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GIRLS WHO WOULD BE GODS:  
THE POETRY OF EMILY DICKINSON,  
ELIZABETH BISHOP, AND SYLVIA PLATH

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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in partial fulfillment of the  
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in  
The Department of English

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Abstract

Girls Who Would Be Gods: The Poetry of Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath charts the development of these three American poets, from concerns with ambition and competition that appear in their early poetry, letters and journals, to their later creation of myths surrounding themselves and the secondary worlds of their creation. With Plath’s explicit wish that she might be God, Bishop’s Crusoe-like exile that allows her to create imaginary realms and homes, and Dickinson’s not entirely tentative proposal that she might well be the Biblical Eve, these poets indulged in imaginative re-creations of their worlds and their selves. What emerges is a portrait of poets actively engaged in a usurpation of divine handiwork; knowingly trading mortal lives for the immortal.
Introduction

“'I took my Power in my Hand- / And went against the World”
(Dickinson #540)

This is a creation story. It is a story not unlike that of the mythical Pygmalion, whom came to love the woman he made with his own hands before any made by God or nature. Pygmalion appeals to Venus to grant Galatea life, for his statue inspired emotions in the artist that none in the natural world could. The goddess does as he requests, and the statue becomes a living, breathing woman, equally in love with her creator.

There are three characters at work in this tale: the mortal artist, the—eventually—living creation, and the supernatural, immortal goddess that grants the art life. The three poets to be discussed here enact this myth individually. Alone, they play each role.

Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath were writers of poetry, scribbling and laboring writers. And they are poets, forevermore represented as such by their verses, their names attached to the living work of their creation. They were each also that otherworldly creature that gave life to the work.

At its inception this study sought to understand the trajectory of the woman poet’s career. It meant to answer questions about when and how one came to be a poet, what it might or might not mean if the poet’s gender was female, and to answer the critics who seemed to want gender to mean more than it might otherwise need to. Dickinson, Bishop, and Plath, among many talented women writers, were exemplary as writers and as literary figures for the general readership. Together, their careers span

1
nearly one hundred years of poetry by women in this country. Moreover, the stories of their lives have taken on mythological proportions. And these stories are significantly varied, representing three very different ways of being a poet.

*Secondary Worlds* was the title Auden chose for his lectures inaugurating the T.S. Eliot Memorial series at the University of Kent in 1967. The term itself was borrowed from a J. R. R. Tolkien essay on fairy tales (41). Auden posited that the creation of these secondary worlds is the job of the poet or of the creative artist, whatever the medium. As he explains, it is love of the primary world that leads one to wish to create a secondary one: “Being a man, not God, a poet cannot create *ex nihilo*. If our desire to create secondary worlds arises at least in part from our dissatisfaction with the primary world, the latter [enchantment with the world] must first be there before we can be dissatisfied with it” (42). Auden lists five aspects of the primary world that may give rise to disenchantment and which can be abolished from a secondary world: death, limited freedom, lack of understanding, the profane, and the evil.

For these poets, the desire to create alternative worlds arose from a desire to deny the reality of death, first encountered while they were quite young. Issues of limited freedom and a lack of understanding seem to arise for them, as they do for us all, and they refuse to accept this as well. They replace this with an uncanny belief in their own abilities, and a competitiveness that leads them eventually to feel themselves as supreme creator. But to accomplish this requires a denial of the primary world that is not always simple or easy, and a denial of their primary selves as well. In order to create secondary worlds, Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath have to
overcome their own circumstance and character. They replace this with a god-like self who, if the poems allow, will be an immortal self.

Dickinson, Bishop, and Plath created their own secondary worlds. Their creations were fashioned with as much acuity as is recognized of most of their male counterparts. What emerges when the secondary worlds of their creation are carefully observed is that they are overseen by a powerful and perhaps immortal figure. This mythical figure is what became of the women who set out to become poets when they were still little girls.
I

"It was given to me by the Gods / When I was a little girl"

To best understand the development of Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, or Sylvia Plath as poets, it is necessary to look at the earliest awakenings of their desire to be poets. Without exception, stirrings of poetic talent are obvious quite early in childhood. Alongside the precocious evidences of talent are the experiences that will eventually become a part of their poetic landscape. Through complex family relationships and feelings of isolation, with its attendant loneliness and pain, comes evidence of a sense of self that is essentially undefined. A breakthrough moment occurs, best illustrated in Elizabeth Bishop’s poem, “In the Waiting Room.” It is the moment when the child realizes who she is, the moment of saying, “I am I.” It is a moment of unrelenting horror.

Why should this be? For the young poet, it is this moment that represents definition. And the horror lies not in being defined by circumstance, gender, sexuality, or any other possible category, but in being defined by one’s own flesh and then, by extension, time. For most people, perhaps, this moment marks the end of childhood. Fantasies of other lives end with the dawning realization that you are you, a recognizable and named entity, and you will never be anyone else. The poet reacts to this knowledge with defiance. The trying on of new identities becomes an obstinate response to the flesh. This is because the moment of realizing who one is also is the moment of realizing one’s mortality. To be alive only within one’s flesh is to die. And the reality of death is more than unfortunate to the young poet, it is unacceptable.

But first there is the child within the family. As Plath is the most autobiographical of the poets discussed here; she is also the one to provide the most
evidence of the life of this child. The death of Plath’s father from complications of diabetes when she was eight years old was perhaps the landmark experience of her life and is the linchpin of her poetic world. Her father assumes many roles in her poems, but remains always a figure to be reckoned with. In a poem that confronts both her mother and her father, and that was composed after a disappointing first visit to her father’s grave, she says: “The day you died I went into the dirt, / Into the lightless hibernaculum / Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard / Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard” (116). His death is her death, and returns her to her mother’s womb to emerge in a virgin birth (the Christ mythology the first to be invoked in this poem)1. “Electra on Azalea Path” is rich in symbolism that begins in the title, evoking the Electra myth, naming the location of her father’s grave (Azalea Path), and, as has been pointed out, is a play on her mother’s name, “Azalea Path” being an exact rhyme for Aurelia Plath. The poem continues:

It was good for twenty years, that wintering --
As if you had never existed, as if I came
God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly:
Her wide bed wore the stain of divinity.
I had nothing to do with guilt or anything
When I wormed back under my mother's heart.

Small as a doll in my dress of innocence
I lay dreaming your epic, image by image:
Nobody died or withered on that stage.

(116)

The epic the poet dreams undoes the father’s death, but reality intrudes with the actuality of the gravesite (unkempt, crowded—not at all what Plath had expected). In

1 Plath’s father was a world-renowned expert on bees. The equation of her self with these bees is the first mythic image of Plath’s invention in the poem.
the poem the myth unravels. The death of the father becomes the death of the daughter, and the father’s death, then, the daughter’s fault.\(^2\) “It was the gangrene ate you to the bone / My mother said; you died like any man,” and the mother’s unadorned truth seems to reveal to the poet her mother’s lack of understanding of the magnitude of the event. The “truth” is known only by the poet and her father, and is something more mystical, grander than simple gangrene: “How shall I age into that state of mind? / I am the ghost of an infamous suicide, / My own blue razor rusting in my throat. / O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father -- your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. / It was my love that did us both to death”(116).

The father figure only becomes more powerful to her, culminating in the poetic images that arise after she and Ted Hughes attempt to communicate with Otto Plath using the Ouija board. Linda Wagner-Martin tells of these experiences in her biography of Plath:

> Her father’s name was Otto, and ‘spirits’ would regularly arrive with instruction for her from one Prince Otto, who was said to be a great power in the underworld. When she pressed for a more personal communication, she would be told that Prince Otto could not speak to her directly, because he was under orders from The Colossus. And when she pressed for an audience with The Colossus, they would say he was inaccessible. It is easy to see how her effort to come to terms with the meaning this Colossus held for her, in her poetry, became more and more central as the years passed. (136)

\(^2\) Otto Plath died after he stubbornly refused to seek medical attention for a stubbed toe that would not heal. His subsequent death was interpreted by his daughter as a type of suicide, placing her in a line of suicides. She felt her own suicidal tendencies implicated her in his death, in a curious reversal of their relationship. As poet, she becomes progenitor of her mother and father, and hence responsible for their failings.
As the link to her father grows stronger, Plath fights to make the link to her mother more tenuous. In a recasting of the Electra myth, Plath assumes her mother’s place, becoming her father’s true mate (and, by extension, mother to herself). In a poem like "The Beekeeper’s Daughter" a stylized Otto Plath is addressed: “Hieratical in your frock coat, maestro of the bees, / You move among the many-breasted hives, / My heart under your foot, sister of a stone” (118). The powerful and oppressive maestro appears to control the action of the poem, but the verse concludes, “Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg / Under the coronal of sugar roses / The queen bee marries the winter of your year” (118). The poet wrests control of the action. In the “Easter egg” of the poem, in the fantasy world Plath has constructed, she and her father (her sometimes “bridegroom”) are united. Had Plath been able to completely control her father’s ghost, her life might have been quite other than what it was. But the figure of her father intrudes, often entering a poem just obliquely, as when he appears as the drowned man of “A Life”: “Age and terror, like nurses, attend her, / And a drowned man, complaining of the great cold, / Crawls up out of the sea” (149). In a most poignant moment Otto Plath eventually becomes nearly interchangeable with Plath’s actual husband, Ted Hughes, in the poem “Daddy.”

Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi in “A Common Language: The American Woman Poet,” says that any discussion of Sylvia Plath’s poems might best begin with a discussion of her family dynamics, particularly those between Plath and her mother. Gelpi writes that the “poems which explore her ambivalence toward images of mother figures may actually be more central to an understanding of her work than are ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’” (276). Plath’s letters to her mother reveal a disturbing desire to
please, even to live in order to fulfill her mother’s ambitions: “You are the most wonderful mummy that a girl ever had, and I only hope I can continue to lay more laurels at your feet” (LH 94). The poems and journals contain sentiments far more complex and dark. “There is nothing between us!” (226), Plath writes in “Medusa.” As Wagner-Martin points out: “‘Medusa’—in Greek mythology the Gorgon who turned all beholders to stone—is also the name of a species of jellyfish, aurela. Mrs. Plath had once joked with Sylvia about her name, which had two meanings, ‘golden’ and ‘jellyfish’” (266). As in “Electra on Azalea Path,” Aurelia Plath’s identity is somewhat concealed under cover of wordplay, but only somewhat.

In other poems the scene is fantastic, but a figure named “Mother” is addressed, as in “The Disquieting Muses.” Taking for its outline the story of the Sleeping Beauty, here it is the mother’s fault that the daughter is haunted by terrifying figures, whose aspects are taken from the De Chirico painting of the same title:

Mother, mother, what illbred aunt
Or what disfigured and unsightly Cousin did you so unwisely keep
Unasked to my christening, that she
Sent these ladies in her stead

With head’s like darning-eggs to nod
And nod and nod at foot and head
And at the left side of my crib? (74)

She seems resigned to accept the curse she labors under: “And this is the kingdom you bore me to, / Mother, mother. But no frown of mine / Will betray the company I keep” (76). The poem itself, however, stands as an indictment. Someone needs to assume responsibility for the disquiet. The last lines point to what is apparent in Letters Home, that Plath often concealed, along with her anger, the nightmare figures that haunted her.
"All the Dead Dears" asserts the lack of kinship that "Medusa" makes explicit:

This lady here's no kin
Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck
Blood and whistle my marrow clean
To prove it. As I think now of her head,

From the mercury-backed glass
Mother, grandmother, great grandmother
Reach hag hands to haul me in,
And an image looms under the fishpond surface
Where the daft father went down
With orange duck-feet winnowing his hair –(70)

There are a couple of interesting things to observe in this poem. One is the figure—
"Mother, grandmother, great grandmother"—that reaches to haul the speaker in and has
also, it seems implied, hauled down the father. Here she and her father are both victims
of the mother, or the unidentifiable mother figure. The second thing to notice is that the
image of the "lady" comes from "mercury-backed glass," so that the lady actually being
addressed is the poet herself. She may be in the guise of her mother; her mother seems
to meet her image in the glass, at least when Plath thinks "now of her head," but the
actual reflection is her own. It becomes manifest that the denied relationship is in fact
so close that there are no clear borders between this series of women. The anger Plath
exhibits toward her mother in her journals seems at times to most extend to herself after
she has her own children (Journals 270).

Elizabeth Bishop felt equally compromised by her lineage, felt that she had
inherited a tendency toward alcoholism and madness. Perhaps because Bishop was
essentially an orphan, the idea of family intrigued her. In "Family Portrait" the speaker
studies the portrait:
The portrait does not reply,  
it stares; in my dusty eyes  
it contemplates itself.  
The living and dead relations  
multiply in the glass.  
I don't distinguish those  
that went away from those  
that stay. I only perceive  
the strange idea of family  
traveling through the flesh. (261)

The relationship between the speaker and the portrait is distinctly mirror-like. While she stares, the portrait stares back. They both seem to meld into her. She sees herself in the figures there; they see themselves in her. She is their culmination (and, curiously, Bishop was to be the last of the family line). The position is a responsibility and a burden. But also, it seems, there is a longing expressed in the poem for the familial relationship.

Emily Dickinson’s experience appears quite different from that of Plath or Bishop. Dickinson, residing in the home of her birth as she did throughout her life, was never without family. She didn’t experience the early loss of a parent to death, as did Plath and Bishop. However, Dickinson did reply to Thomas Wentworth Higginson that she “never had a mother,” not if he meant someone to run to. She seems to have revered her father, but all acknowledge that the household was not an emotionally demonstrative one. Dickinson’s brother Austin kissed his father where he lay in his casket, and remarked that he “had never dared to do so in life.” For all three women,

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3 Paula Bennett links the early loss of a parent to expanded creativity in the female child.
childhood was an experience of acute isolation, a parallel Paula Bennett makes explicit between Plath and Dickinson:

Isolation and its attendant sense of deviance or unwomanliness was a chronic source of anxiety and depression, particularly in adolescence. After extremely promising childhood starts, both Dickinson and Plath ended adolescence, Dickinson at twenty-five, Plath at twenty-one, in suicidal depressions that were followed, not many years later, by second, very different breakdowns or emotional traumas that released their poetic energies. (83)

Bishop’s experience was remarkably the same. Her position as an orphan provided Bishop with a good deal of emotional discomfort. She remarked several times that school holidays had been a source of tension for her, since she had, in effect, nowhere to go. Compounding this was the secret of her mother’s institutionalization, of her mother’s madness. Bishop told people that her mother was dead. Her own bouts of depression and alcoholism are discussed in letters dating from her time at Vassar. One can guess at the effect an uncertain, or hidden, sexual identity lent to the difficulties of adolescence. Her poetic energies did not direct themselves to a full expression until she had reached her mid-twenties, had already begun a life-long battle with the bottle and with the incipient psychological fallout, and had begun to travel in the company of women who were accepting of her homosexuality. As an adult with an independent income, she did not have to strictly face her lack of family. She began instead to construct an alternative to family, and the writing offered itself as a means.

Perhaps a withdrawal from the family is another way to elude pain. Martha Dickinson Bianchi in Emily Dickinson: Her Life and Letters felt there was an ascetic
sensibility present in her aunt even in early childhood. As she wrote, “Even from extreme youth her unconscious philosophy seems to have been one of renunciation before the temptation was presented”(44). But when Bianchi quotes Dickinson’s letters, another idea emerges, and this is that renunciation was a method of eluding pain. While the identities of Dickinson’s particular loved ones and the nature of Dickinson’s known relationships may never be fully explicated, it is certain that what she experienced was deeply felt. Her care, when she conceded it, never ceased. The verses were a way of relieving this pressure. As she wrote to Higginson: “My dying tutor told me that he would like to live till I had been a poet, but Death was much of mob as I could master, then. And when, far afterward, a sudden light on orchards, or a new fashion in the wind troubled my attention, I felt a palsy, here, the verses just relieve”(408). Benjamin Newton’s death is generally regarded as a watershed event in Dickinson’s development as a poet. Her “tutor” she called him. He brought her books and encouraged her writing. He found her, even as an adolescent, a talented poet. He helped her to have faith in her own talent. His death (making him the first of the two, often referred to in the poems, whom she lost) galvanized her ambitions, perhaps by giving her a “mob” to “master” in the form of Death.¹ But death also made her more selective in her society.²

¹ From the language of the letter, Dickinson appears to be saying that although “Death was much of mob” as she “could master, then,” that this isn’t the case any longer. Perhaps, she suggests, now she has mastered it after all.

² Newton had written to Emily Dickinson one week before his death, “If I live, I will go to Amherst – if I die, I certainly will”(Letters 551). As Dickinson did not distance herself from his memory throughout her life (the statement recounted above is from a letter she wrote twenty years later), Benjamin did her yet another service. For the poet he provided a ready audience. She said that he taught her “Immortality.” The poems provide a way to continue to address her tutor, and to thereby master his death.
Helen Vendler believes "In the Waiting Room" to be a poem that exemplifies Bishop’s use of poetry to relieve acute pain. Vendler writes, “A poem of this sort suggests that Bishop’s habit of observing and connecting was initially a defense invented against ghastly moments of disconnection and that it was practiced throughout childhood even before it found a structure in poetry” (297). This early feeling of “disconnection”—dramatized in the poem as the experience of the five-year-old Elizabeth—can be described as a profound and life-altering sense of alienation, accompanied by unforgettable psychological pain. As Vendler recognizes, Bishop employs the poem as an anodyne to that pain. Poetry, after all, allows emotion to be organized into discreet and recognizable units, helping to make any emotion more tolerable. As Frost says, “The best way out is always through”; the poem shows the child getting through. The child speaker of Bishop’s poem says, “And then I was back in it,” and to illustrate provides the date, time, and place.

That organizing principle requires an attention to detail, which seems inherent in poetry, and perhaps in children as well. Joe Summers calls “the child’s capacity for meticulous attention . . . a method of escaping from intolerable pain”; Laskin goes on to identify this as the “key to Bishop’s poetry” (322). Many critics have commented upon Bishop’s meticulous attention to detail, aligning her, as she herself did, with an artist like Joseph Cornell, a gatherer and shaper of minutiae into narrative. But Summers and Laskin are correct to recognize in this an interest that had its nascence in childhood. The poem, “First Death in Nova Scotia,” illustrates the poet and the child-observer at work. This “first death” is managed in its details. Her cousin Arthur is displayed in the family parlor. From the child’s-eye view the scene is a quick compilation of related
The colors of red and white, the stillness, the artifice of the stuffed loon on the mantle, the equally as stilled and artificial corpse are quickly seen and related. The explanation the child arrives at, however, that Arthur has been called to be “the smallest page at court,” is the child’s response to what is essentially a horrifying occurrence, and a most macabre scene. There are two aspects to the way Bishop relates the death of Arthur in “First Death in Nova Scotia” that will have a particular relevance to the mythos she constructs as a poet: the way the death is experienced by the family as a whole, a family who shares a particular landscape and tradition, and the concern that the speaker has that Arthur cannot travel now.

The lasting impression of this death is evident in the poem written while she resided in Brazil, and included in the book, Questions of Travel, in the section entitled, “Elsewhere.” This section includes as well the poem “Sestina” and “Manners,” which is subtitled, “For a Child of 1918.” These three poems are the adult’s distillation of the child’s earliest memories, death being perhaps the most formidable of these. The experiences of childhood became the stories that haunted the adult, and were the source of much of Bishop’s prose and several poems.

Sylvia Plath also milled her childhood in this way, and wrote her children’s books addressing her own childhood fears and insecurities, curing them with words, turning them into the magical and the mythic. Anne Stevenson in Bitter Fame expressed the belief that Plath’s precocious use of language was a defense against childhood trauma. After recounting an anecdote told by Aurelia Plath that had the toddler Sylvia Plath reading to occupy herself and relieve the jealousy she felt when her brother was born, Stevenson writes: “What Mrs. Plath does not say—a fact surely relevant to Sylvia’s recourse to language in times of difficulty—is that at two and a half
her daughter was being urged to treat negative emotion (jealousy of her brother) with words” (7). In its most healthy form, Plath’s negative emotion sought an outlet in words. It is also well documented that in less healthy moments it sought an outlet in acts and deeds. The violence that so many have reacted to in Plath’s poetry is her reaction to what she feels has been inflicted upon her. When Plath casts herself as a Jew in “Daddy,” an appropriation that has been read by many as a violation of the true suffers of the Holocaust, she is tapping into what is perhaps the single most recognizable occurrence of suffering in the twentieth century. Plath writes of “an engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a Jew. /A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen. / I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may well be a Jew” (223). The Russian poet Marina Tsvetayeva has said that “every poet is a Jew,” perhaps to emphasize the poet’s familiarity with the painful, or with feelings of persecution. Plath certainly felt herself to be in great pain, and felt that this pain was perhaps her birthright. To be one of the chosen people mingles the price of great suffering with the promise of exceptional reward.

Characteristic of all three poets in early youth is a sense of self that is quite fluid. When a self begins to be defined, the moment of its happening is experienced as a violent break with the universe, as it is in Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room.” Betsy Erkkila in Wicked Sisters sees in the poem a violent reaction to the sudden awareness of gender. She writes, “The poem . . . registers the girlchild’s terror and resistance as she experiences her identification with other women as a fall into the oppression and contraints of gender—signified by her ‘foolish aunt’ and ‘those awful hanging breasts’ she sees in the National Geographic as she reads and waits in the dentist’s office”(150).
And Lorrie Goldensohn reads the situation similarly. Goldensohn speaks of “In the Waiting Room” as Bishop’s attempt as a child to deny “the necessity of joining the adult world in the gender role to which the child is being forcibly assigned” (232). Although most critics agree that the poem expresses, most of all, the recognition on the part of the child, Elizabeth, of her gender, it is perhaps more accurate to read in it a reaction to her awareness of being a member of humanity. As the child looks around the room, looks at National Geographic (seeing the “Long Pig” being carried by the cannibals), and hears the scream, she is disturbed by all that surrounds her, not only that which is specifically female. Expressed is a terror at being a member of the human race, of being an Elizabeth, of being in the specific time and place (which she so clearly records and remembers), and, finally, in being a mortal being. It is the moment of saying, “I am I,” as Bishop does in the poem, and as Plath does in a passage remarkably similar to the experience recounted by Bishop in “In the Waiting Room.” Plath says that when her brother Warren was born: “I trudged off on my own... As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over” (JP 81). For Plath, this moment occurs at the age of two and a half. Bishop puts it at five. It is the uncomfortable moment of being pigeonholed, forever, in one’s own flesh.

Before coming to this point, however, the self is far from a fixed entity. Dickinson and Bishop refer often to the time when they were little boys. (Marianne Moore also had this curious habit [Fenton 43]). Dickinson assumes this male persona frequently in her letters, and also in the poems. For instance, in #389 she speaks of the children who wonder when the mattress is put outside after an illness in the house:
"They wonder if it died—on that- / I used to- when a Boy." In #1487, Dickinson talks of an ancient time in Bethlehem, when she and the Saviour were boys. In this poem, Dickinson doesn't only speak from a male persona, she also assumes a familiarity with the Saviour characteristic throughout her work.

Plath more often sought to be identified as a "typical," if somewhat highly achieving, girl. This is not unlike what Bishop's friends said of her later in life, that she did a wonderful imitation of an ordinary woman. This did not stop people from being, as Sherwood says they were of Bishop, more interested in her as a person than as a poet (4). Mary Gordon has said, "there is no seduction like that of being thought a good girl" (Sternburg 28), and the good girl is one of the masks that these three poets wear.

Slowly emerging in the poems, however, is an assertion of something far greater. In Dickinson's #454, "It was given to me by the Gods- / When I was a little Girl," one finds the clear recognition on the part of the poet that she has been recipient of a rare gift. The poem hints at what has sometimes been characterized as the arrogance of Emily Dickinson: "Rich! 'Twas Myself - was rich- / To take the name of Gold- / And Gold to own- in solid Bars- / The Difference - made me bold." Her recognition that in taking "the name" she becomes the owner of the object, shows an early awareness of the power of language as instrument. The recognition comes to her while still a student, and even then is hidden from the others, who talk, while she knows. The poem in its entirety reads:

| It was given to me by the Gods-   |
| When I was a little Girl-        |
| They give us Presents most – you know- |
| When we are new- and small.      |
| I kept it in my Hand –           |
| I never put it down –            |
I did not dare to eat – or sleep –
For fear it would be gone –
I heard such words as ‘Rich’-
When hurrying to school –
From lips at Corners of the Streets –
And wrestled with a smile.
Rich! ‘Twas Myself – was rich-
To take the name of Gold-
And Gold to own- in solid Bars-
The Difference – made me bold –

More than either Bishop or Plath, Dickinson believed she was called to poetry. Divinity
in the form of gods, or God, or the immortal dead recognized her gifts, even if no one
else did. Bishop never seemed to have the same certainty about her self; it seems it
simply wasn’t in her character. Plath wavered in her certainty, but mostly seems to
have demanded recognition, both divine and otherwise.

It is hard to read a biography of Plath and not see the poet she would become at
the earliest of points. She was a precocious reader and writer, and the biographical
seeds of her poems are visible by the time she reaches the age of two. Linda Wagner-
Martin’s biography reveals Plath’s early interest in Shakespeare, and specifically in The
Tempest:

When Sylvia was in seventh grade, they saw The Tempest
with Vera Zorina and Canada Lee at the Colonial Theater
in Boston. Both children had read the entire play (when
Mrs. Plath gave Warren Lamb’s Tales from Shakespeare,
he insisted on reading the full version, as Sylvia had).
Sylvia’s fascination with Ariel, Miranda, and Caliban,
then, dated from January of 1945. The Tempest is not a
play she read in school, but the father-daughter
relationship, the reunion, the ocean, and the androgynous
powers of Ariel made the story especially germane to a
young girl fashioning her adolescent self-image. (37)
Plath’s first major publication was of the short story, “Sunday at the Minton’s,” in the summer of 1952, when she was nineteen. While her prose was first to be professionally recognized, the poems were developing at an even more accelerated pace, and within them the images and themes that were to continue throughout her writing. Ted Hughes, whose knowledge of Plath’s opus is both intimate and astute, chose the juvenilia to be included in Plath’s *Collected* and commented upon it in his Introduction:

They can be intensely artificial, but they are always lit with her unique excitement. And that sense of a deep mathematical inevitability in the sound and texture of her lines was well developed quite early. One can see here, too, how exclusively her writing depended on a supercharged system of inner symbols and images, an enclosed cosmic circus. If that could have been projected visually, the substance and patterning of these poems would have made very curious mandalas. (16)

Alongside the development of her writing, she was also developing critical skills and a theory of what it meant to be a working writer. When a poem she submitted to her high school English teacher was read with meanings quite other than those she had attached to it as author, she remarked to her mother, “Once a poem is made available to the public, the right of interpretation belongs to the reader”(*LH* 34).

Keeping in mind that there may be no temptation as great for some as that to be a good girl, there is also the great temptation to simply be good: to be someone of recognized ability and importance. The desire to be someone of importance also takes, at times, the form of wanting to please and impress others. Dickinson displayed early the desire to be “great,” in her words, and to that end she hid what was not great about
herself, even if the perceived flaw was quite human, or the anticipated lapse of a child. While in her letters she jokes about the expectations of her mother and father, she also feared falling short of them. When as a child she had trouble learning to tell time, Richard Sewall points out that she was too ashamed to tell anyone she didn’t learn (65). Meanwhile, her little violence was exploding in other ways, a duality she makes explicit in poem #613:

They shut me up in Prose-
As when a little Girl
They put me in the Closet-
Because they liked me 'still' -

Still! Could themselves have peeped -
And seen my Brain- go round-
They might as wise have lodged a Bird
For Treason – in the Pound –

Himself has but to will
And easy as a Star
Abolish his Captivity-
And laugh- No more have I-

The duality between where she was “put” and where she actually was is somewhere between that of prose and poetry, and somewhere between being locked up and being completely free.

Sewall explicitly traces Dickinson’s awareness of her creative power to her early youth. In a letter written to Jane Humphrey in 1850, Dickinson confides:

I hope belief is not wicked, and assurance, and perfect trust - and a kind of twilight feeling before the moon is seen - I hope human nature has truth in it – Oh I pray it may not deceive - confide - cherish, have great faith in - do you dream from all this what I mean? Nobody thinks
of the joy, nobody guesses it, to all appearance old things are engrossing, and new ones are not revealed, but there now is nothing old, things are budding, and springing, and singing, and you rather think you are in a green grove, and it’s branches that go, and come. (95)

This was at approximately the same time that Dickinson wrote of her desire to be “great,” and as Sewall explains, “Though Emily Dickinson can hardly be counted among those romantic poets, like Wordsworth, who were quite explicit about when and how they discovered they were poets, she seems to be coming close to it here” (397).

During Plath’s teenage years, she wrote in her journal: “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? . . . But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I – I am powerful, but to what extent? I am I” (16). With the desire to be more than her self, and more than the flesh that seems at times to imprison, comes the desire to try out other identities through writing. Bishop leaves less explicit evidence of the desire to slip the bonds of self, but records the habit of lying even as a small child (specifically and most often about her parents), while seeking to tell the truth in works that purported to be fictions, but were more often the reshaping of her own personal history. These often featured a male character that was but a thinly veiled recasting of her self.

George Bernard Shaw remarked that “the finding of one’s place may be made puzzling by the fact that there is no place in ordinary society for extraordinary individuals”(Erikson 143). The experiences of these three poets seem to bear this out. Their early feeling of being at a remove from others is not resolved in adulthood. Nor do they seem to later recollect these emotions in tranquillity; the emotions continue to
be felt with an intensity similar to their first occurrence. The most decisive hurts that are encountered: the awareness of being one of many, the awareness of one's own mortality and the mortality of our loved ones, what is known as the loss of innocence, become fodder for their poems and prose all their lives.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge said that "to carry on the feelings of childhood into the powers of manhood, to combine the child's sense of wonder and novelty with the familiar... this is the character and privilege of genius, and one of the marks which distinguish genius from talents." In these poets one can distinguish the genius as child. In addition to Plath's poems, haunted by childhood pain, any doubt that she retained her child's view of the world is dispelled with the reading of her stories for children. (A certain resignation and sadness characterize even her children's books—they are not whimsical.) Bishop, especially in her later poems and prose, recreated the scenes of her childhood. And Richard Chase observed of Emily Dickinson that she illustrates the "double view [which] may be said to belong to the childhood imagination... more than most poets... Emily Dickinson was likely to cling in certain special ways to her childhood perceptions" (Davis 123). Her brilliance with children seems to have been what was most remembered by those who knew her in her life.

Cesare Pavese has said that "one ceases to be a child when one realizes that telling one's troubles does not make it any better" (Millier 384). In that sense, Dickinson, Bishop and Plath never ceased to be children. For them, the telling of it did make it better, as Dickinson said, "Just relieved." The poems did not make the difficulties go away, but act as a defense. And their ability to reconstruct the life of that child and effectively re-access it, seems to provide a stay against mortality.
Extremes of emotion, and the desire not to die, are not enough to make a poet, however. Besides these things, Dickinson, Bishop and Plath had as well a marked ambition from childhood. At times, one finds a reticence in expressing it. Even with a poet of such notable ambition as Sylvia Plath, Linda Wagner-Martin finds that as a teen, “Her thoughts about what it means to be a writer, to depersonalize feelings so that they can be recorded, take up much of [her] summer journal. Her obsession with this one subject suggests that she was not comfortable with her ambition”(55). And Elizabeth Bishop’s shyness, so often remarked upon by her friends, Bishop said kept her from being comfortable with herself as a poet of ambition. To an interviewer’s question of whether she felt herself a writer even as a young woman, Bishop replied, “No, it all just happens without your thinking about it. I never meant to go to Brazil. I never meant doing any of these things. I’m afraid everything has just happened”(Monteiro xiii).

The same denials can be found in Dickinson’s letters. As she wrote to Higginson, “I smile when you suggest that I delay ‘to publish,’ that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin. If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase, and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then. My barefoot rank is better”(408). At the same time, however, one might well wonder what would move Dickinson to send her poems to a noted editor, if not the desire for publication? Allen Tate certainly saw Dickinson as opposed to public scrutiny. He said, “She never had the slightest interest in the public. Were four poems or five published in her lifetime? . . . Here was a poet who had no use for the supports of authorship—flattery and fame; she never needed money”(Davis 103). (Dickinson offers in “Publication is the Auction of the Mind of Man” that the need for money might
justify publication.) Bishop was another poet who didn’t need to earn from her poems, and she also seems to have felt disdain for the business of publishing. She wrote, “Yes, I too hate the idea of publishing. I really have to stir myself to consider it at all, and I think if left to my own devices, without friends urging me on, I’d never do it at all—just hand things around once in a while, in the good old way” (Bishop Letters 431). The “good, old way” she mentions is, of course, chiefly Dickinson’s way.

The famous “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” seems to illustrate Dickinson’s views on the matter:

I’m Nobody! Who are you?  
Are you—Nobody—Too?  
Then there’s a pair of us?  
Don’t tell! They’ll advertise—you know!  

How dreary—to be—Somebody!  
How public-like a Frog—  
To tell one’s name—the livelong June—  
To an admiring Bog!  

(#288)

But it seems as soon as one points to any statement of Dickinson’s, one can just as quickly point to another that will contradict it. Here, in a letter, she presents another view of those noisy frogs: “The frogs sing sweet to-day -- they have such pretty, lazy times -- how nice to be a frog!” (406). Looking at this statement next to the poem, it seems that in the poem the problem is not so much with the croaking frog as with the audience, that “admiring Bog.” The bog seems suggestive of an undistinguished, uncomprehending audience. Not only are they undeserving of her song, but they would also attempt to wrest the control of it from her, they would “advertise.”
An audience was not only outside the realm of her control, their expectations
were lesser than her own. As she wrote in one letter:

Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United
States are laughing at me too! I can’t stop for that! My
business is to love. I found a bird this morning, down --
down-- on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and
wherefore sing, I said, since nobody hears?

One sob in the throat, one flutter of bosom, --“My
business is to sing” -- and away she rose! How do I
know but cherubim, once, themselves, as patient, listened,
and applauded her unnoticed hymn? (413)

Her business, whether it was circumference, to love, or to sing, was ambitious. The
audience she courted was beyond mortal and beyond her own time. But she was certain
of it, and that the whole United States was in some way paying attention. As she wrote
in a letter to her friend Jane Humphrey: “I have dared to do strange things - bold things,
and have asked no advice from any - I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think I
am wrong”(95). The letter concludes in poetic flight:

I hope belief is not wicked, and assurance, and perfect
trust - and a kind of twilight feeling before the moon is
seen - I hope human nature has truth in it - Oh I pray it
may not deceive - confide - cherish, have great faith in -
do you dream from all this what I mean? Nobody thinks
of the joy, nobody guesses it, to all appearance old things
are engrossing, and new ones are not revealed, but there
now is nothing old, things are budding, and springing, and
singing, and you rather think you are in a green grove,
and it’s branches that go, and come. (95)

The joy she speaks of she does not distinctly name, but again, she is certain of it.
Marked in her copy of Ilk Marvel is this passage: “Your dreams of reputation, your
swift determination, you impulsive pride, your deep uttered vows to win a name, have
all sobered into affection - have all blended into that glow of feeling, which finds its
centre, and hope, and joy in HOME. From my soul I pity him whose soul does not leap
at the mere utterance of that name”(Sewall 683), a passage which sounds so uncannily
like Dickinson herself speaking. Her certainty, which so many have interpreted as
arrogance and sometimes class-consciousness, did find its centre in the idea of home,
the one place where she could aspire to greatness on her own terms. What I wish to
draw attention to is that this ambition was in place quite early in her girlhood. As she
wrote to Louise Norcross on January 4, 1859,

I have known little of you, since the October morning
when our families went out driving, and you and I in the
dining-room decided to be distinguished. It’s a great
thing to be ‘great,’ Loo, and you and I might tug for a
life⁶, and never accomplish it, but no one can stop our
looking on, and you know some cannot sing, but the
orchard is full of birds, and we all can listen. What if we
learn, ourselves, some day! Who indeed knows? -- (345)

Richard Wilbur writes in his essay, “Sumptuous Destitution,” “That she wrote a good
number of poems about fame supports my view: the subjects to which a poet returns are

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⁶ The language used here is typical of that found in the writings of Dickinson,
Bishop, and Plath. When Dickinson here refers to a “life,” she clearly refers to a thing
that must be accomplished, that is not idly given. Life in this case is something far
greater than existence; I take it she is referring to the life to be made in poetry.

In Lawrence Lipking’s excellent The Life of the Poet, he distinguishes between
what he terms “anti-careerism” and ambition: “The attack on careerism does not
preclude the poet’s need to shape some sort of career, some sense of destiny or
vocation. Propertius and Pound, Winters and Graves, are not modest authors. Their
contempt for ‘official’ poetry and ‘heroic’ careers implies a reverse ambition: a self-
consuming devotion to craft. Indeed, one might argue that resistance to orthodox
definitions of greatness and public careers itself constitutes a career ideal. Thus a poet
like Emily Dickinson, with her unwillingness to publish, her preference for intensity
and brevity, her hesitation to try new forms or to ‘develop,’ her sublime independence,
seems almost too perfect an example of an anti-careerist vocation”(xiii).
those which vex him” (Sewall, Essays 130). Dickinson was fascinated by fame, but was ambitious most of all to be, as she says above, “great.”

Few poets can match Sylvia Plath in terms of ambition, or if as ambitious as she, few have left such extensive evidence of it. Wilbur’s comment about the poet returning to those subjects which vex her in mind, Plath’s poems often seem nakedly aggressive statements of ambition. A poem, for example, like “Mushrooms,” which speaks of “Nudgers and shovers / In spite of ourselves. / Our kind multiplies: / We shall by morning / Inherit the earth. / Our foot’s in the door” (139), is characteristic of Plath’s voice: determined, demanding, often angrily so. In the poems, she is determined to get somewhere, and there is a forward, driving motion in “Ariel,” for example, which is also there much earlier, in the first poem she wrote based upon a horseback ride.

“Whiteness I remember” was written after her first horseback riding lesson in Massachusetts: “Whiteness being what I remember / About Sam: whiteness and the great run / He gave me. I’ve gone nowhere since” (120). The frustration she expresses here is all but banished in “Ariel.” The determination not to be in any way “fixed” was a concern left from early childhood, equated with freedom and innocence. As she writes in “The Eye-mote:”

What I want back is what I was
Before the bed, before the knife,
Before the brooch-pin and the salve
Fixed me in this parenthesis;
Horses fluent in the wind,
A place, a time gone out of mind.

(109)
This same determination to be moving, and thus "fluent," can be found throughout the journals and letters, but just to cite one circumstance, in an early letter Plath writes: "The consequences of love affairs would stop me from my independent freedom of creative activity, and I don't intend to be stopped" (Plath LH 104).

Elizabeth Bishop's meticulously shaped career has been believed characterized by modesty and reticence, as being almost domestic in its aims. Anne Colwell's recent book, Inscrutable Houses: Metaphors of the Body in the Poems of Elizabeth Bishop, successfully argues against this interpretation. Bishop was perhaps less comfortable with her ambition than either Plath or Dickinson, she leaves less evidence of it. But in her letters one finds the occasional statement such as this: "I am very sick of sounding so quiet" (Laskin 306), and often the expression of doubt that she had done all that she meant to do.

Bishop says, "I am very sick of sounding so quiet." She does not say that she is sick of her poems sounding quiet. The difference is crucial. The poems, and the ambition of the poetry, become synonymous with the ambitions of the self. The poems become a substitute for the self, and the advancement of the poems becomes the goal. The confusion between the poet and the speaker of the poem does not exist in the mind of the reader alone; this confusion belongs also to the poet. The sender of the message seems to become confused with the receiver of the message in poems like this one by Dickinson: "I aimed my Pebble - but Myself / Was all the one that fell- / Was it Goliath - was too large - / Or was myself - too small?" (#540). And fame, for Dickinson, becomes such a central concern in part for this very reason. The publication of the poems equates in her mind with the selling of her very self. In a poem like #709, not publishing becomes a method of self-protection:
Publication – is the Auction
Of the Mind of Man-
Poverty – be justifying
For so foul a thing
Possibly – but We – would rather
From Our Garret go
White – Unto the White Creator –
Than invest – Our Snow –
Thought belong to Him who gave it –
Then – to Him Who bear
Its Corporeal illustration – Sell
The Royal Air-
In the Parcel – Be the Merchant
Of the Heavenly Grace –
But reduce no Human Spirit
To Disgrace of Price –

Publication represents a sullying in this case, a disgrace to what is divine in nature. It is not only divinity contained therein, however, but also the human spirit. Purity of spirit and of motive alone is not what keeps Dickinson from pursuing publication and the fame that might accompany it. In poems like #1659, she compares fame to an overly rich, and ultimately unwholesome, meal. She writes,

Fame is a fickle food
Upon a shifting plate
Whose table once a
Guest but not
The second time is set.

Whose crumbs the crows inspect
And with ironic caw
Flap past it to the
Farmer’s Corn –
Men eat of it and die.
As so often in Dickinson’s poems, the birds are possessed of a knowledge that human beings do not have. Those birds are a stand-in for the poet, their song and her song, even their “ironic caw,” much her own. Poem #1763 seems to speak more to a fear that fame would be transitory. “Fame is a bee. / It has a song- / It has a sting- / Ah, too, it has a wing,” she wrote, and one senses emotions here running somewhere between longing and fear.

Some, like Annette Kolodny, would trace the tradition of women’s poetry in the United States back to the very idea of claiming a female voice. As she says in an essay about Robert Lowell, an essay that tackles the question of what it is that makes a woman write:

At least in part, ‘what it is that makes us do it,’ and what it is women often do when they write, is precisely what Lowell’s ‘The Sister’ is all about; that is, the woman poet’s repeated need to assert for herself some validating female tradition and to repossess its voices for her own needs. In the continental United States, at least, this is the stance with which women’s poetry begins. (122)

The possession of the voice, her own voice, was at least in part what caused Dickinson so much difficulty when faced with the prospect of actually publishing her work. Ownership of her work, and by extension herself, was supremely important to her, as Paula Bennett has recognized: “In her art she was master of herself, whatever that self was, however aggressive, unwomanly, or even inhuman society might judge it to be” (7). How best to be the owner of her work was a concern for Dickinson. In Richard Sewall’s biography, he lists in a footnote several variants of Dickinson’s signature, including Emily E. Dickinson, Emilie Dickinson, E. D., Dickinson, and sometimes
merely the word “Amherst”(380). What these most suggest is someone practicing his or her autograph for the purpose of providing an autograph.

And so the pull between publication (and the fame she seemed to believe would come with it), and the realization of herself as a poet on her own terms, remained a preoccupation. As she recounted to Higginson, there were the occasional calls from editors who wished to publish her work. She wrote and told him: “Two editors of journals came to my father’s house this winter, and asked me for my mind, and when I asked them ‘why’ they said I was penurious, and they would use it for the world”(405). The “world” that the editors would use it for, however, was not the world that most concerned Dickinson. The ambition in her to go beyond the concerns of this world, to even, perhaps, achieve a fame beyond this world, is but one of the more fascinating aspects of her. The power of this woman, whose life appears so circumscribed, who could say, “I feel the presence of that within me, unseen, yet indescribably mighty, that can comprehend worlds & systems of worlds & yet cannot comprehend itself”(241), is to be wondered at.

Questions about her intent and her feelings regarding publication have persisted since the time Dickinson both sent her poems to Higginson and also turned those two editors away. Her decision struck even those who knew her as inexplicable. As Mrs. Ford wrote to Mabel Todd while Todd was at work on the editing of one of the later posthumous volumes:

I think in spite of her seclusion, she was longing for poetic sympathy and renown, and that some of her later habits of life originated in this suppressed and ungratified
desire of distinction. She wore white, she shut herself away from her race as a mark of her separation from the mass of minds. I only wish the interest and delight her poems have aroused could have come early enough in her career to have kept her social and communicative, and at one with her friends. (Sewall 378)

Her wishes regarding her work are still not entirely clear. Yet, careful study of Dickinson, the temperament that comes through in her poems and her letters, makes it hard not to trust her, whatever her motives might have been. It would be mere conjecture to consider what her reaction might be to her standing in American letters today, but her poems speak of fame as an inevitability.

That same inevitability characterizes Plath's work, where the final poems seem the inevitable outcome of all that went before. As Hughes wrote, "The poetry of Ariel was no surprise to me. It was at last the flight of what we had been trying to get flying for a number of years. But it dawned on me only in the last months which way it wanted to fly" (Hughes WP 165). These poems were produced only when various emotional and psychological factors came to head to free her from any worry concerning publication. Again, Hughes addresses this aspect of Plath's writing:

Nearly all her earlier writings (and definitely all the prose she wrote for publication) suffered from her ambition to see her work published in particular magazines, and from her efforts to produce what the market seemed to require. The impulse to apprentice herself to various masters and to adapt her writing potential to practical, profitable use was almost an instinct with her. She went about it, as these journals show, with a relentless passion, and yet in a
fear of uncertainty and self-doubt. This campaign of willful ideals produced everything in her work that seems artificial. Yet a sympathetic reader of these pages will be able to see that it was perhaps only one aspect—and one of the outermost—of a drive that was moving all the time in quite a different direction. *(LH xiii)*

Plath did, of course, intend her last poems for publication. Her arrangement of *Ariel* was in place, although it was left to Hughes to put the book into its final form. The difference between the earlier work and the *Ariel* poems is exactly what Hughes alights upon: it is a disregard for the market borne out of certainty and self-assurance, those qualities that were lacking in the earlier work. Curiously, self-assurance seems to have been something that Dickinson was never without.

This movement, toward the successful realization of the poet, for Dickinson is an uncommonly bold one. Haughtily, she proclaims her own power: “Rich! ‘Twas Myself – was rich- / To take the name of Gold- / And Gold to own- in solid Bars- / The Difference – made me bold(#454). Outside the poems, Dickinson was equally unrelenting, remarking that “the heart wants what it wants, or else it does not care”(405). This is why it is odd to find a critic who would imagine that Dickinson “possessed power in abundance but she confined it to the speaker of her verse”(Bennett 43), so clearly does her power exhibit itself in all she does. Her originality caused William Dean Howells to welcome Dickinson as a “distinctive addition to the literature of the world” (Benfey MED 40).

Harold Bloom, in his *A Map of Misreading*, admits that his model of the family romance has no place for Dickinson. He concludes his discussion of her work by asking, “What can our map of misreading do to or for her, or does her originality extend
so far that she passes beyond our revisionary model”(184)? She is the only female poet Bloom considers strong enough to be considered in terms of his paradigm. Dickinson’s temperament, her underlying dislike of any institutional control, may have made her ideally suited to subvert Bloom’s paradigm, which would be the surest mark of the strong poet, according to Bloom.

For Plath, there may be a more clear division between the words and their power, and the self. In her poem, “Words,” she writes:

Years later I
Encounter them on the road—

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life. (270)

The words (depicted as a horse in this instance, as poetry will again be in “Ariel”) meet the self. The words are independent of the self: alive and mobile. The life is fixed. Some critics and readers feel that the life was fixed in part by Ted Hughes, and that this relationship obscured her originality. Hughes made her lists of possible topics during her dry spells. Linda Wagner-Martin in her biography of Plath asserts that Hughes’s suggestions inhibited Plath. Wagner-Martin writes, “Because she relied so heavily on lists that Ted made up for her of subjects that he would consider possible writing topics, she was screened off from her own primary interests”(167). Her use of these lists seems minimal at best. We know that “The Moon and the Yew Tree” began as a suggestion of Hughes’s that Plath might write a poem about their Yew tree. But such suggestions do not amount to a writing of Plath’s poems for her.
The line between Plath’s and Hughes’s work is still being obscured by critics. In James Wood’s 1998 review of Hughes’s *Birthday Letters*, he is presumably speaking of Hughes’s work when he states that “this verse is accusatory. The metaphors of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath are threats. They challenge the world not to be like this”(30). And this time, it is Plath’s work that seems to intrude upon Hughes’s. Woods goes on to write, “Poems such as these, by Plath and Hughes, with their luxurious menus of likenesses, in which death is granted a domestic animism, are rarely affecting; and they are often comic, precisely because they seem theoretically limitless” (30). *Birthday Letters* is Hughes’s poetic reckoning with Plath’s suicide; the death addressed in the poems is the same as that Plath addressed, but the poems are wholly his.

Plath is very dramatic in her handling of death, sometimes seeming to write of death as an ambition. As James Fenton writes of the woman in Plath’s poem “Edge”: “The woman in the robe, in the scrolls of her toga, has achieved, at last, her ambition: death for her, death for her children” (“Lady Lazarus” 3). But to see in Plath’s poems the depiction of her own death wish would be a vast simplification. Better to see in them a bid for immortality, if the figure meant is Plath, and in this case immortality for her children as well as herself. As the poet Eavan Boland remarked when discussing her own poetic models: “I love Bishop and Plath, and I feel protective of the discussions of Plath, who I feel has been hugely simplified, never discussed as the surrealist and technician she was” (Olander 6). Such simplifications are often leveled at Bishop as well. A common criticism is that Bishop, though actively writing during the Second World War, never wrote a poem addressing the war. David Kalstone sets the record straight, makes it clear that Bishop was not one to shy away from a topic because
of its difficulty: "Bishop always though of 'Roosters' as, at one level, her 'war poem.'
She carefully dated it 1941 when collecting it in _North & South_" (Kalstone 81).

This points to a tendency, which others have recognized, to read these poets in an overly simplified manner. Some would say that this has specifically to do with their being women. Betsy Erkkila highlighted three instances when a prominent male poet was unable to fully comprehend the power of the female poet they were critiquing:

"Responding to the volume as if it were the body of fifties' womanhood, W. H. Auden misperceived the nature of Rich, just as Thomas Higginson had misperceived Dickinson, and Robert Lowell would misperceive Plath" (WS 156). But when Adrienne Rich reads Dickinson, what she perceives chiefly is her power. Rich says of Dickinson, "Given her vocation she was neither eccentric nor quaint; she was determined to survive, to use her powers, to practice necessary economies" (Erkkila _WS_ 163).

Although the power of the female poet may not be apprehended at first, to have the poem read as if it were the body of womanhood might be preferable to having the poem not read at all. Robert McClure Smith, in his recent _The Seductions of Emily Dickinson_, argues that the Dickinson poem is essentially a tool of seduction. Although his reading brings up arguments about the different ways in which poems might be somehow read differently by male and female readers, it also makes the compelling point that underlying the seduction is the question of power.

If seduction failed, the woman poet was not above violence. In Sylvia Plath's "Stillborn" her poems are compared to pickled fetuses. Plath writes:

> These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.  
> They grew their toes and fingers well enough,  
> Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
If they missed out on walking about like people
It wasn’t for any lack of mother-love.

O I cannot understand what happened to them!
They are proper in shape and number and every part.
They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid!
They smile and smile and smile and smile at me.
And still the lungs won’t fill and the heart won’t start.

They are not pigs, they are not even fish,
Though they have a piggy and a fishy air –
It would be better if they were live, and that’s what they were.
But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her. (142)

The poet has the unyielding eye of the clinician. But the “her” of the poem, their
“mother,” is not spoken of by the poems. This poem on its own serves as an answer to
those who would take Plath’s poetry to be a self-portrait in verse. The power of the
clinician that casts a cold eye on the pickled fetuses turns itself to the violence of the
Holocaust in “Daddy.” Plath writes of “An engine, an engine / Chuffing me off like a
Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen. / I began to talk like a Jew. / I think I may
well be a Jew”(223). Even speaking as a victim of the Holocaust (albeit a metaphorical,
very much alive, victim of a tragedy that to some extent has effected every person with
any knowledge of its horror), Plath speaks at a remove from the violence, and the
violence she portrays, it should be noted, is essentially manmade, as opposed to the
natural, or God-sent, violence that figures prominently in Emily Dickinson’s poems.

Dickinson does not assume the distance that Plath does from her poems. Instead,
her identity as writer tends to meld with them. In this letter to Higginson she
continuously says “I” when she is speaking of the poems:
Perhaps you smile at me. I could not stop for that. My business is circumference. An ignorance, not of customs, but if caught with the dawn, or the sunset see me, myself the only kangaroo among the beauty, sir, if you please, it afflicts me, and I thought that instruction would take it away.

Because you have much business, beside the growth of me, you will appoint, yourself, how often I shall come without your inconvenience. (412)

She doesn't underestimate her power, even though it might appear ridiculous to some, like the “kangaroo among the beauty.” In poem #530 it is compared to a flood, and one cannot help but thing of all those poems found by Lavinia Dickinson in Emily Dickinson's bureau. Sometimes, apparently, you can fold a flood and put it in a drawer, although #530 seems to express an opposing view. Dickinson wrote there, “You cannot fold a Flood- / And put it in a Drawer”(lines 5-6), and though you might attempt to control a flood in this way, it will eventually assert itself.

Adrienne Rich borrowed the title, “Vesuvius at Home,” from poem #1705, for her seminal essay on Dickinson. Like poems #530 and #540 (“I took my Power in my Hand -- / And went against the world”), poem #1705 puts the poet in control of the violence of the natural world. Dickinson’s geography in this case oddly calls to mind Elizabeth Bishop’s Geography III; in both cases the terrain is a construct of the poet.

As Dickinson says:

Volcanoes be in Sicily
And South America
I judge from my Geography –
Volcanoes nearer here
A Lava step at any time
Am I inclined to climb-
A Crater I may contemplate
Vesuvius at Home.
Mark Dickinson’s forceful voice: “I judge from my Geography” (emphasis added). Mark too the attitude inherent in her choice of words like “inclined” and “may contemplate,” which leave the impression that the volcanoes exist only when and if she turns her eye to them.

In a letter to Higginson Dickinson explained her view of the dangers of the woods, formed, she says, when she was still a little girl: “When much in the woods, as a little girl, I was told that the snake would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or goblins kidnap me; but I went alone and met no one but angels, who were far shyer of me than I could be of them, so I haven’t that confidence in fraud which many exercise”(415). Although snakes and poisonous flora are not phantasms, they are largely discounted as if they were.

Fear seems to her a foreign concept, equated with deception. Yet again Dickinson illustrates how absolutely at home she is in the world. Violence, like grief, is a welcome part of that world, chiefly because it is, as she writes of agony in another poem, “true.” In fact, violence is the chief criterion she makes in her famous definition of poetry: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can ever warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Is there any other way?”(473).

As other critics have noted, violence is a primary characteristic of Sylvia Plath’s poetry. In the poem “Kindness” the speaker seems to scoff at the assumption that

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7 See, for instance, Margaret Dickie Uroff for a reading of the violence of Plath’s poetry, which she also sees as an important characteristic of Ted Hughes’ work. It should be noted that this same emphasis does not serve to single out Hughes as the perpetrator of the violence in Plath’s writing, as is somewhat suggested by Jacqueline Rose’s biography of Plath.
would mask poetry as something other than violent, such as the kindness of the title. She writes, “And here you come, with a cup of tea / Wreathed in steam. / The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it. / You hand me two children, two roses”(270). And the truth of the poem seems to lie somewhere more complex still, because the ugliness of the “blood jet” is welcomed too, as all that can be turned into poetry is welcomed as a kindness, as, indeed, a blessing. But to say that the poem is less harsh and actual than blood the speaker of the poem would consider a lie.

In her short story, “Stone Boy with Dolphin,” Plath’s narrator voices this wish: “Let something happen. Something terrible, something bloody. Something to end this endless flaking snowdrift of airmail letters, of blank pages turning in library books. How we go waste, how we go squandering ourselves on air. Let me walk into Phedre and put on that red cloak of doom. Let me leave my mark”(Plath JP 175). One can see that violence, tragedy, and blood all seem requisite ingredients to just one end—that the life leave its mark. As Bennett says of this gradual movement in Plath’s work:

One can compare what was really going on in her to a process of alchemy. Her apprentice writings were like impurities thrown off from the various stages of the inner transformation, by-products of the internal work. One really can use these terms in her case. In spite of the care she devoted to each thing she wrote, as soon as it was well finished, she cast it behind her with something like contempt, sometimes with rage. (155)

Inextricably, this violence and rage are related to the casting off of the old self, not only the old work, as Bennett points out. The old self is not as powerful as the poet, and the new poetic self is, the poet would like to believe, immortal.
Dickinson’s “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” is one of her more violent and least understood poems. The poem (#754) is reproduced here in its entirety:

My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun-
In Corners – till a Day
The Owner passed – identified –
And carried Me away–

And now We roam in Sovereign Woods –
And now We hunt the Doe –
And every time I speak for Him –
The Mountains straight reply –

And do I smile, such cordial light
Upon the Valley glow –
It is as a Vesuvian face
Had let its pleasure through–

And when at Night – Our good Day done –
I guard My Master’s Head –

’Tis better than the Eider – Duck’s
Deep Pillow – to have shared –

To foe of His – I’m deadly foe –
None stir the second time –
On whom I lay a Yellow Eye –
Or an emphatic Thumb–

Though I than He – may longer live -
He longer must – than I –
For I have but the power to kill,
Without – the power to die –

Read sometimes as feminist statement, other times as love poem, either secular or religious, it might be better understood as a declaration of poetic intent and a paean to poetic power. In the first line the loaded gun is identified as her life. The owner of that life is not the speaker, but some other who recognizes her. In the second stanza the
owner and she roam together, and where they roam is an exalted type of wood. Curiously, they hunt the doe together. As William Faulkner wrote, it is wrong to kill a doe. And this line in particular has excited some controversy. Perhaps the female the two of them hunt is the poet. Her master and she are out looking, in the words of the cliché, for her self. The “Him” of line 7 is again the owner. She, the loaded gun, “speaks” for the owner, and the natural world attends to her sound. Her sound is, of course, as mighty as a shotgun blast, and in the daylight it casts its light upon the valley, and the fire is “Vesuvian,” which brings to mind other of Dickinson’s lyrics. Eventually, however, their “good” day is done. The night holds other pleasures. Dickinson always did draw a distinction between the duties of the day and the pleasures to be had at night, in those activities that she largely hid. At night, the poet says, she guards her “Master’s head” and it is a supreme luxury to couch with him. It is better than rest.

The penultimate stanza contains the poem’s threat. Her master’s enemy is her own as well, and to that enemy she claims to be deadly. With her eye or her hand she can freeze that enemy. As she says, “None stir the second time.” The final stanza of the poem is very difficult to unravel. It reads: “Though I than He – may longer live - / He longer must – than I – / For I have but the power to kill, / Without – the power to die.” If one accepts the premise that poetry is her master, a fitting paraphrase would be: I may outlive my poetic gift, but I pray it isn’t so, I have the power now to arrest the world with my speech (to kill), but I haven’t the power to die. And to live without the gift, as most poets would agree, is not to live at all. It is the poem that does not have
“the power to die,” a testament to Dickinson’s belief in the immortality of the word. But the poetic “gun” does have the power to kill others.

In the Dickinson canon there are many poems that offer supporting evidence to this reading. In poem #358, for example, Dickinson writes, “When the Ball enters, enters Silence— / Dying—annuls the power to kill.” These lines are a bit clearer than the final stanza of “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun.” Still, the conceit is the same. The ball is death. Death equals silence. Therefore, the adverse is that life equals speech. Since death deprives one of the ability to speak, and it also “annuls the power to kill,” death is also the end of speech, and for as long as one is speaking, one can be assured of life. As she writes elsewhere, “A Word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die” (#1651). In her correspondence Dickinson returns to this metaphor even more explicitly. She says of letters that “an earnest letter is or should be life-warrant or death-warrant, for what is each instant but a gun, harmless because ‘unloaded,’ but that touched ‘goes off?’” (670).

Adrienne Rich comes very close to this reading of the poem when she writes that “My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun” is “a poem about possession by the daemon, about the dangers and risks of such possession if you are a woman, about the knowledge that power in a woman can seem destructive, and that you cannot live without the daemon once it has possessed you . . . . But this woman poet also perceives herself as a lethal weapon” (Benfey Lives 87). But it is poetry that is the gun, and poetry that is the life. The woman is the doe, and only through the power that Dickinson possesses (the gun) and through the muse (the owner), can the doe be completely apprehended. It is
not death sought for the doe; that will come anyway. What is needed is the eternal life that can be given, what is finally the power not to die. And this was sought from early childhood by Dickinson, by Bishop, and by Plath.
II

"I revere holy ones"

The words above come from a letter of Emily Dickinson's in which she apologizes for having taken women too lightly. They help to underscore her attitude to the subject of gender, an attitude largely shared by Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath as well. When Dickinson addresses the "woman question," she differentiates between the great mass of women, and these other, "holy ones." To be merely a woman was not worthy of distinction, but to be an exceptional woman was quite another matter. While Dickinson doesn't specifically classify herself, there is little question which group drew her. And the exceptional, in this case perhaps the immortal poets, is a class whose members might be male or female. That Dickinson felt a greater sense of belonging among these than with the entirety of women is not surprising.

Like Dickinson, Plath identified most with the women she felt were set apart somehow, usually by their talent. As for the common lot of women, this was something she felt she had to overcome. As Plath wrote in her journals: "I must move myself first, before I move others—a woman famous among women" (259). Plath relentlessly compares herself to other writers. She looks to Virginia Woolf, for one, and sees in her a professional and a personal model:

And just now I pick up the blessed diary of Virginia Woolf which I bought with a battery of her novels Saturday with Ted. And she works off her depression over rejections from Harper's (no less! —and I can hardly believe that the Big Ones get rejected, too!) by cleaning out the kitchen. And cooks haddock & sausage. Bless her. I feel my life linked to her, somehow. I love her— from reading Mrs. Dalloway for Mr. Crockett—and I can still hear Elizabeth Drew's voice sending a shiver down
my back in the huge Smith classroom, reading from To the Lighthouse. But her suicide, I felt I was reduplicating in that black summer of 1953. Only I couldn't drown. I suppose I'll always be overvulnerable, slightly paranoid. But I'm also so damn healthy & resilient. And apple-pie happy. Only I've got to write. (Journals 152)

But Plath also finds in being a woman certain liabilities that she must strive to overcome. As a writer, she is concerned that being female will limit her. As she writes here, "Since my woman's world is perceived greatly through the emotions and the senses, I treat it that way in my writing and am often over-weighted with heavy descriptive passages and a kaleidoscope of similes" (Journals 32). In her personal life, what she perceived as the limitations of being female bothered her even more. She felt, for instance, that the threat of pregnancy and the fear of a tarnished reputation kept her from fully exploring her sexuality, leading her to write in her journal that "being born a woman [was her] awful tragedy" (Bennett 119).

There are widely differing views on the availability of female models for the woman poet. Nevertheless, a tradition does exist, and Dickinson laid claim to it from the start. What seems obvious, and what tends to go unstated, is that in her tradition—and this is equally true for Bishop and Plath—are writers of both genders. As Cody comments of the quotation which opens this chapter, "One cannot escape the conclusion

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1 Adrienne Rich, who was a contemporary of Sylvia Plath, remarked that when she went "looking for a clear female tradition; the tradition [she] was discovering was diffuse, elusive, often cryptic" (Blood, Bread and Poetry 152). This might be further complicated by public attitudes resembling Edgar Allan Poe's, who said that "A woman and her book are identical" (Richards 4). At this time, there is a very definite poetic tradition in this country, and women writers may look back to Anne Bradstreet and Phyllis Wheatley for distant poetic models, and all about them for flourishing contemporary writers. But it is almost certainly a mistake, not entirely unlike that made by Poe, to limit the tradition one looks to by gender.
that it was partly because they were admirable women that Emily almost worshipped them. ‘I am sorry I smiled at women. Indeed, I revere holy ones,’ she once said, thereby expressing her contempt for all women except these remote exceptions”(97).

Dickinson’s “holy ones” were other writers. Above her desk hung portraits of two who were most important to her, Elizabeth Barrett Browning and George Eliot.2

Wagner-Martin does a good job of pointing out Plath’s female models, but she does Plath an injustice by leaving out her rivalries, equally as strong, with male poets.

Wagner-Martin says that Plath

was feminist, in a broad sense of the term: she never undervalued herself or her work. She insisted that she be recognized as the talented writer she was even while her children were infants and she was spending more time as a mother and a wife than as a writer. She sought out women as friends and mentors and long admired the writing of Virginia Woolf, Marianne Moore, Stevie Smith, Elizabeth Bishop, and Anne Sexton. Yet, product of the American fifties that she was, Plath knew that, because she was a woman writer, her work would be judged by standards different from those used to judge the work of male writers. (11-12)

This simply isn’t true. Plath went head-to-head with every writer she came up against, including her husband. Bennett contrasts her with Emily Dickinson, saying that Plath, “Unlike Emily Dickinson, . . . would base her mature sense of self on being like, rather than different from, other women”(Bennett 134). This is not entirely the case. Plath was, always, driven to be exemplary. She wanted to excel as a wife, as a mother, and as a poet.

2 This underscores the point that the poet needn’t look only to other poets for a tradition or an inspiration. The three poets discussed here had great esteem, at times bordering on reverence, for certain prose writers. Bishop and Plath were considerable prose writers themselves. Dickinson, too, judging by her letters.
For all of Dickinson's affinities and close female friendships, Dickinson was set
apart from all but the most exceptional of women by her ambition. Nevertheless, a
great deal has been made of Dickinson's letters to her woman friends, and what some
would read as the sexuality inherent in those letters. But the rhetoric of her letters is not
unlike that of other nineteenth century correspondence between women, and the
physical affection alluded to within them seems to have been the norm, and not the
exception. For that reason, Adrienne Rich is right to regard skeptically critics who
would read Dickinson for signs of lesbianism. In Rich's "Vesuvius at Home" she casts
aside rumors of Dickinson's lesbianism by explaining the concept of feminine
friendship as it existed in nineteenth century America: "None of this was condemned as
'lesbianism.' We will understand Emily Dickinson better, read her poetry more
perceptively, when the Freudian imputation of scandal and aberrance in women's love
for women has been supplanted by a more informed, less misogynistic attitude toward
women's experiences with each other"(102). But Rich errs in thinking we will read
Dickinson more clearly with an understanding of female friendships. Rather, these
friendships seemed to have affected the poetry very minimally.

Still, even so astute a critic as Ted Hughes was not beyond looking to femininity
as a way of explaining the poetry produced by Sylvia Plath. Here he speaks of Plath's
determination in her writing of Ariel: "It may have something to do with the fact that
she was a woman. Maybe her singularity derives from a feminine bee-line instinct for
the real priority, for what truly matters -- an instinct for nursing and repairing the
damaged and threatened nucleus of the self and for starving every other aspect of her
life in order to feed and strengthen that, and bring that to a safe delivery" (WP 179). It
is almost as if the feminine is a straw to be grasped at when other explanations fail.
As Jean Gould points out in *American Women Poets: Pioneers of Modern Poetry,* Dickinson’s most persistent supporter was a woman (4). One of Helen Hunt Jackson’s letters to Dickinson contains one of the more astute appraisals of her work.

Jackson wrote to Dickinson,

> I hope some day, somewhere I shall find you in a spot where we can know each other. I wish very much that you would write to me now and then, when it did not bore you. I have a little manuscript volume with a few of your verses in it — and I read them very often - You are a great poet - and it is a wrong to the day you live in, that you will not sing aloud. When you are what men call dead, you will be sorry you were so stingy. (Sewall 580)

Jackson’s admiration of Dickinson is not unlike Dickinson’s admiration for the writers she perceived as great. Dickinson requested of friends traveling abroad that “should anybody, where you go, talk of Mrs. Browning, you must hear for us, and if you touch her grave, put one hand on the head, for me — her unmentioned mourner”(410). She made a similar request of Samuel Bowles, that when in England he should touch Shakespeare for her.3

Plath didn’t leave evidence of such a pilgrimage to Dickinson’s grave, but it is hard to imagine that during her undergraduate years at Smith she never visited Dickinson’s home or burial site (approximately five miles down the road from Smith College). Or that she and Hughes didn’t take advantage of their proximity during the year Plath was teaching at Smith, while Hughes was teaching at the University of  

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3 Now it is Dickinson’s grave that draws such pilgrims to Amherst. In the small cemetery there, hidden by dress shops and the Mobil station, Dickinson’s small stone is easily found among the others. Hers is partially obscured by flowers, coins, and sometimes, poems.
Massachusetts in Amherst. Plath was, while in college, duplicating the Dickinson style as an exercise at times. As she writes in *Letters Home* of a poem she is sending to her mother, “Any resemblance to Emily Dickinson is purely intentional” (110). The poem is a curious mix of Dickinson and Auden, whom Plath called her “god” at the time.

Hughes, for his part, easily refers to Dickinson in his criticism, at times making explicit comparisons between her and Plath. He notes, for example, that both Dickinson and Plath “had a huge capacity for loving” (*WP* 174). And it is well known that Plath liked to make pilgrimages to the homes of other writers. Her journals record a pilgrimage that she and Hughes made to the Brontes (148). And then, as further evidence of the esteem she and Hughes must have felt for Dickinson, Plath wrote to her mother that they planned to name their second child, if a girl, Megan Emily. The Emily was to be for Dickinson and Bronte, and also in memory of Plath’s father, whose name was Emil (407).

There is ample evidence of the competitiveness Sylvia Plath felt with other women poets. Her notable assessment of her place in the poetic landscape remains amusing and accurate:

> I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America (as Ted will be The Poet of England and her dominions). Who rivals? Well, in history Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell, Emily Dickinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay—all dead. Now: Edith Sitwell and Marianne Moore, the aging giantesses, and poetic godmother Phyllis McGinley is out—light verse: she’s sold herself. Rather: May Swenson, Isabella Gardner, and most close,

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4 Their second child was a boy, named Nicholas Farrar Hughes. As for other curious issues of naming, Plath and Bishop both had cats named Sappho. Elizabeth Bishop named one of her “three loved houses” *Casa Mariana*, in homage to Marianne Moore.
Adrienne Cecile Rich—who will soon be eclipsed by these eight poems. (Journals 211)

Plath was unflinching in her estimation of the failings of other women poets, and determined to avoid them. In this letter home she tells her mother, “Ted says he never read poems by woman like mine; they are strong and full and rich—not quailing and whining like Teasdale or simple lyrics like Millay” (LH 244). Instead of experiencing her more “womanly” traits as poetic failings, she is determined to turn them into assets:

I shall be one of the few women poets in the world who is fully a rejoicing woman, not a bitter or frustrated or warped man-imitator, which ruins most of them in the end. I am a woman and glad of it and my songs will be of fertility of the earth and the people in it through waste sorrow and death. I shall be a woman singer, and Ted and I shall make a fine life together. This year of work and discipline away from each other will probably be the hardest ever, but we can both be ascetics while we are working for something as magnificent as our whole creative lives; we plan to live for at least a hundred years. (LH 256)

Unlike Elizabeth Bishop, Plath was proud to be reckoned among the best of the women poets. As James Fenton notes, however, this is not where her ambition ended. Plath was very methodical in her ambition. Being the primary woman poet was something she wanted, but as a progression toward being the most prominent poet altogether.

Linda Wagner-Martin’s view of the relationship between Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton is far too simplistic and overlooks Plath’s overriding ambition. Wagner-Martin writes that when “Houghton Mifflin... accepted Sexton’s first poem collection, To Bedlam and Part Way Back, Sylvia took pride in her friend’s success, but she wanted it for herself as well” (160). In fact, one would be hard-pressed to find Plath rejoicing
over anyone’s success. Plath did badly want her own publishing contract; she reckoned Sexton’s had a great deal to do with Sexton’s extramarital relationship with George Starbuck. The three of them had been cronies while attending Robert Lowell’s creative writing class at Harvard, drinking martinis together at the hotel bar across the street from the classroom (Journals 189). To say, as Wagner-Martin does, that “Sexton was already aware of her special province as a woman poet, and in that respect, she influenced Sylvia as no male poet could” (159), is patently wrong. Plath’s assessment of other poets is uncannily fair, if running toward the negative. She had words for any number of poets more favorable than those she had for Anne Sexton. Here, for instance, are her early thoughts on Elizabeth Bishop. She records in her journals that she is “reading Elizabeth Bishop with great admiration. Her fine originality, always surprising, never rigid, flowing, juicier than Marianne Moore, who is her godmother” (319).

The greatest difficulty encountered by these women, as women, is in the perceptions of others. It exists in the belief, as Aliki Barnstone says, that “women poets . . . have known very well that they are women poets” (xvi), and in the attitude displayed here by Theodore Roethke, as he enumerates the failings of the woman poet:

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5 James Fenton’s articles from “The New York Review of Books” are a good survey of my poets’ attitudes toward their predecessors. Fenton remarks that Alvarez called Plath the most gifted woman poet of her day. He then goes on to write, “If he had said such a thing about Bishop, it would have ruined her day, but he had told Plath as much to her face, and it made hers. Neither Moore nor Bishop seems to have traced her ancestry back through a line of women poets. Bishop only began taking an interest in Dickinson in the 1950s, when Thomas H. Johnson’s edition appeared, and even then, after she had decided that Dickinson was “about the best we have,” she could add, in a letter to Lowell, “she does set one’s teeth on edge a lot of the time, don’t you think?” (12).
Two of the . . . charges . . . are lack of range—in subject matter, in emotional tone—and lack of a sense of humor. And one could, in individual instances among writers of real talent, add other aesthetic and moral shortcomings: the spinning out; the embroidering of trivial themes; a concern with the mere surfaces of life—that special province of the feminine talent in prose—hiding from the real agonies of the spirit; refusing to face up to what existence is; lyric or religious posturing; running between the boudoir and the altar; stamping a tiny foot against God or lapsing into a sententiousness that implies the author has re-invented integrity; carrying on excessively about Fate, about time; lamenting the lot of the woman; caterwauling; writing the same poem about fifty times, and so on. (Roethke xvii)

Evidence of the lack of understanding of the woman poet might also be found in statements such as this one Lowell made in reference to Plath, that the great woman poet is "hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another "poetess"" (Bennett Shakespeare's Sisters 6). One could attribute this to their being male, or on their belonging to another generation, but what can one say about the contemporary female critics like Paula Bennett, who writes,

Lacking the male poet's long-established tradition of self-exploration and self-validation, women poets in our culture have been torn between restrictive definitions of what a woman is and their own fears of being or seeming unwomanly. As a result, they have been unable to allow the full truth of their experience to empower their speaking voice. Without predecessors to whom they might appeal or upon whom they might model themselves, they have either fit into the existing masculinist tradition, or they have worked within a subcultural tradition of their own— the literature of the 'poetess.' In either case, they have inevitably been led to dissociate the concept of creative power from their

6 I am reminded of Dickinson's poem #376, which begins, "Of Course—I prayed- / And did God Care? / He cared as much as on the Air / A Bird — had stamped her foot / And cried 'Give Me'."

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woman selves. Though often possessed, as in Bishop’s case, of extraordinary gifts, they have rarely felt these gifts as inherently theirs. (4)

Elizabeth Bishop has been particularly singled out for this type of criticism. Although Bishop was painfully shy socially, she was not particularly shy in her verse. Poetry writing requires a strong ego. Yet one finds Betsy Erkkila stating that “Bishop experienced her temperamental shyness and reticence as gender limitations--and social constructs--she would have to struggle against as she moved toward the assertion of a historically specific, gendered, and lesbian ‘I’” (Erkkila 120). Although Bishop did remark that she might have gotten more done had she been a man, she was speaking more to what she would have been capable of had she been someone else, a fantasy she often indulged in. This was a matter of temperament more than anything else. She also wondered if she might have written more and better poems if she had belonged to a historically significant family like Robert Lowell’s, but this speculation gets less attention than the instance when she wondered about how another gender might have served the poetry.

Erkkila also states that although “‘Bishop was personally and erotically drawn to other women . . . she never translated her sexual preference into any saving narrative of feminine or feminist transformation”(120). But Erkkila does not say why Bishop should do such a thing, or provide any justification as to why a reader should feel comfortable faulting a poet for not being the poet the reader might have wished for. Bishop held very clear ideas of what sort of poet she wished to be. In fact, Bishop would bridle at being classified as a woman poet at all. Following the lead of Marianne Moore, she refused to be anthologized as a woman. As she wrote to Lowell: “I’d rather be called

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‘the 16th poet’ with no reference to my sex, than one of 4 women—even if the other 3 are pretty good”(Laskin 363). I think Dickinson, Bishop, and Plath might agree with Eudora Welty on the subject: “All that talk of women’s lib doesn’t apply at all to women writers. We’ve always been able to do what we’ve wished”(Laskin 210). But critics persist in reading them first as women; as Gilbert and Gubar familiarly use the term ‘sisterhood,’ and characterize the twentieth century as one in which “women poets read each other’s work with sisterly enthusiasm”(xxv). And elsewhere, Erkkila writes that “recent feminist representations of women’s literary history have tended to romanticize, maternalize, essentialize, and eternalize women writers and the relationships among them in ways that have worked to reconstitute the very gender stereotypes and polarities that have been historically the ground of women’s oppression”(3).

Bishop herself would say, when asked about young women poets, “I never made any distinction; I never make any distinction”(Erkkila 101). Alicia Ostriker in Writing Like a Woman concurs with Bishop, asserting that to make any such distinctions between poets is “foolish”(4). Still Ostriker does make some generalizations about what she sees as the tendencies of women poets, writing that “we may have a general sense that women poets are more likely than men, at the present time, to write in detail about their bodies, to take power relationships as a theme, to want to speak with a strong rather than a subdued voice; are less likely to seek distance, more likely to seek intimacy, in poetic tone”(4). This seems unfair. As she goes on to explain, “‘Woman poet,’ like ‘American poet’ or ‘French poet’ or ‘Russian poet,’ allows—even insists on—diversity, while implying something valuable in common, some shared language and
life, of tremendous importance to the poet and the poet's readers" (4). While the poets discussed here do share some commonalities, and their readers find shared experiences within their pages as well, it cannot be insisted that any woman poet shares any particular experience with any other, except for the great deal which they share by virtue of their being poets.

And this is certainly not limited to being a female poet. None of my subjects would relegate herself to some "ladies' parlor" of letters. And so it is understandable that Emily Dickinson asked one of her correspondents that they "fight with [her] like a man" (127), freely expressing her ability to do so as well. For Bishop and Plath their fierce competitiveness towards all men, which is particularly well-documented in their closest relationships, those with Robert Lowell and Ted Hughes respectively, is evidence that they did not feel unable to compete with regard to gender. If they felt hampered at all, it was by the societal constraints that made them feel at times unable to experience life in all of its aspects without inhibition. Plath felt a certain amount of jealousy toward what she perceived as male freedom. She wrote in her journals, "I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life -- his career, and his sexual and family life" (35). And for Elizabeth Bishop, there was that famous remark that if she had been a man she might have "done more."

Germaine Greer would blame any difficulty women poets have with the male of the species on their own perception of male power. As Greer says:

In large measure it is women who have deified the poet; it was women who fainted when Byron came into a room, who looked for signs of superhumanity in the brow of Wordsworth and grieved over the world-woe engraved in
Annette Kolodny sees in this the need for women to cast off the male model. She says that “a woman need not (to use Bloom’s phrase) creatively rewrite the father/precursors. Instead she must refuse that heritage altogether, and with it the dialectic that is for Bloom the history of poetic influence”(118). Kolodny then goes on to use Anne Bradstreet as an early example of this. This casting off might be characterized by a violent anger, as in Plath’s case, where the separation from her husband acts as a spur to her poetry. Plath wrote, “When I was ‘happy’ domestically I felt a gag in my throat. Now that my domestic life, until I get a permanent live-in girl, is chaos, I am living like a Spartan, writing through huge fevers and producing free stuff I had locked in me for years. I feel astounded and very lucky. I kept telling myself I was the sort that could only write when peaceful at heart, but that is not so, the muse has come to live here, now Ted has gone”(Malcolm 61). A poem like “The Applicant” is wrought with anger at the dynamic of the marriage contract:

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.  

(222)

But then, Bishop creates a similar meaning in “Varick Street” where there is no clear traditional marital relationship implied, though the sexual relationship is. The poem’s
narrator repeats, "And I will sell you, dear, sell you, and you shall sell me." And the
love relationship is reduced to a mechanical transaction.

Erica Jong pinpoints one possible cause of the woman poet's anger. Jong writes,

We must remember that in the nineteenth century women writers were denigrated for their delicacy, their excessive propriety (which supposedly precluded greatness), while in the past decade or so they have been condemned by male critics for their impropriety which also supposedly precludes greatness. The whole issue is a red herring. Whatever women writers do or do not do precludes greatness (in the mind of the chauvinist) simply because they are women. We must see this sort of reasoning for what it is: namely, misogyny. (172)

Gordon and Sternburg summarize the woman poet's position in the following scenario:

"Let us pretend [there] are two men, two famous poets, saying, 'Your experience is an embarrassment; your experience is insignificant'"(28), and that this occurs no matter what the experience is. It would not come as a surprise to find the woman poet angry at a tradition that she felt neglectful to her experience, even if she also admired the poetry that tradition had produced. The woman poet's reaction seems to be just the kind of rebellion that Bloom would mark as necessary to any strong poet, a usurping of the tradition that the poet will, at the same time, revere.

Dickinson, at age twenty, held views about marriage that could be termed rebellious, views that were contrary to those held by many of her peers. She wrote to Susan, her future sister-in-law, saying,

How dull our lives must seem to the bride and the plighted maiden, -- whose days are fed with gold and who gather pearls of evening, -- but to the wife, Susie, --
sometimes the wife forgotten, -- our lives perhaps seem
dearer than all others in the world. You have seen flowers
at morning satisfied with dew, and these same sweet
blossoms at noon with their heads bowed in anguish
before the mighty sun... It does so rend me, the thought
of it, -- when it comes, that I tremble lest at some time I
too am yielded up. (210)

A century later, one finds a poet like Adrienne Rich struggling with much the same
questions. As Rich wrote about these rending divisions:

The choice still seemed to be between 'love' -- womanly,
maternal love, altruistic love-- a love defined and ruled by
the weight of an entire culture; and egotism-- a force
directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, and
often at the expense of others, but justifiably so. For
weren't they men, and wasn't that their destiny as
womanly love was ours. I know now that the alternatives
are false ones. (Erkkila WS 168)

In the last chapter I spoke of the poet using the persona or voice of the child as a
defense against the fact of mortality. Another tactic that can be employed, this time in
denial of gender constraints, is to take on the persona of the other gender. Emily
Dickinson left a handful of poems where the gender of the speaker seems to have been
changed, like #494 where the "Going to Him" is changed to "Going-to-Her." While
this has fueled speculation about Dickinson's sexual preferences, it mostly suggests a
comfort in re-ordering the poems, changing speaker perhaps to fit the sound, to obscure
biographical truths, or to further a goal known only to the poet herself. Or perhaps, she
enjoyed such ambiguities, as when she charmingly remarked of her young nephew,
Ned: "Ned tells that the clock purrs and the kitten ticks. He inherits his Uncle Emily's
ardor for the lie"(449).
And there are the several poems in which she depicts herself as male, as she does in #1487:

The Saviour must have been
A docile Gentleman-
To come so far so cold a Day
For little Fellowmen –

The Road to Bethlehem
Since He and I were Boys
Was leveled, but for that 'twould be
A rugged billion Miles –

(627)

As she wrote to her cousins Louise and Frances Norcross, telling of once when her father admonished her for reading: “Father detecting me, advised wiser employment, and read at devotions the chapter of the gentleman with one talent. I think he thought my conscience would adjust the gender”(427). And her conscience, as one sees, had no trouble making such adjustments.

Elizabeth Bishop also exhibited this ability to adjust for gender. Millier reports, “As a high school writer, Elizabeth had invented a semi autobiographical character named Lucius, a small boy living in Nova Scotia”(6). As Miller says, “Imagination also allowed little Elizabeth, in the absence of real knowledge of her situation, to make up versions of her life in which she was self-sufficient and self-determining and almost always a little boy”(Millier 18). Again, one recalls what she said about how she felt a man might have accomplished more as a writer. As David Kalstone wrote: “Bishop liked to represent herself as wayward to other poets, especially men”(Laskin 306). She assumed poses not unlike the one Dickinson did in her correspondence with Higginson.
When the speaker in Bishop's poems is male, the male character resembles Bishop herself, but is also a concealment of herself. In "Crusoe in England," Robinson Crusoe is the speaker of the poem. His words, however, seem an echo of what Bishop's might be: "They named it. My poor old island's still / un-rediscovered, un-renameable. / None of the books has ever got it right" (164). The poem is like a dream Bishop had, that she would have to catalog an endless series of places (fifty-two islands in this case, for fifty-two weeks in the year): "Well, I had fifty-two / miserable, small volcanoes I could climb / with a few slithery strides – / volcanoes dead as ash heaps" (164). Crusoe is obsessed with the geography of his lost place:

I'd have
nightmares of other islands
stretching away from mine, infinities
of islands, islands spawning islands,
like frog's eggs turning into polliwogs
of islands, knowing that I had to live
on each and every one, eventually,
for ages, registering their flora,
their fauna, their geography.

(165)

His obsession echoes Bishop's preoccupation with geography; Crusoe is a stand-in for Bishop herself.

Having a male speaker whom shares her attitudes or her biography is not unusual in Bishop's work. I have stated that Dickinson, Bishop, and Plath each used the mirror as metaphor. What is curious about Bishop's "To Be Written on the Mirror in Whitewash" is that the reflection found in the glass is a male one, and the gender of the speaker is left unclear. Here, Bishop confounds gender questions when she writes:

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I live only here, between your eyes and you,
But I live in your world. What do I do?
Collect no interest — otherwise what I can;
Above all I am not that staring man.

(205)

Who is the staring man? It seems to be the second to Bishop, either reflection or the
reality, with her on the other side (but which side?) of the glass. And what does the
poet gain by at time seeing her self as male? I suspect that the ability to move between
genders within the work signals a willingness to assume other voices and perhaps also
signals a lack of feeling that one is inhibited by gender.

There seems little question that these poets were actively competitive with their
male counterparts. Dickinson did not dispute the attribution of her “Success is Counted
Sweetest” to Emerson, but neither did she record feeling flattered by it. Plath expressed
dismay when George Starbuck won the Yale Younger Poets’ Competition over her own
submission. She wrote in her journal that she had “found out yesterday, George
Starbuck won the Yale . . . I had inured myself to a better book than mine, but this
seemed a rank travesty” (308). And Bishop always felt herself to be in competition
with Robert Lowell, according to those who knew them. “She thought of him as the
poet to measure herself against,” according to Frank Bidart, who know them both well.
‘The comparison always existed in her mind” (Laskin 307).

There is ample evidence of the depth of the friendship between Bishop and
Lowell, as there is of their rivalry. As Laskin wrote of Bishop,

She turns Lowell’s success—his breakthrough in Life
Studies, his stature in the literary world, his family’s
stature in American history—into a personal reproach. His
greatness diminishes her. His wealth impoverishes her. His assurance and seriousness make her painfully conscious of her own timidity, frivolousness, and insignificance. (298)

But, of course, this competition went both ways, for “both mentioned in letters their habit of addressing the other mentally, conducting silent imaginary conversations with the other, composing interior letters that were never written down” (Laskin 398). And so their habit of addressing one another in their poems.

And it would certainly be a mistake to think that Dickinson, Bishop, and Plath were not competitive with other women. While Helen Hunt Jackson was one of Dickinson’s most fervent supporters, as Betsy Erkkila points out, her remark to Dickinson, “‘I am inclined to envy, and perhaps hate you,’ also suggest[s] the competitive spirit that animated their relationship and inspired Dickinson to write not one but two poems”(94).

Bishop, for her part, was nurtured perhaps by no one so much as Marianne Moore, but their relationship, too, was marked by a streak of competitiveness. Bishop’s opinion of Dickinson was changeable. In 1977, Leslie Hanscom said that Bishop had

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7 Richard Sewall makes this point in his biography of Dickinson. Nineteenth century American verse was populated with women writers, not maintaining any semblance of sisterhood, but engaged in open competition with one another. Sewall writes, “The would-be poetesses (the vogue was notably female) were frankly imitative, which meant, we can assume, competitive. A theme or subject would go the rounds – frustrated love, early death, the seasons, the ‘little things’ in nature – and the point would be to see who could do it best. There seems a hint of this in Emily’s attitude when she said of Mrs. Spofford’s ‘the Amber Gods’: ‘It is the only thing I ever read in my life that I didn’t think I could have imagined myself!’ There surely is a suggestion of competitiveness when she sent Higginson her redaction of his ‘Decoration’, or in her refusal to embarrass Wordsworth about his ‘Light that never was, on sea or land’: ‘Myself could arrest it but we’ll not chagrin Him’”(Sewall 673).
"mixed feelings about Emily Dickinson—not the courageous eccentric who doggedly wrote poetry too original for its time without hope of seeing it published, but the chronic complainer in verse. ‘I am not attracted,’ she said, ‘by the oh-the-agony-of-it school!’" (Monteiro 71). Her 1956 remarks to Robert Lowell seem more representative of her feelings. She wrote to him, "Did I really make snide remarks about Emily Dickinson? I like, or at least admire, her a great deal more now—probably because of that good new edition, really. I spent another stretch absorbed in that, and think . . . that she’s about the best we have" (333).

Plath’s competitiveness with other women was obvious. As Wagner-Martin wrote, "For an undergraduate, Plath was being published in amazing places. The only other young woman poet in the country who was achieving more notice in 1955 was Adrienne Rich, already a winner of the Yale Younger Poets contest. Sylvia’s envy of Rich is clear in a letter to Gordon [Plath’s younger brother]: ‘I keep reading about this damn Adrienne Cecile Rich, only two years older than I, who is a Yale younger poet and regularly in all the top mags . . . Occasionally, I retch quietly in the wastebasket’" (Wagner-Martin 118).

Dickinson, Bishop, and Plath’s admiration extended to writers both male and female.  My three poets’ interest in each other (that is, that Bishop and Plath were each interested in each other’s work as well as Dickinson’s, and that Dickinson was very interested in the poets who would follow her) reveals itself at times in subtle but

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8 Linda Wagner-Martin records that "when Plath received the Mademoiselle internship, she was asked for the names of writers she would like to meet. She named: J. D. Salinger, Shirley Jackson, E. B. White, Irwin Shaw" (97). The feature she later wrote for the magazine profiled five young poets: Richard Wilbur, Anthony Hecht, George Steiner, Alastair Reid, and William Buford.
interesting ways. As Lorrie Goldensohn writes in this comparison of Sylvia Plath’s and
Elizabeth Bishop’s work:

For Sylvia Plath, a rather different poet set uneasily
within a female body, Ariel, or the air sprite, gave the
mask and the freedom to explore the anomalies of her
position in mythic style. For Elizabeth Bishop, water, the
welling, salty element of both birth and tears, provided
the medium of release, and it is the figure of the mermaid,
whose free tail was given in exchange for crippled speech
and female legs, who seems to shade the evolution of her
mermen. (209)

Or, as Charles R. Anderson points out of Dickinson’s poem #1463, and her line about
the mail from Tunis: The sprite Ariel comes from Tunis. Or the interesting fact, as
Brett C. Millier reports in Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It: “‘Five Flights
Up’ was written while Bishop was reading The Bell Jar”(443).

Millier also suggests that Bishop’s frequent paraphrases of Emily Dickinson in
her letters “suggests that the nation’s greatest woman poet was closer to Elizabeth’s
writer’s imagination than she ever admitted publicly”(63). And although Bishop said
she had little interest in Dickinson before the Johnson edition appeared, she did do two
reviews of Dickinson scholarship (Millier 237). When Bishop is living in Cambridge,
she writes to a friend, “There’s an Emily Dickinson room here in the Houghton
Library—I’ve never had the courage to go to see”(Letters 559), but she doesn’t explain
why courage would be needed in order to go see it. And she remarked that she admired
Emily Dickinson for “having dared to do it, all alone.” Kalstone says that “Dickinson’s
‘doing it all alone’ was ‘a bit like’ Bishop’s own beloved Hopkins” and Bishop actually
was working on a poem comparing Dickinson and Hopkins to ‘two self-caged
birds’“(Kalstone 132).
The poets' admiration extends to those seen as doing, or having done, the same work. So do the poets' feelings of competitiveness. The competitiveness resembles a compulsion. Bishop's "North Haven," the poem she wrote after the death of Robert Lowell, her beloved friend, explores what happens to the poems after the death of the poet. Bishop writes of Lowell, "And now - you've left / for good. You can't derange, or re-arrange, / your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.) / The words won't change again. Sad friend, you cannot change" (188). Her poem brings to light Lowell's compulsive need to rework his poems. Now, his songs will be left as they are, to achieve permanence or not as they will. The poignancy of the sparrows, which seem at an advantage because they can change their song, is not so great when compared to Lowell, who is clearly drawn as a particular and living individual. His power and his compulsion (notice the word "derange" -- suggestive at once of Lowell's manic-depressive illness and his attitude toward his poems), ultimately create words and a person, who is in some respects permanent. As the last line of the poem says, "Sad friend, you cannot change."

Bishop's "The Man-Moth" speaks to her own compulsions. "The Man-Moth" was suggested to Bishop by a newspaper misprint for "mammoth." The Man-Moth is a freakish creature. Like the word that inspired the poem, the Man-Moth is a mistake, misplaced and incorrect. "The Man-Moth" is perhaps a semi-autobiographical poem. The Man-Moth has a vantage that "Man, Standing Below Him" does not. Attempting to force the "black scrolls on the light" is a nearly impossible feat, and it is the task of the writer. Still, the Man-Moth continues to attempt it, in spite of his failures. And for all those failures, the man-moth remains above the common lot, isolated, but still above.
The poem follows the Man-Moth as he rides the rails, “carried through artificial tunnels and dreaming recurrent / dreams. Just as the ties recur beneath his train, these underlie / his rushing brain. He does not dare look out the window”(14). Reminiscent of the commotion of Dickinson’s “I Felt a Funeral in my Brain,” the train rushes fitfully (and it seems painfully) through the Man-Moth’s brain. The Man-Moth does not look out the window because “the third rail, the unbroken draught of poison, / runs there beside him. He regards it as a disease / he has inherited the susceptibility to. He has to keep / his hands in his pockets, as others must wear mufflers”(14). There were two diseases Bishop felt she had “inherited a susceptibility to”: alcoholism and insanity. The line above covers both. The suicide by throwing oneself on the rail, or by drinking the poison, is a danger and a possibility. The man-moth has to exercise the control of keeping his hands down in order to avoid it.

Bishop believed in working with what she had, as all poets must, including her inner demons. She didn’t feel herself at a true disadvantage because of her gender. She compares herself and other women poets to Emily Dickinson when she says:

> Women’s experiences are much more limited, but that does not really matter—there is Emily Dickinson, as one always says. You just have to make do with what you have after all. It depends on one’s temperament I suppose. Some women certainly can write like Emily Dickinson, the kind of poetry with no common experience to speak of at all, where there may be some women dying to get out and climb Mt. Everest. They do I guess. They feel that they have not lived until they have done all these things, which is, of course, a lot of nonsense.

(Monteiro 108)
Bishop makes the point that the poet does not need to climb Everest in order to produce poetry. Neither does one need to be male, because the poem will find the poet. Plath predicted that she would one day be considered “Poetess of America,” and in the same passage predicted that she had a good chance to outstrip all other women poets, in America and elsewhere, dead or living. In that passage, however, she does confine herself only to her female competitors. But it would be a mistake to see in this an admission of not being competitive with her male counterparts. Rather, Plath did want to be the preeminent woman poet, on her way to being altogether the foremost. What is startling here, as in the last quote by Bishop, is the surety Plath displays. The writing will happen, no matter the circumstance, the poet’s responsibility is to do her best by the poem. These three are fairly certain that their abilities rival any other poets’, male or female. As Dickinson described her Amherst landscape in a letter to Mrs. Holland: “Here is the ‘light’ the stranger said ‘was not on sea or land.’ Myself could arrest it, but will not chagrin Him”(451). As noted before, the "him" she refers to, and does not wish to chagrin, might be presumed to be Wordsworth. But other evidence, and the use of the capital letter, might also move one to ask if Dickinson isn’t referring to God Himself, and abilities she holds, which rival even His.
III

"I cast off my identity / And make the fatal plunge"

In Chapter One I discussed how the nascence of ambition in the poets in question, how the burgeoning awareness of their own mortality fills them not with resignation, as it perhaps does the vast majority of people, but with defiance. Their belief in the value of their own experience, of their own selves, moves them to record their thoughts and experience in writing. Consciously, they seek out models of immortality among writers, as I sought to prove in the second Chapter of this study. In order to continue in the certainty that they are deserving of immortality (a word which I am using here but which immediately strikes me as one that the poets themselves would not have uttered, preferring to think of this more simply as the urge not to die), the poets pit themselves against others. First, perhaps, measuring themselves against other women, but also measuring themselves against their male counterparts. And first, too, looking at their rivals among the living, and then trying themselves against the almighty dead.

But another curious process is also at work here. Although the act of creating a "Poet" involves the insistence on the self, it involves too the renunciation of that self. The individual (for our purposes, the woman) seems to experience in early life especially, but at times throughout her life, a sense that her identity is uncertain. Quite early, these three record instances when they felt fused with the rest of humanity. This fusion is experienced as terrifying or comforting, depending upon the poet. Eventually the fusion is sundered, and the poet feels able to envelop in herself several different lives, but mostly within the poems. Polarities begin to form between the individual and the personas of the poems, giving way to a division between the "Poet" and the self.
The poet knows which is the weaker character and chooses to banish the self from the work. Hence, we can point to numerous poems in which the “I” of the poem is already dead. A voice speaks in the poem, but the voice is from the grave. It is almost as if the poet is accustoming herself to this future state of things. The person that the poet is in the act of creating in the poems is not her self, although she may allow certain biographical details to be shared in common. And so, although we may speak confidently of knowing Dickinson, we must accept that Dickinson is the creation of a woman whom we will never have the pleasure of knowing.¹

The sense of being displaced in the world is not limited to my subjects. Erik Erikson’s *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* examined this phenomenon among artists of all types. Erikson quotes George Bernard Shaw, who rather eloquently speaks of this sense of displacement and the author’s ability to turn this into a chameleon-like talent:

> Whether it be that I was born mad or a little too sane, my kingdom was not this world: I was at home only in the realm of my imagination, and at ease only with the mighty dead. Therefore, I had to become an actor, and create for myself a fantastic personality apt and fit for dealing with men, and adaptable to the various parts I had to play as author, journalist, orator, politician, committee man, man of the world, and so forth. (149)

This feeling of displacement, in the beginning, seems to stem from the lack of a knowable identity. In the quest to know who she is, the poet tries on various roles. But early on the poet does not see herself as being a divided personality. Rather, she already has a sense of a strong and whole person existing beneath the various guises.

¹ As Dickinson wrote to Higginson in July of 1862, “When I state myself, as the Representative of the Verse—it does not mean—me—but a supposed person”(412).
The guises she does adopt permit her to “fit” into society. As her brother and sister attested, the Dickinson who wrote to Thomas Wentworth Higginson is not the same as the woman with whom they were familiar. Bennett speaks more clearly to this notion, and why it might have been expedient for Dickinson to address Higginson in this way:

Other poses, such as the little girl role she played for her preceptor, Higginson—a preceptor who had nothing to teach and everything to learn—were, on the other hand, clearly reactive and feigned. At best they were strategies for survival. But underneath these guises, none of which was her sum, there lay a whole and integrated, if admittedly very angry woman(42)

This does invite one to ask which of the letters is not a pose, if any? The truest sense of their writer seems to come only in the entirety of the writing, which is as it should be. But most particularly Dickinson’s power is reserved for the poems. As Elizabeth Bishop wrote in “The Imaginary Iceberg,” “Icebergs behoove the soul / (Both being self-made from elements least visible) / To see them so: fleshed, fair, erected indivisible”(4). Like the iceberg, the truest self might be whole and powerful, only not on the surface. What is revealed being only, as we say, “the tip of the iceberg.”

But the artist cannot ignore that she is composed of the selfsame elements as the people she is in the midst of, no more than the iceberg could deny that it is made of water. The youthful artist at first feels fused with the world she sees. In Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Waiting Room” we see a dramatic recounting of a moment when the fusion is too great, as is the lack of identity that springs from it. In the poem the young child Elizabeth accompanies her Aunt Consuelo to the dentist. In the waiting room the child reads from a copy of National Geographic. This pedestrian scene gives way to
the surreal, however, when the inhabitants of the waiting room overhear Aunt Consuelo’s cry of pain. As the child narrator says,

I wasn’t at all surprised; 
even then I knew she was 
a foolish, timid woman. 
I might have been embarrassed, 
but wasn’t. What took me 
completely by surprise 
was that it was me: 
my voice, in my mouth. 
Without thinking at all 
I was my foolish aunt, 
I—we—were falling, falling, 
our eyes glued to the cover 
of the National Geographic, 
February, 1918. 

(160)

Betsy Erkkila sees this poem as one that "registers the girlchild's terror and resistance as she experiences her identification with other women as a foil into the oppression and contraints of gender—signified by her 'foolish aunt' and 'those awful hanging breasts' she sees in the National Geographic as she reads and waits in the dentist's office"(150). I disagree. Rather the poem seems to register the child's terror at finding herself at one with all people. In addition to her aunt and the breasts in the magazine photo, the child makes mention in the next verse paragraph of "gray knees" and "trousers" and "boots" alongside the skirts and other signifiers of women, making it clear that she is uncomfortably identifying herself with everyone in the waiting room. Throughout the poem, as she uses the pronoun "them" to identify all of those in the room, she never restricts herself by gender. And eventually she is able to pull herself back, into herself; "Then I was back in it"(161), ending her fusion with the others:
I said to myself: three days and you'll be seven years old. I was saying it to stop the sensation of falling off the round, turning world into cold, blue-black space. But I felt: you are an I, you are an Elizabeth, you are one of them. Why should you be one, too? I scarcely dared to look to see what it was I was. I gave a sidelong glance --I couldn't look any higher— at shadowy gray knees, trousers and skirts and boots and different pairs of hands lying under the lamps. I knew nothing stranger had ever happened, that nothing stranger could ever happen.

Why should I be my aunt, or me, or anyone? What similarities—boots, hands, the family voice I felt in my throat, or even the National Geographic and those awful hanging breasts—held us all together or made us all just one? How—I didn't know any word for it—how "unlikely"... How had I come to be here, like them, and overhear a cry of pain that could have got loud and worse but hadn't?

The waiting room was bright and too hot. It was sliding beneath a big black wave, another, and another.

Then I was back in it. The War was on. Outside, in Worcester, Massachusetts,
were night and slush and cold,
and it was still the fifth
Of February, 1918.
(160-161)

Without the sense of separation that Bishop achieves in her poem, the child cannot
begin to develop into the poet. For Sylvia Plath, the moment of separation occurs in
early childhood as it does for Bishop, at the moment when Plath's brother is born. She
recounted that when baby Warren was born: "I trudged off on my own... As from a
star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin:
I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was
over" (Bennett 112). Conversely, when Plath is happy in her marriage to Ted Hughes,
the sense of fusion is back. She wrote in her journal that between her and Hughes there
were "no barriers -- it is rather as if neither of us--or especially myself-- had any skin, or
one skin between us and we kept bumping into and abrading each other" (245).
Although she will later explain the burst of creativity that followed the dissolution of
the marriage as a case of the muse coming to live with her only after Hughes moves out,
it may be more likely that the sense of being separate is fundamental to the writing, and
the happiness that came with her marriage inhibited her creativity. Her description of
her union with Hughes as one of frequent "bumping into and abrading [of] each other"
suggests how profoundly discomforting such a state was to her.

The muse, they say, is a jealous master. When Dickinson is at the height of her
creativity, it appears that she enters into a marriage of sorts with her poetry. Bennett
writes,

While it may seem paradoxical or perverse to say so, what
appears to have happened to Dickinson in 1862 is that by
redefining herself as bride-wife-queen of Calvary, within
the context of a fantasy marriage, the poet was able to
integrate her feelings of loss, rage, and frustration, feelings that had left her internally divided from adolescence on, and make these feelings egosystonic. They became a necessary part of her new definition of self as poet. (83)

By linking herself to the poems, and her identity as poet, Dickinson is able to successfully integrate her various selves. The record of those selves remains in the poems.

Plath’s “Poem for a Birthday” is just such a record. In it Plath creates a nightmarish other realm, resembling a mixture between a hospital and a city out of a science fiction movie:

This is the city of spare parts.
My swaddled legs and arms smell sweet as rubber.
Here they can doctor heads, or any limb.
On Fridays the little children come
To trade their hooks for hands.
Dead men leave eyes for others.
Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.
The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.
My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.
I shall be good as new.

(137)

Although the life is fractured and broken, the desire is to have it fixed. Still, even as the narrator declaims, “I shall be good as new,” the voice leaves some doubt. The scene is too nightmarish, and the repairs only physical. Love, which tries to make amends by mending the body, doesn’t touch the person whose voice emerges from the broken
body. In Plath’s “A Life,” the way to repair the self is emerging, although the scene remains horrific. The poem begins:

Touch it: it won’t shrink like an eyeball,  
This egg-shaped bailiwick, clear as a tear.  
Here’s yesterday, last year —  
Palm-spear and lily distinct as flora in the vast  
Windless threadwork of a tapestry.  

(149)

The tapestry and the ability to look in and see “yesterday” and “last year” suggest the writing is creating the life, a metaphor that becomes more explicit as the poem continues. What you are invited to look at begins like a science experiment, something gelatinous and freakish. It makes a sound, though, like a “Chinese chime” and contains busy inhabitants who will not answer. The landscape is her poetry, though the poem is called “A Life.” Some stanzas beyond, Plath writes of a woman who

is dragging her shadow in a circle  
About a bald, hospital saucer.  
It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper  
And appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg.  
She lives quietly

With no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle,  
The obsolete house, the sea, flattened to a picture  
She has one too many dimensions to enter.  
Grief and anger, exorcised,  
Leave her alone now.

The future is a gray seagull  
Tattling in its cat-voice of departure, departure.  
Age and terror, like nurses, attend her,  
And a drowned man, complaining of the great cold,  
Crawls up out of the sea.  

(150)
In this poem one can see the division between the poet and the “woman” in the poem. This woman is “dragging her shadow” around with her, dragging it around like a blank sheet of paper. What there was to her life, “the obsolete house, the sea,” is “flattened to a picture / She has one too many dimensions to enter.” Now that this “flattening” has been accomplished, the transition of the life onto the paper and into two dimensions, then “grief and anger” let her be. In the tradition of the poet as prophet, Plath correctly predicts her future, populated as it is by many of her stock images: the terrifying nurses, the drowned father/god, and the ominous animals.²

At times, the difference between the poet and the person seems untenable.

Robert Giroux in his introduction to One Art, Giroux’s edition of Bishop’s letters, quotes Yeats’ “The Choice,” “The intellect of man is forced to choose / Perfection of the life, or of the work.” Giroux notes that Elizabeth Bishop chose the latter (viii).

Betsy Erkkila quotes Adrienne Rich on the subject of the division between the life and the work, a division that Rich sees as a particularly hard one for women: “The choice still seemed to be between ‘love’ --womanly, maternal love, altruistic love-- a love defined and ruled by the weight of an entire culture; and egotism--a force directed by men into creation, achievement, ambition, and often at the expense of others, but justifiably so. For weren’t they men, and wasn’t that their destiny as womanly love was ours. I know now that the alternatives are false ones”(168). Erkkila goes on to assert

² Bennett speaks of Plath as having been a mask wearer throughout her life, a trait she believes Emily Dickinson shared (11). For further evidence of the division Dickinson clearly saw between herself and her various personas, consult Sewall’s biography for the several different names she used (footnote, p. 380). Notice also her tendency in the letter to refer to herself as “us,” as she does here in a letter to Samuel Bowles: “If we die, will you come for us, as you do for father?”(540)
that for women these differences split the world into “polarities of masculine and feminine, mind and body, self and other, transcendence and immanence” (159).

For Dickinson, these polarities are more simply between good and bad. As she wrote while still a teen, “The path of duty looks very ugly indeed - and the place where I want to go more amiable - a great deal - it is so much easier to do wrong than right - so much pleasanter to be evil than good, I don’t wonder that good angels weep - and bad ones sing songs” (82). Bishop’s chief division, according to Helen Vendler, is between “two frequencies - the domestic and the strange. In another poet the alternation might seem a debate, but Bishop drifts rather than divides, gazes rather than chooses. Though the exotic is frequent in her poems of travel, it is not only the exotic that is strange and not only the local that is domestic” (qtd. in Bamstone 572). Hughes identified in Plath’s horse-riding poems what he called “the crucial, dangerous extreme polarity, the precarious dynamics, of Plath’s inspiration, and achievement, and fate (WP 199), Plath’s movement in this case was between uncontrollable life and controlled death.

What seem to set the poet’s contradictions apart from those of others are the extremes of the emotions, and the fact that the poet sees these polarities as irreconcilable. Instead of acceptance and integration, the factions of the personality spar, and this is played out on the page.

As Janet Malcolm writes, “In the case of Plath, it wasn’t that she was more divided than the rest of us but only that she left such a full record of her ambivalences— which is why the study of her life is both so alluring and so disturbing, and why the predicament of her survivors is so dire” (88). Plath had a habit of speaking to herself as if she were conscious of her divided state. Throughout her journal, she routinely mocks herself in parenthetical asides (for instance, on page 40 she asks herself, “What do you
mean?). Elizabeth Bishop left a similar record in her poems, where she commonly used the parenthetical aside to undermine or reinforce or variously dialogue with the poem. In “The Weed” Bishop carries on just such a conversation within the parentheses. She writes that the weed “lifted its head all dripping wet / (with my own thoughts?) / and answered then: ‘I grow,’ it said, / ‘but to divide your heart again’”(21).

Although further discussion of Bishop’s use of the parentheses is in order, at this point it is enough to recognize that the parenthetical aside suggests an acknowledged division of mind. The question these asides within the poem raise is to whom they are addressed. If one accepts that there is a division between the author and the speaker of the poem, then is the parenthetical the author’s interruption of the speaker, or is the parenthetical meant to be another facet of what the poem’s speaker wants expressed?

Certainly, Bishop’s most poignant aside in the concluding lines of “One Art,” when someone admonishes the person to write (“Write it!”) the word “disaster,” suggests that the admonition comes from Bishop herself, who has to compel the poet toward an honesty of emotion that the poet does not want either to feel or to reveal.

Bishop’s ability to move within and without the poem is one of her great talents. In her poem “The Fish” the identification moves liberally between the poet, the fish and the fisherman. As David Kalstone has written,

This is why, on some readings, the poem has the air of summoning up a creature from the speaker’s own inner depths—the surviving nonhuman resources of an earlier creation, glimpsed painfully through the depredations of time and the various frail instruments we devise, historically, to see them. The ‘victory’ that fills up the little rented boat is one that more than grammatically belongs to both sides. (87)
This fluidity of perception also extended to her readers, who felt that Bishop at times was giving voice to experiences they alone had known. Bishop in her letters recounts that she received much feedback from people when “In the Waiting Room” was published in The New Yorker. People wanted to share with her the moment, as children, when they too experienced a moment such as this (Letters 545).

Dickinson’s record of estrangement from herself is especially poignant, occurring as it does in both the letters and the poems. There is the playful note to Mrs. Holland after the family has moved back to its ancestral home where she writes, “I am out with lanterns, looking for myself” (324), her way of expressing her dismay at being removed from the familiar. (It should be noted that the only two homes Dickinson ever knew were within sight of one another. Most of the move was accomplished on foot.) And there are the more plaintive expressions such as this in a letter to Samuel Bowles while he was traveling in Europe: “I tell you, Mr. Bowles, it is a suffering to have a sea—no care how blue— between your soul and you ” (416). In poem #642 she tries to reconcile herself to how it might be possible to remove herself, through art, from herself:

Me from Myself – to banish –  
Had I Art-  
Impregnable my Fortress  
Unto All Heart-  

But since Myself – assault Me-  
How have I peace  
Except by subjugating  
Consciousness?  

And since We’re mutual Monarch  
How this be  
Except by Abdication-  
Me – of Me?  

(318-319)
Dickinson seemed intuitively to understand, as Bennett writes, that “life in the real world had to be sacrificed. She could be a woman only in and through her art”(82). Never feeling particularly at home in the world, and obviously beset by barriers to romantic fulfillment, in her poetry she was able to achieve a sense of both. Moreover, she is able to become much more than wife, woman, or artist in the poems; she is able to assume each of these roles, and discard them at will.

In order to do this, however, a distancing from the actual self is required, what amounts to a banishment of that self. Plath finds herself questioning repeatedly who she is, saying to herself, “I am I - I am powerful--but to what extent? I am I?”(Bennett 115). In reference to the role-playing required at the family reunion, and in a poem that sounds much like Bishop, Plath writes, “I cast off my identity / And make the fatal plunge” (301). And in echo of the question above, when encountering her reflection, “Leaning over, I encounter one / Blue and improbable person / Framed in a basketwork of cat-tails. / O she is gracious and austere, / Seated beneath the toneless water! / It is not I, it is not I.”(138). As she explicitly puts it in her journals, “Writing, then, was a substitute for myself: if you don’t love me, love my writing and love me for my writing” (280).

Dickinson’s poem #937, “I felt a cleaving in my mind,” demonstrates the violence inherent in recognizing and delineating the difference between the self and the poetic self that is developing on the page. Dickinson writes,

I felt a Cleaving in my Mind –
As if my Brain had split –
I tried to match it – Seam by Seam-
But could not make them fit.
The thought behind, I strove to join
Unto the thought before —
But Sequence ravelled out of Sound
Like Balls — upon a Floor.

(439-440)

The mind is disjoined and cannot achieve synthesis again. The process described in the second stanza resembles the poetic process, but the process is incomplete and finally unsuccessful. From the moment the self is looked at objectively (or nearly so—as a separate object) an irreparable “cleaving” has taken place between the one doing the viewing and the one being viewed, between the poet and the self. Poetry, though some might view it as a means of repairing that gulf, a form of analysis or confessional catharsis, in reality only serves to make the gulf larger.

In Emily Dickinson’s case, Richard Sewall sees the division between selves as a part of her heritage. Sewall writes, “The Puritan drama of the soul had its dialogue, . . . . The Soul addressed its God, or the Soul addressed the Self, or the Flesh addressed the Spirit. The puritans talked a great deal to themselves -- a way of thinking, of attacking one’s inner problems, that Emily Dickinson was born to”(23). When her brother Austin was away teaching school in Boston, Dickinson wrote, “We don’t have many jokes, though, now, it is pretty much all sobriety; and we do not have much poetry, father having made up his mind that it’s pretty much all real life. Father’s real life and mine sometimes come into collision but as yet escape unhurt”(161). In this letter, the distinction she makes between poetry and “real life” is that between the magical and the mundane, the fanciful and the sober.

Much has been made of the changes Marianne Moore recommended Bishop make to her poems, and how rarely Bishop chose to follow her advice. One seemingly minor change that Bishop chose not to make was to "A Miracle for Breakfast," a poem
in which Bishop insisted upon keeping the word “apartments,” a word Moore found common and therefore not poetic. Bishop insisted on her “apartments” because she wanted to convey the sense that each balcony was distinctly divided from the other. The balcony across the way from the speaker’s, then, becomes one that is entirely inaccessible. The narrator says that as she and her companion “licked up the crumb and swallowed the coffee. / The window across the river caught the sun / as if the miracle were working, on the wrong balcony” (19). Her insistence on the word apartments reflects how far the speaker is isolated from the miracle.

From such complete separations are poems made. The mundane breakfast and the miracle require separate selves to be accomplished. But from such powerful separations may come the desire to do away with the everyday self, in order that the poet might have freer rein. As T.S. Eliot describes it, “What happens is a continual surrender of himself as he is at the moment to something which is more valuable. The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality” (53). The poet is always in the process of overtaking the person. The extent to which the poet is successful is the measure of the poet. With Dickinson the evidence of this process translated into a certain ease she had in writing poems where the speaker of the poem has already died. Frederic I. Carpenter writes that “the most strange, and some of the best of Emily’s poems, imagine the experience of life after death. Obviously impossible on the level of reality, this imagined experience nevertheless conveys something of that God-like detachment from life which a person who ‘has died to the world’ may ideally achieve” (Davis 58). Just a few examples of such poems would include #445, “‘Twas just this time, last year, I died,” #449, “I died for Beauty— but was scarce / Adjusted in the Tomb / When One who died for Truth,
was lain / In an adjoining Room −," #465, “I heard a Fly buzz-when I died-," #712, “Because I could not stop for Death-," and #1732, “My life closed twice before its close.” The “I” who “could not see to see” in poem #465, or who carries on a dialogue within the grave in #449, is the poet. It is she who, after death and all its mysteries are known, can objectively recount what has been seen, what Dickinson in another place refers to as her “bulletins from Immortality.”

It is no wonder that the immortal and far-knowing self might be preferable, even though there is something slightly heretical about claiming possession of knowledge of what occurs beyond the grave. Paula Bennett in My Life A Loaded Gun: Female Creativity and Feminist Poetics compares Dickinson to Plath in this, saying that she is “prepared to embrace it nevertheless—together with all other aspects of her unacceptable self. Indeed, embracing the true or unacceptable self appears to be the poem’s raison d’être, just as it is the raison d’être of Plath’s last poems”(6). To come to believe further that this powerful and god-like self is the real self seems a further blasphemy still, though Ted Hughes in Winter Pollen argues that it is only through this other, created self, that the poet can continue to exist. He writes, in reference to Plath and other great poets, that their very talent is to “create a provisional persona, an emergency self, to deal with the crisis. They could create a self who would somehow hang on to all the fragments as the newly throned god and the deposed goddess tore each other to pieces behind his face”(111). For the sake of self-preservation, the poet must come to believe, as James Olney wrote when defending Eliot’s wish that no biography be written in “Where is the real T.S. Eliot? Or, The Life of the Poet?”, that the life of the Poet is that “which is played out in the poetry”(1).
The full assumption of the poetic self is often experienced as a sort of rebirth. Ted Hughes traced Plath's true genesis as a poet to the time of the composition of her "Poem for a Birthday," and saw yet another sort of rebirth in another of her birthday poems, "Ariel." Hughes wrote of "Ariel," "The overt sense here is that the liberation from earthly restraints (earthly life) is a rebirth into something greater and more glorious but which is still some kind of life -- a spiritual rebirth perhaps. She wrote it on her thirtieth birthday" (WP 199). Perhaps his closeness to Plath allows him such insight, for he claims that in most cases the birth of the poetic self goes unmarked:

Few poets have disclosed in any way the birth circumstances of their poetic gift, or the necessary purpose these serve in their psychic economy. It is not easy to name one. As if the first concern of poetry were to cover its own tracks. When a deliberate attempt to reveal all has been made, by a Pasternak or a Wordsworth, the result is discursive autobiography -- illuminating enough but not an X-ray. Otherwise poets are very properly bent on exploring subject matter, themes, intellectual possibilities and modifications, evolving the foliage and blossoms and fruit of a natural cultural organism whose roots are hidden, and whose birth and private purpose are no part of the crop. Sylvia Plath's poetry, like a species on its own, exists in little else but the revelation of that birth and purpose. Though her whole considerable ambition was fixed on becoming the normal flowering and fruiting kind of writer, her work was roots only. (WP 178)

And it may be that the process of becoming looms larger in Plath's work than might have been the case had the life not come to such an untimely end. Only shortly after the full assumption of the poetic self, after all, Plath's actual self ceased to exist.

It seems no accident that Plath accomplished this during a period of relative isolation. The birth of the poetic self seems to require a certain resignation to solitude,
and a freedom from any number of outside factors, including influence. In Elizabeth Bishop’s case, it required the ability to reject the recommendations of a senior poet she held in high esteem; it also required, it seems, exile from the United States and its poetic community. Her isolation allowed her to become, “As she herself would say, . . . half in, half out of her generation,” and as David Kalstone would go on to say, “Nor could she be fitted readily into any generation; she was one of a kind”(x). Howard Moss, in his collection of criticism entitled *Writing Against Time*, would write that “Miss Bishop is not academic, beat, cooked, raw, formal, informal, metrical, syllabic, or what have you. She is a poet pure and simple who has perfect pitch”(147). This independence was characteristic of Bishop even from her first volume. As James Fenton makes clear in his defense of Bishop against those who would make too much of her indebtedness to Moore: “What is remarkable about Bishop’s first volume of poems is, rather, its independence of spirit” (“The Many Arts of Elizabeth Bishop” 14).

This same sort of ferocious independence is clear in Dickinson as well. Here I quote from one of her letters to Higginson, “master” to her as much as Moore was ever “master” to Bishop:

> When much in the woods, as a little girl, I was told that the snake would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or goblins kidnap me; but I went alone and met no one but angels, who were far shyer of me than I could be of them, so I haven’t that confidence in fraud which many exercise.

> I shall observe your precept, though I do not understand it, always.

> I marked a line in one verse, because I met it after I made it, and never consciously touch a paint mixed by another person. I do not let go it, because it is mine.

(415)
I quote the passage at some length because I am charmed by it, but also to show the contrast in the voices employed. This passage seems to offer some evidence that, as Dickinson’s brother and sister attested, she was largely employing various poses when she wrote to Higginson. One can observe how the childish voice of the girl who flits with angels when out in the woods gives way to the dutiful pupil, only to be overturned at the end by the confidence of the artist who will never “touch a paint mixed by another person.” And who still will not let the line go, because, as she says, “It is mine,” with all of the surety of one who knows.\footnote{One recent study of how Emily Dickinson varied from her contemporaries is Elizabeth A. Petrino’s \textit{Emily Dickinson and Her Contemporaries: Women’s Verse in America, 1820-1885} (University Press of New England, 1998). Petrino notes for instance that Dickinson’s poems about the dead are “closer to the acerbic wit of the Puritan graveyards than to the mawkishness of the nineteenth-century elegy.” This book goes on to analyze Dickinson’s other departures from poetic convention.\footnote{Evidence belies this. Susan’s suggested changes to the early poems were politely commented upon, but not actually taken up. After Susan’s marriage to Austin and the subsequent “War Between the Houses,” as it has been termed, Dickinson no longer shared her poems with Susan at all.}} Jane Donahue Eberwein in \textit{An Emily Dickinson Encyclopedia} writes that “Smith and Hart make a case for Dickinson carrying on with Susan [Dickinson’s early friend and later sister-in-law] a sort of literary collaboration”\footnote{Evidence belies this. Susan’s suggested changes to the early poems were politely commented upon, but not actually taken up. After Susan’s marriage to Austin and the subsequent “War Between the Houses,” as it has been termed, Dickinson no longer shared her poems with Susan at all.}(43).\footnote{Evidence belies this. Susan’s suggested changes to the early poems were politely commented upon, but not actually taken up. After Susan’s marriage to Austin and the subsequent “War Between the Houses,” as it has been termed, Dickinson no longer shared her poems with Susan at all.} However, it is very hard to accept the idea of Dickinson as collaborator with anyone. As she herself said rather early on, “I have dared to do strange things - bold things, and have asked no advice from any - I have heeded beautiful tempters, yet do not think I am wrong”\footnote{Evidence belies this. Susan’s suggested changes to the early poems were politely commented upon, but not actually taken up. After Susan’s marriage to Austin and the subsequent “War Between the Houses,” as it has been termed, Dickinson no longer shared her poems with Susan at all.}(95).

Such independence of mind does not seem to be without its cost, however. With all three poets discussed here, there is a freedom from outside influence that is considered one of the marks of a strong poet, but with that seems to come a freedom
from other personal ties. The difficulty of sustaining personal relationships might be a less reported, and certainly less lauded, consequence of pursuing a poetic identity. That the poet is aware of this cost, however, seems undeniable. Only Plath left evidence that she badly wanted to find a way to combine a marriage with her great ambition. Often, her poems recount the difficulty of this, and flash with anger and acceptance of her lot, as in “Lady Lazarus”: “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (244). To the reader, it seems obvious that Plath was unlikely to have the sort of marriage she read about in women’s magazines, even if one allows that she imagined it could encompass more than any example she had yet encountered: a marriage of two great writers, and with a home, garden, and children to be envied. Her cynicism about whether such marriages really exist crept into the poetry, as it did in Dickinson’s and Bishop’s. The sort of resilience and resignation in a poem like Bishop’s “Varick Street,” is markedly similar to that of Plath’s “The Applicant.” Where Plath’s poem employs the chorus, “Will you marry it, marry it, marry it?” “Varick Street” asserts repeatedly, “And I shall sell you sell you/ sell you of course, my dear, and you’ll sell me.” “Varick Street” could almost be termed an anti-love poem:

At night the factories struggle awake, wretched uneasy buildings veined with pipes attempt their work. Trying to breathe, elongated nostrils haired with spikes give off such stenches, too. And I shall sell you sell you sell you of course, my dear, and you’ll sell me.

On certain floors certain wonders. Pale dirty light,
some captured iceberg
being prevented from melting.
See the mechanical moons,
sick, being made
to wax and wane
at somebody's instigation.
And I shall sell you sell you
sell you of course, my dear, and you shall sell me.

Lights music of love
work on. The presses
print calendars
I suppose; the moons
make medicine
or confectionery. Our bed
shrinks from the soot
and hapless odors
hold us close.
And I shall sell you sell you
sell you of course, my dear, and you shall sell me.

Love in this case becomes just another form of commerce, as mechanized as the work done in the nearby factories. The “mechanical” moons move “at somebody’s instigation,” so any higher power is no more than another factory foreman, if such a one exists at all. What gets made, whether it is “medicine or confectionary,” matters not at all. What binds the two lovers seems to be something near to a work ethic, and of course, the smells and the dirt that surrounds. In Plath’s poem, the prospective bride is trotted out while the speaker highlights “its” various utilities. To view love or marriage in such a way might be another step toward the writing of great poetry, for the poet must concern herself with the permanent, and so much of what passes for the common lot is entirely too common for her purposes.

As Betsy Erkkila noted of Dickinson, what particularly drew her to George Eliot was Eliot’s “emphasis on renunciation of immediate pleasure in the interest of some
higher ideal” (81). And Jane Eberwein notes in Dickinson a “resistance to rhetoric, politics, a resistance to the ephemeral things of this world” (44). Although some felt Dickinson unduly distanced herself from the Civil War (by not recording her thoughts about it explicitly in the poetry), Dickinson was always less concerned with the vicissitudes of common life than she was with what was permanent. What concerned Dickinson about that war, and what she does comment upon, was the loss of life, particularly the lives of those from Amherst.

Sometimes the ability of the poet to turn a blind eye to her outward surroundings is perilous, and costs the health in addition to the happiness of the writer. Ted Hughes (notably distancing himself in the following passage) offers this account of Plath’s final days:

The subject matter didn’t alarm her. Why should it, when Ariel was doing the very thing it had been created and liberated to do? In each poem, the terror is encountered head on, and the angel is mastered and brought to terms. The energy released by these victories was noticeable. According to the appointed coincidence of such things, after July her outer circumstances intensified her inner battle to the limits. In October, when she and her husband began to live apart, every detail of the antagonist seemed to come into focus, and she started writing at top speed, producing twenty-six quite lengthy poems in that month. In November she produced twelve, with another on 1 December, and one more on 2 December, before the flow stopped abruptly. (WP 188)

This is of course the most dire outcome to the rejection of the common lot and the encumbrances of everyday life: the eventual rejection of life altogether. It seems likely in Plath’s case that the poems did more to prolong the life than not. As Hughes points out, she encountered the “terror . . . head on” in the poems. That she failed to preserve herself is perhaps less important to the poet than the poems that are the evidences of the
struggle. Even for Hughes, who understands the value of the poems, the suicide of his wife becomes something other and more: the date when the flow of the poems abruptly ends.

In Emily Dickinson's "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun" the life, secondary to the poetry, stands in a corner until the poem carries the "Me" away. Further evidence supporting my theory that poetry is the gun in this poem can be found in Elizabeth Phillips' book, Emily Dickinson: Personae and Performance. Phillips identifies the "Word" as the gun in the poem.

Emotion about this outcome is notably absent. When in "The Moose" Bishop underscores the overheard conversation of the elderly couple that seems to her to be saying with every sentence, "Life's like that. / We know it (also death)" (171), this suggests Bishop's resolve in the face of the tribulations the couple is describing. It is no different than the two last lines of her poem "The Bight," which she said could amount to a personal philosophy: "All the untidy activity continues, / awful but cheerful"(61).

For Plath, the self always seems to be of less concern than the drama being played out in the poetry. Here she describes a self being burned like a communal scapegoat:

In the marketplace they are piling the dry sticks.
A thicket of shadows is a poor coat. I inhabit
The wax image of myself, a doll's body.
Sickness begins here: I am a dartboard for witches.
Only the devil can eat the devil out.
In the month of red leaves I climb to a bed of fire.

But the person in the poem is offering herself up for the greater good. She climbs the "bed of fire" herself. And as it is next to impossible to separate entirely Plath's poetry from her final act of suicide, one can see even here that the expiration of the self was
not of paramount concern to her. Her fate, in so much as death is the final outcome no matter how it is arrived at, was of less importance than what came from the life. While still a teen, and somewhere between her first and second suicide attempts, Plath wrote, “I cannot ignore this murderous self; it is there. I smell it and feel it, but I will not give it my name” (Journals 176). Even at this point, she seems to be asserting that though her self might be murderous (as suicide, according to Menninger in his Man Against Himself, is the act of murder perpetrated upon the self), that is not the self that her name will be given to. For though the self expires, poetry will have the name.

Menninger’s book also discusses the sense of superiority inherent in the role of martyr, which is another element of the sacrifice as these poets see it; they are martyrs to the poems. As Richard Wilbur in “Sumptuous Destitution” asserts of Emily Dickinson,

So superior did she feel, as a poet, to earthly circumstance, and so strong was her faith in words, that she more than once presumed to view this life from the vantage of the grave. In a manner of speaking, she was dead. And yet her poetry, with its articulate faithfulness to inner and outer truth, its insistence on maximum consciousness, is not an avoidance of life but an eccentric mastery of it. Let me close by reading you a last poem, in which she conveys both the extent of her repudiation and the extent of her happiness.

The Missing All, prevented Me
From missing minor Things.
If nothing larger than a World’s Departure from a Hinge
Or Sun’s extinction, be observed
’Twas not so large that I
Could lift my Forehead from my work
For Curiosity.

(#985)

(Sewall Essays 136)
David Daiches in *God and the Poets* sees the same attitude in Dickinson’s poem “The Soul selects Her Own Society.” It is Dickinson’s characteristic dependence on her own insights, her assurance. Daiches concludes that “the soul chooses her own companion then shuts the door to exclude all others, however humble the soul and however high and mighty the suitors, because once fulfilled, once having achieved her own majority, the soul has no farther need of others. The poem is about the self-sufficiency and irrationality of the self within the self” (161). One could point to any number of Dickinson’s poems for evidence of this self-same assurance. In poem #271 Dickinson writes, “A solemn thing—it was— I said— / A woman —white— to be—.” There the life is exchanged for the knowledge of God’s mysteries. She writes that it is “a hallowed thing—to drop a life / Into the purple well— / Too plummetless— that it return— / Eternity—until—.” She concludes that only once this exchange was made would the size of this life be considerable: “And then—the size of this ‘small’ life— / The Sages-call it small— / Swelled-like Horizons—in my vest— / And I sneered-softly—‘small’!” (123/124). The life is like coin, valuable only for what it can purchase, but her awareness of what it can purchase causes her to sneer at those others, “Sages,” who do not know its worth.6

As Christopher Benfey remarks in “The Mystery of Emily Dickinson,” when Higginson suggests that she delay publication, Dickinson “is like Coriolanus (one of her favorites among Shakespeare’s characters), who, when exiled from Rome, retorts, ‘I banish you!’” (40). The assertion of superiority in the poems extended to her everyday life, where she commonly assumed the status of monarch. When, for instance, she

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6 Others which reveal a similar attitude are #540 “I took my Power in my Hand,” #613 “They shut me up in Prose,” #61 “‘Sown in dishonor!’” (Where she protests her value against the Bible verses that would suggest her worth was less than what she believes it to be).
wished to be left alone, she referred to this as “that old king feeling” (Cody 277). And even in her letters one finds the angels listening to her songs as they may listen to the little bird she finds in the bush. Dickinson writes,

> Perhaps you laugh at me! Perhaps the whole United States are laughing at me too! I can't stop for that! My business is to love. I found a bird this morning, down--down--on a little bush at the foot of the garden, and wherefore sing, I said, since nobody hears? One sob in the throat, one flutter of bosom, -- "My business is to sing" -- and away she rose! How do I know but cherubim, once, themselves, as patient, listened, and applauded her unnoticed hymn? (413)

Again, beliefs such as these are not without their cost. As Dickinson wrote in another letter, it was indeed hard “to give up the world.” Death, as always, undermined her. After her father’s death she wrote to her cousins, “I cannot recall myself. I thought I was strongly built, but this stronger has undermined me . . . Though it is many nights, my mind never comes” (526), displaying a vulnerability which is not always so apparent in Dickinson, and again equating herself with her mind. Her friends worried about her seclusion.

Richard Chase believes that “Emily Dickinson had discovered that in the America of the nineteenth century one of the few ways to have a set of manners which was not open to anomaly and subversion was to become a recluse. The idea that one might become an expatriate would hardly have occurred to her” (266). Becoming an expatriate, however, was exactly the course that Bishop and Plath chose. Still, exile alone did not always offer the ideal climate for writing. Plath attributed her final, fever-pitch of writing to the departure of her husband, telling her mother,
When I was ‘happy’ domestically I felt a gag in my throat. Now that my domestic life, until I get a permanent live-in girl, is chaos, I am living like a Spartan, writing through huge fevers and producing free stuff I had locked in me for years. I feel astounded and very lucky. I kept telling myself I was the sort that could only write when peaceful at heart, but that is not so, the muse has come to live here, now Ted has gone. (LH 61)

And although the dissolution of her marriage was a tragedy on the personal front, it is undeniable that her best work was done in the wake of it. Again, one has to separate the personal cost from the work. Bishop, though involved in several fulfilling relationships with women, needed isolation within those relationships. Still, she called her childlessness her “worst regret in life” (Millier 452).

Much of the isolation felt by any of these writers was still a psychological isolation. Even in the best of company, they tended to feel that they did not belong. As Bishop wrote, “My friendly circumstances, my ‘good fortune,’ surround me so well and safely, and only I am wrong, inadequate. It is a situation like one of those solid crystal balls with little silvery objects inside: thick, clear, appropriate glass—only the little object, me, is sadly flawed and shown off as inferior to the setting” (Kalstone 32). Some might say this is the price paid by the writer. Bishop quoted Henry James in one of her prose pieces, who said that “he who would aspire to be a writer must inscribe on his banner the one word ‘Loneliness’” (Prose 44). Yet, it might equally well be asserted that the vocation only arises in a temperament that is predisposed to be this way.

Here Sister Mary Humiliata distinguishes between Dickinson’s exile and that of the mystic:

In Emily Dickinson’s poetry one finds indeed that intense sensitivity to experience which is characteristic of the mystic. Her self-chosen isolation from the world might
easily be interpreted as the retirement for contemplation which the mystics practice. But the writing which came out of this solitude does not tell the story of the mystic quest. The motive for the secluded life is blurred a little in the biographies, but for present purposes it is not that life which one wishes to judge for its mystic experience but rather the poetry for its expression thereof. And, as far as one can perceive, the poems seem to evoke the picture of one whose intellectual and emotional equipment for life was extraordinary in perception and depth. There is a deliberate contraction of the circle of experience, but within that circle the ultimate meaning of each act is traced to its end. Experience is related to experience by metaphor; intense conviction of truth is pointed by personification, but there is never the deliberate putting-by even of the infinitesimal which is the asceticism of the mystic. Miss Dickinson’s assertion: ‘The time to live is frugal, and good as it is a better earth will not be quite this’ is not the statement of an ascetic.

(Davis 80)

As Dickinson wrote when urged towards a profession of Christian faith while at Mount Holyoke, “It is not now too late, so my friends tell me, so my offended conscience whispers, but it is hard for me to give up the world”(67). For the world of poetry, even the requirements of Christianity represented too much renunciation.

The isolation of these three poets was not a total isolation by any means. It is more accurate to say that each of these poets was, as Edith Wharton said of Henry James, “a solitary who could not live alone”(Laskin 23). The separation between themselves and the other self they are in the act of creating—the poet—is in itself enough to insure that their solitude is never complete.
IV

"Two, of course there are two"

The poet cannot be fully divorced from her creator, but instead acts as her double. It is hard to see whether the poet emerges from the person, whether the poet emerges from the poem, or whether it requires some mixture of the two. The familiar concept of the muse arises out of this confusion. How else does one account for the production of a work of art, when it seems so far beyond the capability of an individual acting alone? In this chapter I'll look at the definition of the poetic double, and the confusion that arises between the poet and person in the mind of the reader. Also, I will look at a number of poems that make explicit the division the writer feels between herself and the poetic self, including the sad resignation that the poetic is the superior incarnation. For Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, and Sylvia Plath, this resulted in a number of poems that employ mirror images. I invoke, too, traditional beliefs about the doppelganger: the idea that the meeting with the double heralds the impending death of the individual. For each, the nurturance of the poetic self involved a renunciation of the actual (lived) life, and with it the sense that this sacrifice was a sort of suicide. The payoff is that this death, to whatever extent it is accomplished, gives life to the poet, and the poet is a superior (because more lasting) incarnation.

Ted Hughes provides an excellent definition of the poetic self. As he writes in *Winter Pollen*:

The traditional idea of the poetic Self [is of] that other voice that in the earliest times came to the poet as a God, took possession of him, delivered the poem, then left him. Or it came as the muse, after the poet's prayers for her favour. Shakespeare only half mocked it as 'that affable familiar ghost' which nightly gullied his rival with
intelligence. For Blake, it was the ‘authors in eternity’. For the young Yeats, ‘a clear articulation in the air’.

This familiar concept is worth a closer look. The qualifications of the poetic Self (apart from its inspiration) were: that it lived its own life separate from and for the most part hidden from the poet’s ordinary personality; that it was not under his control, either in when it came and went or in what it said; and that it was supernatural. The most significant of these peculiarities was that it was supernatural. In ways that were sometimes less explicit than others, it emerged from and was merged with a metaphysical Universe centered on God. And it did this happily throughout history, right up to the beginning of this century. (268)

Hughes’s definition will be useful to remember throughout the remaining pages of this argument. Particularly worth noting is Hughes’s emphasis on the unmanageable aspects of the poetic self, a notion which I will attempt at least in some part to dispel. Yet, what he calls the “most significant” of the peculiarities prescribed to the poetic self, the notion that its origin is supernatural, is not as easy to explain away. If we have banished the idea of the muse, then poetry does become that much more related to the individual, and dangerously so, it seems to me. But no biographical reading can entirely explain the process by which the poem comes to be. The poets themselves cannot fully explain it. And that is why any such inquiry can only go so far, and the magical, the otherworldly, the supernatural again might become the most provocative place to turn for an answer.

For now, if we no longer look to a muse or to God as the source, where does the poetic self come from? It seems most likely that the origin of the poetic self is the poem. The poetic self is born, as it were, from the poem. This still leaves us without a full account of where the poem comes from, but it is perhaps true that the poem arises out of a collaboration between the person in the act of writing, the poet who emerges in
that act, and something which is ineffable, which causes the enterprise to be more than the sum of its parts. Hughes speaks of the poem as "inevitably a mongrel, a record of the conflict of selves, partly what the limited, vigilant, personal ego has made of the inadequate ego, and partly the result of the contractual labors of a go-between or mediator, that third entity who argues both sides, or curses both sides, or despairs between them, or is torn apart by them, or successfully makes — on some terms or other — peace" (WP 277).

Although this is not the forum for me to assert that all poets go through a similar process, I do believe that to be the case. Hughes records that Samuel Taylor Coleridge felt this division. Hughes asserts, "Coleridge was two people. From childhood, throughout life, he had the occasional feeling that he was a 'hive of selves'. But mainly he was aware of being two" (WP 376). W. B. Yeats insisted that the poet must create such a second self, and that that self must be "more type than man, more passion than type" (qtd. in Donoghue 19). T.S. Eliot wrote, "The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality" (Grimes 20).¹ The better one is at the creation of the second self, then, the better one is at the act of poetic creation, as if these were one in the same. Anne Sexton spoke of the poem as the place where she conducted her hunt for truth, as she said that "behind everything that happens to you, every act, there is another truth, a secret life" (Ostriker 71). Given the possibility that the poetic self is another entity entirely, it is amazing, as Lawrence Lipking writes, "How confidently we refer to 'Keats,' or 'Homer,' or 'Dante,' or 'Goethe,' as if the author and all his works were one. Clearly no single name can accommodate such a

¹ Lawrence Lipking on page 67 of his The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending of Poetic Careers asserts that Eliot's famous "compound ghost" is actually the master poet, Eliot's poetic second.

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variety of poems or so many phases of a life. ‘Keats’ represents a fiction, a cipher that stands for the whole of the poet’s career”(4).

In Sylvia Plath’s poems, her doubles are polarized and opposingly different. In “Two Sisters of Persephone” she introduces two girls. She writes, “Within the house / One sits; the other, without. / Daylong a duet of shade and light / Plays between these”(CP 31). The life of the one inside the house is mundane and colorless, while the one outside is natural and healthy: “Bronzed as earth, the second lies, / Hearing ticks blown gold / Like pollen on bright air”(32). One could argue that for all Plath’s attempts at domestic bliss, this poem also represents a veiled expression that life inside the home is lesser. It is enough for our purposes here to notice that the “outside” sister is the superior one, as the poet is the superior manifestation of the lesser Plath. A more explicit rendering of this dichotomy is in “The Lady and the Earthenware Head.” Plath and Hughes both recount the actual story of the earthenware bust of Plath, how, not knowing what to do with it, they eventually settled on lodging it within the branches of a tree. Suggestive as this act was in itself, Plath’s poem dramatically depicts her underlying horror at this visual manifestation of herself, and of a doubling that denied her own artistry. She replaces the head with a poem:

Yet, shrined on her shelf, the grisly visage endured,
Despite her wrung hands, her tears, her praying: Vanish!
Steadfast and evil-starred,
It ogled through rock-fault, wind-flaw and fisted wave –

An antique hag-head, too tough for knife to finish,
Refusing to diminish
By one jot its basilisk-look of love.

(CP 70)
Sometimes Plath’s feelings about her own visage seem to amount to self-hatred. As she addresses the mirror in “The Ravaged Face”: “Myself, myself! – obscene, lugubrious”(115). The addressing of her self twice may not be purely for poetic effect, but might be in recognition of the double nature both of the reflection and of the self who is speaking. I will quote in its entirety the poem “In Plaster,” a poem that was in partial response to the cast she wore when she broke her leg while skiing as an undergraduate, and that partially evokes her response to the same earthenware sculpture of “The Earthenware Head”:

I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:  
This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one,  
And the white person is certainly the superior one.  
She doesn’t need food, she is one of the real saints.  
At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality –  
She lay in bed with me like a dead body
And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was

Only much whiter and unbreakable and with no complaints.  
I couldn’t sleep for a week, she was so cold.  
I blamed her for everything, but she didn’t answer.  
I couldn’t understand her stupid behavior!  
When I hit her she held still, like a true pacifist.  
Then I realized what she wanted was for me to love her:  
She began to warm up, and I saw her advantages.

Without me, she wouldn’t exist, so of course she was grateful.  
I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose  
Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain,  
And it was I who attracted everybody’s attention,  
Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had first supposed.  
I patronized her a little, and she lapped it up –  
You could tell almost at once she had a slave mentality.

I didn’t mind her waiting on me, and she adored it.  
In the morning she woke me early, reflecting the sun  
From her amazingly white torso, and I couldn’t help but notice  
Her tidiness and her calmness and her patience:  
She humored my weakness like the best of nurses,  
Holding my bones in place so they would mend properly.  
In time our relationship grew more intense.
She stopped fitting me so closely and seemed offish.
I felt her criticizing me in spite of herself,
As if my habits offended her in some way.
She let in the drafts and became more and more absent-minded.
And my skin itched and flaked away in soft pieces
Simply because she looked after me so badly.
Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal.

She wanted to leave me, she thought she was superior,
And I'd been keeping her in the dark, and she was resentful —
Wasting her days waiting on a half-corpse!
And secretly she began to hope I'd die.
Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely,
And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case
Wears the face of a pharaoh, though it's made of mud and water.

I wasn't in any position to get rid of her.
She'd supported me for so long I was quite limp —
I had even forgotten how to walk or sit,
So I was careful not to upset her in any way
Or brag ahead of time how I'd avenge myself.
Living with her was like living with my own coffin:
Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully.

I used to think we might make a go of it together —
After all, it was a kind of marriage, being so close.
Now I see it must be one or the other of us.
She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit.
I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her,
And she'll perish with emptiness then and begin to miss me.

The narrator says, "There are two of me now: / This new absolutely white person and
the old yellow one, / And the white person is certainly the superior one." The "white"
person, who is "unbreakable and with no complaints," resembles the white of the cast
her leg was encased in when it was broken, and the white of the paper on which she
writes. As she complained to her mother when the cast was removed, the leg inside was
yellowed and hairy. As she wrote elsewhere that her poems were "stillborn," this other
is "like a dead body."
As the poet must breathe life into the poetry, so must the poet here animate the other, superior one. In stanza three she perfectly represents this conundrum. Plath writes, “Without me, she wouldn’t exist, so of course she was grateful. / I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose / Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain, / And it was I who attracted everybody’s attention, / Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had first supposed.” The writer animates the poem, but it is often the writer who garners the greater attention. The writer is aware, however, of which is the more able. The relationship between the two evolves in the poem as the relationship between Plath and her poetry would evolve in actuality. Eventually it is that “other” one who has the upper hand.

Plath writes that eventually the double would “let in drafts and become more and more absent-minded” and this all because “she thought she was immortal.” The confrontation between the two is like the confrontation of the person with her doppelgänger. As she writes, “I see it must be one or the other of us.” At this point, the mortal one believes she may prevail.

The poem foreshadows the actual outcome of this struggle. Plath says of the other one, that one whom I take to be the poems themselves, “She was resentful -- / Wasting her days on a half-corpse! / And secretly she began to hope I’d die. / Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely. / And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case / Wears the face of a pharaoh.” When Plath did die, the poems continued to walk around, winning the Pulitzer posthumously, acting as her representative in the world.

There is a certain power in “In Plaster” that is not always visible in the other poems. In that poem, at least, the poet believes that one of the two incarnations will
survive and be victorious. In some of her other works, she is less than optimistic that
this will be the case. In “Sheep in Fog,” Plath recounts, “The hills step off into
whiteness. / People or stars / Regard me sadly, I disappoint them” (262). What she feels
is a double failure. The mortal self disappoints people, the immortal self the stars.

“Tale of a Tub,” one of the many poems Plath wrote that employs a mirror
image, concludes with the lines: “In faith / We shall board our imagined ship and
wildly sail / Among sacred islands of the mad till death / Shatters the fabulous stars and
makes us real” (25). Only death and the resulting shattering of the stars will make her
real. The poem begins with an image of the speaker “Caught / Naked in the merely
actual room, / The stranger in the lavatory mirror / Puts on a public grin, repeats our
name / But scrupulously reflects the usual terror” (24). The dramatically isolated word
“caught,” quickly coupled with the word “naked” on the following line, belies the idea
that the scene will be so “merely actual.” The double figure seen in the reflection wears
a “public” face, though the speaker sees through this to “the usual terror.” What is
perhaps most unsettling about the encounter is that the “stranger” in the mirror repeats
“our name,” and the speaker does not deny that the name belongs equally to them both.
Elsewhere, in a poem about a happy couple sleeping one floor above a not-so-happy
couple, Plath writes, “We are a dream they dream” (“The Sleeper” 122). The question
that arises then is which couple is the dream and which are the dreamers. Plath uses the
same scenario in “The Other Two,” in which the confusion between the illusory and the
real is made more explicit. In this poem she writes

We dreamed their arguments, their stricken voices.
We might embrace, but those two never did,
Come, so unlike us, to a stiff impasse,
Burdened in such a way we seemed the lighter –
Ourselves the haunters, and they, flesh and blood;

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As if, above love's ruinage, we were
The heaven those two dreamed of, in despair.

(68)

As in "Tale of a Tub," who is the reflection and who is the "real" person is unclear.

Elizabeth Bishop's poems display a similar anxiety about the world found within the mirror, whether it is better or worse, and which is the more real. In the poem "Insomnia" Bishop wishes to disappear into the reflected and inverted world of the mirror, a world where (in part because she has created it) the outcomes are more to her liking. Bishop writes,

The moon in the bureau mirror
looks out a million miles
(and perhaps with pride, at herself,
but she never, never smiles)
far and away beyond sleep, or
perhaps she's a daytime sleeper

By the universe deserted,
she'd tell it to go to hell,
and she'd find a body of water,
or a mirror, on which to dwell.
So wrap up care in a cobweb
and drop it down a well

into that world inverted
where left is always right,
where the shadows are really the body,
where we stay awake all night,
where the heavens are shallow as the sea
is now deep, and you love me.

(70)

Bishop's "To Be Written on the Mirror in Whitewash" delves again into that inverted world, this time one where the gender is reversed. The speaker (who is the reflection) says, "I live only here, between your eyes and you, / But I live in your world. What do I
do? / Collect no interest – otherwise what I can; / Above all I am not that staring man” (205). The impulse that brings Bishop, in her poems, to record a divorce between the self and the reflection, suggests a similar division between the poet and the person. An astute critic such as Brett Millier will find it necessary to acknowledge that the difference between the two is a real one. In his *Elizabeth Bishop: Life and the Memory of It*, Millier makes clear in the preface that he will refer throughout his book to the poet as “Bishop” and to the person as “Elizabeth” (xiii).

And yet, within the poems themselves are records of the uncomfortable nature of such a split in the self. Like sufferers of Multiple Personality Disorder or victims of demoniac possession², they sometimes deny the existence of the other or their relation to it. As Plath writes in “All the Dead Dears,” as she looks at what is reflected back to her: “This lady here’s no kin / Of mine, yet kin she is: she’ll suck / Blood and whistle my marrow clean / To prove it”(70). Related, but not related, the relationship is ultimately a lethal one. Her “Mirror” is the most literal and in some respects the most harrowing depiction of the fascination with the reflected self and the movement transpiring under the glass:

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I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful –

The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.
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² Plath records on page 256 of her journal that she is reading Oesterreich’s *Possession: Demoniacaal and Other* with interest.
Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns back to those liars, the candles and the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

(173-174)

Emily Dickinson’s poem #351 invokes the use of the mirror to gauge the life of
the subject. The appearance is not emphasized, as it is in Plath’s “Mirror,” instead it is
the very presence that is important: is there a person on this (the actual) side of the
mirror at all?

I felt my life with both my hands
To see if it was there—
I held my spirit to the Glass,
To prove it possibler—

I turned my Being round and round
and paused at every pound
To ask the Owner’s name—
For doubt, that I should know the Sound—

I judged my features-jarred my hair—
I pushed my dimples by, and waited—
If they—twinkled back—
Conviction might, of me—

I told myself, “Take Courage, Friend—
That - was a former time-
But we might learn to like Heaven,
As well as our Old Home!

(166-167)

“That - was a former time” leaves some question as to whether the speaker of this poem
is departed. The reader is left without answer as to whether the spirit appears in the
glass (in the form of the breath) or does not, whether the incarnation is unrecognizable.
The poem does seem to suggest that a death has taken place, but the death may very well be a metaphorical one, as it so often is in Dickinson's poems.

Plath's "The Burnt-out Spa" records yet another denial of the reflected self. In the poem the speaker says,

Leaning over, I encounter one
Blue and improbable person
Framed in a basketwork of cat-tails.

O she is gracious and austere,
Seated beneath the toneless water!
It is not I, It is not I.

This only sometimes glimpsed and probably superior (as "she is gracious and austere") person provokes fear in the speaker. There are several possible reasons for this. Her superiority is one; the strict improbability of an encounter with the double is another. Finally, for Plath, there is the threat implicit in the double's existence underwater. In the mythology of Plath's work, underwater is synonymous with underground, with being dead.

In a sense, the duplication is also a reduction of the self. Its result seems to be a martyrdom of the actual existence. The loss of self that ensues may eventually lead to a killing of the self, either literally or metaphorically. Here is Ted Hughes's very astute discussion of the role of the second self in modern psychology:

\[\text{Abundant evidence of Plath's capacity for self-sacrifice exists. Shortly after her marriage to Hughes she wrote in her journal, "I live in him until I live on my own"(185). Curiously, when she writes this it is in reference to her willingness to sacrifice her own poetic ambitions in support of his. In the early days of marriage, and in particular living as they did in Britain, it was Hughes's career that was most on the ascendant. Here, as one can see, the notion of what "life" entails is already hopelessly enmeshed with the idea of poetic aspiration. But more notable at this point is her belief in her own ability to "live" within another person.}\]
An ordinary ego still has to sleep and wake with some other more or less articulate personality hidden inside it, or behind it or beneath it, who carries on, just as before living its own outlandish life, and who turns out, in fact, to be very like the old poetic self: secularized, privatized, maybe only rarely poetic, but recognizably the same autonomous, mostly incommunicado, keeper of the dreams. Psychoanalysis simply re-drafted the co-tenancy contract in the new language. But in the process it did slightly change some things. By shifting the emphasis of certain clauses, it confirmed this other self, this new-style possibly poetic self, in powers that had previously often been challenged. It ensured, for instance, that this doppelgänger, though it might remain much of the time incognito, will always be dominant, with its hands, one way or another, on the controls; it will always possess superior knowledge about what is happening and will happen to the creature in which it dwells; and, more important, and reintroducing with a bang the heady higher gyroscope of a sacred creation, it may represent and may even contain, in its vital and so to speak genetic nucleus, the true self, the self at the source, that inmost core of the individual, which the Upanishads call the divine self, the most inaccessible thing of all. (WP 274)

Hughes identifies the control the doppelgänger exercises over its host, and goes on to assert how that control will eventually wish to express itself. Hughes concludes, “There is one further well-worked law, fundamental to psychoanalysis and to the modern secular outlook. This concerns the inevitability with which the true self, once it is awakened, and no matter how deeply and silently buried in the bones it may be, will always try to become the conscious centre of the whole being” (WP 275). Elsewhere Hughes has discussed how this operated in Plath, and how what was not useful to her poems (though it may very well have been of great concern to her loved ones), did not express itself on the page: “The hidden workshop, the tangle of roots, the crucible, controlled everything. Everything became another image of itself, another lens into itself. And whatever it could not use in this way, to objectify some disclosure of itself,
did not get onto the page at all” (WP 181). As Hughes sees it, what gets on to the page is the disclosure only of the doppelgänger. For this reason, it would be that the poems are at least twice removed from their author.

This other self, undeniably, is the stronger of the two. For Paula Bennett, the new self is the woman poet’s best recourse to express what the woman herself must contain in order to peacefully exist in society. Bennett writes of Plath, “For this woman-poet to write angry, violent, murderous poetry becomes . . . not just a means to revenge, but a way to re-create a new self, a self possessing all the power the old self had abjured” (Bennett 155). For all the power inherent in the new self, however, the destruction to the actual self continues. As Hughes writes, “That her new self, who could do so much, could not ultimately save her, is perhaps only to say what has often been learned on this particular field of conflict – that the moment of turning one’s back on an enemy who seems safely defeated, and is defeated, is the most dangerous moment of all. And there can be no guarantees” (WP 189). For Hughes, it is more the terms of her engagement with what he terms her “Ariel self” that are troubling Plath just prior to her suicide than any marital conflict or garden-variety depression. Plath, he believes, understood that her opportunity for success as a poet rested in her ability to live long enough to write the poems of Ariel. Hughes mentions Samuel Taylor Coleridge as an example of a poet who walked away from this confrontation with his second self, and thus ultimately failed as a poet (WP 187). At the time it may have appeared to Plath that the other roles she had planned to excel in, as wife, mother, daughter, etc., were more than she could master.

Sylvia Plath had already established within herself another who was an accomplished poet. Conflict between the selves, however, led to resentment, one of the
other. In Plath’s case, it is as if there were twins, one healthy, one not. Plath reveres and yet resents the poetic self who will outlive her. And the poetic self is angered by the perceived weaknesses of its host, who will eventually die and fail to sustain it.

Albert Gelpi talks about this division in “Emily Dickinson and the Deerslayer: The Dilemma of the Woman Poet in America,” in reference to Jungian theory. He relates that “all too easily, sometimes all too unwittingly, connection—which should move to union—can gradually fall into competition, then contention and conflict”(125).

That of the doubles locked in mortal conflict seems to be exactly the scenario portrayed in many of Plath’s poems. In her “Winter Landscape, with Rooks” she writes of a pond “Where, absurd and out-of-season, a single swan / Floats chaste as snow, taunting the clouded mind / Which hungers to haul the white reflection down”(21). The color white in Plath’s poems may be symbolic of purity or chastity, but it seems just as often a reference to the paper, and therefore to the superiority of the poetic self. In the image of the swans (one real and one reflected) is the metaphor of the double. Underneath the water the other, “the clouded mind,” wishes to ruin by drowning the one above. Similarly, Plath’s sometime “clouded mind” wished at times to destroy the white and superior poetic self. Plath’s “Moonrise” speaks of one moldering body lying in the grave, while another version of itself walks about “in clean linen”(98). The poem recognizes that though she herself will one day “rot,” whiteness

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4 And I believe this to be the same for Dickinson. White is the color in her verse worn by the elect, and when she asks in the Master letters how her Master would feel if she would come to him in white, it seems an apt metaphor for what she often spoke of as the superior visitation of the letter without the corporeal self.

5 I am reminded here that one of the most harrowing moments from the Plath-Hughes marriage was her burning of Hughes’ papers. The violence that she could not so easily perpetrate on Hughes himself could easily be exercised on his work, a relationship I believe she well understood.
will preserve the poetic self. And the poem contains echoes of other resurrection stories, a comparison that is still more explicit in other of her poems.

Dickinson, too, felt herself to be divided, sometimes into many, as in poem #298 where she writes,

   Alone, I cannot be—
   For Hosts- do visit me-
   Recordless Company-
   Who baffle Key—

   They have no Robes, nor Names-
   No Almanacs—nor Climes—
   But general Homes
   Like Gnomes—

   Their Coming, may be known
   By Couriers within—
   Their going—is not—
   For they’re never gone—

   (140)

In poem #196 she seems to invent another, Tim, who shares her troubles. They must die together in an ending that is slightly reminiscent of “My Life had Stood -- A Loaded Gun” (92-93). In her letters there is a propensity to refer to herself as “we,” and in her second letter to Higginson the connection between Dickinson and a second self who is closely linked to the poetry is quite explicit. A short passage from the famous letter follows:

   Thank you for the surgery; it was not so painful as I supposed. I bring you others, as you ask, though they might not differ. While my thought is undressed, I can make the distinction; but when I put them in the gown, they look alike and numb.

   You asked how old I was? I made no verse, but one or two, until this winter, sir.

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I had a terror since September, I could tell to none; and so I sing, as the boy does of the burying ground, because I am afraid.

You inquire my books. For poets, I have Keats, and Mr. and Mrs. Browning. For prose, Mr. Ruskin, Sir Thomas Browne, and the "Revelations." I went to school, but in your manner of the phrase had no education. When a little girl, I had a friend who taught me Immortality; but venturing too near, himself, he never returned. Soon after my tutor died, and for several years my lexicon was my only companion. Then I found one more, but he was not contented I be his scholar, so he left the land.

You ask of my companions. Hills, sir, and the sundown, and a dog large as myself, that my father bought me. They are better than beings because they know, but do not tell; and the noise in the pool at noon excels my piano. (238)

This passage is compelling on many levels. In the first quoted paragraph, Dickinson thanks Higginson for the "surgery," her way of acknowledging his comments upon the poems she had recently sent to him. The metaphor she chooses is a provocative one, linking the poems to her body and revealing that what is done to the poems is painful to her, though in this case "not so painful as . . . supposed." When Dickinson attempts to reply to Higginson's query regarding her age, he is met with a similar conflation between herself and the poems, as she answers that she "made no verse, but one or two, until this winter." Now, although we know that she wasn't exactly truthful in this (she had in fact been making verses for many years by this time), this isn't as important as the way she subsumes her chronological age to her age as a poet.

The letters to Higginson have been particularly cited as evidence of the "poses" Dickinson would assume. For some it is quite bothersome to find such an accomplished woman speaking to this man as if she were a little girl, hiding, it would seem, her considerable power. Yet, if one were to read the same letter as not being in the voice of Emily Dickinson, but in the voice of the poet Emily Dickinson felt herself in the process
of becoming, the voice of the letter becomes a very natural one. The poetic self was the recipient of the surgery she thanks Higginson for. And perhaps the poetic self’s age was only counted from those "one or two" verses of this winter, as poets will disown their early efforts until something they consider successful has been produced. Only from the time the "true" poems are written does it seem that the poet has been born. This would better explain the rest of the letter, as Dickinson goes on to write, "I went to school, but in your manner of the phrase had no education." We know that Dickinson was very well educated for her time and for any other, completing one year of the two-year college curriculum at Mount Holyoke Seminary. But if she means that she had no poetic education, then this would be closer to truth.

Poetry does seem to be what she is referring to, when in the next sentence she speaks of the friend who taught her "Immortality." We know that Leonard Humphrey, Dickinson’s first “master,” encouraged her as a poet and that she counted her relationship with him as her first true introduction to poetry and to death. In the years following Humphrey’s death, Dickinson was not yet a recluse and was far from isolated, but when she speaks of her lexicon as her "only companion," this too is easily explainable if the lexicon was the only companion the poet found. As the letter goes on, Dickinson explains to Higginson: "I could not weigh myself, myself. My size felt small to me. I read your chapters in the ‘Atlantic,’ and experienced honor for you. I was sure you would not reject a confiding question"(239). Certainly, there can be no confusion that what Dickinson wants weighed when she sends Higginson her verses is her stature as poet. The sense of being doubled, however, is evident in the letter. For she writes that she "could notweigh myself, myself," and those two references back to her self reveal the confusion inherent in existing in two different incarnations.
In Elizabeth Bishop's work there seems to be an abiding concern with the area between the two incarnations. In her "Poem" she meditates on the difference between the vision and the poem, the painting and the word, memory and reality:

How strange. And it's still loved,
or its memory is (it must have changed a lot).
Our visions coincided — "visions" is too serious a word — our looks, two looks:
Art "copying from life" and life itself,
life and the memory of it so compressed they've turned into each other. Which is which?
Life and the memory of it cramped,
dim, on a piece of Bristol board,
dim, but how live, how touching in detail -- the little that we get for free,
the little of our earthly trust. Not much.
About the size of our abidance
along with theirs: the munching cows,
the iris, crisp and shivering, the water still standing from spring freshets,
the yet-to-be-dismantled elms, the geese.

The poem is a meditation on family, too. Bishop receives the small oil, done by a great-uncle, and realizes that the scene is one she knew as a child. Looking at the painting, there is a sort of amazement at the ability of art to both record and to transcend time. It is an amazement at her ability to see so closely what her great-uncle had seen as to "coincide," so that life and art and memory compress into one another and the Bristol board that she holds ends up holding all of our "earthly trust," ends up holding all of life itself. But that is when art succeeds, and the artist she is reflecting upon here is not Bishop herself but her great-uncle. Oftener in Bishop, the transformation does not take place. In "The Fish" the moment of recognition happens, but only for an instant. The
epiphany of the poem comes with the release of the fish. Bishop writes of the glassy appearance of the eyes that do not admit her in, that do not return her stare:

I looked into his eyes
which were far larger than mine

but shallower, and yellowed,
the irises backed and packed
with tarnished tinfoil
seen through the lenses
of old scratched isinglass.

They shifted a little, but not
to return my stare.

(43)

The fish, in this case analogous to the otherworldly and hidden poetic self, is the victor in the encounter. That he surfaced even momentarily is a gift to the poet, and indeed, the reason for the poem. What occurs between them has less to do with the fisher (Bishop) and nearly all to do with the fish. Their visions, in this case, do not coincide. They only momentarily seem to meet. The poet experiences this same lack of connection when she comes face to face with her forebears in “Family Portrait”:

The portrait does not reply,
it stares; in my dusty eyes
it contemplates itself.
The living and dead relations

multiply in the glass.
I don’t distinguish those
that went away from those
that stay. I only perceive
the strange idea of family

traveling through the flesh.

(261)
A connection exists, however tenuous. Its reality is evident in the “flesh” of the speaker, and therefore undeniable. Time is negligible in this world, as it is in the painting in “Poem.” The living and the dead, those that went away and those that stayed, they are all the same “family.” As in “The Fish,” the portrait is as mute as a mirror. Bishop is the medium, rather, through which it views itself. Without her “flesh,” the portrait would be completely mute. But as long as she is there to turn her gaze on the portrait, the oil, the fish, all remain alive. These are like the aforementioned companions of Emily Dickinson, superior because “they know but do not tell.”

Sylvia Plath seemed to move with relative ease between voices. In her “Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices,” the poet gives voice to a woman who has happily given birth to a son, a woman who has miscarried, and another who will give her daughter up for adoption. Each voice is recognizably close to the poet and the poet’s experience: Plath was a mother, had also miscarried, and feared in her youth being “caught” by an unwanted pregnancy. But each voice is also distinct from the others. Quite often Plath’s poems seem to directly address another version of Sylvia Plath. As the narrator says to the one who enters her home uninvited in “The Other,” “The police love you, you confess everything”(201), seemingly in answer to those who would label her work confessional. She asks of that one, who she refers to as “White Nike,” “Is my life so intriguing?”(201). Again, we encounter her fascination with “whiteness” and with this double who is likened unto the goddess of victory. Plath says to that one, “Cold glass, how you insert yourself / between myself and myself”(202). It comes as no surprise to the author or her readers when she states in “Death & Co.,” “Two, of course there are two”(254). Elsewhere she had long been developing seconds to herself. In this passage from The Bell Jar, her character Esther Greenwood is busy
Greenwood says of the autobiographical novel she will write, "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" (98). When Plath set down to compose her autobiographical novel she called her heroine Esther, with six letters like Sylvia. The double is rarely such a lucky and friendly apparition. More commonly Plath's encounters with it are as she describes here in her journal from 1950: "A perfectly ghastly brief nightmare—I was looking at a head, showing it to someone—no one's I recognized, white and neat like a statue and very perfect. Then I said 'See' and opened the mouth to show that the inside was corrupt and running with ants" (qtd. in Lombardi 183).

The advent of the double involves a rebirth that rids the double of the former, corrupt self. Plath characterized her experience of shock treatment after her second suicide attempt as just such a rebirth. She wrote of the experience after shock treatment as "the inevitable going down the subterranean hall, waking to a new world, with no name, being born again, and not of woman" (Journals 113). Her belief that she had symbolically died and then been resurrected made her feel somewhat Christ-like, as Ted Hughes explains here:

The 'death', so important in all that she wrote after it, was that almost successful suicide attempt in the summer of 1953. The mythical dimensions of the experience seem to have been deepened, and made absolute, and illuminated, by two accidents: she lay undiscovered, in darkness, only intermittently half-conscious, for 'three days'; and the electric shock treatment which followed went wrong, and she was all but electrocuted – at least she always claimed. (WP 179)
Never mind Hughes's note of skepticism at the end. What is important is Plath's understanding of the event, even if she constructed a mythos around it to suit her. To her, those “three days” of entombment and the survival of that near-death did make her Christ-like, and the poems that followed are often poems of a “new self,” born not of her mother or father, but born this time of Plath herself. “Face Lift” is just such a poem, as she writes of her former, cast off self and the new one to come:

Now she’s done for, the dewlapped lady
I watched settle, line by line, in my mirror –
Old sock-face, sagged on a darning egg.
They’ve trapped her in some laboratory jar.
Let her die there, or wither incessantly for the next fifty years,
Nodding and rocking and fingering her thin hair.
Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,
Pink and smooth as a baby. (156)

The speaker is the “mother” to herself. Plath characterized the excitement in the process of being made new when she recorded in her journal her feelings about an impending move she and Hughes were about to make. Plath wrote, “Whenever we are about to move, this stirring and excitement comes, as if the old environment would keep the sludge and inertia of the self, and the bare new self slip shining into a better life” (Journals 329). For Hughes, Plath’s process of becoming and re-becoming her poetic self is the reason for the poems’ existence; he writes,

All her poems are in a sense by-products. Her real creation was that inner gestation and eventual birth of a new self-conquering self, to which her journal bears witness, and which proved itself so overwhelmingly in the Ariel poems of 1962. If this is the most important task a human being can undertake (and it must surely be one of the most difficult), then this is the importance of her
poems, that they provide such an intimate, accurate embodiment of the whole process from beginning to end—or almost to the end. (WP 189)

Hughes sees Plath’s “Poem for A Birthday” as a milestone in the process:

She was getting somewhere. Late in 1959 (toward the end of the surviving diaries) she had a dream, which at the time made a visionary impact on her, in which she was trying to reassemble a giant, shattered, stone Colossus. In the light of her private mythology, we can see this dream was momentous, and she versified it, addressing the ruins as ‘Father’, in a poem which she regarded, at the time, as a breakthrough. But the real significance of the dream emerges, perhaps, a few days later, when the quarry of anthropomorphic ruins reappears, in a poem titled ‘The Stones’. In this second poem, the ruins are none other than her hospital city, the factory where men are remade, and where, among the fragments, a new self has been put together. Or rather an old shattered self, reduced by violence to its essential core, has been repaired and renovated and born again, and—most significant of all—speaks with a new voice. This ‘birth’ is the culmination of her prolonged six-year ‘drama’. It is doubtful whether we would be reading this journal at all if the ‘birth’ recorded in the poem, ‘The Stones’, had not happened in a very real sense, in November 1959. (182)

In “The Stones,” that last sequence of “Poem for a Birthday,” Plath writes that

A workman walks by carrying a pink torso.  
The storerooms are full of hearts.  
This is the city of spare parts.  

My swaddled legs and arms smell sweet as rubber.  
Here they can doctor heads, or any limb.  
On Fridays the little children come  

To trade their hooks for hands.  
Dead men leave eyes for others.  
Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.

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6 It seems likely that this is where Hughes got the title for his own Birthday Letters.
Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.
The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.
My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.
I shall be good as new. (137)

But all along, and even before the reconstruction is complete, “the mouth-hole piped out, / Importunate cricket / In a quarry of silences. / The people of the city heard it”(136). Hughes refers to the poem “as a piece of practical magic.” He writes, “‘Poem for a Birthday’ came just at the right moment. Afterward, she knew something had happened, but it is only in retrospect that we can see what it was. During the next three years she herself came to view this time as the turning point in her writing career, the point where her real writing began”(WP 183). She is pursuing the same effect on her thirtieth birthday when she writes “Ariel.” As Hughes says of that poem, “The overt sense here is that the liberation from earthly restraints (earthly life) is a rebirth into something greater and more glorious but which is still some kind of life – a spiritual rebirth perhaps. She wrote it on her thirtieth birthday”(WP 199). Hughes explicitly links this process of rebirth to pregnancy:

The strange limbo of ‘gestation/regeneration’, which followed her ‘death’, lasted throughout the period of this journal, and she drew from the latter part of it all the poems of The Colossus, her first collection. We have spoken of this process as a ‘nursing’ of the ‘nucleus of the self’, as a hermetically sealed, slow transformation of her inner crisis; and the evidence surely supports these descriptions of it as a deeply secluded mythic and symbolic inner theater (sometimes a hospital theater), accessible to her only in her poetry. One would like to emphasize even more strongly the weird autonomy of what was going on in there. It gave the impression of

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being a secret crucible, or rather a womb, an almost biological process – and just as much beyond her manipulative interference. And like a pregnancy, selfish with her resources. (WP 180)

The process of rebirth need not be so dramatic in every case as it was in Plath's. M. L. Rosenthal says that every poet is

thrice-born at least: first, when they discover in themselves a love of the sounds of language and a desire to make attractive shapes with them; next, when they come alive to the riches of the speech around them; and third when they realize they have let themselves in for practicing an art and not merely recording what they hear or 'expressing themselves'. (The Poet's Art 29)

What is unusual in Plath is the very explicit symbolism she attached to this rebirth.

While the process is less exalted perhaps in Dickinson and Bishop, their record of it is no less remarkable. With each remaking and shifting of their various selves came yet another opportunity to create a perfect incarnation of the self. With the belief that they each are to some extent their own progenitors came further evidence of their own considerable power and responsibility.
“The woman is perfected”

“I am your opus,” says the narrator of Plath’s “Lady Lazarus.” The separation of the poetic creation from the writer herself is in part accomplished by the writer’s need to create a perfected self. The poet will represent the perfection of the person.

Anne Stevenson in her biography of Plath, *Bitter Fame*, opens the final chapter with this quote from Joseph Brodsky’s *Less Than One*: “A poet is a combination of an instrument and a human being in one person, with the former gradually taking over the latter. The sensation of this takeover is responsible for timbre; the realization of it, for destiny” (qtd. in *Bitter Fame* 300). While death is the known destiny of all human beings, the “instrument,” as Brodsky terms it, can achieve quite another destiny—but only to the extent that the instrument accomplishes its takeover of the human being. And for this, the human being must be more than compliant; the human being must willingly promote the takeover.

To some extent separation from others seems to be a first step in this process of takeover. As Dorothy Huff Oberhaus traces in *Emily Dickinson’s Fascicles: Method & Meaning*, Dickinson “recollect[ed] her death to the world as a supremely felicitous occasion when she leaned into ‘Perfectness,’” although she “immediately thereafter . . . began to suffer from the pain of self-denial necessitated by her chosen way of life” (87). Dickinson’s devotion to “perfectness” seems to have been complete by 1862, her most prolific year and the year her seclusion became nearly complete. Here Ted Hughes conjectures about what might have happened to Dickinson during that fateful year:

In 1862 alone it has been calculated that she wrote 366 poems. Those years coincided with the national
agitations of the Civil War, with her own coming to mental maturity, and with the beginning of her thirties—and perhaps she realized that her unusual endowment of love was not going to be asked for. This theory supposes that the eruption of her imagination and poetry followed when she shifted her passion, with the energy of desperation, from this lost person onto the only possible substitute—the entire Universe in its Divine aspect.

(WP 156)

Although Hughes refers to a “lost person,” one who could not or would not return Dickinson’s affections, the same lover numerous biographers have repeatedly attempted to identify, it might be equally possible to imagine Dickinson’s writing of 1862 as a response to a turning away from the self. If there were (and it is certain that there were) certain personal disappointments raging at the time, these belonged to someone Dickinson often referred to as “Daisy,” and not to, strictly speaking, the poet. Dickinson had other roles at her disposal to embody, as “empress” or as “czar” for instance, which served to distance her from the fray. The poet, in her longed for perfected state, could rise above life’s discontents and humanity with its flaws.

The self, then, that is presented in the verse represents a version of the woman at her imagined best. Separations from the common lot are evident in the poems, with speakers who are already dead, who are freakish half-human, half-animal creatures, who are wholly imagined but horrifying. But contrasted to this (and I am talking in a general sense of all three of my poets here) are the poems in which the speaker is a divine being. She might be a shaman, a priestess, a queen, and her poetic quest is heaven-sanctioned. This person represents the apotheosis of the fallen and flawed self.

Thus, one has the small child in Dickinson’s #454, rushing to school aware that the “Gods” have given her gifts that no one else, child or grown person, can even guess
at. And in Plath’s “Sheep in Fog” the protagonist is “let through to a heaven / Starless and fatherless, a dark water” (262), where she has achieved heaven without death, and without a corresponding birth, being “fatherless” as she is. In “Zoo Keeper’s Wife” the reality is as abnormal as it is exalted in “Sheep in Fog.” Here Plath writes of a world where the speaker “can stay awake all night, if need be - / Cold as an eel, without eyelids. / Where the heads and tails of my sisters decompose. / Look, they are melting like coins in the powerful juices” (154). Though the speaker is still special and powerful, she is seemingly untouched by the beauty that is possible to the speaker in “Black Rook in Rainy Weather.” In this poem, “MIRACLES occur, / If you care to call those spasmodic / Tricks of radiance miracles. / The wait’s begun again, / The long wait for the angel, / For that rare, random descent” (57).

The “angel” of “Black Rook in Rainy Weather,” with her “rare” and “random descent,” certainly resembles the figure of the muse. As Ted Hughes links this figure to the poetic self, he implies that the frustrating and the magical aspect of this being is that it is not under the writer’s control. I concur with Hughes, but wish to add that the choice to serve this being is very much the writer’s own, akin to establishing an open door policy to the supernatural. In this, the writer puts herself not only at one further remove from the common lot, but in the role of divine vessel. Hughes himself in Winter Pollen likens the poet in this to the tribal shaman. It is not a similarity that others have failed to note; Lorrie Goldensohn summons the same metaphor in Elizabeth Bishop: Biography of a Poetry. Goldensohn writes, “In speaking of initiation, the

1 This relatively early poem sets up a relationship Plath will continue to explore throughout the rest of her work: that she is essentially “Christ-like,” because of her fatherless state. In addition, being “let” into heaven without having to die would suggest that the poet had achieved an apotheosis akin to Mary’s.
shaman already speaks from within a community of the elect. Within this context, first
person narration is something unusual, literally, something of an alien self-
consciousness”(220). Goldensohn immediately establishes that Bishop as poet speaks
from a privileged position, at once “elect,” but also “alien.” Ted Hughes makes the
peril of being called to service in this role palpable. Hughes notes that when the “call”
comes to an individual, “the traditional penalty for refusing the ‘call’ is death of some
kind (which is why, in societies that observe such events closely, the ‘call’ itself is so
much feared: no normal person wants either of the two options)”(WP 452). In a poem
such as “The Hanging Man” Plath writes of a god who is responsible: “By the roots of
my hair some god got hold of me. / I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert
prophet”(141).

Charles R. Anderson’s explication in 14 By Emily Dickinson of Dickinson’s “I
Could not Stop for Death” accurately explains as well her feeling that she had dedicated
herself to an employment greater than herself. Anderson writes,

As an artist she ranked herself with [the] elite. At the
time of her dedication to poetry, presumably in the early
1860’s, someone ‘kindly stopped’ for her—lover, muse,
God—and she willingly put away the labor and leisure of
this world for the creative life of the spirit. Looking back
on the affairs of ‘Time’ at any point after making such a
momentous decision, she could easily feel ‘Since then –
tis Centuries.’ Remembering what she had renounced,
the happiness of a normal youth, sunshine and growing
things, she could experience a momentary feeling of
deprivation. But in another sense she had simply
triumphed over them, passing beyond earthly trammels.
Finally, this makes the most satisfactory reading of her
reversible image of motion and stasis during the journey
passing the setting sun and being passed by it. For though
in her withdrawal the events of the external world by-
passed her, in the poetic life made possible by it she
escaped the limitations of the mortal calendar. She was

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borne confidently, by her winged horse, 'toward Eternity'
in the immortality of her poems. (Davis 118)

Although her deprivations were great, so were her rewards. As Anderson surmises, the
choice was set into motion by someone, a muse, a lover, or a God who provided an
initial impetus toward poetry. Dickinson seems to have believed, however, that being a
poet would put her beyond worldly concerns, and further make her exceptional. Poem
#508 provides a description of what the process of becoming a poet might have been
like for her:

I've ceded - I've stopped being Theirs -
The name They dropped upon my face
With water, in the country church
Is finished using, now,
And They can put it with my Dolls.
My childhood, and the string of spools,
I've finished threading - too-

Baptized, before, without the choice,
But this time, consciously, of Grace -
Unto supremest name -
Called to my Full - The Crescent dropped -
Existence's whole Arc, filled up,
With one small Diadem.

My second Rank - too small the first -
Crowned - Crowing - on my Father's breast-
A half unconscious Queen -
But this time - Adequate - Erect,
With Will to choose, or to reject,
And I choose, just a Crown -

The poem describes a baptism and subsequent re-naming, this time in the full awareness
that was lacking at the first baptism. Who has she ceded from? The church, her family,
all of humanity, the possibilities are open. If she were “crowned” and “crowning” at her
first baptism, it seems she is no less crowing at this second, or at least singing. The
crown she chooses here will be chosen more often than just this once in her poems. As Betsy Erkkila writes in *Shakespeare's Sisters*: "Dickinson returned to a pre-revolutionary and aristocratic language of rank, titles, and divine right to assert the sovereignty of her self as absolute monarch"(51). Dickinson refers to the "day" that she was crowned in poem #356:

The Day that I was crowned
Was like the other Days—
Until the Coronation came—
And then—t’was Otherwise

As Carbon in the Coal
And Carbon in the Gem
Are One—and yet the former
Were dull for Diadem—

I rose, and all was plain—
But when the Day declined
Myself and It, in Majesty
Were equally-adorned—

The Grace that I—was chose—
To Me—surpassed the Crown
That was the Witness for the Grace—
’Twas even that ‘twas Mine—

Here, the “I” who begins the day is replaced by day’s end by another. Although she makes it clear that they are the same in essence, the same “carbon” whether of coal or of

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2 Dorothy Huff Oberhaus in *Emily Dickinson's Fascicles: Method and Meaning*, lists numerous examples in the fascicle she is examining (the reference numbers are Oberhaus’s): “In F-9-16 she has been given a crown and title, anticipating the many occasional poems in which she has been made royal, become a ‘Czar,’ a ‘Queen,’ or an ‘Empress’—‘The Day that I was crowned’ (F-29-4, J-356), for example, and ‘Title divine—is mine!’ in which she is both a ‘Wife’ and an ‘Empress’ (J-1072). In F-9-16 she then marvels that such a royal sake has ‘stooped down’ to her, as in ‘Perhaps you think me stooping’ Christ ‘stooped’ (J-833), as in ‘My worthiness is all my Doubt’ Deity ‘stoop[s]’ (F-37-19, J-751), and as in the Imitation of Christ the disciple repeatedly marvels that Christ has ‘stooped’ down to his unworthy self”(85).
gem, the self at the end of the day is now equivalent to the day, splendid and unique as nature. The “crown,” or outward manifestation of the grace, is not as important as the grace itself, though both belong to the speaker. The use of the word “dull,” though obviously a reference to the coal’s lack of luster, seems also suggestive of the intellect. Having, perhaps, a dull intellect before the crowning takes place, the speaker is transformed by grace. If the crown the poem refers to is the poem, and the grace is the ability to create poetry, then the better form that the carbon takes also represents the perfection of the intellectual self. The “crowned” version of the self is a perfected version of the self.

Elizabeth Bishop was in many ways working further back, looking to a time before she was born in search of a perfecting of her self. Any familiarity with Bishop’s biography easily reveals her preoccupation with her orphan status, and the feeling that she was essentially rootless as a result. But in her writing it could be otherwise. As Robert Lowell is quoted as saying of Bishop in David Kalstone’s Becoming a Poet: “She has gotten a world, not just a way of writing” (138). Bishop nearly confirms that she was after such a re-creation. When questioned about the reasons behind her extended exile from the States to Brazil, she answered, “It is sometimes necessary for sons to leave the family hearth; it may well be necessary at least for intellectuals to leave their country as it is for children to leave their homes, not to get away from them, but to re-create them” (Kalstone 155). Bishop thought herself successful, too, saying much later that what she doing was “recreating a sort of deluxe Nova Scotia all over again in Brazil. And now I’m my own grandmother” (Kalstone 152). In a sense, it is as if Bishop had to reach into the past to begin to accomplish the making of her self. As if
before creating Elizabeth Bishop, she had to create a home, her own Nova Scotia, and her family all over again.

The desire to create a new self is not limited to these three poets. As Betsy Erkkila writes, evidence of such desire can be found in the writings of Simon De Beauvoir, where what Erkkila terms the “De Beauvoir Woman” is in the process of becoming herself. Erkkila writes that she “is not a completed reality, but rather a becoming, and it is in her becoming that she should be compared with man; that is to say, her possibilities should be defined. What gives rise to much of the debate is the tendency to reduce her to what she has been” (161); that is, to ignore her possibilities. Adrienne Rich has spoken of her own use of writing to allow her “to give birth to— a recognizable, autonomous self, a creation in poetry and in life” (Erkkila 157).

But how does the writing allow such a re-creation to be possible? Plath wrote once that she wanted in her writing to get “the real world. Real situations, behind which the great gods play the drama of blood, lust and death” (Stevenson 151). In this statement rests the conundrum, for the real world meant very little without the underpinning of something mysterious and monumental. In a poem like “On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad,” one finds Plath searching for the magic behind the mundane, and failing, the speaker of the poem complains, to find it:

But no hocus-pocus of green angels  
Damasks with dazzle the threadbare eye; 
‘My trouble, doctor, is: I see a tree, 
And that damn scrupulous tree won’t practice wiles 
To beguile sight: 
E. g. by cant of light 
Concoct a Daphne; 
My tree stays a tree.

‘However I wrench obstinate bark and trunk 
To my sweet will, no luminous shape
Steps out radiant in limb, eye, lip,
To hoodwink the honest earth which pointblank
Spurns such fiction
As nymph's; cold vision
Will have no counterfeit
Palmed off on it.

'No doubt now in dream-propertied fall some moon-eyed,
Star-lucky sleight-of-hand man watches
My jilting lady squander coin, gold leaf stock ditches,
And the opulent air go studded with seed,
While this beggared brain
Hatches no fortune,
But from leaf, from grass,
Thieves what it has.'(66)

As she says, “My tree stays a tree,” and the magic, which would make it a Daphne, is lacking. The poem points to the difficulty of remaking the world, and the various approaches that fail the poet this time. Finally, she is reduced to thieving if need be. Somewhere else, some “man,” is having an easier time of it, watching her “lady” (Plath herself?) squander what she should be able to transform.

In “Words,” Plath writes of the “fixed stars” which “Govern a life”(270). But poetry is different from life. Poetry unleashes words, the poem suggests, which carry on an existence separate from the life. As she writes, “Years later I / Encounter them on the road —/ Words dry and riderless, / The indefatigable hoof-taps”(270). Life is rather more static, and sadly unchangeable to Plath. One reality that she finds difficult to accept is the many-layered past that belongs to us all, a past that seems to make the future largely predetermined. As she writes in “A Life,” “From the mercury-backed glass / Mother, grandmother, great grandmother / Reach hag hands to haul me in, / And an image looms under the fishpond surface / Where the daft father went down / With orange duck-feet winnowing his hair”(70). To escape the fiendish and menacing women that she sees when she looks into the mirror, Plath invents an alternate reality.
where she is the first of her kind. On two occasions in her journals, she even refers to herself as “Eve,” the first woman (40 and 75). In her early poem “Tale of A Tub,” appears the same fantasy: “Each day demands we create our whole world over, / disguising the constant horror in a coat / of many-colored fictions; we mask our past / in the green of Eden, pretend future’s shining fruit / can sprout from the navel of this present waste.”

It is not unusual that Plath would look to Eden and Eve for one way out of her present circumstances. Rather, the stories of Christianity provide numerous metaphors for rebirth. Ted Hughes wrote in the preface to Plath’s Journals of her desire to be metaphorically reborn:

She showed something violent in this, something very primitive, perhaps very female, a readiness, even a need, to sacrifice everything to the new birth. With her, this was vividly formulated at every level of her being. The negative phase of it, logically, is suicide. But the positive phase (more familiar in religious terms) is the death of the old false self in the birth of the new real one. And this is what she finally did achieve, after a long and painful labor. (xiv)

As mentioned before, Hughes traced her success to the writing of “Poem for a Birthday,” and although the poem was written by Plath to commemorate an actual birthday, one cannot fail to note the possibility that she also intended the poem to be just such a declaration of a new birth, the beginning of a new life, this time created by

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3 It is deeply interesting to find Emily Dickinson indulging in the same fantasy. In an early letter to Mrs. Holland she writes, “I have lately come to the conclusion that I am Eve, alias Mrs. Adam. You know there is no account of her death in the Bible, and why am not I Eve? If you find any statements which you think likely to prove the truth of the case, I wish you would send them to me without delay.”
herself and in a poem. The poem begins with the rejection of a “mother,” as Plath
writes in the section entitled “Who,” “Mother, you are the one mouth / I would be a
tongue to. Mother of otherness / Eat me. Wastebasket gaper, shadow of a
doorway”(132). The second section, “Dark House,” continues,

This is a dark house, very big.
I made it myself;
Cell by Cell from a quiet corner.
Chewing at the gray paper,
Oozing the glue drops,
Whistling, wiggling my ears.
Thinking of something else.

It has so many cellars,
Such eelish delvings!
I am round as an owl,
I see by my own light.
Any day I may litter puppies
Or mother a horse. My belly moves.
(132)

Many of the images here are of the office: the wastebasket, the gray paper, the glue and
the quiet corner. But always in the midst of these pedestrian images are the freakish:
the litter of puppies, the horse, the eelish delvings (and all of these images repeat
throughout the body of Plath’s work). The line that seems particularly important carries
the boast of a small child: “I made it myself.” The poems tell a story similar to the
diaries, that of a poet being forced into existence by Plath, seemingly out of necessity.
Whatever gets birthed in “Poem of a Birthday” is not of primary significance. What
matters is that it lives, and that she is its mother. “Stillborn” reflects another possible
outcome:

These poems do not live: it’s a sad diagnosis.
They grew their toes and fingers well enough.
Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.
If they missed out on walking about like people
It wasn't for any lack of mother-love.

O I cannot understand what happened to them!
They are proper in shape and number and every part.
They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid!
They smile and smile and smile and smile at me.
And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start.

They are not pigs, they are not even fish,
Though they have a piggy and a fishy air –
It would be better if they were alive, and that's what they were.
But they are dead, and their mother near dead with distraction,
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.

(142)

A note of despair at the lifelessness of the progeny is here, as it is in Plath’s journals
where one can find Plath talking back to a photo of herself she pastes in, saying, “Look
at that ugly dead mask here and do not forget it . . . the pouting disconsolate mouth, the
flat, bored, numb, expressionless eyes: symptoms of the foul decay within” (66). And
at other points in the journals, too, when she returns to the pages and mocks what she
has written. At one point she had written, “What is better than being a virgin?” Later
she answers herself in the margin, “Being raped” (4).

Poets have long regarded poetry as a form of religion, a means of redemption
and as life-giving as the act of birth. As Plath herself put it in her Journals,

Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a
relearning and reloving of people and the world as they
are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass
away like a day of typing or a day of teaching. The
writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world.
People read it: react to it as to a person, a philosophy, a
religion, a flower: they like it, or do not. (270-271)
Not only does Plath speak of writing as a religious act, but also as a way of "reforming" people, as she says, "as they are and as they might be." As William Robert Sherwood writes in *Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson*: "The creation of a poem is not an act of intellection so much as it is the saving of a life" (211). For Dickinson it certainly seems that a devotion to poetry replaced the devotion she was expected to have, but could not muster, for organized religion. This is perhaps what she is alluding to when she writes to Susan Gilbert, "I shall remain alone, and though in that last day, the Jesus Christ you love, remark he does not know me—there is a darker spirit will not disown its child" (306). We know from her letters that she sought excuses to miss Sunday services, preferring to spend those quiet times alone in her garden and catching up her correspondences. Many of the poems speak of Sabbaths conducted by the birds and Dickinson alone. In #18, the poet seems to take the role of preacher, pronouncing: "In the name of the Bee— / And of the Butterfly— / And of the Breeze—Amen!" Obviously, this is a different kind of devotion, but one she felt eminently able to conduct. As has been elsewhere remarked, Dickinson often seemed to place herself in marked proximity to deity. For instance, in #374 one finds her remarking nonchalantly: "I went to Heaven— / 'Twas a small Town." Nor did Dickinson thing it wrong for her to scold or correct God. In poem #376 she writes, "Of Course—I prayed— / And did God Care? / He cared as much as on the Air / A Bird—had stamped her foot— / And cried 'Give Me.'" Although He hasn't listened, her complaint is no less made.

Sometimes what Dickinson is creating through religious imagery in her poems seems to border on the blasphemous. In poem #387, the "churches" seem to suggest sexual union: "The Sweetest Heresy received / That Man and Woman know / Each
Other’s Convert / Though the Faith accommodate but Two— / The Churches are so frequent- / The Ritual- so small- /The Grace so unavoidable- / To fail- is Infidel.”

Certainly, this is a different sort of service than the one being held down the street from the Homestead each Sunday, a love relationship as the religion, as she writes, the “sweetest heresy.” “There came a Day at Summer’s full” is a better known example of sexualized religion in Dickinson. In this poem, what seems to be a parting of lovers is compared to a crucifixion, the beginning of a long suffering that will end only in the resurrection:

There came a Day at Summer’s full,
Entirely for me-
I thought that such were for the Saints,
Where Resurrections —be-

The Sun, as common, went abroad,
The flowers, accustomed, blew,
As if no soul the solstice passed
That maketh all things new—

The time was scarce profaned, by speech—
The symbol of a word
Was needless, as at Sacrament,
The Wardrobe—of our Lord—

Each was to each The Sealed Church,
Permitted to commune this-time-
Lest we too awkward show
At Supper of the Lamb.

The Hours slid fast—as Hours will,
Clutched tight, by greedy hands—
So faces on two Decks, look back,
Bound to opposing lands—

And so when all the time had leaked,
Without external sound
Each bound the Other’s Crucifix—
We gave no other Bond—
Sufficient troth, that we shall rise-
Deposed-at length, the Grave-
To that new Marriage,
Justified-through Calvaries of Love-

(#322)

What might appear to others to be blasphemies do not leave her fearful. Dickinson had no doubt that she would achieve heaven; if such a place existed she didn’t believe it would be denied her. She had faith in the loving God, a creature different from the one she found discussed at the local church. So when Dickinson writes in #324, “Some keep the Sabbath going to Church- / I keep it, staying at Home-,” it seems that she does mean that God and she are conducting their own services, with the help of the birds, and that this is the heaven, already achieved, on earth. Dickinson writes, “God preaches, a noted Clergyman— / And the sermon is never long, / So instead of getting to Heaven, at last— / I’m going, all along,” and the satisfaction and happiness found in this is palpable. The fun Dickinson can have with the loftiest of topics is part of her charm.

Poem #79 offers such an approach to the subject of the final judgment, rendering it with the lightness (at least in its first half) of a girl discussing her plans for the evening:

Going to Heaven!
I don’t know when—
Pray do not ask me how!
Indeed I’m too astonished
To think of answering you!
Going to Heaven!
How dim it sounds!
And yet it will be done
As sure as flocks go home at night
Unto the Shepherd’s arm!

Perhaps you’re going too!
Who knows?
If you should get there first
Save just a little space for me
Close to the two I lost—
The smallest ‘Robe’ will fit me
And just a bit of ‘Crown’—
For you know we do not mind our dress
When we are going home—

I’m glad I don’t believe it
For it would stop my breath—
And I’d like to look a little more
At such a curious Earth!
I’m glad they did believe it
Whom I have never found
Since the mighty Autumn afternoon
I left them in the ground.

Only when she mentions the “lost” two does the poem move toward solemnity. Of the many poems Dickinson wrote on the subject of dying, this one seems to most encapsulate the view she portrayed in her letters, one of amused skepticism. On the one hand, she doesn’t believe she is going; on the other she knows she must, because those she left in the ground certainly have. This presupposes the existence of a heaven, because Dickinson did not accept death as an end. She always thought that those who died were still near her; she could just no longer find them. She is sure that they are in another home, and that one day she will go home too. As she wrote in one of her last letters and what was to become her epitaph, “Called Home.”

Meanwhile, on the earth which she felt held a predominant place in her affections she was busy leading other lives. As she wrote to her cousins in consolation

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4 In a letter to Higginson she described her family thus, “I have a brother and sister; my mother does not care for thought, and father, too busy with his briefs to notice what we do. He buys me many books, but begs me not to read them, because he fears they joggle the mind. They are religious, except me, and address an eclipse, every morning, whom they call their ‘Father’” (404). She seems hardly pained or embarrassed by her lack of piety.
on the death of their father: “Be sure you crowd all others out, precious little cousins. Good-night. Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray”(421). With her lines she enclosed a poem. The poem is the equivalent of the prayer she cannot make for her cousins. As the poetry offers a substitute means of devotion, the poem offers an altogether other means of being. When Dickinson remarks to Higginson that she had read “Miss Prescott's ‘Circumstance,’ but it followed me in the dark, so I avoided her”(404), she betrays in her word choice the belief that the book might be the proxy of the woman. In a poem like #199, “I'm wife -I've finished that-- / That other state-- /I'm Czar—I'm ‘Woman’ now,” she assumes a role unassumed by Dickinson in her actual life. It is a hidden status, though, like that of God: “How odd the Girl's life looks / Behind this soft Eclipse—/ I think that Earth feels so / To folks in Heaven- now.” Remember, she wrote to Higginson that her family each morning addressed an eclipse they called “Father.” The speaker of the poem occupies a similar exalted position, “Behind this soft eclipse.” There are many Dickinson poems that allow Dickinson to speak in other voices, and as Paula Bennett seems correctly to surmise, the power of Dickinson's voice might in some part reside in that hers “was a voice that obtained its power from the fact that the person behind it had experienced in her poetry, if not in her life, all the stages of a woman's life, from childhood through ecstasy and marriage to, finally, martyrdom and death”(Bennett 78). The poetry, then, becomes the means to an exemplary and abundantly full life.

Sylvia Plath's work represents an equally full existence, though of a different sort from Dickinson's. Plath's work tends toward the larger-than-life, the mythic, and ultimately, the tragic. As Joyce Carol Oates writes in her essay “The Death Throes of Romanticism”: “It is proper to say that Sylvia Plath represents for us a tragic figure
involved in a tragic action, and that her tragedy is offered to us as a near-perfect work of art, in her books" (Stevenson 300). Although the tragic outcome of Plath’s life is well known, that must remain separate from the tragic action of the poetry. Anne Stevenson points out that Plath sometimes revised her personal history to serve “the purposes of her art-myth; she revised her life constantly to suit her art”(14). It is equally true that her art served as a place to further revise her life by elevating it to god-like proportions, as she does in “Electra on Azalea Path”:

The day you died I went into the dirt,
Into the lightless hibernaculum
Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard
Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard.
It was good for twenty years, that wintering --
As if you had never existed, as if I came
God-fathered into the world from my mother’s belly:
Her wide bed wore the stain of divinity.
I had nothing to do with guilt or anything
When I wormed back under my mother’s heart.

Small as a doll in my dress of innocence
I lay dreaming your epic, image by image.
Nobody died or withered on that stage.
Everything took place in a durable whiteness.
The day I woke, I woke on Churchyard Hill.
I found your name, I found your bones and all
Enlisted in a cramped necropolis,
Your speckled stone askew by an iron fence.

In this charity ward, this poorhouse, where the dead
Crowd foot to foot, head to head, no flower
Breaks the soil. This is Azalea Path.
A field of burdock opens to the south.
Six feet of yellow gravel cover you.
The artificial red sage does not stir
In the basket of plastic evergreens they put
At the headstone next to yours, nor does it rot,
Although the rains dissolve a bloody dye:
The ersatz petals drip, and they drip red.

Another kind of redness bothers me:
*The day your slack sail drank my sister’s breath*
The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth
My mother unrolled at your last homecoming.
I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy.
The truth is, one late October, at my birth-cry
A scorpion stung its head, an ill-starred thing;
My mother dreamed you face down in the sea.

The stony actors poise and pause for breath.
I brought my love to bear, and then you died.
It was the gangrene ate you to the bone
My mother said; you died like any man.
How shall I age into that state of mind?
I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,
My own blue razor rusting in my throat.
O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at
Your gate, father -- your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.
It was my love that did us both to death.

In this poem, the true story of her visit to her father’s grave takes on the epic
proportions of the Electra myth, and the Plath figure is elevated to tragic heroine. The
movement is from the knowable to the unknown, to some extent, leaving the female
character in the poem as inscrutable as god. Her experience, after all, is now like no
one else’s. When she was composing “Full Fathom Five,” she wrote,

It relates more richly to my life and imagery than
anything else I’ve dreamed up: has the background of The
Tempest, the association of the sea, which is a central
metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the artist’s
subconscious, of the father image—relating to my own
father, the buried male muse and god-creator risen to be
my mate in Ted, to the sea-father Neptune—and the
pearls and coral highly-wrought to art: pearls sea-changed
from the ubiquitous grit of sorrow and dull routine.

(Journals 222)

What seems rather evident in this passage is that the mythmaking extended outside the
poem. Plath ascribed, for instance, a “central metaphor” to her childhood, and it seems
fair to say that Hughes, the “male muse and god-creator,” and her father really were intertwined in her thinking.

But one must not lose sight of the fact that these are Plath’s myths, not necessarily her realities. The power these male figures might hold over her is only that which she, as their creator, ascribes to them on the page. Her poem “The Colossus” shows the poet at work on her creation:

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.
Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles
Proceed from your great lips.
It’s worse than a barnyard.

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am none the wiser.

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

A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us. O father, all by yourself
You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.

Perhaps because of the address, “O father,” most criticism of the poem tends to discuss Plath’s relationship with her dead father; the poem being, then, a record of her failed attempts to conjure him poetically. However, in the act of putting together the colossus she is also recording the making of a self. The “you” of the poem at times seems to shift between the poet and the father figure. Particularly in the second stanza, where the thirty years that the poet has labored being also Plath’s age, the throat that has been
labored over might equally well be Plath’s own. And perhaps it is Plath who considers herself “an oracle / Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other,” since it is Plath who is attempting to make the Colossus speak. But, then, it wouldn’t be accurate to say that what she seeks is speech alone. For already the “mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles” emerge. This doesn’t satisfy. What the poet seems to be after is a particular sort of speech, something, perhaps, more “pithy and historical.” The Colossus, by himself, is these things. His words (or hers) could elevate his daughter to such. Other poems, such as the “Maenad” section of “Poem for a Birthday,” show her achieving just this, moving from the reality of Sylvia Plath into the realm of the mythic. As she begins,

Once I was ordinary:
Sat by my father’s bean tree
Eating the fingers of wisdom.
The birds made milk.
When it thundered I hid under a flat stone.

The mother of mouths didn’t love me.
The old man shrank to a doll.
O I am too big to go backward:
Birdmilk is feathers,
The bean leaves are as dumb as hands.

This month is fit for little.
The dead ripen in the grapeleaves.
A red tongue is among us.
Mother, keep out of my barnyard,
I am becoming another.

Dog-head, devourer:
Feed me the berries of dark.
The lids won’t shut. Time
Unwinds from the great umbilicus of the sun
Its endless glitter.

I must swallow it all.

Lady, who are these others in the moon’s vat –
Sleepdrunk, their limbs at odds?

143
In this light the blood is black.  
Tell me my name.  

(133)

She waits for some unidentified lady to tell her who she is. In the poems, who she is remains relatively fluid. In “Daddy,” famously, she writes, “I think I may well be a Jew” (223). In “Purdah,” she is Medea: “I shall unloose— / From the small jeweled / Doll he guards like a heart; / The lioness, / The shriek in the bath, / The cloak of holes” (244). Gilbert points out Plath’s recurring “bee” mythology, which she took from her father’s work on bees, and her own experience as a beekeeper, writing,

For Plath the baby is often a mediating and comparatively healthy image of freedom (which is just another important reason why the Plath Myth has been of such compelling interest to women), and this is because in her view the fertile mother is a queen bee, an analog for the fertile and liberated poet, the opposite of that dead drone in the wax house who was the sterile egotistical mistress of darkness and daddy. (Gilbert 255)

“Lady Lazarus” is Plath at her myth-making best. In it, the speaker is a carnival freak of sorts, a modern-day Lazarus. She combines biblical imagery with the circus atmosphere, and the very real details of Plath’s own biography, like the suicide attempts that occurred once in every decade of her life, but that she survived until the third:

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it—

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen.
Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me head and foot—
The big strip tease.
Gentleman, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

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.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.
I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I’ve a call.
It’s easy enough to do it in a cell.
It’s easy enough to do it and stay put.
It’s the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

‘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

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash—
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.
Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

These are not the experiences of a normal woman. In stanzas nine and ten she talks of what is left of her: the ash, and it seems, a shriek. Out of the death, the decay, and the nothingness, the voice remains, and the voice is able to do miraculous things. This is the reality of the poet, and is perhaps what moved Lawrence Lipking to write, "Of course poets share the human lot. But the great poet also makes his own destiny; he makes it, precisely, with his poems"(ix).

This is perhaps also the reason Dickinson built her mythology around the poet. Poem #569 is a wonderful elucidation of her hierarchy:

I reckon – when I count at all-
First – Poets – Then the Sun-
Then Summer – Then the Heaven of God –
And then – the List is done –

But, looking back – the First so seems
To Comprehend the Whole –
The Others look a needless Show –
So I write – Poets – All-

Their Summer – lasts a Solid Year –
They can afford a Sun
The East – would deem extravagant –
And if the Further Heaven –

Be Beautiful as they prepare
For those who worship Them –
It is too difficult a Grace –
To justify the Dream –

The poet might almost seem to be worthy of worship (and notice that the "Heaven of God" appears fourth on her list). "Poets—All," she writes, and one might question where she places herself among them. Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* wrote
that "American poets, rather more than other Western poets, at least since the
Enlightenment, are astonishing in their ambitions. Each wants to be the unifier, to be
the whole of which all other poets are only parts"(52). Did Dickinson, as Bloom
contends others do, wish to be the first among all others, and more than the summer,
more than the sun? Did she wish people to say of her, as she does of other poets in
#448:

This was a Poet – It is That
Distills amazing sense
From ordinary Meanings-
And Attar so immense

From the familiar species
That perished by the Door –
We wonder it was not Ourselves
Arrested it – before –

Of Pictures, the Discloser –
The Poet – it is He –
Entitles Us – by Contrast –
To ceaseless Poverty –

Of Portion – so unconscious –
The Robbing – could not harm –
Himself – to Him – a Fortune-
Exterior – to Time-

The self-sufficiency of the poet in Dickinson’s poem, who is “Himself—to Him—a
fortune,” is enviable. The poet who is capable of all she writes is certainly superior to
the common lot, one who is entrusted with revealing truths unknown to most men. In
poem #338 she writes of God, “I know that He exists. / Somewhere – in Silence— / He
has hid his rare life / From our gross eyes.” As she says that He hides in silence,
presumably, then, she indicates that speech reveals him. A job such as this requires
perfection in the process, and poem #1126 is reflective of what we know to be
Dickinson's own painstaking process of revision. But #1126 also compares the process to divine election. Faith, like the poem, is less a choice than a revelation, though the work must be done to arrive there:

Shall I take thee, the Poet said
To the propounded word?
Be stationed with the Candidates
Till I have finer tried –

The Poet searched Philology
And when about to ring
For the suspended Candidate
There came unsummoned in –

That portion of the Vision
The World applied to fill
Not unto nomination
The Cherubim reveal -

Once the difficult process is accomplished, the finished product wears a semblance of effortless grace. This is in part because it is divine and inspired. The poem, like the grace bestowed in communion, is precious. In its true form, it is awarded to few. Poem #1452 explicitly makes the connection between the communion and thought truly captured in words:

Your thoughts don't have words every day
They come a single time
Like signal esoteric sips
Of the communion Wine
Which while you taste so native seems
So easy so to be
You cannot comprehend its price
Nor its infrequency

Poems such as this, some might say, serve to perpetuate the mystique of the poet and the poetic process. The poet distances herself from her readers in this way, perhaps.
But it seems likely that the frequent occurrence of poems about poetry owes more to the mystery the poets themselves feel is inherent in the process of composition. What happens on the page, as Dickinson’s #1126 “Shall I take thee, the Poet said” implies, appears even to the poet as a combination of hard work and divine inspiration. It is no wonder then, that the poet herself begins to assume mythic proportions, as if the poem springs not from the individual alone, but from the individual imbued with a touch of magic, an altogether separate self.

The poetry produced consequently reflects this split. As Albert Poulin remarks in the essay that accompanies his anthology Contemporary American Poetry: “The collective impact of today’s poetry . . . seems to say: I am my own myth”(660). This is not restricted to Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop or Sylvia Plath. As Helen Vendler writes in The Music of What Happens, “Yeats at one point called himself a marble triton growing old among the streams; that moment when a poet becomes marble is the moment of myth”(439).

Ted Hughes believed that the myth was a reflection of the poet’s truest self, and so had as its foundation an insight into the subconscious. That a mythology would grow around the poet, then, was taken for granted. The mythology would be always with each of us, just more accessible to the poet, and made visible in the poem. Hughes writes that the “poet’s myths always are, (among other things) a projected symbolic self-portrait of the poet’s own deepest psychological makeup”(WP 375). The biographical details would necessarily be a component of this mythology, as they are a component of the psychological makeup of the author. Hughes justified the publication of Plath’s journals in this manner, saying,
The interrelationship [between the journals and her poems] is especially important in a writer whose work was so completely centered on her biographical details, though it’s important to understand that the autobiography does not work in Plath as it does in the ‘confessional writers’, but rather in a mythological sense—as can be seen most clearly in Judith Kroll’s critical study ‘Chapters in a Mythology’. (Journals xi)

In what is traditionally regarded as Plath’s last poem, “Edge,” the biographical details and the mythic seem of equal importance. Plath writes,

The woman is perfected.
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffen and odors bleed
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
Her blacks crackle and drag.

(272)
Some of the actual details of her suicide are here, such as the pitcher of milk left for her two babies next to their beds, and here too is the sense that a conclusion has been reached, a resignation, and the mother figure in the moon who, she felt, would regard the whole scene unflinchingly. But the tragedy is also one of "Greek necessity," and it is as beautiful as it is terrifying. The orchestration of the death seems to have been foretold in the poem, and perfected in the poem, just as the woman, in the poem, "is perfected." If perfection of the self, in the poem at least, is the goal, then the poem is one of triumph. To lose the gift of the poem might be, to the poet, a fate worse than the death itself. It would be the failure of the creation, both the poem and the self that the writer has worked to create. Hughes says,

For any poet, this loss means acute distress. It means, in effect, that the poetic self's bid to convert the ordinary personality to its own terms, or to supplant it, or to dissolve it within itself, [was] successfully resisted. And this in turn means depression -- the unproductive poet's melancholia. Or it may take the form of violent psychological or even physical breakdown, or religious crisis. (WP 276)

To remain until the death a poet, as Plath did, is the triumph of the poetic self over the more fallible woman. At this point whatever identity the writer once held, daughter, wife, woman, is supplanted, leaving only the poet. Dickinson wrote, "Poets—All," and when the poet is all that is left, the woman is in a state of perfection. The poet has, after all, made art out of the woman and what was her life.
VI

“I will be a little god in my small way”

The title Girls Who Would Be Gods was taken from Plath’s statement that she would like to be known as “the girl who wanted to be God.” Looking at the work of these very diverse woman poets, this desire toward godhead seems to emerge as a common goal for each. The poet, as Auden said, takes as his or her job the creation of secondary worlds. In the world of her creation, the poet is god. As mythology, the figure of god can be counted upon to evoke an emotional response in the reader, and, presumably, in the writer who feels competent to evoke its name and assume its position. The power to evoke that name as her own comes to the writer relatively late in her development, after the poet has overtaken the less powerful and able personality of the girl. Plath writes only toward the end of her life: “Now I resemble a sort of god” (147). Elizabeth Bishop struggles throughout her life to reach a similar conclusion, but without quite ever claiming that she is God. Dickinson, on the other hand, seems deceptively sure of her power, writing in #724: “It is easy to invent a life— / God does it— every Day.”

In American culture, where Christianity is the predominant belief, it may seem unusual for a woman to aspire toward godhead. But in literature, such undertakings are not without precedent. Ted Hughes in Winter Pollen discusses the woman poet’s position as being similar to that of a shaman. And the role of shaman, he notes, is not an exclusively male one. Hughes explains, “One main circumstance in becoming a shaman, in the first place, is that once you’ve been chosen by the spirits, and dreamed the dreams, there is no other life for you, you must shamanize or die: this belief seems almost universal. The calling is not exclusively male: in some traditions (Japanese)
women predominate" (58). Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* posits that the
female who desires to be god is moved by her own narcissism: "At once priestess and
idol, the narcissist soars haloed with glory through the eternal realm, and below the
clouds creatures kneel in adoration; she is God wrapped in self-contemplation. 'I love
myself, I am my God!' said Mme Mejerowsky. To become God is to accomplish the
impossible" (632). Other writers have doubtless recognized the impulse but perhaps
have lacked the unabashed voice of Mme Mejerowsky in proclaiming it. Helen Hunt
Jackson, Dickinson's fervent supporter, wrote that "the woman who creates and sustains
a home, and under whose hands children grow up to be strong and pure women, is a
creator, second only to God" (Ostriker 88). Such a statement, made in nineteenth
century America as it was, one would think would have been considered a blasphemy.
The role of woman as creator, certainly, is one that Jackson would not have confined to
childrearing. Knowing Jackson's strong views regarding her own literary ability and
Dickinson's as well, it seems not irrational to assume that Jackson would have put the
woman poet somewhere on par with the woman as mother. Late in the twentieth
century one finds Anne Sexton writing unabashedly, as Ostriker notes, "When I was
Christ, I felt like Christ" (72). And again, one should note that the impulse is not
restricted to the woman poet. Hughes identifies a similar drive in the work of T.S.
Eliot. Hughes writes, "We could fix our attention, first of all, on the fact that the mirror
image of Eliot's poetic self is a god, and not only a god but (albeit in disguise) the
supreme autochthonous God of the natural cycle and of the cultures of the West" (*WP
283). James Olney identifies in Walt Whitman the identification with God, but believes
this identification to be usually missing in more self-effacing poets like Dickinson and
Hopkins: "This was not Whitman's ordinary experience—when he looked into the
mirror he saw not only his own but God’s reflection—but it does seem to me eerily accurate for Dickinson often and Hopkins sometimes: when they looked into the mirror they saw neither their own nor God’s reflection”(146). Perhaps this is the case that when these poets looked into the mirror such a reflection was lacking; however, when they looked into the poems, I believe that they very clearly saw God reflected there, as well as the reflection of their created selves.

Outside of the poems and the occasional journal entry, the notion that she wanted to be god is not something most poets can be imagined to be entirely comfortable with. There is, after all, the essentially retiring nature of the personalities of both Emily Dickinson and Elizabeth Bishop to consider. Dickinson, of course, seemed to eschew most public attention, writing as she did to Higginson: “I smile when you suggest I delay ‘to publish,’ that being foreign to my thought as firmament to fin. If fame belonged to me, I could not escape her; if she did not, the longest day would pass me on the chase, and the approbation of my dog would forsake me then. My barefoot rank is better”(161). And Ted Hughes wrote of Sylvia Plath in Birthday Letters: “You did not want to be Christlike”(153). Hughes, however, was moved to write such a thought in reaction to the many times Plath herself stated otherwise, and his statement makes greater sense when one considers Hughes’s idea that the movement toward such an apotheosis is willed upon the woman, and not chosen by her. As for Dickinson’s choice of a “barefoot rank,” Christ himself chose a similar path.¹

It is possible that to speak in the voice of God (or Christ) allows the woman poet a measure of freedom and power that she is slow to claim as her own by directly

¹ David Daiches’s God and the Poets includes a good discussion of Emily Dickinson’s religious temperament.
speaking in a persona too close to her actual identity. Alicia Ostriker identifies such a shift in Emily Dickinson’s poems: a movement toward more powerful and aggressive action when Jesus becomes the speaker of the poem. Ostriker writes, “Jesus becomes, among other things, a figure for active and aggressive (i.e., ‘male’) elements in her character which she was reluctant to acknowledge while writing as a woman”(85). As William Robert Sherwood explains of one of Dickinson’s poems, “If God was still Father and Burglar, He was, if Emily Dickinson could mint her own currency, not necessarily the only Banker available”(63).

Oftentimes, however, it seems that the persona of Christ allows the poet to invoke a shared cultural mythology of extreme suffering. In the Brooks and Warren reading of “After Great Pain” anthologized in Davis’s 14 By Emily Dickinson, they write that Dickinson’s poem invokes the experience of the Crucifixion:

The capital letter in the word He tells us that Christ is meant. The heart, obsessed with pain and having lost the sense of time and place, asks whether it was Christ who bore the cross. The question is abrupt and elliptic as though uttered at a moment of pain. And the heart asks whether it is not experiencing His pain, and – having lost hold of the real world- whether the crucifixion took place yesterday or centuries before . . . .the quality of the suffering makes the connection implied between its own sufferings and that on the cross not violently farfetched.

(50)

Sherwood, in Circumference and Circumstance: Stages in the Mind and Art of Emily Dickinson, writes that, “The question—whether it is she or Christ who has suffered this apparent death—reflects the power pain has to destroy one’s consciousness of even the elemental distinctions of time and person”(113). Sewall notes Dickinson’s identification with Christ’s suffering along with several other levels of identification.
Ruth Miller in *The Poetry of Emily Dickinson* asks, “If the world of nature is the genuine sacrament of God, what is the sacramental offering of the poet? (Recall that Emily Dickinson has linked her stature with that of God.) Or to put it another way, if God gives nature, what does the poet give?” Miller answers, “The poet gives her poems” (80). Sewall comments upon Miller’s scholarship:

Ruth Miller, asking what Emily had left after Bowles and Higginson failed her, answers: ‘A thousand and more poems,’ and stresses the degree to which her redemption was religious, with Christ as savior, redeemer, lover—great themes she incorporated into her poetry. Though my own reiterated stress in previous chapters on the concept of self in the poem ‘on a Columnar Self / How ample to rely / In Tumult - or Extremity—’ suggests that she proceeded without special religious dependency or inspiration, her identifications with Christ, especially the suffering Christ, are frequent and impressive. (606)

Elsewhere, Dickinson’s view of God borders on irreverence. Poems like #357, for instance, feature an eroticized God. Dickinson begins, “God is a distant-stately Lover- / Woos, as He states us-by His Son.” Then there is her near-constant avowal that Amherst might well rival heaven. She wrote to Mrs. Holland in 1856, “If roses had not faded, and frosts had never come, and one had not fallen here and there whom I could not waken, there were no need of other Heaven than the one below—and if God had been here this summer, and seen the things that I have seen – I guess that He would think His Paradise superfluous” (329). If she were to be shut out of heaven, she seemed to think it would be unfair, but was willing to take such a risk to pursue the life she wanted on earth. Poem #248 discusses the possibility that she might be shut out of paradise, and the reason she might be shut out as well: “Why-do they shut Me out of
Heaven?/Did I sing—too loud?” It was a willing trade. The letter to Mrs. Holland quoted above continues, “Pardon my sanity, Mrs. Holland, in a world insane, and love me if you will, for I had rather be loved than to be called a king in earth, or a lord in Heaven” (329).

Still, Dickinson seems to continue to look at Christ as a model for her own life, replicating in her letters and poems his steps and his voice. In poem #85 she calls upon His strength to enable her to say that which she might otherwise shrink from saying: “I could not have told it, / But since Jesus dared— / Sovereign! Know a Daisy / Thy dishonor shared!” Clara Newman Turner in her reminiscence entitled “My Personal Acquaintance with Emily Dickinson,” which is included in the Sewall biography, recalls that on one occasion when she was visiting, Dickinson (who declined to appear before the company) sent out a flower accompanied by a note that read simply, “I, Jesus, send mine angel” (272).

What one gains in mythic power by the assumption of such a demeanor is not without price, however. “Jesus wept,” goes that shortest of Bible verses, and the isolation and suffering of Christ seem to accompany his courage and strength. Dorothy Huff Oberhaus traces Dickinson’s use of the voice of Christ to her approximate “death to the world,” a time when Dickinson also “began to suffer from the pain of self-denial necessitated by her chosen way of life” (87). Jean-Luc Nancy in The Birth to Presence gives a more dire reading to such a movement on the part of the poet; he says that

“I am God’ is the statement of someone who sees his divinity abolished. On the other hand, it is the statement of a subject who affirms himself to be anterior to his own production. He affirms that he has presided over the operation of the self-relation, which would therefore not be anterior to him. At this extreme it turns out that the Subject is identical to the null moment required by its
production, that necessary and impossible moment of self-
production where no ‘itself’ is available, or ever will be—
that moment of pure and simple death. ‘I am God’ means
‘I am dead’. (54)

If, as postulated in the previous chapter, the full development of the poet cannot take
place before the self has been somewhat conquered and vanquished, it would appear
that Nancy is right. The self to some extent dies so that the poet might live. In
Dickinson’s work, Christ is that rarified woman who is left, after the dross has fallen
away. Christ can then function, as Oberhaus puts it, as “her inner voice, her better
self”(168). And for all that, she isn’t sure that He could not be improved upon. As she
writes in poem #1487:

The Saviour must have been
A docile Gentleman—
To come so far so cold a Day
For little Fellowmen –

The Road to Bethlehem
Since He and I were Boys
Was leveled, but for that ‘twould be
A rugged billion Miles –

Oh, if I-were the Gentleman
In the ‘White Robe’—
And they—were the little Hand- that knocked—
Could – I – forbid?

The Savior, she felt, often lacked in compassion. Were they to change places, she
would forgive him what it seemed he could not forgive in her. And how close they are,
in truth, childhood friends, it seems, having progressed approximately together. She
remains as aware of Him and his doings as if they were still involved in daily
communication. In poem #827 she seems to suggest that the divine world is the only
world she holds congress with:
The Only News I know
Is Bulletins all Day
From Immortality.

The Only Shows I see –
Tomorrow and Today –
Perchance Eternity –

The Only One I meet
Is God – The Only Street –
Existence – This traversed

If Other News there be –
Or Admirabler Show –
I’ll tell it You –

Poem #632 employs an unusual simile: “The Brain is just the weight of God- / For –
Heft them – Pound for Pound – / And they will differ – if they do- / As Syllable from
Sound.” If the brain were the approximation of God, then the woman who fully
mastered the workings of her mind and ordered them on paper might also resemble
Him. Then she, like Him, might find that “It is easy to invent a Life- / God does it –
every Day”(#724). The brain was not in itself the only equivalent to God for
Dickinson; she drew the same parallel between poetry and love in poem #1247:

To pile like Thunder to its close
Then crumble grand away
While Everything created hid
This – would be Poetry –

Or Love – the two coeval come –
We both and neither prove –
Experience either and consume –
For None see God and live –
God is present, then, in these two extreme states, but as their herald, like thunder. He himself, remains hidden, and the best means to approach him is with the brain, and in the imagination.

In Elizabeth Bishop's poetry God is similarly difficult to come to, more of a presence hidden still in silence, but felt. Her poem "Seascape" is an example of this, and in it Bishop looks to the landscape to reveal Him. Bishop writes of a seascape that "does look like heaven," specifically like a "cartoon by Raphael for a tapestry for a Pope" (40). And yet, this is only what most people assume heaven to be like. The poet, imagining the thoughts of the lighthouse, suggests she knows better. The poem concludes,

But a skeletal lighthouse standing there
in black and white clerical dress,
who lives on his nerves, thinks he knows better.
He thinks that hell rages below his iron feet,
that that is why the shallow water is so warm,
and he knows that heaven is not like this.
Heaven is not like flying or swimming,
but has something to do with blackness and a strong glare
and when it gets dark he will remember something
strongly worded to say on the subject. (40)

For Bishop, the deity is defined often by what it is not. It is not this landscape, beautiful though it might be. The lighthouse, cloaked in black and white like the page, believes that something will be found "to say on the subject." What it is does not get spoken in the poem, however, though the hope of it is there. "The Filling Station" employs a similar negative definition before reaching the conclusion, "Somebody loves us all" (128). The filling station does not occupy a landscape that would likely be anyone's idea of heaven. "Oh, but it is dirty!" is the first line of the poem, followed shortly thereafter by the threat of explosion when the speaker exclaims: "Be careful with that
match!(126). All about is dirt, the smell of oil, and the persistence of grease. Bishop finds a few details that interrupt the ugliness: a begonia, comic books, a lace doily, and, most importantly, the Esso cans lined up neatly so that they appear to be saying, “ESSO—SO—SO—SO”(127). The sense that this is a holy place comes mostly in that last line about someone loving us all, revealed in the details of care. What makes this place special, it seems, are the cans bearing the careful arrangement of sound, so like the work of the poet, and the fact, revealed in parenthesis, that this is “a family filling station”(126).

In the secondary world of Bishop’s creation, these two things comprise heaven: the well-ordered landscape and the presence of the family therein. Nowhere is this more beautifully actualized in Bishop’s poems than in her “Over 2,000 Illustrations and a Complete Concordance.” From her volume North & South, the poem begins, “This should have been our travels: / serious, engravable”(57). Of all that has been seen on the speaker’s travel, nothing satisfies. The Seven Wonders of the World pale in comparison to those that can be found in the book she holds; although it isn’t specifically identified, her description makes it recognizable:

Everything only connected by ‘and’ and ‘and’.
Open the book. (The gilt rubs off the edges of the pages and pollinates the fingertips.)
Open the heavy book. Why couldn’t we have seen this old Nativity while we were at it?
--the dark ajar, the rocks breaking with light, an undisturbed, unbreathing flame, colorless, sparkles, freely fed on straw, and, lulled within, a family with pets, --and looked and looked our infant sight away. (58-59)
"A family with pets" in a perfect landscape, this is Bishop's wished-for paradise. That she would see it with “infant sight” seems to suggest a close identification with the child of the Nativity. The longing for it seems prompted by the ugliness that has been seen on the speaker's actual travels. Several scenes of death, disease and sin were witnessed, as most frightening of all:

A holy grave, not looking particularly holy, one of a group under a keyhole-arched stone baldaquin open to every wind from the pink desert. An open, gritty marble trough, carved solid with exhortation, yellowed as scattered cattle-teeth; half-filled with dust, not even the dust of the poor prophet paynim who once lay there. (58)

It is the lack of the holy one, his absence, that frightens the traveler most. Like the speaker of "The Riverman" who asks, "Why shouldn't I be ambitious?" (107), Bishop seems to look for god's presence, and attempt to move toward a power that would describe it. But, like her ample use of the parenthesis suggests, along with the lighthouse that will find "something strongly worded" to say on the matter eventually, the god is more a suggestion than full-drawn on the page. For herself, his duties would consist of creating a family, a past, and a well-ordered landscape, all duties she attempts to accomplish.

Similarly, Sylvia Plath linked the idea of God to the ordering of the imagination. In the essay "Cambridge Notes" published in her prose collection *Johnny Panic and The Bible of Dreams*, she wrote, "It is that synthesizing spirit, that 'shaping' force, which prolifically sprouts and makes up its own worlds with more inventiveness than God which I desire" (260). The linked ideas were there long before her time in
Cambridge; while still at Smith she was exploring in her journal the connection between
god, the woman, and the writer: “To be god: to be every life before we die: a dream to
drive men mad. But to be one person, one woman—to live, suffer, bear children and
learn other lives and make them into print worlds spinning like planets in the minds of
other men”(182). On her better days Plath did not doubt her ability to achieve this. She
wrote while a teenager, “I will be a little god in my small way”(Journals 16), and then,
in adulthood, “In the morning light, all is possible; even becoming a god”(Journals
312).

Other times this seemed much less possible. Plath lacked Dickinson’s degree of
assuredness, and unlike Bishop, she was unforgivingly driven. Her journals record
many instances of her frustration, such as this where she bemoans her inability to
become God: “Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is impossible for me to be God -- or
the universal woman-and-man- or anything much”(23). It seems odd to find a young
girl frustrated at falling short of a goal that most would never imagine possible anyway,
but she repeatedly is. She linked the divine aspect directly to her ability as a writer:
“Every day is a renewed prayer that the god exists, that he will visit with increased
force and clarity”(Journals 328). She exulted and commemorated his visitations in
poems, though they actually seem less like visitations than possessions. In “Love
Letter” she writes, “Now I resemble a sort of god / Floating through the air in my soul-
shift / Pure as a pane of ice. It’s a gift”(147). “The Moon and the Yew Tree” finds
Plath as God and also Christ, though a god of indifference born this time of a mother
who is cruel and unforgiving. David Perkins in A History of Modern Poetry:
Modernism and After believes that in this poem in particular one sees in Plath evidence
of “a simmering irritability and psychological malaise”(592). He continues,
Several poems express feelings of being a demonic god. In ‘Blackberrying’ the berries ‘love me . . . They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening their sides’; in ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ the grasses ‘unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God, / Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility;’ in her role as God the speaker’s response is sardonic or indifferent. (592)

She seems to recognize herself as this dark sort of god, but if she could she would trade places with the Christ child in order to experience this greatest of maternal loves:

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary. Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls. How I would like to believe in tenderness— The face of the effigy, gentled by candles, Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes. (172)

The phrase, “Bending, on me in particular,” recognizes the urge of the speaker to occupy such an exalted position. This is not a fate she would desire for her son. In the poem that recasts herself as Mary and her son as Christ, Plath writes: “I do not want him to be exceptional. / It is the exception that interests the devil. / It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill / Or sits in the desert and hurts his mother’s heart” (186). And yet she seemingly could not resist casting him in this role in the poem “Nick and the Candlestick,” where she wrote to him, “You are the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious. / You are the baby in the barn” (242). Of course, her son’s promotion to Christ-child is her own promotion to Madonna.

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2 It brings to mind the lines of Auden, who wrote that “what man desires is not universal love / But to be loved alone.”
In this way Plath did mine her life for similarities to the Christian mythos, and found the symbolism she was looking for. The circumstances of her suicide attempt, in which she lay undiscovered and “buried” in the crawlspace below her mother’s house, only to reawaken after three days, represented to her a resurrection similar to Christ’s from the tomb. Ted Hughes acknowledges that Plath regarded her life as following a trajectory of death followed by rebirth into perfection. Hughes writes that Plath’s poems chart this progression, and that “after its introductory overture (everything up to 1953), the drama proper began with a ‘death’, which was followed by a long ‘gestation’ or ‘regeneration’, which in turn would ultimately require a ‘birth’ or a ‘rebirth’, as in Dostoevsky and Lawrence and those other prophets of rebirth whose works were her sacred books” (W 171). In Plath’s mature work the speaker of the poem is likened unto God repeatedly. Just a few instances include the poem “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” where the speaker says, “Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free” (213), and “Ariel,” where she speaks of “God’s lioness, / How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees” (239), and it is uncertain whether the horse is meant, the rider, or the unified creature they together become. “Fever 103” features a speaker who is physically refined beyond the mortal world. She says, “I am too pure for you or anyone. / Your body / Hurts me as the world hurts God” (232).

But of course the poet is in the world. As Joseph Brodsky wrote, “The late Auden said that the poet, unlike God, creates on the basis of experience” (8). And perhaps the devotion of the life to poetry is essentially a nihilistic leaning toward self-extinction. Alicia Ostriker in Writing Like A Woman discusses what she sees as the essentially self-destructive nature of poetry in America versus an emphasis on ‘wholeness’ in Chinese poetry. Why the difference? She mentions several variables,
among them that “China has no Christ.” She writes that it is the poetic emulation of
Christ which is to blame for this temperament in American poetics and American poets,
writing, “Of course, it is the Christ figure who achieves poetic apotheosis par excellence
in his resurrection, the casting off of the flesh, and the perfection of the spirit. The
exchange of lives”(57). And for the poet, that movement toward annihilation is not
made without the belief in resurrection and the immortality that the verse allows. The
verse, if it is successful, is another incarnation of its author. In poem #1651, Dickinson
seems to identify the word as such:

A Word made Flesh is seldom
And tremblingly partook
Nor then perhaps reported
But have I not mistook
Each one of us has tasted
With ecstasies of stealth
The very food debated
To our specific strength –

A Word that breathes distinctly
Has not the power to die
Cohesive as the Spirit
It may expire if He –
‘Made Flesh and dwelt among us’

Could condescension be
Like this consent of Language
This loved Philology.

Ruth Miller in The Poetry of Emily Dickinson writes, “Emily Dickinson knew the
sacrifice she was making, knew why, and was willing to gamble on an imitation of
Christ for the sake of a victory like His—immortality”(3). For Sylvia Plath and
Elizabeth Bishop the same desire existed, as perhaps it does in all poets. It is there in
Dickinson’s asking Higginson whether or not her verse was alive, and Plath
pronouncing in “Stillborn” that her own poems did not live. With Bishop it seems more
apparent in her unceasing fear that she would not produce the poems that would justify her, creating the family and the home she felt she lacked. Bishop’s own personal reticence seemed to make her unable to declare godhead as her goal. Meanwhile, she quietly went along creating her geographies with all the grace of the Lord at work in Genesis. For all three poets, the life of the verse beyond the poet’s mortal life has brought a measure of immortality. If immortality is the province only of the gods, the writer, it seems, might sometimes approximate it.
"Excuse me for the voice, this moment immortal"

From the first encounter with death, and the disbelief that met it, these poets were concerned with producing the work that might overcome it. At times, when the poets address this worry, it seems they are looking both forward and backward, to poets of the future and poets of the past, and finding some assurance in each. When Plath writes as she does in her *Journals*, "Some girl a hundred years ago once lived as I do. And she is dead. I am the present, but I know I, too, will pass. The high moment, the burning flash, come and are gone, continuous quicksand. And I don't want to die"(5), Dickinson quickly comes to mind, though Plath doesn't refer to her specifically. And it is tempting to imagine Dickinson one hundred years before, looking ahead and imagining a girl like Sylvia Plath.

Lawrence Lipking would not find this scenario improbable, unlikely as it might sound. In *The Life of the Poet: Beginning and Ending Poetic Careers*, Lipking writes that a belief in the continuity of poetry, and of poets, throughout time is one that other poets have shared:

Rilke believes, like Shelley, that all significant poets since the beginning of time have collaborated in a single poem. 'The poet, there where the great names, Dante, let us say, or Spitteler, no longer matter—it's the same thing, it's the poet; for, in the ultimate sense, there is only one, that infinite one who, here and there through the ages, asserts himself in some spirit that has been subjected to him.' The name of that one poet is Orpheus: he who has become the familiar of death and, by being dismembered and dispersed, at last insinuated himself into every particle of nature... The poet dies to live, and reappears in future song. (190)
David Daiches writes that Dickinson “had a profound sense of the numinous and of the way in which the movement of life in some sense prefigures and leads to something permanently at rest” (162). I would only disagree with the last two words of this statement, replacing “at rest” with “alive.” As Dickinson wrote in one of her letters, “‘It is finished’ can never be said of us” (613). It certainly cannot be said of her yet, nor for anytime in the foreseeable future. But like the light in poem #883, Dickinson the poet is as vital as she was one hundred years ago, perhaps more so. Poem #883, “The Poets light but Lamps,” is a meditation on how the dialogue begun by the poet continues to grow as each succeeding generation expounds upon it:

The Poets light but Lamps – 
Themselves – go out – 
The Wicks they stimulate – 
If vital Light

Inhere as do the Suns – 
Each Age a Lens 
Disseminating their 
Circumference –

The implications of this must have been clear to Dickinson, for she was a fervent believer that pen and ink could replace the corporeal self, if need be. As she wrote to Samuel Bowles, “If it were not that I could write you, you could not go away; therefore pen and ink are very excellent things” (153). Numerous times in her letters Dickinson suggests that the letter might not only replace her presence, but that it might also provide her with a measure of immortality. Here, in a letter to Mr. And Mrs. Holland, Dickinson jokingly writes, “If it wasn’t for broad daylight, and cooking-stoves, and roosters, I’m afraid you would have occasion to smile at my letters often, but so sure as ‘this mortal’ essays immortality, a crow from a neighboring farm-yard dissipates the
illusion, and I am here again” (264). This letter reveals, too, how much Dickinson preferred to be employed at any type of writing rather than doing housework. The curious last phrase, where she writes, “I am here again,” seems to suggest that while writing she is not there, and brings to mind a statement made in another letter that even more pointedly expresses her views on the matter. Dickinson wrote, “A letter always feels to me like Immortality because it is the mind alone without corporeal friend” (330).

As recent Nobel Laureate Wislawa Szymborska’s poem “The Dead” says, “We read the letters of the dead like gods.” The living are like gods to the dead because they are privileged to know what came after the death of the writers, with all the responsibility that knowing entails. So it is with the poets. They are in the curious position of being chronologically and psychologically the children of the poets that came before them, while having the benefit of further knowledge.

The poet Sappho wrote to one of her fellow poets, “Someone, I tell you, will remember us” (Barnstone 1651); did Dickinson believe she would be remembered? Dickinson didn’t have what one would normally call a poetic “career.” And yet, the poems chart a destiny as clearly as if Dickinson had been creating such a career, and build to the fruition Lipking would call the province of the great poet. Lipking writes that the great poet works toward a goal far beyond herself and her time:

A great career, carefully husbanded, builds slowly toward its final moment of truth, its ultimate reaping: immortality or death. The poet who lives with such a responsibility has only one way to meet it: planning ahead. To husband a destiny, finally, one must be able to think in terms of decades, perhaps generations. (79)
In Elizabeth Bishop’s short stories there are characters who themselves look forward to future readers, one of whom states, “No small part of the joy these writings will give me will be to think of the person coming after me—the legacy of thoughts I shall leave him, like an old bundle tossed carelessly into a corner” (Prose 189). Bishop looked back to her poems for the words that would sustain her in her life. After hospitalization for a drinking binge, Bishop wrote to her doctor, Anny Baumann, “If I can just keep the last line ['awful but cheerful'] in mind everything may still turn out all right” (Millier 212), referring back to her own poem, “The Bight.” As we know, “awful but cheerful” was also Bishop’s chosen epitaph, a phrase several times attached intimately to her life, and like Dickinson’s epitaph, a way of causing the life to reference her writing.\(^1\) It seems uniquely self-assured to find in one’s own words one’s own monument. With Plath, her belief in the power of writing to make one immortal never wavered; she was only uncertain if she could make the magic work for her. In this passage from her Journals she compares herself to Virginia Woolf, saying,

> I shall go better than she. No children until I have done it . . . I cannot live for life itself but for the works which stay the flux. My life, I feel, will not be lived until there are books and stories which relive it perpetually in time . . . Writing breaks open the vaults of the dead and the skies behind which the prophesying angels hide. The mind makes and makes, spinning its web. (165)

The passage reveals not only Plath’s belief in the transformative nature of writing, but also her belief that writing would “stay the flux,” creating something of real permanence. Nearly a decade after Plath’s death, Hughes wrote in the introduction to

\(^1\) Yeats is but one other famous example of a poet who composed his own epitaph.
her poems, "Ariel is not easy poetry to criticize. It is not much like any other poetry. It is her. Everything she did was just like this, and this is just like her—but permanent" (WP 162). Hughes seemingly believes, as his wife did, that the writing is the permanent Plath.

Bishop’s poem “North Haven,” written in memoriam to Robert Lowell, suggests that Bishop believed similarly that the writing becomes the person, but etched, as it were, in stone this time, not subject to weathering or to death. Bishop begins the poem with a memory etched in time, specifically 1932: "Years ago, you told me it was here / (in 1932?) you first ‘discovered girls’/ and learned to sail, and learned to kiss. / You had ‘such fun’, you said, that classic summer. / (‘Fun’ -- it always seemed to leave you at a loss . . .)” (188). Bishop quotes Lowell’s own descriptions, adding only her commentary, what she knew of him—her own thoughts trailing off into an ellipsis. Lowell is like North Haven now, anchored and afloat, and permanent:

You left North Haven, anchored in its rock,
Afloat in mystic blue . . . And now – you’ve left
for good. You can’t derange, or re-arrange,
your poems again. (But the Sparrows can their song.)
The words won’t change again.
Sad friend, you cannot change.

(188)

In Polly Longsworth’s The World of Emily Dickinson, she recounts of Dickinson: “While sending Higginson dozens of her finest poems, Dickinson begged him to tell her faults, to assure her she wasn’t ready to publish. Always baffled by his ‘eccentric poetess,’ Higginson complied. ‘You saved my Life,’ she later told him, and by way of thanks granted him two astonishing interviews at her home, in 1870 and
While many question what Dickinson meant when she repeatedly told Higginson that he had saved her life (Higginson never understood what Dickinson meant by this), no one suggests that in saving the poems from publication, Higginson might have also have saved Dickinson’s life for her, if she felt that her life was the poems. It seems likely that freed from the knowledge that she might find a sympathetic audience or be somehow compelled to publish, Dickinson was better able to continue to write as Dickinson, entirely self-sufficiently. What else did Higginson, after all, do for Dickinson, except caution her against publication? Somehow she equated this with saving her life.

Harold Bloom in *The Anxiety of Influence* writes, “A poem is written to escape dying. Literally, poems are refusals of mortality”(19). In the same volume Bloom asserts, “The inherent belief of all strong poets [is] that the animate always had priority, and that death is only a failure in imagination”(13). When Dickinson writes, “I have perfect confidence in God and His promises— and yet I know not why, I feel the world has a predominant place in my affection”(38), she seems in agreement with what Bloom has to say of the strong poet. God’s promises, of course, include eternal life, but all three poets tend to believe that such might be achieved in what Dickinson always termed “the world” as well. Certainly she has the same trust in the animate that Bloom would call the mark of the strong poet, along with the belief that death is “only a failure in imagination.” For Dickinson, death was viewed less as a fact than a failing of her own, often likened to blindness, the inability to “find” the people she’d lost. Her own death seemed unlikely to her as well. She wrote: “I do not know why, but it does not seem to me that I shall ever cease to live on earth—I cannot imagine with the farthest
stretch of my imagination my own death scene—It does not seem to me that I shall ever
close my eyes in death. I cannot realize that the grave will be my last home”(28).

When James Wood comments in his review of Plath’s and Hughes’s poetry,
“Death may be closing in, but the damned poem is unstoppable”(30), one is inclined to
exclaim, yes, exactly. Wood doesn’t seem to realize that this is the point. The poet
would exult to hear that her poem was unstoppable, even if her death is not. As
Dickinson wrote, “How long to live the truth is! A word is dead when it is said, some
say. I say it just begins to live that day”(496). Dickinson’s poems provide ample
evidence of her interest in future readers, poem #441 being perhaps one of the best-
known examples, her “letter to the world”:

This is my letter to the World
That never wrote to Me-
The simple news that Nature told-
With tender Majesty

Her Message is committed
To Hands I cannot see-
For love of Her – Sweet – countrymen-
Judge tenderly – of Me.

In this poem Dickinson entrusts her message to the hands she “cannot see,” asking that
when they hold the “letter” or poem they judge Dickinson herself with the same
tenderness they might feel toward nature. Another example of Dickinson’s belief in the
posthumous life of the poet can be found in poem #544:

The Martyr Poets- did not tell-
But wrought their Pang in syllable-
That when their mortal name be numb –
Their mortal fate – encourage Some –

The Martyr Painters – never spoke-
Bequeathing –rather- to their Work-

175
That when their conscious fingers cease –
Some seek in Art – the Art of Peace –

This is a curious poem. The first question that might arise in the mind of the reader is why the artists are called "martyr." It seems they are so because the pain that they endured found its only outlet in their work, though this would be considered no small solace for Dickinson. Their mortality is perhaps the greatest of their pains. "Their mortal fate" may be encouraging to those who come after, in part because they have somewhat managed to avoid it. Their lives, which those who are not artists spend in the telling and speaking, are instead "bequeathed" to the work, and hence to the future.

Of course, how the future will regard that work is uncertain. At times, it would seem that the reader wants too much for the work to resurrect the woman. Returning to the Wood review, we find him faulting Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters* for a number of things, among them the failure to evoke Sylvia Plath adequately:

Our only literary question should be whether Hughes succeeds in evoking his subject. The answer is, only rarely; and for several reasons. One is that Plath has become a celebrity to Hughes as well as to his readers. We were all married to her. Thus it is that although these poems abound in the acutest intimacies, it is as if they needed the hard literary work of expansion, aeration, and universalization. Instead, they have been broken up by our own curiosity, and Hughes clearly feels this. In some sense these details are no longer private to him, and he cannot animate them for a public that has already spun them around and around. This explains why *Birthday Letters* manages the extraordinary feat of devoting almost 200 pages to Sylvia Plath, and providing almost nothing original or refreshed about her. (31)
The valuable insights Wood might have had about Hughes’s book are lost in some of the more outrageous statements he makes and his seemingly odd expectations. For as much as the reader might know many details of Plath’s life, we do not know her, and to expect Hughes to further clue us in hardly seems fair. Certainly, we are not “all married to her.” The most proper answer to criticism like this still rests with Hughes, who wrote in his introduction to her *Journals*: “I feel no obligations whatsoever. The scholars want the anatomy of the birth of the poetry; and the vast potential audience wants her blood, hair, touch, smell, and a front seat in the kitchen where she died” (*WP* 164). His anger is palpable and seems justified, for Plath’s posthumous life has been fraught by those who wish they might have been married to her, and who hunger for details (when she herself already provided so many) that it seems morally wrong to ask her family to continue to supply. What Hughes finally had of Plath (after his memories and their children) was, like us, no more than what she wrote. A. Alvarez, who knew Plath in the final months of her life, believes that the work is what Plath would have wished posterity to concentrate on, and that she would have been angered by those who would choose to see her as a martyr or a victim. Alvarez wrote in “Your Story, My Story”:

I doubt that Plath would have seen herself that way. She was too talented and ambitious to want preferential treatment and, by the end, when the poems were pouring out unstoppably, sometimes three a day, she was too convinced of her achievement to need anyone’s say-so. It was Hughes who was left with the consequences: public accusations of murder and treachery, his name hacked off her tombstone again and again. (58)

Hughes’s shepherding of Plath’s work provided us with a Plath we would not have had without him. The recently released, unexpurgated version of Plath’s journals reveal that what was cut in the first version was not suppressed in the interest of his own self
protection, but was truly, as he always maintained, for the protection of others. When he supervised the first publication of Plath's journal, he did so with trepidation, but in hopes of further elucidating the poems of *Ariel*. Hughes wrote at the time,

The motive in publishing these journals will be questioned. The argument against is still strong. A decisive factor has been certain evident confusions, provoked in the minds of many of her readers by her later poetry. *Ariel* is dramatic speech of a kind. But to what persona and to what drama is it to be fitted? The poems don't seem to supply enough evidence of the definitive sort. This might have been no bad thing, if a riddle fertile in hypotheses is a good one. But the circumstances of her death, it seems, multiplied every one of her statements by a wild, unknown quantity. The results, among her interpreters, have hardly been steadied by the account she gave of herself in her letters to her mother, or by the errant versions supplied by her biographers. So the question grows: how do we find our way through this accompaniment, which has now become almost a part of the opus? Would we be helped if we had more first-hand testimony, a more intimately assured image, of what she was really like? In answer to this, these papers, which contain the nearest thing to a living portrait of her, are offered in the hope of providing some ballast for our idea of the reality behind the poems. Maybe they will do more. (*WP* 177)

Even then, so quickly after her suicide, the public wished to read the poems in relation to Plath's death. The publication of the journals was Hughes's answer, and an attempt to clear up the misinterpretations that had already begun. He was not entirely successful in this.

As Plath would make clear, what actually happens vanishes in death. Her poem "Blue Moles" says it succinctly: "What happens between us / Happens in darkness, vanishes / Easy and often as each breath"(126). And as she wrote in "Last Words," words are the only stop for it. Plath proclaims,

178
I should sugar and preserve my days like fruit!

I do not trust the spirit. It escapes like steam
In dreams, through mouth-hole or eye-hole. I can’t stop it.
One day it won’t come back. Things aren’t like that.
They stay, their little particular lusters
Warmed by much handling. They almost purr.

Words are one of the only things that can be counted on. Plath had less belief than Dickinson in a celestial hereafter, and one recalls that even Dickinson had a tendency to question. Her #827, “The Only News I know / Is Bulletins all Day / From Immortality,” contains the line, “Perchance Eternity,” as if eternity were a question. How much more certain she sounds in poem #1066, where she writes of “Fame’s Boys and Girls, who never die / And are too seldom born.”

The last words Emily Dickinson wrote were in a letter. She wrote, “Excuse me for the voice, this moment immortal”(901). Her words seem to have been prophetic, but in truth her voice had been immortal for some time, and in the poems had already experienced and lived through death. In poem #465, “I heard a Fly buzz-when I died,” the speaker of the poem recounts her own death, and her speech from beyond it implies immortality. Dickinson writes,

And Breaths were gathering firm
For the last Onset – when the King
Be witnessed – in the Room-

I willed my Keepsakes – Signed away
What portion of me be
Assignable – and then it was
There interposed a Fly-

With Blue – uncertain stumbling Buzz –
Between the light – and me –
And then the Windows failed – and then
I could not see to see –

The eyes as windows fail before reaching the light, and the sight of the “King” has been
denied her, but even without the sight, the consciousness seems to continue, as does the
voice. There was no question in Helen Hunt Jackson’s mind that Dickinson’s voice
would give her life beyond her mortal span. Jackson eloquently called Dickinson to
task for her failure to publish, saying that Dickinson would be sorry when she was
“what men call dead”:

I hope someday, somewhere I shall find you in a spot
where we can know each other. I wish very much that
you would write to me now and then, when it did not bore
you. I have a little manuscript volume with a few of your
verses in it -- and I read them very often - You are a great
poet - and it is a wrong to the day you live in, that you
will not sing aloud. When you are what men call dead,
you will be sorry you were so stingy. (Dickinson Letters
545)

In poem #406 Dickinson distinguishes between the accolades of now and the accolades
of the future, which might be everlasting. She leaves no doubt as to which she
considers the richer. Dickinson writes,

Some-Work for Immortality—
The Chiefer part, for Time—
He – Compensates- immediately-
The former – Checks – on Fame—

Slow Gold – but Everlasting –
The Bullion of Today—
Contrasted with the Currency
Of Immortality—

A Beggar—Here and There—
Is gifted to discern

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Beyond the Broker's insight—
One's - Money- One's - the Mine

The poet, she suggests, works for immortality. The worker, who expects to be compensated for his time and immediately, cannot draw his check on fame. If those appear to the world as beggars, it might be because their impoverishment serves to disguise their wealth. It is the difference, Dickinson suggests, between money and the mine. It is tempting, too, to hear in her line the light pun, "One's mine," because the latter was Dickinson's. Christopher Benfey wrote in 1986 in *Emily Dickinson: Lives of a Poet* that Dickinson had lived at least three lives since her death. He says, "In a sense, a poet has as many lives as she has readers, but literary historians must distinguish the tendencies of whole generations of readers. To simplify, we may say that Dickinson has had at least three lives since her death, and these different Emily Dickinsons, far from supplanting one another, have survived into our own time" (73). One aspect of Dickinson's legacy seems to be this Cassandra-like awareness of a life beyond the grave, and that language might be Jesus, in that in it lies the hope for a resurrection to eternal life, as she suggests in poem #1651 where she writes, "A Word that breathes distinctly / Has not the power to die / Cohesive as the Spirit / It may expire if He — / 'Made Flesh and dwell among us' / Could condescension be / Like this consent of Language / This loved Philology." And maybe there is no death for the woman who has already relinquished her life to her art. When Dickinson writes in "I'm Nobody! Who are you?" that it is dreary to be "somebody," she dismisses anyone who would find pleasure in croaking their own name. The artful noise of someone else's name, perhaps of God and his creation, would be another matter. When Dickinson wrote, "I believe we shall in some manner be cherished by our Maker-- that the One who gave us
this remarkable earth has the power still farther to surprise that which He has caused.

Beyond that all is silence . . .” (750), the trail of her ellipses suggests the only negative to that future and its surprises will be the inability to speak of it.

To insist, while in life, upon godhead is an attempt to move beyond this silence, and to defy the nothingness the grave might hold. The fame of the writer rests in her voice being listened to after her death. Bishop, whose hopes of that seem somewhat less than either Dickinson’s or Plath’s, has gained a large measure of fame since her death. As Brett C. Millier writes,

she has become more famous since her death, defying the more typical inverted arc of the American poet’s reputation by refusing to disappear immediately after dying, only to reappear twenty or thirty years later. As critical judgments of her poetry have developed, the early comments on her ‘objectivity’ and ‘impersonality’ have yielded to the gentle insistence of the personal voice in her poems, as her readers have come to see that she, like most other poets, told the story of her life in her work. She told it with sorrow, humor, and almost perfect understanding of her own strengths and failures. ‘Awful, but cheerful,’ she asked Alice Methfessel to inscribe on her tombstone in the Bishop family plot in Worcester.

(550)

And a further appreciation of Bishop appears in J. D. McClatchy’s introduction to The Vintage Book of Contemporary Poetry, where he writes,

Elizabeth Bishop’s modest career and reputation as a poet’s poet may at one time have limited a true appreciation of her power. But over the past decade her work has come to seem unrivaled for its ability to estrange the familiar, to describe the space between moments, the textures or lives and places, the homely paradoxes and human reversals that go on under our light regard. Her mysteriously confidential tone of voice, the way she shuffled the orders of dream and reality, flesh
and spirit, memory and loss—these are the terms of her mastery. (McClatchy xxix)

Helen Vendler writes in *The Music of What Happens* that Bishop’s name is now attached to a particular manner of verse writing: “The combination of somber matter with a manner net-like, mesh-like, airy, reticulated to let in light, results in the effect we now call by her name—the Bishop style” (299).

Though Plath wrote in “Blue Moles,” “What happens between us / Happens in darkness, vanishes / Easy and often as each breath” (126), Sylvia Plath the poet has not vanished. As Alvarez wrote in “Your Story, My Story,” “When Sylvia Plath committed suicide, early in the morning on February 11, 1963, she ceased to be merely a poet and became, like Thomas Chatterton, a symbol, a warning, a myth” (58). Certainly, though Sylvia Plath ceased, the poet remained, perhaps in Plath’s case alongside “a symbol, a warning, a myth.” Anne Stevenson would write in 1989 in *Bitter Fame* that “there is almost no one writing poetry today who has not been affected by the power and passion of Plath’s poetry” (303), a fact that explains why the imitation of Plath is considered a stage that many younger poets now have to pass through. And it is why the tragedies of the life become eclipsed, eventually, by the triumphs of the verse. As Adrienne Rich writes, “It is as though the risks of the poet’s existence can be put to some use beyond her own survival” (119).

In the reminiscence Clara Newman Turner included in Richard Sewall’s biography of Dickinson, she began to hint at the extent of Dickinson’s posthumous life, saying, in a near echo of what Helen Hunt Jackson had written to Dickinson years before, “And we speak of her as Dead! How later facts have reproved our mistake! Like the butterfly she had shown to the children in her conservatory, she had burst the
chrysalis only to find wings for a wonderful delight-giving life. The Recluse is entering strange homes all over the land. The quiet sweet voice calls even across the great waters”(274). And though, like Bishop and Plath, Dickinson will spawn imitators, it seems fair to say of all three that they remain uniquely themselves. Klaus Lubbers notes of Emily Dickinson, “Comparisons of her to other poets yields little but differences”(177).

Henry H. Wells, in his *Introduction to Emily Dickinson*, claims that ‘Emily Dickinson was a reincarnation of masters long dead and a prophecy of masters to come”(132). She stands, too, as the very model of the woman as master poet. With Dickinson, far less than with either Elizabeth Bishop or Sylvia Plath, godhead was not so much a matter of belief than a realization. She did not so much aspire to be; she simply was. If for any poet the goal must be to appropriate the role of Maker, each of the three poets discussed here did that, and went beyond it, creating worlds and a voice that would outlive them. When Plath looked backward one hundred years to a girl who had lived as she did, she had Emily Dickinson there as an exemplar. Perhaps other girls a hundred years hence, looking for others like themselves, will find in Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop, or Sylvia Plath the course a poet might take from girlhood to her own god-like future.
Bibliography


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Vita

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Date of Examination:

April 6, 2001