

"Something in me said, now, you must see this": Reconciliation of Death and "the empty benches of memory" in Sylvia Plath's "Berck-Plage"

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Written in the summer of 1962, Sylvia Plath's longest single poem, "Berck-Plage" has been described by commentators as, "126 lines of seemingly unmitigated malaise and funereal gloom," "one of her heaviest and least appealing works" and a piece filled with "ugly and terrifying pictures of death" (Folsom 521). Inspired by a holiday visit to Berck beach, in the Nord-pas-de-Calais region of France in 1961, and juxtaposed with the sickly slow death of neighbour Percy Key in early summer 1962; the poem is full of vivid and grotesque descriptions of mutilation, fragmented images of death and confusing, dystopian funereal scenes. In supplementary notes to Plath's *Collected Poems*, Ted Hughes reinforces this categorisation of "Berck-Plage" as a horror-filled poem by suggesting that it signified deeply rooted fears within Plath's subconscious. Commenting, "It was one of her nightmares stepped into the real world," Hughes identifies the pervasive and oppressive imagery of a hospital overlooking Berck beach as innately significant to Plath's composition of the poem (194). It is perhaps this prominent placing of the hospital building – and the memories it may have represented to Plath - that has led "Berck-Plage" to be generally defined as a confusing confessional piece. Doris L. Eder considers the poem best understood in context with Plath's biography, and Jack Folsom argues that the speaker is "transparently Sylvia Plath herself" in parts (Eder 303, Folsom 535). However, despite what further critics have defined as "the ubiquitous medicalization of the place," to suggest that it was simply the presence of a hospital building that drove the inspiration for "Berck-Plage" arguably underemphasizes the wider sphere of the poet's creative inspiration (Gilbert 123).

Plath had begun her thorough dissemination of hospital experiences in both poetic and fictional form many years before writing "Berck-Plage." Indeed, on June 13, 1959, she famously commented, "There is an increasing market for mental-hospital stuff. I am a fool if I don't relive, recreate it" (495). This quotation makes clear that Plath attached personal and profitable goals to her creative examination of mental hospital themes, and that she was not afraid to explore such avenues for inspiration. With this in mind, it is difficult to fathom that two years later, Plath could be so terrified of her hospital memories, that the presence of a French sanatorium would

debilitate her psyche and render her creative drive as nothing more than fearful. Indeed, Plath's engagement with her medical past and its subsequent impact on her mental health has polarised critics. Luke Ferretter has suggested that writing *The Bell Jar* had little "therapeutic effect on her sensibility" and Al Alvarez has notably remarked that in Plath's final poems, she explored the darker sides of her personality, "not much caring whether she won or lost. Her calculations went wrong and she lost" (Ferretter 85, Alvarez 55). For these critics, Plath's engagement with themes of medicalization in her work directly correlates with her personal mental status.¹ This connection is perhaps representative of a dominant trend within Plath studies that seeks to diagnose or define the poet. However, in her 2001 study, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Tracy Brain perceptively identifies alternative possibilities for Plath's artistic inspiration, suggesting that it is impossible to definitively define her mental stability. "What we *can* know of Plath are the historical and cultural events in which she lived" (15). Perhaps then, by re-framing interpretation of "Berck-Plage" within a more historical and cultural arena, Plath's alleged private fears may not be the principle theme driving the poem. Positioning the focus of "Berck-Plage" away from supposed nightmares about hospitals and medicalization perhaps reveals a wider interrogation of cultural and historical world issues, such as comprehending mass-scale deaths in a post-WW2 world.

In her essay, "On the Beach with Sylvia Plath," Sandra Gilbert comments: "Of course, much has no doubt changed in Berck-Plage since Plath and Hughes strolled here in 1961. But much is surely still the same" (122). Indeed, as photographs provided in Gail Crowther's essay, "The Playfulness of Time" or a virtual walk along Berck beachfront via Google Maps show – even now in 2013 – the landscapes described in Plath's poem are clearly identifiable. Bars and cafes line the busy French promenade, as shops sell their "electrifyingly-coloured sherbets." Tourists walk along the "sandy damper" that "stretches for miles," amid the remains of "concrete bunkers" (196-197). Because many remnants of Plath and Hughes's visit to Berck beach are visible fifty years later, we still have a somewhat tangible grasp of what these poets saw and experienced on their holiday. Given this physical link to the landscapes and environments that inspired Plath's poem, it may be important to consider what elements – aside from the presence

¹ See Ferretter, *Sylvia Plath's Fiction*: "The poems Plath wrote after she completed *The Bell Jar* in August 1961 suggest that the experience of writing the novel was not a cathartic or therapeutic one ... there is no sense in the works written after she had transformed her early experiences of breakdown and recovery into the aesthetic form of the novel that the kind of emotions with which she deals in that novel have developed or changed" (85)

of a hospital - were present on the beach in 1961. With this in mind; a closer enquiry into the history and environment of Berck beach reveals a wounded landscape which has a much greater significance to Plath and indeed, the world than the overhanging spectre of a hospital.



(Figure 1. Bombs descend on Berck beach. Image © *The Daily Mail*.)²

² Press Authority (PA). *The Daily Mail Newspaper*. Web. Last accessed: 18 March, 2013. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-1230025/Google-Earth-Second-World-War-Amazing-aerial-images-taken-daring-Allies-revealed-Hitlers-weapons.html>.



(Figure 2. Bombs explode on Berck beach. Image © Flickr.)³

³ EspressoBuzz, *Flickr*. Web. Last accessed: 18 March. 2013.
<<http://www.flickr.com/photos/espressobuzz/6803262664/>>.



(Figure 3. Artillery/bunkers occupying Berck beach. Image © Atlantikwall: Mythe ou Réalité.)⁴



(Figure 4. Troops on the northern part of Berck beach. Image © Atlantikwall: Mythe ou Réalité.)⁵

⁴ Images courtesy of <http://www.bunkerpictures.nl> and taken from, *Atlantikwall: Mythe ou Réalité*, (Editions Histoire et fortifications, 2008).

⁵ Ibid.



(Figure 5. Concrete bunkers on Berck beach. Image © *Atlantikwall: Mythe ou Réalité.*)⁶

These images clearly show that twenty years prior to Plath and Hughes's holiday visit, the beach at Berck was a battlefield. An important stronghold in Rommel's Atlantikwall during WW2, the town of Berck was heavily occupied by invading Nazi German troops and was strongly fortified. The concrete bunkers described so clearly by Plath in "Berck-Plage" were built to support the Third Reich's war campaign between the years 1941 and 1944. In a radio interview with Peter Orr, Plath defined herself as being "quite a political person" and her poetry, fiction, diary entries, letters as well as school and college essays reveal her to be an individual who was very knowledgeable of past history and contemporary cultural politics (169).⁷ Plath's particular interest in Germany, WW2, the Holocaust and its impact are considered to be a principal theme within her oeuvre. Understanding, or coming to terms with the anonymous, mechanised deaths that occurred in concentration camps are a deeply-rooted concern within Plath's poetry, and an issue she thoroughly dissected in her artistic endeavours. In her 1957 poem, "The Thin People," Plath describes the survivors and memories of WW2 as, "always with us," and four months after writing "Berck-Plage" she would compose unique poems that disturbingly evoked vivid war and Holocaust imagery (64). She dared to voice post-war speakers within the context of unimaginable atrocities of WW2. The history permeating Berck beach – both in memory and plain sight – would have undoubtedly been significant to Plath. The scattered remains of Nazism, war and slaughter as well as imagined memories of the D-Day landings (which occurred less

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Robin Peel has acknowledged that Plath's interest in history and politics waxed and waned throughout her life. But there is no doubt that she was aware of her surroundings. In "The Political Education of Sylvia Plath," Peel notes: "It would be very off if her habitual monitoring of radio, magazines, and newspapers and the political awareness that her education had developed, suddenly ceased. It survived her meeting with Hughes and more than survived her parting from him" (59). See also: Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*. Fairleigh Dickinson, 2002.

than 150 miles away from Berck beach) drench the atmosphere, even in photographs today. To deny Plath a poetic response to such sights neglects an integral component of her thought process.

In an essay that explores the correlation between Plath's writings, photographs and memory, Anita Helle draws attention to comments made at a New York Public Library reading of Plath's work in 1997. Helle observed Jacqueline Rose encouraging readers to devote their attention to what Plath does not reveal in her poetry, urging consideration of "what is not pictured in the poems – and the histories, the memories, the silences these create" (Helle 205). Rose posits that within Plath's writing, what is left silent or unsaid is important. Maurice Blanchot similarly argues that, "Thought is the pure word," suggesting that artistic silences are important because it is only in silent thought that full expression can be achieved (39). Pierre Macherey also reminds us that Freud considered the "absence of certain words" integral to the subconscious mind, commenting that, "to reach utterance, all speech envelops itself in the unspoken" (95). What Blanchot and Macherey theorize is that perhaps thought processes or motivation for expression, which exist fully in the unconscious, do not wholly translate to the conscious or spoken world. These critics suggest that what is written on the page may not be fully representative of what is being expressed: "if the author does not always say what he states, he does not necessarily state what he says" (Macherey 99). And so, in order to ascertain full meaning, silence must be accounted for and interpreted. This approach offers a different consideration of "Berck-Plage," with a focus on what is not physically present within the text, and the tensions that arise in language between the said and unsaid. It is clear that Plath ascribes importance to "what is not pictured" because of the startling contrast between blank spaces and deeply descriptive, text-laden stanzas in the poem.

"Berck-Plage" is made up of disconnected vocabulary and its short, spaced-out verse structure assigns meaning to textual gaps and blank spaces. The structure of the poem, combined with fragmented descriptions which require thought and pause between words, intimate that Plath is negotiating with textual presence and absence, perhaps engaging with what Macherey hypothesizes as: "diverting attention from the very thing which is shown" (98).

Theodore Adorno famously commented "to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric," arguing that humanity had been irrevocably altered due to the extent of man's inhumanity to man during the Holocaust (34). Words and expression ceased to have meaning in the wake of such

events and needed to be redrawn in the face of such horrific circumstances. The first three verses of "Berck-Plage" reflect Adorno's statement because while Plath does not directly reference memories of war, its presence is everywhere, deeply embedded in the speaker's silent subconscious and pervading the poem by its very absence.

This is the sea, then, this great abeyance.
How the sun's poultice draws on my inflammation.

Electrifyingly-coloured sherbets, scooped from the freeze
By pale girls, travel the air in scorched hands.

Why is it so quiet, what are they hiding?
I have two legs, and I move smilingly. (*Collected Poems* 196)

The poem begins amid descriptions of a bizarre and unnatural beach scene, where the sea is set aside, and the unrelenting heat of the sun aggravates a wound belonging to the speaker. Typical beachfront activities like purchasing ice-cream have been distorted into sickening imageries of electrocution. The speaker questions the girls selling sherbets: "what are they hiding?" suggesting that something sinister is lurking beneath the surface of this seemingly average picture. The speaker moves eerily, uneasily, "smilingly" against the backdrop of a beach filled with the echoes of "shrunk voices" and dehumanised people "waving and crutchless" (196). The poem continues, conjuring a horrific dystopia, where the speaker cannot seem to accurately describe or make sense of the beach landscape. Perhaps this landscape is described in such a fragmented manner because the trauma that fills its history is inexpressible. Every element on the beach is grotesque and unnatural: lovers are described with disgust, the typical attire of bikinis is deemed obscene. Plath's speaker cannot articulate what is wrong with the scene, so instead expresses a description through fragmented and disjointed vocabulary.

The speaker's "inflammation" is important because they have received the wound in some "other" space; prior to the beginning of the poem. There is no explanation for the origins of the abrasion; the speaker has simply entered the poem bearing it. In her writings about unremembered memory, Bracha Ettinger explores memories of the "Other," believing that in our subconscious, human beings carry with them traumatic memories they may never have experienced, or do not remember. Ettinger suggests that "the work of the artist is the working-through and bringing-into being of that which cannot be remembered," and her theories resonate strongly with "Berck-Plage" (163). Plath was inspired to write this poem commemorating her

visit to Berck beach, twenty years after horrific scenes of slaughter and inhumane brutality. The physical presence of concrete bunkers imprints war onto the landscape. Yet, these memories of war and slaughter are not something Plath's speaker has experienced directly. Therefore, as Plath's speaker stands on this beach, the memories of trauma and torment are felt through physical "inflammation," but the speaker does "not know that they hurt, nor where they hurt" (Ettinger 162). While not directly mentioning the histories and memories of Berck beach, rather describing surroundings in an abstract and fragmented way; it is possible to argue that Plath tries to identify and work through these unknown wounds and unremembered memories by employing silence as a literary device – what is not textually present becomes the focus of the poem. The awful imageries of mutilated bodies, suffering and descriptions like "this black boot" – which suggests fascism – as well as the physically present "concrete bunkers" in the speaker's landscape all contribute strongly to the assertion that "Berck-Plage" is an elegiac poem about death and exemplifies Plath's endeavours to process and come to terms with traumatic memories of our human history (*Collected Poems* 197).

With the introduction of a priest figure, wearing a "black cassock," the poem moves away from the speaker's vain attempts to accurately define the landscape (196). Local fishermen, "mackerel gatherers" resist the figure of the priest and wall up their backs against him (196). This resistance – and the priest's central figure as mediator between the living and the dead towards the end of the poem – indicates his position as a dividing point between life on land and death in the ocean. Evocative imageries such as the "long hiss of distress" that moan from the sea bear striking remembrance to the mass deaths that occurred on French beaches, particularly in the sea (196). German and Allied forces engaged in brutal warfare, with parts of bodies and "limbs, images, shrieks" filling the air and scattered over sand and ocean (197). Is it any wonder that the "green pool" of the sea is "sick with what it has swallowed" – witnessing the darkest days of humanity (197)? Plath's speaker is again overwhelmed by these disturbing unremembered events and begins to exhibit dehumanised behaviour by showing an inability or lack of desire to aid broken bodies - forcing distance between the self and humanity:

Why should I walk

Beyond the breakwater, spotty with barnacles?
I am not a nurse, white and attendant,

I am not a smile. (*Collected Poems* 197-198)

The speaker's inability to accurately express memories of trauma experienced on Berck beach causes them to become distant and compassionless. Words lack meaning and cannot accurately express the emotion felt in the wake of mass, anonymous death; and because of this, the speaker regresses into a state of passivity. With the emotional admission, "And my heart too small to bandage their terrible faults" (198), the speaker articulates the futility of trying to process and reconcile the horrors of the past.

It is at this moment of desperation that the poem shifts focus to a domestic and immediately more nurturing scene. Despite the presence of death, Plath's concentrated focus on the "old man" distinguishes him from the insurmountable number of deaths that Berck beach symbolises. The old man and his wife are categorised as individuals and are relevant: "On a striped mattress in one room / An old man is vanishing. / There is no help in his weeping wife" (198). These descriptions demonstrate Plath engaging with a very different kind of death from the scenes described on Berck beach. The presence of a "weeping wife" immediately humanises this vanishing old man, conjuring relatable images of family, children, and ordinary instances. Unlike the beach scene at Berck, Plath does not describe *around* the death of the vanishing man. She does not rely on silence to divert attention towards a larger, inexpressible event: instead, Plath keenly observes every small nuance of the old man's death scene in a soft, human and almost loving manner. Emotive language like "touched gardenias" combined with imageries like "the bed is rolled from the wall," "washed sheets fly in the sun" and the desperate "goodbye, goodbyes" of the wake give this vanishing man a tangible human presence (198). This man had a family, owned items; he will be missed. The deaths experienced on Berck beach relegate the individual to insignificance, but by focusing on personal belongings and small incidentals, Plath's speaker is able to find meaning in words to express and process the death of the old man.

From entries in her *Journals*, it is revealed that the "vanishing man" who appears in "Berck-Plage" was inspired by Court Green neighbour, Percy Key. Plath observed the progression of his illness and slow death, writing in great detail about each stage of this process. At times, Plath forced herself to physically see Percy Key's slow demise, and this action demonstrates her commitment and need to witness death and watch this man wither away:

I thought I would stay and wait, and then something in me said no, you must see this, you have never seen a stroke or a dead person. So I went... The sense his morale, his spirit, had gone. That he had given in with this. Everybody, it seems, is going or dying in this cold mean spring." (668)

Plath's desire to watch a man slowly die, and to view his failing body does not represent morbid fascination on the author's behalf – as her journal entries show, she used these experiences expressly for her art, with many words from her detailed journal accounts appearing directly in the poem. Watching Percy Key die gave Plath the opportunity to feel and experience death and its impact first-hand. Any prior personal experiences she had with death, for example, losing her father and grandmother, had seen Plath kept away or unable to attend the funerals. While the chasm of horror experienced in WW2 may represent deaths too large for Plath to process; the demise of Percy Key allowed Plath the opportunity to view every instance in great detail, and contribute to the event by attending the wake and joining the funeral cortege. As a result, Plath's speaker begins to comprehend death more ably, "This is what it is to be complete. It is horrible," and:

They are flying off into nothing: remember us.
The empty benches of memory look over stones,

Marble facades with blue veins, and jelly-glassfuls of daffodils.
It is so beautiful up here: it is a stopping place. (*Collected Poems* 198, 199)

The individual death of this normal, "Everyman" has given Plath's speaker the tools to be less consumed by the "empty benches of memory" and to reach a place of clarity where she is able to accept and process the Event of death in all its guises (Gilbert 133). When the priest re-enters the poem, he is again seen as a figure between life and death: he will release the "vanishing man" into the afterworld: "The voice of the priest, in thin air, / Meets the corpse at the gate, / Addressing it..." (*Collected Poems* 200). Plath's speaker makes last desperate attempts to hold onto the dead man, trying to record everything connected to his death: "What is the name of that colour?" (200). But, much as with all human cycles – the phase of death has arrived unto the vanishing man. As he is buried, the poem changes tone, becoming more concerned with unearthly concepts, and reflecting this new position of the soul: "For a minute the sky pours into the hole like plasma. / There is no hope, it is given up" (201).

Plath wrote in her journals: "We left the open grave. An unfinished feeling. Is he to be left up there uncovered, all alone?" (673). This personal reflection is strikingly different to the

conclusion of "Berck-Plage." Plath's artistic response differs from her personal one, and seems to transcend human concerns. Her speaker envisions an ethereal connection between grave and sky, describing the soul leaving the body. The vanishing man is no longer of the human world – and our human concerns, such as hope and being alone are not relevant, they are "given up." The vanishing man has ceased to exist and Plath tries to comprehend this in two ways: as a living human being personally affected by the death of her neighbour and also as an artist, responding to death as a process.

Tim Kendall has suggested that Plath's work is reminiscent of Northern Irish poet Seamus Heaney because like him, she taps into a "higher consciousness" in order to respond artistically to traumatic real life events (195). By reacting to the individual death of Percy Key, Plath teased out why she was unable to fully express traumatic memories of the past. Like Heaney, Plath uses alternative routes to access such problematic issues. Plath allowed her experience of individual death to inform how she could begin to process mass, mechanical and anonymous slaughter. By concluding that our earthly concepts of hope, loneliness and individuality are just part of the process of existence, "Berck-Plage" is revealed to be an important poem, showing Plath's evolving artistic reassessment of death and comprehension of a post-WW2 world. We see Plath further explore the theme of death in many poems after "Berck-Plage," but it must be argued that without this epic elegy, Plath's later work may not have had such a clear and unique perception of death. Jahan Ramazani comments that, like Yeats, Keats and Dickinson, one of Plath's major poetic achievements was the individualization of death in the face of modern warfare "Berck-Plage" clearly shows that for Plath, one of the principle ways to process and understand death at the hands of modern warfare was to individualize it (203-204). While on the surface, this poem may appear to represent Plath's personal fears and an unhealthy preoccupation with doom and gloom; a closer look at "Berck-Plage" offers a complicated philosophical interpretation of the nature of different kinds of death, the difficulty we have in expressing our emotions towards it and our understanding of its role in our life journey.

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