other is concerned, however, more important underlying and pressing aspects of the self are under scrutiny. Both kinds of poems explore feminine subjectivity. One is that of the adult lover responding to the active desire of the male (though elements of the childlike and the fantastic emerge; the parameters of each category are not entirely clear-cut); the other is that of the small, needy child dependent upon its mother. This second holds out challenges and potential for change: the daughter can 'grow up', 'become' her mother, or differentiate herself. Therefore this subjectivity opens up profound questions on identity and sexual/social relationships. Sexton's work here is undeniably proto-feminist in its subject-matter and its articulation of 'taboo', or at least secret, emotions.

Like Plath's poetry, Sexton's addresses, at a very personal and painful level, the Freudian question 'What does the little girl want from her mother?' Sexton's poems articulate Demand, which must forever be mystifying and unanswerable. The child-self remains hungry, but the poems move towards new insights into subjecthood.
and struggle towards new, fruitful and more loving definitions of the self.

Sexton's poems about her daughters evoke intense desire too. The imagery used is often linked with food, and oral sensuality - images used by many women poets, such as Diane Vakoski here, writing of children:

little ice-cream sundaes...
butterfingers,
or creamy fudge.
Such babies (5)

In retelling fairytales in Transformations (1971) Sexton explores maternal desire threatening to go too far, the nurturing mother becoming the devouring mother:

little plum
said the mother to the son
I want to bite
I want to chew
I will eat you up.
Little child,
little nubkin,
sweet as fudge. ('Hansel & Gretel' T CP p. 286)

Sexton's poems about her daughters express strong possessiveness, as if their bodies were parts of her own and could be retrieved back into herself (Plath uses a similar idea in 'Edge' (1963) when the mother has 'folded' her dead children

'...back into her body'.)
Since Sexton's poems deal chiefly with the separating rituals and processes of puberty, this hope of retrieval becomes increasingly painful and unrealistic. The poems chart each daughter's coming into womanhood, that key point for the self, for 'women are born twice', Sexton writes in 'Little Girl, My String Bean, My Lovely Woman' (LoD 1966 CP p.145), echoing Simone de Beauvoir. This 'double birth' is something the mother-self experiences on two levels: painfully and immediately as a bereavement, mourning lost intimacy, and more broadly or analytically, taking a detached pride in the child's development, and her whole female life. For example, In 'Pain for a Daughter' (LoD 1966 CP p.163) it is the father who tends the injured child while the mother can only watch, hearing her daughter cry out:

"Oh my God, help me!"

Where a child would have cried out Maaa-
Where a child would have cried out Maaa-
She bit the towel and called on God
and I saw her life stretch out...
I saw her torn in childbirth,
and I saw her, at that moment,
in her own death and I knew that she knew.

The poems voice contradictions in the mother-self and in her role. She experiences herself as all used up and no longer useful to her growing daughters - 'You've picked my pocket clean/...and left me empty' ('Mother and Daughter' BOF 1972 CP p.305). Yet the daughter's blossoming is what the self also wishes for, and celebrates:

I would touch you,
that pulse brooding under your Madras shirt
each shoulder the most well-built house
As the body here is domestically a house, the self's maternal body in 'Little Girl...' is portrayed as a garden, from which the daughters came; now, in turn, their bodies are 'gardens' approaching ripeness: 'the apples...beginning to swell', the 'garlic buds all engorged'.

The oral element reminds one of Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market' (1862), where taste and texture evoke sensuality and desire. As in Rossetti's poem, a deliberately 'childlike' sexuality in Sexton's work focuses on the female body. Sexton's poems express this desire usually within family relationships as if it is only here that it can be recognised. The daughters are shown to be increasingly independent and unaware of this need; the mother-self is constructed as needy, jealous and conscious of her own ageing. The sequence seems cyclical, a repetition of the self's own feelings towards her mother in youth. (The use of Grimms' tales as structures for the poems in Transformations, dealing primarily with family relationships, growing daughters and ageing mother-figures, emphasises the pre-ordained outcomes, showing little hope of change: in this way the title is doubly ironic.)

It is an incestuous circle in which female identities constrict and alternatives are difficult to find. The particularly feminine mother/daughter cycle of dependence and rebellion is one Sexton's work explores with perception and courage; that it is something Plath would recognise, too, is obvious from her Journals (particularly the section covering December 1958-January 1959,
Sexton's emphasis on specifically female experiences and relationships influenced other women poets, notably Plath, whose subject matter, imagery and tone in 'Three Women' (1962) bear strong resemblance to Sexton's 'An Unknown Girl In A Maternity Ward' (TBAFVB 1960 CP p.24) exploring the relinquishment of a newborn child by its mother. Sexton's focus on intimate and woman-centred subjects, and areas generally avoided, (such as abortion, menstruation and masturbation) brought adverse criticisms. It is in its insistent expression of desire for the female body that her work is most challenging; nowhere else does it articulate such an active longing. The poems, above all else, are moving because of their depth of tenderness; they express love without the posturing and anxiety about appearances evident in Sexton's evocations of heterosexual relationships:

We laugh and we touch.
I promise you love. Time will not take away that.

('The Fortress' AMPO 1962 CP p.66)

It is as if the 'real' business of discovering one's selfhood lies fundamentally within the nexus of female relationships. This is a potentially subversive and exciting direction, moving away from the narrow definitions of the self prescribed by traditional heterosexual relationships and family networks.

Yet the female relationships depicted are far from untouched by the family, or by patriarchal structures; they carry limitations and restrictions of their own for the construction of self-image. This produces a constant process of 'recuperation' - the 'negating and defusing [of] challenges to the historically dominant meaning of gender'. (6) Sexton's work constantly sidetracks itself towards
more socially-acceptable channels; having originated defiance, it enacts self-stifling. This curious and fascinating dynamic can be seen clearly in poems on her daughters: the mother-self desires them, actively and sensuously, and then steps back.

The potential for challenge and subversion has been taken up in Adrienne Rich's poetry, where desire for the female other begins from a stronger and more self-conscious standpoint. Greg Johnson rightly points out that Sexton's work expresses a feeling of such inferiority to other women that relationship on equal terms becomes impossible. (7) Sexton's sense of her own oddness prevails over any feeling of a shared and empowering identity:

I think women are essentially with things. They're part of the earth and perhaps it's my own particular trait that I feel not part of the earth...I feel a little more outcast, and perhaps it makes me more of a writer. (8)

Her work operates in a confusing entanglement of discourses which constrain elements of subjectivity which might otherwise be more freely explored. In this interview Sexton seemed to accept a romantic discourse of the 'artist', separate from life, which would preclude a close engagement with working for change or accepting a non-unique self. Yet her writing itself creates a self-image far from that of the rarefied 'artist': '...Once I called breakfast the sexiest/meal of the day. Once I invited arrest/at the peace march in Washington' ('Angels of the Love Affair' BOF 1972 CP p.332).

Sexton's poetry haughtily evokes the child's voice, speaking its hungers, fears and needs: needs the nuclear family proves inadequate to meet. Her critique is of the self's inadequacy too; but her work challenges the emotional bankruptcy of the family and
intimate relationships. It desires an imaginary wholeness within
the self, an idealised bond between mother and daughter, impossible
given the construction of the subject within the family and
society. The utopian desire for other, better ways of relating
between women, emerges as a strong theme, always undercut by
feelings of loss and anger, but always reappearing with renewed
hope.

Section 5: Religion

Sexton's attitudes towards religion, and her poetry's emphasis
upon the religious quest, gather up elements of feminity and self-
image discussed in the previous section. Perhaps the quest for
spiritual belief (and the profound significance of death) appeared
a more elevated and important task than that of the female body
(more socially-understandable, too?); but Sexton's poems on Christ
articulate very similar hungers and wants, merely 'translated' into
a more overtly metaphysical discourse.

Sexton's last poetry, then, turns from desire and tenderness for
the ideal mother-figure and the blossoming daughters towards
questions of religious and moral belief. Her poems seek to account
for the existence of good and evil on a wide scale, of cruelty,
war, and greed, and, more personally, of 'good' and 'evil' self-
images, the 'good Anne' and 'rat Anne'.

The personal and metaphysical connect, often startlingly, when
the religious poems evoke family relationships very similar to
those of her earlier poetry. 'God' is a recognisable development
of the supra-masculine father figure, both as unpredictable and as
charismatic as the earlier 'Gatsby' model, while the Madonna evokes echoes of the powerful, authoritarian mother in poems such as 'Christmas Eve' (LoD 1966 CP p.139). As Adrienne Rich suggests, 'a woman's poetry about her relationship to her daemon - her own active, creative power - has in patriarchal culture used the language of heterosexual love or patriarchal theology'. (1) In her religious poems Sexton's struggle is still to understand herself, her own creativity and self-destructiveness, in terms of a family structure against which she must rebel. It is only within the context of such a nexus that either extreme of self-image (the creative and the destructive) can have meaning.

The self in these poems identifies, accordingly, with Christ - the child of powerful, mysterious parents. They develop the earlier theme of her Transformations, 1971 - that of the fairytale quest - in terms of the religious quest for self-knowledge. The 'Christ' of poems such as 'The Jesus Papers' (BoF 1972 CP p.337) is passive and dependent, yet exhibitionist and rebellious; a typical scapegoat figure. In this sequence the Jesus-self desires very much what the daughter-self did:

Mary, your great
White apples make me glad...

I close my eyes and suck you in like fire.

('Jesus Suckles', The Jesus Papers,
CP p.337)

The poems create a very complicated and contradictory mythology. 'The Holy Family' becomes a transmuted version of Sexton's own familial history and the writing struggles, all over again, to come to terms with the pain and inadequacy experienced there. It is contradictory because, despite being the focus for so much creative
scrutiny and endeavour, the family is precisely the place where, it is implied, no change or self-development can happen.

On one level this application of the family appears straightforward. It is, as Rich makes plain, the definitive structure whether in terms of heterosexual relationships or the idealized father and son bonding of religion - within a patriarchal culture. On another level it is problematic: Sexton's work takes Jesus as an alter-ego or self-image: many poems start with taking the Christ persona and using the first-person; others, using the third person still present Christ as an intimate companion, like 'Christopher' in 'O Ye Tongues' (TDN 1974 CP p.396).

Jesus stood over me looking down
and He laughed to find me gone
and put his mouth to mine
and gave me His air.

('The Sickness Unto Death' TARTG 1975 CP p.442)

Christ, it seems, interested Sexton most. As she wrote in a letter to WD Snodgrass, 'There are no new Gods to find. So I must convert to myself. Or Christ. Or whatever.'(2) It may be that the figure of Christ fascinated her because identification with it offered an alternative to the increasingly closed spiral of depression and suicide: Christ symbolises, above all, a triumph over death - a 'knowing' of death and a return from it. From this perspective death might be seen as a process, rather than a terrifying end in itself. The excerpt above seems to bear this out: Christ can bridge the chasm between life and death and offer the comfort and power of such knowledge.

Yet also, in direct contradiction of this, Christ embodies (almost literally) a number of conflicts experienced in Sexton's life and explored in her poetry. As a totem, in his ultimate situation of suffering and redemption, he unifies flesh and spirit:
his body becomes both his martyrdom and his salvation: his experience transforms him completely. Sexton's poetry continually longs for such a profound and effective (and final) transformation. (The contributory elements of masochism and self-display inherent in the mythic representation of Christ also echo aspects of femininity which interested Sexton.)

It is deeply ironic that, however 'feminine' in his vulnerability and status, Christ remains a male figure representative of a patriarchal religion and embodying masculine values. This alone raises difficulties in terms of self-image. Phyllis Chesler in her Women and Madness mentions briefly that some women experience themselves as female Christs, but does not elaborate. She describes Plath as a 'Christ-figure' for other women: for 'women, like men, have never had any trouble worshipping a victim they have destroyed or, more particularly, in "forgiving" a talented woman her talent - after her death.' (3)

Sexton's exploration of a 'Christ-self' within the intensely personalised mythos of her 'Holy Family' coincides with an increasing fragmentation of body images, as if the construction of identity were becoming more and more difficult and desperate. She writes of

lugging myself as if
I were a sawed-off
body in a trunk ('Live' LoD 1966 CP p.167)

Her language fragments correspondingly, becoming more wildly associative, exploding outwards in bursts of aggression and then exultant energy. The Christ-self image cannot meet the urgent desire for wholeness which clashes with her glorying in disintegration. This inability is expected: no intimate self-image has yet been given the power or ability to 'focus the personality's disparate elements into transformation. This power is always given to other, parental, figures.
Relevant here is E. Spelman's discussion of feminism and its adoption of the Platonic mind/body dualism: she notes that Betty Friedan and Shulamith Firestone, in valuing the mental over the physical and believing that women's liberation 'ultimately means liberation from our bodies', continue a long tradition of somatophobia - 'flesh-loathing'. (4) The implications are clear for Sexton's work: an increased awareness, through feminism, of the powers and significance of the female body, only works to complicate her increasing disgust at the 'gross' physical self, her urge 'to pour gasoline over my evil body and light it'. ('Is It True?' TARTG 1975 CP p.448) She wishes her readers, in another poem, to

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{take off your life like trousers,} \\
&\text{your shoes, your underwear,} \\
&\text{then take off your flesh,} \\
&\text{unpick the lock of your bones.} \\
&\text{In other words} \\
&\text{take off the wall} \\
&\text{that separates you from God.} \\
\end{align*}
\]

('The Wall' TARTG 1975 CP p.445)

God, or 'Mr Death', is the only one who seems able to heal the grotesque mess of parts the self now experiences itself to be (hands are kept in boxes, the body becomes 'a side of mutton'). Once again, this powerful figure evokes incestuous desires; he is both father and lover, the one for whom the child-bride tries on her 'black necessary trousseau'. ('For Mr Death...' TDW 1974 CP p.351) Acquiescence to him means the end of the struggle for self-definition.

The self still expresses rebellion, no matter how frightening, against this power. In a late poem ('The Death King' 1975, CP
Sexton still fights against closure and the ultimate, even the appealing, resolution of death. Here the self dances before God -

a crematory flight,
blinding my hair and my fingers,
Wounding God with his blue face,
his tyranny, his absolute kingdom,
with my aphrodisiac.

She uses her 'tainted' sexuality as a means of fighting back. Sexton's tone is typically defiant, affronting and yet self-destructive when dealing with masculine authority, laced, also, with salty humour and determination to continue the struggle, almost in spite of herself:

I say live, live, because of the sun,
the dream, the excitable gift
('Live' LoD 1966 CP p.170)

What emerges as a new element is the resolution to change, to bring about the ultimate transformation, testing familiar physical boundaries to their limits, through God and because of God:

the artery of my soul has been severed
and soul is spurting out upon them,
bleeding on them...

... And God is filling me,
though there are times of doubt
as hollow as the Grand Canyon,
still God is filling me.

('The Big Heart' TARTG 1975 CP p.463)

Anne Sexton acknowledges that her vision of transformation is violent and radical, testing identity to the core:
So I ate myself,
bite by bite,
and the tears washed me,
wave after cowardly wave

('The Sickness Unto Death'
TARTG 1975 CP p.442)

Though complete disintegration of the self must occur, it seems
that a 'new' self can emerge, whole and hopeful:

But I will conquer them all
and build a whole nation of God
in me - but united,
built a new soul,
dress it with skin.

('The Civil War' TARTG 1975 CP p.419)

Sexton emphasises the body's part in what is otherwise a deeply
psychological and spiritually-perceived process. It is typical of
her to include the everyday - the 'trousers, shoes and underwear'
of 'The Wall' - in poems dealing with profound metamorphosis. The
elements and objects of 'real', visible life remain important (just
as they did in the most nightmarish poems about the family). This
has to do, I believe, with the way Sexton's poetry imagines
metaphysical transformation specifically through the discourse of
femininity.

Media constructions - in popular culture, women's magazines,
advertising for example - put forward the ever-elusive and ever-
enticing figure of the 'new you', transformed through new or
different clothes, cosmetics, and haircuts, with body shapes
redesigned through diets and exercise. Sexton's poetry articulates
aspects of this pressure. Confession, also is an important element
in her writing as in women's magazines, where P. Stewart, in an
article 'He Admits... But She Confesses...' calls it, tentatively,
even a genre in itself. To see confession as a female mode of response, reflecting women's increased sense of moral culpability compared to men, substantiates my point about the importance of 'transformation'. P. Stewart sees confession in terms of a process towards 're-education', lacked by men who 'admit', therefore go through no such rigorous self-blame or self-growth. (5)

Sexton transposes confession on to her desire for a spiritual and mystical transformation and release from an imperfect selfhood. As Marjorie Ferguson argues, the focus for many women's magazines is woman as 'totem'; (6) and the process of attempting (impossible) perfection is a wearying rather than an enabling one. Sexton's work is not alone in imagining an end to these futile attempts - a definitive gesture, or an outcome almost orgasmic in its finality.

Sexton's poetry is merciless in its attack upon the self's flawed soul and body, as if endless attempts at cutting, reshaping, erasing and disguising might effect real change. Yet she shows underlying consciousness that such attempts are little more than a 'con' trick. Disguise may well be the best that can be achieved, and this only heightens the sense of unreality and falseness.

Many of these poems seem to deal with the experience of ageing, not overtly, but in a 'sub-text' which resonates through her later poems and illuminates many of her self-images:

The silence is death.
It comes every day with its shock
to sit on my shoulder, a white bird,
and peck at the black eyes
and the vibrating red muscle
of my mouth.

('The Silence' BoF 1972 CP p.318)
The poetry struggles so often to articulate ideas in limited language felt to be unsatisfactory: the language of advertising, women's magazines and 'feminine' discourse. (In this discourse any direct, honest exploration of ageing is taboo.) Though Sexton's use of everyday objects and elements often works to great effect, it can also trivialise. It also reflects the pressure of internalised values from advertising and the cultures of affluence, which encourages a competitive individualism. This half-visible presence in Sexton's work produces a jarring between her ideas and their treatment.

Sexton's work on religious belief also fascinates because it can be read as an example of the allure of what Marjorie Ferguson calls 'the feminine cult', (7) and its effect upon development of identity. Ferguson sees the role of women's magazines in society as a form of 'religious cult', with immense repercussions for women in terms of self-esteem. Women's magazines, she argues, carry out a socialisation process, emphasising key values of conformity and self-help. The 'totem' of the cult is 'Woman' herself - that fantastic being which it is never quite possible for mortal females to emulate.

Sexton's poetry accepts these values; they emerge vividly in her work on religious themes. Though she sees herself as a Christ-figure, it is through the feminine qualities he represents. His self-sacrifice, submission to authority, devotion and gentleness all compare with the stereotypical 'perfect' Woman. Christ's struggle, as presented in religious discourse, is an individual one, but his rewards are all that might be imagined: his 'transformation' and return to the Father in love and approval fit the fairytale quest theme very closely. As progression forward and outward seems more impossible for Sexton's self-images, the desire and need to become 'another' becomes more painful. In

You must be a poet,
a lady of evil luck

- 183 -
desiring to be what you are not,
longing to be
what you can only visit
('The Fish That Walked'
TARTG 1975 CP p.430)

Sexton seems to be tasting the bitterness of self-acceptance. But acceptance is rare in her poems:

My ideas are a curse.
They spring from a radical discontent
with the awful order of things.
('February 3rd' The Horoscope Poems,
WDY 1978 CP p.595)

If the experience of wholeness and peace through God is elusive, withdrawal of the promise of God's power to heal is far worse:

God went out of me
as if the sea had dried up like sandpaper,
as if the sun became a latrine.
God went out of my fingers.
They became stone.
('The Sickness Unto Death'
TARTG 1975 CP p.441)

It is the self who always constitutes the flaw, the error. God, the family, love, are all means of trying to heal the flaw, to integrate the outsider self; all have limited success (or are the expectations unrealisable?) Yet Sexton's work can unexpectedly discover a sense of peace and even unity. 'In Excelsis' ('Last Poems' 1974 CP p.608) describes coming to the seaside with a woman friend: the experience is completely holy; the self can imagine a kindly and wise transformation, in confronting

- 184 -
...the great mother arms
I never had
except here, where the abyss
throws itself on the sand,
blow by blow,
over and over,
and we stand on the shore
loving its pulse

The self can imagine being part of such apparently formless, and
benign, energy, supported by friendship - 'We have come to
worship,/the tongues of the surf are prayers,/and we vow/the
unspeakable vow' - and also being tiny, irrelevant, since the ocean
will 'continue into oblivion,/past our knowing/and the wild
toppling green that enters us today,/for a small time/in half
winter, half spring'. This poem escapes self-consciousness here,
and discards the boundaries erected between self and the world
outside. The religious element contributes to this: it is one poem
in which this element of faith seems integral.

Section 6: Conclusion

Sexton's defiant and rebellious assertion of self, the
demanding, tenacious, never-satisfied 'I', has had important and
interesting implications for women's poetry. The self is needy,
vulnerable, a victim; she is mad, or at least eccentric;
threatening and threatened; an efficient housewife, a loving
mother, a dutiful wife, a rebellious daughter; a survivor; a poet.
Sexton's self-image prefers to assume fairly socially-marginal
identities, assuming in the process the powers of the marginal to
criticise and reject. The very strength of the self's sense of its
own oddness lends an aggression to the 'I', demanding to be heard
and seen, and this takes its own courage. On the other hand, other
aspects of self-image emphasise the ultra-conventional, the
socially normative. The self, in all its complexity, becomes
conflated with its life, as does the poetry with its subject (that self and its life):

I am the only actor.
It is difficult for one woman
to act out a whole play.
The play is my life,
my solo act.

('The Play' TARTG 1975
CP p.440)

Sexton's tone is primarily that of the performer. Whether the performance is compulsory or self-instigated is often ambiguous. Because the self becomes centre-stage, there follows in the poetry a renegotiation of public and personal boundaries. The intimate takes precedence, and throws new light on the 'public' in the process.

Sexton's uncompromising emphasis on feminine experience in its most immediate aspects (abortion, menstruation, masturbation, sexual desire, breakdown) was important in initiating debate on such 'taboo' subjects in women's writing. The affection, grace, wisdom and humour of Sexton's work are often overlooked, but these are integral elements too, discoverable in her persona of 'wisewoman', someone who has suffered and loved, able to pass on knowledge and experience to younger women. Strength and resilience emerge from her concentration on the precedence of 'small' domestic details and family lives, her joy in everyday matters and love for her daughters.

Sexton's writing takes its place within a continuum of women's poetry including that of Emily Dickinson and Marianne Moore. These poets have, like her, used specific forms, particularly the diaphoric (that of the subconscious: associative, juxtapositional).
J. Kammer writes of the diaphoric imagination as constituting 'a process in itself': (1) and this emerges clearly when reading a Sexton poem, as if the words are 'finding themselves' and coming into being to create new meanings in a particularly exciting way. Kammer also notes the anti-linear form and syntactic compression notable in some poetry by women; again this applies to Sexton's poetry in particular for, despite revisions, she too produces 'negative space' around anti-linear poems, implying instability and potentiality. Her poems evoke the fragmented, dreamlike, rushing and multi-layered experience of women's inner experience, partly through this anti-linear, associative form of writing.

Sexton's explorations of female desire for the maternal body open up other areas of debate. As part of the cultural liberalisation of the 1960s and early 1970s, her poems responded to the influence of the 'woman-centred' feminist movement; but her explorations of desire among women were ahead of their time in seeking to voice an 'unvoiceable' hunger (that of the infantile needs in women for maternal love). I feel her work influenced Rich's later 'lesbian continuum'.

Yet in some sense the poetry's emphasis on self-revelation acts as a smokescreen to a developing knowledge and understanding of the self and the self's relation to society. I see two conflicting directions: one moves towards real enquiry and growth (painful, perhaps, but ultimately fruitful - like, for example, the poems on desire for the maternal body); the other relies on a sensationalism of the self which brings only self-disgust.

The 'solo act' then becomes self-reflexive, relying on static imagery and symbolism. This side of Sexton's work is associated with the more tawdry elements of the emerging 'Plath cult' of the middle and late 1960s. The poem 'Sylvia's Death' (LoD 1966 CE p.126) evokes only her envy for Plath and her fame derived from suicide. Sexton seems too willing to settle for melodramatic imitations of Plath's work: 'I am flying like a single red
rose, 'leaving a jet stream of solitude' in 'Killing the Love' (45MS 1976 CP p.529) is too uncomfortable an echo of Plath.

K. Newlin describes Sexton as a 'bandwagon follower' after Plath's death. (2) Her late work over-simplifies the artificial glamour of suicide and victimisation which bolstered the Plath myth. For example, her use of the Nazi and Jew subject lacks the highly-controlled edge and precision of Plath's work. Her fascination with Plath as a person and with aspects of her work hampered Sexton's later development of her own different voice. Sexton later shared Plath's critical fate: R. Howard described her in absurdly elevated terms after her suicide, calling her 'a priestess', gaining 'a kind of sacerdotal stature, the elevation of a priestess celebrating mysteries' - terms echoing Robert Lowell's strange appreciation of Plath as 'one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines.' (3)

Sexton lived, unlike Plath, through the late 1960s and early 1970s flowering of the women's liberation movement. Her work was influenced by feminism; she wrote affectionately and positively of women and resolutely concentrated on those subjects designated as 'female'. In poems such as 'Is It True?' (TARTG 1975 CP p.446) she celebrated new abortion legislation with typical humour:

Today the Supreme Court made abortion legal.
Bless them,
Bless all women
Who want to remake their likeness
but not every day.
Similarly, 'In Celebration of my Uterus' (LP 1969 CP p.187) imagines a world full of women all active in separate lives - 'one is in the shoe factory', and 'one is wiping the ass of her child' - but joined in an affirmation based upon their shared gender. Sexton's work can use feminist themes with warmth and assurance, as in 'Woman with Girdle' (AMP 1962 CP p.70) which celebrates the older female body, its nipples 'warm starfish', its belly 'soft as pudding' rising 'a city from the sea, born long before Alexandria was, straightway from God you have come into your redeeming skin.'

These collective visions of women, however, are outnumbered by poems exploring a sense of deeply-felt isolation. Though the women's movement may have given Sexton freer access to certain subjects and vocabulary, it could not provide her with a happier and more secure self-image. The 'Ms Dog' persona in poems such as 'Hurry Up Please It's Time' (DN 1974 CP p.384) and 'Is It True?' (TARTG 1975 CP p.446) emerges as embattled and defensive, struggling to make the grade in the masculine world, 'fighting the dollars, rolling in a field of bucks' ('Hurry Up...') and experiencing familiar feelings of failure: 'She don't want no dollars. She done want a mama.' ('Hurry Up...') The feminist image for the self arouses uncertainties and anxiety.

This contradiction in Sexton's work affected her practice: obsessively self-reflexive, fascinated by the self. A.R. Jones points out that her poetry differs from the Romantics' in its search for wholeness, not awareness, and in presenting a ceaseless dialogue with the self rather then constructing the omniscient 'I'. (4) This 'dialogue' is one of the most dynamic and exciting elements of Sexton's work, in that it accepts nothing at all as being fixed; everything is under scrutiny, the self is always redefining itself. Subjects and themes recur in an inward motion, yet the language and forms used are as outward-going as a catherine wheel; explosive, associative, wildly imaginative.
Taking the self insistently as subject brought new attention and emphasis: Sexton's poetry was extremely popular and successful in her lifetime. Yet as Denise Levertov saw, such success was dangerous for someone like Sexton, whose work - 'manifestations of private anguish' - became exploited by a public hungry for an experience of community. Her alienation 'fed' others and her creativity internalised this process, becoming, in Levertov's opinion, self-exploiting. (5)

The self then becomes an object, defined by expectation. In the 1950s and 60s (under the influence of R.D. Laing's work) individual creativity and rebellion was often seen in terms of the discourse of 'Romantic' alienation, which encouraged the idea that creativity was somehow the privileged result of a doomed personality. (6) That Sexton herself felt this to be true can be seen in her work and her letters. Further pressure came with the expectation that Sexton's work should continue to dare to be indecorous. Some of her late poems appear to strain in the effort to live up to this expectation, being self-consciously crude (like 'Hurry Up Please It's Time').

The Soviet poet Bella Akhmadulina has also been defined by her 'indecorousness'; her poetry has some vivid parallels with Sexton's. In an admiring Foreword to Akhmadulina's, Fever, 1969, Yevtushenko wrote:

She wants to tear away the garments of decorum from everything, to tear away everything from her own soul and place it, fearlessly naked and contemptuous, right before the slippery gaze of other people. (7)

'Naked and contemptuous', however celebratory in purpose, evokes an unfortunate image of striptease. There is such a fine line between bravado and exhibitionism, between power and helplessness, in a situation where the self is being defined in public (either by
itself or by others). The 'shamelessness' of Sexton and Akhmadulina can limit and discount the importance of their work, even while it appears to yield acclaim and interest.

Though often uncomfortable to read simply because it seems so little 'translated' from lived experience, Sexton's poetry should not be read as unproblematically autobiographical. The created 'I' and its world are carefully controlled. The poetry seems chiefly concerned with the dilemma of how to create an affirming sense of one's own subjectivity in a social context where the 'feminine' is trivialised and distorted (whether by the language of popular culture or by the silences of incomprehension between male and female) and the 'feminist' opens wider chasms of self-doubt and feelings of inferiority. Sexton's treatment of her metaphysical themes - life, death, spirituality - and themes of love, loss, sexuality, all bear the scars of this dilemma. Operating in a tainted atmosphere, Sexton's poetry can never attain its desires, but the need and demand sustaining the work refuses to be silenced.

Sexton's poetry drew strength from new social developments such as the ideas of the New Left, the anti-Vietnam movement and of course feminism. They all offered insights into new ways to live and to see the self. Sexton's reality, however, remains deeply feminine, more of the 1950s than of the two subsequent decades. Her subject could be described as an exploration of the American Dream as lived by a daughter and wife within the nuclear family; and the betrayal of the Dream is seen mainly in terms of individual, personal relationships. History and society remain distant. It is the failure of the family, worked out in the discourse of the feminine mystique, which finally leads to such a desperate desire for transformation: but only into another family, this time that of God. The radical elements of her work interconnect with much deeper convictions about 'inescapable' femininity, her innate culpability and the predetermined consequences. They cannot be separated, since each aspect feeds, in contradiction, the other:

- 191 -
Perhaps I am no one. 
True, I have a body
and I cannot escape from it.
I would like to fly out of my head,
but that is out of the question.
It is written on the tablet of destiny
that I am stuck here in human form.
That being the case
I would like to call attention to my problem.

('The Poet of Ignorance' TARTG 1975
CP p.434)
CHAPTER TV:  Footnotes

Section I


   'I feel very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. This intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience, which I feel has been partly taboo ... interests me very much.'

Plath and Sexton had met in a graduate writing seminar taken by Lowell at Boston University in 1958/59.


4. Examples include poetry by W.D. Snodgrass, Muriel Rukeyser, and particularly Diane Wakoski's poems of need and desire, feelings of loneliness and ugliness.


Section 2


2. E. Wilson, *Halfway to Paradise*, p. 81.


Section 3


11. Women's relation to cultural ideals, and therefore to their own images, is more accurately described as a relation of narcissistic damage ...... There is, then, for women, an ambivalence between fascination and damage in looking at themselves and images of other women. The adult woman never totally abandons the love which the little girl had for her own image, in the period of narcissistic glory. But this culture damages the glory, turns it into a guilty secret.


-195-


27. Sylvia Plath, Journals, Jan 10, 1953, p. 66.


- 196 -
Section 4


'I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range - through each woman's life and throughout history - of woman-identified experience ... not simply ... genital sexual experience ... [but] many more forms of primary intensity between and among women'.


Section 5


Conclusion


6. E. Wilson, Only Halfway to Paradise, London, Tavistock, 1980, p.120-123.

CHAPTER THREE: MARGARET ATWOOD

Introduction

Margaret Atwood began writing poetry while still at school in the mid 1950s, a time spanning resurgence of interest in Canadian nationalism and national literature: these years are now seen to be crucial ones for Canadian writing. Up until then the British and American classics had been taught as a matter of course, subsuming Canadian work. But a revival of interest in an ignored Canadian literary tradition brought out two influential anthologies (1), and by the early 1960s 'a recognizable Canadian poetic canon' (2) had evolved which included two important women poets, Jay McPherson and Margaret Avison. Both poets were associated with the University of Toronto while Atwood studied at its Victoria College. Therefore one can see Atwood's work evolving from this context of nationalist self-appraisal, encouraged by the presence of eminent female role models.

Atwood undertook academic work in the early 1960s, taking an MA, beginning doctoral studies and lecturing while sustaining a high creative output. By 1972 she had five major collections of poetry published, two novels, and a text on Canadian literature. (3) All were well-received.

Like that of Plath, Sexton and Rich, Atwood's first writing belongs to the 1950s. Growing up in the Quebec bush, she did not attend a full year of school until 1950, but studied at home. (Her father was an entomologist). As Frank Davey says, this remote existence must have made 'both her early reading and her father's work of special importance to her'. (4) The contrasts and tensions between the Quebec wilderness and the urban environments Atwood inhabited subsequently, emerge in her poetry with great force. Her solitary and rather unusual childhood could
be argued to have protected her, to some degree, from the socialisation into the contemporary femininity experienced by the other poets in this study. As Atwood remembers, her parents expected her to use her intelligence:

and they did not pressure me into getting married. My mother is rather exceptional in this respect. Remember this was taking place in the 50s, when marriage was seen as the only desirable goal. My mother...was a tomboy in youth and still is one.(5)

In spite of this, however, it seems that Atwood's memories of her earliest writing are set against the macho elements of the blossoming nationalist ideology, and, interviewed in 1973, she was under no illusions:

In a frontier society...men writers... define writing as a really male thing to be doing. And if you're a woman doing it, that really threatens their position....(6)

Atwood goes on to indicate that it was not just masculinity, but continuing responses to femininity (and success) which caused her problems:

Back in the days when what you were supposed to do was pay attention to the diapers....I was a threat to other women's life positions. I think now (with Women's Liberation) I tend to get made into a kind of hero, which is just as unreal. It makes me just as uncomfortable.(7)
There is a contradiction in Atwood's work which these excerpts illustrate. Though in one sense her poetry stems from a recognisable confluence of historical circumstances (principally nationalism, civil rights, the ecological movement and feminism) of which she is acutely aware, in another sense her poetry almost defensively separates itself from contextualisation.

The defensiveness is evident in an article on women writers completed by Atwood between 1973 and 1975. ('Paradoxes and Dilemmas: The Woman as Writer', Women in the Canadian Mosaic, 1976, ed. G. Matheson). Though she describes the stress of being a woman writer before feminism, she makes it clear that she has deep reservations on the 'pigeon-holing' of the women's movement. She writes of herself growing up when it was still assumed a creative woman

was either neurotic or wicked or both, derelict in her duties to some man, child or aged relative....These writers accomplished what they did by themselves, often at great personal expense. In order to write at all they had to defy other women's as well as men's ideas of what was proper, and it's finally not all that comforting to have a phalanx of women....come breezing up now to tell them they were right all along....There's a great temptation to say to feminists "Where were you when I needed you?"(8)

In her determination not to be 'the transmitter of someone else's ideology'(9), Atwood originally rejected feminism. In an article in 1973 she expressed doubts about the value of writers becoming directly involved in causes: [That] may be good for the Movement, but it's yet to be demonstrated that it's good for the writer.(10) By 1975 she had lifted her disapproval slightly: 'Feminism has broadened its base ....
It's now not so much a political movement as a climate of opinion .... less radical, less faddishly transforming attitudes'.

Atwood identifies the self in her poems as being uncompromisingly female, in opposition to the male, which is represented as alien and often incomprehensible. Her construction of difference is very similar to a radical feminist position in that it depends upon fixing essentialist characteristics. Yet, as can be seen, she steers away from any overt connection with the feminist movement. Her self-image is ultimately that of the independent, the non-aligned dissident, the artist, even though much of what she writes can be shown to endorse a mixture of beliefs held by contemporary movements and groups.

In this chapter I hope to explore various themes Atwood employs to develop self-images, looking at where, I think, a major contradiction lies, emerging from Atwood's use of the underlying dualism of masculine and feminine in order to explain the dynamics of wider power struggles. This depends upon her definitions of 'male' and 'female' as eternally unchanging in antipathy towards one another. It is this gender opposition which becomes the base line for other, crucial oppositions in Atwood's work, informing the painful splits between art and life, city and wilderness, colonised and coloniser, victim and oppressor, nature and culture, and, particularly, self and other.

Section 1

If Atwood's poetry is determined not to become 'a transmitter of someone else's ideology, no matter how fine that ideology might be'(1), it also appears determined to avoid comparisons with other, earlier work by women poets (such as Sexton and Plath). The self in it remains guarded and secretive, deceiving and devious.
In a review of Sexton's *A Self-Portrait In Letters* Atwood seems to have taken to heart the criticisms lavished upon both Sexton and Plath because of their 'self-exposure'. In the poem 'The Words Continue Their Journey' (I, 1984 p.82), she writes: 'Most suicides are not poets: a good statistic.' Remarking that Sexton was 'a hoarder, saving everything', Atwood reacts by wanting 'to rush to the incinerator...with one's own scrap heaps'. (2) Her poetry is deliberately anti-autobiographical in any overt way. The effect is a chillingly impersonal one at times.

The self-conscious process of mystification emerges primarily as a strategy for survival. To survive is a central preoccupation in the poetry. It is almost as if the times appeared now too dangerous to expose one's vulnerability as Sexton's work did. Again a contradiction emerges, that of the popularity and enormous readership of these poems, linked with the 'tease' effect of extreme reserve.

The selves in Atwood's poetry no longer believe, even hopelessly, in the male hero who might save them: the responsibility for survival rests primarily within. The hero is now more likely to be the enemy against whom one must survive by stealth. (Yet in the intimacy and fascination with this enemy, the obsession with his weak spots, there are echoes of Plath and Sexton.)

This is a major element in Atwood's poetry: its fascination with oppositions, its creation of antagonistic polarizations between the genders. In one sense this can be seen as a continuing theme, 'translating' into a slightly different discourse, a similar material to that of Plath's angriest poems: an anger, in Atwood's work, made strangely impersonal and detached. Alan Williamson has written of Plath's
desire to leave the personal sense of the self behind, to attain some mode of being that is conscious, yet impersonal ....

Other poets of Plath's generation have tried to realize and inhabit a larger than personal .... mode of selfhood (3)

Atwood's work has, perhaps, achieved this, but with some loss involved. A patterning is created, through folklore (the Bluebeard tale, in particular, seems to fascinate), myth, ghost stories, and the gothic, in which the intensely personal material becomes subsumed, made deliberately obscure. Her poems contain fragments and elements of concerns shared with Plath and Sexton, but the emphasis is changed. The autobiographical, which appeared liberating initially for these earlier poets, now seems more of a straitjacket (being as much the result of critical responses and the context of the poetry's marketing and readership as a judgement on the work itself). Instead Atwood's work avoids revelation through play with meaning and stressing ambiguities: at its most extreme, the unknowable self exists in an ultimately unknowable environment.

In contradiction to this radical, modernist retreat from certainty, Atwood's sexual dynamic retains a fixed position from her earliest work, Double Persephone (written in the late 1950s, published in 1961), on towards her most recent poetry. As Frank Davey points out,

Flesh and blood girl in the timeless, ceremonial garden of patriarchal mythology...is a basic dramatic situation (4)

This opposes life, process, and growth as symbolized by the female, to the static, deadly destructiveness of her masculine
surroundings. In this, various influences can be detected (for no matter how detached, a writer is always, to whatever extent, a 'transmitter' of some ideology). Matriarchal religion, as rediscovered by radical feminism (for example, in the work of Mary Daly who published *Beyond God The Father* in 1973, and *Gyn/ecology* in 1978) appears as a connecting thread in Atwood's work: particularly in its images of earth deities and elemental goddesses, powerful in their fecundity, in tune with the natural world. Another theme used by Atwood is that of the exploitation of natural resources by capitalist and patriarchal big business. This is particularly so because Atwood's work sees the landscape as being gendered female ('virgin'), attacked by the masculine oppressiveness of urban development and industrial expansion. The male element is always hard, unyielding (the 'wooden leader' with his 'heartful of medals' *Power Politics* 1971 p.7) while the female element is elusive, fluid, and above all, stoic, even though it is usually the one to suffer harm and lose any stable identity: 'I flake apart layer by layer down quietly to the bone' (*F* p.22).

Added to this Atwood's poetry presents Canada as a smaller, more vulnerable 'female' nation under threat from voracious America. Novels such as *Surfacing* (1972) deal, as does the poetry, with this experience of colonialism, exploring it on both a national and a sexual level, informing the self's sense of its position as marginal or dispensable.

The element designated 'male' assumes many complex resonances; its threat is far-reaching, embracing the personal sphere of relationship but going far beyond, to include transpersonal forces such as technology, war, nuclear power, pollution and violence. Atwood's poetry then develops themes from Plath's and Sexton's work which remained oblique or half-uttered. Their heresy has become, in the context of late 1960s and 70s radicalism, a new orthodoxy. We see this process occurring in Rich's poetry too and her own eventual questioning of it.
The 'female' comes to be seen in terms of its separateness, its defensive position protesting the status quo. What was once 'neurotic' is now celebrated as sensitive, organic, creative, nurturing.

Initially this reconsideration of the implications for 'female' creativity seemed to promise a whole new writing practice for and by women, a fruitful 'revision' of the self. Atwood's poetry is part of this revaluation, but much of it remains muted, even pessimistic, where others' work brims over with celebration. (5)

Much of this pessimism comes from Atwood's poetic vision of female and male elementals locked together in a struggle for survival. Though both Plath and Sexton found romantic ideology disturbing and disappointing they still recognised its allure: the male remained a figure resonant with desire and mystery, no matter how hateful (even hatred sometimes acted as an aphrodisiac). But for Atwood's scrupulous scepticism, there can be no happy ending, since the battle injures both irredeemably. The most bitter examples lie in Power Politics, but 'Variations on the Word Love' (True Stories, 1981, p.82) attacks 'love' with typical forthrightness: 'this is a word we use to plug/holes with' and goes on:

Love! Love! sing the soldiers, raising
their glittering knives in salute.
Then there's the two
of us. This word
is far too....
...sparse
to fill those deep bare
vacuums between the stars
that press on us with their deafness.
It's not love we don't wish
to fall into, but that fear.
The female self armours herself against dependency upon the male, in personal, emotional, sexual and social terms. Otherwise, it's implied, neediness will create a state of victimhood, in thrall to a male who will hurt and destroy without even being aware of it. In the process the female's armour self-imprisons her in an ironically similar wasteland to that of the male's. This is a static situation, a stand-off: in a sense the struggle has already been decided, hence the fatalism: nothing can broach 'those deep bare vacuums' separating the two. What emerges is a sterile status quo where desire, when it occurs, can be experienced only in a perverse and destructive way:

Next time we commit
love, we ought to
choose in advance what to kill. (Power Politics p.35)

The situation seems so hopeless partly because the female hides from, and rejects, the authenticity of her own needs. Communication is impossible: the female remains silent, with the detached, rather cynical 'narrator' explaining for her. This creates an eerie, almost schizoid effect.

Atwood does not assert, overtly, the primacy of the female point of view. The male may be shown to be useless, even dangerous, yet there remains a tacit acceptance of his 'power politics' based upon non-acknowledgement and repression: 'your mouth is nothingness/where it touches me I vanish' (PP p.53), 'Language, the fist/proclaims by squeezing/is for the weak only,' (PP p.31).

The female's pain becomes increasingly inturned and desperate; ('I lie mutilated beside/you' PP p.47) and the strategy for survival is to desire to be like the male other who wants 'only answers' (PP p.11):

Let me stop caring
about anything but skinless
wheels and smoothly-running money

Get me out of this trap, this body, let me be like you, closed and useful. (PP p.19)

The male and female cannot communicate; yet they are drawn together constantly to fail and to damage one another. The female in *Power Politics* is not merely a victim — she can 'approach this love/like a biologist/pulling on my rubber/gloves and white labcoat' (p.10). Atwood's female figures are often portrayed as having offputting exteriors, very different from their inner realities and violent needs and desires. (6)

She portrays the weakness at the core of the masculine will-to-power:

you clench yourself, withhold
even your flesh
outline/pleasure is what
you take but will not accept (PP p.34)

you attempt merely power
you accomplish merely suffering (PP p.32)

Linked with this disdain is a confidence in her self's power as well as need to change ('I can change my-/self more easily/than I can change you' PP p.4). Rather than neediness and dependency, there seems to be a pressure, visible in Rich's work also, to reconstruct the self, to struggle to create new directions which leave the male behind as a lost cause. Within the context of feminism the self creates an image of survivor and challenger rather than victim — the transformation into the 'new woman' dreamed of by Sexton.
Atwood's poetry achieves this by rejecting the clichés of feminine subjectivity - the self seen as neurotic, a freak, or as mad - and instead recreates a typically contemporary state of mind (near to the brink, vulnerable, hyper-sensitive), celebrating the undervalued potentiality of the feminine psyche. For both Rich and Atwood the mysterious experiences brought about by heightened consciousness provide valuable insights into the true, yet hidden reality obscured by patriarchy: the psychiatric becomes, by contrast, deeply coercive.

In this attempt, however, ideological pressures feature, highlighting how fragile the dividing line is between these different approaches to self-image. The self in Atwood's poetry is often at odds with a hostile, incomprehending environment. She lacks the comfort and security of conventional ties (no matter how restrictive) and sees herself as an outsider: displaced and isolated. Stubbornly and courageously she sticks to this self-marginalisation, partly rejecting society herself, but also rejected by it. Her sense of loneliness links with her refusal, or inability, to articulate need or to initiate intimacy. Her neutrality is portrayed as being a kind of defensive power. In 'Georgia Beach' (Interlunar 1984 p.50) Atwood writes:

Two kinds of people walk here:
those who think they have love
and those who think they are without it.

I am neither one nor the other.

Where Atwood's work breaks free from this pessimism is in its own specific vision of an ideal female consciousness, existing within the imagination and harking back to a pre-linguistic state, an oceanic vision of unity and completeness: 'language divides us into fragments, I wanted to be whole' (Surfacing 1972 p.146).
Naming and defining are elements of 'male' language, the language of planting flags and taking possession, while being constitutes the oppositional 'female' discourse, one that is fluid, biologically-based and outside time.

Profound pessimism and fatalism emerge on one hand: on the other, a compensatory celebration upon the mystic and spiritual. The one fixed point, gender, which is necessary to sustain this uneasy equilibrium, is always slippery and admits doubt and illusion.

In their introductory chapter to *Nature, Culture, Gender*, (1980) editors M. Strathern and C. MacCormack argue that 'the values ascribed to male and female, though apparently 'natural' and constant, in fact shift constantly in order to accommodate changing ideological assumptions. Though I will discuss their argument in more detail further on, I want here to emphasize their perspective on the complexity and ambiguity of gender relations within gender ideology because it gives a counterpoint to Atwood's stance that gender, on some original, profound level, is pre-ideological.

Strathern suggests why such constantly-shifting paradoxes regarding gender emerge in society. She gives as example the common belief that the male is savage while the female is cultured (a view held by elements of the feminist movement), and the contradicting belief that it is the female who is savage, passionate and ultimately destructive, while the male epitomizes order, culture, civilisation. Strathern believes that such contradictions emerge because of the paradoxical contemporary concept of the individual, someone who is creator of their environment, yet simultaneously at that environment's mercy.

This dilemma of experienced power and powerlessness seems strikingly relevant to Atwood's constructions of self-image. The figures in the poems are extremely strong, almost frighteningly so; the self is portrayed, as Frank Davey says, as 'a magician...a
transformer, a producer of metamorphoses' (7), able to make things happen, to exert control over the environment, even literally to create the surroundings. Yet she is often afraid, not merely of the alien 'male' environment of industry and intellect, but also, more damagingly, of the potentially annihilating 'female' landscapes of pure being - the mountains, wilderness and coast: 'the waves/are chill fire, clean/us to the bone' ('Fragments: A Beach' PEW 1970 p.74) This kind of terrain acts upon the self, paring it down to essentials but going perilously close to complete extinction of self-awareness:

I'm a category, a noun
in a language not human,
infra-red in the moonlight,
a tidal wave in the air. ('Landcrab 11, TS 1981 p.15)

Even the self's potential seems at times to be threatening: in 'Doorway' (I 1984 p.29) Atwood's brooding self-image is that of the 'power of a door unopened', 'waiting' to discover new knowledge, new powers. Her contradictory feelings of power and feelings of passivity and negation are frighteningly similar at times: Atwood finds her power often self-destructive, like Plath and Sexton. Fear of the self and its power to change appears to feed Atwood's desire for a fixed, 'female' identity.

Feminism has made women much more aware, and so consciously afraid of their environment: radical feminism has channelled fear and anger towards the masculine. Atwood's attempts at opposing 'male' and 'female' look like efforts to create equilibrium, to secure identity through difference in a period where gender roles have been dislocated. Yet rather than create a sense of resolution and safety, this polarization increases a sense of female vulnerability. A rigid, essentialist separation of the 'female principle' as under threat from technological, patriarchal culture is not conducive to optimism or a sense of self-empowerment.
Atwood’s work can be traced as successor to Plath’s first voiced doubts about mass destruction. Plath wrote of the Holocaust; Atwood’s novel *The Handmaid’s Tale* (1986) amplifies radical feminist fears of a masculine backlash and a patriarchal appropriation of childbirth.

Both Atwood and Rich emphasise this sense of threat and danger, focusing it upon gender predominantly, as an area with unhealed scars and jagged edges. They seem to argue, with Michele Barrett, that ‘the struggle over the meaning of gender is crucial. It is vital for our purposes to establish its meaning in contemporary capitalism as not simply ‘difference’, but as division, oppression, inequality, internalized inferiority for women’. (8)

An important strategy of Atwood’s poetry is to assert a subversive feminine identity defining itself in opposition to the dominant masculine discourse, creating self-image through opposition. In doing so it aligns itself with recognisable feminist concerns, voiced by such as Luce Irigaray, ‘who challenges phallocentricity by celebrating difference, women’s characteristics defined positively against masculine norms, and imagines a specifically feminine language’. (9) In its tersest form the opening poem of *Power-Politics* sets this agenda:

you fit into me
like a hook into an eye
a fish hook
an open eye.  (PP p.1)
This self-image, based purely on differentiation from the male other, depends on it for antagonistic definition. The scenario created is a sombre one based upon eroticism derived from power imbalance and masculine brutality. The male cannot be desired with tenderness:

yes at first you
go down smooth as
pills, all of me
breathes you in and then it's

a kick in the head, orange
and brutal, sharp jewels
hit and my
hair splinters. (PP p.22)

In 'A Woman's Issue' (IS 1981 p.54) the female body represents, literally and figuratively,

Enemy territory, no man's
land, to be entered, furtively,
fenced, owned, but never surely,

subject to monstrous mutilation and disfigurement, yet always rebellious. An intrinsic element of this power game is that the female self never becomes entirely subordinated. Atwood's poetry allows small victories to emerge through the use of irony and under-statement. It is a deliberately muted but always tenacious element in the construction of masculine and feminine conflict; there is a rather sour humour in the way Atwood plays with the feminine 'mothering' role here, taking it further than expected by hinting at the female's ability to 'create' the male, keeping the sick game going, as in the 'Frankenstein' poems and 'He shifts from east to west'. (PP p.26): 'Because we have no history/I construct
one for you...I invent'. Irony is also the means by which the poems approach some kind of tenderness, even if mixed with self-dislike and contempt for the other:

You say, Do you
love me, do you love me

I answer you:
I stretch your arms out
one to either side
your head slumps forward.

later I take you home
in a taxi, and you
are sick in the bathtub. (PP p.6)

Tenderness seems possible only at times such as these when the male is temporarily weakened, feminized. Generally in Atwood's work desire for the individual male is linked with revulsion from the all-pervading masculine culture; such desire, therefore, is perceived as fraught with danger. Fully articulated eroticism is attached not to a man but to a particular non-urban landscape: 'the/marginal orchards branched/colourful/
feathered/and overfilled/with giving.' ('A Descent through the Carpet' TCQ 1966 p.21) or 'the plum season. the nights/blue and distended, the moon/hazed .... the plums/dripping on the lawn outside/... burst/with a sound like thick syrup/muffled and slow' ('Late August, YAH 1974, p.93). Only occasionally does the idea of the desired male connect benignly with the self's surroundings, as in 'Late Night' (IS p.20):

Screw poetry, it's you I want,
your taste, rain
on you, mouth on your skin.
Yet here the male is absent, and desire therefore deferred and non-threatening.

It is not always true that emphasizing the 'other'ness of the male reinforces identity for the female self. Sometimes the meaninglessness of the male's existence only makes the self's life appear correspondingly dreary:

How long do you expect me to wait
while you cauterize your
senses, one
after another
...
...
How long will you demand I love you?

I'm through, I won't make
any more flowers for you

I judge you as the trees do
by dying

(Pp. p.32/33)

The male's alleged refusal to feel, to accept a position as part of the natural life-force, creates in the female self an answering numbness. Atwood portrays the heterosexual relationship as deathly - as if, having emerged from the white-hot anger of Plath's response, the next position is an utter giving-up of hope that masculine and feminine can co-exist productively.

Atwood's poetry continually struggles to assert identity in face of threats of annihilation; to sustain a coherent subjectivity in the face of passing time and many-faceted attacks from outside the self. Some of the positions assumed in this struggle are contradictory. For example, one reiterated threat is the manner in which the masculine viewpoint seeks to objectify the female body.
In 'A Woman's Issue' (IS p.54) the impetus to protest against this seems to lead Atwood to objectify equally. The female body reduces to the biological: 'notice what they share/is between the legs' or, in 'Torture' (IS p.50) becomes a sign of the evil visited upon it, an icon impersonal in the extremity of its suffering. All that remains is a gendered determinism: identity is forfeited. This is a risk to her construction of subjectivity which Atwood’s poetry takes continually. It evinces an uneasiness with the question of identity; Atwood seems to turn away, deliberately, from exploring individuation. Instead her work concentrates on the archetype; on the mysterious, the profoundly impersonal—on 'puns, echoes and symbols'.

At moments of heightened consciousness the self actually loses its shape, becomes one with its surroundings: 'I'm ice-clear, transparent... the trees are like this too, they shimmer, their cores glow through the wood and bark' (Surfacing p.181). It is also the time when sign and signifier, thing and its descriptive language, lose contact with each other: 'The animals have no need for speech, why talk when you are a word - I lean against a tree, I am a tree leaning' (S p.181)

The fluidity of identity at times of stress—its ability to merge with natural surroundings—lies with this psychic force, this super-sensitivity which makes boundaries of identity (physical and psychological) open to question. Atwood’s female self-images are correspondingly archetypal: the priestess, the wisewoman, the shamaness, the nature goddess. These are, by their own definitions, elusively mysterious, masking rather than revealing.

This is an aspect of Atwood’s attempt to reclaim ‘Nature’ as essentially feminine. Still, of course, bound in language, her work seeks to articulate an alternative and authentic discourse in contrast to the trivialising, distorting cultural images of women in contemporary society—even the wordless one: 'The billboard lady/with her white enamel/teeth and red/enamel claws', from 'On
The female principle and its correlative, landscape (the specific and yet mythical landscape of the Canadian 'bush'), suffused with mysticism seeks appropriate speech. The privileged landscape is that of the 'underworld', both secret wilderness and the hidden terrain of the unconscious, beautiful, alluring and yet deeply menacing. In 'Notes From Various Pasts' (ALT 1968 p.10) the speaker-self feels the jarring involved between conflicting realities: the surface reality of worldly language 'sheathed in an armoured skin' and the submerged reality of the rich, elusive unconscious, 'these once-living/and phosphorescent meanings/fading in my hands'.

This poem's resonance lies in expressing uncertainty over the truth of either reality's existence. What can be remembered or salvaged from the mystical unconscious? Words appear, like fish, to die out of their element. This 'deep', almost a void, threatens identity rather than offering any secure vision of it. The painful tension between the past - the treasurehouse of memory and the 'collective unconscious' - and the present, with the self as transcriber of memory - remains unresolved. What is searched for and desired seems also that which is most frightening and dangerous to the one who uses language and recall in that search.

This is an important paradox because it is in the wilderness or in the underworld, that Atwood's poems (notably in her collections Procedures for Underground, The Animals In That Country, The Journals of Susanna Moodie, You Are Happy and The Circle Game, between 1966 and 1978) root their symbolic landscapes, carrying out this search for the deep past and the mythical, imaginary, feminine principle. On the other hand, she evokes a bleak acceptance of the 'worldly', the modern urban wasteland, and shows a determination to face its horrors head-on. (See, for example, Two-Headed Poems (1978); True Stories (1981); and Murder in the Dark (1983).)
The feminine principle, still present in these later poems, is more and more entangled, violently, with society. For the feminine principle to acquire power and a sense of self-knowledge takes a 'journey' of suffering and struggle, rather as with Adrienne Rich's poems of female 'quest'.

Atwood's exploration of the character of Susanna Moodie, for example (JSX 1970), who comes to the wilderness as a European immigrant and must confront her own terror and sense of weakness on facing such enormous, annihilating space, is such a quest. Atwood creates this 'real' figure from the Canadian past as an eventual seer or shamaness, wholly at one with her once alien surroundings: someone who has 'finally turned herself inside out, and has become the spirit of the land' ('Afterword' JSX p.62). Although based on the author Mrs Moodie, and upon historical circumstance, the Journals focus entirely on the mythic dimension of experience. Atwood's fascination is with the interior of Susanna Moodie's mind, its intensity at times verging on paranoid schizophrenia, responding to volatile environment with a volatile consciousness.

Atwood organizes her retelling of Canadian origins, then, into her own mythological concerns, in which the past retains its paramount importance. Like all Atwood's personae, Moodie achieves a magical transformative power, able to change both herself and others. She moves from the experience of utter alienation:

- The moving water will not show me
  my reflection.
- The rocks ignore.
- I am a word
  in a foreign language

('Disembarking at Quebec' JSX p.11) -

...to speaking for the land in a heightened, disembodied state. From experiencing herself as unintelligible in language, Moodie moves beyond the need for conventional language. Her symbolic climb
towards the top floor of a women's asylum characterises the
different stages of consciousness she herself has attained
throughout her own quest. The first floor houses the docile women
who sit sewing gently and sadly. The second houses the rebellious,
who scream uselessly in anger and grief; but on the third, highest
floor, Moodie joins other women who have become part of a wordless
'language', pregnant with meaning, which embraces their own
environment:

the air
was about to tell me
all kinds of answers

('Visit to Toronto with Companions',
LSM, p.50)

This visionary level is closely akin to social definitions of
madness: Moodie's state of mind is de-centred. The experience of
the self's physical boundaries fade in and out and, as here, the
impetus of transformation is always towards a state of technical
'non-being' which leaves behind the alternatives of female
consciousness, resignation or aggression.

Atwood owes much to folk tales and myths, especially to her
knowledge of North American Indian culture - animals change shape,
assuming symbolic meanings, as in 'The gods avoid revealing
themselves' AITC p.24, and 'The totems' AITC p.19. Sherrill Grace
remarks upon the influence of 'Ojibway and North Coast Indian
mythology, both based upon fundamental homologies that facilitate
transformation.'(11) Plath's work was similarly influenced,
strengthening an emergent fascination with primitive myth so
geocentric that 'the gods ... of Africa must lose their earthly
constituent, their earthly adhesions, before they can become
deine.'(12) Plath's poems emphasise the rage and fierceness of
the transformative desire, while Atwood's depict the fluidity of
identity as a continuing, unfinished process. Sexton's work, too, struggled with need for transformation beyond the self. One may identify in all three a common desire to leave the denigrated and problematic female body, with its limitations and constraints, and the unresolved questions of subjectivity, far behind.

Atwood's and Plath's fascination with transformation may stem from a related source: both their fathers were entomologists. Atwood has described her father bringing home

these 'things' in one form [which] would go through some mysterious process and emerge as something else. So metamorphosis was familiar to me at an early age. (13)

Plath was similarly fascinated by the metamorphosis of the bee (her father's special interest), investing it with intense private significance. Their fathers' profession may also have helped create an interest in the power of the scientific observer. Both poets' work confront warm, living flesh with the cool, powerful scrutiny of the appraising gaze. For both, in varying degrees, the contradiction between organic matter and detached observer becomes one separating femininity from masculinity.

Atwood's work has concentrated on the female body in terms of its biological, 'nature'-given powers of birth, considering the process of gestation and childbirth to be one of the greatest and most powerful of all transformations. Her powerful, intense 'inner' vision raises difficult contradictions. The self-image of the psychic and that of the earth mother conflict elementally, like air and earth, paralleling the conflict between the mythologised treatment of giving birth and its social or actual guise.
Therefore the 'highest' consciousness threatens any attempt at sustaining a recognisable identity. Atwood rejects these implications and ambivalences in poems such as 'Carrying Food Home in Winter' and 'Weed Seeds Near a Beaver Pond' (PFU 1970), but in ways which seem to acknowledge the lack of choices available for feminine identity. Rejecting the role of earth mother involves, for Atwood's poetry, a subjectivity experienced as being frighteningly blank, unreal, absent. It involves rejection of writing, creativity, everything which can give existence meaning. A stoic, wryly humorous acceptance that neither extreme state provides what the self wants or needs, expresses itself in a typically Atwoodian nihilism:

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there is hope, never keep
a diary, already
there are events I can't remember

and in my brain cells, bone
marrow, parasite molecules, men's faces
unlock, discard
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('Weed Seeds Near a Beaver Pond' PFU p.30)

These poems, like some of Plath's, struggle against a perceived tide of meaninglessness in objects and mundanities: they dwell on a desire to resign the struggle - to be carried away on the elemental flood. Yet they never entirely do so (the expressed desire for formlessness contrasts with the patterning and structuring of their language). Atwood's work constantly renegotiates identity, moving between extreme states, dependent upon strong and vividly-portrayed self-images (the lover in Power Politics; the female pioneer and shamaness, the earth mother).
In solitude and embraced by a maternal landscape are the opposite of the wilderness and peace sometimes experienced in traditional male partner or masculine society in General. Such games develop social and sexual power games, as detailed by either an

There her effort to survive involves the playing out of

Forbidden space controlled by the male.

Is almost anthropological: the female breaks taboo by entering

The attitude stance into a reductivist construction of gender. Her poetry sees a recontextualized romantic anti-urban

Female cycle. Her poetry sees a recontextualized romantic anti-urban

and destructive surroundings which negate the rhythms of their

women's existence in modern cities, struggling to survive in alien

Alwood contrasts this synchronic mode of consciousness with

feminine awareness of being.

writers like Kristeva explore (1) as pertaining to a specifically

Linear, therefore non-serial condition of time which

mythicall. Koolhaas's time corresponds with synchronic time, the non-

her equally powerful tendency to privilege the visionary and the

intertextual/historic awareness and social concern for urgent

architectural being. A particular tension comes into play: Alwood's

material, and outside time, in an endless, seamless mode of

construction as sequestered, transhistorical, operates outside the

conflicts with time. In the ensuing Koolhaas poses the female psyche

influences, but the celebration of the female psyche ocen

Alwood's poetry evokes a strong feeling for social issues and

Cassandra, the mute and forgotten conscience of a nation; a

for the silenced and oppressed; but she too, is silenced, an

endodes a contrapuntal helplessness. She appears as a figure

expanding city, seems a powerfully disengaged figure. Yet that power

the spirit of the wilderness, a ghostly presence in the Rapid-

In the final poem of the ghost-cronne, now constructed as
In this massive tide
warm as liquid
sun, all waves are one
wave; there is no other

('April, Radio, Planting, Easter' 2HP 1978 p.96) -

Their artificing takes its toll. The female in her destructive relationship with the city sees herself as fractured, a mass of jagged edges, dangerous both to herself and to others. Far more closely than Plath or Sexton, Atwood confronts urban life and urban evils. The male, king of the city in Atwood's scenario, embodies a negation of all natural life forces:

You are the sun
in reverse, all energy
flows into you and is abolished

(PP p.47)

The self in this poem lies 'mutilated' beside her partner, but getting up, 'Putting on my clothes/again, retreating', she employs a typical Atwood defence mechanism - survival through detachment, a slicing through and casting away of the painful, even if that involves rejecting elements of the self. Beyond the mutilations produced by city life and heterosexual intimacy, lies self-inflicted harm produced by this distancing mechanism.

Unlike the wilderness, the city is full of reflective surfaces of superficial accuracy, glass and mirrors highly polished to impose endless images of the external self, and others, upon the general consciousness. Their apparent, needle-sharp clarity sets them in opposition to the deep, visionary, internal perception Atwood's writing chooses to celebrate, as in her 'Instructions for the Third Eye', (MID: 1982, p.61):

- 223 -
If you want to use the third eye,
you must close the other two.

In the city, birthplace of technology and the mass media, the female self becomes reduced to a highly scrutinised, and therefore vulnerable, series of 'images', facets and illusions, which fracture and destabilise any sense of a secure identity. Atwood's poetry powerfully articulates the alienation of the essential or true self, a theme familiar in the feminist movement from the early seventies. Her work is especially concerned about the danger of the gaze: the masculinist culture's scrutiny, it argues, is devastating to the feminine psyche.

The 'spell' of the city, and of the images the self sees reflected in glass, advertising posters, television and cinema's camera lenses, weakens the power, Atwood suggests, of the inner spirit, that which cannot be captured by the image-makers. (Ironically, much of the poetry can be read as an attempt to create a depiction of this inner power.) The protagonist of Surfacing, making her decisive break with her past urban life to live 'wild' in the bush, asserts the dominance of the spirit when she tells herself:

I must stop being in the mirror.
I look for the last time at my distorted glass face...Not to see myself but to see. (S., 1972, p.175)

This dislike and distrust of externally-imposed cultural reflections, shared by most women poets, is hardly surprising. Hardly surprising, then, either, that so much energy channels into dreams of imaginary freedoms of expression and existence. Atwood's poetry is interesting because its dreams of empowerment rely so heavily upon an idealised 'whole' and true self (even though other
aspects of her work show a sharp awareness of the limitations of such a linear approach to subjectivity) and because the 'true' self is so often shown as being swallowed up in nature.

Whereas Adrienne Rich imagines change occurring on social and political levels as well as on that of the spirit or imagination, Atwood searches for the dreamed-of 'unity' of the self, as occurring primarily within nature. Atwood's work is too intelligent in approach, however, not to acknowledge the contradictions which spring up and the tone is often wry, rueful and self-mocking, as if dealing with impermissible desire. It must be said, also, that even far from the city epiphanies are few and the self still experiences moments of alienation.

In 'Delayed Message' (PFU p.19) the self experiences an eerie sense of splitting into two, even though the setting is beside water (usually a place of tranquillity in Atwood’s poems). It may be that the presence of the unnamed and unexplained man in the landscape has unsettled and troubled the self (it is unusual for males to inhabit such designated 'female' space as uncultivated wilderness, unless as intruders or hunters, or as quasi-females: mythic animal-impersonators or magical beings). One aspect of the self is portrayed as being in the arms of this man, on the banks of the lake, beside 'the/house door, the lantern': the other is rising from the lake looking at the other 'through the eyes which were empty holes'. The sense of recognition and identification between the two is strong: 'she [the self in the water] could feel your hand on her shoulder.' Which one is the 'ghost', which one is 'real'? The answer seems evident but becomes complex and puzzling. The apparently domesticated self enfolded by the man shares equally powerful psychic faculties with that Gothic revenant in the water; neither is accorded absolute centrality. Subjectivity is destabilised. The 'ghost' self is marginalised by use of brackets, speaking in parentheses; yet by her very presence she manages to marginalise the self on the shore.
This use of dual identity through dual speech and thought is common in Atwood's poetry, used to overturn expectation, as here, when the apparently 'real' safe-seeming self ends up as outcast and ghost after all. *Two Headed Poems* (1985) shows a developing awareness of the complexities of the subject, a drawing away from idealization of the whole and 'true' self towards exploration of conflict between aspects of the self.

Once again the mechanisms used to cope with this involve retreat and withdrawal. Linda Rogers notes the Atwood persona's 'refusal to be known, except as a female god or witchdoctor' and her articulation 'in the motif of invisibility' as she 'struggles to extricate herself from personal relationships'. Among the confusion of multiple selves, it is by representing the self as a powerful, magical figure that contradictions can be handled.

Atwood's self-presentation as magician is identified by Rogers as a weakness as well as a charm. Everything, ultimately, is illusion, a vanishing trick, an endless Gothic corridor of mirrors. The self vanishes into disguise, or into the landscape: deconstructed into oblivion. This, paradoxically, is a means of asserting control. Yet, as Linda Rogers argues:

No-one is strong enough to challenge her supremacy at the centre of the universe, and this is a weakness, as her voice...

[loses]...conviction. There is no dialogue. (15)

The loneliness of the self in such a private and self-created world is evident, as is the defensiveness against admitting to such loneliness: images abound, of something curled in on itself, surviving by drawing upon inner resources:
...what I have,
this clenched green apple, small
knowledge, thorny heart, this fist
shut against the desert air

(which however still guards
its one mouthful of water)

('Daybooks II', 2HP 1978 p.90)

Linda Rogers' contention that 'there is no dialogue' returns us to
the issue of making sense of the individual self within a social
and cultural context. Atwood's response to this issue appears to
favour moving inwards: 'I can change myself/more easily than I can
change you' (EE, 1971, p.4) or 'To have it out on your own
premises', as Adrienne Rich wrote of the belief underlying Emily
Dickinson's work. (16)

Focused on the interior, the self often seems passive in the
'outer' world, an observer rather than an actor, presenting a
deeperly bland and neutral persona. In Atwood's prose, most of
her female figures bear this family resemblance. In a short story,
'The Resplendent Quetzal', the narrator's husband is driven to
violent fantasies of murder - 'Anything to shatter that
imperturbable expression, bland and pale and plump and smug'

Such blandness may be a protective disguise. The narrator is
recovering from a stillbirth; inner, private processes of discovery
and healing are going on, hidden from the husband. In some ways
Atwood asserts her personae's femininity in its most traditional
aspects: submissiveness, passivity, stoic individualism. In 'Tricks with Mirrors' (YAH, 1974, p.26), an apparently ultra-powerless image of the self (that of a mirror) speaks back:

Don't assume it is passive
or easy, this clarity

with which I give you yourself.
Consider what restraint it
takes: breath withheld, no anger
or joy disturbing the surface

This protective exterior, Atwood seems to accept, warps and limits inner meaning. through the iron control needed to suppress the 'anger or joy'. Atwood sees the effects of a masculinist culture on the feminine as producing 'The All-Round Reduced Personality'. (17) The female self speaks again and again of physical and psychological experiences of mutilation, rape, amputation, attack:

...I break
open, the pieces of me
shine briefly in your empty hands (PP 1971, p.42)

The sexual coming together of masculine and feminine is particularly painful and destructive:

we collide sightlessly and
fall, the pieces of us
mixed as disaster
and hit the pavement of this room
in a blur of silver fragments (PP 1971 p.11)
This is a violent scenario, imagined in terms of a major 'disaster', in which the male is equally damaged. It seems to me, partly because of this, to image a 'collision' within the self ultimately, created by assuming such exaggerated gender divisions. Atwood's work is haunted by 'masculine' elements kept secret within the self: the hated and feared Frankenstein-like figures who manipulate and create only to destroy. In poems such as 'Speeches for Dr Frankenstein' (AITC, 1968, p.42) an almost schizoid self identifies both with the scientist and writer whose murderous certainties lead him to hunt, and with the 'dream fox', his quarry - 'I hear you.../.../reducing/me to diagram, your accurate/paper aiming' ('Arctic Syndrome: Dream Fox' AITC p.48). It is surely significant that this echoes the title of a poem by Ted Hughes (also called 'Dream Fox').

For the masculine is not only 'out there' but also 'inside', a hated and distrusted part of the self, characterised in imagery of the doppelganger, the ghost, shadow and freak. The struggle for dominance between 'masculine' and 'feminine' elements is fought out not only in images of the city versus the wilderness, not only between man and woman but also in deeply personal intra-subjective terms.

Images of amputation indicate the intensity of pain and suffering involved. The poet finds it necessary to amputate the 'masculine' aspects, the ordering, fixing, analytical, observing elements (ironically, those closely involved in the creative process of writing). Adherence to such strict gender differentiation means inevitable damage to, and loss of, inadmissible parts of the self. Paradoxically, Atwood's finished style of writing is rational, cool, and detached, but the cost of this control is high since these qualities imply condemnation of much of her own power and belief.
This desire to reject the masculine, both externally and internally, is a recognisable feature of much contemporary poetry by women. Atwood's project is reminiscent of Plath's - to construct a strong, creative self-image, without seeming a 'man-imitator'. The touchstone is an authentic feminine consciousness, the 'essential' consciousness beneath the social exterior. It is an indictment of social attitudes towards women that this exaggerated and idealistic distinction has had to be made. For both Atwood and Plath the earth-mother/shamaness seems to epitomise the uniquely female poet.

Suzanne Juhasz (18) has posited a 'split' for women writers, created out of a crisis of opposition between the 'male' role of poet and accepted roles for women. This is a useful idea, but I think that in Atwood's work, as well as in Plath's, the very opposite of a split has occurred. The identity of earth-mother/woman poet involves, on the contrary, a meshing of essentialist assumptions about feminine creativity - that childbirth, and intimacy with natural cycles, somehow provide access to poetic vision. In a reappropriation of the Romantic traditional idealization of nature as female, the feminine principle, instead of acting as 'muse' for the male poet, signifies in a self-reflexive creative loop, both poet and muse. The Romantic anti-industrial stance is then transferred to gender, becoming anti-masculine.

This serves to channel the apparently 'negative' aspects of feminine identity (irrationality, for example) into an exalted, creative identity, as Atwood does in her celebration of the transformative, psychic powers of the shamaness. It seems initially to be wholly empowering. The problems emerge later, caused not by the 'split' between the categories of 'woman' and 'poet' but by the essentialist definitions of creativity itself, which produce a chasm between the self and the 'outside' world which such a reductionist view of subjectivity cannot diminish.

- 230 -
Atwood's embrace of the 'natural' is very important here. In contrast to the superficial world of disposable rubbish, detritus of a wasteful and sordid culture, the 'underland' spans many images (from the dinosaurs of pre-history in the novel Life Before Man, (1979) to the desert; or the underwater arenas of Surfacing; or, as in the title poem of Procedures for Underground: 'the country beneath/ where the earth has a green sun/and the rivers flow backwards').

Atwood's work sees urban, technological culture as alien, imposed by superpowers (such as the USA) upon vulnerable indigenous societies: its nationalism views encroachments by American culture on Canada with particular concern, though many short stories turn a critical eye on similar effects in South America and the Caribbean.

Despite her stand against colonialism, Atwood appropriates indigenous North American Indian folk culture and religion; she shows some unease at her own colonising. Her work does not confront the ambiguity of its position overtly, however: Indians remain the other, the unknown, much of their value and mystique depending on this quality of apartness, which authenticates their vision.

A further contradiction is outlined by Michael Castro, in his book Interpreting the Indian: Twentieth Century Poets and the Native American (1983), (19) in relation not to Atwood but to Gary Snyder and Jerome Rothenberg. Castro links the reaction to 'limiting rationalism' in modern poetry to a post-Vietnam pessimism about contemporary culture, and to an identification with oppressed indigenous peoples rather than with the societies of the poets themselves - societies experienced as intensely oppressive. From this comes a search for renewal of the spiritual energy felt to be so lacking in the dominant culture, for 'intimacy with the spirit of the land' (p.16). Poets such as Snyder who believed 'Poets as few others must live close to the world primitive men are in' formed part of a general movement of interest out of the cities and back to the land, back to 'nature'.

- 231 -
Castro notes that this initial political momentum waned in the 1970s, taken over by others who turned to Indian mythology with more interest in self-enlightenment than in social transformation. Atwood's poetry seems to embrace both these tendencies, rooted in the original protest which was politically and socially motivated, but pursuing more and more the desire for private self-knowledge.

Castro quotes, among reactions from North American Indian writers themselves, a woman writer, Leslie Marmon Silko:

> Ironically as white poets attempt to cast off their Anglo-American origins, they violate a fundamental belief held by the tribal people they desire to emulate: they deny their history, their very origins. (20)

This raises some interesting and relevant questions with regard to Atwood's work, whose rejection of much of her own cultural background for the mythopoetic world of Indian folk custom involves a certain denial of the historical. Even her treatment of the Journals of Susanna Moodie, Canadian white settler, remakes Moodie into a visionary whom she or her own society would not recognise. Atwood here rewrites history, trying to merge the differences between colonised and coloniser by emphasising the vision of the colonised, and overturning the conventional story by having Moodie stand not for the triumph of her own cultural war (the historical fact) but that of the colonised.

Atwood's poems produce an effect of timelessness through the use of the present tense and, as Frank Davey notes, 'the large numbers of copula verbs...especially in opening lines', with 'syntactic parallelism' emphasise spatial juxtapositions of events and relationships rather than 'mutual interaction'. (21) Self
and others exist in an endless present in which the processes and struggles of history do not belong, and where events happen at random. The only important time-structure in Atwood's poems is that of the natural life-cycle of organisms, seasons, tides.

Atwood's landscapes are detached, distanced, and far more dreamlike than Plath's. Northrop Frye's influence can be seen here. Frye's interest in the literary potential of archetype and myth encouraged his criticism to prioritise these over history and society, as Atwood does. As Sherrill Grace remarks,

Atwood views myth as a system that articulates and unites the individual and the universal, indeed all the basic dualities of existence. (22)

This approach seems to produce an underlying fatalism, however, about the individual's ability to act outside such a dream-landscape: to cause change or to 'make history'. Indeed, as a result of this attitude, history itself comes to be seen as an alien, meaningless category. (The poem 'Totems' AITC 1968 p. 61 discovers 'historians, wearing/wreaths and fake teeth/belts'.) Both the 'making' and recording of history can be designated 'masculine' activities uncharged with muse-like feminine sensitivity.

Though Atwood rejects so uncompromisingly much that seems to her masculine, her work does not reject the underlying assumptions (forming in themselves the lynchpin of the dominant discourse) which produce such dualism in the first place. Her poetry affirms that discourse which deems women to be closer to nature than men, and so any rebellion against destructiveness in society becomes subsumed within a feminine leaning away from society.
To assert a sensitive, psychic feminine identity appears to be empowering for the self in a culture which trivialises and downgrades female qualities. Atwood's self-images are of great strength; her construction of the self as a woman poet/shamaness has, as we have seen, meshed with traditional images of female nurture and creativity. Poetry becomes rooted in the biological: for an earth mother childbirth becomes, increasingly, a metaphor for writing. The mother, nurturer, self seems able to effect any changes, and work her magic: 'I say I will transform this egg into a muscle/this bottle into an act of love' ('Carrying Food Home in Winter' PEW 1970 p.73). Frank Davey observes that for Atwood 'the "mouth" of poetry is not the male oracular head of bardic recitation...but the vagina and its wordless speakings.'(23) In these ways, the feminine self and its articulation through poetry become increasingly distanced from the social and material.

Section 2

Atwood's fascination with the female body is not unique. Feminism's reappraisal has had a profound influence on poets. Linda Bundtzen has said of Plath, for example, that she progressed from accepting Robert Graves's idea of woman as vessel for man's creative seed, to using the female body 'as vehicle for imaginative transformation and release'.(1) Similarly, in her angriest poems, Plath has translated 'social and psychological constraints on women into physical and sexual terms.'(2)

In celebrating the female body for its ability to give birth, Atwood's work returns, like Northrop Frye's, to earliest myths which consider the process of pregnancy and childbirth to be the greatest and most magically potent of all transformations.(3) Feminism's original radicalism lay, however, in its assertion that gender is not innate but socially and discursively produced. Atwood's evocation of the mysterious biological rhythms and powers of the female body tends to ignore this. When the question does
arise, Atwood sees the female body as the site of ideological struggle: she sees social and cultural forces as corrupting an original, ideal and natural power, rather than shaping it in an ongoing process.

She has found the mythopoeic approaches of Frye and Robert Graves attractive: Graves particularly, because of his involvement with matriarchal myth, though Atwood's feminism has made her wary of the implications for women of Graves' idealization (visible particularly in the poem 'Christmas Carols', IS 1981, p.56). However, she seems now to have adopted a 'cultural feminism' which can reconcile her celebration of female nature with a strong sense of the injustices perpetrated against women in society.

Cultural feminism, a development of radical feminism, has tended to promulgate the vision of a female counter-culture based on values of nurture and sensitivity, as the major means towards women's liberation. Adrienne Rich has contributed much towards this vision through her writing, but has not been entirely uncritical of its implications.

Cultural feminism coincides with Atwood's approach in its emphasis upon the psychological rather than the material, and a refusal to explore the extremely complex relation between ideology and base. Alice Echols argues that its goal 'becomes the development of an alternative consciousness'; material realities necessarily become relegated to a secondary role. Atwood's similar concern to create an alternative, even oppositional, consciousness leads to blurring the material conditions of women's lives, their myriad contexts as social beings.
The Black American poet Audre Lorde's work makes an interesting comparison to Atwood's. Where Atwood speaks of disinheretance, of the female shut out from the 'lost' wilderness by patriarchal culture and living a rootless, aimless and alienated life in the cities, Audre Lorde speaks of racial and sexual dispossession and a desire for Africa as a lost homeland.

But Lorde's poetry also embraces a powerful sense of Black identity. Lorde's imaginary landscapes do not depend on their separateness from the corrupting superculture for their oppositional stance, as do Atwood's: rather, they are intricately connected. She writes of her children in 'New York City', CP 1971, p.73:

I submit them
letting them above all others save myself
to the fire to the rage to the ritual
sacrifications
to be tried as new steel is tried;
azi in its wasting the city shall try them.

The city (azi society) as it is, cannot live: but change through struggle - even apocalypse - is possible, and welcomed. When Audre Lorde writes of landscapes, as in Coal (1976), she meshes the visionary with a sharp awareness of underlying material and political conditions:

I am Black because I come from earth's inside
now take my word for jewel in the open light
Here Lorde explores a self-image at once elemental and also rooted in matters of material and political significance: the precious, exploited commodities of diamonds and coal, mined by Black workers.

Atwood's prevailing sense of detachment, and alienated observation, contrasts vividly with Lorde's work. Atwood presumably lacks the experience of being part of a close-knit minority culture; she pictures herself as rootless and alone, lacking any sense of historical continuity, either in family or society. She expresses little empathy with other women, either, in spite of her pro-feminine stance. For Atwood, the self and her surroundings seem curiously displaced from one another.

Also relevant to Atwood's work is something that Alice Echols calls a 'double-think'(6) in the cultural feminist position. This involves the belief that femininity is a construct, conditioned by patriarchal culture, while 'female nature is nurturant, loving, open and egalitarian';(7) masculinity, on the other hand, is an unconditioned result of male biology and is therefore immutable.

How, then, can there be a reclaimable if yet unrealised 'female nature', if the essence of destructive maleness is unchangeable? How can 'culture' intervene oppressively in female existence, and yet not do so in the male? To argue that culture is 'male' and therefore 'penetrates' the female reduces the female once again to a familiar position of passivity, outside the processes of social change. The far-reaching implication of this, too, is that 'culture' of any kind - predominantly 'male' or 'female' - cannot intervene in any progressive way, since 'female nature' sets itself far beyond the pale of 'culture', and male biology's primitiveness makes change and development in culture most unlikely.
This implicit and total rejection leaves nothing to rely on but utopian fantasies, with a corresponding fatalism about 'real' life. By reducing dialectics to a common denominator of gender, cultural feminism ignores the many complex interactions which create power, powerlessness, and inequalities. Atwood's own attempts at exploring questions of moral and social responsibility are hampered by her commitment to this static gender dualism. It may be easier to believe it is that which women share 'between their legs' which leaves them vulnerable to abuse and torture ('A Woman's Issue' TS, 1981, p.54) than to explore further the complex, dynamic instances of women's intervention in the world or the myriad causes of their oppression.

The apparent radicalism of asserting 'female values' as a subversive route to change is undercut by the static element of this belief. If male nature is intrinsically destructive, then transformation of society as a whole cannot happen. Atwood's work, though it dreams of attempting to create an alternative world, is shot through with pessimism. Her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1988) is an example of this, articulating the cultural feminist fear of gynocide.

Atwood's feminism bears a debt to traditional femininity. Both celebrate muteness, sensitivity, stoic courage, imagination, irrationality, apparent docility. I am not sure how far femininity can be reappropriated in radical ways. As Toril Moi points out:

> It is after all patriarchy, not feminism, that insists on labelling women emotional, intuitive and imaginative, while jealously converting reason and rationality into an exclusively male preserve. (8)

-238-
Atwood's cultural feminism reclaims the 'feminine' qualities of intuition and creativity and attempts to revalue them. In doing so her poetry conjures up a lonely, mysterious and alienated existence heavily dependent upon fantasy and epiphany, an isolated, classless and rootless life as an outsider critical of the city's corrupt and ugly culture, but unable or unwilling to envision change. Though she struggles to distance the self from the traditional identity of 'victim', that is what Atwood's self-images invariably come to resemble: attacked by hostile social forces outside the self, and attacked within by unwelcome 'masculine' qualities, surviving through stoicism and the camouflage of silence - but only just. Even the desired wilderness dissolves individuality. Atwood's work creates a hauntingly recognisable and familiar vision of modern existence for women who feel homeless and disinherit everywhere.

Section 3

In this section I want to extend my previous argument dealing with the underlying elements which have produced Atwood's nature/culture, female/male oppositions. I also want to explore alternative ideas on how gender and identity might be approached, drawing from Sherry Ortner's 'Is Male to Female as Culture is to Nature?', Margaret Homans's Women Writers and Poetic Identity, and C. MacCormack and M. Strathern's Nature, Culture and Gender. (1)

The nature-versus-culture opposition is integral to Western thought and is based upon European cultural assumptions of origin and evolution. (2) Genesis sets human beings in opposition to nature from the beginning, through having domination over it. The conception of nature after the Fall centres on its troubling, disturbing aspects (such as its apparent 'chaos'). The impetus has been to distrust the 'chaos' which nature seems to share with Hobbes's vision of primitive man (who, however, only wants improvement in his situation), and to celebrate the coming of
control. Atwood's poetry shares a preoccupation with origins (as in her 'totem' imagery, and poems on ghost-selves in pre-history), and one with order and chaos (remaining deeply ambivalent about the imposition of 'order'). Her particular Canadian literary and historical context tends to impose specifically gendered interpretations of the nature/culture dichotomy. Sandra Djwa points out that Atwood's work shows traces of Northrop Frye's vision of 'threatening, unexplored nature', a uniquely Canadian strain of Romanticism obsessed with the wilderness, and infused with Darwinism. (3)

Frye's nature is a Canadian wilderness, a Romantic, Gothic landscape. To face this, as those who journeyed from Europe had to do, was to enter it

like a tiny Jonah entering an
inconceivably large whale...
to enter Canada is a matter
of being swallowed by an
alien continent. (4)

One's size, and by implication, one's human culture are dwarfed and made virtually meaningless by the majesty of the virgin landscape. For Frye the wilderness is definitely female, signifying the mysterious and uncultivated force of the matriarchal goddess. The male settler 'enters' the womb-like whale, but is overwhelmed, surrounded. It is the masculine reaction which Frye explores: the 'female' wilderness remains dangerously inchoate, profoundly threatening. Frye expresses a traditional ambivalence towards 'female' nature as a disruptive, pagan force. He reflects the desire to gain conquest over its alien powers, and the existential terror evoked by such gigantic space.
Atwood's poetry makes use of this approach, but her deep identification with the 'female' makes it difficult for her to accept the 'male' urge to garrison and enclose the wilderness. She is critical of those pioneers who seek to dominate the chaotic 'nothingness' of nature (unable to face the boundlessness of 'unstructured space'). Their need to create boundaries leads only to their will being broken by the 'green/vision, the unnamed/whale' ('Progressive Insanities of a Pioneer' AITC p.36).

Unlike Frye, Atwood chooses female figures, archetypal explorers, Indians, settlers, mothers, to face nature and to search for identity within it. Less crazed by power and self-importance than their male counterparts, they gain some measure of power over the self, and wider understanding, in their acceptance that nature can never be entirely understood, or pinned down:

we are all immigrants to this place,  
even if we were born here: the country  
is too big, for anyone to inhabit  
completely, and in the parts unknown  
to us we move in fear, exiles and  
invaders. (5)

For Northrop Frye, as for Robert Graves, if nature is female then the poet is male. He writes of the relationship between the poet and the surrounding landscape in this way:

...the father of a poem is much  
more difficult to identify than  
the mother... The poet... is not  
the father of his poem: he is at  
best a midwife, or more accurately  
still, the womb of Mother Nature  
herself: her privates he, so to speak. (6)
Here the poet becomes quasi-female, appropriating both female identity and role; yet remaining male all the while, able to return at will to his original state. It is not surprising that Atwood should want to claim back the image of maternal creativity from the male poet.

Yet this desire creates a contradiction, because of Atwood's enduring distrust of the fixing and ordering and analysing which art involves - the 'marbled flesh/a fixing eye, a stiffened form/Where leaves turn spears along the glade' ('Formal Garden' DP 1961, p.2), the masculine instrumentality of imposing order upon chaos, creating a garden from the wilderness. Atwood identifies more with Frye's vision of 'mother nature' - that organic state of flux, of process, of underlying levels of the primal and unconscious.

Sherry Ortner proposes another variation on male-female, culture-nature relationships, and does so in a metaphorical setting which is strikingly apposite here: a typical Atwood landscape - that of wilderness and clearing. Ortner sees the female as mediator between nature and culture. Culture becomes 'a small clearing within the forest of the larger natural system': the female is located on 'the continuous periphery of culture's clearing', both 'outside and around' it, a kind of membrane, bearing the brunt on both sides and locus of highly contradictory meanings. This echoes Atwood's own sense of marginalisation, of the female self as both 'exile and invader'. As in Atwood's self-images, the female is at home in neither nature or in culture. As a magician, a transformer, the self can manipulate this limited and entrapping situation, as the Circe figure does in the 'Circe/Mud Poems' sequence of You Are Happy (1974). Circe is the mediator between her island, and the surrounding ocean from which comes its rapacious male invader. Aware that she gives power into his hands only for him to destroy her, she is a contradictory image of power and helplessness as she negotiates that membrane between 'nature' and 'culture'. A number of Atwood personae are unsure of their
place in the order of things. Persephone (who recurs continually, appearing in Atwood's eponymous first collection, 1961, and in the title poem of Procedures For Underground, 1970) belongs neither to the surface nor to the 'country beneath', a freak in both worlds; Susanna Moodie, the 'exile and invader', is never sure whether the landscape is about to swallow her up completely.

Atwood's poetry puts forward varying possibilities for what 'nature' actually signifies. On one hand is the romantic vision of nature as a privileged, pre-patriarchal realm, a fluid, nurturing paradisal womb into which the female self can dream of retreat. This first version is used to express great need for the ideal maternal relationship, never attained; Atwood uses water imagery (in the novel Surfacing and in poems such as 'Descent Through the Carpet', 'This is a Photograph of Me') to indicate a desire to descend into the depths of this primal experience, to 'regress' to primordial, pre-patriarchal unity. A return to womb-like nature becomes a return to the lost plenitude of the maternal body, and by implication, to the 'lost' aspects of the self. Desire is expressed for a non-phallic, non-limited state of being based not upon the fitting together of male and female, but upon a process of osmosis, a sense of the self as co-existent with environment, a fluid merging:

More and more frequently the edges of me dissolve and I become a wish to assimilate the world, including you.

('More and More' 1968)

As John Wilson Foster remarks, it seems such 'a diffuse, vaginal urge resents the forms nature has decreed for sexual expression and gratification.'
On the other hand Atwood's poetry also shows nature as a kind of merging to be feared, a terrifying unstructured space and destruction of identity boundaries:

When will be
that union and each
thing (bits
of surface broken by my foot
step) will without moving move
around me
into its place

(‘Paths and Thingscape’ ISM p.20)

The disjointed syntax here points to tension and stress. This fear of nature is often expressed (paradoxically, given Atwood's emphasis on the life-giving qualities of the underwater) as a fear of drowning. The desire to reach surface, to break away, is a desire to escape from nature. For Atwood, ultimate success in merging would involve death, since the self and the imaginative space it inhabits become synonymous. (10)

Another contradiction emerges. Nature and the natural landscape cannot always be the privileged antidote to contemporary existence. Sometimes it becomes ungiving to the observer, ugly, polluted by civilisation, and made meaningless. Atwood's personae mourn this and the sense of loss it brings. It is strange that so much of Atwood's work explores the experience of being displaced, alienated in one's surroundings, when it shows a stronger sense of place and national identity than the work of other poets studied here. Yet it suggests that the dream - of nature as a female-centred force where creativity and mysticism can flourish - cannot be squared with the sorry 'reality' observed by the intellect.

The relationship of women poets to 'nature' has been fraught with difficulty, as we have seen. Northrop Frye's idea of feminine
Nature as muse for the male poet is part of a tradition which has tended to experience the masculine as unproblematic paradigm. As Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out, Nature is for women what woman herself represents for man: herself and her negation, a kingdom and a place of exile: the whole in the guise of the other. (11)

Dorothy Jones takes this as a starting-point for her exploration of the ambiguity of assuming nature to be one's 'kingdom' as a woman poet. As she says, it is a means of commanding space - but, to take possession of her own space a woman must all too often withdraw from a society which accords her little or no space at all. (12)

Atwood's work has helped to initiate feminist debate on whether nature is 'kingdom' or 'exile', notably, in the dialogue between Carol Christ and Judith Plaskow in Signs. (13)

Atwood looks toward a construction of nature as female in order to create powerful images and self-images which seem impossible to achieve in urban surroundings. (Her work has striking similarities in atmosphere and emphasis to the mystic vision of power through remote landscape in the Canadian paintings of Emily Carr. (14)) But the problems of definition recur. The opposition nature/culture becomes volatile and confusing. The self finds itself on the edges of both, safe in neither.

In an interesting and relevant study of the poetry of Emily Brontë, Dorothy Wordsworth and Emily Dickinson, Margaret Homans (15), argues that these three poets responded to working within the 'masculine tradition' of poetry in quite different ways, particularly in their treatment of Nature. Brontë saw herself as
violating masculine authority, but believed that punishment for such defiance was death. Wordsworth tried to atone for the 'fall' by being a docile daughter of Nature. Homans believes these reactions, though quite different, agree in accepting women's place in the masculine order of things, accepting Romantic egoism but in a female guise.

Emily Dickinson, however, Homans argues, goes further than this: her strategy is a reconstruction of the masculine tradition at the level of its basic premises. She refuses to accept the idea of gender distinctions as mutually exclusive, and so no longer needs to identify herself with Nature, or otherwise, in terms of a dichotomy. She does not see herself as the object, and, rejecting the egoism of the poet whose language is 'truth', she is free to explore a complex state of being where subjectivity embraces both subject/object, nature/culture, self/other, masculinity/femininity.

Atwood's poetry seems to strive for a comparable state, in that her desire for the self to be fluid, creative, multi-layered, to go beyond its ego boundaries, its time and spatial constrictions, is evident. So, too, is her dissatisfaction with the apparent transparency of language: True Stories, 1981, and Murder in the Dark, 1982, both experiment with the inability of language to express 'truth', and its tendency to conceal and distort experience. Sherrill Grace also believes that Atwood's work is based upon the idea that polarity, the swinging backwards and forwards between two extremes, is destructive: that freedom comes from accepting duality. (16)

Yet I feel that much scope for fruitful duality is lost in Atwood's insistence on identifying with a particular, contemporary definition of 'feminine' (what Marilyn French calls 'the revalorization of feminine qualities'17)) - that of cultural feminism and matriarchal myth-scholarship. The 'female' is over-idealized, the 'male' over-reviled. I have tried to show here that
these definitions are far from timeless and transhistorical, but ideologically produced, and to argue that their effects upon Atwood's work are to limit, finally, its range and complexity of self-image.

Section 4

In this final section I want to explore Atwood's authorial ideology, her construction of the self as poet and writer. Sherrill Grace argues that Atwood's voices 'are not highly-individualised, three-dimensional characters so much as representatives or symbols of social concerns, archetypes and myth.' (1) Atwood's own stated aim as a poet is to be non-autobiographical and non-expressive. (2) Yet there is a confusing level at which her work appears to be intensely, and yet for the reader elusively, personal. The element of mystery is central to Atwood's construction of the persona.

Robert Graves has been important. She has used all three incarnations of his White Goddess, the maiden Helen, the sexual woman Venus, and the crone Hecate, as well as his sense of the feminine principle as a source of creativity; like Plath, she is intrigued by his wealth of mythic female imagery, and like him, she believes that the long-repressed matriarchal force must re-emerge. Yet her feminism causes her to be somewhat sceptical, too. Writing of Graves, she says

The twentieth century authority on the poetic Muse is of course Robert Graves. In his The White Goddess he asserts that the Muse is always female, and if it isn't, it should be. Poets who have the bad luck to be women should write either as priestesses of the Goddess...or as the Goddess herself. (3)
Atwood's strategy has been to assume the mantle of the Goddess, finding the 'muse' within the resources of the self. On one hand this is a bold step but on another it limits her (as Plath was limited) to the biological determinism upon which the Goddess myth is based.

Atwood's poems regularly present the self as a writer, and as therefore somehow set apart from everyday life. The personae appear lonely, isolated as if by choice, with little sense of living community. The self harks back to the past for ghostly companionship. Even Two-Headed Poems (1978) (in which Lorna Irvine discerns a new, and less bleak, hope for some kind of community, specifically between mothers and daughters) (4) the poet's landscape remains alienated. In many poems the self retreats from her sleeping or unknowing family, becoming ghost-like and distant. The emphasis on the self as an artist, a psychic, a goddess, helps to produce this enduring sense of loneliness. As Northrop Frye prioritised literature, claiming it imitated not the world but 'the total dream of man', therefore transcending history and ideology, (5) so Atwood too stresses the primary integrity of her writing, and the crucial importance of the writer's detachment as an 'eye-witness, I-witness' (6) which necessitates stepping back from a role as actor.

Her stance emerges in her review of Adrienne Rich's Dream of a Common Language in the New York Times Book Review, where she suggests that labels such as 'feminist' and 'lesbian' are too often used 'to pigeonhole and dismiss'. She would rather not use these labels: 'Poets are, after all, not the sum of their stances, but the sum of their words, their images.' (7) This contrasts with Rich's ideas on the crucial political importance of 'the process of naming and defining'. (8) Atwood's review prefers to see Rich as another version of the Goddess - 'a portentous presence, half dark, half light, moving imponderably in moonlight across a space formed by a great circle of stones' (9). She emphasises the mythic and timeless, not the contemporary urgency of Rich's work.
What draws Atwood is not feminism as such, since much of her belief is antithetical to 'feminism as a political movement'. Instead it is the underlying elements of feminine mythology which sustain the self-image of poet and author. Though Atwood served on the Board of Directors of the Canadian Civil Liberties Association from 1971 to 1973, her work seeks to separate artistic production from other aspects of life, particularly the political.

It is interesting then that Atwood's work has come to be seen as feminist, and Atwood a feminist writer. It seems that her female mysticism - her poetry which emphasises its visionary powers - has found a parallel in the rise of new feminist initiatives, such as those at Greenham Common, and has helped influence a new generation of women to experience themselves as rooted within the earth and potentially powerful as a result.

It is in any case true that many of Atwood's poems do explore the issues of political intervention. A sense of urgency, and of frustration, results. These poems, chiefly in later collections such as *True Stories* (1981) go beyond Atwood's own stated aims that the poem should keep its distance from 'reality'. Through the late 1970s and early 80s Atwood's poems have become increasingly didactic. The self sounds increasingly frustrated, both with its own 'innocent' collusion and equally with the limitations of what can be done by an individual alone in a violent and dangerous world. Underlying this, however, a deep-seated sense of fatalism still pervades her work, a feeling that the self is apart from others and misunderstood. *Interlunar* (1984) returns to private feelings (such as, grief) and to far more oblique explorations of the political (as in 'A Massacre Before it is Heard About' p.72).

Atwood's construction of the self in her writing is fraught with tension. She elevates the self as writer to heights of psychic power, perhaps because she finds women's low status in everyday
life extremely irritating: 'Women writers can keep as much as possible to the "writing" end of their life, avoiding the less desirable aspects of the "woman" end', she wrote, well aware that a woman writer may have shelves of publications at home but on the street is still treated 'as a nit'. From tension between the imaginary construction of a distant, powerful, transforming self - and the awareness of the degrading constructions applied to the self in the contemporary world - a wry, jagged fury emerges in the poetry.

One last contradiction remains unresolved: that between rich, organic, pliable life, and the cold organisation of the writing force: Atwood's vision of creativity is deeply marked by the impact of gender. What is she to make of her own sense of the writer as finally fixing and controlling, in an apparently truly masculine manner, the fluid process of perception? Assenting to a view of the poet's high status, yet despising it, she controls and perpetuates the cultural 'mirror' which defines and entraps her as a woman. Atwood seeks, through the symbolic and the gestural, to 'escape' from language; yet it is only through the most precise use of language that such an effect can be achieved. The desire to be both 'mirror' (creative intervention) and 'pool' (innocent 'raw' material), as explored in 'Tricks with Mirrors' (YAH) raises impossible questions of identity. Yet writing, which poses this problem, remains the only hope of solving it.

Conclusion

In this last section I want to relate some of the points raised earlier to Atwood's use of language. Many poems explore language as a form of non-communication, an alienating impediment, rather than as a means of contact - 'the polite and terrible slogans/by which
we live' ('Chaos Poem' YAW p.12). In The Circle Game and Power Politics, silence becomes a defence mechanism: if the self speaks, her words will only be used against her. Social language is a force bending individuals to its will, squeezing cliches out of them, reinforcing the oppressive status quo. It is another paradox that so many of Atwood's poems are so hostile to their intrinsic medium. They demand, not a more authentic contemporary understanding between men and women (which appears impossible) but a return to ancient time before human language, before the linguistic division between 'I' and 'you'. Atwood's poem 'After Heraclitus' (L, 1984 p.20) explores this other form of language:

To talk with the body
is what the snake does, letter
after letter formed on the grass,
itself a tongue, looping its earthy hieroglyphs.

In its desire to explore 'talk with the body' Atwood's poetry parallels Helene Cixous' vision of a 'feminine' writing which does away with differentiation: a writing emanating from the oceanic plenitude of the maternal body and its 'white ink', fusing with the female energy of the unconscious. (1) This is what is evoked for me in Atwood's 'male monosyllables, labial polysyllables' (2).

Atwood's personae identify with the vulnerable (yet enduring) and silent, archaic presences of the 'natural' landscape - stones, water, totems, animals, light. (Of course totems, like the 'hieroglyphs', belong not to nature but to cultures so ancient and so earth-centred that they are undecipherable and pose no threat, hence the slippage of terms.) Their value lies precisely in their silence, their inability to speak en cratic language ('that which is produced and spread under the protection of power...as a language of repetition...advertising, pulp novels, pop songs, news...' (3)) which Atwood defines as masculine and as signifying the dominant culture.
Again and again her poems explore the paradox that to create is to destroy. In the title passage of *Murder in the Dark* (1982) Atwood describes the writer, the 'I', as a murderer, one who must 'always lie', by the very rules of the writer's own game. And the privileged 'natural' landscape, written about as the alternative to such a murderous game, seems only vulnerable for betrayal by it, as in poems such as 'Backdrop Addresses Cowboy'.

The pastoral poems in *Double Persephone* (1961) explore Atwood's distinction between the 'garden' of patriarchal art and the original, excluded landscape, with the central female subject moving uneasily between the two.

To write is, Atwood implies, similar to taking photographs; fixing an image into an unchanging eternity, transforming free process into product. This then fits into another artificial ('man-made') category, that of history, based upon masculine perceptions of linear time, cause and effect. The self in many poems deeply resents how she is hunted and fixed by the camera eye, the eye of culture always possessed by the male other, as in 'This is a Photograph of Me' (CQ). Her resentment becomes more complex with the realisation that as a poet she herself creates and fixes these Gorgon-like instances from the flux of life. In 'Eden is a Zoo' (PEW 1970, p.6) Atwood expresses the anguish of keeping elderly parents within the confines of a painting, imprisoning them 'behind a hedge of spikes', behind this barrier which 'I built with so much time/and pain.' In another poem from the same collection Atwood writes of her similarly entrapping art: 'I made this window', she asserts, recognising self-created constraints.
One response to this is to split off into two or more identities, such as the watcher and the watched, or as in 'This is a Photograph of me', an objectified self and another, more elusive self who, ghost-like, stays 'just under the surface'. As Frank Davey points out, 'the rationalist that Atwood opposes in her writing, the manipulative, amputating, technology-using analyzing figure...becomes to some extent herself...Clever writer, witty satirist'. (4) But this self is only half the story.

Since Atwood's gender distinctions in language lead to profound tensions and an inability to resolve painful opposition, we may ask why she should be so pessimistically suspicious of language, and assign to it the 'masculine' properties she finds so distasteful? Atwood's conception of language, influenced partly by Frye's 'structuralism' (5) is the Platonic view that thought exists in ideal form pre-linguistically. In its polluted 'male' form, language then becomes almost an impediment between a 'pure' idea and its expression. Atwood's poems depict language as this flawed instrument which encases the concept of self within the head (once again, paradoxically, given Atwood's emphasis on the body). The head is where the idea originates. Words generate impossible space, separating the self from its surroundings. Others remain strangers; in the absence of viable language interchange becomes a continual disappointment since their thoughts are as mysterious and unrealisable as the self's own.

From this rather static and individualistic conception of language springs a discernible scepticism about the use and value of literature, especially in a materialistic world which honours advertising not art. This doubt about poetry's value is not unique to Atwood: it forms part of a general contemporary reassessment. In 'The Aesthetics of Silence' 1966, Susan Sontag has noted that the artist's temptation has been to sever dialogue with his [sic] audience as a result of the devaluation of language and signs by technology. The effort is one to evade a 'servile bondage'; (6)
'language must regain its chastity' (7) and this can be achieved through 'the rhetoric of silence' (8) - a contradictory impulse in itself but satisfying the artist's desire to pursue the ineffable. According to Sontag, art is 'the most active metaphor for spirituality in modern times.' (9) Atwood's work seems to assent to Sontag's argument, in that it values the 'purer' silence of a language that is not man-made, and so closer to the spirit.

Though much of her work seems to embrace the Platonist approach, this language-system itself comes under suspicion as male: as she says wryly, 'Plato has a lot to answer for.' (10) Her approach to language has become self-conscious, appears to be a deliberate reconstructive effort concentrating on narrative and realism as a whole. True Stories and Murder in the Dark seem to offer potential for change in understanding and creation of language, and to harness Atwood's concept of 'process' to language in flexible and interesting ways.

Atwood has opposed to Plato a celebration of a female language which is gestural, 'natural', connotative, part of biological cycles, of 'blood, sky and sun' ('Spelling') traced in the instinctive movements and sensations of herself as mother and of her daughter. It is a language in constant flux, and rooted in the female body. A 'word, like an unclenching flower' ('Journey to the Interior', 1979) brings to mind images of the vagina opening, metaphorically for 'speech', and for childbirth.

This relates to Luce Irigaray's conception of 'womanspeak', (11) which in turn is rather similar to the vision of feminine writing outlined by Helene Cixous. Irigaray's belief that mystical discourse empowers women parallels Atwood's wish to 'return' to nature and to 'natural language' of stone, air, light. Irigaray also seems in agreement with Atwood when she writes that woman is 'silenced' by patriarchal, philosophical and Freudian discourse, made nothing more than the negative reflection of the masculine. This is what Atwood's dislike of the camera seems to
assert; the feminine, in the patriarchal camera lens, becomes no more than a negative image. Atwood, like others, wishes to restate the agenda so that the feminine can be explored within its own terms of reference.

Irigaray's 'womanspeak' shares similar self-contradictions to Atwood's position on gender and language. By acting-out the language-denied female in patriarchy, 'womanspeak' 'intends to undo the effects of phallocentric discourse simply by overdoing them.' (12) 'Womanspeak' would involve a new freedom from dualist oppositions, from hierarchies of self and other. In it the self 'would acquire a strong sense of self so powerful she need not search for self in everything she sees', (13) and need not care that being non-logical, non-linear, she would still risk being incomprehensible.

This 'womanspeak' is what I think Atwood's poetry struggles to define; but it falls back from using such speech in fear of being found unintelligible or mad. She returns again and again to the frustration of having to use a tainted language. Her alternative attempts, to get beyond language in this polluted state, take her towards formulating a language of the female body. But like Irigaray she must face the paradox that to articulate this anti-language discourse she must use language itself. So there seems no way out from the problem of trying to articulate an essential feminine principle and define the self in its terms.

It is this essentialist view of gender which lies at the heart of Atwood's contradictions over self-image, and language, and it is a problem for any poet who is concerned to assert a gendered identity. Frank Davey (14) argues that numerous Canadian poets have struggled with themes Atwood uses - nature vs. culture, affirmation
vs. defensiveness, 'openness versus closure', reason vs. intuition - and most relevantly here, with the problems of using language to articulate the conflicts inherent in language.

What distinguishes Atwood from these male others, according to Davey, is primarily her gender-specific approach, her belief that language is a traditionally masculine tool of rationality, alien from her identification as a dissident female. Davey seems to accept as unproblematic the idea that poets such as Eli Mandel or Robert Kroetsch start from unthinking acceptance of the masculine viewpoint as universal. Kroetsch suggests that it is 'through the liberation of the male and his phallus' that repressive language-use can be overcome. His position could be that of the male lover in the Power Politics poems when he continues: 'I've never thought of the erotic relationship as male aggression. It seems to me that it involves total exchange right to the freedom of who is aggressive, who passive.' (15)

Given this context, then Atwood's work is only doing exactly what Kroetsch, B.P. Nichol, Bill Bissett, and other Canadian poets, are doing - asserting the sense of its own gender as a paradigm in terms of language-use. This of course is putting to one side for the present the question of whether it is useful to do this at all. But Davey's sympathetic criticism of Atwood shows how deeply-ingrained the dominant, masculine-centred discourse remains, even in those uncrossed to feminism, and throws into relief the difficulties of those who seek to question and ultimately to destabilise such a discourse. In a sense the terms are already set: to challenge phallocentrism, the poet's work posits an oppositional femininity which has to assert difference in a defensive way.

Davey illuminates for me what I think is the deepest of Atwood's 'paradoxes and dilemmas'. As a woman poet she must be gender-specific, otherwise the feminine element becomes subsumed and invisible once again within a masculine-dominated overview. Her
work bravely refuses to conform to the Canadian pioneer tradition of 'writing west', (16) refuses to become, by implication, 'victim' to this machismo-celebrating literature. But the only apparent alternative, the creation of a female self-image as goddess, is fraught with problems for identity: it must look back to older and unreachable cultures, or to pre-culture, identifying with the timeless and ahistorical, and conceding therefore the contemporary arena to the masculine. This mythic female image which seems initially so separate from the masculine death-culture, so vital and empowering, turns out to be inextricably linked with it.

In some ways this particular definition of emphatic female self-image (a definition shaped by feminism and going on to shape it in turn) has hindered Atwood's range of choice and possibility. The turbulent, volatile self-explorations of Plath and Sexton, in which seemingly unacceptable and even disliked aspects of self were raised, contrasts here with a sense in Atwood's work that much is clamped down and silenced in order to create a mysteriously pre-moulded, powerful, alluring subjectivity which conforms ironically, with much that is traditionally 'feminine'.

So I feel Davey is right to see Atwood's work as trapped by its own definitions, ending up in a self-reflexive 'loop', 'a writing written against its own writing, a writing that denies its writer.' (17) Atwood's stance is, unremittingly, that of a separatist, in the sense that her work shies away from the macho 'writing west' grouping of male contemporaries. It shies away also from organised political feminism, moving, instead, towards matriarchal myth and religion and a celebration of essentialist femininity. It valorizes the spiritual and the psychic levels of experience, at the expense of history or material conditions. Atwood's celebration of myth as a means of making sense of existence means that actual events tend to be explained in terms of fixed, recurring cycles (linked to female reproductive cycles).
Her rejection of rationality, of intellectual theories of struggle and process, appears to be another self-mutilation. Rather like Plath, Atwood seems to feel she must deny intellectual power in order to tap feminine creative forces. The attempt to 'create' subjectivity in order to conform to a blueprint seems even stronger with Atwood's work, however. Rage is muted or expressed in detached, deadpan humour. The visionary experience is paramount:

this nebulous mist of interstellar
dust snagged by the gravity
of a few bones, mine,
but luminous:
('The Skeleton, Not As An Image of Death', L, 1984, p.90)

The self remains, in a large degree, separate from the 'real' world; material objects assume significance only when harnessed to intense perception, like the white cup which becomes 'this quiet shining/which is a constant entering,/a going into' ('White Cup', L, p.89).

Such visionary intensity depends upon strong individualism, the Romantic egotism of the 'I' in a hostile world. Atwood's self-images stand alone against the world and assert their powers. The narrator in the novel Surfacing who recants 'the whole belief that I am powerless', and refuses to be a victim, makes a huge claim. Marge Piercy has commented that it is naive to expect a woman simply to reject victimhood. After all, external factors have also shaped her situation: 'I don't believe one woman can single-handedly leave off being a victim: power exists and some have it.' (18)

Atwood's poetry illuminates the strengths possible for women's writing - a defiant survival in a dangerous time and a determined struggle to rewrite its agendas. Yet it also bears witness to problems which emerge when the feminine is celebrated as essential 'female' power in opposition to a rigid definition of patriarchy and categorisation of technological culture as masculine.
Though Atwood denies close links with feminism, a connection can be found. Elements of the feminist movement, too, have tended to prioritise consciousness at the expense of exploring 'the ways in which material conditions have historically structured the mental aspects of oppression'. This has created a chasm between consciousness and materiality, which constructions of subjectivity (such as Atwood's) find difficult to bridge. This is particularly so when the 'female' is celebrated in challenge to a perception of the masculine bias of patriarchy, meshing the intellectual and emotional force of feminism with traditional concepts of poetic subjectivity (the visionary 'I').

Atwood's work typifies the conflict between two attempts to rework a contradictory ideology of gender and to bring into being a utopian alternative based upon feminine consciousness, freed from the perceived 'stranglehold' of social realities. The casualty in the middle seems to be Atwood's self-image, an enigmatic and elusive lacuna.
CHAPTER THREE: Footnotes

Introduction


7. Interview with Graeme Gibson, p.19.


11. Atwood added this 'Postscript' to 'Paradoxes and Dilemmas' in 1975 (G. Matheson, ed. p.272).
1. Margaret Atwood, 'Paradoxes and Dilemmas', p.270.


4. Frank Davey, p.17.


6. In Atwood's story 'Under Glass' (Dancing Girls, Toronto, McClelland and Stewart, 1977), the narrator wants to be like the cacti plants 'that have taught themselves to look like stones', 'little zeros, containing nothing but themselves.' See also Gloria Onley's 'Power Politics in Bluebeard's Castle', Canadian Literature, 60, 1974, p.40:

   Integrity of form resides primarily in the natural structure, not in the imposed social form .... thus being has a biological rather than a transcendental authority [for Atwood].

7. Frank Davey, p.44.


17. Title of feminist film, Scandanavia, 1980.


23. Frank Davey, p.51.

Section 2


2. Linda Bundtzen, p.19.


5. Alice Echols, p.66.


Section 3


3. S. Djwa, 'The Where of Here', in Margaret Atwood and A Canadian Tradition, (eds.), Davidsons, p.34.


7. Sherry Ortner, p.68.


12. Dorothy Jones, p.258.

13. Carol Christ, 'Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest'; Judith Plaskow, 'On Carol Christ on Margaret Atwood: Some Theological Reflections', both Signs 2.2., Winter, 1976, p.316 and 331. Also, Margaret Atwood, 'A Reply', same issue, p.340. Margaret Atwood stresses the fictionality of writing and characteristically distances herself from the debate: 'The duty of the critic is to society, but the primary duty of the writer is to the thing being made.'


15. Margaret Homans, p.168.


- 263 -

Section 4


11. Margaret Atwood, 'Paradoxes and Dilemmas', p.262.


Conclusion


9. Susan Sontag, p.3.
17. F. Davey, p.165.
18. Marge Piercy quoted by Carol Christ in *Signs*, 2.2, p.316, 'Margaret Atwood: The Surfacing of Women's Spiritual Quest'.
CHAPTER FOUR: ADRIENNE RICH

Introduction

Perhaps the major factor differentiating Adrienne Rich's poetry from that of the others in this study is its self-conscious determination to change from the inside out, to create a positive self-image as a deliberate role model for its readership. Rich's project has been, from the early 1970s onwards, to forge a political, social and literary programme for change: 'not to pass on a tradition but to break its hold over us'. (1) Because she makes the self the focus for such wide-ranging and ambitious visions of change, she places tremendous emphasis on its construction as strong, resilient, and heroic. This raises, in all Rich's work, an interesting ambivalence towards the role of subjectivity; for while she views the Romantic tradition of the unique, individualised perception with dislike, stating her lack of belief in 'the idea of the poet as someone of special sensitivity or spiritual insight, who rightfully lives above and off from the ordinary general life', (2) her writing necessarily articulates a privileged consciousness, seeing and making sense of life in highly individual responses, no matter how she may posit this 'I' as a version of Everywoman. Therefore her relationship to a 'tradition' of poetry is complex, and the evidence of her writing is that she does not, simply, wish to 'break its hold' - at least not on every level.

Rich's poetry starts, from the collection Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law, (1963) to explore the idea of the psychological 'split' at the heart of women's lives: the splits created by conflicts between contradictory social expectations, the split between taking oneself seriously as a writer or putting others first, for example. (3) Rich redefines this splitting process in ways which emphasise its potential for new development, new consciousness. Instead of wishing for resolution or closure, Rich's
work celebrates splitting as a process of growth, painful and disturbing but essentially valuable.

The acceptance of feminist beliefs and values allows Rich's work to reject the schizoid or 'mad' connotations traditionally applied to such celebration. Instead Rich sees this endless complexity of women's lives in terms of an ongoing receptivity to new experience or new perspectives; she applies to it the supremely female image of the way the body splits apart to give birth. Feminism also informs Rich's determination to create female self-images which take their destinies into their own hands: to define 'a female consciousness which is political, aesthetic and erotic, and which refuses to be included or contained in the culture of passivity'.

In many ways Rich's writing is a culmination of a trend in poetry which has become increasingly feminine-oriented since the early 1960s. It has turned away from masculinity, no longer accepting it as unproblematic, but seeing it rather as the source of fear, anxiety and deep distrust.

Rich herself outlines this development in describing Plath's poetry, where

> Man appears as...a fascination and a terror; and that the source of the fascination and the terror is, simply, Man's power...over her....It is finally [Plath's] sense of herself - embattled, possessed- that gives the poetry its rhythms of...female energy.

For Rich, it is Plath's final self-consciousness of her embattled state that inspires. It is no mere coincidence that Rich's criticism of her own and others' poetry involves such extensive self-contemplation and curiosity about the creative process: it is self-consciousness that her work celebrates, since this, according
to her, becomes a means to empowerment. Therefore Rich's approaches to construction of self-images are multiple: myth, symbol, literary influences figure predominantly, but there are also sociological elements, focusing on ideology, the media, social conditions, and theoretical concerns, raising questions as to the nature of self and the construction of language itself. All these seek to provide a knowledgeable and truthful representation of the self as 'a person in history'. (6)

In all this multiplicity, however, certain conflicted aspects of the self - the bleak self-dislike, the creation of fragmented, uncertain, dissatisfied self-imagery which appear in Plath, Sexton and Atwood - are not so visible in Rich's work. This could be read as a sign of strength and psychological well-being. I, nevertheless, suspect an element of self-censorship in this projection of the positive: as if Rich is seeking to make a dream real by asserting it loudly.

Rich presents the self as tested to the utmost yet remaining strong and basically stable. Identity seems safe and, on a deep level, unchanging, no matter how rigorous the splitting process. The strong, analytical 'I' of the earliest poems emerges, easily recognisable, in much later work. This is intensely surprising, given the fact that Rich's life, upon which much of her poetry draws, has gone through enormous change and her existence has been transformed under intense pressures, both political and personal. These changes - from wife and mother to lesbian activist - have been documented in Rich's autobiographical prose; as readers we have a clear, programmatic view of the directions and patterns of her life. Rich's extensive writing constructs herself as survivor, a testament to how women's lives can change and how self-image can be transformed.

Rich's poetic career began as a student when her first collection, *A Change of World*, (1951) was admired by Auden for its 'modestly-dressed', respectful formalism. The poems exude an
ack of elegant fatalism and interest in gender relations as a social force. Leaving university, marrying into a traditional, conservative Jewish family and raising sons, produced eight years of silence between collections. What work she did seemed 'mere excuses for poems I hadn't written'.

The Civil Rights movement of the late 1960s provided Rich with new impetus and she wrote *Leaflets* (1969) engaging with the aims of revolutionary political struggle. Questioning women's roles within the family and more, and becoming increasingly disillusioned with the male-dominated Left, Rich turned her strengthening commitment towards feminism and lesbianism, focusing on these themes in her poetry.

Some of the elements of Rich's personal, political and literary journey are paralleled in the work of the other poets studied here. But Rich's poetry expresses the triumph of a transformation achieved (even at great cost). What emerged as an inchoate desire for change in Plath's work and to some degree in Sexton's, is in Rich's poetry channelled into a deliberate agenda for the reshaping of self-image for intervention upon cultural practice, for strategies to revise negative assumptions about lesbianism.

Instead of looking into the 'fascination and terror' of the masculine gaze, Rich simply refuses to allow masculine perceptions to judge, define or constrain the lesbian self-image. Her work focuses on the rediscovery of the 'mirror-image' of the female self in relation to other women, believing this identification to be empowering. Rather than accept the self as an object of the male gaze, Rich's strategy is to 'remake' herself and, in the process, to create a global community of equally strong sisters; her project is to gain 'subjective collaboration' with women readers. Obviously the desire and will to achieve this could not alone make it possible; there has been a transformation in the 'consumption' of work with the emergence of a wide feminist readership. Unlike
that of the other poets studied here, Adrienne Rich's work has a sure idea of its committed audience and a strong sense of its importance.

So Rich's work celebrates its vision of female power more robustly and assertively than Plath or Sexton, for whom gender emerged as an area of disturbing ambivalence. And unlike Atwood, Rich evinces little unease at her excision of any 'masculine' aspects from her work or psyche. Her self-image is that of heroine: the sum of many parts, whose different selves have come together not to jar but to co-exist, and bring new levels and layers of resilience. The poem 'Integrity' uses a Mary Daly-inspired image of spider-spun web to explore the ability of the self to make a whole, even from fragments:

Azar and tenderness: my selves.
Azar now I can believe they breathe in me as angels, not polarities.
Azar and tenderness: the spider's genius to spin and weave in the same action from her own body, anywhere—
even from a broken web.
('Integrity', 1981; in FOARP p.274)

This excerpt exemplifies a tone in Rich's poetry, which expresses a sense of having come through, of having achieved self-knowledge after great pain, of being able to look back and review her life. This distance of judgement is not visible in the other poets' work: I think that Rich's awareness of her own ageing contributes to this dimension.

Another important aspect of Rich's subjectivity lies in her self-images of mother and nurturer. Rich's work celebrates the physical powers of the female (even if distorted and constricted by patriarchal oppression) and seeks to fuse these with intellectual
abilities, in order to create a 'new' intellectualism which connects body and mind, 'practicing till strength and accuracy became one with the daring to leap into transcendence' ('Transcendental Etude', 1977, DCL) in FOADF p. 264. For Rich, motherhood is a central issue, informing not simply mother-child relationships, personally and socially, but informing equally the new relationships, sexual and sisterly, forged between women, and their own self-images: 'Sometimes I feel it is myself that kicks inside me, myself I give suck to, love...' ('Paula Becker to Clara Westhof', 1975-6. DCL, in FOADF p. 250).

Despite many assurances to the contrary (that the poet is no-one special, very ordinary in fact), Rich's voice assumes a mythic and affectingly powerful resonance. This gives her work an urgency and directness; it is also intensely pedagogical in its vision, and this aspect constitutes both a strength and a weakness (a limitation of agenda). In this chapter I want firstly to explore Rich's project of showing how the self can be remade, again and again, and culture reshaped as a result. It seems to me that such a project carries its own contradictions - though Rich's work is inspirational, prophesying the future, imagining far-reaching new freedoms, it seems at times to exist only within the charged, transcendent moment -

I am travelling to the edge to meet the face
of annihilating and impersonal time
stained in the colors of a woman's genitals
outlasting every transient violation
a face that is strangely intimate to me

('Turning the Wheel' 1931 in FOADF p. 310)

This moment, no matter how significant and illuminating, cannot be escaped from: it constitutes, to some extent, the culmination of the process, rather than its dynamic. In the effort to reach such charged, transcendent 'truth' of perception, elements of
ambivalence and unease become erased, and the process of 're-
vision' is belied.

Secondly I hope to point out in this, determinedly feminist 're-
vision' some important elements shared with the discourse of
femininity. I shall look at how, in some senses, femininity comes
full circle to emerge again in such politically-engaged poetry as
Rich's, and shall discuss the implications for Rich's hope of
creating 'a whole new poetry beginning here.'(8)

Section 1

Rich's first volume, A Change of World, would seem to accept
the then prevailing 1951 belief that to be of equal standing
writing by women must 'sound the same' as that of men. Rather like
the female poet 'most admired at the time (by men)', Marianne
Moore, Rich produced poems which were 'maidenly, elegant,
intellectual, discreet.'(1) They fitted in comfortably with the
elite, masculine ambience of post-war American academia. As James
Breslin puts it, such poetry was 'characterised by deference'
towards the shadowy modernist giants Yeats, Pound and Auden; poets
such as Rich 'were remarkable for their avowed eagerness to meet,
rather than to revise, prevailing standards'.(2)

Intrinsic to this deference was an attitude towards the world,
and the situation of the self within it, which stressed the value
of the status quo. The world seemed to be beyond control, where
the 'terror' remained, but 'without the meaning.'(3) Lacking a
unified framework which might supply such meaning 'the self becomes
helpless and static, confronted with immense temporal, historical,
social and natural forces ... Power is outside ... in this context,
heroic aspirations are viewed as foolish delusions.'(4) Rich's
sense of her own power and will is directed into the formalism of
her poetic structures in *A Change of World*: her careful and skilful use of the sonnet, of terza rima, her emphasis on metre, all testify to this. Questions of both selfhood and gender become subsumed within this effort of containment and detachment.

Yet a number of underlying, discordant elements run through the collection, emerging for example in the glimpse of the Jungfrau, 'legendary virgin spire', in 'The Kursaal at Interlaken': an imagined independent and powerfully enigmatic female presence which mocks the speaker's carefully civilised, but artificial, sexual and social arrangements. Similarly in 'Storm Warnings' an approaching storm causes the female speaker to shut up her house, acknowledging implicitly its subversive powers of rebellion and restlessness which disrupt her orderly life. Though ungendered, the storm, like the mountain, asserts a powerful elemental presence which seems to offer wider horizons to the poems' socialised female figures. Yet when the poet imagines a 'female' landscape, it is from the perspective of the dominant male-oriented poetic discourse. The garden in 'From A Chapter in Literature' is repellently damp, disordered, a morass of lax fecundity (recognisably imbued with feminine characteristics!). She turns back in relief to the 'masculine' rationality of the intellect, to the precision of music by Bach.

Born in 1929, Rich is placed among the 'second generation' of formalists by Robert Kiernan (in his *American Writing Since 1945*), one of those who, like Randall Jarrell and James Merrill, were shaped by the 'irony, allusion, and literary precedents' of the older Wallace Stevens and Robert Frost. (5) Rich began writing young, under the powerful masculine influence of her father. At first needy of his approval, she later rejected his traditional literary values, apparently in repudiation of that need. He represented, in Rich's memoirs, an impersonal, patriarchal force as well as a personal figure in his own right. As a 'good student', Rich depended upon him: 'he criticised my poems for faulty
Reading the male poets, she found her style by the discoveries made in her father's study - 'What I chiefly learned from [Frost, Auden, Stevens, Yeats] was craft'.

Rich's father's importance was contradictory:

His investment in my intellect and talent was egotistical, tyrannical, opinionated...
He taught me nevertheless...to feel that I was a person of the book, even though a woman; to take ideas seriously. He made me feel...the power of language and that I could share in it.

The fact that for Rich this very personal relationship also embraced an acceptance of established literary values and practice illuminates the significance, on many levels, of her later emphatic rejection of these things. She felt that the status conferred upon her as 'the special woman, the favoured daughter', gave her insight into the ways she was 'controlled and rewarded'; and yet the rewards were not negligible.

Elements of Rich's earliest career were shared by Plath and Atwood. They too, were part of the academic milieu, writing poetry in approved, conventionally-crafted structures. Though rather younger than Rich, Plath and Atwood were still students in the early 1950s while Rich was marrying and bearing children; but Plath's marriage in 1954 confronted her with the similar question of combining academic and creative life with the feminine mystique of domesticity and marriage. What has been shared by all the poets in this study is the original influence of male teachers or authority figures which shaped the kind of earliest work they produced. Both Rich's and Plath's fathers were academics, deeply influencing their daughters' early values, as did poets and critics; Sexton's first work emerged as the result of psychiatric
therapy and dependence on male medics, while Atwood's male mentors at university included the dominant figure of Northrop Frye.

As formalism declined, as poetry reacted against its self-imposed restrictions and limited world-view, so can a decline in masculine influence be traced in these poets' work. Each began to 'find a voice' and assert a growing need to make sense of personal contradictions rather than to continue writing detached, formally perfect poetry. Sexton's and Plath's poetry has been seen as part of the 'confessional' school, and to a certain extent this is a useful categorisation, given that poetry deemed to be 'confessional' emerged as a challenge to the impersonal chill of formalism. But in its self-emphasis it shares, also, with Rich's work: labelling can never be conclusive. Similarly, Atwood's poetry could be said to share many of the characteristics of the 'deep imagists', using Jungian archetypes of the unconscious.

The diversity, yet similarities, of these poets' development can be linked to what Robert Kiernan calls 'the cultural disarray' of the postwar period, whose 'literary amorphousness' reflected national life.(10) The poetry follows a commonly discernible trend in both literary and social attitudes: a growing dissatisfaction with the conservative status quo, a movement towards personal engagement with global issues, and a consciousness of anger. James Breslin has noted that in the 1950s 'writers didn't want to be rebels or exiles, but part of US life and US values.'(11) Writers characterised their activities as dogma-free (conformism having proclaimed 'the end of ideology')(12), able to transcend personal and historical limitations; the irony being, according to Breslin, that 'just such claims...placed them firmly in their historical era.'(13)

An important element of this postwar quietism was the American obsession with 'security', exemplified by the McCarthy mentality and a heightened nationalism. This xenophobic, almost paranoid
atmosphere linked with more personal, private desires for security at home, and this laid enormous emphasis on women's role as symbol of stability, depending upon normative values and rigid gender divisions.

This was a burden carried by women writing. On one hand, gender was not a subject for discussion, women's role being wholly 'natural'; on the other, those who challenged, in any way, the dominant ideology laid themselves open to social criticism and self-doubt, as Rich recalls in her own experience as a poet, wife and mother. What had started as an unexamined position of strength, an exercise in analysis and control, an ordering of the world, now seemed an evasion, a refusal to face up to the underlying anxiety and insecurities which were threatening the complacency of what Robert Lowell termed the 'tranquillised 1950s' in his Life Studies, and what Breslin called 'the violence and uncertainty just below the bland surface.' (14)

The change in Rich's work - progression from a self-negating, detached kind of writing to a poetry which focuses on wider issues such as racism, homophobia and anti-Semitism precisely through an assertion of the importance of the self and of subjectivity - is to some extent a characteristic direction in postwar poetry. But the particular intensity of Rich's rejection of past values, repudiation of deference, and creation of a passionate central consciousness of selfhood, creates a striking 'before-and-after' scenario.

Rich's own treatment of the 'story' of her life represents an increasing awareness of the cruciality of her own gender as being central to separating the 'before' from the 'after'. Writing in the 1970s of the time of marriage and first motherhood, she has contrasted the academic poet's life with the myth of domesticity - and found them both wanting. Her escape, her 'change of world' into housewifery brought her only the 'secret emptinesses ...
frustrations' of middle-class married life; (15) and yet the poetic life seemed one of sterility.

What Rich emphasises is the isolation, the silence endured by women then (principally in the home, but also, implicitly, in the academic establishment?): 'life was extremely private; women were isolated from each other by the loyalties of marriage'. (16) For her the discourses of formalist poetry and of domesticity each constituted a kind of silencing. The 'power of language' and the ability to 'share in it' were lost. Only acts of speech and writing between women, in a far more liberal atmosphere, could allow her to reclaim her unshaken belief in the primacy of language and to take the first steps out of an oppressive existence.

As we saw earlier in connection with Anne Sexton's work (in particular, Rich's memorial address to Sexton in 1974), (17) Rich's self-image seems to depend heavily on distinguishing between the oppression of the past and the self-realising potential of the present and future.

What Alaz Williamson says of the 'middle generation' of contemporary male poets (Robert Bly, William Merwin, Gary Snyder and Galway Kinnell) is to some extent true of Rich. They have gone through an unusually marked crisis of confidence in mid-career, in which their poetic self-definition - being so highly ethical to begin with - tempted them to exchange a problematic aesthetic merit for an imperishable moral one . . . [becoming] more ambitious ideologically, but at the same time given to abstract self-explanation and to formula. Few are free of . . . the self-importance about the act of writing, regardless of the aesthetic value of the result. (18)
The 'bcrn-again' nature of Rich's radical and feminist transformations tends to influence a pronounced splitting between past and future; the urgency of the message does, at times, obscure any problems in the present. The cost of Rich's escape involved rejection not merely of the 'silence' of domesticity, but also of her own literary heritage: the original 'dream of Europe', attachment to patriarchal 'civilisation'. In rejecting both roles - wife and mother, and poet of tradition - Rich indeed moved far from Sexton, who remained, embattled, in the domestic sphere. In the half-uttered defensiveness of Rich's memorial address we can perhaps guess at doubts and unresolved pains which are never directly expressed. Instead her work has a tendency to celebrate the alternatives she has chosen as being the only right course.

This sureness of purpose emerges again and again in writing of the escape from the 'feminine mystique', characterised as 'that female fatigue of suppressed anger and loss of contact with my own being...the discontinuity of female life with its attention to small chores': Rich stresses how her sense of self became so urgent in its need for expression that she could no longer ignore it, and her work places deliberate emphasis on personal consciousness as a way out of the impasse. Rich articulates the individualist basis of the feminist project for female autonomy: despite her guilt, she was certain that her 'fragments and scraps had a common consciousness and a common theme', her life an interconnectedness which, if I could see it, make it valid, would give me back myself, make it possible to function lucidly and passionately.

There is no such clear sense of the potential wholeness and meaning of life, if only the self can be freed, in the work of Plath, Sexton or Atwood, for whom life seems baffling, and the self's position uncertain.
Rich's account of her subjectivity (explored in both prose and poetry) is a version of the quest myth, involving the separation-initiation-return rites of passage. A poem charting such a quest for deeper understanding, 'Diving into the Wreck' (1973), could be said to outline Rich's own perception of the process of her emergence as a radical feminist poet:

I came to explore the wreck,
The words are purposes.
The words are maps.
I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail
('Diving Into The Wreck', in ECARE p.163)

In 1951 Northrop Frye identified the quest-myth (22) as the central myth of literature, the source of all literary genres. If this is so, then Rich's work 'borrows' fruitfully from the literary traditions it also seeks to reject; the relationship is rather more complex than allowed for. (Rachel duPlessis sees 'Diving into the Wreck' as creating a new reading of the patriarchal myth in that its focus becomes the creative antagonism of the female hero to traditional consciousness and old patterns of myth.) (23)

It is worth stressing the level of courage and self-confidence presented as necessary to accomplish this reappraisal of self and of life. Rich hints at self-judgement and guilt: 'It's no accident that the words "cold and egotistical" appear in the poem 'Orion' and are applied to myself', (24) she writes. Yet there is very little evidence of self-loathing in her poetry; instead there is a discernible belief in a continuity of self and its intrinsic worth, which makes even radical change easier.

Paradoxically, the movement away from the 'feminine mystique' towards a growing awareness of wider choices depends upon an increasing interest in the importance of gender: 'I was able to write, for the first time, directly, about experiencing myself as a
woman... Until then I had tried very hard not to identify myself as a female poet." (25) Unlike Plath or Sexton, for whom gender was a source of ambivalence and self-doubt, Rich found her growing sense of her female identity, and her commitment to exploring it, provided the lynchpin for a change of direction in her work which she saw as extremely exciting. (It is useful to remember that Rich's account provides a polished, finished version of a complex network of events; we cannot accept the text as a completely accurate 'transcription'.) But it is clear that, in the main, Rich's sense of her own womanhood strengthened her self-images, and gave substance and meaning to them, instead of undermining them. Even when she believed herself to be 'cold and egotistical', her guilt and self-doubt were weaker than her certainty that she had chosen the right course.

This can be seen clearly in poems which look to other female figures who 'chose to have it out at last/on [their] own premises' ('I Am in Danger-Sir-', written in 1964, from MOL, in FOADF p.72), and in poems which express an interest in women's lives or an identification with female experience (such as 'Sisters', 1961, FOADF p.47, 'Women', 1968 FOADF p.94). Rich is critical of the private domain of women in the family in 'Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law', 1967, FOADR p.35 and 'A Woman Mourned by Daughters', also 1968, FOADR p.42, believing that only in the larger, outside world, with all its dangers, can the female self develop.

Despite her growing sense of identification with the female, Rich's poems of this period continue to employ male personae - perhaps not merely because this was the accepted mode, but also because she felt that entry into the 'outside' world could most easily be effected through assuming the imaginative guise of the male, with all its extra freedoms. 'The Roofwalker' (1961, FOADF, p.49) is perhaps the clearest example of this, dealing as it does with the self's escape from 'A life I didn't choose/(but which) chose me':

-280-
I'm naked, ignorant,
a naked man fleeing
across the roofs
who could with a shade of difference
be sitting in the lamplight.

The stark distinction between the outcast (male) and the
domesticated (genderless, possibly female?) figure - with their
interconnection as alter egos - is another characteristic of Rich's
strategy of exploring oppositions and conjunctions, trying to
understand and resolve the 'splitting' process.

But her experiments with masculine personae (such as the young
male lover of Hadrian in 'Antinous: The Diaries', 1959, FOADE
p.39), or the male friend of a married woman in 'The Loser', 1958,
FOADE p.33) come to seem too limiting: so, too, do later
androgynous figures (the mermaid/merman in 'Diving Into The Wreck'.
or the lofty. asexual narrating 'I' or 'we' in 'For The
Conjunctions of Two Planets', (A Change of World, 1951, p.46).
Poems where the 'I' is gendered female have a distinctive urgency
and directness, changing the tone to one of painful, even ungainly
honesty (for example in 'Sisters', 1961, FOADE p.48), rather than
the previously-desirable detachment.

A too-compassionate art is half an art.
Only such proud restraining purity
Restores the else-betrayed, too-human heart.
('At A Bach Concert', ACOV p.54)

This new direction means not merely a shift in tone and in
structure, but a new vocabulary, rejecting everything that
diminishes or evades female experience:

There are words I cannot choose again:
humanism androgyny

- 281 -
Such words have no shame in them, before the raging stoic grandmothers.

('Natural Resources' 1977, FOADF p.262)

Running through Rich's new perspective - the belief that female experience must never be subsumed within the male or 'human' - is the strong sense of individual rights, an idea of the self as the starting-point of any process of wider social change, issuing from her own political awakening: 'I began... to feel that politics was not something "out there" but "in here" and of the essence of my condition'.

This sense of self emerges in Rich's poems in a particular way: the female body becomes highlighted as central to the process of discovery and knowledge. The body itself becomes the locus for such change of consciousness, forming the 'doorway':

I tell you truth is at the moment here
burning outward through our skins

Eternity streams through my body:
touch it with your hand and see.

('Ghazals' 7/16/68 i, 1968, FOADF p.106)

And, more pointedly: 'The moment when a feeling enters the body/is political. This touch is political.' ('The Blue Ghazals' 5/4/69, FOADF p.123). This fusing of the historical moment with the sexual was a feature of 1960s radicalism, when physical gestures were given prominence (an example being the slogan 'Make Love Not War!'). Rich concentrates, even in her most politically-engaged poetry of the 1960s, on the sexual female body, seeking to find new meanings, as in 'Planetarium', a poem written 'Thinking of Caroline Herschel'.
I am bombarded yet       I stand

I have been standing all my life in the
direct path of a battery of signals
.......  
....I am an instrument in the shape
of a woman trying to translate pulsations
into images for the relief of the body
and the reconstruction of the mind
(1968, FQADF p.116)

Rich's work seeks to express this sense of excitement and
potentiality, and it is through bodily imagery and metaphor that
her poetry best explores processes of self-realisation:

nerve friable as lightning
endless in burnt pine forests.
You are begun, beginning, your black heart drumming
inside its pacific cave.
(‘Night in the Kitchen’. 1969 FQADF p.106)

and, more directly:

The will to change begins in the body not in
the mind
My politics is in my body, accruing and expanding
with every
act of resistance and each of my failures
Locked in the closet at 4 years old I beat the wall
with my body
that act is in me still
(‘Tear Gas’. 1969 FQADF p.199)
The body as heroic, transcendent, must be seen as a conscious self-creation. In *A Change of World* the female body is the central, yet absent, subject. In 'The Rain of Blood' (*ACOW* p. 55), the 'unnatural' menstruation-like torrent which pours angrily down upon a horrified community evokes an image of the repressed and unmentionable bursting through imposed conventions of silence. There is a sense of anxiety and tension here, as if the poet is trying to speak that which is unspeakable, or yet unformulated. Rich herself described her use of formalism in the 1950s as being 'like asbestos gloves, it allowed me to handle materials I couldn’t pick up bare-handed'. (27)

This focus on the powers of the body can be seen as related to Rich's rejection of the cerebral and intellectual literary tradition espoused by her father and the establishment. But this emphasis on the physical only succeeds because of the immense amounts of psychic energy which are infused into it, and a reliance on the metaphysical tradition to give it significance. Rich seems divided between desire to achieve heightened effects – such as

the air through which child and mother
are running the boy singing
the woman eyes sharpened in the light
heart stumbling making for the open

('Mother-Right', 1977, *FOADF* p. 256)

and her project to write practical, didactic work:

Sex, as they harshly call it,
I fell into this morning
at ten o'clock, a drizzling hour
of traffic and wet newspapers.

('Two Songs', 1964, *FOADF* p. 65)

Rich comes to see the psychic power of imaginative empathy as being specifically feminine. In 1974 she said that
Women's gift for relationship is fundamental, I think. We can say it's been socialized into us, but I also think that for women there isn't that radical split between self and others, because what was within us comes out of us and we still love it and care for it and we still relate to it. It's still part of us in some way. (28)

Initially Rich's rebellion against suburbia, and her involvement with radical politics, led her to explore struggle in terms of men and women's joint involvement: 'I'm speaking to you as a woman to a man: when your blood flows I want to hold you in my arms' ('Ghazals', 8/8/68, FOADF p. 109). But disillusion with the masculine followed quickly, and brought her into conflict with those comrades who 'Speak of Che Guevara/Bolivia, Manterre,' those men of whom she says 'I'Äôm too young to be your mother/you're too young to be my brother' ('Leaflets', 1968 FOADF p. 101). These relationships with males involve jarring differences in outlook, and provide no familial ties of loyalty; it is the sexual aspects which become emphasised and these appear increasingly confrontational and oppressive: 'Early and late I come and set myself against you./Your phallic fist knocking blindly at my door.' ('The Blue Ghazals', 9/23/68, FOADF p. 121). Once again Rich's work articulates a groundswell of contemporary feeling among women who found that 'radical men were frequently as sexist as traditional patriarchs'. It is relevant here that Rich's dissatisfaction with the left partly stemmed from her growing sense of its divisive emphasis upon masculine interest and sexuality within an ostensible common cause.
Radical left politics become subsumed within sexual politics from the late 1960s in Rich's work as it asserts the primary split in society to be based upon sexuality, and stands up for female interests. The pain of such a rift with the masculine, as communication with men becomes increasingly fraught, is expressed in 'Gabriel', (1968). This poem describes the male in terms which mythologise him, and emphasise his beauty, but this is undercut by the writer's sense that he is destructive to her own ability to write, speak. name:

It's true there are moments
closer and closer together
when words stick in my throat
the art of love
the art of words.

Their obsessive mutual antagonism is reminiscent of the couple in Atwood's *Power Politics*:

he isn't giving
or taking any shit
We glance miserably
across the room at each other

This pain comes to a head in poems on the Vietnam war, where Rich draws an analogy between the military and the men who use violence, setting out to destroy women, physically and psychologically, in intimate relationships:

my body is a list of wounds
symmetrically placed
a village
blown open by planes
that did not finish the job

('Nightbreak' 1968, in *FOMAS* p.99)
In its theme this poem is similar to Anne Sexton's 'I'm Dreaming the My Lai Soldier Again' (1969)(29). The atrocities reported from Vietnam caused a crystallisation of imagery by women poets which tended to emphasise masculinity as oppressive on many levels. In 'Nightbreak', as elsewhere, Rich situates the female subject as victim, exploring and displaying her psychological injuries through familiar imagery of wounding and scarring and bleeding. Yet there remains the consistent tone of determination to survive, to triumph: to achieve this Rich makes even the victim's status heroic.

In the final poem of The Will to Change (1971) Rich makes a promise to herself to keep moving, to keep faith in her own changes of direction. She is helped by confidence in the underlying wholeness and patterning of her life, if only she can decipher it, seize its meaning:

To reread the instructions on your palm,  
to find there how the lifeline, broken,  
keeps its direction.

To pull yourself up by your own roots: to  
eat the last meal in  
your old neighborhood.

('Shooting Script', in FOADE p.141)

Rich's 'old neighborhood' includes a heterosexual past: in Diving into the Wreck (1974), her subsequent collection, she commits herself to imagining a far more fruitful kind of communication, between women whose talk is 'a striking of sparks' ('After Twenty Years', 1971. FOADE p.157).

From the early seventies Rich celebrates increasingly what she sees as the female principle, a magical potentiality hidden within women and brought to the surface by an awareness of women's collective identity. This principle might even be called a feminist
'collective unconscious', partly inherent and partly socialised into women, but equipping them with sensitivity and even psychic powers unavailable to males.

In *Diving Into the Wreck* Rich asserts her project to excavate 'the treasures that prevail' from the morass of patriarchy. What distinguishes this collection (and in particular its title poem) from the earlier work is its shift in emphasis from the female self as seen in relation to others - for example, in sexual, social, political, familial and academic relationships with men - to a sense of the self as central to an inner, psychological quest myth of discovery.

It is not simply that, as K.K. Ruthven makes clear, the embrace of myth forms part of a general reaction against the cerebral rationality of the New Criticism in the 1960s. (30) It is also that for a female poet working with the 'deep structures' of myth was enabling, avoiding more obvious social relegation of the feminine to secondary status. Perhaps the most important point, made by Rachel duPlessis, (31) is the way this 'new' feminine transformation myth does away with the traditional 'terrible mother' figure, representing the female captive's despised matriarchal past, and, in Rich's process of 'cultural displacement', the familial/heterosexual arrangement of hero taking daughter from mother ceases to happen. Instead the female subject becomes everything - the hero, daughter, and mother. The drama of the quest becomes female-centred and introspective. The masculine ex-hero represents only an irrelevant or marginalised element.

Of course Rich's poetry is not the first to revise this myth. Plath, too, made the hero female, reappropriating her transformative powers from the male. But Plath's version of the myth is much more vengeful, far more rooted in the mystery and allure of the masculine, far more self-destructive in that the resolution it seeks is apocalyptic. Where Rich's work differs is in its belief that such a vision of female self-heroism can produce an
ongoing process of continuous and fruitful transformation from helplessness to power. And what cements her woman-centred vision, 'outside' the patriarchal family structure, is, paradoxically, the figure of the mother, the symbolism of maternity. Rich's female heroes are maternal: they give birth to new selves, they are midwives for their developing subjectivity. They nurture and care for other women. Carol Pearson(32) explores Rich's frustrations at being 'unmothered' in patriarchal culture, and her expression of her need for a strong, wise mother-figure, linking this with images in Rich's poems where the female lover can become the 'mother', giving some idea of how resonant, wide-ranging and deeply-felt is Rich's vision of motherhood.

We may ask what is the difference of this approach from the 'Great Mother' or 'White Goddess' myths from which it draws its inspiration. In spite of the quite different political outlook of those involved in feminist matriarchal scholarship from that of their antecedents Neumann and Graves, all seem to share essentialist assumptions regarding the Great Mother archetype.

I feel that Rich's celebration of the female hero as motherly and mothering asserts an attractive and positive 're-vision' of women's potentialities, fusing the heroic with the maternal in a deliberate effort to intervene and redirect cultural undervaluing of motherhood. The self-image of mother makes sense of many separate strands of subjective experience for Rich, too, drawing together the daughter, the lover, the sister, and the mother-self in ways which combine eroticism with a whole range of relationships, from the collective and political to the most intimate, giving them all new significances.
Rich's reworking of the maternal in literary terms resembles Helene Cixous' matriarchal vision. Both involve a positive, celebratory evocation of maternity which idealises the mother and which succumbs to, as well as sustains, the maternal ideology. This is an important contradiction: as they use and re-use familiar material in order to challenge cultural values, the force of ideological pressure is so strong that the challenge becomes partly co-opted within the dominant discourse once more.

Rich's maternal female hero seems to exist in a psychological vacuum, as all idealised figures do, remote from, and rejecting, the social and material tensions which have produced them. Her work represents female transformation and female experience of motherhood as fundamentally separate, existing apart from masculinity across an unbridgeable gulf, and also far away from the forces which make maternity far from ideal for many women.

Where Rich's work differs from Plath's, Sexton's and Atwood's is in its self-confidence. Her female hero is nobody's muse or goddess; the question does not even arise. Instead her role is mother to herself (and to other women). This role is that of a prophet, in a position of power. Elements of this self-image are evident in Plath's work, as flashes of power, or of autonomy, but Rich's poetry seeks to systematise it.

Yet Rich's work shares a difficulty with Plath's, one which is intensified in proportion to her idealisation of the maternal role. In her non-fiction work on motherhood, Of Woman Born, Rich distinguishes clearly the two jarring elements of just such a contradiction: that between the 'institution' of motherhood, on a material level, and the mythic dimension of the 'potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction'. (33)

In the poetry, however, the jarring between the primarily ideological and the primarily mythic forms a fascinating
counterpoint to its overt celebration of motherhood. This is partly because myth assumed enormous significance for Rich, who, with *Diving Into the Wreck*, turned from politics towards a vision of inner psychic and emotional energies as being potentially the more revolutionary. (34) Motherhood offers to Rich's vision a wealth of meanings, but its more ambivalent aspects refuse to disappear.

Rich wrote little about her own experiences of childbirth and motherhood, nor did she use childbirth as a metaphor, until poems of the early 1970s, when these aspects of female existence became focus of a new interest. (As Ellen Moers notes in *Literary Women* (p. 93), the subject of childbirth was not acceptable in any detail in literature until the nineteenth century Naturalism of Tolstoy and Zola. Pearl Buck was responsible for establishing pregnancy, labour, and breastfeeding as valid subjects for women's writing in America, where, therefore, the subject is relatively new.)

In 'Night-Pieces: For a Child' (1964, FOADF p. 67) Rich describes the child waking from sleep to see the mother's head anxious over the cradle, not as its own human mother but simply the archetypal 'death's head, sphinx, medusa' of its nightmare. The child and the poet, who is the child's mother, appear wholly alienated from one another. The images of 'death's head, sphinx, medusa' also conjure up a sense of self-alienation, implying repressed violence towards the child.

'The Fourth Month of the Landscape Architect' (1973) explores the ways pregnancy can diminish creativeness, in contrast to later poems which tend to emphasise the opposite. The pregnant architect imagines 'female' cities, visionary freedoms for women now enclosed in 'purdah, the salon, the sweatshop loft'. The creator/architect is powerful, her 'ink' is rain, which (like Cixous' milk) can
irrigate gardens, terraces,
dissolve or project horizons
flowing like lava from the volcano of the inkpot
at the stirring of my mind.

It is the mind which Rich sees here as being truly creative, even
though she imagines her visionary powers through the body. The body
traps this creativity, indicated by open, unlimited space, within
its own enclosed boundaries. The child within 'cannibalises' the
speaker's creative energy, so that imagining anything more becomes
fruitless. One can no longer be 'like a man', 'whose body contains
simply: itself' when the mind is dragged back by the disturbing,
ambiguous presence of the child within her.

In my body.
Spaces fold in. I'm caught
in the enclosure of the crib my body
where every thought I think
simply loosens to life another life.

This poem appears in the 1974 collection of Poems Selected and New,
but not in the 1984 volume. Is this because it presents the woman
as unable to make visionary changes because of the changes going on
within her own body? Rich's meshing of guilt and claustrophobia,
here, echoes through the work of other women poets including Plath
and Sexton. Her later poetry shows a striking reversal, however;
such complexities are increasingly played down in order, it seems,
to put forward a more positive view of motherhood as part of Rich's
poetic treatment of the strong, heroic female body.

In 1963 'The Afterwake' (FOADF p.43) focuses on the tension and
fatigue of the midwife. The poet identifies with her: she has
helped another give birth, but has not experienced birth herself.
Everything is still before her, 'colossal as this load/of unexpired
purpose'. In 1971 the self-image of midwife has come to mean much
more: she gives birth, herself, to new aspects of the self. In 'The
Mirror in Which Two are Seen as One' (1971 FOADF p. 159) the poet's self is addressed as 'you', imagining her birthing into a whole new life. In a profound de-centring of subjectivity, she is both the coming child and the nervous, inexperienced but determined midwife/mother 'learning her trade':

your mother dead and you unborn
your two hands grasping your head
drawing it down against the blade of life.

It is Rich's continuing aim to articulate women's existence as being upon the edge - that blade of life and death - being born and reborn continually, birthing others. Atwood voices this belief too: 'I live/on all the edges there are' (1967). So does Plath: 'I feel between two worlds, as Arnold writes - "one dead, the other powerless to be born".' (35) What gives Rich's evocations of maternity their moving and compelling quality, is a discernible sense that motherhood is a state on the very cusp of life and death, where the self stands on the brink of either survival as hero or extinction as victim. By emphasising 'the blade' she focuses on the cutting edge of this supreme experience as one which fragments the self, decentres the self. Yet her poetic treatment works, paradoxically, to assert the triumphant, wholeness of self as one who has come through, reminding us of Rich's claim in Of Woman Born, that the experience of pregnancy and childbirth may enable women to overcome traditional dualist assumptions about self and other, inner and outer, mind and body.

Whether Rich uses specific imagery of childbirth, or the more oblique image of the doorframe and its 'bloodstained splinters' ("The Fact of a Doorframe" 1974) the process of struggle to pass through a narrow way and to emerge the other side is urgently described. And the celebratory tone fitting to such a journey of self-discovery is undercut by an awareness that this imagery involves the potential for loss and self-sacrifice, as much as for self-transformation.
Where Rich does deal with loss, she tends, however, to romanticize, as if acceptance would be too painful. Maternal imagery signifies the ideal female collective endeavour in 'Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev' (1974 FOADF p. 255). A group of women climbers come together, each having felt, slowly, 'her own yes growing in her', to risk, and to find, death on the mountain. Rich asks

what does it mean 'to survive'
A cable of blue fire ropes our bodies
burning together in the snow  We will not live
to settle for less

The embryo 'yes', and the umbilical blue cable, apply the passionate, primary associations of motherhood not to the personal life but to an act of collective daring. Some readers will regret that it is accidental death which is seen as the outcome, even if as a deliberate choice: it is as if the vision Rich has of these women is so heightened that she has not realised its implications. It seems suspiciously like a female version of Scott of the Antarctic. Rich's comments on her own poetry tend to draw back from the implications of such celebration of heroism, which collides with her determination expressed in other poems that women will and must 'survive'. Her poetry remains attracted by the doomed element traditional in the heroic all the same.

It is Rich's lesbianism and lesbian-feminist politics which help focus her poetry on images of birth. 'Phantasia for Elvira Shatayev' is a striking example of how the maternal body can become a central image for a specific vision of intimacy and shared purpose. She also uses the image more personally, as when she
imagines the end of a relationship as a painful 'rebirth', a moving out of the other's body and life. 'I have written so many words/wanting to live inside you' introduces a commitment to survival, to growth even through expulsion: 'I look at my face in the glass and see/a halfborn woman' ("Upper Broadway", 1975, FOADF p. 247).

Though Rich's work celebrates a sense of community, she also makes discernible a strong feeling of loneliness and isolation. While her images of birth become more significantly suffused with sexual and political implications, she questions their implications less and less, writing more of the mythic 'potential relationship' and questioning less the 'institution'. It may be the use of archetype which makes reference points between the mythic and material levels so problematic to create: in the absence of such reference points Rich turn more and more to the mythic. For the self remains alone. Perhaps this is partly due to her self-selected role of 'prophet and scapegoat, living out individually the possibilities of collective destiny', according to A. Gelpi. (36) Her feeling of separation from others fosters a defensive self-reliance:

but really I have nothing but myself
to go by
...
Nothing but myself?...My selves.
After so long, this answer.

("Integrity" 1978, FOADF p. 273)

Why should there be this loneliness, in spite of such a compelling sense of female community? It may partly be that identification with others on purely biological or reproductive capacities cannot compete with strongly-worked-out ties of commitment and solidarity. It may also be that an extremely ambivalent and often painful response to the issue of mothering creates divisions between those who mother and those who do not;
this intensifies when it is lesbians who face it. Rich's strongly asserted individualism also produces the consciousness that we all are, inescapably, alone with ourselves. This is voiced poignantly in 'Mother-in-Law' (1980, FOADE p.292):

    tell me something
    Your son is dead
    ten years, I am a lesbian,
    my children are themselves.
    Mother-in-law, before we part
    shall we try again? Strange as I am,
    strange as you are?

Here, Rich's voice seems deliberately unheroic, flat with need and a recognition that communication can be difficult, even painful, between 'mothers'. It also expresses the sadness involved in mothering when one's children live their own lives; that these bonds, too, loosen and change.

Rich's poetry looks back to the past for confirmation of its dreams. More critically aware of the processes of 'history' than Atwood, perhaps, clear that 'Nostalgia is only amnesia turned around' ('Turning the Wheel', 1981, FOADE, p.305), Rich turns to female figures from more recent history - the artists, poets, activists and scholars of the nineteenth century, for example. Instead of celebrating the primordial, Rich chooses those earlier middle-class, educated women whose relationship to the literary and academic establishment appeared as ambivalent as her own.

In accordance with this interest, Rich's poetry concerns itself with a powerful contemporary ideal, the passionate female friendship (as explored in Lillian Fadermann's Surpassing the Love of Men). This ideal of intimacy and devotion forms a basis for Rich's vision of 'woman bonding', with its particular emphasis on the emotional aspects of relationship suffusing the sexual. Though Rich's work does celebrate lesbian sexuality (most vividly
and beautifully in her sequence of 'Twenty One Love Poems', 1978, in *Dream of a Common Language*), it also explores less sexually-specific relationships, such as the sisterly intimacy enjoyed by Victorian women. It is this dream of female bonding, which may include sexual expression but which is not defined by it, which Rich has named the 'lesbian continuum'. The breadth of the term is evident when Rich writes 'it is the lesbian in every woman who is compelled by female energy, who gravitates towards strong women, who seeks a literature that will express that energy and strength...it is the lesbian in us who is creative' (37) As a result of ensuing controversy Rich made it clear that she was seeking to affirm 'lesbian', to create a mainstream meaning for the term, to re-negotiate the cultural terrain by broadening out its original meaning.

Again and again Rich celebrates the woman-identified woman as 'self-chosen'. 'It was a sense of desiring oneself; above all, of choosing oneself.' (38) Therefore Rich celebrates the likeness between women, the security and safety of self-recognition in others. It produces a strangely narcissistic echo, behind the initially empowering idea of collective identity. The self's creativity depends upon producing a favourable 'reflection'in the eyes of the other, a process of self-validation which though originating from a profound sense of difference ('a primary intensity between women...which in the world at large was trivialised, caricatured or invested with evil' (39)) also seeks to erase any difference within the relationship.

Such idealising of this 'primary intensity' harks back to the model of the nineteenth century female friendship (often articulated through love letters, and other means similar to heterosexual romantic rituals, with similar emphasis on fantasy and idealisation). Rich's vision of female bonding would seem to accept, implicitly, certain traditional concepts of femininity.
The primacy of the special friendship depended upon the Victorian
division of work and home into 'separate spheres': middle-class
women possessed leisure and space within the private, emotion-ruled
sphere of the home. Though these friendships had the potential to
subvert established gender divisions, they were not intrinsically
subversive.

Section 2

Rich's work seems to reject much of its recent past,
particularly the nineteen fifties where femininity raises its head.
This period is figured as the 'ruins' to which Sexton's work forms
a guide. In rejecting the feminine mystique and looking ahead
towards a collectivity based upon lesbian culture, Rich's stance
appears unequivocal. Even her response to the nineteenth century
helps shape this rebellion. Yet her vision depends quite heavily
upon an acceptance of traditional femininity.

In Rich's desire to rescue culture from masculine
destructiveness, there is a recognisable echo of a similar impetus
from the 1950s. In her book Mothers and More: American Women In the
1950s (Boston, 1984) Eugenia Kaledin charts how women both within
the family and outside it, saw themselves as 'civilizers'; their
'public utterances...continued to emphasize caring roles'. (1)
Distrustful of the emerging professional-military-industrial power
structures of the time, and wary of their social implications,
women organised around 'humanising' issues such as childcare,
education, integration and pacificism 'in the face of new
technological barbarities'. (2) In effect, feminine qualities were
invoked to exert moral pressure and to neutralize what was
perceived to be an increasingly destructive and hostile masculine
culture. In spite of popular belief that the fifties were bleak
years of women's silence, Kaledin argues that much important work was begun.

Rich's tone matches the idealism which Kaledin delineates, and puts forward a similar 'humanizing' programme through feminism two decades later:

I believe in dreams and visions and 'the madness of art'. And at moments I can conceive of a woman's movement that will show the way to humanizing technology and fusing dreams and skills and vision and reason to begin the healing of the human races. (3)

The moral zest in Rich's work of the 1970s and 80s has been noted by critics with varying degrees of unease. Helen Vendler notes that 'In Rich, the moral will is given a dominating role that squeezes the lifeblood out of the imagination' (4) It is not simply that in Rich's work the female principle always constitutes the moral high ground, but that it is celebrated in ways which also strengthen the lynchpins of traditional femininity - stoicism, compassion, nurturance - since these are the means by which the human race is to be healed.

The earth mother is an obviously 'feminine' figure, as are the matriarchal homesteaders of Rich's long poem 'From An Old House in America' (1974; FOADF p 212). The earlier, revolutionary woman, wanting 'to hand you this/leaflet streaming with rain or tears/but the words coming clear/something you might find crushed into your hand/after passing a barricade' ('Leaflets'1968 FOADF p.103) has made way for the 'raging stoic grandmothers', figures which embrace many contradictory aspects of passivity and defiance. To a certain extent Rich replaces the romanticised image of the activist with a differently romanticised image of the mother; yet her evocations of
motherhood and intimate relationship provide a complex interweaving of political and personal subjectivity.

In 'Transcendental Etude' (1977 FOADF p.264) Rich puts forward a concept of the heroine which Margaret Homans criticises. Homans sees this figure, walking away from 'the argument and jargon' to sort patchwork under soft kitchen lamplight, as a very traditional feminine stereotype. She objects to Rich's evocation of this figure as a heroine, a Mother Nature, seeing this as celebrating a regressive, 'valorized image of womanhood'. Homans is particularly critical because she sees Rich's project as so intensely polemical. She believes Rich herself must be aware of the cultural implications inherent in celebrating such a stereotype. (Woman Writers and Poetic Identity, Princeton, 1980.)

That Rich is aware of these contradictions can be seen in her poem 'Heroines' (1930, FOADF p.292) where her subjects, once again, are the 'exceptional/even deviant' women of the nineteenth century. Rich considers the contradictions of their power and their helplessness - 'You may inherit slaves/but have no power to free them' - which provide such a complicated inheritance for herself. She concludes:

How can I fail to love
your clarity and fury
how can I give you
all your due
take courage from your courage
honor your exact
legacy as it is
recognizing
as well
that it is not enough?

The limitation of this as poetry is the way the poem constantly looks outside itself, towards action or just cleansing one's own
thoughts: to reform of some kind. Despite Rich's reservations about such 'heroines', her work continues to praise them for strength of purpose and a courage which creates a strong sense of identification:

I have to cast my lot with those
who age after age, perversely,

with no extraordinary power,
reconstitute the world.

('Natural Resources' 1977 EDADE p.264)

Rich equates such female heroism with nature. the voices of the dead 'urging on our works/...to help the earth deliver' ('Natural Resources'). Again and again her work imagines landscape as female, and imagines women drawing inspiration from its power and strength, its ability to survive: the 'great canyon', 'the female core of a continent' in ('Turning the Wheel', 1981 EDADE p.310.) An important image for female power is the volcano. 'This is the law of volcanoes, making them eternally and visibly female' (Twenty-One Love Poems, 1978, EDADE p.241).

Unlike Atwood or Plath, Rich believes that nature and culture, intuition and reason, are not mutually exclusive. She desires both:

I refuse these givens, the splitting
between love and action I am choosing
not to suffer uselessly and not to use her
I choose to love this time for once
with all my intelligence
('Splittings' 1974 FOADE p.229)

For Rich the challenge is exactly this resolution of interior
and cultural conflict, into a wholeness of selfhood which can
embrace opposing 'givens' and reconcile them. As this poem
suggests, achieving it involves a massive effort, a shift in
consciousness. The effort is to be 'intelligent': an affirmation of
the cerebral which harks back to Rich's early academic roots. Yet
this intelligence becomes fused with the intuitive, emotional
desire 'not to suffer uselessly', in order to create a new
awareness of the self and its capacity to love.

Though Rich's work imagines a breakthrough into wholeness of
consciousness as the culmination of struggle, she also frequently
imagines interim processes of 'splitting' in female identity.
These images of suffering, pain, vulnerability distinguish the
female from the male. While the female is the 'burning core', or
'fissure' and 'rock erosions' ('Turning the Wheel'), the male is
described in images of urban landscapes which are in contrast
inflexible, monolithic, non-fertile and oppressive. His failure is
often characterised by his inability to split open and make new
from himself:

The prince of air and darkness
computing body counts, masturbating
in the factory of facts
('The Phenomenology of Anger', 1972, FOADE p.166)
Despite the strength and conviction of the imagery, I find it rather disquieting that it is so wholly envisages the female in terms of 'natural' landscape and the male in terms of the urban or technological.

Rich's female figures and alter-egos are drawn from a specific range. They are architects, writers, poets, climbers, witches, midwives, explorers, painters, or the partners of creative men. Though they widen possibilities for female experience, they also play down, by virtue of their very womanliness, areas of gender ambiguity where masculinity and femininity might interconnect. Rather than explore what might seem to be 'masculine' aspects of the female psyche Rich appears to focus on comforting, maternal elements.

Plath's work wrestled with the uncomfortable 'masculine' aspects of the self, designated rather negatively as arrogance, rage and jealousy, and more positively as ambition, determination, and pride. Her poetry struggled to understand their disturbing effects upon a 'feminine' self-image. Though the 'script' of male/female characteristics was already equally firmly set out, Plath's breadth of engagement tackled the masculine; Rich's work simply ignores it.

Rich's horizons are far less restricted than Plath's by social constraints of what constitutes a 'feminine' woman, but her radical feminist discourse puts different constraints on self-exploration, simply by excluding what could be called the 'masculine' element in women from serious consideration. Suzanne Juhasz wrote in 1976 of the 'split' women poets experience, being both 'supra-feminine' and 'quasi-masculine'. She saw feminism's task as the resolution of this contradictory subject-position and the creation of an integrated self, where 'woman is a function of poet, poet a function of woman'. Juhasz's work articulated a key direction for feminist and women-oriented poetry, and both Atwood
and Rich provide vivid examples of its practice in their work. The body becomes the focus for the meshing of traditional biological assumptions with new, seemingly radical concepts of female creativity. But in attempting to deal with the 'split' in this way, the poets also attempt to contain and control, to effect closure and erase contradiction. In doing so, and in banishing the masculine, they re-appropriate, and partially accept, much of the vocabulary of femininity.

Elizabeth Wilson, lesbian herself, expresses unease about Rich's ideal of 'the power of woman-bonding', finding it 'too maternal, too suffocating'; 'I always wanted my lover to be other, not like me. I did not want to be...drowned in the great tide of womanliness'. (6) Having stated a personal preference and personal agenda, she goes on to explore what she calls 'the outlaw lesbian', a figure not conforming to the essentialism Rich adopts when writing of the female body and desire. She states:

Far from securing gender and womanliness, the outlaw lesbian destabilises male and female...For to insist on lesbianism as a challenge to stereotypes of gender is ultimately more political than the political importance so far given it in practice by feminists...We must continue to insist on the complexity of sexuality and sexual identity. (7)

Though Elizabeth Wilson does not say so here, it is undeniable that the outlaw lesbian, perhaps dressed in ambiguous clothes such as motorcycle leathers or overalls, appears as working-class (suggesting a class, as well as a sexuality, not traditionally expected as that of the poet). Cora Kaplan(8) points out that 'true womanhood', and concepts of refined femininity, are rooted in upper and middle-class discourse. It seems inescapable that Rich's constructions of female subjectivity carry class implications.
While her work celebrates a particular construction of femininity, the subjectivity of the outlaw lesbian, butch, defiant, emerges only on the margins as a kind of present absence, a troubling, disruptive, non-educated antagonist. The question of cross-dressing or adoption of masculine attributes (which is an issue for lesbian identity) is not addressed by Rich. Instead the maternal, nurturing characteristics of the lesbian continuum, and woman-bonding, are paramount. Rich's work deliberately seeks to erase the barriers between lesbian and non-lesbian women:

If we consider the possibility that all women - from the infant suckling her mother's breast, to the grown woman experiencing orgasmic sensations while suckling her own child... exist on a lesbian continuum, we can see ourselves moving in and out of this continuum, whether we identify ourselves as lesbian or not.(9)

This puts forward some radical ideas: that all female experience can be counted as lesbian, and that relationship between women is the primary but repressed truth of their lives. Yet also, as Elizabeth Wilson suggests, it desexualises lesbianism and in so doing becomes reductionist, ignoring women's diversity.(10)

Rich's strategy deliberately asserts the strength of women and of the female self; it roots them in definite difference between masculinity and femininity. She emphasises the positive attributes of traditional femininity and celebrates it where it can flourish best: in the 'separate sphere' of a female cultural ghetto. Rich's heroines move through gardens, kitchens, quiet living-rooms, studios, studies and dramatic feminised landscapes - canyons, deserts, volcanoes, mountains. In contrast those female figures who struggle in more hostile surroundings such as the dark city streets are represented as victims, 'women and children standing in line or milling/endlessly calling each others' names' ('In the Wake of
Home', 1983 FODAE p.323), suffering harrassment and rape ('Frame', 1980, FODAE p.303, 'Rape' 1972 FODAE p.172). Their strength seems feeble when confronted directly with the brutal realities of the outside world. Again a poet is creating imaginary 'female' space in which the self can explore and develop, but a dilemma follows, since such female space is marginalised, while the 'real' world appears increasingly alien and incomprehensible. It is a question raised by all the poets' work studied here; how far is the creation of imaginary female power and space a refusal to engage with oppressive 'reality'?

The helplessness of the women described contrasts with the assertion of the poet-self. Rich ponders on her country 'where poets don't go to jail for being poets, but for being/dark-skinned, female, poor' ('North American Time', 1983, FODAE p.327). In 'Frame' the poet describes an unjustified and racially-motivated arrest and concludes: 'What I am telling you/ is told by a white woman who they will say/ was never there. I say I am there.' In this way the poet-self manages to identify with the victim ('Any woman's death diminishes me', 'From an Old House in America', 1974, FODAE p.222) and yet establish distance: for the act of writing in itself confers power. Rich's work has become more self-conscious about this:

We move but our words stand
become responsible
for more than we intended

and this is verbal privilege
('North American Time' 1983)

This unease about the writer's position, and about the discrepancy between secure female space and hostile male-controlled space, raises some further questions about Rich's project of creating a
heroic female self-image. Is it, in spite of its pride and celebration, really defensive? Can it be anything other than defensive, given Rich's view that the destructive forces of society are other, are masculine? This view seems to involve a refusal to explore women's roles and responsibilities in the shaping of the world, or to countenance the question of female evil and culpability. (Exceptionally, Rich relates how Ethel Rosenberg's female relatives testified against her in 'For Ethel Rosenberg'. 1980, FODAE p.289.)

Rich aims to intervene in cultural practice in order to foster the positive elements of female identity, to provide encouraging role models. It is odd that her work assumes female input has been hitherto so ineffective, yet that it can now effect a fundamental transformation. It is as if she expresses two conflicting views of women, one of quiet passivity and another of unleashed power, and that both are slightly idealised.

This has some bearing on Rich's constructions of self-image. Dominant in them is the identity of exemplary survivor, spanning both these positions. Given the strong sense of threat aroused by the patriarchal culture to which the self unwillingly belongs, survival and even growth depend on focusing on the positive, and creating, in the process, a careful, deliberate, blueprint for identity.

An example of such selective presentation emerges from Rich's choice or rejection of poems in her two volumes of collected work (Poems Selected and New, 1974, and The Fact of a Doorframe, 1984). The poem 'Wister' (1965), never included in a contemporary collection, appeared in 1974, but was omitted in 1984. In it the poet likens herself, in her misery, to 'a beast or a tuber', the equivalent of a female monster from The Faerie Queene or a 'bleakly leaden' hyacinth bulb. It articulates a state of passive misery, of
self-disgust and stupor, and expresses feelings of failure at achieving no more than this vegetal female existence.

The 1984 collection retains only one poem which strikes a similar note of passivity and self-hatred: 'Moth Hour' (1965, p. 74) from Necessities of Life (1966):

I am gliding backward away from those who knew me
as the moon grows thinner and finally shuts its lantern.
I can be replaced a thousand times,
a box containing death.
When you put out your hand to touch me
you are already reaching toward an empty space.

This strikes an interesting dissonant chord among the other, more positive and celebratory poems. But many more earlier poems do fall by the wayside in The Fact of a Doorframe. (11) This indicates Rich's shaping of her own identity and directions, her projecting the self as survivor and heroine. Like Atwood, she seeks not to emerge as another mad, despairing female poet. Instead she wants to be seen as a triumphant woman on a political march:

I walk Third Avenue
bare-armed with flowing hair.

('The Days: Spring', uncollected in PSAK p. 137)

She is 'a woman in the prime of life', someone 'sworn to lucidity/who sees through the mayhem' ('I Dream I'm the Death of Orpheus', 1958 FOADF p. 120). To achieve such power she must renounce past indecision and weakness:

I can see myself years back...

Well, that's finished. The woman who cherished her suffering is dead. I am her descendant,
I love the scar tissue she handed on to me,
but I want to go on from here with you
fighting the temptation to make a career of pain.

('Twenty-One Love Poems' VIII, 1974-76, FOADF p.240)

That Rich's courageous, heroic stance is profoundly compelling and empowering can be seen in Nancy Milford's response. She writes:

I want a heroine. A woman who will stand her ground... she who touches and wrests from her own unconscious its secret and lavish fruits and brings them to us ripe is heroic. And we have great need of her. (12)

Milford's fantasy, 'dreaming of the person within the poem', meshes Rich the heroine with images of mother and lover, too:

she walking toward me, naked, swaying, bending down, her dark long hair falling...like heavy cloth shielding my face and her own, her full breasts brushing my cheek, moving towards my mouth...That is the potency of her poetry: it infuses dreams...forges an alliance between poet and reader. The power of her woman's voice crying out I am: surviving, sustaining, continuing and making whole. (13)

Rich's heroic stance becomes even more remarkable when it is remembered that she has suffered from rheumatoid arthritis since 1950. Writing of her editorship, with Michelle Cliff, of the lesbian journal Sinister Wisdom between 1981 and 1983 she described the escalation of her illness during that period:

Within two and a half years I had orthopaedic surgery twice, and began learning both to live in a new relationship to disability, and to meet pain and attrition and a wide variety of healing approaches; finally, to stabilize my health. During
much of the time... I have been slowed down by physical pain and its impact on the spirit. (14)

She seldom mentions this condition in her poetry (though the excerpt from 'Twenty-one Love Poems', quoted above, may refer to physical 'suffering' as much as emotional). One poem stands out, however: in 'Transit', 1979, (FOADF p.283) the narrator meets a skier, and the contrast between this fit woman with her 'fifty-year-old, strong, impatient body' and the self, who halts on the path, emphasises both the chasm and the affinity between them. The moment of 'transit', where the skier passes the self 'as I shall never pass her/in this life', is charged with significance. Is the skier 'she, who I might have been', an alter ego, the self's healthy ghost? The poet asks who haunts whom, 'or is it I who do the haunting'. She forces the skier, as she gathers speed, to 'recognise' the other, perhaps with implications of guilt or obligation. It is a mysterious poem, evoking a split subjectivity. On one level it expresses loss: the memories evoked, of climbing high into 'giddy air/like dreams of flying' jar with the self's present incapacity and description of herself as 'cripple'. On another level the self imagines herself into the skier's 'free-swinging' existence, identifying with her freedom and strength, so there is affirmation, too. If not different constructions of the self, they are at least 'sisters' ('when sisters separate they haunt each other') and the poem moves on from the purely individual to consider the issue of achieving comprehension between women living vastly different lives: 'I look into her face/wondering what we have in common/where our minds converge'.

It is significant that Rich's poetry deals so slightly with her arthritis. Her prose is slightly more explicit, but very casual: writing of her first pregnancy and then sterilization after her third child, she mentions the illness in passing - 'my body, despite recurrent flares of arthritis, was a healthy one' (Of Woman Born, 1976, p.29). Rich's poetry displays little or none of Plath's or Sexton's curiosity and fascination for her own female body or
normal biological functions, like menstruation, or abnormalities and illnesses.

For Rich it is the self's 'intelligence', the power of the mind, which appears as truly heroic: she is silent concerning the heroic body (unless idealised as the child-bearing, maternal body). Rich describes the self in terms of the central, powerful, controlling consciousness. She ascribes, however, great importance to the female body and the issue of who controls it:

The repossession by women of our bodies will bring far more essential change to human society than the seizing of the means of production by workers.

(Of Woman Born, p. 285).

I see Rich's assertion of self - as Nancy Milford put it, Rich's 'crying out I am' - as a reworking of Romantic subjectivity in the cause of feminism. One of Rich's most characteristic poems about discovery of the self as lover, feminist, poet, is written within the Romantic mode. In 'Transcendental Etude' (1977, FOADF, p.264) the self is 'poised at the moment of change, at the experiences of both loss and self-discovery', (15) rather like Wordsworth's persona in The Prelude.

Rich's method is recognisably Romantic: to reveal the mystery and 'truth' at 'the intense and visionary core of subjective experience'. (16) Like the Romantic poets she celebrates the autonomy of the self and its close association with nature. In this instance the alien world is that of patriarchy, while nature is a mirror for female creative power.
Margaret Homans makes some relevant points about Rich's poetics in the final chapter, 'The Feminine Tradition' of her book *Women, Writers and Poetic Identity* (Princeton, 1980). Margaret Homans, however, suggests that the women's movement's attempt to create a female culture, in Rich's case through expressing female 'truths', is based upon a concept of literality which denies poetry its power, denies the very fictiveness of language. The difficulty of reconciling the didactic with the poetic is of course not unnoticed in Rich. As her poetry became increasingly urgent in its politics, critics responded in varying degrees of harshness: Robert Boyars accused her of falling 'prey to ideological fashions...so that, though she is too intelligent ever to mouth petty slogans, she allows herself to be violated by them' (a significantly sexual phrasing!) and becoming 'charged...with the nauseous propaganda of the advance-guard cultural radicals'. (17)

Helen Vendler sees Rich as a 'stern, even grim ringmaster to [her] poems; and the hoops, once aligned at the beginning, remain in place in the poem for all the subsequent jumps.' She goes on to describe Rich's vocation as that of 'obsessed preacher', and accepts that 'the compulsion is real; but not everyone wants to be told a single mandatory way to grace. Inner lights differ, after all'. (18)

Margaret Homans writes that such a belief in poetry's capacity for the duplication of experience fosters a feminine self...paradoxically more egotistical than the masculine paradigms from which the self wants to be free. (19)

Rich's self-confident, autonomous subjectivity seems achieved by an erasure of contradiction and complexity, a jettisoning of uncertainties in order that sureness of purpose can be set out. It
ignores an issue remarked by Michele Barrett: 'the extent to which
women's consciousness is formed in conditions of subordination and
oppression. No act of will can wish away 'reactionary' sources of
pleasure.' (20) Rich's strong female 'I' is achieved at the cost of
ignoring any threat to that strength, rather than exploring and
coming to terms with it.

While Atwood, Plath and Sexton all struggle with the disturbing
elements of dualism, unsure of where they stood between nature and
culture, intuition and reason, masculine and feminine, subject and
object - that 'violent duality' as Sherrill Grace described it (21)
- Rich's work implies that dualism is destructive per se and
concentrates all its energies on the wholly 'female'. Though on
one hand this stands as a radical, daring rejection of tradition,
on the other it appears that an underlying traditional structure
does not really change: the male 'I' becomes female, and 'the
other' simply changes into the masculine - the other in traditional
poetry constituting the disturbing and shadowy, in feminist poetry
the threatening masculine.

Two antagonistic elements emerge from Rich's desire to be
inspirational. Her programmatic political stance, her rhetorical
zeal, conflict with Rich's immense sensitivity as a poet. The
didacticism is undercut by her interestingly ambiguous use of form.
She has used the Urdu ghazal form in order to explore how
'continuity and unity flow from the associations and images playing
back and forth among the couplets in any single ghazal' (Notes,
FOADEF, p.331). Her long poems, such as 'Pierrot le Fou' (1969,
FOADEF, p.123) and 'Shooting Script' (1971, FOADEF, p.137) explore a
sequence of juxtaposed, filmic images, so that 'the sensibility can
act and make connections' (22) through associational, rather than
discursive means. Helen Vendler has admired Rich's later use of
line-form, which she sees as closer 'to the older English
alliterative line ... than the old seamless ... pentameter.' This
line, with its gaps and halts, suggests to Vendler 'an
interesting intellectual process different from her productions of intransigent diction' (23) - a process of fluid and energetic thought, suggesting the difficulties and ambiguities of speech, rather than its transparency (an example being the poem 'Merely to Know', 1959).

Such aspects of Rich's poetry co-exist with the numerous heroic statements and assertions - 'I stand convicted by all my convictions' ('Hunger', 1974-5); 'I believe I am choosing something new/not to suffer uselessly yet still to feel' ('Splittings', 1974); 'I suddenly see the world/as no longer viable' ('The Phenomenology of Anger', 1972). Her project is to redress injustice through speaking the 'truth'; to assert, as in 'Frame', 1980, 'I say I was there.' And yet Rich writes that 'to think like a woman' means

listening and watching...for the silences,
the absences, the nameless, the unspoken,
the encoded - for there we will find the true knowledge of women.

Her ambivalence emerges, however, when she goes on:

...in breaking those silences, naming our selves, uncovering the hidden...we begin
to define a reality which resonates to us. (24)

Rich's compulsion to name, to define as an assertion, a seizure of power, clashes with her poetic project 'in which connotative and symbolic meanings...prevail over denotation.' (25) This compulsion connects her firmly with the scholastic tradition, with which she has such an ambivalent relationship.

- 314 -
Naming herself as 'lesbian', the poem 'Mother-in-Law' (1980) tries to define subject-positions in an attempt to connect women distant from each other. However, 'Mother-in-Law' is not one of Rich's strongest poems, which bears out Margaret Homans' argument about the 'literal' approach to language.

Rich's politics are such that, as Homans puts it, she wants not to write 'abstract preludes to action, but poetry that takes action itself.' (26) Urgency to communicate demands the concrete image. Like Atwood, Rich is impatient with what she sees as 'the oppressor's language' ('The Burning of Paper Instead of Children', 1968, FOADE p.116). It is through the concrete, the immediate, the emotional (in Plath's phrase, 'the blood jet') that communication between women is hoped for.

Rich is not unique in her dissatisfaction with language. Alan Williamson notes poets as diverse as Robert Bly and Galway Kinnell sharing the view that

language is one of the most powerful agents of our socialization, leading us to internalize...our world's definitions, and to ignore the portions of our authentic experience, the experience of the body and the unconscious—-that do not express themselves directly in verbal terms.(27)
Conclusion

For some women writers this 'ignored' experience of the body and the unconscious, privileged by Williamson as 'authentic', has profound significance for the construction of subjectivity, since it is construed as the site of creative, maternal powers. Helene Cixous' fusion of these specific powers of the female body with the unconscious in order to envision 'feminine writing', shares, in its enthusiasm and sense of new potential, a vocabulary similar to Rich's. For Cixous the self-transforming maternal body becomes the source of a 'new, insurgent writing', of 'subversive...volcanic texts', or in Rich's words, 'a whole new poetry beginning here'.

Rich's work is too concerned with social conditions to dwell on utopias:

- this continent of changed names and mixed-up blood
- of languages tabooed
- diasporas unrecorded
- undocumented refugees
- underground railroads trails of tears

('In the Wake of Home', FOADE, 1983, p.323)

She does, however, turn away from what she sees as the monolithic detachment and objective sterility of forms of dominant discourse. Instead she looks towards new intimacy between word and referent, signified by a wish to return to the maternal body, a pre-linguistic state: 'touch knows you before language/names in the brain', for 'A conversation begins/with a lie' ("Cartographies of Silence" 1975 FOADE, p.232).

Like Atwood Rich is also concerned with the potential of creating 'new' forms of language, subversive to patriarchal forms. She wishes to root language in the tactile, the material, rather than the abstract:

- 316 -
If at the will of the poet the poem
could turn into a thing

a granite flank laid bare, a lifted head
alight with dew

If it could simply look you in the face
with naked eyeballs, not letting you turn

till you, and I who long to make this thing
were finally clarified together in its stare

('Cartographies of Silence')

Unlike Atwood, however, whose work inclines towards the Derridian concept of endlessly deferred meaning, Rich has aimed, in her earlier poetry at least, to achieve a definitive truth and clarity through language: 'I wanted to choose words that even you/would have to be changed by' ('Implosions', 1968, FOADE p.95).

In 'Divining into the Wreck' (1973, FOADE p.162) the self believes 'words are maps', but maps and compasses become useless in the oceanic, maternal depths where patriarchal language ceases to dominate. This is where the narrator-self seeks 'the thing I came for: ... the thing itself and not the myth', and where she must jettison her own intellectual baggage, approaching with only the blank pages of 'a book of myths/in which/our names do not appear', as blank as if Cixous' 'white ink' had covered them, with feminine myth as yet invisible. (2)

This is a contradictory position for Rich as a poet. On one hand she seems to remake language, emphasising all that is non-verbal and intuitive; while on the other her role is to be a speaker for other women, her task to inscribe upon the blank pages a chronicle of their struggle, to 'break the silence' or correct inaccuracies - 'False history gets made all day, any day' ('Turning the Wheel', 1981, FOADE p.306). There seems to be a process of
internal struggle between these two directions, becoming more pronounced in later poetry as Rich explores further the ambiguities of language.

In 'Cartographies of Silence' Rich considers her choices, from the 'concrete' of the 'granite flank', to the mystic, 'the pure announcements to the eye, /the visio beatifica'. Each is incomplete because they cannot encompass each other. The 'common language' is a failed dream; so, too, is elevated 'poetic language'. Rich even considers muteness as an honourable response to the alienation of imposed, artificial language: 'Silence can be a plan/rigorously executed/the blueprint to a life'. Finally, however, she decides:

what in fact I keep choosing

are these words, these whispers, these conversations from which time after time the truth breaks moist and green.

While Atwood tends to present the production of 'truth' through language as highly problematic, Rich seems far more optimistic about the powers of language (as here, where the image of 'truth' emerges privileged and romantic). Her belief in her own political position involves confidence in language's ability to change opinion, to open up new ideas. Though as a woman poet Rich sees herself very clearly as existing on the margins between the oppressor's language and the silence of the oppressed, she also sees herself as powerful, intervening to raise the collective female voice as a force to be reckoned with.

Rich's poetry is a vivid example of the pressures produced when the feminist project of speaking the 'truth' - its purpose, as Margaret Homans suggests, being 'to make poetry approximate as closely as possible a personal, spoken communication' (3) - clashes with the fictiveness of poetic language. Rich's desire to create a simple, straightforward writing which will change lives, leads her
towards a damaging literalness, particularly towards the self. Homans criticises Rich's reliance on the concrete image to produce poetry able to 'take action itself'. She argues that the image is 'both tenor and vehicle, a figure for vision and the vision itself', and that in this desire to show 'that exhortations are over and that practice has begun', an impossible conflation of word and referent, signifier and signified has occurred. (4) This surely applies to a poem such as 'Diving into the Wreck' (which yet succeeds, almost in spite of its programmatic subject, because of its fineness of poetic touch).

Rich's position as articulator of a collectivised feminist self produces another contradiction in self-image. On one level she celebrates this collectivity, using the pronoun 'we' and imagining a shared future:

we will turn
to the desert
where survival
takes naked and fiery forms
(Blood-Sister', 1973, FOADE p.204)

While Atwood's self-images experience vulnerability as shameful and weakening, protecting themselves by defensive stoicism, Rich's celebrate their wounds, believing that it is only through experiencing vulnerability, and triumphing over it, that the fruitful process of transformation becomes possible.
And I think of those lives we tried to live
in our globed helmets, self-enclosed
boils self-illuminated gliding
safe from turbulence
and how, miraculously, we failed

('The Wave', 1973)

On the other hand, however, Rich's work accepts the reality of a profound loneliness. The poems project the self as 'disloyal to civilization', an outsider, always questioning and disbelieving. Loneliness is also deeply personal. 'Twenty-One Love Poems' (1974-76) charts a love affair from beginning to end, from the joy of intimacy to the first intimation of estrangement: 'Something: a cleft of light - ?/Close between grief and anger, a space opens/where I am Adrienne alone. And growing colder.' (EOADF p.245) The sequence ends, however, with an affirmation of this 'cleft of light', a 'solitude, shared... chosen without loneliness':

I choose to be a figure in that light,
half-blotted by darkness, something moving
across that space, the color of stone
greeting the moon, yet more than stone:
a woman. I choose to walk here. And to draw this circle.

This seems a deliberate celebration (mixed with pain and regret) of the self's separateness, (celebration because so much has been risked, and salvaged, and won). It is not limited to this specific occasion:

No-one who survives to speak
new language has avoided this:
the cutting-away of an old force that held her
rooted to an old ground
the pitch of utter loneliness

- 320 -
where she herself and all creation
seem equally dispersed...

('Transcendental Etude', 1977, FOADE p.267)

Hand in hand with this comes a strong sense of self-reliance.
'Integrity' (1978) contemplates 'this forty-ninth year of my life'
and goes on:

but really I have nothing but myself
to go by; nothing
stands in the realm of pure necessity
except what my hands can hold.

(FOADE p.273)

Rich's poetry has contributed to a new discourse both within
women's writing and outside it. Based on the strong female 'I',
asserting her truth, breaking a patriarchally-imposed silence, this
'I' becomes in itself the longed-for transformation, offering both
self-discovery and social change. The authority of Rich's poetic
voice testifies to the shift of values achieved.

In exploring my doubts about the essentialism underlying the
construction of 'female' here, I have also explored doubts about
the validity of the concept of a whole, discoverable self or
subjectivity (one which can be 'recovered' through process of
transformation). I have tried to show how conflicting projects have
affected Rich's creations of self-image, and how her poems have
tried to resolve these contradictions.

Rich's work offers the clearest, most programmatic vision of
transformation from the 'ruins' of femininity to the powerful
Jerusalem of radical feminism. It is a striking transformation but
one which operates within its own self-containing boundaries of
ideological correctness. In setting out its agenda it necessarily
ignores or
erases its internal paradoxes. One of these involves its re-appropriation (without acknowledgement) of key aspects of conventional femininity. Much of the feminist 'new tradition' (itself a contradiction in terms) relies on previously-validated female roles and states of being (particularly motherhood).

Given this, I see Rich's project, of self-transformation (as the first step to 'a change of world') threatening to become self-reflexive. Self-transformation brings no further development beyond the dream of woman-bonding and female collectivity (a dream which Rich's poetry depicts, with characteristic honesty, as often elusive). Transformation becomes the feminist version of an epiphany. Rich herself seems to have realised that this 'new writing' (if not radical feminism also) has created its own rules and silences:

When my dreams showed signs
of becoming
politically correct
not unruly images
escaping beyond borders
when walking in the street I found my
themes cut out for me
knew what I would not report
for fear of enemies' usage
then I began to wonder

CHAPTER FOUR: Footnotes

Introduction


Section 1

5. R. Kiernan, American Writing since 1945, p.111.


27. A. Rich, 'When we Dead Awaken', *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*, p.44.


- 324 -

Section 2

1. E. Kalefín, Mothers and More, Boston, 1984, p.32.
11. In the 1974 collection, A Change of World had five poems included (dropped in 1984 collection); DC had seven poems included (not in 1984 collection); SOADL four poems (not in 1984), NOH had four (not in 1984), L had two poems (not in 1984), Uncollected Poems 1957-1962, had three poems not in 1984, VTC one poem not in 1984, DITY one poem not in 1984.
23. M. Homans, Woman Writers and Poetic Identity, p.64.

Conclusion

2. Note a very similar poem by Margaret Atwood, 'Descent Through the Carpet', The Circle Game, imagining a deep sea quest.
Conclusion

Rachel duPlessis(1) has argued that the conflict between the claims of the self and the claims of others forms a thematic motif in recent writing by women. Making sense of self in terms of individual desires, aspirations and needs, and still referring to social and cultural demands and expectations, has certainly been a central concern of this study. I have set out to explore patterns of negotiation undergone as a result of this tension, and to discuss the complex states of subjectivity-in-process which emerge. Self-image is the keynote: exploring constructions of the self forms the basis for this study. It is the creation and recreation of varied self-image which makes possible the construction of subjectivity. Self-images form part of the process linking the development of identity, connecting past, present and future, memory and imagination, the fantastic and the factual. Exploring self-image in poetry involves becoming aware of the elusive boundaries between the fictive and the more straightforwardly autobiographical: to realise that, to some degree, self-imagery remains autonomous. The question of degree, and the relation of self-image to social representation, must remain open in consideration of changes in the potential for female self-image between 1950 and 1980. I would agree with Graham Dawson, however, in his 'understanding of individual subjectivity as inherently social, a product of shared forms of culture',(2) and would therefore accept, tentatively, that any constructions of self-image (in poetry, or autobiography) can be used to draw conclusions about the cultural making of identities within specific historical circumstances. I have argued, for example, in this study, that female self-images in women's poetry did change, very broadly, between 1950 and 1980, becoming more confident, more consciously celebratory of their gender, and more confrontational. Yet it is equally arguable that the self-images presented by these poets have also been marked by a rising uncertainty about the implications of such emphatic selfhood, and ambivalence about changing roles and choices. Because
this study is far from representative, the four poets under scrutiny all being Western, white, and middle-class, I am wary of trying to draw definitive conclusions, but I do feel that many aspects of experience explored by these poets connect to a general contemporary trend of women's changing and developing concerns - concerns based on social, sexual, political and cultural identities - and that the processes of identification are reflexive: readers of the present and future are, and will be, as much open to influence from the attitudes and outlook of the poetry as the poets themselves have been transformed through the process of writing.

Making sense of the self in private and public terms has been affected, too, by the profound political and literary changes which swept America and Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s particularly. A key facet of the New Left's dynamic appropriation of the civil rights campaigns was its commitment to the importance of individuality. (3) The 1960s, termed 'the me decade', celebrated the revolutionary potential of the self in its varied sexual, social and creative guises. Sexual self-expression and sexual 'liberation' were experienced initially as progress for radical women, but women's disillusion with male exploitation of new sexual 'freedoms' formed a major impetus for the re-emergence of a feminist movement. (4) Out of this newly-'permissive' period, in fact, came a freshly-articulated anger against forces of masculinity in many forms - whether as war industry, multi-national business, or individual sexuality. Certainly the masculine became a newly-potent focus for fear, fascination and rejection, in women's writing: Plath's highly influential work re-negotiated the self from a role as handmaid to a powerful male, to that of furious avenger. As a culmination of this, Rich's work tends now to ignore the masculine entirely, except as an absent presence, a sense of threat, relevant to the female only in relation to its capacity to harm and destroy. Certainly, in contrast to Plath, Rich's work makes the assertion completely clear that the poet is handmaid only to her own work, her own craft and beliefs.
In poetry, the social themes of the 1940s and the formal, academic, detached work of the 1950s gave way in America to writing which was far more frankly autobiographical, and which set the 'self' firmly under scrutiny. (5) As Jerome Mazzaro (6) argues, a decisive turning-point occurred with the waning of Auden's influence, (and his 'industrial imagination') in the 1950s for the emergence of Lowell as the new figure-head with his far more private and introspective work.

The emerging emphasis on the validity of the personal, connecting with the contemporary 'renaissance' of Black writing, (7) revolutionary poetry, women's writing, and feminism's insistence that 'the personal is political', gave women poets impetus to celebrate the self and the 'personal' sphere, which had been dismissed and trivialised earlier.

An example of this process can be seen in Adrienne Rich's transition from traditional, quasi-'male' poetic forms to a gradually more urgent exploration of self and self's place, as female, in history and culture, through the 1960s.

Together with a greater awareness of the political ramifications of 'self', has emerged a self-conscious acceptance of the vital importance of language to explore selfhood, and an agreement, with Foucault, that language is not set apart from historical and social frames of reference but, on the contrary, 'writing is the activation of a multiplicity of forces and that the text is where the struggle among these forces takes place'. (8)

In the context of this study, these forces could be said to include a growing dissatisfaction with the feminine role, and the enjoyment of an increasing amount of freedom in which to challenge roles and identities. Language becomes increasingly politicised and has had far-reaching implications for writing by women as they have gathered power and confidence.

The controlled, controlling language of authority - ungendered, because assuming the generic 'he' without question gave way to a writing
which was much more open, and subjective, within which male writers explored their repressed, 'feminine' elements. (9) 'Women's writing' emerged as a definite, gender-specific production of meaning. Poems by women, according to David Brooks, seemed

more eccentric and disjunctive in style,
less concerned to elaborate a distinct narrative or discursive line than to present the gestalt of an experience or emotion in images. (10)

The women poets of this study have explored strategies for articulating experience which pre-figure Julia Kristeva in the cases of Plath and Sexton, and connect with her theories, in the cases of Atwood and Rich, suggesting there is an ongoing, multi-layered fascination with the potentialities of language as used by marginal or semi-silenced groups such as women.

Kristeva's 'semiotic' language, with its emphasis on the disruptive element, the jagged and tangential, has strongly set its place with that of the dispossessed. Atwood's poetic project has been strikingly reminiscent of Kristeva's theoretical stance: her work has sought to break through, to make meaningless, the patriarchal symbolic order. Its strengths have been matched by weaknesses shared with Kristeva's theory, however - the lack of any materialist base which might offer a negotiable alternative to the symbolic order, and a concomitant romanticising of the 'marginal' female outsider as an artist.

It is in celebrating such 'semiotic' language as being intrinsically feminine, and celebrating such 'alternative' femininity, that the promise is lost. Kristeva's work states after all that the semiotic is not inherently feminine: if the semiotic is a function of language itself, then it lies open to be used by either gender. If women have been drawn to the semiotic, David Brooks argues,
It may simply be because those who are long denied a voice become, ultimately, the repository not only of all that is not allowed to be voiced, but of all proscribed ways of saying. (11)

Ironically, perhaps, Plath's and Sexton's work shows a clearer, more acute sense of the truth of this than Atwood's writing, putting forward as it does a dream of an idealised 'post-feminist' femininity.

Each poet has emerged from a unique set of life circumstances and has therefore used different strategies in writing. However, the issue of sexuality is fundamental to all four. I have concentrated on the two discourses of femininity and feminism, through which female sexuality in the poetry has been mainly articulated. Though embracing broadly different aspects - femininity concerning a 'being-for-others', an acceptance of heterosexuality and the family's monogamous social authority, feminism asserting a 'being-for-oneself', and a re-negotiating of social and sexual givens - I have stressed what I see to be the symbiotic relationship between the two, resting importantly on each's emphasis on sexuality as a central controlling factor in female existence and consciousness.

An equally important connection has emerged between class positions and subjectivity. Plath's early self-images of princess and 'golden girl', staunchly middle-class, (and socially aspirational) found the overbearing masculinity of the 'dark man', the 'miner's boy' as threateningly attractive for its forbidden proletarian undertones as for its sexuality. There remains a sense in Plath's work in which masculinity remains 'other' on a class basis: locus for a complex fascination/dissatisfaction because of its grossness, its sensuous link with the material. For Sexton, middle-class identity appears to bring a 'moral' stamp of approval, but this synthetic identity soon emerges as a hollow dream. Middle-class identity, for Sexton, becomes as frustrating as for Plath. The 'fairy-tale' personae of Transformations may seek an escape from its limitations.
Atwood’s subjectivity appears at first to be classless, totally adrift in the alienated city, lacking the support (and rigid constraints) of intimate family class structures. Atwood’s work posits the male as the dominant class, however, with the female as the underclass: economic and social power are ellided within the signifier of gender.

Rich’s self-images and role models are strongly female-identified, seeking to expand the ‘lesbian continuum’. As argued earlier, her figures are strikingly recognizable as middle-class; they are educated and artistic, not the ‘butch cutlaw’ lesbian figure described by Elizabeth Wilson, with her connotations of working-classness.

A further common theme in all four poets’ work is a fascination with the female body. As John Berger remarks,

Men look at women. Women watch themselves
being looked at ... The surveyor of women
in herself is male: the surveyed, female. (12)

The body, in its most contradictory guise, becomes all-important to identity. It is the affirmation of one’s sexual being: it is inhabited by the female self, and desired by the observer-self, the poet; it constitutes a process of objectification, of self-exploitation: it offers promise of mysteries and uncharted inner space, out of reach of a defining gaze. Out of the confusing welter of signals and information raining down as the female body becomes increasingly scrutinised, defined and packaged, the self must come to terms with the crucial role the body-as-sign has to play in the construction of identity, for

The definitions addressed to ... women’s bodies
become women’s own language ... We come to speak
the words that are written on our body. (13)

There is a constant struggle to revise, not merely reaffirm, these cultural definitions by the poets. In the 1950s when the topic of the intimate workings of the female body was virtually taboo, Plath’s ardent
love poems attempted to articulate pleasure and desire (despite this, her work symbolised female sexuality as a 'wound' or 'scar'). Sexton's poems deliberately test the limits of taboo in relation to the female body, though her work negotiates a razor-fine edge between self-exploration and self-exploitation, celebration and self-hatred. Atwood's poems articulate a deep sense of unease in relation to the female body, seeing it as frighteningly vulnerable to masculine assault.

Rich's treatment of the female body is contradictory, articulating women's ambivalence. She speaks of women as being 'lashed to their bodies',(14) yet imagines the heroic body bringing female freedoms.(15)

For each of these poets it is the maternal body which is the most poignant and resonant image. It carries the fantasy of unlimited love and nurture: its physical creativity becomes a compelling metaphor for literary creativity. Images of the body as sexual, involved in intimacy with another, do not form a large part of Rich's considerable poetic output. One may suspect it is because through the assertion that women were not innately or excessively sexual, that on the contrary their 'feelings' were largely filial and maternal, the imputation of a degraded subjectivity could be resisted.(16)

Is it, in other words, that Rich's work, consciously or otherwise, seeks acceptance at the highest level by sacrificing less highly validated imagery for that of socially-acceptable motherhood?

Yet the closeness and intimacy experienced in the fantasy of the maternal body also give rise to an opposing claustrophobia and loss of identity. Both Plath and Sexton describe their terror of the 'devouring' mother, and Plath's 'Poem For a Birthday' focuses on the terrifying unconscious experiences of pregnancy where the maternal body is felt to be both eating and being eaten. There emerges a definite lesbian sub-text in all these poets' work on the body. Sexton's poems explore most...
vividly the subversive desires of the polymorphously perverse infant suckling at the breast, and her work explores these desires in relation to adult feminine sexuality. There is a compelling link between Sexton's love poems to the mothering body and Rich's later contention that since the mother is the primary love object all women harbour elements of lesbian desire, even if heterosexual.

Plath's early poems, and her 1962 novel *The Bell Jar*, show a fascination with lesbianism, and Atwood's work establishes a powerful emotional connection between women, against whom men constitute a threat.

For all the poets the female body appears to work as a central distinguishing reality. The body becomes the means of transformations both superficially transitory and profound, but it also constitutes the 'problem', since it exists as inescapable sign or symbol, imbued with a host of cultural meanings. In turning to explore its significance, women poets may well discover that they simply objectify the self as damagingly as any aspect of the dominant culture. Unease and unresolved conflicts emerge from this new literary emphasis on gender. A common partnership of themes which seems to underlie such conflict involves self-images which confer power (the subject becomes a prophet, an avenging force, a shamaness, a seer, a midwife) and those which articulate experiences of utter powerlessness and resulting self-disgust. Both clusters of images tend to be highly exaggerated, even deliberately grotesque. Use of the Gothic is common to all four, and draws on the ambivalences experienced when the poets seek to extend the boundaries of gendered identity and to articulate self-realisation in opposition to the dominant culture. The occult, or at the very least, the anti-rationalist position opens inventive possibilities: Atwood and Plath, for example, explore the concept of the doppelgänger in ways which emphasise the darkest aspects of such a 'self-haunting'. All the poets write of the self as fragmented, violently, into mutilated hands/hearts or other body parts which challenge or accuse both their oppressors and the self. This Gothic genre draws upon emotions of entrapment, monstrosity, and self-hatred of a warped, damaged femininity.
The emergence of women's writing as a recognisable and respectable field within the period 1950-1980 (the 'new tradition'(17) embracing creative writing and criticism) has had important effects upon the range of self-images open to Margaret Atwood and Adrienne Rich. Feminist literary criticism has challenged the traditional literary canon, and drawn attention of the importance of how texts are produced, in specific circumstances, and the ways in which they are consumed.

Since the 1970s women's intervention in publishing has grown, with the re-emergence of feminist and women-only publishing houses. Women's poetry has become widely popular, and contemporary poets such as Rich and Atwood attract large audiences to readings: they have something of a celebrity status. The flowering of a 'community' spirit among women's writing has provided support and encouragement for a specifically female-oriented creativity. This contrasts sharply with the isolation experienced by Plath. The figure of Plath herself, and her work, became distorted by the 'Plath myth' which emerged in the 1960s after her death. For a time this mythic representation seemed to encapsulate a typically 'feminine' creativity, setting the limits for what appeared to be achievable in women's writing. Plath's mythic ghost can still be seen to haunt many contemporary women poets, including Atwood and Rich. How was the myth constructed? The Ariel collection which first made Plath's name when it was published posthumously by Ted Hughes (with Faber) in 1965, was not Plath's own originally-intended collection completed at the time of her death. It was not until 1981 that Hughes gave the original list of Plath's Ariel in a brief note at the back of his edition of the Collected Poems, without comment on why he had altered the original so radically.(18)

When one compares this list with the Faber volume the differences are evident immediately. Four very angry and critical poems ('The Jailer', 'The Detective', 'The Rabbit Catcher' and 'Purdah') attacking masculine dominance, have been excised. In all Hughes replaced 13 of Plath's choice with 13 poems of his own selection, changing the tone, the
thematic connections and most of all, the note on which the book ends.(19)

Plath's own Ariel ends with her sequence of bee poems. Hughes notes that Plath arranged her Ariel poems 'in a careful sequence', pointing out to him that 'it began with the word "love" and ended with the word "spring"'.(20) The strong, life-asserting final poem would have concluded the book thus:

What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
The bees are flying. They taste the spring.

In contrast Hughes ends his version with the poem on suicide, 'Edge', concluding:

The moon has nothing to be sad about.
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.

This served to focus on Plath's own death, encouraging a voyeurism which distorted and denied Plath's original theme for Ariel. This fell in with the prevailing atmosphere in the 1960s of fascination with (particularly female) breakdown and madness. Hughes' descriptions of Plath's creativity emphasised such neurotic intensity: her work underwent a process of alchemical 'inner transformation' through which, with the intensity of 'Islamic fanatic lovers of God'(21) she attained some kind of mystical perfection. Others followed Hughes' lead, Alvarez calling Plath a 'priestess',(22) Lowell a 'goddess'.(23) By mythologising Plath's life and work her poetry's threatening and provocative elements could be contained, and Plath's material circumstances could also be ignored. Plath herself became a doll-fetish, a warning and a lure to others, doomed and glamorous. The Plath myth has made it difficult to come to the work unaffected.(24) Feminist critics have broken the spell, coming to see the myth as ideological, the 'life' presented as an
artefact. The powerfully-asserted call of 'life' and 'spring'
mysteriously changed into the 'death cult' of the Plath myth.

In contrast, Adrienne Rich's poet-persona appears to be fully
controlled by her own wishes. She has had complete control over the
selection of her many collections and two volumes of poems 'selected and
new'. The publishing houses now give sympathetic hearing to feminist
voices, since these sell well.

However, it is worth remembering how Rich's literary career began,
with Auden's condescending evaluation of her poems as 'modest' and
'discretely dressed' in 1951 (an interesting conflation of poem with
poet's sexual and social demeanour).(25)

Rich's work changed in the '60s and '70s, becoming more
confrontational, and traditional criticism took her to task for using
four-letter words and losing 'grace' and charm. Supported by the
feminist and lesbian movements, however, Rich continued to experiment
and to develop. Rich's work has enjoyed a committed and responsive
readership which, though predominantly lesbian and feminist, also
includes mainstream and academic readers. (One of the major challenges
feminist publishing has raised has been to the distinction between 'high'
and 'popular' culture. Women's writing has tended to bridge both, and in
doing so constitute challenges to established meaning.)(26)

The 'Plath myth' distorted Plath's work for subsequent readers and
highlighted a damaging and trivialising stereotype of female creativity.
In opposition, Rich's life and her work seeks to present a strong,
surviving, heroic female figure who stands up against oppression and
intervenes in political causes: an empowering role model for other
women.

There are difficulties in this position, however. Rich's work, and
the images of self projected, show a tension emerging between the effort
to reconcile poetic 'realism' with the intrinsic fictiveness of poetic
language. Rich's project is clearly stated: she wants to expose
injustice and oppression. To do this her method is to 'flatten out' the abstract into the concrete (for example, in 'The Days: Spring' she writes, 'The stars come out like facts'). Rich's language is complex; but she follows a direction separate from that of the semiotic when her work seeks to articulate the 'real', uncovering the silenced truth of women's experience. In its urgency this must involve language becoming to some extent transparent, unmediated. As Margaret Homans argues, this drive towards revelation of 'truths' (as exemplified by the title of the feminist anthology, No More 'Masked!) leads towards a denial of the fictiveness of writing, and can point backwards towards self-objectification. Homans feels that knowledge of language's fictiveness, the origins of masks, can mediate between a woman poet and the cultural dictate that women are objects. I think this is a legitimate anxiety for some aspects of feminist writing — that in its urgency to expose and revise, creativity becomes conflated with crude autobiography, and complexities of meaning are lost.

Partly to blame must be feminism's inability to theorise ideology in its varied complexities: Kate Millett's Sexual Politics saw sexual ideology as simply a set of false beliefs fostered by a male conspiracy. Cora Kaplan argued( and Gilbert and Gubar's Madwoman in the Attic pitted the 'truth' of femaleness against ideology. (29)

Rich's work, and self-presentation as woman poet, shows the strains invoked by ideological pressures quite different from those felt by Plath, but perhaps equally disturbing. As Jill Matthews points out, (30) it has only been in the last 20 years that the popular ideology of femininity (with its emphasis on duty, heterosexuality and marriage as the only proper expressions of female sexuality) has been replaced by one which focuses on 'permissive consumerism', based on the belief that self-fulfilment can be obtained in the market-place. The dynamics and development of late (20th Century) capitalism, in encouraging such rampant individualism, has allowed female sexuality to emerge as a site of struggle, and indirectly aided the development of contemporary feminism.
The desired transformation of the self is a powerful linking theme throughout this study. It covers a spectrum from profound, spiritual change to the rather tainted transformation of advertising discourse to produce the superficial 'new you'. Transformation, even given the greater licence of the '60s and '70s, remains somewhat limited, and 'selfhood' still remains a highly problematic concept for women's writing. Feminism's key precept, that the 'personal is political', has struck at the root of the separation and isolation experienced by femininity, and asserted women's right to a collective identity, as a first step towards social change. Yet, paradoxically, as Jill Matthews makes clear, feminism is intimately bound up with prevailing desires for individuality and self-fulfilment. This contradiction emerges as a source of tension in both Atwood's and Rich's work, where the boundaries between self and society are continually renegotiated.
For all its constraints, femininity as a discourse (seen in the light of the 50s as progressive, and reclaimed by some feminists in the 70s as a radical rejection of a malign status quo) has provided potentially important sources for self-image. It encouraged a self-consciousness to emerge which contributed to a creation of more gender-specific perspectives; yet it also provided a valorizing social 'stamp' of identity within which a range of roles could be relatively securely explored. (Though these roles were limiting it is arguable that they were no more so than those of other discourses subsequently explored by women.) That the 'feminine' roles of mother, homemaker and lover were seen to be profoundly satisfying, on some levels at least, by the poets studied here, does not deny their structurally oppressive bases. The 'fantasy' of femininity proved alluring to both Plath and Sexton's work.

Most importantly, 50s femininity made necessary a whole series of cultural negotiations and process of newly-illuminated female subject positions. It is this sense of negotiation and challenge which contributes to Plath's and Sexton's interrogative poetry.

Contemporary radical feminism's reappropriation of femininity has emphasised its intrinsic separation from masculinity and sought to recreate it from within its own terms. Initially this pre-patriarchal, female-centred culture seemed to offer new directions for women's writing. However this turning away from dealing with the masculine has tended to limit strategies; underlying the exultant self-enablement of Rich can be sensed a dislocation, and alienation, as Atwood's poetry explores, of a subjectivity locked in a vacuum, in a hostile stalemate with the nightmare enemy, the masculine.

This study has explored what it sees to be a distinctive trend from the 50s onwards: intensifying fascination with construction of oppositions, specifically increasingly antagonistic polarizations between masculinity and femininity. I have noted a refusal to explore meeting-
points between these constructions of gender, and to discuss gender as a
relational, positional process, involving possibilities for merging and
assimilation as well as separation and differentiation.

While not denying that there is much to be critical of in what is
culturally deemed 'masculine', it may be possible that the tendency to
create increasingly hostile, static gender identities works against
women's creative practice. I look towards a theory of gender which
allows for difference (not subsuming the 'feminine' into the
'masculine') as a creative rather than destructive process, refusing to
accept the idea of gender distinctions as being mutually exclusive, but
the potentialities of both being open to all. This of course depends on
new definitions being provided for both 'masculinity' and 'femininity'.

- 341 -
CONCLUSION: Footnotes


9. The 'best' poets, for example.


17. Suzanne Juhasz, *Naked and Fiery Forms*.


19. I added up the poems deducted and replaced, using Hughes' Index and Concordance in the *Collected Poems*.


He adds that the last poems of the 1965 *Ariel* she regarded as being 'different', more suitable for a 'third book'. It is important to note how fragmented the body of work extant has now become: in Marjorie Perloff's opinion 'the state of the poems is surely one of the [greatest] scandals of recent publishing history.' Quoted by Mary Lynn Erle, *Protest Poetic: the Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Univ. of Missouri Press, 1980, p.8. The 1981 edition has not radically improved or repaired this situation.


24. The initial feminist 'backlash' to the Plath myth, principally involving Robin Korgin's poem, 'J' Accuse' (accusing Hughes of Plath's murder) did not help to achieve clarity of vision either.


26. Plath published work in women's magazines and wrote a children's book; Atwood's work shows a strong interest in Gothic/romantic fiction; Sexton's work was influenced by fairytales; Rich's political poems sought to be as accessible as 'leaflets', the title of a collection. (Probably the overall majority of 'high' or serious women writers this century have written for children as well.)


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V


- 364 -


