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Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation

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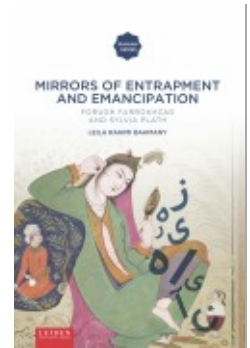
Published by Leiden University Press

Rahimi Bahmany, Leila.

Mirrors of Entrapment and Emancipation: Forugh Farrokhzad and Sylvia Plath.

first ed. Leiden University Press, 0.

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Mirror Imagery in the Works of Sylvia Plath

The time will come when it will disgust
you to look in the mirror. Ovid

The Mirror as the Intersection of Academic and Artistic Talent

In her use of mirror imagery throughout her literary opus—whether poetry or prose—Sylvia Plath reveals a puissant imaginative creativity. Plath's felicitous use of mirror imagery and her aesthetic manipulation of it, rendering it a cornucopia of competent and ambivalent meanings, was not merely the fruit of her strong creative power; it was also supported by her deep academic research on the subject. Her fascination with the mirror and the shadow as forms of the human double prompted her to choose it for the subject of her undergraduate thesis at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. She entitled her thesis: *The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels*, which she submitted in January 1955.

For this study of mirror, shadow and double in the works of Dostoevsky, Plath threw herself into a deep study of the subject from the standpoints of anthropology and psychology. She began with a close reading of the chapter on "The Perils of the Soul" in James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the chapter on "The Double as Immortal Self" in Otto Rank's *Beyond Psychology* and Sigmund Freud's essay "The Uncanny."¹ In her exploration of the mirror image and the double as essential parts of man, also manifested at times in the form of shadow, Plath introduces the mirror in her thesis in these words:

The appearance of the Double is an aspect of man's eternal desire to solve the enigma of his own identity. By seeking to read the riddle of his soul in its myriad manifestations, man is brought face to face with his own

mysterious mirror image, an image which he confronts with mingled curiosity and fear. This simultaneous attraction and repulsion arises from the inherently ambivalent nature of the Double, which may embody not only good, creative characteristics but also evil, destructive ones.²

Plath acknowledges the ambivalent constitutive share—constructive as well as destructive—the mirror image plays in the construction of one’s identity. The very ambivalence of this share accounts for the simultaneity of appealing and repulsive feelings the image in the mirror evokes in the beholder. Further on in her study, Plath asserts that to achieve wholeness man should reconcile himself with its inherent duality by acknowledging the multiple insubstantial presences inhabiting his mirror:

that recognition of our various mirror images and reconciliation with them will save us from disintegration. This reconciliation does not mean a simple monolithic resolution of conflict, but rather a creative acknowledgment of the fundamental duality of man; it involves a constant courageous acceptance of the eternal paradoxes within the universe and within ourselves.³

Plath here wittily locates man’s inner paradoxes within the larger paradoxes of the universe; in other words, she relates the paradoxes of the *Innenwelt* to those of the *Umwelt*, which one should acknowledge creatively and courageously to avoid disintegration. Therefore, one’s *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt* can be indeed perceived as micro-macrocosmic mirrors mutually reflecting their inherent and eternal paradoxes. How far Plath herself was able to reconcile these conflicting images appearing on her mirror through her creative art, and thereby save herself from disintegration by acknowledging their inherent paradoxes, still remains a controversial issue.

This succinct background information on Plath’s scholarly involvement with mirror imagery reveals to us her deep knowledge of the theme and her conscious crafting of it in her art, aesthetically enhanced by her highly creative and imaginative mind. It also reveals to us that Plath was well aware of the ambivalent and even sometimes antithetical nature of one’s multiple specular images; of how they are inherently fundamental to the structure of one’s subjectivity. To this, the twenty-first-century reader can add post-Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalytical critique, not to mention the deconstructive readings of Feminism. The conflicting images of a person, projected and perceived in the mirror, and the inherently split

subjectivity of a person constituted by an inevitable lack are particularly aggravated in the case of female subjects, having to struggle with warring images of twentieth-century womanhood. Plath's mirror and double images bear witness to the impossibility of approximating these warring images in any form other than death or in what is regarded as insanity.

Some critics have interpreted Plath's mirror imagery in general terms. For instance, Axelrod in his study of Plath's mirror and shadow imagery categorizes them as her "imagery of poetic incapacity," asserting that her mirrors portray a negative envisaging of herself as well as of her world.⁴ Axelrod believes that for Plath the mirror was a sort of "Baudelairean mirror of despair," functioning "as an agent of anxious narcissism," emphasizing "gross corporality" by reflecting "an ugly outer being but no inner queen."⁵ There is some undeniable truth in such assertions; however, we should be careful not to ignore the highly ambivalent, even sometimes contradictory nature of Plath's mirror images which need to be studied individually and within their textual and biographical contexts.

Plath uses her poetry for the purpose of self-inquiry. For her, art is a vessel in which she can set out in search of her true subjectivity within the stormy ocean of warring images; on the one hand, the images of monsters, sirens, witches, *femmes fatales* or madwomen rise to surface from the dark and obscure depths of femininity and haunt her, and on the other hand, the promising, yet contemptible flat images of "Angels in the home" stretch out temptingly on the surface. Furthermore, Plath uses her poetry, as well as her mirror to become involved in the less emotional mode of self-inquiry, and finally, through writing, she struggles to express herself. By the objectification of the self in her text and her mirror she can prove her existence as an intellectual and emotional being. In this chapter, I will address some of these attractive and repellent images of womanhood and female subjectivity and an analysis will be provided of the ambivalent confrontations of the poetic persona with these images, mostly presented through her mirror imageries.

The Mirror as a Weapon of the *Femme Fatale*

The deluding nature of the mirror has been recurrently drawn upon in art and literature to present it as a tool of deception and beguilement, particularly in the hands of sirens, witches, sorcerers and *femmes fatales*.

These narcissistic women use their maleficent mirrors to erase or destroy the face of the other on their surfaces. Referring to the end of the nineteenth century, when the cult of the *femme fatale* and her sexuality was explicitly claimed a treat to masculinity, Dijkstra discusses:

Woman came to be seen as Narcissa, the true feminine incarnation of what had once been an image of masculine egotism. ... The mirror, then, came to be regarded as the central symbol of feminine narcissism. The story of Narcissus and the nymph Echo became especially popular because it permitted a convenient conjunction of the themes of woman as mirror and woman *in* the mirror.⁶

Plath draws upon the intimate association of the witch and her mirror in the poem “Vanity Fair.” Composed and published in 1956 along with another poem of hers, “Spinster,” in the first issue of the literary magazine *Gemini*, the two poems share for their central image that of a lonely spinster, a witch.⁷ There have been strong and inevitable cultural associations between the spinster and the witch. Both are associated with extreme malevolent female powers by dint of their non-conformity to patriarchal rules, for not being under the control of men, and particularly for their barrenness. Spinsters were frequently considered misfits, deviants and mad; as Ussher points out, they have incontrovertibly been considered “our social Nemesis.”⁸ By stigmatizing spinsters as witches in the patriarchal culture, it has been sought to punish these women and harness their unchecked powers.

Plath keeps her artistic distance from these repellent figurations of womanhood by narrating their stories in the third person, in the form of “This witch” in “Vanity Fair” and “This particular girl” in “Spinster.” In these two poems Plath is indeed echoing the “cultural noise pollution” surrounding these figures of womanhood, which are the fossilized images her society feeds on.⁹ In the first poem, the lonely woman “sets mirror enough,” and in the latter, “And round her house she set/Such a barricade of barb and check,” both serving as means of fortification and defence, in the case of the first “Against virgin prayer” and “To distract beauty’s thought,” and in the case of the latter “Against mutinous weather/As no mere insurgent man could hope to break/With curse, fist, threat/Or love, either.”¹⁰

The title of the poem, “Vanity Fair,” is an overt allusion to the classical nineteenth-century novel by William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair: A Novel without a Hero*. In its turn, the title of the novel is an allusion to John

Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, a seventeenth-century puritan Christian allegory in which Vanity is the name of a town along the pilgrim's progress where a permanent fair is held, symbolizing man's sinful attachment to worldly things. "Vanity Fair" generally symbolizes the deluding transience of worldly life, when one loses sight of higher realities, of eternal life after death. Plath's vision of spinster, sorceress and witch, the central persona in this poem, also particularly corresponds to a major female character in Thackeray's novel, *Becky Sharp*. They both share the common themes of feminine wile, attachment to the world, self-love, ageing and the loss of physical beauty.

In the poem "Vanity Fair," Plath gives an alarming portrayal of ageing and corporeal deterioration, especially in the first two stanzas, through the witch's crooked fingers and her eyes which have a cold squint look and are veined like crow's feet. The continual passage of time, accompanied by the brutal consistency of ageing, positions this woman in an intermediate state between this world and the afterlife. The continual physical deterioration works as a harbinger of her death:

Through frost-thick weather
 This witch sidles, fingers crooked, as if
 Caught in a hazardous medium that might
 Merely by its continuing
 Attach her to heaven.

At eye's envious corner
 Crow's-feet copy veining on a stained leaf;
 Cold squint steals sky's color; while bruit
 Of bells calls holy ones, her tongue
 Backtalks at the raven¹¹

This old woman "sidles," either because of her physical disabilities of old age or because of her rejected and outcast position in her society, attempting to move around furtively and inconspicuously.

Due to her nature and also because of her social position, "This witch" is envious of everything and everyone, especially of virgin, beautiful girls, ardently desiring their youth and beauty. *Invidia*, one of the Seven Deadly Sins in Christianity, is closely associated with looking, particularly with evil eyes. Melchior-Bonnet's description of Envy personified closely corresponds to Plath's description of the witch: "Envy is also a sin of the gaze

(*in-vidia*), personified by an old, dried up, wrinkled woman with flaccid breasts and hair in disarray. . . . Envy follows the virtue she denigrates everywhere: her malicious gaze corrupts what she sees.”¹² While the vain narcissist seems to take extreme pleasure in the assumed wholeness of his double, the envious person’s sense of selfhood is dominated by “not having” and deprivation. Due to the envious witch’s ardent desire, she looks at things or people askance—she squints. The witch struggles to manipulate the fates of others with her unharnessed power.

By presenting the witch’s body in these grotesque terms, and also by the “eye’s envious corner,” Plath emphasizes her abject position. Abjection literally means in a downcast or cast-off state. The abject thing, remaining in the intermediate state, is neither subject nor object; it is something in between, something alive yet not. Kristeva defines the abject as:

the jettisoned object, [which] is radically excluded and draws me towards the place where meaning collapses. A certain “ego” that merged with its master, a superego, has flatly driven it away. It lies outside, beyond the set, and does not seem to agree to the latter’s rules of the game. And yet, from its place of banishment, the abject does not cease challenging its master.¹³

The witch is situated outside the symbolic. In her marginalized position, she does not abide within the rules of patriarchy, maintaining a sort of antinomian relationship to it. The attempt to bring her under the control of men and the church has somehow failed, and now she constantly challenges the symbolic Father from her peripheral outcast position.

In Christianity, the crow has been used to symbolize the Devil who plucks out the eyes of sinners.¹⁴ Likewise, the envious witch of this poem blinds the eyes of young ladies to their sins and to higher truths with the help of delusionary, *de*-substantiated and ephemeral images projected onto mirrors, as we will learn in the following lines. The raven, like the crow, is a “talking bird,” thereby signifying prophecy.¹⁵ These birds are often considered companions to the dead. Though the sound of bells, apparently church bells, is a reminder of things holy, the witch’s voice remains profane. The witch impudently disputes with the raven, the harbinger of death. She has the power to foresee what is going on in the hearts of “simple girls, church-going” and how ready they are to sin with “every amorous oaf” or “for a trinket,” probably because she had once gone through the same experiences as those young girls.

Cleaving furred air
 Over her skull's midden; no knife
 Rivals her whetted look, divining what conceit
 Waylays simple girls, church-going,
 And what heart's oven

Craves most to cook batter
 Rich in strayings with every amorous oaf,
 Ready, for a trinket,
 To squander owl-hours on bracken bedding,
 Flesh unshriven.¹⁶

The “skull's midden” and the “whetted look” of the witch are reminders of Medusa—another female abject figure with hair of hissing serpents and looks that turn the onlooker into stone. Both these abject figures share a look which immobilizes others into death, and in both stories power and control are exerted through a mirror.

Like the fair in the city of Vanity in *Pilgrim's Progress*, which distracts the pilgrims on their holy way, this witch owns a powerful tool by which she can distract the prayers of these simple virgin girls. It is something whose lure no young lady can withstand. This powerfully guileful weapon is nothing other than the mirror:

Against virgin prayer
 This sorceress sets mirrors enough
 To distract beauty's thought;
 Lovesick at first fond song,
 Each vain girl's driven¹⁷

Plath shifts from addressing her malevolent central figure as the “This witch” of the initial stanza to “This sorceress” in this fifth stanza. In his study of *Witchcraft, Magic and Alchemy*, de Givry marks “exaggerated unsociable individualism” as the main characteristic of sorcerers or sorceresses.¹⁸ These grotesque figures serve Satan as priests and priestesses in his infernal church by casting *sors* or evil spells. The sorcerer/sorceress is indeed the mirror image of the priest/priestess—mutually reiterating an inverted simulacrum. These demonic sorcerers/sorceresses, observes de Givry, “invoked the curse of Hell upon them as the priest called down the blessing of Heaven, and on this earth he was in complete rivalry with the ecclesiastical world.”¹⁹

Plath here draws upon the traditionally close association of sorceresses, sirens and witches with their magical mirrors and crystal balls. These reflecting surfaces gain significant power when in the possession of devils and *femmes fatales*. They use this reflecting surface to create a *fata morgana*, to deceive and entrap men and women within their selves, distracting them from divine realities. In their hands, the mirror serves as a vestibule to the realm of the devil. A young girl, made vain by the mirror, “wills all to the black king,” to the devil:

To believe beyond heart's flare
 No fire is, nor in any book proof
 Sun hoists soul up after lids fall shut;
 So she wills all to the black king.
 The worst sloven

Vies with best queen over
 Right to blaze as satan's wife;
 Housed in earth, those million brides shriek out.
 Some burn short, some long,
 Staked in pride's coven.²⁰

The mirror traps these young girls within their vain narcissism, unable to see any other world beyond their own, a world confined within the frame of their mirrors. Deception and delusion being their predominant characteristics, Satan or the devil, as the masters of simulacra, have often been metaphorized into mirrors. Melchior-Bonnet explains:

The devil is the deceptive mirror par excellence, the *speculum fallax*; he is the father of lies who creates illusions, usurps resemblance, and causes man to turn away from his true model. The devil is sometimes allegorized in iconography through the image of a monkey playing with a mirror, since each one counterfeits the world, for the devil wants to rival his creator by producing simulacra.²¹

In this poem, Plath employs the mirror in its traditional meaning as a vehicle of vanity and pride, and hence guilt. It is a negative tool which distracts “beauty's thought,” bedazzles her into the oblivion of the fire of hell, religious books and ultimately causing her downfall and eternal damnation.²² Finally, the vain girl bewitched by illusions will be housed with other vain

girls, a “million brides” burning in the subterranean hell, a fate which the witch herself definitely shares. Vanity has long been considered a form of self-idolatry, because one rejects the image of God for the sake of one’s own.

The poem “Vanity Fair” reveals Plath’s growing belief in the occult and black magic. This preoccupation was to be intensified through her husband, Ted Hughes, who sank himself into celtic superstition and pagan myth for the sake of poetical inspiration. Following Alvarez, some blame black magic for Plath’s ultimate suicide.²³ On the other hand, the theme of the poem and its diction—words such as holy bruit of bells, flesh unshrive, virgin prayer, vanity, pride, church-going, flares, and housed in earth—make “Vanity Fair” an overt didactic poem of Christian Puritanism. Vanity was a primary concern for the Puritans, for whom the mirror was anything but divine. When the mirror ceased to be a mirror of divinity, reflecting God or his divine *imagoes*, it was invariably to be associated with the devil. Melchior-Bonnet observes:

With the emergence of the mirror, a fantasy world of fears and desires is born. For the preacher, mirrors were the paraphernalia of witches who lock demons inside them, but they were also dangerous objects for any Christian because they attracted “crazed stares.” When the mirror was not reflecting the spotless divine model, it was the seat of lies and seductions, used by a cunning Satan to deceive men. As an instrument of both simulation and lust, the mirror fed illusions of mind and cupidity of the flesh, and thus was tied to numerous allegorical representations of sin.²⁴

This irresistible attraction of the specular image is due to its ethereal, de-substantiated and ephemeral virtuosity, which renders the reflection more attractive than the real object. Furthermore, Melchior-Bonnet asserts:

An illusionary version of the original proves more seductive than the original itself, as does variety over sameness. Reference to the unique source of all likeness is lost in the inexhaustible varieties and mutations of reflections that stimulate the mind.²⁵

The simple virgin girl seems to lose her pure simplicity and holy virginity once she becomes enthralled in the illusory images in her mirror; thereupon, she loses sight of her religion’s teachings and the divine image.

In this early poem, Plath’s use of mirror imagery complies with its traditional associations. In Western art and culture, the woman-with-mirror

figurations were invariably associated with feminine narcissism. These figurations were often accompanied by the symbols of the devil or presented in the form of a *memento mori*. It is only in her later poems that Plath departs from the mirror as a tool of female vanity when she becomes increasingly sceptical of institutionalized religious teachings. Plath likewise draws upon the traditionally recurrent coupling of the witch and the mirror in another early poem, “On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover.” In this juvenilia poem, which will be studied in more detail later, the textual I, calling herself “witch,” dares to look inside her “scorching mirror” only because she believes that sirens and witches are immune to the mirror’s destructiveness, which invariably “cripples,” “injures” and transfigures lovely ladies.²⁶

The Childless Woman: A Narcissist

A popular cultural belief, expounded and further reinforced by Freud, holds that as women mature their primary narcissism is intensified to the extent that their love for the other remains undeveloped. In his essay “On Narcissism,” Freud announces, “Strictly speaking, it is only themselves that such women love with the intensity comparable to that of the man’s love for them.”²⁷ Nevertheless, Freud allows just one outlet for women’s narcissism, and that is when they bear children. It is only then that their libido can be directed to the other. Through the love of their offspring, women can for the first time experience the love of the other. However, Freud also asserts that the love of one’s offspring, a biological extension and part of one’s self, is “narcissism born again.”²⁸ Therefore, according to Freud, women—with or without children—are inevitably assigned to the closed circle of narcissists. For Freud, recapitulating the popular belief, the most intense female narcissism occurs in the case of barren or childless women, whose sole outlet for the love of others is thwarted.

This belief is what Plath, with the help of mirror imagery, reiterates in her poem “Childless Woman.” Composed in 1962 and narrated in the first person, “Childless Woman” is an expression of the purely feminine experiences of a woman desperate to bear a child, but unable to do so. The processes of her womb and her monthly menstruations turn out to be totally futile:

The womb
Rattles its pod, the moon
Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go.²⁹

Hers is a uroboric womb consuming itself with nothing to create. Everything seems to converge into herself, a knot in which she is trapped and from which she cannot disentangle herself. She is rewarded by nothing but a profane and ungodly love of herself. The woman, destined to reproduce, feels desperate when unable to do so; there is no future, no destiny for her. Plath portrays the despairing feelings of the barren woman through the metaphor of the palm of a hand with no lines to be read:

My landscape is a hand with no lines,
The roads bunched to a knot,
The knot myself,

Myself the rose you achieve—
This body,
This ivory³⁰

This white-skinned barren woman fails in her obligation to reproduce: both to give birth and to reproduce her mother's and her female ancestors' story. In a simile, the speaker compares herself to a weaving spider. Instead of webs, however, she produces mirrors, reflecting nothing but herself. She is completely trapped in solipsism and self-love. The spider's web is often considered a symbol for "neglect or decay," thereby indicating that the blood, as well as the life, of the childless woman is wasted.³¹

Ungodly as a child's shriek.
Spiderlike, I spin mirrors,
Loyal to my image,

Uttering nothing but blood—
Taste it, dark red!
And my forest³²

The mirror reiterates ethereal images without any substance or reality to them. Likewise, the body of this barren woman imitates the processes of reproduction, but ultimately fails to give birth to a substantial reality. Both the mirror and this sterile woman are as blank spaces, ready to receive the images of simulacrum. While interpreting the woman and the mirror in the famous painting by Hieronymus Bosch, *Garden of Delights*,³³ Melchior-Bonnet asserts, "Sterile like her, the mirror imitates forms rather

than creating them, thus taking its place among other human inventions, many of which are useless and dangerous.”³⁴ The barren woman was often regarded as useless, threatening and ungodly for not fulfilling her engendering role.

The spider also symbolizes the female in general. Woman, like a spider, spreads nets for her prey—for men. In “The Merchant of Venice,” Shakespeare employs the spider in the same meaning: “Here in her hairs/The painter plays the spider; and hath woven/A golden mesh t’entrap the hearts of men/Faster than gnats in cobwebs.”³⁵ It is interesting to note that, in weaving their webs, spiders are independent of any other thing, and by spinning webs they actually create their own world. Moreover, their threads are drawn out of their abdomens.³⁶ In his “King Henry the Eighth,” Shakespeare calls a spider’s web a “self-drawing web.”³⁷ The image of the spider weaving its web further emphasizes the speaker’s entrapment within the solipsistic self.³⁸ Even if the woman becomes pregnant, it is in vain; she gives birth to dead children:

My funeral,
And this hill and this
Gleaming with the mouths of corpses.³⁹

Due to the similarity in their protruding shape, the hill, for Plath, symbolizes a pregnant woman.⁴⁰

While Plath employs the mirror metaphor in her poem “Childless Woman” to portray the woman’s morbid inability to move beyond the self through engendering a child, in another poem dealing with the same theme, entitled “Barren Woman,” Plath employs the image of a museum as a heterotopic site, but devoid of any statue. Whereas in “Childless Woman,” the mirror’s facelessness with its lack of subjectivity is drawn upon to convey the woman’s state of being, in “Barren Woman” the noiselessness of a historical site is invoked. The speaker of the first poem employs the image of visual doubling, while in the latter she evokes auditory doubling: “Empty, I echo to the least footfall.”⁴¹ Plath aptly recognized and depicted the close alliance of the image and voice in defining subjectivity.

On another level, these two poems, “Barren Woman” and “Childless Woman,” along with some other poems by Plath, such as “Stillborn” and “A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem,” can be read as metapoetry—poetry about poetry. On this deeper level, a more different and independent mode of

meaning, carrying the implications of self-referential discourse, is provided. Read in this light, these poems are an allegory of the poet's wretched struggle in crafting her art, and Plath here indicates that her efforts in crafting poetry are futile. Either she fails to compose poems and stays barren, or the poems she crafts are dead, aborted, or stillborn. In the tenth book of Plato's *The Republic*, Socrates employs the metaphor of the mirror to define the artist's work contemptuously—Plato's theory of *mimesis*. Accordingly the artist is someone who spins a mirror:

turning a mirror round and round—you would soon enough make the sun and the heavens, and the earth and yourself, and other animals and plants, and all the other things of which we were just now speaking, in the mirror.⁴²

Plato's sceptical view of art, which was to be accentuated by later Platonists, holds that the artist's creation, contriving an imitation of an imitation, like the reflection in a mirror, is at its best twice removed from the true reality of Ideas. Likewise, Plath in her struggle to concoct poetry while imagining herself "with a great public," appears to spin mirrors like a spider.⁴³

The Gigolo: Male Narcissism

Unlike the other instances of mirror imagery in Plath's oeuvre, mainly drawn upon to convey female anxiety, narcissism, vanity or her ruse, the mirror in the poems "Gigolo" and "Purdah" is intended to portray the male personas' obsession with narcissistic self-love and their failure to distinguish anything beyond their selves. "Gigolo" is a dramatic monologue, composed on 29 January 1963, i.e., in the final days of Plath's life. On the same day, Plath composed "Paralytic," too, apparently trying her hand at poems in which the speakers were not speaking about Plath's own personal experiences. In both these poems, the first person speakers are distinctly male figures. In "Gigolo," the male figure emerges as a direct descendent of Ovid's Narcissus, trapped in his primary narcissism. Bassnett asserts that there is a close correspondence between the persona of the gigolo "preying on women" and "an emblematic narcissist."⁴⁴

"Gigolo" opens with the male speaker haughtily presenting himself in the first person through the metaphor of a watch. Here, the pocket watch

symbolizes the mechanical and dehumanized nature of the gigolo. On the other hand, the watch ironically refers to the brevity and mortality of human life. With each tick of it, the gigolo is approaching his end. The poem proceeds with sexually charged metaphors, signifying the gigolo's sexual obsession as the dominant nature of his narcissism.

Pocket watch, I tick well.
 The streets are lizardy crevices
 Sheer-sided, with holes where to hide.
 It is best to meet in a cul-de-sac,

A palace of velvet
 With windows of mirrors.
 There one is safe,
 There are no family photographs,⁴⁵

The misogynist I-narrator of “Gigolo” hides in holes; he is trapped within the “cul-de-sac” of his selfhood. In his solipsistic velvet palace, there are no windows, no openings to the world outside, nor is there any possibility for communication with others. All he can see is the specular reflections of himself, signifying, as Kendall notes, his “inability to range beyond the barriers of the self.”⁴⁶ Gigolo can see only this specular reflection; the *de*-realized, illusory reflection of his visibility. He invariably fails to see the whole reality of his selfhood. He is only interested in this metaphorical/metonymic projected visibility of his being. The reality of his total self, beyond the specular image, particularly those aspects of his subjectivity which are formed through relatedness with others and with the world outside, remains unknown for him, and these unknown aspects remain increasingly threatening to his sense of security.

The gigolo feels secure within the confines of his solipsistic palace, a palace of mirrors with no outlet to the world of others. He fears any relatedness with others. There is no place even for family emotion. The presence of family members through their photographs threatens his narcissistic sense of containment; he feels much safer without the family members and their memento, represented through family photographs. Family for him implies oppressive subjugation, enslavement and depressive feelings, and is expressed through associating it with “cries” and through the symbol of “rings through the nose”:

No rings through the nose, no cries.
 Bright fish hooks, the smiles of women
 Gulp at my bulk
 And I, in my snazzy blacks,

Mill a litter of breasts like jellyfish.
 To nourish
 The cellos of moans I eat eggs—
 Eggs and fish, the essentials,

The aphrodisiac squid.
 My mouth sags,
 The mouth of Christ
 When my engine reaches the end of it.⁴⁷

The gigolo, like the classical Narcissus, is not willing to listen to the voices of others. By the use of the word “engine” once more the dehumanized and mechanical nature of his actions is stressed. Although the female personas of Plath’s poems are generally anxious about time, getting old and physical degeneration, and although the poem begins with the consciousness of the passage of time, “Pocket watch, I tick well,” there is no ageing and degeneration at work for this male persona or, at least, he expresses no concerns about it.⁴⁸ Even his joints are made of gold, resistant to time and its corruption:

The tattle of my
 Gold joints, my way of turning
 Bitches to ripples of silver
 Rolls out a carpet, a hush.

And there is no end, no end of it.
 I shall never grow old.⁴⁹

The speaker describes his joints in terms of gold while talking about the “bitches,” the female others, in terms of silver. The metal gold in literature is invariably a solar figure, whereas silver is lunar. The gigolo assumes the active role of the sun over the passive and denigrated moon. His radiation turns the women, these “bitches,” into “ripples of silver.” The women are assigned to the passive and objectified position of reflecting his light back

onto him. They are turned into mirrors on whose surface this narcissus-misogynist can indulge in the joy of seeing himself. The language the gigolo employs leaves the reader with no doubt about his deep contempt for women. For him, women serve merely as mirrors reflecting back to him a magnified picture of his male ego. The same theme of the woman as a mirror to the male ego is repeated in the poem “Purdah,” to be discussed in detail later.

The gigolo continues to describe women as “new oysters”:

New oysters
 Shriek in the sea and I
 Glitter like Fontainebleau⁵⁰

Under the entry “oyster,” the Merriam-Webster dictionary lists such definitions as “something that is or can be readily made to serve one’s personal ends” and “an extremely taciturn person,” as well as “a grayish-white color.” Considering Plath’s meticulous choice of words, these meanings were most probably in her mind when she wrote down the word. Thereby, women are things which readily serve this male figure and his narcissistic sexual desires. Furthermore, the oyster, due to the association of bivalves with the vulva on the one hand, and with water and fertility on the other, symbolizes “female sexuality and reproduction.”⁵¹ Describing women as oysters indicates that the gigolo perceives women in terms of their sexual organs rather than their whole personality.

Moreover, the oyster has often been regarded as an aphrodisiac. The colour “grayish-white” is the colour of silver and the mirror, again emphasizing women’s reflecting function, their silence and passivity, as well as their subordinate peripherality to the centrality of the male figure. On the other hand, “grayish-white” can also refer to the colour of the male ejaculated semen. The adjective “new” shows the gigolo’s avoidance of a prolonged sexual relationship with a woman. He constantly searches for and gratifies his desire with a new woman-mirror. The gigolo’s recurrent description of women in terms of the sea and sea creatures, like “fish hooks,” “jellyfish,” “ripples of silver” and “oysters,” leaves the reader in no doubt that the “shriek in the sea” is the shriek uttered by a woman. The gigolo glitters like Fontainebleau. The context of the lines also immediately brings a fountain to mind, implying his ejaculation.

In the concluding stanza of the poem “Gigolo,” the textual I gives us a description of his acts of copulation and his orgasms:

Gratified,
 All the fall of water an eye
 Over whose pool I tenderly
 Lean and see me.⁵²

Here Plath once again turns to the mirroring imagery. Now that the gigolo has been sexually gratified, benumbed to the other's feelings he leans over the pool of a watery eye to see himself, just like the mythological Narcissus. In this poem, "I" is employed six times, which shows its central significance for the speaker and his entrapment within it. Through the dehumanizing process of turning women into mirrors and objects of narcissistic gratification, the gigolo has actually dehumanized himself to an even greater degree.

On the other hand, through the pool of a watery eye the reader is assured of the human and emotional sadness of the women figures. While the gigolo ticks, we hear the female figures' cries, their "cellos of moans," shrieks and their hush. Looking into the other's eye could provide the gigolo with an opportunity for relatedness and with a passageway to the other. Nevertheless, by turning the eye into a mirror reflecting a mirage of himself, he blocks that passageway and remains entrapped within his self. The gigolo perceives nothing but the projection of his self onto the other, blocking the projection of the other's onto his. The path to bilateral mirroring reciprocity, vital for mutual love and true friendship, is blocked by the gigolo's narcissitic self-love.

Woman as a Mirror of Male Ego

The passive reflectivity of the mirror, its lack of agency and its ability to receive any image on its surface have been drawn upon in English literature in the recurrent metaphorization of women as mirrors of the male ego. This metaphorical thought has been based on the ambivalent nature of the mirror image; on its simultaneous adoption of the positions of both subject and object. In the patriarchal context, women have been forced to strive towards absolute effacement and the nullification of their own subjectivity in order to fit into the culture's procrustean definition of feminine normality. Women were generally perceived and depicted merely as the passive reflectors of men.

On the other hand, men relied on female reflectivity for the construction and sustenance of their masculine identity. As Jacques Lacan speculates, in

the mirror stage—when the subject for the first time perceives his body in its *gestalt*—the ego’s attempt to end desire and to attain an ideal version of itself by projecting a unified image onto an object inevitably leads to the subject’s castration anxiety. Hence, for the masculine subject relying on the woman-mirror other for his self-image and for the definition of his masculine subjectivity, the withdrawal of that female reflectivity would be a great threat to his unified sense of self. In other words, without the reflecting function of femininity his sense of masculinity would be castrated.

In western medieval narratives, women were repeatedly depicted as mirrors of the knights. A courtly lady was to mirror the knightly perfection of the lover and provide him with a sense of self-importance. Nightingale in her study of the twelfth-century Chrétien de Troyes’ *Erec et Enide*, observes that courtly ladies were often metaphorized into “idealizing mirrors” on which the knights depended for their sense of identity. The knight used to turn to this speculum “to verify his progress and ratify his very existence.”⁵³ In her discussion of the female beloved in *Of Chastity and Power*, Berry writes, “This figure was usually little more than an instrument in an elaborate game of *masculine* ‘speculation’ and self-determination, for the philosophical enterprise common to both Petrarchism and Renaissance Neoplatonism used women as a ‘speculum’ or mirror of masculine narcissism.”⁵⁴

An illuminating instance would be Hutchinson’s *Memoirs of the Life of Colonel Hutchinson*, from the seventeenth century, in which she uses the metaphor of the woman as a mirror reflecting the man within a didactic discourse that she has set down, as she informs us, for the benefit of her children. Hutchinson acts as the mouthpiece of patriarchy’s limiting definition of a woman. She echoes the era’s conceptualization of a woman as a passive imitator, a mirror and shade, and as a shadow of her male consort. Hutchinson herself concedes that she, as a wife, “only reflected his [her husband’s] owne glories upon him: all that she was, was him, while he was here, and all that she is now at best is but his pale shade.”⁵⁵ Further on, she postulates that the true role of a woman is and should be that of a mirror:

a very faithfull mirror, reflecting truly, though but dimmely, his [her husband’s] owne glories upon him, so long as he was present; but she, that was nothing before his inspection gave her a faire figure, when he was remoov’d was only fill’d with a darke mist, and never could againe take in any delightfull object, nor returne any shining representation.⁵⁶

Hutchinson has undoubtedly internalized, and forcefully defends, the subordinate mirroring position of women. As she remarks elsewhere, a woman should be her husband's "shaddow."⁵⁷ Moreover, it should be noted that the image women should reflect of their men should not be a realistic one, reiterating them as they are; on the contrary, this reflected image should be "dim"; it should reflect a delusive image of his "glory." What Hutchinson appears to mean by the "very faithfull mirror" is not a truthful reflection of the First Cause, the man in front of the mirror; on the contrary, what she means is that the woman should be faithful to the man by reiterating a distorted and illusory image, a glorifying image of her man.

By the incorporation of this figuration of womanhood into the structure of her self and into her self-narrative, Hutchinson has indeed turned into a mirror reflecting patriarchy, an echo mimicking its voices. Certainly this subjugation did not come easily. When she was young, Hutchinson "had a melancholly negligence both of her selfe and others, as if she neither affected to please others, nor tooke notice of anie thing before her."⁵⁸ These melancholic days were most probably the effect of her going through the process of self-effacement, the forced abnegation of the self and the internalization of her subjugated position, the strict limits that her society was placing on her. Notwithstanding, it is clear that a man's love for a woman, when that woman is rendered nothing but a mirror-metaphor reflecting back his image, is the love of Narcissus deluded by his own flat image in the water.

During the era of Romanticism, the metaphorical thought of an individual as a living mirror or *Seelenspiegel*, reflecting the soul of the beloved or friend, became popular. It was within this context that Goethe calls his friend, Charlotte von Stein, "my dearest mirror."⁵⁹ In the nineteenth century, Dijkstra discusses how the topos of woman as an imitator, as a mirror, became one of the most recurrent clichés of Western culture. Grounded on the biological-essential conceptualization of womanhood as an objective entity, the mirror itself became a symbol for woman.⁶⁰ In the twentieth century, Virginia Woolf in her book, *A Room of One's Own*, was to confront critically the subordinate position of women, their passive reflectivity, and their morbid, culturally advocated self-effacement. Woolf evokes the woman-as-a-mirror metaphor when she points out:

Women have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of a man at twice its natural size. ... Whatever may be their use in civilized societies, mirrors are essential to all violent and heroic action. That is why Napoleon and

Mussolini both insist so emphatically upon the inferiority of women, for if they were not inferior, they would cease to enlarge. That serves to explain in part the necessity that women so often are to men. ... The looking-glass vision is of supreme importance because it charges the vitality; it stimulates the nervous system. Take it away and man may die, like the drug fiend deprived of his cocaine.⁶¹

Woolf believes that this passive reflective role of women has been fuelling masculine powers for centuries, a power based not on reality, but on a magically enhanced version.⁶² Women have been functioning more like convex mirrors, reiterating expanded images of the male others while conceiving for themselves a diminutive self-image. Hutchinson and Woolf both play on the distorting nature of the mirror reflection, basing their arguments on the fact that the image which the mirror gives back is a reversed one. Irigaray echoes Woolf when she writes about her own mirroring function to the man and his gaze:

I, too, a captive when a man holds me in his gaze; I, too, am abducted from myself. Immobilized in the reflection he expects of me. Reduced to the face he fashions for me in which to look at himself. Traveling at the whim of his dreams and mirages.⁶³

This is a clear manifestation of phallogentrism, where a singular model—the masculine one—is used to represent the two sexes. Analysing the psycho-philosophical history of western theoretical discourse from Plato to Hegel in her *Speculum of the Other Woman*, Irigaray argues that the feminine is never defined in its own autonomous terms, but only through some peripheral relation to the defined centre of humanity, i.e., to the masculine model. Femininity has always been defined and represented as the complement, as the “inverted or negative alter-ego,” “*the reverse, the negative* of the properties of sameness,” “the outside, backside, other side,” “an *other same*, or the *same model*” and as the mirror image of masculinity.⁶⁴ Women remain the Other, the Other which, as Daly points out, “Society as we know it fears and tries to destroy.”⁶⁵

Sylvia Plath evokes this traditional motif of woman-as-a-mirror in her poem entitled “Purdah.” Composed in 1962, the poem is a portrayal of a woman in her dialectical struggle to release herself from the imprisoning bond of narcissistic masculinity. The woman is striving towards liberation from the stifling mental, physical, spatial and verbal captivity systematically

enforced on her by the visible and invisible veils—the purdahs. Plath, in this poem, cites the recurrently used mirror metaphor for women, not to conform or advocate it, but rather to reject it step by step and ultimately to cast it off violently. Butscher aptly describes the poem as Plath's "most clearly feminist poem."⁶⁶ The poem, Butscher elucidates, is "a distinct roar of rage over the condition of women—which she naturally related to her own special situation."⁶⁷ Perloff likewise argues that the poem is "one of Plath's most forceful statements about power—the power to assume a new identity, to shed the 'veil' of harem wife and destroy her former persona as 'small jewelled/Doll'"⁶⁸ The poem depicts an image of a charming and crafty *femme fatale* in purdah. The woman is initially a captive within the possessive boundaries of domesticity set up by patriarchy. Moreover, she is a captive within her own consciousness, marked by the internalization and echoing of the stereotypes of womanhood dehumanized into a mere object.

Purdah or veil has a literal and metaphorical significance. The word "purdah" is of Persian origin, literally meaning "curtain," "veil" or "screen."⁶⁹ It also means hijab, face or head covering, and burqa, as well as the invisible world. Figuratively, it refers to the harem or haremsaray, the interior part of the house where the women and children were kept out of the sight of other men. Historically purdah refers to the sequestration tradition, separating the sexes and protecting women from the male gaze by the installation of the curtain. Furthermore, *parde* represents the hymen in Persian.⁷⁰

In Persian, the "eye's *parde*" indicates the different layers of the eye's sphere that break up light rays. Conversely, a layer like dust covering the eye and preventing the person from seeing is also called *parde*. "In *parde*" suggests secretiveness, invisibility or implicitness. It may also refer to the invisible world in general. "Without *parde*" implies explicit, direct and deflowered or unchaste. To take *parde* away from something means to render its truth revealed, exposed. It should also be noted that "to go within the *parde*" figuratively means to pass away, to die. Moreover, in Persian musical and literary terminology, *parde* signifies melody, tone or note.⁷¹

In Persian poetry, the words *parde* and mirror are often paired. Poets used to draw on the fact that in ancient times mirrors were built from iron or other metal and were therefore susceptible to rust and a loss of reflectivity by exposure to humidity. Hence, it was a common practice to cover the mirror with a piece of soft cloth like silk—or a *parde*—to preserve its clarity and brilliance and also to keep it clear of dust and rust.⁷² Maillet observes, "To protect this fragile object and to avoid any scratches, especially on those with a vulnerable metallic surface, mirror makers would bind the mirror in

a case lined with cloth—generally either velvet or silk.”⁷³ On the motif of veil, screen or purdah in literature Gilbert and Gubar further expound:

An image of confinement different from yet related to the imagery of enclosure that constantly threatens to stifle the heroines of women’s fiction, the veil resembles a wall, but even when it is opaque it is highly impermanent, while transparency transforms it into a possible entrance or exit. Unlike a door, which is either open or shut, however, it is always potentially both—always holding out the mystery of imminent revelation, the promise or the threat that one might be able to see, hear, or even feel through the veil which separates two distinct spheres: the phenomenal and the noumenal; culture and nature; two consciousnesses; life and death; public appearance and private reality; conscious and unconscious impulses; past and present, present and future. Because it is an image of confinement that endows boundaries with a transitory and ambivalent fluidity, and because it takes on special status with respect to images of women.⁷⁴

Further on, Gilbert and Gubar claim that the image of the veil, when associated with women and femininity, becomes invariably “a symbol for women of their diminishment into spectral remnants of what they might have been.”⁷⁵ The patriarchal rhetoric frequently adopted for the enactment of this veiling claims that woman is like a precious gemstone for her owner. She is so precious that she should be guarded from the lascivious male eye of the stranger. Being exposed to the male eye will decrease her value and render her unchaste, as the male gaze, particularly in veiled cultures, is assumed to have phallic powers.⁷⁶

The veil has been basically regarded as an *Anschauungsform*, a form of intuition or perception. By intercepting or reducing perception, the veil provides the observer with an unlimited space of imagination. While the view of a naked object gives it a frame and curbs the imagination, veiling grants the imagination a free rein. The veil blurs the boundary between reality and illusion. The pictorial fantasy provided by the veil invites eroticism as well as religious involvement. In eroticism, the veil plays a central role, which is exercised by the clothing and unclenching of the body. While it interposes a physical distance, the veil also holds promise of a tempting intimacy. It provides a possibility for materializing a disguised enigma. Like the mirror, which blocks the subject’s experience of the true self, the veil, too, blocks knowledge of the other. The veil, and in particular the bridal veil, has been

used to signify the hymen. Furthermore, for its function as a form of representation providing a space of imagination, the veil has been regarded as a metaphor for text, moving from the erotic experience to the aesthetic one.⁷⁷

Plath was undoubtedly aware of the associations of the word “purdah.” She had underlined the etymology of the word in her Webster’s dictionary and also noted it in abbreviation at the top of her manuscript in these words: “Hind. & Per. Pardah—veil curtain or screen India to seclude women.”⁷⁸ Plath opens her poem with a parodic adoption of the traditional discourse recurrently used in the prelapsarian narratives on the genesis of Adam and Eve. She provides an echo of these texts in her ironic tone. The poetic persona introduces herself in the first person pronoun as the female other. The speaker declares that she has been created from the jade green gemstone of the agonized side of freshly created Adam:

Jade—
Stone of the side,
The agonized

Side of green Adam, I
Smile, cross-legged,
Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities.
So valuable!
How the sun polishes this shoulder!⁷⁹

According to sympathetic magic, Kroll remarks, “jade—was believed to cure pain in the side. As a jade Eve made from a green Adam, she can cure the pain which may initially have been caused by carving her out of him.”⁸⁰ When associated with women and femininity, jade paradoxically denotes a flirtatious, disreputable or ill-tempered woman.⁸¹ The woman is enigmatic; she shifts her clarities, again mimicking the patriarchal myth which holds woman to be the mysterious Other. Freud, in his essay “On Narcissism,” represents women as the enigmatic other, because they tend to preserve the original narcissism which men denounce: “it is only themselves that such women love.”⁸² This, according to Freud, becomes for men the great source of fascination and at the same time anxiety. Freud goes even further and compares the female narcissist to a cat—both sharing an ambiguous nature. He observes:

The great charm of narcissistic women has, however, its reverse side; a large part of the lover's dissatisfaction, of his doubts of the woman's love, of his complaints of her enigmatic nature, has its root in this incongruity between the types of object-choice.⁸³

According to Freud and his followers, women, in keeping with their common tendency towards narcissism, develop an enigmatic nature unknown to their male counterparts. This enigmatic nature of women, together with its association with animals like the cat, has been recurrently exploited in literature by male and female authors alike.⁸⁴ The mysterious nature of the woman, as the other, and the mystifying feature of the veil, associate the woman and the veil with each other. As Gilbert and Gubar emphasize, "the ambiguity of the veil, its essential mystery as an emblem of obscure potential, should associate it in male minds with that repository of mysterious otherness, the female."⁸⁵ The persona in Plath's poem is evidently adopting an ironical tone in repeating the old cultural cliché when she hyperbolically claims that she is "So valuable!"

In the following stanzas, the persona adduces her close affinity with the moon by calling it her cousin. The moon is a female cousin, as Plath refers to it, in the stanza following, using the pronoun "her":

And should
The moon, my
Indefatigable cousin

Rise, with her cancerous pallors,
Dragging trees—
Little bushy polyyps,

Little nets,
My visibilities hide.
I gleam like a mirror.⁸⁶

Within these lines the female persona transfigures into a mirror and becomes a close relative of the moon. The mirror is indeed a lunar symbol because the moon, like a mirror, reflects the light of the sun while its nature remains totally unaffected by it. The cyclic nature of the mirror, with the presence and absence of an image within its frame, and the moon's phases of fullness (as if impregnated with an image) and its emptiness, lead to their

being evoked, in literature, interchangeably—both symbolizing femininity. The regular twenty-eight day cycle of the moon matches the woman's cycle of menstruation. As in the poem "Childless Woman" ("The womb/Rattles its pod, the moon/Discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go"), Plath here also uses the moon as a metaphor for menstruation and the tree for the uterus.⁸⁷ The bleeding makes the woman seem to exhibit "cancerous pal-lors," a trick of the light of the moon. Furthermore, the moon represents the shadow side of the sun and is therefore associated with fear and mys-tery.

It is her femininity that makes the woman appear invisible; she gleams like a mirror. The apparent invisibility of the feminine sexual organ, espe-cially in the flat mirror, has been interpreted in psychoanalysis as a lack, constituted by "holeness," in contrast to the male's "wholeness." Turning invisible due to one's femininity can be read in terms of the masculine econ-omy which values male identity and unity (signified through identification with the penis or the phallus) while devaluing the other, the women iden-tity (signified through identification with lack, dispersion, or "*a nothing to see*"), as Irigaray discusses at length in her work, *Speculum of the Other Woman*.⁸⁸

As noted earlier, the passive and objective nature of the mirror and its reflecting characteristics turn it into a feminine means of granting delight. The mirror has been rendered into an emblem of women's objective position in the patriarchal context. In the poem "Purdah," the persona is transfig-ured into a mirror for lacking agency of her own. As Kroll observes, the speaker only "reflects her Sun-god, just as the Moon reflects the Sun."⁸⁹ The adjective "indefatigable" describes the energy- and time-consuming nature of the role of reflectiveness expected from women. The idea of the woman coming into existence merely to serve as a reflector of the man is stressed in the opening stanzas when the speaker mimics the biblical narrative that Eve was created from Adam's side, not as a discrete or independent entity, but from a part of him. She should always serve him and be his compan-ion.

By hiding her own visibilities and by turning into the mirror of masculin-ity, the female persona is also turned into a metaphor—imposing obscurity on clarity. The Western tradition has always linked clarity with the penis and phallic masculinity, while associating obscurity with female genitalia due to their being internal and unseen. Irigaray adds, "*Woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. ... This is doubtless why she is said to be whimsi-cal, incomprehensible, agitated, capricious.*"⁹⁰ Thereby, the feminine subject

has been considered incomprehensible and confusing due to the invisibility of her internalized genitals. When the woman's visibilities hide and when she is metamorphosed into a mirror, the bridegroom, the owner of the mirror, makes his haughty appearance:

At this facet the bridegroom arrives
 Lord of the mirrors!
 It is himself he guides

In among these silk
 Screens, these rustling appurtenances.
 I breathe, and the mouth

Veil stirs its curtain
 My eye
 Veil is

A concatenation of rainbows.
 I am his.⁹¹

The figure of the virgin bride serves as the groom's ego-ideal. She reflects his lordliness; reiterating a pleasurable and often "magnified" (to draw on Woolf's word) image. Aristotle asserts, "the proportional metaphor must always apply reciprocally to either of its co-ordinate terms."⁹² Metaphorization is therefore employed here to reaffirm gynaecologized femininity in reciprocity with phallicized masculinity.

After the arrival of the bridegroom, Plath's diction becomes sexually charged. The bridegroom is narcissistically guiding himself among the "silk screens" and "rustling appurtenances." He comes to his bride at the time when she has already turned into a mirror, protected within the silk *pardah* and made invisible. The breathing and the movements of the mouth and the eye now become more conspicuous. It may also be recalled here that one of the meanings of the word *parde* in its Persian origin is hymen. Her mouth is veiled; she is not supposed to let her voice be heard. The "eye veil" or the "eye *parde*," referring to the refractory layers of the eye sphere, is metaphorized into nature's grandest manifestation of light refraction in the form of a rainbow. In an alternative reading, the eye veil can also refer to her eyelid, and the "concatenation of rainbows" to the excessive use of eye make-up, a common practice for brides.

At this point, after being engaged in the sexual act, Plath once more, and this time more overtly, claims “I am his,” highlighting the imbalance of power and the possessive nature of their relationship—the sexualized possessiveness. The woman is nothing more than an enigmatic and alluring commodity in the economy of psychological partnership. Her position within this structure undoubtedly confounds her authentic agency. Even in the absence of her owner, the woman is essentially impotent, incapable of doing anything. She feels frustrated by her own total lack of agency:

Even in his

Absence, I

Revolve in my

Sheath of impossibles,⁹³

“Sheath of impossibles” is how the subject feels, helplessly entrapped, when transformed into a reflecting object. The subject experiences a frustrating state of impotence while confined within a *pardah*, a kind of “bell jar.” “Impossibles” have been systematically imposed on the woman by the patriarchal culture. This is quite comprehensible since she was created out of the bridegroom’s side and as his valuable property—as his mirror. The woman has always existed only “in and for what she mirrored,” to quote Dijkstra.⁹⁴ Therefore, without her lover’s presence, she would be nothing and can do nothing. The female speaker claims to be silent, and voiceless. Plath draws upon the entangled interaction of the self-image and voice. When the persona was robbed of her own image, when her visibilities hid, she was definitely robbed of her own voice, too:

Priceless and quiet

Among these parakeets, macaws!

O chatters⁹⁵

After this point in the poem there occurs a shift of attitude and tone, from that of helpless desperation to that of assertive agency. The persona will no longer remain a passive and desperate sufferer of her own objectified position. She will launch herself on a violently rebellious and liberating performance. The phrase “I shall unloose” is repeated four times in this poem. The use of “I shall” in itself reveals the determination of the speaker in her process of acquiring agency. The woman is going to

unloose first a feather, then a note, and ultimately a ferocious lioness. Her mirror- and moon-like passivity will be superseded by her ferocious activity.

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!⁹⁶

When sexually stimulated, the male peacock looks exceedingly proud, flaunting his colossal, colourful plumage, decorated with eye-shaped designs. Due to the eyes on his feathers, the peacock has been regarded as an ever watchful bird. In literature, it has been recurrently evoked as a byword for pride and vanity as well as for watchfulness.⁹⁷ In Grecian mythology, the peacock is a symbol of goddess Hera and her ever watchfulness; thereby also symbolizing feminine power. Moreover, since the feathers of the peacock are renewed each year, it has also been evoked as a symbol of regeneration and renewal.

By unloosing a feather, the I-speaker is probably talking about setting herself free from the artificial eyelashes that are applied to the bride as an adornment, thereby rejecting her peripheral position as a decorative object in the ownership of man. The female speaker is gaining more and more confidence and voice. As mentioned earlier, in Persian literature and musicology, the word *parde* can mean “note.” The persona’s freshly acquired voice will be so piercing that it will shatter “The chandelier/Of air that all day flies.”⁹⁸ Her voice will mobilize “A million ignorants./Attendants!.” It will mobilize those still in the inferior and subjugated position of serving. Within these lines, Plath is indeed adopting a feministic emancipatory

voice. She employs the term “Attendants!” once more and in isolation, as if to highlight the peripheral position of women and their serving role, and to wake up her readers:

Attendants!
And at his next step
I shall unloose

I shall unloose—
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart—

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes.⁹⁹

In the concluding three stanzas, the ultimate cataclysmic moment of *dé-nouement* emerges. The persona, in her next move, will set herself completely free from the captivity of his ownership, from being a companion object of adornment, from ever being on the side of the gazed at and watched. The final two lines allude to the assassination of Agamemnon by his wronged wife Clytemnestra in Greek myth, dramatized in Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*, and in which Clytemnestra is called “this two-footed lioness.”¹⁰⁰ In Aeschylus’s version of the story, Clytemnestra stabbed Agamemnon in the bath after ensnaring him within a thrown cloak. As Britzolakis observes, Clytemnestra, for Plath, constituted one of her female “apocalyptic-destructive power[s].”¹⁰¹

After the step by step unloosings, there arrives the ultimate moment of rebellion and the destruction of the source of her oppression. The woman breaks the vicious circle of oppression and complicity by acquiring a voice and an active agency. She will cast off her passive, submissive, decorative and object position by transfiguring into a “lioness,” which will kill the bridegroom and set herself free. She ultimately manages to unveil her voice and her “lioness” body—literary and literal unveiling. The lioness for Bassnett symbolizes the “female strength,” and Axelrod names her “a spirit of unveiled female rebelliousness.”¹⁰² On the other hand, Uroff believes that by “lioness” Plath is alluding to the two lioness-goddesses in Egyptian mythology, namely, Sekhmet and Bast:

One is Sekhmet, the terrible goddess of war and battle, whose name means ‘The Powerful.’ Claiming that her heart rejoiced in killing, she attacked men with such fury that the sun-god, fearing the extinction of the human race, appeased her with a magic potion. The other is Bast, whose origin as a lioness-goddess personified the fertilizing warmth of the sun. Goddess of pleasure, she loved music and dance. Plath’s conception embraces both goddesses.¹⁰³

In the poem “Purdah,” the female speaker undergoes a deep metamorphosis; from the desperate angel, suffocating within the airless boundaries of her domesticity, continually guarded by a “purdah” and the phallogocentric discourses, into a monstrous, powerful Medusa; into a “Lady Lazarus” who will eventually “eat men like air.”¹⁰⁴ Strangeways hails this moment of liberation as “transcendental,” for transcending the male oppression.¹⁰⁵ The persona succeeds in liberating herself from being in captivity to the male gaze and desire by transcending her position as a reflecting agent. Without a woman as a mirror, as a metaphor, for the masculinity through whose flattering reflection the man can identify and measure himself, that masculine subjectivity would become endangered, and the power lost.

By bringing together the two ambivalent and intertwined motifs—veil and mirror—Plath conceives a poem of highly multilayered meaning. The woman-as-mirror image serves to divulge her passive numbness and her peripherality within patriarchal culture. This metaphor symbolizes woman’s loss of self-image and the lack of her authentic voice. Therefore, the mirror functions oxymoronically as a veil, too, hiding the true self. The images of the veil and the mirror are so intertwined that the slightest change in the function and meaning of the one invariably affects the other’s. O’Hara argues that the meaning of veil in this poem is not limited to a “piece of oriental decoration but a reference to those veils of glamorous docility.”¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, Sanazaro explains that women are:

Imprisoned and dehumanized by the veils of a curtain devised for the subjugation of women in Oriental societies. Not only does the veil separate her from the world at large; it also confines the dynamic, active self and effects a division of her personality. Ultimately the “purdah” is the system of male domination, and the poem is the process of the speaker’s emergence from that system.¹⁰⁷

The outside, visible segregation sneaks its way inside, inserting an invisible, yet more sinister, schism within the female subjectivity. O'Hara speaks of another sort of unveiling, within the wider context of the poem, the unveiling of "simpering clichés" enacted by Plath's "murderous irony."¹⁰⁸

A second reading of the poem leaves the reader with no doubt about the speaker's ironic language; as if she is mocking the phallogentrism of religious texts and patriarchal cultures. By shedding her mirroring/metaphorical self, the woman is casting off her fake self and acquiring a true self with an authentic voice, a self that has been kept latent within the literal and metaphorical purdahs. According to Winnicott, the true self, the authentic and vital self, which often remains totally or partially hidden, is that spontaneous, instinctive core of one's personality; the one that can be creative. On the other hand, the false self is a mask used to defend the true self from environmental and social threats. This false self is developed in compliant adaptation to external demands, codes and rules and in line with the person's attempts to relate to others. The existence of the false self continually disturbs the person with feelings of unreality and futility.¹⁰⁹ At the end of the poem, the persona accumulates enough power to murder the false self—the self burdened with the image of a decorative object, an angel, a doll incarcerated within the purdah.

Now that the woman kills her oppressive husband, and together with it her false self, she can overthrow patriarchy's hierarchical system and its enforcement of the mirroring function on women. Not only has the female persona liberated herself from her subdued position by achieving self-awareness and a consciousness of the source of injurious oppression, but she has also done so by violently asserting that self; by acting out what Butler calls "theatrical rage": "theatrical rage reiterates those injuries precisely through an 'acting out,' one that does not merely repeat or recite those injuries, but that also deploys a hyperbolic display of death and injuries."¹¹⁰

At the beginning of the poem, Plath merely recites and repeats the injuries induced by the historical specular/metaphorical function imposed upon her female subjectivity. Thereafter, she portrays her gradual self-empowerment by the very rejection of that role and ultimately by a hyperbolic display of death, inflicted upon the bridegroom—the source of her oppression and her metaphorization. The metaphorization of the woman into the mirror, enacted by the phallogentric rhetoric of the patriarchal system, in the realm of the imaginary, eventually keeps both masculine and feminine subjects alienated from the Real—the authentic truth of the self.¹¹¹ In the poem "Purdah," Plath is narrating a story of voicelessness

and voiced eloquence, invisibility and stark visibility, oppression and rebellion and ultimately death and killing. By inscribing her personal story and desires within her text, Plath's voice indeed becomes an emancipatory voice of Feminism.

Mother in the Mirror

In her poem "All the Dead Dears," Plath evokes the motif of the mother and female ancestors appearing in one's own mirror. This image transposition can occur when the female subject is dealing with her anxiety over the passage of time and its accompanying degeneration. It may also occur in dealing with her anxious obsession in forging an independent subjectivity, one which is discrete from the mother's. The mother-daughter image dislocation in the mirror is an overt manifestation of the female subject's mental and emotional struggle in tearing herself away from the mighty hold of her mother (and female ancestors). "All the Dead Dears" was written in 1957 when Plath was an undergraduate student in England. The poem is considered by Butscher as "one of the few genuine masterpieces from the late stages of her relentless apprenticeship," and a prime example of Plath's technical craftsmanship in dealing with a serious theme of personal obsession.¹¹² In a letter to her mother, dated 8 April 1957 Plath writes, "I just yesterday finished one of my best, about 56 lines, called 'All the Dead Dears.'"¹¹³ The poem was inspired by Plath's visit to a fourth-century A.D. stone coffin on public display in the Archaeological Museum in Cambridge. Plath begins the poem with this explanatory note:

In the Archaeological Museum in Cambridge is a stone coffin of the fourth century A.D. containing the skeletons of a woman, a mouse and a shrew. The ankle-bone of the woman has been slightly gnawn.¹¹⁴

The first stanza contains a picturesque description of the contents of the coffin in the museum—a heterotopic site of time dislocation. And time, together with its devouring ruination, remains the controlling theme all through the poem:

Rigged poker-stiff on her back
With a granite grin
This antique museum-cased lady

Lies, companioned by the gimcrack
 Relics of a mouse and a shrew
 That battened for a day on her ankle-bone.

These three, unmasked now, bear
 Dry witness
 To the gross eating game
 We'd wink at if we didn't hear
 Stars grinding, crumb by crumb,
 Our own grist down to its bony face.¹¹⁵

Only now that, within the space of a museum, the veil of life and its absurdity are stripped from these three pathetic skeletons, we can observe the denuded, bitter reality, the ongoing devouring and “grinding” destruction of time. These three skeletons now bear naked witness to the reality of an illusion, the illusion of life. The skeletons in themselves function as a mirror through which the persona confronts the reality of her mortality. Once the veil of illusion is cast off in the form of these skeletons, the narrator is confronted with the excruciating reality of the brutal universality of death, depicted thus:

How they grip us through thin and thick,
 These barnacle dead!
 This lady here's no kin
 Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck
 Blood and whistle my marrow clean
 To prove it. As I think now of her head,

From the mercury-backed glass
 Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother
 Reach hag hands to haul me in,¹¹⁶

Although there is no affinity between the I-speaker of the poem and the dead lady lying in her coffin, paradoxically, she discovers a kinship between herself and the lady, who is going to pass her death onto her. At this point in the poem, Plath bridges the glass behind which the skeleton is kept to the glass of her own private mirror, both functioning as spatiotemporal heterotopian sites. The speaker oscillates between these two kinds of glass—the museum glass case and her mirror—to summon up the connection. On the

surface of her private mirror an image dislocation takes place. Her mirror, as Foucault demonstrated, is both a utopian space, “fundamentally unreal,” and a heterotopian one.¹¹⁷ The persona visualizes herself drawn into a virtual space with the help of a mirror; a space where she is currently absent, a space that constitutes the realm of her dead ancestors; therefore, it becomes utopian. Like a sanctuary, a cemetery or a museum, the mirror is a heterotopic site. All these places are real places; they are “counter-sites,” pertinent to her present spatiotemporal position where the “outlaws” abide.¹¹⁸ It is interesting to note that necromancers use a black mirror or Claude glass for conjuring up, visualizing and communicating with dead souls.¹¹⁹

Bridging the real with the imaginary, the mirror maintains a hybrid site of the exterior world and the inner psychic one—the *Umwelt* and the *Innenwelt*. The kinship that the persona (and by extension the poet) senses with the dead lady in the coffin, as well as the witch-like appearance of the images of her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother on the surface of her mirror, point to the homogenous identity she is forced to reproduce by society’s narrow definition of womanhood. The apparition of one’s mother within the mirror marks the unformulated implacable destiny awaiting the daughter. With their hag hands, these female ancestors resemble witches. They hover as Medusa figures which Christodoulides terms “abject.”¹²⁰

In psychology it has been suggested time and again that the daughter is unceasingly involved in a fight against the mother figure—the figure held to be an adversary in the Symbolic. The daughter vehemently resents her engulfment by the mother and her paralysing hold on her. She struggles to reject any identification with the mother whatsoever.¹²¹ In the poem “All the Dead Dears,” the persona reveals her “matrophobic fears” through mirror imagery—the fear of a continual merging of the ego boundaries between herself and her mother, as well as between herself and other women sharing the same inevitable fate and forced to reproduce the same life story. Christodoulides asserts, “the speaking persona, the phobic girl, is afraid of all mother figures; she is afraid of sharing the same fate as her female ancestors, and feels that she is unable to do anything to change such a fate.”¹²²

The mirror in the process turns into a tool of personal apocalyptic prophecies; now it is the witch’s crystal ball inviting the onlooker to communal homogeneity. Due to the mirror’s essence as a temporal palimpsest which can remind us of the passage of time by revealing the incessant alterations on its surface, it has been regarded by many women as the site for this fearful ageing process. For them, mirrors function as “terrible rooms,” as Plath says

in her poem “The Courage of Shutting-Up.” Within these mirroring rooms, “a torture goes on one can only watch./ The face that lived in this mirror is the face of a dead man.”¹²³ In fact, mirrors themselves have been considered by many female authors to be the very cause of ageing and its concomitant degeneration: “Mirrors can kill and talk,” Plath notes in the aforementioned poem.¹²⁴ Or the mirror becomes a place where tenacious old age and death lurk. While in her forties, de Beauvoir wrote, “Deep in that looking glass, old age is watching and waiting for me; and it’s inevitable, one day she’ll get me.”¹²⁵

As the poem “All the Dead Dears” proceeds in the next lines, the persona once again annexes the glass surface of her mirror to another reflecting surface; that is, to the surface of the water. Turning away from the mother and the female ancestors in the glass case, this time the speaker identifies with the distorted and indistinct image of her father in the depths of the water:

And an image looms under the fishpond surface
Where the daft father went down
With orange duck-feet winnowing his hair—¹²⁶

Plath’s anxious relationship with both her mother and her father is explicitly presented in this poem, the poem which Lane aptly describes as “Freudean Gothic.”¹²⁷ In the Jungian reading of the lines, water symbolizes her subconscious/unconsciousness, in the depths of which she is haunted by the image of her father. Plath considered her father’s death “a ‘deliberate’ act of betrayal,” because he had not sought medical treatment for his diabetes until it was too late, and because he had failed to provide for his family financially after his death.¹²⁸ In an effort to save his life, the father’s leg had to be amputated but he died a few months later. In this poem, and in the poem “Mirror,” Plath demonstrates that she was influenced to a large extent by Jung’s passage where he explains:

Whoever looks into the water sees his own image, but behind it living creatures soon loom up; fishes, presumably, harmless dwellers of the deep—harmless, if only the lake were not haunted. They are water-beings of a peculiar sort. Sometimes a nixie gets into the fisherman’s net, a female, half-human fish. Nixies are entrancing creatures The nixie is an even more instinctive version of a magical feminine being whom I call the *anima*.¹²⁹

The following stanza further reveals the persona's obsession with death and how it will take hold of living beings in unanticipated moments:

All the long gone darlings: they
 Get back, though, soon,
 Soon: be it by wakes, weddings,
 Childbirths or a family barbecue:
 Any touch, taste, tang's
 Fit for those outlaws to ride home on,¹³⁰

Finally, in the concluding stanza, Plath explicitly articulates the central theme of her poem: the time that devours everything; the Ovidian *Tempus edax rerum* (time, devourer of all things), or the Shakespearean "Devouring Time."¹³¹ Like the lady's skeleton in the museum, each one of us, easily fooled into the absurdity of life while alive, will be summoned and seized by death at any moment, just when life's cycle has set off somewhere else:

And to sanctuary: usurping the armchair
 Between tick
 And tack of the clock, until we go,
 Each skulled-and-crossboned Gulliver
 Riddled with ghosts, to lie
 Deadlocked with them, taking root as cradles rock.¹³²

"All the Dead Dears" portrays the persona's (and the poet's by extension) ambivalent feelings towards the mother-daughter bond: her post-infantile anxiety as well as her inner desire to return to the realm of the imaginary and identification with the mother. On the one hand, the female subject fears merging her identity with that of her mother/foremothers and losing her very own authentic image and voice. On the other hand, the lines of the poem hint at the persona's inner desire to reconstruct "the mother-child dyad" which once existed prior to the mirror stage and which Kristeva describes as "the voiced breath that fastens us to an undifferentiated mother."¹³³ Schwartz and Bollas interpret the desire underlying Plath's self-destructive behaviour and her many suicide attempts as her desire for:

turning back to a maternal space to find the father when the sources of fatherhood in the outside world seem depleted. That is, the search for

merger with the dead father who, in fantasy, resides inside mother's body is the last alternative.¹³⁴

Plath chose the same title, "All the Dead Dears," for one of her short stories, which is based on her first visit in 1956 to her parents-in-law at their house, The Beacon. At the time, Ted Hughes's father, Billie Hughes, and his mother, Edith Farrar, provided Plath with the initial sketches for her characters, Clifford and Nellie Meehan.¹³⁵ The story shares with the eponymous poem the theme of a dead woman taking another woman with her to the abode of the dead. One evening in the house of Mr. and Mrs. Meehan, accompanied by their two guests, they become involved in a roll call of their dead relatives and acquaintances. The story begins with Mrs. Meehan's claim that she has seen her dead sister. She admits to having sensed and seen other dead people, too, whom she calls "*presences*," at times coming back and waiting for them.¹³⁶ At the end of the evening, when everybody else has left, Mrs. Meehan recognizes the apparition of a dead woman, the previous owner of the house, informing her that her time has arrived.

In both the verse and prose versions of "All the Dead Dears," the central female persona comes into contact, and gets involved in an ambivalent dialogue, with her female precursors. The dialogue of the female author with the ghosts of her female ancestors carries immense literary significance. Based on Harold Bloom's theory of "The Anxiety of Influence," Gilbert and Gubar have developed their own gender-differentiated theory of "The Anxiety of Authorship." Gilbert and Gubar discuss that Bloom's theory is based on the male-dominated and male-oriented literary tradition. Therefore, for the anxious female author, the immediate question is not that of the direct or indirect influence of literary "forefathers," but how she can gain enough self-confidence to write and to contemplate her position as an author within this male-dominated literary tradition. Whereas in Bloom's model, male authors are involved in competition and aggression with other literary figures for being self-consciously influenced as well as for desiring to be influential, the woman author feels a "secret sisterhood" with her female literary role models for showing her that she can write. In Plath's works, too, the female persona's coming into contact with her "fore-mothers" may indicate the author's "Anxiety of Authorship." Plath reaches back for her literary fore-mothers to establish a literary identification, a sort of "secret sisterhood."¹³⁷

The Monstrous Degeneration Lurking in the Mirror

The mantic power of the mirror evokes an *unheimlich* or uncanny otherness on its surface which appalls the female onlooker. The mirror can give the keen observer an inkling of her future, her ageing and the ineluctable destiny she will share with her female ancestors through the image of the mother emerging in the daughter's mirror. Apart from the mother-daughter image dislocation, female authors have resorted to other exaggerated grotesqueries and animal imageries in depicting their apprehension of ageing and its accompanying physical and mental degeneration. One of the most extensively discussed poems by Sylvia Plath depicting the complex reciprocity of female subject and her specular image is the 1961 poem entitled "Mirror." As suggested by its title, the mirror is of nexus significance for the narrating persona, the textual "I," and for its poet. The mirror in this poem speaks; it has a distinct voice and exerts an excessive controlling power over the female persona, while the woman, on the other hand, is rendered mute and voiceless. The whole poem, containing only two stanzas, is presented through the perspective of the mirror in the first person pronoun I. The pronoun I is repeated ten times in this rather short poem, thereby emphasizing the narrator's deep involvement with her subjectivity. This I begins the poem in an assertive mode, indicating the cardinal centrality of the mirror as a subject-speaker and its independent identity. This poem is a proof of Plath's dramatic ability; she is able to project herself into any persona—even an inanimate one. The vigorous and imposing agency of Plath's mirror stands in harsh contradiction to the passive and silent objectivity of mirrors in general. On the other hand, the mirror's obsessive concern with itself echoes its author's almost Narcissus-like concerns with herself.

The language and the tone of the mirror persona is that of self-defence; as if the mirror is arguing to prove its own innocence against the ambiguous feelings of the woman towards it. The mirror claims to be veracious, exact and sans preconception in contrast to the woman, who seems to be encumbered with preconceptions. The mirror seems to claim tacitly, it is not me the mirror, but the woman, who is posing. Being utterly devoid of preconceptions also means that the mirror has, in Kroll's words, "a pure and enlightened mind," a mind which the woman undoubtedly lacks.¹³⁸ Likewise, the language the mirror persona adopts is clear and precise.

I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
 Whatever I see I swallow immediately
 Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.¹³⁹

In the metapoetic interpretation of her poem as a mirror, Plath is struggling to achieve an exact language free of any preconceptions. The mirror claims to be omnivorous, feeding on everything that comes within its domain. All the while it remains unjudgemental, cool and untouched by any sort of feeling. Through anthropomorphization, the mirror gains immense power over the objectified woman. It has the ability to swallow, to meditate, to look, to think, to see and, above all, to speak. Yet, despite the mirror's enormous power, particularly over the woman, it claims not to have abused this power, as if exonerating itself from the woman's censure of cruelty: "I am not cruel, only truthful—/The eye of a little god, four-cornered."¹⁴⁰

While the woman's ability to practise a veracious and objective self-analysis is to a large extent hampered by her preconceptions, the mirror, on the other hand, is equipped with what Axelrod calls, the "Freudian means of objective self-analysis."¹⁴¹ The mirror's impersonal dispassion and aloof objectivity give it titanic power and the opportunity for cruelty. The mirror can devour everything and see everything. For the female beholder, the mirror holds infinite knowledge within its frame; the knowledge that raises the mirror to the status of a god in her eyes. The mirror-god knows everything about her and can tell her all. This mirror is a descendant of the magical omniscient mirrors that recur in literature, whose infinite knowledge transcends the borders of time and space. It is reminiscent of the villainous stepmother's mirror in the story of Snow White or the mantic crystal balls of witches. Unlike the woman who depends so much on her mirror for the image it reiterates, the mirror, like the god, does not need any mirror image. On the god-like status of the mirror for women, La Belle observes:

The radical exactness and objectivity of the mirror generate its value as a corrective for the subjectivity that women bring to the glass. It is indeed a "god" elevated above the mortal world, its serene silence broken only by utterances of absolute truth and enormous rhetorical potency.¹⁴²

Plath evokes the topos of the omniscient mirror in a similar sense once again in her 1962 poem "Berck-Plage," this time ironically. In the third part of this poem, the persona introduces a partially knowledgeable surgeon in these terms:

... and this is the surgeon:
One mirrory eye—

A facet of knowledge.¹⁴³

Folsom argues that the surgeon's impersonal, mirrory eye is only "a facet of knowledge," because he is "capable of mending broken bodies, but by implication incapable of mending broken souls."¹⁴⁴

In the poem "Mirror," the mirror persona proceeds by reflecting upon itself in the following words:

Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.¹⁴⁵

In these lines, the wall opposite the mirror has also been anthropomorphized. It has the colour of a human face—pink with freckles, apparently the attributes of the woman. The mirror and the woman constantly trade places: where the mirror has been anthropomorphized, the woman has been dehumanized, depersonalized and defined in terms of a wall. This also marks the shift in power, implying how the mirror is controlling the woman and her life.

The lifelong dialogue and interaction between this woman-wall and her mirror-god have made them exceptionally intimate and loving. Internalizing whatever exists in the outside world, the mirror introjects the wall and the face of the woman into itself, as the woman introjects the images on the mirror into her own subjectivity. By seeing and internalizing everything outside itself, the mirror incorporates them into its heart. Therefore, it turns from silver into pink with freckles. In Western culture, *Speculum sine macula*, a mirror without spots, invariably epitomizes the Virgin Mary, her Immaculate Conception and her perpetual virginity. Thereupon, one might infer that the woman in Plath's poem is a normal, fallible woman, tarnished with her sins and faults.

Claiming to have a heart is another emphasis on the mirror's anthropomorphized identity. The image in the mirror is not fixed; it is marked by the cycles of presence and absence, a quality that makes it a lunar symbol. While the sun has always been considered golden, the moon, like the mirror, is invariably regarded as silver.¹⁴⁶ Plath herself draws upon this mirror-moon

association in her other poems. In “Lorelei,” the full moon is called “bland mirror-sheen,” and in “Purdah,” the mirror-woman claims the moon to be her cousin.¹⁴⁷

In the second stanza of the poem “Mirror,” the mirror metamorphoses into a lake, still maintaining its reflecting feature. Here the woman intrudes for the first time: “Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,/Searching my reaches for what she really is.”¹⁴⁸ The reflecting power of the water has made it a mirror symbol. In her 1959 poem “Dark Wood, Dark Water,” Plath employs the phrase “mirror of water.”¹⁴⁹ In psychology, lakes and waters have been interpreted as symbolizing the unconscious. It is pertinent to note that the lake has often been associated with silver in literature.¹⁵⁰ The mirror-lake is, for the woman, not only a means of introjection but one of introspection over which she leans for self-contemplation as well as for a chance at revelation. The woman peers into this lake-mirror, searching for her real identity and true self. She fixes her gaze on these reflecting surfaces not only for an observation of her exterior or her visible appearance, but also for the revelation of her innermost invisibilities. Indeed, the mirror’s interiority can reveal the psychic inner states to its sentient beholders.

To her disillusionment, the woman faces the cruelty of a truth which she cannot bear. She therefore turns to mendacious reflectors—the candles and the moon: “Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon./I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.”¹⁵¹ Candles and the moon, like the mirror and the lake, reflect light, but they do not reflect things and the cruelty of their truth as they are. Therefore, they are called liars by the mirror-lake-persona. The pale quality of their light and their inability to shed full light on objects cause the candle and the moon to be associated with fancy and imagination. They are indeed delusory by virtue of giving a false sense of brilliance not belonging to the original object. As Kroll argues, the moon’s “light softens and romanticizes what it illuminates.”¹⁵² Plath herself explicitly mentions this delusive nature of the moon in her juvenile poem, “Moonsong at Morning” in these terms: “O moon of illusion,/enchanting men.”¹⁵³

The woman turns her back on the visible and invisible inner reality of her self emerging on the surface of her mirror. The mirror, unaffected by the woman’s faithless move, continues to reflect her back faithfully. In response to her reflected image, the hands of the woman become agitated, probably in an effort to wipe away her tears, to hide her facial blemishes (by applying make-up) or to smooth out the facial wrinkles and the other signs of ageing.

The mirror is capable of exerting extreme power over the woman all through her life. It can make her anxious or cry:

She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.¹⁵⁴

Significantly, the mirror of this poem elicits only negative feelings from the woman: tears or agitation. There is no trace of joyous feelings; or perhaps they are so superficial, short-lived and trivial that they do not deserve to be reported by the mirror. Therefore, it is impossible to infer from the lines that the woman turns to her mirror for the gratification of her vanity, in a way in which female characters of the male-authored, emblematic traditional texts have been constantly and exclusively depicted; far from it. The mirror-lake is well aware of how essential the specular reflection is for the woman's sense of selfhood. Furthermore, the mirror knows that it plays a crucial role in her ineluctable destiny, in the context where she is judged and evaluated only on the basis of her visible appearance, presentable *in toto* in the mirror. The woman begins her days by looking at herself in this mirror. A young woman has been drowned/swallowed in this mirror-lake and an old woman, "a terrible fish," springs into existence: "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman/Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish."¹⁵⁵

The mirror remains the only truthful and faithful life-long companion of the woman, from the time she was a young girl until her old age. The poem reveals a profoundly intimate and symbiotic relationship that exists between the woman and her mirror. The mirror exercises an overwhelming power over the woman. It controls her feelings and her fate. It is within the mirror's frame that the woman attempts to gain self-awareness and self-definition. The shift of agency and power from the woman to her mirror is depicted through a shift in attributes. The mirror is anthropomorphized while the woman is *dehumanized*. It enjoys an assertive individuality and voice while the woman suffers from depersonalization and muteness. The woman introjects the projected image on the mirror in the same way as the mirror claims to introject everything within its domain. The mirror truthfully reveals to the woman her invisible interiority and her visible alterations; the signs of her caducity and the irreversible degeneration, portrayed through the abject image of "a terrible fish."

The theme of “a young girl” turning into “an old woman,” as well as the phrases like “comes and goes” and “day after day” convey a crushing sense of time, dominant in the poem. Forebodings of her growing old, degeneration and death force the woman to turn her back faithlessly on the mirror. In the concluding stanza of Plath’s 1961 poem “Face Lift,” the female narrator, recovering from cosmetic surgery, expresses her extreme aversion to the physical degeneration, capturable within her mirror, in these words:

Now she’s done for, the dewlapped lady
 I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror—
 Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg.
 They’ve trapped her in some laboratory jar.
 Let her die there, or wither incessantly for the next fifty years,¹⁵⁶

The uncanny grotesquery of the woman, her abjectness, the consequence of her growing old and her physical degeneration are removed from the surface of her looking glass and relocated in another glass object—the laboratory jar.

More than being a heterotopic space, where a young girl is replaced with an agitated, crying woman and ultimately with an old woman, “a terrible fish,” the mirror is indeed a temporal space, governed by *Zeitlichkeit*. The mirror promotes the summoning of the past, present and future simultaneously within a single act of looking. Furthermore, the anthropomorphization of the mirror facilitates the relocation of the blatant human attribute, that is its *Zeitlichkeit*, within its luminous surface. The mirror is in fact a slate for the registration of time and its enforced alterations. Like the devouring time of Plath’s poem, “All the Dead Dears,” the temporal mirror of “Face Lift” becomes devouring, too; sharing the recurrent topos of *Tempus edax rerum*. This mirror likewise “swallows” and “drowns” everything. Any time the woman turns to her mirror, it is an attempt at re-identification. She tries to trace the alterations from her last consultation of the mirror, while at the same time attempting to foresee coming alterations. Though her previous self is dead, swallowed/drowned in the mirror-lake or incarcerated in a laboratory jar, its apprehensive memory lingers on in her mind and in her mirror’s reflecting surface. The woman’s confrontation with the mirror is, therefore, laden with her past memories, her present status and her anticipated future, capturing the *Zeitlichkeit* of her human essence. Having in mind past images while observing her present state, the woman conceives in her imagination her future face. Therefore, the mirror, like the witch’s

globe, is for her prophetic. By revealing things that are not literally present, things that transcend her present physical appearance, the mirror becomes for her a very important site on which she depends for its divine god-like knowledge. For a sense of self-hood and self-continuance, the woman lives on the mirror's prophesies.

In Freudian psychology, the lake is identified as a symbol of unconsciousness, while fish are regarded as the "'live' material from the depths of the personality, relating to fertility and the life-giving powers of the 'maternal' realms within us."¹⁵⁷ In a Jungian reading of the poem "Mirror," Timmerman maintains that the woman's confrontation with the fish within the mirror-water is actually her confrontation with the "unconscious self" and "the reality of her true nature."¹⁵⁸ Furthermore, Timmerman asserts Jung's invariable association of fish with femininity, "the mythic variations employed by Jung associate the fish with feminine nature, which Jung names in his quaternity as the *anima*, the unconscious, feminine self."¹⁵⁹ Thus, in the Jungian approach, the "terrible fish" stands for one's anima, shadow, or his demonic self; indeed a Hydean alter ego that rises to the surface of consciousness from the depths of the subconsciousness/unconsciousness. Timmerman draws attention to the "forceful parallelism" between Plath's poem and Jung's analysis of the reality of the shadow in his *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*.¹⁶⁰

Through her image of the "terrible fish," Plath depicts a monstrosity within the mirror by resorting to the inherent otherness of the mirror image. Reader and writer share this knowledge that the mirror image cannot be equated with the entity in front of it. Plath uses her artistic imagination to push this otherness to an extreme. This otherness is also confirmed with the reversing quality of the mirror. As Cooper observes, the mirror is "the gateway to the realm of inversion."¹⁶¹ The woman is further dehumanized in terms of a "terrible fish," having neither the body nor the soul of a human. For Freedman, on the other hand, the woman's monstrosity is a picture of her autonomy and "assertive selfhood" in her struggle to define and to express herself.¹⁶² In defiance of patriarchal dictates, the woman-mirror tries to develop a voice of her own to tell her own story. Freedman argues:

To tell one's own story, even if it is, as it must be, the story of absence and effacement is to establish a presence and to display, perhaps for the first time, the face behind the angelic silver mask.¹⁶³

Plath's frightening image of the "terrible fish," a Medusan figure, has been linked to her desire not to comply with the image of the silent woman, just as the abhorrence of Medusa has been linked, by some critics, to Medusa's being voiced.¹⁶⁴

Many female authors have reported their horrible confrontation with an uncanny otherness or a monster within their mirrors. The artistic productivity of the female writer, where silent mothering is regarded as the only acceptable and advocated creative outlet for a woman, transfigures the Angel in the House into a monstrous creature. Having a voice and not reiterating the homogeneous images of womanhood forced on them results in these women being cast as grotesque monsters, feared and repelled by their culture. Time and again this grotesquery relocates itself in the women's private mirror, inciting immense terror and desperation. Johnson, in her *A World of Difference*, argues, "It is as though male writing were by nature procreative while female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal," that is, the most horrible crime one can commit.¹⁶⁵ Ultimately, the symmetrical, mirror-like structure of the poem "Mirror" has been considered "catoptric" for its simultaneous description of the mirror's properties and for its exemplifying it in the poem's structure.¹⁶⁶

The Promising Mirror

In the poems studied above, the mirror is a surface into which the female onlooker introspectively peers to gain a consciousness of self, but time and again she comes up with bitter disillusionment. The mirror has not only been the location of these negative transfigurations, but it was actually endowed with a power to initiate these transfigurations. This was enforced mainly by the mirror's temporal and spatial dislocating feature. By its overwhelming power over the woman, the mirror repeatedly terrified or upset her.

The only poem of Plath's in which the mirror's inimical feature is reversed and the persona ultimately comes up with an appealing, solacing image is her juvenilia poem "On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover." In this poem the mirror is metaphorized into the eyes of a demon lover and his black scorching pupils. This mirror-eye, like Medusa's eye, damages the onlooker, turning "each lovely lady" into a cripple, making her a disabled passive creature:

Here are two pupils
 whose moons of black
 transform to cripples
 all who look:

each lovely lady
 who peers inside
 take on the body
 of a toad.¹⁶⁷

The mirror and the moon, the passive reflectors, are paired here once again. The moon-mirror cripples and transforms every female onlooker into a toad, a creature traditionally viewed as demonic. The woman turned into a toad in her mirror is a precedent for the woman transfigured into “a terrible fish” in the water-mirror of the poem “Mirror.” Pupils resembling “moons of black,” “scorching glass” and “furnace” are employed here as a different metaphor for the mirror. The eye-mirror transfigures the bodies of the lovely ladies into the bodies of toads and into cripples.

The eye-mirror inverts the world, turning back the lover’s burning gaze “to injure/the thrusting hand.” It “inflames to danger/the scarlet wound”; it scorches, and finally chars the exquisite features of the female onlookers. The inverting feature of the mirror, its deceptive metonymic/metaphoric feature, and the inherent otherness of the specular image threaten to trap the lovely ladies within their vanity and solipsistic self-love, ultimately leading to their downfall and total destruction:

Within these mirrors
 the world inverts:
 the fond admirer’s
 burning darts

turn back to injure
 the thrusting hand
 and inflame to danger
 the scarlet wound.¹⁶⁸

In traditional Christian culture, once the mirror fails to be a space for the manifestation of God or his divine truth, it invariably becomes a medium for the devil. The mirror draws the person into the vertigo of his flesh

and into the physical world of appearances. By supplying the imagination with illusions, mirages and thus desires, the mirror turns into the most convenient tool in the hands of the guileful Satan and his servant witches and sorceresses. Melchior-Bonnet discusses the association of the woman at her mirror with demonic forces in these terms: “Woman thus personified the disorders of the soul, and by looking at herself in the mirror, she always played the devil’s game: either she gave in to his temptations or, possessed, she sheltered a demon in her heart.”¹⁶⁹ Therefore, the tight association of the woman’s mirror and the demon remains inextricable.

The witch’s mirror has the power to invert; it is not only the reversal of the left and right sides, but also the inversion of the whole world. As Maillet explains, “The great satanic principle so well understood by witches consists in inverting, reverting, overturning everything invested by the sacred world.”¹⁷⁰ One of the etymological meanings of the word “reflect” is “to turn back to.” Hence, the specular reflection would be injuring, endangering for the “lovely lady” who indulges in self-admiration within the mirror. Women’s visible beauty and their narcissistic loving obsessions with their specular images within the demonic eyes of their mirrors have been recounted as the root of their downfall. Nevertheless, the textual “I” claims, in the poem, that she is not afraid of looking into the mirror, because she is not a “lovely lady.” She is a “witch”; and, therefore, immune to her own tools; the mirror cannot damage her:

I sought my image
in the scorching glass,
for what fire could damage
a witch’s face?¹⁷¹

Witches have frequently been known to use curved mirrors or mirror balls as their tool for seeing the otherwise invisible and forbidden spirits or forbidden worlds. These curved mirrors have traditionally been associated with devils and demonic forces. Maillet reports:

Mirrors, which are supposed to celebrate the epiphany of vision, are used against nature—that is, against settled expectations—according to diabolical principles that make of them the devil’s dark and illusory traps. Witches, always a subversive force, recuperate convex mirrors, whose dim reflections lend themselves to all sorts of troubling

phantasmagoria, for their éclat bewitches and blinds anyone who looks at them.¹⁷²

The disorder or subversiveness in the persona's nature makes her consider herself a witch, as all subversive women have been culturally stigmatized. The concave side of the spherical mirror can concentrate the rays of the sun. When intensified sufficiently, these rays can set fire to anything inflammable. Therefore, they are also called "burning mirrors." This mirror, as well as the curved pupil, can burn her face; or it can "afflict painfully with censure or sarcasm," as the other meaning of "scorch" denotes.¹⁷³

The question the speaker poses here is a rhetorical one; not inquiring after any information, but rather acknowledging it on the part of the speaker as well as the reader. It is taken for granted that the speaker and reader jointly agree that no fire can ever damage a witch's face. The belief that witches cannot be burned is further corroborated by the two concluding lines of the poem, where the female persona is confronted by an exquisite image in her mirror. Contrary to her forebodings, however, the speaker encounters in her mirror an image which is a symbol of love and beauty—the Roman goddess, Venus, whose beauty was believed to surpass that of all other goddesses and who used to move in "radiant" beauty.

So I stared in that furnace
 where beauties char
 but found radiant Venus
 reflected there.¹⁷⁴

The persona dauntlessly stares at her image in the burning mirror, the site where beauties are burned. This is the only case in Plath's poems where a female subject turns to her mirror without having any doubt, apprehension or anxiety. Dictionaries provide us with another meaning for "char" beside that of "to burn," and that is "to work as a cleaning woman."¹⁷⁵ While expecting to come up, within her mirror, with a demonic reflection of herself, an image of a witch as the female arch-subversive figure, probably due to her aspirations to move beyond the char-work of domesticity or probably due to her involvement in writing, the speaker comes up instead with the figure of Venus, known for her radiant beauty. Jinghua provides us with an intertextual reading of the poem:

The projection of this dauntless self in poetry can be read as a visual representation of her famous “I am I” and “the girl who wanted to be God” declaration of adolescent independence in her 1949 diary, which subsequently presents her altering perceptions of both the beautiful and the flawed image she sees when looking into the mirror.¹⁷⁶

Through her juxtaposition of abject figures of spinsters, sorceresses, witches, hags, as well as terrible fish and toads on the one hand, and simple girls, virgins, young girls, lovely ladies and Venus on the other, Plath presents a conspectus of her culture’s stereotyping of womanhood into the dichotomy of the angel and the monster, leaving no space in between. Through her use of mirror imagery, Plath not only portrays this binary opposition, the conflict *between* knowable entities—what Johnson calls the “difference *between*”—but also unveils the “difference *within*,” the cryptic duality *within* the self as one entity, the idea of this oneness problematized by this very difference.¹⁷⁷ In Plath’s portrayal of “difference *within*,” the reader as well as the poet is confronted with an unknown presence, a frightening stranger, something indefinable, unnamed, and thereby monstrous. This is exactly what Freud calls the *Unheimlich*, the uncanny, while arguing that the fluidity between the two counter-terms, canny and uncanny, is the core of their meaning. The monstrous other, the stranger, the witch, mother, fish, and toad, as well as Venus, that the female subject encounters within her mirror—and that encounter shocks her because she finds it unfamiliar and incomprehensible—represents nothing less than the uncanny version of herself. Freud elucidates:

It may be true that the uncanny [*unheimlich*] is something which is secretly familiar [*heimlich-heimlich*], which has undergone repression and then returned from it, and that everything that is uncanny fulfils this condition.¹⁷⁸

Plath’s persona of the witch in this poem is a Medusan figure; a frightening, repressed and oppressed figure whose dark continent—the selfhood knowable through the mirror—should remain unexplored. Plath, just like Cixous in “The Laugh of the Medusa,” dares to look into her self in her introspective eye-mirror in defiance of the warnings and, contrary to her expectations, she comes across an exquisite image. Cixous writes, “You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she’s not deadly. She’s beautiful and she’s laughing.”¹⁷⁹ The woman’s power and voice once—and still—feared as

threatening and thereby repressed in the ossified and ossifying figures of Medusa and witches should no longer remain unexplored. Women should dare to look into their own images within their mirrors. These mirrors are maps that will guide them through their fears and through the depths of their frozen rage into the sources of their power.

Child as a Mirror

Plath associates one's offspring with a reflecting surface—water or the mirror—in her poems “You're,” “Morning Song,” “For a Fatherless Son,” “Brasilia” and “Child,” two of which will be studied in this work.¹⁸⁰ In her poem “Morning Song,” composed in 1961, Plath provides a detailed narration of her giving birth and the ensuing maternity experience from a first person perspective. Apostrophizing her daughter, Frieda Rebecca Hughes, born on 1 April 1960, Plath draws a clear analogy between the child and the mirror. The poem was written when Frieda was about ten months old. It begins with the word “love” as the initiating force of the baby's life. Nevertheless, this life is itself described in mechanical terms, encumbered with time, and proceeding within antithetical elements:

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.¹⁸¹

The baby's heartbeat is described in terms of the tick-tock of a fat gold watch; an extremely precious premium for the mother. The midwife guides the baby, by slapping the soles of her feet, through the threshold of life among the ever-warring elements—mainly constitutive and atmospheric.¹⁸² The baby assertively claims her place among these elements by an elaborate “bald cry.” Though the life of this new-born infant is set in motion by the force of love, the stanzas that follow reveal that her coming into existence is enmeshed in *angst* and foreboding, not only for herself but for her parents as well; it poses a threat to their safety and peacefulness. The parents are overwhelmed by her birth. They are transformed into baffled, speechless, inactive walls. The simile also marks the parents' anxious feelings of alienated detachment towards this new creation as well as their “emotional frigidity and dread,” to quote Middlebrook's terms.¹⁸³

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.
 In a drafty museum, your nakedness
 Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.¹⁸⁴

The parents' voices echo, aurally mirroring and magnifying the cry of their baby. The baby is a new creation; a "new statue" in the desolate museum exposed to a hostile atmospheric element—the wind. Her nakedness is regarded as frightening to the parents, since it directly exposes the baby to the elements—unmediated and unshielded. Through an extended metaphor, the mother compares her new-born child to a mirror, and herself to a cloud. The mother-cloud distills itself forming a puddle—the child-mirror—on whose surface the mother's effacement is reflected.

I'm no more your mother
 Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
 Effacement at the wind's hand.¹⁸⁵

Now that the baby has been born, the mother persona claims that she is "no more" her mother; the placenta, their biological link, has been severed and she is discrete and separate. In this extended metaphor, running through the entire stanza, Plath returns to the atmospheric elements mentioned in the first stanza to depict the nature of her child-mother interaction. The mother-cloud precipitates itself in the form of drops, extracting her essence into that of her child-puddle as mirror, obliterating her own existence in the process. The synecdochic metaphor, "the wind's hand" signifies the passage of time and its forced alterations, particularly in their daughter-mother relationship; their gradual separation as well as degeneration and the ultimate abolition of the self.

Through the process of distillation a kind of detachment is at work; the detachment of the child from the mother's body, marking a deprivation in the sense of wholeness the mother used to feel when they were united during pregnancy. On the other hand, Wisker explains that Plath is here creating "liberating, celebratory images," because through these images the mother speaker can show the reader that the new-born baby is gaining her unique and independent individuality, differentiated from that of her mother, just by being born and leaving her mother's body.¹⁸⁶

The infant, having an imaginary identity with the mother and with no concept of self or the boundaries separating it from the (m)other, is initially living in the Real (in the Lacanian sense). Facilitated particularly

by the mirror in the mirror stage, he will soon be able to differentiate and thereby detach himself from the mother. It leaves the mother with a sense of detachment from her own part and self—a sort of effacement. Nevertheless, the Real will continue to remain, after the mirror stage and even after the acquisition of language (foreshadowed in the poem by the baby’s playing of her notes and vowels), as the irreducible perceptual surplus of outside world that resists being turned into language and entering into the realm of the Symbolic.

The Real exists more conspicuously in the mother-daughter bond where the daughter remains her mother’s visual and aural double—mirroring her image and echoing her voice. To this bond the daughter is going to respond with a display of strong ambivalent feelings. Moreover, by turning into a mirror of the mother, reiterating her effacement, the daughter will undergo the same process of effacement. The mirror employed in the poem “Morning Song” is not an introspective medium, nor an instrument of delusory vanity; it is an imitative mirror reflecting the mutual effacement at work.

In the fourth stanza, the mother recounts how she wakes through the night and listens to the soft feeble breaths of the baby amid the pink roses, reassuring herself that the baby is alive:

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.¹⁸⁷

The baby’s moth-breath flickering reveals the frailty of her life. By the pink roses Plath is probably referring to the patterns of her quilt or the wallpaper which also hints at the baby’s gender. In deprecatory language, the mother describes her attending to the baby devotedly and almost self-effacingly; a single cry from the baby involuntarily activates the mother’s endocrine system, releasing milk. “Cow-heavy” due to carrying the extra weight she gained during her pregnancy and/or because of the milk produced in her breasts:

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s. The window square¹⁸⁸

Moreover, as Bayley observes, cow, for Plath, is often associated with confinement in domestic life.¹⁸⁹ The dawn breaks. It is perceived only within

the limits of “the window square”—a metonymy for the dawn, whose brilliance will swallow all the “dull stars.” The baby is fully awake, babbling and making the first “morning song”:

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.¹⁹⁰

The poem can arguably be classed within the genre of *aubade*; a song greeting the dawn. The mother persona links the first day of her baby’s life to the morning of her own. A new life has begun both for the mother and for the daughter; a life of ambivalent emotions: love and fear, a new creation and effacement in that creation.

Plath returns to the child-as-mirror metaphor in her 1962 poem “Brasilia.” This time, she adopts the mirror as a metaphor for her baby son, Nicholas, who was born on 17 January 1962. At the time of the poem’s composition, Nicholas was barely eleven months old. Two months later Plath took her own life. The poem embeds some ostensibly classical Nietzschean themes. This is corroborated by our knowledge of the fact that Nietzsche exerted an extreme influence on Plath. To reiterate her own words, Plath “devoured” Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* and in a paper called it “our bible of individualism at present.”¹⁹¹ She also incorporated ideas from Nietzsche into her other poems.

In the first two stanzas of “Brasilia,” Plath talks about expressionless people; people who have steel torsos with “Winged elbows and eyeholes.” She talks ironically of these potentially “super-people,” the Nietzschean *Übermensch* or superman—the this-worldly antithesis to God.¹⁹² The winged man contains a multiple allusion. It may allude to the best-known iconic symbol of Zoroastrianism: *Faravahar*, the Achaemenid winged man, the symbol of Ahūrā Mazdā, which is generally taken to represent the human soul. It also represents the “Divine Royal Glory” (*khvarenah*), or the *fravaši* of the king.¹⁹³ On another level, Plath may be alluding to the famous Nazi iconic figure of the winged man with a swastika. Moreover, the winged man may be an allusion to the statue of Christ the Redeemer, now the symbol of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, with its loose sleeves hanging down its sides, resembling wings.

Will they occur,
These people with torsos of steel
Winged elbows and eyeholes

Awaiting masses
 Of cloud to give them expression,
 These super-people!—¹⁹⁴

Plath talks about these supermen waiting for the time to be given expression, thereby implying not only the past winged men, the former super-people, the Zoroastrian *faravahar*, Christ or the Nazis, but also pointing to yet to come super-people, signifying the eternal recurrence in history—another Nietzschean theme. In the following lines Plath introduces her baby son, Nicholas, in terms of a plump baby shrieking:

And my baby a nail
 Driven, driven in.
 He shrieks in his grease

Bones nosing for distances
 And I, nearly extinct,
 His three teeth cutting

Themselves on my thumb—
 And the star,
 The old story.¹⁹⁵

Her baby would be only a nail in the steel torsos of these super people. The depersonalization of these expressionless “super-people” is juxtaposed in sharp contrast to the vulnerable humanity of her baby who has a greasy human body, eloquent expressions and is experiencing pain. He is crying apparently because his bones are growing rapidly, causing him some pain, and because he is also teething and bites on his mother’s thumb in an attempt to soothe this irritation. Here, as in the poem “Morning Song,” the mother persona claims to be experiencing the process of effacement, the annihilation of her own self: “I, nearly extinct.” Then once again the persona returns to the theme of eternal recurrence through her image of “the star,/The old story.”

In the next stanza, the mother persona is confronted with two contradictory elements: sheep and wagons; similar to what she has already depicted in the figure of her baby and the depersonalized super-people. Plath associates the image of sacrificial, innocent sheep with her innocent baby son and wagons with expressionless, steel super-people:

In the lane I meet sheep and wagons,
 Red earth, motherly blood.
 O You who eat

People like light rays, leave
 This one
 Mirror safe, unredeemed

By the dove's annihilation,
 The glory
 The power, the glory.¹⁹⁶

Apostrophizing the powerful, glorious and voracious deity in the form of "O You," the mother speaker pleads with him to spare her baby, to leave him unredeemed. This pleading occurs in a context where the imploring mother has herself already been devoured: "And I, nearly extinct." The ravenous, devouring God of this poem with his insatiable hunger, desiring perpetual sacrifice, conforms to Plath's general image of God, depicted in her other poems. Plath here portrays "the brutality of the Christian universe" with its "intense callousness."¹⁹⁷

The poet's depiction of herself as a mother corresponds to the *mater dolorosa*, lamenting herself into extinction for the coming sacrifice of her son in a future historical cycle, turning the earth red with her "motherly blood."¹⁹⁸ The dove is a symbol surrounded by only positive connotations. It stands for love, spring, simplicity, innocence and the Holy Spirit. It is also a widespread symbol for peace.¹⁹⁹ Hence, the "dove's annihilation" implies the time when innocence is lost, when the Spirit of God is dead and when love and peace are only a distant memory.

Plath employs the metaphor of the mirror now and again to represent her baby. The brilliant clarity of the mirror, its vacuity and its receptivity have been recurrently drawn in literature and theology to represent the original soul and the innocent self untarnished by sin and unmarked by the illusory images provided by demons. This recalls the fact that *speculum sine macula* is one of the popular attributes of the Virgin Mary and her divine child, signifying their immaculate purity. Accordingly, the Virgin Mary gave birth to God's imago and his reflection, Jesus Christ, while she remained untransformed in the process. The mother of the poem "Brasilia" begs the voracious God to spare her baby—already free from sin—from redemption. The mother-child mirroring depicted in Plath's poetry—the mirror being

a metaphor for the poet's offspring or a surface upon which her mother's image is reflected—has destruction, degeneration and self-effacement at its heart.

The Mirror Image Being Identical with the Self

The ambivalent self-substantiating reliance of a woman on her mirror is nowhere more explicitly and aesthetically portrayed than in Sylvia Plath's semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, first published in January 1963 in London under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas. The novel is a chronicle of Plath's struggle with madness and her escape from it at the end of the novel. The protagonist of the novel, Esther Greenwood, corresponding to Sylvia Plath herself, wins a writing contest sponsored by a fashion magazine at the age of nineteen. For her prize she is given a job for a month as a guest editor in New York, where she is psychologically disturbed by the huge amount of obsessive emphasis given to how she and other girls in the company look and should look. How she thinks or how she writes seems to have far less importance than her outward appearance. These girls are systematically reduced to their mere outward appearance, a phenomenon that can be captured *in toto* within the constraints of a mirror.

This cultural structuring of women reduced to their looking glass image is “epitomized,” as La Belle observes, in the various gifts given to these young female writers while they are actually there as apprentices for their later careers and lives.²⁰⁰ Quite early in the novel, among many other gifts of the same sort, Plath meticulously describes the contents of a make-up kit Esther had received from the magazine:

I still have the make-up kit they gave me, fitted out for a person with brown eyes and brown hair: an oblong of brown mascara with a tiny brush, and a round basin of blue eye-shadow just big enough to dab the tip of your fingers in, and three lipsticks ranging from red to pink, all cased in the same little gilt box with a mirror on one side.²⁰¹

On another occasion, at the *Ladies' Day* banquet, the place-cards in the restaurant to which the magazine girls were invited are actually pocket mirrors. Esther's friend, Doreen, is absent that day and Esther saves her place-card for her. Her place-card is “a pocket mirror with ‘Doreen’ painted

along the top of it in lacy script and a wreath of frosted daisies around the edge, framing the silver hole where her face would show.”²⁰² This “silver hole” with her name on top is supposed to be a reminder of who she really is in her totality each time she looks into it. “Hole” is employed here as a metaphor for the mirror; it functions as a window, a threshold to the world outside.

The image on the mirror is what the girl would be presenting to the world outside. The feminine being is reduced to an exteriority, to an image on the mirror’s surface; and, therefore, it constitutes a hole in the structure of her being. It is also interesting to note that the mirror is a gift chosen for the *Ladies’ Day*. These gifts disturb Esther so much that she cannot bear the sight of them; she hides them away for a long time, until such time as she will feel “all right again.”²⁰³ Such gifts indicate one of the patriarchal culture’s structured methods of reducing female subjectivity into a mere outer image, an object of male gaze and desire. The quality and quantity of these “free gifts showering” the girls—lipstick, sunglasses, mascara, eye-shadow and mirror—all suggest that the outward appearance of these girls, presentable through specular reflection, is actually the only thing that counts.²⁰⁴ What remains insignificant and inconsequential is their mental reflection.

Esther is unable to bear the sight of these gifts because she cannot cram her total self within the limited and limiting frame of the mirror. She cannot submit herself to the act of continual self-creation through make-up in order to satisfy the demands of her patriarchal culture. Esther can bring these gifts out only when she thinks she feels well or, to rephrase it, when she feels that she is ready to conform to her society’s categorization of a sane woman who has accepted and follows the normative roles it has thrust upon her. When Esther feels sane and “all right,” she brings out these tools of feminine self-definition and self-creation and puts them to use, but while insane she hides them away. An interpretation in the opposite direction can also be valid. When Esther gets “a kick out of those free gifts” and, as we shall see, when she becomes recurrently unable to identify with her mirror image, culminating in her highly problematic reaction to her self-image on one occasion in the asylum that results in her being denied access to a mirror, she is considered mad.²⁰⁵

A minor character in the novel that best fits into the patriarchal culture’s definition of femininity is Hilda. Hilda is one of the girls residing at the same hotel with Esther in New York. Hilda not only obsessively and slavishly follows fashion, but she is actually “half a year ahead of time.”²⁰⁶ She

makes fashionable hats for herself and always moves “like a mannequin.”²⁰⁷ Bundtzen describes Hilda as:

a mindless mannequin for the stylish hats and other accessories she creates in accord with shifts in fashion (another example of female creative energy channeled into a socially acceptable, and absurdly insignificant, activity).²⁰⁸

During Esther’s long walk with her, Hilda “stared at her reflection in the glossed shop windows as if to make sure, moment by moment, that she continued to exist.”²⁰⁹ Hilda represents a woman who has completely internalized her culture’s masculine conception of woman as an object of gaze, presentable and creatable within the mirror. She has no independent authentic identity of herself; therefore, for her, existence is all that is visible within the mirror. For Hilda, the only way to be reassured of the continuum of her existence is by ceaselessly checking her specular image. The mirror, for her, is anything but introspective or a site for exploration of the self. It is merely a site of exteroception; a utopian site of hallucinated completeness, where she can present this completeness to herself and to the world outside. Like schizophrenic women, as noted by Showalter, Hilda relies on the continual observation of her mirror image as a representation of her “unoccupied bod[y],” and for confirmation of her existence.²¹⁰ Melchior-Bonnet argues, “The world represented in the mirror is curiously neutral in that its image depicts only the appearance of an appearance, a dream existing only as a pale and colorless reality that is uncertain of its existence.”²¹¹

Hilda is representative of all female subjects trapped within their mirrors, in the world of visible appearances, vanity and solipsism. She lives in the terrain of mere visibilities. She represents the patriarchal images of feminine vanity and sheer appearance. Hilda’s self conception and her sense of social presence are all defined by her mirror. Therefore, she invests the mirror with great power because her appearance is what determines her social destiny. The image reflected in the mirror determines how others and especially men will react to her. Therefore, as La Belle observes, “The reflection goes beyond sign or metaphor and becomes the self itself; the reflection becomes the predicate of existence.”²¹²

For Hilda, having no specular reflection means having no existence. Bundtzen comments on Hilda in these words, “Her narcissistic habit of gazing at herself in shop windows is compensation for nonentity: ... Behind

her ‘vacant, Slavic expression’ is a ‘blind cave.’ She does not, in fact, exist.”²¹³ The vacuity of Hilda’s subjectivity corresponds to the mirror’s vacuity and its receptivity—the mirror as a “silver hole,” which is also hinged on the inherent gap between the self and the image, the sign and the signifier. The continuum of Hilda’s existence is conceptualized through her specular reflection, and not through mental reflection. Hilda is herself an imitative mirror, introjecting and projecting her society’s images and echoing its voices. Hilda reiterates the images of womanhood and the voices that her culture has recurrently and abundantly fashioned for her; the reiteration of what is called “cultural noise pollution” by Mayers.²¹⁴

Moreover, Hilda evidently becomes Esther’s mirror image, her double and reverse replica. While Hilda is completely trapped within the mirror, Esther is unable to cram herself into its confines. Coming to terms with the conceptualization of woman as a mere object, presentable in its totality by her specular reflection, remains an excruciating experience for Esther all through the novel. Being in Hilda’s company is, for Esther, such a disturbing experience that she believes it to be her “penalty.”²¹⁵ Esther hears Hilda’s voice as the voice of a terrifying creature and curses “the luck that had timed my arrival in the hotel cafeteria to coincide with Hilda’s.”²¹⁶ They fail to communicate: “The silence between us was so profound I thought part of it must be my fault.”²¹⁷

At the very beginning of the novel, Esther recounts how the execution by electrocution of the Rosenbergs continually disturbed her. Julius and Ethel Rosenberg were the American communist couple who were executed in 1953 on dubious charges of espionage. Esther empathizes with them. She is disturbed by the atrocious violence exerted on human beings in the name of law:

The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn’t help wondering what it would be like, being burned all along your nerves. I thought it must be the worst thing in the world.²¹⁸

Hilda, on the other hand, detached from human pain, advocates their being executed: “It’s awful such people should be alive I’m so glad they’re going to die.”²¹⁹ At this point, Esther likens her voice to a voice of the dybbuk she had seen in a play the night before. Dybbuk is derived from a Hebrew word meaning “attachment,” “hanging on,” “cleaving” or “clinging.” In Kabbalah and European Jewish folklore, a dybbuk is a demon or a

malicious possessing soul of a dead person that attaches itself to the body of a living person and inhabits it until it fulfils the function that it had failed to perform in its lifetime.²²⁰

Through this ventriloquism not only does Hilda put on a face which the gaze of her society expects her to, but she also echoes whatever noise her society feeds her without being involved in genuine mental reflection. It is not a voice of her own, but the callous voice of the ferocious society which has attached itself to her. Like the mythological figure Echo, Hilda's voice is unauthentic or, as Spivak calls, "non-originary."²²¹ And as with the figure Narcissus, the mirror has paradoxically blocked her way to an authentic self-knowledge by reiterating an illusory and delusive image. Hilda is deprived of her own voice and is petrified into the image her culture fashions for her.

Later on in the novel, when all the girls are expected to pose for the magazine photographer "with props to show what we wanted to be," Hilda's identity is epitomized by her holding a "bold, faceless head of a hatmaker's dummy to show she wanted to design hats."²²² On the other hand, Esther, the last one to be photographed, is reluctant to pose for a photo. She has been hiding in the powder-room, but they find her. When asked what she wants to be, at first she says she does not know and then she says she wants to be a poet. When the photographer asks her, "Show us how happy it makes you to write a poem," Esther bursts into tears. The photographer asks her to smile and "at last, obediently, like the mouth of a ventriloquist's dummy, my own mouth started to quirk up."²²³

Esther tries, with extreme difficulty, to pose, to reflect the face that society has fashioned for her. For Esther, striking a pose becomes as excruciating as confronting her own mirror image—both frozen and immobilized. Posing for the photographer and the others means presenting herself to the gaze of the other, already as a picture. Owens describes Lacan's "mechanism of *pose*" in the following terms:

to strike a pose is to present oneself to the gaze of the other as if one were already frozen, immobilized—that is, *already a picture*. For Lacan, then, pose has a strategic value: mimicking the immobility induced by the gaze, reflecting its power back on itself, pose forces it to surrender. Confronted with a pose, the gaze itself is immobilized, brought to a standstill.²²⁴

Owens labels the idea "rhetoric of the pose."²²⁵ Striking a pose functions similarly to the look at one's specular self, as they are anchored with the gaze

of the others as well as with the cultural images of selfhood. In her study of the self-portrait in convex mirror, Haselstein argues that:

the view of one's own mirror image is charged with the imaginary gaze of others; the strange-appearing face and the observer form a split whole. Face, like speech, appears as a zone of mediation between the private self-reservation and public self-alienation, that is as a space of a double-coded script, referring to the sedimentation of the self as and in the mirror of the other.²²⁶

Therefore, viewing one's image in the mirror, like posing for the photographer, remains psychologically demanding for the female subject, in that she has to deal with all the intransigent images appearing on her private mirror and in the mirrors of others. Posing for the gaze of the other becomes an excruciating experience for Esther since she has to negotiate her "private self-reservation" with that of her "public self-alienation." Esther has to arbitrate between these two worlds in order to strike a pose. That makes Esther feel:

limp and betrayed, like the skin shed by a *terrible animal*. It was a relief to be free of the animal, but it seemed to have taken my spirit with it, and everything else it could lay its paws on.

I fumbled in my pocketbook for the gilt compact with the mascara and the mascara brush and the eyeshadow and the three lipsticks and the side mirror. The face that peered back at me seemed to be peering from the grating of a prison cell after a prolonged beating. It looked bruised and puffy and all the wrong colors. It was a face that needed soap and water and Christian tolerance.

I started to paint it with small heart.²²⁷

Esther's effort in painting her face is indicative of her creating a new face and positing a different self to appease the outside world. Unlike the other female characters in the novel, such as Hilda, who are drawn into this self-creation and appear content with it, for Esther it remains an excessively difficult task. While Hilda has managed her own total self-effacement, it becomes increasingly disturbing for Esther to represent herself, or even a part of herself, in the mere realm of visibilities.

Hilda symbolically represents herself to the world through the faceless head of a dummy. She is as faceless and as voiceless as her dummy, just

as the world around her wants her to be—a dumb object of vision easily refashioned by her patriarchal culture. Esther, on the other hand, is reluctant to be presented to the world of visibilities, as well as to herself, as an entity the world incessantly and cruelly insists upon. Finally, when she succumbs to be photographed, she feels herself “betrayed” like a “ventriloquist’s dummy,” like a “terrible animal.” Esther describes her self in terms of skin, “an unwanted envelope,” as Biven suggests.²²⁸ She feels that her spirit and her everything else have been taken away. Then she tries to create herself afresh for the world by creating a new appearance. La Belle explains Esther’s reaction in these words:

Esther reacts so emotionally to the photographer because his request tears something essential from her being—her ambition to be other than an object completely capturable in a photograph, the mirror with a memory. Even the concept of being a writer has been reduced to a visual image, to looking like a “happy” poet (perhaps a contradiction in terms for Plath). Esther responds to this double trauma, both to herself and to her ambition, by testing her sense of self-identity. But the single means for doing so immediately available to her is the glass, an instrument that demonstrates the way Esther is trapped in visual objectification not only by others but also by herself. The external incident with the photographer dramatizes an unresolved conflict between competing semiotic modes of self-realization: writing and mirroring.²²⁹

Esther does not succeed in escaping from posing as the images her culture systematically imposes on her, frozen and immobilized for the gaze of the others, and that is what makes her feel so terribly betrayed. She has extreme difficulty in reconciling her two dialectical worlds, her *Innenwelt* driven by her authentic self and its predilections on the one hand, and her *Umwelt* assailing her with contradictory figurations of twentieth-century womanhood on the other. Therefore, she becomes immensely insecure, anxious and vulnerable. Looking into her mirror-image as well as posing for a picture—an image with a memory—both immobilized and frozen and somehow exterior to her real self, brings Esther back into the front line of her battlefield. Moreover, presenting mental reflection in the form of a frozen picture is indeed paradoxical and betraying.

In a context in which a person’s specular self is equated with his being in its totality, destroying the mirror signifies destroying one’s self, as is purported in Plath’s juvenilia poem, “Epitaph in Three Parts.” The poem is

one of Plath's early poems where she deals with suicide. It reveals, as the title suggests, Plath's early mental obsession with death. The first person perspective is adopted in the poem. The persona receives a similar message three times: "There is more than one good way to drown," which forms the refrain at the end of each part.

In the first part of the poem, the persona receives the message through a telegram addressed to her in a bottle, that is, a human message; in the second part, she receives the message from a lonely gull flying above, that is, a message from the world above; and finally, in the third part, waving grass engraves the message on a stone, as if speaking to her from the world below, and as if she is being beckoned by her very own grave.

In the first part of the epitaph, the persona watches the message arrive by sea:

Rocking across the lapis lazuli sea
comes a flock of bottle battleships
each with a telegram addressed to me.

'Destroy your mirror and avoid mishaps,'
chirps the first; 'live on a silent island
where the water blots out all footsteps.'²³⁰

Contrary to the culturally held belief that breaking a mirror brings bad luck, here the message asserts that, to avoid mishaps, she should destroy her mirror. Though the popular belief and the message in the bottle seem contradictory on the surface, they are both built on the same underlying *a priori*: that a person's mirror image is equal to one's selfhood and whole being, and therefore the determinant of one's destiny. The mirror here bridges her inner self to the world outside. It marks the passage from the self to the other, as the message continues by advising her to lead an isolated life with no human presence or memory of others. Moreover, the mirror, being the tool of demons, witches and sorcerers, entraps young girls within its frame of vanity and narcissism.

The second sings: 'Receive no roving gallant
who seeks to dally in the port till dawn,
for your fate involves a dark assailant.'

The third cries out as all the ships go down:
“There is more than one good way to drown.”²³¹

In the second part of the epitaph, the message “There is more than one good way to drown” is put into the mouth of a bird flying above, after other birds have devoured the eyes of a drowned sailor:

In the air above my island flies
a crowd of shining gulls that plunge to launch
an accurate assault upon the eyes

of the bold sailor falling under drench
and hunger of the surf that plucks the land,
devouring green gardens inch by inch.

Blood runs in a glissando from the hand
that lifts to consecrate the sunken man.
Aloft, a lone gull halts upon the wind,

announcing after glutton birds have flown:
“There is more than one good way to drown.”²³²

In the first two parts, the persona appears to be on the shore of her island watching horrible incidents taking place: the ship sinking and the drowned sailor being devoured, all the while receiving constant warnings and invitations to death. In the third part, the scene is going to change; she is entering her room at night:

Grasshopper goblins with green pointed ears
caper on leafstalk legs across my doorsill,
and mock the jangling rain of splintered stars.

My room is a twittering gray box with a wall
there and there and there again, and then
a window which proves the sky sheer rigmarole

that happens to conceal the lid of one
enormous box of gray where god has gone
and hidden all the bright angelic men.

A wave of grass engraves upon the stone:
 "There is more than one good way to drown."²³³

The speaker's room appears as a suffocating and depressing box. The room's only window opens on to the threatening confusion of the celestial world. The sky disguises the lid of another grey box where god detains "all the bright angelic men" from her view. Both these grey boxes—her room and the one in the sky—are in fact graves which she and the bright angelic men inhabit or will soon inhabit. By entering into this grey box, the persona enters her own grave, marked by a tombstone bearing the message, repeated for the last time in the poem, "There is more than one good way to drown."

The Appalling Otherness of the Specular Self

In the portrayal of her self through a mirror, Plath relies, more than any other feature of the mirror, upon the inherent otherness of its reflected image. In the realization of the self and in the presentation of it, Plath pushes the inherent otherness of the reflected image, often taken for granted in the usual daily use, to an extreme. In doing so, Plath either totally rejects her reflected image as an absolutely foreign entity or depicts a complete otherness present within the mirror's frame. Through this rejection, as well as through her presentation of the otherness, Plath becomes capable of aesthetically conveying to her readers her difficulties in relating to her subjectivity and to the world around her.

The horror induced by the uncanny otherness in the mirror is because one of the very first and fundamental means of self-knowledge is often acquired by the objectification of the self on the mirror, and then by identification with the reflected image. In other words, the consciousness of the self is attained first by the projection of one's image on a reflecting surface and then by introjecting that reflected image within the structure of consciousness. This act, according to Lacan, is an intellectual act through which one gains a perspective and thereby a knowledge of one's self. Therefore, one remains an image of one's image. When the identification with one's specular image fails, one abruptly comes across a menacing vacuity. The subject loses his grasp of that fundamental base of self-knowledge and of the knowledge of the world. All the means of relation with one's self and with one's world are severed. When the onlooker unexpectedly confronts something

other than the familiar projected image in a mirror, something grotesque, monstrous, unknown or uncanny, it fills him with extreme bewilderment, horror and despair.

The disturbing otherness of the image can be more than apprehension of the soon-to-arrive debacles, as discussed in the previous parts. The mirror's reversing, *de*-realizing and *de*-materializing nature opens up to further transmutations in the mirror of the mind. In other words, the logical conversions transpiring on the mirror's surface—reversion, *de*-realization and *de*-materialization—prompt boundless illogical conversions in the subject's psyche. The delusive nature of the mirror can turn it into a threshold of a utopian otherworld, where the lack is fulfilled; a theatrical stage where the desire is performed or the anger is released. On the other hand, the mirror can turn into a courtroom where ruthless trials of the selves are staged, the "terrible rooms" where the ongoing torture in the psyche of an alienated and split subject is enacted.²³⁴

One of the occasions in Plath's poems on which the poet persona openly rejects the reflected image as that of herself occurs in the poem "The Burnt-out Spa," penned in November 1959 in Yaddo, the artists' colony in Saratoga Springs, New York. While there, Plath visited an ancient abandoned spa, which became the inspiration for this poem. In her journal entry dated 11 November, Plath writes, "I wrote a good poem this week on our walk Sunday to the burnt-out spa. A second book poem."²³⁵ In her elaborate description of the place, Plath draws on fantastic imageries of beasts and monsters. She imagines that "An old beast," "A monster of wood and rusty teeth" had died on the spot and had thereafter been transformed into that spa. The first four stanzas are the poet's imaginative portrayal of this monster and the description of its transformation into the spa:

An old beast ended in this place:

A monster of wood and rusty teeth.
 Fire smelted his eyes to lumps
 Of pale blue vitreous stuff, opaque
 As resin drops oozed from pine bark.

The rafters and struts of his body wear
 Their char of karakul still. I can't tell
 How long his carcass has foundered under
 The rubbish of summers, the black-leaved falls.

Now little weeds insinuate
 Soft suede tongues between his bones.
 His armorplate, his toppled stones
 Are an esplanade for crickets.²³⁶

In the fifth stanza, the poet-persona introduces herself for the first time into the poem by adopting the first person perspective. Through a simile, the poet-persona draws an analogy between what she is doing in her study of the interior parts of this monster-spa and what doctors as well as archaeologists regularly do in their study of the interior parts of the body/psyche or an archaeological site:

I pick and pry like a doctor or
 Archaeologist among
 Iron entrails, enamel bowls,
 The coils and pipes that made him run.²³⁷

The close affinity between her work and that of a doctor/archaeologist can be traced back to the example of Freud who had a passion for both. According to Pankejeff, “Freud himself explained his love for archaeology in that the psychoanalyst, like the archaeologist in his excavations, must uncover layer after layer of the patient’s psyche, before coming to the deepest, most valuable treasures.”²³⁸ Kuspit believes that the psychoanalyst-archaeologist metaphor, which Freud originally draws upon and Plath revives in this poem, is “a mighty metaphor.”²³⁹ Both disciplines are involved with the study of surface-depth dyads and different strata developments.

In the sixth stanza, Plath continues portraying the spa in terms of natural elements:

The small dell eats what ate it once.
 And yet the ichor of the spring
 Proceeds clear as it ever did
 From the broken throat, the marshy lip.²⁴⁰

The lines provide a depiction of how nature overpowers the monster, transforming it into its own landscape. The shift of power is conveyed through how the valley is now eating away at or eroding this monster, whereas in the past the monster used to feed on it. In fact, the monster has not stopped bleeding through its broken throat and marshy lip ever since. Plath once

again stresses the fantastic element in her description by employing the term *ichor*, which in Greek mythology refers to the ethereal fluid running through the veins of the Greek gods, corresponding to human blood.

From the seventh stanza onwards, the persona engages in talking about herself; initially she does so by adopting the first person pronoun “I” in the seventh and eight stanzas, and then, upon encountering her reflected image in the water below, she suddenly shifts her perspective to that of the third person (“it” or “her”) and finally, in the ninth stanza, she adopts the plural “we” and “us.” After the encounter with the image reiterated in the water, the poet-persona, as a doctor and archaeologist, shifts her attention from picking at and prying into the monster-spa and focuses on this new object, prying into her “entrails”:

It flows off below the green and white
Balustrade of a sag-backed bridge.
Leaning over, I encounter one
Blue and improbable person

Framed in the basketwork of cat-tails.
O she is gracious and austere,
Seated beneath the toneless water!
It is not I, it is not I.²⁴¹

The reflected image of the persona in the water below is blue, depressed and melancholic. Moreover, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary inserts under the entry “blue”: “*of a woman*: learned, intellectual.”²⁴² The reflected image is improbable, signifying the improbability of her dreams and artistic aspirations in the form of her desired self-image—the *Idealich* or ideal ego. The basketwork in which her reflection is framed is in fact the reflection of the above “Balustrade of a sag-backed bridge” over which the persona is standing. The mirror-like surface of the water objectifies her in the form of the reflected image. Now the subject “I” comes across the objectified and estranged image who seems gracious and austere. Her description of the image reveals the dichotomy of her experienced self and the specular self, induced by the ethereal essence of the mirror image.

This dichotomy and the experienced duality of the personality are expressed through shifts of pronouns. The persona refers to her reflected image as “she,” not as “I,” signifying the otherness of the image and the exteriority of her self-experience. The inherent alienation and division, enforced

by the initial misrecognition of one's specular image, according to Lacan, in the mirror stage, haunts the subject throughout her life and surges to the level of consciousness, particularly in times of crisis and when one comes across the otherness in her reflected image. The objectified and alienated image takes on a passive position. She has not sat there under the water by her own will, but is being seated. At the end of the stanza, the persona twice overtly and vehemently rejects her reflected image as hers: "It is not I, it is not I."

The uncanniness of the persona's experience of the self as the other is situated within the uncanniness of the place she describes. The persona observes the world around her, her *Umwelt*, in its monstrous features and then she encounters the monstrosity of her inner subject, her *Innenwelt* through the medium of a reflecting surface. The spring, the monster's ichor, is the mirror in which she comes across the otherness of her inner self. It is this mirror that bridges her two dialectical worlds. The uncanniness and the monstrosity of these two worlds are described in abject terms. Abjectness not only finds meaning in physical grotesquery, such as in the form of a monster and his ichor, deadly to mortals, but it can also mark a psychological deviance, as manifested in her aberrant encounter with her specular image. Christodoulides links the abjectness of the persona's self image in this poem to the image of the feminine arch-abject, Medusa, by calling the reflected image an "abject medusan figure."²⁴³ She reads Plath's poem in the light of Kristevan theory, observing that rejection and negation of this "blue" and "improbable" other is a process prerequisite to adopting an identity as a subject and entering into symbolicity.²⁴⁴

In the concluding two stanzas, the persona reveals her fear of degeneration and death, brought home to her by the erosion and putrefaction continually going on in nature:

No animal spoils on her green doorstep.
And we shall never enter there
Where the durable ones keep house.
The stream that hustles us

Neither nourishes nor heals.²⁴⁵

On another level, the lines are an expression of the poet's fears of barrenness, of artistic impotency, tonelessness, silence and stillness, envisaging herself "Seated beneath the toneless water!" These fears continually haunted Plath

and she recurrently expressed them in many of her poems as well as in her novel. Plath's conception of her self-image has been closely linked to her linguistic creativity, since both mirror and the language function as subjective semiotic modes. The persona fears that she will not be able to find her way into the realm of art—the world of immortal imagination and dream.

Butscher, on the other hand, reads the poem “The Burnt-out Spa” in the biographical light of the death of Plath's father and her obsession with it. He interprets the monster and its ruins in terms of Plath's “fallen idol of her father,” observing that the poet-persona meets “her double in the magic mirror of a father-shadowed past.”²⁴⁶ For him, the “other self” seated under the water is “the real artist in her and the offspring of the myth of the father.”²⁴⁷ By adopting the pronouns “we” and “us,” after the pronoun “it” joined the pronoun “I” in referring to the same self, the multiplicity of self-experience is emphasized once more. Moreover, it may hint at the universality of the feeling of impotence and artistic aridity, particularly for the female author who seeks entry into the male-dominated literary canon.

In her 1956 poem “Tale of a Tub,” Plath gives aesthetic expression to her anxieties over the otherness of her self-experience, the irritating feelings of the antithetical inner duality, the discrepancy between her private and public selves, between her mask and nakedness; all raised into consciousness and presented through the depiction of her mirror encounter in a lavatory room. For the title of the poem Plath borrowed the title of Jonathan Swift's first major satirical work, *A Tale of a Tub*. Therefore, the title of the poem is indeed a satire of a satire.

Plath's poem launches with a portrayal of the eye of the poet-persona gazing, like the “photographic chamber” or a *camera obscura*, recording the “bare painted walls” of her lavatory room. The homophonic eye/I, where the “chamber of the eye” can be understood as the chamber of I, especially when read aloud, posits a pun. Through recording the “bare painted walls,” the persona is actually introjecting them—incorporating their bareness and repressing delimitation into the structure of her subjectivity. The recording chamber of the eye/I immediately renders any exterior phenomenon into something interior through its process of internalization. This internalization, combined with the blurring of the distinction between exterior and interior, is further exposed by metaphorizing the room's plumbing into raw nerves, rendered visible by means of an “electric light” which flays these nerves. As well as denoting stripping off the skin or surface, to flay has the figurative meaning of to criticize harshly. The persona is stripping her

self of its surface layers and its masks, exploring her innermost self while continually censuring herself scathingly, evoking the Kristevan “subject in process”:

The photographic chamber of the eye
 records bare painted walls, while an electric light
 flays the chromium nerves of plumbing raw;
 such poverty assaults the ego; caught
 naked in the merely actual room,
 the stranger in the lavatory mirror
 puts on a public grin, repeats our name
 but scrupulously reflects the usual terror.²⁴⁸

The persona is naked in her lavatory room. She feels threatened by the poverty and vulnerability of this very nakedness, which is assaulting her ego; just as the poet feels threatened by the nakedness of her newborn infant in the poem “Morning Song,” which casts a shadow on her safety.

The persona calls the mirror “the merely actual room,” juxtaposing the actuality of this site to all those other places where she is not naked and is wearing a public mask. It is paradoxical in the sense that the reflected specular image is in fact virtual to the reality of things held within its scope. The mirror is a heterotopic site where the subject can meet her true self, while it is also a place where she can pose for public presentation, examining her false self. Therefore, the mirror here functions simultaneously as introspective and imitative/mimetic. The actuality of this site is also juxtaposed to the “photographic chamber” of her “I.” Whatever is devoured and internalized by the camera of her eye no longer remains actual; it is tainted by her imagination and by her subjectivity, distancing it from reality.

The persona, unable to bring her experience of the self (introception) and her mirror image (extroception) together, encounters a total stranger, the other in her mirror. She fails to experience a cenesthetic subjectivity; i.e., she fails to recognize her specular image, the image directly projected from bodily zones as her own. Therefore, she experiences the feelings of an uninhabited body. The otherness she encounters in her mirror is due to the inherent otherness of the specular image. It is this otherness that renders the mirror an illusory and delusory tool. Paradoxically, it is within its frame that illusions are disclosed in epiphanic moments.

In this actual and most private place—the mirror—the persona casts off all her public masks and veils and engages in self-scrutiny and self-criticism.

It is through such nakedness that she feels her ego is exposed to assault. The existence of a discrepancy between her public mask and private nakedness is overtly presented. Despite the persona's excruciating feelings of duality and monstrous otherness, the stranger "puts on a public grin" in her mirror, as if mechanically putting on make-up, veil or a mask. The phrasal verb "to put on" also means to tease or to "mislead deliberately especially for amusement."²⁴⁹ Though this private self feels desperate, also confirmed by the tone of the entire poem, her public self manages to put on a grin.

This stranger, i.e., the public self, repeats "our name," indicating the subject's anxious efforts to retain the relatedness of her private self to her public self. She struggles to keep conscious about the position of her self in the public site, a virtual place for her, through a pretentious imitative act. Now naked in the actual room of the mirror, released from her masks and clothes, the persona "scrupulously reflects the usual terror" of her unknown and anonymous self, the monstrous self, the abject inside. This mirror is the same actual "terrible room[s]," in Plath's other poem "The Courage of Shutting-Up," "In which a torture goes on one can only watch./ The face that lived in this mirror is the face of a dead man."²⁵⁰

In the second stanza, the first person plural pronoun "we" is adopted, which the poet maintains throughout the rest of the poem. Employing this plural pronoun, despite the stark loneliness of the persona in the most private room while describing her most private experience, indicates the multiplicity of her self-experiencing, as well as her awareness of the universality of her experience. The speaker anticipates her readers' sympathy or even their empathy:

Just how guilty are we when the ceiling
reveals no cracks that can be decoded? when washbowl
maintains it has no more holy calling
than physical ablution, and the towel
dryly disclaims that fierce troll faces lurk
in its explicit folds? or when the window,
blind with the steam, will not admit the dark
which shrouds our prospects in ambiguous shadow?²⁵¹

When there exists nothing to bemuse her imagination or to distract her mind, when things are stripped of their visionary or sacrosanct associations, and when the world outside is shut out of her mind by the steam on her window, she cannot refrain from plunging into desperate meditations over

the reality of her subjectivity, her ego, while also becoming aware of her tangible corporeal landscape. Nakedness and the unmasking assault her ego, leaving her guilt-ridden.

In the third stanza, the persona expresses how she has cast off all her beliefs in things metaphysical. She has lost all her illusions over the last twenty years. Now her “authentic sea” rejects those beliefs, plucking away their veil of flesh and revealing their innermost depths of “honest bone”:

Twenty years ago, the familiar tub
bred an ample batch of omens; but now
water faucets spawn no danger; each crab
and octopus—scrabbling just beyond the view,
waiting for some accidental break
in ritual, to strike—is definitely gone;
the authentic sea denies them and will pluck
fantastic flesh down to the honest bone.²⁵²

In the fourth stanza, the persona draws a portrait of her corporeal experience. She expresses how her limbs waver in the water of the tub and how they shudder “away from the genuine color of skin,” which is “faintly green.” She has a problematic sense of her body’s borders. The “lines which draw/the shape that shuts” her in are “intransigent.” The persona wishes to get rid of these uncompromising lines within her imagination. The problematic sense of body borders is indicative of her critical psychological problem. But even in her dream the persona cannot ignore “absolute fact”:

We take the plunge; under water our limbs
waver, faintly green, shuddering away
from the genuine color of skin; can our dreams
ever blur the intransigent lines which draw
the shape that shuts us in? absolute fact
intrudes even when the revolted eye
is closed; the tub exists behind our back:
its glittering surfaces are blank and true.²⁵³

Plath’s poetry and prose reveal her obsession with skin. She frequently portrays her disturbed consciousness of her skin as both a “highly cathected organ” and a psychological construct.²⁵⁴ The present eye/I is no longer the passive entity that it was at the beginning of the poem, mechanically and

passively recording and internalizing any outside phenomena. The eye, very much like her “I,” has revolted. But even when closed, the “blank,” “true,” naked and “absolute” facts forcefully thrust themselves upon her.

The necessity of putting on a mask for the public self and disguising the inner horror is brought up more elaborately in the fifth stanza:

Yet always the ridiculous nude flanks urge
 the fabrication of some cloth to cover
 such starkness; accuracy must not stalk at large:
 each day demands we create our whole world over,
 disguising the constant horror in a coat
 of many-colored fictions; we mask our past
 in the green of eden, pretend future’s shining fruit
 can sprout from the navel of this present waste.²⁵⁵

Societal public life will not tolerate the presentation of one’s true self without any sort of covering or mask. The interaction of the individual with society forces the disguise of the true self. The use of masks is more emphasized in women. Female non-conformists are punished severely. For any individual, Birkle observes, “Sameness and difference on several levels necessarily lead to tension and can create various manifestations of self, such as the ‘true’ and ‘false’ or ‘private’ and ‘public’ selves.”²⁵⁶

The female persona’s consciousness of the unreality of what she is experiencing as self and whatever is related to her being finds itself emphasized once again in the concluding stanza. For her, life is all imagination and madness. It is only through death that things can be rendered real:

In this particular tub, two knees jut up
 like icebergs, while minute brown hairs rise
 on arms and legs in a fringe of kelp; green soap
 navigates the tidal slosh of seas
 breaking on legendary beaches; in faith
 we shall board our imagined ship and wildly sail
 among sacred islands of the mad till death
 shatters the fabulous stars and makes us real.²⁵⁷

In the poem “Tale of a Tub,” as well as in some of Plath’s other poems, the catoptric experience is accompanied by fear, terror and anguish. The mirror becomes a site where the repellent poverty and vulnerability of her female

ego are revealed to her. La Bella observes, the mirror for the female poet is not fallacious, as it would be for the male poet, but “perilous,” associated with anxiety and terror.²⁵⁸ The poem “Tale of a Tub” is a register of Plath’s reflection over her dialectical multiple selves and their excruciating incompatibility with both her inner and outer worlds. The mirror reveals, or even inserts, the duality of the subject’s dialectical worlds, inside and out, private and public, together with their threatening nakedness and shielding masks, respectively. While a person can adopt different public masks to reduce or block the others’ knowledge of the self and thereby, protect the self, her nakedness remains unflinching, because, as Bloom affirms, “nakedness is not a fiction”; it “is precisely what cannot change.”²⁵⁹ This immutability of nakedness makes it even more threatening to its subject.

The journey within and without is initiated by the subject’s reflection over her reflected image in the lavatory mirror. The specular image nourishes her meditations not only over what appears visible within her mirror but also all that remains invisible to it. Therefore, by emphasizing the oxymoronic nature of the mirror, which gives it psychological interiority as well, the poet makes it a model of divine reflection. Nevertheless, the persona fails to delve into the fantastical and transcendental illusions initiated by her mirror, which Plath uses in some other poems. The subject remains conscious of the naked, unmasked and terrifying reality of her self.

Plath’s 1962 poem “The Other” is highly ambiguous. In it, the mirror is vehemently denounced as the source of the excruciating radical split within her subjectivity. The mirror is also regarded as the source of her problematic relationships with others. All thorough the poem, the other functions ambiguously. The other can be referred to as an exterior entity, such as another person. Some critics believe that the other in this poem refers to a rival, somehow identifiable when the poem is read in the light of biographical information. Some mention that the other is none other than Assia Wevill, a married woman at the time with whom Ted Hughes had an affair “despite all marriages,” as Hughes himself puts it, and for whom he eventually left Plath.²⁶⁰ This reading is strengthened by the fact that the poem was composed within a few weeks of Assia and her husband David Wevill’s visit to their house.²⁶¹ On the other hand, Butscher believes that the other, as Plath’s rival, refers to Olwyn or Olga—both of whom were mistresses of Ted. Butscher also suggests that the other may even refer to both of these women.²⁶² Axelrod detects the source of Plath’s rage in her references to her “flirtatious husband” and to the “three young women in a park.”²⁶³

On the other hand, Christodoulides identifies the other with Plath's mother. This speculation is supported by some elements in the poem itself as well as by the fact that at the time of the poem's composition, Aurelia Plath was visiting them in their house in Devon, England.²⁶⁴ Other readings hold the other not to be an exterior entity but an integral part of the persona's self; that is, her double, her shadow or her *alter idem*. In this reading, the other marks a "difference *within*," as Johnson categorizes, emphasizing the presence of duality and chasm, particularly in the psychologically turbulent moments of the poet's life.²⁶⁵ Wood, affirming such reading, observes, "the other is more a projected reflection (a 'cold glass' image) of a potential facet within the speaker's personality than any character from the real life."²⁶⁶

All these interpretations seem simultaneously valid enough, revealing Plath's artistic dexterity in composing a multi-layered and ambivalent poem. In this poem, the demarking boundaries between the interior other and the exterior one seem so evanescent that these two entities merge into one meaning. As the reference of the textual "I" oscillates between the outside and inside "you," the tone of the poem alters from one of frustration, rage and hatred to one of contempt and ultimately victory. There exists no clear distinction between the psychological otherness of the inner I and the others, exterior and alien to the self. As Lacan's theory reveals, with the misrecognition of the specular I, and the identification with the specular image as a metaphoric/metonymic other in the mirror stage, the subject sets out on a lifelong series of identifications with outside others. Therefore, the identification with the specular image and the realization of its inherent otherness inextricably controls one's relation with any outside other. As manifested in this poem by Plath, the insurmountable otherness of the inner self overshadows the relationship of the subject to the outside others.

Although the gender of the person to whom the poem "The Other" is addressed remains ambiguous throughout, reading further leaves us in no doubt as to its gender. The persona is certainly apostrophizing a feminine subject/object. In the first half of the poem the addressee comes home late, wiping her lips as if wiping away lipstick. She is a white Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, the Roman equivalent of Victoria, who is intruding on her private territory, exasperating her victoriously. Furthermore, as Jinghua argues, "White Nike" as an "emblematic icon" may also allude to a particular visual art motif: "These emblems not only contain meaning in themselves as minimized representations but also enrich the meaning of the poems through intertextuality."²⁶⁷ The addressee's handbag stinks; inside, she carries her knitting and her sticky candies:

You come in late, wiping your lips.
 What did I leave untouched on the doorstep—

White Nike,
 Streaming between my walls?

Smiling, blue lightening
 Assumes, like a meathook, the burden of his parts.

The police love you, you confess everything.
 Bright hair, shoe-black, old plastic,

Is my life so intriguing?
 Is it for this you widen your eye-rings?

Is it for this air motes depart?
 They are not air motes, they are corpuscles.

Open your handbag. What is that bad smell?
 Is it your knitting, busily

Hooking itself to itself
 It is your sticky candies.²⁶⁸

The intruding other's smile seizes her. This other is presented as a Medusan figure, with a threatening smile. All through the poem the other is described in terms of its abjectness. The persona remains the target of her overpowering gaze. The other's presence leaves her with a fragmentary body view; she feels her body shattering into its component cells.

The second half of the poem starts by mentioning that the persona cannot get rid of the overwhelming presence of this abject other, because she has her head on her wall. One interpretation can be that the persona has on her wall a picture of this other—most probably her mother. Through the poet's evocation of "Navel cords," Christodoulides's identification of the other with Plath's mother becomes more evident. This identification is made even more valid by the description of a "Shriek" from her belly in the line immediately following. Moreover, in both her poetry and her prose Plath has recurrently portrayed her mother as an abject figure, vehemently rejecting her mother's powerful grip over her.

On the other hand, the second interpretation is that the persona sees herself in a mirror on the wall. In this meaning, experiencing the otherness of her specular image and her alienation from it becomes so gravely painful that she not only rejects that image as hers, but also rejects the mirror. Furthermore, Plath often associates the moon with the mirror. The mirror is definitely a lunar symbol since the moon, like a mirror, reflects the light of the sun while its nature remains totally unaffected by it.

I have your head on my wall.
Navel cords, blue-red and lucent,

Shriek from my belly like arrows, and these I ride.
O moon-glow, o sick one,²⁶⁹

In the following couplet, the persona metaphorically talks about the adultery of this other or her desire for it, although the adultery fails to lead to any pregnancy because this other has “a womb of marble”; the female other is depicted as totally barren. Britzolakis asserts that by referring to this other in terms of a Greek statue with a “womb of marble,” Plath “turns the female body, which conventionally signifies life and fertility, into a trope of imprisonment and petrification.”²⁷⁰

The stolen horses, the fornications
Circle a womb of marble.

Where are you going
That you suck breath like mileage?

Sulfurous adulteries grieve in a dream.
Cold glass, how you insert yourself

Between myself and myself.
I scratch like a cat.²⁷¹

The mirror inserts a rupture and a multiplicity in the speaking persona’s sense of self. As the experiencing self and the specular self will never fully correspond, the person is left with an ever-present sense of splitness and alienation. By initially projecting an image of the self onto the mirror and then by introjecting that image, i.e., by incorporating it into the structure

of one's subjectivity, the subject remains an image of one's own image. Therefore, the mirror leads to a *connaissance paranoïaque*, to evoke Lacan's terminology; a paranoiac and frustrating knowledge of a split and alien self, which also forms the foundation on which the knowledge of the other or the outside world is laid.²⁷²

The mirror's ultimate purpose is indeed reversed. It prevents the person's gaining knowledge over her subjectivity by returning a metaphoric/metonymic image. Meanwhile the mirror, as the cause of frustrating and paranoiac duality and alienation, like the mirror of the poem "Mirror," remains unsympathetic, undisturbed and cold. It faithfully and cold-heartedly reflects her and her pains. In this poem, the mirror functions more as a kind of veil, rather than a means of revelation. It is a mask disguising her from herself by giving back an image of otherness. The mirror traps her in a virtual space between the real and the imaginary. Butscher comments on these lines in the following words:

The mirror is again installed, and the poem doubles back on itself as a dialogue between two Sylvias, another confirmation of the fact that she was growing more aware that Ted's betrayal had led to the emergence of the bitch goddess.²⁷³

In reaction to this disturbing situation, the speaker, like a cat, scratches. She scratches either herself or the surface of that cold glass, probably in an attempt to erase her image, or at least to alter her visible exteriority or its reflected image in the mirror. It is the very same knowledge of this uncompromisability of the duality of the self into a unity which ultimately proves destructive for Narcissus as he realizes, "But now we two—one soul—one death will die."²⁷⁴ The reflected image is indeed a representation of contrast rather than similarity. In her essay "Divine Women," Irigaray observes that the mirror:

functions as a possible way to constitute screens between the other and myself. ... the mirror is a frozen—and polemical—weapon to keep us apart. ... The mirror signifies the constitution of a fabricated (female) other that I shall put forward as an instrument of seduction in my place.

... Though necessary at times as a separating tool, the mirror—and the gaze when it acts as a mirror—ought to remain a means and not an end that enforces my obedience. ... The mirror freezes our becoming breath, our becoming space. Our becoming bird, perhaps? Though it may

at times help us to emerge, to move out of the water, the mirror blocks our energies, freezes us in our tracks, clips our wings. What protects me from the other and allows me to move toward him or her is more often the settling of a space, an enclave of air rather than the interposition of mirrors and glasses whose cutting edge all too often threatens to turn against me.²⁷⁵

The mirror does not respect the subject's boundaries; it forces itself in between. The mirror features the Kristevan abject, as described in her *Powers of Horror*: "What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."²⁷⁶ In this poem, the mirror functions as an abject in that it exactly becomes what "simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject."²⁷⁷ The next couplet describes the persona's blood again in terms of abject, marking her intermediary, in between state of being—between being and non-being, life and death. Her blood running, i.e., her being alive, is, like her mirror image, merely a physical appearance, used to distract the onlooker as well as herself with a false impression: "The blood that runs is dark fruit—/An effect, a cosmetic."²⁷⁸ Finally, in the concluding couplet, the other's smile, which was previously regarded with extreme foreboding, "like a meathook" and metaphorized into a "blue lightning," turns out not to be fatal. Plath seems to be able to overcome the crisis of this intruding otherness once again: "You smile./No, it is not fatal."²⁷⁹

Plath in her poem "The Other" draws upon the otherness of her spectral self-image and the terrifying rift it inflicts. Through her mirror, an uncanny version of the self emerges from the dark realm of repression. Furthermore, the inner otherness and multiplicity, enforced by the mirror, are inextricably concatenated with the others outside, brutally and cold-heartedly intruding on her territory; just as the projection of the self into the other is connected with the introjection of the other into the self. This inner otherness, marking the "difference *within*," as well as the "difference *between*," to adopt Johnson's terms, is particularly aggravated by the position of the women amid the contradictory and irreconcilable images of female selfhood.²⁸⁰ Like the witch-Venus of the poem "On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover," the persona of the poem "The Other" ultimately survives victoriously the devastating smile of this overwhelming and omnipresent Medusan other; just as Cixous describes it, "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."²⁸¹

The pattern of shocking monstrosity of the specular image and the non-recognition of it are interwoven in Plath's semi-autobiographical story of her madness in *The Bell Jar*. During the periods of turbulent emotional crisis, Esther (corresponding to Sylvia Plath herself) comes across a grotesquery in her reflected image, which she rejects as the other. This failure to bring together her introception and extroception, the experiential self and her projected image, culminates in her extension of that otherness to the mirror itself; she rejects the mirror being a mirror. Esther is acknowledged as sane and ready to be released into society only when she can re-establish the normative relationship with her mirror image.

To represent her sense of utter alienation and detachment, Esther sees herself initially as a Chinese and then as an Indian woman. At the time of her psycho-emotional crisis in New York, just before her total mental collapse and hospitalization in an asylum, Esther fails to identify with her reflected image. In the mirror of the hotel elevator she confronts "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face. It was only me, of course. I was appalled to see how wrinkled and used-up I looked."²⁸² Back in her hotel room, lonely and depressed, she thinks the cause of her depression is her silence: "The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence."²⁸³ She regards her telephone as her only means of communicating to other people, relating her to the world outside, but it remains "dumb as a death's head."²⁸⁴ That night Esther returns to her mirror once again before trying to sleep. On its surface she comes across a grotesquery of her image, corresponding to her psychological grotesquery: "The mirror over my bureau seemed slightly warped and much too silver. The face in it looked like the reflection in a ball of dentist's mercury."²⁸⁵

One night after having experienced some devastating events, Esther creeps onto the hotel's parapet and from the top she throws away all her clothing, saving not a thing:

Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York.²⁸⁶

By casting all her clothes into the city's streets Esther is symbolically rejecting all her public masks, her false selves, and together with them all the codes of femininity, feeding them back to her society. The next day, in the train heading home, Esther looks into her mirror and encounters an uncanny otherness:

The face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian. I dropped the compact into my pocket-book and stared out of the train window. Like a colossal junkyard, the swamps and back lots of Connecticut flashed past, one broken-down fragment bearing no relation to another.

What a hotch-potch the world was!

... A wan reflection of myself, white wings, brown ponytail and all, ghosted over the landscape.²⁸⁷

Esther fails to identify with the ocular reflection in her mirror. The projected self resists being introjected completely. Then she turns away from her mirror to the window as if in an effort to detach herself from this appalling grotesquery projected onto her mirror. This psychologically significant shift reveals her struggle to take her mind off her inner splitness and its frustrating grotesquery and to relocate it in the outer world, but this shift proves of no avail. The reflection of her face on the window interpolates itself on the entire outside world. The psychological fragmentation of her inner self is translated into the fragmentation of landscape in the world without; proving the intertwined reciprocity of these dialectical worlds. The chaotic disarray of her innermost subjectivity casts itself onto the world outside.

In constructing her text as a mirror house, Sylvia Plath synthesizes her ingenious aesthetic imagination with her academic erudition on the subject. She installs different mirrors—flat or curved, transparent or opaque, mimetic or introspective—at different angles to present her ambivalent multiple selves from varied perspectives. Her mirrors, installed within a broader text-mirror, provide us with kaleidoscopic insight into her tumultuous inner and outer worlds, dominated by the intransigent images of twentieth-century womanhood. These mirror images reveal the exasperating “difference *between*” as well as the “difference *within*.”²⁸⁸ By employing the mirror imagery in its plethora of meanings, Plath reveals her extensive understanding of the highly ambivalent nature of the mirror.

Plath draws upon the mirror’s delusory nature, which provides an alluring simulacrum by reiterating a de-realized, ethereal and inverted version of reality, to make it a powerful and irresistible tool in the hands of witches, sorceresses and demons (“Vanity Fair” and “On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover”). The mirror is installed in her poetry to portray the *de*-humanized narcissism of the male figures who, like the mythological Narcissus, are trapped within their solipsism, failing to relate to others (“Gigolo” and “Purdah”). Furthermore, Plath echoes the cultural views surrounding a barren woman in her portrayal of a female Narcissa whose only way to

experience the love of the other—i.e., through having a child—is blocked (“Childless Woman”).

In her depiction of woman as a mirror/metaphor for the male ego, traditionally forged to describe and prescribe the nature of gender reciprocity, Plath does not advocate it but rather mimics it in order to reject it vehemently (“Purdah”). Plath demonstrates her most contradictory feelings to the mother-child relation through wielding the dialectics of mother-child mirroring (“All the Death Dears,” “Morning Song” and “Brasilia”). There are also instances in her works in which the visible specular image is equated with the self in its totality. Thereby, the existence or non-existence of the specular image signifies the individual’s life or death (for example, through the characterization of Hilda in her *The Bell Jar* and the poem “Epitaph in Three Parts”).

The confrontation with the inner otherness and the multiplicity of the subjectivity as well as the grotesquery forced on one’s image by the hand of devouring time make mirrors terrible rooms of torture for women (“The Burnt-out Spa,” “Tale of a Tub,” “The Other,” “Mirror,” “Face Lift,” “The Courage of Shutting-Up” and the example of Esther, the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*). Despite all the appalling otherness and monstrosity of the specular reflection, the mirror can be liberating and the image beautiful and victorious when peered at straight on (“On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover” and “The Other”).

The present study of Plath’s mirror imagery is by no means exhaustive. Plath’s dexterity in manipulating the diversity of mirror images and the mirror’s capacities to elicit different interpretations are not limited to the instances studied in this chapter. The present study only provides a reading of some of her poems and some cases in her prose. For instance, the mirror is also depicted by her as both a utopian space through which the person desires to pass (the speaker in the short story “Ocean 1212-W”) and a dystopia where the subject is continuously inflicted with desperation over the division and degeneration (“The Other” and “The Courage of Shutting-Up”).²⁸⁹ Mirrors have also been adopted to present the mind, consciousness and imagination as well as memory (“Insomniac”). Moreover, it has also been metapoetically used to liken her poem to a mirror (“A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem”).

