Writing Through The Body:
Autobiography, Femininity And Organization

*Stream 3: Organization / Literature: Beyond Equivalence and Antinomy*

**Beverly Metcalfe**

*University of Manchester*

Institute for Development Policy and Management (IDPM)
University of Manchester
Crawford house
Oxford Road
Manchester
M13 8GH
[Bevemry.Metcalfe@man.ac.uk](mailto:Bevemry.Metcalfe@man.ac.uk)
Tel. 0161 2752812
Fax. 1061 2738829
Beverly Metcalfe is a Lecturer in IDPM. Her research interests are concerned with gender, management and organisations specifically gender and identity; feminist theory, especially Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous; international diversity and global feminisms. She is currently involved in research projects examining the social and organisational position of women in Singapore and Russia.
Writing Through the Body:
Autobiography, Femininity and Organization

Abstract

Examinations of feminine identity within organisation and social contexts has tended to ignore the materiality and specificity of gendered bodies and sexual practices. Locating the analysis within a feminist post-structuralist theoretical stance the aim of this paper will be to draw on the reconstructive nature of Luce Irigaray’s feminine writings and link them to the confessional/autobiographical writings of Sylvia Plath. I use Plath to demonstrate how her poetry is a site of struggle and resistance, a medium through which she can articulate a feminist consciousness, so as to explore female embodied identity and sexuality. I suggest that poetic texts can thus represent a medium through which we can attempt to disrupt and modify organisation and sexual discourses, and provide for a fleeting moment glimpses of a feminine identity.

1 The use of the use word feminine does not necessarily infer essentialism, rather Irigaray’s intention is to use the term as a mimetic strategy to destabilise masculine constructions of language (See Moi, 1985: 129-135; Butler 1993: 36-49; Schor, 1994; Price and Shildrick 1999:2-14)
Writing Through the Body:
Autobiography, Femininity and Organization

‘I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:
This new absolutely white person and the old yellow on.
And the white person is certainly the superior one.
She doesn’t need food, she is one of the real saints….

And it was who attracted everybody’s attention,
Not her whiteness or her beauty, as I had first supposed.
I patronised her a little, and she lapped it up—
You could tell almost at once she had a slave mentality’
(In Plaster, Sylvia Plath, Written 1961 in Crossing the Water Published 1971 p 30)

Introduction

In organisational settings women’s subordinated position is clear and yet it is only in the last
decade critical accounts of sexual identity and organisation have begun to emerge
(Sheppard, 1989; Mills and Tancred, 1992; Hearn and Parkin, 1995). Critical discourses
have approached managerial and organisation theorising in an asexual way and ignored the
fact that the conditions of work life have been created, for men, by men. Texts have drawn
heavily on masculinist assumptions, whether discussing managerial qualities such as decision
making, risk taking and entrepreneurial flair and generally concluding that when critiquing
managing and organising we are defining male characteristics and attitudes (Collinson and
Hearn, 1994; Kerfoot and Knights, 1998). When we think about women it is usually about
how they can support men in their managerial capacity, act as aesthetic and symbolic
accessories in organisations and finally how women are different to men, and in emphasising
difference we infer deference.

The voice of women and female identity has been invisible as researchers have focused on
sexual segregation, class relations and more broadly, on patriarchy and capitalism, and yet
we still lack an adequate theory of gender identity in organisations and its role in creating and
reproducing relations of power (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998; Jackson and Scott, 2001).
One particular theme of the gender, management and organisation terrain has sought to
elucidate on the ways in which women’s presence in organisational settings is entombed
within prevailing masculinist discourses. Drawing on principally Foucauldian frameworks,
critiques of female identity have focused on the management of gendered organisational
bodies and sought to uncover the myriad of ways in which disciplinary processes script and
re-write women’s identities (For example, Taylor and Tyler, 1998; Trethaway, 1999;
Bordo, 1999). This line of inquiry seemed to disappear the body (See Jackson and Scott,
2001: 10-11; Marshall, 1996) and paid no attention to the ambiguities surrounding the
constructions of organisation and social identities and the experiencing of embodied
individuals through time and space. A move I feel in the right direction is the work of feminist

---

2 In March 1961 Plath spent a week in hospital undergoing an appendectomy. The patient in the next bed was
complete in plaster (Hughes comment in Plath 1981: 291). The In Plaster poem represents Plath’s struggle in relation
to her acceptance of her woman’s body and her perceived lack of creative and artistic power.
and organisation theorists who have begun to examine the lived experience of embodiment, and how this can help inform sociological investigations of embodied subjectivity (See for example Dale, 2001; Metcalfe, 2001 organisation perspectives and Jackson and Scott, 2001; Witz, 2000; Marshall, 1996; Gatens, 1997 for feminist perspectives). In particular commentators have been keen to illustrate how theorists have ignored the materiality and specificity of gendered bodies and sexual practices (Metcalfe, 2001; Scott and Jackson, 2001). It is the experiencing of material and real gendered bodies and how this can advance our understandings of bodily identity and subjectivity in organisation and social contexts that this paper is concerned with. Rather than focus on case study material the vehicle of investigation will be the narratives of a female poet travelling in a male literary world, Sylvia Plath. I suggest that feminist writings and the moves to ‘bring the body back in’ (Howson and Inglis, 2000) offer the potential to regenerate new gender debates in management and organisations literatures. Flowing from feminist theorists concerns to write the bodies of women, and write femininity, so as to elucidate more nuanced understandings of selves and identities, my approach rests on the navigations of female textual narratives or autobiographies. I label this technique writing through the body.

Locating the analysis within a feminist post-structuralist theoretical stance the aim of this paper will be to draw on the reconstructive nature of Luce Irigaray’s feminine writings and link them to the confessional writings of Sylvia Plath. I use Plath to demonstrate how her poetry is a site of struggle and resistance, a medium through which she can articulate a feminist consciousness, so as to explore female identity and sexuality. In focusing on poetical text, significantly confessional narratives, my feminist theorising will be concerned with drawing out, and drawing on, Plath’s self (re)-constructions of the female body and female sensibilities. There are good reasons for linking the writings of Luce Irigaray and Plath together, both theoretically and also in embodied and textual ways. Luce Irigaray’s writings have always been labelled as poetic because of the way in which she uses highly creative prose, and urges readers to challenge phallocentric language structures. Throughout her writings Luce Irigaray makes many references to the way certain literatures had revealed things to her, assisting her to define human relationships to the ‘air, sea, earth and fire’ thus exposing the myriad of ways in which we have difficulties in:

‘.. revealing and hiding something of our identity, situating ourselves, in relation to ourselves and fellows, something of the dramas and spells, that captivate us, capture us, blind us and separate us’ (1993: 67, See also Luce Irigaray 2000: 60-62). 4

Luce Irigaray further continues:

‘Poetry recalls the elements-as does science does in a different way- endlessly defining new material principles that compose and form our environment without our naming them or perceiving them, any least consciously’ (1993: 57-58).

---

3 The use of the use word feminine does not necessarily infer essentialism, rather Irigaray’s intention is to use the term as a mimetic strategy to destabilise masculine constructions of language (See Moi, 1985: 129-135; Butler 1993: 36-49; Schor, 1994; Price and Shildrick 1999: 2-14)

4 This reflection is based on her remembering what is like to first read Melusine and The Little Mermaid.
Luce Irigaray takes and learns from literature, and like Adrienne Rich articulates a sense of ‘what I know I know through making poems’, poetry is an instrument for exploring ‘embodied experience’ (in Yorke, 1997: 22-23). This textual openness thus reveals evolving forms of lived and living subjectivities. The same glimpses of embodied subjectivities can be discerned from Plath’s poetical writings. For both Plath and Luce Irigaray the body of the writer plays an important role in the textual product. The body is both the product and the communicator of the culturally specific symbols and values that play a crucial role in determining who one is. In writing through the body Plath and Luce Irigaray encourage us to unveil and interrogate the links between body/sexuality and text and so invite (re)interpretations of phallocentrism, in both ideological and material forms as well as reach out to a literary self-consciousness, a ‘productive space’ for a female voice.

In the following discussion I firstly relate confessional modes of writing to Luce Irigaray’s theoretical concerns to articulate an I, so as to expose the way in which the feminine is constructed as residue excess, other in dominant discourses. I suggest that writing can be a form of resistance to dominant masculine modes of control and order, and that gendered and sexual bodies, cannot, and should not, be separated from gendered, sexual and social selves (See Jackson and Scott, 2001). I then turn to explore how the mirror metaphor is central to constructing female identity and sexuality in both Luce Irigaray and Plath’s work. I suggest that writing femininity, writing bodies and writing ourselves does provide some space for expressing otherness, and opens up new territories for women in organisation contexts, but only for a fleeting moment since masculinist constructionist orthodoxy pervades in all literary and organisation discourses. In essence I use the poem along with other poetical writings to demonstrate how the plaster is a masculine dress obscuring and controlling the ‘feminine imaginary’.

Self-Disclosure, Body and Text

A creative and dynamic way to explore feminine identity is to use literary texts which represent reflective and personal accounts of the authors self-discovery. This strand of analysis follows recent feminist writings on the role of autobiography in social science investigations since it emphasises women’s experiences as a vital resource in the creation of women’s knowledge (See for example Stanley, 1992; Yorke, 1997; Cosslett et al, 2000). A perfect candidate for literary self-reflexivity is Sylvia Plath. The extracts from Plath’s poem at the beginning of this paper expresses how she, and indeed, how other women deny their true sexuality by constructing a ‘plaster’, a ‘surface of femininity’ (Bartky, 1997). They perform this slavishly because their female self has to be denied, it cannot be surfaced since it is hidden behind the masculine veil/plaster. Since all knowledge construction and reasoning is built on masculinist traditions women must submit to masculine framed codes of behaviour that desexualises their true female sensibilities, and construct a ‘plaster’ that defines womanly passions and a sexual identity that conforms to men’s discourses, their values, their dreams and desires (Whitford, 1991; Schor, 1994: 65).

Plath’s sentiments are symbolic of much feminist theorising relating to women’s sensuality and their sexual essence and vitality (Rowbotham, 1973; Moi, 1985; Luce Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b). It is ironic that Plath as a feminist icon spent her few years with Ted Hughes
struggling with her professional and sexual identity. There was tension and conflict between
the two poets careers. Plath searched for literary acclaim and recognition from Hughes and
rather than denounce Hughes’ womanising initially sought to win him back. Her suicide in
1963 appeared to represent to many feminists that being with a man, and consumed by men
was the fate of women. Plath’s *In Plaster* poem reveals the tensions she felt in relation to
her artistic identity, her perceived acceptability of her body and womanliness. Significantly it
is the way in which masculinist constructions deforms and alters female sensibilities and
passions that is a defining aspect of Plath’s poetry (Rose, 1991; Lant, 1993; See also Moi,
1985).

It is the dominance of the masculine subject that is also central to Luce Irigaray’s
interrogation of philosophical reasoning. She argues the place of the feminine subject in
traditional discourse is outside of it, except from a position of constructivity. She therefore
stresses the need to define the status of women as knowing subjects, where we can readily
connect with the feminine sensibilities of emotion and comprehension. Luce Irigaray enacts
a dialogic female voice to express the passions and emotions of women as a means of
exploring feminine silence. She argues there is an existence of different sensibilities based on
otherness and most importantly on women’s relationship to her body, and feelings of desire.
Representations of embodied subjectivities are articulated by ‘compelling readers to
acknowledge the historical connectedness between subject and object in the light of her
feminine sensibilities and the embodied nature of social relationships’ (Rockwell, 1996 : 69).
She aims to connect to an *other*, a feminist consciousness (Moi, 1985), calling for the
reader to act as an interlocutor:

> The only way that can be given to the meaning of the text is: read perceive, feel...
> Who are you?... Can we meet? Talk? Love? Create something together?’ (Luce

By contesting masculine intellect and spirit and drawing attention to the feminine process of
text making Luce Irigaray aims to create ‘productive spaces’ so that women can regain
and celebrate the feminine bodies jouissance- which goes some way in understanding female
subjectivity and a fully sexed, embodied experience, and invites multiple responses and new
understandings of self, language and other (Johnston, 1992).

Following Luce Irigaray’s approach I am to read Plath’s confessional poetry and reflect on
the intertextual forms both ‘sensually and mindfully’, (Rockwell, 1996 : 68). This requires
that I engage with Plath as an embodied, social, and sexual being, so that I relate and
interpret the text in a performative way. As Dale states she cannot disconnect her embodied
identity in her work observing that it is ‘a deliberately political act that I critique the absent-

As I journey into Plath’s confessional poetry there are a myriad of tensions between
masculine text building and male artistic power, their cultural bondage, and of Plath
experiencing jouissance, encompassing sexual, spiritual, physical and conceptual feminine
pleasure (Luce Irigaray, 1985a :191). If we are to touch the existence of an embodied
female subjectivity within Plath’s confessional work we must feel and read the text as:
‘...always open onto a new sense, and onto a future sense...onto a potential You, a potential interlocutor’ (Luce Irigaray in Hirsch and Olsen, 1994: 94).

In order to highlight how Plath’s work can be read as searching for a ‘productive space’, a feminine consciousness beyond the text, it is useful to draw on literary theories of confessional writing. Plath’s dark and emotional sentiments make it clear her work is grounded in life experiences, and for her, poetical revelations of the self were a significant passionate display. In essence confessional writings renders imagery of self-revelation, disclosure, and unmasking of the self. However, reading confessional poetry can be problematic because we tend to equate the poet's voice with the poet's self, and that is also bound up with unquestionable assumptions about the unity of the self, the stability of the self, and the identifiability of the self (Rose, 1991; Lant, 1993). A true confessional poet places few barriers between herself and direct expressions of that self. When we read literary texts we become aware, more or less consciously, of an authorial figure who, through her treatment of her subject matter appears to have certain feelings and attitudes. Where personal features are displayed in a work these features are ascribed to it an understanding that they reflect the state of mind of the writer as she wrote. This ‘relational view’ (Taylor, 1999) argues that the central expressions of a literary text embody the authors feelings and sensibilities and that our critical appreciation of the literature includes an awareness, a connection with, the presence in the work of the flesh and blood author. Through poetic gestures the personal representations of the self becomes a public emotional identity.

An alternative analysis argues the confession mode of confiding uses the poets voice to evade and obscure, and purposely seeks to build an ‘aesthetic entity’ (Taylor, 1999). Within literary debates the argument about the differentiation between voice and writer, persona and poet I argue is insufficient in exploring forms and meanings of embodied identities when we consider that the very personal and artistic process of writing can for some represent self-disclosure, as well as create spaces for exploring other personal qualities and sensibilities. In this sense we cannot refer to the unity of the self, stability of the self and identifiability of the self since the words and feelings of the poet are continually in a moving interplay. Luce Irigaray asserts that the performative dynamics of textuality constitutes evolving and shifting feminine identities (1985b; See also Schor, 1994 67-69. Post-structural readings thus show that there are many versions of the text as there are readers reading it, so following Luce Irigaray Plath’s texts and her selfhood must be read as open, fragmentary and fluid.

There are clear linkages between confessional poetic theory and how Luce Irigaray seeks to go beyond traditional language boundaries. Luce Irigaray wants to overturn a binary constructed through the language and body, to show an overlap in the written itself- an expression of jouissance (Johnston, 1990). For Plath her writings convey to the reader a struggle with her feminine other, and so can be read as both unmasking herself as writer, and also a place where she shapes and creates an ‘aesthetic’ persona. As Hughes’ commented both her life and her poetry represented:
‘a shattering of the self and the labour of fitting it together again and finding a new one’ (in Lant, 93 : 623).

In the recent volume Birthday Letters Hughes reveals intimate and candid details of his relationship with Plath. A central theme throughout the poems is Plath’s search for her own individual identity. In the poem ‘God Help the Wolf after Whom the Dogs Do Not Bark’, he tells of Plath’s difficulties in locating, using and feeding her creative senses- ‘Searching for yourself, in the dark, as you danced,’ and of how Cambridge University could not connect with her sense/style of writing:

Nobody wanted your dance,
Nobody wanted your strange glitter-your floundering
Drowning life and your effort to save yourself,
Treading the water, dancing the dark turmoil.
Looking for something to give-
Whatever you found
They bombarded with Splinters,
(Hughes, 1998 : 27)²

These insights highlight the tensions women face when trying to translate female embodied experiences when masculine language and masculine poetic heritage (Cambridge University a classic example) is the formalised imaginary. Rose argues Plath’s poetry cannot be read independently from the surrounding discourses and suggests male literary traditions and critiques have served to project forms of sexual and feminine subordination (1991: 69-70). There clearly are differences between how men and women writers express personal sentiments and experiences in poetical texts. Gilbert explores provocative differences between male and female confessional poets and tells us that men ‘write in the certainty that he is the inheritor of major traditions...the female poet... writes in the hope of discovering, or defining a self ’ (in Lant, 1993 : 623).

In this respect when interpreting feminine subjectivities through the medium of poetry, or indeed any written text, we must be aware of the ‘literary formalisation’ processes that ‘veil’ the feminine (Luce Irigaray, 1994: 96). The mental and creative process of writing can provide some degree of orderliness and perhaps even predictability of the world - writing permits a space where, self-reflexivity, and exploring identity can feel safe. At the same time the confines of language- the ‘sexuation of discourse’ inhibits creativity(Luce Irigaray, in Hirsch and Olsen, 1994: 98, See also Luce Irigaray 2000). To connect with Plath’s feminine emotions the reader must play a part in the performative dialogue and recognise that her poetry represents both a repressive force and a liberating form of self-expression. Lant comments:

---
³ Hughes Birthday Letters attributes much of Plath’s torments to her search for creativity – see in particular Apprehensions p. 140. In the introduction to Plaths’ collected poems (1982) Hughes also recounts how she agonised over poem titles.
‘She was ready to fight against herself, but she often found herself siding with the part she wanted to suppress against, the part she wanted to release’ (Lant, 1993:636).

Both Plath, by expressing her sensitivities in her confessional poetry, and Luce Irigaray by emphasising the feminine subject beyond the text demand the reader touches the ‘feminine other’ through a ‘performing textuality’ (See also Rockwell, 1996).

It would be useful to draw attention here to Luce Irigaray’s differentiation between speaking like a woman and speaking as a woman (Whitford, 1991:50; Irigaray 1985b:119-145). In this sense Plath is torn between male mastery - expressing desires in a woman’s body like a man, and in reclaiming feminine knowledgability. This is certainly true when we engage in readings of her feelings about her body and female passions. Plath resisted feminine sensibilities both physically and intellectually, and adopts a metaphor of nakedness to represent the stripping away of the masculine plaster to expose her vulnerable female body. In Lady Lazurus she writes the ‘crowd’:

‘.. unwrap me hand and foot-
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same identical woman’.
(1965 Lady Lazurus, written 1962, in Ariel:16)

The ‘unwrapping’ and ‘strip tease’ depict almost a form sexual stripping - and beyond this carved sexuality and femininity, she is the ‘same identical woman’, her sense of ‘other’ that we should try to connect with. In A Birthday Present she alludes to female self-definition in terms of sexual representation and conjures up imagery of her femininity behind a veil:

‘What is this. behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?
It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?
(1965, written 1962, in Ariel:48)

She goes on in the poem: ‘If only you knew how the veils were killing my days’ (op cit.:49). Plath embraces a powerful feminist consciousness as she writes through the body as a way of both exploring and unveiling her female identity. Plath laments in her letters:

‘Yet if I were not in this body where would I be- perhaps I am destined to be classified and quantified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I- I am powerful- but to what extent am I’ (Plath, 1975:40, See also Wurst, 1990:25)
The sentiment in the above diary record clearly depicts the way in which Plath seeks to define the self in relation to her embodied experiences. Her female body is ‘classified’ and ‘quantified’ and thus subjugated and controlled. She resists female body definition based on masculine representations - ‘I cry out against it’, and makes reference to a ‘powerful’ feminine essence- ‘I am I. I am powerful’. At the end of the passage Plath appears confused as herself and other are not easily distinguishable. There is a female voice crying out but it cannot break away from masculine representations.

It is not surprising that females first begin with the body as a way of exploring creativity and subjectivity if we consider how female and male differences have been conceptualised historically and socially. This is particularly true in relation to artists representations of female and male nudes. When writing about bodies men revel in the male bodies physical strength, freedom and power (Moore, 1994, Bordo, 1994). For female writers, and certainly with Plath the nakedness of the female subject is perceived as a barrier between the authorial self and the poets persona (Lant, 1993). The sexes are unequally endowed with respect to their powers of physical imposition and assertion. The unclothed male body intimates transcendence and connects to his understanding of masculinity, of being a man, of being physical (See Whitehead, 2002). In contrast women’s sexedness is submissive, passive, capable of being taken, devoured and victimised. Thus the female poet inherited a tradition in the visual arts which has prevented the female nude from having the same meaning as it did for men. Female bodies when explored through artistic creativity and subjectivity have a rigidly codified and subjugated role (Lant, 1993; See also Bordo, 1994).

For Plath, finding a way to express herself, her sensitivities and femaleness is deeply problematic. There is clearly a conflict between her lived experience as a woman, her desire to encode that creative experience, and the experiencing of her body in the discourses available to her. In this sense when artists seek to discover themselves through writing, the representation of the physical body may function quite differently for the poet who writes as a woman and the poet who writes as a man. Similarly for female travellers in a man’s organisational world the way in which embodied subjectivities are conceptualised will be constituted and reconstituted through gendered interpretations of organisations/bodies.

This line of inquiry is developed further by considering how the mirror distorts female social and organisation identities b which I now turn. The analysis draws attention to linkages between the body and female imaginary showing how Plath’s writing and speaking as a woman and speaking like a woman - writing through the body can (and cannot) shift women’s position as knowing subjects. The connections and implications for body work and body knowledge in organisations is also discussed.

**The Female Body and Mirror Control**

A central element of western patriarchal culture is the professional display of women to be looked at and admired (?), subjected to the gaze of the male audience. The objectification of women is apparent via the exhibition of women’s passive sexuality in pornographic magazines and videos, but it is also prevalent in many product development and product marketing strategies, where women’s bodies are used to sell and promote cars, drinks and
fashion. The incorporation of women’s bodies and their female presence as decorative accessories in organisation environments also signifies the male control and fascination for male voyeuristic pleasure (Mulvey, 1975; See also Taylor and Tyler, 1997). Women’s bodies in organisations can thus be read as sexual and feminine capital, or merely excess, out of place. The way in which the aesthetics of femininity is controlled and utilised is clearly gendered as ‘to be looked-at-ness’ is the fate of women so that the relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves, the surveyed female, means she is turned into ‘an object: and most particularly an object of vision: a sight’ (Berger, in Zoonen, 1994: 87).

Much of the imagery that Plath reveals uses the mirror as a metaphor to highlight a special way of looking at herself which undermines her female identity. In this sense Plath uses the mirror to forge a feminist consciousness. Through the act of self-surveillance and observation she sees the body as a ‘canvas’ that is incomplete and so lacks both aesthetic and material qualities:

‘At the beginning I hated her, she had no personality-
She lay in bed with me like a dead body
And I was scared, because she was shaped just the way I was’
(1971 In Plaster, written 1961 in Crossing the Water: 30)

‘I am not cruel, only truthful’
(1971 Mirror, written 1961 in Crossing the Water: 52)

‘The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine’
(1971 Poem for 3 Voices, written 1962 in Winter Trees: 40)

Plath’s sentiments reveal disgust and resentment of her ‘dead body’ - a body that she cannot connect with sexually and mentally and yet she is afraid and aware of its actual physicality and specificity - ‘I was scared because she was shaped just the way I was’. She cannot accept it’s contours and shape and this even distances her from her feminine psychology - ‘... I hated her, she had no personality’. It seems to reject the material specificity of our bodies we must also deny the spiritual essence of woman. The mirror forces women to critically examine her own feminine failures. Plath despises the female form because it is not a man- it lacks power strength and self-affirmation. Plath makes the mirror and the process of self-surveillance a sign of anger and passion which reaffirms women’s subordination in physical and mental realities. Critical reflections of the female body distorts perceptions of the self - male eyes and mirrors are all pervasive and powerful:

‘But how about the eyes, the eyes, the eyes?
Mirrors can kill and talk, they are terrible rooms
In which a torture goes on one can only watch’.
Plath like Luce Irigaray infers male power because men project their unwanted male bodies onto women- women become the man’s body, the man’s sexuality- consumed by the masculine ‘plaster’, so much so that everything about women is sexualised except their own sexuality (See Moore, 1994, Holland et al, 1994).

Thus as Dale suggests the mirror does not just allow observation of the self it invokes the ‘scalpel’ so as to highlight the tensions between:

‘….the problem of the surface and what is superficial. While the mirror appears to address the problems of the superficial, its primary utilisation is to ask questions of meaning, interiority and interpretation. The mirror is the superficial, which is only seen to be effective in its revelation of hidden meaning, especially identity… (italics my insertion). Meanwhile, the scalpel is incisive and penetrative through the bodily wall, but it creates new surfaces as it cuts. The scalpel is thus an instrument of the surface, not only of depth; and the mirror is as much an instrument of depth as it is of the surface’ (Dale, 2001: 173).

Plath’s poetry symbolises the mirror and the scalpel as it cuts/reflects the surface- ness of female bodies/identities, thereby reinforcing women’s sexual subordination. Following Luce Irigaray’s analysis we can only look at the masculine, women the ‘defective men’, through the eyes of the male voyeur. Like Plath, Luce Irigaray refers to how women relate to their own reflection as they look in the mirror - women are constructed through the male and female gaze as nothing but ‘man’s negative mirror’: "

‘ If I look at myself in the mirror, if I see the other in the mirror, perception resembles sensation. The image reflected by the mirror, or by the mind, has lost the volume of the body; I see myself in only two dimensions, and I see the other as an inverted alter ego ‘(2000: 40).

Thus we can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the masculine. Plath in submitting to masculine codes of sexuality and desires renounces the:

‘…specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary. Subjecting herself to objectivisation in discourse- by being “female”. Re-objectivising her own self whenever she claims to identify herself ‘as’ a masculine subject’ (Luce Irigaray, 1985a: 133).

The masculine represents the ‘faithful polished mirror, empty of altering reflections. Immaculate of all auto copies’ (Luce Irigaray, 1985a: 136).

Because women are looked at and objectified we are silent and unassuming and thus absent, within literary traditions and also within organisation and management theorising. As objects and not subjects women struggle with articulating their feminine identity. Rowbotham states ‘I felt invisible inside myself although my appearance was clearly visible in the glass’ (1973 : 27). The mirror and speculum is a reminder of how female sensuality and subjectivities are silent and unassuming, they are entombed within masculinist representations and so they are reduced to an absence, an unarticulated ‘other’ and unarticulated ‘she’ (see Oseen, 1997).
The following section explores how women’s silence and absence is represented through the disembodiment of our sexualities through the dominant discourses that control the social construction of the female body.

**A Woman’s Inescapable Femininity?**

A significant feature of the literature of the female body in both feminist and organisation theorising has demonstrated the way social discourses and practices subjugate women, femininity and femaleness. At the cultural level Bartky has identified female disciplinary regimes which constitute ‘obedience to patriarchy’ (Bartky, 1997). At an organisational level scholars have highlighted how ‘body work’ disciplines and constructs bodily performance through discursive practices that require women to conceal, constrain and contain excessive female sexual behaviours. Trethaway (1999) for example notes how organisation surveillance techniques have material and real consequences for the experiences of female employment. A ‘body in control’ and a ‘fit not fat body’ symbolises professionalism, and one that does not conform to idealised feminised standards represents a ‘professional liability’. Moreover studies reveal that women have to engage in both the self management of their professional identity and sexuality (Sheppard, 1989; Wolf, 1990; Hearn and Parkin, 1995). Yet like Luce Irigaray (1985a; 1985b; see also Moore, 1994) I believe feminist consciousness can be heightened by a deeper understanding of our relations to our bodies. But this means accepting/liking our bodies. This also means encouraging new ways in which female narratives can be unveiled, and new subtleties and re-interpretations exposed as this paper interlocutor’s navigations are attempting to do.

The female body in Plath’s work is a reminder of women’s failures and the supremacy of men’s strength and physicality. Plath writes in her journal:

> ‘Being a woman is my awful tragedy. From the moment I was conceived I was doomed to spout breasts and ovaries rather than penis and scrotum; to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed to my inescapable femininity’ (italics my insertion) (Plath, 1982 : 35).

The reference to sexual reproductive organs here is significant. Plath clearly feels that the possession of male genitalia is advantageous in terms of physical, social and creative power (See Journals. 2000; Letter Home, 1975). Her cage of femininity strangely reflects a form of reverence or preference for male sexuality as she believes her femininity will restrict her sensory and creative thoughts and feelings. Indeed Plath connects artistic imagination with male intellectual power. When Hughes’ first volume of poetry was accepted she exclaimed: 'I am more happy than if it was my book published. I am so happy his book is finished first’ (In King, 1993 : 53). Her reverence of Hughes’ creative talents is clear so much so that she wished him to be acknowledged as the better poet (King, 1993).

In Plath’s work masculine constructions of femininity invades women’s personal interactions and conceptions of the self and in so doing deforms the female self. Lant (1993) and also her mother in Letters Home (Plath, 1975) suggests that Plath’s writings emerge from her own imposition of styling herself as a male artist, embracing both the resentment of herself (a
defective man), and also her resistance to, and jealousy of, masculine creative power. Her sense of struggle with the self- her feelings of a disembodied woman both physically and intellectually and the association of men with artistic imagination is clearly revealed in her journal entry below:

‘I am part man, and I notice women’s breasts and thighs with the calculation of a man choosing a mistress...but it is the artist and the analytical attitude to the female body....for I am more woman; (italics my insertion) even as I long for full breasts and a beautiful body, so do I abhor the sensuousness which they bring... I desire things which will destroy me in the end’ (Plath, 82 : 23)

In the above extract Plath clearly reveals her struggle with her self identity. The reference to ‘full breasts,’ beautiful body,’ and their ‘sensuousness’ depicts sentiments that rejoice in the physicality of a woman’s sexuality- and appear to connect to an embodied self-consciousness- she is ‘more woman’- she has ‘more’ energies and desires than what a man and masculinist constructions permits her to be. And yet, her look is through men’s eyes (writing like a woman) and therefore her ‘sensuousness’ is somehow dangerous- being ‘more woman’ will ‘destroy’ her in the end- it signifies female sensitivities that are disembodied both materially and intellectually, as well as present a challenge to male artistic/sexual/organisational power.

Plath’s poetical narratives reflect the many tensions and ambiguities women feel in organisation contexts in terms of how they should dress and display, and also how her presence is constructed and reconstructed within existing masculinist conceptual schemes. As already noted where she does not embody professionalism as defined by dominant forms of cultural masculinism then her managerial capacity may be questioned and challenged (Trethaway, 1999). However as Plath reveals women collude to support patriarchy and so reinforce masculinist images of femaleness and femininity. Women learn to display their feminine goods in order to package themselves as a professional/true woman- all wrapped up in masculine plaster:

‘He is drawn to attractive women - even if it is not to search for a mate - all through life I would be subjected to a physical, hence animal jealousy of other attractive women - always afraid that a shorter girl, one with better breasts, better feet, better hair than I have will be the subject of his lust, or love - and I would always be miserably aware that I would live up to his expectations - or else, someone else should’ (Plath, 00 : 101).

Luce Irigaray also argues that female sexuality constructed under patriarchal systems of representation disrupts women’s creativeness and at the same time derives from the diffuseness of her sexuality:

‘Woman has sex organs just about everywhere. She experiences pleasure almost everywhere… that is undoubtedly the reason she is called temperamental, incomprehensible, perturbed, capricious not to mention her language in which she
goes off in all directions and which she is unable to discern the coherence of any meaning’ (1985b: 103).

In essence woman becomes a passive body rather than actively embodied, with the scripting of her body in masculinist discourse also subjugating possibilities for creative sensitivities. Men through controlling desire exert sexual power that results in the disembodiment of feminine sexuality and establishes gender relations that demands the regulation of women’s bodies in social and organisation contexts. 7 This admiration/resentment of male power is problematic for Plath because as my analysis of Plath has highlighted there is female voice, ‘an other’- a feminine identity she cannot reach, cannot touch, cannot communicate with because of masculine dominance in physical, social and creative activities. In this sense much of Plath’s sentiments and struggle and in writing through the body is represented as writing like a woman. This then begs the question whether one can meaningfully talk of a female identity and subjectivity being articulated in organisation environments which is addressed in the following discussion.

Conclusions: More Than A Woman?

The paper has sought to locate the feminine other and further develop an understanding of feminine identity by examining the links between Plath’s confessional writings and Luce Irigaray’s emphasis on the feminine subject of language. I have demonstrated that literary/poetic texts can provide a dynamic and creative way to further develop our understanding of feminine identities and corresponding sensualities- they permit a way in which we can unveil the struggles and tensions women feel when attempting to articulate a fully sexed embodied identity in organisational and social contexts.

Yet my concern to write the female body so as to invite new ways of interpreting feminine identities is problematic since women’s bodies have been central to the construction of female identity both historically and culturally (Scott and Jackson, 2001; Wolff, 1990). Feminist theorists have long noted that the foundations of Western philosophy has constructed images of women that placed the importance of the body over the soul, whereas reasoning capabilities and the spiritual consciousness and rationality of the soul was central to man’s identity. As Moore suggests ‘women were everywhere associated with their reproductive functions, while men were associated with culture’ (1994: 81; See also Wolff, 1990). The materiality of women’s bodies has been appropriated to signify the wholly embodied nature of social existence, therefore denying the other sensibilities of women. Female identities are thus conceptualised as excessive, unmarked and unsymbolised. Plath’s poetic sentiments discussed in this paper revealed this body consciousness and its perceived weaknesses, was central to Plath’s psychology. Poetry above all involves a willingness to let the unconscious speak- ‘the voice within’ and to make audible those subtle intuitions, sensations, and images which can be released from the unconscious mind through the creativity of writing. In this way a writer may come to know her deeper self, below the surface of the words. In writing through the body Plath touched upon other feminine

6. However Bordo (1999) rightly argues that there are no dominant hierarchies of power, power is not held, rather people are positioned within it differently and its is the established relations between men and women that socially constitute male dominance.
sensibilities- more than a woman and so provided insights into forms of embodied subjectivities (See Jackson and Scott, 2001; Thomas and Webb, 1999). However, Plath remained trapped by the masculine plaster- writing like a woman. The textual self-realisation of her poetry is bound by masculine power discourses (Rose, 1991; Irigaray 1985a).

And yet, where women are aware of their sexedness, and control their sexuality and sexual needs it is portrayed as the dark side of woman’s identity - only ‘the bad girl is sexual’ (Wolf, 1993 : 244). As Hearn and Parkin (1995) state it is female sexuality in organisation settings that has been conceptualised as problematic not men’s. It is through the body that women seek to control their sexual identity, yet this shaping is through discursive practices that pressurise women to diet, to dress for sexual appeal or professional acceptance and credibility, and generally to survey their bodily movements and gestures (Bordo, 1994; Bartky, 1997). As Bartky identifies ‘the panoptical male connoisseur’ (1997) controls women’s consciousness and explains why women’s bodies are disciplined, supervised and observed. And as Luce Irigaray asserts the symbolic realm of the masculine ‘maintains men’s pre-eminence, their position as the One, the sexually indifferent which obscures the sexually specific’ (Oseen, 1997 : 170). The subject of the ONE, the masculine, denies the theorising of sexual difference and so denies women her own body and sexuality (Irigaray, 1985a).

This raises the question of whether, or how, women can engage in a critical politics of the body and feminine identity in organisations in a culture which so comprehensively codes and defines women’s bodies as subordinate and passive, and as objects of the male gaze. However, there are problems using the female body for feminist ends. Its pre-existing meanings, as sex object, as object of the male gaze, can always prevail and appropriate the body, despite the intentions of the woman herself. While the body is important in articulating who one is in the writings of Plath and Luce Irigaray, to emphasise the body and feminine identity in organisational and managerial terms is unquestionably linked with sexedness, and plays down the spiritual and intellectual qualities of women. (Oseen, 1997: 173; Irigaray, 1985a, 1985b). Women learn that we have to monitor their appearance, yet the notion that we can construct a femininity of an as yet ‘unimagined transformation of the female body’ (Bartky, 1997) is problematic. To control our sensualitys we must still need to feel our bodies, be aware of our shape and curves in order that we as women can control it. To control it is to understand it and also define it. As Rich stresses:

> ‘In order to live a fully human life we require not only control of our bodies.... we must touch the unity and resonance of our physicality, our bond with the natural order, the corporeal ground of our intelligence’ (1977: 39 see also Yorke, 1997: 14). (Italics my insertion)

This would represent the foundations of a woman to woman bond (Metonymy), for women to be identified in relation to women not men (Luce Irigaray, 1985a,1985b; Moore, 1994; Holland et al, 1994, Oseen, 1997). Like Luce Irigaray I feel if we are to discover the feminine other we need to create a space for women other than as mirror reflections of men. A specifically sexed female should be identified in relation to other women, but must
also articulate sexual difference. ‘We need a symbolic order where women have an identity as women where we are represented symbolically as ourselves’ (Oseen, 1997: 173).

Thus we need to find ways of understanding women’s presence and identity in organisational and social contexts. However this cannot be achieved if women passively deny who they are as women. When reading Plath I capture a sense of the female imaginary and delight in the curves of the female body and in this respect I feel/absorb the text in a performative way, in the way Luce Irigaray urges women to move beyond the masculine text building. Plath despises her femininity yet wishes to locate her true sensuousness. She constructs feminine sensibilities in masculine terms - she wants to be attractive/beautiful/creative in men’s eyes - she envies men both their economic and physical power and their artistic power. She envies women who are more woman than she is - in the masculine sense - her writing about the masculine plaster is what she wants and deplores - ‘I shall never get out of this’, (1971, In Plaster: 30). Unfortunately for Plath the glimpses of jouissance do not materialise into a fully articulated feminine consciousness. For Plath female sexual identity is shaped through her dependence on men’s sexuality:

‘Living with her was like living in my own coffin’

‘ I still depended on her though I did it regretfully.’
(1971, In Plaster: 32)

Plath’s writings cannot transcend or rewrite the figurative language that encases the female subject but it can unveil desires and appetites that act as an ‘instrument for embodied experience’ (Yorke, 1997: 23).

Plath’s poetry encourages one to identify with a transcendent state, to locate and touch ‘an authentic female self-hood’, while at the same time subjecting it to the most devastating critique (See Rose, 1991). Similarly Luce Irigaray argues there is an existence of different sensibilities based in sex otherness and most importantly of woman’s relationship to her body, bodily experiences and feelings of desire. Like Plath Luce Irigaray celebrates women’s strengths through the emotional attachment of women to their bodies and by urging women to connect to their feminine sexuality. Both women’s writings rest on relating to the ‘feminine other’ as a way of understanding the embodied experience of women’s social identity. As Burke observes by engaging performatively with Irigaray (and I argue Plath too) we can move towards connecting with forms of embodied subjectivities and:

‘..participate in the play of self-unfolding within writing, for once the requirement of objectivity is demystified, we come to salutary admission of the autobiographical necessities of our own work…Through such play with language the conceptual systems that have determined the representation of the female may be deconstructed as the machinery of masters reluctant to recognise their actual lack of mastery. Let us dream, with Irigaray…’ (1994: 52).
Flowing from this argument I would suggest that organisation and gender theorists must take and learn from literary accounts of self-reflexivity in two ways. Firstly female autobiographical accounts can be useful in discerning and contributing to women’s knowledge (Cosslett et al 2000). While studies of the disciplinary processes prevalent in organisation and social contexts is useful in informing the myriad of ways in which female and feminine identities are constructed and reconstructed, they ignore the materialisation of bodies (See Marshall, 1996; Trethaway, 1999). This is not to suggest that female navigations will be codified outside the boundaries of masculine literary and organisation orthodoxy but investigations of female narratives, and the explorations of an embodied social self in a male organisation world can help elucidate on women’s experiences and provide insights into embodied interactions and embodied selves. As Jackson and Scott argue ‘What is lacking in the imaginary bodies of much social and feminist theory is the socially located body’. They continue that what is needed is to ‘ breathe life into an embodied sociology and to animate the abstract bodies of much feminist theory’ (Jackson and Scott, 2001: 23).

Secondly my focus on feminine poetical resistances and the ‘marriage of bodies and language’ (Luce Irigaray, 2000) attends to the ways in which Luce Irigaray assists the deconstruction of dominant masculine texts. Her textual strategies have tended to be labelled as essentialist rather than be presented as creative and imaginative ways with which to re-write gender into organisation theorising. As I have been arguing throughout this paper Luce Irigaray’s concern with the feminine subject in language calls for a new female symbolic- the unheard of femininity in patriarchy so that we can go beyond the text and speak to the true sensuousness of woman, and to be two (Luce Irigaray, 2000). Developing this line of argument further Luce Irigaray recognises that there is an alternative to the instrumental mode of being. She suggests we attempt to ‘disrupt’ and ‘modify’ the existing social order. Returning to the mirror metaphor again Luce Irigaray suggests that the role of the speculum can change:

‘It may, quite simply, be an instrument to dilate the lips, the orifices, the walls, so that the eye can penetrate the interior. So that the eye can enter, to see, notably with speculative intent. Woman, having been misinterpreted, forgotten, variously frozen in show cases, rolled up in metaphors, buried beneath stylised figures, raised up in different idealities, would now become the “object” to be investigated, to be explicitly granted consideration, and thereby, by this deed of title included in the theory’ (Luce Irigaray, 1985a: 144-145).

Plath’s poetic writings symbolise attempts to ‘disrupt’ and ‘modify’ sexual and organisational relations, and present opportunities to challenge existing divisions and inequalities rather than simply reproduce them (Kerfoot and Knights, 1998a). Thus Plath provides us with ways of connecting with textual resistances that can become regenerative and transformative, a form of mimesis (See Irigaray, 1985a; See also Schor, 1994: 67) which allows women to subvert the social order as it is presently defined by patriarchal structures. Plath attempts to open up new territories for exploring a male code of ethics and discourse and of women completely withdrawing into their difference. If Plath does not offer hope of transcendence then I wonder who else can- because the spirit of other and the struggle with her feminine self, within, and outside the structures of male artistic and creative
power, is the essence of her poetry. There clearly are textual resistance’s that must be read as ‘embodied performances of language’ (Rockwell, 1996 : 86). Perhaps we should see poetry and all language as a mask, where the literary tradition sees the figure of a poet as masculine and the poet of the voice as masculine property. (See Rose, 1991; Lant, 1993). Women’s resistance will always be problematic where difference infers devaluation and suggests that the successful construction of femininity in relation to masculinity requires women to enable the exercise of men’s power. To destabilise and overthrow men and masculinity would lead to tensions and problems with feminised power and in ‘reclaiming’ masculinity (see Kerfoot and Knights, 1998a). While Plath has provided us with glimpses of a feminine subjectivity throughout her poetry she recognises that she is still only a woman, and that poetical mastery/mystery are interlocked and interlocking. As Luce Irigaray states:

‘To play with mimesis is thus for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself…to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, which was supposed to remain invisible… It also means to “unveil” the fact that, if women are such good mimics, it is because they are not simply absorbed in this function. They also remain elsewhere’ (Irigaray, 1985a: 76).

Where women achieve a ‘critical consciousness’ of the embodiment of their sexuality and the significance of how they want to dress and display, then of course men’s power relations will be threatened. Only when women reclaim their feminine strength and discard the plaster or dress and articulate feminine jouissance as a woman, can they can attempt to ‘manage without her’ (the masculinised identity) (1971, In Plaster : 32), and subvert men’s dominance in social realities.

References


Schor, N. (1994) This essentialism which is not one: Coming to grips with Irigaray, in *Engaging with Irigaray*, Burke, C., Schor, N Whitford, M., Columbia University Press, New York.


