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## Sex/textual Conflicts in The Bell Jar: Sylvia Plath's Doubling Negatives

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# Lesbian Configurations

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## 4 Sex/textual Conflicts in *The Bell Jar*: Sylvia Plath's Doubling Negatives

In psychotic depersonalization, the . . . subject's ego is no longer centred in its own body, and the body feels as if it has been taken over by others or is controlled by outside forces. When autoscopy occurs, the subject may see itself as it were from the outside or may be haunted by the most terrifying images, the *Doppelgänger*.  
Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*

Since its publication in 1963, the reputation of Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar* has acquired almost mythical proportions.<sup>1</sup> While Plath's life and premature death have been extensively documented over the years,<sup>2</sup> her semi-autobiographical novel has become one of the classic twentieth-century stories of female adolescence, enjoying virtual cult status with both readers and literary critics.<sup>3</sup> Taken up by the early women's movement, *The Bell Jar*'s protagonist, Plath's *alter ego* Esther Greenwood, has frequently served as the embodiment of female victimization in the pre-liberation days of the 1950s and early 1960s.<sup>4</sup> Feminist critics have seen in this tale of madness and self-destruction a harrowing account of growing up female in post-war middle-class America,<sup>5</sup> finding it one of the most powerful indictments of the so-called double standard that made many young female lives miserable at the time; in other words, a splendid exposition of what is so aptly captured in Betty Friedan's phrase the 'feminine mystique'.<sup>6</sup>

In mainstream literary history, *The Bell Jar* generally figures as the 'female counter-part' to that other quintessentially American story of post-war 'alienation and disengagement', J. D. Salinger's

*The Catcher in the Rye* (1951).<sup>7</sup> In fact, as Linda Wagner-Martin has pointed out, Plath used this classic male quest narrative as a model for what was to become her own, turning to Salinger's novel for structure, and drawing on it 'whenever she ran out of events that seemed to fit Esther's story.'<sup>8</sup> Although such comments should warn us against reading *The Bell Jar* as a direct reflection of the author's life, Plath's various biographers and her posthumously published letters and journals confirm that the novel is largely autobiographical in content.<sup>9</sup> Compounded by the author's suicide a few months after the book came out, its autobiographical groundings have undeniably enhanced *The Bell Jar*'s sensational impact, an impact which does not appear to have diminished during its more than thirty-year history.

What could be the incentive, or perhaps even the point, of attempting to reread a text which is so well known and so exhaustively analysed that it seems to have become almost common property? Moreover, and considering the novel's longstanding feminist appropriation, what could be the purpose of doing so from a lesbian perspective? What I propose to do in this chapter is to perform a 'perverse reading' of *The Bell Jar*, to approach it as a narrative of female adolescence in which it is not in the first place the operations of *gender-ideology*, but rather the conflicts of female (hetero)sexuality that play a structural part. In other words, to draw out the story's ambivalent sexual subtext, which forms not only its own 'unsaid', but also that of most feminist readings of it.

The figure of the lesbian makes a phantom-like yet critical appearance in *The Bell Jar* on various textual levels, asserting its disruptive potential in two striking ways: first, by complicating and unsettling the relationship between the narrator and her protagonist, and second, by surfacing in the guise of the 'most terrifying of images', the *Doppelgänger*. Whereas the focus of my discussion will be on specific complexities offered by and in the text, I will additionally consider those contextual factors that are crucial to such a 'perverse', that is to say, lesbian understanding of its signifying operations.

A first illuminating extra-textual detail is couched in the history of the novel's publication. While she was working on it, Plath wrote to a friend that she 'enjoyed writing the book,' that she

between the extradiegetic and the intradiegetic levels of the text – in order subsequently to concentrate on the figure of the *Doppelgänger* or ‘double’.<sup>18</sup>

In rereading *The Bell Jar* – or, for that matter, any other text by a not self-identified lesbian author – in the context of a study on configurations of lesbian sexuality,<sup>19</sup> I am not necessarily, or even primarily, concerned with the representation or portrayal of lesbian characters; nor, I should add, is it my objective (posthumously) to establish the ‘truth’ about such authors’ sexual orientations. By focusing, in contrast, on textual figures and figures that in some way suggest, in Marilyn Frye’s words, a specific ‘mode of disloyalty’ towards the heteropatriarchal order, I am employing a notion of lesbian sexuality that first of all designates a disruptive material phenomenon with regard to the smooth operations of ‘Phallographic Reality’. On a more abstract, symbolic level the figure of the lesbian additionally represents, as Judith Roof has convincingly argued, the ‘vanishing point’ of Eurowestern metaphysics as such. Such ‘disloyalty’ to prevailing systems of thought in cultural production itself may hence also serve as an enabling analytical tool in critical practice. Let me briefly digress to illuminate the grounds for these assumptions.

Drawing on a diversity of discourses – from cinema and psychoanalysis to literature and literary criticism – the project of Roof’s appropriately entitled book, *A Lure of Knowledge*, comprises a sustained and thought-provoking effort at disentangling the paradoxical (non)existence of lesbian sexuality in Western culture. Through a meticulous exploration of a large number of both male- and female-authored texts, she succeeds in bringing to light a range of ‘similar rhetorical or argumentative positions’ *vis-à-vis* lesbian sexuality, whose specific contextualization leads her to the following conclusion:

Operating as points of systemic failure, configurations of lesbian sexuality often reflect the complex incongruities that occur when the logic or philosophy of a system becomes self-contradictory, visibly fails to account for something, or cannot complete itself.<sup>20</sup>

Highlighting the overdetermined nature of such configurations, Roof makes clear that lesbian sexuality does not only upset the

logic of dominant conceptual frameworks, but that the subject ‘simultaneously . . . instigates the overtly compensatory and highly visible return of the terms of the ruptured system that mend and mask its gaps’. Since the threat of exposure embodied by the ‘female invert’ can be directly traced to the figure’s undefinability, she further infers that ‘attempts to depict or explain lesbian sexuality spur anxieties about knowledge and identity.’ As a result, the configurations of lesbianism in the variety of (straight) discourses under investigation can be seen to function as ‘complex representations whose particular location in a text . . . reveal not lesbian sexuality *per se*, but the anxieties it produces.’<sup>21</sup>

Precisely because of its significance as a fundamental disloyalty to a hierarchical system of (hetero)sexual gender relations, lesbian sexuality poses a threat of confusion to the ‘straight mind’ that frames Western social reality. It simultaneously constitutes the moment at which the fundamental contradictions of, to recall Irigaray’s provocative term, the hom(m)osexual symbolic order most conspicuously reveal themselves.<sup>22</sup> This not only holds true for such obviously male fantasies as, for instance, the films discussed in the preceding two chapters. The lesbian’s destabilizing, ‘complicating’ effects also become apparent when we consider the various discursive figures under whose guise her ‘unnatural’ desires tend to surface in female-authored texts, especially in those pre-dating the liberatory era of the late 1960s.<sup>23</sup>

As covert articulations of the ‘love that dare not speak its name’, it is primarily, we recall, through complexly veiled and often recurring patterns of imagery that lesbian desire speaks through the overtly heterosexual surface in pre-, or proto-feminist female fictions. What is ‘unnameable’ emerges in the contradictory ‘nodal points’ structuring a given narrative, discursive knots which acquire the significance of, to quote Roof again, ‘conflicting impetuses of representational insufficiency and recuperation’. To her list of such configurations – which includes ‘titillating foreplay, simulated heterosexuality, exotic excess, knowing center, joking inauthenticity, artful compromise, and masculine masks’ – I wish to add the figure of the female adolescent.<sup>24</sup> Functioning in the Western cultural imagination as an emblem of indefiniteness and ambiguity, the figure of the female adolescent, as I will try to show here and in the following chapter, may

had, indeed, 'never been so excited about anything else she had written.' Its impressive reputation may easily lead us to forget, however, that Plath later called *The Bell Jar* a 'pot-boiler' and first had it published under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas.<sup>10</sup> To resolve such apparent contradictions in the author's feelings about her all-time bestseller, Anne Stevenson notes that Plath at the time insisted that she did not wish to link her name as a poet to such a prosaic piece of work. Obviously not quite satisfied with this explanation, Stevenson then goes on to attribute Plath's reluctance to publish under her own name to a need for 'discretion', a desire she considers quite understandable in view of the 'barely disguised, hurtful portrait of her mother' the novel presents, on top of the 'portrayal . . . of a devastating period in [the author's] own personal history'. But even these presumed grounds for the option of anonymity appear inadequate, for in a footnote Stevenson informs us that 'toward the end of her life [Plath] abandoned this discretion and spoke of the novel to several London friends.' She unfortunately refrains from giving us any clues as to the cause of this shift in the author's attitude.<sup>11</sup>

In remarkable contrast to these 'exonerating' observations, Wagner-Martin asserts that writing *The Bell Jar* was a 'liberating experience' for Plath, whilst further suggesting that the author's *alter ego* Esther is 'not ashamed of her descent into madness; she wants to tell about it, partly to rid herself of memories, partly to help other women faced with the same cultural pressure' which precipitated her mental breakdown.<sup>12</sup> In trying to account for the author's desire for anonymity, Wagner-Martin points to the ambivalent portrayal of not just the mother figure, but of all the older female characters in the novel, whom she identifies exclusively in their function as unreliable teachers or dubious role models. Despite the fact that the intertextual paradigm of the 'young girl/older woman', or the 'pupil-teacher relationship', forms one of the central topoi in the fragmented tradition of lesbian literature,<sup>13</sup> Wagner-Martin apparently feels no need to probe into the underlying causes or the specific quality of the ambivalence characterizing Esther's relations with these older females.<sup>14</sup> Nor does she seem to perceive that a similar kind of ambiguity suffuses the protagonist's strained relationships with female characters her own age. Yet it is precisely in the equivocal

depiction of these variously strained same-sex relationships that a more persuasive answer to the question of the author's willingness to lay claim to her 'pot-boiler' would seem to lie. I will come back to this shortly.

Another significant detail in the history of its publication, one that is equally likely to be obscured by *The Bell Jar's* present-day prominence in the American canon, is the fact that the manuscript was accepted by its original British publisher only after several editors in the US had rejected it. Whilst Plath's decision to use a pseudonym can be read as a deliberate act to disengage herself from this 'transposed autobiography', the text was thus subjected to a further, in this case externally-imposed, divorce from its author, making its official *début* not in her native country but in that in which she was at the time cast in the role of resident alien.<sup>15</sup> The atmosphere of disconnection and estrangement marking the novel's history from the beginning, acquires, as I hope to show, distinct significance in retrospect. For the moment, it is furthermore interesting to note that the two female American editors who refused the manuscript did so – 'kindly but with apt criticism', Stevenson approvingly remarks – on account of the fact that Esther Greenwood's 'experience remain[ed] a private one'.<sup>16</sup> Clearly, any awareness of the 'feminine mystique' – or of what would later be captured in the feminist slogan 'the personal is the political' – had not yet entered New York editorial offices.

When the book was eventually launched by Heinemann on 14 January, 1963, none of the reviews that subsequently appeared in the British press was 'entirely adverse'. Most critics' responses show remarkable agreement in at least one respect, however: all felt that the author had not succeeded in 'establishing a viewpoint'.<sup>17</sup> While generally considered a serious flaw, it is this very same 'problem' of perspective which, we shall see, is not only closely entwined with the ambivalence characterizing the female interrelationships central to the protagonist's quest, but which additionally allows us to perceive the connections between the narrative perspective and the sexual conflicts and contradictions operating on the novel's variously interacting textual levels. To further explore these connections, I will first briefly discuss the relationship between the narrator and her protagonist – or to use Gérard Genette's somewhat opaque but more precise terms,

operate in (pre-liberation) women's literature as both a mask for and a signal of an unstable and transgressive, that is, lesbian sex/textuality.

The concept of adolescence as a stage of development with explicitly sexual connotations is of relatively recent date.<sup>25</sup> While the Romantic Age can be considered to have given birth to the category of the child – think of Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) – it was the work of the sexologists at the end of the nineteenth century, and the dissemination of (Freudian) psychoanalytic theory at the beginning of the twentieth, that produced the notion of adolescence as we know it.<sup>26</sup> In Foucaultian terms, it was thus with the 'invention of sexuality' as such, that the adolescent entered our discursive universe as a recognizable type, a specific kind of human being. Conceived of as an essentially transitional phenomenon, adolescence was subsequently recognized as a crucial stage in identity formation precisely on account of its sexual overdetermination, as an intermediate period during which the relatively unsexed child develops into a sexually fully-differentiated adult subject. Encompassing an inevitable but passing psychosexual crisis, the task of adolescence is successfully completed with the individual's 'espousal' and internalization of either of two culturally acceptable forms of adult subjecthood, that is to say, when s/he adopts on a subjective, psychic level what are in effect culturally constructed images of 'masculinity' and 'femininity' respectively.<sup>27</sup>

Whereas the locus of twentieth-century definitions of identity thus in the first instance appears to reside in a person's sexuality, the institutionalization of nineteenth-century medico-scientific discourses has, paradoxically, succeeded in shifting attention away from sexuality to gender. In line with prevalent biological and psychological notions regarding puberty, adolescence is today generally regarded as a period of mental as well as emotional confusion, of (sexual) experimentation, and overall irresponsibility. As a 'privileged' timespace in Western consumer culture, adolescence or 'youth' represents a stage of licensed rebellion ultimately aimed at setting the individual on her/his way to her/his future role in the social order. By positing a direct and causal relationship between the biological body, psychosexuality

and gender, the discourse of adolescence has thus itself become another of what Foucault calls 'technologies of the self', ushering children of either sex into their adult positions as gendered subjects.<sup>28</sup>

In traditional literary terms, it is the genre of the *Bildungsroman* or novel of development which centres on the critical phase of subjective formation. Depicting the hero/ine's quest for her/his self, such narrative itineraries are usually characterized by a strong sense of dislocation.<sup>29</sup> Organized around a protagonist overwhelmed by feelings of meaninglessness and incoherence, adolescent novels present often disconcerting accounts of disorder on which an omniscient narrator, firmly established in her/his position as an adult speaking subject, retrospectively imposes order. From its opening sentence onwards, *The Bell Jar* conforms to this pattern: 'It was a queer, sultry summer, the summer they electrocuted the Rosenbergs, and I didn't know what I was doing in New York' (1). Situating the narrative in a specific moment in the past, the sense of disconnection expressed in the latter part of this sentence immediately acquires a gruesome dimension by the preceding reference to the Rosenbergs. Invoking an atmosphere of betrayal, death and destruction, the narrator forges an unequivocal link between her former Self and the socio-political context: 'It had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't help wondering what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves' (1). Having observed that 'something was wrong' with her at the time, she proceeds by emphatically establishing a distance between this nineteen-year-old girl – feeling 'still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel' (3) – and herself, shifting to a later moment at which she 'was all right again', and on to the narrative present. We learn that this later Self still keeps material objects from the past 'around the house' and only 'last week' brought them out again 'for the baby to play with' (4). By demarcating her present Self in precisely these terms, the narrator not only makes clear that nothing is 'wrong' with her anymore, she also discretely conveys that she is currently fulfilling her proper role as a wife and mother. By implicitly yet effectively linking the return of sanity to motherhood, the text thus foregrounds the suggestion that the 'recovery' of the narrator's *alter ego* is located first and foremost

in the acquisition of a 'normal' gender identity.

While a deliberate distancing between the narrator and her/his protagonist is a feature characteristic of most novels of development, the clash between the disturbing narrative events of *The Bell Jar*, between Esther Greenwood's story of madness and despair, and the jauntily sarcastic, even cynical tone of voice in which it is rendered, is quite extreme. The novel's high degree of artistic control and its self-deprecating sense of irony appear to point up a need to set up a complex defence system against the disconcerting contents of the story. The narrator's show of discursive authority hence simultaneously serves to ascertain symbolic agency, and to contain the threat of disintegration posed by the inscription of insanity in the text itself and in the narrative's constituting events.

The tension resulting from the interplay between these two textual levels has, I think correctly, been analysed by feminist critics as a reflection of the contradictory demands made upon women by and within patriarchal ideology.<sup>30</sup> Still, even though I have no wish to imply that gender is *not* relevant to Esther Greenwood's predicament, I do think that too little critical attention has been paid to her story's sexual undercurrents. By privileging the category of gender, feminist readings of *The Bell Jar* have not so much neglected as actually obscured the powerful sexual subtext underpinning the narrative. As suggested before, it is this fraught sexual subtext, even more than gender conflicts, which structurally informs the novel's discordant discourse.

Since sexuality largely obtains on the level of the unconscious, a psychoanalytic approach to the novel of adolescence would appear most viable to assess the relation between its author-narrator and her subject matter. In psychic terms, adolescence is induced by the re-emerging Oedipal depression at the end of the latency period. It entails a reawakening of the repressed desire for the primary love object, which, in Western societies organized around the nuclear family, is the mother for subjects of either sex. Prompted by the onset of puberty, the adolescent quest is aimed at the recovery of a second love object.

The French psychoanalyst and critical theorist Julia Kristeva contends that the psychosexual crisis known as adolescence involves a resurgence of repressed pre-symbolic or imaginary

material 'in the aftermath of the oedipal stabilization of subjective identity'.<sup>31</sup> This destabilization of her/his subjective identity, she posits, leads the adolescent to a renewed questioning of her/his identifications 'along with his [sic] capacities for speech and symbolization'. As an 'open structure' personality, the adolescent hence 'maintains a renewable identity', having access to imaginary material which in Western culture is granted to the adult 'only as a reader or spectator . . . or as artist'. Directing her focus to narrative fiction, Kristeva goes on to submit that the activity of writing adolescence consequently 'permit[s] a genuine inscription of unconscious contents within language', while the act of fictionalizing simultaneously serves as a 'powerful screen against madness'. The genre of novel, as an open structure *par excellence*, is largely 'tributary to the "adolescent" economy', and can thus serve to accommodate the re-emergence of repressed unconscious contents as well enable its symbolic recollection in a process of psychic reorganization. The adolescent novel, Kristeva concludes, allows the writing subject to 're-elaborate his psychic space' while the authorial narrator, with her/his unrestrained power over characters, action and plot, at the same time functions as a forceful ordering principle to protect her/him 'from phobic affects'.<sup>32</sup>

Singling out the adolescent as a '*topos* of incompleteness that is also that of all possibilities', the altogether celebratory vein in which Kristeva describes the polyvalence of adolescent writing no doubt partly derives from her unwavering bias for male-authored texts.<sup>33</sup> By not considering any female-authored adolescent novels, she is able conveniently to gloss over the fundamental contradictions marking female sexuality from its earliest stages onwards. Such contradictions, while ingrained in the normative process of female heterosexuality as a whole, would appear to make themselves felt with a vengeance during the adolescent crisis.

Within the context of normative heterosexuality, the Oedipal crisis for the little girl involves not only the abandonment of her desire for the first love object and its redirection to an object of the opposite sex, but also the enforced identification with the position of inferiority of the (now devalued) mother. Taken together, the loss of the original object and the girl's recognition

of her constitution in lack, acquire, to borrow a phrase of Kaja Silverman's, the significance of 'major surgery'.<sup>34</sup> Surely a re-emergence of this highly traumatic experience cannot but painfully inculcate upon the female subject the founding split in her Self, the split caused by the irreconcilability of her need for symbolic agency on the one hand, and her desire for the primary object on the other. Since a female same-sex object choice falls virtually outside the realm of the patriarchal symbolic, it seems likely that these oppositional desires will significantly qualify the writing of *female* adolescence, as compared to what in Kristeva's book evidently goes for adolescent writing *per se*, that is, male adolescent writing. And, I propose, it is the split between the desire for discursive control and the forbidden desire for the female love object which, by extension, accounts for the palpable friction between the intra- and the extradiegetic levels that tends to characterize female quest narratives.

The strained intensity marking the discourse of *The Bell Jar* can be seen to signal precisely the kind of 'systemic failure' that, as Roof suggests, allows us to locate 'configurations of lesbian sexuality' in ostensibly straight narrative surfaces. The metaphor of 'speaking in tongues', a phrase not infrequently used in relation to lesbian writing, conveys that the irreconcilability of 'abnormal' desires with the rules and conventions of sex/textual normality discloses itself primarily on the level of discourse. Realized in a splitting-off of markedly discrepant voices, the psychic causes and, by implication, the effects of such discursive fragmentation are nonetheless rather more serious than what readers today have learned to recognize as the self-conscious multi-voicedness or 'carnivalesque heteroglossia' characteristic of post-modern texts.<sup>35</sup>

At an early point in the novel, *The Bell Jar's* narrator, finding herself being addressed by two different names in two different voices, seemingly jokingly remarks that it is 'as if [she] had a split personality or something' (22). In view of the specific nature and primary aims of the adolescent process, that is, the acquisition of a recognizable socio-cultural identity as a gendered individual, the profound sense of confusion and extreme self-consciousness that lies behind this remark is not really surprising. Indeed, as Susan J. Douglas observes, 'there's little doubt that a pathological

level of self-consciousness is what being an adolescent is all about, at least in America.<sup>36</sup> Douglas, partly reminiscing about her own adolescence, partly engaging in social historiography, traces the origins of this national trait to an important shift in US history, to the rise of consumer culture in the post-war period. The source of such pathology, she argues, should be sought primarily in the influence of the mass media, and especially of the popular magazines directing themselves specifically to young girls, which began flooding the American market in the 1950s and 1960s. Highly popular publications like *Seventeen*, *Glamour* and *Mademoiselle* hugely 'exaggerated [girls'] psychic schizophrenia', being 'schizophrenic' themselves 'about whether to approach [them] as if [they] were coherent, unified individuals or a bundle of contradictory, inchoate multiple personalities'.<sup>37</sup> Autobiographical sources reveal that Plath drew on her own stint as a guest editor of *Mademoiselle* to describe her *alter ego's* summer in New York City: in the novel's opening section, Esther is staying as one of a group of female guest editors of a fashion magazine called *Ladies' Day*. Uttered by a temporary resident in the homeland of such cultural confusion, the flippant remark concerning Esther's personality would appear poignantly to underscore Douglas's observations. The multiplication of differences in our own multicultural times should therefore not prevent us from sufficiently recognizing the profound anxiety lying behind it.

The reference to the protagonist's 'split personality' takes on even more disturbing significance when we further take into account the novel's wider socio-historical context. As one among a number of psychoanalytic concepts that today belong to most people's everyday vocabulary, such pseudo-scientific terms, but also more strictly clinical ones, like schizophrenia and hysteria, were introduced to the general public only some fifty years ago; that is to say, when the rapidly expanding purview of the mass media, in particular television, facilitated the popular dissemination of all sorts of 'specialist' discourses. Whilst Freud's ideas had for a long time been available to various contingents of 'experts' (including medical doctors, intellectuals, writers and philosophers), it was only in the post-war era that psychoanalysis became a virtual lay discourse, setting firm foot in the public domain of industrialized societies at large, and on both sides of the Atlantic.



Moreover, the post-war vulgarization of Freud's work did not only result in the kinds of 'normalizing cures' that have given American psychoanalytic practice such a bad name. It also grew in the reactionary 1950s, into one of the most effective and widely used repressive tools of socio-political control.

Whilst the postmodern celebration of difference may easily allow us to overlook the anxiety-ridden psychic subtext of Esther's story, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, and its symbolic value with regard to East-West relations, might equally cause us to neglect the significance of the repressive political climate in which the story is set, that is, the Cold War and its incisive effects on people's personal lives. Exposed to the so-called Communist threat that defined the overall parameters of the Cold War era, in the course of the 1950s, Americans in all walks of life were subjected to what was, in the final instance, a system of virtual national surveillance. The immense impact of the public tribunals to which formerly well-respected individuals were summoned (accused of engaging in such un-American activities as adhering to progressive political ideas), to a considerable extent resulted from the fact that the secret surveillance of citizenry was being engineered and channelled through the mass media. The 'Red scare' literally entered into ordinary people's homes.

Foregrounding the structural significance of *The Bell Jar's* socio-historical context, Pat MacPherson pertinently observes that by the mid-1950s the norm, that is, 'a single-dimensional conformity based on image', seemed to have 'achieved the status of official language' in US society. At the height of Senator McCarthy's power, 'those speaking a different language were by definition Alien.'<sup>38</sup> Rhetorically dividing the world into Us and Them, McCarthy's system of public persecution was geared to securing social conformity by disseminating a nationwide scare around what J. Edgar Hoover, director of the FBI, termed 'the enemy within'.<sup>39</sup> The power politics effected by a 'mass communication system unprecedented in history' at the same time proved to be the most pervasive ideological state apparatus to date.<sup>40</sup> Propelled into positions in which mental health equalled social adjustment, MacPherson suggests, 'each citizen was set self-policing to enact a "fulfilled" conformity convincing to others if always fraudulent to oneself.' The paranoia proceeding from this

enforced yet 'basic psychic dishonesty' urged individual subjects to seek 'only external screens on which to project the denied self and call it the Other'.<sup>41</sup> Given the atmosphere of demonization and criminalization that has traditionally surrounded practices and activities associated with 'perverse desire', it should come as no surprise that McCarthy's America, as Katie King has pointed out, saw a thorough intertwining of the 'spectres of homosexuality and communism'.<sup>42</sup> With even the suspicion of disloyalty to the Law rendered a potentially criminal act, openly deviating from the sexual norm would indisputably have appeared, to the majority of the American public, no less than suicidal.

It is the all-encompassing sway of the phrase 'the enemy within' which establishes the link between Esther Greenwood and the Rosenbergs. The paranoid concept additionally marks, though slightly less straightforwardly, the connection between the adolescent protagonist's sense of her 'split personality' and the figure of the lesbian, in its historical function as a repressed psychosexual Other in Western culture. In view of Plath's frequently noted preoccupation with 'doubles', finally, the notion of 'the enemy within' acquires particular significance when set against a background in which ideological scapegoating was a policy practised on a national scale.

In psychoanalytic terms, the setting up of (imaginary) *Doppelgängers* or doubles serves to screen the subject against unwanted or anxiety-ridden aspects of or in her/himself, allowing her/him to displace such negative aspects onto (an) external Other(s). Similarly, or so argues Robert Rogers in an early study of the phenomenon, in literary texts the figure of the double generally represents a character 'which may be thought of . . . as directly portraying, or indirectly generated by, conflict which is intrapsychic or endopsychic' to the author, or to her/his unmarked textual representative, the author-narrator.<sup>43</sup> Such literary doubling may take multiple forms, different aspects of the author's Self may be transformed into a number of different characters that represent a variety of 'conflicting drives, orientations, or attitudes'.<sup>44</sup> Splittings of the Self are not restricted to the inner psyche; or rather, the inner psyche does not function as a sort of self-contained unity that merely acts in response to the outside world. Psychic formations are structurally informed, if not

constituted, by the operations of the (external) culture in which they obtain. Hence the frequent 'inclination of the racist' to '[adopt] social myths as a mode of dealing with his own inner tension and insecurity'.<sup>45</sup>

To elucidate the complex underpinnings of fictional doubling, Rogers attempts to draw an analogy between the 'phenomenon of decomposition in literature' and the neurotic's strategy of psychic dissociation or depersonalization. Writing in the late 1960s, he apparently had little evidence to go on, and obviously was (or felt) able to maintain that 'decomposition remains a minor concept in psychoanalytic theory.' Cases of 'autoscopic vision and multiple personality' – the principal counterparts of decomposition in clinical practice – had, he contends, as yet 'not been encountered' by practising psychoanalysts.<sup>46</sup> The spate of medico-scientific publications on Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD) that have been flooding the market in recent years would appear to signify a dramatic change in this respect.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, it may not be entirely coincidental that it is only now, when the diffracting effects of the 'cultural crisis' jointly occasioned by postmodernism and the ending of the Cold War are making themselves felt in the popular domain, that the so-called decentred subject of deconstructive theory has also been fully acknowledged in its clinical guise.

The relative prevalence of MPD in (female) patients who have, at some point in their lives, suffered from sexual abuse or incest, indicates that the syndrome, as a complex psychic defence system consisting in a splitting up of the Self into several, more or less independent, partial selves or 'alters', entails extreme measures of self-repression and potential self-mutilation. Seen in this light, Rogers' description of the double as the outcome of an 'inner, emotional split, an ambivalence generated out of his own confusion about his identity' seems decidedly underplayed.<sup>48</sup> Such an appreciation of the *Doppelgänger* comes, in effect, very close to what psychiatrist Erik Erikson has popularized as the 'normal' crisis structure of adolescence.<sup>49</sup> The often sexual underpinnings of psychic dissociation, or clinical MPD, would nonetheless appear to corroborate Rogers' claim that there is an indissoluble connection between paranoia and the 'narcissistic phenomenon' of doubling, a point of intersection which manifests itself in the

'mechanism of projection ... common to both'. The existence of such links between sexuality, doubling and paranoia forms the underlying ground of my supposition that it is in the multiple figurations of *The Bell Jar's* adolescent protagonist that the inscription of insanity in its narrative surface converges with its conflictual sexual subtext.

At some point during her enervating stay in New York City with *Ladies' Day*, Esther Greenwood consciously assumes the fictive identity of 'Elly Higginbottom ... from Chicago', in order to feel 'safer' in the unwonted cosmopolitan world of the big city. Whilst such a deliberate act of protective dissociation is a fairly common phenomenon in people living under stress, three major doubles figure in the text that represent the kind of genuine psychic split-offs or *alters* of the (unconscious) Self manifested in multiple personalities.

The first of these *alters* is Doreen, a luscious Southern belle whom the narrator retrospectively 'guess[es]' to have been 'one of [her] troubles' (4). Described in unmistakably erotic terms, Doreen at once functions as the object of the narrator's younger Self's aggressive sexual desires – '[She] had an interesting, slightly sweaty smell that reminded me of those scallopy leaves of sweet fern you break off and crush between your fingers for the musk of them' (6) – and figures as an object of identificatory investment: 'Everything [Doreen] said was like a secret voice speaking straight out of my bones' (7). The contradiction implied in these observations is rendered explicit when Doreen, with her 'bright, white hair standing out in a cotton candy fluff round her head and blue eyes like transparent agate marbles' (4–5), is envisaged as the positive image of femininity in relation to which the narrator differentiates her own former Self as its negative counterpart: 'With her white hair and white dress [Doreen] was so white she looked silver ... I felt myself melting into the shadows like a negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life' (10). While her double's unrestrained sensuality and sexual escapades alternately make Esther feel like a 'small black dot' and a 'hole in the ground' (17), what she has learned to regard as the Other's wanton promiscuity at the same time fills her with a profound sense of guilt and disgust. In order to dissociate herself from the

American publishers who rejected Plath's manuscript on account of its failure to 'establish a viewpoint'. Placed within its socio-political context, I think we can safely assume that the *The Bell Jar* was not only considered unfit for publication because it called into question the myth of all-American womanhood. Plath's 'pot-boiler', the writing of which was supposedly such a liberating experience, was also, perhaps primarily, unacceptable because its subversive sexual subtext threatened to expose the 'wound in the whiteness' of normative female heterosexuality as such. And that specific form of sex/textual unaccountability was, in the USA of the early 1960s, obviously altogether intolerable. The next chapter will show that, at a different time and a different place, some female authors did succeed in positively inscribing lesbian desire into ostensibly straight(forward) narrative texts – and got away with it.

## 5 Queer Undercurrents: Disruptive Desire in Elizabeth Bowen's *Friends and Relations*

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The writer, like a swimmer caught by an undertow, is borne in an unexpected direction. He is carried to a subject which has awaited him – a subject sometimes no part of his conscious plan. Reality, the reality of sensation, has accumulated where it was least sought. To write is to be captured – captured by some experience to which one may have hardly given a thought.

Elizabeth Bowen, Preface to *The Last September*

Thinking about pre-liberation 'lesbian' authors, the name of the Anglo-Irish novelist and short-story-writer Elizabeth Bowen (1899–1972) is not the first to come to mind. If remembered at all, or actually acknowledged as a not insignificant figure on the early twentieth-century English literary scene, Bowen is usually placed among a gallery of 'minor writers', male as well as female, whose work has been largely overshadowed by the (overwhelmingly male) luminaries of High Modernism. Nor is Bowen's name likely to be associated with the group of female authors who, in the course of several decades of feminist critical practice, have been claimed as her 'Sapphic' contemporaries,<sup>1</sup> such as token female modernist Virginia Woolf, or her one-time lover Vita Sackville-West; nor, indeed, to shift to a slightly different literary league, is she ever numbered among 'officially' acknowledged lesbian writers such as Natalie Barney or Radclyffe Hall. Still, Bowen's novels are often to be found on the 'lesbian fiction' shelves of

continues to relate an event occurring earlier that day, allowing the ground of her former Self's obsessions to be disclosed by association. Getting no answer to her knock on another patient's door, Esther had 'stepped into [DeeDee's] room', fully aware of the fact that she was transgressing against the most fundamental of unspoken hospital rules:

At Belsize, even at Belsize, the doors had locks, but the patients had no keys. A shut door meant privacy, and was respected, like a locked door. One knocked and knocked again, then went away. I remembered this as I stood, my eyes half-useless after the brilliance of the hall, in the room's deep, musky dark. (230)

Urged on by her wish to know, to solve the riddle of what 'women and women – would be actually doing', hoping for 'some revelation of specific evil', Esther's transgression brings her face to face with what she desires to see but cannot consciously register; an 'unspeakable' secret, moreover, which the narrator, even in retrospect, cannot depict in anything but veiled terms:

As my vision cleared, I saw a shape rise from the bed ... The shape adjusted its hair, and two pale, pebble eyes regarded me through the gloom. DeeDee lay back on the pillows, bare-legged under her green wool dressing-gown, and watched me with a little mocking smile. (230–1)

After this unnerving yet mesmerizing incident, Joan's function as the protagonist's most haunting Other becomes ever more pronounced. The latter's need to alienate her Self from her inverted *Doppelgänger* continues to grow in equal measure, until even looking at Joan gives Esther a 'creepy feeling', as if she were 'observing a Martian, or a particularly warty toad'. The closer she comes to an acknowledgement of her fascination with the sexual Other, the stronger her need to distance herself from Joan's 'thoughts and feelings', which are literally presented as 'a wry black image of [her] own' (231). While evoking the connotations of negativity and inversion surrounding the lesbian in the Western cultural imagination generally, the striking resemblance between this image of blackness and the view of her former Self as the 'negative' of the white, bright embodiment of female heterosexuality, Doreen, becomes all the more suggestive when the

narrator subsequently admits: 'Sometimes I wondered if I had made Joan up. Other times I wondered if she would pop in at every crisis of my life' (231). Since it is evidently her double's inverted sexuality that poses the most fundamental threat to Esther's frenzied attempts at 'practic[ing her] new, normal personality' (238), it is not really surprising that, with the protagonist's increasingly successful 'normalization', Joan's mental health deteriorates. In the end, the negative Other is quite literally killed off: in the penultimate chapter we learn that she has 'hanged herself' (248).<sup>53</sup>

This act of narrative erasure with respect to the 'wry black image' of sexual inversion forms the culmination of a string of similar displacements, a sequence of narrative and discursive dissociations which may have found its starting-point in *The Bell Jar's* extra-textual, or pre-textual, history. But as her survival as a character suggests, the lesbian Other's disappearance from Esther's story may not be as definitive an obliteration as it would seem. Indeed, the spectre of the invert continues to haunt the text, for the ambivalence surrounding the *Doppelgänger* identified as the protagonist's 'old best self', is, despite her elimination on the novel's intradiegetic level, sustained on its extradiegetic level. The narrator's unabating struggle with 'the enemy within' is unmistakably conveyed by the sequence depicting the scene of Joan's funeral:

At the altar the coffin loomed in its snow-pallor of flowers – the black shadow of something that wasn't there ... That shadow would marry this shadow, and the peculiar, yellowish soil of our locality seal the wound in the whiteness, and yet another snowfall erase the traces of newness in Joan's grave ... All during the simple funeral service I wondered what I was burying. (256)

In the light of the foregoing 'perverse' reading of the text, the black and white imagery controlling this passage would in itself seem adequately to support my contention that it is a conflictual sexuality which lies 'buried' beneath *The Bell Jar's* 'normalized' surface structure. It is, however, the narrator's retrospective self-questioning which conclusively accounts for the profound anxiety, articulated in the text's disparate discursive operations, which was apparently recognized, though perhaps not consciously, by the

attractions of 'Doreen's body', which she perceives as the 'concrete testimony of [her] own dirty nature', Esther frequently purges herself by taking hot baths: 'I guess I feel about a hot bath the way ... religious people feel about holy water' (21). Producing a complex mixture of feelings, ranging from an acute sense of inadequacy to physical attraction and repulsion, Doreen embodies the stereotypical image of Woman as flesh, simultaneous source of temptation and object of damnation, and thus represents one of the stock figures of normative femininity, at once imposed and forbidden by the Paternal Law.<sup>50</sup>

Set off as a foil to 'bad girl' Doreen, we encounter another of Esther's doubles in 'good girl' Betsy, who seems 'imported straight from Kansas with her bouncing blonde pony-tail and Sweetheart-of-Sigma-Chi-smile' (6). The incarnation of innocence, of all-American girlishness, of clean and healthy virginity (the narrator wryly observes that 'pureness was the great issue' when she was nineteen), Esther treasures this Other as her most inner Self: 'Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy ... It was Betsy I resembled at heart' (24). As flip sides of the coin stamped patriarchal womanhood, the two oppositional sets of sexual values personified by these doubles symbolize the incompatible demands imposed on female subjects by the heterosexual gender system, the resulting contradictions of which are so adequately reflected in the protagonist's name.<sup>51</sup>

Introduced at an early point in the text, Esther's third double Joan Gilling gradually gains significance. She begins to figure prominently only when the protagonist's increasing mental disorder, culminating in a nearly successful suicide attempt, has issued in her commitment to a psychiatric hospital. Joan – 'big as a horse' and a former 'college hockey champion' – is unsympathetically portrayed throughout. With her 'teeth like tombstones', her 'breathy voice', and her keenness on 'doing things out-of-doors' (61), she is immediately recognizable as a horrifying example of the stereotypical 'mannish lesbian'.<sup>52</sup> While the narrator takes great pains to distance her former Self from the alien Other, Esther's suggested 'schizophrenia' is thus from the first tightly linked up with a figure consistently presented in terms which invoke the pathological notion of female inversion. As if to

underline the contrast between the protagonist's 'masculine' and her 'feminine' doubles respectively, the text initially suggests that it is Joan, with her 'pale, pebble eyes', who identifies with Esther rather than the other way around.

The 'female invert' miraculously shows up in the mental hospital where Esther has been taken after her forcible resurrection to life. She claims to have cut her wrists upon reading about Esther in the newspaper, an act which gives the latter the idea that they 'might have something in common' (212). Esther's subjection to the psychiatric 'discipline of normalization' (treatment consists of large doses of insulin supplemented with electro-shock therapy) has by then effectively broken her spirit. Identified as the 'beaming double of [her] old best self', Joan presently breaks the spell of passivity in which the protagonist has been caught up since her hospitalization. Awakening her from the stupor brought about by what was, at the time, a not unusual medical regime, the repulsive sexual Other enables Esther's intellectual and artistic aspirations to re-emerge. But with the resurrection of these 'masculine' ambitions, the old fear of 'feminine' inadequacy also returns, leading Esther to suspect that this 'old best self' is something 'specially designed to follow and torment' her (217).

Alternately taking up a position as object and as subject in the ensuing desirous and identificatory interchange between herself and her double, Esther's feelings toward Joan remain utterly ambivalent, as does the narrator's tone in describing their curious bond. Although the 'unspeakable' word is never actually mentioned, the precise nature of this ambivalence is indirectly disclosed by numerous references to lesbian sexuality generally, and in connection with Joan in particular, which surface with growing frequency in the latter half of the text.

The narrator's penchant for blunt statement and direct description conspicuously falters on the negative semantic space of female same-sex desire. When Joan tells Esther about her close relations with one of the older women haunting the latter's imagination, that is, the mother of her former boyfriend Buddy Willard, the gap in the narrator's discourse is typographically rendered in a series of full stops: 'Joan and Mrs Willard. Joan ... and Mrs Willard ...'. The suggestive value of these dots is revealed in a roundabout way when, without further transition, the narrator

- (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1979), 353–77. I will have occasion to explore this model in more detail in chapter 5.
- 14 Cf. Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 186–91.
- 15 The phrase ‘transposed autobiography’ derives from Elizabeth Bowen, who, having first used it in a very restricted sense, eventually expanded the notion to encompass fiction in general. See Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Preface to *Stories by Elizabeth Bowen*’, in *Afterthought* (London: Longmans, 1962), 78.
- 16 Cited in Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, 285.
- 17 See, in addition to Stevenson’s and Wagner-Martin’s accounts of the novel’s reception, Pat MacPherson, *Reflecting on The Bell Jar* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991).
- 18 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, trans. Jane Lewin (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986). Wallace Martin explains these terms under two different headings. He describes diegesis as an ‘element of narration’, comparable to summary or ‘telling’, and applicable when a ‘narrator describes what happened in his/her own words (or recounts what characters think and feel, without quotation).’ In this scheme the extradiegetic level falls under the category of ‘authorial narration’, indicating whether a narrator is her/himself ‘inside’ or ‘outside’ the story s/he narrates. See Wallace Martin, *Recent Theories of Narrative* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1986), 124; 135. Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan defines diegesis as the narrative ‘events themselves’, while the extradiegetic level refers to the ‘highest level’ within the hierarchy of narratives within narratives characteristic of novelistic discourse, i.e., the one ‘immediately superior to the first narrative and concerned with its narration’. See Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (London: Methuen, 1983), 91. I will be using the terms in the latter sense. Susan Sniader-Lanser further distinguishes the ‘extra-fictional voice’ to designate the authorial instance, who/which, though ‘absent’ from the narrative text, is always present as the ‘most direct counterpart for the historical author’. Cf. Susan Sniader-Lanser, *The Narrative Act: Point of View in Prose Fiction* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), 123.
- 19 The useful phrase ‘configurations of lesbian sexuality’ I have shamelessly appropriated from Roof, who, to my knowledge, first used it in *A Lure of Knowledge*.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Irigaray, ‘Commodities Among Themselves.’ See also chapter 2, note 10.
- 23 I borrow the term ‘complicating’ from Meijer, who coined its Dutch equivalent in *De Lust tot Lezen*.
- 24 Roof, *A Lure of Knowledge*, 5, 4. On the significance and function of masks and signals as textual strategies in (male) homosex/textualities, see, for instance, Marita Keilson-Lauritz, ‘Maske und Signal: Textstrategien der Homoerotik’, in *Homosexualitäten-Literarisch: Literaturwissenschaftliche Beiträge zum Internationalen Kongress*

- ‘Homosexuality which Homosexuality?’ Amsterdam 1987*, ed. Maria Kalveram and Wolfgang Popp (Essen: Verlag Die Blaue Eule, 1991), 63–75; on lesbian masks in Dutch literature of the 1950s, see Pattynama, ‘Maskering en Geheimhouding’, in *Schrijfsters in de Jaren Vijftig*, ed. Margriet Prinssen and Lucie Th. Vermeij (Amsterdam: An Dekker, 1990), 252–63.
- 25 Katherine Dalsimer, *Female Adolescence: Psychoanalytic Reflections on Literature* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1986), 4.
- 26 For bibliographical references, see chapter 2, note 1.
- 27 Despite its gender bias, and its heterocentrism – occasionally bordering on acute homophobia – Erik Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis* (London: Faber & Faber, 1968) remains one of the seminal studies of the phenomenon of (male) adolescence in modern Western culture.
- 28 Michel Foucault, ‘Technologies of the Self,’ in *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, ed. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16–49.
- 29 On the ways in which this initially 18th-century – predominantly male – genre was transformed, at the end of the 19th and throughout the 20th century into the specifically female genre of the ‘novel of awakening’, see Abel, Hirsch and Langland, eds, *The Voyage In*. In my *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* (New York: New York University Press, 1994), I pay considerable attention to the interrelations between lesbian desire and adolescence in literary texts. For an extensive study of female adolescence in contemporary fiction, see further Pamela Pattynama, *Passages: Vrouwelijke Adolescentie als Verhaal en Vertoog* (Kampen: Kok Agora, 1992); or, in the context of American literature only, White, *Growing Up Female*.
- 30 As Plath’s various biographers contend, and her own *Journals* confirm, the author-poet was herself quite literally split apart by the double standard informing the myth of femininity prevailing in her lifetime.
- 31 Julia Kristeva, ‘The Adolescent Novel,’ in *Abjection, Melancholia, and Love: The Work of Julia Kristeva*, ed. John Fletcher and Andrew Benjamin (London & New York: Routledge, 1990).
- 32 *Ibid.*, 9; 10.
- 33 *Ibid.*, 20.
- 34 Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Routledge, 1988), 122.
- 35 For a general introduction to postmodernism, see, for instance, Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York & London: Routledge, 1988); for an appreciation of the postmodern phenomenon in the context of lesbian sexuality, see Doan, ed., *The Lesbian Postmodern*; and also, Sally Munt, ‘Somewhere Over the Rainbow ... Postmodernism and the Fiction of Sarah Schulman’, in *New Lesbian Criticism*, ed. Munt, 33–50. With the terms ‘heteroglossia’ and ‘carnival’ I am loosely referring to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin. A

- 3 Single-author books, such as those by Judith Roof, *A Lure of Knowledge: Lesbian Sexuality and Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991); de Lauretis, *The Practice of Love*; Butler, *Bodies that Matter*; Hart, *Fatal Women*, all contain chapters on popular cultural forms. Examples of critical anthologies exclusively devoted to popular cultural production in relation to lesbianism, are Gabriele Griffin, ed., *Outwrite: Lesbianism and Popular Culture* (London: Pluto Press, 1993); Arlene Stein, ed., *Sisters, Sexperts, Queens: Beyond the Lesbian Nation* (New York: Plume, 1993); Laura Doan, ed., *The Lesbian Postmodern*; Liz Gibbs, ed., *Daring to Dissent: Lesbian Culture from Margin to Mainstream* (London: Cassell, 1994); Diane Hamer and Belinda Budge, eds, *The Good, the Bad and the Gorgeous*.
- 4 Cathy Griggers, 'Lesbian Bodies in the Age of (Post)Mechanical Reproduction,' in *The Lesbian Postmodern*, ed. Doan, 118–34; 119.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Cf. Butler, 'Imitation and Gender Insubordination', in *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories*.
- 7 On the persistently 'haunting' presence of the lesbian in the margins of the Eurowestern cultural imagination, see Terry Castle, *The Apparitional Lesbian*.
- 8 See, for instance, Hamer and Budge, *The Good, the Bad and the Gorgeous*.
- 9 Milou van Rossum, 'Zin in een vriendin', *Glow*, summer special of the Dutch *Avant Garde* (August 1993), 58–61.

#### Chapter 4 Sex/textual Conflicts in *The Bell Jar*: Sylvia Plath's Doubling Negatives

- 1 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (1963; reprint, London: Faber & Faber, 1980). Subsequent page references are to this edition and will appear in parentheses in the text.
- 2 'The story of Sylvia Plath' continues to vex as much as to fascinate her various biographers' imaginations. Plath's life has been the subject of two recent major biographies written by women (Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (London and New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987) and Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989)), whereas her death – significantly – forms the primary focus of a male attempt to capture the author's life narrative (Ronald Hayman, *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Minerva, 1991)) – a shift in emphasis which, incidentally, gives new impetus to the question of the gendered significance of beginnings and endings of stories. Cf. Teresa de Lauretis, 'Desire in Narrative', in *Alice Doesn't: Feminism, Semiotics, Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). Wagner-Martin presents an appreciative though conventional account of Plath's life; unfortunately, her reading of *The*

- Bell Jar* in this volume seems more informed by wishful thinking than by careful attention to the contradictions in the text. Her later work, *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties* (New York: Twayne, 1992) presents a more persuasive analysis. Stevenson's is a particularly disturbing book, since its author evidently has little sympathy for the character she is trying to reconstruct. The 'bitterness' of the book's title, in fact, suggests more about the biographer's relationship to her subject than about that subject itself.
- 3 For extensive critical material, consult Gary Lane and Maria Stevens, *Sylvia Plath: A Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1978). A slightly dated list of works by and about the author is provided by Stephen Tabor, *Sylvia Plath: An Analytic Bibliography* (London & New York: Mansell Publishing, 1986). For additional essays, see Edward Butscher, ed., *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Co., 1977); Gary Lane, ed., *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1979); Paul Alexander, ed., *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1984); Linda W. Wagner, ed., *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1984).
  - 4 Examples of this line of argument are Ellen Moers, *Literary Women* (1963; reprint, London: Women's Press, 1978); Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists From Brontë to Lessing* (1977; reprint, London: Virago, 1978); Annis Pratt, *Archetypal Patterns in Women's Fiction* (Brighton: Harvester, 1981); Rosalind Miles, *The Female Form: Women Writers and the Conquest of the Novel* (London: Routledge, 1990). Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Verso, 1991) is the most thoughtful and illuminating feminist study of Plath's life and work to date.
  - 5 See, for instance, Elaine Martin, 'Mothers, Madness, and the Middle Class in *The Bell Jar* and *Les Mots pour le Dire*', *French-American Review* 5 (Spring 1981), 24–47; Barbara White, *Growing Up Female: Adolescent Girlhood in American Fiction* (Westport & London, 1985); Linda W. Wagner, 'Plath's *The Bell Jar* as Female Bildungsroman', *Women's Studies* 12 (1983), 55–68.
  - 6 Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique* (New York: Norton, 1963).
  - 7 Peter Conn, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of American Literature* (London & New York: Guild Publishing, 1990), 481.
  - 8 Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 187.
  - 9 Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975); Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Ballantine, 1983).
  - 10 Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 186; 189.
  - 11 Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, 285; 227.
  - 12 Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 186.
  - 13 Elaine Marks traces the development of model of the 'unequal couple' from its origins in Greek myth to its contemporary survival in lesbian utopian fiction in her essay 'Lesbian Intertextuality,' in *Homosexualities and French Literature*, ed. Elaine Marks and George Stambolian

- comprehensive introduction to his work and thought is provided by Clark and Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin*.
- 36 Douglas, *Where the Girls Are*, 99.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 100.
- 38 MacPherson, *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*, 3.
- 39 This was Hoover's term for American Communists.
- 40 The term 'ideological state apparatus' derives from the French political scientist Louis Althusser. On the different functions and effects of 'Repressive State Apparatuses', e.g., the police and the legal system, as distinct from 'Ideological State Apparatuses', e.g., the educational system, the family, the church, and the mass media, see Louis Althusser, 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)', in *Essays on Ideology* (1970; reprint, London: Verso, 1984), 1–60.
- 41 MacPherson, *Reflecting on The Bell Jar*, 3.
- 42 Katie King, 'Audre Lorde's Lacquered Layerings: The Lesbian Bar as a Site of Literary Production', in *New Lesbian Criticism*, ed. Munt, 51–74; 52. Jonathan Katz has extensively documented the 'simultaneous persecution of "perverts" and "subversives"' taking place in the US from 1950–5. Cf. Jonathan Katz, *Gay American History: Lesbians and Gay Men in the U.S.A.* (1976; reprint, New York: Avon, 1978), 91.
- 43 Robert Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study of the Double in Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1970), 4.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 5.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 46 *Ibid.*
- 47 See, for example, Frank W. Putnam, *Diagnosis & Treatment of Multiple Personality Disorder* (New York & London: The Guildford Press, 1989); Barry M. Cohen et al. eds, *Multiple Personality Disorder from the Inside Out* (Baltimore: The Sylvan Press, 1991). The Dutch documentary film *De Ontkenning* (1992) (*Denial*) offers a careful and authentic portrait of a young woman suffering from MPD, shedding a disturbing light on the ramifications and backgrounds of the disorder.
- 48 Rogers, *A Psychoanalytic Study*, 6.
- 49 See Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, 128.
- 50 The racial connotations of the interconnected patterns of imagery (black/white; negative/positive) sustained throughout the text are never explicitly addressed in those terms. Considering the growing prominence of the 'race question' in US politics and society in the late 1950s and early 1960s, they cannot, however, but be considered powerful echoes as they speak through the protagonist's anxious self-searching questions. See Wini Breines, *Young, White, and Miserable: Growing Up Female in the Fifties* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), for an exploration of *The Bell Jar's* racial subtext.
- 51 In the Old Testament, Esther is a beautiful Jewess who becomes queen of Persia and saves her people from a massacre. The protagonist's Christian name hence suggests strong (Jewish) womanhood, and further reinforces her identification with Ethel Rosenberg. This given name at

- the same time sits in sharp contrast with her family name (the Name of the Father), Greenwood, which at once signifies 'immaturity' and 'confusion' (as in being 'in the woods' about a problem or question).
- 52 See Newton, 'The Mythic Mannish Lesbian'; de Lauretis, 'Perverse Desire'.
- 53 Wagner-Martin's comment on this passage provides a perfect example of the strategies of erasure commonly practised on configurations of lesbian sexuality. While she may well be correct in maintaining that 'for Esther ... the suspicion of her friend's sexual preference is much less important than the fact of her death', she fails either to perceive or acknowledge that it is precisely because of her 'sexual preference' that Joan's death acquires such crucial importance for Esther. See Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath*, 187.

#### Chapter 5 Queer Undercurrents: Disruptive Desire in Elizabeth Bowen's *Friends and Relations*

- 1 Cf. Shari Benstock, 'Expatriate Sapphic Modernism: Entering Literary History', in *Lesbian Texts and Contexts: Radical Revisions*, ed. Karla Jay and Joanne Glasgow (New York: New York University Press, 1990), 183–203.
- 2 The first to situate Bowen in a tradition of lesbian writing was the American/Canadian novelist Jane Rule, who included a short essay entitled 'Elizabeth Bowen', in *Lesbian Images* (Freedom, Calif.: The Crossing Press, 1975). My own earlier work forms, as far as I know, the first extended effort at reassessing the author's accomplishment from a poststructuralist lesbian feminist perspective. See hoogland, 'From Marginality to Ex-Centricity Feminist Critical Theory and the Case of Elizabeth Bowen', Ph.D. diss., University of Amsterdam, 1991; and, *Elizabeth Bowen*.
- 3 For an extensive historical overview of early 20th-century female writing practices with special – though sometimes disturbing – reference to lesbianism, see Shari Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank: Paris, 1900–1940* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).
- 4 I here hesitantly endorse Benstock's use of the term 'Sapphic modernism', in Benstock, 'Expatriate Sapphic Modernism'.
- 5 Elizabeth Bowen, *Friends and Relations* (1931; reprint, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982).
- 6 Benstock, 'Expatriate Sapphic Modernism', 184–5.
- 7 As mentioned in an earlier chapter, Barbara Smith has argued with reference to Alice Walker's novel *Sula* that such a critique of heterosexual institutions, in tandem with a concentration on female same-sex relations, sufficiently qualifies a text as a 'lesbian' one. See Smith, 'Toward a Black Feminist Criticism.' Although I would contest this claim in its generality (there are, after all, innumerable novels that severely criticize heterosexual relations without undermining or even questioning the