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Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Counter-Narrative

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American literature in the mid-twentieth century undertook a thorough critique of some of the guiding narratives of the nation's popular mythology and political ideology. The fiction of the 1960s was especially intent on reevaluating such official discourses by de-centering narratives to include previously suppressed viewpoints.

This project parallels in many ways the manifesto issued by Michel Foucault in his essay "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History": Foucault concurs with Nietzsche that "effective history" can only result from the abandonment of intellectual or metaphysical knowledges, and from the refocusing of attention on the near horizon—on the body, which registers the brute fact of power relations. Foucault also argues that traditional history depends on "metaphysical narratives," those grand schemes that seek always to discover the pure origins and identities of things. Because of the idealist impulse of this project, Foucault ridicules metaphysical history as an examination of the "soul" of events. Effective history, however, traces, he contends, the descent or emergence of forces from unexpected, accidental developments. Foucault uses a medical metaphor in likening the pursuit of effective history to the examination of the body. Indeed, descent "attaches itself to the body," as he puts it. In tracing a "genealogy," the practice of the effective historian, the body is the primary object of study. The body "manifests the stigmata of past experience," and functions as "the inscribed surface of events." The goal of genealogy is to "expose a body totally imprinted by history." Thus, the body is the site at which counter-memory is registered. When one focuses on the "near horizon" of the body and its emotions, the metaphysical narrative crumbles and one is left with the brute fact of the power relations responsible for "history's destruction of the body" (148).

It follows that through the process of counter-memory, it is possible to reconstruct the obliterated evidence of past domination. Given the inseparable nature of power and knowledge in Foucault's system, I propose that novelists must also use a form of counter-memory in order to challenge official forms of discourse. "Counter-narrative," as I wish to label this form, also shortens its vision to the near horizon and relates the experience of the "low" elements—the body, intuition, the emotions

and folk life—in order to challenge the metaphysical knowledges generated in the interest of power.

Sylvia Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* (1963) is an interesting, if flawed, example which demonstrates very effectively—especially in the first half of the novel—the techniques of "counter-narrative." Plath's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, a young woman in search of a stable and satisfying adult identity, must continually confront powerful discourses that prescribe gender roles, determine "legitimate" forms of knowledge and dictate political orientation. These powerful discourses enforce the norms in Esther's 1950s America by means of binary oppositions and judge her deficient according to their evaluation of her sex, rationality, political sentiments and, ultimately, her sanity. While Plath and her narrator must accept the official discourses as a necessary starting point for narration, it is from the zone of rejected and devalued material—women's sexuality, aesthetic values, humor, emotions, non-rational ways of knowing, political dissent—that counter-narrative must spring. In centering the narrative on precisely those elements branded as inferior, illegitimate and invalid by the culture of normalization, the counter-narrator can begin to reverse the power relations maintained in the official discourses.

In Plath's novel women are continually defined—and frequently define themselves—in terms of the marginalized other. They are seen as members of oppositional classes that belong outside the mainstream of white middle class experience. This representation is especially obvious when women forsake their assigned ornamental and domestic spheres. As Esther prepares to escape a fashion magazine party, she comments: "I looked yellow as a Chinaman". She is exiled in this instance, by her own judgement, from the realm of all-American virtues. Her self-censure is even more severe at the conclusion of the same episode, when she interprets her reflection in an elevator mirror as "a big, smudgy-eyed Chinese woman staring idiotically into my face". She now characterizes the feminine other as lacking perception and intelligence. Similarly, when Esther is fleeing New York and a violent confrontation with a young man, she reports that "the face in the mirror looked like a sick Indian" (*The Bell Jar* 6, 15, 92). So, Esther begins a pattern of imagery that casts women in the role of marginalized (and in various ways inferior) other.

Esther's partner in rebellion, Doreen, likewise figures as the negative image in the binary opposition. Normally an outspoken and irreverent woman, Doreen is silenced by the presence of the masterful Lenny Shepherd. The male gaze has a still more extreme effect; as Esther reports, "He just kept staring at her the way people stare at the great white macaw at the zoo, waiting for it to say something human" (9). Later in the same passage, the still-silent Doreen is described as "a bleached-blonde Negress." Clearly, in the politically polarized world of the 1950s, women frequently assume a role as oppositional in the gender war as America's enemies do in the ideological one. If they are not always portrayed as communists (as

suggested by Esther's Chinese faces), women nevertheless very often appear in the role of dangerous other.

Another central opposition examined in the novel pits rational, scientific knowledge against intuitive poetic vision. Plath clearly suggests that 1950s society assigns the former as the exclusive province of the male, and likewise grants it his prestige and privilege. Poetic expression is consigned to a lesser, merely ornamental role, since its sensual and emotive qualities are not valued under the prevailing power-knowledge relations. Esther is acutely aware of this hierarchy; she hears the male voice speaking from "a cool, rational region far above" (37). The figure of Buddy Willard embodies the scientific ideal and his courtship of Esther allows her to test her relationship with the male rationalist viewpoint. In doing so, she discovers the dominance of scientific discourse that is authorized by the cold war. Buddy uses science to "prove things," to state his truth, which Esther repeatedly accepts (46). Although she can later assert the value of poetic vision, during her debates with Buddy she is silenced by scientific discourse.

A male voice similarly institutes a one-way flow of power in many other forms: the scientific formulae of Mr. Manzi's physics class, the "serious" news media, and the shorthand in which female stenographers take men's dictation. Many of the agents who transmit this controlling male voice are women. Mrs. Willard offers maxims that celebrate the virtues of flattening out under a man's feet like a kitchen mat (58, 69). Esther's mother teaches shorthand and urges her to learn it. The staff at *Ladies' Day*magazine, dressed in pure white, trumpet kitchen culture and domesticity as the only sanctified forms of feminine knowledge. In their "celestially white kitchens" they prop up the image of American apple pie à la mode (symbolizing an ideal of womanly purity?) largely through photographic trickery (21).

The fashion industry is also driven by a covertly male voice. Betsy, the Kansan whom Esther identifies as the ideal "good girl," is made over and labeled "P.Q.'s wife" in a clothing ad (5). Hilda, the statuesque hat designer, similarly suggests the male control of the fashion industry. She eagerly adopts the colors and styles that "they" are promoting six months ahead of time (81). Apparently devoid of her own will or opinions, Hilda is consistently identified with the dumb objects associated with her trade: she moves "like a mannequin" (81) and poses for a *Ladies' Day* photo holding the "faceless head of a hatmaker's dummy" (82). Even her speech suggests external control rather than autonomy and self-expression. Her voice is cavernous and deep and Esther is not sure whether it is that of a man or a woman. Further, Hilda's voice sounds exactly like that of the dybbuk, a possessing spirit,in a play Esther had seen. The proposition that fashion devotees are controlled by an alien male voice—the same voice that overtly seeks mastery in scientific discourse—emerges forcefully in the figure of Hilda. Her entire sense of being must be continually confirmed by external data; she stares at her reflection in shop windows, Esther thinks, as if she requires proof of her existence (81-82).

The reader suspects Hilda's political sentiments, too, as the mere parroting of conformist justifications of power. Her profession of satisfaction with the impending execution of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg is also uttered by the hidden dybbuk (82). The figure of Hilda thus relates compliance with the strictures of fashion to acceptance of the political norms. The Cold War setting Plath describes lays out an axis which opposes a set of good American values with a set of evil Soviet norms. To a large degree, this Cold War schema informs Plath's discussion of the pressures of social conformity. Esther is sensitive to the organization of all aspects of life into two warring camps. Indeed, this binary structure is so basic to the public reality of the time that Esther cannot formulate personal categories without it. Esther models the only truly meaningful classification of society (to a teenager) on all the political and philosophical oppositions dictated to her: the world is populated by two sorts of people, "those who'd slept with someone and those who hadn't" (66).

Her flirtation with Constantin, the Russian simultaneous interpreter, shows that she is unwilling to accept the negative brand of inferior status placed on one side of the binary equation. Indeed, her admiration of Constantin's professional skill suggests that she seeks a bridge between the opposed factions. Esther's desire to seduce Constantin reveals her need to harmoniously join antagonistic elements and her willingness to embrace values popularly regarded as negative. In a sense, Esther, as a talented and ambitious woman, is herself automatically stigmatized. In the male-dominated world with which she contends, success can only be attained through great sacrifice. One of Esther's mentors, the literary editor Jay Cee, advises her to prepare diligently for her career, urging the study of German and the Romance languages, or "better still, Russian" (27). In this cultural context, the particular advisability of Russian study suggests that the sexual politics of the day require women to play the role of dangerous other in order to consolidate patriarchal power, much as the Soviet threat provides a compelling rationale for the worldwide expansion of American hegemony and the institution of domestic political conformity. Furthermore, taken with the references to the Rosenbergs, Esther's association with Russian hints that a young woman's desire to gain a high position in publishing may be as treasonable under the protocol of 50s gender relations as the suspicion of selling nuclear secrets to the Soviets. This hint is supported by the pattern of references to electrocutions. Esther remarks after her first electroshock treatment, "I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done" (118). Her interpretation of electroshock as a punitive measure recalls her revulsion with the execution of the Rosenbergs which is expressed in the opening paragraph of the novel.

Electricity represents the invisible functioning of a coercive power that is active in both the normalization of the personality and in effecting political conformity. In Dr. Gordon's hospital Esther does not *see* bars on the windows, although a wall-eyed nurse assures her they are there (115, 117). The effect of this unseen coercion is demonstrated by people such as Hilda, who voice the internalized dictates of

power in place of emotional responses or speech originating in direct bodily knowledge. In eliminating the registration of dissent in emotional or bodily experience, discipline relentlessly steers young women in *The Bell Jar* toward the acceptable roles: domestic, maternal and auxiliary.

In choosing among the available feminine roles, Esther is repeatedly forced to confront the coercive principle of the norm. On one side, women such as Dodo Conway, a college-educated woman who dedicates herself to bearing and raising children, are entitled to "serene, almost religious" smiles. On the other side, women who transgress the norms in any way sacrifice this perceived wholeness and tranquility. The famous woman poet at Esther's college puts career above all else and rejects marriage, childbearing, and indeed all heterosexual connections as fatal to professional aspirations. Esther classifies her among her collection of "weird old women." Similarly, Jay Cee, the successful editor, despite her professional accomplishments, is seen as deficient. Doreen and Esther characterize her as sexless and unappealing, as achieving her right to knowledge and power only at the cost of the culture's cardinal female virtue, beauty (*The Bell Jar* 4, 5, 32, 95, 180). Esther cannot imagine Jay Cee as a sexual being at all, and Doreen can only imagine her as a monstrous failure. In every case, women's intellectual accomplishments are represented as eccentricities that exclude women from the most desirable "normal" status; one must choose either a prodigious and "unnatural" success or an accepted and endorsed subservience.

Young women are steered towards an exalted ideal of sexual "purity," compliance and modest deportment, and simultaneously threatened with a corresponding condemnation of sexuality, power and confidence. Esther views a technicolor movie in New York which uses good and bad girl stereotypes in order to reinforce the authority of the norm. In that production, the sexy, assertive young woman is "punished," deserted by the male characters, and the docile young woman collects the reward of marriage. Esther wonders whether the film is making her ill (34). Yet she identifies the extremes of her own behavior between the ideal purity represented by Betsy and the image of condemned sexuality projected by Doreen. Once again these types are characterized as mutually exclusive, two separate personalities that cannot coexist in one body. Although Esther identifies with both women (it is Betsy she claims to "really" resemble, yet she acknowledges Doreen as a "concrete testimony to [her] own dirty nature" [19]), she feels compelled to choose one image and raise it up as her absolute and distinct identity according to the stereotypical categories.

Esther's rejection of Doreen as a role model—she "couldn't go all the way being bad"—is significant because early in the novel Doreen is the most obvious agent of rebellion and counter-memory. Doreen is always armed with "some fine, scalding remark" (24) to deflate the self-important discourses of authority. Moreover, Doreen's speech originates from intuition, a bodily knowledge that Esther feels as a "secret voice speaking straight out of [her] bones" (6), as opposed to the abstract,

"metaphysical" knowledge that makes Yalies so "stupid." Doreen's physical presence itself as well as her frank sexuality give her a type of power that Esther denies herself. In recoiling from the abandoned physicality of Doreen—in particular from the frenzied courtship dance she performs with rock-n-roll DJ Lenny Shepherd, which includes biting, screeching, profanity and laughter—Esther seems to close off a possible avenue of liberation from the discourses that entrap and poison young women. Indeed, when the interns are all poisoned by the products of *Ladies Day*'s celestially white kitchens, only the rebel Doreen, who has not "swallowed" the domestic philosophy of the magazine, escapes and offers healing as Esther's "fern-scented nurse" (39). The earthiness of the nurse, in contrast with the cool rationality Esther detects in the doctor who attends her, restores her health temporarily; however, Esther loses this tenuous contact with bodily knowledge. Only months later will Esther follow Doreen's example in "climbing to freedom" when she obtains a diaphragm and engages in sex without the threat of a baby "to keep [her] in line" (181). I argue that her body's reaction to sex—uncontrolled bleeding—suggests the release of long-suppressed physical experience. It is as if sexual initiation opens her to bodily knowledge, releasing the awareness of the violence and threats that had kept her subject to male-imposed morality.

It would be inaccurate to judge Esther as totally lacking in bodily knowledge previous to her sexual initiation. Esther feels, in the pain of a once-broken leg, the bodily memory of Buddy Willard's betrayal (70). She is much less likely to regard physical ailments as the symptoms of faulty moral or mental functions than are Buddy Willard and his father, who seem to regard "all sickness [as] sickness of the will" (74). Esther's narration generally focuses on the "near horizon," reporting emotional and bodily experience almost exclusively. This tendency is especially strong when Esther is the most deeply disturbed. In "madness," she finds an escape from the polarizing metaphysical systems that demand the selection of one personal quality and the rejection of all the rest. In embracing a type of experience outside the norm, Esther finds a sort of freedom of motion:

> If neurotic is wanting two mutually exclusive things at one and the same time, then I'm neurotic as hell. I'll be flying back and forth between one mutually exclusive thing and another for the rest of my days. (76)

She seems to recognize that the stasis enforced by the narrow band of normative behavior leaves one an easy target of panoptic observation. Only in dispensing with coercive binary logic can one begin to "fly" free of restraints.

Esther's contemplation of the near horizon also allows a recognition of the gaps, voids and "non-places" from which counter-narrative can speak (see Foucault,

"Nietzsche, Genealogy, History"). She is aware of the voids in her life, such as the experience of her father's death, which she is never able to feel until she seeks out his grave. Similarly, she imagines an abyss at the center of all the irreconcilable oppositions in her life. Initially, she seeks to bridge this hopeless void by several means: an affair with Constantin, learning to simultaneously interpret for foreign speakers, and especially through writing. She sees a summer writing course as "a bright, safe bridge over the dull gulf of the summer" (93). When she is rejected, she imagines herself plummeting into the gap, entering the dark void outside the norm.

From that point, gaps themselves become very important to her; she seeks them out in the repeated imagery of shadows, caves, cages, underground holes and prison cells. Esther also singles out the gaps in public discourse, finding significance only in the veiled, silenced or suppressed events in life, which the mainstream press treats "as if they didn't happen." She prefers "scandal sheets" that document the "local murders and suicides and beatings and robbings" and sex crimes to *The Christian Science Monitor*. A photograph of a suicidal man especially attracts her. The "smudgy crags" in his face seem to hide something very important for Esther to know (111-112). In the gaps of popular discourse, outside the norms, the fact of power relations emerges. When Esther angrily rejects the metaphysical languages that deny the existence of pain and brutality, she then reads only scandal sheets and abnormal psychology books: these texts alone attempt to bring to light elements obscured by the untroubled surface of official normalizing discourse.

Esther's search for the dark spaces, however, becomes exclusively the search for graves and wombs. At this point, the novel proposes a darker vision of 1950s sexual politics: one that admits the possibility of the sacrifice—the complete negation—of the female subject. Plath subtly evokes imagery implying, not a cold war standoff, but a holocaust. For example, Esther's male counterpart—an absent brother—is reportedly living in Germany and speaking German like a native. Esther fails to emulate her brother's linguistic accomplishment because when she attempts to read German characters, "those dense, black, barbed-wire letters [make her] mind shut like a clam" (27).

Such imagery is very similar to that of the poetry in Plath's *Ariel* (1965) which at times portrays patriarchal power in terms of Nazi atrocities. The poem "Daddy," with its rich catalogue of Nazi imagery, clearly demonstrates the identification of patriarchal privilege with the repressive machinery of Hitler's Germany. The suggestion that women occupy a role analogous to that of the Jews during the holocaust lurks subtly in the treatment of Esther's breakdown in *The Bell Jar*, but is expounded fully and forcefully in "Daddy" and other poems from *Ariel*. Esther's aversion to the German language echoes the horror Plath expresses in "Daddy," where she declares the language "obscene" and likens it to an engine transporting her to a concentration camp.

In answer to the tyranny of this forced male occupation, Esther attempts suicide, spitefully seeking death like Plath's Lady Lazarus (*Ariel*), and fully expecting a triumphant resurrection. However, the asylum Esther lands in mirrors the larger society she has left behind. It is hierarchical: three residence buildings divide the women into groups of varying status. This graduation, the threat of demotion and the awarding of privileges to those belonging to the highest rank are all familiar parts of the disciplinary model of normalization.

Despite its normalizing structure, the asylum provides opportunities for the emergence of new knowledges subversive of the prevailing power relations. Dr. Nolan is an empathic, intuitive healer who suits Esther much better than the cold, sterile practitioners of the male paradigm, represented by the distant Dr. Gordon. Dr. Nolan helps Esther to escape the sexual double standard by recommending the use of birth control in defiance of the "propaganda" she had previously been fed. The possibility of "tenderness," rather than domination, in a sexual partnership is suggested by the lesbian characters Esther is forced to confront. Although she cannot accept this avenue of escape from 1950s gender relations, Esther must recognize its freedom from the restrictions of traditional marriage that she has likewise rejected.

Ultimately, however, the institution forces Esther back toward the norm and to a final "evaluation" by the authorities. The writing itself over the final third of the novel reflects this impulse; it is more linear and goal-driven, and is propelled far less by memory, emotion and bodily sensation than are the recursive, achronological early portions of the narrative. Plath concludes the novel short of any full resolution, suggesting that the suspended bell jar may again descend. Absolute closure is always problematic in late twentieth-century fiction, and it is particularly so in *The Bell Jar*, since the resolution suggested in this case is a return to the psychological norm, itself a principle instrument of limitation and control.

Esther's descent to suicide, as I implied earlier, stems from her failure to access the transformational power of discourse. If writing offers a "safe bridge" over the abyss that threatens her, it also supplies the means to describe and degrade the powerful discourses that act upon her. After her failure to get into the summer writing course, Esther runs to another bridge structure, "the screened breezeway between the house and the garage" (98), to begin writing her novel. After she concedes defeat in this ambitious project, she begins seeking graves and finally selects a hole directly beneath the breezeway for her suicide attempt. Her earthward motion is a healthy one according to Mikhail Bakhtin's prescription for carnival, which attempts to thrust all that is high, serious and oppressive into the zone of the earth, of graves and wombs (21). However, the crucible which transforms official "high" language into subversive counter-narrative is popular discourse, especially laughter, which at this point Esther cannot achieve. A dive earthward without the redemptive quality of laughter is a plunge into the grave.

In writing the novel, Plath has applied the formula that Esther lacked. An older Esther, a mother who has apparently overcome her writer's block, narrates the events of her youth. She is now capable herself of a fine, scalding remark or two and manages to render the oppressive institutions—1950s sexual mores, fashion and marriage—absurd through caricature and a colloquial language driven by emotion and cynical humor. From the dark non-places occupied by those branded as "mad," Plath's narrator launches a counter-narrative that reveals the brutal fact of sociopolitical conformity and male dominance beneath the apparently "natural" and "normal" organization of male-female power relations in 1950s America.

Notes

1 The end of the novel lapses into a linear, traditional narrative that represents sanity as a complete and meaningful concept rather than a contested site capable of registering dissent. Esther Greenwood accepts the categories imposed by official discourses.

2 I follow Foucault's description of the coercive principle of the norm as he presents it in *Discipline and Punish*. The norm is among the "modest techniques" that characterize the operation of the disciplinary mode of power.

3 A dybbuk is a wandering soul believed in Jewish folklore to enter and control a living body until exorcised by a religious rite *(Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* 10th edition). Editor's note.

4 The Panopticon prison was designed by English utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham. It contains several tiers of cells, all well lit by windows, surrounding a central tower where the warders keep watch. Michel Foucault takes Bentham's design as a diagram for the operation of disciplinary power in *Discipline and Punish*. According to Foucault, Bentham's prison illustrates the fact that power operates invisibly, while those who are subject to disciplinary power are always visible.

5 I thought every German was you
And the language obscene

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.

(From "Daddy" in *Ariel*.)

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