



Sylvia Plath and Edvard Munch: Mindscape of Chagrin

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Although a considerable amount of crucial works on Sylvia Plath are biographically-oriented, and treat her poetry little more than the illustration of case history, the artistic merits of Plath lie much less in the personal-confessional aspect than in a startling, dramatic voice with imagistic-symbolist expression. Her poems are not poetry of ideas, but of states, and often unsteady states of extremity. The images in her best poems, elliptical and disjunctive, shifting with a dream logic far beneath consciousness, startle readers with their unexpected leap and precision, and possess a physical immediacy that at times absorbs readers into their vortex.

Plath's poems attract much negative criticism. Harold Bloom, for example, disapproves of Plath's "hysterical intensity" and "coercive rhetoric" ("Introduction" 3). Irving Howe also holds "a partial dissent" towards Plath's sensationalism even as he recognizes the strain of "jeeringly tough" tones directed partly against herself ("Plath Celebration" 9). In *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation*, Jon Rosenblatt effectively refutes the negative criticism by clarifying the term "confessional poetry" and pointing out that Plath's work is not merely autobiographical self-revelation, but a reordering of personal experience into patterns that obtain an objective character through repetition, allusion, and symbolic enactment, especially in her "scenario of initiation": entry into darkness, ritual death, and rebirth (27). His statement that in Plath's poems, landscapes are often mindscapes and bodyscapes, concurs with my association of Plath's poetry with the Norwegian Symbolist painter Edvard Munch's works, which display the same traits.

Since Plath's imagery is a predominant feature of her art, it attracts much criticism. The recent study of Plath's mythological sources by Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, reads Plath's images as code elements for aspects of the Great Mother myth that Robert Graves explained in *The White Goddess*. Charles Newman's *The Art of Sylvia Plath* includes a few perceptive essays on Plath's imagery. However, the only comparative study of Plath with pictorial art is made by Constance Scheerer in "The Deathly Paradise of Sylvia Plath," in which he compares Plath's images with Rousseau's carnivorous gardens. However, it strikes me that at a deeper level Plath has more affinity with Munch in their shared powerful sense of despair and alienation. In the use of color symbolism, Plath shares with Munch the taste for the starkly eloquent expression of black, white, and primary red. Often her poems and his

paintings are seized at an extreme psychic moments that deform objects and create a vortex of contorted images. They have the same obsession with death, either in its aspect of the void, or in its voracious, seductive side. Emotions are objectified in their works in the same opposite direction of molten dissolution and frozen fossilization. The Medusa persona in Plath's works with its exalted blasphemy recalls Munch's dire Madonna, women as victim as well as victimizer in their passion, bearer of vicious energy as well as devouring agent of death.

In color symbolism, black often dominates Munch's work. In his "The Kiss" (1897), only the woman's facial contour and long hair emerge a little into light, hovering above the backdrop of night like a moon-wrought chimera, fragile and evanescent as a first kiss.¹ In "Melancholy, Evening" (1891), a man in pensive thought is absorbed into background gloom.² In the distance, a woman in a white dress on a trip to a distant island draws a faint expression of ache and longing from the man's immovable face. The apparitional white nearly engulfed by dark in these pictures elicits the fragility of life, the passage of love, and alienation from the longed-for object. In spite of the deep negativity of the black, it is the suppressing dark that is the protective cloak of men in melancholy, while the white in its living beauty is felt as a sting.

Similar emotional connotation in similar chiaroscuro is found in Plath's poems. In "Winter Landscape, with Rooks" (1956) the speaker, walking like a dark-feathered rook in her pensive thought, is in her congenial element with the black pond and approaching winter night, but for the lonely whiteness of a single "out of season" swan (Plath 21). The whiteness of the swan, reverberating the later image of "dry frost covering the window" of the poet's wound is a reminder of passing love (22). Thus, white, as in Munch's "The Kiss," in its intrinsic remoteness from demonstration, paradoxically takes on the rich, disquieting color of memory, while black is the muted, soothing element of oblivion, in which the speaker seeks to efface herself. The speaker yearns to drag down the white reflection into dark to regain that oblivion. The sudden destructive impulse disrupts the smooth flow of the poem, and reveals the muffled depth of the speaker's agitation.

The rich expression of spectral white is brought out like lightening in Plath's poem "Crossing the Water" (1962). Plath's imagery in black and white, such as this one, is characterized by a hushed sense of alienation and longing in a tranquil nightscape. The black boat, black lake, and

¹ For an image see <<http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/26/596>>. Accessed 10 July, 2010.

² For an image see <<http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/26/589>>. Accessed 22 July, 2010.



black trees create a pervasive atmosphere of extinguished consciousness, equivalent to death, into which people's lives seem to drain out without struggle, without sound, so that they become only two black, paper cut-out people. Objects in Plath's poems are often flattened and emptied, suggesting at times a wild barrenness, at times a soothing subterfuge in a minimum life, which is the case in this poem. Just as the poet sits oblivious in the dark, stars cast their light among the lilies. The lilies under the starlight are compared to expressionless siren. The soul is awoken in silent shock (160). The starlight that momentarily lit up the lilies also lit up the extinguished soul, with a painful sensitivity, to the seductive beauty of death, incarnated in the lily, the expressionless Siren. The lily-Siren rouses the speaker from the dark element of stupor into a momentary experience of other-worldly beauty before luring her into drowning. In the astounded soul, there is a tension between longing and distance. It seems that in Plath's poems, the awakening to life and beauty invariably triggers the threat of death.

The death impulse in "Winter Landscape, With Rooks" and in "Lorelei" (1958) is turned into that of self-destruction before the beautiful marble sculpture of Lorelei, which is also depicted as a Siren. Mist, moonlight, and water reflection weave a world of dream. As the marble turrets look down, reflections in the water float up. The clear, full singing of the Sirens is already weighty enough for the mortal ear, but more shattering is their silence (194). The very beauty of their voice, too much for the mortals to bear, is felt as a threat: they were felt as siege, as pitched wail of reefs in a nightmare (94). Their white-marbled beauty, in their peace, affects like a riot, so that the poet cannot even drown peacefully into the dark, but has to invoke the stone to haul her down (95).

In these poems built of predominant dark and chimerical whiteness, white, as in Munch's paintings, in the otherness of their beauty, is the disquieting element that disrupts the harmony of dark existing within man and his environment, and reminds him of deprivation: of a world he cannot enter or has lost. White, more richly implicated in Plath's poems, evokes an acute awakening to life which at the same time has a death seduction, because the speaker, alienated from the otherness of the beauty, can merge with it only through an act of self-destruction.

The same feeling is enacted in the drama of color juxtaposition of red and white/black. The stark clash of original colors and their emotional connotations in Plath's and Munch's works often turn their landscapes into the mindscape of chagrin, in which the split between the self and

the threatening as well as alluring Other cannot be erased unless through a symbolic act of self annihilation.

Red, emerging out of the predominant dark in Munch's paintings, such as "Jealousy" (1895) "Vampire" (1893-4), "Ashes" (1894), is the color of female body that tears open the shaded, innervated world of man.³ In his "Separation" (1900) red spots open like bloody cuts on the black-cloaked man covering his heart from the pain of separation.⁴ In their shameless postures, the women in his paintings represent the vicious energy of life as well as the voracious, seductive agent of death that suck up man's life. The converging of life energy and death in the color of red is also found in Plath's poems, in the blossoming poppies, blackberries, and tulips, which are described as gaping mouthfuls of blood, whose intensity of life is too strong to bear, so that their very life threatens to devour the poet's life.

In "Poppies in July" (1962), the poppies are described as hell flames which exhaust the poet to watch (203). They strike the poet as bloody mouth and bloody skirts (203). Envyng their life, the poet wishes to marry such a wound—bleeding to sleep under the effect of its product, opium (203). The image of bleeding suggests that the awakening to life also elicits the hemorrhage of being.

In "Poppies in October" (1962), the natural brilliance of poppies breaks through a killing Nature—among poisonous air and forest frost and exhausted men. The poppies are unrequested endowment of love that overwhelms the deprived poet with the fierce abundance of their life (240). However, the image of sanguine poppies is linked with a suicidal woman in an ambulance, whose blood is like blooming poppies (240). The poppies here are also an emblem of the spasmodic flame of life ignited by destruction. In the ecstatic converging of the forces of life and death, the poet loses herself into the life of the poppies, and become one with them. Her shout is like the late open mouth of the poppies among forest frost and corn flowers in the frigid breath of early morning (240).

"Tulips" (1961) describes the poet in the process of convalescence. The presence of death is represented by white, the ideal static world of a hospital in the stagnant chillness of winter. Tulips are a present from the outside world that arouses the speaker from the death stupor, but

³ For images see <<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/munch/jealous.jpg.html>>, <<http://romanjaster.com/edvard-munch/gallery/love/vampire.htm>>, and <<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/munch/ashes.jpg.html>>. Accessed 22 July 2010.

⁴ For an image see <<http://romanjaster.com/edvard-munch/gallery/love/separation.htm>>. Accessed 22 July 2010.



with an effect almost as death-threatening. The poet feels the sanguine redness of the tulip scathing her and robbing her of oxygen (160).

Apart from color symbolism, Plath shares with Munch the two opposite directions through which emotions are objectified: molten dissolution and frozen fossilization. In Munch's "The Scream" (1893), the scream dehumanizes the man, whose physical contour is nearly dissolved into the cauldron of the sky.⁵ The image of a scream is often found in Plath's poems, and accompanied by the same physical transformation. In "Lady Lazarus" (1962), the poet sees herself in a hallucinatory vision as a gold baby melting and bursting into a shriek (246). In Plath's poems, the hallucinatory self-transformation takes the form of being burnt, torn to pieces, evaporating, becoming the arrow, the dew that flies into the red eye of the sun. In the vortex of warped space, everything is seen in its whirling distortion or speedy merging. The gaping mouth in Munch's "Scream" is one of the most frequently occurring images in Plath's poems. The mouth emblemizes uncontrollable and insatiable craving. It also refers us back to the ever menace of death by suffocation. It's the yawning gap, an unfillable hole, the orifice of nothingness, the organ of human need turned into an instrument of destruction and death, and death, conversely, appears as a voracious, all-engulfing mouth. The mouth is almost as often associated with ejection and rejection as it is with absorption. Nausea is never far away, and paradoxically, it is perhaps through the act of vomiting that in this world the helpless and the abandoned come closest to the gesture of refusal and protest. In the throes of nausea, the body repudiates itself as flesh.

The exhibitionist nature of suicide in "Lady Lazarus" often revolts the critics, and is cited by Harold Bloom and Irving Howe as the sign of Plath's sensationalism. However, beneath Plath's sensationalism, theatricality, self-aggrandization, and her roughly jeering tone is the wave of nausea directed both at herself and at the world. Through the sickness over her own sensationalism and theatricality, Plath pushes herself further toward the mortification of the flesh and the consequent repudiation of it, so that her spirit might be liberated. In "Fever 103°" (1962), the proximity of self-blasphemy and self-glorification, virgin and whore, suggests that it is through the chastening process of blasphemy that the spirit may rise out of the flesh, hence the religious intonation of resurrection in the title of "Lady Lazarus." Although Munch's Madonna is

⁵ For an image see <<http://romanjaster.com/edvard-munch/gallery/anxiety/scream.htm>>. Accessed 22 July, 2010.

also cast in the Virgin-whore figure, she has no such moment of self-transcendence and is inevitably imprisoned in the body.

In Plath's "Elm" (1962), as it often happens in Munch's painting, landscape is turned into bodyscape. The woman becomes the elm, the tree of mother, desire and death. Like Munch's Madonna, with deadly face and lush body contorted with desire and pain, tormented and tormenting man with her insatiable demand, the woman in this poem is also shown as victim and victimizer in the enslavement to a hopeless passion. In this poem, the use of bodyscape in identifying the woman and the elm, the image of sea as metaphor of drowning desire, in which the woman is the devouring agent of death, can find its equivalence in Munch's "Lovers in the Waves" (1896)⁶ In this painting, a man's head is strangled in a woman's flowing hair which is transformed into wild waves. The man is drowned by his desire for her, just as in Plath's poem, the woman's desire, imaged in the galloping horse, sends man to death. His head turns into stone. The woman in Plath's poem, turned murderous by her need to hold the vanishing love, is possessed by a poisoned will, a will that expands to the whole universe, so that even the rain—the image of drowning desire—becomes arsenic. The use of bodyscape is crucial in building the passion of the poem. The identification of body, mind and landscape suggests a compulsion that makes everything in the outside world a mirror of inner weather, and makes it felt through the sharpest physical immediacy.

Then the poet compares love to a shadow that she chases after. Shadow is a continuous presence in Munch's pictures about lovers and sexuality. In his "Attraction" (1896) two lovers captured in profile gazing at each other projected their mingled shadow on the background.⁷ In "Consolation" (1894) the huge shadow thrown on the background by the lovers holding each other seems to be looming forward and shielding the lovers in its embrace.⁸ In "Puberty" (1895) the girl's sudden awareness of sexuality with its lure and terror is cast in the ghostly tangle of shadows on the wall.⁹ Shadow, in its insubstantiality, seems always to be on the verge of slipping away. In its association with the myth of the double, it takes on the uncanny nature of the murderous dependence of ego and its darker self. Thus, seen in all its different aspects—the pull of subconscious desire, the protective shield, fascination and terror of the primitive,

⁶ For an image see <<http://cs.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=62417>>. Accessed 22 July, 2010.

⁷ For an image see <<http://www.abcgallery.com/M/munch/munch109.html>>. Accessed 22 July, 2010.

⁸ For an image see <<http://www.munch.museum.no/tegneren/work.aspx?id=3&item=1>>. Accessed 22 July, 2010.

⁹ For an image see <<http://www.artchive.com/artchive/M/munch/puberty.jpg.html>>. Accessed 22 July, 2010.



ephemerality, and the murderous dependence of lovers, love is a shadow, and shadow is a perfect paradigm for the emotion of the poem. Then Plath writes: she has "suffered the atrocity of sunsets" (192). Sunset suggests the evanescence of passion. Having "suffered the crime of sunset" suggests the infliction of pain on her by the transience of passion. In her desire to break up the barren isolation of ego in merging with her love, the physical self of the woman is torn apart. She is burnt, broken into pieces. The gaping mouth of a shriek, the scathing barren moon, the whole being turned into the habitat of a cry, all are striking reminiscence of Munch's painting. The moon in Plath's poems is often bald and barren, mirroring the sterility of emotionally deprived women. The fetus image in the following passage brings no maternal comfort, only fright.

A momentary giving way to grief and tenderness demonstrates Plath's characteristic mastery of tonal contrast, but it soon hardens into implacable self-destruction. The following group of images is hallucinatory. The face among the strangled branches is probably the moon, the mirror image of the wild, sterile woman, who is strangled in the branches of the elm, the tree of motherhood, desire and death. Her hardness, her petrified will of killing impulse brewed to cruelty bespeaks both destructive and self-destructive impulses.

There is no salvation, nor relief of suffering – no matter whether she hides herself in the dark night of oblivion, or merges herself into a bloody sisterhood with the flaming life of the poppies. The last resort to mutual destruction to become one with the beloved is also futile. Passive surrender and active contra-aggression make no difference. Plath's last poems reveal the tendency toward fossilization and the surrender to the ultimate insentience of death. Stones, skulls, marbles already present in her earlier poems finally take over the whole field. In her earlier poems, there is still some impulse or outside stimulants for her to resist the fossilization. For example, the deadly codified adult world, imaged in museum in "Morning Song" (1961) can still be penetrated and let in a draft of wind by the resounding cry of the new-born baby. The cavern-like underground world of "Nick and the Candlestick" (1962) can still be melted by the warmth of the infant child. However, in her later poems, the deadened world in the process of petrification is not only endured but even affirmed, as in her "Edge" (1963). Death is envisioned as a composure, a perfection, and a world of art finally accomplished in the marbled beauty of the suicide woman and her children. In Munch's bodyscape painting, "Girl's Head On the Shore" (1899), a girl's head is turned into rock, suffering in immovability the eroding wind and sea

tides.¹⁰ The texture of the wood print etches deep lines into the girl's face, and conveys a time-ravaged face. It is despair fossilized and turned into peace. The corrosive and petrifying effect of time is brought out movingly in Plath's "Words" (1963). In this poem, the redeeming power of poetry is also shown as turned into nullity with the passage of time.

About books, Franz Kafka once wrote in his letter:

The books we need are the kind that act on us like a misfortune, that makes us suffer like the death of someone we love more than ourselves, that makes up feel as though we were on the verge of suicide, or lost in a forest remote from all human habitation—a book should serve as axe for the frozen sea within us (Ashton 9).

Like Kafka's comment on the impact of words, this poem suggests that language moves us as if we receive a mortal wound, as if we were trees cut deeply by an axe. Moved by words, tears well up in our eyes as the saps of a tree wells up at the cut wound. Percussive language evokes in us rings like the echoes of the cutting sound. Its acute effect makes us feel as if we had been through a kind of death. Death is imaged in the white skull, covered gradually by green weeds. From the image of tears to the congealed form of rock and skull there is a progression toward fossilization through time, until it reaches the image of oblivion in green weeds. The image of the white skull gives away to the fixed, white star, symbol of fate. The sound of hooves, at first symbolizing the sound of words, also gives away to that of ticking time, compared to tireless tapping of hooves. Years later, words turn dry and gradually lose their meaning and affective power, becoming merely empty sounds. The only governing thing is the immovable fate of our lives, which lasts much longer than the power of poetry.

Plath's poetry has a hallucinatory sense of physical immediacy from which no blow is cushioned. In her poems, the stimulants of life are inevitably commingled with death. Nature takes on a menacing otherness, and becomes a haunted hall echoing the poet's nightmarish inner life. Plath shares with Munch a symbolic landscape which is a mirror of mindscape and sometimes turns into the sharp immediacy of bodyscape. Feelings of exile, despair, alienation,

¹⁰ Title and year obtained from Vivian and David Campbell's *The Symbolist Prints of Edvard Munch: The Vivian and David Campbell Collection*. New Haven, Conn: Yale University Press, 1996. Print.



and death pervade their works and their emotions experience the similar opposite processes of molten dissolution and frozen petrification. The emotional effect of their works is achieved through similar symbolic strategies. Plath's mindscape, like Munch's, is one of chagrin, and is represented by the clash of original colors and their symbolic emotions. In her poetry, Plath strives to merge the self and the other in that mindscape, but she cannot achieve it with anything short of life.

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