

Endangered Subjects: The First-person Narrator in Sylvia Plath's Hospital Poems "Waking in Winter," "Tulips," and "Three Women"

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Sylvia Plath's departure in her poems' subject matter from what she called "the old lyric sentimental stuff" is nowhere more obvious than in her hospital poems (*J293*). In "Waking in Winter" (1960), "Tulips" (1961), and "Three Women" (1962) in particular, the confluence of self and environment, or self and nature, is reflected as a crisis of subjecthood. The poems demonstrate an uncanny consequence of an encounter with what Ralph Waldo Emerson phrased as "the currents of Universal Being" that "circulate" through the beholder's "transparent eye-ball" ("Nature" 10). When, for Emerson, "the individual feels himself invaded" by "an influx," the oracular, perceiving self becomes part of an integrating dynamic of "joyful perception" between the self and the world ("The Over-Soul" 392). Plath's early *Ariel* poems and her hospital poems in particular explore this romantic ambition.

In the three poems I will discuss, it is in moments of attempted integration with the subject's surroundings that Plath's narrators feel "...the inexorable reality of the outer world," a phrase in the introduction to her copy of *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*¹ which Plath underlined with an asterisk in the margin (Freud 12). This dynamic, I believe, shares with Emerson an ambition for the possibilities of "metamorphosis" ("The Poet" 456). It is a word which occurs repeatedly in Emerson's essay, "The Poet." But in Plath's modern 1950s world, the transformative powers of Emerson's poet are menaced and fragmented as they undergo transformations, or, more literally, morph according to their physical encounters with the world.

The speaker in "Tulips" (titled "Sickroom Tulips" in a first draft²) notes, "They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff/Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut./Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in." (*CP160*). The Emersonian promise of a

¹ SP's copy of *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud* is part of the Sylvia Plath Collection, held in the Rare Book Room, Neilson Library Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.

²Almost all the drafts of SP's poems, including the *Ariel* poems, are held in the Sylvia Plath Collection of the Rare Book Room, Neilson Library Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts. The original drafts of "Tulips," a rare exception to this, are held at the Houghton Library, Harvard University. I warmly thank Karen V. Kukil, Associate Curator of Special Collections, who made this material available for my research.

transcendent "act of seeing," which maintains that "the thing seen, the seer and the spectacle, the subject, and the object are one," here become threatening to "the seer" who, in "Tulips," cannot stop herself from taking "everything in" ("The Over-Soul" 386). What amounts to a sensory, often surreal, experience of the speaker's surroundings also evokes the collapsed borders between the distancing function of sight and the physical world experienced through bodily sensations intimately connected with the subject.

In the hospital, Plath's speaker notices the nurses passing in the ward: "one just the same as another," as her own body "is a pebble to them," they who will bring "numbness in their bright needles"(CP160). If the speaker sees, and seeks, those belongings that would identify her to herself, they become irrelevant once they are taken from her: "I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses." And, "They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations." Watching her things go by as she lies "on the green plastic-pillowed trolley" – "my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books" (CP160-161). The speaker is unable to keep "Stubbornly hanging" onto the "name and address" of selfhood.

Like the Second Voice speaker in "Three Women" who has had a miscarriage and says "The nurses give back my clothes, and an identity," the speaker's focus on the loss of personal artifacts in "Tulips" suggests that any claim to conventional accoutrements that might signify identity eludes her (CP183). The things that construct conventions of belonging are just that, conventions, which serve to further alienate Plath's hospital speakers from their environments. As the Second Voice in "Three Women" notes, readying to leave the hospital: "I draw on the old mouth./The red mouth I put by with my identity/A day ago, two days, three days ago" (CP183). While she states "I can go to work today./I can love my husband, who will understand" she herself feels deformed by her miscarriage: "Who will love me through the blur of my deformity/As if I had lost an eye, a leg, a tongue"(CP 183). What becomes clear in Plath's hospital poems is that physical sensations make for permeability between the speaker's outer and inner worlds. Rather than the symbolic markers that constitute a subject, Plath's speakers' interactions with the sense nature of their worlds become the occasion for naming or engendering a subject *sense*.

"Waking in Winter" (1960), the first in the chronological sequence of hospital poems I am discussing, is a poem which significantly never made it to a final draft. Tim Kendall notes that her having left the poem unfinished "raises the suspicion that she was struggling with new

material or a new style" (34). Indeed, among the noteworthy things in reading the four drafts of this poem, is how Plath's speaking "I" moves, with increasing intimacy, into the landscape of the poem, collapsing both grammatical and connotative distances between the speaking "I" and its surroundings. The poem's landscape, its "metal sky," ultimately becomes part of the "I"'s sensory, and tactile cosmos. In the first draft the speaker is quite separate from the landscape when she sees birds and compares them to falling pennies. In the second draft, the speaking "I" tastes the sky: "the real, tin thing." By the fourth draft, the only typescript of the poem, we have an insertion of "can," so that the first line now reads: "I *can* taste the tin of the sky – the real, tin thing" (CP151, my emphasis).

I would like to focus on the insertion of "can" as an act of volition, as taking in, tasting, the sky, is also an example of what I view as the Emersonian ambition to "... conform your life to the pure idea in your mind," that will allow for "A correspondent revolution in things" ("Nature" 48). In a November 3, 1952 journal entry, Plath writes "Reality is what I make it. This is what I have said I believed" (J150). The conflation of the landscape with the self, the blurred and collapsed boundary between "sky" and "I" prefigures the "cold and planetary" mind in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" which likewise conflates "the trees of the mind" with the yew tree (CP 172). In a first draft of "Waking in Winter" Plath shows the deleted title of "Woman as Landscape," and in the poem's second draft "Ninth Month" is added; both titles refer to the female body's expanded contours, and demonstrate ambitions that might "attend" Emerson's "influx of the spirit" that follows the poet's attempt to "conform" his life to the "pure idea" in his mind ("Nature" 48).

In drafts of "Elm" there is also the initial separation of speaker and landscape, or "I" and elm, in which the tree is described as something massive, but something the speaking "I" views quite separately from itself. The "I" is then removed in the "Item 1: Holograph" of a first draft which describes the elm as a "she" separate from the speaking "I," while in the final published poem, the "I" and "she" are voiced as one and the same: "I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root" (CP 192). I would suggest that these confluences evoke Emerson's correspondences between the poet's self and his external landscape which become, in Plath's hospital poems, terrorizing for the subject's proximity to forces that have the potential to overwhelm and fragment.

Plath's first person encounters with hospital environments demonstrate the difficult, if not

impossible, effort to assimilate what is threatening. While Emerson speaks of the "correspondences" of the spirit that elevate the "I" in its surrounding "Not me" ("Nature" 8) of nature, Plath's later hospital poems, beginning with "Waking in Winter," dramatize how these correspondences confuse and conflate interior mindscapes with exterior landscapes. Her speakers are exposed to a sensory "influx" that amount to assaults: "I dream of massacres./I am a garden of black and red agonies." says the Second Voice in "Three Women," adding, "I drink them,/Hating myself, hating and fearing. And the world conceives/Its end and runs toward it, arms held out in love" (CP180-1). As with "Waking in Winter" when the speaker states, "All night I have dreamed of destruction, annihilations — /An assembly-line of cut throats, and you and I/Inching off in the gray Chevrolet, drinking the green/Poison of stilled lawns," the dream/mindscape is barely distanced from a "waking" present in which the speaker's dreams have emotional and physical consequences: "I dream" immediately becomes "I am" for the Second Voice in "Three Women"; and in the second stanza of "Waking in Winter," the use of the present tense and exclamation marks — "How the balconies echoed! How the sun lit up/The skulls, the unbuckled bones facing the view!" — dramatizes the speaker's vulnerability and sense of entrapment when she yells "Space! Space! The bed linen was giving out entirely" (CP151).

In "Tulips," the second in this sequence of Plath's hospital poems, written in March 1961, a month after her own miscarriage and appendectomy in February, the flowers' redness, suggestive of blood and wounds, are "too red." The speaker tells us that "they hurt me." And, "Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds" (CP161). Here, too, the speaker's imagined sense of the thing seen overwhelms and defines the object, in this case the tulips. If the "the Universe is the externisation of the soul" for Emerson, in Plath's world this externisation expresses a condition of abjection as Julia Kristeva has described it ("The Poet" 453). According to Kristeva, what is not-yet-a-subject "disturbs...What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (4). Disempowered by its dependency on insecure and depersonalized structures, the abject "I" is without a centering or totalizing ego. Kristeva writes: "Instead of sounding himself as to his 'being,' he does so concerning his place: 'Where am I?' instead of 'Who am I?' For the space that engrosses the deject, the excluded is never one, nor *homogeneous*, nor *totalizable*, but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic" (8).

The speaker in "Tulips" feels that the flowers "eat my oxygen," confessing herself "a nobody" in a hospital where she has given up her name to nurses and her history "to the

anesthetist and my body to the surgeons" (CP160-1). This is very far from Emerson's poet "who re-attaches things to nature and the Whole," though the inability to "re-attach" in an Emersonian vision of the "Whole" does not preclude the desire for "re-attaching even artificial things and violations of nature, to nature, by a deeper insight" ("The Poet" 455). In "Tulips" as in other hospital poems, that insight finds itself obstructed or damaged by radically un-Emersonian, inorganic contexts that the speaker nevertheless assigns a sensory nature. The tulips' redness weighs the speaker down, "Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color/A dozen red sinkers around my neck" (CP161). Emerson's metamorphosis, what happens as the poet "stands one step nearer to things" for Plath's speaker produces an abject condition ("The Poet" 456). Ultimately, "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow/" she is with "no face," and "asks nothing" (CP161).

Pamela Annas notes that "The paper self" is "part of Plath's portrait of a depersonalized society; a bureaucracy, a paper world" (137). And the setting of the hospital is especially representative of spaces where treatments of the body can reduce it to a bureaucratic and depersonalized anonymity, as the Second Voice in the maternity ward of "Three Women" notes: "I am beautiful as a statistic. Here is my lipstick" (CP183). Lipsticks, or tulips, viewed as they are though the speaking subject's sensory perception blurs their objective reality, and their distance from the subject. This suggests that binary constructions which separate and maintain a subject-autonomy from what is apart or other to it become destabilized, and open to invasions of the sensory. Almost a decade away from her stylistic experiments in "Waking in Winter," Plath acknowledges to herself the importance of the senses in a 1952 journal entry: "as for myself," she notes, "I perceive all through the senses – mind among them" (J122).

The sensory, bodily reactions of Plath's speakers to the intrusions of their hospital environments can be read as subversions to what undermines a subject-sense. While the Second Voice narrator in "Three Women" tells us that the "mirror gives back a woman without deformity," it is only a reflection (CP183). She in fact feels "a little sightless" (CP184). The distinction between a reflected whole and a sense of sightlessness is intriguing as Plath considers this in non-symbolic terms. Or terms that attempt to articulate the non-signified in symbolic structures, and its silences. In the stanza that closes the Second Voice speaker's departure from the hospital, she focuses on the body:

The body is resourceful

The body of a starfish can grow back its arms
 And newts are prodigal in legs. And may I be
 As prodigal as what lacks me. (CP184)

This last line in the stanza is startling for its grammar: the more predictable "what lacks *in* me" becomes, without the preposition, an admission to a lack of self, as opposed to a condition of a lack *inside* an existing subject. In other words, the speaker articulates a lack of any *subject*-sense, a "me." And instead, constructs an understanding, or consciousness, of the self through sensation, sense that makes for subjecthood, rather than the other way around, born as it is, paradoxically, of the subject's lack of a totalizing or (to recall Kristeva) a "*totalizable*" ego.

Again, the Second Voice speaker recognizes herself as other, as a reflection of *something* rather than *herself*: "This woman who meets me in windows – she is neat./So neat she is transparent, like a spirit./... She is deferring to reality" (CP 184). As in "Waking in Winter" the sensory moment engenders subject-sense, a cognition rather than a recognition of self: "It is I. It is I--" she notes, in a moment when "She" in her deference "to reality" understands herself to be "I": "*Tasting the bitterness between my teeth./The incalculable malice of the everyday*" (CP184, my emphasis). Kristeva distinguishes between the self who compares itself to another: "I *am* only *like* someone else," and the self in its abjection which will "*seek* (myself), *lose* (myself), or experience *jouissance* –" this is the subject whose "I" is "*heterogenous*," open to the multivalent (Kristeva 10). Or to use Emerson's notion of metamorphosis, the poet who "perceives that thought is multiform" ("The Poet" 456).

In Plath's copy of Freud's *The Basic Writings*, in a section of his "Interpretation of Dreams," she has underlined parts of a passage in which Freud discusses the workings of the "creative mind": "it seems to me, the intellect has withdrawn its watchers from the gates, [in the case of the creative act], and the ideas rush in pell-mell, and only then does it review and inspect the multitude" (193). Plath has added an asterisk in the margin. This suggests, with Kendall, that Plath was exploring ways to access and articulate what might otherwise be kept repressed by the intellect's gate keepers. Other underlinings give added clues. I will quote from two in an effort to reimagine the impressions Freud's words might have had on Plath's thinking; this is from the introduction to *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*: "giving-up of hypnotism in favor of free association;" and, in light of Kristeva's discussion of the abject, the following evokes Plath's interest in possible articulations of "the lawless id's tendencies":

An unorganized chaotic mentality called the Id... becomes modified into what Freud calls the ego. This ego, possessing awareness of the environment, henceforth strives to curb the lawless id's tendencies whenever they attempt to assert themselves incompatibly. The neuroses, as we see it here, was therefore, a conflict between the ego and the id. (9, 12)

The location of the maternity ward in "Three Women" and the fact that an early draft of "Waking in Winter" is titled "Ninth Month" provides added evidence of Plath's interest in conditions of physicality that override boundaries between self and other; the pregnant body, defined or confined as it is by its biological transformations becomes, too, abject. As Nöelle McAfee explains it in his introductory note to Kristeva's essay: "The abject is what one spits out, ejects, almost violently excludes from oneself... What is abjected is radically excluded but never banished altogether. It hovers at the periphery of one's existence, constantly challenging one's own tenuous borders of selfhood" (McAfee 46). The tenuous borders of selfhood are made evident in drafts of "Waking in Winter" where the speaker specifically refers to being overwhelmed by the landscape. As the "I" struggles with its physical and psychic borders it, by turns, is violently merged with the earth and enlarged by dreams and emotions, until its final declaration: "I can taste the sky – the real tin thing" (CP 151). But this landscape of tin skies and "green poison," like the "alien" moon the Second Voice in "Three Women" feels enters her "like an instrument," is inorganic, far from Emerson's celebration of "the suffrage of the world" for the one who can "Absolve you to yourself" (CP182, "Nature" 48). Rather, "the suffrage of the world" in the sterility of Plath's hospital environments is obstructed, though a consciousness of the self's desire effects efforts to enlarge or free it from its confines.

In her copy of Emerson, a young Plath had underlined: "Classic art is the art of necessity: organic," the rest of the sentence reads, "modern or romantic bears the stamp of caprice, or chance" (128 ed. 1953). That Plath (perhaps 16 when she underlined her 1947 copy of Emerson), had a fledgling view of art's necessity as organic contributes to an understanding of the crises of her later speakers' attempts at transforming the inorganic aspects of their hospital worlds. Unlike earlier poems in which the hard surfaces of marble and stone³ make for impenetrable and recalcitrant resistances, in Plath's hospital poems the body's reactions, its pain and consciousness of physical extremity, make for organic if abject responses to the otherwise silencing and

³ See Plath's poems in *The Colossus* where stones, rocks, and marble are referred to consistently; examples include "Hardcastle Crags," "The Colossus," "Child's Park Stones," "Private Ground" and "Magnolia Shoals."

anatomizing environments her speakers find themselves in. As the First Voice speaker tells us in "Three Women": "There is no miracle more cruel than this./I am dragged by the horses, the iron hooves." But she endures, "I last. I last it out. I accomplish a work." And as such, the "work" becomes her naming of the experience, how her body has become the nucleus of its own struggle, "the center of an atrocity." that understands: "What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?" (CP180).

"The violence of a revolt *against*, demarcates a space out of which signs and objects arise" (10) explains Kristeva of the condition of abjection, which can also be read as a refusal on the part of the abject 'I' to enter the symbolic realm, to become a subject objectified in contexts where authoritative subjects – doctors/nurses – can disempower agency. "Space! Space!" exclaims the speaker in "Waking in Winter" as "Each nurse patched her soul to a wound and disappeared" (CP 151). In "Tulips" the narrator feels overwhelmed by the "too excitable" flowers (CP160), which, like the echoing balconies and "Cot legs melted in terrible attitudes" (CP 151) of "Waking in Winter" invade and dominate the speaker's consciousness: "The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;/They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat" (CP 162). As Kristeva notes, this "revolt *against*" is a reaction, a "loathing" of otherness that has "settled in place and instead of what will be 'me';" as such, Plath's speaker in "Tulips" is oppressed by the tulips' redness, upset by "their sudden tongues and their color," yet the very sensations that blur the speaker's subject-autonomy from the object-sense she experiences make her conscious of the space she describes so sensually, and her place in it: "I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes/Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me" (10, CP 161, 162).

In "The Death Throes of Romanticism," a 1974 essay on the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Joyce Carol Oates articulates a complaint about the lyric "I" she believes Plath is "obsessively preoccupied with," examining what she understands, or misunderstands, to be an "I" that "cannot identify with anyone or anything, since even nature – or especially nature – is antagonistic to it" (10). Oates suggests Plath's "regressive fantasies" belong to "the deathliness of an old consciousness" that sees "all other fields of consciousness" as threats (14, 9). I find the binary Oates creates between a threatened, regressive "I," and an antagonistic Other to be reductive and mistaken in regards to understanding the sources of Plath's narrators' ambitions, and her poems' achievements.

The instabilities of the lyric "I" in the hospital poems I have discussed express more of the anxieties of what Pamela Annas' understands as "a continual struggle to be reborn into a new present," than any drawing away, or retreating from, a surrounding, object world. Plath's first person narrators do not shy from the truths of their often terrifying worlds (136). As the Second Voice speaker in "Three Women" notes, realizing she is having a miscarriage: "this is a death./Again, this is a death. Is it the air,/The particles of destruction I suck up?;" the First Voice, too, who gives birth, declares: "Like a big sea. Far off, far off, I feel the first wave tug/Its cargo of agony toward me, inescapable, tidal./And I, a shell, echoing on this white beach/Face the voices that overwhelm, the terrible element" (CP 177, 179). This is to say that rather than enacting the "Death throes of Romanticism" as Oates argues, Plath's poems suggest ways to read Emerson's understanding of the poet's calling.

"The poet, by an ulterior intellectual perception," notes Emerson, "gives [symbols] a power which makes their old use forgotten, and puts eyes, and a tongue, into every dumb and inanimate object." ("The Poet" 456). Indeed, Plath's Second Voice narrator, asks: "Is it so difficult/For the spirit to conceive a face, a mouth?" (CP177). While partaking in urgent, if failed, attempts to assimilate or reify assaults to her destabilized (and hospitalized) "I"s, these poems reflect, more precisely, on what will be an increasing ambition of Plath's poetry, and a distinction of the *Ariel* poems, that the self's wager to transform itself is no longer a "subject" that confronts the world, but one that is immersed in it⁴ as that immersion takes it apart: "I am breaking apart like the world." the Third Voice in "Three Women" tells us, while "the air is thick with this working" (CP180).

⁴In "The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems," Pamela Annas notes of Plath's late poems: "Rather than the self *and* the world, the *Ariel* poems record the self *in* the world" (See Annas ,131).

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