

I Have a Self to Recover: Sylvia Plath and the Literary Success of the Failed Suicide

Clare Emily Clifford, Birmingham-Southern College

How shall I age into that state of mind?
I am the ghost of an infamous suicide,
My own blue razor rusting in my throat.
Sylvia Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path"

For most people, Sylvia Plath's work represents the epitome of suicidal poetry. The corpus of her poetic oeuvre forever captures the exhumation and resurrection of the material corpses it recomposes through figuration—fragments of bone from the colossal father, the "rubble of skull plates" in the cadaver room, Lady Lazarus' perpetual suicide strip-tease (*Collected Poems* 114). Plath's poetry is virtually a playground of decomposition; her speakers inhabit a "cramped necropolis," piecing together a ferocious love gathered among the graves (117). By collecting the force of this energy, Plath's work evidences a honed, disciplined voice of controlled extremity. This leads many critics, and often my students, to read into Plath's poetic intensity that she is an angry poet—considering her characters and poetic speakers' fierce energy as evidence of Plath's own anger. But as Plath's speakers wrestle with their anger on the page, they reveal the pain they feel and peace they fiercely and desperately wish for. This anger derives from their frustrated desire to find a lasting peace by recovering language from the constriction of suicidal thinking. Her speakers' rage represents the voice of anger turned against the self. Scavenging the ruins of the suicide's inner landscape—their inscape—Plath's speakers piece themselves together, death after self-inflicted death, becoming virtual experts at trying to recover from failed suicides.¹

¹ The field of Suicidology uses the term "completed suicide" to distinguish "individuals who have died by their own hand; have been sent to a morgue, funeral home, burial plot, or crematory; and are beyond any therapy" (Maris 15). Clinically this term is preferred rather than the terminology I interchangeably use here (i.e., "failed suicide") because delineating one's "failure" or "success" at suiciding ascribes a judgment of worth to the completion of the act which clinicians expressly work to combat. However, I have chosen to specifically address this linguistic issue in my study of Plath since I argue that her literary success is inextricably linked to her perceived "success" at figuring suicidal characters in her poetry and prose. In fact, the issue of her poetic speakers' "failure" to suicide—their inability to complete the act, to remain dead—is the true "success" of her artistic, linguistic, and literary dexterity.

Other terms in Suicidology to distinguish types of suicidal individuals and behaviors include the following: nonfatal suicide attempters, suicide ideators, individuals who exhibit indirect self-destructive behaviors and parasuiciders, as demonstrated in various kinds of self-injury "in which there is neither suicidal intention nor

Alicia Ostriker claims, in "The Americanization of Sylvia," that Sylvia Plath's poetry is the "truth of a national predicament," that the suicides of our poets—John Berryman, Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath—exemplify our culture of American narcissism and American self-destructiveness (108).² By extension, Ostriker mocks how the core American value of "individual liberty" by extension also "includes the liberty to suffer" as much as it sanctifies the right to life and the pursuit of happiness (108). Ostriker's disdain, contempt even, for a poetry that addresses suffering is troubling: it reveals a dangerous devaluing of poems based solely on their subject matter. No degree of denial or erasure of suffering as a subject of poetry—which has addressed and assuaged humanity for centuries—eliminates the real suffering occurring in the world daily. Yet this same facet of narcissism and self-destruction which bothers Ostriker figures prominently in her description of her own poetic awakening:

[T]o my first encounter with Plath I date the initial stirrings of a realization (practical not theoretical, and not her realization but mine) that to accomplish [the creation of a personal and female poetic voice] will require, for me, reconciliation with a self that wants to kill or die. Not denial, not 'indulgence:' reconciliation. (Ostriker 99)

Tracing her own vocation to the "initial stirrings" Plath's work ignited in her, Ostriker asserts that the writer must reconcile the impulse to murder or suicide, or suffer from an inauthentic and unintegrated self.

Despite Ostriker's insistence that a distinctly female voice in poetry must be reconciled with the violent impulses at play in our world and language, Plath's poetry is pregnant with such a voice. Her poetry is noted among the most masterful of the century, and speaks with a voice arguably unparalleled in its sophistication and style. Frieda Hughes notes in her Foreward to Plath's *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, that the "*Ariel* voice [emerged] in the poems of late 1961 and early 1962. It was as though it had been waiting, practicing itself, and had found a subject on

awareness or expectation of any suicidal outcome," but which is markedly self-harming even to the point of sub-intentioned suicidality (Maris 21).

² Jo Gill's recent scholarship in *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* (2007) reconsiders the function of "narcissism" within the confessional mode by masterfully showing—in her chapter on "Narcissism"—how Sexton crafts a "textual narcissism" which is a "deeply self-reflexive contemplation of its own discursive processes... unexpectedly anticipat[ing] many of the practices of postmodernism" (36). Gill is informed by Linda Hutcheon's scholarship on "narcissistic narrative" and contemporary metafiction or postmodern fiction (all synonyms Hutcheon uses) in *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1984).

which it could really get a grip" (xiv). In her poems, that subject *is* the reconciliation Ostriker describes; Plath's poetry acts out the "awful little allegory" of reconciliation in order to be free of the murderous and suicidal impulse (*Ariel: The Restored Edition* 196). Her most vulnerable characters studies reveal a suffering self that wants to either kill or die, and fights furiously to reconcile these two frustrated and misdirected actions of violence.

It is her speakers who wish to die, and so flauntingly fail at completing their own suicides, that interest me. The cultural significance of these speakers with mad death wishes—or as Plath says in her journals, "the death unwish"—reveals a characteristic of the suicidal mind: painful anger within, and turned back onto, the self (*Unabridged Journals* 184). In effect, Plath's speakers are trapped in a paradox which is a matter of literal life and death. They don't so much want to die as they want a *different* life. They want to live under different conditions. Their temptation to suicide is encouraged by the painful conditions of life as they experience it, but they recognize the hopeful prospect of one day recovering a peaceful life. Peace is the "opus" of life, as the speaker of "Tulips" describes: "I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly... How free it is, you have no idea how free— / The peacefulness is so big it dazes you, / And it asks nothing" (*Collected Poems* 246, 160-1). Contrary to the "charge" for Lady Lazarus's performance, true "peacefulness... asks nothing" and expects nothing in return (246). Plath's suicidal speakers yearn for the peaceful absence of pain, but find themselves ineffective at eradicating it in their lives, which heightens their self-denigration and insecurities, thus multiplying the rage they unleash upon others and inflict upon themselves. As failed suicides they have also failed to end their pain, which burrows deeper and multiplies.

In Plath's work, the text is a site for employing the special language of suicide—the suicidal yarn, though, can be spun into a lifeline untangling the knots of the suicidal mind. With self-knowledge as weft, and language as warp, a tapestry of wishes for self-recovery is woven—written—into the poem's survival. The journals exemplify an intricate textual space for Plath's philosophical and psychological analysis of suicide in our culture.

Even when Plath's journals balance most on the knife-blade of optimism—"let me think clearly and brightly; let me live, love, and say it well in good sentences, let me someday see who I am"—the prospect of the future brings an ambivalent realism about mortality: "Tomorrow is another day toward death" (*Unabridged Journals* 184-5). Plath's speakers want a "fresh life" from their tomorrow, not the dregs of this one (395). They wander through a decomposing world

enrapt by the promise of the Lorelei's song which dreams of "a world more full and clear // Than can be" (*Collected Poems* 94). At the heart of suicidal pain is the recognition that life *can* be otherwise, which can actually serve to intensify the suffering associated with the dichotomous thinking of suicidality: "life as I want it or death" (*Suicidal Mind* 61). The inability to open the constricted diaphragm of the suicidal mind to other options—coupled with the shame and isolation of having suicidal thoughts—drives Plath's speakers further into their own alienation and self-recrimination which only fuels a feedback system of suicidal drama. As the groundbreaking Suicidologist Edwin Shneidman explains: "Suffering is half pain and half being alone with that pain" (119).

In her early journals Plath writes that she finds it "ironic" that she "pick[s] up poetic identities of characters who commit suicide... and I believe completely in them for a while" (*Unabridged Journals* 204). This identification with others in pain, the empathic awareness of how their suffering warps their "poetic identit[y]," reveals the degree to which Plath recognizes that the state of suicidality and its relationship with self-identity are intricately tied to one another. As repeat-suicides, her speakers often work through a question such as: "Who am I without the pain that identifies me? How can I recover life—or effect the recovery of myself, my life—*after* a suicidal crisis?" At times in her journals Plath claims, like Ostriker's accusation, that the indulgence of self-destructive tendencies is the extreme of shallow and solipsistic behavior: "To annihilate the world by annihilation of oneself is the deluded height of desperate egoism," she says (149). Egoism, she recognizes, is not equivalent to a reconciled, integrated, or recovered self. At other times, her language boils with an unbridled capacity for self-destruction, as when she seethes "I have a violence in me that is hot as death-blood. I can kill myself ... I think I could" (*Unabridged Journals* 395). Plath assiduously investigates the role of suicide—the constrictive reality of suicidal thinking and the romantic fantasy of suicide as escape—as it pertains to the success or failure of self-recovery in her poetic project. Resurrecting suicide from the grave of the unmentionable, the taboo, Plath's work is inscribed by the literary success of the failed suicide.

Shortly before her death, in an interview with Peter Orr of the British Council given in October of 1962, Plath expounded on what she identified as contemporary poetry's recovery of individual experience as a valuable facet of the poetic project:

Perhaps this is an American thing: I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*. This intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience, which I feel has been partly taboo. Robert Lowell's poems about his experiences in a mental hospital, for example, interest me very much. These peculiar private and taboo subjects I feel have been explored in recent American poetry. I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also about her experiences as a mother; as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsman-like poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting. (Orr 167-8)

Noting a poetry which figures "peculiar private and taboo subjects" with self-reflective "emotional and psychological depth," Plath's comments directly pay tribute to and pave the route for her own poetry's suicidal speakers. Seeing Sylvia Plath's admiration for the "very personal emotional experience" infused into postwar American poetry, her own project of resurrecting a "taboo" subject like suicide becomes aligned with the projects of her contemporaries. Experimenting with the poetic freedom of self-definition, Plath's suicidal speakers embark on their own journey to define—and redefine—suicide in our cultural currency.

The conventional view of suicide is that it is a reality to be shocked by, ashamed of, and whispered about in hopeless defeated tones. Yet to treat suicide in this manner—unable to even say the word, let alone admit the suffering and truth of its reality—is to do a disservice to the entanglements of the suicidal mind. In contemplating her own feelings about suicide and the inner workings of suicidal thinking, Sylvia Plath evaluates how one can emerge, and learn, from suicidal death wishes: "How is it done? Talking and becoming aware of what is what and studying it is a help" (*Unabridged Journals* 447). Armed with the weapon of "self-knowledge," her writing spins an awareness of suicide, untangles the knots of the suicidal mind, and weaves a tapestry of suicidal literature seeking to recover individual selfhood in a troubled time (395).

By situating Plath culturally, among a conformist and arguably depersonalized American mid-fifties culture, we find twentieth century literature preoccupied with suicide. Frederick Hoffman recounts how

The erosive influence of a depersonalized world of "others," in wars, in concentration camps, in organizational maneuvers of one kind and another, is a major threat to the chances of preserving self-identity... to kill the self that was and to make it another self. Modern literature abounds in illustrations of this kind of depersonalizing strategy. A crucial feature of the existentialist view of death

(for Sartre, as for Heidegger and Jaspers) is that in each case it is a unique event: I will die, and it is the act that *only* I can perform. (448)

His argument, rooted in Existential philosophies of selfhood, is that the self's awareness of its freedom to define itself—as a consciously choosing individual at every moment of life—is complicated by the "depersonalization in modern life" which, in effect, limits "the self's balance of choice within life and in terms of death" (449). Hoffman voices concerns also relevant to Cold War culture's anxieties about death and survival, and links global anxiety with individualized anxiety about selfhood wherein an individual's capacity to choose a life foregrounding the preservation of self-identity. It is as though Plath's suicidal characters are trapped in the aftermath of this state—scavenging the graveyard for human parts that can be pieced together to form a new self. Therefore, one mode of repersonalizing the individual, recomposing a thinking choosing self, occurs in the poem with the writer's choices in textually portraying the suicidal minds of their characters. Plath masterly figures her suicidal speakers in the midst of their own elegiac mourning of themselves—self-elegy becomes the site for the success of the failed, and repeat, suicider.

Jahan Ramazani notes in *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* that a distinguishing feature of the elegiac genre's fluctuation in the middle part of the twentieth century arrives in the form of an anti-elegy. Characterized by their "anti-eulogistic, anti-transcendental, and anti-consolatory" rhetoric and the anger-fueled tone expressed toward the elegized subject of the poem, Plath's elegies become crafted examples of this unique sub-genre of elegy (Ramazani 298). Ramazani observes that "[w]hile all of Plath's elegies are angry, her early ones turn rage inward, resulting in poems of bitter self-reproach" (264). Even as Plath's elegies unleash her speakers' anger toward others, they simultaneously turn equal amounts of that fury inward, self-destructively. In fact, in Plath's poetry the suicidal mind finds locution in yet another form of the elegiac generic, that of the self-elegy. Historically self-elegies have mourned "the deaths of the poets themselves... extend[ing] the tradition of poetic self-mourning inherited from such poets as Keats, Dickinson, and Yeats" (30). In Plath's evolution of the elegiac genre, her self-elegies take the distinctive form of also being anti-elegies, and her suicidal speakers forge a new kind of hybrid elegy: what I term *the anti-self-elegy*.

Plath's early elegies—while not explicitly figuring speakers in the throes of suicidality—feature numerous references to the speaker's passive desire to surrender to death. In "Full Fathom

Five" the speaker would rather willfully "breathe water" and drown, than subsist on the "murderous... thick air" which causes her powers of clearly perceiving the world to "die" (*Collected Poems* 93). And while the poem "Lorelei" announces in its opening line that "It is no night to drown in," Fred Moramarco has deftly shown how the sirens' song allegorizes the seduction of the suicidal mindset over the course of the poem, until the speaker ultimately pleads to join "those great goddesses of peace" in the poem's final line: "Stone, stone, ferry me down there" (94-5, Moramarco 35-6). The poem's deep meditation on the sirens, who sing of "a world more full and clear / Than can be," give the impression that a place "[p]romising sure harborage" exists—a place exempt from obfuscating emotions like fear, anger, and self-reproach (*Collected Poems* 94).

Plath's suicidal speakers are like the carbon birds in "Burning the Letters," which "[go] on / Dyeing the air, Telling the particles of the clouds, the leaves, the water / What immortality is. That it is immortal" (205). Especially as we move toward the *Ariel* poems, Plath's speakers literally become immortal in the text, suiciding again and again without completion of the act. Instead of trying to die and get "back, back, back" to an intact and innocent self, Plath's speakers practice "learning peacefulness" with themselves and each failed suicide they survive (224, 160). In "Electra on Azalea Path" Plath's speaker figures herself as the "ghost of an infamous suicide," and while the implication is that the speaker is a survivor of suicide—with the father's death in this elegy fashioned as a sub-intentioned death, not overtly deliberate—she is actually the walking ghost and survivor of the "infamous suicide" of her own father (117).

In Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* poems, Ramazani argues that all the self-elegies in *Ariel* end in the imagery of recovery and renewal:

Whereas Plath's elegies for her father never end in a traditional image of renewal, her self-elegies close with images of reconstruction from fragments ("The Stones"), of ascent from death ("Fever 103" and "Lady Lazarus"), of rebirth as a child ("The [sic] Birthday Present" and "Getting There") sometimes even concluding with the most traditional emblems of continued life—flowers ("Tulips") and the sun ("Ariel"). (Ramazani 283-4)

Seen also as anti-self-elegies (anger turned against the suffering self which must die), in these Plath pieces the suicidal act is figured as a form of dangerous but ultimately liberating rebirth available for recovery. The opportunity to recuperate life from the agony of suicidality is a chance Plath's speakers—obsessed as they are with achieving purification and painless

immortality—would hardly pass up. For instance, in "Fever 103," the poem opens by questioning: "Pure? What does it mean?" (*Collected Poems* 231). Immediately from the poem's onset the speaker announces an intention to understand purity and its relationship to pain. When introducing this poem for her BBC radio program reading, she describes how this poem is "about two kinds of fire—the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second" (293). The description of this poem's psychic landscape is a microcosm for how Plath's suicidal speakers envision their suicidality and suicide recoveries.

As the speaker of "Fever 103" suffers from her feverish agony, she envisions the "triple // Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus" at the gates of Hades presiding over her slow burn (231). As she lies, "flickering, off, on, off, on" the speaker's materiality becomes the locus of her suffering—the fever of the body, the body's refutation of the "Lemon water, chicken / water" which keep her hydrated, alive (232). The poem's transitions from the imagery of hellfires acting upon the speaker—annihilating her like "radiation," rendering the body to nothing but "ash"—then morphs into the fires of heavenly purification (232). This speaker's lucidity about her own transfiguration, from agonizing hell to pure paradise, becomes the microcosm of Plath's suicidal speakers' conception of suicide and the desired outcome they seek through their recurrent suicidal acts:

I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God.
...
I think I am going up, I think I may rise—
...
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)—
To Paradise. (232)

Just like the speaker of "Tulips," who claims to have lost herself and is "sick of baggage" wanting only the freedom of unattached pain-free "peacefulness," the speaker of "Fever 103" anticipates a transcendent and "pure" existence, free of materiality and therefore free of physical pain (160, 160, 232). As the speaker envisions her "selves dissolving" away to paradise, she imagines herself in transcendent recovery from her fever—this poem figures the intricate suicidal mythmaking which Plath's speakers exemplify and enact (232). Seeking a materially unencumbered existence, they first believe they must dispense with the painful agony of their

lives by annihilating the body, thus locating the suffering of their experience in the corporality of their physical form. This accounts for the fragmentation, decay, and decomposition—the directly figured violence enacted upon the body—in Plath's elegies and self-elegies. Nevertheless these same speakers are compelled to become the agent of their own psychic—and physical—molting, as the self-elegy and anti-elegy merge into the anti-self-elegaic. In effect, these suicidal speakers view suicide as the vehicle for eliminating the pain of their existence and performance of life, transmuting existence into an idealized, recovered, purer self.

The only problem with this figuration of suicide as a pathway to liberating a pure, peaceful self is that Plath's speakers seem unable to finally and completely die. They act upon the self with suicidal, self-murderous rage but because they continue to resurrect after their suicide attempts they cannot achieve full transfiguration into the idealized and romanticized escapist realm of pure and peaceful recovered selfhood which they *insist* is possible. Ironically, hopelessness is *not* part of the suicidal mind's etiology in Plath's speakers, as is usually the case with truly suicidal individuals. Instead, Plath's speakers *are* hopeful—they seek full responsibility, orchestration, and control over themselves for an entirely unachievable and unrealistic outcome. Even the painful shedding of their encumbering physical form becomes an orchestrated drama, with the theatrics of their suicidal performance occurring even at a cost to the "peanut-crunching crowd" which thrives—partly at their own expense, or "charge"—on the repeat performances of Lady Lazarus' suicidal artistry (245-246).

Analyzing the manuscripts of "Lady Lazarus," Susan Van Dyne points out that Plath worked very doggedly to compose Lady Lazarus "as a survivor rather than a compulsive suicide" (404)³. Plath's rigorous drafting process with the poem produces a singular, defiant, and theatrical persona, reconstituted through a masterfully crafted identity of revolutionary self-confidence and assurance. Deftly making her audience complicit in her own suicidality, Lady Lazarus opens the poem as a "walking miracle," performing her oration fresh from the grave:

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?—

³ A key portion of Susan Van Dyne's analysis of the "Lady Lazarus" manuscripts shows Plath rigorously working through the decision of what, exactly, Lady Lazarus' profession is. Van Dyne notes that Lady Lazarus has had the "most success as an attempted suicide" (406).

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

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

And I a smiling woman.
 I am only thirty.
 And like the cat I have nine times to die. (*Collected Poems* 244)

Announcing that she is a third of the way through her "nine times to die," Lady Lazarus describes her "eye pits... full set of teeth" and "sour breath" as badges of honor, authenticating her resurrection from the "grave cave" of suicidal death.

As she describes the "big strip tease" of her graveclothes and disintegrating corpse—miraculously reanimated—falling away, Lady Lazarus describes her first suicide as an "accident" (245). Exhumed from the grave by the "call" of life, she flaunts the horrific details of how they had to "pick the worms of [her] like sticky pearls" (245). Lady Lazarus' mock-perfect image of the recovered suicide, complete with faux-pearl necklace, becomes a satire of the aesthetic project of poetic recovery gone tragically wrong. Instead of reclaiming fragments to repair the textual subject, Lady Lazarus' fragmented life is punctuated by the agonizing and costly charge of her suicide performances. Here the fires of hell become her crematorium, subtly depicting her rigorous attempt to transcend painful existence through the narrative of her own immolation: "I turn and burn... // Ash, ash— / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—" (246). Even as she materializes anew, rising like the phoenix from the ashes of her own cremains, Lady Lazarus has not been able to shirk the encumbrances of corporeality—she "rise[s]" from her own self-immolation full of fury, pain, and hate. The fires of heaven she believes will deliver her purely to peace have failed her, because she has failed to suicide completely (247).

In this respect, the success of Plath's suicidal artistry—through the representation of her speakers' suicidal acts—achieves perfection not because of their repeated suicides but because of their failures to successfully die. In the figuration of "Fever 103," the speaker can only reach the purity of paradise by annihilating the ruinous self by immolating herself to death/transcendence. But Plath's speakers cannot seem to stay dead. Both Lady Lazarus and the speaker of "Daddy"

continue to resurrect ad infinitum in the same painful bodies of experience they ferociously work to annihilate. Susan Van Dyne depicts Lady Lazarus as a "recovered suicide," but this is not quite accurate (405). From the poem's opening to its close, Lady Lazarus does not recover from anything—she is a survivor of suicide, not a recovered suicide. She is still in the throes of suicidality. Recounting the performance of her third suicide in the poem, the audience is fully aware that "Lady Lazarus" has six more suicidal acts of self-annihilation remaining. She is nowhere near recovered.

Renowned for her controlled execution of suicidal poetry, Sylvia Plath's repeated practicing of suicidal death—figuratively and textually—present her speakers as successfully crafted authorities on dying by suicide. Ironically, despite Sylvia Plath's uncontested place as the queen of literary suicide, the suicidal speakers of her poetry are, quite literally, revealed as failed or uncompleted suicides. While the speakers of Plath's poetry repeatedly figure their suicides and inability to suicide completely, only in *The Bell Jar*,⁴ through the character of Esther Greenwood, does Plath compose an extended meditation on suicide which depicts an actual recovery from suicidality. Unlike traditional pathography narratives of what Suicidology calls suicide-survivorship—family members who survive the loss of a loved one to completed suicide and then give narrative to their own survival in the face of suicide—the concept of autopathography is more appropriately applicable to Plath's speakers, who eagerly and self-possessedly describe their suicidal death-drives. By addressing and "opening up public discussion of suicide and suicide survivorship," the poems of Sylvia Plath represent complicated examples of "didactic pathographies" (Sanderson 42). As such, they are also self-educating narratives, offering Plath's speakers the opportunity to evaluate their own identity-fixation, their own powers of recovery and resurrection, which tests their own resilience in a perilous world.

While her speakers are armed against the world, each of their confrontations with death—suicide attempt after suicide attempt—endows them with the figurative armor and weaponry needed to navigate the perils of being *alive*. For Plath, the greatest life is a written life, as she explains the tempting allure and potential failure, of writing about a resurrected suicide. The textual dimension of suicidality occurs in a description from her journal:

⁴ Robin Peel reveals in his study of *The Bell Jar* manuscripts, that Plath had nearly titled the novel "Diary of a Suicide" (Peel, "Bell Jar Manuscripts" 442).

Being dead, I rose up again, and even resort to the mere sensation value of being suicidal, of getting so close, of coming out of the grave with the scars and the marring mark on my cheek which (is it my imagination) grows more prominent: paling like a death-spot in the red, wind-blown skin, browning darkly in photographs, against my grave winter-pallor. And I identify too closely with my reading, with my writing. (*Unabridged Journals* 199)

These flirtations with death become raw energy for coming to life, returning to it, recovering some bearable fashion of living. It is this "coming out of the grave" that gives Plath's speakers such focused purpose, assurance, and authority at suicide. This public function, even the "mere sensation value of being suicidal," is an unabashed and defiant commitment to recovering an empowered self—something precipitated by the intimacy of death but not the finality of it. "It is almost over," the speaker of "Stings" reassures herself, "I am in control... They thought death was worth it, but I / Have a self to recover" (*Collected Poems* 214-5).

It is not their success at dying which make Plath's poetic personas such marvels of suicidal success, but rather their failure to die. Time and again her speakers are the ghosts of their own "infamous suicides," and their repeated stabs at suiciding are figured as something which they are still—by their own admission—in the midst of producing, practicing, and perfecting. Sylvia Plath's working artistry with suicide figures the suicidal act as a tool used "not [to] carve, but enter / Pure" (208). In perfecting her speakers as failed suicides—as immortal speakers who *cannot ever completely die*—Plath succeeds in achieving a posthumous career which figures her poems as perpetually in the midst of reconciling the motifs of suicidality and self-recovery in her poetry. Her renowned literary success as the *grand dame* of suicidal poetry often fails to acknowledge—beneath the pain and anger and guilt which accompany suicide—that her poetics of suicide always portray speakers hoping to achieve relief and freedom from suicidal agony. With her death, Plath's speakers will forever perform and resurrect from their suicides, forever hoping for a better incarnation. Plath's majestic ability to out-live even her own suicide pays tribute to the immortality her speakers believed in, and so desperately sought in the poetry of their lives.

Works Cited

- Gill, Jo. *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007.
- Hoffman, Frederick J. *The Mortal No: Death and the Modern Imagination*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1964.
- Maris, Ronald W., Alan L. Berman, and Morton M. Silverman. *Comprehensive Textbook of Suicidology*. London: Guilford Press, 2000.
- Moramarco, Fred. "'Burned-up Intensity': The Suicidal Poetry of Sylvia Plath." *Mosaic*.15:1 (Winter 1982) 141-51.
- Orr, Peter. *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966.
- Ostriker, Alicia. "The Americanization of Sylvia." *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Linda W. Wagner. G.K. Hall & Co: Boston, MA, 1984. 97-109.
- Peel, Robin. "The Bell Jar Manuscripts, Two January 1962 Poems, 'Elm,' and Ariel." *Journal of Modern Literature*. 23:3-4 (Summer 2000) 441-454.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. "Foreward" by Frieda Hughes. New York: HarperCollins Publishers. xi-xxi.
- . *The Bell Jar*. New York: Bantam Books, 1981.
- . *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992.
- . *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1994.
- Sanderson, Richard K. "Relational Death's Narratives of Suicide Survivorship." *True Relations: Essays on Autobiography and the Postmodern*. Eds. Thomas Couser and Joseph Fichtelberg. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998. 33-50.
- Shneidman, Edwin. *The Suicidal Mind*. New York: Oxford UP, 1996.
- Van Dyne, Susan R. "Fueling the Phoenix Fire: The Manuscripts of Sylvia Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'." *Massachusetts Review*. 24:2 (Summer 1983) 395-410.