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# "The Child's cry/Melts into the wall": Sylvia Plath and maternal ambivalence

Alice BRAUN

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- 1 Engaging with the criticism of Sylvia Plath's poetry often means engaging with the legacy of psychological speculation which has characterised most of the approaches to her poetic work for decades. Only recently have critics made the effort to approach her poetry without necessarily making her suicide at 30 the ultimate entry point to her entire body of work. From that point of view, the 2019 book edited by Tracy Brain can be seen as a confirmation of the recent trend in Plath criticism which consists in relocating Plath's poetry in the cultural and historical context in which it was written, instead of endlessly psychoanalysing an author who has been dead for 60 years. There is indeed in most Plath criticism from the 70s and 80s a tendency to use psychoanalysis as a tool to make sense of her tragic life story, with her poems as so many clues to reconstitute the different steps in the mental breakdown that would eventually lead to her death – see, for example, Holbrook (1988), Schwartz and Bollas (1976), or Juhasz (1978) among others. In a previous book about the poetry of Sylvia Plath, Tracy Brain (2001) is very critical of such a reductionist view of Plath's poetry. Even though she recognises that the conversation about her work did start to shift in the 1990s, Brain regrets that so much of the marketing discourse around Plath's books revolves around her death as a way of baiting the readers' morbid curiosity. As this author notes: "The reader is not simply purchasing a novel or a book of poems; they are invited to buy an autobiography" (Brain 2001, 7). Furthermore, she believes that this trend in approaching Plath's body of work has all but contaminated the critical reading of her work, viewed as a spontaneous outburst of unfiltered emotions, but not as literature in its own right. The fact that Sylvia Plath's portrait may feature on the cover of many editions of her books is for her a proof of the near total identification between the author and the poetic persona<sup>1</sup>.

- 2 Brain is also critical of the slotting of Plath's poetry in the "confessional" category that was fashionable in the 60s (which included such authors as John Berryman, Anne Sexton, or Robert Lowell). This tendency may have been reinforced by the constant juxtaposition of Plath's poetry with the personal material, such as letters and journals, which have been made public and are frequently referred to as keys of interpretation. According to Brain, such documents should be taken at face value but should be viewed as artistic writings in their own right – drafts, experiments, explorations.

Nonetheless, as far as Plath is concerned, many critics assume that life is fair game in their reading of her writing. Such a critical methodology would not be so troubling if it were preceded by some effort to rationalise the use of biographical evidence in literary reading, or theorise the relationship – and gaps – between life and art. (Brain 2001, 19)

- 3 Similarly for M.D. Uroff (1977), Plath's work may have been too hastily bundled up with the rest of the "confessional poets". She believes that her poetry should not be viewed on a par with the work of Robert Lowell, whose poetry was self-avowedly "confessional" and often narrated actual events. Plath's poetry, by contrast, relied much more on the power of metaphor and resorted to stereotypes more than actual people (see also Bundtzen 1983). Tracy Brain also spends some time debunking the idea that Plath's poems, and especially her later ones, should be read as "a personal cry of pain" when any analysis of the archived drafts reveals a careful crafting and rewriting of each piece.

- 4 Another common approach in Plath criticism consists in interpreting her work within the context of the troubled relationship she had with her father, as well as her mother, her failed marriage to Ted Hughes, or the ambivalent feelings she harboured towards her children. (See Axelrod, 1980) Many books actually use these relationships as categories of analysis: Sylvia Plath as daughter, as jaded wife, as ambivalent mother and so on. This is in fact quite common in the way writing by women is usually approached as opposed to writing by men. Male authors are usually studied in "splendid isolation", as sole individuals whose ties with other people are usually viewed as incidental, or at least as far less crucial in the interpretation of their work as they would be with female authors. Suzanne Juhasz (1978), for all the psychological speculation she engages in with her study of Plath in her book on US female poets, claims that this approach is typical of the treatment usually reserved to female poets, one that has to do with stereotypes about femininity:

Women traditionally lack not only that self-confidence but that sense of self. Always defined in terms of someone else –someone's daughter, wife, mother– they find their worth, meaning, validity in terms of other people. Consequently, 'feminine' women are nurturing and giving, sensitive and committed to interpersonal relations: all to my mind admirable qualities. But in conflict with the role of poet who puts art (and himself) before everything. Selfless versus selfish. (Juhasz 2)

- 5 The stereotypes she refers to have been analysed by psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow (1978) in her book on motherhood. According to her, women are first and foremost considered through the relationships they have with the people around them: before they can be considered as individuals in their own right, they are daughters, wives, and mothers. Criticism of Sylvia Plath's work does not escape that bias.
- 6 While this critical overview remains succinct, it felt necessary to at least mention the debates that have been surrounding the analysis of Plath's work in order to define my

own positioning. The topic I would like to address in this reflection is the representation of motherhood in Sylvia Plath's work, which means I will be exploring personal territory so as to make sense of the ambiguous feelings depicted in her poems and in *The Bell Jar*. In order to do that, I will be straddling a line between a uniquely textual approach and a wider, contextual approach. While I am interested in the texts themselves as original sources of meaning, I cannot pretend that they were written in a vacuum and that there is not a bulk of personal material that can shed light on their meaning or at least on the context (be it personal, cultural, etc) in which they were written. As much as I remain wary of psychological speculation such as it was conducted in the early stages of Plath criticism, I cannot however refuse to acknowledge the ambiguities between Plath's expression on certain topics in her poems and her more private thoughts on the same subject.

- 7 At this point, I would like to introduce the concept of "maternal ambivalence" and show how it can be useful to my reflection. While it is a concept that belongs to psychoanalysis, I do not intend to engage in psychological speculation on the way Sylvia Plath felt as a mother towards her own children. This notion is best used as a tool to analyse the poems themselves, the types of conflictual emotions they portray and the value that this representation of motherhood as a human experience can have for us as readers, and certainly not as biographers. Issues surrounding childbirth and early motherhood have often been viewed as best addressed behind closed doors, as belonging to the feminine and therefore the domestic. The risk of tackling this issue, combined with the usual biographical approach of Plath's writing, is to end up with more speculation on what Plath was trying to say about her relationship with her children. I would like to show that in Plath's poetry, motherhood becomes an experience of ambivalence between love and hate, elation and despair, a complex set of emotions that tells of the human experience, not just of her own individual fate. My main contention is that in her poems about motherhood, Sylvia Plath is trying to work through the conflict between her two roles as a mother and as a poet. I will therefore be using the notion of "maternal ambivalence" not as a key to Plath's psyche, but to the symbols and images she deploys in her poetic work.

## 1. Maternal ambivalence

- 8 "Maternal ambivalence" is a concept which has gained a lot of traction in the last couple of decades. One can track its origin to the work of famous child psychiatrist Donald Winnicott (1964), and his work on the concept of the "good enough mother", but it was further theorised by psychoanalyst Rozsika Parker, who gave it the following definition:

Maternal ambivalence constitutes not an anodyne condition of mixed feelings, but a complex and contradictory state of mind, shared variously by all mothers, in which loving and hating feelings for children exist side by side. (Parker 2002, 17).

- 9 In her book on the subject, Parker explains that this ambivalence is a product of the contradictory injunctions mothers have had to labour under: they need to be ever present in their children's lives and provide them with an unconditional source of love and attention, while at the same time being expected to release fully-grown subjects into the adult world. This is also to be understood in a cultural context in which mothers are both demonised for either abandoning their children or smothering them

with their affection while at the same time being idealised in the culture at large as angelic figures of selflessness (See Bassin, Honey, and Kaplan 1994). Parker goes on to show mothers nowadays are far less exposed to other women mothering in their close social circles as women are often isolated each in their homes right after they give birth, which leaves them very unprepared to the realities of motherhood, and vulnerable to feelings of inadequacy and failure. On top of that, the usual psychological discourse on mother-child relationships, with its sole focus on the child's wellbeing has further contributed to holding mothers responsible for their children's ills (Parker [1995] 2005, 2). Yet for Parker, maternal ambivalence is a complex feeling to be reckoned with, which, she believes, can be a source of creativity in the relationships between mother and child. Maternal ambivalence is therefore a common experience among mothers, and one that is not necessarily pathological either.

- 10 While maternal ambivalence is commonly experienced by many women, it takes a specific meaning when it implies mothers who are also writers, and who find childrearing to be an impediment to their creative activity. Yet on studying Plath as an author and a figure in the literary tradition, one finds that she was also very ambivalent in her relationship to motherhood as a poet. While many recent memoirs (think of Jane Lazarre's *The Mother Knot*, Tillie Olsen's *Silences*, or Rachel Cusk's *A Life's Work* among others) have expounded on the difficulty of holding a child and a pen at the same time, in Plath, motherhood is at least fantasised as a source of poetic creativity, while writer's block is often metaphorised as barrenness. Motherhood takes on a very specific role and value in Plath's poetic imagination, and that is what I would like to explore.

## 2. Being a mother and a poet

- 11 Many of the authors who have studied Plath (Axelrod, Britzolakis, Bundtzen and Van Dyne) have noted the apparent contradiction between the way she extolled the virtues of motherhood in her private writing and the pain and suffering expressed in the poems written about the experience. Once again, although I do feel wary about making use of private documents, it would be counterproductive not to quote her journals in order to get some context as to Plath's representation of the role of motherhood in her creative life, if only to get a sense of the cultural discourse around motherhood in the time when she was writing.
- 12 In her journals, she frequently agonized over her fear of not being able to bear children. The following is an extract from her 1959 journal, which was written after an appointment with her gynaecologist:
- If I could not have children – and if I do not ovulate, how can I?– how can they make me?– I would be dead. Dead to my woman's body. Intercourse would be dead, a dead-end. My pleasure no pleasure, a mockery. My writing a hollow and failing substitute for real life, real feeling, instead of a pleasant extra, a bonus flowering and fruiting. (Davey 20)
- 13 It should be noted that Plath wrote this before she had her children. What we read here are the reflections of a young woman trying to "make it" in life both as a poet and a wife/mother. This quote tells us a lot about her view of poetry as "a pleasant extra", a reward for a life well-lived, and not as the existential mission of the poet; something that runs counter to the representation of the poet's vocation inherited from the

Romantic tradition. From a biographical point of view, this quote is rather surprising given the amount of effort she had dedicated to becoming a poet.

- 14 Similarly, both her private writings and her poems reveal how she personally feared barrenness, which she viewed both as the literal failure of her mission as a wife and as a metaphor for lack of creativity and artistic failure. This, according to Heather Clark in her biography of Plath, is the result of the deep influence of D.H. Lawrence's writing on her imagination (Clark 483), but it also testifies to a conflation between fertility and creativity. Poems such as "Two Sisters of Persephone", "Barren Women", or "The Munich Mannequins", which begins with the oft-quoted line "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children" (Plath 2016, 325) are all variations on the topic. All these poems explore this horror of, and fascination for, infertility. In "Two Sisters of Persephone", the dilemma is embodied by the opposition between two sisters, one who is locked inside the house working sums on "a mathematical machine" while the other lies in the grass surrounded by the menstrual blood of poppies in the grass and is impregnated by the sun.

On that green altar  
 Freely becomes sun's bride, the latter  
 Grows quick with seed.  
 Grass-couched in her labor's pride,  
 She bears a king. Turned bitter  
 And sallow as any lemon. The other, wry virgin to the last,  
 Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,  
 Worm-husbanded, yet no woman. (Plath 2016, 31)

- 15 The two women represent, at first sight at least, opposite stances regarding fertility, the body's ability to procreate, but also regarding the poet's relationship to her own creativity. One woman is labouring over her work in a closed room, shut away from nature, and is only bringing forth sterile numbers, while the other is lying on the grass and is open to the sun's radiance. The first dies "a wry virgin", fails to live up to her potential as a woman, while the second gives birth to a king. The first sister's womanhood is associated, thanks to the play on the letter "w", with such adjectives as "sallow", "wry" or "worm-husbanded" and with the noun "waste", which suggests that her barrenness has made it sour, even putrid. I do not believe that the poetic persona is aspiring to one role over the other, but rather that she is trying to find her place between those two polar opposites. This poem was also written before Plath had become a mother and was still a very young woman, so they can also be construed as reflections on the meaning she was trying to give to her life – and her poetic practice.
- 16 Motherhood becomes further associated with creativity down the line as Plath does become pregnant, but her poems express a fear of delivering deformed ("Thalidomide") or stillborn ("Stillborn") babies. In "Stillborn," the poems she fails to write are akin to fetuses preserved in jars which "smile" and "stare" forever but fail to live and breathe by themselves (Plath 2016, 142). Because the foetus is associated with the poem, the poet is voicing her fears of failing both as a mother and as an artist. Now fertility and creativity are fused by the metaphor, but the easy, immaculate impregnation by the sun in "Two Sisters of Persephone" has been replaced by an anxious encounter with the material realities of pregnancy. The poems "do not live" despite their mother's attempt at making them perfect:

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.  
 They grew their toes and fingers well enough,

Their little foreheads bulged with concentration.  
 If they missed out on walking about like people  
 It wasn't for any lack of mother-love (Plath 2016, 142)

17 The "barren enterprise" of the sister-mathematician in "Two Sisters of Persephone" has evolved into the image of a failed birth; the final realization that total control over one's creation is impossible.

18 These poems can be contrasted with the musings of Esther Greenwood, in *The Bell Jar*, which was written after Plath had become a mother. In the book, Esther stands for the young women who were trying to claim their own space in a culture that was still decidedly patriarchal. Her view on motherhood is very different from the view expressed by the young poet in "Two Sisters of Persephone":

I also remembered Buddy Willard saying in a sinister, knowing way that after I had children I would feel differently, I wouldn't want to write poems anymore. So I began to think maybe it was true that when you were married and had children it was like being brainwashed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state. (Plath 1963, 66)

19 As Marilyn Yalom (1985) has analysed, *The Bell Jar* expresses a deep fear of childbirth and small children, which she claims amounts to "infantophobia" (Yalom 22). This is visible in a scene in which the poet again encounters deformed fetuses in jars (Plath 1963, 59), but especially in the awful childbirth scene which is described by Esther, from a distance, as pure torture and humiliation by the patriarchal medical institution. For Yalom, this sense of horror expresses Esther's perception of motherhood, as well as marriage as "the ultimate entrapment" (Yalom 20). In *The Bell Jar*, motherhood is not the key to creativity anymore, it is the death of creativity. But the fault is not the children themselves: what ultimately entombs women is their participation in a patriarchal scenario that would have them renounce all their personal dreams to lock themselves at home with their children. In her book *Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976), the poet Adrienne Rich has made an important distinction between the patriarchal institution of motherhood, its attending medical, pathologizing discourse and its unfair distribution of caring responsibilities on the one hand; and on the other hand, motherhood as experienced by women as the liberation of creative forces, which she believes remain stifled by the institutional aspect of the experience.

20 Although Plath ultimately chose a marriage in which she did not have to abandon her vocation as a poet, she frequently lamented how deeply her life had changed once she had become a mother, especially in her letters to her own. For one thing her marriage, which she conceived of as a creative alliance, had become a domestic partnership, as she suddenly found herself burdened with most of the caring tasks. More deeply than that, and this is something that can be found in most writing from authors who have become mothers, she found that her mental space had shrunk, as well as the amount of time available for her writing. The poem "Child" illustrates this ambivalence:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.  
 I want to fill it with color and ducks,  
 The zoo of the new  
 Whose names you meditate —  
 April snowdrop, Indian pipe,  
 Little  
 Stalk without wrinkle,  
 Pool in which images  
 Should be grand and classical



Not this troublous  
 Wringing of hands, this dark  
 Ceiling without a star (Plath 2016, 328)

- 21 There is a stark contrast here between the aesthetic marvelling at the beauty of the child's eye, the deep fusion between the poet's eye and her child's, her desire to "fill it" with even more beauty at the beginning of the poem, and the reality of the poet's circumstances, introduced by "should", which are characterized by despair as expressed in the terms "troublous", the image of the "wringing of hands", and the claustrophobic "dark ceiling without a star". While the mother poet would like to make her child a source of beauty and creative inspiration, she is stuck alone with them in a desperately closed room from which she cannot escape. The poem starts with an optimistic, effusive tone, with flashes of wonder, but as it progresses, the lines become shorter, and the poetic voice seems to trail into nothingness.
- 22 It is useful to note that at the time when she wrote the poem, in 1963, Plath was a single mother raising two children on her own while trying to write her poetry. Critics have often noted that, despite the circumstances, this period in her life was her most productive. The poem "By Candlelight" plays on the same contrast between a night scene in which mother and child share an intimate moment together in what seems to be the safe, secluded space of the bedroom. Yet in the final paragraph, the space of intimacy suddenly becomes suffocating as the poet exclaims "The sack of black! It is everywhere, tight, tight!" (Plath 2016, 292). Both "Child" and "By Candlelight" can be read as examples of maternal ambivalence in its primary sense: the coexistence of tender feelings with the resentment at being entrapped by one's condition. For Parker (2005), these negative feelings can sometimes translate into outright aggressive thoughts and even cruelty towards the child. But when the ambivalence remains "manageable" she argues that it can be a source of creativity – and in the case of Plath, despite the claustrophobia and the despair, a poem does end up getting written.
- 23 Moreover, the ambivalence felt by the poet – not so much about her children themselves, but over the lack of space given to mothers – can be found within the poems themselves, literally from one stanza to the next. Susan Van Dyne provides an analysis of what motherhood represented in Plath's imagination:
- What Plath wanted from motherhood and from writing is entangled in knots like this one throughout her journals. She esteemed both as essential forms of self-realization; producing a book of poems or a baby was an accomplishment that would mark her as an adult. Without them she was still a student, an apprentice, a daughter. As intensely as she desired motherhood and writing as products, and as guaranteed sources of approval and recognition, however, she quailed equally before the prospect of self-imposed discipline that writing required and the loss of self-control that maternity seemed to threaten. (Van Dyne 129)
- 24 As a contrast to the claustrophobic bedroom scenes in "Child" and "By Candlelight", the poet in "Ariel" is riding a horse, an activity that Plath had only recently taken on, flying through space like "an arrow". The whole poem is a celebration of movement, speed, and freedom. Yet towards the end of the poem the movement is interrupted by "The Child's cry" which the poet allows to "melt in the wall" as she pursues her "suicidal" flight into the sun. Much has been written about those last stanzas with regard to Plath's tragic fate, but for Heather Clark, the poem should be read as a text about the specific plight of the mother/poet.

And so 'Ariel' became the first poem in English that confronts the risks and burdens of maternity for the woman poet. (In an ironic twist, it is the baby who nearly prevents the poet from giving birth to the poem.) 'Ariel' is partly about the competing 'drives' of creativity and maternity. Plath had begun to realize that the two were not so easily reconcilable, and that her creative drive was, as her friend Lorna Secker-Walker observed, as strong as her maternal one. (Clark 796)

- 25 The "child's cry" is the epitome of the constant interruptions childrearing imposes on a woman's creativity, yet here, the poet decides to ignore her child in order to pursue her epiphany. Being interrupted is in fact the plight of the mother poet: unlike the Romantic poet who is usually represented writing in a closed room, or alone in nature, away from the hustle and bustle of human life, the poet who is also a mother needs to contend with the intermittent demands from her children who need to be fed, cleaned, loved, and entertained. The time available for poetry shrinks to the time when the children are asleep, either at night, or during their nap, which means that the poet must either sacrifice her own well-being (by waking very early, for example) or depend on external circumstances (finding a babysitter) in order to make the time for her writing. The baby's cry, then, according to Lisa Baraitser, who has written extensively on the phenomenology of motherhood, is the first way the baby will "puncture the mother's consciousness" (Baraitser 74), and she will continue to demand her constant attention far into her childhood. Such constant demands are difficult to reconcile with a vocation as a poet, and there is good reason to think Plath had become aware of this conundrum. In "Ariel" the poet chooses to pursue her goal to the bitter end, even if that means ignoring the child's cry in the nursery.

### 3. The childbirth metaphor

- 26 Because in Plath's imagination, creativity and motherhood are so closely linked, while lack of creativity and writer's block (which is a condition Plath often struggled with) are depicted in terms of infertility, the poems themselves end up being implicitly compared with children and the act of writing with childbirth. Yet the "childbirth metaphor" is often deemed problematic by the critics who have been writing on the issue of creativity and motherhood.
- 27 In a famous article on the subject, Susan Stanford Friedman contended in short that "Babies are never books" (Friedman 1987, 58). She did not mean that women were not able or allowed to be both mothers and writers, but rather alluded to the cultural prohibition on being both all at once, as well as the material impediments women faced when they tried to pursue their careers as poets while mothering. In the specific case of Plath, she believed that "[her] childbirth metaphors for creativity are ridden with self-loathing and fear of motherhood as biological entrapment" (Friedman 68-69). The childbirth metaphor, according to her, has often been appropriated by male writers, especially in the Romantic period, to claim an experience that they did not have access to and often were not even involved in. Susan Rubin Suleiman makes a similar point by analysing how perpetuating the metaphor contributed to fetishising the pregnant body and essentialising women in their roles as procreators. Yet how could women writers who are also mothers not incorporate this central experience to their poetry? How could they not compare giving birth and writing poetry even if they are somehow participating in their own alienation? For Adrienne Rich, motherhood and poetry are incompatible. As she explains in *Of Woman Born*: "poetry was where I lived as no-one's

mother, where I existed as myself" (Rich 31). As a contemporary to Sylvia Plath, Rich's view on motherhood and creativity was diametrically opposed to Plath's: the two have been made mutually exclusive by a patriarchal society which has handed most of the tasks of caring for children to mothers, forcing them to choose between their two vocations.

- 28 Conversely, in Plath's imagination, books, or rather poems, are, literally babies, as we have seen with the example of the poem "Stillborn". Therefore, I would like to argue now that the experience of motherhood gives the poet access to a wealth of experience she would not have encountered had she not become a mother – and remained metaphorically barren. For Lynda Bundtzen, Plath is trying to reclaim the birth metaphor as "a woman's special prerogative" (Bundtzen 41).
- 29 Another issue raised by the discussion around the childbirth metaphor is how to write a poetry of motherhood that is not relegated, first, to the margins of the literary canon, and two, to the margins of articulate language itself. It turns out in fact that the two are linked: as French feminists Kristeva, Irigaray and Cixous have shown, the experience of motherhood has always been construed as the "other" to reason and language<sup>2</sup>. Similarly, Christina Britzolakis (2006), argues that Plath's work tries to escape this relegation by playing with a form that would explore the ambivalence particular to the experience of motherhood and also deconstruct the either/or binary that has structured the symbolic order:

Plath's poems about motherhood, many of which elegiacally celebrate the mother-infant relation, are no less caught up in these paradoxes. Her exploration of the relation between maternal subjectivity and writing is highly innovative, combining lyrical intimacy and tenderness with a critique of motherhood as a symbolic and institutional discourse. Since Plato, the maternal has been located at the limit of the symbolic order and aligned with nature and matter as the 'literal' ground of representation from which both enlightened thinking and figurative language emerge. Plath draws on this philosophical tradition, reflexively exploring the transformative potentialities and limits of metaphor. (Britzolakis 2006, 116–117)

- 30 In this regard, the poem by Plath which provides the best synthesis of what she was trying to achieve with her representation of motherhood in poetry is probably "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices". It was written as a radio play, and it features three first-person voices which intermingle and echo each other. The whole poem takes place in "A maternity ward and round about" and features a mother delivering her first child, a secretary who just suffered a miscarriage and a student who gave birth to a daughter, whom she decides to give up for adoption after she was apparently raped. The three women experience motherhood in completely different ways, but the images they use to describe this experience echo one another. All three of them associate birth with mortality and with a dissolution of the self. The first voice, which belongs to the happy mother, describes the immense responsibility which has suddenly befallen her: "It is a terrible thing/To be so open: it is as if my heart/Put on a face and walked into the world" (Plath 2016, 185, l. 327-329). The self is dismembered, her own heart seems to have ripped itself from her chest. The student who is forced to leave her child behind the hospital experiences the same sense of being split open. She becomes a walking wound, with a hole where her daughter should have been:

I am a wound walking out of hospital.  
I am a wound that they are letting go.  
I leave my health behind. I leave someone

Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like bandages: I go. (Plath 2016, 184, l. 294-297)

- 31 In this passage, the experience of grief is rendered by the two anaphors "I am a wound" and "I leave", while the broken rhythm of short sentences evokes flashes of traumatic experience. The secretary also experiences a form of dismemberment after she miscarries and is released from the hospital:

And so I stand, a little sightless. So I walk.  
 Away on wheels, instead of legs, they serve as well.  
 And learn to speak with fingers, not a tongue.  
 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 in what lacks me. (Plath 2016, 184, l. 275-281)

- 32 The poetic voice seems to have detached from her own body as she watches herself leaving the hospital. Even as she aspires to grow back a part of herself ("may I be"), she eventually bumps into the hole within ("what lacks me"). Each woman is given access to her own epiphany – about the beauty and horror of birth, the fragility of new life, the capacity to heal or the desperate flatness of patriarchal society. It should be pointed out here that the simple binary between the fertile and the barren women that was at the centre of a poem like "Two Sisters of Persephone" has been replaced here by a polyphony, a chorus of voices which attempt to formulate their experiences with pregnancy and birth from different, yet coexisting points of view. The plurality of experiences functions as the manifestation of maternal ambivalence not just as a psychological phenomenon, but also as a poetic trope. The voices belong not to stereotypical women but to different aspects of the experience of childbirth. Much like in Woolf's *The Waves*, language is not anchored in characters, or even types, but flows between anonymous voices. Plath articulates this experience by using a new language, or to quote David Axelrod, "a capable language free of phallic law" (Axelrod 168) in which several realities can coexist at the same time, breaking the either/or binary.

- 33 It is interesting to note that "Three Women" was written at the same time as *The Bell Jar*. The novel, narrated in the first person, focuses solely on the point of view of Esther Green, a young woman, who observes motherhood from the outside and is resentful at the perceived constraints imposed by the patriarchal institution of motherhood. To borrow once again from Adrienne Rich's terminology, "Three Women" explores motherhood as both "institution" and "experience". One could even claim that there is ambivalence even from one work to the next (*The Bell Jar* and "Three Women") regarding the role of motherhood in the writer's imagination. The poem allows to combine the lyrical celebration of nature's bounty (first voice) with the elegiac laments of the second and third voices. Like Esther, the second voice, which belongs to the secretary who has suffered a miscarriage, is appalled by the "flatness" of patriarchy, its obsession with machines, and its hatred for the female body. In *The Bell Jar*, patriarchy was sustained by the possibility for women to become pregnant; yet in "Three Women", the roundness of pregnancy is presented as the antidote to this quasi-totalitarian domination of the mind over the body which she believes is responsible for her miscarriage:

It is these men I mind:  
 They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods  
 That would have the whole world flat because they are.  
 I see the father conversing with the Son.

Such flatness cannot but be holy.

'Let us make a heaven,' they say.

'Let us flatten and launder the grossness from these souls.' (Plath 2016, 179, l. 95-102)

- 34 The repetition of the word "flat" in this passage evokes the constant quashing of women's creativity, which is coded as full and round, like the belly of a pregnant woman.
- 35 In "Two sisters of Persephone", Plath opposed two forms of womanhood, one associated with virginity and barrenness, and the other with procreativity. In "Three Women", women's capacity to become pregnant is a form of creativity that elicits jealousy not in other women, but in men ("they are jealous gods"). The "father" may converse with the "Son", but the former did not give birth to the latter: they may share words, but no truly incarnated connection. The heaven that they create together is one that has been wiped clean of the remnants of birth, the flesh, and the body fluids. The world of men is pure, but it is also barren. "Three Women" displaces and reformulates the issue surrounding the childbirth metaphor, and the way it makes woman's labour invisible, by placing childbirth at the centre of the poem. When in *The Bell Jar*, childbirth was represented as a form of debasement, and a dehumanisation of women, in "Three Women", it becomes a vantage point from which to explore a specific form of female creativity. In fact, there is also ambivalence in the way Plath envisaged the role of motherhood in her imagination: is it an impediment to the poet's creativity? Or is it the condition for a specifically female creativity? There does not seem to be a definite answer to that question, other than, for Plath, the experience of being a mother is both those things at once.

## Conclusion

- 36 In Plath's work, motherhood is an experience of loss, pain, beauty, and wonder. It is a brush with the sublime. Yet because as a material condition, it is so demanding in terms of time and mental space, it can also be perceived as a threat to creativity. In that respect, the experience of childbirth in particular, and motherhood in general, can be compared to the experience of war for early 20th-century male poets, except that the war poems were never denied access to universality the way female-specific experience often is. There had been poems about motherhood before, as several anthologies can attest, but Plath, along with Anne Sexton, was probably the first poet to write about its contradictions and the complexity it introduces in the poet's life. As I have tried to show by looking at some of Sylvia Plath's poems, maternal ambivalence is a multi-layered issue in her work. From a biographical point of view, it describes the inner conflicts of a woman who is trying to achieve what she perceives as a perfect life by being a lauded poet and an accomplished wife and mother. From a poetic point of view, it is about trying to find a way to centre the female experience without being relegated to a marginal place in the literary tradition.
- 37 In that respect, she opened the way to later poets' engagement with female poets' unique plight: speaking of and from the female body while at the same time producing a poetry that is not just by and for women. In her two volumes of autobiographical essays, Irish poet Eavan Boland tries to find a path towards a reconfiguration of Romantic aesthetic ideals which have dominated poetic expression and have imposed

their normative vision of the poet as isolated and unmoored, engaging with his surrounding as an individual. For Boland, Plath's depiction of motherhood essentially functions as a way to reclaim the poet's relationship with nature (Boland 157–158). Nature is no longer a canvas for the projection of one's feelings, but it is the matrix of poetic expression. Making motherhood a subject of poetic expression also means introducing another type of attachment when love has so often been limited to romantic feelings and sexuality. The bond between a mother and a child does not involve the capture or the fetishising of the loved one, as children are reluctant and demanding muses: it involves reciprocity, nurturance, sometimes outright aggression, and it inevitably evolves towards separation. Maternal ambivalence, from a poetic view, demands a whole new expression in order to render the full range of its conflicting reality.

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## NOTES

1. Nephie Christodoulides, author of the book *Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking: Motherhood in Sylvia Plath's Work* (2005) makes a point of using the word "persona" when referring to the "I" in each poem.
2. On that particular question, see the work of Alison Stone, notably *Feminism, Psychoanalysis and Maternal Subjectivity*.

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## ABSTRACTS

This article aims at studying the representation of motherhood in the fiction and poetry of Sylvia Plath using the concept of "maternal ambivalence", which was first explored by psychoanalyst Rozsika Parker, and which has become central in the area of maternal studies. Although Sylvia Plath often drew a parallel between creativity and fertility in her earlier poems and some of her

personal writings, the poems she wrote after she became a mother display the mixture of conflicting emotions which is typical of maternal ambivalence. The conflict revolves around the difficulty for Plath to articulate her life as a poet and a mother, but also around the possibility of writing about motherhood in a way that would not relegate her work to the margins of the literary canon. I would like to contend that Plath's poems on the topic should not be read as confessions of her individual travails, but rather as explorations of the conflict between creativity and motherhood.

Cet article a pour but d'étudier la représentation de la maternité dans la fiction et la poésie de Sylvia Plath à l'aide du concept d'« ambivalence maternelle », dont l'usage a été popularisé par la psychanalyste Rozsika Parker, et qui est devenu l'un des concepts centraux dans les études sur la maternité. Bien que l'on retrouve dans les premiers poèmes et certains des écrits personnels de Sylvia Plath une analogie entre créativité et fertilité, les poèmes écrits après la naissance de son premier enfant font apparaître ce mélange d'émotions contradictoires typiques du concept d'ambivalence maternelle. Ce conflit est lié à la difficulté pour Plath de concilier sa vocation de poète avec sa vie de mère, mais également à sa quête d'une écriture de la maternité qui ne serait pas reléguée aux marges de la tradition littéraire. Je souhaiterais démontrer que les poèmes de Plath sur la maternité ne devraient pas être lus comme des témoignages intimes de ses difficultés individuelles, mais plutôt comme des explorations du conflit entre créativité et maternité.

## INDEX

**Mots-clés:** Sylvia Plath, poésie, XXème siècle, maternité, ambivalence maternelle, accouchement

**Keywords:** Sylvia Plath, poetry, 20th century, motherhood, maternal ambivalence, childbirth

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