

A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF SYLVIA PLATH

By Frederick Feirstein

Despite the work we've done for the past hundred years, many poets I know still believe that psychoanalysis will take away rather than enhance their creative gifts. Despite our conversations and my giving them chapters from such books as Lawrence Kubie's (1952) and Susan Deri's (1984) it has been hard for me to convince them that all of us are a combination of health as well as pathology and that working within the psychoanalytic dialogue helps literary dialogue and metaphor making. I even go so far as to tell them that my definition of psychological well-being is not far from the wisdom of gym trainers: Health equals flexibility. Pathology equals rigidity of any sort. Sometimes I show them how we can see this in the poetry of Sylvia Plath.

The creative flexibility in much of Sylvia Plath's major work *Ariel* is what Susan Deri would call a model for health for all of us. But, alas, it also is one long suicide note, often a rigid outburst at the emotional abuse of her husband the poet Ted Hughes and her unwarranted rage toward her late father.

This paper is an attempt to use applied psychoanalysis to try to understand that some of the power as well as obscurity in Plath's work is both a deliberate creation of a tragic myth and a pathological displacement of rage at her good enough mother Aurelia onto her male figures.

Despite her good intentions Aurelia seemed to be both symbiotically suffocating at times and abandoning at crucial times. Tragically, along with her father Otto's medically self-negligent death amounting to suicide, and Hughes' sadism and occultism, the perfectionistic Aurelia's mistakes seemed at times to overwhelm Sylvia's incredible gift. A clue to the symbiosis is in her mother's *Letters Home* (1973) in which Aurelia made this statement: "Between Sivvy and me there was a psychic osmosis so that you couldn't tell where she began and I left off."

As for Aurelia's potentially devastating abandonments, when Sylvia brother Warren was born sickly and Sylvia was two and at the separation-individuation phase, all of Aurelia's attention was focused on her brother and Sylvia often was put in the care of her maternal grandparents. Then when Otto ignored his doctor's advice and developed what would be a fatal diabetes, Aurelia's attention was solely focused on him and Sylvia was sent away again to live full-time with her grandparents. These abandonments, along with her in-and-out schizoid personality and bouts of mania and depression (for which she was given primitive electroshock and insulin treatments) Sylvia was stuck in a psychic muddle from which - despite her will and artistic power - she was unable to overcome.

Sylvia Plath's life ended with a third and fatal suicide attempt at thirty. From my point of view had she lived psychoanalysis might have helped her rival young Keats as a poet. It might have helped make her affective disorder her schizoid dilemma more flexible, made some obscure poems in her major work *Ariel* clearer.

(Given the space limitations of paper, I'm going to quote lines and passages from it. I leave it to the reader to read the whole poems – particularly ” Lady Lazarus,” “Daddy,” and “Edge,” her clearest and from my point of view her strongest.)

If Plath had the advantage in her time of working with Fairbairn or Guntrip or our contemporary psychoanalysts whose work adds to theirs -- such as Nancy McWilliam's (2009) deft understanding of schizoid phenomena, or David P. Cellini's *Fairbairn's Object Relations Theory In The Clinical Setting* (2010) or John D. Sutherland's *Fairbairn's Journey Into The Interior* (1999) I fantasize Plath might have survived and not made *Ariel* one long suicide note. At the time her American therapist and British psychiatrist seemed not to have the advantage of working closely with object relations theory and taken a multimodal approach.

Despite her mother Aureila's urgent concern, as well as that of Sylvia's confidante and poetry teacher the clinical social worker Lois Ames, nothing seemed to help. To further compound her situation today's anti-depressants and bipolar drugs like equetro and latuda weren't available... Perhaps if they were administered not only to Plath but also to other schizoid and bipolar poets and highly skilled poets – the brilliant Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton, John Berryman, and Randall Jarrell, they might have survived -- as well as painters such as Jackson Pollack and Mark Rothko.

Plath, hospitalized, along with her teacher Robert Lowell, were labeled “Confessional Poets” by M.L. Rosenthal (1967) who taught me to read them closely. Over the years the Expansive Poetry literary movement exhaustively and finally successfully

countered the “fashionable” imitators of The Confessional Poets who wrote without true understanding of The Confessional Poets wonderful ability create mythic meaning out of their intense misery. The imitators unfortunately had helped convince the poetry reading public that poetry comes from pathology rather than a combination of health and pathology as Plath’s was.

Fortunately because of the efforts of many New Formalists (another name for the Expansive Poets) who put the sickly sensational seeking “I” back in the therapist’s office the imitators began to be considered a dead end of a *faux* Romanticism and at the same time they rendered the dramatic myth of Plath’s tragic heroism clearer.

Whereas Sylvia turned her self-inflicted tragedies into poetry, her only sibling Warren saw his life as ordinary and led a basically normal life. But not so for her son Nicholas. His trauma at the hands of his mother was all too real. Unlike the plodding engineer Uncle Warren or his more flexible sister Frieda, who is a well-known British poet, Nicholas became, like his mother deeply depressed, and would hang himself in 2009.

Among the best theoretical takes on how Plath’s tragedy unfolded is Fairbairn’s Chapter Three of the *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality* (1952) “Return Of The Repressed Bad Object “subtitled “The War Neuroses” which captures the hellish internal warfare in which Plath mythically often turned herself into a -- in the hands of Nazis. Most bizarrely and dramatically her suicide would take place in

a gas oven into which she stuck her head after setting out milk and bread for her children.

These lines are directed at her non –Nazi father who she lost at eleven:

‘I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you
And the language obscene.

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew

A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I might well be a Jew.”

(from “Daddy”-- the original title of *Ariel*)

The best dramatic portrayal of this hellish internal world wasn’t Plath’s on British radio but the actress Angelica Page’s in a one-woman play about Plath. I saw it twice. It focused on Plath’s relationship with her father who went to an early grave and her husband Ted Hughes whose demonic behavior helped destroy her. But the play left out her symbiotic and finally infuriating relationship with her widowed mother.

In between two performances I gave to the playwright/director a draft of this essay so that he could incorporate Plath’s psychological displacement. He read it quickly, revised the script, and had Angelica add lines about her relationship with her mother -- often symbolized by her key metaphor *The Ocean* --to her performance.

Perhaps the most helpful, extensive psychoanalytic work that can shed light on Plath’s internal world is Harry Guntrip’s *Schizoid Phenomena: Object Relations And The Self* (1969 *edition*). I am going to quote from it to help us understand how Plath’s pathology, often expressed through her key metaphor *The Ocean*, inform the content and style of her poems.

The clearest poems revealing both sides of her schizoid dilemma are “Daddy” and “Edge ,” and prose passages in her brief autobiography *Ocean 1212W* and her autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). If we can understand the poems’ frequent subtexts as the displacement of her rage at her father toward the smothering aspects of Aurelia, it will enhance the meaning of “Daddy” -- which usually has been seen simply as the voice of a feminist heroine. It is that politicized view to which her daughter Frieda strongly objects to in the Introduction to her *The Restored Edition of Ariel* (2004).

Often I have written (2008, 2009) about how a key metaphor gives form to the split off part of the psyche. In Plath’s case, the structuring element is *the ocean* – representing the watery womb which she is both is sucked into and resists.

When sarcastically wounded in the real world, the schizoid retreats to the oceanic womb for safety. Knowing that the womb also is death, the schizoid will hold onto an internalized bad object – anything to maintain a hold on relations outside the walled-in self.

Plath portrayed that wounded self as one that is enclosed in a *The Bell Jar*. Her book of poems *Ariel*, paralleling the novel when taken as a whole, represents a dramatic conflict in the mythic heroine between a desire to retreat to the womb by suicide – and a rageful holding onto bad objects and the threatening real world to avoid the slide. Often her individual poems play the terror of death against the terror of dominance of the ego by the bad object. The stalemate in that conflict is the imprisonment of the self in a protective but suffocating bell jar, another metaphor for her rigid attachment to her mother.

Since most of her poems are structured in terms of this conflict, we often can make sense of her frequent use of nursery rhymes against her death-dealing subject matter. Sometimes she'll begin a poem trembling at her bad object (her father) and then end with a merging with *him* (a displacement from her mother, the essential goal of her regressing into death).

For example the moon, clouds, gas = mother. Black shoes, boats = father. This symbolization is a private but accessible one that can become almost as understandable as Gerard Manley Hopkins' symbolism when we read it in the light of his Jesuit discipline. If you don't understand the dramatic underpinning of Plath's schizoid dilemma poems and passages such as this one about her mother will seem asymbolic gibberish:

“The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right.
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet
With the O gape of complete despair. I live here
Twice on Sunday; the bells startle the sky –

Eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection.
At the end, they soberly bong out their names.”
(from “The Moon And The Yew Tree”)

What Plath offers us in most of *Ariel* is a limited human experience, remote yet made exotic because of her great gift as a poet. We can't expect her to render more than this interior journey any more than we can expect a severe schizoid to establish consistently warm object relations. There is no one in her poems but her “I,” mythologized or simply struggling for survival with internalized representations of her parents.

Technically in her use of rhyme, meter, baroque imagery, and assonance she superbly uses style to echo her sense. Learning mainly from Dylan Thomas who often was called by critics as the womb-tomb poet and Theodore Roethke, another schizoid, Plath has found an exact style for her poetry of regression and the struggle against it. It is full of childlike repetitions of word, phrase, assonance, and rhyme – which counterpoint her image of herself as a victim of the Holocaust.

“The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
 Are not very pure or true.
 With my gypsy ancestress and my weird luck
 And my Tarot pack and my Tarot pack
 I may be a bit of a Jew.
 I have always been scared of *you*
 With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygook.
 (from “Daddy”)

The rhymes and rhythms are in many of her poems driving and impatient, full of simple parallelisms and echoes of fairy tales. The assonance and consonance are prolific and sensual, coming from what Fairbairn calls the schizoid’s “libidinal ego.” The transitions are often illogical yet seem to make internal sense. The voice is highly emotional and at times wildly ironic – complementing the rhythmic electricity and the conflicted content.

Plath’s life and essentially autobiographical poetry and prose seems a series of illustrations for the false and true self as described in Harry Guntrip’s *Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations, and The Self*.

As for her false self, to all outward appearances, Sylvia was a model college girl of the early 1950’s -- an achiever, extroverted, exceedingly “well-rounded.” She seemed to have excellent ego functions, was almost perfectly adapted to the realities of that time.

As Lois Ames (1971) her life-long confidante says, “In high school she played tennis, was on the girl’s basketball team, was co-editor of the school newspaper, joined a sorority, painted decorations for class dances, went on college weekend dates, was Lady Agatha in the class play *The Admirable Crichton*. In addition she was a she was a superb scholar and writer. Before she entered college, she had poems published in magazines, quite an achievement for an eighteen-year-old.”

It seems academic to add that her reality testing, object relations, thought processes, autonomous ego functions – perception, intention, intellectualization, drive control, etc. were functioning well.

In college she outstripped these achievements as Ames’ further details. She went to Smith College on a scholarship. Her grades were tops – she was elected to Phi Beta Kappa and to the honorary society for the arts. She was elected to class office, was an editor of *The Smith Review* and published stories and poems in major magazines such as *Mademoiselle*. In the summer of her junior year she was chosen from thousands of entrants to be a Guest Editor at *Mademoiselle*. In her scrapbook, she described that month in the breathy style of the magazine:

““After being one of the two national winners of *Mademoiselle*’s fiction contest (\$500!) last August I felt that I was coming home again when I won a guest editorship representing Smith and took a train to NYC for a salaried month working – hatted and heeled in Mlle’s air conditioned Madison Avenue offices ... Fantastic, fabulous, and all other inadequate adjectives go to describe the four gala and chaotic weeks. I worked as guest managing Ed.. living in luxury at the Barbizon. I edited, met celebrities, was feted and feasted by a galaxy of UN delegates, simultaneous interpreters and artists ... an almost unbelievable merry-go-round month – this Smith Cinderella met idols .. wrote articles via correspondence with 5 handsome young male poet teachers .”

A month later she crawled behind the boiler in her mother's basement...

“Wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow, I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water, one by one.”

What went wrong?

We get only such hints of it in the first few episodes of *The Bell Jar*, an autobiographical account of these days but called a novel. Here a girl of nineteen is living the dream of every 1950's co-ed. Yet, “I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley bus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.”

Although the narrator can locate her emotional state and make us feel it with such rhetorical devices as the consonance of “her hatted and heeled, “and fantastic, fabulous” she doesn't have any insight into the genesis of her manic state. Off-handedly she'll mention:

“My grandmother always cooked economy joints and economy meatloafs and had the habit of saying, the minute you lifted the first forkful to your mouth, ‘I hope you enjoy that, it cost me forty-one cents a pound.’”

Or that she wished she had a mother like her boss at the magazine:

“My own mother wasn't much help.”

Even when later Plath describes her withdrawal from her activities, her flight from discipline into a state of zombie-like sleeplessness, her suicide attempt and hospitalization, we don't get any insight into the causes of her dilemma. She gives us no

developed exposition of her past and no developed characterization of others in her present – her mother, in particular, is there but not there.

We have to take a look at *Ocean 1212W* (1962) an autobiographical sketch for the answer. There she attempts to explain the fascination the ocean had for as only a child of two and a half. She sees the ocean, tellingly her symbol for her mother, as the ultimate source of her being:

“Breath, that is the first thing. Something is breathing. My own breath? The breath of my mother? No, something else, something larger, farther, more serious, more weary ...”

She then describes the sounds of the environment surrounding the ocean:

“I was not deceived by these. The motherly pulse of the sea made a mode of such counterfeits. Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal, had many faces, many delicate, terrible delicate veils. It spoke of miracles and distances: if it could court, it could also kill. When I was learning to creep, my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the wall of green when she caught my heels.”

Plath’s mother, as we can see in reading her key metaphor, does not offer her a safe base but instead abandons her to the danger of the smothering sea, to death by drowning. As in much of her work, by symbolically establishing the ocean as her mother, Plath seems to be saying that Aurelia left her vulnerable to the kind of drowning she would have by gas -- carbon monoxide – another key symbol for her mother in her work.

The symbol of water, gas (usually carbon monoxide) and clouds used throughout Plath’s poetry seem to be not only an expression of her mother’s lovingly symbiotic pull but of her suicidal attraction to it:

“A gift, a love gift
Utterly unasked for
By a sky

Palely and flimsily
 Igniting its carbon monoxides ...”
 (“Poppies In October”)

“But my god, the clouds are like cotton –
 Armies of them. They are like carbon monoxide ...”
 (“A Birthday Present”)

Usually the ocean is not all-good, all-powerful – re-birth; identity doesn’t really come from there. And gas usually in conjunction with her self image as a Holocaust victim kills. It treacherously draws you into a witch’s oven. Grotesquely Plath made this symbol a reality when at thirty she laid out bread and butter at her two sleeping children’s door, put her head in her oven and gassed herself to death.

The very birth of her brother Warren, happening concurrently with her schedule to separate, complicated matters for her. She experienced her mother’s hospitalization as an abandonment, a blow to her omnipotence, a cutting off of a safe retreat. Separateness apparently was not joyful for her as it should be in normal development.

As it would become her fictional bell jar, Plath felt walled off from warmth and safety. The real prison near the beach house in *Ocean 1212W* was an apt symbol for the direction she was heading. She was to be imprisoned in a frail separate self, easily feeling rejected as if the sea cast her out and left her like a starfish, “a dummy of my own hand.” Her image of a ship in a bottle that she wanted to return to is a neat description of herself regressing becoming more and more isolated from the real world. As she would say in her novel *The Bell Jar*:

“I would be sitting under the same glass jar, stewing in my own sour air.”

Without knowing any the facts of Plath's tragedy, we might anticipate her end from her autobiographical note. We can trace a clear line of catastrophe from Plath at two and a half, to Plath's attempting suicide at twenty and succeeding at thirty. And it is the playing of this catastrophe that gives us the keys to understanding even the most obscure passages in *Ariel*.

In "Lady Lazarus," one of the strongest and clearest poems in *Ariel*, Plath dramatizes three suicide attempts:

"I have done it again/One year in every ten/ I manage it." It creates an arc with attempts and Lazarus-like rebirths. And "the first time it happened I was ten/ It was an accident." Although her father died of a long illness she constantly describes him as a suicide and tries to account for her impulse as an Electra desire to be with him:

As I mentioned at the beginning of this paper, sometimes she'll begin a poem trembling at her bad object (almost always her father) and then ending with a merger with him (a displacement from her mother, the real goal of her regression) in death. What I had in mind is clearly indicated by the above stanzas. I think in her self-analytic way she tried to understand the terms what was most accessible to her: The Oedipus/Electra complex. In a BBC broadcast (1962) to reading the poem, tried to fictionalize the voice in "Daddy" as her daughter Frieda Hughes (2004) pointed out:

"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 paralyze each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it."

(The Restored Edition: Ariel)

Guntrip says "... a clear cut Oedipus Complex can mask a serious schizoid condition." But that's not all that's involved in her portrayal of her father in her poems. Besides making up the fiction that he was a suicide, she conceived of him as a Nazi which he was not. He was a renowned Biology Professor at Boston University who came from Germany well before the Nazi period at age fifteen. Then why did she represent him, hold on to this object representation this way? And how did it protect her from schizoid regression and suicide?

Because his dying was melancholic for her, she invested him with hate. That way in terms of classical depression, she could hold onto him. But why couldn't she mourn him properly and eventually let him go?

Of the reaction of the schizoid to death, Guntrip said this:

"Objects are only internalized in a more radical way when the relationship turns into a bad-object situation through, say, the object changing or dying. When someone we need and love ceases to love us, or behaves in such a way that we interpret it as cessation of love. Or disappears, dies i.e. deserts us, the person becomes, in an emotional libidinal sense, a bad object."

An unsatisfactory pathological ego can be kept going precariously by hating, when loving is impossible. But this motivation is negative and destructive, aiming either at the elimination of bad objects or of the bad object element in good objects. It has no positive aim in itself and does not provide any experience of a positive self. We shall see later how hating is used, alone with the guilt it engenders ... as a desperate method of keeping in touch with bad objects so as to fend off a breakdown into a schizoid state, for in that condition the individual feels always on the brink of hopeless despair, with not enough of an ego to make any real contacts, unless the therapist can find him in his isolation."

Thus when Plath describes her attraction to "Daddy," when she makes up lines such as "Every woman adores a Fascist/The boot in the face, the brute/ Brute heart of a brute like you," and when she describes in "Lady Lazarus" her intention to liberate

herself from him – “Beware/Beware/ Out of the ash I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air” she is only not being a Woman’s Lib heroine whose husband Ted Hughes betrayed her with a friend (who later bizarrely put her head in an oven) and of course depressed her, she is describing a schizoid dilemma – her agony at being caught between the Scylla of schizoid suicide and the Charybdis of bad internalized object relations.

To return to the prose equivalent of “Daddy” in *The Bell Jar*, to her playing out her catastrophe: At twenty she tried suicide again. This autobiographical novel details this attempt but the motives she attributes to it here are unclear where her schizoid state is poorly delineated. Instead of charting an inevitable course from greater and greater withdrawal to the act, she merely mentions her emotional paralysis here and there and then springs the attempt on us. The effect of this weakness in prose narrative technique is to show us how a characterological problem is masked by the mores of the day. For the first third of the novel, Plath’s persona seems to be, as I mentioned earlier, a rather successful 1950’s co-ed. She has some dating problems but no more than other girls of the time torn between their desires and the ideal of pre-marital virginity. She seems immature in her awkwardness, but only by the standards of our day. It is in the hints of emotional paralysis while playing Betty co-ed that we can see the pathology in action. For example, her most steady boyfriend Buddy takes her up to a Yale University lab after the Junior Prom, ostensibly to show her the view. There he kisses her for the first time.

“While he kissed me I kept my eyes open and tried to memorize the spacing of the house lights so I would never forget them.

Finally Buddy stepped back. ‘Wow,’ he said.

‘Wow what?’ I said surprised. It had been a dry uninspiring little kiss ...”

A typical, lightly comical moment. But when we connect it with her distancing herself from her girlfriends’ fun and with such a statement as –

“And then I wondered if as soon as he {another man Constantin} came to like me he would sink into ordinariness, and if as soon as he came to love me, I would find fault after fault, the way I did with Buddy Willard and the boys before him. The same thing happened over and over. I would catch sight of some lawless man off in the distance, but as soon as he moved close I immediately saw he wouldn’t do at all. That’s one of the reasons I never want to get married.”

Here we see a bit of what Guntrip calls the “In and Out Programme of the Schizoid:”

“The chronic dilemma in which the schizoid individual is placed, namely that he can neither be in a relationship with another person nor out of it, without in various ways risking the loss of both his object and himself ... This ‘in and out’ programme, always breaking away from what one is at the same time holding onto, is perhaps the most characteristic behavioral expression of the schizoid conflict.”

But when her breakdown begins, the pathology, as Guntrip describes it, comes very clear. She starts on her path of schizoid regression and fights it and, as the battle ensues, the narrative for the first time in *The Bell Jar* comes alive. A narcissistic wound, immediately precipitates her withdrawal – after a humiliating dating experience she returns home only to find she’s been rejected for admission to a summer fiction writing workshop. She retreats to her room and refuses to get up from bed. Friends call her and ask her to enroll in a summer course anyway but “My voice sounded strange and hollow. You better count me out.””

On a revealingly deeper level she next says, “I made a point of never living in the same house with my mother for more than for more than a week. I reached for the receiver. My hand advanced for a few inches then retreated and fell limp. I forced it toward the receiver again but again it stopped short, as if it had collided with a pane of glass.”

She tries with some determination to write a novel anyway. But then her mother, a shorthand teacher, convinces her to learn her skill so that she could write her novel quicker and have something practical at the same time. She tells her mother she has a headache and goes to bed. She tries to sleep, can't, feigns sleep when her mother leaves for work, then tries again to sleep: “I crawled beneath the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a tombstone. It felt dark and safe under there, but the mattress was not heavy enough. It needed about a ton more weight to make me sleep.”

Finally the conflict between her withdrawal and her weakening ego functions narrows to the issue of sleep. This is perfectly in keeping with what Guntrip states is the motive for sleepiness in the schizoid. Sleep which would be a natural regression, a return to the symbolic womb is experienced as threatening: “The fear and struggle against the regressive drive, and the fear of sleep and relaxation, are aspects of the psyche's self-defenses against its insidious internal danger of losing all contact with external reality.”

The more she denies herself sleep, the weaker her ego becomes and she drives hard on her path to final sleep. Her physician, sensing what's coming sends her to a psychiatrist.

She comes prepared to show him a letter she's written that disturbs her. The handwriting indicates a frightening failure of intention and motor control:

“But when I took up my pen, my hand made big, jerky letters like those of a child, and the lines sloped down the page from left to right almost diagonally, as if they were loops of string lying on the paper, and someone had come along and blown them askew.”

The Bell Jar

But she doesn't show the letter. The psychiatrist's seemingly All-American manner put her off. For no reason apparent to her, he makes her furious. What she's done, as the following passages indicate, is projected onto him – both her rage against her “false self and her terror of her regressive drive, of annihilating merger. Thus she immediately experiences in the transference what Guntrip calls “persecutory anxiety:”

“I didn't see why it {the photograph} should be turned toward me unless Doctor Gordon was trying to show me right away that he was married to some glamorous woman and I'd better not get any ideas.”

Perhaps finding her responses inappropriate, she doesn't report what she said to him, only that she was concealing her craziness. Dr. Gordon tries, I think, to determine the extent of her reality testing.

“When I finished, Doctor Gordon lifted his head. ‘Where did you say you went to college?’ Baffled, I told him. I didn't see where college fitted in.

“‘Ah!’ Doctor Gordon leaned back in his chair, staring into the air over my shoulder with a reminiscent smile ... ‘I remember your college well. I was up there during the war. They had a WAC station, didn't they? Or was it WAVES?’

I said I didn't know.

‘Yes, a WAC station, I remember now. I was a doctor for the 1rst, before I was sent overseas! My they were a pretty bunch of girls.’

Doctor Gordon laughed. Then in one smooth way, he rose to his feet and strolled toward me round the corner of his desk. I wasn't sure and stood up as well."

As Frieda says in her note she had an Electra complex, and her fantasies in such poems such as "Daddy," made precise because of the intense brevity her style, imply a higher level functioning. But we can gather that from "Daddy" that her failing ego, her suicidality, her Oedipal/Electra fantasies are used as a defense masking a pre-psychotic deathly state. – jarringly equated with the Holocaust.

Though the Oedipal problems in "Daddy" were dealt with panic and fury, the underpinning of Plath's condition in "Daddy" as well as her transference to Dr. Gordon was a ruthless pre-Oedipal fixation on her mother.

Fittingly, right after this encounter with Dr. Gordon she tries to free herself by acting out the underlying fantasy of merger and fleeing from it at the same time. Leaving Gordon's office she picks up a sailor, a symbol of her ocean/mother. She tells him she's from Chicago, though she'd never been there because ... "it seemed the sort of place where unconventional, mixed-up people would come from."

Without even glimpsing his face she lets him put his arm around her. Then, as he advances to kiss her, she has a paranoid fantasy -- that Buddy's mother (who she identifies with her own) is striding toward her. She furiously orders the sailor to take his hands off her. When the woman passes by and she sees it isn't Buddy's mother and remembers she was out of town, she begins to cry uncontrollably:

"I thought what an awful woman that lady in the brown suit had been, and how she, whether she knew it or not, was responsible for my taking the wrong turn, here and the wrong path there and for everything bad that had happened after that."

Besides the sharpness of her description of fear of merger tinged with Oedipal guilt, Plath musters whatever narcissism she can to ward off a psychotic break. By the time she sees Dr. Gordon again, she hasn't slept for fourteen nights. She can't eat, she can't read, she can't concentrate. She finally shows him another bizarrely written letter and he says, "I think I would like to speak to your mother. Do you mind?"

What he has in mind are out-patient shock treatments.

But she doesn't take them until after her second suicide attempt.

On the way home from his office she begins to fantasize about suicide. She becomes attracted to scandal sheets depicting successful suicide attempts. But threatened by the loss of self, she makes plans to leave for Chicago. She fails. The bank from which she would withdraw her money is closed. Her appointment is for ten the next morning and she sees no alternative but to go.

Once at the hospital she separates herself from what she calls the dead people there:

"I felt as if I were sitting in the window of an enormous department store. Around me weren't people but shop dummies painted to resemble people and propped up in articles of counterfeiting life."

But both wanting to get well and wanting to lose her self, she subtly acts out.

She succumbs to "the treatment," an act which aptly embodies both sides of her conflict.

The result? She leaves for home, identifying even closer with the scandal sheet suicides:

"I felt in my pocketbook among the paper scraps and the compact and the peanut shells and the dimes and nickels and the blue jiffy box containing nineteen Gillette blades, till I unearthed the snapshot I'd taken that afternoon in the orange and white striped booth.

“I brought it up next to the smudgy photograph of the dead girl. It matched mouth for mouth, nose for nose. The only difference was the eyes. The eyes in the snapshot were closed. But I knew if the dead girl’s eyes were to be thumbed open, They would look at me with the same dead, black, vacant expression as the eyes in the photograph.”

As she we see later she also says in “Lady Lazarus she makes second suicide attempt. She locks herself in the bathroom, runs a tub full of warm water, and takes out a Gillette blade. She wants a peaceful rest after the fashion of a Roman philosopher she once read about. But, although drowning is the schizoid’s style, razor blades aren’t and she merely nicks herself – in a dry run.

Again she tries to help herself. She returns to the spot where her mother first exposed her to the ocean. But she has taken her box of razor blades with her. Yet she can’t commit suicide that way. She waits on a sandbar for the tide come in, for the ocean to take her back. She becomes indecisive:

“I waited as if the sea could make my decision for me. A second wave collapsed over my feet, lipped with white froth and the chill gripped ankles with a mortal ache. My flesh winced, in cowardice, from such a death.”

But she only winced momentarily. Drowning in some way was precisely the death she desired, a return to the watery womb.

In the very next episode, she goes on a date, attempting to re-connect with the outer world. But unfortunately the boy takes her to a beach.

“I started to walk toward the water. Somehow, in the broad, shadowless light of noon, the water looked amiable and welcoming.

I thought drowning must be the kindest way to die, and burning the worst. Some of these babies in the jars that Buddy Willard showed me had gills, he said. They went through a stage where they were just like fish.

A little rubbishy wavelet, full of candy wrappers and orange peel and seaweed, folded over my foot. I heard the sand thus behind me, and Cal came up.

‘Let’s swim to that rock out there.’ I pointed at it.

I started so swim to Egg Rock. Cal did a slow crawl. After a while he put his head up and treaded water.

‘Can’t make it.’ He was panting heavily.

‘Okay. You go back.’

I thought I would swim out until I was too tired to swim back.

As I padded on, my heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears.

‘I am I am I am’”

The lack of punctuation is very interesting. It is as if she’s also saying, *I am only I when I eliminate separateness, when I merge with the ocean, with mother.*

In the poem “Suicide off Egg Rock,” Plath changes the bather to a “he” -- who actually commits suicide.

Here, in this attempt, she fails. Her body, split off from her self, is against her. As it had been earlier that morning when, in a flashback, she describes how she tried to suffocate herself by strangling. With a fitting sense of symbolism she took the silk cord from her mother’s bathrobe, ludicrously walked around looking for a place to hang herself from and then settled for sitting on the edge of her mother’s bed where she tried to pull the cord tight.

Her mother, not knowing of either episode said that the cure for thinking too much about herself was helping somebody who was worse off than her. So her physician arranged for Plath to work as a volunteer at the hospital. But she couldn’t manage it. She

alienated the patients and in a last attempt to save herself, she ran to her father's grave, to visit it for the first time.

Here she reveals that she would have been her father's favorite, that he wasn't a Nazi.:

“I thought that if my father hadn't died, he would have taught me all about insects, which was his specialty at the University. He would also have taught me German and Greek ... At the foot of the stone I arranged the rainy armful of azaleas I had picked from a bush at the gateway of the graveyard. Then my legs folded under me, and I sat down in the sopping grass. Then I remembered I that I had never cried for my father's death. My mother hadn't cried either. She had just smiled and said what a merciful thing it was for him he had died, because if he lived he would have been crippled and an invalid for life, and he couldn't have stood that. He would rather have died than had that happen ... I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain.”

Her last hope dead, exhausted without sleep for a month, she arranges a nearly successful second attempt. She goes home and takes fifty of her pills from her mother's locked jewelry box and a glass of water from the kitchen. Then she goes down to the cellar, fittingly into a gap in the wall behind the oil burner where no one has been for years. She describes her near end in images of the ocean and return through the vagina to the actual wall:

“A dim undersea light filtered through the slits of the wall ... Behind the oil burner, a dark gap showed in the wall ... It took me a good while to heft my body into the gap. ... At last after many tries I managed it, and crouched at the mouth in the darkness ... Wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow, I unscrewed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly between gulps of water one by one ... At first nothing happened, but as I approached the bottom of the bottle, red and blue lights began to flash before my eyes. The bottle slid from my fingers and I lay down ... The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the line of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep.”

“The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell,
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.”

(“Lady Lazarus”)

After suicide attempt #2, perhaps more powerfully expressed in the brief lines of the poem, she was rescued, hospitalized again, given more shock treatments this time totally traumatizing her and returning her to the world fantasizing she is a suicide artist making the extravagant attempt and then Houdini-like dramatically re-appearing:

”Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

“It’s easy enough to do it in a cell.
It’s easy enough to do it and stay put.
It’s the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

‘A miracle!’”

(“Lady Lazarus”)

To defend herself against the trauma. she mythologized the doctor as a vengeful and bizarrely loving god in her short story *“Johnny Panic And The Bible of Dreams”* and her poem “The Hanging Man::

“At the moment when I think I am most lost, the face of Johnny Panic appears in a nimbus of lights of the ceiling overhead. I am shaken in the teeth of glory. His beard is lightening. Lightening is his eye. His Word changes and illuminates

the universe.”

“The air crackles with his blue-tongued lightning-haloed angels.
His love is the twenty-story leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart.
He forgets not his own.”

(“The Hanging Man”)

This time Plath was returned to the world, her false self a tuned-up walking time-bomb, wired as she was in the hospital. She returned to Smith College where she wrote her honors thesis on the double in Dostoyevsky, graduated *summa cum laude*, and won a Fulbright to study at Cambridge. There she met Ted Hughes, married him, returned to Smith College where she put in a spectacular stint teaching. After a while, trying to make a go of it as writers, they returned to England. Their first child Frieda was born. Plath’s first book of poems was accepted for publication by Heinemann. She had a miscarriage, then an appendectomy, and then became pregnant again. She won an important Saxton fellowship to write *The Bell Jar*, moved to the countryside, gave birth to her second child Nicholas, wrote her novel regularly and began a couple of the poems which later would appear in *Ariel*. Then she returned with the children, without Hughes, to London. What precipitated their separation was Hughes’ cruel affair with their close friend who bizarrely enough would put her head in the oven, turn on the gas and kill her two children along with herself.

Plath moved into Yeats’ house. Heinemann accepted *The Bell Jar* and she planned to write a new one. Against the ferocious cold of her final winter and the frozen life within her, she began heatedly to write *Ariel*. At dawn. Sometimes three four poems a day. But the curative power of art did not help her. Perhaps writing the book bound her to

the horror within her. On her last day she encountered her downstairs neighbor in the hallway, chatted with him, and put her children to sleep.

Then she stuck her head in the oven perhaps hoping for re-birth as is often the case in the schizoid suicide. There was the chance that the man downstairs would save her. But the gas entered his apartment and he fell asleep.

In “Lady Lazarus” she expressed this wild hope for salvation:

“Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

“And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty
And like the cat I have nine times to die.”

But she only had three.

After her death, her husband collected the best poems of that manic writing spell into the volume *Ariel*. However *Ariel* is more than an elaborate suicide note laying bare the motives for her act. In terms of literary tradition *Ariel* ironically is a rebirth. (Perhaps the fantasy of immortality many poets, particularly the Confessional Poets maintain as they exploit their pathology, accelerates their regression – as in other poets the act of sublimation decelerates it.) But one thing is clear : *Ariel* is the strongest, most dramatic expression of the schizoid dilemma. Robert Lowell’s advances in making confessions of psychological disorders an accessible poetic mode helped Plath achieve this. More so though, it is her own unflinching artist’s courage in communicating disaster, her own back-to-the-wall technical virtuosity that makes *Ariel* the powerful work it is. And the honest pathological

work it is – mad Lear ranting poetry at dawn. Each poem is a movement toward suicide or away from it. Or it is a two-part movement both towards and away. The poems taken together perfectly characterize the persecutory anxiety, the grandiosity, and the terror of schizoid withdrawal and desperate holding on. Even Plath's poetic failures are part of this process. Sometimes for instance there is pure primary process symbolization and condensation without the necessary bridge to the rest of the poem.

To illustrate the psychodynamic at work in *Ariel* let's take a close look at two of the poems' content, structure and communicative poetic techniques which surpass immersion in primary process – for example in her title poem "Ariel" where private symbolism mostly obscures her intention.

"Edge" and "Daddy" are among her least obscure poems, perhaps because each fully expresses one opposite side of her conflict. And so none of the symbols except, interestingly, the last in each poem which are ambiguous compromise formations. In "Edge" Plath elevates her withdrawal to the level of Greek tragedy. She mourns the annihilated ego and sees the grown woman as a victim of tragic necessity. She lies in her toga, a child at each emptied breast, the impersonal moon shining on her – a part of the sea. Like the Roman philosopher she admired, she has a classical bearing in death.

The choice of sound is a perfect shadow to her sense, a verbal music creating the quietness of a noble death. Except for the last line, there are no clusters of harsh consonants and only two (significant) moments of counterpoint giving the feeling of death throes.

Thus, there is no poetic resistance to the act – there is no harshness of sound as there is no interfering bad object to prevent the killing symbiosis. The short “i’s and frequent dentals and sibilants create a gentle resigned mood, almost as if an inert baby is babbling in her crib.

Occasional long vowels shape the poem into three separate sections centered around three different images. In section one (lines 1-8) with its image of the almost marbled heroine, the long “o’s” of “flows,” “scrolls,” “toga,” and “so” come to rest with her in “it is over.” Section two (lines 9-16) with repeated long “e’s” : “I bleed,” “sweet,” and “deep” take us by assonance into unspoken sleep. The last section (lines 17-20) with its moon image, seems to be an almost complete unresisted swoon toward death.

The three stresses in most lines of the poem help create the stately effect of a corpse in white bedding. Further, the solitary iambs (comprising lines 2&6), the two moments of rhythmic counterpoint, pull the former slack lines up short and aptly throw a frightening stress on the image of her dead body with its bare feet. The repetition of the two unstressed syllables followed by three stressed syllables at the close of the first two sections Plath ultimately focuses our attention on the delicately cryptic, fairytale last line:

“The moon’s blacks crackle and drag.”

If they are only the black areas of the moon, why should they crackle? The phrase is so obscure as to be meaningless – unless one is aware that black is a frequent symbol of her father as a life-saving bad object. “Crackle” in the Rice Krispies ad goes along

with “Pop,” and it is that exact object relation which can drive her away from suicide – as “drag is often used by her to describe a movement away from it.

There is no other bit of content in the text of the poem or implication in the subtext to make this displacement communicable to the reader. Here the primary process embedded in the style is split off from the secondary; and, therefore, the line coming past all conscious intention from the unconscious (except from when considering pure sound) is obscure.

But then again style as I’ve pointed out in several of my case histories often can communicate almost as much as content. So if we look to her use of the consonant cluster (the “k” of “black” and “crackle” followed by the voiced “k” of “drag” that hardness contradicts the soft slide the vowels create . It as if at the last moment that she’s holding onto the bad object for dear life. Consonance holding us back from infantile assonance or, as she beautifully renders, her newborn Nicholas’ cries for comfort and joy:

“... And now you try
Your handful of notes:
The clear vowels rise like balloons.”
(“Morning Song”)

The content and style of “Daddy” expresses the other side of Plath’s conflict – the drama of her struggle with her internalized bad object in order to ward off the kind of merger she sought in “Edge.” We perhaps can understand the purpose of this drama best when we look psychoanalytically at the subtext of the poem. And when we do so, quite an extraordinary thing happens: The text and subtext counterpoint each other.

The text of the poem deals with the father figure in Oedipal terms – the father as a lover who disappointed her by dying and who she has been wanting to re-connect with in death:

“...the black man who
Bit my pretty red heart in two.
I was ten when they buried you.
At twenty I tried to die

“And get back, back, back to you.
I thought even the bones would do.”

But when we look at the subtext of the poem we can see that she is struggling with her rage at a hated father to stop her more primitive drive toward suicide . At the end of the poem, exhausted by her internal struggle she realizes that by being through with him, she’s finished, dead. Thus in the interplay between text and subtext we get a fantastic tension developing that is released in the perfectly complementary stylistic choice: an infantile repetition “u” sounds contrasted with a fury of plosives, dentals and glottals.

“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 ...

“There’s a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I’m through.”

It is interesting to note that “you” is a consonant short of Hughes (the father figure being a condensation of him and her father). The “u” sound not only is used for repeated assonance but for many of the rhymes. That style creates an apt fairytale voice, one that conveys the dangers in fairytales and the attempts to be re-born into an original innocence.

The voice is a childish, regressed, screaming one. It is full not only in the repetition of the “u” rhymes which end four or five lines of every stanza but also repetition of phrase: (“You do not do, you do not do”) but also of words as an insistent child would convey them (of wars, wars, wars.) In one startling instant her fairytale voice technique also counterpoises murder and baby-talk

“I have always been scared of *you*,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.”

To sum up: both Plath’s style and content create meaning, their fusion Accounting for the simple emotional impact of some of her best poems like “Daddy.” Her style essentially creating the subtext forms a perfect counterpoint to the violent text – again typical of the fairytale.

As for the last line of the poem, it is in its own way as clever as her ambiguous ending to “Edge.”

“Daddy. daddy, you bastard I’m through.”

By being through with her bad object she is cutting off her attachment to reality to life, lines which were metaphorically anticipated earlier.

“The black telephone’s off at the root,
The voices just can’t worm through.”

“Edge” and “Daddy,” each essentially representing one side of her conflict are relatively easy to understand. Her pathology doesn’t make a muddle of her content (which would happen in a manic episode) or make her style a simple adornment. The ego is fully in charge and developed primary processes along with secondary processes make the poems intact works of art. When the two processes are out of synch then we can see that her pathology is in charge. When the ego functioning is weak, without thought imposed on unconscious product the poem seems a nightmare with no rhyme or reason. Unfortunately several of the poems in *Ariel* are like this and require us to secondarily rework her cryptosymbols in terms of what we know about her symbolization processes as a whole. Ironically one of the most obscure poems in the book is the title poem whose engaging style entices the reader to study the meanings in the loose associations of the poem.

The individual poem “Ariel” begins with a group of opaque images (lines 1-14) which vaguely suggest a birth, a horseback ride, and a fish being hooked. There are no logical connections between the images except that they all involve movement. But the description of the movement is only fragmentary, a narrative without links.

The lines, though, are connected by a skilled use of sound. The form of the poem is a modified terza rima, fittingly alluding to Dante’s hell. The excitement of violent movement is suggested by the interplay between the short “i’s” and the long “e’s.” The

consonantal movement from the front (plosives) to the back (gutturals) of the mouth suggest a direction to the movement. But there is no real conscious comprehensibility; the lines seem all primary process, full of auditory condensation, of pure hallucination with the meagerest secondary revision.

Thus we can say that in such instances pathology by divorcing primary from secondary process almost defeats the art, makes for a failure in communication to the uninitiated reader. But if we are willing to put in the work to get into her pathological symbolization processes we co-create the poem and in doing so make for a different though agonized aesthetic experience. We finally can understand these first fourteen Ines with the hindsight both of the rest of the poem and our awareness of her pathology trumpeting itself.

The rest of the poem clearly develops her familiar theme – schizoid suicide and rebirth – but here in a rather unusual way. Here instead of beginning with the suicide and showing her self re-born, she begins with a re-birth image and then identifies the procedure as being suicidal. In lines 15-23 the re-birth seems a variation of the strip-tease image in “Lady Lazarus.”

“This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them wrap me hand and foot –
The big strip tease.”

“Something else
 Hauls me through the air –
 Thighs, hair:
 Flakes from my heels.

White Godiva, I unpeel –
 Dead hands, stringencies.”

(“Ariel”)

So now if we return to the first fourteen lines, we see that in their obscure way the movement of the lines parallel the movement of the rest of the poem where secondary process finally takes a hand. The earlier images suggesting horse-back riding and naked birth set up the later metaphorical association between birth and Lady Godiva’s ride. All said, though, what do we make of such unlikely images?

“Nigger-eye
 Berries cast dark
 Hooks –

 Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
 Shadows something else

 Hauls me through air --

Hooks and shadows frequently are used by Plath to suggest the early love that keeps her in this world. That early love is her father (as usual symbolized by “black”) and by means of displacement her mother (in the subtext of the birthing process). These images are doomed to fail because of her uncontrollable rage.

Time as she has been abusing it moves like an arrow in one particular irreversible direction. She has nowhere to go but into suicidal schizoid flight:

“And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.”

If we were to stretch things, we might say that in some preconscious way Plath gave free rein to her confusion because she wanted to give us the emotional experience of her chaos. But to belabor this, it would be like trying to defend a long boring section of a play by saying that the playwright was trying to create the effect of boredom for some aesthetic end. By looking at “Ariel” in this way we can conclude that when the ego doesn’t function to shape primary process, the artist fails, the pathology defeats her. When the ego does function mightily along with developed primary process then the art as in “Edge” and “Daddy,” is clear for all of us to share emotionally. Much of *Ariel* accomplishes this. When it doesn’t her failure in art mirrors her pathology which led her in reality to become a suicide rather than a symbolic mythic heroine. Sad. Truly tragic.

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525 East 86th Street
New York, N.Y. 10028

Feirstein2@aol.com