"Fever 103°": the poetics of paroxysm in the common text of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton

Yasna Bozhkova
Université Sorbonne Nouvelle - Paris 3

1. This paper focuses on the ways in which the poems of Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton, most prominently those collected in Plath's *Ariel* (1965) and Sexton's *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960), *Live or Die* (1966), *The Book of Folly* (1972) and *The Death Notebooks* (1975), may function together as a single text. The various female personae which appear throughout these poems could eventually be understood as facets of the same persona, in the sense that they echo each other and are nourished from each other, they have a common drive and a common purpose. In this intertextual network of echoing voices and common imagery, the two poets, seen through the prism of their proliferating semi-autobiographic avatars in textual space, emerge as doubles, as poetic twins who share a "special language"[1] of suicides. The endeavor of this common poetic language works towards a poetics of paroxysm, in which the craving for self-destruction begins as an "unnameable lust" and grows into "an infection" (*SCP* 142-3). The common image of a suicidal "fever," which appears both in Plath's "Fever 103°" and in Sexton's view of poetry as a "fever chart for a bad case of melancholy," (*SCP* 95) provides the trope which best encompasses the medical and metaphoric associations of the paroxysmal drive of this poetic mode. In this suicidal fever, visions of excess are magnified in a kind of chain reaction. This double poetics of paroxysm originates in a moment of acute psychic crisis, bereavement and trauma, evolves through the poetic license to transgress gender-roles, the norms of propriety and the limits of sanity, and culminates in an ecstatic "crematory flight" (*SCP* 587), a final gesture of self-immolation in which excess becomes a craving for the *outre-tombe.*

2. The nature of this "suicidal epidemic" may be elucidated through Georges Bataille's notions of expenditure[2] and sacrifice. The invisible backdrop of the excesses of such poetry is the repressive social climate of 1950s American consumer culture, where everything which does not serve a utilitarian function becomes a new form of taboo. Hence, the unsettling figures of excess in Plath's and Sexton's poems are aimed at subverting the social norms and constructs, prompted by a need to

1 A. Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, 143. [*SCP*]
2 See G. Bataille, "La Notion de dépense," *Œuvres complètes : I*, 302.

break with the utter banality of their social context and to see beyond the limits of commodity culture. While the "Confessional" mode has been criticized because of its excessive preoccupation with the self as subject matter, it is precisely the insufficiency of the personal, which in the context of middle-class commodity culture inevitably becomes the domestic, that ultimately triggers the exasperation in which self-sacrifice is crystallized as the only way to transcend the personal.

3. Thus, the poetic expenditure which culminates in an act of self-sacrifice paradoxically becomes the only way to reach a form of transcendence, to articulate a truth about the abyss of man's psyche which goes beyond the discourse of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. In this sense, in Plath's and Sexton's poetry insanity is both real and performative, and while the poetic imagery borrows heavily from the spaces of the psychoanalytic session and the psychiatric asylum, it does so ambivalently, and its staged excesses ultimately aim at subverting the paradigms of psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Paroxysm thus becomes a transgressive but ambivalent spectacle, in which pathology and theatricality are inextricably intertwined. The lavish, flamboyant expenditure of poetic utterance, which may be seen as a series of delirious projections exploring what Bataille has called the "*moi* qui meurt"[3], is further amplified by the contagion of the common poetic language. As "the blood jet"[4] of this poetry spends itself, death, and especially its transformation into an "art" (*PCP* 245), becomes the ultimate form of excess, a rapture which may be seen as a form of Bataille's "pratique de la joie devant la mort"[5].

Poetic twins: the special language of Anne and Sylvia

4. Plath and Sexton developed their bond in 1959, while they were both auditing Robert Lowell's poetry workshop at Boston University, and came into the habit of going to the Ritz bar after each class to drink martinis and discuss matters of poetry and suicide. Sexton's 1966 memoir entitled "The Bar Fly Ought to Sing," the sole existing testimony of their personal relationship, sheds some light on the nature of their poetic dialogue as predicated on their common infatuation with death: "We talked death with burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb. Sucking on it!"[6] Through a sketch of Plath and two poems, "Wanting to Die" and "Sylvia's Death," Sexton gives some insight into the nature of the drive which becomes the basis of their

3 G. Bataille, *Sacrifices*, *Œuvres complètes : I*, 92.
4 S. Plath, *The Collected Poems*, 270. [*PCP*]
5 G. Bataille, "La Pratique de la joie devant la mort," *Œuvres complètes : I*, 552.
6 A. Sexton, *No Evil Star*, 7. [*NES*]

common poetic language.

5. "Wanting to Die" is Sexton's "Why-poem," an attempt to elucidate the nature of the death drive which possessed them so utterly, suggesting an answer "directly for both of us and for that place we met" (*NES* 6): "I do feel somehow that it's the same answer that Sylvia would have given. She's since said it for me in so many poems — so I try to say it for us in one of mine..." (*NES* 8) The poem focuses on the uncanny transmogrification of the lyric subject by the "almost unnameable lust" of suicides, making explicit the terms of the secret language ("But suicides have a special language./ Like carpenters they want to know *which tools*./ They never ask *why build*." — *NES* 8, her emphasis) which becomes the basis of their bond:

> Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet,
>
> […]
>
> leaving the page of the book carelessly open,
>
> something unsaid, the phone off the hook
>
> and the love, whatever it was, an infection. (*NES* 8)

6. While Plath and Sexton's friendship and mutual stylistic influence have already been subject to some critical attention, I argue that rather than examining these parallels within the framework of influence, it is more productive to see them as a poetic dialogue, the impact of which exceeds the idea of "influence" properly speaking and becomes a complicity, a common grammar, which deliberately works through the unstable boundary between biography and poetry ("leaving the page of the book carelessly open"). Echoing voices similarly seep from one poem to another, just as Plath's "Words heard, by accident, over the phone" (*PCP* 202) percolate into Sexton's "phone off the hook". Thus, infatuation with suicide figuratively functions as a "contagion," in which what begins as an "unnameable lust" grows into an "infection".

7. "Sylvia's Death" is a poem where the boundary between poet and persona is at its thinnest: composed six days after Plath's suicide, it is a poem *for* Plath, and not *about* Plath, an apostrophe pierced by an emphatic "O," which reads like a delirious call to a dead sibling ("O Sylvia, Sylvia,/ […] Sylvia, Sylvia,/ where did you go," *NES* 11). This emphatic call collapses into a paroxysmal state:

> what did you stand by,

just how did you lie down into?

Thief! —

how did you crawl into,

crawl down alone

into the death I wanted so badly and for so long (*NES* 11)

8. The insistent repetition of "our" ("our skinny breasts," "our eyes," "our heart, our cupboard," "death again,/ that ride home/ *our* boy" — *NES* 12, her emphasis), which reads like a pledge establishing the two poets as blood sisters, collapses into a delirious fit of jealousy for the one that has crossed "into" before the other, while the elliptic "into" becomes the grammatical vehicle of the craving for the Beyond.

9. A highly eroticized attraction for death, for "*our* boy" (*NES* 12), emerges as the basis of Plath and Sexton's common language. Even though Sexton alludes to their fellow poet George Starbuck who accompanied them on their weekly "death talks" in the Ritz lounge bar ("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." — *NES* 7), in fact Starbuck's figure functions as a substitute for the implicit presence of the third figure who accompanied them at their tryst, the "supple Suitor"[7]. Sexton's description of the Ritz bar, where they held their death talks, functions metaphorically as the entering of a common poetic space: "In the lounge-bar of the Ritz, not a typical bar at all, but very plush, deep dark red carpeting [...] where one knew upon stepping down the five velvet red steps that he was entering *something***,** we entered." (*NES* 7, her emphasis). To describe the common poetic space which is a subterranean temple of death, where the poet is blindly building a womb/tomb for her poetic gift, Sexton uses the image of a mole: "what is your death/ but [...] a mole that fell out/ of one of your poems?" (*NES* 13) The source of this image may be traced to Plath's early poem "Blue Moles":

They're out of the dark's ragbag, these two

Moles dead in the pebbled rut,

7 E. Dickinson, "Death is the supple Suitor," poem 1445.

Shapeless as flung gloves, a few feet apart —

Blue suede a dog or fox has chewed.

One, by himself, seemed pitiable enough,

[...]

The second carcass makes a duel of the affair:

Blind twins bitten by bad nature. (PCP 126, my emphasis)

10. While the image of the mole "dead in the pebbled rut," "out of dark's ragbag," quite transparently functions as an allegory of the poet at the moment of symbolic death, one should note that there are two moles in the poem. Since the poem was written in 1959, at the time Plath and Sexton both frequented Lowell's poetry workshop and developed the habit of "[talking] death with burned-up intensity, both of [them] drawn to it like moths to an electric light bulb" (*NES* 7), it is possible to assume that the apparition of two moles in the poem instead of a single one signals Plath's attempt to explore her budding relation to her "twin" Sexton. The somewhat enigmatic ending of the poem ("whatever happens between us/ happens in darkness" — *PCP* 127) reads like a secret vow or pledge, echoing Sexton's allusion to "that place where we met" (*NES* 6) as a common poetic temple to suicides ("Balanced there, suicides sometimes meet" — *NES* 9). The poem also hints at the nascent political dimension of this common poetic language, positing it as a double revolt ("The second carcass makes a duel of the affair").

11. The contiguous nature of Plath's and Sexton's poetics is often foregrounded through the recurrence of such common figures, another one being the "queen bee," which brings to light a subterranean connection between Sexton's "You, Doctor Martin" and Plath's "The Arrival of the Bee Box":

You, Doctor Martin, walk

from breakfast to madness. Late August,

I speed through the antiseptic tunnel

where the moving dead still talk

of pushing their bones against the thrust

of cure. And I am queen of this summer hotel

or the laughing bee on a stalk

of death. (*SCP* 3)

12. The stanza quoted above is emblematic of the way Sexton works through the trope of the talking cure in her poems, deliberately problematizing its therapeutic dimension: since for the speaker it is impossible to truly recover from her trauma, to "push [her] bones against the thrust/ of cure," her triumph is that of a "laughing bee," a lunatic who laughs in the face of death. Apart from the obvious typographical separation of death from the rest of the stanza, which brings to mind the inevitable collapse back into the death-wish, one notes the oxymoronic opposition between "thrust/ of cure" and "stalk/ of death": a more logical combination would have been "stalk of cure" and "thrust of death". The break at the end of the line, which introduces the oxymoron, functions as a somatic twist, an uncontrollable rush away from recovery and a magnetic attraction towards death. The persona's voice in this early poem is already driven by the peculiar mixture of self-mockery and rapture which becomes so characteristic in Sexton's late poetry. Having gone through an "antiseptic tunnel," the persona defines her new identity as that of "a laughing bee on a stalk/ of death"; yet, this laughter is a paroxysm of laughter, a spasmodic dance on a "stalk/ of death," in the limbo between sanity and madness, and life and death, where the line break operates as an irrevocable split, an embodiment of the abyss of psychic disorder.

13. In Plath's "The Arrival of the Bee Box," the queen bee figure becomes a vehicle of the speaker's vehement exasperation:

They thought death was worth it, but I

Have a self to recover, a queen.

Is she dead, is she sleeping ?

Where has she been,

With her lion-red body, her wings of glass ?

Now she is flying

More terrible than she ever was, red

Scar in the sky, red comet

Over the engine that killed her

The mausoleum, the wax house. (*PCP* 215)

14. Seeking to recover a dead self, the speaker conjures up a new one, "a queen," whose very flamboyancy becomes deadly. Besides, the persistent use of the color red ("lion-red body," "red scar," "red comet") suggests that the queen bee may be seen as a bee-avatar foreshadowing Plath's red-haired man-eating woman-phoenix, Lady Lazarus. Both Sexton's "laughing bee on a stalk/ of death" and Plath's lion-red queen bee function as incarnations of "that bawdy queen of death" (*PCP* 77) produced by a dead self which is irrecoverable.

15. Such points of contiguity often function more obliquely, such as the "ant in mourning" (*PCP* 129) from Plath's "Colossus" which is projected into a surreal downpour of "red ants" in Sexton's "The Fury of Rain Storms":

The rain drums down like red ants,

each bouncing off my window.

These ants are in great pain

and they cry out as they hit,

as if their little legs were only

stitched on and their heads pasted. (*SCP* 372)

16. While the frantic effort of the ant in Plath's poem is aimed at "mending the immense skull-plates," a re-membering of the Father/Oracle, in Sexton's poem it is the ants which are dismembered, with legs "only/ stitched on and their heads pasted," as though surreal embodiments of a severe paroxysm of psychic disintegration. Similarly, Sexton's depiction of the two poets "drawn to [death] like moths to an electric light bulb" evokes the beginning of Plath's "Ouija" where "those unborn, those undone/ Assemble with the frail paleness of moths,/ An envious phosphorescence in their wings." (*PCP* 77)

17. Such motifs flow one into another and feed upon each other, like fragmented and volatile

embodiments of a single drive. Arguably, it is precisely the porosity between Plath's and Sexton's poems, as well as between biography and poetry, which allows voices and images to "percolate," to seep from one poem into another, and which ultimately functions as the catalyst which magnifies the visions of excess in their common text.

"All-mouth": a language for silence

18. Plath's and Sexton's poetics revolve around an orality which is inherently problematic. In "The Theme of the Three Caskets," Freud discusses the symbolic function of dumbness as a "common representation of death," concluding that it symbolizes "Death itself, the Goddess of Death," and tracing it to the figure of the third of the Fates, Atropos ("the inexorable").[8] For Plath's and Sexton's personae the petrifying inability to speak becomes equivalent to a state of psychic death, making the "I" "dumb as a death's head"[9]. Therefore, poetic utterance is essentially empowering since it hinges on the healing potential of the talking cure, and voicing functions as a possibility of recovering a dead self ("I/ have a self to recover" — *PCP* 215) through a cathartic discharge. On the other hand, this cathartic potential is endlessly complicated, since the sought recovery is never complete and never permanent, and its repetition becomes a form of compulsion. The very polysemy of the word "utterance" is helpful to grasp this phenomenon, since apart from the act of giving vocal expression, it denotes "the uttermost end or extremity," an archaic meaning coming from the Old French *oultrer* – "to carry to excess"[10]. Thus, the act of voicing inevitably becomes an act of transgression. Since Plath's and Sexton's poems hinge on a metonymical relationship between poetic voice, creativity and life, the excesses in their poetics may be tackled through the lens of the dialectic between voice and muteness.

19. An eloquent example of the dramatic tension between voice and dumbness appears in Sexton's "The Silence," where silence opens "Like an enormous baby mouth" (*SCP* 319). Essentially, "The Silence" is a poem about the impotency of language, about poetry's failure to make a powerful utterance:

I am filling the room

8 See S. Freud, "The Theme of the Three Caskets," 295-296.
9 S. Plath, *The Bell Jar*, 19. [*TBJ*]; On the link between compulsive orality and silence in Plath's work, see also S. Axelrod's developments in *Sylvia Plath*, 4.
10 *The Collins English Dictionary*, 1991.

with the words from my pen.

Words leak out like a miscarriage.

I am zinging words out into the air

and they come back like squash balls. (*SCP* 319)

20. Instead of sounding out mightily and flamboyantly like the buzz of the "queen bee" and releasing cathartic energy, the speaker's words "leak out" impotently, "like a miscarriage." Despite the use of the verb "zing" which suggests the buzz of bees, i.e. the liberating potential of the poem, words fall listlessly back down onto the speaker "like squash balls." Just as Esther Greenwood meditates in *The Bell Jar:* "The silence depressed me. It wasn't the silence of silence. It was my own silence." (*TBJ* 18), what the speaker in Sexton's poem is terrified by is her own interior silence, the "enormous baby mouth" of a devouring psychic void:

The silence is death.

It comes each day with its shock

to sit on my shoulder, a white bird,

and peck at the black eyes

and the vibrating red muscle

of my mouth. (*SCP* 319)

21. Indeed, the paroxysms of poetic voice hinge on the double dread of being "blank and stopped as a dead baby" (*TBJ* 237). Sexton's poem "The Death Baby" evokes a tellingly similar image: in an uncanny dream, the speaker is turned into an "ice baby," whose frozen mouth stiffens "into a dumb howl" (*SCP* 354).

22. The mute mouth becomes a pivotal image of both panic and rage, and ultimately assumes an existence of its own, becoming a "Mouthpiece of the dead" (*PCP* 129). It is also the vehicle of an all-consuming appetite, an insatiable desire to taste excess. For instance, in Plath's sequence "Poem for a Birthday," the speaker's utterance "I am all mouth." (*PCP* 131) in the beginning of "Who" is transmogrified into the character of "All-mouth" in "Dark House": "All-mouth licks up the bushes/ And the pots of meat" (*PCP* 132). The "fruit," that is "eaten or rotten" (*PCP* 131) in the beginning of the poem is in fact "a fruit that's death to taste" (*PCP* 118), the forbidden fruit kept in a Biblical

"garden of mouthings" (*PCP* 118), which entices the speaker into the netherworld.

23. While the speaker's mouth often functions as a "wound" (*PCP* 161) or a "cut" (*SCP* 174), the "an enormous baby mouth" (*SCP* 319) of the Other becomes a symbol of the psychic void, of the all-devouring nothingness. It is menacing not only because of its gigantic proportions but because its mute cry is the "O-gape of complete despair" (*PCP* 173). In Sexton's "Suicide Note," the gaping mouth acquires a similarly expressionist dimension:

> And once with
>
> a mouth like a cup,
>
> clay colored or blood colored,
>
> open like the breakwater
>
> for the lost ocean
>
> and open like the noose
>
> for the first head. (*SCP* 157)

24. Far from being the origin of a healing utterance, the gaping mouth is the incarnation of a "dumb howl" (*SCP* 354), an all-devouring hunger for death ("O my hunger! My hunger," *SCP* 157), a "[sucking] on the electric bulb" (*SCP* 158).

25. In Plath's "Tulips," a tension is established between the challenge of the tulips' mouths which open "like the mouth of some great African cat" (*PCP* 160) and the speaker, who wishes to remain numb and dumb. Not only is the speaker "faceless" ("I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself" — *PCP* 160), but she is also deliberately "voiceless": "I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly" (*PCP* 161). To the extremely acute perception of the "I" in this hospital pantomime, the very opening of the flowers' mouths is equivalent to a wild, menacing roar, much in the same way that the very breathing of the "awful baby" (*PCP* 161) is equivalent to a piercing cry which tortures her and "talks to [her] wound" (*PCP* 161). Not only her own but all voices become maddening to the persona, since she has embraced the ultimate silence of death:

> The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
>
> [...]

> It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
>
> Shutting their mouths on it, like a communion tablet. (*PCP* 161)

26. Death as a "shut mouth," "close[d] on" a final muteness, is an image at the same time enticing and terrifying for the speaker, and the tension of the poem is based on the dramatic opposition between the shut mouths of the dead and the gaping mouths of the flowers. Similarly, in Sexton's poem "To Lose the Earth," death is represented as "a mouth hole" (*SCP* 123), a cave where a hideous dwarf "with an enormous misshapen mouth" (*SCP* 125) is playing deadly music with its "instrument" which is "an extension of his tongue" (*SCP* 125). It is interesting to note the androgynous character of the imagery: the dwarf is both a "piper" and a "midwife" (*SCP* 124). Likewise, in Plath's "Poem for a Birthday" death is androgynous, both a "mouth-hole" (*PCP* 136) and a poisonous tongue: "The dead ripen in the grapeleaves. / A red tongue is among us." (*PCP* 133).

27. This dramatic tension between voice and silence is only made possible through the implicit presence of a bell jar. A key characteristic of the bell jar is that it is used to create vacuum, a common laboratory experiment being to place a ringing alarm clock inside it and pump out the air in order to prove that sound cannot travel in the absence of a medium. This is important not only because the absence of oxygen is deadly, turning the persona enclosed in it into a "dead baby," but because a bell jar essentially *stops* sound. Furthermore, since a bell jar resembles a real bell (used to sound out alarm) in everything else but its ability to actually make a sound, lacking a "tongue" (a clapper) it becomes an epitome of mute alarm, an all-devouring mouth of death.

28. Another important characteristic of these "mouth-poems" is manifested in "the linked figures of *mouthing* and *eating*."[11] Whereas *mouthing* is concerned with voicing, with utterance, *eating* is associated with a mouth that is "stuffed," silenced, an effect further amplified through the implicit association with the force-feeding practices of psychiatric hospitals. In Sexton's "To Lose the Earth" the act of dying is viewed as an initiation completed through a similar act of "feeding":

> And you, having heard,
>
> you will never leave.
>
> At the moment of entry
>
> you were fed —

11 S. Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath*, 4.

— and then you knew. (*SCP* 125)

29. The elliptic rendering of the ritual, uncanny initiation recalls the image of death as a "communion tablet" in Plath's "Tulips".

30. Hence, poetic utterance ultimately becomes a form of compulsion, a paroxysmal obsession to both articulate and withstand the void of psychic fragmentation. These "mouth-poems" point toward the fact that the excesses of Plath' and Sexton's poetics revolve around a performance of psychic disorder, an impossible effort to voice "the silence of astounded souls" (*PCP* 190). As Axelrod comments, this all-devouring silence "unmakes what utterance makes, dissolving rather than defining the subjectivity of the author"[12]. The "engine" (*PCP* 215) of this excess is a Sisyphean effort to conjure-up a language for a "great silence of another order" (*PCP* 188), a grotesque pantomime of "black statements," (*PCP* 158) in which "the deaf and dumb/ Signal the blind, and are ignored." (*PCP* 187).

Performing disorder

A social diagnosis

31. While Plath and Sexton's poetics revolves around an acute psychic crisis, the crisis in question far exceeds the dimensions of the personal properly speaking. In order to locate the source of the strikingly similar tendencies to be found in their works, one must pay closer attention to the phenomena which agitated their social milieu. Plath and Sexton both underwent their formative years during the 1950's, which represented Cold War America at its worst. The proliferating figures of disorder within their poems have been seen by various scholars as a response to the repressive normalcy and the roles attributed to women in the stifling domesticity advocated by 1950's American culture.

32. Plath's semi-autobiographic novel *The Bell Jar* proves an especially apt lens through which to approach this phenomenon. While this study is less concerned with Plath's novel as a work in its own right, it is impossible to overlook the importance of the bell jar as a meta-device, a magnifying glass allowing "certain key insights not vouchsafed to the 'normal' point of view."[13] In the novel, even as it documents Esther's descent into psychic disintegration, it enables her to pinpoint with

12 S. Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath*, 20.
13 C. Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, 17.

devastating precision the twisted dimension of the reality around her, providing the most caustic picture of the Cold War reactionary climate of middle-class domesticity to be found in American literature. Individual illness in the novel clearly functions as a reflection of the disease of a culture.

33. Crucially, the novel begins with an allusion to the electrocution of the Rosenbergs, and as the storyline unravels a series of uncanny parallels is established between their execution on the electric chair for supposed collaboration with the Soviet Union, and the shock treatment Esther is forced to undergo at the psychiatric hospital after her nervous breakdown. Throughout the novel, as she sinks into depression, Esther gradually comes to understand herself as an Other, making devastating comments on all the characters in the book, and most importantly, rejecting female role model after role model, and seeing as equally terrifying the "sex women" like Doreen, the fatuous "career women" like Jay Cee and, most of all, the suburban housewives, whom she sarcastically dubs "the mother women": "maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterward you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state" (*TBJ* 94).

34. Esther's awakening to the utter vacuity of the world around her, from the inane glamour of Mademoiselle Magazine to the slumbering suburbia of her home, is underscored in the telling scene where she imagines her future as a fig tree:

> I saw my life branching out before me like the green fig tree in the story. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful future beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and a happy home and children, and another fig was a famous poet and another fig was a brilliant professor, and another fig was Ee Gee, the amazing editor […] I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. […] as I sat there, unable to decide, the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and, one by one, they plopped to the ground at my feet. (*TBJ* 77)

35. All the different visions of the future Esther comes up with read much like an advertisement of the American dream ("a wonderful future beckoned and winked," "happy home and children," "famous poet," "brilliant professor," etc.). The above lines read like a paradoxical social diagnosis: in a society which advocates success and happiness at any cost, consumerism and sheepish complacency, paradoxically the only sensible reaction can be a feeling of profound disturbance or even nausea.

36. For Sexton the problem was even more acute, since she lacked Plath's precocious talent, elite

education and determination to become a writer. She relates in an interview:

> 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 was trying my damnedest 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. (*NES* 84)

37. It is certainly telling that Sexton suffered a mental breakdown and started writing poetry only after having led a somewhat erratic life, worked as a model, given birth to two children and, despite her striking physical appearance, having come dangerously close to staying a "mother-woman" for the rest of her life. The paradox is that the imagery of acute frustration and inadequacy used by the under-achiever Sexton and the over-achiever Plath essentially point toward the same source: social pressure to lead "a conventional life" which is ultimately equal to being "brainwashed" (*TBJ* 94) and imprisoned within a "private, totalitarian state" (*TBJ* 94).

38. In Sexton's caustic critique of the oppressive vision of middle-class domesticity, America emerges as "the country of comfort,/ spanked into the oxygens of death." (*SCP* 392) The nauseating consumerism makes an uncanny reappearance in her poetry, transmogrified into a Gothic scene:

> We are America.
>
> We are the coffin fillers.
>
> We are the grocers of death.
>
> We pack them in crates like cauliflowers. (*SCP* 308)

39. Elisabeth Bronfen links the exhibitionist self-display of Confessional poetry to the histrionic nature of the hysteric condition, arguing that both can essentially be understood as enacting "the return of what has to be dislocated or excluded for the construction of the American, middle class, bourgeois housewife to take place and to hold". She sees Sexton's deliberately shocking self-representations as a "desperate somatic parody of what was expected of the suburban wife and mother at the time: the vacuous smile, perfect poise, and total submission to the bourgeois myth of domestic bliss."[14]

14 E. Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject*, 300-1.

40. Indeed, pathology such as it exists in the textual universe of Plath's and Sexton's works is both real and performative: the imaginary obstacle of the bell jar, a symbol of the haunting inability to transcend the social constructs, could only be transgressed by its adoption as a main poetic device, by transforming diagnosis into a spectacle. The histrionic and often grotesque self-display staged by Confessional poetry can essentially be understood as enacting a return of the repressed, a psychotic response to the stifling postwar bourgeois notions of femininity. In this sense, Plath's and Sexton's excessive poetics hinge on the need to articulate what is wrong with female subjectivity through series of disturbing self-representations.

"The Freak Show"[15]: madness as a spectacle

41. The title of Sexton's first collection of poetry, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*, explicitly situates the poems in the locus of the psychiatric ward. Bedlam, a popular name for Bethlem Royal Hospital, a once notorious psychiatric institution, was famous for the so-called "show of Bethlehem": as Michel Foucault relates, as late as 1815 the general public were admitted into the asylum for a penny and allowed to peep into the cells of the lunatics, who were treated more or less as circus freaks.[16] Through this sarcastic allusion to the penny show of Bedlam, Sexton telescopes an entire history of insanity. In Sexton's poetic universe the proliferating representations of mental disorder emerge as a pure spectacle, a "freak show" in which the lyrical "I" functions ambivalently as both a freak and a visionary — a grotesque revenant who inhabits the liminal space "part way" between sanity and madness, and between life and death. On the other hand, an important phonetic association appears in "Ringing the Bells" which superimposes Sexton's "Bedlam" with Plath's "bell jar":

> And this is the way they ring
>
> the bells in Bedlam
>
> and this is the bell-lady
>
> who comes each Tuesday morning
>
> to give us a music lesson
>
> [...]

15 See Sexton's article "The Freak Show" in *No Evil Star*, 33-38.
16 See M. Foucault, *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, 161.

like bees caught in the wrong hive,

we are the circle of the crazy ladies

who sit in the lounge of the mental house

and smile at the smiling woman (*SCP* 28)

42. Through the paronomastic link between "Bedlam," "bells" and "Belsize" (the name of the ward where Esther is confined in Plath's novel), Sexton's "Bedlam" and Plath's "bell jar" emerge as interchangeable spaces. This analogy is further reinforced by the fact that Plath ostensibly echoes Sexton's "smile at the smiling woman" in "Lady Lazarus": "And I a smiling woman." (*PCP* 244) The personae enclosed within these spaces are understood to be under minute observation, guinea pigs in a twisted scientific experiment, but also a voyeuristic spectacle in which lunacy becomes a "show," and the death drive is parodically redefined as a "strange theater," as in Sexton's "Letters to Doctor Y.":

The leaves tell you to die? you ask.

Yes.

A strange theater. (*SCP* 577, her italics)

43. In "Talking to Sheep," Sexton touches on the problematic core of the psychological exhibitionism in which the public exposure of intimate trauma ultimately becomes a "compulsion":

My life

has appeared unclothed in court,

detail by detail,

death-bone witness by death-bone witness,

and I was shamed at the verdict

and given a cut penny

and the entrails of a cat.

But nevertheless I went on

to the invisible priests,

confessing, confessing

through the wire of hell

and they wet upon me in that phone booth.

Then I accosted winos,

the derelicts of the region,

winning them over into the latrine of my details.

Yes. It was a compulsion

but I denied it, called it fiction

and then the populace screamed *Me too, Me too*

and I swallowed it like my fate. (*SCP* 484)

44. While the fact that the persona is "given a cut penny" for "the latrine of [her] details" alludes once again to the "penny show" of Bedlam, the derogatory designations of the audience of this deliberately disturbing spectacle ("sheep," "populace") evoke the "peanut-crunching crowd" (*PCP* 245) for which Lady Lazarus's "Big Strip Tease" is performed. While the poem explicitly provides the link between confession and its endless complication resulting in a repetition compulsion ("Yes, it was a compulsion/ but I denied it, called it fiction"), this compulsion is less a repetition compulsion in the Freudian sense than a paralyzing lack of alternative vision. As is posited in the paronomastic relationship between "I *went on*"/ "They *wet upon* me," the persona is trapped within a repressive apparatus, which is essentially the apparatus of "institutional psychiatry, a technology for the 'cure' of psychic disorder"[17], yet may assume a variety of surreal forms: from a Kafkaesque "court" to a lascivious "booth," which deliberately conflates the box of Christian confession with the "phone booth" of phone sex, thus equating the exposure of intimate trauma to a form of prostitution. Through the thick glass of the bell jar, madness emerges as a highly eroticized spectacle, performed both in front of the "invisible priests," i.e. the psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, and for the "peanut-crunching crowd," in an uncanny hospital reality-show. This inextricable mix of theatricality and pathology has prompted several scholars to speculate on the

17 C. Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, 150.

possible analogy between Sexton's proliferating disturbing self-representations and Charcot's public experiments with female hysterics at the Salpêtrière hospital[18], an analogy reinforced by Didi-Huberman's comment on the common etymology of "cure" and "curiosity"[19], which becomes the vehicle of the slippage in which female enactments of mental disorder are performed "in an excessive foreground."[20]

"That Bawdy Queen of Death"[21]: from Ms. Dog to Lady Lazarus

45. While Plath and Sexton adopt similar poetic strategies, working through a disturbingly direct and personal voice to explore the unstable boundaries poet/persona, their voices retain their idiosyncrasies, echoing each other without ever becoming completely analogous. While Sexton has a marked preference for quirky, scatological and grotesque imagery, Plath's personae assume an Erynies-like vehemence. These two extremes create a gamut of representations of femininity in crisis, oscillating between caustic mockery and rapture, parody and tragedy. Maintaining a mode of disturbing equivocality, such poetry operates through the supreme artifice of volatile theatrical incarnations, stripping one and assuming another with a seemingly effortless and derisive wizardry. In this hyperspace of self-representation, the entire theatrical spectrum is explored, from the ribald, burlesque mockery of Sexton's "Ms. Dog" to the Gothic vehemence of Plath's "Lady Lazarus," yet these protean projections of disturbed femininity may all be seen as embodiments of the "queen bee" of poetic license.

46. "Ms. Dog" was a favorite *nom de plume* of Sexton's[22], an impudent self-designation which hinges on the fact that "Dog" is a palindrome for "God". In "Hurry Up Please It's Time," Ms. Dog becomes the vehicle of Sexton's use of scatology and obscenity to flout convention, taking self-exhibitionism to a grotesque extreme:

> What is death, I ask.
>
> What is life, you ask.
>
> I give them both my buttocks,
>
> my two wheels rolling towards Nirvana.

18 See for instance E. Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject*, 298.
19 G. Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie*, 47.
20 G. Didi-Huberman, *Invention de l'hystérie*: "un excessif premier plan," 182 (translation mine).
21 *PCP*, 77.
22 See A. Sexton, *The Complete Poems*, xxx.

They are as neat as a wallet,

opening and closing on their coins,

the quarters, the nickels,

straight into the crapper.

Why shouldn't I pull down my pants

and moon at the executioner

as well as paste raisins on my breasts? (*SCP* 385)

47. While the allusion to the act of "[pasting] raisins" on one's breasts alludes to the nipple pasties worn by burlesque dancers, thus situating the poem in the burlesque, a kind of cheap variety show including ribald comedy and strip tease, the poem's aggressive scatological imagery works toward a deliberate "bad performance" (*SCP* 441) which aims to shock and dazzle, to provoke a hiss of displeasure from the audience ("Many boos. Many boos" — *SCP* 441). Yet, as evidenced by the buttocks-wallet image, the poem explicitly posits a thoroughgoing link between the shocking scatology of Ms. Dog and the American culture of consumption:

Good morning life, we say when we wake,

hail mary coffee toast

and we Americans take juice

[...]

Good morning life.

To wake up is to be born.

To brush your teeth is to be alive.

To make a bowel movement is also desirable.

La de dah,

it's all routine. (*SCP* 394)

48. Yet, the ribald dance of Ms. Dog acquires its full meaning only when confronted with one of Plath's most memorable personae, Lady Lazarus. Whereas Ms. Dog is deliberately vulgar, situating

herself in low culture, Lady Lazarus is ostensibly situated at the other end of the theatrical scale, a "pastiche of the numerous deathly or demonic women of poetic tradition."[23] Sarcastically revisiting Poe's maxim from "The Philosophy of Composition" that the death of a beautiful woman is the most poetic subject in the world, the persona presents the audience with a highly eroticized spectacle of decomposition ("pick the worms off me like sticky pearls" — *PCP* 245). The male eye for which Lady Lazarus performs her highly disturbing strip tease, the "Herr Doktor," "Herr God," "Herr Lucifer" may be seen as another embodiment of "the same brute" (*PCP* 246), the omnipresent doctor/confessor who ultimately becomes an "executioner." All these male figures of authority and control over disturbed femininity could be understood as representations of patriarchal culture, the "Father" that such poetry revolts against, as the highly sarcastic refrain "Forgive us, Father, for we know not." (*SCP* 385) suggests. This explains Ms. Dog's desire to appropriate masculinity, to acquire a phallic force:

> I wee-wee like a squaw.
>
> I have ink but no pen, still
>
> I dream that I can piss in God's eye
>
> I dream I'm a boy with a zipper. (*SCP* 385)

49. The use of the term "squaw," offensive slang for "woman" or "wife"[24] suggests Sexton's need to radically break with images of middle-class domesticity, to shed her femininity, appropriating God's power through her palindromic reinvention as a "Dog," or a "boy with a zipper," so that she can "piss in God's eye," which is an equivalent of the "bee sting" (*SCP* 387) of phallic female poetry.

50. Similarly, through the emphatic repetition of "there is a charge," the electrifying strip tease of Lady Lazarus quickly assumes the dimensions of shock treatment:

> *There is a charge*
>
> For the eyeing of my scars, *there is a charge*,

23 C. Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, 154.
24 *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 2009.

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. (*PCP* 246, my emphasis)

51. The abundance of aggressive internal rhymes ("grave cave," "large charge," "turn and burn," etc.) and the repeated mirror effect between "I" and "die" only serve to magnify the charge, electrifying the audience. Yet the twofold meaning of "charge," not only an electric jolt and but also a fee, parodically includes "Lady Lazarus" in the "penny show" of Bedlam. "Lady Lazarus" seeks to turn her art of dying into a deliberate "bad performance," something different in register but akin in "charge" to the "latrine of my details" (*SCP* 484) displayed by the bawdy Ms. Dog, as suggested by the lines "The peanut-crunching crowd/ Shoves in to see/ Them unwrap me hand and foot." (*PCP* 245)

"Fever 103°"

52. Regardless of their register, and in spite of their often overtly parodic overtones, all of these self-representations feed on a kind of "erethism of images."[25] Sexton's "The Ambition Bird" provides an image which is emblematic of the febrile hyper-temporality this poetic mode works toward:

insomnia at 3:15 A.M.,

the clock tolling its engine

25 C. Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, 11.

like a frog following

a sundial yet having an electric

seizure at the quarter hour.

The business of words keeps me awake. (*SCP* 299)

53. The precision of "3:15 A.M.," like the "4.48" in Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis*, signals the onset of fever, unleashing the delirious visions of the speaker[26]. The extremely jagged rhythm of the poem and the incongruity between the formal line breaks: "like a frog following/ a sundial yet having an electric/ seizure at the quarter hour" and the logical breaks: "like a frog following a sundial/ yet having an electric seizure/ at the quarter hour" give the impression of an epileptic fit, an effect amplified by the Gothic grotesquerie of the frog's "electric/ seizure," alluding to the galvanic electric experiments with the bodies of dead frogs. The speaker is encapsulated in an enormous "clock tolling its engine," another transformation of the ubiquitous bell jar, which is here both a "coffin" and an "immortality box," turning the topos of the female biological clock into a grotesque vision of poetic fertility: "all night I am laying/ poems away in a long box." (*SCP* 299). This image echoes both "the engine that killed her/ The mausoleum, the wax house," (*PCP* 215) from Plath's "The Arrival of the Bee Box," and "I do not want a plain box, I want a sarcophagus." (*PCP* 172) from "Last Words".

54. These haunting echoes highlight the parabola of Plath's and Sexton's common text, which culminates in a grand gesture of self-execution, where death paradoxically completes the recovery of the self ("I/ have a [dead] self to recover," *PCP* 215), enclosing the dead persona in a "sarcophagus," which is also the poem itself. Both Sexton's "The Starry Night" and the end of Plath's "A Birthday Present" revolve around such a ritual cutting of the umbilical cord. Sexton's image of shedding the self to become one with the void echoes the image which appears at the end of Plath's "A Birthday Present," "And the knife nor carve, but enter/ [...] And the universe slide from my side" (*PCP* 208):

Oh starry starry night! This is how

I want to die:

26 A similar temporal reference appears in a discarded draft of Plath's "Fever 103°": "Four o'clock, and the fever soaks from me like honey" (*PCP* 294).

into that rushing beast of the night,

sucked up by that great dragon, to split

from my life with no flag,

no belly,

no cry. (*SCP* 54)

55. The convulsion-like assonance in Sexton's "I," "die," "cry" and Plath's "cry," "slide," and "side" textually enacts the moment of laceration which Bataille describes in "Sacrifices" as a paradoxical reaching for transcendence in death: "it is only at the boundary of death that laceration, which constitutes the very nature of the immensely free *me,* transcending 'that which exists,' is revealed with violence. [...] The *me* accedes to its [...] integral transcendence only in the form of the '*me* that dies'."[27] The act of self-execution becomes a way to access a vision of the sacred, an auto-mythology: "The body of this woman,/ Charred skirts and deathmask/ Mourned by religious figures, by garlanded children" (*PCP* 249). Thus, death emerges as a state of perfection, the ultimate "accomplishment" (*PCP* 272) sealed in a glass sarcophagus, the final avatar of the bell jar.

56. Yet, most eloquent are the poems which explore the culmination of this suicidal drive as an act of self-immolation. While Plath's use of "charred skirts" in "Getting There" already evokes fire imagery, other poems take the image of the internal furnace to an extreme. The gesture of self-immolation which is parodically explored as a trick in Plath's "Lady Lazarus" ("Ash, ash —/ You poke and stir./ Flesh, bone, there is nothing there" — *PCP* 246) is revisited in Sexton's poem "The Death King". The poem hinges on the idea that "Death will be the end of fear/ and the fear of dying (*SCP* 587)". Thus, the frantic repetition of "fear" in ten consecutive lines ("fear like dung stuffed up my nose," "fear as my breast flies into the Disposall," "fear as flies tremble in my ear," etc.) becomes performative, reaching an ignition point in the final stanza:

Fear and a coffin to lie in

like a dead potato.

27 G. Bataille, *Sacrifices*, *Œuvres complètes, I*, 91-92: "c'est seulement à la limite de la mort que se révèle avec violence le déchirement qui constitue la nature même du *moi* immensément et transcendant 'ce qui existe'[...] Le *moi* n'accède à sa spécificité et sa transcendance intégrale que sous la forme du '*moi* qui meurt'" (translation A. Stoekl, *Visions of Excess*, 132).

Even then I will dance in my fire clothes

a crematory flight,

blinding my hair and my fingers,

wounding God with his blue face,

his tyranny, his absolute kingdom,

with my aphrodisiac. (*SCP* 587)

57. The movement from "fear" to "fire" and "flight," reinforced by the alliterative link on the sound "f," sparks off the irresistible craving of the persona to "light a kitchen match/ and immolate [herself]" (*SCP* 300). Sexton's vision of death as an "aphrodisiac" echoes the "aphrodisiacs" of Plath's "rotten queen" (*PCP* 77) in "Ouija," just as the act of "wounding God's [...] absolute kingdom" recalls Plath's "to conquer cinder kingdom in the stroke of an hour" (*PCP* 45). Thus, Sexton's "Death King" emerges as the final incarnation of the ubiquitous doctor/ interrogator/ executioner, the "Herr God," "Herr Lucifer" of "Lady Lazarus," but also a figure much larger than that, a personification of the all-consuming mouth of death, sarcastically dubbed the "Disposall".

58. The act of self-immolation assumes the dimensions of an erotic fantasy, of a *Liebestod* in which "life and void are [...] mingled like lovers, in the convulsive movements of the end."[28] The all-devouring flame becomes a phallic "red tongue," a figure magnified through its endless reappearance: from Plath's "A red tongue is among us" to Sexton's sequence "O Ye Tongues," to "the tongues of hell" of Plath's "Fever 103°". Plath's "Fever 103º" serves metaphorically as the climax of the "fever chart" of this poetic mode, since 103° Fahrenheit refers to the point when fever becomes life-threatening, and thus, fusing the medical and metaphoric associations of this pyretic drive, it provides the point of ignition, the passing from "fever" to "fire" and implicitly conflating "pure" ("Pure? What does it mean?") and "pyre":

I am a lantern—

My head a moon

Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin

Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

28 G. Bataille, *Œuvres complètes : I*, 93: "Vie et vide [...] se mêlent comme des amants, dans les mouvements convulsifs de la fin." (Translation A. Stoekl, *Visions of Excess*, 133).

> Does not my heat astound you. And my light. (*PCP* 232)

59. The lyric subject is defined as a texture "infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive" ("my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade," "My face a featureless, fine/ Jew linen," *PCP* 244). This lavish expenditure of the lyric subject in death proves to be the ultimate outrage, which becomes all the more disturbing as the "furnace" of this self-immolation is both the kitchen oven and the gas chambers of the Holocaust, as in Plath's "Mary's Song" ("The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat./ [...] The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent,/ […] This holocaust I walk in," *PCP* 257). Yet, paradoxically this problematic transgression becomes the only way to transcend the confines of the domestic and reach a vision of the Beyond.

Double death, or suicide as the opposite of the poem

> "Suicide is, after all, the opposite of the poem. Sylvia and I often talked opposites."[29]

60. In a poetry which hinges on an endless reenactment of suicide scenarios ("Indeterminate criminal,/ I die with variety—/ Hung, starved, burned, hooked," *PCP* 227), Sexton's enigmatic vision of suicide as the *opposite* of the poem calls for further inquiry. In "The Strange Project, or Double Death," Maurice Blanchot remarks that in the "strange project" of suicide:

> death is somehow doubled: there is one death which circulates in the language of possibility, of liberty, which has for its furthest horizon the freedom to die [...] and there is its double, which is ungraspable. [...] To kill oneself is to mistake one death for the other; it is a sort of bizarre play on words.[30]

61. What Blanchot calls the "bizarre play on words" created by suicide, the trickery in which, by embracing Death, one in fact embraces its Other, perhaps explains the need to make a distinction between suicide as an irrevocable act, and suicide as a unifying core of the poetry, as *ars poetica,*

29 A. Sexton, "The Bar Fly Ought to Sing," *NES*, 7.

30 M. Blanchot, "L'Étrange projet ou la double mort," *L'Espace littéraire*, 104: "Cela revient à penser qu'il y a comme une double mort, dont l'une circule dans les mots de possibilité, de liberté, qui a comme extrême horizon la liberté de mourir [...] — et dont l'autre est l'insaisissable. [...] Se tuer, c'est prendre une mort pour l'autre, c'est une sorte de bizarre jeu de mots." (Translation A. Smock, *The Space of Literature*, 103-104).

which is essentially *reversible* as evidenced by the phoenix figure of "Lady Lazarus". The engine of Plath's and Sexton's theater of excess is located in the very ambiguity between suicide as an irrevocable act and suicide as a textual performance, where visions are magnified in the liberating poetic "language of possibility". In poetic space, what Blanchot describes as a "strange project" becomes a series of excessive *projections* of the self, in which the shared language of suicides emerges as an enticing "horizon of freedom," or even a kind of siren song:

> *And these death girls sing to you?* you ask.
>
> Yes.
>
> *And does it excite you?* you ask.
>
> Yes. (*SCP* 577, her italics)

62. In the asymptotic relation between actual death, which remains forever enigmatic, and the series of delirious projections of the "*moi* qui meurt" in poetic space, emerges the "sisterhood" (*SCP* 577) of the two poets. Since Sexton outlived Plath by a number of years, it is only logical that her poetry should make the terms of this sisterhood both more explicit and more pressing, and that in her poems should unravel the problematic bond between poetry and suicide, in which that "bizarre play on words" becomes a form of haunting.

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