An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
The Body is the Role: Sylvia Plath

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In the past few years there has been increasing interest in the work of Sylvia Plath. In the environment of a growing feminist consciousness, it is clear why. Sylvia Plath's poetry is political not because it is ideological but because it presents our experience. The poems delineate the psychological and emotional horror of a woman living in a society that keeps women down. As such, they are our lives.

Sylvia Plath's poetry, particularly the collection *Ariel*, is the articulation of female pain in a world which denies a woman full value as a human being. The poetry constructs the coherent world-view of a single passive persona, and as such, in the voice of one woman, speaks to all women. In the world which emerges from her work, the female is reduced to biological and social functions which she can neither reject nor transcend. These roles conspire to lock her into a mere physical presence. Thus limited to her body, she is especially threatened by decay and destruction. And she is subject to physical and psychological control by others. Her body is her vulnerability. This absence of self-determination and autonomy results in self-hatred and alienation from both herself and others.

Sylvia Plath has written three volumes of poetry which show a

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progressive concentration on the particularities of being female. The first volume, *Colossus*, has occasional signs of sex-role tension and polarization. In *Crossing the Water: Transitional Poems*, she begins to treat the female situation more directly. By using a persona—a single voice—she focuses on the alienating experience of being female, especially physically female. In “Face Lift,” for instance, there is self-objectification in the persona imagining her discarded face, “the dewrapped lady/ ... trapped ... in some laboratory jar.” In other poems, the persona describes her sense of occupying a body, of internal struggle. In “Witch Burning” she says: “I inhabit/ The wax image of myself, a doll’s body./ Sickness begins here.” To save itself, the ego is forced to flee from the body.

In *Ariel*, the last volume before her death, Sylvia Plath describes the biological predicament as a social predicament. Here she treats a fuller range of experience with the added dimension of social consciousness. Caught between reflecting social values and rebelling against them, the persona has conflicting attitudes toward the female biological role of reproduction. This conflict and preoccupation is displayed through her choice of recurrent images. A few poems connect worth with fertility through the image of the moon. In “Munich Mannequins,” for example, the round complete, self-sufficient moon is associated with menstruation, a lost opportunity for reproduction.

*(perfection) tamps the womb*

*Where the yew trees blow like hydras,*

*The tree of life and the tree of life*

*Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.*

In “Elm,” the moon is described as “Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.” Flatness, the result of mastectomy, lessens her value. In other poems, flatness itself means superficiality, removal from life, deadness.

Rebellion against the reproductive role is articulated in poems whose central image is the bee colony. This image makes connections between the reproductive function and its social enforcement. On the most simple literal level, “The Bee Meeting” is about a group of villagers who are removing the virgin bees from an old hive in order to start new hives. This activity becomes, on another
level, a ceremony preparing the persona for marriage and motherhood. The villagers—the rector, the midwife, and sexton, among others—first dress her in a white smock and straw hat with a significantly black veil. As they walk through the bean field, she notices flowers, “blood clots . . . that will one day be edible.” The image connects the phases of the reproductive process.

As the poem develops, the tension of the persona increases. She becomes aware of the possibility for rebellion, which she is incapable of choosing, even though ceremonial acquiescence means self-destruction. She says:

*I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me
With its yellow purses, its spiky armoury.
I could not run without having to run forever.*

The sexual references throughout the poem create the sense of the oppressiveness of the reproductive role. The hive, a “virgin” who has sealed “off her brood cells,” is being raped.

A similar theme is developed in “Stings,” a poem which describes the removing of honey from the hive. The persona identifies herself with the queen bee, whose life and value is determined by her biological function in the hive. Although in “The Bee Meeting” she was unable to defend herself, here she threatens a retaliatory return:

*More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her—
The mausoleum, the wax house.*

The conflicting attitudes of the persona toward the biological role depends upon whether she is considering it for other women or herself. While she makes accusations against others who do not fulfill their reproductive function, the persona senses the inherent threat to herself in this definition. She identifies with the prodded queen and virgin bees.

The reproductive role is only half of the definition externally imposed upon the persona. She is also assigned the role of wife. She sees this role as one in which her needs as a human being are secondary to her husband’s. She must be constantly adapting to his
varying needs, be they sexual, physical or emotional. This role is bitterly satirized in “The Applicant,” where a fast talker is selling a living doll that not only cooks and sews, but talks.

While “The Applicant” is a functional description of the wife role, the pain of the lived experience comes through when the persona speaks directly, in poems such as “Lesbos.” In this poem, the male-female relationship is so destructive to her that it affects all other relationships. Husbands are parasites on the emotional and sexual energies of their wives. The opening description of traditionally female territory, the kitchen, uses the metaphor of a Hollywood stage set, the appropriate home for a “living doll.” The mood is repressed rebellion. The male-female relationship is presented in the image of female sexuality and male impotency. His needs and dependencies are such that they exhaust and limit her. Everyday, she must “fill him with soul-stuff, like a pitcher.” This self-denial for the needs of the husband turns into self-hatred.

The ultimate destructiveness of this role system is dramatized by the inability of the persona in “Lesbos” to establish a meaningful relationship with the woman to whom she is speaking. Locked in their respective kitchens, they are kept apart by their own self-hatred. The poem conveys the feeling that they can change neither themselves nor the situation. Instead, they perpetuate the cycle by projecting their own self-hatred onto the girl-child. She is described as an “unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear,” a girl who will “cut her throat at ten if she’s mad at two.” She indicates a special female insanity that comes from accepting an unacceptably limiting situation.

These poems, then, present a world in which the female is defined by two overlapping functions that focus her meaning in her body. When the definition of self is limited to the body in this way, it leads to an obsessive emphasis on physical vulnerability. The body is threatened by natural elements, such as the sun which gives ulcers, or the wind which gives T.B. It is subject to decay from within, such as in “Contusion,” where a bruise is the first step to death. Fumes threaten to choke the body like Isadora’s scarves. The body can be hurt by man-made implements such as axes and knives. The awareness of the body’s vulnerability can become so heightened that ordinarily neutral or life-affirming things can threaten annihilation. In “Tulips,” the red flowers watch her, use
up her oxygen, and become "red lead sinkers round (her) neck."

The body is also the means through which she is controlled by others. One frequent image for this theme is the health care/patient relationship. In the poem "Tulips" the persona is hospitalized. She is merely an object in the bureaucratic mechanics of the hospital, "a pebble to them." Reducing her body to an object for tending, the hospital staff affects her psyche as well. She says, "They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations." In this situation her defense is passive withdrawal.

*I am nobody . . .
I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.*

In "Tulips" the situation is impersonal and functional; but, in poems such as "Lady Lazarus," she imputes malevolent motivation to the health deliverers. The doctor becomes "Herr Doktor, . . . Herr Enemy." She is his "opus," his "valuable,/The pure gold baby." The poem is a cry of hatred, ending in a threat to return as something terrible which will "eat men like air." However, even in those few poems where she personalizes the situation, thus focusing her anger on a particular target, she cannot overcome her passivity. She can only go as far as threatening a menacing comeback, the "red scar in the sky." But the future does not materially change the present, and the battle on the physical plane is lost.

The experience of being controlled by another person and the hatred it creates overflows in "Daddy." The persona and her father move through a series of images in which their identities change, but the relationship between them remains constant. In this way, the poem explores several dimensions of the dominance-submission dynamic. In the first image she is a white foot totally contained by a black shoe. The black shoe grows into the Nazi, and the persona becomes first the Jew, then the gypsy, then the masochistic woman. The image then changes to the teacher-child, the teacher cleft-chinned, a devil, who then becomes the vampire finally killed by a stake in his heart.

*Ariel* is the presentation of a persona caught in a world which denies her humanity by defining her sexually. As a female, she has no substantial freedom or self-definition. The poems are studies of the resulting states of mind; we experience how she feels. Descrip-
tions of scenery, for example, tell us not so much how the world looks, as how the world symbolizes her feelings. Not surprisingly, images concerned with the body recur throughout Ariel. On one level, the body can be directly affected by others, as in the doctor-patient images. Control is so complete that a doctor can obstruct her desire to die; he can force her to live. On another level, psychological and emotional oppression are physically rooted. The photograph of her husband and child are “smiles that catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.” Hooks, vampires, blood-suckers are images that recur throughout the poems.

Because the world gets to her by attacking her body, she has strong desires for self-dissolvement into amorphism. Escape into death becomes rarefaction into air, or dissolution into water. The call of the elements is the release from painful solidity. As the body unlocks, the spirit is released.

Finally, Ariel gives us the world in which destructive feelings and pain are grounded in real causes. As the poetry develops, the treatment of these themes becomes explicit, and is rooted in women’s place in a woman-hostile world. The biological prison, the preoccupation with physical pain and deadness, are intimate consequences of a pre-eminently social ordeal. Inexorably trapped, the persona sharpens, narrows. Her defensive passivity, her search for dissolution into primordial sea and air, lead her forward to a single answer, a single way out.