

Transforming the Law of One: Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath from a Kristevan Perspective

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By

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Abstract

A recent trend in the study of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath often dissociates Confessional poetry from the subject of the writer and her biography, claiming that the artist is in full control of her work and that her art does not have naïve mimetic qualities. However, this study proposes that subjective attributes, namely negativity and abjection, enable a powerful transformative dialectic. Specifically, it demonstrates that an emphasis on the subjective can help manifest the process of transgressing the law of One. The law of One asserts a patriarchal, monotheistic law as a social closed system and can be opposed to the bodily drives and its open dynamism. This project asserts that unique, creative voices are derived from that which is individual and personal and thus, readings of Confessional poetry are in fact best served by acknowledgment of the subjective.

In order to stress the subject of the artist in Confessionalism, this study employed a psychoanalytical Kristevan approach. This enables consideration of the subject not only in terms of the straightforward narration of her life, but also in relation to her poetic language and the process of creativity where instinctual drives are at work. This study further applies a feminist reading to the subject's poetic language and its ability to transgress the law, not necessarily in the political, macrocosmic sense of the word, but rather on the microcosmic, subjective level.

Although Sexton and Plath possess similar biographies, their work does not have the same artistic value in terms of transformative capabilities. Transformation here signifies transgressing of the unity of the subject and of the authoritative father, the other within, who has prohibitive social and linguistic powers. Plath, Kristeva's the "deadmost," successfully confronts the unity of the law, releasing the death drive through anger. Moreover, Plath's psychic borders are more fluid because of her ability to identify with the

pre-Oedipal mother. This unsettling subject is identified by shifts in texts marked by renewal, transgression, and *jouissance*. Unlike Sexton, Plath is able to achieve transformation as she oscillates masochistically between the “inside” and the “outside” of her psychic borders, and between the symbolic and the semiotic. Furthermore, this enables Plath to develop the unique “Siren Voice of the Other.”

In comparison, Sexton, the “dead/less,” evades any confrontation with the maternal and the performance of death in her poetry. Her case is further complicated by the discovery of a second mother. As a result, passivity becomes a main characteristic of her work. This passivity remains until the maternal abject bursts in her text and she reacts to this by performing cleansing rituals, and gravitating toward a symbolic father. Without the dynamism of transgression, Sexton’s work is heterogeneous but does not achieve ultimate transformation and *jouissance*.

Confessional poetry, in this sense, takes on a new dimension. The life stories of the poets become important not for their pejorative, pathological aspects that focus on narrative mimesis, but rather for their manifestation as an aesthetic process. The subject of the writer becomes important as an aesthetic identity in the poems, which are rooted in real life. The main concern then becomes the aesthetic transformative dialectic between the semiotic and the symbolic in her work of art.

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Abbreviations

- ASCP* *Anne Sexton: The Complete Poems*. Boston: Houghton, 1981.
- CP* Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. London: Faber, 1981.
- The Journals* *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. London: Faber, 2000.
- Johnny Panic* Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, and Other Prose Writings*. 2nd ed. London: Faber, 1979.
- Letters* *Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters*. Ed. Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977.
- Letters Home* Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*. Ed. Aurelia Schober Plath. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1975.

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Introduction

I. Overview

An examination of Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath from a Kristevan perspective will help to establish their different psychological positions in life and in their poetry. According to Kristeva, the subjectivity of the poet in her work of art is not discarded. On the contrary, the instinctual drives released in the poet's psyche lead to poetic creation and transgression of the law of One,¹ which is the patriarchal, monotheistic law as a social closed system.

M.L. Rosenthal first coined the term "Confessional poetry" in 1959. At that time, he used the term to describe a new poetry which, he believed, was therapeutic and autobiographical as it "put the speaker himself at the centre of the poem in such a way as to make his psychological vulnerability and shame an embodiment of his civilization" (69). This definition was advocated by many critics. A. R. Jones, for example, described the "voice" of Confessional poetry as the "naked ego" (30). In this sense, such poetry constitutes a break from formalist, impersonal verse (Gill, *Anne Sexton* 10). Because of what Hoffman views as "the limited" and "pejorative" sense of the term (687), especially in the light of the high incidence of suicide among the Confessionals, it has become common practice to avoid associating this poetry with the subject of the artist. Rather, they objectively studied the instability and the uncertainty of language, as well as the indeterminacy of subjectivity removed from the subject of the artist who remains in control of the work by employing "deliberate literary strategy" (Gill, *Anne Sexton* 11). This was done under the pretext that in following the psychological claims of the traditional characteristics of Confessional poetry one accepts the naïve mimetic qualities of literature and the transparency of language (Gill, *Anne Sexton* 15). However, those critics who divorced the artist from her art in order not to fall into the trap of conventional

Confessional criticism, conferred a humanist intellect on the writer, or a holistic being, a unified consciousness, and an integrated ego (Wright 409). Though the subject of the poems they analyse is seen as part of the evolution of post-humanist thought, it seems that this unified ego is not. In this sense, they treat the writer as a “self” who “uses language to convey ideas” and “means and intends what she says” rather than a “subject” who is “not fully aware of all the phenomena that shape” her (McAfee 1-2).

Although some of the studies that ignore the subject of the writer and her biography are enriching, others fall into the trap of abstraction. For example, in his study of Anne Sexton’s work, McGowan abandons the biographical approach altogether. Reiterating Eliot’s famous doctrine of the impersonal,² McGowan discards what he describes as the “selfishly solipsistic exercise” (xi) to focus on the phenomenon of writing poetry as a “laboratory within language” (viii). He contends that Sexton, along with the Middle Generation poets, formed voices on issues including depression, psychosis, and trauma, which, he suggests, “preoccupied the American psyche” but never the poets’ psyche (viii). He dissects some of Sexton’s poems by applying different philosophical approaches, but it could also be argued that what helps him in showing the dialectic of these poems is the inherent contradiction in language itself, especially poetic language removed from any constrictions in the poet’s life.

McGowan concedes that in his examination of Sexton’s work, he chose only a few poems. In other words, he ignored significant aspects of Sexton’s life for the sake of expanding some ideas in relation to her minor work. In his study, Sexton appears to be a philosopher rather than a poet, let alone a human being who has experienced a traumatic life. In addition, he claims that to study the personal grief of these poets means to “nullify the effect and impact that their poetic works had on the creation of new American poetries” (viii). With such an approach, subjectivity begins to look like an abject element that should be abandoned. But for whose benefit?

The trend of looking at Plath's poetry objectively was initiated by Bassnett. Many other studies continued to give Plath complete control over her work. For instance, Tracy Brain, following in the steps of Markey, is concerned with environment, consumerism and other cultural and political issues. However, Brain's argument against biography as a whole is suspect:

Plath's writing is sane in its argument and subject matter. Insistently, the writing concerns itself with real political and material issues, with 'definite situations' [...]. Second, the writing is sane in so far as it is controlled, methodical, and carefully wrought — a circumstance to which Plath's manuscripts in the archives testify. Both of these senses of sanity are the very opposite of the myth of Sylvia Plath as mad, depressed and pouring out her distress in an ink of blood. (37)

Implicitly, this argument divides not only Plath's work, but also her critical interpretations, into two categories: sane and insane. This distinction is further articulated by Broe: "Critics have split between the speculative and the biographical; the craft followers and the cult devotees; the mythmakers and the demythologists; those Gradgrindians who praise the cast-iron discipline of her prosody and the necrophiliacs who probe the poems for sufficient pain and suffering to require a deadly consummation" (ix). According to these critics, writing one's subjectivity and its trauma, and not the "real" material issues, becomes insanity. To defend Plath one should strip her of her feelings and equip her only with intellect. The question that arises here is whether poetry, like "Plath's manuscripts in the archives," should be "sane" (Brain 37). Moreover, do violence and blood not exist in Plath's work, or should one close one's eyes on the "insanity" and see only the "sane" things?

Many other works take a similarly objective approach. Strangeways stresses the political element in Plath's work and emphasizes that Plath is the agent of her psychoanalytic discourse. In *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*, Kroll underscores the universality of Plath's poetry and mythologizes her life. Broe, Annas, and Britzolakis also focus upon the self-reflexivity of the poet's writing. However, the latter

admits that Plath's text "can never be entirely disentangled from the narrative of her life and death" (*Sylvia Plath* 8). These studies repudiate what they view as an uninhibited reading, dependent on biography, although the counter concern is that they ignore the poet's subjectivity, her expression of personal suffering. Moreover, it can be said that studying poets beyond the personal might run contrary to their own intention. For example, Sexton insists in an interview with Harry Moore: "my poetry is very personal." In fact, she goes further: "Any public poem I have ever written, that wasn't personal, was usually a failure" (*No Evil Star* 50). Almost all of the studies which resist the personal in Plath quote her famous comment in a BBC interview:

I think my poems come immediately out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these "cries from the heart" that are informed by nothing except, you know, a needle or knife, or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience; and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind. (Orr 169)

While Plath is trying to diminish the role of personal anguish, the violent words reveal that "the larger things, the bigger things" also hide suffering (Orr 170). All traces of consciousness cannot be erased from Plath's work, but the personal must also be emphasized.

It can be argued that in order to guarantee a concentration on the poet's singularity and subjectivity a turn towards psychoanalysis from a Kristevan perspective becomes necessary. Kristeva relates the subject of the artist to her work of art. In other words, Kristeva connects the poetry to the destiny of the writer, literally her suicide. Similar pathological diagnoses of poets are given by, for example, David Holbrook, in *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*, where he dubs Plath as clinically schizoid. He regards her as having "false maleness" and "promoting irrationality and paranoia" (178, 246). Furthermore, Butscher, in *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*, views Plath's work as a reflection of her neurosis. However, to follow a psychoanalytic approach does not mean

only trying to understand the reason for the poet's suicide, as Schwartz and Bollas claim: "to understand her suicide, we need to understand her work and life as unity" (180). For Kristeva, poetry does not follow mimesis in the conventional sense. Poetry is not simply a mirror that reflects reality, but rather a cave of mirrors where subject and words are in process and where there is a possibility for transformation: the subject does not suppress her instinctual drives and thus is an unsettling identity, allowing thethetic (the symbolic) to be breached (Kristeva, *Revolution* 57-61). Therefore the focus on the personal and the biographical here does not mean a simple narrative of the life of the poet, but also encompasses the signifying process. In other words, the evolution of the subject is associated with the evolution of language.

In this sense, psychoanalysis seeks to understand not suicide, but rather the subject's dialectic and the change that she can (as in the case of Plath) or cannot (as in the case of Sexton) achieve in her work. This form of psychoanalysis preserves the singularity among the poets labelled as "Confessional." Moreover, psychoanalysis examines the relationship between the poet and her poetic practice, this being what Stephen Spender calls, "an effect of controlled uncontrolledness" where "consciousness and unconsciousness meet" or rather are at odds (200, 199). This means that the poetry is not necessarily seen as a "race to the grave," but as language where instinctual drives are at work. There might be consequences due to the release of these drives, but it is the process that is of central interest. For example, Steven Gould Axelrod's *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* is a psychoanalytic study which focuses on both the poet and her language rather than on her suicide. Moreover, Diana Hume George's *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton* is a feminist psychoanalytic study that shows balance in discussing the poet and her poetry. The present study attempts a similar balance, using a poststructuralist Kristevan approach and focusing on the personal, in its real and symbolic sense, and its relation to poetic language and its instability.

In terms of psychoanalysis, instinctual drives, mainly the death drive, may bring transformation and liberation (as in the case of Plath) which are of particular concern to feminists. Many studies, especially those written by American authors, view her as a victim of male, social, and historical oppression. For example, in the works of Annas, Shook and Ferrier, Plath was regarded as “a victim of the fifties and its ideology of the family” (Ferrier 215). In contrast, other feminists, such as Bundtzen in *Plath's Incarnation: Woman and the Creative Process*, do not view Plath as a victim, but rather as a poet liberating herself from patriarchal oppression through her writing (256). The perspective of this study is that Plath was able to make a change on a psychic level only. Moreover, to transform the law of the father can never be a total triumph since it threatens the poet's identity.

In comparison, Middlebrook and George in their introduction to *Sexton: Selected Criticism* declare that almost all of the essays in the book are, despite their different approaches, essentially feminist (xi). Sexton is interpreted by feminists primarily on the basis of her extensive use of the woman's body. In fact, some critics consider Sexton's biological material (talking about her breasts, her uterus, her abortion, her vagina, menstruation, adultery, drug addiction, etc.) as distinguishing her from Plath by demonstrating a stark contrast with patriarchal discourse. Ostriker, for example, although deliberately pointing out that Sexton is “not a *fine* artist” (“That Story” 253), insists that:

Far more than Plath, Sexton challenges our residual certainties that the life of the body should be private and not public, and that women especially should be seen and not heard, except among each other, talking about their messy anatomies. We believe, I think, that civilization will fall if it is otherwise. (252)

However, it can be argued that Sexton's “body” poems are more an indictment of the self than a tribute since they do not help to transform her relation to the father-figure. They mostly show passivity and if they show power, it is only sexual power over men (H. Norton 172). Liz Hankins comments on these body poems as follows:

In the process of defining herself, Mrs. Sexton comes to regard the female body as an object which, she feels, is somehow owed to men. She, however

uneasily, comes to define herself by her sexual relationships with men and by the extent to which her body is offered and used as a sacrifice. (515)

Helen Vendler, in *The Music of What Happens*, does not view Sexton's biological writing in any sense as innovative (301). She argues, however, that the difference in this poetry lies in naming the occasion of the poem. Moreover, Vendler claims it is the feeling of these biological acts and not the acts themselves that are of interest. For example, masturbatory fantasy, she explains, has taken many forms in literature although it is not explicitly named. This theory has strong validity. Plath's body, in contrast, is seen as "an emblem of pain and mutilation" (Ostriker, "That Story" 251). However, this disintegrated body, one can argue, is the sign of negativity that creates transformation. As Jacqueline Rose has pointed out, it is a "body [that] can be called feminine to the precise degree that it flouts the rigidity (the masculinity) of the requisite forms of literary cohesion and control" (*Haunting* 28). Consequently, this study is not only interested in the biological sex of a person, but also in the position that the subject takes up in language (in terms of either identifying with the father or the mother), which determines her revolutionary potential.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that transgressing the law of One begins in the personal. To achieve this, the study compares Sexton and Plath in terms of two subjective attributes: negativity (the release of the death drive in the form of anger) and abjection (the fluidity of psychic borders). It proposes that the more negativity, and the more movement between the psychic borders — that is, between "inside" and "outside" and between a father and a mother — the more the poet is able to transgress the law of One as well as to create a unique voice.

Sexton and Plath have been compared by critics for several reasons. First, both were classified as Confessional poets, along with Robert Lowell and others, because they exposed intimate personal emotions in their poetry. Second, both writers were contemporaries and indeed friends. Their brief but intense friendship, as David Trinidad describes it, influenced their work mutually (29). In her memorial essay written after

Plath's suicide, "The Bar Fly Ought to Sing," Sexton explains that she had known Plath since they lived in the same town, but only had the chance to meet her relatively late: "I knew her for a while in Boston. We did grow up in the same suburban town, Wellesley, Massachusetts, but she was about four years behind me and we never met" (6). The first meeting that established their friendship took place in Lowell's poetry class at Boston University. This was, Sexton notes, after Plath was married to Ted Hughes. Sexton describes how, after Lowell's class, they, along with George Starbuck, would

pile into the front seat of my old Ford and I would drive quickly through the traffic to, or near, the Ritz. I would always park illegally in a LOADING ONLY ZONE, telling them gaily, "It's okay, because we are only going to get loaded!" Off we'd go, each on George's arm, into the Ritz and drink three or four or two martinis. George even has a line about this in his first book of poems, *Bone Thoughts*. He wrote, "*I weave with two sweet ladies out of The Ritz.*" Sylvia and I, such sleep mongers, such death mongers, were those two sweet ladies. (7)

The third and probably the most important factor of the Sexton-Plath dyad is that both writers were obsessed with death. They both had breakdowns and eventually committed suicide. In "The Bar Fly Ought to Sing," Sexton refers to this mutual interest in death: "Often, very often, Sylvia and I would talk at length about our first suicides; at length, in detail and in depth between the free potato chips" (7). She adds: "We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it!"

However, in spite of the friendship and the mutual influence and interests of the two women, each poet's work remains uniquely hers. This is not to equate the two poets' achievements. In fact, many critics see Plath's work, especially her last poetry, as surpassing Sexton's, without underestimating or minimizing the latter's work (Hall 66; Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath" 62; Nims 138; Markey, *A Journey* 145). Markey, for instance, remarks that "even the most sympathetic critics find her [Sexton] lacking" (*A New Tradition?* 101), and Trinidad states bluntly: Plath "undid her [Sexton] in the end" (29). Pettingell sounds particularly harsh when she declares "as the passing years provide a greater perspective on Plath's verse, it continues to look strong, while Sexton's sound

dated – the product of a dead-end movement, like imagism or beat poetry, has lost its momentum” (18).³ What is interesting in Pettingell’s comment is her use of the word “momentum” which, it can be argued, comes from personal factors. This lack of “momentum” is seen as the antithesis of the “anger” or “hate” that Sexton talked about when she compared her poetry to Plath’s in an interview with Barbara Kevles:

Her first book didn’t interest me at all. I was doing my own thing. But after her death, with the appearance of *Ariel*, I think I was influenced and I don’t mind saying it. In a special sort of way, it was daring again. She had dared to write hate poems, the one thing I had never dared to write. I’d always been afraid, even in my life, to express anger. I think the poem, “Cripples and Other Stories,” is evidence of a hate poem somehow, though no one could ever write a poem to compare to her “Daddy.” (13)

Therefore, there is truth in Markey’s observation: “Unlike Plath, Sexton’s anger is never clarifying; no sooner expressed, it is repressed, and the same emotional and intellectual impasse remains” (*A New Tradition?* 116).⁴ This anger, which is “the thing that is unique to Plath” and “the ingredient that is [especially] missing from Sexton’s early poems,” is what Kristeva calls negativity (Trinidad 28),⁵ a “release of controlled drive energy” (Lechte, *Julia Kristeva* 127). The violent energy expenditure (anal drive or death drive), as Lechte explains, becomes part of the signifying process as heterogeneity. That is, this discharge of drives, expressed as violent anger and hate in Plath’s case, creates a dynamic, conflictual process in the text between the semiotic (the rhythmic pre-Oedipal, pre-linguistic instinctual space, which is maternal) and the symbolic (the social and cultural law of the father). As Sexton’s poetry, especially her early poetry, does not express this kind of anger, it could be argued that the level of heterogeneity, and in turn of fluidity, is less evident in her work than in Plath’s. The death drive is released less in Sexton’s text and thus it has less transformation (“positive” destruction, capable of change) if compared with Plath’s. Nonetheless, Sexton’s poetry is not totally passive, as shall be seen later.

Transformation, which brings pleasure and results from negativity, makes the difference, this study posits, between Plath’s and Sexton’s work. Transformation

represents a transgressing of the unity of the subject and of the authoritative, prohibiting social and linguistic powers represented by the father. According to Kristeva, this must begin with the disruption of the subject, which in turn leads to the disruption of the social: “there can be no socio-political transformation without transformation of subjects: in other words, in our relationship to social constraints, to pleasure, and more deeply, to language” (“Woman Can Never” 141). Markey expresses this clearly in relation to language when describing Plath’s last poems: “there is no distinction between the life-force in the speaker/protagonist and the flow of creative energy in art” (*A Journey* 143).

In *Imaginary Incest: Sexton, Plath, Rich and Olds on Life with Daddy*, Swiontkowski argues that while Sexton and Plath are victims of their father, Rich and Olds stand as rebels against him. She believes that these four poets write not of actual incest with their real fathers, but rather they view him as a symbol of social and cultural powers, against which they struggle. They “desire the father’s creative potency” (33). Although she ranks Sexton and Plath as subordinate to the father, unable to free themselves from his shackles, Swiontkowski uses a different expression to describe this relationship: “Sexton’s poetry seeks the father’s power to protect and affirm her; much of Plath’s poetry seeks the father’s power to advance her ambitions, to accept her as an equal” (33). But to what extent is the power needed to feel secure equal to the power needed to enhance an ambition, which is already there? For this reason, it can be argued that Plath differs from Sexton in her ability to confront the power of the symbolic father through negativity and abjection.

In contrast to Swiontkowski, Joseph contends that both Sexton and Plath are able to eliminate the symbols of their social entrapment, namely the bell jar and the inverted bowl: Plath through transcending the social and Sexton by glorifying the female body (8-9). These two studies try to equate the two poets in terms of their success or failure. It can be argued instead that Plath, unlike Sexton, was able to create a unique voice capable of changing the law of One. Accordingly, the present study will call Plath, who expends death

energy in her poetry, the “deadmost” (*plus mort*)⁶ and her unique voice the “Siren Voice of the Other.” On the contrary, Sexton, who does the same, yet to a lesser extent, without achieving a similar change, will consequently be called the “dead/less,” depending on a Kristevan approach.

II. Theoretical Background

A. Kristeva: General Perspective

In her departure from traditional linguistic models and critical stances that advocate rigid, systematic structures and ultimate rationality, Julia Kristeva seeks a language that has transformative powers and heterogeneous character. One model for this is poetic language. According to Kristeva, poetic language is not a series of rules in a rigid system of signs, but rather one where the emotions and the “dialectics of the subject [are] inscribed” against ordinary language and social constraint (Kristeva, *Desire* 25). Language and the subject in this sense become inseparable: “any theory of language is the theory of the subject” (Oliver xviii). The subject’s drives and pulsions constitute “the heterogeneous, disruptive dimension of language” (Moi, *Sexual/Textual* 161). The semiotic is the name that Kristeva gives to these instinctual drives, especially the death drive that ruptures the symbolic. This indicates that violence is the root of such language and its subject. This violence is also evident in Kristeva’s definition of abjection, which is the necessity to dissociate oneself from the mother by killing her: “Matricide is our vital necessity” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 27-28). One has to suppress drives in order to enter the symbolic. However, they return violently to disrupt language and the revolutionary subject.

Moi defines the “revolutionary subject” as “a subject that is able to allow *jouissance* of semiotic motility to disrupt the strict symbolic order” (*Sexual/Textual* 169). This motility is poetic motion that marks the rupturing of the semiotic to the symbolic through the appearance of and conflict with otherness, which causes musical rhythms. Kristeva refers to motility in relation to the definition of the *chora*: “a nonexpressive

totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” (*Revolution* 25). According to Kristeva, motility is related to language, especially to the rhythmic aspects of language, which are maternal.

A way of releasing the semiotic drive in the text is through negativity which masks the death drive, the most important semiotic drive in Kristeva’s theory (Moi, *Sexual/Textual* 169). The death drive is a term that was proposed originally by Freud in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to refer to the individual’s instinctive propulsion towards death, self destruction and the organic earlier state of things (18: 37-38). He wrote of the opposition between this drive and Eros, the life or sexual instincts (18: 40-44, 258-59). Lacan kept this definition unchanged (Lacan, *Seminar VII*: 211-12). However, he stressed the linguistic aspects of the death drive through his famous proclamation: the unconscious “is structured like a language” (Lacan, *Seminar III*: 167). Kristeva, who borrows the definition from Freud, stresses the aggressivity of this drive and the biological, corporeal elements that constitute the subject (Beardsworth 42). She also accepts the Lacanian idea that ties the “speaking subject” to a paternal, symbolic law (Beardsworth 27). However, in contrast to the Lacanian subject, Kristeva argues that negativity, as the released destructive drives, perpetuates tension and thus life and the transformation of the symbolic law through the work of art (*Revolution* 70, 150). Language derives in this way from the death drive (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 129).

The discharge of the destructive, aggressive death drive can be detected in the phenomenon of primary masochism where there exists an opposition between the death drive and the life drive. Freud dealt with the question of masochism, a term which he first encountered in the writings of Krafft-Ebing, in a number of his essays: “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” (7: 157-60), “A Child Is Being Beaten” (17: 179-204), and “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (19: 159-70). According to Freud masochism is a perverse pleasure sought by means of inflicting pain on the sexual object; it is “an extension of sadism turned round upon the subject’s own self”, that is, “[a] sadist is always

at the same time a masochist” (“Three Essays” 158-59). The impetus for masochism is Oedipal conflict, especially as it is connected with the relationship with the father (the child’s passive position as an identification with the mother is nothing but a manoeuvre to gain the father’s love) (“A Child” 126, 128). In his final essay, “The Economic Problem of Masochism,” Freud proposes a new concept of primary masochism, a drive which has its origin in the death instinct. Kristeva shares this idea with Freud. However, she opposes Freud’s concept of masochism as father-centred theory. She has redefined the mother’s role in masochism by locating this phenomenon in the pre-Oedipal stage where, in terms of abjection, the mother is loved and hated, which creates ambivalence in the child. Moreover, Kristeva does not look at masochism only as a sexual perversity but as an aesthetic experience related to literary language and thus capable of transformation. Studlar explains this position:

the masochistic aesthetic extends beyond the purely clinical realm into the arena of language, artistic form, narrativity, and production of textual pleasure. Emerging as a distinct artistic discourse, the masochistic aesthetic structures unconscious infantile sexual conflicts, conscious fantasies, and adult experience into a form that is not only a measure of the influence of early developmental stages but also a register of the transformative power of the creative process. (14)⁷

This masochistic reciprocity between the self and the other becomes important to feminism when related to the Hegelian “master-slave dialectic” (Hegel 111-19),⁸ which according to Kristeva, is irreconcilable. Lacan was one of the first psychoanalysts to adopt this concept of dialectic that is positioned within the law. He emphasizes desire for that which is lacking (*petit objet a*). *Objet a* is related to the concept of the real in Lacan’s theory. This concept in particular went through many stages of metamorphosis: from connection to biological need to concrete materiality and finally to what Lacan calls X (*jouissance*, death drive) that exists elsewhere (Homer 84). It is the traumatic kernel (navel) of subjectivity (Homer 84). Fantasy (as well as the *objet petit a*) is the way through which the subject “sustains [itself] in th[e] impossible scenario [of the real]” (Homer 94). This lack is referred to by Lacan as the phallus which stands for language, authority and law. As

woman lacks the organ that represents the phallus, she is considered “a *fantasy* of what is other than the law” (Colebrook 168). The social discourse in this sense is primarily patriarchal where “women” play the role of the slave. Although Kristeva follows Lacan’s view that what is feminine is marginal, she stresses that the interaction between the master and the marginal slave, between meaning and non-meaning, “the speaking subject of law and the repressed maternal body” is still possible (Colebrook 168-69). In this way the subject changes her position in the law to a revolutionary position, which can disrupt and transform that same law.

Feminism in this sense takes a different track from previous schools. Kristeva, who paradoxically does not regard herself as feminist, deals with the issue of feminism or woman in two major essays: “Women’s Time” and “Stabat Mater.” In the first essay, Kristeva discusses three generations of feminism. The first movement, Liberal feminism, seeks equality with men and aspires “to gain place in linear time” (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 193).⁹ This movement rejects characteristics that are traditionally considered to be feminine or maternal. The second-generation feminism — in stark contrast with the first wave — rejects linear temporality totally, focusing on female specificity. It seeks “intrasubjective and corporeal experiences left mute by culture in the past” and believes “in Woman, Her power, Her writing” (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 208). This demand for bringing difference beyond the very principle of sociality is for Kristeva a radical thought enslaved to Patriarchy. A third generation, which is emerging, is against this stance of reversal in the second wave and its *l’écriture féminine* (Jonte-Pace 10-11). The third position, which Kristeva adopts, sees that exclusive choices would not help the cause of women. In her view, feminism can both work within the symbolic and yet challenge it at the same time. Her “Stabat Mater,” which is divided into two parallel columns, reinforces this idea although, at first instance and when looking at the left column, describing Kristeva’s personal experience of childbirth, one thinks of the second-generation feminism that Kristeva rejects. However, as Edelstein explains, the existence of the right column

which analyses the Christian discourse about the mother creates a dialectic with the other column between the subjective and the social and the semiotic and the symbolic (31). The essay becomes, in this sense, transgressive and heterogeneous, oscillating between culture and nature, a “WORD FLESH” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 235).

In short, the third position highlights again what makes Kristeva’s work different from that of Lacan. For while he focuses on the symbolic order covering the function of language, she stresses the pre-verbal semiotic (Lacan’s Real) and its effect on language (A. Smith 15). According to Kristeva, the unconscious, unspeakable drives manifest themselves in poetic language, which speaks the unspeakable. Therefore, her theory focuses on the “voice,” on speaking; even the silence of the semiotic which alternates with the symbolic becomes spoken. However, the issue of silence as that which exceeds language in poetry and which can be a means of power is still controversial in feminist theory as a whole (Mahoney 603). This study looks at both speaking the unspeakable and silence beyond the text as means of defiance against the law. Moreover, although this thesis uses a Kristevan framework, it goes beyond this when the work of Sexton and Plath indicate the limitations of this framework. This is most apparent in the case of the concept of silence and the exclusiveness of the choices that Kristeva provides for the subject. This will be further elaborated in the coming discussion and in the conclusion.

B. Criticism of Kristeva’s “Feminist” Theory

Kristeva claims consistently that she is not a feminist. Some critics even think that she has a condescending attitude towards feminist movements and their political struggle (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 93). However, on many occasions, Kristeva seems sympathetic to the feminist’s concerns and the rights of women. For example, this is evident in her essay “Woman Can Never Be Defined” (138) and in *About Chinese Women* (16). And although she rejects traditional feminist’s waves in “Women’s Time,” she places her theory within and as a conclusion to feminist movements (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 91).

These contradictory views in Kristeva's theory allowed severe criticism from some critics, while others looked upon it as evidence to the openness of her writing to interpretation, which challenges the law of One.

The works of Julia Kristeva remain controversial, especially in relation to feminism. Kristeva's "feminist" ideas were criticized as essentialist by well-known feminists as they relate the semiotic *chora* to the maternal and to the feminine in general. For example, Nancy Fraser disapproves of "Kristeva's quasi-biologicistic, essentializing identification of women's femininity with maternity" (66). Judith Butler contends that Kristeva's "naturalistic descriptions of the maternal body effectively reify motherhood and preclude an analysis of its cultural construction and variability" (80). "Ahistorical, biologically reductive, psychologically revisionist, universalist – the list of crimes of which Kristeva is found guilty, under the guise of essentialism, abounds," writes Tina Chanter (182). Moreover, Elizabeth Grosz believes that although Kristeva describes maternity using biological, physiological, and genetic terms, she refuses to define it as female on an essentialist account (*Sexual Subversions* 81). The list of critics who accuse Kristeva's theory of being based on essentialist conception of maternity and femininity extends to Kaja Silverman (125), Domna Stanton (176-77), and Teresa De Lauretis (174).

Furthermore, unsatisfactory to feminists is Kristeva's emphasis upon sexual difference, where female subjectivity cannot exist except within a patriarchal framework. Sexual difference, according to Kristeva, destruct totalising identities and thus she relates it to the concept of exile and foreignness. In a sense this means that women are not only marginal, but also dependent on the phallic order to exist. In her article, "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident" (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 292-300), Kristeva explains the relationship between sexual difference and marginality:

And what of sexual difference, of women, are they not another dissidence? [. . .] Too caught within the boundaries of the body and perhaps also of the species, a woman always feels exiled by those generalities which make up the just measure of social consensus, as she does in relation to language's generalising power. That

exile of the feminine in relation to Meaning and to generality, means that a woman is always different. (A. Smith 78)¹⁰

Grosz argues that Kristeva's emphasis on the "feminine" as difference and differentiation, the existence of the masculine and feminine within each subject as bisexuality, rather than on the identity of "woman" is problematic for feminism:

[Kristeva's] critical attitude to feminist texts is, I suggest, a function of the slippage she effects from the concept of woman to that of the feminine, a displacement of the question of identity by *differentiation*. This remains the most troublesome of her various contentions regarding feminist theory and politics. By means of this manoeuvre, she is able, on the one hand, to evacuate women of any privileged access to femininity, and, on the other, to position men, the avant-garde, in the best position to represent, to name or speak the feminine. (*Sexual Subversions* 95-96).

Moreover, some feminists attack Kristeva's theory of not being useful for the ambitious feminist politics as it offers no potential for transformation. Nancy Frazer, for example, contends that Kristeva's theory focuses on the intrasubjective conflicts rather than on the social, pragmatic struggles of feminism (189). Also, Dorothy Leland believes that Kristeva's ideas about feminism leads to political pessimism as such ideas imitate Lacan's symbolic order, which is not susceptible to change (96). She also agrees with Terry Eagleton and Toril Moi who condemn the anarchism and the disruptive libidinal drives which Kristeva promotes, instead of establishing solidarity, meaning and institutions (Leland 95-96; Eagleton, *Literary Theory* 190-91; Moi, *Sexual/Textual* 169). Fraser also shares these views by claiming that neither her maternal essentialist feminism nor her other extreme position of deleting the existence of women can be useful to political feminism (67). Joining the two together, according to Fraser, is not of help either.

However, in defending Kristeva's position, Kelly Oliver explains that while American feminists view sex as biological and gender as culturally constructed, Kristeva views sexual difference only as culturally constructed and the body only as representation (156). Kristeva advocates a secular discourse about motherhood in order to establish a fresh theory of alterity removed from any patriarchal and religious discourse (Oliver 156). In other words, neither she rejects motherhood the way some feminist groups, particularly

Simone de Beauvoir, did nor does she accept its traditional representation (*Tales of Love* 234). Instead, she calls for a heretical ethics, a “*herethics*” where women/mothers are separated from morality, which means evoking the semiotic in poetic text and allowing the unconscious to speak its desires (*Tales of Love* 263). Kristeva’s declaration that “*woman as such* does not exist” shows that Kristeva does not have a theory of femininity (*About Chinese* 16), rather an anti-essentialist theory that locates “woman” in the marginal in order “to undermine the phallogentric order that defines woman as marginal in the first place” (Moi, *Sexual/Textual* 162). In this sense, the difference between man and woman is a difference in the position, for or against the symbolic. This leads to the conclusion that one cannot categorize all women under the same group. They are, in fact, different according to the position they take in relation to the symbolic. Strengthening their bond with the semiotic does not mean being more “feminine” rather it means dissolving gender divisions (Moi, *Sexual/Textual* 164). The commonality between the semiotic and the feminine is only their marginality and their capability of defying the law from that very position (Moi, *Sexual/Textual* 165).

Many critics saw in Kristeva’s theory a possibility of change and political agency. Jacqueline Rose, for example, believes that Kristeva’s work is important as it stands on the border of politics, psychoanalysis and feminism. Kristeva’s feminism, according to Rose, is promising for change in the field of politics. However, the idea of what is political has changed as it is shifted from the social to the personal when politics opened itself to the violence of the unconscious (*Sexuality* 150-51, 164). Jenny Robinson suggests that “heterogeneous spatialities,” described by Kristeva, enable transformation (298). This study, aligning with the second camp, also thinks that the semiotic is a source of dynamism and thus change.

C. Kristeva and the Socio-biographical

Readers of Kristeva's early work, especially "The Ethics of Linguistics" would realize how much she is indebted to Russian formalist theory and futurist practice (Cavanagh 283-85). With the formalists, particularly Roman Jakobson, she shares the interest of linguistic aspects of poetic language and with the futurists their revolutionary ambitions. However, from the outset, Kristeva does not separate poetic language from the social, political, or psychoanalytic. By using Freud's revolutionary idea of the unconscious, she attaches the poetic language to a speaking subject, her desire and pleasure. She also suggests a revolution in poetic language leading to social change based on a sacrifice from the poet's side. Like Jakobson, she is fascinated by murder and suicide as themes not only in Russian history "on the eve of Stalinism and fascism" but in all time (*Desire* 31). Suicide here is not only literary but literal one as an act of revolution in the face of society: "The poet is put to death because he wants to turn rhythm into a dominant element; because he wants to make language perceive what it doesn't want to say, provide it with its matter independently of the sign, and free it from denotation" (*Desire* 31). This means that Kristeva fuses life and art and gives the artist the ability of transformation through drives. In this sense, the poet becomes a threat to society and to her mental and physical health. Clare Cavanagh gives a description of this rebel:

This poet is a linguistic daredevil, perched precariously on a tightrope that stretches between sense and nonsense, cosmos and chaos, order and insanity. Or, perhaps more appropriately, he is a linguistic terrorist and his text is a poetic minefield which threatens the psychic, even physical integrity not only of its maker and his audience, but of society itself. (293)

This means that by adopting an avant-garde revolutionary attitude, Kristeva is involved in a dangerous business of pathologising creativity that glamorises the suicide of the poet. In other words, she juxtaposes the success of the poet to her suicide. This is a double danger for a female poet. This is because, as Oliver explains, in identifying with the maternal, the

man “breaks through repression” while the woman risks death or madness (109). A

warning of such danger is clear in *About Chinese Women*:

For a woman, as soon as the father’s not calling the dance and language is being torn apart by rhythm, no mother can serve as an axis for the sacred or the farce. The girl tries herself: the result is so-called female homosexuality, identification with men, or a tight rein on the least pre-Oedipal pleasure. And if no paternal ‘legitimization’ comes along to dam up the inexhaustible non-symbolized impulse, she collapses into psychosis or suicide. (41)

In her other works, Kristeva always discusses clinical cases of her patients while discussing literary texts. Anne-Marie Smith argues how Kristeva transgresses the border between the objective and the subjective, which she sees most obvious in Kristeva’s approach to Nerval’s “El Desdichado” (68). Smith shows how Kristeva considers the personal and the clinical besides her literary interpretation of his work:

It is a shock to those of us educated in the heydays of structuralism and post-structuralism, who learned to ignore biography, both the writer’s and our own, when writing academic papers. Kristeva ignores neither and furthermore, she concludes the essay on Nerval with an interpretation of his suicide. I asked her about this. Wasn’t suicide outside the frame of interpretation? Wasn’t it even outside the frame of analytic interpretation? “That is the wager”, ‘C’est le pari’, she replied. (68)

Some of Kristeva’s critics attacked this crossing over to biography, especially to the suicide of the writer. Grosz, for example, suggests that psychosis and poetry for Kristeva are “moments of breakdown of identity” (*Sexual Subversions* 48). Judith Butler also views a problem in defining the semiotic as an “emancipatory ideal” as it cannot be “maintained within the terms of culture,” that its presence in culture “leads to psychosis and to the breakdown of cultural life itself (80). Unfortunately, Kristeva herself emphasises these complaints about her own theory by shifting her position dramatically in her more recent work as she has become more loyal to a more conservative, Freudian psychoanalytical practice. For example, William Watkin notices that while Kristeva’s main concern in her first position was that of poetry dominated by a disruptive, violent semiotic at the expense of the symbolic, her priority has since become that of healing and returning back to paternal authority as foundation in her later work (88, 98). Rosi Braidotti also describes

Kristeva as a dutiful daughter because she thinks that in Kristeva's recent work her relationship to psychoanalysis becomes greater than that to feminism (238). This dedication to more therapeutic ends stresses the critics' doubts that Kristeva relates the biographical and the pathological, especially the poet's madness and suicide, to the libidinal drives released in the poetic text and implicitly shows the invalidity of Kristeva's scheme of subversion: it is either the subject stays healthy or involves in a suicidal revolution in poetry.

In spite of this embarrassing position that Kristeva puts herself in, some critics still find in her theory a way of "rational" subversion. Allison Weir believes that Kristeva differentiates between psychosis that breaks identity and "renders coherent expression impossible" and poetry "which is a capacity to give a coherent form and meaning, and hence expression, to what is 'nonidentical' and 'heterogeneous'" (172). Weir contends that the semiotic is not repressed but always present in culture and art and that its presence does not necessarily lead to psychosis (172). And although Rose understands that Kristeva's recent work suggests "a race back into the arms of the law," Kristeva's work and criticism is marked by the opposite impulse of focusing on the semiotic (*Sexuality* 151). Rose explains that Kristeva, in this sense, shows that identity is always partial and therefore it faces a dual risk of either a total wreck of identity or a blind obedience to the law (*Sexuality* 150). Identity is "always implicated in both" and that dynamism is the result of this implication (*Sexuality* 150). This study also argues that the biographical is important in approaching a work of art and despite the serious ethical implications this might bring as is clear from the above discussion, the main focus should be on the heterogeneous, dynamic, aesthetic process that transforms the law rather than on these implications. This becomes far more important in the case of Sexton and Plath because of their suicide, which can be easily confused with poetry. However, although the effect of poetry on real death is not excluded here, the focus on its process and its ability of transformation becomes a priority.

D. Different Speaking Subjects

“The deadmost alone is capable of formulating something new” and “right belongs only to the ‘deadmost.’” (Kristeva, *Desire* 187)

One can logically deduce from this statement that there are different kinds of death for Kristeva and, therefore, different kinds of speaking subjects. There are at least two obvious kinds: the “deadmost” (*plus mort*) and what shall be called the “dead/less.” But what are these from a psychoanalytical perspective? What is their position and effect in poetic language and what characteristics of the text do they produce? Kristeva explains that there are two choices for the speaking subject in a signifying process that underlies two psychological positions:

Either he goes elsewhere, which is to say, beyond rejection into reality, forever surpassing the trajectory of separation and scission, living it only as the spin-off or side aspect of a “commitment” to the real where all the logic of *meta~* is reified [...]. In this case he places himself under the Law of the father [...]. Or else the subject constantly returns to rejection and thus reaches [...] the schizoid moment of scission. (Kristeva, *Revolution* 156)

In other words, the first subject that Kristeva refers to is one that chooses to identify with the father by suppressing the maternal. She is more or less the “unary subject” (*sujet unaire*), whose “social and family constraints block the heterogeneous process” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 173). Moreover, she produces a work of art that is more of a structure than a practice. In this sense, her text lacks the transgression that goes along with dynamism, which will, to a certain extent, deprive that subject of *jouissance*, which is enjoyment and pleasure.¹¹ However, according to Kristeva, sometimes when negativity (as both facilitation and stasis) refuses to be stopped by specular identification, it explodes unconsciously in the text in spite of all shielding against it (*Revolution* 124). Therefore, this subject, and the text she produces, is heterogeneous but not to the extent of achieving “ultimate” transformation and *jouissance*. Although *jouissance* may be present, it is not

revolutionary, because it is not a result of confronting the law of the father, for “jouissance is not (only) a certain transgressive relationship to the Law” (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 38). For research purposes, this subject is termed the “dead/less.”

The second subject, the “deadmost,” is in process/on trial (*le sujet en procès*). She is able to produce a heterogeneous practice (*signifiance*), in other words, a work in process. This happens because of her ability to identify with the pre-Oedipal mother. Therefore, this questionable, unsettling subject is identified by shifts and her text is marked by renewal, transgression, and *jouissance*. This *jouissance* is not only oral, but also, and predominantly, anal. Moi explains that the anal drive is translated in textual terms “as a negativity masking the death drive,” and then it is analyzable in poetic language “as [a] series of ruptures, absences and breaks in the symbolic language, but it can also be traced in [the poet’s] thematic preoccupations” (*Sexual/Textual* 169). This is why Kristeva focuses on the term “deadmost” as it signifies an oscillation between “I” and “not-I,” life and death – with more emphasis on the latter – as a heterogeneous process in the text. Violence and conflict then seem to be the characteristics of such a text. This violence does not only belong to the content of the writer’s stories about her life, but also to the act of symbolization, writing itself (Rose, *Haunting* 37).

The writing subject produces the “deadmost,” or the subject in process, in a signification (*Bedeutung*) characterized by an irreconcilable heated dialogue (dialectic) between the symbolic (*le symbolique*) and the semiotic (*le sémiotique*). The result is a signification that takes the form of a process. It is the 0-2 interval which Kristeva endorses (where two is the transgression of the law), rather than the 0-1 interval (where one is law, God), which she condemns, as it produces a hegemonic monologue of power and law. The latter interval is a discourse that hinders or delays as much as possible the rupture of thethetic (the boundary between the symbolic and the semiotic). That is to say, the realm of

the rhythmic, pre-Oedipal semiotic is capable of defying patriarchal culture and language. Patriarchy is not an absolute power anymore.

The distinction between the “deadmost” and the “dead/less” can also be explained in terms of abjection. Abjection relates to the psychic borders,¹² which, as well as the borders of the “clean and proper” body of the two poets (Kristeva, *Powers* 108), differ in the level of their fluidity, and thus in the poets’ ability to invest the semiotic and the maternal in the text. The maternal is dealt with, especially in Sexton, mostly in relation to the abject — the impure elements, including dung, mucus, vomit and saliva (Wright 198). The abject is also a negative and evil force that causes heterogeneity in poetry, and yet whose effect is positive to the work of art. Both the psyche and the proper body are formed when the “filthy” maternal body is repudiated. They are frontiers that protect the inside from outside threats. The inside is “the part that protects and shields the symbolic order from the imaginary chaos” outside (Moi, *Sexual/Textual* 166). The more the subject clings to these shields, which belong to the symbolic, the more she is integrated. However, the revolutionary subject, as in the case of Plath, oscillates between her borders’ inside and outside. The difference of the volatility in these borders in Sexton and Plath depends on psychological reasons related to the poets’ biographies.

Is it the drive’s (*Trieb*) quest for “real” death in the “deadmost’s” poetic language or the Lacanian quest for desire (*manqué*) which is never-ending? Although the writing subject may be a “bearer of death” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 70), death is not a teleological end in her poetic practice. On the contrary, in her artistic work, death is a synthesis that leads to life, rebirth and resurrection. Continuous rupturing of thethetic in turn leads to death, renewal and transformation. Death, therefore, is not an end, but rather a means. In fact, it combines the purposive with the purposeless (T. Eagleton 113). However, this process is not without dangers (Kristeva, *Revolution* 104). The purposive transformation may, through excess, turn into purposelessness, which is an excessive “purpose” — in Plath’s case, perfection.¹³ Accordingly, the subject in process who seems, for one instance,

to be heading to Blanchot's promised land of Canaan (a goal) may in fact be heading, if asking for the extreme, to the desert of nocturnal nowhere (71).¹⁴

The question remains whether this concept of the "deadmost" is relevant to poetry, especially women's poetry, since it was mainly applied in Kristeva's essay to polylogue in the novel. Kristeva makes it clear in *About Chinese Women*, as Moi explains, that women have two choices in terms of identification:

Woman is presented with a clear-cut choice: either she remains identified with the mother, thus ensuring her own exclusion from and marginality in relation to patriarchal society or, repressing the body of the mother, she identifies with the father, thus raising herself to his symbolic heights.
(*Kristeva Reader* 139)

Although the woman's identification with the mother's body excludes her from social reality, that same action raises her to the rank of "deadmost" in reference to her artistic production. While the "homologous woman," the dutiful daughter to the father, might be prized from a social perspective, she may not be identified as a perfectionist in relation to her work and its capacity for achieving aesthetic transformation. However, in works of art where subjects mostly hover between identities and non-identities, as well as between identifications with the father and the mother, it is difficult to draw definite lines between the daughter of the mother and the daughter of the father. From this study's perspective, the most important indicator is the level of negativity and dialectic manifested in the text and whether the subject is ultimately gravitating towards the father or the mother. Moreover, the father and the mother should not always be understood solely as the real parents of the poet. While the mother is also a pre-symbolic space, the father is the imaginary father, who is a "harmonious blending" of the loving father and the "oedipal father in symbolic Law" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 23).

The question remains whether poetry, in general, and women's poetry, in particular, are conflictual rather than dominated by the law of the One. Janet Rex observes that Kristeva is more concerned with the narrative language of prose fiction due to

Bakhtin's influence on her work (768).¹⁵ However, Margaret Dickie maintains that "the double-voice of contemporary women poets challenges Bakhtin ... because he sees poetry as the genre dominated by a unitary literary language" ("Alien" 301). Dickie, however, sees Kristeva's position as different from that of Bakhtin.

Moreover, Dickie argues that the confrontational, disruptive voices of women's poetry bring change through what she calls alien language (using words that refer to an alienating and destabilizing experience). Although Dickie may be right in regard to the extension of dialogism and heterogeneity to poetry, one feels reluctant to accept her generalization about women. Are all modern women writers equal in performing the task of subversion? Are their texts equal in their level of heterogeneity and dialogism? From a Kristevan perspective, they are not. Nevertheless, to individualize the experience of each female poet does not mean to abdicate from the political agenda of women but rather to deal with it on an aesthetic micro-level. As Noëlle McAfee points out, we should start by "put[ting] our own house in order first" (102). Political and aesthetic change will be achieved in this case by individual female poets who are distinguished from each other through "dying" differently. In her book, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Rose suggests that "it is not possible to read Plath's work in relation to literature that comes *before* her" (120-21, emphasis added); her work, as liberation from oppressive patriarchy, should not be compared to previous literature written by women. However, this study considers it legitimate to compare two contemporary poets, living under almost identical social conditions.

In short, the difference between the "deadmost" and the "dead/less" is the level of negativity and abjection, which is dependent upon the subject's choice of identification, as manifested in their writing and the level of transformation and *jouissance* achieved. The former is able to produce a masochistic, but effective, dialectic between the bodily drives of the semiotic and the linguistic and the social of the symbolic. As a result, death, not only as a motivating drive, but also as a performance in the work of art, will lead to change and

ultimate *jouissance*, that is, to die “exceptionally well” in one’s work of art in order to achieve both transformation, *jouissance*, and a unique voice. In this sense, her art is not only that of “dying,” but also of “killing” (Axelrod 160).

Although Plath’s poetry is dialectic (dialogic), acts of final death in the form of transcendence risk cutting the oscillation in her poetry towards a pre-verbal space, towards fusion with the mother. They risk the life of the “I” and the other, the addressee, as participants in that dialectic. However, this gambling with death is one way of forming a temporary synthesis in which a drastic change can happen. It could be reasoned that transformation in Plath’s poetry does not occur only as a result of the semiotic as sublimation (*Aufhebung*), the rupturing and shattering of the thetic, but also through stopping the whole process of interaction — the dialectic between the symbolic and the semiotic — as an act of suspense, silence, absence and death. It is silence opening a space beyond the text that brings an ultimate *jouissance* (Mitchell 37).¹⁶ Although Jenny Robinson might disagree with this kind of topography, since she believes that “‘shattering’ the symbolic and reconstituting subjects takes place *within* the space of the symbolic [only]” (291-92), it is tempting to create that space in Plath’s text. In this context, heterogeneity and the final silence in the poem are called the “Siren Voice of the Other,” which is both a space and a voice. Kelly Oliver observes: “It [the unconscious] points to the maternal music *in* and *beyond* language” (95, emphasis added).

The Greek mythological creature, the Siren, is used for three main reasons.¹⁷ First, the Siren is feminine and so is easily conceived of as part of the semiotic *chora*, which has the characteristics of the feminine, though it is not itself feminine. Second, the Siren lives at the edge of the sea on rocky islands, which resemble the thetic border between the semiotic and the symbolic and stand for the idea of a new space. Third, she sings, which goes with the rhythmic characteristics of the semiotic, besides being deadly. “Siren” originally meant a rope or a snare, which suggests how she is deadly for men and for herself as well. Eventually, she becomes a dead creature, metaphorically speaking, because

she does not meet the men and communicate with them in a “sexual” dialogue.¹⁸ This “Siren Voice of the Other” is singing and silent, oral and anal, the “spoor [. . .] of non-being” and the want-to-be (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 266).

Plath is able to evoke the maternal and the semiotic, which are linked in Kristeva’s theory,¹⁹ in her work without totally rejecting the paternal symbolic, while Sexton remains the dutiful daughter to her father until the end. Sexton needs the father as a shield to confront an abject mother for the sake of a unified identity. However, her shielding from an abject mother does not prevent her from longing for a pre-Oedipal connection with that mother. Sexton also needs the shield to protect a secret that she hides, as shall be seen later. For this reason — namely the fear of facing death, represented by an abject mother, as well as losing a second mother — she remains mostly passive in her work. Plath, on the other hand, looks death in the face and hence is able to defy her father. Therefore, Plath’s work transgresses the law of the father, unlike Sexton’s which resists the maternal and semiotic irruption. Sexton, unlike Plath, fears motility and disintegration. Her father is her means of security, and thus she cannot face him. In short, in comparing Sexton and Plath from a Kristevan point of view, this study proposes that the level of negativity, which results from the investment of the maternal and the semiotic in the text, is more evident in Plath’s work than in Sexton’s.

III. Kristeva, Sexton, and Plath

Although Middlebrook and George suggest that Lacan and Kristeva can be applied to Sexton’s work, theoretical approaches to her poetry have been restricted to Freud and his followers (xx). To date, Sexton’s work has not been approached from a Kristevan perspective as a full study. Kristeva has only been used by some critics to understand Sexton’s relationship to language without relating this to her subjectivity.²⁰ For example, McGowan uses Kristeva, among other theorists, to argue that Middle Generation poets like Sexton were not, in fact, writing their own stories as the title “Confessional poets”

suggests. He argues that their writing is selfless rather than selfish and solipsistic. Therefore, he refuses to approach her work biographically. Instead, he explores the dynamism (in Kristevan terminology an oscillation between the symbolic and the semiotic) of Sexton's work, and its ability to deconstruct masculine language from within. Nevertheless, contrary to McGowan's view, it can be argued that Sexton was, to an extent, resistant to dynamism in her work.

According to McGowan, Sexton's poetry asks fundamental questions through her "experiments in and with language" about being, love and the aesthetic (23). This creates a geographical space of grief where the subject's traumatic encounter with the world and language is depicted. However, this traumatized position is not a psychological description of Sexton. Rather it is, according to McGowan, an experiment with the space of the text and, therefore, Sexton's project is social, cultural (mainly American) and universal, but never personal. It can be argued, however, that McGowan's selective reading pulls Sexton out of context. Such theorizing deprives her of expression and casts her over to the other extreme of impersonality. For example, it is legitimate to read God in her poetry as the Absolute (the maternal), as death itself. Nevertheless, how should God be read in the presence of Sexton's two mothers and her father?

In comparison, the relationship between Kristeva and Plath is more complicated. Kristeva referred to Plath for the first time in her book *About Chinese Women* along with Virginia Woolf and Maria Tsvetaeva. The aspect common to the three writers is that they committed suicide. In her commentary, Kristeva seems to relate their personal deaths to their writing as if the disintegration of their words is the cause of their suicide. Sean Hand's translation of this idea makes the connection especially clear: "Once the moorings of the word, the ego, the superego, begin to slip, life itself can't hang on: death quietly moves in" (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 157).²¹ Kristeva describes Plath in particular as "disillusioned with meanings and words, who took refuge in lights, rhythms and sounds: a refuge that already announces, for those who know how to read her, her silent departure

from life” (157). In *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Tracy Brain criticizes Kristeva’s reading of Plath for not allowing new interpretations of the poet’s work (138). In fact, Kristeva’s reading shares common features with the often criticized position of Alvarez, who regards Plath’s poetry as the reason behind her death: “For Sylvia Plath it [suicide] was an attempt to get herself out of a desperate corner her own poetry had boxed her into” (*The Savage* 13-14). He generalizes that this is the whole nature of artistic practice:

for the artist himself art is not necessarily therapeutic; he is not automatically relieved of his fantasies by expressing them. Instead, by some perverse logic of creation, the act of formal expression may simply make the dredged-up material more readily available to him. The result of handling it in his work may well be that he finds himself living it out. For the artist, in short, nature often imitates art. (53-54)

In one of Kristeva’s interviews, a slight change in her position can be detected. The interviewer asks her if the artistic practice can save or destroy, and how one would draw the line between the two possibilities. Kristeva’s answer this time puts her in a more secure position than her discussion of suicide in *About Chinese Women*. She explains that art can sometimes save the artist, depending on the individual case of the writer. Art, here, has shifted from being a cause for suicide to being, partly, a means of salvation. She then emphasizes the role of psychiatry and transference, and not poetry alone, in helping those writers:

I would not employ the phrases “being saved” or “destroyed” by art, because that is not exactly my metaphysical conception of aesthetic practice. That said, for many writers, the experience of art was lived as a salvation. I am thinking of someone like Dostoevsky or Kafka, in particular. One can, however, give counterexamples to this; I am thinking of Nerval — whom I discuss in my book on melancholy [*Black Sun*] — who was not saved by art; that is, art did not stop him from committing suicide. We can say the same about certain great women writers, like Virginia Woolf or Sylvia Plath. More specifically, then, I think that aesthetic process, which for psychoanalysis is a process of sublimation, consists in finding a certain harmony of the most violent drives, the life drive and the death drive. This Harmony is obtained through the powers of language; an everyday language that, in the case of literature and poetry, is modified through music, through the rhythms and rhetorical figures, through pleasure, is introduced into signification that then brings about a sense of stability within (and with) the crisis. By these means, the artist prolongs the conflict and is able to live with it, but alternatively, such a harmonization can be very fragile, and

when it is not accompanied by what psychoanalysis would call a “favorable transference,” destruction is inevitable. (Guberman 214)

In spite of this modification of Kristeva’s position, the writer as a person is still, in her opinion, connected and psychologically affected by her work. In the foreword to Kristeva’s *Proust and the Sense of Time*, Stephen Bann poses the question: “Does this mean the return of the biographical subject?” He answers it immediately: “In a sense, it undoubtedly does” (xi). For Brain this changed position cannot be satisfactory either since her study is the other extreme, the totally non-biographical. Another advocate of the non-biographical approach is Silvianna Blosser who, in her penetrating postmodern study, deals with Plath’s work and creativity as a work in process. She argues that Plath is developing her materials and tools consciously, and so one understands that she might be a poet in process, but not necessarily a subject in process who “pour[s] out poems from the depth of [her] unconscious, [her] drives and private agonies” (156). Therefore, the semiotic in Plath’s early work is viewed by Blosser as “decoration.” In her later work, the irruption of the semiotic threatens the creativity of the poet, but not necessarily her psyche. Blosser views Plath as a poet who did not “encourage a writing practice fuelled by the semiotic or Lacan’s imaginary only” (156). Instead Plath resorted to “ungendered” metaphors of the “open hand” and “closed fist” to express a dialogism that is mainly evident in her prose, and, to a certain extent, her poetry.

Blosser argues that for Plath, poetic form is not as satisfactory as that of prose. One reason for this, according to Blosser, is that the semiotic completely takes over the poetic text. However, one wonders where this irruption stems from if the unconscious drives of the writer are not at work, as she claims. Although she suggests that dialogism can exist in both poetry and prose, her discussion of the Bakhtinian “chronotope of the threshold”²² in Plath’s novel shows that the poem is incompatible with prose as a form of creativity (229). Therefore, she believes that Plath’s poems are “unfinished work,” a ledge from which Plath was going to leap to other forms had she not died. Hence, the irruption of the

semiotic, according to Blosser, has no consequences at the end of Plath's poetry; in other words, it is not a source of suffering or *jouissance*.

According to the current study, a psychoanalytical reading of the poems makes biography indispensable. After all, Plath reminds us in *Letters Home* that "It's funny how one always, somewhere, has the germ of reality in a story, no matter how fantastic . . ." (87). Moreover, death in Plath's poems is considered as the death of the subject in process in defying the father of the law and as a way of perfecting creativity rather than contributing to her actual suicide. It is also the death drive in harmony, or rather in conflict, with the life drive. Even if it happens to be Plath's death, it is the *how* rather than the *why* that this study emphasizes. In other words, it asks whether she died confronting death or out of fear of death.

Kristeva's theories have been used by critics to interpret Plath's work. There are three major contributions in this area. One of them is Nephie Christodoulides's *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work*. Christodoulides applies post-structural psychoanalysis and biographical criticism in relation to Kristeva's theory of subject formation to discuss motherhood in Plath's work. She reads Plath in terms of abjection, rejection, and regression. According to Christodoulides, it is necessary to discuss motherhood or the mother in process in order to save Plath from being labelled simply as suicidal and father-obsessed. She argues that mothers in Plath's poetry oscillate between authentication and non-authentication, between releasing their children into the symbolic order and merging with them. Mother-personae try to reach autonomy and generativity through motherhood, yet sometimes the task seems to be difficult and, therefore, neither procreativity nor the existence of the baby can offer any solace. There is doubt, Christodoulides suggests, about "whether motherhood and creativity can thrive at the same time" (117). Moreover, she argues that motherhood can authenticate the mother when there is a bond between her and her daughter in particular. The end of the book discusses daughterhood in Plath's work as inseparable from the subject of motherhood for the

mother is ultimately a daughter as well. Christodoulides stresses the eternal love/hate drama between mother and daughter where the daughter loves the mother, yet blames her and fears the inevitability of becoming like her “since she is but an extension of her” (168). As Christodoulides shows, mothers can be suffocating figures in Plath’s poetry and, therefore, the daughter struggles to release herself from the abject mother, a process which seems to be impossible to achieve. For this study, the release from the mother does not happen in the end, rather it is all part of the heterogeneous process of creativity, which is an oscillation between a mother and a father.

Christodoulides focuses attention on real mothers rather than on the concept of the maternal as a linguistic element and so sometimes “Medusa” becomes Aurelia, Plath’s mother. She concedes that her reading might be criticized as incompatible with Kristeva’s theory, which concentrates, in Strangeways’s words, “on symbolic events (rather than on concrete experiences of ‘real’ mothers)” (142). However, it could be argued that both the social and the symbolic dimensions of the mother are important and that one should not be excluded for the other.

In her insightful, pioneering book *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, Jacqueline Rose views Plath as being “not consistent” (10): “She writes at the point of tension–pleasure/danger, your fault/my fault, high/low culture” (10). Her work, as well as her life, is based on conflict, a dialectic without an end. This approach is closely related to the current study in terms of the dialogic aspect of Plath’s work and its rejection of the traditional view of a unified identity in the conventional sense. However, this study focuses on the dialectic from a Kristevan perspective as a heterogeneous interaction between the symbolic (society, language, and culture) and the semiotic. What is cultural is “inside” and not “outside,” as Rose views it. The dialectic, which is often presented between “I” and an other (the addressee), reflects an inner conflict in the writing subject that is capable of cultural and social transformation of the symbolic at the micro level. Moreover,

transcendentalism is viewed in this study not as a masculine project, but a momentary defying silence and a reunion with the mother in absence at the end of that dialectic.

Rose resorts to Kristeva's concept of abjection in discussing "Poem for a Birthday," suggesting that the sequence shows "the permeability of boundaries [. . .] which allow objects to pass back and forth across inner and outer space" (*Haunting* 52). However, as Strangeways notices, Rose only focuses on the "subject's relation to the physical world" (*Haunting* 143). In other words, Rose concentrates on the concept of negativity mostly in relation to nature. This study will refocus attention on to Plath's later poems, which have a more violent level of negativity leading to transformation. Moreover, her earlier poems about nature are mostly considered as failing to produce negativity.

In "Reading (And) the Late Poems of Sylvia Plath," Paul Mitchell suggests a new way of reading Plath's last poems: "Sheep in Fog," "The Couriers," "Words," and "Edge." According to Mitchell, these poems are a challenge for the critic who tries to impose a coherent meaning, what he calls, using Lacan's terminology, a "master-discourse," upon them. He views Ted Hughes's reading of "Sheep in Fog" as one example of this kind of approach. Mitchell insists on regarding these poems as signifiante where the subject or the work itself is under erasure. These poems are characterized by stasis rather than thetic tension. Therefore, in Mitchell's view, all the sound techniques used in these poems, such as alliteration, assonance and resonance, no longer act to reinforce meaning. Rather, they indicate the collapse of identity. For him, signification is on the verge of psychosis in these poems. It is a moment of fusion with Kristeva's primordial mother or what he sees as Lacan's *objet a* to achieve *jouissance* beyond the text. In other words, these poems become an example of a genotext.²³ Therefore, any attempt to read them in terms of autobiography will, according to Mitchell, suppress the *jouissance* of the text. The last poems "intensify the role of silence [as inherent in language and as a textual space] [. . .] and thus expose the instability of the phallic signifier" (50).

A consideration of the poetic technique of silence beyond the text is essential to the present study of Plath's early and late poems. It is used to expose the phallic instability and, as a form of death, a temporary synthesis, a "last word" in an argument that paradoxically leads to protest and thus change. Therefore ultimate *jouissance* is not experienced only in her last poems but in some of the earlier ones as well. In his reading of Plath's last poem, "The Edge," Mitchell suggests that we are left with only *jouissance* without identity. He emphasizes that the reading of the woman's corpse in "Edge" can never be given a master narrative. According to him, one cannot know for sure if the woman's perfection is actual or illusory. Yet is not judging the discourse as psychotic, while giving an example of Kristeva's patient Anne, an indictment of Plath herself as psychotic? Does this not in a sense represent a master narrative?

Although not a Kristevan study, Strangeways' *Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows* dedicates its third chapter, "The Psychoanalyzing of Sylvia," to discussing the relationship between Plath and psychology. Kristeva's theory takes up part of that discussion. Rather than diagnosing the poet's illness or imposing what Strangeways describes as "simplistic order" on a work of art (159), she suggests applying psychology to Plath's work without her being part of it. To paraphrase Matterson, Plath becomes the agent rather than the object of her psychoanalytical discourse (817). This makes her in complete control of her work as a non-suffering subject.

Strangeways uses Rose's reading of Kristeva to examine "Poem for a Birthday" both in terms of the subject's relation to the physical (which Strangeways sees as involving too much abstract analysis) as well as ambivalent feelings towards her mother. It is suggested that the "often conscious conflict between "masculine" and "feminine" ideas about her work as a writer" results in a transcendence that is usually considered as a male project (177). Strangeways argues that Plath's transcendentalism does indeed ultimately serve masculinity as the poet loses her femininity to it (172).

For Strangeways, Plath did not agree with transcendence in solidarity with Nietzsche, she did not believe in the otherworldly. If that was the case, why does Kroll devote a whole book to Plath's interest in spiritual matters and superstition? And why should Plath resort to the otherworldly in her later poetry which does not have the feminine Romantic interests in the relational aim of living?

In contrast to Strangeway's opinion, this study argues that transcendence in Plath's poetry is maternal. It equals ultimate silence, a relapse to a pre-Oedipal position. This silence creates a hole in the symbolic and cuts communication between the "I" and the other only temporarily. It comes as a final word in an argument. Although deadly, it is a hole that dissolves the symbolic father in the beyond. Therefore, it partakes more of descendance than transcendence. It is committing suicide (silence) in the text as a protest. Renewal takes place in speech again in a following poem. This becomes not only a hole for reunion with the mother but also of separation on the way back to the symbolic. This silence as transcendence, which "silence[s] the (male) order of speaking," answers the call of the mother though it kills the identity (Nikolchina 119). It is a silence that reaches "the ultimate limits of discourse," bringing transformation and *jouissance* (Nikolchina 119). Although Kristeva is an advocate of immanence rather than transcendence or transparency, Plath insists through her work that transcendence as ultimate silence is part of her unique voice. Is not silence an aspect of the semiotic? Could it not be the "maternal gesture that allows to be" (Nikolchina 133)?

The striking argument comes at the end of Strangeways's discussion, when she simplistically turns all Kristeva's project into something similar to T. S. Eliot's "auditory imagination," which, she claims, Plath depended on as part of her "male-established literary arsenal" (174). Not only that, she also claims that Hughes directly influenced her use of free verse in her last poems: "it was her 'male master' Hughes who encouraged her to write in freer rhythms, and Plath was keenly aware that such style would, in the 'symbolic' world of literary publishing 'make my name'" (173). Hughes, then, according

to Strangeways, is the source of Plath's later creativity. However, according to this study, both the masculine and the feminine are emphasized as two reciprocal modalities.

IV. Method and Outline

In general, this study combines poems according to chosen themes and images. However, the chronology of the poems is not totally neglected. It is what Jo Gill describes as a "loosely chronological structure" (*Anne Sexton* 2). This is because it is difficult, for example, to decide on a precise chronology with regard to Sexton's poetry as sometimes what is written earlier in her career is published later (Gill, *Anne Sexton* 2-3). According to Linda Gray Sexton and Lois Ames, between June of 1972 and October 1974, Sexton had written three new books: *The Death Notebooks*, *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, and *45 Mercy Street*, although these were published successively (*Letters* 390). Therefore, for the two poets, "loose" chronological phrases have been used, such as "in her early poems" or "in the middle of her career" (more "in her transitional poetry" for Plath) and "in her last poetry" to indicate the progress of each poet.

The present study, which consists of nine chapters, traces each poet's movement from the beginning to the end of her work:

Chapter 1 discusses Sexton's loyalty to her father. She begins and ends her work with the father, and this structure may be termed the Ouroboros. In the middle of her career the maternal enters. This structure is clarified, using three different poems: "Music Swims Back to Me," "The Bells," and "The Silence."

Chapter 2 demonstrates how Sexton erects symbolic shields by jettisoning her mother over her psychic borders. She then takes refuge behind this armour for fear of the haunting abject mother who is both abhorred and loved. In Sexton's work, shields take many forms, which are discussed separately. Behind them she shows total passivity and hence an inability to change her relation to the law of the father. This is explained in connection with Sexton's fear of going out, which she faced in her personal life. While

Sexton holds to her psychic shields and decides to stay “inside” as she fears facing an abject mother, Plath, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, tries to oscillate between “within” and “without.”

Chapter 3 considers how Sexton’s case is further complicated by the discovery of a second mother, Sexton’s aunt, as a secret crypt buried in her psyche. This adds even more to her passivity and hinders her from any transformation in order to keep her regressive relation with that crypt, which causes stagnation in her work. However, under the attack of the abject mother from “outside” and the ability of Sexton to admit finally the loss of her second mother, negativity appears ultimately in the poetry in the form of an abject burst. Nonetheless, as soon as the maternal abject erupts in the text causing motility that has the potential of change, Sexton performs cleansing rituals which are in the law’s favour.

Chapter 4 explores the failure of Sexton’s cleansing rituals and her decision to head to a symbolic father again for protection after the collapse of her borders. Her fears of maternal persecution, confrontation, and disintegration make her unable to relinquish the father as he provides support and psychic integration against the maternal. In this sense, Sexton is called the dead/less.

In Chapter 5 it is explained that Plath at the beginning of her work is, like Sexton, an ally of her father. However, in contrast to Sexton, from the outset Plath, as a revolutionary outsider, tries to leave her proper borders to change her confinement under the law of the father. Nevertheless, she succumbs to the allure of maternal nature “outside.” In order to dispense with the passivity that resulted from fusion with nature, Plath tries to create a hurting other and thus motility in her work in a transitional step. Nonetheless, negativity, as conflictual reciprocity and dynamism, does not take place until Plath is exposed to anger and shock. Only then is she able to discard her symbiotic relation with the mother and father/husband to face them from the “outside.”

Chapter 6 analyses the most famous poem in Plath's *oeuvre*, "Daddy," in order to illustrate how she was able through heterogeneity and reciprocity to defy the father. The violent, dynamic voice that defies the father through subversive heterogeneity and ends with a defying silence is termed "The Siren Voice of the Other." Another kind of motility between presence and absence, and the symbolic and the semiotic, takes place not in single poems but across poems. This movement between "Daddy" and "Medusa," as well as in other poems, is an oscillation between death as fusion with the mother and rebirth as a separation towards the symbolic world of creativity. The same movement that shows the split of the subject between the conscious and the unconscious can also be recognized in Plath's attitude to time, which is used as evidence of negativity.

Chapter 7 presents the assortment of weapons which Plath uses in her "art of dying," especially in *Ariel*, to defy the father in an act of masochistic reciprocity and to create her unique voice. In this sense, she is seen as the "deadmost." Nevertheless, Plath pushes things to the extreme, discarding the father and allowing the death drive to violate her psyche.

Chapter 8 discusses the semiotic as it gains the upper hand in Plath's last poetry. The discarding of the father and the excessive explosion of the death drive cause the subject's identity to be erased under total *jouissance*. This is explained as a "triumph" over the law of One, yet with deadly consequences as the unconscious takes control of the poet's psyche. A discussion comparing Sexton and Plath socially and psychologically is conducted in Chapter 9, which closes by using two poems to illustrate the difference between the two poets. This is followed by a conclusion emphasizing a new reading of Confessional poetry, combining the personal and the aesthetic.

Chapter 1

Sexton, the Ouroboros

1.1 Law of One: Starting With the Father

This chapter discusses Sexton's alliance with the law of the father, especially in her relatively early work, which reflects her celebration of the unified ego/body. It also seeks to emphasize Sexton's identification with the law as an attempt to defend herself against an abject mother, which will appear in between the beginning and the end of her work. It will show that the structure of three of Sexton's poems imitate the general Ouroboros-like structure of her *oeuvre*. The following three chapters will discuss how Sexton establishes proper symbolic shields in different forms after jettisoning the mother outside of them, and the return of this abject mother to haunt Sexton. They will also analyse how Sexton hides a crypt for her second mother inside her symbolic shields to introject it later, causing the burst of the abject in the text. This is followed by a discussion of how she tries to perform cleansing rituals to discard the abject and gravitate towards the Name of the Father again.

Anne Sexton, a middle-class suburban housewife from Boston without a college education and a mother of two daughters, became a poet late in her twenties. After advice from her psychiatrist to write poetry as a kind of therapy, followed by watching a TV programme about writing sonnets by I. A. Richards, Sexton made up her mind to start a career as a poet. From that time on, she was known as a Confessional poet, and considered by many critics as the best writer on women's issues (Middlebrook, "Housewife" 493). For example, Middlebrook asserts that "No poet before her had written so frankly of the female realm of family life, nor of its pathologies" ("Housewife" 483). She hails Sexton's voice as "distinctively female," and femaleness in her apprenticeship as "an aspect of identity that

had, *with great difficulty*, been assimilated to the sense of authority necessary to mastery” (503, emphasis added).

However, there is something in Sexton’s work which resists her applauded feminism and femininity. This is why Alicia Ostriker, for instance, adopts a more careful evaluation of Sexton, when she suggests, in distinguishing between critique and transformation, that she “can penetrate, but cannot transcend — cannot imagine transcending — a patriarchal theology that swallows her alive” (“What Are Patterns For?” 495). She thinks that “an intellectually devastating subversion is equaled and canceled by an emotionally devastating submission” in Sexton’s work (495). Furthermore, Joyce Carol Oates compares Sexton’s poetry to a feminine image of flowers that lacks effective anger: “The poems themselves are small angry wounds that bloom, blossom fiercely, like flowers” yet “like flowers, have no strength, no permanency” (“Anne Sexton” 52). Therefore, in spite of her contribution to feminism, Sexton’s work remains somewhat associated with the father and his unity, especially at the beginning and end of her career.

In fact, Anne Sexton’s *oeuvre* evokes Kristeva’s concept of the “bounded text,” which she introduced when discussing Antoine de la Sale’s *Jehan de Saintré*. In this novel, “the end of the narrative is given before the narrative itself even begins” (*Desire* 42). Bruce Morrisette, in reference to what he calls “fictional topology,” based on Robbe Grillet’s *Pour un nouveau roman*, explains that “[t]he novel, like the other arts, may anticipate systems of thought,” and in spite of many twists and turns, it ends with the “primitive image of the Ouroboros serpent biting its tail” (56). Sexton’s work follows this pattern since it begins and ends with a father. It literally starts by addressing her male doctor, Dr. Martin Orne, and ends by addressing God. However, in between there is another story of fear of and yearning for the maternal. Therefore, in spite of a level of heterogeneity, which one can detect, especially in the last books, there is always a resort to unity in the end.

As a dutiful daughter and ally of her father, unity is essential for her if she wants to be part of his symbolic order. For her to maintain a unified ego, she has to return to phallic

identification as a defence against the cause of her fragmentation and disintegration, her primary identification with the archaic mother. The issue of patriarchal identification and unity are intertwined in Sexton's work. The celebration of her father is a celebration of her unity and the celebration of her unity is nothing but a celebration of the father. Paradoxically, this can be detected in Sexton's most feminine poetry.

It is important to approach Sexton's work from a psychoanalytical perspective at first in order to resolve the confusion that some critics face when attempting to explain the leap in Sexton's work from the exceedingly mundane to the spiritual. For example, W. H. Shurr views Sexton's transition from a flamboyant self to "Saint Anne" as startling (184). He wonders how one can find "such traditional piety in the sophisticated lady whose conversation was sprinkled with conventional obscenities, whose trademark was the ever-present pack of Salems" (176). He refers to a photograph, which accompanies her work, showing Sexton "immaculately groomed, expensively dressed," posing against a background that carries no suggestion of suffering or anguish. "On the evidence of the photographs," he elaborates, "one might almost accuse Anne Sexton of self-indulgence," of lacking any real mystical interests (176-77). He then relinquishes the contradiction on the grounds that Sexton's last poetry is a "primordial climb," a "leap of faith" towards what Emerson called "magnanimity" (189-190).

Shurr's reading neglects a possible focus on the father-daughter relationship and God as representative of the law of the father. In fact, in many of her letters, Sexton referred to her male friends and lovers as "gods." For example, she used this title in talking about Robert Lowell, W. D. Snodgrass, and other poets (*Letters* 43, 45, 73). She calls them "gods" because "I am always saved by men who understand me better than I understand myself" (*Letters* 41). Moreover, she used this term to refer to her doctor analyst in such poems as "You, Doctor Martin" and "Flee On Your Donkey."

From this perspective, almost all of Sexton's celebrations of her body are more or less celebrations of her unity with the patriarchal order. This is most obviously seen in her

Love Poems (1969): “The Touch,” “The Kiss,” “The Breast,” “Us,” “Mr. Mine” and “In Celebration of My Uterus.” The addressee in these poems, which describe Sexton’s numerous affairs, is male (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 299).²⁴ Diana Hume George emphasizes three “voices” in Sexton’s poems: the first is the woman’s, the second the suicide’s and the last what she calls the “maker’s.” She looks at the maker’s voice as positively building a whole body of love and the “resurrection of the body in this life” (*Oedipus* 62). In contrast, it could be argued that these voices belong to only two categories as result of a conflict in the speaking subject either to regress towards an archaic mother or to separate from her and move towards the symbolic realm of the father and keep intact under his law. The “maker’s voice” is viewed as belonging to the father as a defence against a fragmenting mother.

The persona’s body in these poems is formed by a symbolic father since he resurrects her into unity. In “The Touch,” the persona’s hand is “sealed off / in a tin box” (*ASCP* 173). According to the female speaker, “they have locked it up” as a consequence of its impairment. It is “bruised,” it “lay there like an unconscious woman / fed by tubes” and was “Nothing but vulnerable.” As such, it is not an adequate image of unity. Then, suddenly, “all this became history” and “Your hand found mine. / Life rushed to my fingers like a blood clot” (174). In the final lines of the poem, the persona not only celebrates the unity of her hand but also the unity of the two hands — hers and her lover’s — which make “the kingdom” reminiscent of the kingdom of God, strong and fortified. In an interview with Gregory Fitz Gerald, Sexton comments on “The Touch” as a poem related to God: “‘The Touch’ shows something about my feeling that there’s God everywhere” and “I must have seen God and the kingdom, the eternal” (195).

“Two Hands” (*ASCP* 421), a later poem in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (1975), calls forth the image of two hands which are at first separate. The first hand is “ignorant as a penny” emerging from the sea, a new arrival from the realm of the semiotic *chora* of the mother. Thus, “Discrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is

not yet constituted as such” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 25). The hand is still “troubled with the salt of its mother, / mute with the silence of the fishes, / quick with the altars of the tides.” Afterwards, “God reached out of His mouth / and called it man.” The subject is now named and so belongs to the realm of the symbolic. “Up came the other hand / and God called it woman.”

As in “The Touch,” unity is achieved in each hand and between the two hands: “The hands applauded.” Although the persona admits that a body could be a prison for some like the body of Christ, this situation is temporary “until the triumph came.” For Christ, the triumph is death and joining God in his unified kingdom. This is equivalent to the triumph that comes when male and female bodies “cup together and let yourselves fill up with sun.” In this sense, Sexton, in what sounds like the first movement of equal rights feminism (Colebrook 119), calls not only for the equality of hands but also for unity under God’s kingdom, inviting the whole world to “applaud” and thus be unified in “angel webs.” This shows Sexton’s search for unity with the masculine although it seems she is celebrating her female body and sensuousness.

The same scenario is established in a parallel poem, “The Kiss” (*ASCP* 174). This time, a mouth, “like a cut,” experiences a “resurrection” after a kiss. Again, it is a rebirth of the body into the symbolic realm after relinquishing the mother: “It’s tearing old Mary’s garments off.” Mary could be the Virgin Mary or Sexton’s mother, Mary Gray. Here, the carpenter is again at work with that useless part, which is now a boat “quite wooden / and with no business.” Her lover, or her father, “hoisted her, rigged her” and she is his now; “[s]he’s been elected.” Her lover/father is simply an artist (a carpenter, a painter and later a composer), “[p]ure genius at work,” and the female persona is nothing but his work of art and hence belonging to the maker (175). He resurrected her from silence into life: “Where there was silence / the drums, the strings are incurably playing.” Neither his work of art nor his music, as a composer, is that of the semiotic but rather that of the symbolic order

creating unity. Therefore, the fire he has “stepped / into” is that of sexual desire and has nothing to do with destructive *jouissance*.²⁵

These poems, where the personae expose themselves in star fashion, remind one of the celebrity lives which Sexton adored. She was something of an actress according to those who knew her. In an interview with Barbra Kevles, Sexton referred to herself as “an actress in her own autobiographical play” (27). Indeed, Middlebrook states that one interviewer described Sexton as acting “as if on stage” (*A Biography* 312). Moreover, Middlebrook refers to Marian Seldes, an actress herself, commenting on Sexton:

There was a great deal of what people think of as an actress about Anne. She was a dramatic-looking person; her behavior was interesting; her laugh, people would say if she was an actress, was a theatrical laugh. Oh yes, her reactions were spontaneous and full, not guarded. She fit in with actors instantly. (320)

Middlebrook also notes in her the “charisma of the *artiste*” with Sexton “dressing in beautiful clothes” and “traveling with an entourage” (319). Jon Stallworthy used to call her the “Nefertiti of New England” (*Letters* 318). This obsession with the role of actress, in contrast to Sexton’s well-known fear, shows her need for an identity in the symbolic world. This is why the persona in “The Breast” compares the size of her breasts to those of the movie stars. She, like Sexton in real life, tries to please a father and makes sure that her “*sex will [not] be transfixed*” (176). In very self-effacing lines, she says: “I am your mother, your daughter, / your brand new thing — a snail, a nest. / I am alive when your fingers are.” The “offering” she is mad about is not what the lover offers to “track me like a climber,” rather it is the offering of her body to burn like money under his power. One meaning of the word “offering” is presentation, an outward show. Therefore, the theatrical presentation which Sexton, the actress, likes to perform is nothing but an offering or sacrifice to her father. The persona, as well as Sexton, becomes a sacrifice to her male god. As Caroline King Barnard Hall has pointed out, these poems, as well as others such as “Moon Song, Woman Song,” “Mr. Mine,” “Barefoot,” and “You All Know the Story of

the Other Woman,” indicate the lover’s active power and the speaker’s passive waiting (75). Maxine Kumin seems to share Hall’s opinion:

in Sexton’s poetry the reader can find the poet again identifying herself through her relationship with the male other, whether in the person of a lover or — in the last, hasty, and often brilliant poems in *The Awful Rowing*, which make a final effort to land on “the island called God” — in the person of the patriarchal final arbiter. (206)

Middlebrook, however, considers *Love Poems* to have deeper insight: “Desire seeks what has been lost forever, the unsymbolic experience of infant intimacy with a maternal body” (299).²⁶ There is another facet to this relationship and that is surrendering to a symbolic authority. The words which are used to describe the relationship in these poems are mostly those of construction, which is related to the symbolic realm rather than to maternal fusion. For example, in “Mr. Mine” she uses a lot of images of creation to describe the male lover: “He is building a city, a city of flesh,” “he constructs me” and “The time I was dancing he built a museum” (*ASCP* 204).

Sexton’s relationship to the patriarchal authority is not even reciprocal in these poems. As an introduction to *Love Poems*, Sexton quotes Yeats: “I have lived many lives. I have been a slave and a prince” (Yeats, *The Collected Poems* 279-80).²⁷ Nevertheless, there is no application of the fullness of this saying to the volume for almost always she is the slave. There is only a “quest for a male authority figure to love and trust” (Kumin 206). For example, in “Us” she rubs her lover’s feet “because I was your slave / and then you called me princess” (*ASCP* 202). In “Moon Song, Woman Song” she announces: “I am alive at night. / I am dead in the morning, / an old vessel who used up her oil.” And to her lover she says: “You need only request / and I will grant it. / It is virtually guaranteed / that you will walk into me like a barracks” (*ASCP* 196-97). In “You All Know the Story of the Other Woman” she concludes with the following lines: “when it is over he places her, / like a phone, back on the hook” (*ASCP* 196). This is all enacted in full submission to her father/lover without the least defiance.

In *Oedipus Anne: The Poetry of Anne Sexton*, George draws parallels between Sexton and Sophocles's Oedipus, as read by Freud and Bettelheim. George tries to show that Sexton struggled for the unconscious truth, especially in relation to her family protagonists. Consequently, George views Sexton as a hero, like Oedipus struggling for insight through blindness, rather than as a victim/victimizer, a Jocasta. She views Sexton's failure to save herself in the end as heroic and courageous. This death is a sacrificial role on behalf of the lives of other "beautiful women," imposed on her by her audience to purge themselves of "the one who has broken boundaries and violated taboos" (21, xiii). One cannot deny Sexton's struggle at a certain phase in her career and her attempts to break the boundaries and violate taboos, as George suggests, but it can be argued that she is not successful in the end. In fact, Sexton is better at building boundaries than in breaking them. This is why she succumbs to a God who declares her as his sacrifice, a role which seems to suit her. In "The Author of The Jesus Papers Speaks," Sexton's God declares: "we must all eat sacrifices. / We must all eat beautiful women" (*ASCP* 345). Sexton does not seem to protest.

Another poem that many critics look at as a feminist achievement, but which hides identification with the father, is "In Celebration of My Uterus" (*ASCP* 181).²⁸ In this poem, Sexton moves from, as it were, "first wave" to "second wave" feminism to celebrate the uniqueness of her femininity and to emphasize sexual difference (Colebrook, 119, 127):

Sweet weight,
in celebration of the woman I am
and of the soul of the woman I am
and of the central creature and its delight
I sing for you. I dare to live. (183)

Here, the persona becomes godlike, a central creature. "It is a relief," George comments, "to find the central creature singing to her soul in the absence of a savior always male, always other, always externalized" (*Oedipus* 67). However, the male exists in the

background, for the persona is identifying with his central position. She is welcoming the roots that belong to him, and this is why she can be. This creates what Leslie Rabine, based on her reading of *About Chinese Women*, calls the isomorphic structure of the symbolic order, which generates homologous models. According to Rabine, this structure represses the maternal function and suppresses woman under the law of One (43-45). According to Kristeva, to eradicate this structure, it is essential to eradicate identity, even sexual identity (Guberman 98).

The persona continues her celebration with an implicit invitation to her sexual world: "There is enough here to please a nation" (182). In "The Civil War," a poem written at the end of Sexton's career, the female speaker promises to "build a whole nation of God" (ASCP 419). This poem begins with the romantic notion: "I am torn in two / but I will conquer myself" (418). Not only she but also the persona's God is torn. Nevertheless, she "will put Him together again" (418). All "united" around her, she will "sing an anthem, / a song of myself" (418). The anthem, in "In Celebration of My Uterus," is sung by a women's chorus, the sacrificial beautiful women. The persona, on their behalf, "carr[ies] bowls for the offering / (if that is my part)" (183).

Unconsciously or otherwise, this sacrifice is done for the sake of the socio-symbolic contract. At the end of the poem, she sings again and one wonders whether she sings "for the correct" or simply the "erect" (183). She sings for a man that will tie her to him forever. This recalls the lines of a later poem, "When Man Enters Woman," where Sexton celebrates a man tying a knot in a woman "so that they will / never again be separate" (ASCP 428). In this sexual scene, God is there, a mentor, a perverse voyeur that "unties the knot" after they are done. Jane McCabe put this in simple terms: "for all the ostensible glamour and sexual confidence in Sexton's poetry, there is an increasingly clear sense that her body is only hers and admirable when it is given to men" (228).

In this godly patriarchal realm, deformity is not allowed for sacrificial bodies must be proper. This faultless body looks like the one presented in "It Is A Spring Afternoon"

(*ASCP* 193). After describing the fertility and sexuality of a woman who has just left childhood in this poem, Sexton suggests that “[s]urely spring will allow / a girl without a stitch on / to turn softly in her sunlight / and not be afraid of her bed” (41-44). This subject, which belongs to the symbolic realm where “the blind men can also see,” must have a unified image in that Lacanian “green green mirror” (194). This gestalt, the “‘orthopedic’ form of [the body’s] totality,” sacrificial and perfect, is offered on a golden plate for the sake of the law of One (Lacan, “The Mirror Stage” 76-78).

Sexton has been loyal to the law of the father, which means having a unified body/ego. This applies even to the most considered feminine poems. The relationship with her father is not, as has been mentioned earlier, only a result of love and loyalty to him, but also of the need to protect herself from an abject mother. This mother, as will be seen, appears between the beginning and end of Sexton’s work. The next section will discuss how three of Sexton’s poems imitate the general structure of Sexton’s *oeuvre*.

1.2 The Mother In Between

The notion of unity recurs in Sexton’s work. Does she belong easily to this concept? Is there no heterogeneity in her poems whatsoever? Where then does her suffering stem from? The answer to these questions can be found in one of her early poems, “For John, Who Begs Me Not to Enquire Further.” This poem was written for John Holmes, Sexton’s teacher in the first poetry workshop she attended on her psychiatrist’s advice. In one of her interviews, Sexton admitted that Holmes criticized her poetry and warned her friend, the poet Maxine Kumin, to stay away from her (Kevles 8). Sexton also revealed that he asked her to stop writing what he thought was mad poetry. The answer came to Holmes in the form of a whole poem and to the above questions in the refrain of the poem: “Not that it was beautiful, / but that, in the end, there was / a certain sense of order there” (*ASCP* 34).

The symbolic gives that sense of order, even if it does not give a sense of beauty, at a point when the abject collapses “in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us – and ‘that cancels our existence’” (Kristeva, *Powers* 210). What is beautiful and alive for Sexton is essentially abject and related to death, for “death too is in the egg” (“The Operation” 57). In “Fortress,” Sexton addresses her daughter by referring to what is beautiful as deadly and dangerous. The mole on her daughter’s cheek is an “inherited [. . .] spot of danger / where a bewitched worm ate its way through our soul / in search of beauty” (*ASCP* 66). This maternal abject that Sexton tries to order will appear later in her work.

Sexton’s sense of beauty as being outside the law of the One is the beginning of her narcissistic crisis, her suffering and alienation, before she thrusts herself back into God’s arms. She will be, as she describes herself to the “Kind Sir” in “Kind Sir: These Woods” (*To Bedlam and Part Way Back*), “Lost and of your same kind” (*ASCP* 4-5), “search[ing] in these woods,” while “afraid of course,” finding “nothing worse / than myself, caught between the grapes and the thorns” (5). The dilemma of being torn between a mother and a father will mark the beginning of her crisis.

This structure of beginning and ending with the father while having the mother in between as the reason for her crisis, resembles that of three poems: “Music Swims Back To Me,” and “The Bells” in *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), and “The Silence” in *The Book of Folly* (1972). At the beginning of “Music Swims Back To Me,” the persona calls for a “Mister” in a childish manner: “Wait Mister. Which way is home?” (*ASCP* 6). She relies on him as a support in that desolate place where “There are no sign posts.” This dark place is a “private [patriarchal] institution” where she longs for a “sensorial ‘timeliness’” (“felt time”) (Guberman 235; Kristeva, *Proust* 7) although she is not allowed to return to the maternal place, “home.” Therefore, music with its memories swims back to her.

Diana Hume George notices correctly that “father-daughter rituals, especially tinged with sexuality, take place in mediums usually fluid, although sometimes also in music, fire, or flight” (41). However, music here is semiotic since it is evoked by a “radio

playing.” Sexton explains the association between her mother and radios in her essay “All God’s Children Need Radios”. After Mary Gray’s death from cancer, Sexton took her portable radio, which she described as “her [mother’s] heartbeat,” wherever she went, especially to the mental hospital. The speaker of the poem “liked [the music] and danced in a circle” for “Music pours over the sense / and in a funny way / music sees more than I. / I mean it remembers better” (6). Music sees “more than I” because it also sees the “not-I,” the Invisible, the Unnamable, and it remembers better because it takes one back to a pre-verbal space which belongs to one’s history (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 41).

While those feelings may sound nostalgic and relaxing in the midst of darkness, they are equally threatening and horrifying, belonging as they do to a sinister space outside the room: the stars are “strapped in the sky” and the moon, an appalling mother, is “forking through the bars to stick me” with a different kind of music strong enough to pull her into a state of amnesia (7). The moon lurks behind that jail, snatching the souls and, therefore, we have the right not to believe the persona when she claims that she “was not afraid.” In addition to Freud’s famous formula of changing negation to affirmation when the unconscious is at work (Freud 19: 235-39), one learns through reading Sexton’s biography, as well as her interviews, that she is capable of telling lies. Sexton herself confesses, “I am known to lie, and I never let myself down” (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 279). Her favourite paradox, we are told, is “In poetry, truth is a lie is a truth” (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 258). Thus, in Sexton’s canon, “[Lying] / Is an art, like everything else” (Plath, “Lady Lazarus” 245). The last word uttered by the persona is “Mister?” as if she is begging that “gatekeeper,” as Middlebrook sees him, or jailer to stay since her fear of the outside is unbearable (71). The poem starts with a father and ends with a father. Fear and loss dominate inbetween.

Music swims back to her again in “The Bells” (*ASCP* 7). The music belongs to the circus, which is frightening for a little girl. The speaker claims that “she was not afraid” (which means that she was initially frightened) when her father was there to “explain” the

dangers of the world of the maternal carnivalesque: “the three rings of danger.” The “naughty clown / and the wild parade” are more dangerous than the love rings of her father which grew other “rings” around her (7-8) for “the carnival challenges God, authority, and social law,” it is “rebellious,” threatening individuality (Kristeva, *Desire* 79). But her God/father is strong enough to keep her safe. The music that belongs to the world of the circus becomes her father’s music in the end:

I remember the color of music
and how forever
all the trembling bells of you
were mine. (*ASCP* 8)

Therefore, “Today the circus poster / is scabbing off the concrete wall / and the children have forgotten / if they knew at all,” which indicates that a detachment occurred in the persona’s psyche between the realms of the semiotic and the symbolic through the help of her loving, authoritative father (*A Biography* 7). As a result, the music of the “poetic language here [does not] ‘pluralize, pulverize and ‘musicalize’ all the static socio-symbolic features” of the father’s world (Lechte 29).

“The Silence” further reveals the overall structure of Sexton’s canon, which takes the form of white-black-white (*ASCP* 318). This poem is, in a metaphorical sense, more of a painting than a poem, but it is a painting without vividness. There is, in the first stanza, a room which is “whitewashed, /as white as a rural station house.” It is “whiter than chicken bones / bleaching in the moonlight / pure garbage.” Furthermore, there is “a white statue” and “white plants /growing like obscene virgins” scattered in the painting. It is a painting with no sound and no life like those silent “rubbery tongues” of the virgins who “say nothing,” although they are “pushed out.” Then, suddenly, a little black appears in the second stanza, which one thinks will save the situation: “My hair is the one dark,” and “My beads too are black.” Blackness increases in the third stanza and the “words from my pen” fill that white room (319). Finally, “zinging words” violate the white silence of the

symbolic and add some negativity to the painting. Now, there is a silence of another kind. It is “like an enormous baby mouth” that babbles a semiotic rhythm. It is also the devouring silence which is “death.” However, at the end of the poem “a white bird” “peck[s] at the black eyes/ and the vibrating red muscle/ of my mouth.”

White, according to Kristeva in “Giotto’s Joy,” is “the white of dazzling light, a transparent light of meaning cut off from the body, conceptual, instinctually foreclosed” (*Desire* 222). It could be argued that white in “The Silence” means the same as it belongs to the symbolic father, only here it is connected to the proper body represented by the white house. Black, on the other hand, is the “cast of form, an undefilable, forbidden, or simply deformable figure” (222). Accordingly, it belongs to the archaic mother of death. If white is the pure language of the symbolic system and black is the maternal semiotic which Sexton tries to incorporate in order to add vividness and struggle to the scene, her efforts are an absolute failure, a “miscarriage” (319). It is the victory of the “white bird” of the symbolic in the end. In fact, if one examines the blackness, one finds that it is from a white origin and thus not original. The persona’s hair, in the second stanza, is dark and charred since it “has been burnt in the white fire” (318). Furthermore, the red colour one sees at the end is the sacrificial colour of red. The white bird by pecking at the “vibrating red muscle of my mouth” and “at the black eyes,” not only shows the authority of the symbolic order, but also recalls Oedipus’ sacrificial blindness for the sake of the patriarchal city-state (319). Oedipus becomes blind only because he transgresses the law of the city by killing his father and marrying his mother, and it is only by his blindness that the law can be restored.

In these three poems, as in Sexton’s *oeuvre* in general, the law of the father functions as a parenthetical bracket for what takes place within her work. The heterogeneity that appears in the middle and towards the end of her career is toned down because of Sexton’s alliance with the father. However, this alliance is not motivated only by an Oedipal love of the father (an Electra complex), but, as will be seen later, also by a

fear of facing an abject mother. The father is the lesser of two “evils.” The passivity in the painting of “The Silence,” as well as in Sexton’s work, is due to the inability to move across the borders which separate the father and the mother, the “I” and “not-I.” Pure whiteness is death in life and pure blackness is simply death. Heterogeneity is the struggle of both life and death. Before reaching this heterogeneity, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, Sexton’s work remains generally passive. Both the rigidity of Sexton’s psychic borders in the face of an abject mother, and her keeping a second mother as a secret, leads to passivity in her work, preventing her from transgressing the father of the law. The first reason for Sexton’s passivity and her inability to change the law of the father will be discussed in Chapter 2, by looking at the separation, which causes suffering in her psyche, between the father realm and the first mother in terms of psychic borders. By jettisoning her mother over the proper borders, Sexton establishes strong shields to protect herself from the return of this abject figure from the “outside.” Sexton rejects the idea of leaving these shields in order to confront this haunting mother, and thus stays inert. The second reason, as shall be discussed, is Sexton’s secret bond with a second mother, which complicates things in her work as it adds to the passivity and later to the heterogeneity. By keeping this second mother as a crypt in her psyche and refusing to abandon it, Sexton remains passive. It is not until she admits the loss of this mother that mobility starts to seep into her work.

Chapter 2

“Geometry and Abjection”

2.1 Establishing Borders (Shields)

In an interview which appeared in *The Paris Review* after she received the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1967, Sexton talked at length about her transformation from a middle-class housewife to a successful poet:

Until I was twenty-eight I had a kind of buried self who didn't know she could do anything but make white sauce and diaper babies. I didn't know I had any creative depths. I was a victim of the American Dream, the bourgeois, middle-class dream. All I wanted was a little piece of life, to be married, to have children. I thought the nightmares, the visions, the demons would go away if there was enough love to put them down. I was trying my damndest to lead a conventional life, for that was how I was brought up, and it was what my husband wanted of me. *But one can't build little white picket fences to keep nightmares out.* The surface cracked when I was about twenty-eight. I had a psychotic break and tried to kill myself.

(Kevles 3-4, emphasis added)

However, building fences is precisely what Sexton did initially in her poetry in order to keep the nightmares of the abject mother out. The creation of strong psychic borders, which also indicate a proper body in alliance with patriarchal law, will be a defence against Sexton's fears of an abject mother. The cracking of these borders will be witnessed later as the beginning of heterogeneity in her poetry.

Abjection, one of Kristeva's most important concepts, is discussed most fully in *Powers of Horror*. Abjection is a process where the infant starts to separate from her mother for the purpose of forming the self's border: “We may call it a border” (Kristeva 9). This happens when the mother's unclean, improper body is jettisoned outside the symbolic order so that the subject can structure its identity. In other words, it is a process where the not-yet subject relinquishes the object-subject dyad of the mother and the child, the “realm of plenitude, of oneness with our environment, and the semiotic *chora*” (McAfee 45). This

separation takes place before thethetic phase of the mirror and the subject's castration. It is a rejection of one's corporeality, animality and materiality represented by the mother in order to enter the realm of the symbolic.

However, this expulsion is not final. The mother's abject body does not disappear forever. Like Freud's "return of the repressed" it comes back to haunt the subject, threatening to pulverize and obliterate its borders (Grosz, "The Body" 87). The subject is thus threatened with being engulfed in an abyss, a void. This is horrifying for the subject as much as it is fascinating – horrifying in that it threatens the subject's symbolic unity and its position in language, fascinating in that it promises merging and confusion with the archaic mother and the freedom of incestuous prohibition. This situation is what Kristeva calls the "double-bind" where the ambiguity is between "inside" and "outside," nature and culture, subject and object, self and other (*About Chinese Women* 76).

Relying on Mary Douglas' *Purity and Danger*, Kristeva discusses in *Powers of Horror* demarcating a clean proper body, the social body, away from pollution and defilement, what she calls the abject. The abject is which is dirty and impure, what incorporated and expelled from the body: "food, faeces, urine, vomit, tears, spit" (Grosz, *Sexual Subversions* 72). The dirt is not an intrinsic quality in what is considered abject, rather, Grosz explains, it is what causes disorder in a system: "Dirt signals a site of possible danger to social and individual systems, a site of vulnerability insofar as the status of dirt as marginal and unincorporable always locates sites of potential threat to the system and to the order it both makes possible and problematizes" (*Volatile Bodies* 192). The demarcation, becomes important, in this sense, as it separates culture from nature, in linguistic terms, the symbolic from the semiotic, and in psychoanalytic terms, child from maternal/feminine body.

To dispose of the impure and the unclean and to suppress the feminine become essential for protecting the unity of the speaking subject. However, what is excluded

always hovers at the borders of the body threatening this unity with fragmentation and dissolution and provokes a reaction, such as horror, fear, or disgust, recalling a state prior to signification. The abject elements haunt the subject because she has to face them after they have been cast from the social world causing her a trauma. By invoking the Dionysian festival, Kristeva relates the disintegration of both body and identity to the dissolution of the symbolic order and language “in a dancing, singing, and poetic animality” (*Revolution* 79). In art, abjection is seen as semiotic drives penetrating the poetic text, exactly as the abject traverses the bodily zones, such as, the mouth, the anus, and the genitals. Both the abject and the semiotic are revolutionary elements since they are maternal and feminine. They disturb the identity, the authority of the law, and language. Experiencing the abject in poetry brings fear but also *jouissance* and breaks down the boundaries of the subject towards what is heterogeneous.

In his illuminating essay “Geometry and Abjection,” Victor Burgin narrates the history of geometry from the cosmology of classical Greece, through the Middle Ages, to Euclidean geometry and then modern and post-modern geometry where space becomes psychological space. Burgin then comes to the conclusion that no subject is without a boundary – that is, without a space. However, he argues that Kristeva takes us to a space prior to Lacan’s mirror stage where the ego will take its place as a Gestalt, to a space with uncertain boundaries. Therefore, he reaches another conclusion: that “the origin of geometry is abjection” (115). It is of utmost importance, however, to understand geometry here in a non-Euclidean sense. In other words, it is important to understand it as a psychological space that is ready to collapse in what Kristeva calls the “degree zero spatialization” (122).²⁹ It is a “mutation of space” (119). It is “geometry.”

A close look at Sexton’s poetry can startle one with the number of two and three dimensional geometrical shapes it contains. These can relate to her relationship with her father and mother, the real and the symbolic. Although Sexton is loyal to her father and his

city-state, she yearns for an archaic mother who, at the same time, threatens her with an ominous call. As this chapter will discuss, in defence against the call of the mother, Sexton builds different kinds of obstinate walls which initially seem to belong more to a Euclidean geometry that is “separated, segregated” (Burgin 108). This is why there is less negativity in Sexton’s work as there is resistance to and less confrontation with the maternal, which cannot go through the walls of the city-state to achieve transformation. This, of course, means less death and Sexton is, in this case, the “dead/less”. That is when the maternal element or the semiotic is resisted to enter into the psychic borders and thus into poetry. Therefore, the ability to show violent fragmentation and the dissolution of the “I,” that is her death in poetry, is less.

The “dead/less” is passive because she resists confronting the other in conflictual reciprocity in order to make a change. In other words, she longs for death more than achieving death, especially in relation to an other, and encountering it face to face. Thus, in spite of a desperate need for her lost mother, Sexton’s fear of the mother’s destructive powers prevails. Therefore, she erects walls and uses anything to shield and cover her from that omnipotent power, from the devouring body of the mother. Her father, though sometimes symbolically castrating and frightening, is, nonetheless, her only support and defence against the mother. Consequently, his city-state, his walls and his ghetto are welcomed by the daughter. Unable to confront her mother or father, she has small chance of transformation.

Disability and fear of confrontation can be detected in Sexton’s life as well as her poetry. For example, after her breakdown, “she had become acutely fearful of mingling with strangers: even the prospect of leaving her house now terrified her” (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 42). Furthermore, her psychiatrist, Dr. Orne, commented that “Anne used a metaphor for the comfort she needed in order to discuss things effectively in treatment: she called this ‘having room.’” Paradoxically enough, the poet who is known more than any other Confessional poet for exposing herself in her poetry, sexually speaking, wrote once

to her psychiatrist that “she feared exposure of every kind” (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 44, 127). “Only her closest friends,” Middlebrook reports, “knew how terrified she was when she opened her car door and stepped away from its protective frame into the midst of strangers” (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 127). She was also afraid to face her audience, despite her well-known and successful theatrical readings: “they actually scare the shit out of me! But it is money and I have to have it [. . .]. Fear, always fear” (*Letters* 163).

Above all, and surprisingly enough, since she was often suicidal, Sexton acknowledged her fear of facing death: “I worry about the minutes before you die, that fear of death. I don’t have it with the pills, but with a gun [referring to Hemingway’s death] there’d be a minute when you’d know, a terrible fear. I’d do anything to escape that fear; death would be a friend, then” (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 216). This no longer remains a surprise when we understand that Sexton wants to die peacefully without pain: “Killing yourself is merely a way to avoid pain” (*Letters* 232). She wants to die with the least confrontation possible, especially with the maternal.

In Sexton’s poetry, and in opposition to that maternal horror, we see houses, walls, ceilings, rooms, doors, windows, gates, boxes, coffins, prisons, beds, shoes, life jackets, blankets and many other shields. However, it is important to consider the first difficult separation that Sexton achieved from her first mother, the real and the symbolic, before establishing her “Fortified Castle” (Kristeva, *Powers* 46).

This separation is explicitly represented in three of her major poems: “The Double Image,” “The Division of Parts,” and “The Operation” (*ASCP* 35, 42, 56). Although Melanie Waters suggests rightly that these poems show abjection, as it means “the fragile borders of subjectivity” between mother and daughter, especially in “The Double Image,” and the “leakage” between “inside” and “outside” (216, 212), it can be argued that this “uncontainability” is a first step that Sexton takes before establishing her strange containments later on (218). For at the end of these poems, Sexton shows a successful separation from her first mother before she proceeds to erect her walls.

“The Double Image” is a poem loaded with guilt and blame (*ASCP* 35). Sexton, estranged from her daughter for three years because of her mania, blames herself for her daughter’s illness. Later on, Sexton’s own mother blames her daughter for her cancer, brought on, she claims, by Sexton trying to commit suicide. This, unsurprisingly, makes the daughter feel very guilty: “an old debt I must assume” (36). In trying to rehabilitate herself, the persona comes to live with her mother: “too late, to live with your mother.” Thus we have the dilemma of the poem: “And this is how I came / to catch at her; and this is how I lost her” (37). A Fort/Da game, which is negativity as love and hate of the mother necessary for the onset of subjectivity, is established between them. In fact, Fort /Da (German for gone/there) was a game played by Freud’s grandson to express his anxiety about his mother’s absence. Freud talked about this game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It is a “game of disappearance and return” where pleasure is attached to the second act, which is the return of the mother (Freud 18: 15). This game shows how symbolic language gives presence to objects and feelings. But most importantly this game represents the relationship with the mother, who can be gone but is still present in language as play (Freud 18: 14-15). Kristeva explains that the child deals with the experience of the loss of the mother through the imagination and then through language (*Black Sun* 6).

A strange solution to this comes from the two parts of the conflict and is indicative of Sexton’s later obsession with geometrical shapes. It comes in the refrain of the poem: “I [or she] had my portrait done instead.” The persona as daughter chooses to petrify her own powers and imprison herself in a portrait. The picture implicitly belongs to the symbolic father although the mother is the one who asked for it to be done: “‘I am a picture’ (just ‘I was God’s picture in the medieval space of emplacement)’” (Burgin 112). The persona in that portrait “holding my smile in place, till it grew formal” evokes another scene in her childhood in the church “where they locked us up /row by row, like puritans or shipmates” (*ASCP* 37).

The persona's portrait is then hung "in the chill / north light, matching / me to keep me well." The mother, in what seems a defiant act, had her portrait done and hung on the south wall, opposite her daughter's portrait. When they are portraits, they are separate, but when the portraits turn into mirrors, fusion takes place:

And this was the cave of the mirror,
 that double woman who stares
 at herself, as if she were petrified
 in time — two ladies sitting in umber chairs.
 You kissed your grandmother
 and she cried. (*ASCP* 41)

The confusion here is not only with the mother, but it extends backwards to a grandmother and forward later to the little daughter of the persona who could not "cure" or "sooth" the pain caused by her mother (42):

I, who was never quite sure
 about being a girl, needed another
 life, another image to remind me. (*ASCP* 41-42)

However, the persona, as a daughter, is able, albeit only partly at the beginning, to overthrow and outgrow that alluring yet horrifying relation to her mother:

In south light, her smile is held in place,
 her cheeks wilting like a dry
 orchid; my mocking mirror, my overthrown
 love, my first image. She eyes me from that face,
 that stony head of death
 I had outgrown.
 The artist caught us at the turning;
 we smiled in our canvas home
 before we chose our foreknown separate ways. (*ASCP* 40)

The Demeter-Kore (mother-daughter) dilemma, as Stephanie Demetrakopoulos likes to refer to it in her archetypal study, comes to an end with the daughter managing to separate

completely from her mother in pain and anguish (118). This is again emphasized in “The Division of Parts.”

“The Division of Parts” also discusses Sexton’s separation from her mother. It begins with the death of the mother on Good Friday, leaving an inheritance for her three daughters: “I am one third / of your daughters counting my bounty” (*ASCP* 42). With the persona’s usual guilt, the inheritance “settle[s] on me like a debt.” The mother’s belongings are “obstacles,” “gifts I did not choose.” She is in her grief left in a double-bind: “I fumble my lost childhood / for a mother and lounge in sad stuff / with love to catch and catch as catch can” (44). Sometimes, however, in the poem, she withdraws from her sadness: “Time, that rearranger / of estates, equips / me with your garments, but not with grief” and “I planned to suffer / and I cannot” (43). Moreover, to emphasize the detachment from her emotions, she refers to her mother’s house as “your house.”

The love/hatred relationship toward her rival mother continues:

Since then I have pretended ease,
loved with the trickeries of need, but not enough
to shed my daughterhood
or sweeten him as a man. (*ASCP* 44)

The persona here identifies the mother’s death with Christ’s sacrifice, which reminds her of “The clutter of worship / that you taught me, Mary Gray” (43). It is not orthodox religion that the mother wants her daughter to follow and so the daughter prefers her own version of that religion, as Margaret Honton explains it (102). The mother would like her to follow “the grotesque metaphor” of Christ, which belongs in the realm of ghosts where she now exists and from where she haunts her daughter (46):

Divided, you climbed into my head.
There in my jabbering dream
I heard my own angry cries
and I cursed you, *Dame*
keep out of my slumber.

My good Dame, you are dead. (ASCP 45)

She is haunted by “Black birds” (43), pecking at her window, or sometimes her mother’s dangerous angels, whose walls creak exactly like the psychic walls of anyone who will adopt the maternal religion they call for, letting the semiotic in: “*Anne! Convert! Convert!* / My desk moves. Its cave murmurs Boo / and I am taken and beguiled” (45). Because she cannot succumb to her mother’s will and her haunting presence, she will adopt an orthodox religion belonging to the symbolic father. “For all the way I’ve come / I’ll have to go again” if she does not follow the religion of the father (45). All her efforts at detachment so far will go to the zero degree of fusion with the mother for she is still walking now on a way “formed from a single, continuous, surface” which is not separated yet (Burgin 108). She has not erected firm borders yet. The poet Maxine Kumin, Sexton’s friend, describes the God and thus the religion that Sexton sought: “The God she wanted was a sure thing, an Old Testament avenger admonishing his Chosen People, an authoritarian yet forgiving father decked out in sacrament and ceremony” (200). Sexton describes the religion she would like to convert to in her poetry as follows:

Instead, I must convert
to love as reasonable
as Latin, as solid as earthenware:
an equilibrium
I never knew. (*ASCP* 45)

This is the religion and love of the father. More precisely, it is the love of the conglomerate father or what Freud calls a “father of individual prehistory” (Freud 19: 31) and which Kristeva renamed as the “imaginary father” that will initiate her movement away from the mother’s stifling powers to the realm of the symbolic (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 26).

In a last affecting moment of detachment, where Sexton is at her best, one feels an acceleration of movement, through the acceleration of words, towards separation. The persona, in an absurd amalgamation of love and hatred, is sucking what she can from her

last fusion, feeling the harshness of separation before it happens, saying goodbye in the most affectionate way to the “lady of my first words,” the babbling words of the semiotic *chora*:

Now it is Friday’s noon
and I would still curse
you with my rhyming words
and bring you flapping back, old love,
old circus knitting, god-in-her-moon,
all fairest in my lang syne verse,
the gauzy bride among the children,
the fancy amid the absurd
and awkward, that horn for hounds
that skipper homeward, that museum
keeper of stiff starfish, that blaze
within the pilgrim woman,
a clown mender, a dove’s
cheek among the stones,
my lady of my first words,
this is the division of ways. (*ASCP* 45-46)

The division from the mother is re-emphasized in “The Operation” in *All My Pretty Ones* (*ASCP* 56). This poem is closely related to Sexton’s biography. It depicts again the ambivalent feelings she harboured towards the death of her real mother from breast cancer. However, Sexton’s relationship with her mother had become complicated even before her mother’s death. One can detect many of her contradictory feelings towards her mother in Middlebrook’s biography. At one point, Sexton admits, “I know I was dependent – but Mother didn’t want to be motherly. I clung to her” (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 37). At another, the relationship between the two becomes competitive, something which began in a minor way during Anne’s childhood, especially in terms of writing poetry (45, 101). In one of her sessions with Dr. Orne, Sexton said regretfully that “Mother doesn’t think I wrote them [referring to her poetry] still” (101). She both wished and feared her mother’s

death: “Part of me would be free if she died. It would also be awful — I would dissolve” (47). She put it simply: “Mother makes me sick but I love her” (46-47).

In her letters too, Sexton expressed her ambivalent feelings toward her mother. For example, she wrote to W. D. Snodgrass in 1959: “She is in the hospital with cancer now in her liver, stomach, lungs, and bones . . . (I feel guilty. Remember the letter I wrote you about hating her) . . . What do we do with our old hate?” (51). In another letter to Anne Clarke in 1964 she wrote: “for me she is a big something . . . a something I love and hate and still react and talk to” (230). In a letter to her daughter Linda in 1969, Sexton added the element of fear which became prominent in her later poetry: “Even if I say my mother was mean, I still love her and anyhow she wasn’t that mean. I exaggerate everything I fear” (339).

In “The Operation,” the persona, who is in need of an operation, recalls the death of her mother, who is back to haunt her life: “the historic thief / is loose in my house / and must be set upon.” (57). Successful in expelling the thief, the persona maintains her unity and the place of haunting changes to the outside:

The rooms down the hall are calling
all night long, while the night outside
sucks at the trees. I hear limbs falling
and see yellow eyes flick in the rain. Wide eyed
and still whole I turn in my bin like a shorn lamb. (ASCP 57)

Nevertheless, the persona is still longing for fusion with her mother’s body which is torn from hers and jettisoned “outside”:

I plunge down the backstair
calling *mother* at the dying door,
to rush back to my own skin, tied where it was torn. (ASCP 58)

In the last lines of the poem, as in “The Division of Parts,” the separation from the mother is complete and the persona is initiated into the symbolic world. The game she is to play is that of hide and seek:

All’s well, they say. They say I’m better.
 [.]
 Time now to pack this humpty-dumpty
 back the frightened way she came
 and run along, Anne, and run along now,
 my stomach laced up like a football
 for the game. (*ASCP* 59)

This discarding of the mother is considered a release which facilitates the allegiance to God that appears later in her work. The evidence of this release appears in another poem written early in Sexton’s career (1959) called “My Friend, My Friend” where the persona declares clearly: “Watching my mother slowly die I knew / My first release” (13-14).³⁰ Elsewhere, this death seems to be a matricide, as in “Christmas Eve”: “Then I thought of your body / as one thinks of murder . . .” (*ASCP* 140). Heather Cam argues convincingly of the debt Plath’s “Daddy” (*CP* 222) owed to Sexton’s “My Friend,” a poem she encountered during one of Robert Lowell’s workshops at Boston University or after class in personal meetings with George Starbuck and Sexton in the Ritz bar. Cam also notices that while Plath’s “Daddy” portrays a “mutually destructive relationship” with her father, Sexton’s poem, in an Ouroboros fashion, “turns back on itself, taking the reader back through the poem’s closed circuit of guilt” (431-32). Moreover, according to Cam, in spite of Sexton’s claim that she has “no special legend or God to refer to,” her sense of guilt, the need to forgive and be forgiven, and her feelings of “release” caused by her mother’s death shows the opposite. She is totally submissive to this “Nazi” God as she insists on her Jewishness in the poem’s refrain: “I think it would be better to be a Jew.”

The symbolic shelters that Sexton constructs after her separation from her mother, whose death facilitated the procedure, represent her body-ego. This proper body initially

shows a rigid psyche towards the return of the repressed, the abject mother. Later on, another reason appears for holding onto these shields: the hidden crypt for Nana, Sexton's aunt, who is considered a second mother to Sexton. These shelters, which proliferate in Sexton's poems, take many forms. The discussion of these can be divided into five major themes and images. The first section will discuss protective boundaries of houses and rooms. In the second section, proper dolls will be discussed, as they relate to this symbolic rigidity, and holes, which are supposed to be an escape from rigidity, but which sometimes, for Sexton, are impenetrable. The third section will discuss windows and other barriers. The fourth will discuss shields in myths and fairytales while the last section will aver that in some of Sexton's poems, even when she is "outside," she is using some sort of shield.

2.2 Houses and Rooms

Sexton shields herself from the powers of the mother jettisoned outside the borders of the self in a house which initially belongs to the symbolic. Diana Hume George similarly views houses in Sexton's work as a symbol of the psyche and body. However, she makes a more social reading of houses as "feminine places where mothers live, where daughters become wives and mothers, into which men enter as into an alien land" (*Oedipus* 62). The present study will argue that, apart from this social perspective, houses in Sexton are places shaped by the father. In fact, they are proper psychic borders shaped by the symbolic. Therefore, mothers/women are pushed back to the margins, leaving the centre of these symbolic houses/city-states. Hence, for women to remain integrated they have to be loyal to the father. To go outside is to be threatened by the abject mother. In other words, if the house is a body, it is the "clean and proper" body which belongs to the law of the father (Kristeva, *Powers* 108). A description of such a body occurs in the "Housewife": "Some women marry houses. / It's another kind of skin; it has a heart, / a mouth, a liver and bowel movements" (*ASCP* 77). This body is integrated and clean: "The walls are permanent and pink. See how she sits on her knees all day, / faithfully washing herself down."

Sexton seems to differentiate between a house and a home. A home, it can be argued, refers to the mother and this is why she has “never been at home in life,” as the epigraph at the beginning of “Old Dwarf Heart” indicates (*ASCP* 54). In a letter to Anthony Hecht, Sexton seems unable to explain clearly the difference between the two. However, if one looks closely at her words, one can understand that “house” is for her a place of hiding from a threatening outside, while “home” is a situation she feels or she desires to have and which seems to elude her:

You remember I said I didn't feel at home in life, well that was almost always any life — not just the outside world — more the outside than my house here. But sometimes, all my life really, I've stayed home hiding from the world. Hiding is different from being “at home.” (*Letters* 123)

In another letter to Carolyn Kizer in 1959, she described herself in terms of house hiding: “I am kind of a secret beatnik hiding in the suburbs in my square house on a dull street” (*Letters* 70-71). The hiding place of the house is paternal since it is the only place she has with protecting borders. It is a place for the sensible people, as she puts it in a letter to her poet friend Philip Legler:

He [Sexton's husband] is with the world. I am not of it whatsoever. You? Perhaps only your wife is of the world. And maybe you and I are otherworldly — poets, to be exact. Poets, can't live for/ die for/ live with/ breathe in nothing but themselves — they need the sensible people, the roots, the down the house world of people. (*Letters* 293)

Moreover, in “January 19th” in “Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die: The Horoscope Poems” (*ASCP* 591), Sexton defines home in maternal terms. It is home that she has to leave and forever long for in order to enter a symbolic world of sexual difference:

I leave you, home,
when I am ripped from the doorstep
by commerce or fate. Then I submit
to the awful subway of the world, the awful shop
of trousers and skirts. Oh animal bosom,
let me stay! Let me never quit
the sweet cereal, the sweet thumb! (*ASCP* 594)

When Sexton refers to her childhood, there is always a house: “A thousand doors ago / when I was a lonely kid / in a big house [. . .]” (“Young” 51). Furthermore, in “Eighteen Days Without You,” “December 16th,” she describes her confinement in the house as a child, projecting that onto the addressee: “Once upon a time / you grew up in a bedroom the size of a dime / [. . .] / Longing for country you were penned / into city” (ASCP 218).

She is in her father’s city-state. In “Mr. Mine,” the male lover builds the speaker’s body: “He is building a city, a city of flesh” (ASCP 204). She also may be in the “dead city of my marriage” (“The Break Away” 525), longing for country, a home. She continues to narrate her confinement in “December 16th”:

Once upon a time
I was the only child forbidden to climb
over the garden wall. I didn’t dare to speak
up over the Victorian houseful of rare antiques.
My dolls were all proper, waiting in neat rows.
My room was high ceilinged, lonely and full of echoes. (ASCP 218)

This detention goes back to a real incident in Sexton’s childhood. One of her most persistent memories was of being locked in her room as a toddler by a “folding gate drawn across the doorway” (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 7). The room was high ceilinged and papered with a pattern of red roses. Tall windows looked onto trees outside. Little Anne sometimes hid in the closet as she feared the roses on the wall. Middlebrook argues that Sexton used images of this old memory very effectively in her poetry (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 8). However, it can be argued that this imagistic pattern haunts her poetry not only as a memory but as something she still lives with. In fact, as an adult, Sexton imitated this pattern by choosing to lock herself literally in her house (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 49). Sexton used these images to express terror for what is abject outside, which she can be protected from only by a barrier: the window from the trees, and the closet door from the roses. For Sexton these barriers had to be strong and thus unified. The regressive state behind these barriers expresses a further relationship with her second mother, as shall be

seen later. The state of being hidden behind a barrier, fearing what is “outside” and clinging to the crypt of a second mother “inside” is what makes Sexton and her poetry generally passive. Even when Sexton depicts creativity in her poems, she uses the same enclosed imagery which shows the difficulty of abandoning this passivity.

That Sexton uses an enclosed image to express her creativity is clear in “For John, Who Begs Me Not To Enquire Further” (*ASCP* 34). In this poem, we have the most peculiar image of the source of her creativity which summons a scenario of confinement. It is an inverted bowl over the persona’s head or, to be more precise, it is the head which is made of glass like a bowl. Therefore, unlike Plath’s famous bell jar in her novel of that name, Sexton’s bowl is immobile. It is a fixed part of Sexton and thus not choking, whereas Plath’s bell jar threatens although its movement up and down brings mobility and heterogeneity to her work. For this reason, negativity as “rage” struggles to occur in such poetry:

I tapped my own head;
it was glass, an inverted bowl.
It is a small thing
to rage in your own bowl.
At first it was private.
Then it was more than myself;
it was you, or your house
or your kitchen. (*ASCP* 34)

The persona adds a layer to that cracked bowl to fasten it and give some sense of order to her creativity. While one sees Plath in her poetry shedding a lot of her skin, one sees Sexton fixing more skin around her creativity, clinging to her borders. This coverage reinforces the subject’s unity since it hides the fragile cracks in Sexton’s psychic borders underneath. The reason for this weakness that Sexton is hiding will be revealed in Chapter 3 in relation to Sexton’s second mother.

I will hold my awkward bowl,

with all its cracked stars shining
 like a complicated lie,
 and fasten a new skin around it
 as if I were dressing an orange
 or a strange sun.
 Not that it was beautiful,
 but that I found some order there. (*ASCP* 34-35)

There is no violent reciprocity between the two separate worlds. Sexton dreams that the words of her poem written in her own room will be physically assertive as she describes them in the letter written on June 6, 1960 in “Letters to Dr. Y.”:

Words waiting, angry, masculine,
 with their fists in a knot.
 Words right now, alive in the head,
 heavy and pressing as in a crowd.
 Pushing for headroom, elbowing,
 knowing their rights. (*ASCP* 563)

However, her words are passive without reciprocal love because they have been produced in that narcissistic room:

A word, a sunflower seed.
 One we would surely overlook.
 So easily lost, a dead bee.
 So vulnerable.
 She is already trampled, that one,
 having traveled so far from the heart.
 She weighs so little.
 She is so light and vulnerable.
 She is the dead bee called love. (*ASCP* 563)

A more detailed analysis of this locked creative room where the abject maternal is not allowed in will be discussed under “Windows and Other Barriers” and also in relation to Sexton’s fusion with her aunt in the next chapter. In what follows, Sexton’s stubborn walls are projected onto her dolls. She uses the word “proper” to describe them: “My dolls

were all proper” (“Eighteen Days Without You” 218). Even the holes which are supposed to be a way of escape from this incarceration sometimes turn out to be impenetrable.

2.3 Proper Dolls and Holes

Sexton talks a lot about dolls in her work, as a way of projection, and of her failed efforts, as a result of fear, to help them escape their imprisonment. Like her, the dolls welcome confinement instead of facing an abject mother “outside.” Holes are usually the doll’s and Sexton’s way of escape. However, even holes sometimes become impenetrable and imprisoning in her poetry exactly like her other shelters.

Sexton’s dolls, like her house (body) are clean and proper. They are God’s dolls “falling out of the sky” (“The Falling Dolls” 486). In “All God’s Children Need Radios” under the subheading “Little Girl, Big Doll,” Sexton describes her dolls as both “a replica of herself” and as whole proper dolls, especially that big doll, her size, which resists death, at least for a while:

I had a Dye-dee doll myself, a Cinderella doll with a crown made of diamonds and a Raggedy Ann with orange hair and once on my sixth birthday a big doll, almost my size. Her eyes were brown and her name was Amanda and she did not welcome death. Death forgot her. (For the time being.) (27)

“Those Times . . .” in *Live or Die* (1966) portrays another house where the little girl is imprisoned in a labyrinth of enclosures with the same proper dolls (*ASCP* 118):

At six
I lived in a graveyard full of dolls,
avoiding myself,
my body, the suspect
in its grotesque house.
I was locked in my room all day behind a gate,
a prison cell.
I was the exile
who sat all day in a knot. (*ASCP* 118)

This scene of entrapment depicts the “grotesque” spectacle that the child Anne surveyed painfully. However, as Robert Boyers notices: “Though her past is a nightmare of grisly proportions, she cannot evade its urgent appeals to her consciousness” (209). Sexton starts to erect these same barriers that seem to victimize her in order to evade the “spectre of violation” which haunts her (Boyers 210). The statement “[s]he delights in stillness, but fears everything” is a precise description of Sexton’s relation to her entrapment (Boyers 209). For this very reason, it is rare that Sexton erupts with fury. Another scene in the same poem refers to this multiple prison:

When I wanted to visit,
 the closet is where I rehearsed my life,
 all day among shoes,
 away from the glare of the bulb in the ceiling,
 away from the bed and the heavy table
 and the same terrible rose repeating on the walls. (*ASCP* 119)

Even if the entrapment “among shoes” here recalls that of Plath in “Daddy,” where she exists in the black shoe of her father, “[b]arely daring to breathe or Achoo” (*CP* 222), Sexton’s poem “lacks vindictiveness or even anger” (Johnson 91-92). This appalling pattern of confinement is repeated in many of Sexton’s poems. As Sexton is projecting her feelings onto her dolls, she is, like them, “so well made,” “so perfectly put together,” and “born quietly and well” (*ASCP* 119). No matter how hard she tries, “the me who stepped on the noses of dolls” just “couldn’t break” them. They stayed unified and integrated. This is reminiscent of the formal and proper life enforced on the Harvey family members especially by Sexton’s father, Ralph Harvey, who, with the blessing of his wife, loved appearances. For example, he enforced a dress code upon his daughters and himself, and he never sat down to dinner without a jacket and a tie (Middlebrook 9). It was even worse in public.

“The Falling Dolls,” (posthumously published in *45 Mercy Street*, 1976) presents what seems like a dream of dolls falling from the sky “by the thousands.” The child persona “look[s] up in fear” and “wonder[s] who will catch them” (*ASCP* 486). The real fear, however, comes from not knowing their destination and their destiny. Are they going to land outside in the haunting abject mother’s realm where they will be mutilated and “sooty” or in the father’s protecting, albeit castrating, realm? The maternal destination is depicted as ghoulish:

The leaves, holding them like green dishes?
 The ponds, open as wine glasses to drink them down?
 The tops of buildings to smash in their stomachs
 and leave them there to get sooty?
 The highways with their hard skins
 so that they may be run over like muskrats?
 The seas, looking for something to shock the fish?
 The electric fences to burn their hair off?
 The cornfields where they can lie unpicked?
 The national parks where centuries later
 they’ll be found petrified like stone babies? (*ASCP* 486-87)

She struggles to catch the dolls in her arms to protect them from disintegration. All they need is to be dressed up and shielded from what is maternal. This recalls the humiliation, which Sexton and the persona of her poem “Those Times . . .” felt when her mother undressed her. The unshielded and undressed dolls are destined to be smashed on the roof. Although she is trying her best to keep her dolls safe and sound, she is still anguished as her rhetorical questions reveal:

and I dream, awake, I dream of falling dolls
 who need cribs and blankets and pajamas
 with real feet in them.
 Why is there no mother?
 Why are all these dolls falling out of the sky?
 Was there a father?
 Or have the planets cut holes in their nets

and let our childhood out,
 or are we the dolls themselves,
 born but never fed? (ASCP 487)

The question “Why is there no mother?” suggests that she is mournful, though safe, for having no mother. In using the present tense to ask about the mother, the persona confirms that the mother does not exist in her world, and in using the past tense to ask about the father, affirms that he is the origin of those dolls or “we” that are “born but never fed” (487).

However, if the origin of these dolls, under any circumstances, is the impossible, engulfing, maternal “holes,” this justifies the persona’s longing. In “Those Times,” Sexton refers to a hole: “and all that would remain / from the year I was six / was a small hole in my heart, a deaf spot, / so that I might hear / the unsaid more clearly” (ASCP 121). That hole in her heart belongs to her longing for a pre-linguistic maternal space where the “rhythmic, onomatopoeic, babble [. . .] precedes the symbolic” and hence “unsaid” (M. Eagleton 217).

Morrisette explains that “while the hole *per se* is not exactly a topological figure, it becomes one upon the passage through it, or the establishment around it, of groups of elements that have been suppressed within the hole or that are used to fill it with true or false ‘content’” (48). For Sexton, the hole is the forbidden outside and is her way out of life. It is the orifice of the maternal mouth and anus. In this sense, it is the opposite of the topological shapes she uses as symbolic armours. However, according to Morrisette’s definition, sometimes even holes in Sexton’s poetry represent topological figures as they become impenetrable. A description of such a hole occurs in “Angel of Hope and Calendars,” part four of ‘Angels of the Love Affair’ in *The Book of Folly* (1972):

That hole I crawl into with a box of Kleenex,
 that hole where the fire woman is tied to her chair,
 that hole where leather men are wringing their necks,
 where the sea has turned into a pond of urine.

There is no place to wash and no marine beings to stir in. (*ASCP* 334)

The voice exists only out of this hole, not in it, and thus there is no change once you enter it: “Your voice is out there. Your voice is strange. / There are no prayers here. Here there is no change.” It is obvious then that the hole for Sexton is not a place for exit, for freedom out of her geometrical shapes. Rather, it becomes itself a prison, which adds to her passivity. It is the hole of “despair” where she is “not brave.” The hole is nothing but her creative room which she cannot rage in. This will be understood fully, as mentioned earlier, in relation to her second mother, a situation that constitutes another reason for Sexton’s inertia.

The longing for the abject mother is shown as the persona’s pining to leave her confining house: “and yet I planned such plans of flight,” and

I sat all day
stuffing my heart into a shoe box,
avoiding the precious window
as if it were an ugly eye
through which birds coughed,
chained to the heaving trees. (“Those Times . . .” 120)

The window leading outside is tempting, as well as ugly, deformed and haunting like those flowers on the wallpaper which remind her of her outcast mother. Whether she knew it or not, “in the end,” as at the end of her career, Sexton’s persona would get rid of her mother forever: “I did not know that my life, in the end, / would run over my mother’s like a truck” (121).

Again, in the “Sixth Psalm” of “O Ye Tongues” (*ASCP* 405), the child Anne is delineated as “locked in” with “her imaginary twin and ally,” Christopher, projecting her dreams of deforming her proper dolls and escaping (Ostriker, “That Story” 268):³¹

Anne hides inside folding and unfolding rose af-
ter rose. She has no one. She has Christopher. They sit in their
room pinching the dolls’ noses, poking the dolls’ eyes. One

time they gave a doll a ride in a fuzzy slipper but that was too far, too far wasn't it. Anne did not dare. She put the slipper with the doll inside it as in a car right into the closet and pushed the door shut. (*ASCP* 405-6)

The mutilation of the dolls and their escape “far, too far,” although safely inside a slipper, is frightening for the little Anne. She does not dare go outside and, therefore, goes further into the closet and shuts the door again. Anne and Christopher find an alternative, in the end, to their escape towards a mother in one towards God. In the “Tenth Psalm” God “was as large as a sunlamp and laughed his heat at us / and therefore we did not cringe at the death hole” (*ASCP* 413).

Yet God's symbolic love is not as liberating as it seems. In “Jesus Unborn” (*ASCP* 343), we see Christ shutting Mary's life and body as if with a heavy door: “Now we will have a Christ. / He covers her like a heavy door / and shuts her lifetime up / into this dump-faced day” (344). Sexton seems not to care about this and she decides in “Is It True?” to wear God as a house (*ASCP* 446):

I wouldn't mind if God were wooden,
 I'd wear Him like a house,
 praise His knot holes,
 shine Him like a shoe.
 I would not let Him burn.
 I would not burn myself
 for I would be wearing Him.
 Oh wood, my father, my shelter,
 bless you. (*ASCP* 449)

Sexton's projection of her feelings onto her dolls shows her own obsession with being a proper unified self, and her fear of taking trips far away from her fortified borders. The holes, which should be means of escape, turn out to be impenetrable in her poems because of Sexton's inability to abandon her passive situation behind her shields. Therefore, it seems that until this moment, the Fort/Da game of a fluid movement between

“inside” and “outside” has not begun. The game of owls and ice against poor mice and birds where “Owls force mice into the open. Owls thrive / The ice will do the birds in, or come unglued” is not yet due (“Eighteen Days Without You” in “December 7th” 210). In the following section, Sexton is made to keep inside her house, looking through “precious windows” to the outside before being forced out there (“Those Times” 77).

2.4 Windows and Other Barriers

Jo Gill views the windows and the suburban American houses as barriers between the private and the public in Cold War America. However, she does not ignore the fact that they are also a border between the self and the other. She defines this “feared” but “welcomed” presence “outside” as perhaps Sexton’s depression or her muse (*Anne Sexton* 68). However, this feared and loved presence lurking outside these borders could also be read as Sexton’s abject mother, as shall be discussed in this section. Gill speaks of the permeability of these borders, giving some lines of “What’s that” as evidence: “Before it came inside / I had watched it from my kitchen window [. . .]” (*ASCP* 25). However, this means that there is a “before” for this permeability, which are the inflexible borders that extend through Sexton’s poems.

Windows become an ambivalent motif of both horror and love in Sexton’s work; they provide a shield against the abject mother from behind which she is able to peep out and communicate her longing. In “Killing the Spring,” she looks at the horror outside (*ASCP* 320):

From my gun-metal window I watched
how the dreadful tulips
swung on their hinges,
beaten down like pigeons. (*ASCP* 320)

A similar sinister scene can be found in “Eighteen Days Without You” in section “December 5th”:

Now I feel my age,

watching the feverish birds outside
 pocketing grain in their beaks.
 The wind is bizarre.
 The wind goes boo, boo, boo at my side
 and the kitchen faucet leaks. (*ASCP* 209)

In a 1962 letter to her friend, Brother Dennis Farrell, she expresses fear of maternal nature outside her window: “nature (out the window) becomes my enemy” (*Letters* 143). On the other hand, in “The Break Away” (*ASCP* 518), the scene becomes a dreamy one of love and longing:

And I awaken quickly and go to the opposite window
 and peer down at the moon in the pond
 and know that beauty has walked over my head,
 into this bedroom and out,
 flowing out through the window screen,
 dropping deep into the water
 to hide. (*ASCP* 521)

This motif appears earlier in “Three Green Windows” (*ASCP* 105) where the persona, “Half awake in my Sunday nap,” sees “three green windows” and declares: “At each window such rustlings!” The scene outside is one of tactile love: “The trees persist, yeasty and sensuous, / as thick as saints. / I see three wet gargoyles covered with birds. / Their skins shine in the sun like leather.” Thirsty for that love, she dreams of the coming summer as a mother putting her on her lap — a reminiscence of their primal fusion — in the openness that does not know of cellars:

Soon it will be summer.
 She is my mother.
 She will tell me a story and keep me asleep
 Against her plump and fruity skin.
 I see leaves –
 leaves that are washed and innocent,
 leaves that never knew a cellar,
 born in their own green blood

like the hands of mermaids. (*ASCP* 105)

From her cellar, she peeps out secretly lest her father knows, lest her mother knows, for she would rather avoid any confrontation with either: “secretly watching, secretly knowing, / secretly naming each elegant sea” (106). A similar room where the outside mother is spied upon is also described in “February 4th”: “a room with a wide window, a spy hole, / on the sea scrubbing away like an old woman / her wash” (*ASCP* 596-97). This is her secret time of play: “I am young and half asleep. / It is time of water, a time of trees” (“Three Green Windows” 106). The secrecy of the game sometimes takes the form of not naming the names in order not to be discovered. In “Love Song” (*ASCP* 115), for example, the little girl is depicted again shackled in her entrapment: “I was / the girl of the chain letter, / the girl full of talk of coffins and keyholes, / [. . .] / with her eyes half under her coat, / [. . .] / with an old red hook in her mouth.” Then she describes that lover who is the only one capable of changing that prison with “trap doors” into sensorial love and freedom though one doubts it is “with nothing dangerous at all”:

as soft and delicate as
 an excess of light,
 with nothing dangerous at all,
 like a beggar who eats
 or a mouse on a rooftop
 with no trap doors,
 with nothing more honest
 than your hands in her hand –
with nobody, nobody but you!
 and all those things. (*ASCP* 116)

As gender is not mentioned here, one can read the lover as the mother. The secret untranslatable language the poet uses to describe this elusive lover also leads to this conclusion. The persona who is frustrated to name not only the emotion, but also the beloved provides images to make the guessing easier. The mention of the “ocean” and

“music,” which are archaic dispositions, and the dissolving of the lines of the poem into a last breath of fragmented words enhance this reading of the lover as a mother:

Oh! There is no translating
that ocean,
that music,
that theater,
that field of ponies. (*ASCP* 116)

Now the romantic scenes outside the windows can reveal another face suddenly where there are no secret games to play. In “Mother and Jack and the Rain” (*ASCP* 109), the rain “drops down like worms” onto the room. This room is like the persona’s psyche “[h]aunted, always haunted by rain.” And “[t]hough rain curses the window” for not letting it in, the persona declares, “let the poem be made” and “the room affirms / the words that I will make alone” without the help of the rain “with its old unnecessary stories.” For “It [the rain] spoke the unspeakable” (“The Break Away” 520). The “room of my own” is not the room Virginia Woolf dreamed of. It is a room where she can hear her father, the jailor and the guard, kissing her “through the wall” (110). She can also hear her mother’s “heart pump like the tides” of the sea, calling for her, but she cannot respond, for her poem is to be made only in a room. The anger, the death drive, of the maternal sea, which is “the final destiny of rain,” is excluded from her poetry (George, *Oedipus* 34).

In the third stanza of “Mother and Jack and the Rain,” the father has been replaced by a boy named Jack (George, *Oedipus* 35). It is true that water and rain surround them, but this is not the mother’s fluid. As George explains, “The sexual encounters of Sexton’s fathers and daughters take place in a medium of fluid, fire or music or flight” (*Oedipus* 34), and now she is “a blind lake,” “instead of the sea that was her mother” (*Oedipus* 35). Only in travelling to the sea can she really be creative and haul the semiotic into her writing room. However, she cannot and does not make that journey, protected by a father who “outlasted the weather,” even though he is a drunkard. “Whiskey fortified” could refer to

Sexton and her father, Ralph Harvey, as both were alcoholic in real life (Middlebrook 13-14, 15, 210):

I made no voyages, I owned no passport.
I was the daughter. Whiskey fortified
my father in the next room. He outlasted the weather,
counted his booty and brought
his ship into port. (*ASCP* 110)

His ship is her ship, safe “[n]ear land.” Moreover, in order to produce her poem, she intends to tread the “mercantile” land of her father by riding a horse and by trying her own guitar (George, *Oedipus* 34). If riding the horse (which is a doubtful activity since she is locked in the room) refers here to her creativity, it is unlike Plath’s “indefatigable hoof-taps” (“Words,” *CP* 17) or the fiery horse of “Ariel” (*CP* 239). It is rather like that horse beaten by a phallic whip in her final sexually-connotative poem “Love Letter Written in a Burning Building” (*ASCP* 613): “the flames making the sound of / the horse being beaten and beaten, / the whip is adoring its human triumph” (614). And, therefore, “their two separate names” might refer to her mother (who is now dead) and Father Jack (who is now a priest) or to the mother and father as two separate parts of her creativity. She prefers to keep them separated by the walls of her room. However, as usual, her yearning for her mother, expressed here as bread — an oral object “that sets up archaic relationship between the human being and the other, its mother” (Kristeva, *Powers* 75-76) — continues along with her endurance: “to conjure / up my daily bread, to endure, / somehow to endure” (*ASCP* 110-11).

The “room of my own” becomes “The Room of My Life” in *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (*ASCP* 422). “Here, / in the room of my life / the objects keep changing,” the persona claims. To a scrutinizing eye, however, they do not. It is a very boring room with “Ashtrays to cry into, / the suffering brother of the wood walls,” and “the books, each a contestant in a beauty contest, / the black chair, a dog coffin made of Naugahyde.” Moreover, we have

the sockets on the wall
 waiting like a cave of bees,
 the gold rug
 a conversation of heels and toes,
 the fireplace
 a knife waiting for someone to pick it up,
 the sofa, exhausted with the exertion of a whore,
 the phone [. . .]. (*ASCP* 422)

These objects do not change. They are either waiting to do something or there are movements and changes around them like the sofa and the rug, for example. Sometimes even their movements are to create greater stability like the movement of the flowers “taking root in [the phone’s] crotch.” The only two obvious movements are those of “the forty-eight keys of the typewriter” and “the doors / opening and closing like sea clams” under some force attacking from the “outside.”

However, the movements which result from mere suffering without the encounter of death are monotonous and lead to no real change. The windows that drive “the trees like nails into my heart” are still “starving” like the persona’s creativity. Her borders are very solid, so there is no osmosis between the two worlds of “inside” and “outside.” They cannot connect or communicate:

Each day I feed the world out there
 although birds explode
 right and left.
 I feed the world in here too,
 offering the desk puppy biscuits.
 However, nothing is just what it seems to be. (*ASCP* 422)

Her objects, like the words of her creative writing, “dream and wear new costumes, / compelled to, it seems, by all the words in my hands / and the sea that bangs in my throat.” One wonders, however, how she or her words dream of change and are, at the same time,

compelled to such a dream. The answer to this paradox is that the compelling force comes from some unconscious “bangs” under the pressure of such strong borders, while the courage to confront a mother and incorporate her body in the written text to create violent transformative heterogeneity is still a dream and so there is no real change. The dream is there but the application is difficult, aside from a few exceptions.

In “Wanting to Die” in *Live or Die* Sexton again alludes to her creativity in terms of her borders. She refers to her ambivalent love for the archaic mother as the “unnamable lust” (*ASCP* 142). This lust keeps returning although she “walks in her clothing” protected and “unmarked by that voyage” to that mother who is waiting for her to come out of her prison toward a void, toward death:

and yet she waits for me, year after year,
to so delicately undo an old wound,
to empty my breath from its bad prison. (*ASCP* 143)

The prison is not only her body, but also “masculine” words. Thus the “breath” that she wants to get rid of refers not only to the breath of life, but also to articulated language. Sexton realizes that death has a different language, which is untranslatable: “But suicides have a special language. / Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*” (142). In poetry, it is the language where the mother’s body exists in rhythm, echolalia and glossolalia and, above all, silence: “leaving the page of the book carelessly open, / something unsaid, the phone off the hook” (143). Suicides leave all material love (“the fruit” and “the bread”) in the end to enjoy a greater lust for death. However, Sexton, who wishes to be one of the dead, has not embarked on that journey yet as the beginning of the poem suggests. It seems that Sexton’s archaic mother who is waiting for her to “undo an old wound,” is still waiting. Sexton is not yet responding to her call.

“The Witch’s Life,” whose protagonist cannot be fed by the maternal “soup,” expresses the same obstinacy towards the realm of heterogeneous creativity (*ASCP* 423).

Again Sexton's detachment from orality sets her text within the symbolic (Kristeva, *Desire* 195):

Maybe I am becoming a hermit,
opening the door for only
a few special animals?
Maybe my skull is too crowded
and it has no opening through which
to feed it soup? (*ASCP* 423)

In order to open the door she has three choices or, in terms of Sexton's symbolic world, three potential keys. The first key appears in "Riding the Elevator into the Sky" (*ASCP* 426). It is "a very large key, / that opens something – / some useful door – / somewhere – / up there" in God's kingdom (427). The second key is that which the bird of "The Ambition Bird" wants to be pressed into so as to "unlock the Magi" (*ASCP* 300). The origin of the word "magi" is related to magic, "a potent source of female power" (Joseph 31).³² Sexton always used the word "magic" to talk about her creativity. To "unlock the magi," therefore, means to allow the death drive in the form of anger and the maternal abject to seep into her poetry and create a movement between the self and the other "outside." This is most probably one of the keys for which the narrator of "Red Riding Hood" was reproached by her departed mother's soul for losing (*ASCP* 269). It is also related to a third kind of key she can use, temporarily at least, to "fill [the mouth] with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now on more than ever": the keys of her typewriter (Kristeva, *Powers* 41). Yet, is Sexton capable of such a confrontation? In one typed "confessional statement" written on 29 December, 1973, she expressed the difficulty of this task although she resolved to keep trying. One wonders whether her poetic words could make her wish true by dying "inside" without confrontation:

I am afraid to die. Yet I think it might do a few favors. If I COULD [sic] I'd just die inside, let the heart-soul shrink like a prune, and only to this typewriter, let out the truth. I feel awfully alone – crying in the bathroom so no one need hear – crying over these keys, where they sit as patient as an

old granny Can I save myself? I can try . . . I can keep right on trying. (Middlebrook 381)

The harder the choice becomes the more she fortifies herself behind her walls and windows and in her rooms. “Leaves That Talk” in *45 Mercy Street* delineates Sexton’s aggravated crisis profoundly. The call of the mother has become more seductive and more frightening:

It’s May 20th and the leaves,
green, green, wearing their masks
and speaking, calling out their Sapphic loves,
are here – here – here –
calling out their death wish:
“Anne, Anne, come to us.” (ASCP 540)

Nevertheless, she is persistent in wanting to remain shielded, and yet the suffering grows wilder:

They call, though I sit here
sensibly behind my window screen.
They call, even if I’m pinned behind bars.
They call, they call their green death call.
They want me. They need me.
I belong lying down under them,
letting the green coffin fold and unfold
above me as I go out. (ASCP 541)

The persona tries three solutions to counteract that voice. First of all, “I flee. I flee” even further inside (541). Next, she shields her ears: “I block my ears.” Finally, she “eat[s] salami.” By eating she is trying to appease her hunger temporarily for the ever lost mother by incorporating an oral object. However, Sexton’s hunger persists throughout her poetry. For example, in “Flee on Your Donkey” in *Live or Die*, the persona feels the same forceful hunger for the mother’s body that has no place, except in dreams of the primordial “abyss”:

I stared at them,
concentrating on the abyss
the way one looks down into a rock quarry,

uncountable miles down,
 my hands swinging down like hooks
 to pull dreams up out of their cage.
 O my hunger! My hunger! (ASCP 101)

The solution for hunger in “Flee on Your Donkey,” like that in “Leaves That Talk,” is to eat. However, this time the meal is God’s finger, eaten as soon as he enters her shielded fort:

I stand at this old window
 complaining of the soup,
 examining the grounds,
 allowing myself the wasted life.
 Soon I will raise my face for a white flag,
 and when God enters the fort,
 I won’t spit or gag on his finger.
 I will eat it like a white flower. (ASCP 103-4)

She will never “spit or gag,” eating God’s finger in an act of “identification based on an absorption, an oral assimilation of his body [as] a relief of oral sadism directed at the archaic maternal body” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 149). This represents the consumption of the male body of Christ, as in the Eucharist, as a substitute for the mother’s body. In contrast, in “Killing the Spring,” where she rides a donkey, shielded with “blindings,” she will vomit the food (ASCP 321). She is walking “in a circle, a warm circle” where she tries “to ride for eternity / but I came back” and “I swallowed my sour meat but it came back,” as we suspect the salami of “Leaves That Talk” would come back. She has to vomit the food to “establish [her]self” and “give birth to [her]self amid the violence of [. . .] vomit” (Kristeva, *Powers* 3). This means that the flight on the donkey will never be towards the abject mother, and although it is a fleeing backwards, it may be towards the “natural conclusion” of “Courage” where civilized death, without violent confrontation, “opens the back door” and “you’ll put on your carpet slippers / and stride out” (ASCP 426).

The hunger and the consequent need for the mother's food, which Sexton, as well as her personae, are deprived of, becomes urgent in "Food" in *45 Mercy Street*:

I want mother's milk,
 that good sour soup.
 I want breasts singing like eggplants,
 and a mouth above making kisses.
 I want nipples like shy strawberries
 for I need to suck the sky.
 I need to bite also
 as in a carrot stick.
 I need arms that rock,
 two clean clam shells singing *ocean*.
 Further I need weeds to eat
 for they are the spinach of the soul. (ASCP 488)

In spite of the long list the persona craves for, all she gets from the paternal symbolic world are "a dictionary to decipher" and the "reading [of] the paper" without anything to eat, leaving her mouth salty and unquenched (488-89). Here the mother's breasts have clearly been removed. In fact, Sexton's real mother, Mary Gray, underwent a mastectomy. This memory seems to haunt Sexton, as she is losing her binding with her mother who is here becoming a regulator, a "law before the [symbolic] Law" (Oliver 46) facilitating Sexton into a language where milk is not available anymore. The maternal function that foreshadows the paternal function facilitates the infant's recognition of the paternal "no" or the Name of the Father at the Oedipal stage (Oliver 47). In this sense, the mother is related to the patriarchal, phallogocentric order:

I am hungry and you give me
 a dictionary to decipher.
 I am a baby all wrapped up in its red howl
 and you pour salt into my mouth.
 Your nipples are stitched up like sutures
 and although I suck
 I suck air

and even the big fat sugar moves away.

Tell me! Tell me! Why is it?

I need food

and you walk away reading the paper. (*ASCP* 488-89)

Sexton's attitude to food is as ambivalent as her attitude towards her mother. On the one hand, in "The Fury of Cooks," she asks for food: "Give me some tomato aspic, Helen! / I don't want to be alone" (*ASCP* 368). On the other, she declines naming types of food mournfully as in "The God-Monger": "who am I to reject the naming of foods / in a time of famine?" (*ASCP* 458). She will certainly never find "the lost ingredient" she is looking for ("The Lost Ingredient" *ASCP* 30).

The last solution Sexton tries in "Leaves That Talk" is to "turn on THE song of THE LADY" as a compensation for the lost mother's song, "but the leaves' song crawls through / and into it and mixes like a dream in a dream" (*ASCP* 541). They simply "do not shut up / They do not." Sexton admits that she is lured by that horrific seductive voice: "and yet I am in love with it" for "It has a body" (541). Her mother's body, unlike her proper body, is multiple and rich – "It has many bodies" – or maybe those bodies belong to her women ancestors of "the Mayflower" (542). Nobody can stand against those grandmothers who are malicious like "ghosts," except a grandfather. Sexton used to have a good relationship with her grandfather, Arthur Gray Staples, whom she called Comfort, "a term of endearment" and with whom she shared a talent for creativity because he was an editor and publisher (*Middlebrook, A Biography* 12, 5). In "Leaves That Talk," the rescue of this great father takes on a sexual dimension, which will kill the leaves of the semiotic instantly and establish the symbolic creativity of the old man, leaving little Anne, as well as Anne the poet, in ultimate despair in front of her need. Her tears are not polluting although, like sperm, they belong to borders of the body (Kristeva, *Powers* 71). It can be argued, therefore, that the purifying tears, along with her waking up, free her from the dreamy realm of the mother:

I dream it's the fourth of July
 and I'm having a love affair
 with grandfather (his real birthday)
 and that the leaves fall off,
clank, clank,
 crashing down like stones, New England
 stones, one by one,
 and in my dream
 grandfather touches my neck and breast
 and says, "Do not be afraid!
 It's only the leaves falling!"
 There are one hundred thousand woman cries,
 tree by tree, and I scream out in my fear
 that my green ladies are leaving,
 my lovely obsessions,
 and I need them.
 I sob.
 I wake up.
 Kleenex.
 Grandfather. (*ASCP* 542)

She is "Rip van Winkle," but has anything changed? (542). Has she converted to her mother's religion which is nothing but atheism? The answer is perhaps that someday she will when she is "faithless to the summer," her sunlamp God:

And from the window as I peer out,
 I see they have left their cages forever –
 those wiry, spidery branches –
 for me to people
 someday soon when I turn green
 and faithless to the summer. (*ASCP* 543)

In one interview, Sexton confesses that she hears the voices of those leaves as part of her religious visions: "If you want to know the truth, the leaves talk to me every June" (Kevles 24). The voice of those leaves reappears in "Letters To Dr. Y." luring her to get out of her confining house (Letter on June 6, 1967):

“I am the leaves. I am the martyred.
 Come unto me with death for I am the siren.
 I am forty young girls in green shells.
 Come out of your house and come unto me
 for I am silk and convalescent.” (ASCP 571)

Will she ever be a martyr like those trees, going out to confront a mother and thus die? Will she ever have their “Siren Voice of the Other,” a challenging transforming voice where the maternal drives are heavily invested as a violent reciprocity between the I and the other until death and silence prevails? There are many hindrances and the most horrifying one is not a “Nazi Daddy,” like Sylvia Plath’s, but rather a “Nazi Mama” (“For Mr. Death Who Stands With His Door Open” 351) like the one in Letter December 4, 1967 in “Letters to Dr. Y”:

She is a commercial woman.
 She waits at the gate.
 She dogs me on the street.
 She shuts me in a lavatory.
 She is my other face,
 grunting as I sigh,
 vomiting as I chew. (ASCP 573)

However, she typically promises to keep her commitment to shields in the face of her need, not to her doctor but to her mother (Letter August 24, 1964):

I will be steel!
 I will build a steel bridge over my need!
 I will build a bomb shelter over my heart!
 But my future is a secret. (ASCP 567)

The father-figure here is Dr. Y who is her shelter and support. She is “the irritating pearl” and the doctor father is her “necessary shell” (567). He is the one who can “take the altar from a church and shore it up. / With your own white hands you dig me out. / You give me

hoses so I can breathe. / You make me a skull to hold the worms / of my brains” (*ASCP* 568).

It seems that Sexton will remove her stubborn walls for no one except God. At least this is her advice in “The Wall” (*ASCP* 443) for those “who will be painted out with a black ink” (*ASCP* 446), which recalls the blackness in “The Silence” (*ASCP* 318), the maternal semiotic ink that will add negativity to the poet’s work later on, and which is here also an element of defilement. Her advice for those people, as she herself would obviously do in the end, is to throw away the defilement and all the clothes which have been painted with it, overthrow one’s body if necessary - or the mother’s body in writing for that matter - and head towards God:

For all you who are going,
and there are many who are climbing their pain,
many who will be painted out with a black ink
suddenly and before it is time,
for those many I say,
awkwardly, clumsily,
take off your life like trousers,
your shoes, your underwear,
then take off your flesh,
unpick the lock of your bones.
In other words
take off the wall
that separates you from God. (*ASCP* 445-46)

And if the wall is to be removed, the prisoner who spent a very long time in her prison will “be blinded by the sudden light” (445). This justifies the “distress” the earthworms would feel “if Christ should come in the form of a plow / and dig a furrow and push us up into the day” (445).

The moment for dismantling the wall has not come yet, and there is time for Sexton to tell another lie, though this time it is a lost one. In “The Lost Lie,”³³ the persona feels “rust in my mouth /the stain of an old kiss” (*ASCP* 533). Her rigid features are caused by a

lost love and this is why her heart “is still there, / that place where love dwelt / but it is nailed into place.” However, because “nothing is just what it seems to be” (“The Room of My Life” 422), the persona has to clarify the situation by saying that “in fact the feeling is one of hatred” (*ASCP* 533). She feels “no pity for these oddities, / . . . / For it is only the child in me bursting out / and I keep plotting how to kill her.” She plots to kill the nagging child who wants to go outside. Empty of that “woman” “full as a theater of moon” (“The Lost Lie” 533), the house where she roams is “a dead house,” the kitchen is “frozen,” the bedroom is “like a gas chamber,” and the “bed itself is an operating table / where my dreams slice me into pieces.” The problem is, to borrow a line from “Old Dwarf Heart,” that “even if I put on seventy coats I could not cover you” (*ASCP* 55). It is the severe love/fear disease of an “old” archaic mother:

Oh love,
the terror,
the fright wig,
that your dear curly head
was, was, was, was. (*ASCP* 533)

In conclusion, the windows and all other barriers in Sexton’s work have the function of protecting her from an abject mother, who is nevertheless longed for. Sexton tries to compensate for this loss by doing many things, especially by consuming food. However, hunger remains Sexton’s main characteristic, as she is deprived of her mother by the symbolic shields. In terms of Sexton’s creativity, the maternal and the semiotic are excluded from these confinements, and thus heterogeneity is not achieved at this stage of her work. In the following part, other shelters that Sexton is confined to and which she delights in creating are found in many of the myths and fairytales of her poetry. Simultaneously, these barriers are proper social prisons and welcomed shields, protecting Sexton from a horrific fear of what lurks “outside,” the abject mother.

2.5 Borders in Myth and Fairytale

The separation between the realm of the paternal “inside” and the abject realm “outside” is further explored in Sexton’s poems of myth and fairytale. “Where I Live in This Honorable House of the Laurel Tree,” presents the nymph Daphne imprisoned in a tree by the patriarchal god, Apollo. She lives in her “wooden legs and O / my green green hands” (*ASCP* 17). It is not only “Too late / to wish I had not run from you,” it is also useless because he will “honor” her anyway by imprisoning her in his confinement, the tree (17-18). It is because of his “untimely lust” that she “tossed flesh at the wind forever” (17). The problem is that “the trickeries / of need” pain her “everywhere.” This need is not directed towards the god Apollo, since “need is not quite belief,” as Sexton insists in “With Mercy for the Greedy” (*ASCP* 62), but at an ever-lost mother due to Daphne’s confinement. Although “the crown of honor” bestowed on her by Apollo “keys / my out of time and luckless appetite,” it has done her a favour by moving her “fears” of that same source of need “toward the intimate Rome of the myth we crossed” (17-18). This is the intimate city-state of her father where she can, though imprisoned, be safe.

Some of the reconfigured fairytales, which are sixteen stories from the Brothers Grimm,³⁴ show the geometrical aspect of Sexton’s inside/outside dilemma. The “middle-aged witch, me,” who has “The Gold Key” for *Transformations* (*ASCP* 223), tells us at the end of “The White Snake” that the hero of the story and the princess lived happily ever after in their socio-symbolic marital confinement:

So, of course,
 they were placed in a box
 and painted identically blue
 and thus passed their days
 living happily ever after —
 a kind of coffin,
 a kind of blue funk. (*ASCP* 232)

“Cinderella” portrays the same patriarchal confinement: “Cinderella and the prince / lived, they say, happily ever after, / like two dolls in a museum case” (*ASCP* 258). Although this seems to be an unwelcomed social entrapment, in another poem, what is unsolicited is the open door to the chaotic “outside.” In “Self in 1958,” Sexton becomes Cinderella-like (*ASCP* 155), an eye-fluttering, smiling “plaster doll,” who is dressed in the proper “Magnin” clothes and lives in a neat “doll’s house.” This “synthetic” doll is asked to open her doors as part of her social role in spite of the abject “ruin” and the “fear” this might cause:

What is reality
to this synthetic doll
who should smile, who should shift gears,
should spring the doors open in a wholesome disorder,
and have no evidence of ruin or fears? (*ASCP* 155-56)

The tower of “Rapunzel” provides further evidence of Sexton’s confinement, which is implicitly welcomed (*ASCP* 244). In the story of “Rapunzel” Mother Gothel, a witch, has a garden locked to strangers and trades a transgressing couple’s not-yet-born baby for her irresistible tubers. And “so of course when it was born / she took the child away with her.” As the girl grew older “Mother Gothel thought: / None but I will ever see her or touch her.” Therefore, “She locked her in a tower without a door / or a staircase. It had only a high window.” This story could be read as an allegory of a mother’s power to keep the daughter fortified inside that “stone-cold room, as cold as a museum” (247). Although the narrator, the “middle-aged witch” Sexton, realizes that “A woman / who loves a woman / is forever young” (244-45), she lets the witch’s heart wither at the end of the story and the prince and Rapunzel get married.

It is interesting, however, that this witch, unlike the witches and bad mothers in other fairy tales, is not doomed to a horrible death. For example, the stepmother of “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs” dies after dancing in “red-hot iron shoes,” which tear her feet ferociously (*ASCP* 228). The witch of “Hansel and Gretel” is pushed into an oven

where her “blood began to boil up” (*ASCP* 289). In contrast, the witch’s heart in “Rapunzel” “shrank to the size of a pin, / never again to say: Hold me, my young dear, / hold me” (249). Is it the utmost punishment for the witch to be deprived of Rapunzel’s body, as Ostriker contends (“That Story” 258), or is it more Rapunzel being deprived of the witch’s body that is at stake here? If Sexton is projecting her relationship with her great-aunt Anna Ladd Dingley (Nana), as the introduction to the poem suggests, then Sexton would prefer her not to die: “They would play rummy / or lie on the couch / and touch and touch. / Old breast against young breast ...” (245).

In fact, what happens in the poem has resonance in Sexton’s life: “While they lay together under Nana’s blue bordered quilt, Nana would stroke Anne’s back and tell stories or reminisce about old days” (Middlebrook 15). In a recorded conversation (15 April, 1974) with Maxine Kumin, Elaine Showalter, and Carol Smith, Sexton talks candidly about her close relationship with her great aunt (Showalter 133). Moreover, although a controversial claim - Dr. Orne, for instance, believes it does not account with the facts - Lois Ames, a psychiatric social worker and a very close friend of Sexton, “could never believe anything *but* that Anne was a victim of child sexual abuse by both Nana and her father” (Middlebrook 58).³⁵ In spite of this, the story of “Rapunzel” ends with a prince who saves her, and not with the Nana, who denied her boys: “Many a girl / had an old aunt / who locked her in the study / to keep the boys away” (245). Nana, as will be discussed later, adds to the complexity of Sexton’s psychic and aesthetic dilemma.

The last confinement that works as shield in Sexton’s reworkings of fairytales is erected in “Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty)” (*ASCP* 290). This story is about a king who “had a christening / for his daughter,” but “because he had only twelve gold plates / he asked only twelve fairies” (291). He forgot to invite the thirteenth. In revenge, his daughter was doomed to sleep for a hundred years when she “prick[ed] herself / on a spinning wheel.” The prophecy came true and a “bunch of briar roses grew / forming a great wall of tacks / around the castle” (292). This story could also be viewed as an allegory of the

abject mother's power as represented by the thirteenth fairy, who imprisoned the daughter, notwithstanding her prior imprisonment in her father's castle. The prison, prescribed by fear of an abject mother, is not only symbolized by the wall of roses erected around the castle, but also by the princess's sleep, her "death." However, a prince comes to save the princess from the powers of the abject mother and his magical kiss awakens her.

The dutiful daughter, Briar Rose "woke up crying: / Daddy! Daddy! / Presto! She's out of prison!" (293). However, the prison remains not the castle which appears to be her safe haven, nor the wall of roses which disappeared with the prince's kiss, but the fear of sleep, a backward journey to an undifferentiated mother, which causes her to become insomniac. She could not sleep "without the court chemist / mixing her some knock-out drops" (293). In fact, Sexton herself had a problem with insomnia and used to take an overdose of sleeping pills, or what she would call a "bedtime cocktail of sleeping pills," to overcome her sleeplessness (Middlebrook 26, 341, 378).

Nobody can save Sexton from entrapment except her incestuous, tyrannical father, who is another form of imprisonment, albeit a more tolerable one. Unable to confront either him or her mother, she is a "Dy-dee doll" in every hand ("The Dy-dee Doll" 355):

I was forced backward.
 I was forced forward.
 I was passed hand to hand
 Like a bowl of fruit. (*ASCP* 294)

The last lines of the story are appallingly suggestive of incest where the father wins his "bowl of fruit":

It's not the prince at all,
 but my father
 drunkenly bent over my bed,
 circling the abyss like a shark,
 my father thick upon me
 like some sleeping jellyfish.
 What voyage this, little girl?

This coming out of prison?
 God help —
 this life after death? (*ASCP* 294-95)

Such a traumatic scene represents, as Sexton declares in “Oysters” “the death of childhood” (*ASCP* 323). In the companion piece, “How We Danced,” instead of being wed to a prince, the speaker is wed to her father: ““oh how we danced on the night we were wed’ ” (*ASCP* 323). The incestuous scene finds concrete expression in the father’s arousal and Sexton never seems to protest:

You danced with me never saying a word.
 Instead the serpent spoke as you held me close.
 The serpent, that mocker, woke up and pressed against me
 like a great god and we bent together
 like two lonely swans. (*ASCP* 324)

The most important thing about this incestuous prison is that it keeps her away from the sight of her mother just like the tomb where the little girl of Arabia holds the moss of her father’s dead skin:

It was only important
 to smile and hold still,
 to lie down beside him
 and to rest awhile,
 to be folded up together
 as if we were silk,
 to sink from the eyes of mother
 and not to talk. (*ASCP* 26)

This can be read as expressing the Electra complex of a girl who wants to have her father for herself. However, the relationship with her father can also be viewed as her only defence against the abject mother. This is arguably why the persona surrenders to her father’s abuse. Her relationship with her father is essential to protect herself from the abject mother who always seems to pursue her: “Mother, / each time I talk to God / you interfere” (“Praying on a 707” 378). She, in this sense, never fought against the violence

done to her by a devouring father. The persona accepts it the way the “ice baby,” who is “as hard as a Popsicle” in “The Death Baby,” accepts the deadly sexuality of the “ten Boston bull terriers, / ten angry bulls” (*ASCP* 354-55). She surrenders passively to these dogs that lick her until she becomes “clean” and then eat her up (355). Sexton never seems to protest.

The symbolic shields that Sexton erects and which sometimes she seems to abhor form an essential defence against an abject mother “outside.” These shields are nothing but reflections of her identification with her father. For without her protecting father, who also has a dubious face, she cannot defy the horror lurking “outside.” As a result, there is no attempt on Sexton’s part to defy the father’s abuse for the sake of her own safety. In some poems, even when the personae are “outside,” Sexton also tries to create some sort of shield for delaying a close encounter with what she fears, as shall be discussed in the next part.

2.6 Outside Shields

After all these confinements in geometrical shapes, one feels surprised to see Sexton depicting some of her personae “outside” — in, for example, “The Boat,” “The Death of the Fathers” and “The Consecrating Mother” (*ASCP* 324, 554). As it is a daring act, Sexton takes all possible precautions. In the former, the persona is sailing a boat with her father and mother (*ASCP* 324). She is shielded from the sea, a symbolic mother, by two things. First, she is in her father’s boat “with an orange life jacket on.” Second, her father is with her and “at the wheel” of that boat. He sails fast with the boat dividing the sea. The power of the daughter comes from the “we,” not the “I”: “We are daring the sea. / We have parted it. / We are scissors.” (*ASCP* 325).

An angel appears warning her: “[y]ou have no business. / No business here” (325). What makes the threat of the sea’s “green room” where the “dead are very close” tolerable is her father’s closeness and leadership. The sea here is a place where there is no “sign,”

only a pure flow of the semiotic's destructive force. Thus, the leader "Father" cries for a "sign," a word from God. Kristeva summarizes this situation briefly: "That's what the father means: sign and time" (*About Chinese* 35). As a result, "the sky breaks over us. / There is air to have" (325). The three protagonists are left at the end "dividing our deaths, / bailing the boat."

Another transitional poem is "The Consecrating Mother" (*ASCP* 554). The persona stands "before the sea," which is the place of "handfuls" of gods, instead of the one God and his law that the persona believes in. The temptation of the sea is powerful: "steamed in and out" and "gasp[ed] upon the shore" (555), but the persona does not lose herself to this seduction: "I wanted to share this / but I stood alone like a pink scarecrow" (*ASCP* 554). Moreover, ironically, she moves her shield, her mask, and sticks it on the faces of the sea. The border is not violated yet: "but I could not define her, / I could not name her mood, her locked-up faces" (*ASCP* 555).

Sexton seems to envy the people who have been able to cross the rolling sea with their ships. The archaic mother is still "[f]ar off" from Sexton and her poetry. "I wonder how she had borne those bulwarks" could be also read as projection, reflecting how Sexton had borne all those shields (another meaning for "bulwarks"), which withheld her mother from her:

Far off she rolled and rolled
like a woman in labor
and I thought of those who had crossed her,
in antiquity, in nautical trade, in slavery, in war.
I wondered how she had borne those bulwarks. (*ASCP* 555)

One feels the heaviness of the persona's task of shielding herself in "the face of [an] erotic outburst" (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 323):

She should be entered skin to skin,
and put on like one's first or last cloth,
entered like kneeling your way into church,
descending into that ascension,

though she be slick as olive oil,
 [.]
 with its one hundred lips,
 and in moonlight she comes in her nudity,
 flashing breasts made of milk-water,
 flashing buttocks made of unkillable lust [. . .]. (*ASCP* 555)

The daughter who is loyal to her father to the end never puts a “thumb” on this mother, in spite of the heavy seduction, for this sensual love that recalls the eroticism of “Song of Songs” is nothing but death. As the beloved in Solomon’s Song states, “[. . .] love is strong as death” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 93):

I am that clumsy human
 on the shore
 loving you, coming, coming,
 going,
 and wish to put my thumb on you
 like The Song of Solomon. (*ASCP* 555)

It has been seen so far how Sexton’s stubborn psychic shields, which look almost Euclidean, have helped to protect her from the attacks, as well as the seduction of the abject mother, even if this means consigning herself to a patriarchal prison. This prison is, paradoxically, a loving and a protective one. Even when Sexton is depicted as outside her shields, she seems almost always to use some means of protection. In a dream she describes such safe covering in her journey to the outside world:

Next I dream that I put on the love
 like a lifejacket and we float,
 jacket and I,
 we bounce on that priest-blue.
 We are as light as a cat’s ear
 and it is safe,
 safe far too long! (“The Break Away” 521)

What helps Sexton hold on to these shields is not only the fact that she is a dutiful daughter who wants protection from an abject mother, but that she also holds a little secret behind her proper borders, which cannot abandon. This secret, as shall be discovered in Chapter 3, is her second mother, her aunt, Nana. The divided nature of the witch in “Rapunzel” makes it easier to understand the situation of the two mothers. This witch has two faces. When she is outside the tower, she has the powers of an abject mother and so looks like Sexton’s first mother, and when she is inside, she is Rapunzel’s secret lover and resembles her second mother, Nana. The following chapter is going to focus on Sexton’s pivotal relation to this second mother.

Chapter 3

The Secret Within

3.1 A Second Mother

While Sexton is busy protecting her borders from “without,” threatened by an abject mother, a horrific cancer starts growing “within.” This horror helps her later in the initial collapse of her obstinate borders. However, although this inner horror is threatening, it nevertheless holds the subject back from total absence and the dissolving of her identity (Kristeva, *Powers* 53). Therefore, negativity starts to take shape in Sexton’s body and her poetry, which witnesses an eruption of the semiotic and defilement.

Yet the question remains: what has helped to form the horror “within” and to violate the strong borders of the dutiful daughter? It is simply the “Nana-hex” (*ASCP* 313), for while Sexton has been able to jettison one mother over her borders, she has not managed to do the same with the second mother, her aunt, Nana. Therefore, that “Thing” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 11) causing her sadness has been put in a crypt, engulfed in one of the secret rooms of her house. However, at the moment of the collapse of her borders caused by attacks from the “outside,” Sexton manages to introject her loss and release a hidden passion for the second mother as negativity in her poetry.

The “Thing” was first used by Freud in his distinction between the presentation of the thing and the presentation of the word. Freud argues that both comprise conscious presentation while “the unconscious presentation is the presentation of the thing alone” (14: 201). The presentation of the thing remains in a state of repression and is not put into words (14: 202). To clarify Freud’s concept, Lacan, defines *das Ding*, as the thing in its “dumb reality” (*Seminar VIII*: 55). It belongs to the real as it is “the beyond-of-the-signified” (*Seminar VIII*: 54). It is the lost object outside language that “no one will ever reach” and that no one will ever forget (*Seminar VIII*: 53). This concept is developed later

into Lacan's theory of the *objet petit a*, "the lost object that must continually be refound" (Homer 85). Moreover, Lacan argues that the mother occupies the place of that thing (*Seminar VIII*: 67). According to Kristeva it is an indefinable, unnamable feeling caused by the loss of the mother, which severs the subject from the symbolic. Describing this "Thing," Kristeva says: "[It is] the real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated" (*Black Sun* 13). It is obvious from this quote that Kristeva has almost the same definition of the "Thing" as Lacan. However, for her, the real can be recovered after entrance to the symbolic world; it can penetrate language.

Kelly Oliver refers to one of Kristeva's interviews concerning the relationship a woman can have with her mother:

One possibility is that she doesn't ever "get rid" of her mother. Rather, she carries with her "this living corpse," the mother's body that no longer nourishes. Kristeva claims that usually women close their eyes to this corpse. They forget about it. And they certainly don't eroticize it. The other alternative is that a woman forms a defense against the mother. As a defense, some women devote themselves to the Symbolic order. (62)

However, Sexton has two mothers. Therefore, while choosing the second option, she has closed her eyes on Nana's corpse, to introject her later on, causing negativity to emerge, albeit for only a short time. Smith gives us a clear definition of the two concepts of incorporation and introjection where the first means that "the lost object is incorporated into the self in a fantasy guarding against its loss" and the second is "the metaphoric activity through which we acknowledge and symbolize loss" (A. Smith 39-40).³⁶ In fact, Sexton's double mothers allow for the doubleness of choices.

One of the notes that Sexton wrote on Dr. Martin Orne's instruction, commenting on tapes that she recorded in treatment sessions, summarizes her psychological state:

I would like to lie down beside you and go to sleep, and you will never leave me because I am a good girl. But I can't have sex with you because I can't have sex with Nana. My father was a king. The king can have sex with anyone. Don't say anything that will scare me or I will run away. I want to run but I am scared. Don't move because I am scared of things changing. I

am so scared that my fingers hurt, my arm hurts, my stomach hurts. I pass out, for one thing, to get rid of my body. I'm myself, I tell you, that means my body is itself, that my soul has left it alone. I am going out of my mind, is there no place that is calm, a pool of milk. I want my mother, I hate my mother. Nana was safe. Nana was crazy. Daddy was drunk. I am a little bitch. (Middlebrook 174)

The note reveals the three dimensions of Sexton's dilemma: first, the incestuous, though protecting, "king" father who is all-powerful (he can have sex with anyone); second, the mother who is both loved and hated by her daughter; third, Nana who "was safe." The meaning of "safe" here could be interpreted as the crypt which Sexton has put Nana into and from which she will not release her until later. Importantly, the note also conveys Sexton's inability to "run away" from her shields because she is "scared" of confronting the mother, of letting the mother through her shields. She, therefore, is scared of "things changing." It is not only fear of an abject mother, but also of separation from Nana which will bring change. Change here is negativity, the movement of a libidinal drive in her body that corresponds to a movement of this drive in her poetry. This will lead to somatic and symptomatic pains in the body, which Sexton used to get rid of by passing out. In fact, Sexton experienced trances and dissociation very often, not only in her psychiatric sessions, but also in her outside life (Middlebrook 39, 133). Her letters describe these trances in detail:

I have blackouts. I don't mean I pass out. I mean everything goes black [. . .]
I was having them at least every day, sometimes seventeen a morning [. . .]
I've had these blackouts and this heart condition for four years [. . .] I
attributed it to anxiety and took seven 50 mg. Librium.

(Letters 364-65)

For Cynthia A. Miller these blackouts are a way of escaping the unbearable present as the Sleeping Beauty in "Briar Rose" does to free herself from her father. However, as she argues, Sexton is "a prisoner of time" (300). She cannot escape her past, present, or even her doomed future. She cannot, therefore, move freely in her poetry and cannot transcend or transform her situation.

That Sexton had two mothers, who played different roles in her life and assumed different linguistic positions in her poetry, is clear in her first short story “Dancing the Jig.” Its beginning shows the protagonist dancing the violent semiotic dance of threatening creativity, the dance of death, like the persona in “The Red Shoes” (*ASCP* 315):

What I want to talk about is dancing the jig. It is very strange to dance the jig. I am doing it now. My hands jolt from my wrists, my elbows fly from my shoulders, my head twists from my waist and my legs leap over the people on the floor. Oh, I am dancing, dancing. Before this I was sitting on the floor with the others. I am at a party. When they put the music on I began to feel lively, very lively. My nerves began to tick like a French clock, chimes rang from my fingers, my feet began to tap upon the floor and my toes curled in my shoes. I was up on my knees with my hands swinging out in frantic circles over my head and my head, itself, rolled on its hinges.

(146)

Although it seems she enjoys the dancing, she “didn’t like it. I didn’t want to . . .” She is dancing (writing) in spite of her will “over their silent faces” (146). Jacqueline Rose shows how “the narrator’s desire to dance fuses with the memory of her early attempts to eat and to speak” (*Haunting* 35). The dance, as she suggests, takes us back to the early drama of language where orality, that is eating and speaking, and dancing become one: “I have eaten the music,” “I must eat music” and “We are going back and forth, chewing, eating” (146,148, 152). However, this orality is threatening because devouring is related to the mother who menaces her identity and is thus disgusting and engulfing. For this reason, she tries to escape her by looking at the mirror-like napkin ring in order to identify with an other: “I look down at my napkin ring. I hold it like a mirror and an object of escape, an object to see twice” (149). However, the “I shine” soon turns to “We shine” because of the fusion with the mother (149-50). The mother wrenches the mirror violently from her hand to stop the act of separation: “Oh! She snaps my fingers with her nails. It stings. She takes the napkin ring and puts it beside her place and then puts my plate back in front of me” (150).

Although the mother is endangering the identity of the narrator through oneness with her, it is the first identification with the mother “which gave to her (took from her,

hurled at her) the body of words” (Rose 35). This is what causes heterogeneity in the work of art where the maternal and the semiotic irrupts violently into language, causing authentic creativity, dancing. However, if the dancer loses control in what Joan Nucifora describes as frenzied movement, which equates artistically to the “outpouring of words,” she risks losing her identity in that deadly act (312).

The narrator seems to like something else, besides her ambivalent feeling towards dancing, and that is staring at a chair. This is a state of total fusion with the “Thing,” which is the opposite of heterogeneity:

I am distant, as plain as a chair, as unmoved, as unnoticeable. The chair says, don’t look at me, I am nothing. The chair says, I stay the same, sit on me, crack my legs, lean on my arms, but I will not move. Yes, that’s just what I like about a chair, about being a chair. But it doesn’t work. The opposite of chair is dancing the jig. (148)

She seems to realize that the problem involves taking this position against heterogeneity, especially as it will affect her creativity: “That’s my worst mistake, thinking I am a chair, trying to stay fixed” (149). This position makes her afraid since it represents complete death to her identity, as well as for her creativity: “I shouldn’t try to become the chair. Other people probably do it differently. But they are not afraid. Why did I say afraid. I am not afraid” (148). It is true that she fears this petrification, but what she fears more is a separation from that position which means losing her hidden love, her second mother, and being exposed to heterogeneous change (Quebe 321). It should be obvious by now that this second position as a chair is not related to her first mother, but to her second one, Nana. The narrator has incorporated her Nana who “eats very nicely” (who eats the narrator very nicely) in a secret crypt in her psyche away from her first mother (151):

I wish Mother would smile. She is lighting a cigarette. Maybe it will be easier now that she is done eating. Maybe if I could think of something else—something nice—then I would feel better. Nana! I am thinking of Nana. Nana is nice. (151)

The narrator is finally able to jettison her first mother and successfully enter into language by rejecting the food, by “giv[ing] birth to [her]self” (Kristeva, *Powers* 3): “All

right, Mother, you win! . . . I gag it out. I am still trying to chew although I am crying. Win? Win what? I hear her through her cigarette smoke. She is turning away now” (153). Her identity seems fully established now as her mother leaves the scene. But has Nana left as well? A negative answer comes at the end of the story. She is still hiding in the narrator’s melancholic psyche. She, the narrator as well as Sexton, has the “Thing” and the question remains whether she is ever going to give it up:

I’ll look at that chair, at its color, the streak of its grain, the smooth shadows, the stiff arms in their places, the four legs hitting the floor. I can see it. I can see it double! It is fine. No one notices this. No one sees how it is. It is a relief to dwell on it—a perfect object. So fixed. So always the same. (153)

The crypt of Sexton’s aunt is engulfed in one of the secret rooms of Sexton’s house. This room resembles the one in “Locked Doors” (*ASCP* 442). It is a room of the “antinorm, the forbidden, the anomalous, the excessive, and the repressed: Hell” (Kristeva, *Desire* 215):

However, there is a locked room up there
with an iron door that can’t be opened.
It has all your bad dreams in it.
It is hell.
Some say the devil locks the door
from the inside.
Some say the angels lock it from
the outside.
The people inside have no water
and are never allowed to touch.
They crack like macadam.
They are mute. (*ASCP* 443)

Once this room is open, the mute hell moves “outside,” ready for change and destruction. Sexton has, therefore, been loyal to her borders not only because she identifies with her father and fears what is “outside,” but also because she wants to hide the secret “inside.” Although she wants to open the door for the sake of a dynamic creativity, relinquishing passivity for conflictual heterogeneity seems very difficult:

I would like to unlock that door,
 turn the rusty key
 and hold each fallen one in my arms
 but I cannot, I cannot.
 I can only sit here on earth
 at my place at the table. (“Locked Doors” 443)

In her short story, “The Letting Down of the Hair,” forbidden love is made in the same room. Sexton uses the tale of Rapunzel as “a parable for the life of a poet,” her friend Ruth comments (42). The Rapunzel-like girl locked in a tower where there is only one window from which to let out her very long hair, is seen by people in the process of drying it. But one wonders why Sexton chooses a “stone room” where she “hide[s]” as the factory of her poetry, the long hair? It is simply because she has hidden a secret there and everything emanates from it and revolves around it: “All the time of the child in me this room was my secret,” “the dead maybe live up here” (40). The relation of this room to Nana becomes clearer when one considers the words Sexton uses to describe the room: “a room like the inside of a church bell. A chalice, a cave, a perch, *queer* bird that I am. A hidden place inside of a seedpod” (40, emphasis added). The femininity of the hair that is sweeter and wetter when it is inside the room reflects an unconscious orgasmic desire for Nana: “There is so much hair, so much sucked-up honey, that I must wash it in sections. The room becomes clammy like a sea cave, never dry” (41). This receptacle represents the womb that holds her — “it carries me” (41) — and the hair stands for the umbilical cord that ties her to Nana: “I have never cut my hair. That’s something you ought to know right off. It fills the room the way ten giraffes would, twisting and twisting their long, innocent necks” (40). The single window is her only connection with the outside world to which she is called by her first mother: “the new leaves are green. They are my green ladies. They sing. They call out to me” (41). Therefore, it is only when she hangs her hair out of the window to let it dry that it is given “a life of its own” away from Nana and into the world of original poetry where motility exists: “if there is a hopeful wind, the breeze takes it; hair

by hair, yellow by yellow. As it dries it is owned by the wind; as it dries it moves swiftly like a thousand minnows” (42).

Although Kristeva asserts that the relation with the crypt cannot be eroticized as has been mentioned earlier, Sexton’s case proves the opposite. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva describes the female’s psyche that engulfs such a crypt as frigid: “the feminine interior (meaning the psychic space and, at the level of the bodily experience, the vagina-anus combination) can then [be] the crypt that encloses the dead woman and conditions frigidity” (79). Contrary to Kristeva’s opinion, Sexton projected her hidden sexual desires for her Nana onto her eldest daughter. Linda Gray Sexton, a novelist and a writer, recounts the sexual abuse her mother practiced upon her in *Searching for Mercy Street: My Journey Back to My Mother, Anne Sexton*. Linda claimed that her mother masturbated in front of her while drunk. In a long letter written to Linda, who received it, upon the request of Sexton, only after her mother’s death in 1991, Sexton told her daughter that her therapist thought their relationship was like hers with Nana. Anne Sexton’s homosexual relationship with her friend Anne Wilder related in the book was another way for her to get Nana back.

Sexton was not able to commit symbolic matricide against Anna, her Nana. Although one sees Sexton’s persona holding a knife in her armpit in “Anna Who Was Mad,” she, loaded with guilt for her aunt’s derangement, does not kill but rather engulfs her in her inner psyche and is in turn engulfed by her:³⁷

Speak Mary-words into our pillow.
 Take me the gangling twelve-year-old
 into your sunken lap.
 Whisper like a buttercup.
 Eat me. Eat me up like cream pudding.
 Take me in.
 Take me.
 Take. (ASCP 312)

The complexity of this situation, namely Sexton's admitting the loss of her aunt, becomes clear when one examines the fifteen worksheets of "Elizabeth Gone" (*ASCP* 8), an elegy for her aunt. As McClatchy observes, Sexton seems to have more trouble with the later stanzas than the opening ones. This is because, he argues, "as so often with confessional poetry, the difficulties lie not in exposition but in resolution" (52). However, the problem is not only technical. It is the final decision to make Nana go or stay in her prison that is at stake. If one compares the last two stanzas of the drafts, which were condensed into one, with the final product, it is apparent how Sexton changed the resolution to make it more elusive in relation to Nana. All the worksheets end by showing a bitter struggle for separation from Nana. This is the third stanza from the last draft available:

I strained you out, my mind was a press
 That pushed out the way of your apple cheek face;
 That spoke name, but no word for your flesh,
 That forgot the cry of your palm's caress.
 Hard on each number day I fought
 to grain you out, to shun you fresh,
 When something cried. . . let me go let me go

This fight to push Nana out has been cancelled in the final version. Moreover, the last line in the draft's last stanza looked like this: "and somehow I cried. . . and let you go let you go." In this line the "I" stands firmly in separation from the "you" which means that Sexton introjected her loss, while in the final poem she uses the passive instead to have the potential of hiding her Nana, Elizabeth, in her safe crypt again: "Then I sorted your clothes / And the loves you had left, Elizabeth, / Elizabeth, until you were gone" (26-28). There is no clear opposition in the final choice. Getting rid of Nana, after all, is not an easy task for Sexton. Among all of Sexton's relations, her bond with her aunt seemed to be the strongest. This is maybe why Sexton, in her essay "Comment on 'Some Foreign Letters,'"

which is also about her aunt, confessed: “Some Foreign Letters” still puts a lump in my throat, I know that it is my unconscious favorite” (“Comment” 17).

Despite the hurtful fact that “[Nana] was an extension of myself and was my world,” Sexton manages in the end to admit to losing her (“Comment” 16). Among the many guilt-ridden questions she poses in “Anna Who Was Mad” is a particularly important one (312): “Did I open the door for the mustached psychiatrist / who dragged you out like a golf cart?” This could be understood in two ways. First, on a literal level, Sexton feels guilty for allowing Anna’s psychiatrist to take her away to a mental home. In fact, Nana had really suffered a nervous breakdown along with a dramatic loss of hearing (Middlebrook 15-16). Second, on a symbolic level, Sexton’s opening of the door to the psychiatrist enables her to introject her loss, to let Nana out of her secret room, out of her crypt. This expulsion threatens the stability of Sexton’s identity, as is obvious in “The Hex”:

Every time I get happy
the Nana-hex comes through.
Birds turn into plumber’s tools,
a sonnet turns into a dirty joke,
a wind turns into a tracheotomy,
a boat turns into a corpse,
a ribbon turns into a noose,
all for the Nana-song, [. . .]. (ASCP 313)

In spite of everything, Sexton who — as she describes her position in the sixth and eighth ‘Psalm’ — is “locked in” that “dark room putting bones into place” and “hides inside folding and unfolding rose af- / ter rose” (ASCP 405, 408), has opened the door: “For I am not locked up.” This will affect her creativity positively: “For I am placing fist over fist on rock and plunging into the / altitude of words. The silence of words” (“Tenth Psalm” 411). She will be like those people who accept the key given to them to unlock their doors: “For they open each door and it gives them a new day at the / yellow window” (“Tenth Psalm” 412).

It is clear from the previous discussion that Sexton was affected by not just one mother, the abject mother, but two. There is a second mother, Nana, who is secretly engulfed in Sexton's mind, which adds to her passivity. Being unable to release Nana affects Sexton's creativity negatively. However, the release of Nana results in the beginning of a dynamic heterogeneous poetry. The following discussion shows that Sexton is able to introject the loss of her Nana and to get the secret out of the room, causing temporary reciprocity in her work. She is successful in contradiction to the view of Hall, who argues that Sexton's loss of Nana was never resolved (5). As a result, the maternal abject bursts into Sexton's work, especially in her last books. Her "safe, safe psychosis" which "covered her face like a mask" has "cracked" ("Letters to Dr Y, July 21, 1970" 578).

3.2 The Burst of the Abject

As Sexton's proper borders are attacked by an abject mother "outside," and as she is able to introject Nana's loss, heterogeneity begins in her work in the form of the burst of the abject. Thus, passivity is relinquished temporarily for dynamism, especially in her last books. However, as shall be discussed, Sexton eventually performs cleansing rituals to discard the maternal in favour of the father.

Sexton liked to quote Kafka in her interviews and readings (Kevles 28): "A book should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us" (Kafka, *Franz Kafka* 16). This, Sexton thought, was applicable to her art: "And that's what I want from a poem. A poem should serve as the ax for the frozen sea within us." Although she uses Kafka's statement as an epigram for her second volume, *All My Pretty Ones* (48), it could be argued that it is more applicable to her later writing when the borders collapse as a result of the maternal attack from "within" and "without." In a discussion of her earlier work, and in particular one poem in *All My Pretty Ones*, Michael Burns has written: "the lines [. . .] are like waves within a large room; they turn back on themselves" (132). If there was movement there, it

was within frozen borders. It is only under the pressure of violent drives that Sexton goes out: “I was shut up in that closet, until, biting the door, / they dragged me out, dribbling urine on the gritty shore” (“Imitation of Drowning” 109).

In “Ke 6-8018,”³⁸ there is an early reference to that violent maternal language (*ASCP* 140). The persona asks a “Black lady” “who inked you in?” This ink, like the lady, is both “a sweetener” and “a drawer of blood” (140-41). In poetry, it is “a hot voice, an imminence and then a death,” exactly like the “Rorschach blot” which the angels of “The Fallen Angels” throw on the white sheet (*ASCP* 141, 430). And if the ink lady leaves, “what signs will remain?” Surely, they are stale signs without defiling elements: “Black slime will not come of it, / nor backwash from the traveler” (141). If that black lady enters the sign, “nothing” will remain, an “absence” and a “peculiar waiting” for the mother that has to be lost in order to imagine and name her (Oliver 85). Sexton’s decision has been to restore the mother into words, pushing her “like a needle” in and out. With these bodily words, the persona “perjured” her soul. And although these words will lead her to “inherit darkness,” she will continue writing, “dialing left to right,” and struggling: “I will struggle like a surgeon. / I will call quickly for the glare of the moon. / I will even dial milk. / I will hold the thread” which will end “in the sea” (142). The burst of the semiotic, however, is not complete since the persona still stands “at the gate.” Nevertheless, this poem gives an indication of the burst of the semiotic later on in Sexton’s work.

Sexton, as she confesses in a poem to her daughter Joyce, has tried to “look for uncomplicated hymns” but finds that “love has none” (“A Little Uncomplicated Hymn” 152). Negativity, the rejection of passivity in Sexton’s poetry, begins as a dream, a “secret hope” of the inside that is violated by the “woman-of-war” outside her borders, a scene like the one depicted in “February 4th” in “Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die: The Horoscope Poems”:

It’s a room I dream about.

[.]

There I was dragging the ocean, that knock-out,
in and out by its bottle-green neck, letting it chew

the rocks, letting it haul beach glass and furniture sticks
 in and out. From my room I controlled the woman-of-war,
 that Mary who came in and in opening and closing the door. (ASCP 596)

Even in her dream, her grandfather, her “little Superman,” comes to the rescue as usual and “rocks” her “when the lighthouse flattens her eyes out” (“February 4 th” 597). However, in spite of the support of the symbolic father against the mother and the vigilance of the daughter, Sexton confesses in “Letters To Dr. Y.” (March 14, 1964) that it is difficult to play the role of the watchman for long: “you are the watchman and you / can’t keep the gate shut” (ASCP 566). The addressee (the watchman) here could be read as Dr. Y, the “father” who is trying to protect her psychic borders, or as her resistant self objectified. She and her father/doctor cannot stop her from dying (opening the gates).

However, this time there is another movement coming from the inside, which is the beginning of her introjections of the secret crypt. “Keeping the City” in *45 Mercy Street* shows the persona as a vigilant watchman for her and her father’s city-state (ASCP 494).³⁹ Despite her dedication of protecting the walls of her city, they crumble for the first time. The attack comes not only from the outside but also the inside. At the beginning of the poem, we see the watchman betrayed by something taking shape inside her chest and trying violently to burst outside:

Once,
 in August,
 head on your chest,
 I heard wings
 battering up the place,
 something inside trying to fly out
 and I was silent
 and attentive,
 the watchman.
 I was your small public,
 your small audience
 but it was you that was clapping,

it was you untying the snarls and knots,
 the webs, all bloody and gluey;
 you with your twelve tongues and twelve wings
 beating, wresting, beating, beating
 your way out of childhood,
 that airless net that fastened you down. (ASCP 494-95)

Helpless, the persona could not do anything in regard to this monstrous thing attacking her fortified city, but commit herself to duty:

Since then I was more silent
 though you had gone miles away,
 tearing down, rebuilding the fortress.
 I was there
 but could do nothing
 but guard the city
 lest it break
 I was silent. (ASCP 495)

The thing that is forming is very threatening and the persona wonders if her supporting omnipotent God/father could bolster the unity of her identity and body and stops them collapsing:

I had a strange idea I could overhear
 but that your voice, tongue, wing
 belonged solely to you.
 The Lord was silent too.
 I did not know if he could keep you whole,
 where I, miles away, yet head on your chest,
 could do nothing. Not a single thing. (ASCP 495)

The “wings of the watchman,” if she “spoke,” would “hurt the bird of your soul / as he nested, bit, sucked, flapped” (“Keeping the City” 495). This bird still belongs to the realm of silence, the pre-linguistic, for it is newly formed and so would be hurt by the symbolic words of the poet that would not let it in yet. The “I” and the “You” here, like the semiotic of the bird and the symbolic of the persona’s speech, are still treated separately as if they

belong to two persons. Nevertheless, the persona wishes — though for Sexton one might doubt this wish or at least regard it as an intimidating wish — for the semiotic to “burst” within the symbolic “like a missile” from “the spidery-mother-web, / burst from *Woman herself*” (495).

The city is waning under the attack and the watchman “guardeth in vain,” as the epigraph of the poem shows, “Unless the Lord keepeth” it (494). But will the Lord do so? The persona is not sure about the answer:

The city
of my choice
that I guard
like a butterfly, useless, useless
in her yellow costume, swirling
swirling around the gates.
The city shifts, falls, rebuilds,
and I can do nothing.
A watchman
should be on the alert,
but never cocksure.
And The Lord —
who knows what he keepeth? (*ASCP* 495-96)

The appearance of the maternal element, the abject, “inside,” in “Keeping the City,” indicates the beginning of motility and conflict in Sexton’s poetry. It can be observed in many other poems, taking many forms. In “The Poet of Ignorance,” for example, it assumes the shape of a crab which the persona tries to get rid of but to no avail (*ASCP* 433):

There is an animal inside me,
clutching fast to my heart,
a huge crab.
The doctors of Boston
have thrown up their hands.
They have tried scalpels,
needles, poison gasses and the like.

The crab remains.
 It is a great weight.
 I try to forget it, go about my business,
 cook the broccoli, open and shut books,
 brush my teeth and tie my shoes.
 I have tried prayer
 but as I pray the crab grips harder
 and the pain enlarges. (*ASCP* 434)

The persona interprets the crab as her “ignorance of God” for it is the cause of her disintegration, which contrasts starkly with God’s guarantee of wholeness and unity.

In “The Fallen Angels,” the abject takes eponymous form. The definition of the angels in the epigraph shows the heterogeneity they might provoke in the persona (*ASCP* 430): “Fallen angels who were not good enough to be saved, nor bad enough to be lost.” In relation to creativity, they will start to fill the white “clean / sheet of paper” with the semiotic black ink, the “Rorschach blot” to “shove” the black on white with bodily drives to produce a semiotized “sign” as well as a “piecemeal body” (Guberman 110), like that of the fallen Humpty Dumpty:

For I am like them –
 both saved and lost,
 tumbling downward like Humpty Dumpty
 off the alphabet. (“The Fallen Angels” 430)

The persona tries to get rid of the angels as she has tried earlier to rid herself of the crab and so each “morning I push them off my bed / and when they get in the salad / rolling in it like a dog, / I pick each one out/ just the way my daughter / picks out the anchovies” (430). Sometimes we see them comically “wearing out their toes, / laughing like fish,” wiggling “up life,” going to the dentist or her class with the persona (430-31). At others, we see them sucking “the childhood out of the berries / and turn[ing] them sour and inedible” in an intimidating way (430). They insist on the persona’s company in all cases, until they push her into the grave:

O fallen angel,
 the companion within me,
 whisper something holy
 before you pinch me
 into the grave. (*ASCP* 431)

The bodily drive bursting inside the poet, and thus inside her writing, begins to take another shape of the eponymous “The Ambition Bird” (*ASCP* 299): “All night dark wings / flopping in my heart. / Each an ambition bird.” This maternal bodily force is artistic. It is the creative semiotic thrusting forcefully and violently into the symbolic:

The bird wants to be dropped
 from a high place like Tallahatchie Bridge.

He wants to light a kitchen match
 and immolate himself.

He wants to fly into the hand of Michelangelo
 and come out painted on a ceiling.

He wants to pierce the hornet’s nest
 and come out with a long godhead.

[.....]

He wants to be pressed out like a key
 so he can unlock the Magi. (*ASCP* 300)

This forceful, though creative, energy will bring two things: first, death, so “all night I am laying / poems away in a long box” because it is “my immortality box, / my lay-away plan, / my coffin” (299); second, transformation and change, as the bird “wants to die changing his clothes / and bolt for the sun like a diamond” (300).

Another form of that force is a group of gods, which oppose Sexton’s God (“Gods,” *ASCP* 349). In “The Consecrating Mother,” the maternal sea says that she has a “handful” of these gods (*ASCP* 554). After a long journey in “Gods” searching for the deities, the

persona discovers that they “were shut in the lavatory” of “her own house” the whole time (349). This is the place where the abject maternal elements of excrement and urine are found and thus the creative world begins from the lavatory. For this reason the “learned books / and the print spat back at her” and “the great poet / [. . .] belched in her face” (“Gods” 349): they would not take those maternal bodily elements and the semiotic into their creativity.

In an attempt to bring about that abject change that permeates the creative words of the persona, “The Hoarder” makes the whole house a lavatory (*ASCP* 319):

There is something there
 I’ve got to get and I dig
 down and people pop off and
 muskrats float up backward
 and open at my touch like
 cereal flakes and still I’ve
 got to dig because there is
 something down there in my
 Nana’s clock I broke it [. . .
]
 earlier it was the diaper I wore
 and the dirt thereof and my
 mother hating me for it and me
 loving me for it but the hate
 won didn’t it yes the distaste
 won the disgust won and because
 of this I am a hoarder of words
 I hold them in though they are
 dung oh God I am a digger
 I am not an idler
 am I? (*ASCP* 319-20)

Here, the boundary of the persona’s doll is violated from all sides: “it was earlier much earlier it / was my first doll that water went / into and water came out of [. . .]” (“The Hoarder” 320). This is “The Dy-dee Doll” which Sexton once “snapped / her head off / and

let it float in the toilet” (*ASCP* 355). The doll is not proper anymore, but she “was a gloom / her face embracing / her little bent arms. / She died in all her rubber wisdom” as she melts (“The Dy-dee Doll” 355). The mutilation of the doll calls forth the mutilation of the doll girls who “were played with” in “The Red Shoes” (*ASCP* 316): “They tore off their ears like safety pins. / Their arms fell off them and became hats. / Their heads rolled off and sang down the street” (316). Those girls are dancing the semiotic “death dance” of creativity in the bloody red shoes that “are my mother’s / Her mother’s before. / Handed down like an heirloom” (316). After all, Sexton was “a pink doll with her frantic green stuffing” (“The Love Plant” 529).

The green stuffing inside is nothing but the maternal, which at the end, and after being frozen for so long, is going to burst out like that “freak but moist flower” that starts to “crawl up my throat” without the persona knowing that “it would come to crowd me out, / to explode inside me [. . .]” (“The Love Plant” 527). Sexton tries to kill the green stuffing by swallowing stones, matches, and “slender vials / with crossbones on them. / But it thrives on their liquid solution” (527-28). Her keeper/father, or her “keepers,” seem not to be able to “get a lawn mower / and chop it down” (“The Love Plant” 528). This stuffing will keep smothering her “before [she] erupt[s].” This “green” lively eruption is nothing but the heterogeneity that will be evident in Sexton’s later work.

Dismemberment, which becomes part of Sexton’s new heteronomy, is allowed into many of her poems. For example, the protagonist of “The One-Legged Man” has given away, planted, shipped off, and eaten his leg (*ASCP* 308). She also refers to “Going Gone” where a man gives a crone parts of the female persona in a basket: plucked eyes, lips, two hands (*ASCP* 311). Moreover, in “One-Eye, Two-Eyes, Three Eyes,” the mother protagonist “loved only One-Eye and Three” and “she liked to poke / at the unusual holes in their faces” (*ASCP* 260-61). “Two-Eyes was as ordinary / as an old man with a big belly.” In other words, what is normal without any abject distortion is without creativity and, therefore, does not cause any interest.

In other poems, “The Dead Heart,” “Is It True?” and “Demon,” the defilement takes the form of evil or a demon (*ASCP* 439, 446, 549), which is for Kristeva synonymous with the suppressed feminine (*Powers* 70). In “Is It True?” the persona kneels in front of the Pope “as he waved from his high window” (*ASCP* 446). Unexpectedly, we discover that this kneeling is not a result of her meekness, but rather of “a pain in my bowels.” The feminine power of the maternal abject is what causes her submission. What occasionally happens now to the persona is that “the devil [. . .] crawl[s] / in and out of me” (446).

Because of the burst of the maternal element, Sexton’s poems, like those in “The Dead Heart” (*ASCP* 439), become “EVIL,” abject, stinking “like vomit” (440). Furthermore, in “Demon” (*ASCP* 549), the “pawed demon, / Yellowing with forgetfulness” of the persona’s creativity is getting out of “hock” (550). The “undressed” demon which “farts and giggles” makes the persona frightened (550-51). Therefore, she occasionally puts her hand over her mouth, “covering you, smothering you / from the public voyeur eyes / of my typewriter keys” (550). And although this demon comes “with the dead who people my dreams” and give “sweets to the diabetic in me,” she accepts it: “I will not cover your mouth” since it adds to her creativity (550-51). After all, it, along with the dead, gives “bolts to the seizure of roses / that sometimes fly in and out of me” (550-51).

A dialogue is initiated between the persona and a priest regarding this evil in “Is It True?” (*ASCP* 446). She tells the priest about the evil in her and he interprets it as a sin. Refusing this definition of the word evil, she explains that it is not sin for “I’ve committed every one” but it is “just something I ate” (447). The reference to eating here relates to the mother: by eating, the persona is incorporating her to her own body as well as her poetry. Eating under these circumstances “wields a [maternal] power that is as vital as it is fierce” (*Powers* 76). This evil lies “to God” and “to love.” This is something the priest “doesn’t comprehend” (448). He only understands evil as sin and hence he understands the persona

when she tells him that she is going to “pour gasoline over my evil body / and light it” (448).

The conversation continues with the persona now given the name of Ms. Dog. In fact, this title, as Maxine Kumin explains, was used by Sexton to “shuck the earlier designations of Miss and Mrs.” and as a reverse of the word God (207). In this way, Ms. Dog could be understood as the heterogeneous feminine/maternal authority, opposed to God’s. This is clear when the priest asks her, “why is you evil?” and she replies that it “climbed into me” and that maybe “my mother cut the God out of me / when I was two in my playpen” (448). Therefore, “All is wilderness” now and “All is hay that died from too much rain.” She wonders if it is too late “to open the incision and plant [God] there again.” The priest asks again, “whose God are you looking for?” Ms. Dog replies with an answer that shows her need for evil as her God, where her typewriter is “my church” and its keys are the “altar” (449). She requires a mother to devour and be devoured by her and for the maternal semiotic to be played in her poetry as music:

a starving man doesn’t ask what the meal is.
I would eat a tomato, or a fire bird or music.
I would eat a moth soaked with vinegar.
But is there any food anywhere [. . .]. (448)

However, God always appears to repair the persona who tries to wear him as a house. Although she blesses all this and “the lights for going on,” she asks with astonishment “then why am I in this country of black mud?” (449), a land where war is taking place, the “sun is black mud” and the moon “becomes a blood ball” (450). But in God’s heaven, her soul will give her a “butter knife” to “scrape off [her] hunger and the mud,” to get rid of the maternal (451). This is perhaps why her “tongue is slit. / It cannot eat” (451).

Later in the poem, the dialogue with the priest becomes vaguer. She explains to him why she called herself Ms. Dog: “Because I am almost animal / and yet the animal I lost most” (452). Indeed Sexton writes in one of her essays: “Dog stands for me and the new

puppy, Daisy” (“All God’s” 29). She has almost become an animal now because she has allowed the maternal element into her poetry to compensate for the loss of her mother. This inner animal is tyrannical and loving like God and so “near to [Him].” Yet, it belongs to a pre-linguistic space and thus “lost from Him.” Therefore, “No language is perfect” for it cannot be wholly maternal. She only knows “English” but “English is not perfect,” for it needs a mother tongue (453).

When the persona tells the priest that she is “full of bowel movement, right into the fingers,” he “shrugs” (453). To the priest “shit is good” because expelling the maternal element establishes oneself: “dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be” (Kristeva, *Powers* 3). To her, however, it is “poison” as it stays in her body threatening her identity (453). It is true that Sexton had constipation as a child and, as an adult, was constantly “beset by fears of constipation” (Middlebrook 238), but the problem here has become more extensive, encompassing her creativity. The inability to expel dung from her body means that she “can’t push the poison out” and is therefore prevented from establishing herself: “That’s why language fails.” For the priest “shit is a feeder of plants,” establishing identity and life, while “to another [it is] the evil that permeates them,” threatening to pulverize not only the unity of that identity, but signs used in her poetry as well. In this linguistic sense, “God lives in shit” means that the symbolic poetry immersed in the heavy maternal substance may lead to its collapse. In this scatological drama, the persona believes “both” opinions: the priest’s and the other’s.

In an interview, Sexton expresses the dilemma of writing about the experiences of her life, which shows a contradictory attitude towards dung: “There was a part of me that was horrified, but the gutsy part of me drove on. Still, part of me was appalled by what I was doing. On the one hand I was digging up shit, with the other hand I was covering it with sand” (Kevles 6). The repetition of words such as “horrified” and “appalled” show the difficulty for Sexton not only of getting rid of dung, which is part of her body, the way Nana is, but also in facing it from the outside, the way she faces her abject mother.

Although covering dung alternates here with digging it up, which shows negativity, Sexton will try to cover it permanently in the end as she gravitates towards a pure God.

The last form Sexton uses to personify the impure element of the mother is an abject rat. The rat is a “creature of nature rather than culture, who is crude and rude” (Juhasz 304). This rat is born in “Rats Live on No Evil Star” (*ASCP* 359), Sexton’s favourite palindrome (Kumin 207). Since Eve gave birth to the rat, it is the defiled feminine (360). The description of this rat is given in detail:

Eve gave birth to the vilest of creatures
with its bellyful of dirt
and its hair seven inches long.
It had two eyes full of poison
and routine pointed teeth. (*ASCP* 360)

Sexton’s panic when encountering this creature is depicted in “Cripples and Other Stories”: “I see dead rats in the toilet. / I’m one of the lunatics” (*ASCP* 160). In spite of this, Sexton realizes from the beginning of her writing that the abject is important to her creativity. In an early poem, “With Mercy for the Greedy,” Sexton defines authentic creativity partially in terms of the polluted rat:

This is what poems are:
with mercy
for the greedy,
they are the tongue’s wrangle,
the world’s pottage, the rat’s star. (*ASCP* 63)

Although all food is liable to become rancid and defiled, the cooked food (in Sexton’s poem the “pottage”), which is treated with fire is more polluting for Kristeva, as she herself explains:

In contrast to a ripe fruit that may be eaten without danger, food that is treated with fire is polluting and must be surrounded with a series of taboos. It is as if fire, contrary to what hygienist conceptions posit, far from purifying, pointed to a contact, to organic food’s meddling with the familial and the social. The virtual

impurity of such food comes close to excremental abjection, which is the most striking example of the interference of the organic within the social. (*Powers 75*)

Food, in this sense, becomes the abject other that threatens the identity. This cooked food together with the loathsome rat are the fascinating elements of the mother needed in poetry (Kristeva, *Powers 75*). The rat is represented again with the buried Christ of “In the Deep Museum,” another early poem (*ASCP 64*). Christ is tolerant of the rat that licks his sores:

What’s that I hear, snuffling and pawing its way
toward me? Its tongue knocks a pebble out of place
as it slides in, a sovereign. How can I pray?
It is panting; it is an odor with a face
like the skin of a donkey. It laps my sores.
It is hurt, I think, as I touch its little head.
It bleeds. I have forgiven murderers and whores
and now I must wait like old Jonah, not dead
nor alive, stroking a clumsy animal. A rat.
His teeth test me; he waits like a good cook,
knowing his own ground. I forgive him that,
as I forgave my Judas the money he took. (*ASCP 64*)

Christ here seems to appreciate “this other death” [i.e. rats eating his flesh] not in relation to God and thus “not in air — / in dirt” (65). This Death is a “return, with abjection and jouissance, to [a] passivity status” (Kristeva, *Powers 63*):

[. . .]. Under the rotting veins of its roots,
under the markets, under the sheep bed where
the hill is food, under the slippery fruits
of the vineyard, I go. Unto the bellies and jaws
of rats I commit my prophecy and fear. (*ASCP 65*)

Sexton’s rat sometimes become so abhorrent that the persona as a poet in “Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women” would rather feel hungry and deprive her poetry of the maternal element than face the rodent inside her (*ASCP 537*):

Now that I have written many words,

and let out so many loves, for so many,
 and been altogether what I always was –
 a woman of excess, of zeal and greed,
 I find the effort useless.
 Do I not look in the mirror,
 these days,
 and see a drunken rat avert her eyes?
 Do I not feel the hunger so acutely
 that I would rather die than look
 into its face? (*ASCP* 537)

It is worth noting that in most of the poems where a rat appears, Sexton refers to Christ. Many critics have recognized Sexton's ambivalent attitude in her poetry towards Christ (McClatchy 264; Nichols 385; Ostriker, "That Story" 263, and so on). This ambivalence stems from the fact that although he is for Sexton a unifying God, which might help her to discard the rat, he is not a typical God even in terms of gender: "I am no more a woman / than Christ was a man" ("Consorting with Angels" 112). For this reason she identifies with him sometimes and other times she refers to him simply as God.

In one of her letters Sexton reveals her uncertainty about the figure of Christ: "Oh, I really believe in God – it's Christ that boggles the mind" (*Letters* 346). In this context, the "dead Christian god" plays the imaginary loving father without whom "we are abandoned [. . .] and possibly devoured by abjection" (Oliver 83). For example, in "Is It True?" the persona sees Jesus as her saviour from the land of mud she lives in and so "[m]aybe my evil body is done with" (*ASCP* 454). However, Christ appears in the poem in the most abject form:

Christ,
 soiled with my sour tears,
 Christ,
 a lamb that has been slain,
 his guts drooping like a sea worm,
 but who lives on, lives on
 [.]

despite it all. (*ASCP* 454)

Moreover, in “Jesus, the Actor, Plays the Holy Ghost,” Sexton depicts his ambivalence in relation to his mother (*ASCP* 456). Jesus asks his mother to marry him “before the gulls take me out the door,” in order to save him from different maternal horrors he faces such as an imprisoning tree and an abject cockroach that he will face if he goes “outside.” Yet he hopes for her other face, a place where “There will be bread. / There will be water” (457). He asks her to “let me in!” so he can float in her belly “like a fish”, for she is the only one — not even God can do this — capable of changing “a false Messiah” into “something true.”

In her essay “Radical Discontent with the Awful Order of Things,” Estella Lauter recognizes the previously discussed force, especially in Sexton’s last books. She points out that this force which is personified differently by Sexton, both attracted and repelled her.⁴⁰ Lauter does not make any attempt to define or analyse this force. However, she does suggest that there are two major forces in Sexton’s work, one positive, the other negative. She finds it ironic that Sexton worked more on the negative side: “It is ironic that she could recognize such figures well enough to allow herself to be propelled by them but could not accord her more positive discoveries the same degree of validity” (148). She gives as an example of this positive dimension the personified feminine force of the sea in “The Consecrating Mother.” She also mentions the “woman who has survived her arduous voyage and is now giving birth to a baby” in the “Eighth Psalm” of “O Ye Tongues.” This mother-female figure, Lauter asserts, takes on the “qualities of the Great Goddess until in the moment of birth, she becomes the creator of a ‘new dawn’ in the world” (154):

For the baby crowns and there is a people-dawn in the world.

For the baby lies in its water and blood and there is a people-cry in the world.

For the baby suckles and there is a people made of milk for

her to use. There are milk trees to hiss her on. There are milk beds in which to lie and dream of a warm room. There are milk fingers to fold and unfold. There are milk bottoms that are wet and caressed and put into their cotton.

For there are many worlds of milk to walk through under the moon. (*ASCP* 409)

Lauter overlooks the possibility that both what she calls negative figures and positive figures are two faces of the same coin, the mother. Indeed, both of them add to the heterogeneity of Sexton's work. While milk is, for example, a binding medium between mother and child, the abject is also related to the maternal body, the feminine (Kristeva, *Powers* 105, 54), for what is inside the mother's body is "desirable and terrifying, nourishing and murderous, fascinating and abject" (Kristeva, *Powers* 54).

In her essay "Seeking the Exit or the Home: Poetry and Salvation in the Career of Anne Sexton," Suzanne Juhasz shows that the existence of the rat in Sexton's work presents a conflict between the woman and the poet in Sexton as different "selves." She argues that the woman in her wants to get rid of that rat, while Sexton, the poet, knows that it is important to the power of her poetry. This tension increases, according to Juhasz, Sexton's sense of fragmentation in her quest for wholeness. She, therefore, concludes that Sexton's poetry was not able to save her. It is difficult to deny the existence of conflicting powers in Sexton, particularly in her late work. However, it could be argued that the conflict is not between Sexton's different roles as woman and poet. Rather it is in the position she takes for or against the mother. She needs the maternal abject, and she wants to dispose of it, producing a split in her subjectivity. Moreover, in spite of the disfigurement Sexton faces, she is ultimately able to achieve unity under God's sovereignty. Therefore it is not the fragmentation in her poetry that is responsible for her death but the fear of fragmentation.

To conclude, Sexton, who was attacked from the outside of her borders by an abject mother and who was able to introject her second mother's loss, finds herself and her poetry full of the abject. This abject is presented in different forms as impure elements and negative forces especially in her last books. As much as this abject is beneficial to her generativity in the way it creates a higher level of heterogeneity in her work, it becomes threatening to the unified identity that she once celebrated. In order to regain her integrated ground, Sexton makes an effort to purify herself and her poetry of the abject and then drift towards God.

3.3 Purification Rituals

When negativity reaches its acme in Sexton's poetry and the speaking subject is in danger of becoming polluted by the abject, Sexton begins her rituals of exorcism and cleansing in the liminal space between culture and nature. She becomes a sacrificer who "gives up something of [her]self but [she] does not give [her]self" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 75) to re-establish her oneness, the social symbolic coherence, sexual difference, and the city of God with its prohibition of *jouissance* (Kristeva, *Revolution* 80). Through purification rituals, Sexton tries to remove the abject, which prevails in her work especially in her last books. By doing this, Sexton attempts to go back to her previous identity, which was unified as it resisted the semiotic and took paternal support as its underpinning.

Attacked from the inside and outside, Sexton's refuge is under great stress. Irrationality has reached its peak. Her place of safety becomes like the house in "May 30th" in "Scorpio, Bad Spider, Die: The Horoscope Poems" (*ASCP* 602):

The house sinks in its fill, heavy with books;
 in the kitchen the big fat sugar sits in a chamber pot;
 in the freezer the Blue Fish vomit up their hooks;
 the marriage twists, holds firm, a sailor's knot. (*ASCP* 602)

Sexton seems to be asking God to be patient with her for letting the abject in the form of death in: “Please God, we’re all right here. Please leave us alone. / Don’t send death in his fat red suit and his ho-ho baritone.”

There are no borders in this house and “[t] here is no map” (“January 24th” 594). As a result, Sexton starts her mission of cleansing “knowing the historic thief / is loose in my house / and must be set upon” (“The Operation” 57). In “Courage,” she gives the best instructions to heal the wounds opened by the abject (*ASCP* 425). These instructions are more or less like those given by the Lord God to Jesus in “Jesus Summons Forth” to resurrect Lazarus “whole” (*ASCP* 341-42). They include covering and shielding after cleaning and powdering the despair caused by disorderliness:

If you have endured a great despair,
 then you did it alone,
 getting a transfusion from the fire,
 picking the scabs off your heart,
 then wringing it out like a sock.
 Next, my kinsman, you powdered your sorrow,
 you gave it a back rub
 and then you covered it with a blanket
 and after it had slept a while
 it woke to the wings of the roses
 and was transformed. (“Courage” 426)

The blanket that Sexton recovers here is connected with the one that her mother took away in “Hurry Up Please It’s Time” to “wash the me out of it,” to wash out her unified identity (*ASCP* 390). The transformation here is not anti-thetic but rather a theological transformation.

Sexton starts to wash the abject elements in her poetry one by one. As for the “ambition bird,” she will get rid of it and “get a new bird / and a new immortality box” for “[t]here is folly enough inside this one” (*ASCP* 300). She also disposes of the eponymous

demon, which makes her an “anonymous woman,” by taking “bread and wine.” This will let “God out of my mouth” instead of the demon (*ASCP* 551). The Eucharist sermon in “Demon” not only replaces the demon with God’s body and “earn[s] divine grace and homologation with symbolic order” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 248), but also by the act of devouring, it removes the “guilt from the archaic relation to the first pre-object (ab-ject) of need: the mother” (Kristeva, *Powers* 118). The woman will not be “anonymous” after that for God is “the Word” that is coming out of her mouth.

An omnipotent God/father threatens Ms. Dog who is still questing for an incestuous fusion with the mother in “Hurry Up Please It’s Time”: “oh water lady, / place me in your cup / and pull over the clouds / so no one can see” (*ASCP* 388). Ms. Dog, it seems, must hurry up in adjusting the situation with God and in doing her cleansing rituals: “Ms. Dog, how much time you got left? / Ms. Dog, when you gonna feel that cold nose? / You better get straight with the Maker / cuz it’s a coming, it’s a coming!” (388). The refrain of the poem emphasizes Sexton’s need for forgiveness: “Forgive us, Father, for we know not.”

She has to do the cleansing rituals not only because God is despotic, but also because he is her only support in the face of a mother represented here as the moon:

Hear that, Ms. Dog!

[.]

Them angels gonna be cut down like wheat.

Them songs gonna be sliced with a razor.

Them kitchens gonna get a boulder in the belly.

Them phones gonna be torn out at the root.

There’s power in the Lord, baby,

and he’s gonna turn off the moon. (“Hurry Up Please It’s Time” 389)

She is going to forget about her “fishdom” and “the pleasuring seas, / the country of comfort, / spanked into the oxygens of death” and come back to God (“Hurry Up Please It’s Time” 392). In this life, people routinely do their rituals of cleaning the body and

getting rid of excrement in order to establish their identity: “To wake up is to be born. / To brush your teeth is to be alive. / To make a bowel movement is also desirable.”

The expulsion of waste products is especially important in the process of Sexton establishing herself. This is clear in “Baby Picture” where “Merely a kid keeping alive” gets rid of her violent fusion with the abject on “a toilet seat” (*ASCP* 362-63). In this, Sexton is equating expelling excrement with survival:

I open the vein
and my blood rings like roller skates.
I open the mouth
and my teeth are an angry army.
I open the eyes
And they go sick like dogs
with what they have seen.
I open the hair
and it falls apart like dust balls.
I open the dress
and I see a child bent on a toilet seat.
I crouch there, sitting dumbly
pushing the enemas out like ice cream,
letting the whole brown world
turn into sweets. (“Baby Picture” 363)

The faeces going out will establish the girl’s clean and proper body once again. Kristeva explains:

Contrary to what enters the mouth and nourishes, what goes out of the body, out of its pores and openings, points to the infinitude of the body proper and gives rise to abjection. Fecal matter signifies, as it were, what never ceases to separate from a body in a state of permanent loss in order to become *autonomous, distinct* from the mixtures, alterations, and decay that run through it. That is the price the body must pay if it is to become *clean and proper*. (*Powers* 108)

Only in this way can her “fishdom” turn into “the kingdom” and Ms. Dog into Ms. God (“Hurry Up Please It’s Time” 392, 395). Although “Hurry Up Please It’s Time” starts by presenting a wasteland in the manner of T.S. Eliot’s modernist epic (*The Complete Poems*

59-75), it will end with a unified vision of life and hope. Moreover, by asking God for forgiveness, she will turn from worshipping “the question itself” and its irresolute vagueness (to “ask and ask and ask”) towards reaching an answer, an absolute signified (a definite meaning that is opposite the process of questioning), a God (395). Therefore, at the end of the poem, Ms.Dog is asked to get her “flashlight” to light the darkness she has been living in and bring in the kingdom of God, the father’s symbolic.

Another attempt to clean up the mess of the abject, which violated Sexton’s work appears in “The Evil Seekers” (*ASCP* 443). The poem explores the importance of knowledge about evil:

but one must learn about evil,
 learn what is subhuman,
 learn how the blood pops out like a scream,
 one must see the night
 before one can realize the day,
 one must listen hard to the animal within [. . .]. (*ASCP* 444)

Nonetheless, Sexton ends by affirming the need not only to hide evil and restrain it, but also to conceal it completely. This is, Frances Bixler believes, where the irony of the poem lies (212):

But even in a telephone booth
 evil can seep out of the receiver
 and we must cover it with a mattress,
 and then tear it from its roots
 and bury it,
 bury it. (*ASCP* 444)

Even God himself, wishing for a body, is contaminated by Sexton’s abjection. He will, like her, engage in cleansing rituals. In “The Earth,” we see that God envies the earth and the body that belongs to it, even an abject body. However, he will purify that body:

He does not envy the soul so much.
 He is all soul

but He would like to house it in a body
 and come down
 and give it a bath
 now and then. (*ASCP* 432)

This goes in conformity with the ceremony of the heart “that swallows the tides / and spits them out cleansed” (432).

In this sense, one wonders if Sexton, all along, has allowed the abject in her work to get out again in sacrificial, cleansing rites which strengthen the symbolic order instead of transforming it. Thus the God/father may have a hand in all this, as is suggested in “The Big Heart” where the persona admits his relation to dog thought (*ASCP* 462):

still God is filling me.
 He is giving me the thoughts of dogs,
 the spider in its intricate web,
 the sun
 in all its amazement,
 and a slain ram
 that is the glory,
 the mystery of great cost, [. . .]. (*ASCP* 463)

The “Fourth Psalm” in “O Ye Tongues” shows Anne’s imaginary brother Christopher helping her in her cleansing ceremony, which includes expelling dung and having a bath: “For I shat and Christopher smiled and said let the air be / sweet with your soil” and “For I lay as stiff as the paper roses and Christopher took a tin / basin and bathed me” (*ASCP* 402). Furthermore, the persona, Anne, tries to go back to her vigilant protection of the city and relinquishes the sleep of Briar Rose (Sleeping Beauty): “For I was prodding myself out of my sleep, out the green room. / The sleep of the desperate who travel backwards into darkness” (403).

Anne and Christopher also “swallow magic.” They assimilate the maternal magic only to expel it and hence Anne is delivered separate from the maternal body.⁴¹ For this

reason magic is related to Sexton's creativity as has been mentioned earlier. Sexton used to refer to her creativity as magic and wondered whether Thorazine was going to eliminate that transformative power (Middlebrook 227). That this magic is related to the incomprehensible maternal is clear from Sexton's inability to define it in an interview with Brigitte Weeks: "I can't, but then I'm not sure that I want to. Obviously it is your job to try to analyze, but in a way it is mine to try to hide. I don't really know what the magic is — as I said before it begins with a kind of heightened awareness" (116). Magic, for Sexton, seems to be elusive but she can sense it in her poetic language. However, she thinks she is able to harness it, although not often as she did at the beginning of her career. For in response to the question: "Is it difficult to discipline this magic into poetic form?" she replies: "No, I often work to a very rigid form, although not so often as when I began writing poetry. My conventions are my own, but if the magic is there I can work with almost any form. It often changes with each section of a poem" (116). According to Kristeva, the subject learns to speak and fills her mouth with words in order to compensate a lost mother. The link between speaking words and having a relationship with the mother is the appropriation of an oral object. Instead of devouring a mother, one devours words: "Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now on more than ever, I elaborate that want" (Kristeva, *Powers* 41). That is, in language one finds the lost mother: "'I have lost an essential object that happens to be, in the final analysis, my mother,' is what the speaking being seems to be saying. 'But no, I have found her again in signs, or rather since I consent to lose her, I have not lost her [. . .], I can recover her in language'" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 43). Therefore, in terms of creativity, devouring "magic" that Sexton refers to could be interpreted as devouring language, instead of the lost maternal body, which delivers Anne into the symbolic world: "[T]he symbolism of magic is based on language's capacity to store up the death drive by taking it out of the body" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 244).⁴² This is why magic is considered in "Fourth Psalm" as "cure," as a kind of a purification ritual (403).

In light of this, one can venture to suggest that Sexton's choice of the long narrative style in her poetry is not totally arbitrary.⁴³ It is a way of devouring language not only to compensate for a lost mother, but also to delay a frightening journey backward to a non-differentiated mother in the crevices of silences such as *Sleeping Beauty* undergoes. In fact, Middlebrook has identified the relation between Sexton's creativity and the loss of her mother although she has referred only to one period of the poet's life, the autumn of her real mother's death: "Perhaps it was awareness of the imminence of a permanent separation from Mary Gray that made Sexton avidly productive that autumn; the threat of separation would always be the ally of her deepest work" (89). However, one can suggest that Sexton wrote not only to overcome a threat of separation, but also, and more significantly, in order not to go back with the dead into silence.

We seldom encounter in Sexton's work silence or transcendence as silence, as is the case in Plath. Moreover, Alicia Ostriker discusses the ability of Sexton to penetrate analytically but never transcend a patriarchal theology ("What Are" 495). Part of this inability to surmount the father in fact stems from an unwillingness to face death, despite the fact that in her poetry death is something to be longed for. However, outside her poetry, Sexton confronted the silence of death involuntarily as something she desired, as much as she feared, in the form of trances and blackouts. Usually these trances were silent, but if Sexton did mumble something during them it would be a call to her Nana (L. Sexton 58-59, 79).

The last thing to be exorcized in Sexton's poetry is the rat. The rodent in the "Tenth Psalm" is depicted as imprisoned in a picture, a geometrical shape, and then given a bath by Anne and Christopher. Their God/father protects them during the ceremony:

For they hung up a picture of a rat and the rat smiled and held out his hand.
For the rat was blessed on that mountain. He was given a white
bath.

[.]

For God did not forsake them but put the blood angel to look

after them until such time as they would enter their star. (*ASCP* 412)

What is more, in “Rowing,” Sexton states bluntly that she will head towards God after a final removal of the abject, “the Nazi–Jap–animal” (“‘Daddy’ Warbucks” 544) with the help of her stern God / father :

but there will be a door
and I will open it
and I will get rid of the rat inside of me,
the gnawing pestilential rat.
God will take it with his two hands
and embrace it. (“Rowing” 418)

Finally, Sexton will wash away all that is related to her before her final death. In “Clothes,” she is preparing for a clean perfect death. She will be like “a nice girl smelling of Clorox and Duz” (*ASCP* 381):

Put on a clean shirt
before you die, some Russian said.
Nothing with drool, please,
no egg spots, no blood,
no sweat, no sperm.
You want me clean, God,
so I’ll try to comply. (*ASCP* 380)

If Rosemary Johnson had looked closer, she would not have launched her stern criticism at Sexton: “More are likely to ask if such messy preoccupations will remain to stain the linen of the culture for long or whether good taste bleaches out even the most stubborn stain eventually” (387). In fact, Sexton has kept the linen of the culture clean, removing at the end all of the abject stains which she tried for some time to incorporate into her poetry.

After the burst of the abject in her poetry, Sexton relinquishes both her own and her poetry’s passivity to motility. Nevertheless, her attitude towards the law of the father does

not seem to change as she performs cleansing rituals for the abject maternal element, which only strengthen the law. Now that Sexton seems to have finished her task, she will gravitate towards her father/God again to try to establish a unified subjectivity, which has been fragmented severely for a period. However, this pulling towards the father again will not be an easy task for Sexton.

Chapter 4

Hegira to the Name of the Father

4.1 Dying Whole

In previous chapters, Sexton was viewed as an ally to her father, whose proper shields were the only support against an abject mother residing “outside,” and the means to protect the secret crypt of her second mother kept on the “inside.” As a result of the attack of the abject mother from the “outside,” and the ability of Sexton to introject her second mother’s loss, the semiotic and the maternal burst in her poetic text in the form of heterogeneity. Out of fear of this exploded negativity and its power of disintegration, Sexton again takes a journey towards her father, represented by God. This is because although Sexton wishes for an imaginary wholeness in the form of perfect death, she fears the disintegration and mutilation which precedes death. In other words, she fears encountering death and hence is termed the “dead/less.” Her journey toward God, who manipulates her all the way, appears successful. However, fear of the persecution of the maternal causes her death in the end, in spite of her resort to the symbolic.

Hegira is defined at the beginning of Sexton’s posthumously published work as a “journey or trip especially when undertaken as a means of escaping from an undesirable or dangerous environment; or as a means of arriving at a highly desirable destination” (*ASCP* 481). In her essay “45 Mercy Street and Other Vacant Houses,” Linda Wagner–Martin defines Sexton’s hegira as a female one. She argues that the desirable destination for Sexton is a maternal home where she returns “to her own womanliness as her chief identity” (160). According to Wagner-Martin, Sexton remains “outside an accepted tradition, both geographic and poetic,” searching for that home (161). It is true that Sexton

longed for her mother and thus a maternal home. However, her final destination, after searching for that lost place, has been her father/God. In fact, Wagner-Martin does not differentiate between home and house in Sexton. In addition, Sexton's geographical existence "outside" in "45 Mercy Street," looking for the lost maternal home, is nothing but a dream for the home which is "unfindable for an entire lifetime" (*ASCP* 483). And since the speaker cannot find the address she is seeking, her journey through her memory becomes unsuccessful (Hall 154-55). In fact, at the end of "45 Mercy Street," Sexton pulls "the dream off / and slam[s] it into the cement wall / of the clumsy calendar / I live in" (484). This means that Sexton goes back to where she started and does not reach her desired destination where she can discard all of her fears and worries.

Accordingly, the undesirable and, most importantly, dangerous environment for Sexton is where the maternal abject, which threatens her unity and her passivity, resides in her poetry as well as her body. It is this pain of negativity she is now trying to escape: "I would sell my life to avoid / the pain that begins in the crib" ("The Big Boots of Pain" 547). As she cannot find a maternal home where she can relinquish her pain, the highly desirable destination becomes her father-figure (the Lord) who protected her once from the mother's attack: "Surely all / who are locked in boxes of different sizes should have their / hands held. Trains and planes should not be locked. One should / be allowed to fly out of them into the Lord's mouth" ("Fifth Psalm" 404). But would she be able to do that now?

While Sexton longs for a perfect death, "my imaginary wholeness," which is a fantasy of the reunion with the mother, a regression to a state before the symbolic and the Oedipal father (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 29), she resists it because she does not want to encounter the pain of disintegration before she reaches that state. This resistance takes the form of clinging to another wholeness, which is that of the Lacanian mirror, and of trying to lessen the pain by avoiding encounters (Lacan, "The Mirror Stage" 75-78). This wholeness means the ability of one to see herself as a "wholly separate being" from the mother, and thus her ability to see herself as all-powerful (Cranny-Francis 36). The mirror

stage in early stages of childhood provides an example of an optical illusion of a unified subject. Sexton realizes the awfulness of the perfection of death and the consequences of confrontation. For instance, in “Cigarettes and Whiskey and Wild, Wild Women,” she depicts the horror of being whole in death: “plant[ing] my fires underground / where none but the dolls, perfect and awful, / could be whispered to or laid down to die” (*ASCP* 537). However, she still wishes for the perfection of that death. In “Letters to Dr. Y,” while the leaves are calling her to death, she wishes to end as a completely integrated whole: “I need to be laid out at last / under them, as straight as a pea pod. / To die whole. To die as soft and young as a leaf. / To lie down whole in that green god’s belly” (Letter, 5 May 1970, *ASCP* 577). She also speaks of a unified body/ego: “even as I rise from the sea,” she is still “all woman, all there” (Letter, 16 February 1960, *ASCP* 561). She wants the perfect death but with the least confrontations and pain, with the lethal sleeping pills, “the do die pills” (562). She needs an easy death without dangerous confrontations like those of the aerialist whom she likes only to watch:

My manic eye
 sees only the trapeze artist
 who flies without a net.
 Bravo, I cry,
 swallowing the pills,
 the do die pills.
 Listen ducky,
 death is as close to pleasure
 as a toothpick.
 To die whole,
 riddled with nothing
 but desire for it,
 is like breakfast
 after love. (*ASCP* 562)

Sexton, therefore, builds a shelter for her final death, which perhaps will protect her from disintegration and pain. In “The Break,” she builds “a death crèche” (*ASCP* 192), and in the “Tenth Psalm,” she constructs funeral statuary with Christopher: “For Anne sat

down with the blood of a hammer and built a / tombstone for herself and Christopher sat beside her and was / well pleased with their red shadow” (*ASCP* 412). Furthermore, in “The Death Baby,” she and Max have “made a pact / [. . .] / To build our death like carpenters” (*ASCP* 357). Although Sexton is discussing death here, she uses the image of the carpenter, the builder, which is, as Hall contends, “a male role that the speaker comes to assume” (173), which makes her complicit with the father and his unity.

The perfection of death in “Dreams” from “The Death Baby” poems turns the persona into a “Popsicle” (*ASCP* 354):

I was an ice baby.
 I turned to sky blue.
 My tears became two glass beads.
 My mouth stiffened into a dumb howl.
 They say it was a dream
 but I remember that hardening. (*ASCP* 354)

The “hard as a Popsicle” baby is put in a refrigerator, an abject atmosphere where with its glacial perfection it does not fit (354):

I remember the stink of the liverwurst.
 How I was put on a platter and laid
 between the mayonnaise and the bacon.
 The rhythm of the refrigerator
 had been disturbed.
 The milk bottle hissed like a snake.
 The tomatoes vomited up their stomachs.
 The caviar turned to lava.
 The pimentos kissed like cupids. (*ASCP* 354)

Escaping the abject force of the fridge, she surrenders to the masculine power of devouring dogs at the end of the poem in conformity with her last choice in her poetry as a whole. In “Baby” from the same sequence the persona rocks a perfect dead baby, this time a cherub (*ASCP* 357). It is even “more” perfect than the ice baby of “Dreams” (*ASCP* 354).

However, the persona worries about keeping the baby from breaking like the ice baby of “Dreams”:

Death,
 you lie in my arms like a cherub,
 as heavy as bread dough.
 Your milky wings are as still as plastic.
 Hair as soft as music.
 Hair the color of a harp.
 And eyes made of glass,
 as brittle as crystal.
 Each time I rock you
 I think you will break. (*ASCP* 357-358)

This worry about the state of the cherub, as a whole, is not only related to the beautiful perfection of death, it also reflects, indirectly, Sexton’s concern about her unified ego and hatred of the disintegration she has to face before death. The state of that frigid baby’s icy eyes is very important in this context since it reflects the unity of the beholder as in the mirror stage where the child (mis)recognizes its totality:

Glass eye, ice eye,
 primordial eye,
 lava eye,
 pin eye,
 break eye,
 how you stare back! (*ASCP* 358)

Moreover, the persona and the dead baby with the rocking movement are “comforting each other” (358). The addressee in “We are stone. / We are carved, a pietà” becomes important here as a companion, an other. The cherub is felt to be more than death. It is somebody to soothe death, to lessen the fear. For “Outside, the world is a chilly army / Outside, the sea is brought to its knees.” It is worth noting here that in some of Sexton’s poetry, there is someone to die with like Christopher or Max, somebody who is not only an

alter ego, but also a companion who would help overcome the fear of death. In one of her letters to her husband, Sexton confesses:

I feel myself beginning to love you instead of just need you. I don't think I have ever loved anyone in my life, not really – just needed them, wanted them to love me to possess me – to become such a part of someone that I could lose my frightened self. (*Letters* 24).

Throughout her life, Sexton was not able to go out of her house even to poetry readings without a companion like her neighbour, Sandy Robart (Middlebrook 193-94).⁴⁴ Sexton always felt threatened by her Nana's phrase "No one came" (Middlebrook 395). She once told Anne Clarke, a friend and a psychiatrist, of "the awfulness of dying . . . that you must do it alone" (*Letters* 229). In "Imitations of Drowning," she is not only frightened of drowning but of something else: "Fear / of drowning / fear of being that alone" (*ASCP* 107). In her passive meeting with death, she will ask her friend Max to "Hand me the death baby / and there will be / that final rocking" (49-51).

In "Max," Sexton is seen again with her friend building "our death like carpenters" (*ASCP* 357). In what seems a rather weak confrontation, because not pursued alone, they have made a pact "[t]o beat death down with a stick." Moreover, they have promised "that when the moment comes" they will "shoot words straight from the hip, / we'll play it as it lays." Sexton also declares that "when death comes with its hood / we won't be polite." However, one feels tempted to read these last lines as one of Sexton's lies or at least exaggerations, for in "Seven Times" she lets death be "impolite" by showing power over her (*ASCP* 356):

I died seven times
in seven ways
letting death give me a sign,
letting death place his mark on my forehead,
crossed over, crossed over. (*ASCP* 356)

Although dying as whole is an obsession Sexton lived with in her life, it is always a conditional death. It must not be preceded by a disintegration which is the condition for

heterogeneity in poetry and thus authentic creativity, and transgression of the law of One.

Her feelings towards this issue are described to Dr. Orne:

I'm so fascinated with Sylvia [Plath]'s death: the idea of dying perfect, certainly not mutilated. . . . To lose your virginity is to be mutilated; virginity is un-open, not yet spoiled. . . . I'd rather die than have a breast removed — talk about mutilation! By the time they were done with my mother — or life was done with my mother or Nana! My father had this thing about perfection, physical perfection that is — Sleeping Beauty remained perfect. (Middlebrook 216)

A disfigured body is what Sexton seems to be afraid of. She prefers her father's unified perfection and so remains his virgin, an object of his desire. In contrast, Jo Gill, in her provocative reading of Sexton's poetry, insists that nowhere in the work can we find a "vivid, unified, coherent self" (*Anne Sexton* 99). She further argues that Sexton never attempted to show such wholeness in her writing. Sexton, instead, used "self-conscious strategies of distortion, occlusion, and denial" (*Anne Sexton* 4). Following Brain's example in approaching Plath, Gill, while emphasizing the heterogeneity and uncertainty of Sexton's work and the kind of Confessional poetics she uses, gives the latter unlimited conscious power.⁴⁵ While it is easy to agree with Gill about the heterogeneity of Sexton's work, especially in the last books, one could not agree with Gill's presentation of her as being, in "Telephone," like Saussure theorizing and giving the reader a lesson about the signifier and the signified.

Gill also claims that Sexton's work anticipates recent poststructuralist practice. In her argument, Sexton appears unified and coherent in explaining the incoherence of language, controlling her material from which she is detached. Sexton's unconscious seems unimportant in such a drama. Although Gill's discussion is convincing to an extent, especially in relation to Kristeva, she ignores the personal element, which is important to both Kristeva and Sexton.⁴⁶ Moreover, in discussing one important poem that shows heterogeneity, "Hurry Up Please It's Time," and which draws its sources mostly from Eliot's *The Waste Land*, Gill argues that the poem ends in uncertainty, while in a

previously published essay, she notices something else:⁴⁷ “Finally, as these closing lines avow, what ultimately unites Sexton’s poetics, and Eliot’s, is their shared anticipation of, and subjection to, a greater will; their hopeful expectation that notwithstanding their chosen paths, the kingdom of God, ‘however queer, / will come.’ ” This comment — which goes with Sexton’s quotation from Kierkegaard at the beginning of *The Awful Rowing*: “But above all do not make yourself important by doubting” — is omitted in Gill’s book in favour of uncertainty.

Moreover, Gill chooses to end her discussion with several poems from *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, as well as “Love Letter Written in a Burning Building,” in order to emphasize the uncertainty of Sexton’s poetics, but she avoids discussing the last poem in that last book, “The Rowing Endeth,” which is almost unanimously agreed upon by critics as a relapse in Sexton’s work. For example, Gregory Fitz Gerald, in an interview (1974), seems unconvinced of Sexton’s winning the game of poker with God (192). Furthermore, her close friend Maxine Kumin thinks that God or her “Daddy left to Sexton out of ‘The Death of the Fathers’” held “the crooked, winning hand” (208). The most enthusiastic feminist defenders of Sexton feel disappointed with this poem, regarding it as a kind of submission to the father. Ostriker, for example, describes this ending as “appalling” because the father (God) is “atrocious, brutal, a betrayer” (“That Story” 271). Furthermore, “Love Letter Written in a Burning Building,” which was composed a week before Sexton’s death, certainly shows an immolation of self “without meaning it” (*ASCP* 614). However, although the persona is forsaking her companion lover “Foxy,” she is still addressing him and writing “just for you,” insisting on shielding herself out of fear of confronting death to the end: “I have on a mask in order to write my last words” (613). She is also with “asbestos gloves” (614). That is, Sexton refuses to relinquish her armours and masks to the end, unlike Plath who, as shall be seen, sheds them to the point of total disappearance. Although this is a “cremation of love,” Sexton still asserts the “we” of the lovers until the end: “but instead we seem to be going down / right in the middle of a Russian street”

(614). The building collapses involuntarily while she still holds onto the father/lover and the flame of creativity is “beaten” with whips of fire rather than beating courageously like Plath’s horses.

As much as Sexton wishes for perfection and wholeness in death, she fears facing degeneration before dying. That is, she fears the disfigurement brought by that encounter. Her Whitmanesque celebration of the unified body at the beginning of her career is evidence of an obsession of her unity. The burst of the abject in her poetry becomes fearful to Sexton since it threatens her sense of completeness. As a “dead/less,” her fear becomes urgent and she decides to journey toward God, her symbolic saviour.

4.2 The “Dead/less”

The burst of the maternal abject in Sexton’s work begins to threaten her identity. The fear becomes so urgent that she wishes to die without facing death. Because of Sexton’s fear of losing her unified self through the disintegration that comes from encountering the maternal, she tries to restore her unity by journeying towards God. She attempts to reiterate her first movement from the semiotic to the symbolic in a last effort to gain safety. God, however, does not seem the right saviour for Sexton as he gets even more authoritative at the end. He turns from being an imaginary father, stern and loving, into the unyielding father of the law. Sexton dies even after reaching God’s island out of her fear of the persecution of the maternal. She dies only in order to run from the persecution of death.

At the beginning of her book *The Awful Rowing Toward God* (416), Sexton quotes Henry David Thoreau where he says: “There are two ways to victory, – to strive bravely, or to yield. How much pain the last will save we have not yet learned” (Thoreau 134). In the end, Sexton chooses to yield, to be the “dead/less,” to cover and shield herself on the battlefield. In “Courage” the eponymous virtue is “a small coal / that you kept swallowing” (ASCP 425):

if you faced the death of bombs and bullets
you did not do it with a banner,

you did it with only a hat to
 cover your heart.
 You did not fondle the weakness inside you
 though it was there. (ASCP 425)

The dead/less is the subject who resists the death drive, represented as anger, death, and violence in her work of art and who fears confrontations in contrast to the rebellious “deadmost.” In other words, she dies less than the “deadmost,” causing stagnation and passivity, rather than movement in the poetic text and thus the inability of change. In terms of abjection, oscillation between the “inside” and the “outside” of her psychic borders, represented in her poetry by different geometrical shapes, is avoided. Silence, as the ultimate revolutionary act, is less welcome in her text than that of the “deadmost.”

As the dead/less Sexton frequently refers to small deaths. In “The Addict,” it is death in “small amounts” or “little death” in “Red Riding Hood” or dying “a little” in “The Evil Seekers” or even dying “for no reason” in “Killing the Spring” (ASCP 166, 272, 444 322). She also confesses: “I’m on a diet from death” although she promised to keep practising it (“The Addict” 165). In “Suicide Note,” she confesses: “I could admit / that I am only a coward / crying *me me me*” (ASCP 158). In her letters too she wrote about dying in “socially acceptable ways like drinking myself to death or taking sleeping pills each day” (*Letters* 97). Even early on in the poem “The Starry Night,” Sexton describes her wish to be engulfed by sweet death: “I want to die: / into that rushing beast of the night, / sucked by that great dragon” (ASCP 54). However, this engulfment is conditional: “to split / from my life with no flag, / no belly, no cry.” That is, she wants to die without confrontation or pain.⁴⁸ She wishes to die without the action, without the negativity in her work that might disintegrate her body. Until negativity starts to creep in, passivity remains Sexton’s main attribute. In this sense, Sexton identifies with the nailed Christ. “I nailed my hands,” she declares in “Killing the Spring,” so that they “would not reach out and speak. / They could no longer get in the act. / They were fastened down to oblivion” (ASCP 321).

These battles with little death are supported by her father who always comes to rescue her from the perils of nakedness and exposure although he himself has exposed her sexually. His Phallus will be always the knife to kill the mother and thus make money, as is clear from the unpublished poem “The Thought Disease”⁴⁹: “(I see s, that snake, that swan, / with a knife you are money).” As this money is related to the father, it is also related to language: “My business is words. Words are like labels, / or coins, or better, like swarming bees” (“Said the Poet to the Analyst” 12). This is why God’s opposite, Ms. Dog, is “fighting the dollars” (“Hurry Up Please It’s Time” 387). However, it seems that her father’s dollars are indispensable, as becomes evident in “‘Daddy’ Warbucks” (ASCP 543):

You let me touch them, fondle the green faces
lick at their numbers and it lets you be
my “Daddy!” “Daddy!” and though I fought all alone
with molesters and crooks, I knew your money
would save me, your courage, your “I’ve had
considerable experience as a soldier . . .
fighting to win millions for myself, it’s true.
[.]
and always came at my perils, the black Christs of childhood,
always came when my heart stood naked in the street
and they threw apples at it or twelve-day-old-dead-fish. (ASCP 543)

In *The Awful Rowing Toward God*, Sexton’s last published collection, her father becomes God, and Sexton decides finally to row to his island. In “Rowing,” she reviews the story of her life, placing herself in the position of a “fender” (ASCP 417). She is first imprisoned in a crib of “glacial bars,” then comes the perfect dolls “and the devotion to their plastic mouths,” and life “with its cruel houses.” Following that, there is the beginning of the violation of those houses by her negativity: “and then there were many strange apparitions, / the nagging rain, the sun turning into poison / and all of that, saws working through my heart.” However, she decides to overcome her fragmentation and make a hegira towards God’s island: “but I grew, I grew, / and God was there like an island

I had not rowed to.” The problem is that in order to do so she has to cross the semiotic sea as if reiterating her birth into the symbolic order: “the oarlocks stick and are rusty / and the sea blinks and rolls / like a worried eyeball, / but “I am rowing, I am rowing.” And “though the wind pushes [her] back” and she is tantalized by the narcissistic fusion with the mother and though “I know that that island will not be perfect,” the decision has been made to discard “the rat inside of me” and row toward God (418). If the choice is between “the exit or the home” (“The Children” 420), Sexton chooses an exit towards her father and not her mother, although both are threatening.

The play of Sexton’s life was not active enough to reach a level of negativity that would affect transformation in her work. In “The Play,” where Sexton is “the only actor” in a “solo act,” she admits that “[i]t is difficult for one woman / to act out a whole play” (*ASCP* 440). A prolonged dialogue has not been allowed between the different aspects of a split personality. All she has been able to do is unsuccessfully keep up with her situation in her life and writing: “All I am doing onstage is running / running to keep up, / but never making it.” Although she stops running for a while to give an “absurd” speech which shows creativity, the last lines of her play reveal a boring and less daring final choice:

To be without God is to be a snake
 who wants to swallow an elephant.
 The curtain falls.
 The audience rushes out.
 It was a bad performance.
 That’s because I am the only actor
 and there are few humans whose lives
 will make an interesting play.
 Don’t you agree? (*ASCP* 441)

Without a God that “is filling me,” she will be back to her hunger for the archaic mother (“The Big Heart” 463). In “The Sickness Unto Death,” when “God went out of me” she “saw only the little white dish of my faith / breaking in the crater” because it contains no food there from God and so “I kept saying: / I’ve got to have something to hold on to”

(ASCP 441-42). Trying to participate in a Eucharist to satiate her hunger, she fails: “I who wanted to crawl toward God / could not move nor eat bread” (442). This is because her house (body) has been full of “bowel movement.” Resolved to row toward God, she indulges in “symbolic oralization” as Christ resuscitates her (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 150):

So I ate myself,
bite by bite,
and the tears washed me,
wave after cowardly wave,
swallowing canker after canker
and Jesus stood over me looking down
and He laughed to find me gone,
and put His mouth to mine
and gave me His air. (ASCP 442)

After the disappearance of the self, it is only rescued by *agape*, unconditional spiritual love, and thus Christ becomes “a Third Party between the Self and its destructive hunger” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 140,149). In other words, Christ is the imaginary father, who, as was defined earlier in Sexton’s discussion, operates as a conglomerate father-mother. The annihilation is nothing but a step towards synthesis and integrity of resurrection, reconciliation with God (*Tales of Love* 142). This Christian love, as Kristeva explains, is “a more-than-hunger in the Father’s bosom . . . [It is s]ublimation of homosexuality, abduction of the mother’s nourishing attributes, and subordination of imagination to the sadistic protection of the One” (*Tales of Love* 149-50). In other words, this symbolic orality, represented by Christ putting his mouth to Sexton’s to nourish her, indicates love of the ideal father. It is a symbolic identification that displaces the mother and protects the law all at once.

At the end of Sexton’s life as play, she comes to the realization in “Not So. Not So.” that “I cannot walk an inch / without trying to walk to God / I cannot move a finger / without trying to touch God” (ASCP 472). She feels that “God is not indifferent to your need” (473). In “Snow,” Sexton sees “hope everywhere” and she attempts a symbolic

orality once again by biting hope as bread (*ASCP* 467-68). Likewise, “God gives milk / and I have the pail” (468). This androgynous God takes maternal traits to deny the mother and subjugate the daughter sexually (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 147). In *About Chinese Women*, a full description of such a being is provided:⁵⁰

But when this most wealthy Spouse desires to enrich and comfort the Bride still more, He draws her so closely to Him that she is like one who swoons from excess of pleasure and joy and seems to be suspended in those Divine arms and draw near to that sacred side and to those Divine breasts. Sustained by that Divine milk with which her Spouse continually nourishes her and growing in grace so that she may be enabled to receive His comforts, she can do nothing but rejoice. Awakening from that sleep and heavenly inebriation, she is like one amazed and stupefied; well, I think, may her sacred folly wring these words from her: ‘Thy breasts are better than wine.’ (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 147-48)

This sexual relation between the father and daughter recalls the scenes between Sexton and her inebriated father and grandfather, such as the one alluded to in

“‘Daddy’ Warbucks,” which takes the form of denial:

I never saw a man expose himself.
No. No.
I never saw a drunkard in his blubber.
I never let lightning go in one ear and out the other.
And all the men out there were never to come.
Never, like a deluge, to swim over my breasts
and lay their lamps in my insides.
No. No.
Just me and my “Daddy”
and his tempestuous bucks [...] (*ASCP* 544)

Rosenthal and Gall think that “The Divorce Papers,” which consists of seventeen poems, represents the end of Sexton’s work (428-43). They argue that in this group of poems she relies heavily on the actual story of her divorce and short-lived love affair followed by suicide the following year. They suggest that Sexton was able to reject the heterosexual relationship as represented both by the divorce and the abandoned lover. “The Red Dance,” they believe, shows the resistance to male force where Sexton dances toward

the perfection of death. However, Sexton, who has tried to divorce her father/spouse, as the two critics suggest, seems always to get back to him in his role of a husband and God. In "Divorce, Thy Name Is Woman," she has attempted to divorce "Daddy of the whiskies, daddy of the rooster breath" who "would visit and then dash away / as if I were a disease" (ASCP 545). She has been "divorcing him ever since" and she is "still divorcing him." However, at the end of the poem she becomes like that Bride of God preparing the bed for a final sexual act that, she hopes, will result in conception:

I am pacing the bedroom.
Opening and shutting the windows.
Making the bed and pulling it apart.
I am tearing the feathers out of the pillows,
waiting, waiting for Daddy to come home
and stuff me so full of our infected child
that I turn invisible, but married,
at last. (ASCP 545-46)

Sexton's words of creativity at this stage, as her attitude to her father, are passive, lacking destructive dynamism and violent passion that have the two faces of negativity: power and dissolving of the ego (*Tales of Love* 79). This is what Kristeva calls "demonical Eros" (*Tales of Love* 79). They lack the violent death drive and, therefore, cannot soar high as happens in "Words" (ASCP 463):

Yet often they fail me.
I have so much I want to say,
so many stories, images, proverbs, etc.
But the words are not good enough,
the wrong ones kiss me.
Sometimes I fly like an eagle
but with the wings of a wren. (ASCP 464)

The passivity of her words stems from the fact that Sexton would not want them to disintegrate under the pressure of the semiotic. For her, unity is more important than a creativity which brings forth the destructive maternal impossible:

But I try to take care
 and be gentle to them.
 Words and eggs must be handled with care.
 Once broken they are impossible
 things to repair. (ASCP 464)

These are God's words, as is obvious in "Frenzy" where the persona defensively claims: "I am not lazy" (ASCP 466). Every day, she types out "the God / my typewriter believes in. / Very quick. Very intense." This act puts her "on the amphetamine of the soul." Therefore, the heaven in the poem is a heaven of language, which is not heavenly at all. It is not a place for a lazy subject, thus causing "the angels [to] close the windows" and not allowing her to enter (467). The persona is begging for the windows to stay open because she cannot survive without that heaven where objects of desire (*petit objet a*) belong, objects that will compensate for the lost mother. As a result, "the sea is not dying," the "dirt" that belongs to the mother still "has a life-wish," Christ, a loving father, can still walk in a symbolic world where words "like bees [are] stinging the heart all morning." But will the angels consent to her soliciting? Will they allow the world of frenzy (the semiotic) to enter their heaven? Will they keep their windows open? Yes, they will permit the dirt of frenzy to come in for a while, exactly as the abject does in Sexton's poetry, not to have freedom of movement in the symbolic realm, but to be washed in an "English bathtub."

The last act of Sexton's hegira to the island of God has drawn close. It is a re-entering into the symbolic through complete submission not this time to a loving father, but to a more-or-less a Lacanian Name of the Father, a stern father, who resembles that God of the Old Testament whom Sexton always admired.⁵¹ In fact, Swiontkowski sees Sexton's father as Lacan's "symbolic Father, the absolute Patriarch" and thus "the daughter [makes] no progress in relation to her father-*imago* over the course of the poetic canon" in relation to incest (141).⁵² Although one agrees with Lauter that Sexton's choice of God with feminine qualities in the end has to do with "her inability to name the forces and figures she discovered in her images," which are considered maternal, her final choice

of a stern father without maternal qualities in “The Rowing Endeth” makes this scenario no longer applicable (157).⁵³

In “The Rowing Endeth,” the speaker seems to reach a safe place at the end of her journey, the island of God (*ASCP* 473). She appears triumphant after her long voyage at sea. But if one views God as a representative of the patriarchal system, The Name of the Father or the symbolic order, then the island is the place where new suffering begins. It is true that she suffered on her journey from the semiotic *chora* “with blisters that broke and healed/and broke and healed—” and “salt sticking to my face and arms like/a glue-skin pocked with grains of tapioca,” but the suffering in that new world of the island is still horrific or, at least, unpredictable. The subject moves from sea to shore, from the imaginary to the “real” world. It is a process of giving birth to a new subject. But she is not the only one to suffer for “there are many boats moored / at many different docks.” The blisters and the salt sticking to her face could be seen as the dirt that comes with the baby, emerging from the mother’s body, a residue of that re-enacting of separation from the mother. The newborn “I,” terribly exhausted, empties herself “from my wooden boat” to the “flesh” of “The Island” where the thetic is separating the two realms.⁵⁴

Sexton’s separation from the sea becomes important to enter the symbolic land of the island. This is like a separation from the mother which is a vital necessity for acquiring language where desire takes place. At that moment of entrance to language, God’s world, the doors of desire open “and play — can it be true —” (474). She has been implicitly raped and marginalized at the very moment she entered that world, an exhausted child. She wins only because she has obeyed the order of the system and because “I hold a royal straight flush,” which distinguishes her as part of this new system. Behind the use of a technical term in poker, Sexton is suggesting, at a secondary level, the type of flush that is caused by the sexual manipulation by God, and a process of cleaning she had to go through to get rid of the residues of her attachment to the maternal world of the *chora*. He wins simply because he has the power. His laughter is an indication of that power “rolling like a

which threatens her with mutilation. The fearful Sexton attempts to postpone any confrontation with the mother as bodily drives (anger) invested in the text. This is why one presumes she died out of fear: “but in the end it’s fear / that drowns you” (“Imitations of Drowning” 107).

In conclusion, Sexton’s work has enabled us to look closely at the central dilemma of her life and creativity. Fear of facing an abject mother and of losing another have made fighting back difficult. Her reliance on a father for her unity adds to the dilemma for he is also the abhorred lover, who is the only support against disintegration, so she cannot transgress his law and make any change. Robert Boyers, commenting on one of Sexton’s poems, put it neatly: “she cannot really fight back, but withdraws instead. She delights in stillness, but fears everything” (209). In her last poems, the maternal bursts in once the shields of her psyche collapse and the secret mother is introjected. This is where heterogeneity starts in Sexton’s work, a process which added to her fear. She decides to journey toward God who might give her unity but who is unable to relinquish her fear.

Moving on to Sylvia Plath’s work and life, we will notice a subject who is braver in dealing with the mother and the father. Plath, unlike Sexton, does not hold onto her psychic borders, which are fluid from the start. She is more of an “outsider.” This, of course, will endanger both her position as a subject and her creativity. Therefore, she starts to open and close her armour successively, trying to create heterogeneity in her poetry. Through this subversive heterogeneity, she tries to confront a father in order to get rid of him, something that also requires a constant confrontation with the mother. This oscillation between mother and father (“I” and “not-I”), between motility and stasis, results not only in a successful transgression of the law, but also in the discarding of the father in an authentic creativity where the semiotic has the upper hand, but where death has to be confronted as the last perfection.

Chapter 5

Plath, the Pharmakos (Scapegoat)

5.1 Pharmakos to the Father

Sexton could not transform the law of the father in spite of the heterogeneity manifested at the end of her career. She turned to the father despite that final explosion of death drive in her text, which could have enabled her to change his law. However, her fears prevented her from facing the father whom she needed for love and security against an abject mother. On the other hand, Plath was able to transform this law of One in her final work.

Sylvia Plath had a precocious talent, writing her first poem when she was only eight. Although she had to cope with a traumatic event in her early childhood, which was her father's death, she nevertheless continued to pursue success: writing poetry and short stories, winning prizes, editing magazines. Even her first attempt at suicide while she was a student at Smith College did not stop her from graduating with honours. Her first book *The Colossus and Other Poems* was written after a two-month residency at Yaddo Writers Colony in New York in 1959, three years after meeting and marrying Ted Hughes, and was published in England in 1960. This was when she was twenty-eight years old, the same age that Sexton began her writing career. Sexton published her first collection of poetry the same year as *The Colossus*, which made Plath jealous (Kirk 81). Only one year later, she finished writing *The Bell Jar*. However, her real burst of creativity did not take place until she had discovered her husband's affair with Assia Wevill. The resulting anger was embodied in her final book *Ariel*, which is one of the most controversial, haunting, and widely-read collections of poetry in the twentieth century. Sexton described Plath in these

poems as “riding straight out with the image-ridden-darer, Roethke [. . .]. Her poems do their own work [. . .]. What matters is her poems. These last poems stun me. They eat time” (“The Bar Fly” 11).

This chapter will argue that although Plath’s initial loyalty is, like Sexton’s, to her father, she tries from the outset of her career to defy him and look for an authentic, yet unconventional, independent voice. In a dangerous step, she tries to get out from behind the shields which stand for the borders of her proper body and psychic borders. However, these are dissolved into nothingness when she finally responds to the lure of the mother, represented by nature “outside.” In this sense Plath turns from being a sacrifice to the father to being one for the mother (nature). Nature is, according to Blosser and other critics (74, 78), maternal in Plath’s *oeuvre*. It threatens and lures the subject into full disintegration, passivity and death.

Finding the consequences of this passivity inhibiting to her creativity, the revolutionist, who tries to make a transformation, creates a hurting other, which might add motility and vitality to her work. However, it is not until violent negativity moves in Plath’s body as a result of psychological reasons that she is able to release it in her work as transformative energy. In this stage, which is embodied the *Ariel* poems, the subject of her poems becomes one of process, mobile and non-subjugated. In its mobility, it oscillates between “I” and other, the symbolic and the semiotic, presence and absence, “writing” and silence. Negativity, as energetic movement away from passivity, is considered a kind of creativity for Plath, who begins to realize the difference between her early and the later, more dynamic work. She asserted the value of her last poems: “I am a writer . . . 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). Many critics locate the achievement of *Ariel* in its supreme energy. Markey talks about “[t]he creative flow in energy” (*A Journey* 138); Blessing describes Plath’s psyche as “pure energy” and her last poetry, using one of Roethke’s phrases, as “rhythmical energy” (58).

The following chapters will discuss Plath's heterogeneous movement between "I" and "not-I" as both conscious and unconscious. It is a reciprocity which rejects the unity of the subject. This movement redefines the pharmakos as both "inside" and "outside" at the same time. The pharmakos, which has many meanings in Ancient Greek ("remedy," "off-scouring," "that which is wiped off" and "the Forbidden Thing") played an important part in religious rituals as a scapegoat (Nilson 87; Murray 51). This scapegoat, which can be an animal, a criminal or a cripple "upon which all evil is loaded" is like a sponge that absorbs every impurity (Nilson 87). Because of its impurity, the scapegoat was usually "thrown away, burned up, cast into the sea" as a means of purification (Nilson 87).

In his essay "Plato's Pharmacy," Jacques Derrida uses the *Phaedrus* to show how Plato's use of the word pharmakon (both a cure and a poison) in different contexts is related to the concept of writing. However, "pharmakon," is not the only form of the word used by Plato; rather there is a chain of "pharmaceutical" words: pharmakeia-pharmakon-pharmakeus (129). According to Derrida, although these words appear often in Plato's text, he never uses the closely related word, Pharmakos (129). The Pharmakos, he explains, is the "evil and the outside" that is expelled from the "city's body proper" (130, 133). However, this "representative of the outside" is "regularly granted its place by the community, chosen, kept, fed, etc., in the very heart of the inside" (133). This means that the scapegoat is in fact situated on the boundary line between the inside and the outside (133).

Kristeva has somewhat a similar perspective to Derrida, possibly owing to the fact that his essay was published in *Tel Quel* (1968), which Kristeva as a member of the *Tel Quel* group would certainly have read. She also views the function of the scapegoat as "simultaneously violent and regulatory" (*Revolution* 75), on the border between the outside and the inside. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva refers to this ambiguous situation as abjection. The present study will deal with Plath from this perspective. After beginning as

a scapegoat to the father (only inside) and then to the mother (only outside), she takes the position of abjection, which is inside and outside at the same time.

The Pharmakos, in this new sense, is capable of challenging the father, who is considered to be Kristeva's "imaginary father." He is the loving, loved and symbolic father (the law), whose oppression is also an oppression of language. Transgressing the law of the father is translated in Plath's work as dying and killing repeatedly and in a variety of ways (burning, cannibalism, slaying and shedding blood, and the veil as weapon). Masochism takes the new Kristevan perspective on the term as reciprocity, a master-slave game whose energy is derived from the death instinct that challenges the law of the father. It is a reciprocity which is not only manifested in the various acts of death in Plath's work, but also in the oscillation between linear time (social, historical time, which is masculine) and timelessness (which belongs to the semiotic, the feminine). This reciprocity enables her to create her own unique heterogeneous voice, which is termed the "Siren Voice of the Other." It is a voice which shows a conflictual heterogeneity and which ends with a defiant silence that pulls the communicators into a pre-symbolic space. Plath's oscillation ends when she discards the father forever. The consequence is ultimate *jouissance* in a final triumphant, yet deadly confrontation with the mother.

The Colossus (1960), Plath's first book, embodies her first steps towards this last freedom. In an interview with Peter Orr, Plath comments on her earliest poems, in particular her first book, in a surprising way: "I can't read any of the poems aloud now. I didn't write them to be read aloud. They, in fact, quite privately, bore me" (170). Although no one can deny the craftsmanship of Plath's earlier poems – in fact, Sexton suggests that they are nothing but form ("The Bar Fly" 9) – it would appear that there is something deficient in them. That is, they seem to lack an original, authentic voice that could be described as Plath's. This is not to say that "[t]hose early poems were all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that)" and that the later poems were all freedom in an authentic voice (Sexton, "The Bar Fly" 9). The idea of a drastic difference between her first works and

those completed just before her death has been promoted by such critics as Marjorie Perloff (“Sylvia Plath’s Collected Poems” 294), Al Alvarez (“Sylvia Plath” 58), Douglas Dunn (51) and Peter Davison (39)). It could be argued, on the contrary, that there is a continuity in her work, which, for example, Pamela Smith and John Frederick Nims, who focus on technical aspects, have also detected (112, 136).⁵⁶ In fact, without the daring first steps in *The Colossus*, the later poems, especially those in *Ariel*, would have been an impossibility.

In Plath’s early poems, there are attempts to go outside the proper borders, which keep her unified, in contrast to Sexton who took a long time to accomplish this. Plath’s efforts are sometimes manipulated and crushed by the symbolic father and his law, and when she does go outside, she finds herself facing an archaic mother, represented by nature. This revolutionary act of going further outside runs the risk of fusion with the maternal “Thing.” As a result, we see Plath, or her personae, often going back to the discarded symbolic armour, until, in the end, she is utterly lost in the maternal non-differentiation of *jouissance* and psychic void, the depressive emptiness which entails collapse of meaning. This fusion with maternal nature creates neutrality — the boredom that Plath describes in some of her poems — and reduces the level of heterogeneity and transformation that one finds in her early verse. However, the escalated level of heterogeneity seen in the later work, especially in *Ariel*, may not have been achieved without the initial efforts in the earlier verse.

Plath’s *Collected Poems* (1981) begins with a piece based on Giorgio de Chirico’s painting called “Conversation Among the Ruins” (1927).⁵⁷ In this poem, the abjection in terms of the erasing of borders between the inside and outside prefigures what is happening in the later poems. Christina Britzolakis has noted that it is not only the conventional powers of eros that are responsible for the ruins in the poem, but also the “clash of interior and exterior, culture and nature, classicism and modernity” (*Sylvia Plath* 196). In fact, the poem establishes a dialogue between a female and male rival and between the semiotic and

the symbolic where the borders between the inside and outside have collapsed. It is what Rose describes as “a battle over the meaning and possibility of poetry, of culture, as such — Dionysus versus Apollo, wild furies versus Grecian tunic and psyche-knot” (*Haunting* 90):

Through portico of my elegant house you stalk
 With your wild furies, disturbing garlands of fruit
 And the fabulous lutes and peacocks, rending the net
 Of all decorum which holds the whirlwind back.
 Now, rich order of walls is fallen; rooks croak
 Above the appalling ruin [. . .]. (*CP* 21)

With the collapse of her borders, the outside landscape becomes part of the room where the female sits: “Fractured pillars frame prospects of rock.” Although the female subject seems, as Britzolakis suggests, a victim of the power of the male other, as she is “[r]ooted to your black look” in a static, melancholic way (*Sylvia Plath* 196), the question at the end of the poem opens the possibility of taking up dialectics once again. In fact, the last line puts the narcissistic crisis of lost boundaries which the speaking subject is facing into a question: “What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?” Is it a ceremony allowing her to resume more fiercely “the erotic mania along with the havoc of the ‘master-slave’ game,” a “ricocheting”⁵⁸ between “I” and the other or to keep depressively static and in a final ceremony of death, which are the only two paths open to the person and the poet (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 81)? Contrary to Britzolakis’ opinion, one can suggest that Plath was not statically obedient to the male other, but rather was able to play the transformative masochistic game.

At the beginning of her career, Plath, like Sexton, remains loyal to her walls and her idolized father. In “Pursuit,” for example, a poem written shortly after Plath’s first meeting with Hughes, the persona is followed by a panther. The “black marauder,” “the lithe one” with “claws” and “taut thighs” stands for both “sexual fear and desire” for her victimizing male counterpart (Uroff 70; Hayman 95). In running away from the panther, the persona actually runs towards his house: “I shut my doors on that dark guilt, / I bolt the

door, each door I bolt” (22-23). The end is predictable when the male panther follows her back to his territory: “Coming up and up the stairs” (23). The resulting sexual consummation is a cannibalistic act where the persona is forced or even consents, to sacrifice:

I hurl my heart to halt his pace,
To quench his thirst I squander blood;
He eats, and still his need seeks food,
Compels a total sacrifice. (*CP* 23)

Another sacrificial scene where the persona is totally submissive to the symbolic father, who represents the law, is clearly evident in “The Glutton”:

He, hunger-stung, hard to slake,
So fitted is for my black luck
(With heat such as no man could have
And yet keep kind)
That all merit’s in being meat
Seasoned how he’d most approve;
Blood’s broth,
Filched by his hand,
Choice wassail makes, cooked hot,
Cupped quick to mouth;
Though prime parts cram each rich meal,
He’ll not spare
Nor scant his want until
Sacked larder’s gone bone-bare. (*CP* 40)

The poem is all about “He;” the “I” is not there, except as food in the master’s stomach. “He” is totally in control, and the persona surrenders to him.

These sacrificial rituals are rooted deep in history: “Insatiate, he ransacks the land / Condemned by our ancestral fault, / Crying: blood, let blood be spilt; / Meat must glut his mouth’s raw wound” (“Pursuit” 22). These roots are also linguistic. It is the power of the panther’s voice that subjugates the persona and makes her vulnerable, accepting the deadly sacrifice: “His voice waylays me, spells a trance, / The gutted forest falls to ash” (23).

Moreover, in “Firesong,” there is another allusion to sacrificing the female persona, like the animals of the poem, to the male’s burning flames, she will be snared where “all most fair / is tricked to falter in spilt blood” (30). This sacrifice is again related to a masochistic sexual scene where in full complacency, the persona is enjoying the deadly act, asking for more blood to be spilt: “brave love, dream / not of staunching such strict flame, but come, / lean to my wound; burn on, burn on” (30).

However, in “Pursuit,” Plath promises that “[o]ne day I’ll have my death of him” (22). This promise will later come true when the subject is able to take an active role in the masochistic sexual linguistic drama. Such an outcome can be achieved when Plath uses what Judith Kroll describes as the “fascist sensibility” in her early glorification of Hughes (for example in “Ode for Ted” and “Faun”) to glorify herself (249). In other words, this change takes place when Plath turns the monolithic, hegemonic relationship with the father-figure into a violent reciprocity between two parts.

At first the powers of the male antagonist seem to control the borders of the female protagonist. At one point his image “glazes the window of my hurt” (“Winter Landscape, With Rooks” 22) and at another “all the windows broke when he stalked in” (“The Queen’s Complaint” 28). Whether the windows or the walls, like those in “Conversation Among the Ruins,” are in one piece or not, and thus whether the persona is “within” or “without,” she is still the pharmakos of the terrorizing male state.

In “Two Sisters of Persephone,” there are two girls: one “within the house” and the other “without” (31). The girl “within” “works problems on / A mathematical machine.” Her labour is described as a “barren enterprise” as she works with abstract symbolic numbers without being able to translate artistic space into numbers for the infinite, that is, without being able to create an art permeated by music and rhythm (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 323-24). This is why “[d]ry ticks mark time.” It is, as Kristeva describes it in her essay “Women’s Time,” “obsessional time” (Kristeva, *Kristeva Reader* 192), the linear time of language that has the structure of a sentence and thus the true structure of the slave. The

time that belongs to the “girl within” does not differ from the time that belongs to the “girl without” although Plath describes it as “ticks blown gold” (32). This is because the girl “without” “bears a king,” a phallus which emphasizes her lack. In other words, although Plath seems to describe a better destiny for the girl who flourishes under the sun, the reason for this prosperity is, in fact, complete submissiveness to the patriarchal symbol of power.

Although the subject is seemingly not imprisoned, for she is neither “within” nor “without” and thus is capable of linguistic creativity, this creativity may be considered to lack authenticity since she has not been the one, until this moment, who is responsible for pulverizing, semiotizing and transgressing the borders. It is the powerful male, and thus the traditional symbolic realm, who is responsible for such creativity. The dilemma of an authentic creative voice, which is paradoxically non-authentic from a conventional perspective, becomes, in terms of abjection, clear in “Tale of a Tub.” The poverty of the room, described at the beginning of the poem, “assaults the ego” (24), which itself becomes “poor,” like the room, for the lack of an authentic maternal semiotic element: “no cracks that can be decoded.” The persona feels guilty towards her creation sealed from a “true” horror outside:

Just how guilty are we when the ceiling
reveals no cracks that can be decoded? when washbowl
maintains it has no more holy calling
than physical ablution, and the towel
dryly disclaims that fierce troll faces lurk
in its explicit folds? or when the window,
blind with steam, will not admit the dark
which shrouds our prospects in ambiguous shadow? (*CP* 24)

The persona’s nudity in the lavatory room, like the nudity of the walls inside, is “poor” since it is also inauthentic: “Yet always the ridiculous nude flanks urge / the fabrication of some cloth to cover / such starkness [. . .]” (25). The coat as a symbolic shield must always

be there, “disguising the constant horror” in an act of linguistic sublimation and social restriction: “of many-colored fictions; we mask our past / in the green of eden, pretend future’s shining fruit / can sprout from the navel of this present waste” (25). The mirror in this room is a Lacanian mirror reflecting the persona’s symbolic ego, a mirror that shows “a public grin” and “repeats our name” and hence the “usual terror,” a boring familiar terror with no authentic thrill of creativity (24). Now “water faucets spawn no danger” and “each crab / and octopus [. . .] / [. . .] is definitely gone; / the authentic sea denies them and will pluck / fantastic flesh down to the honest bone” (25). No matter how the tub’s surfaces are “blank and true,” there is no compensation for the authentic lost maternal sea, which is as a pre-symbolic space connected to death in the poem, and thus nudity in the room is not authentic either.

The female speaking subject is dreaming of an authentic moment of creativity not only by dissolving the borders (“lines”) of the tub, the room, or the coat, but also her own body’s lines: “can our dreams / ever blur the intransigent lines which draw / the shape that shuts us in?” (27-29). The poem ends with a dream of sailing in her own imaginative sea, in her authentic ship, a moment of madness, death and *jouissance*.

At the very beginning of Plath’s poetic work, her borders are proper, symbolic borders like those of Sexton. The movement in and out of them is still under the control of the patriarchal tradition. For Plath has to break through her unified borders in order to achieve a singular unique voice and dynamism, which will transform her relation to the patriarchal law. Plath, unlike Sexton, will try to go further outside her borders to face a m/other presented as nature. However, this action will jeopardize her identity and her creativity as the dreamed of encounter turns into full submission and passivity when Plath surrenders to the lure of the archaic mother.

5.2 Pharmakos, Outside in Nature

In order to transgress the walls and borders controlled by patriarchal power and its literary heritage, Plath goes further outside to confront a m/other, to reach the edge of death itself, which will ensure her authentic heterogeneous creativity and transformation. In contrast to Tracy Brain's assertion in her discussion of "The Fifty-Ninth Bear" that "many women do not feel safe enough in open spaces to commune, one to one, with nature, and so are by necessity more tolerant of the intrusiveness of crowds" (101), Plath was, as Linda Wagner-Martin contends, an outsider and a rebel:

Even at fifteen and sixteen Sylvia saw herself as *outside* the mainstream of society, and she worried about being *out* there. Whether she felt guilty [. . .] or rebellious, she hid her feelings except in her writing. Throughout her life, Sylvia's writing expressed feelings she did not allow herself to admit otherwise. (*A Biography* 51, emphasis added)

Wagner-Martin presents Plath as more of an outdoor girl and an outsider (*A Biography* 35,115). As Plath herself observed: "Perhaps I was doomed to be on the *outside*" (*A Biography* 40). On 6 July, 1953 she wrote in her *Journals*: "Stop thinking selfishly of razors and self-wounds and going *out* and ending it all. Your room is not your prison. You are" (186). She adds in the 22 January, 1958 entry: "Words, words, to stop the deluge through the thumbhole in the dike. This be my secret place. All my life have I not been *outside*? [. . .]" (318). In her *Letters Home* she describes herself as follows: "Basically, I think, I am an '*outdoor*' girl, as well as a contemplative sedentary writer" (164, all emphasis added). Wagner-Martin explains: "Her attitudes were [. . .] too rebellious for her to be part of the main stream" (*A Biography* 61). Plath likens terror to being shut behind doors where creativity is constricted. This is seen when she discovers her first pregnancy, which she thinks will affect her writing. She recalls in her *Journals*: "Remembering my growing casualness about contraception, as if it couldn't happen to me then: clang, clang, one door after another banged shut with the overhanging terror which, I know now, would end me, probably Ted, and our writing and our possible impregnable togetherness" (294).

This suggests that creativity and “going outside” are related for Plath. As Lindberg-Seyersted demonstrates in “Sylvia Plath’s Psychic Landscapes,” the outdoor settings in Plath’s poems are “in overwhelming majority” and these landscapes are not only physical but also psychic (509). To confront a father and a mother outside and not inside is fundamental to the creation of Plath’s poetic identity.

In “Black Rook in Rainy Weather,” we see Plath further outside in what seems to be a tentative search for heterogeneity in her art. In her search for a moment of inspiration, she thinks of “disquieting”⁵⁹ movements like the “set[ting of] the sight on fire” or an angel that might “flare” any minute :

At any rate, I now walk
Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); skeptical,
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. [. . .]. (*CP* 57)

This creative step was inspired by a black rook “[a]rranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain” (56). The movement of arranging and rearranging evokes the dynamic movement of heterogeneity in a work of art, which is again “disquieting” as Kristeva likes to describe it in her essay “Within the Microcosm of ‘The Talking Cure.’”⁶⁰ She explains that this disquieting heterogeneity, which can take different names in different theories, refers always to something irreducible and a movement which defies patriarchal enclosure (40). Plath wishes for such a movement to create reciprocity between her and an other. She hopes for “a miracle” such as a “backtalk / From the mute sky.” For her it seems that the most horrific thing is not horror, but “fear / Of total neutrality,” death in life and dull poetry. However, Joanne Feit Diehl explains that although the verbs ‘[s]eize’ and ‘haul’ that Plath chooses to characterize the moment of her inspiration register the rook’s affect upon her, they also show a resistance on her part to leaving her passive, neutral position

(120). In other words, lively heterogeneity in her work remains a dream which Plath waits for in “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” but which she will not achieve until later on:

Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait’s begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent. (*CP* 57)

Dave Smith has taken note of this ambitious search for energy and movement in her early poetry, which paved the way for the *Ariel* poems, although he thinks she failed often and her successes were often “partial” (274). Smith considers “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” as an important poem in this respect: “Evanescence wasn’t enough for her [Plath]; she had to be the flame and the radiance, the electrical horse” (274).

In “Street Song,” Plath takes tentative steps further “outside” to achieve dynamism and transformation. These are as much dangerous as ambitious. They involve facing horror and being exposed to the maddening “call of the mother”:

Even as my each mangled nerve-end
Trills its hurt out
Above pitch of pedestrian ear,
So, perhaps I, knelled dumb by your absence,
Alone can hear
Sun’s parched scream,
Every downfall and crash
Of gutted star,
And, more daft than any goose,
This cracked world’s incessant gabble and hiss. (*CP* 36)

With her extreme artistic sense, the persona is the only one to feel panicked when she smells the “[r]eeks” of the butcher’s meat and so by “a mad miracle I go intact” and thereby keeping her ego from disintegrating. The abject scene of the chopped meat takes her immediately to a primary scene of scission from the mother’s body: “And that great wound / Squandering red / From the flayed side.” She seems aware that only being loyal to

the symbolic and what is reasonable can save her from such danger: “Arming myself with the most reasonable items / To ward off, at all cost, suspicions / Roused by thorned hands, feet, head.”

However, Plath still needs that dark side to gain “[a]bsolute Power” (“Soliloquy of the Solipsist,” *CP* 37). In fact, the words “absolute,” “too much,” “the best,” “perfect” are some of the most common in Plath’s personal dictionary. At her school in Winthrop “records indicate that she maintained a straight ‘A’ profile from the very beginning, impressing her teachers with her intelligence and dedication” (Butscher, *Method and Madness* 11). Plath also excelled in every activity she participated in: “She played tennis, was on the girl’s basketball team, was co-editor of the school newspaper, *The Bradford*, joined a high school sorority, Sub-Debs, painted decorations for class dances, went on college weekend dates, was Lady Agatha in the class play *The Admirable Crichton*” (Ames 152). Her life at Smith College and later in Cambridge was no less perfect with more ‘A’s and more poetry prizes. Moreover, her many dates were not simply for enjoyment. She looked at them as a task that she must excel in and so she used to rank them (Wagner, *A Biography* 48). Plath refers to herself as a perfectionist in many journal entries (144, 208, 386). For example, she writes on 1 October, 1957:

I cannot ignore this murderous self: it is there. I smell it and feel it, but I will not give it my name. I shall shame it. When it says: you shall not sleep, you cannot teach, I shall go on anyway, knocking its nose in. It’s [sic] bigger weapon is and has been the image of myself as a perfect success: in writing, teaching and living. (618)

Her psychiatrist, Dr. Beuscher, recognized the perfectionism in Plath as an obsessive pattern of unrealistic expectations of success (Wagner, *A Biography* 110; *Letters Home* 128). Moreover, one of her boyfriends, Gordon Lameyer, described Plath as a person who was “anxious to experiment in extremis” and “to find out what ‘enough’ was by indulging herself in ‘too much’” (39). Even her simplest acts, like laughter, took the extreme form of being more “frenetic than amused” as her high school teacher, Mr.

Crockett, noticed (Wagner, *A Biography* 45). In her essay “America! America!” Plath criticizes American society for rejecting the “too special” as eccentric, and presents herself as the dangerous perfectionist: “The girls’ guidance councillor diagnosed my problem straight off. I was just too dangerously brainy. My high, pure string of straight A’s [sic] might, without proper extra-curricular tempering, snap me into the void” (*Johnny Panic* 36).

The only way to achieve this extreme or absolute power is to confront what is truly “outside.” The clever visual manipulation which Plath uses in the “Soliloquy of the Solipsist” shows that her power is achieved by being a long way from the imprisoning houses: “I / Make houses shrink / And trees diminish / By going far” (*CP* 37). Moreover, in “The Snowman on the Moor” and “Hardcastle Crag,” the persona goes further outside though she comes back at the end (*CP* 58; 62). In “The Snowman on the Moor,” there is a post-battle scene of two unrelenting factions, a man and a woman. The female subject draws the battle outside to her own territory instead of the male symbolic territory, his house. Although she has been warned by the “winter-beheaded daisies” to keep indoors, away from a landscape “[o]f stark wind-harrowed hills and weltering mist,” she does not respond to their warning and makes her way to a liminal area, “the world’s white edge” where she thinks she can “call” the forbidden maternal “hell to subdue an unruly man / And join her siege” (*CP* 58-59). However, in the world of “outside” everything becomes extreme. The male opponent turns into a monstrous giant. His roaring, it seems, reminds her of his symbolic powers over the sounds of his “Ladies’ sheaved skulls,” “his chattering trophies” who are “dangling from that spike-studded belt” (*CP* 59). Therefore, she goes back in a state of “mild obeying.” Another reading could be that the girl confronts the demon of perfection which threatens her being. Plath describes this beastly demon in her *Journals* as a fearful stifling power that she has to fight: “I have this demon who wants me to run away screaming if I am going to be flawed, fallible. It wants me to think I’m so

good I must be perfect. Or nothing” (619-20). However, Plath does not choose to fight this abject beast after seeing its gruesome deeds. Humbled, she decides to go back.

In “Hardcastle Crag” (CP 62), the female subject again walks out of her house. The further she goes, the more violent the natural maternal landscape becomes. Initially, she walks through the threatening streets of the town, then moves on to an appalling countryside where the last meaningful “echoes” of sound gives way to silence. In this maternal place names do not exist. They have no bodies (houses) to materialize them: “Nor did any word body with a name” (CP 62-63). The only thing she can hear is a horrendous babel of engulfing yet fascinating sounds. In her journey to the edge of the night, Plath is threatened by the dark “maternal continent”⁶¹:

The whole landscape
Loomed absolute as the antique world was
Once, in its earliest sway of lymph and sap,
Unaltered by eyes,

Enough to snuff the quick
Of her small heat out [. . .]. (CP 63)

However, before her disintegration into “mere quartz grit in that stony light / She turned back” (CP 63). In *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*, Edward Butscher reads this coming back as “a courageous first step, refusing to be ground down to a skull by the mindless processes of an annihilating cosmos” (16). Contrary to Butscher, it could be argued that in terms of the search for her own unique voice and for the sake of transforming the law of the father, Plath’s first step “outside” towards confrontation is courageous. However, coming back each time she reaches the edge remains a condition for being protected under the wing of the symbolic. And thus what Richard Howard calls “the spell,” which is achieved through her initiation into deadly nature (84), breaks out in her withdrawal.

It is a sign of her extreme ambition that Plath breaks the condition of coming back. Although in “The Snowman on the Moor” and “Hardcastle Crag,” she came back to her proper borders, she will not perform the return anymore. In her ambitious journey “outside,” she surrenders to the powers of the archaic mother and thus is unable to achieve the heterogeneity in her early work, especially in *The Colossus*, which will transform the sacrificial law of the father. The “Day in, day out” becomes a day out (“On the Plethora of Dryads” 67), making Plath a victim of the whiteness of annihilation rather than achieving colourful transforming dialogic heterogeneity. This dilemma of going outside as a revolutionary act and then turning back is expressed in Plath’s *Journals*. In an entry on 29 March, she writes:

There is a certain unique and strange delight about walking down an empty street alone. There is an off-focus light by the moon, and the streetlights are part of the spotlight apparatus on a bare stage set up for you to walk through. You get a feeling of being listened to, so you talk aloud, softly, to see how it sounds:

I am walking down this street and I am being propelled by a force too powerful for me to break because eighteen years of walking down streets had chained me to the inevitable action of going from one place to another and always repeating the circle or line and returning home without stopping or wondering [. . .] but I could not turn and walk back . . . no . . . but some night I will break these eighteen years of walking home and walk all night, away from the magnet that pulls and attracts me like a scrap of metal . . . and now I am walking again . . . but I will take this road instead of mine . . . I will assert myself feebly and approach from a less frequented path [. . .].
(54-55)

Moreover, on 14 May, 1953, she writes: “I wanted to walk until I dropped and not complete the inevitable circle of coming home” (184). Tim Kendall also notices that Plath’s personas are “courageous pioneers, confronting landscapes” (42). He goes further by giving Plath the power of assimilating a destructive and violent environment as she pushes the Emersonian definition of nature beyond its limit. According to Kendall, she moves decisively away from an ideal nature,⁶² which is the antidote of culture and tradition and a paradise that leads to self-awareness. Moreover, since he does not see Plath’s nature in the ideal Emersonian sense, he cannot envisage any kind of joy in her achievement: “But what is *joy* in Emerson is fatal inevitability in Plath” (44, emphasis added). Plath’s joy or

jouissance, it can be argued, comes from this passive fusion with the mother, even if it is threatening. The magnet that she tries to run from attracts her and terrifies her “outside” to the point of surrender. This is why, in the early poetry, what is intended as a struggle towards creativity and authenticity becomes a movement towards passivity.

Passivity in the work of art is expressed by Plath as too much thinness and total disintegration. Although thinness, like silence, is generally beneficial to the work of art, too much thinness is threatening. In “The Thin People,” for example, Plath becomes like one of the scapegoats who are “outlandish” on the verge of disintegration, “[m]eager of dimension” (*CP* 64).⁶³ Those who are pale are martyrs in a “hunger battle” wearing an “insufferable nimbus.” Their creativity only “persevere[s] /In thinness,” which is nothing but “thin silence” in the text. In fact, Plath related fatness to lack of creativity (pregnancy, as a sort of fatness, was sometimes an exception to this rule, as in “Metaphors,” for example). In one of the entries to her *Journals* she complains: “God, must I lose it in cooking scrambled eggs for a man . . . hearing about life at second hand, feeding my body and letting my powers of perception and subsequent articulation grow fat and lethargic with disuse?” (88). In another entry, she adds: “otherwise, in the world of pies & shin beef, I die. The great vampire cook extracts the nourishment & I grow fat on the corruption of matter, mere mindless matter. I must be lean & write & make worlds beside this to live” (275). However, too much thinness might lead to a total silence and confusion with the mother of non-differentiation. Thinness is related to barren perfection: “She would rather be dead than fat, / Dead and perfect, like Nefertiti” (“The Fearful” 256). The poetic subject, as well as her work, may turn into “[a] thin, silly message,” which is “mailed into space” like that in “Wuthering Heights” (*CP* 167). In Plath’s case, going further “outside” in nature ends, and silence prevails as anaemic thinness, which means total passivity instead of dynamism.

If the artist starves herself deliberately and so puts her signs at risk of dissolution, such as the artist in “On the Plethora of Dryads” (*CP* 67) in order to devour words more

wantonly, she should do this “before they thin to nothing” like the sheets in “The Ghost’s Leavetaking” (*CP* 90).⁶⁴ Those sublimatory sheets covering the emptiness of the pre-symbolic world speak the unspeakable: “speak in sign language of a lost otherworld.” The sheets, “which signify our origin and end,” become the thetic, which brings “the ambrosial revelation” between the “two incompatible modes of time”, the extra-phenomenal, timeless semiotic and the historical symbolic. As the sheet ghost is saying farewell, the whole work of art, along with the artist, is close to disintegrating into “no-color void,” a maternal abyss.

The movement of the artist further “outside” without returning to the symbolic borders, “the sheets,” starts to be clearly threatening for Plath’s subjectivity as well as her creativity. In “I Am Vertical” (*CP* 162) the speaking subject wishes to be horizontal in relation to outside nature, to lie in death among the flowers and trees, exactly as in “Wuthering Heights” where nature invites her to whiten “my bones among them” (*CP* 167). In linguistic terms, this is a wish to move from symbol to sign, from metaphor to metonymy (Kristeva, *Desire* 38-40).⁶⁵ That is, it is a movement from what is homogeneous, static and close-ended to what is heterogeneous, dynamic, and open-ended. However, Plath’s movement from an exclusive identification with what is masculine to an exclusive identification with what is feminine in her early poetry represents a total disintegration of identity. A complete union with the archaic mother is a personal death wish that threatens Plath as well as her work. This magnetic lure to be united passively to nature is a theme in Plath’s early poems, such as “Moonrise” (*CP* 98). In this, a journey is taken into the furthest boundaries of nature where the colours of that natural painting start to collapse into sheer whiteness and thus the death of heterogeneity and transformation occurs: “White bruises toward color, else collapses.”

This deadly passivity is like that in “Blackberrying” and “Whiteness I Remember” where all colours spin to halt as whiteness. It is the whiteness of smothering nature: “I walk among them, and they stuff my mouth with cotton” (“Finisterre” 169), and “[t]he

flowers and the faces whiten to a sheet” (“Last Words” 172). Plath has always associated colours, as opposed to whiteness, with creativity and life, as she states on 8 February, 1958: “A new life of my own I shall make, from words, colors & feelings” (*Journals* 327). She talks about her creation as a wound and then “invent[s] on the drop of a feather, a whole multicolored bird” (Wagner, *A Biography* 165). Colours are also associated with a violence that leads to transformation: “The colors assert themselves with a sort of vengeance” (“Two Campers in Cloud Country” 145). The problem is that if these colours turn to a “bad monochrome,” as they do in the “The Eye-mote,” the “parenthesis” of language which holds her identity firmly, though in an imprisoning manner, will be erased, threatening her existence (*CP* 109). The bed of the hospital and the knife of the doctor, which help extract the splinter at the end of “The Eye-mote” could be read linguistically as the bed of sexual difference and the symbolic castrating paternal phallus, two conditions for entering the parenthesis of the symbolic. They are the only cure for disintegration. However, the persona still longs for a time prior to this restricted one, which is, in fact, timeless and thus only a space:

What I want back is what I was
 Before the bed, before the knife,
 Before the brooch-pin and the salve
 Fixed me in this parenthesis;
 Horses fluent in the wind,
 A place, a time gone out of mind. (*CP* 109)

This merging with the whiteness of nature is what Butscher describes from his perspective as a “passive female speaker pounc[ing] almost joyfully upon vicious insights” (*The Woman and the Work* 21). Moreover, Robert Phillips, commenting on Plath’s early poetry, observes her obsession with this maternal deadly whiteness where there is no other(s), only Plath’s identification with the lower forms of natural existence, including, mushrooms and moles, snakes and insects, stones and bones (191).

The whiteness of death and passivity, which proliferates in Plath's early poems, also enters Plath's only novel, *The Bell Jar*. Esther Greenwood, before her attempt at suicide, is threatened with shrinking into nothingness, similar to that which ends Plath's journey in *The Colossus*. In the bar scene with Doreen and Lenny Shepherd, she experiences these feelings: "I felt myself melting into shadow like the negative of a person I'd never seen before in my life" (8) and "I felt myself shrinking to a small black dot against all those red and white rugs and that pine paneling. I felt like a hole in the ground" (14). Furthermore, at the culmination of Esther's despair, Doreen asks her to go with her and Lenny instead of attending the fur show arranged by the fashion magazine. Esther, however, has something else in mind:

For a minute I was tempted. The show certainly did seem stupid. I have never cared for furs. What I decided to do in the end was lie in bed as long as I wanted to and then go to Central Park and spend the day lying in the grass, the longest grass I could find in that bald, duck-ponded wilderness.

(24)

This dissolving takes place in other scenes where Plath looks at the process as equivalent to the notion of purification. The "I," no more connected to an other, becomes clean and pure as a baby. For example, after witnessing a sexual encounter between Doreen and Lenny, Esther takes a hot bath in what seems like one of the tubs she remembers having come across before, a "modern coffin-shaped tub." In the hot water, she feels that everything about her is dissolving (16). Another two scenes of purification take place when Esther merges with things around her: one when she gulps hot broth after vomiting the contaminated food she had earlier eaten at a luncheon organized by *Ladies' Day* magazine. In another scene, she skis down a slope where she merges with the natural scene around her until "the white sweet baby cradled in its mother's belly," and Esther ends the scene with a broken leg (79). This allusion to the baby fusing with the mother suggests that "purification" for Plath is nothing but a regression to an archaic state, in other words, death.

Merging with the mother (nature) is the consequence of her decision to go outside.

The fascination with the maternal and the dream of reaching the outer limits becomes very powerful. However, Plath seems to realize that her closeness to nature and her wandering too far outside the walls of her psyche will deprive her of what is essential to her writing:

A serene sense of the slow inevitability of the gradual changes in the earth's crust comes over me; a consuming love, not of a god, but of the clean unbroken sense that the rocks, which are nameless, the waves which are nameless, the ragged grass, which is nameless, are all defined momentarily through the consciousness of the being who observes them. With the sun burning into rock and flesh, and the wind ruffling grass and hair, there is an awareness that the blind immense unconscious impersonal and neutral forces will endure, and that the fragile, miraculously knit organism which interprets them, endows them with meaning, will move about for a little, then falter, fail, and decompose at last into the anomalous [sic] soil, voiceless, faceless, without identity. (*Journals* 75).

The collapse of her identity when confronting nature motivates Plath into creating an otherness, a face to encounter in reciprocity instead of falling, in the process of her creativity, into the Nirvana of nothingness. At this point, the “merging of the perceiver with thing perceived,” in what Eileen Aird calls “the poetry of experience” (19), is not, as Charles Newman suggests, a “triumph over ‘Otherness,’” at least not at this stage where the poet is starting her career and looking for an authentic voice (34). But it is a merging with otherness and a loss of identity.

Moreover, Pamela Annas seems to look positively at Plath's early poetry of natural landscape where she is “still imagining forays across the boundary lines between self and world” and thus “there is a possibility of choice and movement.” In contrast, she argues that in her later work, Plath's movement “rigidifies” as she enters the social and the historical where she is trapped between “exclusive alternatives” and thus the possibilities of transformation decrease (17, 161). What Annas describes as active movement in *The Colossus*, according to this thesis, ends with a passivity that cancels any previous movement. This is different from entering the social and the symbolic (as psychic and not only as contemporary social landscape),⁶⁶ which allows a positive movement of heterogeneity, rather than what Annas describes as an entrapment. The “fluid boundaries”

of Plath's early poetry do not lead to actual or potential change, as Annas suggests, but rather this overabundant fluidity leads to a merging with maternal nature. This fusion is a psychic one – in fact “the distinction between psyche and nature [here] is a false one” (Rose, *Haunting* 52) – with the archaic mother and thus the poet succumbing to the passivity of that oneness which dissolves all residues of otherness.

At the beginning, and in a courageous step, Plath leaves her symbolic borders to the “outside” nature to return to them again. However, in going further outside, she merges with maternal nature in an act of total silence, whiteness, which threatens her identity and brings silence to her creativity. In the absence of alterity, an encounter with the father in order to effect change is quite impossible. Although these poems turn out to be “[s]tillborn” (142), “[t]he white stomach may ripen yet” (“Moonrise” 98). In her attempt to abandon passivity resulting from fusion with maternal nature, Plath tries to achieve dynamism in her poetry by searching for an other within her psyche, as shall be seen in the next section.

5.3 The Appearance of a Face (an otherness)

In her first poems, Plath's going “outside” without returning into the father's symbolic shield becomes threatening to her identity, as well as her art. Therefore, she tries to create an otherness under the symbolic order so as to achieve a more productive heterogeneity where suffering and hurt is a requirement. For example, in “Two Campers in Cloud Country” (144), Plath realizes that the only assurance in the midst of an engulfing nature is the existence of an other (Markey, *A New Tradition?* 88): “These rocks offer no purchase to herbage or people: / They are conceiving a dynasty of perfect cold. / In a month we'll wonder what plates and forks are for. / I lean to you, numb as a fossil. Tell me I'm here” (*CP* 145).

Moreover, “Poppies in July” reveals the dilemma of a subject who wishes, under the temptation of the total passivity and neutrality that she ran from in the first place, either

to bleed or to sleep (203), in other words, either to achieve transforming authentic heterogeneity, a violent intensity and vividness, what Markey describes as “the flow of creative energy in art” (Markey, *A Journey* 143), where “[t]he blood jet is poetry” (“Kindness” 269) or surrender to death. Plath is trying, by means of a transitional step, to direct her aesthetic struggle towards “the need to speak one’s singularity” (A. Smith 24) and to achieve transformation through a violent erotic heterogeneity. This can be initially done by creating an other that hurts as in “Tulips,” “In Plaster” and, later, “Poppies in July” (*CP* 160, 158, 203).

Plath is trying to evoke a “face,” an other, for her to encounter instead of the sweeping natural void. She seems to realize the importance of this step: “otherwise there is no i [sic] because i am what other people interpret me as being and am nothing if there were no people” (*Journals* 168). She borrows some elements from nature, like those flowers, and tries to create a face for them in order to establish what Jacqueline Rose calls a “reciprocating activity” (*Haunting* 133). But is she really completely successful in this or is it just a transitional step for her later more intense poetry? Are the sexual encounters and the hurts in these poems reciprocal? For example, in “Poppies in July,” the speaking subject seems to feel no pain — “I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns” — and the redness of the poppies turns “colorless” in the end (203).

Furthermore, the flowers in “Tulips” hurt the patient to life again where the otherness of her husband and children in the photo next to her fails to do so. However, the redness of the tulips which seems to initiate a dialogue with the woman — “Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds” (161) — threatens to engulf her. If heterogeneity is achieved in Plath’s poetry of nature, as Rose argues, and it is so to some extent, at least in her transitional poems, it does not reach the same level as *Ariel* where the sexual reciprocity is more violent and transformative. Moreover, if Plath in these early poems has returned to the origins of language, the symbolic and its function as social code is less apparent there. In fact, Plath, who has taken her way “outside,” turns from being a

pharmakos to a father to just being one to maternal nature. Plath has tried to walk further “outside” and encounter an archaic mother in order to establish a creative “territory” for herself, such as the one in “Letter in November” with the colours red and golden. Unlike the territory that Wagner-Martin sees as a feminine territory that dispenses with women’s need to be protected and housed by men, it turns out to be a circular abyss and a tomb (*A Literary Life* 145). There is no hope for heterogeneity in this place of “thick gray death-soup,” where “[g]old leaves [are] metal and breathless” and where all ends in the belly of the “Thing” (“Letter in November” 253).

In fact, Plath’s early poems, as Constance Scheerer observes, seem to ask Alan Watts’s question: “How far out can I get? How lost without being utterly lost?” (174). Therefore, for Plath, it is no use looking only for a place; there is also a need for a face-to-face encounter, to hurt and to be hurt by. In her *Journals*, we find evidence of a related encounter with suffering: “I’ll be able, piece by piece, to face the field of life, instead of running from it the minute it hurts” (619). Further evidence of Plath’s suffering in encountering her other instead of passive perfection, is in the same entry of the *Journal*:

I must reject the grovelling image of the fearful beast in myself, which is an elaborate escape image, and face, force, days into line. I have an inner fight that won’t be conquered by a motto or one night’s resolution. My demon of negation will tempt me day by day, and I’ll fight it, as something other than my essential self, which I am fighting to save [...] (620)

It is very important to observe how Plath relates creativity with that hurt: “I am afraid. I am not solid, but hollow. I feel behind my eyes a numb, paralyzed cavern, a pit of hell, a mimicking nothingness. I never thought, I never wrote, I never suffered” (*Journals* 149). She also declares: “my happiness streams from having wrenched a piece out of my life, a piece of hurt and beauty, and transformed it to typewritten words on paper” (*Journals* 22). Moreover, Plath underlines the importance of hurt in her creative reading: “Read widely of others experiences in thought and action –stretch to others even though it hurts and strains” (47). It is clear then that creativity for Plath is the opposite of the passivity and total silence

that she manifest in her early work. Alterity and heterogeneity, which causes motility and pain, seems to be Plath's definition for creativity.

Although "In Plaster" Plath is being ironic, one can nevertheless detect beneath the comic surface the recurrence of the important theme of otherness where the persona has the new white self and the old yellow one (*CP* 158). The white one seems to belong to the symbolic order, the yellow one to the maternal as she is abject, rotten and yellow. The white self is "the superior one," "one of the real saints." Because she belongs to the symbolic order, she "doesn't need food" since she will devour words instead. The "unbreakable" white holds the yellow core from fragmentation. Besides, she is a "true pacifist," unlike the revolutionary maternal yellow (159). All she needs from the yellow other is for her to love her: "Then I realized what she wanted was for me to love her." Megan Becker-Leckrone explains that the subject, according to Kristeva, cannot love until she enters the symbolic after separation from the mother (152). Love provides meaning against fragmentation. The white part "had a slave mentality" to the law of the father as she likes to please by being quiet, patient and passive. However, she has an important role as she is responsible for the unity of the ego, "[h]olding my bones in place so they would mend properly" (159). The abject yellow part, which belongs to the maternal or its representative, is as important since it gives, paradoxically, beauty and soul to the artistic work:

Without me, she wouldn't exist, so of course she was grateful.
I gave her a soul, I bloomed out of her as a rose
Blooms out of a vase of not very valuable porcelain,
And it was I who attracted everybody's attention,
Not her whiteness and beauty, as I had at first supposed. (*CP* 159)

A conflict is initiated between the two: "In time our relationship grew more intense." Nevertheless, when the white symbolic part, in search of immortality through traditional creativity, does not firmly hold the maternal other, the abject part is dissolved and absented. The yellow part complains about this: "And my skin itched and flaked away

in soft pieces / Simply because she looked after me so badly. / Then I saw what the trouble was: she thought she was immortal.” The symbolic self begins to wish for the death of the abject maternal, using her dead face only for ornament necessary in traditional poetry: “And secretly she began to hope I’d die. / Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely, / And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case / Wears the face of a pharaoh, though it’s made of mud and water.” The abject yellow self cannot for the moment exist without the symbolic for that would cause her disintegration:

I wasn’t in any position to get rid of her.
 She’d supported me for so long I was quite limp –
 I had even forgotten how to walk or sit,
 So I was careful not to upset her in any way
 Or brag ahead of time how I’d avenge myself.
 Living with her was like living with my own coffin:
 Yet I still depended on her, though I did it regretfully. (CP 159-60)

The struggle between the part loyal to the symbolic, on one hand, and the part loyal to the semiotic and the maternal, on the other, is threatened by an overflow of the semiotic and a violent burst of the maternal, dissolving the ego’s identity into emptiness:

I used to think we might make a go of it together –
 After all, it was a kind of marriage, being so close.
 Now I see it must be one or the other of us.
 She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
 But she’ll soon find out that that doesn’t matter a bit.
 I’m collecting my strength; one day I’ll manage without her,
 And she’ll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me. (CP 160)

What Butscher refers to as “the rage of these poems,” which he describes as “not yet complete,” is the heterogeneity that increases in intensity with the evolution of Plath’s poems as she tries to create an other to encounter (*Method and Madness* 267).

The straight-A student of literature, who graduated *summa cum laude*, seems not to be satisfied until this moment about her work. Plath realizes that she needs to raise the

level of “drama” to an intense one of “blood, lust and death.” She, who asks, “When will I break into a new line of poetry?” sees clearly what is required (*Journals* 516):

My main thing now is to start with real things: real emotions, and leave out the baby gods, the old men of the sea, the thin people, the knights, the moon-mothers, the mad maudlins, the lorelei, the hermits, and get into me, Ted, friends, mother and brother and father and family. The real world. Real situations, behind which the great gods play the drama of blood, lust and death. (471)

The answer to the earlier question comes, as the quotation suggests, from a mining of Plath’s autobiographical background. Because heterogeneity is not only achieved through intellect, but also genuine suffering, Plath’s personal story becomes a vital element in her writing. After the loss of her father, Otto, in 1940, when she was just eight, she was unable to mourn fully, even in the many early father-oriented poems. This may be one of the reasons why she tried to commit suicide during her time at Smith College in 1953. However, with the help of Dr. Ruth Beuscher she was able to introject her loss and express it in works of art.⁶⁷ The process began with the poem “Electra on Azalea Path.” Dr Beuscher gave Plath permission to hate her mother as the one responsible for her father’s death (*Journals* 429-431).⁶⁸ No one can deny the stifling powers of Plath’s mother, whether one looks at her real mother — *Letters Home* is striking evidence of this — or simply the mother as a pre-symbolic space. Plath understood only too well the problem of her particular relationship with her mother and its connection with her writing. She was able, sometimes, to express her anger and hate towards her mother artistically:

But although it makes me feel good as hell to express my hostility for my mother, frees me from the Panic Bird on my heart and my typewriter (why?), I can’t go through life calling RB up from Paris, London, the wilds of Maine long-distance: “Doctor, can I still go on hating my mother?” “Of course you can: hate her hate her hate her.” “Thank you, doctor. I sure do hate her.” (*Journals* 429).

It is precisely for this reason that one can challenge Christodoulides’s argument that Plath suffered from a “mother’s clutch”⁶⁹ all through her poetry until she finally was able to achieve separation in a single poem, “A Birthday Present,” where she experiences a final

release that is also a rebirth (Christodoulides 191, 235). If one argues thus, it follows that heterogeneity is not achieved until this moment and that Plath does not inhabit her voice fully until she writes this particular poem. In addition, rebirth is as recurrent a theme in Plath's poetry as is death: it is not a final moment. If birth and rebirth means entering the symbolic, then Plath acts this process more than once. The movement that is recurrent in Plath's later work is eloquently characterized by Blessing: "But it's the kinesthetic sense of pitch and roll, the stomach-tilting sensation of that bottomless series of plunges, that we experience most strongly. And the evocation of that sense is her particular genius" (59).⁷⁰ Mary Lynn Broe also views Plath's movement in her late work as a "worship of kinesis," a "dialectic between inertia and energy." (182, 190).⁷¹ In fact, a subject in process, like Plath, struggles with and against a mother, oscillates between mother and father, and creates a dialogue between the semiotic and the symbolic: she is a moving subject. When Dr. Beuscher allowed Plath to hate her mother, a process which the poet describes as "[b]etter than shock treatment," she allowed negativity to flow into her body and thus into her text (*Journals* 429). Consequently, Plath's poems, especially those in *Ariel*, show this constant oscillation between a stifling mother and a release into the symbolic. Plath expresses this in two successive questions in her *Journals*:

How to express anger creatively?

Fear of losing male totem: what roots? (438).

Plath wants negativity (anger) in her writing where her bodily drives can be at work, but without the semiotic being unleashed to cause destruction. This is why she needs to go back to her "roots," to her father's "totem." In other words, she needs to attack the father but not to the extent of losing him, of losing his shields, her proper body and psychic borders.

Paradoxically, what contributes to this kind of shock treatment in relation to her mother is Ted Hughes, whose adultery increased the level of anger in Plath and added to the dynamism of her poetry.⁷² Erica Wagner pertinently asks: "would [Plath] have been the

poet she was if she were ‘godless, happy, quieted?’” (45).⁷³ Plath incorporated her husband into herself in a similar way as she did her mother. In her *Journals*, Plath shows the strength of this attachment: “I am so glad Ted is first. All my pat theories against marrying a writer dissolve with Ted: his rejections more than double my sorrow & his acceptances rejoice me more than mine - - - it is as if he is the perfect male counterpart to my own self” (271). In another entry she says: “my whole being has grown and interwound so completely with Ted’s that if anything were to happen to him, I do not see how I could live. I would either go mad, or kill myself. I cannot conceive of life without him” (274). Her attachment to him becomes an obsession: “I am superstitious about separations from Ted, even for an hour, I think I must live in his heat and presence, for his smells and words – as if all my senses fed involuntarily on him and deprived for more than a few hours, I languish, wither, die to the world” (378). Plath used to think before her marriage that finding the right counterpart would enhance the vitality of her poetry:

Sure, marriage is self expression, but if only my art, my writing, isn’t just a mere sublimation of my sexual desires which will run dry once I get married. If only I can find him . . . the man who will be intelligent, yet physically magnetic and personable. If I can offer that combination, why shouldn’t I expect it in a man?– (*Journals* 21)

However, reality did not live up to this expectation. Plath repeats in her *Journals* how being far from Hughes affects her writing positively. For example, she writes in the entry for Monday, 7 July, 1958:

I enjoy it when Ted is off for a bit. I can build up my own inner life, my own thoughts, without his continuous ‘What are you thinking? What are you going to do now?’ which makes me promptly & recalcitrantly stop thinking and doing. We are amazingly compatible. But I must be myself – make myself & not let myself be made by him. He gives orders – mutually exclusive: read ballads an hour, read Shakespeare an hour, read history an hour, think an hour & then ‘you read nothing in hour-bits, read things straight through’. (401)

Although she realizes Hughes’s negative influence on her writing, Plath is not able to hate him as she did her mother. This was possible only when she was jealous:

I identify him with my father at certain times, and these times take on great importance: eg [sic] that one fight at the end of the school year when I found him not-there on the special day and with another woman. I had a furious access of rage. He knew how I love him and felt, and yet wasn't there. Isn't this an image of what I feel my father did to me? (*Journals* 447)

One can feel the intensity of the bodily drives that afflicted Plath when she discovered her husband's infidelity, and this precipitated their separation. His loss was then sublimated in her writing, thereby achieving dynamism and transformation. Uroff contends that Hughes's adultery aroused Plath's poetic energy (144). But she also believes that after this event Plath was able to regain her whole self, which Hughes had "stolen." In contrast, one could argue that his departure aroused negativity as a conflict with the other within Plath's psyche. Moreover, in her *Journals*, Plath accused her mother of killing her father and feared that her mother would kill her husband in the same way (434). In seeking revenge against Hughes because of his cheating, she has to identify with the mother, the "killer" (433), while in killing her mother, as she wished, she has to identify with her father, even though she admits that in killing her mother, she kills herself (433). This family drama and its changing of allies (identification) is translated aesthetically into Plath's work as a dialectic between the symbolic and the semiotic, between "I" and "not-I," and between signification, which is composed of the two elements of the semiotic and the symbolic, and silence.

This psychological drama is further apparent in Plath's 1962 essay about her childhood, "Ocean 1212-W." It is often referred to by critics in order to emphasize what Plath terms the "awful birthday of otherness," where "[m]y beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over" (*Johnny Panic* 120-21) and initiation into language took place.⁷⁴ However, although Plath is expelled from the sea, moving inland, the sea has become part of her identity. Even if "those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle" (124), preventing access to the sea, Plath photocopied the sea in her mind: "Then one day the textures of the beach burned themselves on the lens of my eye forever" (114). In "Ocean 1212-W," Plath identifies with the sea creatures: "Nobody taught me to swim. It

simply happened” (122). She also says: “Would my infant gills have taken over, the salt in my blood?” (117). This identification with sea creatures re-emerges later as qualities of dynamism and negativity like the beach swing which moves between land and sea, “I” and “not-I”, father and mother:

Did my childhood seascape, then, lend me my love of change and wildness?
Mountains terrify me – they just sit about, they are so proud. The stillness of
hills stifles me like fat pillows. When I was not walking alongside the sea I
was on it, on it, or in it. My young uncle, athletic and handy, rigged us a
beach swing. When the tide was right you could kick to the peak of the arc,
let go, and drop into the water. (122)

This swing best represents Plath’s later work. It shows a dynamic movement which results from an oscillation between the safe yet “stifling” symbolic land to the wild maternal realm of the sea. In fact, Plath coded the sea for herself through her grandmother’s phone number “Ocean 1212-W.” This ensures that the sea can be captured in language and that “change,” which she loves, as she admits in the above quotation, could be achieved (21-22). The monkey, which the water throws to Plath as a “sign of election and specialness,” holds the promise that she will not be forever cast out from the maternal in writing. It is a sign of a coming heterogeneity in her poetry, the monkey being “scarred” and “oddly foreign” (121).

At the beginning of her poetic career, Plath tries bravely to get outside her psychic borders in order to escape her imprisoning situation under the law of the father. However, she succumbs to a fascinating deadly maternal nature. This prevents her poetry from becoming entangled in conflictual dynamism. In a further step, she tries to evoke a hurting other to achieve heterogeneity in her work. However, she was not able to achieve a transformative momentum until she released her hatred and anger both against her mother and father/husband. The resulting suffering as released bodily drives will be more evident in her future poetry, especially in *Ariel*, where her unique subversive voice develops. Above all other *Ariel* poems, “Daddy” is the best example of this defying voice where Plath plays the slave–master game in sado-masochistic transformative reciprocity. Another

kind of reciprocity, which will be discussed in the next chapter, shows a movement between presence and absence, between the symbolic and the semiotic, and between writing and silence across poems. The fragmentation of time is used as evidence to support the idea of movement in Plath's poetry.

Chapter 6

Subversive Heterogeneity

6.1 “Daddy,” the Nazi . . . Mummy, “Medusa”

“Daddy,” Plath’s best-known poem, can be taken as an exemplar of heterogeneity leading to transformation in Plath’s *oeuvre*. Although this heterogeneity can be detected in some early poems, “Daddy” and its subject as a subject in process remains the finest example (*CP* 222). For instance, Jahan Ramazani shows that Plath’s most important contribution to the modern elegy is the poem’s “harsh ambivalence,” which “renounce[s] the submissive mourning commended by gender codes” (1143, 1154). He sees “Daddy” as the culmination of heterogeneity in her elegiac poems (1150). “Daddy,” as shall be noted in this chapter, foregrounds Plath’s unique dialectic, sadomasochistic voice which ends with silence. This voice will be termed “The Siren Voice of the Other.” It exhibits not only a movement between presence and absence, death in the realm of the semiotic and rebirth in the realm of the symbolic, but also a movement between writing and silence. The fragmentation of the subject as a result of these different movements is manifested in the fragmentation of time, about which Plath was ambivalent.

Plath’s father in the poem is viewed by Butscher and Holbrook as her personal father, Otto Plath, or as a combination of father and husband by Wagner-Martin in *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*. Other critics have argued that the exaggerated elements of caricature and other linguistic elements prevent one from identifying the father of the poem with her real father (Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath* 123). The father of “Daddy” can also be seen as Kristeva’s father of individual prehistory, the imaginary father, while never ceasing to be Plath’s personal father, as Rose and Parkin-Gounelas have suggested (*Haunting* 225; 222). One can agree that Plath’s father is a combination of the imaginary and personal. However, it should be emphasized that the version of the imaginary, symbolic father in

Kristeva's *Black Sun* is closer to Plath's version than the one in her *Tales of Love*. Kelly

Oliver explains the difference:

In *Tales of Love* Kristeva sets her loving father against Lacan's stern authoritarian father. By *Black Sun* they seem to be two faces of the same father, or at least collaborators. Here, the loving imaginary father must not only support the paternal function and the move to the Symbolic but also be able to take the place of the stern oedipal Father. (77)

Without the loving father, one is to be devoured by an abject mother, resulting in the collapse of language. This is close to what Plath felt after her father's death: "But with your father dead, you leaned abnormally to the 'Humanities' personality of your mother. And you were frightened when you heard yourself stop talking and felt the echo of her voice, as if she has spoken in you, as if you weren't quite you" (*Journals* 64). This loving father paves the way for the stern Oedipal father (the father of the law), who in turn paves the way for the subject to enter the realm of desire (Oliver 83). In other words, the imaginary father prepares the child to enter the symbolic world dominated by the Oedipal father whom the child will later encounter. This figure who is in fact a "father-mother conglomerate" is capable of this by offering the child deep love (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 40), which facilitates the child's separation from the mother to the Oedipal father's world. Therefore, without him, no identity can be established and no entry into language away from an engulfing mother instituted. In *Black Sun*, Kristeva believes that the imaginary father plays "his part as oedipal father in symbolic Law, for it is on the basis of that harmonious blending of the two facets of fatherhood" that the child is able to connect abstract signs to the "affective meaning" of emotion (23-24). Plath's father is indeed Janus-faced, both loving and stern. This is why she has ambivalent feelings towards him: "He was an ogre, But I miss him" (*Journals* 431). As a stern father (as law) he is attacked by Plath in order to transgress that law and transform it.

Rose argues that Plath's loss of her personal father is also a symbolic loss: "[“Daddy”] seems to be outlining the conditions under which that celebrated loss of the

symbolic function takes place. Identity and language lose themselves in the place of the father whose absence gives him unlimited powers” (*Haunting* 227). This crisis of representation, Rose argues, “forces” Plath to identify with the Jew, the oppressed (*Haunting* 227). Gounelas takes Rose’s position but represents her argument in terms of fetishization:⁷⁵ “Like the fetish object, the word symbolizes the absence of a theorized presence — Daddy” and so postulates “presence as a veil over loss” and unlimited authority for the father (222). One could say that although the father’s power is immense, it is not unlimited and that the poem shows reciprocity in relation to him, something that Plath sought and which her personal conditions, namely her husband abandoning her, aggravated. It is true, as Rose suggests, that the irruption of the semiotic in the poem as a paternal alien tongue is threatening (*Haunting* 227), but, arguably, it is also transformative. Moreover, the dynamism of the poem allows the Jew to become a Nazi in reciprocal masochistic terms. That is, the oppressed (the passive) and the oppressor (the active) take turns as in a sexual scene. Therefore, the veils that cover the loss are as deadly as they are seductive and subversive. Put differently, the words where the semiotic erupts could threaten the “I” of the poem, but they could also help in transforming it, as well as the law of the father.

A more deterministic Lacanian opinion is given by Kathleen Lant, who sees Plath as “trapped within a system she could neither manage nor elude” (664). Lant gives language an unchallenged excessiveness of power over Plath’s poetry: “Plath was held fast by the language which undid her. Plath was shaped and ultimately undone — as was her poetry — by forces she could never surmount” (665). She does not seem to allow any moment of triumph, however scant, whether within or beyond language. Although it is true that language or the law of the father is powerful, it can also be argued that Plath was able to achieve transformation and *jouissance*. Despite the fact that this task is difficult and threatening to the identity of the speaking subject, Plath accepts the wager.

Plath explains her own understanding of the poem in a reading for BBC radio:

Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other— she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.⁷⁶

In fact, “Daddy” shows an internalized dialogue (what Plath refers to as marriage and paralysis) between an “I” and an other (“you”). However, the “you” can take the role of “I” sometimes in an act of reciprocity. In fact, some of the entries in her *Journals* replace the “I” with “you” to refer to Plath herself (e.g. 63, 67). This heterogeneous dialogue makes the symbolic stern father defiable and modifiable, although with serious consequences.

The first lines in “Daddy” show defiance:

You do not do, you do not do
 Any more, black shoe
 In which I have lived like a foot
 For thirty years, poor and white,
 Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (*CP* 222)

The female subject shows her resistance by repeating twice to the symbolic, oppressing and choking father, “you do not do” to his face. Repetition here is part of singing, which is semiotic. She has once been denied the possibility of *achooing* but she is now doing so using a nursery-rhyme (do, shoe, Achoo). As Kristeva puts it in “The Ethics of Linguistics,” “we have this rhythm; this repetitive sonority; this thrusting tooth pushing upwards before being capped with the crown of language; this struggle between word and force gushing with the pain and relief of a desperate delirium” (*Desire* 28). It is a rhythm that entails eroticism, pain and *jouissance*. Plath’s opening lines work temporarily through what Shuli Barzilai describes as a foreclosure of the paternal function, which enables the subject to echo “infantile discourse” (300). However, this triumph does not last for long because there is no struggle without the paternal function. Moreover, the word “daddy” with its childish resonance makes the situation closer to that of addressing the personal father whom the girl feels guilty for killing. As Freud shows, this guilt flows from her

incestuous desire (Freud 19: 220). She “used to pray to recover you,” or the desire repressed in her, to kill him once again in an act of sexual violence because “you died before I had time —.” This dash, as with many other dashes which Plath frequently uses, gives space to the unconscious to speak its desire.

While the “I” speaks to the personal father, it also speaks to the imaginary one. This father is Janus-faced. When he is love, he is dead. When he is God, he is the word and the law and as such he exists (Oliver 83): “Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue with one gray toe / Big as a Frisco seal.” This statue resembles its huge equivalent in “The Colossus” (*CP* 129). It is the ugly deformed symbolic oppressor, but it is also Otto Plath who suffered from “a gangrenous, swollen toe,” who is German in origin, and whose “head pours bean [bees],” that is, his specialty is bees (Srivastava 126-28).

The oppression of the symbolic father is an oppression of language. Although Plath’s father is a German and she found it difficult to learn the German language, the problem goes beyond that. The foreignness which she finds difficulty in dealing with is not the foreignness of the German language, but rather the foreignness of the language of the father, estranged from a killed love, what Rose calls an “alien tongue” (*Haunting* 227). According to Kristeva, one is capable of translation and metaphorizing only by killing a loving father, who is in fact a “father-mother conglomerate” as has been already stated (*Black Sun* 42; *Tales of love* 40). Therefore, “I used to pray to recover you” also means to recover love, the mother and lost *jouissance*.⁷⁷ However, being unable to translate is threatening. In fact, Esther, the heroine of Plath’s novel *The Bell Jar*, loses the ability to read in her mental collapse, describing letters as untranslatable: “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” (102).

What is left now are the powers of the law, a stern patriarch, a God who is practising his hegemonic powers over the speaking subject and who tries to silence her: “I

never could talk to you. / The tongue stuck to my jaw / It stuck in a barb wire snare / Ich, ich, ich, ich” (*CP* 223). And between love and law, the subject suffers exile, as “Full Fathom Five” shows: “You defy questions; / You defy other godhood. / I walk dry on your kingdom’s border / Exiled to no good” (92-93). As Kristeva explains in terms of abjection, the subject in process asks, “where am I?” instead of asking, “who am I?” (*Powers* 8). Therefore, “I never could tell where you / Put your foot, your root,” is, in fact, “I never could tell where I put my root.” She is neither “inside” nor “outside.” The language of the father is thus “obscene,” an “engine” which pulverizes the subject’s love. In this sense, the female subject identifies herself with the Jew, the oppressed. As a consequence, the father is seen as a Nazi God, an oppressor:

I have always been scared of *you*,
 With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
 And your neat mustache
 And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
 Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You — (*CP* 223)

“Why a Jew?” asks James Young,⁷⁸ “why not a black slave or Russian Gulag or Armenian?” The answer, according to Young, is “the visibility of the figure as a public figure for suffering.” Does this mean that the Jewish female “I” will succumb to the Nazi male “you” masochistically and thus linguistically? Does this mean that the voice in the poem turns out to be monologic? One might nod in affirmation, especially after reading the following lines:

Every woman adores a fascist,
 The boot in the face, the brute
 Brute heart of a brute like you. (*CP* 223)

Gounelas reads the boot scenario, as well as the voices in the poem, as an alternation of a masochistic Deleuzian eroticism where Plath’s presentation of the foot moves between a “fetish object and a fetish objectifier” (221). In other words, the foot or the shoe belongs at one time to the father, who puts the boot in the face, and at another time to the girl who has

lived “like a foot / For thirty years, poor and white” (222). Even the tongue stuck in the speaking subject’s jaw could be a masochistic act of defiance. An episode of a woman whose tongue is swollen and stuck out is mentioned twice by Plath, once in *The Bell Jar* (146) and once in “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” (21). This happens in the latter because the woman’s husband invited his French-Canadian mother to visit them, although he knows his wife could not stand her. This was for the protagonist an act of defiance: “she hated that French-Canadian mother-in-law worse than pigs, and her tongue was true to her opinion, even if the rest of her wasn’t” (21). This means that the stuck tongue is not necessarily forced by the power of the father but is an act of defiance, albeit unconscious here.

However, this reciprocity of struggle, according to Gounelas, ends with the triumph of the law in spite of the seemingly triumphant acts of the girl: “this is an enactment of projective identification, whereby the subject projects on to the other her unacceptable aggressivity, only to find it thrown back at her with deadly force” (221). Uroff also looks at this scenario, as well as the reciprocity of torture in “Daddy” in general, as failing to change anything for the girl and argues that her poetry is nothing but juggling images: “when she caricatures her father as a Fascist and herself as a Jew, she develops associations of torture which are not exactly reversed when she reverses the identification and calls herself the killer of her vampire-father” (160). However, this study tends to agree with Markey in *A Journey into the Red Eye* and Bundtzen in *Plath’s Incarnation: Woman and the Creative Process* when they argue that Plath’s poetry is sado-masochistic where women’s compliance plays a significant role. What Plath has done to change this subordination of women, according to Markey, is deflate prescribed femininity and show romantic love as a myth. As for Bundtzen, Plath’s ability for transcendence made her triumph unquestionable. Both critics suggest that open rebellion has helped in renouncing the negative powers of the father. However, unlike this study, both critics look at masochism in terms of gender where, according to Bundtzen, there is tension between

Plath's role as a woman and as a writer (19). Moreover, they do not look at Plath's voice as singular, but applicable to all women, especially to female writers (Bundtzen 43).

In her *Journals*, Plath depicts a masochistic personal encounter resembling the reciprocity in "Daddy" where the female "Jew" is not totally a victim:

with the good heavy weight of body upon body, arching, undulating, blind, growing together, force fighting force: to kill? To drive into burning dark of oblivion? To lose identity? [. . .] An easy substitute for bad slashing with angry hating teeth and nails and voice: the curious musical tempo of hands lifting under breasts, caressing throat, shoulders, knees, thighs. And giving up to the corrosive black whirlpool of mutual necessary destruction. [. . .] What is it but destruction? Some mystic desire to beat to sensual annihilation – to snuff out one's identity on the identity of the other – a mingling and mangling of identities? A death of one? Or both? A devouring and subordination? No, no. A polarization rather – a balance of two integrities, changing, electrically, one with the other, yet with centers of coolness, like stars. (105)

In this scene, Plath uses words that indicate not only her sexual relation to the other, but also her poetic creation. She seems to be an advocate of a semiotic "musical" violent "voice," instead of "los[ing] identity" in total "annihilation," although there is sometimes a wish for this "sensual" mingling of identities. In other words, Plath seems to support a dialogue between the "I" and the other, exchanging power for the sake of creativity: "I must find a strong potential powerful mate who can counter my vibrant dynamic self: sexual and intellectual" (*Journals* 173).⁷⁹ In the real world of her marriage to Hughes, however, this ideal found expression not in a perfect balance of two strong personalities, but in a sado-masochistic nexus. This kind of masochism manifests itself in art as what R. McClure Smith calls "subversive aesthetic masochism" (393). Smith explains how Kristeva collaborates in the subversion of the law of the father while attaining the pleasure of the loss of a stable identity.⁸⁰ Kristeva, she stresses, believes in the transformative power of the creative process and its ability to defy the established hierarchies, and thus the sexual perversity seen in the masochistic act goes beyond itself as a mobility and heterogeneity in representation (392-96).

In light of this, the line “every woman adores a fascist” does not only mean “every woman desires a violent man” or “it is identification *with* the fascist being what every woman desires” (either “her total innocence or her total guilt”), but it also means something else (Rose, *Haunting* 233). Reading the line with an ironic voice helps the female subject to get out of the choking circle of the father. This voice can be read mockingly as “surely, women adore a fascist, especially if he puts the boot in the face.” Then the comment comes with its repeated word “brute” to show that the previous statement is just a mocking one, “the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you.”⁸¹ Moreover, what Rose views as a “partial, hesitant, and speculative” identification with the Jew, because of the difficulty of claiming rootlessness (*Haunting* 228), can also be looked at as a deferral to the act of the orgasmic pleasure she will have at the end of the violent act of reciprocal masochism: “Death, like a final orgasm, like a full night, waits for the end of the play” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 215). This pleasure is delineated by Plath in her *Journals*: “Oh, I would like to get in a car and be driven off into the mountains to a cabin on a wind-howling hill and be raped in a huge lust like a cave woman, fighting, screaming, biting in a ferocious ecstasy of orgasm . . .” (174):

An engine, an engine
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
 I began to talk like a Jew.
 I think I may well be a Jew.
 [.]
 I may be a bit of a Jew. (*CP* 223)

In this sense, she is not completely triumphant, nor completely a victim. Besides, usually victims do not speak, but now the “I” has begun to talk like a Jew, a language most probably different from that of the oppressor.

In “Daddy,” one of the most striking kinds of defiance comes in the lines: “The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna / Are not very pure or true.” H.C Phelps

explains these lines as voicing rage against Plath's mother (249-50). He explains that Plath's mother, Aurelia Schober, was of Austrian origin. She is, like the "beer of Vienna" and "the snows of the Tyrol," "not very pure or true" and hence she is reproached like the father. But "not pure" is controversial here. For Kristeva, as has been stated earlier, what is not pure, what is unclean is the abject maternal, the *chora* (Wright 198). It is not pure or true from a patriarchal perspective, exactly as a Jew is for a Nazi. The female subject will identify with this "not pure" and so she "may be a bit of a Jew." What is maternal or feminine, after all, has a voice in a father-oriented poem.

The dialogue continues with the personal father, "the black man who / Bit my pretty red heart into two" (223-24). He is the father who caused the poem's speaker a psychosexual trauma while she was a child: "I was ten when they buried you / At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you" (224). The father, who divides the girl's heart into two, is both a stern devil that must be killed and a loving father she wishes to return to. At one point in the poem, Plath identifies this father with her husband. In fact, "Daddy" was written on the day Plath learned of Hughes's approval of divorce proceedings after he had left her for several months and she, as a consequence, "defended against depression by almost literally throwing herself into her poetry" (Axelrod 52). Her husband becomes "the vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year, / Seven years, if you want to know" (224), and thus, as she puts it in "The Colossus," "My hours are married to shadow" (*CP* 129-30). Despite these gloomy lines, the defiance continues in the dialogue with the symbolic father who "stand[s] at the blackboard" where the symbolic is written (223). This tableau brings to mind a similar scene of the chemistry teacher, Mr. Manzi, in *The Bell Jar*. Plath, expressing her hatred of chemistry with its rigid formulas in comparison to Botany lessons with its leaves and diagrams of holes, evokes the conflict between the rigidity of the symbolic (letters and numbers) and the semiotic (the leaves and their holes):

What I couldn't stand was this shrinking everything into letters and numbers. Instead of leaf shapes and enlarged diagrams of the holes the leaves breathe through and fascinating words like carotene and xanthophyll on the blackboard, there were these hideous, cramped, scorpion-lettered formulas in Mr. Manzi's special red chalk. (29)

The redness of Mr. Manzi's chalk becomes in "Daddy" a black charred "swastika / So black no sky could squeak through" (223). The blackness of the swastika, the blackboard and the "man with a Meinkampf look" (224) are to be defied by the female subject. The father, in particular, is to be defied in two ways. First, the obscene word, "bastard," is used against him. According to Kristeva, obscene words bring *jouissance* as they cause mobility in the poetic text through releasing bodily drives (*Desire* 143). This movement of negativity caused by the obscene word appropriates the other (*Desire* 143). Second, the "voice" of the words' blackness is removed as she takes the black telephone "off at the root." In fact, in stopping the masochistic oscillation between the "I" and "you," the speaking subject is creating a "moment of acting out" (Kristeva, "Within" 38), cutting the cables of linguistic exchange between "I" and the other, and creating an (orgasmic) explosion which leads to transformation, ultimate *jouissance* and death: "And I said I do, I do. / So daddy, I'm finally through. / The black telephone's off the root, / The voices just can't worm through" (67-70) and "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" (80).

In this way Plath creates a space of silence, which she has already articulated, beyond the text where the speaking subject can plunge into the pre-symbolic, the space of the semiotic *chora* for an ultimate *jouissance* or, what Paul Mitchell calls, "pure *jouissance*" (49). In *The Bell Jar*, Esther dreams of this space between the black lines of a story about a fig tree: "I wanted to crawl in between those black lines of print the way you crawl through a fence, and go to sleep under the beautiful big green fig tree" (45). Although the text of "Daddy" oscillates between "I" and "not-I," there is a moment of extreme "not-I," a moment of death, which, paradoxically, stresses identity in a temporary synthesis that leaves an "imprint." Margaret Homans regards this silence as transcendental, albeit "scarcely articulable," against the objectification of the father (220). In other words,

the female subject objectifies herself to destroy the self against the father's objectification. Homans states: "Suppressing the power of the one who silenced her, she simultaneously returns herself to the silence that the poem came into being to protest" (221). However, this is not the same forced silence that the poem begins with. This is a "[g]reat silence of another order" ("Little Fugue" 37) where one fuses with the mother.

Axelrod regards Plath's poetry as a means to heal her private wounds and create her own identity and voice in a paternal symbolic order, thereby negating the void and marginality. This void and marginality are seen as silence and death, as opposed to linguistic productivity and living. He argues that Plath managed to pass her body in language, especially through orality, which indicates her earlier experience with her mother and her need for love as well as oral linguistic capacity. In addition, he sees two kinds of silence in Plath's work: one is political and the other linguistic and "inherent," as it "plays dialectically with utterance in the dualism of language" (20). The political is manifested by the patriarchal order, silencing the oppressed woman, not only in the text, but also in real life (Hughes's manipulation of Plath's work after her death). The other silence is that which dissolves the author's identity and is "manifested as fragmentation or contradiction" (20). Axelrod considers both kinds of silence to threaten Plath's textual creation. He contends that although Plath welcomed silence occasionally in her text, she considered it generally an enemy. Plath, he thinks, "was in search of her 'name'" and so "did not easily accommodate the intrusion of silence into her discourse," which would make her a "wordless thing in an empty place" (20-21).⁸² Alternatively, it can be argued that silence, emptiness and non-being, as manifestations of *jouissance* and transformation, are an essential part of Plath's creativity in "Daddy," as well as in other poems.

This moment of transcendence or, in fact, descendance (silence as fusion with the mother) is not the "I am, I am, I am" of "Suicide off Egg Rock" (9), the "iamb," "lub-dub of the heart" (P. Smith 114), but rather when the heart stops beating for a moment. For this reason, the female subject in "Daddy" becomes a "Satanic version of God" by "blowing a

black hole in what God has fashioned” (T. Eagleton 97). This is similar to the image in the seventh section of “Berck-Plage”: “For a minute the sky pours into the hole like plasma” (17). This can be glossed by means of Kristeva’s formula: “God does not exist— I am God—I do not exist—I commit suicide [silence]” (*Black Sun* 186). Unlike real death, which Kristeva refers to here, the suggested “silence” is part of the aesthetic process. It is a temporary death, a return to the mother in an act of *jouissance* just to relinquish her once again and return to the symbolic. The “stake in your fat black heart” becomes a stake in her own heart to deflate it from the life of motility into a last word of silence (76).

Earlier Plath tries to create a “we,” the villagers, in order to take revenge on the father, who is treated in this sense as a foreigner, a slave (Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* 20). But is she not also the foreigner persecuted by the law? And might not the villagers be on the side of that law? (79). Could she not end this controversial scene in silence? Lynda Bundtzen in *The Other Ariel* has noticed how in her creative competition with Hughes, Plath constructed a kind of reciprocity between the two texts: “Her words are on top and one peeks at the other side, often finding her ink has bled through, indelibly splotching and staining Hughes’s work” (8). She always sought the last word in an argument too:

Plath’s textual body is also hopelessly entangled with that of her husband, Ted Hughes. Many of the manuscripts and typescripts for her final poems are written on his backside, so to speak: Plath recycles old manuscripts and typescripts by Hughes, and often she seems to be back talking, having the last word in argument. (7)

The last “word” in Plath’s argument in “Daddy,” as well as in many other poems, is achieved by a defying silence.

“Daddy” shows an unprecedented subversive heterogeneity in Plath’s work. In it, Plath articulates reciprocity in dealing with both a loving and a stern father in a slave- master manner. The father also stands for language. To defy him Plath has to use the same oppressive language belonging to him, and sometimes she abandons language as a

whole in an ultimate act of defiance. Both ways of defiance form what is termed in this study “The Siren Voice of the Other.”

6.2 The Siren Voice of the Other

Both the violent silence at the end of “Daddy” and heterogeneity, the masochistic linguistic tension (dialectic) in the text, are what is called “The Siren Voice of the Other.” Plath, as the marginal Other, is capable of defying the symbolic order through this dissident voice, which results from the violent eruption of the semiotic in the poem. In other words, “The Siren Voice of the Other” is a subversive voice that belongs to the revolutionary, marginal Other. This Other is marginalised as it lies in a space outside borders of patriarchy. It is the phallogentric’s Other associated with “the dark and discredited negative side of every polarity, as body to mind, nature to culture, night to day, matter to form and madness to reason” (Connor 229). For Kristeva, this marginality does not mean to place woman as second to the phallic position as is always the case, but rather to undermine “our most cherished convictions precisely because it situates itself outside our space, knowingly inserting itself along the borderlines of our own discourse” (Moi, *Sexual/Textual* 149). Therefore, there is subversive potential of the discourse of the marginal Other, as it refuses the concept of intrinsic identity and thus an intrinsic position (Connor 229). Craig Owens views women in their marginal position as potent: “Excluded from representation by its very structure, they return within it as a figure for – a presentation of – the unrepresentable” (59). In its most revolutionary act, this voice reaches silence, the unsaid.

The rhythms and themes of violence in “Daddy,” as well as in other poems, become a special kind of “singing”⁸³ that is threatening to the poet’s identity, as much as it brings her *jouissance*; it is both “a burden and a promise” (Broe 58). Plath describes this kind of singing in an interview of 1958, but can apply equally well to the poems of *Ariel*:

Technically[,] I like it to be extremely musical and lyrical, with a singing sound. I don’t like poetry that just throws itself away in prose. I think there

should be a kind of constriction and tension which is never artificial yet keeps in the meaning in a kind of music, too. And again, I like the idea of managing to get wit in with the idea of seriousness, and contrasts, ironies, and I like visual images, and I like just good mouthfuls of sound which have meaning. . . . At first I started in strict forms— it's the easiest way for a beginner to get music ready-made, but I think that now I like to work in forms that are strict but their strictness isn't uncomfortable. I lean very strongly toward forms that are, I suppose, quite rigid in comparison certainly to free verse. I'm much happier when I know that all my sounds are echoing in different ways throughout the poem. (21)⁸⁴

The technical and the “extremely musical” go hand in hand. The result is a free verse where there is “tension” made by “sounds echoing in different ways.” Unlike Sexton’s narrative style where music may be restricted, free verse is Plath’s final choice for her unique voice. As much as there is talk about technique and form in her comment, the *jouissance* that she feels in this kind of singing is clear in the oral image of “good mouthful of sound,” which has meaning until the “extremely musical” immerses her in complete pleasure. In this way, Plath, the poet, is like the siren who sings until silence prevails by killing the man she drags down into the depths of water. The siren’s fate is death since there is no other to sing for anymore. The power of this voice of the Other and its effect on the ordered city state of the father is well depicted in “Lorelei”:

They sing
Of a world more full and clear

Than can be. Sisters, your song
Bears a burden too weighty
For the whorled ear's listening

Here, in a well-steered country,
Under a balanced ruler.
Deranging by harmony

Beyond the mundane order,
Your voices lay siege. (14-23)

However, even more effective than her song is her silence: “Worse / Even than your maddening / Song, your silence. At the source / Of your ice-hearted calling— / Drunkenness of the great depths” (28-32). Pamela Annas correctly states that there are two kinds of silence in Plath’s poetry, one of which could be her own choice:⁸⁵

This loss of a voice, obviously a crucial metaphor for a poet, can be seen in Plath’s poetry in two ways. It is something that might be done to her, and as such is an expression of powerlessness. At the same time, it is something she could choose as the price for her transformation, a risk she could take to reach a reality outside her own sphere, outside of language. (61)

Many critics agree about the theatrical nature of Plath’s work, and some emphasize it as a psychic inner one.⁸⁶ If what happens in “Daddy” is a stage show, then going into the hiatus of silence is really going offstage. This movement off is like the act of drowning in “Full Fathom Five”: “Father, this thick air is murderous / I would breathe water” (*CP* 92-93). The speaking subject, muted now, has to reiterate her birth into the symbolic, to climb on stage to breathe and act out again. Therefore, Plath’s unique voice is not only manifested in each poem, but also across poems where silence as transcendence lies in between. For example, the drama of “Daddy” continues in its companion piece, “Medusa” (*CP* 224), where the subject is still offstage or down under water — the watery atmosphere in “Medusa” is evidence of that — as freshly separated from an abject mother and in “a defense against the emptiness of separation” (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 42). In other words, in “Medusa” there is a separation from the mother and towards narcissism (identity) and dynamism for the sake of transformation. At the same time, narcissism covers an abyss where this identity is threatened with being engulfed (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 42).

“Medusa” is considered Plath’s real mother by many critics (Bundtzen, *Plath’s Incarnation* 91, 106; Butscher, *Method and Madness* 305-306). Some read the end of the poem as indicative either of Plath’s ability to get rid of her mother (Uroff 183) or inability to do so (Christodoulides 228). Although “Medusa” was discussed earlier by other critics in terms of Plath’s poetic creativity, Christodoulides was one of the first to call her an

abject mother in the Kristevan sense of the term. The daughter struggles against a stifling mother, who in turn threatens to engulf her and is fascinating, as well as horrifying. This, according to Christodoulides, reflects the love-hate relationship between Plath and her mother. However, to understand “Medusa” as Plath disappearing in silence, offstage at the end of “Daddy,” then trying to separate from her abject mother again gives the poem another dimension. Frightened and overwhelmed as she is, she says: “I didn’t call you / I didn’t call you at all” (*CP* 225). This is because the mother, powerful as she is, is the one who calls the subject. This is what Kristeva describes as the “call of the mother” (*About Chinese Women* 39). Nevertheless, by cutting the dialogue with the father and by creating silence at the end of “Daddy,” Plath facilitates fusion with the mother, responding to her call as she waits at the other end of the telephone line in “Daddy”: “In any case, you are always there, / Tremulous breath at the end of my line” (225). After succumbing to the call of the mother as fusion with her, the most important question posed by Plath is: “Did I escape, I wonder?” Can Plath unbind herself from this sweet stifling fusion?:

Curve of water upleaping
 To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
 Touching and sucking.
 [.].
 Nevertheless, nevertheless
 You steamed to me over the sea,
 Fat and red, a placenta

Paralysing the kicking lovers. (*CP* 225)

Christodoulides reads “Off, off eely tentacle! / There is nothing between us” at the end of the poem as the inability of the daughter to achieve freedom from her mother (Christodoulides 191). One could argue, however, that the subject is able to get rid of the stifling hold of the mother at least temporarily, to form an “I” again on stage. This is why Medusa’s “Old barnacled umbilicus” keeps itself in constant “repair,” as the subject in process keeps oscillating between “I” and “not-I.” Each time she wins her struggle with the

mother, the victory is only temporary, as she relapses and returns to her again. If the symbol of *The Bell Jar* is identified as the “mother child matrix” (Draskau 48) that is stifling and choking, which in “Medusa” is equivalent to the “ghastly Vatican,” then in Plath’s poetry, as well as her novel, this bell jar keeps moving up and down until the end. Christodoulides shows that Plath’s mother, Aurelia, is victorious since she manages to survive the difficulties in her life (227). Nonetheless, it is the subject who is able to confront the abject mother and survive creatively for a while away from her. Whether it is “Medusa” or “The Disquieting Muses,” whether a mother or a maternal literary heritage, Plath is able to confront them and be separated from them. This will give her a unique voice that will enable her to continue the process of transformation.

Oscillation between fusion with and separating from the mother, between passivity and motility, is clear not only in the reciprocity of a poem like “Daddy,” but also the movement between the two poems, “Daddy” and “Medusa.” This kind of movement manifests itself in Plath’s verse towards the end of her career. It is what other critics refer to as the cycle of death and rebirth. Kendall suggests: “Each poem offers a fresh start” where transcendence, silence, that happens at the end of each poem is a “contingent or temporary solution” (159). This reveals Plath’s work as the Kristevan body “digitalized-in a kind of off-on, off-on” or “open versus shut” (Foster et al. 13, 18). It is like the feverish quivering body in “Fever 103” (*CP* 231): “I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.” It is also like the red wall in “Apprehensions”: “This red wall winces continually: A red fist, opening and closing” (*CP* 195). Moreover, “[s]queezing the breath from the blood bells / Of the fuchsia” (“Medusa” 225) in one instance becomes “[t]he blood jet is poetry” (“Kindness” 270). In the moment when “[m]eaning leaks from the molecules” and the heart seems to come to a stop, “[t]he chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats, / The children leap in their cots. / The sun blooms, it is a geranium. / The heart has not stopped” (“Mystic” 269). This winking oscillation between disintegration and wholeness is transformative, like making a colossus again by gluing it together, as in “The Colossus,”

and identifying with it as in “Daddy”: “But they pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue” (224). This is done just to destroy the colossus once again, making silence only to start afresh. This alternation between “I” and “not-I” is put most eloquently by Plath herself: “I: how firm a letter; how reassuring the three strokes: one vertical, proud and assertive, and then the two short horizontal lines in quick, smug succession. The pen scratches on the paper . . . I . . . I . . . I . . . I . . . I . . . I” (*Journals* 34). This entails one identification with the father (the “I”) and one with the mother (the strokes).

After the dialogic heterogeneity witnessed in “Daddy,” Plath’s silence at the end is a final defiance against the father. Silence, which in Plath’s later work comes to equal transcendence, is a fusion with the mother. In order to free herself from this paralysis and get back to the symbolic where dynamism is at work, she has to separate from the mother, as in “Medusa.” However, this movement between passivity and dynamism, between presence and absence, is not unique to these two poems, but is a general characteristic, especially of Plath’s later work.

6.3 Back again from “Medusa” to “Daddy”

The merger with, then separation from the mother in “Medusa” can be detected in other poems where Plath asserts her rebirth, as she always asserts her death. The rebirth is a movement from the semiotic to the symbolic, as, for instance, in “The Rabbit Catcher,” “Event,” and “The Stones” in “A Poem for a Birthday.” Although the speakers of these poems do not have the dynamism of “Daddy” and the later poems, they have “the ability to assert their continuing existence and self-hood” as an act of defiance (Kendall 99).

“The Rabbit Catcher” (*CP* 193) is often approached in context of marital problems between Plath and Hughes caused by his infidelity (Wagner-Martin, *A Biography* 205; Stevenson 244-45). It is usually read as the ability of Hughes, as a representative of the patriarchal system, to dominate her life. The reference to catching a rabbit — Hughes was a

keen hunter — and the line “And we too, had a relationship” make this reading justified. However, “The Rabbit Catcher” could be read as Plath’s assertion of her identity in the form of a rebirth, a movement from the semiotic *chora* to the symbolic. At the beginning of the poem, the subject to be born is in a place similar to the semiotic *chora* where “[d]iscrete quantities of energy move through the body of the subject who is not yet constituted as such and, in the course of his [her] development, they are arranged according to the various constraints imposed on this body” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 25). This is a place where the subject to be born is still in a state of abjection and where “that impetus, that spasm, that leap is drawn toward an elsewhere as tempting as it is condemned. Unflaggingly, like an inescapable boomerang, a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (Kristeva, *Powers* 1). Plath’s delineation of an undefined place of certain energy sounds like Kristeva’s definition of the *chora*:

It was a place of force—
 The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
 Tearing off my voice, and the sea
 Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
 Unreeling in it, spreading like oil. (*CP* 193)

In this “place” the fusion is with the maternal as there is no other. The wind gags the speaker’s mouth with her own hair. Moreover, when a voice tries to assert itself, it is torn off. The reference to the “lives of the dead” in the sea seems to refer to the not-yet constituted subject as it is still neither alive nor dead. In fact, the atmosphere where the speaker appears to be is like a womb contracting for birth. Then begins the formation of an other in the imaginary where the hurt is an indication of the beginning of ego formation: “I tasted the malignity of the gorse, / [. . .] / They had efficiency, a great beauty, / And were extravagant, like torture” (193). The subject is to be born in a few minutes after what Rose describes as “the activity of the mother’s body in childbirth as it contracts and opens, ushering the fetus into the world” (*Haunting* 138). Kendall identifies this separation but not the suffocating other at the end of the first stanza, which could be read as the mother.⁸⁷ The

hole which is made for birth is the same hole that the subject has blown in the text as silence at the end of a poem such as “Daddy,” but this time to go out of silence into life.⁸⁸

In “The Rabbit Catcher,” one sees suddenly the subject in a social context fully born:

I felt a still busyness, an intent.
I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing the white china.
How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him. (*CP* 194)

The poem ends with the idea that after separation from the maternal in order to reach the symbolic world, the speaker has to face another dismal world of social constriction. She has to confront her husband/father again and assert herself in this world, which is also the world of writing:

And we too, had a relationship—
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing,
The constriction killing me also. (*CP* 194)

The connections between them, which are “too deep to uproot,” are not only feelings that Plath still has for her husband, in spite of his betrayal — and considering that this poem was written not long after she suspected him — but also the language which is in his power.

The journey taken in “The Rabbit Catcher” resembles that in an early poem called “Channel Crossing” where the “[b]lue sailors” are faced with the “stark violence” of the sea (*CP* 26-27). The abject violence of the poem “lays all walls waste” until at the end when “all dangers end” and “we assume our names.” Entering the symbolic world where “docks halt our brief epic,” the sailors, though safe, are strangers in exile, facing a different kind of horrors: “we walk the plank with strangers.”

“Event” (*CP* 194), a poem written the same day as “The Rabbit Catcher,” further discusses the marriage of Plath and Hughes in terms of death and rebirth. The event could be read not only as separation from her husband, but also the subject’s rebirth into the symbolic, followed by death for lack of love, a m/other. The artist is “subject to death but also to rebirth” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 70). This is why in “Event” “the elements solidify” and “[i]ntolerable vowels enter my heart” (194). The child in the poem is juxtaposed with the poet’s birth where a face must be created for him: “His little face is carved in pained, red wood.” It “[o]pens its mouth” not only for food, but also its first vowels. The other scene in the poem is that of death where “I cannot see your eyes.” There is this dissolving of the other whenever love is not possible. Whether this is a separation from Hughes, as indicated by the reference to the ring here, or from the child, it is a final one into death:

Where apple bloom ices the night
 I walk in a ring,
 A groove of old faults, deep and bitter.

Love cannot come here.
 A black gap discloses itself.
 On the opposite lip

A small white soul is waving, a small white maggot.
 My limbs, also, have left me.
 Who has dismembered us?

The dark is melting. We touch like cripples. (*CP* 195)

The “black gap that discloses itself,” the soul that is waving goodbye, the limbs which “have left me” are all indications of this final descent into darkness. The “apple bloom” fails to relieve the darkness in contradistinction to Aird (47). For it “ices the night,” that is, freezing it as in a fatal atmosphere.

This cycle of death and rebirth is further related to the semiotic and the symbolic in “The Stones” in “A Poem for a Birthday” (*CP* 136). It shows movement from

dismemberment on the verge of the thetic (the threshold of the symbolic) to full birth into the symbolic. One sees the subject falling out of light, most probably the light at the end of the preceding poem “Witch Burning,” in order to enter into the “stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard,” the place of fusion with the mother “[i]n a quarry of silences.” The people of the city state of the father not only hear it, but also fear engulfment from it: “The mouth-hole crying their locations.” This is to take a revenge in return for “the days / I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone” (“Witch Burning” 135), in other words, living under the shadow of a colossal father. However, she has kept struggling masochistically in pleasure and pain — “My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs” — until she is lost in silence (“Witch Burning” 136). Burned or engulfed in the cupboard of silence, she now struggles to go back (Christodoulides 215). On the edge of the symbolic (the thetic) — “This is the after-hell: I see the light,” — the “old worrier” or the old warrior is stitched again from fragmentation into being to assert herself in the symbolic world of language and confront the father-figure later on. “There is nothing to do,” it is claimed, but in fact there is still plenty to do to achieve transformation, and yet there is nothing to do with this bothering “itch” that will hurt as long as there is something to do.⁸⁹

As has been discussed so far, Plath’s negativity and angry feelings have been released in the text. This results in an unprecedented motility in Plath’s work which takes shape in poems like “Daddy”, as a masochistic oscillation between “I” and the other. The movement of Plath’s work takes another form and that is movement between the realm of the symbolic and the semiotic (presence and absence) either in one poem or between poems. What many critics refer to as the cycle of death and rebirth in Plath’s work is seen in terms of the fusion and separation from the mother, from the semiotic *chora* to the symbolic. The fragmentation in the subject of Plath’s poetry, which is caused by her movement, can be also detected in her attitude to time and its fragmentation.

6.4 Fragmentation of Time

Just as Plath's subject fluctuates between two heterogeneous modes, the semiotic and the symbolic, so does time; Plath's obsession with which evidences her ability to achieve this heterogeneity. In Kristeva's essay, "Women's Time," she presents female subjectivity as linked to cyclical time (that is, repetition), which is related to natural cycles, gestation, biological rhythm, and monumental time (that is, eternity) "all encompassing and infinite like imaginary space" (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 191). In opposition to this is the linear and masculine time of history, or "the obsessional time" as "project, teleology, linear and prospective unfolding: [. . .] as departure, progression and arrival" (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 192). These modes are defined by Broe in relation to Plath's work as "clock time versus heart time" (15).

Although the cyclical and eternal are related to the mother and thus bring *jouissance*, they are inscribed within history. Kristeva stresses this earlier in *About Chinese Women*: "There is no time without speech. Therefore, no time without the father" (35). The woman or the mother is outside time and cannot enter to transform it as "Truth" unless she is masked by it (36). Kristeva explains that the word "temporality" imperfectly fits the feminine time, which is more space than time. It is "anteriotemporal" (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 192), a space where involuntary memory and sensations ("colour, taste, touch and other forms of experience") are regained by way of signs (Kristeva, *Proust and the Sense of Time* 14, 25). Therefore, the non-temporal, which is perceived by the senses, is "embodied time" (Kristeva, *Proust* 24). The eternal, for Kristeva, is a time of revolt capable of transformation. In its extreme form, this becomes a "time of death" opposed to the "advance or increase of consciousness, as well as of life" (Kristeva, *Intimate Revolt* 31).

As has been noted, Sexton is a prisoner of time like the protagonist of "Briar Rose," who "cannot escape her present, past, or even her doomed future" (Miller 300).

Sexton's inability to break free from her proper borders to confront an abject mother or separate from another evokes stagnation in her work. Like a person who is pulled by ropes in opposite directions, Sexton is immobilized, just like much of time in her work. No wonder, then, that she refers to time in "For Mr. Death Who Stands with His Door Open" as "Nazi Mama" and not as a father (*ASCP* 351). In contrast, Plath swings between modes of time and thus brings change to her work. For her, time is in constant fluctuation and "cannot be seen as any positive movement toward a stable subjectivity" (*Strangeways* 152).⁹⁰ In her later poetry, however, death marks the disintegration of linearity into a pre-symbolic space of unconsciousness.

Plath expresses her obsession with time in a number of *Journal* entries. In one entry, she shows her intolerance to the measured ticking of the clock (linearity) and its capacity to destroy dreams and restrict creative thoughts:

... I may say that my philosophy has been deeply affected by the fact that windshield wipers ticked off seconds too loudly and hopelessly, that my clock drips loud sharp clicks too monotonously on my hearing. I can hear it even through the pillow I muffle it with – the tyrannical drip drip drip drip of seconds along the night. And in the day, even when I'm not there, the seconds come out in little measured strips of time. And I wind the clock. And I look at the windshield wipers cutting an arch out of the sprinkled raindrops on the glass. Click-click. Clip-clip. Tick-tick. snip-snip. And it goes on and on. I could smash the measured clicking sound that haunts me – draining away life, and dreams, and idle reveries. Hard, sharp ticks. I hate them. Measuring thought, infinite space, by cogs and wheels. Can you understand? (25)

Plath complains about "measured" time as it controls "infinite space," the unbound time of imagination and "dreams." In another entry she writes: "God, I scream for time to let go, to write, to think" (33). However, elsewhere in her *Journals*, she registers the importance of time to her writing: "Do I need to write anything? Or do I need time & blood? I need a full head, full of people" (308); and "yes, obsessed, as always, with the vanishing of time!" (164). For if time disappears, this means the vanishing of ideas imperative to the writer: "Overwhelmed by lack of time, race of time, speed of time, I retreat into non-thought [. . .] momentary ephemeral flashes of well-being and ill-being" (92).

Plath's short stories, too, are haunted by time. For example, the tyranny of linearity is portrayed in a dream in Plath's story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams." The dream is that of a Catholic man who fears death and going to hell, and analyzed by the young assistant in the hospital's psychology clinic. It shows what real hell is: "a gothic interior in some monastery cellar, [. . .] and it was the Hall of Time, with the bodies in the foreground still warm, discoloring and starting to rot in the middle distance, and the bones emerging, clean as a whistle, in a kind of white futuristic glow at the end of the line" (*Johnny Panic* 22). The real hell for this religious man is the linear time that decays the body. The different stages of the corpses as they appear in the dream emphasize the importance of the body and its sensations to the man. Therefore, there seems to be a hidden wish in this dream for a somatic time, for passion, forbidden a Catholic man.

Hanging on walls in these stories is "the grandfather clock." This clock "gap[es] at [Elizabeth], speechless before the next reproving tick" in "Sunday at the Mintons" (153) and there is "[n]o sound, except for the hollow ticking of the grandfather clock" in "Stone Boy with Dolphin" (300). This paternal clock conspires with the male protagonists. For example, in "Sunday at the Mintons," which appeared in *Mademoiselle* in August 1952, Henry, who lives with his spinster sister, Elizabeth, and controls her life, is depicted in terms of measured time:

She visualized Henry in the centre of the map, which was quartered like an apple pie under the blue dome of a bowl. Feet planted firmly he stood with pencil and paper making calculations, checking to see that the world revolved on schedule. At night he would watch the constellation go ticking by like luminous clocks, and he would call them cheerily by name, as if greeting punctual relatives. (154)

Unlike her own luxuriant imagination, her brother's was mathematically calculated and geometrically shaped:

Henry's mind, she was certain, would be flat and level, laid out with measured instruments in the broad even sunlight. There would be geometric concrete walks and square, substantial buildings with clocks on them, everywhere perfectly in time, perfectly synchronized. The air would be thick with their accurate ticking. (155)

In comparison, Elizabeth's world is dominated by the senses. It is a semiotized world of art with its "colored lights swinging and wavering, like so many lanterns reflecting on the water, and pictures coming and going on the misty walls, soft and blurred like impressionist paintings" (155). In this feminine time colours, rhythms, and scents are triggered in the memory by the various flowers and musical instruments mentioned: "The colors would be broken down in small tinted fragments, and the pink of the ladies' flesh would be the pink of the roses, and the lavender of the dresses would mingle with the lilacs. And there would be, from somewhere sweetly coming, the sound of violins and bells" (155).

In the concluding part of the story, Elizabeth fantasizes about a secret wish for her brother to drown in the sea, weighted down by his measurement tools: "She envisioned a green, aquatic Henry dropping through layers of clouded water like a porpoise. There would be seaweed in his hair and water in his pockets. Weighted by the round gold watch, by the white-faced compass, he would sink down to the ocean floor" (158). In this imaginary scene, his watch stops ticking and he is encompassed by Elizabeth's destructive art: "The water would ooze inside his shoes and seep into the workings of his watch until the ticking stopped" (158). Unlike the female protagonist in "The Wishing Box," Elizabeth, at the end of the story, submits to the symbolic world of her brother, avoiding death but living a death-in-life. By writing such stories, Plath seems to emphasize the way the tyranny of linear time prevents the working of the imagination.

The power of the imagination is further explored in "The Wishing Box." The story is about Harold, who is able to dream and his wife, Agnes, who cannot. Their difference echoes the competitive relationship between Plath and Hughes. The wife envies her husband for his astonishing imagination and those colourful dreams, which "were nothing if not meticulous works of art" (*Johnny Panic* 49). The cruel husband makes her conscious of her problem. Although Agnes used to have fertile dreams in her "more creative

childhood days,” she is now threatened by sheer silence in her head and loss of imagination (50). Agnes reads “anything to keep from facing the gaping void” and “as soon as she lifted her eyes from the printed matter at hand, it was as if a protecting world had been extinguished” (53). For this reason Agnes seems to be overwhelmed by anything she encounters: “She felt choked, smothered by these objects whose bulky pragmatic existence somehow threatened the deepest, most secret roots of her own ephemeral being” (53). Afterwards, we witness the release of Agnes’s imagination which turns the story into infinite emptiness, silence and death. First, time speeds up: “she suddenly realized to her terror that her eyes scanned five pages without taking in the meaning of a single word,” and when attending movies “the fluid kaleidoscope of forms before her eyes lulled her into a rhythmic trance” (54). The physical time, which is constituted from divided days, becomes an endless stretch of nullity:

the curtains of sleep, of refreshing, forgetful darkness dividing each day from the day before it, and the day after it, were lifted from Agnes eternally, irrevocably. She saw an intolerable prospect of wakeful, visionless days and nights stretching unbroken ahead of her, her mind condemned to perfect vacancy, without a single image of its own to ward off the crushing assault of smug, autonomous tables and chairs. (54)

At the end of the story, her silence is a moment of “triumph” and death where eternal dreams extend linear time. Her suicide becomes the only way to defy her husband and free herself from the tyranny of temporality. Agnes’s “secret smile of triumph” is also her last smile “in some country unattainable to mortal men” (55).

Plath’s poetry also refers to time fragmentation as related to the subject’s disintegration. Like the stories, some of these poems focus on the oppression of time and nostalgia for an oblivious time. In “Sonnet: To Time” (*CP* 311), part of her *Juvenilia*, linearity is presented as vanishing in spite of its dazzling albeit fake glamour: “Today we move in jade and cease with garnet / Amid the ticking jeweled clocks that mark / Our years. Death comes in a casual steel car, yet / We vaunt our days in neon and scorn the dark.” The persona of the poem, like Sexton’s, is yearning for space outside the historical

bars of the father's city state. The persona is dreaming of eternity, an artistic time free of the symbolic: "Time is a great machine of iron bars / That drains eternally the milk of stars." Furthermore, in "Cinderella" (*CP* 303), the persona is depicted in an eternal dream world: "The whole revolving tall glass palace hall / Where guests slide gliding into light like wine; / Rose candles flicker on the lilac wall / Reflecting in a million flagons' shine" (304). Then suddenly she, as one of the "gilded couples all in whirling trance," is deprived of the otherworldly dream when "[s]he hears the caustic ticking of the clock."

However, in "The Times Are Tidy" (*CP* 107), one senses some appreciation of linear time although it is nevertheless tedious, a "stuck record." This positive reception is clear in the lines: "History's beaten the hazard" and, therefore, "the children are better for it, / The cow milks cream an inch thick." Additionally, in "Years" (*CP* 255), Plath relinquishes her idea of an eternal space outside time, taking an opposite position. She does not even seem to envy God for it. She insists that real life, negativity and creativity are in the chronological here and now, rather than in the spatial cosmos, for it is only when eternity is inscribed in the linearity of time that change can happen and motility be achieved. Therefore, temporality in Plath's *oeuvre* is not only frozen, spatialized, or oppressive, it is also transforming (Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath* 52-56). The dynamism, which she yearns for in her art, is depicted as the movement of the piston and the horse:

What I love is
The piston in motion—
My soul dies before it.
And the hooves of the horses,
Their merciless churn.

And you, great Stasis—
What is so great in that! (*CP* 255)

Moreover, "Notes to a Neophyte," a piece of advice to a young artist (*CP* 306), emphasizes the importance of time and dynamism in the act of creation:

it was a solar turbine

gave molten earth a frame,
 and it took the diamond stone
 a weight of world and time
 being crystallized from carbon
 to the hardest substance known. (*CP* 306-7)

Although Plath sounds here like a believer in the divine creation of the universe, she wishes in “Sonnet to Satan” to create a “Doomsday” of creativity (*CP* 323), a violent heterogeneity which ends in total and perfect silence: “Commanding that corkscrew comet jet forth ink / to pitch the white world down in swiveling flood, / you overcast all order’s noonday rank / and turn god’s radiant photograph to shade” (“Sonnet to Satan” 323). Her deepest wish is to stop time: “O maker of proud planet’s negative, / obscure the scalding sun till no clocks move.”

But this extreme wish to freeze linear time, which adumbrates Plath’s early poems, is postponed until the end of her poetic journey. Dialectic oscillation between conscious and unconscious time will take place before that moment. The journey through her poetry is, in fact, a journey in relation to time. It is the journey of Giorgio de Chirico’s trains,⁹¹ as manifested in “Getting There” and “Totem” (*CP* 247, 264). It is a psychic journey from whiteness in her early poems to a final whiteness and, in between, the bloody red atrocities of negativity. In “Getting There,”⁹² the persona takes a linguistic position in the train: “I am a letter in this slot— / I fly to a name, two eyes” (*CP* 248). For Schwartz and Bollas, this journey also starts with a departure from “the beautiful fusion with the world” that “must have supplied her [Plath] with psychic nourishment” to “some inexorable drive” presented by the train which “merges in her language with her own driving rage” (182-83). Likewise, Aird suggests that it is a life journey that “contains only blood, suffering, pain, wars and screaming” (85). In “Getting There,” when negativity begins in language, the result is the disintegration of the subject, who is healed momentarily in a “trainstop” (*CP* 248). The atrocities of “some war or other” could be a result of negativity achieved by the

movement of the train which causes pain and suffering: “The men the blood still pumps forward, / Legs, arms piled outside / The tent of unending cries— / A hospital of dolls.”

In order for the train of linear time to move, it is necessary to kill the mother which will make the symbolic accessible. The body of the woman, considered an obstacle to the train’s movement, could be read, in this sense, as the mother’s, which is paradoxically the final destination of the train. Death is a temporary fusion with the mother followed by a separation. This is why a baby is born out of “the black car of Lethe” at the end of the poem (249). The violent heterogeneity, “[t]he fire’s between us,” is what prevents that fusion for a while (249). Oppressed by linear movement, the persona dreams of a circular feminine time, an “untouchable” place as an escape existing outside language: “Is there no still place / Turning and turning in the middle air, / Untouched and untouchable” (“Getting There” 249). In fact, Plath describes a feminine cyclical time within linearity in many poems. For example, she uses the image of the menstrual moon as a symbol of fertility and barrenness in poems such as “The Munich Mannequins,” “Moonrise,” and “Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices.” Moreover, she oscillates between fecundity (in “Morning Song” and “Heavy Women”) and sterility (in “Barren Woman” and “The Munich Mannequins”). At times, she wishes for a frozen sterility in perfection outside language. The train, however, like an insatiable animal, will not stop until it reaches the final destination of death, which is also a rebirth. During this journey, the subject in process will hold “suitcases,” similar to the ones in “Totem,” which are multiplied and split like her personality or like the spider with “many arms.” The result of this is active creativity until death circulates all (“Totem” 264-65).

Plath has to set out on the journey and ride the train or else remain in the state of whiteness, witnessed in her early poems. Any delay could be disastrous for her creativity although paradoxically the journey will end in death. Tracy Brain describes one of Plath’s collected images in a scrapbook, kept at the Lilly Library, as implying human beings’ slavery to the age and its technologies, which we can also read as indispensability of linear

time and language to her life and creativity: “A horrified man in a savage landscape holds his arms akimbo in desperate frustration as a train moves off without him. A wristwatch, bigger than the man, hangs from a tree. The watch’s face shows the time: ‘8:16’. Below it are the words ‘. . . is much too late’ ” (Brain 93). Plath, it seems, must ride the departing train, which will ensure her works will achieve the momentum and transformation. During the ride she faces the law of the father in poems, such as “Daddy,” “Lady Lazarus” and “Purdah.”

As the subject becomes almost ahistorical towards the end of Plath’s career, time starts to dissolve in favour of space and, in “The Night Dances,” it peels and melts like the “petals,” like “your gestures” (*CP* 249). The “smile” and the “dances” will lose themselves in space rather than mathematical time:

A smile fell in the grass.
Irretrievable!

And how will your night dances
Lose themselves. In mathematics?

Such pure leaps and spirals—
Surely they travel
The world forever [. . .]. (“The Night Dances” 249-50)

The portrayal of the mother with her child is reminiscent of the kind of memory Kristeva refers to in “Stabat Mater”: “Concerning that stage of my childhood, scented, warm, and soft to the touch, I have only a spatial memory. No time at all” (*Tales of Love* 256). At the end of “The Night Dances,” spatial memory reaches “[n]owhere,” which means everywhere without any restricting borders of time. In the poem a lost maternal time is only regained in an involuntary memory, perceived by the senses:

The comets
Have such a space to cross,

Such coldness, forgetfulness.

So your gestures flake off—

Warm and human, then their pink light
Bleeding and peeling

Through the black amnesias of heaven.
Why am I given

These lamps, these planets
Falling like blessings, like flakes

Six-sided, white
On my eyes, my lips, my hair

Touching and melting.
Nowhere. (*CP* 250)

In “Nick and the Candlestick,” the mother addresses her son, saying, “You are the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious” (*CP* 242). But can she lean on space itself without any solid phallic reference in terms of her creativity? The answer comes in “Thalidomide” (*CP* 252): in creating a frail maternal space without solid symbolic foundation, one ends up with an abject form like that of the mutilated Thalidomide babies: “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 kind of art is liable to annihilation: “The dark fruits revolve and fall. / The glass cracks across, / The image / Flees and aborts like dropped mercury.”

However, before this space proliferates, the speaking subject is destined to live in “[d]oom of Exiles” (*CP* 318). She has to swing forward — “[b]oth seraph song and violins are dumb; / Each clock tick consecrates the death of strangers” and “[b]ackward” — we travel “to reclaim the day / Before we fell, like Icarus, undone.” In “All the Dead Dears,” the maternal is going to usurp the space between the “tick” and the “tack” of the clock (*CP* 71). The subject will fluctuate, accordingly, between dying in fusion with the mother(s),

the “outlaws,” and living heterogeneity “as cradles rock,” which evokes the sense of time passing.

In her essay “A Comparison,” Plath envies the novelist who, unlike the poet, has enough time and space in the novel. Whereas the poet “can take about a minute” and her poem is “a door opens, a door shuts,” the novelist has sufficient time to say whatever she wants: “Her business is Time, the way it shoots forward, shunts back, blooms, decays and double exposes itself. Her business is people in Time. And she, it seems to me, has all the time in the world. She can take a century if she likes, a generation, a whole summer” (*Johnny Panic* 56). Despite envying the novelist, Plath, “[t]he poet [who] becomes an expert packer of suitcases” (57), demonstrates fluctuation between “I” and “not-I,” in the compactness of her poems. In refutation of her own critical opinion, Plath was able to create worlds between the tick and the tack of the clock in her poetry.⁹³

The fragmentation of time between the conscious and the unconscious not only in one poem, but also between different poems, along with Plath’s short stories, provides general momentum in her work. This is why she is considered a subject in process, capable of transforming herself and confronting the law of the father. Plath’s defiance against the father will be discussed in the next chapter. Plath mainly achieves this by releasing death into her work through a variety of means: burning, cannibalism, killing and shedding blood, and by using veils. Death is freed not only as a drive in her work, but also a theme and performance. For this reason Plath deserves the title of the “deadmost.”

Chapter 7

The “Deadmost”

Plath started her journey by breaking her proper borders to encounter a m/other, but ended in her passivity. Not surrendering to this passivity, she tried to evoke a hurting other to wake her senses into reciprocity. However, it was not until negativity, a form of anger and hatred directed at her mother and her husband/father, was released in her work of art that a “real” transformation of herself and the law of the father began. In “Daddy,” for instance, she defies the father by releasing anger. Other poems also exemplify her movement between presence and absence, the symbolic and the semiotic, language and silence. The release of the death drive as a violent dynamic force is evident in many other poems. In them, she encounters death face to face. Therefore, the masochistic reciprocity in “Daddy” is also shown in these poems.

The release of the death drive and the recurrence of many forms of violent death in her poetry make Plath worthy of the title the “deadmost.” The “deadmost” is the revolutionary subject, the subject in process whose text does not only witness the release of the death drive, but also the recurrence of violence and death, which culminates in the most deadly act, silence. She dies the “most” in contrast to the dead/less who dies “less” in her work of art as she fears confrontations and thus disintegration. In terms of abjection, the “deadmost” oscillates between “inside” and “outside” of her psychic borders, and between the symbolic and the semiotic. This is why the “deadmost” is more capable of motility and change, as well as creating a unique revolutionary voice.

As the “deadmost” she dies a great deal in her work for the sake of achieving transformation and *jouissance*. This is why “[d]ying / Is an art, like everything else / I do it exceptionally well” becomes a general dictum for Plath (“Lady Lazarus” 244). Plath states in “Tulips,” “I have nothing to do with explosions” (CP 160), which makes her, according

to Freud, unconsciously guilty of them. It makes her not only capable of the violence of “pulverizing” thethetic, “exploding the subject toward heterogeneous materiality” and “shattering in the process,” thereby reflecting her bodily suffering (Kristeva, *Revolution* 69, 211, 188), but also of creating ultimate silence as the “most” deadly act. In her poetry at this stage, the subject’s somatic drive is at its peak; it will take her to “the heart of *jouissance* and death” (Kristeva, *Revolution* 179). This may be why Kendall views Plath’s poetry as at its best when death is present. When it disappears, the “incandescent energy” of her poems loses its triumphant resonance (168).

In contrast, Sexton, as we have seen, resists the face to face encounter with death, represented by the abject mother. This resistance is due to fear and the crypt she holds buried inside her. It delays violent reciprocity in her poetry where the death drive is not fervent enough to make transformation possible. In other words, Sexton does not have the courage to encounter or perform death although she longs for it. And when the maternal abject bursts into her text, she resorts to God to protect her. Therefore, Sexton deserves to be given, in contrast to Plath, the title of the “dead/less.”

The “deadmost,” the “[i]ndeterminate criminal,” declares in “The Jailor”: “I die with variety — / Hung, starved, burned, hooked” (*CP* 227). In fact, in her work, generally, Plath “appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg” (“A Life” 149). Rather than simply being forms of torture, these ways of dying become her weapons as she dreams of confronting the law of the father: “All night I have dreamed of destruction, annihilations — / An assembly-line of cut throats, and you and I” (“Waking in Winter” 151).⁹⁴ These destructive dreams together with the weapons are means to achieve a new identity and to subvert the husband/father who ruthlessly hurts her, as in “The Jailor”:⁹⁵ “All day, gluing my church of burnt matchsticks, / I dream of someone else entirely. / And he, for this subversion, / Hurts me, he / With his armor of fakery” (*CP* 227). To dispose of the law of the father, of the symbolic order entirely is extremely difficult, if not impossible, in terms

of her identity and creativity, for even confronting a mother is unattainable without the symbolic:

I imagine him
 Impotent as distant thunder,
 In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration.
 I wish him dead or away.
 That, it seems, is the impossibility. (*CP* 227)

The hopelessness of the task can be looked at also in terms of amnesia. In relapsing into the hole of silence, she actually falls into “a beautiful blank” where every fact of life is being erased, threatening her identity, as characterized in “Amnesiac.” In order to remember, she has to wear that symbolic (father/husband) mask in “The Jailer,” “[h]is high cold masks of amnesia” (227). She moves from chosen silence to enforced silence, forgetting about forgetfulness if she is to preserve her identity and creativity. And thus the question “what would he / Do, do, do, without me?” (227) in “The Jailer” is also ‘what do I do without him?’ However, the “deadmost” dreams of this impossibility as the only way of being free: “That, it seems, is the impossibility. / That being free” (227). Death with its ultimate *jouissance* becomes, paradoxically, her life: “Sweet Lethe is my life” (“Amnesiac” 234). She is, therefore, ready to die many times in a variety of ways to create heterogeneity, ending it each time with the “most” deadly act, silence, until she reaches, at the end of her journey, the impossible, freedom and final death.

One question remains: how could Plath, who was a pacifist, turn out to be the violent “deadmost” in her art? One answer comes in a comment made by Wagner on Plath’s personality: “There was a core of idealism to Sylvia’s often stubborn character, and her anger usually flared when her ideals were not respected” (*A Biography* 59). Plath’s poetry is further referred to by George Steiner as “the ‘Guernica’ of modern poetry”, thereby comparing it to a painting which is an anti-war symbol (218). However, reading her poetry means coming face to face with horror and violence. One can understand this if

one realizes that it is only through the clashing of horrors, which Picasso's painting presents, that the poet finds peace in the end.⁹⁶

The war launched against the law of the father, which is demonstrated in "Daddy," becomes apparent in other poems. Death, as a drive released in the text and as performance, will take many brutal forms in Plath's poetry to achieve the transgression: burning, cannibalism, killing and shedding blood, and using veils. By means of these weapons, she becomes the tortured and the torturer, moving between the "inside" and the "outside" of her psychic borders fluidly. However, Plath's project to defy the law exceeds its limit in the end. The father is not only defied, he is also discarded. More importantly, this defiance is related to Plath's process of creativity which is also jeopardized each time she threatens the symbolic law.

7.1 Burning

Burning is the first method Plath uses in the masochistic transposition between herself and the law of the father. In "Burning the Letters" (*CP* 204), as revenge for Hughes's deception, Plath puts all his correspondence into the fire. The "letters," which can also be read as writing symbols, belong to him. They are challenging ones and thus she decides to exterminate them: "I made a fire; being tired / Of the white fists of old / Letters and their death rattle / When I came too close to the wastebasket." The subject tries to stop the reciprocity of hurt between her and the "letters": "And here is an end to the writing, / The spy hooks that bend and cringe, and the smiles, the smiles." The letters "would flutter off, black and glittering, they would be coal angels / Only they have nothing to say to anybody. / I have seen to that." With her rake, she flakes up the papers, which, still resisting, "breathe like people," but she spreads them out to cool down in a pre-symbolic space: "Between the yellow lettuces and the German cabbage / Involved in its weird blue dreams, / Involved as a foetus" (204-5).

However, despite this cremation, a root of the burnt “letters”, a seed, and a name stays. Even the rain cannot extinguish the glow of the fire. Perloff (“Sylvia Plath’s Collected Poems” 301) and Van Dyne (“Fueling” 145-46) suggest that the remaining name in “Burning the Letters,” which strikes Plath, is that of Hughes’s mistress as there are many references in the poem to her origin, which was part German, part Russian. However, it could also refer to the name of the father. The symbolic name is what remains in the ash, albeit wilting: “And a name with black edges / Wilts at my foot” (205). The poem ends with a “red burst and a cry.” The cry “[t]hat splits from its ripped bag” is like that of the baby splitting from his mother into the world of the symbolic. The dynamic act of burning here is not going to end with a final act of silence and sexual relief for her “veins glow like trees” and rain “extinguishes nothing” (205). Although the “dogs are tearing a fox,” in reference to Hughes, and although her cry will “not stop / With the dead eye / And the stuffed expression, but goes on / Dyeing the air,” she is not successful in defying the father/husband this time, for the name that belongs to him remains.

The “immortality” Plath claims at the end of “Burning the Letters” is a forced artificial one, initiated by the name of the father. Therefore, the heat of the fire and “the smiles” that appeared earlier in the poem (204) might turn into “[t]he smile of iceboxes,” which “annihilates me” in “An Appearance” (*CP* 189). The woman in the latter poem turns into a language machine devoid of the semiotic. The symbols coming out of her mouth like kisses are devoid of any feelings: “From her lips ampersands and percent signs / Exit like kisses.” She follows the social rules blindly as she is “reducible to the domestic appliances she operates and the repetitive functions she performs” (Britzolakis 119). She is producing art here, expressed in terms of clothes, but it is inauthentic. For it is true that she suffers to produce these clothes (art) but they are only for the socially powerful. Therefore, the automatic, mechanical speaker is subjugated to the linear time of her Swiss watch:

Is this love then, this red material
 Issuing from the steel needle that flies so blindingly?
 It will make little dresses and coats,

It will cover a dynasty.
 How her body opens and shuts—
 A Swiss watch, jeweled in the hinges! (*CP* 189)

The “disorganization” that she complains of is, in fact, too much organization. As opposed to the authentic violence of the stars, which are “flashing like terrible numerals,” the speaker is hypnotized into accepting a conventional kind of creative language: “ABC, her eyelids say.”

As the subject’s effort to defy the law of the father in “Burning the Letters” reaches an unexpected result, she tries again elsewhere. “Fever 103°” (*CP* 231), for example, shows how the heat generated by the illness becomes an element of defiance against the father/husband as much as it is torturous for the subject. The masochistic dialogue between “I” and “you,” who “has been burning me with cigarettes” (“The Jailer” 226), is most obvious in the lines: “Your body / Hurts me as the world hurts God” (*CP* 232). In this sense, she identifies with God. However, with her dangerous satanic heat, which is also creative, she becomes an evil version of God, burning the symbolic world:

Such yellow sullen smokes
 Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe
 Choking the aged and the meek,
 The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,
 The ghastly orchid
 Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!
 Radiation turned it white
 And killed it in an hour. (*CP* 231)

This is not the dull conventional hell of “fat Cerberus,” who is unable to consume the sexual hurt of the speaking subject or cleanse her “sin” (231). The sin here is transgression of the law of the father, which is also sexual transgression, “an overwhelming release of drives, unrestrained by the symbolic” (Kristeva, *Powers* 121,123-24). It will, then, be consumed totally not in the subject’s feverish hell, but in her infernal paradise, her ultimate evaporation and silence.

Before the ultimate death, as transcendence, negativity will be a burning “personal Hiroshima” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 236). Kristeva, like Plath, uses the political image of Hiroshima to describe private pain. In this sense, destructive radiation is a metaphor of psychic suffering that is also, like sin, transgressing the law: “[g]reasing the bodies of adulterers / Like Hiroshima ash and eating in. / The sin. The sin” (*CP* 231). In these lines there is an implicit threat to Plath’s husband who could be the addressee of the poem. Consequently, she has “a readiness to be victimized,” as Marsack suggests, and to defy, to be the flames that burn (10). At one point, Plath declares herself a “lantern,” a hellish God producing light by herself (232). Or she is a moon reflecting the light and thus passive and oppressed although sexually attractive: “My head a moon / Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin / Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.” In spite of the implicit question of origin posed here, the feverish female “I” is using her erotic heat and light to seduce the male “you” before the “huge camellia” withers due to water evaporation. It is interesting how flowers in this poem, namely the orchid and camellia, which usually connote women as beautiful and passive objects, become huge and murderous with sexual appetite: “Does not my heat astound you. And my light. / All by myself I am a huge camellia / Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.” As in “Daddy,” the female subject is trying to delay the erotic pleasure for a greater relief in the end. In masochism, “it is the moments of suspense that are the climactic moments” (Deleuze 30). Plath’s use of tentative words before her final evaporation indicates this kind of suspense: “I think I am going up, / I

think I may rise—.” The flickering between “I” and “not-I” ends with the subject’s transcendence (descendence) into a pre-symbolic paradise of silence: “Not him, nor him / (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) — / To Paradise.” If “[e]very woman’s a whore” (“Lesbos” 229), then in a communicative context between the semiotic and the symbolic, shedding the whore petticoats and dissolving becomes an act of defiance against the father who cannot touch her now. And thus, with the removal of the symbolic parenthetical brackets, “he,” and all other lovers, will not go to paradise. He will not enjoy the final sexual act because she has evaporated. This is why she is “a pure acetylene / Virgin.” She will have her *jouissance* though in her paradise of ultimate silence.

“Lady Lazarus” presents a similar case where the female “I” describes herself as “[b]right as a Nazi lampshade,” identifying with the Jew as in “Daddy” (CP 244). Then she later declares, as she addresses the father in the shape of “Herr Doktor,” “Herr Enemy”: “I turn and burn / Do not think I underestimate your great concern” (246). She reciprocally burns both herself and the other. In fact, she cannot burn the other unless she herself catches fire. The sexual movement, “I turn and burn,” is a condition for active reciprocity. This seductive scene of mutual hurt turns into another scene of ash where the father is taking his final breaths, dying with her: “Ash, ash – / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—.”

If the last act of burning to death is a microcosmic, personal holocaust or “Hiroshima ash” (“Fever 103°” 231), this is all done for the sake of transformation. However, the subject in process, the “deadmost,” will keep burning and healing, back and forth into a holocaust, as is clear in “Mary’s Song”: “It is a heart, / This holocaust I walk in” (CP 257). Although this holocaust burns and ousts the Jews, “[t]hey do not die” (257). The speaker, like them, will fight back in negativity, a *pharmakos* neither “outside,” nor “inside,” but “[o]n the high / precipice” (257). The world that “will kill and eat” in “Mary’s Song” will be burnt somewhere else:

Then hurl the bare world like a bluegreen ball

back into the holocaust
 to burn away the humbug rust
 and again together begin it all. (“Song for a Revolutionary Love” 323)

The beginning needs two to perform it, an alterity where the semiotic and the symbolic are in dialogue. For, as much as the “deadmost” is subjected to the terrors of the holocaust, she is also like that witch who gazes into the furnace seeking beauty and *jouissance*: “So I stared in that furnace / where beauties char / but found radiant Venus / reflected there” (“On Looking into the Eyes of a Demon Lover” 325). This reciprocity will continue in Plath’s work as she defies the law of the father. Cannibalism is another vicious weapon she will use to achieve transformation.

7.2 Cannibalism

In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva discusses the concept of abjection. As has been discussed earlier, abjection involves separation from the mother in order to establish oneself. This separation is manifest in faeces expulsion. It is only with the repetitious act of expelling waste that one can be. However, it is not only anality that makes “I” possible. Orality, as the child separates from her mother’s breast, can establish that “I” and her position in language too. It is a switch from the orality of sucking and chewing (incorporation and assimilation of the mother) to that of language (incorporation and introjection) (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 26). This is why orality, as separation from and fusion with the mother, act as negativity (Kristeva, *Revolution* 47). In this sense, cannibalism as a form of orality disturbs and dismantles the symbolic law of One.

One needs to devour the mother and assimilate her by devouring words or else one will be devoured by her. But what does it mean to devour a father? Is it a victory or a failure? It tends to be “normal” when the sexually powerful, symbolic father devours the female speaker. When she devours him in acts of revenge, she tries to disempower and dispense with him. However, in assimilating him, which is also erotic, she threatens not only his borders, but her own as well. She risks her identity and creativity being engulfed

by sameness. As a result, this form of cannibalism is repeated in Plath's poetry. This Fort/Da game — where separation from the mother (Fort) is introjection and the return and reunion with her is incorporation (Da) — keeps Plath's creativity not only dynamic, but also transformative. In this sense, orality as cannibalism demonstrates both love for the father and revenge on him in simultaneously assimilating and rejecting him as enemy. This is what Rose calls "protest and participation" (*Haunting* 123).

Since the "deadmost" is like that suit in "The Applicant," "waterproof, shatterproof, proof / Against fire and bombs through the roof" (*CP* 221) — not in the sense of resisting being pulverized, but of being reborn again into the symbolic — she continues her defiance of the law of the father in other poems. Thus she is seen as being reborn again in "Lady Lazarus" (*CP* 244): "I have done it again. / One year in every ten / I manage it—." Plath wrote about feeling like Lazarus after her suicide attempt in 1953 (*Journals* 199). However, the Lady Lazarus of the poem dies more frequently and in a more creative fashion. The "deadmost" dies in a variety of ways in this poem: burning, cannibalism and the use of veils in an attempt to defy the law of the father and achieve *jouissance*. As a result, she is "[a] sort of walking miracle." She can expire many times because "like the cat I have nine times to die." She therefore asks: "Do I terrify?—" Her versatile ability to kill herself is also a condition for her creativity. Torn between the call of society and the symbolic — "[t]he peanut-crunching crowd" who "had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls" — and her pre-Oedipal mother — "I guess you could say I've a call" — she creates an outstanding art: "Dying / is an art, like everything else / I do it exceptionally well" (245). The striptease act is both deathly — she is "skin and bone," "Do I terrify?" (245, 244) — and erotic:

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge

For the hearing of my heart—

It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
 For a word or a touch
 Or a bit of blood [.] (*CP* 246)

The connotations of “charge” here relate not only to the erotic and financial, but also to drives. After all, negativity, for Kristeva, is a “process of charges and stases” (*Revolution* 28). The charges are quantities of energy which, move through the body of the subject and which are arranged by family and social structures. Charges and their regulation are articulated in the definition of the *chora*: a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated (Kristeva, *Revolution* 25). The violent release of drives, especially the death drive, which are “simultaneously ‘positive’ and ‘negative,’ ” resembles an electric flow (Kristeva, *Revolution* 28). In her *Journals*, Plath describes a similar electric flow which runs through her and controls her life and poetry: “It is as if my life were magically run by two electric currents: joyous positive and despairing negative – which ever [sic] is running at the moment dominates my life, floods it” (395). In “Lady Lazarus,” after the aggressiveness shown by the release of the death drive, she submits to the male addressee by admitting to being his “opus,” his “valuable” (246). Some critics add that she is also his “baby” in the list of his valuable possessions (Van Dyne 55; Schwartz and Bollas 187). However, the lines end with a baby without a possessive pronoun preceding it: “The pure gold baby / That melts to a shriek.” This semiotic scream might indicate suffering but also defiance (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 100). After the immolation things begin once again: “I turn and burn.” However, the poem concludes with a last word for the “deadmost,” who avenges the father-figure by eating him in an act of cannibalism: “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (247).

The terrifying figure appears earlier in “Lady Lazarus” metonymically as “the full set of teeth” and “[t]he sour breath” that is indicative of her arising from the dead and of cannibalism (244). Another image that points towards this act is the red hair of hell which

will engulf the father in nothingness for “[o]nly the devil can eat the devil out” (“Witch Burning” 135). The end of “Lady Lazarus” is controversial. For some critics, it is a successful act of revenge against the male ego (Phillips 201), and “the system of male values” (Bassnett 115). Moreover, Van Dyne specifies the male culprit of the poem as Plath’s husband (*Revising Life* 55). Other critics see the last scene of devouring as a failure. For example, Ostriker views it as “hollow” because the reader realizes that the speaker is powerless (“The Americanization” 102). Lant similarly regards the speaker of the poem as vulnerable:

she has displayed herself not in an assertive way but in a sexually provocative and seductive way, and - at the very end - she resorts to descriptions of her *appearance* - her red hair - but not delineations of her *reality* - her anger. She does not convince the audience that she is, in fact, dangerous, for she must offer the female body as an *object* rather than assert it as a *weapon*. (654)

For Lant, the poem shows the speaker’s susceptibility as “too feminine” and submissive (653). Van Dyne, on the other hand, suggests that Plath was able to take revenge on her husband and to “appropriate his male powers to herself” (*Revising Life* 55). Although the power of the erotic act may sound masculine, it has its reverse side of dissolving and merger with the m/other. Hence the devouring act at the end of the poem could be seen as both a triumph and a threat to the speaker’s identity simultaneously, it is not either/or. It is triumphant as it helps transform the subject and defy the law, even if that defiance is only temporary. For this reason Britzolakis’s suggestion that “the attack on patriarchy is undercut by the illusionistic character of this apotheosis which purports to transform, at a stroke, a degraded and catastrophic reality” is incorrect (*Sylvia Plath* 155-56). The “stroke” that Britzolakis complains of at the end of the poem recurs in many others. Death in this sense is therefore a temporary solution repeated after every masochistic encounter between I and the other. However, it is not a monotonous repetition, for transformation brings a new level of meaning each time.

In fact, the last scene in “Lady Lazarus” is a reenactment of an early poem, “The Shrike” (*CP* 42) where the wife envious of her husband’s creativity turns into a shrike to eat him:

With taloned fingers,
 Shaking in her skull’s cage
 The stuffed shape of her flown mate
 Escaped among moon-plumaged strangers;
 So hungered, she must wait in rage
 Until bird-racketing dawn
 When her shrike-face
 Leans to peck open those locked lids, to eat
 Crowns, palace, all
 That nightlong stole her male,
 And with red beak
 Spike and suck out
 Last blood-drop of that truant heart. (*CP* 42)

The reciprocity never ends; we see Plath elsewhere not as a bird this time, but a “[c]arapace smashed” and “spread to the beaks of birds” (“The Jailer” 226).

Kristeva associates cannibalism and the body with the maternal in her discussion of defilement rites in *Powers of Horror*. She concludes that only in separating the speaking being from what is polluted and from assimilation through cannibalism, can the body be proper, protected, and powerful, that is “non- assimilable, uneatable” (*Powers* 78). The reference to the initiated other as “brother,” when quitting cannibalism, evokes Freud’s primal horde where the other is constituted only when it challenges the homogeneity of One (Lechte and Margaroni 94).⁹⁷ If “I give up cannibalism because abjection (from the mother) leads me toward respect for the body of the other, my fellow man, my brother” (Kristeva, *Powers* 79), then the devouring act of the other is a fusion again with the mother who engulfed me once like “[t]he grave cave” which “ate” my flesh (“Lady Lazarus” 244) and who sometimes “I” wish would engulf me again, taking me away from the symbolic: “Mother, you are the one mouth / I would be a tongue to. Mother of otherness / Eat me.

Wastebasket gaper, shadow of doorways” (“Who” 132). In the story “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams,” an engulfing pre-symbolic maternal space takes the form of a lake “stretching away in every direction,” at the bottom of which exist dragons that belong to an age before “figuring out the wheel and the alphabet” (19):

By this time, I already see the surface of the lake swarming with snakes, dead bodies puffed as blowfish, human embryos bobbing around in laboratory bottles like so many unfinished messages from the great I Am. I see whole storehouses of hardware: knives, paper cutters, pistons and cogs and nutcrackers; the shiny fronts of cars looming up, glass-eyed and evil-toothed. (20, emphasis added)

The lake’s arsenal of weapons shows that it is only identification with the maternal that enables the subject to defy the father later on. Thus “Johnny Panic,” or the “Panic Bird,” which is viewed by Plath as stifling her creativity — “[. . .] it makes me feel good as hell to express my hostility for my mother, frees me from the Panic Bird on my heart and my typewriter [. . .]” (*Journals* 429) — can be seen, as in this story, as an essential part of the creative process. “Johnny Panic,” or the “Panic Bird,” and his nightmarish world “simply can’t resist melodrama. Melodrama of the oldest, most obvious variety.” “Johnny Panic injects a poetic element in this business you don’t find elsewhere. And for that he has my eternal gratitude” (22). This movement between stifling force and transforming “radical energy” (Dickie, “Sylvia” 181) has been observed generally in Plath’s work, which, according to Buell, seems to oscillate between “two kinds of extreme images, one kind relating to herself as formed, fixed subject matter, and one kind relating to herself as demonic creator” (147). It is an oscillation between total non-differentiation with the mother and negativity where Plath can identify with her as well as the father.

Eating men embodies a reaction against Plath’s husband: “The vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year” (“Daddy” 224). Thus “[t]he small dell eats what ate it once” (“The Burnt-out Spa” 138). Van Dyne looks at this relationship in the light of Plath and Hughes’ “duel for poetic survival” as well as their marital life (*Revising Life* 42), drawing evidence from her *Journals*: “Do we vampirelike, feed on each other” (260). It is

also an attack against a father/husband who fed her deceit — “What have I eaten? / Lies and smiles” (“The Jailor” 226) — and a predatory world — “O golden child the world will kill and eat” (“Mary’s Song” 257). The daughter/wife in turn engulfs him and the whole world in the stomach of silence: “Radiation turned it white / And killed it in an hour / Greasing the bodies of adulterers / Like Hiroshima ash and eating in” (“Fever 103” 231). In fact, Plath’s universe is ruled by a “piranha / Religion” (“Nick and the Candlestick” 241), a brutal violent religion of devouring and being devoured (122). However, this is not, as Kendall suggests, a masculinist religion (123), but an atheism which enables the “deadmost” to swing between the maternal and the paternal. The shift of her position allows for changing the position of the law as absolute.

However, the phallic power of cannibalism that the father and his law have is not to be underestimated. Devouring is as much an act of assimilation (identification) with the mother against the symbolic, as it is an encounter against her since the “symbolic, paternal prohibition already dwells in me on account of my learning to speak at the same time” (Kristeva, *Powers* 39). The father is “King of the dish” (“The Beast” 134) and “All-mouth” (“Dark House” 132) who⁹⁸

licks up the bushes
And the pots of meat.
He lives in an old well,
A stony hole. He’s to blame.
He’s a fat sort. (*CP* 132)

The silencing and castrating power of this father targets the daughter’s mouth and tongue, her linguistic powers. The symbolic threat is summed by Kristeva as follows: “I am not the one that devours, I am being devoured by him; a third person therefore (he, a third person) is devouring me” (Kristeva, *Powers* 39). This is clear in “The Detective” where the speaking subject’s tongue is hung out: “The mouth first, its absence reported / In the second year. It had been insatiable / And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit / To

wrinkle and dry” (*CP* 209). “Getting There,” likewise, presents this power as symbolized by the train, which is “[s]teaming and breathing, its teeth / Ready to roll, like a devil’s” (39-40). The question posed in the poem — “What do wheels eat, these wheels / Fixed to their arcs like gods [?]” (248) — is answered in “Totem”: “In the bowl the hare is aborted, / Its baby head out of the way, embalmed in spices, / Flayed of fur and humanity” and “These are the people that were important— / Their round eyes, their teeth, their grimaces / On a stick that rattles and clicks, a counterfeit snake” (264). However, the phallic train will be eaten by the mother (death) as the early lines correctly anticipate: “The engine is killing the track, the track is silver, / It stretches into the distance. It will be eaten nevertheless” (264). In fact, eating and being eaten by a father and a mother is a “gross eating game” (“All the Dead Dears” 70).

The primal power of cannibalism can be traced in Plath’s biography and *Journals*. Peter Davison, a young poet Plath once dated, described her “appetite for experience” in his memoir as almost cannibalistic: “Her quest for knowledge was voracious. I felt as if I were being cross-examined, drained, eaten” (Wagner, *A Biography* 123). In addition, one entry in her *Journals* equates her voracious abilities with the castration of men: “yet the vampire is there, too. The old, primal hate. That desire to go around castrating the arrogant ones who become such children at the moment of passion” (200). In describing her first encounter with Ted Hughes at *St. Botolph’s Review* party, she wrote:

[. . .] I was stamping and he was stamping on the floor, and then he kissed me bang smash on the mouth and ripped my hair band off, my lovely red hairband scarf which has weathered the sun and much love, and whose like I shall never again find, and my favorite silver earrings: hah, I shall keep, he barked. And when he kissed my neck I bit him long and hard on the cheek, and when we came out of the room, blood was running down his face.

(*Journals* 212)

Plath transferred this scene of mutual cannibalistic violence to “Stone Boy with Dolphin.” In the story, Dody, the protagonist, meets Leonard, who “bent to his last supper,” devouring her (*Johnny Panic* 309). She responds in a violent teeth-clashing like “a pack-dog, / Grinning over its bone of ivory” (“The Swarm” 23-24):

Teeth gouged. And held. Salt, warm salt, laving the tastebuds of her tongue. Teeth dug to meet. An ache started far off at their bone-root. Mark that, mark that. But he shook. Shook her bang against the solid-grained substance of the wall. Teeth shut on thin air. (*Johnny Panic* 309)

Plath's violent and insatiable sexual desire is translated later as heterogeneity in her work, thereby quenching her creative hunger: "Oh hungry hungry. I am so hungry for a big smashing creative burgeoning burdened love" (131).

Furthermore, not only does Plath bite the father-figure, but also the mother. Her war is of two faces and "I am all mouth" ("Who" 131). The mother will devour and be devoured mutually. This "O-gape" mother ("the Moon and the Yew Tree" 173) appears in "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices" as the earth mother described by the second voice in the poem. Although she supports whoever identifies with her powers, she also threatens to devour everyone eventually:

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,
Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.
I know her. I know her intimately—
Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.
Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.
Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end. (*CP* 181)

In one of her dreams, Plath described biting her mother's arm in an act of assimilation: "Dreams last night troubled: mother and Warren in puritanical, harsh, snoopy poses. I bit her arm (repeat of my biting the delinquent), and she was old, thin, every-watchful [sic]" (*Journals* 529). She becomes like the mouse that has gnawed the ankle of the museum-cased lady in "All the Dead Dears". One of Kristeva's cases, Helen, describes a dream in which she is invited to a cannibalistic meal at her mother's wedding and devours the bodies and heads of the invited people as well as that of her mother (*Black Sun* 75). Kristeva explains that the devouring of the mother connotes "possessing her, holding her within oneself so as never to be separated from her" (75). Hence Plath appears hesitant in "Medusa" to feed on her mother as this would paralyse her or, as Van Dyne suggests in *Revising Life*, initiate a similar appetite in the mother to feed on her daughter: "Who do

you think you are? / A Communion Wafer? Blubbery Mary? / I shall take no bite of your body" ("Medusa" 225). However, in Plath's dream or even in the case of the mouse, a little bit is taken from the mother, which implies, one can argue, that the mother is not fully assimilated in preparation for a separation later on. The biting of the hand is especially significant for it indicates release from the hold of a constrictive mother.

This mutual act of devouring and being devoured is a linguistic one. Christodoulides suggests that orality in Plath's work is associated with language acquisition (92).⁹⁹ Kendall also contends that the mouth is a means of linguistic communication (118). This open mouth devours and speaks as much as it is silenced or chooses to become silent. Gubar, in comparing Plath's visual and poetic art, declares:

Unlike the separately enclosed women, many without mouths, in her brightly painted 'Nine Female Figures' or the harlequin-lipped woman in 'Triple-Face Portrait', she was to be preeminently a poet, a speaker whose lips opened to hiss and croon, cry and decry the 'garden of mouthings' that made and unmade her. (231)

Plath, Gubar argues, spoke about not speaking and, in doing so, wrote poems that are to be recited aloud for the ear and not scanned by the eye, as Plath herself explains:

These ones that I have just read, the ones that are very recent, I've got to say them, I speak them to myself, and I think that this in my own writing development is quite a new thing with me, and whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them to myself, I say them aloud.

(Orr 170)

Plath's cannibalism, after all, is nothing but an expression of that violent eagerness to mouth her poetry, and thereby seek transformation. As "the mouths of Thermopylae" suggests ("Letter in November" 254), Plath battles courageously against overwhelming powers. It is a battle of reciprocity where there are probabilities of defeating and being defeated. The sexual "hot gates" of Plath's Thermopylae is the vaginal mouth of birth and death, of speech and silence.¹⁰⁰

Orality in Plath's work assimilates as well as defies the other, especially the father-figure. It is not only a fluctuation between authority and passivity, but also reflects

Plath's creative practice in the sense of her ability in *Ariel*, for example, to articulate the poems aloud and fluctuate between orality and silence. The next section will discuss another violent way of defying the father-figure, namely killing and shedding blood.

7.3 Killing and Shedding Blood

In Plath's early poems redness appears only to change into whiteness or no colour at all as in "Blackberrying" and "Poppies in July" (CP 168, 203). A wish in "Poppies in July" to bleed or sleep is answered in her later poetry where blood becomes a symbol of dynamism and creativity, a way of transformation and revenge against the father of the law. For example, in "Cut," "Getting There," and "Totem" bleeding is embodied in a "dream of massacres" ("Three Women" 180) and the world turns "blood-hot and personal" ("Totem" 264). In a conversation with her friend, Elizabeth Compton, Plath called her late poems "dawn poems in blood," (Wagner, *A Biography* 223).

Plath referred to red as "my color" (Connors 114),¹⁰¹ preferring it for its vivacity and the way it seemed to provide her with psychic comfort. In one of her letters she writes: "It's incredible to think that carpets can create a state of mind, but I am so suggestible to colors and textures that I'm sure a red carpet would keep me forever optimistic" (435). Even when she was a child, the red ink marks on her father's corrected papers fascinated her (Wagner, *A Biography* 24). Moreover, Bundtzen argues, Hughes felt unsettled by Plath's use of red (198). In fact, he dedicated the poem "Red" at the end of *Birthday Letters* to Plath's appalling love for this colour (Hughes 197), which symbolized anger and revenge for her.

As Marckey notes, the red is of importance in the later poetry and often represents vitality (120). Uroff agrees that this intensity is evident in the poems of 1962-63: "[The] black-and-white images are a temporary abatement of the blood red that bloomed in "Tulips" and would flood the later poems" (141). For Uroff the spilling of blood is a symbol of "the life force pulsating with a creative violence that outraged destruction"

(155). For Van Dyne it is “the sign of the female body beyond her control,” of female victimization, as well as of her vivacity as a poet (*Revising Life* 145-49). Therefore, the vitality or negativity presented by the flow of blood in Plath’s poetry represents both life and death as well as murder; it is fertility and sterility. Kristeva looks at blood from the same perspective:

Blood, indicating the impure, takes on the “animal” sense of the previous opposition and inherits the propensity for murder of which man must cleanse himself. But blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where *death* and *femininity*, *murder* and *procreation*, cessation of life and vitality all come together. (*Powers* 96)

Hence “[t]he blood jet is poetry” (“Kindness” 270). Creativity is a negativity that connotes both murder and life where there is always violation of a logical conformity (Kristeva, *Powers* 98). Plath’s poetry seems capable of encompassing this contradictory formula.

If “Contusion” (*CP* 271), one of Plath’s last poems, hinders the flow of the maternal blood out of the body, “Cut” turns it on again. Both poems play the Fort /Da game of presence and absence, the “lub-dub” of the heart. “Contusion” is a regression to the non-identity of whiteness and death where the “heart shuts” and “mirrors,” which reflect the other, “are sheeted” and signs, “[t]he doom mark,” diminish and eventually be annihilated (*CP* 271).

“Cut,” on the other hand, allows the blood to gush forth (*CP* 235). The speaker comes face to face with the maternal element, after accidentally slicing off the top of her thumb while cutting an onion. The flowing of blood out of the phallic “I” of the finger asserts her existence. The “flap like a hat” is the threshold between life and death, flesh and blood, the outside and the inside:¹⁰² “Dead white, / Then that red plush.” The thumb’s “heart” opens like a narcissistic wound:¹⁰³ “Little pilgrim, / The Indian’s axed your scalp. / Your turkey wattle / Carpet rolls / Straight from the heart” (235). As Plath remarked in

“Three Women” (*CP* 176): “It is a terrible thing / To be so open: it is as if my heart / Put on a face and walked into the world” (185).

A masochistic reciprocity begins between the little pilgrim and the Indian. If the little pilgrim whose scalp was axed by the Indian stands for the “I” of the finger, then the defiled Indian is the feminine other. In fact, the whole scene is a celebratory war of havoc where “Out of a gap / A million soldiers run, / Redcoats, every one.” However, because of the seesawing between identification with the father and the mother, no one is able to know the true alliance of these soldiers: “Whose side are they on?” For “I am the wound and the knife” (Baudelaire 340).¹⁰⁴ The subject, as well as her writing, is on the border between the symbolic and the semiotic, fluctuating between identities.

The gush of blood means creativity for Plath, but too much flow is destructive. The speaker of “Cut” has to take a pill to relieve the pain from too much bleeding, which results in a drifting towards the thinness of total destruction. The excessive violence is represented by the “Saboteur,” “the Kamikaze man.” However, stopping the flow by using “Ku Klux Klan / Babushka” is also destructive of the speaking subject’s creativity although it saves the “I” from the violence of the maternal element. This kind of dull creativity formed by stopping the flow of the blood is presented as the darkened, dull stain. The beating of the heart confronts a “[m]ill of silence” (236), the stopping of the blood flow, which gives life to the finger and stresses the identity of the “I.” However, to stem the bleeding could mean death to the poet’s creativity when it is faced with silence and non-being, “thump stump.” It also means that the impure element will not flow out of the body and hence the “I” will become a “[d]irty girl.” Life and death are combined in the maternal medium of blood. The speaker, like the “trepanned veteran,” will never be whole again.

Allowing too much blood to flow without stemming it with a moment of conceiving silence is deadly as much as it is perfect. In “The Munich Mannequins” (*CP* 262), menstruation makes the woman perfect in regard to her femininity. We see a similar

kind of infertile flow of blood in “Childless Woman” (*CP* 259): “Spiderlike, I spin mirrors, / Loyal to my image, / Uttering nothing but blood– / Taste it, dark red!” But this pure femininity is problematic. It is a threat to productivity, sexuality, and social conformity. While all abject elements, which threaten the identity, derive from the outside, “[m]enstrual blood [. . .] stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (*Powers* 71). The “Me and you” in “The Munich Mannequins” are, therefore, the woman and her mother, far from any sexual difference posed by the social and the symbolic.

Plath’s poetry presents a lot of killing as a reciprocity between “you” and “I.” Plath confesses, “I dream of massacres” and “I should have murdered this, that murders me” (“Three Women” 180). This is clearly evident in “Daddy” where the speaker confesses: “If I killed one man, I’ve killed two.” She reacts to “the black man who / Bit my pretty red heart in two” (*CP* 223-24). In “Pheasant,” however, there is presented one side of killing. Plath begs a hunter, most probably Hughes, not to kill a pheasant: “You said you would kill it this morning. / Do not kill it. It startles me still” (*CP* 191). The pheasant deserves to live since “[i]t is such a good shape, so vivid. / It’s a little cornucopia. / It unclaps, brown as a leaf, and loud.” One feels the speaker identifying with the bird: “[it] [s]ettles in the elm, and is easy. / It was sunning in the narcissi. / I trespass stupidly. Let be, let be.” The reader is left doubting whether the hunter will listen to the speaker’s plea.

The poet, like the creative spider of “Widow,” would like to kill her husband in a Fort/Da game:

Widow. The bitter spider sits
 And sits in the center of her loveless spokes.
 Death is the dress she wears, her hat and collar.
 The moth-face of her husband, moonwhite and ill,
 Circles her like a prey she’d love to kill [. . .] (*CP* 164)

“Widow” is a poem about the loss of a husband. However, what is most intriguing is Plath’s use of metaphors of writing in order to deal with this trauma, which gives the poem a further dimension. In killing the husband, the patriarch of the symbolic, the creative words will vanish into nothingness like a sheet of paper on fire. The “dead syllable” vanishes to the pre-linguistic world of death:

Widow. The word consumes itself—
 Body, a sheet of newsprint on the fire
 Levitating a numb minute in the updraft
 Over the scalding, red topography
 That will put her heart out like an only eye.

Widow. The dead syllable, with its shadow
 Of an echo, exposes the panel in the wall
 Behind which the secret passage lies—stale air,
 Fusty remembrances, the coiled-spring stair
 That opens at the top onto nothing at all. . . . (*CP* 164)

The loss of the husband means the loss of language by which one, especially the poet, orders her creative world into meaning. Consequently, she yearns to kill him “[a] second time, to have him near again —.” Only in reviving him again can she regain her body, “singing like arrows up to heaven” (164). The husband is likened to a paper where she “laid his letters, till they grew warm / And seemed to give her warmth, like live skin.” But in the end, she becomes reified without him and his words, climbing the spiral stairs into nothingness: “But it is she who is paper now, warmed by no one.” The widow is passive without her husband. It is only in “Daddy” that the reciprocity of the persona does not surrender to the husband’s murder and thus creates her unique voice. After all, violence and murder are also related to the act of poetic creation in Plath’s art:¹⁰⁵ “What inner decision, what inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing?” (*Journals* 469).

In another act of violence, the speaker of “Elm” has to kill her mother (*CP* 192). The stairs in “Widow” are transformed here into the ladder to Hades. The speaker, who projects her dreadful suffering and pain onto a yew tree, is accustomed to this journey: “I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root: / It is what you fear. / I do not fear it: I have been there.” Her fear of the unknown is translated later into an internal fear: “I am terrified by this dark thing / That sleeps in me; / All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity” (193). According to Uroff, in “Elm” Plath begins to explore her destructive-self that will appear in the late poems (144).¹⁰⁶ This inner self, Medusa-like, is capable of destroying both her and others (Kendall 87): “Its snaky acid hiss. / It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults / That kill, that kill, that kill” (*CP* 193). Christodoulides suggests that this other self is the mother (219). But although she asserts the impossibility of Plath escaping the stifling power of the mother, it can be counter-argued that Plath is able to commit matricide momentarily and hence achieve linguistic freedom. The speaker’s relation to the moon parallels what she is going to do with the elm: “The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me / [. . .] / I let her go. I let her go / Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery” (*CP* 192). Although there is a kind of passivity in the statement “I am incapable of more knowledge,” the murderous “cry” that inhabits her will be the angry voice of *Ariel* and the beginning of dynamism (193). However, this voice would be impossible without killing, without being divided by the “isolate” “faults” (lines of fissure)¹⁰⁷ from that petrifying other.

The knife is Plath’s most frequently used murder weapon. Killing with the knife is both a necessity in separating from the mother into the world of the symbolic and a tool which causes a wound in the subject simultaneously. For example, “[t]he yellow knife” in “By Candlelight” (*CP* 237), which is indicative of the severance between the child and his mother (Christodoulides 88). If the child wants to enter the world that “kill[s] and eat[s]” (“Mary’s Song” 257), it has to commit matricide in order to be initiated into the symbolic. In contrast, the knife used at the end of “A Birthday Present” shows how the subject is

killed and enters the realm of silence as defiance against the symbolic. If the knife's function is contradictory, this is because of the secret nature of murder. In "A Secret," Plath describes one knife as not harmful: "A knife that can be taken out / To pare nails, / To lever the dirt. / 'It won't hurt'" (CP 220). But the knife proves her wrong: "Dwarf Baby, / The knife in your back / 'I feel weak' (220). "A Secret" appears to be an incomprehensible poem, usually avoided by critics. However, it could be argued that this unintelligibility is its aim. It has to remain a secret, a part of the horror of murder where the taboo and the desired dwell in the same place.

A mirror in Plath's work can also be a murder weapon as it reflects an other and provokes violence within the onlooker. In "The Courage of Shutting-Up" Plath wonders:

But how about the eyes, the eyes, the eyes ?
Mirrors can kill and talk, they are terrible rooms
In which a torture goes on one can only watch. (CP 210)

However, if the subject decides to go behind the mirror in an act of perfection, killing stops:¹⁰⁸

Like an Alice in distressland, the depressed woman cannot put up with mirrors. Her image and that of others arouse within her wounded narcissism, violence, and the desire to kill—from which she protects herself by going through the looking glass and settling down in that other world where, by limitlessly spreading her constrained sorrow, she regains a hallucinated completeness. (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 74)

Thus killing is synonymous with the release of suppressed drives. Going behind the mirror can also be a temporary act of defiance against the father, but then it achieves a different kind of silence. It is "[t]he courage of the shut mouth, in spite of artillery!" ("The Courage of Shutting Up" 209). For, although there is death behind these mirrors, there is also freedom.

Burning, cannibalism, and killing and shedding blood have been discussed as various weapons used in masochistic reciprocity against the law of One. The violent

dynamism produced by these tools is immense, causing re-shaping of the symbolic and a unique individual creative voice. The last violent tool evoked in Plath's poetry to defy the father is the veil. It has been left until the end of the discussion because it is the least obvious means of attacking the law of the father. The veil is almost always represented as a feminine symbol indicative of submissiveness and slavishness. In Plath's case, however, it is an important weapon that embodies defiance in her master-slave game.

7.4 Veils

An unexpected weapon in Plath's arsenal is the veil. Jeffrey Louis Decker uses Kristeva's concept of the veiled Phallic Mother in a political and cultural context as a means of subversion and this can be applied to Plath's poetry. Decker argues that the veil is "simultaneously an oppressive inscription and a counter-construction of feminine specificity that produces different subjectivities and, potentially, revolutionary agency" (185). In other words, the veil disrupts the law of the father despite the fact that it places women in the "impossible position 'behind' the veil of signification" (186). For the Phallic Mother to gain her position in language, she must be veiled, whereas by lifting the veil in a theatrical manner, she threatens the law of the father as well as this position:

she exposes the (im)position of the so called Phallic Mother. The aim of unveiling the Phallic Mother is to exercise her signifying power and thereby produce a 'jamming' in the phallogocentric machinery so that it (mis)represents women as speaking subjects. This, in turn, might be tantamount to *dephallogocentrizing* the Father by revealing his arbitrary foundation. (187)

The verb "exposes" highlights the parallel between being unveiled and nakedness. The act of veiling and unveiling entails pleasure and pain, an oscillation between "power and lack," as well as between language and silence (188). In fact, the veil constitutes the fetish object that compensates for the mother's lack of a phallus and covers behind it *jouissance*, death and silence. This is not contradictory, as Decker explains, for Kristeva stresses in "Motherhood According to Bellini" that the other face of "a ravishing maternal *jouissance*" is "its terrorizing aggressivity" (*Desire* 263).

Before one actually reads “Purdah” (*CP* 242), the visual aspect of the poem’s form attracts attention. The use of the tercets and short sentences allow more silence into the text. The enjambments affect the syntactic unity of the sentences, allowing the irruption of the semiotic in the text. In order to create an alternation of language and silence in the body of the poem, Plath tears apart the sentence in an act of linguistic suspense that is like a veil being removed and resumed in an act of sexual seduction.

In “Purdah,” the woman’s alluring veil “gleam[s] like a mirror.” It is “[a] concatenation of rainbows” (242, 243). She seems to belong to the symbolic, a possessed jewel created from Adam. This is why she is “agonized” although Adam’s “green” side is the only place where she can live and flourish (242). This erotic woman, almost invisible behind her veil (“My visibilities hide”) is also sinister (242). She portends evil like the moon, which in its appearance and disappearance each month is akin to the ominous powers of the veil:

And should
The moon, my
Indefatigable cousin

Rise, with her cancerous pallors,
Dragging trees —
Little bushy polyps[.] (*CP* 242)

Paradoxically enough, this veil is the only way that she can be visible in language. In covering and sublimating the impossible, the lost mother, the subject is able to enter language. Therefore, veiled as she is, she still belongs to the symbolic order: “I am his. / Even in his / Absence, I / Revolve in my / Sheath of impossibles” (*CP* 243). Yet this is not satisfactory for the ambitious and revolutionary artist who becomes like a parrot imitating the paternal literary heritage: “Priceless and quiet / Among these parakeets, macaws!”

Although it is usually seen as feminine, the veil is actually also symbolic. This veil makes her one of the villagers in “The Bee Meeting” (*CP* 211): “black veil [. . .] molds to [her] face, they are making [her] one of them.” It protects her from the bees, whose energetic movement resembles the eruption of the semiotic. “I am rooted,” she proclaims. In “Purdah,” however, the subject in process starts with a seductive, threatening veil — “Veil stirs its curtain” (243) — and ends with deadly defiance when she removes it. The theatrical striptease here resembles the one in “Lady Lazarus.” She unveils gradually in the coldest, most cruel way, creating suspense and *jouissance*. The repetition of the word “unloose” helps to create such an effect. Moreover, unveiling transforms “the small jewelled / Doll” into a deadly unveiled “lioness” (*CP* 244). In a final act, reminiscent of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon,¹⁰⁹ the woman unveils totally, unsheathed, killing her bridegroom who was also once covered “[i]n among these silk / Screens, these rustling appurtenances” (243). In fact, the act of unloosing the veil could be simultaneously read as an undressing of the male, as Clytemnestra did to make Agamemnon vulnerable before killing him. The shriek in the end is both sexual and deadly, and the cloak’s hole of silence is the only evidence of the crime. The last grand unveiling, or the act of *jouissance*, happens offstage, beyond all signification. However, the “[p]uppets, loosed from the strings of the puppet-master” (“Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond” 135), who “[w]ear masks of horn to bed” until the big moment of unhusking and steering into the air, will reattach to that string in another poem to play the Fort/ Da game of unveiling again.

In “The Big Strip Tease: Female Bodies and Male Power in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” Kathleen Lant rejects the concept of nakedness in Plath’s poetry as any sort of triumph or *jouissance*. For her, “the female body plays a specific and rigidly codified role” (628). She argues that nakedness is a source of power and joy only for male writers, and that the naked body of the woman is vulnerable and susceptible to penetration and rape. Holbrook goes further in his claims that “Sylvia Plath’s attitude to sexuality often belongs very clearly to the age of a pornography explosion” (265). In their discussions, they seem

to dismiss any possibility that the exposure of the female body could transform the law of the father. However, it could be argued that the movement between covering and uncovering the body in an act of suspense, one that ends in a grand unveiling of ultimate *jouissance*, is transformative and challenging.

“Lady Lazarus” further deals with the theme of veils (*CP* 244). In the poem, the face of a Jew acts as a veil ready to be “peel[ed] off” into the appalling face of a Nazi cannibal (*CP* 244). Nevertheless, the female speaker requires the “featureless” face for her last act of *jouissance* and transformation. The final process of the subject’s unveiling is also a process of unpeeling the face of the “I,” which is like “White Godiva,” riding on “God’s lioness” in “Ariel” (*CP* 239). The unpeeling is achieved out of energy expenditure, a momentum, rather than out of passivity. It is the death of “I” that in its dying produces rhythm. It frees the subject, as well as language, from denotation (Kristeva, *Desire* 31):

Something else

Hauls me through air—
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel—
Dead hands, dead stringencies. (*CP* 239)

This Godiva is reminiscent of “Truth” in Tiepolo’s painting *Time Disrobing Truth*. Indeed, Kristeva maintains that “truth” as woman cannot exist without the veil of language, albeit in a defying transgressive act (*About Chinese Women* 36). In Godiva’s case, nonetheless, her grand unveiling, according to the legend, is in defiance of her husband.¹¹⁰ In “Ariel,” her unveiled, moving body might be “suicidal” but it destroys men as well. Their corpses appear in the drafts of the poem: “Hands, hearts, dead men / Dead men / Hands, hearts, peel off—” (Van Dyne, *Revising Life* 121). This deadly movement toward a fusion with the mother is also an ultimate *jouissance*: “And now I / Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas” (239).

The phallic “arrow,” the “I,” turns into “[t]he dew that flies / Suicidal, at one with the drive” (239-40).¹¹¹ The “I” evaporates “[i]nto the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning” to fall down again as a rain of creative heterogeneity — “And now I / Foam to wheat” — and back to the maternal sea (239-40). Reading the drafts of the poem provided by Van Dyne, one notices that Plath used “rain” before changing it to “dew” (120). This is significant as Plath is searching within her psyche for a transforming energy, a fruitful heterogeneity that can change “dew” into “wheat” despite the fact that this same energy could be fatal. The energetic symbol of the “cauldron,” which is “talking and cracking” in “The Couriers” signals heterogeneity and dynamism (*CP* 247). It is the “red / Eye” symbolizing the beating of the heart and “the metaphor of metaphors,” the sun (Kristeva, *Tales of Love* 213).

In the first essay of *Desire in Language*, called “The Ethics of Language,” Kristeva explains how the poet is in a constant “solar contest” (29). “I is bound to the sun,” she insists. In other words, “I” is the sun as it “must master rhythm.” This is where the poet is part of the agency of the sun: “Eye [I], the cauldron of morning” (240). However, “I” is also opponent of the sun, “threatened by it because solar mastery cuts off rhythm” (Kristeva 29). This is where the pun on “morning” as “mourning” fits, as does the description of the movement in “Ariel” as “[s]uicidal” (240). Therefore, this eternal struggle embodies the poet’s struggle “within and against the system of language” (30).

The veil is also pivotal in “A Birthday Present” where the speaker examines a gift and asks the male addressee: “What is this, behind the veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?” (*CP* 206). Again, the veil is as seductive as it is threatening: “But it shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me.” It bears the same characteristics of the maternal sea, described by Plath in “Ocean 1212-W”: “Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many terrible, delicate veils. [. . .] If it could court, it could also kill” (*Johnny Panic* 117). The suspense involved in delivering the gift as well as the veils that shimmer “like curtains” is again both very erotic and masochistic (206), deadly before death happens: “O

adding machine— / Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go whole? / Must you stamp each piece in purple, / Must you kill what you can?” (207). The suspense here is similarly evident in the following lines: “Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger. / Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty / By the time the whole of it was delivered, and too numb to use it” (208).

Plath never makes a firm statement about this gift, not because she is unsure whether what is behind the veil is masculine or feminine, as Lant suggests (651), but in order to create, where the power of the paternal and the maternal are exchanged, an erotic suspense in advance of a grand feminine moment of death and *jouissance*. In fact, one can argue that the present is nothing but the shimmering veil itself, signifiers given by the male addressee to the female recipient in order to subdue her. However, a seductive thin veil could swell with dangers underneath: “Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity” and “Is this the one for the annunciation?” (207, 206). For this very reason the male addressee is “terrified” to give it to her, for the veil or what is behind it, which is in fact nothing, could be a real threat. The veiled subject is no other than Salome with her dance of the seven veils that will be the moving dynamite until the grand unveiling, killing the oppressing onlooker:¹¹² “The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it, / Bossed, brazen, an antique shield .”

It is true that “the veils were killing [her] days” but they are also killing the father’s days (207). It is only through movement between veiling and unveiling that subjugation to the stereotypes of history “where spilt lives congeal and stiffen” can be challenged (208). The grand unveiling allows the subject to escape completely into the “timeless eyes” of death (208). This can happen if death does not occur prematurely before the whole process of seduction has taken place, as when Isadora Duncan’s scarves (“Fever 103 °” 231), or her veils for that matter, are caught in the wheels of her lover’s car thereby preventing her from achieving a grand unveiling.¹¹³ Not only by the oscillation of the veil will change occur, but also by a last “word” of death, a grand unveiling in the poem’s final four

stanzas, which is also a birthday of renewal and *jouissance*. Christodoulides reads the last moment as triumphant because Plath was finally able to separate from her stifling mother (235): “And the knife not carve, but enter / Pure and clean as the cry of a baby, / And the universe slide from my side” (208). However, this moment is related to unveiling which leads to the evaporation of signification and the universe as a whole. It is a last word of silence in a masochistic battle rather than an initiation into the symbolic.

The clouds in “A Birthday Present” could be read as wan veils which can be easily removed “like cotton” though they are deadly as “carbon monoxide” (207). Their coming and going creates a movement similar to that of the veil: “Clouds pass and disperse” (“Elm” 193); they are defiant, but they remain weak and transient: “I’m no more your mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind’s hand” (“Morning Song” 157). In a manuscript draft of “Little Fugue” the “mute” clouds are described as “these fool-white motherly clouds.”¹¹⁴ They, therefore, belong to the semiotic in that they have no roots. As in “Gulliver” (*CP* 251), they have “no reflections” and thus no identity, “no strings attached,” in spite of being free.

However, the clouds, which are “silence after silence” (“Parliament Hill Fields” 152), can add to the transformative creativity of the poet if they alternate, like silence, with thick veils of blackness, the veils of the symbolic as in “Little Fugue” (187). The dialogue between white and black in this poem is similar to that masochistic dialogue between the Jew (“The featurelessness of that cloud” 187) and the stern black-hearted Nazi father. The violence of this alternation produces “horrific complications. / Finger-traps — a tumult of keys.” At one point, the speaker says: “I like black statements.” These belong to the father’s language, which is terrifying and rooted like the yew tree:

Such a dark funnel, my father!
I see your voice
Black and leafy, as in my childhood,

A yew hedge of orders,

Gothic and barbarous, pure German. (*CP* 188).

Nevertheless, the itinerant clouds are also present, sharing in that horrific musical piece of speech-silence and defying black veiling-white unveiling: “Now similar clouds / Are spreading their vacuous sheets” (188). However, the end of “Little Fugue” sees the white semiotic clouds prevail, an occurrence which equals a grand unveiling. This is transformation, *jouissance* and morning (mourning), a last word of silence and death:

I survive the while,
 Arranging my morning.
 These are my fingers, this my baby.
 The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor. (*CP* 189)

The “arranging” for mourning is in fact a regression to the semiotic *chora*. In “Place Names,” Kristeva discusses the psycholinguistic development of the infant. She shows that the use of the anaphoric demonstratives phenomenon (in Plath’s poem “[t]hese are my fingers, this my baby”) is part of other archaic vocalizations and echolalias which constitutes the semiotic *chora* and which forms the basis for syntactic acquisition (*Desire* 287). When Plath defies the blackness of the father in “Little Fugue,” she returns to a previous stage of infancy using the demonstratives “these” and “this” before evaporating completely into the wandering veils of whiteness.

The theme of the veil is extensively used in the Bee sequence of poems, with which Plath intended to end *Ariel*, both as a defying element and a way of creating her unique voice (Van Dyne, *Revising Life* 136). In “The Bee Meeting,” only when the speaker is veiled can she become one of the villagers. Without the symbolic veil, the speaking subject is, in linguistic terms, unprotected, vulnerable before the attacks of instinctual drives (the semiotic bees):

I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?
 Yes, here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock,
 Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees.
 Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice.

They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear. (CP 211)

Though the symbolic veil is protective, it chokes creativity. The heavy veil prevents her from running, that is, from being dynamically creative. She will be just like any of the unrecognized villagers in “The Bee Meeting” under their veils, although they become more protected in the face of semiotic attack (the release of death drive):

Which is the rector now, is it that man in black?
 Which is the midwife, is that her blue coat?
 Everybody is nodding a square black head, they are knights in visors,
 Breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under the armpits. (CP 211)

If Plath dons the veils, she will suffer from a lack of freedom and individuality in her poetry. And if she unloosens the veil and thus the roots of language, allowing in the semiotic bees, she will have to run forever to protect her poetry from collapse and her identity from being pulverized: “I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me / With its yellow purses, its spiky armory. / I could not run without having to run forever” (212). However, freedom from the veil of language into pure *jouissance* is her ultimate dream. This is like the female bees’ dream of escaping from the wax box, their particular veil: “While in their fingerjoint cells the new virgins / Dream of duel they will win inevitably, / A curtain of wax dividing them from the bride flight” (212).

Another poem in the Bee sequence, “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (CP 212), shows the speaker receiving a terrifying box similar to the veiled gift in “A Birthday Present” (CP 206). This box of language, which has sublimated and harnessed the semiotic drive, the “swarmy feeling” in it (CP 213), acts as a veil which suffocates creativity, but protects the speaker from the lethal drive:

The box is locked, it is dangerous.
 I have to live with it overnight
 And I can’t keep away from it.
 There are no windows, so I can’t see what is in there.
 There is only a little grid, no exit. (CP 213)

For Bundtzen the allegory of this poem is related to Plath's "confronting the problem of poetic identity and the burden of authorship and control," of how writing can also be a curse (*The Other Ariel* 133). The individual bees in the box are, as Bundtzen observes, "syllables that refuse to become words or sentence, to assume meaning" (*The Other Ariel* 135). She also describes them as "ink-blotted inscription that garbles language" (135). Without the box that holds them, they represent the instinctual drive of the speaking subject unleashed for death. The inability to metaphorize and translate the bees' language threatens her creativity:

How can I let them out?
It is the noise that appalls me most of all,
The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,
Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

I lay my ear to furious Latin.
I am not a Caesar.
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
They can be sent back.
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner. (*CP* 213)

Uroff summarizes the poem's dilemma as "inner turmoil and outer form": "to open the box [the form] is to open the possibility of attack by its contents" (148). Thus the stricter the form of the poem, the safer the poet is as she is not attacked by the death drive. However, when Plath begins using free verse in *Ariel*, in comparison to her earlier more formal forms, she opened herself to dangerous consequences. In "The Arrival of the Bee Box," the insects are depicted in terms of engulfing cannibalism, "the swarmy feeling of African hands" that would snatch and devour her: "I wonder how hungry they are. / I wonder if they would forget me / If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree" (213). The aggressive nature of the semiotized syllables that nearly become one with the drive threaten both the poet's creativity and life. The bees' connection to death is explored

in an earlier poem in Plath's *Juvenilia* called "Lament": "The sting of bees took away my father / who walked in a swarming shroud of wings" (CP 315).

The owner of the bees, in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" (CP 213), decides not to feed them in order to keep her creativity in check: "[she is] in control" ("Stings" 214-15). However, she cannot resist the temptation to unveil them and, at the same time, herself. For although they threaten the poet through their aggression, they are the only way to "artistic greatness" (Axelrod 232). She knows that "The Box is only temporary" ("The Arrival of the Bee Box" 213). She also recognizes that hiding behind the "petticoats of the cherry," instead of turning into a tree, to avoid the bees is far less protective than the villager's thick black veil or the bee box (213). The thinning veil becomes increasingly menacing, allowing the semiotic drives to flow more into the body of language. The cherry tree will one day unveil its "petticoats" and hence she would have to run forever in a different direction from that of the hive's working bees, the agitated women: "Will they hate me, / These women who only scurry, / Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover?" ("Stings" 214). At the end of "The Arrival of the Bee Box," she promises to release the bees: "Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free" (213). This promise challenges, as well as creates suspense, before the grand unveiling and release of the bees' sexuality. Yet delaying the action also reflects fear of the powers derived from unleashing the instinctual drives.

This box, which is as much protection from the bee stings as it is suffocating to her creativity, is described as a "honey-machine" ("Stings" 214). Bundtzen views it as "a poetic organism," "primarily masculine and public, and historically recognizable" (*The Other Ariel* 137). For Uroff, moreover, the box is "an emblem of survival" and "a possible coffin" (147). This status as coffin becomes manifest when the queen bee, which Plath identifies with, is put in a box after the villagers of "The Bee Meeting" kill her. The speaker wonders: "Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they

accomplished, / why am I cold” (*CP* 212). In this sense, Plath shows veiling as a deadly operation.

However, although the last choice of Plath’s defiance is almost always a grand unveiling, she sometimes depicts this process as humiliating and veiling, its opposite, as a symbol dynamically related to language. “Stings,” for example, illustrates the importance of the veil in gaining power and motility. At the beginning, it presents the queen of the bees as weak and ill: “she is old, / Her wings torn shawls, her long body / Rubbed of its plush— / Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful” (*CP* 214). A Lady Lazarus, she has been revived from death, exposed and wounded. And now she has to regain her covers (her veil), “lion-red body” (215), and negativity in order to revenge her killing by the symbolic engine of language.

This veiled body indicates that she has retained “terrible,” “red” sexual powers in her nuptial flight (*CP* 215). Although, as Bundtzen observes, in terms of beekeeping the queen can never have a second bridal flight, Plath insists on this in her poem (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 117). This is clear in her early draft of the penultimate stanza where the speaker appears as subject to rebirth and death.¹¹⁵ Her “wings of glass” are an indication of this destiny towards freedom and annihilation. The decision never to return means dying unveiled, free of all forms of shelter, hives and linguistic veils. However, in changing her drafts, Plath postponed this unveiling and the decision of never returning to the hive until the final poem in the sequence, “Wintering.”

All father-figures must be excluded before the final departure from the hive of language. “The Swarm” depicts Plath facing a patriarch instead of an engine (*CP* 215). This “black man” has two faces, neither loving: one is of a beekeeper who shoots at the “black ball” of bees and the other of the arrogant Napoleon who tries to conquer all (216). In an act of revenge, the bees stinging the beekeeper become themselves a defeated Napoleon. Plath’s draft of “Stings” shows how the veil adds a further note of sexual seduction: “The black veil molds to your lips: / they think they must kiss you, they think

death is worth it” (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 147). Edward Butscher reads the attacked man as Hughes, who had left Plath, leaving her eager for revenge through poetry, neglected in Devon (*Method and Madness* 320). Another reading is that in order to veil him in death, the bees have to unveil themselves to death. Plath’s revenge against her father/husband is as dangerous for her as a bee shedding its sting because the shedding of any relation to the symbolic powers of language makes death inevitable. The attack of the father-figure, however, is not a triumphant final word of revenge since “[t]he last badge of victory” remains with a “pleased” Napoleon at the end of the poem before his ultimate Waterloo and Elba’s evacuation in “Wintering” (217).

Plath’s quest for a unique, transformative voice through a grand unveiling of death away from the shelter of the hive takes place in “Wintering” (*CP* 217). Winter is “the time of hanging on for the bees” (218). They must stay in the hive for survival. Nevertheless, Plath refuses the confinement not only of the hive but also the cellar where the bees are to be kept, another suffocating box where honey, as metaphor of creative production is:

This is the room I have never been in.
 This is the room I could never breathe in.
 The black bunched in there like a bat,
 No light
 But the torch and its faint

Chinese yellow on appalling objects—
 Black asininity. Decay.
 Possession.
 It is they who own me. (*CP* 218)

If this is the room of creativity, it is certainly not a lively one. This is reminiscent of Sexton’s attic where the bees have long ceased to move: “as if words were counted like dead bees in the attic, / unbuckled from their yellow eyes and their dry wings” (“Said the Poet to the Analyst,” *ASCP*12).¹¹⁶ It is true that honey is produced in this room, but it is a “refined,” artificial “Tate and Lyle” where the semiotic vitality is reduced (“the bees / So

slow”) and thus the poet surrenders, as “[t]he cold sets in,” to a suffocating passivity “inside,” “[f]iling like soldiers / To the syrup tin” (*CP* 218).

However, at the end of the poem, the female bees make a drastic change by excluding all males from the hive: “They have got rid of the men, / The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors” (219). Moreover, in search of dynamic creativity “outside” that room, the bees fly away from the hive, which could be a dangerous move as it is winter time. The unleashing of the bees with their semiotic power from the veils of the hive is deadly. However, this is a moment of freedom and ultimate *jouissance* (218):

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
The bees are flying. They taste the spring. (*CP* 219)

This is, nevertheless, not a spring of women’s liberation without consequences, as Marckey and Uroff claim (*A Journey* 11; 146). A world without men and the hive (the symbolic) is fatal although it is the only way of achieving freedom. For Plath, the spring of her singular creativity is liberating, a *jouissance* that comes necessarily after the act of writing. However, her sad tone reflects the truth of that liberation : “Anyhow: by dint of squandering some ink here, after counting your pages, you should see me through to the spring, to my so-called liberty – from what I seem to know, but for what I can only dream” (*Journals* 307).

The act of veiling and unveiling, which Plath uses against the law of One and for creating her unique voice, has been last discussed. It reveals conflict between control and the released drives of anger. However, the question is whether Plath succeeds in challenging the father and his law in a risky step of “grand” transformation or is forced to surrender to his powers. Unlike Sexton, who clung to the father until the end, Plath through the violence set free in her work, defied and discarded the symbolic father, sacrificing his love, in order to confront the oceanic pleasure of death. Although this is a

transformative “triumph” it comes, nonetheless, with fatal effect. “Berck-Plage” could function as a summary of Plath’s work in the way it begins by magnifying and deifying the black image of her father and ends with his funeral, which is hers too. The next chapter will examine Plath’s last confrontation with death, where the semiotic gains the upper hand after abandoning the father forever. Ultimate *jouissance*, freedom, and triumph are achieved, but with serious consequences. The next chapter presents a comparison between Sexton and Plath.

Chapter 8

Last Confrontation

By her ricocheting between “I” and “not-I” and allowing the semiotic to penetrate her text, thereby formulating a transformative heterogeneity, Plath is able to dismantle the law of the father. For this reason we no longer encounter the father and thus the masochistic scenes of the early poems in *Ariel*. However, this triumph leads to the disintegration of the “I,” which is no longer held together firmly by the symbolic. In these poems, the semiotic seems “to gain the upper hand at the expense of thethetic and predicative constraints of the ego’s judging consciousness” and “set up a new formal construct: a so-called new formal or ideological ‘writer’s universe,’ the never-finished, undefined production of a new space of significance” (Kristeva, *Desire* 134-35). For Plath, the most important thing about this new space is that it has no symbolic father. In an early version of “Sheep in Fog” (*CP* 262), Plath ended the poem as follows: “Patriarchs till now immobile / In heavenly wools / Row off as stones or clouds with the faces of babies” (Kendall 190). Plath’s patriarch is “rowing off,” unlike Sexton’s who is the one to be “rowed to.” He becomes fixed and the only movement is through a maternal medium, “stones or clouds with the faces of babies,” which will row off taking the father with them. In the last version, however, Plath gets rid of any kind of movement that might imply positivity and rebirth to state that her heaven is simply “fatherless” and, therefore, one in which the semiotic will gain the upper hand (Kendall 190-91).

But what does it mean that the semiotic gains the upper hand? And is the whole process intentional or not? If the semiotic does take control, this should not be considered a total triumph. Many feminist critics, including Lynda Bundtzen, Susan Van Dyne, and Elaine Connell, read Plath’s dismantling of the father in this light. Rather, triumph and terror have been oscillating within a masochistic relation with the other (Kristeva, *Black*

Sun 166). However, after getting rid of the father, lethal consequences accrue. Although the act of dismantling the father is indeed transformative, creating a new space of generativity as well as freedom, it is also a threat to the subject in process. The speaking subject's "textual practice is that most intense struggle toward death" (Kristeva, *Revolution* 180). The threatened "deadmost", in her last encounter with the archaic mother (death) is, nevertheless, immersed in absolute *jouissance* on her way to wholeness and perfection. She "celebrates reunion with the Thing" as she confronts "the silence of horror in [her]self and in the world" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 41, 225). This is a primal form of triumph (Kristeva, *About Chinese Women* 40). And if it is not a complete triumph, it is never a "defeat" (Kendall 207; Hardwick 111).

How intentional is this process of dismantling the father and the consequent irruption of the semiotic? In *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*, Van Dyne, after claiming Plath to be a transformative subject in process through Vesuvian rage, modifies this to the assertion that Plath is a "discerning subject" in total control (3). She relies on Plath's revised manuscripts to prove that her "performances are always self-conscious and frequently parodic," although she refers to Plath sometimes as culturally structured (47, 69). In her review, Bundtzen observes this contradiction in Van Dyne's stance, which, more than any other study, stresses the agency and consciousness of Plath's creativity. However, the last poems, in particular, seem a hindrance to Van Dyne's project as Plath's agency evaporates.

This study neither dispenses with Plath's intentionality in processing her poetry, nor does it claim she had total control over the whole process of writing. The ricocheting between "I" and "not-I" entails both consciousness and unconsciousness. In fact, the issue of agency in Kristeva's work is a problem for some critics. For example, Toril Moi asks, "who or what is acting in Kristeva's subversive schemes?" (*Sexual/Textual* 169). She argues that Kristeva's focus on the semiotic as an unconscious pulsion excludes any conscious decision-making. Although Kristeva's position is not clear regarding this matter,

as she sometimes overemphasizes the unconscious force, she does not seem to exclude either the consciousness or the unconsciousness of the process. However, the more the semiotic is unleashed in Plath's poems, the more unconscious drives are at work. But this is not really the issue here. The most important thing in Plath's last poems is whether the subject is able to confront the mother and the irruption of the semiotic face to face.

Calvin Bedient, in his disagreement with Toril Moi, asserts that the semiotic taking the upper hand means that the unconscious semiotic becomes art itself ("How I Slugged" 646) and thus the subject is absented under the flow of the semiotic, a position also held by Mitchell (39). In Plath's last poems, we witness the "deadmost" immersed in oceanic *jouissance* on her way towards a total disintegration, "where the power of language seems to have utterly dissolved" (Bronfen 95). We also see the "I" barely breathing like the speaker of "Paralytic":

It happens. Will it go on?—
My mind a rock,
No fingers to grip, no tongue,
My god the iron lung

That loves me, pumps
My two
Dust bags in and out,
Will not

Let me relapse
While the day outside glides by like ticker tape. (CP 266)

The "I" of the last poems, beginning with "Sheep in Fog" and ending with "Edge," is barely raises her head above the deadly *jouissance*. The dying "I" is like the train in "Sheep in Fog" at the end of its journey, which "leaves a line of breath" (4).

In "Sheep in Fog," the "deadmost" speaker, unlike the arrow-like horse of "Ariel," is slowing down towards stillness, and this is expressed by the retardation of a different horse:

O slow
 Horse the color of rust,

 Hooves, dolorous bells—
 All morning the
 Morning has been blackening,

 A flower left out.
 My bones hold a stillness, the far
 Fields melt my heart. (“Sheep in Fog” 262)

The slow horse becomes poetic words themselves, moving towards disintegration: “Words dry and riderless, / The indefatigable hoof-taps” (“Words” 270). At the end of her journey, Plath gets off her horse to walk on foot and encounter dissociated words: “Years later I / Encounter them on the road— / Words dry and riderless” (“Words” 270). On her bare feet, she is heading towards her lost maternal paradise, a paradise without the father: “They threaten / To let me through to a heaven / Starless and fatherless, a dark water” (“Sheep in Fog” 262).

Plath’s confrontation with the archaic mother in her early and last poems is radically dissimilar. In the early poems her passive fusion with nature was an immature act at that stage. She was only beginning her career as a poet, searching for a singular voice. In the later poems, after her “triumph” over the law of the father and generation of the Siren Voice of the Other, her perfection will be achieved in this last meeting. And after combining the purposive with the purposeless, she turns into purposelessness, which is paradoxically an excessive “purpose,” perfection.

Perfection is the last of Plath’s achievements: it is death itself. Therefore, not only does “the creation of perfect aesthetic forms” prove to be “itself a source of death,” but death also becomes a source of aesthetic perfection (Bronfen 95). This why perfection is terrible: “It is the exception that interests the devil” (“Three Women” 186). Its nature

derives from the fact that it is sexually unproductive. It involves a homosexual feminine pleasure with no children and eventually no words:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
The blood flood is the flood of love,

The absolute sacrifice.
It means: no more idols but me,

Me and you. ("The Munich Mannequins" 262-63).

"Me and you" is the daughter in her last jubilant confrontation with the archaic mother. This incisively means the end of communication with the symbolic. Therefore, the telephone receiver is back in its cradle. It is glittering like some dangerous weapon threatening annihilation if not used: "And the black phones on hooks / Glittering / Glittering and digesting / Voicelessness. The snow has no voice" (263).

"The heart has not stopped yet" ("Mystic" 268). Instead, there is a sweeping identification with the beyond (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 136-37), a shedding of meaning and desire towards perfection in death: "I smile, a buddha, all / Wants, desire / Falling from me like rings / Hugging their lights" ("Paralytic" 267). Plath seems to realize the consequences of perfection as she belongs to a nation which does not believe in the "too much." This is clear in her essay "America! America!": "Eccentricities, the perils of being too special, were reasoned and cooed from us like sucked thumbs" (*Johnny Panic* 36). This is not, however, the perfection that Bundtzen describes as the social requirement for what it is to be feminine, a requirement which "seems inextricably associated with social constraints in Plath's eyes" (*Plath's Incarnations* 56). This is a perfection that aspires to wholeness in

death and the breaking of all constraints. Plath writes: “I love freedom. I deplore constrictions and limitations. . . . I am not as wise as I have thought. I can now see, as from a valley, the roads lying open for me, but I cannot see the end — the consequences. . . .” (*Letters Home* 40). Plath, like the first voice in “Three Women,” does not wish perfection for her child: “I do not will him to be exceptional.” (186). She sometimes seems to envy those with modest hopes. Yet she cannot run from the fact that she is a perfectionist in need of “great love” and *jouissance*, instead of mere “tenderness,” with a great voice of her own although it is a “silent” one:

the ones

Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable—
The humpback in his small, washed cottage
Under the spokes of the clematis.
Is there no great love, only tenderness?
Does the sea

Remember the walker upon it?
Meaning leaks from the molecules. (“Mystic” 269)

The leakage accelerates in the overall situation of retardation. This is akin to the tears making a pool of eternity in “Words” where feminine “stars” rule forever. The leakage of meaning and the draining of the ego result in a severance between the “I” and words. These now sweep with their own momentum from the perfect poet to their destination in “the land of cockaigne” (“Johnny Panic” 26):

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

That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.

Years later I
 Encounter them on the road—

Words dry and riderless,
 The indefatigable hoof-taps.
 While
 From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
 Govern a life. (“Words” 270)

“Contusion” delineates the beginning of the end: “The heart shuts, / The sea slides back / The mirrors are sheeted” (271) and, finally, the woman speaker is perfected in “Edge” (CP 272). Her accomplishments are the transformation of the law of the father, the singularity of her art and ultimate *jouissance*. But the real final “accomplishment” of the “deadmost” is death itself (“Edge” 272), which seems to take place on rather than offstage in an “illusion of Greek necessity.” In fact, in her last poems, the stage is turned upside down and the offstage becomes her arena where the act becomes a “non-act, or rather a sign of completion, a near-aesthetic harmonization of its fictitious fullness, ‘beyond’” (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 73). The smile on her face is reminiscent of Agnes’s smile at the end of “The Wishing Box”: “Her tranquil features were set in a slight, secret smile of triumph, as if [she is] in some far country unattainable to mortal men.” (*Johnny Panic* 55).

Now the speaker’s quest is over. Once her bare feet appeared in “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams” immobile: “I can’t keep my eyes away from the bare feet, and I find myself glancing back from my typing every few minutes to see if they are still there, if they have changed their position at all” (21). Plath’s bare feet have walked through her poems, suffering because of negativity, until they reached “Edge.” The rose in the poem was once in the bull of Bendylaw (CP 108): “And the royal rose in the bull’s belly.” In this image, the feminine relies on the symbolic to hold it in. Heterogeneity results from the fact that the rose “is buried in the darkness of the grave,” but is also “promising a flowery resurrection,” an alteration between death drive and life drive (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 155).

Now, the rose is out of the bull's belly and hence lethal, folding everything in death. The last sound we hear in "Edge" is that of the moon crackling before disappearing.

Significantly, in Plath's last poems the "deadmost" seems to have a prophetic willingness to have a face to face confrontation with her destiny, which is no less "heroic" than that shown in previous poems. The *jouissance* attained from this encounter is like that attained from looking on the face of God: "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" ("Mystic" 268). There is no remedy in this case but a total fusion with the "Thing." For Plath, "[t]he girl who wanted to be God," "a little god in my small way" (*Letters Home* 40; *Journals* 22) and thus nothing other than "a radical, sullen atheist" (Kristeva, *Black Sun* 4) tries now to reach the throne of silence as a final step in her journey after her "loud-mouthed" revolution:

... I don't believe in God as a kind father in the sky. I don't believe that the meek will inherit the earth: The meek get ignored and trampled. They decompose in the bloody soil of war, of business, of art, and they rot into the warm ground under the spring rains. It is the bold, the loud-mouthed, the cruel, the vital, the revolutionaries, the mighty in arms and will, who march over the soft patient flesh that lies beneath their cleated boots. (*Journals* 44)

That "Edge" is written on the reverse of a typescript of "Wintering" is significant (Van Dyne 171). In the end, the taste of spring is an indulgence in *jouissance* before the "deadmost" is swallowed by death and the flying bees of the semiotic turn destructively against her. This recalls a scene described by Plath in one of her last letters to her mother:

Everything is breaking—my dinner set cracking in half, the health inspector says the cottage should be demolished—there is no hope for it, so I shall have to do over the long, unfinished room in the house instead. Even my beloved bees set upon me today when I numbly knocked aside their sugar feeder, and I am all over stings (465)

However, Plath always reminds us of the importance of resilience. After her husband left her, she wrote to her brother, Warren, emphasizing the importance of facing her destiny: "and you must help her [Plath's mother] see how starting my own life in the most difficult place — here — not running, is the only sane thing to do" (*Letters Home* 472). From the

beginning, life is about confrontation: “in my head I know it is too simple to wish for war, for open battle but one cannot help but wish for those situations that make us heroic, living to the hilt of our total resources. our [sic] cosmic fights, which I think the end of the world is come, are so many broken shells around our growth” (*Journals* 195). The “magician’s girl who does not flinch” in the “blackout of knives” never hides from the worst (“The Bee Meeting” 212): “I believe in going through and facing the worst, not hiding from it” (*Letters Home* 477).

In conclusion, Plath, unlike Sexton, ends her journey by facing a mother. Rather than resorting to a patriarch, Plath rejects him to achieve transformation and *jouissance*. Not afraid to die, she unleashes all her semiotic powers to reach originality and perfection in spite of the fact that this is a destructive act. This unleashing of the semiotic has been gradual. From the beginning until the last explosion of the drives there has been heterogeneity in play. The difference between Sexton and Plath lies not only in the level of the maternal and semiotic drives invested in the text, but also in the capacity to face them. While Sexton surrenders to her fears and hides behind symbolic shields to protect her from an abject mother, Plath courageously breaks those shields and oscillates in and out of them to face the father of the law. And while Sexton chooses God at the end to protect her from the released death drive that burst in her text after the break of her symbolic armour, Plath abandons all traces of patriarchy to confront death with open eyes.

Chapter 9

Sexton and Plath

In her essay, “The Ethics of Linguistics,” Kristeva launches an attack on traditional schools of grammar. She is looking for a different practice that would allow “the speaking animal to sense the rhythm of the body as well as the upheavals of history” (*Desire* 34). She advocates a linguistics that is not separate from the subject and her social function. Her theory declares the convergence of the social, political, psychoanalytic, and the aesthetic. The subject is made and unmade by these different aspects. In “Oscillation between Power and Denial,” Kristeva talks about the writing of woman as an oscillation between power as an identification with the phallic and denial as fleeing from that same phallic. Then she relates this writing to the social, not the whole social body that she focuses on in later writing, as *Strangers to Ourselves*, but rather the family:

Women generally write in order to tell their own family story (father, mother and / or their substitutes). When a woman novelist does not reproduce a real *family* of her own, she creates an imaginary story through which she constitutes an identity: narcissism is safe, the ego becomes eclipsed after freeing itself, purging itself of reminiscence. (Kristeva, “Oscillation” 166)

Sexton and Plath’s writing shows the meeting of the social, psychoanalytic and the aesthetic in the story they tell about their families.

It is true that Plath dwelled on her father’s death for a long time — Helen Vendler reminds us that she wrote nineteen poems before her adult verse about her father (*Coming of Age* 117) — but she also was able to defy him in her later work. Plath first deals with her father’s death in “Electra on Azalea Path” where she visits his grave for the first time to mourn his loss. Then in “The Colossus,” he is perceived in magnified and God-like form (*CP* 116, 129). Hughes was similarly a father-figure until, in later poems, such as “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” (*CP* 222, 244), he is confronted and dismantled. As for Sexton, she

started her work by addressing her doctor and psychoanalyst, then her lovers, and incestuous father and ended with an inflated father-figure, God.

Approximately eleven years after Plath wrote her energetic, transformative “Daddy,” Sexton composed two poems addressing her father, “‘Daddy’ Warbucks” and “Divorce, Thy Name Is Woman” where the reader grows increasingly shocked by the total submissiveness to an incestuous father (*ASCP* 543, 545). In fact, Sexton spent all her journey in his “velvet train”:

and even my dog puts up his four feet
and lets go
of his military secret
with his big red tongue
flying up and down
like yours should have

as we board our velvet train. (“‘Daddy’ Warbucks” 544)

In “Divorce, Thy Name Is Woman,” she confesses that her father’s crime is not his incest but that of leaving her. Therefore, she needs her mother in court not to witness their alleged “divorce,” but to let her, as a rival, see their “exceptional” relationship:

I have been divorcing him ever since,
going into court with Mother as my witness
and both long dead or not
I am still divorcing him,
adding up the crimes
of how he came to me,
how he left me. (*ASCP* 545)

There is complete submission in these poems such as one cannot find in Plath’s later work, in spite of all the claims that she is also compliant to the father of her poetry.

Plath’s literary relationship with her father changed after her husband’s betrayal. Following this crucial event, Plath started to attack the father instead of being submissive to him. Hughes’ position as a writer and her real father’s position as a professor added a

further dimension to the conflict. In this sense, the father stands for the symbolic and the law, and fighting against him is not only inscribed in the personal, but also in language. For Plath, Hughes/father is the lost love and the symbolic law that must be defied to find a voice of her own. She sacrifices love for her father in order to defy him as law in the end.

Sexton, on the other hand, was the one who betrayed her husband. She had many affairs, which her husband, Alfred Sexton (Kayo), knew about, and the most shocking was with her psychiatrist. However, despite these extramarital relationships, Kayo remained important to her as a loving and supportive husband. Although sometimes he was aggressive to her, it was an aggression that, she admitted to her doctor, she needed (L. Sexton 88). The reader of her daughter's biography deduces that she even provoked such fights. She wished him to act as a hurting other and beat her, the way her father had done before, in order to wake her into life: "When I feel depressed I keep wanting to hurt myself, but he no longer [hurts me]: I need to be punished, then forgiven, [I] never realized he was actually doing this for me" (L. Sexton 110). However, this anger and conflict with her husband was not reflected in her art. Forgiveness as passivity was important to her. Her husband was also the symbolic father who protected her psychic borders from collapse and made her feel secure. For this reason, Sexton used to panic when her husband, who was a wool seller, like her father, went on a long journey: "My father used to go on trips, just like Kayo. I was brought up on this same cycle; Kayo calls on the same customers as my father did, Kayo is now where my father used to go" (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 166). This is why, it is argued, she could not fight the father-figure in her work, not only for the sake of incestuous pleasure with him, as seems always the case, or love for Kayo, but also because she needs him for security and psychic integration. Kayo was important for her mental health and, therefore, her women friends' encouragement for her to divorce him was a mistake that she later regretted. After her divorce, Sexton wrote: "I am helpless and thirsty and need shade / but there is no one to cover me — / not even God" ("Divorce" 513). In her poetry, Sexton sacrificed defying the father as law for his love and security.

Plath was also helped to subvert patriarchy by an ability to identify with her mother. Critics have almost always focused on Plath's hatred for her mother, especially as reflected in *The Bell Jar*. However, Aurelia was a high-minded woman who initiated Plath into the world of poetry from early childhood. Wagner reports that: "Aurelia systematically and energetically recited poems and rhymes to her" (*A Biography* 16). Reading Arnold's "The Forsaken Mermaid" aloud, Aurelia provoked powerful responses in Sylvia: "A spark flew off Arnold and shook me, like a child I wanted to cry; I felt very odd. I had fallen into a new way of being happy" (*Letters Home* 32). Plath's mother projected all her ambitions on her daughter and introduced her to a "vision of an alternative way of life, other than the phallogocentric or the gynocentric" (Joseph 19). Therefore, to identify with her mother in writing poetry — which is translated into unconscious pulsations — was easier for Plath than Sexton.

Sexton was not close to her mother, Mary Gray, as was the case with Plath and Aurelia. Although unknown by the reading public, Mary Gray was a writer. However, she did not try to encourage her daughter to be like her. On the contrary, she suppressed her talent. On one occasion, Sexton wrote a poem that was published in the school year book, which only evinced the reaction from her mother that she was guilty of plagiarism. This event left Sexton scarred and their deteriorating relationship, as Joseph suggests, "had the effect of doubling the intensity of patriarchal oppression for Anne Sexton" and reinforcing "the divide created by the father between the male and the female worlds" (20, 19). Accordingly, it was difficult for Sexton to identify with her mother and that was also translated as fear of spasmodic force attacking her from the "outside."

Plath wrote her first poem at the age of seven and from then on poetry became part of her life. Her university education in literature, where she excelled, enhanced her talent. As it grew, her poetry changed from imitating her predecessors to developing her own voice. Therefore, whereas Plath wrote "to be," Sexton wrote "to live": "Sexton thought of death as an irrelevancy in her poetry, which is of life, whereas for Plath, death was the

pivot of her poetry, the central myth, at the center of which she placed herself” (Joseph 76). Sexton only started writing poetry intensively following her psychoanalyst’s advice at the age of twenty eight.

Almost all psychological and social circumstances qualify Plath to be more in conflict with the law of One than Sexton: the death of a powerful father, the betrayal of her husband, and a love-hate relationship with a mother who was supportive and inspirational, but also stifling. Plath is able to release her anal drive against the father despite the serious consequences this might have on her psyche and her work. Sexton, as a result of her fears, could not face a father whom she relied on for existence and security against an abject mother. Furthermore, she could not handle the anger that might awake her from a dreamy symbiosis with her second mother, Nana. And because of this fusion, she lived a regressive life behind the father’s bars. Paradoxically, a lot of her poetry was a call for life, not death. After all, the last poem from the suicidal thread in the third volume *Live or Die* comes down on the final decision to “Live.”

Although Plath’s and Sexton’s relation to death may appear similar, Sexton’s is more passive towards death. She simply waits for it to come, a sleeping beauty. She does not face it, question it, or even use it as a tool of reciprocity against others who cause her pain. It simply employs its tools against her and she accepts that. In “OH,” Mrs. Death seems in full control of Sexton (*ASCP* 302):

Meanwhile you pour tea
with your handsome gentle hands.
Then you deliberately take your
forefinger and point it at my temple,
saying, “You suicide bitch!
I’d like to take a corkscrew
and screw out all your brains
and you’d never be back ever.”
And I close my eyes over the steaming
tea and see God opening His teeth.

“Oh,” He says.

I see the child in me writing, “Oh.”

Oh, my dear, not why. (*ASCP* 303)

According to A.R. Jones, “the *persona* of Anne Sexton is essentially passive, a patient rather than an agent, who suffers *under* experience. Indeed, passive suffering is one of Anne Sexton’s main concerns” (31). Plath, on the other hand, not only releases the death drive in her work, but also uses death as a weapon against the other, especially the father, in a sadomasochistic reciprocity of dying and facing death. She herself becomes an implement of death. Plath writes: “I feel like a very efficient tool or weapon, used and in demand from moment to moment” (Ames 172).

Sexton tries to resist anger. It is there sometimes, but never grows to a scream, a harsh protest against the other, especially the father represented by different male figures in her work. For example, in “After Auschwitz,” Sexton declares: “Anger, / as black as a hook, / overtakes me” (*ASCP* 432), but when she tries to express this anger, it does not come out full throttle:

Man is evil,

I say aloud.

Man is a flower

That should be burnt,

I say aloud.

Man

Is a bird full of mud,

I say aloud. (*ASCP* 433)

The refrain “I say aloud,” does not show Sexton’s anger as much as it points to her suffocation. Some critics try to compare Sexton’s and Plath’s anger. For example, Caroline Hall claims that Sexton’s animus in “The Doctor of the Heart” is similar to Plath’s in “Lady Lazarus” (*ASCP* 301; *CP* 244). Although the two poems are analogous in form, they do not embody the same level of anger. Sexton, as Sandra Gilbert correctly describes her, is a “watered-down Plath” (165). Robert Mazzocco also notes that “Anne Sexton’s sense

of violence was always faltering. Violence seems never to have enhanced her work as it did that of [. . .] Plath” (175). If we compare “The Doctor of the Heart” to Sexton’s earlier poems that address a doctor, it does sound angrier. Nevertheless, if compared to “Lady Lazarus” the increase in emotion seems modest. The similarity between the two poems lies only at the end of each:

Is there such a device for my heart?
I have only a gimmick called magic fingers.

Let me dilate like a bad debt.
Here is a sponge. I can squeeze it myself.

O heart, tobacco red heart,
beat like a rock guitar.

I am at the ship’s prow.
I am no longer the suicide

with her raft and paddle.
Herr Doktor! I’ll no longer die

to spite you, you wallowing
seasick grounded man. (“The Doctor of the Heart” 302)

The final lines of “Lady Lazarus” as follows:

There is a charge
For the hearing of my heart —
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge,
For a word or a touch
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

[.]

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air. (*CP* 246-47)

Hall views the addressee in “The Doctor of the Heart” as an “authoritarian victimizer” who is challenged by Sexton: “Take away your knowledge, Doktor. / It doesn’t butter me up / You say my heart is sick unto. / You ought to have more respect!” (*ASCP* 301). She argues that in this poem “diffidence and subservience are gone” and the persona is “rude, reckless, and unafraid of anger” (117). Hall adds that Sexton “may have found safety in adopting childlike postures in earlier poems, but here she has developed a purer, more courageous self-expression.” But is not saying “I’ll no longer die / to spite you” childlike? (*ASCP* 302). If she really does not care about him, she will die, instead of rejecting death to annoy him. He is still important to her as an authority and a loving other. He is, after all, the doctor of the heart, as the title describes him. While he is the authority of the poem, “Lady Lazarus” is the authority of Plath’s poem. Hall claims that Plath amplifies and reinforces Sexton’s poem, although Sexton’s poem is the later of the two. She insists that both poems have the same defiant message to the “doktor”: “go away. Leave me alone. I mean to take care of myself” (119). However, in “Lady Lazarus,” Plath does more than that. She cannibalizes the doctor/father. Moreover, Halls contends that “each [poem] presents a red, fiery resurrection of the speaker, newly bold and contemptuous” (119). However, whereas the red-haired witch at the end of Plath’s poem swallows men, although such an act is dangerous for the persona’s identity, the “red heart” of Sexton simply beats “like a rock guitar” and belongs to her “doktor.” The rocking of her heart and being at a safe “ship,” instead of a suicidal “raft,” means that Sexton belongs to life which also means that she is still under the doctor’s authority.

The “magic fingers” of the “witch-writer” in Sexton’s “The Doctor of the Heart” are not as dangerous as those of Plath’s witch. In “Her Kind” (*ASCP* 15), this witch that goes out only under the cover of night is pathetic: “lonely thing, twelve-fingered, out of mind.” Although “dreaming evil,” she is, in fact, harmless, and simply “whin[es]” (*ASCP* 16). Even when she is in “the woods,” she finds a cave for shelter. The poem ends with a seemingly courageous step towards death: “A Woman like that is not ashamed to die. / I have been her kind.” However, Sexton uses the word “ashamed” instead of “afraid.” Ellen Merriman Capo explains that shame “requires an awareness of others as separate from the self that others form an ‘audience’” (36). Sexton is not ashamed of exposure in this sense, but fear is something else. Capo asks: “Why does one intuitively expect the last line to read: ‘is not *afraid* to die?’ (36). In fact, Greg Johnson unconsciously makes this very slip when he quotes the line (85). Sexton’s fear of death, it is argued, is what prevents her witch from saying the word. Capo asks again: “Does brutal treatment which should call forth anger or aggression produce submission in Sexton?” (36). Capo refutes her own uncertainties, which are justified, to view Sexton’s tone as not resigned but resistant. Since Sexton is unable to face the abject and the sweeping bodily drives in her text, she resigns, while Plath’s witch remains unashamed and, not afraid, “eats men like air.”

As a result of her fear of an abject mother and of losing another, Sexton stands still. The death drive does not permeate her poetry enough to make a dynamic movement between her and the other, which can lead to transformation. And when dynamism appears towards the end of her career, she tries to bury it. Crossing the frontier “inside” and “outside,” Plath is able to show more violent reciprocity and oscillation between I and the other and between presence and absence. Violent irruption by the maternal and the semiotic makes her text flexible to change and revolt.

Conclusion

By using a psychoanalytical perspective, this study demonstrates that in Sexton's and Plath's work transgressing the law of One begins in the subject. A Kristevan perspective on psychoanalysis is pivotal for grasping the significance of the destabilization of the subject and her identity in relation to the aesthetic process. It offers a model of a subject in process, changing and capable of transformation, committed not only to a rigid linguistic structure, but also emotion. It challenges a new trend of studies that ignores the suffering and passions of the subject of the writer by treating her only as an intellect in complete control of her work, thereby taking us back to an obsolete definition of the subject.

Subjective attributes, namely negativity and abjection, can affect the poetic voice and its ability to transform the law of the father. In the poetry of Sexton and Plath, the greater the death drive in the form of anger and psychic fluidity, the greater the transformation of the law. Negativity in Plath's work is more violent and transformative, defying the other in reciprocity. She oscillates between "I" and the other, the symbolic and the semiotic, presence and absence, and language and silence. This confrontational dialectic, which is part of the signifying process, is defined as heterogeneity.

In terms of abjection, there is fluidity between "inside" and "outside." Plath tried, from the beginning of her work, to break down her proper psychic borders and move to the "outside." By becoming too ambitious as an outsider, she lost her borders completely. She then regained them by the appearance of an other in her work. However, it was not until personal anger seeped into her work that her unique voice was created and masochistic reciprocity was able to change the patriarchal function. The death drive was released in a violent momentum towards transformation, in stark contrast with Sexton's fears of confrontation. In comparison, Sexton is afraid to show anger or trespass beyond her proper

psychic borders in order to confront “outside” an abject mother. She is also fearful of abandoning her second mother “inside.” In other words, and in terms of abjection, her borders are rigid where it is hard to move between “inside” and “outside.” When the maternal abject bursts in her poetry involuntarily, she performs cleansing rituals and gravitates to her father/God again for security.

It is necessary in this study to stress a new definition of Confessional poetry depending on Kristeva’s psychoanalytic approach. In this new perspective, “Confessional Poetry” is still regarded as biographical, but not in the pejorative sense of the word, which focuses only on the pathological side of the story. Rather it helps to delineate the potentialities of the writer and her creative process regardless of the personal consequences of such writing. Moreover, this new concept of Confessional writing pays attention to the uniqueness and singularity of each writer. It highlights differences among these writers instead of similarities. After all, change starts within the particular subjectivity of each poet. In fact, bracketing together Plath and Sexton as Confessional women poets affects their individuality. For Plath, heterogeneity is the source of motility and creativity. In this context, she is the Kristevan subject in process or the “deadmost,” oscillating between identification with the mother and the father. Therefore, she is able to transgress the law by releasing the death drive and facing death in a variety of ways. Her poetry is “blood jet,” a creativity that connotes murder and life, violation and logical conformity, and a masochistic fluctuation between the conscious and the unconscious.

Passivity is the general characteristic of Sexton’s work, unlike Plath’s renewal and “love of change” (“Ocean 1212-W” 122). As a result of her fear, Sexton cannot encounter an abject mother. Neither can she defy a father who is responsible for the integration of her body-ego against a disintegrating maternal. In this context, many obstinate shields, the forms of which seem at first Euclidean, are discussed as proper borders which help Sexton to relinquish her fears and delay the irruption of the semiotic and the maternal abject in her text. The subject of Sexton’s poetry is thus termed the “dead/less.” She has less ability than

Plath to express the violent fragmentation and the dissolution of the “I” (that is, her death in poetry) while confronting the other. Although her text might be heterogeneous at times because of the involuntary irruption of the semiotic, it is not enough to achieve transformative *jouissance*. Sexton fears to defy anybody she needs or loves. In fact, she sacrificed defiance of the law for love, for being in the symbolic. The unity of the body and psyche is as important to Sexton as dying in perfection. Disintegration, which causes change and motility, is terrifying for her.

Another aspect to consider in relation to Plath and Sexton’s poetry is feminism. Kristeva’s position on feminism can be justified by an understanding of the poets’ work. Although Kristeva’s “feminist” thought is rejected by some critics (Oliver 1), the notion of the semiotic as a revolutionary aspect of her theory becomes important to artistic and political change. Kristeva has been criticized for not advocating the political movements of women (Fraser 60-67, Butler 81). She has also been criticized for focusing on the maternal as deterministic, biological motherhood (Butler 80, Stanton 176-177). However, it is through a microcosmic change that the political can take place. This is not to neglect what is political; rather it is a matter of priorities. Changing the subject will definitely lead to cultural change, as the subject is the basic unit of a culture. Moreover, it is not only the biological mother that is essential for change, but also the feminine in general. As has been demonstrated in Plath and Sexton, the feminine manifesting itself as the semiotic in language, threatens the law. A woman can challenge phallic primacy if she releases the power of her drives and involves herself in a master-slave transgressive revolt.

Some aspects of Kristeva’s theory, however, do not withstand the same scrutiny. Although she may emphasize oscillation and heterogeneity, this study shows how her ideas sometime fall into the trap of exclusion. Many times, Kristeva puts the subject in front of a perplexing choice, which Plath and Sexton defy. For example, she underlines two paths for the daughter: identification either with the father or the mother. She also pinpoints two options: burying the crypt of the mother in the daughter’s psyche and thus resulting in the

inability to mourn or introjecting it in order to be part of the symbolic, either a pull to death or to life. In defiance of Kristeva's system, Plath fluctuates between two identifications, and Sexton adopts two mothers: one is thrown away and one is engulfed, while the father works as a protection against the threat of the mothers.

Furthermore, where Kristeva stresses the spoken unspeakable, this study reassesses the meaning of silence. Both can be seen as manifesting the subject's grief and her powers of change. That is to say, although the semiotic defies conventional language, it is manifested as language. Even silence is spoken. In this sense, Kristeva's argument resembles conventional feminist, psychoanalytical discourse where total silence is not appreciated as power. However, Plath's poetry, especially in terms of transcendence, gives thought to a silence beyond the text. This "transcendence" becomes a complete fusion with the mother as an ultimate defiance of the law of the father in the signifying process, a final word in an argument. This might be interpreted as a Lacanian way of seeing the feminine completely outside of language. Hence, what is termed "The Siren Voice of the Other" articulates the notion of voice and silence working together in the process of transgressing the law. It is a violent, dynamic voice that defies the father through subversive heterogeneity, resulting from the violent eruption of the semiotic and ending with a defying silence. Therefore, the woman is not only capable of pulverizing thethetic, which reflects her suffering, but also of creating ultimate silence as the "most" deadly act. This happens when the somatic drive is at its peak both as pain and *jouissance*. Moreover, the singing voice exhibits dynamism in each of Plath's later poems as a movement between presence and absence, authority and passivity, as well as a movement between death in realm of the semiotic and rebirth in the realm of the symbolic. It also represents a movement between writing and silence across poems. Silence, therefore, is as authoritative and powerful as voice.

For the first time, this study examines both Plath and Sexton from a Kristevan perspective. In the past, discussion has focused predominantly on Sexton's feminism.

However, this study demonstrates how fear made her an ally of the symbolic. The imaginary father that exists in Sexton's work turns out to be, in the end, the Lacanian Name of the Father. Furthermore, although other studies examine Sexton's relationship with her first mother and with her Nana, they do so separately. Here, they are discussed as two forces pulling Sexton in different directions and thereby leading to her passivity: one mother is jettisoned outside the symbolic border, returning as the repressed, while the other is not abandoned. Such passivity in writing can be expressed in terms of orality. Sexton is, generally speaking, "hungry" in her poems. She does not consume maternal food, although she does sometimes eat to compensate for her abject mother being behind her bars. Instead, she devours language, which justifies her long narrative style in contrast to Plath's free verse. She is not as able, like Plath, to fall back into fearful silence because it risks losing her symbolic protection. Plath is able, in contrast, to oscillate between writing and silence, not only devouring words, as Sexton did, but also being devoured by an archaic mother. Under the pressure of the abject mother from the "outside" and the introjections of the mother "inside," Sexton's poetry witnesses the burst of the abject, defined in this study for the first time as negative maternal forces. This ultimately brings positive change to the poetry.

It is further demonstrated that Plath is able to defy the authority of the father and in her final poetry the semiotic takes the upper hand. This is not a total triumph, but more a pyrrhic victory with strong elements of defeat. While Sexton dies out of fear of death, Plath dies confronting it. Previous Kristevan studies have focused on the relationship between the daughter and her mother and children only, so neglecting the daughter-father relationship. For the most part they did not see transcendence as positive, but as a resort to patriarchy, away from maternal immanence. This study treats transcendence as silence, as a fusion with the maternal, in an act of rebellion against the father and a final assertion in an argument. The act is also considered threatening because it is a fall into a pre-linguistic space, which means giving up language and the social world of meaning. Therefore,

Plath's subject always makes a separation from such fusion in order to go back to "writing." Additionally, it is stressed, and this is also true for Sexton, suffering, and not intellect only, is part of the poetic process. For Plath, furthermore, time is a manifestation of this oscillation between consciousness and unconsciousness.

Plath committed suicide when she was much younger than Sexton (Plath died at the age of thirty while Sexton was forty-six). Sexton's clinging to the symbolic enabled her to survive longer. Although this might be true for Kristeva and other critics, it has serious ethical implications as it suggests the poet is in a race towards the grave — that nature imitates art. The primary concern here, nevertheless, is how the poet faces death in her poems, not the reality of her suicide. In this sense, "the author's experiences embedded in the works become primary, and biographical information which may elucidate the works becomes secondary" (Miller 301). The personal does not necessarily mean, as some critics try to claim, the focus should be on the life of the poet rather than her work. It is rather seen through the work of art as different positions in language; it is indeed in the core of the aesthetic process. Gill rejects personal readings of the poets since they imply that the better poet is the one that has the fiercest of emotions at the expense of formal control (Gill, *Anne Sexton* 12). Paradoxically, in spite of the intensity of emotions Plath releases in her text, she has more aesthetic control than Sexton, whose loose craftsmanship, particularly at the end of her career, has been criticized by many (Middlebrook, *A Biography* 379-80; Ostriker, "That Story" 251; Spacks 188-89; Pollit 70). Jon Rosenblatt observes that the "wildness of emotion [in Plath's later work] is contained and channeled through [different] structures" (169). However, this control does not rely on the rigid forms of her earlier poetry. Rather, Plath uses evocative language that does not interrupt the flow of the poems. Therefore, Kristeva's attempt to stress the syntactic elisions and the dissolving and tearing apart of the symbolic thesis in poetic language does not mean, as she tries to insinuate, losing control over form (*Desire* 134, 165). Plath's poetry witnesses this "controlled uncontrolledness" of the death drive in her late poetry where the law of One is

radically defied. “[R]eady for enormity” (“A Birthday Present” 207), she is the “deadmost” and her voice is “The Siren Voice of the Other.”

In the light of this study, a new reading of Confessional poetry does not, therefore, necessarily mean neglecting the personal history of the poet. Critical objectivity should not be understood simply as ignoring the feelings of the writer and the narrative of her life. The focus on the aesthetic process and the aesthetic identity of the writer as rooted in real life can also guarantee objectivity. In reading Confessional writing and keeping all the elements of poetry active, whether they be personal, social or aesthetic, the critic creates a balance that may be lost if the personal is completely eliminated. This kind of reading applies to all other Confessional poets, including male writers, such as Robert Lowell, John Berryman, and W.D. Snodgrass. Male writers as well as female writers can defy and transform the law of One by relying on the semiotic and its feminine characteristics. Through tracing the process of the eruption of the semiotic in their texts depending on their life story, one can follow their aesthetic evolution and its potential for transformation.

Notes

Introduction

¹ This law of One is equivalent to Lacan's Name of the Father who is associated with the instigation of symbolic law. See Lacan, *Seminar III*: 96.

² Eliot's "impersonal theory of poetry" (44) is discussed in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent." See Eliot 39-49.

³ Jane Hedley agrees that Sexton's work is dated and that her "historical moment has passed" (150).

⁴ Plath's question in her 1959 journal, "What to do with anger?" — as Axelrod sees it— "was Plath's key personal and creative question" (110). In her anger, he explains, she was defying her literary mother, Virginia Woolf, who did not advocate anger for women writers (110).

⁵ Negativity is an important Hegelian concept. However, for Kristeva, as Maria Margaroni explains, the dialectic of the symbolic and the semiotic is never reconcilable, as is the case with Hegel; the two modes are of "antagonistic nature" (6). For a detailed explanation of the term negativity, see Lechte and Margaroni 18-23.

⁶ The deadmost (*plus mort*) is a term that Kristeva borrows from Soller's novel, *H*, in her essay "The Novel as Polylogue" in *Desire in Language*.

⁷ Studlar explains this position in reference to Deleuze. However, McClure R. Smith does point out that Kristeva and Deleuze have the same perspective on masochism.

⁸ The master-slave dialectic, which is also translated as Lordship and Bondage, comes from a passage in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. This dialectic occurs when one self-conscious being struggles with another self-conscious being. The result is that the winner becomes the master and the loser the slave. This is a better choice than when the self ignores the other and thus supersedes itself or when the self becomes paralysed by a mirror-like other. Although the master attains ascendancy because he fears death less, he depends on the slave for recognition and economic production. In this sense, the slave becomes stronger until the painful struggle begins again, which

eventually leads to a higher unity when both the master and the slave realize that they are interdependent.

⁹ The essay entitled “Women’s time” is also published in Kristeva’s *New Maladies of the Soul* 201-24.

¹⁰ Anne-Marie Smith’s translation has been adopted for this passage instead of Moi’s translation.

¹¹ This *jouissance* encompasses simultaneous sexual, physical and spiritual pleasure .

¹² The psyche belongs to the symbolic. In order to be integrated, it repudiates the soma which, nevertheless, threatens the borders of the cultural psyche afterwards.

¹³ Lilia Loman argues that although Kristeva’s project defines the death drive in terms of ambivalent heterogeneous tension, life and renewal, she believes that there is a hidden teleological approach underneath. Loman thinks Kristeva constantly implies the reduction of the author to a non-being, an absence (87).

¹⁴ The two places that Blanchot discusses originally appeared in a passage in Kafka’s diaries dated 28 January, 1922. For more details, see Kafka 407-8.

¹⁵ Julia Kristeva was one of the first to introduce Mikhail Bakhtin’s work to the West by writing her essay “Word, Dialogue and Novel,” which was translated in *Desire in Language*. This essay draws on two books by Bakhtin: *Rabelais and His World* and *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*. Kristeva was influenced by the idea of dialogism presented in the latter book, where Bakhtin abandoned the traditional static, mechanistic text for one which is disrupted and transformed by “the other side of language” (Moi, *Kristeva Reader* 34). Bakhtin emphasizes that all relationships in the novel are dialogic in character not only in relation to heroes but also in relation to “every word of the novel, making it double-voiced” (*Problems* 40). The speaking subject, in this sense, becomes nonintegrated, producing a subversive language that defies authority. This is where Bakhtin’s dialogism coincides with his idea of the carnival and the Menippean text. In *Reblais*, Bakhtin speaks about the language of carnival as a transformative one that threatens the law and prohibitive discourse. He talks about “the joy of change and renewal,” a “gay transformation” and a laughter that “purifies the consciousness of men from false seriousness” (*Rabelais* 83, 91, 141). Kristeva’s reading of Bakhtin’s dialogue and ambivalence led to her own idea of intertextuality where poetic

language is double. This means that “any text is the absorption and transformation of another,” which gives space to a multiplicity of meanings (*Desire* 66).

¹⁶ Paul Mitchell applies this idea of a silence beyond the text only to Plath’s last poetry.

¹⁷ The Sirens were mentioned in Homer’s *The Odyssey*. Living on an island, they were beautiful, but evil creatures, who lured sailors to their death with their singing. Odysseus, however, outwitted them by having himself tied to the ship’s mast and by plugging his men’s ears with wax. For full details of the story, see Homer 190-94. For definition of the Sirens, see Barber 240. For their use in English literature, see Norton and Rushton 341-342.

¹⁸ As Viola Mecke observes, the attachment to the Sirens is based on “a singing-listening” connection, i.e., it depends on communication.

¹⁹ For more about Kristeva’s association of the semiotic with the maternal and how it has been attacked because of its seeming essentialization, see Lechte and Margaroni 24-25.

²⁰ Paula M. Salvio’s *Anne Sexton: Teacher of Weird Abundance*, for example, is a study that uses Kristeva, Lacan, Morrison, Torok, and Winnicott, among others. However, her study is a pedagogical one, which emphasizes the importance of the social and the personal in the process of teaching, using Anne Sexton’s strategies as a teacher as a model.

²¹ For the purposes of this research, Hand’s translation in Moi’s *The Kristeva Reader* shows the connection between the poetry and the act of suicide of these poets more clearly than Anita Barrows’ translation of the same text in *About Chinese Women*.

²² Blosser defines this term in relation to prose as “crossing over into ‘new land’.”

²³ A genotext is set in contrast to a phenotext, according to Kristeva. The phenotext is a structure that is subjugated to linguistic rules, while the genotext is a process, which is a semiotic disposition, constrained by the phenotext, exists within it, and breaks its rules. See Kristeva, *Revolution* 86-89.

Chapter 1: Sexton, The Ouroboros

²⁴ Jane Hedley suggests that, “more typically, the ‘you’ Sexton conjures up is adult and male, a father-doctor-mentor figure” (25).

²⁵ Desire is related to the symbolic order where meaning and structure take place, while *jouissance* is an enjoyment that is related to the symbolic and its beyond, where meaning is on the verge of collapse. *Jouissance* has to do with fusion rather than construction.

²⁶ Jacqueline Rose has endorsed Middlebrook’s opinion of *Love Poems*. However, she thinks that although Sexton’s relationship with her daughter Linda might be an enactment of this longing for the mother, its literality contaminates the dream. For more details, see Rose’s *On Not Being*.

²⁷ Yeats learned this quotation from a Hindu friend, Mohini Chatterjee, who visited Dublin in 1885. When Yeats asked him if he should pray, the Brahmin instructed him to say before going to sleep: “I have lived many lives, I have been a slave and a prince. Many a beloved has sat upon my knees and I have sat upon the knees of many a beloved. Everything that has been shall be again” (Ellmann 44).

²⁸ For example, see Honton 115-20, and Hall 80.

Chapter 2: “Geometry and Abjection”

²⁹ The “degree zero of spatialization” is a phrase used by Kristeva in response to Burgin’s paper at a conference at the University of Warwick, May, 1987. To read Kristeva’s full comment, see Burgin’s notes 122.

³⁰ This poem is not published in *The Complete Poems of Anne Sexton*. It first appeared in *Antioch Review* 19 (1959) 150. It was collected by Middlebrook and George under the title “Early Poems” in *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*.

³¹ For Diana Hume George, Christopher is the male principle within Sexton. See George, *Oedipus* 81. The name Christopher could also refer to the poet Christopher Smart, whose way of writing

poetry influenced Sexton in *The Death Notebooks* and whose life has some similarities with hers. See Hall 144.

³² “Magi” is the plural of the Persian word “magus” which means “a magician”. See Serjeantson 228.

³³ M. L. Rosenthal and Gall suggests that all the seventeen poems in “The Divorce Papers” refer to the actual story of Sexton’s divorce in 1973, followed by a transitory love affair and then later her trajectory towards suicide. They equate her success in renouncing the lover with the triumph of the suicidal compulsion which dominates her last poetry (20). As these poems show a violent eruption of death drive, they can be read — especially “The Lost Lie” and “The Love Plant” — as also related to the maternal.

³⁴ See Grimm, Jacob and Wilhelm.

³⁵ In her book *We Heal from Memory*, Cassie Premo Steele also believes that Sexton was a survivor of traumatic childhood sexual abuse. Steele contends that Sexton’s life, as well as her poetry, is full of signs which point to that trauma. However, through her poetry, Sexton was able to heal her wounds and survive her trauma.

Chapter 3: The Secret Within

³⁶ These terms originally belong to Sandor Ferenczi and were developed by Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok in their book *The Shell and the Kernel*. To review their definition of incorporation and introjection in detail, see the two essays “The Illness of Mourning” 107-24, and “Mourning or Melancholia: Introjection Versus Incorporation” 125-38.

³⁷ The excerpt of the transcript of one of Sexton’s therapy tapes clearly shows her relation to Nana and the difficult psychological decision she faced on whether to kill her. In this excerpt, Sexton asks her psychiatrist: “Why did I want to kill Nana?” Then she later acquires: “Why would I try to become Nana? That does not make any sense: I try to become Nana in order to kill her?” And the doctor replies: “in order not to lose her. It’s what we do when we can’t let people die.” For the whole excerpt, see Middlebrook, *A Biography* 401-3.

³⁸ The title of the poem is in fact Dr Orne's office phone number.

³⁹ As the poem "Keeping the City" begins with the lines: "Once, / in August, / head on your chest," Scalapino suggests that the addressee is Linda Sexton. She explains, based on Linda Sexton's biography, that the head on the chest refers to a game the mother used to play with Linda called "play nine" where Sexton used to put her head on Linda's chest, pretending that she is a little nine-year-old girl, and the latter pats her head, thereby anticipating a series of prospective sexually abusive acts. For more details, see Scalapino 61-67. However, Scalapino notices how Sexton blurs her identity with that of her daughter. Therefore, what happens in the poem can be read as what happens within Anne Sexton's own chest and not in the context of her relationship with her daughter.

⁴⁰ Frances Bixler also notices that "knowledge of evil is the source for much of Sexton's poetic energy." See Bixler 217.

⁴¹ Kristeva explains the relation between magic and the semiotic and the maternal by stating that "[m]agic, shamanism, esoterism, the carnival, and 'incomprehensible' poetry all underscore the limits of socially useful discourse and attest to what it represses: the process that exceeds the subject and his communicative structure" (*Revolution* 16).

⁴² As has been noted earlier, Kristeva changed her position later about the ability of poetry to cure the poet.

⁴³ Middlebrook and George, in their introduction to *Selected Poems of Anne Sexton*, emphasize the narrative voice of Sexton's poetry which they see as a personal narration of the story of a character named Anne. "Storyteller," they say, was Sexton's favourite label for her role (xiii). Moreover, although McGowan argues that Sexton brings silence to her work as irruptions in her text – which makes the speaker, according to him, Kristeva's bearer of death – he believes that by "producing more and more words" Sexton's poems "resist the abyssal moment at the end of language when the individual passes from life into death, from the word into silence." In other words, she fills the abyss with words instead of silence. See McGowan 104, 110.

Chapter 4: Hegira to the Name of the Father

⁴⁴ Other friends, who used to accompany Sexton because of her fear of going out alone, were Maxine Kumin, Lois Ames, and Anne Wilder. See Middlebrook 196, 243, 237-39.

⁴⁵ Philip McGowan's *Anne Sexton and Middle Generation Poetry: The Geography of Grief* shares a framework with Jo Gill's book in that they both stress the consciousness of Sexton's project which tries to demonstrate the uncertainty of language. Both focus on the importance of Sexton's words—which are not disconnected from her contemporary world and culture— and not her personal world. One can add the work of Melanie Waters to this line of critics with a new approach to Sexton.

⁴⁶ See *No Evil Star* 50, 52, and 184.

⁴⁷ The essay is “‘My Sweeney, Mr. Eliot’: Anne Sexton and the ‘Impersonal Theory of Poetry.’”

⁴⁸ Sexton used to suffer from immense fear of stomach ache as a result of chronic constipation. See Middlebrook, *A Biography* 238.

⁴⁹ This poem is quoted in Gill's *Anne Sexton's Confessional Poetics* 194.

⁵⁰ See note 18.

⁵¹ Lacan's theory was attacked by many feminists for, among many other aspects, not enabling the woman to transgress the law. For more details, see Colebrook and Cranny-Francis.

⁵² In her book, *Imagining Incest*, Swiontkowski assumes that both Sexton and Plath were unable to transgress their incestuous relationship with their fathers through their poetry, unlike Adrienne Rich and Sharon Olds. Although the present study agrees with her opinion in connection with Sexton, it finds the situation different in connection with Plath who was able to transgress her relationship with her father.

⁵³ Lynette McGrath also argues that God in Sexton's late religious verse “becomes all-inclusive, literally omnipresent, Protean, androgynous, non-authoritarian.” Even in “The Rowing Endeth,” McGrath fails to see God as oppressive and argues that her union with Him is a liberating experience of death. See, McGrath 146- 49. Her reading is close to McGowan's in its reference to God as the Absolute (death).

⁵⁴ It is worth noting that the island mentioned in the poem is reminiscent of Squirrel Island in Maine where Sexton's grandfather Arthur Gray Staples used to own a summer home, in which she and her two sisters spent a happy childhood. This island is the place "where the fathers of her personal and mythic lives congregated" (169). For full detail of this island and Sexton's life there see George's article "Anne Sexton's Island God." Moreover, George in her *Oedipus* insists in a reference to the island: "The quest for the father-god appears to overwhelm the matriarchal deity whom Sexton searched out with equal diligence but could not as clearly name" (54).

⁵⁵ Basing his discussion on Blanchot's ideas about suicide in *The Space of Literature*, McGowan asserts that Sexton recognized in her poetry the difference between death and dying and that suicide "comes as the final response to fear, not of death, but of dying, not of life, but of living" (128). It could be argued that this is something that Sexton not only recognized, but also lived.

Chapter 5: Plath, the Pharmakos

⁵⁶ Pamela Smith believes that although Nims talks about the continuity between *The Colossus* and Plath's later work, he uses pejorative words to describe *The Colossus* such as "drudgery." This, according to Smith, weakens his position. See Smith 112.

⁵⁷ The reason for depending on the collection of 1981, rather than that of 1965, is articulated by Hughes in the introduction to the former:

The *Ariel* eventually published in 1965 was a somewhat different volume from the one she [Plath] had planned. It incorporated most of the dozen or so poems she had gone on to write in 1963, though she herself, recognizing the different inspiration of these new pieces, regarded them as the beginnings of a third book. It omitted some of the more personally aggressive poems from 1962, and might have omitted one or two more if she had not already published them herself in magazines — so that by 1965 they were widely known. The collection that appeared was my eventual compromise between publishing a large bulk of her work — including much of the post-*Colossus* and pre-*Ariel* verse -- and introducing her late work more cautiously, printing perhaps only twenty poems to begin with. (15)

Many critics feel that the poems not included in the 1965 *Ariel* were omitted by Hughes because they refer to his infidelity.

⁵⁸ "Ricocheting" is a word often used by Plath in her *Journals*.

⁵⁹ This is a word Plath employed in one of her early poems related to her creativity, “The Disquieting Muses” (*CP* 74).

⁶⁰ In this essay Kristeva states: “it [heterogeneity] goes by various names according to the conceptual framework of the theory that posits it and the level of its operation. But the name always designates something irreducible, a disquieting heterogeneousness, outside the transcendental enclosure within which we are otherwise constrained by phenomenology and its relative, linguistics” (40).

⁶¹ The expression ‘dark continent’ was first used by Freud to refer to the ambiguity of the sexual life of women. Kristeva refers to this term as maternal continent, a “lost territory” (*Tales of Love* 234). The original term is in Freud’s *Standard Edition* vol. 20, 212.

⁶² Emerson discusses his ideal perspective on nature mainly in his essay “Nature.” See Emerson, 9-39.

⁶³ The eponymous thin people are seen as war victims by some critics. See, for example, Britzolakis 207-8. The whole poem has also been dismissed as wholly “psychotic.” See, for example Ostriker 101. Holbrook looks at it in both lights. He believes that the poem must be about the victims of concentration camps if it is to be read sanely. However, according to him, it was originally an “insane” poem. For full explanation of the poem, see Holbrook 243-44.

⁶⁴ This poem alludes to a painting by Paul Klee entitled “Departure of the Ghost.”

⁶⁵ In her essay “The Bounded Text,” Kristeva explains how, in the second half of the Middle Ages, the ideologeme (a mode of textual organization) of sign replaced the ideologeme of the symbol. For example, myth and epic are forms of the ideologeme of symbol since they are homogeneous, universal, static, and close-ended. Kristeva describes this ideologeme as having “vertical dimension” and is thus articulated as metaphor. The ideologeme of the sign, in contrast, is heterogeneous, dynamic and open-ended. According to Kristeva, it has “horizontal dimension” and thus articulated as metonym.

⁶⁶ Annas looks at the landscape in *Ariel* from a cultural rather than a psychological point of view. Therefore the landscape is contemporary: “an office, a battlefield or concentration camp, a kitchen, a hospital” where the female protagonist is entrapped (96).

⁶⁷ Many critics agree with this opinion. For example, see Hayman 41; Christodoulides 169.

⁶⁸ In contrast to this opinion, Barbara Johnson argues that an ideal motherhood, as the very opposite of violence, does not exist. Therefore we should not blame Aurelia Plath for falling short of that ideal. Unless we stop blaming the mother, Johnson argues, we will not be freed from the constraints of the ideal. See Johnson 93.

⁶⁹ This expression was used by Plath to describe her relationship with her mother in the *Journals* (447). Christodoulides used this expression later throughout her discussion of this relationship.

⁷⁰ John Beer also views Plath’s personality as “mercurial” and “constantly changing;” a “dispersed range of energies” work in her psyche, as opposed to Ted Hughes, who has strong consciousness, “a well organized centripetal system,” and a fixed identity (146, 155, 172). Beer’s argument is not intended to prefer one poet over another, but to show how Plath and Hughes, as well as their work, are different like their Romantic predecessors. Plath in her “plays between stability and energy” is closer to the mercurial Coleridge, while Hughes is closer to Wordsworth (158). Beer shows how Plath and Hughes’s difference initially served to complement each other, but that later on, it led to the tragic consequences, as Plath’s psychic condition after the separation. For the full argument, see Beer 141-74.

⁷¹ This movement described by Broe is more to do with a technical poetic control achieved by Plath in her late volumes, a conscious ability for protean emotional exploration. Therefore, this elastic shifting is, in Broe’s view, not psychological. It is rather Plath’s full control over her materials and her ability to mould emotions into different forms. For this reason, Broe does not believe in a biographical approach to Plath’s work under any circumstances.

⁷² In her biography, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*, Anne Stevenson argues that rage was responsible for Plath’s creativity. Anger in Plath is presented as antisocial behaviour and

aggression and sometimes as demonic possession, due to “her social isolation as a girl” or “her father’s death,” but never due to Ted Hughes or her mother (4). Hughes’s infidelity seems to be completely blamed on Plath. Moreover, everyone, including Plath’s family, friends and neighbours seem to be the innocent victims of her insensitive, behaviour or her aggressive pen (266). According to the present study, violence and anger might have their root in Plath’s character, but they find expression as creative vitality, energy and intensity rather than as antisocial behaviour. Social pressures, it can be argued, intensified the level of that anger. Stevenson’s accusations against Plath may be understood when one knows that she received significant help from Olwyn Hughes, the literary agent for the Estate of Sylvia Plath, and thus one may doubt the ultimate motives of her book. In her memoir, Plath’s friend Jillian Becker shows how Stevenson, with the help of Olwyn, manipulated the facts she had told them and how some of the main events she narrated to them were deleted from *Bitter Fame*, while carrying other testimonies antagonistic to Plath, like that of Dido Merwin. See Becker 55-56. Moreover, in his biography, *Rough Magic*, Paul Alexander reveals a letter written by Ted Hughes in 1963 and deposited by Plath’s mother in the Lilly Library at Indiana University until the former’s death. In this, Hughes himself confesses that his “madness” contributed to Plath’s depression and suicide (xvi).

⁷³ Wagner takes these lines from a poem written by Ted Hughes entitled “The Shot” (*Birthday Letters* 16-17). She argues that in this poem Hughes accepts the blame for Plath’s death (45). Although this might be true of this single poem, and of a few other poems, *Birthday Letters* as whole tries to throw the blame on fate. Hughes is represented as the helpless husband dragged involuntarily, along with his wife, to inevitable doom. While we might have a certain sympathy for this opinion, we feel less so when Hughes throws responsibility on other people’s shoulders like Dr. Ruth Beuscher, who is accused of practising destructive psychoanalysis with Plath in “Night-Ride on Ariel” (*Birthday Letters* 174). However, he was right to point that her art was made out of a “Mummy-Daddy” duet (*Birthday Letters* 169):

Of Mummy Daddy Mummy Daddy—
Daddy Daddy Daddy Daddy
Mummy Mummy (“Blood and Innocence”)

⁷⁴ For example see Rose, *Haunting* 146; Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath* 44-45.

Chapter 6: Subversive Heterogeneity

⁷⁵ Freud defines the fetish as any non-sexual object, such as a foot or a piece of clothing, which abnormally excites erotic feelings as an after-affect of some sexual impression in childhood. Freud suggested that the fetish stands for the male's fear of female castration. In other words, it represents a woman's penis, the absence of which is substituted by the fetish object. Freud only focuses on perverted male behaviour when discussing this term, but never that of females (as in the case of Plath) or normal males. For more details on Freud's views on fetishism, see *The Standard Edition* vol. 7, 153-55.

⁷⁶ This interview is quoted from the notes in *Sylvia Plath: Collected Poems* 239.

⁷⁷ Jahan Ramazani has argued for this primordial loss of the mother in "Daddy" as suggested by Kristeva. (see Ramazani 1150). Some critics such as Bredsdorff, Jennifer Draskau explains, go further and suggest that "Daddy" is nothing but a cipher for "Mother" (Draskau 93). As Plath cannot attack her living mother directly, her feelings of hatred are "canalized" into the other dead parent. Though Draskau believes that Bredsdorff's attempt to exorcize both parents at once in "Daddy" cannot be fully successful, she agrees that Plath's ambivalent relationship with the mother is what is responsible for the tension in her work. The present study agrees that that the daughter-mother relationship is essential in Plath's work, but that it does not delete the role of the father and the symbolic from Plath's work. Plath's father, and his later substitute, Ted Hughes, are also essential in forming Plath's dilemma, the termination of which becomes the end of her career and maybe the end of her life.

⁷⁸ Many critics have protested at Plath's use of images relating to the Holocaust. For example, George Steiner asks about the legitimacy of using such imagery by anyone not involved in such an event (218). In fact, he accuses poets of larceny as they appropriate the Holocaust for their private suffering. Irving Howe takes an even fiercer position than Steiner when he describes such appropriation as "monstrous" and "utterly disproportionate," refusing Steiner's "positive" stance describing Plath's "Daddy" as "the 'Guernica' of modern poetry" (232-33). Seamus Heaney criticizes Plath's poetry as "rampage[ing] so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows,"

while Bedient describes Plath as “climb[ing] to self-importance over the bodies of the dead” (The Government 165; “Sylvia” 5). In addition, Marjorie Perloff emphasizes the same idea of the illegitimacy of identifying with the suffering of the Jews in the Holocaust, describing it as “a hollow ring” (“Sylvia Plath’s ‘Sivvy’ Poems” 173). After several decades, however, other critics have moved on from previous opinions and started to look at the reference to the Holocaust in Plath’s poetry as part of a historical and linguistic discourse. For example, Jacqueline Rose insists that the issue is not “whether Plath has the right to represent the Holocaust, but what the presence of the Holocaust in her poetry unleashes, or obliges us to focus, about representation as such” (205). Moreover, Antony Rowland views Plath’s Holocaust poetry as an “ethical response to history” and “an artistic rupture sensitive to recent history” (174, 176). He stresses the poet’s self-conscious, imaginative reflection on the event in poetry, which enables a better understanding of Holocaust writing (177).

⁷⁹ This reciprocity refutes Oates’ argument that Plath made poetry out of her paranoia, which set boundaries between the ‘I’ and the other, looked at as overwhelming, destructive, and engulfing. For the full argument, see Oates 26-45.

⁸⁰ In her article, Smith regards Kristeva has having a common perspective on masochism with Deleuze. In fact, Deleuze opposes Freud’s concept of masochism as a father-centred theory (Deleuze 50-53). Gaylyn Studlar points out that Deleuze has redefined the mother’s role in masochism by locating this phenomenon in the oral stage rather than the anal and phallic phases stressed by Freud (Deleuze 50-51, 54). The mother is looked at by Deleuze as a lover, as well as a controlling object that creates ambivalence in the child (Deleuze 53). The conflict is pre-Oedipal rather than Oedipal in this sense. This is where Kristeva and Deleuze’s position meet. Moreover, neither of them looks at masochism as only a sexual perversity but also as an aesthetic experience related to literary language which is capable of transformation (Deleuze 13, 53-55, 58, 80).

⁸¹ In *A Journey into the Red Eye*, Janice Markey describes this line as “a line of incomparable irony,” a view which feminists have adopted (77).

⁸² The last quotation in the sentence is taken by Axelrod from Beckett’s *The Unnamable*.

⁸³ In *Letters Home*, Plath describes herself as a “woman singer” (256).

⁸⁴This comment is taken from McClatchy's essay "Short Circuits and Folding Mirrors." McClatchy explains that this interview was conducted by Lee Anderson on 18 April 1958; it is now in the Lee Anderson Collection of Recorded Poets at the Yale Collection of Historical Sound Recordings, Yale University Library.

⁸⁵ Pamela Annas talks about silence in this way only when discussing Plath's early and transitional poetry and not her later poetry. The present study views Annas's statement as applicable to all of Plath's *oeuvre*.

⁸⁶ For example, see Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath* 18, 101.

⁸⁷ Kendall states: "Escape from the buffeting natural forces is represented as directly analogous to the end of the speaker's suffocating relationship with an unidentified other" (98).

⁸⁸ Plath's poems have been looked at by many critics as a chthonic journey, a cycle of death and rebirth. For example, see Kendall and Kroll. Richard Allen Blessing, in discussing Kroll, views the pattern of Plath's energies, unlike that on the chthonic journey, as being "more violent, more sexual, more perversely exciting" (69). Linguistically, this is seen as a masochistic oscillation between the symbolic and the semiotic.

⁸⁹ "Poem for a Birthday" in particular, has been discussed in detail in terms of abjection by many critics. For example, see Rose 40-63; Strangeways 137-51; and Christodoulides 205-19.

⁹⁰ This idea about time was discussed by Strangeways in relation to one poem by Plath, "Poem for a Birthday," and not to Plath's whole work.

⁹¹ Plath was fascinated by the work of Giorgio de Chirico. She wrote poems in response to his paintings, such as "The Disquieting Muses" and "On the Decline of Oracles." Plath also used many of his landscape icons in other poems, such as the train. She refers to this train in her *Journals*: "everywhere in Chirico city, the trapped train puffing its cloud in a labyrinth of heavy arches, vaults, arcades" (359).

⁹² "Getting There" is a poem usually approached historically rather than psychoanalytically by critics. See Rose 148; Strangeways 103-4; and Uroff 154.

⁹³ When responding to Plath's essay "A Comparison," Silvianna Blosser seems to agree with the poet that prose is more adequate for expressing time and space and thus more able to create a dialogue than poetry. Blosser uses a Bakhtinian term, which she modifies as "chronotope of the threshold," to pinpoint the ability of Plath's prose to show the "crossing over into 'new land' " (229, 217). In comparison, a poem, according to Blosser, is a "closed fist" and usually the break of that fist comes at the end of Plath's poems to bring in light through a small crack. According to Blosser, this dissolving at the end of Plath's poems is a crossing over to nothingness rather than a new land. However, it can be argued that the movement between time and space, indicating the movement between "I" and "not-I," is heterogeneous in Plath's work and the movement of this heterogeneity is not only in one poem, but can be found across many poems. Moreover, in her essay "Conversation amongst the Ruins: Plath and de Chirico," Britzolakis comes to the conclusion that "the work of both [Plath and de Chirico] can be described as a 'dream writing' governed by a tropology of spatial enclosure and mortification, and tied to an imaginary construct of "lost time." (182). However, being related to that 'lost time,' which is obviously not time but space, endows Plath with mobility and heterogeneity. Rather being just an enclosure tied to psychic 'prehistory,' her poetry is always an extending space to somewhere else. Moreover, although Britzolakis's discussion suggests that there is a static enclosure in de Chirico's painting, it sometimes refers to conflicting spatial instability and an oneiric subversive vision "poised on a frontier between dream and waking consciousness" (169).

Chapter 7: The "Deadmost"

⁹⁴ The second of these two lines continues as follows: "An assembly-line of cut throats, and you and I / Inching off in the gray Chevrolet, drinking the green [. . .]." As "you and I" stands at the end of the first line it could be read as part of the list of nouns in the same line as well as the refrent for the participle "inching off."

⁹⁵ "The Jailor," a poem written after Plath knew about her husband's infidelity, was one of the poems he eliminated when editing *Ariel*. The other two poems were "The Rabbit Catcher" and "Purdah" (Axelrod 19).

⁹⁶ Hammer believes that Plath's inner war is fundamental to the "constitution of the self." See Hammer 153.

⁹⁷ Freud depended on Darwin's hypothesis of a primal horde to explain the concept of totem. The idea, put simply, is that the horde is controlled by a jealous and violent father who keeps all the females for himself, depriving his sons of incestuous acts. One day the brothers kill and devour their father, and civilization is established. The brothers institute a law against incest in order to stop any potential struggle between them and to rescue the organization which made them strong. See Freud vol. 13: 141-45.

⁹⁸ Judith Kroll suggests that the source of Plath's presentation of "All-Mouth" is the African folktale "Mantis and the All-Devourer" (*Chapters in a Mythology* 238 n.13) in Paul Radin's book *African Folktales*. This All-Devourer has many names; one of them is Father. He has a tongue like fire and he licks bushes and many other animate and inanimate entities including people. He is very heavy, so he often stays at home. For more details, see Radin 93-99.

⁹⁹ Rose in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* also stresses the relation between orality and language: "language and orality run back into each other" (31).

¹⁰⁰ For more information about the battle of Thermopylae, see Herodotus, Book VII.

¹⁰¹ Connors quotes Plath from Box 6, among other boxes at Indiana University, which contains her products. For more on Plath and colours, especially red, see Connors essay "Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath," especially the section entitled "Favorite Colors in Art as in Life" 114-18.

¹⁰² Tracy Brain also discusses the poem in terms of abjection, as the blurring of borders between friend and enemy, native and alien, inside and outside, and self and not self (74-78). However, her reading of the poem is mainly cultural, presenting the idea of the "foreigner within" in relation to the American and English identities.

¹⁰³ The narcissistic wound refers to this ambivalent state between the symbolic “inside” and the semiotic “outside.” Writing this wound, as is the wound itself, is always on the border.

¹⁰⁴ This line is translated by Higson in “The Self-Torturer” as: “I am the gash, the dagger-spur!” However, the simple translation of Roudiez in Kristeva’s *Tales of Love* is used instead (340). For the translation of the whole poem, see Baudelaire 82.

¹⁰⁵ Rose is one of the critics who suggested the connection between murder and creativity in Plath’s work. For more details, see Rose, *Haunting* 37.

¹⁰⁶ Kroll has the same opinion as Uroff. She thinks that Plath’s “Elm” begins the voice of the *Ariel* poems (47).

¹⁰⁷ For the definition of “fault,” see Hoad.

¹⁰⁸ In discussing mirrors in Plath, Pamela Annas views them as standing for “an undefined and dangerously shifting area of uncertainty and tension” and if one passes behind them, a view she holds in common with Kristeva, one will “dissolve, losing a separate identity” (2-3).

¹⁰⁹ For the detailed story of Agamemnon, see Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*. The story is also narrated by Zeus in Homer’s *The Odyssey* (see Homer 26).

¹¹⁰ For details about the story of Lady Godiva, see Mermin’s *Godiva’s Ride*.

¹¹¹ Ann Keniston argues that the speaker of “Ariel” not only unpeels herself “from what is dead in her,” but also “from her femininity,” and that the feeling of triumph in the end comes “from its sense of phallic, indeed military, trajectory” (40). However, it can be argued that “unpeeling,” is a kind of “feminine” unveiling that is deadly, as it is subversive, and from this comes the note of triumph. Moreover, Blessing asserts that “this motion that Plath celebrates is almost too intense to be sustained, one that breaks down syntax (“Foam to wheat”) and takes in multitudes (“a glitter of seas”). It is a rhythm that strains the pulse rate to its limits and beyond, that finally would do away

with all resistances and become pure doing at the end” (65). This rhythm that shatters the syntax resembles the work of the semiotic in the text. Therefore, the energy produced in “Ariel” is not necessarily phallic, as Keniston suggests.

¹¹² “The Dance of the Seven Veils” is believed to be the dance performed by Salome for her stepfather, Herod, whom she asked for the head of John the Baptist. The story is described in the Bible in Matthew 14 (6-11) and Mark 6 (21-28). The biblical story does not mention the name of the dance. In fact, this name has appeared in art as an elaboration of the biblical story since the advent of Oscar Wilde’s play *Salome* (see Wilde 380-414).

¹¹³ Isadora Duncan (1878 – 1927), U.S. dancer and teacher. A pioneer of modern dance, she was famous for her “free” barefoot dancing. She died from strangulation when her long scarf became entangled in the wheels of a car. See McKean, *The New Oxford American Dictionary*.

¹¹⁴ See Britzolakis 117.

¹¹⁵ The lines of the draft are as follows:

[I] have a self to recover, a queen,
That dreams of a second bride-flight
Her wings of clear glass,
Her banded body
More terrible than it ever was.
Deserting the nurseries, the workers,
The years. A glitter of dew
On blades she will not return to. (Bundtzen, *The Other Ariel* 117)

¹¹⁶ This room is also like the one depicted in “Electra on Azalea Path” where Plath resides for twenty years after her father’s death:

The day you died I went into the dirt,
Into the lightless hibernaculum
Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard
Like hieratic stones, and the ground is hard. (*CP* 116)

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