



**PARALITERARY LABORS IN SYLVIA
PLATH'S *THE BELL JAR*:
TYPISTS, TEACHERS, AND
THE PINK-COLLAR SUBTEXT**

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Sylvia Plath typed the early drafts of *The Bell Jar* on the same pink office paper that she had used to prepare lesson plans and quizzes during her appointment as a freshman English instructor at Smith College. In a journal entry dating from March of 1958, Plath confesses that an urge "to write, or typewrite, my whole novel on the . . . Smith memorandum pads" had already impelled her to pilfer several notepads "from the supply closet" (*Journals* 344). For anyone reading the journals, Plath's determination to continue using the paper is likely to come as a surprise. In entries penned during previous months, Plath had repeatedly complained of being exhausted by her teaching duties, and she had already turned down the offer of a contract extension. What's more, in letters written to her family during the same period, Plath had emphasized the incompatibility between teaching and writing. As early as November of 1957, just two months into the school year, she had confided to her brother that her "ideal of being a good teacher" while "writing a book on the side" was "rapidly evaporating" (*Letters* 329). One month later, in a letter to her mother, she would observe, "I now know that I can never combine teaching and writing" (333). If Plath had come to view teaching as an impediment to her writing career, why was she

so determined to draft her first novel on Smith notepads? And why, in the first place, would Plath resolve to use office memo paper for her creative endeavors?¹

As scholars of the post-World War II period know, Plath was writing at a time when the creative autonomy of the fiction writer was bolstered by being juxtaposed with the seemingly automatic labor of the typist. It was an era when Truman Capote is said to have dismissed Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) with the quip, "That's not writing. That's typewriting."² While Capote was taking aim at the method of textual production that Kerouac dubbed "spontaneous prose," the poignancy of his remark derived from its reference to a mode of textual reproduction that had come to be thought of as "women's work" (Kerouac 72). In short, Capote was drawing on what Leah Price and Pamela Thurschwell have referred to as "a model of the author defined in contradistinction to the clerk" (2). In doing so, moreover, he was exploiting a discourse that could only exacerbate the gendered distribution of textual labor, reinforcing the divide between male creators and female copyists.³

Since the publication of Jacqueline Rose's field-changing study, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, scholars have paid increasing attention to the ways in which Plath transgressed normative boundaries not only between poetry and prose, but also between highbrow modernist fiction and lowbrow popular fiction.⁴ Taking this approach one step further, I hope to demonstrate that, in the novel that she would refer to as a "pot-boiler," Plath also transgressed the boundaries between textual labors marked as masculine and those marked as feminine (*Letters* 472). My claim is that whereas authors like Capote used the opposition between logos and graphos to distance themselves from the likes of typists and stenographers, Plath used the same opposition to establish a strategic affinity with women in gender-segregated occupations.

Scholars who have included *The Bell Jar* on course syllabi are likely to appreciate Linda Wagner-Martin's observation, in one of the few book-length studies of Plath's fiction, that today's students often experience "difficulty understanding the comparatively rigid social stratification in place during the increasingly prosperous 1940s and 1950s" (55). In a chapter entitled "The Bell Jar as Economic Text," Wagner-Martin observes that narrator-cum-protagonist Esther Greenwood is framed as an "outsider" with respect to social circles like the country club and elite women's college (58). Building on Wagner-Martin's analysis, the present essay focuses on Esther in her capacity not only as a consumer but also as a producer who endeavors to find a place within a burgeoning knowledge economy.⁵ To date, scholarship on Plath's novel has not addressed the central role that labor

plays within the text. While my analysis affirms Wagner-Martin's observation about Esther's paucity of material and social capital, I wish to suggest that the protagonist's professional aspirations and productive capabilities are equally central to the narrative form and thematic content of the novel.

During the 1950s, a rigid system of occupational sex stereotyping had the effect of concentrating large numbers of educated white women in positions as typists, stenographers, and teachers. By the end of the decade, the number of white women employed as clerical workers comprised 32.7% of the white female workforce, while the number employed as teachers comprised 39.1% of the female professional and managerial workforce (US Bureau of the Census 218).⁶ If, in the journal entry cited above, Plath affirms a desire not just to "write" but to "typewrite" a novel, she may have intended to suggest that the labors of typists would occupy a central place within the text. If she evidences a desire to write her novel on teaching notepads, she may have anticipated that the labors of teachers would occupy a similarly central place. I hope to show that the narrative structure of Plath's novel is informed by a persistent concern about the segmentation of the labor market and, in particular, about the sexual division of textual labor. My suggestion is that typing and teaching not only hovered in the background when Plath was drafting the manuscript, but also linger as an interpretive key that can help readers make sense of the main character's perceptions, narrative digressions, and symptomatic behaviors.

Yet if occupational segmentation is a central issue in *The Bell Jar*, it is not one that gets thematized in the plot of the novel as it might have in a more traditional realist text. Indeed, there are several ways in which Plath's novel departs from the modes of literary realism that had become prominent in earlier decades. First, *The Bell Jar* treats experiences in its protagonist's life that predate her entry into the labor market. Second, the novel is set in almost every location except the ones that its narrator envisions as potential workplaces. That is, instead of taking place in either a writer's study or a steno pool, the novel is set in the likes of hotel rooms and banquet halls, suburban homes and private hospitals. Third and perhaps most importantly, the main character's feelings about the employment opportunities available to her are never expressed in her thought or speech but manifest only in the protagonist's bodily symptoms and the narrator's disjunctive narration.

These differences are crucial to distinguishing the mode of realist fiction that I refer to as affective realism. In the proletarian novels of the 1930s and early 1940s, the characters' experience of the concrete conditions of their labor facilitated their increasing

class consciousness and political agency. In *The Bell Jar*, by contrast, Esther's anticipation of the limited employment options available to her—together with her perception of others' complacency in the face of those options—causes her body to fold in on itself. Indeed, while the labors of secretaries and teachers may not make a direct appearance in the novel, they constitute an almost constant presence in the protagonist's life, manifesting through the abridged aspirations of her peers and the abstemious expectations of her mother and mentors. For the protagonist of Plath's novel, these occupations mark the outer limits of a cultural imaginary whose cramped confines are experienced affectively through a reflexive bodily withdrawal.⁷

What Esther wants, I claim, is to expand the horizon not only of the possible but of the imaginable. It is a desire for a different configuration of the world, a desire for a world that would potentiate new and different objects and desires. Yet, as I also aim to show, Plath's novel investigates the paradox of a desire that is suffered, of an aspiration that is experienced in the form of agony and affliction. When Esther's hope of becoming a writer or editor finds little support within the gender-segregated knowledge economy, her body begins to withdraw into itself. The prospect of becoming a typist or teacher triggers a reflexive corporeal closure that is captured by words like "shrinking" and "shutting," "cramping" and "reducing." The ways in which these forms of labor shape the main character's unconscious, her bodily symptoms, and the form of her narrative amount to what I will refer to as the novel's pink-collar subtext.

Automatic Hands: Historicizing the Literary Secretary

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the appearance of secretaries in British and American literature served primarily to manage widespread anxieties about whether women's entry into the white-collar workforce would present a threat to the gendered separation of the public and private spheres. It was only toward the middle of the twentieth century—when those anxieties were trumped by the labor demands of an increasingly corporatized economy—that the subjective experiences of secretaries became a literary topic in their own right. I open the first section of this essay by surveying the seemingly antithetical images of the secretary that appear in two exemplary modern texts, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. While these texts paint very different pictures of how secretarial labor could impact women's capabilities as mothers and homemakers, both pictures turn on the figuration of such labor as a quasi-mechanical form of textual reproduction. In the second half of this section, I examine the literary conventions

that would organize representations of the secretary in the mid-twentieth century, focusing on Rona Jaffe's *The Best of Everything*, Mary McCarthy's *The Group*, and especially Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. I argue that while Plath relies on many of the same metaphors used by her male predecessors, she refigures them to draw attention to how women were impacted by limited employment opportunities.

Until the late nineteenth century, secretarial labor was undertaken largely by men who were apprenticed in fields where they sought to become professionals. As historian Margery Davies has shown, the typical secretary was an all-purpose clerk responsible for tasks ranging from copying and bookkeeping to trade and publicity. During the Civil War, the increasing demand for correspondence and record-keeping dovetailed with a shortage of male workers, motivating US Treasurer General Francis Elias Spinner to hire what some historians have taken to be the first female clerical workers. As growing businesses began to partition themselves into departments, the duties formerly performed by a general clerk were distributed among copyists, filing clerks, billing clerks, and so on. With the introduction of the first mass-produced typewriter in 1874 and the development of the Gregg shorthand system in 1887, the position of the copyist was further subdivided into the positions of the typist and the stenographer.⁸ Because women had been able to get a foot in the door during the war, they were able to achieve some traction in these new jobs before the positions could become sex-typed as masculine. As early as 1880, women accounted for 40% of all stenographers and typists; by 1890 they accounted for more than 60%; and by 1930 they had all but taken over the occupation—accounting for more than 95% (Davies 52).

Of course, if economic forces produced the need for women workers, those forces in and of themselves could not overcome the ideological obstacles to women's employment. In the years since Davies published her seminal study of women's entry into the clerical workforce, literary critics like Jennifer Fleissner and Christopher Keep have analyzed the cultural processes that recast the image of clerical work as a form of labor that would present little threat to the gendered separation of spheres. Fleissner astutely argues that in Stoker's *Dracula*, for example, the figuration of secretarial labor served to quell widespread concerns that women would be corrupted by the competitive imperatives of the capitalist workplace and end up unwilling to return to the home. Fleissner explains that insofar as secretarial duties like transcription and typing have the effect of transforming protagonist Mina Harker into a "hypnotic conduit," she functions as the kind of worker that "can be exposed to great 'corruptions,' without being branded for life," and her reproductive

activities in the office serve to "reinforce rather than threaten her future reproductive activities in the home" (79–80). Although Mina is subjected to the metaphorical markings of Dracula, her ability to make herself into a transparent intermediary—that is, her facility for secretarial reproduction—ultimately erases his marks and prepares her for the domestic duties of sexual reproduction.

Once clerical employment had become accepted as the provenance of women workers, social anxieties about women's economic and sexual empowerment ushered new cultural representations of the female secretary. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the secretary's capacity as a passive means of transmission would become the sign not of her immunity to the "corruptions" of modern life but of her vulnerability to them. In T. S. Eliot's rendering, for example, modern technologies like typewriters and gramophones threatened to render women passive and mechanical. In an incisive essay on the sexualization of literary secretaries, Christopher Keep observes that the typist in Eliot's *The Waste Land* becomes involved in a sexual affair that is "brought on not by her active desire but through sheer boredom. . . . Libidinal energy passes through her just as easily as the words she types at work" (425). Once this woman and her male suitor have finished eating, the secretary becomes a conduit for the man's voracious sexual appetite:

The time is now propitious, as he guesses,
The meal is ended, she is bored and tired,
Endeavours to engage her in caresses
Which are still unrequited, if undesired.
Flushed and decided, he assaults at once;
Exploring hands encounter no defence;
His vanity requires no response,
And makes a welcome of indifference. (Eliot 235–42)

In this passage, the secretary's agency has undergone a double negation. The verbs that would convey her emotions and volition are couched not only in the passive voice but also in a negative modality: the caresses she receives are "undesired" yet "unrequited." If the secretary's body engages at all, it does so automatically, absent desire or volition. For his part, the male suitor is not unlike a business executive dictating a letter to the woman who will transcribe it, type it up, and dispatch it: he "requires no response." The scene comes to a close when in the aftermath of this asymmetrical encounter the typist "smoothes her hair with automatic hand, / And puts a record on the gramophone" (255–56). Whereas the male suitor is attributed the hyperactive agency of "exploring hands," the secretary is presented as the volitionless bearer of an "automatic hand."

Historical fluctuations in how authors like Stoker and Eliot represented the secretary reflect the push and pull between the growing demand for female workers and the ideologies that prioritized women's domestic obligations. Whether an author championed or criticized women's pursuit of paid employment seems to have depended largely on whether such employment would have mitigated the tension between the needs of capital and the need for biological and cultural reproduction.⁹ Although Stoker and Eliot adopt different positions on women's workforce participation, both authors might be said to partake in the ideological work of bringing women's employment expectations into line with the needs of capital for human labor power. By constructing the secretary in the ways that they do, both Stoker and Eliot help women to "find value," as Roger Rouse has put it, in moving "in and out of paid labor" (375).¹⁰

By the middle of the twentieth century, as already suggested, the labor demands of a corporate economy trumped social anxieties about the separation of spheres.¹¹ It was at this point that the experiences of female secretaries would get promoted to a central theme in the pages of American literature. Given how much ideological work had gone into shaping women's employment expectations during the early twentieth century, it is perhaps unsurprising that mid-century authors like Rona Jaffe, Mary McCarthy, and Sylvia Plath would share an interest in the politics of female desire. These authors turned out novels that queried what college-educated white women were being encouraged to want, whether there was room for them to want other things, and what they would realistically be able to attain or achieve. In *The Group*, for example, Mary McCarthy tells the story of Libby MacAusland, a recent college graduate who gets hired to write reports on manuscripts for an unnamed publishing company. Although her supervisor, Gus LeRoy, recognizes that Libby has "real writing talent," he concludes that she is "not cut out" for what he refers to as the "man's business" of publishing and tells her to apply at "one of the women's magazines" (McCarthy 253–54). Undaunted, however, Libby soon finds work as an assistant to a literary agent and ultimately makes a name for herself as a "high-powered literary agent" (314).

Rona Jaffe's debut novel, *The Best of Everything*, explores the question of how women raised in a society that mandated that they become homemakers could arrive at the desire for a career.¹² The main character of Jaffe's novel is Caroline Bender, a twenty-year-old Radcliffe graduate who initially wants little more out of life than "to be a good and interesting wife" for the boy whom she hopes to marry (6). Yet when her fiancé falls for another woman, Caroline begins to rethink her attachment to such a limited vision of the future. She

enrolls in a six-week shorthand course, moves to New York City, and accepts "the first job she was offered"—as a general secretary at Fabian Publications (7). When Caroline first walks into the typing pool at Fabian in January of 1952, readers learn that she "did not consider herself basically a career girl" (1). Yet Caroline's exposure to the intellectual life of the editors will plant the seed of professional aspiration. "There's something catching about ambition," she soon remarks (24). The novel focuses on the emergence of what Caroline refers to as her "beginning feelings" and examines how those inchoate affects grow into a coherent and actionable "editorial hope" (37). Before the end of the year, she is not only promoted to the position of a reader but also resolves to become an associate editor: "There was one thing she was sure of. She was going to become an editor" (124–25). Taken as a whole, the novel might be said to track how Caroline rises from being a general secretary (making \$50 per week) to a private secretary (\$65/week) to a reader (\$75/week) to an associate editor (\$90/week).

If Jaffe's novel dramatizes how the exposure to a vibrant workplace can kindle the desire for a career, Plath's novel dramatizes how the impediments to fulfilling work can subdue that same desire. In *The Bell Jar*, narrator Esther Greenwood tells of how in the summer of her nineteenth year she won a writing contest and traveled to New York City for a month-long apprenticeship with an intellectual fashion magazine called *Ladies' Day*. When the novel opens, the narrator frames the nineteen-year-old version of herself as an ambitious student who knows what she wants and has mapped out a strategy for getting it. "All my life I'd told myself studying and reading and writing and working like mad was what I wanted to do, and it actually seemed to be true" (*Bell* 31). A few paragraphs later the narrator similarly recalls, "I thought I'd be a professor and write books of poems or write books of poems and be an editor of some sort" (32). The protagonist's ambitions are substantiated by the many ways in which she has applied herself throughout high school and college. While on scholarship at a "big eastern women's college" (132), she has served as both the "editor of the literary magazine" and the "college correspondent for the town *Gazette*" (31). Readers also learn that a "well-known woman poet and professor" has championed her "for graduate school" with "promises of full scholarships" (31).

Yet if the protagonist of *The Bell Jar* aspires to become an editor or professor, she is surprised to find that the other girls apprenticing at *Ladies' Day* do not harbor similar career ambitions. Although the majority of the interns are promising intellectuals who have won writing contests in order to come to New York, Esther learns that they have resigned themselves to working at short-term secretarial jobs before

becoming permanent homemakers. In the early pages of the novel, the narrator relates that the other girls are either enrolled in "posh secretarial schools like Katy Gibbs" or else they "had just graduated from places like Katy Gibbs and were secretaries to executives and junior executives and simply hanging around in New York waiting to get married to some career man or other" (4).

If the narrator frames her fellow interns as behaving mechanically, this is not because they have already become secretaries, but rather because their aspirations seem so abbreviated. Esther describes her peers as speaking in truncated sentences consisting largely of verbal automatisms. For example, when Hilda pipes up about the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, the narrator remarks that her "two lips met and moved and the dybbuk spoke out of its hiding place, 'I'm so glad they're going to die'" (100). What's more, just as Eliot's secretary is "bored and tired," Esther's peers seem content to yawn away the better part of their lives. The emotional keynote that organizes the tones in their diatonic scale is boredom:

These girls looked awfully bored to me. I saw them on the sunroof, yawning and painting their nails and trying to keep up their Bermuda tans, and they seemed bored as hell. I talked with one of them, and she was bored with yachts and bored with flying around in airplanes and bored with skiing in Switzerland at Christmas and bored with the men in Brazil.

Girls like that make me sick. I'm so jealous I can't speak. Nineteen years, and I hadn't been out of New England except for this trip to New York. (4)

To readers trained in the semiotics of social status, the boredom exhibited by Esther's peers is likely to read less as an affect than an affectation meant to index their elevated place on the social totem pole. As a stylized emotional stance, boredom enables the girls to index their abundance of leisure time, their access to exotic destinations, and their general knowingness and world-weariness. More importantly, however, Esther interprets the boredom of her peers as a sign of their exhaustion with and perhaps even their paranoid defense against new experiences and new knowledge. For these girls, concerns about social propriety and impression management trump personal feeling as the basis for action.

Esther's assertion that her fellow interns make her "sick"—and that they put her in a state where she "can't speak"—should perhaps be taken at face value. Soon enough, Esther's cognitive apprehension of what she hopes to achieve in life will be contravened by changes occurring at the level of bodily affectivity. When her supervisor, Jay

Cee, notices that Esther's investment in her editorial work has begun to wane, she inquires, "'Doesn't your work interest you, Esther?'" (31). In an attempt to answer this question, Esther musters a strained affirmation: "'Oh, it does, it does.'" Reflecting on this retort, the narrator recalls that she "felt like yelling the words, as if that might make them more convincing." Readers get the sense that it may be Esther herself who needs "convincing" and that she may be trying to talk her way into a certain depth of feeling. But the attempt to ground her assertions in the bedrock of conviction eventually fails. "'I'm very interested in everything,'" Esther continues, only to concede that the "words fell with a hollow flatness on to Jay Cee's desk, like so many wooden nickels" (32). Although the semantic content of Esther's speech reflects an attempt to affirm an interest, this attempt is belied by a delivery that remains expressionless, bereft of emotional depth: "flat," "hollow," "wooden." Jay Cee's question about Esther's interests will become one among a "chorus of voices" that haunts Esther throughout the rest of the summer: "*Doesn't your work interest you, Esther?*" (146).

At a certain point, Esther gives up on the attempt to speak herself into a feeling. Toward the end of her encounter with Jay Cee, the latter asks, "'What do you have in mind after you graduate?'" (32). Esther's response seems to issue from the depths of the body: "'I don't really know,' I heard myself say. I felt a deep shock, hearing myself say that, because the minute I said it, I knew it was true." Here, Esther's cognitive awareness of her career aspirations—or what she "had in mind"—gets contravened by her awareness of the social norms and prejudicial hiring practices that constrain her employment horizons. The question of desire emerges again when the interns at the magazine are asked to be "photographed with props to show what we wanted to be" (101). Esther's response is the same: "When they asked me what I wanted to be I said I didn't know."¹³ Interestingly, then, Plath relied on many of the same metaphors that Stoker and Eliot had introduced when attempting to convey how women were impacted by secretarial labor. Unlike her male predecessors, however, Plath used those metaphors to suggest that, due to their limited career options, the members of her generation were threatened with becoming figures of impoverished ambition, defined by boredom, hypnotic conduits for the agency of others.

The Pink-Collar Subtext of *The Bell Jar*

In *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose argues that the diagnostic frame that controlled the first three decades of Plath's reception history—a frame that encouraged connections "between the

writing and the life"—had the effect of "remov[ing] the problem of the unconscious" from the texts (4). Rose uses the Lacanian concept of the *corps morcelé*—the fragmented body—to discuss both Plath's embrace of culturally incongruous genres and the subsequent violation of her textual corpus by family members, editors, and the culture at large.¹⁴ Yet far from bemoaning such fragmentation, Rose maintains that scholarly attempts "to produce a unified version of Plath" (5) reflect a specious wish to "repair" the author's shortened life and scattered archive—not to mention the "division between conscious and unconscious." Rose suggests that the gaps and contradictions in Plath's oeuvre may have something to teach readers not only about the splitting endemic to the subject and the socius, but also about how such splitting is an ineradicable dimension of communication. "What she presents us with, therefore is not only the difference of writing from the person who produces it, but also the division internal to language, the difference of writing from itself" (5).

In the second section of this essay, I build on Rose's analysis by exploring the central importance of the body and the unconscious in *The Bell Jar*. Given Rose's esteem for Plath's fiction, it is surprising that she chooses not to comment on the importance of either the body or the unconscious within the author's only work of long-form fiction. In the chapter where she discusses the novel, however, Rose does remark on the breadth and diversity of the textual body found therein:

From the unnamed women's magazines where she is guest editor, to *Ladies' Day*, *The New Yorker*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, the scandal sheets, cinema (Technicolor football romances, *Gone with the Wind*, the Bette Davis movie made out of her benefactress's book), and, in passing, the *Reader's Digest*, *Vogue*, and *Life* and *Time* magazines—it is the range and density of cultural reference in *The Bell Jar* that is so striking. (186)

Yet if Rose registers the heterogeneity of textual reference within Plath's novel, she does not touch on how this textual body constitutes raw material for the unconscious of its central character. Instead, she collapses the "range and density" of textual material into a unified interpretation that itself risks removing the problem of the unconscious from the novel. Reading Plath's text as twist on a Joycean Künstlerroman—a portrait of the artist as a young woman—Rose argues that it tracks the protagonist's "development" through her "negotiation of this multiplicity of cultural forms" (186).¹⁵ Contending that Esther finds herself "oppress[e]d" by the popular fiction associated with female characters like Philomena Guinea and Jay Cee, Rose asserts

that Esther's "regeneration" is enabled by her identification with the "male writers" whose "sarcastic" and "scientifically distanced" tone had come to comprise the house style at highbrow literary journals like the *New Yorker* (186–88).

What I am suggesting is that Rose's interpretation of *The Bell Jar* goes against the astute analysis offered throughout the rest of her monograph. In her introduction, Rose praises Plath for contravening the normative distinctions between high and low, masculine and feminine, poetry and prose. "Once again, this is a boundary that Plath transgresses: certainly she writes high poetry, but she also writes—and very often prefers to write—low prose" (9). In her chapter on *The Bell Jar*, by contrast, Rose suggests that Esther's psychological and aesthetic "regeneration" are conditioned on her embrace of masculine high style. In my view, this neat developmental reading not only provides a hasty resolution to the textual fragmentation within *The Bell Jar*, but also misconstrues the central role that textual production plays in Esther's breakdown and recovery.

To be sure, Esther responds quite strongly to the textual materials that she encounters. Any number of scholars have expressed puzzlement over why Esther loses her ability to transact—both intellectually and aesthetically—with certain textual bodies. "Why," asks Linda Wagner-Martin, "do the incomprehensible words in James Joyce . . . strike on her eyes and mind with no meaning whatsoever? Why can she not read? Why can she not write?" (78). In order to answer these questions, it will be important to remember that during her internship Esther is a worker-in-training whose body gets processed in different ways by the different forms of textual labor that she is charged with carrying out: from creative writing and editing to transcribing and typing. A careful examination of Esther's reflexive aversion to certain texts reveals that she is actually responding to the processes of textual production found in gender-marked work-force positions. On this reading, the distinction between the feminine lowbrow and the masculine highbrow is not the most important axis for interpreting Esther's affective responses to the novel's heterogeneous textual body. By extending the lucid analysis found in the early chapters of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, I hope to show that what haunts Plath's protagonist is actually the gendered division of textual labor. My claim is that the withdrawal of Esther's desires and communicative capacities can be attributed to unconscious anxieties about whether the persistence of gendered occupational segmentation will limit her prospects for fulfilling employment.

Plath constructs *The Bell Jar* as a diagnostic text focused on the question of why the protagonist feels increasingly isolated from her social surroundings. The diagnostic frame is established from the

first paragraphs of the novel, which introduce a set of symptoms that readers are charged with interpreting. The narrator recalls that during the summer of her nineteenth year, she was afflicted by an ailment that neither she nor her doctors were able to understand. "I knew something was wrong with me that summer," the narrator recalls (2). The text challenges readers to diagnose what that "something" is and to determine whether it can really be localized in the person of the protagonist. In order to diagnose Esther's ailment, readers must employ a multiplicity of diagnostic techniques, actively interpreting not only the contents but also the form of Esther's narrative. A complete understanding of that ailment can only be reached by correlating the protagonist's physical symptoms with the unconscious anxieties betrayed by the narrator's episodic and digressive narrative.¹⁶

Analyzing the narrative structure of *The Bell Jar*, scholars like Wagner-Martin and Lynda Bundtzen perceptively argue that the personality of Plath's narrator strongly inflects the organization, pacing, and focus of the novel. Describing the narrator's consciousness as a "fragmented but relentless stream" (31), Wagner-Martin observes that Esther "grasps at pieces of information, races to another topic, returns to the first," and so on (26). In conjunction with this insight, she notes that Plath utilizes a "technique of fragmentation" that involves inserting a line of blank space to signal "a change in narrative time, sometimes a flashback, sometimes a flash-forward, sometimes a different narrative section" (30–31). Bundtzen observes that the narrator's "flashbacks reveal that Esther's depression is not brought on solely by new experiences in the big city and the adult world, but also by a series of events from her past now having a cumulative effect and distorting her vision of the present" (*Incarnations* 111). While these reflections usefully point to the disjointed character of Esther's narration, the phrase "stream of consciousness" does not do justice to the largely unconscious associative process that propels her narration. Because the narrator's unconscious informs the sequencing of events and memories—or the temporal play—in her narrative, the form of that narrative needs to be interpreted in much the same way that a therapist might interpret a patient's free-associative speech. In a 1962 essay comparing the craft of the novelist with that of the poet, Plath emphasizes the importance of such temporal play in long-form fiction. Noting that in a novel the characters' "emotions" and "motivations" amount to "rumbling, thunderous shapes" that struggle to get expressed, Plath asserts that the novelist's "business is Time, the way it shoots forward, shunts back, blooms, decays and double-exposes itself" ("Comparison" 62).

Returning to the text of *The Bell Jar*, I propose to look more closely at what the "shoots" and "shunts" of Esther's narrative might

reveal about the "rumblings" of her unconscious. As we will see, Plath forces readers to pay close attention to what feminist critics like Carolyn Heilbrun and Catharine Stimpson have referred to as "hollows, centers, caverns within the work—places where activity that one might expect is missing . . . or deceptively coded" (62). After the protagonist has said that she doesn't know what she wants to do after graduating, Jay Cee inquires about what languages she speaks and encourages her to take courses in French and German. "Hundreds of girls flood into New York every June thinking they'll be editors. You need to offer something more than the run-of-the-mill person. You better learn some languages" (33). Esther agrees, saying that she might "fit into one of those double-barreled accelerated courses in elementary German they've rigged up" (34). But she reveals something to readers that she doesn't say to Jay Cee: "What I didn't say was that each time I picked up a German dictionary or a German book, the very sight of those dense, black, barbed-wire letters made my mind shut like a clam" (33).

Plath's use of the imagery of barbed wire has been the subject of more than a little scholarly commentary.¹⁷ For people reading *The Bell Jar* in 1963, just eighteen years after the end of World War II, the mention of barbed wire in conjunction with the German language might have evoked the Nazi concentration camps. But the reference to barbed wire also seems intended as a comment on the lexicological nature of the German language. Whereas Ferdinand de Saussure describes the English language as highly "grammatical," he describes the German language as highly "lexicological" (134). In the English language, the meaning of an utterance is likely to be determined by a combination of major lexical units (such as nouns, verbs, adjectives) and coded grammatical rules (for example, the inversion of subject and object changes an assertion into an interrogative). In the German language, by contrast, the meaning of an utterance will be strongly informed by the concatenation of a number of derivative, minor lexical units (such as prefixes, suffixes, and circumfixes specifying either the conjugation of a verb or the declension of a noun, pronoun, or adjective). Esther's aversion to German dictionaries and books would seem to stem from the fact that German is a highly lexicalized language in which meaning is produced through the concatenation of such minor units: like barbs on a wire. Perhaps most importantly, the sight of such linguistic compression sets off a mimetic affective response, causing Esther to "shut like a clam."

After disclosing her feelings about German, Esther launches into a four-page account of her feelings about the various science courses that she has taken in college. The bodily withdrawal that Esther had experienced when exposed to the German language will get repeated

in her response to the physical sciences. Esther reports that on the first day of physics class, her teacher "started talking about let a equal acceleration and let t equal time and suddenly he was scribbling letters and numbers and equals signs all over the blackboard and my mind went dead" (34). She observes that physics entailed "shrinking everything into letters and numbers" and then combining them into "hideous, cramped, scorpion-lettered formulas" (35). Regarding her chemistry class, Esther similarly recalls that "all the perfectly good words like . . . cobalt and aluminum were shortened to ugly abbreviations" (35). Shrinking and shortening, clamping and cramping. From Esther's point of view, courses like physics and chemistry feel diminishing because they translate the world into a tableau of abstract properties and quantifiable forces. She concludes: "Physics made me sick the whole time I learned it. What I couldn't stand was this shrinking everything into letters and numbers" (35).¹⁸

Given Esther's aversive reaction to science classes like physics and chemistry, it is all the more interesting that she does not flinch at the violence entailed by cutting up leaves in biology class, by cutting open a cadaver in medical school, or by cutting into a pregnant woman to facilitate childbirth. But in those contexts the cutting serves not to shrink but rather to expand the world. The narrator recalls that her college botany teacher had students "cutting up leaves and putting them under the microscope" in order to create "enlarged diagrams of the holes the leaves breathe through" (35).¹⁹ Indeed, where her physics and chemistry teachers reduced words and relations to letters and formulas, her botany teacher fills the blackboard with "fascinating words like carotene and xanthophyll." Whereas the reductive formulas of physics and chemistry feel like "death"—they make her mind go "dead"—the expansive operations of the biological sciences have an animating effect on Esther: "it seemed so real to me," she affirms (34).²⁰ The narrator also reports having cut all her classes in order to accompany Buddy Willard to a teaching hospital where she was able not only to watch him dissect a cadaver, but also, against his warnings, to witness a team of obstetricians perform a cesarean section. "I could see something like that every day," she asserts. (67). In Esther's experience, sciences like physiology and botany—as well as the "life" sciences of obstetrics and autopsical anatomy—have the effect of creating openings within the world. In such contexts, cutting an object into pieces does not diminish that object, but expands what can be known about it.²¹ Esther's fascination with these cutting scenes may be taken to confirm Rose's suggestion that Plath locates more freedom in the fragmented body—or in the splitting that is a condition of the emergence of the subject—than in the coherent "I" that comes to take its place.

Like her experiences with German dictionaries, the narrator's memories of various science classes contribute very little to the plot of *The Bell Jar*. They read like disconnected episodes from a distant past. Significantly, however, it is Jay Cee's question about what Esther wants to do after graduating that causes these charged memories to come flooding back. Lest her readers miss this connection, Plath calls attention to it in the opening sentence of the following chapter. The fourth chapter opens with the narrator's conspicuous admission, "I don't know just why my successful evasion of chemistry should have floated into my mind there in Jay Cee's office" (38). Here, Plath suggests that the seemingly trivial and tangential scenes that "float" into the protagonist's mind may actually amount—like the contents of a dream—to hieroglyphs that encode her unconscious feelings about the life choices that she confronts in the present. It is only by uncovering the connections between these seemingly unrelated narrative strands that readers can decipher the associative logic of Esther's unconscious.

The key that enables readers to decode these digressions is the secretarial task of transcribing oration in shorthand. To the extent that German is characterized by lexical compression and hyperrational combinatorics, it resembles the abbreviated shorthand systems used by stenographers. To the extent that physics and chemistry involve the abbreviation of words and phrases into letters and symbols, they resemble the practice of shorthand transcription. Indeed, the symbols of the Gregg shorthand system surpass even the German language in their resemblance to barbed wire.

When Esther attempts to read or write, it is telling that the words on the page separate into curls and crosses reminiscent of shorthand transcription. When she attempts to read Joyce, for example, she finds that individual "letters grew barbs and rams' horns. I watched them separate, each from the other, and jiggle up and down in a silly way" (124). When she attempts to write, the words similarly distort into loops and dashes: "When I took up my pen, my hand made big, jerky letters like those of a child, and the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally, as if they were loops of string lying on the paper, and someone had come along and blown them askew" (130).

That Esther's bodily symptoms constitute a response to gendered occupational segmentation is further suggested by her encounters with actual women workers. When Esther visits the UN auditorium, for example, her attention settles on a Russian woman who earns a living by translating the words of male diplomats. Of course, Esther's response to the work of translation is not entirely averse; as Pat Macpherson astutely suggests, Esther seems intrigued

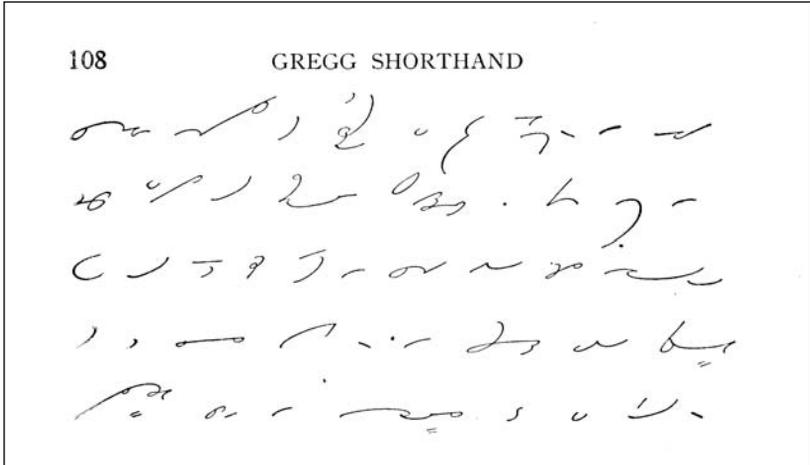


Fig. 1. John Robert Gregg, *Gregg Shorthand: A Light-Line Phonography for the Million* (New York: The Gregg Publishing Company, 1916), 108.

by the prospect of facilitating congress across the iron curtain (17). Yet just as the scientific practice of "shrinking everything into letters and numbers" makes the protagonist feel "sick," the spectacle of a woman translating the statements of male diplomats triggers a feeling of betrayal and separation: "Then Constantin and the Russian girl interpreter and the whole bunch of black and white and yellow men arguing down there behind their labeled microphones seemed to move off at a distance. I saw their mouths going up and down without a sound, as if they were sitting on the deck of a departing ship, stranding me in the middle of a huge silence" (75). Here, the curtailment of professional opportunities associated with occupational sex stereotyping gets experienced as desertion and diminution. The protagonist's perception that the affordances of her environment are diminishing results in a mimetic sensory withdrawal.

In *Seminar XI*, Jacques Lacan discusses the experience of "fading" or "closing" that can transpire when the subject is forced to identify with a normatively mandated social role in order to attain recognition from others (207–08). Referring to such fading as *aphanisis*, Lacan describes the subjects who suffer this experience as having been covered over by the signifier. For the protagonist of *The Bell Jar*, the prospect of becoming fixed within a single place in the social order threatens to sever the dialectics between the unconscious and the symbolic field. What's more, the prospect of transcribing someone else's oration carries the risk of being almost literally reduced to a signifier. Ironically, this is the place where the

roles of typist and translator overlap with the role of diplomat. Lacan suggests that the diplomat exemplifies the "pure representative": "What do diplomats do when they address one another? . . . In the very exchange of views, each must record only what the other transmits in his pure function as signifier, he must not take into account what the other is, *qua* presence, as a man who is likable to a greater or lesser degree" (220). Not unlike the titular secretary of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" (1853), the protagonist of Plath's novel would seem to endure the fading that results from being transformed into a kind of dead letter.

Immediately after Esther witnesses male diplomats interacting through the mediation of female interpreters, she is moved to contrast the creative autonomy of male authors with the subservience of female copyists. It is the first time that she explicitly associates the reductive operations of the physical sciences with the abbreviations of shorthand:

My mother kept telling me nobody wanted a plain English major. But an English major who knew shorthand was something else again. Everybody would want her. She would be in demand among all the up-and-coming young men and she would transcribe letter after thrilling letter.

The trouble was, I hated the idea of serving men in any way. I wanted to dictate my own thrilling letters. Besides, those little shorthand symbols in the book my mother showed me seemed just as bad as let *t* equal time and let *s* equal the total distance. (76)

In this passage, readers learn that it is not only Jay Cee but, in the first place, Mrs. Greenwood who recommends that Esther pick up additional skills—language skills, stenography skills—in order to increase her marketability: "Everybody would want her."²² The question of what Esther desires becomes increasingly bound up with questions about what is desired of her, questions about her desirability, questions about where she fits into both the economy and society—in short, with questions about the desire of the Other.²³

In recent years, scholars have begun to complicate the popular image of Plath as a bereaved daughter and aggrieved widow whose writings are preoccupied exclusively with the loss of men. Christina Britzolakis and Nephie Christodoulides have re-centered Plath scholarship on the importance of motherhood in her writings. In *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, for example, Britzolakis argues that while Plath sometimes presents herself as a "daughter-in-mourning" whose primary loss was her deceased father, her writings are equally concerned with recovering from the losses associated with her living

parent, Aurelia Plath (18). Although she focuses primarily on the poetry, Britzolakis observes that Plath's writings became especially complex when she realized that her relationship with her mother involved a redoubling of loss: "both the infantile loss of the mother and the mother's own losses are at play" (19).

While the connection between mothers and loss is equally central to *The Bell Jar*, a full understanding of that connection needs to account for the ways in which the curtailment of women's employment opportunities complicates the mourning work of both mother and daughter. Just as Aurelia Plath taught shorthand to medical secretaries at Boston University, Mrs. Greenwood teaches shorthand and typing at an unnamed secretarial school. She took the job out of economic necessity in order to support her two children after her husband died. "My mother had taught shorthand and typing to support us ever since my father died, and secretly she hated it and hated him for dying and leaving no money because he didn't trust life insurance salesmen" (39). Whether or not Mrs. Greenwood supports Esther's literary ambitions, she insists that her daughter learn shorthand so that she'll have a salable skill to fall back on. "She was always on to me to learn shorthand after college, so I'd have a practical skill as well as a college degree" (39-40). As we have seen, however, Esther associates shorthand with the reduction of the self to a kind of symbol or letter.

For the duration of her stay in New York, Esther assumes that the remainder of her summer will be spent in a creative writing course at Harvard University. "I was sure I'd find the letter of acceptance waiting on the mail table at home," she affirms (103). Yet when she returns from New York to her home in a Boston suburb, Esther learns that she has been refused a place in the course. Although I am wary of the temptation to ascribe causality to attempts at suicide, scholars like Jo Gill have good reason to conclude that the "news Mrs. Greenwood gives Esther of her failure to secure a place on the summer writing course. . . is the catalyst for Esther's suicide" (81). The news of her rejection from the writing course propels Esther into what Lacanians might describe as the space between two deaths. Even before receiving this news, Esther had experienced the return trip as a kind of regression: "I stepped from the air-conditioned compartment onto the station platform, and the motherly breath of the suburbs enfolded me. . . . A summer calm laid its soothing hand over everything, like death" (113).

Following a day of rest and a failed attempt to begin a novel of her own accord, Esther confronts the possibility that she too may end up a pink-collar worker. Indeed, the novel's most important teaching scene takes place when she assents to sit for a lesson in shorthand:

By the end of supper my mother had convinced me I should study shorthand in the evenings. Then I would be killing two birds with one stone, writing a novel and learning something practical as well. I would also be saving a whole lot of money.

That same evening, my mother unearthed an old blackboard from the cellar and set it up on the breezeway. Then she stood at the blackboard and scribbled little curlicues in white chalk while I sat in a chair and watched.

At first I felt hopeful.

I thought I might learn shorthand in no time. . . .

The only thing was, when I tried to picture myself in some job, briskly jotting down line after line of shorthand, my mind went blank. There wasn't one job I felt like doing where you used shorthand. And, as I sat there and watched, the white chalk curlicues blurred into senselessness.

I told my mother I had a terrible headache, and went to bed. (121-22)

By this point in the text, it should come as little surprise that, surrounded as she is by so many teachers, Esther finds her initiative overwhelmed by the claims that others make on her desire. If her mind had "shut like a clam" when trying to learn German, and if her mind "went dead" when trying to learn physics, here we learn the source of this response pattern: "When I tried to picture myself in some job, briskly jotting down line after line of shorthand, my mind went blank."

Coda: Literary Affinities

In this essay I have argued that, in contrast to Truman Capote, who dismissed Jack Kerouac's prose as "typewriting," mid-century women writers resisted the temptation to exploit the figure of the typist in order to bolster their status as creative artists. Instead, writers like Rona Jaffe, Mary McCarthy, and Sylvia Plath took up the cause of women workers and pushed for the transformations in gender norms that would enable typists to become authors, editors, and professors. While the protagonist of *The Bell Jar* develops an aversion to the labors of secretaries and teachers, it would be a mistake to conclude that her aversion reflects a pejorative attitude toward the practitioners of those occupations. After all, Esther's aversion is directed not at any single occupation, but rather at a wide range of occupations that involve reproductive textual labor: typists, teachers, translators, and so on. For that reason, Esther's bodily aversion to

"women's work" needs to be understood as an aversion to gendered occupational segmentation and workplace segregation.

As we have seen, writers like Jaffe, McCarthy, and Plath focused their novels on young female protagonists who possess the talent to become professionals but are discouraged from doing so by discriminatory hiring practices and a restrictive social imaginary. By constructing such characters, these writers drew attention to the conditions that too often prevented educated women from pursuing high paying and intellectually fulfilling work. They employed the opposition between "writing" and "typewriting" not to fortify the prerogatives of artistic originality but to shine a critical light on the sexual division of textual labor. Rather than distancing themselves from typists and teachers, they used their literary talents to establish strategic affinities with women in the rapidly expanding pink-collar proletariat.

Notes

1. Scholars such as Susan Van Dyne, Lynda Bundtzen, and Robin Peel have provided compelling accounts of why Plath chose to recycle the pink typescript of *The Bell Jar* when composing the *Ariel* poems. But scholars have yet to ask why Plath was so determined to utilize the paper for her novel in the first place. As Robin Peel recently observed, the typed drafts of *The Bell Jar* have been the focus of sustained attention "not so much in their own right but in relationship to the poems written on the reverse" (Peel 122).
2. Although Capote's line about Kerouac is often misquoted, James Michener has verified the precise phrasing: "When asked his opinion of Jack Kerouac's lava-flow effusions he said: 'That's not writing. That's typewriting.'" (In its later version this often appeared as 'That's not writing. That's typing.' Which, of course, loses the wonderful poetry, rhythm and impeccable use of words in the original. I once asked Capote about this and he confirmed the *typewriting*") (qtd. in Grobel 130–31).
3. For further analysis of how modernist writers constructed themselves in opposition to the feminized culture of sentimentality, see Clark.
4. Referring to how some scholars have privileged the *Ariel* poems over Plath's earlier poetry and prose, Rose observes that "the way those late poems are detached from the body of her other writing becomes a little allegory for the process whereby culture divides itself up, discriminates against one part of itself" (9). Rose praises Plath for refusing the neat divisions imposed by her culture, observing that she was as committed to writing stories and novels as she was to polishing her poetry. "From the poems to the stories, to the letters, to the journals, to the novel, what is most striking is the differences between these various utterances, each one contradicting as much as

completing the others, each one no less true for the disparity which relates them and sets them apart" (Rose 4–5). Reviewing more recent scholarship by Bundtzen, Peel, and Deborah Nelson among others, Anita Helle observes that sustained attention to Plath's exploration of a wide range of genres—and her practice of writing on the backside of previous drafts—has taught a new generation of readers "to be interested in Plath for her contradictory selves, accepting the disintegration we have to work with, both the history of her reception and the materials themselves" (641). At the same time, however, Janet Badia has good cause to observe—in the only essay from *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* devoted to the author's fiction—that Plath's novel "still receives less attention than the poetry" (135).

5. In 1956 white-collar workers surpassed blue-collar workers as the largest segment of the nonagricultural workforce. For lucid accounts of how post-World War II economic restructuring influenced a broad swathe of American fiction, see Hoberek and Thompson.
6. The proportion of the white female workforce employed in clerical positions (32.7%) was more than twice that in any other field. Other fields where working white women were concentrated included manufacturing (15.7%), service (12.4%), and sales (8.7%). While the proportion of the white female workforce employed in teaching (5.4%) may seem small by comparison, it is worth repeating that teachers made up 39.1% of the women hired in professional and managerial positions. The proportion employed in teaching (5.4%) looks more significant when compared with the proportion in medicine (3.9%), management (2.5%), and business ownership (1.5%) (US Bureau of the Census 218). My focus is on the distribution of the white female workforce because nonwhite women faced double discrimination in the labor market and were consolidated in low-paying fields like domestic labor (34.3%) and service labor (20.7%). Renée Curry has written insightfully about how Plath's writing "avows" the phenomenon of white privilege even as it "equivocates" about the significance of imagery like "white" and "whiteness" (167).
7. I use the word "affect" instead of "emotion" because the narrator does not rely on codified expressive conventions in order to alert readers to what is happening inside the protagonist's body. Instead, the protagonist's deepest desires and anxieties remain as unintelligible to the narrator as they do to the protagonist herself. As a result, readers are put in the position of having to interpret the protagonist's external symptoms if they wish to discern why she becomes unable to transact with the world.
8. Although the first attempts to make writing machines date to the early eighteenth century, it was not until the 1870s that printer Christopher Latham Scholes—aided by an expanding market for office technologies—was able to convince the gunmaking firm of E. Remington and Sons to make a sufficient investment to produce the technology on a wide scale. By the late 1880s, Remington was manufacturing more

than 1,500 typewriters a month, and the technology began to establish itself as a permanent fixture of the office environment. The word "stenography," from the Greek *stenos* (narrow) and *graphē* (writing), refers to the process of writing in any shorthand orthographic system where abbreviations or symbols stand in for words and phrases. Prior to the invention of recording technologies, training in stenography was a central part of any secretarial or administrative curriculum, crucial as it was to transcribing the oral dictation of executives. In 1888 John Robert Gregg published the first in a series of pamphlets and books introducing the Gregg shorthand system, which quickly became the most popular form of shorthand in the United States. In the Gregg system, each consonant or vowel sound gets transcribed as a distinctive curve, loop, or hook, and these geometrical figures are joined together to complete a word. The system also features "brief forms" whereby entire words and phrases can be transcribed into such figures. To the average reader, a document transcribed using the Gregg system would look something like a drawing of a barbed-wire fence—and would be completely illegible.

9. The changing face of secretarial labor amounts to a fascinating case study of what labor historian Alice Kessler-Harris has called the "struggle to contain the tension between the need for certain kinds of labor power, on the one hand, and perceived women's roles in a changing economy, on the other hand" (98).
10. Rouse explains that such ideological work is crucial to the ability of capitalism to reproduce itself: "Given the importance of both maintaining a reserve army and limiting the frustration of those within its ranks, ruling blocs have worked hard to make a segment of the population accept and even find value in moving intermittently in and out of paid labor and, in this process, a key role has been played by gendered ideologies regarding the importance of domestic obligations and other ideologies that have stressed for urban immigrants the merits of periodically returning home" (375).
11. Fleissner argues that by mid-century, the secretary and the typing pool were no longer taken as a threat to separate spheres ideology but had come to seem like the very affirmation of it. As she describes it, the office had come to be imagined "as something very like a home," with its "receptionist as wife surrounded by a cadre of servants of differing ranks" (70).
12. Jaffe took her title from a help-wanted advertisement that would serve as her epigraph: "YOU DESERVE THE BEST OF EVERYTHING: The best job, the best surroundings, the best pay, the best contact" (v). The advertisement is couched in the language of boundless plenitude, but implicit in its address is an admission that women too often faced mutually exclusive choices. Referring to the use of this advertisement in her title, Jaffe would subsequently reflect, "In fact, I thought of it as an ironic term" (Commentary).
13. At this point the narrator refers to the protagonist's mouth as being like the "mouth of a ventriloquist's dummy" (102), and she refers to

the impersonal voice that speaks through that mouth as a "zombie voice" (119). By doing as much, the narrator suggests that the protagonist has been infected by the attenuation of desire evidenced all around her. One aspect of *The Bell Jar* that has received little commentary is the permutation of Esther's voice. The person named Esther is the locus of at least three voices: the elder narrator's voice, the nineteen-year-old protagonist's voice, and the zombie voice that sometimes speaks through the protagonist. For an analysis of this latter type of semi-autonomous voice, see Dolar.

14. Plath's textual corpus was violated when Ted Hughes burned her journal, when he rearranged and removed some of the poems intended for *Ariel*, and when Aurelia Plath published a censored edition of her journals.
15. More specifically, Rose argues that the novel's central plot is "the coming-into-being of a writer across the fragments of contemporary cultural life. Writing is a passage through all the disparate strata of high and low art (James Joyce to the scandal sheets)" (186).
16. The argument in this paragraph has been informed by Jane Thraikill's astute analysis of "forensic narrative" in nineteenth-century realist novels (12). Thraikill argues that when physiologists discovered, in the late nineteenth century, that the impacts of trauma were not always visible on the surface of the body, the need for diagnostic interpretation served to buttress the authority of both the doctor and the realist narrator. But Plath structures the apparatus of *The Bell Jar* somewhat differently. Because the narrator remains perplexed by the enigma of the protagonist's symptoms, the responsibility for interpreting those symptoms falls to the reader. And in order to ascertain the anxieties that inform such symptoms, readers must also interpret the sequencing—or the unconscious poetics—of a highly associative narrative.
17. Such imagery returned in the fall of 1962 when, after learning of her husband's infidelity, Plath wrote several poems on the backside of Hughes's hand-written manuscripts. In "Burning the Letters," for example, Plath invokes the image of "spry hooks that bend and cringe" (*Collected* 204), and in "Daddy," she describes the feeling of being "stuck in a barb wire snare" (223). In *The Other Ariel*, Lynda Bundtzen keenly observes that such imagery may "allude to Hughes's sometimes indecipherable handwriting, clotted with a thicket of curlicues, hooks, flourishes, and backward snarelike strokes" (8). Yet because *The Bell Jar* was written before the couple experienced marital difficulties, the images of barbed wire therein would seem to demand a different reading.
18. The textual "shrinking" that causes Esther to feel "sick" should be distinguished from the compression that came to characterize Plath's poetic style. Plath's late style has been described by Diane Middlebrook in terms of the "clenched assertion of metaphorical thought traveling in short stanza-bursts, each line a snare closing on emotional quarry" (170). Yet even in *The Bell Jar*, as we will soon see, certain modes of cutting or compressing can serve the purposes of

expansion and self-extension, deepening a person's involvement with their material and social surroundings.

19. In her journals, Plath writes that learning botany would be a technique for opening herself onto the variety of the world: "I should study botany, birds and trees: get little booklets and learn them, walk out in the world. Open my eyes" (*Journals* 523).
20. The narrator of *The Group* offers a remarkably similar verdict on various language and science courses: "Next to the Physics and Chem majors in dreariness came the language majors; Libby had narrowly escaped that fate. They were all going to be French or Spanish teachers in the high school back home and had names like Miss Peltier and Miss La Gasa. . . . Astronomy and Zoology were different—not so dry, more descriptive" (264).
21. What disturbs Esther about the birthing scene is not the pain or the cut, but rather the drug that would make the woman "forget that she'd had any pain" (66). This is because one of Esther's greatest fears is the prospect of becoming what Fleissner calls a "hypnotic conduit" (80): an inert vessel for someone else's biological and/or textual reproduction.
22. Tracy Brain has suggested that an intertextual precedent for Esther's aversion to shorthand can be found in Plath's annotated copy of Charlotte Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette*. In Brontë's novel, Monsieur Paul tells Lucy Snowe that while his distaste for "mechanical labor" makes him reluctant to write out his stories, he would be happy to "dictate" those stories to a suitable "amenuensis" (Brontë 478). It is an invitation that Lucy declines.
23. Of course, the question of the subject's desire is always bound up with the question of the desires of others. My claim here is that the desires of others come to occupy such an overbearing place in Esther's life that they threaten to eclipse her own desire. Indeed, another cultural phenomenon that Plath's novel lampoons is the pervasive tutelary drive of the 1950s. Readers learn, for example, that Mrs. Greenwood sends articles from magazines like *Reader's Digest* to her daughter, counseling that she "take the advice of people who were already experts" (81). One such article, "In Defense of Chastity," advises women to refrain from premarital sex on the grounds that their husbands will have "wanted to be the ones to teach their wives about sex" (81). In light of such advice, it is appropriate that Esther's erotic encounter with her would-be husband, Buddy Willard, amounts to one of the more humorous teaching scenes in the novel. Buddy stages the encounter as a lesson in anatomy: "Suddenly, after I finished a poem, he said 'Esther, have you ever seen a man?'" (68). What gets described in these scenes as "teaching" amounts to a mode of pedagogy that reifies knowledge, certifies those who possess it, and reduces the student to its passive recipient. Buddy's act of baring his body forecloses everything lively and unpredictable about education—to say nothing of flirtation. The defensive conviction that grounds his and other characters' attempts at teaching betrays their sense of the limits of what can be learned from life.

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