

Words as Axes: Suffering as Catalyst of Meaning in Sylvia Plath's Poetry

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"I do it so it feels like hell"

One of the fundamental problems in Sylvia Plath's poetry appears to be the problem of identity, not only in the sense in which identity is constructed in a very ambiguous way in Plath's work, but also from the point of the reader's understanding of this construction. In his *Introduction* to the first edition of Plath's *Journals*, Ted Hughes argues that Plath's writing can be seen as a teleological journey towards one undeniable poetic identity manifested powerfully through her *Ariel* voice. However, Hughes seems to have made the very mistake which he condemned: he fused the empirical identity with the artistic one: "All her poems are in a sense by-products. Her real creation was that inner gestation and eventual birth of a new self-conquering self, to which her journal bears witness, and which proved itself so overwhelmingly in the *Ariel* poems of 1962." (Hughes, in Bloom, 119). The value of her poetry, Hughes writes, lies precisely in the fact that it courageously displays this painful process of self-discovery that is the "most important task a human being can undertake." (*idem*). While I agree that Plath's poetry is a poetry made by an "I" continuously searching for an adequate mode of existence, I do not think that the two levels (the empirical and the artistic one) of identity should be considered as running parallel to each other. In Plath's case, the finding of a poetic voice is not conditioned by the presumably conquered identity of her person. Empirical identity, in fact, is subordinated and forgotten in favour of the former one, since the only way in which she felt she could become real was through writing: "My health is making stories, poems, novels, of experience... I cannot live for life itself: but for the words which stay the flux. My life, I feel, will not be lived until there are books and stories which relive it perpetually in time." (*Journals*, 286).

Writing, however, is an activity that does not prove accessible to the poet all the time: she experiences sterile periods in which creativity is forbidden to her by both psychic and physical suffering. Manic-depression, apparently brought about by the

premature death of her father when she was eight, combines with physical symptoms (fevers, sinusitis, weariness, headaches, PMS), and all in combination lead her to suicide. I am not interested here in the nature of her illnesses, be they psychic or physical. What I want to point out is the fact that if suffering prevents her from expressing herself in the earlier period of her creation, it is, at the same time, the only possible way towards the poetry of *Ariel*.

In her earlier poetry, she experiments with various styles and forms and she tries to speak, as so many critics have said, through the voices of her predecessors. Her suffering is manifested in these poems as a suffocation of her authentic subject's discourse. The "black shoe" of her inherited culture keeps her a prisoner resigned to endlessly perform the Sisyphean and useless "dredging" of the silt from the Father's throat ("The Colossus"). During this period of creation, her pain cannot be localized and defined as yet;¹ it runs underneath the text which becomes a sort of prison, because of rules that have not been sufficiently internalized by the self. In phenomenological terms, it is as if she perceived things from an alien body, thus not being able to connect her own consciousness to the intentional objects of her perception in order to achieve meaning. Suffering is therefore poetically manifested as a fissure between body/text and mind/meaning, as an unnatural division between the physical and the psychic planes. What the "I" sees outside does not correspond to what she feels inside. Traditional reference appears as a false link between worlds.

In a poem written during this period, "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows", the poetic self cannot find a proper connection between the inner and the outer levels of existence. The description of a happy tame world of "a country on a nursery plate" occupies twenty-five of the twenty-eight lines of the poem, with its "Spotted cows" that "revolve their jaws and crop/Red clover or gnaw beetroot/Bellied on a nimbus of sun-glazed buttercup", with its students who "stroll or sit,/Hands laced, in a moony indolence of love." The "arcadian green" of this benign world is only disrupted in the last two lines and a half, where the true perceptual body of the subject makes its presence felt through

¹ In one journal entry dating from her college days, Plath significantly writes about loneliness that "It comes from a vague core of the self – like a disease of the blood, dispersed throughout the whole body so that one cannot locate the matrix, the spot of contagion." (*Journals*, 29)

the reference to the hidden menace of an apparently “mild air” in which “The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.” (“Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows”). The fact that the description of the outer world of tame existence takes such a large space in the poem as compared to the tiny space of the allusion to the hidden menace residing within, may also suggest that, in order to arrive at the core of her identity and to escape the prison of a discourse felt as alien, the “I” has to pierce the considerable thickness of the world, in order to arrive at her own space of identity.

Her journal entries from this period reiterate this desire for an alchemical transmuting of words into living bodies: “small poems [...] very physical in the sense that the worlds are bodied forth in my words, not stated in abstractions, or denotative wit [...]. Small descriptions where the words have an aura of mystic power: of Naming the name of a quality: spindly, prickling, sleek, splayed, wan, luminous, bellied. Say them aloud always. Make them irrefutable.” (*Journals*, 285). Abstract thinking is thus rejected in favour of a more natural type of existence, which fuses all the dimensions of being and refuses the artificial distinctions of philosophical thought. Words are connected with the paradigm of the body.

In March 1959, a month after she had written “Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows”, Sylvia Plath was aware that she still had a long way to go to her true poetic identity: “I may have all the answers to my questions in myself but I need some catalyst to get them into consciousness.” (*Journals*, 474). Between these mysterious answers waiting to be revealed in herself and her consciousness there is her body, which becomes the only reliable medium of meaning she has, since all other structures inherited prove inefficient. (“The body is resourceful” in “Three Women”) Plath discovers poetically what the philosopher Maurice Merleau Ponty argued: that words, before they send us concepts, are events that involve our body and that their physiognomy is the result of our adopting a certain behaviour towards them, in the same way in which we adopt different types of behaviour towards different persons. It is our body which, through the way in which it receives them, provides words with their primordial meaning.²

Plath’s artistic dilemma is how to find that poetic body which should be able to guide her towards the apprehending of those mysterious messages waiting to be revealed

² See Maurice Merleau Ponty, *op. cit.*, pp. 286-7.

within her. She arrives at a conviction that the truth of the world and of identity is not to be found in the concepts fabricated by others, but to be discovered from the inside out, by using one's own body and mind, by fusing all the dimensions of one's being in one sincere undertaking: the experience of Otherness, that is, of meaning, of identity. Yet Plath's experience of Otherness is an experience deeply conditioned by suffering. "We must fight to return to that early mind... Be a chair, a toothbrush, a jar of coffee from the inside out: know by feeling in." (*Journals*, 307)

Intensifying suffering

In July, 1956, while spending her honeymoon with her husband in Benidorm, Spain, Plath disturbingly mingles the life of her body with her anxiety:

Alone, deepening. Feeling the perceptions deepen with the tang of geranium and the full moon and the mellowing of hurt; the deep ingrowing of hurt, too far from the bitching fussing surface tempests. The hurt going in, clean as a razor, and the dark blood welling. Just the sick knowing that the wrongness was growing in the full moon. (*Journals*, 250)

The quotation above is important because it shows how Plath was already exploring new ways of translating and exorcising pain by making it into words on a page. It is through the minute observation and description of her perceptions that the poet comes to connect sensory experiences and psychic events. For Sylvia Plath, the body and its experiences offer the ultimate analogy for the process of creation. The image of the moon is, in the passage above, as in Plath's entire poetic work, equivocal: while it maintains and even deepens the chasm between surface and depth, i. e. her paralysis, it also favours the apparition and growth of "hurt", which leads her to her meanings. To increase pain by opening and extending old wounds becomes one necessary step in the economy of Sylvia Plath's writing, since it is through an ever-increased pain that the sensitivity of the body is awakened, and, consequently, the ability of the mind to create. I do not think that it can be interpreted as a masochistic gesture, since the poet does not search pain for its own sake and pain does not offer her any self-sufficient pleasure; instead, it is a deliberate gesture that is courageously assumed and subordinated to a superior purpose, and not the act of a deranged mind: "My first job is to open my real

experience like an old wound; then to extend it; then to invent on the drop of a feather, a whole multicoloured bird.” (*Journals*, 511) It is not a derangement of the senses in Rimbaud’s words either. Her poetic body needs to be awakened in order to make its perceptions yield paths to significations. Her perceptual body is already deranged in the sense in which it is paralysed. Plath rather wants to have it come back to an authentic life of its own.

The supreme aim is therefore to sharpen her perceptual sensitivity to its farthest limit and then to use it for creative purposes. Meanings, for Plath, must be seen, heard, tasted, smelt and felt, as if they were material objects or beings, as this is the only way in which she can motivate them poetically, the only way in which she can give coherence to her discourse/body. Paper becomes a sort of skin on which words turn into generators of psychic pain in the same way in which things and beings generate sensations of pain in the body. One of Plath’s last and best poems, “Words”, illustrates this process:

Axes
 After whose stroke the wood rings,
 And the echoes!

 The sap
 Wells like tears, like the
 Water striving
 To re-establish its mirror
 Over the rock

That drops and turns

The making of meanings, that is, of echoes, is brought about by the violent gesture through which the words break the hard surface of the world,³ and it is associated with a complementary action, a reparatory one: tears, just like the sap, or the water that re-establishes its mirror after the falling of the rock, are the reward for the painful search

³ The image of words as axes haunted not only Plath, but also Anne Sexton (the two poets actually knew each other and attended together Robert Lowell’s course of creative writing at Boston University). The latter chose a sentence from one of Kafka’s letters and made it into an epigraph to her second volume of poetry: “a book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us.” (*apud* David Perkins, *op. cit.*, p. 595)

for meaning. Pain connects the levels of existence, although this connection is never positive, since pain is never finished: the mysterious "life" at the end of the poem is still "governed" by the "fixed stars" "from the bottom of the pool", while words are "dry and riderless."

Plath's metaphors and images figure suffering as a fundamental lack, as a gap impossible to bridge even when the poet has learned how to make physical signifiers convey psychic torment. In "Berck Plage", for example, "shrunk voices, /waving and crutchless" are "half their old size," while "the lines of the eye, scalded by these bald surfaces,//boomerang like anchored elastics, hurting the owner" and "the onlooker, trembling," is "Drawn like a long material//Through a still virulence." In "Event", the "little face of the child" is "carved in pained, red wood"; in "Purdah", the trees are "Little bushy polyps" and "My eye/Veil is//A concatenation of rainbows." All these images are the result of a perception that is primarily experienced through and as intensified pain, in its both physical and psychic aspects (vulnerability, exposure, menace, fear, violation, loneliness, anxiety, suffocation). It might be said, after all superficial significations have been identified and settled apart, that the ultimate reference of such metaphorical imagery is suffering itself, and this is what paradoxically offers unity to the poet's discourse: the fact that she is ultimately able to express her wound ("the separateness of everything"). Her poetic identity is itself a wound that the poet feels she should extend: "Tell from one person's point of view: start with self and extend outwards: then my life will be fascinating, not a glassed-in cage." (*Journals*, 508)

In "Lady Lazarus", for example, syntactical parallelism and the repetition of the pronoun "I" provides the means for a painful intensification of suicidal identity:

I do it so it feels like hell.

I do it so it feels real.

I guess you could say I've a call.

Discursively speaking, the intensification of pain is achieved as an extension of metaphorical associations, as a kind of textual growth imagined as a cancerous proliferation of words/identities whose heterogeneity creates a tension that is never neutralized. The development of meaning is of a negative type, it partakes of a deathliness which infects everything. In "Mushrooms", an earlier poem announcing the

Ariel performance, the prolific growth of the mushrooms turns into a rapid process menacing the world itself: Overnight, very/Whitely, discreetly,/Very quietly//Our toes, our noses/Take hold on the loam,/Acquire the air.//...Our hammers, our rams/Earless and eyeless,//Perfectly voiceless,/Widen the crannies,/Shoulder through holes. We//Diet on water,/On crumbs of shadow,/Bland-mannered, asking//Little or nothing./So many of us./So many of us...// We shall by morning/Inherit the earth./ Our foot's in the door." ("Mushrooms"). "Metaphors" is based on a reflection of the same meaning into as many mirrors/paradigms as the poetic self can summon to Plath's purpose. The mirroring process (or the self-reflexivity, in Britzolakis's terms) at work in Plath's poetry can be also interpreted as a result of an intensification of suffering: the many masks assumed by the "I" are the extensions of her fundamental wound, of the impossibility to define the lack characterizing her being. Experiencing Otherness is painful: daddy, the medusa-mother, the moon-muse, the Nazi-like husband, the beekeeper, the daughter mourning for her father, the surgeon – all of them are provisional identities treated as if they were "old wounds": their relationship to the poetic self is a deeply wounding one and their gestures are hierarchized according to a climax that finally annihilates the body of the "I": an excruciating pain, which unlocks meaning, but also compromises it, because the extinction of the body is, in true phenomenological fashion, the extinction of the whole being. Speech ends with the death of the body. Suicide is the result of the splitting of the Self into parts that are inimical to the "I": they both kill and are killed in rituals of terrible exorcising.

The strategy of extending old wounds can be also connected with the way in which the poet constructs the temporality of her discourse. As many critics have said, Plath's temporality is a traumatic one, a result of her unsolved melancholia. The poetic subject never seems able to get out of the circularity of her mourning. When she apparently frees herself from the suffering originating in the past, this is only for a short-lived moment: the visions of identity are vulnerable, exposed, false, transitory, they only inscribe the subject's journey into nothingness, into a Paradise she never believes in, into a sky whose blackness is an amnesia, and whose stars are only "stupid confetti". The actions of the persona in "Lady Lazarus", for example, are articulated as moments of a present meant to stop the flow of time, to arrest both the past and the future within its

black hole. The two failed suicidal attempts that belong to the past are remembered and re-evaluated by the persona in the poem from the perspective of a rebellious present, in order to re-open a wound and to take it to a state in which the subject could control it. The gradual intensification of physical pain and of psychic suffering reaches a final point in which the fierceness of words menaces and forbids any possible future:

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.
“Lady Lazarus”

Wounds are taken to a climax (the tentative resurrection of the red-haired female spirit from the ash) which doesn't appease suffering, but stops it through the denial of the subject's own individuality. It is what happens in such poems as “Daddy”, “Ariel”, “Fever 103°”, “Medusa” and others. The body that provides the poetic “I” with a source of signification is also a body that jeopardizes meaning. The many masks chosen by the self as markers or representatives of Plath's identity only conceal an emptiness. When deprived of her suffering, that is, of her connections, Plath's self loses the power to put herself into words. The persona in “Tulips” simply puts it: “I am nobody”. Later, in one poem written during the last weeks of her life, she encodes her ambivalent relation to the body in a line whose meanings will be forever in conflict with one another:

Meaning leaks from the molecules.
“Mystic”

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