I AM VERTICAL
The Creation of Self in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

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There is a famous story about Lionel Trilling. In 1958, Trilling was the featured speaker at Robert Frost’s 85th birthday in New York. Frost was, by then, a nationally recognized figure as a poet. He was the poetry consultant at the Library of Congress and would read his poem “The Gift Outright” at the presidential inauguration of John Kennedy (Parini 408). And Trilling, when called to make a speech about America’s public poet, said the following:

I have to say that my Frost is not the Frost I seem to perceive existing in the minds of so many of his admirers. He is not the Frost who reassures us by his affirmations of old virtues, simplicities, pieties, and ways of feeling: anything but. In sum, I regard Robert Frost as a terrifying poet.’ (qtd. in Parini 409)

Those in attendance were befuddled. So was Frost, who, after Trilling quickly excused himself, would ask the audience “if they thought he was so terrifying?” (Parini 409). What interests me about Trilling’s remark is the idea at stake simply by shifting the emphasis of Frost’s poems. (Note here how Frost wasn’t making a distinction between being a “terrifying man” and a “terrifying poet.”) Trilling was casting Frost’s poetry in a light that emphasized their modernity and dread over their sage, grandfatherly tone. And Frost, rather than feeling indifferent about a
comment of an abstract narrator-self in his work, felt personally taken aback by Trilling’s comments.

The story about Trilling and Frost illustrates one of my interests in poetry. How does a poet like Robert Frost create a known sense of self through writing poetry? A number of significant, fundamental questions emerge from the reframing of Robert Frost’s self. For instance, what is the quality of “a self”? Is the self a construct? A myth? A composition? A mask that is a matter of adjustments on the page? Conversely, is the self the poet presents in a work real; that is, is the self an actual representation of the poet? Difficult epistemological issues fan out from these few questions of self; for example, even if the poet is purposely being dishonest, or using a clearly fabricated mask as the self, isn’t that mask, or that dishonesty, a real representation of the poet?

Luckily, this paper doesn’t suppose to answer these questions. Instead, I want to place these questions in the background as stakes and energies that will eventually be worked out in my own writing. What this paper does aim to look at is the work of one poet, Sylvia Plath. Plath’s poetry presents many of the large, immediate questions about the self in poetry. This paper will examine Plath’s unique use of imagery to identify the reader with her first person narrator; show that two systematic directions of imagery (horizontal and vertical) aid in the resonance of Plath’s personal, dark hyperbole; argue the chronological arrangement of Plath’s poems create an understandable aura of a biographical self; explain how the Bee Poems in Plath’s last book Ariel dramatically shift the tone of Plath’s first person voice into a newer, “realer” area of power and candor;
and, finally, show one of the chief powers of Plath’s poetry is how a true self and the fabrication of a self may be a distinction without meaning.

Plath is a far more subtle poet than she is given credit for. She is frequently considered a dark, confessional poet known for rage, self-destruction and her eventual suicide. Such considerations are simplifications, because Plath’s facility with syllabic verse, upsetting images and musicality point to her artistic integrity, innate complexity, and aesthetic achievement. But a great deal of Plath’s complexity surrounds her supposed simple use of first person voice.

The most subtle means Plath employs first person voice might be by directly forcing the reader to identify with the “I” of the narrator in her poems. Plath identifies with readers in more than one way, but the most effective is by simply grounding her poems in the details of the regular world. Such an approach could be viewed as mundane since it is employed by almost every poet, but in Plath’s poems the approach is unique. Plath’s poems have a strikingly similar structural movement. Nearly all of her poems begin in the world of observable images where normal principles, such as gravity, social interaction, physical objects, nature, and familiarity, prevail. For example, here are five beginnings to poems: “Morning Song”: “Love set you going like a fat gold watch” (Plath 156); “Mirror”: “I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions” (Plath 173); “Berck-Plage”: “This is the sea, then, this great abeyance” (Plath 196); “The Arrival of
the Bee Box”: “I ordered this, this clean wood box/ Square as a chair and almost
too heavy to lift” (Plath 213); “Stings”: “Bare-handed, I hand the combs” (Plath
214).

Note the earthly specificity of each image: a watch, a box, the sea,
honeycombs, a mirror described by color and use, clocks. Plath inhabits the
common space of shared experience with the beginning of these poems. She
makes a gesture to the world of her readers, which is a horizontal world, the
regular world people walk on, look at, and have experience in. When looked at as
a strategy, the uniformity of this approach throughout Plath’s poems is startling.

Along with forcing the reader to identify with the first person narrator of
her poems, Plath’s approach also has the major effect of grounding the reader in
the experience of the poem. The connection is important, as an immediate
immersion in the dread of Plath’s poems would most likely turn a reader off. But
the uncanny effect of the common, horizontal immersion of Plath’s poems as a
type of identification begins with Plath’s first person narrator. Identifying with the
“I” of Plath’s poems should be an almost impossible task. Plath’s first person
persona notoriously engages in savage hyperbole that, among other extremes,
compares her father to a Nazi (Plath 222), sweats that grease a breakfast plate
(Plath 226), a placenta that can paralyze lovers (Plath 225), and images of
adulterer’s bodies in Hiroshima ash (Plath 231).

But aided by the hypnotic cadence of her music, Plath envelops the reader
in the first person perspective within this accessible horizontal world. Such
groundedness in the beginning of poems is a strategic approach, because after
Plath adequately plants readers in the observable world, she invariably rockets-off into what might be described as hyperbolic imagery. Take the previous five horizontally arranged beginnings to her poems and place them next to the upward moving end-points of the same poems:

“Morning Song”
Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear notes rise like balloons. (Plath 157)

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“Mirror”
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish. (Plath 174)

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“Berck-Plage”
Their eyes opening
On a wonderful thing—
Six round black hats in the grass and a lozenge of wood.
And a naked mouth, red and awkward.
For a minute the sky pours into the hole like plasma.
There is no hope, it is given up. (Plath 201)

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“The Arrival of the Bee Box”
They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary. (Plath 213)

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“Stings”

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her—
The mausoleum, the wax house. (Plath 215)

Note the consistent upward movement of these poems. These poems are all about vertical ascension; they move up and away from the horizontally familiar world into the frightening scar in the sky, where all hope is given up. Again, the uniformity of this approach is startling. But what is truly frightening is how Sylvia Plath, a poet full of dread, anger and reckless hyperbole, does the near impossible by making the reader co-equal with the powerful first person narrator of her poems. Consequently, the reader co-experiences the poem with the narrator: the effect is simultaneously chilling and familiar.

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But is the first person narrator of Plath’s poetry real? Plath creates such a powerful aura of self that the reader is made to believe so. Plath not only uses the first person to draw the audience into the intimate space of her poems, she deftly uses the ongoing narrative of her poems to convince the reader of a life being
experienced by a self. The narrative may in fact be an inadvertent result of the confessional approach, which M.L. Rosenthal and Sally M. Gall describe in The Modern Poetic Sequence the following way: “The ‘I’ becomes something other through the medium that absorbs its associations; it becomes a magnetic cohesive center for all the emotional and subjective currents running through the work (394).

It is important to note Rosenthal and Gall consider any grouping of Plath’s poems a poetic sequence. More specifically, they go on to say, “We were formerly persuaded, on the whole, that the closing poems in her Ariel (1965) were a sequence in formation, and the idea was reinforced by Hughes’s ‘Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s poems’” (429). But such a distinction is arbitrary. All of Plath’s poetry biographically reads into the climatic ending of the Ariel poems and Plath’s life. The closing poems are simply the most energetic and emotionally candid of Plath’s writing. The powerful sense of biographical order in Plath’s poems ends with the emotionally charged death of Sylvia Plath the person. And if there was ever a question about the distinction between Plath-the-person and Plath-the-first-person-narrator, suicide is as convincing a gesture that can be made to say the two are the same.

Perhaps nowhere does the biographical order of self and the interplay of horizontal-vertical movement become more interesting than the poems that lead up to the end of Ariel. The Bee Poems—“The Bee Meeting”; “The Arrival of the Bee Box”; “Stings”; “The Swarm”; and “Wintering”— as they are often called,
are where Plath has the final debate between flawed, horizontal world of human existence and the vertical, ideal world of perfect ascension.

Again, it is nearly impossible to remove Plath’s life from the first person narrator in her poems. One cause of this blending of self and narrator is Plath’s fame. Sylvia Plath is simply known in popular consciousness the way other poets are not; consequently, readers perpetuate popular myths about Plath. Karl Malkoff in his book *Escape from the Self* writes in a clearly skeptical vein:

There is no need to do more that sketch in outline the life of this bright, gifted, attractive woman who killed herself one grey, winter morning in London, her head in the oven, her two small children in the next room. She was thirty years old. To reach that moment she had led a life that was on the one hand clearly promising, on the other, headed directly toward disaster. (124-5)

Malkoff goes on to argue that the blending of self and narrator may simply be an effect of the confessional mode of truth telling:

If we remember Lowell’s remarks about *Life Studies*, we will recognize that there is no point in learning the ‘true’ facts of the poet’s life, since the poem is admittedly a selection and distortion made in the interests of creating a “real” version of the poet, in short, of creating a myth. It is the myth of the self, which reaches inward to the archetypal
patterns of the unconscious, and outward to the shared experiences of the poet’s society, rather than the objective actions of the arbitrary isolated individual, that forms the focus of Confessional poetry. (126)

In fact, here it is important to make a small sketch of Plath’s actual biography. Plath wrote the Bee Poems as a sequence over a week, beginning with “The Bee Meeting” on 3 October 1962 and ending on 9 October with “Wintering” (Kendall 129). Plath and her husband Ted Hughes separated in late summer, and Plath, by October 1962, was writing the Ariel poems in a flat in London (Wagner 223-224). Important in this sketch is the season, fall. Plath’s commits suicide on 22 February of 1963 (Wagner 240) and fall begins Plath’s descent into literal and figurative darkness. The Bee Poems create a stake in the two directions Plath could move in her life after the separation with Hughes: into the flawed, horizontal life of regular living; or into the perfect, vertical realm of death.

The first Bee Poem, “The Bee Meeting,” begins firmly in the horizontal world of the social:

Who are these people at the bridge for me? They are the villagers—
The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees.
In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,
And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?
They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.
(Plath 211)

Note the surprise in this first stanza. It is as if Plath awakened to the reality of the regular world after a period of being deeply internal. The people that the narrator
encounters become viable in a way previously unknown. Note also the people meet the narrator at a bridge, a structure the people have crossed, rather then the narrator crossing to come to them.

The other tension in this stanza is covering. The first person narrator is considerably less covered than the people. In fact, her clothes are out of season ("summery") and the people are more than adequately covered as they gear-up to handle the bees. And so, the horizontal-vertical distinction is firmly set in the first stanza: the covered, masked and helmeted villagers versus the narrator with no-protection, who, in the second stanza describes herself as, “nude as a chicken neck” and proclaims “my fear, my fear, my fear” (Plath 211).

In the third stanza distinctions disappear between the villagers. They are in their official bee keeping “cover” and evaporate into similarity:

> Which is the rector now, is it that man in black?  
> Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat?  
> Everybody is nodding a square black head, they are knights in visors,  
> Breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under their armpits,  
> Their smiles and their voices are changing. I am lead through a beanfield.  
> (Plath 211)

The impression is that all social roles and covers in the horizontal world are a mask, a lie. And if they are not a lie, they are contingent upon a deep myth, “they are knights in visors.”

“The Bee Meeting” becomes an interesting poem for Plath here. Plath observes something about the villagers that completely wipes away their social roles of distinction and a significant insight occurs where Plath becomes suddenly
aware of the role persona has played in her poems. Consequently, the entire quality of the narrator’s voice shifts. She begins seeing “the cover” of her narrator-self versus a version of self closer to what feels like Plath’s actual self. The distinction is a difficult one to see, but it is of great importance. The new change in quality can best be seen two stanzas later where Plath admits to physical pain caused in the ordinary, horizontal world. And where normally the narrator-poet would shoot-off into hyperbolic imagery to deal with such pain, she confronts the horizontal cause:

I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me
With its yellow purses, its spiky armory.
I could not run without having to run forever.
The white hive is snug as a virgin,
Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming.  
(Plath 212)

Plath is coming to a large decision about the horizontal world here. “I could not run without having to run forever” is not only a line that begins to point to finality, but begins to feel like a real reflection about the status of her persona. The hive, by contrast, becomes something of an ideal state; it is snug, virginal, a type of Platonic vacuum where things are sealed off and hum.

The last stanza in “The Bee Meeting” reads,

I am exhausted, I am exhausted—
Pillar of white in a blackout of knives.
I am not the magician’s girl who does not flinch.
The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished,
why am I cold. 
(Plath 212)
It is important to note that this poem ends planted among the grounded detail of shaking hands, a long white box, a grove, and the feeling of cold. What’s going on is the narrator-poet is making an important decision about the horizontal realm that needs to be contemplated in the horizontal realm. But there is a new quality of slight ascension in “The Bee Meeting,” which isn’t Plath’s typical total-ascension, but more of a mild floating. And here the new quality of voice is caused by the narrator-poet clearly overhearing herself for the first time.

Overhearing creates a newer, realer sense of self in the Bee Poems. But the new overheard-self does nothing to negate the former sense of the narrator, which coexists and resonates with the newly created self. For example, these lines in “The Bee Meeting” ring with the new consciousness of being newly overheard: “Who are these people at the bridge for me?”; “I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me”; “I could not run without having to run forever”; “why am I cold”—but they only do so within the context of the reader’s previous sense of the narrator’s self. There is a pure, non-rhetorical quality to these lines; they jump out as tonally direct and act as commentary on the poet-narrator’s reflections. Such lucid, icy commentary creates the feeling of overhearing that marks the Bee Poems as the place Plath begins to take a side in the narrative-like, horizontal-vertical debate at the core of her poetry. Take the following truncated versions of the remaining Bee Poems (italics used to show overhearing):
“The Arrival of the Bee Box”

How can I let them out?
It is the noise that appalls me most of all,
The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,
Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

I lay my ear to furious Latin.
I am not Caesar.
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
They can be sent back.
*They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.*

I wonder how hungry they are.
I wonder if they would forget me
If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

*The box is only temporary.* (Plath 212-213)

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“Stings”

I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,
Honey-drudgers.
I am no drudge.
Though for years I have eaten dust
And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate,
Blue dew from dangerous skin.
Will they hate me,
These women who only scurry,
Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?

*It is almost over.*
*I am in control.*
Here is my honey-machine,
It will work without thinking,
Opening, in spring, like an industrious virgin.

To scour the creaming crest
As the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea.
*A third person is watching.*
*He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me.*
Now he is gone

In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat. (Plath 214-215)

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“The Swarm”

The last badge of victory.
The swarm is knocked into a cocked straw hat.
Elba, Elba, bleb on the sea!
The white busts of marshals, admirals, generals
Worming themselves into niches.

*How instructive this is!*
The dumb, banded bodies
Walking the plank draped with Mother France’s upholstery
Into a new mausoleum,
An ivory palace, a crotch pine.

The man with gray hands smiles—
The smile of a man of business, intensely practical.
They are not hands at all
But asbestos receptacles.
Pom! Pom! ‘They would have killed me.’

Stings as big as drawing pins!
*It seems bees have a notion of honor,*
*A black intractable mind.*
Napoleon is pleased, he is pleased with everything.
O Europe, O ton of honey. (Plath 216-217)

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“Wintering”

This is the room I’ve never been in.
This is the room I could never breathe in.
The black bunched in there like a bat,
No light
But the torch and its faint

Chinese yellow on appalling objects—
Black asinity. Decay.
Possession.
It is they who own me.
Neither cruel nor indifferent,

Only ignorant.
This is the time of hanging on for the bees—the bees
So slow I hardly know them,
Filing like soldiers
To the syrup tin

To make up for the honey I’ve taken.
Tate and Lyle keeps them going,
The refined snow.
It is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of flowers.
They take in. The cold sets in.

Now they ball into a mass,
Black
Mind against all that white.
The smile of the snow is white.
It spreads itself out, a mile-long body of Meissen,

Into which, on warm days,
They can only carry their dead. (Plath 218)

Plath is in the middle of making her mind up in these poems: the industrious, perfect virgin; the queen that needs to be recovered; the detachment that allows the narrator the perspective to see people as dumb banded bodies; a black mind set against perfect whiteness and death—Plath is choosing the vertical world and showing the reader in each Bee Poem how she comes to her decision.
The implication of choosing the vertical world over the horizontal world in the Bee Poems within the ongoing narrative of Plath’s poetry is enormous. First, the decision adroitly sets a lethal stage for the outright rage and ascension of the poems that follow the Bee Poems. So there is compositional advantage to the Bee Poems that borders on exposition reaching a narrative climax. But the advantage for the sense of self of the narrator-poet is even greater. There is a tremendous feel of earnestness that comes out of the narrator-poet’s commentary-like overhearing of the poems. Mental anguish and the process of cognition are registered with great affection and power. But the other quality is of elucidation: within the commentary of overhearing it is as if narrator-self has finally puzzled-out some great problem and has realized both the cause and solution to the anguish. And the solution seems the perfect realm of ascension, death.

The reader, who still identifies with Plath’s first person “I,” sharply feels the shift in voice Plath makes into overhearing. In a way, the shift is very easy to understand. Plath’s first-person “I” registers as a constantly held analogy with the reader and creates the feeling of intimacy; therefore, the shift the narrator-self encounters will likewise be encountered by the reader. Where the analogy becomes highly effective in the Bee Poems is through a new sense of sincerity the narrator-self creates with the reader. It is as if Plath’s new sense of elucidation is finally revealing the true self of the narrator-poet-Plath. Put differently, it is as if
the true person behind the masks is finally being revealed, and the rhetorical “coverings,” as in “The Bee Meeting,” are being sloughed-off and the real Plath-the-person is being revealed.

What essentially occurs in the Bee Poems is the authentic feel of merging between Sylvia-Plath-the-narrator-poet and the Sylvia-Plath-the-person. A new, even deeper sense of intimacy is created between Plath and the reader; and the direct, sparkling dread of poems like “Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” and “Death & Co,” are written with the energetic feel of a unified self and narrator. Take “Death & Co,” for instance:

Two, of course there are two.  
It seems perfectly natural now—  
The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded  
And balled, like Blake’s,  
Who exhibits

The birthmarks that are his trademark—  
The scald scar of water,  
The nude  
Verdigris of the condor.  
I am read meat. His beak

Claps sideways: I am not his yet.  
He tells me how badly I photograph.  
He tells me how sweet  
The babies look in their hospital  
Icebox, a simple

Frill at the neck,  
Then the flutings of their Ionian  
Death-gowns,  
Then two little feet.  
He does not smile or smoke.

The other does that,  
His hair long and plausible.  
Bastard
Masturbating a glitter,
He wants to be loved.

I do not stir.
The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a scar,
The dead bell,
The dead bell,

Somebody’s done for. (Plath 254-5)

The first line reads like elucidation through overhearing. And the second, continuing into meditation on a death mask, reads like a comment on the naturalness of Plath’s new process that creates this elucidation. Also, the simplicity and tonally confident lines of “Death & Co” create the same overheard quality as in the Bee Poems, but without wavering into parts of the poem that are not overheard; that is, “Death & Co” is a poem that is completely immersed in overhearing and its stark energy is attributable to a narrator voicing the feel of singular truth.

Compare “Death & Co” to an earlier poem, “The Mirror”:

I am silver and exact. I make no preconceptions.
Whatever I see I swallow immediately
Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
I am not cruel, only truthful—
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
Faces and darkness separate us over and over.
Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
Searching my reaches for what she really is.
Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
She rewards me with tears and an agitation of hands.
I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness. 
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman 
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish. (Plath 173-174)

Note how a great deal of the “The Mirror” is devoted to commenting about what it does: “I am silver and exact”; “I make no preconceptions”; “I meditate on the opposite wall”; “Now I am a lake.” Part of the pleasure of this poem is the argument that this poem is making. This poem isn’t primarily about a mirror, but it is trying to convince you that it is about a mirror; that is, this poem is not being mirror-like, it is making assertions about something that is mirror-like. “Death & Co,” by contrast, is a poem that isn’t making any assertions. “Death & Co” knows what it is: it is a poem completely about death, rather than a poem trying to make an argument about death.

The reason for this alteration in quality, again, is the merging of Sylvia-Plath-the-narrator-poet and the Sylvia-Plath-the-person. With “Death and Co” Plath has adopted the sincerity and tonal directness of overhearing from the Bee Poems, but she has done so totally, without the previous coverings of her former narrator-self. What occurs after the Bee Poems in Ariel, then, is the narrator-poet takes on the new quality of a self that feels completely real, and more than a handful of the poems—“Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus,” “Death & Co,” for example—become stunning and sublime in their deadly candor.

What transpires after the unified feel of self and narrator combined with Plath’s suicide is an entire recasting of Plath’s poetry. The sequential arrangement of Plath’s poetry, of course, aids in this. What could have been seen as the rantings of a melancholy, enraged young poet begin to take on new weight and
shape. Instead of merely looking like the poetry of rage, sadness and depression, the poems turn into a narrative of psychological descent with a discernable curve. And any doubt readers have about the confessional theatricality of Plath’s poetry begins to look hollow against the total ascension of *Ariel* and the ending of Plath’s life.

The Bee Poems are the hinge. They are the cognition of Plath’s situation and bear all the weight of the ongoing vertical-horizontal tension of Plath’s poems; they frame the narrator-poet versus real-self debate; and they shift the tone of Plath’s first person voice into an area of powerful, deadly candor.

Of course, although this paper has failed to mention it until now, there is a way in which the self is a type of fiction. Two well known examples are suggested from Freud and Jung. In the Jungian model, for instance, the self is a series of altering masks within a large narrative; for Freud, the self is a battle between subconscious forces. Although these descriptions are gross simplifications, it’s important to note that “the real self” has always seemed unknowable in some fundamental way. The default perspective of this paper is the self is real and knowable and the narrator of Sylvia Plath’s poems is a type of evasion of this real self. But it is philosophically fashionable to consider all narrators as being “a fabrication”; in this way, my paper is flawed. Michel
Foucault, himself firmly enmeshed in the reliably sophisticated voice of the philosopher, in his essay “What is an Author,” writes:

But the author function is not a pure and simple reconstruction made secondhand from a text given as passive material. The text always contains a certain number of signs referring to the author. These signs, well known to grammarians, are personal pronouns, adverbs of time and place, and verb conjugation. Such elements do not play the same role in discourses provided with the author function as in those lacking it. In the latter, such ‘shifters’ refer to the real speaker and to the spatio-temporal coordinates of his discourse (although certain modifications can occur, as in the operation of relating discourses in the first person).

(Foucault 111-112)

Certainly readers are no longer in the land of the simple trust of a first person persona with Foucault.

But on paper, in a text, there is no logical reason to distinguish between a writer’s persona and a writer’s true self. One could easily hold the inverse opinion of Sylvia Plath’s poetry and consider the true self a persona, and the persona a true self. Although this would drastically change the reading of Plath’s poems, nothing in the text of Sylvia Plath’s poems would change. The real question, then, is how either a persona or a self could be considered true or false, or more real or
I don’t really want to tease the philosophical point too far, but I want to point out how a persona and a true self, in a piece of writing, are fundamentally equivalent and holding one in higher stead then the other is a tenuous position.

I think the sense of the self in the poetry of Sylvia Plath says just that: Plath’s self and the formation of self through fabrication of the first person persona are one in the same. What Plath shows us is a true movement of a self through a grouping of poems. Various mechanisms—the biographical arrangement of Plath’s poems, the horizontal-vertical tension, the first person persona, among others—point towards how this sense of self is created. If anything, what is so affecting about the poetry of Sylvia Plath is how accurately she renders the fictive portion of her self into what eventually becomes the feeling of a true self. And it doesn’t so much matter which is the fictive self and which is the real self in Plath’s poems. The secret of Plath is the process revealed in her poetry is frighteningly similar to what readers of her poetry experience. Readers become analogous to Plath. They see themselves in the ebb and flow of Sylvia Plath’s creation of self, and Plath ensures that they see themselves, and what frightens readers, and what ensconces her poetry in hearts and minds, is how personal, lucid and understandable the narrative of her life registers.

Ultimately what is so frightening about Sylvia Plath when you read her poems again and again is how planned the narrative unfolding of her self feels. What I can’t get over is how a self so capable of the care and beauty in Ariel couldn’t extent that care and beauty into an actual life. Even more disturbing, as you become more and more familiar with Plath’s poems, is how premeditated the
end of her narrative looks. It is as if she knew her life was more meaningful tied
to her death and she consciously made movements in that direction. Reading her
chronologically arranged poems, then, becomes a reenactment of the narrative of
her death. And that’s why a poem like “I Am Vertical,” written almost two years
before Plath’s suicide, becomes a terrifying statement about an actual self with
previous knowledge of the process that would end itself:

But I would rather be horizontal.
I am not a tree with my root in the soil
Sucking up minerals and motherly love
So that each March I may gleam into leaf,
More am I the beauty of a garden bed
Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,
Unknowing I must soon unpetal.
Compared with me, a tree is immortal
And a flower-head not tall, but more startling,
And I want with one’s longevity and other’s darling.

Tonight, in the infinitesimal light of the stars,
The trees and flowers have been strewing their cool odors.
I walk among them, but none of them are noticing.
Sometimes I think that when I am sleeping
I must most perfectly resemble them—
Thoughts gone dim.
It is more natural to me, lying down.
Then I shall be useful when I lie down finally:
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time
for me. (Plath 162)
WORKS CITED


