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According to Timothy Melley, in his *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America,* the latter half of the twentieth century has been characterised by conspiracist readings of texts, readings which result from a contradictory impulse - an impulse that may originate from the author, or from the reader, or from both. Melley explains this in reference to the writings of the political philosopher, Leo Strauss:

> At the height of the cold war, Strauss advanced an unusual but influential theory of reading. In "Persecution and the Art of Writing (1952), he suggested that in countries where writers are compelled to espouse government views, they might engage in the literary equivalent of leaving secret messages in their work. Such messages would be discernible only to those elite readers capable of penetrating the obvious… attempts to locate hidden messages [therefore] hinge upon the paradoxical assumption that any message on can easily detect must not be the *truest* message of the text.[1]

This practice of leaving hidden messages in a work of fiction or of poetry reflects the dynamic at play in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar.* Specifically, this article will show the novel to be instrumental in constructing the Cold War category of McCarthyism, elaborating conspiracist suppositions of how the novel's protagonist Esther Greenwood attempts to author herself, by employing a "schizophrenic" narrative that attributes a sinister significance to apparently benign events and motifs. Nothing is coincidental in

[1] Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy,* 21

the novel, and in this way Plathian paranoia echoes the conspiracy theory narratives that gained momentum, particularly after the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, as we have seen in Melley's appropriation of Straussian theory.

It would seem reductive to argue that, as per Melley and Strauss's reasoning, Plath - or perhaps any writer or artist - was somehow 'compelled' to 'espouse' the retrenchment impulses of the US government at the height of the Cold War. Indeed, even if this was the case, the period that we call McCarthyism proper had ended some six years prior to the writing of the novel. On the other hand, insofar as this article advocates a Foucauldian archaeological analysis of history, it will endeavour to show that the most potent form of power is not that of a higher authority that represses the individual; but that which suffuses, and has been fully internalised, by the individual who in turn wields this power over themselves.

Foucault's archaeological method is an historical *modus operandi* instated in his 1969 book, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, expressed in his conviction that '[h]istory must be detached from the image that satisfied it for so long... that of an age-old collective consciousness that made use of material documents to refresh its memory.'[2] In other words, a "discourse" – say, the Enlightenment period or the history of medicine – is usually confirmed or "proven" by the documents that it has produced, just as the primary source of the modern prescription slip "proves" there to have been an NHS era of medicine. Archaeology, on the other hand, would use the prescription slip as a document in its own right to build a picture of the NHS as the public service of medicine and a power for change and social utility in the modern United Kingdom. We could deduce from the prescription slip, for example, that some people within the United Kingdom

[2] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge,* 7

would be liable to pay for their subscriptions and others would not. Archaeology therefore attributes the document a paramount importance in building a picture of an epoch. Thus, Esther Greenwood's illness and recovery is a veritable case study in how the individual "writes" herself within McCarthyist discourse, as her text *The Bell Jar* becomes something akin to the prescription slip; a document excavated from the era of Cold War, and a power for capitalism and conformity internalised.

Thus, one may maintain that the Straussian theory above, as advanced by Timothy Melley, still has significance for literary readings of *The Bell Jar* as a conspiracist text, even though it would be prudent to dispense with such terms as 'compulsion' and 'espouse.' Given Plath's flagging of this individual operation of power by Esther Greenwood, it seems quite possible, if not probable, that the former was indeed aware of her own constraints within the dominant discourse of the day. Plath too, therefore, can be seen to be writing in these secret, encoded messages. However, as is characteristic of her *oeuvre,* Plath never employs such tropes in an unproblematic way; and though she does indeed encode the novel with "secret messages," this is not just for the benefit of some sort of elite and charismatic reader. Instead she employs a more playful, even humorous way of inscribing the text that is entirely self-aware and affected. As there are no coincidences in the novel, there is similarly nothing that escapes the wry gaze of Sylvia Plath.

The Bell Jar as Confessional novel: A rational interpretation

The Bell Jar is frequently referred to as a novelistic form of the Confessional text. The word "confessional' was yoked with poetry by the critic M L. Rosenthal in 1959 in a review of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies,* and referred to a lyric form that made reference to family life and taboo subject matter such as mental illness and suicide. The term

“confessional’ had overtones of the Sacrament of Confession or Penance in the Catholic church, whereby the speaker is absolved of their sin by speaking of it to the figure of the priest within a small booth, known itself as the Confessional. However, it would be useful at this stage to outline in more detail the reasons why *The Bell Jar* might be called a "Confessional novel," which are more wide-ranging than a simple conflation of the two categories - Plath was a Confessional *poet,* and therefore must be a Confessional *novelist.* Such reductive assumptions have indeed been commonplace in the canon of Plath criticism, but they are not assumptions that one would wish to perpetuate here.

It is the case, however, that the precedent for Confessional prose was set with the publication of Robert Lowell's *Life Studies.* The middle section of this volume, "91 Revere Street" details an incident in Lowell's childhood in Boston. The first and only piece of prose in a Lowell volume, the "91 Revere Street" section also reflects the prosody at work in the latterly and characteristically Confessional section, Part Four, and eponymous "Life Studies." (The first poem in the section, "My Last Afternoon with Uncle Devereux Winslow" is a case in point: ' "I won't go with you. I want to stay with Granpa!" / That's how I threw cold water / on my Mother’s and Father's / watery martini pipe dreams at Sunday dinner.'[3]) Prosody has therefore been associated with Confessional poetry since its inception, perhaps because the themes of the genre so often become conflated - by critics, and by the poets themselves - with memoir and autobiography. That is not to say, however, that prose has no role in Confessional literature other than through its misappropriation as autobiography, and this article aims to debunk this myth in its analysis of *The Bell Jar.* However, the worth of prosody in Confessional literature can only be identified if we dispense with such terms as autobiography and memoir, as in this context they can refer us only to the life of the

[3] Lowell, *Life Studies,* 67.

author and their pathologies.

Prose in *Life Studies* in fact points towards the inception of the most highly Confessional poems in the volume, in Part Four. Prose is defined as that which seeks to mimic the organic flow of speech in contrast to the formalities or structures that govern poetry. Lowell's "91 Revere Street" gestures towards the new style of Confessional poetry in its talking-cure cadences; as Lowell "speaks" the memories that characterise the section, he is able to undertake his own therapy. The rationalised and firmly historicised memories surface in the mind of the narrator, to the extent that such memories, by virtue of reliving them, have a cathartic effect.

Specifically, these memories borne out in prose centre around the usually dysfunctional relationships that have moulded the perceptions of the speaking voice: in this case, his parents and their relationship to their son, the child Lowell: 'During the weekends I was at home much of the time. All day I used to look forward to the nights when my bedroom walls would once again vibrate, when I would awake with rapture to the rhythm of my parents arguing, arguing one another to exhaustion.'[4] This allusion to what forms the cornerstone of psychotherapy – the primal and formative relationship between the child and the parent – underscores the nature of the therapeutic project of the narrator's in speaking or writing out his memories. Psychic relief, both for the narrator and for the reader, is elicited. But more importantly this prose study has laid the groundwork for the most intensely personal and confessional poems in Part Four: a series of family portraits that refer back to the depiction of relationships remembered and memorized in "91 Revere Street."

Moreover, this article utilises the term "Confessional" in relation to *The Bell Jar* in

[4] Lowell, *Life Studies,* 21.

light of its archaeological analysis of the text. This seeks to be an unorthodox literary analysis that uses the novel as an artifact from which we can build a concept of McCarthyism, rather than a conventional approach that uses pre-conceived notions of historical context to impose an interpretation. McCarthyism is an incarcerating logic that doubles back on itself, entrapping its subjects into its stifling axiom. It is helpful to refer back to Foucault at this stage, in order to clarify what this power means for the McCarthyist subject. Speaking in an interview, Foucault observed the following in regards to the workings of modern power relations:

> But it seems to me now that the notion of repression is quite inadequate for capturing what is precisely the productive aspect of power. In defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridicial conception of such power; one identifies power with a law which says no; power is taken above all as carrying the force of a prohibition... If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it includes pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body.[5]

This use of pleasure and the productive aspect of power is instructive in relation to the Confessional genre, and, in turn, the personification of society as a body that is powered by discourses, like blood and oxygen. The pleasure elicited in *The Bell Jar* is that of the author accounting for herself in the world through literary endeavour: in self-naming in textual forms to a world that insists upon the interpellation and definition of its subjects. Esther Greenwood's masochistic recounting of all the painful details of her breakdown has an ameliorating influence on her narrative: it becomes apparent that, the worse things get for Esther, the more clarity she has as author of her ordeal. The aberrant logic of Esther's decision to commit suicide is reflected in an inverse relation: that of the rational and measured tone of her narration:

[5] "Truth and Power," *The Foucault Reader,* 60 – 61.

> But I hadn't enough money for an umbrella. What with bus fare in an out of Boston and peanuts and newspapers and abnormal psychology books and trips to my old home town by the sea, my New York fund was almost exhausted.
>
> I had decided that when there was no money in my bank account I would do it, and that morning I'd spent the last of it on the black raincoat.[6]

Esther as accountant here not only monitors the balance of her bank account, she also tallies the remaining unites of her life like small change, resolving to kill herself when her money runs out. There is a black humour to this suicide by sum totals and their lack; especially in light of Esther being the apparent poster-girl for the all-American dream: '...so poor she can't afford a magazine, and then she gets a scholarship to college and wins a prize here and a prize there...'[7] Her expected death by her own hand is a perverse and upside-down version of the rationale that has got her to a women's Ivy League college and acquired all her other worldly successes.

The use of pleasure that has been referred to then, in this context, is the relief elicited by the authorial admission of Esther to her darkest moments. McCarthyism has become, under this analysis, not just a Manichean logic that restricts its subjects, but one that confers approval in appropriate situations. In this sense McCarthyism, as constructed by the character Esther Greenwood, comes to reflect paranoid conspiracist narratives, in its apparently arbitrary impartation of significance. This in turn has implications for the inferences we make about Foucauldian discourse as canonical "history":

> The real difference between irrational and rational interpretation, then, lies not so much in *whether* one believes in uncontrollable determinants or agents as in *where* one locates those determinants - and thus, in how one conceptualizes the agency of persons... We can in fact hypothesize that paranoia is a defense of - perhaps even a

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[6] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 160.

[7] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 2.

> component of - liberal individualism. If the paranoid, like the superstitious, are overzealous in their interpretations, they nonetheless retain the liberal notion that *intentions* are the supreme cause of events in the world... Whether such a view is "paranoid" in the sense of "wrong" is hard to say. More clear is its implicit view of the self as an atomistic, rational agent beleaguered by other (often immense) rational agents.[8]

Thus, Plath's conception of confession and McCarthyist power is one that has quintessentially American scruples at its core. If McCarthyist paranoia ultimately stands for liberal individualism, this has wide and far-ranging implications in terms of the American political landscape, wider, perhaps, than even the Cold War. Plathian and conspiracist notions of the epoch therefore, underscore the extent to which the politics of Joe McCarthy is aligned with partisan interests such as the right to bear arms and the belief in small government. Concerns about the apparent erosion of liberal individualist values came to the fore during the 1950s, as the Eisenhower administration resolved to maintain a standing army within a nation that, constitutionally speaking, had been predicated upon the principle of self-armed citizens.

The US standing army has, of course, outlived the Cold War. However, this was an immediate concern after the Second World War, and one that is not excluded from Plath's wry and ironising gaze, as in the figures of the Rosenbergs who are executed in spite of their civil right to political freedom, and whom Esther ‘kept hearing about…over the radio and at the office till I couldn’t get them out of my mind.’[9] Moreover, this was the epoch of the military-industrial complex. The Eisenhower administration (1953- 1961) was distinguished by its unprecedented levels of government spending after the Second World War. This was with a view to avoiding recession after the massive investment of the war; and was the financial impetus behind the disbursement of government funds into

[8] Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy,* 25.
[9] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 1.

the first standing army. The very economic policy of the early Cold War, then, seemed to be aimed at the dissolution of much that was formerly held to be exemplary American values. The irony was, however, that these changes took place under the auspices of a Republican administration.

Confessional literature in this context, then, has come to reveal something of how the individual can obtain consolation within a society that confers guilt, in the guise of the blacklist and the communist slur with a quasi-religious fervour. It becomes a kind of soothing balm that has the capability to reconcile the Confessional subject back to precisely the power relations that have alienated it. It is for this reason that the trope of "conspiracy" is appropriate for demonstrating how confession operated within a Cold War setting: even pleasure, in the sense of the alleviation of one's anxieties, functions in the interest of the dominant discourse. It ensures the maximum number of sheep adhering to the flock, and deters would-be goats. This definition of conspiracy, therefore, traces the Foucauldian account of discourse that emphasises the totality of power, and in who's interest knowledge operates. Conspiracy theory mimics power; it is a performative version of how power operates. This article therefore argues in favour of a Plathian acknowledgment of a *conspiracy to confess* in the literature and culture of the McCarthyist epoch.

Naturally, the notion of a conspiracy to confess would undercut ideas of Confessional literature as purely an artistic endeavour, and implies in fact that it is operational in the subtle, pernicious and largely inconspicuous repression of people. However, Plath ultimately demonstrates self-awareness in appropriating the Confessional literature banner that disavows the subjugatory effect of art and culture within power relations. Existing in freedom, for Esther and Plath's readers, therefore

becomes a possibility if we conceive of freedom as a mental space - a mental space conferred by self-awareness and perspicacity.

Foucauldian subject-positions and Plathian perspicacity: The freedom to confess

What implications do these so-called mental spaces of freedom have for the subject-positions of a discourse? Quite simply, according to the Foucauldian analysis, the subject-position relates to where an individual stands in relation to the dominant discourse - for example, a gay man in a hetero-normative society, a woman within a patriarchy (of course, a subject doesn't necessarily have to be defined in opposition to the discourse). If freedom can only be achieved through mental space or a kind of gap in consciousness, this will presumably complicate the relationship of the Confessional subject to his or her subject-position. This is because discourse must necessarily become ruptured in order for a consciousness to seep through in its liberty.

When this mental space is achieved, it is in an inconspicuous way that does not appear to mar the fabric of the discourse from which it has broken free. If these subjects were discernible as rebels and mavericks within the discourse - say, the outwardly homosexual individual in a strictly heterosexual demograph, such as fundamentalist Christianity in the US - these individuals would be, and are, sought out, punished or merely silenced among the cacophony of the typical. In this case, this repression, whether overt or by stealth, presumably cannot have happened, as Confessional literature escaped censorship. Indeed, one might consider that Confessional literature has continued to thrive until the present-day, under the guise of the so-called "misery memoir" and the prevalence of autobiography. Confessional writing, in other words, must have found a way of circumventing the censorious impulses of Cold War culture and later historical epochs.

There are indications that Esther Greenwood has achieved some kind of cognitive independence, and the signs are evident even during the darkest hour of her breakdown. This is initially reflected in the autonomy of her body, which throughout the novel manages to withstand Esther's attempts to kill it. As with her suicide by bank balance, such incidences are related with black humour. Esther is unable to find a suitable gallows:

> The trouble was, our house had the wrong kind of ceilings. The ceilings were low, white and smoothly plastered, without a light fixture or a wood beam in sight...
>
> After a discouraging time of walking about with the silk cord dangling from my neck like a yellow cat's tail and finding no place to fasten it, I sat on the edge of my mother's bed and tried pulling the cord tight.
>
> But each time I would get the cord so tight I could feel a rushing in my ears and a flush of blood in my face my hands would weaken and let go, and I would be all right again.
>
> Then I saw that my body had all sorts if little tricks, such as making my hands go limp at the crucial second, which would save it, time and again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash.[10]

Her body seems to have ideas of survival independent of her mind. Indeed, Esther attributes her mind a kind of secondary significance, all too frequently undermined by the 'tricks' that keep her alive. She does not even have full agency over her body, commenting, with dark humour that 'if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash.' We can deduce from this, then, that Esther's subject-position in relation to the McCarthyist discourse is one that has disenfranchised her - it has affected a schism between body and mind to the extent that she is frustrated in her attempts to make the most fundamental decisions between life and death. However, while it has disenfranchised her in one sense, it has also makes her capable in another.

[10] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 151 – 152.

Esther's mind becoming somehow alienated or severed from her body acts as a decapitation metaphor that has consequences for Esther's subjectivity. The spectre of the decapitated person is one that signifies the severing of an individual's power (and, consequently, a nobleman's death). Taken in the context of Foucauldian power, therefore, the separation of the head (i.e. mind) from the body is illustrative of the subject's falling away from discourse, an inability - or an unwillingness - to be delimited by the dominant discourse. No details are given of how such a feat may be made possible. However, Esther's inability to hang herself on this occasion, in a deeply ironised way, posits a lateral sphere beyond the noose, a sphere that has previously been unthinkable. The strangulation that Esther attempts with her own hand does not, in the end, suffocate; in fact, it affects a release of consciousness. It is as if the noose of power has been turned inside out.

Whatever this release is, and whatever effect it may have on Esther, it is evidently something that must remain camouflaged in the text. Plath, purveyor of secret literary messages, hereon after must encode her novel with these spaces of liberty, building them into the landscape of Esther's narrative. This has consequences for how we read, or misread, *The Bell Jar,* this literary exercise in 'secret hermeneutics.'

> First, it so divorces signification from normative reading practices that interpretation may depend upon the (often self-declared) authority of a charismatic interpreter... The other odd consequence of a secret hermeneutics is that it casts doubt on the value of "surface" communications, messages that would be obvious to most members of a discourse community... it turns out that Ezra Pound's war broadcasts, whose overt fascism brought him into disgrace in England and America, were "mistrusted" by the Italian government because they were suspected to contain coded (i.e. *anti*-fascist) messages for Allied intelligence.[11]

[11] Melley, *Empire of* Conspiracy, 21 – 22.

The example of Ezra Pound's broadcasts here is interesting because it demonstrates binary logic of textual paranoia: the overt message is distrusted because it is held to harbour secrets, and the covert message is distrusted because the secret message, once revealed, is inevitably functioning in the service of shadowy or nefarious organisations. If we take certain messages from *The Bell Jar* as a whole, then, we can see this binary logic of paranoia as ultimately shoring up this article's contention that Plath posits a space outside of McCarthyist discourse, one that offers hope of liberation. So, for example, if we use the imagery of Esther effecting her own decapitation through suicide, then, we can surmise that the overt imagery within this motif is a doubtful one because it reveals that Esther harbours disturbed and possibly violent predilections. At the covert level, this predilection and Esther's admission to it reveals Esther as an ostensible agent of McCarthyism in all its dubious honour.

However, insofar as this is a binary relation made visible by Plath to the reader, its conspicuous quality assures that it is delineated outside the content of Esther's narrative as literary pathology. The reader is invited to participate in an analysis of the novel and the discourse that it produces that is not merely the passive affect of "reading," but one that actually contributes towards *writing* or inscribing the text as an anarchic and irreverent manifestation of McCarthyism on the page. Plath's project of reader/writer conflation therefore seems to constitute a literary prototype for the Debordian 'class of consciousness' that, for the first time, has the ability to construct history in its own image. It is a negation of the passivity of reading - texts or images - that has just been described. It has a revolutionary potential, even for the modern-day "consumer" of literature, and assists in the recalibration of literature as a lived relation: 'Historical thought can be saved only by becoming practical thought; and the practice of the proletariat as a revolutionary class than the historical consciousness operating on the

totality of its world.'[12]

Given that Plath aims to show the points of departure for Esther Greenwood, the threshold at which the narrator is able to write herself outside of McCarthyist discourse, might it be fair to say that she aims to erode subject-positions? If it is possible to exit a discourse, however fleeting or shaky this opportunity is, wouldn't it have the effect of dissolving the original situation of the subject within the discourse? This article answers in the affirmative in relation to the first two questions posed here. From the outset, we can see that, according to Foucauldian archaeology, the subject position can only shift as the discourse shifts, known here as changing 'perceptual fields' (the word 'perceptual' indicates the extent to which all knowledge is already contained within the discourse, and making new discoveries is simply a matter of a change in emphasis).

> The various situations that the subject of medical discourse may occupy were redefined at the beginning of the nineteenth century with the organization of a quite different perceptual field... and with the establishment of new systems of registration, notation and description, classification, integration in numerical series and is statistics, with the introduction of new forms of teaching, the circulation of information, relations with other theoretical domains (science or philosophy) and with other institutions (whether administrative, political or economic). [13]

However, as we have already established, it is not merely the perceptual field of McCarthyism that has been altered in Plath's *Bell Jar,* as if the focus had simply shifted from rhetoric and accusation to outright repression and incarceration. Rather, a point of retreat has been located in the discourse, like a gap appearing between tectonic plates. The subject that can exit and re-enter discourse through this gap will surely have a different relationship to the dominant ideology when he or she is back within it, just as a retired surgeon will have a different affiliation to the practice of medicine when she

[12] Debord, Guy *Society of the Spectacle,* 39.
[13] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 58 – 59.

returns in an advisory capacity, to take an example that falls within medical thought. Esther Greenwood, following her nearly successful suicide attempt, has an almost ghost-like and spectral relationship to her own narrative. But when using this image, this article does not mean to re-appropriate metaphors of death, rebirth and images of the phoenix in Plathian literature that have already been used to good effect within the Plath canon of criticism.[14] Instead, the term "spectral" or ghostlike is used to illustrate the extent to which Esther haunts her own narrative in an apparitional way - she is both *there* and both *other* to it. This is echoed in the incident with the mirror when Esther has first been admitted to the asylum. Her reflection, that most iconic synecdoche of personality, does not seem to bear any resemblance to her:

> At first I didn't see what the trouble was. It wasn't a mirror at all, but a picture.
>
> You couldn't tell whether the person in the picture was a man or a woman, because their hair was shaved off and sprouted in bristly chicken-feather tufts all over their head. One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown, with a rose-coloured sore at each corner.
>
> The most startling thing about the face was its supernatural conglomeration of bright colours.
>
> I smiled.
>
> The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin.
>
> A minute after the crash another nurse ran in. She took one look at the

[14] For Robert Phillips, this metaphor is borne out most clearly in "Lady Lazarus," and has Biblical overtones: 'Such dark waters are the subject of "Lady Lazarus," a much quoted poem in which Plath compares herself to that biblical figure once resurrected by Christ, and also to a cat with its nine lives, because she has been "resurrected" from attempted suicide three times.' Phillips therefore can be seen to be drawing out the aforementioned, Roman Catholic character of Plath's Confessional poetry in its religious imagery. This is most interesting for the Plath scholar, though I will take a different approach in my own work here. Phillips, *The Confessional Poets,* 146.

> broken mirror, and at me, standing over the blind, white pieces, and hustled the young nurse out of the room.[15]

The 'supernatural conglomeration of bright colours' in Esther's face disavows her humanity, making her over in the image of a primary-coloured cartoon character, and her insistence on referring to herself as the 'person in the picture' compounds this sense of her having a depleted subjectivity. This subject without individuality is devoid even of gender, and when the mirror breaks, the pieces become 'blind' and 'white', in stark contrast to the vivid picture of that Esther sees in her reflection. Significantly, Plath's use of the word 'blind' in relation to the shattered mirror pieces locates the seeing subjectivity both behind the eyes of Esther, and outside herself, in the inanimate object that is the whole mirror. In the first instance, the pieces are 'blind' from Esther's point of view as they no longer reflect anything back at her. But they are also blind, from their own perspective, insofar as these broken pieces can no longer "see" Esther.

We thus see a Plathian poetics of pure affect appear in Esther's account of herself. In the context of a first-person narration such as Esther Greenwood's, this affective signification, in tandem with Esther's own subjective perspective, effectively locates the novel's narration in a liminal space. Esther's voice therefore seems to hover on the threshold of novel, both authoring herself within the discourse, and pulling away from it. This pulling away is what lends affective significance to the objects of her world; as Esther moves further way, the more these objects emanate with their own power. This in turn indicates that, in order for the discourse to fully function, it needs a subject; and without a subject, the world apart from discourse begins to exude its own efficacy. Esther's subject-position, therefore, is both *there* and *away,* or other. She inhabits a unique position in the autocratic logic of McCarthyism, neither here nor there

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[15] Plath, *The Bell Jar,* 168.

to it, and both simultaneously. Esther's situation, in other words, is unprecedented, as unprecedented as Plath's textual self-determination.

McCarthyist paranoia and the problem of Esther Greenwood

As Plath seeks to deconstruct the subject-position of Esther - and, perhaps, her very subjectivity itself – we may deduce that this says something about McCarthyism as the contemporary discourse. Thus, we may draw conclusions about McCarthyism in general, and whether it retains any semblance of a discourse in light of the analysis given here. Moreover, this analysis of the McCarthyist discourse has consequences for the status of *The Bell Jar* as a document. It seems jeopardous indeed to modulate what the essential qualities of Foucauldian discourse are. If Plath's conception of a McCarthyist discourse is one that renders it permeable, we must ascertain if it can still be called "discourse" or not. Foucault is very clear that nothing and no one can reside outside of discourse. Indeed, any possibility of discourse's exteriority would render the archaeology metaphor redundant: 'in our time history aspires to the condition of archaeology, to the intrinsic description of the monument.'[16] If everything about the historical moment is deduced from, for example, a shred of papyrus, then surely nothing about that moment can be gleaned from anything else - the edges of the papyrus are finite.

So the question is now, does McCarthyism under the Plathian analysis hold its shape as a discourse, given that it lacks such a necessitous characteristic? This article's contention is that, where the Plathian figuring of the McCarthyist discourse pushes its boundaries, it also strengthens it, precisely because it makes such definitions more malleable, more workable, broader than the shred of papyrus insofar as it exposes its possibilities, and not simply its limits. If we take, for example, what has already been

[16] Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Abingdon: Routledge, 2002. 8.

stated; about the apparitional or spectral way that Esther haunts her own narrative, which in turn can effect her release from the stringencies of the McCarthyist discourse. The discourse, then, must hold on to some kind of influence over the subject if she is to return to it, if it is to continue to hold any sway: and it is this influence that can be described as a necromancy, or shamanism, of discourse. Aside from the wordplay here, however, we can deduce that McCarthyism must somehow be able to reach outside of itself in order to still speak to its subjects, a forbidden faculty that nevertheless extends its boundaries and widen its frontiers.

In a curious way, then, this has brought us full-circle to the Orphic myth that has sustained criticism of Confessional poetry since its inception (that is to say, that Confessional poetry if Orphic insofar it has engendered the loss of any criticism not relating to the biographies of the poets). Just as Orpheus is obliged to enter Hades in order to try to free Eurydice, so discourse is obliged to engage in moving outside its own living relation in order to communicate with those who are, in one respect at least, dead to it - persons such as Esther Greenwood. However, unlike this Orphic account of Confessional poetry that relates to criticism, as above, the instatement of Foucault's archaeological analysis does not result in the loss of meaningful (that is to say, non-biographical) criticism of the genre. On the contrary, and paradoxically, by insisting on an archaeological account that uses *The Bell Jar* to "write" history, this ensuing and deeply historical commentary doubles back on itself and produces a highly "literary" response to the novel. This is manifested not just in the *absence* of Sylvia Plath's biographical details from the archaeological account, but in the *impossibility* of biography in this context.

It has already been observed by Foucault that his archaeological method involves

- indeed, it is perhaps his *raison d'etre* with the book - an account of history that disavows the 'privileged shelter for the sovereignty of consciousness': history has used documents to 'refresh its memory' and it is what Foucault describes as this continuous or coherent history that 'is the indispensable correlative of the founding function of the subject.' Interestingly, Foucault intimated a fetishisation that he saw in an association with this kind of 'continuous' history and the figure of the monarch or supreme ruler in political theory: '...political theory has never ceased to be obsessed with the person of the sovereign... What we need, however, is a political philosophy that isn't erected around the problem of sovereignty, nor therefore around the problems of law and prohibition. *We need to cut off the king's head*' (My italics).[17] The manner in which Plath has sought to, in Timothy Melley's terms, divorce her narrative from the normative reading practices (hermeneutics; "deep" reading; author's intentions) means that, within the text's paranoid elucidations, there is no room for authorial supremacy.

If Esther's truest reaction to the dominant discourse is one that is revealed on the underside of her words, in their neurotic inversion or their aberration, this precludes authorial veracity. This is not to say that Plath as writer is not *authentic* in her vocalizations in *The Bell Jar.* Rather, her "intentions" as author cannot be discerned, at least from a psychological point of view, as psychology itself has been obviated by the very systemization or logic that has been employed to write the novel. To re-iterate, this does not preclude the possibility that Plath's intentions were genuine, simply because of the degree of textual contrivance: on the contrary, this level of literary gambit is a pre-requisite to Plath's political credibility. But while Esther Greenwood may obtain some measure of subjectivity independent of McCarthyist discourse, Sylvia Plath's identity

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[17] Truth and Power," in *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought* Rabinow, Paul Ed. London: Penguin, 1991. 63.

remains obscured by the masks of literary exposition.

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First Response

This is an interesting and provocative article that applies Foucauldian theory in a productive way to offer a new perspective on *The Bell Jar.* It is refreshing to eschew biographical readings of this novel by situating it historically and aligning Esther Greenwood's paranoia with a wider state-induced paranoia of the era and the prevalence of conspiracy theories. The article makes a good case for state control of mental space through control of discourse, and applies this productively to Esther's acts of self-authorship. It would have been interesting to have included some discussion of state control of *bodies*, too, and the female body in particular, drawing on Timothy Melley's discussion of these dynamics in *Empire of Conspiracy*. In *The Bell Jar,* Esther's bodily experiences impact on her mental

trauma in many ways, and arguably it is her ability to take control of her body and her sexuality that offer her a way out of her troubles. Esther's analysis of her life also places heavy emphasis on her experience of a woman struggling to break with the gender expectations society places on her, and the ways in which patriarchy threatens to curtail her growth as a person, as the symbol of the bell jar suggests. The article's positive conclusion about the possibility of finding a 'measure of subjectivity independent of McCarthyist discourse', would then become especially empowering when read from a gender perspective.