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BURROWING INWARD—AND OUTWARD: IDENTITY, MATERIALITY, AND  
THE BODY IN THE JOURNALS OF SYLVIA PLATH AND SUSAN SONTAG

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## ABSTRACT

Critics and casual readers alike often approach the journals and notebooks of famous authors as secondary rather than primary texts, full of biographical information but not worthy of the same critical eye as more literary works. This thesis, however, reads the journals of Sylvia Plath and Susan Sontag as primary, literary texts, exploring the ways that the journals engage with questions of genre, writerly and personal identity, and the materiality of bodies and the journals themselves. I argue that Plath and Sontag seek to discover and construct their identity in their journals while also seeking to escape from categorization all together, and through this, their journals posit identity as a fluid rather than fixed concept, one that must be constantly re-created through language. In addition, the materiality of journals prompts authors to use varied modes of composition and to interact with the physicality of writing and of bodies, subverting traditional forms, challenging the distinctions between “high” and “low” subject matter, and bucking tendencies to romanticize descriptions of experiences and the body.

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## Introduction

*“Why did I write it down? In order to remember, of course, but exactly what was it I wanted to remember? How much of it actually happened? Did any of it? Why do I keep a notebook at all? It is easy to deceive oneself on all those scores...Keepers of private notebooks are a different breed altogether, lonely and resistant rearrangers of things, anxious malcontents, children afflicted apparently at birth with some presentiment of loss...I imagine...that the notebook is about other people. But of course it is not.”*

—Joan Didion, “On Keeping a Notebook”

This quote, taken from Joan Didion’s 1969 edition of her collection of essays, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, features in an online Flavorwire article entitled “10 Famous Authors on the Importance of Keeping a Journal” (Temple 3). The article showcases authors’ thoughts on journal writing, celebrating the joy, creativity, and usefulness of the authorial notebook. In fact, each author’s excerpt focuses on a different benefit of journaling—Virginia Woolf emphasizes how journals allow her to practice her craft, while Franz Kafka re-read his journal to trace and understand changes in his life (2, 5). Throughout, this article approaches journals as places of wonder and possibility, as sorts of open vaults filled with dazzling, inner thoughts. The enthusiasm for journal writing and reading is contagious.

As this article would suggest, recently it seems that there has been a surge of interest in authors’ journals, notebooks, and letters. After the publication of Susan Sontag’s journals, for example, the searchable archive of Sontag’s personal emails drew considerable attention and outrage from the public and critics alike, as discussed in the

article “In the Sontag Archives,” published in *The New Yorker* in January 2014 (Moser 7). In the article, Moser, an academic and biographer himself, examines the logistical and ethical concerns of digital email archives, highlighting questions surrounding privacy and intrusion. He confronts the “queasiness” in his stomach and wonders: is it ethical to study the deceased’s notebook or computer, their personal communication in real time? While Moser’s article specifically deals with the ethics of reading emails and other digital correspondence, the same question is often applied to manuscripts, journals, and other “literary remains” of authors (6). As Moser says, “Today, a letter makes a statement that it was not making twenty years ago: like telegrams, they are usually sent only for special occasions, and betray, by their very existence, information about their senders that they would not have conveyed before” (8).

This word, “betray,” is both interesting and important. Often, ethical questions surrounding journals or other “literary remains” approach these manuscripts as naturally revealing personal property, as documents that can “betray” or expose their authors. Inherent in this philosophy is a certain belief in the credibility, literality, and almost divine truth of the journals themselves, as if the author’s definitive feelings and confessions line the pages of these ultra-personal works, as if journals can incriminate in a way that more traditional literature cannot. In other words, while art exists to be interpreted and analyzed, journals and notebooks simply offer clear windows into authors’ souls—or at least into their heads.

Perhaps because of this philosophy, much literary criticism utilizes journals as sources of secondary, biographical or background information. Indeed, such self-aware, insightful passages like Didion’s might encourage scholars to study journals and

notebooks in this way, as straightforward speeches or snapshots of the author's perspective. Biographers, too, often comb journals for new and increasingly esoteric details about an author's life. For example, in the *Salon* article, "The Real Sylvia Plath," Kate Moses uses Plath's journals as evidence to support a biographical claim and to verify assumed attitudes or relationships. Moses (not to be confused with Moser) argues, "The unabridged journals and other new information, some of it reported here for the first time, lend credence to a little-noticed theory that Sylvia Plath suffered not just from some form of mental illness (probably manic depression) but also from severe PMS" (5). While this claim may or may not have merit, Moses' approach to the journals limits them to sources of information rather than of dynamic meaning.

Unsurprisingly, stemming from this approach, there is a dearth of scholarly work on the genre of journaling and on journals as texts themselves. While genre studies in general is a relatively new field—one that seeks to interrogate the conventions of writing form—in many instances, journals remain overlooked. Perhaps because journals have been around for so long, we think we know what they are and what they're for (recording life happenings, musings, reflections, joys, etc.). And true enough, while searching for books specifically on the journals of Sylvia Plath, I found that the texts lining the library shelves were biographies that only occasionally mentioned specific facts from Plath's journals, focusing instead on Plath's life or analyses of her work, not on the journals themselves. This lack of research on journals, juxtaposed with the plethora of biographies that mention Plath's journals, is unfortunate, as journals exist not only as collections of facts but also as dynamic, studiable texts. In fact, like biographies or other texts, journals present facts that are influenced by culture and genre as much as anything else. Indeed,

just as Moser acknowledges that the biography “form...imposes choices. Just as history is not the past itself but a story about the past, biography is not a life but a life story,” so journals also stem from larger rhetorical contexts than just themselves (17). In this same way, journals are not mere, neat records of life—instead, they are dynamic, rhetorical, constructed texts, brimming with possible meaning.

In this thesis, I seek to examine the journals of Sylvia Plath and Susan Sontag as primary, not secondary, texts, as literary events worthy of the same thoughtful analysis as literature. In other words, I read the journals on their own terms, without trying to fully understand biography or access the “facts” of any one detail. I focus specifically on the journals of Plath and Sontag for several reasons. Their journals are recently available in accessible formats to the public, and both women write during a similar American cultural moment in the 1950s and early 60s, interrogating many of the same themes and concerns in their writing. Most importantly, their journals are fascinating, and I love them. They are infectious, spilling over with enthusiasm, snark, and witticisms.

Journals also tend to be viewed as introspective instead of extrospective texts, as works that exist in a single, private context, and I also want to challenge this perspective. This belief ignores the larger, rhetorical context and effect of journals, and even Plath herself writes in 1951 that she wants her journal to be so much more than a simple, egoist rant:

It seems to me that I am more than ever a victim of introspection. If I have not the power to put myself in the place of other people, but must be continually burrowing inward, I shall never be the magnanimous creative person I wish to be. Yet I am hypnotized by the workings of the individual

alone...But I must discipline myself. I must be imaginative and create plots. (76-77)

This phrase—“burrowing inward”—does accurately characterize some of Plath’s journals. However, as Plath herself desires and describes, she also burrows outward—toward ideas, new experiences, other people, and imagination. Sontag, too, expresses this desire to reach outward, when she wonders in 1950, “Where is the *out-going* freedom, the instrumental freedom from, freedom that is not *this enormous possession of one’s own heart which is death?*” (65). Indeed, both Sontag and Plath’s journals reach outside of “just [their] own heart[s],” engaging with the large and small questions of 1950s American society and their historical and literary context. To ignore this—to write off the journals as merely personal, merely private—is to ignore the complexity of the human mind, the rhetorical situation, and language itself. Thus, I examine these journals through a literary lens, not a biographical one, analyzing the meaning, themes, and literary techniques that occur within their pages.

In the first chapter of my thesis, I discuss how Plath and Sontag engage with complex questions of personal and writerly identity, at different times trying to discover themselves, create and re-create their own identity through language, and even move away from identity all together. Their fluctuating and even at times confusing relationship with identity and the word “I” highlights identity as a construct that must constantly be created and performed. This refutes the idea that the self exists as a cohesive, accessible, fully conveyable whole, and at the same time, complicates a simple reading of journals as straightforward insight into an author’s “real” self or situation. In

fact, through their journals, both Plath and Sontag continually reflect on the role that language and journal writing itself plays in the construction of their identities and desires.

In the second chapter, I explore how the materiality and physicality of journals influences both the exploratory, multi-modal form and the bodily-focused content of Plath and Sontag's entries. While the materiality and genre of the journal itself opens up new possibilities, techniques, and materials of composition, the physicality of journals allows Plath and Sontag to compose their entries visually and experimentally, utilizing varied rhetorical devices, such as photographs and drawings, in addition to more traditional linguistic modes. Similarly, Plath and Sontag use their journals to engage with the often shied-away-from physicality of the body and bodily experience. In doing this, both writers challenge binaries and distinctions, subverting expectations and demolishing the distinction between "high" and "low" subject matter through the physicality of the body.

Thus, through reading Plath and Sontag's journals on their own terms as imaginative, complex texts, the impossibility of finding a "true" Plath or the "real" Sontag emerges. And, indeed, why would we want to? Instead of discovering one person, in these journals, we find rich worlds of meaning surrounding questions of identity, materiality, and the body.

## Chapter 1

### **“Conglomerate Garbage Heaps of Loose Ends”: Questions of Identity and Finding versus Creating the Self**

Sylvia Plath’s hardback journal, written from 1950-1953, contains a myriad of Plath’s reflections, conversations, stories, personal mandates, rants, poems, and observations from her time as a teenager in Wellesley, Massachusetts, before her enrollment in Smith College. Her entries often record and address her artistic ambitions, her thoughts on dating, and her struggles to fit into society. In one such narrative, at the very beginning of her journal in 1950, Plath relates the story of a farmhand, Ilo, kissing her in the barn at the farm where she worked for the summer (10-12). The event causes Plath emotional confusion, sexual longing, and anxiety, especially because the other farmhands hold this “secret” over her: “Tomorrow my name will be on the tip of every tongue...they know. They all know. And what am I against so many?” Plath wonders (12).

Plath’s frustration with this unfair situation overflows in her entry, as she tries to come to terms with this life event through journaling. She states, “Some things are hard to write about. After something happens to you, you go to write it down, and you either dramatize it or underplay it, exaggerate the wrong parts or ignore the important ones. At any rate, you never write it quite the way you want to” (10). While this statement highlights both the difficulty of conveying precise meaning and how the presentation of a narrative can change meaning, Plath’s words illustrate her quest to understand both

herself and her surroundings. For Plath, journaling exists as a form of self-awareness, and, through her journals, she strives to develop and convey her sense of selfhood while engaging meaningfully with the events of her life.

In this first chapter, I seek to investigate how Plath and Sontag interact with identity through their journals and through the process of journaling, mostly because questions of identity are so prevalent throughout the journals but also because journals are often read to determine identity. Certainly, questions of social and sexual identity explicitly reoccur in both Plath and Sontag's journals, as the two writers struggle to interact meaningfully with the world around them. More interesting, however, is the shifting and even conflicting desires they have surrounding categorizing themselves as young women—that is, both writers express conflicting desires to fit into common categories, to distinguish themselves from common categories, and to break free from categorization all together, as the current labels don't suffice and often limit them.

Plath and Sontag's search for identity is challenging, and their journals highlight the complex nature of identity, as both writers express anxiety and frustration over how or whether to categorize themselves. In addition to this, their journals draw attention to identity as a category in and of itself—one that is always shifting and, ironically, hard to define. Indeed, for Plath and Sontag, identity emerges in these journals as a concept that must be forged, produced, and re-produced, partially through language, from fragments and loose ends, from life and from art, from personal, introverted experiences and from social, extraverted ones.

## I

Most obviously, journals offer a space for both Plath and Sontag to interrogate their own ideas of identity and to attempt to categorize themselves, perhaps in much the same way as biographers have done. As young women and writers, Plath and Sontag want to understand how they fit into the world, and the process of journaling allows them to explore their own ideas and selfhood. Plath writes in 1958, “I must not be selfless: develop a sense of self. A solidness that can’t be attacked” (446). However, finding or establishing one’s place in the world is not an easy task, and navigating identity causes both writers stress. In an entry from 1957, Sontag wonders, “What is the secret of suddenly beginning to write, finding a voice? Try whiskey. Also being warm” (156). The fact that Sontag views her own identity as a “secret” emphasizes its elusiveness. Plath laments in April 1951, “I am I, with all the individuality of an earthworm. After a rain, who knows the unique pink worm by the twist of its elastic segments. Only the guts of the worm know. And it is nothing to crush the yellow liquid intestines under a casual heel” (62). Plath’s pessimistic description of the impossibility of knowing another’s individuality—“only the guts of the worm know”—both expresses her frustration over trying to distinguish herself while also critiquing a simple approach that would believe that identity is indeed neat or easily knowable. While Plath contradicts herself, both wanting to communicate and believing that communication will also fail, it is clear that she still desires to both have an identity and to communicate it. For both Plath and Sontag, this frustrating task occupies much of their journals.

Indeed, since both Plath and Sontag wrote in the mid-twentieth century, against the backdrop of the conservative 1950s and the start of the second wave of feminism in

the 60s, their journals focus on how to categorize themselves both as women and writers (and indeed, as writers who are women). In fact, Plath's drive to understand her own identity and sexual role as a young, single woman in the 1950s occurs again and again in her manuscript journal: destined to go on endless blind dates, feel both sexually frustrated and pressured at the same time, and be expected to marry and bear children, Plath struggles with societal categorizations of her own desires and wants, both wanting to embrace and refusing to embrace societal claims about her own gender, sexuality, and desires.

In one entry from around 1950, an eighteen-year-old Plath narrates a date rape attempt, reflecting on her own conflicting feelings of lust, anger, shame, and intrigue, as well as the social and sexual implications of prevailing cultural norms. After narrating the dialogue between her and her date, Plath denies Bill and must physically wrestle with him to ward him off (42). Plath yells at him, "I hate you. Damn you. Just because you're a boy. Just because you're not worried about having babies!" The next paragraph, referring to Plath's just-spoken dialogue, reads: "You trail off. You sound ridiculous. You are playing a part. You want him, yet you remember: 'Once a woman has intercourse, she isn't satisfied.' 'You need time and security for full pleasure.' 'You'll be finished at Smith'" (42). The dissonance between her spoken words to Bill and her observations of her own adherence to the social script that she performs highlights Plath's own confusion over her identity (while confusing identity altogether, as she is "playing a part"). Even as she ignores or polices her own lusts, which she acknowledges again and again throughout the journal, she listens to Bill tell her that she doesn't "know how it is...you can't, when you're all burning, on fire inside" (43). After she has wrestled him

away, Plath apologizes to him and writes, “At last he forgives you. (What for? You should be forgiving him.)” (43). She expresses similar conflicting feelings about the situation when she explains, “You pull away, disgusted but not disgusted. Lightning hasn’t struck you. It’s only…” and trails off (43).

In this entry especially, Plath struggles with how to express and categorize her own identity and sexuality, although she is not concerned so much about her actions themselves as about her selfhood and sexual identity or reputation. Through the act of journaling, Plath conveys both her desires to conform to standards of expected femininity, with her thoughts about the repercussions of sexual action or enjoyment, and her dissatisfaction with these same standards, as she herself possesses sexual desires, understands the inequality in Bill’s advances and claims about lust, and ultimately feels confused about her feelings and options. This confusion is evident in her writing and re-writing of the last sentences in this entry. First, she decides, “But you will see him if he asks again. You are a girl,” but she then erases this and writes instead, “And you won’t see him if he asks again” (678). However, Plath did continue to date Bill briefly after this incident, a decision that reflects both her fluctuating desires and the uncertainty surrounding this choice.

This entry is not peculiar—multiple other entries in Plath’s journals recall the reflective, confused tone of this anecdote as Plath tries to figure out her identity, especially surrounding sexuality. Plath seems to reconcile herself to the fact that she is deviant from typical femininity in some way but still must work within the established gender system. “Face it, kid,” she tells herself in 1951, “unless you can be yourself, you won’t stay with anyone for long. You’ve got to be able to talk. That’s tough. But spend

your nights learning, so you'll have something to say. Something the 'attractive intelligent man' will want to listen to" (53). This statement shows Plath reflecting on her own sexual identity as somewhat atypical, not conforming completely to the common script, while her use of quotations around the phrase "attractive intelligent man" shows her awareness of societal scripts and of these established categories of men and women. In this way, Plath engages with her own terms of classifying herself and her identity through her journals, telling her experiences as stories in what appears to be an attempt to understand her own identity, among other things.

Interestingly, Plath's anxieties surrounding her identity occur in relatively distinct stages, showing a link between her situation and specific identity anxiety. Before her marriage, Plath writes often about school, lusts, a possible marriage; after her marriage, her worries shift, and she wrestles more heavily with what it means to be a wife, to reproduce, to write and create while married to a man—"Am I afraid that the sensuous haze of marriage will kill the desire to write? Of course—in past pages I have repeated and repeated this fear," she writes in 1952, before her marriage (100). Regardless of her age, however, Plath's journals reflect her passion for her work while also revealing her anxiety about establishing her own identity as a woman and individual, in relation to norms and against them.

Similarly, Sontag uses journaling as a way to explore and seek out her identity, beliefs, and, especially, her sexuality. Just as the young Plath sought a sense of self, Sontag too wants to understand her thought processes, although her experience also resists a fully straightforward, biographical reading of her journal. For example, she explicitly acknowledges in 1957 that she is not merely reproducing reality in her journal

but filtering it, supervising herself”—“Being self-conscious. Treating one’s self as an other. Supervising oneself” (155). Sontag also writes in her first published journal, posthumously given the title *Reborn*, in 1951, “I believe in more than the personal epic with the hero-thread, in more than my own life: ...One *can* know worlds one has not experienced, choose a response to life that has *never been* offered, create an inwardness utterly strong + fruitful” (64-65). In this passage, Sontag asserts her belief in the individual consciousness, in imagination, and in the possibility of identity existing as a positive descriptor of the self (“create an inwardness”). At the same time, however, she challenges the traditional concept of personal identity, as she “believes in more than...the hero-thread.” She also asks in 1957, “Am I myself alone?” (128). On the next line, she writes, “I know I’m not myself with people, not even Philip [Rieff, her husband]...but am I myself when alone? That seems unlikely too” (128). Questioning the traditional system of identification and selfhood shows Sontag’s own anxiety and doubt over the shifting categories with which she identifies herself. Through this, she both destabilizes the idea of one knowable self and also posits identity as at least partially situational.

However, Sontag does still strive to seek out her identity, especially in the realm of sexuality, as a large portion of *Reborn* occupies itself with sexual experience, and Sontag repeatedly wonders how to incorporate her lusts into her concept of herself. Sontag aggressively analyzes her early sexual experiences with H and L, along with her relationship with Irene and her marriage to Philip Rieff from 1950-1958 to understand her own positions on sexuality, promiscuity, and sexual orientation. Much of this concern over identity occurs through prose sentences or paragraphs outlining an event in Sontag’s life, similar to Plath’s style. In 1949, Sontag writes, “I said good-bye to L tonight. Sex

again, of course. I discover in myself an irradicable and very dangerous streak of tenderness—without logical substantiation, even in opposition to all reason” (47).

Sontag’s intense focus on sexuality as an essential part of her overall identity is understandable, especially at a time when much of female and queer sexuality was simply ignored, while her desire to police her own “tenderness” also shows her awareness of social situations and gender dynamics.

Sontag’s emphasis on understanding her sexual identity, then, figures not as fringe interest but rather as a core desire, as necessary self-exploration. Earlier in her journal, in 1949, Sontag recalls, after sufficient time and distance from the experience itself, how she had tried to “feel a physical attraction for [a man] and to prove, at least, that [she was] bisexual” (15). The explicit attention to sexual categories (“bisexual”) emphasizes Sontag’s identity search while also highlighting her departure from those traditional sexual categories. Interesting marginalia, added near this sentence, offers Sontag’s later revision of her statement—dated only May 31, “What a stupid thought!—‘at least bisexual’”—and shows her obvious scoffing at how she tried to force herself into this category (15). In these ways, Sontag’s marginalia illustrates the continual sculpting of her identity and her way of speaking about sexual identity.

Thus, both Plath and Sontag’s journals engage with questions of identity on the basis of sexuality, as the two attempt to understand their sense of selfhood largely through their gender and sexual experiences. For two women writers in the mid-twentieth century, before the popularization of feminism, this was simply necessary—where else would they find role models but themselves?

## II

However, while both Plath and Sontag journal in a desperate attempt to categorize themselves, they ultimately cannot merely find or discover their own identity—instead, they must actively create it. Over and over, their journals highlight the necessity of creating and producing the self through writing and language. In other words, identity for Plath and Sontag does not exist in a vacuum; it must be forged and reforged—or, in Sontag’s case, born and reborn, as the title given to her journals by her son acknowledges. On the inside cover page of her journal, dated 5/7/49 - 5/31/49, Sontag had written in capital letters—“I AM REBORN IN THE TIME RETOLD IN THIS NOTEBOOK”—and a few pages later, she writes, “everything begins from now—*I am reborn*” (18, 34). Her emphasis on not birth but rebirth emphasizes the active and continual process of creating identity. Sontag explicitly outlines this process in her journals in 1957:

On Keeping a Journal.

Superficial to understand the journal as just a receptacle for one’s private, secret thoughts—like a confidante who is deaf, dumb, and illiterate. In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could to any person; I create myself. The journal is a vehicle for my sense of selfhood. It represents me as emotionally and spiritually independent. Therefore (alas) it does not simply record my actual, daily life but rather—in many cases—offers an alternative to it. (165-66)

Sontag’s observation of the disconnect between reality (“daily life”) and her journal entries, along with the “alternative” they offer, reinforces the productive nature of

journaling. The journal does not merely record; instead, it creates and builds worlds, interactively. Sontag repeats near the end of *Reborn*, in 1962, “I write to define myself—an act of self-creation—part of [the] process of becoming—In a dialogue with myself, with writers I admire living and dead, with ideal readers.../ Because it gives me pleasure” (295). Indeed, Sontag’s awareness of the constructedness of her selfhood (recall her comment about “supervising” herself and viewing herself “as an other”) complicates a reading of journals that seeks to discover an author’s essence or biography. According to Sontag, identity is a “process of becoming,” not a product, and biographers must use sophisticated methods that take this “becoming” into account.

Other aspects of Sontag’s journals frequently draw attention to the way that language and the act of writing create categories and meaning. Departing even further than Plath from a traditional journal format of dated entries and paragraphs, Sontag’s journals include copious lists of books she wanted to read, phrases that caught her attention, and lists of vocabulary words. One such list, from 1957, is entitled “Notes of a Childhood” and occurs near the middle of her journal, containing dozens of separate phases or memories related to Sontag’s childhood. One line reads “All the lies I told”; another “Chemistry sets”; still another “Poison ivy. Dr. Stumpf” (104-127). Sontag assembles two different versions of this list, ordered in different ways to convey alternative meanings: the first follows more of a stream-of-consciousness remembering, while the second is actively ordered and built from the first. These two lists emphasize how language and order actively produce meaning and, by extension, Sontag’s self, as they differ in story arc, tone, and meaning.

Another example of this is Sontag noticing how specific language, especially slang, is used to describe and even produce various phenomena. In fact, she often muses on specific linguistic constructions and even writes lists of phrases surrounding certain topics, such as “Gay slang” in 1949:

“the gay kids”

straight (east)

jam (west)

normal (tourist)

“he’s straight”

“he’s very jam”

“I lead a jam life”

“I’m going normal” (41)

Lists like this abound in Sontag’s journals, as she investigates language and how language is used to produce specific meaning and forms of categorization in different contexts. Without a doubt, the complex matrix of language and identity intrigued Sontag, and her journals emphasize language’s ability to create complex meaning and identity categories.

Similarly, Plath draws attention to the process of creating her own identity, not only as a writer but as an individual. The very nature of journaling, of putting physical pen to paper, causes Plath to remark in 1958 on her own autonomy: “Simply the fact that I write in here able to hold a pen, proves, I suppose, the ability to go on living” (334). In 1950, she points out that the very use of “I” assumes a subject, and by extension, an identity: “But I am I now; and so many other millions are so irretrievable their own

special variety of ‘I’ ...how firm a letter, how reassuring the three strokes, one vertical, proud and assertive, and then two short horizontal lines in quick, smug succession. The pen scratches the paper...I...I...I...I...I...I” (34). Certainly, this “I” is a declaration of personhood, of subjectivity, of writerly power, of the ability to speak; however, it also comes with limitations. For example, Plath’s realization that many people are their own “variety of ‘I’” undermines the very individuality that “I” supposedly entails. How then, can one feel that the same word, “I,” truly speaks of one’s identity? When Sontag reflects on the same word in 1957, she decides that her “I is puny, cautious, too sane. Good writers are roaring egoists, even to the point of fatuity” (166). Sontag’s self-consciousness and insecurity on the level of language shows that both writers realize the need to create their own identities, both in their writing and in real life, in order to be able to wield their own “I.”

Going even further, Plath emphasizes in an entry from 1952 that her journaling writing itself is an integral part of not only her general identity but her moral identity as well: “If I did not have this time to myself, to write here, to be alone, I would somehow, inexplicably, lose a part of my integrity” (83). The word “integrity” as defined by the Oxford English Dictionary means “the condition of having no part or element taken away or wanting; undivided or unbroken state; material wholeness, completeness, entirety,” or “the condition of not being marred or violated; unimpaired or uncorrupted condition; original perfect state; soundness,” as in mathematics (OED, integrity, n). Plath’s “integrity” then is tied up in her identity in language and writing, which she acknowledges would not be the same without her journal as both an outlet and inlet for her thoughts.

In this way, the language used to describe the self becomes just as important as whatever that self may be, as it ultimately has the power to construct the self. Indeed, the act of writing establishes an identity just as much as so-called “possessing” and expressing a sense of self does—in other words, through language, the self emerges as a linguistic construct that must be continually re-created.

### III

Thus, Plath and Sontag use their journals both to investigate their own identity and to create it through the very process of journaling. In the end, however, their identity is not neat and tidy either way; it is a compilation of different and sometimes conflicting slices of their personalities or desired personalities. In fact, both women acknowledge the multiplicity and even contradiction of their own selves, creative styles, and experiences. Sontag’s meticulous lists often reveal her as emerging from the works of many artists and thinkers as she interacts with them, and in 1952, Plath openly examines her own discontinuity, referring to herself as “a conglomerate garbage heap of loose ends” (149). In fact, almost inherent in the idea of identity as a process rather than a product is the fact that personal identity is not immediately (or possibly ever) cohesive—that is, certain aspects of identity resist rather than cohere toward a holistic person. As Plath observes in 1952, “I am not solid, but hollow...I do not know who I am, where I am going ...my life up till now seems messy, inconclusive, disorganized” (149-50).

Plath’s identity as a fluid rather than a fixed concept is highlighted by her artistic mimicking of authors she read and admired. For instance, after reading James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Plath enthusiastically mimics his prose style for an entire entry before explicitly

alluding to Joyce's influence on her writing, in a letter written during the same time frame in 1953. The entry begins:

friday: january 29: 6 p.m. after science exam: everything is lovely lately. i am getting trite. a cliché coming true. a moonhappy night pouring light on the dew. Banalitybanalitybanality. hell damn bitch shit piss corruption: i have so many books i am perishing to read in my bookcase. hours-and-hours-and-hours-and-hours. i could be caught in a bombastic blithering blizzard of rhetoric... (168)

Anyone familiar with Joyce's characteristic style will notice Plath's devil-may-care departure from traditional capitalization and punctuation, the way she pushes two words together to form a new idea, such as "moonhappy," how her sentences and syntax flow smoothly and freely from thought to thought, and how she utilizes traditionally vulgar concepts, such as swear words or references to bodily functions, for effect. Really, this entry reads almost as fanfiction. Plath is channeling Joyce and his creative vision, and she herself explicitly nods to this.

In the published version of Plath's journals, the next paragraph explains: "i am reading 'ulysses.' god, it is unbelievable semantically big, great, mind cracking, and even webster's is a sterile, impotent eunuch as far as conceiving words is concerned" (168). Her use of the lowercase "i" in this sentence further links the entry and this statement, and Plath's reverence for and enthusiasm about Joyce's way with language incites her to experiment on her own, to incorporate parts of his style into her style, parts of his writerly identity into her own. In this way, journals highlight the linguistic construction of the

self, emphasizing how the writerly self, “the author,” comes to exist through language and interaction.

Of course, Joyce is an obvious though not exclusive example of this intertextuality for Plath. Plath also explicitly reflects on her reading of e.e. cummings’ poems in her journals, and she extensively underlined her copies of his “Collected Poems,” circling almost a dozen poems and often paying special attentions to sections about the body or sex. Naturally, many other authors and thinkers influenced Plath, such as Freud and Dostoevsky (on whom she completed her honors thesis at Smith and whose name is scrawled on her earliest outline of *The Bell Jar*). Plath also mentions Virginia Woolf in her journal in 1957: “I feel my life linked to her, somehow I love her—from reading Mrs. Dalloway...” (269). Also in 1957, Plath expresses a desire to “read more of what influences [her] writing, rather than paralyzes it: contemporary work. I want to stress the living-writing life now” (231). Again, Plath acknowledges that her identity is formed through others and through multiple, moving parts: “I pick up poetic identities of characters who commit suicide, adultery, or get murdered, and I believe completely in them for a while,” she writes (204). The “for a while” emphasizes even more firmly that identity is also shifting, as certain aspects surface and then fade away.

Perhaps the fragmentary and multifaceted aspects of identity are most obvious, however, when Plath asserts in 1952: “‘I am a part of all that I have met.’ To you, all, whether or not you know, having wandered into the tissue of my life and out again, you have left a momentary part of you which I will work into something... Through me transmuted” (141). While Plath often berates herself for what she considers to be false starts and the inability to write a novel—she writes in 1952 that “it is only when these

bits [creative pieces] are woven into an artistic whole, with a frame of reference, that they become meaning-ful and worthy of more than a cursory glance”—perhaps the fragmentation and incohesion so common in Plath’s journals does serve a purpose, at least for the modern reader (83). Truly, like a diamond with many facets, Plath shines as an example of a self-diagnosed “passionate, fragmentary girl” (165).

Sontag’s soaking up of famous authors and art into her own identity is more subtle but also more pervasive throughout her journals. As already mentioned, her endless lists of films watched, books read, or books to read shows Sontag’s commitment to immersing herself in great art and engaging with philosophy. Always, however, Sontag filters art through her own analytic and creative lens, judging the aesthetics, assumptions, and creative forms of the films and books she studies. For example, on 1/9/50, Sontag writes on separate lines: “Re-read: *Doctor Faustus*. / Read: Antonia White, *Frost in May*; Aldous Huxley, *Eyeless in Gaza*” (63). She often explicitly muses on works of literature or art in her journal, as a way to understand her own aesthetics and also to brainstorm ideas for her essays, such as *Against Interpretation*, for which she jots down notes in *Reborn*. For instance, another entry reads from 1950: “I’m reading [Jack London’s novel] *Martin Eden* for the first time in three years. I can see clearly now, over four years after I first read it, how enormous a personal influence it has been on me, despite the fact that I consider it to be insignificant art” (70).

Thus, like Plath, Sontag’s creative aesthetic and her identity as a critic and author is molded by her interaction with these works. However, Sontag also points out that, just as the journal and the author create identities through language, the journal and the author can also lie. The journal, too, is a text and not some form of absolute truth. In other

words, Sontag claims that the self is such a multiplicitious and even evasive construction that the author's own assertions do not necessarily hold automatic merit or trump other assumptions. She explains:

There is often a contradiction between the meaning of our actions toward a person and what we say we feel toward that person in a journal. But this does not mean that what we do is shallow, and only what we confess to ourselves is deep. Confessions, I mean sincere confessions of course, can be more shallow than actions. I am thinking now of what I read today (when I went up to 122 Bd. St-G to check for her mail) in H's journal about me. (66)

Sontag relates this instability of identity and authorial credibility to the social functions of a journal, when she describes the journal as explicitly meant "to be read furtively by other people, the people (like parents + lovers) about whom one has been cruelly honest only in the journal" (66). Thus, Sontag's statement that journals do not hold supreme truth or overarching "confessions" further emphasizes the multifaceted and complex nature of identity and of the authorial voice.

Indeed, as can be seen in both Plath and Sontag's journals, identity is not merely discovered or stemming from one distinct self—it is multiplicitious and fragmentary, flowing from the interaction with and structure of language and literature.

#### IV

Up to this point, I have argued that Plath and Sontag try to establish or categorize their own identities through their journals, that these identities must be and are created or

produced rather than merely discovered, and that the resulting identity is nevertheless a sort of compilation of fragments and different parts. However, there is yet another push in these journals, and it is away from categorization and identity all together. In fact, both Plath and Sontag at times express the desire to erode their carefully-cultivated identity and established norms of selfhood in favor of possibility and the lack of labels. Plath laments in 1950, “I am not content because my lot is limiting, as are all others. People specialize; people become devoted to an idea; people “find themselves”” (44). Another such instance occurs in 1952, when Plath describes a sexual encounter as blissfully smashing identity categories—“Force fighting force: to kill? to drive into the burning dark of oblivion? To lose identity? Not love, this, quite. But something else rather. A refined hedonism” (105). Plath’s distinction between killing and “losing identity” highlights the subtle but important difference between the two: one still takes personal identity into account while the other operates outside of labels and norms of classification.

Clearly, Plath celebrates the freedom and excitement that stems from the loss of identity in this passage when she continues:

Training, conditioning, make a hunger burn in breasts and secrete fluid in the vagina, driving blindly for destruction. And what is it but destruction? Some mystic desire to beat to sexual annihilation—to snuff out one’s identity on the identity of another—a mingling and mangling of identities. A death of one? Of both? (105)

Since this passage occurs in the context of Plath worrying about sexual and gender roles between her and a boyfriend, the fact that she rejects dominant-submissive roles and

instead seeks complete annihilation of self emphasizes her desire for the total absolution of identity, even in her recording of this experience and her thoughts. In other words, she does not merely want to fit into a particular schema of male-female relations; rather, she seeks an absolution of gendered identity. This absolution, it should be noted, does not equal simply a “passive” role; instead, it rejects categorization all together.

These sexual moments of self-annihilation, of anti-identity, are common in queer theory, as theorists such as Leo Bersani have focused on and analyzed the *jouissance* that eliminates self-awareness and recalls the Freudian death drive (Bersani 217). While traditional wisdom would lead individuals to believe that categories help rather than hinder, queer theory emphasizes the possibilities of living on the margins of normativity, going against the common factors of categorization.

Interestingly, Sontag’s interaction with her young son, David, reinforces this same idea that categorizations often only limit desire and options. After describing declining and then scooping cottage cheese onto a spoon, she realizes, “Suddenly I understood why David can vehemently refuse something + at the same time accept it. For the child, life is so utterly self-centered that there is no impulse to be consistent, which is already a limitation of desire” (76). In many ways, this anecdote perfectly illustrates the ways that categorization and identity box in an individual, prescribing them to roles and values that either they or others have already chosen for them.

Just as Plath speaks enthusiastically about sexual experiences and the destruction of identity categories, Sontag also describes sexual experiences and identity in a similarly ecstatic tone. Recalling her formative sexual encounter with H, what appears to be her first lesbian and perhaps positive sexual experience, she writes: “And *I never was so*

*close to completely negating myself* of surrendering altogether. My concept of sexuality is so altered—Thank god!—bisexuality as the expression of the fullness of the individual...to love one's body and use it well, that's primary" (28-9). Here again, Sontag draws attention to the ways that escaping the self and self-awareness is pleasurable, using sexuality as the conduit and even teacher of this fullness.

However, in their journals, both Plath and Sontag celebrate losing their identities in small, non-sexual ways as well. For example, when Plath marvels at the beauty of the world around her, the look of the light on her strands of hair or of the flapping of the laundry hanging out in the air to dry, she remarks, "God I love it all...I loose [sic] track of my identity" (91). Even her mistake, "loose," illustrates how she is actually "losing" track—of spelling rules, of editing herself—because she is so immersed in the beauty of the moment. Furthermore, "loose" also implies a loosening, a comfortable unraveling of language, of identity. Sontag too expresses a desire to be lost and loose—free-flowing, though not explicitly in relation to identity—when she writes, in what occurs in very little context, "Let go / Let go / Let / Really go" (96).

In addition to these non-sexual ways of losing identity, Plath also rejects standard gender categories and household roles, preferring to embark on her own new territory. For a woman and a female artist in the 1950s, Plath must actively invent herself and her options, or they truly won't exist. In 1958, she describes her relationship with her husband, Ted Hughes, as bending traditional gender categories: "Both of us must feel partly that the other isn't fulfilling a conventional role: he isn't 'earning bread and butter' in any reliable way, I'm not 'sewing on buttons and darning socks' by the hearthside. He hasn't even got us a hearth; I haven't even sewed a button" (445).

In 1958, Plath expresses frustration with society's standards, especially in the realm of relationships, and the desire to create her own rules, as "society...seems to want us to be what we do not want to be from our hearts: I am angry at these people and images. / I do not seem to be able to live up to them. Because I don't want to" (437). Instead, Plath must build her own visions of reality, rejecting ideas of categorization: "There are no rules for this kind of wifeliness—I must make them up as I go along & will do so" (412). This idea of world building, which Plath explicitly alludes to both in categories of writing and her own life, resonates strongly with queer theory's interest in alternative fantasies and realities. When Plath writes in 1957, "I must be lean & write & make worlds besides this to live in," she is really reaching toward open, uncharted space and away from strict categories (275). She is burrowing both inward *and* outward.

Thus, even with all of Plath and Sontag's identity questions and time invested in figuring out their identities, both writers express desires to escape from identity and to elude categorization in some way. While Plath and Sontag's journals provide a space for them to muse on questions of identity, both writers do so in ways that both engage and disengage in the rhetoric of categorization. In the end, journals highlight both the limits and the possibilities of writerly identity and language, while clearly showing the problems inherent in viewing identity as one-sided, easily accessible, or independent of situational context.

Plath's and Sontag's disillusionment with the task of categorizing themselves can shed light onto how we approach identity in life and in journals. Instead of offering a definitive or simple answer, instead, journals encourage us to engage with the process of

writing and creating identity itself, understanding the multiplicitious, constructed self that language enables. As Plath writes in 1958:

Writing is a religious act: it is an ordering, a reforming, a relearning and reloving of people and the world as they are and as they might be. A shaping which does not pass away like a day of typing or a day of teaching. The writing lasts: it goes about on its own in the world...It feels to intensify living: you give more...you get more: monsters, answers, color and form, knowledge. (436)

This “reforming, relearning, and reloving,” like Sontag’s “rebirthing,” is a process that must continually occur and reoccur through language. Perhaps, the “shaping” of reality through journal writing suggests we would be far better off inhabiting one of Plath or Sontag’ rich worlds, created through language and imagination, than constantly wondering if this or that *really* happened.

## Chapter 2

### The “Big Good Book” and the “Snot-Green Sea”: Journals, Materiality, and the Body

On a snowy December day, I visited the Sylvia Plath archive in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts. The library holds an extensive collection of Plath’s journals, letters, correspondence, and work, as Plath completed her undergraduate degree at Smith. Working with Karen V. Kukil, the editor of *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, I sat only inches from Plath’s handwritten journals, their beige pages tumbling open in front of me. The first journal of the collection, an autograph manuscript written from 1950-1953, felt like a heavy library book or even a modest dictionary: large and hardback, its red cover spotted with rings of coffee stains and the grain of the cover fading, the book appeared more like a tome than a contemporary pocket-size journal. Opening its flap, Sylvia’s Plath name, penned in bold, flowing cursive, proclaimed it hers—her journal, her space, her property. Plath’s tidy, full script filled the lined pages, entries numbered and boxed with blue or black pen.

After reading Plath’s published journals in print for so long, seeing the loops of Plath’s original handwriting, feeling the weight and texture of the hardback book, and noticing her pen ink run dry on certain pages was an altogether different experience. On one hand, seeing her original journals was exciting, invigorating. On the other hand, the journal felt so normal—so casual and unassuming, so concrete, like any other book. Most importantly, however, seeing Plath’s unmediated writing and touching the fading pages

reinforced the physicality of the journals and of Plath's work. A physical book offers a sensory experience along with an intellectual one, and, far from feeling distant or esoteric, in the archive Plath's journals felt incredibly tangible in their blatant physicality. Likewise, books from Plath's personal collection, which she had owned and scribbled in, displayed her interaction with other physical books, also sitting right there on the shelf near my work table.

It's easy to romanticize the archive—not only because I felt excited and honored to have held Plath's actual journal in my hands but also because rhetoric surrounding archives seems to lend itself to exaggeration. In her article, "Theorizing Shiny Things: Archival Labors," Kathy Ferguson highlights the possibilities of the paradoxes, pleasure, and pains that arise from archival work and the idea of the archive itself, specifically noting how "archives [can] 'seduce'" (1). This powerful attraction of the archive, so Derrida claims, can lead to peril for the researcher, even becoming "destructive" (1). Ferguson, however, notes how this language of seduction and charm limit the archive's possibility—that is, viewing the archive as some abstract, untamable space overlooks the physicality of the archive and its contents, glossing over their concreteness in favor of more abstract praise or fear (5). Sometimes, it's easy to forget that a book is also just a book, even when the archive itself "is an inexhaustible 'contact zone,'" a very physical, concrete space (34).

Perhaps today, with mass-production and the systematic typeset of printers, books and the writing process also feel abstract, seeming less physical and more mechanical. Even journals, which the reader would assume to be inherently messy—written, sometimes hurriedly, in personal script, perhaps in different pens—appear relatively

uniform, edited, and just generally *tidy* when printed.<sup>1</sup> For example, Susan Sontag's journals, *Reborn* and *As Consciousness is Harnessed to Flesh*, edited by her son, David Rieff, contain so many editorial insertions that the original look and overall feel of the journals is hard to experience. Even if editors keep comments to a minimum, however, mass printing journals inherently changes their original format and feel. Specifically, published journals often contain different page numbers, altered margins, and black-and-white type, and the paper used by the printer often differs from that originally used in the journal. While these changes might seem minimal, they nevertheless influence and even mask the materiality of the journals, obscuring the "fleshiness" of the journals' physicality.

In the first section of this chapter, I explore the physicality and materiality of Plath and Sontag's journals, investigating how the material possibilities and sensory experiences of the journal itself influence both the form and thematic content of entries. Journaling exists as both a structured genre and an unstructured one, and Plath and Sontag experiment with non-traditional forms of writing and composing an entry. For example, Plath includes pen sketching in the middle of entries, a cut-out photograph of her own head, and various other creative insertions while Sontag similarly uses creative license in the form of her list-making, inclusion of snippets of dialogue without any other explanation, and other non-traditional techniques of composition. These interesting choices directly reflect both authors' messages and the physical form of the journal itself—that is, the materiality of the journal makes these creative insertions possible, as

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<sup>1</sup> Karen V. Kukil's unabridged edition of Plath's journals, however, reproduce the text as close to Plath's original as possible. The results are surprisingly authentic. Specific instances can be seen throughout this chapter.

the sensory experience of both writing in and reading journals adds a physical component to writing and composing that other genres lack.

In the second and third sections of this chapter, I explore how Plath and Sontag use their journals to draw attention to the physicality of bodily experience, challenging the distinction between dichotomies such as “high” and “low” subject matter, subverting traditional expectations and aesthetics, and blasting tendencies to romanticize descriptions of the body. Plath wants “to live and feel all the shades, tones, and variations of mental and physical experience possible in [her] life,” and through her exploration of illicit sexual desires, bodily processes usually ignored or perceived as disgusting (such as menstruation, illness, or nose-picking), and urges toward violence, her journals de-hierarchize traditional aesthetics or perceptions of experience through humor and calculated chaos (31). While Sontag includes fewer direct musings on supposedly disgusting bodily processes, like Plath, she rails against dichotomies and distinctions, celebrating the life of the body and physical experience through sexuality and sensation. Thus, materiality in these journals reinforces the “fleshiness” of the physical book, of the body, and of experience in order to destabilize and deromanticize traditional notions of power, pleasure, and aesthetics.

## I

Most basically, more than other genres, journals call for an interaction with physicality through their very format. Authors of journals, even more than other manuscripts, must undertake the process of handwriting words and composing pages with pen and pencil, without a screen and cursor. The physical act of writing—of filling a

blank page and feeling an aching hand—highlights the physical process of writing itself, as well as the concreteness of a book. Plath draws attention to the mode of her reflections, the materiality of her journal, observing in 1958, “I love this book, black point of pen skidding over smooth paper. Shall catch up & keep up” (322). The coffee stains and fingerprints on her journal further emphasize this idea of the journal as an object, not just a collection of ideas. Plath also invokes her journal in much the same way as she would a person: “Goodnight, oh Big Good Book,” she writes at the end of an entry dated November 14, 1952, as if saying farewell to a friend (154). This use of capitalization emphasizes Plath’s treatment of her journal as a person or a being, as well as adding a humorous or fond tone. Just as Sontag’s journal is not a “deaf, dumb, illiterate” confidante, as mentioned earlier, so Plath’s journal interacts and figures as its own presence. And indeed, it is the physicality of journals that give them their material presence.

While the journal exists as a genre in and of itself—and quite a conventional one used by many over the years—Sontag and Plath use their journals to push the limits of conventional writing and composition, including the conventions surrounding how and with what materials entries can be composed. For example, while many traditional journals have meticulously recorded dates of entries, both Plath and Sontag’s do not—Plath often numbers her entries, circling or boxing around them, while in *Reborn* Sontag only sometimes indicates the date informally, with slashes (Plath 138, Sontag 40). Neither author follows a traditional “Dear Diary” format or writes in the uniform, gentle tone so often associated with the journals of young women. Instead, both Plath and Sontag approach their journals as dynamic, multi-modal compositions, using a wide

range of unique, non-traditional forms of interacting with the blank page and conveying complex meaning.

These interactions set journals apart from other books, as the materiality of journals prompt equally physical and even improvisational interaction from their writers.

I have already mentioned Sontag's habit of listing vocabulary words and phrases in

columns—this format would rarely work in

different, more formal space. Similarly, unlike the

uniform text of other books, Plath's journal

features changes in colored ink, underlining,

various symbols (stars, asterisks, and dashes), and

even pen drawings blended into her entries (see

Figure 1). Through these and other nontraditional

or often unutilized forms of rhetoric, Plath

reinforces the materiality of journals and the process of composition.

One such Plath entry from 1950 appeals visually as well as rhetorically, when Plath muses for four pages in a stream-of-consciousness manner about money, sex, and philosophy, using symbols as forms of punctuation:

[How unfortunate] to learn that while you dream and believe in Utopia, you will scratch & scabble for your daily bread in your hometown and be glad if there's butter on it. ★ to learn that money makes life smooth in some ways, and to feel how tight and threadbare life is if you have too little. ★ to despise money, which is a farce, mere paper, and to hate what you have to do for it, and yet to long to have it in order to be free from

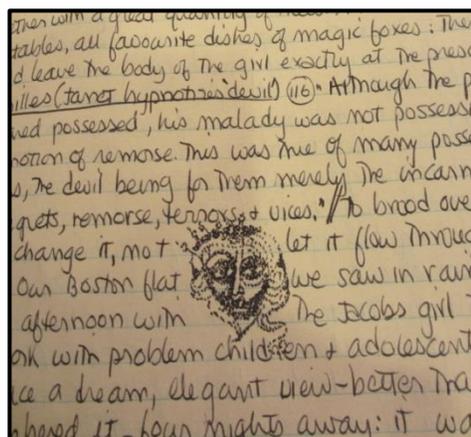


Figure 1. "I am in the middle of a book on demonic possession" (415). Plath's devil, drawing in pen and ink, 1958.

slaving for it. ★ to yearn toward art, music, ballet, and good books, and get them only in tantalizing snatches. ★ to yearn for an organism of the opposite sex to comprehend and heighten your instincts. (36)

Plath draws these tiny stars in pen with shocking attention to neatness and detail, and the stars aid the flow of her writing while also helping to organize her thoughts (see Figure 2). Clearly, the use of these non-traditional symbols, including the “&” sign substituting for the written word “and,” arise from the fact that she writes by hand in this journal and can draw any symbol she wants. In this way, materiality allows and even inspires new ways of conveying meaning, as Plath is not limited much by generic conventions or a word processor. The result is a very self-aware physical composition.

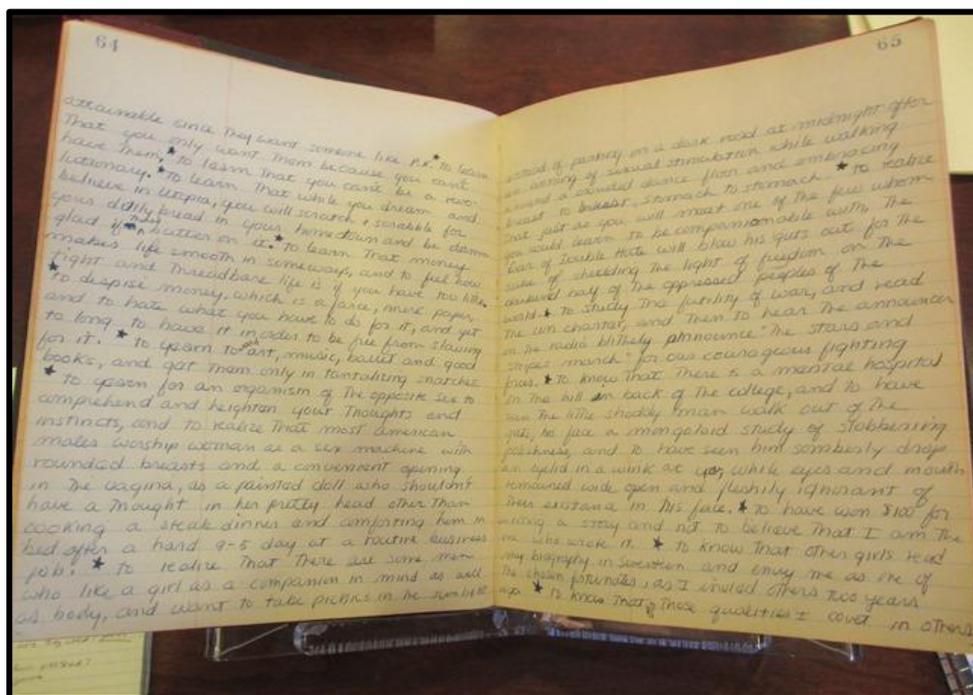
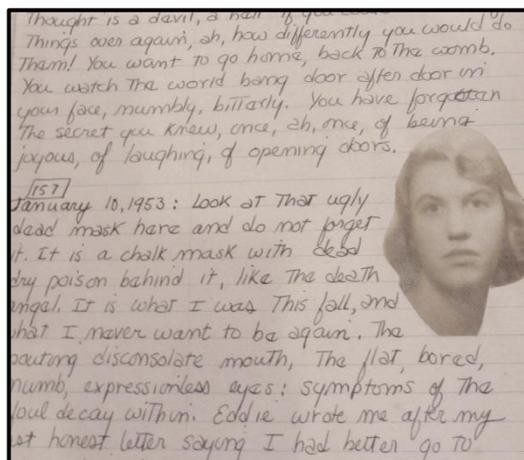


Figure 2. Handwritten stars in Plath's manuscript journal, in blue pen, 1950.

In another interesting entry that takes advantage of the materiality of the journal form, Plath pastes a photograph of her own face to serve as a sort of warning to herself in

1953. “Look at that ugly dead mask here and do not forget it,” she commands herself. “It is a chalk mask with dead dry poison behind it, like the death angel. It is what I was this fall, and what I never want to be again” (155). The introduction of the image of Plath’s own face onto this lined paper brings in a visual rhetoric not often seen in traditional texts, which



**Figure 3. "Look at that ugly dead mask..." Cut-out photograph of Plath’s face, January 1953.**

usually just feature words or perhaps illustrations. However, as illustrated in Figure 3, the effect of her staring face reinforces Plath’s meaning better than any words she could supply—that is, her face jumps out from the text, surprising in its blank and unflinching stare, as her words describe, “the pouting, disconsolate mouth, the flat, bored, numb, expressionless eyes: symptoms of the foul decay within” (155). The distinct materiality of her journal and the photograph allows this hands-on approach, and through this, Plath creates a dynamic, multi-modal entry that challenges convention surrounding written texts and engages with the body visually as well as through words.

Similarly, the materiality of journals also influenced Sontag’s style: Moser points out, “You can see, in the handwriting, as never in a typed letter, how feverishly Sontag, given what looked like a death sentence when she was barely forty, sketched out the meditations on cancer that would become ‘Illness as Metaphor’” (5). The physicality of Sontag’s journals also accommodated her more truncated style of writing and lack of full sentences. In fact, Sontag’s entries, much more than Plath’s, rarely contain traditionally developed thoughts, stories, or even paragraphs. Instead, they offer snippets of ideas or

images, along with numerous lists. One entry near the middle of *Reborn* reads simply: “5/27/57 / Philip is an emotional totalitarian. / “The family” is his mystery. / An ejaculation of weeping” (140). The next entry contains equal signs, a list of dates compiling a sort of historical timeline, and then another sort of blended entry (which has no separation and is undated from 1957), reading: “For theory of language: / Limit of thought=language. Language the link between sensations + the world. / CONDILLAC / Read Condillac! / Hart: ‘He took me round the problem. It’s like a labyrinth with a hundred doors; you pop in one, look about, then pop out again” (141). In these entries, Sontag’s use of capitalization, line breaks, and symbols informs meaning just as much as “regular” grammatical conventions, stemming from the possibilities of the journal. In turn, Sontag’s journal itself functions as this sort of labyrinth Sontag describes—a maze of meaning and code, one that can confuse and also enlighten, leading to new avenues of composition and understanding.

While the materiality of journals encourages interesting methods of composition, the resulting book has a unique relationship with time, not only because authors themselves continue to edit journals but also because the journal functions as a space containing multiple experiences of time. In other words, unlike other books, which are published once and perhaps edited into multiple editions, journals continually remain in some draft-like state, almost always open to editing and re-editing, either on the day of the entry or months later. As can be seen in the journals of both Plath and Sontag, the two frequently write entries that they never touch again—there are no marks or added comments on the pages. However, other entries have been revised or added to, such as in the case mentioned before with Sontag, when she writes and updates her thoughts about

bisexuality in the margins of her journal (15). Plath, too, occasionally crosses out phrases or adds writing, which sometimes occurs in a different-colored pen, implying a possible lapse in time. One such instance occurs when she debates whether to see Bill again, from around 1950, as mentioned before as well. She writes one resolve, only to cross it out at some point later (43). Similarly, in 1958, Plath writes “Why don’t I write a novel?” and after she does, pens, “I have! August 22, 1961: THE BELL JAR” (438, 696). This reoccurring interaction of the author with her own text is a unique rhetorical context that allows and even encourages the construction and re-construction of textual meaning, building onto an original entry penned in what instantly becomes the past.

This existence of multiple times—that is, of overlapping and conflicting experiences of time, as the journal exists as a collection of many little times bound together—relates to Michel Foucault’s theory of heterochronies in “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”: “Heterotopias are most often linked to slices in time...heterochronies. The heterotopia begins to function at full capacity when men arrive at a sort of absolute break with their traditional time” (6). Journals act as these unique moments in which time exists both “normally” and in an “absolute break with traditional time,” with the various dates and entries represented in the journal. Indeed, what Foucault argues about a museum could easily be applied to journals—that “the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages” is a “project of organizing...a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place...this whole idea belongs to our modernity” (7). Journals offer an alternative to the normative experience of temporality and physicality, blurring the lines between past,

present, and time of composition. Through materiality, journals emphasize the possibility of experiencing time in new and non-normative ways, again opening up realms of possibility for both the reader and the writer of journals.

Thus, the genre, materiality, and blank pages of journals encourage innovation and alternate methods of composing for both Plath and Sontag, including the use of different inks, pen drawings, pasted photos, and symbols. Through the addition of non-lingual visual rhetoric, the journals both emphasize and use their materiality to veer from traditional expectations and genre, opening up modes of composition that hinge on physicality.

## II

While the materiality of journals encourages Plath and Sontag to compose entries in new ways and with new materials, experiences of and interest in materiality and physicality, both of writing and the body, also influence the content of their journals. In fact, Sontag and Plath especially turn their interest to themes and details of corporeality often avoided and even shied from—specifically, the human (usually female) body, illness, and supposedly gross bodily processes. In 1950, near the beginning of the hardback manuscript journal, Plath explicitly proclaims that her journal is devoted not only to the life of the mind (an abstract realm) but to the life of the body (a physical realm): “I remember what this flesh has gone through; I dream of what it may go through. I record here the actions of optical nerves, of taste buds, of sensory perception” (30). Plath’s use of technical, scientific language (“optical nerves,” “taste buds”) also reinforces her outward focus on physical phenomena and experience, not only on the life

of her mind. Plath later, in 1957, re-emphasizes this dual-focus, claiming to “hav[e] blasted through conventional morality, and come to my own morality. Which is the commitment to body & mind: to faith in battering out a good life. No God, but the sun, anyway” (269). This image of a “sun god”—a somewhat pagan, nature deity—nicely sums up Plath’s Whitman-esque dedication to physicality, materiality, and both the “body & mind.”

Sontag expresses this joy in turning away, in some ways, from the life of the mind and towards the life of the body and physical experience. After her self-diagnosed sexual awakening, she exclaims, “I had never truly comprehended that it was possible to live through your body and not make any of these hideous *dichotomies* after all!” (27). As Sontag notes here, the binary distinction (“these hideous *dichotomies*”)—between thinking and feeling or even body and mind—is false and limiting, resulting often from an over-intellectualization of topics and a renunciation of the body. One recalls also the instance with her son declining and then wanting the cottage cheese on the spoon (76). In this instance, the realm of physicality and the body influence desire and receive Sontag’s attention.

Interestingly, Plath’s focus on the body comes through interrogating and celebrating bodily processes surrounding sexuality, such as intercourse and menstruation, and also non-sexual bodily processes, such as illness and mucous production. On January 10, 1959, Plath reflects on the feeling of tears and muses on their meaning: “Cried yesterday morning: as if it were an hour for keening: why is crying so pleasurable? I feel clean, absolutely purged after it” (459). At another time, in 1956, Plath focuses on her love of everyday life activities and sex when she proclaims, “I would like a life of

conflict, of balancing children, sonnets, love and dirty dishes; and banging banging an affirmation of life out on pianos, and ski slopes and in bed in bed in bed” (225). The repetition of “banging banging” and “in bed in bed in bed,” along with the absence of punctuation, makes these phrases function as sorts of onomatopoeia, mimicking a sexual rhythm. Thus, as evident in these examples, Plath’s attention to bodily processes emphasizes her own interest in physicality and bodily sensations, as well as her dedication to recording the life of the body on paper, in her journal.

One of Plath’s reoccurring fascinations with her body, however, involves not its beauty or health but its scabs, blood, and minor wounds. Far from being squeamish, Plath investigates her bodily injuries and illnesses with intrigue and a sort of illicit pleasure. After mentioning “visions of violence,” Plath shares, “the animal world seems to me more & more intriguing” (398). Presumably, the “animal world” is one of sensation, urges, and violence, of unmediated physicality and flesh. Indeed, after a musical comedy on June 26, 1958, Plath’s entry focuses not on the drama onstage but on the fleshiness of her own skin: “Pulled a piece of skin off my lip & my lips began welling blood, lip-shape—my whole mouth a skinless welling of brilliant red blood” (398). These evocative details and the imagery of Plath’s bloody lip-print seem to both excite and fascinate her, as she again turns her focus to her bloody mouth and body: “My lips are drying, chapped, & I bite them raw. I dreamed I had long stinging scratches down the fingers of my right hand but looking down saw my hands white & whole & no red blood-scabbed lines at all” (329). Her vivid dreams about her body, along with her recording of them in her journal, emphasize Plath’s almost morbid fascination with her bodily physicality.

A much longer inspection of her bodily fluids occurs in her January 1953

description of nose-picking:

As for minute joys: as I was saying: do you realize the illicit sensuous delight I get from picking my nose? I always have, ever since I was a child—there are so many subtle variations of sensation...Or sometimes there will be blood mingled with the mucous: in dry brown scabs, or bright sudden wet red on the finger that too rudely scraped the nasal membranes. God, what a sexual satisfaction! It is absorbing to look with new sudden eyes on the old worn habits: to see a sudden luxurious and pestilential ‘snot-green sea’ and shiver with the shock of recognition. (165)

Plath’s reference to the “snot-green” sea refers to Joyce’s description in *Ulysses* (the “snotgreen” and “scrotum-tightening” sea), which itself is generally agreed to be an intentional, vulgar spoof on Homer’s description of the “wine-dark sea” in *The Odyssey* (Joyce 5, Homer xi). Interestingly, Plath had actually underlined Joyce’s phrase, the “snotgreen sea,” in her copy of *Ulysses*, housed in the Smith archive, further emphasizing her interest in this type of destabilizing and profane description and language. While Plath finds both the tactile and visual details of the entire process of picking her nose “absorbing,” her extreme focus on this supposedly low or undesirable process of the body serves not only to challenge common ways of looking at and talking about the body and its functions but also to de-hierarchize the body and its processes, to question the distinction between so-called highbrow or lowbrow culture or themes.

The history of the terms “highbrow” and “lowbrow” is equally interesting and tied to physicality and the body. Perry Meisel explains, “The terms ‘highbrow’ and ‘lowbrow’

come from phrenology, the nineteenth-century science of regarding the shape of the skull as a key to intelligence. A ‘high’ forehead meant intelligence; a ‘low’ one meant stupidity” (Popova 4). The terms actually originated from describing the placement of someone’s brow, stemming from the belief that a higher forehead implied a bigger brain. Because of this, higher brows supposedly occurred on more educated, elite individuals while lower brows signified a less educated or refined person (OED, highbrow, n. and adj.). The derogatory term “middlebrow” also existed. Since even the terms to describe supposed distinctions in taste and culture come from physicality, the body figures as an especially powerful and important force when it comes to aesthetics and high/low culture.

Thus, with the phrase “snot-green sea,” Plath shockingly deromanticizes what often gets romanticized, bringing low what often appears to be high (both the sea and the female body) through the mention of a “vulgar” bodily truth—snot. Joyce too, through giving the sea physical and even profane bodily characteristics, both juxtaposes and combines supposedly unsavory bodily processes with the more elevated register of the “sea.” Thus, the resulting effect is to level the playing field, so to speak, to achieve a sort of equilibrium of culture through the physicality of the body. Indeed, just by invoking this term, Plath interprets Joyce’s “snotgreen sea” literally and, in doing so, even de-hierarchizes and reinterprets Joyce, a respected master of English literature, in the process.

One cannot mention this de-hierarchizing of power through the physicality of the body without recalling the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bahktin, who offers in *Problems of Dostoyevsky’s Poetics* and *Rabelais and His World* the concept of what English critics refer to as “carnival” and “carnavalesque”—a literary technique or mode that destabilizes

traditional power structures and/or dominant assumptions through humor and a sort of chaos (Robinson 1-3). In Andrew Robinson's "In Theory" column entitled "Bahktin: Carnival against Capital, Carnival against Power," he argues that "hierarchies are overturned through inversions, debasements and profanations, performed by normally silenced voices and energies" (10). Robinson also explains how, in carnival, "everything is permitted":

[Carnival] is a brief moment in which life escapes its official furrows and enacts utopian freedom...Its defining feature is festivity—life lived as festive...An emphasis is placed on basic needs and the body, and on the sensual and the senses, counterposed perhaps to the commands of the will. It lowers the spiritual and abstract to the material level. It thus recognises embodiment, in contrast with dominant traditions which flee from it. (4-7)

Plath certainly "lowers the spiritual and abstract to the material level" in her journals, turning the literary eye toward the body and its supposedly lesser functions, presenting them as luridly fascinating and exciting. Indeed, this too is a festive moment—even celebratory. Through this, she both laughs at and confuses authority, subverting expectations about acceptability, traditional aesthetic, and the scope of literature itself in a Bahktinian way. In some ways, Plath's focus on the details of nose-picking is a study in observation and even a writing exercise. As her journals test out more exploratory topics, her work calls into question typical delineations and aesthetics.

This aesthetic of the body—that is, Plath's mode of "looking with new eyes on the old worn habits," her inspection and introspection of her own body—offers new ways to characterize experience and art through physicality and the material world. Plath

approaches life openly and vigorously, grabbing experiences with her fist and her eyes instead of predetermining what subjects or sights are acceptable, and Plath's entries inhabit this spirit of nonconformity (68). In some ways, this work fits into a sort of disability aesthetics, as Tobin Siebers argues, an aesthetic of disability "does not embrace an aesthetic taste that defines harmony, bodily integrity, and health as standards of beauty" (71). While Plath most likely does not write with a conscious disability aesthetic, Plath's focus on and fascination with wounds, blood, and fluids does share some similarities with the concept that both bucks traditional notions of beauty and refuses "to prettify the human body" (68). Certainly, Plath explores the relation of the body to other bodies and to art, as Siebers asserts, "At a certain level, objects of art are bodies, and aesthetics is the science of discerning how some bodies make other bodies feel" (67). In this way, although Plath is not concentrating on the disabled body itself, she employs similar tactics of challenging disinterest and celebrating forms of often-ignored physicality and fleshiness.

### III

While Plath examines the non-sexual workings of her body in an effort to challenge traditional aesthetics and language, much of Sontag's journals explicitly focus on physicality through Sontag's interaction with her emerging sexuality and her sexual experimentation near the beginning of her journals, as she attempted to learn about herself through this aspect of her identity. After her experiences with H, she says, "I know now the capability of experiencing the greatest pleasure on a purely physical basis, sans 'mental companionship,' etc., although, of course, that is to be desired, too...I have,

in some part, been given permission to live—” (34). Overall, Sontag’s interaction with bodily physicality is less explicit than Plath’s and occurs less frequently, perhaps, as Sontag’s journals probe deep intellectual questions and contain notes for what would later be her book *Against Interpretation* (1966). Her life as an intellectual, then, takes up much of her journal, but it is important to note that Sontag herself rejects treating the body and the mind as separate entities. Instead, she celebrates her body and does not make distinctions between thoughts and sensations.

Plath also explores in detail the body’s sexuality, again resisting a romanticization of love or sex. In December 1958, she writes, “Never felt guilty for bedding with one, losing virginity and going to the Emergency Ward in a spurt spurt of blood, playing with this one and that. Why? I didn’t have an idea, I had feelings...I found out what I wanted...” (438). Plath’s reflection on ideas of virginity and sex are not abstract but physical, as evidenced by the concrete and fleshy “spurt spurt of blood.” This detail is yet another example of her focus on seemingly “low” bodily processes, but her frank description of taboo notions of virginity (mixed with hospitals) challenges the common narrative surrounding sexual relationships and the rhetoric of those relationships, especially for women at this time.

While this entry might have been shocking enough, Plath goes even further from the accepted attitude in her interrogation of sexuality and her interest in the body: multiple times in the journals, Plath mentions rape, often in an effort to undercut and deromanticize situations or to emphasize the physicality of the body and of sexuality. Interestingly, Plath refers to rape at least somewhat positively, as a sort of sexual ecstasy or freedom (although, actual instances of attempted rape were not spoken of positively, as

mentioned in the first chapter). While this may seem strange, the general suppression of female sexuality, along with the mandate to remain a virgin until marriage, in some ways encouraged both women and men to view rape as a more positive moral option than consensual sex, as an unwilling woman remained more chaste than a willing one (Tuerkheimer 1-3). Although this philosophy suppresses female desire while encouraging male lust and acts of violence (an outrageous double-standard), it can also foster rape fantasies. Indeed, Plath's identification with rape often seems to stem from a desire for sexual activity as well as from an aesthetic that celebrates raw physicality and lust—this recalls “the animal world” she admires, mentioned earlier (398). For example, Plath describes a summer scene on a Massachusetts beach, laying on her stomach on a flat, warm rock:

Such a heat the rock had, such a rugged and comfortable warmth, that I felt it could be a human body...I felt I was being raped deliciously by the sun, filled full of heat from the impersonal and colossal god of nature. Warm and perverse was the body of my love under me...An orgiastic sacrifice on the altar of rock and sun, and I arose shining from centuries of love, clean and satisfied from the consuming fire of his casual and timeless desire. (74)

In this passage, rape has a positive connotation, and while nature (both the rock and the sun) have no physical human bodies, Plath embodies them through language, giving them sexual physicality and warmth (74). Since this scene parallels a pagan sacrifice, the fact that Plath (the sacrifice or at least part of the sacrifice) feels “clean and satisfied” from the “causal and timeless desire” of the sun emphasizes the fleshiness of the body, of the

bodily-ness of sexuality, along with Plath's own lust in this entry for contact and a sort of fierce, unrelenting masculinity.

Plath also uses scenes of rape, or mentions of rape, to destabilize the established norms both of dating traditions and of everyday language. In January 1953, Plath declares, "See Dick? Damned if I am! He can go rape and/or suavely seduce Anne. To hell" (165). Plath's invocation of violence both highlights some darker aspects of the dating scene and also makes light of these, while the almost equivocation between rape and suave seduction could either draw attention to dangers or ignore them. Also, the phrase, "to hell," adds an almost comic element while also blasting through idea of feminine politeness and gentleness. Indeed, Plath makes it clear that she's not afraid to swear or speak openly of the body and sexuality, when she also says, in 1956, after comparing herself to Isis, "Love turns, lust turns, into the death urge. My love is gone, gone, and I would be raped. 'It is night'" (234). While this passage has a negative tone, Plath's attention to rape reintroduces the body into an otherwise relatively abstract idea of depression, highlighting the physicality of experience.

A much more explicit deromanticization of sexuality occurs right at the beginning of her journal in 1950, when Plath writes, "A sudden slant of bluish light across the floor of a vacant room. And I knew it was not the streetlight but the moon. What is more wonderful than to be a virgin, clean and sound and young, on such a night?... (being raped.)"

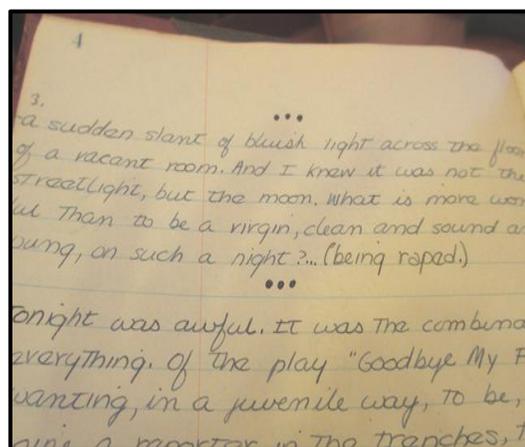


Figure 4. "What is more wonderful than to be a virgin... (being raped)." From Plath's manuscript journal, in blue and black pen, 1950.

(8). In her autograph manuscript, Plath added the phrase, “(being raped),” in black rather than blue ink, which serves both to provide a visual contrast between the two thoughts in this sentence and to again emphasize the materiality of writing and writing process (676). Even more importantly, Plath’s undercutting of the familiar, romantic scene she sets forth—with even a singsongy slant rhyme of “moon” and “room”—interrupts the romantic ideal, inserting violence and the physicality of the body into this otherwise clichéd scene. Her juxtaposition of the concepts of virginity and rape conflict precisely because these two ideas don’t often occur in the same realm, as virginity traditionally avoids connotations of physicality while rape recalls the “animal world” yet again.

Plath again deromanticizes and in some ways mocks traditional rhetoric of rape and sex when she envisions in February 1952: ““Oh, I would like to get in a car and be driven off into the mountains to a cabin on a wind-howling hill and be raped in a huge lust like a cave woman...’ That sounds nice, doesn’t it? Really delicate and feminine...I wonder at my morbid fascination with day-dreams this month” (174). Plath’s use of quotes in this passage calls into question whether she or someone else is saying this, but regardless, Plath’s somewhat sardonic tone toward both the overly-dramatized setting of the “wind-howling” hill and the equally outrageous “delicate and feminine” aesthetic underscores her skepticism of both clichés. Although Plath does seem at times to be pulled toward narratives of animalism and rape, in this specific instance, her use of “really delicate and feminine” points out the romanticization in both these instances of rhetoric. Resoundingly, however, Plath’s fascination with rape emphasizes her focus on the bodily and sexuality, even in atypical and taboo realms.

Plath's journals also deal with the sexual and reproductive processes of the female body, delving into relatively detailed descriptions of menstruation and pregnancy, not so much to deromanticize—as these processes were usually just ignored completely—as to re-insert the body and physicality into these realms. For example, in 1959, Plath writes about trying to get pregnant with detailed narrative imagery of doctors' tests, ovulation charts and guides, and her resulting emotions and philosophies on the subject of motherhood (500). Her attention to pain and her attempts to communicate it—“Dare I take another pill? If the pain would shut up, but then I'd be sicker... If childbirth pangs are real, why aren't cramps real? And why should I have them if I think they're ridiculous?”—relay her experiences while refusing to shy away from the concreteness of her bodily experience (486). Instead of ignoring her struggles to get pregnant, she narrates her experience with detail and emotion: “After a 40 day period of hope, the old blood cramps and spilt fertility,” she laments in 1959 (474). Plath even relates vivid dreams about miscarriage, which Plath experienced at least twice. In one dream, she describes, “I gave birth, with one large cramp, to a normal sized baby, only it was not quite a five months baby... ‘it has a nest of uterus in its nose.’ ... Symbolic of smother in the womb?” (506).

Plath's interaction with her own dreams—dreams interwoven with female sexuality and bodily gore—highlight the materiality of her writing, her focus on the body, and her unconventional frankness and even taboo interest in these subjects of physicality. Her interrogation and attempt to understand the meaning of these bodily happenings, such as her dream of miscarriage or her failure to get pregnant (as she tries to interpret her dream in a sort of Freudian way here—“smother in the womb?”) shows Plath's desire

to process these experiences in both her body and her mind, to come to a holistic understanding of her bodily physicality and to interact with this on the physical page.

Thus, the materiality of journals in both form and content places an emphasis on the body that other genres tend to overlook. Themes of bodily physicality and sensation in the journals also challenge the romanticization of situations and rhetorical convention, inserting bodily processes and supposed disgusting or vulgar themes to re-energize clichéd situations and to subvert false distinctions between “high” and “low” culture. Materiality also prompts Plath and Sontag to compose entries in multi-modal ways and with new tools, such as photographs, illustrations, pen drawings, and symbols. The journal also accommodates an untraditional syntax or sentence structure, such as Sontag’s, that can open up new forms of thinking and ways of writing through physicality and the body.

## Conclusion

*“Sontag wrote that photographs are as much about what they don’t show as what they do, that what we see depends on where the photographer places the frame. Her journals reveal a love of statistics and astonishing facts, but the moral center of her writing (about photography, about war, about politics) is an insistence that what we see is not always what we get.”*

—Benjamin Moser, “In the Sontag Archives”

As Moser asserts, just as with photography, in Plath and Sontag’s journals we get so much more than what we see at first glance, and perhaps, something quite different too. As demonstrated throughout this thesis, Plath and Sontag’s journals are dynamic spaces in which they explore and experiment with questions of identity and of materiality and the body, not simply places where they record the daily facts of their lives. Identity—of Plath and Sontag and also in general—emerges then as a complicated construct in their journals. Far from being one fact that must be discovered, as biographers might hope, identity is a process that must be cultivated over and over, through collecting fragments of experience and different literary voices, through language and interaction. These journals also highlight the alluring nature of non-identity as well, calling into question the benefits of any sort of categorization, which often only serves to limit desire.

Instead, in these journals, Plath and Sontag affirm desire and truly celebrate the life of the body, physicality, and sensation. While the physicality of journaling by hand and the bookishness of the journal itself offer new ways of writing and composing, the themes of the body that occur in Plath emphasize how the body can de-hierarchize

experience and language, while Sontag's focus on not dividing experience into binaries similarly resists distinctions between "high" and "low" culture or the vulgar and the profane.

In this way, Plath and Sontag's journals figure as dynamic, constructed texts that *create* more than they reveal or "betray," that allow their writers to burrow outward as well as inward. Just as Plath and Sontag cannot definitely decide their identities, so journals complicate rather than present a fixed picture of their authors' selves. Read through a literary lens, in fact, journals emerge as prime world-builders themselves, forays into the realms of imagination and experimentation with story-telling, language, genre, and even visual rhetoric. Plath emphasizes these possibilities in 1958, wanting to both be herself and everything around her: "[I desire] to be a god: to be every life before we die: a dream to drive men mad. But to be one person, one woman—to live, to suffer, bear children & learn other lives & make them into print worlds spinning like planets in the minds of other men...a god breathes himself in everything: know by feeling in" (306).

Journals give both Plath and Sontag this opportunity and burden, to "know by feeling in." And indeed, both writers use their journals not only as places of reflection but also of empathy, of inhabiting worlds and entertaining thoughts they might not otherwise. How then, could we boil journals down to mere facts about an author's life or health? As has been seen, if anything, journals are messy and inconclusive, full of tales of gore and confusion and longing, with coffee stains on their covers.

And indeed, through Plath and Sontag's interaction in their journals with questions of materiality, identity, and the physical body, their journals function as

imaginative and complex texts—challenging distinctions and the status quo, experimenting with form, and ultimately, presenting exciting ways of writing and living often overlooked.

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