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Vidhu Aggarwal

Rollins College, vaggarwal@rollins.edu

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Talking Body Parts and Missing Commodities: Cinematic Complexes and Sylvia Plath

Vidhu Aggarwal, Rollins College

The suicide of Sylvia Plath—which Anne Sexton notoriously referred to as a career move—highlights the relationship of lyric poetry to the detective story by producing a body. It brings together a story whose pivot point is that most suspect of American writers, Edgar Allan Poe, the originator of the detective story, who claimed that the death of a beautiful woman was the best theme for a poem ("Philosophy of Composition"). The more familiar questions asked of lyric poems, such as the constant refrain of *What is it?* and *What could it possibly mean?*, or *Why read it at all?* are transformed by critics and readers into other more pressing questions: *Why did she do it?* and *Who is responsible?* There is difficulty in finding any such answer in Plath's poems, where even separate parts of the same body offer divergent accounts of the body's history, such as in "Cut." This essay shows correspondences in the reception and methodology of Plath's poetry with the aesthetic apparatuses of "talk therapy," surrealist cinema, and the detective genre, via Baudelaire, Hitchcock, Freud, and Poe, among others. In doing so, it looks at the cultural production of Plath's work within a Cold War U.S. context as part of a complex of objects from disparate genres and mediums.

Alfred Hitchcock's 1945 movie *Spellbound* offers a look at how some of the terms of psychoanalysis entered the postwar popular consciousness, as a detective/love story. Someone has been killed; meanwhile an amnesiac posing as a doctor, John Ballantine (Gregory Peck), is on the run from something: most probably himself. An analyst, Constance Peterson (Ingrid Bergman), due to extraordinary psychological insight or love, does not believe that he is guilty of the murder: she works very hard to prove his innocence. The film *Spellbound* opens with a caption that explains the goals of psychoanalysis:

Our story deals with psychoanalysis, the method by which modern science treats the emotional problems of the sane. The analyst seeks only to induce the patient to talk about his hidden problems, to open the locked doors of his mind. Once the complexes that have been disturbing the patient are uncovered and interpreted, the

illness and confusion disappear ... and the evils of unreason are driven from the human soul.¹

If this description of psychoanalysis is rather simplistic, we move quickly from the locked doors of the mind out into the liquid portal of the eye—one equivalent for cinema and the cinematic gaze. *Spellbound* has a dream sequence that Salvador Dali choreographed for Hitchcock—one which riffs off of his earlier film collaboration with Luis Buñuel, *Un Chien Andalou* (1928), and comes into *Spellbound* as a symptom of Gregory Peck's disorder. *Un Chien Andalou* is famous for an extreme close-up of a woman's eye, which is slit by a razor. This scene's counterpart in *Spellbound* takes on a Hollywood remove: a self-propelled pair of scissors cuts through *the image* of an eye painted on a curtain. Of course the idea of a "cut" has a specific relationship to film, where reels of film footage are cut and spliced together in order to produce certain effects, such as suspensions of temporality, a change of scene, or changes in point of views. It also allows for the effects of montage, images cutting into images, producing a rhythm of interrelated shots from disparate contingent material.

In *Un Chien Andalou*, the film cuts from the image of clouds zipping past the moon to a razor slicing across a woman's eye. We do not quite expect to see the incision: the clouds run interference. Then the cut happens, after all, but no one cries. This sequence is captured by Sylvia Plath in her earlier diaries, where she includes a shot by shot description of the movie: "man idly whittles fingernail with razor . . . goes on porch outside . . . looks at sky . . . (switch to sky) . . . three thin clouds slice horizontally over a full moon . . . (girl's face on screen) . . . moon again . . . (girl's face again) . . . hand of man lifts eye and slits it neatly with razor . . . closeup of gore . . ." (*The Unabridged Journals*, 56)²

If Plath's initial description of the man idly whittling his fingernail recalls that image from James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* about the artist in relationship to his work, "refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails" (191), the action in the film and in Plath's description turns immediately violent, shaking the ironic notion of the detached

¹ *Spellbound*. Dir. Alfred Hitchcock. USA: Vanguard Films, 1945.

² See Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen Kukil. New York: Random House, 2000. This particular journal entry is not dated, but comes from the July 1950-1953 book, and likely is an entry from 1951. See also Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992: 140. Rose points out that Plath wrote out the scenes from *Un Chien Andalou* in her journals, specifically in relationship to Rose's interest in Plath's S & M configurations of identity and desire. At the time Rose mentioned Plath's discussion of this film, this journal entry was archived and had not yet been published.



artist attending to his manicure. Plath calls *Un Chien Andalou* a "shock film: sex and sadism," but part of that shock involves nobody crying aloud. There is a creepy level of affective removal of the characters from the extreme action, which gives the film a strange theatrical finish where every individual is a prop, a sexy fetish, rather than an acting subject. Later in the film, a dismembered hand lies in the road, while a woman and a crowd observe it, calmly. This is not to say that emotion is not present in the film or that it is cut out completely; rather emotion is submerged into odd, seemingly ritualized actions, and attention is called to the violence of these actions, their specific rhythms.

Sylvia Plath's poem "Cut" (1962) is also an extreme close-up, with inter-cutting images, like the famous scene in *Un Chien Andalou*, but with a thumb instead of an eye. The poem also has some of the attendant violence, and wild associations, a "black cinema" as one critic characterized her late poems (Furbank 74).³ There is a similar observational stance that the speaker takes to "her" injured thumb. The near-dismemberment is fascinating.

What a thrill—
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush. (Plath, *The Collected Poems* 235)⁴

Unlike the emotionally removed characters in *Un Chien Andauou*, the speaker does admit to a "thrill." However, even despite the dismemberment and the overdetermined presence of an onion in the poem, there are still no tears. Many critics have addressed the trope of warring selves in Plath's work, but what happens when these selves take the form of images-states? These "self-like" entities are constantly substituting, one for the other, in erratic time shifts. In the cross-section that is "Cut," two-sidedness is a self-perpetuating process, a historical dialectic, that is of necessity abrupt and confusing, as the interior layers of identity-images peel into each

³ Plath's work has been seen as cinematic, without reference to specific film language. However, Susan McCabe has pointed out the nature of the cut as a film editing technique in relationship to Plath's poem "Cut" in a class she led at University of Southern California, and I am indebted to her for that discussion.

⁴ All further references to Plath's poems will be indicated by page number from *The Collected Poems* (1981).

other in a successive sequence of quatrains. While this happens, the nursery song rhythm is spliced further into abrupt visual enjambments:

Little pilgrim,
The Indian's axed your scalp.
Your turkey wattle
Carpet rolls

Straight from the heart.
I step on it,
Clutching my bottle
Of pink fizz.

A celebration, this is.
Out of a gap
A million soldiers run,
Redcoats, every one.

Whose side are they on? (235)

Aside from the initial thrill, feeling is "thin" and "papery." Feeling has been flattened after the euphoria of a million soldiers embarking from the carpet rolls of "the heart," which the speaker steps on in order to staunch other frightful emotions. But are they really? Truly, the numb papery feeling is the perhaps the most frightening of all; this repression produces an equal and opposite force. And so when the heart re-enters wadded in a "balled / Pulp" and "Confronts its small / Mill of silence," its return forces another twitching associative movement, the jump cut: "How you jump— / Trepanned veteran, / Dirty girl, / Thumb stump" (236).

"Thumb stump!" What an emphatic ending to a poem that is a riddle—a nursery rhyme—of origins! Is this an enactment of the castration scene (i.e., Freud and Lacan), where either 1) the (female) speaker's confrontation with the penis has induced phallic loss, stumping speech altogether; or 2) where the (male) speaker's confrontation with the feminine has induced a phallic crisis, revealing that he could have nothing more than a stump? In the second scenario, the perverse solution to a boy's initial outrage at his mother's lack would be to invent a substitute for the missing penis—a fetish. In this, the boy tricks himself away from the horror of castration and sexual difference, by holding on to some object—fur, shoes, the shine on a woman's nose—



in a tight visual and emotional clutch, a faux phallus by way of fur.⁵ According to Freud and Lacan, a girl could not do that: woman could not suffer from fetishism as a perversion (except as clotheshorses). Although she could be a fetish, an object for the male gaze, she already lives with lack, and therefore had no need for such compensatory objects.

But as far as perversions go, fetishism is inordinately satisfying, and according to Freud, inordinately difficult to cure. But could we call Plath's odd images and symbols, substituting one for the other in the poem, "Cut," fetishes? Not exactly—since by definition a fetish is supposed let us stave off loss, and these images let us thrill in it. Rather, Plath seems to show the pleasurable mechanics behind the process of fetish-making.

Plath will not let us linger on any single substitution; rather, each substitution is summarily discarded, violated, and replaced until we are left with a stump, a bit of lack. In the end, Plath's penises do not line up in a row, as if the speaker is finally stumped by the witty cascade of images and just cannot go further, having exhausted all ingenuity as well as innocence. The cut thumb has several lives of its own as gender binaries go berserk, and the speaker along with the rest of "her" body, similarly confronts these changes in all their spectacular and horrifying momentum, a momentum reflecting the short and violent history of the U.S. up to that point. In this, Plath demonstrates the impossibility of the fetish to substitute for losses incurred by the violent disjunctions of temporality, as well the impossibility of giving up fetish-making as a shielding strategy. There is always another emblematic substitution. The terms for people in a spy film, a wounded soldier, a bleeding girl, a Russian witch, a woman or a man? A communist, a clan member? An American, a Japanese? Was this cut an accident or deliberate? Are we bigots or innocent victims? Whose side are we on? Whose fault? How can the heart or thumb decide?

There has been similar mode of response to Plath's poems as there was to *Un Chien Andalou*—shock and outrage about the violence enacted in the work (she has gone too far altogether), and a desire to find a proper subject with defensible emotions (detective/romance plot), where in such poems as "Cut," the emotional axis seems completely out of whack. The representative fantasy of "the talking cure" is exemplified to some extent by the film *Spellbound*, which offers a narrative frame for the emotional violence of *Un Chien Andalou*, reading the

⁵ See Sigmund Freud "Fetishism." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol. 21. 1963: 149-157.

violence as symptom. Emotion, within *Spellbound*, has a retrievable and useful content, as does the dream: at least the doctor played by Ingrid Bergman thinks so in her diagnosis. The working through of the dream leads to clues that have a counterpart to reality, leading to the recovery of Gregory Peck's identity and the psychic rationale behind his amnesia, if not the solution of the murder plot. It is not that the dream is prophetic but that it offers clues that release tendrils in the world of fact. The project of the detective then is to see random and arbitrary details as clues, where no detail is necessarily too small. To ask "what is it?" must lead necessarily to "who did it?" Then, there is, of course, *the why?*

Plath originally included a poem called "The Detective" in her *Ariel* manuscript, where ordinary objects and actions are infused with the characteristics of clues, and the body of a woman goes missing from the household, albeit part by part, year by year—the very negative of acquiring fine China.

What was she doing when it blew in
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?
Was she arranging cups? It is important.

.....

This is a case without a body.
The body does not come into it all.

It is a case of vaporization.
The mouth first, its absence reported
In the second year.

The breast is next.

.....

We walk on air, Watson.
There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.
There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes.

(Plath, *The Collected Poems* 208-9)

Something blows in, like a nuclear cloud: *what is it?* "Make notes," could be an injunction to either the apprentice detective, or other novice Watsons, such as a therapist or reader, and many readers find this poem to be a coded and highly personal indictment of marriage and in particular of Plath's husband, Ted Hughes—who is thought to have committed a psychic obliteration upon



Plath.⁶ In such a Cold War economy, we could find menace in the innocent meanings straying out of any object, including the mind (of a woman). When the idea of decoding enemy signals was in the air, and where anyone could be a spy, any search for a "recovery" of the psyche could take you to a dangerous place. And as a reader of Freud, Plath must have also known that any attempt at psychic recovery could produce distortion and substitution—there is a false promise in her poems of identifying a criminal that is both within and without, who is, at any rate, always changing guises—transferring into that everyday cup of steaming tea.

In this sense, the terms of detection are important in Plath's work where secrets abound, and there is a running theme about the loss and recovery of identity that is concealed in mystery, or otherwise lost among objects, domestic or otherwise, Could we find the "self" by chance alone, and would we really want to? As seen in "Cut," accidents often seem deliberate in Plath's work, or mischance produces its own violent compulsions.

We can look at lost objects in Plath's work in relationship to Edgar Allan Poe's detective fiction. The aura in Poe's work has perhaps as much to do with the monetary value of lost objects, as with their possibility for sexual and emotional revelation through a surrounding halo of clues. For example, in Poe's much-examined "The Purloined Letter," the exchange rate of the object—the missing letter—has everything to do with the spicy piece of gossip it will reveal about royalty, and the potential shaming of the queen through the emotional manipulation and bribery. Nevertheless, the letter—because of its very everydayness, its similarity to all other letters—can remain out in the open, and still be hidden. Indeed, surrealists work within this logic of Poe's double object:⁷ they often yank the particular formulations of the detective plot out from underneath the object, but keep the tinge of unease and criminality.

Of course, this doubleness or double-sidedness of Poe's purloined letter can be also linked to Marx's idea of the commodity, where an object's inherent relationship to class and exploitation, one set of exchanges, is concealed by the potential of object's ultimate exchangeability within a capitalist system. Baudelaire—the great French translator and

⁶ See Jacqueline Rose *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*; and Cynthia Sugars, "Sylvia Plath as Fantasy Space: or, the Return of the Living Dead." *Literature & Psychology* 14.3 (1999): 1-28, for further discussion about readers' inexhaustible fascination with Plath's biography.

⁷ Poe's letter has been granted a high place in high theory. See John Muller and William Richardson, Eds. *The Purloined Poe: Lacan, Derrida and Psychoanalytic Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988, for readings of the purloined letter in relationship to the play of the signifier. See also Rosalind Krauss and Jane Livingston, *L'Amour Fou: Photography and Surrealism*. New York: Abbeville Press, 1985: 31 for Krauss's take on "doubling" in surrealist works.

worshipper of Poe—knew about the marketplace, loved cosmetics and jewelry, incense, and myrrh and celebrated all of these objects in his poems with great sensuality. Baudelaire was fascinated by the hidden character of musk and incense, which, in his famous poem "Correspondences," provides another set of exchanges—the transport between spirit and the senses.

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
 Laissent parfois sortir de confuse parole;
 L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
 Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent
 Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité
 Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté
 Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants
 Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,
 —Et d'autres corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des chose infinies,
 Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
 Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens. (*Oeuvres Complètes*, 11)

[Nature is a temple of living pillars where
 Words often come out in a haze;
 Man wanders through a forest of symbols there
 They observe him with a knowing gaze.

Like distant echoes that blur and last
 In a deep and shadowy surround
 And like the night and day so vast
 Perfumes, sounds, colors correspond.

There are perfumes sweet as childflesh
 Soft as oboes, green as the hills
 —And others rich corrupt and triumph-filled,

As powerful as those infinite things
 Amber, musk, benzoin incense,
 Which sing the transports of the soul and senses.]⁸

⁸ Translation mine.



In "Further Notes on Edgar Allen Poe," Baudelaire takes Poe to be a fellow initiate into "secret connections between things, *correspondences* and analogies" (102), and wonders how Poe's pure sensibilities must have suffered in that "glorious country of Utilitarianism" (110) and high morals—America. Baudelaire's recurring idea of correspondences is slightly vague, probably because it always seems to concern furtive alliances, a knowingness that is exclusive. But for such descriptions on wares and utility in relation to pure poetry, Baudelaire is held, by Benjamin among other Western philosophers, to be the artist who first realized the lyric potential for object as commodity—particular in relationship to its "fetishistic character."

As Giorgio Agamben shows, in a sequence tying Baudelaire, Marx, Benjamin, with the fetish and the lyric poem, the commodity is seen by Marx as performing the ultimate cut. Marx defines the magical quality of the commodity by the way it enacts a split in use-value (association with direct indexes of labor and need—the object's materiality) and exchange value (association with the aura of capital, the abstraction of the object into appearance and phantasmagoria).⁹ The exchange value, the object's mystical price, detached from any use, gives the object an *enchanted* quality; indeed, the object itself does not have to be useful at all to be valuable, nor is the commodity marked by the worker's efforts in producing it. Fetishism, as aroused by the commodity, rather than the Freudian castration scene, involves "the superimposition of a particular symbolic value on the normal use of the object," a palimpsest of two contrary registers that we cannot consume equally or simultaneously (37). It is not that we cannot have the cake and eat it too; rather, we can never have the cake, whether we eat it or not.

To paraphrase Agamben, even if we can manipulate the material register of a commodity in any number of ways, even if we were to destroy the object altogether or simply consume it, the commodity will keep asserting its symbolic register in its unattainability, with that magical exchange value. Hence, we can never possess the commodity completely, and are always in a state of wanting more. Agamben attributes Baudelaire's greatness "with respect to the invasion of the commodity," not only in his transformation of "the work of art into a commodity and a fetish," through replicating the division between use value and exchange value, but in the creation of "an absolute commodity" (42). For Agamben, this entails a type of violence:

⁹ See Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*. Trans. Ronald L. Martinez. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993: 31-46.

Baudelaire transfers the use-value of the commodity into an exciting performance of its destruction, a shattering which produces the shocks Baudelaire is most famous for. In this way, by violating the value of an object's materiality, Baudelaire enacts a perpetual affirmation of the object's unattainability and intangibility.

If according to Benjamin, commenting as he does on Baudelaire's Poe obsession, "the original social content of the detective story was the obliteration of the individual's traces in the big-city crowd" ("The Flaneur" 206-07), the reception of Plath's work describes a different sort of vanishing in the context of historical disappearances and dispersals of identity—Cold War threat of nuclear annihilation, and desire for historical forgetfulness. Confessional poetics—under whose rubric Plath's work has often been contentiously placed—could be thought of as a vexed reading practice rather than a writing practice, a need to make particular and account for the traces of self along a continuum of history, when "history" itself is in danger of being shattered. That such an undertaking might entail discovering the self as commodity was perhaps no surprise to Plath, but that recent historical trauma as the Holocaust could operate as a commodity and fetish was perhaps still a shock to readers at the time Plath wrote *Ariel*.¹⁰ We could see Plath's work in relationship to Baudrillard's claim that contemporary fetishism of fascist spectacle works as compensation to "a loss of the real," a loss that occurred just after, simultaneously, or as an outcome of that historical period (Foster, 79).¹¹

In her famous striptease poem "Lady Lazarus," a suicidal speaker kills herself repeatedly in show-stopping fashion against a Holocaust backdrop and famously exacts a "charge" for "the eyeing of my scars," and "For a word or touch/Or a bit of blood/Or a piece of my hair or clothes" (246). Indeed, the fame or iconic status of a *subject*—whether traumatic historical event or royal individual—is what gives such associated objects—touch, strand of hair, or purloined letters—totemic status as commodity and fetish. Of course, the consumption of self is nothing new in the history of the lyric poem—full of self-shattering and violent boiling up of self-matter—a consumption that is nevertheless productive of language. Yet Plath ups Baudelaire in terms of the absolute commodity: dying is an art, where the self, though under perpetual siege via desire

¹⁰ See Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et Simulation*. Paris: Editions Galilée, 1981: 69-76.

¹¹ Quot. in Hal Foster, *Recordings: Art, Spectacle, Cultural Politics*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1985: 79. Foster describes fascist spectacle as a compensatory fetish for "a loss of the real" via Baudrillard in a reading of late twentieth century artworks. See also Laura Frost, *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002. Frost discusses fascism in relationship to the work of George Bataille and Hans Bellmer, as well as Plath and Duras.



for self-annihilation, cannot be killed even materially and continues to have surplus symbolic value—even long after Plath's actual suicide in early 1963.

In the traditional striptease, according to Barthes, furs and jewels and other "luxurious objects" surround the body with a "magical décor" and "magical virtue," but at the same time "constantly make the unveiled body more remote," only to produce nakedness that is a slippery glittering surface—smooth and unreal (85). In his description, Barthes removes the whiff of eroticism from the striptease; diamonds—those fetish-objects—lend the body a miraculous purity, sealing it against death. Plath makes the striptease stink like a freak show: reminding us of mortality—"The sour breath/Will vanish in a day," and "They had to call and call/And pick the worms off me, like sticky pearls." (245)—even in the attempt to defy death through spectacle.¹² In exchanging pearls for worms as decoration, she certainly does not endow pearls with virtue, but like Baudelaire with his child-flesh and bejeweled prostitutes, and his poems about exotic colonized others lounging in savannahs ("Bizarre déité, brune comme les nuits"¹³), Plath lets the reader indulge in unseemly objects of worship. (We know that for Baudelaire even lyric poems were unseemly: worms and verse were one in the same with his perpetual pun on "vers.") On the other hand, speakers in Baudelaire are more likely associated with a worshipful distance of the observer or the reader, rather than with the object of worship, the spectacle.

Whether Plath's intimacy with objects—of projecting the speaker's personality as spectacle—can be viewed in terms of difference from the standpoint of gender or history, we could say her "Lady Lazarus" engages with the sticky problem of affect, against the slipperiness of historical iteration. Given, for instance, Theodor Adorno's famous, oft-repeated injunction from "Cultural Criticism and Society" (1951), that to "write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric" (210), both the Holocaust, as unspeakable atrocity, and lyric poetry, as transcendent object, become somewhat forbidden objects, long after Adorno's later attempts at retraction. Plath's speaker announces "I do it so it feels real," (Plath, *The Collected Poems* 245) specifically not claiming that the experience in the poem is real; the realness or materiality of objects cannot be won back by invoking the Holocaust, but perhaps feeling can. In other words, Plath plays with the notion of naked feeling—emotional bareness—against a shimmering, unreal surface. In the

¹² See Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*. Trans., Donald Nicholson-Smith. New York: Zone Books, 1995. Debord speaks of the spectacle as entirely shaped by social power and the primacy of objects, supplanting the individual reality and negating the individual.

¹³ See Baudelaire, "Sed Non Satiata," *Oeuvres Complètes*, p. 28.

triumphant final line, "And I eat men like air" (246), men are to some extent "air," without material substance, as in Marx's emblematic observation about commerce in *The Communist Manifesto*: "All that is solid melts into air" (7).

Yet, in terms of the emotional resonance, think of how differently "Lady Lazarus" would read in the third person; "She does it so it feels real, She does it so it feels like hell," would lack the quality of pronouncement and exclusive knowledge given to the speaker, who can address "Herr God" and "Herr Lucifer" directly in emblematic lyric speech. Yet this poem is not simply a direct address either. If Plath transforms the striptease into an act of veiled revelation—a sort of *now-you-see-me-now-you-don't* that the "peanut-crunching crowd/Shoves in to see," (245) then she does it through suspenseful enjambments—a striptease montage—in which a foot or "Jew linen" juts out against the rhythm, as in "Cut." Of course, this fascination with intense emotional effects—sadistic as well as masochistic—does much to link Plath to surrealists such as Bataille or Buñuel, who saw themselves working against the the State. When Plath's speaker casts off the "fine / Jew linen" of her face, instead of furs or the jewels that ornament Baudelaire's beauties or the stripper, we are reminded not only of fascism and the Holocaust, but also of the role of Jews as furriers and jewelers, of the taint of commerce embodied by "the Jew," historically in Europe, as well as through Nazi propaganda.

Lyric pleasure becomes associated with audience complicity in traumatic exchanges between objects and historical bodies—as commodities with a surplus value of emotional thrill. As any current Hollywood trailer might ask: how far will fascination transmogrify you—the audience—from detective (is the speaker a Jew?) to criminal participant (I enjoy watching and consuming her annihilation)? To return to this idea of lyric barbarism and "Cultural Criticism and Society," Adorno—rather than focusing on poetry per se—was, in fact, also talking about the barbarism of cultural criticism that "fetishizes" culture, cultural objects, and categories such "mind, life, and the individual," in isolating them from societal concerns (200). Adorno suggests that neither critics, nor artists, necessarily acknowledge or recognize their own entanglements in commerce and ideology in the sphere of material production, and instead produce false idols in their own mythologizing of culture. Perhaps, one scandal of "Lady Lazarus" is its acknowledgement of such entanglements as the very source of lyric pleasure or any pleasure. Plath then demonstrates how historical identities and personal entities become mythic and emblematic—ready for consumption, but—using the terms of the striptease—remote, unable to



become wholly present or specific. Can we strip these entanglements off, so to speak, and still maintain a self?

When Plath wrote her poems, surrealism as a movement had arguably already had its day (with a new epicenter in New York), but like psychoanalysis, its emblematic signs were present in the marketplace, part of the advertising landscape in the women's magazines to which Plath contributed, such as *Ladies Home Journals*.¹⁴ Kitchen appliances dispense intimate advice and the women gleam like the objects on their shiny kitchen counters, with their frozen smiles—those smiles that return again and again as "hooks" in Plath's poems. In one of the small collage books that Plath put together from advertising images pulled from such magazines, the iconography from Dali's painting, "The Persistence of Memory" (1931) appears in an advertisement for printers—a blocky version of Dali's melting watch and fleshy tree.¹⁵ Surrealism had perhaps forgotten (or completely fulfilled) its revolutionary potential by Plath's coming of age (*Un Chien Andalou* already entering into Hollywood via *Spellbound*), but it was if the whole consumer world in 1950's America was also coded, heavy with symbolism, embalmed—if someone paid enough attention to such signals. The objects from the burgeoning postwar American consumer culture could be both seductive and frightening with their constantly shifting scale and obvious, desperate pleading.

Plath might be a late surrealist, but like those practitioners, she found something highly provocative about both cuts and correspondences, and what such excisions and analogies had to do with methods of psychoanalysis. Perhaps more telling is how such methods actually undo the narratives that psychoanalysis produces. In her poems, Plath plays with the terms of psychoanalysis, and, in particular, with the notion of the "case study," which, like certain poems, could also be seen as an arrangement of special objects around the psyche.¹⁶ (The striptease is thus another process or description for such arrangements.) But as complex arrangements, Plath's poems are also experiments with the working methods and processes of psychoanalysis as much as any representation of a psychoanalytic case: for Freud, repression has a type of

¹⁴ See Marsha Bryant, "Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising." *College Literature*. 29:3 (Summer 2002): 17-34.

¹⁵ The picture of this printer advertisement can be found reproduced in Tracy Brain's *The Other Sylvia Plath*. London: Pearson Education, 2001, plate 4.

¹⁶ See Jeffrey Berman, *The Talking Cure: Literary Representations of Psychoanalysis*. New York, New York University Press, 1985.

"topography,"¹⁷ a dynamic of substitutions which can be seen as one aesthetic method in Plath's poem "Cut." And as any detective and surrealist would know, method is important. For the surrealists also claimed the methods of Freud and his followers for their formal gestures and patterns—the psychoanalytic habit of dreamwork, the attention to hysteria and deformation, the view of the unconscious as apparatus, the truly weird stories and case studies, and always, *always* the bodies of the more stunning hysterics themselves.¹⁸

Unrestrained talk is perhaps another fantasy of psychoanalysis: liberated speech for even the most ordinary neurotics. In an analyst's room, supposedly anything is allowed—there is a freedom of association that is perhaps purposeful, but has no purpose. But is bizarre speech somehow more valuable? Plath's "Lady Lazarus" is addressed to Herr Doctor, and because of "the charge" enacted by the speaker's revelation ("there is a charge for the eyeing of my scars"), we must wonder if it's the speaker, Herr Doctor, or the audience who is paying? What is the exchange value of talk? Within the notion of the "talking cure," there is expense both emotional and financial—a sort of commerce of tears, but then an interesting enough case—the case study—perhaps, requires no payment. We must wonder, for instance, which clients paid Freud and Breuer for their cures, and what deals these doctors cut in order to have continued access to the client's fascinating mind: were Rat man and Wolf man just part of the general patient populace, or were they special—thus, requiring totemic animal names? What acts must a patient perform to become a case? Being boring is simply not allowed. In the movie *Spellbound*, the doctor played by Ingrid Bergman charged no fee to Gregory Peck: but that was love.

What, then, did talk entail for Plath? Certainly, not clear transparent communication: there seems to be an anger directed at talk itself, for its very uselessness, a uselessness that is quite different from the lyric, although that uselessness, too, overlaps. Plath has her own woman as machine or product in the poem "The Applicant": "It can talk, talk, talk" (223) but to what end? Where is sense? Where is senselessness? Like Plath, Robert Creeley, who was writing at the same time, performed heavy enjambment. But Creeley often cuts up the most plain banal of sentiments, cracking apart the clichés of talk, and forcing such words as "in" to erupt out of these

¹⁷ For a detailed description of the topography of repression see "Repression (1915)" in *The Standard Edition of Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* Vol. 14. Trans., Strachey, p. 180-189. Further references will be made to *The Standard Edition* by volume number.

¹⁸ See Elaine Showalter, *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997; Johanna Malt, *Obscure Objects of Desire. Surrealism, Fetishism, and Politics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; Kristen Oelrich, "From Diagnoses to Decadence: A Brief History of Hysteria." *Art Criticism*. 17.1 (2001): 86-103.



clichés with a new emotion that includes and even doubles the original registers of the sentiment. Plath's enjambments, while cutting up the line quite forcibly against the poem's rhythm—as we've seen in "Cut"—do violence to talk, but also assist in the formation and dissolution of images, whether photographic or cinematic.

Hugh Kenner dismisses Plath as engaging "in a little Freudian monologue" (68), but it is true that Plath herself represented at least one of her poems as a case study, or at least as a very special case. In any case, "Daddy" (1962) is often read as if it is the Rosetta stone of Plath's *Ariel* work, and a key to her (our) deranged psyche(s). Unlike "Cut," Plath endstops, and does not break up lines so much as in "Daddy," and so keeps the tight nursery rhyme rhythms intact. Of this most notorious poem, which takes on the figures of Nazi and Jew quite mockingly, Plath says, "The poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyze each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it" (quot. in *The Complete Poems*, 292).

An allegory is another structure that scoops up objects and figures into rather totalizing arrangements, and invests them with symbolic function. Plath describes the particular allegory that is "Daddy," as "awful" and "little," though the values inserted are rather large and historical and generally unspeakable. Is this a problem with allegory—a problem with the notion of a case study? In this description of "Daddy," Plath seems somewhat dissatisfied with the limits of the Electra complex as an aesthetic constraint, as if one could wish for another fantasy, or different circumstances, but are stuck with this rather suffocating means of transport: the shoe.

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breath or Achoo. (222)

Is the shoe not a fetish or charm? Walking in it would not be the point. As the sudden shift in address from the first stanza to the second seems to show, rubbing the shoe, as confining an object as it might be, immediately and abruptly evokes Daddy:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time—

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God . . . (222)

As if having emptied the sacred bag of objects—the shoe, being one—the speaker emphatically announces that she has already killed Daddy. The uncomfortable black shoe of the first stanza later becomes the black "boot in the face" of the Fascist every woman adores, and we can feel it banging (with impatience and anger) in the stomping rhythm of the lines, and even later in the black telephone that's off of the hook—where transport—travel as well as communication—is cut off. Yet within these imperfect vehicles, there remains the obsessive mode of address: "I could never talk to you," (223) says the speaker to the dead Daddy by way of the shoe. Of course, Daddy and the shoe cannot or will not talk either. And yet what is the shoe's use, its utility, the speaker seems to ask? What does the shoe do, when it will not do? Here are a number of correspondences—shoe, phone, engines, and finally the villagers: "They always *knew* it was you" (224). Our wandering and somewhat ridiculous Daddy is everywhere, in every object, in the large foot that has no root (no shoe), and in the Nazi swastika; every object moves towards him, as if "Daddy" were indeed walking into a Baudelairian forest of symbols that gaze at him knowingly, first in the guise of the shoe he once wore, and finally in those multiplying villagers who know to show up in the last stanza in full stomping mode. However, the speaker's relationship to this constellation of objects is perhaps too close. We can look at this as another striptease that is slightly off. Has the speaker actually cast off the shoe?

What can finally undo the shoe? The fascism references—the Holocaust references Plath's work is famous for—do not appear until the sixth or seventh stanza. Like in "Lady Lazarus," fascism allows the speakers to "do it so it feels real." In pushing those most laden figures, the Nazi and Jew, fraught with historical enormity, into such narrow compartments the speaker already feels herself to be occupying (such as the "Electra Complex," or the shoe), in which the German language is "an engine, chuffing me off like a Jew," we see that Plath is trying to stretch the compartments or squeeze the outlandish figures, which one cannot help but recognizing as cartoons in this context. At any rate, the question of freedom comes up.

At least in this one poem, we could say that Plath spins the notion of correspondence into the notion of psychic transference within a psychoanalytic paradigm: the circular logic of the poem depends on transference to one emotional point—that engine. In other poems, such as "Cut" or "Totem" (in which the "engine is killing the track" (164)), we can witness how Plath



reroutes these energies along a greater number of points, turning one type of complex into another.

It is important to note that for Freud, the psychoanalytic process did not entail finding a key to the symbolic structure of thoughts or dreams, as if deciphering scrambled signals from an enemy spy ship to determine its exact plans and location. Says Freud: "If you were a detective engaged in tracing a murder, would you expect to find that the murderer had left his photograph behind at the place of the crime, with his address attached? or would you not necessarily have to be satisfied with comparatively slight and obscure traces of the person you were in search of?" (*Standard Edition* Vol. 15, 27). We are all criminals in our unconscious—committing murders, breaking incest taboos—whether or not we are in fact. Unlike *Spellbound* in which Ballantine's dream is decoded to produce a knowledge of facts—his identity, his name, the specific details of a traumatic event from childhood—for Freud, every unconscious gesture is, in actuality, manifold, centrifugal. Despite the blankness at its core, the unconscious is productive. In these poems of detection, perhaps Plath is herself questioning the therapeutic efficacy of psychoanalytic model, which values such secret inaccessible regions as generative of complexes and cases.

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