Plath and Desire

by Stephen Gould Axelrod

Sensual drift, which pervades midcentury American poetry, appears in a particularly anxiety-ridden form in the work of Sylvia Plath. In an era Alan Nadel has labeled "containment culture" and Tom Engelhardt has called "an American culture of victory" (Nadel 2; Engelhardt 4), Plath's writing gnaws away at the containment structures, the "gender rigidity" (Rippon 206), and the triumphalism of normative sexual and gendered performance. Through its complicated subversions and "breakthroughs" (Orr 167), Plath's poetry and prose expose the resistances embedded within the very boundaries and binaries shaping Cold War epistemics.

Plath produced an especially conflicted set of rebellions against the gendered and sexual norms of official midcentury culture. She furiously critiqued the containments of female expression imposed by male supremacist ideology. She felt that the concept of "maleness" facilitated men's "conservation of creative power" (*Journals* 437). She railed in her prose and poems against the "big conquering boys" and "jealous gods" who made the rules (*Journals* 199; *Poems* 179). In her novel *The Bell Jar*, her protagonist Esther Greenwood says she hates "the thought of being under a man's thumb," and she wonders, "Why was I so unmaternal and apart?" (*Bell Jar* 221, 222). In Plath's later poems, the female speakers repeatedly satirize or vituperate senior male figures such as "Daddy," "The Jailer," and "Herr God, Herr Lucifer" (*Poems* 222, 226, 246).

Nevertheless, Plath came to self-awareness within the standardized male-female binary system, and she had difficulty extricating herself from its valorization of maleness and its fixed, inflated sense of biological difference. That gender system conventionally evoked a parallel but distinct senior-junior binary, which privileged seniority. She seemed unable to escape both of those constructs, no matter how hard she tried. She over-identified with power of masculinist seniority, causing her speakers either to obey, to assail, or to emulate male authority. Often they do a strange combination of all of those strategies at once.

In a related way, Plath's narrators attempt to reflect their sensual drift but often fail to find a way to do so. Her texts protest sexual rigidity while on the way to reinforcing it as inevitable or even, at times, preferable. For example, in her *Journals*, Plath recalls asking her psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, "What does a woman see in another woman that she doesn't see in a man: tenderness?" (460). Perhaps not coincidentally, on the same page she also wrote: "Glimmer last night of pleasure, which slipped away" (*Journals* 460). Plath replicates this exchange in *The Bell Jar*, when Esther Greenwood asks her psychiatrist, Dr. Nolan, "What does a woman see in a woman that she can't see in a man?" (*Bell Jar* 219). The psychiatrist replies, "tenderness." Esther comments, "That shut me up" (219) Yet Esther, like Plath herself, chooses to enter a heterosexual marriage in which

gender roles were pre-assigned and the female mother role inevitable.

This contradictory yearning for and rejection of a non-normative sexual identity recurs in Plath's writing, as when she praises Elizabeth Bishop for being "surprising, never rigid" and yet marginalizes her as "lesbian & fanciful & jeweled" (*Journals* 516, 322). This ambivalence also appears in *The Bell Jar*, in which the unhappily heterosexual Esther is mirrored by her lesbian double, Joan Gilling. Esther admits to being "fascinated" by Joan (219). She says that Joan's "thoughts were not my thoughts, nor her feelings my feelings, but we were close enough so that her thoughts and feelings seemed a wry, black image of my own" (*Bell Jar* 219). Esther's approach-avoidance toward her double is intense. When Joan says, "I like you," Esther replies "I don't like you. You make me puke if you want to know" (220). But soon she thinks, "I would always treasure Joan. It was as if we had been forced together by some overwhelming circumstance, like war or plague, and shared a world of our own" (225). Toward the end of the novel, Plath kills Joan off just when she initiates Esther into the physical pain and emotional blankness she associated with heterosexual intercourse. At Joan's funeral, Esther asks herself "what I thought I was burying" (198). Implicitly, it is a side of herself that she is attempted to inter: the "wry, black image" of lesbian desire, which she here associates with Joan's suicide, providing an interesting sidelight on the enigma of Plath's own suicide. Esther will not absorb and make familiar the currents of her sexual identity that are variant to her other sexual currents or to her illusion of heterosexual wholeness. Instead she expels and buries her sexual otherness, her complicated multiplicity, her wry black image, her queerness.

We see a similar conflict embedded in Plath's poem "Medusa." Suzanne Juhasz argues in *A Desire for Women* that the "preoedipal relationship with the mother" is the originary power behind all desire, and particularly lesbian desire (Juhasz 11, 15-22). But Plath asked herself, "What do you do with your hate for your mother and all mother figures? (*Journals* 435). Plath's textual "I" figures her mother as a medusa—at once a Gorgon monster of classical myth and a small jellyfish whose full name, "medusa aurelia," contains the name of Plath's mother, Aurelia. The poem treats its central vaginal image as an object of repulsion—a negation that suggests the repressed presence of desire. The poem ends ambiguously:

> Off, off, eely tentacle!
> There is nothing between
> us. (*Poems* 226)

In these concluding lines, we note first a wish for separation—a declaration that mother and daughter have nothing in common ("*nothing* between us"). But coiled within that manifest assertion hides its negated but enduring opposite—a fear or hope that there is actually no difference between mother and daughter ("nothing *between* us"). Instead of not touching at all, they touch at all locations; they permeate each other. Or to adopt Freud's insight in his essay "Negation" (235), the speaker's negative assertion of having "nothing" in common with her mother masks the initial suspicion bubbling up to consciousness that they have *everything* in common.

In the poem "Lesbos," similarly, a fantasy of same-sex intimacy arises from unconscious desire, and is then transformed by a censorious consciousness into an impassioned denunciation of the female acquaintance or rival with whom she experiences a transitory closeness (*Poems* 227). The speaker's visit with the other woman is flooded with an erotic desire that is ambiguously ascribed either to the other woman or to the speaker herself, or to both as a shared fantasy:

> I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and

comb my hair.
I should wear tiger pants, I should
have an affair.
We should meet in another life, we
should meet in air. (228)

Yet the speaker explicitly rejects this fantasy in the poem's conclusion: "Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet" (230). The disgust here and throughout the poem may be understood as a "reaction formation" (Freud, "Three Essays" 178, 232, 238-39)—that is, as a defense against a feared or unacceptable impulse, the nature of which is suggested by the poem's title. One could plausibly view that title as simply ironic, but given the complexity of Plath's writing about desire, I think it is even more plausible to regard it as ambivalent. One of Plath's ways to consider a possibility was to denounce it. The female acquaintance may be a desired but repellant other, but she could also be yet another "wry, black image" of the speaker herself (*J* 179). As an object of identification, she articulates, among other things, the antagonism toward children that Plath's speakers often feel but have difficulty admitting. Yet the antagonism stubbornly refuses to remain underground, appearing for example in the final lines of the poem "Metaphors" (where pregnancy is compared to eating a bag of green apples) and in Esther Greenwood's offhand comment in *The Bell Jar* that she would "go mad" if she had to care for a baby all day (*Poems* 116; *Bell Jar* 222).

The effort at the very end of "Lesbos" to secure heteronormative identity and autonomy at any price, to immobilize a fantasy of sensual drift, can thus be seen as a frightened reaction against the always already-present otherness within the self as well as a rejection of an otherness that is external. Plath's speaker rejects her own sexual difference, attempting instead to adhere to the regulatory system that Adrienne Rich—Plath's closest "rival" (Unabridged Journals 360) and wry counter-image—was later to call "compulsory heterosexuality." (Rich 23). Yet Plath's enticing title, "Lesbos," strains against the text's exaggerated disgust, suggesting an anxious, ambiguous set of split affinities. At this early moment in what might have been a long career but wasn't, her speaker tilts momentously both toward and away from same-sex desire and queer identity.

We can see the Plathian clash of opposites repeated in many of her most famous poems, for example, "Daddy." The speaker here directs a torrent of ridicule, fury, and yearning toward the father—and implicitly toward all patriarchs, who are teasingly unapproachable and omnipresent at the same time. She starkly distinguishes genders from each other as she stages a confrontation between male power and female victimization. The only way for drift to occur in the Manichean epistemics of "Daddy" is for positions simply to reverse, which is just what happens in the poem's final apostrophe to the father:

There's a stake in your fat
black heart
And the villagers never like
you.
They are dancing and
stamping on you.
They always *knew* it was
you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard,
I'm through. (*Poems* 224)

The father figure lies back in a supine, stereotypically feminized posture, while the villagers—the speaker's surrogates—trample him to death. A poem about male cruelty ends with the female voice momentarily, fantastically assuming the guise of male sadism. The result is neither peace nor pleasure but some kind of ambiguous apocalypse: "I'm through." Is the speaker through with anger, through with fathers, through with male impersonation, through with this poem, or through with life?

The only way Plath could fully imagine the identity drift she sought yet feared was to displace the male-female agon entirely. In "Three Women," the text occupies female space, drifting among the sounds of three women's voices, each echoing the others yet distinct. Each speaker is a young, pregnant woman about to undergo childbirth, a miscarriage, or an abortion. In what Foucault might call the "heterotopic" space of the hospital (Foucault 5), and in what I would call the heterotropic space of discourse, two of the women ultimately accept the viability of psychic and sexual mobility, while the third sinks, perhaps irretrievably, into the stasis of loss and melancholy.

The first reinvigorated woman has a son, who she prays will "marry what he wants and where he will" (*Poems* 186). This verse, which marks a transformation of this speaker's earlier social conformity, carries with it a queer aura, congruent with Ginsberg's asserted desire for a "man / or woman, I don't care what any more" ("Message," *Collected Poems* 191). Plath's gender-fluid formulation actually goes beyond the man/woman binary still present in Ginsberg's assertion. The second reinvigorated woman, who has suffered a miscarriage and is arguably the hero of the poem, expresses her sense of recovery through a figure of dynamic change: "The little grasses / Crack through stone, and they are green with life" (*Poems* 187). Plath here has surmounted her usual affirmation of progeny production and her recurrent association of childlessness with death, as in "Barren Women" and "Childless Woman" (*Poems* 157, 259). She has provided instead an image of an autonomous woman, with a companionate husband who does not define her. This woman finds childlessness to be a zone of growth, "healing," and self-acceptance.

Plath's ambiguous attachment to the heteronormative gender paradigm usually exposed a countervailing impulse toward queerness which, though hidden, was eager to make its presence known. The restless sexual and gendered identifications in her work opened a space for a similarly complicated poetics. Her confessional "I" spoke from personal emotions and memories in a way that troubled Eliot's clear-cut distinction between "the man who suffers and the mind which creates" ("Tradition" 41). The poem now retained, even flaunted, the marks of its precipitating passions and became enmeshed with the practices of everyday life, suspended somewhere between the refreshment of art through radical innovation and the de-idealization of art through an obliteration of its borders. Plath's often anguished and uncertain queering of the subject carried with it a challenge to the poetic traditions of an earlier era.

Moreover, in subverting gendered and sexual norms, she undermined what Kaja Silverman calls the "dominant fiction" of her age. As Silverman tells us, "the dominant fiction not only offers the representational system by means of which the subject typically assumes a sexual identity, and takes on the desires commensurate with that identity, but forms the stable core around which a nation's and a period's 'reality' coheres" (41). Thus, Sylvia Plath's contestations of sexual identity ultimately challenged not only her self-understanding and her poetic inheritance but also her social reality, and ours.

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