Medusa/Melusina: The Magic Mirror of Sylvia Plath's "Medusa"

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An uncanny feeling seizes the reader who glances at two honor theses housed in two educational institutions not that far from one another: Boston University and Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. One bears the name of Aurelia Frances Schober and the title is "The Paracelsus of History and Literature" (1930); whereas, the other belongs to her daughter, Sylvia Plath and is entitled "The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels" (1955).

Quite surprisingly, the fonts seem to be similar, but the topics of the theses differ greatly: the former is informative and enlightening regarding its biographical material on Paracelsus, but most importantly it discusses his presence in literary works such as Goethe's *Faust*, Robert Browning's "Paracelsus" and E.G. Kolbenheyer's historical novel *Paracelsus* ("The Paracelsus of History and Literature" i-ii). Sylvia Plath's thesis, on the other hand, is a psychological-psychoanalytic discussion of the notion of the double in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Double*; it is a project that reflects her own lay self-analysis of the notion of the double with which she was much preoccupied. Hopefully this would lead her into a "recognition of contradictions in man's character" – it may be her own contradictions she has in mind which would then offer "a fresh insight into the complex question of identity" ("The Magic Mirror" 2), since this "recognition of our various mirror images and reconciliation with them will save us from disintegration" (60).[1]

Neither Aurelia nor Sylvia Plath utilized Carl Jung; Aurelia could not have possibly consulted Jung's "Paracelsus as a Spiritual Phenomenon" (1942), since she probably wrote the thesis between 1929 and 1930. Yet, perhaps, she could have known his 1929 address.[2] She does mention, however, that she had examined Paracelsus's

[1] There is much evidence in her *Journals* that she originally saw her subjectivity predicament and then her illness – especially in 1953 – herself "in a straight jacket" (*Journals* 187) – as stemming from what she called "vacillations" between sanity and insanity, goodness and badness. See *Journals*, 76, 91, 149, 185. Thus, it is likely that she used her thesis as a way of finding more about this "dichotomy."

[2] In June, 1929, Jung delivered an address on Paracelsus (Philippus Aureolus Theophrastus Bombastus von Hohenheim), in the house where he was born, at Einsiedeln (Canton Schwyz) under the auspices of the Literary Club of Zurich. This was published in *Der Lesezirkel* (Zurich), XVI: 10 (September, 1929). In

"writings and all other available material concerning him in literature and history" ("The Paracelsus of History and Literature" i, my emphasis).

Plath, however, must have read Jung as her reference to one of his case histories attests.[3] At the same time, in a letter to her mother dated October 15, 1954, she discusses extensively her honor thesis and mentions having read "Freud, Frazer, Jung," although she never acknowledges Jung (*Letters Home* 146). Interestingly enough, throughout the thesis she raises issues similar to Jung's notions. For instance, in her discussion of Golyadkin's character in Dostoevsky's *The Double*, Plath foregrounds the use of the shadow and stresses the character's obsession with shadows: he hides in shadows, but paradoxically he feels that the "treacherous shadow had betrayed him" (25) and then she stresses the inability of the shadow to hide the dark side of his personality (25). In his seminal "On the Psychology of the Unconscious," Carl Jung comments on the presence the of shadow part in every person, which apart from "little-weaknesses and foibles" contains a "positively demonic dynamism" (*Two Essays on Analytical Psychology* 35).

Interestingly enough, although Plath's interpretation of Golyadkin's association with his shadow is closer to Jung's notion of the shadow, she does cite Sir James Frazer as her source and his chapter "The Perils of the Soul" in which he discusses the different manifestations of the soul, one being "the shadow" (*The Golden Bough* 160). In another part of the thesis, she observes: "Smerdyakov's [*The Brothers Karamazov*], attachment to Ivan is more like that of a shadow, dark and deformed, without any of the light and clear

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1941 Jung participated in ceremonies commemorating the four-hundredth anniversary of the death of Paracelsus and to this purpose he gave two lectures, one in Basel where he delved into Paracelsus' medical achievements. The second he presented at a monastery in Einsiedeln, Paracelsus' place of birth. This lecture had been revised several times and was published under the title "Paracelsus as a Spiritual Phenomenon" (1942).

[3] See Plath's October 4, 1959 journal entry, written while she was at Yaddo (*Journals* 514). The book she cites in this entry must be Jung's *Contributions to Analytical Psychology* and specifically the chapter "Analytical Psychology and Education." In this particular case history, Jung discusses the ways children are affected by powerful and money-seeking mothers. These children are "nothing but pieces on the chessboard of parental egotism and self-centred blindness," and the parents' gesture is made "under the cloak of unselfish devotion" to them (377). She also transcribed excerpts from Jung's *The Development of Personality*, including the essay "Marriage as a Psychological Relationship." It is interesting to note that one of the excerpts she transcribed attests to the maternal hatred experienced by "[t]here girls who had a most devoted mother" yet they "had suffered from horrible dreams about her." The animality of the mother manifested in the girls' dream became reality years later when she became insane and "in her insanity [she] would exhibit a sort of lycanthropy" (Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College). Judith Kroll also contends that Plath "was quite possibly reading or rereading [Jung] in late 1962" (77).

outlines of the original" (36). This is a Jungian interpretation which does not appear in Frazer's chapter on the perils of the soul.

What Aurelia called the psychic osmotic bond (*Letters Home* 32) between mother and daughter – what Plath interpreted as suffocating, malignant and unhealthy – has been the subject of much literary research and more often than not the focal point is Plath's 1962 venomous poem "Medusa." The discussion of the poem revolves around psychoanalytic, autobiographical readings triggered by the title "Medusa," the colloquial term to denote the scientific name of the jellyfish which is "*Cnidaria Scypozoa Aurelia*."[4] Written in October 1962, some months before Plath took her life, indeed the poem is built around Aurelia's omnipotent and everlasting vigilance over Plath despite the distance that separated the two: Plath was in Devon, England; whereas, her mother was in Wellesley, Massachusetts. Plath resented Aurelia's interference, although she was in desperate need for help.[5] While I concur with the above reading of the poem as an attack on the mother, I would like to propose a new reading which will cast into sharp relief the intertextuality of the poem and Aurelia's honor thesis. In my reading the guiding force will once again be the title, "Medusa," which I see as an anagrammatic reconstruction of the name "Melusina," mentioned in Aurelia's discussion of Paracelsus.[6] Although the reference is single, it is my conviction that Plath, who must have read Aurelia's thesis, much as she did with her father's dissertation,[7] went further and expanded Aurelia's reference,

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[4] Judith Kroll mentions that in a conversation she had with Aurelia Plath, she was told by the latter that the association Aurelia/Medusa had been "a private joke" between her and Sylvia (xxxv).

[5] Plath wrote two desperate letters to Aurelia on October 16, 1962 in which she stresses the need for someone she loves "to protect [her], for [her] flu with [her] weight loss and the daily assault of practical nastiness […] has made [her] need immediate help" (*Letters Home* 469); yet she resents Aurelia's interference since she now has the chance to interfere more openly due to Plath's unfortunate circumstances. An unpublished letter from Aurelia underscores her authoritarian and patronizing tone (Unpublished Correspondence, Aurelia Plath to Sylvia Plath, Tuesday, December 4, 1962, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts).

[6] Aurelia describes Paracelsus's rejection of "the diabolical and malignant" of magic but stresses his "half-questioning faith in elemental beings" (65). Among these beings, she stresses the presence of "Melosinae," the water spirits (65).

[7] Otto Plath's thesis, turned into a book entitled *Bumble Bees and Their Ways* (The Macmillan Company, 1934) triggered Plath's bee poems which she wrote between October 3 and October 9 1962, roughly the same period that she was probably working on "Medusa."

"manipulated" it, as she would have said "with an informed and intelligent mind."[8] Thus, she colonized maternal language only to turn it into a vindictive tirade against her.[9]

Paracelsus is closely related to the mother as the maternal thesis indicates and constitutes her textual body; Jung is also associated with Paracelsus having written about him and he is associated with the mother as the case history to which Plath refers indicates. Thus everything leads back to the mother, a notion that reinforces my belief that Medusa is Melusina, which Jung casts into sharp relief in his chapter "Paracelsus as a Spiritual Phenomenon." Another point worth mentioning is that Paracelsus is not only associated with maternal discourse, but he is also a strong example of filial longing. As Jung sees it, his mother "died young, and she probably left behind a great deal of unsatisfied longing in her son – so much that, so far as we know, no other woman was able to compete with that far-distant mother imago, which for that reason was all the more formidable" (*Alchemical Studies* 112).

For Jung, Paracelsus is haunted by the "remote and unreal" maternal imago, an absence that awakens "that primordial and eternal image of the mother for whose sake everything that embraces, protects, nourishes and helps assumes maternal form" (112). In an unconscious effort to reverse this, Plath undertakes a cathartic form of action where she will be taking up Paracelsus and his maternal desire only to exorcise the maternal figure.

A Kristevian consideration of the linguistic bond between Plath and her mother would stress the role of the "good enough mother" who releases the daughter and initiates her into the "Paternal Symbolic Discourse." Mrs. Plath, however, as her daughter recalls in "Ocean 1212-W," initiates her into a poetic, semiotic discourse with Matthew Arnold's "Forsaken Merman:"

Sand-strewn caverns, cool and deep,

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[8] This is what she confessed in an interview with Peter Orr. See Michael Kirkham, "Sylvia Plath" in Wagner's *Sylvia Plath:* The *Critical Heritage*, 276-291.

[9] In her introduction to *Letters Home* Aurelia proudly emphasizes Sylvia's willingness to read what she read, a notion that she turned into a stiff and patronizing relationship (32). Some months before Plath's death, Aurelia also boasts of her book reviews, urges Plath to read the very same books, and plans to read books Plath has read (Unpublished Correspondence, Aurelia Plath to Sylvia Plath, Tuesday, December 4, 1962, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts).

> Where the winds are all asleep;
> Where the spent lights quiver and gleam;
> Where the salt weed sways in the stream;
> Where the sea-beasts rang'd all round
> Feed in the ooze of their pasture-ground;
> Where the sea-snakes coil and twine
> Dry their mail and bask in the brine;
> Where great whales come sailing by,
> Sail and sail with unshut eye,
> Round the world forever and aye. (*JP* 118)

Although the reference is to a merman and not a mermaid, the light, color, movement of the "motherly" sea creates a new world for young girl. While she vicariously senses "the winds [that] are all asleep" the lights that "quiver and gleam" the salt weed that "sways in the stream," the sea-beasts feeding in "the ooze of their pasture-ground," "the sea-snakes [that] coil and twine," she sees "goose flesh on [her] skin." She does not know what has caused this. She "was not cold. Had a ghost passed over? No, it was the poetry. A spark flew off Arnold and shook me, like a chill. I wanted to cry; I felt very odd. I had fallen into a new way of being happy" (*JP* 118). Through poetic language, which Aurelia must have used as a means of drawing the girl closer to her, Plath has relived the severed semiotic bond with "The Mother." But, as the daughter's sole initiator into the semiotic, Aurelia wants to retain her privileged position: she thus exerts tremendous control over the daughter: she guides her very semiotic track. Barbara Mossberg describes her desire "to nurture her daughter's artistic and intellectual skills" (*Coming to Light* 190). In her enlightening chapter "Sylvia Plath's Baby Book," Mossberg gives excerpts from Aurelia's letter to her daughter, which very specifically articulates this effort:

> Plath is given creative chores: stories to illustrate ("Color them carefully. Remember that the little girl has golden hair [yellow] hair."), [sic] clay figures to model, a painting of Whistler's mother to study: "He loved his mother so much that he made this picture of her. Can you find little curved lines in the picture?" (190)

Very cleverly Aurelia is brainwashing her daughter to associate art with the maternal *chora,* as she wishes to draw her into her territory and keep her there. She is using Whistler's devotion to his mother as an example and she further stresses the maternal character of his painting which does not only depict the mother but also reproduces her in the design he employs.[10] The curved lines recall the maternal body in gestation, an idea Aurelia tries to implant in her daughter's mind.

A further proof of her effort to nurture Plath's intellectual dependence upon her is her ecstatic confession that "Sylvia read all" her college books and "used them as her own, underlining passages that held particular significance for her" (*Letters Home* 32, my emphasis). This underlining constitutes one of Plath's first neutral efforts to write on the maternal body, to usurp it and use it "as her own," to quote Aurelia. It is my contention that in much the same way but in a more acerbic manner, she is usurping Aurelia's honor thesis as the locus to write her own story of maternal entrapment and suffocation.

Jung focuses on Melusina in his discussion of Paracelsus's *De Vita Longa,* as one of the four important elements that contribute to longevity, which is the subject of his treatise.[11] Melusina belongs to "the realm of the Aquaster" and as a water nymph, she is endowed with the tail of a fish or a snake (*Alchemical Studies* 143). In her discussion of *anima,* Emma Jung talks about *anima* images as "elemental women," who may represent "either the undeveloped and still natural femininity of the woman concerned, or else her inferior function." She stresses the importance of the water maiden, and mentions the Lorelei, combing her hair and mirroring herself in the lake.[12] Further, she narrates the story of the water nymph Melusina, who married a human, but born him "monstrous" and "abnoarmal" sons and had to go back to her watery realm to escape her husband's anger (*Animus, Anima* 65-66).

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[10] The picture Aurelia sent Sylvia is James McNeill Whistler's "The Artist's Mother," an 1871 oil-on-canvas painting, owned by the Musée d'Orsay in Paris.

[11] The others are: the Iliaster, Ares, and the Aquaster.

[12] Plath wrote the poem "Lorelei" in 1958. Interestingly enough, the poem was suggested to Plath during an *Ouija* session, the first one she and Hughes had conducted in America. In her July 4, 1958 journal entry Plath noted that she remembered the German song mother used to play and sing to her and her brother: "The subject appealed to me doubly (or triply): the German legend of the Rhine Sirens, the Sea-Childhood symbol, and the death-wish involved in the song's beauty" (*Journals* 401). Once again, it is Aurelia that initiates her daughter into a poetic discourse that paradoxically is expressed in the paternal formidable "obscene" (*CP* 223) language that Plath found hard to master.

It is important to note that in a French version of the legend, Melusina, as a water nymph, appears as *mère Lusine* (Carl Jung, *Alchemical Studies* 143), which accentuates her connection with the maternal figure. In Plath's poem, the maritime and watery allusions to Medusa constitute an important feature of the poem. Medusa is a creature endowed with ears "cupping the sea's incoherences" (*CP* 224), a quality that contrasts with the persona's inability to do so and which leads back to Plath's 1963 "Ocean 1212-W" where she talks about "the susurrous murmur of the sea" and her curiosity to find out the secrets of the motherly sea, who "[l]ike a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veins. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill" (*JP* 117).

In the marine environment where Medusa functions, her coterie, her "stooges" threaten the persona's "keel," always "riding the rip tide to the nearest point of departure," blocking every possible leeway that would enable her to escape her suffocating presence (*CP* 225). She is a "barnacled umbilicus" that makes sure there is an unbroken bond between mother and daughter, the way the umbilical cord keeps the two bonded in the mother's body during gestation, and which would make the daughter's space increasingly permeable and threaten her boundaries (225). She is also an "Atlantic cable," a "[c]urve of water upleaping/To [her] water rod" (*CP* 225).

Quoting Paracelsus, Carl Jung observes that Melusina is a maternal creature since she "is descended from the whale in whose belly the prophet Jonah beheld great mysteries" (*Alchemical Studies* 143). Her birthplace "is the womb of the mysteries, obviously what we today would call the unconscious" (143). She emerges from a matrix, a receptacle; hence she acquires maternal, encircling qualities. That Melusina comes from the unconscious gives her an even more frightening trait. For Jung, the psyche consists of various systems, including the *personal unconscious* with its complexes and a collective unconscious with its archetypes. Jung's theory of a *personal unconscious* is quite similar to Freud's creation of a region containing a person's repressed, forgotten or ignored experiences. However, Jung considered the *personal unconscious* to be a "more or less superficial layer of the unconscious" ("Conscious, Unconscious and Individuation" in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, 4). Within the personal unconscious is what he called "feeling-toned complexes" (4) He said that "they constitute the personal and

private side of psychic life." These are feelings and perceptions organized around significant persons or events in the person's life (4). Since Melusina/Medusa emanates from this locus, she is a significant, formidable presence who can act very much like the unconscious itself, which influences and controls the self, being most of the times the realm of the Id. Medusa is a controlling figure who keeps the subject under its close vigilance, guiding it: "Did I escape, I wonder?/My mind winds to you;" she is "always there,/Tremulous breath at the end of [her] line," a "bottle" which encloses her (*CP* 225).

For Paracelsus, Melusina has no genitalia, a fact which endows her with a paradisal character since Adam and Eve in the Pre-Lapsarian period had no genitalia whatsoever, but when they fell, they became "monstrous, that is, as a result of their slip-up with the snake, they acquired genitals" (*Alchemical Studies* 143). Melusina, however, remained in that paradisal state and as a water creature she dwelt in the blood. For Crawley blood is a primitive symbol for the soul, thus Melusina is thought to be a spirit, or as Jung sees it, "a kind of psychic phenomenon" a "a vision appearing in the mind" (143-144). Medusa's disciples carry her "Red stigmata" (*CP* 225) towards the persona in an enveloping gesture that threatens to overwhelm her. Much like Melusina, she is "[f]at and red, a placenta" (225) who would not allow anything else to share with her the privileged position of residing in the blood, thus, "squeezing the breath from the blood bells / Of the fuchsia" (225). As Plath exclaims in a 1958 Journal entry, Aurelia would boast of her "bloody, bloody" ulcerous self (*Journals* 430), summoning perhaps another group of the "peanut crunching crowd" (*CP* 245) to view her.

Medusa's lack of genitalia turns her wishes "Green as eunuchs" (226) and makes her envious; thus she paralyzes the "kicking lovers" (225) trying to impose frigidity. Frigidity, claims Kristeva, "betrays an imaginary capture by the frigid woman of a maternal figure" (*Black Sun* 77). The frigid woman rescue requires the intervention of a third party, a "godsend figure" ("Freud and Love: Treatment and Its Discontents" in *The Kristeva Reader* 257). This figure, "who is more-than-a-mother" [….] not a phallic mother but rather a restoration of the mother by means of a phallic violence that destroys the bad but also bestows and honors" (*Black Sun* 79) is the one to intervene and rescue. For Plath's persona, no such figure seems to be accessible and Medusa /Melusina, devoid of genitals, paralyzes "the kicking lovers" (*CP* 225).

In a 1958 journal entry, Plath reflects upon Aurelia's sexuality and her lack of sexual *jouissance*: Her husband was much older than she was, "older than her own mother;" she "didn't love him" and [s]tood in the shower forcing herself to enjoy the hot water on her body because she hated his guts" (*Journals* 429-430).

For Jung Paracelsus's Melusina is an anima figure, appearing, "as a variant of the mercurial serpent," often represented as a snake-woman" to show "the monstrous double nature of Mercurius. The redemption of this monstrosity was depicted as the assumption and coronation of the Virgin Mary" (*Alchemical Studies* 144). As a monstrous creature, Plath's Medusa is "ghastly" and she definitely has some of the characteristics of a "snake-woman": she is "Cobra light," she "hisses" instead of talking when the persona sins, as if making fun of her and reprimanding her and of course she is an "eely tentacle" (*CP* 226).[13]

If Melusina's monstrosity has been redeemed in the Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin Mary, Melusina's/Medusa's has not. Plath's protagonist in "Medusa" asks,

> Who do you think you are?
> A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
> I shall take no bite of your body. (*CP* 225)

Medusa is a "[g]hastly Vatican" (225) who retains her Melusinian monstrosity which as Paracelsus claims in "De Pygmaeis," derives from the fact that she was a nymph seduced by Beelzebub into practicing witchcraft (Paracelsus in *Alchemical Studies* 143). Thus, she is reminded that she needs to stop usurping the "Mater Dolorosa" role.

In another effort to free the self from the intellectual and spiritual Medusan intervention, the persona exclaims, "I am sick of hot salt" (*CP* 225). Many scholars have seen this as a strong religious allusion, a "Roman Catholic iconography [that] links her in turn with the consecrated host, with the Virgin Mary, vessel of incarnation, and with the 'Ghastly Vatican' which houses God's representative on earth" (Britzolakis 168). Though I do find plausible the religious element of the above, I contend that it is another latent reference to Aurelia's early Paracelsian interest. Jeffrey Raff observes that Paracelsus,

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[13] For instance see Plath's December 12th, 1958 "Notes on Interviews with RB [Ruth Barnhouse]" where she is ventriloquing her mother's discourse concerning her very own sexuality and morality (*Journals* 432).

among his other achievements, was the one to have first realized that salt was as important as mercury and sulfur, especially for the alchemical opus (42). Furthermore, as Jung sees it, salt as a cosmic principle

is "the spirit, the turning of the body into light *(albedo*), the spark of the *anima mundi,* imprisoned in the dark depths of the sea and begotten there by the light from above and the 'reproductive power of the feminine'" (*Mysterium Coniunctionis* 244).[14]

Indeed, salt was a substance that Plath saw as very tightly associated with the mother. In "Ocean 1212-W," she looks into her seaside origins as she revisits her childhood landscape, "the cold, salt, running hill of the Atlantic" (*JP* 117, my emphasis). As a child she enjoys a closer affinity with her marine surroundings, an affinity which was still dependent on her retaining the origins of her primitiveness: she still has "infant gills" and the "salt in her blood" fights for predominance in case she is able to pierce the "looking glass" of the motherly sea (117). "Ocean 1212-W" is a hymn to the maternal semiotic nurturance but "Medusa" written at roughly the same time, is a resentful protest against the mother and hence everything she sees as closely related with her. Even salt, in a dual way, comes to be centered upon her as a Paracelsian allusion which is, of course, maternal as well as a manifestation of her marine side.

With "Medusa," Plath makes an effort to act out the maternal hatred: she finds a new way of doing it, using an old method: writing on the maternal body, which in this instance is her honor thesis. She is recycling it only to destroy it and denigrate the maternal intellectual suffocation. Has she been successful? The answer she provides is Pythian, ambivalent, meant to trick the "peanut crunching" reader. The favorite "magic mirror" technique she used in the writing of her own honor thesis, in many of her poems, and most importantly in "Melusina/Medusa," is stated plainly in the final line, "There is nothing between us" (*CP* 226).

[14] The alchemical opus involved the transformation of base metals into gold and consisted of originally four (then reduced to three) stages: *nigredo, albedo* and *rubedo*. The *nigredo* stage is equivalent to the chaos, the *massa confusa*, the beginning of the opus. At a later stage, the different colors fuse to cause the *cauda pavonis*, the peacock's tail which of course is the white color, *albedo*. "The *rubedo* then follows direct from the *albedo*, as the result of raising the heat of the fire to its highest intensity" (*Psychology and Alchemy* 231-232).

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