

## Chapter 4)

### A Disenchantment with Numbers: Philosophy and Literature

*To treat their [confessional poets] poems mainly as documents of personal experience is not just to diminish their achievement, but to ignore their unanimous disdain for the idea of confessional poetry.*

Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon*  
*So even as governmental tactics give rise to this sovereignty, sovereignty comes to operate on the very field of governmentality: the management of populations. Finally, it seems important to recognize that one way of 'managing' a population is to constitute them as less than human without entitlement to rights, as the humanly unrecognizable.*

Judith Butler, *Precarious Life*

#### 1. — Agamben's and Foucault's critique of political theology

As we have seen in the previous chapter the ethics of literature uncovers the partiality of the purported impartiality (or non-subjectivity) of publically acclaimed truths. Public representations of justice and law, of what is human or non-human, and associated with these, of what is normal or abnormal, healthy or pathological, innocent or guilty, harmless or accused, may be false or fictitious. Yet these representations, once they have governmentally and socially been approved, come to precondition our understanding of what is ethically acceptable. The way we represent the world may be subjective. The subjective turns substantive, however, once it has received public or governmental approval as well as acclamation. *Acclamation marks the point where politics and modern media meet theology.*

What kind of theology? A theology that appraises, that glorifies either transcendent (God or gods) or secular power (the sovereign, the ruling party and so forth, the ruling class of managerial power and so forth). It is a theology of glory ~~which~~ that

constitutes, as Giorgio Agamben has recently put it, “the secret point of contact through which theology and politics continuously communicate and exchange parts with one another.”<sup>2</sup> Agamben argues that modernity does not constitute a rupture with the theology of pre-modernity, but that it merely displaces the theological imprint of power from a Trinitarian sacred location to a secular and immanent one of management, the economy and (secular) politics—issues with which the Butler quote is concerned at the opening of this chapter: “Modernity, removing God from the world, has not only failed to leave theology behind, but in some ways has done nothing other than to lead the project of the providential *oikonomia* to completion.”<sup>3</sup> Here Agamben clearly positions himself within the famous debate about the secular between Hans Blumenberg and Carl Schmitt. Blumenberg defends the legitimacy of modernity against Schmitt’s political theology, which proclaims that all secular terms are but translations of theological ideas. Agamben is, however, not a follower of Schmitt. Here it is worth noting that Agamben speaks of modernity’s failure to leave theology behind. According to Schmitt this is not a failure but a triumph. Similar to Walter Benjamin’s approach in the ~~twenties of the past century~~ 1920s, Agamben engages with the conservative political theology of Schmitt (and also that of Erik Peterson) not in order to affirm the repetition of theological patterns within modernity but to hold modernity to account for precisely such repetition.

In what ways does Agamben’s critique of theology’s persistence within secular practices of politics and economics pertain to the development of a new ethics borne out of the sources of literature? Strikingly modern literature often alludes to as well as works through theological themes and images. Kafka has done so ~~and also~~ as has one of the most important twentieth-century poets: Sylvia Plath. A recent study has a chapter dedicated to “Plath’s Theology.”<sup>4</sup> Does Plath have a theology? Or rather, does her work struggle with the theological structure—albeit emptied out of transcendent content—of

the world we are facing within modernity? Agamben makes a strong case that our predilection for what achieves the greatest number of sales or the greatest number of clicks or views (the ~~I~~internet or ~~T~~television and media — internet channels like YouTube for instance — in general) or the greatest number of approval/acclamation ratings is not as secular or immanent as it seems but rather instantiates the displacement of theological hierarchies onto a different location:

As should be evident today, people-nation and people-communication, despite the differences in behaviour and figure, are the two faces of *doxa* that, as such, ceaselessly interweave and separate themselves in contemporary society. In this interlacing of elements, the “democratic” and secular theorists of communicative action risk finding themselves side by side with conservative thinkers of acclamation such as Schmitt and Peterson: but this is precisely the price that must be paid each time by theoretical elaborations that think they can do without archaeological precautions. That “government by consent” and the social communication on which, in the last instance, consensus rests, in reality harks back to acclamations is what can be shown even through a summary genealogical quest.<sup>5</sup>

Agamben here analyses the delusions of progressive thinkers such as Habermas, which consist in establishing consensus as a liberal rather than conservative strategy. The delusion in question derives from the ignorance of the ways in which history repeats itself in different disguises. Agamben refers to Foucault's method of inquiry when he evokes terms like “genealogical quest” and “archaeology”.

The invocation of Foucault is significant, because it was ~~Foucault~~ he who has shown that concern for population growth and, associated with it, the marketability of huge quantities of goods becomes the measure of what matters and what not from the eighteenth-

century onwards. According to Foucault, from the eighteenth century onwards those who achieve the greatest number of sales or popular approval measures (such as fame or electoral success) become arbiters of both power and truth (rather than philosophical or theological notions of metaphysical accuracy, as was the case during the scholasticism of the Middle Ages).

Pace, Foucault and Agamben argue that such modern strategies of public approval, marketability and public consensus are not something new but rather a displacement of Church theology which that glorifies as God's representatives those who govern through public displays of acclamation. According to Agamben, within medieval theology there is already a clear point of coincidence where politics, economics and theology have become indistinct. Ernst Kantorowicz's famous *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* substantiates Agamben's argument about the blurring of the distinction between the economic, the theological and the political within traditional Church thinking: the King represents at once the otherworldly and the worldly and this simultaneity makes mundane issues such as people, management, and popular (quantitative, or, in other words, what is based on the greatest number of people) acclamation indistinct from theological *doxa*.

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Agamben's concern is with the dark aspect of theology: a region where it has become indistinct from oppressive political and economic management. While employing Foucault's archaeological methodology, Agamben nevertheless begs to differ when it comes to the question of modernity's break with what preceded it. His genealogy of modernity diverges from that given by Foucault. For Agamben the origin of modern economics and politics is ironically non-modern, early Christian and Medieval, whereas for Foucault — here sharing the progressive thinking of Blumenberg and Habermas — it is the break with pre-modernity. I think both versions of modernity's origin help explain how and why we live the way we live

today. Genealogical inquiry is a method Foucault has inherited from Nietzsche. As Judith

Butler has recently argued, it is a methodology that allows for a plurality of truths:

“Indeed, it may be that to have an origin means precisely to have several possible versions of the origin—I take it that this is part of what Nietzsche meant by the operation of genealogy. Any one of those is a possible narrative, but of no single one can I say with certainty that it alone is true.”<sup>7</sup>

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Once we are able to read Foucault’s and Agamben’s respective accounts as partial truths ~~which~~that complement each other, we grasp that modernity is paradoxically both a break with and a continuation of pre-modern thought, myth and social practice. What for Foucault is a non-theological modern fabrication of markets and other quantitative measures, Agamben sees as being part of a genealogy ~~which~~that connects the ~~premodern~~pre-modern with the modern. The *doxa* of purported pre-modernity already delineated as well as supported the activity of secular economics and politics.

Qualifying Agamben’s argument by complementing it with Foucault’s, we could say that modernity intensifies within an imminent and immanent realm the operations of power and oppression, which in pre-modernity were shared and somewhat postponed (far off in another supernatural context) between this world and the world to come (a transcendent realm). The way power and oppression work, remains, however, the same. Its operations are premised on acclamation, on the will of the majority, on the power of the sheer quantity of those who acclaim the ruler.

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What characterizes the working of oppressive power? The *simultaneity of the quantitative and the uniform* (conforming to the rule laid out by the ruling party) reinforces the impression that the operations of oppressive power depend on homogeneity. According to the *OED* the first English usage of the term ‘homogeneity’ (N. Carpenter 1625) denotes both harmony and communion. The ruler who has the power to oppress certain groups of people has a harmonious relationship of acclamation with the majority of the people who uphold his rule. The sovereign’s subjectivity assumes the objectivity and substantiality of the population as a whole. The ruler thus has two bodies: representing both God and the people as a homogenous unity. Law, justice and the ethics associated with the legal system serve to enact and reinforce ‘the one size fits all’ motto ~~which~~that characterizes homogeneity. Public

images of law and justice have the horrific function ~~to facilitate~~ of facilitating not only acceptance but also acclamation of forms of activity ~~which~~ that have been instituted by managerial authority. *Through the public approval of homogenous rule, subjectivity becomes at one with substantiality.* Let me unpack this dense argument. The ruling party ~~which~~ that makes its rule uniform and homogeneously applicable in actual fact represents its partiality or subjectivity as if it were universal and substantive. *The representation of the partial as the universal, of the subjective as the substantive is precisely what takes place in displays of public approval, or, as Agamben puts it, acclamation.*

When it comes to the interruption of homogeneity literature plays a crucial role, precisely because *literature foregrounds the subjective against the background of its public representation where it appears under the guise of substantiality.* By unmasking the deceptive display of substantiality (during the acclamation of a ruler or during the public marketing of a political or economic idea or procedure), literature performs a form of heuristic or detective work. It does so by delineating how the purported substantiality of an ideology or an economic system or of a medical assessment is ~~an~~ in actual fact a fantasy ~~which~~ that grows out of the longing for a world in which we all cohere and are identical tools for a greater teleological or providential good. *The ethics of literature disrupts the governmental blurring of the subjective and the substantive.* In other words, *literature's insistence on subjectivity is not a subjective but a public matter: it counters the one-size fits all approach in public policies by articulating the infinite variety of subjective voices ~~which~~ that do not fit into the homogenous call of the ruling discourse.*

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## 2.— Sylvia Plath and the disruption of ‘confessional poetry’:

For a critique of homogeneity, Sylvia Plath's work is highly relevant because it foregrounds subjectivity. This is why it is purported to be “confessional poetry”. Her poetry has frequently been accused of being excessively subjective— — subjective to the point of being

egotistic. In this way the poet (and one of Sylvia Plath's numerous biographers) Anne Stevenson demotes the intensity of Plath's poetry as "egoistic fantasizing" and refers to "her gift for romantic self-aggrandizing".<sup>8</sup> The main title of Stevenson's biography *Bitter Fame* is quite ambiguous and the ambiguity derives from a highly moralizing assessment of Plath's work from the perspective of her life and personality shaped as it was by ~~so-called~~ so-called 'madness' or 'mental illness': "She was indeed cursed. Desperately she struggled in the bonds of selfhood; through her writing she must find a way out!"<sup>9</sup> Too bad, then, when her poetry does not seem to find a way out of subjectivity, of selfhood.

Critics have recently discovered a more public aspect to Plath's and confessional poetry in general. As Deborah Nelson has put it:

At the time of their emergence, the confessional poets were taken to be an extreme instance of romantic self-absorption. However, their significance in literary history and to the changing culture in privacy lies in their exposure of limitations on lyric autonomy and constitutional sovereignty that we had not perceived the lyric subject or the constitutional citizen to suffer.<sup>10</sup>

As we shall see, in her poetry Plath strenuously and unceasingly strengthens her selfhood. This act of strengthening selfhood highlights the precarious existence of the individual or constitutional citizen. The poetic voice touts subjectivity precisely because lyric autonomy and the individual difference of constitutional citizen are threatened by the homogenous forces of society.

As Michael W. Clune has recently argued apropos a reading of her only novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath withdraws from intersubjective recognition (and in doing so joins the antipsychiatry movement of P. D. Laing and Gregory Bateson)<sup>11</sup> — from what

constitutes our sociality in social thought from Hegel via Lacan to Martha Nussbaum, Gayatri Spivak and Charles Taylor: “Plath’s understanding of the separability of subjectivity from recognition underlies a dimension of her work that has remained invisible to the critics.”<sup>12</sup> By separating cognition from social recognition Plath emphasizes her difference—her deviation from societal rules, roles and regulations. According to Plath the social “dialectic of recognition is evil”<sup>13</sup> because it paves the way for the totalitarian equation of one particular subject or idea with substance, with the totality of all there is in an actually diverse world. Clune discusses the asocial aspect of Plath’s work. This is an important and potentially innovative approach but Clune may highlight Plath’s hostility to intersubjective recognition while not considering the reasons for her poetic withdrawal from society.

Most importantly the reason d’être behind Plath’s vacating the sphere of the social is itself socio-political: it constitutes an affront to the politics of homogeneity. As has been intimated above, her insistence on the individual difference of her poetic voice has provoked outrage in the public sphere. Far from finding a way out of her selfhood, Plath’s poetry creates and also preserves the life of subjectivity that refuses to meet moralistic rules and standards ~~which~~ that a biographer à la Stevenson imposes upon not only her life but also ~~on~~ her literary work. Crucially, this refusal to budge and stifle the idiosyncrasy of selfhood constitutes a public act. It is indeed the scandal of Plath’s poetry.

Some of Plath’s most notorious poems—most famously ‘Daddy’—ostensibly do not achieve a transcendence of selfhood as demanded by Stevenson and others. While introducing her poem for a reading on the BBC, Plath highlights the idiosyncratic and subjective ground of the poetic voice:

“Here 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 a Nazi and her mother possibly part Jewish. In the daughter or in her imagination, the two strains

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marry and paralyse each other— she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.”<sup>14</sup>

As Tim Kendall has noted this description of the poem emphasizes a critical or almost clinical distance: “having been portrayed as the passive victim of a disordered psyche, Plath now becomes a manipulator, using her wide and detailed knowledge of psychoanalytical literature to mould her persona, rather too blatantly, according to pre-existing Freudian models.”<sup>15</sup> Plath’s persona is certainly not autobiographical. Her mother was not Jewish and her father was not a Nazi. The poem is not confessional in the sense of autobiographical.

The poem vibrates in the tension between distance and closeness, between the histrionic and the sincere, between the factual and the imagined, between the deftly calculated and the rawness of experience. George Steiner has appraised the poetic acumen and emotive force of ‘Daddy’ in terms worth quoting:

In ‘Daddy’ she wrote one of the very few poems I know of in any language to come near the last horror. It achieves the classic act of generalization, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all. It is the ‘Guernica’ of modern poetry. And it is both histrionic and, in some ways ‘arty’, as is Picasso’s outcry.<sup>16</sup>

Steiner here describes how supposedly private or subjective experience comes to turn public, how via poetic rationale it ‘concerns us all’. The poem voices an imagined subjectivity, which becomes overwhelmed by substantive reality. Subjectivity here is passive, that of victimhood. The oppression of the outside reality, of substance, of all there is, goes under the name of father.

The starting point is subjectivity that is being crushed by a force which that is taken to be that of all there is: the universe, the world, in short, God. Plath’s use of the word “complicated” evidences her detached position. For what does it mean that God here is a Nazi, a Panzermann? God as Nazi is a travesty of traditional notions of a benevolent deity. The way Plath reads the poem emphasizes this ridiculous aspect. The poem’s tone is infantile

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and absurd. Take its title, which is quite childish: 'Daddy'. Kendall has astutely drawn attention to the interrelation between vowel repetition—the silly messiness that jumbles together shoe and Jew—and the Freudian context ~~which~~ that Plath's poem re-enacts as well as parodies:

This repetitive pattern of disappearance and return represents Plath's version of the *fort-da* game as famously described in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the child's repeated and long drawn out "o-o-o-o" is only a slight vowel modulation away from the 'oo' repetitions of 'Daddy'. The father-figure is a 'contemporary experience', not a memory; and, as Freud explains, the reason for his continuing presence lies in the speaker's 'infantile sexual life'. The father's early death ensures that she cannot progress, and her sense of selfhood is stutteringly confined within a compulsion to repeat.<sup>17</sup>

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The persona of the poem had to kill her father or god figure before in order to avoid having her subjectivity crushed by him. At the opening of the second stanza the voice admits this compulsion for a liberating kill:

Daddy, I have had to kill you.

The penultimate stanza doubles this act of murder before closing in the hard-to-believe closure of 'I am through':

If I've killed one man, I've killed two—

The vampire who said he was you

And drunk my blood for a year,

Seven years, if you want to know.

Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart

And the villagers never liked you.

They are dancing and stamping on you.

They always *knew* it was you.

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I am through.<sup>18</sup>

The two acts of murdering the father figure hark back to Freud's primal scene where the angry and jealous sons kill their father who has had a monopoly on sexual intercourse and procreation. According to Freud, the Jews repeat the primal scene by killing their overbearing, monopolizing and rather strict as well as homogenous leader: Moses.

Patricide gives not only rise to a feeling of guilt. More importantly, it makes possible a break from sovereign power, which prevents the flourishing of diverse forms of life. Plath's poem in a tongue-in-cheek tone performs the liberation of a subjective voice from the oppressive subject of the father. The subject of the father, at least in the eyes of the daughter, denies his own limited subjectivity: he was God, the substance of all there is. The poem bores holes into such pretensions. Admittedly it does so in a scandalous and offensive way. It attaches the category of Nazi to overbearing and homogenizing authority figures and equates victims of such regime with victims of the Nazi genocide. There is, however, a so far ~~not detected~~ undetected connection between Plath's juxtaposition of the silly, the thoughtless, the banal and the extraordinary criminality of the Holocaust. As Berel Lang has shown this tension between banal or ordinary violence and the unprecedented systematic as well as industrialized planning of the Nazi genocide has in different but related ways informed Jewish thought in the post-Holocaust period:

The 'YetzerHa'rah' introduced in *Genesis* had the function of asserting the lure of evil (not necessarily its triumph, but its presence) even in the presence of understanding and thinking, which would *always* be options. The problem for this juxtaposition, we saw, concerned the imposed resolution of theodicy — that whatever happens in history, up

to and including the Holocaust, was ultimately the best, with God and man in some sense collaborative agents. Arendt would certainly reject this verdict on history—on world history, on Jewish history, *and* on Eichmann's history. But the terms that she herself sets for the problem of Holocaust-evil by insisting at once on its banality and its extraordinary criminality afford her no ready way of reconciling the two sides of that tension. She is, of course, not alone in facing this difficulty, and no doubt Jewish thought in the post Holocaust will continue to wrestle with it.<sup>19</sup>

The complexity of 'Daddy's' poetic voice may do justice to complex, paradoxical and contradictory ways of thinking through the rationalized, industrialized and systematically 'managed' violence perpetrated in the Nazi genocide.

Plath's poetry has certainly a direct intellectual point of reference in Freud's psychoanalysis. The point of Freud's psychoanalysis is to validate the subjectivity of his patients and to prevent the repetition of harm, which results from desire or drive (Id) as well as authority (superego)-driven forms of homogeneity: where Id was, subjectivity shall be. I would argue that Plath's poem performs such a break through its appalling and offensive offerings. There cannot be any doubt that 'Daddy' has offended if not outraged many readers from Joyce Carol Oates via Hugh Kenner and Marjorie Perloff to Helen Vendler and Seamus Heaney. In her defence of Plath's poem Jacqueline Rose has argued that it "addresses the production of fantasy as such".<sup>20</sup> Although potentially insightful, this is a rather general point. Where does this production of fantasy take place? Of course, the whole poem is a fantasy or fiction, but how precisely is it concerned with the mechanism of the production of fantasy? The speaker endows the father figure with a substantive power to represent God or the whole universe. This fantasy of the almighty father collapses at the point of its enunciation in the poem:

Not God but a swastika

So black no sky could squeak through.<sup>21</sup>

The ~~g~~God-like figure of the father collapses into the brute force of Nazism. The poem performs this deflation of the inflated. In doing so it ~~also breaks~~ not only ~~breaks with~~ the myth of quasi-divine patriarchy but ~~it~~ also deflates and interrupts its own inflations in infantile babble. The poem swerves away from the voice that articulates its lines. It puts an end to the fantasies from which it has derived its oppressive, stifled and infantile existence. No wonder that Plath read 'Daddy' aloud to a friend ~~“in~~ in a mocking and comical voice that made both women fall about with laughter<sup>22</sup>. Its poetic voice is ridiculous. It cancels itself out to make room for something else.

'Daddy' is not the only poem that enacts as well as witnesses the death of a self who has been confined to the stifling stasis of conformity and homogeneity. 'Ariel' opens in the oppressive darkness of stasis and at its close turns into the shape and speed of an arrow:

And I

Am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.<sup>23</sup>

The image of the arrow denotes freedom from oppression. It validates subjectivity and frees it from being subservient to homogenizing forces. Does not the ending of 'Ariel' return to the homogenous darkness with which it opens ('Stasis in darkness')? It closes with 'morning'. We associate morning with light. The spelling and the pronunciation of the word, however, also evokes 'mourning'. Furthermore, the image of a cauldron may give rise to an association with witches and other prejudicial representation ~~which~~ ~~that~~ mark women as dangerous. These possible dark images and evocations, which return the ending of the poem to its

beginning, are nevertheless put to rest by the promise of endless transformations in which we move from suicide to a new beginning, a new morning. Ariel's arrow-flight is suicidal, but this is a suicide of an angle that is capable of re-birth, of unceasing metamorphoses of subjectivity.

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— As we will see, throughout her writing Plath takes issue with conformity and homogeneity. In Steiner's words, her poems are “unique in their implacable, harsh brilliance”.<sup>24</sup> She sets out to develop a tough style of poetry that does not conform and please but one ~~which~~ that appals (as is clearly the case with ‘Daddy’). Her struggle with homogeneity is feminist. The arrow into which the speaker of ‘Ariel’ transforms has an ~~inter-textual~~ intertextual point of reference in Plath's *The Bell Jar*. This reference illuminates the context of patriarchal homogeneity and societal stasis from which the persona of the poem breaks free. Apropos established gender relations Esther Greenwood rejects the lack of subjectivity that goes with the traditional role of women as ~~self-less~~ selfless servants who sacrifice their subjectivity for the life of their male companions: “The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement to shoot of in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July Rocket.”<sup>25</sup> Rather than being the place from where an arrow shoots of from, Plath's persona wants to turn, in ~~Ariel-like~~ Ariel-like fashion, into the arrow itself. The place that is a launch pad for an arrow is passive and static, recalling the opening of ‘Ariel’: ‘Stasis in darkness’. In Plath's poetry, stasis is a state of mind imposed upon individuality: it is a straight jacket, a form of imprisonment. Movement concerns the free space granted to subjectivity.

This implies that the subjective cannot be separated from what may sometimes stifle and oppress it: the stasis or darkness into which it may find itself placed as in the opening and closing of ‘Ariel’. Those of Plath's poems that are not about the self are often concerned with

the social and economic pressures to hide or to be deceptive through misleading

representations ~~which~~ that veil aspects of our lives deemed unacceptable. As Steiner has put

it, “Sylvia Plath had mastered her essential theme, the situation and emotive around which

she was henceforth to build much of her verse: the infirm or rent body, and the imperfect,

painful resurrection of the psyche, pulled back, unwilling, to the hypocrisies of

health.”<sup>26</sup> Plath’s poetry cries foul of the normative and acceptable. Her poems

open up what society represses. They render glaringly visible what has been confined to

darkness. Plath’s poetry creates a new public space where what has been drowned in darkness

and stifled by stasis shoots off like an arrow. In one of her earlier poems, ‘Tale of a Tub’

(1956), Plath focuses on the ways in which we lie and deceive others as well as ourselves

about ourselves in order to conform to the roles we have to display day in and day out.

Instead of acknowledging the stark nakedness of what is our subjective substance, we acclaim

the fabrications of representations that cover us like clothes in our social actions and

interactions, which turn out to be role acting:

Yet always the ridiculous nude flanks urge

the fabrication of some cloth to cover

such starkness; accuracy must not stalk at large:

each day demands we create our whole world over,

disguising the constant horror in a coat

of many-colored fictions, we mask our past

in the green of eden, pretend future’s shining fruit

can sprout from the navel of this present waste.<sup>27</sup>

Our embodied self is demarcated by ‘nude flanks’ ~~which~~ that we have to cover with

fabrications, with clothes. Plath’s ‘Tale of a Tub’ does not reduce the truth of the self to the

materiality of “nude flanks” but its intensity derives from the pressure to hide aspects of

one's sheer existence. An enjambment emphasizes the verb "urge" and the urging in question then falls on the verb "cover", which closes the following line until we face the alliterating and rather grave statement: "such starkness; accuracy must not stalk at large".

The hiatus (marked by the colon) between starkness and accuracy establishes a parallelism between two different semantic fields: between the harsh rigidity of starkness and the truthfulness of accuracy. What is harsh, unpleasant is nevertheless true or accurate. And yet this harsh, ugly truth must not enter public consciousness: it must not stalk at large.

We have to hide or to repress—Plath was an avid reader of Freud and thought about entering a Ph.D. program in psychology— aspects of our lives that are rigid or otherwise unpleasant. Strikingly, the point of and for offense ~~is~~ here is not some inner subjective issue— or an embodied form of a mental issue such as a tic— but the sheer rigidity of the body's demarcation (nude flanks). We all share such nude flanks in different but related ways. ~~So~~ Hence, the nude flanks denote the point where subjectivity turns substantive in at least two ways: (1) as the material form of our subjectivity (i.e. our body) and (2) as the shared constitution of life ~~which~~ that is the substantive or objective fact of our existence (the *conditiohumana*).

What Plath's 'Tale of a Tub' uncovers is the cultural, social, economic or political conformity that is imposed on the appearance of the merely material so that the materiality of our embodied life is itself not something natural but a fabrication. While being ostensibly concerned with the subjective— the nude flanks that pertain to the poetic voice and on whose starkness the poetic voice reflects enjoying a bath— 'Tale of a Tub' has a public dimension. A ~~two-staged~~ two-staged covering takes place. First the poem masterly downplays the public dimension of this so private bath by calling itself not "Tale of the Tub" but rather, more partially, more subjectively, 'Tale of a Tub'. Then there is of course the uncovering of the public coverings and deceptions for which the privacy of the bath becomes



the privileged place of inquiry. The title 'Tale of a Tub' also establishes an intertextual reference to ~~Swifts~~ Swift's 1704 satire on society and religion entitled *A Tale of a Tub*.

Whereas the content of Plath's poem includes the taking of a bath, Swift explicitly plays with the non-literal meaning of his title. He makes clear that the title of his satire describes not what it ostensibly denotes (a tub or bath) but the condition of the society it satirizes:

And to render all complete I have, with much thought and application of mind, so ordered that the chief title prefixed to it (I mean under which I shall design it shall pass in the common conversations of court and town) is modelled exactly after the manner peculiar to *our* society. I confess to have been somewhat liberal in the business of titles, having observed the humour of multiplying them to bear great vogue among certain writers whom I exceedingly reverence.<sup>28</sup>

Plath does not choose and use the title of her poem in Swift's liberal manner but her concern is social and public too. There is also a satirical component to 'Tale of a Tub': it ridicules the pretensions of various social performances and the deception of our public roles.

The social focus of the subjective is a topic ~~which~~ that the social sciences — — at the time at which Plath was writing 'Tale of a Tub' — — were in the process of discovering. Commenting on Mary Douglas's ~~s~~ groundbreaking analysis (in the late fifties and early sixties of the last century) of the convergence between seemingly subjective parts and practices and the normative dimension of the socio-political, Judith Butler analyses the public codification of the individual's body: “Her (i.e. Mary Douglas's ~~s~~) analysis suggests that what constitutes the limit of the body is never merely material, but that the surface, the skin, is systematically signified by taboos and anticipated transgressions; indeed the boundaries of the body become, within her analysis, the limits of the social *per se*.”<sup>29</sup> She goes on to say that analysis shaped by the ~~poststructuralism~~ post-structuralism of Foucault and Derrida attempts

to unseat the hegemony ~~which~~that shapes the societal structure Douglas investigates: “A poststructuralist appropriation of her (i.e. Douglas’s) view might well understand the boundaries of the body as the limits of the socially hegemonic.”<sup>30</sup> As we have seen, Plath’s “Tale of a Tub” goes further: it delineates how the body (the ‘nude flanks’ of the body) is itself taboo. Hegemony cannot brook the harsh and stark differences between our bodies (as well as minds) and demands that they ~~are~~be hidden, masked and covered through fabrications. In contrast to Butler’s ~~poststructuralist~~post-structuralist approach, Plath insists on the unbending, rigid kernel of subjectivity that will not budge. The nude flanks remain there and they cannot be wished away through the streamlining process of homogeneity; they can only be covered with homogeneous fabrications.

**Comment [S5]:** AU: Please check the use of the word "brook". Should it be "break"?

Refining and revising her poetic voice, throughout her literary life, Plath keeps uncovering the raw starkness of the idiosyncrasy that marks each of our lives in different but related ways. Throughout her writings, Plath attempts to uncover the universal truth of the idiosyncratic, the subjective, the excluded, the clothed over and covered harshness of selfhood: “to wrestle through slick shellacked façades to the real shapes and smells and meanings behind the masks.”<sup>31</sup> Poetry makes us see the public truth ~~which~~that the public hides. Plath’s word for the public is ‘façades’. The façades ~~which~~that constitute the architecture of the public are shellacked. In American slang the word ‘shellacked’ means intoxicated, ‘plastered’. Intoxication reigns in the public sphere. Poetry’s sobriety contrasts with the intoxicated deception of socio-political conformity. The romantic German poet Hölderlin employs the term “the holy sober” ~~in order~~ to describe the elevated truth of poetry. This is not to say that Plath read Hölderlin or that her poetry bears similarity to his. It is to make you aware of the sombre and coldly calculated fabric of Plath’s sometimes seemingly emotive and subjective poetry.

Plath's poetry is sober also ~~in~~with respect to its reflective background. Plath was determined to find her individual voice in a tough and truthful harshness that goes beyond and sometimes offends conventional niceties. This is more than just the ambition to become America's greatest female poet as she famously puts in her *Journals*: ~~"I~~I have the joyous feeling of leashed power ~~—~~— as I am not all now, though I sit on poems richer than Andrienne Cecil Rich."<sup>32</sup> This ambition has perhaps less to do with outward recognition than with the reflective desire to create a new style of writing, a new style that cannot be reduced to anything else past or present in its tough truthfulness. The frenzy of Plath's writing goes hand in hand with her calculated aims and objectives as she makes clear in her *Journals*:

I was taken by a frenzy a week ago Thursday, my first real day of vacation, and the frenzy continued ever since: writing and writing: I wrote eight poems in the last eight days, long poems, lyrical poems, and thunderous poems: poems breaking open my real experience of life in the last five years: life which has been shut up, untouchable, in a rococo crystal cage, not to be touched (Friday afternoon: March 28, 1957).<sup>33</sup>

What is that which is not to be touched? It is what society has put under taboo. Taboo concerns that which is dangerous, which is untouchable for certain groups of people, especially women.<sup>34</sup> Taboo denotes what society perceives to be dangerous and which it puts out of reach, hides and covers. In the quote above, Plath locates her poetry on the side of precisely that which is untouchable, outcast, dangerous, tabooed.

Could it be that those entities ~~which~~that have become untouchable are not only certain facets of life but that they ground life in its entirety? What precisely puts life under taboo? In my reading of Plath's poetry we encounter received forms of not only ethics but

also ~~of~~ aesthetics as instruments of oppression. Plath focuses on aesthetics: “on the rococo crystal cage.” The term ‘Rococo’ designates the ornamental style of the late baroque, which emphasizes normative propriety and social niceties. (Goethe attempted to overcome such a style as part of his early poetic development in an attempt to capture a poetry that is true to lived experience rather than to social rules). Plath does not have the period (late baroque) in mind but the word ‘rococo’ denotes for her homogenous poetry, a poetry that is not subjectively sober and sombre but one that attempts to live up to the standardized pleasantries ‘good society’ expects of us.

Plath’s usage of the term ‘neatness’ is another word for poetry, not of truth but of social conformity. She thus abrades herself for being “fixed, fixated on neatness” (July 19, 1957).<sup>35</sup> The fixity of social and stylistic conformity contrasts with breaking open into life’s true and idiosyncratic experience of the quote above. Fixed and fixated does not refer to being closed in on oneself but to being put into a preformed social cage of rococo aesthetics and ethics: as denoted by the word “neatness”. To break out of such a societal cage, Plath radicalizes her subjectivity. She goes on a quest to find her distinctive voice:

“But to make my own voice, my own vision, that’s another matter: do I must.”<sup>36</sup> From the early ~~fifties~~ 1950s onwards, the quest for an inner self ~~is~~ has always ~~already had~~ a universal undertaking, which includes different and often marginalized identities. This inclusion of the socially excluded takes place while reading literature and poetry. The early Plath admonishes herself: “Read widely of others experiences in thought and action— stretch to others *even though it hurts and strains* and would be more comfortable to snuggle back in the comforting cotton-wool of blissful

ignorance!”<sup>37</sup> Whether the reading or the writing of poetry, literature combines one’s own subjectivity with the multiplicity of selfhood that forms the universal substantiality of what is humanity. From early on Plath’s self has been premised on literature’s inclusion of

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so many selfhoods. Plath's appetite for different lives seems to be enormous: "I can never read all the books I want; I can never be all the people I want and live all the lives I want."<sup>38</sup> The self here emerges not as a single but as potentially a universal entity.<sup>39</sup> The covering of selfhood implies the exclusion of so many selves. What demands such exclusion is the "one size fits all" approach that reigns not only in the social conformity of rococo aesthetics, but also in various political, medical, economic and, for Plath most significantly, gender policies.

There is in fact a parallelism between Plath's search for a non-conventional style and her revulsion with established norms about womanhood. Gender norms were still unquestioned in the early ~~fifties of the last century~~ 1950s. In her journal entry of 29 March ~~29th~~ -1950, Plath reports and vehemently rejects such norms:

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Perry said today that his mother said "Girls look for infinite security; boys look for a mate. Both look for different things." I am at odds. I dislike being a girl, because as such I must come to realize that I cannot be a man. In other words, I must pour my energies through the direction and force of my mate. My only free act is choosing or refusing that mate. And yet, it is as I feared: I am becoming adjusted and accustomed to that idea.<sup>40</sup>

This quote brings to the fore how deeply conceptions of selfhood contend with as well as succumb to preordained gender roles in Plath's writing and thinking. As a girl, she has been relegated to a passive role through society's ethical norm system. Were she not to play the role of the passive female ~~which~~ who merely follows the male lead, she would become ethically suspect. The only active role she is allowed to initiate is that of judging who the man is whose actions she will merely reiterate.

There is a sense of inevitability. Whether she likes it or not, she cannot vacate the ethical sign system of society and step out of her prescribed passive role of girl and woman:

“And yet it is as I feared: I am becoming adjusted and accustomed to” the idea of what societal ethics expects of a girl or a woman. Against this background of inevitability within society at large, *poetry emerges as free space that is not subject to societal rules and regulations delineating the conduct of gendered selfhood*. It is a space ~~which~~ you could figure either beyond or below the straight line of social homogeneity. Here selfhood can flourish in idiosyncratic ways, in ways that would be precluded within the homogenous fabric of the socio-political. The act of stepping out of the socio-political is, however, itself a public one. Its publicity may manifest itself in ~~so-called~~ so-called scandals. Conduct ~~which~~ that deviates from a given norm or gendered role occasions scandal. Plath’s poetry is more radical than being merely scandalous: it not only offends against the norms and roles of society but calls into question their very ground of existence. A turning of table takes place: poetry becomes the measure of truth and reality; and under this heuristic gaze society’s flat or homogenous operations come to light in their fabricated fictitiousness.

The many coloured fictions are those where we try to cover or to hide our specific subjective experiences in order to fit into one of the prearranged pigmentations of governmental rationality. Plath takes issue with conformity and unmasking conformity as deception, as cover of a disturbing truth ~~which~~ that may be ugly or beautiful or both at once. In the long poem *Three Women* (1962) the second voice articulates her revulsion with conformity in society, politics, economics and gender relations. Those who rule and govern, impose the homogeneity of their flat faces on us:

And then there were other faces. The faces of nations,  
Governments, parliaments, societies,  
The faceless faces of important men.

It is these faces I mind:

They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods

That would have the whole world flat because they are.

I see the Father conversing with the Son.

Such flatness cannot be holy

¶et us make a heaven,' they say.

Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls.

There is a certain continuity between 'Tale of a Tub' and *Three Women*. The latter belongs to

Plath's later poems. Here the focus has shifted from the outward s (the 'nude flanks') to the

inner, to the psychology of power and subjection with which we are already familiar from the

discussion of some of the entries in Plath's *Journals*. The oxymoron "faceless faces"

describes homogeneity's constitution: it cannot endure the presence of subjectivity, of a

distinctiveness ~~which~~ the term 'face' describes — hence its face is faceless. The lines

establish a tension between the idea of the sacred or holy and the reality of political theology

and economy that is oppressive.

The oppression of this theological, political, societal and economic power is the flatness into which it forces everyone and everything. Homogeneity is flat. It is a flatness that pertains to the whole of society, including religion. The poetic voice articulates its

consternation about the ~~all-encompassing~~ all-encompassing force of society's homogeneity.

How can even religion be flat? The word "holy" marks something that stands out (in

Hebrew *quodesh*), that is dangerous, not-to-be-touched, that is tabooed. The holy cannot be

flat: "Such flatness cannot be holy." The oxymoron of holy flatness pertains to the

conformity of traditional Christian theology, centred as it is on the Trinity and the interaction

between ~~f~~Father and ~~s~~Son. This interaction is flat and therefore cannot be holy. Plath takes

issue with a religion and theology ~~which~~ that does not endow the world with difference, with

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holiness. On the contrary the heaven created by the theology of *Three Women* is premised on plastering over difference.

The violence of such theology that flattens everyone and everything into an image of its faceless face has ethical connotations. Ethics cleans society of conduct that is improper. Here ethics seems to justify the agreement between Father and Son to “Let us flatten and launder the grossness from their souls.” Similar to the nude flanks of the ‘Tale of a Tub’ grossness embodies that which stands out, which cannot be flattened, assimilated or accustomed to prearranged norms and roles. Grossness will not conform. Plath’s poetry is gross in this sense, in the sense of ~~non-conformity~~ nonconformity.

As her *Journals* make clear Plath takes issue with the conformity of consumer society and sees it as threat to both poetry and life:

“What do they want? Concern with a steady job that earns money, cars, good schools, TV, iceboxes and dishwashers and security First. With us these things are nice enough, but they are second. Yet we are scared. We do need money to eat and have a place to live and children, and writing may never and doesn’t give us enough. Society sticks its tongue out at us.”<sup>42</sup>

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The quote from *Three Women* focuses on the theology of flatness. In this Journal entry Plath discusses economic pressures ~~which that~~ endanger writing and the survival of poets. Whereas homogeneity finds its endpoint in the repetition of the same or similar kind of products (dishwashers) and services (good schools), poetry is life, is the kernel of ever-different and ever-renewed life. Society with its established gender roles stifles, smothers, in short, flattens the life on which poetry feeds. The image of the mother, of a past where the child becomes trained to conduct herself properly, resembles that of the conforming pressures in society at large.

Plath reflects upon the anger ~~which that~~ such threats to the writing of poetry provoke. She starts with her selfhood and then realizes that the self has to be rediscovered, has to be differentiated from the mother:

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“If you are angry at someone else, and repress it, you get depressed. Who am I angry at? Myself. No, not yourself. Who is it? It is my mother and all the mothers I have known who have wanted me to be what I have not felt like really being from my heart and at the society which seems to want us to be what we do not want to be from our hearts: I am angry at these people and images.”<sup>43</sup>

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The pressure to live a conforming life as economically measured by money earned has its symbolic equivalent in the figure of the mother. What is crucial here is that this is a literary figure but not necessarily the autobiographical mother. The terms 'mother' and 'father' have entered another realm—that of literature and its various constructions where we encounter a world that relates to but also utterly changes the way we think and interact with the social world. Literature counters the societal oppression of our distinctiveness, of what each of us in quite different and often contradictory ways could be. In Plath the word 'mother' evokes the smothering of societal demands, especially as they relate to gender.

As has been intimated above, Plath attacks gender identities and roles as one of the most glaring and violent forms conformity has taken. She at once feels obligated to conform to the role as daughter, wife and mother and at the same time rebels against such conformity. Here poetry emerges as an alternative to the promises of social harmony and homogeneity.

Her *Journals* frequently juxtapose the lively prospect of having babies and being a good mother and wife with the new life, the birth that occurs through the writing of poetry. Writing poetry is for Plath not only a ~~life-enhancing~~ life-enhancing but more importantly a ~~life~~ generating life-generating activity ~~which~~ that is more fecund than the fecundity of conception and motherhood, precisely because it resides outside the reglementary structure of roles. In this way writing is the precondition for life. The mother acts as the conforming force ~~which~~ that not only stifles but also steals or expropriates the writing of Plath, who tries to commit suicide in her teens:

How, by the way, does mother understand my committing suicide? As a result of my not writing, no doubt. I felt I couldn't write because she would appropriate it. Is that all? I felt if I didn't write nobody would accept me as human being. Writing, then, was a substitute for myself: if you don't love me, love my writing & love me for my writing. It is also much more: a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience.<sup>44</sup>

Writing preconditions life because it confers distinctiveness—if not distinction—which characterizes the interface between public and private. It is one way of connecting one's

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subjectivity to the public arena shared by humanity at large. Distinctiveness and distinction does not necessarily involve hierarchy. We are all distinctive in our different ways and one way may not be superior to another. In the quote above, Plath writes from the position of weakness: writing compensates for a lack, for a lack of social recognition and appreciation. It not so much puts the self front and centre but substitutes for selfhood via literary constructions. These literary constructions change social reality by creating a new world that is not flat but one that is truly holy in a non-theological sense. It is holy in its dedication to the ordinary, the messy, the gross, in short, poetry sanctifies the profane and elevates what has been labelled gross and impure in proper theological, economic, ethical and political discourse.

Far from being theological or based on a set of creeds (*doxa*), poetry is nevertheless sacred and its conception and composition deserves a dedication ~~which~~ that is associated with the religious:

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 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. It helps them, or it does not. It feels to intensify living: you give more, probe, ask look, learn and shape this: you get more: monsters, answers, color and form, knowledge.<sup>45</sup>

The roots of the word 'religion' have two mutually exclusive meanings, signifying the act of both binding and unbinding.<sup>46</sup> Plath may be referring to the second connotation when she defines the religious act of poetry in ~~term~~ terms of 'a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and the world as they are and as they might be'. The ~~pre-fix~~ prefix 're-'

~~highlight~~ highlights the change poetry brings about. Plath underscores the significance of poetic change: it remains; it does not pass away as so much else ~~which~~ that partakes of societal work (teaching, typing, etc.). Poetry is different, it is not a copy or a vision of what exists but redoes our life and world. Poetry unbinds us from the flatness of societal existence and this form of unbinding is binding: it lasts, it does not pass away. Its endurance manifests itself in the different actions and reactions it occasions. According to Plath not just the writing but the long life of poetry is an activity ~~which~~ that marks our world, precisely because the flatness of this world is undone within it.

Poetry unbinds us from societal or economic or theological or gender structures and the act of this unbinding binds us into a new public space of intensified, heightened life. Its religious dimension consists in the creation and also preservation of new forms of being. To be sure the life in question here is utterly unlike what we live when we conform to social roles and rules. Plath does not equate the act of physical conception with the composition of poetry. She juxtaposes the two in order to highlight the contrast between them.

Babies are born into a world in which sooner or later they have to conform to gender roles and other structures through which the socio-cultural sign system conceptualizes their bodies and minds. The conception, ~~by~~ in contrast, that takes place in the birth of poetry opens up a new space in which we are free to vacate the homogeneity that shapes much of our socio-economic and political existence. This is the unbinding performed by poetry: it works through a reshaping of our accustomed societal role. *Plath argues that the life of poetry runs counter to the economic imperatives* ~~which~~ that *reinforce the force of social conformity.*

Economics does so with the veiled but nevertheless clear threat of death: earn your money by conforming to social roles and rules or else you face hunger, homelessness and social death.

Plath sees her life with Ted Hughes as an open scandal, as insult to such economic hegemony where making money is the only excuse for writing poetry: <sup>24</sup>Images of society:

the Writer and Poet is excusable only if he is Successful. Makes Money.”<sup>47</sup> The problem is of course that it is quite difficult to make enough money with poetry. Plath and Hughes offend not only economic commands of conformity but they also disrupt the hegemony of gender roles: “he isn’t earning “enough bread and butter” in any reliable way, I am not “sewing on buttons and darning socks” by the hearthside. He hasn’t even got us a hearth; I haven’t even sewed a button.”<sup>48</sup> While Hughes does not fulfil the gender role of the husband—earning money and providing for household necessities presided over by the wife—he nevertheless expects Plath to conduct herself in accordance with the rules of a homogenous female identity. Plath’s *Journals* record fights “about his deep-rooted conventional ideas of womanhood, like all the rest of men, wants them pregnant and in the kitchen.”<sup>49</sup> The conventionality of Hughes’ ideas contrasts with the non-conventional, ~~non-conforming~~ nonconforming life of poetry ~~which~~ that reshapes the life of the couple—making it insecure and intense. The life reshaped by poetry contrasts with the figure of the mother, which literarily embodies the longing for a security: financial security, societal security, the security of firm and clear gender roles, the security of clear targets and goals, the security of ‘final answers’: “Her (i.e. the mother figure’s) information is based on a fear for security and all advice pushes toward the end and goal of security and final answers.”<sup>50</sup>

As we have seen, Plath’s poetry attempts to unbind us from such moral panic by revealing security and final answers as delusions and deceptions ~~which~~ that nevertheless shape our societal existence in its wish to find a safe home in a common lot. By denuding the deceptions that go with our public representation of ourselves, poetry overcomes the **letter** through which it works by performing a new —radically subjective in the sense of nonconformist ~~non-conformist~~ —form of life. In one her last poems, Plath celebrates the nascent life of poetry by closing her poem ‘Kindness’ with the following three lines:

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The blood jet is poetry,

There is no stopping it

You hand me two children, two roses.<sup>51</sup>

It is almost as though Plath were here conflating word and deed, world and poetic word, life and poetry's letter. In the religious context of Biblical writing blood symbolizes life. The

poem 'Kindness' closes with the connection between blood and life— rather than the destruction of life, which could also be evoked here— with the parallelism of "two children, two roses". The roses point to the redness of blood. The two children appear within the context of poetry and not that of actually giving birth within the social setting of family or hospital.

The blood jet alludes to the gushing forth of blood, which also accompanies conception. It is an allusion, however, that diverges from what it alludes to, because the reference point is not that of an emergent new child but that of poetry. The blood jet does not go with actual birth but with the continual birth and rejuvenation of poetry: "The blood jet is poetry." "There is no stopping it" harks back to the religious image of life without end, of a form of eternity that goes beyond mortality. The kindness of the title of the poem has, according to the OED, its etymology in the old English word for generation. In its early fifteenth-century usage, kindness referred to natural affection but also to natural right, a kind of ~~birth-right~~ birthright. Plath investigated the etymology of the words with which she worked in her poetry. The very opening of the poem evokes an allegorical medieval personification of kindness as "Dame Kindness".

The allegory of this dame invokes and evokes a sphere of nature that is beyond social forms of deception into which we are born when we enter an ~~already-established~~ already-established system of signs, roles and regulations. This beyond is the non-theological religious dimension of poetry. It is religious in the *sense of an unbinding that binds us to the*

*new public of literature and poetry where we go without the various deceptions and*

*homogenous roles* ~~which~~that *language and society otherwise impose on us.* The subjective and idiosyncratic kernel of our respective lives is the blood jet ~~which~~that is poetry: it unbinds or liberates us from societal conformity. Poetry performs a redemption of sorts: it creates Paul's messianic life, which, in Agamben's intriguing interpretation, "is the impossibility that life might coincide with a predetermined form."<sup>52</sup> Literature disrupts the identity between life and the homogeneity of a predetermined form ~~which~~that supposedly fits all. Literature confounds this rationality in such a way that it makes it appear inadequate, Panzer-mann-like, subjective, desire-trenched, fantasy-driven, obscene.

### 3. — Kafka's and Plath's struggle with Augustine's eternity and the inadequacy of traditional ethics

Plath's work at a poetry that is forthright in its raw starkness of heterogeneity has a point of support in Kafka's rough parody of the substantive realms of law, order, economics and government. The representative picture of a judge within Kafka's *The Trial* depicts not fair disinterest but impassioned fury:

"The unusual thing about it was that this judge was not sitting in tranquil dignity but was pressing his left arm hard against the back and side of the chair and had his right arm completely free and just held the other arm of the chair with his hand as if his intention was to spring up at the next moment with a violent and perhaps outraged gesture to utter something decisive or even pronounce judgment."<sup>53</sup>

Ethics, justice and violence here become indistinct. We see the judge in action as a violent and highly biased man. The Law should, however, be ~~un-biased~~unbiased. At the point where law and ethics attempt to punish ~~non-conformity~~nonconformity, the ethical and the juridical turn violent.

With reference to Kafka's writing, Judith Butler has recently critiqued the violence of ethics: "Condemnation becomes the way in which we establish the other as nonrecognizable or jettison some aspect of ourselves that we lodge in the other, whom we

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condemn.<sup>54</sup> The crucial point in Kafka and also in Plath's literary critique of ethical violence is how in their writings societal norms, which we tend not to question otherwise, are represented in a way that turns representation against itself. Strikingly, *The Trial* represents the allegory of Justice as the contradiction of the just and the fair: as triumphalism, hunt and kill. K's incredible 'Ah, now I recognize it' follows upon the painter's revelation that the figure represented in his painting is Justice. The recognition of what may be just in the representation of justice quickly reverses into its opposites. K first seems to see symbols of impartiality and fair, non-violent-judgment judgement: 'here's the bandage over the eyes and these are the scales.' Immediately this image of patience and measure turns into one of fear-inducing movement: 'But aren't these wings on the ankles and isn't this figure running?' The painter replies that he is not allowed to paint as he likes but that he has to follow societal norms as they are dictated by the court of law's strict commission. He has been commissioned to paint Justice in terms of Violence, Hunting and Victory:

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'Yes,' said the painter, 'I was commissioned to paint it like that. Actually it is Justice and the goddess of Victory in one.' 'That's hardly a good combination,' said K with a smile. 'Justice has to be motionless or the scales will waver and there's no possibility of correct judgement.' 'I'm only following the instruction of the person who commissioned me,' said the painter. 'Yes, of course,' said K., who had not wished to cause offence with his remark.<sup>55</sup>

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This indistinction between justice and victory points to the triumphalism prevalent in warfare. Indeed later on, we learn that the painting that purports to represent Justice depicts the opposite, namely the violent act of hunting: 'it was scarcely reminiscent of the goddess of Justice any more, nor of the goddess of Victory either; now it looked exactly like the goddess of the Hunt.'<sup>56</sup> Hunting is an act of victimization which-that ethics and the law are supposed to preclude or, in case it has already occurred, rectify.

In *The Trial* the law hunts and victimizes. One of the wardens who come to arrest K. says as much: 'Our authorities, as far as I know them, and I know only the lowest grades, do

not go in search of guilt in the population but are, as it says in the law, drawn to guilt and must send us wardens out. That is law.’<sup>57</sup> In Kafka’s writing *the law has abandoned any cultural or historical conditioning and has turned into a quasi-scientific force of nature*. A pseudo-scientific law of attraction governs the working of the ~~L~~law.

This quasi-natural aspect of the legal system truly turns obscene. The obscenity of the ~~L~~law reinforces the already-~~e~~established sense of its extreme inadequacy and dark ridiculousness: the court of law ‘is composed almost exclusively of lechers’.<sup>58</sup> K. goes on to provide a striking example where yet again animalistic hunting constitutes legal procedure—~~—~~— ‘Just let the examining magistrate see a woman in the distance and he’ll dive over the table and the defendant to get there in time to catch her.’<sup>59</sup> Different but similar to the self-parodying tone of Plath’s ‘Daddy’, *representation turns against itself*. The dive of the judge resembles that of a tiger rather than that of a professional lawyer. Or rather the professional lawyer appears as a rapacious tiger and the conflation of the two makes us feel ill at ease with societal systems such as the legal/ethical one. *Here representation does not represent a copy of something but rather exposes the inadequacy of the thing it represents*. The daddy of Plath’s poem deflates from being ‘God’ to the ‘brute force’ of a Panzermann. Representation turns against itself: *it hollows out, exposes as obscene the represented*.

Plath was fascinated by Kafka’s writing, by how he commingles the familiar with the uncanny, the realistic with the symbolic. In a *Journals* entry of 15 July ~~15~~, 1957 she puts it as follows: ~~“like~~“like Kafka, simply told, symbolic, yet very realistic.”<sup>60</sup> The yet is quite perceptive: there is indeed a clash between the symbolic and the realistic in Kafka’s writings. The reality ~~which that Kaka’s~~which that Kafka’s short stories and novels describe calls into question, even into ridicule, what they purport to represent or to symbolize. Plath enacts a similar diremption between a symbol or concept and the reality described. She does so most

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strikingly when she exposes the inadequacy of traditional ethics at the end of her late poem

‘Burning the Letters’ (1962):

The dogs are tearing a fox. This is what it is like—

A red burst and a cry

That splits from its ripped bag and does not stop

With the dead eye

And the stuffed expression, but goes on

Dyeing the air

Telling the particles of the clouds, the leaves, the water

What immortality is. That it is immortal.<sup>61</sup>

In keeping with Plath’s reputation as a confessional poet, the poem has been read in terms of

her marital breakup with Ted Hughes.<sup>62</sup> ~~While~~ Although it is beyond doubt that,

at one level, the subject of the poem refers to the realistic and quite physical act of burning

the letters of Hughes, there is quite clearly also another level ~~which~~ that comes to the fore in

the lines quoted above. *The ~~comingling~~ co-mingling of an animalistic image with a symbol or concept that has been foundational for the Western tradition of ethics: immortality.*

The closing lines of Plath’s ‘Burning ~~of~~ the Letters’ provide a stark contrast to the traditional conceptions of ethics, metaphysics and, associated with it, immortality. Within a

traditional system of ethics, theology sustains the continuity of the just and the good by

guaranteeing— — via belief in a benevolent and personal God— — the absence of eternal

death. According to Paul, and following him, Augustine, there exists a dialectical relationship

between change, trauma, death and sin. As we will see in the following chapter, modern as

well as pre-modern medical discourse in different but related ways establishes a reciprocal

connection between sin or unhealthy living and mortality. In Augustine’s and Paul’s pre-

modern context, death is a question of eternal death versus eternal life, and in modern

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medicine it concerns the secular extension of life in a quasi-eternal domain: the biomedical promise of longevity ~~which~~ that denotes the absence, not of eternal death, but of its secularized version: the retreat of ~~aging~~ ageing and decay.

Sander L. Gilman has recently used the term “moral panic” to describe the secularized reaction to ways of living (obesity, smoking and so forth) ~~which~~ that may cause premature death in our contemporary culture, which has been shaped by the biomedical prospect of an ~~ever more~~ ever more extended longevity. Moral panic vis-à-vis disease and mortality evidences the link between medicine and culture (whether it is theological or secular; pre-modern or modern): any given illness “is culturally, not scientifically, limited and its centrality in the mental universe of any given individual is heavily dependent on the role of anxiety associated with it.”<sup>63</sup> The closing section of this chapter prepares for the following chapter by ~~analyzing~~ analysing how our secularized anxiety in the face of mortality refers back to a theological-ethical approach towards the absence of eternal death that characterizes the writings of Paul and Augustine. As Gilman has shown, in the pre-modern context “science is part of religion, as it is seen as means of understanding the complexity of human health and illness within a world view that does not separate the human from the divine.”<sup>64</sup> In the wake of modernity science increasingly partakes of the immanent sphere of politics, economics and government. Whether it is theological and pre-modern, or whether it is secular and biomedical, our anxiety about disease and mortality gives rise to forms of moral panic through which we establish various delusions of ethics.

The lines above from Plath’s poem attempt to unmask pre-modern as well as modern fantasies about the way out of eternal death: immortality or longevity. Paul proclaims the redemption from eternal death through the sacrifice of Jesus who absolves those who believe in him and follow his example (the Greek dogma derived from the Hebrew *dugmah*) from the sin incurred by the old Adam. So from Paul onwards, the finality of death results from the sin

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incurred at the origin of sinfulness: what Augustine calls original sin. In Augustine death is a symptom of the corruption or the illness ~~which~~ that characterizes the earthly city of fallen humanity where we encounter ~~“the death in which God forsook the soul”~~.<sup>65</sup> Here death has an ethical significance. It is an inevitable punishment for original sin: the whole of humanity is subject to the fall and thereby to disease and death. In this way everyone undergoes death *but the question is whether death is momentary or momentous* — — whether it is a brief interlude paving the way to eternal life in the city of God or whether it defines the eternity of life after death in terms of eternal death.

The lines by Sylvia Plath make a strong case for the immortality not of life but of death. In Paul and Augustine — — and as we will see in our biomedical society of the twenty-first century — — there is an alternative to death. In a world where death is not inevitable but avoidable, the fact that we all face the prospect of dying, functions as a moral warning. The warning may give rise to what Gilman has called the ~~“moral panic”~~ of contemporary medico-political policy. According to Augustine death and disease ~~is~~ are not something we need to panic or fret about. Augustine puts it as follows:

We may therefore take it that this was the death God meant when he gave the warning ‘On the day that you eat from that tree you will die by the death,’ this being tantamount to saying, ‘On the day that you forsake me in disobedience, I shall forsake you with justice.’ But even so, he certainly gave a warning in this death, of the other deaths also, which without doubt were destined to follow.<sup>66</sup>

Death works as a warning in our contemporary biomedical society too. The warning may give rise to moral panic where we see death as the fruits of either theological or medico-political sins of our ~~life-style~~ lifestyle. Pre-modern theology and modern biomedicine attempt to come to terms with the inevitability of our mortality in different but related ways: the

former proclaims resurrection in the eternal life of the city of God for those who conduct their lives in the proper theological manner and the latter promises the ever-increasing deferral of the moment of death via the consumption of biomedical cures allied with what it considers a “healthy life-style”. Both demand forms of obedience.

Within a pre-modern context, humanity’s refusal to follow divine instruction constitutes sin. The fruit of sin is eternal death. Here clearly death works as part of an ethical system where a theological hierarchy prevails. It is a hierarchy ~~which~~ that informs Augustine’s politics. His politics divides the universe into either an earthly city— — represented by Cain’s murder of his brother Abel— — or that of God where we encounter immortality as the absence of death and ~~blood-shed~~ bloodshed.

The ending of Plath’s poem “Burning the Letters” (see the quote above), ~~by~~ in contrast, unmasks as delusion this ethical system ~~which~~ that differentiates between immortal life, and lack of virtue; grace and death; sin and just punishment. The ways in which Plath illuminates a conflict between the aesthetic and the ethic— — rather than a reconciliation between the two, as the critical consensus holds— —has have not sufficiently been recognized. In this way Adam Kirsch has recently faulted poems such as “Daddy” or “Burning the Letters” for allowing “the ethical to intrude on the aesthetic.”<sup>67</sup>

Instead of letting the ethical intrude on aesthetics these poems disrupt our current understanding of ethics by hallowing out what they claim to represent. Plath describes immortality not as the blessing of more life but rather as the eternity of death.

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How can we come to see immortality not in terms of life but in terms of death? In order to address this question let me briefly engage more minutely with the lines quoted above from Plath’s poem “Burning the Letters”. At the beginning we encounter not the eternal but *the momentary*, which becomes momentous in a metaphysical and poetic sense. *The transition from the momentary to the momentous re-enacts the pre-modern conception of*

eternal death: mortality not as a stepping stone to eternal life but as constituting a lifeless form of eternity where eternity turns into nothingness. The poem depicts the moment of dying in an image——that of a fox who is being torn to pieces by dogs: “The dogs are tearing a fox.” Plath’s usage of the gerund (“tearing”) reinforces a sense of the instantaneous. The lines then, however, break from the momentary to the momentous with the phrase “This is what it is like.” The likeness bears full bloom in a metaphysics of sorts: a new metaphysics of immortality with which the poem closes: “What immortality is. That it is immortal.” The image of the kill ceases to remain singular and momentary. Through Plath’s evocation of likeness the physicality of the tearing to pieces turns metaphysical. It becomes a simile for a new type of immortality. *The momentary transmogrifies into the momentous event of apocalypse.* Plath’s poem disrupts and corrupts the traditional connotations of apocalypse: the apocalyptic is not final but eternal and its purpose is not, as theology has it, the redemption from the endless perpetuation of pain.

Nevertheless, violence in the sense of tearing and disrobing appertains to the traditional usage of the word ‘apocalypse’. True to its Greek origins, the term ‘apocalypse’ denotes a denuding, an unclothing. In Augustine’s theological tradition apocalypse uncovers the revelation ~~which~~ that redeems us from death. Against the background of this tradition, Plath redefines apocalypse as a poetic uncovering of delusions. The delusions in question here are those of traditional ethics. This may sound odd. Ethics seems to be far removed from the action taking place here. The actors are animals. Ethics is, however, the privilege of those who are rational as opposed to animalistic——or, in a theological context, those who have been created in God’s image of benevolence. Moreover, the action itself seems to have nothing to do with ethics: it is that of either a gratuitous or hunger-driven kill.

The poetic voice indeed lingers on the violence of the act. The “what it is like” expression first unfolds as empathy with the victim. This is what it is like: put yourself into

the place of the fox that is being torn to pieces. We are thus undergoing what Keats has called poetry's negative capability—its capacity to leave the self behind and live the life of others. The other in question here is quite alien to our sense of humanity: it is an animal, a fox. A fox that is violently taken apart and the poem enacts this taking apart by splintering into “A red burst and cry”. The fox has left behind the physicality—or, may we say, the animal nature?—of being a fox and has become a voice—the voice of a cry. The distress that gives voice to the cry both accelerates and universalizes its core of pain. It splits away from the ripped physicality of the lung and then unceasingly imparts its tone into the universe. The cry does not stop—but goes on/dyeing the air.” Here the gerund has transformed its syntactic function. No longer does it focus on an instant—the kill of the “tearing”. Instead, it describes the process of staining or colouring. A synchrony of colour and sound takes place: the cry carries the redness of blood and thereby translates a singular death into the universality of its environment. Given the emphasis placed here on acoustics, it is worth noting that the verb dye bears an acoustic resemblance to the verb die. The dyeing of the red spreads and perpetuates the act of dying of which it is the symptom.

*In rapid spasms of both metaphor and metamorphosis, the symptom of pain then morphs into the symbol of immortality.* The rapidity of poetic movement performs the revolutionary upheaval that overturns both the metaphysics and ethics of a philosophical-theological tradition ~~which~~ that Augustine has helped ~~to~~ inaugurate. The message of death and pain quasi-metaphysically informs us of immortality's truth while forming the physicality of our universe:

Telling the particles of the clouds, the leaves, the water

What immortality is. That is immortality.

The move from the physical (clouds, leaves, water and so forth) to the metaphysical is in

keeping with a traditional methodology of ethics. A metaphysician does not need to be hostile

to the physicality of particles. As Peter Brown has clearly shown, in contrast to the radical Platonism of Origen, Augustine—as his career developed—increasingly attempted to include the body's physicality within his ethical and theological metaphysics:

“The agenda that Augustine brought with him from Ambrose's Milan changed subtly and irrevocably in his first decade as a bishop in the African Church. By 400, Augustine was no longer the convert who had broken, so suddenly and with such evident relief, from his need for a physical relationship with a woman.”<sup>68</sup>

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Instead of condemning the needs and longings of the body, Augustine appraises corporeal sacrifice through which the early Christians both lay claim to and witness the validity of Augustinian ethics. They forsake the mortal pleasure of body and mind for the immortality of the City of God. The resurrection into the City of God is corporeal. *Augustine does not disapprove of the body. Instead he censures mortality.*

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Death by martyrdom helps confirm belief in immortality. Hence, martyrdom tests ethics: “For Augustine, martyrdom always represented the highest peak of human heroism. To have triumphed over the bitter fear of death was a far greater sign of God's grace than to have triumphed over the sexual urge.”<sup>69</sup> The sexual urge partakes of mortality—indeed Freud would later conceptualize sexuality as death written small (as death drive)—and we could say that for Augustine it is a symptom rather than the cause of transience. The bliss of Augustine's heavenly city thus incorporates the notion of an incorruptible or immortal body:

“The conclusion is that it is not necessary for the achievements of bliss to avoid every kind of body, but only bodies which are corruptible, burdensome, oppressive, and in a dying state; not such bodies as the goodness of God created for human beings, but bodies in the condition which the punishment for sin has forced upon them.”<sup>70</sup>

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The ending of Plath's “~~Burning of the letters~~ Letters” denies the goodness of God while evoking Augustine's notion of immortality in an entirely different context.

Here too immortality does not exclude the corporeal. Plath, however, turns upside down the dialectical relationships between corruptibility and mortality; between the

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incorruptible and the immortal. Instead of testing and thereby proving the goodness of God, death and bloodshed unmask the inadequacy of traditional ethics. Traditional ethics has been built upon the axiom of God's goodness.<sup>71</sup> As we have seen in our discussion of Augustine's theology of an incorruptible body, Augustinian ethics establishes a causal relationship between goodness and immortality. While referring to the parameters of traditional Christianity Plath's poem "~~"Burning the Letters"~~" corrupts and disrupts precisely such dialectics ~~which~~ that Paul and Augustine have established between the immortal and the non-deadly or non-violent. "~~"Burning the Letters"~~" depicts *immortality in terms of the eternal perpetuation of violence and death*. This suffusion of turbulence ~~works~~ not only works on a temporal axis. ~~It~~ but also determines the nature of space and the cosmos at large. Here pain (the cry) floats oblong throughout the cosmos. Rather than God's goodness, pain infuses the universe. The act of killing a fox questions what this violent act functions to represent in Plath's poem. *Representation turns against itself and exposes the hollowness of grand concepts ~~which~~ that may grow out of theology but still hold sway over our secular approach towards ethics*. As we will see in the following chapter, works of literature (novels by E. L. Doctorow and Philip Roth) ~~helps~~ help us discover how scientific endeavours — — such as the medical quest for longevity — — are in actual fact *mutations of economic and secularized theological paradigms*.

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<fn><label>1</label> The theology of approval and acclamation contrasts with Mark C.

Taylor's s theological vision. See Taylor's *Nots*,<sup>72</sup> (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

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<fn><label>2</label> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. By Lorenzo Chiesa (with MatteoMandarini),<sup>73</sup> (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 194.</fn>



<fn><label>3</label> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, p. 287.</fn>

<fn><label>4</label> See Tim Kendall's *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), pp. 111–127</fn>

<fn><label>5</label> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, p. 259.</fn>

<fn><label>6</label> For a discussion of this see Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957).</fn>

<fn><label>7</label> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), pp. 37–38</fn>

<fn><label>8</label> Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath. With a New Preface, 1998* (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 32. </fn>

<fn><label>9</label> Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, pp. 32–33. </fn>

<fn><label>10</label> Nelson, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), p. xvii.

</fn>

<fn><label>11</label> Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 34–38.</fn>

<fn><label>12</label> Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945–2000*, p. 31.</fn>

<fn><label>13</label> Clune, *American Literature and the Free Market, 1945–2000*, p. 32.</fn>

<fn><label>14</label> Quotation from Elisabeth Bronfen's *Sylvia Plath* (Tavistock: Northcote House Publishers, 2004), p. 82.</fn>

<fn><label>15</label> Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), p. 150.</fn>

<fn><label>16</label> Steiner, 'Dying is an Art,' in Steiner *Language and Silence: Essays 1958–1966* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969), pp. 183–190 (189). </fn>

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<fn><label>17</label> Kendall, *Sylvia Plath*, p. 152</fn>

<fn><label>18</label> Plath, *Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes; (New York: Harper Collins, 1981), p. 224

</fn>

<fn><label>19</label> Berel Lang “‘Evil, Suffering, and the Holocaust,’” in Michael L.

Morgan and Peter Eli Gordon (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Jewish*

*Philosophy*; (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 277–299 (p.295).</fn>

<fn><label>20</label> Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*; (London: Virago Press, 1991), p.

230. </fn>

<fn><label>21</label> Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 223</fn>

<fn><label>22</label> Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, p. 277.</fn>

<fn><label>23</label> Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 239–240.</fn>

<fn><label>24</label> Steiner, ‘Dying is an Art,’ ~~in Steiner *Language and Silence: Essays 1958–1966*, pp. 183–190 (183).~~</fn>

<fn><label>25</label> Plath, *The Bell Jar*; (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), p. 79</fn>

<fn><label>26</label> Steiner, ‘Dying is an Art,’ ~~in Steiner *Language and Silence: Essays 1958–1966*, pp. 183–190 (186).~~</fn>

<fn><label>27</label> Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 25.</fn>

<fn><label>28</label> Swift, *A Tale of a Tub and other Works*, edited with an introduction

by Angus Ross and David Wooley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 33</fn>

<fn><label>29</label> Butler “‘Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversion (1990)’” in Sara Salih with Judith Butler (ed.), *Judith Butler Reader*; (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 90–118 (106).

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<fn><label>30</label> [Butler, ‘Bodily Inscriptions, Performative Subversion \(1990\)’](#)~~[Ibid.](#)~~</fn>

<fn><label>31</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950–1962*, edited by Karen V.

Kukil; (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 352</fn>

<fn><label>32</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 371.</fn>

<fn><label>33</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 356.</fn>

<fn><label>34</label> For a detailed discussion of taboo, danger and power see Mack's

*Anthropology as Memory: Franz Baermann Steiner and Elias Canetti's Responses to the*

*Shoah*, (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2001). </fn>

<fn><label>35</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 409. </fn>

<fn><label>36</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 327.</fn>

<fn><label>37</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 47</fn>

<fn><label>38</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 43.</fn>

<fn><label>39</label> I think it is more accurate and insightful to read the multiplicities of

Plath's persona not in pathological terms but as [an](#) innovative opening-up of marginali~~s~~zed

subjectivities to public sight and public esteem. For an almost clinical account of Plath's

divergent persona in terms of hysteria see Elisabeth Bronfen's *Sylvia Plath*, (Tavistock:

Northgate House, 1998). </fn>

<fn><label>40</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 54.</fn>

<fn><label>41</label> Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 179.</fn>

<fn><label>42</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 437</fn>

<fn><label>43</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 437.</fn>

<fn><label>44</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 448.</fn>

<fn><label>45</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 436.</fn>

<fn><label>46</label> For [a](#) detailed discussion of the etymology of religion see Mack's

*Spinoza and the Specters of Modernity: The Hidden Enlightenment from Spinoza to Freud*,

(New York: Continuum, 2010), pp. 152–167.</fn>

<fn><label>47</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 438.</fn>

<fn><label>48</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 445.</fn>

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<fn><label>49</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 444.</fn>

<fn><label>50</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 450</fn>

<fn><label>51</label> Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 270.</fn>

<fn><label>52</label> Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory*, p. 248.</fn>

<fn><label>53</label> Kafka, *The Trial*, translated by Idris Parry, (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 85</fn>

<fn><label>54</label> Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, p. 46.</fn>

<fn><label>55</label> Kafka, *The Trial*, pp.114–115.</fn>

<fn><label>56</label> Kafka, *The Trial*, p. 115. </fn>

<fn><label>57</label> Kafka, *The Trial*, p. 5. </fn>

<fn><label>58</label> Kafka, *The Trial*, p. 165. </fn>

<fn><label>59</label> [Kafka, \*The Trial\*, p. 165.](#)~~Hibid.~~</fn>

<fn><label>60</label> Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, p. 283.</fn>

<fn><label>61</label> Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 204.</fn>

<fn><label>62</label> Recently Adam Kirsch has in an intriguing book about confessional poetry taken issue with [“Burning the Letters”](#) as a poem that is indeed all-too confessional and self-centred:

“That is the lesson of ‘Burning the Letter,’ in which an actual episode—Plath’s vengeful burning of Ted Hughes’s papers in the summer of 1962—can be all too easily discerned. Plath herself seems to acknowledge her failure of art: ‘I am not subtle,/Love, love, and well, I was tired...’ There is still a movement toward magical thinking in this poem—with the husband’s letters gone, Plath writes, ‘at least it will be a good place now, the attic,’ as though by burning them she had performed an exorcism. But the underlying motives of revenge and jealousy seem all too human, leaving the poem finally just a record of sordid domestic sabotage.” Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*, (New York: Norton, 2005), p. 264.</fn>

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<fn><label>63</label> Gilman, *Obesity: The Biography*, (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010), p. xiii. </fn>

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<fn><label>64</label> Gilman, *Obesity*, p. 37. </fn>

<fn><label>65</label> Augustine, *Confessions*, translation by Henry Chadwick,(Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 524.

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<fn><label>66</label> Augustine, *Confessions*, pp. 523–24.</fn>

<fn><label>67</label> Krisch, *The Wounded Surgeon*, p.267.</fn>

<fn><label>68</label> Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men Women and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*; (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), p. 396.</fn>

<fn><label>69</label> Brown, *The Body and Society*, p. 397. </fn>

<fn><label>70</label> [Brown, \*The Body and Society\*, p. 397.](#)~~Ibid.~~</fn>

<fn><label>71</label> See Janice Soskice’s *The Kindness of God: Metaphor, Gender, and Religious Language*; (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). </fn>

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