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THE ARROW AND THE MIRROR; a study of the metaphor of pain in Sylvia Plath's poetry.

There's something about the energy, the attacking dynamism of Plath's poetry which reminds me of an irascible wasp which can inflict without relinquishing its sting. This special quality gives her metaphors both the intense clarity of a mirror reflection, and having created this focal centre, which in turn extends her internal world into one of external relationships, she then creates a trial of mirror facets in which the reader discerns the poem.

One might argue that all pain is amorphous until it is centralised. Plath's poems work in a similar manner. She is all the time searching to find a central image of stability, and having once set up this mode of reflection, she is at liberty to use her means of metaphorical attack. Thus the mirror is often the reflective surface of her inner tension. Repulsed by it, she becomes her own antagonist, and in many ways her own torturer as she relentlessly dissects the subject of her poem. Likewise in the natural world it is the mirror of the sea which occurs most often as her pre-occupying symbol, for the ocean too is an unstable mirror, one that is continuously forming only to reform. Constant too amongst her imagery is the symbol of the moon, and this is most often observed as a barren mirror and in terms of pain or sterility is associated with blood or women who are unable to conceive.

The arrow, Plath's symbol for her saddled "suicidal drive" in the poem *Ariel* denotes speed, her often desperate sense of urgency to transfix the target. Hence there is little retrogression in her poems; the impulsive motion of the arrow is towards the mirror attraction of her target. In this aspect, I think, Plath is unique amongst women poets. There is a compression, an urgency in the best of Emily Dickinson's lyrics, there is a vitality in Anne Sexton's work, but neither have the sense of ruthless no-return to which Plath's poems seem committed. Each good poem for her is in a sense the assassin on the thirteenth floor whose aim must leave no question of error.

Such poetry is often intent on extrapolating pain, of exorcising a trauma to which the poet can refer by isolating it. Plath's poems become a head-hunter's gallery of trophies, an accumulative mortuary of images as the arrow is released with recurring fatality. Let us look at the arrow and mirror effect in the poem *Totem* from the collection *Ariel*, where pain is pronounced in the initial line, is heightened by refractives, and polarized to

"Death with its many sticks"¹ as a completion.

The engine is killing the track, the track is silver,
It stretches into the distance. It will be eaten nevertheless.

Its running is useless.
At nightfall there is the beauty of drowned fields.

Dawn gilds the farmers like pigs,
Swaying slightly in their thick suits,

White towers on Smithfield ahead,
Fat haunches and blood on their minds.

There is no mercy in the glitter of cleavers,
The butcher's guillotine that whispers: "How's this,
How's this?'

In the bowl the hare is aborted,
Its baby head out of the way, embalmed in spice...²

The mirror effect here is one of exposure. The track like the poet's mind is vulnerable because its projection is inexorably pursued, its attempt at distance is simultaneous with its killing - as of course the process of writing a poem does not exterminate pain so much as exposes it. One notices too the distance traversed by the engine between two lines - the transition from nightfall to dawn. Part of the mirror passage is Smithfield and the arrow accelerates in flight with the sibilant onomatopoeia induced by the rails and the evocation of a butcher's implements. It is almost too as if Plath is resonantly flexing at the degree of pain administered, savouring her own capacity to intensify pain. In the urgency of her poem there can be no solace in relating the past to the present for the train is compulsively destined towards a totem which is death with its savagery of portent.

There's no terminus, only suitcases

Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit
Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes,

Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors.
I am mad, calls the spider, waving its many arms.

1. Sylvia Plath, *Totem, Ariel*, (Faber&Faber, London, 1965), p.77. All further quotations from *Ariel* are taken from the same edition.

2. *Ibid*, p.76.

And in truth it is terrible
Multiplied in the eyes of the flies

They buzz like blue children
In nets of the infinite,

Roped in at the end by the one
Death with its many sticks.³

Like a train in direct motion to the holocaust there are no intermediary stations. What remains is the permanent identity of the self. A wound, which, caught in its own exposure, can only anticipate its own extinction. It is conscious of the spider as it is not engaged in any useful creation, it is only "waving its many arms," as a token of insanity. "And in truth it is terrible" when seen through the eye of a fly because not only does it suggest a ritualistic madness, but also avoidance of the purpose of simply killing. An uncontrolled mania, which like Plath's inner hysteria can be resolved neither by victim nor victor.

What is most noticeable, however, in Plath's poetry, is her ability to take record of experience right up to the moment of death, either metaphorical, as in the above poem, or physical, as lived out in the actuality of her own suicide. There is this fascination in her concerning the death-motivated impulse to observe reflections in the way that a condemned prisoner takes a last note of his environs, and for Plath this becomes the telekinetic function of the poem. The engine will annihilate itself on the symbolic totem pole into which it must crash, but the poet must notate the journey to the point of impact. Each of her arrow and mirror poems comprises an assault on the source of her suffering. Pain delivered is also pain exposed, acknowledged.

At times the mirror takes on the form of an effigy which is mercilessly needled to test its resilience to suffering before it is destroyed. Thus in *Daddy* the incantatory, almost nursery-rhyme effect sadistically evokes in order to toy with and recriminate against a malevolent father figure.

...they pulled me out of the sack,
And they stuck me together with glue.
And then I Knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look.⁴

3. Ibid, p.77.

4. Plath, *Daddy*, Ariel, p.56.

Part of the poem's maleficence derives from the poet's thwarted suicide attempt at the age of nineteen. Her rebirth can only come about as a consequence of symbolically killing the figure to which she attributed her suffering; her father. He becomes transformed into "A man in black with a Meinkampf look/And a love of the rack and the screw." Plath, while identifying herself with the fate of the Jews, uses a nursery rhyme effect. Her diction does not denote casualness. It is more that anger and resentment have burnt through all other fabrics save incantation, and that incantation itself has become the mirror in which to reflect the victim and ultimately impale its heart with a stake. The poem ends with that finality one comes to associate with Plath. It is not only that the stake or arrow has been delivered, but that the tonality is irrevocable. The last line resounds like a door being slammed angrily.

...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.⁵

It is Plath's ability to empathise with, to allegorize suffering which saves her from the hysteria which undermines Anne Sexton in the most confessional of her poems. The allegory often denotes the cold sadism of torture; the subconscious desire to be abused, and empathy becomes a mirror to reflect this while the arrow scores a fretwork of scars before the finality. This is apparent in *Death & Co.*

Two, of course there are two.
 It seems perfectly natural now -
 The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded
 And balled, like Blake's,
 Who exhibits

The birthmarks that are his trademark -
 The scald scar of water,
 The nude
 Verdigris of the condor.
 I am red meat. His beak

Claps sidewise: I am not his yet.⁶

5. Ibid, p.56.

6. Plath, *Death&Co.*, Ariel, p.38.

The imagery is more forceful because it works by delayed tactics. Rather like a Robert Lowell poem the tension is the more deadly for the apparent calm. Like Lowell the current is imperceptible until it electrocutes. After the psychopathic delineation of the first and the condor-like rapacity of the second, we are exposed to the ruthless predicament of the poet "I am red meat." There is no longer the safety veneer of the flesh in which to conceal identity. His conversation mirrors the clinical, the aborted, "He tells me how sweet/The babies look in their hospital/icebox." Plath works through this poem with the paralysed but observant gelidity of a victim of Nazi torture. It is as though the three have met, had to meet in timelessness; and of the second:

His hair long and plausible.
Bastard
Masturbating a glitter,
He wants to be loved.⁷

The coldness of the image is in accordance both with the mirror of pain as characteristic of Plath's use of metaphor, and also in tune with her horrifying predicament of "I am red meat."

The tone of the poem seems to promote the will for self-abusement; a resilience to death so that it is not the victim of the poet who succumbs, but another victim.

I do not stir.
The frost makes a flower,
the dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.

Somebody's done for.⁸

In the victim's own time-stasis everything is becoming something else, is completing its own metamorphosis; the frost is patterning a flower, the dew a star, while "The dead bell" is gravely announcing another's death. The barely noticeable half-rhymes (stir, flower, star for) create an atmosphere of cold, while the onomatopoeic toll of the bell is created by its iteration "The dead bell/The dead bell," slowing to "somebody's done for".

Plath's poetry is always one of reflective dynamism; even in the

7. *Ibid.*, p.38.

8. *Ibid.*, p.39.

earlier poems collected in *The Colossus* there is a tense spitting of image, a preoccupation with the metaphor of suffering which, while it is embodied in a denser rhetoric, and parallels Ted Hughes' early work, never loses its sense of urgency.

Sun struck the water like a damnation
 No pit of shadow to crawl into
 And his blood beating the old tattoo
 I am, I am, I am. Children
 Were squealing where combers broke and the
 spindrift
 Ravelled wind-ripped from the crest of the wave,
 A mongrel working his legs to a gallop
 Hustled a gull flock to flap off the sandspit.⁹

There are echoes here of the early Lowell, but Plath possesses her own powerful attribute of facilitating the fusion of character, the suicide off Egg Rock, with an impetus which corresponds to the harshness of the landscape. The suicidal drive and the ocean's raucity become one in their annihilative tendency. Certainly the movement is more muscular than in the attenuated shriek-anatomy of the later poems, as in the compact visual energy of "A mongrel working his legs to a gallop/Hustled a gull flock to flap off the sandspit." There are always last observations, presuicidal observations and it is their intensity and adrenalised magnification which Plath evokes. She engenders a baldness or shimmer of minutiae which are invariably stimulated by acute anxiety; things appear retinally in the manner of acid abrading a plate.

Everything shrank in the Sun's corrosive
 Ray but Egg Rock on the blue Wastage.
 He heard when he walked into the water

The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges.¹⁰

Hence we have significantly motion and mirror; but there is a vitiation in the last line which is discordant with the pressure previously sustained. I think it has to do with the adjectival softening, the "forgetful" surf and its motion of "creaming" which denies us the refraction of imagery synonymous with intensity. What is it really that Sylvia Plath, and by a natural

9. Sylvia Plath, *Suicide off Egg Rock*, *Colossus*, (Faber & Faber, London, 1967), p.33. All further quotations from *Colossus* are taken from the same edition.

10. *Ibid*, p.33.

extension Ted Hughes, are achieving which so alters their manner of poetic perception without radically altering their selection of subject material? It is not in any exclusivity of the latter, it is more in their ability to infuse their subject with the tension points of their own personal and worldly predicament, to interrelate the two in a manner often resonant of myth and allegory which is also vitally plausible. It is also for Plath a quality of nerve; a poetry engendered by nervous energy and sensitised by that increasingly thin membrane which seems to divide the individual from either psychotic or universal catastrophe.

It is not that aesthetic beauty has been erased, so much as Plath's response to the natural world is one that focuses upon its vicissitudes with startling accuracy, and equates these with the tension of a post-holocaustical world, a pre-nuclear eclipse. The mirror image is often that of the sea which admits no mercy.

A woman is dragging her shadow in a circle
 About a bald, hospital saucer.
 It resembles the moon, or a sheet of blank paper
 And appears to have suffered a sort of private blitzkrieg
 She lives quietly

With no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle,
 The obsolete house, the sea, flattened to a picture
 She has one too many dimensions to enter.
 Grief and anger, exorcised,
 Leave her alone now.

The future is a grey seagull
 Tattling in its cat-voice of departure, departure
 Age and terror, like nurses, attend her,
 And a drowned man, complaining of the great cold,
 Crawls up out of the sea.¹¹

The poem in its connotations is an allegory or parable of future portent. The whiteness of the moon and hospital cannot be dissociated. What is this "private blitzkrieg" which the woman has suffered and in doing so acquired "one too many dimensions" to enter into the physical environs which she was once a part of? Are the connotations not such that this might be the last woman who is "dragging her shadow in a circle" in a landscape of obsolescence? Her life is lived "like a foetus in a bottle" - it is a

11. Sylvia Plath, *A Life. Crossing the Water*, (Faber&Faber, London, 1971), pp.53-54. All further quotations from *Crossing the Water* are taken from the same edition.

containment of someone who can no longer relate nor be related to. A dehumanized future is punctuated alone by the tattling outcry of a seagull until we encounter what appears to be the second post-disaster survivor. "And a drowned man, complaining of the great cold,/Crawls up out of the sea." It is this which points to the mythic aspect of Plath's work, her ability to improvise with new myths to accommodate a new terror.

Plath herself is the generative locus from which the poem takes off, thus the direction behind the arrow; it is her ability to use narrative which saves her from the excesses of psychoanalysis, self psychoanalysis, which comes to flaw so much confessional poetry. Her ability is to find external correlatives to her/suffering, as in the poem *Medusa* where the fatality of the Grecian archetype is invested with a new terror, and becomes the poet's counterpart.

Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,
 Eyes rolled by white sticks,
 Ears cupping the sea's incoherences,
 You house your unnerving head - God-ball,
 Lens of mercies,

Your stooges
 Plying their wild cells in my keel's shadow,
 Pushing by like hearts,
 Red stigmata at the very centre,
 Riding the rip tide to the nearest point of departure,

Dragging their Jesus hair.
 Did I escape, I wonder?¹²

Again the mirror image is that of the ocean; a landspit supporting the unnerving lens, and its red stigmata, while its attendant stooges ply into the ocean. It is noticeable how Plath evokes terror before entering the poem, "Did I escape, I wonder?" The question creates an apprehensive uncertainty; there are intimations in the second stanza, and through the sheer malevolence of the seascape, that the damage inflicted is already irremediable, that the relationship is malignantly schizophrenic.

I could draw no breath,
 Dead and moneyless,

Overexposed, like an X-ray.

12. Plath, *Medusa*, Ariel, p.45.

Who do you think you are?
 A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
 I shall take no bite of your body,
 Bottle in which I live,

Ghastly Vatican.
 I am sick to death of hot salt.
 Green as eunuchs, your wishes
 Hiss at my sins.
 Off, off, eely tentacle!

There is nothing between us.¹³

The questioning in Plath's poetry, her sense of indignant outrage, is part of the arrow's temper not to be deflected from its target. While the neurosis pertains to myth, the poem's function is to exorcise it. Medusa is the "Bottle in which I live;" thus the tension is to extricate, to seek individuation by dispelling what would strangle as an "eely tentacle." There is also the outrage against the eucharist, its connotations for Plath with theophagy.

It is significant how the curdling repudiation hisses like the sea throughout the last stanza. "Ghastly, sick, wishes, hiss, off, us," all create an onomatopoeic surf. It is as if metaphorically she has survived Medusean paralysis, despite being "Overexposed, like an X-ray."

What is really the nature of pain in Sylvia Plath's work which so informs the twentieth century sensibility, the anguish which is so peculiar to it. Moreover, the anguish which is so peculiar to the twentieth century poet and which begins with Eliot's refutation of an attenuated post nineteenth-century romanticism, but assumes its full tension point with Lowell's *Life Studies*. In them the self becomes the expansive locus from which anxiety is transmitted. It is not the sense of detachment; it is, I think, this membrane of exposure, that the self has become transparent, vulnerable to the probings of mental institutions, encroached upon by communality in the way that the private has become universal. Thus, a poem in the manner of Plath creates a defence-mechanism for the poet, a means of erecting a scaffolding between self and a visible chaos.

I am inhabited by a cry.
 Nightly it flaps out
 Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

13. *Ibid.*, p.46.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches? -

Its snaky acids kiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.¹⁴

The elm of the poem's initial stanzas becomes a co-extensive metaphor for the poet's own suffering; the seething of her own nervous stress is reflected in the movement of its branches. Even the rain is "tin-white, like arsenic," and the wind "Will tolerate no bystanding; I must shriek." Although poet and the elm are distinct, Plath is not establishing the existence of the elm as contingent to her own emotive projection, but seeing in it a vehicle through which to relate her own possession of fear. We never doubt that it is Plath who is "inhabited by a cry" which goes out searching with "hooks" and "malignity," and we notice how the second stanza mentioned above does in its movement and rhyme snag like a hook. "Thing, turnings and malignity" all possess the onomatopoeic sharpness of metal, the ring of metal, in contradiction to the words denoting vulnerability - "sleep, soft and feathery." In extrapolating her own neurosis the elm becomes metamorphosed into something more than a tree, it becomes a receptacle for malevolence; something akin to the branching psychosis which feeds on her. The slow distillation of which petrifies and kills.

This pain which so corrodes the twentieth century sensibility and around which the poem serves as a precarious capsule demanded a new form of poetry which Lowell did much to instigate and was successfully followed by Plath. Not the laconic measure of an unstructured free verse, but a poetry in which rhyme possesses the ability to startle often where it is least anticipated. Where the nervous lines are polished with a magnified attention on minutiae, on small life-savers, on natural detail. Not only do they serve as handholds, but neither Lowell nor Plath can work with the

14. Plath, *Elm*, Ariel, p.26.

assurance that their sanity or universal equilibrium will survive for a second approach. Thus, things are delineated with an accuracy against possible extinction. As in Plath's *The Rabbit Catcher* from *Winter Trees*.

I tasted the malignity of the gorse,
 Its black spikes,
 The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers.
 They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
 And were extravagant, like torture.¹⁵

It is this emphasis on detail, how line by line sharpens the focus, extends the metaphor, that is peculiar to the manner of expanding on perception in proportion to fear.

The poetry is controlled but never straightjacketed; it relies on both internal and external rhymes remaining unobtrusive. "Black spikes" creates an internal rhyme friction, as does "extreme unction" and "yellow candle-flowers." The rhyme endings are the mote tense for remaining subdued - "gorse, flowers, torture." There is a sharpness to the stanza which is synonymous with both the gorse flower and Plath's mind.

At other times the arrow is replaced by a portentous waiting, a movement which delineates but disquiets by its unhurried calm. It is as if the torturer has turned his back on the poet in order to light a cigarette.

This is winter, this is night, small love -
 A sort of black horsehair,
 A rough, dumb country stuff
 Steeled with the sheen
 Of what green stars can make it to our gate.
 I hold you in my arm.
 It is very late.
 The dull bell tongues the hour.
 The mirror floats us at one candle power.¹⁶

There is no startling beginning to the poem. The feeling of darkness as having the roughness of an animal is not made too oppressive for it is offset by light coming from the stars and a mirror. The only air of disquiet here is in the ambiguous restlessness of the characters, who are by

15. Sylvia Plath, *The Rabbit Catcher*, *Winter Trees*, (Faber&Faber, London, 1971), p.25. All further quotations from *Winter Trees* are taken from the same edition.

16. Plath, *By Candlelight*, *Winter Trees*, p.28.

evocation only and indeterminate. Plath is moving inwards to mental threat and domesticities, to what is caged and therefore views the candlelight as hostile;

I hold my breath until you creak to life,
 Balled hedgehog,
 Small and cross. The yellow knife
 Grows tall. You clutch your bars.
 My singing makes you roar.
 I rock you like a boat
 Across the Indian carpet, the cold floor,
 While the brass man
 Kneels, back bent, as best he can.¹⁷

Again, the stanza uses rhyme to create the tension points, to create the friction of things rasped upon metal, to impress with its vividness. Like Robert Lowell, Plath possesses the ability to make domestic objects a source of mythic, almost personalised threat. Plath's mirror is metaphorically one in which fear is multiplied. Objects are observed as being disquietingly close; the elements are in their remoteness a mirror but not a source of comfort. Hence the feeling of overexposure, the sense of vulnerability to insanity which menaces so many poems.

This is a 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 asinity. Decay.
 Possession.
 It is they who own me...¹⁸

The descent works like a stair-well. After the stifling recognition of fear, "This is the room I could never breathe in," the lines skillfully trip with a sense of loss of balance, of being taken over by the shape of fear. The torch too with its light of "Chinese yellow on appalling objects" intimates at torture, at Plath's obsessive fear with intrusion into the mind.

In reading Plath and Hughes one is conscious of a distinctly new

17. Ibid.

18. Plath, *Wintering*, Ariel, p.68.

sensibility, an ability to externalize their deep anxiety in a way that allows for it to inform and reread the physical landscape. In other words, their tense pressure of seeing and absorbing every single object comes to interpret how they see the physical world which becomes a reading of their own neurosis. Thus, they are projecting into nature their own anxiety and their reading of nature appears clinical. Their poetry in that sense is vitally personal; it does not attempt like Eliot to restore poetry to a vitiated ethos, but to transmute survival, and for Plath its impossibility, into durable poetry. I think this accounts for Plath's empathy with semitism, with victims of surgery and a natural world that is similarly eroded;

On a black wall, unidentifiable birds
Swivel their heads and cry.
There is no talk of immortality among these!
Cold blanks approach us:
They move in a hurry.¹⁹

Things are both apprehensive and premonitory. After the "unidentifiable birds," "Cold blanks approach us:/They move in a hurry." In Plath and in Hughes the tenacity of the poetry has much to do with the resilience to endure, to grimly fashion a cosmos for who survive or will survive the pressures of personal and universal catastrophe. It is a poetry that demands an unflinching confrontation on the part of the poet, a steeling to the strain of whatever will still be sinewed by poetry, rather than surrendering to any largesse of culture which makes poetry permissible. Plath is forced to confront rather than to select.

Ash, ash -
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there -

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.
Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.²⁰

19. Plath, *Apprehensions*, *Crossing the Water*, p.57.

20. Plath, *Lady Lazarus*, *Ariel*, pp.18-19.

The poetry is kept at one with the sparsity of human liquidation, its residue. The maleficence of it all invokes the almost incantatory rhythm, as though it was a witch addressing a hecatomb: "Ash, ash/You poke and stir."

God is envisaged as a Nazi torturer, as one and the same with Lucifer; but the will to confrontingly endure and recriminate, of which we have spoken, is given full and envenomed vitality in the last stanza. So through the force of poetry, the victim remains irrepressible. It is as if at times both Hughes and Plath invoke an imminent catastrophe in order to establish counteracting hostilities, to establish what in Plath we have designated as the "mirror" which isolates whatever looks at it. It multiplies the poet's horror, therefore, as it does not cure or solve anything, it just reflects back.

In this light one could conceive of Plath as obsessive in the recurrence of her imagery, in her thematic preoccupation with violence. Intensity in poetry, however, is largely inseparable from obsession and all poems are in a sense one poem, and that poem comprises the author's sensibility. One agrees that the unparalleled atrocities of the concentration camps, the new pressures, brought to bear upon the individual demand a psychological depth that is new. Plath came to this validly as Lowell did, except that one was heightening and the other detoning his work. What one does call in question is that the poems written about "taboo subjects" are no more likely to be good poems.

Certainly in Anne Sexton's work, and the work of so many "confessionals," there is an unreadable note of neurotic obsession. This does not apply to Plath as it does to other poets who feel that being in a mental hospital is a criterion for good poetry. Plath came to it young enough, for one cannot forever go on writing poems that are terminal in their conclusions. With Plath one sympathises. The frantic speed of her last years and the created energies they brought about were awesome; one does not like to conjecture on her poetic themes had she been alive today, two decades later.

One could also support Dan Jacobson's conviction that

In view of the kind of poems she left, perhaps I should say at once that I don't believe one has any business to ask of poetry that it be 'affirmative' in tone, or positive in its conclusions, or that it should set on presenting us with ostensibly 'healthy' models or versions of the emotions. Far from it. If literature is an 'incitement to living,' as Pound puts it, it isn't because authors have a duty to find consoling or cheering messages to pass on to us, or because they are under an obligation to think, feel and work in any single, approved mode. The obligation of the writer is simply to bear witness as truthfully

and as disinterestedly as he can to his experience of the world we're all condemned to live in.²¹

Before concluding this essay I would like to focus upon the metaphor I have used of the arrow and mirror bearings in Plath's poetry and point to their conciliation in mutually exposing the self in either its motion or its arrested motion. In *Ariel*, the name of Plath's horse, the volatility of the ride and the sense of oneness with the animal - "How one we grow" -²² intensifies the need to be projected into death -

And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.²³

The line placings not only create the effect of speed, but that inexorable compulsion. Similarly, the leap from "red" to "eye" creates the ascendancy of sunrise; the urgency of the advancing triptych or arrow-head: poet, horse and the sun. Hence, the self in motion is suicidal in Plathean terms, but it also carries the poetry. The relationship is a symbiotic one. Likewise, the prospect from the viewpoint of arrested motion is equally harrowing: the elemental mirror of the ocean, as in *Suicide off Egg Rock*, offers no redemption. I quote the final stanza of what had been for Plath a relatively sedate poem - *Blackberrying*:

The only thing to come now is the sea.
From between two hills a sudden wind funnels at me,
Slapping its phantom laundry in my face.
These hills are too green and sweet to have tasted salt.
I follow the sheep path between them. A last hook brings me
To the hill's northern face, and the face is orange rock
That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.²⁴

21. Dan Jacobson, *Mirrors can kill*: Dan Jacobson considers the artistic martyrdom of Sylvia Plath, *The Listener*, (7 October 1971), p.482.

22. Plath, *Ariel*, p.36.

23. *Ibid.*, p.37.

24. Plath, *Blackberrying*, *Crossing the Water*, pp.24-25.

It is the anxiety without the suicide of *Egg Rock* or *Ariel*; the permanence and illimitable ferocity of the ocean, facing in at the poet with the dissonance of "Beating and beating at an intractable metal," while she looks out at "nothing, nothing but a great space/Of white and pewter lights" with a sense of diminution and can resort to neither polarity as a source of comfort, hence the anxiety of Plath and the late twentieth century sensibility.

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Ευαγγελία-Λιάνα Σακελλίου, *ΤΟ ΒΕΛΟΣ ΚΑΙ Ο ΚΑΘΡΕΦΤΗΣ: Μία μελέτη της μεταφοράς του πόνου στην ποίηση της Σύλβιας Πλάθ*

Ψάχνοντας για ιδιαίτερη έκφραση συγκινησιακών βιωμάτων και άπλων έμπειριών στους στίχους Αμερικανίδων ποιητριών, στάθηκα προσεκτικά στη Σύλβια Πλάθ (1932-1963).

Υπάρχει κάτι στον έπιθετικό δυναμισμό της ποίησής της που μου θυμίζει μια όργισμένη σφήγκα που τραυματίζει χωρίς να έγκαταλείπει τὸ κεντρί της στη σάρκα του θύματος. Μία ροπή πρὸς τὸν θάνατο και τὴν εξόντωση τῆς ἀνθρώπινης ταυτότητας – θέματα ταμποῦ στην κοινωνία του σήμερα – έκφρασμένα με ξεχωριστὴ ἀμεσότητα και βιαιότητα.

Χρησιμοποιώντας τὴ μεταφορὰ του «βέλους» και του «καθρέφτη» σὲ κάθε ποιήμα της, ἡ Πλάθ περιλαμβάνει μὴ ἐπίθεση στην ἐστία του πόνου της, τὴν ἐξωτερικευση ἐνὸς τραύματος σὸ ὅποιο μπορεί νὰ ἀναφερθεῖ μόνο ὅταν τὸ ἀπομονώσει. Ἔτσι πάντα ψάχνει νὰ βρεῖ ἓνα σταθερὸ κεντρικὸ εἶδωλο και ἀφοῦ σιγουρευτεῖ γιὰ τὸν τρόπο ἀντανάκλασῆς του εἶναι ἐλεύθερη νὰ χρησιμοποιήσει τὰ διάφορα μέσα τῆς μεταφορικῆς τῆς ἐπίθεσης. Ὁ «καθρέφτης» γίνεται συχνὰ ἡ ἀντανάκλαστικὴ ἐπιφάνεια τῆς ἐσωτερικῆς τῆς ὑπερέντασης. Πάνω του ἀπομονωμένος και τραγικὰ ὀρατὸς ὁ πόνος της τὴν ἀπωθεῖ και κατ' αὐτὸ τὸν τρόπο γίνεται ἡ ἴδια ἀνταγωνίστρια ἢ βασανίστρια του ἑαυτοῦ της, ὅταν ἀμείλικτα κάνει ἀνατομὴ στὰ θέματά της. Τὸ «βέλος» ἐκφράζει ταχύτητα, τὴ συχνὰ ἀπεγνωσμένη ἀνάγκη της νὰ διαπεράσει τὸν στόχο, ἀλλὰ ἡ πιεστικὴ φορὰ του εἶναι πρὸς τὸν «καθρέφτη». Ἡ φαινομενικὴ ἀσυμφωνία τῶν δύο συμβόλων περιγράφει τὴν ποιητικὴ πορεία (process) τῆς συνεχοῦς ἐκτόξευσης του κάθε νέου ποιήματος πρὸς τὸν καθρέφτη τῆς ἐμπειρίας. Ὅπως ἓνα βέλος χτυπᾷ στὸν καθρέφτη και γυρίζει πίσω, ἔτσι και ἡ προσπάθεια σύνθεσης ποιητικῶν ἐπιτευγμάτων εἶναι μὴ σειρὰ ἀπὸ διαδοχικὲς προσεγγίσεις ἐνὸς συγκεκριμένου στόχου.

Εἶναι δύσκολο νὰ ἀποδοθοῦν στην Ἑλληνικὴ τὰ ἡχητικὰ ἐμφε τῶν στίχων τῆς Πλάθ, ἡ συριστικὴ ρίμα τους, ὁ ρυθμὸς τους και τὸ ρετάρισμα τῶν εἰκόνων της· γι' αὐτὸ και ἔγραψα αὐτὴ τὴ μελέτη τῆς «μεταφορᾶς του πόνου» τῆς ποίησής της στην ἴδια τὴ γλώσσα τῆς ποιήτριας. –