

My Beautiful Fusion with the Things of the World

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Reading Sylvia Plath's essay "Ocean 1212-W" written a few weeks before she took her life in February 1963, the reader is faced with a barrage of bordered and borderless images, which flow along Plath's memories. It is inevitable, especially for someone well versed in psychoanalytic discourse, not to recall the psychopathology of schizophrenia and especially what pertains to the embodied and unembodied self proposed by R.D. Laing. For me, such a thought was a challenge, which I let go, as endorsing this would entail psychoanalyzing Plath. When, however, I was introduced to Marion Milner's The Hands of the Living God, I could see in the detailed analysis of Susan, Milner's case history, elements which can be productively applied to the narrator of "Ocean 1212-W" as well. The similarities were there but I was reluctant to see Plath as the case history of a schizoid individual. What was the case then? Why so much preoccupation with borders, why lament the extinction of the borderless self? Why persecute the mother who neglected her because a little brother was born? Why the breath of the sea? All of a sudden, the final paragraph of the essay came before my eyes in neon colors:

And this is how it stiffens my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth. (240)

Interestingly enough, Marion Milner discusses one of Susan's drawings: a boat in the sea, "enclosed in an oval shape" (305). Reflecting on the drawing, Milner observes that the boat cannot be taken out of the bottle without breaking the enveloping glass and sees it as Susan's way of saying that she is trying to "get born into the world, but without breaking what she has been contained in; as if what she feels she is contained in is something which cannot be emerged from without destroying it" (306). She wants to be able to be born, but paradoxically without having to break the maternal womb. Conversely, Plath sees the constriction of the borders of the self reflected in

the enclosed boat. She wants to find a way to blur borders and access the boat, as this will enable her to regress to her nascent state and achieve rebirth. Thus, it is the purpose of this paper to read the preoccupation with borders and borderlessness in Plath's essay not as the schizoid's alteration of the "sense of self,"¹ but as the subject's effort to access the status of its nascent condition, for it this state of primary narcissism² that will lead her to rebirth.

In my reading, the schizoid's motto, "You can't give birth to your self, it's wrong" as reproduced by Milner (102), is to be reversed in Plath and seen as her conscious, deliberate effort to find ways to give birth to the self. Her effort is to be seen as "a benign regression" (ibid. 323), during which, by blurring the borders between the self and the world, she will reach the state of "primary love,"³ will bask in an "oceanic feeling" and re-achieve subject formation. For Freud, "oceanic feeling is a feeling of an indissoluble bond, of being one with the external world as a whole" ("Civilization and Its Discontents" 252). Originally, the infant thought of itself as being part of the world but soon it realizes that the world constitutes an external reality and its ego is "only a shrunken residue of a much more inclusive – indeed an all-embracing – feeling which corresponded to a more intimate bond between the ego and the world about it" (ibid.). Although Freud acknowledges that the ego seems to "maintain clear and sharp lines of demarcation," the longing for fusion can by no means be "stigmatized as pathological" (253).⁴ In mental life, "nothing which has once been formed can perish," and in "suitable circumstances (when for instance regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to life" (256). Thus, Plath's journey will be seen as a conscious attempt to reach this primordial state of mind, and not as a schizoid preoccupation with borders. Further, the subject whose existence happens to be at the limits of abjection and subjectivity, as Kristeva sees it in Powers of Horror, "at the limit of primal repression" (10-11), is not necessarily schizoid, but as Eynel

¹ A sense of self is an awareness of one's physical body and mental state.

² What Freud terms as "primary narcissism" denotes "an early state in which the child cathects its own self with the whole of its libido; when the child takes itself as its love object before choosing external objects;" this autoerotic feeling that characterizes the infant corresponds "to the child's belief in the omnipotence of its thought" (qtd in Laplanche and Pontalis 337).

³ Primary love is to be equated with the Freudian "primary narcissism," autoeroticism and megalomania that is not necessarily schizoid.

⁴ Melanie Klein also talks about the occurrence of the paranoid-schizoid position in normal child development and refers to adult regression as a phase of development which is normal (qtd in Hanna Segal 55, 54).



Wardi observes with Dylan Thomas, it “manifests the crisis of subjectivity to which contemporary, post-Freudian literature and psychology testify with distinctive intensity” (25).

Marion Milner’s account of the psychoanalytic case history of Susan,⁵ a schizoid patient, who was referred to her claiming that “she had lost her soul,” and felt that “the world was no longer outside her” a feeling experienced after her ECT shock (xix), focuses on recurrent elements that appear in Susan’s dreams as well as her drawings. Since, Milner found it difficult to resort to a descriptive account of what actually happened during the sessions with Susan, she resorted to Susan’s drawings as she saw them “containing in highly condensed form the essence of what [they] were trying to understand” (xxi). She saw them as her “patient’s private language” (ibid.).

In the detailed account of Susan’s case history, Milner draws into sharp relief the girl’s preoccupation with boundaries. At the beginning of the analysis, things are always depicted as being contained: “protecting cowls” surrounding faces (154), baby-animals protected by an “encircling snake-like coil” (ibid.). Milner associates this with Susan’s complaint that “the world [is] no longer outside her” (xix). If she is contained in the world, this entails blurring of borders, as her skin seems to have been ruptured and she forms part of the world. Her drawings, however, depict her desire to be contained inside the borders of her skin. Near the end of the treatment, Milner observes that now Susan is preoccupied with drawings of seas. For Milner that means, “she is coming to the base-line which is the ever-moving inner sea.” This Milner interprets as her effort “to let go the articulate organized form of external perception and go inside herself to the undifferentiated sea” (318), thus “turning inwards, and finding that it is not really ‘ground’ but something for which the symbol of water is more appropriate.” By re-entering her inner undifferentiated sea “where differences are wiped out,” she can reach the place where symbols alone can be created” (320), where the self reaches its nascent state.

Considering the above with Plath’s border preoccupation is likely to identify Plath with Susan. Indeed, a great number of critics have discussed the “madness” in Plath,

⁵ The whole analysis lasted 16 years.

placing her inside a circle of “mad” writers, such as Virginia Woolf, Robert Lowell, and Anne Sexton. Among many others, Marilyn Yalom talks about the emergence of “a subgenre of fiction devoted to the *topos* of madness” and mentions a number of women writers who drew from their personal experiences the raw material for their artistic work, referring to Margaret Atwood, Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath (1). Edward Butscher, in his biography Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness, applies to Plath the oxymoronic label of the “bitch goddess” and sees her “insightful” and “beautiful” artistic production as emanating from the adoption of a technique he calls “method and madness” i.e. “escapism” from different periods of life (madness) through “a commitment, a vocational dedication to [...] craft and vision” (method) (xi, xii, xiii). Further, David Holbrook sees in Plath the schizoid individual who “believed that death could be a pathway to rebirth” and sees her suicide as “a schizoid suicide” (1).

It seems that all Yalom, Butscher and Holbrook have touched upon a “layer of gold,” a breakthrough in Plathian scholarship, but being blinded by their obsession with the writing and experience of madness, have left this layer intact. Paradoxically enough, Yalom makes a reference to madness as a “boundary experience through which the sufferer passes, clutching the hope that a new life will be found on the other-side” (89). Butscher defines the real poet as one who is different from others in that she has “remain[ed] locked inside an enormous ego that must constantly alter [her] given world through language to satisfy her particular vision of it” (xii). Finally, Holbrook talks about Plath’s “existential insecurity,” and her “regressed libidinal ego,” i.e. “herself unborn” (190). What all three have sensed is the self’s quest for re-crossing the boundaries in order to achieve rebirth, but their preoccupation with the application of certain psychoanalytic theories has rendered them unable to consider such a possibility.

From a very young age, it seems that Plath found it hard to solve her existential predicament, and occasionally she resorted to her own kind of lay analysis, as for instance after reading Freud’s “Mourning and Melancholia” (Journals 447). At the age of 18, she talks about “the disease which eats the pith of [her] body with merciless impersonality” (150), and asks the self: “Who am I?” (92). “God, who am I” (26), “I



scarcely know who I am I” (76), but of course she knows that she “is the one who has to decide the answers to [this] hideous question” (149).

Her initial effort to answer this question leads her to a close examination of preferences and dislikes, yet even this provides no answer: “I know pretty much what I like and dislike; but please don’t ask me who I am. A passionate fragmentary girl maybe?” (165). She admits to having a body but her corporeality does not guarantee subjectivity: “I have a body ... and am curled up in its neat and miraculous network of muscles and bones” (55). She does know that the self is a self in process and she must not “delude” itself “about printed islands of permanence” (130).⁶ She can have many “futures” and she can be a child, an adult, a woman (154). She longs to be “one person, one woman” (ibid.). Killing the self will not offer a solution, for to do so constitutes the “height of desperate egoism” (149). Thus, to solve the problem she resorts to the endorsement of various masks, which will give the invisible self a sense of visibility. Clothes can help in the acquisition of subjectivity; in them she feels “like a new woman” (Letters Home 480). Sexual intercourse could be another way of losing identity and perhaps acquiring a new one (Journals 105), but it will simply be a “snuffing out one’s identity on the identity of the other – a mingling and mangling of identities” (ibid.). If all these efficacies prove fruitless, there is the ultimate solution: “a return to the womb” (52), crawling “back abjectly into the womb” (149).

One is likely to notice Plath’s effort to provide answers to her subjectivity predicament in her Honor’s Thesis entitled “The Magic Mirror.” The thesis is a sequel to her paper “The Devil’s Advocate” submitted to George Gibian (her Russian literature professor)⁷ in which she discusses Dostoevsky’s novels and accepts his idea about regeneration through suffering. In “The Magic Mirror,” she delves into the notion of the double in Dostoevsky’s The Double and The Brothers Karamazov, a “topic [...] that intrigues [her]” as she writes to her mother (Letters Home 145). What she mentions as one of the greatest attractions the double has for human beings becomes her own preoccupation as well: “man’s eternal desire to solve the enigma of his own identity” (1). Considering the theoretical background she is providing in

⁶ For Kristeva, in Revolution in Poetic Language, the speaking subject is always a split subject, a subject in process (*sujet en procès*), not fixed but always developing.

⁷ See Paul Alexander’s Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath, Penguin Books, 1991, 136, 142, 148, 151, 152.

order to discuss the nature of schizophrenia, the reader gets the impression that examining the double becomes equated with her preoccupations with borders as the double entails borders in opposition to borderless states. “Accepting the fundamental duality in man” (“Magic Mirror” 1) entails the acceptance of the establishment of borders between self and other, thus creating two out of one, a process she calls “dividing off” (Letters Home 146), and examining the double in Dostoevsky’s novels enables her to delve into her own duality; the self whose skin feels “the pounds & pounds pressure of the other I’s, on every inch, wrinkled, puckered, sank in an itself” (Journals 306).

Her citation of Freud’s insights into the double casts additional light to her preoccupation with the double and its association with borders:

The theme of the “double” has been very thoroughly treated by Otto Rank (in “Der Doppelgänger”). He has gone into the connections the “double” has with reflections in mirrors, with shadows, guardian spirits, with the belief in the soul and the fear of death; but he also lets in a flood of light on the astonishing evolution of this idea. For the “double” was originally an insurance against destruction of the ego, an “energetic denial of the power of death.”, [sic] as Rank says; and probably the “immortal” soul was the first “double” of the body ... Such ideas, however, have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-love, from the primary narcissism which holds sway in the mind of the child as that of primitive man; and when this stage has been left behind the double takes on a different aspect. From having been an assurance of immortality, he becomes the ghastly harbinger of death. (17-18)

As seen by Otto Rank and endorsed by Freud, the double was a “myth” originally constructed to assure the self of its immortality. Freud goes further and contends that the double emanates from “primary narcissism,” a state that characterizes the minds of children and primitive men. With the overcoming of the “primary narcissism” stage, the notion of the double becomes an omen of death. Following Plath’s elaborate argument about the existence of the double in the two novels by Dostoevsky, one can notice her belief in the dangerous side of the double: it can be “an ever-present liability for it increases the vulnerability of the creator” or it may “even betray the



personality which gave it life” (17). Although she acknowledges “the fundamental duality of man,” she seems to be sharing Golyadkin’s⁸ ambivalent reaction: “a fearful attraction toward the reproduction of his own image and a still more fearful repulsion from the incarnation of his own doom” (ibid. 18). Her repulsion, however, stems from the fact that the double becomes an omen of death as it precipitates the extinction of oceanic fusion; for the self being divided means being deprived of its infinity. At the age of 22, when Plath wrote her thesis, the self senses that border crossing could prove to be beneficial for the self in crisis, but the notion that self-regeneration could be achieved through the victorious conquest of borders has not matured enough to enter consciousness.

The inaccessibility of the infant and childhood experiences becomes another predicament for the mature Plath who has been left alone to cope with two children in a snow-blitzed London, “the worst weather since nineteen-forty-seven” (Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams 133) and the demands of her art. W.B. Yeats’ house is not a good omen after all, her “new hairdo and new clothes” will do nothing to her “rather shattered morale” (Letters Home 492). She is “seeing the finality of it all, and being catapulted from the cowlike happiness of maternity into loneliness [she realizes that] grim problems is no fun” (ibid. 498). The self now longs to break the glassed-in ship and access the lost experiences which are seen as blocking the self’s journey back to time immemorial. By writing “Ocean 1212-W,” Plath gives expression to the moment of remembrance, lets her unspoken experience “worm through” (Collected Poems 224) the level of the text and achieve representation.

As Julia Kristeva states in About Chinese Women, in a chapter entitled “I Who Want Not To Be,” for a woman the call of the mother in the world of the patriarchal symbolic order “troubles the word” as it “generates hallucinations, voices, ‘madness’.” If the ego is not strong enough to stave off the lava from the maternal volcanic eruption, then the self is led to suicide (157). Sylvia Plath is one of the three women she mentions, whose suicides she sees as the answer to this maternal call. For Kristeva, Plath, disillusioned with the symbolic world, longed for the semiotic

⁸ Yakov Petrovitch Golyadkin is the protagonist of Dostoevsky’s The Double, “a humble introvert with repressed ambitions, who imagines that he meets his Double on a stormy night in Petersburg” (7)

maternal world and resorted to “lights, rhythms and sounds” (ibid.), which she could only access in suicide.

Kristeva’s discussion becomes significant for this project as it not only dissolves the notion that Plath’s “madness” teleologically led to her suicide,⁹ but it also reinforces my argument about Plath’s attempt to transcend borders and experience regeneration: Kristeva talks about Plath’s taking refuge in lights, rhythms and sounds: for this refuge to be accessed, the self needs to access the maternal semiotic and to access this one needs to renegotiate borders.

In Powers of Horror, Kristeva presents her theory of the abject, its relation to the mother and its significance in the constitution of subjectivity. She makes a distinction between the paternal symbolic and the maternal semiotic. The latter she sees as a pre-oedipal space experienced as an undifferentiated continuum between the self and the mother’s body, the *chora*. Although the state is characterized by borderlessness, paradoxically, the mother becomes “the law before the law,” mapping the self’s boundaries between the clean and proper space. The abject threatens a stable subject position and does not “respect borders, positions, rules.” It is what “disturbs identity, system, order.” It is a place “where meaning collapses,” the “place where ‘I’ am not,” (4), presenting a life-threatening negation that must be radically excluded. Yet the abject remains ambiguous, repelling and fascinating. Its incorporating aspects promise the return to the oceanic primordial state inside the semiotic *chora*, the original oneness with the mother:

[A]bjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it – on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives. Abjection preserves what existed in the archaism of pre-objectal relationship. (ibid. 9-10).

⁹ In the same excerpt cited above, Kristeva enclosed the word madness in quotation marks thus questioning the term itself.



To control the abject, societies used purification rituals in which the contact with it would be renewed and be ejected so that the demarcation could be redrawn. In the same way, Plath renews her own contact with her borderless state by reliving it in memory. Such a remembrance reminds her that she can always go back (not merely regress like a psychotic) but revisit, blur borders and draw them anew.

Delving into Plath's rebirth efforts and looking at them not as parallel but as distinctly in opposition to Susan's schizoid symptoms, I will focus on common elements, which were traced in both texts, but which paradoxically are not identical in character: the sense of being bordered and borderless, the fluidity of the sea, breathing, violence, and the mother figure. As noted in the beginning, "Ocean 1212-W" is characterized by an abundance of bordered and borderless states: Plath talks about her childhood landscape: "My childhood landscape was not land but the end of the land – the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic" (117). Whereas the land is limited, restricted, the sea, which encloses it, seems infinite. Shells and lucky stones she would collect are separate entities "with a white ring all the way round" (ibid.), the grandfather's verandah is "glassed-in" (120), the road is constrained, as if banded, "curved into the waves with the ocean on the one side, the bay on the other" (118).

Most importantly, Plath associates states of borderlessness with the self. The traumatic experience she has with the "disappearance" and neglect of her mother due to the birth of her brother makes her realize that after all, she is not fused with the world, but she is a separate entity: "As from a star I saw coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. My beautiful fusion with the things of the world was over" (120). The unembodied self, which she has "relished," the absolute oceanic feeling of primary narcissism, is now brought face to face with the grim reality. She is enclosed between the skin borders, she has a body along with the mind like the other things of the world and it is only the maternal sea that is characterized by borderlessness (but even her children, the waves, have borders, "rims").

In his seminal book The Divided Self, R.D. Laing talks about the way "ontologically insecure people" do not seem to have a sense of basic unity, which can abide through the most intense conflicts with themselves but seem rather to have come to experience themselves as primarily split into a mind and a body. Based on these, he distinguishes

between embodied and unembodied individuals, whereon, embodied individuals have the feeling of always being contained in the body, whereas unembodied ones, divorced from the body, feel that this is one object among other objects in the world and not as the core of individuals' being. Such individuals are in one sense trying to be omnipotent, enclosing within their own being the outer world, but in another impotent sense as shut-up selves, they are unable to be enriched by outer experience.

Because she could not remember any aspect of her infant experience, i.e. the mother's "hands and arms, holding her, sustaining her, protecting her," it was as if Susan felt herself as "being God" (52). Such a loss of belongingness to the world entails loss of omnipotence, for she loses her "megalomaniac delusion" (77). Plath's megalomaniac desire is epitomized in the following quotation: "I want, I think, to be omniscient ... I think I would like to call myself 'the girl who wanted to be God [...]' Sometimes I try to put myself in another's place, and I am frightened when I find I am almost succeeding" (Letters Home 40). Omnipotence, as Plath perceives it, is not a pure megalomaniac delusion, but a coveted state since it also entails the blurring of borders between the self and others and the acquisition of the power to enter others. God is omnipotent because He is not limited. Although occasionally Plath asserts her atheism (Journals 44-45), she longs to believe "in some beneficent force beyond [her] own limited self" (ibid. 187).

As Laing puts it in his discussion of the unembodied self,

Such an individual in one sense is trying to be omnipotent by enclosing within his own being modes of relationship that require the effective presence into him of other people and the outer world. (175)

Retrospectively, the adult Plath realizes that the loss of fusion entails the loss of the Godlike quality: "I who for two and a half years had been the center of tender universe felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones. I would be a bystander, a museum mammoth" ("Ocean 1212-W" 120).

Although Susan's mother was unable to bring her up and vacillated between loving and rejecting her, she established a suffocating bond between herself and the child,



not allowing her to have a separate existence (10). Susan recalls sleeping with her and feeling the constricting tentacles of her arms. This fusion led the child into believing the world no longer to be outside her (15).

Not letting the daughter breathe and achieve her own individuation in a separate existence of her own – experienced by a vast number of mothers and daughters – was a feeling Plath experienced throughout her life. In “Ocean 1212-W” the adult Plath accuses the mother of leaving her with the grandparents for the birth of her brother: “her desertion punched a smouldering hole in my sky. How could she, so loving, so faithful, so easily leave me?” (120). The good enough mother becomes a bad, unloving mother who very easily gives up her child for the sake of another. At the same time, however, she implicitly accuses her of not allowing her individuation even at a small age:

When I was learning to creep, my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the wall of green when she caught my heels. (117)

Once more, the mother is an ambivalent figure, a sublime and abject mother whose touch like Thetis’ is harmful. The adult Plath, now a mother herself, who surprisingly ended up replicating her mother’s state, husbandless mother of a girl and a boy, still feels her overpowering presence. Letters like the following keep crossing the Atlantic, making Plath unable to “breathe or Achoo” (Collected Poems 222). The mother is “always there,/Tremulous breath at the end of [her] line” (225). In a letter dated December 4, 1962, Aurelia Plath is giving advice to her daughter who is about to move to London, but her overpowering suffocating presence hovers over her text.

Naturally, I assumed that you would not leave deposit books lying carelessly about so that they could be noted! [...] Aren’t you going to bring your pressure cooker, stainless steel service and kitchen utensils? You do have to cook, after all. (Mortimer Rare Book Room)

Further, Plath recalls the incident immediately after her brother’s birth:

Sometimes I nursed starfish alive in jam jars of seawater and watched them grow back lost arms. On this day, this awful birthday of otherness, my rival, somebody else, I flung the starfish against a stone. Let it perish. It had no wit.
(121)

Unable to restore the good mother inside the self, the girl resorts to violence and kills the starfish she so earnestly tried to nurture.

It is important to note that in her reading of Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," adult Plath recognizes in the essay her own "feelings and reasons for suicide." She sees her inclination for self annihilation as a "transferred murderous impulse from [her] mother onto [her]self" (Journals 447). In the same way, one may see the killing of the starfish as a sort of transference. Since she was the one to have saved and nurtured the starfish, she assumed the role of its mother, and killing it, persecutes the bad mother inside her. She now becomes a baby-hater: "I hated babies" (120). Thus, she displaces the baby onto the starfish and by killing it she resorts to infanticide, a feeling which marks Susan's psychoanalytic treatment.

Susan's infanticidal tendencies, mostly emerging from her dreams, occurred when she was nearest to the point of being born "into the real world of her own body." Because this emergence was the result of the psychoanalytic treatment with Milner, it entailed much dependence on her. This dependence recalled her own suffocating dependence on her mother. Thus, her infanticidal tendencies were in fact "an urge to kill [...] her own infant dependent self emerging in the analysis as the child of [their] relationship" (25).

Infanticide features prominently in Plath's work: an obsession with dead fetuses can be traced in many of her works, ranging from the dead babies in "old pickle jars" in The Bell Jar (65) to the enigmatic infanticide in "Edge" (Collected Poems 272; Christodoulides 178-79). While it becomes difficult to state conclusively that Plath was tormented by infanticidal tendencies, occasionally it is noted that the killing of babies is a mere metaphor for the killing of any obstacles that hinder the self. In "Ocean 1212-W" the narrator resorts to murder as a revengeful action because an



infant paradoxically made her lose her own infant position which she so much cherished.

The oceanic feeling Plath experiences as disappearing is still to be manifested in the sea, which as opposed to all other natural elements is boundless: “the sea waltzed off into nothing, into the sky – the dividing line on this calm day almost invisible” (119). Lamenting the disappearance of her own borderless self, the only vivid memory the adult Plath can still cherish is the sea: “I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the closest thing I own” (117). It is the memory not only of the Atlantic that borders her grandparents’ house, but also the amniotic fluid of the maternal womb which still invites her to obliterate any borders, face abjection and achieve rebirth anew.

The image of the speculum has always been associated with the emergence of the subjectivity of the baby, and the sea becomes Plath’s own speculum, giving her a starting point to search for the lost subjectivity: “I often wonder what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking glass” (117). What lies on the other side of the speculum? How can she re-enter? And what if the image is dark? What if she re-experiences what she had sensed as a child during the hurricane? “On a mirror of rivy black our faces wavered like moths, trying to pry their way in. Nothing could be seen” (123).

But the sea (who is “motherly”) keeps calling her to break her watery border and fuse with her. Her grandmother’s phone number is still vivid in her memory: it is “Ocean 1212-W.” She could call it as a child, “half expecting the black earpiece to give [her] back, like a conch the susurrus murmur of the sea” (119). The word “susurrus” itself an onomatopoeic adjective strongly recalls the maternal semiotic which, as Kristeva defines it, in Revolution in Poetic Language is characterized by a lack of differentiation between child and mother, a pre-verbal dimension of language, marked by sensual impressions, *echolalias*, bodily rhythms, sounds and incoherence. The sound is a call from the maternal sea and makes the self remember another call. Interestingly enough, it is the mother, Aurelia Plath, “a sea girl herself” (118), reading to the children Matthew Arnold’s “The Forsaken Merman”:

Sand-strewn caverns, cool and deep,

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 for ever and aye. (Johnny Panic 118)

The girl falls “into a new way of being happy,” and experiences “gooseflesh on [her] skin” (ibid.). Perhaps this is another means of joining the maternal through the semiotic call of poetic language. Kristeva talks about the “semiotization of the symbolic,” the flow of *jouissance* into language which is achieved through poetry (Revolution in Poetic Language 79). This pre-verbal semiotic energy, what Milner would term as “the pre-logical and non-discursive” (xx), is what young Plath has grasped from Arnold’s poetry, but this is what she tries to transfuse into her own poetic composition.

Here follows my first sonnet, written during the hours of 9 to 1 a.m. on a Saturday night, when in pregnant delight I conceived my baby. Luxuriating in the feel and music of the words, I chose and rechose [sic], singling out the color, the assonance and dissonance and musical effects I wished – lulling myself by supple “I”s and bland long “a’s” and “o’s.” (Journals 96).

The *echolalias* of the baby are there, the “a’s” and “o’s.” the semiotic has entered the paternal symbolic language. This gives her the opportunity to become God by re-appropriating her lost omnipotence: she has “more inventiveness than God” (210). She is able to “recreate the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word-patterns [she] make[s]” (232).

The sea as a mother is both benevolent and malevolent: “Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it



could court, it could also kill” (117). In Powers of Horror, Kristeva talks about the two-faced mother: the sublime and the abject. The sublime is the ideal, “the focus of the artist’s gaze;” the abject, on the other hand, is “tied to suffering, illness, sacrifice,” she is “repulsive and fascinating, abject” (157-58). As a sublime mother, the sea “had conferred a blessing” to the little girl. Upon the birth of the little brother, when she turns into a “bystander, a museum mammoth,” (120), the sea has her own gift: “a monkey of wood” which “had the noble pose of a simian thinker,” a “totem” (121). But the sea, like her mother, who although being “so loving and faithful” so easily abandoned her for the brother, can become violent. She is, then, a devouring abject mother: she can “bite” the grandparents’ house during the hurricane: now she becomes a “molten” beast, “steely-slick, heaving at its leash like a broody animal, evil violets in its eye” (123).

Another indelible memory for Plath becomes the “smell of salt,” which makes her nostalgia for the sea even greater. What would have happened if she had managed to enter the sea: “would her infant gills have taken over, the salt in my blood” (117). There is an affinity between the child and the sea; a common element: salt. The very matter of subjectivity is further cast to sharp relief if one considers that salt is not merely the alchemists’ “prima material,” as Jung states in Psychology and Alchemy (317), but as Hillman sees it, to “experience sea/salt is to be within the visceral elements of bodily life” (qtd in Eileen Gregory “Rose Cut in Rock: Sappho and H.D.’s ‘Sea Garden’” Contemporary Literature 27:4, Winter 1986). Thus, recalling the smell of salt itself becomes a catalyst leading the self back to a consideration of its nascent condition.

In Susan’s later drawings, the sea becomes an important symbol that Milner tries to decipher in order to be able to delve into Susan’s imaginary.¹⁰ The lack of basis in her first drawings is closely associated with her own lack of basis, the absence of a solid ground on which to stand. As Milner sees it, Susan “has to discover that her baseline is the ever moving inner sea” (318), thus “turning her attention inwards, and finding

¹⁰ The imaginary, as Kristeva sees it in New Maladies of the Soul, is “a kaleidoscope of ego images that build the foundation for the subject of the enunciation” and it is a way of “gaining access to more archaic affective representations” (104).

that it is not really 'ground' but something for which the symbol of water is more appropriate" (ibid.), something that she did in her later drawings.

In recapturing the lost childhood, Plath encounters a gust of wind that she calls the "first breath." She is not at first sure whether the breath is the breath of her mother that she recalls as an embryo in her womb: "Breath, that is the first thing. Something is breathing. My own breath. The breath of my mother? No, something else, something larger, farther, more serious, more weary" (*Johnny Panic* 117). It is a bit later that she comes to associate the gust of wind with the breath of the sea (119).

It was near the end of Susan's long psychoanalytic treatment when Milner observed the importance of breathing as an indication of the existing relationship between body and mind leading to body awareness and thus to the realization of the separate existence of body-mind. She talks about the resulting

sensation of total melting, so that one's whole self-awareness changed to being a dark warm velvety puddle, intensely related to, in fact almost interpenetrating with, the supporting ground. And it was from this that there came, if the relaxation had been deep enough, the astounding feeling of both oneself and the world as new created. (381)

Like Susan, whose realization of breathing could lead back to time immemorial, or as Dylan Thomas would see it, to "once below a time" (124-25), Plath could achieve fusion if she considers the breath of the sea as an irresistible call that the self has to answer. Now so many years later, when Plath is a mother herself, she feels more strongly the call of the mother sea. If she answers the call and manages to blur the boundaries and approach the abject, then she may start anew. Her preoccupation with boundaries which so amazingly coincides with Susan's and which would lead someone to confer upon her the schizoid state are pure efforts to face the abject. Winnicott says:

In fact, if we look at our descriptions of schizoid persons we find we are using words that we use to describe little children and babies, and there we actually



expect to find the phenomena that characterize our schizoid and schizophrenic patients. (67)

What Winnicott observes leads to a Kristevan approach to Plath's boundary obsession, which in turn is associated with the self's effort to blur boundaries, experience primary narcissism and set things right. On many occasions, Milner, recalling Susan's case history, observes the same effort on behalf of Susan but as Guntrip puts it, the schizoid individual though she yearns for rebirth is yet terrified of being "drawn back inside – into a loss of all objects, by ultimate regression" (qtd in Holbrook, 25). Their dread of regressing back to the womb is manifested in their fear of being buried alive (ibid. 120). Susan's case history manifests this effort of giving birth to the self, but as Milner observes, the feeling is stifled at the beginning of the analysis (36, 102), and is associated with "a terror of what she feels she will be like" if she is reborn (102). "Primary objects (sea, air, water) stand out for an environment that both accepts and sustains a feeling of flowing together of the self and the world" (323). This gives a chance to the self to re-experience fusion with the amniotic fluid of the womb, an action that involves the "necessary annihilation of the self as Blake sees it (325), what in Susan, Milner would see as "the way of losing herself to find herself" (301) and which Susan resists.

In "Remission," Ted Hughes considers childbirth as a way Plath could use to renegotiate her borders and achieve rebirth, or, as Ann Skea very aptly puts it, to be "linked by Nature to the Source, thus becoming the Spiritual Child." Hughes sees Plath taking root in the "oceanic submissions/Of giving birth" (109). The importance of this is that Hughes acknowledges Plath's efforts to renegotiate her borders and achieve freedom. By giving birth, it is as though she does not only break the border between mother and child, but rediscovers the mother in childbirth as Kristeva sees it in "Stabat Mater" (Tales of Love), once again blurring the borders between the old mother and the new, achieving fusion. Hughes sees Plath's birth-giving as the characteristic of "the you [sic] you shared with the wild earth" her "membership/Of a sorority of petals and creatures" (109), another instance of her fusion with the things of the world.

The “Indian midwife” with “yoga breath [...] folded [her] from [her]self” and “stowed [her] aboard” in a “free-floating crib” (p.110). For Ann Skea, it is in these images where one can see “the human mother and child linked by Nature to the Source;” what can also be noticed, however, is the joining of the mother and child with the world. Once the borders were blurred with childbirth, the mother is liberated, can join the world and enjoy oceanic fusion. Hughes, however, knows that death “had already donned [Plath’s] features” (Birthday Letters 110), but Plath may not be aware then of “the mask of his disguise” (ibid.) approaching her menacingly. Now in 1963, however, she has realized that border crossing with childbirth has proved totally ineffective. In motherhood she could not find the catalyst to enable her to “verbalize [the] pre-linguistic, unrepresentable memory” (Desire in Language 239) which would lead her to re-experience subject formation. Although she had “the queerest feeling of being reborn with Frieda” (Letters Home 450), and saw the night of her son’s birth as “Christmas Eve, full of rightness & promise” (Journals 697), she now sees the finality of everything and needs to find a new way to re-new the self.

In “Creative Writers and Daydreaming” Freud relates creative writing daydreaming and fantasy to three temporal points: an intense experience in the **present** “unseals” a so far sealed childhood experience **past**. The encounter of these two temporal points triggers a desire to “vocalize” or produce in writing the moment or remembrance, “the time of the moment of the literary work” (139) **a new temporal point**, what Kristeva calls *les temps sensible*, sentient time which integrates the moment of history and personal history and as Anne-Marie Smith puts it, “enables images and text to emerge from the silence of the dark-room” (67).

In Proust’s Swann’s Way, the narrator remembers the moment “when one day in Winter, on [his] return home, [his] mother, seeing that [he] was cold, offered [him] some tea.” Then he dipped in it his *petite madeleine*, one “of those squat, plump little cakes” which “look as though they had been moulded in the fluted valve of a scallop shell” (51). This brought a “cascade of involuntary memories” (Kristeva, Proust and the Sense of Time 43) and he was illuminated by a childhood memory of Combray where Aunt Léonie on Sunday mornings used to give him a *madeleine*, “dipping it first in her own cup of tea or tisane” (54). For Kristeva, “[i]nvoluntary memory” is already there, causing the boiling lava of memories and desires from the past to



coagulate around a present sensation, however slight, however intense” (9). Proust has found a form of memory, beyond the control of consciousness, which he will resurrect in writing; his art will be the isolation and preservation of the moments of remembrance on the written page, and this would dissolve his “dreary day[s] and the prospects of depressing morrow[s]” (51).

Like Marcel Proust, Plath knows that voluntary memory could just make you “remember [...] sensual observations” give you facts and “you could delude yourself into thinking – almost – that you could return to the past, and relive the days and hours in a quick space of time.” However, she is also aware that “the quest of time past is more difficult than you think [...] The film of your days and nights is wound up tight in you never to be re-run – and the occasional flashbacks are faint, blurred, unreal, as if seen through falling snow” (Journals 63). This time, during the winter of 1962-63, however, the memory will be reactivated involuntarily. Like Proust, she will be “dreary” and the prospects of the “depressing morrows” will haunt her. Her special *madeleine* is only the solidity of the snow; at first “white, picturesque, untouched” which “hardened and froze” (Johnny Panic 125, 126) and then, suddenly: “I saw official-looking men sprinkling shovelfuls of powder on the already half-melted ice. ‘What’s that?’ I demanded. ‘Salt’” (*ibid.* 133). It is the smell of the salt again. Now the self in its *cul de sac* recalls the lost happiness which is associated with a liquidity, that of the sea and its borderlessness. This state recalls another liquidity, that of the mother’s womb and the floating in the amniotic fluid, which brings back states of borderlessness, where “the surfaces – skin, sight – are abandoned in favour of a descent into the depths of the body, where one hears, tastes and smells the infinitesimal life of the cells” (*Moi* 154). Now that Plath is seeking “a new way of being happy,” re-fusion with the things of the world to re-experience a nascent condition is a possibility. Kristeva, in *New Maladies of the Soul*, discusses the case history of Paul, “the inexpressible child,” whose imaginary has to be re-entered so that communication can be achieved. Kristeva found a way of breaking into the child’s blocked imaginary by identifying with his pre-verbal retreat into a space outside language: singing (New Maladies of the Soul 108).

In the same way, by recalling her borderless state, Plath renews her own contact with it, finds her own way of approaching a pre-verbal experience which will give her the

chance to go back, not merely to regress but to “re-visit.” There is however, no psychoanalyst close by to help her retreat. She is in frozen London. Ruth Beuscher is miles away and can only communicate with her through letters.

I have thought alot [sic] about your difficulty [...] Now then, the problem is: am I being consulted as a woman (mother) (witch) (earth-goddess), or as a mere psychiatrist? As the latter, I could properly only explore your feelings, and invite you, in the light of whatever was discovered, to make your own decisions. But my 3rd ear tells me I am also wanted in some other role, if not actually one of those parenthetically suggested. Also, in spite of much effort on my part, I am totally unable to function solely as a psychiatrist in this crisis. (Unpublished Correspondence, Mortimer Rare Book Room, September 17, 1962)

She advises her to read Eric Fromm’s The Art of Loving (Mortimer Rare Book Room), but she cannot help her verbalize repressed material. Thus, Plath resorts to writing, for this will act like a dark room in which sensory experiences can be slowly processed, seen and understood in the wider context of interpersonal experience. Through literary language she can infringe on the laws of fixed syntax and grammar, and she can re-enter the maternal semiotic, re-experience subject formation and achieve rebirth.

“Ocean 1212-W” with its poetic fiction is merely a sample of what Plath did in her Ariel collection, which more than any other work of hers, is purely “semiotic.” Color, sound, gesture, rhythm, a pre-verbal energy enter the paternal symbolic text, transgressing its code of strict grammar and syntax: poetic language is revolting; the semiotic is calling. This call of the maternal semiotic is urgent. Will, however, going back enable return? What will this retreat come to? Is there any space for subjectivity to define itself, seek expression, encounter obstacles, imagine ways round them?

Now Plath has moved the black telephone receiver off the hook. She has answered the call of the mother and “fled to the refuge of light, rhythm, sounds” (Kristeva, About Chinese Women in The Kristeva Reader 40). But the entry into the maternal realm, the chora, was too deep and the self too exhausted to rise above it to achieve rebirth.



Thus, she chose to stay forever in it: in its maternal, preverbal, realm of light, sound, rhythm, in the “susurrus” of the ocean where self and world are eternally fused.

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