Museum-Making in Women's Poetry: How Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson Confront the Time of History

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MUSEUM-MAKING IN WOMEN’S POETRY:
HOW SYLVIA PLATH AND EMILY DICKINSON CONFRONT THE TIME OF
HISTORY

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By
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In The Newly Born Woman, Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement note that Michelet and Freud "both thought that the repressed past survives in woman; woman, more than anyone else, is dedicated to reminiscence" (5). Whether or not this is true of woman, that expectation of her—as keeper of the past—has perhaps subsisted in the deepest realms of the collective unconscious.

From the work of Cixous and Clement, Julia Kristeva and Angela Leighton, I ultimately deduce that there are two perceptions of time: man's time has been associated with the straight, the linear, the historical, and the prosaic; woman's time has been associated with the circular, the cyclical, the monumental, and the poetic. Each time has its obstacles to overcome: man's time is stubbornly rooted in patriarchal language; woman's time is dizzyingly enigmatic.

The struggles between these two times manifest themselves in the poetry of perhaps the two most canonical American women poets, Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. In the corpus of each, I find a common mode of operation that attempts to reconcile man's and woman's time, to varying degrees of success. Emily Dickinson uses the language of linear history to stretch its boundaries; she experiments with the nature of time and memory as related to trauma, beginning to question and reform historical
memory (men’s and women’s) and our experience of it in poems such as #1458, “Time’s wily Chargers will not wait”; #563, “I could not prove the Years had feet”; #33, “If recollecting were forgetting”; and #312, “Her – ‘last Poems’—.” Sylvia Plath, on the other hand, is not as certain that the two can be so easily reconciled. Determined to establish her place in literary history and lay claim to posterity, but terrified that doing so will take away her present voice, Plath often represents woman—sometimes literally, as in “All the Dead Dears,” and sometimes metaphorically, as in “The Courage of Shutting-Up”—as a potential museum, a live body always in danger of drying out and immobilizing, being admired as she is, frozen in the present moment, but denied future evolution.

Through close readings of the poets’ afore-mentioned works and others, in conjunction with the frequent application of critical/theoretical scholarship in feminist, psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, and postcolonial veins, I will explore the attempted reconciliation of man’s and woman’s time in four chapters: “The Thrust of Manliness” concerns the limitations of linear time, including entropy, atrophy, and the charge of feminine reminiscence; “Morning Glory: Cycles and Resurrection” outlines the advantages of a circular perspective, including possibilities for change and resurrection; “Secretaries of Aporia: Recording without Meaning” explores the limitations of cyclical time as encased in linear time, particularly in the literary charge to detail without explaining; and “The Time of Trauma” underlines the historical and political implications of both the burden of reminiscence without return and the study of women’s poetry in linear time.
INTRODUCTION

Julia Kristeva, in “Women’s Time,” notes Nietzsche’s division of “temporal dimensions” into *cursive* time and *monumental* time (14), cursive time being the time of linear history from which women have been excluded, and monumental, or *recursive*, time being a more circular experience of time. Cursive time leads inevitably toward death, marked with a clear beginning and an “explosion” in the end. Monumental time, on the other hand, is marked by “eternity” and cycles of “repetition” most commonly experienced by women (16). For Kristeva, female subjectivity, which has emerged over the last century or so thanks to the feminist movements, allows women to be *inserted* into the time of linear history, but then also begs for a *refusal* of that time.

Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement, in *The Newly Born Woman*, find a similar division of time into two “rhythms”—one of “periodicity of culture” and one of “feminine periodicity” (29). In the same text, they note that Michelet and Freud “both thought that the repressed past survives in woman; woman, more than anyone else, is dedicated to reminiscence” (5). If she must contain the past, woman cannot align with the forward-looking periodicity of culture, which ends, for them, not with Kristeva’s explosion, but with the “entropy of language” (28). Woman is thus supposed to “rescue human exchange” from this “imminent catastrophe,” but as Cixous and Clement note, that responsibility requires that she continue to stay out of man’s linear organization of time, that she not take part in history (28-29).

For Angela Leighton, one way into history—or more specifically, to escape its confines and thus enter a place devoid of its necessity—is through poetry. In “In Time, and Out: Women’s Poetry and Literary History,” she attributes poetry with being “the
genre that has been least amenable to history's 'straight' time and which has not readily fitted any evolutionary narrative of political feminism" (133). She writes that "the historian looks 'straight'" but "the poet must look 'round'" (132). Much more explicitly for Leighton than for Kristeva, time is a "problem [...] a problem of history, memory, and identity, as well as of poetry itself" (132). Leighton pits the literary, which almost always betrays a "pull away from history" but is still told "in time," against the historical, which here may be understood as the linear time of history as described by Kristeva. Leighton thus equates the literary with the feminine and the historical with the masculine. While she admits that doing so is perhaps "too general and too limiting," she nonetheless discovers that the woman poet cannot emerge unscathed: her "freedoms" are impeded by time (148). To be sure, Leighton's definition of poetry as antithetical to history allows male poets to be equally encumbered by this paradox, but she insinuates, and I would agree, that women poets are more conscious of this limitation. This consciousness, I think, is a direct result of the dedication to reminiscence with which Cixous and Clement burden them.

What I ultimately deduce from the work of these various theorists and critics is that there are two perceptions of time: man's time has been associated with the straight, the linear, the historical, the prosaic, and the masculine; woman's time has been associated with the circular or round, the cyclical, the monumental, the poetic, and the feminine.¹ Each time has its obstacles to overcome: man's time is stubbornly rooted in patriarchal language; woman's time is dizzyingly enigmatic. Whether or not the "the repressed past survives in woman" (Cixous and Clement 5) that expectation of her—as

¹My division of these times is not meant to generalize gender differences, but rather to denote perceptions as they have commonly been understood: in terms of gender.
keeper of the past—has perhaps subsisted in the deepest realms of the collective unconscious. Since the very study of poetry involves an unavoidable ‘looking back,’ it seems that this expectation takes on a new significance as we add women to the canon and are introduced to these conflicting times. The ancient quest to understand mortality becomes especially unnerving, as one time leads inevitably and recklessly toward death and destruction while another absorbs the issue entirely into aporia, as there is no true end. The struggles between these two times—both freeing and constraining at once—manifest themselves in the poetry of perhaps the two most canonical American women poets, Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson. In the corpus of each, I find a common mode of operation that attempts to reconcile man’s and woman’s time, to varying degrees of success.

Emily Dickinson, despite her staunch refusal to conform to the poetic conventions of her time, uses the language of linear history to stretch its boundaries; she experiments with the nature of time and memory as related to trauma, beginning to question and reform historical memory (men’s and women’s) and our experience of it in poems such as #1458, “Time’s wily Chargers will not wait”; #563, “I could not prove the Years had feet”; #33, “If recollecting were forgetting”; #312, “Her – ‘last Poems’—”; #548, “Death is potential to that Man”; #1464, “One thing of it we borrow”; and #561, “I measure every Grief I meet.” Death for Dickinson is finite and infinite, and the oscillating view of it in her poems does not represent undecidability as a factor of hopelessness, but rather as emblematic of a semiotic acceptance of what Lilach Lachman writes is an experience of time “as simultaneity,” the result of the “interplay” of time and space on the “time-axis” (85-86). The enigmatic conflation of man’s and woman’s time in Dickinson’s poetry is
rather soothing. In her playful riddles, there is a remarkable ease with which she reconciles man's and woman's time (by not reconciling them at all). Beginnings, middles, and ends, the stuff of linear time, are strictly for the narrative and the historical, for extracting meaning in an otherwise meaningless universe. Perhaps this is exactly the kind of acceptance we must come to about the fluctuating nature of Dickinson criticism. As it changes, so too does the language we use to speak about her. Cristanne Miller, in "Whose Dickinson?" locates the brunt of these changes in the editing of the poet's work. Referring to Ellen Louise Hart and Martha Nell Smith's *Open Me Carefully: Emily Dickinson's Intimate Letters to Susan Huntington*, in which the authors, Miller claims, "see editing as participation in an interpretive dialogue about the poet's life and ideas and are explicit about their part in the dialogue" (236), she concedes that such 'new' formats may be "radically disorienting" to the current critical climate (238). The frameworks of literature, then, may themselves be changing, no longer limited to patriarchal structures—and by that I do not intend to distinguish *men* from *women*, but only highlight a kind of time and perception that has been shaped by patriarchal language and has inhibited both men and women.

Sylvia Plath, on the other hand, is not as certain that the two can be so easily reconciled. Determined to establish her place in literary history and lay claim to posterity, but terrified that doing so will take away her present voice, Plath often represents woman—sometimes literally, as in "All the Dead Dears," and sometimes metaphorically, as in "The Courage of Shutting-Up"—as a potential museum, a live body always in danger of drying out and immobilizing, being admired as she is, frozen in the present moment, but denied future evolution. As I will argue, this is an apt metaphor for
what has happened in Plath criticism. We tend to view her poems as "artifacts," as the back cover of The Colossus so triumphantly calls them. As his daughter points out in the foreword to Ariel, Ted Hughes' re-arrangement of Plath's poems seems like an attempt at making "everything associated with her [...] enshrined and preserved as miraculous" (xviii, emphasis mine). Frieda Hughes writes that she is averse to having her "mother's death [...] commemorated" (xix), but, after making the distinction between Hughes' arrangement and Plath's, claims that "each version has its own significance though the two histories are one [emphasis mine]" (xxi). It is fitting that their progeny attempts to merge their histories; even more so because Frieda, a woman, bases her arrangement on her mother's—there seems to be an understanding at least partially influenced by the sex they share. In the decidedly linear arrangement of many of her poems, particularly of the entire Ariel collection, which begins with "Morning Song" and goes through the ominously paired "Lady Lazarus" and "Tulips," to the compact title poem, and finally ends with the sequential bee poems, Plath dallies with cycles as a means of delaying finite death and affirming infinity.

Through close readings of the poets' afore-mentioned works and others, in conjunction with the frequent application of critical/theoretical scholarship in feminist, psychoanalytic, deconstructionist, and postcolonial veins, I will explore the attempted reconciliation of man's and woman's time in four chapters: "The Thrust of Manliness" concerns the limitations of linear time, including entropy, atrophy, and the charge of feminine reminiscence; "Morning Glory: Cycles and Resurrection" outlines the advantages of a circular perspective, including possibilities for change and resurrection; "Secretaries of Aporia: Recording without Meaning" explores the limitations of cyclical
time as encased in linear time, particularly in the literary charge to detail without explaining; and “The Time of Trauma” underlines the historical and political implications of both the burden of reminiscence without return and the study of women’s poetry in linear time.
I. THE THRUST OF MANLINESS

At this joint between two worlds and two entirely Incompatible modes of time...

from Plath's "The Ghost's Leavetaking"

Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson are certainly not the only poets, the only women, or even the only women poets, to experiment with time. Their experiments are not even particularly fruitful; neither can break free from the patriarchal language that inhibits the adequate expression of what I think they may have needed to express: a frustration with man's sense of time as it competes with an emerging impulse to order things a bit differently. In that sense, of course, I am equally limited, and have as my only advantage access to a few decades' more investigation into the issues of language, gender, and time. In many places in Plath's and Dickinson's work, the poets seem to be colluding with the general consensus that time is best and most accurately understood as rhythmical, methodical, and forward-looking. Time, as they often represent it, is a steadily moving line; history, the narrative of points on that line. The linear ordering of time is actually quite artfully used in their work, and serves a great purpose in anchoring their experiments in the dominant ideology. While I am most concerned with the places in which each poet works against the dominant, linear perception of time, these adherences are nearly as significant in that they reveal the weaknesses of man's time without negating its obvious strengths.

Linear Time as Dominant Ideology

In A Watched Pot: How We Experience Time, Michael G. Flaherty notes the recent emergence of a "U-shaped" model of time perception which he finds inadequately

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2 I use the phrase "dominant ideology" less in the Marxist sense and more in the Althusserian vein—the literary must always be seen as a product of its culture's ideology, regardless of how much it challenges it.
replaces the original linear model (12-18). Each has its various divisions in theory, and Flaherty clearly favors the U-shaped models, but he nonetheless defers to the linear models as less problematic, perhaps because the U-shaped models lack the circularity of woman’s time. David Leverenz, in his seminal work on *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, turns a linear experience (not just of time, but of all experience) on its head, making it vertical rather than horizontal, but it nonetheless remains perceived as a two-dimensional line. Leverenz details the emergence (beginning in Dickinson’s lifetime) of an unforgiving, abrasive male competition that intensifies conventional norms of manhood as a result of increasing obsession with commerce and enterprise. By defining manhood vertically, in terms of “upward mobility,” Leverenz visually represents the difficulties of man’s time (83). Taking Leverenz’s concern with men’s constant struggle upwards and the accompanying fear of falling down, I posit applying this model to horizontal time. Going upwards vertically is going forward horizontally, so the manly necessity for moving up is equated with forging into the future. As Leverenz points out, men are in constant fear of being “humiliated” by dropping in social and economic class (73-76). Moving down is the same basic language perception we have for moving backwards, moving to the past. Back or down, both signify failure. The mode is stultifying, over-laid with too many uses for the same words, signs, representations.

Leverenz helps to further clarify my claim, then, that not only women are affected by linear limitations. Indeed, Leverenz finds that the impetus to forge blatantly ahead is the most obtrusive obstacle for male writers such as Emerson, Thoreau, Melville, Hawthorne, and Whitman. According to Leverenz, Emerson’s application of business terminology to the operations of man’s internal life “mine and undermine the common
meanings of manly words to illuminate their spiritual possibilities” (49). Leverenz’s Renaissance writers, reacting to the pressure to be manly, engage in both “reader-” and “self-refashioning” as an alternative (131, 34). Naomi Schor also notes that women poets see themselves as “exceptions, as isolates, departing from, rather than building upon, a tradition” (2). There is little difference between this and Susan R. Van Dyne’s suggestion that Sylvia Plath “regard[s] her life as if it were a text that she could invent and rewrite” (1). Much like I attempt to illustrate what Dickinson and Plath do with the language of time, Leverenz illustrates what Emerson does with the language of manhood: he uses it to defy or possibly transform it.

In linear time, man must forge ahead. His view is of the future, which he must conquer. “Manhood begins,” Leverenz writes, “as a battlefield code, to make men think twice before turning and running” (73). If man does turn around, then, it is with sword and shield in hand, as if in an isolated duel on the battlefield of time, set to stave off the past like an attacker from behind before turning back to face the more formidable opponent that is the future. Let us set down, as an example, W.B. Yeats. He will be a soldier to show that history is a brutal, oppressive force to be reckoned with, a force that is in itself a reckoning, a merciless re-telling of all that has gone before. Yeats’ poetry—a visionary model for Plath, who quite literally took the poet’s place3—exemplifies the masculine resistance to letting the past inform. Yeats seems aware of an inertia carrying him and his homeland forward—even if into an abyss. In certain poems like “Lapis Lazuli,” an optimistic voice emerges from Yeats, and in his mysticism, he is aware of an eternal and immortal history—“All things fall and are built again”—but even here the

3 Plath lived in “what was once Yeats’s house” in London from the end of 1962 until her death in 1963 (F. Hughes xiv).
inevitability and constancy of time are questioned. Reach though he does to the past, to “old civilizations,” Yeats does not appear certain whether time will keep ticking, whether humankind’s history provides any indication that it will have a future (27). Though he points to “longevity” (40) and hopefully muses that destruction can result in rebuilding (35), he does not ignore the stresses that accumulate from so much falling apart and putting together again. But in “The Second Coming,” this kind of history is endangered and appears on the brink of destruction: it “cannot,” and perhaps will not, “hold.”

Yeats’ time—man’s time—thusly teeters on the brink of explosion.

Rachel V. Billigheimer, in Wheels of Eternity: A Comparative Study of William Blake and William Butler Yeats, notes a sort of evolution taking place in Yeats’ poetry, in which he moves from what I conceive of as man’s time into woman’s time: she describes “the development of Yeats’s views on Time and Eternity, from his early concept of a symbolic apocalypse precipitating rebirth into the realm of immortality, to his final acceptance of the ‘unwinding’ of historical time which creates the cyclic rhythm of the wheels of Eternity” (98). For this exploration of man’s time, then, Yeats is an example of the prevailing notions of man’s linear time but also for the unease with which reality seems to match up to this time. And although Billigheimer shows Yeats achieving a “final acceptance,” it remains fraught with conventions of manhood: “in its signifying of predestination in the cyclic nature of history, the ritualizing of political violence associated with sexual violence evokes a sense of horror and tragedy in the unfolding of history” (112). Where Yeats folds in woman’s time, Plath and Dickinson prosper.
Dickinson: Trying Time

The nature of temporal experience is fascinatingly explored in Dickinson’s poetry, as she uses the linear language of the patriarchy to express a circular experience without circular language. It is her very inability to locate experiences that coincide with a clear-cut beginning, a meaningful middle, and a definitive and tidy end that reveals her perception of time as cyclical. Dickinson tries to find a beginning; she tries to write time as a chronology. In poem #157, she refers to “Time’s first Afternoon” (12). But there is a “music” in its origin (1), an origin she cannot place. Neither, apparently, can anyone else: “Some – think it service in the place / Where we – with late – celestial face— / Please God – shall Ascertain!” (16-18). In lieu of finding meaning in the here and now, in this place and time, the words forever separate-but-inseparable, others muse that some future place and time will have meaning; then “we,” or at least “God,” will “Ascertain” an origin. Unable to discover, but continuing to look for, points on a line, Dickinson has thus framed her experience with the standard perception that there must be a beginning, middle, and end.

Dickinson also posits a distinctly linear time in poem #563, “I could not prove the Years had feet—.” In this poem, time takes off, never stopping, but the present moment itself is in stasis, giving the illusion that time runs away from the present moment if one does not move along with it. Within the first stanza, Dickinson questions the possibly negative reception one might receive by so hastily hitching a wagon to the perpetual motion of time:

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3 Mary Loeffelholz, in Dickinson and the Boundaries of Feminist Theory, narrows the lack of feminine language in Dickinson’s poems to the lack of a feminine literary tradition, citing “the male Other” who takes over both speech and body (83). I am more specifically concerned with the way man’s time takes over our speech, but must also admit that, with Dickinson as our guide, it will be increasingly impossible to claim for ourselves a lack of feminine tradition as an excuse for a lack of woman’s time.
I could not prove the Years had feet—
Yet confident they run
Am I, from symptoms that are past
And Series that are done——

Here she wonders, the third and fourth line forming a question without the mark, whether running from the past is a way of shedding it, leaving it behind, a move away from both it and the present moment. The insinuation, of course, is that such a move is childish, an evasion. By the second stanza, however, the speaker begins a dialogue to counter those evasions: she is not running away from the past; she is running toward the future:

I find my feet have further Goals—
I smile upon the Aims
That felt so ample – Yesterday—
Today’s – have vaster claims——

A mere shift in perspective changes the present, molds it to what she wants it to be, a technique reminiscent of the self-refashioning Dickinson’s contemporaries resorted to (Leverenz 13). She chooses to define the present by the future rather than the past. Her “smile” indicates that the past does not torture or burden her, but brings her a sense of accomplishment, a sense of conquering. Coleman Hutchinson might make of this a Civil War poem for its emphasis on “martial imagery but also [...] in references, however oblique, to the personal, political and ideological battles that raged alongside the physical ones” (20). And I do not disagree that Dickinson’s poems often contain elements of the political; this very subject comes up in Chapter IV. For these purposes, however, the political, if it exists at all, is so far entrenched in the personal that I relate it to a conflict of broader ideologies rather than of the present circumstances of a very specific war.

By the third and final stanza, the speaker comes to a happy resolution, tying up any loose ends of condescension toward the past the second stanza may have revealed.
Lest the speaker sound too triumphant over the past, as though she had discriminated against it, subjected it, unfairly squashed it under toe, she softens in the poem’s last lines:

I do not doubt the self I was
Was competent to me—
But something awkward in the fit—
Proves that – outgrown – I see—

Shifting doesn’t have to mean abandoning, she seems to say; you can still show proper reverence to the past even if you have chosen not to let it dictate that you remain stagnant. Emerson would be proud: for him, “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds. […] With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do” (1164). The speaker here feels that tug, pulling the “self” to evolve.

And yet. And yet it seems that the “self” is not the only thing she’s outgrown. Indeed, the second stanza left open the possibility that her “feet,” rather than reaching “further” than her past ambitions, reach further than the feet of years, thus aligning her with time, as a running mate, as a running competitor (5). Can she out-run time? Both are changing, both are perhaps outgrowing their original forms.

Given the choice between growth and stasis, however, the speaker of poem #1455 chooses the tested stability and permanence of tradition over uncertain fluid change, simply for its lasting power:

Opinion is a flitting thing,
But Truth, outlasts the Sun—
If then we cannot own them both—
Possess the oldest one—

At first glance, the message is clear: Truth trumps opinion. Truth is older than opinion and thus must be respected; we should treasure and keep it, and let opinion bounce away, as it is wont to do anyway. But the poem is more riddled than that: Which is “the oldest
one"—is truth merely an opinion held a long time? Why must we choose between them?
How can they be owned? To take the circumlocutions further, which is perhaps not
completely off the mark in light of the "syntactic doubling" Cristanne Miller describes in
*Emily Dickinson: A Poet's Grammar* (37), one may wonder whether "both" is meant to
signify truth and opinion at all. If the line between truth and opinion is thin, if opinion is
granted rank by its sheer longevity, perhaps "both" refers instead to "Truth" and "the
Sun." It seems that, rather than own the sun, one should own truth.\(^5\) Isn't that what the
woman poet does—choose truth over the opinions of conventional man, over the
seemingly everlasting sun?

Indeed, Dickinson’s speaker, here and elsewhere, seems to hope that linear time
can only add up to Truth, that time is on her side, and she can be on its. The
impossibility of time’s one-sidedness, however, creeps up despite her best efforts to
believe in its simplicity. In poem #101, “Will there really be a ‘Morning’?” she cannot
appear to see time as a place. In “Time-Space and Audience in Dickinson’s Vacuity
Scenes,” Lachman insists that Dickinson uses the “spatialization of abstract words” in her
poems not to simply “apprehend the [. . .] elusiveness of time by means of a metaphor or
a figural situation” as many other critics have decided, but to give *space* “equal status
with time” (83-86). If this is true, she fails miserably in this poem. In searching for time,
which for Lachman would also be space, and which for me would also be Truth, she finds
all lost to her. She wants to grasp time, but does not possess the language that allows her
to envision time as anything other than an object or place. The poem begins with a
relatively detached, almost defiant, exploration—a testing of the boundaries and imagery
of temporal language: “Will there really be a ‘Morning’? / Is there such a thing as

\(^5\)It is important to note here the insistent association of sun with man.
‘Day’? The tense of the first line begins to suggest that she may be worried the morning will not come, and as the poem swells, the speaker reveals her intense desire for an understanding of time beyond the linear—here represented with time-words, Morning, Day, etc.—by asking someone, anyone, “Please to tell a little Pilgrim / Where the place called ‘Morning’ lies?” (11-12). She longs for time to be tangible. She is asking for help; perhaps time can help her, but not as long as it hides from her. If she could only hold it down, make it stop for a moment, she could discern its meaning. The power it holds for her is reminiscent of the power she looks for in God: to bestow meaning, to dispel aporia. Time will have the answers; Time is her god.

Dickinson’s speaker seeks an escape from linear time in order to meet this more god-like time of truth in poem #336, “The face I carry with me—last—.” Beginning the second line with an undeniably forward-looking proposition, “When I go out of Time” (2), the poem finds that, once “out,” she’ll be “turn[ed] […] round and round” (13), able to see the “sky” from all directions (14), a benefit of having “Rank” (3), wearing “a crown” (10), being “Royalty” (16). Similarly, in poem #193, “I shall know why – when Time is over—,” death is not what marks the end of a linear time. She does not purport to “know why” when she is dead; only “when Time is over.” Perhaps it seems for the speaker that her individual death would effectively be the end of all time, but I consider it more likely that Dickinson is exploring a concept larger than the chronology of a single human life: the chronology of the sum of all human lives. It seems she must tell herself, in that first line, that knowledge is inaccessible here on earth, in our conception of time. But this is a thinly veiled comfort, too reliant on a “Christ” (3) that elsewhere in her poetry is not sufficient. In both poems, Dickinson reveals an impulse to find a different,
an unearthly (and thus an un-manly, a non-linear) time. She wants to escape from time, but can only imagine doing so in the language of an escape from the world, from life; the two are stubbornly linked.

Dickinson is thus not only unafraid of death, but views it as a very calm experience, often welcoming it. "'Tis not that Dying hurts us so—," she begins poem #335, "'Tis Living – hurts us more—" (1-2). Dickinson also downplays death in poem #561, citing it as "but one" (27) of several "Cause[s]" (26) of grief, and appears unmoved by its power: it "comes but once— / And only nails the eyes" (27-28). In one of her most well-known poems, #712, "Because I could not stop for Death—," Dickinson personifies death, turning it into a kind and patient man, whom she pleases by becoming patient herself. She also turns "Immortality" into a fellow passenger on a carriage ride (4), and the three travel in what seems to be a linear fashion, moving straight, "passing" things as they move along at their slow pace. This view of time, though decidedly linear, is a slowed-down extension of linear time, and because other poems contain circular elements, it indicates that the linear imagery of this poem is only a helpful poetic device; the commonly understood experience of time as having a beginning, middle, and end allows her to bend "toward Eternity" (24), expanding our view of time by building on it. She attaches so much to the end that it can longer have an end, thereby challenging (albeit subtly) a linear view of time, in which death (because a definitive explosion) prevents a similarly linear afterlife; eternity defies end, so the linear carriage ride becomes monotonous with no end to look forward to.

Dickinson seems to be unafraid of death because it is not the end or the explosion that results from a strictly linear view of time. Instead, the end of time—to be understood
as linear time—is freeing; it is not a loss, but the bestowal of a certain knowledge or understanding that exceeds the satisfaction gained from a two-dimensional linear view—hence the “Ecstasy of death” preceding the “still” that it brings in poem #165 (3-4). In this poem, “Mirth is the Mail of Anguish” (9); something seems to beckon beyond the anguish of a linear time that ends in destruction. As we saw in poem #157, the afterlife (or the aftertime) brings with it our ability to “Ascertain” (18).

The first two lines of poem #1462, “We knew not that we were to live— / Nor when – we are to die—” use tense to play with time, blurring the boundaries of the dead and the living, the past and the present, the present and the future. The middle of the poem makes light of death, but under the guise of chastising such a light-hearted view: “We wear Mortality / As lightly as an Option Gown / Till asked to take it off—,” but this is “Our ignorance” (3-6). The gown is shed, but the seriousness of death is thus conferred as a heaviness. We are naked, but shrouded with the absence of life, the understanding that it is fleeting. The first two lines also locate our existence on a point in which we can not see in back or front: before we were alive, we were unaware, and now we are unaware that it’s going to end. Dickinson seems to imply that the resulting presence—living ‘in the moment,’ so to speak, should cause us some kind of shame. Or does she? Does she simply mean to suggest that we should attempt a look around?

**Plath: Re-Tracing Time**

The impulse to examine time from every dimensional angle is applied by both Dickinson and Plath to a similar examination of self, no surprise in the criticism of either poet’s “confessional” work. While Dickinson’s poem #336 requires a transcendence “out of Time” to truly conduct the former analysis, including help from an “Angel” (5) who
“turn[s] [her] round and round” (13), the latter analysis is possible in this life, in this time, in the present as well as the future. In the second stanza of poem #351, “I felt my life with both my hands,” Dickinson’s speaker “turn[s]” her own “Being round and round” (5) taking the time to “pause” (6) and consider a seemingly new self as it is separate from a “former time” (14).

If Dickinson must turn inward to escape a linear time, Plath instead turns a critical eye outward. She, it seems, is often better able to dismiss linear time, blatantly retreating from it to seek shelter elsewhere. The most direct reference to time in the title story of Plath’s prose collection, Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, is striking: The narrator imagines a man dreaming about “the Hall of Time” (157). Clearly an indication of linear time, the hall is telling—the “end of the line” emits a “futuristic glow” (157)—but even more telling is the nightmarish qualities the dream thus takes on. The setting is “gothic,” “bodies [are] starting to rot,” and the “walls [are] made of nothing but human skulls and bones” (157). A linear view of time, the time of history, is terrifying—and, for Plath’s narrator here, artificial: she specifies that in order for the dream to have any “accuracy” it must be lit with “ice-bright fluorescence” rather than “candles” (157).

Plath seems to think, in an admittedly linear fashion, that man’s time is no match for her own, more natural, less-constructed experience of time; the trappings of linear perception are the result of accumulated mistakes. Like Yeats, she feels the present weighed down, worn down, by the past, but rather than allow this to indicate apocalypse, she instead posits it as an opening for rebirth; the “end” will just be one of many, not the definitive explosion Yeats foretells. Plath finds, indeed, that the thrust of linear time has lost its proper roots in history and mythology, in which are to be found patterns of
repetition indicating a time that plods on and recycles, does not discriminate toward any act of man. “History / Nourishes,” she reminds us in “The Manor Garden” (C 8-9). Finding signs of “death” (2) and decay, finding “yellow[ing] heavens” (15), History, perhaps some kind of narrative, feeds the ruins and allows them to grow again—“roses,” “pears,” “acanthus” (1, 3, 10). Narrative is like life to them; the past, in its re-telling, gives birth, but it is a “difficult borning” (20). Arising like a Phoenix from ash is an unnamed “you” whose “day approaches,” whose future is made possible by the past (5, 2), but who seems unimpeded by the linear time that refuses to admit transgressions across more than a tiny space of time: the you “move[s] through the era of fishes, / The smug centuries of the pig—” (5-6). The poem begins with an end—“The fountains are dry and the roses over” (1)—and ends with a beginning—a “borning” (20), and in so doing, the poem defies linear time. Plath, in the first poem of her first collection, has already defied linear time.

She has always already done this.

Plath’s most poignant explorations of time involve a defiance of the idea of beginning and end. Time, for her, has no origin, has no end; it is forever; it just is. Infinity plays a key role in several of Plath’s poems, such as “Departure,” in which the “sea / …is brutal endlessly” (C 14-5); “The Night Dances,” in which she supposes “your night dances” will “travel / The world forever” in “spirals” (A 3, 6-7, 5); “Full Fathom Five,” in which “origins” are an “old myth” (C 10); and “The Bee Meeting,” in which she “could not run without having to run forever,” and “The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything” (A 33, 37). In this last case, Plath joins Dickinson in separating oneself from the common fear of death, in knowing that there is no end. Plath also
recalls Dickinson in her drawing of the present as an exclusion from the past and future; from the vantage point of a dot on a line, sight is limited: a “splinter,” she writes in “The Eye-mote,” makes her “Blind to what will be and what was,” all the while causing her to imagine “a better time” (C 9, 23, 15).

If Plath does desire a beginning of sorts, it is still not to be found in this world or lifetime. As is often the case in her poetry, the otherworldly commingles with our own conception of time in the notion of a spirit world from which ghosts come. In “The Ghost’s Leavetaking,” if the beginning is anywhere, it is inaccessible; it is not in the linear world or the circular spirit world, but “At this joint between two worlds and two entirely / Incompatible modes of time” (12-13, emphasis mine). Linear time and circular time form a sort of hinge on which ghosts waver; indeed, in the “dream-like” state Judith Kroll notes in Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath (139), the poet herself swings on this hinge. This is where Plath finds “the starting / Point of Eden” (C 30-31)—not in a time or place we can penetrate, but in a place only ghosts can go: Plath’s speaker sends them there for us, “not down / Into the rocky gizzard of the earth, / But toward a region where our thick atmosphere / Diminishes” (23-26, emphasis mine). Indeed, Plath’s use of the word “toward” indicates an inability to properly communicate a kind of movement that is fluid and not reliant on our sense that is limited to up, down, left, or right—our sense of direction—and yet she knows it is “not down.” She can only explain it by affirming that it cannot be explained: only “God know what is there” (26).

That sense of direction which is so reliant on lines is the primary subject for the poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” in which Plath glorifies the non-linear circle that is the moon. In pitting it against the stark upward-pointing tree (A 15), the speaker finds
respite in the moon which is her “mother” (17); it lights the way when the yew tree only affords “blackness and silence” (28). Significantly, though, the linear yew tree is a means of finding the non-linear moon: it “points” and “The eyes lift after it and find the moon” (15-16). The first stanza suggests, however, that the entire poem may be set inside “the mind,” but death, “a row of headstones,” stands in her way: she “simply cannot see where there is to get to” (1, 6, 7). Definitive endings prevent her from fully experiencing “this place” where she purports to “live” (5, 11). Like Dickinson, Plath finds that religion doesn’t quite suffice in providing answers; she finds something above religion: her mother, the lunar cycle, “sees nothing” of what happens “Inside the church,” where the parental figure, God, foretells the end of life on earth (24). Plath wants to come outside, she is looking for something outside of the “Gothic shape” of trees and the “stiff […] holiness” of religion (15, 26); she aligns with the moon, if one can align with a circle; she considers herself a child of the moon, and thus escapes from linear boundaries, at least in her “mind.”

Linear time, for Plath, is also restricting in that it cuts her off from the past. If Dickinson seeks to escape beginnings and endings altogether, Plath would rather find origins and deaths so that they can inform the present. When they are allowed to inform the present, however, in linear time, they are too detrimental, too heavy, too Yeatsian.⁶ A yearning for a return to history is hampered by its tendency to blind; if time exists on a line, how does one mine some of the past without mining it all? One point leads to the next, so the point closest is heavier than the point furthest away. Plath does not want to be responsible for picking up that ball.

⁶ Declan Kiberd notes that the swan in Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan” “threatens the abolition of art as well as portending inspiration” (313). Though Kiberd is referring specifically to one poem, he has captured a theme that runs throughout Yeats’ poetry: vision is inextricably linked to the explosion of linear time.
In “The Eye-mote,” she finds herself in a “parenthesis” (28) contrary to the “point of exclamation” and “round period” of the circular otherworld in “The Ghost’s Leavetaking” (C 27, 29). Trapped in linear time, she cannot move left or right unless she is willing to travel in one direction until she comes to a stop—she “could not,” remember, “run without having to run forever” in “The Bee Meeting” (A 33); each point would carry her along uncontrollably to the next, so the parentheses necessarily enclose her. It is the “salve” that “Fixed” her there, the impetus to save oneself from such a torture (27-28). The something Plath’s speaker gets in her eye, that obstructs her vision—both her literal vision and the power to prophecy the future—in this poem is linear time. It makes her long for the past: “What I want back is what I was / Before” (25-26). The present is a cage; linear time prevents movement not only out of boundaries, but across them. She wants “a time gone out of mind” (30). History suggests to her that maybe a circular perception—in the form of recurring myths and worship of lunar cycles—is behind her, if only she can make her way back to it. If she can find it, travel to the past, it can unravel the line and let it come round again.

Again and again, returning to the same spot, to replenish and be replenished by “History” at the “fountains” that are “dry” in the first poem of Plath’s first collection (“The Manor Garden” C 8, 1). In woman’s circular time, the beginning and the end are always intertwined, like lovers who cannot part.

“All the Dead Dears”: Woman as Museum

The ease with which Plath and Dickinson approach death is almost always paired with an acknowledgement of its cyclical features: they note its inherent attachment to beginnings; they know that death brings life. When either poet imagines that linear time
holds any truth, however, when they entertain the idea that they may be on a path to explosion, fears creep in. The possibility for refreshment after fountains run dry begins to dissipate into the terror of blankness and immobility that may lie ahead—the forever of exhausted resources. In man’s time, the need to quell these fears is satisfied by the illusion of stasis, by artificial preservation. Since Plath’s greatest cause for worry seems to be personal death-without-resurrection, she fears an embalming of herself.

Plath’s “All the Dead Dears,” which appears in the Colossus collection, but is also the name of a short story in Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, most explicitly expresses fears of time and an accompanying drying out. The first stanza warrants full quotation for its dramatic influence on my reading:

Rigged poker-stiff on her back  
With a granite grin  
This antique museum-cased lady  
Lies, companioned by the grimcrack  
Relics of a mouse and a shrew  
That battened for a day on her ankle-bone.

This stanza opens the door to the duplicity of woman being frozen in time: with it comes a great deal of power (though admittedly an eerie power), but at the risk of permanent immobility and, arguably, of silence. Distinguished from “a mouse and a shrew,” the woman is undoubtedly superior, undoubtedly not a mouse, and not a shrew, euphemisms for the too-passive and the too-aggressive woman, respectively. She is still “companioned by” them, however, and as they are “relics,” perhaps too is she.

The mouse and shrew—her evil dopplegangers—have taken from her, eaten parts of her, but she retains “a granite grin.” If her fragmentation is permanent, so is her happy (if somewhat smug) perseverance. Her power comes in her frozenness, in her

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7 Jacqueline Rose makes much of this, the only doubled title in her work (1-2).
inflexibility. The line “Rigged poker-stiff on her back” evokes a shocking masculinity, which Jane Gallop may help to explain. In “Beyond the Jouissance Principle,” she explores the reliance of French feminist theory on masculine principles. Jouissance, she writes, was very reliant on a masculine experience of sexual pleasure when it was defined by Roland Barthes, but, when feminism adapted the term, the phallic imagery was excluded—almost: “When jouissance becomes an emblem of French feminine theory [...] it is specifically identified as non-phallic, beyond the phallus. But even though jouissance is specified as feminine, the tendency to stiffen into a strong, muscular image remains” (114). This “tendency” is indeed prevalent throughout Plath’s writing: images of immobilization and stoniness abound. The last paragraph of her essay “Ocean 1212-W” begins, “And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood” (26). In attempting to inflict the future (a “vision”) on the past (a “childhood” over), the writer finds herself in a stalemate. The time of history prevents fluid movement through time. The masculine language that equates pleasure with stiffness is for woman translated to the rigidity of two-dimensional lines. Stiffness, no matter how pleasurable, becomes an emblem of helpless immobility. The stiffness is done to her, as it is in “Johnny Panic” when the narrator is “extend[ed] full-length on [her] back” (JP 166). In other places, though, a masculine tension is welcome for the jouissance it represents. In the essay “Context” in Johnny Panic, Plath writes: “Surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure” (65). In “A Birthday Present,” Plath’s speaker “want[s]” (48) to own the place (or what is contained in the place) “Where split lives congeal and stiffen to history” (51). In this

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instance, the masculine imagery is doubled: moisture does not disappear, but remains and becomes stronger.\(^9\)

The mummified woman of “All the Dead Dears” in fact finds pleasure (her “granite grin”) in stiffness, in her masculine (read: empowered) femininity. The speaker has already specified that the woman is “on her back” but repeats that she “lies,” from which we may infer that there is an untruth to her stiffness, an artificial enhancement to further distinguish her from mice and shrews—the latter a definitively gendered term, the former a more subtle but no less significant nod to femininity. The “lie” returns in the last stanza, as an apparently universal but quite possibly feminine “we” bides time—“Between tick / And tack of the clock” (32-33)—before going “to lie / Deadlocked with them” (35-36), “them” being “all the long gone darlings” (25).

To bide time. To bide time is to experience time without its sisters, space and place. To welcome lost time. To patiently wade through, gently pushing present time into the past. To welcome the future into the present. To bide time is woman’s time: to wait. Now we are waiting. Ellen tells herself (tells us), “Now all I have to do is wait...” (Plath, “Day of Success” JP 89). So we are waiting.

Now back to the mouse, the shrew, and the woman. Though the relics may be without speech, they are not, in the second stanza, without sight: they “bear / Dry witness / To the gross eating game” (7-9). The relics betray their stiffness by the third stanza and become fully mobile, able to “grip” (13) and “suck” (16). In the fourth stanza, the relics have become emblems of all dead, all once-living women, and finally reach the height of their aggressiveness: “Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother / Reach hag hands to haul me in” (20-21). The speaker herself seems to have been drawn in similarly, at first

\(^9\) See Chapter II, where the feminine is associated with potential dryness.
recounting the images, a "witness" herself, and slowly being drawn to action, if only of the imagination, until, finally, she becomes mobile herself. The ironic reversal here is that the world of the dead is more active than the world of the living, and the speaker, on the (wrong?) side of "the mercury-backed glass" (19), is lured by the dead, but ultimately must actively enter the world of inaction. In order to be "taking root" (36) in the world of the dead, but more specifically the world of the displayed dead, as in the Archaeological Museum, in order "to lie" (35), she must "go," but "until" then, she is only "usurping the armchair" (31), which is a further play on active inaction: the verb evokes power and movement, but results in possession of an object that, with open arms, begs to be the site of escapist immobility, of non-life.

We cannot freeze oppressed woman in time and go back to her as a museum—she is affected by us, as we are by her. Plath especially seemed to welcome immortality but fear a post-mortem display of bones separated from a voice. Ironically, Plath has been displayed as more than a poet: her death has been memorialized as much as, if not more than, her life, on show like the "museum-cased lady" of "All the Dead Dears." The act of preserving, of museum-making, does not seem to serve a purpose other than trapping pain, rendering it immobile, making it forever, out of time, but fossilizing it, perhaps becoming greater and greater the more times it is re-lived. Robin Peel, in Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics, reads "All the Dead Dears" as an example of "the power of the past to haunt the present" and "the intrusion of that distant past into the now" (155), and his reading adequately hits on the sense of fear, but incorrectly describes it as a fear of the past. The only fear Plath associates with the past is one directly related to a fear of the future, how the past may be an indication of the future. A fear of
becoming a bag of bones, of drying out, is not a fear of inaction. In fact, for Plath, inaction seems a welcome respite from the constant grind at becoming someone, a self-imposed set of rigorous approaches to life and literature that Langdon Hammer insists Plath was obsessed with (72-75). He contends that “she believed in the traditional promise of poetic success—immortality—in an almost literal way” (67). There is certainly a fervor for immortality in Plath’s poems, but what Hammer’s statement might also ominously imply is that she fears the survival of her work much as she seeks it. The fear of bones is instead a fear of being displayed but unable to speak.

The Time of Time: Dickinson’s Pacing

If Plath and Dickinson both hope to reject the finality of death, whether it is, in Plath’s case, a refusal to be mummified, or in Dickinson’s case an insistence on an afterlife, both hope to reject the idea of an explosion without rejecting the idea of an escape from the constancy and seeming un-alterability of time that is prevalent in both man’s and woman’s perception of it. What is more helpful about circular time in this regard is that it allows play, separated from a line, so that at least the illusion may be made that time changes pace now and then. Dickinson begs it do so, to slow down in death, as in the cordial, leisurely carriage ride of poem #712.

The desire to slow down, from a linear perspective, should be automatically coupled with a desire for time to wind down to a stop, but by doing so slowly, it simultaneously avoids that which makes linear time linear—the sudden explosion of the end. Lachman also contends that Dickinson uses narrative to “entice and delay,” causing us to shift our perception “from a past experience to the manner in which we contemplate that prior event” (86). In the second stanza of poem #1129, the speaker notes the
necessity for “The Truth” to be revealed “gradually” (7), presumably because it is so overpowering one cannot take it all in at once—it would make one “blind” (8). The simile used for this slow revelation also makes use of indirectly temporal language: “As Lightning to the Children eased / With explanation kind” (5-6). Lightning, is, undoubtedly, quick; the speaker suggests that lightning (truth) can, in Zeus-like fashion, be caught, contained, and slowed down—but only by the poet, the revealer of truth. Here Dickinson makes a mockery of her audience, likening them to children who cannot handle the speed and impact of truth. She can give them small pieces of lightning at once, which is, in essence, what she does with her poetry: the poems are compact but numerous; you must slow down to read them—they cannot be ingested or digested quickly.

It seems that such slowing down is not really allowed in linear time—if you check out, step out of line, even for a moment, you miss out: time is ticking, constantly moving forward, with or without you. There is the sense that we have to match our pace to time’s. But in circular time, one can afford to reflect, to visit the past without giving up a piece of the present. In poem #1677, Dickinson finds a “meditative spot” on her “volcano” (1-2). Evidently, the volcano is inactive, covered over with “Grass” (1), but the second stanza reveals a layer beneath the surface:

How red the Fire rocks below—
How insecure the sod
Did I disclose
Would populate with awe my solitude. (5-8)

The possibility of eruption—similar to the explosion marking the end of linear time—that was subdued in the first stanza by the leisurely pace of meditation and the slowness of growing grass is here revealed as an imminent threat, but one which the speaker can
contain. She seems to literally sit on lava to cover it up. Her own “grass” tames linear time by forcing it to slow down.

We must here emphatically distinguish slowing down from stopping. Slowing down is for meditation, for reflection on the past; it is not for stopping, not for the atrophy that so terrifies Plath and has as its only paradoxical action waiting. Dickinson’s poem #58, “Delayed till she had ceased to know—,” suggests in the first line that waiting evacuates us of knowledge. The past is slow—“Oh lagging Yesterday!”—but so is happiness—“the bliss so slow a pace” (6, 10). Slowness is the speaker’s obstacle, blocking the past and happiness from coming quickly enough to stave off “Death” (5). Ironically, vision may have prevented “Victory” in this poem: the speaker may have been “undefeated” if only she “Could […] have guessed” or someone could have “climbed the distant hill,” thereby gaining a broader, more circular perspective (14, 12, 7, 9). The inability to reconcile the past with the future turns peaceful slowness into an agonizing wait.

In poem #89, Dickinson’s speaker meets this frustration head on, as she finds no relief in either man’s time or woman’s time—she does not mourn “Hours” that “fly” and “Eternity” does not “behooveth” her (2, 1, 5, 6). In both cases, consistency is the criminal: hours (in man’s linear conception) fly, and eternity (in woman’s circular conception) “stay[s]” (4). In the third and final stanza, the speaker does not forthrightly admit that it is a change in the pace of time she seeks, but implies it nonetheless: “There are that resting, rise. / Can I expound the skies? / How still the riddle lies!” Wanting “rest” and to “rise,” wanting that which “expound[s],” and lamenting the “still” that
“lies,” the speaker searches for dynamism, but whether or not she finds it remains a
“riddle.”

Thus, the fight for time begins exactly with the fight against it. Ultimately
rejecting man’s linear time for its refusal to let them in without locking them there,
Dickinson and Plath find an equally frustrating struggle to enter the orbit of circular time.
In the next chapter, I will demonstrate the euphoria that comes with woman’s time before
exploring in chapter III the stalemate it causes between them and their linear language.
They are already here beginning to discover that there is no way out of time, but they
have acknowledged nonetheless that there must be a more freeing perspective on time
than that of the linear time with which they have been equipped.
II. MORNING GLORY: CYCLES AND RESURRECTION

*Not like the Dew, did she return
At the Accustomed hour!*
- from Dickinson’s #149

Since man’s time is limiting for our poets, in both language and perception, they often glorify woman’s time as a sort of paradise, a utopia, where fear dissipates, immortality is palpable, and the destruction and atrophy of man’s time are only parts of cycles of resurrection. Mary Lynn Broe, in *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, considers whether these utopian visions, particularly in the bee sequence, are attempts to “play God,” deciding ultimately that this is a power outside the range of the speaker’s control, as she is “enfeebled by the boisterous liveliness of female drudges” (150). I propose, however, that such plays of power with the patriarchy are less a contest and more an experiment in time travel. Distraught with linear time, which requires that a human being successively begin life as a nothing, be formed rapidly by events, and just as rapidly be stripped of all they accumulated, Plath and Dickinson discover new conceptions that allow for constant renewals and intricate webs that have no blank beginning. In this chapter, I identify dryness and wetness as symbols of linear and circular time, respectively, which are furthermore represented by feminine barrenness and literary creativity. In contrast to a linear cycle, which calls for re-births that erase all that has gone before, Plath and Dickinson write of a circular resurrection that infuses the present with the power of the past. Thus, while many feminist critics have correctly argued that Plath and Dickinson struggled to fight the patriarchy, they have often neglected to recognize the success they achieve in these utopian visions of resurrection. When Susan R. Van Dyne describes Plath’s poetry as a “poetics of survival” (5), for
example, it seems she is sentimentally applauding a fantasy world Plath has created instead of engaging more directly in a confrontational battle with the patriarchy. As I demonstrate near the end of the chapter, poetry is perhaps the most confrontational means these poets have, and it is certainly not unsuccessful in escaping the constraints of man's time.

As we saw in Chapter I, the restraints of man's time found Plath and Dickinson trying to break out, and as we will see in Chapter III, breaking out is hard to do. In this chapter, however, we will evaluate the moments when the poets are most present in circular time. Somehow, sometimes, between turning the ever-critical poetic eye on man's time and (then) on woman's time, Sylvia Plath and Emily Dickinson inhabit a middle world that reconciles times, pasts and futures. And they occupy it lovingly, ecstatically, comfortably. In rare but spectacular language, the poets brilliantly negotiate a circular experience of time without becoming disoriented, in what can only be termed 'transcendence.' This word, of course, is inadequate for our purposes, indicating only up, only one direction, only direction as we sense it with our limited vocabulary; when the poets manage to be in the past, present, and future at once without sensory overload, no phrase can properly describe the three-dimensional expansion that is achieved. This fine line is one we cannot so eloquently walk, and therefore will not even attempt. We have to be less semiotic. We have to make use of the opposites of utopian vision to fully illuminate those moments; we have to define them by what they are not. We must understand the terror that often supersedes, and is so much a part of, the delicate balance. We must understand the dryness of absence before we can appreciate the reinvigorating lubrication of vision. We must understand fears of poetic failure before we can indulge
in its success. We must understand the limitations of prose before we can exalt the freedom of poetry.

**Symbols of Personal Drought**

As I have already mentioned, death in itself, particularly as a definitive end, never much worries Plath or Dickinson. The end of ‘all time,’ the explosion that marks ‘the end’ in linear time, is nearly absent as well: Dickinson already conceives of linear time’s end as a slowing down rather than an abrupt stop, and seems to pay tribute to the cataclysmic only in regard to her own eruptive, often cyclical, power, as in the volcano poems. If there is anything worrisome about the definitive death of linear time, it is what must necessarily precede it. Both poets are attuned to the body—Kristin M. Comment goes so far as to say Dickinson’s consciousness was a “carnal” one (170)—and are perhaps for that reason aware that, though the end of linear time may be a terrible, fantastic, relatively unexpected and unpredictable firework event, the end of the human body is anything but. I contend that there is an especially interesting connection for both Plath and Dickinson between a fear of endings and a fear of drought. Moisture, a constant aid to renewals, most obviously tied to water—the stuff of life—symbolizes for them a continuation not only of life but of circular, cyclical, time. They are all too aware that, in linear time, once moisture is taken away from their *bodies*, it is not likely to be restored. Similar to but distinct from fears of aging, the preoccupation with wet and dry in both poets’ work is more clearly an attempt to protect what they think is rightly theirs—not a body, per se, but the perception of always-changing but never-ending bodily experiences.
Countless episodes in Plath’s poetry concern the speaker on the verge of drying out. In “Barren Woman,” “a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself” in the woman’s “courtyard” (A 3), perhaps teasing that it will one day leap away and not sink back—leap out of her body, leaving her dry. In “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams,” Miss Milleravage, with her “milkless breasts” is terrifying (JP 166). A lack of moisture is vicious in “The Detective”; it is a “punishment” for a “mouth” that was “insatiable”: the mouth is “hung out like brown fruit / To wrinkle and dry” (A 27-30). In “All the Dead Dears,” the museum woman is the moisture-stealing culprit: she strips the speaker of her “marrow” to “prove” that the woman and the speaker are “kin” (C 16-18). We are all relatives of the dead, headed for the same fate, for the same dried-out state.

In Plath’s bee poems, honey is the desired type of wetness. In “The Bee Meeting,” the bee hive is “snug as a virgin” because it “Seal[s] off […] her honey” (A 34-35). Refusing to give away honey is simply a protection against drying out. Because the queen in this poem is “old, old, old” and “she must live another year,” she is perhaps “hiding” and “eating honey,” adding as much wetness to her stores as possible, to stave off the slow drying-out of death (43-44). When, then, in the next poem of the sequence, “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” the speaker declares that she is “no source of honey,” it is nothing other than an exaggeration of her own fears; she is not literally without any honey, but perhaps has none to spare for the bees who may want to attack her for it (33). Choosing to retain the moisture she already has rather than having to risk not being able to replenish it, the speaker chastises those “unmiraculous women” who so shamelessly “drudge” for honey in “Stings” (21-23). She seems to distinguish herself from them by the dignity of her frugality: “for years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense
hair” (24-25). She watches “Blue dew,” another form of wetness, “evaporate” from her; she is slowly stripped of moisture. In “Wintering,” she reaps the benefits of wetness, not having let anyone dry her out thus far: “I have my honey” (3).

Dickinson’s fears of drying out, though just as apparent as Plath’s, are not as closely linked with death; Dickinson’s speakers are more likely to serve their sentence of dryness on earth. In poem #561, Dickinson makes two distinct references to a lack of wetness, but they are the result not of accumulated years, but of accumulated grief. After a considerable amount of time dealing with the burden of emotional pain, the speaker reports that mourners “At length, renew their smile— / An imitation of a Light / That has so little Oil—” (14-16). The bereaved are able to fuel the appearance of happiness, but, because they have so little liquid left, it is fake. Like tears, the moisture most commonly associated with grief, the oil runs out in times of dehydration. Tears, which provide a sign of proof that one is still full of life, can also, in their over-release, bereave one of that very liquid life-force. Interestingly, Margaret Dickie insists that many women poets associate tears with “vision,” insinuating in this context that the ability to look into the future may be represented by this type of wetness (133). It is perhaps this very trade-off that Dickinson wisely observes in poem #125, in which the speaker makes a scientific equation between an “ecstatic instant” and “Sharp pittances of years” that are marked with “Tears” (1, 6, 9).

The second instance of dryness in poem #561 occurs in the very next stanza following the first instance, concentrating dryness (ironically, as concentration evokes images of a substance becoming more powerful by the removal of liquid) in the middle stanzas of a nine-stanza poem, thereby exaggerating, by repetition, the sense of bereft-
ness. The speaker hopefully proposes that time may supply “any Balm—,” perhaps soothe them with the semblance of a return to wetness (20). They could only do this, though, in her estimation, by burying it: “when Years have piled —/Some Thousands —/on the Harm—” (17-19), and no wetness comes out of that, only dusty rubble, dry debris.

In poem #149, Dickinson’s speaker uses a simile in the first stanza which affirms that, while some forms of moisture replenish themselves, like the “dew,” woman cannot so easily reverse dryness:

She went as quiet as the Dew
From an Accustomed flower.
Not like the Dew, did she return
At the Accustomed hour! (1-4)

Once a woman’s wetness is gone, it does not come back. She may house cycles of her own, but she is not unequivocally matched with cyclical time, thanks to her mortality. As dryness leaves her, she leaves dryness in her wake on earth, bereaving her loved ones of her moisture. Perhaps all she can hope to do is leave a successor, an artifact of wetness: her poetry.

To Be Dry is to Be Barren: Literary Production and Motherhood

Ted Hughes uses wet and dry language to describe poetic creativity as literary barrenness, as he credits “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” with “tap[ping] the molten source of her poetry as none of her poems up to then had” (4). As Van Dyne has aptly noted in the introduction to Revising Life, “In Plath’s poetry, making babies and making poems are persistent metaphors for each other” (6). She later calls this “the knot of motherhood and writing” (131). Paper thus symbolizes another kind of dryness that
begs to be repaired with the wetness of ink.\textsuperscript{10} Poetry gives Plath and Dickinson the power to renew and be renewed. To renew a mother, perhaps whether literal or literary, is problematic for Margaret Homans, who suggests that “the quest for substitutes for her [the mother]” unfairly “depend[s] on the death or absence of the [original] mother” (4). Renewal for Plath and Dickinson, however, involves a renewal of moisture that comes from a number of sources that only add and never substract. They obtain moisture from their own ink and from the ink of their predecessors.

The speaker of Plath’s “Point Shirley” mourns her grandmother’s death to find “bones, bones only” (C 38) and claims she can “get from these dry-papped stones / The milk [her grandmother’s] love instilled in them” (41-42). Love is a substitute for marrow. It replaces like milk. Langdon Hammer notes the reciprocal loss of milk when he describes the curious interplay of giving and taking moisture between Plath’s speaker and her two children in the poem “Edge”: “[The children] are coiled like serpents at two empty pitchers of milk. The serpents remind us of the asp Cleopatra used to kill herself by bringing it to her breast, which leads us to read the children’s love as basilisk-like, having turned their mother to stone (for what else has killed her?)” (84). When her milk, her love, her moisture, runs out, she is turned to stone, immobilized, at risk of becoming a museum. The problem, for Hammer, the danger, for Plath, of being mummified, frozen as something to be admired, is that it does not admit the “broken” quality that she wants to mark as wholeness (84). Hammer contends that Plath enacts, not only in “Edge,” but throughout her \textit{Ariel} poems, a “defacing violence” at that which is whole only by being

\textsuperscript{10}Examples of the preoccupation with paper as dryness (and thus failure) in \textit{Ariel} include: “Naked as paper to start / But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver / In fifty, gold” (“The Applicant” 30-32); “I see myself [. . .] a cut-paper shadow” (“Tulips” 46); “I have taken a pill to kill / The thin / Papery feeling” (“Cut” 23-25); “these papery godfolk” (“Magi” 15); and “What holes this papery day is already full of!” (“The Jailor” 17).
aesthetically “formal,” “an art object” (84). He seems to think that Plath wants to un-do the museum-making of woman by distorting her. This, I think, is a mistake. While Hammer correctly situates Plath’s fears of death in her fears of drying out, he neglects the opposite hope that crops up: in a circular view of time, the children would not only take, they would also give. Plath places blame for a loss of moisture in many areas, and sometimes pugnaciously acts against it, to be sure, but in the end of wetness she also finds a beginning; as we will see, every source of moisture exhausts itself, but doing so is only a preparation for a new cycle of production to begin. As Adrienne Rich duly notes in her work on Dickinson’s poem #754, “active willing and creation in women” is often mistaken for aggression (190).

Nonetheless, re-production, motherhood, seems to be the dreariest case of moisture loss. Moisture, in children, literary and literal, is so potent that it seems irretrievably misplaced—maybe even displaced—for the mother. In the poem “I Want, I Want,” children begin in life already bankrupt of moisture, and men suffer equally as women the risk of being drained by their progeny should they tend as nurturers. The child is here linked to “dry volcanoes” and “sand” and has a “milkless lip” (C 4-5). As a “god,” though, the child is not without power (1). The past has not had any chance to take away from it; there is neither charge upon it to reminisce, nor pressure upon it to ‘plan ahead’ for a future. The child’s power is in the present; there are no parentheses here. The “father’s blood” (6) comes to the rescue (as though a rescue were imperative), but as a result, the “patriarch” is left sapped of moisture: he is “dry-eyed” (9). Taking on a motherly role is quite possibly what did him in.
When children are thus seen as robbers of liquid, they are innately tied to the restrictive beginning, middle, and end of linear time. The past, in the time of history, is an accumulation pushing into the present with increasing strength, framed by a blank beginning and an explosive end. When this historical view is pared down to apply to a single human life, the baby must start blankly, without moisture, and without any connection to what may have gone before and what will come after. In the poems in which Plath has been accused of demonizing and/or abandoning her children, she is merely adhering to the standards of linear time. If she despises babies, it is only for the way we idolize their emptiness: the contempt for such a tabula rasa asserts itself in the spiteful poem “You’re,” in which the subject of the poem is impenetrable for its very shallowness: the speaker’s “little loaf” is “Vague,” “Farther off than Australia,” trapped in the inner-most circle of self, refusing to enter any greater circle of time—“Wrapped up [. . .] like a spool”—and ignorant of light, content with the “dark” that he owns (A 9, 10, 11, 5, 6). The summative last line of this poem reads: “A clean slate, with your own face on” (18).

Beginning as a clean slate is clock-setting. Unaffected by history, by time’s autocratic circuit and democratic justice, this perceived beginning ignores the constancy and un-alterability of time, flies in the face of it to impose our own control over history; we manipulate it—the narrative—thinking we are manipulating time; but as Plath bluntly points out, we should not so callously declare a beginning without qualifying it as such. Hence the “fat gold watch” opening the Ariel collection in the poem “Morning Song” (1). Here Plath is at first more forgiving of man’s time: the imposition of a beginning spawns from “Love”: “Love set you going like a fat gold watch” (1). She is nevertheless quick to
equate the perception of babies-as-blanks with a mirrored blankness in our own adult selves: “We stand round blankly as walls” (6). The equation does not formulate from a place of motherly numbness, but rather from a place of accusation. In the linear perception of time, personal maternity means nothing; woman must be “no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind’s hand” (7-9). How then, can we (have we) ever change(d)? What but time can adhere to this blank slate, to this human being, if we must continually renew our blankness in order to perceive it in others, in order to maintain the myth that a beginning can be detached from the rest of the line? In this view, babies are “New,” but they are “statue[s]” entering “a drafty museum” (4-5), a world where things may be older, but no less frozen, no more animated for it.11

Man’s time confines babies to a point on a line: birth is a penetration into the world, insertion into the line, an unavoidably forceful entry. By trying to confine babies to a point-on-a-line, we orphan them, which is exactly what we have done to women by inserting historical mothers into the narrative of history as though they are lift-able points, plucked out of obscurity (perhaps even out of circular time?) and set down as though they belonged there all along.

Literary immortality, creation for posterity, which for women must also mean the admittance into that historical line, often reminds Plath of being mummified: she both desires and fears having her written words survive her and her voice. The succession that is motherhood also seems to take away her voice, but a mutated voice lives on in her children. Another form of creation for posterity, literal child-birthing competes with the creative birth of writing. Plath’s daughter’s voice indeed suitably precedes her own in

11 See also the title subject of the poem “Barren Woman” described as a “Museum without statues” (A 2).
the foreword to the restored edition of her final collection, *Ariel*, which is scattered with orphaned children and nuisance babies. In “A Secret,” there is “An illegitimate baby” (25), a “Dwarf baby” (45). “Stopped Dead” has a “birth cry” (2), “a goddam baby screaming off somewhere” (12), and “a bloody baby” (13). “The Arrival of the Bee Box” mentions “a square baby” and its “coffin” (4, 3). In some places the sounds of crying babies are indistinguishable, either from the surroundings or from the speaker’s own voice. Closely mimicking the baby’s “bald cry” and “clear vowels [that] rise like balloons” and “The child’s cry / [that] Melts in the wall,” the speaker’s voice is “empty” and “echo[es]” (“Morning Song” 2, 18; “Ariel” 24-25; “Barren Woman” 1). The “vaporization” of a woman’s voice is linked to the woman being “tamp[ed] into a wall” (“The Detective” 26, 10). There are “accounts of bastardies” in “The Courage of Shutting-Up” (6), and in “Lesbos,” “The bastard’s a girl,” and the speaker declares, “I call you Orphan, orphan” (16, 38). This ambiguous white-noise racket and coinciding subdued quiet is perhaps another form of immobilization, the turning-to-stone mothers and children do to each other. The blame is pinned on “hawthorn” in “The Bee Meeting”: the paradoxically “barren” hawthorn “etheriz[es] its children” (25), insinuating that children, literary and otherwise, are silenced when their mothers are. And Plath, of course, is a daughter, too, of poetry and of mothering.

**Resisting Linear Re-Birth for Cyclical Resurrection**

Plath and Dickinson use the day, the most linearly understood unit of time, as an analogy for cyclical woman’s time. Menstrual cycles and lunar cycles are units of time not easily expressed in linear language, but the day is a cycle a man could get behind. (When we say we will “get behind” something, after all, it means we are so supportive of
it that we will help to thrust it forward, move it out of the past.) The day follows a line, from morning to noon to night, appeasing our sense of direction, but it also appeases cycles because it repeats itself: the day happens every day.

The woman poet seems to be enamored of the morning more than any other time in this sequence. Morning satisfies the linear idea of a “beginning,” but any given one refuses to be an “origin.” Rather than a tabula rasa, the “blank” page of the morning has many words on its background, the background of previous days. It has, for lack of a better word, a foundation. The despicable emptiness and frustrating terror of blankness are diluted, so to speak, to provide a “fresh start” without throwing us back to that baby/statue state of complete ignorance and isolation. This is perhaps the very sort of foundation Plath found helpful in writing when she wrote her Ariel poems on the back of her Bell Jar manuscript (Van Dyne 9). The subtle difference between the linear morning and the cyclical morning is that each morning in linear time is like a re-birth, whereas each morning in cyclical time is a resurrection. Subtle, yes, but the former can seem like a loss as well as a gain, but in the latter one can retain some of the past and thereby increase her power. In woman’s time and man’s time, every time we go to sleep, we are dying. To wake up in woman’s time is to be re-charged with the past; to wake up in man’s time is to be rid of the past.

The curious crossover between the sleeping/dreaming world and the waking world is visited in “The Ghost’s Leavetaking,” as discussed in Chapter I, but it is also implicitly visited in “Ariel,” where the speaker finds linear power in the early morning transition from “darkness” to sunrise (A 1): she claims she is

[. . .] the arrow,
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (27-31)

Here she amazingly combines the personal pleasure of morning-as-resurrection with the destructive consequences of carelessly plunging ahead in man's time. Morning is the sole proprietor of dew; at no other time is moisture more palpable. In a later poem in *Ariel*, however, she fears this dew's end as she watches her "strangeness evaporate, / Blue dew from dangerous skin" ("Stings" 26-27). Once so inseparable from the morning, she now approaches the end of the day as the end of linear time.

The most potent illustration of the power of circular time occurs in the last two stanza of Plath's poem "Stings," in which the speaker refuses the mortality of definitive linear death, wakes up in resurrection, and expresses vengeful feelings against being immobilized in linear time:

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Now she is flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her—
The mausoleum, the wax house. (51-60)

The "mausoleum" and "wax house" are here the museum—she declares that they "killed her," but now, as a queen bee, she has escaped from that entrapment. There is no "flying" in linear time, no soaring "over."
As Frieda Hughes noted in the foreword to *Ariel*, and as many have noted since, Plath wanted the collection to begin with “Love” and end with “Spring,” and in this restored edition, it does (xiv). I would like to point out the importance of these words in resurrection, but also highlight a similar cycle that happens in *Colossus*: the first poem of the first collection begins “The fountains are dry and the roses over” (“The Manor Garden” [1]) and ends with this image of resurrection:

The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.
My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.
I shall be good as new. (“The Stones” 41-45)

Note that the speaker is *not* “new,” just “good as.” The supposedly dead rose from “The Manor Garden” is not replaced with a new one, but rather revived; it is not given a new vase, but rather the old one is “reconstructed.” The circuit Plath’s otherwise-linearly-designed collections go through is not indicative of re-birth but of resurrection; they do not indicate the ability to forsake the past for a better future. Instead, they locate the past in the present, and carry it into the future like a flower in a patched-up vase.

For Helen Shoobridge, Dickinson “uses flowers as a lure” to attract men (93). She suggests, in “‘Reverence for each Other Being the Sweet Aim:’ Dickinson Face to Face with the Masculine,” that she does so as a means of “re-occupy[ing]” femininity in order to “negotiate the relations between the sexes” (89). Dickinson similarly poses, I think, in woman’s time, to entice man’s time. In poem #470, “I am alive – I guess—,” Dickinson fluctuates between worlds and times. The first line of every odd-numbered stanza is an affirmation that the speaker is not dead: “I am alive – I guess—,” “I am alive – because,” “I am alive – because—,” and “How good – to be alive!” (1, 9, 17, 25). And
yet, the need for it to be affirmed, coupled with the remark of her “Visitors”—“How cold – it grew”—suggests that she is perhaps not quite alive as we conceive of it (12, 14). The space she inhabits is “Immortality” (16), and she has “at [her] finger’s end” the constant promise of renewable cycles, “Morning Glory” (3-4). In this, she is “infinite” (26). In poem #24, appropriately beginning with “There is a morn by men unseen—,” Dickinson envisions a similarly ever-lasting morning that is out of the range of linear perception. Like Plath, Dickinson associates morning and spring, as “maids” can frolic “all day long” as though it were always morning and always “May” (2-4). The speaker openly “wait[s]” to join them in this “different dawn” (22-24).

Ken Hiltner describes poem #712, “Because I could not stop for Death” as “wonderfully depict[ing] three spans of time (a day, a season, and a lifetime) being broken into appropriately three phases” (26). For Hiltner, this break from Dickinson’s usual division into fours serves the purpose of conforming to a classicist imitation in order to tell the myth of Persephone. Perhaps, instead, it deviates to show the myth of linear time’s beginning, middle, and end, while the usual four-part structure reveals Dickinson’s preference for the cycles of the seasons. In an even more simplified structure with only two parts, Dickinson links resurrection with morning in the short poem #1610:

Morning that comes but once,
Considers coming twice—
Two dawns upon a single Morn,
Make Life a sudden price.

Here, in her playful voice, Dickinson motions to the non-linear return. In man’s time, there is only time for everything: time goes straight. For Dickinson, however, though one morning on one day, or one life in one time, is the traditional expectation, the repetition
of a morning or a life is more worthwhile, perhaps because it allows one to see what one may have at first missed. In this sense, any foray into the past, out of the present point on the line, is like a resurrection.

Dickinson’s speaker mocks the singular, non-repeating sort of “Resurrection” anticipated in linear time, which is “Untouched by Morning / And untouched by Noon” in poem #216 (4, 2-3). Though man may understand the day as a smaller unit of linear time, he is not as attentive to it as a cycle; the day is part of the private sphere, and as woman’s domain, has little effect on the public sphere that runs the linear engine of man’s history.

A mocking tone also pervades poem #54, in which cycles seem to be callous and unforgiving under the guise of providing comfort: “It makes the parting [from earth] tranquil” (15). Knowing that the “morn should beam” and “noon should burn” after she dies, the speaker finds cycles to be a relief. Like a babbling brook, the scene she posits is one that would happen “If […] time should gurgle on” (1-3). Man’s cycles replace nature’s and woman’s cycles, however, in the second half of the poem, when the cycles are especially brazen in their forward-looking mentality: “stocks,” “Commerce,” and “Trades” (11, 13, 14). The repetition of cycles is here in no way likened to a sense of resurrection, but rather to business as usual. This kind of cycle makes of circular time a shield. Deflecting all else, it refuses to be interrupted, just like history’s line. This is the nature of time: it bows to no man or woman. In woman’s time, in fact, time itself is even more indestructible. With no beginning we can see, and with no explosion, it is truly Eternity. Perhaps it is just such an indestructible force that our woman poets channel in their morning-as-resurrection poems.
Feminine is to Masculine as Poetry is to Prose

In “Whose Dickinson?” Cristanne Miller reminds us that “Dickinson rejected print publication during her lifetime because the technology and conventions of print in the nineteenth century would have unduly restricted her” (231). In poem #613, Dickinson’s speaker herself declares in the first line, “They shut me up in Prose—,” further reminding us that the conventions of prose are even more stifling than those of poetry. Poetry is thus freeing, at least in contrast to prose, which makes a caged “Bird” of her (7). A caged bird is eerily similar to a museum-cased lady. Each has both power and limitations, just like the woman poet. If the fossilizing of woman in Plath’s poem is an attempt to take her voice, the enclosing of woman in Dickinson’s is an attempt to take her movement. Neither of the attempts is successful—dead women can still talk, birds can still fly. Ironically, “‘Still’” is what “they” want Dickinson’s speaker to be (4). She is “still” in her presence and perseverance, in her continuing existence; but she will never be “still” as in inactive. No matter how they enclose her body, her “Brain—go[es] round—” (6). Just as we cannot freeze the woman poet in a museum, we cannot shut her in a cage.

In poem #334, “All the letters I can write,” the speaker likens “this”—the poem—to “Depths of Ruby, undrained,” (2, 5), hinting that Dickinson’s poems retain their moisture, their life-force, in a way that prose—her “letters” cannot (1). The depths are “Hid, Lip, for Thee— / Play it were a Humming Bird— / And just sipped – me—” (6-8). The word “sipped,” itself indicating that she contains or is essentially a liquid, is jarring
and awkward in its tense, just one of many instances in which Dickinson is able to play with the tense of time in a poetic format in a way she would not be able to in prose.\textsuperscript{12}

In the essay "A Comparison," Plath attempts to make her own distinction between poetry and prose, exclaiming from the beginning that she "env[ies] the novelist" (JP 61). Furthermore, the difference that she explores for the entirety of the essay is the issue not of length but of time. She writes of the female novelist:

Her business is Time, the way it shoots forward, shunts back, blooms, decays and double-exposes itself. Her business is people in Time. And she, it seems to me, has all the time in the world. She can take a century if she likes, a generation, a whole summer. I can take about a minute. (61-62)

While the prose writer's time (female or not) may at first glance seem, with all its ways of moving, antithetical to the time we have hitherto assigned her (the time of linear history), upon closer inspection it reveals its limitation to the linear: it can only go "back" or "forward," "bloom" or "decay." Time must "double-expose itself" because, on a line, all steps must be retraced; there is no up or down or around, only left or right, past or future.

Poetry, to the contrary, "takes place" (62). One must wonder: by force? Does it take place as opposed to time? Or does it take space? Does it kidnap place and space? No matter how, poetry, Plath muses, can contain "the beginning and the end in one breath" (62). Jealous like the wife from "Day of Success," Plath wishes she too could indulge in the "well-thumbed catalog of the miscellaneous" without it having to "insist so much" (63). It is the detail she craves, the detail which Peel and Hughes praised in her poetry, but also the detail that limited her (and perhaps limited the hypothetical female novelist)

\textsuperscript{12} Miller notes that the "traditional line" of thinking in Dickinson scholarship is that she did not "distinguish the genres of poetry and prose," at least not after the late 1850s ("Whose Dickinson?" 234, 238).
in her prose. For Plath, poetry happens too "fast" (63), a sentiment which betrays Hughes' description of her differing approaches to writing poetry and prose: in the *Johnny Panic* introduction, he credits poetry with causing her the least anxiety (4-5). A testament, perhaps, to her (under-recognized) status as a visionary, Plath found her prose—which is often described as "low," according to Jacqueline Rose, for its reliance on skill with details—much more stressful than her abstract, "high" poetry (9).

Unfortunately, we tend to revere only the late poems. According to Rose, we "detach" them from the rest of her work, a practice, she finds, is indicative of "culture divide[ing] itself up, discriminate[ing] against one part of itself" (9). As we will see in Chapter III, this cultural discrimination against details is indicative of linear time's charge upon woman to transcribe the past without translating it.
III. SECRETARIES OF APORIA: RECORDING WITHOUT MEANING

A great surgeon, now a tattooist,
Tattooing over and over the same blue grievances...
-from Plath’s “The Courage of Shutting-Up”

It is important to explore the private domains and domestic territories of these poets that we may apply them to public, literary, political spheres in Chapter IV. I find that Dickinson’s and Plath’s personal decisions to pursue poetry in the first place are almost in direct defiance of the feminine charge to reminisce. By not only recording but narrating the past, they attempt to ‘let it go,’ releasing themselves of the burden and throwing the entire linear system into chaos. They do this by reconciling not only past and future, but the public literary sphere and the private domestic sphere, which, for Heinz Ickstadt, is “the sphere men easily left to women” (59). Ickstadt equates this sphere with “the interior which, on a further metaphoric remove, becomes the sphere of inwardly directed consciousness” (59). The dualistic/deul-istic language indeed makes relations between the sexes a battle: I think of this as an infiltration, Plath and Dickinson slipping into the intellectual through the only open door. But by doing so, I am unfairly limiting them to their times. It would be too simple to relegate them to the conventional role of aid to man’s greater causes, the catalyst for turning to woman’s time. These poets do not act as secretaries, as helpful if influential bystanders, as shadows of great men. They act as great women, in circular time, struggling to accept aporia as not-failure.

In the search for origins, literary and otherwise, Plath and Dickinson often take on the feminine charge to reminisce, which requires them to collect observations about the past and the present for posterity’s sake. As poets, they are allowed to release these observations from their bodies and minds onto the page, transforming the objective detail
into a subject for study, simply by articulating it. Such an unloading, however, is not wholly cathartic for woman; articulation sometimes tempts her to untangle the mass of meaningless memories into a meaningful line, complete with man’s beginning, middle, and end. The search for meaning is not only antithetical to woman’s time, which has no origins or explosive ends, but it is also contrary to what man’s time expects from her as keeper of the past—she is only supposed to harbor reminiscence, not attempt to re-order or analyze it. I propose in this chapter that woman’s paradoxical need to discount and recount history forms her enigmatic cultural identity, which is not unlike the (trans)formation of cultural identity in postcolonial countries: both are plagued by the concept of a psychoanalytic and literal ‘return,’ intrigued by its possibilities for reparation but simultaneously certain of its elusory qualities. Plath and Dickinson reconcile past and future by embracing woman’s time and rejecting the silence she is supposed to keep in regard to the past; they speak in poetry as a means of casting off the burden while refusing to deny aporia.

**Objective Subjects: Recording without Meaning**

In his introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, Ted Hughes notes that Plath’s journals were often a “Flaubertian” exercise in recounting details, and that “some of these descriptions [...] fed into Ariel” (JP 2). The power evoked by such detail in Plath’s poetry, however, is apparently missing in her prose. According to Hughes:

Nothing refreshed [Plath] more than sitting for hours in front of some intricate pile of things laboriously delineating each one. But that was also a helplessness. The blunt fact killed any power of inclination to rearrange it or see it differently. This limitation to actual circumstances, which is the prison of so much of her prose, became part of the solidity and truth of her later poems. (7, emphasis mine)
Robin Peel might agree: he contends that only stories like “Ocean 1212-W,” which recollect childhood memories—which are, I would add, in themselves analyses of the distant past—maintain objective descriptions of place, while in other stories—more “present” stories, I think—“metaphor seems to have left specificity behind” (16). Helen Sword, although she does not forthrightly accuse the poet of under- or mis-using details, outlines Plath’s own concerns with just that: in her occult poems, Plath “complains about the triviality of her own psychic insights compared with those of the great classical prophets” (559). Triviality is detail without meaning, something small and specific, maybe even interestingly so, but deemed unimportant to know.

How is it that even the most abstract of Plath’s poems more skillfully record details than her most studied prose? Poetry, for these women writers, is better able to locate a circular, feminine time. Hughes apparently saw Plath’s resistance to re-see her details as a failing: it lacked the poetic necessity to immerse oneself in circular, poetic, feminine time. But for Plath, perhaps, it was the attention to detail that allowed her to walk among men, to plunge forward into the linear time of history. Apparently, while Plath was proud of her “primal poet” husband, and found America’s code of middle-class “conformity [. . .] emasculating,” she still judged Ted against an “American model of masculinity” (Van Dyne 16-17). Perhaps the defensive awareness of the social climate that felt threatening for American male writers in the 1850s and 1860s, according to the premise of David Leverenz’s *Manhood and the American Renaissance*, found its way into female writers’ sense of competition a century later.

While Hughes notes that Plath strove for “the presence of the objective world” and “fought doggedly against the great suction into her own subjectivity” (JP 3), he
declares that “she did not let herself be objective enough” in some of her prose; he much prefers the journal entries in which she worked solely as a “still-life graphic artist,” a rather compulsive record-keeper as Hughes describes her (7). Indeed, when Plath was at the height of a “paralyzing fear” of literary barrenness, she “escaped […] into a job in the records office for mental patients in the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston,” which ultimately resulted in the success of the title story of the *Johnny Panic* collection (4).

In “Seeing is Re-Seeing: Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop,” Margaret Dickie too notes the abounding details in Plath’s poetry, but ultimately contends that they do not in themselves create meaning (142). It seems, then, that perhaps woman can record and report the past, but she cannot or should not sufficiently analyze it. One tension there created is the struggle between what one wants to be and what one is allowed to be: Hammer decides that Plath “didn’t want to record a self, but to bring one into being” (67), his criticism dripping with the inference that she was sorely limited, tragically unsuccessful. Women are rather more like secretaries than historians. But this seeming sexism is deceiving: the result, for Dickie, is that the poets “call attention […] to the whole process of looking on the borderlines where subjects and objects blur” (142). The poet, just as much if not more than woman, is like a secretary, and necessarily so; the poet is interested in “recording this language” and does “not attempt to construct meaning,” according to Dickie (140-41); they identify by not identifying. Perhaps it is with both a poetic refusal to declare meaning and a womanly compliance with denying meaning that Plath writes of secretaries in her prose: the main character of “A Day of Success” “promise[s] to behave like a model secretary” (JP 80), and the narrator of
“Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” triumphantly declares, “I call myself secretary to none other than Johnny Panic himself” (153). While Hughes’ praise of Plath’s retreat into objectivity may not have been intended literally, to be translated into daily life, the need for a secretary to be equally “objective” carries with it the now-politicized repugnance to the sexist connotations of the word ‘secretary.’

Dickie allows assessments like Hughes’ to apply to all women writers: they are in “a self-imposed state of objectivity, split between exacting observational skills and a reluctance or inability to use them fully” (131). For Dickie, the “odd equation between skill with details and limited vision” is “illogical” (131). Vision (insistently forward-looking) is desired by these women, she insinuates, but is often represented by “tears” (133), types of wetness. The past must, by negation, be dry. And if our women poets fear that their futures are also dry, then the future is rooted firmly in the present when vision is associated with wetness. From this, I contend that women poets must necessarily look behind to properly assess details, but must also look forward if they want to be visionary. Naturally, women poets find that the past can inform the future and vice-versa. Don’t we find, after all, that our present time (their future) informs their present time (the past)?

For the speaker of “The Colossus,” delving into the past looking for answers has not been fruitful. She has tried to piece it together, but she is “none the wiser” for it (10). In fact, the speaker could feasibly be speaking directly to the past, the “father” a godlike amalgamation of her literary predecessors. He is “historical” (18). Her mother, then, must not be. Her literary mothers are lost in obscurity, not anthologized, not historicized. Perhaps we can see that they are recognized now, at least to a much greater extent, but if I
am at all successful in what I have set out to do here, we must at least question whether insertion into parts of the canon or a reappraisal of the entire canon is the proper method.

In a chapter entitled "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation," in his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha finds details to be profoundly important to the construction of identity, in this case of a national one. He admires Mikhail Bakhtin’s "wonderful description of a national vision of emergence" in Goethe’s *Italian Journey* [as a] vision of the microscopic, elementary, perhaps random, tolling of everyday life in Italy that reveals the profound history of its locality (*Lokalitat*), the spatialization of historical time" (143). Thus, the seemingly mundane details of domesticity Plath pores over become important indications of what it means to be a woman and what it means to be an American. In the relentless pursuit of these details, however, the woman poet finds their articulation prohibited.

**Woman as Postcolonial Subject**

We have already established that women are apparently supposed to dredge up the past. What we will now discover is that once they have found the past, they are to do virtually nothing with it. We are supposed to remain museum patrons, admiring women poets’ efforts in a time that was oh-so-hard for *them*—not *us*—to breathe under the crushing oppressive force of evil Man. Perhaps this is woman’s cultural identity (if all women can be homogenized into a universal culture of femininity), to retain history while remaining separate from it, like she retains wetness without ever being sure it is her own, that it will not escape her. Stuart Hall sees cultural identities, specifically the national identities of victims of diaspora, as constructed; post-colonial cultures, like woman, must reconcile the past, and an identity is thereby (in)formed:
Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous 'play' of history, culture and power. Far from being grounded in mere 'recovery' of the past, which is waiting to be found, and which when found, will secure our sense of ourselves into eternity, identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past. (394)

Woman, as one of only two universally recognized genders, unlike the colonized cultures Hall writes about, has no commonly agreed-upon beginning or origin, no place or time to which she should “return” (395) if she were to un-do her patriarchal repression and reclaim some pristine form of femininity.13

Carmela Delia Lanza finds herself nostalgic for that type of homogenized woman with whom she felt a kinship, in adolescence, with Dickinson, but she also recognizes that there can be no such thing, that she enters this longing from a place of “unconscious” ignorance (82). She seems, in her intellectual, scholarly, academic adulthood to agree with Donna Haraway, who writes that “There is nothing about being ‘female’ that naturally binds women. [...] Gender, race, or class consciousness is an achievement forced on us by the terrible historical experience of the contradictory social realities of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism” (qtd. in Lanza, 81-82).

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak may term this “a nostalgia for lost origins,” a practice she warns against for those trying to pin down the many incarnations of Shakespeare’s Caliban and Ariel into one true form for each (118). In a particularly relevant chapter of her A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present, she insists we must not “forget” that each character is simply a “name in a play” or an “inaccessible blankness circumscribed by an interpretable text” (118). I hope to carry over the same remembrance to the similar telling of women’s past, but not only in her

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13 I should clarify that Hall notes that victims of diaspora are only believed to have an origin—he finds the concept of return to be as complex as I do.
literature, in her history as well. Like Spivak, I hope to “incite a degree of rage against
the imperialist narrativization of history, precisely because it produces so abject a script
for a female we would rather celebrate” (116). Because personal and collective
histories co-exist and intertwine in woman’s time, there are avenues other than the
historical narrative by which Plath and Dickinson may convert the burden of
reminiscence into a creative resurrection of the feminine voice.

**Telling to Release**

In an investigation into recent representations of colonialism in the cinema and
elsewhere, Stuart Hall wonders whether those representations can be separated from
present postcolonial conditions:

Is it only a matter of unearthing that which the colonial experience buried and
overlaid, bringing to light the hidden continuities it suppressed? Or is a quite
different practice entailed – not the rediscovery but the **production** of identity. Not
an identity grounded in the archaeology, but in the **re-telling** of the past? (393)

Plath, in her museum fears, and Dickinson, in her insistence on not only remembering but
telling, both reveal a similar aversion to the “unearthing” that linear time does to ‘correct’
the absence of women in history. It is problematic to say that we should instead impose a
narrative on that history, but it is clear that freezing it, isolating it from our present, is not
sufficient.

Hammer, for instance, decides that Plath viewed her life as a job ending in death:
she feared that if she didn’t succeed as a writer (and she had specific criteria for success),
“She would have to give her life back […] as a failing student would a scholarship” (75).

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14 Plath, according to Van Dyne, need not incite or be incited to rage, as she apparently harbors and
performs that emotion herself: in the poem “Lady Lazarus,” she uses a “poetics of rage,” but, in admitting
that it is a “performance,” it becomes too a source of “power” for transitioning into subjectivity (Van Dyne
63).
Could she give her life back, then, by *telling* it? Is one way of giving one’s life back (most obviously in suicide for Plath, but also *during* her life, I think) to provide a reminiscence, a telling—of what must be *past*—a regurgitation—like biographers do? Reminiscence, in this view, is a kind of bulimia. It has to be ugly. If woman has the responsibility of keeping the past, does she fail by telling? Is it impossible to be both a woman and a poet without betraying the responsibilities of one or the other? Reminiscence is both sustenance and poison to the woman poet.

The burden of reminiscence (and its subsequent telling) is apparent in Dickinson’s poem #462, “Why make it doubt—it hurts it so—.” The thing or idea of the poem, the never-identified “it,” “tell[s] the very last They said” (5) and in so doing is “brave” (4). Dickinson’s telling does not go far, however; it is kept to “Itself”; it is “For that dear—distant—dangerous—Sake” (7). It is a sacrifice to harbor the past without being able to give it away, and without, shockingly, the privilege of participating in the “Vision” it is afraid to “Offend” (10). As a result, the “it,” like woman, is stuck in the past, and since she can’t operate in the present or future, she is prevented from creating, from producing anything for which she can be remembered—she is in charge of remembering others, but, as the speaker mourns, “They no more remember [her]” (11). The “it” has perhaps been revealed as, or has become, the woman speaker. In the powerful last two lines, the speaker appeals to a patriarch to get him to turn behind, to look in the past—where she is—rather than continue blindly ahead into the future: “Nor ever turn to tell me why—/ Oh, Master, This is Misery—.” Man’s time not only assigns women as secretaries, but prevents men from investigating her records to help discern them, to help create even the smallest bit of meaning from them.
Dickinson's poem #1142, "The Props assist the House," as has often been noted, is a fairly transparent metaphor for the body/soul distinction: as the last line gives away, a "Soul" is what is built (12). But once more removed, the poem represents the connection between the past and the present, resulting in one of the most utopian visions of time, the kind of utopia for which I am, in this missive, hopeful. The "Props," though most obviously the body, and the "House," though most obviously the soul, may be read here as the past and the present, respectively. In building the present, the past is useful; it "assist[s]" (1). But once the present is fully and truly the present—once the moment of now is clear, "adequate, erect" (4)—it must "cease to recollect / The Auger and the Carpenter—" (6-7); the present must make use of the past, and then, ultimately, let it go. What is forgotten in the Christian sense is Christ's linear past, his role as "Carpenter"; what remains is his circular past, present and future—the image of his resurrection indicated by "Plank and Nail" (10). In an interesting reversal of other of Dickinson's poems in which she desires a slowing down,\(^{15}\) the present is delightfully sped up, contrasted with the "slowness" (11) of the "past" and the building process (12), the sifting through the past to turn it into the present. But this is a fantasy; the poet admits the near-impossibility of using the past as a tool and then coming free of it: the process she describes in poem #1142 is of "the perfected Life" (9, emphasis mine). The linear time woman is dedicated to, but also in conflict with, has thus far been able to achieve the first parts of Dickinson's vision, but cannot seem to let "the Scaffolds drop" (11).\(^{16}\)

\(^{15}\) See "The Time of Time: Dickinson's Pacing" in Chapter I.

\(^{16}\) Critics maintain that Dickinson herself certainly managed to use the literary past as a tool, despite its seeming inaccessibility. In "Emily Dickinson's Place in Literary History; or, the Public Function of a Private Poet," Ickstadt notes the lack of an American tradition for Dickinson to even have access to, bringing, for him, "the question of the literary status of Dickinson's which has accompanied the process of its canonization as a steady murmur of suppressed doubt" (55). Ickstadt convincingly contests this doubt, quoting R.P. Blackmur's dismissal of Dickinson's makeshift juvenile literary artillery: Blackmur writes
The lines "'Twere easier to die — / Than tell—" of poem #155, suggest that language itself, not just reminiscence, is a burden (4-5). Telling is so difficult that dying is easier. The other meaning of these lines rests in an inability to tell, not just a refusal. The reason "why" (3) the speaker is entranced by a bee is unexplained to the reader primarily because it is unexplained to the speaker (and poet) herself. Despite lacking the "will" (7) to tell, she encourages her audience to "Take care — for God is here" (9), not only accepting the aporia, but perhaps taking it as a sign of God's presence. God, the Creator, creates meaning out of nothing. There is no meaning but the constructed meaning. Dickinson equates God with creator, "Artist" (14), but, herself an artist-poet, equates herself with god. Furthermore, both parties are charged with reminiscence: "Artist — who drew me so — / Must tell!" (14-15). Dickinson thus elicits a number of possible readings: the "Artist" could be god, could be the speaker (self-fashioning her own life), could be the poet (Dickinson writing her speaker); and the "me" could be the speaker or the poet on the receiving end of any of those artists.

"The power to forget"

Like coin collectors, women re-collect. As though the past has been scattered, they are picking up the pieces. The fragmented pieces, like woman herself, will be displayed. The pieces serve no use; collecting is simply for having and showing. Maybe this is what women own: reminiscences, memories of all time past. We complain that the white man owned land, that he owned others, but woman owns all of his history, carries it like a baby, has every impact and no impact on it. Is this her gestation period? Is this

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that the poet used "whatever props, scaffolds, obsessive symbols, or intellectual mechanisms came to hand" (qtd. in Ickstadt, 56). Many critics, of course, including Ickstadt, Miller and Hiltner, have successfully uncovered Dickinson's carefully crafted references and allusions to a whole wealth of literary traditions, from classical mythology to Shakespeare.
Freud's incubation, what Cathy Caruth calls "latency" (17)? When is the return of the repressed woman?

All returns are curious and complicated in nature, as Dickinson articulates in poem #1454: "'Again' is of a twice / But this – is one – " (3-4). To go there—to the past, to a beginning—is to go there for the first time; the circumstances have always changed, whether you are in linear time, because there is no going back, or in circular time, because no two experiences in time are the same despite their repetition. Dickinson nonetheless attempts a return in this poem, hoping for a "Costumeless Consciousness" (10). Hall might blame this hope on the idea of the "New World" as "a narrative of displacement": he writes that, despite a "'return to the beginning'" being unattainable—"like the imaginary in Lacan"—we have an "endless desire to return to 'lost origins,' to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning" (402). There it is: the mother, the unidentifiable parent. Woman will always be attached to linear time because she serves as its beginning. The idea of a beginning is troubling to her because it is not an event but a person: her. The mother. The gender capable of creation, making something out of nothing, making a beginning out of no beginning. Dickinson cannot have a "Costumeless Consciousness": she is meant to be it (10).

Dickinson notes the touch of survivor's trauma in poem #548, but also charges God with remembrance; perhaps it is fairer that he ultimately hold it. This religion, which Dickinson could not fully adopt, is where she seemed to turn to unleash her own burden of reminiscence. If she passes it on to God, perhaps she can go about healing:

Death is potential to that Man
Who dies – and to his friend—
Beyond that – unconspicuous
To Anyone but God—
Of these Two – God remembers
The longest – for the friend –
Is integral – and therefore
Itself dissolved – of God—

Here, the survivor's trauma is much worse than the dead's. The dead get to rest in peace, death being the only true release from the weight of remembrance. Man's "friend" (2), woman, is not remembered by any but God; God doesn't pity the dead, he carries the torch for those still alive. So too must Dickinson carry the torch of women's poetry despite her predecessors being forgotten. Thus, in poem #567, she charges us with remembering, not God: "'Tis Ours – to wince – and weep— / And wonder – and decay" (9-10). She could most certainly be referring to woman; for her, maybe God was the one who assigned us reminiscence in the first place.

In poem #1464, Dickinson longs to be rid of the charge of reminiscence. She finds trivial details—"Dross" (18)—in not being able to experience reminiscence, but finds that it is worth it to be rid of the mourning that must accompany it. In its entirety, the poem forms an unsolvable riddle:

One thing of it we borrow
And promise to return—
The Booty and the Sorrow
Its Sweetness to have known—
One thing of it we covet—
The power to forget—
The Anguish of the Avarice
Defrays the Dross of it—

If the "it" is death initially (although it may be life—how are the two not parts of the same thing?), the "it" of the last line refers more immediately to "The power to forget," which is perhaps the "power to die" the speaker doesn't have in poem #754, "My Life had stood – a Loaded Gun—" (24). Wanting to forget so badly, Dickinson would
perhaps rather accept the burden of reminiscence, gladly become a secretary, if only she
could mine the past without being affected by it. As she demonstrates in so many of her
poems, the proposition is an antithesis. A sometimes-feeble memory is lamented in poem
#532. The poet desires to know "a lonelier Thing" because that is where she thinks she
will find "one other Creature / Of Heavenly Love – forgot—" (1, 10-11). Clearly, she
accepts digging through the atrocities of the past if it means she can pull out someone
who suffers like herself, perhaps another woman. But alas, these lost women are
"Retrieveless things" (5).

Dickinson, like Hall, who finds something disturbing in asking a colonized people
“to start their ‘remembering’ by first ‘forgetting’ something else” (401), refuses to tidy up
her memory to allow only the most unambiguous narratives to have a place. Poem #33
most explicitly muses on the act of reminiscence as she accepts it:

If recollecting were forgetting,
Then I remember not.
And if forgetting, recollecting,
How near I had forgot.
And if to miss, were merry,
And to mourn, were gay,
How very blithe the fingers
That gathered this, Today!

Reminiscence is a means to an end: a way of bringing the past to the fore so we can
enthusiastically push it away. In essence, this view of reminiscence makes of the past an
enemy, something we must confront and battle, not let affect us. The speaker of the
poem, however, prefers not to engage in such discrimination. She does not like to forget,
so she would rather not remember anything to forget if "recollecting" means "forgetting"
(1). Conversely, she will choose forgetting—almost ("How near I had forgot" [4,
emphasis mine])—if it means she is free to recollect. The riddle is ambiguous to a
certain degree, but its power is in its playfulness. Each line is mired in the least concrete languages of time that assert nothing and only ponder how things might have been and how they might be: "If [...] were," "Then," "if," "had," "if," "were," "if [...] were," "Today." She assertively ends with the playful promise of the present, "Today," but the present only comes about if the string of 'if's come true.

Because the poet "gathered" the poem—in past tense—she is engaging in recollection even as we read her words (8). The speaker is the poet, and she suggests that her poetry would be fulfilling, for the "fingers" who do the writing anyway, only "if": "if to miss, were merry, / And to mourn, were gay" (5-6). Missing and mourning, therefore, the first a reminiscence that looks to the future in that it connotes hope of a return, and the second a reminiscence that looks to the past in that it suggests no hope of a return (as well as a necessity to cleanse before "moving on," as the saying goes), are perhaps in no way happy engagements.

"The Courage of Shutting-Up"

Hall writes: "The past continues to speak to us" (395). For Plath and Dickinson, it does so quite literally, through the dead women in their poetry; for us, as literary critics, it does so literally as well: through the poetry of dead women. As women poet-secretaries are aware, the past does not "address us as a simple, factual 'past,' since our relation to it [...] is always constructed" (Hall 401). The idea of the past as constructed, or even re-constructed, as with Plath's vase from the end of Colossus, is inherently contradictory to the idea of the past as it is addressed in linear time. There is no going backward in linear time, no time for reconstruction. As eternity seems to just be for Plath and Dickinson, so the past just is for man's time. It needs no reconstruction; it is
restricted to the realm of cold hard facts. And if no facts exist, we leave it that way. Whatever is left of the past is stuck in "museums and archaeological sites," which, for Hall, are sites of "the barely knowable or usable 'past'" (401).

If "All the Dead Dears" is the Colossus collection's most explicit poem about the museum problem, perhaps "The Courage of Shutting-Up" functions similarly in Ariel. Shutting up, Plath tells us, takes courage. Past and present seem to converge in the two places Hammer notes crop up most frequently in Plath's work: the hospital and the museum (79). In an interesting reversal, though, the hospital is left in the past, and the museum is an emblem of the present: there is a once-"great surgeon" who is "now a tattooist," indicating that mending is in the past but memorializing with body art is the occupation of the present (10). In this poem, the body is not a museum, but rather contains a museum, is the site of a museum. The tattooist is not the one denied a voice; instead, "The surgeon is quiet, he does not speak. / He has seen too much death, his hands are full of it" (14-15). Speech and movement are inextricable from one another. Immobilized by death, the present is inactive. The surgeon and the tattooist are one; the surgeon has fallen. As a tattooist, the surgeon does not have the respect he/she once had. The purpose of tattooing, like the museum, is to commemorate, only like a surgical scar in the aesthetic. A recovered wound without the recovery. The needle leaves a mark, but never penetrates. Perhaps tattooing, then, is woman's job, as the poem will demonstrate. If the tattooist can be in the present but move effortlessly into the future (as the tattooist works for permanence), the difference between the tattooist and the surgeon is as subtle and as interchangeable as the difference between the male poet and the female poet: the
woman records, makes a mark (often an aesthetically pleasing one), while the man
penetrates, changes what is beneath the skin.

The act of preserving, of museum-making, does not seem to serve a purpose other
than trapping pain—rendering pain immobile, making it forever, out of time, but
fossilizing it, perhaps growing each time the past is re-lived. The surgeon/tattooist is
"Tattooing over and over the same blue grievances" (11) without, apparently, having any
effect. The museum, in this poem in the form of a tattoo parlor, evolves yet again to most
closely resemble the preservation of women's poetry: "the tongue, too, has been put by /
Hung up in the library" (21-22). The library, a place where the past is kept, where the
present seems almost unattainable, is a museum itself. That is, if we allow it to be—if we
allow the texts, the poetry, to remain frozen. Plath cannot quite make the books a
museum, though; the tongue is only in a museum, "hung up," a library decoration,
sharing space with "the heads of dead rabbits," themselves an example of taxidermy, of
stuffing a body so that it is seen and not heard (23). The speaker of the poem becomes a
museum patron in the next lines: "It is a marvellous object— / The things it has pierced
in its time!" (24-25). The speaker can revere the tongue's past actions (speech in
particular) because it is without the ability to act (speak) any more. It was powerful "in
its time" because its time is no more. The speaker can praise the object because it no
longer has any subjectivity; it is no longer "dangerous" (19). Ironically, Helen Sword
finds mouths, when they are visionary, to be inactive, silent: the wife in Plath's poem
"Dialogue Over a Ouija Board," she writes, "fears yet also desires a more passive role as
divine mouthpiece" (560).
The joyous condescension of praising a mummified tongue in “The Courage of Shutting-Up” disappears when danger returns, when the objects displayed are no longer lifeless. In the very next lines, the speaker worries, “But how about the eyes, the eyes, the eyes? / Mirrors can kill and talk” (26-27). The eyes, unlike the tongue, can be active. As Edgar Allen Poe’s narrator observed in “Ligeia,” another tale about a dead but returning woman, “For eyes we have no models in the remotely antique” (161). Because they cannot be mummified, eyes remind us of mortality; they are frightening mirrors until Plath’s speaker assures us: “The face that lived in this mirror is the face of a dead man” (29). Ah, now the man is dead, so the next line can read: “Do not worry about the eyes—,” leading directly into the last stanza, which, in its entirety, admits the eyes of their power before ultimately rendering them bankrupt:

They may be white and shy, they are no stool pigeons,
Their death rays folded like flags
Of a country no longer heard of,
An obstinate independency
Insolvent among the mountains.

The threat has passed: they once flew like “flags,” but now are “folded,” are not “heard.” The first line of this stanza begs for a “but” following the first comma, almost warning against underestimating the power of the eyes. They can inflict “death,” they are independent—but obstinately so. They are not immobile because they are dead; they are dead because they are immobile. Silence may very well have been a choice for them. Eyes, unlike bones, even unlike the tongue, refuse to be mummified. They are “insolvent,” cannot pay their debt because they cannot be powerful in silence without being dangerous. They are not easily displayed; they see, they are not seen.
So, as the poem moves from the tongue to the eyes, it moves from talking to looking, or seeing, which must here be read as a sort of re-seeing because the eyes are lenses that reflect: “mirrors” reminding of a “torture” (28). Shuting-up is courageous because it is a sacrifice. It takes away your speech. It forces you to look.17

Perhaps even the sacrifice of reminiscence-without-telling is not wholly silent. Cathy Caruth notes that in every trauma (and is woman’s history not traumatic?) there is “a voice that is paradoxically released through the wound” (2). She contends that “trauma is not locatable [. . .] in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on” (4). Did Plath know in what ways she was repressed? In what ways Dickinson was repressed? In what ways their predecessors were oppressed? They could not. Distance from the past allows us to be more specific, to take in the whole picture more objectively, but it also misses something that only the present can capture. Caruth puts it another way: “For history to be a history of trauma means that it is referential precisely to the extent that it is not fully perceived as it occurs; or to put it somewhat differently, that a history can be grasped only in the very inaccessibility of its occurrence” (18). Thus, woman’s circular time is both lost and located in its basis in historical trauma. Woman cannot ever escape her restrictions because they were never recorded in the present before the present became the past. If, as Caruth writes, “The story of a trauma [. . .] as the narrative of a belated experience [. . .] attests to its endless impact on a life,” we must wonder: is the trauma of feminine oppression on the American woman too much to recover? With no place to return, but returning anyway to her

17 The benefits of shutting-up are later reaped in “Tulips,” as the speaker can “imagine [the dead] / Shutting their mouths on [peacefulness], like a Communion tablet” (34-35).
records and her poetry in their study, can we expect there to be an “endless impact” on woman’s history? For now, we are only prophets.

To shed the responsibility of reminiscence, we must accept its necessity for constructing meaning. We must continue to mine the past, to look into the future, and to let our women poets speak rather than to let them *have written*. We must bring the poets into our present—they are the voice released through the wound—and we must “write back” ourselves without writing backwards (Peel 15). Pitch our poetics into space rather than time. In Chapter IV, we will examine the politics of narrating women’s poetry as a history of trauma.
IV. THE TIME OF TRAUMA

Time's wily Chargers will not wait
At any Gate but Woe's—
-from Dickinson's #1458

I have thus far attached many binaries to man's and woman's time: straight/round, linear/cyclical, historical/monumental, prosaic/poetic, and masculine/feminine. Though each is fairly problematic in its own right, none is as difficult as the binary opposition we have yet to discuss: political/personal. This is where man's and woman's time most notably collide. This is where the line of difference is imperceptible. Plath and Dickinson meet linear time head-on in the need to “un-do” historical traumas like the Holocaust, slavery, and colonialism. Simply reversing linear time does not suffice here at all; it admits defeat. If going backward signifies failure, we feel resentment at heading for the past and diving into the wreckage under the assumption of thus being allowed to go forward. In man's time, after all, there is “the impossibility of backward becoming” (Oaklander 79). This is when, not woman, as Cixous and Clement posited, but woman's time, can save us from “the entropy of language” (28). This is when we can lift out of the linear and allow past, present and future to merge: when we study trauma.

We often approach the study of women's poetry as the treatment of post-traumatic stress disorder; it's almost impossible not to. We act (sometimes truthfully, I'm sure) like we have personally been wounded and/or inflicted wounds and therefore go about patching them up. Woman's experience of time as circular has already been marked as literary/poetic, but it is also for the way we study literature and poetry that woman's time is needed. Her connection to the past—her charge to reminisce—connects her to the traumas of all humankind. Woman, as a cultural identity, suffers by proxy if she does not
suffer first-hand. ("Woman" can thus mean any one of either gender who muses on history, literary or otherwise.)

In *Is Literary History Possible?*, David Perkins outlines nineteenth-century struggles with identifying literary histories outside of a narrative requiring an "origin" (1). The "major" forms of literary history, for Perkins, are "narrative" and "encyclopedic," the latter of which comes about not from a causal ordering of history but from the need to admit that "no total explanation is possible" (121-22). Perkins places woman, along with other minorities, squarely in the narrative category rather than in the encyclopedic, which is where my conception of woman's time would put her:

The movements for liberation of women, blacks, and gays produce literary histories for the same motives, essentially, that inspired the national and regional literary histories of the nineteenth century. These groups turn to the past in search of identity, tradition, and self-understanding. Their histories do not usually stress discontinuity but the opposite. They find their own situation reflected in the past and partly explained by it, not (in their opinion) because they are projecting their situation on the past, but because the same situation of suppression or marginalization continues from the past into the present. To see it this way is part of their protest. (10)

As I have demonstrated in Chapter I, however, it is woman’s need to *use* linear time to promote her circular time, or to advocate change, that results in this seeming betrayal. We must study her history as a narrative in order to make any sense of her perceived ‘progress.’ Margaret J. M. Ezell records a similar duplicity in her book, *Writing Women’s Literary History*. Reading literature for the history it tells—and *only* for the history it tells—is troubling to both Perkins and Ezell. Ezell perfectly articulates the need to combine versions of linear and circular time. In one chapter, she marks different views of women’s literary history as French and American. For our purposes—and this is especially interesting in the study of American poets Plath and Dickinson—the former
is decidedly cyclical while the latter is described by Ezzell as “masculinist” (17). She describes the French model, advocated by Helene Cixous, as fundamentally “ahistorical” because it requires a rejection of woman’s history, while the opposing American model, advocated by Elaine Showalter, requires a decidedly political new historicist approach. Ezzell purports to combine the two, and, much like Angela Leighton, quarrels with the “assumption” that women’s writing has a history that “reveals an evolutionary model of feminism” (18). In the quest to conflate cyclical/encyclopedic time with the politically-charged time of linear history, Ezzell answers for herself in the affirmative the question she proposed in her introduction, in which she wondered whether the very model that allowed “the serious study of women’s literature” has ceased to serve its initial function and has “paradoxically” become a vehicle for the continued refusal of what might be deemed (because they have been made so) “obscure” texts that do not satisfactorily fit into “certain models of historical progress” narratives (2).

It is this very collapsing that I map out in the poetry of Dickinson and Plath. Despite the aggressive blame these poets sometimes lay on man’s time, the impossibly euphoric preference they sometimes show for woman’s time, and the discouraging incongruities they sometimes find in reconciling the two, Plath and Dickinson ultimately confirm that some conflation of these temporal perceptions is necessary if we are to locate parental figures in our literary predecessors and simultaneously overcome the necessity for origins. It seems that the key link between man’s and woman’s time is in the experiences of trauma and mourning. In both linear and cyclical time, trauma and mourning are seeped in irreconcilable complexities. For man’s time, trauma and mourning require a denial of the full-speed-ahead that is otherwise required in a linear
perception. For woman's time, trauma and mourning require a distinct separation between past and present that is normally so rejected in the constantly-renewing cycles and resurrections of circular time. "Let us," as Derrida proposes, "begin again" (65).

A History of Mourning

To write about one's own sex lays bare a personal vulnerability. The feminine pronouns "she" and "her" resonate ten-fold for me, strike a chord, touch like a miracle, prick like a needle, because they could (and are, to a limited extent) referring to me. Van Dyne notes a similar, albeit more subtle personal entanglement with Plath, as she opens her "Acknowledgements" with this disarming statement: "It has often felt like a specially designed punishment to be writing about a poet who complained incessantly about her writing blocks." Lanza bases an entire article on her personal attachment to Dickinson. In fact, nearly every female critic of both of these poets I have encountered has demonstrated at least a semblance of personal involvement in her study which is not as much a given in male-authored criticism of the same poets.

This personal-which-is-also-political is perhaps the "crucial link between literature and theory" that Caruth describes. In trying to explain why "Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience," she offers that "literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relationship between knowing and not knowing," further clarifying that the two fields find their interstices in this conundrum (3). Caruth notes the resounding effects of trauma on history: "We could say that the traumatic nature of history [emphasis mine] means that events are only historical to the extent that they implicate others. And it is thus that history has also been the suffering of others' traumas" (18). If history is the history of trauma, the designation seems to imply
that we only remember traumatic events, particularly as we are detached from them. Linear history is then marked by different points of trauma, connected on a line. The criticism of Plath’s “skill with details” we explored in Chapter III is relevant here: she can be much more specific when recollections are wound up in traumas. If one is in any time but the present—if one is open to a circular time that allows the experience of past and future in the present—one must always be at least aware that things are not always peaceful. Peace requires one to ignore, to block out what’s happening “around.”

Dickinson combines the curious pacing of time and the unhappy process of mourning in poem #1458:

Time’s wily Chargers will not wait
At any Gate but Woe’s—
But there – so gloat to hesitate
They will not stir for blows—

This poem is written in man’s time, as the masculine “Chargers” suggest: time is like a war-lord, sending his soldiers to penetrate through an infinite number of “Gate[s].” Perhaps out of a kind of reverence, though, they cease fire in the presence of “Woe.” In man’s time, traumatic experiences like death are the only exception to the forward drive into explosion. Only in mourning is one allowed to step outside of time. Then it becomes woman’s time of waiting.

In poem #63, “If pain for peace prepares,” Dickinson explores trauma as a waiting game. In trauma, man’s time is somewhat reversed, in seasons and the cycle of the day. This reversed time is healing, moves toward a “peace” that is, arguably, like a beginning, but perhaps more like a morning—not a re-birth, a resurrection (1). The speaker will endure hardship—the worse the better—in hope of greater futures. She endures “pain” in the first stanza, “winter” in the second, and “night” in the third, seemingly hopeful that
each can be cashed in for “peace,” “spring,” and “noon” (1, 4, 7, 1, 4, 7). Each of these first three stanzas, however, begins with an “If,” making the final “When” that begins the fourth and final stanza (10) a rather disbelieving one. In succession, each stanza contains a less and less distinct binary opposition. Pain and peace seem opposite enough, and the latter clearly privileged; the next binary, spring/winter, requires a simple deduction: you must equate winter with death and spring with life to agree that the latter is always privileged; and finally, the night/day opposition relies almost completely on ambiguous cultural representations: night is dark, day is light, dark is bad, light is good. Not only that, but the suffering of pain, winter, and night culminates in their being replaced instead with “Noons blaz[ing]” (12) “from a thousand skies” (10). The speaker is met in the after-life with a fuller perspective, as we have seen in other of her poems, but being blasted with rays of sunshine from every direction is not quite the heaven she might have hoped for. If the “Noons blaze,” perhaps they can blaze her. The ultimate drying out comes in the flash of a too-bright sun, comparable, perhaps, to the slow agony of being stripped of one’s wetness bit by bit. Sharon Cameron claims that “loss” is what Dickinson’s poems “attempt to reverse” (260). If trauma is only reversed linearly, however, it retains the explosion of man’s time. A ‘return’ is perhaps not the best method; there is no wiping out a trauma without wiping out the self.

For Dickinson, the concept of historical trauma is pared down to its most elementary emotion: grief. Judith Butler rightly notes in *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* that “Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing. But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order” (22). In sync with Butler’s politicizing of
grief, Dickinson's poem #561, "I measure every Grief I meet," explores the issue of grief, but more specifically the universality of it ("The Grieved – are many – " [25]), and even more specifically, the speaker's interest in observing it in others. She suggests that "Years"—time—may relieve pain if they are sufficiently "piled"—if enough time has passed—but only "wonder[s] if" this is possible (17). The heavy image of the crushing years gives her away: with time, pain becomes "larger" (23); her own pain "weighs" (3). Living with the weight, she insinuates in the third stanza, is worse than dying. Perhaps most notable about the nature of grief as revealed in this poem is that it has no clear beginning: "I could not tell the Date of Mine—" (7). It has no beginning, however, she tells us in the next line, because "It feels so old" (8). It is as though, stuck on a single point in linear time, she cannot see far enough behind or beyond. The ending too is un(fo)reseeable: she imagines others, in their grief, will "go on... / Through Centuries" (21-22). Here, the end does not exist because she cannot see it; she has no proof.

Somehow, though, a different kind of faith falters not, as the last stanza of the poem paints a gloss of piety over these unfair experiences of pain: they are "Cross[es]" to be "worn" (37-38).

Perhaps the most disturbing type of grief Dickinson lists in this poem is "Banishment," a kind of exile, but an ambiguous one: the banishment is "from native Eyes— / In sight of Native Air" (31-32). It is unclear whether the eyes are doing the banishing, leaving the banished invisible, or the banished is banished from seeing. The bearer of grief is stricken either because he/she cannot see or because he/she cannot be seen. Most likely, Dickinson intends both readings. Grief comes from being both blind and invisible, which is worse than being dead. The speaker aligns herself with those
blind and invisible, admitting it possible she cannot properly dissect their pains—she
“may not guess the kind” (33)—but finds “Comfort” (35) in “not[ing] the fashions – of
the Cross—” (37). Here Dickinson resorts to the methodical cataloguing expected of her
as secretary. The “Comfort” is perhaps a meager one, and certainly a “piercing” one
(35), comforting only in its distraction from the lack of meaning, the lack of beginning or
end to grief. The frustration of not being able to explain the causes and meanings for the
burden of grief is wiped away in that last stanza—she seems to hope against hope that,
despite the elusiveness of meaning in the present, the future will hold some kind of
reward, some kind of heaven. As she has already revealed the unpredictability of the
future, however, the reference to the “Cross” seems a futile attempt at explaining aporia
away with religion. We cannot know; we are not supposed to know.

The Hysteria of Trauma

Woman’s circular time, Kristeva writes, is preferable for the “hysteric” because
the time of history, man’s time, inevitably leads to death, and thus, she claims, could be
termed, by a psychoanalyst at least, “obsessional time” (17). A significant issue for the
hysteric is “suffer[ing] from reminiscences” and also preferring to “recognize
[him/herself] in the anterior temporal modalities: cyclical or monumental” (17). Kristeva
relates the borderline obsessive primarily to linear time, but only in connection with the
tensions between it and monumental/cursive time. If reminiscences are “suffered” by
hysterics because they prefer woman’s time but are in man’s world, then the gendered
association with the word “hysteric” becomes clear. Historically, of course, the word is
not a happy one, but rather an uncomfortable reminder of its sexist origins. Patricia
Yaeger worries that her claiming of the word “honey-mad women” to be used in the
critical paradigm may be dangerous, asking: “Does the archetype of the ‘honey-mad’
woman writer invite a return to hysteria, to the ‘powers of the weak’?” (241) She
ultimately answers in the negative, citing Gilbert and Gubar’s use of the phrase
“madwoman,” which has become a part of our lexicon without any detrimental effects.
She has no qualms about her phrase representing a “female delirium,” because it is not
“mindless” delirium, it is “playful” (242).

In a September 26, 2006 article in The New York Times entitled “Is Hysteria Real?
Brain Images Say Yes,” Erika Kinetz, as the title suggests, claims that “hysteria never
vanished” in the medical field, but only lost social popularity because “the word itself
seems murky, more than a little misogynistic and all too indebted to the theorizing of the
now-unfashionable Freud.” The article is rooted in the science of the mind/body
connection, which is increasingly explored as science catches up with Freud. From a
medical standpoint, diagnosis of the illness has apparently never stopped, but another
term has been designated for it because of the negative correlation between hysteria and
women. The ‘new’ term, “conversion disorder,” was coined by Freud, who suggested
that “the body might be playing out the dramas of the mind”—the “conversion” is the
transformation of “unresolved, unconscious conflict [. . .] into symbolic physical
symptoms.” Interestingly enough, the illness seems to be a catchall for the “medically
unexplained,” common symptoms including “blindness, paralysis or seizures,” the very
symptoms we find both desired and feared in the woman poet. The fragility with which

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Kinetz concedes, it may be important to note, that the concept of the hysteric, prior to these new studies,
was “useful for literary analysis but surely out of place in the serious reaches of contemporary science.”
Adept though this statement may be, particularly in conjunction with its proximity to the jab at the
dethroned Freud (who retains his authority in practically no other field of study but our own), it also serves
as a striking example of literature’s seeming dissent from the history of other fields. No matter how the
nature of the criticism evolves, its reliance on the past separates it from the linear time of history.
many critics thus approach the woman poet is unnerving. Dickinson’s and Plath’s poetry
is personal, but to analyze them as temperamental, mentally disturbed artists insinuates
that we ought to take care of or pity them. Admire her but mother her, the hysterical
woman poet. We are coyly operating in woman’s time when we claim to be mothers for
our predecessors.

Hysteria may rightly be a reaction to a trauma, and many of the critics seem to be
in agreement with me, but it is often unfairly interpreted as a psychological anomaly
rather than a normal reaction to an abnormal event. As Laura S. Brown contends, the
very definition of trauma is vexed because it requires an abnormal event: this language
excludes all-too-common events like rape from being properly categorized as traumatic
events. Brown attests that trauma can be experienced by those not directly involved in
the traumatic event itself. For example, “many women who have never been raped have
symptoms of rape trauma” because the act is so common, other women have exposed
them to its horrors (103). Additionally, “Post-traumatic symptoms can be
intergenerational, as in the case of children of survivors of the Nazi Holocaust” (108).

Perhaps Rose would agree that this is the type of trauma Plath reacts to when she writes
Holocaust images, “evoking that piece of collective memory which it is hardest for the
culture to recall, hardest for those who did not live through it” (8). Noting the common
accusation that Plath “trivializ[es] history and aggrandiz[es] herself,” Rose counters the
accusation by suggesting that Plath’s historical references are, in their seeming minutiae,
rather more like the unconscious surfacing that happens with the “return of the repressed
– a fragment of the cultural unconscious that will not go away” (7-8).
I find just such a return in the literal surfacing of an “Old man” in Plath’s “Full Fathom Five” (C 1). The old man washes up on shore from the ocean, but “seldom” does so (1). Here, the speaker observes the surfacing in a lucky sighting, as “rumor” has it that the old man was permanently “buri[ed]” (21-22). In his “reappearance,” the old man seems older than time itself: “For the archaic trenched lines / Of your grained face shed time in runnels: / Ages beat like rains” (25-27). If the old man is (or contains) history, his burial is impossible. He sinks into the subconscious of the sea, but not for everyone, not forever. Plath’s speaker calls the old man “Father,” perhaps because he contains all the forefathers of history, perhaps because he is Father Time (44). But he is also, significantly, “not once / Seen by any man who kept his head” (37-38). To remain sane, one must be blind to any such return. But woman is not blind. In her circular time, she is allowed acquaintance with the past, with this old man who lives in the feminine sea. In man’s time, on “dry” land, however, she is “exiled” (41-42), prevented from her own similar return. Naturally, one might become hysterical as a result, harboring without telling, seeing without speaking, shrieking without explaining.

The Culture of History

In the poem “Letter in November,” Plath’s speaker declares about “old corpses” that she “love[s] them like history” (A 21-23). If woman’s history is, literally and metaphorically, a mere pile of dead bodies, the body is a site of history. In studying poetry, we shut poets up. Women poets in particular are frozen in time, as woman’s evolution cannot be ignored in the study of her poetry. Biographical readings are by no means limited to women’s poetry, but the most basic part of biography—the gender of the poet—is nearly impossible to ignore when the poet is a woman. But we can’t freeze
poets in time, as poetry has to have a presence, has to be alive and moving. Measuring her only against the limitations she faced is measuring her only to measure ourselves, to be sure that her limitations are no longer our own. The poems, then, do not talk, they do not even write, they have only been written. If we let their poems talk—and this is where our fears come in—they cannot be relics, they cannot be hidden behind glass in a museum. We are afraid they will come alive at night. We prefer to say, ‘Oh, look what women had to go through then.’ We are afraid to say ‘Look what Plath is writing, look what she is going through.’ If she is still going through it, we have to be sorry. And we are already sorry enough; we are done being sorry; sorry is for the past. Jacqueline Rose describes it best in The Haunting of Sylvia Plath: “Plath is a ghost of our culture [. . .] because of what she leads that culture to reveal about itself” (6). Notice how Rose at first identifies with culture (“our”) and then distances herself from it (“that”). When Plath and Dickinson are strictly emblems of a time when patriarchy had a firm and visible hold on women’s lives—when they remain safely in the past—we can embrace them. When the woman poet works her way into the present, however, and starts becoming relevant to a time in which we pretend there is no patriarchy, she is a ghost, separate from us, different, dead but alive, dangerous, Other.

Woman cannot stretch across time in evolution because when we read her now, we cannot fully equate her with the present—though her poetry transcends this—not only because our culture has changed, but because she has changed. Rose writes of a “residue of subjectivity” resulting from competing images of woman as victim and woman as sexual being:

This residue is historical, political. Not just because the personal is political [. . .] but because psychic life in itself will not be relegated to the private, it will not stay
in its proper place. It shows up on the side of the historical reality to which it is often opposed. Nowhere is this clearer than in Plath’s own use of historical reference. (7)

Rose also admits that Plath has a “dynamic relation to her culture,” concluding that much of her journal writing consists of insightful attempts at “reading her culture” (2). Because there were so many “meanings for female experience available in her culture” and because they seldom aligned, Rose thinks that “the female subject, like any other, does not preexist her awareness of culture, but, rather, emerges as a product of historicized experience” (2). The female subject is, then, unavoidably, a child with myriad and unidentifiable parents.

**Finding Parents, Finding Successors: Beginning from Non-Origins**

The fears of being displayed in a museum I have mapped out are especially present for a student of poetry, one who is constantly looking at the past (that was looking at the future); the student of poetry studies others’ successful efforts at posterity. Indeed, the need to study the past is not strictly a woman’s charge and certainly has its linear uses for pinpointing origins and beginnings. Mutlu Konuk Blasing thinks we inadequately pin Emerson, for example, as our American “father” simply because we think we need one (1). In the article “James Merrill, Sylvia Plath, and the Poetics of Ouija,” Helen Sword suggests that Plath’s interest in the occult was “a way of making contact with [her] poetic fathers: with the modernist poets, that is, whose works and examples most deeply influenced their own at the time” (569). Sword is no doubt referring particularly to Plath’s intricate ties to Yeats. The irony, of course, is that, as visionaries, the modernists looked to the future, but Plath’s looking at them—the very study of poetry itself—involves an inescapable looking back. Sword earlier asserts that
Plath associates "prophetic vision" with "romance," and that poems like "Ouija" "bemoan" the absence of prophecy (559). Studying poet-prophets and being a poet-prophet seem to be mutually exclusive. Being a prophet means escaping time constraints, being in the future. There's the sense, for Sword, that tapping into the ability of past prophets is a failing; that you cannot be in the future if you are hung up on the past. I argue, however, that prophetic forward-looking is distinctly different from the kind of linear forward-looking that requires tunnel vision and perhaps even from the kind of circular resurrection that relishes ambiguity; it transcends time. Rose finds just such a vexed reconciliation of man's and woman's time in the "moments of prophecy" impeded by "fragmentation" that she finds not in Plath's poetry, or even in her prose, but in a decidedly political collage she made in 1960 (9). The art work serves for Rose as a visual example of the theme of the "inseparability of history and subjectivity" (7). Robin Peel finds similar art in the construction of Plath's words, which form "a verbal collage," indicating that Plath is "informed, not governed by the available discourses" (121).

Exploring planes beyond the seemingly two-dimensional paper-bound written word was common for Dickinson as well. Her organization of her poems was more "manuscript art" than conventional binding, a fact which has contributed to the raging debate over the proper format in which to print Dickinson's poems (Miller, "Whose Dickinson?" 232).

The question of poet-prophets as poetic fathers and mothers is vexed for both Dickinson and Plath. Both grasp at parents for instruction, example, and answers; but in hoping to become poetic parents themselves, they must hope to surpass them as well, realizing there may be no other way than to strip them of their significance. John Cody, for instance, finds the overpowering "Mountains" that "straight reply" in "My Life had
stood—a Loaded gun—" to be representative of the feminine, but specifically of women writers such as George Eliot and the Bronte sisters (407-08). Gilbert and Gubar notes that the female who “rise[s]” to patriarchy—specifically a mother, I think, specifically one who is canonized in man’s literary history—is an enemy as well as a friend for the speaker of that poem (610).

The woman poet becomes more than a mother to Dickinson in poem #312. She takes on queenly/godly status. The quotation marks Dickinson places in the first line are indicative in themselves of the endurance of feminine poetry: “Her – ‘last Poems’—.” The woman poet is “Not on Record” (4) and we, trying too “Late” to “Praise” her (11), find that the process is “dull” (11); we cannot dredge up the appropriate enthusiasm for one who couldn’t have garnered the appropriate respect from us even in her present time. To try to go back and insert her is so useless, so feeble, it is insulting. She can speak to us from the grave—what mean we by trying to speak up for her? She speaks for herself; do not belittle and patronize her by thinking that a rewriting is noble. Her “Head” is “too High to Crown” (13); we cannot lift her up because we could not strike her down, “Be its Grave – sufficient sign— / Nought – that We – No Poet’s Kinsman— / Suffocate –” (15-17). Nothing could “Put Her down,” this poet queen (19).

If a queen is a mother to a country, the individual becomes the political subject of her mothers, biological, historical, and literary. Plath’s reverence for such a mother is diluted. Whereas Dickinson elevates the past woman poet beyond reach, Plath hopefully strives to elevate herself right along with them, risking a number of injuries in the process, and recognizing the duality of such a task, as noted by Van Dyne: Plath “constantly rewrote her literary genealogy, searching for poetic foremothers but
simultaneously fearing their precedence, enviously recording her female contemporaries’ success and vowing to eclipse it” (4). In a reading of Plath’s “The Swarm,” Yaeger finds that beekeeping is the “objective correlative” for “The founding of modern civilization on mob violence and patriarchal restraint” (274). In the bee sequence, however, I find beekeeping to be an attempt at extracting meaning from that violent founding. I propose that Plath’s bee sequence contains an apt description of the dual/duel-istic search for poetic mothers: as much as a poetic mother might help her find honey, she may also sting her if she proves a worthy rival, hence the ambiguous bitter-sweetness inherent in the speaker’s relationship with bees many critics have noted in the “terror” (Bundtzen 177) and the “excitement” (Holbrook 222) they seem to bring.

In “The Bee Meeting,” the speaker enters the past hesitantly; then, in “The Arrival of the Bee Box,” she remains safely a detached student of poetry (acting as a mother to her mothers); in “Stings,” she willingly mines the past to extract it and bring it into the present; and finally, in “Wintering,” returns successfully to the present with women inserted into history, but only to discover that such a victory is unsatisfactory in man’s linear time. I have already noted that honey seems to be one form of wetness that Plath seeks out to prevent dryness and immobilization, but in this context it becomes even more significant: honey, and the bees who produce and protect it, represents women’s poetry as well as the “meaning” woman is denied in her cataloguing of the past. Ultimately successful in obtaining the first kind of honey, the latter remains disappointingly unobtainable.

In “The Bee Meeting,” it is the “secretary of bees” who supplies her protective gear (A 7), protecting, perhaps, against honey rather than against the bees—the secretary,
after all, is “of” the bees—managing them, certainly, but perhaps one of them as well (7). This first poem of the sequence is akin to dealing with the past in linear time—it requires separation and protection. In the next poem, however, the speaker uses this mastery of separation as a means of reducing her fear of the past—which is here a feminine literary past specifically. The past has not been stripped of its voice in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” in the way Plath has feared for herself, but in this it is even more “appal[ling]” (17): the bees—all of history, some of which involves women poets—and the honey they produce and protect—the meaning of that past history—might as well not have a voice, useless as it is (useless as Plath’s noisy babies), all in “unintelligible syllables” (18). Though she is undoubtedly overwhelmed by the mass of bees, she begins to see that they are “Small, taken one by one” (20). Each event, each poet, must be handled carefully and slowly. The past is manageable, but it takes attention to detail, and it takes time. Linear time remains a tool in this poem, allowing the speaker to study the events without feeling their stings, but it is also a barrier separating her from being able to discern their voices. By the end of the poem, Plath’s speaker garners the courage—or perhaps simply the wisdom—to cast off protective linear time, perhaps only because she has nothing to lose (she is “no source of honey” [33]). “The box,” she concludes, “is only temporary” (36). Linear time is only temporary.

The poem “Stings” begins with the speaker “Bare-handed” (1), and though she acts as a secretary meticulously detailing the “cells” to assist a “man” (6, 2), she becomes increasingly “in control” in this circular time (32). The cells are like “fossils,” and the speaker wonders if, in all this history, she will be able to extract a mother, a woman poet, a “queen,” musing that “If” she can find one, “she is old” (12, 15, 16). Unlike Dickinson,
who placed literary mothers beyond our present reach, Plath fears that our neglect has 
rotted them, that they need our recognition, and, lacking it, have become “unqueenly and 
even shameful” (19). Once found, however, once dug out of the past, she is a “honey-
machine” generating meaning, generating more women poets, and she does it with 
details, “As the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea” (37). In this circular time, in 
this slow, simultaneous existence of past, present and future, Plath’s speaker observes a 
“he” who appears and disappears in the space of only three lines (38-40). His brief 
entrance into woman’s time appears to be for reproductive purposes only, for “Tugging 
the world to fruit” (47). Perhaps representative of the collective patriarch who denied the 
queen her crown in the past, the mysterious interloper is “a great scapegoat” (41). 
Unable to visit the past without being blamed, without being “found out” and distorted, 
he has no choice but to move steadfastly on to the future “In eight great bounds” (48, 41). 
As much as woman is relegated to her circular time of cycles, so man is chained to linear 
time for his guilt, a subtle but significant acknowledgment for a poet so often accused of 
unbridled rage against men. For Plath, he is no perpetrator, he has redeeming “features” 
that the past distorts, he has only been made a “scapegoat” (50, 41). It is the past, the 
bees, after all, not woman, who “found him out” (48). 

In the circular, cyclical, seasonal time of “Wintering,” then, there are only 
women. Having won the woman poet a place in history, Plath’s speaker declares that 
“This is the easy time, there is nothing doing” (1). The irony, however, is that although 
she has successfully extracted women poets to glean their honey, to insert them properly 
into history, she has also had to preserve them in “jars” (4). She has made a museum out 
of her poetic mothers. She understands that, though she now contains them, “It is they
who own [her]” (19). She has to produce her own honey now, join the ranks of queen bees before her, “To make up for the honey [she’s] taken” (26). The honey of the women poets that was so victoriously extracted is now only displayed “Next to the last tenant’s rancid jam” (8). This is Kristeva’s disappointment with merely being inserted into linear history rather than refusing that history altogether. The third stanza begins to indicate the speaker’s resulting retreat back into her own circular time: “This is the room I have never been in. / This is the room I could never breathe in” (11-12). Both statements can only be true in circular time, although it is perhaps linear time she is referring to—she was once oppressed, excluded from man’s time of history. Going back to a time in history when women were not previously allowed and now suddenly are does not seem to shed any meaning or un-do any of the repression; there is still “No light” (14). The queen, the woman poet, has been lifted out, but what about the others? That “woman” who is not a queen is “still at her knitting,” she is still “too dumb to think” (43, 45). The bodies of women cannot be brought back to life, even if her words can. She will remain in the past, forever uneducated.

According to Peel, Plath and Hughes required a degree of solitude in order to pursue writing as poet-prophets who “identify with the nineteenth-century Romantic model of the poet as seer and transcendent magician whose wand is language” (20). The “voluntary isolation,” however, was “more congenial to Hughes than it was to Plath” (20), but the woman poet nonetheless embraced the opportunities it gave her for “self-analysis” (20). A self-inflicted shutting-up, a hermitlike retreat into oneself, a hiding away from present society to tap into a past one and a future one, is a curious attempt at operating in circular time for linear results. The meaning of the title for the last poem in
Plath’s *Ariel* collection, then, refers to “Wintering” that is not only cyclically seasonal, but cyclically resurrectional—but the “spring,” the beginning that is not a beginning, like a morning, is only something the bees—the past—can “taste” (50). Nature’s seasons always repeat, but Plath refers to a spring that is less certain, that may not see “the hive survive” (46). Anticipating the results of the entry of woman’s history into man’s time, Plath suggests that a proper meeting between woman’s time and man’s time may be disastrous, may be as explosive and as anti-resurrectional as Yeats’ “Second Coming.” Because “Winter is for women” (42), the time of preserving honey, the time when “there is nothing doing” (1), when waiting is for women, when woman’s time is to wait, the woman poet has ironically been charged with reminiscence in a way that makes her responsible for a cannibalistic museum-making: in having to wait and to preserve, she begins to do to others what she fears will be done to her.
CONCLUSIONS

There are two perceptions of time. Man's time represents the dominant ideology and the need for constant forward-looking; it steadily increases in pace; it requires clearly marked beginnings, middles, and ends in the narration of history; the beginning must be blank, the middle must simply connect the cause to the effect without extraneous complications, and the end must be explosive. Woman's time is composed of cycles; it is marked by resurrections (not re-births); it is dynamic in pacing; it is fraught with inexplicable details; it is multi-voiced and messily so. I have divided the different perceptions of time into gender because the dominant linear time is constructed within the patriarchy, and the alternative circular time has arisen from that patriarchy's charge upon woman to reminisce.

On the one hand, women need the past just as much as men do: for the sake of history—for the sake of not forgetting, of charting evolutions, of establishing and breaking traditions, of rewriting it, of having something distant to dissect (from distance we gain truth, a broader perspective), of building, of learning. On the other hand, women have a powerful need to leave the past in the past, which is, ironically, what the linear begs them to do; the man forges ahead but needs woman as his secretary so his progresses are not lost, are tracked; he has to accumulate like a rolling snowball. Both men and women have 'baggage' they want and need to get away from (it is unfair and grossly inaccurate to suggest that this applies only to women). Woman alone cannot be assigned to the task of reminiscing without the power to dissect it. To be released from these duties, as a culture, is not to strive for a clean slate. There is no isolated text independent of social, cultural, and historical contexts. But with a more circular
approach to our perception of time, linear restraints may be loosened. Ironically, it is the
doubly burdened woman poet who may provide the bridge that reconciles man’s and
woman’s times. The woman poet is doubly burdened, because both women and poets are
charged with reminiscence, with mining the past, with reflecting, with recollecting. She
wants to shed the woman’s burden while accepting the poet’s as a responsibility. For
Dickinson, the responsibility is more clearly to society and art in general, whereas Plath’s
is shaded with a self-imposed responsibility.

In Plath’s and Dickinson’s poetry, the fallacies of linear time are exposed. While, for
example, man’s time requires a sudden explosion to mark the end, Plath and
Dickinson recognize the subtle slowing down and drying out in our bodies that indicates
a gradual winding down but a coinciding lifting up. Thus, there is no end; there are only
cycles which renew moisture. For Plath, the survival of literary history itself proves
immortality; for Dickinson, the promise of an afterlife defies linear time. Though the
relationship between poetic mothers and daughters is vexed (for these poets as well as for
ourselves), it is clear that they can communicate with each other across time, despite the
seemingly linear evolution of woman across time as she is rejected and then accepted into
the canon.

We cannot preserve the woman poet, but we cannot forget her either. We must
resurrect her, let her poetry continue to live and inform rather than hang it up on a
museum wall to be studied and admired. Woman’s time can let us have a morning that is
not blank. Woman’s time can let us continue to the end without fear of exploding; the
morning will come again, and although we may not be able to explain it, we must allow
poets to try—the danger of man’s time is not an explosion, but the implosion that will result from refusing to let one speak the past rather than display it.
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