Metonymic Space: A Different Figurative Possibility in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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I Controversy around Plath

There are plenty of controversial and contradictory comments on Plath as a poet and on her poetry. For most critics, her later poems signify her success as a poet. John Frederick Nims' observes that "without the drudgery of *The Colossus*, the triumph of *Ariel* is unthinkable;" by contrast, Hugh Kenner thinks that "[t]he formalisms of *The Colossus*—assonance, rhyme, stanzaic pattern—serve a number of interdependent offices, one of which is to reassure the genteel reader" (Kenner, "Sincerity Kills" 69, 72). Kenner sees the usage of "formalisms" in Plath's poetry as one of her ways to manipulate the reader: "All her life, a reader has been someone to manipulate;" "formalisms" assure the reader's acceptance of her work and make the reader "half-overlook an intrusion of mortuary, the morbid, and the demonic provided that table-manners are not disrupted" (69, 72). Ted Hughes thinks that the poem "The Stones" is "unlike anything that had gone before in her work" and that "throughout the poem what we hear coming clear is the now-familiar voice of *Ariel*" ("Sylvia Plath and Her Journals" 114). According to Hughes, "The Stones" is "the last of a sequence titled 'Poem for a Birthday'" and marks "the turning point" of Plath's writing career (114). However, Kenner calls this poem "the first free-fall poem." According to Kenner, "The Stones" no longer pretends a look of "a sassy phrase-maker's control and commenced spewing out family secrets" just like the poem "All the Dead Dears" (72); instead, "it ["The Stones"] installs itself at a bound in the madhouse of six years before" (Kenner 74). Hughes sees "The Stones" as a poem that dates Plath's discovery of "her real poetic voice"; nonetheless, Kenner thinks that the poem shows that Plath's "poetic had gone into free fall" as she abandoned formalisms and indulged in exposing personal or family secrets (74).

Besides the contradictory opinions of whether Plath's later poems are better and whether they have defined her success as a poet, there are conflicting reasons for these opinions. Perloff claims that Plath's poetry does not deal with important social/political issues and is only concerned with her personal experiences. In "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' Poems: A Portrait of the Poet as Daughter," Perloff points out Plath's

limitation: "Plath's limitation is that, having finally ceased to be Sivvy, she had really only one subject: her own anguish and consequent longing for death" (173). Perloff acknowledges that Plath does use some "political and religious images," but she thinks that Plath "camouflaged" the narrowness of her only subject by introducing these images (173). Perloff further stresses that Plath's references to "Hiroshima ash" or "the cicatrix of Poland" are simply "calling attention to their own cleverness" (173). As for Plath's references to "Jew," "Nazi," and the "Holocuast" in the poem "Daddy," Perloff thinks that "her [Plath's] identification with the Jews who suffered at Auschwitz has a hollow ring" (173). Contrary to Perloff's opinion, George Steiner thinks that the poem "Daddy" "achieves the classic act of generalization, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images" ("Dying Is an Art" 218). Different from Perloff, Helen Vendler argues that what is narrow about Plath's poetry is not a subject matter: "What is regrettable in Plath's work is not the domestic narrowness of her subject matter […] but the narrowness of tone" (*The Music of What Happens* 276). She then further points out that "Plath has another narrowness, too—her scrupulous refusal to generalize, in her best poems, beyond her own case" (276).

If to generalize means to relate private experiences to social and historical issues, then it could be said that Plath did attempt to meet and had fulfilled the requirement of generalization. However, according to Perloff's comment, such a fulfillment by Plath can still be seen as too forceful and thus unsuccessful. Vendler concludes: "There is more outrage and satire and hysteria in some of the last poems than there is steady thought, especially steady thought evinced in style" (283). Vendler's opinion is similar to Kenner's as they both criticize Plath's later poems for their enormous exposure of personal dramatic emotions and thoughts. What one can easily observe from these conflicting comments and reasons is that when a critic tries to establish a standard to measure the success or failure of Plath's work, the standard creates more confusion and undermines its own validity. Basically, generalization can be seen as a reason to justify the success and failure of Plath's work at the same time. One critic can use this standard to claim Plath's success; another can use the same standard to claim her failure. Such a critical standard is set up for the sake of justifying one's observation and judgment of Plath's work. What is questionable, then, is the legitimacy of the standard itself. Can we say that a poem is better because it deals with larger social issues and generalizes what is particular and individual?

Furthermore, is it only through relating the private and individual to the social and political issues that the particular is generalized and the personal becomes accessible to the reader, the public? What is generalization? How large is a large social/political issue?

When one uses the word "flower" to refer to different species of flower, the word "flower" already goes through the process of generalization. When the issues are private and personal, does this mean that the gap between words and their content is closed and that words are more unified with a writer's real experiences and personal issues? To follow this presupposition, does the closeness (or a better unification) between words and personal experiences then result in the impossibility of generalization or reduce the possibility of generalization? The gap between words and whatever issues dealt with in the content of words is fundamental and not bridgeable. It is thus questionable for one to claim that the gap is narrower just because the issues that words deal with are more personal. In terms of the foundation of language, words dealing with a larger issue do not lead to a better generalization; a smaller personal issue dealt with in writing does not lead to a worse generalization in writing. As the gap between words and the issues or experiences they are addressing is fundamentally the same, can one really decide whether an issue is successfully generalized in writing only by considering and judging how large the issue is? It becomes especially important to be aware of the gap between Plath's work and her life while reading and evaluating her work. One cannot keep the assumption that the gap between her later poems and her life is non-existent and then jump to the conclusion that her later poems lack generalization and that her poems would have been better if they had dealt with issues far away from her personal life.

II   Referentiality or a Fundamental Break

Several recent critics have questioned the representational relation between Plath's life and her work from different critical perspectives. For example, Tracy Brain in her essay, "Dangerous Confessions: the Problem of Reading Sylvia Plath Biographically," questions this method of reading representational meanings into Plath's poems. Brain first introduces David Yezzi's definition of confessional poetry: "What makes a poem confessional is not only its subject matter […] but also the directness with which such things are handled. […] what sets them [confessional poems] apart from other poems is […] their artful simulation of sincerity. […] the poet makes an artifice of honesty" (13). Brain uses Yezzi's definition to argue that

confessional poetry is not a direct exposure of one's emotions and experiences; instead, the sincerity or honesty sensed in such poems is "an artifice" itself. To emphasize sincerity/honesty as "an artifice" is to revise the understanding of the word, "confessional." Diane Middlebrook observes that "[t]he label *confessional* was first applied, disapprovingly, to Robert Lowell's *Life Studies* […] and that "*confessional* referred to content, not technique" ("What Was Confessional Poetry" 632-3). Like Brain, George Steiner also stresses that "the vehemence and intimacy of the verse is such as to constitute a very powerful rhetoric of sincerity" ("Dying Is an Art" 211-2). It becomes important for Brain and Steiner to claim and clarify that the word "confessional" does not mean that the content in a poem is a writer's truthful confession of his/her personal life. Without such a claim, whatever Plath achieves in her writing appears to be insignificant since what she has confessed—the content—is what matters. In other words, being sincere and sounding "confessional" should be taken as an effect created through Plath's "powerful rhetoric," which then necessitates the desire to explore what Plath achieves in her writing and also makes her a more respectable writer.

Similarly, Jon Rosenblatt criticizes that "[t]hose who read Plath in confessional terms thus confuse the point of departure for the poems with their transformed and completed state" (*The Poetry of Initiation* 15). Therefore, Plath's life experiences might be where her poetry starts, but her poetry does not end where her life experiences are. Rosenblatt thinks that "[t]he supposed inseparability of biography and poetry turns out to be nothing more than these critics' preference for biographical criticism" (15). Mary-Lynn Broe reminds us that "[c]areful verbal notation of an object or an event could be no substitute for the imaginative transformation of the private life through the process of art" (*Protean Poetic* ix). Broe succinctly criticizes the tendency of biographical criticism of Plath's poetry: "What ought to be read forward as the creative skill of poemmaking informed by artistic control has been read backward as the footnoted suffering of a broken psyche" (*Protean Poetic* x). Plath has "artistic control" in her so-called confessional poetry. Her life experiences are not directly recorded in her poems but go through "imaginative transformation," which explains Plath's creativity.

With these critics' awareness of the possible artifice and the transformative power involved in Plath's writing, critical views of Plath's poetry appears more beneficial. Nonetheless, if such an effort to bring focus on Plath's writing succeeds,

how can her life still go hand in hand with the interpretation of her work? Why does the drama of her life never lose control over her writing? To emphasize "artistic control" and "imaginative transformation" in Plath's writing suggest that there are real emotions and sentiments that need to be controlled during the process of writing and that there have been the real incidents and feelings that are transformed into her writing through her imagination. In short, these expressions presuppose the existence of the real before the poems are written. It seems difficult to read Plath's poems without considering her dramatic and conspicuous life, so when Broe tries to defend Plath's creative power, she does not question the assumption that there has been always the real for Plath to transform. Another possible reason is that Plath's journals and a few of her interviews have shown that she does write about things in her life. However, if "generalization" cannot be an appropriate standard to measure Plath's success or failure, is "artistic control" a better standard (since the loss of control can appear to be the best control)?

Brain stresses that Plath's life and her work are not the same and that the speaker of a poem does not coincide with the poet. Furthermore, whereas critics often rely on Plath's journals or letters to support their reading of Plath's poems, Brain attempts to deconstruct the belief that Plath's journals or letters can be the primary texts for other texts because such a belief is actually a variation of the belief that there is no separation between Plath's life and her work. Brain uses an incident as an example—when Plath and Ted Hughes encountered a bear in a park where they were camping. There are three completely different accounts of the incident (two from biographers and one from Plath). Brain argues that Plath's account in her letter is not necessarily accurate since she "may be dramatizing the events in a writerly way, perhaps for later use" (15). The possibility of fictional elements in her journals raises questions about one's attempt to establish referentiality between Plath's work and her life with recourse to her journals or letters. Ironically, when Brain questions some biographers' problematic methods of writing about Plath, she also needs to refer to Plath's journals or letters to present her argument. Does the idea of non-referentiality then still rely on the establishment of some referentiality?

Referentiality between sign and referent and between Plath's work and her life is arbitrary and can only be forcefully constructed because signs and words carry the fundamental break from the real (or any other signified such as the past). It is impossible to sustain such referentiality because words are able to "proclaim"

meanings in their current contexts at the present according to Jacques Derrida (*Of Grammatology* 66). Thus, referentiality cannot be questioned through bringing up other possibilities of referentiality. In this case, referentiality cannot be established without obstruction. It is difficult for a sign or a word to simply refer back to its original (the supposedly original), and this difficulty is inevitable because of language's fundamental break from the signified (the real, the original, or the past). Moreover, this difficulty—i.e., the fundamental break, gap, and discrepancy between sign and referent and between the representation and the represented—cannot be removed because a sign or a word proclaims something different from its syntax (metonymy as syntax) and also because a detail or an image signifies differently owing to its present context, its being surrounded by and situated among other contiguous elements (i.e., metonymy as figuration). However, this difficulty is an opportunity—a possibility for writing to create a difference, a deviation from the path of referentiality, a "turn" or a "detour" "during which meaning might seem to venture forth alone, unloosed from the very thing it aims at however, from the truth which attunes it to its referent, metaphor also opens to the wandering of the semantic" (Derrida, "White Mythology" 241). Thus, metonymy allows a metaphor to wander away from its proper referent.

III   Plath's Relation with "Words"

Some of Plath's works have shown that she took this difficulty, the fundamental break or discrepancy, as a possibility for writing, not as an obstacle for her to get rid of. In the poem "Words," Plath directly talks about how words defy and signify meanings at the same time and shows her insightful understanding toward the functioning of language and the relation between writer and words.

Even though "Words" are not clearly defined as written words in the poem, I will interpret them mainly as written words. Close to the end of the poem, the speaker meets "words" written years ago. Plath creates a temporal and spatial relationship between the speaker and "words"—that the speaker meets "words" on the path after so many years (*The Collected Poems* 270). "Words" "riderless" implies that "words" are no longer ridden or controlled by the speaker or anyone and that they probably do not embody or carry whatever ideas or meanings imposed upon them by the speaker years ago (*The Collected Poems* 270). Nonetheless, the speaker can still hear the undying "hoof-taps," which are the consequential effects of words written years ago (*The Collected Poems* 270). In the first stanza of the poem, when words were being

written, words can hack the wood and create sounds that traverse time and space "like horses" (*The Collected Poems* 270). Therefore, ideas or powers exercised upon words are gone after so many years, or, to borrow Walter Benjamin's idea, words have "liquidated" those ideas or powers ("On the Mimetic Faculty" 336). The speaker is still able to recall some residue, the undying tapping sounds, the lingering reverberation, but what the speaker recalls is no longer the original source of the reverberating sounds in the past. The undying sounds of "hoof-taps" signify not only the existence of the past when words were written but also the impossibility of securing the past. Furthermore, it is also impossible to resuscitate the reverberation or effects that words had created in the past or the side-product of the fluid flowing while words hack the wood. In short, what is recalled now does not coincide with what had happened in the past, and the speaker does not attempt to establish the identification between the past and the present but tries to unfold a difference being experienced at the present.

To borrow Derrida's expression, "words" met on the path now retain not the past but the "present-past," the residue, "the trace" of the past (*Of Grammatology* 66). What "words" proclaim now lies in the present context—their being juxtaposed with the "stars" reflected at "the bottom of the pool" (*The Collected Poems* 270). While seeing "words" become "riderless" on the path, the speaker also sees a pool with stars reflected in it. The juxtaposition signifies a possible metonymic operation (by Roman Jakobson's definition)—i.e., the combination/contexture of "words" and a pool with stars based on their spatial and temporal contiguity, which is especially suggested from the word "while" in the poem. Temporally, the speaker meets "words" first and then sees the "stars," and such a temporal sequence could suggest that the contemplation about "words" being "riderless" and the tapping sounds still heard is carried onto what the speaker looks at next. Spatially, "words" met on the path and the pool with the stars at its bottom seem to be located right next to or contiguous to each other (i.e., spatial contiguity). Such spatial contiguity suggests that the speaker might just need to turn her head and switch her attention, and then she can spot the "stars" at "the bottom of the pool." Both temporal and spatial contiguity connote a perception based on distraction—i.e., the speaker's perception and understanding of "words" is based on her distraction from the encounter with "words" and her next attention to the image of the pool with the stars. The temporal contiguity makes possible a transition that signifies a little lapse of time between the encounter with "words" and the

attention to the pool with the stars. The spatial contiguity creates a narrative transition that implies a distance between "words" met on the path and the pool but shows that they are contiguous to each other within the same space. The lapse of time and the spatial distance help avoid the negativity of claiming a simple metaphor too quickly and of drawing an easy equation between "words" and the "stars" too bluntly.

The stars reflected at "the bottom of the pool are not real stars and are simply reflections; however, they could stay "fixed" at the bottom of the pool without being directly connected with real stars (*The Collected Poems* 270). They have a life of their own, which is independent and separate from the real ones in the sky. Therefore, the "stars" at "the bottom of the pool" could be like "words." As "words" become "riderless" and belong to no subject, the "stars" at "the bottom of the pool" stay independent from real stars; then, as these stars have a life of their own, "words" met on the path become "riderless" and are not controlled or owned by anyone but have a life ruled by themselves. If we bring the previous discussion of metonymy into play with this metaphorical interpretation, we can sense a subtle shift in the speaker's view toward "riderless" words. When the speaker meets "riderless" "words" on the path, the speaker appears to be reminiscent as the undying "hoof-taps" could still be heard; therefore, this encounter is not one without any surprise or some sentiment. The encounter probably leads to a pause, which signals a need for a moment of contemplation about "words" whose reverberating sounds could still be heard after so many years; the encounter could also leads to a question—how will the speaker respond to "words" and handle this encounter?

When the speaker sees "fixed stars" at "the bottom of the pool," they could implicitly give the speaker an explanation about how words become "riderless" and how "words" could have a life of their own as well. This explanation might reduce the surprise or shock that the speaker could have experienced from the encounter with "words" and might make the speaker accept and understand that "words" no longer belong to anyone. Nonetheless, it is also possible that the "stars" at "the bottom of the pool" make the speaker feel more disturbed because of their suggestive explanation, which could indirectly confirm the inevitability of words' becoming "riderless" and their forever departure and break from the moment when they were written and from the one who had written them. The little lapse of time and space suggested by the word "while" allow and require further attention to and interpretation of what the speaker has understood and how the speaker's mind is disturbed. Such a temporal or

spatial transition through the word "while" is metonymic as it functions through the temporal/spatial contiguity between "words" met on the path and the "stars" at "the bottom of a pool." The possibility of metonymy here also makes the metaphorical parallel between "words" and the "stars" appear only as a possibility—a possibility of a connection working only implicitly and suggestively through metonymic contextualization, which implies a possible meditation and response in the speaker's mind. Thus, the interpretation of the poem cannot be reduced to a metaphorical interpretation alone since the way that words, images, and details are contextualized in this poem already suggest a resistance to a strict identification between "words" confronted now and "words" written in the past—i.e., a simple metaphorical operation. If Plath is aiming for a simple metaphorical operation, then the last three lines of the poem can be easily changed to or reduced to an expression that words are stars or like "stars" at "the bottom of the pool." Metonymy in this poem thus forbids simple metaphorical reduction.

Rosenblatt emphasizes the themes of death and rebirth and self-transformation in discussing Plath's poetry. When interpreting this poem "Words," he states that "[m]etaphorically, then, language introduces death into personal reality, cutting the living body as an ax cuts a tree and as the skull breaks the water's surface. Words damage the original organic wholeness of the body by bringing death into consciousness" (138). Plath compares words to axes in this poem because of the similar consequential effects after axes cut a tree—i.e., the effects of the reverberating sounds and the flowing liquid. Both effects are the results after words hack the wood. The liquid continues to flow like a river running over stones over the years. Then, here comes a temporal difference—that the speaker meets "words" after so many years. Therefore, there is an intentional disconnection between where the liquid flows and where the sounds reverberate and reach. Basically, they are two different effects after words hack the wood. The liquid is compared to teardrops in the poem, so it could be any emotion or internal turmoil that was produced while words were written. The reverberating sounds "like horses" run across places and spaces; the spatial distance that the sounds go across implies a temporal distance—the lapse of time between the past when words were written and the present when they were met again. The sounds and the liquid that were produced when words hacked the wood have gone on divergent paths over the years. Thus, after so many years, when the speaker meets words "dry and riderless," the speaker could still hear the undying "hoof-taps"

more or less; words being "dry" has lost its connection with the watery liquid, the side-product and aftermath of words' hacking years ago. The flowing liquid is now only a distant memory and is probably a bitter contrast to words met on the path now because they are "dry and riderless" and actually have a life of their own, like the "fixed stars" having a life of their own at "the bottom of the pool." The ending of the poem introduces the speaker's understanding toward words and their relation to the speaker, which is neither a positive rebirth nor a negative death.

  Rosenblatt also reads the details and images too symbolically and metaphorically: "The white skull at the water's bottom has given way to, or been transformed into, the white stars, a traditional symbol of fate, destiny, or the cosmic order" (139). In this quote, the flowing liquid and the reverberating sounds when "words" hack the wood are confused into one single effect. In the poem, "words" that the speaker met again so many years later are disconnected with the flowing liquid and the skull that the liquid runs over. The disconnection is intended by Plath as she establishes a temporal difference and then two different consequential effects about words—i.e., being "dry and riderless"— after so many years. The liquid no longer flows from the wood and is now "dry"; the reverberating sounds that run "like horses" are now "riderless." In this case, stressing the coherence of a metaphor or the symbolic meanings about the "stars" really does not help unfold Plath's success in "words," in writing. The very last image in this poem is very significant as it suggests that words grouped together can form a network just like the mapping of the "stars" at "the bottom of the pool." Words are grouped together and form a contexture based on their positional/syntactic, temporal, or spatial contiguity. Syntax is a very basic linguistic arrangement; metonymy as a possibility of figurative language then requires a particular combination/contexture of constituent elements (such as words, images, and details) based on their contiguous relationships. At the end of this poem, the speaker hears the distant sounds of the undying "hoof-taps" from the past; thus, "words" now "dry and riderless" are spatially adjacent to and juxtaposed to the "stars" at "the bottom of the pool." These constituent elements (such "words," "stars," and "pool") form a contexture and have "a life" of their own in the poem, which a traditional symbolic meaning of the stars, such as "fate" or "destiny," should find it difficult to enter. In this poem, "words" like "stars" have formed a network and have had a life of their own. As the speaker finds it difficult to enter this network and claim what "words" had actually meant in the past or what they should mean now, critics

should also find it difficult to remove a word or an image out of its contexture in a poem and claim its symbolic meanings.

The signification of metonymic contextualization can be understood from another perspective. Plath uses the metaphor of "horse" in another poem "Elm": "Love is a shadow / How you lie and cry after it / Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse" (*Ariel* 27). There is certainly similarity about the usage of "horse" in both poems, such as the movement and the echoes. Nonetheless, to nail down a symbolic meaning of "horse" will lead to the ignorance of its contextual relevance to "words" in the poem "Words" and about "love" in the poem "Elm." The poem "Ariel" is the speaker's experience of riding a horse, whose signification is especially contextual and metonymic since it is not a metaphor used to describe another incident or experience in the poem. One can easily claim that "horse" represents and symbolizes energy, motion, or coming-together of death and birth for the sake of securing a consistent, stable, and thematic understanding about "horse." However, such emphasis on metaphor and metaphorical meanings disregards metonymy and possible metonymic meanings. It basically flattens possible different and various meanings about "horse," which emerge from different contexts in different lines and stanzas in the poem. If the poem "Ariel" is truly to celebrate motion, is it not ironic to claim that the theme of the poem is motion while creating a thematic stability of the poem?

IV   A Metonymy within a Metaphor

To stress how metonymy as figuration is performed in Plath's poetry, I will discuss the poem "The Night Dances" where Plath uses metaphor that also involves the operation of metonymy as figuration. Plath incorporates metonymy (especially one that is based on spatial contiguity among selected details and images) into her usage of metaphor. In such a case, the signification of metonymy can be more clearly understood since metonymy competes with and challenges metaphor. Moreover, it appears clearer that metaphorical understanding alone will only make the interpretation of a poem reductive. Metonymy thus shows its figurative signification as a poetic difference from metaphor.

Who is "you" in the poem "The Night Dances"? According to the notes in *The Collected Poems*, "The Night Dances" is about "[a] revolving dance which her baby son performed at night in the crib" (294). According to the discussion of Brain's essay above, there is distance or gap between the speaker and the author. There is not

complete identity or unification between "I" in the poem and Plath as the author. In his essay, "Resurrection of the Implied Author: Why Bother," Wayne Booth also argues that authors tend to "wipe out the selves they do not like" and project and even fake the selves which are "masks covering much more complex, and too often much less admirable, selves" (77, 78). Therefore, an author implied through his or her writings could be a better and superior self and does not coincide with the real author. According to Booth, "we less often meet ironic portraits of deliberately flawed, intentionally unreliable narrators" when reading poems, and we often meet "thoroughly cleaned personae who imply a total identity with the IA [implied author]"; nonetheless, "the poetic self has emerged dressed up elegantly, exhibiting a sensitivity to life's owes and blisses that careful readers find themselves longing to possess" (78). In other words, Booth thinks that there is less clear distinction between the narrators and the implied authors in poetry because poets tend to create "cleaned personae" (as narrators/speakers) that seem to be more unified with the implied authors. For Booth, even though a poet might create the narrator or the speaker that appears to be: "'I, the poet, speak to you directly in my true voice,'" the implied author is still not the poet (78). In other words, even if a poet attempts to create a better unification between the narrator and the implied author, the implied author as "the poetic self" still does not coincide with the real author. Booth notices that even though Plath has "beautifully revealed and recreated their self-destructive faults and miseries—as if practicing total undoctored honesty," she is "still realizing, during the very act of creating the poems, selves far superior to those who cursed their spouses over breakfast" (79). The implied author is projected by Plath in her writings and is not Plath in real life no matter how honest her poems might appear. Moreover, there could be contradictory implied authors in Plath's poems: "As her husband, and her journals, and her many biographers, have revealed, she herself felt divided about just which of her poems really fit the person she wanted to appear to be" (Booth 80). To follow Booth's thinking here, there is not even one single consistent implied author in Plath's poems; there are different and even contradictory implied authors created through different poetic voices in Plath's poems. Since there are different implied authors, it is impossible to say that Plath is "the" implied author. Since it is difficult to decide which implied author is Plath, then it is odd to claim that any implied author is Plath or that the speaker or narrator is Plath.

Booth's answer to the question in the title of his essay "Resurrection of the

Implied Author: Why Bother?" is that, yes, it is necessary to "resurrect" the "implied author." My answer is "don't bother" because if one understands the unbridgeable gap between words and the proper meanings and between the speaker and the poet, whether a poetic self (a self created in poetry) or the implied author (a self that the author implied through writings) appears superior or not is an "ethical" question as Booth stresses himself. Nonetheless, to interpret a poem based on the assumption that the speaker is the poet and thus relate the poem to the poet's real life experiences violates the fundamental break inherent in language—i.e., when a word, "tree," is written, the word takes its forever departure from a real tree. Thus, when "I" is written in poetry, the word takes its forever departure from the author.

Similar with the gap between "I" as the speaker and Plath as the author, there is distance or gap between Plath's relationship with her son and the speaker's relationship with her son in "The Night Dances." It might be real and true that Plath did see her son doing night dances, but what is presented in the poem is not a copy, a representation, of what actually happened but a created version of a mother watching her son dance at night. Plath might use a real incident to start her poem, but what "The Night Dances" is and the source of the poem will have to lie in the poem, not in Plath's life. To use Paul Ricoeur's idea, "[t]he sense of a text is not behind the text, but in front of it" (*Interpretation Theory* 87). The real incident cannot be recovered in the poem; the purpose of the poem is also not to recover the real incident. To use Plath's idea in this poem, the real incident is impossible to recover.

Therefore, I will maintain a mother-son relationship in my following interpretation of the poem "The Night Dances" while not assuring that the speaker is Plath and "you" is her son. The poem starts with an image irrelevant to "night dances" and the image easily trigger the possibility of a picture or a common situation where someone wears a smile while walking on the grass or sitting on the grass. It does not matter who, when, or where exactly. It could be a smile of some happiness, but its signification remains uncertain till the second line. "A smile" is never going to be recuperated because it disappears right at the moment and right in the place when it first appeared. It not only becomes invisible in the weeds but also drops invisibly since it is not tangible. Nonetheless, the speaker experiences how such a smile disappeared because the speaker claims that it is impossible to recover it.

If a smile disappeared where it appeared, will the son's "night dances" disappear in the same way or will they disappear differently? Then, in what way will

they disappear? It is probably with one of these questions in mind that the speaker answers with another question—whether the son's "night dances" will disappear in the precise calculation of math?—in the second stanza. What numbers are calculated? Could they be the days and years that will be passing by since this moment of the son's "night dances"? Could these numbers be related to the counting of the steps of the dances since the next stanza focuses on the details about these particular steps?

In the third stanza, the poem continues with the same focus on the description of the dances. The speaker claims that those steps of the son's night dances will continuously stay in this world; thus, the speaker will not be ridden of these beautiful details in the future. Such a claim indicates the speaker's appreciation of the son's dances and is a different thought from the previous understanding that the dances disappear like a smile. In terms of contextualization, Plath puts together the image of a "smile" in the first stanza, the question of how the dances will disappear in the second stanza, and then the speaker's appreciation of the son's night dances along with the insistence of their forever existence around the world in the third stanza; through contextualizing these elements in such a sequence, Plath creates and presents the speaker's undulating (and sometimes even contradictory) thoughts and feelings, which could be each other's stimuli or consequences.

After the five two–line stanzas, the sixth and seventh stanzas continue to describe all the beautiful things about the son. Then, between the seventh and eighth stanzas, there is one larger blank space as a stanza break in the poem. Plath has used a larger stanza break within a poem to divide the poem into two parts and thus to create some particular effects—such as an analogy or parallel of the two parts, a comparison or contrast of the two parts, a separation between the two parts in one respect and a suggestive connection between the two in another respect, and so on. Plath has created a larger stanza break in other poems such as "The Couriers," "The Other," "Two Views of a Cadaver Room," and so on for different reasons. In "The Night Dances," the comparatively larger stanza break signifies a break and a link between the previous stanzas and the rest of the stanzas in the poem. The rest of the stanzas will answer the previous question of how the son's "night dances" will get lost in the world and thus further explain how those particular details of the "night dances" will still continue to stay in the world and why the speaker will never be worried about losing them. The stanzas after the larger stanza break together form a grand metaphor, which actually involves the operation of metonymy (as a mode of figuration) within.

This grand metaphor starts with the "comets" (*Ariel* 29).

Instead of creating a link with the previous stanzas, Plath creates a break. Plath does not write that "the comets" are like the son's night dances. In other words, the "comets" are not a tenor or a vehicle of a metaphor but enter the poem simply as a metonymic element. The narrative is thus interrupted as the focus on the son's "night dances" and other memorable things appears to shift to something quite irrelevant. The larger stanza break thus signifies an interruption of the flow of the narrative. The three lines—"The comets / Have such a space to cross, / Such coldness, forgetfulness"—together operate as a metonymy that has figurative signification because the words and images are not only combined through appropriate syntax but also contextualized especially through their spatial contiguity (*Ariel* 29).

"The comets" and "such a space" are spatially contiguous to each other because the speaker here sees or pictures the "comets" crossing "such a space." Through the speaker's observation and perception, the spatial relationship between the "comets" and "such a space" is formed. These constituent elements are combined into a contexture because of their spatial contiguity (by Jakonson's definition of metonymy); at the same time, a metonymic space is created in the poem because of their combination. "The comets / have such a space to cross" is a different expression from "the comets cross a space" because the first expression implies that the "comets" are unwilling to cross "such a space" and that the space is probably too big and is thus difficult for the "comets" to cross. This expression shows that the description about the "comets" crossing "such a space" is not meant to be an objective observation but an observation with subjective projection. "Such a space" has "[s]uch coldness" and "forgetfulness," which help explain why the "comets" might find it hard to cross "such a space." "The comets" are not simply concerned with the huge space but also its "coldness" and "forgetfulness." The "comets" are seemingly sensitive about being unable to keep their own warmth while crossing the cold space. While knowing that they will disappear soon in the great space, the "comets" complain that "such a space" is definitely forgetful of their transient existence. This metonymy alone can trigger some metaphorical interpretations such as an interpretation that the "comets" crossing "such a space" are just like us living in this big world and the space being cold and forgetful is equivalent to the world being distant and indifferent. Nonetheless, this metonymic space encompasses the contiguous relationships between the "comets" and the sky, between the comets' warmth and the supposedly cold sky, and between the

comets' transient existence and the sky's "forgetfulness." The contiguous relationship between the "comets" and "such a space" promises a possible movement of the "comets" across "such a space" and other consequential interactions and contiguous relationships among the constituent elements. On the one hand, these contiguous relationships and interactions together evoke a metonymic space—a figurative space; on the other hand, all of the possible subjective description about the "comets" or its surroundings is based on this figurative space. Moreover, because the space is created through these contiguous relationships, the description of each element is dependent upon its spatial relation to other element(s). The subjective perception of the sky's "coldness" and "forgetfulness" (or the comets' possible responses to "such a space") all relies on a spatially contiguous relationship between the "comets" and "such a space." In conclusion, this figurative space is first suggested by the depiction of an imaginative movement of the "comets" across the space, and then it sets up further development of the constituent elements or details (such as the comets' response to the coldness of the space and the speaker's consequential reaction to the comets' inevitable disappearance). The further development of the details then contributes to this figurative spatial construct. Therefore, this figurative space is not a real setting that Plath simply represents in writing but a spatial construct that can only gradually appear word by word in writing.

When the speaker describes that "such a space" is forgetful, it might bring back the reader's memory of the speaker's previous concern of how the son's "night dances" will disappear but will be kept in the speaker's mind forever. Nonetheless, it is upon the second line of the ninth stanza that Plath makes a clear connection between the "comets" and the particular steps or motions of the son's "night dances." With this line, a metaphorical connection is created with the previous stanzas.

Such metaphorical connection makes the larger stanza break appear as a link since it becomes a hinge that pulls together two groups of stanzas and forms a parallel between them. However, the larger stanza break is an interruption of the narrative first until the connection is made. The larger stanza break suggests a connection and an inevitable interruption at the same time. The interruption created in the narrative is significant because it shows that the connection has to be constructed and is not natural. In other words, Plath has left the traces of constructing such a connection and thus revealed the forceful nature of the connection. Plath recognizes that the "comets" and the son's "night dances" are irrelevant even though she attempts to make a

connection between them. The larger stanza break, which signifies the way the "comets" enter the poem, indicates that Plath is aware of the arbitrary nature of making such a connection. In others words, Plath's larger stanza break has registered its own arbitrary nature.

To view "the comets" crossing the cold space only as a metaphor without regarding how metonymy operates in its constitution is against how Plath contextualized these words and images in the first place. Furthermore, metonymy offers a different perspective toward the correlation and association among the chosen words and details. The "comets" are like those particular details of the son's dances and a metaphorical link is made because the "comets," "such a space," and the cold and forgetful space are spatially correlated and associated and form a metonymy. This metonymy offers a supportive context for the metaphor to function. Most important of all, this metonymy adds a different figurative possibility to the metaphor—a spatial figuration.

The metonymic space allows the metaphor to develop and also guides, limits, and defines its development. Therefore, how the "comets" act and react to the atmosphere in the great space turns into a similar experience with how those beautiful details of the night dances traverse the world. Therefore, when the "comets" cross "such a space" and fall piece by piece, those details of the son's dances also take the same journey. Whatever could possibly happen to the "comets" across the space is an indication of what could possibly happen to the particulars of the son's dances. All of these metaphorical possibilities can only emerge from the metonymic space where the "comets" are situated and are allowed to interact with and form relationships with other element(s) within the same space.

Apparently, the son's "night dances" do not need to cross a certain space in order to have contact with the speaker. Crossing the space signifies a spatialization of temporality—i.e., that the son's "night dances" go through time like crossing a space to meet with the speaker in a future moment. For this reason, the metaphor of the "comets" is clearly a parallel. The speaker previously assures herself that she will never lose those beautiful details of the "night dances," which continuously move around in the world but do not disappear. How does the metaphor of the "comets" further support or contradict the speaker's belief that those beautiful things about the son will exist forever?

In the tenth stanza, the description of the "comets" carries more human

characteristics and reveals more and more projection of the speaker's concern and affection. Watching the "comets" shed off light disturbs the speaker's mind and becomes painful. When the speaker continues to emphasize how forgetful "such a space" is in the eleventh stanza, the speaker has answered the question of whether the "night dances" will get lost in the world or not. The space does not remember the "comets" crossing by; therefore, the son's "night dances" are not remembered in such a forgetful world as well. The "comets" show up but are destined to disappear eventually. Similarly, the night dances show up as such beautiful things but are destined to be forgotten in the world.

Plath ends the poem with a long complicated question; the question is also a response to the forgetful space that devours anything passing by. The question seems to start with a complaint—why did the speaker have to have these beautiful pieces of light if they are meant to be taken away? The tone seems negative. However, the negativity is balanced with the positivity of the words Plath uses to describe these shreds of light. Plath uses adjectives that suggest the speaker's attention and appreciation of these pieces of light. Similarly, the speaker is given and is appreciative of those pieces of memory, images, or fragments of the son's night dances even though they will disappear eventually. Besides those adjectives, Plath has shown how the speaker receives and appreciates the impact of the son's "night dances" by naming and re-naming these pieces of light and depicting the very particular details of their shape and color (just like the way she points out the particular steps of her son's night dances and other things in the third and fourth stanzas).

Plath further shows the impact by describing how the speaker receives and experiences these fragments of the son's dances in the last two stanzas. The pieces of light should drop off fast; nonetheless, Plath writes about how the speaker experiences their landing. These shreds of light land on the speaker's face and head "Touching and melting. / Nowhere" (*Ariel* 30). Such deliberate depiction of which areas of the body the pieces of light land on and how lightly they land creates several significant effects. First, the pieces of light appear to fall on the speaker's head or face one by one in slow motion since the speaker is able to detect where in particular they land. The "comets" might disappear quickly in the space but the depiction here shows that the speaker slowly receives and experiences their impact. The speaker's slow-motion embracement of the fragments from the "comets" is a contrast to the transient existence and the inevitable disappearance of what she attempts to keep forever.

Second, these pieces of light do not seem to have any strong impact because they are simply "[t]ouching and melting." However, "[t]ouching and melting" show that the speaker is sensitive to their impact and that the impact from them is lingering. The last line, "Nowhere," bluntly puts an end to the imaginative lingering sensation. The "comets" cross the space and turn into pieces of light; as the pieces of light fall on the speaker's face and head, they melt and go "[n]owhere." The very ending line contradicts with and thus questions the speaker's previous self-assurance that the son's "night dances" will continue to exist in the world.

If this contradiction does not mean that Plath simply loses control in her writing and fails to create a perfect metaphorical parallel (between how the son's "night dances" will stay in the world forever and how the "comets" will turn into shreds of light and disappear in the end), the contradiction has a deeper signification—that the metonymic contextualization of the "comets" and other spatially contiguous elements has taken the poem to a different direction, which Plath does not manipulate and twist in order to keep a perfect metaphorical parallel. Instead of functioning as a simple metaphor that echoes the idea stated in the previous stanzas, the metonymic contextualization of the "comets" and other elements has developed a different figurative possibility. The metonymic contextualization allows the "comets" and its associative elements to develop the possible consequences of the comets' movement, their encounter and interaction with the surroundings, and also the possible outcome of the comets' journey in the space. Such operation of metonymy constrains and forbids the full operation of metaphor because the "comets" are first addressed as an equivalent to those particulars of the son's "night dances" but what the comets' experiences during the journey in the space cannot fully coincide with how the son's "night dances" will continue to exist in the world.

The outcome that the "comets" turn into shreds of light falling and disappearing does not correspond to the outcome that the son's "night dances" will continue to stay in the world. Such an imperfect metaphor relies on metonymy for its development first, but other figurative possibilities and suggestive meanings emerge from the operation of metonymy and become a counterforce to a metaphorical simplicity. When one insists on a simple metaphorical development of the "comets," one can easily turn the "comets" into something so memorable that they exist forever. The signification of the "comets" then ends up being a cliché—that they disappear in reality but exist forever in one's mind. In the last three stanzas of the poem, the

speaker's interaction with the "comets" takes on a metonymic development as the speaker imaginatively responds to the shreds of light from the "comets" and surreally feels that they are "[t]ouching and melting" on the face and head. It is not questionable that the metonymic development here also carries on the metaphorical development in the previous three stanzas that those particulars of the son's "night dances" are "the comets." Nonetheless, the metonymic development is not circumscribed by the readily-defined metaphorical connection between the "night dances" and the "comets"; instead, the imaginative metonymic contextualization of the comets' shreds of light, their landing on the speaker's face and head, and the speaker's sensitive response to them offers a challenge and becomes a contrast to the speaker's previous understanding that the son's "night dances" and other memorable things will continue to exist. In other words, the speaker's ideas and desires made manifest in the first seven stanzas (before the larger stanza break) cannot stay consistent through the poem. They are challenged, re-thought, and revised as the metonymic development takes on its own direction in the stanzas after the larger stanza break. In these stanzas, Plath does not describe the "comets," their journey in the space, their destination, and the speaker's reaction to their falling to fully represent or repeat the speaker's previous interaction with the son's "night dances." In short, what Plath has created here is not a metaphor which functions as an ornament to decorate an already-known idea. Plath allows the speaker to interact with the contiguous details in the metonymic space and lets such development take on its own course. Such metonymic development leads to an outcome different from what the speaker previously desires.

What especially features the metonymic development here is the space that has a figurative possibility; the imaginative confrontation and interaction between the comets and the speaker rely on the space created through the metonymic operation— i.e., the combination/contexture of the constituent elements (such as the comets and other elements surrounding them) based on their spatial contiguity. Only such a figurative space evokes and encompasses possibilities of existence and disappearance of "the comets" at the same time. Within this figurative space, the speaker's experience goes through a process of figuration as well. In the metonymic space, the speaker's desire or hope that the son's "night dances" will persist is brought into play only as an element participating in the metonymic operation but does not dominate the whole figurative development or control its outcome. The speaker's wishful

thinking about the son's "night dances" is similar with one's admiration and appreciation of the beautiful comets. The speaker's hope starts and then is drawn into the figurative development of the comets; at the end of the poem, the speaker's hope is challenged by the outcome of this figurative development. The line, "Touching and melting," emphasizes the speaker's embracement and full appreciation of what is left from the "comets" and the speaker's clear acknowledgement of their disappearance at the same time. This experiencing process confirms the speaker's appreciation of their existence while registering a reality that they can never be rescued and safeguarded from the forgetful world through such appreciation.

For Plath to allow the metonymic contextualization to develop with such an ending—a sad note to the speaker's romantic hope—shows that Plath's writing is not simply to represent a personal hope, to precipitate an ideal, or just to confirm an already-known idea. Plath does not write the poem to confirm that it is possible to resuscitate the past or to recall the past through writing. Metonymic contextualization allows the speaker's subjectivity to enter the text only as a metonymic element, not as a dominant arbiter. The meanings that emerge from the metonymic contextualization can diverge from a metaphorical purpose just as a writer's purpose is susceptible to challenge offered by metonymy in writing. It is when metonymy operates and challenges the functioning of metaphor that a different figurative possibility emerges—the possibility that the metonymic contextual meanings can lead a narrative astray from a writer's original intention and from a metaphorical purpose, and thus differ from any presupposed or readily-prepared ideas.

V   Conclusion: Metonymy as a Challenge against Thematic Approaches

There are plenty of examples in Plath's poems where metaphors involve the operation of metonymy featuring especially the spatial contiguous relations among images or details, including "Flies watch no resurrections in the sun" (in an early poem "November Graveyard)," "Ages beat like rains / On the unbeaten channels / Of the ocean" (in "Full Fathom Five"), "Clouds pass and disperse. / Are those the faces of love" (in "Elm"), "And I / Am the arrow, / The dew that flies suicidal, at one with the drive / Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning" (in the well-known poem "Ariel"), "I imagine him / Impotent as distant thunder" (in "The Jailer"), and so on.

When Plath no longer celebrates the metaphorical domination and manipulation of words, images, and details in some of her poems and actually allows the metonymic contextual meanings to compete with the metaphorical meanings, critics

still disregard the functioning of metonymy and simply emphasize how Plath subjectively creates or imposes metaphorical or symbolic meanings on objects/images in her work. Thus, critics tend to focus on what meta-meanings those particular images or details in her work represent and symbolize. Such critical tendency permeates both the earlier critics' and the recent critics' discussion of her later poems. Even though several critics (such as Brain, Rosenblatt, and Broe) have shown the problem of interpreting Plath's poetry biographically, (which can be a serious questioning on the metaphorical connection between her work and her life and between the speaker as a created subject and the poet), the metaphorical relation between constituent elements within a poem (such as an echo between the speaker's inner feeling and an image or a correspondence between a detail and its intended symbolic meaning) remains unproblematic.

In the essay, "On the Road to *Ariel*," Perloff suggests that the poems in Plath's *Winter Trees* "could easily be included in an expanded edition of *Ariel* since they burn with the same central passion to destroy the old ego and create a new self, to undergo death and rebirth, to enter the lives of animals, plants, or inanimate objects so as to transcend one's humanity" (140). The edition of *Ariel* Perloff refers to here is obviously one that is edited by Ted Hughes and published in 1965. Perloff comments that the fifteen poems in *Winter Trees* share the same thematic concerns such as "death and rebirth," "imaginative animism," (a term used by Perloff in a different essay, "Angst and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath") and the transcendence of the self with the poems in *Ariel*, and thus could be just put together in the same volume. Perloff made such a suggestion because she thinks that "these supplementary *Ariel* poems" somehow show that Plath's "range" may be "too narrow" and her poems lack "greater depth and variety" (140). In another essay, "The Two *Ariel*s," examining the contents and the order of the poems in *Ariel* in two editions (in 1965 and 1966), Perloff criticizes Ted Hughes for taking out some poems that Plath had originally included in the *Ariel* manuscript and adding some that were not originally in the manuscript. When Perloff points out Hughes' mistake for putting the poem "Words" at the end of the *Ariel* collection (in the edition published in 1965), which is against Plath's arrangement, what is intriguing is not only Hughes' decision but also the contradictory comments made by Perloff. After all, Perloff had suggested that the poems in *Winter Trees*, the ones published after *Ariel*, should be included in *Ariel* herself; now, in a different essay, she criticizes Hughes for doing exactly the thing she

had actually suggested.

Perloff made that suggestion for a thematic consideration (as the poems in *Winter Trees* and the poems in Hughes' edition of *Ariel* share the same thematic ideas). Perloff's criticism of Hughes' mistake is also for a thematic consideration. According to Perloff, the poem "Words" "is despairing in its sense that the poet's 'words' become 'dry and riderless'" and "there is only fate in the form of 'the fixed stars' that 'From the bottom of the pool … Govern a life'" ("The Two *Ariel*s" 196). Perloff thinks that the negative connotations of the poem "Words" as the last poem in *Ariel* edited by Hughes give a totally different message and form a different theme from what Plath attempts to create. Perloff states that as "[t]he poems of *Ariel* [edited by Hughes] culminate in a sense of finality, all passion spent," "Plath's arrangement emphasizes, not death, but struggle and revenge, the outrage that follows the recognition that the beloved is also the betrayer, that the shrine at which one worships is also the tomb" (197). It is questionable whether "Words" is a poem of despair, depression, and death and whether this poem is negative enough to fit into Perloff's theme of an inevitable death, which she thinks that Hughes seems to try to create in order to avoid his responsibility on Plath's death (196). Perloff constantly formulates themes on Plath's poems no matter when it is to criticize Plath's narrowness, to observe Plath's reason for the arrangement of the poems in the *Ariel* manuscript, or to comment on Hughes' decisions. Besides constantly revising the themes that could match one's interpretation of Plath's poems, why does one never question the thematic approaches?

A thematic approach relies on the metaphorical relation or connection between the particular details/images in the poems and their metaphorical or symbolic meanings and between the poems and their consistent thematic ideas. Such an approach accepts the false assumption that the purpose of Plath's poems is to represent the thematic ideas in Plath's mind and the purpose of reading Plath's poems is to locate these thematic ideas. Metonymy offers a different perspective toward the discussion of Plath's work, which has mainly focused on the metaphorical operation. Just as Plath allows metonymic development to lead a narrative in "The Night Dances" and presents how metonymic development competes with and frustrates the metaphorical operation, the metaphorical connection made by critics should also encounter the threating force of metonymy in her poems. When multiplicity of interpretation based on metaphorical connection is celebrated in the studies of poetry,

metonymy becomes a different critical adventure in reading poetry, especially with

Plath's poems.

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