CHAPTER 2

Fate in a Bell Jar
Sylvia Plath's Domestic and Creative Economies

This chapter, on Sylvia Plath's 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*, looks to the primal scene in which affective and immaterial labor combine in the reproduction of capital: namely, the labor of social reproduction.[1] This chapter also continues discussion from the previous one insofar as its reading of Plath's first and only novel remains interested in the ways that reproductive labor intersects with the creative economy. The previous chapter, on Gaddis, accounted for the labor of a whole subculture of creative workers, producing art in and around Greenwich Village during the mid-century. Tragedy was satirized in Wyatt's Faustian pact with Recktall Brown, an agreement ensuring the subsumption of Wyatt's creative aspirations within an increasingly marketized social relation. Despite the narrative recasting of tragedy as comedy by way of satire, tragic affect persists as an all-consuming melancholia that emanates from the textual spaces beyond plot and character: from descriptions of the city, through art studios and the artworks themselves, but most poignantly in the aesthetic labor of Wyatt. With this chapter, focused on a text published in 1963, a moment in which the stirrings of second-wave feminism were infiltrating the popular imaginary of women worldwide, I am interested in how Plath's creative work was preoccupied with the representation of reproductive and domestic labor. In particular, this chapter is interested in how the intersection of these two forms of labor, creative and reproductive, is remediated by the novel's prose style as tragedy. My hypothesis is that, by tracking the permutations of a lyric voice as it moves from Plath's late poetry and into her prose, we are able to make a substantive claim about the reification of labor in Plath's work. Plath's creative labor, the way she draws from her own experience as a woman engaged in reproductive and domestic work, is acutely aware of its own part in the commercial structures of the postwar period, structures that seek to commodify all those innermost corners of subjectivity. These commercial structures settle in Plath's ambitions to

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write a novel and a sensitivity to the ways that the production of popular art is imbricated, if at times critically, in the reification of life.

It has become cliché to describe Plath's suicide as tragic. Tragedy abounds in the publication history of *The Bell Jar*, although it rarely refers to any sort of literary category or genre, instead serving as critical shorthand to reduce Plath's artistic achievement to her lived experience and vice versa. Plath's death has been so inscribed in the postwar literary imaginary that we hardly need to reiterate the details: it was a particularly bleak British winter; she was recently separated from her husband; had just moved into a small flat in London, with her two very young children, after leaving their countryside home in Devon; and was struggling with a difficult episode of depression, all the while experiencing one of the most creatively productive periods she had ever had as a writer. In the early hours of the morning (a time routinely spent writing before the children woke and the day's domestic work began), Plath carefully sealed the doors and windows of her downstairs kitchen, laid her head in a gas oven and succumbed to the fumes while her two children slept upstairs. What I've always found so affecting about this scene, so poignantly "tragic," is the unremarkable detail that she left out two plates of milk and bread in her children's room, ready for them on waking – such a banal and everyday gesture, the provision of small sustenance, that extends domestic labor beyond the laborer's expiration. Perhaps it is the confluence of the prosaic and the totally precarious – realized here in a final act of care, an ordinary domestic task carried out by a mind that, until the end, was preoccupied by the labor of care, set against the horror of her death in that kitchen – that has contributed to Plath's elevation to the role of a tragic martyr in the popular imaginary.

Against this backdrop, the present chapter will continue grappling with the persistence of negative feelings that attach themselves to the reversal of fortune, both as a structure of feeling capable of describing the affective comportment of the postwar period and as a tragic style legible in the literary products of that time. In this regard, *The Bell Jar* is exemplary. First published in 1963 under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, the novel tells the story of Esther, whose ambition to become a writer leads her into an internship at a famous New York fashion magazine. Here Esther occupies a precarious position within the heart of the creative economy, where aspiring writers come to make it big. It is not just the rampant consumerism of New York City but also and perhaps more importantly the reversal of Esther's expectations for social mobility that serve as an accelerator for her ennui. "I was supposed to be having the time of my life.

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I was supposed to be the envy of thousands of other college girls just like me all over America," she reflects. "Look what can happen in this country, they'd say. A girl lives in some out-of-the-way town for nineteen years, so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there and ends up steering New York like her own private car" (2). These kinds of expectations map onto the prosperity of the postwar years, a time when access to careers and education separated young women growing up in the 1960s from those of the previous generation.

Esther's narrative trajectory also articulates a specifically white and middle-class aspiration, insofar as it was to this group of women that creative work was offered as accessible. Myka Tucker Abramson makes this argument in term of class, gender, and sexuality:

> *The Bell Jar*'s narrative of redemption both aligns with, and is about the alignment of, Esther's salvation with the shedding of her working-class position and the shoring up of her whiteness and heterosexuality. But the novel makes explicit the connections between the consolidation of Esther's subjectivity and the physical violence visited on those foreign, poor, or queer bodies that Esther must reject in this process of individual salvation.[2]

In other words, the sorts of mobility and freedom to which Esther aspires are predicated on the denial of freedom to other racialized characters who comprise, in Abramson's terms, the "fallen corpses" of the novel.[3] As with *The Recognitions*, the tragic futility that overrides Esther's aspirations registers against other minor characters to whom social mobility was never made available in the first place. This relation, between the individual suffering of the central protagonist and the deemphasized suffering of other, often racialized figures, is accentuated by the solipsism of Esther's first-person narration, which foregrounds a suffering that is always ghosted by individual entitlement. In making this argument, Kate Baldwin writes that Esther's "problem in a nutshell" is that "she wants it all, but purportedly can't have it. She is," in this sense, "the American girl spoiled by choice."[4] This dynamic should now be familiar. If tragedy, traditionally conceived, is structured around a hero exercising what appears as freedom or choice, in the postwar US novel tragedy is structured around the denial or removal of choice relative to class, gender, and race. One episode, also emphasized in Baldwin's argument, accentuates Esther's relative privilege as a white woman in relation to a black service worker:

> Usually it was a shrunken old white man that brought our food, but today it was a negro. The negro was with a woman in blue stiletto heels, and she

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> was telling him what to do. The negro kept grinning and chuckling in a silly way.
>
> Then he carried a tray over to our table with three lidded tin tureens on it, and started banging tureens down. The woman left the room, locking the door behind her. All the time the negro was banging down the tureens and then the dimmed silver and the thick, white china plates, he gawped at us with big, rolling eyes. (173)

This worker is dehumanized, drawn into narrative via a racial slur, and reduced to a set of animalistic gestures of banging, gawping, and rolling. And yet, rather than note the social determinants of such a figure, the unreconstructed racism of this passage is framed in relation to the limited choices made available to Esther. "Now I knew perfectly well you didn't serve two kinds of beans together at a meal," she notes. "Beans and carrots, or beans and peas, maybe, but never beans and beans." To punish the worker for his incapacity to offer up a variety of culinary choices, Esther gives him "a sharp, hard kick on the calf of the leg," as if she were kicking a dog, and, accordingly, we are told that he "leapt away with a yelp and rolled his eyes at me" (175). In this novel, at least, tragedy is the preserve of those with individual and individualist aspirations for a better life, not those working, subordinate persons on whose exploitation such a life ultimately depends.

While the current chapter is not interested in Plath's biography for its own sake, it is concerned in part with how Plath borrowed from her own experiences, particularly with domestic and reproductive work, and how she turned these experiences into creative output. This process of reification, whereby humans become thing-like and things more human under the force of capital, is something of which Plath's writing was deeply conscious. Both her poetry and prose wrestle with a woman's fear of becoming completely subsumed by "women's work." It is of course this fear that sediments in the image of a bell jar and its sour, suffocating air – or, as Esther articulates it in more concrete terms toward the end of the novel, "a baby hanging over my head like a big stick to keep me in line" (212). Moreover, Plath is acutely aware that she marketizes these fears and anxieties as well as her own experiences of domestic and reproductive labor within a creative economy. If *The Bell Jar* narrates the fear of becoming a one-dimensional woman, wherein social mobility is confined to marriage and reproduction, it also reconciles the unhappy experience of that labor and subject position within a commercial world where, in Plath's words, "mental hospital stuff sells."[5]

Critical theory will help us make sense of how this artistic process is experienced as a contradiction that, ultimately, leads us back to tragedy.

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Herbert Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, published a year after Plath's novel, describes the process by which advanced industrial society, in the second half of the twentieth century, subsumes artistic representations of anguish and alienation, so that "the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference."[6] For Marcuse, this cultural reconciliation of the alienated individual with the business of society is the grounds on which a tragic sensibility might no longer be possible:

> Prior to the advent of this cultural reconciliation, literature and art were essentially alienation, sustaining and protecting the contradiction – the unhappy consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed. They were a rational, cognitive force, revealing a dimension of man and nature which was repressed and repelled in reality. Their truth was in the illusion evoked, in the insistence on creating a world in which the terror of life was called up and suspended – mastered by recognition. This is the miracle of the chef-d'oeuvre; it is the tragedy, sustained to the last, and the end of tragedy – its impossible solution. To live one's love and hatred, to live that which one is means defeat, resignation, and death. The crimes of society, the hell that man has made or man become unconquerable cosmic forces.[7]

Counter to the ultimately destructive contradiction lived by the tragic subject, as described by Marcuse, *The Bell Jar* does not end with Esther's death, but instead with a seemingly redemptive reconstitution of the self as a properly literary subject, with self-realization being expressed via homophony in the language of poetic rhythm: "I took a deep breath and listened to the old brag of my heart. I am, I am, I am" (233). While Esther's fears of a one-dimensional life might be redeemed or at least reconciled in the final pages – "My stocking seams were straight, my black shoes cracked, but polished, and my red wool suit flamboyant as my plans. Something old, something new" – this hopefulness for the future is framed by the following line's injunction. "But I wasn't getting married. There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice – patched, retreaded and approved for the road" (233). The negative conjunction between these two sentences registers something melancholic not least because of the contradiction it contains syntactically. While no further detail is forthcoming about the trajectory of Esther's life, the hope or redemption registered in these final pages appears as heavily compromised in such a way that foregrounds the tragic-realism of this postwar novel – once again, we have a central character whose psychology remains alienated or separated from the external world. The "happy consciousness" that Esther might arrive at "when all was right again," to be realized after all her various hospitalizations and shock therapies, is precisely

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the kind of false consciousness against which Marcuse cautioned. Tragedy, this chapter will argue, is a foil to that happiness – a critical counterpoint to ideological foreclosure.

Housewife's Lyric

Although Marx began to evolve a theory of reproductive labor as early as the first volume of *Capital*, it wasn't until critical theory became suffused with narratives of domestic work, spurred on by the impetus of second-wave feminism in the 1950s and 1960s, that the immaterial work hidden within the private spaces of the household entered the popular, western imaginary as a constitutive social force. These very personal accounts describing the boredom, fatigue, and depression generated by the repetitive tasks of "housewifery" (as Friedan would describe the occupation) questioned the measurement of the working day and particularly the affective energy bound up in this type of work. An early iteration of this theoretical emergence can be found in Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949): "Because housework alone is compatible with the duties of motherhood, she is condemned to domestic labor, which locks her into repetition and immanence; day after day it repeats itself in identical form from century to century; it produces nothing new."[8] Domestic labor produces nothing valuable from the standpoint of the market, or at least nothing that lends itself immediately to exchange, and yet it is integral to the reproduction or perpetuation of production more generally. The effect of domestic labor is just as, if not more, deadening than any sort of wage slavery, as the following run of questions implies:

> How could one expect her to show ardour, disinterestedness, grandeur? These qualities appear only when a free being strikes forward through an open future, emerging far beyond all given actuality. Woman is shut up in a kitchen or in a boudoir, and astonishment is expressed that her horizon is limited. Her wings are clipped, and it is found deplorable that she cannot fly.[9]

That women are locked into this sort of repetition conjures an image of entrapment that appears in many other feminist accounts from the period, all of which reiterate the confinement, boredom, and ennui produced in the domestic sphere. Friedan's *Feminine Mystique* (1963), published a month after *The Bell Jar* and a week after Plath committed suicide, is clearest on this: "the chronic fatigue of many housewives is brought on by the repetition of their jobs, the monotony of the setting, the isolation, and lack of stimulation."[10]

In the United States, these ideas entered the literature of the period and especially the poetry and prose written by women. Female writers involved in reproductive work were among the first to register the crushing

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temporalities of domestic labor. Adrienne Rich's collection *Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law* (1963) was written after the birth of her third child and "jotted in fragments during children's naps, brief hours in a library or at three am after rising with a wakeful child."[11] The seed of this collection is in Rich's reading of *The Second Sex*, which she describes as an exemplary account of things she had "been half thinking but feeling no confirmation for."[12] Anne Sexton – whose poetry Plath admired greatly – would similarly translate the experience of motherhood into poems such as "The Black Art" (1962) and "The Double Image" (1981), and would eulogize Plath's suicide with "Sylvia's Death" (1964), in words that would seem to preempt Sexton's own suicide, by carbon monoxide poisoning, over a decade later:

> O Sylvia, Sylvia,
> with a dead box of stones and spoons,
>
> with two children, two meteors
> wandering loose in the tiny playroom,
>
> with your mouth into the sheet,
> into the roofbeam, into the dumb prayer,
>
> (O Sylvia, Sylvia,
> where did you go
> after you wrote me
> from Devonshire
> about raising potatoes
> and keeping bees?)
>
> what did you stand by,
> just how did you lie down into?
>
> Thief! –
> how did you crawl into,
>
> crawl down alone
> into the death I wanted so badly and for so long . . .[13]

So much of the poetry in this tradition engages women's experience with depression and other forms of mental illness and suffering, and refracts it back into the domestic spaces in which women found themselves trying to creatively produce while immersed in the tedium of housework. It was not just motherhood, however significant it might be, that had a purchase on the feminism and poetic production during the period. Sue Kaufmann's domestic drama *Diary of a Mad Housewife* (1967) is one of the first confessional, novelistic meditations on "housewifery," which centers on the frustrated desire among the ranks of upper-class New Yorkers, rather than on reproductive labor proper. That confessional mode, which traces

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the descent of its speaker into the depths of cognitive disturbance, shares much with *The Bell Jar*, which was written just a few years prior. It also persisted into new waves of specifically American, radical feminism, including work by Andrea Dworkin and Shulamith Firestone, who in very different ways opened up discussion around women's lived experience in private spaces hitherto unmentionable in the public sphere.[14] Audre Lorde's work is exemplary of this as it brought questions of race, class, sexuality, and the experience of illness to intersectional feminist narratives.[15] To be sure, in many ways *The Bell Jar* is guilty of the same white and middle-class myopia that plagues much of the Anglo-American feminism of the period.

All of this contextual detail is to suggest that Plath's writing inhabited a cultural milieu in which domestic labor was being narrated using highly personalized forms and figures. In other words, the theorization of domestic work and reproductive labor was, from the beginning, sutured to a creative economy. While Plath's early writing had primarily sought external nature as a primary medium for poetic figuration, because (in her own words) she "didn't have any interior experience to write about," increasingly and in prolific proportions through the early 1960s Plath turned her experience of marriage and motherhood into art, and she did so within the burgeoning genre of confessional poetry.[16] The poetry produced during this time articulated bleak and violent images of matrimonial servitude, spousal revenge, infanticide, and a whole raft of other domestic traumas. Although, critically, there is little new in locating images of domestic labor in Plath's poetry, I want to focus on the way all of this intersects with Plath's creative labor as a writer and how it galvanizes tragic affect. Domestic labor and creative labor are engaged in a mutually transformative exchange, wherein Plath's creative output manifests a direct reaction to her experience of domestic life. Plath's creative labor is often figured (by critics and by Plath herself) as an outlet for the repetition and entrapment of domesticity, and yet the creative economy of Plath's writing increasingly takes part in similarly constraining relations of production. This is because the existential experience of reproductive labor, which translates as lyric formalism in poetry, becomes reified in its transposition into the novel, which, for Plath, marked the entry of her art into a commercial market.

For a young Plath, whose youthful ambitions are refracted directly in her protagonist surrogate, Esther Greenwood, tragedy is constituted in the antonyms of freedom and social mobility – entrapment, imprisonment, containment – for which the bell jar becomes a primary metaphor. As a

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seventeen-year-old, Plath would confess these fears onto the page of a private journal:

> I am afraid of getting older. I am afraid of getting married. Spare me from cooking three meals a day – spare me from the relentless cage of routine and rote. I want to be free – free to know people and their backgrounds – free to move to different parts of the world so I may learn that there are other morals and standards besides my own. I want, I think, to be omniscient . . . I think I would like to call myself "The girl who wanted to be God." Yet if I were not in this body, where would I be – perhaps I am destined to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I – I am powerful – but to what extent? I am I.[17]

The tone – part self-aggrandizing, part self-mocking – plays with the omniscient voice of God. The self-centeredness of this reflection comes out in the intensity of the personal inflection, the superabundance of first-person pronouns, and a series of apostrophes addressing the objects of fear (marriage, cooking, routine), culminating in the thing itself, "it," as the narrative form of entrapment. Zsofia Demjen has investigated the use of first-person pronouns in Plath's letters and journals as a way of understanding how the affective parts of her "inner world" are "embedded in the style, grammar and lexis of her private journal."[18] Notwithstanding the autobiographical genres within which Plath writes, particularly her notebook and letter writing, for Demjen, "Plath overused first-person pronouns statistically significantly compared to similar types of texts."[19]

There is something to be said for how the lyric dimension of Plath's poetics, with its "rigorous focus on the inner life" (as Sarah Brouillette might have it), can be placed within a broader structure of feeling or affective economy.[20] Alongside Robert Lowell, John Berryman, W. D. Snodgrass, as well as Sexton, Plath is one of the major figures in confessional poetry, a kind of lyric writing that utilizes lived experience.[21] One only has to look to her journals to sense how much of the narrative material in *The Bell Jar* is taken from authorial experience: from her time as a young writer in college; from her stint at *Mademoiselle*, a women's fashion magazine based in New York; and from her suicide attempt and hospitalization in the months following. Typically defined by its championing of the personal, confessional poetry is almost always preoccupied with the private realms of actual and imagined experience. Melanie Waters describes the genre in relation to both Plath and Sexton: "Defined through content, rather than form," she claims, "the confessional poem took 'private suffering' as its 'ultimate referent,' negotiating the putatively taboo

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topics of mental illness, institutionalization, domestic violence, sexuality, incest, bereavement and suicide."[22] Plath's confessional writing, in her late poetry and prose, consists precisely in the attempt to lyricize the physical and psychical texture of domestic space.

These genres and styles also grew out of the Beat Generation, with poets like Allen Ginsberg who reinvigorated a poetics of the personal within America's countercultural movement. Here we should appreciate Plath's first-person mobilization of narrative voice within the context not only of other poetry but also of prose-writing in the period, with works such as J. D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957). While Plath was not aligned with the counterculture or with beat poetry, she was influenced by other poets who were, including Denise Levertov and Sexton.[23] John Clellon Holmes, who introduced Sexton to poetry in his workshops at Boston University, figures this collision between individual and postwar American society in properly tragic terms:

> Where is the era's truly tragic man
> who understood why he was ground to dust,
> and knew the Furies' ague while he ran?
> No man seeks to avoid his curse:
> none are compelled except in morbid mental grooves
> no Athens ran in . . .[24]

These "morbid mental grooves" would be an apt description for the depressing enclosure in which Plath traps Esther and which takes so much of its affective charge from Plath's poetry. Holmes, like so many other artists from the period, also took the lyricism of poetry and injected it into prose, in what is considered by many as the first novel about the Beat Generation: the semi-autobiographical roman à clef, *Go* (1952).[25]

The 1960s stand out as an exceptional decade in which artists harnessed the cultural, political, and economic conversations of the time and translated them into semi-autobiographical reflections of lived experience. Perhaps this is why poetry, and lyric poetry in particular, effloresced in this period: because of its purchase on a singular and highly personalized speaker. But this period also witnessed a migration of lyric subjectivity from poetry into prose. While the resulting prose and its narratives are indebted, at broader generic levels, to the history of the first-person novel, in the variously confessional, journalistic, and semi-autobiographical novels from this period, the personal pronoun in its affective comportment seems much closer to a lyric sensibility. This is especially true of Plath's only novel. In what follows, I want to show how this migration of lyric

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subjectivity into the more commercial form of the novel, when simultaneously concerned with the interchange between domestic and creative economies, urges that text toward tragedy.

Marry It

The accounts of domestic labor from Beauvoir and Friedan both emphasize the momentous effect of monotony not just on time but also on creativity. Put simply, domestic labor is directly antithetical to creative work. Either there is simply not enough time for the woman to engage in any work other than housewifery or, if there is, she is so fatigued by the boredom and drudgery of it all that she lacks the cognitive or the physical energy to do anything else. While this is an oversimplification, these ideas were nevertheless circulating within the popular imaginary as Plath was first coming to experience the labor of marriage and motherhood. It is evident, even as early as the 1949 journal entry by an adolescent Plath, that she was already wary of falling into the repetitive routine of housework, the very idea of which threatened her ambitions for the future.

While the accounts from Beauvoir and Friedan set domestic and creative labor as mutually antagonistic, at first glance it would seem that Plath, despite adolescent fears, had abundant energy for both. Or, at the very least, she approached them as conjoined in exchange.[26] It is well documented, both in her journals and in the critical scholarship, that Plath's intense relationship with Ted Hughes and the experience of motherhood provided a wellspring of material for her poetry. "If Plath," writes Steven Gould Axelrod, "complained of the practical incompatibility of motherhood and writing, she also sought to synthesise 'making in all its forms,'" and so it is that "she tried to finesse her dilemma by viewing childbearing as an impetus to wordbearing."[27] Despite the apparent synthesis described here, these two kinds of labor, domestic and creative, were often in an uneasy relationship with one another, one always threatening to eclipse the other in the manner of what Lauren Berlant would describe as "cruel optimism."[28] "I desire things which will destroy me in the end," wrote Plath in 1951. "I wonder if art divorced from normal and conventional living is as vital as art combined with living: in a word, would marriage sap my creative energy and annihilate my desire for written and pictorial expression . . .?"[29] In a 1956 letter from her early courtship with Hughes, Plath describes how her creativity is threatened by the desire for intimacy: "This gift of creative expression I've somehow been blessed with is now ironically turning in on itself and blighting me; away from you, it is

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as if my hair were shorn, my tongue cut out, and my whole body reduced to some cold ungainly clay that plods about not knowing what the hell it was made for."[30] Earlier that year, this time writing to her mother about "Teddy," Plath's work as a writer seems to disappear into a sort of domestic bliss or marital stupor: "He is the dearest person there is; I never thought I could feel so holy and exalted from day to day, doing dishes, making his meals; it is so wonderful to love someone incalculably more than oneself; such freedom: everything I do now, is for him, to please him and make him proud."[31] While this description of domestic labor is anything but the sort of tedium, torture and imprisonment described by Beauvoir and Friedan, it nevertheless betrays an image of servitude: "make myself fine and creative," she says, "for his sake."[32]

In a radio interview from 1961, after the birth of their first child, Plath describes the reality of housework in much less exalted and more pragmatic terms while still, this time almost self-consciously, diminishing the significance of her creative work: "I certainly have a life just like all the other housewives and mothers in our district, shopping, dishes and taking care of the baby and so forth, I think very few people have an idea I do anything at all except house-hold chores and so on."[33] It is only after marital collapse that these descriptions take on a more violent imagery and, with that, creative energy takes on a renewed if sharpened form. It would therefore seem, at least in these accounts, that while a desire for domesticity as a younger woman may have foreclosed Plath's ability to labor creatively ("as if my tongue were cut out"), with the breakdown of her marriage she acquires newfound inspiration, which will see her compose the collection of poetry for which she is best known and most enthusiastically celebrated. During October 1962, when writing the poems that would be published in *Ariel*, she writes to her mother: "Every morning, when my sleeping pill wears off, I am up about five, in my study with coffee writing like mad – have managed a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems. Terrific stuff, as if domesticity had choked me."[34] The image of choking startles, because it is aesthetically "terrific" but also because it reappears throughout Plath's writing, not just in her journal entries but also in the poetry.

Jacqueline Rose describes the way these experiences bleed into poetic imagery. "On that boundary between literal truth and fiction," she writes, "we therefore discover two different orders of time – the time of verifiable history, of what belongs unequivocally in the past, and the psychic time of trauma, where things do not go forward but repeat."[35] For Rose, repetition, both as a poetic technique and as a method for recirculating images across different texts, demarcates a site of trauma in which the lyric subject

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is caught, unable to move on or past. The following is the first stanza of Plath's "The Rabbit Catcher":

> It was a place of force –
> The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
> Tearing off my voice, and the sea
> Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
> Unreeling in it, spreading like oil. (*Ariel*, 7)

Choking denies an ability to speak. That it is the speaker's own hair choking her also seems significant in respect to what we have said about Plath's desire for Hughes and domesticity as a kind of "cruel optimism," a desire for precisely that which poses a serious threat to oneself.[36] This stanza begins with the recollection of a past event but is quickly catapulted by the force of confession into the sensuous experience of a present. The whole stanza is in verbal flux (gagging, tearing, blinding, unreeling, spreading), written in the immediacy of the present with neither past nor future, all of which reads into the feeling of domestic foreclosure that surfaces more explicitly in the following stanzas. Here the tense shifts back to a past, "deaths," which have already transpired:

> I felt a still busyness, an intent.
> I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
> Ringing the white china.
> How they awaited him, those little deaths! (*Ariel*, 7)

The "still busyness" here reads as the sort of domestic labor the speaker performs as housewife, the sum of so many individually meaningless chores all of which are their own little deaths. The repetition of these chores is actualized in the lines' anaphora, with the repetition of "I felt" both foregrounding the expressive space of the lyric utterance while also alienating that voice from domestic work. The repetition in those first two lines – itself the combination of the personal pronoun and affective verb – places us squarely within the confessional space of a lyric voice insofar as it gives direct access to the speaker's sensorial world. However, at one and the same time, that voice becomes disembodied, detaching itself from the "hands round a tea mug," as if the speaker's inner being has become alienated from the central tools of work. It is, in sum, a poem calculated for affective alienation.[37]

Much of the critical discourse around repetition seems concerned with whether it ciphers an aesthetically unwelcome excess or, conversely, a kind of disciplined rage.[38] Other critics elaborate on the Freudian readings that abound, particularly when we think of repetition as the stutter and stall of

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speech, which the metaphor of choking would also suggest.[39] In multiple iterations, however, poetic repetition attaches itself to domestic labor, as if the material texture of the work as its own repetitive torture finds echo in rhetorical figuration. In "The Applicant," for example, repetition intensifies around images of domestic entrapment, such as in the last two stanzas:

> But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
> In fifty, gold.
> A living doll, everywhere you look.
> It can sew, it can cook,
> It can talk, talk, talk.
>
> It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
> You have a hole, it's a poultice.
> You have an eye, it's an image.
> My boy, it's your last resort.
> Will you marry it, marry it, marry it. (*Ariel*, 11)

Marriage is rendered in terms of work and, more specifically, as a job application. The applicant is reduced to a series of objectified body parts, which autonomously perform a series of mundane tasks and alongside which any subjectivity is replaced by measures of value: silver, gold. This poem betrays a tendency, present in some of the other *Ariel* poems, to shift away from a first-person voice into a more detached mode of expression. It is unclear whether the objectified "it" is the speaker or a third party, another woman perhaps. To get caught up in this kind of speculation is to miss the aesthetic achievement of the poem, that, at an affective level, it really does not matter who the applicant is; rather, what matters is that marriage presents as a kind of domestic bondage, a mechanism for dehumanization, and that whichever applicant gets the job will inevitably perform to a set of generic criteria. Here, as elsewhere, repetition generates a stuttering intensity, the speech-form of a barely concealed rage directed against matrimonial threat.

Execution Season

Whereas Plath's poetry captures the furious intensity of domestic entrapment, her prose style reverberates as numb shock. While *The Bell Jar* famously commences (in words to which we will soon turn) with reference to the execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, this event would hold personal significance for Plath. In a journal entry from 1953, she reflects on this event as not just an individual body or a couple of bodies being electrocuted to death but as an entire society being shocked into numbness

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precisely because of the way death has become a monetized spectacle of political reaction:

> All right, so the headlines blare the two of them are going to be killed at eleven o'clock tonight. So I am sick to the stomach. I remember the journalists report, sickeningly factual, of the electrocution of a condemned man, of the unconcealed fascination on the faces of the onlookers, of the details, the shocking physical facts about the death, the scream, the smoke, the bare honest unemotional reporting that gripped the guts because of the things it didn't do.[40]

The casual complacency and sheer superficially of what Plath conceives of as America's "unemotional" reaction to these executions sediments into her impressions of the creative work she undertakes at the magazine that summer and also the domestic work to which she returns thereafter. Describing her intentions for the book years later, Plath claims she wanted to capture "the pressure of the fashion world which seems increasingly superficial and artificial," as well as "her warped view of the world around her – her own vacuous domestic life."[41] Here, in Plath's own words, domestic and creative labor encircle Esther and her ambitions. This warped view of the world recalls the visual distortion of the bell jar – but here the bell jar is not just synonymous with the depressive fantasies of a young woman; it also responds to the kind of creative and domestic labor in which Plath was engaged.

The following is Plath's description of her internship at *Mademoiselle*, which served as inspiration for the narrative of *The Bell Jar*:

> We're stargazers this season, bewitched by an atmosphere of evening blue. [. . .] Focusing our telescope on college news around the globe, we debate and deliberate. [. . .] From our favorite fields, stars of the first magnitude shed a bright influence on our plans for jobs and futures. Although horoscopes for our ultimate orbits aren't yet in, we Guest Eds. are counting on a favorable forecast with this sendoff from *Mlle.*, the star of the campus.[42]

In contrast to dreamy fantasizing full of youthful optimism, the dominant affect in *The Bell Jar* is fatalism ramified into tragic resignation – of what, in a subsequent poem, Plath would refer to as "fixed stars" governing a life and negating a future, or what within this context reads as the manifest recognition of the putative reversal of fortune.[43] The narrative trajectory of *The Bell Jar*, and of Plath's own descent into exhaustion and depression, disproves any "favourable forecast," and the immortal first lines of the novel seem to say as much, setting out the historical coordinates for a more domestic tragedy, but one set on the stage of history:

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> It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York. I'm stupid about executions. The idea of being electrocuted makes me sick, and that's all there was to read about in the paper – goggle-eyed headlines staring up at me on every street corner and at the futsy, peanut-smelling mouth of every subway. It had nothing to do with me but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves. (1)

These sentences are completely unsettling. In the means of execution, this passage foreshadows the electrotherapy used to treat Esther's and Plath's depression, which Plath will describe, again in a journal entry, in broken sentences: "A time of darkness, despair disillusions – so black as only the inferno of the human mind can be – symbolic death and numb shock."[44] Numbness is the way Esther recalls her experience of New York's creative economy. Although Esther's ambition is to write great books, the sort of work she is subject to during her internship at the magazine is entirely at odds with that vision. "I was supposed to be having the time of my life," she reflects in an early passage, and yet: "I just bumped from parties to my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus" (2). The repeating preposition sticks within the circular logic of the sentence as we are taken through the monotony of Esther's life at the magazine. Esther's depression and her work at the magazine are intimately linked: "all the little successes I'd totted up so happily at college fizzled to nothing outside the slick marble and plate-glass fronts along Madison Avenue" (2).

Consonant with repetition, depression instigates a series of deferrals: to put off college for a year, to learn shorthand or not, to go to Europe and find a lover or not, to read *Finnegans Wake* or be a waitress and learn German and write a novel – or not. All of this equivocation leads to a moment of tragic resignation:

> I saw the years of my life spaced along a road in the form of telephone poles, threaded together by wires. I counted one, two, three . . . nineteen poles, and then the wires dangled into space, and try as I would, I couldn't see a single pole beyond the nineteenth. (118)

The image of a vast, unknown and terrifying space is the negative imprint of that pervasive sense of foreclosure, which registers both thematically in Esther's foreshortening of ambition but also stylistically in the manner that Plath's sentences accumulate in a self-enclosing, first-person incantation. The proliferation of the personal pronoun, which seems to cluster at certain points in the novel, emphasizes the intimate nature of the confession taking place. In this passage, the repetition of the first-person pronoun

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foregrounds Plath's act of confession, or at least the recapitulation of that confession from her journal, into the narrative voice of Esther. Esther's is a declarative voice that declares nothing, or rather declares plenty about inaction: I decided I would; I thought I could; I thought I might; I would; I couldn't; and so on. These Hamlet-esque deferrals characterize much of the novel and are what contribute to a dawning sense of tragic recognition. Christina Britzolakis' metaphor for this affective tendency is a "theatre of mourning," projecting a space that "tends to fragment or displace linear narrative, replacing it with the repetitive temporality of trauma."[45] In *The Bell Jar*, repetition takes the form of the self-enclosing voice of the pronominal "I," stretching lyric sensibility into what I now want to describe as the potentially commercial terrain of prose narrative.

Snake Pit

Definitions of creative labor, popularized in and against neoliberal discourse, appear to constitute the direct antithesis to the descriptions of domestic labor examined at the beginning of this chapter. Richard Florida's commercially popular *Rise of the Creative Class* (2002) emphasizes the imagination, freedom and flexibility involved in creative work and an evolving "creative economy."[46] By contrast to Florida's thoroughly neoliberal worldview, in her 2014 book, *Literature and the Creative Economy*, Brouillette observes that "the primacy of the therapeutic self, motivated by nonmaterial or postmaterialist goals and committed to constant indeterminacy and self-evolution, converges with the neo-liberal image of the flexible creative worker whose career is her primary site of self-discovery."[47] Due to shifts in labor over the second half of the twentieth century, the economy is increasingly characterized by the sort of creative work Florida describes in his book. While creative work ostensibly equates with a type of intellectual freedom, and while it is largely agreed that "over the past few decades more work has become comparable to artists' work," there is reason to be more than a little wary of creative work and its place within the economy.[48] This is because creative labor is driven by the ideological blackmail that "work is now the most important expression of life's meaning and source of human happiness," which is used to fuel an unsustainable work-being that comprises a "vacillation between unemployment and overwork," a kind of semi-unemployment that "can entail ceaseless self-promotion, including presentation of oneself as a marketable brand or commodity."[49] We might say that this is particularly true of the artistry that wants to find a home within popular culture, in the magazines

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to which Plath aspired, such as *Mademoiselle*, *Cosmopolitan* and *Ladies' Home Journal*.

While Plath, as a writer, was primarily interested in the aesthetic expression of a private sphere of domestic experience, this was only half the story of her output; she was equally interested in the reception of her writing in a public space, and in what forms her expression should take within a literary market. "Plath's desire to be part of that mass culture," writes Rose, is "one of the strongest, reiterated refrains of her journals and correspondence."[50] Desire for commercial success was something that concerned Plath the entirety of her career as a writer and it directly imprinted itself on her written work, particularly so on her prose. Becoming a novelist was always a point of commercial aspiration. In this regard, there is an argument to be made that Plath's writing subjects a private space to the laws of public production and marketization. It is precisely this aspect of Plath's labor, its dual character as simultaneously private and public, that can be viewed in part as an exercise in commodification. Plath did nothing as simple as emptying the content of her life into her writing; instead, she wrote with a keen interest in the commercial reception of that life. I want to suggest that thinking through Plath's adherence to the generic conventions of confessional poetry in economic terms can yield new insights into her writing, and especially so in her transition to the novel, a genre that Plath associated with a commercial market. In this way, Plath's creative labor is not just a reaction to personal experience or a medium for confession; instead, it is a material form of labor, one that involves the act of bearing witness to and then transforming that experience into aesthetic products or, in technical language, commodities.

When it comes to Plath's confessional writing, the author is interpolating the matter of experience quite consciously for the market. She seems to acknowledge this in one of her notebooks, from 1959, when she is beginning to jot down ideas for a novel:

> Read COSMOPOLITAN from cover to cover. Two mental-health articles. I must write one about a college girl suicide. THE DAY I DIED.
>
> And a story, a novel even. Must get out SNAKE PIT. There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive, recreate it.[51]

Plath's commercial savvy – the cashing in of experience for exchange on the marketplace of fiction – recalls another of her contemporaries, Joan Didion, who took an apprenticeship at the New York offices of *Vogue* several years after Plath's internship at *Mademoiselle*. While both Didion

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and Plath forged their relationship with commercial writing around the same time and within the same city, their writing trajectories followed very different paths. Whereas Plath's experience preceded her first major depressive episode and subsequent suicide attempt, Didion continued to work at *Vogue* for another seven years and pioneered the aesthetic ideology of New Journalism. And yet they were both engaged in creative acts of reifying experience into a sellable and popular aesthetic, as forerunners of a resolutely middle-class aesthetic that, in Mark McGurl's formulation, "seems to have no politics, and it is, after all, despite a few exceptions, quite white."[52] That Didion assumed this creative economy as the state of things and that Plath constantly felt conflicted by her relationship with commercial writing is one of the distinguishing factors between the two.

Plath was very anxious about the commercial success of her writing and conscious of the ways her ambition for that success were brought to bear on her writing practice and even prose style. At times, she would craft her work to suit what was popular, as we can see from the excerpt above describing the topicality of mental illness in popular magazines. In another of Plath's journal entries, this time from 1958, she writes: "I dream too much of fame, posturings, a novel published, not people gesturing, speaking, growing and cracking into print."[53] And she continues this obsession with the commerce of writing, which, she insists, "ironically freezes me at my work, corrupts my nunnish labor of work-for-itself-as-its-own-reward."[54] There are other times when Plath wants to do away with this preoccupation with literary fashion: "Try a first person story," she dictates to herself in a 1959 journal entry, "and forget John Updike and Nadine Gordimer. Forget the results, the markets. Love only what you do, and make."[55] Unlike the "first person story," which set itself against the fashions of the time, the novel stood as a marker for the sort of commercial success Plath desired. While success was necessary for Plath's subsistence as a writer, the commercial world was also the cause of profound and debilitating anxiety. She was neither wholly at ease with the commercial agenda of the creative economy nor wholly outside it; like so much of the countercultural movements of the period, Plath occupied an anguished position.

In the end, this anguish, to do with circulation and reception, became central to the narrative action of Plath's novel, and in many ways her novel became her most popularly consumed piece of writing.[56] Here the creative economy, as located in New York City, contributes to Esther's inability to write and channels itself into a prose style (written in Esther's voice) that on the surface feels emptied of a certain kind of creative energy. We have begun to see how some markers of Plath's lyric voice transmit into prose by

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way of highly focalized personal pronouns as well as in the manner that syntactical structures and lexical choices tend toward repetition. Plath's poetry is rife with repetition, the compression of which creates a stutter in the narrative voice as though betraying the intense compound of emotions; in her prose, this repetition, stretched out across narrative action, has the effect of emphasizing the monotone of a depressed state. It is in this way that the tone of the narrative voice seems to lack the excitement or the fury on display in many of the *Ariel* poems. And yet "the almost deadpan manner in which she writes of her desire for death," claims Peter J. Lowe, "should not blind us to the emotional force behind these lines."[57] In other words, the voice of *The Bell Jar* is not affectless but instead generates an entirely different affect to that which dominates much of Plath's late poetry, where vivid bursts of intensity appear, only to be extinguished. This style attempts to formalize the dousing of creative fire when it is subject to the market. One of the few points at which Esther writes anything becomes an exercise in programmatic narcissism: "My heroine would be myself, only in disguise. She would be called Elaine. Elaine. I counted the letters on my fingers. There were six letters in Esther, too. It seemed a lucky thing." Plath, in a meta-textual maneuver worthy of Philip Roth, is almost mocking herself here through her fictional surrogate: "*Elaine sat on the breezeway in an old yellow nightgown of her mother's waiting for something to happen. It was a sweltering morning in July, and drops of sweat crawled down her back, one by one, like slow insects*" (116). Note the third-person register in which Esther writes as if Plath, via a fictional surrogate, is consciously eschewing the lyric voice of her own poetry and prose. But Esther is conjuring the exact environment in which she finds herself writing; a page earlier, the narrative voice places Esther in the very same breezeway wearing her mother's nightgown: "I strolled into the kitchen, dropped a raw egg into a teacup of raw hamburger, mixed it up and ate it. Then I set up the card-table on the screened breezeway between the house and the garage" (115). The two descriptions are at odds with one another; the first, by Esther's hand, attains to a poetic image, a vision of insect life, and yet we return just a moment later to a narrative voice that is unrelenting throughout the entire novel and which is sapped of energetic feeling. In a moment of self-estrangement, Esther describes, in a typically detached manner, hearing her own voice recorded in a phone message – "the zombie voice" (115) – as if it was its own autonomous creature. Esther reflects on what she has written: "I leaned back and read what I had written. It seemed lively enough," but then she alights on the observational conceit of "enough," to concede insufficiency: "I had the

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dim impression I'd probably read it somewhere else a long time ago" (116). Esther is all too aware that her writing is derivative, and she concludes that her problem is that she lacks the sort of "interior experience" Plath had attributed to herself at this age: "How could I write about life when I'd never had a love affair or a baby or seen anybody die?" (117).

To the Sea

This tension, between poetic configurations and deadpan prose, appears most markedly as Esther approaches her first attempts at suicide. Depression sediments in repetitions of diction and syntactical arrangement so that an accelerated being-toward-death seems to generate its own poetic rhythm. For almost the entirety of chapters 12 and 13, we are subject to a plodding consideration of the various ways Esther might kill herself: "That morning I had made a start. I had locked myself in the bathroom, and run a bath tub full of warm water, and taken out a Gillette blade." And after a poetic rumination on a Roman philosopher, flat affect meets logistical precision: "It would take two motions. One wrist, then the other wrist. Three motions, if you counted changing the razor from hand to hand. Then I would step into the tub and lie down" (142). Esther's contemplations of suicide are rationalized in a cold-blooded description, broken down into a series of discrete numerical movements, as a kind of scientific management of death. Then, a few pages later: "I considered renting a room. There must be a boarding house among all those summer places. But I had no luggage. That would create suspicion. Besides, in a boarding house other people are always wanting to use the bathroom." (146). The sentences contain the barest modicum of description. Soon after, Esther is at the beach, and here we are granted something more evocative:

> The drench seemed to come off the sea floor itself, where blind white fish ferried themselves by their own light through the great polar cold. I saw sharks' teeth and whales' earbones littered about down there like gravestones.
>
> I waited, as if the sea could make my decision for me.
>
> A second wave collapsed over my feet, lipped with white froth, and the chill gripped my ankles with a mortal ache.
>
> My flesh winced, in cowardice, from such a death. (147)

The equivocation before death brings about a creative flourish, so that the chilling cold and the anemic image of blind white fish combine to figure the interior space of the narrator. This is characteristic of the lyric voice in

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the *Ariel* poems, the use of aquatic imagery to reveal the speaker's troubled inscape. Lowe has meticulously traced Plath's use of the sea as a symptom of working through her father's death. "Plath's poetic treatment of seascapes," he writes, "reveals something of the deeper psychological rupture that her art explored and, in part, sought to heal. The loss of her coastal idyll is intrinsically linked with Otto Plath's death."[58] This sense of loss and mourning generates not just the flourishes in seaside imagery but also the affective aridity of the surrounding sentences. Plath's mourning is formalized in writing as it refracts the melancholiac's state of dejection and detachment from external reality.

When we return to Esther's voice we encounter more of this dejected objectivity: "That morning I had tried to hang myself" (152). The catalogue of methods goes on for pages, relentlessly clinical and detached, until Esther finally settles on a preferred manner of death, entombing herself within a small cavern under the house and taking an overdose of pills:

> A few old, rotting fireplace logs blocked the hole mouth. I shoved them back a bit. Then I set the glass of water and the bottle of pills side by side on the flat surface of one of the logs and started to heave myself up.
>
> It took me a good while to heft my body into the gap, but at last, after many tries, I managed it, and crouched at the mouth of the darkness, like a troll.
>
> The earth seemed friendly under my bare feet, but cold. I wondered how long it had been since this particular square of soil had seen the sun.
>
> Then, one after the other, I lugged the heavy, dust-covered logs across the hole mouth. The dark felt thick as velvet. I reached for the glass and bottle, and carefully, on my knees, with bent head, crawled to the farthest wall.
>
> Cobwebs touched my face with the softness of moths. Wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow, I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water, one by one by one.
>
> At first nothing happened, but as I approached the bottom of the bottle, red and blue lights began to flash before my eyes. The bottle slid from my fingers and I lay down.
>
> The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep. (163)

Again, we have the systematic description of movement giving way to physical sensation, first the feel of the earth, which is relayed in figurative language, and then a subjective interior, which returns to the familiarly oceanic. The stylistically dependent feeling of enclosure, of the plodding sentences entombing us within the narrative voice, is given release in the

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actual entombment of Esther. There's a sort of creative flight in this passage that breaks with the numb description of attempts leading up to this one. Here, too, the flourish of style feeds into imagery of the beach, this time a metaphor for encroaching unconsciousness and a release that comes in a rush. The description of Esther's attempted suicide is a direct remediation of Plath's attempt when she was twenty. In an unsent letter addressed to "E" in 1953, while Plath was still in hospital after her first suicide attempt, she describes the feeling of the rush toward death as "blissfully" succumbing "to the whirling blackness that I honestly believed was eternal oblivion."[59]

That Plath pillages her own life so directly for material in *The Bell Jar* speaks not only to her status as a confessional poet but also to a commitment to turning lived experience into art. Plath addresses this explicitly in "Lady Lazaraus," where she recirculates the event of her attempted suicides:

> The second time I meant
> To last it out and not come back at all.
> I rocked shut.
>
> As a seashell.
> They had to call and call
> And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls. (*Ariel*, 14)

With this poem, Plath repeats not just the experience of suicide but the seaside imagery. Whereas, in *The Bell Jar*, the shell stands in for the debris of Esther's life, here the speaker becomes a seashell rocked shut: she is the total sum of that wreckage. Moreover, the poem seems all too aware of the creative economy through which Plath is mediating her personal experience, that with every reiteration her suffering becomes its own commodity to be bought and sold:

> What a million filaments.
> The peanut-crunching crowd
> Shoves in to see. (*Ariel*, 15)

The speaker then goes on to catalogue each body part – hands, knees, skin and bone – all on display for the audiences' entertainment. "Dying," she says, "Is an art, like everything else. / I do it exceptionally well." We should take this idea, dying as an art, not just as metaphor for a poetic life but as a hypothetical statement of artistic method; it suggests that Plath, in writing about dying, is turning the described suicide into an artistic product. This process of reification is not just indicated in the preceding stanzas, which

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liken the dead body's reveal to a kind of striptease, but is also driven home in the proceeding stanzas' setting of a price:

> "A miracle!"
> That knocks me out.
> There is a charge
>
> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
> For the hearing of my heart –
> It really goes.
>
> And there is a charge, a very large charge
> For a word or a touch
> Or a bit of blood (*Ariel*, 16)

Here "charge" reads in the economic sense, as naming death's price tag, and so its acquisition of exchange value. That there is "a very large charge / For a word" is significant in terms of Plath's ambitions for commercial success. Reflecting on her early success as a writer, Plath asks: "why couldn't I expect big returns for every minute of writing?"[60] If, in Plath's case, creative labor utilizes domestic work as thematic material, it does so by intensifying reification: one labor is subject to another, in mutual remediation, so that Plath's written output is (much like Dionysus, the patron saint of tragedy) twice-born unto the world. What remains to be described is how this remediation, first developed in Plath's poetry and then as it settles in her prose, transforms into a tragic style.

The Birth of Tragedy

Where, then, is the tragedy in all of this? Here tragedy cannot be reduced to the fatefully misaligned circumstances of Plath's death on 11 February 1963 and *The Bell Jar*'s first publication just over a month earlier on 14 January (before she would ever know its success); neither can it be located in the general images of entrapment within the reproductive and creative economies she was both freely and by dint of circumstance ensnared; and neither should we account for a properly tragic structure of feeling in the fact that all of this so frequently directs the writing toward figures of death and morbidity. I want to suggest, rather, that tragedy is to be found in the representation of labor itself – of labor as a writer, as a wife, and as a mother, at each level working within structures that, vampire-like, drain and exhaust the individual so that any hope for mobility within those

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structures is removed. Perhaps this is why the vampire metaphor (also utilized by Marx) appeals to Plath in Freud's description of melancholia:

> Read Freud's "Morning and Melancholia" this morning after Ted left for the library. An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the "vampire" metaphor Freud uses, "draining the ego": that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: mother's clutch. I mask my self-abasement.[61]

"Draining the ego" is precisely how we might begin to understand the way market capitalism instills the process of commodification in the subject. That Plath is able to register the complicity of her own creative labor, her own self, in this process – affectively describing this as exhaustion – is at the core of her aesthetic achievement.

Reification, or subsumption, is written, above all, in the metaphor of the bell jar, a Damoclean threat always suspended above Esther with its "stifling distortions," ever threatening to descend, suffocating her with its "sour air" (178). Increasingly, the bell jar becomes a figure for Esther's fear of reproduction, of being doomed to the sort of domestic work that would spell an end for her artistic ambitions: "What I hate is the thought of being under a man's thumb," she tells her psychiatrist. "A man doesn't have a worry in the world, while I've got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line" (212). The image of a baby "hanging" over Esther's head recalls that of the bell jar, a figure of imprisonment suspended not just over the heads of the hysterical and the psychotic, but, universally, over all women: "What was there about us, in Belsize, so different from the girls playing bridge and gossiping and studying in the college to which I would return? Those girls, too, sat under bell jars of a sort" (227).

As a primal metaphor that recurs throughout the novel, the bell jar seems to come directly from a scene of familial trauma. Esther is taken to a hospital by her friend, Buddy, where she is brought face-to-face with dead babies in jars. "They had," we are told, "stiff, leathery, purple-black skin and they smelt like old pickle jars." And then:

> The baby in the first bottle had a large white head bent over a tiny curled-up body the size of a frog. The baby in the next bottle was bigger and the baby next to that one was bigger still and the baby in the last bottle was the size of a normal baby and he seemed to be looking at me and smiling a little piggy smile. (59)

The description is, clinically, more than just shocking. "I was quite proud of the calm way I stared at all these gruesome things" (59). The babies are

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described as aliens, white and frog-like, culminating in the dehumanizing image of the largest of the lot grinning at Esther with "a little piggy smile." She seems to be cataloguing them, storing up images, one by one. These were the sorts of experiences that a young Plath herself stored up for future recirculation, to "relive and recreate," as she writes in regard to her suicide attempt. Around the same time as she expresses those thoughts, in 1959, she was thinking about dead babies in jars:

> Had my coffee vision in bed. Began clearly to remember Dick Norton. A possible theme: virgin girl brought up in idealism expects virginity from boy her family raves about as pure. He is going to be a doctor, a pillar of society; he is already swinging toward conventionalism. Takes her through lectures on sickle cell anemia, moon-faced babies in jars, cadavers, baby born. She doesn't flinch.[62]

Between the passage from *The Bell Jar* and the notebook entry here, "she" looks at this most horrifying of scenes with a disconnected numbness. It is hard to tell whether Dick Norton, a real family friend of Plath who in *The Bell Jar* is given the name Buddy Willard, showed a young Plath dead babies or whether this image is a flight of imagination, generated by an unconscious that was throwing up night terrors involving all sorts of fetal mutations in part attributed to her anxiety about pregnancy.[63] It does not matter, either way; what all of this shows is that repetition is more than a poetic technique or a general symptom of trauma, real or imagined. It is also a form for articulating the material actualities of reproductive work, as well as the feelings of melancholia attached to that labor, which might, in the end, snuff out a young woman's ambition and future. Repetition is, ultimately, a creative process insofar as Plath was always preoccupied with re-creating and reliving experience in her writing. And so it is that, in the prose of her novel, anxieties about reproduction and reproductive labor meet with self-aware ambitions for commercial success.

At an early point in the novel, Esther attempts to remedy her lack of interior experience (which she must have to become a "great writer") by witnessing an actual birth. Esther's morbid preoccupation with reproductive labor intersects with creative labor in a figure of inhuman morbidity:

> "You oughtn't to see this," Will muttered in my ear. "You'll never want to have a baby if you do. They oughtn't to let women watch. It'll be the end of the human race."
>
> Buddy and I laughed, and then Buddy shook Will's hand and we all went into the room.
>
> I was so struck by the sight of the table where they were lifting the woman I didn't say a word. It looked like some awful torture table, with these metal

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> stirrups sticking up in mid air at one end and all sorts of instruments and wires and tubes I couldn't make out properly at the other.
>
> The woman's stomach stuck up so high I couldn't see her face or the upper part of her body at all. She seemed to have nothing but an enormous spider-fat stomach and two little ugly spindly legs propped in the high stirrups, and all the time the baby was being born she never stopped making this unhuman whooing noise.
>
> Later Buddy told me the woman was on a drug that would make her forget she'd had any pain and that when she swore and groaned she really didn't know what she was doing because she was in a kind of twilight sleep.
>
> I thought it sounded just like the sort of drug a man would invent. Here was a woman in terrible pain, obviously feeling every bit of it or she wouldn't groan like that, and she would go straight home and start another baby, because the drug would make her forget how bad the pain had been, when all the time, in some secret part of her, that long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain was waiting to open up and shut her in again. (61–62)

As a lyric and confessional poet, Plath drew in significant ways from her own personal experiences and interior spaces. Here that poetic voice is on full display. We can see the proliferation of the first-person pronoun, intent on its observation and refracting the observed scene into a poetic description characterized by a sense-certainty typical of the lyric voice. While Buddy speculates that the woman here is drugged, Esther is all too alive to the scene she is witnessing and to the consequence of reproductive labor: that all of this is leading to a "long, blind, doorless and windowless corridor of pain," which, like the topological entombment of the bell jar, "was waiting to open up and shut her in again."

Marjorie Perloff has written of the alienation generated in this passage, the estranging effect that Plath's inhuman descriptions conjure here, claiming that the experience of childbirth is made alienating in the most alien sense of the word.[64] But, for all of its horror, the passage seems to have assimilated into itself the numbness of the spectacle, the clinical registration of the depressive's experience drained of all ego. A young Plath writes that she lacked the experience to be a writer, and here she is attempting to garner precisely that experience so as to achieve commercial success. To witness this experience is to reify – to internalize the process of commodification in the self. This description of the labor of childbirth, while tending toward poetic flourish, is at one and the same time clinical and instrumental. All of this animates the arachnid horror that would repeat itself in mute resignation beneath the house. There's a coldness to the voice, which betrays that deadpan quality so characteristic of the rest of

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the novel and in contrast to that of the poems. Perhaps it is the lyric voice foreclosing on itself, in the alienation of the speaker, realizing that even creative flourish cannot rescue it from the instrumentalism of modern life.

In Plath's prose, we encounter a voice that registers the alienation of Esther from and within herself, from her own narrative, the lyric subject being forced beyond itself and into tragedy. As if to announce the universalization of this predicament, the way repetition and reproduction ultimately become entrapment, it is addressed apostrophically to every reader:

> To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream.
>
> A bad dream
> I remembered everything.
>
> I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story of the fig tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse and the broken thermometers and the Negro with his two kinds of beans and the twenty pounds I gained on insulin and the rock that bulged between sky and sea like a grey skull. (227)

Here, in a moment of narrative condensation, life's most disappointing experiences are drawn together by the force of memory, as an act of consciousness belonging to that speaking persona, so as to plot a line of fate that runs from "a dead baby" through "a grey skull" by way of gendered and racialized labor – and, emphatically, the otherwise unsung depredations of care and service undertaken by semi-anonymous and even caricatural nurses and orderlies and other working people. And so, finally, this passage reads as the tragedy of the white, middle-class woman, aspirations thwarted, now performing lyrical vitality as memento mori – the prose form of tragedy, which galvanizes the vast web of repeating images of which it is the affective center.

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