VOCIFEROUS SELF-EFFACEMENT:

PARADOXICAL POWERS IN THE WRITING OF VIRGINIA WOOLF, SYLVIA PLATH AND ELIZABETH JOLLEY

F.A. PLUNKETT

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I.

very
Whitely, discreetly,
Very quietly

Our toes, our noses
Take hold on the loam,
Acquire the air.

(Sylvia Plath, 'Mushrooms')

'Mushrooms' is a poem about finding power. Its speakers move with relentless energy towards their goal of self-aggrandisement, and announce their success in the poem's last stanza:

We shall by morning
Inherit the earth.
Our foot's in the door.

Yet these resolute and triumphant seekers of power are a clump of mushrooms. Plath's allusion in the last stanza to the 'Beatitudes' highlights her interest in the paradox: the meek are the designated inheritors of the earth. These mushrooms are meeker than meek: insisting upon their own powerlessness. Their determined encroachment is belied by their self-description: they call themselves white, discreet, quiet, 'small, 'soft', 'earless', 'eyeless', 'perfectly voiceless', 'bland-mannered', 'meek', and 'edible'. 'We are shelves, we are tables, we are meek, we are edible' they cry as they proceed with their calculated process of attrition and intensification to wrest control of the world. There are two impulses in the poem, aggrandisement and diminution, focused through the tension between how the mushrooms describe themselves, and what they are doing. The poem itself, like its eponymous narrators, is easy

enough to overlook – it's one of Plath's early 'bland-mannered' poems, with neat, technically clever five-syllable lines and an orderly development of its argument. Critics have scoffed at it. Anne Sexton saw it as Plath's attempt to 'out Roethke Roethke' while Stephen Axelrod dismisses it as transitional and derivative (of Dickinson and Bishop, as well as Roethke)[1]. Yet the theme of the poem is remarkably subversive.

Virginia Woolf would no doubt have recognised this. She describes her decision to adopt mushroom-like tactics as a means of being heard in a social situation where women were supposed to be silent, but deplores the residue of this tendency in her writing:

> the Victorian manner is – I am not sure – a disadvantage in writing. When I read my old Literary Supplement articles, I lay the blame for their suavity, their politeness, their sidelong approach, to my tea-table training. I see myself, not reviewing a book, but handing plates of buns to shy young men and asking them: do they take cream and sugar? On the other hand, the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud. [2]

Elizabeth Jolley's work contains a similar understanding of the power available by adopting the mask of acquiescence; the sidelong manner. She talks about being fascinated with the same passage in St Paul that Plath draws on for the theme of 'Mushrooms'. 'I share [St. Paul's] belief that the foolish things of the world confound the wise and the weak things confound the things which are mighty.'[3]

Woolf, Plath and Jolley are all interested in characters who acquire power through paradoxical means. Woolf's writing charts the wave

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[1] Anne Sexton, 'The Barfly Ought to Sing,' The Art Of Sylvia Plath Charles Newman, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970) 178; Stephen Gould Axelrod, Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990) 141.
[2] Virginia Woolf, 'A Sketch of the Past', Moments of Being ed. Jeanne Schulkind. (1976; London: Hogarth Press, 1985) 164. Cited in the text as MB.
[3] Elizabeth Jolley, 'Who Talks of Victory?' Meanjin, 4, 1 (1987): 4-15.

motion of depression and recuperation experienced by the sensitive. She depicts the victimization of those oppressed by powers exercised by the hegemony – Suzette A. Henke describes her protagonists as 'the young, the helpless, the visionary and the deviant'[4] – and their recovery through imaginative means. In her writing Woolf suggests that there is a variety of epiphany through which the oppressed can be empowered. Woolf's epiphanies – moments of being in which the self is revivified – have their counterpart in the sea of Nothing in which Plath's characters are washed clean of the 'dead hands, dead stringencies' of painful expectations and intolerable pressures. In each of these cases, and in Jolley's writing, imaginative powers lead to rebirth. Jolley's 'playful spinsters and exuberant lesbians' share with Woolf's 'young, helpless, visionary and deviant' characters and Plath's cast of mushrooms, magician's girls and avenging phoenixes, the ability to find power through extraordinary and paradoxical means.[5] One of Woolf's characters, Bernard in The Waves, describes the process of seeking inspiration and power through casting the imagination out into the world of debris, and transforming wreckage into the source of creative energy:

> I took my mind, my being, the old dejected, almost inanimate object, and lashed it about among these odds and ends, sticks and straws, detestable little bits of wreckage, flotsam and jetsam and I said 'Fight! Fight!'... The trees, scattered, put on order; the thick green of the leaves thinned itself into a dancing light. I netted them under with a sudden phrase. I retrieved them from formlessness with words. [6]

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[4] Suzette A. Henke, 'Mrs Dalloway: The Communion of Saints', New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf, ed. Jane Marcus (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981) 126.
[5] Elizabeth Jolley, Cabin Fever (1990; Ringwood: Penguin, 1991) 6. Cited in the text as CF.
[6] Virginia Woolf, The Waves, (1931; Oxford: World's Classics, 1992) 247. Cited in the text as W.

For all of these characters, transformation or rebirth involves new powers, including the power to communicate, volubly and forcefully. The mushrooms' cry, 'our foot's in the door', is as resolute and joyful as Bernard's words which precede his triumphant, imaginative battle against a silence and stasis he calls Death; 'Yes, this is the eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again' (W, 247). I aim in this thesis to chart this trajectory; this rise and fall and rise again of emotional and imaginative energies.

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II. VIRGINIA WOOLF

> A scene always comes to the top; arranged; representative. This confirms in me my instinctive notion – it is irrational; it will not stand argument – that we are sealed vessels afloat upon what it is convenient to call reality; at some moments, without a reason, without an effort, the sealing matter cracks; in floods reality; that is a scene.
>
> (MB, 156)

In Between the Acts, Isabella Oliver understands the message of Miss La Trobe's play as being, in part: 'Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing'.[7] Because of their prejudices as to what art is and should be, however, most characters who watch the play are incapable of realising this, and Woolf depicts the various attitudes of boredom, fear, abnegation and confusion generated by the radical play. One character, Cobbet of Cobbs Corner, standing under a monkey puzzle tree, seizes on it for expression of his confusion: 'What was in her mind, eh? What idea lay behind, eh? What made her indue the antique with this glamour – this sham lure, and set 'em climbing, climbing, climbing up the monkey puzzle tree?' (BA, 87). Like others who look for plot and a sole and ultimate explanation of the play, he is left completely baffled.

In a similar way, to read for the plot or for linear argument in most of Woolf's novels is to misunderstand the artistic philosophy behind them and find oneself, like Cobbet, endlessly climbing the monkey-puzzle tree. Woolf's writing requires a radical type of reading, just as Miss La

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[7] Virginia Woolf, Between the Acts (1941; Oxford: World's Classics, 1992) 82. Cited as BA in the text.

Trobe's play demands of its audience a fresh response which most of them cannot come up with. Instead of traditional patterns and lines, Woolf's writing tends to be based, as Jeanne Schulkind puts it, on 'intricately woven patterns constructed out of recurring rhythms, symbols, images and phrases'.[8] Moments of symbolic importance and resonant images and words are, arguably, the 'moments of being' – to use Woolf's own phrase – on which her writing is built, and it is these rather than any more worldly or traditional scheme or logic which structure it.

The idea of the wave is crucial to the structuring of Woolf's writing, and these moments of being are the crests in a pattern of crests and troughs in people's lives which her writing charts. They convey the idea of fluidity which is important to Woolf's style, and to the literary and imaginative powers she uses in her work: essentially, the sort of free and dynamic power Luce Irigaray claims as the feminine economy. Like Woolf, Irigaray charts a maritime landscape which expresses an energy that is 'continuous, compressible, dilatable, viscous, conductive, diffusible'.[9] Irigaray argues that female sexuality and the feminine economy are both defined in terms of what they are not – specifically their deficiencies in relation to a phallic ideal – and a similar comment could be made about some of the critical response to Woolf's writing. Irigaray suggests that the phallocentric culture demands the silence of the other by defining it in terms of its inadequacy in comparison to the (phallic) ideal within that culture. As she puts it: 'Must the multiple nature of female desire and language be understood as the fragmentary, scattered remains of a raped or denied sexuality?'[10] Woolf's innovative and experimental writing has suffered from just this sort of misreading – a misreading born

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[8] Jeanne Schulkind, introduction, Moments of Being, by Virginia Woolf, 77-78.
[9] Luce Irigaray, Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un (Paris: Minuit, 1977) 109.
[10] Luce Irigaray, 'Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un', trans. Claudia Reeder, New French Feminisms, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, (1980; New York: Schoken Books, 1981) 104.

of flouted expectations, and a resulting confusion which is similar to Cobbet's, when he is faced with Miss La Trobe's subversive and radical pageant.

In responding to Woolf's writing on its own terms, this idea of the crest of the wave or the significant moment is clearly crucial. Of these crests or significant moments in Woolf's writing, the most important type is similar to those for which James Joyce uses the term epiphany. In Stephen Hero, Joyce appropriates Aquinas' idea that beauty, and the epiphanic moment, is made up of integrity, symmetry and radiance – *claritas*. Joyce has Stephen struggle to interpret Aquinas' definition in a secular realm, and to conclude that *claritas* is *quidditas*, or the 'whatness' of things. Theodore Spencer's interpretation of Joyce's neoteric theory of epiphany usefully emphasises the position of the object or thing in the epiphanic moment, describing the theory as one which 'implies a lyrical rather than a dramatic view of life. It emphasises the radiance, the effulgence, of the thing itself revealed in a special moment, an unmoving moment, of time'.[11] Stephen Daedalus stresses the possible 'epiphanising' of and through the most ordinary object when he describes his idea of the new epiphany in this way:

> By an epiphany he meant a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether in the vulgarity of speech or of gesture or in a memorable phase of the mind itself. He believed it was for the man of letters to record these epiphanies with extreme care, seeing that they themselves are the most delicate and evanescent of moments. He told Cranley that the clock of the Ballast Office was capable of an epiphany... Imagine my glimpses at that clock as the gropings of a spiritual eye which seeks to adjust its vision to an exact focus. The moment the focus is reached the object is epiphanised.[12]

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[11] Theodore Spencer, 'Stephen Hero : The Unpublished Manuscript of James Joyce's Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man,' Southern Review 1 (1941): 186.
[12] James Joyce, Stephen Hero (1944; London: Jonathan Cape, 1956) 216-217.

Morris Beja in his study Epiphany in the Modern Novel scrutinises the elements of this definition, considering the suddenness, spiritual nature and the idea of manifestation Stephen alludes to as the essential traits of the modern literary epiphany.[13] For the purposes of Woolf's writing, however, a more essential point is that those moments Joyce sees not just as delicate and evanescent, but as 'the most delicate and evanescent of moments' are the moments through which Woolf's characters derive strength. As with other aspects of her writing, essential to this is the paradox that something apparently powerless – a daydream, a whim, a fantasy – is the means to power.

The idea of a moment of illumination is common to many modernist writers, as Ashton Nichols points out in his study The Poetics of Epiphany, citing the following examples compiled by M.H. Abrams: 'Proust's *moments privilégiés*, Henry James's imaginative acts which derive "revelations" from the "very pulses of the air", Conrad's "moments of vision", Woolf's "moments of vision" (sic), Thomas Wolfe's "single moment," and Faulkner's "instant of sublimation... a flash, a glare."'[14] Nichols quotes Geoffrey Hartman's suggestion that these moments have become 'almost a modern staple'.[15] But as Nichols goes on to argue, such moments also occur earlier in literature, and are crucial to Romantic poetry. Besides Wordsworth's spots of time, Nichols considers 'Coleridge's "flashes", Shelley's "best and happiest moments", Keats' "fine isolated verisimilitude", Browning's "infinite moment", Arnold's "gleaming" moments, and Tennyson's "little things... that strike on a sharper sense"' as examples of epiphanic experiences in Romantic poetry. In most of these cases the epiphanic moment is bound up with an escape –

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[13] Morris Beja, Epiphany in the Modern Novel, (London: Peter Owen, 1971).
[14] Ashton Nichols, The Poetics of Epiphany: Nineteenth Century Origins of the Modern Literary Moment, (Tuscaloosa: Alabama UP, 1987) 216.
[15] Nichols, 4.

a primitivist nostalgia for a pre-industrial rural idyll in which the individual may exist unfettered by the constraints of the 'real' world. The fact that these moments so clearly exist in Romantic poetry leads Nichols to suggest that they provide 'an important transitional device between the poems of the nineteenth century and the poems and prose of the twentieth century.'[16] Morris Beja argues along similar lines that: 'Of course, Stephen merely provides a new name for an old experience'.[17] However, the differences between Romantic and Modernist versions of the epiphany are helpful in illuminating the special concerns of the latter type.

Besides some of the obvious innovations – such as that Modernist epiphanies tend to take place in urban landscapes that are depicted as grimy and soul-destroying, and that the means to the epiphany is often something trivial and commonplace – a clock, a curtain, a fish – Modernist epiphanies are usually part of a quite different ideological scheme from the simple Romantic paradigm of escape into reverie. Woolf's versions of the epiphany, however, differ again from those of her male contemporaries in several important ways. Woolf's epiphanies are part of a complex, almost mystical scheme, and their crucial importance is as moments in which and through which her characters are empowered. Paradoxically, although Woolf's epiphanies are more clearly secular and atheistic than Joyce's, which often wrestle with Catholicism, hers mirror the Christian meaning of epiphany more closely. The biblical epiphany occurs when the three wise men see the newborn Christ in the manger, and ideas of manifestation and the leadership of the mentor or magus are important in Woolf's uses of epiphany. Often, the two elements are combined in Woolf's writing as in the biblical paradigm, when a mentor

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[16] Nichols, 5.
[17] Beja, 13.

figure – a secular goddess like Lucy Swithin, Mrs Ramsay, Miss La Trobe or Clarissa Dalloway – is involved in leading others to illumination. In this sense, Woolf's epiphanies often contrast with those of other writers in the fact that they are essentially about relationships: they are normally not anti-social (as the Romantic and Joycean versions tend to be) in the sense that their primary impulse is not the search for escape from society, but for power and temporary imaginative respite after which it will be possible to return to the company of others. Often, too, Woolf's writing describes the transmission from person to person of the illuminating imaginative skills which make epiphany possible, and depicts their filtering through a society which is antagonistic to them. Characters inspire one another, visions are shared, as the sensitive soothe and encourage one another to persist, to endure, and to fly in the face of Death 'unvanquished and unyielding' like Bernard in The Waves. Whether this is the case, and characters help each other towards the oasis of illumination, or whether the epiphany involves a more private version of the experience in solitude, Woolf extends the Romantic idea of the moment of illumination to describe moments of an illumination which leads to an increased power in dealing with the concrete world.

When critics such as Morris Beja, Robert Langbaum and Northrop Frye have examined the genesis of the literary epiphany, their crediting the Romantics, especially Wordsworth, with preceding Joyce in reviving the concept points to the fact that their emphasis has been on these writers' uses of epiphany in a spiritual and metaphysical realm as a moment of escape and illumination. Generally, these epiphanies involve men wrestling with the diminution of their power that comes with the erosion of time and the oppressions of the 'real' world. Some of the clearest examples of this are in Browning's dramatic monologues, in which Browning examines the impulse in its most extreme form,

scrutinising the minds of personae whose terror and anxiety make them dramatic examples of people who exert desperate energy trying to evade a reality that looms before them with menacing intensity.

Nichols sees epiphany leading to murder in 'Porphyria's Lover' because from the deranged perspective of the lover/narrator, a perfect romantic moment can only be preserved through stopping time. 'My Last Duchess' provides another example of a male narrator who wrests control over a potentially chaotic reality by stopping time, and again murdering – or having murdered – his wife before the epiphanic moment of their unity can be destroyed. To extend Nichols' discussion a little; obviously in each of these examples the psychological disease of the narrator renders his actions extreme, irrational and pathetic, and the poet's perspective is clearly an ironic and critical one, yet the fact remains of the desperate attempts of the personae to seize and control time, which threatens to nullify a moment in which they feel powerful and thus content. The dominant note in each case is the anxiety – even paranoia – of the narrator as he makes his leap of faith, or leap of logic. For these rather pathetic speakers, who understand and expect a certain sort of coercive, brutal power as a male prerogative and condition of masculinity, its loss or even diminution is ultimately threatening. This is especially true when it is a woman's actions which challenge this power. For Porphyria's lover, the dilemma is how to preserve a romantic moment from the corruption of a sexual relationship initiated by Porphyria which the persona both wants and wants to preclude, a moment he rhapsodises about as 'that moment she was mine, mine, fair,/Perfectly pure and good'. The Duke of Ferrara harbours the irrational fear that his wife's abundant sexuality will not be limited to the marital bed, and as a result is terrified that he will be ridiculed and disempowered. Each speaker seeks to be released from time

which he believes can only bring the destruction of a moment in which he feels at ease, powerful and in control.

For saner and less extreme narrators the dilemma is perhaps best considered in the light of Frank Kermode's analysis of Romanticism's two types of time – *chronos*, or chronological time, and *kairos*, imaginative time. Kermode's distinction leads him to the suggestive comment that it is through moments of *kairos* that there can be 'deliverance from the long meaningless attrition of time'.[18] In Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Keats, and in Joyce, there is a longing for such a redemption from time, and from the logically ordered world it governs. As Nichols puts it: 'In the new literary epiphany... kairos will defeat chronos and replace the fear of temporal physical decay with the possibility of momentary mental redemption.'[19]

Although her characters share this desire to evade the crushing inexorability of chronos, Woolf's epiphanies are about more than escape through momentary mental redemption. They are pivotal moments in a larger scheme and process, and, while they do provide the traditional illumination and escape, more importantly their role as what Wordsworth thought of as 'spots in time' is to provide a sort of oasis; a respite from an oppressive world, which furnishes those who experience it with the strength and the new perspective to deal powerfully with what has previously hampered them. For a moment the world and its objects becomes 'swollen with some astonishing significance' yet the experience is more than just this, since through it spills a soothing and uplifting rapture; a healing fluid which '[gushes] and [pours] with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores'.[20] In this sense Woolf's innovation

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[18] Frank Kermode, The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction (New York: Oxford UP, 1967) 169.
[19] Nichols, 24.
[20] Virginia Woolf, Mrs Dalloway (1925; Oxford, World's Classics, 1992) 41. Cited as MD in the text.

is to stress the moments less for their own significance than for their part in empowering those weakened by coercive or oppressive realities. Rather than aiming for escape – from time and the mundane – Woolf's epiphanies result in empowered dealings with these realms of oppression. They are not about negating the troublesome but renegotiating it. The epiphany allows Woolf's embattled characters 'to collect, to assemble, to heap together, summon [their] forces, rise and confront the enemy' (W, 244).

In this sense, they contrast with the epiphanies of Wordsworth, Browning and Joyce in their essentially political nature. Nichols' discussion of the etymology and history of the use of the term epiphany points to the fact that it is a term generally associated with the metaphysical and imaginative rather than the concrete world – though it may spring from the concrete world. Nichols argues that the secularisation of the term from the Romantics onwards follows its centrality in both Greek oral tradition and Christian mythology as a concept associated with the illumination of the divine. The Greek roots of 'epiphany': phainein (to show) and the prepositional prefix 'epi' (on, over, at, after) spawn words like fantasy, phantom and phenomenon in English, suggesting again this association of the word with the incorporeal world. Since traditional, masculine powers are assertive and often physical, and impact directly and obviously upon the material world, the province of epiphany is traditionally not political in the primary sense. It is private, personal and imaginative, where power is traditionally viewed as something public and physical in its orientation. For Woolf, however, power is radically redefined, and her writing explores the power available through these traditionally powerless avenues: the imaginative transformation of oppressive situations and fantasy as an agent of recreation and renegotiation. In The Waves, Bernard describes the epiphany's energy as a

winged equine creature strong enough to carry the victimised on its wings to inspiration and recuperation. This is whimsical, yet enormously powerful.

This quasi-mystical and whimsical aspect of Woolf's writing, and its free and lyrical forms, have proved problematical for some readers: assumptions about the apolitical nature of techniques such as stream of consciousness have caused some to ignore the vital political aspects of this part of Woolf's writing. The imperative informing such criticism is that to be politically effective, texts must demonstrate the values of wholeness and integrity, and must provide accurate pictures of experience, an essentially phallocentric and realistic notion antagonistic to Woolf's writing.

In her essay, 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?'[21], Toril Moi examines the unsympathetic attitudes of several influential feminist critics to Woolf's writing, and finds beneath their hostility a bias towards realism informed by the ideology of Marxist and humanist critics, most importantly Lukács, who denounced Modernism as decadent, and as exemplifying in its fragmentation and subjectivity the antithesis of the unitary and united writing he perceived as having the strength and clarity to be politically effective. In the Preface to the 1972 edition of his Studies in European Realism, Lukács delineates the elements he sees as necessary in politically effective literature. For Lukács, 'great arts... depict man as a whole in the whole of society', and proletarian humanist writers must fight to undo the damage done by Modernism, to 'reconstruct the complete human personality and free it from the distortion and dismemberment to which it has been subjected in class society.' Subjectivity destroys a sense of 'the objective typicality of men and

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[21] Toril Moi, 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? Feminist readings of Woolf', Sexual/Textual Politics, (London: Routledge, 1985) 1.

situations', while 'an excessive cult of the momentary mood' threatens the presentation of truths about the relationship of the individual to the society and its politics.[22]

Informed by this, the preference in much early Anglo-American feminist criticism is for realism, coherence, lack of contradiction and ambiguity, and this, for Moi, accounts for the extraordinary degree of irritation expressed by critics such as Elaine Showalter towards Woolf's writing. Also informing – and compounding the irritation of – opinions such as Showalter's seems to be the idea that a woman's writing must be somehow fully earnest and expressive of her 'self' or at least a single voice, an idea which extends this preference for realism into a form of artistic sexism. Dealing with Woolf's work in a chapter of A Literature of Their Own entitled 'Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny', Showalter uses words like 'teasing', 'shy', 'elusive', 'impersonal' and 'defensive' to describe the writing, all of which suggest an underlying expectation that the text contain or embody a real person, who ought to be a lot more available, and integrated. She draws on biographical details about Woolf's life to attempt to explain what she sees as the impersonality of her work.

Showalter's essay exemplifies a misreading of Woolf's treatment of power and empowerment. The thesis of her essay on Woolf, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flight Into Androgyny' is that Woolf sought escape from troublesome and disempowering reality, that any such impulse is a negative one, and that, accordingly, 'the ultimate room of one's own is the grave.'[23] Frustrated by Woolf's variability and multifariousness, she draws on the myth that suicide is a means of achieving integration, or

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[22] Georg Lukács, Studies in European Realism: A Sociological Study of the Writings of Balzac, Stendhal, Zola, Tolstoy, Gorki and others, (1950; London: Merlin Press, 1972) 5-6.
[23]Elaine Showalter, A Literature of Their Own: British Women Writers From Brontë to Lessing, (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977) 297.

'oneness'[24] which is also described as a perversion of the sort of sexual union she denigrates Woolf for not having achieved.[25] She simply does not seem to see the triumphant and epiphanic moments Woolf's characters achieve, nor does she credit Woolf with conveying any vision. Woolf may have enjoyed the irony that the example Showalter selects to illuminate the notion of her weakness, of her infidelity to 'reality', is an emphatically satirical episode in Mrs Dalloway in which Septimus Warren Smith is taken to see the famous medical specialist Sir William Bradshaw and is once again patronised and dismissed as a madman, because Bradshaw himself thinks in such a limited and conventional way. This is an episode Showalter tells us has been perceived by critics as flawed by its inflation. Showalter tries – rather ambivalently – to rationalise this, seeing the scene's 'inartistic lack of proportion'[26] as a result of Woolf's repressed rage at her own treatment at the hands of another such Harley Street specialist. Ironically enough, in the scene – which is imbued with a raging satire which Woolf makes no attempt to repress – Sir William himself denounces those who do not have 'a sense of proportion' (MD, 126). In fact, it is his euphemism for madness: 'he never spoke of madness; he called it not having a sense of proportion' (MD, 126). In this sort of criticism Showalter effectively turns herself into another insensitive Bradshaw, demanding of the text what Bradshaw demands of Septimus; order, control, integration and attachment to reality. And through this, Showalter ignores the vision in the writing, just as Bradshaw's 'reading' of Septimus disallows the possibility that he might be a visionary.

In its most pernicious manifestation, this desire for wholeness results in strictly biographical readings of fictional texts. Woolf's work has been dealt with in this way, but the critical treatment of the writing of

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[24]Showalter, 280.
[25]Showalter, 291.
[26]Showalter, 277.

Sylvia Plath, which will be discussed later, epitomises this attempt to integrate and account for the disparate and the mysterious in the text by means of biographical explanation. Finding neither a sole ('sane') self nor texts without contradictions, many feminist critics in the Anglo-American tradition have viewed Woolf's writing as evading a political placement or statement. Writing about Three Guineas, for instance, Showalter complains of its 'stylistic tricks of repetition, exaggeration, and rhetorical question' which she finds 'irritating and hysterical' and the 'empty sloganeering and cliché' of the language.[27] She goes on to quote at length and approvingly a review of the text by Q.D. Leavis, which objects to it on the outrageous and ludicrous grounds that, to quote Showalter, 'Woolf knew damn little about [the question of female experience]'.[28] The 'facts' of Woolf's life – and these writers seem to have no interest in the idea that biography is a wily animal in any case – are used in the review to damn Three Guineas. Leavis rejects Woolf's strong feministic statement because it comments on lifestyles she herself has not experienced. Responding to Woolf's suggestion that 'women have done their thinking... while they stirred the pot, while they rocked the cradle', Leavis, in one of the article's moments of inexplicable invective, suggests that Woolf wouldn't know 'which end of the cradle to stir.'[29]

It is largely the techniques of Woolf's writing: its stream of consciousness, shifts in tone, time, voice and place, its playfulness and multifariousness that have been charged with causing this perceived avoidance of political commitment, since they amount to an aesthetic which is fragmented and multiplicitous, rather than clear and whole in the Lukácsian mode. Even a radical critic like Julia Kristeva implies that Woolf evades the political commitment of direct interaction with the

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[27]Showalter, 295.
[28]Showalter, 295.
[29] Showalter, 295.

politics of language. 'Freud's statement "the hysteric suffers from reminiscence" sums up the large majority of novels produced by women... In women's writing, language seems to be seen from a foreign land; it is seen from the point of view of an asymbolic, spastic body. Virginia Woolf describes suspended states, subtle sensations and, above all, colors – green, blue – but she does not dissect language as Joyce does. Estranged from language, women are visionaries, dancers who suffer as they speak.'[30] In short, there has been, on the part of many critics, an assumption that a certain aesthetic is politically effective, while others – especially a Modernist aesthetic such as Woolf's, since it is various and playful – are insufficiently clear and serious to avoid being misappropriated or misconstrued. Thus the political dimension of the stream of consciousness technique in Woolf's writing and elsewhere has been largely ignored in favour of a reading of it which emphasises its existential nature.

In the case of Woolf, and many other Modernist and Postmodernist artists, the text's politics are located within the very artistic practice of the text. Inherent in Woolf's use of the stream of consciousness technique is a consciousness of power: the inequities of the distribution of power as it exists in its social and political forms, on the one hand, and the question of the power available through imaginative processes, through thought, words and feelings, on the other hand. In this sense it maps both external pressures exerted upon human beings, and the power available from within them to respond and overcome these. It deals, then, with power both on a thematic level and as part of the textual politics and aesthetic. In many cases the epiphanic moments of being Woolf's characters experience are moments which occur when they are faced with seemingly

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[30] Julia Kristeva, 'Oscillation Between Power and Denial' trans. Marilyn A. August New French Feminisms, 166.

insurmountable obstacles and pressures, and in which they exercise innovative imaginative powers to transform the threatening moment. The stream of consciousness technique does more than just allow the presentation of these imaginative processes, although that is a part of its effectiveness, since it facilitates the sort of unmediated access to the minds and hearts of characters that is the premise on which Woolf's consideration of imaginative and intellectual powers relies. It charts the rhythms of deflation and empowerment; the rise and fall of courage and energy experienced by characters who are assailed by others and by the world and who find ways of recuperating through the invisible, internal powers: through an innovative version of epiphany.

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In the world Woolf presents us with, even though the most obvious exercises of power are brutal displays of physical strength – women being raped, animals being trodden on, assailants being attacked with hammers by their victims, cities being bombed[31] – far more recurrent than these are uses of power which are coded and subliminal. These are analogous to their more physical counterpoints in terms of their brutality, but less discernible on the surface, since generally no physical harm is done. Woolf's victimised characters more often face looks of disapproval than battery, and subtly undermining words than overt verbal assaults, yet the effects are still deeply felt. In Woolf's writing there is a virtual catalogue of these subtler, but still powerful forms of oppression that exist beneath the impeccable surface politeness and attention to nicety that characterises the Victorian and Edwardian society she depicts.

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[31] There is a newspaper report of a rape at the beginning of Between the Acts, and the woman reading it imagines that the assailant has been set upon by his victim with a hammer. The events of Night and Day take place under a bomb-filled sky, and a man squashes a snake and frog underfoot in Between the Acts.

Good examples of these sorts of pressures occur throughout Mrs Dalloway, and the rhythm of loss and recovery in the early part of that novel exemplifies the elements of mental and imaginative energy utilised by Woolf's characters. As she sets about the organisation of a party to be held at her home in the evening, Clarissa Dalloway avails herself of these energies to empower herself just at those moments when it appears that she will be overcome by the pressures she is facing. After a series of small epiphanic moments, the process culminates in a powerful fantasy, an outstanding example of Woolf's version of the epiphany.

Ecstatic pleasure and abundant energy fill the text as it opens with Clarissa setting out to walk through London to buy flowers. She imagines the beauty she will bestow upon her guests through the decorations and atmosphere she creates. Clarissa's mind is active and her imagination flourishing, so there is a kaleidoscopic impression of bounty and vitality in her thoughts. Starting with the image of the morning as 'fresh as if issued to children on a beach' and going on to the breathless exclamations 'What a lark! What a plunge' (MD 3), Woolf opens the text with a rush of beautiful metaphors and a mobile, playful perspective which alights briefly on numerous focal points, especially the invisible and the evanescent – light, air, and high spirits. Clarissa watches the swoop of 'rooks rising, falling'. They mime the rhythm of the passage, and of her own thoughts. Along with metaphors, memories predominate, and these also radiate in all directions, quite playfully, refracting from other thoughts and impressions, and flowing off in independent streams. There is a lack of the usual indices of authority about this passage; it is chaotic and fluid, foreshadowing in the features of its language the imaginative powers later used by Clarissa.

Time is destabilised: past and present are indistinct, flowing into one another, powered by memory and emotion. Clarissa's thoughts move

her out of the present, allowing her to revisit Bourton, a country estate where she spent the happiest time of her life when she was younger. Her immersion in the memory is so complete that she hears the squeak of the hinges of French windows at Bourton and feels the fresh early morning air. She relives the thrill of solemn foreboding she felt there at eighteen, standing on the threshold between the house and the garden; between the restrictions of ordered life, and the primitive and free Edenic world beyond them, and between innocence and experience. Clarissa's feelings at this moment are the feelings of a virgin, and the whole landscape is charged with the anticipation she experiences before she goes into the garden with Sally Seton, and is kissed by her, in 'the most exquisite moment of her whole life'. The moment is one of empowerment, as Sally's touch and her 'beautiful voice which made everything she said sound like a caress' (MD 45) are bestowed on Clarissa.[32] This is the type of epiphanic moment Morris Beja calls 'the past recaptured'.[33] It is knowledge in all its senses that Sally shows Clarissa, and this transgression in the Edenic garden carries with it the symbols of mouthing, eating and verbalising a desire for knowledge and power that are essential in the archetype of the story. It also carries with it a punishment from the representatives of patriarchy: Clarissa describes the scornful salutation of two of their male friends as a mauling, and says: 'It was like running one's face against a granite wall in the darkness! It was shocking; it was horrible!' (MD, 46).

It could be argued that there is an alternative tradition of women's epiphanies, since Clarissa's experience is similar to that of Eve, and of Pandora, as she enjoys a subversive epiphany – a 'revelation', a 'religious

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[32]This connection between voice and touch is given a sinister echo when Hugh later sexually assaults Sally as a 'punishment' for saying women should have votes.
[33] Beja, 15.

feeling' and an 'illumination' which inspires guilt in her, but which she doesn't ultimately suppress, since it is exquisitely pleasurable:

> a sudden revelation, a tinge like a blush which one tried to check and then, as it spread, one yielded to its expansion, and rushed to the farthest verge and there quivered and felt the world come closer, swollen with some astonishing significance, some pressure of rapture, which split its thin skin and gushed and poured with an extraordinary alleviation over the cracks and sores. Then, for that moment, she had seen an illumination; a match burning in a crocus; an inner meaning almost expressed.
>
> (MD 41)

Clarissa is ambivalent about this power, trying – and failing – to 'check' imaginative and sexual aspects of the memory and the experience. Desire prevails, though, and for a moment she is this empowered and 'alleviated' being. This occurs despite the fact that the reality of her married life in London is of decreasing power, focused through an image of waning sexual power: 'Narrower and narrower her bed would be.' (MD, 40) Because she is no longer a naive young girl, she is increasingly ignored by men and women alike who view feminine power as having its origins in desirability within a rigid hegemonic, heterosexual code which perceives sexual power as the province of youth. Memory of this lesbian epiphany dissolves the present for a moment, and provides encouragement, since it contains an oppositional energy which counterbalances the ideology which belittles Clarissa.

The first pause in Clarissa's imaginative flow and its liquid imagery in these early pages is just that – a hiatus in which her body is described as stiffening while she waits for a gap in the traffic to cross the road. Clarissa becomes a body locked in the grip of *chronos*, which must survive the crossing, and which is vulnerable not only to the traffic, but also to others' observations of her. Clarissa, however, transforms this vulnerability, imagining the pause as a sort of breathless anticipation before Big Ben

strikes; 'a particular hush, or solemnity; an indescribable pause; a suspense' (MD, 4). There is a sense that her mind has orchestrated the sounding of the clock – and the passing of time – and thus she makes herself enormously powerful, even omnipotent, defeating *chronos*, which has threatened to nullify all her powers. She revels in a feeling of divine power, and 'how one sees it so, making it up, building it round one, tumbling it, creating it every moment afresh.' (MD, 4) The power to love and rearrange life is what makes even – and maybe especially – 'the veriest frumps, the most dejected of miseries' invincible, or, in Clarissa's words, unable to be 'dealt with' by 'Acts of Parliament' (MD, 4). It is for this reason that the party at the end of the novel, through which she exercises these powers, is so important to Clarissa. A moment of intense vulnerability, when Clarissa is threatened with extinction by *chronos*, becomes, through the phases of an epiphany in which the world appears to her submissive and malleable, a moment not just of control, but also of apotheosis.

Again Clarissa is freed from her body, the perceived site of her decaying power, and she is part of the spirit of London, flowing through grieving mothers whose sons have not returned from the war, inhabiting cricket greens and omnibuses, hearing barrel organs, brass bands and the tap of cricket bats, thinking of girls who have been up dancing all night and now take 'their absurd woolly dogs for a run' (MD, 5). Then, suddenly she is wrenched back to a fixed place and time after recognising the approaching Hugh Whitbread, an old acquaintance with an overbearing manner, who always manages to make Clarissa feel inadequate. Hugh immediately dominates the conversation, during which Clarissa begins to feel 'oddly conscious of her hat', then 'a little skimpy' and finally 'schoolgirlish' (MD, 7). Her dive back into the present and her body, and her plunging self esteem are accompanied by rationalisations that she does

actually like Hugh, but at the same time she falls into thinking about how her husband Richard, and her friend Peter Walsh dislike and condemn him. Although her mind is taken up with the denigration and belittlement of Hugh, Clarissa herself has no obvious hand in it. Instead, Peter's voice dominates the moment, through his criticisms of Hugh (that he has 'no heart, no brain, nothing but the manners and breeding of an English gentleman') (MD, 7-8). Glimpses of these memories of Peter's passionate indignation about Hugh's concealed cruelty, bring in their wake other memories of Peter: his dry letters and understated humour, Clarissa's arguments with him, and the grief of their break from one another and the long friendship and telepathic closeness they share. These thoughts dwarf and completely dwindle the menace of Hugh's condescending and subtly disapproving behaviour. Again, Clarissa has employed an imaginative recreation to diminish a threat; restructuring the scene so that Hugh, and *chronos* – associated with Hugh – are denigrated by the phantom of Peter; his supernatural presence and demeaning perspective on Hugh.

With Hugh thus diminished, Clarissa feels reasserted, but this feeling is soon undermined again as the apparition of Peter turns back on Clarissa from his protective role, to remind her of the pain in their relationship. At first she distracts herself, thinking abstractly of the way in which affection for people means they can be conjured up at will. This is 'perhaps... the reward of having cared for people; they came back in the middle of St. James's Park on a fine morning' (MD, 8). Peter's return has saved Clarissa from Hugh – she has actually felt his presence with her during the subtle assault. It is not just a fantasy, or a wish that he could be there, but an overwhelming sense of his presence which is far more real than Hugh's own presence, since Hugh lacks the sort of mysterious and fascinating hidden self others have, having concentrated on the worldly

and superficial. Later Clarissa talks of the self inhabiting places and being with people even after death, and it is this sort of imaginative materialism which makes Peter's presence seem so real here. It is based on her belief that 'since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death.' (MD, 200). It is this sort of belief which is a prerequisite for the experience of the epiphany, since it acknowledges the power of the 'unseen' and the possibilities of transcending the logical structures of the world – time, place and even death.

Conjuring Peter's presence, however, soon entails other troubling feelings. The powerful process of recalling memories is a hazardous one; the currents of the imagination are not readily controlled, and Clarissa finds herself besieged by the very power she has called to her aid. It is as though she is trying to manage a difficult horse, pulling the reins in one direction, then having to wrench them in the other when the beast charges too far in one direction or another. So it is that Peter's criticisms, which replace Hugh's, come to mind now. These involve the misunderstanding that Clarissa craves worldly approbation: years ago he had prophesied that 'She would marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase; the perfect hostess.' The words of his condemnation of her as 'Cold, heartless, a prude' sound across the London landscape (MD, 9). Wrapped around Clarissa – again, the memory is indistinguishable from present feelings, and unmuted by time – is the agony of Peter's ambivalence: 'borne about her for years like an arrow sticking in her heart the grief, the anguish' (MD, 9) Just as his presence blocked out Hugh's, it now blocks out London's, and London retreats, like a timid beast, behind the looming apparition of Peter. The language reflects this re-experienced

pain, loosing its ecstatic pace and vigour, as well as its whimsical metaphors and imaginative associations. Like Clarissa's thoughts it is stuck, returning obsessively to the same idea, that Peter has caused her pain and anger. Reaching the gates of the Park, Clarissa wills herself away from memory and into the present moment and place, and the movement of the buses in Piccadilly draws her thoughts in a different direction, acting as the vehicle by which she escapes the rut of her anger. The blurred landscapes of memory and the present moment are split apart by the energy of the buses, rupturing the imagined pact between the present and the spirits of the past, which threatens to clutch and overwhelm Clarissa.

With this reassertion of her self confidence, Clarissa's earlier ebullience returns, and fills the text. The whimsical perspective which accompanied this ebullience earlier returns too, and she plays with ideas, re-sorting and shuffling them continuously. An idea about the insecurity of anyone's identity occurs to Clarissa, but this is a positive concept, since for her it connotes freedom. People are varied and unknowable, and perceiving this, Clarissa does not categorise people, or judge them, which contrasts with the rigid codification, the 'conversion', she abhors in characters like Holmes, Bradshaw and Miss Kilman, who coerce, and are static and relentless. Because this is Clarissa's philosophy, the hidden and unexpected beauties in London and in other people come to the fore. The question 'What was she trying to recover? What image of white dawn in the country?' enters Clarissa's mind, but she is distracted from it by reading in the window of a bookshop the couplet 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun/ Nor the furious winter's rages' (MD, 11) which soothes and calms her now as it will later on, when it returns to her thoughts.

Like the buses in Piccadilly earlier, the quotation draws Clarissa away from an over-investment in the present, and thus demonstrates the

immense power that something intangible – here, words – can have to move and stimulate. Words are an abstract version of the object Stephen Dedalus sees as the focal medium through which the epiphany comes. In fact, compared with the buses, which are more evidently the sort of 'thing' Dedalus prescribes, the couplet is considerably more powerful in its drawing Clarissa into itself, and leads her further than the buses do.

The use by Woolf of the couplet here is part of her appreciation of the power of literature and of words which continues throughout this novel and through much of Woolf's writing, especially The Waves and Between The Acts. It is a theme at the heart of her writing, and her Modernism, and in Mrs Dalloway part of its treatment is a coded allocation of inner resources to those who are able to be affected by literature. Clarissa, Peter, Septimus and Sally are affected in this way, while others, including Bradshaw, Holmes and Richard Dalloway disparage the power of literature, apparently preferring more worldly and overtly forceful weapons, but also unaware of the paradox of power which allows printed or memorised words such influence as they are elsewhere shown to have. Characters who disregard the intangible, epitomised by literature, prove incapable of the imaginative transformations that the epiphany brings to those who are open to its power.

Although the words of Shakespeare's couplet evoke the 'well of tears' bred by the war and 'this late age of world's experience' (MD, 11) the thought is immediately transformed into something positive by Clarissa's concentrating on her memory of the almost talismanic Lady Bexborough, an acquaintance of Clarissa's who had received a telegram, telling her that her son had been killed in the war, immediately before she was meant to be opening a bazaar. She continued with her speech, clutching the telegram in her hand, in a moment of bravery and selflessness which Clarissa remembers with awe. Lady Bexborough's immense courage

inspires Clarissa to the extent that its cause – the horror of suffering – is also ennobled as part of a process which evokes extreme human courage and strength. For a moment Lady Bexborough is illuminated as a human embodiment of those traits of endurance and triumph in the face of pain that Clarissa strives for. The image of Lady Bexborough with the telegram in her hand informing her of her son's death while opening the bazaar is more than an image of middle-class tragedy.

Because it is a bazaar that she is opening, Lady Bexborough's courageous act prefigures Miss La Trobe's pageant in Between the Acts, where she invites others to witness the odds and ends, the 'scraps, orts and fragments' of which lives are made up. But in neither case is this invitation to witness the fragmentation that fills the bazaar of the individual's experience a pessimistic comment on humanity. Lady Bexborough and Miss La Trobe both acknowledge, through their respective gestures, the relative insignificance of the material side of people, which Clarissa calls the 'apparition', compared with that which is not seen, and which is varied and magnificent.

To read Lady Bexborough's action as purely an absurd heroism is to overlook its symbolic importance in the scheme Woolf exposes in which invisible powers are exercised through mundane objects. It is precisely such objects as those overlooked on the bazaar's white elephant stall through which characters exercise power in Woolf's writing. Thus these objects are not abandoned by Lady Bexborough or, later, Clarissa. Although this may be interpreted as a pathetic clinging to the order of objects amidst the chaos of change, it is, rather, in the scheme of Woolf's writing, an act of courage and honesty; an affirmation of the potential for illumination through even the most mundane and humble of objects and moments.

At this moment in her progress through the streets of London, inflating Lady Bexborough to such huge proportions has the side-effect of

making Clarissa feel inferior to her. This is paradoxical – it is another of those empowering memories which has a contradictory side effect. Chastising herself, Clarissa experiences an ambivalent return to her body whilst feeling that it is 'with all its capacities... nothing – nothing at all' (MD, 13).[34] Women's power is undermined throughout Woolf's writing by other characters' demeaning attitudes to their physical appearance, and here again Clarissa plunges into self-loathing which focuses on her physical appearance, as others see it; her 'narrow pea-stick figure [and] ridiculous little face, beaked like a bird's' (MD, 12). Abruptly, as she sinks, London and all its activity and beauty is invoked. This involves a seizing hold of another current, exemplified earlier by the buses and the couplet, and epitomised later when the car back-fires. It is a sort of urban pathetic fallacy, a finding in London what she would like to find in herself, as Clarissa's consciousness effectively shapes the London around her and recreates it from her own perspective, in an omnipotent gesture which contradicts the powerlessness she had experienced a moment before.

It is also, again, a type of meditation through objects or willing towards epiphany, and in this case the objects are selected to reconstruct Clarissa's identity. Contrasting herself with Lady Bexborough involves a sinking into anxiety, during which Clarissa feels her identity fading altogether. She concentrates hard on the present moment and on a string of objects, discovered in shop windows as she passes, so as to recover herself and to reconnect with the real. The objects she chooses – a roll of tweed, then suits, pearls, salmon on an iceblock, shoes, gloves – are important because they represent tangible reality, but they are not randomly collected, as the catalogue might suggest. Each has a deeper

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[34] This passage is underlined and annotated in Sylvia Plath's copy of Mrs Dalloway, which is held in the Smith College Rare Book Room. Plath seems to read the moment as one of losing the physical self. In Plath's writing, this stripping the self of its mortal and corporeal aspects is a prelude to powerful rebirth.

significance, as it evokes some memory or taste that reaffirms Clarissa's sense of who she is. Her father bought his suits here, they were made of this tweed, she knows how to choose fish, she has a penchant for well-made shoes and gloves. They are like character witnesses called to testify to Clarissa's identity. They may be no more than the 'orts, scraps and fragments' of which exteriors are made up, but for the moment they diminish the now troublesome realm of memory and feeling, allowing Clarissa to focus on the tangible, and say 'This is all...This is all' (MD 13).

But again the process is not uncomplicated, and the objects are threaded to other thoughts and memories. This time it is the gloves which taunt Clarissa, since they bring in their wake Clarissa's daughter Elizabeth, who doesn't like what her mother delights in and is aloof from her. Attached to Elizabeth, in turn, is her tutor, Miss Kilman, whom Clarissa does not like, and suspects is in love with Elizabeth. Clarissa tries to exclude them with exactly the sort of bullying power she later associates with her antagonists. She focuses on her physical powers, and propels herself towards the florist's shop, shoving through its swinging doors, exercising a very physical determination and then a fierce concentration in focusing on the flowers to the exclusion of all other thought, using the activity of choosing and the power of purchasing as a foil to the vagaries of depression and anger, and the other negative aspects of her confused emotional response to Doris Kilman. This attempt to repress feelings through sheer physical activity fails, while the concentration which follows it in the same attempt succeeds. The flowers have taken over Clarissa's mind like a mantra in meditation, and now, like the yogic mantra, her intense concentration clears a path in her thoughts and creates a stage for the imagination to flourish.

The flowers all around her in the shop become the starting point of a fantasy about the personalities of flowers; a whimsy which leads to the

creation of an antagonist to the 'brutal monster' Miss Kilman represents for Clarissa described as 'one of those spectres with which one battles in the night; one of those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants' (MD, 15). The idea of battle is now realised in an extraordinary way. Rather than dwelling on bitterness or planning to confront Miss Kilman, Clarissa conjures a powerful armed force, which is, paradoxically and astonishingly, comprised of flowers – the emblem, traditionally, of delicacy and associated strongly with femininity and passivity. Clarissa imagines 'all the sweet peas spreading in their bowls, tinged violet, snow white, pale – as if it were the evening and girls in muslin frocks came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer's day' (MD, 16). Clarissa thinks of the moment, the flowers and the fantasy as 'a wave which she let flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up' (MD, 16).

There are other subliminal signals that the personified flowers are to serve as Clarissa's soldiers in the battle against the spectre of Doris Kilman. Miss Kilman is depicted as a 'monster grubbing at the roots' (MD, 15) and the flowers continue the metaphor of vegetation. Where Miss Kilman's influence promises to disturb and threaten Clarissa's roots, the muslin-adorned happy flowers not only defeat this threat to the plant and portend instead its quite literal flourishing, but specifically relate to images of Clarissa herself at Bourton as just such a girl, in muslin, enjoying the happiest, most sexual and powerful days of her life. The imaginative and whimsical soldiers are therefore no random thing, but a military completely integrated with Clarissa's own experience, beliefs and tastes.

The two forces contrast in numerous details. The floral army wears muslin frocks, while Miss Kilman is represented metonymically by her green mackintosh. Where Miss Kilman seems to loom, stolidly, the flowers are mobile: they are seen spreading and floating, and moving with

a freedom and delicacy directly opposed to the heaviness and stasis associated with Clarissa's enemy. The flowers have a sort of girlish *joie de vivre*, appreciating and revelling in the 'superb summer's day' against which they are set. Miss Kilman, on the other hand, is set against the depressing background of her home 'in a slum without a cushion or a bed or a rug' which reflects the fact that she is grounded in bitterness; 'all her soul rusted with that grievance sticking in it... poor, embittered, unfortunate creature!' (MD, 14). The thought of Miss Kilman rasps Clarissa and has 'the power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine; [give] her physical pain, and [make] all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home delightful, rock, quiver and bend' (MD, 15). The thought of the gamin flowers soothes this pain, like a smooth wave – and this analogy is made explicitly, suggesting again the protean and dynamic qualities of the power being exercised.

Clarissa's immersion in this fantastic epiphanic battle is so complete that, when a car backfires in the street outside the florist's shop, she hears it as a gunshot – one which ends the train of thought and the moment. It is an important part of her imaginative reconstruction of events that Clarissa should hear the backfiring car and interpret it as a gunshot, since the gunshot provides exactly the definite victory needed for her to complete the imaginary battle with Miss Kilman and resume her walk. The gunshot does not interrupt and destroy Clarissa's thoughts, as it may appear. The shift it brings is entirely willed – Clarissa uses the shot to engineer a neat completion to the battle. Again the power of Clarissa's consciousness is apparent as she deliberately arranges the sights and sounds of the world to suit her imaginative purpose. At this moment she is borne on the crest of the wave she has imagined, 'lifted up and up' by it, until it surmounts everything else, and she imagines a sea completely transforms the solid and bullying realm around it. The epiphanic moment

has infused and strengthened Clarissa, and she can now return to the world that has taunted her with its sceptres and ghouls, with new vigour and vitality, and a new feeling of control.

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Epiphanic moments of being like this are part of a larger struggle, with invisible and intangible opponents – sprites, memories, thoughts and feelings. The struggle is depicted by Woolf as one between two distinct forces, and these are represented as ideologically and materially opposed; each is associated not only with a political and ideological position, but also with a range of objects which identify it and are used by it as a means of empowerment and magnification. The notion of the 'constitutive symbol' which Eliseo Vivas applies to the writing of D.H. Lawrence offers one means of illuminating – at least in part – Woolf's use of objects in her writing. Vivas says of the constitutive symbol that it provides a way of embodying things too subtle to be perceived otherwise:

> Ours is a complex world of institutions, values, subtle human relationships, of which we must have knowledge or we run into trouble. To grasp our world in its full axiological density, to acquire a viable sense of our place in it, of the density it permits us to achieve, to grasp it as adequately as we grasp a chair or a fork, requires a process of categorization which is both dramatic and moral. [35]

Woolf's presentation of the opposing forces in her characters' landscapes is an innovative sort of allegory in which the 'good' are surrounded by wide skies filled with birds spiralling upwards but also looping downwards; by fish in ponds, lakes and seas but also on plates,

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[35] Eliseo Vivas, D.H. Lawrence: the Triumph and the Failure of Art, (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1960) 278.

cutting boards and the end of fishing lines; by flowers on the verge of blooming or with their heads cut off and stuck untidily into vases. The double-edged nature of these allegorical objects is a part of their mobility, and they prove to be capable both of strength and of weakness, just as they sometimes support and sometimes undermine those who invoke their power. How they appear depends largely on the nature of the imaginative powers directing how they are perceived. The 'evil' on the other hand are cushioned with furs and expensive fabrics and exercise their power inside stately buildings amid lavish furnishings and myriad heirlooms and prized objects, and these props too have the ability to undermine as well as to affirm. Both the pressures and obstacles faced in the battle between these forces, and the weaponry used in combat, are represented in terms of their associated objects, so that, in a world of hidden sadism – of women being smothered in minks by their husbands, and children experiencing the concealed violence of adults in comfortable nurseries and at lavishly laden dining tables – a pageant of triumphantly leaping fish and soaring birds, battalions of sweet peas and waves of fluttering curtains point to the exercise of other equally hidden and equally powerful energies of a very different kind. These powers and their symbols and instruments are located in landscapes of mainstream covert oppression, and an examination of this terrain and its modes of oppression as depicted by Woolf is essential in delineating them. The two forces battle incessantly in a subtle subliminal antagonism that is occasionally illuminated as an epiphany occurs, and characters are made aware of its dynamics.

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[35] Eliseo Vivas, D.H. Lawrence: the Triumph and the Failure of Art, (Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1960) 278.

cutting boards and the end of fishing lines; by flowers on the verge of blooming or with their heads cut off and stuck untidily into vases. The double-edged nature of these allegorical objects is a part of their mobility, and they prove to be capable both of strength and of weakness, just as they sometimes support and sometimes undermine those who invoke their power. How they appear depends largely on the nature of the imaginative powers directing how they are perceived. The 'evil' on the other hand are cushioned with furs and expensive fabrics and exercise their power inside stately buildings amid lavish furnishings and myriad heirlooms and prized objects, and these props too have the ability to undermine as well as to affirm. Both the pressures and obstacles faced in the battle between these forces, and the weaponry used in combat, are represented in terms of their associated objects, so that, in a world of hidden sadism – of women being smothered in minks by their husbands, and children experiencing the concealed violence of adults in comfortable nurseries and at lavishly laden dining tables – a pageant of triumphantly leaping fish and soaring birds, battalions of sweet peas and waves of fluttering curtains point to the exercise of other equally hidden and equally powerful energies of a very different kind. These powers and their symbols and instruments are located in landscapes of mainstream covert oppression, and an examination of this terrain and its modes of oppression as depicted by Woolf is essential in delineating them. The two forces battle incessantly in a subtle subliminal antagonism that is occasionally illuminated as an epiphany occurs, and characters are made aware of its dynamics.

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become catalysts for the recitation and affirmation of familial history, or simply demonstrate economic power. Within them, people adorn themselves with more objects in a microcosmic version of what is also happening at the architectural level. In Three Guineas Woolf comments on this custom, writing scathingly about the 'symbolic splendour' (TG, 178) of the clothes and pageantry associated with those holding power – the judiciary, academics, church and military leaders:

> your dress in its immense elaboration has obviously another function. It not only covers nakedness, gratifies vanity, and creates pleasure for the eye, but it serves to advertise the social, professional, or intellectual standing of the wearer. If you will excuse the humble illustration, your dress fulfils the same function as the tickets in a grocer's shop. But, here, instead of saying 'This is margarine; this pure butter; this is the finest butter in the market,' it says, 'This is a clever man – he is Master of Arts; this is a very clever man- he is a Doctor of Letters; this is a most clever man –he is a Member of the Order of Merit.'... the tradition, or belief, lingers among us that to express worth of any kind, whether intellectual or moral, by wearing pieces of metal, or ribbon, coloured hoods or gowns, is a barbarity which we bestow upon the rites of savages.
>
> (TG, 179)

Woolf's houses contain a similar encoding of ideology. Each room is a distinct political region and contains coded programs for the type of behaviour to be followed inside it. The city and 'inside' are close to established seats of power (parliament, palaces, newspapers) and so are associated with a highly organised society and restricted opportunities for behaviour which subverts its strictures.

Outside houses, and outside the city in the country – places which are literally marginal – the things which have been marginalised come to the fore. Thus it is in these settings that Woolf's characters feel free to act as they wish to, however eccentrically. Most of the homosexual love in Woolf's novels is experienced outside, in gardens or country settings.

Clarissa Dalloway's most cherished memories are of 'the most exquisite moment of her whole life passing a stone urn with flowers in it. Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down!' (MD, 45) and of 'rooks flaunting up and down in the pink evening light' as she thinks, going to meet Sally, 'if it were now to die 'twere now to be most happy' (MD, 44). Neville, in The Waves, searches in vain amongst the 'grey arches' of the civilised world, the world of 'tradition and emulation, all so skilfully organised to prevent feeling alone' for someone to whom he can 'expose the urgency' of his passionate love for his friend Percival, and dreams instead of a retreat into a homosexual natural idyll: 'Should I seek out some tree? Should I desert these form rooms and libraries, and the broad yellow page in which I read Catullus, for woods and fields? Should I walk under beech trees, or saunter along the river bank, where the trees meet united like lovers in the water?'(W, 40).

In similar settings, marginalised women have more scope to act freely. Sally Seton finds a voice at the country estate of Bourton that she seems to have lost when Clarissa meets her in London. At Bourton she is articulate, demanding votes for women and questioning entrenched patriarchal attitudes; she is artistic, arranging flowers innovatively; and she expresses her lesbianism directly and with celebratory vitality (MD, 43-5). By the end of the novel she describes the more pallid version of this retreat into nature for solace which she has settled for: 'Despairing of human relationships (people were so difficult), she often went into her garden and got from her flowers a peace which men and women never gave her' (MD, 252-3). In contrast, as a man, Peter is not so alienated within the centre, and can't understand Sally's desire to retreat into a peaceful vegetable world, commenting with his usual scoffing attitude that 'he did not like cabbages; he preferred human beings' (MD, 253). In

which they derive their power and freedom, as well as the mediums through which imaginative power is exercised. They are both emblems and instruments of power. Over the landscape of Woolf's first novel, The Voyage Out, for example, hangs a sky that is replete with possible meanings of this kind: 'Some said the sky was an emblem of the life they had had; others that it was the promise of the life to come. Long-tailed birds clattered and screamed, and crossed from wood to wood, with golden eyes in their plumage'.[40]

Birds are the chief emblem of this realm, and the most important part of a network of imagery linking characters who have potential for growth and 'flight' despite all being, in various ways, marginalised and denied access to traditional forms of power. They are homosexual characters, widows, spinsters, ageing women, loners and people suffering from depression and pain. At various times, all are described in terms of bird imagery or associated with birds, especially in Mrs Dalloway. Clarissa is described as having a 'touch of the bird about her' (MD, 4); Peter seeks solace in sinking 'down, down... into the plumes and feathers of sleep' (MD, 73) and appears 'a little hawk-like' (MD, 214); Septimus watches the birds and hears them telling him in Greek 'from trees in the meadow of life beyond a river where the dead walk, how there is no death' (MD, 31), and Miss Parry, a guest at Clarissa's party, looks as though she will 'die like some bird in a frost gripping to her perch' (MD, 213). This imagery functions like a halo, marking the grouped characters out visually. It is also, in a sense, proleptic, since it associates flight and freedom with these characters before they actually experience it, in effect promising the elevation and empowerment that is later their reward.

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[40]Virginia Woolf, The Voyage Out, (1915; London: Granada, 1978) 27. Cited as VO in the text.

> They had met at first in Scotland, fishing – she from one rock, he from another. Her line had got tangled; she had given over, and had watched him with the stream rushing between his legs, casting, casting – until, like a thick ingot of silver bent in the middle, the salmon had leapt, had been caught, and she had loved him.
>
> (BA, 44)

Her own activity is relinquished, and, after a while, both Isabella and the fish are 'caught'. The structure of the sentence insists upon the two actions being linked, or at least on her falling in love being dependent on the catching of the salmon. The salmon itself, appearing as it does from between Giles' legs, is part of a glorification of Giles' sexuality which underlines the scene, and which is also suggested in the virility of the 'stream rushing between his legs.' The phallic salmon is associated also with economic power, when it is likened to a thick silver ingot, stressing the entailment of economic and physical prowess with masculine power. Fish later appear on the kitchen table in the Oliver's home, where they are graphically mutilated, then tested for freshness. The quality of the fish will either affirm or undermine Isabella's power as housewife, and there is much anxiety associated with her selection of the fish to be served for dinner. Yet the fish is more than household object, since it has the potential, even while it is sliced, cooked and presented on a plate, to poison its captors as they eat it. Similarly, without a leap out of the stream which is governed not by Giles but by the salmon itself, Giles will not make Isabella love him. Thus, under each of these scenes of fish as victims, lies the notion of fish as potentially more powerful than those who appear on the surface to have vanquished them. This allows for a positive reading of Woolf's own description of herself, captive in her childhood home with the abusive Duckworth brothers, as 'an unfortunate minnow shut up in the same tank with an unwieldy and turbulent whale'

(MB, 185), since it suggests the possibility of this minnow also turning out to have extraordinary hidden powers to overcome assaults and even to vanquish its assailants.

At the end of Between the Acts, Lucy openly greets the fish in the pond, immediately after her brother Bart has been reminded by them of Miss La Trobe. Bart refuses to let Lucy thank Miss La Trobe for the pageant, asserting that 'She don't want our thanks' and thinking that 'what she wanted, like that carp (something moved in the water) was darkness in the mud; a whisky and soda at the pub; and coarse words descending like maggots through the waters' (BA, 183). His comparison appears to be opportunistic, yet it points to his sense of Miss La Trobe's having some power unlike his own, whilst also patronising her. When he goes off to find his dog – a brutish, earth-bound accomplice in several of his assaults on those weaker than himself – Lucy gazes into the lily pool, and, in an instance of the imaginative transport that recurs in Woolf's writing, experiences a natural benediction through her concentration on its objects – this time the fish, which become instruments through which her imagination works to transform a mood of emptiness to one of hope and vision.

Like Woolf's writing itself, Lucy's thoughts mimic the mobile and free movements of the fish: each darts about unpredictably and uninhibitedly. Lucy, left despondent after her brother's latest verbal assault on her, believes the fish to have vanished. Yet, like Bernard in The Waves, who is hauled out of his misery by a mystical wave – 'And in me too the wave rises' (W, 247) – Lucy finds herself nurturing hope and defiance, and as if in response, the fish reappear. For Lucy, as for Bernard, imagination empowers her, and she revels in the 'delight of the roaming eye' creating 'islands of security' from the patterns of leaves floating on the pond. Then, magically, just as thoughts of Bart threaten to collapse this

recreated leafy haven, the fish arise from the depths of the pond to salute Lucy: 'something moved in the water; her favourite fantail. The golden orfe followed. Then she had a glimpse of silver – the great carp himself, who came to the surface so very seldom. They slid on, in and out between the stalks, silver; pink; gold, splashed; streaked; pied'. Immediately, Lucy responds, murmuring 'Ourselves' and following the fish 'the speckled, streaked and blotched; seeing in that vision beauty, power and glory in ourselves'. Her renewed hope is described as having not 'much help from reason', and yet it is a spectacular 'private vision' of 'beauty which is goodness'. She thinks of the joy of waking to the sound of 'random ribbons of birds' voices' and at that moment the fish come to the surface, and Lucy's faith is restored. In a moment imbued with similar symbolism at the beginning of The Waves, birds chorus and a blind stirs slightly, and elsewhere in Between the Acts William's revival is heralded by birds and by the flapping of a blind.

In the fish and pond scene, the process through which Lucy transcends the obstacles facing her involves projection and investment. Her characteristic caressing of the cross she wears around her neck as a sort of talisman (something she does when reassuring William and soothing Isabella) and her incantatory murmuring of 'truths' applicable in an alternative realm, risible as 'irrational' in the 'real' world, mark an attempt by Lucy to enter into some other state of consciousness. The fish appear only for Lucy, but when they do, she is honoured with a parade including her personal favourite, the fantail, and most importantly 'the great carp himself', a detail that suggests the Christian archetype of discipleship which Woolf is working with. Importantly, Lucy herself, although she purports to be staunchly Christian, becomes a subversive alternative Christological figure as she inspires and shepherds other 'lost' characters like Isabella and William, in scenes which are pastoral in their

nature and symbolic import. Other Christological figures include Septimus Warren Smith, martyred in Mrs Dalloway for his vision, and Clarissa Dalloway herself as she appears in both Mrs Dalloway and The Voyage Out , providing salvation for the unhappy and the spiritually hungry.

Lucy is described as standing between 'two fluidities'– the underwater kingdom and the rushing air – but the metaphor relates also to the domain of belief, faith and imagination. That each is viewed as fluid is important, since a link is established in this geographical metaphor which correlates apparently weak, mobile and ineffectual things – Lucy's often derided wandering and mobile mind and the small and mainly overlooked pond combine to produce a powerful and empowering vision. Air and faith are invisible, and air, water and faith appear equally incapable of physical strength. Yet as the scene goes on, each is proved to have enormous power of unexpected kinds. Effectively 'grounded' in a dominant and materialist economy, Woolf's characters are locked in a solid space between the fluid elements they aspire to and take their instruments of power from, so that there is an element of yearning or straining towards these other realms.

The scene underlines the capabilities of Lucy's mind, of which Bartholomew has said, earlier: 'She would have been... a very clever woman, had she fixed her gaze. But this led to that; that to the other.' (BA, 22)[43] After gazing at the pool for a moment, transformations begin to occur. Leaves become continents, afloat on the water's surface. This

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[43] There is no doubt that Woolf values Lucy's imaginative mentality and its freedom. For instance, describing her own creativity delightedly, Woolf uses a metaphor that suggests that a similar lightness and mobility of mind, and a similar access to a fluid realm underlay the creation of some of her novels: 'I made up, as I sometimes make up my books, To the Lighthouse; in a great, apparently involuntary rush. One thing burst into another. Blowing bubbles out of a pipe gives the feeling of the rapid crowd of ideas and scenes which blew out of my mind, so that my lips seemed syllabling of their own accord as I walked.' (MB, 90).

demonstrates more than just imaginative energy, since the transformation makes water capable of bearing the world on it – it is, thus, ultimately strong, just as 'Old Flimsy' Lucy Swithin herself becomes strong.

Lucy's uses of power in this scene – and elsewhere – exemplify the behaviour found so often in the writing of Woolf, Plath and Jolley, and best described by Woolf's memoir of her own experience of the tea-table: 'the surface manner allows one, as I have found, to slip in things that would be inaudible if one marched straight up and spoke out loud' (MB, 164). Lucy's tactics involve surface submission and subtle subversion rather than open fighting in unwinnable wars. Plath's technique, which I've called vociferous self-effacement, exemplifies this, as do Jolley's bungling derided characters who, once ignored and marginalised, go on to act powerfully and originally. Energy is spent, not in concentrating on the fetters draining the character, but on finding power in an unforbidden realm, the realm of the mind. The technique is characterised, then, not by subversiveness, since its focus is not on the forbidden, but on originality and creativity. In this particular case, since Bart has gone away (back to his centre of power, the house) Lucy need not bother with strategic games, and may go ahead with more direct exercises of power and imagination.

When the fish arise, as if to salute her, Lucy sees in their appearance this vision or demonstration of power and dignity. She herself interprets or decodes it. In effect, she finds affirmation in the natural world for her own behaviour and beliefs. It's a very potent and pointed sort of pathetic fallacy. The fish symbolise Miss La Trobe's idea that human beings are multifarious creatures, mobile and multicoloured, not whole and clearly outlined, but comprised of 'scraps, orts and fragments': they are 'blotched' – scarred and imperfect. Yet just as a fish might be caught and may appear powerless, cut up and presented on a plate with potatoes and a sprig of

parsley, but still has another area of power in its ability to poison those who eat it, so characters like Lucy, even though apparently confined and defeated within the strictures of conventional rules and mores, also have hidden and alternative powers; other aspects of their natures to draw on, like the power of poison stored, hidden, in the fish. The fish carry this moral weight easily, and provide a mirror which reflects back to Lucy her own trampled-on beliefs.

Imagining having to argue her vision (articulated as 'fish have faith') and defend it to Bart, Lucy, in a laconic and coded debate appears to defeat Bart. Certainly, she has the last word, so we may assume that the ambiguously placed 'silenced' refers not to Lucy but to her brother and his voice of reason. Bart is described as carrying the torch of reason 'till it went out in the darkness of the cave' while Lucy's name and mysterious power implies light. More important than the fact that Bart's thoughts have been silenced is the fact that he has largely disappeared from Lucy's mind, so that she is indulging in the freedom of her own realm, and is not focused on subverting Bart's – although her innovative powers are subversive of all he stands for.

In itself, as a metaphor, water conveys the subtlety, dynamism and the paradoxical strength of something gentle and fluid, which illuminates the processes of allegory and transformation running through Woolf's writing. Water has a traditional association with both sacred and profane religious rites and mythology (witch trials, voyages out, baptisms, sacred ablutions, Christ's washing his disciples' feet, the water pouring from Christ's chest as he died on the cross, the miraculous transformation of water into wine) as well as with power exercised by women, epitomised by the breaking of the waters before birth and stigmatised in myths about witchcraft. It is a metaphorical sea; one from which the flower fantasy in Mrs Dalloway springs, and which produces 'a wave which [Clarissa] let

flow over her and surmount that hatred, that monster, surmount it all; and it lifted her up and up' (MD, 16). This has an almost sexual rhythm to it – which contrasts with the fact that when Clarissa is snubbed or degraded she feels useless and, specifically, sexually inadequate. Bernard's resurgence on a wave of defiant ecstasy in The Waves has a similar sexual energy about it, connecting the power of water with sexual power: 'something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back' (W, 247). Miss La Trobe and Lucy in Between the Acts are both associated with water imagery, a link which serves to confirm other connections between them, such as the idea that each is some sort of radical teacher, and each has the power to make others see. In The Voyage Out, To the Lighthouse and The Waves, oceanic imagery is used to underline themes of pattern and movement in life. In Mrs Dalloway, Clarissa and Septimus are also linked by water imagery in the idea of the 'plunge', which is euphoric and freeing, as well as the lark (which insists upon the bird imagery connecting a chain of the 'fallen' in that novel and across Woolf's writing). Related to this metaphorical sea is the idea of mist in Mrs Dalloway : a powerful net 'laid out like mist between people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself' (MD, 11). Through this metaphor, birds, air and the fluidity of the sea are connected, part of Woolf's reinforcement of important symbols through chains of imagery; a constant underlining of connections made at the metaphorical level. Edward Bishop aligns this image with the novel's 'free indirect discourse'.[44] The mist is, like birds, exalted, and like the sea, fluid. Like birds, too, is the mist's ability to take refuge in trees – and to be supported by them. Again, vegetation is part of the 'imagistic formula' which liberates oppressed human beings.

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[44] Edward Bishop, Virginia Woolf, (London: Macmillan, 1991) 49

Mirrors, glass and windows are crucial in Woolf's allegorical scheme, as they are in Plath's. 'The mirrors are filling with smiles' amid a smoke-screen kindness and the demolition of a marriage in one of Plath's poems[45] and Esther in The Bell Jar (an image Plath found in Woolf's journals) sees unrecognisable aspects of herself in mirrors, and reacts xenophobically to the foreign and uncharted territories of her own psyche. Repeatedly, she fails even to recognise herself in the mirror, especially when she is 'ugly' in the conventional terms strangling her life – when she is drunk, vomiting, scarred and bruised. Mirrors and sheets of glass are used by characters to distance themselves from themselves so that they can see more clearly. They are an oracular focal point, mysteriously at once objective and subjective, providing insight and allowing characters to be sealed off, temporarily, from pain.

Isabella in Between the Acts looks at herself with a similar objective scrutiny, evaluating herself as wife, mother and lover as she brushes her hair in front of the mirror and fantasises about love. She is on several occasions cut off from her children by panes of glass. Septimus Warren Smith has forgotten how to feel, and notices that 'beauty [is] behind a pane of glass' for him (MD, 114).

Often, though, through glass, things are magically transformed, and the effect on those who need a new way of looking at a situation is like a beautiful hallucination. In a sense windows and mirrors are crystal balls, and looking into them inspires hope and courage as they contain their own beautiful and mysterious versions of reality. For a child, like Rhoda in The Waves, a vision through glass becomes the sole reality, such as when 'the purple light... in Miss Lambert's ring passes to and fro across the black stain on the white page of the Prayer Book. It is a vinous, it is an

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[45] Sylvia Plath, 'Kindness', Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems, (London: Faber and Faber, 1981) 269. 'Kindness glides about my house./Dame Kindness, she is so nice!/The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke/In the windows, the mirrors/Are filling with smiles.'

amorous light' (W, 25). In Between the Acts Lucy leads William to a high window overlooking the garden and the assembled visitors to show him a new way of seeing a group of people who are hurting and excluding him. Through the window, he soars above those dwarfed below him, 'detached' (BA, 66) triumphant and omniscient. Conversely, when the outside light fades in the evening, and Isabella can no longer see through the window the roses she clings to as emblems of beauty and growth, Lucy brings her mind back inside to a splash of roses printed on wallpaper to restore her 'faith' in imaginative visions. Related is the idea of the 'illusionist' or magician, who can recreate and recreate again any situation, and who in Woolf's novels wields enormous power – a 'moral weight' – from a position of little external power. Lucy Swithin is one example, Miss La Trobe another and Clarissa Dalloway another. Clarissa is described by Mrs Hilbery (who has herself been conjured from Night and Day by Woolf) as a 'magician' (MD, 250), and illusions and visions are part of the power Clarissa exercises to make her party something far more important than a mere social gathering.

Apart from their association with illusion, perspectives and magic, windows are also located on the boundary between inside and outside; entrapment and freedom; the architectural/social order and the natural one beyond it. Theirs is a blurry domain, a marginal space to which numerous marginalised characters are drawn. Lucy, Isabella, William and Clarissa are all drawn to hover at windows, mostly looking from outside, but once or twice looking in, as Clarissa does with the woman neighbour across the street, whose life seems potentially to prophesy Clarissa's future, or when the children in The Waves see a woman writing through a window and have their lives transformed by this vision of artistic expression and the new world of possibilities it opens to them: 'The lady sits between the two long windows, writing... We are the first to come

here. We are the discoverers of an unknown land' (W,12). In Mrs Dalloway, Septimus' fall from a window, his 'plunge' (MD, 242), takes the imaginative flights of these characters from the purely mental realm into a physical enaction of a liberating fantasy.

Woolf's windows are often covered by flirting, animated curtains and blinds, with energy breathed into them by playful breezes. She writes that her own earliest memory is of the flapping of a blind in the nursery at St Ives, and hearing the sound of 'waves breaking, one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach; and then breaking, one, two, one two, behind a yellow blind. It is of hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out. It is of lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive' (MB, 73). Blinds and curtains flap, animated by spirits, sprites, goddesses and shapeless demons throughout Woolf's writing. In Between the Acts as William is revived by Lucy he is saluted by presences from Lucy's world of imaginative beauty and play: 'a breeze blew, and all the muslin blinds fluttered out, as if some majestic goddess, rising from her throne among her peers, had tossed her amber-coloured raiment, and the other gods, seeing her rise and go, laughed, and their laughter floated her on' (BA, 66-7). At Clarissa's party in Mrs Dalloway, just as Clarissa despairs about the direction the party is taking, 'the curtain with its flights of birds of Paradise blew out again' and she knows then that 'it wasn't a failure after all! it was going to be all right now – her party. It had begun. It had started.' (MD, 223) The function of blinds and curtains seems to be to secure the borders of inside and outside, yet the most consistent image is of the violation of these borders by spritely and subversive joyous forces, which lift the light fabrics of demarcation to dispute the definitions they represent, just as the imagination can.

Woolf's sensitive characters resort to these imaginative powers because they feel exquisitely vulnerable, and intolerably oppressed. They feel that they have no access to, or that they detest, conventional forms of authority. The pressures they face are often overwhelming, despite the fact that they tend to be intangible and invisible. Bernard, in The Waves, remembers the moment in which he became aware of 'the presence of those enemies who change, but are always there; the forces we fight against' (W, 201). Later, he conjures them more vividly:

> the inmates, those old half-articulate ghosts who keep up their hauntings by day and night; who turn over in their sleep, who utter their confused cries, who put out their phantom fingers and clutch at me as I try to escape – shadows of people one might have been; unborn selves. There is the old brute, too, the savage, the hairy man who dabbles his fingers in ropes of entrails; and gobbles and belches, whose speech is gutteral, visceral... He squats in me.
>
> (W, 241)

The primitivism of this imagery is striking. As Bernard's mood darkens, and he deplores life – 'Lord, how unutterably disgusting life is!... Disorder, sordidity and corruption surround us... Always it begins again; always there is the enemy; eyes meeting ours, fingers twitching ours' (W, 244), he takes the novel's central and most positive image and recreates it, so that it too becomes an emblem of the power of the unseen antagonist: 'Once more, I who had thought myself immune, who had said "Now I am rid of all that", find the wave has tumbled me over, head over heels, scattering my possessions, leaving me to collect, to assemble, to heap together, summon my forces, rise and confront the enemy' (W, 244).

In To The Lighthouse Lily Briscoe feels, as she tries to paint, 'the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child.'[46] She is described as clutching her vision to her breast, 'struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage' while 'a thousand forces did their best to pluck [it] from her' (TL, 28). As for articulating this sense of oppression any further, her thoughts echo the Prufrockian refrain 'That is not what I meant at all./That is not it, at all.../It is impossible to say just what I mean!'[47] Lily yearns to say 'This is what I see; this is what I see', but collapses into thinking 'One could not say what one meant'. As well as being invisible and intangible, the pressures characters like Lily face are also virtually inarticulable. The 'demons', 'terrific odds' and 'thousand forces' which Lily struggles with threaten her 'courage' and 'her vision' (TL, 28), while Clarissa Dalloway feels that it is 'the privacy of the soul' that must be fought for, and defended against the assaults of the world. Clarissa thinks of her opponents in this struggle as 'those spectres with which one battles in the night... those spectres who stand astride us and suck up half our life-blood, dominators and tyrants' (MD, 14-15). Disturbing her equilibrium from within is a 'brutal monster'; a 'brute' which has 'power to make her feel scraped, hurt in her spine'. As well as causing her physical pain, it can make 'all pleasure in beauty, in friendship, in being well, in being loved and making her home delightful, rock, quiver, and bend as if indeed there was a monster grubbing at the roots, as if the whole panoply of content were nothing but self love!' (MD, 15). Clarissa is dogged by the apprehension that 'something awful was about to happen' (MD, 3) and

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[46]Virginia Woolf, To the Lighthouse (1927: Oxford, World's Classics, 1992) 28. Cited as TL in the text.

[47] T.S. Eliot 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Collected Poems 1909-1962, (1963; London, Faber and Faber, 1985) 13.

Septimus Warren Smith is similarly conscious of a sense that 'the world has raised its whip; where will it land?'

For Woolf's adults – with the exception of Septimus Warren Smith – there is a vacillation between acknowledging such thoughts and denying them. Mrs Ramsay in To the Lighthouse feels, at moments, that it is 'this thing that she called life' that must be kept at bay, since it is something 'terrible, hostile, and quick to pounce on you if you gave it a chance.' In particular she fears the losses her children will have to sustain in life, but even as she thinks this she rouses herself to defeat the threat, saying, as she brandishes 'her sword at life, nonsense. They will be perfectly happy.' (TL, 82). In contrast, Mr Ramsay's approach to living, although not unaware of its difficulty, is a fearless and factual one. He approaches the question bluntly and quite confidently: 'life is difficult; facts uncompromising; and the passage from that fabled land where our brightest hopes are extinguished, our frail barks flounder in darkness... one that needs, above all, courage, truth, and the power to endure'(TL, 9).

For children in Woolf's writing, there is no such recoil from the recognition of oppression; no such vacillation, and certainly no such aloofness from fear. The landscape Woolf's children inhabit is the antithesis of the controlled, repressed and contained bourgeois world of tea tables and spice buns – the Victorian and Edwardian society in which their parents live. The world of Woolf's children is one of pure sensation and atavistic impulses, and of the unfiltered experience of emotion. It is a world filled with monsters and amorphous presences; a primitive world populated by immense versions of the sprites, spectres and forces with which Woolf's sensitive adults wrestle. It is a world transformed by the imagination of the child into one in which normal hierarchies are reversed, and the small and insignificant is given a voice and presence. Emotionally, the experience of children in Woolf's writing is extremely

intense. For example, as his father taunts him and destroys illusions created by his mother, James Ramsay in To The Lighthouse thinks 'Had there been an axe handy, a poker, or any weapon that would have gashed a hole in his father's heart and killed him, there and then, [he] would have seized it' (TL, 8) so overwhelming is his sense of anger and violation. Woolf's children experience the full effects of the assaults of the world – they know no distinction between the assaults of the 'real' world and those subtler imaginative horrors their parents try to deride and diffuse.

In the autobiographical essay 'A Sketch of the Past' Woolf writes about the intensity of childhood feelings, and the sense of herself as a child 'hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of the feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture. Perhaps this is characteristic of all childhood memories. Later we add to feelings much that makes them more complex; and therefore less strong; or if not less strong, less isolated, less complete.' (MB, 76). 'In the beginning there was the nursery' thinks Bernard in The Waves, and Woolf returns again and again to the nursery to examine children's formative emotional experiences.

The memories, however, are rarely as idyllic as this recollection of pure ecstasy. More often the landscape of the nursery is a Gothic one, and its memories are terrifying, such as Woolf's own childhood dream of 'looking in a glass when a horrible face – the face of an animal – suddenly showed over my shoulder'(MB, 78). As with Bernard's image of the fears which haunt him, this bestial image suggests the primitivism of the child's sense of terror. This memory of childhood fear, of the monstrous forces both within the self and beyond it, represented by the 'other face in the glass' relates to another memory; that of unbearable shame associated with being sexually assaulted as a small child 'I remember resenting, disliking it – what is the word for so dumb and mixed a feeling?' (MB, 78).

Another memory involves an incapacitating terror of stepping over a puddle of water and 'the dumb horror [which] came over me... that helpless sadness; that collapse I have described before; as if I were passive under some sledge-hammer blow; exposed to a whole avalanche of meaning that had heaped itself up and discharged itself upon me, unprotected, with nothing to ward it off' (MB, 87). This is another version of epiphany, a negative one, and one to which the sensitive in Woolf's writing are often exposed. The divinity at the heart of the traditional epiphany is replaced by the manifestation of a demon. Occasionally positive but mainly negative, Woolf says that 'these moments of being of mine were scaffolding in the background; were the invisible and silent part of my life as a child' (MB, 82). A rhythm of assaults and recuperation through epiphanies underlies her characters' lives in just such a way; scaffolding to the structure of their experience. While Woolf remembers being scared of the shadows flung up from a flickering fire in the nursery as a child, Rose Pargiter in The Years lies awake terrified in the nursery at night, seeing 'an oval white shape [hanging] in front of her dangling, as if it hung from a string... It bubbled with grey spots that went in and out. She woke completely. A face was hanging close to her as if it dangled on a bit of string. She shut her eyes; but the face was still there, bubbling in and out, grey, white, purplish and pock-marked... She was alone with something horrible'.[48] Cam Ramsay in To The Lighthouse responds with a similar terror to a boar's skull hanging on the wall of the nursery. The skull is inescapable, nailed to the wall, and besides, her brother James won't let anyone touch it. With its horns 'branching at her all over the room' (TL, 154), Cam thinks of the skull as predatory and malicious, casting its

[48]Virginia Woolf, The Years (1937; Oxford, World's Classics, 1992) 38-39. Cited as Y in the text.

shadows everywhere. Mrs Ramsay transforms the skull, covering it with her shawl, and with images of innocent play:

> how the fairies would love it; it was like a bird's nest; it was like a beautiful mountain such as she had seen abroad, with valleys and flowers and bells ringing and birds singing and little goats and antelopes... she must shut her eyes and go to sleep and dream of mountains and valleys and stars falling and parrots and antelopes and gardens, and everything lovely'
>
> (TL, 155)

Louise DeSalvo argues that this moment is one of the child learning the lesson of repression – specifically the mother teaching the daughter to accept brutality: 'She covers [the skull] up, just as she tries to get Cam not only to cover up her own fears, but to convert them into opposite feelings. By telling Cam that the fairies would love the skull she is training Cam to deny her fears rather than to express them'. [49] Although DeSalvo's argument is a compelling one in terms of the historical and sociological context of the novel, the larger metaphorical scheme of Woolf's writing suggests another reading of the nature of this moment and the lesson it contains. The covering of the skull with the shawl is a triumph of feminine imagination over the apparently intractable assaults of the world. It exemplifies again the possible imaginative retreat, through epiphany, from the terrifying and oppressive shapes of the world by means of fantasy. Mrs Ramsay uses imaginative energy to remake the scene for her daughter, teaching her not to let the world bully her, but to take hold of painful experience and remodel it, just as Clarissa does in the florist's shop. Mrs Ramsay leads Cam from a static and seemingly inescapable position of victimisation to a more powerful arena in which invisible energies are able to diminish what would appear from a realistic

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[49] Louise DeSalvo, Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work, (London: Women's Press, 1989) 177.

and materialistic point of view to be an immovable threat. This lesson recurs throughout Woolf's work and culminates in Between the Acts with the character of Lucy Swithin who is a sort of mentor – not unlike the magi in the initial Christian epiphany. Lucy seeks out and teaches those who are tormented within the hegemonic economy. Lucy's lessons, like Mrs Ramsay's in this formative moment for Cam, are all about expression and dynamism – about having the mobility to view the world of objects and coercion from a different and radical perspective, and learning the power to refuse to be bullied. In this sense, Woolf depicts the scene between Mrs Ramsay and Cam as a moment of illumination in which the daughter is taught a means of escaping a repressive situation. Instead of being about repression then, as DeSalvo suggests, the emphasis of the moment is on radical transformation, and escaping repression.

These intense childhood experiences of victimisation and the possibility for recuperation continue into the adult lives of the sensitive in Woolf's writing. These characters are oppressed not just by spectres and visions, but also by physical objects. In terms of the subliminal allegorical economy, through which Woolf locates characters within landscapes and architectures symbolic of their emotional existences, oppressed characters experience landscapes alive with menace and a world of aggressive objects. Woolf's comments in her essay '22 Hyde Park Lane' about the folding doors in her family home which seal off the 'dark and agitated' from the façade of cheerful family life – the 'oval tea table with its pink shell full of spice buns' (MB, 179) suggest her sense of the contributions to morality made by furniture and household objects. The world of her writing is one of Vivas' 'full axiological density'.[50]

In Between the Acts Isabella feels harassed by objects and the architecture. Just as she associates the moment of falling in love with her

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50 Vivas, 278.

husband with his catching a salmon and her relinquishing power, so images of her married life play on ideas of the entrapment and incapacitation involved in love, expanding the image so that Isabella, unlike the salmon which is only caught once, endures a landscape of inexorable entrapments – a Gothic labyrinth of exclusion, rejection and isolation (although, to pursue the metaphor, Lucy stands as a sort of Ariadne holding out the golden thread should Isabella decide to take it). Thus the symbolic salmon, earlier an image of phallic power and a trophy of romantic love, shows another face in the Janus-like way that Woolf's objects tend to, and Isabella finds herself perpetually hooked and struggling for freedom, torn from her natural element and caught as the fish is between her husband's thighs.

As Isabella brushes her hair in her bedroom in an upper storey of her husband's house, she becomes a Rapunzel-like figure, enclosed in the glass of the room's windows, armed only with an embossed hairbrush, with which she taps on the panes, trying to get the attention of her children, who are playing in the garden below. The garden, in this fabulous moment seems to Isabella like an island of childhood: 'Isolated on a green island, hedged about with snowdrops, laid with a counterpane of puckered silk, the innocent island floated under her window'(BA, 13). Like Clarissa Dalloway, whose bedroom seems to her a tower, or the chaste cell of a nun, Isabella's bedroom is cut off from the world, and she feels that she is on another planet, reeling away from the island of green lawn on which her children are playing. Since she is treated as having fulfilled her only useful function in producing heirs, these images of panes of glass severing the connection between her and her children poignantly suggest her incapacitation within the patriarchal household.

Windows, which can provide a longed for isolation for characters, can also be menacing, just as other objects in Woolf's writing can be

invested with both positive and negative energies. Here, they constantly intervene between Isabella and her desires, until in one of the novel's last images, she finds herself encased in the glass of a bay window yearning for the roses outside which she knows it is too late to touch. In this last scene of the text, she feels menaced by a Gothic architecture of 'great hooded chairs' which become enormous as she watches them (BA, 197). As well as panes of glass, newspapers isolate her, and she sits in rooms with men screened off by the financial and political pages. When she is accepted into conversation with these men, such as Bart, she is victimised in another way – 'pegged down on a chair, like a captive balloon, by a myriad of hair-thin ties into domesticity'(BA, 17).

Even her clothes conspire to humiliate her, as she stumbles into the drawing room at night in a dressing gown with her hair in pigtails, and finds that there are visitors, including the man she is in love with, Rupert Haines. Clarissa Dalloway is similarly trapped in clothes that present her to the world as 'a little skimpy... schoolgirlish' (MD, 7). Like Isabella, her home is a prison. She is secluded in her bedroom by her husband and doctors who feel that this will heal her (and the whole question of the nature of Clarissa's 'illness' is an unresolved one anyway). She can't reach her daughter since the green mackintosh of Miss Kilman looms between her and Elizabeth. She makes her way through London's maze of traffic and people, her movements controlled by the 'carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs' which again intervene between her and her desires. At times, for such characters, who are exquisitely sensitive to their environments, the whole landscape seems to mock and overwhelm them. Clarissa feels that she is reduced to 'nothing- nothing at all' (MD, 13) while Septimus is so overcome by the beauty and terror he sees around him that he has to close his eyes: 'But he would not go mad. He would shut his

eyes; he would see no more' (MD, 28). With everything around them – even windows, clothes, hairbrushes and hats – menacing them, and spectres and sprites taunting them all day and in their dreams, these characters enter a mire of despair, and dread the thought of having to continue battling against a conspiracy that seems to involve every object, every moment.

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The question of the nature of the pressures faced by people in Woolf's writing leads to the question of who is victimised by them. Writing about Septimus Smith in Mrs Dalloway, Suzette A. Henke considers the 'rituals of war and coercion that victimise the young, the helpless, the visionary and the deviant' which Woolf's writing dramatises.[51] Young, made helpless by despair and disillusion, visionary *and* deviant, Septimus epitomises the sort of person who is bullied in the society Woolf writes about. He is considered mad, although his madness actually involves an uncanny clarity of vision and a lucid subversiveness. Roger Poole's suggestion that Septimus is not mad at all, but articulates a vision which society has trained itself to ignore, is a compelling one.[52] A remark made in D.H. Lawrence's John Thomas and Lady Jane also provides an interesting interpretative possibility for dealing with Septimus' 'madness' within the society Woolf depicts as decaying and sick itself. The narrator of Lawrence's novel notes: 'Our society has one horrible cancer, one fatal disease: the disease of acquisitiveness. It is the same disease in the mass as in the individual. The people who count as

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[51] Henke, 126.
[52] Roger Poole, The Unknown Virginia Woolf, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1978) 185.

normal are perhaps even more diseased than those who are neurotic. The neurotic at least shows that something is wrong. But the normal consider the very disease part of their normality.'[53]

Septimus is homosexual, though he represses this, and lives in a heterosexual marriage. Septimus has this repressed homosexuality in common with many of Woolf's sensitive characters, including William Dodge in Between the Acts, who is also married, and Septimus' unlikely doppelgänger, Clarissa Dalloway, who has abandoned her passionate love for Sally Seton to marry Richard Dalloway. Repressing their natural sexual inclinations results in misery for all these characters, and the most they can hope for seems to be the sort of moment of epiphany Clarissa experiences when she seeks comfort in her thoughts of 'this falling in love with women'(MD, 41). Society at large simply sees this homosexuality as deviant, and Septimus is chastised by the doctors for, amongst other things, not getting on with his heterosexual life with his beautiful wife Lucrezia: 'And next time Doctor Holmes came he hoped to find Septimus out of bed and not making that charming little lady his wife anxious about him' (MD, 120).

Septimus is neither wealthy nor influential, nor is he worldly, yet he becomes, as Henke puts it, a 'traditional scapegoat, the Christological figure whose martyrdom is precipitated by the "sins of the fathers"'.[54] This kind of paradox – that the weak are most viciously oppressed – mirrors the paradox that these same characters find relief and empowerment through such apparently flimsy means as the 'most gentle and evanescent of moments'. Other scapegoats include openly homosexual characters such as Miss La Trobe in Between the Acts, and Louis in The Waves, who also have in common the fact that they are writers whose work unsettles

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[53]D.H. Lawrence, John Thomas and Lady Jane, (1972; Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1980) 105-106.
[54] Henke, 126.

its readers, causing people to reject them with the protest 'Must we submit to this malicious indignity?' (BA, 167). Neither has much status or money; each struggles to voice a vision, and wrestles with despondency when he or she feels a sense of failure, and yet each suffers from scathing public derision. Miss La Trobe thinks that 'her gift meant nothing... she had suffered triumph, humiliation, ecstasy, despair – for nothing' (BA, 188-9), while Louis feels that 'the streamers of my consciousness waver out and are perpetually torn and distressed by their disorder... I am conscious of flux, of disorder; of annihilation and despair' (W, 75). Their feelings of despair that they will never be understood are perhaps marginally less overwhelming than those experienced by characters who know that they lack inspiration to voice their feelings through art, such as Bernard, who realises 'I shall fail and shall leave nothing behind me but imperfect phrases littered with sand' (W, 74). Louis and Miss La Trobe, on the other hand, for all their insecurity, have the power to '[twitch] the invisible strings', as Lucy Swithin puts it, when she thanks Miss La Trobe for stirring in her 'her unacted part' (BA, 137).

Lucy Swithin in Between the Acts is another target in Woolf's writing because, as the pun on her name suggests ('Lucy's within') she has an intense inner life and is a kind of visionary, inspiring the defeated and weakened around her to look at things from a new and radical angle, ignoring the outside, victimising world. She is universally ridiculed, from the moment her maid brings her a cup of tea in the morning and silently addresses her as 'Batty' (BA, 8), by the villagers who refer to her as 'Old Flimsy' (BA, 24), and incessantly by her brother Bartholomew, whose 'irreverences' and 'blow[s] at her faith' (BA, 22-23) dog her. Other unlikely characters who are thumped into place by those who cherish and abide by the status quo include the unhappy William Dodge in Between the Acts, who is baptised into a world of sadistic repression when his peers discover

his homosexuality and pour a bucket of dirty water over him (BA, 67), and Isabella Oliver, who shares his sense of alienation, and feels him to be 'the lip reader, her semblable, her conspirator, a seeker like her after hidden faces' (BA, 187). These two share a conspiracy based mainly on their common misery, and are strikingly defenceless against the blows they receive. As Septimus Warren Smith sees it in Mrs Dalloway, this defencelessness is precisely the reason for their victimisation: 'human cruelty – how they tear each other to pieces. The fallen, he said, they tear to pieces' (MD, 184).

Throughout her work, Woolf marks out characters into those who love literature and those who don't have any feeling for it. The former group are another class of victims in Woolf's writing, haloed as they are by their sensitivity. In Between the Acts, there is a scene in which Isabella and William forge their bond when they recite Keats together, combining to express their sense of victimisation, but also their kinship in the quest for an escape: '"Fade far away and quite forget what thou amongst the leaves has never known... The weariness, the torture and the fret"'. Another character with 'Shakespeare by heart' (BA, 50) is Clarissa Dalloway, who rallies herself by repeating 'Fear no more the heat o' the sun/ Nor the furious winter's rages' (MD, 11). Septimus Smith discovers feeling in himself when he studies Shakespeare under Miss Isabel Poole, who lights 'in him such a fire as burns only once in a lifetime, without heat, flickering a red-gold flame infinitely ethereal and insubstantial' (MD, 111) over the moment of his introduction to literature and passion. Sally Seton introduces Clarissa to a similarly heady mixture of sensuality and literature, feeding her William Morris, Plato and Shelley until Clarissa, coming to meet Sally, finds herself voicing Othello's thought that 'if it were now to die 'twere now to be most happy' (MD, 44).

On the other hand, characters with no passion are those who scoff at literature as Mrs Manresa does in Between the Acts, with her exasperated sighs of 'Quite beyond me!... Much too clever! May I help myself?' (BA, 50) as she shovels sugar into her coffee to escape the world of the imagination, which unsettles her belief in the invincibility and absoluteness of the physical and material world. Similarly Dr Holmes in Mrs Dalloway opens Septimus' copy of Antony and Cleopatra absentmindedly, then pushes it aside impatiently (MD, 119). When Septimus finds that he can no longer feel, and decides that 'the secret signal which one generation passes, under disguise, to the next is loathing, hatred, despair' (MD, 115), the tragedy for him is symbolised in his inability to discover any other message in literature any more: 'That boy's business of the intoxication of language – Antony and Cleopatra – had shrivelled utterly. How Shakespeare loathed humanity – the putting on of clothes, the getting of children, the sordidity of the mouth and the belly' (MD, 115).

Like the goat used in the ritual of the Yom Kippur, which was symbolically laden with the sins of the Israelites and sent into the wilderness to be destroyed, these characters – 'the young, the helpless, the visionary and the deviant' – are laden with the insults, mockery, taunts and expressions of rage of those who consider themselves to be a sort of moral and social 'centre', and marginalised. They are chosen for their vulnerability – they are all different and isolated for that difference; outsiders without the economic, political and sexual power by which their society quantifies human value. In terms of power, though, rather than being simply powerless, they are powerless in terms of the types of power available in the hegemonic economy. Since they exercise the sorts of alternative, imaginative, and transformative powers under discussion, they represent a realm of power opposite to that exercised by the centre. In this difference, they bring into question the absolute nature of the coercive

powers of the centre, and subvert the notion of the totality of their control. Thus, the assaults on these characters are ambivalently motivated. In part these people are despised and expendable scapegoats, while at the same time their existence and values unsettle the centre, which reacts by removing them through rejection and isolation.

Because the violence, harassment and neglect these scapegoats experience is exercised by the socially, economically and politically powerful (heads of households, doctors, politicians and aristocrats) it is usually violence which is socially unacknowledged or even condoned. Often it goes on at a subliminal level. These exercises of power have their own repertoire of objects and implements, which reflect their ideological background. Usually one of the main things they convey is economic power. In Mrs Dalloway, Sir William Bradshaw drives his 'low, powerful, grey' (MD, 123) motor car through the path of the insecurities of his suffering patients to demonstrate to them his success, and by extension the comfort brought (or bought?) by his philosophy of 'proportion'. One of his patients is Septimus Warren Smith, who sees that Sir William's parade of objects – his car, furs, fine clothes and wife – are being used to taunt him, recognising the subtle moment in his 'treatment' when 'the rack and thumbscrew are applied' (MD, 127). Bartholomew Oliver constructs a wall from the financial papers of the newspaper to shut out his lonely daughter-in-law Isabella, while her husband, Giles, feels empowered enough to embrace Mrs Manresa in his wife's sight as he puts 'his foot up on the edge of the running board' of another expensive car (BA, 187). Other recurrent examples of inanimate objects positioned to bully the weak are large houses, exquisite clothes and furs, and often they are associated with motifs such as silencing and humiliating dissidents into submission; suffocating, smothering and bullying them.

Jeanne Schulkind points out that there are two types of characterisation in Woolf's writing, and, arguably, it is partly the degree of attachment to the material world that distinguishes them. For Schulkind, Woolf's depiction of the first type of character involves fluid lines and mobility, while for the second she uses distinct and precise outlines. The latter group of characters, who are chiefly the exerters of coercive powers, are 'so encrusted with the trivia of daily life, so attached to objects and values which are in the last analysis irrelevant, or so imprisoned by their egocentricity that they are incapable of cutting themselves free from the material world.'[55] Arguably, their 'imprisonment' within this object-encrusted world is a willing one, since it is these very objects through which they wield their power. There seems to them to be little to be gained from dismantling what Lady Bradshaw describes as 'the wall of gold that was mounting between them and all shifts and anxieties' (MD, 123).

There are two main transgressions for which these victimised characters are bullied and punished – crimes of passion and crimes of voice – and often the two are linked. Clarissa Dalloway, Isabella Oliver, Septimus Warren Smith and William Dodge all fantasise about love outside their passionless marriages, yet none of these characters actually indulges in such 'illicit' love-making in the novels – their transgressions are imaginative ones, and their experience is of sexual isolation and the recession of sexual powers. It is ironic, then, that so many of the threats these characters face are distinctly sexual in their overtones, although they take place beneath a surface of polite social exchange, which is typically Victorian in its repression of desires. Both Hugh Whitbread and Peter Walsh mock Clarissa Dalloway's clothes as an indirect way of disparaging her sexuality – Hugh makes her feel reduced: 'a little skimpy... schoolgirlish... oddly conscious of her hat' (MD, 70), while Peter causes her

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[55] Schulkind, 25.

to want to 'hide her dress, like a virgin protecting chastity, respecting privacy' (MD, 51). Woolf herself remembers appearing before her half-brother in a dress of which he did not approve, and having him react with a look:

> which expressed not simply aesthetic disapproval; but something that went deeper. It was the look of moral, of social, disapproval, as if he scented some kind of insurrection, of defiance of his accepted standards. I knew myself condemned from more points of view than I could then analyse.
>
> (MB, 165)

Bartholomew Oliver sees his sister as so repulsive as an elderly woman that he is amazed that she ever had children, and Clarissa feels similarly marginalised by a society that measures women's worth by their sexual attractiveness, sensing that '[n]arrower and narrower her bed would be' (MD, 40). William Dodge endures a symbolic ejaculation of rage when his peers pour a bucket of water over his head to chastise him for his homosexuality, and he senses Giles Oliver's unspoken contemptuous dismissal of himself as 'a half-man... a flickering mind-divided little snake in the grass' (BA, 67).

In her study of the Stephen family and Woolf's literary response to it, Louise DeSalvo analyses the ways in which Victorian beliefs and habits fostered this sort of concealed persecution, and focuses on the media and public response to the Jack the Ripper murders to exemplify the disparity between the surface prudery of the society and its underside of perversion and fear. It is worth noting that Woolf's first cousin J.K. Stephen, a middle-class Cambridge educated and highly esteemed member of this influential family has been accused of being The Ripper, and that during the period of the murders he was a constant and menacing presence in the

house where the ten-year-old Virginia was living a lifestyle that has made its way into myth as an idyllic Victorian childhood.[56]

The covert message of the murders, according to historian Judith R. Walkovitz, is that 'the city is a dangerous place' for women who dare to enter it,[57] and this connects sexual persecution – whether overt or not – with some perceived adventuring or expression of independence on the part of the victim. Victim-blaming discourse surrounds the experience of sexual assault in all its forms from Victorian society to the present, and functions to attribute action to the victim, and mere reaction – usually depicted as relatively natural and blameless – to the person who has committed the crime. This theme of blame-shifting and blurring of categories of action and reaction runs through Woolf's treatment of the sexual threats, as well as many of the non-sexual threats, facing her non-conforming characters. Woolf captures the paradox of the superficially pristine society which contains depths of virulence and sadism in her descriptions in essays such as 'A Sketch of the Past' and '22 Hyde Park Gate.' She writes of the framework of Victorian society as filled with

> all kinds of minutely-teethed saws... the machine into which our rebellious bodies were inserted in 1900 not only held us tight in its framework, but bit into us with innumerable sharp teeth... Society in those days was a perfectly competent, perfectly complacent, ruthless machine. A girl had no chance against its fangs.
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> (MB, 166-171)

One example of subliminal sexual battle in Woolf's writing is the relationship between Peter Walsh and Clarissa Dalloway in Mrs Dalloway. At one stage, Clarissa, who is herself described early in the novel as cutting vigorously though dangerously 'like a knife' through the substance of

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[56]DeSalvo, 51-55.
[57] DeSalvo, 55.

London (MD, 10), finds herself alone with Peter, and discomforted when he produces his pocket knife, which has long been a habit of his. Immediately before his arrival Clarissa has embarrassed a servant by insisting on mending her own dress, which is made by a designer called Sally Parker, who manages to create dresses that could be worn at 'Hatfield, at Buckingham Palace' (MD, 10) despite her love of innovation and 'out-of-the-way things', a balance of interests suggesting Clarissa's own dealings with the Symbolic Order. (An interesting contrast with this is Woolf's own memory of a dress which was 'extreme... artistic... not what nice people thought nice' which set ringing in her repressive half-brother 'a thousand alarm bells'. Woolf remembers, with shame, '[knuckling] under to his authority' and never wearing the dress again'(MB, 166)).

Clarissa, in wearing such a dress and seeing herself as capable of being phallic (as the knife image suggests) acts in ways that call to mind Hélene Cixous' concept of the 'other bisexuality', one which is non-biological and non-essentialist, but relates instead to something that may be described as ideological orientation. This in turn relies on Derrida's concept of *différance* – and his criticism of binary logic, ideas which Toril Moi sees as undermining and subverting 'the comforting closure of the binary opposition'.[58] What is disconcerting to others about Clarissa is that she evades their categorisations – quite literally she is often neither one thing nor the other. In terms of her sexuality she represses her lesbianism yet has no active heterosexual life anymore, and in terms of class she is despised by those who consider her inferior (such as Lady Bruton) as well as by those who feel that she is a spoilt aristocrat (such as Miss Kilman). In more mystical or ideological terms, this same ambiguity persists,

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[58] Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory, (1985; London, Routledge, 1988) 107.

epitomised by her siding with Septimus against the very society for which she is holding a party when she hears of his suicide. In terms of the scene with Peter and the dress, the skirt of the dress has become detached from its waistband, and Clarissa is involved in stitching it back together, and restoring order, whilst trying to overcome her sexual fantasies about Sally Seton, which threaten to bring sexual chaos into her life, so the radical dress functions symbolically to suggest her ambivalence: she wants to preserve the radical statement of the dress, and to repress the chaos it could also symbolise and bring about.

The interaction between Peter and Clarissa is immediately both sexually charged, and about a lot more than just physical sexuality. Peter's arrival prompts Clarissa to hide the dress 'like a virgin protecting chastity, respecting privacy' (MD, 51), while being in Clarissa's presence causes Peter to take out his pocket knife and play with it. He points the knife at the dress, which Clarissa has invested with her chastity – which is immune to heterosexual activity anyway: she has a 'virginity preserved through childbirth' (MD, 40) since her sexuality is lesbian, and her experience is heterosexual – and she responds by opening a pair of scissors. The two blades of the scissors are, logically, twice as powerful as the single blade of his knife, though they don't require a victim to plunge themselves into to feel their strength, but can function autonomously. Symbolically, the knife and scissors are like the economies Irigaray contrasts in her essay 'Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un'. Irigaray argues that male and female *jouissance* – and by extension masculine and feminine economies – are essentially different because unlike male pleasure, which she sees as analogous to the phallus in its wholeness, a woman's sexual organs, and therefore her pleasure, are multiple. To continue this biological metaphor in a slightly different direction to the one Irigaray takes, woman's power, like her sexual pleasure, can operate internally –

'within herself she is already two-but not divisible into ones – who stimulate each other',[59] without needing another, while masculine varieties of power rely on the friction provided by others. The imaginative powers Woolf's characters utilise might therefore be described, in the terms of this metaphor, as autoerotic. Unlike the more common coercive powers which dominate, and rely on having a victim – or scapegoat – for their exercise, the imaginative powers Woolf is interested in are quite aloof from reality in the sense that their realm is a mental and imaginative one. When a Lucy Swithin or a Clarissa Dalloway transforms a menacing moment, what is remarkable is that no one else knows of the dramatic transformative power being exercised. The power is exquisitely subtle and delicate – and yet capable of completely altering a threatening situation. It requires neither victim nor other for its operation.

Scissors belong in the kitchen and, as in this case, the sewing basket, but they are a match for the more adventuring pocket knife, and since Peter probably hasn't understood the scissors' message that power can operate internally as well as externally, Clarissa asks him whether he remembers 'how the blinds used to flap at Bourton?' (MD, 53). Blinds flapping recur as an image of imaginative investment in inanimate objects, and they are associated with subtle powers, and with feminine spirits and goddesses. When Lucy Swithin shows the despondent William Dodge the powers available in this alternative economy, the moment is marked by a breeze which blows and 'all the muslin blinds fluttered out, as if some majestic goddess, rising from her amber throne among her peers, had tossed her amber-coloured raiment, and the other gods, seeing her rise and go, laughed, and their laughter floated her on' (BA, 66-7). Clarissa takes Peter into the past, into a moment when feminine power pervaded the landscape, and when he was in love with Clarissa and thus

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[59] Luce Irigaray, New French Feminisms, 99-106

in her power; he resists, and suddenly they are horses 'before a battle begins... paw[ing] the ground; toss[ing] their heads', challenging one another (BA, 57). When Peter refuses her this power in the present, by ridiculing her dress and telling her that he is 'in love with a girl in India' (BA, 57), Clarissa imaginatively seizes the knife, and shapes with it in three strokes the situation and the woman in India, but he wrests the knife back, paring his nails with it, upon which she cries, inwardly, 'For Heaven's sake, leave your knife alone!' (BA, 59), which ends the drama for the moment. Another version of the struggle occurs in James' mind in To the Lighthouse, when he is overwhelmed with rage about his father's oppression, and fantasises about stabbing him to death: 'striking his father to the heart' for crimes that are both phallic and knife-like, such as 'cutting off [his children's] right to speak'(TL, 248-9) and embodying 'that fierce sudden black-winged harpy, with its talons and its beak all cold and hard, that struck and struck at you' (TL, 248). James, in adulthood, sees that power has drained out of his father, and feels at the same moment the touch of 'the beak on his bare legs' (TL, 248), and now, possessed of the power of the beak, he thinks of stabbing his father with a knife, where earlier, feeling weaker (and less male) as a child, his chosen weapon had been a pair of scissors.

Hugh Whitbread in Mrs Dalloway is possessed by a similar 'beaked' and violent urge, and Clarissa's encounters with Hugh are imbued with a subliminal threat of sexual violence. Hugh is depicted as a sort of moral rapist, as well as someone who has, in the past, actually used unwanted sexual behaviour to daunt and silence a woman whose feministic views offend and threaten him. When Sally Seton argues that women should have votes, Hugh grabs her and kisses her violently as a 'punishment' (MD, 96), in an incident which foreshadows the images of sexual violence throughout Between the Acts, which are all linked to an agenda of

silencing women. Peter Walsh implicitly alludes to this streak of sexual violence in Hugh when he comments that 'the rascals who get hanged for battering the brains of a girl out in a train do less harm on the whole than Hugh Whitbread and his kindness!'(BA, 226).[60] Sylvia Plath's poem 'Kindness' is a more overt version of Peter's complaint that insincere kindness can have a sadistic underside, and is about controlling others. Like Plath in this poem, Woolf is concerned with socially ignored forms of violence – and worse, socially condoned and/or accepted forms. In Plath's writing the most stunning examples are of the covertly sadistic treatment of 'madness' (chiefly suicidal feelings) with isolation and electrotherapy, and one of the most striking examples in Mrs Dalloway is the psychiatric treatment Septimus Warren Smith receives at the hands of eminent doctors. This example shows that not all forms of socially condoned violence are subliminal and encoded. In Mrs Dalloway, Woolf examines the powerful and revered institutions which deliver this sort of bullying treatment at its most pernicious, purporting to act benevolently and with a humanitarian agenda, but actually sadistically exacerbating the pain felt by those they encounter.

Roger Poole considers this covert sadism in his study of Woolf and her writing. The preface to the third edition of his book The Unknown

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[60] In considering the characterisation of Hugh Whitbread in particular, it's worth pointing out the similarity between Hugh and Woolf's half brother George Duckworth, who was on one hand a Victorian gentleman who 'remembered the birthdays of aunts, and sent turtle soup to the invalids, and attended funerals, and took children to the pantomime – oh yes, whatever else George might be he was certainly a saint' and on the other hand bullied, dominated and sexually assaulted both Virginia and her sister Vanessa Stephen. Like Hugh, who is described as having 'the most extraordinary, the most natural, the most sublime respect for the British aristocracy of any human being ' (MB, 94), George had, according to Virginia, 'a curious inborn reverence for the British aristocracy' and a greediness in his eyes 'something obstinate and pertinaceous in their expression as if the pig were grouting for truffles with his snout and would by sheer persistency succeed in unearthing them.' Both men also insult women for the clothes they wear. (MB, 182-184). This is not to suggest something as simple as the idea that Hugh is George, but to point out that the similarities show that, for Woolf, certain attitudes and predilections go along with the natures of those who exercise sexual violence. Characterisation is thus part of the allegorical scheme at work.

Virginia Woolf deals with the treatment of victims of shell-shock and other casualties of the First World War, and compares their treatment with that given to women in the same period, who were generally diagnosed as hysterical. Poole's analysis tests Foucault's and R.D. Laing's suggestions that the diagnosis and treatment of mental illness is about fear, division and rejection. Poole draws on comments Foucault made in a lecture in 1970:

> Our society possesses yet another principle of exclusion; not another prohibition, but a division and a rejection. I have in mind the opposition: reason and folly. From the depths of the Middle Ages, a man was mad if his speech could not be said to form part of the common discourse of men. His words were considered null and void, without truth or significance... the madman's speech did not strictly exist... No doctor before the end of the eighteenth century had ever thought of listening to the content – how it was said and why – of these words; and yet it was these which signalled the difference between reason and madness. Whatever a madman said, it was taken for mere noise.

Foucault in turn stresses a debt to Nietzsche as the main 'philosopher of power', as he connects their considerations of language and psychiatry. He posits, for the first time, in 1978, the view that Woolf was never mad, but responding in a society which allowed her no voice to express the enormous pressures she faced as a child and woman in that Victorian society, and in particular within her own family, and that her words – and those of her 'mad' characters are never completely empty and insane. Of Septimus, Poole says:

> The mode of symbolic discourse used by Septimus is... disallowed... It is not as though Smith speaks stupidly, or dully, or incoherently. Everything he says has its point only too clearly made. Yet in the psychiatric situation, where his symbolic reference-system is refused and discounted, everything he says argues against his sanity, argues for his internment.[61]

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[61] Poole, xiii-xv, 193.

Dr Holmes is the first doctor to deal with Septimus Warren Smith when, after returning from the War, he begins to experience visions and depression. Holmes is a general practitioner, more interested in the body than the mind, and he has contempt for Septimus' condition, patronisingly diagnosing him (between symbolically dismembering Septimus by flirting with his wife Lucrezia and disparaging his great love, literature) as having 'nothing whatever seriously the matter with him'. Septimus, he assures Lucrezia, is just 'a little out of sorts' (MD, 27). He chides Septimus for upsetting his wife and suggests that he take up playing cricket: 'the very game... a nice out-of-door game' (MD, 32). This suggests his own anxiety that Septimus is too introspective and too cerebral, someone who is not conforming to the gender roles assigned to him by society, and that to recover from this wilful deviance he needs instead to lead a more masculine and physical life, with a sturdy (phallic, all-English) cricket bat in his hand, firmly grounded in the concrete world of outdoors and community, and prepared to smash away anything threatening the social stumps. Woolf is aware of the irony that such masculine cultures are underlined by their homoeroticism, and are thus a paradoxical treatment for suspected homosexuality. In The Waves, for example, boys lie on their stomachs in the grass reading poetry and watching a game of cricket, idealising the slightly older Percival as he fields, and most of them love him, in more and less homosexual ways. It is a moment that is a sort of male homosexual idyll, whilst it is also an Edenic garden of pre-sexual innocence and freedom from pain and guilt.

Agonising depression and anxiety can be cured by a good innings, Holmes' attitude suggests. Claire Tomalin emphasises the familiarity of this sort of brisk and insensitive attitude to Woolf, quoting Leonard Woolf's comment about his wife's search for help when she suffered from

mental illness and concomitant physical symptoms, including a persistent high temperature. One Harley Street doctor 'gave his three guineas worth of advice as he shook her hand in farewell: "Equanimity – equanimity – practice equanimity, Mrs Woolf." It was, no doubt, excellent advice, but, as the door closed behind us, I felt that he might just as usefully have said: "A normal temperature – ninety-eight point four – practice a normal temperature, Mrs Woolf."'[62] Septimus too is afraid and contemptuous at once, as he feels that 'human nature, in short, was on him – the repulsive brute, with the blood-red nostrils' (MD, 118). The physicality of the image underlines the ideological battle involved in Septimus' treatment, suggesting the hounding of the fleeing and swift by the tenacious and brutish, and the mind by the body; as well as, more generally, Septimus' sense of being prey rather than a patient.

Sir William Bradshaw is a more sophisticated version of Holmes, who is surrounded by more expensive objects, a title and the polished language of euphemism. Unlike Dr Holmes, who visits Septimus at home, Sir William has consulting rooms at his own home, so that, arriving, patients see first his home, then his car parked ostentatiously in front of it, symbolic of the other objects of power and impression they will see in his house, and filled with furs piled up in a display of opulence and plenitude:

> low, powerful, grey with plain initials interlocked on the panel, as if the pomps of heraldry were incongruous, this man being the ghostly helper, the priest of science; and, as the motor car was grey, so, to match its sober suavity, grey furs, silver grey furs were heaped in it, to keep her ladyship warm while she waited.
>
> (MD, 123)

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[62] Claire Tomalin, introduction to Mrs Dalloway, by Virginia Woolf, xiii.

Like other objects in Woolf's scheme, these furs have a darker side to their power, and the image suggests that they could come to life and smother Lady Bradshaw. While she waits in the car, Lady Bradshaw thinks, 'excusably, of the wall of gold, mounting minute by minute while she waited; the wall of gold that was mounting between them and all shifts and anxieties' (MD, 123). Although this image also suggests the possibility that the wall could come to trap her, for the Bradshaws, this rampart of objects and economic power creates stability, and blocks out change and powerlessness. In contrast, Septimus, Clarissa and others are characterised by movement and the very 'shifts and anxieties' Lady Bradshaw fears. For these characters, freedom and unfiltered experience are both repaid and paid for in emotional intensity; these characters are rewarded with exhilaration and joy, and haunted by unsettling feelings of vulnerability, depression, rage and anxiety. The price of repression – of building walls around oneself to close off painful experience – as both Clarissa and Septimus learn, is an inability to feel at all. Woolf herself identifies with the instability and overwhelming nature of full emotional experience, writing on one occasion 'I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream' (MB, 90). In the context of the marine imagery central to Woolf's allegorical scheme, where fish can be everything from saviours to victims, the ambivalence of the experience is clear.

Where Bradshaw is associated with his solid objects and static identity, and symbolised by his expensive car, filled with furs, sitting outside his house which is itself filled with portraits and 'valuable furniture' and leather upholstered armchairs, Septimus is described in poetic and airy terms, as a kaleidoscopic figure, made up of disparate and contradictory facets; multifarious and difficult to pin down:

> the most exalted of mankind; the criminal who faces his judges; the victim exposed on the heights; the fugitive; the drowned sailor; the poet of the immortal ode; the Lord who had gone from life to death... muttering messages about beauty.
>
> (MD, 126)

Part of Woolf's allegorical scheme is a setting up of twins, nemeses or doppelgängers in the text, and here, the two men instinctively recognise their opposite in the other. On Bradshaw, the tattered figure of Septimus makes 'a distasteful impression. For there was in Sir William, whose father had been a tradesman, a natural respect for breeding and clothing, which shabbiness nettled' (MD, 127). On a deeper level, Bradshaw fears Septimus's cerebral and imaginative powers, a fear which manifests itself as 'a grudge, deeply buried, against cultivated people who came into his room and intimated that doctors, whose profession is a constant strain upon all the highest faculties, are not educated men' (MD, 127). While Bradshaw appears unsettled by Septimus's lack of possessions and lack of respect for them, which indicates a different set of priorities to his own, Septimus sees the power of Bradshaw, and his cruelty, very much in terms of objects – in particular objects of torture: 'Once you fall... The rack and the thumbscrew are applied' (MD, 127). Plath echoes this knowledge of hidden objects of torture, describing in 'Daddy' a husband with 'a love of the rack and the screw'. In an earlier text, she captures the same paradox, writing of the objects associated with the punishment of electrotherapy as sacred icons, applied to a Christ-like lamb who is also, like Septimus' version of Christ, reviled: 'The crown of wire is placed on my head, the wafer of forgetfulness on my tongue'.[63] In each case brutality takes on socially respected forms and means, and becomes a ritual torture administered to the deviant.

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[63] Sylvia Plath, 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams', Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, (London: Faber and Faber, 1977) 33.

Sir William tells Lucrezia that he 'never spoke of "madness"; he called it not having a sense of proportion'(MD, 126), and he is obsessed with exerting his own authority in the interests of what he calls proportion. Septimus realises the violence of this approach, too, and sees Holmes and Bradshaw as cast in the same mould: 'Once you fall, Septimus repeated to himself, human nature is on you. Holmes and Bradshaw are on you. They scour the desert. They fly screaming into the wilderness. The rack and thumbscrew are applied. Human nature is remorseless'(MD, 127). The imagery is close to that surrounding Mr Ramsay in To the Lighthouse, which makes him into a monstrous bird hunting his children's hearts. In Sir William's case, the impulse behind this is centripetal, while what it tries to control is centrifugal. In drawing the world to them to homogenise it, such doctors are megalomaniacs, who use the rhetoric of patriotism as justification for their sadistic and imperialistic violence: 'Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion' (TL, 129). Woolf foreshadows satirical Orwellian descriptions of a dehumanising, ultimately powerful society which starves its dissidents into submission. Like Orwell's Oceania, the purportedly sane and prosperous English society Woolf describes is actually perverted and irrational, which is one of the reasons why Septimus' counterpointing madness remains heroic even after – and in a sense because of – his suicide. Interestingly, Winston Smith (and each of these Smiths is some sort of an everyman – Woolf tells us that 'London has swallowed up many millions of young men called Smith' (MD, 110)) sees himself specifically as mad for deviating from the course dictated to him. Just as Hugh has used violence to silence Sally and to force her to see his point of view and to follow it, so Bradshaw tries to tame Septimus.

Woolf parallels several forms of coercion with this. The first is imperialism, which also tries to 'colonise' and homogenise cultures which are different. In this novel and others, (The Waves, Night and Day) patronising remarks are made about India and Australia, as exiled petty government officials living in the colonies idealise England as the centre and foundation of order. When Louis in The Waves fears he will never be accepted because his father was a banker in Brisbane, he is affected by the imperialist distribution of power, which Gayatri Spivak alludes to when she comments that 'in terms of the hegemonic historical narrative, certain peoples have always been asked to cathect the margins so others can be defined as central.'[64] Elsewhere in Mrs Dalloway, Miss Kilman's religious propagandising, symbolised by her ostentatiously humble green mackintosh and omnipresent bible, is denounced as a similarly intolerant and unscrupulous use of power. Another analogy with Bradshaw's professional exercise of power is the demands he makes in his marriage. Although we are told that 'there had been no scene, no snap; only the slow sinking, water-logged, of her will into his' (MD, 131), the ensuing image of Lady Bradshaw's submerged will is chilling for its implications of cruelty: 'now, quick to minister to the craving which lit her husband's eye so oilily for dominion, for power, she cramped, squeezed, pared, pruned, drew back, peeped through' (MD, 131). The word 'dominion' implies a form of imperialism, so that Lady Bradshaw is another colony. The theatricality of this self-effacement, and the distortion of the image highlight Woolf's use of scale, size and perspective in her consideration – and exercise – of power. Again, while the predominant sense of the image is of Lady Bradshaw's diminished power, the technique points to a paradoxical strength and activity on the part of the shrinking woman.

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[64] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Strategy, Identity, Writing', The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues, ed. Sarah Harasym (London: Routledge, 1990) 40-41.

Such a woman makes herself not just small, but also a figure of horror and carnivalesque interest, just as Esther Greenwood and others of Plath's characters employ a paradoxically active and, in their case, vociferous, self-effacement. The technique is exactly that used to magnify women in Woolf's utopian fragment 'The Magic Garden', where women exist without oppression – and without men. In it, 'gigantic women' recline on lounges, eating strawberries and cream, contented 'as though they looked upon a vision of a jocund world'.[65]

To make room for Sir William and the objects that surround him Lady Bradshaw has to make herself an object which reflects well on him (her portrait or actual presence itself is always with him, like a very versatile accessory or ornament). The object she must become is an ever-diminishing one, so as to accommodate and complement her self-aggrandizing husband. Implicit in the image is her ultimate disappearance, although this suggestion of her gradual defeat is undercut by the activity, energy and adaptability involved in the act of changing to suit him, to evade his wrath and to survive. The female 'nothing' is, in Freudian terms, a lack, but in feminist re-readings of Freud, such as Irigaray's, it is something in itself, and something which defines the phallic, and without which the phallic cannot identify itself. As post-colonial theorists like Spivak point out, the Centre relies on the Other or the colony to delineate the parameters of its own identity just as the identity of the missionary is dependent on the continued existence of the very savages s/he wants to convert. The example of Lady Bradshaw's auto-annihilation can be read in this light as both positive and negative. Clarissa, though, recognising Lady Bradshaw's adaptability, but denouncing its reliance on others, sees her not so much as a person as a rather ridiculous performing seal swathed in objects and demanding

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[65]Virginia Woolf, 'Friendship's Gallery', Twentieth Century Literatures 25 (1979) 273-302.

satisfaction of its appetites: 'in grey and silver, balancing like a sea-lion at the edge of its tank, barking for invitations, Duchesses, the typical successful man's wife'(MD, 239).

Woolf draws ironically on the notion that madness is a form of possession; an idea which combines the worst of foolish medical and religious dogma, when she describes the process of Bradshaw's gaining control over others:

> And then stole out of her hiding-place and mounted her throne that Goddess whose lust is to override opposition, to stamp indelibly in the sanctuaries of others the image of herself. Naked, defenceless, the exhausted, the friendless received the impression of Sir William's will. He swooped; he devoured. He shut people up.
>
> (MD, 133)

This imagery is integrated with that elsewhere in the novel; the taking over is envisaged as a kind of rape, a form of violence that happens to the naked and defenceless. As they are throughout the novel, the sexual and oral are linked – rape is designed to 'shut people up', as Hugh 'shuts up' Sally, and, in Between the Acts, troopers 'shut up' the girl who has asked to see the horse with the green tail, which they have invented. When Woolf writes of the incestuous abuse she and her sister Vanessa suffered at the hands of her half-brother George Duckworth (and the act of writing is itself ultimately subversive of the control exerted by that rape, since it refuses silence. Woolf even delivered this essay and others on the subjects to the Memoir Club, which was made up of the Bloomsbury group, including Vanessa Bell, her husband Clive and sometimes-lover Duncan Grant and others[66]) she makes clear that the abuse often occurred after

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[66] The Memoir Club was formed in March 1920, and aimed to read and discuss each other's memoirs in 'absolute frankness'. Its members, according to Leonard Woolf's autobiography, were Vanessa and Clive Bell, himself and Virginia Woolf, Desmond and Molly MacCarthy, Virginia's brother Adrian Stephen, John Maynard Keynes, E.M. Forster, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, Saxon Sydney-Turner and Lytton Strachey. Jeanne Schulkind discusses the accuracy of this list, and the nature of the Club in an editor's note preceding '22 Hyde Park Gate' in Moments of Being, 175.

evenings out with George, at least one of which was ruined, according to Duckworth, by Virginia's open talk. 'George had always complained of Vanessa's silence. I would prove that I could talk. So off I started... [choosing] to discourse upon the need of expressing the emotions... I realised that I had committed some unspeakable impropriety... George... whispered in my ear in a voice of agony, 'They're not used to young women saying anything'(MB, 190). Roger Poole refers to R.D. Laing's sense of the 'explicit connection between the right to speak and the refusal of the right to remain silent... Almost at the same moment as Foucault, Laing is demonstrating the relation of power and servitude between those who are allowed to speak and those who desperately and vainly try to make themselves heard.'[67] This is illuminating in the context of George Duckworth's seemingly impossible demands of the Stephen sisters in public, but also as it applies to many of Woolf's characters.

Even before she hears of Septimus's suicide, Clarissa senses the destructive capabilities of Bradshaw, seeing him as 'obscurely evil, without sex or lust, extremely polite to women, but capable of some indescribable outrage – forcing your soul, that was it' (MD, 242). The negation is interesting here – a psychoanalytical reading underlines the fact that sex, lust and his attitude to women are foremost in Clarissa's mind as she attempts to articulate what it is that she fears and detests in Bradshaw. She shudders to think of Bradshaw's seeing her unhappy, and thinks that 'they make life intolerable, men like that' (MD, 241-2). An interesting analogy to this is a scene in The Voyage Out, in which Terence Hewlet, in a superficially romantic moment, demands that Rachel let him examine her face, and then declares:

> 'You're not beautiful... and your eyes too – they never see anything. Your mouth's too big, and your cheeks would be

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[67] Poole, xxi.

> better if they had more colour in them. But what I like about your face is that it makes one wonder what the devil you're thinking about – it makes me want to do that –' He clenched his fist and shook it so near her that she started back.
> (VO, 304)

As with Bradshaw, beneath a surface illusion lies a sinister contradiction – a scarcely veiled sadistic urge. Clarissa, although interested in some sort of manipulation of people (she herself admits to doing things 'to make people think this or that' (MD, 12)), abhors the coercion of conversion, and the destruction of 'the privacy of the soul' that goes with it (MD, 164). This thought relates primarily to Doris Kilman's desire to find religious converts, but also has implications for the type of conversion practised by Holmes and Bradshaw. It also interestingly illuminates Clarissa's own struggle, since Doris Kilman is probably a lesbian[68], and Clarissa is reminded by her of her own 'conversion' to marriage and heterosexuality: 'The cruellest things in the world, she thought, seeing them clumsy, hot, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulous, dressed in a mackintosh coat, on the landing; love and religion. Had she ever tried to convert anyone herself?' (MD, 164)

After Septimus's suicide, which is epiphanic and absolving in the terms of the novel's motifs,[69] even his wife Lucrezia is able to rejoice that he and she have triumphed over this sort of twisted power:

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[68] Her name alone suggests this. As Umberto Eco suggests, this sort of thing is unlikely to be accidental. He helpfully considers the idea in his essays in Interpretation and Overinterpretation, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992).

[69] Suzette A. Henke sees Septimus as 'the Christ-figure sacrificed for the sins of mankind – for cruelty, egoism and authoritarian brutality. A victim of the Great War, he is doomed to expiate the sins of the grey-haired men in Whitehall who sentenced him to battle.' Henke, 134.

> '[she] was a flowering tree; and through her branches looked out the face of a lawgiver, who had reached a sanctuary where she feared no-one... a miracle, a triumph, the last and greatest... judges [Holmes and Bradshaw] were; who mixed the vision and the sideboard; saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted. Over them she triumphed.'
>
> (MD, 193)

Lucrezia distinguishes herself from the likes of Holmes and Bradshaw by contrasting the objects associated with them – they mix 'the vision and the sideboard', suggesting their attachment to the world of objects and the prestige they bring, while she is herself transformed into an emblem of natural freedom and flourishing; the flowering tree. She is outside, having escaped their attempts to catch her and imprison her with them, indoors, where their sorts of power reign.

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If the lives of those who exercise coercive powers are object-encrusted: smothered in ermine, hemmed in by austere furniture and formal rooms, and filled with objects which provide an alternative to personal identity, those of Woolf's characters who avail themselves of more radical and imaginative powers utilise instruments which are by nature subtle and evanescent, so that when other characters – and in particular characters associated with the standard coercive powers – try to articulate their sense of these characters' power, they generally resort to making vaguely mystical statements about magic and spiritual magnetism, metaphysical strength and supernatural wisdom and endurance. More logical and definitive words are antipathetic to the types of power being employed, and so are defeated by it. Characters who try to capture these apparently mystical powers in words seem doomed to come up with clichés, or understatements. The fact that being confronted with

types of power with which they are unfamiliar compels characters to attempt to define them, and the fact that definition proves elusive, and their attempts fail, is one sort of victory for these apparently weaker, vaguer powers. There is a sense of Woolf's mirth as self-styled proponents of conservative and generally patriarchal values – seemingly invincible human bastions of authority and security – are tripped up by the very existence of alternative powers, and fumble with words in attempts to control this potentially chaotic experience of confrontation. The battle becomes, literally as well as figuratively, one between two languages which are by nature foreign to one another.

Peter Walsh in Mrs Dalloway sees Clarissa's philosophy as something along the lines of the following: 'As we are a doomed race, chained to a sinking ship... as the whole thing is a bad joke, let us, at any rate, do our part; mitigate the suffering of our fellow-prisoners... decorate the dungeon with flowers and air-cushions; be as decent as we possibly can' (MD, 101). Peter goes on to suggest that Clarissa's attitude is that 'those ruffians, the Gods, shan't have it all their way' and would be 'seriously put out' if, despite the pain they inflict on human beings, 'you behaved like a lady' (MD, 101). This very process of putting words into Clarissa's mouth highlights the risibility of his assessment, as do the words themselves, which conjure up a ridiculously naive and bourgeois Clarissa. On another occasion, this time using his own voice, Peter thinks of her 'power of carrying things through' (MD, 80), which he sees as a form of courage, and towards the end of the text he relinquishes his ambivalence enough to admire her 'indomitable vitality... there being in her a thread of life which for toughness, endurance, power to overcome obstacles and carry her triumphantly through he had never known the like of' (MD, 203). Yet, though it moves towards understanding her, even Peter's praise fails to comprehend Clarissa's power in its fullness, since his

position is determined by his feelings of love and resentment towards Clarissa, and his sense that '[s]he had influenced him more than any person he had ever known' (MD, 201). In the novel's final moment, Peter's subjectivity in assessing Clarissa is clear, when he says to himself, simply and powerfully acknowledging his love for her: 'What is this terror? what is this ecstasy?... What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement? It is Clarissa... For there she was' (MD, 255).

The more whimsical Mrs Hilbery is convinced that Clarissa is an enchantress: 'Did they know that they were surrounded by an enchanted garden?... Just a few fairy lamps, Clarissa Dalloway had said, in the back garden! But she was a magician!' (MD, 250). Clarissa Dalloway evokes a similar awe and reverence from Rachel Vinrace in The Voyage Out. Rachel sees this novel's version of Clarissa as a sort of matriarchal goddess, and is 'overcome by an intense desire to tell Mrs Dalloway things she had never told anyone – things she had not realised herself until this moment... it seemed that Mrs Dalloway was able to understand without words' (VO, 57). In Orlando Woolf writes in a not altogether derisive aside that 'the hostess is... our modern sibyl. She is a witch who lays her guests under a spell.'[70] Woolf, trained in strategy at the Victorian tea table, and aware of the power of the subtle and unobtrusive word or gesture, focuses on the magic of the hostess, the power exerted by characters like Clarissa Dalloway and Mrs Ramsay. It is a domestic power by which these women reach into and affect the lives of those around them, through the gentle benediction of arranging comforts for them, and silently, almost imperceptibly, soothing them.

In key parallel scenes in Mrs Dalloway, To The Lighthouse and Between the Acts, male characters come to an understanding of the power

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[70] Virginia Woolf, Orlando (1928; Oxford, World's Classics, 1992) 24. Cited as O in the text.

of a woman whom they have previously dismissed or underestimated as some sort of household organiser, and in each case the moment is epiphanic. Peter's revelation to himself of his being overwhelmed by Clarissa follows several encounters between the two in which he has tried to undermine her, dismissing her as bourgeois ('She would marry a Prime Minister and stand at the top of a staircase; the perfect hostess' (MD, 8)) complacent and insignificant ('Here she is mending her dress; mending her dress as usual... here she's been sitting all the time I've been in India; mending her dress; playing about' (MD, 53)) no longer attractive, and '[c]old, heartless, a prude' (MD, 9) – and so, to his mind, powerless in any significant way. Similarly, Charles Tansley in To the Lighthouse is suddenly struck by what he thinks of as Mrs Ramsay's beauty:

> she was the most beautiful person he had ever seen... With stars in her eyes and veils in her hair, with cyclamen and wild violets – what nonsense was he thinking? She was fifty at least; she had eight children. Stepping through fields of flowers and taking to her breast buds that had broken and lambs that had fallen; with the stars in her eyes and the wind in her hair.
>
> (TL, 21)

Yet he has had disparaging thoughts about her before this, as she has realised, registering his infectious pessimism and delight in destroying beauty:

> When they talked about something interesting, people, music, history, anything, even said it was a fine evening so why not sit out of doors, then what they complained of about Charles Tansley was that until he turned the whole thing around and made it somehow reflect himself and disparage them, put them all on edge somehow with his acid way of peeling the flesh and blood off everything, he was not satisfied.
>
> (TL, 13)

In Between the Acts, another young man is revived and restored, this time by Lucy Swithin, yet in this case, William Dodge never struggles against her power as Peter Walsh and Charles Tansley do against Clarissa and Mrs Ramsay respectively, since, as a homosexual man, he is distanced form the patriarchal centre, and has no recourse to its gestures. In fact, he is a character whose bonds are with women – his 'conspirator' and 'semblable' Isabella, his mentor and benedictress Lucy – and he is disparaged by characters representing the patriarchy, epitomised by landowner, father, husband and businessman Giles Oliver, who thinks of William as 'a flickering mind-divided little snake in the grass' (BA, 67). So William is overwhelmed by Lucy's power without having disparaged her more than to think that her Christianity is a pale symbol of her immense spiritual power: 'How could she weight herself down with that sleek symbol? How stamp herself, so volatile, so vagrant, with that image?' (BA, 67-8).

William's experience of the powers of this priestess, visionary and mentor 'Lucy's within'[71] overwhelms him, just as Peter's experience of Clarissa does him. Lucy herself in her role of tutor and healer to the afflicted William experiences an immensely powerful moment – William sees it as an apotheosis – when she demonstrates to him the shapes of this alternative, imaginative power, and she does so by means of architectural and geographical metaphors, whilst showing him the house. Lucy epitomises characters who are transformed through their uses of these imaginary powers, since she is repeatedly derided and denigrated by those

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[71] The pun on Lucy Swithin's name ('Lucy's within') is important for its suggestion that Lucy's powers are inner powers; the powers of insight and imagination, rather than the external powers other characters possess. There is, however, a further level to the allusion to the inside/outside theme that runs through these texts, since Lucy's powers may be inner, but their allegorical symbols and their instruments are from an outside realm. So there's a chiasmus: characters with inner powers find their instruments and 'realm' outside, while those who rely on external powers like money and position, rely on interiors for their affirmation.

who represent and hold the dominant scale of values as ultimately powerless and useless – she exemplifies the 'fallen' whom Septimus Warren Smith believes human cruelty '[tears] to pieces' (MD, 184), and the victim of those Rhoda addresses in The Waves: 'More cruel than the old torturers, you will let me fall, and you will tear me to pieces when I am fallen' (W, 187). Yet from the perspective of initiates into the alternative realm, Lucy has extraordinary strength and power as a sort of muse and herald. Isabella sees her as 'courageous' and an 'angel' beating up against 'those immensities... her skinny hands, her laughing eyes' (BA, 22), while William is inspired by her to want to kneel before her and kiss her hand (BA, 67). Depending upon the realm from which she is viewed, then, she is either ultimately powerless and degraded – well educated by 'the four great teachers of the daughters of educated men – poverty, chastity, derision and freedom from unreal loyalties'(TG, 269) – or ultimately powerful and glorious; protecting and propagating a vision of 'beauty, power, and glory in ourselves' (BA, 185).

From the moment Lucy issues the invitation to William to walk into the house with her, its significance is apparent. It is a moment of epiphany in itself – a moment of being set amidst and contrasted with the 'kind of nondescript cotton wool' (MB, 79) of ordinary existence and its meaningless ritual, to which Lucy alludes when talking to Miss La Trobe, specifically contrasting a mundane version of the same trip on which she is to take William: 'This daily round; this going up and down stairs; this saying "What am I going for? My specs? I have 'em on my nose"' (BA, 137). At the symbolic moment of the invitation, Lucy speaks to William 'in a low voice, as if the exact moment for speech had come, as if she had promised, and it was time to fulfil her promise' (BA, 62). William responds by following her like an automaton, rising 'with a jerk, like a toy suddenly pulled straight by a string' while others who think of tagging

along find themselves mysteriously paralysed by duty and fatigue. All of this compulsion suggests an almost supernatural power on Lucy's part, a power similar to the compelling magic Clarissa Dalloway exercises. The soothing balm of the mystical trip is immediately felt, as William follows Lucy from a version of hell as he is excluded and denigrated by the rest of the party, to an oasis: 'along the blazing tiles under the hot wall, till they reached the shade of the house' (BA, 62). On a similar trip, 'the great expedition' (TL, 16), when Mrs Ramsay takes Charles Tansley with her to the shops, he feels 'flattered... soothed... revived' as well as feeling 'many things, something in particular that excited him and disturbed him for reasons which he could not give' (TL, 17). And when Mrs Dalloway puts her arm around the unhappy Rachel Vinrace's shoulder and announces 'How good life is!', a similar healing occurs, and for Rachel the world is transformed: 'it seemed indeed as if life which had been unnamed before was infinitely wonderful, and too good to be true' (VO, 58). Even as William gets up to follow Lucy, other characters observe that his demeanour is altered already; he appears 'unfurled and straightened' (BA, 62) where before Isabella has noticed 'the knot, which had tied itself so tightly, almost to the extent of squinting, certainly of twitching, in his face' (BA, 35). The suggestion of images of plants' fronds unfurling foreshadows botanical imagery which is associated with healing and empowerment in the allegory Woolf uses to convey the shapes of this alternative realm.

It is typical of this type of subtle, alternative power that it operates within the parameters of its ideological opposite. Here, Lucy takes William into the house which symbolises and more literally contains the inherited patriarchal wealth and privilege, from the ownership of which she herself is excluded on the basis of her sex, and from within which she is ridiculed. It is 'the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its

immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility' that Woolf in Three Guineas describes as shutting up women 'like slaves in a harem' (TG, 261) to which Lucy, who doesn't have even the power of a younger woman within the harem, takes William in this quasi-seduction. The power of such a house intimidates even apparently powerful men at times, such as when Peter Walsh visits the Dalloways' house and feels that he is 'a failure, compared with all this – the inlaid table, the mounted paper-knife, the dolphin and the candlesticks, the chair-covers and the old valuable English tinted prints – he was a failure!' (MD, 56). Both Lucy and William are victimised when they are inside the Olivers' stately house, and despite this – in fact because of this – Lucy chooses to use it as the cathedral in which she absolves, blesses and effectively resurrects William. The choice is a subversive one, since through this gesture Lucy challenges all that the house stands for – transforming it just as she goes on to alter William.

Once inside the house, the process of upward movement is central. Ignoring everything else, Lucy points to the staircase and announces 'And now – up we go.' During the ascent, the objects Lucy draws attention to all have a significance in the scheme of power she is offering to William as a model. The portrait of a woman is 'not an ancestress... But we claim her because we've known her – O, ever so many years. Who is she?... Who painted her?...But I like her best in the moonlight' (BA, 63). Discarding the usual facts about paintings, which place the subject in history and society, for a perspective that makes the woman come alive and assume immortal vitality, Lucy appropriates the painting, and shows William that it has been appropriated by the household, so the lesson underlines the possibility of 'illegitimate' borrowings of objects. Lucy also points out the books on the landing as mental forebears: 'Here are the poets from whom we descend by way of the mind.' Again, this demonstrates a radical way of relating to authority, simply by appropriation; in a sense by refiguring the

world of objects. Instead of being excluded from lineages of authority such as the patriarchal, Lucy suggests less alienating traditions with which the imaginative person can align him or herself.

For the next moments, Lucy demonstrates to William the conjuring power of the mind and of suggestion in particular. Pausing in front of a closed door she announces that behind it is 'the morning room... Where my mother received her guests'. Opening the door, the furniture appears to have taken on the sociability of the room's ghosts, 'two chairs faced each other on either side of a fine fluted mantelpiece.' Lucy continues upwards, following, 'it seemed, an invisible procession' upwards 'up and up to bed', underlining that sexuality is at the heart of the mission in the incongruous image of the elderly lady leading the homosexual man to the bedroom. Like Miss La Trobe in her pageant, twitching 'the invisible strings' (BA, 137), Lucy makes William see, doing away with the authority of ancestral tales ('A bishop; a traveller; – I've forgotten even their names. I ignore. I forget.') to make way for another economy, epitomised when she pulls back the curtain to show William the wordless lesson of the pigeons 'flirting and tiptoeing as ornate as ladies in ball dresses. Their elegant bodies swayed as they minced with tiny steps on their little pink feet upon the grass. Suddenly up they rose in a flutter, circled, and flew away' (BA, 64). There are certain symbolic steps in this natural drama, which, again, uses images of birds to show ways of behaviour available to those characters who are themselves imaged as birdlike. The mincing grounded behaviour of the pigeons is very feminine in its delicacy and lack of vigour and also seems uncomfortable and stilted. The moment of flight is preceded by a moment of disruption, so that the upward movement and freedom involves some chaos and wrenching away, suggested in the 'flutter'.

There is no need for Lucy to make any verbal comment on this heavily symbolic moment, since its power is anathema to that of fact and verbal explanation, and since the message is implicit in its pageantry. Lucy has come to mistrust words, like Bernard in The Waves, who cries: 'How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground. Also, how I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half-sheets of note-paper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on the pavement' (W, 199). Instead, the tableau forms a sort of prologue, leading to the bedroom scene in this drama, ('Now... for the bedrooms') where Lucy confronts William's sexuality. The process of imbuing rooms with activity continues, as Lucy knocks on the bedroom door, and murmurs 'One never knows... if there's somebody there', then flings open the door. William expects to see someone there 'naked, or half dressed, or knelt in prayer', so powerful has been Lucy's evocation of the secrets of private bedroom activity. Sitting on the bed in which she was born, a gesture which aligns her with matriarchal power, Lucy begins to tell William what she can about her beliefs in this other access to power, again in a murmur: 'But we have other lives, I think, I hope... We live in others, Mr... We live in things.' 'I think' and 'I hope' point to the terrain from which alternative powers can arise. 'We live in others... We live in things' is similar to Clarissa Dalloway's description of the vaguer, more powerful selves hidden behind a single social self. In Clarissa's case, she talks of people's 'apparitions, the part of us which appears' as 'so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide' and thinks that 'the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places, after death' (MD, 200). The fact that Lucy cannot remember William's name is associated with this belief, since surnames are integral to the

process of defining the social self and its place in patriarchal history. Earlier, Lucy has admitted that her forgetting things is more willed than Bart's assessment of her allows ('this led to that; that to the other. What went in at this ear, went out at that' (BA, 22), saying bluntly 'I ignore. I forget.' Here the unawareness of William's name frees him from his responsibilities, and the pain and inadequacy he feels in being unable to fulfil them.

William's understanding dawns suddenly, and immediately he is given a moment's respite form his body, which is the site and source of his disequilibrium and social vulnerability:

> She had lent him a hand to help him up a steep place. She had guessed his trouble. Sitting on the bed he heard her sing, swinging her little legs, 'Come and see my sea weeds, come and see my sea shells, come and see my dicky bird hop upon its perch'– an old child's nursery rhyme to help a child. Standing by the cupboard in the corner he saw her reflected in the glass. Cut off from their bodies, their eyes smiled, their bodiless eyes, at their eyes in the glass.
>
> (BA, 65)

There is a regression to different phases of childhood in the steps Lucy takes in her role as priestess recognising William's homosexuality, accepting him, and absolving him from the guilt and division he feels. She returns with him to the origins of his consciousness, since, as Bernard puts it in The Waves, 'in the beginning there was the nursery' (W, 200). Charting the contours of her own psyche in 'A Sketch of the Past', the past for Woolf becomes 'an avenue lying behind; a long ribbon of scenes, emotions. There at the end of the avenue still, are the garden and the nursery' (MB, 76). Throughout Woolf's writing – well before her reading of Freud in 1939 – there is an examination of the formative effect of nursery experiences. The Waves traces this meticulously, highlighting the sowing of seeds in the mind and heart which develop and grow with the

individual. In literary terms, this is reflected in the motifs associated with each character, which recur in their streams of consciousness, such as Susan's 'odi et amo' learned in early childhood when she is rejected by Louis, whom she loves, and then learns to hate (W, 10). Other examples include Rose's and Cam's experiences of terrifying shapes and shadows on nursery walls which threaten the innocence of their childhood consciousness in The Years and To The Lighthouse respectively, and haunt them as women.

When Lucy and William move from birthplace to nursery, with its symbols and smells of comfort; warm milk, clothes drying, biscuits, William is slow to follow, but eventually does go with Lucy to the window, where, quite literally, she shows him a different way of looking at the microcosm of society gathering below. At this point, all the symbols Woolf uses during the exercise of this radical, imaginative power are present; a breeze blows, representing unsettlement and providing the conditions for flight, then there are images of birds, which, especially in Mrs Dalloway and Between the Acts signpost these moments of transformative, imaginative power:

> And then a breeze blew and all the muslin blinds fluttered out, as if some majestic goddess, rising from her throne among her peers, had tossed her amber-coloured raiment, and the other gods, seeing her rise and go, laughed, and their laughter floated her on.
>
> (BA, 66)

When this prompts Dodge to say 'I'm William', the moment is one of triumph and apotheosis for Lucy, who has recreated him. Like Miss La Trobe after the pageant, Lucy might say of herself at this point: 'Ah, but she was not merely a twitcher of individual strings; she was one who seethes wandering bodies and floating voices in a cauldron, and makes rise up from its amorphous mass a recreated world. Her moment was on

her – her glory' (BA, 137). She smiles, and her eyes become the amber associated with goddesses: 'she smiled a ravishing girl's smile, as if the wind had warmed the wintry blue in her eyes to amber'. As Lucy talks, William sees 'her eyes only':

> And he wanted to kneel before her, to kiss her hand, and to say: 'At school they held me under a bucket of dirty water, Mrs Swithin; when I looked up, the world was dirty, Mrs Swithin; so I married; but my child's not my child, Mrs Swithin. I'm a half-man, Mrs Swithin; a flickering, mind-divided little snake in the grass, Mrs Swithin; as Giles saw; but you've healed me...' So he wished to say; but said nothing; and the breeze went lolloping along the corridors, blowing the blinds out.
>
> (BA, 68)

Mrs Swithin's mind is divided at this moment, and the two parts of it 'fluttered to right and to left, like pigeons rising from the glass.' The fluttering, the birds and the rising movement affirm her continued power, but William is mesmerised by the cross, swinging from the chain around her neck, and, as if suddenly released from the hypnosis that began with his marionette-like following her into the house, he is released also from his conspiracy with her: 'How could she weight herself down by that sleek symbol? How stamp herself, so volatile, so vagrant, with that image? As he looked at it, they were truants no more' (BA, 68).

Later, though, after the play, he returns to reaffirm his having learnt the lesson she offered. Again, she does not know his name, and he is made to reiterate 'I'm William' at which she 'revived, like a girl in the garden in white among roses, who came running to meet him, an unacted part.' 'Virginal, blushing' she tells William that her brother has told her not to thank Miss La Trobe. This time it is William who releases Lucy from paralysis, by taking her hand and acknowledging her lesson: 'Then I thank you' (BA, 186). It is a moment of triumph, healing and resolution;

the gentle retraction of the water's weight after the breaking of the wave. Pamela J. Transue's comment on the scene underlines its significance as an affirmation of a power based on difference from the patriarchal model: 'The power of women like Mrs Swithin to heal the wounds of the spirit and create wholeness out of fragmentation was one of the qualities which Woolf most feared would be lost should women simply adopt the male model for success.'[72]

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By the end of the novel, Lucy Swithin has achieved her vision, healing and empowering both William and Isabella, while Miss La Trobe has achieved hers, presenting her radical pageant to the bemused audience, and managing to touch at least some of them. She has 'made them see', and feels: 'She could say to the world, You have taken my gift!... It was in the giving that the triumph was' (BA, 188). Similarly, at the end of Mrs Dalloway, Clarissa achieves her vision, triumphantly hosting her party, which is her version of Miss La Trobe's pageant, over which she presides like a director or, as Mrs Hilbery puts it, a magician. Clarissa sees it much as Miss la Trobe does: 'she ... felt the intoxication of the moment, the dilation of the nerves of the heart itself till it seemed to quiver, steeped, upright' (MD, 228).

Most of Woolf's novels end with visions realised, and typically, her characters who are artists of one sort or another, find a resurgence of creative inspiration, such as Bernard's passionate desire and renewed search for 'a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak' (W, 246), or the words which come to Miss La Trobe in the depths of her weariness: 'Words rose above the intolerably laden dumb oxen plodding through the mud. Words without meaning –

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[72] Transue, 169

wonderful words' (BA, 191). Lily Briscoe, at the end of To The Lighthouse, captures what so many of Woolf's characters feel at the end of Woolf's texts, when she proclaims: 'I have had my vision' (TL, 281). Woolf herself achieves a vision in the triumph of each of these novels. As she said after The Waves was reviewed: 'so it wasn't all wasted then. I mean this vision I had here has some force upon other minds.'[73] For Woolf, part of the epiphany is in sharing 'my mountain top – that persistent vision' (WD, 430), and in forming words, as Bernard does, as a stand against mortality: 'I will go down with my colours flying' (WD, 436). Yet amidst all this exquisite description is a more flippant statement about creativity, which captures a paradox at the heart of her epiphanic writing: 'I think it is true that one gains a certain hold on sausage and haddock by writing them down' (WD, 436).

Clarissa's 'magic', Lucy's benedictary rituals, Mrs Ramsay's healing powers and Miss La Trobe's conjuring all exemplify the types of revelatory imaginative powers available through the paradoxical means of Woolf's epiphanies. The movement of these energies follows a wave-like pattern, as well as reflecting the paradoxical strength of the sea's dynamic and protean element. In the opening lines of Mrs Dalloway, the words 'lark' and 'plunge' are used to designate the movement involved in the rhythm of loss and recuperation which is central to the novel, and which is at the heart of the mystical and political scheme at work. The word 'lark' punningly connotes images of birds, air and flight which are pivotal in the text. 'Lark' and 'plunge' together suggest the wave movement later more overtly described by Clarissa as the pattern of human emotional experience. This same wave movement is the structural and imaginative basis of The Waves, which concludes with the double climax of Bernard's resurgence of hope and the coda of the waves breaking on the shore.

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[73] Virginia Woolf, A Writer's Diary (London: Triad, 1978) 217. Cited as WD in the text.

Bernard's passionate optimism – 'Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!' (W, 248) – follows his realisation of the 'eternal renewal, the incessant rise and fall and fall and rise again' (W, 247). Faced with the pressures of exclusion, 'dullness and doom' (W, 224), Bernard sinks into depression, but then finds within the impulse to rise up again: 'I jumped up. I said, 'Fight! Fight!'... It is the effort and the struggle, it is the perpetual warfare, it is the shattering and piecing together – this is the daily battle, defeat or victory, the absorbing pursuit' (W, 225). Similarly, at the end of The Years, Eleanor feels a resurgence of hope when she glimpses a new moon: 'the lovely slip, cut sharply in the sky' (Y, 466) which restores her hope. Orlando plummets into the present with extraordinary energy, Isabella and Giles start to look for a resolution at the end of Between the Acts, and Lily Briscoe discovers at the end of To The Lighthouse that she has her vision. Woolf's writing unfailingly offers the vision of hope through imagination; resurgence through epiphanic respite and renegotiation of the troublesome. Again and again, her work delivers to its readers a captivating vision of hope; the inspiration described by Bernard at the culmination to The Waves:

> And in me to the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back. What enemy do we now perceive advancing against us, you whom I ride now, as we stand pawing this stretch of pavement? It is death. Death is the enemy. It is death against whom I ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped into India. I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!
>
> (W, 248)

III. SYLVIA PLATH

'Small as a doll in my dress of innocence'
('Electra on the Azalea Path'[74])

The self-professed ineptitude of Esther Greenwood, protagonist of The Bell Jar, dominates the opening of the novel. 'I don't know', 'I'm stupid about', 'I couldn't help', 'I couldn't': most first person verbs in the early pages of the novel are negative. These pages are smattered with 'I didn't' and 'I wasn't', an unrelenting mantra of self-deprecation. This vociferous self-effacement is a clear and deliberate campaign of self-diminution, like that of the persona of the poem 'Tulips', who announces: 'And I have no face, *I have wanted* to efface myself' [my italics]. Yet since self-effacement goes hand in hand with its announcement, at the same time the self is diminishing, the voice is strengthening. Evidently there is more going on than mere, pointless self-denigration.

There are two important areas of power that this self-denigration leads to and licenses in Plath's work. One is a form of rebirth: the emergence, phoenix-like, of an empowered self from a purgative fire. The other occurs as a consequence of this journey into the essence of the self with the loss of the 'dead hands, dead stringencies' of social restrictions it entails, and involves a freeing up of intellectual and imaginative restrictions.

In The Bell Jar, this second aspect is apparent before the larger scheme of rebirth is clarified. It is noticeable that, although she claims to be hopeless at just about everything, often the failures Esther insists upon are intellectual. Phrases such as 'I couldn't get them out of my mind' and 'I

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[74] Sylvia Plath, Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems (1981: London: Faber and Faber, 1990) 116. Future references to Plath's poems are to this edition, cited in the text as CP.

couldn't help wondering' recur, and stress her sense of transgression in failing to stop thinking, fantasising and dreaming. This cognitive transgression – this failure to dam (and damn) the currents of the imagination – is the defining sin of the confessional mode. Yet the confessional is a space in which sinners are licensed to speak, even if only for the purposes of self-denigration: there they list their misdemeanours or their offences against morality. The term 'confessional' is often applied pejoratively to writers such as Plath, Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell to comment on their openness about intimate topics. The sin that they are charged with is the sin of failing to be silent – failing to draw the line and failing to observe the boundaries of what is considered appropriate in the province of poetry. Poets like Plath, Sexton, Lowell and Michael Dransfield drag suicide, abortions, drug addiction, masturbation and incest into the sacred arena of poetry. In Plath's case, particularly, as a result, critics often arrive at an expression of distaste for her excess: 'she doesn't stop', seems to be a common charge against her. As Ted Hughes puts it 'She went straight for the central, unacceptable things.'[75]

As though anticipating this censorious response to the openness of her writing, Plath has Esther imply the psychic claustrophobia she feels, which is symbolised throughout the text by images of cages and enclosure. The car transporting her to the suburbs feels like 'a prison van', each house another bar in a 'large but escape-proof cage'.[76] The imagination is fettered by the environment, but also by the body, which is referred to as the mind's 'stupid cage' (BJ, 168). The only creature the imprisoned Esther relates to much is a snake in the Bronx Zoo which strikes and strikes and strikes at 'the invisible pane' of its cage in rage and frustration when she

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[75] Jacqueline Rose, The Haunting of Sylvia Plath (London: Virago, 1991) 69. Hughes made the comment in his introduction to the American edition of Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams.

[76] Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, (1963: London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 120. Cited as BJ in the text.

teases it (BJ, 111). The image of the bell jar, which Plath borrows from Woolf, is the novel's central metaphor of enclosure and oppression. It is the space into which Esther is crammed, a cage filled with her own 'sour air' (BJ, 197) and 'stifling distortions'(BJ, 254). Another of Plath's characters sees herself as existing 'like a foot... poor and white' within a 'black shoe', 'Barely daring to breathe or Achoo' (CP, 183).Trapped within this labyrinthine ideology of confinement and repression, it is impossible to breathe, speak or move, so escape becomes vital.

Yet rebellion or self-expression is transgressive and punishable within these strictures, so Plath's personae scheme to appear harmless and incapable, and therefore innocent of their determination to escape. Throughout Plath's writing there is a rhetoric of ineptitude surrounding her protagonists, so transgression is, as her various personae insist, entirely accidental. Once they have 'inadvertently' slipped over the line into a forbidden territory in which they can speak and move, however, Plath's personae take on huge voices and monstrous proportions with relish, dramatically asserting themselves with uninhibited energy. The power of their voices, and what they say, is stunning. Yet the route to it, according to a conceit these personae insist upon, is, paradoxically, ineptitude and failure. Plath constructs this conceit with a bitterly ironic perspective. Her personae are intelligent women, self-conscious about the games they are playing with the ideological conditions which oppress them. They play the only role by which they can stow away across the border into the province where they can speak – a role insisting on their own powerlessness – but they play it with self-mockery, and irony.

Diminution of the self, and then explosion out of the 'stasis in darkness'[77] of nothingness, is also a means of freeing and empowering the

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[77] 'Stasis in darkness' and 'substanceless blue' are terms Plath uses in 'Ariel' to describe the phases of this journey.

oppressed self through spiritual rebirth. This process is a more dramatic version of Woolf's wave motion pattern of deflation and recuperation.[78] In Plath's writing the process involves similar crests and troughs, but the line she charts is a more jagged one, with deep troughs and exalted soaring crests. The process starts with her personae mockingly shrinking themselves, journeying via self-deprecation to the province of Nothing. There, however, the joke ends, as they lose the things that fetter them: they are rinsed clean of expectations, pain and criticism. Yet they are also unburdened of ignorance, and innocence. The ensuing acquisition of knowledge may be painful, but this pain of honest self-assessment, and assessment of the world, brings power. Nothing becomes a cleansing place, and a haven, in the stillness of which Plath's characters can feel and understand what it is to be themselves. From the moment of reaching Nothing, the moment of becoming aware of its 'stasis' and 'darkness', they begin to be unburdened, and then to explore the infinite possibilities of its 'substanceless blue'. From this pivotal moment the self is reborn, and rises, like the phoenix, to freedom, power and honest self-expression. As the speaker in 'Lady Lazarus' puts it: 'Out of the ash/I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air' (CP, 244) Power, then, emerges through both diminishing the self, and stripping it completely. The self has to be made nothing – reduced entirely – before it can be reborn into power.

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The start of this journey is a diminution of the self. Esther typifies Plath's heroines in her repeated expression of a sense of amassing failures,

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[78] Plath's copies of Woolf's novels are covered with annotations and underlinings, and one of the things she is particularly interested in is Woolf's use of the word 'nothing' in an ambiguous sense. In Mrs Dalloway, Plath underlines: 'But nothing is so strange' (early pages) and Clarissa's curiously empowering realization that 'this body she wore... this body, with all its capacities seemed nothing – nothing at all' (early pages). She sees in Woolf, then, a sense in which nothing can be a place of peace and empowerment.

now that 'all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing' (BJ, 2). The alliteration of the denigratory adjectives 'little' and 'totted' emphasises this self-deflation and suggests a degree of linguistic self-consciousness on the part of the retrospectively narrating Esther. In Plath's writing words describing the insignificant are often linked together, by means of assonance and alliteration, to magnify them into a paradoxical volubility. In 'The Colossus' the persona is obsessed with the futile task of 'scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol' (CP, 129) and in 'Waking in Winter' graves are described as 'Poison of stilled lawns, the little clapboard gravestones' (CP, 151). In each case, the alliteration stresses the thing that is otherwise trivialised, making it emphatic and dramatic. In 'Daddy', the tyranny of the persona's father specifically, and patriarchal society generally, is conveyed by the metaphor of the 'black shoe' in which the persona has lived 'like a foot, poor and white' (CP, 183). The poor, oppressed foot comes to dominate the sound of the opening lines of the poem, just as Esther's lament comes to dominate the opening of the novel.

This first phase of the journey involves Esther's professing her own incapacities so as to win her passport to the state of Nothing. Before she begins this course she is a mistress of disguise. The stress of this constant concealment precipitates a crisis, and a change of tactics. The anxiety she experiences about her disguise is augmented when she wins a guest editorship at a women's magazine, Ladies' Day, in New York City. Despite the frenetic celebratory goings-on around her, she begins to realise that her chief experience is of immobilisation and incapacitation, and of being utterly passive whilst appearing active and adventurous. She knows she is expected to be playing the role of the feminised, 1950s version of the log cabin to White House myth, the idea of the poor girl who works hard and 'wins a prize here and there and ends up steering New York like her own

private car' (BJ, 2). Her glum counterpoint to descriptions of parties and presents and glamour is the start of her rebellion:

> Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.
>
> (BJ, 2)

The volubility of these cries of weakness and incapacity and their thematic predominance from this point on bring into focus the paradox that the act of expressing powerlessness is itself an empowering one – in itself, under any circumstances, as well as for its part in Plath's scheme. Articulation is a refusal to be silenced, to be passive and incapacitated; a refusal, indeed, of everything Esther appears to be claiming to be. This insistence on her weakness is in part a decoy, working to distract attention from the activity, strength and angry mobility which will help her to access the subversive realm of Nothing. It is also in itself a contradiction: someone yelling and shrieking insistently is hard to ignore, regardless of what they are saying. The words themselves may insist on the powerlessness of the speaker; but their delivery stresses her power. Insisting on one's transgression is also a means to self-expression in another sense, since admitting to sin entails admitting oneself to the realm of the confessional, where anything can be said. Reducing the self is, then, a powerful way of gaining entry to the state of Nothing.

But '[c]an nothingness be so prodigal?', as one of the speakers in Plath's extended 'poem for three voices' Three Women asks (CP, 49). The answer to this, in the world of Plath's writing, is a resounding yes. Something traditionally perceived as an ultimately powerless state becomes the site and source of catharsis and rebirth to power for Plath's

characters. The word 'nothing' itself occurs seventy-one times in her Collected Poems [79] and even more frequently in Plath's prose. One persona goes so far as to call herself Duchess of Nothing.[80] In The Bell Jar, Esther's stress on the word 'nothing' invests it with great significance, so that its ambiguity in her narrative becomes apparent.

'Nothing' becoming something is, in itself, not an uncommon literary theme. It is the central tension in Shakespeare's King Lear. For Lear, the dilemma is that he knows Cordelia's response of 'nothing' to his demands for a profession of her love for him does not mean that she does not love him. It is a full 'nothing' which contrasts with the empty somethings of the speeches of Cordelia's sisters. The choral Fool returns again and again to the associations of the word 'nothing' with the play's three main themes: death, madness and sexuality. As with Esther's concerns, which are much the same as the play's, the three are linked in different combinations, all of which focus on questions of power. Lear and Esther both find 'reason in madness', for instance, and both come to understand that death is not necessarily a defeat and annihilation.

The Modernist concern with nothing similarly associates it with powerful mystery and disintegration. In 'A Game of Chess' in Eliot's The Waste Land, empty conversation painfully reveals what it is trying to conceal: the fact that the relationship between the couple speaking has been overtaken by nothing. Fear of nothingness's mystery causes the couple to keep up a charade:

> 'What is that noise?'
> The wind under the door.
> 'What is that noise now? What is the wind doing?'
> Nothing again nothing.
> 'Do

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[79] Richard M. Matovich, A Concordance to the Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath (London: Garland Press, 1986) 293.

[80] In 'Poem For a Birthday' and 'The Beast', CP, 131, 134.

> You know nothing? Do you see nothing? Do you remember Nothing?'[81]

In Kenneth Slessor's 'Five Bells' nothing is again a dominant entity. The persona is grieving for the death of his friend, who has been transported into the state of nothing by his sudden death:

> But I hear nothing, nothing...
> Nothing except the memory of some bones
> Long shoved away, and sucked away, in mud...
> The night you died, I felt your eardrums crack,
> And the short agony, the longer dream,
>
> The Nothing that was neither long nor short.[82]

Repeated often enough, even the word describing the opposite of something can become something. The very use of the word 'nothing' thus epitomises the scheme at work in Plath's writing whereby repetition and volubility are used to empower the weak. Like the images in Auden's poetry of powerful and seductive nothingness, such as that in 'In Praise of Limestone', in which 'an older, colder voice, the oceanic whisper' announces, in response to the poem's repeated existential questioning:

> I am the solitude that asks and promises nothing;
> That is how I shall set you free.[83]

the 'nothing' in the narrative of The Bell Jar assumes the status of something far more alluring and positive than nullification, as its grammatically ambiguous placement suggests.

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[81] T.S. Eliot: Selected Poems (London: Faber and Faber, 1954) 55.

[82] 'Five Bells', in Kenneth Slessor: Selected Poems (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1975) 121.

[83] 'In Praise of Limestone' in W. H. Auden: Selected Poems, (London: Faber and Faber, 1979) 184. Auden, another poet interested in the meaning of Nothing, is the fourth most mentioned poet in Plath's writings, after Eliot, Yeats and Shakespeare. Axelrod 36.

At first it seems that Nothing is simply a place of retreat, a removal from pressure and expectation, as Richard suggests in Richard II: 'Nor any man but man is/ With nothing shall be pleased, till he be eased/With being nothing.'[84] In New York, Esther comments that there are 'girls just like me all over America who wanted nothing more than to be tripping about in those same size seven patent leather shoes' (BJ, 2). The proleptic suggestion of this is that, contrary to the surface claim that she is the envy of so many girls and is happy for that reason, Esther would actually prefer the lull of Nothingness. This nihilism is not particularly noticeable this early in the novel, but becomes more resonant as the novel progresses and the reader is familiarised with her profound depression, and with the paradoxical ways in which she empowers herself.

This brand of Nothingness is also a solution to the complex problems of containing sexual longing within the framework of a repressive society. It is the place where the self is stripped of the 'dead hands, dead stringencies' ('Ariel') of the troublesome demands of a repressive society. Esther remarks that 'pureness' is 'the big issue' affecting her. Society demands her 'pureness': not just virginity, but an entire negation of the sexual self. This amounts to a demand of a blank spot in a person's identity, as Esther sees it. In Plath's writing, a world is depicted in which the pure body, or non-entity, is the only acceptable form of feminine corporeality. Women must be neat, small, clean, empty of desire and self-effacing. The theme of purity is pivotal in the novel not only in terms of plot, but also in terms of the novel's imagery, since it is Esther's sense of psychic revulsion from the truth of her own 'impurity' that results in her projecting her rage at the demand for purity by dwelling on the horror images of the 'impure' body haemorrhaging, decomposing, vomiting, disintegrating, being burnt or disembowelled. At the same time,

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84 William Shakespeare Richard II Act V, V : 38-41

these horrific images of the body are associated with purification rites of various cultures – from witch burning to leeching to stomach pumping, and from the nips and tucks of cosmetic surgery, to the ultimate example, given by Esther, of the disembowelling. These are the ways the hegemonic culture achieves the physical eradication of the potentially guilty body. Purity is revered enough to drive those who feel it slipping away because they think, move and desire, to dream of an annihilation which will remove both the impure self, and the dilemma.

For Esther, physical impurity is linked with an analogous guilt associated with her 'impure' focus on 'bodying forth', to borrow T. S. Eliot's phrase, her self in words, the pure body/text being the untouched one or the one that has not been spoken, written or otherwise experienced. So vomiting and other experiences of the 'impure' body become a self-imposed purgatory where Esther hovers; the potentially purging, potentially damning limbo between truly having a voice (an authorial version of Barthesian *jouissance*) and being condemned to silence and moral censure. But just as Buddy Willard, touted as 'a fine clean boy' turns out to have had sexual experiences, whilst maintaining his facade of purity, so Esther creates a text whilst professing her dumbness and incapacity. Plath alludes ironically to the traditional literary pun which equates female sexuality with both the 'o' of nothing, and with annihilation of the male – again, paradoxically, instances where nothing becomes ultimately powerful – as purity and annihilation become two dominant themes in Esther's thoughts about her sexuality.

At the moment when she is being sexually assaulted by Marco, one of her 'dates', Esther feels passive and powerless. The great twin values of purity and choice, the latter advertised by a publication 'In Defence of Chastity' which Esther's mother has sent her, are at once reduced to rhetoric. This pamphlet advises girls to negate themselves sexually, to

have nothing to do with sexual relationships. At all costs they must not be sexually active. Yet to offend against this, the most emphasised moral code of the novel, and lose her virginity, the very action Esther could take is 'nothing'. As she puts it, 'If I just lie here and do nothing it will happen' (BJ, 114). She discovers that purity can be stolen from a woman, and so the whole debate about its importance is silenced. She sees that doing 'nothing' can have horrifying consequences. This highlights the oversimplification of the moral code of the defenders of chastity: in this case, Esther sees that the passivity and weakness demanded of her have the potential to cause her physical as well as psychological violence. The idea that passivity can result in destruction for women is suggested again in the riddle of a line from 'Three Women':

> I am flat and virginal, which means nothing has happened,
> Nothing that cannot be erased, ripped up and scrapped, begun again.
>
> (CP, 49)

The question of purity which haunts Esther permeates Plath's poetry. One of Plath's last poems, 'Fever 103°', with its mock mantra 'the sin. The sin', opens with the question 'Pure? What does it mean?' a question central to Esther's quest. In the poem, the answer offered is the image of the persona, delirious and infectious, retching from the curative and purgative lemon water and chicken water offered to her, crying 'I am too pure for you or anyone' and finally, ascending as 'a pure acetylene/Virgin', with 'selves dissolving, old whore petticoats... to Paradise'. It is a patently false virgin who has been weakened almost to the point of annihilation by the punitive violence of infection or assault who is considered pure. The purity the persona boasts about is the sort demanded by a rigid morality which makes women into impassive plastic dolls. This 'pure acetylene virgin' is another version of the annihilated,

but 'living' doll advertised as the ideal wife in 'The Applicant', bereft of personality and even gender (described as 'it' throughout the poem) but better, purer and more amenable for this. In 'The Applicant', the doll has been stored in a cupboard to stop her from developing an identity and thereby to preserve her perfect purity. In 'Fever 103°' extreme illness has reduced the persona to an empty body on a bed, drained of her 'selves', which allows her the triumphant status of purity. Esther's rage stems from her sense that these are the sorts of ways she could earn the approbation of being called pure. She does not want to have to be a 'living doll' or a dying body in a hospital bed; she refuses to make herself nothing in any ordinary sense.

Yet she courts, and delights in, another form of Nothing. Throughout Plath's writing the word 'nothing' is situated grammatically so as to stress its potential to slip semantically from ultimate diminution and negation into powerful positivity. Psychoanalytical criticism has emphasised the importance of negation in language as a means by which the unacceptable or the taboo can be spoken. The example Jacqueline Rose gives is of the patient who, 'invited to associate the content of a dream, starts by insisting "It's not my mother", the analyst can fairly ask from where, therefore, the idea of the mother has suddenly come.'[85] In Plath's work, 'nothing' veils and fails to veil the taboo in a similar way.

The first positive aspect of Nothing in the journey to rebirth is its capacity to provide a retreat from pain and moral censure. In 'Paralytic' the persona is, like the speaker of 'Fever 103°' extremely ill, lying in hospital with only an 'iron lung' to love him. The magnolia given to him by a visitor becomes the focus of his attention, and he projects onto it his powerful desire for respite and for removal from the hospital landscape which has made him, and declares him, weak and passive. The magnolia

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[85]Rose, 32.

'asks nothing of life' and this asking represents for the patient an exercise of choice and voice, especially when the choice made is the antithesis of the one which has been made for him. Having been made to taste the barest existence, the slightest and most meaningless 'something' in the resurrection of his body, but with no independence or activity, the choice of 'nothing' is contrastingly an empowering one, a haven where – 'wants, desire/ Falling from me like rings' – he can be at peace.

In 'Tulips', another extremely ill persona longs for respite from suffering, eulogising the state of calm she longs for: 'the peacefulness is so big it dazes you,/ And it asks nothing'. Again, as in 'Paralytic', in the context of the persona's desire for removal from pain and the poem's series of images of the brink of death, there is little ambiguity. The persona has been stripped of identity by pain and illness: 'I am nobody... I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses/ And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.' She too relishes the irony that reduced like this, she has suddenly fulfilled the requirements of 'purity': 'I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.' Nothing lures her away from pain, like a sacrament. She imagines a wafer of peace and nothingness which she thinks is 'what the dead close on, finally'. She yearns to ask for nothing from life and longs to embrace the sacrament of peaceful death. She claims to have desired Nothing throughout her illness: 'I only wanted/ To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty' (CP, 161).

Plath's letters are full of a similar thirst for the respite of Nothing: no pain, no censure, and none of the irritating attentions of a false kindness, neurotically and 'sweetly picking up pieces' after disasters, precluding the expression of grief as satirised in the poem 'Kindness':

> Kindness glides about my house.
> Dame Kindness, she is so nice!...
>
> Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says.

Sugar is a necessary fluid,

Its crystals a little poultice.
Oh kindness, kindness
Sweetly picking up pieces.

(CP, 269)

In a letter to her mother on August 27th, 1962, announcing her discovery of Ted Hughes' infidelity and her decision to arrange a legal separation, Plath writes [I] 'am in need of nothing and am desirous of nothing', powerfully conveying her despair despite the surface appearance of independent coping and self-sufficiency.[86]

The theme of wanting to place a buffer of 'nothing' between oneself and a mother figure, which is one of Esther's central concerns, recurs in the poem 'Medusa', the companion poem to 'Daddy'. The subject of the poem is the persona's ambivalent relationship to not just one mother, but a host of mother-figures, who are represented as at once responsive to the point of martyrdom to the needs of their daughter, who is weak: 'I could draw no breath, Dead and moneyless' (CP, 224), and destructive and parasitic. The relationship and the poem are strictly patterned, until the end when the persona tries to break both moulds, exclaiming in the single line stanza which ignores the five line stanza pattern: 'There is nothing between us'. As with the last lines of 'Daddy': 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through'(CP, 183), what looks like a clear rejection of the parental

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[86]Sylvia Plath, Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963 (1975; London, Faber and Faber, 1990) 460. The much-mocked, much mutilated published text of Plath's Letters Home is generally read as being brightly but deceitfully removed from the emotional 'truths' of her existence, and for that reason somehow embarrassing to the priest/critics of the confessional mode who seem to require a single, nihilistic (therefore transgressive) authorial voice in the writing. The use of the word 'nothing' in these letters is one of many examples of tensions evident in their texts, the ambiguities and anxieties of which refute such a dismissal of the letters (and there are possibly even more so in the unpublished manuscripts, which contains half as many letters again).

bond is far more complicated and ambivalent in the context of the whole poem.

In 'Medusa' Plath uses a central chain of images of sea creatures sabotaging a small boat as it struggles to escape, culminating with the poem's penultimate line: 'Off, off, eely tentacle!'. Structurally, the poem's final line: 'there is nothing between us', which tries defiantly to place itself independently from the body of the poem from which it has grown, straggles and hangs from the poem as though trapped by the mothers' clinging tentacles and umbilical cords, which also find their structural representation in the enjambement between many stanzas of the poem. These instances of enjambement work in tandem with images of clinging and sticking – the entrapping 'Jesus hair' of martyr/witches, a fat, red placenta and a bottle/body from which the persona cannot escape – suggesting the oppression of the relationship. The persona's cry that 'there is nothing between us' occurs after the emphatic finality of the 'Off, off, eely tentacle!' with its conclusive exclamation mark, which suggests that the break indicated by the line has not been as complete as it insists. As in 'Daddy', the 'black telephone' of familial communication may be 'off at the root', but the persona appears to have called back to say one more thing after hanging up so abruptly.

Since it seems like a structural afterthought, the ambiguity of the last line's 'nothing' becomes noticeable. The break cannot be complete because there is something between the persona and her mother, even if that something is that puzzling entity 'nothing'. The persona refers to moments of powerlessness in her life, including a time when she is 'dead' and incapable even of drawing breath, which suggests either a suicide attempt or extreme illness or injury, a dive into nothingness, and voices ambivalent feelings about her mother's role in 'squeezing the breath from' her at this time. This phrase, whose object is the bunch of fuscias

brought to the 'dead' persona, displaces onto them the persona's accusation of murderous intentions on her mother's part towards her daughter, but unmistakably captures a sense that the ministering actions of the mother are murderous even as they appear to be resuscitative.

Esther Greenwood has a similarly ambivalent relationship with her mothers – real and symbolic. Esther's suicide attempts are at least in part designed to insert death or 'nothing' between herself and her mother, to allow her a vacuum in which to rest. Yet as long as there remains some element of the compelling nothing between mother and daughter, neither can be truly independent, since between them lies an irresistible haven and insoluble dilemma. All of this makes Nothing a powerful issue, and one which becomes more complex as Plath focuses on it, ironically echoing Lear's 'nothing will come of nothing' as it makes itself more and more dominant in the minds of her personae.

But it is in 'Witch Burning', part of the sequence 'Poem For a Birthday' that the use of the word 'nothing' most closely reflects Esther's use of it in The Bell Jar. 'Poem For a Birthday' is a death and resurrection text, and 'Witch Burning' is its moment of death. The witch/rice grain who narrates the poem has already been condemned to death, and climbs to 'a bed of fire' where she considers her past strategy of appearing powerless and 'little', which is, like the mushrooms' strategy in 'Mushrooms', based on self-effacement. But, like the mushrooms' litany:

> We are shelves, we are
> Tables, we are meek,
> We are edible

which is thrown into doubt by subtle self-assertion at other moments in the poem, and by the vociferousness of their insistence that they are

powerless, so the witch's strategy is ambivalent, again, with the word 'nothing' being the focus of this ambivalence:

> If I am a little one, I can do no harm.
> If I don't move about, I'll knock nothing over.

The first three phrases are the prerequisites for achieving the third, the aim of knocking over nothing. 'Nothing' is again at the heart of the ultimately assertive, ultimately subversive act available to the persona.

David Holbrook, whose commentary on Plath's poetry focuses on linking her writing to quasi-psychoanalytical diagnoses of what he decides are her 'schizoid characteristics', sees these lines quite differently. His criticism warns the reader again and again that 'we must be careful here, because we are responding to schizoid utterance, and, as we shall see, there are occupational hazards in this, of "falling in love" with the schizoid individual and of becoming involved in her paranoid feelings of being "oppressed"' and that 'we shall suffer pain and deep disturbance, because of our concern, which she sometimes lacks'[87]. It would be tempting to laugh, were it not for the fact that Holbrook's approach to and reproach of Plath remains central to the canon of Plath scholarship. In his chapter 'Poem For a False Birth', he castigates the poet for the evidence the poem provides of the 'fatally false sequence in her logic' that he diagnoses earlier in the book whilst delving into what he terms her 'private phenomenology'. He sees this moral error as centring on the belief 'that death could be a pathway to rebirth'. He speaks of Plath, rather than the persona, and treats the poem as poem-therapy for its creator rather than as

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[87]David Holbrook, Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence, (London: Athlone, 1976) 1, 57. Interestingly, Ian Hamilton comments that the Hughes family responded angrily to the book. Olwyn Hughes wrote to Holbrook saying that the book 'seriously misrepresented' Plath 'as an artist and as an individual'. Ian Hamilton, Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography, (London: Pimlico, 1992) 296.

text, that is, as non-fiction rather than fiction, albeit non-fiction chastisable as too fictionalised. From this position, Holbrook sees the aim of the rice grain as purely that of the 'true self' trying to 'shrink and preserve itself by being too tiny to be hurt'[88]. The grain metaphor is, for Holbrook, all about being a victim, although a paranoid (and therefore invalid) one. I would argue instead that, although the persona is victimised, kept in a cage, hunted down and burnt alive (hardly trivial or vague assaults, so hardly paranoid to respond to them), there is a strategy on the part of the persona to appear exaggeratedly weak as a decoy, and that the irony associated with the rice grain metaphor is self-mocking, the opposite of the self-aggrandisement Holbrook sees as attending paranoid states. Whether her personae pretend to be microscopic grains of rice and ants, or huge avenging phoenixes, irony permeates the role-playing that goes on in Plath's writing. The energetic and strategic mobility of Plath's personae, as they shrink so as to explode, mocks the ideology in which they exist, which demands that they remain still, preferably as still as 'living dolls' or 'pure acetylene virgins'.

'Witch Burning' continues with the metaphor of the rice persona, 'tiny and inert' in the face of fire, but full of starch, and potentially explosive. The fire itself will empower the rice grains, and the witches, since its 'red tongues will teach the truth'. Punishment, then, becomes the means to empowerment, just as the punishment of being labelled 'confessional' licenses those confined within it to speak. The moment of death by burning becomes, in this context, the lunge into nothingness and, at the same time, an apotheosis. Thus nothingness is the ultimate site/arena of power:

> My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs.

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[88]Holbrook 57, 1, 59.

I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.

(CP, 135)

In the next poem in the 'Poem For a Birthday' sequence, 'The Stones', the persona is a stone ready to be hammered into new life in the 'city where men are mended'. In describing the stone landscape, she notices that the headstone is quiet, 'jostled by nothing.' The newly resurrected persona, like her emblem, the headstone, has been silenced by a Nothingness whose jostling suggests its incessant and irritating presence. But having yielded to Nothingness and having now been resurrected, she has the power of Nothing on her side. Almost like an initiate to a cult of nothing, she is keen to recover, to carry on with the work of that cult:

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

(CP, 136)

The resurrecting persona of 'Lady Lazarus', who has also been burned to death, and has warned those poking recklessly through her ashes that 'there is nothing there' has been transmuted from ultimate victim to a powerful man-and-air-consuming force through death:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

(CP, 244)

For Esther, near-death and resurrection bring similar power, chiefly the power to narrate the retrospective tale of her own breakdown. Esther

courts oblivion as a space in which to 'mend' and as a respite from the oppressive haranguing she is subjected to by those around her. After she is seduced by Nothing, she too emerges fresh and energetic.

Through insistent repetition, ideas of paralysis and incapacitation in The Bell Jar become, in the same paradoxical way that Nothing does, powerful in their dominance of the text. These ideas are present in Plath's first published collection of poems, The Colossus. The obsessiveness with which Esther discusses smallness, paralysis and nothingness and their resultant omnipotence is similar to the pattern in the collection's eponymous poem, which again concentrates on the persona's sense of powerlessness and immobilisation. The text presents, in allegorical terms, the same quest Esther undertakes. Again, in 'The Colossus', there is stress on what the persona cannot do or fails to do, starting with the defeated line 'I shall never get you put together entirely'. As the poem progresses and the persona finds herself unable to achieve the symbolic rebuilding of the image of her dead father, the task is described in increasingly exaggerated terms, so that the sense of futility is magnified further. In the poem's landscape of nightmare-consciousness, the pieces of the puzzle which the persona strives to piece, glue and properly join are described as 'worse than a barnyard', in which she crawls 'like an ant in mourning.' As the task of reconstructing her father seems to increase, the metaphors describing the persona's state of mind and self-image become diminished. She is an ant, then later is small enough to 'squat in the cornucopia/ Of your left ear' (CP, 129). As in 'Two Views of a Cadaver Room', the decomposing body is described in terms which are almost Gothic in their magnification and distortion. In that poem too, the persona struggles to make sense of a corpse, the head of which has 'caved in'. Again her efforts fail, 'she could scarcely make out anything/ In that rubble of skull plates and old leather' (CP, 114)

Another metaphor for an emotional incapacity like Esther's appears in the sequence of bee poems originally published in Ariel. Again, the persona, a novice bee keeper, employs tactics similar to those Esther uses. In 'The Bee Meeting' the narrator is unable to understand the rituals of the apiarists' meeting, and finds herself unprotected from both the bees and the other bee-keepers. She is lost in the province of the apiarists, silenced within their discourse, just as so many of Plath's personae are silenced within the hegemonic economy. The apprentice beekeeper's questions are not answered and she is unable to move, 'I cannot run, I am rooted'. Her only possible defence is to be completely inactive so that the bees do not notice her. In other words her only escape from the vulnerability of having no knowledge and no ability to act is to exaggerate this state so that she moves beyond vulnerability and into nullity. She poses as 'milkweed silk' and hopes to be mistaken for 'cow-parsley'. By the end of the poem, when she suspects the villagers of murderousness, she is for a moment that heroine of stillness, 'the magician's girl who does not flinch' (CP, 211), but, ultimately, is unable to tell even whether she is alive or dead, or whether it is her own execution they have planned and maybe already carried out.

Like the uncomprehending novice at the bee meeting, Esther feels incapable of understanding the society she lives in, and she focuses on a sense of imminent revelation, when everyone will discover that she is an impostor, dreading yet yearning for this time when energy will no longer have to be expended on facade, the moment when incapacity (the inability to hide or to be the girl who does not flinch) will unmask incapacity generally:

> I felt now that all the uncomfortable suspicions I had about myself were coming true, and I couldn't hide the truth much longer. After nineteen years of running after good marks and

> prizes and grants of one sort or another I was letting up, slowing down, dropping clean out of the race.
>
> (BJ, 30)

Her language also reveals her desperate response to this sense of failure and fear. Her attempts at cheerful involvement in fashion and glamour are underscored by images of corruption and annihilation. She claims that her acquaintance Doreen's life of 'marvellous, elaborate decadence... attracted me like a magnet', unwittingly stressing her own desire for annihilation with the choice of the ambiguous 'decadence'. Here decay is accompanied by the idea of its magnetism: on one hand it may be an immensely attractive state, at the same time since it is an irresistible attraction, so no volition is needed to reach it. It is reached, the metaphor suggests, by incapacity, weakness and passivity. For Esther, its lure is certainly irresistible. This irresistibility effectively exonerates Esther in her movement towards it, especially in the context of the stress she places on her own ineptitude and incapacity. Esther describes her early suicide attempts in terms of this hopelessness and ineptitude, so that they would appear, if successful, suicides by incapacity rather than suicides of her own volition.

From ordering drinks, which 'floor[s] her' (BJ, 10-11), to studying physics, which 'ma[kes] her sick] (BJ, 36), Esther consciously and methodically adds to the body of evidence which establishes her as capable of very little. From isolated instances of incapacity in which she adroitly treads the fine line around appearing foolish ('I thought I might make a fool of myself' (BJ, 11)), a pattern is established whereby Esther demonstrates the scheme of silence, and the adoption of facade of confidence, by which she avoids admitting her incapacity to those around her. Ordering drinks in New York, Esther asks simply for vodka, refusing the offer of something to have with it because saying anything will reveal

her ignorance. Minimal answers and the shroud of silence veil her ignorance again when she avoids the physics she describes as 'death' by appearing so thoroughly on top of the work that no one suspects how defeated she is by it. This is the corollary to the scheme she uses more often, which is to appear so thoroughly defeated by things that no one suspects her power.

The irony which characterises the mature Esther's narration of the thoughts and actions of the younger Esther adds to the self-deflation of these acts and thoughts themselves. Seeing a finger bowl in New York, she recalls the earnest Esther devouring the flowers from a finger bowl at Philomena Guinea's house and contemplates 'what a long way I had come'(BJ, 41), having added this important sophistication to an array of other Ladies' Day sophistications. The mocking of the younger self by the mature narrating self stresses the gawkiness of the younger self's unworldly acts and inexperienced mistakes, while the stylistic and temporal distance between the coolly ironic retrospective consciousness and the clumsy embarrassed antics of the young Esther diminishes the latter even further.

As the list of her self-professed failures grows, Esther embarks on a sort of neurotic contre-blazon of herself, introduced with the rather off-hand 'I started adding up all the things I couldn't do' (BJ, 78). The most dominant failures Esther mentions are failures to live up to the ideals of 1950's femininity. For several paragraphs, she expounds at length on her inability to cook. This is something her mother and grandmother, who are grouped together like the grotesquely dominant matriarch in the poem 'Medusa', and have become an exaggerated monolith which diminishes Esther, have attempted to teach her. The same maternal medusa tells her that 'nobody wanted a plain English major' and suggests she learn shorthand. In each case the language belies the fact that Esther fails at these

things not, as she purports, because she is hopeless, but because she decides not to do them well. Of cooking she says, 'they were always trying to teach me one dish or another, but I would just look on and say, "Yes, yes, I see," while the instructions slid through my head like water and then I'd always spoil what I did so nobody would ask me to do it again'(BJ, 78-9), clearly indicating that the failure is one of volition rather than capacity, while of shorthand she admits candidly that 'The trouble was I hated serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters'(BJ, 79). The list of failures goes on to cover her professed inability to dance, carry a tune, balance on a beam with a book on her head, ride a horse, ski, speak German, read Hebrew, write Chinese or identify countries on a map. Since some of the arts at which Esther fails are arcane or trivial, especially placed alongside one another in a list, and since excuses such as lack of money are offered for others, the sense that more than self-denigration is going on becomes clear.

Each of these failures prepares the reader for accepting the novel's pivotal motif, that of suicide by incapacity, an exonerable or morally neutral suicide for which Esther herself can in no way be held responsible. In literary terms, there is an analogy with a text or utterance for which the persona or narrator cannot be held responsible, one example of an attempt at which is John Cleland's Fanny Hill: Memoirs of a Woman of Pleasure which operates under the guise of the confession: its narrator tells of her sexually profligate past only to renounce and condemn it. In each case the conceit scarcely hides the fact that textual utterance is a form of empowering or of savouring the taboo experience.

Thus, the language of organised (and outraged) morality dominates criticism of Plath's writing about thanatos. David Holbrook epitomises the desire to tidy up Plath's work, removing from the body of her writing texts in which 'she', meaning Plath, 'gives herself up to a black and

furious contempt for her existential needs'. His accusation is vague and odd – essentially he casts it in terms of the idea that 'she' gave 'way to the moral inversions of 'Evil be thou my good!'[89]. The epigraph to his book on Plath mythologises this same impulse in aligning Plath with George MacDonald's Lilith who first lies naked writhing around, making a lot of noise, but significantly, saying absolutely nothing intelligible until:

> She began to moan, and sigh deep sighs... she would writhe as if in the embrace of a fiend whom her soul hated...A horrible Nothingness, a Negation positive infolded her.[90]

This ominously prefigures Holbrook's efforts in his book first to silence the voice he characterises as insane and morally contaminated, then to annihilate it; specifically to give it the body of a woman and have that body raped. (Lilith lies 'naked to the torture of pure interpenetrating inward light', and Holbrook likewise uses the tools of the 'pure' light of truth and morality to mutilate and humiliate the body of Plath's writing, which is constantly confused with aspects of Plath the woman.)

In her book The Haunting of Sylvia Plath, Jacqueline Rose analyses several other such critical responses to Plath's work, and specifically to her treatment of suicide, including that of Hugh Kenner who sees Plath as saying:

> 'The price of absorption in pornography is an incremental deadening of the spirit, an attenuation of the already frail belief in the sanctity of personhood. I shall now show you a pornographic film.'

adding: 'All her life a reader had been someone to manipulate.' Rose also quotes Richard Howard's analogy that [there is]:

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[89]Holbrook, 296-297.
[90]Holbrook, 1.

> a certain pride [in the accents of these final poems] the pride of an ultimate surrender (like the pride of O, naked and chained in her owl mask, as she asks Sir Stephen for death).[91]

The ironic part of such assaults is that unravelling their metaphors results in each case in locating the violence they claim to shun in their own approach, rather than in Plath's. Holbrook's 'pure interpenetrating light' is as violent and sinister as Howard's metaphor which specifically denies the writer any power, having her chained, and in both cases naked. The difficulties they claim to encounter are violence and morally suspect authority in the texts, but what they themselves create is something far more sinister – even if it is hard to take at all seriously as a critical stance. Most importantly, they fail to see that heading towards Nothing is not simply about destroying the self. This journey in Plath's writing has an important and life-affirming goal – the rebirth of an honest and powerful self.

Plath seems to have been aware of the possibility of such responses to her work, since she has employed strategies which puncture any impetus that moral indignation of this kind could have. Firstly, she uses a range of personae in her work, from whose actions she is as removed as Browning is from those of his murderous lovers in 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'My Last Duchess'. Complementing this is the strategy of these personae themselves, who evade criticism by attempting to appear weak and incapable. Plath's scheme of suggesting that her personae are powerless and have no volition – and therefore cannot be guilty – has a corollary in the contradictory strategy on the part of Esther and other characters in the poems to neutralise their actions and words by constantly emphasising guilt. The fact that the two schemes contradict one another points to the ambivalent position these characters occupy in relation to the

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[91]Rose, 12

society that censors them: on one hand they insist on their innocence, defusing the accusations levelled at them with a display of their sheer incapacity. On the other hand they adopt an apologetic stance, deploying the self-denigrating discourse offered to them by those who accuse them, profusely deploring their own actions and words. The effect of each of these strategies is the same: in each case the angry censure is distracted. At the same time, the fact that two antithetical stances achieve this end creates a mobility, and slipperiness in these characters, which establishes that they are playing roles, and consciously manipulating their scrutineers.

In The Bell Jar, Esther's confessional impulse culminates in her decision that she is interested in becoming a Catholic. Emphatically reciting a negative credo, that spirals like that of Edmund in King Lear or Iago into nihilism ('I didn't believe in life after death or the virgin birth or the Inquisition or the infallibility of that little monkey-faced Pope or anything'), she reveals that the real reason for her conversion is that 'I could just concentrate on my sin'(BJ, 174). She identifies this sin as her desire to commit suicide, something she knows Catholicism considers not just a sin, but 'an awful sin' (BJ, 174). Psychological suffering is another of her sins, as both Esther's mother, Mrs Greenwood and Mr Willard (the father of Esther's boyfriend Buddy) see it: it is a moral pestilence and something that the sufferer can decide to snap out of or give up like an indulgence or an addiction. If anguish is a sin, from this clear cut and xenophobic perspective, then electrotherapy is its punishment. Perceiving this, Esther describes the landscape of the hospital where it is administered as a sort of whitened sepulchre (the driveway is described as having been 'whitened with broken quahog shells' and everything looks as if it has been buried 'under siftings of pale, fine dust'(BJ, 148-9)).

And if speaking uninhibitedly about the nightmares of the human psyche is a sin too, as Mrs Greenwood and Mr Willard, along with the

Holbrooks of the critical world assume, the assignation of the confessional label is a major part of its punishment, since it is used to deride and degrade Plath's work. Even when it is applied more benignly, there is a strong argument against giving this label of confessional to work which is characterised by fantasy, role playing, decoy and dramatic mobility. It is about as far from an intimate and honest outpouring of the poet's emotions as possible. If it were necessary to gather witnesses to support this suggestion, the first and most compelling testimony would come from the cast of characters Plath creates – from timid little sprouts of fungus to death-defying circus performers to paralysed men and smug gigolos. In 'Daddy' alone, a poem long touted as her most confessional, the persona has myriad selves including a foot with the capability if not the present ability to breathe and sneeze; a murderer; a pious and prayerful mourner; someone who speaks German; a lost traveller looking for a Polish homeland; someone who is dumb with oppression; someone speaking German; someone speaking Yiddish; a Jew being transported simultaneously to Auschwitz, Dachau and Belsen; a child of gypsies; a Tarot reader; a persona cowering with fear in front of a Hitleresque fascist; a teacher's daughter; a devil's daughter; the victim of a vampire; a ten-year-old girl whose father has died; a twenty year old who attempts suicide; a broken doll, stuck together with glue; a model-maker, building a man; a bride; a vampire's killer; a victorious survivor of evil. The persona, who Plath specifically distanced herself from is dancing around a fantastic dressing room, throwing on and casting off costumes and posing with different attitudes in front of her audience.[92] This poem typifies the drama of Plath's writing: this is writing characterised by its mobility, its

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92 In a BBC interview, on October 30, 1962, Plath described the persona of 'daddy' as 'a girl with an Electra complex'.

fantastic edge and fabulous imagery; its non-naturalistic costumery and cast of characters and, particularly, its idiosyncratic metaphors.

The second witness to testify against the confessional nature of Plath's work is the magnificent goldmine of unpublished manuscripts. These are housed in several libraries in the United States, most importantly at the Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, and the Lily Library, the University of Indiana, Bloomington. For most of the Ariel poems, there are many drafts, in which she works and re-works her ideas. For instance, there are some forty pages of drafts of the poem she eventually called 'Elm'. Paradoxically, it is the least 'personal' poems which were composed in an outpouring. 'Kindness', for instance, which allegorises repression, has only a few drafts.

In the case of Plath, the confessional label seems to have more to do with critics' sense of her having transgressed than with the strategies and style of the writing it is applied to. In other words it is the desire for, or demand of, a confession for what has been written, rather than the discovery of one in the writing itself, which prompts them to apply the label.

In the same way that masquerades destroy any sense of the poems' containing a sole authorial voice, in The Bell Jar through recurrent images of passivity and shrinking, melting or falling into oblivion Esther tries to create an illusion of her own disappearance. At different stages she says 'I felt myself melting into the shadows like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life'(BJ, 10), 'I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot' and 'I felt like a hole in the ground' (BJ, 17). In terms of this imagery, Esther moves steadily into the dark in each of the above; into the shadows, into a photographic negative, into a black dot and into a hole in the ground. These grey ghosts of herself merge into the novel's moral

landscape of dark/light imagery, which is used ironically to represent the clear-cut logic of a nervous 1950's morality. This clearly delineated black and white landscape means little to the more complex Esther, who sees mainly in grey, yet it is convenient for her to camouflage herself in order to escape being allocated a place in it. After her breakdown and recovery, Esther remembers this camouflaging of herself as a psychic isolation, and she encapsulates her own true position in the glimpse of a macabre 'rock that bulged between sky and sea like a grey skull' (BJ, 250).

Linked with this evasive strategy are the novel's various images of failing to recognise or 'claim' the aberrant self, which occur after moments of rebellion. It is another means by which Esther dissociates herself from her own powerful actions. If an unrecognisable outer self is the outrageous actor, the inner self is exonerated. Seeing her reflection after getting drunk and skipping the ladies' cocktail party, Esther sees 'a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face' (BJ, 19). Later, that face seems as distorted as something at a freak show, 'the face in [the mirror] looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury' (BJ, 20). Before having her photo taken as guest editor and poet, Esther tries to 'conceal' herself in the powder room, and after throwing her glamorous clothes out the window in a rejection of the Ladies' Day magazine mores, Esther comments that 'the face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian' (BJ, 118). Moments after this, she calls herself 'Pollyanna Cowgirl', the derisive nickname given to one of her co-editors, the one whose clothes Esther is wearing (BJ, 118). As she slashes her ankle with a razor blade, in preparation for slashing her wrists, Esther dissociates herself from both the actor who wants to commit suicide, who is culpable by external standards, and the one who doesn't, who is culpable and weak from Esther's own point of view: 'If I looked in the mirror while I did it, it would be like

watching somebody else, in a book or a play. But the person in the mirror was paralysed and too stupid to do a thing' (BJ, 156).

After all this expounding on the theme of her 'inadequacy', Esther demonstrates a paradoxical power available through it. She conjures up the image of the fig tree, with each fig representing a choice for a 'wonderful future'. Elsewhere Esther had been told by Buddy Willard that her inability to choose in a psychological multiple choice test between the city and the country as her preferred place to live indicates that she 'has the perfect set-up of the true neurotic'. Esther replies that if 'neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell,'(BJ, 97). In front of the imaginary fig tree, Esther is struck with inadequacy, and again 'unable to decide' which symbolic fig to pick, because she wants 'each and every one of them'. She hesitates until 'the figs beg[i]n to wrinkle and go black, one by one at [her] feet'. Inaction results in decay and death, as conveyed by the figs which wrinkle and go black before plopping to the ground. Hinted at in the language is the suggestion of the daunting world represented by the beckoning, maddening figs of possibility, falling at Esther's feet. This submission, albeit submission in death, occurs because of Esther's inaction, which implies that this inaction or withholding of action has its own power – one great enough to defeat the world and have it fall at one's feet.

The image of the fig tree foreshadows Esther's use of her understanding of this power – a power based on being passive and inactive – in her descriptions of her attempted self-annihilations by inaction. Janet Malcolm takes the title of her book on the Plath biographies, The Silent Woman, from a story Olwyn Hughes, Plath's sister-in-law, tells of Plath herself utilising a version of this power to win a battle. Hughes describes a disagreement between herself and Plath, and reports with surprise that Plath failed to respond or take her part in the

argument. Plath simply remained silent. Malcolm talks of Plath's speechlessness' as a 'deadly, punishing weapon'.[93] Plath employs a supremely powerful tactic – which would today no doubt earn the disparaging description 'passive aggression' – which allows her to make her point without any words or action at all. It is a tactic reliant on self-control and surprise, as well as an opting out of the use of conventional forms of cruelty. Anne Stevenson describes Hughes' enraged reaction to Plath's refusal to react to her own angry words: 'Why doesn't she *say* something?'[94] Similarly, Esther's oxymoronic 'accidental' suicides, or suicides by inaction, allow the expression of rage and violence without the need to take responsibility for them.

One of these, Esther's food-poisoning death-and-resurrection which operates within an extended Last Supper metaphor, contains a proleptic glimpse of Esther's appreciation of the paradox that this type of blameless near-death results in her feeling 'purged and holy and ready for a new life'(BJ, 49). With purity as the dominant ideal in the society in which she lives, it is significant that the passivity which leads to 'You almost died' poisoning entails the one moment of achieving this sought-after pureness: 'I felt so pure as a result'(BJ, 50). It is also impossible to ignore the irony that the feeling of purity follows several pages of description of the poisoning and its results; nausea in the cinema, vomiting in the cab, vomiting in the elevator, vomiting in the hotel bathroom, vomit on the floor of the cab, vomit stains on towels, girls queuing in the hotel to vomit and vomit some more. As the nurse puts it, 'I never seen anything like it. Sick here, sick there...Sick as dogs and crying for ma'(BJ, 48).

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[93]Janet Malcolm, The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994) 49.

[94]Anne Stevenson, Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990) 204.

Esther's first suicide attempt occurs immediately after she has refused Buddy Willard's proposal of marriage, a refusal which represents a subversion of the ideal of marriage to a 'fine, clean boy' – and a doctor at that. Although she does not know how to ski, something the reader knows from the earlier catalogue of her incapacities, Esther agrees to ski down a huge hill, under the tuition of the fine, clean and covertly sadistic Buddy. It seems to Esther that, in an oppressive case of pathetic fallacy, the elements have joined with Buddy in chastising her for her decision, and this seems to result in pureness too: 'the cold air punished my lungs and sinuses to a visionary clearness' (BJ, 99). Esther's guilt transforms the wind into the natural agent of Buddy's anger too, though this angry wind in turn produces a monster in place of Esther, so that ultimately she has both transformed herself into a witch, and been powerless to resist this transformation, which is itself ultimately Buddy's: 'A keen wind that had been hiding itself struck me full in the mouth and raked the hair back horizontal on my head' (BJ, 102). Amidst Esther's use of the pathetic fallacy to make her own volition in the death-drive of the skiing disappear, and to link Buddy's covert rage with the harm done to Esther by the elements, there is the ironic counterpoint of a section of Esther's consciousness which sees the lunge towards oblivion as controlled by Esther's own volition, and which notes several times that the sun is impassive – 'hardened' (BJ, 99),'mist-shrouded' (unseeing) (BJ, 101) and 'an insentient pivot' (BJ, 102).

This underlines the consciousness of Esther's pretence that this is an accident, and she a passive victim, and not a suicide attempt, for which, in the context of the faux-morality the novel describes, Esther would herself be guilty. Unlike Lear's description of himself as 'more sinned against than sinning', in this account Esther acknowledges the complex contributions of innocence and guilt, activity and passivity, conscious and

free decision to act and manipulated reaction, even whilst purporting to vindicate herself. The stress on her passivity continues with the claim that 'it never occurred to me to say no' and the excuse of meekness 'I didn't want to make trouble, so I hung quietly on' (BJ, 100). These are followed by images which could almost be serpentine, suggestive of Esther's strategic fighting of fire with fire – her answer to those who accuse her of the sin of despair, the unforgivable sin of some Christian denominations, is the same answer given in the Eden story by Eve to the accusation that she, of her own choice, ate fruit from the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, namely, that she was tempted to do it by the serpent. In her images of the serpentine ski-rope, 'the rough, bruising snake of a rope'; 'the rope dragged me, wobbling and balancing, so rapidly I couldn't hope to dissociate myself from it'(BJ, 100), Esther virtually alludes to the whole Eve debate about women's desire for knowledge and power, the blame for men's actions falling on women, the unequal treatment of men and women in predominant moral discourses and the mythic representation of woman as perched on the border between evil on one side and man on the other in a sort of moral landscape which views her as culpable for the transmission of all sin into the human race. The allusion is emphasised by the fact that Esther's sin, not so much of nihilism as of voicing nihilism and voicing other subversive counter-discourses, is represented in the novel, and generally in Plath's writing, as an oral sin, often expressed in terms of biting, chewing and munching:

> I could not go up to your door and knock and say: 'Let me come in and suck your life and sorrow from you as a leech sucks blood; let me gorge myself on your sensations, ideas and dreams; let me crawl inside your guts and cranium and let me live like a tapeworm for a while, draining your life substance into myself... no.'[95]

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[95] Quoted in Rose, 32. Excised from the published journals, this sort of comment in Plath's writing was objected to by her own executors, who claim openly to have cut, amongst other equally amorphous things, 'quite a few nasty bits' from the published version. Frances

In the garden of Eden, Eve's sin of eating the forbidden fruit is only the forerunner and metaphor for her greater sin; the verbal sin of persuading Adam to eat it too, of transmitting or generating transgression through her words. Plath has allusions to Adam and Eve throughout her writing, most strikingly in an early poem 'Dialogue *en Route*' in which a vociferous Eve wishes desperately for 'something to happen' and casts a spell wishing for a hedonistic spree –'erotic and elegant episodes' – to transform her life. A similar confidence and defiance fills Esther as, rushing down the hill, the thought that she 'might kill [herself] form[ing] in [her] mind coolly as a tree or a flower', she feels as though the whole landscape is a part of her – 'I felt my lungs inflate with the inrush of scenery' – and claims that 'this is what it is to be happy'(BJ, 101-102). It is unclear what the 'this' is: passivity or powerful activity, the embrace of the whole landscape or the rush into annihilation which rejects this embrace, the vital feeling of her lungs working or the idea that they may not have to work for much longer. The result of the attempt turns out to be not the freedom of death, but the further enclosure and passivity of a broken leg, but this does not end Esther's attempts at suicide by passivity or incapacity.

After the violence of the negligently administered shock therapy, which feels like a sadistic reproach for being depressed, 'I wondered what terrible thing it was I had done' (BJ, 151), Esther makes a further series of attempts at staging a suicide for which she cannot be blamed, her desire for invulnerability from blame should she fail intensified by her experience of electrotherapy.

At the beach, with friends and a blind date, Esther listens to them talking about a play about murder and euthanasia, again unable to see the

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McCullough, editor's note, The Journals of Sylvia Plath, by Sylvia Plath (New York: Random House, 1982) Cited in the text as J.

moral landscape in black and white, mesmerised by a 'big, round, grey rock' poking out of the water (BJ, 164). Her head is full of negative, suicidal mantras such as 'You'll never get anywhere like that' (BJ, 155), so she decides to swim out towards the grey rock, symbol of truth in an otherwise meaningless landscape, so that she'll be too tired to swim back, and will drown. Where her friends are weighing on her nerves 'like a dull wooden block on the strings of a piano', the water seems 'amiable' and 'welcoming', and drowning 'the kindest way to die'. Just as the death-flight on skis had involved the comfort of regression beyond issues of volition and responsibility (Esther sees her path as 'into [her] own past', to 'the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly'(BJ, 102)), Esther remembers associating the stillborn babies in jars that Buddy shows her with fish, so the desire for drowning involves regression to infancy as well as death. In Kristevan terms, since abjection is sited at, and initiates from the moment of the child's separation from the body of its mother[96], Esther wants to regress beyond abjection. She actually chooses the only possible image of this state, since only the stillborn child has a time of experiencing the comfort of its mother's womb without ever experiencing the moment of the inception of the experience of abjection, so it's an entirely precise metaphor.

As she swims, she contemplates the morning's failed suicide attempt, in which ineptitude has not been required as a cover-up, since ineptitude itself has precluded the suicide. She has tried to hang herself by the cord of her mother's bathrobe, but is 'poor at knots, and had no idea how to make a proper one' (BJ, 167). There is a half comic, half desperate rendition of the attempt, with its myriad small failures – there is no suitable ceiling beam, her hands are too weak to strangle herself – all of

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[96] Julia Kristeva, Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,trans. Leon S. Roudiez (1980: New York: Columbia UP, 1982).

which establishes that 'Dying/ is an art, like everything else' (CP, 245) – before the narrative returns to the patiently swimming Esther of the present, who decides that this method isn't working either so the only alternative is to drown herself then and there. This fails too, as the water spits her back up, like something indigestible, and the grey rock, representing truth, which seems to have receded as she has approached it, 'mocks' her for her failure. This suggests to Esther that, after all, suicide has nothing to do with volition at all, since the spirit may be willing, but the flesh, stubbornly, remains weak. Weak enough that suicide seems due to be added to Esther's list of her own incapacities, so that the point of compiling this list, to distract attention from destructive capabilities Esther feels, is made superfluous – she has effectively demonstrated that she has no such destructive powers in the first place.

Strategies of self-effacement to conceal power have been made unnecessary by a demonstrated lack of power, and the efforts of the voice in compiling lists and implementing strategies have been made redundant, it seems, so it is unsurprising that Esther's near-successful attempt to kill herself is understated and directly, simply described. In terms of the mythic scheme at work, Esther has entered the state of being Nothing, and has emerged from it more powerful. The language is active, positive and unadorned.

Esther's description of her near-successful suicide attempt is built on short sentences, generally with an unmasked narratorial 'I' as their subject, and one or more active verbs. From strategies of passivity and incapacity, Esther leaps into straightforward, unshirking reporting of her actions: 'I jumped... hurried... went... picked up... scrawled... propped... laughed... ran... dragged... climbed up... reached... wanted... pulled... slipped... unpinned... unlocked... hoped... ' (BJ, 177-9). Prefacing this is the stark remark 'I knew just how to go about it' (BJ, 177). The trigger for this

certainty has been a visit to her father's grave, where she has 'howled [her] loss into the cold salt rain'(BJ, 177). This grieving seems at once to relieve her suffering and to intensify and clarify her desire for death, so that it has the effects of displacing distracting strategies and giving Esther a feeling of freedom and activity. This pattern also occurs in Plath's poem 'Daddy'. In each case, the persona experiences rage and struggles with language to find a metaphor for her pain to externalise it, or somehow experience it with more clarity and less mystery. In 'Daddy', the persona's passivity and incapacity is emphatic: she is suffocated, trampled on, drowned and sent to a concentration camp, yet all of this is obscured by the pivotal struggle with articulation, which refuses to yield a single metaphor, breaking out instead into a kaleidoscope of mobile images, none of which is sustained or seems sustainable by the persona. Rather than being about self-aggrandizement, as some critics have said, the poem is concerned with disintegration, both of language and of the persona's identity.[97] It is not until the persona focuses on a photo of her father, and associates her past suicide attempts with him that she becomes active as Esther does, with the line 'And then I knew what to do'. In 'Daddy', as in The Bell Jar, this is the point after which the persona must come to terms with her own power and her own voice, each plunging into an imaginative landscape occupied by vampires and witches, murderers and victims, a landscape imbued with Gothic distortions and horrific decomposings, a landscape of haemmorhagings and retchings and the torrents of words they represent.

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[97]Leon Wieseltier, 'In a Universe of Ghosts 'New York Review of Books, 25 Nov. 1976: 20. 'Whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews... [Sylvia Plath] did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place.' Wieseltier refers to a specific metaphor in Plath's poetry, and certainly his position seems an entirely reasonable one, though I would argue that it is a response which does Plath the injustice of assuming that she is using the metaphor without irony: the very point of the metaphor is that the speaker knows she has no clear charge against her father or patriarchy. She is longing to be able to identify with an image of atrocious injustice, but struggling to do so, since the pain she has experienced is so much more confused and confusing.

II.

Hands, hearts, dead men
Dead men,
Hands, hearts, peel off–
Old
Dead hands, dead stringencies!
I am bare
I am white
Godiva
Rising...
In a season of dying,
A season of burning

(early draft of 'Ariel'[98])

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.

('Elm', CP, 192)

The notion of rebirth is not a new one in criticism of Plath's work. In Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath, Judith Kroll gives several examples of the moment of recognising the 'false self', which must be sloughed off to allow the 'true self' to emerge in rebirth. Examples of the false self include objectified dolls and works of art: 'A living doll, everywhere you look' ('The Applicant'), 'The small jeweled/Doll he guards like a heart' ('Purdah'), and 'I am your opus,/I am your valuable' ('Lady Lazarus').[99] Other critics employ similar terminology, including the polarisation of false and true selves, and the notion of a continuum in which the poet progresses from the former to the latter. Since, as her literary executor, Ted Hughes has controlled the publication of Plath's

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[98] Sylvia Plath, 'Ariel', Draft 3. Smith College Library Rare Book Room.
[99] Judith Kroll, Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (New York: Harper and Row, 1976).

work, his beliefs have been enormously influential in motivating such views, and in fuelling them. The title of Kroll's book comes directly from a comment made by Hughes which tries to unify Plath's poetry under a schematic metaphor of movement towards Ariel.[100] For Hughes, 'her reputation rests on the poems of her last six months', earlier work and work in different genres is variously described as 'by-products' and useful for its 'glimpses into early phases of the strange conflict between what was expected of her and what finally was exacted.'[101] In the most recent – and much lauded – publication on Plath, Janet Malcolm takes this theme of waste products even further, consciously or unconsciously employing Hughes' phrase to dismiss the Ariel poems with an extraordinary stroke of critical imperiousness: 'In the Ariel poems [Plath] gives us what could be called the waste products of her madness'.[102] These views have determined the course of the publication of her work, which in turn means that work is published – or not published – to accord with them. That the critical response to her published work tends to emulate these notions of continuum, smooth and consistent improvement and apotheosis in the Ariel poems, requires questioning. Their definition of rebirth must be replaced by one more in harmony with Plath's style.

This myth of the continuum – that everything in Plath's life and career was leading towards Ariel, which diced with and was defeated by death – is antithetical in its application to work which is generically and stylistically multifarious, whether it is based on the biography of the writer

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[100]'Most readers will perceive pretty readily the single centre of power and light which her poems all share... how faithfully her separate poems build up into one long poem... The poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear.' Ted Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems,' Tri-Quarterly, 7 (1966): 82.

[101]Ted Hughes, introduction to The Journals of Sylvia Plath xiii. 'One can compare what was really going on in her to a process of alchemy. Her apprentice writings were like impurities thrown off from the various stages of inner transformation, by-products of the internal work'; and his introduction to Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams 13.

[102]Malcolm, 66.

or that of the poems. It is also fundamentally a logocentric ordering. Like Orlando , Plath's poems and prose are characterised by their diversity and unruliness, their playfulness, whimsicality and theatricality. They, like Whitman's poem 'Song of Myself' might say of themselves: 'Do I contradict myself?/Very well then I contradict myself,/(I am large, I contain multitudes.)'[103] The demands of some psychoanalytical criticism have contributed to this predominant critical gaze beyond the writing of Plath, and the attempts to find there some rationale or cohesive metaphor with which to bind and control this unruliness.[104]

An alternative approach to this, informed by Luce Irigaray's definition of the feminine as an 'economy which diverts the linearity of a project, undermines the target-object of a desire, explodes the polarisation of desire on only one pleasure and disconcerts fidelity to only one discourse', is to accept the problematical nature of texts like Orlando and Plath's writing rather than to try to tame it.[105] Rather than looking outside the text to contextualise its phases, we should look instead at the nature of the different selves Plath presents in her texts, the characteristics of what are generally termed 'true' and 'false' selves, and what it is about them that might motivate their being thus categorised. Instead of scrutinising the moment of rebirth of a bolder voice as the moment of the origins of the confession, this moment may be considered, in a rereading of the notion of confessional, as the moment of the commission of the oral sin (the sin of saying something transgressive and/or speaking in a way which is transgressive) which is the prerequisite for the confessional genre. The conflicting nature of these two moments forces a consideration of the whole discourse of the confessional; words like 'true', 'false', 'honest',

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[103]Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself' Leaves of Grass, (1921; New York: Random House, 1944) 102.

[104] The important exception to this is the psychoanalytical study of the body of Plath's writing , Rose's The Haunting of Sylvia Plath.

[105]Irigaray, in New French Feminisms, 104.

'deceitful', 'integrity', 'intimacy' and 'candour' must be reassessed as elements of a certain ideologically motivated reading of the work. An examination of the ideological basis of these terms in the confessional discourse highlights the fact that it is a critical discourse which obfuscates and mutilates the writing it attends.

Without the explanatory guide of extrinsic discourses, it becomes clear that Plath's writing is actually doing the opposite of what it is described by these commentaries as doing. In place of these controlling critical terms used to fetter writing, Plath's writing may be explored in terms of notions of the feminine voice. Irigaray describes the plurality of feminine oppositional discourse, and the concept of 'other meaning' which is 'constantly in the process of weaving itself, at the same time ceaselessly embracing words and yet casting them off to avoid becoming fixed, immobilised'.[106]

Plath's writing is diverse thematically, stylistically and in terms of quality whether it was written before or during the prolific final months of Plath's life, which is the period Hughes confines her talent to. This alone makes a fallacy of the dichotomy of 'by-product' and 'what was finally exacted', and undermines any concept of discernible drive towards a single goal: an apotheosis. Just as Plath's 'rebirth' writing is not limited to a specific period, it is also not limited to a single genre. It occurs in The Bell Jar, prose writings in her personal journal and in her short stories. Rather than occurring at a certain point in an artificial continuum of Plath's work, rebirth is a motif which defines the intrinsic structure of many of Plath's poems and prose writings. It is present from early on, in poems located in the marginalised 'Juvenilia' section of Hughes' edition of her Collected Poems and in one of her first prize-winning stories 'Sunday at the Mintons' (written when she was seventeen) but is absent from the last

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[106]Irigaray, in New French Feminisms, 103.

poem she ever wrote, 'Edge', which is an oblique and objective description of a woman 'perfected' in suicide, 'her dead/ Body [wearing] the smile of accomplishment.' Rather than being explicable in biographical terms as a movement towards wholeness on the part of a single persona, who is actually the poet, scarcely veiled, rebirth in Plath's writing involves increased power and a multiplicity of voices, moods, roles and styles. David Holbrook talks of 'a fatally false sequence of logic' in Plath, that the violence of suicide can result in reborn integrity, but the logical flaw is the product of the critic's misinterpretation or failure to hear what Plath's writing says. Quite clearly, what emerges again and again in Plath's mythological scheme is a rebirth in the province of Nothing from stasis to the vitality of mobile, multifarious roles; in other words, a shattering of any concept of single and delimited selfhood. This is defined in the writing as an artistic rather than personal transformation; as the personae move towards variety and freedom, the only implication for the writer is a corresponding movement towards poetic mastery and virtuosity, regardless of when in her career Plath wrote the text. It is simply illegitimate to suggest that fluid personae relate to some psychopathology on the part of the writer, as text after text on Plath has suggested.[107] Finally, the term 'rebirth' itself needs redefinition, as it means something far more metaphorical and complex than many commentators acknowledge.

To demonstrate these claims, it seems appropriate to meet them at their extreme edge, and show some of the ways in which Esther in The Bell Jar experiences much the same thing later poetic personae do. Apart from instantly demonstrating that poetry is not the only genre in which Plath worked the theme, and that it is present in writing prior to the last

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[107]Not just Holbrook. Butscher and his 'bitch goddess' analysis of Plath's writing, which posits the existence of a sort of spiritual possessor of the writer, whose attempts at emergence did not succeed until the Ariel poems. Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work (New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1977) These should simply not have the status they do as seminal texts.

poems, Esther's own interior monologues provide a fuller debate within the text about what this rebirth entails, its origins and the reasons it provides a freeing metaphor which in many ways activates Esther and makes her articulate.

*

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?

('Lady Lazarus', CP, 244)

Up until her near-successful suicide attempt in The Bell Jar Esther has experienced only moments of power, and these have occurred when she is treading the precipice between survival and annihilation. Tearing down the ski slopes in a gamble with death she feels vital and strong and thinks 'this is what it is to be happy' (BJ, 102). When she is trapped in a social situation which she perceives as somehow dangerous, and in which she feels 'gawky and morbid as somebody in a side-show', redemption comes fleetingly in the form of vodka, which goes 'straight down into [her] stomach like a sword-swallower's sword' and makes her feel 'powerful and god-like' (BJ, 13). She sees and relates to violence all around her, but feels barred from experiencing the power she associates with it, as she is intent on appearing passive, incapable and, as a result, innocent of it.

To Esther, the landscape seems full of potential destruction. She notices the 'sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers' (BJ, 5-6) and perceives the 'stale tropical heat' as hitting her in the face deliberately, 'like a last insult' (BJ, 18). Her descriptions often suggest her foreboding and anxiety, as though she senses that the violence around her

will not be easily harnessed, and is more likely to turn on her and victimise her. When she visits the flashy apartment of the disc jockey Lenny ("You prob'ly must have heard of me... I'm as famous as hell" (BJ, 11-12)) even inanimate objects and facets of the architecture seem to be involved in this threatening conspiracy. She notices in the urban Gothic of his apartment 'partitions knocked down', 'great white bearskins [lying about] underfoot', 'antlers and buffalo horns and a stuffed rabbit head' ('Ran over that in Las Vegas' offers Lenny, noticing her gaze) and hears his 'cowboy boots echoing like pistol shots'. The drink he makes tastes like 'dead water' and is presented in a glass with a pink lasso printed on it. Drinking it, she feels that it victimises her from within by weakening her rather than incorporating its violence within her. Even the shrewd comic edge to her perspective, which satirises this predatory man as a wordless, grunting, biting animal, fails to dispel a sense of Esther's being overwhelmed by her own fear and vulnerability, even when the violence she notices is not unleashed and doesn't really have anything to do with her or affect her in any way. Esther, ambivalently drawn to and away from violence, attempts to experience its power to terrify and destroy vicariously: 'If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I'd stop and look so hard I'd never forget it' (BJ, 13).

This ambivalent attitude to violence and gore is explored in the poem 'Two Views of a Cadaver Room'. In that poem, the 'two views' are analogous with Esther's two approaches to power. In the first stanzas, a woman visits her lover while he is at work dissecting not just one but four corpses. Although she recognises the power of the horrendous scene and of the 'white-smocked boys' at work, and although she is made privy to (and maybe victim of) this through the gift of the corpse's cut-out heart, she can 'scarcely make out anything.' The gift, the terms of the proffered

relationship and the setting of these amidst all these reminders of human mortality and powerlessness against disintegration preclude her from taking her role in the scene. Like Esther, the poem's narrator finds that vicarious knowledge, both sexual and intellectual, through a relationship with a medical student is unsatisfying. Each is plagued by the desire to know more, and to question. Each is forced to test the limits of her ability to endure, and thus to remain passive. In The Bell Jar a very similar situation is transformed into a prelude to the comic scene in which Buddy asks 'Have you ever seen a man?' and proceeds to show Esther 'a man', making explicit the connection between the two types of knowledge, intellectual and sexual, being offered. This occurs immediately after Esther has read him some poems, which he finds threatening – they represent a challenge to the authority he emphasises, since they contain an area of discourse unfamiliar to him, and are voiced by a woman. Fairly obviously, his main aim in the display is to shock and silence the woman uttering something which undermines his control of the situation because it is something about which he knows nothing. Plath treats the scene lightly, wryly diffusing the aggression of Buddy's act with Esther's realisation that he is putting her in her place. The reader, hidden inside her consciousness hears the comment she chooses not to make in response to what she sees: 'The only thing I could think of was turkey neck and turkey gizzards and I felt very depressed' (BJ, 71), which is a far more subversive thought than anything that precedes it. In a sense this presents a more forthright version of the vision in 'Two Views', the second section of which, an imitation of Auden's fairly misanthropic 'Musée Des Beaux Arts,' places human love, depicted as blind, in the context of martial destruction. The self-aggrandizing lover of the first stanza, like that of the second, forgets his own mortality because of a heady moment's experience of human power. The woman in this section of the poem contrasts with the passive

watcher of the first. She is seductively blinding her lover with her billowing skirts, and plays music which prevents his hearing the song of death, which is approaching the couple as a personified abstraction. It is she who defies death, and tricks her lover, although her power depends on her self-sacrifice. For Esther, the choice similarly appears to be between vicarious experience of power, which is unfulfilling, and a dare-devilish reckless wielding of power, which may entail, as its price, the sacrifice of aspects of the self.

Vicarious experience involves, by definition, a removal from the essence of that experience, so that whatever strength and power Esther experiences in this way is limited, second-hand, delegated and thus diluted. Full power, the power to act and initiate, to speak and affect others is not something she is going to achieve by paying attention, even in the form of lip service, to the demands of social convention. Realising this, the Esther who is only just resuscitated after her active, determined suicide attempt is quite a different character, like the many phoenix personae of the Ariel poems who find themselves suddenly powerfully uninhibited, rising from the ashes of pain and torture to 'eat men like air' (CP, 244).

Earlier in the novel, Esther has struggled with the fact that society not only sees moral issues in oversimplified terms, but colour codes them, so that around her is a facile, black and white environment that cannot tolerate, or maybe just can't contemplate, the grey in between. At one stage, when she feels that she is transgressing, her guilt makes her feel tainted and blackened like a 'dirty scrawled-over letter [stuffed] into a fresh, clean envelope' and she takes a bath so hot it is as punitive as it is purgative (BJ, 21). The worst transgressions, this image suggests, are verbal ones – there is something dirty and guilty about the text itself.

When Esther wakes up, after her suicide attempt, the world has become irredeemably black. 'It was completely dark,' she comments, 'I felt the darkness, but nothing else' (BJ, 180). There is a silence like 'black water' around her, and the immediate darkness is a womb-like 'thick, warm and furry' one, which, in Kristevan terms places her at the site beyond abjection. The connections in Plath's symbolism, based on traditional associations in myth and superstition, between the moon, female sexuality, the womb and the sea highlight this suggestion. The first and last things Esther is conscious of before and after falling unconscious are visions and sounds of the sea. The sea she envisages at the moment of losing consciousness is almost maternal, although it 'rushes' her to sleep, suggesting a failure of mothering or half-hearted and harassed mothering:

> The silence drew off, baring all the shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep.
>
> (BJ, 179)

The dark to which she awakens is like a silent sea, and one which is controlling and oppressive, covering disruption with a facade of calm: 'The silence surged back, smoothing itself as black water smoothes to its old surface calm over a dropped stone'(BJ, 180).

How she looks and what she says have been Esther's obsessions so far in the novel, since they are the chief indices by which her society, a distorted, almost dystopian one, judges the individual. Now they are reduced to insignificance as the sounds around her, when they are not overpowered by the silence, are unrecognisable and meaningless, and she cannot see anything, as she is blind. There are thus very physical images of her sense of being cut off from society with its vociferous demands. It is clear to Esther that there is no way she can disclaim responsibility for the

attempted suicide, but she feels blank rather than guilty about the punishment of resurrection, with all its violence. She has no desire to face the light and the reproaches that go with it. This signals, in symbolic terms, a turning away from striving to appear innocent. At the same time, paradoxically, she refuses to accept passively the implication that she has been tried and found guilty and must now submit to chastisement. These relinquishments entail various freedoms, the most crucial of which is a linguistic one. No longer content to confine outspokenness to the realm of fantasy, to wonder what havoc could ensue 'if my mouth could marry a hurt like that' ('Poppies in July', CP, 203), when she speaks, Esther is direct and open and angry. To her weepy mother, she is unrelenting in her refusal to pretend she is not depressed, beating out this uncompromising position bluntly. When an old acquaintance, working in the hospital visits her simply to 'see what a girl who was crazy enough to kill herself looked like' she won't show him her face, and tells him in bullets of monosyllables to 'Get out... Get the hell out and don't come back' (BJ, 184).

The experience for the reader is just as direct, uncompromising and relentless. Plath's depiction of Esther's state of mind, her alternating rage and depression, is never squeamish or truncated. Like the earlier scene in which the reader is told in detail about the food poisoning; 'sick here, sick there and crying for ma', here Esther's perspective is imbued with anger; anger turned inwards, anger turned outwards and anger rushing indiscriminately through everything she experiences. There is no softening of this perspective, and the reader has the same amount of relief from it that Esther does – none. There is no repression or dissembling on Esther's own part. She now overstates and dramatises her feelings, rather than concealing and diminishing them. Now her anger is active, unveiled and acted out in many ways. Importantly, too, it is articulated. A similarly vocal rage permeates much of Plath's poetry. Apart from the much quoted

last line of 'Daddy', 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through', there are many instances of violent, enjambed lines full of articulate vitriol and 'obscene' or blasphemous diction. One persona exclaims 'the fish, the fish – /Christ they are panes of ice' (CP, 241), another calls her eavesdropping neighbour 'Toad-stone! Sister-bitch! Sweet neighbour!'(CP, 261) and a third character decides she hates her friend's baby daughter because 'The bastard's a girl' (CP, 228) A tortured wife becomes the 'lever of [her husband's] wet dreams' (CP, 226), a mother notices a 'stink of fat and baby crap' (CP, 227) and a male persona boasts of his 'way of turning/ Bitches to ripples of silver'(CP, 268). In 'Death & Co.' a woman realises death is advancing towards her like a door to door salesman, and calls him 'Bastard/ Masturbating a glitter' (CP, 254) and a couple debate over the fate of a monstrous child in 'A Secret' saying 'Do away with the bastard.'(CP, 220) Another wife, jealous of being excluded from her husband's dreams, becomes a bloodthirsty shrew:

> Twisting curses in the tangled sheet
> With taloned fingers,
> Shaking in her skull's cage
> The stuffed shape of her flown mate
> Escaped among moon-plumaged strangers;
> ... She must wait in rage
> Until bird-racketing dawn
> When her shrike-face
> Leans to peck open those locked lids
>
> (CP, 42)

And contrary to Hughes' view, crucial to his defence of his suppression of Plath's work, that this full-voiced persona doesn't occur except in Plath's late poems, examples can be found in The Colossus and even earlier. ('The Shrike', quoted above, was written in 1956, seven years before the period Hughes describes.) In 'The Beast', a clipped anger chips away at the edge between articulate metaphor and rage that is intense enough to

become indecipherable streams of impressionistic and onomatopoeic insult, naming a repulsive husband 'bullman', 'my lucky animal', 'Mumblepaws, teary and sorry', 'Fido Littlesoul, the bowel's familiar', 'Mud-sump, happy sty face' and 'Hairtusk' and concluding 'I've married a cupboard full of rubbish.' This was written in 1959.

Like the decomposing persona of 'Lady Lazarus', who, resurrected, warns of her 'sour breath' and the absence of 'the flesh the grave cave ate', and the persona in 'In Plaster', who boasts that she knows that the pristine plaster cast on her broken leg contains a body that has grown 'ugly and hairy', Esther uses her body to flaunt her new resistance to social mores. As feminist writers like Naomi Wolf point out, beauty becomes an ill-defined and unattainable ideal in cultures which fear the self-esteem of women. The fear of 'ugliness' becomes 'a secret "underlife" poisoning [women's] freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of ageing, and dread of lost control'.[108] Or as Susan Faludi puts it fashion and beauty are used as weapons to control women, with punitively restrictive clothing, symbolising and quite literally ensuring, the restriction of female activity.[109], A long way from the Esther who tries (and guiltily fails) to enjoy the experience of 'tripping about in those... size seven patent leather shoes...with a black leather belt and a black leather pocket-book to match' and the fantasy of wearing 'a skimpy imitation silver-lame bodice stuck on to a big, fat cloud of white tulle'(BJ, 2), Esther now refuses to be controlled in this way. Her legs are unshaven and flabby, but she makes no attempt to cover them before a visitor arrives, partly because, as she says 'it was too late,' and partly because they are 'disgusting and ugly' and, she reasons, that's what she is (BJ, 183). After demanding to see a mirror ('you don't

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[108]Naomi Wolf, The Beauty Myth, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1990) 2.
[109]Susan Faludi, Backlash, The Undeclared War Against Women, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1992) 203ff.

look very pretty', the nurse warns her) Esther smashes it, splintering passivity and superstition as she does so, and sending the nurses into an angry, frightened attack on her, which culminates in her expulsion from the hospital (BJ, 185). In Plath's writing, mirrors are sheeted by a society terrified of the taboo (rage, blood, suicidal depression) and the mirror represents the vanity and indirectness of the poseur. In shattering the mirror, Esther rejects the imperative that she be indirect and that she shroud her own powerful image, as well as the insistence that she be pretty, with all this implies in terms of smallness and restriction. Like the speaker of 'Kindness', Esther rages against the repression of painful and tabooed experience that inserts a pane of glass between her and the world, replacing truth with the smothering image of content 'the mirrors are filling with smiles.' Her body becomes powerful, and she feels suddenly aggressive, sexual, and, very soon, beautiful.

At the next hospital, Esther won't chat with her neighbour, and silences her by telling her that she tried to kill herself. She tells the doctors that she feels lousy, hating the fact that 'people... ask cheerfully how you are when they know you're feeling like hell and expect you to say "Fine"'(BJ, 187). Her neighbour pulls a white curtain between her bed and Esther's, which shuts Esther out like a 'white wall' (BJ, 188) and the lawn seems 'white with doctors'(BJ, 189), but Esther is not moved from her morally 'black' perspective by any of this. She has nothing but suspicion and contempt for the doctors, who she thinks have names like Doctor Pancreas and Doctor Syphilis and are thereby banished from her reality as a surreal joke. This highlights her subversion of the symbolic order, in Lacanian terms. She eats huge amounts of food and kicks the orderly, only after telling him off angrily. She won't get out of bed, won't make anything in Occupational Therapy and deliberately kicks a tray of thermometers off her bed when the nurse leaves them there, shattering

them and sending balls of mercury rolling around the ward, each bearing a distorted, monstrous reflection of her image in it, which she gloats about like an omnipotent narcissist.

This sort of image of omnipotence recurs in Plath's writing. The jubilant narrator of 'Lady Lazarus', who ends her monologue with the ominous 'Beware./Beware' and who has become various voices, cries 'What a million filaments', proudly envisaging herself as combustible energy; a dynamic shower of sparks, unpredictable and uncontainable. (Interestingly, this is generally read as the lament of a splintered self, a feeble whisper of defeat. Yet the tone is entirely theatrical and defiant, and quite at odds with such a patronising reading.) The speaker of 'Mary's Song' lives within a heart huge enough to encompass holocausts: 'It is a heart,/This holocaust I walk in'(CP, 257). The speaker of 'Daddy' transforms even suffering into powerful assertion, becoming not just 'like a Jew', but like one monolithic all-encompassing representative of Jewish suffering:

> An engine, an engine
> Chuffing me off like a Jew.
> A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
>
> (CP, 222)

Before her suicide attempt, at the moment of 'howling her loss into the cold air' at her father's graveside, Esther has arrived at a turning point, the result of which is the enraged defiance described above. Visiting the grave of her father is an important part of the symbolic journey the novel traces. It entails a movement away from the matriarchally articulated social expectation that she be a pure, infantilised, whittled sliver of a self; a dumb, self-effacing, weak creature, since part of this has been the prescription that she ignore or bury the pain of her father's death, as her

mother has done. Although her suicide attempt can be read as the ultimate expression of this role, the ultimate self-effacement, a pure and disintegrating love affair with Nothingness, it is the opposite – transgressive, crossing an invisible line to where self-effacement itself becomes a political act, and thus a voluble dissent from the code of silence and insignificance. It is Esther's mother's reaction which suggests this most strongly. She is described as looking reproachful each time she visits her daughter in hospital and keeps up a constant litany urging her to behave, 'I wish you would co-operate. They say you don't co-operate...promise you'll be good?' The newspaper reports of Esther's disappearance similarly contain the voice of her mother upbraiding her. 'SCHOLARSHIP GIRL MISSING. MOTHER WORRIED' and 'Mrs Greenwood asked that this picture be printed in hopes that it will encourage her daughter to return home'(BJ, 210-1) both focus on the mother rather than the daughter. The daughter is present only in terms of the implicit connection between the mother's worry and her absence, and as the morally vagrant child who is in control of her actions, and can return 'home' of her own volition.

The Esther who left is never to return. Just as the persona in 'Daddy', once she has been 'pulled...out of the sack,/And stuck... together with glue' after her suicide attempt, announces 'then I knew what to do' and shifts from passivity to activity, from victim to victor and from silenced to outrageously vocal, so does Esther. Much the same turning point can be observed in many of Plath's other poems and in her short stories, and even in 'Snow Blitz', the bleak, falsely prophetic autobiographical essay she wrote days before her death, in which she undergoes an imaginative transformation from terrified, freezing young mother struggling through a savage London winter into a feisty old

woman who has survived it all, and is nurtured by strong children who bring her tea.

In The Bell Jar Esther's rebirth involves relearning the language from an old English teacher who brings her word games to encourage her to regain interest in language (BJ, 215). Other visitors offer other sorts of ideological languages to relearn. They include a Christian Scientist who tells her that her problem is that she has faith in the biblical mist of error, and that once she stops believing in it, it will disappear and she will see that she was always well, and a Unitarian minister, who offers much the same thing, but is precluded from delivering his sermon by the obstructive Esther. 'I hated these visits', Esther repeats bluntly.

Yet in a more subversive sense, a different sort of mist of error *has* cleared, and Esther experiences the Modernist and feminist anxiety about the relationship between language and patriarchal culture, specifically the concept of a logocentric order. Like Orlando, who sums up the meaning of canonised literary achievement in a telegram 'which summed it up precisely' and reads 'Rattigan Glumphoboo' (O, 269), the scrambled alphabet Esther awakens to after her recovery paradoxically illuminates for her the conservative discourses encoded within it. Earlier, in the mist, Esther's own ability to read and write had ground to a halt, and she is haunted by a defamiliarisation with language, which she is encouraged by her mother and psychiatrist to believe is symptomatic of madness rather than disillusion with patriarchal discourse, which is how she sees it after her rebirth. Quite literally, language itself taunts her at this earlier stage. It is a barbed wire fence then an alphabet soup, words 'dimly familiar, but twisted all awry, like faces in a funhouse mirror, fled past, leaving no impression on the glassy surface of [her] brain'; 'letters grew barbs and rams' horns' and 'associated themselves in fantastic, untranslatable shapes, like Arabic or Chinese' (BJ, 130-1). Reading Joyce's opening lines in

Finnegans Wake , 'riverrun, past Eve and Adam's', Esther has no idea what it means, deciding that perhaps it is a pub in Dublin. In fact, in the light of the references to the Fall throughout the novel and Plath's work as a whole, Plath is setting up the terms of the revolutionary language to which Esther will reawaken; one which the river in which she has drowned in sleep carries her to, one which sets out to question and disrupt and one which bypasses the traditional assignation of the punitive prescription of silence to Eve. The inversion of the traditional 'Adam and Eve' is proleptic; many of the things Esther (and other personae) say are subversive and disruptive. In another poem, the unpublished 'Song of Eve', written when Plath was a teenager, this subversion is even more striking, as Eve makes herself God:

> When I woke in the garden that first night,
> I said to the sun: let there be light;
> so the dawn began, and with coloured words
> I created a flock of singing birds;
> to each leaf and flower I gave a name
> that put Adam's vocabulary to shame;
> then I looked around at the simple wood
> and in my innocence, called it good.[110]

Esther makes it clear that she is skeptical about the doctors' authority, calling it 'a lot of nonsense' (BJ, 198). To the minister, she delivers a long spiel about hell and atheism, 'I told him I believed in hell, and that certain people, like me, had to live in hell before they died, to make up for missing out on it in life, since they didn't believe in life after death, and what each person believed happened to him when he died'(BJ, 214). To the people who pressure her to be cheerful and normal, like the novel's ubiquitous representative of feminine suffering, Mrs Tomolillo, Esther shows herself at her most monstrous: 'I turned her my full face,

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110 Sylvia Plath, 'Song of Eve', Smith College Library Rare Book Room

with the bulging purple and green eye. "I tried to kill myself"' (BJ, 186). She sets out to lose her virginity, which, now that she sees it as a patriarchal means of repressing and controlling women, hangs 'like a millstone around [her] neck.' (BJ, 240). Similarly, another persona, in the poem 'Fever 103°', scoffs at the dominant cult of virginity, euphemistically known as 'purity'. 'Pure? What does it mean?' she asks, and goes on to answer this with a logical rejection of the man who at once represents this devotion to purity and control, and wants her sexually, 'I am too pure for you or anyone.' Late in the poem, she undergoes a mock-apotheosis, rising beyond reach to become 'a pure, acetylene/Virgin', the whole line devoted to the word 'virgin' as it confronts its euphemistic counterpart 'pure' (CP, 231).

This debate about language, and confrontation of received 'truths', runs throughout Plath's writing. One of the most fascinating subversions in her later poetry is that it is written on the back of drafts of Ted Hughes' work. The most striking example of this literal opposition to a patriarchal discourse is that the poem 'Widow' is written on the back of typed drafts of Hughes' children's story 'Meet My Folks'. The debate which ensues is a violent one. 'Meet My Folks' is a jaunty, Dr Suess style trip through a ghastly house, which is filled, in particular, with frightening 'holes'. Luckily, the narrator's father is an inspector of holes, and keeps in check their potential mutiny:

> A Hole's an unpredictable thing ---
> Nobody knows what a hole might bring.
> Caves in the mountain, clefts in the wall,
> My Father has to inspect them all!

While Dad's conscientiously doing this job: 'A rumbling hole, a silent hole, /My father will soon have it under control', Mum's in the kitchen busy being a witch:

Her kitchen is a continual crisis,
Billowing clouds of aromas and spices –
Bubbling cauldrons and humming ovens,
Pans spitting by sixes, pots steaming by sevens.

Most mothers stick to their little cook books.
But this is the way *my* Mother cooks.

While Hughes' poem is the work of the responsible father-figure, Plath's versos contain the witches' debate with patriarchy, tackling a vision of the widow as a witch: 'the bitter spider' sitting in 'the center of her loveless spokes'. She is shrouded in death: 'Death is the dress she wears, her hat and collar.' She is a 'shadow-thing' with hands folding on 'nothing', fantasising about and fearing the possibilities of her flight through the spirit world to reunite with her husband. She is much more interesting, and much more complex than the traditional stereotype of the sweet, grieving widow. The word 'widow' is repeated, as Plath considers its connotations. Its most important resonance seems to be that it reduces a woman to Nothing. It is a word which 'consumes itself', and a 'dead syllable'. Yet this dead syllable becomes a 'shadow of an echo' which leads to a 'secret passage' of meaning which 'opens at the top onto nothing at all'. Thus, Plath's version of the widow has access to the realm of Nothing, and so is far more powerful than the traditional figure of the pathetic old woman.[111]

Similarly, Esther voices oppositional ideologies to characters within the text. There is a modulation evident in her thinking after her resurrection, one result of which is that the reader is exposed to a flood of interior invective. There is no longer the distance placed by Esther between herself and the reader which is the precondition to the maintenance of any myth or illusion. In the earlier part of the novel, this

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111 Sylvia Plath, Drafts of 'Widow', held at the Lilly Library, Indiana University.

keeping the reader at arm's length is used in an attempt to keep in place the crucial myth of the jaunty, resilient Esther, who doesn't really have much idea about the sources of her own dissatisfaction, the representation of which is played down too, so that the novel becomes a feminine version of Caulfield's lamenting narrative in The Catcher in the Rye . The prop of tradition is also a security at this stage. A similar situation occurs in Woolf's Orlando, when the eponymous protagonist undergoes a series of transformations over many centuries. In each case erratic transformation flouts the reader's expectation that the protagonist's identity will be clear and secure.

Since part of the transformation at this point in The Bell Jar is that there is no longer any polite and myth-securing distance between Esther and the reader there are changes in the novel's subject matter. Part of Esther's new, black world order is a redefinition of the limits of the taboo. Again, this pushing at the limitations prescribed in polite society is generally considered the exclusive domain of the Ariel poems. In actual fact, recognition of this shift in The Bell Jar is likely to be the subliminal reason for commentators recoiling from its second half, the half containing the new, 'reborn' Esther. There are myriad examples of Esther's new perspective, ranging from the introduction of a lesbian character to a detailed description of the sour, stale air inside the bell jar. The most striking example of this new openness, though, occurs as Esther again encounters the novel's dominant concern with virginity. Since virginity becomes interlinked with annihilation in a metaphorical scheme which aligns purity with the unspoken text and the untouched body, the merging of body and text as potentially dangerous and powerful means of subverting social authority sets up a link between the act of transgression, especially sexual transgression, and the act of writing. Writing can thus be subversive in two ways; it can itself transgress, in terms of style or genre

(or even by existing at all), or it can contain transgressive themes or reports of transgressive behaviour.

When Esther feels virginity weighing 'like a millstone around her neck' (BJ, 240) she is conscious of a range of oppressions it entails. For a start she feels excluded from knowledge. She is also excluded from the mystique of motherhood, and the power traditionally allowed to women, under certain conditions, during maternity. She ponders the division of mothers into the virgin mother and the woman Julia Kristeva calls 'la mere qui jouit' – the mother who experiences sexual pleasure. The socially desirable image of maternity is the former; throughout the novel there are images of women swallowed up by maternity and deprived by it of individual power and identity. These women appear harassed and exhausted, devoid of any personality or personal aspirations, like Gwen Harwood's persona in 'In the Park', who, after mouthing platitudes about motherhood to an old lover ('It's so sweet/to hear their chatter, watch them grow and thrive,') tells the wind: 'They have eaten me alive.'[112] In Plath's poem 'Nick and the Candlestick' maternity is similarly terrifying, as children may be 'A vice of knives,/A piranha/ Religion, drinking/its first communion out of my live toes' (CP, 241).

Thus, until she discovers the possibility of contraception, Esther senses 'a baby hanging over [her] head like a big stick, to keep [her] in line' (BJ, 234). Esther's new psychiatrist, who, by her very existence has caused Esther to question the notion that authority must be an exclusively male privilege, politicises the purity question too. When Esther raises the 'Defence of Chastity' article her mother has sent her, with its tortuous arguments about value and respectability, Doctor Nolan bursts out laughing and says 'Propaganda!' (BJ, 234). Esther seems convinced enough

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[112]Gwen Harwood, 'In the Park' Gwen Harwood: Selected Poems, (1975; Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1985) 27.

by this response, but Plath doesn't pretend the pressure to be either a virgin or a 'virgin' mother vanishes. Even in the waiting room before she has her diaphragm fitted, Esther is faced with doubts about her femininity: 'Why was I so unmaternal and apart? Why couldn't I dream of devoting myself to baby after fat, puling baby like Dodo Conway?' (BJ, 234). The pun on this woman's name, with its suggestions of an extinct and futile existence, and stupidity, and having been 'conned', doesn't stop her from playing an important, if parodic, role in the novel's debate about feminine worth. A later poem, 'You're', celebrating the life-affirming characteristics of children, describes the embryo as an embodiment of 'thumbs-down on the dodo's mode' (CP, 141). In the same way, constantly assessing the myths surrounding the question of maternity, Plath sets up a surreal landscape of babies around Esther, which works both to parody and stress the status given to mothers – or more accurately babies – in the society:

> I leafed nervously through an issue of Baby Talk. The fat, bright faces of babies beamed up at me, page after page – bald babies, chocolate-coloured babies, Eisenhower-faced babies, babies rolling over for the first time, babies reaching for rattles, babies eating their first spoonful of solid food, babies doing all the tricky little things it takes to grow up, step by step, into an anxious and unsettling world...
>
> I looked at the baby in the lap of the woman opposite. I had no idea how old it was, I never did with babies – for all I knew it could talk a blue streak and had twenty teeth behind its pursed, pink lips. It held its wobbly little head on its shoulders – it didn't seem to have a neck – and observed me with a wise, Platonic expression.
>
> (BJ, 234-5)

Even within this comic inflation of the baby population, in which the word 'baby', mentioned twenty times, studs the language as the babies themselves do the environment, Esther's fear is registered. The nightmarish babies with Eisenhower's face provide an image of the potential tyranny of the baby, as well as again stating the debate in overtly

political terms – albeit garishly comic ones. The central baby, the only one not brought to life through the magazine text, is an enigma to Esther, excluded as she is from the cult of motherhood. Behind its disapproving pursed lips and knowing gaze may or may not lie the weapons symbolised by teeth and voice. It is unclear to her, in other words, whether motherhood is really as positive as the beatific smiles of the mothers promise, or whether it is a form of slavery to a demanding dissembler.

Having turned her back on babies and motherhood, Esther sets out to get rid of her virginity, determined to enter into the forbidden realm between virginity and maternity that is neither of them. It is during the execution of this aim, in a scene that resembles 'The Fire Sermon' in Eliot's The Waste Land in its squalor and lack of romantic illusion, that Esther transforms herself into a bloody and horrific creature. In Eliot's poem, there is a sustained allusion to Dante's hell, and an allusion to the hell depicted in Paradise Lost, when the reluctant voyeur/s Tiresias talks of having 'foresuffered all/Enacted on this same divan or bed.'[113] It is no coincidence that 'Divan' is the term used in Milton to describe the council in hell.[114] Eliot's use of the incomplete allusion to Goldsmith's The Vicar of Wakefield gives an ironic twist to the original lines, which prescribes the only way to escape the guilt of prohibited sex:

> The only art her guilt to cover,
> To hide her shame from every eye,
> To give repentance to her lover,
> And wring his bosom, is to die.

Plath, like Eliot, is a well-read writer whose reading pervades her writing, and whose writing is constantly set in debate with canonical texts. In this pivotal scene in the novel, Plath is drawing on the tradition of the 'lovely

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[113]T.S. Eliot, Collected Poems 70.
[114]Milton, Paradise Lost, X 457.

woman [stooping] to folly' and the connection of this with ideas of sin, judgement and necessary death. As she is bleeding after losing her 'purity', Esther remembers this literary tradition: 'I remembered a worrisome course in the Victorian novel, where woman after woman had died, palely and nobly, in torrents of blood, after a difficult childbirth'(BJ, 244). But Esther is no mythical Tess Durbyfield, and the results of her loss of 'purity' are not the inevitable downfall and death central to this tradition, but the opposite – regeneration and another form of rebirth. The inclusion of the short, painful and indistinct moment of the loss of Esther's virginity, and the detailed progress of the haemorrhage which results, deprives this traditional transformative moment of the mystique commonly associated with it. It also ignores taboo, especially in focusing on blood. Blood signifies the moment of breakage; of the rupture of the old, in this case of the untenable image of the pure, voiceless woman Esther has tried to be earlier in the novel. Implied in this is the tenuousness and fragility of that earlier pose, and its membranous covering of something more vital. It is also a metaphor for the vital fluid of language and the mobility and formlessness of the subversive text. Life-force (sexuality) and text-force become inextricably mixed in an image of powerful and inexorable flow, that is also life-threatening and dangerous if it is allowed to spill out completely. Susan Faludi suggests that a pale, unhealthy look, the look of the woman drained of blood and strength, becomes fashionable at moments in history when women seem to be gaining power, so blood, by implication, symbolises strength and vitality.[115] Throughout Plath's writing, the primary association of spilling

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[115]Faludi, 241: 'Historically, the backlash Venus has been an enervated invalid recovering on the *chaise-longue*, an ornamental and genteel lady sipping tea in the drawing room, a child bride shielded from the sun. During the Victorian era the beauty industry glorified a cult of invalidism – and profited from it by promoting near-toxic potions that induced a chalky skin. The wasting-away look helped in part to unleash the first dieting mania and the emergence of anorexia in young women. In times of backlash, the beauty standard

blood with violation and pain extends into interwoven metaphors of a powerful but dangerous breakage of the status quo, and the flowing forth of words, voice and emotion.

In 'Daddy', the persona breaks out of the 'black shoe' which has silenced and inactivated her for thirty years. The poem's main dialectic is about silence and voice. Punning on *langue* and tongue, the persona relates her attempts to learn to speak her father's language, German specifically, but with more general implications about a patriarchal language:

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

The only way she can talk in the presence of her father is 'like a Jew'. As he is magnified, becoming variously Hitler, with his 'Aryan eye, bright blue', his 'Luftwaffe' and 'gobbledygoo', and the devil, 'the black man who/Bit [her] pretty red heart in two', she experiences diminution and confusion. She tries to find his home town in Poland, but is told there are 'a dozen or two' by the same name. She is immobilised by her ambivalence towards this amorphous father-figure, spitting out the bitter line 'Every woman adores a Fascist', but otherwise struggling to voice her feelings. After a suicide attempt, which fails, she is 'stuck... together with glue', which implies her earlier fragmentation, and there is a turning

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converges with the social campaign against wayward women, allying itself with "traditional" morality; a porcelain and unblemished exterior becomes proof of a woman's internal purity, obedience and restraint.' Again, diminution of the body becomes symbolic of an attitude of powerlessness and passivity, especially when coupled with a drained-of-blood look, another index of physical weakness.

point in the poem, indicated by the clear resolution of the line 'And then I knew what to do.' Almost immediately, though, this becomes a regressive transformation, and she finds and marries the 'man in black with the Meinkampf look', a man made in 'the model of' the father, a man who is as controlling and sadistic as the absent father, a man with 'a love of the rack and the screw.' Again the persona experiences a moment of speech, but only long enough to voice the assent that silence would convey just as clearly: 'I do, I do'. When the poem's second turning point arrives, the primary rejection is of the language of these men, suggested first in the image of the 'black telephone', torn off at the 'root', and the 'voices' which can no longer 'worm through'. This last phrase vividly conjures the insidious power of the language, and its ability to corrupt and eat away, especially as the poem contains a series of other images of destructive orality; eating, biting (her heart) and drinking (her blood). Immediately after this moment of tearing the telephone off at its root, the persona makes two accusations about her husband, each charging him with the commission of one of these oral sins: the first involves speaking – his explicitly locating himself in the place of the patriarch (he has said that he is her father); the second, pivotal to the poem, is that he has drunk her blood.

Draining her of blood has involved draining her of language, and of the power of articulation and dissent. The vampire's consumption of blood silences the persona, but also means that the blood cannot spill or leak in any other way. In her journals, Plath deals specifically with the vampiric image in Freud's Mourning and Melancholia, commenting, 'the "vampire" metaphor Freud uses, "draining the ego": that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing.' (L279). The secondary meaning of 'vampire' – the theatrical term describing a small spring trap of two flaps used for sudden disappearances of a person from the stage – is

suggested here. Again, the image is of swallowing up or removing a person. In a poem slightly later than 'Daddy', 'Kindness', the persona refuses to let the repressive Dame Kindness force her to 'disappear' by stopping her from uttering the subversively real sense of fragmentation and violation she is experiencing. While the figure of Kindness, 'sweetly picking up pieces' tries to veil everything with steam-wreathed cups of tea and false smiles, the persona stubbornly refuses to be silenced. In a debate with Hughes' radio play 'The Difficulties of a Bridegroom', the poem insists on the woman's right to a voice, and denounces the symbolic exchange of two rabbits, hit by the bridegroom's car in the play, for two red roses, an exchange which demands that illusion be upheld, the shrieks of the dying rabbits displaced and silenced by a pat romantic gesture. By the poem's concluding lines, the persona's fight for the right to articulate has become redundant, since articulation has taken over her body like a spiritual possession, 'The blood jet is poetry,/There is no stopping it' (CP, 270). Poetry supplants social nicety and usurps the power of its embodiment, Dame Kindness. It is the language of violation, but also threatens to endanger the life of its vessel, the poet-persona, who no longer has control over the flow of this vital life-force. The word 'jet' conveys the velocity and power of this poetry: this is the poetry of space age flight, the poetry of the 'million filaments'.

Other moments in Plath's writing imply the connection of the spillage of blood with finding a voice. In her journals, she writes of escaping 'this jam-up of feeling behind a glass-dam fancy-facade of numb dumb wordage', but recognises that violence must be done as a prerequisite, though she is unsure exactly what violence, and to whom or what it is to be done, 'What inner decision, what inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing [?]' The publication of two poems makes her feel as if she is 'breaking out

of [her] glass caul'(J,295). This implies laceration as well as breaking away from the maternal, which is described in The Bell Jar in one of its images (albeit one encoded in a pun) of imprisonment and confinement as: 'hands wrapped round my limbs like mummy bands, and I couldn't move' (BJ, 112) When she can't write, she describes 'a dull, electric burning dessicating my skull, my bloodstream' (J,252) and even 'bristling inner recalcitrance' creates demands which 'exact [her] blood' so that it can't be spilled into writing (J, 240). Obliquely continuing the metaphor, rage stops the blood until it can manifest itself in words; 'Fury jams the gullet and spreads poison, but, as soon as I start to write, dissipates, flows out into the figure of the letters' (J, 227). Elsewhere in her journal Plath talks of the moment of fear's transformation into defiance (and then writing): of the 'sick, soul-annihilating flux of fear in my blood switching its current to defiant flight' (J, 176). Associated with this is the memory of the woman giving birth, something Plath saw as a student while visiting a student-doctor boyfriend, 'that anonymous groaning woman, shaved and painted all colors, got cut, blood ran, water broke, and the baby came with bloody veins and urinated in the doctor's face'(J, 219). The fact that the image of blood-flow is one linked to the female body is important, since the metaphor of the painful cuts through social mores to find a voice is one applicable chiefly to women. In this childbirth image, creation, blood-inevitability, blood-sacrifice of the (female) creator and subversion of authority are linked again.

Esther's haemorrhage after she loses her virginity is laden with similar metaphorical implications. It symbolises dissent on several fronts. It bars her from being the ideal of the 'pure' woman. Esther's sexual experience leaves her emphatically sullied, in 'sweaty clothes', spilling blood on sheets, towels, car seats, her skirt and the carpet. Her blood leaks into the omnipresent black patent leather shoes, which have earlier been

emblematic of a lifestyle of glamour and feminine prettiness that Esther has – literally – tried to fit into during her summer in New York. As in 'Poppies in July', where blood-coloured poppies are likened to 'A mouth just bloodied./Little bloody skirts', the marring of feminine clothing by blood involves a marring of femininity and is linked back again to the idea of the transgressive mouth, utterer of the transgressive text. Esther's dramatic emptying of blood from these shoes onto the carpet stresses the significance of their having been wrecked; 'winter-cracked'(BJ, 243) and blood-filled. It marks a further break from any attempt to fulfil these social imperatives, a new defiance. The blood is described as 'black' in colour, and active in nature, as indicated by verbal participial adjectival forms such as 'dripping', 'trickling' and 'oozing' (BJ, 243), which suggests its independence and power whilst locating it in the 'black' area of the colour-coded moral universe of this novel, and Plath's writing generally. Placed against the body of the transgressive Esther, a white towel comes away black, stressing the ability of this new black perspective to seep into its environment as insidiously as the niceties it subverts do. As well as emphasising a moral breach in terms of what society demands, the scene's images and diction themselves involve breaches of literary 'propriety'; subversion of its mores.

Firstly, the subject matter is taboo. In literary terms, Plath employs a trope here which emerges throughout the novel at its moments of tension, and contributes to the vociferousness of these moments. Plath repeats a key word up to twenty or more times, insisting on it. In this case, the words are 'blood' (and 'bleed') and 'doctor'. 'Blood' and 'bleed' occur fifteen times in the space of a few pages. Stressing the importance of the symbolism of blood throughout Plath's work is the fact that the word occurs fifty-seven times in her Collected Poems, without counting the various compounds or variations based on it, like 'blood-black', 'blood-

heat', 'blood-loving', 'blood-spoor', 'blood-caul' and 'bloodied'.[116] In the scene at hand, repetition functions to magnify the effects of the words thus stressed. The repetition of the word 'blood' mirrors the earlier repetition of the word 'nothing', highlighting the chasm between these two states, the first of purity which teeters on the edge of annihilation and powerlessness, the second of the loss of purity and the birth of the fully transgressive voice out of Nothing; the moment of the achievement of the means to the power of articulation. The technique itself is best exemplified by the repetition of the word 'doctor'. Esther's desperate search for a doctor is described in paragraphs which build up to a manic intensity, until she finds one, who tells her 'You're one in a million' after which the passage stops abruptly, and the action of the plot shifts, flouting readers' expectations of a denouement or tapering off, and placing stress on this enigmatic comment on the part of the doctor.

> Sunday – the doctor's paradise! Doctors at country clubs, doctors at the seaside, doctors with mistresses, doctors with wives, doctors in church, doctors in yachts, doctors everywhere resolutely being people, not doctors.
>
> (BJ, 245)

The word is repeated vociferously, the language soars to heights that are both absurd and poetic. The poetic pairs of prepositions (at...at, with...with, in...in) create a sing-song rhythm and the guise of an innocent nursery tale, whilst sheer repetition is insistent enough to stress the strength of this new blood-flow of vocalness. The passage is almost epistrophic, but instead of repetition occurring at the end of each phrase, it occurs at the beginning, thus invoking the traditional tropes of literature only to subvert them. Similarly, having taken courses on tragedy at Cambridge, Plath would have known that revenge tragedy is also called 'tragedy of

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[116]Matovich, 58-59.

blood', a fact which again exemplifies Plath's incorporation of literary knowledge and allusion to subversive ends, as well as further underlining the connection between blood and the avenging of victimisation.

This victimisation, the violence that has caused the blood is here, as elsewhere in Plath's work, masculinised. Quite literally, the phallus is a sadistic instrument in the horrific scene of Esther's first sexual experience, but more metaphorically, it is patriarchy, the text suggests, which has made the finding of a voice so painful and dangerous for Esther. Similarly, in 'Daddy', the search for articulation is impeded by violence which is characterised as masculine, as words like 'root', 'brute', 'boot', 'screw' and the final line's 'bastard' make clear.

The novel ends pretty much as soon as Esther's search for a voice ends. After losing the 'millstone' of her virginity, and breaking with tradition and propriety in doing so, and in speaking with a new and subversive voice, Esther becomes increasingly strong. With the exception of the moment of the death of her 'double', Joan, when Esther regresses into silence, (the news 'slow[s] her blood... I opened my mouth, but no words came out') and blood and words fail, Esther is no longer either dumb or incapacitated. The novel ends with her preparations to leave the asylum, in her 'black shoes... cracked, but polished, and [her] red wool suit flamboyant as [her] plans' and even at Joan's funeral she is aware of 'the old brag of [her] heart. I am, I am, I am' (BJ, 256).

The focus of The Bell Jar, then is on Esther's transformation from a role-playing aimed at diminution of the self to an articulate mobility between roles, and activity. In the first section of the novel, she is intent on appearing small, passive, incapable and therefore harmless. In the novel's later section, Esther cannot be so easily characterised, except by negatives; by her refusal to be inarticulate; her refusal to be small, unthreatening and silent, her refusal to toe the line. There is a certain

amount of drama involved in acting out this dissent. She shifts from paradoxical position to paradoxical position: from monstrous victim barely containable in the hospital bed to survivor of vampires, streaming blood and words and terrifying those who prey on her. Tracing the metaphor which links blood with words uttered to lacerate the status quo, through Plath's writing, the dramatic and vital role-playing which results from this breakage and subversion and which characterises her work becomes even more striking. It is in viewing her writing as a whole that its multifariousness and dynamism is most evident. This is not to suggest that these characteristics are not noticeable in individual poems, just that scrutiny of the writing as a whole – stories, poems early and late, prose writings – provides irrefutable evidence of their existence in a dramatic and colourful display.

In 'Ouija', a woman's voice is displaced into the mouth of 'a chilly god' who 'rises to the glass from his black fathoms' as she uses a ouija board. The sorts of things he utters are foreshadowed by the note of black so dominant in the description of him – he is as morally 'black' as the resuscitated Esther, and as subversive of a white, pure, moral order. He is described as repulsive by the persona, he is a writer of unacceptable things, of 'poetry/In tarnished modes, maundering among the wastes,/Fair chronicler of every foul declension' (CP, 77). The word 'declension' implies, as well as grammatical order (which is destroyed, as the adjective 'foul' stresses), a decadence and a dissent. His subject matter, according to the poem, centres on an impure sexuality. Yet there are clues throughout the poem, apart from that in the central image of the ouija board, that it is the woman's own voice. The mythology of Plath's writing illuminates the meaning of this poem's insistence that the god's speech involves the woman's blood being spilt. 'The glass mouth sucks blood-heat from my forefinger./The old god dribbles, in return, his words', reads one such

couplet, which is preceded by the image of 'the blood-heat that would ruddle or reclaim.' The reclamation, the 'ruddling', the heat and life-source are the woman's, as are, by extension, the unacceptable words. The marginalised omnipotent god of words is an encoded reference to an aspect of herself; as a male, a deity and a wordsmith the woman is given a voice, though it is one she cannot directly acknowledge. Similarly, in the story 'Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men', a child has her naughty doll voice things she herself is not allowed to say, then vents more of her rage in punishing the doll, and in chronicling her atrocities, 'She gets splinters in her feet... She pokes people's eyes on the sidewalk. She pulls off their dresses. She gets diarrhoea in the *night*...' [117]

In 'Monologue at 3 a.m.', a one-sentence poem, the persona claims that it is 'Better that every fibre crack/ and fury make head,/blood drenching vivid' than to 'sit mute' in rage (CP, 40). This again emphasises the literary philosophy enacted so often in Plath's writing; that the transgressive must be said, and the woman's voice be heard, no matter what the cost. In contrast, the woman deprived of the ability to speak is depicted in 'Maudlin' as a hideous 'sleep-talking' virgin, 'in a clench of blood' (CP, 51).

In 'Daddy' the persona, once she learns how to speak, transforms herself from victim to victor, entombing the patriarch who has imprisoned her earlier, and joining with the righteous villagers in 'dancing and stamping' on the dead man. From silence and passivity, she is transformed to violent words and activity, wrenching the telephone of patriarchal language out of the wall, and cursing the crushed sadist, calling him 'you bastard.'

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[117]Sylvia Plath, 'Sweetie Pie and the Gutter Men,' Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, 349.

'Lady Lazarus' as its title implies, is also about transformation. It is a vivid, present tense dramatic (in the truest sense) monologue, in which a woman, having risen from the dead, appears before humanity. She has myriad forms, from the bodily remnants of murdered Jews incarnated as lampshades, paperweights and linen returning to horrify her torturers, to the 'big strip tease' whom 'the peanut-crunching crowd/Shoves in to see' but who is actually a rotting corpse in a shroud. She is a seashell, rocked shut in death, wrenched open to begin a new life, the freak show exhibit and scattered bits and pieces left after incineration 'a wedding ring,/A gold filling.' At one moment she is bombastic: 'Dying/is an art, like everything else./I do it exceptionally well' and then she is disconcerted, 'It's the theatrical/Comeback in broad day... That knocks me out.' She is variously brash, bitter, violent, polite, nostalgic, formal, humorous, arrogant and slangy. Her language flows from the poetic image of 'the pure gold baby/That melts to a shriek' to the blunt 'I do it so it feels like hell.' By the end of the poem she issues a warning made more ominous by its amorphousness, clearly, she may be capable of anything: 'Herr God, Herr Lucifer/Beware/Beware' (CP, 246)

In an unpublished letter, Plath talks about the powers of the unfettered self:

> If I can write, I don't care what happens. I feel like an idiot who has been obediently digging up pieces of coal in an immense mine and has just realised that there is no need to do this, but that one can fly all day and night on great wings in clear blue air through brightly colored magic and weird worlds.[118]

In the similarly triumphant 'Purdah', a woman kept silent and wrapped in saris by an oppressive husband and a social code designed to

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118 Sylvia Plath, Letter, March 22, 1958, Lilly Library, Indiana University.

obliterate the feminine, plans her emergence from this cocoon, swapping this passive role for a host of possibilities and a mobility that will defy categorisation, 'enigmatical,/Shifting my clarities.' She could be a huge shattering voice, a peacock among parakeets, or something more enigmatic, and more terrifying:

> Attendants of the eyelash!
> I shall unloose
> One feather, like the peacock.
>
> Attendants of the lip!
> I shall unloose
> One note
>
> Shattering
> The chandelier
> Of air that all day flies
>
> Its crystals
> A million ignorants.
> Attendants!
>
> Attendants!
> At his next step
> I shall unloose
>
> I shall unloose –
> From the small jeweled
> Doll he guards like a heart –
>
> The lioness,
> The shriek in the bath,
> The cloak of holes.
>
> (CP. 242)

IV. ELIZABETH JOLLEY

'Playful spinsters and exuberant lesbians give birth' begins an early chapter of Cabin Fever, announcing with a mixture of forthrightness and conundrum typical of Jolley's work, an interest in women who are not normally literary heroines, and a fascination with the unexpected, the unlikely and the bizarre (CF, 6). Throughout Jolley's *oeuvre*, 'playful spinsters' and 'exuberant lesbians' are the two main types of women who recur as her surprising and irrepressible heroines. These women are unpredictable, transforming and adapting themselves continually in response to pressures – or more capriciously, according to whim. Their mutability and their unpredictable behaviour make them fascinating characters. They are at times crippled with self-consciousness and at other times wildly uninhibited, and they revise and reinvent themselves. They come home from cowering awkwardly in the office 'fussing through filing cabinets while surreptitiously nibbling biscuits and screwing up and throwing away countless typing errors' to splash and sing and drink brandy in the bath.[119] They stand in other peoples' gardens before dawn inviting them out for tennis with 'hunting horn voice[s]' then go off to teach primly at prestigious girls' schools.[120] They invite parents of their students to bra-burning ceremonies only to insist with pride in their efficiency, organisation and conservatism that the garments to be burnt are first checked off by the school's matron, 'and for every one burned, a fresh one is put on the bill' (MP, 2-3).

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[119] Elizabeth Jolley, Miss Peabody's Inheritance, (St Lucia: Queensland UP, 1984) 4. Cited as MP in the text.
[120] Elizabeth Jolley, The Sugar Mother, (Ringwood: Penguin, 1989) 32. Cited as SM in the text.

These characters are mobile and elusive, appearing at times to be simple, then suddenly confounding us with their paradoxical behaviour, or their inexplicable lurches from timidity to boldness or from awkward stammering inarticulacy to poised eloquence. As in Plath, there is a drama to the strategies Jolley's heroines use to empower themselves, but it is a drama characterised by disguise, concealment, impersonation and trickery; a subtler and less direct form of transformation than the stunningly complete and clear reinvention of Plath's characters. With their common traits and behaviours, Jolley's women form a bizarre subculture – with their own signifying clothes, attitudes and behaviours – in the world of her writing.

Dick Hebdige defines subculture as a 'compromise solution between two contradictory needs: the need to create and express autonomy and difference from parents... and the need to maintain the parental identification.'[121] In the case of Jolley's heroines, there is a similarly ambivalent relationship with the power of the hegemonic culture. If Woolf's characters seek respite from the institutions in which they live, and remove themselves from them through imaginative flight, and if Plath's characters vilify and destroy the institutions which confine them, Jolley's characters' relationships with powerful institutions are complicated by their dependence on them. They seek independence – 'autonomy' and 'difference' – within the context of identifying strongly with the society which oppresses them. Where Woolf's characters choose to transcend the vessels which confine and oppress them, and Plath's confront, defy and destroy them, Jolley's women are firmly planted within these vessels, and subvert them from within, choosing to rock the boat rather than to abandon or sink the ship.

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[121] Dick Hebdige, Subculture: the Meaning of Style (London: Methuen, 1979) 77

Jolley's playful spinsters exist like nuns or prisoners within cells; they are confined within large and daunting ideological and physical institutions. They usually live in huge, efficient hospitals or boarding schools, cramped in nurses' quarters or dormitories, lacking privacy and deprived of individuality. Physically, these are sterile and highly organised Orwellian environments, which disallow the expression of individuality. Bells ring to signal a call to queue for regulation servings of bland, unidentifiable food, uniforms are worn to blur the distinction between one person and another, and clock-work regularity and stability are valued above everything. There is a certain prescribed way to make a bed and clean a floor, a prescribed length to wear a hem, a set way to address a superior, write a letter, even spend free time. These institutions run on order: they have infallibly regular routines and consistent patterns. Within them, everybody has their place, and there is practically no mobility within these hierarchies. These are environments run on – and dependent on – the assumption that certain expectations will be met. There is a profound conservatism about them: they judge people's value by their clothes, accents, occupations, wealth and race, and rely on being able to predict and thus control the people and events within them.

The ideological climate Jolley writes about is as inert as the physical environment it operates through. In the same way that these women scrub the walls of hospital kitchens and sort out cupboards, and thus maintain the cleanliness, sterility and order of the environments which entrap them, in ideological terms they exist in roles and behave in ways which keep in place a patriarchal order which sees them as important only for their functions. Their role is to keep the machinery of the institution going, both physically and ideologically. They are meant to cook for their superiors, clean and maintain the environment, and attend to the needs of those above them in the hierarchy. In terms of their sexuality, they are

similarly viewed either as asexual and 'useless', or useful for the satisfaction of their superiors' appetites. Perhaps, if they are very privileged, they may marry these superiors and bear their children. Jolley's characters are often at the bottom of these hierarchies: they are junior nurses, cleaners and secretaries, whose roles are to support the system which looms over them, or rests on their backs. In this sense, they are like Plath's 'bent-backed Atlas', oppressed by the demands upon them to serve and to be practical. They are versions of the useful, practical 'living doll' Plath describes in 'The Applicant', which can sew, cook and 'talk, talk, talk'. It has no identity of its own, no needs or desires of its own, but is reduced to its functions: 'a hand... willing/To bring teacups and roll away headaches/And do whatever you tell it' (CP, 221).

Since these physical and ideological institutions are so fundamentally inflexible; so rigid and unaccommodating – in a word so conservative – the sneaky mobility of Jolley's spinsters within them enacts a debate with their values. Where the culture of these institutions operates on principles of order, consistency and regularity, Jolley's subculture of spinsters is one of slippery manoeuvres and unpredictable actions. Yet these subversive currents are never enough to destroy the system from within which they operate, nor are they intended to be.

Jolley's women paradoxically derive their power from adopting roles and poses traditionally seen as powerless. It is a means of camouflage: the energy otherwise spent in directly debating with the status quo is directed instead to its subversion. Purporting to conform, especially purporting to accept one of the humblest roles within that status quo, signifies an absence of threat, which economically defuses the reactionary zeal of conservatism.

In their wiliness and ascension to power, Jolley's spinsters are completely unlike the figure of the spinster in other writing. Generically,

novels about women have predominantly focused upon their romantic fortunes, viewing feminine power as something achieved only vicariously, through marriage or alignment with a man. Even in the far from formulaic works of writers such as Aphra Behn and Jane Austen, interest in a woman herself is ultimately subordinate to the larger and structurally pivotal interest in her marriageability. Margaret Atwood writes in her poem 'Women's Novels' that:

> Men's novels are about how to get power.
> Killing and so on, or winning, and so on.
> So are women's novels, though the method is different.
> In men's novels, getting the woman, or women
> goes along with getting the power. It's a perk
> not a means. In women's novels you get the power
> by getting the man. The man is the power...[122]

Elaborating on this, Jan Cohn describes novelistic patterns whose 'depiction of sexuality and sexual relations... affirms and maintains an ideology of female subordination and submission' and whose conventions valorise 'a condition of permanent female dependency'.[123] In Jolley's writing, characters are rarely traditional literary heroines. She does deal with women getting married, but these marriages tend to be bizarre and parodic, such as 'Hilda's Wedding' which takes place in a hospital when 'Hilda the fat maid who was always pregnant' marries the reluctant Casualty Porter wearing a gown borrowed from X-ray and a veil made from three packets of sterile surgical gauze, immediately before going into labour and giving birth in the lift on the way to the maternity ward. [124] In Milk and Honey, the narrator goes through his engagement and marriage to the refined and sensitive Louise, fantasising about Madge,

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[122] Margaret Atwood, 'Women's Novels', quoted in Jan Cohn Romance and the Erotics of Property (Durham, Duke U P, 1988) 13.
[123] Cohn, 16.
[124] Elizabeth Jolley, 'Hilda's Wedding', Woman in a Lampshade, (Ringwood, Penguin, 1982) 41. Cited as WL in the text.

a woman who is variously occupied groping to see whether she has remembered her tampax, pulling off her corset and seducing him with lines such as 'Have some more plonk'. 'My bladder's up to my chin' and 'The story of the week!'[125]

If Jolley's writing about marriage is eccentric, her spinsters are even more so. In more traditional writing than Jolley's, focus on a heroine's marriageability is often accompanied by what Mary Ellman calls a relentless horror of the spinster:

> Nothing is more reliable than the irritability of all references to prolonged virginity: behind us, and undoubtedly before us, stretch infinite tracts of abuse of *maiden ladies, old maids, schoolmarms, dried-up spinsters,* etc., etc.[126]

Jolley's spinsters are seen from this perspective by many of those around them They are viewed with pity at best – often, sheer horror. Hester Harper in The Well and Dorothy Peabody in Miss Peabody's Inheritance are two such characters. To others they seem 'gaunt and odd' (W, 68), and 'withered' (MP, 15). They are unlikely to get married, and pitied for this: 'She was quite a pretty little thing... Funny thing really Mr Right not ever turning up' (MP, 22), 'Hester knew and understood too well; the awful fact that a man, if one should come, would not want her in her ugliness for herself' (W, 53). Hester even notices in others' eyes at times 'a look of distaste amounting to hatred' (W, 77). Dorothy and Hester are the type of characters Jolley refers to when she comments that she is interested in 'the individual, and the particular aspect of loneliness, or fear, that that individual has, which puts him immediately on a fringe of some sort'.[127]

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[125] Elizabeth Jolley, Milk and Honey, (Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press, 1984) 61-68. Cited as MH in the text.
[126] Mary Ellman, Thinking About Women (New York: Harcourt, 1968) 136.
[127] Jennifer Ellison, Rooms of Their Own (Ringwood: Penguin, 1986) 174-175.

A survey of fiction about women confirms that the attitudes Ellman points out have been firmly established for centuries. As Jean B. Kern's essay 'The Old Maid, or "To Grow Old, and Be Poor, and Laughed at"' points out, the spinster in the eighteenth century novel is often a troublemaker.[128] The implications of Kern's study include a sense, more directly analysed in Jolley's novels, that the spinster represents a threat to the established domestic and sexual order. Kern is concerned with the disagreeability and disadvantage of the unmarried woman as she appears in various novels, examining what Defoe called that 'set of despicable characters called Old Maids'. In The Prude, for example, unmarried Elisinda is persuaded that a husband will require her 'to move like clockwork at his Will and Pleasure' and that sexual appetite may be satisfied at less personal cost outside marriage. This attitude may be thoroughly condemned by the cruelty and deviousness she uses to achieve these ends, culminating in her arranging for the virtuous young heroine to be raped, yet still it is articulated, and when it is enacted, its power to upset the traditional progress of the plot is impressive.[129]

Later in her essay, Kern mentions the work of Jane Barker, whose spinsters are permitted not only to narrate her poems and novels, but also to voice frustration at the attitude that marginalises them 'that we, in a manner, frustrate the End of our Creation to live in that uncouth kind of Solitude'. This narrator foreshadows many of Jolley's characters who are subversive in their enjoyment of being unmarried:

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[128]Mary Anne Schofield and Cecilia Macheski, eds. Fetter'd or Free? British Women Novelists 1670-1815 (Athens: Ohio UP, 1986)

[129]Rape is a recurrent motif in this topos, such as in Bennett's Anna. It at once confirms the 'unnaturalness' of the spinster, makes her a criminal and deviant in real as well as ideological terms, and exposes her sense that it is virginity that renders the heroine marriagable, as much as 'virtue'.

> Fearless of twenty-five and all its train,
> Of slights and scorns, or being called old maid...
> Ah lovely state how strange it is to see,
> What mad conceptions some have made of thee,
> As though thy being was all wretchedness,
> Or foul deformity in ugliest dress.

By the nineteenth century, with the number of spinsters increasing as men left for the colonies, debate over such issues as women's work and roles grew.[130] In an 1851 essay entitled 'What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?' Frances Power Cobbe argued for 'a revision of many of our social arrangements', commenting on the disparity between the social perception of unmarried men and unmarried women:

> writers on this subject constantly concern themselves with the question of *female* celibacy, deplore it, abuse it, propose amazing remedies for it, but take little or no notice of the twenty-five per cent old batchelors (or thereabouts) who must exist to match the thirty per cent old maids. Their moral condition seems to excite no alarm, their lonely old age no foreboding compassion, their action on the community no reprobation.[131]

Refusal to desire what is deemed to be the ultimate source of power – marriage – yields a paradoxical and enigmatic force, threatening for its amorphousness, and for the sense that it is supernatural (as well as unnatural). From this springs the association of witchcraft with spinsterhood. In the traditional fairy-tale, passivity and powerlessness dog 'good' women characters. Power, which does not reap the ultimate reward of marriage, saps women who exercise it of beauty and kindness. 'True' heroines wait locked in towers to be rescued by handsome princes deft

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[130] Pauline Nestor gives a thorough description of this demographic imbalance, quoting the findings of the 1851 census which counted half a million more women than men in Great Britain, in her Female Friendships and Communities (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985) 7.
[131] Nestor, 8.

enough to leap tall buildings. Some sleep for a hundred years to pass the time before the prince's kiss awakens them to life. Evil women are active; they look in mirrors, cast spells and haunt their more beautiful rivals (often, in an interesting Oedipal configuration, step-daughters). In response to the question 'Why witches?' Xaviere Gauthier focuses on mobility and voice as the defining characteristics of the woman who is excluded from the category of ideal women who are 'impotent, immobile, paralysed'.[132]

The kind of dichotomy which results correlates all positive traits with one another, and produces stereotypes of hideous women, devoid of all virtue, most commonly the witch. 'Why must we choose between these two extremes which are mutually dependent? Why let ourselves be locked into a choice of opposites that are two sides of the same coin, which is the exclusion of women: idealised/scorned, sanctified/satanized, worshipped/martyred?' is Gauthier's question[133]. The witch, however, is supernaturally powerful. So it is that after being abandoned by her husband, and after being told by him that she is not a woman but a she-devil, Ruth, protagonist of Fay Weldon's The Life and Loves of a She-Devil, decides that she might after all be powerful. The notion of witchcraft, rather than humiliating her, empowers her. In Jolley's fiction, there are several versions of the witch. In My Father's Moon, the possibility exists that one of the senior nurses, Night Sister Bean is a witch. Vera, the narrator, doesn't quite use the word as she waxes lyrical about her powers, but the implication is clear:

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[132]Xaviere Gauthier, 'Why Witches?', New French Feminisms, 199 ff
[133] Gauthier, 199.

> She is starch scented, shrouded mysteriously in the daintily severe folds of spotted white gauze. She is a sorceress disguised in the heavenly blue of the Madonna; a shrivelled, rustling, aromatic, knowledgeable, Madonna-coloured magician; she is a wardress and a keeper. She is an angel in charge of life and in charge of death... She is said to have powers, an enchantment, beyond the powers of an ordinary human.
>
> (ME, 62)

When this character reappears in 'Hilda's Wedding' there is no such confused adoration. 'Everyone said Night Sister Bean was a witch' (WL, 39) begins the story, which goes on to catalogue the superstitious behaviour of the other nurses as they try to protect themselves from her powers. The relationship between this woman and a more traditional spinster is interesting. In My Father's Moon, Vera tries to challenge Bean's powers by making a soap effigy of her and using her own dark powers to test those of the sorceress. She announces her intentions innocently enough, so that the reader gets a jolt when it becomes clear that she wants to emulate the witch and access her magical powers: 'I am going to split the image in half very carefully and torture one half keeping the other half as a control, as in a scientific experiment, and observe the effect on a living person' (ME, 72). Vera, however, is discovered by Night Sister Bean sculpting the effigy at a hand basin. Vera plunges her whole head into the basin, with the soap effigy, and pretends to be washing her hair, remarking to Bean 'Oh, I can never get the soap out of my hair!'. She feels exhilarated that she has fooled the witch: 'delighted at the sound of weariness achieved'. Bean gives her a few tips about rinsing her hair, and Vera is gleefully convinced she has concealed her secret, until Bean says, as she leaves 'And it is better to take off your cap first' (ME, 73). 'It is a solemn moment of understanding that from a remote spot, namely the door, she has been able to spoil what I have made and add a further destruction of

her own, my cap' (ME, 74). The spinster/witch in Jolley's writing has exceptional powers of detection and observation, and uses these as the basis of her power.

Emma Tennant's The Bad Sister takes the form of the journal of a 'witch' – in reality a woman who is thrown into confusion by the choice between goodness and passivity, and evil and power.[134] As she becomes involved with the occult, this tension takes an active form: she experiences a sort of fantasy and mobility in which she assumes and tests the limits of different feminine roles, just as Jolley's spinsters do. She oscillates between being the big-breasted, carefully made up, silently companionable, skilful and invisible cook, housewife, wife and passive sexual partner (a post-fairytale version of the princess, perhaps – the woman Dorothy Hewett calls Rapunzel in Suburbia) and the alternative of the unkempt, sexually predatory, energetic, powerful witch, represented in the novel as thoroughly evil, and thoroughly powerful. As in the ancient legal trial, she discovers, effectively, that an innocent woman will sink for her innocence, whereas a witch will swim and survive – even if only briefly. This sink or swim trial of feminine innocence is perhaps one version of the voyage out. In the writing of both Woolf and Plath women who wield power to triumph over oppression are described as versions of the witch. In Woolf's case sybilline women like Lucy Swithin and Clarissa Dalloway seek out and dissolve the pain of other characters with magical imaginative balm; in Plath the victims of cruelty and disapproval rise up Phoenix-like from graves to 'eat men like air' and take the stage in fantastic circuses and courts of law to claim their right to exist and to be powerful.

The witch is never married, and the majority of Jolley's female characters are unmarried, remaining so throughout the course of the

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[134]Emma Tennant, The Bad Sister (London: Faber and Faber, 1978).

novels. Jolley's often post-menopausal women without men, her spinsters, lesbians and widows defy a conventional perspective which views them as asexual, uncreative and interesting only as stock humorous stereotypes, subverting the mores of the 'women's novel' as described by Atwood and Cohn, and exploring the power these women achieve autonomously. Instead of being ludicrous foils to a heroine, Jolley's spinsters are heroines in their own right.

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Miss Dorothy Peabody, Miss Alma Porch, Miss Edgely, Miss Hailey, Miss Hester Harper and Miss Paisley – protagonists, respectively, of Miss Peabody's Inheritance, Foxybaby, Diana Hopewell's novel in Miss Peabody's Inheritance, Mr Scobie's Riddle and The Well, and secretary in Foxybaby – are examples of Jolley's playful spinsters who surprise us by somehow 'giving birth' to new versions of themselves, miraculously and spectacularly. Their ridiculous and usually old-fashioned first names, and their even sillier nicknames (Dotty, Edge, Fluffy Hair, Bulge, Paze) and their surnames which are usually made up from appropriately absurd nouns (porch, pea, hail and harp) suggest that they are comic figures, like T.S. Eliot's ludicrously named J. Alfred Prufrock.[135] In a sense they are. Throughout Jolley's fiction there is a sense of vaudevillian play, and there is a wry comic edge to her presentation of most characters. However, they also have sinister aspects which belie the ineptitude suggested by their bungling comic exteriors.

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[135] Jolley's exuberant lesbians generally have titles and more exotic names than her playful spinsters. Matron Hyacinth Price and Dr Arabella Thorne are two examples. Matron Price is the director of the nursing home in Mr Scobie's Riddle, Dr Thorne is headmistress of a girls' boarding school in Miss Peabody's Inheritance.

There is, nevertheless, a clear and ebullient comedy which stems from these women and their behaviour. Jolley's spinsters are known by those around them for their 'silly little mistakes' (MP, 1). One sends a get well note to a superior whom she is trying to impress which reads 'I hope you are feeling yourself again'.[136] They also have in common their ridiculously trivial occupations ('Just tidying my hair clips... Mother!' (MP, 6), their awkwardness and their self-inflicted embarrassments, such as Miss Peabody's attempts to be considered 'hip' by her co-workers one Monday morning:

> 'Oh! Parties! Parties!... I like alcohole but alcohole doesn't like me... I'm in a Really Bad Mood!'... The typewriters, the addressing machines and the adding up machines were all rattling away and no one even looked in Miss Peabody's direction.
>
> (MP, 90)

Jolley's spinsters misunderstand, misspell ('The copulation in the pubic schools is increasing at an alarming rat' (MP, 1)), misquote and generally bungle most things they attempt. Yet they can never be perfunctorily dismissed as stock comic figures, since they have other traits which make them remarkable and even, at times, radical.

There is far more to them than sheer comedy since they are often cruelly oppressed, and yet they somehow triumph over this oppression. Jolley stresses the many ways in which they are confined and caught within their environments. They are hemmed in by dull jobs they detest (often they are secretaries or nurses), by living under other people's roofs (their ageing parents' or demanding employers'), and by their own self-consciousness. They manage to find means to disrupt these situations, yet

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[136] Elizabeth Jolley, Mr Scobie's Riddle (Ringwood: Penguin, 1983) 37. Cited as MS in the text.

they do so almost imperceptibly, appearing all the while to be toeing the ideological line.

There is, therefore, a dynamic debate with conservatism going on within these atypical heroines. As Hebdige suggests of subcultures, this is because they are positioned ambivalently in relation to the culture that oppresses them. Although they wish to shake off the oppression, and although they seek revenge for this abuse, they also want to retain a place within the society. Their identities are based firmly within the hegemonic culture since they define themselves against it, and derive their identities, and their power, from and through their rebellion against it. Their behaviour identifies them as quibblers with the power of the institutions within which they exist. This dialectical relationship is the source of paradoxical behaviour. Jolley's spinsters manage to be, on occasion, extremely repressed and anxious about convention and appearances, and triumphantly self-actualised and uninhibited.

Surprise is an essential part of the impact of these paradoxes in Jolley's characters. It is entirely unexpected when, in Miss Peabody's Inheritance, Dorothy Peabody, the protagonist we have been introduced to as an easily embarrassed, timid typist, gets drunk and approaches men in the street inquiring about the whereabouts of An Ideal Husband – failing to explain that she is talking of a play. Similarly, it is unexpected when Hester Harper suddenly stops behaving with stilted social politeness to launch into a wild tale of monsters and violence at the end of The Well. For the reader, these women flout our expectations as to what a literary heroine should do, say and be. They are slippery; difficult to place. Because they usually do not participate in heterosexual relationships, they become alienated from a society which uses heterosexual relations to define its norms. Thus, estranged – voluntarily or otherwise – from the signs by which literary heroines are 'read' they become unreadable. Luce Irigaray

talks of this dynamic of the relationship between the eccentric and the centre in these terms:

> 'She' is indefinitely other in herself. That is undoubtably the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious – not to mention her language in which 'she' goes off in all directions and in which 'he' is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning. Contradictory words seem a little crazy to the logic of reason, and inaudible for him who listens with ready-made grids, a code prepared in advance.[137]

The eccentric protagonist of Foxybaby is Miss Alma Porch, a playwright, of whom her employer, trying to read her according to the 'ready-made grid' of clothes and appearance, says: 'You seem to be a twinset-and-pearls sort of person, so reliable' .[138] This assessment could hardly be further from the truth. A 'twinset-and-pearls sort of person' is one whose clothes signal a conservatism, a reliability. Alma is far more complex, using the clothes, by which people like her employer 'read' her, to set up decoy signals, that set her assessors on a wild goose chase in terms of understanding her identity. At first glance, though, it seems a fair enough assessment of Alma Porch. She gives plenty of signals that she will not rock the boat; that she will be reliably supportive of the ideological climate. Although she feels irritated that others seem intent on seeing her as a harmless and ineffectual presence, and taking over her play and altering it completely, Miss Porch speaks 'in a meek voice' (F, 38), or a 'small shaky voice' (F, 255) and goes along with ideas she hates. This inability to assert herself compounds her sense of powerlessness and makes her experience 'feelings of hopelessness and exhaustion' (F, 36).

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[137] Irigary, New French Feminisms, 103

[138] Elizabeth Jolley, Foxybaby (St Lucia: Queensland UP, 1986) 24. Cited as F in the text.

She wonders why 'she seemed unable to resist people' but concludes that it is because she has no excuse, 'not even a disagreeable and forbidding cat' (E, 225) to avoid unwanted social functions. 'An invalid mother would have been so useful,' (E, 224) she thinks, conjuring up the sort of excuse that a spinster might be expected to have, and an excuse, in fact, which Dorothy Peabody in Miss Peabody's Inheritance does have. Miss Porch tries to behave as people expect her to, with mute obedience and adherence to convention: 'It would be best, she thought, to try and look as if she had not noticed the comments... [she] made a small noise of what she hoped would sound like enthusiastic appreciation' (E, 24-5). It seems at first as though the more provocation she is offered, the more she effaces herself. She has a policy of ignoring things that disturb her, so as to avoid confrontation: 'The whole idea of her class, was, it seemed, slipping out of her hands. She would have to do her best to ignore Miss Peycroft if ignoring was possible' (E, 84).

Yet every now and again she asserts herself dramatically and stunningly, such as when she tells her employer, Miss Peycroft, that she cannot possibly have classical music in her play as her preferred musical style is 'definitely solid rock, punk rock and disco' (E, 33). We know this incongruous assertion to be untrue, since earlier in the novel Miss Porch has been driving along 'in a style suitable for a *prima donna*'(E, 14) singing operatic arias in Italian, and hitting a quite respectable top G. The surprising and untrue statement is designed to shock – and that is exactly its effect on both the reader and the previously loquacious Miss Peycroft, who abruptly ends the conversation. We have now also seen Miss Porch in two very different roles: self-effacing, awkward and bullied employee, and exuberant *prima donna*.

Miss Porch's ability to play these two diametrically opposed roles is apparent from the first pages of the novel, which opens with a letter from

Miss Porch to her employer, Miss Penelope Peycroft, accepting, in formal language with a slightly florid, drawing room style, a post as summer school tutor at Trinity House School. Jolley quickly establishes the illusion of a polite epistolary interchange, creating a narrative voice for Alma Porch which is deferential and meticulously well-mannered, and imbuing the letter with slightly archaic diction appropriate to this voice: 'charming', 'nitty gritty', 'I note that' and so on. (E, 1) These signals point to tame and well-traversed terrain, suggesting as they do genres such as the epistolary novel or the boarding school novel. They suggest a Miss Porch who is, like Eliot's Prufrock 'an easy tool,/Deferential, glad to be of use,/Politic, cautious, and meticulous;/Full of high sentence, but a bit obtuse;/At times, indeed, almost ridiculous –/Almost, at times, the Fool'.[139] This expectation about the identity and genre of the narrative voice is soon destroyed, however, by a string of letters which reveal that Miss Porch has been recklessly indifferent to the details of her acceptance letter, as her still apparently deferential reply indicates:

> I am sorry I made a mistake with your name and your position and the name of your establishment. The fault of carelessness is entirely mine and I do hope that I have made the necessary corrections properly. As Teiresias, who made various pronouncements and at least one serious judgement on our lives, says, 'No man alive is free from error...' Thank you for printing your corrections in block letters. I found them, the block letters, most helpful.
>
> (E, 2)

Two letters later, Miss Porch drops any pretence of ladylike politeness and bickers haughtily with her potential employer, addressing her as 'Madam' and bluntly stating 'No, I do not enjoy arguing about titles. I am always cautious of anyone who either writes or begins a sentence with "for the sake of argument"' (E, 5). The irony of this is clear,

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[139] T.S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock', Selected Poems 11.

when Miss Porch continues to savage Miss Peycroft's ideas, and defy her authority in every way possible, apparently nonchalant as to the effects this may have on her chances of employment. The surface of the letter is just the opposite of the message beneath that surface, and the voice Alma uses to deliver her subversive missiles is incongruously polite and deferential.

Miss Porch chooses elusiveness and a chameleon-like adaptability and changeability to achieve unassailability. She shifts from tone to tone, register to register and constantly works at altering her image, changing everything from her outfits to her vocal mannerisms self-consciously and deliberately so as to avoid losing her mysteriousness and being categorised and dismissed. At times she plays a role opposite to that which she really means, to confuse those who wish to pin her down. The Freudian notion of comedy veiling the serious or painful is relevant: in Jolley's case comedy is often about disarming the threatening or established, by concealing a serious agenda beneath a flippant surface. In this sense comedy is integral to her campaign of subversion. This is a form of comic negation – a denial of the meaning of a communication by means of shrouding it with a contradictory comic tone. The surfaces of Alma Porch's letters, for instance, vociferously deny the recklessness and irreverence evident within them.

In Jolley's study of weak women playing games with conventions and 'making what one can out of what one has' (MH, 135) a certain type of character recurs. Jolley's novels delineate this woman as a type, and place her, Gulliver-like, into various settings and situations, some of which dwarf her, and others of which allow her to loom hugely and awkwardly. Different texts show her at different stages of her life, and in various occupations, but the features of this character, Jolley's essential persona, vary little. As Jolley herself puts it, 'they seem to develop from each

other... I find that I go on exploring a character in yet another situation, and it's a different person.'[140] The result is a parade of variations of the theme of paradoxical means of self-assertion and a catalogue of the ways in which the various versions of the spinster surprisingly but decisively take advantage of invisibility and traditionally powerless positions and objects to emerge as triumphant avengers of their own belittlement.

In the trilogy, made up of My Father's Moon, Cabin Fever and The Georges' Wife, Jolley explores the life of one version of the playful spinster, the significantly named Vera Wright. Vera is certainly 'green' and unworldly and comes from a family which follows established patterns, and seems to hate change and instability. Vera, like Alma, Dorothy and Hester has a staid and old-fashioned name that reflects her sense of her own inadequacy and dullness. 'I have never liked my name' she comments (MF, 75). Her fantasy of overcoming all this includes the detail that she dreams her name is Chevalier (MF, 54). Vera is only rarely offered the gift of being addressed by her full name, Veronica. Yet the fact that this occurs once or twice suggests the possibilities within this apparently ordinary woman, since Veronica is a more elaborate and dignified name than its dull diminutive. Significantly, it is loving women who call her Veronica, in particular Nurse Ramsden, who is arguably the person Vera loves most passionately in her whole life, albeit that circumstances prevent their being lovers or even close friends. In the scheme of Jolley's writing, Vera is the name of the awkward spinster, Veronica (particularly with the title 'Dr' which she later earns) is the name of someone altogether bolder: straightforward, self-respecting and strong. In the light of this development, Vera cannot be described as just a playful spinster. Or, perhaps, part of her playfulness is a refusal of

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[140]Ellison, 174.

definitive categories. Mobility is the basis and essence of the spinsters' strategies.

Following the usual path of Jolley's spinsters, at the beginning of the trilogy Vera is timid, naive and inexperienced. She feels so saturated with poverty and loneliness that she believes that her clothes announce this: 'I possess a three quarter length oatmeal coat with padded shoulders and gilt buttons which my mother thinks is elegant and useful as it will go with everything. It is so ugly it does not matter what I wear with it. The blue skirt I have is too long, the material is heavy, it sags and makes me tired' (ME, 53). She feels self-conscious and inferior, and imagines ridiculous evidence of the elegance and sophistication of others, such as 'the superior quality' of the underwear of Staff Nurse Ramsden, whom she loves (ME, 3). Later she thinks that everything about Ramsden – 'her shoes and stockings, her suits and blouses and hats' – has the 'fragrance of being of a superior quality' (ME, 67). The fact that she is obsessive about appearances and clothes emphasises the irony that she is reading herself and those around her according to the conventional signs – the 'ready made grid'. She might resent being judged herself, but she uses the same system to judge others. She is caught in the ideology, and can't separate herself from its currents. She takes part – with great studiousness – in what she calls its game of comparisons, used to define the hierarchy which oppresses her. Vera comments, for example, that when she sees the other nurses more generally, she 'can't help comparing their clothes with mine and their faces and bodies with mine. Every time I am always worse than they are and they all look so much more attractive in their uniforms, especially the cap suits them well. Even their fingernails are better than mine' (ME, 51).

Her discomfort in the hospital is again expressed through details of her clothes and appearance – she is literally ill-suited to the environment,

and this provides a symbol of her temperamental misfit within the ideological conditions of the hospital. She looks so ridiculous in her nurse's cap that her friends laugh, and she wishes she wasn't going to do nursing at all. She has no sooner arrived at the hospital than her buttons start to break, and, as she puts it, 'My sleeves are always rolled up when they should be rolled down and buttoned into the cuffs. When my sleeves are down and buttoned it seems they have to be rolled up again at once' (ME, 50).

The landscape of the hospital diminishes her, and she imagines it to be far bigger and more terrifying than it really is. She works on wards called Isolation and Bottom, which suggests her place in the hierarchy. The hospital – objective correlative of the ideology based within it – becomes huge and terrifying, a monstrous Gothic vessel full of grotesque visions and oppressive forces. Vera feels victimised by these forces, pursued by real and imagined horrors. 'The putrid smell of wounded flesh' becomes a spectre which 'comes with [her] to [her] room' (ME, 56) and her nights are disturbed by grisly sounds such as 'the sounds of bone surgery' (ME, 56). She imagines that the darkness is filled with 'rotting arms and legs' and fears that she will be grabbed by a 'protruding maimed hand' (ME, 63). The imagined Gothic of the hospital starts to becomes real, as the war goes on, and conditions for both the patients and the staff becomes worse. One day Vera notices maggots coming from a patient's wound: 'Suddenly I see there are maggots everywhere. It's as though he is being eaten alive. They are crawling from under his other bandages and in and out of his shirt and the sheets... I see the horror of it in his eyes' (ME, 113).

She starts to experiment with adopting roles to conceal the plainness, fear and inferiority she feels crippled by. She begins to play games. It starts with small alterations to herself: 'I practise some words and

an accent of better quality' (ME, 11). She progresses, like Dorothy Peabody and Hester Harper, to more involved and subversive machinations. Immediately before arriving at the hospital, Vera has been irritated by the fact that her best friend, Helen Ferguson, has lost interest in their friendship because she has developed a crush on a boy by the name of David. 'Everything is David these days' grumbles Vera, who feels left out and invisible (ME, 46). She feels that she must appear to be supportive: 'Because I am a visitor in the house I try to be agreeable' (ME, 47). But when Helen sends David a postcard with a 'silly passionate message' (ME, 47) scrawled on it, and then wants Vera to pretend that she has sent it, Vera inwardly draws the line and offers a secret and subversive counter-attack:

> In the morning I write another card saying that I am sorry about the stupid card which I have sent and I show it to Helen, saying, 'We'll need to wash our hair before we go.' 'I'll go up first,' she says. While she is in the bathroom using up all the hot water, I add a few words to my postcard, a silly passionate message, and I put Helen's name on it because of being tired and confused with the bad night we had. I go out and post it before she comes down.
>
> (ME, 47-8)

Although this seems a harmless enough misdemeanour – the spiteful revenge of a naughty schoolgirl rather than anything more stunning or extraordinary – it is perhaps the playful spinster's perfect crime. Vera has a motive: not wanting to be the one to look foolish. She also has secondary and tertiary motives: desire for revenge for being kept awake all night with Helen's melodrama and for Helen's tendency to get into the bathroom first and use all the hot water.[141] There are also other possible

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[141]We may assume that Jolley has had to endure many cold baths in her time. It is a subject to which she returns again and again. In Cabin Fever, she describes using up all the hot water, part of the survival skills learned at boarding schools. 'Dib Dib, with the cunning bred in boarding schools for girls of good families, was up in the bathroom first and the

motives. She feels jealous of her friend for being in love and miserable because she is not the focus of Helen's attention. She is also unsettled by the change David has brought: she wants to have her friendship as it was. She has an alibi: tiredness after the disturbed night. Throughout the crime she appears submissive and loyal, even to the point of agreeing to bear the embarrassment of acknowledging herself as the letter's author, and feigning concern for her lovesick friend. This veneer of submission – of unstinting 'niceness' – masks the subversive action beneath it. As a narrator, she is not even honest with the reader, using the facile excuse of tiredness as a fairly obvious cover for her own actions. It is hardly a typical crime, nor are its weapons likely, yet it is effective in achieving for Vera the revenge she seeks. Throughout the crime, Vera is the invisible criminal, sculpting the invisible crime to punish Helen invisibly. She not only gets her revenge for being treated as though she is invisible, she actually uses this invisibility against those who ignore her, thus using it to her own advantage. Vera becomes adept at using anything at hand to her own advantage. She arms herself with whatever is available, using objects and attitudes associated with her own oppression. Mimicked love letters, forgery and hair washing are from this point on some of the bizarre, completely unlikely but extremely effective weapons of covert attack in Vera's arsenal.

These apparently ridiculous weapons help mask the crime. Because Vera is ambivalent about her oppressors – she wants revenge for what she feels they do to her, but she also wants to retain their favour, and often even hopes to win their friendship – she devises strategies which are absolutely subtle. In most cases, no one would ever guess that the spinster is involved, as she tries so hard to appear innocent and inept. She knows

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water could be heard gushing for a long time filling the deepest of deep baths. Steam even appeared under the door' (CF, 85).

that the conservative forces she wants to unsettle rely on appearances to judge people, so she concentrates on crafting an innocuous exterior for herself. Because they overlook her, however, she has a certain amount of leeway to act in. As she practises more this lee-way becomes unnecessary, since she becomes more and more adept at disguise and trickery and generally handling the materials of her trade. The spinster uses her knowledge of her oppressors' assessments of situations to her advantage, and she uses her invisibility as the space from which to attack. No one would suspect the derided spinster to be capable of malicious or even devious actions. Even less suspicious is the woman they have judged so unimportant that she is invisible. Her oppressors have literally nullified her existence by belittling and ignoring her, and a non-person is hardly a likely candidate for powerful subversions of a megalithic and hierarchical status quo.

They can and do, however, execute many such *coups*. On one occasion, as a junior nurse in the hospital, Vera discovers that she can forge the handwriting of the Home Sister, the nurse in charge of the probationary nurses. Forgery is typical of the methods the spinsters use to achieve power because it is a derivative power: a power that mimics the dynamics of the oppressor, rather than defying it with some more radical strategy. A successful forgery is an undetected or invisible one, and similarly a successful spinster's crime will never be detected or traced to its creator. Forgery is also a good example of the childish nature of the strategies the spinster employs. Naughty school students forge notes from their parents to their teachers to excuse themselves from classes, homework or unwanted sporting activities, and have the pleasure of seeing their oppressor, the teacher, look foolish for having been deceived by their trick, whilst incurring no reprimand, because their crime is undetected. Similarly, Vera takes to forging notes from the Home Sister

reprimanding the other nurses, in covert revenge for wrongs she feels they have done her. Or, perhaps more accurately, the notes punish those she feels could be responsible for the fact that 'an unutterable loneliness is the only company' within the hospital walls (ME, 69). Night nurses Sharpe and Queen get Vera to do all the unpleasant work while they smoke and chat, so Vera slips into the unattended ward they are meant to be in charge of and rings the emergency bell. When Night Sister Bean arrives to investigate, she finds Vera innocently and industriously washing the walls of the kitchen. Sharpe and Queen are reprimanded for negligence and smoking. When Sharpe orders Vera to wash down the bathroom walls and do out all the cupboards while she herself relaxes with Queen, Vera does it, but she also takes her revenge:

> In the morning when I see Sharpe safely in the queue for letters I rush up to the Peace corridor and find her room. I cram her curtains into her messy wet soap dish and leave one of my neatly folded notes on her dressing table.
> *Do not let your curtains dangle in the soap dish. Sister.*
>
> (ME, 70)

She uses the language of the hospital to punish others, deploying – or forging – the discourse which oppresses her so that she can oppress others. Here, she mimics the details of the exercises of power that she herself lives under – the obsessive attention to detail, the sniffy reprimands, the code of values that judges messy soap dishes and disorganised bedrooms morally reprehensible. The nurses Vera targets are those who reprimand and punish her. She simply reverses the roles, impersonating the head nurse, who is the superior of Vera's superiors. Again, she uses her invisibility, which these nurses have brought painfully to her attention by ignoring and excluding her, to her advantage, sneaking around the hospital seeking her revenge. Vera is canny enough to use her invisibility to her advantage

by becoming a fly on the wall, carefully and intelligently analysing the culture around her, so that she is familiar with every detail of its routine and its dynamics. Again, she uses what is available to her, making use of the long hours she is forced to spend working in the hospital to become a student of its nature. She then uses this knowledge against it.

In perhaps her most stunning moment of glory, Vera sets up a remote control catastrophe. The complete regularity of the hospital, and Vera's keen observation of it from her position as a cog in the wheels of its machinery allows her to create from the slightest effort on her part a monumental disturbance. There are some empty oxygen cylinders carefully stacked in one of the corridors. Vera rearranges them so that they fall over when nurses Sharpe and Queen pass by them, causing nothing less than 'the biggest disturbance ever heard in a hospital at night' (ME, 68). Vera thus sets up a huge commotion and experiences the pleasure of the disruption vicariously. She is again busy, this time innocently pouring out cups of mouthwash for the patients, when Night Sister Bean arrives to investigate the commotion. Knowing the system as well as Vera does, she can create this, 'the biggest disturbance ever' with just the tiniest alteration to its pattern, whilst retaining her invisibility. Again, no one thinks to blame someone diligently and compliantly absorbed in a dull task. Vera, from within the mask of innocence and acquiescence, relishes the rocking of the boat which she has set in motion, whilst also impressing on Night Sister Bean that she, unlike her lazy, disorganised and sloppy seniors, is a hard worker never seen smoking, chatting or otherwise behaving irregularly. The economy of this is remarkable – by moving a couple of empty cylinders a few centimetres, Vera has disturbed the hospital, achieved revenge on Diamond and Snorter, got them reprimanded and earned brownie points for herself in Sister Bean's eyes.

Vera's other major area of strategy concerns food. Once again, her weapon is something in itself entirely innocuous, and something which is an important part of the hospital routine. Food is also an integral part of the domestic sphere – associated with the oppression of women through the labour its preparation involves. Vera seems constantly to be assigned the most menial jobs in the hospital, including having to go to the cellar to collect food to prepare for the other nurses. In a sense, within the female hierarchy of the nurses, she plays wife to their versions of husband. She is resentful of the isolation and degradation this entails, and frightened of what might lurk in the bowels and margins of the monstrous hospital. When she discovers supplies of exotic food in two tea chests in the cellar, she takes to surprising her colleagues with her culinary ingenuity as she steals the food and serves it to them. When she is asked questions about the source of the delicacies she presents, she affects the role of the efficient worker, responding with a breezy 'No time to chat now, sorry' (ME, 71).

Again, the strategy is a complicated one, but one which has a curious logic and impressive economy to it. Pilfering from the stores of an ungrateful employer is a common tactic of the belittled. Like Jolley's spinsters, those who do this probably feel devalued, ridiculed and resentful. For Vera, it is an activity tied up with similar feelings. There is a rich irony in her serving to her superiors the very food she has stolen from them in response to their unkindness to her. But she also wants to please, and she fantasises about what she can do with the spoils of her crime to surprise and delight her superiors. The results of this crime are pleasant for everyone – Vera gets the sense of revenge she seeks, and her superiors, who have no idea that they are being tricked, thoroughly enjoy their tasty snacks. Far from being chastised for her wickedness, Vera is undetected, and even praised for what she has done. Once again, Vera's

arsenal is stocked with unlikely – but very effective – weapons: bottled Chinese gooseberries, dressed crab, tinned bilberries and custard powder – all part of the pantry of the efficient housewife, schooled in practical ways of pleasing those she serves.

It is just as she masters handling these strategic objects – food, forgery and small subversions of the hospital's routine – to execute internal sabotage, that Vera is presented with an even greater threat to the tiny amount of power she has. This occurs when, as a probationary nurse, she becomes involved with a senior member of the medical staff, Dr Metcalf and his complicit wife, Magda. This compounds her problems, since now she is effectively being victimised on two fronts – she is used personally, as well as impersonally through the dehumanising drudgery of her work. Vera's friend Lois immediately warns her that Dr Metcalf is an abuser of power: 'do I realise that Dr Metcalf has made eleven nurses pregnant and don't I know what it was that caused Sister Green on chests to suicide' (MF, 107). It is generally agreed that Metcalf is also responsible for the suicide of Smithers 'Lemmington Frazier's rectal orderly' (MF, 148). (Vera objects that Smithers was a man. 'Exactly.' Lois replies darkly (MF, 135).) Vera is unworldly, lonely, inarticulate and, in short, quite the powerless antithesis of those to whose machinations she succumbs. The Metcalfs make her feel even weaker. With them she feels either too big or too small, saying at one stage 'I feel all big and white-faced and puffy and ugly' (MF, 127). In short, as the more confident Lois remarks 'You're daft... going with Them! She's as bad as he is. Can't you see? Those Metcalfs!' (MF, 134). The situation is more complicated for Vera, though, since she desperately craves attention and affection, and so finds it harder to understand the politics of this relationship than that of the oppressive hospital routine. The couple's attention robs her of invisibility, which has been crucial in her earlier strategies. Now, there is a steady beam of

attention focused on her, which nullifies her usual methods of empowerment which all pivot on the fact that she is overlooked, ignored, excluded or forgotten. However, despite all this, she ultimately manages to use the situation to her advantage, and empowers herself in unlikely ways.

Initially, though, Vera ignores her friend's warnings, and allows Dr Metcalf to give her a copy of Virginia Woolf's The Voyage Out, which symbolises his invitation to Vera that she too might like to take a voyage from innocence to experience with him (the flippancy of this suggests his attitude). This detail proves to be ironic, since the relationship is juxtaposed with Vera's increasing lesbian longings, and culminates at about the time that Vera finds herself in bed with Lois, saying to her 'Your breasts... are indescribably soft' (MF, 150). Much earlier in the novel Vera has noticed that she has strange feelings for Lois: 'I have some feelings for her which I am not able to define' (MF, 84). The destination of the rite of passage, then, is not what Dr Metcalf may have assumed it to be.

Although she is disconcerted by this new challenging situation, and feels disempowered, Vera is never completely naive in her dealings with the Metcalfs. Her well developed analytical skills are apparent as she monitors her own awkwardness with disgust, such as her comment about Woolf : 'A lady writer, ' I say, and feel ashamed to have said such a stupid thing' (MF, 90). When Dr Metcalf is seducing her, and accompanies his kisses with the platitude: 'I can't give you all the love you ought to have', she responds 'That's all right Dr Metcalf', 'hearing [her] own voice and words with surprise' (MF, 133). These skills, however, are overshadowed by the novelty of the situation, in which Vera repeatedly finds herself speechless and derided. Magda flatters her with a stream of gushing endearments: 'precious child', 'precious pet', 'a natural perfect!', 'dear child' (MF, 89, 111, 112). This infantilisation is just one of the ways she is

diminished by the encounter. Vera notices the hysterical chorus of friends' laughter which forms a backdrop to the couple's seduction of her and realises on some level that she is risible in their eyes (ME, 111). Staying at the Metcalf's house on the night that Dr Metcalf has given her The Voyage Out, Vera freezes in her makeshift bed. The waters of this voyage out are turbulent from the start, as she lies awake, feeling confused and discarded now that Metcalf has signalled his intentions then abandoned her in his house. She imagines that she sees the forbidding face of the Metcalfs' housekeeper when she switches off the light and decides that she 'can't breathe when the light is out' (ME, 92). She recognises even at this point that 'Dr Metcalf obviously does not like me much' (ME, 93). The situation could hardly be more dismal, but it is at this point that Vera begins to assert herself.

It is appropriate in the context of the Woolf novel that her chief means of reviving her flagging self-esteem is an imaginative one, as she uses fantasy to escape the uncomfortable situation of being isolated in her lover's house, cold and lonely, and filled with foreboding that this sort of treatment will only get worse if the relationship continues. This is just the sort of imaginative transformation of the situation Woolf's marginalised characters use to cope with their oppression and neglect. Like Mrs Dalloway in her lonely bed, she comforts herself with thoughts of women's love. In particular, the moment of abjection brings thoughts of her mother, recalling the Kristevan configuration of abjection's source being the moment of separation from the maternal at birth. She goes on to imagine a moment of communication with Nurse Ramsden, in which they exchange passionate views on Mozart, replacing the reality of a cold affair with Metcalf with the fantasy of warmth with Nurse Ramsden. This retreat into fantasy is an empowering strategy quite unlike Vera's usual methods. Usually she emphasises her weakness as a decoy to work behind

as she fiddles with dynamics to achieve revenge, attention or an arrangement of circumstances which suits her. Here, she uncharacteristically removes herself from a painful situation through an imaginative foray. There are no objects involved here, just her ever-active imagination. This versatility suggests again Vera's ability to adapt her strategies to suit any occasion. She makes what she can of the circumstances at hand, whatever they may be.

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In Milk and Honey, the narrator, Jacob, lives in a household which includes two 'maiden aunts', Tante Rosa and Aunt Heloise. Taken together, the two aunts make up a composite figure of the playful spinster. The paradigm of the playful spinster's power involves a tension between competing elements – awkwardness and freedom, conservatism and radicalism, embarrassment and lack of inhibition – and here the two aunts embody the two sides of the debate. Usually, the struggle is chiefly an internal one. In this case, the tensions are both within the two women. and dramatised in their interaction with one another and with others. Aunt Heloise provides the innocuous, vulnerable aspects – the digressive anecdotal speech of the elderly, the fluttery nightdress, the 'crumpled face and watery eyes' (MH, 161). Jacob characterises her as a 'giddy old lady on her pillows' (MH, 162). Rosa is stiff and cold, but has a surprising alacrity best exemplified when she arrives to snap shut a window Jacob has opened next to the sick bed of his ailing wife. Jacob has hoped to free himself from the responsibility of the sick woman so that he can be with his mistress, but Tante Rosa, having close to supernatural powers of observation, is obviously aware of this, and closes out the murderous cold air as soon as Jacob leaves the room (MH, 98).

Tante Rosa walks 'stiffly like a grenadier' (MH, 17), has a stern mouth and is altogether forbidding. She is characterised as asexual, or a masculine woman. She humbly offers Jacob some of the jam she has made, in which she has concealed what she calls, when challenged, 'sedatives', which have the bizarre and disturbing side–effects of disorientation and temporary paralysis (MH, 30). This concocting of potions is one of many details which suggests that she is a version of the witch. Early in the novel there is an image of her transforming the humble art of supervising piano lessons into a show of power. She is depicted teaching two pupils at once: 'a pupil in both rooms, [standing] in the doorway conducting scales and arpeggios nodding her head stiffly, first in one direction and then in the other' (MH, 22). Late in the novel the narrator notices a certain look in Rosa's eyes, and realises that she hates him: 'All the time she had offered me food and had watched me eating and had hated me' (MH, 80). Heloise describes Rosa as 'her own severe wardress. A keeper of herself' (MH, 120). This attitude transforms the home into a sort of institution, which Rosa polices.

Aunt Heloise is altogether softer, embodying the allowable passive femininity of the spinster. In terms of the musical metaphor that runs through Jolley's *oeuvre*, where Tante Rosa plays the piano 'with severe precision' (MH, 19), Aunt Heloise is a patient accompanist, sensitively attuned to the player whose work she is supplementing. She has 'plump little hands and a demure mouth' (MH, 19). At one stage she gets drunk and sentimental, irritating the narrator by: 'making herself so stupid with so much port' (MH, 122). He sees her as completely reduced, nothing more than 'the bedraggled mauve dressing gown... a heap of discarded clothes'(MH, 122). She does, however, use the opportunity of her drunkenness, as well as 'the privileged intimacy of old women' (MH, 122) to tell him a few home truths about how various members of the

household feel about him, and the fact that his lies and adultery with Madge are more transparent than he realises. She uses her drunkenness and her old age – which others assume will diminish her power – to her advantage, saying things which otherwise would be impossible for her to mention.

Heloise comes up with her own description of this pattern of using whatever is at hand, however unlikely, to achieve her goals. Playing scrabble in the drawing room – a suitably benign pastime for a spinster – Aunt Heloise comments aphoristically: 'In this game one makes what one can out of what one has' (MH, 135). Heloise jolts her family's foregone conclusion that she cannot win, by forming the word *selbot-morder* ('self-murder') by adding the *morder*. Her very mention of this blunt word, a rare synonym for the more usual and euphemistic *freitod* (free death, suicide), is discomfortingly incongruous to her sweetly insipid façade, and chillingly evokes a sense of the misery of her existence. Heloise is not allowed to use this move, and loses the game, assuaging her ruffled family and restoring the established order. But later, after the brutal slaughter of Madge, the reader is reminded of this glimpse of Heloise's ability to win by means of the most raw, honest and horrifying methods, albeit that these are swathed in gestures indicating compliance, and using objects associated with her oppression.

Despite the complete incongruity of the suggestion that fruit-preserving, nightdress-wearing elderly maiden aunts could be criminals, taken together, the two aunts are the main suspect for the murder of Madge, although Jolley herself claims only to have suspicions as to who killed Madge.[142]

When the playful spinster appears as the eponymous protagonist in Miss Peabody's Inheritance, we see her initially placed in a conventional

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[142] Ellison, 174.

romantic expository cameo which suggests that murder would be about the last thing she could ever even contemplate. We first meet Dorothy Peabody clumsily mismanaging the heating of the evening's milk, an activity suggesting infirmity, asexuality and staidness. She confines her comments to the inane diction of the ladylike romantic lead, ejecting the occasional 'Blast!' and 'Drat!' and a 'Drat! and Drat!' as she fails to glide adroitly through her domestic ritual. Dorothy is derided both as a spinster, caring rather grudgingly for her incapacitated ageing mother, and as an inefficient clerk. It is, so far, a conventional 'bourgeois fairy-tale', with Dorothy cast as a Cinderella-waiting-to-be-saved. Jolley gives just enough clues to signal this terrain, playing upon the fact that 'the reader's familiarity with the plot gives her an assurance of her own ability to understand both the texts and human nature.'[143] We expect, perhaps, that a dashing stranger will fall in love with and transform Dorothy, taking her away from typing pool and burnt saucepans. The signs certainly lead us to expect a 'Reader, I married him' (as opposed to the 'Reader, I wrote my own narrative' we eventually get). Dorothy is transformed, but not from outside by a handsome prince, from within, aided by Diana, the goddess of chastity, in a more complete and radical way.

At the beginning of the novel, Miss Peabody, an avid reader of pulp romances, is conditioned by their conventions into viewing life as existing only within the parameters of the novelette. In this scheme, she colludes with an ideological perspective which sees her as insignificant because she is unmarried, and, in conventional terms, unmarriageable, because she is no longer young. Because she accepts these values, she feels that she is unimportant, and that it is natural tat she will be excluded from any direct 'life'. 'This is so,' as Anne Cranny-Francis says generally of the woman's position within this ideology, 'because in this (sexist) discourse, a

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[143] Anne Cranny-Francis, Feminist Fictions (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990) 191-2.

woman's social status is identified with that of her father and then that of her husband. She is essentially class-less, an object, a commodity, without any class positioning of her own.'[144]

Instead of having her own life, Dorothy settles for the voyeurism society confines her to, reading romantic novels and enviously admiring others' relationships. Dorothy, however, is an extremely careful observer, and learns from what she sees and reads. At first, she views the affair of her colleague Miss Truscott with a married company man as glamorous, worthy of emulating, powerful and impressive. Miss Peabody is a passive onlooker, vicariously absorbing the quasi-exuberance of Miss Truscott, whose virtues include her 'gun-metalled legs; very firm and shapely legs for her age', a 'slight bandiness' assumed to be the result of the 'boudoir exercise' she advocates, and 'a youthful waistline' (MP, 85). Miss Truscott is a woman whose morals include the belief that Worth Perfume 'never fails.' Miss Peabody reverently incorporates this belief that a woman must place her faith not in any innate worthiness, but in external applications of the power of Worth, a process by which through consumerism, an involvement in a male-organised system of economic power, a woman is made worthy.

Initially, structures and ideologies such as these form a strict container around Dorothy, allowing her no initiative, in part because of her own belief in and collusion with the values they embody. Later, through reading the novels of the vital Diana Hopewell, enabling rather than fettering texts in Barthesian terms, she comes to develop a deviousness and a playfulness which afford her a certain power, although she is still involved in the awkward antics associated with her stereotype, that of the naive spinster bumbling and bungling along in life, impotent in every way. One ancestor of this stereotype Dorothy embodies is the

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[144]Cranny-Francis, 181.

maid Mrs Slipslop in Fielding's Joseph Andrews. Her social inferiority is linked to her romantic undesirability, and her role is auxiliary and peripheral. There is virtually nothing at which she succeeds, or even aspires to, and it is in her unremitting hopelessness that her role as figure of fun has its origins – and its ideological basis. She is humorous because she is hopelessly unsuccessful, unsuccessful because she can not be taken seriously. Dorothy, however, proves to be much more than this.

Epitomising this stock source of humour in Miss Peabody's Inheritance is the (previously referred to) scene late in the novel in which an inebriated Dorothy Peabody searches for a production of An Ideal Husband. (MP, 124 ff.) apparently confused into thinking Hopewell's novel – in which the characters go to see that play – has come to life. She has been unsettled as a reader into questioning, in a sense, the boundaries of narratives. Her graceless progress through the busy streets, and her unwitting pun ('I'm looking for "An Ideal Husband"') which evokes the farce of the rather facile and cynical rejoinders 'Aren't we all, ducks!' and 'Hey! Take more water with it!' seems to be little more than slapstick based upon her clumsiness. Deaf to the ironies in her own words, and to the ridicule they entail, Dorothy in this scene is initially no more than an alcoholically exaggerated version of Dorothy elsewhere in the novel. Robbed by brandy of her usual inhibitions, Dorothy after drinking is less logical than elsewhere, more physically awkward, less reticent in vocalising her often absurd thoughts, in short – utterly without power. It is comical, rather facile humour, as Dorothy bumps into people and treads on their toes apparently aimlessly.

Then Jolley allows her reader a glimpse of cunning in Dorothy as she steers her warbling course towards Miss Truscott and her lover Mr Bains, and embarks upon a metaphorical toe-treading which is calculating and potent. Her power is derived from the fact of her invisibility to the

lovers, who have assumed her to be so powerless as to be discountable as a potential betrayer and openly conducted their meetings in front of her with no inhibition or caution. Like Vera, she proves to have made the most of being overlooked, and derived a power from being excluded and ignored. She has observed the couple closely enough to be able to shake them up effectively, in much the same way that Vera is able to cause disruption in the hospital because she has studied it so closely during her confinement within it. In each case, no one values the spinster enough to consider that she could be a threat. Having been arrested for drunkenness and disorderly behaviour, Dorothy cites Mr Bains as her bailor, exposing his office social ties, ironically on the very weekend he has denounced adultery and returned smugly to complying with his marital vows.

Imposing so intimately upon Bains, Miss Peabody thus 'becomes' Miss Truscott in the most bizarre of ways, her behaviour no doubt indelibly impressing upon all concerned – especially the wife Bains is trying to reconcile with – that her links to Bains are personal, probably adulterous. Making this assumption more disconcerting and embarrassing to Bains is the fact that Dorothy is at her least charming – drunken, dishevelled, loud, uninhibited and unwashed. In short, as he muses, 'not a pretty sight' (MP, 128). She is all the things the Miss Truscotts of the world repress to be the ideal mistress. She is not a picture of neat legs tucked under a barstool along with an overnight bag, but a monstrous avenging shrew – the 'bad sister' Emma Tenant suggests lies behind a woman's unwilling complicity within patriarchal discourses. After boosting Dorothy through her bathroom window, an experience, for Bains, 'quite without magic,' he waits to be let into her house for, he expects, profuse thanks, apologies and breakfast. Dorothy Peabody ignores him completely, snapping the door in his face when he knocks and calling crankily and imperiously 'Not today, thank you' (MP, 129).

It is unlikely that she is still drunk at this stage, as Bains muses aloud, concluding that she must be mad. He arrives, in other words, at exactly the repressive reaction Gilbert and Gubar see as historically attending active and independent women in the nineteenth century novel – the diagnosis of madness, which marginalises, and thus silences and paralyses such women. Her ungainly performance of the damsel-in-distress role in her self-directed drama has, however, the marks of cunning dextrousness. Its effects are to wrest power from the posing heroine, Miss Truscott, in usurping her mistress's prerogative, from Bains in obliquely exposing his adultery, from the office social crowd who have isolated and ignored her as insignificant in their intrigues, and from Bains as employer, who has failed to recognise the threat of Dorothy's knowledge of his affair to his personal and professional reputation.

The power Dorothy wields is derived, in part, from the surprise of its emergence. The weaker she appears, the more surprising her cunning, and since the surprise magnifies the effects of her assault, the more powerful she can be. It is this type of incongruity and unsettling in Jolley's writing that Martin Gray, in his essay on the use of surprise in Jolley's writing, terms 'irony by disruption' and 'ironic dissonance'.[145] Dorothy effectively parodies the behaviour of Miss Truscott, by demanding to be rescued and adopting a childish dependence on Bains. Yet this is only one aspect of the situation, since Dorothy would also like to be in Miss Truscott's position – having some sort of romantic intrigue with a colleague. In this sense she is also enacting a fantasy, shoving Miss Truscott out of the way and taking her place in the office soap opera. Bains is confused enough by the phone call from the police, and nervous enough that his wife will discover the truth about his affair with Miss

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[145]Martin Gray 'Surprise in the Novels of Elizabeth Jolley.' Elizabeth Jolley, New Critical Essays. ed. Delys Bird and Brenda Walker (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1991) 24.

Truscott that he does what Dorothy asks, and arrives to bail her out. The triumph shows Dorothy to be a shrewd psychologist and a cunning engineer of a situation which humiliates and unsettles those who have ignored her. It is enough to make Bains, the juggler of women, feel suddenly caught by feminine power, or, as he puts it in horror: 'tangled utterly in female arms and legs' (MP, 135). Dorothy breaks out of the silence and invisibility imposed upon her like the persona in Plath's 'Purdah':

> I shall unloose –
> From the small jeweled
> Doll he guards like a heart –
>
> The lioness,
> The shriek in the bath,
> The cloak of holes.
>
> (CP, 197)

Dorothy's unmistakable – though subliminal – message is one of rage and defiance, a version of Plath's more direct serving notice to the patriarchy: 'Herr God, Herr Lucifer/Beware/Beware' (CP, 198).

Jolley's implication is that Dorothy's hopelessness is to some degree a conscious façade. She is playing games with the values and the people she is dismissed by. In the case of Leila's mother, Mrs Bott, in The Sugar Mother, the adoption of a similar façade is more patently deliberate and studied. The difference is in their attitudes to the society which sees them as powerless, and their resulting fantasies. Where Dorothy is ambivalent – wanting to ridicule her oppressors and get her revenge, but also wanting them to like her, or even wanting to be them – Mrs Bott knows exactly what she wants, and sets about achieving it using the techniques of the playful spinster. Mrs Bott, however, has a much clearer contempt for those she entangles in her schemes.

She is a mistress of malapropisms and hilarious errors, like Night Sister Shady in Mr Scobie's Riddle and Miss Edgely in Miss Peabody's Inheritance. It is notable that Miss Edgely's typing errors rarely result in nonsense, but instead cause inconvenience and embarrassment to the superiors who belittle her: as in the aforementioned 'the copulation in the pubic schools in increasing at an alarming rat' (MP, 1), as well as 'some of the beautiful fruit served in our dinning hail' (MP, 41). Similarly Leila's mother might be uneducated compared with her neighbour, academic Dr Edwin Page, but she shows herself to be a shrewd manipulator and possibly a belittler of him for the disparity between his high level of education and his lack of wisdom. Her jaunty 'Mercy buttercups' (SM, 22), for instance, follows Edwin's obscure literary allusion with such deflating alacrity that there is a sense that she is mocking his attempts to distance himself by means of intellectual assertion. Similarly, her obstinately recurrent 'sugared mother' (SM, 22) for surrogate mother pithily suggests her desire for a euphemistic approach – her insistent return to the topic is matched by an insistent refusal to nominate it openly. This is because concealment is essential to her machinations – if she were to nominate what she wanted from Edwin bluntly, or if Edwin recognised her power, there is no way Edwin would be as compliant as he proves to be. As insistent as the malopropism is its implication that Edwin is to be Sugar Daddy in the projected scenario. Yet the error dissolves any intimidation Edwin might feel, since Leila's mother presents herself so emphatically as a harmless and rather silly woman, whilst offering Edwin her daughter's body as a trade-off for something she doesn't specify in a rather terrifyingly manipulative scenario.

Roland Barthes sees errors such as Mrs Bott's 'sugared mother' as 'meaningful incidents', especially when they result in words which are meaningful in themselves so that 'the sentence retains a meaning, even if

eccentric... there is a sliding within the codes – meaning remains but pluralised, cheated, without law of content, message, truth.'[146] Sliding within the codes is precisely what Jolley's characters do too, and arguably what Jolley herself does in her reassessments of stereotypes, generic limits, words, roles and stock situations.

For Leila's mother, babyish language serves as a decoy to lull Edwin into submission through the belief that she is no match for him. Mrs Bott relies on insisting upon the disparity between herself and the man she wants to manipulate to disarm him, so that she can get what she wants from him. Since the reader is also being kept in the dark, we never know exactly what it is she is scheming to acquire, though money obviously comes into it somewhere, as the sugar daddy pun suggests. Often Mrs Bott's infantile language is accompanied by a reference to Edwin's being a doctor, thus doubly stressing the disparity: 'we both love ickle babies, don't we Leila honey?... Just think, Leila, we are next door to a house with two doctors. Remember *The Young Doctors*?' (SM, 23).

Soapie-watching, baby-loving, doctor-revering women would appear to be consumers of mainstream ideological offerings, and therefore hardly threatening to anyone. These women appear to be doing exactly what they are traditionally trained to do, but again, Mrs Bott is using the system to her advantage, and deploying acquiescence to mask her more sinister motives. Like many of Jolley's heroines, Mrs Bott cultivates a faux naivety, requesting a visit to the ice cream parlour and adopting a wide-eyed, reverent attitude to Edwin's knowledge, such as his musical knowledge. She quite consciously plays the role of the daffy, ingenuous but benevolent woman assigned to her by a society that has no use for a woman like her – single, post-menopausal, uneducated, poor and working class. Adopting this role makes Edwin comfortable as it instils in him a

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[146]Roland Barthes, Image Music Text. trans. Stephen Heath, (London: Fontana, 1987).

sense of his superiority, and the power of his knowledge and his role as cultural pedagogue. Edwin begins to fantasise himself into the role of handsome prince, capable of transforming Leila into a more cultured person – his 'fair lady'. Or perhaps, in a more faithfully Shavian vein, he wants to be Professor Henry Higgins to her Eliza Doolittle. He muses that Leila is 'unspoiled in the literary sense' (SM, 52) and considers that 'One of the advantages of having a mother like Leila's mother was that Leila could, without anyone being hurt, be educated a little' (SM, 52). It is worth noting that in the classical version of the Pygmalion story, the king falls in love with his own image in a sculpture. Certainly there is a narcissistic element to Edwin's response to being flattered. He takes to wearing jaunty yellow ties and admiring himself in the mirror, for instance.

Usually, however, such instances of submissiveness and feigned silliness on the part of Leila's mother have a sting in their tail. In the ice cream parlour Leila's mother draws attention to her figure and that of her daughter, discomforting Edwin: 'Being overweight, she said, the flesh did protect the organs' (SM, 63) and going on to imply, yet again, Leila's suitability as a sexual partner for Edwin and the woman who could carry his child. She doesn't actually say this, of course, but instead alludes to the possibility with a dramatic display of offhandedness, calling the plan for Leila to carry Edwin's child: 'whatsaname, whatyoucallit, the surrated mother, sugared whatsit, thingumijig sugar mother' (SM, 63). Here she is playing the part of the fool to the hilt, exaggerating her ignorance so that she becomes as inarticulate as a vaudevillian clown, gesturing with overblown drama towards what she wants to convey.

Elsewhere, as Mrs Bott plays a more toned down version of the role of the ignorant student, her reverence, which maintains Edwin's sense of his own power, is accompanied by a scarcely perceptible act of defiance and rebellion:

> 'That's a nice tune,' Leila's mother often said at intervals during his records. She sat bent over her knitting, humming something that was entirely her own.
>
> (SM, 68)

Mrs Bott doesn't go overboard, however, and let the opportunity for a small insurrection distract her from her larger purpose. Her shrewd, calculating eye is fixed on ensuring that Edwin feels secure and adored. This will get him to drop his defences, and give himself over to her plans. Like Vera, Mrs Bott knows the ideological conditions in which she is working. She uses this knowledge about 'masculine' egotism to manipulate the gullible Edwin. Initially her elaborate ruse works as it is intended to, and flatters Edwin into a submission far more sincere than that which elicits it. He begins to feel confident about his own power, and takes to displays of his feelings of youthful attractiveness, which the women have encouraged:

> Quite clearly Leila and her mother admired him. It was easy to enjoy approval and admiration even without any recent practice. One morning he found, when searching among his clothes, a youthful yellow tie and some socks patterned with cream triangles. He felt quite excited when he put them on. It was like being young again to wear them.
>
> (SM, 60)

Before long, however, Edwin begins to sense a façade and to fear what lies behind it. He worries that the silent shyness of Leila may mask something he finds repulsive: an indifference to him, a tough personality or a worldly cynicism. He envisages the possibility of Leila's gruff rebuff to the romantic declaration he fantasises about: 'Aw! Get off the grass, willya. Just you watch it! Tough cookie, you'll end up with egg on your face!' (SM, 85).

His flattered, patronising treatment of the two women becomes tinged with a sense of fear as their power is glimpsed. He notes uneasily of Leila's mother that 'Her way of getting into the house, by invitation from him, was frightening' (SM, 62). He perceives that Mrs Bott is highly adaptable, noticing that her bulky comfortable exterior conceals an alacrity and dextrousness:

> If Leila's mother had been there... she would in her large and heavy way have been thoroughly in command. Leila's mother, he had noticed in the short time of being acquainted with her, was a discerning woman. She perceived and acted immediately on her perception. He was not sure that he really liked this. There was something frightening, almost sinister, about the ease with which she adapted herself, fitted herself in.
>
> (SM, 96)

Mrs Bott's adaptability is something she shares with many of Jolley's heroines, who prove to be similarly shrewd and perceptive, and similarly capable of self-transformation. Her adaptability and her unerring powers of observation combine to facilitate her machinations. Her time on the sidelines – or perhaps as a wallflower – has given her the opportunity to dissect the machinery she now wishes to upset. In this case, she does so through an elaborate and outrageous scam that she can only get away with because she so carefully puts on the facade of the harmless and naive blunderer.

In terms of seduction, Edwin feels suffocated by the various women who offer themselves to him, diminished and fearful of his own possible failure in the face of their initiative, a little like Mr Bains' sense of terrifying entanglement in female limbs. Because he senses that there is some sort of devious scheme at work, Edwin's first night with Leila is a triumph for him because he has resisted her: 'He found he enjoyed the sensation and the power which was in the restraint'(SM, 113). What

Edwin feels only as a sort of ineffable discomfort with the situation: 'Some nagging misgiving which kept coming at intervals... an uneasiness accompanying the whole transaction' (SM, 117), the more forthright Daphne phrases baldly: 'What if this woman... is pulling a fast one on you, pulling the wool over your eyes – about to cheat you out of several thousand dollars?' (SM, 116). Daphne probably proves to have been right. There are enough references to Leila's extraordinary appetite and unreliable digestion at the time when she first meets Edwin ('She ate quite hungrily... even though it was not long since breakfast' (SM, 38); 'those radishes... She's fetched them straight up, pardon me for mentioning... Really, young people! They will not be told! Especially if there's a craving' (SM, 40)) for a reader to suspect that Edwin's contribution has nothing to do with Leila's pregnancy. Mrs Bott has deliberately retrieved the existing situation of her daughter's pregnancy by involving the easy prey Edwin shows himself to be. Jolley, however, doesn't spell this out, and throws in the complication that Edwin appears to have fallen in love with Leila, or perhaps become addicted to the flattery and attention of Leila and her mother. By the end of the novel, the confusing events leave both Edwin and the reader nervous. While the reader perhaps hopes for some clear plot-driven narrative to dissolve his or her uneasiness, Edwin, after drinking too much champagne with Daphne, wishes for World War Three to forestall the events he fears: the arrival home of his wife Cecilia, the loss of his lover and Sugar Mother Leila, the stomach cramps that drinking champagne always brings him. All of this confirms his suspicions about Mrs Bott's ability to shake his life up completely, and possibly maliciously.

Of characters such as Dorothy Peabody, Hester Harper, Aunt Heloise, Vera Wright and even Leila Bott herself, true spinsters, no one suspects such sinister machinations. Paradoxically, suspecting Leila's

mother reduces her power, since a mistrust exists nigglingly, where the more bungling versions of this character are immune from such mistrust by virtue of their apparent inability to do anything much at all – especially something powerfully destructive. Hence the need for Mrs Bott to flaunt her faux naiveté as flagrantly as she does, stressing as often as she can that she is innocuous. Even when they commit crimes or breach mores – Dorothy's leaving her job to abscond to Australia and become a novelist, Vera's larceny and forgery, Weekly's and Heloise's murders and Leila's giving birth – these events seem so incongruous as to leave the reader wondering as to whether they have really happened. These bizarre characters have the same disorienting effect on some readers that they do on their victims, prompting such remarkably facile critical questions as the interviewer who asked Jolley about Milk and Honey 'Can you tell me how Madge died?'[147]

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A fascinating sub-category of bungling, inefficient and apparently powerless spinsters exists in Jolley's work: several of Jolley's warbling women are novelists. Like Margaret Atwood's overweight, derided and isolated protagonist in Lady Oracle, and Ruth 'no beauty but a good soul' in Fay Weldon's The Life and Loves of a She-Devil, Jolley's Alma Porch, and later Hester Harper and Dorothy Peabody derive their power from literary creation.[148] Each text implies that self-expression can be powerful and transformative. Each text extols the virtues of a rare role for women in which they may at once be influential and invisible, uncoloured by

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[147]Candida Baker Yacker: Australian Writers Talk About Their Work, (Sydney: Pan, 1986) 232. Jolley's response is as naïve and baffling as one would expect were Heloise herself confronted with this question: 'I'm not sure I even know who killed Madge, although I've got my suspicions.' Even her creator plays at disbelieving Heloise's incongruous murderousness.

[148]Margaret Atwood, Lady Oracle (London: Virago, 1982). Fay Weldon, Life and Loves of a She-Devil (Sevenoaks: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983) 9

their romantic status or physical appearance, which have been traditionally and widely regarded as the central indices of feminine power.[149] Jolley herself is unwilling to be dragged into the public arena, and prefers to remain a writer, rather than a public figure.

For this reason, Jolley's interview style is self-deprecating and evasive. To keep the focus on her writing rather than her own life, she employs strategies similar to those of her playful spinsters. Because she is interested in maintaining the autonomy of her work, she deflects the sorts of critical questions which seek to make facile connections between her own life and the texts she has written. Her real thoughts about this appear in jottings on her manuscripts: 'Most people who read this book will relate the situation and the events to the Author. This is natural but it is narrow and conventional.'[150] Jolley has the advantage of having seen the sensationalism surrounding Woolf and especially Plath, which tends to obscure their work, and thus to be able to preclude access to her personal life which could facilitate a similar obfuscation of her own *oeuvre*. She realises the importance of maintaining the illusion of her own invisibility, just as characters like Vera do. Her chief strategy to achieve this in interviews is to adopt a naive, deferential, self-effacing persona. Often, she invents herself as a paradoxical figure – a sort of sibylline simpleton – precluding criticism by adopting an ingenuousness and self-effacing and apologetic attitude entirely unbelievable to her readers.[151] Of her prolific publishing in the last decade, for instance, she says modestly:

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[31]As Naomi Wolf puts it in her thorough study of this oppressive correlation of 'beauty' with success, The Beauty Myth 'we are in the midst of a violent backlash to feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement' 2.

[150]Elizabeth Jolley, from a draft of Palomino, held by the Mitchell Library, State Library of N.S.W.

[151] At one public reading at the N.S.W. Art Gallery Jolley appeared not to be able to get up the stairs to the stage and had to be helped up by an obliging young man – though after the reading she seemed perfectly spritely – and prefaced her reading with the remark that they (the two performance poets preceding her in the programme) were much 'better' than she would be.

> That was a slow, hard business... I did submit work, some things were accepted and a great many were rejected... from there I somehow took off... but I didn't think of myself as a writer, it was just a natural thing to do.[152]

This sense that her success is accidental and even a little baffling, and certainly something to be excessively grateful to reviewers, readers and interviewers for is often expressed in rather awkward language, peppered with assertions of the gaps in her own knowledge. Jolley, however, is never cantankerous about intrusive or unintelligent questions, employing instead a polite and politic public image which purports not to refuse certain questions, but simply to be unable to answer them. On the other hand, her spinster/writer characters are often less tolerant. In Foxybaby a weary Miss Porch responds to questions about the autobiographical basis of her fiction with irritation:

> 'Did all this really happen to you?' Miss Paisley asked. 'All what?' Miss Porch placed her files on a chair. 'Why, the things in the story,' Miss Paisley said. 'I am a fiction writer, 'Miss Porch said, pulling her hat lower over her eyes. 'My books are fictitious.'
>
> (F, 129)

An interesting footnote to this is a rather more candid comment made by Jolley in an interview in the Australian Women's Weekly, in which she gives the clear message that she is not at all interested in the interview, but also suggests why she is doing it:

> Anything that will help the sale of books I think is a good thing... However much you dislike publicity, and you don't

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[152]Baker, 216.

> regard yourself as a public person, you understand that you've simply got to go along with certain things.[153]

This may also explain why Miss Porch also sometimes veils anger and irritation with politeness when dealing with officious critics:

> Miss Porch hoped that Miss Peycroft would not notice her lack of interest. The idea of *tableaux vivants* had given her a shock. All energy seemed to drain away and she had an incredible longing to yawn, to relax in a deep bath of warm water and to sink into bed.
>
> (E 30)

Porch's image, that of the hopeless spinster, serves to deflect irritating critics' questions, since it makes her seem to be incapable of answering them, rather than reluctant to. Her pose thus silences that which disturbs her more completely and efficiently than aggression would, and provides her with a position from which to write that is immune from distracting intervention. From this position she writes vital and confronting texts that transform the lives of her readers. She, like Jolley, has understood that 'you've simply got to go along with certain things' not as a compromise, but because it is an exceptionally powerful way of getting what she wants. Like wily, intelligent Miss Porch and many of her other spinsters, Jolley is herself an impersonator, wearing masks which will allow her to achieve what she needs to without upsetting potential opponents with overt confrontation.

If Jolley as a public figure shares some of the wiliness of her spinsters, so does her writing itself. This is writing which teases its readers. Sue Gillett's comment that at the end of The Well 'we are left with our imaginative appetites aroused rather than satiated' suggests this sense of being toyed with as a reader and alludes to the refusal of the writing to

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[153]Pam Gilbert, Coming Out From Under: Contemporary Australian Women Writers, (North Sydney: Pandora, 1988) 46.

privilege its readers with definitive solutions to its puzzles.[154] Paul and Keryl Kavanagh, writing about imagination in Jolley's work, comment that 'there is an ironic gap between what we are offered in the novel, and our desire for an ideal, organic whole, explicable, understandable.'[155] The writing is mercurial, urging its reader on with every textual incentive, every promise, and yet often leaving him or her dangling – a sort of inexorably questing post-modern version of the courtly suitor at the mercy of a capricious and unyielding text.

Jolley's reader is constantly being unsettled, tricked, toyed with and sometimes mocked or denigrated for feeling confused and alienated by this. As the writer Diana Hopewell tells her reader Miss Peabody: 'A reader can be as involved as he wishes and some readers will fight off this involvement' (MP, 115). Yet despite all this trickery and evasion, Jolley's writing inspires rereading; its riddles and puzzles entice the reader to return to the text which has been so destabilising in its playfulness. Sue Gillett's description of this process in terms of appetite suggests the erotic element of this process. The comment also brings to mind Enobarbus's description of Cleopatra: 'other women cloy/The appetites they feed, but she makes hungry,/Where most she satisfies'.[156] Jolley's writing has about it the dangerous and unsettling character of Cleopatra's style of seduction rather than a more conventional paradigm of appetite – readerly or amorous – which is linear rather than circular; safe rather than threatening. As with her characters, the 'ingredients' and 'methods' which produce the power of Jolley's writing pivot on the idea of paradox.

Jolley comments (with a typically self-deprecating aside):

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[154]Sue Gillett, 'The Well: Beyond Representation, the Active Space of Desire and Creativity.'Westerly, 1, (1992) 33.
[155] Paul and Keryl Kavanagh, 'Miracle Play: The Imagination in Elizabeth Jolley's Novels', Elizabeth Jolley: New Critical Essays 166.
[156] Shakespeare, Antony and Cleopatra, (London: Methuen, 1965) II, iii 236-7

> My main interest is not in the rich, the powerful and the successful. I do not understand much of St. Paul's writings, but I do share his belief that the foolish things of the world confound the wise and the weak things confound the things which are mighty.[157]

The paradoxical politics of Jolley's writing work similarly; raising up the humble and undermining the traditionally strong – characters and structures. Variability, fragmentation, transformation, play, and Martin Gray's idea of 'ironic dissonance' are the chief examples of this in Jolley's writing.

Part of the playfulness of Jolley's writing is in its structure. Her texts have a self-referential character, folding back in on themselves again and again: peripheral characters in one text recur as protagonists in another, the same stories recur with variations or are told from different perspectives in different texts, themes are worked and reworked and ideas emerge and merge as characters come to terms with their memories and beliefs. The effect of this is an instability in the texts; a lack of closure and of definitive solutions and parameters, and a destabilisation of the reader. Yet, paradoxically, as with the spinsters' power, it is precisely from this instability, mobility, playfulness and elusiveness that the power of the writing emerges. The two are analogous and work in tandem: devious characters throw on and cast off masks and elude categories, and derive power from unlikely objects and poses, and devious narratives take off in unexpected directions, shift from tone to tone and mode to mode and derive power from the unusual structures and characteristics they adopt. The abrupt lurches and mobility of one highlight and compound the effects of the quirky elusiveness of the other.

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[157] Elizabeth Jolley, 'Who Talks of Victory?'

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In The Well, there are good examples of both the structural politics which characterise Jolley's writing, and the type of protagonist who is wily, cunning, changeable and adaptable. This protagonist, Hester Harper, is even more mobile than many of Jolley's characters as she evolves from playful spinster to exuberant lesbian during the course of the novel.

The novel's first rebellious gesture is to present the reader with no fewer than three versions of the baffling expository paragraphs which open the novel, introducing the novel's protagonists and presenting the hinge on which the plot will pivot. This rebelliousness is belied, however, by the extreme conventionality and decorousness of this first version. Like the spinsters' acts of defiance, disruption occurs from within conservative structures. 'One night Miss Hester Harper and Katherine are driving home from a celebration' (W, 1), we are told in the first pages of the novel, when, speeding down the deserted country road, they round a bend and hit something mysterious. Hester, at first fully occupied with shrieking hysterically, suddenly shifts gear to become practical and calm, and takes charge in the moment of crisis. She directs Katherine to drive to the well near their house, where they will deposit the body of their victim. The scene ends abruptly, and Jolley moves on to relate details of the idyllic if infantilised life the two women share – concocting extravagant and exotic meals and throwing the dirty dishes down the well afterwards, recreating scenes from cinema classics, dancing, singing and brushing one another's hair. 'It was all simple and pleasant' (W, 21), and it is – if only we as readers can ignore the unsettling possibilities the story of the collision suggests, and keep the lid on the well of our own uneasiness securely fastened.

At its first rendition this section of The Well seems innocuous and simple:

> Katherine had insisted on driving. 'You sit back Miss Harper, dear, and take a rest.' She had covered Miss Harper's bony knees with a cheerful rug before taking her place at the wheel... Pleasantly lulled with thoughts of Katherine's happiness at the dance and with looking forward to her own warm bed and possibly because of the enormous, even when shared, plateful of sherry trifle Miss Harper sleeps.
>
> (W, 1-3)

As a result of the simple style and naive tone, part of the impact of the story's subsequent repetition and variation derives from the surprise that a narrative so much like a child's story could transform itself into something unsettlingly macabre and unstable. Like the narrative itself, Miss Hester Harper is an entirely unmenacing figure, an old 'dear' dozing off in the car with a cheerful rug tucked around her knees in this scene – hardly the teller of chilling tales of her own murderous possibilities that she becomes. This first version of the story draws the reader in with its drama and cinematic clarity – 'Hester stops shrieking suddenly as something hits the Toyota with a dull heavy thud' (W, 5) – and with the traditional hooks of urgency, suspense and mystery: 'It's not a roo, Katherine. It's not a roo. Don't come out, it's too horrible. We've caught something on the bar' (W, 6). The narrative has about it the linearity and focus of a fairytale, and the fairytale's sense of containing deeper moral and philosophical significance in its symbols: night, the moon, a deserted road here do what the three bowls of porridge, the cottage and the forest do in more famous fairytales. Its oracular or parabolical aspect is suggested by the morally and symbolically charged landscape of fragrant ploughed fields ready to be sown, a watchful moon which discreetly slips behind a bank of cloud like a *deus ex machina* so that everything is obscured at a significant moment, and of course the well itself. Other than these hints of a fabulous

edge to the tale, these qualities typify the sort of prose which attracts to Jolley's writing bemused comments about its simplicity and naivety. Most readers probably feel as 'pleasantly lulled' by all this familiarity as Hester Harper is by tiredness, happiness, the cheerful tartan rug over her knees and an excess of sherry trifle. Certainly it's a little upsetting that the drive home has involved hitting some sort of creature on the road, but characters, narrator and author don't seem too perturbed, and so we as readers read on, just a bit shaken, but reassured that the incident seems to have had no sequel nor any unpleasant aftermath. As the novel progresses, however, these signs of the narrative's simplicity and the event's insignificance prove to have been deceptive, just as the spinsters' veneer of innocuous and deferential behaviour proves deceptive.

After the first version of the mysterious collision, but before the second there is an incident in which Hester Harper notices that Katherine has a tendency to alter her narratives according to whim. She observes in a fairly offhand way that Katherine: 'repeated several incidents of unkindness or unfair treatment often describing the same incident over again with added details which made Hester wonder sometimes about the truth of them' (W, 15). The remark is not elaborated upon, and seems little more than a slight and unexplained buckle in the otherwise smooth fabric of the story. Yet, typically of Jolley's writing this understated detail proves to be crucial, and resonates when the narrative, like Katherine, shows itself to be less reliable than it has initially appeared.

The second version of the story of the collision on the road pops up some way into the novel. It is almost identical to the first, except that Katherine behaves slightly differently, and seems to be a far wilier character. Instead of taking the key to the ute from Hester with a laughing 'If I'm to get my [driving] test next week Miss Harper, dear... I'd better get in some practice, hadn't I?', (W, 1) 'Katherine's neat quick fingers [help]

themselves' to the key while she remarks 'Make a good burglar, wouldn't I?' and slips 'into the driver's seat' (W, 78). The details of this are not insignificant – who's in the driver's seat is fundamental to our understanding of the narrative and the dynamic between the two women. To extend this, the notion of practising driving or controlling the narrative – or relationship – an idea analogous to the playful spinsters' practising ways in which to empower themselves until they perfect them, is also implicit. The innocent, fabulous veneer of the story is scratched by the notion of Katherine's agency in the events, and more generally the changes render the narrative suspect. The moon is no longer a mythical omniscient power arranging the lives of those who bathe in its rays, but a dumb backdrop to human machinations – Katherine's apparently, but also possibly Hester's. Like Hester earlier, the reader is infected with the doubt which arises. And like Hester earlier, added and altered details make the reader 'wonder about the truth of them' (W, 15).

By its third telling, the story is macabre, and the circumstances of its telling are heavy with symbolism. The ute which Hester has considered invincible has run out of petrol on an empty road. 'Not like you at all, Miss Harper to run out of gas!' her neighbour Mrs Borden comments later (W, 172) – Hester replies that this has never happened to her before. As she limps along the road with a petrol can, Hester feels small and insignificant, but, paradoxically, protected by this:

> As she walks she tells herself she must enjoy the feeling of her own insignificance which is enhanced by the indifference of the land. This silent indifference towards her can make her feel small and safe. It is a safety which brings freedom for the time being.
>
> (W, 170)

She feels about as small and lonely and powerless as possible, a lame woman walking along an isolated stretch of road, having left Katherine, and the protection her friend affords, behind her:

> She feels the obsession coming over her and she can only think of Kathy, of her appearance, of the sound of her voice, and of her dancing. She thinks of how Kathy will tell her that she wants to go away and leave her and she thinks of what she must say in reply and she wants to break down and weep before this conversation can take place. She wants to beg her not to go, not to want to go. During this time of obsession she cannot face a life without Kathy; every day to wake up and know that she is no longer there.
>
> (W, 171)

Hester is found wandering along the long empty road by Mrs Borden in her car full of restless little boys, who hope their unexpected passenger will entertain them with a story. Having been urged by their mother to 'scare 'em witless' (W, 175), Hester begins the story of the collision to her audience of Mrs Borden's sons. These are the very boys who have inherited the property and power which should still be Hester's, since she has had to sell it, having insufficient income and no heirs of her own. It is in this situation that the sudden and intoxicating realisation dawns on her that she has become an author, with the power to say anything – to tell her story in any version that suits her. 'I'll have to decide which monster I'll tell you about' Hester announces, luxuriating in the thought of the narrative choices available to her. Since Hester's version of the story, the third version, starts here, the reader only knows that it is to be a version of Hester's story which she herself controls. The novel's circularity – we are right back where we started from in terms of the plot – suggests that the whole tale could be a protracted fantasia of Hester's creation. Whether this is this case or not, the novel ends with Hester's launch into a new phase of her life, which she will direct. As in Miss Peabody's Inheritance, the

protagonist has been inspired by her encounters with a writer – in Hester's case a fleeting conversation in the grocery store – to wrest control of her own narrative, and so begin her change from derided spinster into a far more powerful character. This is nothing less than the 'shattering entry into history' Cixous describes as the result of woman's 'seizing the occasion to speak'. Hester has done just what Cixous calls for. She has taken the opportunity to 'become *at will* the taker and initiator, for her own right, in every symbolic system, in every political process.'[158]

Yet the moment is understated, even somewhat ironic for Jolley's heroines, and tinged with absurdity and flippancy. In Hester's case, the anonymous mentor/writer she has been inspired by has been busily searching in the grocery store for a square bucket to soak her feet in, and Hester's seizing control of the narrative is accompanied by thoughts of her own perfect foot-soaking bucket, something she realises she has always had. In essence, this signals Hester's realisation that she too can create and give voice to her own narrative, much as Cixous advocates. Yet the fact that this realisation is associated with plastic buckets and sore feet disallows it any sort of pompousness or even certainty – the combination is bizarre enough to offer the unsettling possibility that on some level this mundane and humorous detail is mocking or even satirical of manifestos and glorious and ennobling ascensions to power. Humour, then, is another ingredient in this allegorically resonant collision: it is unclear whether Jolley is serious, and so, again, it is hard to know how to take the story, and how to 'read' its characters. Roles collide with roles, masks with masks, generic elements clash and bicker, and the atmosphere shifts from that of a sombre parable to a farcical joke. Yet the fact remains that Hester has been empowered, and begins to tell a devastating, seductive and betraying tale.

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158 Helene Cixous, 'Le Rire De la Meduse' New French Feminisms 251.

In both The Well and Miss Peabody's Inheritance a woman, despised for her meekness and timidity, arrives at the inheritance of imaginative and narratorial powers. Both Hester and Miss Peabody are treated as daffy spinsters, and Hester in particular settles into her demonstration of imaginative powers ironically at precisely the moment when, as during the collision incident, she allows another woman the driving seat. Yet this time, as Mrs Borden's passenger, Hester is stunningly and irrefutably in control of the narratorial vehicle – so much so that the reader wonders whether the whole text has been a protracted fantasia of Hester's creation, and whether we have been her blinded passengers all along. It also reminds us that, since Hester was in the passenger's seat when the mysterious collision took place, she may have been equally in control of events then. This suggestion, which has come about because of Mrs Borden's request that Hester scare her boys witless, is unsettling for the reader: it is perhaps enough to scare some readers witless too. The lesson in each case for the protagonist is that surface displacement, or removal from apparent power, need not mean complete removal from sources of power, and can in fact even provide access to powers of its own. Hester learns that she can control the narrative from the passenger's seat, while Dorothy Peabody learns that the unlikeliest people can be heroes and 'authors'. Dorothy herself is transformed even more dramatically than Hester, from universally ridiculed bungling office clerk and isolated spinster to confident traveller flying to Australia to start a new life as a writer. One of the last sentences her mentor, writer Diana Hopewell has written to her has been: 'it interests me very much that people can and do change their level of expectation' (MP 148-9). For the reader, the apotheosis is thrilling, as Dorothy stops thinking in terms of her limitations, and recognises the power available to her: 'though she made abysmal typing errors, [she] knew she could type well enough... there were

enormous possibilities' (MP, 156). Hester's acquisition of her inheritance – the confidence to tell her own story and direct her own life – is less comforting than Dorothy Peabody's. In the case of The Well, the effect is less of triumphant self-assertion than of the sudden raising of questions about the reliability of narrative and the variability of truth. Hester's moment of empowerment is a moment of disempowerment for the unsettled – or 'scared witless' – reader. When Martin Gray talks of 'the occasional sense of chilling dispassionateness, perhaps even cruelty' in these texts' creator, the aloofness of this 'invisible creator' from her readers is as pertinent as the impartiality Gray sees existing towards her characters and their fraught situations.[159]

The effect of having three versions of The Well's central story is to kaleidoscope the text; parts of the narrative collide with and refract off one another. Seekers of truth and fixed meaning are thrown, and as Paul Salzman puts it, the reader instead becomes 'entangled' as 'narrative seduction is intertwined with narrative betrayal.'[160] The Well ends with a moment of empowerment for its protagonist. Paradoxically, however, as the protagonist seizes narrative control, the reader is thrown into confusion. As the protagonist experiences a sort of epiphany – a moment of triumphant clarification and understanding (albeit focused through the absurd medium of a square plastic foot-soaking bucket) – the narrative becomes confused, and the reader unsettled. The surprise of Hester Harper's ascension to power enhances its impact for her and for the reader, yet this same element of surprise confounds the reader, and exacerbates our discomfort. At this moment of profound importance for Hester, Jolley foregrounds the playfulness and unreliability of her text, so that politics and flippancy wrestle for the reader's attention. Janus-like, the

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[159] Gray, 26, 36.

[160] Paul Salzman, Helplessly Tangled in Female Arms and Legs: Elizabeth Jolley's Fictions (St. Lucia: Queensland UP, 1993) 48.

text startles with a new and unexpected second face which underscores its naivety and apparent openness with a sinister suggestion of manipulative and devious politics. These strategies call to mind Gilbert and Gubar's notion of the palimpsestic text, since here too an innocent face conceals another version of the text.[161] Yet since Jolley has far more freedom than the nineteenth century predecessors under Gilbert and Gubar's consideration, it seems that Jolley's strategy is not so much about protecting and concealing a potentially subversive idea behind a more conventional facade, as a wily and dextrous manipulation of the narrative and of the reader for different political reasons. In Jolley's case the effect is to maximise the text's and character's power, rather than to conceal and minimise them, as perhaps can occur with the palimpsestic text when it is survival driven – as in the cases of the nineteenth century women writers Gilbert and Gubar discuss.

By the end of The Well, Hester Harper has been transformed, and has emerged from cowering spinster afraid of her own voice to become a teller of a dramatic tale whose heroine is herself. She no longer seeks invisibility, but instead relishes the fact that she has a spellbound audience in her power. At this point, filled as she is with delight and power, she is reborn as the other main type of woman in the subculture Jolley depicts – the exuberant lesbian.

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If Jolley's 'playful spinsters' derive their power from paradoxical strategies of dramatic diminution and mobility, her 'exuberant lesbians' take a contrastingly direct route to power. They flaunt their difference and

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[161] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination (New Haven: Yale UP 1979).

their exuberance, and ignore (or thumb their noses at) oppressive conventions rather than circumnavigating them. In her consideration of her 'playful spinsters' Jolley creates a detailed study of a type of access to power only to supplement this with its polar opposite. Her spinsters are wily, paradoxical and cunning, acquiring power strategically and often undetectably. Jolley's exuberant lesbians are direct, strong and seem to have no interest in the idea that they might be ignoring conventional expectations. They are flamboyant, often seeing themselves as goddesses. Some of them are politely subtle about announcing this, such as Daphne in The Sugar Mother, who recognises the jealousy of another teacher at the school she works at, and sees it in these terms: 'it's simply because I'm tall, taller than average, and she's very short. She wants to be a goddess and everyone knows there's no such thing as a short-legged goddess. I'm not implying... that I think of myself as a goddess... though I do happen to have rather long legs' (SM, 114). Diana Hopewell in Miss Peabody's Inheritance is another example of the goddess, at least as Dorothy Peabody envisages her: 'Diana, the Goddess of the Hunt, would be a tall woman graceful and shapely about the neck and breast. She would wear tall riding boots' (MP, 8). Diana is also, of course, the goddess of chastity, so it is appropriate that she becomes the mentor and benefactor of the inexperienced Miss Peabody. In 'The Libation', a writer replies to a rude letter from a rather disturbed reader whose questions refer to a text much like Palomino, and whose comments are similar to those critics actually made about that book.[162] This exasperated and angry reader sends the writer a list of criticisms that concludes, as the writer indicates when she responds: '"What is the goddess?" This is your last question at the end of

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162Helen Garner talks of its 'failure' (Meanjin, 42, 2 (1983) 153-7.) Helen Daniel describes it as 'often ridiculous rather than absurd, with much bathos and wordy earnestness and it suffers from a terrible plot' (Westerly, 31, 2 (1986) 50-63.) A.P. Riemer sees it as 'febrile melodrama' and goes on to denounce it as a text 'imbued with a heavy-handed romanticism redolent of Mills and Boon and the television 'soapie' industry.'(Westerly, 31, 2 (1986) 74)

twenty-three pages of questions. "What is the goddess? What is the goddess?" It's your last question typed out twice as if in exasperation' (WL, 112). Later she adds, politely, 'From your notes I see that you want the goddess removed from the book. I would like to keep her in as she is essential to the story' (WL, 111). As well as the removal of the goddess from the book, the unsettled reader also wants her to remove or change her treatment of lesbianism and pregnancy. The writer refuses on all counts, and tells him, cryptically, in response to his question about the goddess: 'The goddess is both an image and a symbol' (WL, 110). Jolley's exuberant lesbians are often associated with goddesses, and they provide an image of the freedom and power of this type of woman. This is a positive image of female power, the antithesis of which, in terms of convention, is the figure of the witch. Where Jolley's spinsters live in trepidation at the thought of being labelled witches if they are seen to step out of line by acting powerfully and assertively, Jolley's lesbians aspire with joy to the stature of the energetic goddesses they associate themselves with. In Miss Peabody's Inheritance Miss Thorne's lover celebrates her goddess-like power: 'You're a sort of goddess Ella. You can do or get anything you've a mind to do or get' (MP, 32).

Jolley writes about lesbians themselves, and also about their relationships. With the exception of Milk and Honey, Jolley's novels all deal with lesbian relationships – real or desired, remembered or dreamed of, poignant, tender, ludicrous, comical and lyrical, as part of a peripheral plot-strand or central to the novel. A range of characters is involved – from the ageing to the adolescent, from the awkward schoolgirl to the uninhibited artist, and the relationships occur in numerous contexts and settings – between student and teacher, between medical colleagues, in bathrooms, hotels, mansions, in forests and on farms. Apart from their multifariousness, the relationships have in common the fact that Jolley's

main focus is not on their sexual facets. It is their circumstances in which Jolley is interested, and this is something the author Diana Hopewell in Miss Peabody's Inheritance explains:

> it is the circumstances, the going towards love making and then the time afterwards, the thoughts, d'you see, and the feelings which make the scene memorable. Love scenes should be a whole lot of things.
>
> (MP, 12)

This is not to suggest that Jolley's descriptions of lesbianism are euphemistic. Jolley is interested in the sensual aspects of lesbianism – its association with music, play, tenderness and pleasure – but also in its political aspects. Again, one of her characters, the protagonist in 'The Libation' articulates the philosophy Jolley's writing enacts. 'The words "a deep spiritual and emotional experience" do not mean orgasm. If I want to write orgasm I will write it' (WL, 112). Jolley, like the writer in 'The Libation' does not generalise about sexuality: 'How can you accuse me of "perpetuating a myth about lesbianism"... Lois is merely describing her own feeling and her own experience and I do not consider her to be speaking on behalf of all sexual partners' (WL, 115). The implications of lesbianism – ideological, metaphorical and political – which are stressed in Jolley's writing are similar to those Adrienne Rich sees as important:

> It is crucial that we understand lesbian feminism in the deepest, most radical sense: as that love for ourselves and other women, that commitment to the freedom in all of us, which transcends the category of 'sexual preference'... to become a politics of *asking women's questions*, demanding a world in which the integrity of all women – not just a chosen few – shall be honored and validated in every aspect of culture.[163]

163Adrienne Rich, On Lies, Secrets and Silence: Selected Prose, (London: Norton, 1989) 17.

The erotic is part of this, both for Rich and for Jolley. Rich's argument is more political and polemical than Jolley's. Jolley's is a more subtle process of attrition upon bastions of power which belittle women, such as the imperative that women be passive and gentle, and that their highest function and sole aim should be wifedom and motherhood. Rich defines the political work to be done as 'the effort to define a female consciousness which is political, aesthetic and erotic, and which refuses to be included in the culture of passivity'.[164]

Jolley's emphasis on lesbianism in her literary consideration of similar questions is about far more than just the erotic too. Paulina Palmer summarises Rich's argument as one about power in which heterosexuality is an institution to which lesbianism acts as a form of resistance.[165] Rich uses the term 'lesbian continuum' to emphasise the politics of her position:

> I mean the term lesbian continuum to include a range – through each woman's life and throughout history – of woman identified experience; not simply the fact that a woman has had a consciously desired genital sexual experience with another woman... we expand it to embrace many more forms of primary intensity between and among women, including the sharing of a rich inner life, the bonding against male tyranny, the giving and receiving of practical and political support.[166]

Writers concerned with the power relationships between the sexes, and with the effects upon these of lesbianism comment on the association of lesbianism with madness. Foucault's concept of the medical metaphor used to regulate and control society and culture elucidates the basis for this association. As he sees it, the notion is prevalent of the

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164 Rich, 18.
165Paulina Palmer, 'Contemporary Lesbian Feminist Fiction: Texts for Everywoman' Plotting Change: Contemporary Women's Fiction ed. Linda Anderson (London: Edward Arnold, 1990) 49.
166 Rich, 17.

> social body which needs to be protected, in a quasi-medical sense... remedies and therapeutic devices are employed such as the segregation of the sick, the monitoring of contagions, the exclusion of delinquents.[167]

A study of the construction of femininity under this ideology conducted by Jill Julius Matthews finds a list of the attributes of the 'healthy' woman which includes that they

> differ from healthy men by being more submissive, less independent, less adventurous, more easily influenced, less aggressive, less competitive, more excitable in minor crises, having their feelings more easily hurt, being more emotional, more conceited about their appearance, less objective... and disliking math and science.[168]

As Matthews sees it, the behaviour prescribed by this is behaviour that renders a woman feminine but inferior to a male standard, but by challenging it, she places her femininity in jeopardy too. Matthews examines the social and medical reaction to this state, and sees the term 'lesbian' as one applied to denigrate 'mannish' women, including those who exercise independence, those who are unmarried, with no wish to marry, those who do not subordinate themselves to the wishes of men, and those who compete professionally with men. She cites a pamphlet written by the New York Radicalesbian organisation:

> Lesbian is the word, the condition that holds women in line. When a woman hears this word tossed her way she knows she is stepping out of line. She knows that she has crossed the terrible boundary of her sex role... Lesbian is a label invented by the Man to throw at any woman who dares to be his equal, who dares to challenge his prerogatives (including that of all women as part of the exchange medium among men), who dares to assert the primacy of her own needs.[169]

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[167]Michel Foucault, Power/Knowledge, Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977 (Brighton: Harvester, 1981)
[168]Jill Julius Matthews, Good and Mad Women: The Historical Construction of Femininity in Twentieth Century Australia (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1984) 115.
[169]Matthews, 116.

Matthews examines the use of the term 'lesbian' by psychiatrists as one to describe women whose depression, anxiety, or anger has caused them to become rebellious. From the history of the label that Matthews traces, it is possible to see its two chief associations – with 'madness' ('maladjustment', 'neurosis', 'dissatisfaction' and 'deviation from normality') and secondly with activity – the expression of frustration, the acting out of a refusal to be subordinate through striving to compete, assert herself and challenge an oppressive system of social requirements as to how she should behave and look. Its association with homosexuality is, in this construction, unimportant. As Matthews puts it, 'women's experience of the subordination, of the oppression, of the unequal relations between the sexes is defined as natural and normal, and any expression of opposition is... deemed pathological.'[170]

The term, and its consequences (revilement, ridicule and physical assault) are described by Matthews as 'the exorbitant price demanded of women who seek independence from their subordination as women' and whose actions are seen as 'violation of the norms of femininity'.[171]

In Jolley's work, the recurrent theme of lesbianism focuses in a similar way upon the rebelliousness and atypicality of the women rather than upon their sexuality itself. Rather than describing the physical side of lesbian sexuality, Jolley describes lesbians' subversive use of their surroundings and of conventions about them. In this sense, perhaps, she could be seen to be circumnavigating the taboo by broadening her treatment of lesbianism to deal with its political aspects. Where people should be quiet, for example, in hospitals and nursing homes, Jolley's lesbians sing, shout and splash. Often, their lovemaking occurs in places

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170Matthews, 119.
171Matthews, 119.

that are typically bastions of male power such as operating theatres and offices. In My Father's Moon , Diamond and Snorter splash soap suds all over the walls of the operating preparation room as an antidote to the decorum they observe in that place during the working day. They are challenged by Vera, who wonders why they chose this room: 'it is strange because they live somewhere outside the hospital and would not need to use that bathroom – it is not a comfortable place at all, very cold' (MF, 57). The irony is, of course, that it is precisely the psychological discomfort produced by the room that draws them to it as a venue for their sexual encounter. Dr Arabella Thorne, the headmistress of a prestigious girls' boarding school in Miss Peabody's Inheritance, invites the occasional 'gel' into her room in the evening, where the two sit and chat in dressing gowns in an allegory of harmonious love-making. Dr Thorne's unashamed openness about this suggests that in her view it need not be discontinuous with her pastoral and teaching responsibilities. Indeed, in Jolley's presentation of these scenes, since she deals in allegories and metaphors, they are entirely innocent.

Paradoxically, the term 'lesbian' has cultural connotations of considerable power, despite the associations with madness and deviance – perhaps, indeed, because of these associations. Rich speaks of the history of lesbianism pointing out that lesbians were 'tortured and burned as witches, slandered in religious and later 'scientific' tracts, portrayed in art and literature as bizarre, amoral, destructive, decadent women.' Referring to the reception of and response to the paper in which she first commented on this, Rich comments:

> I believe I failed, in preparing my remarks, to allow for the intense charge of the word *lesbian,* and for all its deliquescences of meaning, ranging from 'man-hater' to 'pervert,' to the concepts I was trying to invoke, of the self-chosen woman, the forbidden 'primary intensity' between women, and also the woman who refuses to obey, who has said 'no' to the fathers.[172]

This power derives in part from the very fact that it is a taboo topic. Elsewhere in her work Jolley confronts other taboos, such as incest and murder. To use Rich's term, Jolley speaks 'the unspeakable':

> Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collections of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language – this will become, not merely unspoken, but unspeakable.[173]

Yet Jolley could not be described as being forthright about these issues. Her attitude to the transgressive nature of her choice of material is ambivalent. She herself seems coy about it, and the writing itself is often oblique and coded. Yet beneath this surface lurks a defiance, similar to that expressed by the character of the writer in 'The Libation', who responds to the idea that her subject matter is somehow inappropriate with defiance: 'Oh Get Stuffed!' and exasperation: 'I have not tried to write a thesis or dissertation on pregnancy or lesbianism. You seem to wish for or need a different kind of book, one which I have not written' (WL, 114).

As Anne Cranny-Francis observes, the romance genre foregrounds the political nature of sexual relationships, traditionally 'the nature of male/female relationships in a patriarchal society.'[174] In typical romantic fiction an older, established, wealthy man often marries a younger, less

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[172]Rich, 225, 202.
[173]Rich, 199.
[174] Cranny-Francis, 178.

experienced, poorer woman, tracing, as Cranny-Francis puts it, 'the subjugation of the heroine to the hero'[175]. There are two alternatives to this paradigm in Jolley's writing. On one hand she presents lesbian relationships which mimic the heterosexual stereotype: headmistresses seduce students, female bosses make love to their secretaries, landowners take in and fall in love with orphaned girls. These relationships contain a strange combination of conservative habits (the older women correct the grammar of the younger ones, or buy their clothes, or supervise their cultural education) and radical departures from convention (the women dye one another's hair, or make love in orchards or have baths together in operating theatres). On the other hand, Jolley presents relationships which are characterised by their equality, and their refusal to imitate the conventional heterosexual paradigm. These relationships are emphatically balanced.

In love scenes between the women in these rarer, balanced relationships, the language used highlights the evenness and harmony of the interaction by stressing the mutuality of all actions and by extension of all power. On a grammatical level, the verbs usually have both sexual partners as their subject. In My Father's Moon Vera observes Diamond and Snorter as they dance:

> It is a dance, a little dance for two people, a minuet, graceful, strange and remote. In the steam the naked bodies are like a pair of sea birds engaged in mating display. They appear and disappear as if seen through a white sea mist on some far off shore. The dance quickens. It is more serious. Each pulls the other more fiercely, letting go suddenly, laughing and then not laughing... To and fro, together, back and forth and together and round and round they skip and dance.
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> (MF, 58)

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[175]Cranny-Francis, 181.

In Palomino, one lover, Laura recalls that when things between the lovers were happy 'every time we touched each other, gently and slowly, we always touched each other more' (P, 1) and her partner, Andrea, remembers the same idyllic period in their relationship: 'we were always looking into each other... Laura's eyes looking straight into mine' (P, 57). Where the verbs have just one of the lovers as their subject, they still describe actions performed by both partners, alternating with one another. Miss Hailey pleads with Matron Price 'stroke the inside of my arm like you used to, then I'll do yours'(MS, 152). A corollary to this is that in Palomino Laura and Eva 'never had [their] night together' (P, 139) because Laura refuses to take the risk of unbalancing their relationship by taking the initiative: 'I wanted to take Eva and lead her through all the ways I have known, safely and tenderly, if only she would come.' And in Mr Scobie's Riddle , Miss Hailey refuses the temptation of Frankie's advances because of her perception of their inequality: 'I am far too old and ugly, dear, for a young and pretty girl like you' (MS, 148).

This utopian equality and reciprocity rarely exists, however, and Jolley's lesbians usually have quite unequal relationships. The central lesbian relationships in Palomino and The Well between Laura and Andrea in the former, Hester Harper and Katherine in the latter, resemble the unequal ones of the traditional romantic novel's protagonists in that Laura and Hester are both wealthy and in powerful positions conventionally occupied by men – Laura is a surgeon, Hester is a wealthy landowner, though significantly they are both displaced from these positions of power (Laura has been deregistered, Hester has been forced to sell most of her land). Andrea and Katherine are much younger, and have no power or money. Andrea is carrying her brother's child, and Katherine is scarred by a lifetime of emotional neglect. Neither of these young women is exclusively homosexual. Often the lovers are not equal

intellectually. In 'The Libation' the narrator travels with a secretary, and when the passionate narrator pours wine out as 'a libation' her lover can only respond: 'What! It's a what? It's a whatter what?' (WL, 117). In these cases, as well as in the potentially unequal relationships between Miss Thorne and her 'gels' in Miss Peabody's Inheritance a tension exists between the utopian possibilities of a balanced, mutually powerful relationship which dissolves difference, and the reality that power is based quite firmly on its conventional and pragmatic supports – money, rank and experience.

Despite these inequalities, most of the lesbian relationships depicted by Jolley are characterised by their tenderness, naturalness and play. Anne Cranny-Francis identifies, in contrast, the violence which pervades the traditional romance – the brutal masculinity which is part of the attraction of characters such as Heathcliff in Wuthering Heights , for example, of whom Cathy, who is in love with him says: 'Don't imagine that he conceals depths of benevolence and affection beneath a stern exterior. He's not a rough diamond – a pearl-containing oyster of a rustic: he's a fierce, pitiless, wolfish man.'[176] In Jolley's fiction tenderness is emphasised both by the recurrent use of the word itself, almost as a litany, and by images of natural harmony and gentleness which surround scenes of love making. In 'The Libation' the writer tells her reader that 'I have tried to make it clear that the relationship between the two women is a tender one with healing qualities' (WL, 115). In My Father's Moon, Diamond and Snorter's love seems to Vera to be completely natural: their bodies seem 'naturally quite naked. There is nothing unusual about their bodies' and they move 'like a pair of sea birds engaged in mating display' (MF, 58). Laura sees this tenderness as a feminine quality. She describes her love for Eva 'I love her tenderly, as only a woman can love another woman' (P, 138) and

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[176]Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights (1847; London: Penguin, 1985) 141.

remembers her love-making with Andrea as 'tender worship' (P, 1). This memory extends into a series of images of natural tenderness. When Laura's love is reciprocated, the entire landscape is softened and feminised, transformed and transfused with the tenderness that overflows from within her. This is typical of the ways in which environments reflect characters' states of mind in Jolley's writing.

This transformation of the environment for women through utopian lesbian relationships is part of the cartography of power and powerlessness which emerges from Jolley's treatment of the politics of space. Jolley's writing utilises landscape primarily to examine political questions, especially the question of power. With her spinsters cloistered in oppressive looming hospitals and schools, and her lesbians often luxuriating in huge open natural spaces, she raises questions of the politics of space and mobility within that space. Claudine Hermann speaks of 'man's space' as 'a space of domination, hierarchy and conquest, a sprawling, showy space, a *full* space'.[177] Jolley depicts the oppression of those – men and women – who do not find a place within the hegemonic distribution and organisation of space. In her writing this includes immigrants who remain perched on the edges of cultures which make no attempt to see them; sufferers of infectious diseases, such as Noel in The Georges' Wife who is removed from society as though he himself is the disease; escaped convicts; deregistered doctors; the lonely, poor and elderly, but most essentially her playful spinsters. Woolf's suggestion that 'Once you fall... human nature is on you'(MD, 127) and Plath's images of Dame Kindness preying on those in pain, (CP, 269) and the 'peanut crunching crowd' (CP, 244) keen to view and demonise anyone different have their resonances in Jolley's marginalised people.

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[177] Claudine Hermann, 'Women in Space and Time' New French Feminisms 169.

Jolley's study of space involves a cartography of powerlessness in which a lack of private space and a forcing of characters into marginal spaces suggest, respectively, violation, lack of freedom and invasion, and oppression and exclusion. The rigidity of hospital routines and the dehumanisation of living in places in which there is no privacy cause misery to those like Vera in the trilogy who are forced to suffer these indignities. Often, paradoxically, it is only after having been marginalised as Jolley's lesbians are – only within these marginal environments – that characters find any solace, and with it, the experience of freedom and the power to speak. Jolley's lesbians exalt in setting themselves free from all constraints, and living in places that are truly their own, where they can be completely uninhibited, and have only their own rules to obey.

Thus for Laura in Palomino, moving to a remote farm allows her to feel free, and provides a space for her in which she can experience the 'tender worship' of her love for Andrea. The whole landscape seems to respond to Laura's feelings. When she has been abandoned by her lover the house and surrounding land are suddenly 'bald and empty' where before the lover's presence has made everything 'part of a tender worship, the noise of the stream in flood, rushing between clay banks, the quiet green paddocks, the blossom and the fruit, all the harvest, when it came, even the constant changing of the seasons was yours' (P, 1). Laura has been forced to resign as a gynaecologist, and has moved to a property away from everyone, a place where, as she puts it: 'I am my own warden... I have hidden away in the secret folds of a narrow valley where the land is mine and no–one else can come there without my asking them to come' (P, 19). She is no longer subject to the petty rules of the hospital hierarchy, as Vera is in the trilogy. In the past she has resented her lover's patients for 'filling her space' and now she has sought the refuge of solitude as a way of controlling her dealings with people, which have caused her anguish.

Jolley has Laura turn from the calm retreat into 'the emptiness which lies before [her] now' (P, 27) towards love, for the object of which Laura searches 'in all the wild places round the house' (P, 84). The novel's cartography rests on motifs of the tension between independence and sharing space, and concludes with the gentle resolution to the lovers' power struggle that now, despite physical separation: 'Neither of us need to wander in strange places which have no meaning for us. We need not rest under strangers' trees or stare into hostile gardens' (P, 259). Similarly, the writer in 'The Libation' says of her own novel, which has a plot much like that of Palomino, that the relationship is itself like a safe place for the two lovers. Again, the figure of the goddess hovers over the haven: 'the goddess in the lily pool suggests that love and safety are to be found, for a time, in the seclusion of the vegetarian guest house' (WL, 111). Or as one of the lovers in her novel puts it: 'Once there was a German poet... He said something like this: "If I can make a fruitful land between rock and stream" or, "if I can find an orchard between rock and stream" the idea appeals to me immensely' (WL, 115).

Claudine Hermann talks of women's need for empty space such as this as a protective buffer from the colonising urge of men: 'in order to avoid total annihilation, to escape man's habitual urge to colonise, she must conserve some space for herself, a sort of *no man's land*'[178]. Many of Jolley's novels and stories depict communities of women: girls in boarding schools, nurses cramped together in nurse's quarters, lesbian couples living on farms. They are often similar to the communities Nina Auerbach describes:

> Female communities are united by their necessary oddity as well as by their corporate strength. Together they form a tradition within the British and American novel that gains in power and magnitude as we move from the nineteenth

[178]Hermann, New French Feminisms 169.

> century to our own and from communities that are represented as strangely powerful pockets of history to potent representations of history itself, as they abandon the family to invade that larger reality which is both war and the target of warriors.[179]

Once again, however, Jolley is not so idealistic in her approach, and although she describes idyllic closeness between women, she also writes about some of the less than desirable aspects of this closeness, such as the 'inevitable intimacy of bowels and false teeth' as one couple get older (WL, 105) and the revulsion the young heavily pregnant woman feels from her lover's touch in Palomino: 'I didn't want her near me. "It's too hot for that," I said crossly. "I'm too big! and I hate being pregnant, so big! It's awful, Laura! How can you think it's anything special! I hate it, I hate the baby. I hate this hot wind! I hate everything!' (P, 226).

Often, however, Jolley's female communities are havens. Laura and Andrea in Palomino find in their idyllic rural acreage a retreat from the pressures they face. As they enter this space loneliness, incest, legal suits, deregistration and self-loathing disappear. As they drive to the farm together for the first time, Laura celebrates by singing Schiller's 'Ode to Joy': 'Daughter of Ellysium. We approach with hearts aflame' (P, 71). Similarly, Hester and Katherine in The Well leave behind a world that has hurt them: Hester has always been lonely, and pitied for her ugliness and her lameness, and Katherine has been orphaned and cruelly treated at the orphanage. More importantly, they leave behind society, and the world of heterosexuality which Hester fears, since the one true friend in her whole life, Hilde Herzfeld, disappeared from Hester's life after a miscarriage. After seeing Hilde 'the blood-stained woman who was her dearest friend' (W, 122), Hester decides that friendship between women

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[179]Nina Auerbach, Communities of Women: An Idea in Fiction (Cambridge, Harvard UP, 1978) 32.

can be destroyed by the intrusion of men: 'Girls of fourteen do have lifelong friends, Hester almost bit her pillow... and those who have their friends do not want any intruders' (W, 123). So Hester and Katherine go to Hester's farmhouse which becomes, at least for a while, a world of fantasy and play, an Edenic hidden corner of the world.

Other communities are born of circumstances rather than Utopian visions. In the trilogy Jolley depicts crowded rooms shared in nurses' quarters, in which women borrow one another's clothes and possessions and read one another's mail. Yet despite the physical intimacy, the nurses feel isolated from one another. When Vera leaves the hospital after discovering her pregnancy, she can't say goodbye to Nurse Ramsden, or tell her friends the truth, because of the rule that 'well-bred people... don't burden each other with their dreams and mistakes' (MF, 45). The Boarding House at Pine Heights girls' boarding school in Miss Peabody's Inheritance is orderly by day, but disturbed by illicit music and dancing after lights out. The theory, according to headmistress Miss Thorne, is that 'here at Pine Heights we all sleep in our own beds' (MP, 40). The practise is different, as the intimacy encourages relationships between the girls, between staff members and between staff and students. In women's rooms in nursing homes a similar lack of privacy leads to various relationships, such as those between nursing staff and patients in Mr Scobie's Riddle.

Within Jolley's marginal communities, landscape – natural and architectural – plays a vital role in exploring the ambivalent desires of these women to escape hierarchies which belittle them, and the tendency, as in Lord of the Flies, for human power struggles to result in the establishment of replacement hierarchies. A headmistress like Miss Thorne, however well-intentioned, begins to select lovers from amongst her students and staff routinely and openly; certain nurses ridicule and oppress others; and Hester begins to wish and plan for complete control

over Katherine in The Well. Once again, Jolley's approach is a paradoxical and independent one: she depicts radical communities of women, but unpolemically – she also shows that they may be prey to the same sorts of human vices – greed, jealousy and depersonalising lust – which have caused women to seek refuge in the first place.

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Whether they live in secluded farmhouses or in nurse's quarters, throughout Jolley's *oeuvre* part of the exuberance of her lesbians is their sensuality and their enjoyment of whatever their environment has to offer. This is the same principal as the spinsters 'making what one can out of what one has' but applied with an exuberance and delight strikingly different from the spinsters' sly grabs for power where they can get it within hierarchical institutions. Jolley's lesbians relish their food and delight in art and nature: they enjoy themselves with abandon, indulging in every pleasure from long languorous afternoons of love-making to delectable wines and nights spent listening to Beethoven. In Miss Peabody's Inheritance, where spinster Miss Edgely eats nervously and without pleasure, her lover Dr Thorne relishes huge helpings of food, takes a studious approach to tasting fine wines, indulges in a sherry every night and drinks Scotch in bed while she reads Rasselas (MP, 36). She enjoys fantasising about food, remembering 'the Aubergine Mozart' which she praises for having 'not too many false notes' (MP, 150). After a lunch of 'crayfish and a pleasant lettuce salad' she enjoys a little black cigar (MP, 153). Daphne in The Sugar Mother regularly suggests drinking champagne as a solution to various dilemmas. She jumps up early in the morning to play tennis and go for long energetic walks with her huge dog,

Prince, and plays her 'Hiawatha' record in her friend's bathroom for the added pleasure the excellent acoustics afford.

Where spinsters such as Vera in the trilogy find huge buildings fearsome, other characters, such as Dr Arabella Thorne in Miss Peabody's Inheritance, provide a counterpoint, appearing to relish the cavernousness of these landscapes and their tendency to magnify sound. Never timid, Arabella Thorne seems to enjoy the echoing of her voice – reciting Shakespeare at night in the school and delivering sermons on Wagner's tastes in a formal hotel dining room in London. Often the content of her speeches has pointed emotional significance for her life or those of other characters. In the case of Wagner, she admires his ability to defeat seemingly indomitable limitations by sheer 'forcefulness,' something she emulates: 'He was slightly under middle height,' she says, 'but because of his forcefulness, he seemed taller' (MP, 102). The volume of her voice, and the proud precision of her grammar give her great pleasure as she recites these informative speeches. In Foxybaby Miss Peycroft instructs her employee Miss Porch on similar pleasures of taking up space in the huge school: 'Play with it... play with the whole place. You are absolutely free! You have *carte blanche* to go where you like. Arrange things as you wish them to be. Simply roam whither thou willest, or words to that effect' (F, 29).

When they project their uninhibited voices into the space around them, singing and orating, these women, like Jolley's playful spinsters, misquote. In their case, however, there is none of the clumsiness the spinsters effect – none of the 'all too familiar "Naughty me!"' one lesbian is fed up with in her scrawny lover (WL, 245). No apologies, and no decoy, these women misquote either recklessly, indifferent to the irreverence of altering the words of Shakespeare or the bible, or deliberately, changing texts to suit themselves. Arabella Thorne changes 'Immensitie cloystered

in thy deare womb' to 'suit present day needs': '"Immensitie cloystered in their hearts"... many of these girls have no intention of devoting themselves to motherhood' (MP, 80). When one of her students gets her period, she thinks: 'who would have thought, there could be so much blood... Shakespeare' (MP, 94). But then, this sort of recklessness and irreverence is nothing compared with her decision to invent a saint: 'Saint Pine, Miss Thorne smiles to herself. That will do very well. Pine Heights will have a saint' (MP, 51).

Foxybaby 's Miss Peycroft is similarly feisty and fearless, orating and gesturing incessantly, while Patch, another version of the type, and headmistress of the boarding school in My Father's Moon walks about the school 'singing and eating the ends off a crusty loaf'. Her voice described as loud and contralto (MF, 16–7). Another teacher, Daphne in The Sugar Mother is described as having a 'hunting horn voice' (SM, 5). She 'bellow[s] pleasantly' (SM, 31) and her attempts a whisper fail (SM, 32). The senior nursing staff in Jolley's hospitals often sing and laugh during operations, while their timid juniors are characterised as creeping, silent and unconfident. In My Father's Moon seniors Diamond and Snorter enjoy a riotous bathroom love-making evening, dancing, singing and soaping one another without any sense of inhibition, and when Vera attempts to augment her own power by intimating that she has seen and heard them they merely correct her grammar in their 'well-bred voices' (MF, 52-9), thus re-affirming their lack of any interest in catering to conservative or repressive mores, whilst insisting on other equally conservative values such as using the language properly. Vera, naively attempting to dent their exuberance by drawing attention to the fact that their affair is something taboo within the rigid hospital setting, finds that in this space of celebration and play, this type of attitude has – literally – no voice, inverting the norm.

Castles, mansions, forests and echoing halls are the realm of the traditional literary heroine, the landscape of fairytale and thus the birthplace and means of cultural inculcation of feminine stereotype. Fainting with fear of these colossal landscapes, weakness and cowering in the face of lurking evil predators who may not prove real, however, the stock behaviour of such heroines from Jane Eyre to Sleeping Beauty, is behaviour quite incongruous to that of Jolley's exuberant lesbians. Again Jolley questions assumptions; here the conventional concomitance of powerful landscapes with daunted women, and the indomitability of their fear. Jolley's women do not behave conventionally beyond occasionally employing such a reaction briefly, often as a wile, and in this way their innovativeness and individuality is highlighted by the resultant contrast between the way they behave (variously, adaptively) and the way they would conventionally be expected to behave (predictably, unimaginatively). When, occasionally, daunted characters momentarily slip back into these traditional patterns – such as when Hester Harper hopes for strong, young Mr Borden to arrive on his tractor like a knight in shining armour and take over handling her crisis – these moments are so disappointingly trite that they paradoxically serve to reinforce the usual, untraditional behaviour we are more used to in Jolley's heroines.

As well as reciting poetry and making speeches, Jolley's exuberant women enjoy music. Although they prefer to see themselves as heroines of Wagnerian operas or Beethoven's Fidelio ('I had not known Ludwig many months before he decided to make me the heroine of his opera' one character, Leonora in 'Winter Nelis', fantasises (WL, 243)), they also enjoy other musical styles. Again, their musical tastes highlight their odd combination of conservative values and radical departures from conservatism. Arabella Thorne loves Mozart, and looks forward to visiting Munich during the Wagner Festival. Her ideal seduction

involves good whisky, a measure of Wagner and a dose of misquoted or misapplied Shakespeare: 'All's well now, sweeting; come away to bed' (MP, 55). She invites a younger member of her staff, Ms 'Electra' Fortune, to listen to the *Siegfried Idyll* with her: 'Miss Thorne, who is lying on her big double bed with her heavy tumbler of whisky, pats the eiderdown, "lie down and listen," she says, "music is best heard lying down," she invites, "you like Wagner?"' (MP, 53). It is a little surprising, then, that she finds herself captivated when her student Debbie Frome sings to her 'Heaven must have sent you/You held my hand' (MP, 54), and 'you turn me on I'll have to come' (MP, 39), whilst dancing seductively towards her teacher. Throughout Mr Scobie's Riddle the young lesbian nursing staff combine seductive dancing with recitation of lines from pop songs: 'Flip me Tip me/ Turn me on' (MS, 100–1) and Miss Hailey and Matron Price sing 'Je sweez une petite prairie fleur' (MS, 156). This is also the song Miss Peabody sings 'in the lasting pleasure of the new letter' in which Diana has made her realise that single women and ageing women, desexualised in conventional discourse, may in fact enjoy their sexuality. 'Nobody cares to cultivate me–mee–mee–mee/So–o I'm as wild as wild can bee–bee–be' (MP, 20), sings Dorothy in exhilarated response to Diana's defiance of the conventional view that her sexuality can not exist without someone to 'cultivate' it for her. Pop music usually accompanies light-hearted playful lesbian love-making. In more passionate and emotional scenes Jolley tends to use classical music to highlight their intensity:

> She talks about Beethoven, she says the first phrases of the Ninth Symphony are like the very beginnings of love in two people, shy and quiet and hesitating, like the unfolding of the sky and sun and the fields and woods and mountains in the very beginning of the world.
>
> (P, 99)

In this case the motif of song reinforces the sense of celebration and sacrament which is associated with many of these scenes by means of religious imagery, epitomised by the extraordinary subversion of Laura's offering herself to Andrea: 'This is my body of the New Testament which is given for you' (P, 219). In a similarly passionate vein, Laura dreams of singing to Eva 'Vieni, vieni con me O Caro' from Orfe and Eurydice (P, 139), but when she is alone and grieving, she cannot be moved by music: 'All around me people sighed with the tenderness and longing and love Mozart has in his music, and I sat like a block' (P, 12). In the trilogy Vera's love for Nurse Ramsden, and the relationship between the two women, is expressed through the currency of music. Ramsden lends Vera records when the two women cannot think of anything to say to one another, and Vera, longing to talk to Ramsden, fantasises about a conversation about Mozart:

> I would like to talk to Ramsden now about the way in which the musicians, in a quartet, play towards each other, leaning forward as if to emphasise something in the music and then, pausing, they lean back allowing the phrases of music to follow one another, to meet and join, to climb and cascade. I would like her to agree with me and to say that she knows about the serious expressions the musicians have while they play and that she has noticed too the way they have of drooping their wrists and showing the vulnerable white backs of their hands.
>
> (ME, 98)

The physicality of this emphasises the link between music and sensuality, the music entwining as gently and gracefully as the embraces Vera imagines, and as strongly as the emotional and spiritual harmony she has with Ramsden.

Often, images of natural landscape, especially water, combine through metaphor with images of music and sexuality, a linking which suggests the inextricable entwining of the cerebral with the emotional and

the sexual. Music and landscape stress the absence of the aggression, inequality and violence traditionally underlying sexuality in romantic literature, subtly but emphatically reinforcing the gentleness and harmony of the circumstances of the relationship and the episode.

In this, water is significant as the realm of freedom, a place for play and song, for sensuality and sexuality. Cixous uses water as a metaphor for the 'polymorphousness' and 'heterogeneity' women can experience in freedom and this expresses in figurative terms what Jolley's choice of water as the physical medium for her lesbians' encounters expresses more literally.[180] The mobility of water and its ability to modulate in mood from soothing gentleness to fierce power suggests too the fluidity of the relationships described; their variability and vitality. Watching Diamond and Snorter during their 'minuet de la salle de bain' Vera describes their actions as 'graceful, strange and remote'; 'now serious, now amusing' and 'rhythmic and ridiculous' (ME, 58). In the hotel bathroom, Miss Thorne and Miss Snowdon adopt school-girl language so that feminine desire is highlighted and the idea of transgression is mocked playfully: 'Oh Super! Prickles! A water fight! Oh rather! Come on! Race you... oh wicked!... You exquisite naughty. Oh indecently exquisite' (MP, 11). Joyful childish play co-exists with desire and the subversion of codes of moral behaviour which denounce such sexual encounters as transgressive. Similarly, in My Father's Moon Vera listens, puzzled, to the 'singing... laughing and shrieking above the rushing water' from the bathroom, unable to reconcile this playing with the colleagues of her strict working day (ME, 58). And Dorothy's sensual bathing, splashing and singing is behaviour shocking enough to prompt her ailing mother to ask whether she is ill (MP, 20).

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[180]Helene Cixous, 'Le Rire de la Meduse,' New French Feminisms 260.

The use of these motifs also serves to reinforce the idea that private and personal relationships are related to the social and political conditions of a person's life. For example, Palomino deals with Laura's lesbianism in the context of her rejection by the medical world, a bastion of male power which she has tried to 'invade', and for which invasion she has been punished with ostracisation. Throughout Jolley's work the personal and political are woven together, and women's sexual relationships are microcosms of their social lives. Their experiences in the wider world are reflected, addressed and sometimes redressed in their sexual relationships. Jolley's writing reflects the belief that

> women's discontent... is not the neurotic lament of the maladjusted, but a response to a social structure in which women are systematically dominated, exploited and oppressed...*The personal is political* means for radical feminists... that the motive force of history is the striving of men for power and domination over women, the dialectic of sex.[181]

Jolley's lesbians take up their space with exuberance, singing and splashing through convention. They are dramatic, with their affectionate nicknames (Prickles, Snow, Tin Tin, Dib Dib [182]) pageants and uninhibited play. They are playful and magnify their voices and personalities in a spirit of joyous energy and celebration. All of this would appear to be polarised behaviour to the wiliness evident in Jolley's spinsters, whose strategies base themselves on diminution and evasion. Yet, again, there are essential paradoxes at work for Jolley's lesbians too. The very terms 'playful spinsters' and 'exuberant lesbians' derive their impact from their tinge of the oxymoron – at least as far as conventional ideology goes. Where, as discussed above, 'lesbian' has been a term used to chastise women, keep

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[181]Heidi Hartmann 'The Unhappy marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union,' Women and Revolution ed. Lydia Sargent (London: Pluto, 1981) 13.
[182] Dr Arabella Thorne and Matron Snowdon in Miss Peabody's Inheritance and Matron Price in Mr Scobie's Riddle , sister of Dub Dub, an employer of Vera's in Cabin Fever.

them in line and deprive them of their femininity, Jolley's lesbians are her most passionate, energetic and fulfilled characters. They are unashamedly *out* of line, and delight in being so. They are a foil to Jolley's playful spinsters, and yet they share with them the desires for freedom and self-expression: their means may be polar opposites, but the ends are the same.

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'It interests me very much that people can and do change their level of expectation' (MP, 148) comments Diana Hopewell to Dorothy Peabody in one of the letters that encourage Dorothy to do just that. Early in their correspondence Diana signals her radical intentions: 'It is a tremendous pleasure to initiate a person whom one believes to be innocent. To be the initiator' (MP, 34). Dorothy Peabody proves to have within her some of the traits of the exuberant lesbian, as, by the end of the novel, she leaves her dull job and rainy London to move to Australia to take over Diana Hopewell's unfinished novel. 'The possibilities' she remarks, are 'enormous' (MP, 157). Not the least of these is that when Dorothy arrives to meet Diana, and finds that she has died, she meets Miss Flourish, the matron of the nursing home where Diana has been, and takes a liking to her. The name Miss Flourish is perhaps Jolley's parting joke: although it sounds rather silly and spinsterish, it's also the Victorian euphemism for making love. The whole interaction between the two women is charged with coded, very polite homosexual suggestion. Miss Flourish tries to console Dorothy, heaping pieces of upside-down cake onto her plate, chomping noisily on an apple and inviting Dorothy to stay in Diana's room, 'Flowermead'. It crosses Dorothy's mind that the two women – Diana and Miss Flourish – may have been friends (MP, 148). Dorothy reads

the last, unfinished letter Dorothy wrote her, with its description of Miss Thorne's predatory growl as she greets four new students: 'I am sure we shall get to know one another very well' (MP, 153), and associates Miss Thorne with Miss Flourish: 'Miss Thorne's coloured dressing gown cord... Miss Flourish looked the sort of person who would possess such a cord' (MP, 157). If going to see Diana's farm is the symbolic destination of this voyage, it is appropriate that Dorothy wants Miss Flourish to come with her. Dorothy's inheritance, then, is far more than the unfinished novel: she has learned to take control of her own narrative, and this includes her 'coming out' as a writer, a lesbian and a woman who looks forward to the next phase of her life.

This suggests that within this most creeping of Jolley's playful spinsters there has always lurked an exuberant lesbian. Certainly Dorothy is heading for a pleasurable life on a farm, writing, and enjoying the company of a lover, and in this sense resembles women like Laura in Palomino, or Hester Harper at the end of The Well. In a similar way, Hester Harper frees herself, at the end of The Well, from the fetters of convention, and sets about telling a very different version of her narrative from the one she has told both readers and those around her, earlier in the novel. As she sits in the front of her neighbour's car, luxuriating in the number of narrative choices available to her, the sadness which has filled her throughout the novel seems to dissolve. She revels in the power she has, and postpones starting her story so as to maximise her power over her audience. Again, this pride and pleasure are signs of the exuberant lesbian, so Hester has progressed from her status as spinster to enjoy more direct powers.

On the other hand, in 'Winter Nelis', a woman who has once been much like Arabella Thorne, travelling around with a lover, relishing classical music and food, finds herself, much later in life, married to a staid

and unsympathetic man, and too depressed to get out of bed, except to pry into her neighbours' life. Arguably her development has been from exuberant lesbian to the stereotype of the (sometimes) playful spinster.

There is a debate, then, within Jolley's characters, as well as between them. Most of her spinsters have repressed or half-expressed lesbian yearnings, and most of her lesbians occasionally resort to the self-effacing wiles of the playful spinster. Sometimes an exuberant lesbian will convert a playful spinster: Dorothy for example learns about lesbianism through Diana Hopewell's energetic text Angels on Horseback, and its depiction of the powerful Dr Arabella Thorne. Earlier in the novel, Dorothy has been reading Great Expectations, because her father liked it. In particular, she reads the scene in which the convict takes Pip, holds him upside down and shakes him:

> The man, after looking at me for a moment, turned me upside down, and emptied my pockets. There was nothing in them but a piece of bread. When the church came to itself – for he was so sudden and strong that he made it go head over heels before me, and I saw the steeple under my feet.
>
> (MP, 23)

This foreshadows the literary shake-up Diana gives Dorothy, who certainly magnifies Dorothy's expectations. As with Pip, it seems terrifying, but proves to have been essentially benevolent. Other exuberant lesbians are less kind about their desire to shake up irritating spinsters. Miss Peycroft in Foxybaby, for instance confides in Miss Porch that she is feeling very annoyed with her secretary/lover, Miss Paisley:

> Sometimes, you know, I have this great wish to hold her dangling by the scruff of her neck over a cauldron of something, nothing too painful, but absolutely deadly. I actually visualize the scene and see her horrible little legs kicking helplessly over the morass. But they don't make cauldrons, these days, do they?
>
> (F, 107)

Yet this horrible fantasy comes after Miss Paisley has triumphed over the apparently overpowering Miss Peycroft. They have been filming a scene from Miss Porch's novel. Miss Paisley has no part in it except to swing a lamp for lighting effects, but manages to steal the scene:

> during the whole film Miss Paisley was in the foreground still swinging the hurricane lamp with its flashing red-and-yellow light. She was still there flashing all through the hospital scene and on to the visit in the prison scene and she was still there when Steadman was supposed to have driven off – this being the end of that scene. The flashing lights belonged only to the disco dancing in the opening scene, which was very brief. Miss Paisley, most of the time, was blocking the action as she had placed herself between the actors and the cameras.
>
> (F, 103)

There may be a tension between this playful spinster and exuberant lesbian, but this time it is clearly the spinster who has triumphed.

Similarly, there are tussles between the two components of these women. Even Dr Arabella Thorne is weakened at times enough to give in to conventional behaviour. She flirts briefly with a young man on an aeroplane at the end of the novel, making herself momentarily simpering and silly; a fawning old woman flattering a young man (MP, 150). She talks about books in her flirtatious mood, and the young man lends her a literary journal which is filled with theoretical material Miss Thorne cannot understand. It makes her lose confidence – and 'doubt her own position' (MP, 151). She immediately reverts to her usual behaviour, however, when she returns to Pine Heights school, dominating her students, and making sinister flirtatious overtures to them: 'I am sure we shall get to know one another very well' she says, in a 'soft growl' (MP, 153).

In the trilogy Vera manages to disconcert some powerful people too. One striking example is when she washes the surgeon's woollen vest in hot water, shrinking it so that it looks like a doll's jumper. We already know how much he values the vest: 'He has only two and is very particular about them' (ME, 52). This is the scorn of the exuberant lesbian leaking from the apparently deferential playful spinster.

Jolley sets up a continuum, then, and part of the slipperiness of her characters, and her style, is that nothing is stable. Lesbians seduce and convert spinsters, spinsters become lesbians, lesbians sometimes marry and become dull versions of the 'spinster'. Lesbians adopt spinsters' mannerisms, and vice versa. All of this frenetic putting on and taking off of masks and costumes creates a vaudevillian playfulness in the text, and an unsettling refusal of closure. Perhaps, ultimately, the stable factor is the mobility of these women, and their adaptability. Jolley celebrates the power of the eccentric and the idiosyncratic and dynamic originality. Her writing raises myriad questions, and, as Keryl and Paul Kavanagh put it: 'The imaginative weight of the novels is greater because of the density of their possibilities.'[183] Diana Hopewell muses in one of her letters to Dorothy Peabody that 'Perhaps it is in writing... that the writer remakes himself and his world' (MP, 15). At the heart of Jolley's *oeuvre* is this mobility and energy; this pleasure in remaking the world.

*

[183]Kavanagh, 166

V

At the end of The Waves, Bernard imagines the resurgence of hope and energy rising within him as a fantastic wave. As it swells, it undergoes a dramatic metamorphosis. Its gentle, scarcely perceptible rocking motion grows, and its watery incorporeal energies are gathered into the muscular form of a horse which can barely be restrained:

> in me the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back
>
> (W, 248)

Before the emergence of this powerful beast within him, Bernard has felt paralysed by despair; despondent and apathetic at the thought of having to fight on against the sceptres which oppress him, and against stasis. '[H]ow can I go on lifting my foot perpetually to climb the stair?' he wonders, with all the exhaustion of the persona in T.S. Eliot's 'Portrait of a Lady' who watches himself go on, with less and less energy:

> I mount the stairs and turn the handle of the door
> And feel as if I had mounted on my hands and knees.

Bernard, like Eliot's persona, feels that part of him has broken off and failed to fight on with words and defiant fists: 'He threw up no opposition. He attempted no phrase. His fist did not form... Nothing came, nothing, I cried then with a sudden conviction of complete desertion, Now there is nothing' (W, 237). Yet it is in the depths of this nothingness – earlier

described as 'that immersion – how sweet, how deep!' (W, 232) – that he meets the equine spirit of inspiration which carries him into ecstasy. Nothing becomes a state of complete peace: 'I need no words. Nothing neat. Nothing that comes down with all its feet on the floor' (W, 246). From its silence and stillness rises hope, and poetry; first a gentle lolling current of energy, then a full-bodied cantering equine energy. With it, he flies forward, and flings himself into the future 'unvanquished and unyielding' (W, 248).

Sylvia Plath's copies of Woolf's novels are extensively underlined and annotated. She once said that she felt Woolf's writing made hers possible. Her poem 'Ariel' is built on Bernard's words, and shares his hopeful vision. The poem starts from 'stasis in darkness', then the persona immerses herself in an imagined fused sea and sky of nothingness: 'the substanceless blue/Pour of tor and distances'. Like Bernard, she then feels the ecstatic wave of imaginative energy arising within her, like a powerful and spirited horse. As she rides, she notices, just as Bernard does, an ineffable second side to this spirit of energy lifting her towards flight. Where Bernard senses 'something rising beneath' him, she feels that 'Something else/Hauls me through air'. Bernard's 'new desire' eroticises the imaginative energy which gives him flight. Similarly, sexual desire and inspiration merge, as Plath's persona tastes 'Black sweet blood mouthfuls' of poetic inspiration through which she 'Foam[s] to wheat, a glitter of seas.' Where Bernard flings himself into the unknown, braving Death, Plath's persona announces:

> And I
> Am the arrow,
>
> The dew that flies
> Suicidal, at one with the drive
> Into the red
>
> Eye, the cauldron of morning.

The 'suicidal' note of this seems paradoxical in the midst of this furious energy. Yet Bernard, too, perceives himself as flying against Death, as an antagonist. The most daring inspiration flies in the face of death, and brushes against it, for it is defying mortality, and refusing to be led silently out of life. It is the most hopeful, most life affirming energy of all which looks death in the face like this.

In Jolley's My Father's Moon, the freeing of intellectual energies is again imagined as a fantastic horse in flight. For the narrator, Vera, the image is suggested through her idyllic vision of an orchestra seized with the delight of the Brandenburg Concerto, racing off in all directions in their playing: 'Everyone playing at their own pace, some ahead of others' (MF, 120). As for Bernard and the speaker of 'Ariel', Vera's vision involves a flight from stasis. She remembers the horror of uncreative order:

> Miss Robson, at school, had a little rod, a baton.
> She tapped it to start and to stop the orchestra.
> She used it to make us lift our wrists at the piano.

And she delights in an oppositional, anarchic energy:

> The pianist on the concert platform can let his wrists drop.
> His galloping fingers can be flat, splayed out, or arched. He can choose.
>
> (MF, 121)

Equine imagery and inspiration are connected with the erotic in Jolley's writing too. The same sort of 'dullness and doom' Bernard encounters in The Waves characterises the life of Miss Peabody until she discovers the inspiring writing of Diana Hopewell. This well of hope that Diana

introduces is imagined by Dorothy as a place of freedom, a fused sea and sky, or as Diana herself puts it 'a harbour in the sky' (MP, 8). Dorothy is enraptured by the image of Diana on horseback, striving towards her sky harbour. She imagines that 'looking at the sky was probably easier on horseback' (MP, 9). Diana's words seem to Dorothy to 'plunge' across the world to greet her and to fly over the page. Diana knows that she is inspiring 'unknown erotic adventures to race and surge' (MP, 19) within Dorothy. Dorothy's erotic vision involves Diana charging towards her on a horse, 'galloping, with passion and grace' (MP, 7). And when Miss Peabody flies across the world from London to Australia to embark on her new life as a writer, she shows a courage as death-defying as Bernard's or Plath's speaker's.

The means to achieving this visionary ideal are mundane. The ecstasy of release contrasts with the often menial or unobtrusive ways by which it is reached. This thesis has charted the acquisition of powers which spring from paradoxical means. The means may appear insignificant, yet the vision they lead to is a magnificent one which lingers with the reader.

In the work of Woolf, Plath and Jolley, characters emerge from stasis to fly on horses of air towards the unknown future and poetry. They charge courageously 'unvanquished, unyielding' into a fantastic and dangerous world, riding on the wings of waves of inspiration. They soar away from paralysis, and unpeel 'dead hands, dead stringencies'. Desire spurs them on, and they plunge through whimsical elements to the 'red Eye/The cauldron of mourning' that is the essentially honest self, and the sun – the source of all power.

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