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**Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking : Sylvia Plath as  
Mother-Creator in Light of Julia Kristeva's Theory of  
Subject Formation**

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**Presented for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy  
at the  
University of Stirling  
October 2001**

05/02

**OUT OF THE CRADLE ENDLESSLY ROCKING**

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## **Acknowledgements**

This dissertation would not have been completed without the valuable moral and intellectual support of my advisor Professor David Punter, my friends Dionysis, Maria, Athena and my husband Zenon who labored with me.

**To my mother Olga, and my daughter Raphaella-Mariam**

## Abbreviations

BS	<i>Black Sun</i>
CP	<i>Collected Poems</i>
J	<i>The Journals of Sylvia Plath ( abridged )</i>
JP	<i>Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams</i>
NJ	<i>New Unabridged Journals ( 2000 )</i>
LH	<i>Letters Home</i>
MRBR	Mortimer Rare Book Room
PH	<i>Powers of Horror</i>

## Chapter I

### Initiation

This introductory chapter aims to briefly address the theoretical approach used in my dissertation, situating Julia Kristeva in relation to Sylvia Plath's work, as well as to place my work among particular psychoanalytic studies of Plath. 'Initiation' further continues by briefly discussing the way primary and secondary data are utilized in the dissertation and developing the rationale behind juxtaposing biographical material (mostly journals and letters) and creative work, life and art. The chapter finishes by giving an overview of the dissertation organization.

The purpose of this dissertation is to discuss the notion of motherhood in Sylvia Plath's work in light of Julia Kristeva's theory of subject formation. For Kristeva, as subjects, we are never the absolute masters of our own experiences, but split subjects divided between unconscious and conscious motivations, inhabiting both nature and culture. The subject is not only split, but is also a 'subject in process' ( *sujet en proces*); s/he is always on trial, tested in a way against his/her various contexts (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 22, 58, 233 ). Kristeva is concerned with discourses that call up a crisis in identity and for her the discourse of motherhood is such a discourse. Motherhood is also characterized by an instability as it takes place at the level of the organism, not the subject : 'It happens but I'm not there' ( 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' 237 ). The maternal body is a place of splitting; it is more of a filter than anything else – a thoroughfare where nature meets culture ( *ibid.* 238 ). Neither parturition nor the birth itself are final. They are, as it were,

beginnings of something other than themselves – the onset of maternity for the woman, the beginning of life for the child ( Robbins 138 ).

Plath's 'baby' poems are the locus where one can see Kristeva's subject-formation theory materialize. On one level, her mother-personae experience the kind of motherhood that takes place outside themselves and 'stand round blankly as walls' (CP 157). On another level, they oscillate – 'ricocheting [ sic ]' Plath would say ( NJ 59 ) – between authentication in motherhood and effacement : motherhood can provide the stable mirror where a mother's identity is reflected, 'I look in / And find no face but my own...' ( CP 205 ). Paradoxically, however, on occasions, the mother-personae cannot see their own reflection and the mirror turns into a 'clean slate with [the baby's] face on' ( CP 141 ). Then in other circumstances, like Kristevan mothers, they are located at the threshold between nature and culture, obliged to 'surrender' the child to the Symbolic order but potentially unwilling to do so ; they want their 'pink-buttocked infants [to] attend them' (CP140). Further, in some of Plath's 'baby' poems, Kristeva's subject in process, the instability is also manifested as alterity within : in gestation the mother-personae experience the indistinction between self and other, subject and object; they may be 'a big loaf with its yeasty rising' (CP 116). Motherhood is an on-going process in which the self cannot be stabilized. She can only achieve perfection, stability, immanence in death and infanticide, but even this does not hold true; it is simply 'the illusion of a Greek necessity' ( CP 272 ).



An important aspect of Kristeva's subject formation theory is the relation with the mother. As Kelly Oliver puts it, in 'Stabat Mater' Kristeva rephrases Freud's question 'What does a woman want?' to 'What does a mother want?' The answer lies in the very same essay. She wants her mother ( 66 ). The ambivalence of the subtitle of the essay : 'Mother or Primary Narcissism' becomes Plath's preoccupation, too, involving the 'lost territory' or individuation. Plath's 'baby' poems lead unmistakably to the mother : motherhood is closely linked to daughterhood. The journey back, however, to daughterhood is characterized by a duality manifested as abjection and regression.

Abjection, according to Kristeva, is the psychical function through which subjective identity is constituted and expressed mostly as the effort to extinguish any threats against our borders as subjects. This disturbance of identity stems from the initial confusion between the body of the mother and that of the child; abjection is thus bound up with the relation to the unsignifiable body of the mother from which the subject never quite manages to detach him/herself completely (*Powers of Horror* 13). In Plath's 'mother' poems the effort to get rid of the mother is pivotal : her daughter personae are engaged in a struggle to release the strict maternal hold but, on most occasions, they are entangled in the constrictive tentacles of the mother medusa.

Daughterhood is also manifested as regression. Kristeva talks about the precocious pre-symbolic organization which could be grasped by the adult as regression – jouissance or schizophrenic psychosis ( *Desire in Language* 276). The daughter

regresses in an effort to find the answer to her subjectivity riddle. This journey back is a linguistic journey in which the self is using the means of fairy tales and children's books to get back to the period 'once upon a time' only to discover that such a regressive journey does not provide the answer to the subjectivity enigma, either.

For Kristeva, the archaic dyad of mother and child, a threatening fusion, is based on the 'non-separation of subject/object, on which language has no hold' (*Powers of Horror* 58). From this point of view it can be said that the 'I' is an achievement of language and the Symbolic order, representing success in breaking with the archaic dyad. However, breaking away with the archaic mother, entering the Symbolic order and acquiring language do not finish the process. In language naming is not the ultimate goal and language is a means rather than an end, a means whereby the 'impossible' or 'unnameable' is gestured at. Everything, Kristeva says, 'points to the elusive nature of that *Thing* [ italics existing ] – necessarily lost so that this 'subject,' separated from the maternal 'object' might become a speaking being ( BS 145 ). The writer, a user of language, however, 'never stops harking back to symbolization mechanisms, within language itself, in order to find *in a process of eternal return* [my emphasis ] the hollowing out of anguish in the face of nothing' ( *Powers of Horror* 43). The Symbolic, as it seems, has only a tenuous hold on the subject whose 'I' keeps slipping out of place into different identities, a situation manifested in Plath's baby / mother poems in which the 'I' remains in limbo: in process, a stranger to herself 'endlessly rocking' out of her baby's as well as her own cradle.



Applying Kristeva's theory to Plath must be read against the background of other studies focusing on psychoanalysis and Plath. Psychoanalysis as a critical theory has been applied widely for the discussion of Plath's work. Two major movements dominate this criticism, one mostly connected with object-relations theory and the other focusing on post-structuralism. The most important representatives of the former are David Holbrook (*Sylvia Plath : Poetry and Existence* – 1976 ) and Lynda Bundtzen ( *Plath's Incarnations : Woman and the Creative Process* – 1988 ). The latter category is represented by Steven Axelrod ( *Sylvia Plath : The Wound and the Cure of Words* – 1990 ) and Jacqueline Rose (*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* – 1991).

The first psychoanalytic readings of Plath's work are launched by David Holbrook. As he puts it in his introductory chapter 'Who Is Sylvia?', his book 'attempts to use interpretations from psychoanalysis and kindred disciplines to improve our understanding of the poetry of Sylvia Plath' ( 1 ). He enters realms where poetry, philosophy and psychology merge and meet so, as he says, he 'cannot restrict himself to a mere literary analysis' ( 4 ). In his approach he reminds the reader that certain works will be seen as purely autobiographical and fictional, too ( 5 ). Finally he suggests that Sylvia Plath's 'message about schizoid experience – if one has ears to hear it – may unlock many private languages, and help schizoid individuals to find what they most desperately need – the opportunity to communicate' ( 7 ). Although



he recognizes the schizoid element in Plath's work, he asserts that neither she nor her work are considered 'sick' ( ibid. )

Prior to delving into the notion of motherhood in Plath's work, Holbrook attempts to examine the 'child' in her work which, borrowing Fairbairn's term, he calls the 'regressed libidinal ego' ( 12 ). He regards this baby as embodying the 'hungeriest part of the self' which is 'a hunger for substantiality of identity' ( ibid. ), what Kristeva will later elaborate on as the subject formation theory. What he perceived as the schizoid individual is nothing else but Kristeva's 'subject on trial.' Holbrook is insightful enough to have discovered this pattern but his effort to explicate it through the theories pertaining to the schizoid individual which led to the psychoanalyzing of Plath, the person, made his theories extremely controversial.

In the chapter 'Mother and Children,' Holbrook discusses Plath and motherhood, and analyzes specific 'baby' poems. For instance, in 'Nick and the Candlestick' he sees the mother regressing to an infant's status (another hint of Kristeva's rediscovery of the mother in childbirth, thus becoming the mother's daughter again ) and 'internaliz[ing] the father's dead penis.' Finally, this mother figure finds solace and reparation for the father's death in the 'Dasein' – 'the individual's need to assert a meaningful sense of "being there" against nothingness' ( 8 ) – of her baby's existence ( 188 ). Holbrook's approach differs from Kristeva's in the sense that the regression to daughterhood leads to the father's daughter, not the mother's.

In 'Three Women' Holbrook comments on Plath's insights into the special state of the mother but he sees these insights as disturbed by her schizoid perspectives which culminate in 'fear and hatred of female creativity' ( 200 ). Finally, he talks about the mother-infant separation as 'the schizoid detachment' ( 202 ), a situation which Kristeva will regard as the separation of the child from the mother and its subsequent entrance into the Symbolic order with the help of the Third Party, the Imaginary Father ( *Tales of Love* 41-42 ). Although Holbrook makes worthwhile and incisive comments about particular pieces, his perspective of Plath, the woman, as a case history and her poetry as 'dangerously schizoid' ( 5 ) makes many scholars dismiss his work.

Secondly, Lynda Bundtzen, who like Holbrook endorses object relations theory in her discussion of Plath's work, makes constant references to Nancy Chodorow to examine Plath's ambivalence toward her mother which she sees as an important principle in Plath's poetry ( 51 ). She relies heavily on Plath's biography to read her work, seeing it as 'more significant than literary history for understanding Plath's poetic development.' She justifies such an approach not as her attempt to psychoanalyze Plath, but as an effort to see Plath turn 'inward and backward, to the personal past and psychological development' ( 41 ). Although criticized for her biographical approach ( *Strangeways* 140-144 ), Bundtzen can be considered another precursor of Kristeva, since in her effort to discuss Plath's 'psychological development' one can see glimpses of Kristeva's theory of subject formation. Further, Plath's journey 'inward and backward, to the personal past' is but another



hint of Kristeva's recapturing of the past as 'sentient time,' 'le temps sensible' (*Proust and the Sense of Time*).

In the second category of post-structuralist psychoanalytic readings of Plath's work, Steven Gould Axelrod's *Sylvia Plath : The Wound and the Cure of Words* is, as he puts it, a 'biography of imagination' ( ix ). It is an effort to explore Plath's attempt to cure her wounds through the healing element of words and through the creation of a 'textual self' to seek satisfaction in the paternal Symbolic order. On occasions, he uses a combination of object-relations and post-structuralist psychoanalytic criticism to discuss Plath's work, as for instance in his discussion of Plath's preoccupation with orality, mouthing and eating which he further connects with her 'earliest experience of parental nurturance' ( 5 ).

Regarding Plath and motherhood, Axelrod suggests that 'Plath's poems oscillate between representing motherhood skeptically and as redemption' ( 145 ) and 'they express feelings about marriage and babies that are [ ... ] complex, mobile and charged' ( 146 ). He further connects motherhood with generativity which he sees as her effort to give birth to herself ( 171 ). Although there is a continual reference to Plath's baby poems ('By Candlelight,' 'Nick and the Candlestick,' 'You're,' 'Child') no systematic analysis is attempted.

The most important representative of psychoanalytic critics of Plath's work is Jacqueline Rose with her ground-breaking book, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. Her

analysis revolves around the notion that 'Plath is not consistent. It has been the persistent attempt to impose a consistency on her work which has been so damaging – whether as diagnosis or celebration of her work' ( 10 ). In her book she discusses the ways in which through a concept of fantasy one can look into the inner psychic processes which unsettle language, identity, and sexuality.

The two most significant aspects in Rose's work which directly apply to my own research are her insights on the biographical tendencies to view Plath's work and her exploration of Kristeva's theory of abjection in her reading of 'Poem for a Birthday.' Concerning the former, Rose is skeptical about the use of biographical data to discuss Plath. Very aptly, Al Strangeways in her book *Sylvia Plath : The Shaping of Shadows* provides incisive comments concerning Rose and the use of biographical aspects and asserts that Rose in her attempt to refute the biographical approach in the reading of Plath's work is driven to the other extreme of 'too much abstraction.' Furthermore, she states that despite her negative approach to biographical readings, Rose does resort to the journals opportunistically, for instance in her reference to Plath's journal entry in which she discusses Defoe and Osterreich (155 ).

Secondly, concerning Rose's adoption of Kristeva's theory of abjection to discuss 'Poem for a Birthday,' I find her application interesting for her insights into the subject's relation to the physical world, 'the permeability of boundaries' ( 52 ). On the other hand, I agree with Strangeways that abjection encompasses not only the



physical world but also, as Kristeva puts it in *Powers of Horror*, the maternal wish to blur the boundaries between self and child :

The abject confronts us, on the one hand, with those fragile states where man strays on the territories of animal [ .... ] The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archaeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity even before existing outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. ( 12-13 )

Strangeways suggests that Kristeva's theories be used 'in textual analysis [ ... ] to elucidate thematic and imagic complexities' especially those pertaining to 'Poem for a Birthday' rather than focus on the experiences of real mothers ( 130 ). Finally she asserts that she finds Kristeva's theory useful 'in its mirroring of Plath's often conscious conflict between "masculine" and "feminine" ideas about her work as a writer and the resulting, gendered transcendence' ( 171 ).

In my research, I attempt to show that Kristeva's theory of subject formation, encompassing aspects such as the subject on trial and abjection can be used not only to clarify textual inconsistencies in 'Poem for a Birthday,' but also to shed new light on the notion of motherhood in Plath's work. Motherhood is the very embodiment of the subject on trial as Plath's mother-personae are always in motion. They are frequently not the absolute masters of their experience, they are not authenticated by motherhood and, if they discover that motherhood indeed authenticates them in the Symbolic order, they are unwilling to release the child to enter the paternal symbolic order. Furthermore, as I will show, maternity is closely associated with daughterhood and daughterhood is manifested mostly as abjection, the struggle to liberate the self

from the maternal hold. On the other hand, Plath's personae endorse abjection as another means of subject formation and often permeate the animalistic world, thus transcending the loose boundaries of self and other ( 'Poem for a Birthday' ). At the same time, aspects such as orality and its association with language and defilement as connected with abjection constitute important aspects in my analysis. Finally, the daughter's regression, not seen as 'schizophrenic psychosis' but as another subject-formative technique, is utilized in my analysis of Plath's fairy-tale poems and her books for children.

Although post-structuralist psychoanalysis avoids any equation between life and work, with my own reference to Plath's journals, letters, and biography, I tend to regard the connection between these and her actual work as a form of intertextuality. 'Any text,' says Kristeva in 'Word, Dialogue and the Novel,' in which she discusses Bahktin's work, is 'constructed as a mosaic of quotations, any text is the absorption and transformation of another' ( *The Kristeva Reader* 280 ). Like Bahktin, Plath 'replace[d] the static hewing out of texts with a model where literary structure does not simply exist, but is generated into another structure' ( 35-36 ). Like Bahktin's, in Plath's work there is an 'intersection of textual surfaces' ( 36 ) whose origin is to be found in journals, letters, diaries and any other biographical sources. If the speaking subject is a subject in process and if the speaking subject is a text (Robbins 124 ), then the text can be said to be carrying the subject's very characteristic, that is instability, oscillation, which in Plath's oeuvre is manifested in the 'displacement' and 'condensation' of the various materials on the page.



My use of psychoanalysis does not preclude any reference to biographical material. As Marcus puts it, '[b]oth autobiography and psychoanalysis paradigmatically involve the reconstruction of a life in narrative and the shaping of events into a meaningful framework' ( 214 ). Autobiographies, at least in their modern version, tend to make childhood experiences pivotal and psychoanalysis sees childhood as formative. Plath makes frequent references to her childhood years in both poems and stories, as if she were trying to go back to 'recover' a lost selfhood. Her retroactive essay 'Ocean 1212-W' is the most significant manifestation of the above. This is a text in which the adult Plath is trying to recapture the lost time but her going back is vain : that part of her life 'sealed [ itself ] off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth' ( *Johnny Panic* 124 ).

Always according to Marcus, a second characteristic that binds autobiography and psychoanalysis is the fact that psychoanalysis is a theory of the making of an individual and autobiography the 'privileged site for representing this process' (214). Plath used her writing not only to be accepted and loved as a linguistic being – 'If you don't love me love my writing & love me for my writing' ( NJ 448 ) – but also to form a selfhood. Her work is simply the very manifestation of the process of becoming : her 'identity [ ... ] shaping, forming itself' ( NJ 327 ), and her notion of motherhood is one option of the self to solidify a 'wobbly,' a 'shimmering' subjectivity. Thirdly, an important dimension of both psychoanalysis and autobiography is the 'charge attached to image and memories which stand out against

the backdrop of the past' (ibid.). Images and memories of the past constitute Plath's focus in the *Journals* and many of these images and memories are transformed and transferred to her writing ('The Disquieting Muses,' 'Among the Bumblebees'). In her annotated copy of Margaret Mead's book *Male & Female. A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* kept at the Lilly Library in Bloomington, she underlined the following excerpt, which in a way explains the method she, herself, endorsed :

Civilization depends on such an orderly transformation of the primary experiences of childhood into the disciplined symbolism of adult life [ .... ] Those who keep an easy access to their own memories but have also talent and skill become our artists .... ( 58-59 )

Like the scientist who, according to Mead, 'renders' the veils of reinterpretation of the past experiences 'transparent' ( ibid. 60 ), Plath preserves her own veils, for to tear them would be a fatal mistake, and on occasions she sees through them to the past, transferring 'those primary experiences' ( ibid. 58 ) onto the page.

My reliance on biographical elements for my analysis does not go against or misuse Kristeva's theories, but 'endorses' Kristeva's approach. Kristeva has written three semi-autobiographical novels, *The Samurai* (1990), *The Old Man and the Wolves* (1991), *Possessions* ( 1998 ). In certain works of hers she 'recycles' her personal experiences. For instance one should consider the duality of 'Stabat Mater' manifested in the existence of the two columns – the left encompassing her own experience of her son's birth and the right the cult of the Virgin, the theoretical text – which on occasions mingle to create a unified whole. One can also notice the way in



which Kristeva makes constant references to Proust's biography and letters in her discussion of his work in her books *Proust and the Sense of Time* ( 1993 ) as well as in *Time and Sense. Proust and the Experience of Literature* ( 1996), with special emphasis on the role played by Proust's mother. Kristeva, as Anne-Marie Smith puts it, is a thinker who takes pleasure in entertaining contradictions in her work (psychoanalysis, modernism, using biographical data in her literary analyses). Specifically, in her analysis of Nerval's 'El Desdichado' ( 'The Dispossessed' ) in *Black Sun*, Kristeva relies on biography to discuss the poem and finishes her article with, as Smith says, 'an interpretation of his suicide.' She continues 'I asked her about this : Wasn't suicide outside the frame of analytic interpretation?' 'That's the wager,' 'C'est le pari,' she replied ( 68 ).

The material I have consulted for the thorough research of my main thesis, except for secondary data on Julia Kristeva, includes the most representative work on Plath starting with works published in 1973 ( e.g. Eileen Aird ) culminating in those published in 2000 with the latest works not only on Plath (*White Women Writing White* by Renee R. Curry), but also on Ted Hughes' work, especially after the publication of *Birthday Letters* (1998). Such material are *Ariel's Gift* by Erica Wagner and *The Laughter of Foxes* by Keith Sagar.

The primary material I have used comprises Plath's published and unpublished work – the latter consulted at the MRBR at Smith College and the Lilly Library at Indiana University in Bloomington. This material includes three types of works : ( a )

Plath's several drafts – mostly of the *Ariel* poems ( b ) Plath's 'recycled' material, mostly typed pages from *The Bell Jar*, on the reverse side of which she wrote particular poems and ( c ) underlined and annotated parts of books from her personal library.

Going through the several drafts, especially of the *Ariel* poems, does not only enable the interested scholar to note Plath's painstaking efforts to compose her poems but also serves as a further manifestation of a subjectivity in process. If Plath regards her writing as 'a substitute for the self' ( J 280 ) and if the subject is always a subject of language ( *Language the Unknown* 265 ), then the several drafts characterizing her poetic composition indicate that the process of writing inevitably leads to an on-going subjectivity, to a dialectical condition of the subject in language.

Furthermore, the study of Plath's recycled material, which particular critics attributed to 'sympathetic magic' ( Van Dyne 5 ), constitutes the top of the iceberg : it leads the reader through the looking glass, like Alice in Wonderland, to probe beyond the surface. At the same time, such a method constitutes another means of looking at the double – Plath's fascination. It is not just the surface the reader/scholar needs to see, it is the idol, its other side that s/he has to take into consideration as the poet is fully aware that 'duality' is the very characteristic of human nature, 'the fundamental duality of man' ('The Magic Mirror' 70).



Finally, consulting particular books from Plath's personal library is of the utmost importance, since, as *Al Strangeways* supports '... her academic and intellectual pursuits formed such a large and important part of her life that they are ultimately inseparable from her poetic activities' and they 'helped shape her poetry' ( 15 ). At the same time this approach enables the interested scholar to examine not only the depth of influence but also the 'manipulation' of the borrowed material : the 'displacement and condensation,' a method popular with Plath who supports that 'one should be able to control and manipulate [ material and experiences ] with an informed and intelligent mind' ( 'Voices and Visions' ).

For Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath's 'separate poems build up into one long poem' ( 'The Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems,' qtd in Newman 187 ). Reading Plath's 'baby,' 'mother' and fairy tale poems as well as her book for children as an organic whole enables the reader to trace a notably consistent thread which encompasses the three main characteristics of Kristeva's subject formation theory, namely the subject on trial, abjection and regression. Since the poems are perceived as an organic whole, they are not classified chronologically : conversely the 'baby' poems ( 'Unclutching the Sticky Loving Fingers of Babies' ) are studied in the middle of the dissertation as they constitute the pivot of this study. The fairy tale poems and books for children ( 'Songs of Innocence' ) are located on the left ( chronologically and spatially prior to the 'baby' poems) to indicate the regression and the 'mother' poems ( 'Mother's Clutch' ) are to be seen on the right, indicating that the only way out for the

daughter-personae is to the right, where they will be involved in the endless struggle with the mother.

## Chapter II

### Songs of Innocence

'Piper, sit thee down and write  
In a book that all may read.'  
So he vanished from my sight,  
And I plucked a hollow reed,

And I made a rural pen,  
And I stained the water clear,  
And I wrote my happy songs  
Every child may joy to hear. ( Blake, Introduction to *Songs  
of Innocence* )

### Freeing the Self

A study of Plath and motherhood can never be complete, unless one considers her books for children. Her notion of maternity is closely associated with her notion of the self as a daughter, and this is the aspect that constitutes the focus of her books for children : she is going back to a prior stage, she becomes a child again so that she can have access to a child's world, but at the same time she keeps her duality : she can not dispose of the self as an adult, and the result is books written by the adult-child meant for the adult-children.

And after all it's worth bothering to write in order to rewrite the game of life and death for children – the children we forget that we ourselves are. Some live, some die, and the child-adults tell one another artificial stories so as not to die while they're still alive. Telling stories for children shows enormous humility. ( *The Samurai* 340 )

The above comment is made by Olga, Kristeva's alter ego in her autobiographical novel *The Samurai*. Olga, in her effort to 'invent a story' so that her son Alex 'could fit present-day words' to his learning games, writes a book for children. Like Olga, Plath has a 'talent for innocent reverie to create emotion still out of those wrinkled



old signs we call words' ( *ibid.* ), and with these words, she tries to become the 'puer aeternus,' the mouth-piece to utter great truths. In her journal entry for November 1, 1959, she writes: 'My Bed Book will probably fail because of no human, or child, interest – no plot' ( 324 ). In a sense she was right : her book 'failed' as it was not a book for children. It was more the voice of the eternal child revealing truths to the other adult children.

Written in May 1959, *The Bed Book*, the very first of Plath's books for children, was meant to be a manifestation of her writing ability, perhaps a way of emulating Hughes' *Meet My Folks*, during a period of linguistic sterility; at the same time, however, it was a catalyst assisting a linguistic reaction in the alchemy of words, thus enabling her to liberate herself from aspects which have been haunting her. She writes in her journal on May 3 :

I chose ten beds out of the long list of too fancy and ingenious and abstract list of beds, and once I'd begun I was away and didn't stop till I typed out and mailed it ( 8 double-spaced pages only ! ) to the Atlantic Press. The Bed Book, by Sylvia Plath. Funny how doing it freed me. It was a bat, a bad conscience bat brooding in my head. If I didn't do it I would do nothing .... Suddenly it frees me. ( 301 )

The book in a sense released her, since it enabled her to express her anguish. In her discussion of 'Ocean 1212-W,' *Al Strangeways* sees the essay as Plath's 'defense mechanism,' a composition of a myth in order to free herself from her anxieties :

Yet the timing of its composition demonstrates that such a myth was an adult necessity. A mother herself, and a daughter who still feared her mother's

disapproval for her failed marriage, Plath knew the liabilities of her sexuality and the fragility of her identity as a poet. To counteract these anxieties, she constructs a myth of origins .... ( 87 )

In the same way, I am of the conviction that *The Bed Book* is another myth Plath constructed as an adult to reexamine a self-hood. In another Journal entry of about the same period ( 1959 ), she writes : 'I seem to want to cover everything up, like a cat its little crappings with sand' ( 302 ). Covered behind the poem, she utters what was bothering her at the time and what constitutes the focus of her writing attempts of the period just before her departure for England.

The book focuses on the speaker's efforts to locate a different kind of beds, more interesting than any other conventional bed, and

Not just a white little  
Tucked-in-tight little  
Nighty-night little  
Turn-out-the light little  
Bed –

One of the first attempts is the invention of a 'submarine' bed, 'nosing through water, / clear and green, / silver and glittery / as a sardine.' Such a bed leads the narrator into a journey to get reacquainted with the ocean, the 'central metaphor' for her childhood ( *Journals* 266 ), the sea which for Plath would be both rewarding ( she gave the jealous little girl the baboon in 'Ocean 1212-W' ) and destructive ( it destroyed Grammy's garden in 'Point Shirley' ). As Edward Butscher puts it,

Sylvia would acquire her powerful, almost obsessive love and fear of the ocean, envisioning it from a romanticized adult perch as 'a deep woman' who



spoke 'of miracles and distances,' and who could 'also kill,' as a mother, *the* [ italics existing] mother, mother of the universe that transformed the ordinary processes of existence into the stuff of myth and poetry. ( *Method and Madness* 7 )

For Plath the ocean is associated with the maternal semiotic language, since it was the 'marine' language, the language of Arnold's 'The Forsaken Mermaid' that introduced her to poetic language and made her skin get 'gooseflesh' : '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' (*Johnny Panic* 118 ).

Like Olga, in *The Samurai*, she experiences poetic language emerging from the ocean:

she remembered how as a child by the sea, her feet burned by the black sand, [and ] she used to see the gaps between the shining pebbles, vibrant spaces in which invisible words seemed to jostle one another, trying to take the place of the stones and make themselves heard. ( 197 )

Another important trait in Plath's work of the same period is her preoccupation with food, which as noted before, shows the association created in little Sylvia between feeding (milk) and language as a substitute. She is weaned from milk, but she is given the 'ticket' to the language of the paternal Symbolic order. The mouth, however, remains hungry and she still 'fill[s] it with words instead of [ her ] mother whom she miss[es]' ( *Powers of Horror* 41 ). Food images abound in *The Bed Book*, from the picture of the '[s]nack Bed' with its 'pillow of bread' and its 'head' with the 'night snacks' vending machine, to the bananas, one can pick up from the trees while



travelling in an 'Elephant Bed.' Further, the 'Bounceable Bed' can help its owner see if the 'Big Dipper's / Full of stew,' and in another instance, birds are presented as flocking to the 'Berries and cherries / And bits of bacon' of the 'Hammock Bed' owner.

Another kind of bed is the 'Spottable Bed' with 'blankets all splotches ... so nobody will notice if you spill ink.' The reference to ink is a direct allusion to writing which is, however, ineffective : just a spilling of ink, not 'the blood jet of poetry.' It is the kind of writing that 'nobody will notice,' nobody will publish : '... all my work to overcome my easy poeticism merely convinces [ my critics ] that I am rough, antipoetic, unpoetic. My God' (*Journals* 305). The blanket is a symbol for the page with its ink spots which do not constitute language on this occasion, and this kind of writing is further made 'filthy' with 'muddyish' footprints from dogs, cats, parakeets and jam spots.

For Kristeva, defilement exists on the border of identities, it is 'an element connected with the boundary' and threatens the unity of the ego epitomizing the separation from the mother, as it turns her from an object of desire to an abject object ( PH 66). The most archaic boundaries of the clean and proper self are regulated by the maternal authority ( *ibid.* 72-73 ), but in the poem, it seems that the speaker, in an attempt to do away with such a maternal authority, presents the filthy 'spottable' bed escaping from the mother's sphere as 'the trustee of [ the ] mapping of the self's clean

and proper body' ( 72 ), as filthiness is in a way overcome by the 'art' of the bed, and the maternal presence is not necessary to regulate it.

Further, the next bed is a 'Hammock Bed,' 'Between two tall trees,' where someone can sit, watch birds '[a]nd write their names / In a Naming Book.' In this case, it is as if the speaker invites the reader to become a linguistic being, between the two tall trees, the symbolic and the semiotic, and in such a position s/he will be endowed with linguistic abilities to 'name' the birds, the very same ability the child engages in, in its process of acquiring language, thus achieving signification. In her own copy of *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, specifically in 'Totem and Taboo,' Plath underlined heavily the word 'name' and further the following sentence : 'if therefore you know the name of a person or spirit you have acquired a certain power over its bearer' ( 870 ). By being endowed with the power to 'name' the birds and preserve them for posterity through writing, the bed owner acquires a linguistic power over them. The birds s/he can name include such kinds as humming birds, parrots ( 'the great macaw' ) and hoopoes. Parrots 'repeat' what others say as if by mere imitation. Hoopoes are 'upupa epos,' with 'upupa' strongly reminding of 'pupa' associated with the stage in which insects undergo transformation from the larva to the imago (*Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* 683, 1166). The densely packed image in this case is suggestive, not only of the father, with his insect jargon, the language of the paternal Symbolic order, but also the daughter ( pupa = girl ) and at the same time, the presence of the humming birds, with their language is strongly

reminiscent of the language of the semiotic with its rhythms, intonations, the language of the mother.

The birds here, however, are trying to devour the bed owner's food :

And all the birds would flock  
( If I'm not mistaken )  
To your berries and cherries

And bits of bacon.

This is the image of orality again, but orality, on this occasion, associated with devouring, with preying on others' food. It is important to note the combination of language and food : it is the hungry mouth once more displaced onto the birds. They are depriving the bed inhabitant of the food so that they can fill his/her hungry mouth with words, and very soon this inhabitant will start 'naming.' As Kristeva very aptly puts it, the hungry mouth is filled with language, and instead of the mother and milk there is language. The mother has not been lost but has been regained in signs.

We suggest that naming, always originating in a place ( the chora, space, 'topic,' subject-predicate ), is a replacement for what the speaker perceives as an archaic mother – a more or less victorious confrontation, never finished with her. ( 'Place Names' 291)

Another kind of bed, very convenient, is the pocket size bed which the potential owner can develop into a proper size through watering, but

Only how can you tell,  
O how can you tell



It won't shrink back  
To the size of a pea  
While you're asleep in it?  
Then where would you be?

A significant aspect is not the way the bed grows, but the way the self will diminish along with it if it goes back to its former size. This is the very same 'shrinking' to be seen later in Plath's 'Poem for a Birthday,' in which the self permeates the borders of the skin and becomes one with inanimate objects – 'I am a root, a stone....' ( CP 132). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther, while watching Doreen and Lenny engaged in their amorous actions, feels that she is diminishing. 'I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine-panelling. I felt like a hole in the ground' ( 17 ).

An elephant bed ( the 'ponderous' elephant in 'Metaphors' ) can give its owner accessibility even to tall banana trees, in an image in which orality is associated with the phallus, more specifically, with the phallic mother. Finally, a 'North-Pole Bed' can give the owner the chance to 'hibernate' in hard winters because '[i]t's warm as toast / [u]nder ten feet of snow.' Like the father's bees in their 'hibernaculum,' the owner can survive; however, such a case is only applicable if the hibernation is a voluntary decision, because the father's great bee book says that bees in captivity never make it ( *Bumblebees and Their Ways* 94-95 ).

These are the Beds  
For me and for you!

Special and queer  
And full of surprises —  
Beds of amazing  
Shapes and sizes.

This is the journey the poet is inviting the reader, the addressed 'you,' to join : a journey in which a number of beds in a tale can condense a life time : unconscious thoughts of the poet have now 'wormed' through the medium of the story. Well-covered aspects, like maternal and paternal influences, orality, linguistic sterility and writing constitute the core of the 'book.'

It is important to note that at the time of the book's 'production,' Plath was haunted by the suspicion that she was barren, that she could not 'produce' children. Paradoxically, she was also at the time, worried about her linguistic sterility. The 'book' gave her the chance not just to prove her writing competence but also to delve into her life, to become an adult-child, to confirm that even from this angle, under this mask, she could still discern the same issues that have been haunting her and which have been characteristics of her whole 'oeuvre.'

*The It-Doesn't-Matter Suit* is Plath's second 'book' for children, published posthumously, in 1996. In her journal entry for October 6, 1959, there is a reference to the 'book': 'Also a wordless, even formless rejection of Max Nix, which bore me. An inexcusable thing ...' ( 318 ). Like *The Bed Book*, this is not a book for children either, but has its roots in the poet's desire or 'impulses of the mind' ( Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* 346 ) to regress into childhood and tell a story from the

position of the child. It is my conviction that Plath has based her book on material she drew from Freud's 'The Embarrassment Dream of Nakedness,' as well as from Andersen's 'The Emperor's New Clothes.' My conviction goes beyond the fact that she had read the above material, as this can be inferred from her underlined copy kept at the MRBR of Smith College, but from the similarity of the subject matter, as well as from the fact that on many occasions she had used Freud as a psychoanalytic source for answers to her predicaments ( *Journals* 279 ).

*The It-Doesn't-Matter Suit*, unlike *The Bed Book*, has a plot revolving around the mysterious receipt of a 'yellow-mustard' suit by the Nix family, and the passing over of the suit to all the male members of the family until it is accepted by the youngest boy, Max. Since a suit, a garment, was going to be the focus of the plot, Plath turned to Freud, as already mentioned before, and perused whatever he had to say about the appearance of clothes in dreams.

Unlike Max, who, like an innocent child free from any inhibitions, at once 'endorsed' and put on the suit, Plath during her sojourn in New York for the *Mademoiselle* editorship, threw all her clothes off the roof of The Barbizon Hotel, in an effort to cast off, to abort, an unwanted identity. Paul Alexander quotes another guest *Mademoiselle* editor, Janet Wagner, saying :

Sylvia came in my room [ at the very end of the month ] and asked if she could have a dress to travel home in because she had thrown all hers off the roof of the hotel.... At the time I dismissed this as one of Sylvia's fictions, said to attract attention. I offered her my old green print dirndl skirt and the



white peasant blouse with the eyelet ruffles on the sleeves. (*Rough Magic* 115)

The very same scene is reproduced in *The Bell Jar*, in which Esther throws all her clothes down the roof of The Amazon Hotel :

A strapless elasticized slip which, in the course of wear, had lost its elasticity, slumped into my hand. I waved it, like a flag of truce, once, twice ... The breeze caught it and I let go [...] Piece by piece, I fed my wardrobe to the night wind, and flutteringly, like a loved one's ashes, the grey scraps were ferried off, to settle here, there, exactly where I would never know, in the dark heart of New York. ( 117)

As one may notice from other journal entries, clothes constitute a partial solution to Plath's subjectivity predicament, since by wearing them, she endorses a new identity; such a partial solution makes her spend lavishly on them, even if her funds are depleted:

Today I bought a raincoat – no, that was yesterday – yesterday I bought a raincoat with a frivolous pink lining that does good to my eyes because I have never ever had anything pink-colored, and it was much too expensive – I bought it with a month's news office pay, and soon I will not have any money to do anything more with because I am buying clothes because I love them and they are exactly right, if I pay enough. ( NJ 183 ).

In a letter to her mother, in 1962 she writes about her new clothes : 'I feel like a new woman in them' ( LH 480 ). Like Max, who, by wearing the bright mustard-yellow suit, puts on a free self uninhibited by shame, Plath wishes with different clothes to establish an identity.

Laura Marcus in *Autobiographical Discourses, Theory, Criticism and Practice* sees autobiography as 'the site upon which subjectivity will be saved' ( 183 ). Plath, in her own manipulation of autobiographical material, is seeking not only to establish a subjectivity, but to save it as well. That Plath meant *The It-Doesn't-Matter Suit* to be associated with her own experiences is obvious if one considers the choice of names for the male members of the Nix family : Paul, Emil, Otto, Walter, Hugo, Johann, Max. Most of these names are associated with male members of her own family. Otto was her father's first name, and Emil his middle. If one considers the first three names as a unity, one can see that they constitute her father's initials : P.E.O. At the same time in the story, these three elder brothers do not differ very much from each other physically, as if Plath meant them to be denoting one entity, one person. Further, Walter might be a camouflaged 'Warren,' her brother's name. Hugo might be an allusion to Victor Hugo, whose first name she has chosen for the pseudonym under which she published *The Bell Jar*, Victoria. The setting she is using is somewhere in Austria or Germany : 'Max lived with his Mama and Papa Nix and his six brothers in a little village called Winkelburg' ( 6 ). Again it is Plath's Austrian and German origins, the most remote trace of her existence that come into play in the story.

The element of orality, an important point in Plath's work with its association with motherhood, is once more a significant trait in the book: 'The mountain had three peaks, and on all three peaks, winter and summer, sat caps of snow like three big



scoops of vanilla ice-cream' ( 6 ). The orality associated with the mother manifested in the description of the three peaks covered with vanilla ice-cream, could be further associated with feces, an analogy linked with God and in extension with the father, as this can be derived from an examination of Freud's Wolf Man's case, the infantile neurosis of the boy who thought 'of the Holy Trinity whenever he saw three heaps of dung lying together in the road' ( *An Infantile Neurosis* 68 ). Freud links the boy's association to his ambivalent feelings for his father whom in this case he comes to identify with God who sacrificed His son, as if he never loved Him : 'God had treated his son harshly and cruelly, but he was no better towards men; he had sacrificed his own son and had ordered Abraham to do the same [ .... ] If he was Christ, then his father was God' (65-66 ). By debasing God, he is debasing his father, he rejects him. In Plath's story, it seems that the maternal is favored over the paternal; there is no dung on the three peaks, which the Wolf Man associated with the father, but only good vanilla ice-cream which is directly associated with the benevolent mother, who is the provider of nourishment : 'Mama Nix had just baked a batch of apricot tarts' (14 ). Her cooking ability is further linked to her 'artistic' ability, her efficiency with the needle, and her ability to take 'a tuck here and a stick there' (21,23,25,27), and be 'clever with needle and thread' ( 21 ). She is the phallic mother with her needle (her penis) and her power as the provider of nourishment for the family members, that is someone who can regulate orality, who can impose her own law onto the law of the paternal symbolic order. Since she can regulate orality she represents gratification : in other words she is the phallus ( Kristeva, *Revolution* 47 ).

The appearance of the parcel, containing the mysteriously sent suit ‘shaped like a long, flattish box [ ... ] wrapped around with heavy brown wrapping paper’ ( 14 ), is strongly reminiscent of the mysterious gift in ‘A Birthday Present’ – ‘What is this behind this veil ....’ ( CP 206 ), and the Nix family members’ curiosity as to the contents of the parcel echoes the curiosity of the owner-to-be in the poem. Moreover, the parcel itself will ‘mature’ as an image in another subsequent poem ‘The Arrival of the Bee Box,’ from the bee sequence, ‘I ordered this, this clean box’ ( CP 212 ).

When the box is opened, it reveals a

woolly  
whiskery  
brand-new  
mustard-yellow  
suit  
with three brass buttons shining like mirrors on  
the front of it, and two brass buttons at the back,  
and a brass button on each cuff. ( 18 )

This is the mirror stage which Plath introduces in the poem as another indication of her journey backwards to infancy. Kristeva states that subjectivity is operative before the mirror stage ( *Desire* 276-277), and that the mirror stage is important as it ‘breaks’ the mother-child fusion, with the child starting to differentiate its sounds from those emitted by the mother ( 195 ). It is at this point that the child realizes its separateness. Like the ocean, which, acting as a mirror, showed Plath the ‘separateness of everything’ (JP 120), the brass buttons of the suit are an indication of emerging subjectivity for Max. It is important to note that Father Nix rejects the suit on the grounds of the mirroring surface of its buttons : ‘Those brass buttons would



flash out like big coins' ( 20 ).The fact that the father does not actually need the reflecting surface of the buttons to reconfirm his identity, as well as the fact that he does not need the needle of the phallic mother for any alterations of the suit, since the suit fits him perfectly, shows that in a way he denies her very existence, as if the Symbolic he represents wishes to 'outdo' the Semiotic she stands for.

Further it is important to associate Max's story with Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Emperor's New Clothes' and Freud's analysis in his *Interpretation of Dreams* in which he sees the dream of nakedness as the basis of the tale. In the well-known story by Andersen two impostors lure the Emperor, as well as many of his subjects, into pretending that they can see the Emperor's clothes since these garments supposedly are only visible to persons of virtue and loyalty. Finally, the emperor walks out in the invisible garment, and all the spectators, intimidated by the fabric's power to act as a touchstone, pretend not to notice the Emperor's nakedness. ( 342 )

Freud saw the tale as well as the dream of nakedness in which the naked person is embarrassed whereas the spectators take no notice, as manifestations of 'forbidden wishes that have fallen victim to repression' ( 342 ). In his interpretation 'the impostor is the dream and the Emperor is the dreamer himself' ( *ibid.* ). The hidden meaning is the wish of every human being to go back to a carefree childhood, like the Edenic state where no shame was to be experienced, an idea Plath seems to be propagating in the book.



On the other hand, one is likely to see the ‘mustard-yellow suit with the three brass buttons shining like mirrors,’ from a different angle, considering the association between Logos and Language. In His parable of the Mustard Seed, Jesus preaches :

The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and planted in his field. Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches. ( Matthew 13 : 31-32 )

... the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear. ( Matthew 13 : 43 )

Max, the youngest and smallest, is the only one to have accepted the mustard yellow suit, and he will shine like the righteous because he has ears to hear and incorporate the Logos. After all, as it will be seen, he is the only one not to be embarrassed by the bright color of the suit, and it is finally proven that this causes no embarrassment whatsoever. The connection lies in the fact that there does not seem to be any embarrassment or inhibition in childhood; there is freedom and, according to Freud, this is the core of the dream of nakedness : the wish to go back to a childhood, free of any inhibitions. Plath’s Max is the free self, the ideal self that Plath might have wished to endorse, perhaps the childhood which after the death of her father ‘sealed [itself] off like a ship in a bottle – beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth’ ( JP 124 ).


‘My day is adult, but my night is a weeping child,’ states Joelle Cabarus, one of the participants in Kristeva’s autobiographical drama *The Samurai*. This is what emerges from Plath’s children’s books : the adult, active during daytime, decides to write to

free the self; but in such an effort she confronts the 'weeping child' active during nighttime. The weeping child urges her to write a book to talk about fascinating beds for happy children, or about a happy family in which the father and mother lived along with their male children, and the adult obeys, only to be led by an invisible hand to write the story, distorted in a way : it is indeed the very same family the weeping child has requested, it is the fascinating series of beds, leading to an imaginative world, but beyond this translucent material, at the bottom, it is the adult's world, the hidden iceberg.

It is the duality element once more, the mirror image of the self which in this case is manifested in the self's desire to become a child again, to relive a life and interpret it through the lens of her adult world. Here it is 'the eternal return of parent / child : Am I parent or child, cause or effect, chicken or egg?' ( Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 272). Like the child seer in 'The Emperor's New Clothes,' who realizes that the Emperor is naked and exclaims, 'But he has nothing on,' thus astounding the rest of the spectators who shout, 'He has nothing on; a child says he has nothing on!' (Andersen 220), Plath, with these two stories, encounters the very same aspects which constitute her own predicament, unsolved riddles, what 'is not yet spoken, or will always remain unsaid, unnameable within the gaps of speech' ( Kristeva, *Desire in Language* 272 ).

In contrast to Kristeva, who talks about the adult-child, the reemergence of the self in its duality, Jacqueline Rose maintains that 'the writer for children must keep his or



her narrative hands clean and stay in his or her proper place,' thus leaving the 'psychic barriers' between the adult self and the child 'undisturbed' ( *Peter Pan. The Impossibility of Children's Fiction* 70 ). The paradox in Plath's case is that she indeed goes back, becomes a child again, but keeps both aspects. In her journal entry for May 1952, reflecting upon an ideal bond between Dick Norton and herself, she talks about a 'balanced tension, adaptable to circumstances, in which there is an elasticity of pull, tension, yet unity. Two stars, polarized:  like so' ( 43 ). The two tangential circles are the very characteristic of her children's books. The two aspects ( adult-child ) coexist, a duality which Plath considers an inherent characteristic of the self. Exploring this duality in her BA thesis, she asserts that Dostoevsky implies

that recognition of our various mirror images and reconciliation with them will save us from disintegration. This reconciliation does not mean a simple or monolithic resolution of conflict, but rather a creative acknowledgement of the fundamental duality of man; it involves a constant courageous acceptance of the eternal paradoxes within the universe and within ourselves. ( 59-60 )

An important point not to be missed in Plath's children's books, especially in *The Bed Book*, is the problem of identity in language. In the book, the 'you' appears 29 times, whereas the 'I' emerges on four occasions only. It is significant to note that on the first two occasions, the 'I's' utterances are used as interpolations.

( If you see what I mean )

( If I'm not mistaken )

A North Pole Bed  
Is the best I know



These are the Beds  
For me and for you!

As mentioned before, Rose discusses the 'linguistic saving of face' in the writing for children, something which is non-existent in *Peter and Wendy* (*Peter Pan*), in which the narrator and his characters get blurred ( 72-73 ). In *The Bed Book* there is a line which separates the two, but which, paradoxically, as shown before, joins them as well. The 'I' is an authority : 'If you see what I mean.' She knows of many different kinds of beds, which knowledge, in a way, sets her apart from the 'you,' the child who seeks adventure. On the other hand, however, despite her authority, the 'I' wishes to share the pleasures these beds are likely to offer : 'these are the Beds / For me and for you!' What Rose is talking about is the 'extreme edge of subjectivity,' that is how far one can go before one's identity 'crumbles and breaks down' ( 141 ). Plath allows the self to retain its authoritative presence, but lets a part of it 'touch' the selfhood of the 'you,' and such a gesture is manifested in the sharing of the pleasures offered by the beds.

It is important to note what Aurelia Plath mentions in her introductory notes to *Letters Home* : 'I invented the bedtime stories centered upon Warren's favorite teddy bear, "The Adventures of Mixie Blackshort," which ran into nightly installments for several years' ( 19 ). In the same excerpt, she goes on to mention proudly that the children were read poems by Eugene Field, R.L. Stevenson, A.A. Milne, poems from *Sung Under the Silver Umbrella*, Dr. Seuss' stories, and Tolkien's *The Hobbit*. She adds : 'Both children made up their own rhymes and limericks,

patterned on those I read to them' ( *ibid.* ). This world of the fairy tales Plath rejects in 'The Disquieting Muses,' and writes about it in her journals :

And does not my desire to write come from a tendency toward introversion begun when I was small, brought up as I was in the fairy-tale world of Mary Poppins and Winnie the Pooh? Did not that set me apart from most of my school-mates' [ And ] the fact that I got all A's and was 'different' from the rough-and-tumble – how I am not quite sure, but 'different' as the animal with the touch of human hands about him when he returns to the herd. ( 22 )

One has the sense that Aurelia's taking up of the 'authorial' role, inventing the 'heroic bear's' stories for her children, not to guide them in the world, as Bruno Bettelheim suggests ( 39 ), but to save them from the ugliness of this world is seen critically by Plath. She sees such a gesture as destructive and attempts to rectify it with her own books for children : hers, a direct result of her regression, will not save from an ugly world, but will lead to it. Her books, as I have shown, are the mirror image of her other works, not of the rosy atmosphere of *Letters Home*, but of 'Belsen' ( *Letters Home* 473 ).

### **You Have To Have My Fairy Ears To Hear the Blue Bells Ring**

Apart from the children's books she wrote, Plath 'manipulated' well-known fairy tales. The poems in which she used fairy tales fall into two categories : poems from her juvenilia ( i.e. composed before 1956 ) and secondly four poems she wrote in 1956. Of the juvenilia fairy-tale poems only three are included in the *Collected Poems* ( 'The Princess and the Goblins,' 'Cinderella,' and 'Bluebeard' ), whereas the Indiana University Archive houses the others : 'I Found a Little Fairy,' 'I Have a



Little Fairy,' 'You Have to Have My Fairy Ears,' 'Humpty-Dumpty,' 'Silver Thread,' 'The Fairy Scarf,' 'In the Corner of My Garden' which are very early poems, mere exercises some of which date back to 1942.

'The Princess and the Goblins' focuses on the 'pragmatic' versus the creative approach to imagination as this is depicted in the different attitudes of the Princess and the miner's boy. It extends in a way Plath's predicament about the value of fairy tales, of the stories she has been brought up with. 'From fabrication springs the spiral stair / up which the wakeful princess climbs to find / the source of blanching light that conjured her' ( CP 333 ). The princess who wishes to locate the source of the dazzling light is said to be 'wakeful,' alert to the intricacies of the story; she climbs the 'spiral stair,' one emanating from fabrication, an unreal one, perhaps one likely to be found in a dream. Freud in his short paper 'The Occurrence in Dreams of Material from Fairy Tales,' discusses the dream of a young lady, 'a recollection of a fairy tale incorporated into the dream.' The plot is a version of the 'Rumpelstiltskin' story and one may note the presence of the very same staircase Plath uses in her poem : 'A little door led to the top of a steep staircase ...' ( 281 ). Freud discusses the sexual connotation of the stairs, suggesting that it was a 'representation of intercourse' (ibid.). In the poem the sexual character of the scene becomes the initiation of the princess into the world of the fairies, which might be denoting a sexual initiation too, since the staircase will lead her to the boy.



The injured hand which she seeks the 'holy blue' of the moon to heal is a characteristic borrowed from 'Snow White' and Bruno Bettelheim's interpretation is that Snow White's mother's bleeding suggests menstruation and the bleeding following the rupture of the hymen ( 202 ). It is important to note, at this stage, that the 'blood drops' Snow White's mother has seen after pricking her finger on the embroidery needle, in the poem are being attributed to the princess herself : now it is the princess who is bleeding due to the injury she suffered from the needle : 'She mounts through malice of the needle's eye.'

Wearing 'her scrupulously simple gown,' a Cinderella element, the Princess is soon to meet the 'legendary godmother,' who is to spin 'a single stubborn thread of wool' for her gown. The 'legendary godmother' is likely to stand for Kristeva's 'sublime mother,' Winnicott's 'good enough mother,' who creates the basic trust, unlike the evil stepmother who is absent in Plath's poem. Bruno Bettelheim, quoting Erikson, states that Cinderella's mother and subsequently her godmother personify the 'basic trust,' that is an attitude toward oneself and the world derived from the experience of the first year of life' ( 258 ). This basic trust in both the poem and the fairy tale is manifested in the dress the godmother has made for the princess in an effort to prepare her for the encounter with the man, the Prince in the Cinderella fairy tale and the miner's boy in the poem. In contrast to the fairy tale, in the poem it is the princess who is going to take initiative and appear more active than the male : she will liberate the miner's boy who is kept imprisoned by the goblins. At this point, it is the fairy tale of 'Hansel and Gretel' that is being used, with the female presented as stronger

than the male, who in the poem is sharing the dwarfs' profession – mining – thus presented as 'devalorised' like the midgety dwarfs.

Always according to Bettelheim in the Hansel and Gretel fairy tale 'Gretel's importance in the children's deliverance reassures that a female can be a rescuer as well as a destroyer' ( 164 ). In Plath's poem, it is the princess who sets out to liberate the boy, the godmother is benevolent, but there is a 'fiendish' goblin queen whose offense causes the imprisonment of the miner's boy. For the liberation of the boy the princess has to go 'down the darkening stair,' and like Hansel and Gretel follow the 'sheen / of thread conducting her to the worn tracks / made by miners up the mountainside.'

To alleviate her fear at the 'weird cackle from afar,' the princess clings to the 'talismanic cord' of the thread. It is likely to be the dependence on the umbilical cord the good fairy godmother has bestowed upon her. Suddenly she can hear the 'brazen' song of the 'pragmatic' boy, and she sets out to liberate him by demolishing the wall behind which he has been imprisoned. Despite her wound and the oozing blood from her feet, she does set him free and 'leads him home to be her chosen knight.' The bleeding feet is an element Plath has borrowed from 'Cinderella,' specifically the Brothers Grimm's version. The ugly stepsisters mutilate their feet so that the glass slipper can fit them : one mutilates the heel, the other the toe. Such a gesture is according to Bettelheim an indication of the 'female castration complex' (267), as well as an indication that unlike Cinderella who is a pure virgin, the stepsisters have



lost their virginity, or have started their menstrual cycles which does not make them as pure as Cinderella, who is likely to be in her pre-puberty.

In Plath's poem, the princess uses 'candid kitchens' to coax the incredulous boy 'to seek the staircase by the glare of the day.' It is again the regression to the primitive 'incorporative desires' ( 160 ) of the boy that the princess resorts to, to seduce him to the 'creaking heights of the heat,' where she hears the weaving machine of fate 'which quaintly wove the fabric of her fate / behind the zodiac on the attic door / with abracadabra from the alphabet' ( CP 335 ).

The princess' fate is inexorably bound with language, with the magic power of the word and it is suggested that she can only function as a semiotic being. It is such a quality, along with the appearance of the weaving godmother, that the 'pragmatic' boy cannot conceive, and his inability to perceive the scene causes laughter.

Laughing aloud, the dazzled boy demands  
why he should kneel before a silly scene

where pigeons promenade the gable ends  
and coo quadrilles about the blighted core  
in a batch of raveled apple rinds.

What he can only see is the scene of primitive orality in which the pigeons are engaged, the very same orality the princess used to lure him to the meeting with the fairy godmother. His laughing reaction makes the godmother indignant and she 'vanishes in a labyrinth of hay.' Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language*,



discusses Lautreamont's *Les Chants de Maldoror* seeing them as examples of the semiotic disruption of the symbolic ( 217-218 ). Further, she comments on the negative character of the laughter in Maldoror and quotes : 'But know this : poetry happens to be wherever the stupidly mocking smile of duck-faced man is not' ( 223 ). The miner's boy can only laugh at the sight because he is not a semiotic being like the princess; he lacks imagination, he is 'pragmatic' and unpoetic.

The godmother's departure signals the end of the imaginary world of the fairy tales :

O never again will the extravagant straw  
knit up a gilded fable to the child  
who weeps before the desolate tableau  
of clockwork that makes the royal blood run cold.

Plath's 'The Princess and the Goblins' bears a resemblance to Christina Rossetti's 'Goblin Market.' Evidence from the Journals shows that Plath considered Rossetti one of her 'rivals.' Her March 28, 1958 journal entry reads: '[W]ho rivals? Well, in history Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti, Amy Lowell...' (211).

At the same time, based on Aurelia Plath's information in the introductory chapter of *Letters Home*, one learns that one of the early educational tools Aurelia Plath used to initiate both Sylvia and Warren into the English language was *Sung Under the Silver Umbrella* ( 19 ).

The anthology Aurelia Plath commemorates is a 1935 edition in which Christina Rossetti plays a prominent role with 11 poems of hers anthologized. The resemblance between Plath's and Rossetti's works goes beyond the use of goblins but focuses on the use of creative imagination and the different approaches of men and women to it.

In Rossetti's poem, goblins 'seduce' Laura, Lizzie's sister, who sells her 'golden lock' to be able to taste the luscious fruit the goblins sell, which once tasted, in a way binds the goblins ( goblin-gobble ) and the eater eternally, producing a kind of intoxication, an addiction to it. Lizzie is the one who saves her sister by letting herself be 'imbued' with the juice of the fruit and finally becoming Laura's food, by offering herself to be eaten and drunk by her sister. This proves to be Laura's cure, who years later, after she has become a mother of daughters, recalls with nostalgia, '[t]hose pleasant days long gone' ( 914 ).

Gilbert and Gubar interpret the goblins as representing the 'male muse' which is a forbidden sector for women :

Rossetti's pleasure place is thus quite clearly a paradise of self-gratifying art, a paradise in which the lures of 'Goblin Market's' masculine fruit merchants are anticipated by the seductions of the male muse, and the sensual delights of the goblin fruit are embodied in an artfully arranged microcosmos of happy natural creatures.

( *The Madwoman in the Attic* 571 )

In Plath's version the roles are reversed : the goblins imprison the 'pragmatic' boy, who, unlike the Princess, is devoid of creative imagination, and it is the Princess, herself, who undertakes to liberate him, only to find herself in a boomerang-like

position : by releasing him, she is deprived of the creative power of imagination as this is embodied in the fairy tales of the godmother, who, offended by the laughing boy, is to vanish for ever.

At the outset of 'Cinderella,' a 1959 poem, it is the prince who 'leans' to the girl in 'scarlet heels,' while they are waltzing around in the 'revolving tall glass palace hall.' The male is dependent on the female, a motif already used in the fairy tale of Hansel and Gretel, in which the children's liberation is in Gretel's hands. Cinderella is wearing 'scarlet heels,' as if endowed with a certain kind of creativity. The very same motif of red shoes is used by Anne Sexton in her poem 'Red Shoes' in which the red shoes handed down from female generation to female generation denote female art, which, as Sexton says, has a 'hidden but crucial tradition of uncontrollable madness.' ( Gilbert and Gubar 56-57 ). And as it has already been shown, red is a color Plath associates with blood, menstruation and female creativity ('the blood jet is poetry' ).

Her May 5, 1958 journal entry reads :

Put on my red silk stockings with red shoes – they feel amazing, or rather the color feels amazing – almost incandescent fire silk sheathing my legs. I can't stop looking – the stocking goes almost flesh color, but gathers rose and glows at the edges of the leg as it cuts its shape on air, concentrating the crimson on the rounding-away, shifting as I shift. ( 221-222 )

Wearing the red shoes and stockings has a fire-like effect on both Plath and her Cinderella; it is as if the redness of this fire would endow her with a new power, the power of the creative imagination. The figure of Plath emerging from the quoted



journal entry bears resemblance to Karen, the heroine of H.C.Andersen's 'The Red Shoes.' Plath cannot help looking at them; Karen cannot help looking at and thinking about them, even in sacred moments, during her confirmation: 'it was just as though the shoes had obtained power over her' ( Andersen 325 ).

The very same pair of red shoes in Andersen's fairy tale, the one which has haunted Karen and led her into an endless destructive dance, in Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger's film *The Red Shoes*, which Plath saw in 1950 ( NJ 30), comes to stand for the dual role a woman has to forego and instead adopt one : the dancer has to choose between dancing or loving a man : between artistic creation and domesticity, the very same predicament which agonized Plath until the end of her life : the dilemma of her Cinderella.

In Andersen's tale, Karen, in order to get rid of the red shoes which 'clung fast to her [ ... and ] had grown fast to her feet' (326), appeals to the Executioner who, in order to save her, cuts off her feet along with the red shoes. The amputation is not violence directed against the female, but more or less female-artistic amputation in order that the girl can survive. Karen has to forego her artistic capacity, that of the dancer. In the same way, Plath's Cinderella realizes her dual capacity but she does not suffer 'dismemberment,' which in her case would entail endorsing the 'ash-girl' quality; by not going back to the stepmother's house, she is not deprived of the privileges bestowed upon her by the shoes and her dance with the Prince. She, therefore,

manages to compromise the two : she keeps the ash-girl trait in disguise and exploits the creative ability, dancing, as the power bestowed upon her by the red shoes.

Further, the prevalent motif in the poem is that of the mirror, with '[r]ose candles flicker[ing] on the lilac wall / Reflecting in a million flagons' shine.' Amid this 'liquid' atmosphere the 'gilded couples' 'glide into light like wine,' as if in a 'whirling dance' till the clock strikes twelve; Cinderella pays no attention to it ; her only reaction is to 'cling to her prince.' In the Brothers Grimm's version of Cinderella, the girl can stay as long as she can, but she chooses to go back, as according to Bruno Bettelheim, she wants to be 'chosen for the person she really is, and not for her splendid appearance' ( 263-264 ); viewed from another angle, her running away 'could be seen as her effort to protect her virginity ( 265 ).

Plath's Cinderella sticks to her disguise, and in this disguise, she has the assistance of the mirror-like atmosphere of the ball which reaffirms her borrowed identity : she can see herself as part of the 'gilded couples.' She does not go back as she does not wish to be recognized. She wishes to keep her duality. Like Plath, Cinderella is aware of the inherent duality in man, and the challenge to make creative use of it to fight disintegration ( *The Magic Mirror* 59-60 ). What Cinderella can draw out of this chosen duality is the exploitation of the power bestowed upon her by the 'scarlet shoes,' the very same 'blood jet of poetry,' the 'divine madness,' which will assist her in her effort not to collapse linguistically, as long as she can keep her duality (ash-girl, princess) in perfect harmony.



Sylvia Plath, along with other writers ( W. Thackeray, V. Nabokov, M. Lowry, A. Carter, K. Vonnegut ), was fascinated by the Bluebeard theme and used it in one of her juvenile poems. A brief, eight-lined poem, 'Bluebeard' starts with the speaker's resolution to return the key that enabled her entrance into Bluebeard's study : 'I am sending back the key / that let me into bluebeard's study;/ because he would make love to me/ I am sending back the key.'

The key word that assists in the unravelling of the linguistic knot underlying the poem is 'study.' It is not any other room, but a study, a room associated with learning, education, language. The persona's entrance into the study did not offer her the promised fate : she would not be killed like Bluebeard's wives in Brothers Grimm's tale, but she would be made love to by Bluebeard, inseminated by his semen. Such an insemination would lead to her acceptance in the Symbolic order and her conversion into a linguistic being modelled after the initiator himself. This twist of fate, however, was unwished for, so she turns the key back.

Endowed with prophetic insight, she can now see in the mirror of his eyes her 'x-rayed heart, [ her ] dissected body.' She can see her annihilation in the hands of Bluebeard after the love-making scene. It is as if the speaking persona, like Plath herself, is renouncing the paternal Symbolic order, the language of the father, her forefathers, her predecessors. If she is going to survive as a linguistic being, she will do so outside Bluebeard's study, without his 'dissective' love.



Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, in their ground-breaking book *The Wolfman's Magic Word*, discuss the way in which using the language of Wolfman's dreams as 'cryptonyms,' they interpret his predicament. In the same way, one can see the name of Bluebeard as a cryptonym denoting 'the cleft of the chin' of 'Daddy' and associate Bluebeard with the Father, not Plath's biological father, but the father of language whom she wants to do without and survive on her own linguistic 'stilts' without any outside loans emanating from the paternal Symbolic order. The speaking persona, like Plath, wishes to establish her own independent linguistic identity without any sort of insemination from any literary forefathers. Originally for Plath, it was Matthew Arnold who had initiated her into poetry and made her skin get 'gooseflesh' ( 'Ocean 1212-W' 21 ). Later she talks about the 'buried male muse' (J 222 ) in her, but talks about not 'copying' ( 199 ) her literary ancestors and feels that she needs to be original and her inability to do so makes her life shameful (203). This predicament is very aptly manifested in her 1956 short story 'The Wishing Box' in which the husband is endowed with creative imagination shown in the dreams he has, whereas the wife lacks such a 'gift.' In her effort to emulate and compete with him she kills herself so that she can have real, perennial dreams.

Further, Plath's journal entry for August 28, 1958 reads :

Dreamed last night I was beginning my novel [ ... ] to 'set' the scene : a girl's search for her dead father – for an outside authority which must be developed from the inside. ( J 257 )

It is this paternal authority, the outside authority, that she wishes to get rid of in 'Bluebeard' with the figure of Bluebeard himself becoming 'the jealous god' who would humiliate her 'degrade [[her] by [ his ] attitude' ( J 290 ).

Margaret Atwood's short story 'Bluebeard's Egg' bears some resemblance to Plath's poem. The plot of the story revolves around Sally and her husband, Ed, 'the heart man' and their conventional marriage which to the unsuspecting Sally hides no secrets. The Bluebeard story is associated with Sally's class Forms of Narrative Fiction in which the students have to listen to 'a variant of the Bluebeard motif, much earlier than Perrault's sentimental rewriting of it' ( 154 ) and then write a 'transposition' using a particular point of view ( *ibid.* ). The assignment has been bothering Sally for some time and she finally decides to base her 'transposition' on the egg's point of view. Her decision to use this particular point of view coincides with her discovery of Ed's infidelity. It is then that she is struck with the realization that 'the egg is alive, and one day it will hatch. But what will come out of it?' ( *ibid.* 164 )

Superficially one may see no similarities between the poem and the story but a closer examination reveals some close affinities. As already mentioned before, Ed is a 'heart man' who lately has acquired 'a new facility' ( 143 ), which enables him to 'see' a patient's heart :



... they could wire a patient up and bounce sound waves off the heart and pick up the echoes, and they would get a picture in the screen, an actual picture of the heart in motion. ( 144 )

In Plath's poem, Bluebeard's eyes become the mirror where the speaking persona can see her 'x-rayed heart' and it seems that both figures – Bluebeard and Ed – stand for the patriarchal figure who has authority over the female, since in both cases, they have the power to 'exhibit,' to 'expose' the woman's organs.

Secondly, it is likely that in both cases, the women will emerge victorious and they can do so through their semiotic language which can breach and threaten the paternal Symbolic order. Sally with her own 'transposition' of the story can manipulate it, thus turning it to her own advantage : she will retell the story from the egg's point of view, which she sees as alive. Originally she has thought of the egg as a sign of fertility and in this interpretation of hers it is as though she is keeping in pace with tradition which wants the woman a fertile creature who can bear children. Further she sees the egg as a virginity symbol : the blood-stained egg leads to the murder of the promiscuous brides-to-be : those who lost their virginity and bled like the egg should perish. Finally, freed from any disillusionment about Ed's faithfulness, she can use her own linguistic power to 'make' the egg alive, make it hatch : 'But what will come out of it?' Revolution, the phallic mother? The answer remains vague, but the male figure is 'devalorized,' since as Sally thinks, 'Ed is the egg. Ed egg, blank and pristine and lovely. Stupid, too' ( 157 ). She can manipulate it with her linguistic power, she can make it partake in the story the way she wishes it to do so, as if she is forcing the egg, Ed, to enter the Semiotic. With this newly discovered power, a power



that lay dormant for years and which only came to the surface after the revelation of Ed's infidelity, Sally will act like the third sister in Bluebeard's story. She will take fate in her hands and act accordingly. Her fate is indeterminate, but certainly she will not share that of the other two wives – and sisters. Sally does not even need the 'seeing-eye dog' she thought Ed needed, a personal need she originally projected on him, but she will be reborn, baptized anew in the fluid of her ink, her linguistic power. Likewise, the speaking persona in Plath's poem will defy the authoritarian linguistic insemination of Bluebeard which will only result in her 'degradation' and is now sending back the key since the door to the symbolic order will be forced open through her very own power.

All three fairy tale poems from Plath's *Juvenilia* focus on the 'manipulation' of the fairy tales of Cinderella, elements from other stories involving princesses and goblins as well as the story of the Bluebeard to stress the female creative imagination: in 'The Princess and the Goblins' the Girl faces her loss, a loss caused by the male, a similar aspect to Rossetti's case as it has already been shown; in Cinderella's case the creative imagination is inextricably bound with the red shoes which she decides to keep by not going back. Finally in 'Bluebeard' the Girl will use her semiotic linguistic power to breach the symbolic and refuses any linguistic 'insemination' from the male.

## Privileging the Maternal Semiotic

The following four poems 'The Queen's Complaint,' 'Tinker Jack and the Tidy Wives,' 'Maudlin' and 'Rhyme,' were composed during a span extending from April 18, 1956 till the Fall of the same year. The main issue they deal with is the superiority of the Semiotic ( the female, the maternal ) over the Symbolic. Such a superiority is manifested in the poetic quest which cannot reach a successful target unless it is endorsed by the semiotic.

It is not coincidental that these poems were written in 1956 when Plath met and married Ted Hughes 'after three months of seeing each other every day, doing everything from writing to reading aloud to hiking and cooking together ....' ( LH 257 ). Jacqueline Rose, discussing the excerpted *Letters Home*, mentions that it is worth noting

[in the ] censored passages of the letters the idealisations and the anxiety about Hughes, alongside Plath's insistent reassurances to her mother – Plath partly expressing, partly denying her own fear. (89)

The censored passages mentioned above in the *Letters Home* with the contrasting feelings of admiration and anxiety about Hughes are reflected in these four poems : she is taking Ted Hughes' 'tool,' fairytales – 'He tells me fairy stories, and stories of kings and green knights' (LH 244 ) – and recycling them reveals her predicament; her predicament, however, on this occasion shows that the 'valor' she so much

admired in him can be diminished if one knows or tries to project on the self that such a 'valor' will be always dependent on the semiotic, on the female.

'The Queen's Complaint,' originally titled 'Complaint of the Crazy Queen,' must have been written in April 1956 when Plath met and was infatuated with Ted Hughes. It seems that his presence had the power, the 'valor,' to dissolve her writer block since she asserts : 'I am writing poetry as I never have before' ( LH 240 ).

My voice is taking shape, coming strong. Ted says he never read poems by a woman like mine; they are strong and full and rich – not quailing and whining like Teasdale or simple lyrics like Millay [ both Teasdale and Millay used to be models for her ]; they are working, sweating, heaving poems born out of the way words should be said.... ( LH 244 )

In the same letter to her mother whom she addresses as 'Dearest most wonderful of mothers' ( 243 ), she praises Ted's creative imagination :

He tells me fairy stories, and stories of kings and green knights, and has made up a marvelous fable of his own about a little wizard named Snatchcraftington, who looks like a stalk of rhubarb. He tells me dreams, marvelous colored dreams, about certain red foxes .... ( 244 )

Finally she thus finishes the very same letter: 'Enclosed, a poem or two [ 'Firesong,' 'Strumpet Song,' and 'Complaint of the Crazy Queen' ]. I don't remember whether I sent you these' ( *ibid.* ).

In the poem, written in 'pseudo-ballad form with a regular meter' ( Hargrove 56,47 ), Plath is 'recycling' the fairy tale of 'Cinderella,' borrowing at the same time elements



from the fairy tale of 'The Brother and Sister,' using the figure of the Giant, a popular figure in fairy tales, as one of her protagonists. The prevailing element in the poem is that of 'penetration,' a characteristic attributed to the Giant who in a noisy commotion, in 'ruck and quibble of courtfolk,' 'hulkes' on the Queen's 'scene,' breaks windows and 'stalks' in 'ramp[ing]' through 'the dainty acres,' killing her favorite antelope. Her mild 'chiding' makes him empathize with her, and he provides 'solace' by undressing her only to leave her 'at cock's crowing.' This desertion makes the Queen take up a search to locate him only to realize that no man in the kingdom is up to his standard of valor and strength.

As stated above, the poem's predominant characteristic is that of penetration, perhaps Plath's sexual desire for Hughes displaced on the Queen and the Giant. Such a characteristic, however, may not only signify the sexual desire, since if one considers any linguistic terms existing in the poem, one connects the above penetration with the symbolic and the semiotic. Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* asserts that the semiotic cannot be circumscribed by the Symbolic order; it always threatens to disrupt it ( 48-49 ). In the poem, however, it is the Symbolic, the Giant, which threatens to penetrate the semiotic. The Queen is characterized as owning 'dainty acres,' and 'gentle doves,' and she is 'chiding' instead of shouting. After the Giant's departure she 'come[s] to this rare pass,' as if on the threshold between the Symbolic and the semiotic. This is what Kristeva would call the 'thetic' which operates as a break, a threshold, and which is necessary for the entrance into the Symbolic.

The thetic phase marks a threshold between two heterogeneous realms : the semiotic and the symbolic ... *Symbolic* would seem an appropriate term for the always split unification that is produced as a rupture and is impossible without it. ( *Revolution* 48-49 )

The Queen is using her own semiotic language : she 'treks in blood' and sings. Once more, it is the poetic language with its rhythms and intonations, the music ( *Desire* 157 ), the 'blood [ that ] reflects across the manuscript' ( CP 301 ). This semiotic song, however, ends up into a complaint : her utterance ' How sad, alas, it is / To see my people shrink so small, so small.' This utterance reverberates Kristeva's assertion in 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' about the devalorized man. Agreeing with Freud that a woman's desire to have a baby is 'a desire to bear a child of a father ( a child of her own father),' Kristeva proceeds to state that once this happens that is 'once the object is produced, once the fruit is detached,' the desire is 'assimilated to the baby' who then is reduced to the role of the 'devalorized' man summoned only to accomplish his function, which is to 'originate and justify reproductive desire' (238-239).

The denouement remains vague : Does the semiotic represented by the Queen require the penetration of the Symbolic represented by the Giant in order to thrive? Does this procedure constitute Plath's quest for a subjectivity, a selfhood backed up by the Symbolic and liberated from the 'Dearest most wonderful of mothers,' only to deduce that it is sad to experience the 'shrinking' of her men, who are unable to back her up in such an effort? She laments her inability to 'locate' the 'valorized' man, but



paradoxically her lament, her song constitutes the actual rupture of the symbolic :  
after all it is the semiotic which has penetrated the symbolic.

According to Nancy Hargrove, 'Tinker Jack and the Tidy Wives,' 'a ballad-like form with archaic diction' (72 ), must have been written on June 7, 1956 ( 48 ). She sees it as revolving around the thesis of 'the transience of youth and beauty' ( 45 ). Despite its thematic conventionality, however, she considers it important as 'the only 1956 poem to use a male speaker.' Further she sees in Jack's character Yeats' Jack in the 'Crazy' Jane poems ( 72 ).

Temporally, the writing of the poem 'coincides' with Plath's meeting Ted Hughes, and it is my conviction that the poem revolves not around 'youth and transience,' but around Hughes. The title could have been taken from a Mother Goose ABC nursery rhyme in which the phrase 'T was a tinker and mended a pot,' constitutes one of the alphabetical entries ( 29 ). In this case it is important to note the equation of the tinker with the letter 't' which places the Jack figure in the symbolic order as a linguistic being. In the poem Tinker can 'correct each mar,' can 'polish,' and 'shine [ ... ] bright as blood,' the latter being a phrase in which there is a covert reference to poetry : the blood jet. Further, Jack is shown as capable of making eyes 'glisten,' and most importantly of 'forg[ing] beauty from hag.' Finally one of his other capabilities is to 'repair' 'cracked hearts.' It seems that Jack is a manipulator of language, after all he *is* 'T' and through this manipulation which is nothing else but poetic language, he can work miracles.



The final stanza, however, in a way diminishes his great feats, for he is presented as dependent upon 'fair, blythe wives,' not to regain a diminishing sexuality due to senility, as Hargrove claims, but metaphorically, if he is a linguistic being, to be drawing sustenance from them; after all, the semiotic he is dependent on for his poetic language constitutes the female, the maternal.

It is well known from the published journals and letters as well as the existing poems how 'thrilling and infatuating' Plath's meeting with Hughes was. The unabridged excerpt from the journals in which she is describing the incident, reads as follows :

His poem 'I did it, I.' Such violence and I can see how women lie down for artists. The only man in the room who was as big as his poems, huge, with hulk and dynamic chunk of words; his poems are strong and blasting like a high wind in steel girders. And I screamed in myself, thinking oh, to give myself crashing, fighting, to you. (*Journals*, Smith, 19 February – 18 April 1956 )

Further in 'Pursuit' a poem she wrote about Hughes ( J.116 ), the speaking persona asserts :

There is a panther stalks me down :  
One day I'll have my death of him;

Crying : blood, let blood be spilt ....

In the Journal entries, Plath is presented as 'infatuated' with the 'colossal' poet, but at the same time she realizes that the violence in his poetry is in a way reflected in his attitude. In the excerpt from the poem, the speaking persona acknowledges the existence of violence – she is talking about a panther – and this violence she comes to associate with creativity. So it seems that in both cases the speaker acknowledges a sort of black side, a flaw in the character of the admired figure. This 'flaw' is what the final stanza of 'Tinker Jack' exploits, and converts into a kind of dependence on the merry wives. Jack is Kristeva's 'shamanic' poet, one who can 'move outside the norms' ( Ives 58 ). This omnipotent figure, however, is one who needs the maternal semiotic as this is represented by the young wives.

Kristeva in *Desire in Language* states that

the unsettled and questionable subject of poetic language ( for whom the word is never uniquely sign ) maintains itself at the cost of reactivating this repressed instinctual maternal element. ( 136 )

This is the dependence and sustenance the otherwise omnipotent Jack needs : the semiotic. The symbolic order he represents is seen as strongly dependent upon the semiotic : if he is a poet who can create beauty out of 'hag' then the semiotic is indispensable for his survival as a poetic, and not just as a linguistic being. It is not sexual rejuvenation that he can take from the merry wives but participation in the dialectic between the semiotic drive ( 'the white heat' ) and the symbolic space, without which he will never be able to function as a tinker : a forger of rhythms and words, of poetry.

According to Nancy Hargrove, 'Maudlin,' 'an early unsuccessful attempt at surrealism,' is a 1956 poem ( 96, 46 ). Plath's so far censored journal entry for Monday, May 25, 1959, reads: 'My Maudlin poem is a prophetic little piece I get the pleasure of a prayer in saying it : Gibbets with her curse the moon's man' (NJ 485).

At the same time, her journal entry for Tuesday, April 22, 1958 reflects the poem :

Yesterday was wiped out by the cramps and drug-stitched stupor of my first day of the curse, as it is so aptly called. Do animals in heat bleed, feel pain? Or is it that sedentary bluestockinged ladies have come so far from the beast-state that they must pay by hurt, as the little mermaid had to pay when she traded her fish tail for a girl's white legs? ( 218 )

The first stanza of the poem is a birth scene in which the 'sleep-talking' virgin gives birth, 'in a clench of blood' to Jack, 'faggot-bearing in his crackless egg.' The image is densely packed with elements taken from four different sources : the Bible, fairy tales, R. Graves, and J. Frazer. Jack is the virgin's curse in the same way God cursed Eve after the Original Sin : 'I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children' ( Genesis 3:16 ). Secondly, Jack is 'faggot-bearing' in the same way Jack was offered a wondrous stick to swap the cow in 'Jack and His Bargains.' All the owner has to say is 'up stick and at it,' and the stick will beat all enemies senseless ( qtd in Bettelheim 184 ). Finally Jack is said to be the 'moon's man,' and the moon is associated with menstruation. In R. Graves' book, *The White Goddess* which was avidly perused by Plath ( NJ 289, 377 ), the author states that 'the moon, being a woman, has a woman's menstrual period ( menstruation is connected with the word 'moon' ) of twenty-eight days' ( 161 ).



Further in the poem, the curse attributed to the 'sleep-walking' virgin may be also associated with the curse of menstruation. In another favorite book of Plath's, *The Golden Bough* by Frazer, the author elaborates upon the belief among primitives that 'the things touched by a menstruous woman kill' ( 175 ), and that during menstruation a woman is in a way cursed.

Helene Deutsch, discussing PMS, a syndrome she calls 'menstrual depressions before the menstrual period [ or ] during it,' talks about psychologists' inability to trace the exact causes of this syndrome, but she connects them to women's 'prepuberty' expectations that something terrible was going to happen to them with the arrival of their first period ( 174 ). At the same time, on other occasions, girls associate menstruation with their mothers' menses and feelings of cruelty, disgust, uncleanliness as well as the female castration complex emerge. Thus, the girls are unwilling to discuss the matter with their mothers and in certain cases, they may even 'hide' it from them ( 157 ).

In specific poems, Plath associates the moon with the mother and to an extent with menstruation ( moon-menses-month ). Whenever infertility is involved, she stresses the vain 'visits' of the moon which lead to no conception, since the monthly blood is wasted : Says the Secretary in 'Three Women' : 'It is she that drags the blood-black sea around / Month after month, with its voices of failure' ( CP 182 ). For the Wife the presence of the moon (menses) is benevolent since it led to her fertility and the

persona seems to have rediscovered the mother in childbirth : ‘The moon’s concern is more personal : / She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse’ ( CP 176 ). In ‘Childless Woman’ the ‘moon discharges itself from the tree with nowhere to go’ (CP 259), and in ‘Munich Mannequins’ the dummies ‘unloose their moons, month after month to no purpose’ ( CP 263 ). In ‘Barren Woman’ the ‘moon lays a hand on [the persona’s] forehead,’ but instead of being benevolent and fruitful it is ‘[b]lank-faced and mum,’ (CP 157 ) silent, unproductive. Finally in ‘Letter in November,’ the persona, deprived of any male presence – lover or husband – is left on her own with the ‘irreplaceable / [g]olds [that ] bleed and deepen, the mouths of Thermopylae’ (CP 254), a purely sexually connoted image with the menstrual blood clotting, deepening thus rendering the mouths of Thermopylae, the vagina opening, impenetrable and therefore intact.

The *Journals* abound in references to Plath’s menstruation and the careful scholar can detect a pattern which chronologically fits specific temporal intervals. Starting from the journal entry for 25 February 1956, one can notice the reference to Plath’s menstruation as ‘the macabre cramps of my period ( curse, yes ) and the wet messy spurt of blood’ ( NJ 206 ). On August 9, 1957, Plath expresses her fear at being pregnant, a fact which would ‘block’ her career and convert her into an unloving mother, ‘hating the intruder’ ( 294 ), but then came ‘the red stain dreamed for and longed for during the white sterile ominous minutes of the six weeks’ ( *ibid.* ). On Thursday, February 20, 1958, she experiences ‘the pain of the blood-spirt, the aching ague of a tired body, & the aesthetic & and moral pain of a badly botched unprepared



tragedy beginning' ( NJ 333 ). From then on, references to her menstruation come in regular intervals : March 28: 'stitched in the worst cramps and faintness for months' ( NJ 356 ); April 22 : 'Yesterday was wiped out by the cramps of drug-stitched stupor of my first day of the curse, as it is so aptly called' ( NJ 371 ). Then there are no menstrual references till July 13 : 'The sticky weather, sulphurous, sultry, has begun with a flow of blood : began yesterday' ( NJ 398 ). The next reference is dated September 11 : 'Yesterday was lost in a fog of pain, cramps, curses, a dopey-sickness from too much useless bufferin' (NJ 419). A pause of approximately three months (no journals are available for the period between October 14 and December 12 1958) and then the subsequent journal entry for January 8 reads : ' Very bad dreams lately. One just after my period last week ....' (NJ 458). Then the following 40-day delay, which is mistaken for pregnancy ( a situation Plath now longs for ) : 'Cramps. Pregnant I thought. Not such luck. After a long 40 day period of hope, the old blood cramps and spilt fertility ' ( NJ 474 ). The last reference is to be found in the entry for March 25 : 'Again, again, the grumpy fruitless cramps. The two or three odd days of hope blasted and all to begin again' ( NJ 485 ).

It is important to note that whereas in the poems menstruation is directly associated with infertility, in the journal entries it is only on the final two occasions that she makes such an analogy and this coincides with her desire to become pregnant. All previous journal entries associate menstruation with pain and wounds, which Plath seems unable to tolerate. Writes Helene Deutsch : 'Throughout their lives individuals of both sexes react to wounds on their own bodies in a manner that betrays the influence of the infantile castration complex' ( 164 ). Furthermore, for Kristeva



menstrual blood is abject as it reminds of the corporeal link to the mother (PH 71). Plath's reaction against menstruation can be regarded as an instance of an infantile castration complex as well as resulting from her ambivalent relation to her mother, a relation which, always according to Deutsch, may be connected to the mother's menses.

In 1990 there was an effort by the scholar Catherine Thompson to associate Plath's case with the PMS. Relying on Plath's diaries kept at the Lilly Library, and going through the unabridged journals, she 'theorized that Plath's mood, volatility, depression, many chronic ailments and ultimately her suicide were traceable to the poet's menstrual cycles and the hormonal disruptions caused by PMS' (Moses 3). It is not my purpose to discuss the matter from a physiological point of view but to consider the way Plath 'manipulates' menstruation in her work, and the constant references to it in her journals which encompass all aspects pertaining to motherhood, that is fertility, creativity and most importantly, the maternal influence.

In the poem, the 'crackless egg' Jack was housed in, is hatched with the help of a cask full of claret 'to swig,' but Jack, like another Humpty-Dumpty figure, prizes the egg 'navel-knit' while he sells his white legs to mermaids 'at the price of a pin-stitched skin.' The predominant aspect of the poem is a juxtaposition of female and male elements : blood, moon, navel, egg on the one hand, and faggot, pin, leg, on the other. Jack seems to be willing to part with any phallic elements i.e. the legs, but sticks to the female, the maternal ones. When Plath said that the poem was prophetic, she was in a sense right for the poem sets the tone for a number of subsequent poems,

in which the maternal, the semiotic, the call of the mother is there and cannot be eradicated. It is as though Jack, the faggot-bearing man prophetically says to the semiotic maternal presence : 'There's nothing between us.'

Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* talks about the mother split in two : the abject and the sublime; if the child ( and she is referring to the male child ) makes the mother abject, then it is easier to separate from her and become autonomous. If, on the other hand, the image pertaining to the mother is that of sublimity, then the child will never be able to separate from her ( 45, 157 ); he will be 'navel-knit.' Kristeva in *Desire in Language* further talks about the function of the paternal agency which will compromise the two ('Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' 263). In the poem the separation is never to materialize because, although the mother figure is somehow abject ( 'hag,' 'blood,' curse ), there is no paternal agency to facilitate the separation. The paternal agency is beaten by the budding sexuality of the son. In the fairy tale of 'Jack and His Bargains' the faggot will beat the father (Bettelheim 184). Also in another version of the tale, 'Jack and the Beanstalk,' ' the mother, on seeing the giant's huge legs coming down the beanstalk, freezes into immobility; she is unable to deal with phallic symbols' ( ibid. 192 ).

Bettelheim looks into the incident of the 'freezing' of the mother at the sight of the Giant's legs, which, according to him, might be taken for the phallus and which proves the mother unable to cope with it. It is not, however, a matter of her inability to cope with phallic symbols as Bettelheim posits it, but more her fear at an imminent



invasion of the Giant ( the Father ) which predetermines her separation from the son. In 'Maudlin,' however, Jack sells the legs and any phallic symbol is uprooted.

The title of the poem in its ambiguity leads the reader to the origin of the term : the word has been coined from 'Mary Magdalene portrayed in art as a weeping penitent' ( *Random House Unabridged Encyclopedic Dictionary* 885 ). What is the target of this lament? Based on what has been mentioned above, this cry may be the crying of the maternal semiotic, the call of the mother who Jack does not want to separate from.

The inspiration for 'Rhyme' is to be found in the fairy tale of the hen that laid the golden eggs. In the poem the speaking persona complains about her 'goose' whose 'gut' although 'honeycombed with golden eggs' refuses to lay any. With the metaphor of the hen, Plath conveys the creative imagination, which refuses to 'lay' any material. It is well-grounded, mostly based on information from the Journals that Plath, on many occasions, equates the poetic process with birth (33, 58, 65). In the poem, the goose's 'gut' is 'honeycombed' with eggs but she does not bring them out. In the same way, the speaking persona's creative imagination is 'honeycombed,' imbued in the language of the symbolic paternal order, but she cannot use this means for creative production.

Like a witch, a 'taloned hag,' the goose walks proudly in the barnyard, thriving on fine food, while its owner lives on 'grits.' Kelly Ives sees in Kristeva's discussion of



the orphic poets – poets such as Artaud, Mallarme, Joyce, Rimbaud, Rilke – her fascination with the witch, the ‘shaman.’ She writes :

The idea of the ‘Orphic poet’ is essentially shamanic : for beyond the ancient, mythic figure of Orpheus is the figure of the archaic shaman, who is the witch doctor, [ ... ], who travels into the Underworld and manages to return. ( 58 )

Further, Ives interprets Kristeva’s assertion ‘when we move outside the norms,’ as a reference to ‘the shamanic journey of the outsider or bacchanale or witch’ ( ibid. 58 ).

Indeed Ives concludes that ultimately it will be the poets who will help

to show us where the norms are, where the borders are between sanity and madness, fantasy and reality, inner and outer, representation and identity, stability and instability. ( ibid. )

Plath, in her choice of ‘hags’ as a vehicle for the goose, conveys the very same aspect, the creative imagination. The golden eggs the goose hides will be the tool that will lead the speaking persona to the ‘shamanic journey,’ to the semiotic which, after all, will ‘rupture’ the symbolic. In the poem, the speaking persona despite the pleas of the goose decides to kill her, to get the eggs on her own, only to discover ‘ruby dregs.’

The speaker’s predicament is manifested in the whole procedure : she knows she is endowed with creative imagination, but stubbornly, like the goose, she cannot produce, so she is looking for ‘artificial’ ways to get hold of the eggs, to bring the outcome of creative imagination on the blank page. She kills the goose to make blood

run ( 'the blood jet' of poetry ) but it is only 'ruby dregs' that she can see. The meaning here is two-fold : it could be the sediments which could be used creatively and productively or dregs as the least valuable part which constitutes the utter disappointment of the persona : although she is well versed in the language of the paternal symbolic order, such a quality is latent and will not assist her creative imagination to produce 'rhyme' ( hence the title of the poem ) to use the language of the semiotic to enter the symbolic through her poetic creation. The goose is 'stubborn.' It 'struts,' perhaps boasting of what it possesses, 'like those taloned hags / [w]ho ogle men.' The parapraxis in the word 'ogle,' is clear : it could have been 'ogre,' a term the Plath associated with the father and in extension with the mother as the following Journal entry for Friday, December 12, 1958 reveals :

I hate her hate her hate her ... I hate her because he [ Otto Plath ] wasn't loved by her. He was an *ogre* [ my emphasis ]. But I miss him. ( 'Notes on Interviews with RB' 431 )

The goose that can lay the golden eggs but refuses to lay any is the creative imagination as displaced on the self, the self who is not enabled by a benevolent mother figure to enter the Symbolic, to break the Symbolic through her poetic creation. It once again leads to Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' and Plath's realizations about the existence of her writing block, which she sees as caused by the mother. She does not write because she does not want her mother to appropriate her labor ( J. 280 ).



The poem is characteristic of Plath's experimentation with stanzaic form and meter.

As Nancy Hargrove observes, she

splits the final six-line stanza into four lines and two lines, thus setting off the latter for greater shock value. And she experiments with an elaborate syllabic pattern of 8-7-4-8-8-4 in the first two stanzas and 8-8-4-7-7-4 in the last. ( 98 ).

Plath's efforts to experiment with and utilize rhythms and forms is a further manifestation of her wish to preserve the maternal semiotic in the paternal symbolic with its heavy reliance on strict forms, 'linguistic rules of grammar, syntax and propriety in vocabulary' ( Robbins 128 ).

Kristeva in *New Maladies of the Soul*, a book in which she discusses some of her case histories as a practising psychoanalyst, presents little Paul, the 'inexpressible' child, who is unable to use the symbolic, and analyzes the problem he faces with enunciation. She locates his problem as one emanating from his 'inhibition that hampers his access to discourse, as if language scared him.' Her effort focuses on reconstructing the psychological preconditions that keep him back in the imaginary, while he has 'burie[d] himself in a crypt of unexpressed affect.' The imaginary, according to Kristeva, is a kaleidoscope of ego images that build the foundations for the subject of enunciation and problems do arise from the child's inability to make 'rich and extensive use of [ it ]' ( 103 ). So she suggests going back to the imaginary, assisting the child to use it extensively, because the imaginary is the threshold to the symbolic. If the child can use his imaginary properly then any barrier to the symbolic will be removed. One method that facilitated the access to the full development of the child's imaginary is songs, but most importantly fairy tales. Characteristically, she



mentions Paul's confusion of the personal pronouns 'I,' 'you,' and how the story of Pinocchio, specifically the scene in which Pinocchio saves the father Gepetto from the jaws of the whale, helps Paul to identify (previously the 'you' was the inefficient bad child ) with the 'you' the father ( the good 'you' ) with the sentence : '*I am coming Dad, wait for me, don't be afraid, I am here for you.*'

Kristeva suggests that the 'time of the imaginary is not that of speech' but of 'mythos,' a 'time in which a conflict is formed and a solution is revealed, a solution that consists of a path that the subject of speech can follow,' ( 110 ), in other words a fairy tale, a story. She asserts that the fairy tale enables access to the imaginary and 'stumbling around it again will enable us to knock down the logical dead-end that block[s] the child's growth' ( 111 ).

Proceeding with Paul's case, she mentions the way in which his inability to perceive time correctly is remedied with the help of the fairy tale of 'Sleeping Beauty.' Specifically, Paul in his identification with the Sleeping Beauty is simultaneously able to experience the temporal shifts she has passed through : her childhood ( past ), sleep ( zero time ), which he equates with his current life which he sees as a form of 'stagnation,' due to the cropping difficulties he faces; finally her 'revival' foreshadows his own symbolic revival as he is 'freed from the threat of separation and reassured that his future would be a reunion, a rebirth' ( 112). As Kristeva states: '... fairy tales that spoke of metamorphoses, were able to integrate the function of temporal shifts into Paul's discourse' ( 111 ).

In a 1950 journal entry, Plath questions the value of fairy tales and expresses her doubts as to their facilitating role in preparing the child to enter the adult world. She writes :

After being conditioned as a child to the lovely never- never land of magic, of fairy queens and virginal maidens, of little princes and their rose bushes, of poignant bears and Eyore-ish donkeys, of life personalized, as the pagans loved it, of the magic wand, and the faultless illustrations- the beautiful dark-haired child ( who was you ) winging through the midnight sky on a star-path in her mother's box of reels [ this is the same old story of the fort-da game and the lurking maternal figure giving and taking ], of Griselda in her feather-cloak [ ... ]. All this was my life when I was young. To go from this to the world of 'grown-up' reality [ ... ] why the hell are we conditioned into the smooth strawberry-and-cream Mother-Goose-world, Alice-in-the-Wonderland fable, only to be broken on the wheel as we grow older and become aware of ourselves as individuals with a dull responsibility in life? (NJ 35 )

Because she sees their inadequacy, Plath uses the fairy tales she had been exposed to in a new way : to access her imaginary, in a way to be enabled to use language, to enter the symbolic as a new subject of enunciation : a speaking subject who will be able, like Paul, to tell who the 'I' is. By reentering the imaginary as an adult, through the medium of the fairy tales and the books for children, she tries once more to acquire a fixed subjectivity. The regressive journey paradoxically leads the self to her limbo status : endlessly rocking out of her cradle, oscillating between the symbolic and the semiotic, between linguistic sterility and creative imagination . It is as though the female subjectivity she acquires in her regressive journey 'would seem to provide a specific measure that essentially retains repetition and eternity from among the multiple modalities of time' ( *The Kristeva Reader* 91 ).



## Chapter III

### Unclutching the Sticky Loving Fingers of Babies

'I will write until I begin to speak my deep self, and then have children and speak even deeper' ( *Journals* 166 )

'To purge myself of sour milk, urinous nappies, bits of lint and the loving sloveliness of motherhood' ( *Journals* 632 )

'The mirror floats us at one candle power.  
We smile and stare.  
That's you. That's me' ( 'By Candlelight' – draft )

As already mentioned, for Kristeva motherhood is the very embodiment of subjectivity in process : a mother is never the absolute master of the whole experience as motherhood takes place at the level of the organism, not the subject : 'It happens, but I'm not there,' 'I cannot realize it, but it goes on' ( *Desire in Language* 237 ). The maternal body is the 'place of a splitting, a thoroughfare, a threshold where "nature" confronts "culture"' ( 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' 238 ). It is a process which cannot be divided into subject and object : it is 'an identity that splits, turns in on itself and changes without becoming other' ( *The Kristeva Reader* 297 ).

Plath's poems dealing with the notion of motherhood fall into two categories : those focusing on or addressed to her own children and those in which she makes references to babies or children in general. The latter constitute a group of 22 poems



out of a number of 233 poems written from 1956 till 1963, according to *The Collected Poems*, and it is important to note that most of these poems were written after 1958, when motherhood became one of her preoccupations. The actual motherhood experience is revealed in the latter category which is my main focus. Experienced motherhood in these poems embodies the very notion of subjectivity on trial; the mother personae are vainly engaged in an effort to reach the end of their 'narcissistic shimmering' and establish an autonomy of the subject ( BS 257 ) via the maternity route. This route, however, is not smooth, and there can be noticed an oscillation between the attainment of this goal and the failure to do so. On occasions, the personae even consider relinquishing their maternal role as it does not authenticate them. Experience in motherhood shows that 'subject identity can never be a pure immanence' ( qtd in Fletcher 168 ); it is rather a ricocheting between authentication and non-authentication, another form of the 'fort da' game with the mother-figures this time substituting the reel for the baby, throwing it away and then recapturing it, not simply to control its absence and presence through language but to use it as an authentication means.

In my analysis the poems are not grouped chronologically; on the contrary, perceived as an organic whole, a process, they are rearranged thematically to denote this process, to show the fluidity of the experience.

## Letting the Doll Grip Go

As Julia Kristeva says in *Powers of Horror* a mother finds it extremely difficult to let her child enter the Symbolic order and she is unwilling to do so as her child is her only means of authentication in the patriarchal Symbolic order ( 13 ). The mother personae, however, in 'The Manor Garden' ( 1959), 'You're' ( 1960 ), 'Parliament Hill Fields' ( 1961 ) and 'By Candlelight' ( 1962 ) are releasing the child, thus enabling its entrance into the Symbolic order. Such a gesture emanates not from their wish to be the 'good enough mothers' whose desire for the third party ( the Imaginary Father'—Freud's 'father of our individual pre-history' ) facilitates the separation, but because they see this release as inevitable.

'The Manor Garden,' according to Plath's journals, must have been written in Yaddo late October or early November 1959. Her journal entry for November 4 reveals :

Miraculously I wrote seven poems in my POEM FOR A BIRTHDAY sequence, and the two little ones before it, 'The Manor Garden' and 'The Colossus,' I find colorful and amusing. ( NJ 523 )

The poem is in fact the very first poem she wrote about her actual pregnancy, and although superficially it does center upon this, it encapsulates other aspects such as destiny and heredity. It is written at a time when Plath is worried about her creativity, her pregnancy, and still puzzled about her relationship with her mother as well as the 'ego ideal' she has attributed to Ted Hughes. She feels she cannot get rid of 'Johnny Panic' and that writing is her health.

Dream, shards of which remain : my father come to life again. My mother having a little son : my confusion : this son of mine is a twin to her son. The uncle of an age with his nephew. My brother of an age with my child. Oh, the tangles of that old bed. ( 322-323 )

I am desperate when I am verbally repressed. Must lure myself into ways and ways of loquacity. Must WORK the stuff. ( NJ 510 )

Feel oddly barren. My sickness is when words draw in their horns and the physical world refuses to be ordered, recreated, arranged and selected. I am a victim of it then, not a master. ( 319 )

While these thoughts and dreams occupy her mind, she wishes to preserve the separateness she seems to have discovered at a very young age, when she felt ‘the wall of [ her ] skin’ ( JP 120 ). This time, however, it is from the husband that she feels she must detach herself :

Ted’s dreams about killing animals : bears, donkeys, kittens. Me or the baby. (324 )

Dangerous to be so close to Ted day in day out. I have no life separate from his, am likely to become a mere accessory. ( 326 )

At the onset of the poem, an image of sterility is juxtaposed with the actual gestation of the speaker, with the growing of the body. ‘The fountains are dry and the roses over.’ It is Autumn, and the image connotes a sort of linguistic sterility : there is no liquid, no sap, no blood jet, so there are no roses, no generativity. But still ‘[t]he pears fatten like little buddhas.’ The addressed ‘you,’ the embryo, is developing, going through the several stages, acquiring ‘[h]ead, toe and finger.’ This is the actual



formation of the baby, as Kristeva puts it in 'Stabat Mater' : 'inordinately swollen atoms of a bond, a vision, a shiver, a yet formless unnameable embryo' (234).

The 'fish' and the 'pig' are associations Plath uses extensively when she refers to the physical formation of children, or even poems which she identifies with children which after all are creation, 'production' ( 'Metaphors,' 'Stillborn' ). For Freud the fish, along with cats and mice is used in dreams, as it is also used 'in mythology and folklore' to connote the genitals ( *The Interpretation of Dreams* 474 ). Plath must have perused the book, as can be deduced from her heavily underlined parts of the text from her personal library held at the Mortimer Rare Book Room of Smith College. The reference to the sexuality or the gender of the embryo suggests the legacy the child brings with it, a legacy which will greatly influence its whole life. Somehow, the speaking persona realizes that biology determines everything, as if she agrees with the Freudian concept of 'anatomy is destiny.'

Physically perfect, with 'history nourishing the broken body parts,' the embryo will enter a world where it will be given 'the crowns of acanthus.' It will be the child-god, the 'baby in the barn,' ( 'Nick and the Candlestick' ), but at the same time it will inherit a personal history : 'white heather,' uniqueness, the ability to live individually like Millicent in 'Initiation' ( *Johnny Panic* 144-145 ). It will also inherit a 'bee's wing,' the grandfather's legacy, '[t]he two suicides,' the grandfather's and the mother's, and 'the family wolves,' 'all the dead dears,' the family members of 'Family Reunion,' 'Cousin Jane, [ the ] spinster with / the faded eyes, Uncle Paul

with the rough as splintered wood ... baritone,' the nephew with the 'fretful whine,' who may threaten to incorporate the child. In the meantime, the embryo passes '[h]ours of blankness,' in the womb, but the life cycle is going on and 'hard stars / [a]lready yellow the heavens.' Destiny and design govern the universe and as in Frost's 'Design' the 'spider on its own spring / [c]rosses the lake,' thus proving the inevitability of everything : 'Boarded the train there's no getting off' ('Metaphors').

The small birds 'converge' to offer their gifts 'to a difficult birthing.' The image is strongly reminiscent of the Nativity scene, but instead of the three wise men, it is the birds that lay their gifts to the baby-to-be-born. Like the Holy Star, they 'converge,' and they seem to be combining both roles : those of the wise men and the star : what they give the child, however, will be their song to facilitate a 'difficult' birth, difficult not only because it suggests the entrance to the Symbolic of the father, but an entrance which presupposes the maternal separation. That the 'song' of the birds will facilitate the transition is crucial. Along with the mother's semiotic song, 'the rhythms, the intonation,' it will constitute a legacy that the mother will bestow upon the child, and she will be the figure who will facilitate the separation, though the process is difficult and painful for her. The poem is characterized by omission of syllabics and rhyme. Its short, choppy sentences, sometimes non-sentences – 'Incense of death,' 'Hours of blackness' – reverberate mourning bells thus echoing the persona's feelings at the approaching separation.



'You're,' written during her first pregnancy, would be very aptly considered a companion to 'Metaphors.' In 'Metaphors' the speaking persona is seeking to establish her own identity through a series of metaphors, whereas 'You're' expresses the speaking persona's ambivalence as to what her unborn child constitutes for her, relying heavily on similes.

Writing and children are subjects which seem to preoccupy Plath in the decade of 1950-1960. She longs to have children, as she believes that they will make her 'speak deeper' ( *Journals* 166 ), since they will authenticate her and establish her bond with the Symbolic order; on the other hand, however, she does wish for : 'Books & Babies & Beef Stews' ( 153 ) but '[o]nly I've got to write' (152). She talks about having children as a 'production' ( *Letters Home* 409 ), and in a way admits of her own 'feminine masochism' ( *Tales of Love* 246), when she confides to her journal :

I have even longed for that most fearsome first woman's ordeal : having a baby – to elude my demanding demons and have a constant excuse for lack of production in writing. I must first conquer my writing and experience, and then will deserve to conquer childbirth. ( 240 )

As Kristeva puts it in *Tales of Love*,

What is loving, for a woman, the same thing as writing. Laugh. Impossible Flash on the unnameable, weavings of abstractions to be torn. Let a body venture at last out of its shelter, take a chance with meaning under a veil of words. WORD FLESH. From one to the other, eternally, broken up visions, metaphors of the invisible. ('Stabat Mater' 235 )

It is the semiotic body of the mother which seeks a way to be established in writing, by transferring its rhythms, intonations, and colors into the Symbolic order.



Feeling that her writing is her life, 'the blood jet is poetry,' and knowing that life is sustained through offspring, Plath infers that the two are equated and she endeavors in all her life to balance them. During her early years, if one considers her journals carefully, one will notice a preoccupation with writing ( producing ) which she sometimes associates with sex ( 14, 16, 37, 122-123 ). After her marriage, however, the sexual bed is replaced by the birth bed, and writing and children constitute her life. If one fails, the other cannot survive on its own; if 'asymbolia' conquers motherhood, the being will collapse.

'You're' lacks a regular rhythmical pattern but depends mostly on well chosen marine similes ( 'gilled like fish,' ' like a sprat' ). Such a choice to compare the embryo to images taken from the sea / ocean and its creatures is not coincidental; it could be an effort of the speaking persona, like Plath, to relive her past, to go back to her childhood spent by the sea since 'the ocean is a metaphor for [ her ] own childhood' ( *Journals* 222 ), the sea 'open and hopeful' ( JP 35 ), will enable her to 'find [ herself ] and be sure of [ her ] identity' ( *ibid.*290), which process will enable her to delve into the core of motherhood.

At the onset of the poem, the embryo, whom the speaking persona sees as an infant, is 'clownlike, happiest on [ her ] hands, / [f]eet to the stars.' Kristeva asserts that before becoming a speaking subject, that is before mastering speech, the infant expels sounds in order to release tension and such a sound is laughter, which is the result of

space, and a remnant of 'its intrauterine' experience. Initially, the laughter has no object, but later the appearance of the mother's face becomes the target of this laughter, and this constitutes, according to Kristeva, the first sublimation ( *Desire in Language* 280-282 ). In 'You're,' however, it seems that the face of the mother is nowhere to be seen; even at the end when the mirror image is presented in a form of a 'clean slate,' the only reflection is the baby's face : '[a] clean slate with your own face on.' The 'clownlike' image is further succeeded by a series of tropes as said above, mostly similes. In line five, the embryo is said to be '[w]rapped up in [herself] like a spool,' an image which excludes the mother figure, as if there is no symbiosis whatsoever, despite the fact that the baby is still in its mother's womb and there is a physical dependence on her. A similar point is made by Kristeva in 'Stabat Mater' in which the mother witnesses the fusion of cells, but she is just a 'framework' ( 243, 255-256 ).

Further, the embryo is likened to a 'mute turnip,' a simile which 'deviates' in a way from the marine similes used throughout the poem, but which, nevertheless, borrows one of their traits : muteness. The baby is not a speaking subject yet, since she has not entered the Symbolic order. This 'mute turnip' will cover the nine month period and be finally delivered on April 1, which is indeed a kind of foreshadowing envisioned by Plath, which in the poem is coupled by the reference to Australia '[f]arther off than Australia,' a country where Frieda is to spend a considerable part of her life, years later, and where she will finish her poetic collection *Wooroloo* ( 1998 ).



The embryo is '[v]ague as fog,' unformed, still in process, a 'traveled prawn,' both tropes denoting the conception procedure. Most of the vehicles to which the Baby (tenor) is likened are positive (with the exception of 'moon-skulled' ) and one can sense a happy note emanating from the internal rhyme 'snug as a bud,' – not 'bug' – and '[l]ike a sprat in a pickle jug.' Despite these, however, there is a sense of anxiety caused not by the absence of love for the unborn child, but from a sense of the unknown, from the mother's effort to exclude herself from the scene, and rationalize the existence of the embryo.

The exclusion of the mother is converted into successful mourning, introjection in 'Parliament Hill Fields,' a process achieved gradually under the catalytic influence of the landscape. Written on February 6, 1961, five days after her miscarriage (*Letters Home* 408), the poem is addressed to her unborn child, a lament. I tend to consider the poem important for its emphasis on the dissolution of the fusion between the mother and the unborn child, which renders the mother able to introject the loss.

This is the beginning of the new year, 'faceless,' hiding many unexpected events, ambivalent. The hill is 'bald' and the sky, '[f]aceless and pale as china,' does not seem to be empathizing with the speaker, 'minding its business.' The image is reminiscent of the dummies in 'The Disquieting Muses,' who are bald, and faceless; the lack the speaking persona feels, the 'absence' of the lost baby is her own business only : 'Nobody can tell what I lack.' Nobody can acknowledge any loss since the lost object – the baby – has been 'incorporated' by the mother who guards it like a



'cemetery guard' ( Abraham and Torok, 'Mourning and Melancholia : Introjection versus Incorporation' 130 ), thus not allowing anybody to experience it.

One of the strongest images is that of the gulls which seem to be endowed with a kind of ability to fuse, to 'thread the river's mud bed' with the 'crest of grass.' They are also endowed with linguistic capacity, since they can argue and 'settle and stir' like 'blown paper,' an implicit reference to language which seems to be escaping the speaking persona : ' *ἔπεα πτερόεντα,*' flying words, according to Homer, words in the 'hands of an invalid,' implying her own linguistic sterility : 'I have started writing poems again ...' Plath writes to her mother on February 26 ( LH 410 ), in an effort to balance the loss with words.

The ashen sun seems to be equipped with its own fusing capacity since it can 'strike,' touch with its rays 'the linked ponds' ( another kind of fusion ) and produce 'tin glints.' Its rays hurt the speaker in the same way her realization of its fusing capacity makes her envious, since she, herself, is devoid of such a capacity, a secret she, herself, knows only. Suddenly, there comes a continuous ( fused ) line '[a] crocodile of small girls / knotting,' uninterrupted, kept close together, opening up to swallow her. She wishes to be incorporated in the body of the little girls, to be diminished, to shrink into 'a stone, a stick.' By apostrophizing her own maternal body, she wishes to become diminutive, and go back into the mother's body – any mother's – semiotic chora.

The 'pink plastic barrette' dropped by one of the girls does not seem to be able to disrupt such a joined line, and they keep continuing their gossip; they are bonded together, and at the same time they are endowed with linguistic capacity too, like the gulls, whereas the speaking persona is engulfed in a kind of silence, accompanied by suffocation : 'The wind stops my breath like a bandage,' an image Plath will use later in 'Daddy,' in which the speaker-daughter 'barely dar[es] to breathe or Achoo,' and in 'Medusa,' in which the daughter 'could draw no breath.'

The next ring in the chain of fusing and fused elements in the poem is the 'ashen smudge' which 'swaddles roof and tree.' The choice of the verb 'swaddle' with its two denotative meanings – to wrap a new born infant with strips of cloth to limit movement and to wrap anything around – may be alluding to the fusion of the 'smudge' and the roof and the tree, in contrast to the speaker's own lack of real fusion with the lost unborn child, or the suffocation experienced with such a fusion already hinted at by 'the wind [ that ] stops [ her ] breath like bandage.' It seems that the speaking persona has already started to introject the loss : 'I suppose it's pointless to think of you at all. / Already your doll grip lets go.'

Fusing images continue but they are not as prevailing and vigorous as in the previous stanzas, since the 'I' has become 'less constant, less faithful' to the lost unborn child; unlike the 'tumulus,' the mound, which 'guards its black shadow,' the speaking persona is not mountainous and not in a position to 'guard' her own black shadow, her 'attachment,' the lost baby, which keeps eluding her. She is too happy, she will



forget, but the cypresses are 'rooted in their heaped losses,' as though they have buried, encrypted them within themselves: these losses are 'heaped,' ponderous, mountainous, contrasting with her own flatness. Further, the cypresses 'brood,' they dwell upon their losses with morbid persistence, which she, herself, will not do: the choice of 'brood,' ( brood = sit upon eggs to hatch ) implies once more the breeding quality she seems to lack at this point, since the child is lost and already its 'cry fades like the cry of a gnat.' Separation begins to be effected, she loses sight of the baby 'on [ its ] blind journey.' The 'clean slate' and the 'stupidity,' 'the newness' Plath attributed to children figures in other poems ('Child,' 'You're' ), become the 'blind journey' on this occasion, blind, sightless because it will not be filled with any images ever.

Her stream of thought flies, along with the 'spindling rivulets,' and the only indication she has of the unborn lost child is some 'heel-prints.' The rivulets are 'spindling,' like her thought, her imagination which is likely to finally overcome silence and 'spin a tale,' write; her loss will be sublimated into this song.

'The day empties its images / Like a cup or a room' and along with this emptiness, the moon makes its appearance : its 'crook whitens' and leads somewhere, to a nursery, the nursery of the speaking persona's other child. The moon, on this occasion, seems to be a benevolent appearance since it enables the speaker to transcend her grief, to introject the loss, as she has something else to consider. However, one would also pause at the word 'crook' with its ambivalent meaning : is



it the bent or curved part of the moon that the persona has in mind or a dishonest person disguised in the form of the moon? In many poems by Plath, the moon is associated with the sinister appearance of the mother, but in this poem it seems that the moon, in its maternal disguise, is likely to be reminding the persona of the other child.

Blue is the prevailing color in the scene that follows, a color suggesting the speaker's depression : 'blue plants,' 'the little pale blue hill,' 'blue shrub,' 'indigo nimbus.' Plath writes to her mother : ' ... and my daily routine with Frieda and Ted keeps me from being blue' ( LH 409 ). The solace of the other child is acknowledged and appreciated : 'Luckily I have little Frieda in all her beauty to console me by laughing and singing "Lalala" or I don't know what I'd do' ( ibid. 408). It is this realization that leads her to the 'lit house' where '[t]he old dregs, the old difficulties [ will ] take [ her ] to wife.'

Like her mother, she is ensnared into these tasks, which, however, will be a kind of blessing since they can distract her from her grief, the remembrance of the lost child. 'Ted gave me poems to type and generally distracted me ...' she writes to her mother on the day of the miscarriage ( LH 408 ), and her already mentioned 'daily routine with Frieda and Ted,' a blessing among the other 'purple patches' of the letters to her mother, become the 'dregs, the difficulties' the suffocating life Plath wishes to escape from.

From the sixth stanza onwards, the prevalent sound is 'u,' a sound which creates an ominous, a foreboding tone : 'tumulus,' 'noon,' 'too' 'brood,' 'rooted,' 'rivulet,' 'unspool,' 'pooling,' 'room,' 'moon's crook.' This accumulation of 'u' sounds culminates in stanzas nine and ten in which it is paired with sound 'b,' '[b]lue shrub,' 'nimbus,' 'balloon,' thus creating an explosive note indicative of the persona's own 'explosion' of the encrypted loss and its final introjection.

What the speaker has managed to do in the poem is the introjection over the loss of the unborn child. Introjection according to Abraham and Torok is 'a synthetic enlargement of abreaction, binding, working out working-through, and the work of mourning' ( *The Shell and the Kernel* 8-9 ) and works like a genuine instinct, as life itself takes care of the gradual process of psychical readjustment or expansion ( 19 ). In the poem, this process is gradual, as it has already been proven, as the persona passes through the various steps of acknowledging and accepting the loss, and finally transcending it in the realization of the other child's existence.

Written on October 24, 1962, 'By Candlelight' originally 'Nick and the Candlestick,' is one of Plath's poems addressed to her eight-month-old son, most likely inspired by one of his night nursings in Devon. It is a poem whose uneven-lined stanzas do not only allude to the flickering light of the candle but also to the fluidity, the process that characterizes the relationship between the infant and the mother. It revolves round particular aspects that the poet associates with the son, and which reverberate with her anxieties and fears: such aspects are linguistic issues, identity problems.

The linguistic aspect of the poem starts at an inanimate level, with '[t]he dull bells tongu[ing] the hour,' in an otherwise barren and silent landscape, where the only light is the one 'beamed' by certain 'green stars,' unripe ones, if and only when 'they can make it to [ their ] gate.' Further the linguistic emergence of the son starts at a semiotic level, with his 'creaking' sounds which are converted into an animal-like 'roaring' sound resulting from his reaction to the maternal semiotic song of 'rhythms, intonations, and echolalias' of the mother-child symbiosis which Kristeva describes as 'intense, predating the father' ( *Desire in Language* 157 ).

To rediscover the intonations, scansion, and jubilant rhythms preceding the signifier's position as language's position is to discover the voiced breath that fastens us to an undifferentiated mother, to a mother who later, at the mirror stage, is altered into a maternal language. ( *ibid.* 195 )

The very same 'voiced breath,' the echolalia of the mother-son bond logically leads, as Kristeva suggests above, to the mirror stage. Indeed the following prevailing image in the poem is that of the mirror which is indicative of the subject-formation and identity establishment both for the mother and the son.

The mirror floats us at one candle power

This is the fluid in which we meet each other,  
The haloey radiance that seems to breathe  
And lets our shadows wither

Only to blow  
Them huge again, violent giants on the wall.



By candlelight, they can see their reflection in the mirror, 'floating,' unstable, yet to be formed, identities in process, a point which is strongly proved with the series of consecutive images of the mother-child dyad reflections from 'shadows' that 'wither' to 'violent giants.' The two figures are well-blended ( 'meet each other' ) in the fluid of the 'candle power,' a fluid similar to the amniotic fluid which physically 'blended' the mother and the child in gestation; it is this fluid which can 'manipulate' their reflection, making them diminutive at one point and then automatically turning them into 'violent giants.' According to Kristeva, subjectivity is a process which functions even before the mirror stage, and the mirror stage is important for the breaking-up of the symbiotic hold of the mother and the child, as it is then that the child starts to realize its own separate existence. In stanzas one and two, the reflection is always plural : 'us,' 'we meet,' 'our shadows,' 'violent giants.' It is as though maternity is alterity, a stage which cannot be divided into subject and object; 'it is an identity,' says Kristeva, 'that splits, turns in on itself, and changes, without becoming other' (*The Kristeva Reader* 297), and this is the prevailing image in the poem thus far. But further on, it seems that the baby starts to differentiate himself from the mother : 'one match scratch makes you real,' when he starts his entrance into the symbolic by making his first nondescript sounds : 'creak,' and 'roar,' when he seems to be distinguishing his sounds from those of his mother's song, ' the voiced breath,' as Kristeva says ( *Desire in Language* 195 ).

Further, one can notice the introduction of phallic symbols which are associated with and attributed to the child. In stanza three, when the child begins 'to creak to life,' the

candle turns into a 'yellow knife' that has grown tall, a phallic image suggesting the child's masculinity, but at the same time, the severing of the mother-child bond : the knife will separate them; the baby sticks to its masculinity, 'clutch[ing] the bars' – another phallic image – of his cot. Kristeva argues that for both male and female children, the mother, in as far as she represents gratification, is the Phallus, and separation from her entails castration, through which the 'dependence [ ... ] is severed, and transformed into a symbolic relation to an other' ( *Revolution* 48 ). In the poem, however, it seems that the boy is not actually castrated : he clings to his masculinity, and for the mother, who will soon give him up to the Symbolic, he becomes a small Atlas, carrying the burden of the earth, saving the world; he becomes the 'baby in the barn' of 'Nick and the Candlestick.' The mother is like Virgin Mary, the perfect mother and hers is a sacred motherhood, a point which is firstly hinted at in the poem with the adjective 'haloey,' which has been introduced early in the poem and which characterizes the dyad of the mother and son.

That the child, like a small Atlas, will carry the burden of the sky is quite evident, if one considers the most common mythological interpretation of the figure of Atlas. What is not so evident, however, is another mythological version which links Atlas to Perseus : Perseus appealed to Atlas for shelter, which was refused, whereupon Perseus, by means of the head of the Medusa changed him into Mt Atlas, 'on which rested heaven with all its stars' ( *Smaller Classical Dictionary* 88-89 ). Such an interpretation further complicates the issue of motherhood as depicted in the poem, for it introduces another mother figure. For Plath the Medusa was both overtly and



covertly associated with her mother (see 'Medusa' ) and this gave her the opportunity to vent her anger and dissatisfaction with her mother, especially focusing on their 'osmotic' ( LH 32 ), symbolic bond, which she found too 'stifling.' The camouflaged presence of the mother in 'By Candlelight,' however, is a neutral appearance perhaps leading to the Kristevan argument in 'Stabat Mater,' that in childbirth a woman identifies with, rediscovers her own mother :

Concerning that stage of my childhood, scented, warm, and soft to the touch, I have only a spatial memory. No time at all. Fragrance of honey, roundness of forms, silk and velvet under my fingers, on my cheeks. Mummy. Almost no sight – a shadow that darkens, soaks me up, or vanishes amid flashes. Almost no voice in her placid presence. Except, perhaps, and more belatedly, the echo of the quarrels : her exasperation, her being fed up, her hatred. ( 256)

The drafts of the *Ariel* poems kept in the MRBR of Smith College show the poem in four different copies : the first draft handwritten in two pages, written on a Smith College pink Memorandum paper, on the reverse of which she had typed page 15 of Chapter 3 and page 10 of Chapter 2 of *The Bell Jar*. Secondly there is a revised typed copy of the poem on the Smith College Memorandum paper with page 3, Chapter 1 on the back. Then there is the second draft of the poem typed on the familiar pink memorandum paper, on the back of which is page 4, Chapter 2 of *The Bell Jar* and finally the typed copy, dated October 24, 1962, with Plath's name and address on the top left hand side.

Before I actually proceed to the connection that I can see between the several drafts and the selections from the novel, I would like to note that apart from the original title



– ‘Nick and the Candlestick,’ – the several drafts do not indicate any other major revisions. What is important is the reason Plath used the already written parts of the novel. Susan Van Dyne suggests superstitious reasons, ‘a desire for sympathetic magic’ (5). If she had managed to finish the novel which would definitely be published in January 1963, then that was evidence of her blooming generativity, and would constitute a token, a tangible proof that she could still write, ‘produce’ (ibid.). At the same time Melanie Klein observes that girls draw or write on sheets of paper that ‘stand for their mother’s body’ ( 208 ); Smith College is another mother figure, her ‘alma mater.’ By writing ( or better rewriting on it ) she further wishes to take away and give back, to strengthen the ‘ties that bind’ her to her mother. The above point is also depicted in *The Bell Jar*, in which Esther, prior to her nervous-linguistic breakdown attempts to write a novel :

I counted out three hundred and fifty sheets of corrugated bond from my mother’s stock in the hall closet, secreted away under a pile of old felt hats and clothes brushes and woolen scarves. ( 126 )

At the same time, Plath writes in her journal :

Got a queer and most overpowering urge today to write, or typewrite, my whole novel on the pink, stiff, lovely-textured Smith memorandum pads of 100 sheets each: a fetish : somehow, seeing a hunk of that pink paper, different from all the endless reams of white bond, my task seems finite, special, rose-cast. Bought a rose bulb for the bedroom light today and have already robbed enough notebooks from the supply closet for one and a half drafts of a 350 page novel. Will I do it .... ( J 201 )

*The Bell Jar* excerpt on the reverse of the first page of draft 1 is the part which describes in succulent details the food presented to the Mademoiselle guest editors as

well as Esther's obsession and preoccupation with food; the second part of the very same draft is written on the back of page 10, Chapter 2, on which part of Doreen's vomiting is given as well as Esther's resolution that the Doreen identity, which she had tried to usurp in an effort to compromise herself to a set, stable identity, is dismissed. The page ends with Esther observing the faint 'dark stain,' the remnant of Doreen's vomiting escapade the night before. Why did Plath choose these two separate incidents to connect to the poems? It seems that there are three different aspects which Plath had tried to use as sides to construct a triangle : motherhood ( in the poem ), food ( orality ), and Doreen's throwing up, who in the novel is one of the surrogate identities Esther is taking up in an effort to discover her own. Plath's obsession with food can be located from different sources the *Journals, Letters Home*, as well as from a number of poems; she seems to be associating this orality, this obsession with food with the hungry mouth, the self seeking love and recognition as another form of nutrition. As it has already been mentioned, Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* considers food a unique mother-child link stressing the maternal power in such a relationship, a power so vital but so fierce, too ( 75-76 ). Esther's obsession with food could be taken back to her relationship with her own mother, which, as seen from the novel itself, was a suffocating bond resulting from the mother's fallacious rearing of the daughter. In the same source quoted above, Kristeva discusses food in its association with the hungry mouth '... the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now on more than ever.' Language learning then takes place 'as an attempt to appropriate an oral "object" that slips away' ( 40-41 ). The maternal loss, the presence which is both feared and desired, is



associated with the absence of food and with language. It is this presence that is camouflaged in 'By Candlelight' connected to the persona's own maternal experience with the choice of the Atlas figure and the myth associated with the Medusa lurking behind it.

Doreen's vomiting scene echoes the Kristevan analysis of vomiting in *Powers of Horror* :

I expel myself out, I abject myself. I am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which 'I' become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs and vomit. ( 3 )

It seems that Doreen, with her vomiting, gives birth to a self : if she is a surrogate identity for Esther, then by association, it is Esther herself who is in the process of acquiring a new self. In fact after the incident, Esther decides that Doreen is not a good role model for her, so she turns to Betsy : 'I would have nothing to do with her. Deep down, I would be loyal to Betsy and her innocent friends. It was Betsy I resembled at heart' ( 24 ).

The second draft of the poem still under the original title 'Nick and the Candlestick,' is backed up by page 4, Chapter 2 which describes the erotic scene between Doreen and Lenny and Esther's escape into the streets 'before anything more could happen' (18). Though this incident seems to constitute a new element quite foreign to the aspects discussed above, it is important to note the orality element in it, especially in the description of Doreen's naked breasts, which Esther likens to 'full brown melons' ( *ibid.* ). Further, Doreen kept biting 'Lenny's left earlobe,' and Lenny 'was trying to



bite Doreen's hip through her skirt.' As a final orality element, after her escape into the streets, Esther feels the sidewalks, 'sucking' her stale heart.

Finally on the reverse of the first typed copy is page 3 from the same chapter. It is the very same scene in Lenny's apartment in which Esther is watching the two 'get more and more crazy about each other' ( 17 ). The orality element on this occasion is presented in the image of Esther drinking and her realization that her drink was 'wet and depressing [ ... ] more like dead water' (ibid.). Orality manifested in the several food tropes of the previous quotations now becomes 'liquid' orality, as if the self were going back to the womb's amniotic fluid, to the wet environment which is 'depressing,' stifling. Self-disintegration has begun. Esther observes the 'pink lasso with the yellow polka dots' on the glass, an image associated with the mother : it is the umbilical cord that joins the little girl ( who is aware in a way of her femininity, hence the pink color ) and her mother, making her regress, diminish ( hence the polka dots ), not just back to the womb as a foetus, but as a dot, thus regressing even further, 'once below a time,' when she is simply a 'swollen atom' (*Tales of Love* 234).

## **Children May Humanize Me but I Must Depend on Them for Nothing**

Releasing the child for the Symbolic entrance was carried out by the mother-personae of the previous group of poems. The mother figures in 'Morning Song,' 'Heavy Women' and 'The Night Dances' realize that children offer no authentication to them; they do not provide a stable mirror on which a firm reflection would be established. Their motherhood is not the perfect motherhood like Mary's : she is alone of her sex, while any trajectory they wish to transcend to attain a perfect motherhood is vain, too. The sought-for beauties of motherhood are lost '[t]hrough the black amnesias of heaven ... Touching and melting / Nowhere.'

According to the final typescript of *Ariel*, kept in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, Plath meant 'Morning Song' to be the starting point in *Ariel*, most probably as it began with the word 'love' : 'Love set you going like a fat, gold watch.' In the poem there is no fixed pattern or line length, but particular lines echo the sounds they denote as in the line quoted above, which on this occasion echoes the rhythmic ticking sound of the clock. The conception of the child to whom the poem is addressed is said to have been inaugurated by love, thus excluding the parents themselves. As already mentioned, this is a point made by Kristeva in 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' in which the mother sees the conception of her child and its formation as a process carried out regardless of the mother who feels like an onlooker ( *Desire in Language* 237 ).

In the poem, the 'bald cry' of the child, along with the parents' voices 'echoing' each other, constitutes a linguistic image which, however, implies a kind of negativity ('baldness' for Plath suggested sterility) from both sides, especially on behalf of the parents who exaggerate the arrival of the baby, considering it a beautiful exhibit in 'a drafty museum.'

The 'clean slate' of the child's mind, a trait attributed to children in other poems, is displaced onto the parents, who 'stand round blankly as walls,' constituting separate identities from that of their child. This separation is further underscored in stanza three, in which the mother is 'effaced,' replaced in a way by the child, and desperately tries to see her own reflection in the mirror to confirm her own very existence. This 'effacement' is what will lead her to the taking up of a series of identities to establish a new existence : 'A far sea moves in my ear' : the ocean of her childhood years, the 'metaphor for [ her ] childhood' (*Journals* 222 ), sets the tone for the first identity : she longs to be a child again, to retreat into the womb. The sea cry, however, is to be replaced by the cry of the child which will lead her to her second identity : 'cow-heavy,' she is now a cow with a 'calf' ('Metaphor'), milky, ready to satisfy the hungry mouth, with milk.

It is worthwhile to pause and go back to a scene, reproduced by Aurelia Plath in LH, the scene in which the nursing Aurelia in an effort to 'distract' the jealous Sylvia, tries to do so through letters, language :

... the one difficult period was when I nursed the baby; it was always then that Sylvia wanted to get into my lap. Fortunately, around this time she



discovered the alphabet from the capital letters on packaged goods on the pantry shelves. With great rapidity she learnt the names of the letters and I taught her the separate sounds of each. From then on, each time I nursed Warren, she would get a newspaper, sit on the floor in front of me and pick out all the capital letters to 'read.' (16)

The above precocity, however, the early obsession with the language of the Symbolic order and the 'kind' mother who facilitated the separation from her maternal semiotic, weaning the little girl, perhaps a little prematurely, led to an obsession with nourishment, which Plath associated with breasts : 'flesh of your breast' ( NJ 35 ); 'rounded breasts' ( 22 ); 'I long for full breasts' ( 23 ); 'full milky love' ( 83 ); 'I notice women's breasts ....' ( NJ 55 ). The breast obsession is carried over in *The Bell Jar* ( 20 ), her poems ( 'Point Shirley,' 'I Want I Want' ). Abraham and Torok, discussing introjection, associate it with the emptiness of the baby's mouth and its satisfaction through the maternal milk. Further, they talk about the 'transition from the mouth filled with the breast to a mouth filled with words' ( *The Shell and the Kernel* 127 ). In Plath's case the 'weaning' occurred prematurely, leading her to a precocious acquisition of language, but leaving her hungry for 'milk.' Now, in her role as a mother, she is trying to be the good enough mother, a 'floral Victorian' mother, perhaps the emblem of ideal motherhood, the ideal Madonna who puts her child's needs above hers, who, however, 'stumbles' from bed to satisfy the baby's hungry mouth. At the same time, however, Plath's journal entry for January 10, 1959 reads :

Talked also with R.B. of Victorian women who fear men : men treat women as brainless chattels : have seen so many romances end in this sort of thing, waste of a woman, they don't believe marriage can work without woman

becoming maid, servant, nurse and losing brain. Ulcers : desire for dependency & feeling it is wrong to be dependent : you reject food ( mother's milk ), dependency, and yet get dependency by being sick : it is the ulcer you blame, not you. ( NJ 461 )

The above journal entry adds a new dimension to the phrase 'in my Victorian nightgown,' since it introduces two elements : the reification of the Victorian woman, and secondly the maternal role. It seems that the speaking persona, by putting on the Victorian nightgown, appropriates the role attributed to the Victorian women: man's servants, women fully engrossed in motherhood and domesticity, a point shared by Betty Friedan. In her chapter titled 'The Sexual Solipsism of Sigmund Freud,' Friedan talks about Freud's mistaken concept of women as still belonging to the Victorian era, 'the fate of being a woman the limitation of outlook and life' (114). The poem's persona does not seem to be in a position to escape this role. Further the case becomes even more complex with the introduction of the mother figure in it, if one associates the journal excerpt with the poem. A subjectivity crisis seems imminent : the mother-daughter oscillates between the two roles : that of the daughter and that of the newly-become mother. She tries to be 'weaned' from the mother, to achieve her individuation, but at the same time, the 'ulcer,' the mother's bleeding stomach ( another image associated with orality, with undigested food ) and by association the mother herself, renders this individuation effort impossible. Further, the mother's ulcer ( most likely caused by tension and overworking ) places her along with the Victorian women, a role the daughter resents but which, by choosing to wear the Victorian nightgown, she seems to be endorsing.



The baby's mouth 'opens clean as a cat's.' It is clean as it is empty and ready to be filled with milk as it has already been indicated, which substance is soon to be substituted for language :

And now you try  
Your handful of notes;  
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

The baby is about to leave the maternal semiotic order and enter the paternal symbolic, where she will be exposed to the intricacies of language.

The poem, itself, is not a hymn to motherhood : the speaker mother does not try to restrain the separation of the child which she sees as inevitable. Unlike Bellini's 'Madonna and Child,' in Bergamo with 'hands [ that ] hold their object tightly,' with 'aggressive hands' ( *Desire* 254 ), she does not try to restrain the escaping child, as from the very beginning, it is suggested that her presence is not so necessary. It is love which has initiated the conception and finally the child has achieved a linguistic individuation by renouncing the mother as soon as her hunger for food has been satisfied.

The loss of a woman's very identity is what Kristeva calls 'feminine castration' (Oliver 54). A woman risks losing herself when she loses her mother, and it is through childbirth that she identifies with her mother on a semiotic level ( 'Stabat Mater' 240, 247 ). In 'Morning Song,' the mother seems to be about ready to 'release' her child, and she has in a way experienced her own reunion with her own



mother by going back to her childhood and experiencing 'a far sea moving in [ her ] ear,' thus regressing in an infantlike status. It is important to note an excerpt that Plath has underlined in her book, *Childbirth Without Fear*, now housed in MRBR at Smith College.

Conception is a supreme event in a woman's life – it is the physiological purpose. Conscious and unconscious experiences of her childhood and early maturity flood the vista of her future whilst being strongly influenced by the phantasies of the past. ( 178 )

Throughout the poem the 'I' seems to be suffering from a kind of narcissistic crisis manifested in her effort to 'borrow' identities to authenticate herself; ultimately, seeing the inevitability of everything, after considering adopting the several identities of mother, daughter, 'intruder' in the conception process, she ends the poem, her own swan's cry, with a staccato resolution about the child's escape : 'The clear vowels rise like balloons.' She can do nothing about it.

My analysis of 'Heavy Women,' a companion piece to 'Barren Women,' will concentrate on the connection between the Venus, 'the nude and passably erotic body' ( 266 ) and the pregnant Madonnas in the poem, theoretically supported by Kristeva's essay 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini.' At the same time, an effort will be made to link the above to Freud's Dora's case, mostly focusing on Dora's preoccupation with the Sistine Madonna.

Julia Kristeva in 'Motherhood' ( *Desire in Language* ), in which she discusses Bellini's accomplishments with his Madonnas, and especially his depiction of the Virgin's hands restricting baby Jesus, thus preventing him from escaping her hold, mentions the way in which from the painting of these heavenly Madonnas with the unrepresentable maternal jouissance, Bellini turned to the nude Venus ( 265-266 ). What Plath is engaged in, in the poem, is the reverse trajectory : she starts with the 'pedestaled' Venus (perhaps inspired by the Botticelli Venus) and stops at the pregnant Madonnas with the 'pink-buttocked' infants attending them.

Like Venus, herself, the Madonnas are 'irrefutable,' and 'beautifully smug.' It seems that nobody can contend their divinity, their maternal role, in the same way nobody can contest Venus' beauty. They are complacent, self-satisfied with their accomplishments, and their faces 'float' over their huge bellies 'calm as a moon or as a cloud.' They float, drift about, like unsteady mirror reflections, sometimes moonlike, and sometimes cloudlike, with no definite identity. Such an oscillation can be attributed to the fact that there seems to be a loss of identity : as mothers they are neither subjects nor objects ( 'Motherhood' 237-238 ). Their complacent smiles are the result of their own 'meditations' about the infant they are carrying. Kristeva talks about the 'averted, modest, ecstatic, melancholic or reticent gaze' of the Madonnas (265 ), whose 'jouissance is mute' ( 241 ) as they contemplate their secret, as they know that they can hear something others cannot. This is the very same image Plath uses to denote the silent contemplation of the heavy women, like 'Dutch bulb[s] / Forming [ their ] twenty petals.' It is as though the bulbs will split to produce the

flower in the same way the women's bodies are 'a place of splitting' ( *ibid.* ), a locus where '[c]ells fuse, split and proliferate: volumes grow, tissues stretch, and body fluids change rhythm, speeding up or slowing down' ( 237 ).

While one may say that these figures are indeed real Madonnas with infants, that they can be models, archetypes, although '[d]usk hoods them in Mary-blue,' they are not real Madonnas, since :

... far off, the axle of winter  
Grinds round, bearing them down with the straw,  
The star, the wise gray men.

For them there will not be any holy star and the 'wise gray men,' the magi, will be diminished and extinguished by the depressing winter. What Plath is suggesting here is perhaps that although they share a common fate, motherhood, the heavy women are not like Virgin Mary : she is 'alone of her sex,' she is the only one not to die, since with her death ( dormition or assumption ), she is revived thus 'eliminat[ing] the distance between her son and herself' ('Motherhood' 251).The 'heavy women,' however, are not like her : they are mortal and they will distance themselves from their unborn children, as they have already done with their born children who just 'attend them [... ] doing nothing in particular.'

In discussing Bellini's 'trajectory from Madonna to Venus in the nude,' Kristeva asserts that in his painting of the nude Venus, whose face he seemed to have borrowed from the 'Madonna with Blessing Child,' and 'The Madonna with Two



Saints' a painting with mirrors surrounding the body, Bellini has presented the Virgin as having 'come down from her clothed exile in an elsewhere that racked her' ( 265-266 ), as if he had rediscovered the female form.

What did Plath have in mind by juxtaposing the two images? Perhaps both the jouissance, 'the nude, passably erotic body' ( *ibid.* ) of the Venus, her erotic jouissance, with no attachments, and the jouissance of the heavy pregnant women which leads to the creation of attachments. Both poles seem complacent, as if the poet is trying to make a concession by asserting that both groups are satisfied, 'beautifully smug.'

Plath's preoccupation with the pregnant, heavy women whom she equates to the pregnant Madonnas is strongly reminiscent of Dora, specifically her own preoccupation with the Sistine Madonna. At one point during her psychoanalysis with Freud, Dora had spent two hours meditating in front of the Sistine Madonna in the Dresden Museum. Upon being asked by Freud as to what prompted her to remain in such a pensive mood before the picture, she answered : 'The Madonna.' ( 96 ). Dora's meditation before the Sistine Madonna has been given a lot of importance : Lacan regards her problem as her difficulty in accepting herself as an object of desire for men, so 'in her long meditation before the Madonna, and in her recourse to the role of distant worshipper, Dora is driven toward the solution which Christianity has given to this subjective impasse by making woman the object of desire, or else, a transcendent object of desire' ( *In Dora's Case* 99 ).

Maria Ramas, concentrating on Freud's realization that Dora's problem was 'gynaecophylic' and had to do with her own attraction to Frau K., regards her preoccupation with the Sistine Madonna and her immaculate conception as a denial of the phallus, hence 'the negation of masculinity and femininity.' At the same time, since the sexuality existing between mother and infant is oral, the picture of the Madonna and the baby, the ideal motherhood, is a further negation of the phallus (173). Collins, along with other critics, sees Dora's 'immobilization' in front of the Madonna as an image recalling 'the fascination of the mirror stage' in which the child reflects itself fused with the mother, hence Dora's desire to be fused with her own mother ( 249-250 ).

The latter is closer to what I see in Dora's preoccupation with the painting : it is her desire to be a mother, which leads her to the rediscovery of her own mother, since according to Kristeva ( 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' ) in childbirth a woman rediscovers her own mother. Although deemphasized by Freud – 'I never made the mother's acquaintance. From the accounts given to me by the girl and her father I was led to imagine her as an uncultivated woman and above all as a foolish one' ( SE 7:20; 30 ) – the absence of the mother seems to be crucial for Dora's problem, which I regard as closely related to subjectivity : she cannot accept herself as an object of desire for men; she cannot accept the roles of masculinity and femininity, and her solution lies in the longing to go back to the mirror stage, a stage characterized by the maternal fusion.

The poet in 'Heavy Women' covers a trajectory from the nude Venus to the heavy Madonnas whose jouissance derives from their pregnancy, but which will soon be given up, as the fusion with their unborn babies will not be perennial. Dora seems to be following a similar trajectory : she starts with the erotic body, her own sexual awakenings, and her desire to learn as much as she can about the 'physiology of love,' adoring, according to Freud, Frau K.'s 'white body,' and finally being immobilized before the Madonna, wishing for maternity which will make her fusion with her own mother feasible.

The poet's trajectory from Venus to the heavy Madonnas, like Bellini's own route, and like Dora's, is strongly reminiscent of another kind of trajectory, evident in a work of art which, like the above, shows this kind of duality : La Gioconda. The enigmatic smile has become the subject of many critics, but what is mostly relevant for my analysis of 'Heavy Women' is Freud's own interpretation. He writes :

Anyone who thinks of Leonardo's painting will be reminded of a remarkable smile, at once fascinating and puzzling, which he conjured up on the lips of his female subjects. It is an unchanging smile, on long curved lips. ( *Art and Literature* 199 ).

Further, he associates it with Leonardo's vulture phantasy in which a vulture (a mother symbol ) 'struck [ him ] many times with its tail against [ his ] lips,' and which Freud interprets as evidence of the 'erotic activity' between the mother and the son in terms of the mother's passionate kisses on the baby's lips ( *ibid.* ). In the smile



Freud sees 'the most perfect representation of the contrasts which dominate the erotic life of women; the contrast between reserve and seduction, and between the most devoted tenderness' ( 200 ). This point suggests the same trajectory covered in Plath's poem; from Venus to the Madonnas in their 'belling dresses,' an image which does not only imply the 'ponderous' situation of the pregnant women, but also the suffocating character of their condition : it is as though they are under a bell jar, overwhelmed by maternal duties and domesticity.

Written some time after her miscarriage ( the revised typescript kept in the Mortimer Rare Book Room is dated February 22 ), the poem constitutes Plath's own effort to 'justify' her preoccupation with babies, and reconcile her previous 'promiscuous' life. Her own 'trajectory' from the Venus figure to the Madonna is her personal route to her establishing an identity, a selfhood, a subjectivity that will be confirmed or consolidated by motherhood as it was consolidated in the past by her sexual escapades, her 'promiscuity : [ her ] ingenious, evasive self-deceiving explanation' (*Journals* 290), a 'necessary therapy until she could [ ... ] reassert her masks' (Butscher164), another effort to get to the core of a self-hood, to lose one identity and secure a subjectivity :

Some mystic desire to beat to sensual annihilation – to snuff out one's identity on the other – a mingling and mangling of identities? A death of one? Or both? A devouring and subordination? ( NJ 105 )

In her own arrangement of the *Ariel* poems, Plath placed the following poem, 'The Night Dances' between 'Elm' and 'The Detective.' This is a poem fusing in a tragic way the role of the mother with that of a daughter, a poem expressing the speaking persona's utter despair at not being able to be authenticated fully by the presence of her baby son.

The very outset of the poem sets the tone for what is going to follow : 'A smile fell in the grass. / Irretrievable!' This is a small blessing that cannot be enjoyed by the mother. The whole stanza strongly reminds one of a similar line by Plath's 'mother,' Emily Dickinson : 'A narrow Fellow in the Grass / Occasionally rides.' The shared alliteration of the 'f,' 'l' and 'g' sounds in the first line and the 'r' in the second indicates the poet's effort to reproduce the acoustic effect Dickinson's poem makes. Further, the speaking persona wonders at the 'destination' of the child's movements likely to be disappearing, mingling with mathematical abstractions. These movements, however, will set their particular seal on the world, and connected with the child's existence, will constitute a kind of blessing for her : 'I shall not entirely / Sit empty of beauties.' The baby's 'small breath,' his smell indicate that he is alive, an existence unlike that of the lilies. Holbrook asserts that by making gestures and movements, the baby wishes to get a response that will establish his very own connection to the world and adds that the speaking persona 'sees that this impulse is like the growth of the lilies, fulfilling themselves as lilies, arum or tiger, fulfilling their nature from energies within themselves' ( 209 ).



The baby wishes with his movements to establish his own identity not only as far as he, himself, is concerned, but also regarding the authentication he will offer his mother. He exists, therefore she exists, too. These movements, however, according to the mother's perception, 'flake off,' 'bleed,' and 'peel' '[t]hrough the dark amnesias of heaven,' and it is likely that any creativity deriving from them will evaporate to be lost in the endless firmament. The three verbs, 'flake off, peel, and bleed' are connected with motherhood and creativity : the heavy madonnas wait while their flesh, like a Dutch bulb 'splits' to form the baby ('Heavy Women'), an idea already suggested by Kristeva, too. And the 'blood jet is poetry' ( 'Kindness' ). Only through bleeding can someone produce. This creativity, though, is lost, and the mother wonders why she is given such blessings which she cannot absorb, which cannot fulfill her, leading '[n]owhere.'

It seems that the meaning of the poem is epitomized in the final word 'nowhere.' The speaking mother is in despair since the fusion with her son which she envisioned in other poems ( 'Nick and the Candlestick' ) is lost here and even the existence of the baby cannot offer solace; she has possibly realized that the blessing she has expected from procreativity cannot lead to generativity, and that she is not in a position to exploit this gift. Such a realization entails her inability to grasp this blessing, an inability associated with a point made in stanza one. As has already been mentioned, in this stanza Plath is trying to imitate Dickinson. The effect, however, is abortive, since the only feeling aroused by this imitation is a pure resemblance of sounds. With this, it is implied that this 'mothering' has not been very effective. Consequently, if



she has not been mothered properly, how can she hope to become a proper mother?  
How can she taste the fruit of motherhood?

### **Conquering Motherhood**

For the mother personae in 'Magi,' 'Barren Women,' 'For a Fatherless Son' and 'Nick and the Candlestick' motherhood can be authentication. Motherhood, as experienced by them, is not an abstract entity but a tangible image of a six-month-old baby who 'rock[s] on all fours like a padded hammock,' who conceptualizes love with the mother proffering milk. Motherhood does not have to do with the vain visits of the moon but it is about the fused image of the mother-child dyad with the child being 'the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious.'

'What is so real as the cry of a baby?' says Dame Kindness ( CP 269 ). This is what the speaker is trying to account for in 'Magi,' attempting in a way to rationalize the preference for the down-to-earth world of her child and not her preoccupation with abstract entities. For the angels, the existence of a 'nose or an eye,' biologically essential, is 'vulgar' as opposed to their ethereal existence; such bodily members 'boss' their faces. No earthly white could be compared with their 'whiteness;' they know nothing about domesticity, 'snow, chalk,' they are the 'real thing.' The internal rhyme of the 'ai' sound in 'such like' and 'all right' denotes a sense of irony, a mocking tone directed at the angels' spiritual level. Indeed these angels are pure, but at the same time 'loveless' sharing the nonsentimentality of mathematical notions

which are completely foreign to any sort of feeling. On the other hand, next to this abstract world there is reality : the miracle of life, the little girl who, although only six months old, has made her entrance into the world, 'she is able / [t]o rock on all four like a padded hammock,' but she is ignorant of 'heavy notions' like Evil and Love which she equates to a belly ache and milk respectively.

This is a poem Plath must have written while deeply engrossed in domesticity, especially motherhood. What I see in it is her effort to rationalize her preference for the world of her child to the intellectual world of the Good, the True, the Evil and the notion of Love. What arise from the depth of her utterances are two images : Dorothea Krook on the one, and Plath, the Mother on the other, 'the girl who would not have flourished in such company,' but who will actually try to flourish at the crossroads of domesticity and poetry. At that time, six months after Frieda's birth, however, troubled by a heavy load of maternal duties and linguistic sterility, she is trying to find a way out of her dilemma and her rationalization leads her to the dismissal of Krook's world.

During her Fulbright years at Cambridge she was under the tutorship of Dr. Dorothea Krook who lectured on Henry James and the English Moralists and whom Plath admired ( NJ 332 ). Her lectures on the True, the Evil and Love, especially her notion that moral life constitutes the effort of the higher to appropriate and transform the lower, challenged Plath. In 'Magi,' however, she seems to be dismissing Krook's world as unreal, abstract, while under the 'stewing' air of domesticity which she

breathes in her bell jar. Her 'Books & Babies & Beef Stews' motto of 1957 (*Journals* 153 ) seems to be crashed against reality. She now experiences the 'oppressive and crushing forces' resulting from her inability to 'conquer [ her ] writing and experience and then [ ... ] conquer childbirth' ( 240 ).

'Barren Women,' is a poem written on February 19, 1961 (*Collected Poems* 157), a few days after Plath's miscarriage, and although many critics and biographers see it as her indictment against childless women, and in particular Olwyn Hughes and Dido Merwin ( Alexander 256 ), I tend to regard it as a 'self-confirmation' of her own fertility, as well as a mild revival of the old hatred towards her mother.

Although brief, the poem is heavily packed with images ranging from 'edificidal' ones to metaphorical tropes. In the first stanza, the barren 'I' is equated with a museum, which although perfect in all other respects, 'grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas,' is unable to house statues to fulfill its purpose; even the existing fountain goes wasted as it 'sinks back into itself,' and any present flowers are not real : they are 'marble lilies / [ that e ]xhale their pallor like scent.'

In the second stanza, the speaking persona, in her capacity as a museum, expresses an ardent wish to be the mother 'of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos,' but instead, all she can have is the 'attentions' of the 'dead dears' again that remind her of human destiny and keep haunting her. The final image of the poem is that of the moon that 'lays a hand on [ her ] forehead,' during her monthly visits to her.



Literally, this image is strongly reminiscent of a scene as described by Aurelia Plath and has to do with Ted and Sylvia's visit to Wellesley to spend the Christmas vacations with her : 'I placed my hand on Sylvia's forehead in the old maternal gesture' ( 333 ). The gesture in the poem offers no solace, as the moon is expressionless and 'mum' like a nurse.

It will be worthwhile to stop at these two final lines and link them to the third line of the first stanza : 'In my courtyard a fountain leaps and sinks back into itself;' all three lines combine menstruation and maternal presence, a point that Julia Kristeva tackles in *Powers of Horror*. She classifies polluting objects into two groups : excremental and menstrual and whereas she sees the former as 'a danger to identity that comes from without,' she regards the latter as symbolizing 'the danger issuing from within the identity' ( 71 ). She sees both forms of defilement as stemming from the maternal and / or the feminine, of which the former is the real support. Further she regards the maternal authority as a trustee of the self's clean and proper body; such an authority in her effort to enforce a law that resembles the paternal law of language,

shapes the body into a *territory* having areas, orifices, points and lines, surfaces and hollows, where the archaic power of mastery and neglect, of differentiation of proper-clean and improper-dirty, possible and impossible, is impressed and exerted. ( 72 )

This is the very same analogy Plath employs to denote the barren self who, endowed with menstrual blood and perfect as a museum, a territory, can not conceive.

'For a Fatherless Son' is a sonnet addressed to her son, whose life will be sealed by the absence of the father, an absence Plath has experienced as a little girl. The first stanza of the poem focuses on this absence, which, however, unlike the 'fort-da' game in which the child is the master of the process, throwing and recovering the reel, is beyond his powers, and for which he will be utterly unassisted by nature which is indifferent to his plight : 'And the sky like a pig's backside, an utter lack of attention.'

The child at this point is not aware of such an absence, as he is 'dumb,' with his 'stupidity' connected to his lack of knowledge, with a mind like a 'blind mirror.' For him ignorance is bliss, and his face becomes the mirror in which the mother sees her own reflection, a realization and confirmation that she cherishes since it assures her that the fusion with her child is still in operation and that the separation of their dyad has not been effected yet.

This causes laughter for the boy, 'you think that's funny,' a point leading to Kristeva's 'Place Names' in which she asserts that the infant reacts to the 'breast, light, and sound with laughter': 'The imprint of an archaic moment, the threshold of space, the "chora" as primitive stability absorbing anaclytic facilitation, produces laughter' ( 283 ). Kristeva goes on to say that any objects that cause laughter are signs, 'markers of something in the process of becoming stability' ( *ibid.* ). This laughter further reassures the mother in the poem, and the son's gestures in touching 'grab[bing]' her facial features is additional evidence that they are together fused, and

she derives her subjectivity from his very own existence. This fusion, however, the mother knows, will not last forever :

One day you may touch what's wrong  
The small skulls, the smashed blue hills, the godawful hush.

But she cherishes the present moment, now that his 'smiles are found money,' unexpected bliss, a miracle.

Instead of focusing on the absence of the father, a point touched upon in the first stanza only, the poet seems to be concentrating on the presence of the mother and the so far inseparable dyad such a presence presupposes between herself and her child. It is from this fusion that she derives sustenance manifested in the reassurance of her subjectivity : she is a mother.

Draft two of the poem is written on the reverse of an excerpt from Chapter 7 of *The Bell Jar* in which Esther discusses the article 'In Defense of Chastity,' an article her mother has sent her and she seems preoccupied with her sexuality and the double standards concerning men's and women's premarital sexual relationships. She meditates :

Finally I decided that if it was so difficult to find a red-blooded intelligent man who was still pure by the time he was twenty-one I might as well forget about staying pure myself and marry somebody who wasn't pure either. Then when he started to make my life miserable I could make his miserable as well.  
( 85 )



Again there seems to be a kind of connection between the absence of the father in the poem and the betrayal women seem to be experiencing from the existence of such double standards in society. The absence of the father is a kind of betrayal which, however, Plath has managed to avenge by absolutely excluding him from the scene, thus emphasizing the presence of the mother, despite the misleading title which suggests that the poem will deal with the absence of the father.

In a reading for the BBC radio, Plath is giving her own explication of the next poem, 'Nick and the Candlestick' :

... a mother nurses her baby son by candlelight and finds in him a beauty which, while it may not ward off the world's ill, does redeem her share of it.  
(*Collected Poems* 294 )

The final draft of the poem consists of 14 three-lined stanzas, while in the previous draft there were some eight additional stanzas which she finally deleted. In the printed version of the poem the first seven stanzas are 'occupied' by a mother figure who seems to be engulfed by a deadly atmosphere and her utterances, disjointed and confused echo her inner state. She is not simply a mother, but a 'miner' in that 'blue' light of the candle. Blue is an adjective used by Plath very often to denote her hours of poetic composition, of conception that preceded the waking of the children, a time during which cell by cell, word by word, line by line writing was formed. Now she is a miner, trying to bring to the surface events, figures, ideas long buried in the subconscious, to use them creatively for composition. There is a succession of images and there does not seem to be any coherence among them, while '[t]he earthen womb

exudes [tears] from its dead boredom.' The womb is unable to conceive after the husband's abandonment and the persona's creativity suffers from the very same plight, as it can only 'echo' what was 'produced' before, obviously unable to utter anything new ( 'old echoer' ).

All of a sudden, though, '[t]he candle / Gulps and recovers its small altitude,' and it is then that the speaking mother realizes that there is an existence that authenticates her, her baby son : 'O love, how did you get here? / O embryo.' The authentication his presence confirms is strong since he is still in an embryonic condition, an idea suggestive of the existing fusion between them. The baby is doomed to be suffering, but for the time being '[t]he blood blooms clean in [him].' The alliteration of 'l' suggests a happier tone, a purity which belongs to the child exclusively. At present he knows nothing. This is another 'tabula rasa,' he has 'the stupidity' of the 'clean slate' Plath used in other poems to talk about infant ignorance.

His very presence prompts her to be creative :

I have hung our cave with roses,  
With soft rugs –

The last of Victoriana

This is a creativity that is not restricted to the decoration of their 'cave;' it goes beyond this to the surge of creativity inaugurated during the blue hour of the morning poetry, which she seems to be associating with her maternal duties. The sustenance

she derives from her two-fold creativity – procreativity and generativity – surpasses any despair likely to emanate from the dark orbit of the stars or the falling atoms of the broken mercury at the beginning of the poem. Her child, her creativity is the ‘one solid the spaces lean on, envious.’ For her the baby is ‘the baby in the barn,’ Jesus Christ and she a virgin, a Madonna who, however, is still fused with her son, an indivisible dyad so far with no concern for the future.

It is interesting to consider the eight deleted stanzas of the poem which mostly concern the Atlas, a figure she kept in ‘By Candlelight.’

The brass Atlas you inherited  
Is hefting his milk pillar  
He kneels

Head bent,  
A panther head on a panther pelt  
Gnawing his forehead

Each incisor a wide, bright horn,  
The panther mane  
Squirring, a million

Gold worms down his back  
A bearded Greek!  
Under the gold

Bowl of his navel  
Where his phallus and balls should be –  
A panther claw!

I leave you to the mystery.  
It is not the firmament  
That makes him look so sick,

This philosopher.



Maybe it's the panther jaw –  
The beastly lobotomy!

The mirror floats us at one candle power.  
We smile and stare.  
That's you. That's me. ( MRBR )

The panther mane squirms, twists the body like a snake and turns into a million gold worms thus usurping Medusa's very own power. His masculinity is destroyed : instead of the 'phallus and balls,' he has got claws, he becomes a castrated, 'devalorized' man ('Motherhood' 238 ).

It is up to the child now to find the answer to the riddle : why does he look so sick? There is a tentative answer provided to him : 'Maybe it's the panther jaw – the beastly lobotomy.' He looks so sick because of the duality in his character : he is both endowed with an Atlas identity and a panther claw, which turns him into an animal. The final image of the mirror reflecting the mother-child dyad, seems to be erasing the troubled Atlas figure. The mother and child smile and stare : 'That's you. That's me.' The presence of the baby authenticates the mother : 'I am because of you.' The Atlas figure, unlike the mother-child dyad, is doomed, since he cannot accept his duality; the mother, however, seems to have cast his figure behind her and she is happy, smiling and staring at her other half : her son.

From an early age, Plath was troubled by the existence of the double in human nature, a preoccupation evident in many of her works ( 'In Plaster,' 'The Bell Jar' ), but most

importantly in her honor thesis, *The Magic Mirror* in which she asserts that duality is bound to exist in all people and it is up to them to fully use it to their own benefit (59-60 ). It is this duality which the mother has fully utilized in the poem and which gives her sustenance : she exists because of her son, but she has used her motherhood as a 'trigger' for her creativity : she is writing this poem, whereas the Atlas has been dismissed as impotent, unable to accept his duality.

### **Can a Mother Speak Even Deeper?**

The ambivalent link between motherhood and female creativity is the focus of 'Metaphors,' 'Stillborn,' 'Thalidomide,' 'Mary's Song,' 'Childless Woman' and 'The Munich Mannequins.' The reader can notice an oscillation between the personae's desire to be creative beings and the inability to do so because the production, the baby-poems have been poisoned or 'murdered' by offspring. Further, a mother figure is presented as capable of sublimating a child's loss through a poem; 'perfection is terrible it cannot have children' because it is firm, fixed, unlike motherhood which is a process; on the other hand, '[t]he baby lace' can bring 'voicelessness' along with it, and a woman's 'forest' can be her 'funeral' and the 'mouths of corpses' reflect her fate.

The poems focusing on Plath's children start with 'Metaphors,' which was written along with 'Electra on Azalea Path,' as Plath's journal entry for March 20, 1959

indicates, at a time during which she seemed to be in a psychological 'cul de sac' as she could see no improvement in her condition although she had regular sessions with her psychiatrist, while at the same time she was longing to get pregnant : 'Cramps. Pregnant I thought. Not, such luck' [ sic ] (298).

I propose to consider the poem in light of its 'binary aspect' as manifested in the dialogue between the speaking persona, the pregnant 'I,' and the text which is a metaphor on its own. The poem consists of nine lines, each line consisting of nine syllables. Emphasis has been laid on the choice of words for their connotative meaning of heaviness, stage, process, pain, inevitability.

Like Kristeva's essay 'Stabat Mater' ( *Tales of Love* ) which is divided in two columns joining her own experience in childbirth along with the Virgin Mother cult, the eight lines of the poem are divided into two parts, with only the final line left on its own to constitute the denouement. In each line ideas are transferred from the one part to the other, from tenor to vehicle, with the title of the poem playing a significant role indicating the double function of the word itself : metaphor : μεταφέρω, transfer, transgress, or φέρω which in Greek is associated with the verb φέρω meaning bear children. So implicitly the 'metaphor' itself is associated with motherhood and this image is further reinforced with the eight well-chosen metaphors that denote motherhood. It is as though the maternal becomes a kind of metaphor, and as Kristeva puts it,



metaphor [ is ] the economy that modifies language when subject and object of the utterance act muddle their border. ('Throes of Love : The Field of Metaphor' 268 )

'I'm a riddle in nine syllables,' asserts the speaking persona at the onset of the poem: the tenor, the 'I' becomes a linguistic being consisting of nine syllables and the unsettling of boundaries is evidenced in the transgression between this 'I' and language, that is author and text. In line three the vehicle for the 'I' is a melon 'strolling on two tendrils,' an image associated with the maternal umbilical cord that joins the foetus to the mother, an image meant to underscore, or simply to foreground the notion of fusion, unification, an issue tackled in the concluding line of the poem, 'Boarding the train there's no getting off.'

Further, in line five, the vehicle of the 'I' becomes a 'loaf [ ... ] big with its yeasty rising,' a trope associated with orality, with the devouring body, with eros, pertaining to the mother and language, an image which uncovers the hidden implications of motherhood, elements beyond 'the inordinately swollen atom of the [ mother-child ] bond' ( 'Stabat Mater' 234 ). The 'I' becomes a 'means, a stage,' since the mother is neither a subject nor an object, but a 'continuous separation, a division of the very flesh' ( *ibid.* 254 ).

Finally, the speaking persona is presented as 'having eaten a bag of green apples,' a trope not only associated with orality, but a kind of orality which, instead of pleasure, brings pain. This pain which is connected to food leads to maternal love which,

according to Kristeva, 'integrates a certain feminine masochism but also displays its counterpart in gratification and jouissance' ( 'Stabat Mater' 246 ).

The unripe, green apple that causes pain is an idea Plath used in *The Bell Jar*, in which the 'Mademoiselle' guest editors are food poisoned. Further, in a 1958 journal entry, she observes the nourishing quality of food which becomes polluting for her : 'Gulping a chicken wing and a mess of spinach and bacon, all, all, turning to poison' ( 205 ). Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* talks about cases in which food appears as 'polluting object;' it becomes polluting as an oral object only when its orality 'signifies a boundary of the self's clean and proper body.' Polluted food becomes abject since it is a 'border between two distinct entities or territories' ( 75 ). The 'I' in the poem ( a split entity ) has eaten a bag of green apples, not unripe ones, but a certain brand of pure green fruit and located in the border between the entities of motherhood and language, procreativity and creativity, nature and culture, is likely to become polluted, hence the pain.

In 'Metaphors' the 'I' is presented as branded by pain, made impure after the eating of the green apples, an image the biblical allusion of which denotes the apple Adam ate and the Primal Sin emanating from it. The 'eater' in this case is the speaking persona, who, unlike Virgin Mary who conceived by immaculate conception, is not pure. Further, the speaking persona seems to be the little girl whose early anxiety-situations make her resort to her 'needs for nourishment' in order to overcome them. 'The more she is afraid that her body is poisoned and exposed to attack, the more she



craves for the “good milk” ( Klein 207 ). The polluting bag of green apples causing pain needs the antidote of the good mother’s milk, and the pregnant ‘I’ oscillates between the two roles of the hungry daughter and mother-to-be.

Finally comes the resolution : ‘Boarded the train there’s no getting off.’ This conclusion strikes with its ambivalence. Is this the saddening realization of the mother-to-be of the inevitability of such a role and the repercussions it entails : a new life will be born, will this be sacrifice, will the progeny ‘execute’ the progenitor? On the other hand, does the ‘I’ hint at the inseparability of mother and child?

As if that was what I had given birth to and, not willing to part from me, insisted on coming back dwelled in me permanently? ( *Tales of Love* 241)

On the level of the poem itself, one wonders which birth the speaking persona has in mind. Does she refer to her text as her child? Is her text part of her physical body, indispensable for the complete function of such a body : ‘the blood jet is poetry,’ says Plath in ‘Kindness;’ and in the *Journals* she describes the actual ‘conception’ of a sonnet :

Here follows my first sonnet, written during the hours of 9 to 1 AM on Saturday night, when in pregnant delight I conceived my baby. Luxuriating in the feet and music of the words, I chose and rechose, singling out the color and assonance and dissonance and musical effects I wished –lulling myself by supple l’s and bland long a’s and o’s. ( 33 )

In ‘Metaphors’ the ‘I’ subject of enunciation and subject of enunciating, is double-voiced : it is composed of the authorial ‘I’ and its metaphoric disguises: it is as



though the 'I' splits like the maternal body which Kristeva calls the 'place of a splitting' ('Motherhood According to Bellini' 238). Like the maternal site, which is a site of alterity, the 'I' turns into the same sort of transformation, with the various linguistic disguises it employs.

Further, the 'I' in its metaphoric linguistic capacity ( 'a riddle in nine syllables' ), transgresses the maternal semiotic chora, where it belongs and enters the Symbolic where it usurps language, thus making the semiotic and Symbolic co-exist, since 'these two modalities are inseparable within the signifying process that constitutes language' ( *Revolution in Poetic Language* 24 ). It seems that in the existing 'dialogue' between the 'I' and its metaphoric disguises, we, readers, experience a kind of tension between Logos, language and specific voices that threaten it : the voice of the mother, the voice of the poet, the voice of the semiotic.

'Stillborn' is a poem which is further evidence of Plath's predicament. The poem must have been written in the early summer of 1960, after a long period of linguistic sterility partly resulting from her after-birth exhaustion and postpartum depression. In comparing poems to dead fetuses, Plath projects two of her greatest apprehensions : motherhood and creativity. The first stanza is the dreadful prognosis : 'These poems do not live,' despite their almost perfect condition and their intellectual superiority : with '[t]heir little foreheads bulged with concentration.' The mother is not to blame for such a fate, since her love was strong and supporting, but the poems were doomed from the very beginning.

In stanza two there is a sudden shift in the point of view and from the neutral observation of a third party, the reader is introduced, rather abruptly, to the 'I' who will usurp the mother's role. She expresses her dismay as to the 'stillborn' creatures' fates, since she knew that they were 'proper in shape and number and every part,' that is elaborately wrought. These are Plath's very first poems, the apprentice work, as critics have called them, before the geyser of *Ariel* sprang forth in 'that still blue, almost eternal hour before the baby's cry' (quoted in Alvarez, *The Savage God* 37).

These first poems were carefully and elaborately composed with the help of Otto Plath's red thesaurus (Wagner-Martin 166). 'I would rather live with [ a thesaurus ] on a desert island than a Bible,' she writes ( *Journals* 98 ), as if she were endeavoring to 'usurp' a position in the realm of language, in the paternal Symbolic order. At the same time, however, those 'nicely' made poems derived from the strict adherence to her scholastic inheritance, mostly modeled upon literary prototypes ( Dickinson, Millay). This rich inheritance would not give them any life, so now they are preserved 'in the pickling fluid,' smiling at the mother, but dead. Their smile is a persistent kind of smile, in a way annoying, hence the repetition : 'They smile and smile and smile and smile at me,' not like the first sublimatory smile of the infant at its mother's face as suggested by Kristeva (*Desire in Language* 283 ).

These poems do not belong to the fish or pig species, they are not children; they are supposed to be alive, '[b]ut they are dead and their mother near dead with



distraction.' Why would their mother be distracted? What is this almost deadly distraction that seems to be frustrating the mother? Is it perhaps her 'distraction' from her own mother, in an effort to enter the father's Symbolic or perhaps the literal distraction imposed upon her by the duties to her other offspring, her daughter?

The last line's resolution '[a]nd they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her' seals the 'sad diagnosis' of the first stanza. Stupidity, which Plath associated with infant inexperience, the 'clean slate' of their mind, and which in other cases ( 'Child' ) she viewed as a positive force for the mother to turn into experience, is now presented as a negative force. Unlike her biological offspring, who are 'stupid' because they are blank, and who will soon 'erase' their blankness with the help of the mother, the stillborn poems do not seem to be in a position to overcome such a stupidity with or without the 'mother's' help.

'Stillborn,' written after 'You're' and 'Metaphors,' expresses Plath's fear that motherhood was going to suffocate and 'stifle' her. What she seems to be implying with the poem is that her biological offspring will thrive at the expense of her linguistic offspring, a sort of sacrifice, and there is nothing she can do.

That Plath used to refer to poetry as if it were a biological process is well known : 'Slowly, with great hurt, like giving birth to some endless and primeval baby, I lie [...] and let the words come and speak' ( *Journals* 162 ). What she is actually doing in 'Stillborn' is a clever camouflage of her fear : will motherhood kill my linguistic



creativity? The point she is trying to make is that these poems will not survive, not just because of a certain lack of originality or 'blood' in them or because they 'quite bore[d] her,' (Alvarez, *Savage God* 39 ), but mostly because her other creation is stronger, more demanding and will defeat them. They will only survive carefully conserved in the pickling liquid with their annoying smile. Such a lamenting mother figure as this emanates from 'Stillborn' strongly contrasts with the image of the 'Female Author' whose

[G]arnets on her fingers twinkle quick  
And blood reflects across the manuscript;  
She muses on the odor, sweet and sick,  
Of festering gardenias in a crypt,

And lost in subtle metaphor, retreats  
From gray child faces crying in the streets.

'Thalidomide' is a poem which, in one way, shows Plath's concern for universal subjects like children's deformation after the administration of thalidomide to pregnant women; on another level, however, there is a great likelihood that with it, she associates deformed offspring with deformed creation, 'stillborn' poems. That Plath was concerned about universal subjects like the fall-out is evident from her journal entries, the letters home, and what extra pieces of information biographers can give. Of particular importance are two pieces of evidence from the *Letters Home* : in her April 21, 1960 letter to her mother, Plath describes her 'immensely moving experience' when she attended along with infant Frieda, sleeping in a cot, the arrival of the 'Easter weekend marchers from the atomic bomb plant at Aldermaston to Trafalgar Square.' She admitted that she found herself 'weeping' and was proud that

'the baby's first real adventure should be a protest against the insanity of world-annihilation' ( 378 ). Further, her strong conviction against 'tampering with nature' is evident in a letter again addressed to her mother in which she reprimands her for 'adopting' endocrinologists' attempts to regulate height through hormone administration ( 376 ).

'Thalidomide' starts with a series of metaphors and one simile meant to qualify the deformed 'child.' This deformed child with its 'half-brain,' gives out a kind of 'luminosity,' which, however, is superficial, momentary, fake : 'Negro, masked like a white.' Renee R. Curry, in her recently published book *White Women Writing White* in which she discusses the notion of 'whiteness' in H.D., E. Bishop and S. Plath, considers the choice of the negro image in 'Thalidomide' as Plath's connection of the Negro with 'horror in the white imagination' ( 153 ). The 'leatheriness' that the persona sees as her protection, her 'immunity,' Curry identifies with her 'whiteness' and she concludes by asserting that in the poem 'Plath unleashes her most vehemently racist images and associations' (154 ). Although Curry's observation, triggered by her effort to see 'racism' in Plath's work, is quite extreme, it is my belief that indeed the negro image is a negative one employed by Plath to convey fakeness. The 'negro' trope is an image Plath used in *The Bell Jar* as well, in the scene where Esther and Doreen meet Lenny, the disc jockey. Doreen 'just sat there, dusky as a bleached blonde negress ....' ( 12 ), a point indicating Doreen's servile role, as a sex object to satisfy men's desire and at the same time the actual disguise of the servile role, the artificiality manifested with 'bleached.' In 'Thalidomide,' the deformed



child is dependent on others for the satisfaction of its needs of nurture, love, affection. In this role, however, the child is disguised under the mask of a white person. Such a disguise presupposes hidden needs, hidden feelings, additional care or even original satisfaction with the offspring which turns out to be utter disappointment and despair. What the baby lacks, paradoxically, becomes 'spidery,' snakelike, like Medusa's head likely to stifle and suffocate. Further, the speaking persona praises her good fortune not to be subjected to the ordeal she described at the onset of the poem, assuring herself that she is 'protected [ ... ] from the shadow.' Yet, as the poem progresses, she is presented as striving to build a haven, to acquire love for her deformed 'child,' the object, the 'res.'

All night I carpenter

A space for the thing I am given  
A love

Of two wet eyes and a screech  
White spit

Of indifference!

This paradox stems from the speaking persona's identification of procreativity and generativity : her offspring are healthy, she is safe; but her creative offspring, her writing is not, she is unsafe. Her children are perfect in all respects : 'Ein Wunderkind' ( LH 373 ). However, there is another kind of perfection that cannot have children and this is the second creativity that will authenticate her : her creative power, her writing. Writing is her life and if she cannot have it, then her reflection in the mirror is aborted and self-disintegration ensues :



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The glass cracks across,  
The image

Flies and aborts like dropped mercury.

A similar image is used in *The Bell Jar* when Esther appropriates the thermometer and breaks it only to watch the pieces of mercury reflecting items, an indication of her own disintegration, ( 194 ). At this point it is important to consider what her acquaintance Clarissa Roche wrote in a memoir of Plath :

Most of us who knew Sylvia knew a different Sylvia Plath. This [ ... ] was because aspects of her character were dispersed. In a curious way she seemed uncompleted. Like fragments of mercury racing and quivering toward a center to settle in a self-contained mass, the myriad ramifications of her personality sought a focal point. (‘Sylvia Plath: Vignettes from England’ 89 )

This is the very same simile Plath’s excerpt suggests about Esther’s personality on the verge of disintegration, a fragmented selfhood. It is important to note that the material used is the mercury, with its mirror-like characteristic, the mirror itself being the means for the discovery of the self.

If thalidomide can cause children’s deformity, what can cause writing deformity? It is important to consider Plath’s arrangement of the poem between ‘The Rabbit Catcher’ and ‘The Applicant’ (see Chapter IV, ‘Degrading the Eeely Tentacles’). Such an arrangement implies that the thalidomide-stricken mother is lost, or better oscillates between a hunter of rabbits, a husband obsessed with killing animals – ‘Ted’s dreams about killing animals : bears, donkeys, kittens. Me or the baby’ (J 324)

– and an almost perfect mother who is well equipped to cater to the needs of the applicant daughter. If such is the case, then thalidomide can be said to be a poisonous venom, emanating from both sources likely to deform writing and cause disintegration. Both figures have the power to cause linguistic deformity and sterility : the mother with her authority to appropriate everything the daughter ‘produces’ and the husband with his ‘enveloping’ capacity, making her unable to ‘breathe or achoo’ (‘Daddy’), unable to lead an independent writing life, a feeling which was prevalent in her 1958-1959 journals : ‘Dangerous to be so close to Ted day in and day out. I have no life separate from his, am likely to become a mere accessory’ ( NJ 524 ).

My analysis of ‘Mary’s Song,’ a poem written on November 19, 1962, will revolve round Kristeva’s notion that the maternal body is allowed joy only in pain, and that her body has only ear, milk and tears ( ‘Stabat Mater’ 248 ). It will also focus on sacrifice and will attempt to prove that since poetry signifies creation by means of loss ( Lechte 74 ), the speaking persona utters the song, poem, to sublimate the son’s loss.

The initial image of the poem is that of the ‘Sunday lamb crackling in its fat;’ an image in which the ‘double entendre’ of ‘lamb’ is interwoven with food, orality, an idea Plath associates with motherhood and offspring and the Lamb, Jesus Christ. Further, the above image leads to the notion of sacrifice, in which the fat is said to be ‘sacrific[ing] its opacity,’ thus undergoing liquefaction by means of the fire. This is a



religious image, perhaps suggesting Jesus' blood which in its turn is equated to the Holy Communion of the Orthodox Church.

The attribute of the fire as a purifying agent is further elaborated upon, since it can turn the window into 'holy gold' but at the same time it is destructive as it burns heretics and extinguishes the Jews. Such a destructive role, however, is only temporary, superficial, since the presence of the burnt victims is conspicuous : they 'do not die.'

It is only in the fifth stanza where the 'I' appears, with her heart 'haunted' by the 'gray birds.' The assonance of 'ai' in 'my,' 'eye' and 'high' denotes this very appearance of the 'I.' Technology is further juxtaposed to destruction : man has stepped on the moon but the ovens are still glowing, suggesting a new holocaust which the persona feels has become a way of life : 'it is a heart / This holocaust I walk in;' and since destruction reigns, she knows that her 'child-god,' her 'golden child' will be killed to constitute food for the hungry world.

The speaking persona identifies with the Virgin, a point made in the fifth and final stanza, and her jouissance is pain and despair. Such a point is made by Kristeva in 'Stabat Mater' ( 248 -249 ) in which the mother is endowed with 'milk, ear and tears,' that is, satisfying the child's physical need of hunger, crying for him, but with an ear of understanding, as well. The mother figure in the poem is mourning for the

loss of her golden child, a potential victim of the holocaust and this loss is sublimated in an utterance, a poem, a song, 'Mary's Song.'

Kristeva asserts that

[p]oetry emerged alongside sacrifice as the expenditure of the thesis establishing the socio-symbolic order and as the bringing into play of the vehemence of drives through the positing of language. ( *Revolution* 83 )

The mother's jouissance and pain are flowing into language ( 79 ) with the utterance of the song.

Written on the same day as 'Brasilia,' and being palimpsestically dependent on it, 'Childless Woman' centers on the speaking persona's distinction between procreativity and generativity and her emphasis on the latter, thus in a way dismissing, de-emphasizing the importance of the former. Such a resolution is adopted in 'Edge' as well, in which the woman has attained a state of perfection after she has effaced or erased her procreativity.

With the onset of the poem, an image of sterility is introduced. The womb is presented as empty, 'rattling' its seed vessel with the monthly menstrual blood 'wandering,' with no actual place to go. The speaking persona is then introduced as a being with no future, no sense of purpose in life, mostly as a 'knot,' a tangle of different personalities, 'a knot of disparate selves' ( Bronfen 35 ), with no 'solidity' (NJ 409). One of these knots is the identity of the rose which she usurps : 'Myself the

rose you achieve.' She equates herself to her writing, her poetry, as if she is writing the body. Further, she presents her 'ivory body' as 'ungodly, as a child's shriek,' bringing a sort of violence in it, a point she has already made in 'Brasilia' ('And my baby a nail' ). She becomes a spider, 'spinning' mirrors. The choice of the above image connotes with either the pun of the verb 'spin' to spin a tale, to create a song, a poem, or the medusanlike identity she takes on which will give her the power to stun, to turn into stone, to 'eat men like air,' to become a phallic mother, with the pen instead of a penis, and linguistic creation instead of children. In such a capacity, she creates, loyal to her original resolution, 'loyal to my image,' of equating writing and life, '[u]ttering nothing but blood,' an utterance she will later use in 'Kindness' as 'the blood jet is poetry,' writing as an organic aspect. She seems, however, to be aware of the implications and restrictions imposed upon her by her gender, when she says : 'And my forest / My funeral.' The metaphor Freud uses to interpret Dora's second dream in which a forest plays a significant role is apt here. For Freud the forest denotes Dora's pubic hair ( *Case Histories* I 139 ), a point that can be transferred to the speaking persona in the poem, a fact implying her sexuality. It seems that she sees her femininity, her sexuality as one of her enemies, leading to her destruction – Plath writes in her journal 'Being born a woman is my awful tragedy' (NJ 77 ). Since the role attached to someone of her gender is the role of the mother, if she decides to renounce such a role, she will find herself in a dead end with '[t]he roads bunched to a knot,' to a 'cul de sac.' She will find herself on a hill '[g]leaming with the mouths of corpses,' the 'dead dears,' who will be threatening to absorb her, to eat her, since by incorporating her, they will make her one of them, a yes-creature,



agreeing with what the women of her generation, and those before, have already dictated to her, that is the inseparability of femininity and motherhood, and writing as the odd-one out, the intruder.

'The Munich Mannequins,' a poem written on January 28, 1963, discusses female identities and choices in life ranging from motherhood to linguistic creativity. The statement in the opening line : 'Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children,' eliminates one priority : you cannot have children if you are a perfectionist. Or, as Ruth Robbins puts it, perfection is terrible as it is fixed ( 127 ), whereas motherhood in its alterity is always a process. On the other hand, if the speaking persona dismisses procreativity, there will be a whole waste of her monthly menstrual blood, since '[t]he blood flood is the flood of love,' and love on this occasion cannot 'set a [baby] going like a fat gold watch' as in 'Morning Song.' Of course [t]he blood jet is poetry,' and the speaking persona could have this other choice, this opportunity which requires '[t]he absolute sacrifice,' to resort to infanticide so that she can have generativity. David Holbrook suggests that the 'you' in the poem is Plath's daddy and he further associates this with the existence of the 'shoes,' the 'broad toes' mentioned later in the poem ( 158 ). One may say that such an association is plausible, especially if one considers the palimpsestic nature of 'The Munich Mannequins' and 'Daddy' in which there can be seen borrowed images such as 'the black telephone,' 'voicelessness' which in 'Daddy' is rendered as 'the voices can't worm through,' as well as the pun in the use of the verb 'polish' in 'The Munich Mannequins' with its equivalent 'Poland' in 'Daddy.' The similarities are obvious, but I tend to see the

'you' as the other aspect of the speaking persona, the alter ego, the other subject who suggests the other role, that of the generator.

The impersonalization of images manifested in the reference to body parts – 'hands,' 'broad toes' – instead of wholes is contrasted with 'domesticity' presented as the 'baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery.' It is this domesticity, strongly reminiscent of the sugar Dame Kindness offers as a panacea, that lures the persona into considering it as a choice. But '[t]he black phones' are on their hooks, there is no voice emanating from them to help her out, and even their 'glittering' surfaces can provide no safe mirror for a subject reflection. Even the father's Aryan race can provide no solace, no assistance to facilitate decision making, as '[t]he thick Germans are slumbering in their bottomless Stolz,' arrogant as if taking no notice of her.

## What Is My Voice?

Each English major saying, 'I am Sylvia,  
I hate marriage, I must hate babies.'  
Even men have a horror of giving birth,  
mother-sized babies splitting us in half  
sixty thousand American infants a year,  
U.I.D., Unexplained Infant Deaths,  
born physically whole and hearty, refuse to live,  
Sylvia ... the expanding torrent of your attack.

( Robert Lowell, 'Sylvia Plath' )

'Three Women : A Poem for Three Voices' was written by Plath in March 1962 intended to be produced by the BBC radio. The play, as Edward Butscher quotes in his book *Sylvia Plath : Method and Madness*, was written after a request from the BBC producer Douglas Cleverdon who had already produced Ted Hughes' play *The Wound*. Always according to Butscher, the poem was finished by early May 1962 (290 ) and was written at a time when Plath had already given birth to Frieda, April 1, 1960 and Nicholas, January 17, 1962 – ( Wagner 174, 198; Hayman 132, 151; Stevenson 190, 230 ), after she had a miscarriage and after she, herself, must have had an abortion as quoted by Paul Alexander (*Rough Magic* 196-197), and as it can be inferred from a particular journal entry for January 4, 1958 : ' Abortion. Suicide. Affairs. Cruelty. All those I know' ( NJ 307 ). The poem encapsulates all these experiences but it may have been written as an attempt not to emulate but to accompany Ted Hughes' radio play, as she did with other genres he had already tried before her ( for instance the books for children ). Particular biographers, like Linda



Wagner – Martin, suggest that the poem was modeled on Dylan Thomas' *Under Milk Wood*, subtitled *A Play for Three Voices* : 'Read by the author on his 1953 American tour ( which Plath heard in Amherst ), his work had been one of the earliest models of truthful, comic – sometimes bawdy – drama. What Sylvia attempted in "Three Women" was also a truthful and unconventional treatment of an equally unconventional literary subject' ( *Sylvia Plath* 199 ).

According to Edward Butscher, Plath admired Dylan Thomas, a feeling triggered by her seeing

in him a male reflection of her secret bitch self, which was quite masculine in its consciousness of power – herself without sexual restraints and social inhibitions. (*Method and Madness* 69 )

Perhaps it was not just her admiration and idolization of Thomas 'as the perfect example of the modern poet, excessive in language and life' ( *ibid.* ) that mattered but something both poets seem to share : the painful quest for selfhood, the quest for subjectivity experienced as poetic signification and as an effort to go back to the 'time immemorial' before separation to the fairy land of 'once below a time' ( Wardi 56 ), to relive their abortive births and seek an answer to their predicament problems, emanating from the same root but manifested in different ways due to their gender difference.

The unconventionality of themes ( birth, miscarriage, unwanted birth in Plath's poem, and bigamy, Satanism, cannibalism, nymphomania, alcoholism in Thomas' poem ) is

a common denominator of the plays. Secondly in both, action is promoted through 'voice' only : the characters are linguistic beings. What distinguishes the plays, however, is mostly the 'bawdiness' in Thomas' work, which , however, according to Holbrook, 'hides despair' ( *The Code of Night* 244 ). Further Holbrook states that the 'crimes' the denizens could be accused of constitute 'false solutions,' for them after their aborted efforts to seek love, and 'be real in normal ways' ( *ibid.* ). In Plath's play, as I will attempt to show, one is not likely to encounter 'false solutions' to the motherhood predicament, but rather three different attitudes to procreativity and creativity.

As Edward Butscher mentions, according to a confidential 'Audience Research Report' conducted by the BBC, and now kept at the Lilly Library, the poem was not very successful :

Many in the audience thought it unconvincing and were critical of the author's tendency to strive too hard for effect. Others found some redeeming quality to touch upon, such as the cleverness of the writing, though a small minority rejected the play completely. Part of the problem...was that 'two of the three readers engaged for the production were, almost the last moment, unable to take part, and had to be replaced at short notice: consequently the voices of the three women were not differentiated as clearly as they should have been.' ( *Method and Madness* 292 )

The poem is set in a '[m]aternity [w]ard and round about' ( *Collected Poems* 176) and the three voices with no actual interaction among them but some overlapping and repetition of diction ('That would have the whole world flat' ; '[t]hey hug their flatness like a kind of health' ) seem like 'variations of the same personality'



(Butscher 290 ). The three voices belong to three women who happen to be in the hospital ward for three different reasons all associated with motherhood : two births and a miscarriage. The inspiration for the poem is a film by Ingmar Bergman as this is shown in a letter to her mother dated June 7, 1962 :

I've had a long poem ( about 378 lines! ) for three voices accepted by the BBC Third Programme ( three women in a maternity ward inspired by a Bergman film ), which will be produced by the same man who does Ted's plays and who'll be down here to discuss production with me. (*Letters Home* 456 )

As Pamela Annas mentions, the poem is based on a 'less known' film by Bergman, *Nana Livet* ( *The Brink of Life* or *So Close to Life* ) which focuses on three women in a maternity ward whose circumstances are a bit different from those of Plath's characters. In the film the three characters are the Secretary, who, like Plath's Secretary, miscarries, the Worker who gives birth to a dead baby, and a younger worker who is determined to give up her baby, but changes her mind after the admonitions of the other characters. The film itself is based on a short story by Ulla Isaksson 'The Aunt of Death.'

In the film there are certain other characters ranging from the three men 'whose attitude toward pregnancy and childbirth and toward the women significantly affect the three women' ( 75 ) to the hospital staff. Plath, however, focuses her poem on the three women, who are 'voices,' not characters. In her poem there seems to be no one else, though there is a vague reference to the husbands of the Wife and the Secretary, and covert hints of the presence of maternal and paternal figures.



The title 'Three Voices' is indicative of what Plath likely meant her poem to be focusing on : language, the linguistic capacities of the three entities and it is on this aspect that I will be focusing in this chapter : the linguistic characteristics of the poem as these overlap with the notion of motherhood. The two polarities of my analysis will be the maternal and language, which as Kristeva shows in 'Stabat Mater' 'are homologous in existing at the threshold of culture and nature' ( 238 ), and as she also puts it '[a] mother is a continuous separation, a division of the very flesh. And consequently a division of language' ( 'Stabat Mater' 254 ).

The poem has been analyzed greatly and the various critiques range from feminist interpretations to psychoanalytic criticism. The most significant ones for this study are those by Holbrook, Annas, Axelrod, and Aird, constant references to which will be made throughout my interpretation. What I propose to do in this chapter is to comment on the poem exploiting its linguistic references, simultaneously backing up my analysis mostly with quotations from Kristeva's *Desire in Language, Tales of Love, Powers of Horror, New Maladies of the Soul*.

The poem itself is the imitation of the 'actions' of the three women which are 'serious, complete and of a certain magnitude' as Aristotle puts it in his *Poetics* ( 23). The actions of the three women are indeed complete as through their monologue, the reader can envision them at three stages i.e. before the hospital experience, at hospital, and afterwards when they seem to have recovered, each in her own way.

Thus, the poem is itself complete with its exposition, rising action, falling action, and denouement. This feat of Plath to achieve action without character interaction, mainly through telling, has mistakenly been taken by Edward Butscher as a 'feat beyond her skills' ( 291 ).

The poem opens with the 'appearance' of the first woman, the Wife, in the hospital ward being ready to experience the great event of childbirth. She says that she feels well-prepared for this new role assigned to her, 'assisted' by nature itself which 'regard[s] her with attention,' bowing before this miracle. Even the moon which in other poems by Plath is presented as a sinister, indifferent mother ( 'Edge,' 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' ) seems to be personally involved .

She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse  
Is she sorry for what will happen? I don't think so.  
She is simply astonished at fertility.

At this point, the Wife experiences identification with the mother, a point made by Kristeva ( 'Stabat Mater' 240, 256 ). It seems that the Wife acknowledges the maternal presence in the moon which stands for the 'Maternal Thing' she has lost, the Thing she was castrated from. Now during childbirth she will experience 'the bittersweet' reunion with the mother. It is the body of the mother that she aspires to, a body toward which all women

aspire all the more passionately simply because it lacks a penis : that body cannot penetrate her as can a man when possessing his wife. By giving birth, the woman enters into constant relationship with her mother; she becomes,

she is her own mother; they are the same continuity differentiating itself.  
(Klein 239 )

The Moon Mother in a way rejoices at the daughter's new role. The wondering on behalf of the new mother-to-be over her mother's reaction to the birth and her conclusion that the mother will be happy strongly brings the reader back to another case of mother-daughter interaction in matters of motherhood : Aurelia Plath trying to instill in her daughter – quite early in her life – maternal instincts, thus symbolically joining her in an imaginary childbirth in which the daughter becomes a mother. Sylvia Plath's Baby Book, kept by her mother and now housed at the Lilly Library in Bloomington Indiana, among other items from Plath's childhood like maternal observations, unpublished mother-daughter correspondence, includes a poem read by Aurelia and now being sent to the daughter :

I have a doll, Rebecca,  
She's quite a little care,  
I have to press her ribbon  
And comb her fluffy hair

I keep her clothes all mended  
And wash her hands and face,

And make her frocks and aprons,  
All trimmed in frills and lace

I have to cook her breakfast,  
And pet her when she's ill:  
And telephone the doctor  
When Rebecca had a chill.

Rebecca doesn't like that  
And says she's well and strong,  
And says she'll try – oh! Very hard,  
To be good all day long.



But when night comes, she's nodding,  
So in bed we creep  
And snuggle up together  
And soon we are fast asleep

I have no other dolly  
For you can plainly see,  
In caring for Rebecca,  
I'm busy as can be!

The maternal admonition follows the poem in Aurelia's asking her daughter about the fulfillment of her maternal duties : 'Are you such a kind mother to them [ her dolls ] as this little girl was to her doll Rebecca?' ( quoted in Marilyn Yalom 188-189 ). Like Aurelia and Sylvia, who, according to the mother, this time, seem to have reached a joint comradeship in imaginary motherhood, in the Wife and the Moon's case, the moon is rejoicing, astonished at the miracle of birth and it is as though both figures, Wife and Moon-mother, are united, 'reconciled' before the great miracle.

The Wife is further succeeded by the Second Voice, the Secretary, who reflects upon her unsuccessful pregnancy giving it universal dimensions, linking it to destruction and generally to the futility of the mundane world. She sees herself as belonging to the mechanical world she seems to be questioning : 'There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had caught it.' She sees destruction everywhere and most importantly she is the very first character who introduces and meditates upon language. When addressed to, she is mute : 'And I said nothing.' The language she produces, however, flows from her typewriter and is mechanical : 'The letters

proceed from these black keys, and these black keys proceed / From my alphabetical fingers, ordering parts.'

Commenting on how easily Sylvia Plath became a competent typist at the age of thirteen, her mother adds that on various occasions Sylvia used to say that 'the typewriter becomes an extension of the body' (Aurelia Plath in 'Voices and Visions'), which statement reflects the Secretary's feelings : she is being made into an artificial linguistic automaton. Further, proceeding, she wonders whether her plight to miscarry is in a way due to an ancient 'sin' of hers :

As a child I loved a lichen-bitten name  
Is this the one sin then, this old dead love of death?

Like the daughter in 'Electra on Azalea Path' who wonders if she has actually caused her father's death, the Secretary makes a covert reference to the death of a father figure and wonders if this love of hers for the dead has actually been the cause of the death of her embryo. The 'lichen-bitten' name is nothing else but the dead father long entombed into her crypt of mourning, sealed away from those who separated them. The French psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok see reality as a masked and hidden knowledge, kept in a psychic crypt, born of the necessity of remaining concealed, unspoken. This reality is buried within the individual, unbeknown to others, emitting, however, slight tones to the individual reminding of its existence. Further, they suggest that it is the analyst's task to put the unnameable into words ( 141 ). It is in fact, this hidden, concealed knowledge that has surfaced itself right now in the Secretary. Her latest miscarriage was the [ cata / ana ]lyst, that

allowed in a way the secret knowledge to 'worm through' ( 'Daddy' ) the psyche and open the door to the full light of consciousness.

The appearance of the third voice, the Student, signals the end of the character presentation. Her first monologue mostly focuses on the moment she found out she was pregnant and her feelings reverberated through the landscape : 'The willows were chilling / The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine / It had a consequential look like everything else.' What the girl does not want to see in the mirror of the pool is abjection : it is her ego's undesirable face; it is the dark side of narcissism : 'it is precisely what Narcissus would not want to have seen as he gazed into his pool' ( Lechte 159 ). Literally, it is her 'undesirable face,' as she is ensnared in a situation she does not wish to be in; she does not want to be a mother : 'I should have murdered this, that murders me.'

And all I could see was dangers : doves and words,  
Stars and showers of gold – conceptions, conceptions.

The student seems to be having a premonition about her future status : she sees words, conceptions everywhere; the connotation of the latter could be twofold : generativity and procreativity. The foreign reflection in the pool is accompanied by the sinister look of the Swan which might have impregnated her. The created image here is greatly reminiscent of Leda's impregnation by Zeus transformed into a swan (Aird 57 ). Unlike Zeus, the swan here is endowed with an eye which 'had a black meaning,' and like a mirror, it reflects a world 'small, mean, and black'. But still



there is something lurking, something the Girl has glimpsed before : a new discourse is emerging out of the existing chaos : ‘Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act’, a prophetic line for it suggests the Girl’s final ‘restoration’ after her childbirth experience.

She says she is not ready, but nature follows its own course and the baby develops regardless of the mother’s involvement, ‘and the face / Went on shaping itself with love, as if I was ready.’ Here the motif Plath uses in ‘Morning Song’ is being repeated. The fetus develops regardless of the mother, like the baby in ‘Morning Song’, who is ‘set ... going ...’ by love like ‘a fat gold watch,’ while the parents stand there watching.

After the great ‘entrance’ of the three voices during which each exposes the situation, the plot unravels for each one. The Wife records herself at the brink of delivering the baby and she equates her calmness to the actual calmness in nature before the fury of something awful, like a storm. Linguistically, the ‘[v]oices stand back and flatten’ and they are transcribed down in ‘hieroglyphs’ in a language that is not decipherable : Arabic, Chinese. Her linguistic alienation is similar to Esther’s linguistic breakdown in *The Bell Jar* :

The letters grew barbs and rams’ horns. I watched them separate, each from the other, and jiggle up and down in a silly way. Then they associated themselves in fantastic, untranslatable shapes, like Arabic or Chinese. ( 131 )

It is as if just before the great event, the Wife has broken down linguistically, although she can 'talk to herself only, set apart' and like a shell she can only answer, 'face the voices [ that ] overwhelm' her by 'echoing' them; she is linguistically a forged entity, a heterophoton, like the Moon, and she will soon identify with her in her new role of a mother. The reader becomes aware of her condition, 'I am a seed about to break.' Very soon the 'dusk,' the passing out will hood her in blue, 'like a Mary.' The Wife here identifies with the Holy Mother, an identification which, according to Kristeva, is 'masochistic' as it sacrifices identification with the semiotic maternal body for an identification with the Symbolic mother, a paternal mother ('Stabat Mater' 260, Oliver 52 ). In her role as a future mother, the Wife is potentially an instance of Winnicott's 'good enough mother' who will protect the baby, 'I shall be a wall and a roof, protecting. I shall be a sky and a hill of good ...' and she will make adaptations to her infant's needs. She will be soon 'exposed to childcare demands structured by the social relations of the patriarchal nuclear family' (Weedon 33). At the same time, however, like the Kristevan mother, she realizes that it is not a question of giving birth in pain but of giving birth to pain ('Stabat Mater 241); '[w]hat pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?' Her love is seen as a 'form of sacrifice [ that ] produces an acute sense of both identification and separation, of narcissism and masochism, of pleasure and pain' ( Crownfield 33 ) identification with the mother, separation from the son, a 'good enough' mother according to patriarchal standards.



The Wife is going to participate in a 'miracle,' a cruel miracle, during which she will be driven away by the 'horses, the iron hooves' ( 'Words' ). Considering Plath's linguistic poem 'Words' ( 'Off the center like horses'; 'The indefatigable hoof-taps'), the reader is given a clue to the linguistic fate of the Wife : words will drag her away from their domain; she will have her child to focus on without any further linguistic creativity. Her eyes 'are squeezed by this blackness / [ she ] see[s] nothing' and then she is holding 'this blue, furious boy, / Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star.' The baby in the poem makes his appearance 'with a shriek at his heel' in a way like Achilles, the demigod, who, despite his godly origin, is subject to death. In the same way, the Wife's child, although he is for her the 'child king,' something like Plath's 'baby in the barn' ( ' Nick and the Candlestick' ), will be subject to all the evil and the pain of the world. The word 'heels' as associated with the baby's vulnerability, is simultaneously used by Plath in her autobiographical essay 'Ocean 1212-W,' a seminal text for the complete understanding of Plath's philosophy of ego formation, language and creativity. In this essay, she remembers a case when she was caught by the heel by an overprotective mother, perhaps it is the same overprotective role of the Wife as it is implied in the poem :

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. (*Johnny Panic* 117)

As the Wife goes on with her monologue, she proceeds into celebrating motherhood, a praise strongly reminding the reader of the Kristevan motherhood praise of 'the



sublimation taking place' in the mother's body ( 'Motherhood According to Giovanni Bellini' 242 ). At the same time, however, she is amazed at the infant's helplessness and the way this weakness binds her to him, creating a strong bond which like a huge plant growing on milk joins the two. Like the Kristevan 'Mater Dolorosa,' she has her own signs of 'milk and tears' as 'metaphors of nonspeech, of a "semiotics" that linguistic communication does not account for' ( 'Stabat Mater' 249 ), another glimpse into her prospective role.

The last act of the Wife's theatrical performance is played in another setting, that of her house, perhaps in her son's room which she has 'papered ... with big roses' and 'painted little hearts on everything,' the same nursery of 'Nick and the Candlestick,' 'I have hung our cave with roses ....' Although her son is normal she cannot help but think about malformation, about these deformed children that keep haunting her. This fear, a normal fear of mothers, is the same fear that tormented Plath '... birth-pain, even a deformed child' (*Journals* 285), expressed in 'Thalidomide.' The Wife, however, is determined not to be frustrated by such thoughts, but she will instead focus on her son who is normal and whom she wishes to be ordinary and not exceptional :

I do not will him to be exceptional  
It is the exception that interests the devil  
It is the exception that climbs the sorrowful hill  
Or sits in the desert and hurts his mother's heart

Though the above remarks can be made by any mother, Holbrook sees in them the 'caricature' of the schizoid individual directed at 'those normal satisfactions of love the schizoid cannot understand, but really envies' ( 200 ). This could be the predicament of the schizoid individual. But it could also be the predicament of the exceptional individual who, like Plath, is destined to suffer. Further, despite her overprotective tendencies, the Wife is willing to let her child achieve individuation; she says : 'And to marry what he wants and where he will.'

The second voice, the Secretary, is the most complex and most prominent of all three finishing the poem in the same way the Wife starts it, thus enclosing the voice of the Student. After her introductory soliloquy, the Secretary 'discusses' her position in terms of her surroundings : 'It is a world of snow now. I am not at home.' She is at hospital where the white color haunts her like the faces of the dead fetuses she produces. They 'do not touch her;' they elude her and they are 'terrible.' This is another ambiguous use of the adjective 'terrible', a word which Plath mainly associates with motherhood; 'Perfection is terrible. It cannot have children.' ('Munich Mannequins' ) and further on , the Student will call her little girl 'terrible.' The Secretary conjures up her efforts, suggesting that she has somewhat been forced to abandon her critical abilities, perhaps any intellectual pursuits, so that she can conceive a child. At this point, the Secretary is likely to be reproducing Winnicott's address to mothers : ' In the ordinary things you do you are quite naturally doing very important things, and the beauty of it is that you do not have to be clever, and you do not have to think if you do not want to' ( 'A Man Looks at Motherhood' 16 ).

She has endeavored to be a victim of love like other women, trying not to see beyond the surface, trying not to be allured by the sirens of the 'lichen-bitten' name :

I have tried not to think too hard. I have tried to be natural.  
I have tried to be blind in love, like other women,  
Blind in my bed, with my dear blind sweet one,  
Not looking through the thick dark, for the face of another

She can never take hold of her children who, preferring the perfection of their dead status, have escaped her, since '[they] loved [ their] perfection.' Her plight, however, is not only hers: she gives it international dimensions : 'Governments, parliaments, societies.' The disintegration she sees in herself is only the microcosm. What is going on universally is the result of the actions of the 'jealous gods' the 'flat' people who wish to convert the universe into flatness. The Father converses, rather conspires with the Son, without any third person involved, and discuss their plans for the future of the World:

'Let us make a heaven,' they say  
'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls'

They mistakenly take any beautiful existence for 'grossness' which they wish to uproot and clean, disinfect the whole world on their own. Continuing, the Secretary says that her sterility causes self-hatred and fear and she can see death everywhere, even in the 'newsprint,' whereas the 'dark earth,' the 'vampire' drinks her lost creatures. The voracious earth is someone she knows intimately, perhaps someone



close to her, perhaps a mother figure. It is known that in many instances, Plath associated the earth with a mother figure, and she even called her good friend Clarissa Roche 'earth mother' ( Wagner 229 ). The mother figure in the case of the Secretary, however, is one who resorts to cannibalism. On this occasion, it is not the Secretary-daughter who will devour the mother to 'assimilate' her, to 'possess' her to hold her 'within herself so as not to be separated from her' ( *Black Sun* 75 ), but the mother herself who will end up eating her offspring. The image of the devouring mother earth is the one assimilated with the Moon who penetrates her, 'alien' not belonging anywhere, a stick with the O-mouth face, like the lollipop Munich Mannequins. It is she who is to be blamed because she gave her femininity and not a penis ( Chodorow 15 ). It is because of her that she is endowed with monthly cycles that turn into nothingness since she cannot conceive :

It is she that drags the blood-black sea around  
Month after month, with its voices of failure.

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva does not consider menstrual blood polluting or defiling ( 71 ), though she says that in chapter 15 of Leviticus 'any secretion or discharge, anything that leaks out of the feminine or masculine body defiles' ( 102 ). Menstrual blood, however, in its capacity of 'stem[ming] from the maternal ...' is not polluting at all, something which perhaps the Secretary realizes, but like the persona in 'Munich Mannequins,' she sees it as wasted away. Because of this inability, the Secretary sees no definite role attributed to her : Is she masculine ? She does not possess a penis. Is she feminine? She cannot have children. It is as though the persona

here is ridiculing the 'Maternal' label attached to every woman, who is supposed to be fulfilled only through children, a belief that Plath reconsidered many times :

Children might humanize me. But I must rely on them for nothing.  
Fable of children changing existence and character as absurd as fable of marriage doing it. ( *Journals* 293 )

The Secretary has been castrated from her maternal role and she will instead turn into 'a heroine of the peripheral' taking up 'housewifish' daily chores and duties : 'buttons,' 'socks,' 'letters.'

Now it is time for her to go home; she has to go back to her old lifestyle as if nothing has happened. She has to take back her old identity, she has to put on lipstick and 'draw on the old mouth / The red I put by with my identity.' This line conceived as every woman's desire to 'recover her self-interest' after childbirth (Holbrook 198), is indicative of the Secretary's new role, a role she will take up right now since she cannot function as a mother. If we agree with Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok that originally the empty mouth of the baby is filled with food and then the baby experiences 'novel satisfaction' namely language ( 127 ), it is as if the Secretary identifies with a baby or becomes a baby again and draws her own new mouth, so that it can be filled with words anew, with new forms of language. It seems that she longs for a mouth, an outlet for words. She seems to be questioning her identity, 'Am I a parent or child, cause or effect, chicken or egg?' ( *Desire in Language* 272 ). Since she cannot be a parent, she will resort to being a child again with a new mouth, soon to be filled with words, with language.



The body is resourceful.  
The body of a starfish can grow back its arms  
And newts are prodigal in legs

Something is in process right now. The reader suspects that something is budding and it will soon show up. There is a hint that this event will be linguistic. The above image is strongly reminiscent of Plath's 'Stillborn' in which she aligns the creation of poems with the development of a fetus through the acquisition of arms and legs : 'They grew their toes and fingers well enough.' Consequently, it is highly likely that it is language the Secretary will be dealing with.

The denouement of her ordeal is set at her home where she '[is] mending a silk slip [while her] husband is reading.' The light beautifies the surroundings and there is 'pinkness' everywhere suggesting that 'something [ is ] healing.' She is waiting for something to happen and she knows that 'There is a great deal else to do ... Time ... weighs upon [ her ] hands' but she recovers, she is safe, a new life starts for her and '[t]he little grasses / Crack through stone, and they are green with life.'

Axelrod in his study *The Wound and the Cure of Words* suggests that the Secretary, who 'begins as a silenced artist, a woman forbidden entry into the symbolic order except in the role of amanuensis [ will ] replace her miscarried texts with viable ones' ( 176-177 ). My previously suggested linguistic quotations, further supported by Axelrod's revelation as well as the allusion to '[t]he little grasses / [ that ] crack through the stone, and they are green with life,' a reference to Whitman's *Leaves of*



*Grass* as well as Dickinson's 'Grass' ( Axelrod 177 ), reinforce the proposition that, being deprived of motherhood, the Secretary will resort to a new kind of motherhood, that of textual generativity

The initial monologue of the third voice, that of the Student, includes the reflection in the pool water of a beautiful face that is not hers, which, as stated above, could most possibly allude to Narcissism. Kristeva suggested that narcissism is an ongoing structure of the ego, a development ( Crownfield 75 ), and this may be regarded as the first hint that like the Secretary, the Student will also bud into a new being.

Being in a 'mountainous state,' like Plath's persona in 'Metaphors' ( 'I am a ponderous elephant' ), she seems to be sharing the Secretary's negative attitude of men as she blames the doctors for what has happened to her. They are 'flat' like the renounced 'flatness' in the Secretary's monologue. She then makes a reference to the 'flat red moons' of the nights that 'are dull with blood,' suggesting her aggravated fear of death in childbirth as well as the maternal presence of the moon which is not benevolent but shares the indifferent flatness of the male world.

The child the Student gives birth to is a 'red, terrible girl,' crying herself out in a furious delirium, and it is only through the 'hooks' she creates with her screams that her mother takes notice of her. Otherwise she is indifferent to her, imitating the indifferent moon mother in Plath's 'Edge' ( 'The moon has nothing to be sorry about,' 'She is used to this sort of thing' ).The girl is said to be 'terrible', the mother

does not dare face her and supposes that 'her little head is carved in wood.' The silent wooden figure is an image Plath used in her poem 'Event' which focuses on the hopeless end of a couple, the presence of whose child is not comforting but menacing and 'demanding.'

The child in his white crib revolves and sighs,  
Opens its mouth now demanding.  
His little face is carved in pained, red wood.

Both baby figures are painted with obscene colors and both are connected with orality: the open mouth quite ready for the breast and then for language. It is as though in both cases, the child explores the dark side of being and seeks to incorporate a devouring mother in order to give birth to itself in that way, as though s/he is ready to 'bite before being bitten' (*Powers of Horror* 38-39 ).

The Student, despite her realization that her baby daughter is terrible, now feels that '[s]he is a small island, asleep and peaceful,' while she herself is 'a white ship,' not peaceful, but 'hooting' ready for departure, literally her departure from hospital to her old student life, but also the departure for the Symbolic order where she will take up a new identity. All of a sudden, everything, nature included, seems so depressing, so 'mournful' and the girl takes back her old self, 'undo[es the baby's ] fingers like bandages' and leaves. In the next scene, she is at her college's graduation ceremony, she 'is healing' and she feels as if she has experienced 'a dream of an island, red with cries. / It was a dream, and did not mean a thing.'

Ultimately, it is summer again. Lovers 'pass by, pass by / They are black and flat as shadows' with no real blessing or benefit to offer, as if their relationship is sterile so she concludes that '[I]t is so beautiful to have no attachments!' She is 'solitary like grass [ my emphasis ].' 'The swans are gone'; the river misses them. Her baby is gone, perhaps she misses her, too. But the river suddenly hears a sound : 'What is that bird that cries / With such sorrow in its voice?' 'What is it I miss?' Like the Secretary who is deprived of her embryo but is given permission to enter the symbolic order as a linguistic being, the Student is given her lot, too. As suggested above, the word 'grass' is an indication that the Secretary will soon be linguistically creative, generating texts since she cannot produce children. For the Student, the repetition of 'grass' further suggests that she will share the same fate as the Secretary, but there is a further reference which reinforces the above hypothesis : the cries of the bird. It is Whitman who comes to the rescue again, Whitman, the forefather, the 'forerunner' who is to be the inspiring muse. The Student will be a 'chanter.' The cries of the bird that the Student hears are nothing else but the cries of the bird in Whitman's 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.'

Taking all hints to use them, but swiftly leaping beyond  
them,  
A reminiscence song.

As Axelrod suggests, Plath, for whom the ocean was a 'poetic heritage,' 'incorporated' the elements of 'ocean, mother, death, and poetic utterance in her work,' elements concocted by Whitman in 'Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking' (139 ). The reader is at this point experiencing the 'death' of the Student and her



'rebirth' as a mother of texts, which feat she will achieve upon hearing the 'delicious' cry of the bird, a 'reminiscence song,' a song which will carry into the Symbolic order the rhythm, the intonations, the melody of the Semiotic, a remembrance song. It is as if a secret is revealed : of the three voices, the first one is given a baby, domestic bliss and linguistic sterility. The second and third voices are in a way refused the role of the mother but instead they are compensated for by being given the gift of generativity. All three Plathian women 'are, in varying degrees, trapped within the definitions of creativity which their society has assigned to them' (Annas 79). The Wife seems to be the traditional case of the woman whose demands are not many, who prefers the ordinary to the 'exceptional,' who joins the mother in perfect harmony. For her 'mothering involves a woman in double identification with her mother and her child in which she repeats her own mother-child history' (Weedon 56-57). The Secretary and the Student are not 'good enough' mothers, and it is highly likely that their true vocation would be linguistic creativity, thus differentiating the maternal from the creative force. All three voices seem to be Plath's alternatives in a demanding society; they tend to be Esther Greenwood's echoes who aligns her life and what it has to offer with a fig tree full of figs, each fig another alternative for a 'wonderful future' :

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and everyone of them, but choosing one meant losing all the rest.  
( *The Bell Jar* 80 )

It also reverberates the patriarchal society, in the face of Buddy Willard :

I also remember Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. ( 94 )

'I have often wondered if I'd be swallowed up in motherhood and never feel any time to myself' is Plath's personal confession ('Voices and Visions' ). In the poem, however, the catharsis seems to be the incompatibility of the two roles, an incompatibility she must have realized in her personal life, although she desperately tried to 'reconcile' them, getting up at dawn to 'produce' and then dedicate herself to motherhood, 'with the babies [ being ] a constant demand' (*Letters Home* 495 ). As Aurelia Plath puts it,

She began at 4 A.M. each morning to pour forth magnificently structured poems, renouncing the subservient female role, yet holding to the triumphant note of maternal creativity in her scorn of 'barrenness.' ( LH 483 )

### **A Renewed Broth of Communication**

Motherhood can be another form of authentication for the mother if it entails a linguistic rapport between her and her female offspring. Such a 'linguistic conspiracy' will be the mother's effort to initiate the daughter into a linguistic alchemy in which the semiotic will rupture the Symbolic. Kristeva talks about 'le féminin' to denote the unrepresentable aspect of psychical life, what actually remains once the maternal body is incorporated into signs. This 'unnameable' aspect, the remnant from 'once below a time,' ( Wardi 56 ) can be recaptured in various ways – psychosis, psychoanalysis, aesthetic experience, religion – but mostly in motherhood ( De Nooy 18-19 ). It is this 'feminine' that becomes accessible to the mother-



personae of 'Child' (1963) and 'Balloons' (1963) through her rapport with her little daughter.

Although most of Plath's poems focusing on her own children are addressed to her little boy, Nicholas, 'Child' is addressed to her daughter, Frieda ( 'April snowdrop' – Frieda was born on April 1, 1960 ), and along with 'Balloons,' associate the little girl with maternal language. The central image of the poem is that of the clear eye of the child, which is transformed into a mirror, thus strongly implying the mirror stage. As in her other poems related to her children, the image exploited here is that of the child's 'clear eye,' another mirror surface, which the mother wishes to 'fill with color and ducks, / [t]he zoo of the new,' with ' grand and classical' reflections.

This is the mirror stage which presents the subject with an image, which, separate from itself, becomes the object, the other (m)other; the subject is painfully separated from the object of its desire and must search for 'stand-ins,' alternative satisfaction. The mother's body is the source of all gratification ( *Revolution in Poetic Language* 47 ).

The phallic images Plath employs to refer to the daughter, 'Indian pipe, / [l]ittle [s]talk without wrinkle,' are indicative of the child's identification with the mother, the phallus, the phallic mother. At the same time, however, the poem, like 'Balloons,' joins the daughter and the mother like two intersecting circles in which the common, overlapping part is language.



In the first stanza, as mentioned before, the mother wishes to fill the child's eye with '[t]he zoo of the new / whose *names* [ my emphasis ]' the child 'meditates.' The naming is the semiotic disposition that makes its way into language through intonation, rhythms and echolalias of the mother-daughter symbiosis ( *Desire in Language* 157 ). The 'voiced breath' of their previous 'symbiotic' bond becomes maternal language ( 195 ), and it is now that she feels that she is a separate being, quite differentiated from the image of hopelessness the mother projects, with 'this troublous / wringing of hands, this dark / ceiling without a star.' Efforts to incorporate this model, this mirror idol, to assume its being as one's own, recall processes of oral maternal assimilation but are distinct from it. Because the preobject to be incorporated is given in language, when the child assimilates the paternal model to itself, it swallows words. The words, however, on this occasion, are maternal, and by reproducing the (m)other's words, the child achieves a merging : it becomes like the mother and imitates her speech. And the mother's speech is the language she is uttering to write the poem. There seems to be a secret conspiracy between the mother and daughter : language. It is with language that the mother is writing this song to the daughter, this solace, and at the same time the very same process has already been adopted by the daughter who has 'named' the objects of her desire, but she is still 'meditating' upon them, that is refining, processing them in her mind before she turns them into language.

'Balloons' may be one of the last poems Plath wrote, dated February 5, 1963. Many critics see it as a playful poem, 'rejoicing in the mobility of life' ( Bassnett 144 ), but I tend to see it as going more deeply than this. The only playfulness evidenced in the poem is that of the mobility of the balloons, but even that is eclipsed by the other issues Plath brings up in the description of the incident with the Christmas balloons.

The balloons are described as 'guileless,' innocent with no cunningness whatsoever, yet they are said to have taken 'half the space,' as if usurping, colonizing what would normally belong to the mother and the children. Their 'clarity,' the fact that they have been filled with clear air, makes them resemble the 'clean slate' of children's mind, the 'clear water,' as the persona will say in the final stanza of the poem. Their own linguistic capacity is restricted to 'shrieking' and 'popping' sounds, something similar to babies' 'echolalias' signifying the dependence on the mother figure. But, of course, with balloons there is a difference, since the 'popping' sound is their 'swan's cry' since after this they are diminished to pieces, 'shreds,' and 'die.'

They 'delight' the heart like wishes which give somebody sustenance and hope, and at the same time, they are like peacocks 'fulfill[ing] a human need for sheer non-utilitarian beauty. They allow the mind to play upon wishes and fantasies' ( Annas 117 ). This is the impractical side of beauty which is absolutely essential, 'art for art's sake,' that the three lonesome family members need to grasp for survival.



The poem is addressed to Frieda, and it is significant to note that the line 'Boons, you say, boons, boons' of the draft, referring to the little girl's linguistic reaction to the balloons, in contrast to the little boy's 'echolalias' is deleted. The erased line strongly reverberates Hughes' own in 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' : "Moon!" you cry suddenly, "Moon! Moon!" ( *Wodwo* 182 ). The explosive quality of the 'b' sound in the mouth of the little girl is banished from the poem , as the mother wishes to replace the father-daughter dyad with the mother-daughter-son triad. The father is lost. In the same way any reference to the father, anything reminding of him should be deleted.

The baby brother, linguistically incompetent, like his own balloon, can only make it 'squeak like a cat,' and both baby and balloon seem to be belonging to the world of sounds, rhythms, intonations, the 'echolalias,' of the semiotic. Such a world is governed by the strong dependence on the mother and the fusion of the mother and child. It is orality that plays a significant role in this stage, the hungry mouth, and the little boy transfers this capacity of his 'biting' to the balloon which annihilates it. And it is this annihilation that he meditates upon, like an empty 'jug,' a vessel waiting to be filled with 'clear water.' He is the empty vessel, the 'clean slate,' which is to be filled with experiences the first of which had already been added, the 'biting' action that led to the destruction of the balloon and which left the baby with '[a] red / [s]hred in his little fist.' The poem, however, is addressed to Frieda, and it seems that there is a kind of 'linguistic conspiracy' going on between the mother and daughter figures. They are both endowed with linguistic capacities, whereas the little boy is



still absorbed in the world of sounds and rhythms, the semiotic. With this last poem it seems that the mother and daughter have managed to bring the semiotic into the symbolic, to combine the two, while the son has not found such a compromise yet.

Plath writes to her mother :

I have the queerest feeling of having been reborn with Frieda – it's as if my real, rich, happy life only started just about then. I suppose it's a case of knowing what one wants. I never really knew before. I hope I shall always be a 'young' mother like you. ( LH 450 )

Marilyn Yalom, commenting on the above excerpt, writes : 'Here the sense of female bonding and identification extends from mother to daughter to grandddaughter, ignoring the existence of Sylvia's two-month old Nicholas' ( *Maternity* 30 ). The 'bonding' extending from mother to daughter and granddaughter is a kind of linguistic rapport, the language of the Semiotic in the Symbolic order, which the son has just started to use. The mother is trying to compensate for this 'inadequate' use of the semiotic by dedicating most of her baby poems to him : he has to be given poems patterned on the semiotic elements of rhythm, intonation, music to cherish him, to accompany his entrance into the Symbolic order. The daughter will not need any: for her own entrance is already adorned with both elements : like the mother and the grandmother she will carry her semiotic elements into the symbolic, thus 'rupturing' it.

## **Chapter IV Mother's Clutch**

‘WHY DON'T I FEEL SHE LOVES ME? WHAT DO I EXPECT BY “LOVE”  
FROM HER? WHAT IS IT I DON'T GET THAT MAKES ME CRY?’ ( NJ 448 )

‘How can I get rid of this depression : by refusing to believe she has any power over  
me?’ ( *Journals* 280 )

The daughter's love through identification with the mother is the focus of ‘Stabat  
Mater’ : the daughter wants her mother and is reunited with her in childbirth. A  
close consideration of Plath's motherhood poetry leads to this rediscovery of the  
maternal, which, however, is not the idyllic union of ‘Stabat Mater’ :

Recovered childhood, dreamed peace restored, in sparks, flash of cells, instants  
of laughter, smiles in the blackness of dreams, at night, opaque joy that roots  
me in her bed, my mother's, and projects him, a son, a butterfly soaking up  
dew from her hand, there, nearby, in the night. Alone : she, I, and he. ( 247 )

Maternal rediscovery is manifested as abjection and as the regressive attempt to  
recapture the past, to experience ‘sentient time.’ The latter is, as already seen, the  
main characteristic of Plath's books for children and ‘fairy tale’ poems. Abjection as  
the struggle of the daughter personae to release themselves from the stifling maternal  
power and the impossibility of doing so is the main characteristic of the mother  
poems.

For Kristeva, the experience of abjection arises from an indistinction between self and other, a blurring of the limits between inside and outside. This disturbance of identity stems from the initial confusion between the mother's body and the child's. At first separation seems impossible. The child can only partly distinguish the mother's body from its own : her body disturbs the borders that are in the process of being formed. It is then that the mother is 'abjected' : she seems repulsive, unwanted ( PH 13 ). To effect the break from the mother-child dyad, a third party is required : the Other, the Imaginary Father who will facilitate the child's entrance into the Symbolic order, into the realm of language ( *Black Sun* 257 ).

In Plath's case a seeming paradox aggravates the situation : her mother Aurelia was the one to have initiated her into language, perhaps a little prematurely, thus enabling her to achieve a precocious individuation, a writing 'subjectivity,' which helped her feel the 'separateness of everything,' ( JP 120 ). This was the seal which branded her, as if the mother usurped the role of a fairy godmother, 'blessing' ( or cursing ) the daughter with this gift.

Throughout her life, Plath felt that language, her writing 'was a substitute for [her]self' and 'much more : a way of ordering and reordering the chaos of experience' ( *Journals* 280 ); it was 'necessary for the survival of [ her ] haughty sanity as bread [ was ] to [her ] flesh' ( J 37), and made her a 'small god' (ibid. 131). Even at an early age, she 'was used to writing rhymes constantly and making



sketches to accompany them, which she hid under [ her mother's ] napkin to surprise [ her ] when [ she ] came home from teaching' ( *Letters Home* 30 ). As Melanie Klein puts it, if the little girl believes that she has taken all the 'good things' from her mother and 'exposed' her, leaving the 'bad contents' in her, her sense of guilt leads her to the wish of making restitution and giving her back what she has taken from her, 'an impulsion which finds expression in numerous sublimations of a specifically feminine kind' ( 208 ). This is what the daughter has been engaged in throughout her life, but because of the nature of the bond – the phallic mother as language initiator – the daughter feels oppressed by the maternal authority over her writing and believes it to be causing her writing blocks. From Plath's 'mother' poems, a speaking persona emerges engaged in a quest for the true self, attempting to rid herself of the 'stifling' linguistic maternal presence and gain her independent writing identity, but most of the time, this persona seems unable to do so, 'lured' by the inevitable 'call of the mother.'

In the 'mother' poems the 'fusion' and 'separation' from the abject mother are characteristic elements of the struggle to surpass the subjectivity crisis created by the fusion, which is further aggravated by the 'intrusion' of language. As already discussed, the very same drama is reenacted in the poems addressed to her own children. It is the same 'fort-da' game experienced in the mother poems : on this occasion, however, it is not a matter of losing ( getting rid of ) the mother and refinding ( fusing with ) her, but a matter of 'effacing' and 'being effaced;' if she

'effaces' the children figures she can be a writing subject; if her writing subjectivity is erased by them, she can be the 'good enough mother.'

This chapter will focus on Plath's 'mother' poems; an attempt will be made to discuss abjection manifested as the struggle for individuation, a further extension of the 'fort da' game, which, since it revolves around language, becomes even more acute.

### A Stink of Women

'All the Dears' sets the trajectory the daughter-persona will follow until she is able to say '[t]he woman is perfected' and ignore the 'moon' mother who '[s]taring from her hood of bone / [ ... ] has nothing to be sad about' ( CP 272-273 ). The poem must have been finished by April 7, 1957, as this can be deduced from a letter ( dated April 8, 1957 ) that Plath sent her mother :

[ I ] am at last coming out of a 'ghastly stretch of sterility' put upon me by writing countless essays last term, taking all my writing energy. I just yesterday finished one of my best, about 56 lines, called 'All the Dead Dears.' ( *Letters Home* 306 )

Edward Butscher considers it 'one of the few masterpieces from the late stages of her relentless apprenticeship,' dealing with Darwinian evolution (201), whereas Holbrook, in a more Freudian approach, links the mirror images in it to the mother imago. Further, delving into the dead woman figure, he sees in it the mother, who in



this case proves to be 'psychologically sterile,' condemning the daughter 'to a living death' ( 142 ).

On the level of the poem, orality is seen as 'the gross eating game,' a trait of the mother figures which, however, will become a characteristic of the persona too, as she is being summoned to join 'all [ those ] dead dears.' Inspired by Plath's visit to the Archaeological Museum in Cambridge, it is based on an exhibit of

a huge stone coffin, face-up covered by glass, in which lay the remains of a woman. It had been found among the Roman burials at Arbury Road in Cambridge in 1952. The catalogue card attached to the exhibit explained what it contained : 'Apart from these fragments of textiles remaining from the shroud in which the body had been wrapped, and the skeletons of a shrew and a mouse, no objects were found with the bones of the woman buried in this double coffin of stone and lead. A.D. 400.' A further message instructed the viewer to 'note distal end ( near foot ) of left tibia, which has been gnawed.' (quod in Butscher, *Method and Madness* 201 )

Using the trio of the woman with the 'granite grin' and the '[r]elics of [ the ] mouse and [ the ] shrew / That battened for a day on her ankle-bone' as her starting point, she shifts the 'eating game' to the woman herself, observing that 'kin she is' and that 'she'll suck / Blood and whistle [ her ] marrow clean / To prove [ the kinship ].' At this point, according to Nancy Hargrove, Plath plays with the 'expression "blood relatives"' ( 114 ); with this pun, she goes on to present a scene of cannibalism which in a way complements the first image of the mouse and the shrew that ate the woman's ankle bone. The eating game is intensified, as the devouring kin shifts into another trio : the mother, grandmother and great-grandmother who '[r]each hag hands to haul [ her ] in,' thus making her one of them.



The 'mercury-backed glass' of the coffin turns into a mirror, but instead of her own reflection, the speaking persona sees the three women, her ancestors. Winnicott remarks that when the subject sees his / her reflection in the mirror s/he gets a proof of his / her existence, 'When I look I am seen, so I exist' ( quoted in Holbrook, *Poetry and Existence* 142 ); in this case, however, the persona sees the three 'hag' figures instead of her own reflection; in a way, the identity she is seeking to establish gets blurred with their figures and she gets the impression that she is one of them. The figures become abject in their witchlike approach, and like the 'Medusa' figure, they threaten to absorb her, to invite her 'to lie / Deadlocked with them,' in an all-women's world. The image is strongly reminiscent of a 1958 journal entry in which Plath remarks :

The little white house on the corner full of women. So many women, the house stank of them .... A stink of women : Lysol, cologne, rose water and glycerine, cocoa butter on the nipples so they won't crack, lipstick red on all three mouths. ( 266 )

And again in *The Bell Jar*, Esther watches her mother put on lipstick : 'The cruellest twist for Esther comes when the mother's mouth is anxiously forced into a smile for the daughter, because the mirror's reflection only compounds the confusion of real and false faces between mother and daughter' ( Macpherson 70 ). Macpherson continues comparing this scene to a similar one from Olive Prouty Higgins' novel *Stellas Dallas* in which the duet of mother – daughter 'before the mirror tacitly relat[e] to one another through the medium of the feminine mask – each putting on a good face for the other' ( *ibid.*). Doane and Hodges, discussing an illustration of a

'good mother,' in Winnicott's 'Mirror,' stress that unawares, what he presents as the case of a good mother, 'creative and supportive,' turns out to be an example of a mother with psychic disorders. This woman :

seems to unconsciously acknowledge that her role is artificial rather than natural. Only by 'putting on her face' ( i.e. applying make up ) can she meet her responsibilities. ( 27 –28 )

Alice Miller, in her book *For Your Own Good. Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, shows this 'artificiality' when she discusses parents' efforts to be 'ideal parents' which result in 'hushing up,' covering unpleasant experiences in the child pretending that they never happened, which attitude reflects their own desire to 'be the ideal child – well behaved and dutiful – of [ their ] own parents' (257 ). A similar attitude can be observed in *The Bell Jar*, when Mrs. Greenwood remarks about her daughter's nervous breakdown and suicide attempt : 'We'll take up where we left off, Esther ... we'll act as if all this were a bad dream' ( 203 ).

The grandmother, the woman who was supposed to have been adored by Plath in reality, becomes an ambivalent figure : in 'Point Shirley' she is presented as a survivor of the hurricane of 1938, a 'labor of love and that labor lost,' while the sea '[e]ats' the site of the house. Her grand-daughter comes to visit her house, years after her death, to pay her respects and to try and get from the 'dry-papped stones' the 'milk [h]er love instilled in them.' The sinister figure, the abject one in this poem, is the sea which is a 'dogfaced' devouring creature, whereas the grand-daughter is trying to get her grandmother's milk. Edward Butscher remarks that '[b]reasts play an



important part in this poem' ( 240), perhaps indicating the grand-daughter's obsession with milk, with motherly love, or perhaps indicating her insecurity and anxiety.

Plath says in her Journals, 'What do I expect or want from Mother? Hugging, mother's milk? But that is impossible to all of us now. Why should I want it still? What can I do with this want?' ( *Journals* 285 ). According to Melanie Klein, when the small girl's early anxiety-situations set in, her ego makes use of her need for nourishment in the widest sense ( 207 ). Plath's obsession with breasts can be traced very early when, according to Aurelia Plath's reminiscences, she promised to get her two new breasts 'without any holes in them' ( Wood and Yalom 186 ). The above point illustrates, according to Klein's observations, small children's desire to eat up and destroy the breast ( 129 ). If Plath, the girl, wishes to destroy the breast she offers a 'mended' one to cover up things, to bottle up emotions, not to mourn, an approach triggered by Aurelia's upbringing which according to Alice Miller promoted the erection of a false self and led to her suicide (257 ).

In a dream that she quotes in her journals, Plath is living among the Jews, 'drinking milk from a gold chalice' wishing for some honey in it, while the mother is 'furious at [ her ] pregnancy' and mocks at her growing belly (317). In 'Point Shirley,' however, the milk the grandmother could offer may symbolize her motherly and domestic temperament obvious in 'her domestic bliss and joyous acceptance of a narrow female world ...' (Butscher 186 ) which the grand-daughter will try to retrieve from the dry stones, thus seeking another substitute identity.



In a very early poem composed in 1946 'I Thought That I Could Not Be Hurt,' the grandmother figure is presented as 'careless,' when she accidentally blurs 'a pastel still-life Sylvia had just completed' :

Then, suddenly my world turned gray,  
and darkness wiped aside my joy.  
A dull and aching void was left  
where careless hands had reached out to  
destroy

my silver web of happiness .... ( *Letters Home* 33 )

The poem, written when Plath was only fourteen, diminishes the grandmother figure, making her insensitive before the eyes of the reader as an individual unlikely to appreciate and take special care of a work of art. Another reference to the grandmother in Plath's journals creates the impression that what the grand-daughter notices is only her weakest points, what the girl does not wish to inherit :

'To be incorporated into a sarcastic poem about a fat, greasy and imperfect grandmother' :

Laugh as you lift your eyes to the heavens  
And think of her fat pink soul  
Blundering among the logical five pointed stars. ( 24 )

The speaking persona, the 'I' of the enunciation, who wishes to incorporate the above lines into a poem, is laughing; according to Kristeva poetic language would 'wipe out sense ... through nonsense and laughter' ( *Desire* 142 ). The persona's poem-to-be,

her poetic language, will 'erase' the fat grandmother figure and this will only be effected through laughter, as the 'I' 'lifts' her eyes to the heavens and considers Grandmother's femininity 'gone sour,' ridiculing her 'fat' figure which moves 'stupidly' 'among the logical five pointed stars.' Her stupidity and naivete are contrasted to the pragmatism, the 'seriousness' of the stars, the 'fixed stars, [which] govern a life' ( CP 270 ). In the same journal entry quoted above Plath writes:

Grammy is spry, with a big fat bosom and spindly arthritic legs. She cooks good sour – cream sauce and makes up her own recipes. She slurps her soup, and drops particles of food from her plate down the front of her dresses. ( 25 )

This very same figure of the grandmother, along with the great – grandmother and the mother, stretches her hand like an old witch to 'devour' the speaking persona, while simultaneously, another figure behind another mirror, that of the fishpond, invites her: it is the 'daft,' the stupid father, who lost his own life because of negligence, refusing to seek timely medical treatment.

Nancy Hargrove mentions that reading through Plath's unpublished manuscripts, she came across two more stanzas on the father figure, in which he is described as skillful and fearless and his early death is lamented :

A man who used to clench  
Bees in his fist  
And out – rant the thundercrack,  
That one : not known enough : death's trench  
Digs him into my quick :  
At each move I confront his ready ghost

Glaring sunflower – eyed  
From the glade of the hives,  
Antlered by a bramble – hat,  
Berry – juice purpling his thumbs : o I'd

Run time aground before I met  
His match. Luck's hard which falls to love.

Such long gone darlings.

Hargrove argues that Plath decided to omit the above stanzas as she must have considered them too 'confessional' ( 115 ). Plath's omission of these stanzas, however, may not have been due to their too personal character, as she 'released' more confessional pieces like 'Daddy,' and 'Medusa,' but to the fact that she wanted to lay more emphasis on the female figures in the poem to stress their 'devouring' character.

These female figures are likely to grab every occasion to come back to her, like the figures in the short story 'All the Dead Dears,' wishing to make her become like them, to lie there along with them forever 'taking root as cradles rock.' Inevitably, she feels that she will be one of them, devoured and devouring. Written in 1957, a year after she got married, the poem expresses Plath's 'matrophobic' fears and sees the inevitability of her maternal fate : she knows she will be like the mother figures who keep haunting her. Like Anna Freud's phobic Sandy 'who is afraid of being eaten up by a dog,' ( quoted in *Powers of Horror* 40 ) the speaking persona, is afraid of the 'eating dog – faced' mother sea, as it was seen in 'Point Shirley,' which fear has now been transferred and clarified in 'All the Dead Dears' : now the speaking persona, the phobic girl, is afraid of all mother figures; she is afraid of sharing the



same fate with her female ancestors, and feels that she is unable to do anything to change such a fate.

Kristeva maintains that the mirror stage is essential to break 'the mother-child dyad.' Behind the mirror, 'prior to the mirror stage' what can be noticed is the 'voiced breath,' the music that 'fastens us to an undifferentiated maternal body who later, at the mirror stage, is altered into a maternal language' (*Desire* 195 ). It is to this realm that the three figures invite the speaking persona to go, thus proving the inevitability of fate, 'the unrevisable "family script" of self-sacrifice, which Plath so much wished to change' ( Van Dyne *Revising Life*, 174 ).

### **Between a Smarmy Matriarchy and a Missed Ogre**

The daughter-personae in 'I Want, I Want,' 'Electra on Azalea Path,' 'The Beekeeper's Daughter' and 'The Burnt-out Spa' invite a third party, the Imaginary Father, not only to complete the pre-oedipal triangle but also to alleviate their burden. The Father, conversely, is ineffective and cruel. On his death the daughter is not allowed to mourn, prevented by the abject mother. Thus the anticipated beneficial paternal intervention is never to materialize and the daughter-personae 'ricochet' between this father and the abject maternal presence.

The 'demands' of the daughter which the mother seems unable to meet are highlighted in 'I Want, I Want.' According to Nancy Hargrove, the poem must have

been written in the fall of 1958 and published a year later; she sees it as a companion to 'Owl,' both discussing 'the brutality of nature' (137 ).

Janice Markey explicates the poem from a religious point of view, equating the baby figure in it 'incessantly crying' with Jesus Christ. She sees the God figure, not as merciful, but arrogant, someone who has not sacrificed His son for the sake of humanity, but 'one that is intent on ignoring or even persecuting humanity' (76-77). Further, she states : '[W]ithout an influence of women and a real mother, Christ, Plath suggests, is endowed with negative potential and is essentially a sterile, destructive figure' ( ibid.).

I tend to see the poem as the 'baby god's' vain effort to get rid of a mother figure and turn toward an otherwise benevolent father figure, who, however, turns out to be different from the baby's expectations, a sinister, violent figure. The first stanza presents an 'open mouth' image, that of the baby's, longing for the milk, for orality. The baby is 'bald' like the moon, 'bald' being an adjective immensely used by Plath on many occasions, either to describe infants or to connote negativity. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther flipping through the pages of *Baby Talk*, notices the faces of babies 'beaming up' at her 'page after page': 'bald babies, chocolate-colored babies, Eisenhower-faced babies, babies rolling over for the first time' ( 234 ).

In 'The Disquieting Muses' the ladies have heads ' like darned eggs,' and in 'The Munich Mannequins' the sterile dummies are 'naked and bald in their furs, / Orange

lollies on silver sticks.’ The ‘Baby god’ in the poem might be Jesus Christ himself, but the word ‘god’ ( written in lower case ‘g’ ) might be used ironically to denote any baby with its many demands, likely to distract the mother, as these demands, always being given priority, must be satisfied at the expense of hers. The ‘open mouth’ is heading for the ‘dug’ but instead of milk, this ‘dry volcano’ emits nothing but ‘sand’ which scrapes the ‘milkless lip.’ This image of unsatisfied demand for milk is contrasted with the picture Kristeva paints in *Powers of Horror*, with the visceral reaction accompanying the psychic reaction of the child :

[w]hen the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk – harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring – I experience a gagging sensation and, still further down, spasms in the stomach ... nausea makes me balk at the milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. ( 2 - 3 )

The feeling is revulsion caused by the subject’s realization of his / her bodily borders, his / her skin. On the level of the poem, the ‘baby god’s’ revulsion is not caused by the sight and taste of the milk but by its lack, its denial. In a sense, the child is involved in a kind of ‘fort-da’ game, the difference being that it cannot control the offering and withdrawal of the breast in the same way it can control the absence and presence of the reel through language. The control in this case has been placed in the hands of the mother who has not withdrawn the breast but has offered a ‘dried-up’ one. For Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, rejection is to be found in the ‘separation of matter,’ one of the ‘preconditions’ of symbolization and without it there can be no transition from the semiotic ( 117-118 ). In the poem, the mother cannot satisfy the baby anymore – her breasts are dry now – so it turns to the father :



‘crie[s] then for the father’s blood.’ The child which once was the mother’s ‘attachment,’ and associated itself with the breast, now no longer nourishing, is rejected, expelled from the mother’s body and becomes ‘an abject preobject’ seeking salvation elsewhere : it is now that the ‘imaginary father’ should come to the rescue to enable the transition.

The imaginary father imago in the poem, however, is not benevolent but abjectly violent as he ‘set wasp, wolf and shark to work, / Engineered the gannet’s beak,’ creating a cannibalistic, violent world for the ‘baby god’ to reign. Further he is ‘dry-eyed,’ indifferent to the fate of his family, like Plath’s father; he was ‘daft’ ( ‘All the Dead Dears’ ) not to consult a doctor on time so that he could control his diabetes; he was ‘daft’ not to provide for his family financially ( Wagner 29 ). However, like the father-figure in the poem, he wanted to be considered a ‘patriarch,’ a ‘pater familias.’ Ironically, such a wish would prove to be vain, when one considers the family of females, the house full of women, a picture that prevailed after his death, which ‘stifled,’ ‘trapped,’ and ‘smothered’ the daughter ( *Journals* 266 ). The role of ‘der Herr des Hauses’ – leader of the house – Otto Plath wished to attain ( LH 13 ) would collapse.

The father-figure in the poem to whom the baby appeals is ‘inveterate,’ confirmed, established; but another denotation of ‘inveterate,’ ‘chronic,’ points to the father’s long disease. This indifferent father figure is one who, like ‘The Colossus’ considers himself ‘an oracle / Mouthpiece of the dead, or some god or other.’ Like Alice’s

father in the short story 'Among the Bumblebees,' he is a 'giant of a man ... so powerful, and everybody did what he commanded because he knew best and never gave mistaken judgment' ( *Johnny Panic* 259 ). This father figure is further associated with violence: ' ... the vicious little red marks he made in the papers were the color of blood ... ' (262 ), which the speaking persona also sees as a characteristic of the father-figure in the poem who resorted to violent, arrogant actions, turning whatever was positive into negative : 'Barbs on the crown of gilded wire, / Thorns on the bloody rose-stem,' so that he could laugh 'at [ his ] destructive grandeur' ( JP 263). He became a 'maestro' of violence, 'proud and arrogant,' not 'among the bumblebees,' but among the ruins he has created, among the creatures of prey he has put into action, and as such a sinister figure, he can offer no solace, no refuge.

Like the sides of Kristeva's 'archaic oedipal triangle,' the triangle sides in the poem are occupied by 'the subject,' a figure seeking to establish an identity, the 'abject' mother who instead of proffering milk to touch the lips of the baby, offers sand that 'abrades,' and the imaginary father, who unlike Kristeva's father, offers no solution, acts as no intermediary, does not destroy the bad, and never 'bestows nor honors' (BS 79 ).

The 'baby god' figure in the poem seems to be remaining in limbo: since she is not in a position to confront and detach herself from the mother without any help of the father, she sees discourse as not feasible: 'What [ she ] has swallowed up instead of maternal love is an emptiness, or rather a maternal hatred without a word for the

words of the father' ( *Powers of Horror* 6 ). She only 'cried' twice in the poem : once for the mother's breast and 'then' for the father's blood, but those were simply cries, not words, the only words being those of the title, 'I Want, I Want,' which leave both the reader and her with unanswered questions as to her wishes which are aligned with those of the baby god's.

Written in the fall of 1958, the poem expresses Plath's feelings of insecurity and uneasiness evident in the baby god's final indeterminate fate : neither the mother nor the father, but simply the utterance : 'I Want, I Want.' What does she want then? Edward Butscher suggests that Plath must have felt uneasy about abandoning her secure job as a faculty member at Smith College for an insecure free-lance writing career in Boston ( 228 ), especially since this decision was not endorsed by Aurelia (Alexander 221). Her fall 1958 Journal entries indeed reveal a turmoil, the division between a mother and father figure, a kind of vacillation apparent in the poem in which 'the girl who wanted to be god,' ( LH 40 ) oscillates between the two figures :

Queer mother – stiff .... ( *Journals* 222 )

... and begin thus, digging into the reaches of my deep, submerged head,  
'and it's old and old it's sad and old and it's sad and weary I go back to you,  
my cold father, my cold mad father ....' ( 223 )

He was an ogre, But I miss him . ( 267 )

Like a ping-pong ball, Plath, like the baby god persona in the poem, is being hurled back and forth between the two poles, and it is only her psychiatrist who will partly



answer the riddle of her repressed wishes. Kristeva proposes that 'it is want of love that sends the subject onto analysis' ( *In the Beginning Was Love : Psychoanalysis and Faith* 3 ). It is indeed this feeling of insecurity, this unfinished phrase of 'I Want, I Want,' the sense that she is not loved ( *Journals* 268 ), or better that she is loved by a narcissistic mother who loves the child 'for her own sake' ( *Tales of Love* 34 ) and makes Plath appeal to a father-figure unable to help, that leads her to the psychiatrist. For Kristeva analysis, strictly speaking, exacts payment of the price set by the subject for

revealing that his or her complaints, symptoms or fantasies are discourses of love directed to an impossible other – always unsatisfactory, transitory, incapable of meeting my wants or desires. Yet by revealing to my analyst the wants and desires I feel, I give them access to the powers of speech and at the same time bring the powers of speech into ostensibly recesses of meaning. Thus I gain access to my symptoms; I orchestrate my fantasies or I eliminate them, sometimes ably, sometimes less so. ( *In the Beginning It Was Love: Psychoanalysis and Faith* 7 )

What Dr. Ruth Beuscher attempted to do during that fall of 1958 was exactly the same : realizing that it was Plath's inhibited expression of her strong feelings against her mother that caused her writer blocks and consequently her depression, she gave her permission to hate her mother ( *Journals* 265 ). If Plath voiced her hatred, if she acted it out, this could be the best efficacy : so already she feels 'terrific' ( *ibid.* ) The acting out of this hatred 'frees [ her ] from the Panic Bird on [ her ] heart and [ her ] typewriter' ( 266 ) and releases her creative powers.

At the same time, she attempts to connect both father and mother figures in an effort to shed some more light on her predicament. Such an attempt is to be seen in 'Electra

in Azalea Path.' Nancy Hargrove remarks that the poem must have been written some time before March 20, 1959, based on Plath's journal entry for the same date, in which she writes:

Finished two poems, a long one 'Electra on Azalea Path,' and 'Metaphors for a Pregnant Woman,' ironic, nine lines, nine syllables in each : They are never perfect, but I think have goodnesses. ( 299 )

Later, however, Plath dismissed 'Electra' and omitted it from her poetic collection of *Colossus* as it was 'too forced and rhetorical' ( 300 ). The poem is indeed metrically and linguistically 'forced' : it consists of five stanzas of which odd numbered ones ( 1, 3, 5 ) consist of 10 lines and even numbered ones of 8 lines. In all stanzas – with the exception of the first – only the first and last lines rhyme. Linguistically, the poem is a 'patchwork' of colloquial expressions ( 'bothers me,' 'razor rusting' ) which alternate with more formal ones ( 'lightless hibernaculum,' 'hieratic stones,' 'enlisted in a cramped necropolis' ).

What most critics see in the poem is the daughter figure who feels she is to blame for her paternal love as this has caused the father's death, so she now 'knocks for pardon at / [ his ] gate' ( Bassnett 82-87; Marsack 40-42 ). This interpretation is eligible enough, but it is my opinion that the poem can be seen from another angle, if one considers the role the mother figure plays in it. Jacqueline Rose in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, in a chapter discussing Plath's gravesite, brings up a very significant point : the pun Plath is using with the title of the poem : 'Electra on Azalea Path,' versus 'Electra on Aurelia Plath' ( 111 ). Bearing in mind from journal entries ( 272-



298 ) that the poem must have been written in a period during which Plath had recommenced seeing her psychiatrist, and started probing into the feelings she had for both parents, the critic can see the poem not just as an attempt to exorcise the speaking persona's hatred and love for the father, but as an attempt to complete the oedipal triangle by drawing the maternal side in it.

Plath, according to her journal entry dated December 27, 1958, read Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' and was trying to account for her feelings toward both parents as well as her suicide attempt, drawing material from Freud's paper :

An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide : a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself : the 'vampire' metaphor Freud uses, 'draining the ego' : that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: Mother's clutch. ( 279 )

Apart from Freud's reference to the 'vampire draining the ego,' she must have also read his discoveries as to the melancholic's blaming others apart from himself, the attempt to locate a scapegoat :

If one listens patiently to a melancholic's many and various self-accusations, one cannot in the end avoid the impression that often the most violent of them are hardly at all applicable to the patient himself, but that with insignificant modifications they fit someone else, someone whom the patient loves, or should love. ( *On Metapsychology* 256- 257 )

Aurelia Plath, whose name Plath is trying to blend in the poem through the title, is being used as a scapegoat, a catalyst : 'I may have all the answers to my questions in



myself, but I need some *catalyst* [ my emphasis ] to get them into my consciousness' ( J 299 ).

The four references the speaking persona makes to the mother figure are meant to give her own version of the story, 'borrow[ing] the stilts of an old tragedy.' The old tragedy is not just the drama of the house of Agamemnon she is borrowing as an analogy for her own 'family romance' (*Jensen's Gradiva and Other Works* 235-241), but the tragedy between any mother and daughter, the eternal drama of love and hatred, symbiosis and individuation.

In the first stanza, the daughter stresses the protective role of the mother who prevented any feeling of guilt from enveloping the daughter who 'wormed back under [ her ] mother's heart.' Kristeva in *Black Sun*, discussing Duras' works, says:

Identity in the sense of a stable and solid image of the self where the autonomy of the subject will be established, emerges only at the end of [ the ] process when narcissistic shimmering draws to a close in a jubilatory assumption that is the work of the Third Party ( 257 ).

The intervention of the Third Party in the poem is not put into effect because the mother figure lives under a delusion and transfers it to the daughter : 'As if you had never existed.' 'Ocean 1212-W' ends in these words: 'My father died and we moved inland' ( *Johnny Panic* 124 ); a chapter is finished, the page is turned : the daughter 'worms back under [ her ] mother's heart,' no words about the father : they 'just can't

worm through' ( 'Daddy' ) because the protective 'wall and roof' of the mother ('Three Women' ) will not let them.

In the poem, the mother is a 'virgin' mother and '[h]er wide bed wears the stain of divinity.' The reference is most probably meant to be an allusion to the ancient custom, even now preserved among certain cultures, of 'displaying' the virginity of the bride the morning right after the wedding. In the poem it is as though the mother was a virgin mother, one, who having conceived without a father, without a primal scene, 'excluded' him. This leads once more to Kristeva who, in *Tales of Love*, discusses the beneficial role of the imaginary father, without whom there can be no unimpeded entrance into the symbolic ( 149 ), an aspect the speaking persona seems to be sharing, as she blames the mother for the erasure of the father figure. The mother figure, as presented by the daughter, has probably realized that her daughter is the only means for her own authentication, her only acknowledgment in the Symbolic order ( PH 13 ). Consequently she wants to keep her for herself and she is attempting to do so not only by refusing to turn her over to the realm of the father, but also by silencing his name.

There is no further reference to the mother until one reaches stanza four in which there are two more allusions : one to the 'evil cloth' the mother unrolled at the father's last homecoming, a reference to Oresteia with Klytemnystra's unrolling of the red carpet, as well as a dream reference, this time Aurelia Plath's dream. Concerning the red cloth, Susan Bassnett sees 'the association of redness' in it as a

connotation of 'menstrual blood' ( 86 ), a common trait of mother and daughter. Thus the speaking persona realizes the bond that joins her with her mother, the solidarity between them, a solidarity that makes her waver at the feeling of blaming her. As to the mother's dream, Plath's journal entry for December 27, 1958 reveals :

I have lost a father and his love early; feel angry at her because of this and feel she feels I killed him ( her dream about me being a chorus girl and his driving off and drowning himself ). ( 278 )

Ultimately in the poem, interpreting the mother's reaction to the father's death and the effort to 'alleviate' the daughter's pain by stressing human mortality ( 'You died like any man' ), the daughter 'shrinks' at the thought of becoming like her : 'How shall I age into that state of mind?'

The poem deals with the same theme as 'All the Dead Dears' : the daughter's blame of the mother and her fear for the inevitability of her fate: she will be like her : the hands will 'haul' her along with the mother, as she is an extension of her. Max Gaebler, a family friend, in a paper delivered before the Madison Literary Club on March 14, 1983, and now kept in the MRBR at Smith College, mentions his reaction to listening to Plath's recorded reading of her poems :

It was Sylvia's voice all right, but it could as well have been her mother's. Was this 'the echo of her voice, as if she had spoken in' her daughter? Aurelia herself writes that 'throughout her prose and poetry Sylvia fused parts of my life with hers from time to time.' Here she seemed to have fused voice and intonation and vocabulary and enunciation. ( 4 )



In 'Electra in Azalea Path,' the speaking persona is the melancholic who does not mourn for the father because she is in a way prevented by the mother from doing so; the mother has somehow created a 'crypt' and buried the father thus making him inaccessible to the daughter. The visit to his gravesite is symbolic : it is a piece of evidence that the father is buried somewhere : in Azalea Path, but also in the daughter's psyche. N. Abraham and M. Torok in 'Mourning or Melancholia : Introjection versus Incorporation,' talk about an 'intrapsychic tomb' erected through 'inexpressible mourning' ( 130 ). 'The words that cannot be uttered,' the words that the mother prevented the daughter from saying by hindering reference to the father (*Journals* 266 ), 'the tears that cannot be shed,' the tears that the mother prevented from flowing by not letting the children go to the father's funeral and by not shedding any tears herself ( *Letters Home* 25-26 ), were swallowed and preserved ( Abraham and Torok 130 ), and the daughter is blaming the mother now.

The speaking persona can be compared to Marguerite Duras' characters whose, as Kristeva puts it, 'impossible mourning' does not remove their 'morbid lining' thus preventing their setting up an 'independent, unified subject' ( *Black Sun* 257 -258 ). Like Duras' heroines, the speaking persona has reached 'a dangerous, furthestmost bound of [ her ] psychic life' as she is standing at the father's gate, 'a hound-bitch, a daughter, a friend' asking for forgiveness.

The attempt to finish the oedipal triangle by joining the three lines representing father, mother, and daughter is further evidenced in 'The Beekeeper's Daughter.'

Although the prevalent atmosphere is one dominated by the bees, their 'maestro,' the father, and the daughter, the daughter speaking persona is introducing a fourth term : the mother. Such a reference is an indication that the mother has not been got rid of yet; somehow the daughter is carrying her within her and she is making an effort to 'oust' ( Holbrook 26 ) her from the scene by saying that she has no place in such an environment, and she could never crave a queenship in here.

The unexpected reference to the mother in stanza two could be regarded as a form of 'parapraxis,' a slip of the persona's tongue, symbolic of unconscious attitude, which according to Freud, indicates the partial discharge of her incompletely repressed emotional urge ( Clark 95-96 ) : she always has the mother in mind, she carries the Maternal thing with her locked like a corpse in the crypt of her psyche ( *Black Sun* 28-29 ), and her desire to erase her presence results into this kind of partial discharge of her half repressed wish : 'she would not like such an environment, I know, so she shouldn't be here.' The poem once again, but rather mildly this time, denotes the persona's effort to break the bond with the mother and become autonomous in the Symbolic order along with the Law of the Father, where she thinks she can 'pair' with him and find her true self.

David Holbrook suggests that the 'queenship' the speaking persona identifies with is one associated with 'maleness' being anther-like, so it must be directed at the father and not at the mother. And since all its yearning is directed at the father, it is Electral, incestuous and matricidal : 'A fruit that's death to taste : dark flesh, dark



parings.' ( 26 ). Consequently, it is evident that the daughter makes two efforts to 'oust' the mother : firstly by reassuring herself that such a queenship will be unwanted by and unattractive to her, and secondly by resorting to matricide. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva discusses feminine sexuality as another form of abjection, but she goes so far as to state that it is not just the case of making the mother abject, but an instance of killing : matricide. The daughter kills the mother so that she will not kill herself : 'matricide is our vital necessity, the sine-qua-non of our individuation' (27-28). Thus the beekeeper's daughter 'extinguishes' the mother from the otherwise idyllic scene with the sensuous bees and the father figure, by murdering her, excluding her from a place she does not actually belong to, so that she can gain her freedom and join the father.

Subject formation, as closely related to the mother figure, is the subject of the next poem, 'The Burnt-out Spa.' According to Plath's Journal entry for November 11, 1959, the poem was one of those she had written for her *Colossus* collection : 'I wrote a good poem this week on our walk Sunday to the burnt-out spa. A second book poem' ( 327 ). Not many critics consider the poem significant enough, hence the lack of adequate criticism on it. Jacqueline Rose is one of the first to sense the significance of the poem for the connection Plath makes between the conception of identity and the conception of poetic language and form. The gender of the spa as 'male' and the sudden appearance of the 'blue, improbable' woman are, according to her, pieces of evidence that the poem itself is 'a type of allegory for a femininity on the verge of flight' ( 133 ). Further, Rose considers of utmost importance the fact that



in this poem Plath takes up 'male voices,' those of the doctor or the archaeologist, the former being a profession she 'represents in terms of the worst of male institutional and sexual power' in other works of hers, for instance in *The Bell Jar* (134 ). Uroff, on the other hand, considers the existence of the 'blue person' in the poem very significant, as 'the first tentative evolution' of the female identity which will culminate in *Ariel*, a proposition with which Butscher partly agrees, maintaining that the blue person is the 'real artist in her and the offspring of the myth of the father' (247), the latter being a point that in a way diminishes and eliminates the mother figure which is of utmost importance in Plath's poetic philosophy.

N. Hargrove sees located in the poem the existing contradiction between the spa, which is abundant in elements and clues for rebirth and regeneration, and the speaker herself, who seems to be utterly desperate. She quotes J. Rosenblatt's statement concerning the very negation of the other's identity on behalf of the speaking persona, as Plath's 'rejection of the past or of her desire to commit suicide' ( 213 ).

Wood's theory in a way accords with those of Uroff and Butscher and connects the existence of the other identity with Plath's creativity, seeing in it the perfect, the 'immaculate' artistic achievement, as inaccessible. At the same time, he sees this existence as reflecting Plath's 'desire for success in writing' (14 ).

I do consider the poem important as another indication of Plath's preoccupation with elements such as orality, which she covertly associates with the mother figure, and

which seems to be the focus of most of her poems written during the period in discussion ( 1959 ). The first line of the poem sets the tone for what is going to follow and at the same time with its suggestive character leads the reader to another level of perception : ‘An old beast ended in this place’ : the literal interpretation of which is that she equates the burnt-out spa with a beast; the spa, a healing place was not actually purged by fire, but it conversely turned into a beast, an ugly monster with ‘wood and rusty teeth,’ and eyes converted into ‘lumps / Of pale blue vitreous stuff, opaque.’ On the other hand, the beast could be anyone else who, although considered benevolent, turned out to be ‘beastlike.’ This other could be anyone who let her down, father, mother, or husband.

I am of the opinion that the poem, as already mentioned before, shares the characteristics of Plath’s 1959 poetry, with well hidden hints turned against her mother, a topic she had not mustered the courage to discuss openly yet, although she was given ‘permission’ by her psychiatrist to ‘hate her mother,’ to act her hatred out (*Journals* 265). A close reading of the poem reveals many hints which if put together, like a jigsaw puzzle, give the complete picture. The first reference is found in stanza three, in which the ‘rafters and struts’ of the burnt-out spa seem to be wearing ‘[t]heir char of karakul still.’ Though it might be clear that the speaker refers to the actual color of the burnt rafters and struts, there is a painstaking effort to hide, or perhaps to reveal, another message : the phrase could be paraphrased as referring to the ‘black sheep’ – karakul is ‘one of an Asian breed sheep the young of which have a black fleece’ ( *Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary* 779 ). It is quite apparent



that the speaker wishes to imply that someone is the silenced black sheep of a family, and most likely she refers to herself and her family. Why would she, however, be the black sheep, the prodigal child? Perhaps the speaker herself seems rather incognizant of the answer, that is the very reason she 'prick[s] and pr[ies] like a doctor or / Archaeologist' to find the answer. At this point, one is likely to be reminded of Freud's love for archaeology and his office decorated with ancient paraphernalia. The Wolf Man writes :

Freud himself explained his love for archaeology in that the psychoanalyst, like the archaeologist in his excavations, must uncover layer after layer of the patient's psyche, before coming to the deepest, most valuable treasures. ( *Wolf Man by the Wolf Man* 139 )

Gradually, it seems that the answer comes to the speaking persona in the poem : first there is an element of orality which in Plath's poetry of this period is associated with the mother figure. Kristeva talks about food which sets up the 'archaic relationship' between the human being and its mother ( *Powers of Horror* 75-76 ). In the poem '[t]he small dell eats what ate it once.' This is a kind of orality transferred from the original devourer to the one being devoured : it will be the dell, the daughter by association, who will devour the mother now to incorporate her. It is as though the speaker here becomes the phobic whose fear hides 'an aggression, a violence that returns to its source, its sign being inverted' ( *ibid.* 38 ) and tries to escape this fear by incorporating her mother's body to hold on her ( 39 ), though this might not be feasible after all.



'From the broken throat [ and ] the marshy lip' of the spa, like language, the answer seems to be coming forth : there is a mirror, formed by the spring itself which gives the reflection of a '[b]lue and improbable person.' Like a troubled creature of our times, the speaker wishes to acquire a stable mirror to find the reflection that will give her solace ( Anna Smith 162 ). The idol she gets here, however, perplexes her even more : it is something 'blue,' depressed and 'improbable,' too good to be true : a figure, like Plath's mother working hard to make both ends meet ( *Journals* 266 ), Kristeva's second type of the two-faced mother 'tight to suffering, illness, sacrifice,' another abject figure ( *Powers of Horror* 158 ).

The idol is '[f]ramed in a basketwork of cat tails,' gracious but austere behind the looking glass which is 'toneless,' still, as if silence and stillness are some of its inherent characteristics. The medusan creature is not the speaking persona : 'It is not I, it is not I.' It is the mother medusa with her penis-like hair framed around her face, the Phallic mother. For Kristeva negativity, rejection is necessary for the onset of symbolicity ( *Revolution in Poetic Language* 117 ) and the speaker emphatically wishes to differentiate herself from the 'blue person,' like a child who needs to negate the other in the mirror stage in order to identify as a subject ( *ibid.* 117 ).

'No animal spoils on her green doorstep' : the other creature who is definitely not the 'I' but an abject medusan figure is pure and durable as if 'in a miraculous state of repair' ( 'Medusa' ), and her dwelling place is clean of any animal excrements, green as if no one has stepped on it; it is quite clear that the pattern of the poem follows the

pattern reported by Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* concerning the 'thetic' phase : the thetic phase in the signifying process operates like a threshold after the mirror stage in which the child recognizes itself as a separate subject through the other of its mirror reflection. In the poem the spring is the mirror, and the speaking persona recognizes herself as other : 'It is not I.' After this comes the threshold, the mother's 'green, clean doorstep' that leads in and out. The reference to the doorstep is an allusion to *effraction*, a breach, which Kristeva mentions in *Revolution* ( 247 ) : entering a place, like breaching a law, and housebreaking are suggestive of the multiple strategies implicit in breaking through the thetic, a disruption most clearly marked in poetic language ( 49 ). What the speaking persona seems to be hinting at here is that she does not dare break into the mother's house to go back to the semiotic fusion with her, as there is a 'stream,' a buffer that divides them, the Symbolic order which cannot give her, however, any 'nourishment or cure' either, even if she wishes to enter it.

Finally, the prodigal child has revealed her predicament : neither the semiotic nor the symbolic : neither the mother nor the imaginary father : solace is to be found nowhere. It seems that here the situation reverses what Kristeva presents as the ideal case of the subject formation process :

A representative of the paternal function takes the place of the good maternal object that is wanting. There is language instead of the good breast. Discourse is being substituted for maternal care .... ( *Powers of Horror* 45 )



The good maternal object has been rejected but the 'representative of the paternal function,' the spring, who was supposed to replace it, has failed too, providing no nourishment ( no food ), no cure (no language, no writing, no creativity).

### Carrying the Maternal Corpse

Plath's preoccupation with mother figures climaxes in 'The Disquieting Muses.' According to Ted Hughes' chronological arrangement in *Collected Poems* ( 70 ), the poem was written in March 1957. Nancy Hargrove, however, in her book *The Journey Toward Ariel* maintains that the poem must have been written between March 22 and March 27, 1958 ( 140 ). She draws her conclusion from Journal excerpts ( 210, 122, 218 ), and expresses surprise as to Hughes' negligence :

The order of composition for the 1958 poems can be more firmly established than that for 1957 because of copious references in journal entries and letters as well as in unpublished materials of several types. In addition, the list of poems read at recording sessions on April 18, 1958, June 13, 1958 and February 22, 1959 ( see Tabor 134-141 ) provide specific dates by which specific poems had been completed. ( 135-136 )

Commenting on the poem on a BBC radio program, Plath remarked :

It borrows its title from a painting by Giorgio de Chirico – 'The Disquieting Muses.' All through the poem I have in mind the *enigmatic* [ my emphasis ] figures in this painting – three terrible faceless dressmaker's dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird clear light that casts the long strong shadows characteristic of de Chirico's early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women – the Three Fates, the witches in *Macbeth*, De Quincey's sisters of madness. (CP 276 )



Aurelia Plath in the documentary *Sylvia Plath : Voices and Visions* praises the poem for its artistic qualities but remarks that she was hurt by it as her daughter had ‘manipulated what she said.’ In Paul Alexander’s *Ariel Ascending*, Aurelia is quoted as saying that Sylvia Plath had in a way blended some of the autobiographical elements in it, thus combining hers and her mother’s life an action, which Pat Macpherson interprets as Plath’s realization that ‘her mother’s attitudes were supposed to become hers, no matter how objectionable she personally found them’ (qtd in Wagner-Martin 2 ).

Further, in ‘Biographical Jottings about Sylvia Plath,’ kept in MRBR, Aurelia Plath writes :

This poem appeared in the first book of poems, THE COLOSSUS and was sent, lovingly inscribed to me for my birthday. I asked her about the last section of the poem [ ... ] and Sylvia said, ‘Oh, that! Well, you were always so calm, so confident about my recovery when you visited me at the hospital, it made me angry. It seemed you didn’t realize what hell I was going through!’ she pictured me as a Mary Poppins figure, etc. [ sic ] ( MRBR )

There is a tendency among critics to view the poem as the mother’s effort to protect the daughter from the ugly world, but the three fates ‘she so unwisely failed to invite to [ her daughter’s ] christening’ keep haunting the daughter, ‘cast[ing] shadows over her life’ thus making the mother’s effort vain ( Bassnett 75 ). Nancy Hargrove notes that the five negative prefixes in the first stanza along with the invocation to the ‘mother indicate the intensity of the speaker’s angry indictment of her mother.’ At the same time, however, they stress the ‘indissolvability’ of the maternal hold (151).

In my analysis, I will first try to align the three 'enigmatic' figures with Julia Kristeva's three cases of feminine depression as analyzed in *Black Sun* and prove their overwhelming presence on the daughter's life and work. My analysis was triggered by Plath's remark about the 'enigmatic' nature of the muses as well as her observation that they 'suggest' a twentieth-century version of another sinister trio. This trio is sinister in the sense that their presence will leave indelible scars on her, that will become the evil 'company' she will 'keep' for the rest of her life. Furthermore, they are 'contemporary' figures, as they are likely to 'befriend' every contemporary person, and their presence will be only revealed through psychoanalysis, a route Plath found useful if one considers her sessions with Dr. Ruth Beuscher as well as her own reading of Freud, Jung, Rank.

It is not my purpose to consider the confessional character of the poem, but I will use certain biographical elements for I do believe, agreeing with A. Horner and S. Zlosnik that :

the contemporary reader can ... see the works as integral to the author's construction of his or her identity. The critic is thereby free to read autobiographical writings as quasi-fictions, and fictions as aspects of autobiography. ( 3 )

Reading Plath's work in terms of her life, as in Daphne du Maurier's case, is according to Janice Morgan :

To be made aware of the evolving self as an endless negotiation between event and illusion, the critical and the imaginary, where myth, allegory, and



lived experience combine in complex, interdependent patterns to form what Michel Leiris calls the 'authenticity' of the self. (qtd in Horner and Zlosnik 3)

Concerning the confessional character of particular poems, Sylvia Plath is quoted saying that she

cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle [ she was probably alluding to Snodgrass' 'Heart's Needle' that influenced Anne Sexton greatly ] or a knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, like being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind. ( 'Voices and Visions' )

It is very clear from the above statement that Plath used her autobiographical material, but 'distorted' it to make it applicable to her writing, to make it, in a way, subservient to it. Thus, my analysis will not be focusing on autobiographical material to stress the source, but it will stress the 'mixing, the blending' of the material and the technique.

The three aspects my analysis will draw from are the three case histories of feminine depression as analyzed in *Black Sun* : (a) the body as a crypt, (b) blind devotion to duty and (c) the virgin mother. Each figure is addicted in a way to the maternal thing which constitutes an incomplete separation or non-separation from the maternal figure, a point the daughter-persona in Plath seems to be indirectly making, for by suggesting that the presence of the muses has in a way 'eradicated' the presence and influence of the mother, paradoxically, she talks about an incomplete separation from



the mother, thus viewing her fate as inevitable, since she will be perennially carrying with her the mother's corpse as it is also suggested in 'Medusa.'

In the first case history, that of Helen's, the first muse by association, the body is thought of 'as a tomb or the omnipotent devouring' ( *Black Sun* 71 ). For the depressed person in this case 'playing dead seemed ... when she could talk about it, therefore after the event, like a "poetics" of survival, an inverted life, coiled around imaginary and real disintegration to the extent of embodying death as if it were real' (73 ).

The above characteristic constitutes a striking similarity between Kristeva's Helen and Plath's persona in 'Lady Lazarus' who talks about her experience after the suicide attempts and returns as a survivor to fight back. As mentioned by Pamela Annas ( 110 ), in Plath's poetry 'one senses a continual struggle to be reborn into some new present; but when the perceiving consciousness opens its eyes, it discovers that it has instead made' ( *ibid.* ) a

#### Theatrical

Comeback in broad day  
To the same place, the same face, the same brute  
Amused shout  
'A miracle!' ( CP 110 )

In Helen's case history, the anguish to kill the 'intruders' in her 'prostrate, mindless, motionless passivity' ( 73 ), was meant to be a substitute for being dead and 'the faces to be killed were mainly the faces of the children' ( *ibid.* ). When she was

released from the 'dreamlike melancholia [ that ] had trapped her,' she resorted to infanticide ( 74 ).

Infanticide is an important aspect of 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 specific references to dead babies throughout her work, starting with 'Stillborn' in which unsuccessful poems are likened to stillborn babies and culminating with the enigmatic infanticide in 'Edge.' According to Kristeva's psychoanalytic observations, the desire to kill, evident in the first case history and hence in the first sinister muse by association, seems to have been triggered by the subject's ( Helen's ) desire to kill the deformed child in her (74); but in Plath's case the situation is even more problematical.

On one occasion, as her journal entry for Monday, June 15, 1959 indicates, she mentions infanticide as a revenge measure, but this is a rare occasion triggered by her jealousy and disappointment at being rejected for the Yale Young Poet competition. The imagined infanticide in this case is to be found in some notes for a story with Anne Sexton and her lover George Starbuck ( the winner of the Yale competition), as well as Anne's children as the main characters : 'I wouldn't be surprised to read tomorrow in the paper that the little girl was killed falling from that roof' ( NJ 498 ).

Such an obsession with dead children can hardly be accounted for with certainty, but it must be noted that the reason might have to do with her own ambivalent attitude towards children : completion or inhibition :

If I could not have children – and if I do not ovulate how can I? – how can they make me? I would be dead.....  
My writing a hollow and failing substitute for real life, real feeling, instead of a pleasant extra, a bones flowering and fruiting. ( *Journals* 310 )

‘I do not want to be primarily a mother ....’ ( *Journals* 73 )

‘No children until I have done it.’ ( *Journals* 165 )

‘The Merwins want no children – to be free. Free to be narrow, selfish & confined in age’ ( NJ 323 )

Susan Suleiman in ‘Writing and Motherhood,’ discussing the double standards existing between male and female writing, notes :

The male writer, in comparing his books to tenderly loved children (a common metaphor, at least until the recent emphasis on writing as autoerotic activity), could see his metaphorical maternity as something added to his male qualities, the childless woman whose books ‘replaced’ real children too often thought ( was made to feel ) that she had less, not more. ( 359-360 )

Susan Van Dyne quotes Barbara Johnson noting : ‘It is as though male writing were by nature procreative, while female writing is somehow by nature infanticidal’ (142). This could be considered a plausible answer to Plath’s infanticidal riddle : her ‘killing’ of babies , like her killing of the daddy figure is symbolic : she ‘erases’ the



children so that she can be independent or perhaps it is the poet in her that kills, eradicates any baby imago, so that she can dedicate herself to writing without any interruption coming from their demands. She seems to be sharing the statement 'With every word I write, with every metaphor, with every act of genuine creation, I hurt my child' (Suleiman 374).

Paradoxically enough, after Plath's suicide, in 1969, Hughes' lover, Assia Wevill, gassed herself in an action imitating Plath's suicide, at the same time, *literally* killing along with her the baby daughter she had from Hughes :

On a frigid spring morning in a flat in Clapham Common in London, Assia Gutman [ Wevill ] swallowed a handful of sleeping pills and then groggy and disoriented, gathered up her baby Shura and went into the kitchen. She switched on the gas in the oven and , as she held Shura, waited for the gas to fill the room. At the time of their deaths, Assia was thirty-four, Shura just two. Years later, unsubstantiated rumors about that morning could still circulate in literary circles. It was said that Assia had carried out her desperate act on – or beside – a trunk that contained the unpublished manuscripts of Sylvia Plath. (Alexander 346 )

A third significant characteristic traceable in the first case history of feminine depression and hence in the first muse is the analysand's intolerance of mirrors. The looking glass is the locus where she can protect herself from the desire to kill :

'... by going through the looking glass and settling down in that other world where, by limitlessly spreading her constrained sorrow, she regains a hallucinated completedness' ( *Black Sun* 74 ). It seems that the depressed, dismal muse, on this occasion, passes through the looking-glass only to be perfected, to gain a new kind of personality by releasing her sorrow.

Pamela Annas, in her study *A Disturbance in Mirrors*, notes that 'the mirror is a recurrent and powerful image for Sylvia Plath' and suggests the various ways she is using it, adding that the fate of the mirror-looker could be one of the following :

(1) [he ] may, like Medusa, see something in the mirror that turns [ him ] into stone and locks [ him ] rigidly into an identity; (2) [ he ] may pass through the boundary of the mirror and dissolve, losing a separate identity; (3) [ he ] may, caught between two mirrors, see only a shimmering and infinite series of reflections and never have the question of identity resolved; (3) [ he ] may see nothing at all, and that is death. ( 3 )

Kristeva aligns the depressed woman with 'an Alice in distressland' and Annas quotes :

In Lewis Carroll's *Through the Looking Glass*, Alice, whom Plath in an early poem [ sic ] refers to as 'my muse Alice' climbed through the mirror into another world. Sylvia Plath too often found herself up on the mantelpiece touching her hands to the glass and wondering whether to pass through, catching glimpses of a world as strange as but far less full of delight than the world Alice saw. ( 3 )

Like the depressed woman, who passing through the looking glass takes refuge behind that glass where 'dissolving' her previously restrained sorrow will lose one identity and take up another, Plath can 'show' several instances of similar cases in which the mirror gives out different aspects of the self like in 'Mirror' in which the speaking persona, the mirror, 'boasts' of the various personalities it can reveal (*Collected Poems* 173), or in 'Ouija' in which a chilly god 'rises to the glass from his black fathoms' ( CP 77 ), or 'On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover' in which



the 'I' seeks her 'image in the scorching glass' ( CP 325 ). Finally, in 'Ocean 1212-W,' in retrospect, the adult Plath, reflecting upon the ocean, says : 'I often wondered what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking-glass' ( *Johnny Panic* 117 ).

Plath's preoccupation with mirror images is additionally manifested in her senior honor thesis for Smith College, entitled *The Magic Mirror : A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels* in which she seeks to discuss the double in Dostoevsky in an effort to account for the double in herself.

Characteristically she remarks :

By seeking to read the riddle of his soul in its myriad manifestations, man is brought face to face with his own mysterious mirror image, an image which he confronts with mingled curiosity and fear. This simultaneous attraction and repulsion arises from the inherently ambivalent nature of the Double, which may embody not only good, creative characteristics but also evil, destructive ones. ( 'The Magic Mirror' 2 )

Further, another characteristic handed down by the first muse ( the first case ) is a kind of orality evident in Helen's desire on occasions to 'stuff' the body with food 'to get rid of it' ( BS 74 ) or to orally assimilate the mother by eating her 'so as never to be separated from her' ( 75 ).

Indeed throughout Plath's work and glimpses of her life as can be seen from letters and journals, there seems to be an obsession first with food and secondly with orality



which, as suggested by Jacqueline Rose, is associated with writing ( 32 ). Food references figure prominently in Plath's work ranging from letters, journals, poems, stories :

Dearest mother, Oh! camp certainly is wonderful. On Sunday afternoon we had ham and cheese just to start off the season with. I had two helpings along with four cups of milk ! ... At lunch I stuffed myself like a hog.

If you're hard up on ration points when I come home you can have toe [ sic ] slaughter me and you can eat me for pork .... ( quoted in Middlebrook and Yalom 190 )

... I had developed a passionate taste for cold vichyssoise and caviar and anchovy paste.

... my grandmother always cooked economy joints and economy meat-loafs and had the habit of saying, the minute you lifted the first forkful to your mouth, 'I hope you enjoy that, it cost forty-one cents a pound,' which always made me feel I was eating pennies instead of Sunday roast. ( *The Bell Jar* 27 )

Further, as Jacqueline Rose puts it, 'language and orality [ in Plath's ] work run back into each other, their connection made literal – writing as biting, sucking ...' ( 31 ), activities which lead back to the mother, thus revealing an ambivalent attitude towards leaving, absorbing or being absorbed by the mother :

Mother, you are the one mouth  
I would be tongue to. Mother of otherness  
Eat me. ( 'Who' )

As quoted in Diane Wood Middlebrook's biography of Anne Sexton, orality was one of the characteristics that brought the two poets together. Anne Sexton records :

Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicide; at length, in detail, and in depth between the free potato chips. Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem. Sylvia and I often talked opposites. We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. *Sucking on it* [ my emphasis ]! ( 107 )

As mentioned by Kristeva, Helen at the beginning of her analysis 'was warring with her mother' ( BS 74 ); then 'assimilated her into [ herself ]' ( 75 ) 'lock[ing] her up within herself and constantly keep[ing] her company.' ( 76 )

Plath's ambivalent relationship to her mother centers upon similar feelings : a constant battle with her expressed in poems like 'Medusa' in the Journals ( 276, 279, 282 ), but simultaneously a desire to get rid of her, expressed in ambivalent interpretations of particular lines : 'There is nothing between us,' ( 'Medusa' ) and finally a similar assimilation with the mother, an action she both feared and craved :

What do I expect or want from Mother? Hugging, mother's Milk? But that is impossible to all of us now. Why should I want it still?

ASK ABOUT MOTHER-LOVE : Why these feelings? Why guilt .... Magical fear Mother will become a child, My child : an old hag child. ( *Journals* 285 )

Kristeva quotes her depressed patient 'complain[ing] that her words, with which she hoped to "touch" [ Kristeva ], were hollow and dry, "far removed from her true feeling"' ( 76 ). Such a feeling can be very clearly observed in one of Plath's last poems 'Words' of February 1, 1963 :

Echoes traveling  
Off from the center like horses.

.....

Years later I  
Encounter them on the road –

Words dry and riderless ( CP 270 )

As Steven Axelrod very aptly puts it, the poem ‘allegorizes the poet’s problematical relationship to her poetry’ ( 72 ). Since Plath considers herself a linguistic being first and foremost, any linguistic crisis becomes an identity crisis, as well. Since her words have turned out to be ‘dry and riderless’ – better writerless – evading their ‘mother,’ in a way she is doomed. As in Helen’s case, for her words have ‘no meaning’ ( BS 77), have diverged and their echoes travel ‘off from the center ....’

The final ‘gift awarded’ by the first muse is frigidity. Kristeva remarks that ‘frigidity betrays an imaginary capture by the frigid woman of a maternal figure anally imprisoned and transferred to the cloaca-vagina’ ( BS 77 ). She adds that

such a mother, who is imagined as indispensable, fulfilling, intrusive, is for that very reason death-bearing. She devitalizes her daughter and leaves her no way out. What is more, since she has been imagined as monopolizing the jouissance her daughter had given her, but without returning anything in its stead ( without getting her pregnant ), such a mother cloisters the frigid woman in an imaginary solitude that is affective as well as sensory. ( 78 )

Further, Kristeva, interpreting Helene Deutsch’s assertion about the frigidity of the vagina, writes :



A woman uses the fantasy to enclose an inaccessible object inside her body. The object in question is the 'bad mother' whom the woman imprisons to prevent losing her, to dominate her, to put her to death or even to kill herself inside this melancholic embrace between two women. (*New Maladies of the Soul* 197 )

Plath has in a way turned her own mother into a virgin 'phallic mother' after her father's death making her sign a paper 'in shaky printing' in which 'stood these words : I PROMISE NEVER TO MARRY AGAIN [ sic ]. Signed -----' ( LH 25 ). Such an omnipotent, celibate presence 'paralyz[es] the kicking lovers,' ( 'Medusa' ) thus making them impotent, depriving them of their jouissance. Plath's lover-husband has momentarily 'dissolved' the mother imprisoned in her by giving her a new life, but that compromise did not last long. It failed because, unlike Kristeva's ideal partner 'who acts neither the father's part, ideally rewarding his daughter, nor the symbolic stallion's that one is supposed to obtain through a manly competition' ( BS 78), the lover-husband usurped both roles and the bond was doomed.

The second muse can be identified with Kristeva's second case history, Marie-Ange, whose very characteristic is 'blind devotion to duty' ( 80 ). She is distinguished by a feverish activity that gives the depressed person the appearance of a practical woman, at ease with herself, who thinks only of being useful ( BS 80 ). Such a characteristic was discernible in Plath's life during which she managed , at a great cost, to combine maternal duties with writing. Even before becoming a mother, however, with evidence from the *Journals*, the *Letters Home* and the biographies, one gets the impression that she had enormous reservoirs of power and stamina to keep a house,

write and at the same time act as her husband's literary agent, typing and circulating his manuscripts, in the same way Aurelia used to edit her husband's work (LH 12).

Domestic duties, however, are ridiculed in poems such as 'The Tour' and 'Lesbos.' In 'The Tour' the passive maiden aunt, the hidden or 'dirty' side of a disintegrating 'I' according to Axelrod ( 221 ), is introduced to a domestic world where nothing seems to be working properly, where the surface hides many dangers both for the self and the others, where the world of the married niece should make the maiden aunt happy she has remained celibate. In 'Lesbos' Plath's practicality has been replaced with '[v]iciousness in the kitchen!' and the persona's 'alter ego' is inviting her to a world free from 'schizophrenic' baby girls, 'doggy' husbands to 'a rock off Cornwall ... comb[ing her] hair ... wear[ing] tiger pants.'

For Marie-Ange, according to Kristeva, 'loss of the erotic subject [ was ] felt ... as an assault on her genitality and, from that point of view, amount[ed] to castration' (81). '*As if her phallus were her psyche* [ italics existing ], the loss of the erotic object breaks up and threatens to empty her whole psychic life. The outer loss is immediately and depressively experienced as an inner void' ( 82 ).

Plath experienced her own 'phallic castration' with the husband's abandonment; her 'bereavement,' however made her more productive as poems came pouring out of her like a torrent only to be staunched by the gas oven.



Marie-Ange 'had muffled within herself the distress and devalorization where the real or imaginary maternal neglect had left her. The idea of her being ugly, useless, and insignificant did not leave her ...' ( 85 ). After the birth of her baby brother, Plath felt neglected and it seems that her plight must have started then :

I would have a surprise when mother came back. It would be something nice. It would be -- a baby. A baby. I hated babies. I who for two and a half years had been the center of a tender universe felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones. I would be a bystander, a museum mammoth. Babies !  
.....

As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin : I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over. ( *Johnny Panic* 120 )

Maternal neglect resulting from the brother's birth must have enabled Plath to separate herself from the rest of the world and attempt to form a self, whereas Kristeva's patient seemed to have formed '[t]he idea of her being ugly and insignificant' ( 85 ) a feeling Plath seems to share :

Look at that ugly dead mask here and do not forget it. It is a chalk mask with dead dry poison behind it, like the death angel. It is what I was this fall [1952], and what I never want to be again. The pouting disconsolate mouth, the flat, bored, numb, expressionless eyes : symptoms of the foul decay within. ( *Journals* 66 )

Nose podgy as a leaking sausage : big pores full of pus and dirt, red blotches, the peculiar brown mole on my under-chin which I would like to have excised. ( 260 )



Further, Kristeva reports that the patient 'filters' through her phobias 'the desire for death, for her own death ( for want of avenging herself on the mother )' ( 85 ). Throughout Plath's work there can be noticed this desire for death either as a desire to join the father in death as in 'Electra in Azalea Path,' or as a desire to die together with the mother : ' O Mother, let us die together' ( *LH* 124 ). For Kristeva's patient, who displaces her death desire into the mother, the 'terrorism of such depressive hysteria is often expressed by aiming for the mouth' (85), a characteristic shared by Plath and her speaking personae as it has already been shown before.

Additionally, an excerpt from Plath's journals further exemplifies this longing for orality, a remnant perhaps of the little girl's deprivation of the breast :

Finished the Mummy story, really a simple account of symbolic and horrid fantasies. Then was electrified this morning, when I made an effort to come out of my lethargy and actually wash a pile of laundry and my hair, to read in a Jung case history confirmations of certain images in my story. The child who dreamt of a loving beautiful mother as a witch or animal : the mother going mad in later life, grunting like pigs, barking like dogs, growling like bears, in a fit of lycanthropy .... Then the image of the eating mother, or grandmother : all mouth, as in Red Riding Hood ( and I had used the image of the wolf ). ( 317-318 )

Kristeva's third case history, Isabel, is an 'unwed mother,' a woman who has chosen to be 'a virgin mother' ( *BS* 86 ). Kristeva could discern a real or perhaps imaginary 'desired' seduction on behalf of the father, triggered perhaps by the mother's contempt that destroyed or 'demystified' the father figure in the girl's imagination :

Her father's symbolic existence doubtless helped Isabel in erecting her professional armor, but the erotic man, the imaginary father, the loving, giving, and gratifying one had become unbelievable. ( BS 92 )

She then had a choice between a paroxysmal sexual life and ... 'virginity' ....  
( 93 )

The former was her teenage choice and the latter her 'motherhood' period. Her child was the child dedicated to the 'ideal father,' but not the physical one, whom she had bestowed upon the mother.

Plath's 'company,' the third muse, had bestowed on her a similar fate : she became a virgin mother, like her own mother, after her separation from Ted Hughes. In 'Letter in November,' she seems to be rejoicing at such a 'virginity' : she is 'so stupidly happy' and finishes the poem by a kind of invocation : ' O love, O celibate / Nobody but me / Walks the waist-high wet.'

Throughout Plath's life and work there can be noticed a tendency, a pattern leading towards an ideal father, not the father who had 'committed suicide' and deserted her by refusing any medical treatment, but the Colossus whom she had tried to re-erect, a figure she later identified with a husband figure and whom she exorcised in 'Daddy': 'Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through' (CP 224).

Like Isabel's, her early adulthood was characterized by 'a paroxysmal sexual life' which she abandoned for marriage and motherhood. Edward Butscher in *Sylvia Plath*.

*Method and Madness*, discussing Sylvia's promiscuous life, especially her sexual escapades during the ship journey from America to England in 1955, remarks :

Sylvia is real here, and touching, pathetic, a lost little college girl wanting male strangers to reassert her illusions and dreams. Reckless love-making was another form of poetry, a mocking echo of the sea's rhythmic cradle, a necessary therapy until she could reach shore and reassert her masks. ( 164 )

Linda Wagner - Martin in her recently published book *Sylvia Plath. A Literary Life*, discussing Plath's short story 'Tongues of Stone,' in which the persona 'engages in meaningless sex,' suggests that like Plath, the Girl does so in an effort 'to find spiritual closeness, all the while repressing her fears of abandonment by the family' (5-16 ). Further she suggests that Plath did not actually receive the proper attention from her family who tended to evade events instead of confronting them directly (ibid.). Wagner's observation is further supported by a consideration of two of Aurelia Plath's letters sent to Sylvia and which are now housed at the MRBR. Dated December 4 and December 8, they were written and sent during a difficult period for Plath. Instead, however, of comforting her, they are both 'replete' of Aurelia's air of superiority and although maternal love does not seem to be absent, one can sense that the mother is trying in every possible way to prove that the daughter has erred :

Aren't you going to bring your pressure cooker, stainless service and kitchen utensils? You do have to cook, after all.

Naturally, I assumed that you would not leave deposit books lying about so that they would be noted!



At the same time in an effort to 'match' her daughter's critical abilities, she writes her own review of E. W. Barnes' biography of E. Sheldon, *The Man Who Lived Twice* and J. H. Griffin's *Black Like Me*. On reading Aurelia's letter one is drawn to two other letters ( dated September 17 and September 26, 1962 ) written by Dr. Ruth Beusher. The expected maternal comfort and advice which is absent from Aurelia's letter is present here. She tries to build up Plath's confidence by giving her a set of guidelines but at the same time she makes it quite clear that she loves her : 'I have often thought, if I "cure" no one else in my whole career, you are enough. I love you' ( MRBR ). As for books she is not reviewing books to compete with Plath, but she merely recommends Eric Fromm's *The Art of Loving*, as it is 'very important for [her] to read this book at this time' ( *ibid.* ).

### **Stifling Mother**

The characteristic element of 'Aftermath,' 'The Rival' and 'The Other' is the maternal presence which becomes a devouring power aiming at the incorporation of the daughter figures. In 'Aftermath,' the mother is once more turned into an abject figure. Chronologically, Nancy Hargrove places the poem in March 1959, and Edward Butscher states that it was probably written after 'Point Shirley,' and sees in it Plath's effort to externalize 'her interior drama' as well as 'a broader social canvas, a reflection of her growing political awareness' ( 240-241). At the same time, he regards the poem as an indication of Plath's dissatisfaction or dismay with the American way of life, a kind of defense mechanism she might have invented to make 'her forthcoming voyage to England more sensible' ( *ibid.* )

Hargrove sees it as evidence of 'humanity's obsession with the tragic and sordid,' and locates its origin in an excerpt of the journal entry for March 9 in which Plath talks about a fire in the Smith College Library that 'inspired the composition of the poem.' She also mentions and dismisses as 'incomprehensible' Hughes' remark that the poem 'steers in quite masterfully towards some point in Plath's life that has been painful' ( 242 ). With no further elaboration, Hargrove rejects Hughes' remark, while at the same time omitting a significant sentence that clarifies this remark, 'For the first time she tried deliberately to locate just what it was that hurt' ( Aird 27 ), a statement that signifies Plath's effort to discover the source of her problems, which does make sense if one 'probes' into the poem to locate her 'camouflaged revelations.'

During February and March, 1959, Plath was troubled by her desire and inability, as it seemed then, to get pregnant, by the sessions with her psychiatrist during which she had started reconsidering her relation with her mother, speaking more openly about it, and mostly by the visit to her father's gravesite ( *Journals* 298-299 ). Hughes was right in seeing in the poem her effort to delve into her life to see what hurt; in the poem the answer, or perhaps one of the answers, to the riddle is to be found lurking in the mother figure.

The mother in the poem is an abject figure, a Medea, since she has killed her children ( *Smaller Classical Dictionary* 286 ), but at the same time, she has managed to

'cheat' the inquisitive crowd into believing that there is nothing spectacular for them to see except the fire: no murder, no tragedy. Such a realization makes the crowd leave the scene, rather unsatisfied. The irony is that the readers are cheated along with the crowd as they are manipulated to accept the viciousness of 'the peanut-crunching crowd' ( 'Lady Lazarus' ) and sympathize with the mother figure roaming among the ruins of her house, while the crowd is dying for sensational news.

The description in the final stanza of the poem 'cautiously' presents the mother figure, and it is as though the reader can view her through a veil, somewhat remotely; another attempt of Plath's to express herself under a carefully constructed camouflage. Moving 'humbly' among the ruins, like an ordinary housewife, Mother Medea arouses the pity of the reader who blames the curious crowd who sucks 'her last tear' and abandons the scene as mundane with nothing spectacular to offer to cause excitement.

The figure, however, is in reality abject : she is a murderess : she is Medea, but it seems that her crime has gone undetected : the crowd has left wholly unsatisfied, while she is left shedding tears which may not be true. Her gluttony to kill the children and offer them as edible material ( Medea's myth ) is being displaced onto the crowd. It is as if the narrator's wish is to separate the emotional charge from its real object and attach it to an entirely different one, a process characteristic of dream work as this is presented in Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* ( 413-414 ) : 'No



death, no prodigious injuries / Glut these hunters after an old meat ....' Their appetite has not been satiated, consequently, they depart 'sucking' her tears.

The poem is a conventional standard sonnet with a rhyme scheme and a syllabic count of nine. Camouflaged behind forced diction ( 'calamity's magnet' ), strong and compelling images ( 'bloodspoor of the austere tragedies' ), Plath was trying to take up a false façade, to make the crowd blamable while in reality it is the mother figure whom she wants to present as abject, guilty of infanticide, and not the crowd for inquisitiveness.

'The Rival' was composed in July 1961 ( *Collected Poems* 167, Wagner-Martin 98 ) and the 'rival' figure in it was interpreted in different ways. According to Stevenson

[i]t seems likely that the rival addressed was her own evil 'other,' a totemic figure that subsumed women she feared or disliked. Essentially the rival was a projection of herself. The poem is a malevolent exorcism by a woman who for some reason not explained in the poem lives under perpetual threats. (252)

Wood agrees with Stevenson that the poem is 'a portrayal of a self divided' ( 43 ), whereas Wagner-Martin sees in it Ted's sister, Olwyn Hughes, whom Sylvia did not like.

Wrestling with the fact that her sister-in-law had accused her of being selfish and piggish, Plath wrote a poem about the beautiful Olwyn titled simply 'The Rival.' ( *A Literary Life* 97 )

Wagner goes on to briefly analyze not the poem as printed in *Collected Poems*, but a version in its drafts, focusing on the three parts with special emphasis on the second part some excerpts of which appear in the printed poem. According to Stevenson, the second part juxtaposes the childless figure of the ‘rival,’ who, however, has a baby she likes and ‘sits beguilingly in a distant room’ to a young mother who ‘crawled on all fours, / A sow or a cow [ an image associated by Plath with maternity – see ‘Morning Song’ ] to play with the smiling child’ ( 98).

Toni Saldivar suggests that the poem shows Plath’s hidden energy that will be released later :

This poem is addressed to Plath’s muse : the empty O that looks like the moon and leaves ‘the same impression / Of something beautiful but annihilating.’ This is Plath’s furious self who makes ‘stone out of everything’ only to destroy it and then remake it to say ‘something unanswerable.’ Plath shows no fondness for this force. ( 134-135 )

I regard the poem as belonging to that group of poems focusing on the mother figure. The rival in this case is the mother who tends to appropriate everything : writing and children. I base my analysis mostly on my personal interpretation, drawing material mainly from the *Journals* and *Letters Home*.

As stated before, written in July 1961, the poem ‘coincides’ with Aurelia’s visit to England, where she spent some time looking after Frieda while Plath and Hughes were vacationing in France with the Merwins ( *Letters Home* 420 ). It was then that Hughes and Plath decided to buy ‘Green Court’ in Devon, about which Aurelia writes to her son Warren in the States :

I wish I could see it, but Ted and Sylvia are glad ( I sense ) that the distance makes this impossible right now. They don't mind your seeing it, but said I would find flaws that they intend to eradicate by the time I come to visit next summer.! [sic ] ( 421 )

It is quite obvious from the letter, despite its factual character, that Aurelia does not approve of the Hughes' decision, but at the same time, another point can also be seen: the Hughes' determination to keep Aurelia's meddling presence at a distance. It was under these circumstances and after the Hughes' unsuccessful stay with the Merwins caused by Plath's jealousy and obsession with monopolizing Ted that the poem was written ( Stevenson 215-217; Wagner 191 ).

The moon image so recurrent in Plath's work is a prominent figure in this poem as well and serves as a contrasting figure to the Rival. 'If the moon smiled, she would resemble you.' This is the starting statement of the poem. The unsmiling figure of the moon is somehow a foil for the Rival who keeps smiling despite any hardships: the Rival smiles a martyr's smile despite her hard life, despite the fact that she has to wear 'the same old coat' while 'the children had new school clothes and shoes that fit' (*Journals* 266 ). Both figures, the moon and the Rival, however, are 'beautiful but annihilating' with the Rival destroying the daughter through her oversymbiotic bond with her. Neither of them is original : they both derive their power from somewhere else : the moon from the sun, the Rival from the matrilinear inheritance, a point already discussed in 'All the Dead Dears.'



The Rival is a medusan figure who brings the speaking persona back to the mausoleum where the 'stone coffin' of the 'gone darlings' is and where she is '[t]icking [ her ] fingers on the marble table.' This image is strongly reminiscent of an image in 'Leaving Early' :

The roses in the toby jug  
Gave up the ghost last night. High time.  
Their yellow corsets were ready to split.  
You snored, and I heard the petals unlatch,  
Tapping and ticking like nervous fingers.

The above image is further associated with another incident with the mother figure, overtly involved this time :

My mother turned from a foggy log into a slumbering, middle-aged woman, her mouth slightly open and *a snore* [ my emphasis ] ravelling from her throat. The piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be to take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands. ( *The Bell Jar* 129-130 )

On the level of the poem, the Rival is as '[s]piteful as a woman, but not so nervous.' Why would the speaking persona call women 'spiteful' and 'nervous'? Is it perhaps because she associates all women with the mother and sees spite in them all? Does she refer to any literary ancestor of whom she might have been jealous and whom she wanted to outdo? Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *No Man's Land*, examining the 'ways [ women writers ] situate themselves within a female culture,' deduce that twentieth century women writers 'have had complex and problematic relations with their literary foremothers' ( quoted in Axelrod 82 )

'Who am I angry at?' asks Plath in her journals. She gives herself an answer :

Myself. No, not your self. Who is it? It is my mother and all the mothers I have known and who wanted me to be what I have not felt like really being from my heart. ( NJ 437 )

What to do with your hate for your mother and for all mother figures? What to do when you feel guilty for not doing what they say, because, after all, they have gone out of their way to help you? ( NJ 435 )

On the other hand, such a hating attitude can be attributed to Plath's jealousy for any woman likely to be after her husband. Since the poem must have been written shortly after the incidents on the Merwins' farm in France, then it is highly likely that the above generalization can be the result of this feeling :

... a woman, I fight all women for my men. My men. I am a woman, and there is no loyalty, even between mother and daughter. Both fight for the father, for the son, for the bed of mind and body. ( *Journals* 101 )

The Rival, though 'spiteful,' does not seem to be sharing the nervousness characteristic of other women, since despite all her hardships, she has always found the courage and stamina to survive, and proved efficient and resourceful, always 'in miraculous repair' like the medusan figure. Like the moon which 'abases' her subjects, the Rival can, also, humiliate her own subjects, her children, her daughter. However, like the moon which can assume a fake power, a power which can be unveiled in the morning, the Rival becomes ridiculous, the laughing stock of those who can see through her false self : and who is best endowed with such an insight?

Who else but someone who knows her too well, someone who has an 'osmotic' bond with her : her daughter. She realizes that the rival mother has erected a false self both for herself and her daughter and though the daughter has in a way become more assertive and wishes to get rid of such a falsity, she is overwhelmed, bombarded with messages from the rival-mother, which messages, 'expansive as carbon monoxide' do not let her enjoy a moment's peace.

In a 1958 journal entry, Plath, reflecting on her correspondence with her mother, remarks :

One reason I could keep up such satisfactory [ for whom? ] relationship with her while in England was we could both verbalize our *desired* [ my emphasis ] image of ourselves in relation to each other : interest and sincere love, and never feel the emotional currents at war with these verbally expressed feelings. I feel her disapproval. But I feel it countries away too. When she dies, what will I feel? I wish her death so I could be sure of what I am : so I could know that what feelings I have, even though some resemble hers, are really my own. ( NJ 280 )

What she acknowledges in this excerpt is the falseness of their responses as indicative of the 'desired,' ideal image each has created. She realizes that the mother can see through these fake responses, but in a way she feels the distance as security, something that does not apply to 'The Rival' in which distance does not seem to matter at all : 'Walking about Africa, maybe but thinking of me.'

Aurelia, however, gives her own interpretation of their correspondence :



Both Sylvia and I were more at ease at writing words of appreciation, admiration, and love than in expressing these emotions verbally and, thank goodness, write them to each other we did. ( *Letters Home* 32 )

We were very critical of our verbal and written expression, for we shared a love of words and considered them as a tool used to achieve precise expression, a necessity for accuracy in describing our emotions, as well as for mutual understanding. (ibid. 31)

I was very grateful for the flow of communication that existed between Sylvia and me .... ( ibidem 33 )

What Aurelia fails to understand is that their mutual ‘ease,’ or fluency in writing, cannot account for their wish to express those feelings in writing. What is really hidden behind this mask of writing was each one’s opportunity to express false feelings, covered behind nice wording, behind ‘their own purple patches.’

The fourteen-year-old Sylvia writes in a diary entry:

It’s so nice to know long words! I’m trying to make them part of my vocabulary – they’re so-o-o handy. Exempli gratia : This morning I told Warren that he was ‘ostentatiously, obnoxiously superfluous,’ and he hadn’t the slightest idea of what I meant. ( qtd in LH 37 )

It seems that the teenage Sylvia has found a way, through language, to manipulate, a method she will be using throughout her life, especially in the correspondence with her mother.

Julia Kristeva notices that in the case of Sandy, ‘who is afraid of being eaten up by a dog,’ and little Hans, who is afraid of horses, phobia is associated with ‘intense

verbal activity.' Sandy, at three and a half, is a very fluent speaker, and 'enjoys repeating strange and difficult words,' whereas Hans 'assimilates and reproduces language with impressive eagerness and talent,' and both of them, the more afraid they get, the more they speak. Kristeva remarks that this phobia associated with verbal skills goes back to the mother and the phobic fills his mouth 'with words instead of [ his ] mother whom [ he ] miss[es] from now on more than ever ...'

( *Powers of Horror* 34-42 ).

It can be maternal fear that drives Plath to such a precocious use of language – she could read phrases at two and a half as indicated in *Letters Home* – ( 268 ) a means she will use to promote her mother's wishes to erect a false self, to put into her mouth what the mother wants to hear, her approval, her love, as she feels that she is not loved : 'I felt cheated : I wasn't loved but all the signs said that I was loved' ( *Journals* 268 ). Her phobia is a condition in which she 'dreads maternal fusion, but equally fears separation from the mother' ( Anna Smith 158 ).

Kristeva, considering Freud's remark that Hans is in fact afraid of castration, and not of horses, takes a step further and reverses Hans' statement 'I am afraid of being bitten' to 'I am afraid of biting,' a process called 'syntactical passivation' which 'heralds the subject's ability to put himself in the place of the object, [ ... ] a radical stage in the constitution of subjectivity' ( PH 38-39 ). And this is actually what happens in Plath's case; she is afraid not of being bitten, though this is the superficial nature of her fear, but of the power of her mouth – 'I bit her arm' (NJ 529) –

expressed in her liking and fascination with food, as well as the power language is giving her with which she is able to reach the sublime through her literary work.

On the other hand, Aurelia talks about the 'osmotic' bond between them, somehow realizing that at times it can be 'stifling' (Kristeva 17) :

Between Sylvia and me there existed – as between my own mother and me – a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy. ( *Letters Home* 32 )

On another occasion, she remarks: 'Sylvia read all the books I collected while I was in college, used them *as her own* [ my emphasis ]' ( *ibid.* ). The above remark is more than a proud mother's boast about the studiousness of her daughter : it is more a mother's realization that her daughter shares the same feelings as she, that they are both extensions of each other, and being aware of such a realization they behave like mirror reflections.

'The Other,' written in Devon during Aurelia Plath's visit to England, has not received much attention from critics, since most of them see it plainly as Plath's rage directed against her husband's infidelity, with the other figure in it denoting vaguely, but unmistakably, the other woman ( Alexander 282 ). David Wood 'escapes' from the above mentioned tendency, asserting that 'the other is more a projected reflection of a potential facet within the speaker's personality than any character in real life' ( 99 ). Further, he 'condemns' Rosenblatt for renouncing the



poem as 'obscure,' 'impenetrable' and lacking 'a comprehensive dramatic frame,' stressing that Plath herself considered it 'worthy' enough to be included in her *Ariel* collection ( 103 ).

I consider the poem important as another well-covered effort by Plath to direct her rage against the mother figure, 'regressing' in a way, like a psychologically afflicted child, to her 1959 poems, the main characteristic of which is the rage against a devouring mother figure, in an effort to probe into her own life and discover what had been upsetting her.

When Hughes abandoned her to live with the other woman, in a letter to her mother, dated October 16, 1962, Plath complained that her daughter, Frieda, a precocious till then child, 'ha[d] regressed' because of the trauma ( *Letters Home* 459 ). This is what the poet is doing right now : 'regressing,' going back to her 1959 poetry directed against the mother, because in her plight, after her husband's desertion, she becomes the phobic, the child who once more is looking for scapegoats.

The onset of the poem marks the entrance of the 'Other,' 'wiping [ her ] lips' as if after a tasty dinner, an image in which the figure of the devouring mother is being transferred from Plath's 1959 poems (e.g. 'Poem for a Birthday' ). The speaking persona wonders if she has left anything untouched on the 'other's' doorstep, an echo from 'The Burnt-Out Spa,' another allusion to the threshold the other figure is guarding to hinder the persona's escape into the Symbolic order. Stony, like a statue,

a 'White Nike,' ( an image used in 'Barren Women' ) she flows between the daughter's 'walls,' her cells, thus making an independent existence for her not feasible.

The mother figure in 'The Other' is further made abject and disgusting with her smelly handbag and her hooklike knitting, that is her creativity ( the needle as a pen ) presented negatively. Such an attempt to make her abject can soon facilitate the speaker's detachment from her, but the Other's head is still hanging on her wall, like a trophy, disgusting, while it seems that the two are 'peculiarly' joined with '[n]avel cords blue-red and lucent,' which the speaker, the daughter, rides, thus in a way unable to detach herself from the Other.

This Other figure is said to be endowed with a 'moon-glow,' a characteristic Plath often associates with the mother ( 'The Moon and the Yew Tree,' 'Edge' ). The next two-lined stanza is a bit vague : 'The stolen horses, the fornications / Circle a womb of marble,' and those critics favoring the other-as-lover interpretation are likely to see them as denoting the stolen husband figure, and the forbidden sexual intercourse which will lead to no pregnancy due to the other's 'womb of marble,' the rival's barrenness.

What I see in these two lines, however, is the speaker's attempt to associate the other figure, the mother, with her own creativity – not just procreation – but artistic creativity as well. In this stanza, she equates writing with erotic activity, an activity,

however, not actually permissible, which will not lead to actual conception. 'The stolen horses' she refers to could be the borrowed material, the topics suggested by Hughes ( Wagner-Martin 89 ), the models she copied in her own writing, in an effort to find her true voice, or even her optimistic letters home. This procedure is one that she dismisses, according to Axelrod, in one of her last poems, 'Words,' which is a pastiche of borrowed lines put together only to be renounced before the emergence of her own true poetic voice. (74-79). These borrowings are what she now sees as 'fornications,' not actually permitted, and of course, resulting in no real conception. At the same time, however, since it seems that the 'Other' figure is likely to be identified with Aurelia, one is led back to Aurelia's 'ghost writing' of Otto Plath's book *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, as well as his treatise on 'Insect Societies,' which appeared as Chapter IV in *A Handbook of Social Psychology* ( LH 12 ). In both cases she 'did the reading and note-taking along the line he indicated' ( *ibid.* ). A careful reading of *Bumblebees and Their Ways* gives the impression that although the material is seriously academic, the style is not purely scientific and the book reads like a smoothly-flowing book, a style that strongly reminds of the introductory notes in *Letters Home* :

If one takes a walk on a clear, sunny day in middle April, when the first willows are in bloom, one may often see young bumblebee queens eagerly sipping nectar from the catkins. It is a delightful thing to pause and watch these queens in their costumes of rich velvet, their wings not yet torn by the long foraging flights which they will be obliged to take later. ( 7 )

Being a man's – the father's – mouthpiece, manipulating his language is a crime, a 'fornication.'



The Other figure, the mother, is following her course 'sucking' [ her ] breath like mileage,' another characteristic that completes her image as a devouring creature; she will finally insert herself, like cold glass between the speaker's '[her]self and [her]self,' trying to make her frigid, 'cold' as she herself is. It is Kristeva's frigid mother that is encountered here : the mother who is now trying to insert herself between the daughter's 'layers,' her different selves, in a way to be devoured by the daughter, to make her 'impenetrable,' and frigid like herself.

Discussing Helen's case history, as already seen, Kristeva notes that she is engaged in a 'quest for gratification' resulting in her inability to symbolize her negative affects. When, however, in the course of psychoanalysis, Helen was able to express her affects, this led to a temporary frigidity. The maternal object penetrated her : 'I have her within me, she does not leave me, but no one else can take her place, I am impenetrable, my vagina is dead' (*Black Sun* 77). The mother has 'devalORIZED' the daughter, depriving her of any jouissance, 'monopolizing the jouissance her daughter had given her' (78).

Finally, the speaker-daughter becomes aggressive and attempts 'matricide' which, however, will only result in a single 'scratching' that makes the mother 'smile' triumphantly, making thus fun of the wound which is not fatal and which has only proved the daughter's lack of power. The daughter does not seem to be able to 'kill' the mother to earn her freedom, her individuation, but conversely, she will be

eternally bound to her, a frigid creature unable to enjoy any kind of jouissance whether deriving from sexual intercourse or from artistic creation :

To spite your mother, you don't write because you feel you have to give the stories to her, or that she will appropriate them. ( *Journals* 279 )

### **Knowing the Horror of Primal Feelings**

Reflecting on her birthday, the persona is engaged in a vertiginous quest which leads her along the maze of her disjointed thoughts to considerations of daughterhood, motherhood, subject formation connected with abjection and orality. 'Poem for a Birthday,' must have been written between October 22 and November 4 1959. In her entry for October 22, 1959, Plath writes :

Ambitious seeds of a long poem made up of separate sections: Poem on her Birthday. To be a dwelling on madhouse, nature: meanings of tools, greenhouses, florists shops, tunnels, vivid and disjointed. An adventure. Never over. Developing. Rebirth. Despair. Old women. Block it out. ( NJ 520)

The following journal entry ( November 1 ) shows Plath's worry about the nature of the poems she has begun to write: 'They seem moving, interesting, but I wonder how deep they are. The absence of a tightly reasoned and rhymed logic bothers me. Yet frees me' ... ( 324 ). Finally, the journal entry for November 4, 1959, indicates that Plath had already finished the poem : 'Miraculously I wrote seven poems in my Poem for a Birthday sequence ...'( 325 ). The poem greatly interests critics as the

beginning of a new era for Plath's writing, since she allows 'several important new influences [ to ] enter her world in 1959' (Hargrove 214 ). What most critics consider significant is the way she used Roethke's poems, especially *Praise to the End* as a model and how she imprinted it with her own seal, thus differentiating herself from his influence : 'Roethke's influence, yet mine' ( *Journals* 323 ).

On the other hand, considering the title, one is likely to be drawn to a similar title, 'Poem on His Birthday,' a poem by Dylan Thomas, a similarity triggered not just by Plath's admiration for Thomas and effort to emulate him, but also by the fact that they both shared the same birthday : October 27.

Dylan Thomas' poem shares specific characteristics with Plath's poem, aspects such as the 'fort da' pattern experienced as the wish to go back to the maternal site and in Thomas' poem to make it abject so that he can be facilitated in liberating himself from it. A second common trait is the emergence of subjectivity undergone in the course of poetic signification. According to Eynel Wardi, the protagonist 'sets out to begin once again for the first time, by repeating his unachieved beginning' ( 22 ), a notion shared by Holbrook concerning Plath's 'Poem for a Birthday.' Thomas' poem, however, 'diverges' from Plath's pattern in that Thomas' protagonist attempts to achieve rebirth 'through identification with the Word,' an identification which is made feasible through religion.



The critiques I consider most significant for my own analysis of 'Poem for a Birthday' are those by Jacqueline Rose, who in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* dedicates a great part of her chapter 'The Body of Writing' to the poem, as well as the one by David Holbrook who sees the poem from a different angle. Rose discusses the poem from a psychoanalytic angle and uses Kristeva's theory of abjection to discuss the problems of selfhood and poetic creativity as these emerge from the seven parts of the poem. In the ambiguity of the title, she locates 'the act of gestation' as an important element of the poem ( a point which other critics have ignored ) denoting the emergence of something both inherent and alien to the speaker (49). Further, she finds no real scapegoat in the poem:

It might be worth stressing, therefore, that to read the poem in terms of abjection does not involve some personalized accusation against the mother (there is absolutely no point in trying to decide whether Plath's mother or her husband is at fault). ( 59 )

She introduces the element of linguistic and poetic identity, important factors for Plath's own 'philosophy' in which language and creativity are closely linked. She connects Plath's drama about the origins of body and language to both 'maternal and paternal speech,' ( 63 ) a relationship which constitutes a central thrust in Plath's writing, whether this is openly associated with the two parental figures ( 'Daddy,' 'Medusa' ) or presented as problems with the specific kind of language each figure represents, German for the father, a language she found 'obscene' ( 'Daddy' ) and difficult to learn or shorthand for the mother which she does find inaccessible ( *The Bell Jar* 132 ).

David Holbrook in his book *Sylvia Plath. Poetry and Existence* discusses Plath's 'predicament' and considers the poem seminal. He sees the inadequacy of the existing 'literary critical disciplines to fully understand her' (25), suggesting that the critic should look somewhere else, that s/he prospect for new areas to be given an answer. Such areas are for Holbrook sources such as W.R.D. Fairbairn, R.D. Laing, Masud Khan and Harry Guntrip, who provide him with the answers he seeks in associating Plath's 'existence and work' with those of the schizoid individual.

What I propose to do in my analysis is to locate and examine the maternal references in the poem and associate them with the aspect of orality and linguistic identity, both aspects evident in Plath's other works of the period. My analysis will be supported by material I propose to draw from Kristeva's *Powers of Horror* and *Tales of Love*. What is equally important for me is the difference that sets the poem apart from others Plath wrote before, not in terms of her liberation from her older techniques of composition, but in terms of a new element in it : gestation, her own pregnancy.

For convenience reasons I will follow the division Plath used in breaking down the poem into seven parts, but my emphasis will be placed on the parts I consider important for my analysis. 'Who' is the first poem in the sequence and its title, in its ambiguity (relative or interrogative pronoun) is indicative of the persona's realization : she does not know who she is. In her journal entry for Saturday, September 26 1959, Plath writes :



Listening to Schwarzkopf singing Schubert lieder last night in the music room. Immensely moved, 'Who is Sylvia?' and 'Mein vuh ist hin' recognizable words here and there: a strong sense of my own past, from which I find difficult to break through. ( 314 )

By using the pronoun 'who' it is in reality this aspect which she wants to tackle in this part of the poem : the sought-after identity, a problem she does not seem to be capable of solving as this kind of identity she is seeking is multi-faced, influenced by maternal and linguistic elements.

Temporally the poem is located in October, a month connected with harvests of crops, but also the month of Plath's birthday (October 27). In the first stanza the speaking persona becomes 'all mouth,' an infant once more, a baby for whom orality is significant. Holbrook quotes Fairbairn remarking that 'the child's ego is a mouth ego' as the one most important aspect of a baby's life is nutrition; Holbrook further associates this with the fact that in every individual 'there is the remnant of an unsatisfied infant hunger and this "unborn" dynamic in oneself ( the "regressed libidinal ego" ) feels like a hungry all-devouring mouth' ( 25 ). The speaking persona regresses to her infant self, a self strongly characterized by orality : the hungry mouth. It is not coincidental that in the first part of 'Who' as Rose mentions, 'everything which surrounds the speaker [ ... ] either eats or is eaten' ( 52 ), as this condition reflects the condition of the all-mouth regressed self. The all-mouth is the phobic who, in an attempt to escape fear, wishes to incorporate. Kristeva presents the fantasy of incorporation as the wish of the phobic to 'incorporate a portion of [ the ] mother's body, the breast, and thus hold on to her' ( *Powers of Horror* 39 ). She



defines phobia as 'metaphor of want,' a feeling that denotes the 'frailty of the subject's signifying system' ( *Powers of Horror* 35 ), and art in general as 'the only "know-how" where phobia is concerned' (37-38 ). Phobia never disappears but lurks behind language and the writer is the phobic who uses metaphors to alleviate his/her fear ( *ibid.* ). Fear, however, entails 'an aggression, a violence that returns to its source,' the mother. The phobic is frightened of the unnameable : the lack, the absence which psychoanalysis equates to castration, and which in itself is equated to the mother. Orality, according to Kristeva, is represented in food as the oral object (the abject) 'that sets up archaic relationships between the human being and the other, its mother, who wields a power that is as vital as it is fierce' ( *ibid.* 75-76 ). The whole process resembles a causal chain that interlinks permanently fear, orality, incorporation, the maternal, language.

In the poem, the speaking persona leaves her libidinal stage to find herself in the old tool shed which is 'fusty,' stale like a 'mummy's stomach' the ambiguity of which constitutes a pun : 'mummy,' mother, or 'mummy,' the dead, embalmed and preserved body of the ancient Egyptians. Literally speaking, the atmosphere inside a mummy's stomach must be stale, suffocating, 'fusty,' with no fresh air to breathe, like the 'stewing' air inside a 'bell jar.' The air inside a real mother's stomach (womb) must be 'fusty,' too, thus accounting for the speaking persona's unwillingness to go back inside the mother. Her dilemma is manifested in her desire to be an infant once more and her reluctance to retreat inside the mother's womb. This predicament of hers is the predicament of the subject in his / her 'earlier attempt

to release the hold of the maternal entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language,' as mentioned by Kristeva ( *Powers of Horror* 13 ). What the speaking persona is talking about is the ambivalence of this movement, which is 'clumsy' and 'violent' and entails 'the constant risk of falling back, under the influence of a power as securing ( "I am at home" ) as it is stifling' ( "fusty" ) (ibid.54 ).

The subsequent images in the poem revolve around the mad women figures in the 'tool shed,' the asylum, and the diminishing of the persona into the objects of the natural world, 'root,' 'stone,' 'owlpellet,' which Rose considers significant as an action that indicates Plath's effort to reconsider the world and its objects linguistically and to confront what Kristeva terms as the 'desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject inside' ( 52 ).

The ambivalent separation is what the speaker has in mind, a separation she both fears and covets, 'the lack of lack' when she addresses the mother figure in stanza nine : 'Mother, you are the one mouth, I would be tongue to. / Mother of otherness / Eat me.' Lest she should be separated from her, she declares that she 'would' like, tentatively to serve the role of the mother's tongue, to be her spokesperson, and further to be eaten, to be incorporated by her so that she can be carried within her, the way she was carried in the 'fusty mummy stomach' during gestation. The speaking persona resorts to incorporation so that she can get a new identity, so that she will be formed as a speaking subject. David Holbrook, quotes R.D. Laing putting forward



that 'to the schizoid individual, love or indeed any human contact, can seem full of the dangers of mutual incorporation' ( 25 ), a point that seems quite relevant to fit in the pattern presented in 'Who,' in which the speaking persona from an 'all-mouth' devouring figure shifts into a figure craving to be devoured. Further, as Laing says, 'to be eaten does not necessarily mean to lose one's identity' ( ibid. 36 ), thus the speaking persona is likely to be wishing to be incorporated so that she can get a new identity, a linguistic one : she will become her mother's tongue.

In 'Maenad,' the third poem of the birthday sequence, the speaking persona goes back to her childhood years, when she was like all other children, '[o]nce I was ordinary,' and tries to uncover the past; she endeavors to probe into her childhood years to find the solution to her predicament. She is of the opinion that whatever happened, it happened then : when she was a little girl. Alice Miller in her incisive book *The Untouched Key, Tracing Childhood Trauma in Creativity and Destructiveness*, demonstrates that the 'works of writers, poets, and painters tell the encoded story of childhood traumas no longer consciously remembered in adulthood' ( 73 ). It is highly likely that the 'Who' creature of the first poem is still in search of an identity and finds in this temporality into the past a way to overcome her subjectivity problem.

Once she was safe, but then tragedy struck : 'The mother of mouths didn't love me' : the 'devouring,' overwhelming mother did not love her enough and the benevolent figure of the father could not help either, since he diminished into a doll, perhaps a



cursed 'voodoo' doll which haunted her. Kristeva's essay 'Freud and Love' highlights the movement from the abject mother towards the ideal father, a movement greatly significant, as a 'precondition for idealization' which constitutes love as 'agape' associated with the father in contrast to love as 'eros,' associated with the mother whose love is destructive and passionate; she is an 'adhesive maternal wrapping.' Without this 'maternal diversion' toward a third party, the bodily exchange is abjection or devouring ( *Tales of Love* 41, 48, 34-35 ). The benevolent movement, however, is never to materialize for the speaking persona in 'Maenad,' since the father figure has proved ineffective : a 'voodoo' doll, so she now becomes an exile, cut off from both motherland and fatherland.

She longs to go back to the semiotic 'primary fusion and communion' ( *Tales of Love* 26 ) with the mother, but her wish seems to be left unfulfilled : 'O I am too big to go backwards,' and instead she takes up a new identity, that of the maenad, the mad female companion of Dionysus, working herself to a frenzy. Kristeva, in her book *About Chinese Women*, discusses the power of the 'call' of the mother which 'generates hallucinations, voices, "madness"' and which 'like black lava' lurks behind the girl's effort to join the paternal Symbolic order (39 ). It is this call which the speaking persona loves and hates at the same time, ultimately concluding that she cannot go back : she is too big, since she has already 'devoured' ( 'I am all mouth' ) the father's erect penis. The 'red tongue,' the red abject mouth of the mother, what Esther Greenwood has found disgusting in *The Bell Jar* and Plath resented in her journals ( 266 ), is here : it is omnipresent so she infers that the mother will devour

her; she may be reunited with her, and one way to do so is in childbirth. The speaker, like Plath, is pregnant and she is well aware that in childbirth she will find her lost mother and be reunited with her ( 'Stabat Mater' 24 ), a meeting she both dreads and covets : 'Mother, keep out of my barnyard, / I am becoming another' ( one would expect the internal rhyme to be the repetition of 'mother' in 'I am becoming another mother' ). She wishes to keep the mother's presence out of her 'barnyard,' the safe 'stable' where her own child is lying well protected; since she will become a mother too, she does not wish for anybody else to usurp her role, like Plath herself who on many occasions was haunted by this feeling that her mother wanted to usurp her 'production' : writing and children :

To spite your mother, you don't write because you feel you have to give the stories to her, or that she will appropriate them. ( As I was afraid of having her around to appropriate my baby, because I didn't want it to be hers ). (NJ 448)

This contradiction in the speaking persona's statement concerning her wishes to 'go backward' and simultaneously 'keep [ her ] mother out of [ her ] barnyard' is what Kristeva terms as 'the desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so' ( PH 13 ), which constitutes the very feeling the 'maenad' seems to be experiencing.

In 'Witch Burning' the speaker is ready to climb the pile of 'dry sticks' to be burned like another Salem witch, to be purified, and led into a new kind of identity. While the fire is ready to engulf her, she resorts to a kind of soliloquy consisting of disjointed images, expressed in choppy sentences, remembrances intermingling with



her reality. She talks about '[ a ] black-sharded lady,' most probably another mother figure who keeps her locked 'in a parrot's cage,' not letting her use her linguistic abilities freely, but who only allows her to parrot talk, to repeat the lady's utterances, to tell her what she would like to hear, just like Plath and her mother and their odd symbiotic bond as this can be seen from the *Letters Home*. As Alice Miller puts it, the reason for Plath's suffering lay in 'the impossibility of communicating [ it ] to another person.' She adds that in 'all her letters she assures her mother how well she is doing' ( *For Your Own Good* 255 ), what in fact the mother wants to hear to supply the much-coveted praise; she seems to be ignoring her daughter's 'narcissistic wounds' (258), and forces her into a parrot-talk, the very same one the speaking persona alludes to in 'Witch Burning.'

The speaking persona then wishes to become diminutive so that she will not be noticed and claims that if she does not move, she will not cause trouble, she will not be seen and reprimanded. Such a statement is strongly reminiscent of a child's – unawares of the parents – observation of the primal scene, not making any noise, perhaps feigning sleep to avoid being caught, unlike Freud's Wolfman ( *History of an Infantile Neurosis* 80 ). Further, she wishes to be turned into something tiny, 'rice,' something associated with food, unconsciously revealing her desire for food, her wish to fill the hungry mouth with food, which on this occasion is associated with linguistic creativity. Progressively, the image of 'rice' leads to the next image, that of the 'red tongues [ that ] will teach the truth.' These red tongues do not denote 'the hungry flames' of the fire but her own 'red tongues' of language, of poetry, her



subsequent 'oeuvre' that will indeed teach the truth, since they will be emerging from her soul, and they will reach 'farther than the words of a classroom teacher or of a doctor' ( JP 93 ).

She begs the 'mother of beetles,' the abject mother to liberate her, to let her pass through the 'mouth' of the candle to be vomited into freedom, an image strongly reminiscent of the dream of the 'vomited child,' the dream Kristeva's melancholic patient experienced in *Black Sun*, a dream indicating the woman's desire to lock up the maternal representation in her body :

I vomited and I saw, as if I were in between sleep and wakefulness, something like the head of a child falling into the washbasin while a voice called me from a distance, but mistakenly calling me by my mother's name. ( 76 )

The speaking persona who longs to be vomited from the candle mouth may be identified with the baby being vomited from the patient's mouth in Kristeva's case history. The patient reveals that it was not she who was vomiting but her own mother ( she heard someone calling her by her mother's name ). By being called by her mother's name, the patient wishes to be identified with her mother, a case similar to that of the speaking persona's in 'Witch Burning' in which the identification is promoted by the mother who keeps the daughter in a 'parrot cage,' and wishes her to be incorporated in her linguistically, saying what she says. Ultimately, the speaking persona, now that she is overwhelmed by the red tongues of creativity, wishes to grow again, to be given her shape back, not to be a minimal creature, 'dust in the

shadow of a stone,' as she is starting to heal, and she is ready to use her 'early directness felt in childhood into the vocation of poetry' (Vendler 5).

The prevalent characteristic of 'The Stones,' the ultimate part of 'Poem for a Birthday,' is its abundance of linguistic images as aspects associated with language and silence ( 'wordless,' 'quiet,' 'quarry of silence,' 'taciturn' ).

Based on information that Plath was at the time of the poem's composition reading Radin's *African Folktales*, critics have seen Plath's great reliance on these stories (Wagner-Martin 64 ), especially a particular one, entitled 'The City Where Men Are Mended,' which most probably is one of Plath's inspirations for the writing of 'Stones.' The story runs as follows : When a girl, who along with others ran inside a baobab tree to take shelter from the rain, refused to give the devil her 'necklace and cloth,' she was locked by the him inside the tree. The mother would visit her to give her food, but one day the girl was eaten by a hyena who left her bones only, so the mother decided to take them to the city where men were mended to have them mended.

On her way there, she was subjected to several food temptations, but she was strong enough not to succumb to them, and she finally reached the city. There she was given the task of feeding a cattle, a task she successfully carried out by giving the animals ripe fruit, while keeping the green, unripe ones for herself. Because of the mother's kind heart, her girl was restored to life, mended 'very well.'

A rival wife, however, put her ugly daughter in a mortar pounding her up, leaving only the bones, which she wanted to take to the city where men were mended, to be mended into a more beautiful daughter. She succumbed to all food temptations, unlike the first wife, but managed to reach the city where she fed the cattle with the green fruit, leaving the ripe ones for herself. Finally, she was given her daughter back, badly mended. The daughter's ugliness made her renounce her, saying : 'Go away, you are not my child.' But the daughter replied, 'Ah, it is you who are not my mother' ( 252 ). Finally, however, they both had to compromise and live together.

I consider the story significant, as it revolves around particular themes which seem to be Plath's focus not only in 'Stones' but in the whole Birthday sequence as well : mother-daughter relation, the good and the bad mother, the sublime and the abject mother and matters of orality signified by the 'food temptations' the two mothers had to evade. The 'sublime' mother who rejects all food temptations, saves the daughter, but the gluttonous, abject mother who succumbs to them, gets a daughter uglier than before. Orality presented in the food temptations signifies the 'archaic and gratifying relationship' that binds us to our mother (*Powers of Horror* 115 ) and in this story is what will determine the future of each daughter.

In the same source as above, Kristeva quotes the following :

A woman who was a 'syrophenician by nation' (Mark 7:26) or else a 'lost sheep of the house of Israel' ( Matthew 15:24 ) asks for help in order to 'cast



forth the devil out of her daughter' ( Mark 7:26 ). 'But Jesus said unto her, Let the children first be filled : for it is not meet to take the children's bread and cast it unto the dogs.' ( Mark 7:27 )

The devil leaves the daughter's body only after the mother gives her 'privileged food' and 'opens her heart to the words of Christ' ( 115 ). What Kristeva stresses here is the fact that it is only through food that the mother and daughter are reconciled and the mother is subsequently exposed to the words of Christ, the Logos. The motif of the 'hungry' daughter and Christ's advice to the mother to 'supply' the privileged nourishment is being repeated here; further, the element of language is introduced as the privilege accorded to the mother to open herself to Jesus' 'words,' after supplying food. The mother is exposed to 'words,' language, so that she can transfer this linguistic privilege to the daughter in the form of the supplied food who will, thus, be liberated from the devil's 'clutch,' and enter the Symbolic order, assisted in a way by the mother herself.

In the poem, the speaking persona is found in 'the city where men are mended,' in which, while being prepared for reconstruction, she meditates on her past hardships: 'I entered the stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.' She voluntarily got herself inside an enclosed space, a stomach, associated with food and digestion in which there was no language, no linguistic sign for her to use. She was, on this occasion, not unable to 'breathe or achoo' as in 'Daddy,' but unable to utter anything in the indifferent maternal environment.

'The mother of pestles diminished [ her ]' – like the rival wife in the story – as she originally wished to be diminutive so that she would not be noticed and she finally turned into a 'still' pebble: not simply motionless, but voiceless, quiet, in an environment which was equally silent, but with something stirring with '[o]nly the mouth-hole pip[ing] out, / importunate cricket.' The existence of 'mouth-hole' not just necessary for receiving food, but also essential for linguistic utterance, is a significant factor in the poem, for it faintly indicates a kind of linguistic resurrection, an indication of regeneration through language in an otherwise quiet and sterile environment. This indication, slight as it may be, is 'importunate,' pertinacious, stubborn, insisting on its mission : linguistic renaissance.

However, the time is not ripe yet for such a movement, and the speaking persona is a foetus again, 'drunk' as she sucks 'at the paps of darkness,' premature, undeveloped, not ready for any other kind of action apart from the primitive kind of orality as she can only 'suck,' and not chew the 'pap,' the soft food processed for the toothless gums of infants. But things follow a particular order and gradually something will emerge : '[t]he food tubes embrace [her],' soon she will be fed through tubes, another method, which will finally lead to the next stage in which she will be able to feed herself, in her own way.

She begins to see light; she gets some of her members back and she is even given love : 'Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.' The nurse who shows love is 'bald,' an adjective Plath uses on many occasions with negative connotations, as in 'the



Disquieting Muses,' or 'The Munich Mannequins.' The problem arising at this point is the reason love is ineffective. What the speaking persona experiences here is Kristeva's remarks about the plight of the contemporary person : we cannot recognize love and we cannot respond to it effectively. For the speaking persona '[l]ove is the bone and sinew of [ her ] curse,' she is cursed to seek love that will fulfill her and now she is 'aching for love' ( *Tales of Love* 5 ); she has to accommodate herself in relation to a loving, thoughtful other, which the bald nurse does not seem able to provide successfully. It seems that she still feels fragmented, even though her parts have been put together, and she cannot find any self-image with which to feel at home.

The speaking persona sees herself as a 'reconstructed vase, as a house.' Further, the image of '[t]he elusive rose' seems to be another suggestive image : if one goes back to Plath's 'Mademoiselle' summer, one will notice a photograph of Plath, holding a rose, indicative of her future profession : she professed that she wanted to become a poet and the choice of the object to be associated with the poetic vocation was the rose. Moreover in 'Kindness' there is the very same association of poetic creation with roses, as it will be seen. So it seems that the rose in 'The Stones' is symbolic of poetry which the reconstructed self at present sees as a utopia, something she will not be able to pursue successfully, despite her reconstructed self. At this point one is led back to Kristeva's *Tales of Love*, to a chapter titled 'A Holy Madness: She and He' where she discusses 'Song of Songs,' a controversial 'song,' the amatory character of which makes it 'sit so oddly in the rest of the Old Testament' ( Ives 84 ). The



significance Kristeva sees in it is that while it is attributed to Solomon, the song is nevertheless spoken by his beloved, the Shulamite, who according to Kristeva is the 'first woman to be sovereign before the loved one' ( 99 ). One of the subject's assertion is 'I am a rose of Sharon,' ( 3:2 ). Since she identifies with the rose and since she is the first female subject allowed enunciation, one is likely to identify the rose, not simply with poetic creation – the song – but also with the female subject of enunciation, 'the assertion of woman' ( *ibid.* ); she is the first woman to be 'sovereign before the loved one.' She becomes 'the first Subject in the modern sense of the term. Divided. Sick and yet sovereign' ( 100 ). Thus if one goes back to Plath and the recurrent image of the 'rose,' one may identify the rose not only with her vocation, i.e. poetry, but at the same time with the 'enunciation' of the woman, the poet who wishes to surpass all predecessors and 'make [ her ] name' (LH 468) as a woman poet. In the poem, the persona starts to heal, a realization she takes for granted since there is nothing else she can do, and concludes the poem with the statement 'I shall be good as new' : I shall be good as long as I am new.

Although many critics acknowledge Paul Radin's *African Folktales* as one of Plath's influences for the composition of 'Poem for a Birthday,' the two stories they commemorate are 'The City Where Men Are Mended' and 'Mantis and the All-Devourer,' to a lesser extent. Radin's collection, however, contains some further stories in which one can locate elements Plath 'manipulated' in order to include them in her poem. These elements are aspects of orality, orality associated with a mother figure ( mother or grandmother ), the umbilical cord, and the mortar image.

The story 'The Girl Who Stayed in the Fork of a Tree,' is a story which combines elements of orality as these are associated with motherhood, and one can see the role played by the umbilical cord, as well as the mortar which Plath, as already noted, is reusing in 'The Stones' ( 'The mother of pestles diminished me' ). The plot revolves around the two figures of mother and daughter living in the fork of a tree with the hunter mother preparing food for the basket-maker daughter ( the good enough mother who offers nutrition ) before setting out for her hunting expeditions. The beauty of the daughter arouses the interest of the King who sends hordes of soldiers to capture her, who, however, fall victims to the mother's 'phallic power' : 'Many as you are, I shall stitch with the big needle! Stitch!' ( 182 ). It is only the power of the village's newly-born children's umbilical cord which can 'drag' the daughter to the village. The mother finally accedes to the daughter's marriage but sets one condition : 'She is not to pound in the mortar, nor to go to fetch water at night. If you send her to do one of these things, mind you! I shall know where to find you!' (183 ).

The jealous mother-in-law, however, along with the former wives, makes the Girl take up the forbidden task only to have her gradually absorbed by the earth. Finally it is the mother herself who will come to her rescue. The mother figure in the story is a figure encompassing many characteristics to be noted in the mother figures of Plath's poem. She is closely associated with orality, she is the food-provider, but at the same time she is the phallic mother who, with her needle, will beat the King's soldiers. Finally she takes up the role of the death-bearing mother who will save the daughter.



She sets out carrying 'medicines on a potsherd, also tails of animals with which she can beat the air' ( 184 ). She kills the zebra and the people whom she encounters on her way to the place where the Girl has been devoured by the earth. She becomes Kristeva's death-bearing woman, the 'she-Gehenna' (*Black Sun* 28), the one who kills to get to the daughter and achieve symbiosis. The image of the mortar, however, which in the story is associated with the maternal prohibition, in the poem is transformed into a destructive power : 'the mother of pestles diminished me' ( 'The Stones' ).

In another story titled, 'How an Unborn Child Avenged Its Mother's Death,' one can notice the elements of orality, motherhood, the umbilical cord, as well as the figure of the grandmother. Orality experienced as greediness makes the father-to-be resort to the murder of his wife, only to be haunted by his unborn child, 'the little wombless,' who 'dragging its umbilical cord,' ( 186 ) follows the father to the grandmother's house, where it reveals the crime. It is once more the perennial umbilical cord that binds the child inextricably to the mother, Plath's predicament. At the same time, the figure of the grandmother appears first as the food-provider and then as a surrogate mother for the 'wombless' child.

One day, when hunger was particularly severe, the man, accompanied by his wife, was dragging himself along the direction of her mother's house in the hope of getting a little food there. ( 186 )

Finally in the cathartic scene that follows the murder of the father by his wife's family members, the grandmother 'picked up the little grandchild' ( 189 ) thus



appropriating it. This is the fear that comes to envelop Plath in her most agitating moments : that her mother will appropriate her 'baby,' a generic term designating for Plath both her procreation and linguistic creations.

### **There Is Nothing Between Us**

The stifling maternal presence evidenced in other poems ( 'The Other,' 'The Rival' ) is refined in 'Elm' and 'Medusa' as a power which not only overwhelms the daughter-personae and makes them unable to breathe, but which is now suffocating them linguistically. Written in April 1962, 'Elm,' according to Wood, marks an important stage in Plath's poetry, as it is one of the first poems in which the presence of a female spirit can be noticed ( 85 ). At the same time, it shows that the author is reconsidering what she discovered in 1958 with the reading of Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia,' namely that the figure of the mother was associated with language and that the smooth flow of language was in a way controlled by her.

The elm tree creates an ambiguity for the critics and different interpretations see it as the poet's 'alter ego' ( Butscher 293; Axelrod 152 ), or even as a lover ( Markey 26 ). I tend to agree with the former critics who see in the elm the poet's other self, a side of herself that mocks and derides her while at the same time revealing truths to her. I will consider the poem in terms of its focus on the perennial ( for Plath ) mother

problem, which, however, in this poem is elucidated, being partly dissolved as the persona realizes how vigorously and tenaciously it is associated with language, with generativity, a point Plath will elaborate upon even more deeply in 'Medusa.'

The elm's monologue, full of rhetorical questions which the addressee leaves unanswered, starts with the fun-making, mocking tone of her boasting statement : 'I know the bottom ... I do not fear it : I have been there,' thus stunning the other part. Further, the elm, in an effort to get to the addressee's 'regressed libidinal ego,' wishes to find out, in the same mocking tone, whether the other can hear the sea in her, with all its 'dissatisfactions.' This is an important aspect for the other part, as it was for Plath herself, for whom the sea encapsulated significant moments in her life : 'the association of the sea, which is a central metaphor for my childhood' (*Journals* 222 ). At this point, the elm is indirectly asking the addressee if she sees any aspect of her childhood in her, perhaps insinuating a kind of connection with a maternal figure. The oxymoron that follows, '[o]r the voice of nothing, that was your madness,' adds a new dimension to the monologue : the elm is deriding the other part, reminding her of her 'madness,' which the elm attributes to her linguistic breakdown, an explanation Aurelia Plath provided to account for her daughter's breakdown which led to the 1953 suicide attempt : 'How, by the way, does Mother understand my committing suicide? As a result of my not writing, no doubt' (*Journals* 280 ).

It is the same mocking tone that Plath is employing here to dismiss such an explanation which could be partly true, since it was one of the indirect causes for her

writer's block, the direct one in the causal chain being the mother herself. If analyzed on its own, this cause can be said to be true, especially if events in her life are examined carefully : the critic has only to remember that Plath's sanity, like her literary daughter's, Esther Greenwood's, was jeopardized after she failed to secure a place in Frank O' Connor's creative writing class in the Harvard Summer school (Stevenson 43 ). At the same time her descent into the maelstrom of linguistic darkness is evident in her aborted efforts to read *Finnegan's Wake* ( *The Bell Jar* 131).

Further, it will be important to consider one of the ways in which Plath was restored to sanity, 'patched' ( 257 ) to continue her journey : one of her former high school teachers, Wilbury Crockett, had to reeducate her into language :

Although not an expert in psychological matters, Crockett had sufficient sensitivity and experience with students to realize that language, above all, could rescue Sylvia from the chaos of a fragmented identity. Being a child again, she would have to be led like a child back up the stairway of abstract thought. Patiently, he played countless word games with her and strove to get her involved in solving simple anagrams. He concentrated always on the 'game' aspect of making sounds and letters do her bidding once more. ( Butscher 120 )

Kristeva, talking about 'the call of the mother,' associates it with madness in case it 'troubles the word,' language. If the ego or the superego, 'the moorings of the word' fail to provide the necessary buffer to allow individuation, 'death quietly moves in' (*About Chinese Women* 39). This is the linguistic death that the elm is referring to, to remind the addressee of her plight.



A further problem, the quest for love, proves to be another target of derision for the elm who sees love as a utopia, an elusive shadow which the addressee will not be able to grasp ever, since it will be eternally escaping from her : 'Love is a shadow / How you lie and cry after it.' It is important at this point to note the image Plath is using to denote this elusive aspect of love : 'Listen : these are its hooves : it has gone off, like a horse.' The alliteration of the 'h' sound suggests the heavy breathing of someone who runs breathlessly after the eluding love. A similar image will be used later in one of her last poems, 'Words' : 'Echoes traveling / off from the center like horses ... Words dry and riderless, / The indefatigable hoof-taps.' In this poem words seem to be escaping her, the way love is abandoning her according to the elm's affirmations.

Following the elm step by step, the reader reaches a point where the speaking persona introduces another crucial aspect : 'I shall gallop thus, impetuously / Till your head is a stone.' The elm threatens to turn the addressee into stone, to petrify her, as if she were a Medusan figure, endowed with petrifying qualities. This is one of the solutions, but like a real tree struck by lightning, the elm suffered 'the atrocity of sunsets ... [her ] red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires,' an image likely to be associated with electro-convulsive treatment which leads, on this occasion, to the breaking-up of the self. After this breaking-up, the elm has to face an adversary : the moon. She is merciless, ready to push her away as she is barren : not childless, but without artistic production, linguistically sterile. 'Her radiance scathes,' her remarks

are bitterly severe, like Aurelia Plath's caustic remarks : ' hearing Mother warn me I was too critical, that I set my sights too high' ( *Journals* 212 ).

In stanza nine, there is a shift in the point of view and the elm-speaker is replaced by the addressee who is caught in another 'fort-da' game of losing – on this occasion voluntarily by releasing – the elm figure and perhaps finding her again since she has never lost her, after all. But even if she loses her, separated from her as if by the surgical knife, she is haunted by her : 'How your bad dreams possess and endow me.' The choice of the verb 'endow' ( Latin *dotare* = to dower ) is indicative of the association with the mother, which the persona stresses to indicate the inheritance the mother wants to bestow upon her and which she cannot get rid of, an idea Plath used in 'All the Dead Dears.' This is what Kristeva suggests : 'We may call it a border; abjection 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' ( *Powers of Horror* 9 ).

Suddenly, the persona feels 'inhabited by a cry,' a vague feeling, an utterance, but not language yet. This feeling is something requiring love to survive, and like a child in embryonic state, it extends its hooks to catch on something, to take roots, but instead it becomes a demon, torturing with 'its malignity.' What started optimistically as an inarticulate cry, a vague utterance which could quite easily become real language, is aborted and takes up a demoniacal trait : it is a demon that will not release her since it cannot fully develop into linguistic production.



The persona's plight climaxes when once more she realizes that love is 'irretrievable,' and that the ancient cliché 'ignorance is bliss' strongly applies to her case. Despite, however, her unwillingness to absorb more knowledge, there is a presence she will soon be aware of, as it is visible in the elm's 'strangle of branches.' The word 'strangle' itself gives the real essence of the image : it will be a presence, whose very characteristic is likely to be suffocation and 'stifling,' a word Kristeva is using in *Powers of Horror* to denote the maternal power which can be 'as securing as it is stifling' ( 13 ). The presence-to-be is the mother medusa whose 'snaky acids hiss,' and which 'petrifies the will' like the panic bird on Plath's typewriter which renders her sterile and the typewriter useless ( *Journals* 288, 303 ).

There comes a time when every daughter is torn between ambivalent feelings towards her mother : matrophilia, matrophobia, or even contemplated matricide. Sometimes the solution can be relatively easy if the daughter manages to free herself from this constrictive hold, as Nancy Friday puts it in her book *My Mother Myself* :

Letting go of my idealized relationship with my own mother embracing the angers at her that I had worked to conceal all my life, finally freed me to be a grown woman able to make choices about how to lead my own life . ( xiii )

On other occasions, however, the problem cannot be resolved so easily, as one may see from cases like Sylvia Plath's and her mother's, or Medusa's and her daughter's in Plath's 'Medusa,' especially when other factors are involved.



'Medusa,' written by Plath during the last months of her life (October 1962 ), is a poem greatly anthologised and hugely analysed and commented upon. Although a great number of critiques exist, a tendency can be noted to view the poem as the speaking persona's struggle to release herself from the frightening and stifling look and hold of the Mother/ Medusa figure and achieve individuation. Most of the critiques thus far, including those of Axelrod, Markey, Saldivar, stress the constrictive aspect of the maternal hold and the daughter's attempt to liberate herself. Some critics infer that the daughter finally manages to free herself, whereas others stress the failure of the struggle. Of all the critiques the one which mentions, without further elaboration, a new interesting aspect is the one by David John Wood. In his book *A Critical Study of the Birth Imagery of Sylvia Plath*, he regards the poem as an indication of Plath's 'quest to achieve the birth of an independent and unyielding identity' ( 125 ). Although he reiterates the same motif regarding the mother's oppressive influence, he takes a step further to refer to the mother's attempt to thwart the daughter's power of speech, physical and spiritual creativity. The above points, however, although extremely important, are merely alluded to without any further analysis.

It seems that most critics, in their effort to emphasize the struggle and stress the importance of the poem's imagery, fail to notice the true nature of the struggle, which concerns the linguistic aspect of the mother/ daughter bond. This point is extremely significant for the overall interpretation of Plath's work, whose life was actually dependent on words, and whose words, having become 'dry and riderless'

[writerless] ( CP 270 ), led to death. Although I tend to agree with those critics of the poem who see the inevitability of the struggle, I regard the struggle as a linguistic struggle, and the daughter's effort as the effort to achieve her linguistic identity, to establish herself as a linguistic being. I consider the poem not just a manifestation of the daughter's hatred against her mother, nor a companion piece to 'Daddy' but as evidence of the linguistic difficulties of the persona.

Julia Kristeva, in her book *About Chinese Women*, first published in 1974, discusses female suicide and makes specific references to Virginia Woolf, Marina Tsvetaeva, and Sylvia Plath as workers of words. She sees Plath as a poet who 'disillusioned with meanings and words ... took refuge in lights, rhythms, and sounds' (*About Chinese Women* 39). She considers her end inevitable since 'her language was torn apart by rhythm, [ and ] no mother [could] serve as an axis for the sacred or for farce' ( *ibid.*). It is the same linguistic alienation that caused Esther Greenwood's breakdown, which is induced by the 'call of the mother.' If the woman listens to that semiotic call and brings it into the paternal Symbolic order, she risks death or even psychosis.

Plath's obsession with words started quite early in her life, originally as an effort to enable herself to establish her identity, a kind of 'narcissistic crisis' according to Kristeva ( *Powers of Horror* 14 ). In her autobiographical essay, 'Ocean 1212-W,' Plath talks about how her early contact with language – a means the mother used to



'placate her jealousy of the new baby' ( LH 16 ) – led her towards a new way of living :

As from a star I saw coldly and soberly the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin : I am I... My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over ... this awful birthday of otherness. (*Johnny Panic* 120)

This preoccupation with language is, as I see it, the main thread in Plath's work, and it is this aspect that has most importantly shaped her whole work. With this analysis, I will attempt to explore 'Medusa' as a poem which traces this preoccupation with language back to the mother. My focus will be two-fold : a discussion of the speaking persona's attempt to abort the Medusa by making her abject, in light of Julia Kristeva's theory of subject formation, and secondly a study of any linguistic references in the poem connected with the daughter's effort to become a speaking subject, thus defying Medusa's verbal inhibition. It is important to note that although there is no regular rhyme scheme or rhythmical pattern in the poem, what holds everything together is the imagery, the prevalent characteristics of which is the pattern denoting constriction, both physical and linguistic.

The Medusa figure in the poem is undoubtedly the mother figure and this becomes evident from a number of elements. First the reference to the poet's mother's name 'Aurelia' which is connected with 'aurella aulita,' jellyfish, an interpretation very popular with critics (Wood 125; Saldivar 181; Alexander 229; Marsack 95; Bassnett 89-91 ); secondly the original title of the poem 'Mum : Medusa.' Thirdly knowing



that Plath read Freud avidly ( Alexander 225; Hayman 26; Stevenson 147; NJ 92, 98, 306, 447 ), one can tell that perhaps, having read Freud's short paper 'Medusa's Head' in which Freud identifies medusa's head with the castrated mother's genitals (273), she used this riddle to disguise the real target of the poem, namely the mother figure; finally, and most importantly, the poem's abundance in maternal connotations: 'umbilicus' ( 14 ); 'cable' ( 14 ); 'line' (17 ); 'sucking' (20); 'placenta' ( 2 ).

From the very beginning, it seems that the daughter has been engaged in a struggle to free herself from the hold of the medusan figure with the 'stony mouth plugs' ( 1 ). According to Julia Kristeva in her book *Powers of Horror* 'the struggle to separate from the maternal body,' to elude the Semiotic and enter the Symbolic order, thus becoming a speaking subject is defined as abjection ( 13 ). However, abjection is both a strong somatic and 'symbolic' feeling, threatening the person 'internally' and 'externally'. This is a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous. The child tries to separate, but feeling that separation is impossible, makes the mother abject in order to facilitate separation from her. This is exactly what Medusa's daughter is engaged in throughout the poem : trying to escape from the tenacious hold of a maternal figure by making her abject.

As Kristeva posits it, 'food-loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection' ( 2 ). In the poem the speaking persona expresses this disgust with food and associates it with the mother : 'I shall take no bite of your body' ( 34 ). It is

as though the mother's body is identified with food which can cause loathing and disgust to the daughter who is determined not to accept it even if it is being offered by a Virgin Mary figure, or even if it is a 'communion wafer' ( 33 ) which she is disgusted with. Since Medusa's daughter wishes to abort the mother, she is determined not to resort to cannibalism, not to take any food from her, as this is another way to establish her own independent personality and free herself from any physical dependence on the mother.

Medusa's daughter is trying to escape from the mother whose gaze renders her frigid and motionless 'eyes rolled by white sticks' ( 2 ) and whose hair 'cobra light' keeps threatening to drag her, to swallow her, to squeeze her breath, the way it squeezes 'the breath from the blood bells of the fuschia' ( 28-9 ). The daughter, suffocating, unable to breathe, wonders if she has managed to escape, 'Did I escape / My mind winds to you ... you are always there' ( 12-16). Kristeva sees this attempt to expel and reject the mother as a 'violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling' ( 13 ). Medusa's daughter seems to have been rendered suffocating, unable to leave and escape, experiencing a back-forth movement, rising and falling, making the speaking persona a child again engaged in Freud's 'fort da' game. Further, the mother's 'curve of water' ( 18 ) leaps to the daughter's water rod, covering it, absorbing it, or like a huge wave overwhelming it, thus suppressing her individuality. Indeed, this accords with Kristeva who says that the abject is 'what disturbs identity, system, order' (4). It seems that the abject mother medusa has demolished the wall that



separates the daughter from the rest of the world, has rendered her 'separateness' impossible and is now trying to absorb her.

Once the breath is taken from the daughter, she has been left suffocating 'Dead and moneyless , overexposed, like an X-ray' ( 30-31 ), empty in the sense that whatever filled her was taken away and revealed her, 'exposed' her to the outsiders, like a strip-tease show, a familiar image with Plath, reminiscent of the strip-tease show in 'Lady Lazarus.' I would like to pause here for a while and go back to Freud to see what he says about an obsession with money, especially an obsession having to do with the person's feigning financial need. As he puts it, the 'instinctual impulses' to be found in anal eroticism play an important role in the sexual and mental life of the individual. One of the most important example proving this is money. Freud states that the individual in later life attaches the same importance to money – which is indispensable for material survival – as the infant in its anal stage attributed to feces. He sees this as an indication of libidinal influence (*An Infantile Neurosis* 72) and he further reiterates this point in 'Mourning and Melancholia' in which he says :

As regards one particular striking feature of melancholia [ ... ] the prominence of the fear of becoming poor, it seems plausible to suppose that it is derived from anal eroticism which has been torn out of its context and altered in a regressive sense. ( *On Metapsychology* 261-2 )

The daughter-speaker in 'Medusa' is suffocating under the 'osmotic,' stifling bell jar in which she is fighting to liberate herself from the mother's influence. She is 'dead,' that is chained, unable to react and 'moneyless.' It seems that the daughter regresses



to the anal stage of her development, reaching this stage after renouncing the oral stage. She says : 'I shall take no bite of your body.' She is in the anal stage, where with her wish to please her mother, an action which will become a way of life for her later, and to gain and bask passively in her approval and love, 'does the big job' and is rewarded. 'Good Sylvia, you are all dry,' says proud Aurelia Plath ( Middlebrook and Yalom 185 ). She is even then unable to defy maternal authority and her anal stage resurfaces in later life. Now in her thirties, some months before the end of her life, she 'fibs' ( *ibid.* ). She claims she has no money, although Hughes has provided generously for her and her children, and her other benefactors including Olive Prouty Higgins and Aunt Dottie have constantly aided her financially ( LH 461, 464, 477, 490 ).

In the poem, the Medusa/Mother figure is victorious, as she has managed to survive from suffering 'keeping [ herself ], it seems, in a state of miraculous repair' ( 15 ), rather fearful but ready to help, 'tremulous breath' ( 17 ); 'dazzling and grateful/ Touching' (19 ), caressing. Kristeva, in her discussion of Celine's novels, refers to a particular 'maternal image' connected with 'suffering, illness, sacrifice,' exactly like the Medusa /Mother. This kind of mother, whom Kristeva calls 'masochistic' ( PH 158 ), and who, like Plath's mother, never stopped laboring to care for her children 'is repulsive and fascinating, abject' ( *ibid.* ). Medusa, as depicted in the poem, is indeed fascinating, 'dazzling', gripping, emitting so much light that she fascinates the daughter, who must admire and respect her, because, though care-laden, she is grateful, uncomplaining. This mother, however, who is supposed to be admired by

her daughter as a paragon of perseverance, is hated because with her presence she is trying to impose herself on the daughter as her alter ego, 'sucking' ( 20 ) her.

Concerning the second aspect of my analysis, namely the linguistic hold of the mother, whom the daughter wants to defy by making her abject, there is a recurrent motif in the poem of overt and covert linguistic images that reinforce the proposition already suggested that the most characteristic aspect of the struggle is its linguistic trait. In the second stanza, in an image that accompanies the 'stony mouth-plug' of the very first line, there is a reference to the mother's 'stooges plying their wild cells in [ her ] keel's window' ( 6-7 ). An important element not to be missed here is the connotation of the word 'stooge,' as an entertainer who feeds lines to the main comedian. What is being implied here is the role of the daughter as the main comedian, whose tasks are to make people laugh, to ridicule, to use irony and satire. These tasks, however, are taken away by the mother's stooges who wish the daughter to speak the language prompted by the mother herself. Making people laugh was a task that fascinated Sylvia Plath. 'I think I'd love being a humorous public speaker. It's such fun to be able to make people laugh' ( *Letters Home* 163 ). It can also be seen from her whole work with the many instances of the ridicule, the deflation, the exaggeration, the ironic tone and the satire ('Daddy,' 'Magi,' 'Gigolo,' 'The Tour'). On this occasion, however, the stooges of the mother seem to be trying to take this talent away, to hush up, to censor the daughter, who like Plath, wishes to be able to 'tickle, armed with feathers .... endowed with a cosmic/ laugh [ that ] does away with the unstitching, plaguey wounds / of an eternal sufferer' ('Perseus' ).



Further, it seems that the Medusa figure is trying to prevent a movement, a departure 'Riding the rip tide to the nearest point of departure' ( 10 ). The journey alluded to at this point may be seen as Kristeva's departure from the semiotic and ensuing entrance into the Father's Symbolic order in which the emergence of the Speaking Subject occurs. The Kristevan mother has difficulty letting the child go and the Medusa / Mother of the poem shares the same attitude. She holds the daughter tenaciously and her presence is always conspicuous, like a 'tremulous breath at the end of [ the daughter's ] line' ( 17 ). 'Line' is a significant word for its connotation is purely linguistic : not just the telephone line, but the persona's reading and writing line which the Medusa is ready to control and censor.

In the poem the 'I' has not invited the Medusa figure vocally, 'I didn't call you / I didn't call you at all' ( 22-23 ), simply because the mother has never left and furthermore because, deprived of the power of speech, the daughter couldn't have possibly invited her orally . On the other hand, the frigid Medusa has rendered the passionate lovers stiff and hissed at the daughter's wrong-doings.

Despite the depressing realization of the constrictive hold of the mother, it seems that there is nothing the daughter can do to achieve her own freedom that will establish her as a speaking subject: 'There is nothing between us' ( 41 ). With this statement, Medusa's daughter asserts that she cannot be weaned from the mother, and condemned to be eternally connected with her, she is forced, like Plath, 'to crawl



back into the womb' ( *Journals* 38). According to Kristeva, the subject discovers itself as the impossible separation/identity of the maternal body and hates that body, but only because it cannot be free of it . It is a horrifying, devouring body ( PH 39 ). For the poem's persona, the mother will be her perennial companion, one she has never managed to get rid of, one that she will be carrying with her 'a living corpse that no longer nourishes' ( Oliver 60 ).

The critics who have mostly seen the struggle as a usual mother / daughter struggle for the daughter's individuation have missed the real essence of the battle, the linguistic aspect which is the daughter's real life. She pleads for linguistic freedom. It seems that her life is governed by language, just like Plath's whose 'blood reflects across the manuscript' ( 'Female Author' 10 ), who seems to be ' possessed by [ her ] poems as by the rhythms of [ her ] own breathing' ( *Johnny Panic* 92 ), and whose independence is utterly seen as linguistic. And the medusa figure, her camouflaged mother, may not be the biological mother, who at times 'becomes all editors and publishers and critics of the world' ( *Journals* 30 ), but all female figures who, in one way or another, played a motherly role in her linguistic life: Emily Dickinson, Virginia Woolf, Olive Prouty Higgins, Adrienne Rich, Marianne Moore, Elizabeth Bishop. 'Jealous one I am, green-eyed, spite-seething ... What is my voice? Woolfish, alas but tough' ( *ibid.* 186 ); 'I must add philosophy in . Until I do I shall lag behind A.C.R. [ Adrienne Cecil Rich ]' ( *ibid.*295).

Ultimately, Plath will manage to get rid of these medusas and stand on her own linguistic feet, especially during the last months of her life when indeed poetry is going to flow like blood from her being, and she will be able to say : 'I am a genius of a writer; I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name' ( *Letters Home* 468 ).

Paradoxically, as mentioned before, Sylvia Plath achieved her own separateness and otherness through language quite early in her life after the birth of her brother , when she was not the sole recipient of her mother's love and attention any more. As a little girl, she had to attract maternal attention through early language acquisition and a certain precocity, as this becomes quite obvious from her autobiographical essay 'Ocean 1212-W' and her Baby Book kept in the Lilly Library. The mother urged her towards language which, however, was centered on her own [ the mother's ] notion of linguistic utility : language for achievement, praise, obedience, economy. Therefore, the daughter, like her surrogate identity, Medusa's daughter, wants to leave this maternal 'locus' and depart for somewhere else where she will be able to use language to voice her feelings, to cry, to be able to say to the mother :

Don't talk to me about the world needing cheerful stuff! What the person out of Belsen- physical or psychological- wants is nobody saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the worst, just what it is like. It is much more help for me, for example, to know that people are divorced and go through hell, than to hear about happy marriages. Let the Ladies' Home Journal blither about those. ( *Letters Home* 473 )

However, like Medusa's daughter, she is doomed to be carrying the mother in her and at the same time be carried by her in her own 'receptacle.'



... my mother uses me as an extension of herself ... I could be sure of what I am : so I could know what feelings I have, even though some resemble hers, are really my own . ( *Journals* 282-83 )

And you were frightened when you heard yourself stop talking and felt the echo of her voice, as if you weren't quite you, but were growing and continuing in her wake, and as if her expressions were growing and emanating from your face. ( *ibid.* 26 )

### **Night Forces Tearing the Soul Away**

'The Moon and the Yew Tree' was written on October 22, 1961, according to Hughes' chronology in *The Collected Poems*, a span of six months ( till March 1962 ) during which Plath 'wrote intensely about mothers and motherhood ...' and which 'period begins with [ this ] ambivalent representation of maternal power' in the poem ( Axelrod 163 ). For Hughes it is a 'real poem, [a] statement from the powers in control of our life, the ultimate suffering and decision in us' ( qtd in Sagar 65 ).

Edward Butscher, who maintains that the poem was written in May 1962, says that when Hughes read it ( it was meant to be an exercise for Plath suggested by him ), he 'was "greatly" depressed by it and saw in the allegory of the little lost girl the pattern of night forces tearing away at Sylvia's soul' ( 305 ). My own interpretation will be focusing on these two aspects : the little lost girl, on the one hand, and the powerful moon mother on the other.



Throughout the poem there are three references to the moon, the first one in stanza two, where the moon imago is presented as impenetrable, '[t]he moon is no door,' 'white and terribly upset.' The second reference presents the predicament of the 'little lost girl' who seems to be torn away between two figures : on the one hand, the Virgin Mary : 'sweet,' with her 'sexed body' replaced by 'the ear of understanding' (*Tales of Love* 257 ), a *Mater Dolorosa* figure whose virginal body is covered with the 'full, blue gown,' whose very characteristics are 'milk and tears' (ibid. 249) and the other, the moon mother, 'not sweet like Mary,' whose 'blue garments' do not cover a virginal body, but which 'unloose small bats and owls,' an abject figure.

Torn between these two polarities, the speaking persona finally expresses her plight : 'How I would like to believe in tenderness,' a statement likely meant to be referring to both moon and mother, since solace, as can be seen in the last two lines of the poem , is to be found nowhere :

The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.  
And the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness  
and silence.

It seems that for the speaking persona, the image of the Virgin is supposed to be 'sweet,' a figure who will help her overcome her fears, and the terrible predicament of her soul; like a paranoiac 'fixated at the stage of presymbolic primary identification,' she is bound to the archaic mother (*Tales of Love* 234, 257 ), and

feels that the symbol of the 'sweet' Virgin will help her enter the Symbolic order, without ever sacrificing her own mother, without being obliged to turn her into an abject figure to facilitate such a separation.

Like Kristeva, however, who asserts that the myth of the Virgin is crumbling since it sacrifices the semiotic maternal body for the symbolic paternal mother ( *ibid.* 262 ) 'this little lost girl,' the speaker, sees disillusionment even in this solution; she is left in her own plight with '[t]he trees of the mind ... black' engulfed in a 'blue light,' the 'child-god' ( *Tales of Love* 257 ) with the 'grasses unload[ing] their griefs on [her ] feet as if [ she ] were God.' This is the God she wished to be – 'I think I would like to call myself "The Girl Who Wanted to be God"' ( LH 40 ). Despite the hopelessness and despair there is a slight hint, a message of resurrection evident in the word 'grass' which Plath will later use as a sign of linguistic resurrection and there is still one more option left : suicide : 'Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?/ This is rain now, this *big hush* [ my emphasis ]' this is the call of the mother again which, as suggested above, may lead to suicide but which proved to be ineffective as a solution for the addressee.

### **Degrading the Eely Tentacles**

With irony and sarcasm, an applicant daughter mars an otherwise benevolent, 'well qualified' maternal figure. 'The Applicant' ( October 11, 1962 ) is a poem in which most critics discern the struggle of the female individual to establish an entity in a

male-dominated society, and her reification in fulfilling the expected-for-her role (Wagner 111; Annas 105 ). David Holbrook talks about the poem as an indication of the schizoid's uncertainty about being human ( 181 ) and what he maintains is partly true, for the poem is indeed about such a struggle. This struggle, however, does not necessarily pertain to the schizoid individual; in my opinion, the poem is about the daughter's struggle to establish an identity, to form a subjectivity and the process itself takes her years back to her infant status, which she can now see retrospectively.

In the first stanza, the speaking persona, the third voice, who is acting like a mediator, a medium, wishes to verify the applicant's articulation so that he can confirm her eligibility to apply for the required 'product.' The response 'no' which seems to be stemming from the applicant herself, is not actually verbal, but it is just a negative nonverbal response suggesting the applicant's inability to express herself verbally. The interviewer is then trying to alleviate the apparent pain of the applicant by suggesting that she join hands with the someone else : a benevolent creature who is willing

[t]o bring teacups and roll away headaches  
And do whatever you tell it.

The reference to the teacups is an image Plath will be using in 'Kindness' in which the mother's support is diminished to cups of tea, which are unlikely to alleviate any kind of pain. On the other hand, in 'The Applicant' the advertised hand is supposed to be at the applicant's disposal, ready to do whatever she commands it to. This is the promise of the 'good enough mother' as suggested by Winnicott who will sacrifice



her life and adjust her needs according to those of the child ('Baby As a Growing Concern' 15).

The very same figure is supposed '[t]o thumb shut your eyes at the end and dissolve of sorrow,' two lines the critics have seen as the ironic twist of the traditional 'till death do us part;' the wife's faithful promise to serve and stay with the husband until he dies (Holbrook 263), or even as a further reference to extreme Indian cases in which the wife was supposed to form a 'suttee' and be burned along with the dead husband ( ibid. ). What stems from this reassurance, however, is the interviewer's confirmation that the other person is in a position to close the applicant's eyes before unpleasant events thus highly likely to dissolve sorrow by ignoring it, through avoidance. This is the method Plath criticizes in the *Journals* :

I resent her too because she has given me only useless information about life in the world, and all the useful woman wisdom I must seek elsewhere and make up for myself. ( NJ 450 )

Further, the advertised creature will provide a protective apparel, a 'suit' 'waterproof, shatter proof, proof' for the naked applicant, '[a]gainst fire and bombs through the roof,' a statement whose language is patterned upon the bouncy rhythms of an advertising jingle. What the scared little applicant is troubled by like Plath, herself, is the future of the universe and the threat emanating from bombing. The threat from any future atomic bomb was an issue which vexed Plath, especially since she became a mother; indicative of this fear of hers is her participation in the great CND Ban the Bomb demonstration of 1960 in London accompanied by her sixteen-

day-old daughter, Frieda ( Stevenson 192 ). Keith Sagar in her recently published book, *The Laughter of Foxes* discusses Hughes' reference to clothing in *Birthday Letters* and sees 'proprieties of dress' as strongly associated with 'those of behavior' (63). According to him, the mother figure, the one who provides the daughter with a 'pink wool knitted dress' for the wedding ceremony, while Hughes has to wear his 'old thrice-dyed black cord jacket, acquires an almost folk-tale status' ( 63 ). It is the very same figure who is likely to provide along with clothing the proper code of behavior that she wishes her applicant-daughter to have. The interviewer then suggests that the 'advertised creature' has the ability 'the ticket' to fill the applicant's 'empty head.' Thus the applicant becomes a blank-brained infant, and the advertised figure is promoted as a means to fill this blankness.

After the 'peddling' of the creature's qualities and marketable points, she is finally invited to come out of the closet, to undertake her task and the applicant is assured that year by year she will gain further experience and will ultimately become an expert in her field. In a final effort to persuade the applicant to 'marry' the creature, the advertiser stresses some of her additional qualities : 'It can sew, it can cook / It can talk, talk, talk.' The further emphasis on the 'talking' qualities of the creature and the three-fold repetition of 'talk' introduces the linguistic aspect which seems to be of great significance for the applicant. If the other creature can talk, she can be her spokesperson, the mouth that will be talking on her behalf, an idea Plath elaborated upon in 'Poem for a Birthday.' At the same time, the creature's speaking qualities

will replace those supposed to be belonging and developing in the applicant, who will be linguistically inhibited in a way.

Ultimately, some additional qualities of the creature 'seal' the advertisement, and with the colloquial interjection '[m]y boy' there is introduced a final question - statement : 'Will you marry it, marry it, marry it,' a pun of 'mere,' mother, as if trying to say, 'Will you accept it as a mother?' In the poem, the persona regresses to childhood, with her past rolling before her eyes like a black and white movie, with the camera focusing on her relationship with this powerful, omnipotent other creature, the mother; the inevitability of this relationship is evident in the final question, which, without a question mark, turns the dilemma of joining, 'marrying' into a statement which the applicant has to accept passively.

### **Denouement**

After the 'advertised' maternal commodity is strongly rejected, a 'birth day' seems to be present : the daughter-persona feels an aura of individuation and Dame Kindness cannot lure with a 'steaming cup of tea' anymore; furthermore the two children figures have been transformed into poems, roses : procreativity into generativity. Ultimately, the woman has managed to 'marry' motherhood which is fluid, unstable with perfection which is stable, but the maternal presence simply views the achievement without participating, being a mere addendum ( 'Edge' ).



'A Birthday Present' was finished by September 30 ( Butscher 327 ) and many critics see it as 'a poem centered on release' which is a kind of gift for the speaker's birthday ( Markey 103 ). Holbrook sees in it the speaker's effort to be reborn, to gain an identification which is important for her existence. In the poem I see the speaker's release from a constrictive hold, which as it will be proven in the process of my analysis, is the maternal constriction; agreeing with David Wood, I see in the pun of the title : 'A Birthday Present,' the likely outcome of the time-consuming and painful process : the day of a birth is present. It is important to note that the poem consists of 31 two-line stanzas, denoting Plath's age ( she was thirty at the time with the extra stanza standing for the candle 'to grow on' ).

At the onset of the poem, the speaking persona wonders about the identity of this gift, but confesses that she often senses its presence making fun of her while she cooks and has to stick to rules : 'adhering to rules, rules, rules.' The veiled gift seems likely to be deriving from a source which hates rules, dismissing them as insignificant and thus making fun of those who adhere to them. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva presents the abject as something which is not the border, not necessarily associated with 'lack of cleanliness or health' but as something which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, *rules*' [ my emphasis ] ( 4 ). In the poem, the gift giver makes fun of the potential receiver, and feels that she is not worthy of such a great honor : 'Is this the one for the annunciation? / My God, what a laugh.'

The religious imagery in this case and the reference to God as someone who will join in the fun-making connects the gift receiver with the Virgin Mary; she is blessed with offspring 'impregnated by the word,' without enjoying the jouissance of the 'primal scene' ( *In the Beginning Was Love* 42 ), in a way excluding the mother figure from such a pleasure, the way the speaker herself is excluded from the award. Despite, however, the feelings of the personified and speech-endowed weird gift, the speaker infers that 'it' actually wishes to belong to her, and although she feels she does not need any gift, she keeps wondering as to its identity, dismissing guess after guess, seeing different sizes and different shapes, even phallic ones : 'It must be a tusk there, a ghost-column.'

She further invites the holder of this gift to sit along with her in a joint admiration of 'the gleam, / The glaze, the mirrory variety of it.' Like a child, the speaker goes back to the 'mirror stage' and even prior to that, when she was fastened to the mother with the 'voiced breath' that made the two figures undifferentiated. And then after that stage, she looks at the mirror, from a distance now, an onlooker along with the mother figure, and realizes that the 'voiced breath' has become maternal language, an object for her, and finally she perceives the current situation : she is a separate being now (Kristeva, *Desire* 195), she left the mirror stage behind.

While they see the mirror from a distance, and while the speaker-child has now acknowledged her separate existence, she invites the mother figure to their last



supper, a joint feast, before the farewell, as a compromise, a means to settle the devouring problem they faced, a point which has been the focus of many of Plath's poems ('Poem for a Birthday,' 'The Other' ), as has already been shown. Despite all these efforts of the daughter, the mother figure, the gift-holder, is reluctant to give the gift, to allow the daughter individuation, and becomes the phobic, afraid that by giving the gift she will lose something : if we assume that the gift the speaker so much covets is the freedom to be accorded by the maternal figure to enable signification and individuation, then it is likely that the mother figure is unwilling to grant such a privilege, since by letting her daughter go, she loses her own authentication, since her child is her only means to be acknowledged in the Symbolic order of the father and the husband ( *Powers of Horror* 13 ).

The following reference to the fear of the gift-holder reinforces my earlier proposition that this holder is the mother : the medusa. On this occasion, she is scared at the thought of her decapitation, after which process her head will merely decorate a shield and she will be the target of admiration of her offspring :

The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it,  
Bossed, brazen, an antique shield,

A marvel to your great-grandchildren.

The medusa figure presented here is not just a covert reference to the mother figure; it is an image directly associated with 'the gleam, the [g]laze, the mirrory variety' mentioned before, since according to the myth, Perseus used a mirror to see Medusa's



reflection so that he would not be petrified by her gaze. After killing the Medusa, Perseus gave her head to Athena, 'who placed it in the middle of her shield' (*Smaller Classical Dictionary* 381). Consequently, these two images, the mirror and the medusa, are unmistakably leading to a kind of signification, a subject formation directly associated with the mother, a proposition which in a way is in accordance with Holbrook's interpretation who sees the speaker in the poem entangled in an identification game.

Further, the persona regresses once more to a childlike conduct : 'You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle,' a plea from a child to pacify the fears of the mother, an image reminiscent of the speaking persona's plea in 'Poem for a Birthday': 'if I am small I won't be noticed and I will cause no trouble.' Just before the final gift-awarding ceremony, the air, the clouds become imbued with 'carbon monoxide.' It is important to pause for a while and take a look at particular journal entries which shed some light on Plath's experiences with gas. The first reference is located in a 1950 entry and is associated with Plath's visit to the dentist:

'Gas, or novacaine?' [ sic ] 'Gas,' I said firmly. 'Breathe easily.' The gas sifted in, strange and sickeningly sweet. I tried not to fight it. ( NJ 13 )

Further, a 1958 entry describes how Hughes and Plath 'gassed' an injured bird. The whole incident is disturbing with the description of the attempts of the bird to resist death, but finally peace is restored : 'Five minutes later he brought it to me, composed, perfect and beautiful in death' ( NJ 403 ). Finally the journal fragment in

which Plath describes the birth of her son Nicholas is another 'gas' experience. The midwife, Nurse D. arrived, armed with a 'cylinder of gas & air set in it, and a tube and a mask' and when the labor pains set in Plath breathed into the mask : 'It was wonderfully pleasant' ( NJ 645 ).

The common denominator of the above gas experiences as well as the breathing of the persona in 'A Birthday Present,' is the administration of gas to alleviate pain, to trigger a 'numbing,' petrifying sensation after pain is removed or alleviated, what Emily Dickinson calls 'formal feeling,' when the 'Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs' ( *The Norton Anthology* 2454 ). The carbon monoxide numbs the speaker and makes the separating ceremony 'sweet' for the speaker who keeps waiting for the gift, remarking that she wants it whole, and not in installments, so that she can enjoy it now before she will be rendered unable to do so by old age. While waiting, she visualizes what it would be like if the gift were actually given to her :

There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday,  
And the knife not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as the cry of a baby  
And the universe slide from my side.

If the gift became finally hers, the whole procedure would resemble a surgeon's operation during which a knife uncontaminated and sterilized would enter her side and cut off a part of hers : her other part, the maternal corpse she is carrying with her, like the other part of a Siamese baby, the one of the originally 'split' lives which finally congealed. What she has in mind is the eternal, the essential 'matricide, the

sine-qua-non condition' of our individuation ( *Black Sun* 27-28 ), without which there can be no actual signification. The denouement is not final; it is just a conditional statement but if we see the other side of the title, if we are close to the poet to be able to read behind her lines, then we may infer that the gift was ultimately awarded, and the 'birth day' has dawned : it is 'present.'

Plath wrote the first draft of the poem on the reverse of a typed page from *The Bell Jar*, chapter 7, in which Esther meets Constantin, the Russian 'simultaneous interpreter' ( 78 ). She talks about how she and Constantin talked openly, and adds :

This Constantin won't mind if I'm too tall and don't know enough languages  
and haven't been to Europe, he'll see through all that stuff to what I really am.  
( 77 )

In the poem, the speaking persona tries to reassure the 'giver' of the present that she will not make any noise while opening it, but she sees the giver's disbelief in accepting this 'discretion of hers' : 'I don't think you credit me with this discretion,' as if the speaker cannot accept her as she really is, as if she is unable to see through her, unlike Constantin. Further, the speaker expresses her own aversion to 'veils' : 'If you only knew how the veils are killing my days.' It is as though the giver makes her resort to veils, pretensions : it is the mother here who makes the daughter use the veils she so much detests. This is the voice that Plath is using in *Letters Home*, which according to Paula Bennett



[w]ith its enthusiasm and artifice ... mars and invalidates virtually all the writing in *Letters Home*, writing as striking for its artistic as its emotional hollowness and immaturity. ( 111 )

Draft two of 'A Birthday Present' is written on the reverse of Chapter 5: this is the part in which Buddy Willard kisses Esther, 'a dry, uninspiring kiss,' which he considers 'terrific.' It is as though Esther can see through the veils she so much resents, while Buddy is a great hypocrite. At the end of the excerpt, Esther starts talking about the circumstances under which she finally found out about his hypocrisy: '[I]t was there I found out how he had fooled me all these years and what a hypocrite he was. I found out on the day we saw the baby born'. ( 64 ) The hypocrisy, the 'veiling' is connected with the birth they attended, with motherhood, which leads back to the poem, to the pretense the persona has to keep up for the sake of the mother figure, who is so fond of 'veils.'

Plath's last poems 'Kindness' and 'Edge' focus on the ineffective qualities of the mother figure. 'Kindness' depicts rather cynically the persona's realization that any kind of kindness deriving from several kinds of sources can have no therapeutic qualities for her whatsoever. The poem seems to be encapsulating some of her apprehensions : motherly love, religious love, creativity associated with motherhood. Ted Hughes in one of his *Birthday Letter* poems, 'Apprehensions,' is delving into this problem faced by Plath :

Your writing was also your fear,  
At times it was your terror, that all  
Your wedding presents, your dreams, your husband  
Would be taken from you

By the terror's goblins. Your typewriter

Would be taken. Your sewing machine. Your children. ( 140 )

'Dame Kindness' takes up different roles throughout the poem, setting out with a religious identity : 'The blue and red jewels of her rings smoke / [i]n the windows,' an image suggesting the stained glass windows of churches and associating Dame Kindness with a Virgin Mary figure. This figure, however, is very cleverly disguised to be suggesting another figure closely associated with her, and most importantly uniquely connected with mirrors, with the mirror stage : the mother. The persona is now a daughter – a child, hence the nursery rhyme imitation to be noted in lines one and two, 'Kindness glides about my house. / Dame Kindness she is so nice.' Both maternal figures – Dame Kindness and Virgin Mary – do not seem to be very supporting, since they only smile, thus endorsing the bright side of life, an optimistic attitude, a world viewed with rosy-tinted glasses. They promote motherhood as the ideal role for the speaking persona, renouncing any other way of fulfillment, like observation and experience which can turn into expressive inspiration for her. These two embodied figures are both mother figures : the Virgin Mother embodies a kind of perfection of fulfilled femininity, and since her separation from Christ is complete and He makes a perfect entry into the Symbolic order, she is perfect, too ( 'Stabat Mater' 257-258 ); the other figure, however, the real mother, is the one who only smiles and who will not let the daughter achieve her freedom and individuation, but wishes to keep her under her heavy veils of protection. Further, this double figure is suggesting sugar as the panacea for all evils : its motto is likely to be 'a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down, in the most delightful way,' a Mary Poppinsque



pattern that Plath herself was familiar with, since that was the pattern she was exposed to, from an early age ( *Journals* 20 ).

The sugar, however, provides only momentary relief : 'Its crystals a little poultice,' and the speaker, while under the influence of this brief spell of cure, is trying to pick up her pieces, to reconstruct herself, in the same way she tried to reconstruct the broken colossus, in the same way she was put together in 'The Stones,' and finally in the same way she was 'stuck together with glue' in 'Daddy.' This partial solution may not be drastic enough for her, and she is afraid that any moment her 'Japanese silks, desperate butterflies / May be pinned ... anesthetized,' she is afraid lest her inspiration deserts her, lest she is dried up and her creativity is put to a stop.

It is these fears of hers that Dame Kindness comes to nurse with a 'cup of tea,' the usual comforting words a mother would employ. But the daughter, the speaking persona, has already moved to another realm, for she has managed to 'convert' the two children she was given by the Dame as an heirloom, into two roses : she has succeeded in making creativity and generativity compatible. In 'Kindness,' the speaking persona is asserting that she has finally 'married' domesticity and art.

Unlike maternal expectations, and despite her own fears ( depicted in such poems as 'Three Women' ), it seems that at the end of her life, Plath got over her fears and compromised the two otherwise incompatible roles. It is highly likely that Plath paradoxically realized 'her desire to be a mother' to be 'indispensable to [ her ]



discovery not of the plenitude, but of the complexity of the female experience, with all that this complexity comprise[d for her ] in joy and pain' ( Kristeva, 'Women's Time' 205 ). With these very last lines she is saying to the Dame that she has managed to succeed in this maternal path without 'annihilating [her] affective, intellectual personality' ( ibid. 206 ).

Written on the same day as 'Balloons,' 'Edge' extends in a way the image of the child holding in 'his little fist' the 'red shred' of the burst balloon, by connecting him with the perfected woman. Being Plath's very last poem, always according to Hughes' information, it invites a lot of critical interpretations and criticism ranges from its characterization as a 'suicide note,' ( Butscher 357; Eird 86 ) to psychoanalytic criticism ( Wood 177-179; Axelrod 219 ).

What I see in the poem is the existence of a triangle consisting of the perfected woman, the children, who being dead are 'folded back into [ the woman's ] body as petals' and the bone-hooded moon with the detached and indifferent gaze, watching the scene from above. This triangle, like a pyramid, a Sphinx, conceals the secret of the speaker, who, like the moon can detach herself from the whole scene : perfection, generativity, and the moon-mother figure, which constitutes the drama of the dead woman, what she was striving to fight throughout her life.

At the onset of the poem, the woman is said to have been 'perfected,' smiling at her accomplishment while '[t]he illusion of a Greek necessity / Flows in the scrolls of her

toga.' In 'Munich Mannequins' the speaker asserts : 'Perfection is terrible. It cannot have children.' In 'Edge' the woman is said to have been perfected but at the same time she is presented as having children; this seeming inconsistency is resolved if one considers that the children in 'Edge' are dead, or better they have been given a new identity : they have become roses, poetry, they have been converted by the woman herself into a sort of generativity and the woman can now justifiably wear the crown of perfection. On the other hand, it seems that she has now succeeded in 'unveiling' the 'illusion of the Greek necessity' : it is as though she has now realized that any theory stemming from any Greek origin was not true : one of these theories that Plath herself endorsed had to do with the supposed problem of her 'Electra complex,' a point she revealed when she commented on her poem 'Daddy' : 'Here is a poem *spoken* [ my emphasis ] by a girl with an Electra complex' ( *Collected Poems* 293 ).

She has just seen the futility of such an interpretation for the real problem, the point that sealed her life did not emanate from the father figure, but it had to do with all three sides of the triangle the detached narrator can now see. The children who died only to transcend their identity and turn into poetic creation ( roses ) are each accompanied by a 'pitcher of milk' which is now empty, since its content has been consumed. Many critics have associated this empty milk pitchers with Plath's linguistic sterility ( Axelrod 218-219 ); the milk, however is most likely to be referring to the milk the mother figure, associated in Plath's poetry with the moon, will not give anymore. Apart from her refusal to be a source of milk, she is not

willing to listen to anything, she is reluctant to empathize : '[she] has nothing to be sad about .... She is used to this sort of thing.'

'Milk and tears became the privileged signs of the "Mater Dolorosa,"' asserts Kristeva in 'Stabat Mater.' Continuing, she adds :

the Virgin obstructs the desire for murder or devouring by means of a strong oral cathexis ( the breast ), valorization of pain ( the sob ), and excitement to replace the sexed body with the ear of understanding . ( ibid. 257 )

This is what the moon mother in 'Edge' is determined not to be doing anymore, but detached, she is gazing down at the 'perfected' woman who has managed to convert procreativity into creativity.

'Edge' comes as a final seal to denote the moon mother's influence on the woman and her children, and her final detachment from things, her refusal to see reality, her stoicism which turns her into a cruel, indifferent creature. 'She is used to this sort of thing.' What do we expect her to do on this occasion : to cry for the dead woman ? She has no tears to shed. On the other, no tears are needed as the dead woman has managed to get rid of her human body, to kill herself, so that she will be alive through her children whom she has 'killed' too, so that they would be alive as poetry. Even on this occasion the moon mother has no feelings, no rejoicing in the woman's accomplishments but she is left there, looming above the scene with her 'blacks crackl[ing] and drag[ging].'



Linda Wagner-Martin discusses the original title of the poem, 'Nuns in Snow' and connects it with 'the way nuns – or any Catholic, and the oblique reference to Aurelia's early Catholic rearing is relevant – would react with disapproval to the woman's suicide' (*Sylvia Plath* 339 ). Apt though her connection might be, it is not of the suicide that the nuns would disapprove – unless we wish to see the poem as a 'suicide note' – but of the woman's accomplishments, her life, a point echoing the mother's critical attitude to her daughter :

... her *guarded* [ my emphasis ] praise at our getting poems published, as if this were one more nail in the coffin of our resolve to drown as poets .... (NJ 381)

... an infusion of fear that successlessness means no approval from mother : and approval, with mother, has been equated for me with love, however true that is. (NJ 448 )

## Conclusion

Throughout this study, motherhood in Sylvia Plath's work has been examined in light of Julia Kristeva's theory of subject formation and the main argument has been that subject formation theory as regression, subjectivity in process and abjection can be manifested in it. Subjectivity in process is the main trait of the 'baby' poems. Since, however, the mother is always a mother's daughter, motherhood is closely associated with daughterhood which in Plath's mother poems is seen as abjection and as regression in the books for children and fairy tale poems.

Plath's books for children and fairy tale poems are examined as a supplemental indication of the self's different ramifications, of subjectivity as an open system manifested on this occasion in the self's regression to a childlike condition, longing for the recapturing of the lost childhood sealed in the bell jar like 'white flying myth' ( JP 124 ), seeking 'to separate from the restrictions of reality,' to make the 'repressed unfamiliar familiar once more' ( Zipes 174 ). But instead of rediscovering the lost childhood, the self realizes that the lost time cannot be regained in its pure innocence. It is indeed recaptured but instead of the sought-for myth of the vastness of the sea and the fusion with the things of the worlds, 'on the road' the self 'encounters' the great moments of the subjectivity crises she has gone through as well as those she will 'encounter' in later stages : daughterhood, motherhood, creativity, the woman in the paternal Symbolic order. These crises of subjectivity, the self interprets as signs through the work and play of which she forms the 'basis for all creation, one which takes as its very precondition the possibility of survival' ( qtd in Ives 89 ), a

possibility, however, that proved ineffective. The hard winter of 1963, bereavement, but most seriously the double burden of creativity and motherhood Plath craved so much did not allow the mother to survive until 'real female innovation ( in whatever field ) [ would ] come about when maternity, female creation and the link between them [ were ] better understood' ( *The Kristeva Reader* 298 ). The 'mother bee' did not hibernate in her 'bell jar,' just like Daddy's bees which could not hibernate in captivity ( *Bumblebees and Their Ways* 94-95 ).

In Plath's 'baby' poems offspring are mostly seen as an extended form of creativity. Children have been produced like written material: they are a further manifestation of the power of creativity over sterility, but they do inhibit creation as their constant demands perplex the self. Although they may constitute 'a token for her own authentication' ( PH 13 ), they fail to provide that stable prop for the self as my analysis of the 'baby' poems brings to light, and it is only in 'Balloons,' one of the last poems, that maternal authentication is partly achieved in the linguistic rapport established between the mother and the little daughter.

The mother, however, is a mother's daughter too and between the mother and daughter figures there is a bond too 'stifling' and on occasions impossible to get rid of as the 'mother poems' have revealed. The 'medusa,' the negligent mother who has failed to invite the 'ill-bred' aunts to the daughter's christening ( CP 74 ), the 'rival for the father' ( J 101 ), will hardly allow the daughter individuation. Even when the 'tentacled' daughter assumes a new role, that of the mother, and she is bound to



rediscover the mother in childbirth, she purports : ' Mother, keep out of my barnyard/  
I am becoming another' ( CP 133 ). Both motherhood and daughterhood are  
amalgamated in 'Edge,' perhaps Plath's last poem. In the poem the fluidity  
manifested in the baby poems and the on-going struggle to get rid of the maternal  
hold are 'perfected,' fixed, immobilized but this has only been achieved in death.

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Titles are recorded as they appear in the archives.

### **I. The Lilly Library Archive**

Plath MSS II 1-9

I found a little fairy  
I have a little fairy  
Missing Mother ( enclosed in SP to ASP, September 9, 1947 )  
Queen Mary's rose garden  
You have to have my fairy ears ( in SP to ASP, March 20, 1942 )

Box 7  
Folder 8 : Bluebeard  
Folder 9 : Cinderella  
Folder 12 : humpty-dumpty

Box 8  
Folder 6 : Silver thread, The fairy scarf, In the corner of my garden  
Folder 7 : The princess and the goblins, Point Shirley, All the dead dears,  
Metaphors, The disquieting muses, Poem for a birthday  
Folder 11 : Change about Mrs. Cherry's kitchen  
Folder 14 : The it-doesn't-matter suit

Plath MSS- Box 9-15  
Letters Home

Box 11  
Folders 1-3 : Notes for *The Magic Mirror*  
Boxes 14-15  
Folder 2 : Drawings  
Folder 3 : Paper dolls  
Folder 4 : The Baby Book

Plath MSS 1958-1961  
Morning song, Heavy women, Magi, Stillborn, You're

Plath MSS IV  
Frieda's schedule

## II MRBR

*Ariel* ( drafts )  
Related correspondence  
The Magic Mirror  
The unabridged journals  
Selected notes and papers  
Last Encounters by Thomas Trevor  
Unpublished Material  
The garden party  
Shadow girl  
Rewards of a New England Summer  
The lucky stone

## Kitchen of the fig tree

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