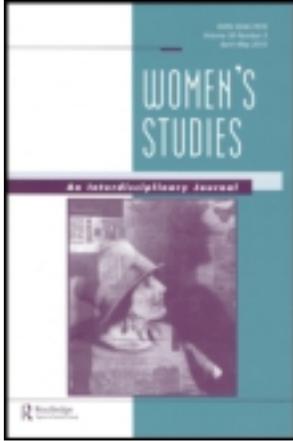


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Sylvia Plath's Emersonian I/Eye

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SYLVIA PLATH'S EMERSONIAN I/EYE

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"In proportion to the energy of his thought and will, [man] takes up the world into himself"

—Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Nature"

If Sylvia Plath remains an uneasy haunting in our literary imagination, the canon's restless, hard to pin-down ghost, she is the ghost that continues to redefine the categories within which she has been canonized.¹ Of the movements Plath's work has come to be associated with, that of confessional poetry focuses questions regarding her uses of biographical material. In exploring the categorization of Plath as a "confessional poet" (part of the movement that includes Lowell, Sexton, Berryman) I would like to suggest that her use of biographical experience and the multiplicity of her speaking "I"s be read as a modern appropriation of Ralph Waldo Emerson's cultural legacy. To develop this argument, I have made use of Plath's annotations in her copy of Emerson's essays, now part of the Sylvia Plath Collection in the Mortimer Rare Book room collection at Smith College.²

Plath's poetry increasingly engages in Emerson's admonition, "Build therefore your own world. As far as you can conform your life to the pure idea in your mind that will unfold its great

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¹Jacqueline Rose introduced the idea of Plath's "haunting" critical studies of her work, and thus engendering further investigations of it, see Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*.

²Plath's annotations were generously transcribed by Karen V. Kukil (Associate Curator of Special Collections at Smith College) onto a 1953 (4th) edition of Emerson's essays which very nearly matched the 1947 (1st) edition of the same book owned by Plath and donated to the Mortimer Rare Book room at Smith College by Aurelia Plath in 1983. See Emerson, *The Basic Writings of America's Sage*, ed. Eduard C. Lindeman.

proportions" (*Essays* 48), foregrounding a tension between the self and the world. A tension I would locate between an inherited American romanticism and the gendered, social challenges of the modern moment Plath was living in. Pamela J. Annas makes the point that "entrapment" in Plath's work has to do with "what stands in the way of the possibility of rebirth for the self" (131), a frustration and ultimately a menace she articulates early on.

In a 1950 journal entry from Plath's first year at Smith, she writes of what was to become a defining struggle in her effort to transcend imposed roles that thwart desire. "Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it's impossible for me to be God—or the universal woman-and-man—or anything much" (45). The paradoxical dead-endedness in the privileged opportunities Plath earns, as a full scholarship student at Smith, as a summer guest editor at *Mademoiselle*, and as a Fulbright fellow at Cambridge, is regularly discussed in the context of what she might have to give up for her achievements: "when asked what role I will plan to fill, I say 'What do you mean role?' . . . Never will there be a circle, signifying me and my operations, confined solely to home" (105). Betty Friedan's work has shown the 1950s and early 1960s to have been a period of impoverished intellectual choices for American women while nevertheless providing certain material comforts.³ Deborah Nelson has undermined accusations of narcissism and self-indulgence in definitions of the confessional by pointing out Plath's interweavings of the personal with the political that resist any dichotomy between the categories.⁴

What critics like Friedan, Annas, and Nelson share in their readings of Plath is an understanding that Plath's investigation of identity through her use of biographical material is a strategy by which she assesses her frustrations with the trappings of convention and gender: "What is my life for and what am I going to do with it?" she asks in an early journal entry from her Smith college years: "I want to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in my life"

³Betty Friedan describes the historical period as "a comfortable concentration camp" for women, see chapter 12, Friedan 271–298.

⁴See Nelson 22–23; as well as Van Dyne who makes a similar point when she says, "biography underestimates Plath's habits of conscious reinvention . . . we need to understand that she experienced her life in unusually textual ways." See Van Dyne 5.

(43). Then in another entry, “Some pale, hueless flicker of sensitivity is in me, God, must I lose it in cooling scrambled eggs for a man . . . hearing about life at second hand” (88). The particular relentlessness with which Plath makes demands on herself, the repeated journal entries that urge ever further achievements—“you haven’t done well enough—You wonder if you’ve got what it takes to keep building up obstacle courses for yourself, and to keep leaping through them, sprained ankle or not” (*Journals* 64), are examples of the ambition with which she tackled the challenges she demanded of herself. But they are equally suggestive of the potentials of selfhood articulated in the nation-building literature of American romanticism, and what I would like to discuss as Emerson’s influence on Plath’s developing identity. In her copy of Emerson’s essays, on the page of the second chapter titled “Culture,” in pencil is the handwritten “February 2, 1948” (she was 16); the entire final paragraph is underlined except for the last sentence, “He will convert the Furies into Muses, and the hells into benefit” (1953 ed. 27).

The effect of the almost entirely underlined paragraph with a pencil line down the right margin brings attention to the omitted underlining (deliberate?) of the last sentence. In the middle of the paragraph, “The formidable mischief will only make the more useful slave,” also not underlined, likewise emphasizes what is. The paragraph reads:

Man’s culture can spare nothing, wants all the material. He is to convert all the impediments into instruments, all enemies into power. The formidable mischief will

only make the more useful slave. And if one shall read the future of the race hinted in the organic effort of nature to mount and meliorate, and the corresponding impulse to the Better in the human being, we shall dare affirm that there is nothing he will not

overcome and convert, until at last culture shall absorb the chaos and gehenna. He will convert the Furies into Muses, and the hells into benefit.

From *Conduct of Life*, Volume VI
(1953 ed. 27)

It is an uncanny coincidence, if it is a coincidence, that in “Conversation Among the Ruins” (1956), the first poem in the posthumously published *Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes, the male presence in the poem “stalk[s]” into the female speaker’s

“elegant house” with his “wild furies,” which unlike the passage in Emerson that promises a conversion of “the Furies into Muses” and “benefit,” here express intrusion, “disturbing” and “rending” “the net/ Of all decorum.” Even if this is a case of coincidence, the Furies in Emerson evoking mythology, and here untamed and threatening, beg the possibility that Plath’s underlining of Emerson’s “there is nothing [the human being] will not overcome and convert” was significant enough to appropriate and test. Would or can language in fact “patch the havoc?” (*Collected* 21) she asks in the poem, or in Emerson’s words “overcome and convert” the kinds of furies she encounters.

Plath’s speaker, situated among the ruins of a mytho-historical past of witches and castles and ruined porticos, addresses a male presence whose gaze frames the speaking woman “in Grecian tunic and psyche-knot.” She is “rooted to the black look” (*Collected* 21, emphasis added) of the “stormy eye” of the sonnet’s first stanza. This psychic-knot of the self enveloped in the “bleak light” of the man’s gaze describes the scene as a “blight wrought on our bankrupt estate,” and asks in the closing line, “What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?” The havoc is held together by the sonnet structure that serves in “Conversation” to contain and frame the “I” (mentioned once, sitting—rooted), and demonstrates the dominance of the “you” to whom the “stormy eye” belongs. I will later discuss the importance of gender in regard to the framing (male) eye/I when comparing Whitman’s celebratory, nineteenth-century “I” to Plath’s modernist “I,” but want here to stress that the eye is the organ by which Emerson’s romantic “I” takes in, and integrates the surrounding “Not Me”⁵ of nature.

It is hard to know how consciously Plath appropriated particular Emersonian ideas. But it is possible to map recurring moments in which the development of her poetic voice incorporates American cultural assumptions that wed individual perception to the larger “Not Me.” Fundamental to Emerson’s Transcendentalism is the ability of the perceiving “I” to assimilate

⁵Emerson writes: “Philosophically considered, the universe is composed of Nature and the Soul. Strictly speaking, therefore, all that is separate from us, all which Philosophy distinguishes as the NOT ME, that is, both nature and art, all other men and my own body, must be ranked under this name, NATURE.” See Emerson, *Essays & Lectures*, ed. Joel Porte 8.

what lies outside of itself in an act of inspired identification. Again from her early Smith years, Plath describes a March night in explicit Emersonian terms: "I felt what the 19th century romantics must have felt: The extension of the soul into the realm of nature. I felt that my feet were growing into the hill, and that I was a jutting outgrowth of the elements . . ." (*Journals* 51). Crucially, Emerson's belief in what redeems and unifies man's disparate parts, encounters non-transcendent material obstacles in Plath's poetry; the eye/I's in the poems articulate a simultaneous desire and failure in their attempts at reification, attempts she will explore with ever greater intensity in the unfixed rhymes of her later poems.

Tim Kendall notes that the "organ through which the transactions between landscapes and mindscapes takes place in Plath's poems is the eye" (36). And the plethora of eyes in Plath's work is striking, suggestive of her efforts at bridging discrepancies between the perceiving self and the perception itself. In "The Over-Soul" Emerson makes the point that: "The act of seeing and the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject and the object, are one" (*Essays* 386). According to Emerson's unifying principle of nature, all that lies outside the self's perception, the "Not Me," is there for the poet in particular to illuminate and integrate. "There is a property in the horizon which no man has but he whose eye can integrate all the parts, that is, the poet" (*Essays* 9). In "Conversation," the sonnet form enacts this integration: the ruinous landscape of the "you" in the octave perceives the perceived self in the sestet whom he "roots" in his "black look" as she sits. With his "wild furies, disturbing garlands of fruit/" the male "you" sets up a juxtaposition Jacqueline Rose and Pamela J. Annas have read as a tension between Dionysus and Apollo.⁶ As "magic takes flight/Like a daunted witch, quitting castle when real days break./" the poem describes a ruin of classical assumptions of beauty, the "decorum" and "rich order" no longer viable "when real days break." The speaker in the sestet, from her sitting

⁶In her discussion of the *Ariel* poems, Annas notes that the female speakers find themselves "caught between nature and society, biology and intellect, Dionysus and Apollo," see Annas 138–139. Jacqueline Rose focuses the juxtaposition more specifically in "Conversation Among the Ruins" in her reference to "Dionysus versus Apollo, wild furies versus Grecian tunic and psyche-knot." See Rose 90.

position, takes in: "Fractured pillars" and "the play turned tragic:/" (*Collected* 21).

With this context in mind it is informative to consider the young Plath's annotation in the margin of Emerson's "Culture" where she writes in pencil (with an asterisk) "effect of great arts and fine scenery seeing life *whole*" (emphasis added), next to this Emerson passage:

The influence of fine scenery, the presence of mountains, appeases our irritations and elevates our friendships. Even a high dome, and the expensive interior of a cathedral have a sensible effect on manners. I have heard that stiff people lose something of their awkwardness under high ceilings and in spacious halls. I think sculpture and painting have an effect to teach us manner and abolish hurry.

. . . There is a certain loftiness of thought and power to marshal and adjust particulars, which can only come from an insight of their whole connection. (1953 ed. 24)

If the "wild furies" of the "stormy eye" are held together by the poem's form alone, the "I" held together, or beheld, by the "you" of its gaze, will go on in subsequent poems to explore "the havoc" as it de-constructs gendered/political and aesthetic frames of so many of those "you"s. In "The Colossus" for example, the title poem of Plath's first collection, the colossus, a god in ruins—to recall Emerson's "man is a god in ruins" (*Essays* 45)—is something the speaker cannot re-construct: "I shall never get you put together entirely,/Pieced, glued, and properly jointed./" In contrast to the seated woman in "Conversation," the speaker is active, gazing over "such a ruin" which she attempts, but fails, to restore to its original wholeness:

Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser.

Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of Lysol
I crawl like an ant in mourning
Over the weedy acres of your brow
To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.

(*Collected* 129)

While no longer “rooted in the black look” (*Collected* 21) of the male figure, the female speaker is nevertheless overwhelmed by his presence.⁷ Despite the fact that the statue is in ruins, it dominates the landscape:

Nights, I squat in the cornucopia
 Of your left ear, out of the wind,

 Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.
 The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
 My hours are married to shadow.

(*Collected* 130)

Many of Plath’s early poems—“Tale of a Tub,” “Street Song,” “Epitaph for Fire and Flower,” and “November Graveyard”—poems written through to the end of 1956, gauge the tentative relationship of a vulnerable self that ventures into increasingly menacing surroundings. In “Street Song” we’re told: “By a mad miracle I go intact/Among the common rout/Thronging sidewalk” (*Collected* 35). In “Tale of a Tub” “The photographic chamber of the eye/records the painted walls, while an electric light/flays the chromium nerves of plumbing raw” (*Collected* 24). Much of what lies outside a perceiving “I” is measured against recurring challenges to that effort to “create our whole world over/.” Like “Conversation,” “Tale” foregrounds modernist tensions between a mythic past and a bereft present:

each day demands we create our whole world over
 disguising the constant horror in a coat
 of many-colored fictions; we mask our past
 in the green of eden, pretend future’s shining fruit
 can sprout from the navel of this present waste.

(*Collected* 25)

Coated in “many-colored fictions,” the past is “mask[ed]” and “the green of eden” is a pretense.

⁷In her discussion of “The Colossus” and the poems in *Crossing the Water*, Jo Gill notes Plath’s preoccupation with “sight and sightlessness, about seeming to see but failing (we are reminded of the ‘bald, white’ and therefore unseeing eyes in ‘The Colossus’) or of not being seen and therefore barely seeming to exist.” See Gill 95.

In Plath's annotation of Emerson's "Experience," she has written "Read" and penciled "Good" in the margin next to this underlined passage:

Dream delivers us to dream, and there is no end to illusion. Life is a train of moods like a string of beads, and as we pass through them they prove to be many-colored lenses which paint the world their own hue, and each shows only what lies in its focus. (1953 ed. 43)

Then in her journal from the July 1950–July 1953 entries (the early Smith years), she conducts a lengthy dialogue with herself defining reality as a series of self-conscious constructions:

Looking at the world through the distorted colored lens of the individual, one might see only a few objects clearly. . . . Even the neutral things seen would be colored by personal attitudes toward them . . . reality is relative, depending on what lens you look through. . . . We all live in our own dream-worlds and make and re-make our own personal realities with tender and loving care . . . individuals construct absolutely real dream Kingdoms—paradoxically all 'true' although mutually exclusive at the same time. . . . We live and move together in the realm of concrete experience, harmoniously, motivated and propelled by our own dream-realities. And even that idea of mine is no doubt itself an artificial dream-reality. (*Journals* 121)

The passage in Plath's journal discusses the selectivity of perception and the dilemma acted out in many of the early poems where the perceiving eye attempts to transform an unregenerate state that resists the projections of a subjective I/eye. In "November Graveyard" "the skinflint trees" "won't mourn" (*Collected* 56). The speaker might "stare, stare/Till your eyes foist a vision dazzling on the wind:/" but that vision amounts to the "howling" of ghosts, "on the leash of the starving mind/Which peoples the bare room, the blank, untenanted air./" Though without the heightened energy of the *Ariel* poems, these earlier poems are significant for how they define a perceiving persona caught between ambitions "Born green" as expressed in "Firesong" and the "flawed garden" (*Collected* 30) of the modern world.

The recurrence of green in the poems written in 1956 is noteworthy: "All green dreams not worth much" (*Collected* 33) from "Strumpet Song"; "Silent and shining on a green rock bedded in mud,/Their fabulous heyday endless.// With green rock gliding"

(*Collected* 43) from “Dream with Clam Diggers”; “Dawn snuffs out star’s spent wick,/Even as love’s dear fools cry, evergreen,/” (*Collected* 45) from “Epitaph for Fire and Flower.” And in “Crystal Gazer,” a poem in which a clairvoyant, Gerd, receives a couple who “enter to tap her sight, a green pair/Fresh leaved out in vows:” she foresees “their future lot”—

Shriveling to cinders at their source,
 Each love blazing blind to its gutted end—
 And, fixed in the crystal center, grinning fierce:
 Earth’s ever-green death’s head.

(*Collected* 56)

Among the annotations of Plath’s readings of Emerson she has written “does it” in the margins, next to two underlined statements by Emerson in “Power”: “Power educates the potentate” (1953 ed. 68) and on the next page, “But it brings its own antidote.” The question and underlining suggest the young Plath’s early questioning of a key romantic premise that the power of good, or its intention, eventually absorbs or subsumes what may threaten it. Emerson argues this further, noting that “all kinds of power usually emerge at the same time; good energy and bad. . . . The same elements are always present, only sometimes these conspicuous, and sometimes those. . . . The longer the drought lasts the more is the atmosphere surcharged with water” (1953 ed. 69). This idea of nature’s intrinsic balance is central to Emerson’s general belief in nature as inherently positive, and that the poet in particular is best equipped to express this: “We are made aware that the magnitude of material things is relative, and all objects shrink or expand to serve the passion of the poet” (*Essays* 35)

Plath’s annotations and the sense of repeated (green) possibilities her personas explore despite the invading threats they encounter, suggest a reluctance to give up the promise of what green might signify of romantic and transformative potentials despite the potentates. Yet it is important to emphasize the implications of gender in relation to Emersonian romanticism; the vulnerability in Plath’s personas suggested by the seated woman of “Conversation Among the Ruins” who watches the encroaching havoc brought on by the male presence, is reflective of a modern “I” that does not share Emerson’s confidence. Plath’s “I”s later fragmented and disembodied presences do not relinquish

the Emersonian ambition to assimilate what lies outside of the self, but their failure to do so often foregrounds the gender-specific nature of what obstructs these attempts.

If Plath's speakers are driven to confront progressively harsher environments, the bald, blind, blank eyes of these poems take on by taking in, and progressively blurring, the boundaries between the perceiver and the world perceived, as the terms for transcendence are eerily fixed by the structuring symbolisms of censorious, generally male, I/eyes. In a September 1959 journal entry, Plath notes, "I write as if an eye were upon me. That is fatal." She then expresses her desire to "become a vehicle, a pure vehicle of others, the outer world" (*Journals* 511). In *The Psychic Life of Power* Judith Butler discusses subjects marked by experiences imposed against their will. Her understanding of the formation of subjecthood as a consequence of "a primary subordination" (20) is helpful in reading Plath's personas' vulnerability to presences of threat. Butler notes that a subject formed by experiences of subjugation binds it to "categories, terms, and names that are not of its own making" (20), something Plath was acutely aware of. Alienating female roles are described throughout her work: in "The Beekeeper's Daughter" the speaker's heart is "under your foot" (*Collected* 118), in "The Zoo Keeper's Wife" the courtship is a brief light that "lit the tindery cages" (*Collected* 154), in "Widow" "the moth-face of her husband, . . ./Circles her like a prey" (*Collected* 164); and of course, in the later *Ariel* poems, confrontations with male figures are fierce, and the more sexualized these confrontations become, the deadlier they are: in "The Rabbit-Catcher," "The Applicant," and "The Jailer," the male other described in relation to the woman-as-object/wife is directly predatory.

The insistence with which Plath asks of her I/eyes to integrate the outer landscapes of her experience, "spill vision/After the horizons, stretching the narrowed eye/To full capacity" brings the speaking I, as well as the speaker's eye, into precarious proximity with what threatens to overwhelm both. Despite "the hopes/Of such seeing" with which the speaker in the poem climbs a cliff above Oxbow, references to eyes and sight are jeopardized by what psychically and physically damages them.⁸ But this is also the

⁸Tim Kendall notes "The eyes' destruction is the destruction of the individual." See Kendall 36-37.

moment when Plath's modernity confronts Emersonian romanticism, the relationship, or the energy if you will, of the desire to transform inherited from romanticism, is the very energy, or insistence, that exposes Plath's "I"s to what menaces and fragments them. Julia Kristeva makes a point regarding what she calls the state of abjection, one in which the subject "weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within" (5). I will elaborate on this later, but would like, for now, to draw attention to a growing intimacy between the outer (physical) and inner (psychic) locations of Plath's speakers. In her copy of Emerson, the young Plath has underlined the sentence "T is curious that we only believe as deep as we live" (1953 ed. 103). As Plath's life experiences are enriched (She goes to England in 1955 as a Fulbright scholar, and in 1956 meets and marries Ted Hughes), "the magnitude of material things" Emerson describes as corresponding to the poet's passion, quite literally "shrink or expand" (*Essays* 35) in relation to Plath's psychic and physical proximity to them.

Further down on the page of Emerson's chapter on "Beauty" where Plath made the previous underlining, she has a penciled line next to the paragraph where Emerson notes that the purpose of science is to bring humankind into closer proximity with nature, "till his hands should touch the stars, his eyes see through the earth . . . *and through his sympathy*, heaven and earth should talk with him." (1953 ed. 103, emphasis added). The increased permeability or porousness between self and world in Plath's later poems has often challenged some of her most informed and gifted critics. Seamus Heaney, for example, who notes that "she permitted herself identification with the oracle and gave herself over as a vehicle for possession" (149). He discusses a "dominant theme of self-discovery and self-definition," describing the *Ariel* poems especially as a "valiant campaign against the black hole of depression and suicide" (168). Heaney's observation suggests a misunderstanding of the cultural legacy behind the ambitions of Plath's personas. The suggestion that Plath does not achieve that "certain self-forgetfulness" Heaney notes exists in "the greatest works," misinterprets her focus on mining the self (and not always hers) as a means to outwitting the authoritative gaze of any one I/eye's obstruction to experiencing the world with ever greater intimacy: As she puts it in "Above the Oxbow," to "dislodge our cramped

concept of space, [and] unwall/Horizons beyond vision" (*Collected* 88), tests Emerson's notion that "the health of the eye seems to demand a horizon" (15).

"Black Rook in Rainy Weather," Plath's last poem of 1956 in *The Collected Poems*, demonstrates a newly acquired intensity with which the speaker wagers to transform the "essential landscape" (*Collected* 56). And eyes are the conduit through which the wager is conducted. Jacqueline Rose describes this tension between the psyche and the object world as "two accounts of causality" (100) that position the outer and inner worlds as opposed locations, brought into increasing proximity as the demands put on the outer world grow. In "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" if the speaker says "I do not expect a miracle/ . . . To set the sight on fire/In my eye," she nevertheless believes "it could happen,"

Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); skeptical,
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow.

Rather than an angel, the speaker finds a rook "Ordering its black feathers" which can "seize my sense, haul/My eyelids up, and grant// A brief respite from fear/Of total neutrality" (*Collected* 57).

This building tension between outer and inner states in Plath's maturing work suggests a desire to make good of Emerson's notion that "The perception of real affinities between events, (that is to say, of *ideal* affinities, for those only are real) enables the poet thus to make free with the most imposing forms and phenomena of the world" (*Essays* 36). In a Cold War America of conservative domestic and national ideology the "imposing forms" prove particularly menacing to women caught in the gendered prototypes Plath explores in her novel *The Bell Jar*, and in poems that confront the limiting roles discussed previously. But when, in her poetry, Plath's speakers focus on landscape, we witness a clearer investment in the Emersonian wager of transcendence. The disappointment of Plath's speakers with the "hocus-pocus of green angels/" in a poem like "On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad" (*Collected* 65) is precisely that it will not, in Emersonian terms "serve the passion of the poet."

“On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad” interrogates a central idea of American romanticism, specifically Emerson’s belief in the transforming abilities of the self’s spiritual encounter with nature. He points out in “The Over-Soul” that “The soul’s advances are made by . . . ascension of state, such as can be represented by metamorphosis” (*Essays* 389). Plath’s speaker complains, “My trouble, doctor, is: I see a tree,/And that damn scrupulous tree won’t practice wiles/ To beguile sight:” The assumption of transformation won’t “Concoct a Daphne; /” in Plath’s modern context; rather, “My tree stays tree.” And “Spurns such fiction/As nymphs; cold vision/ will have no counterfeit/ Palmed off on it” (*Collected* 66). In the following poem, “On the Plethora of Dryads” the speaker, instead, sits “Starving my fantasy down/ To discover that metaphysical Tree which hid/From my worldling look its brilliant vein/” (*Collected* 67, emphasis added).⁹

I would like here to draw a seemingly unlikely parallel between Whitman’s romantic “I celebrate myself, I sing myself” and Plath’s modernist “By a mad miracle I go intact” (*Collected* 35) to rethink some of the assumptions of confessional poetry. If the notion of the confessional begins with Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, as a genre it has its beginnings in European romanticism and therefore positions the discussion of Plath as a confessional poet historically in the larger context of romanticism. One might argue that poems like Whitman’s “A Woman Waits for Me” and “In Paths Untrodden” have a confessional note that anticipates the work of romantic-modernists like Lowell and Plath; “Without shame the man I like knows and avows the deliciousness of his sex,/ Without shame the woman I like knows and avows hers./” Whitman writes or “confesses” in “A Woman Waits for Me” (136). Yet Whitman’s “I,” both male and nineteenth century, is not in jeopardy of being destroyed by its immersion in the object world that it yearns toward and identifies with, nor

⁹“On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad” and “On the Plethora of Dryads” are two poems Jacqueline Rose discusses in the context of Plath’s use of fantasy and representation. What Rose reads as “the problem of poetic representation in explicitly sexual, gendered terms.” And “the stubborn presence, or referentiality, of the world which refuses to transform itself into poetic shape,” I read as the point where Plath’s Emersonian efforts at transcendence confront the obduracy of the real, what refuses transformation because the nature of its reality (or obduracy) highlights the fictional quality of the romantic aspiration. See Rose 114–115.

do his erotic overtures prove dangerous, or prey on the integrity of the self. Quite the opposite, eroticism and identification in Whitman serve to empower and celebrate the poet's sense of himself while Plath's female "I" precariously negotiates what threatens to dissolve it.¹⁰

Though Plath's investment in horizons, to recall Emerson, are rampant with the dangers of the "ruinous landscape[s]" and potentates Whitman never seems thwarted by, both poets share a cultural privileging of the self, an ideology of the individual that affirms Emerson's belief in its ability to achieve "great proportions" (*Essays* 48). Emerson writes in "Self-Reliance": "Trust thyself: every heart vibrates to that iron string. Accept the place the divine providence has found for you" (*Essays* 260). And Plath, a Fulbright fellow at Cambridge in 1955, notes, "I too want to be important. By being different" (*Journals* 197), and in her 1962 poem "A Birthday Present" states: "Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity" (*Collected* 207). Hence the recurrent journal entries which lament her being born female: "My greatest trouble, arising from my basic and egoistic self-love, is jealousy. I am jealous of men—a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode, I imagine any relationship. It is an envy born of the desire to be active and doing, not passive and listening" (98). And, "Of the millions, I, too, was potentially everything at birth. I, too, was stunted, narrowed, warped, by my environment" (31). I would suggest, therefore, that misreadings of Plath's uses of biographical material, the loose basis of the confessional poem, has worked to underestimate the literary inheritances behind the ambitions of her I/eyes.¹¹

¹⁰Given the constructions of symbolic discourse in "the father's account" of meaning formation, the "I" declares itself, as in "I am," confidently separate from pre-symbolic spaces that threaten to engulf and annihilate it. But if in moments of trauma and abjection, as Kristeva describes it, the ego "draws me toward a place where meaning collapses," the ego is threatened, or annihilated. And the devastated "I" no longer adheres to the system-forming "borders, positions, rules" of the symbolic. See Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection" 1–17.

¹¹Plath's later critics, particularly from the 1990s and on, have challenged the reductive ways biography has been conflated with self-referentiality. Jacqueline Rose is fierce in her criticism of Anne Stevenson's biography, *Bitter Fame*, that reduces Plath's work to "the guilt of the psyche, the conviction . . . that the psyche is blame . . ." (100). Tim Kendall refers to Helen Vendler in his chapter on Plath's landscapes, who "complains that 'all of nature exists only as a vehicle for [Plath's] sensibility . . .'" (qtd in Kendall). See Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, and Kendall, "Plath's Landscapes" 25–48.

More recently, Robin Peel has brought attention to the influences of Nietzsche, Ortega y Gasset, and Lawrence.¹² Plath's annotations in the archives at Smith and Cambridge suggest that their philosophies served to further an already established foundation of American "Unitarian beliefs" (41). If Emerson's doctrine of correspondences, his notion that "the pure idea in your mind" will create a correspondent "influx of the spirit" (*Essays* 48), produced a Whitman in romanticism, it produced a Plath in modernism. The lyric "I" of American romanticism that affirms Emerson's ever regenerative nature in Whitman, confronts, in Plath's modernity, an unregenerate nature. Plath's "I"s would be hard put to celebrate any integral self when affirmation itself is at stake: "My limbs, also, have left me./ Who has dismembered us?/" her speaker asks in "Event" (*Collected* 195).

The material world Plath's personas encounter are, unlike Whitman's, often aggressive expressions of entrapment, indifference, and anaesthetization, an object, or abject, world in which the self, in its attempts to assimilate or transcend dehumanizing forces becomes what Julia Kristeva defines as "neither subject nor object" (1). This is precisely where misreadings of Plath's uses of biographical material have taken place, where suggestions of solipsism misunderstand the cultural underpinnings which make Plath's demands on language, her constructions of the "I"s in the later poems especially, a passionate gamble of self-creation against self-effacement, or self-extinction. Kristeva's discussion on abjection begins:

There looms, within abjection, one of those violent, dark revolts of being, directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside, ejected beyond the scope of the possible, the tolerable, the thinkable. It lies there, quite close, but it cannot be assimilated. ("Approaching Abjection" 1)¹³

¹²Peel discusses how Plath's annotations demonstrate that the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche, Jose Ortega y Gasset, and D.H. Lawrence were "assimilated in the context of her precollege experience, as a 1940s daughter, school student, and member of an Emersonian Unitarian church." She gave particular attention to "Nietzsche's celebration of power, will, and strength, and her discovery of Nietzsche became for a time the dominant influence on her worldview" (41–42). See Peel 39–63.

¹³Abjection as Kristeva details it, represents a psychoanalytic condition in which the relation between subject and object is dissolved: the subject as contained entity no longer feels or understands itself as such. "The border [of the subject] has become an object.

Plath's locations of consciousness, and aspirations to consciousness, increasingly challenge the attempt to textualize experience: "It is a heart,/This holocaust I walk in,/" the speaker in "Mary's Song" tells us, "O golden child the world will kill and eat" (*Collected* 257). Tim Kendall has noted that the measure of Plath's achievement is in this ambition of a consciousness creating itself "amidst a brutally indifferent nature" (42). If this achievement gradually becomes an abject identification with surroundings her personas find themselves overwhelmed by, it likewise demonstrates the urgency of Plath's efforts to name, and assimilate, what preys on her.

I will discuss two poems that demonstrate what I read as stages in Plath's personas' increased abjection, and will end with a stanza from "Poem for a Birthday," considered to be the first poem to anticipate Plath's breakthrough style in the *Ariel* collection. "Hardcastle Crags" from 1957 focuses on the subject's vulnerability in a "Flintlike" landscape: the speaker is reduced "To a pinch of flame" with "The long wind, paring her person down/": "The abject," Kristeva notes, "has only one quality of the object—of being opposed to *I*" (1), an opposition the poem dramatizes as the flesh "heart" is juxtaposed against "iron" hills and "black stone."

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

(*Collected* 63)

What Emerson promises of the "currents of the Universal being" that will empower the subject, bring him/her to a sense of God as s/he takes in "infinite space," here threatens the subject with oblivion because it remains "absolute as the antique world." The eyes which in Emerson are the conduit of the spirit, the

How can I be without a border? That elsewhere that I imagine beyond the present . . . that I might, in present time, speak of you—it is now here, jettied, abjected into 'my' world." See Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection" 4–31.

“transparent eyeball” (*Essays* 10), that subsumes the landscape in an identification of self and other, here remain:

Unaltered by eyes,
 Enough to snuff the quick
 Of her small heat out, but before the weight
 Of stones and hills of stones could break
 Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light
 She turned back.

(*Collected* 63)

It is an ironic reversal of Emerson’s description of the subject’s empowerment—“I am nothing; I see all;” (*Essays* 10)—that Plath’s speaker’s act of seeing, of integrating the material world through sight, does indeed dissolve the self to “nothing.” But it is a reductive rather than expansive moment: the threat of dissolution has the subject choosing to turn back from what she sees.

A poem like “Waking in Winter” written in 1960, and according to Hughes a poem “extracted from a tangle of heavily corrected manuscript lines,” which therefore “must be regarded as unfinished” (*Collected* 190), demonstrates a further collapse between the speaking/experiencing “I” and the object/object world. The first line of the poem “I can taste the tin of the sky—the real tin thing./” (*Collected* 151) dramatically inverts Emerson’s “the health of the eye seems to demand a horizon” (*Essays* 15). Instead, we witness a type of cannibalizing of the material world—a *process* of abjection—that conflates the horizon, or sky, with a primary sensation of taste. Sight here is interestingly absent (given its dominance in so many poems). Rather, there’s an implicit idea that sight, or what sight engenders, the ability to see (an)other, is abjectified, if one could use the term: the speaking “I” no longer differentiates itself from what would be “Not Me,” were the boundaries of the subject maintained.

If the health of the eye in Emerson’s nineteenth century world could demand a horizon, in Plath’s twentieth century post-war world, it no longer shares this health; instead her “I”s dream “destruction, annihilations –/An assembly-line of cut throats,” in spaces that collapse symbolic differentiations between signifying “I”s and objects signified. The previous “green” possibilities are now “the green/Poison of stilled lawns,” (*Collected* 151). What was

the “cramped concept of space” that the speaker more confidently declared she must “unwall” in “Above the Oxbow,” has become a non-transcendent cry for “Space! Space!” and the nurses (symbols of healing), “patched her soul to a wound and disappeared.” (151). The gesture is intriguing, one might expect a wound to be patched to, or with, something of the soul. Rather, the soul “patched” to a wound inverts the assumption that the nurses perform any healing action.

The gradually less inhibited, more venturous eyes in Plath's mid-career poems, demonstrate unease about what sight increasingly reveals or fails to reveal; the poems abandon the fixed patterns of an earlier formality for unfixed rhymes that invite and explore more of the “Not Me” that threatens to dehumanize and devour. “Poem for a Birthday,” a poem in seven sections, is dated November 1959, just after Plath's twenty-seventh birthday, and written at a time when Plath is pregnant with her first child. There are recurring references to mouths as a means by which the speaker constructs identity; what can be eaten, swallowed, devoured, is also what threatens the ability to differentiate from the other, or the object. “‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death.” Kristeva notes of the abject persona, “During the course of which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself . . .” (3). This process of becoming an “I” that is other is what Plath enacts in “Poem for a Birthday.” And the fact of Plath's pregnancy literalizes (explains?) this emergence of pre-oedipal spaces, of undifferentiated borders, that precede (and threaten) symbolic constructions. The speaker, in the second line of the first section, titled “*Who*” states “I am all mouth.” The poem is replete with references to spaces and places that engulf—“a dark house,” “an old well,” “the moon's vat,” “shadow of doorways” cupboards, wastebaskets, cellars, and of course, mouths. Like “Waking in Winter” taste rather than sight, and the mouth rather than eyes, dominates.

The speaker in the first part of “*Who*” “either eats or is eaten,” conflating the speaking “I” with the objects in the poem—fruit, flower pots, cabbage heads, pumpkins—and blurring distinctions between them (Rose 52–53). There is a merging, a becoming part of a pastiche of sensations that foregrounds Plath's relinquishing of previous defenses or turnings away from sources of threat often represented by male symbolizing presences. Here the focus on the

mother introduces pre-oedipal taste, shades, and sounds, as the dominant signifiers.

Mother, you are the one mouth
I would be a tongue to. Mother of otherness
Eat me. Wastebasket gaper, shadow of doorways.

(Collected 132)

“Poem for a Birthday” enacts a linguistic birthing of “becoming another,” one “*Who*” is not yet, but who constructs its way toward what it “would be a tongue to.” Thus the forming subject is likely to be itself devoured by the m/other it is appealing to. I would like to suggest that from this point on Plath’s “I”s fall into abjection; their Emersonian ambitions to assimilate the complicated worlds they find themselves in become conflated with their surroundings. In “Poem for a Birthday” Plath’s persona quite literally “takes up the world . . . into [her]self” (*Essays* 16). “Chewing at the gray paper,/Oozing the glue drops,” she is “All-mouth.” And while “lids won’t shut” and “the eye of the sky enlarges its blank/Dominion,” her speaker states, “I must swallow it all” (*Collected* 132–133).

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