

A PSYCHOANALYTIC STUDY OF SUICIDE WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO THE POET SYLVIA PLATH

SUICIDE, BLAME AND CONTAGION

The aftermath of Sylvia Plath's suicide has seen the emergence of a body of carefully researched and scholarly writing. Even so, this literature has the familiar echoes of the way in which survivors of suicide are left confused, casting aspersion, assigning blame, trying to piece events together against the backdrop of mourning. This response to Plath's suicide - the body of writing by her biographers, contemporaries, admirers and friends - represents a kind of polemical collective psychobiography. The process of how this collective biography has emerged might be understood in terms of projective identification, whereby the inner world of the suicidal is projected and introjected by others (Taiminen, 1992). Suicide survivors may experience and enact the confusing inner object relational world of the suicidal. For instance, Miller (1987) criticizes Sylvia's mother for over emphasising the necessity of academic achievement during Sylvia's adolescence, forbidding Sylvia to experience any personal suffering because she, Aurelia, could not tolerate it. In concluding that; "Had Sylvia been able to write aggressive and unhappy letters to her mother, she would not have had to commit suicide" (Miller, 1987; p.255), Miller attempts to simplify what is an otherwise complex tapestry of events.

The complexity of Plath's suicide and it's aftermath is no more apparent than in the debates over the way that her archive has been managed. Rose (1991) comments that during the thirty years since Plath's death, the way her work has been presented has been a network of intrigue, protection and falsification (p. 89).

Furthermore, there have been libel cases (see; Rose, 1991; p.106-111), letters to newspapers (Sigmund, 1987; Stevenson, 1990) and complaints to the director general of the BBC (see Thomson, 1988). And the recently published book by Janet Malcolm about Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, has fuelled rather than quelled the *fierce flames*¹ of controversy. Plath's case is tragic and haunting, embedded in our culture (Rose, 1991). There can be no doubt that she hones our attention spectacularly to suicide, and so her life and work has become a crucible for examining the riddle of death. Her bleak words and confessional poetry have a raw and foreboding quality as she tells us; "dying/ Is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well". (Plath, 1981; p.245).

¹ The inscription on Plath's headstone reads: "Even amidst fierce flames the Golden Lotus can be planted".

She offers herself as the poet of death, a commentator of self destruction par excellence in a genre of artistic extremism, pursuing insight beyond breakdown with a passion equitable to that which drove the romantics to search for truth and beauty (Alvarez, 1968). Plath has become a fascinating but morbid enigma; "The coming again to make and make in the face of flux; making of the moment something of permanence. That is the lifework....My life, I feel, will not be lived until there are books and stories which relive it perpetually in time" [Journal entry, (1958); cited in Wagner-Martin (1988); p.247]. The task in studying her is one of disentangling the tirade of (split) opinions, finding truth about her suicide and discerning how it may have been shaped by the world around her (Durkheim, 1897).

The wider context of Plath's suicide - the sociopolitical antecedents - leads Brown (1994) to ask; "What is the post second war world situation that caused so talented and intelligent writer to even play with the idea?" (p.109). Kristeva (1986) sees Plath's context as central to a discourse of feminism; "suicide, without a cause, or sacrifice without fuss for an apparent cause is, in our age, usually political" (p. 157). Plath has become an emblem of the suffering of motherhood/womanhood, her words speaking of universal troubles, dreams and aspirations, a figure symbolically containing woes, like the poet who becomes a prophet spinning a public fantasy (Arlow, 1986). Her suicide in this sense was not an isolated individual event, an inner dissolution or fracture, but an expression of valency, the deepest kind of interpersonal dissatisfaction. In a letter to her m(other) she expressed concisely the inter-play between herself and her world as she articulated her desire for release; "oh mother...let's die together". (Letters Home; p.123-4).

DEATH IN WORDS - A FURTHER LACANIAN READING OF PLATH

There is a general agreement among Plath's biographers that her writing is interwoven with a reaction to, and expression of, her feelings about the death of her father. Silverman & Will (1986) have described her poetry as an attempt at psychical self repair in relation to the loss of her father, but an attempt that represents a failure of creativity. Likewise, Stevenson (1989) comments on the inadequacy of Plath's writing in dealing with her emotional difficulties; "it was if...every time she put pen to paper she began...sealing herself more securely into her frustration" (p.33). If we agree with this view, the failure of words in self reparation, then a Lacanian reading of Plath's writing might seem apposite (a Lacanian reading is the basis of Rose's (1991) choice of approach).

Lacan has been criticized as being "negative" emphasizing the limits of self understanding and the "inherent falsifications involved in representation" (Rustin, 1995; p. 226) and Lacan certainly does not offer a theory of the *success* of representation, for instance in poetry and literature, the power of the pen or where *talk is good* (as the advert tells us). However, as a description of psychopathology, does Lacan locate something of the experience of the worthlessness of words in a world dominated by the bleak chronicity of depression?

Lacan saw language developing from signs that pre-suppose the *absence* of an object where the *lack* of something is that which creates desire. Language becomes prey to the wish for fulfilment and articulation is an attempt to fill the emptiness left by the object. "Words come to stand in for the loss of imaginary desires and loves as the small child seeks to overcome "lack" through symbolic expression". (Elliot, 1992, p.132). Language cannot **be** the object, it can only "slide around it's own incapacity to signify an object, and the object then only exists as a lacking object" (Benvenuto & Kennedy, 1986; p.176). The outcome is therefore an endless yearning for what Lacan (1960) called; 'objet a' (the other object), driving the subject into the spaces of the unconscious, to the hollowness of a world where meaning evaporates and coherence is subjugated by *illusion*. Here death is not so much feared as desired, more like the beyond of desire, beyond even *jouissance* (pleasure).

Lacan re-cycled Freud's idea that the aim of life was to return to an inorganic state and applied this to language. Lacan felt that language and words, enunciations, were not enough to signify existence. He conceived that there was a *coupure* (a cut) between the discourse of 'I exist' and 'I do not exist'. Referring to a dream reported by Freud where a patient had dreamt about his dead father Lacan wrote that; "If the figure of the dead father survives only by virtue of the fact that one does not tell him the truth of which he is unaware, what, then, is to be said of the I on which this survival depends? Rather than have him know, I'd die. Yes, that's how I get there...Being of non-being, that is how I as subject comes on the scene..." (Lacan, 1960; p.300). The absence of *I* (ego), according to Lacan, derives from the experience of the absence of the desired object. In this framework, the (M)Other is an absolute other that exists before I exist. However the *absolute* (m)other can not fulfil *absolute* desire. This is where anguish arises, in the "irreducible beyond of demand". (Benvenuto & Kennedy, 1986; p. 174). It is here that desire is constructed and "lack" is an inherently experienced in early relations with the other.

Following Freud's (1901) analysis of absences, gaps and lapses in linguistic production, Lacan traced this back further to the infant's early visual experience of lapses and gaps. He saw that the

earliest objects resembled edges and rims; "a margin or border - lips, the enclosure of the teeth, the rim of the anus, the tip of the penis, the vagina, the slit formed by the eyelids, even the horn shaped aperture of the ear" [Lacan, 1960: p.314-315). Lacan saw these shapes as representing the outskirts of the object in which the object could never be found. Sound signifiers are also an attempt to represent the object, that which is yearned for in the proximal emptiness, a desire to fill the lack in both the eyes and the ears. The infant cries out (into the air), the space which it wishes to be filled by *another*. Gestures take over as the hands and arms sweep around until motility allows the infant to engulf the lacunae of separation. Eventually, words and language are utilized in the attempt to defy the absence of the other although destiny means never moving beyond the evocation of the yearning for the other.

The sense of absence that Lacan sees language as attempting to overcome would seem to reverberate in Plath's writing. Plath's poetry is brimful with references to razor-like mouths and rings that are vacant and empty, for instance in *The Rabbit Catcher* (1962) with "razor like mouth". Elsewhere we see cracks, crevices and even less obviously we see words skirting around a mouth, for instance in *Tulips* (1961). Biven (1982) has discussed the role of skin in Plath's writing, speculating that references to damaged or blemished skin is a metaphor for Plath's damaged psyche, however, it would seem that it is not so much that the skin is damaged and therefore it does not hold, it is more the quality of *laceration* or *coupure* of skin that pre-occupies Plath. The skin once cut becomes a fissure from which her blood jet poetry gushes (see *Cut*, 1962). Bick's (1964) notion of psychic bleeding when the skin does not hold would seem apposite here. In *The Bell Jar*² (1963) there are several scenes where Esther's skin is cut, for instance after her suicide attempt there are cuts and grazes on her face and legs and when Esther is in hospital she awakes to a; "A chisel cracked down on my eye, and a slit of light opened like a mouth or wound, till the darkness clamped shut on it again" (p.180).

The next incident in the hospital is telling about Esther's emergent sense of herself as she takes the bandages off and looks at herself in the mirror; ".hair was shaved off...One side of the person's face was purple, and bulged out in a shapeless way, shading to green along the edges, and then to a sallow yellow. The person's mouth was pale brown with a rose coloured sore at either corner. I smiled. The mouth in the mirror cracked into a grin". (p.185). Esther then smashes the mirror. The scene reverberates with a despairing Lacanian *meconnaissance* at the mirror stage of

² *The Bell Jar* (1963) is used throughout in this essay to illustrate biographical detail. Although *The Bell Jar* is not an autobiography it is continually cited by her biographers to illustrate how Plath may have felt about real events. The characters appear as composites of real people and the events are also condensed from real occasions in Plath's life. The fact that *The Bell Jar* is fictional in some ways means that it is a window to Plath's phantasy life.

development (Lacan, 1949; p.6]). Here there is no maternal other as in Winnicott, because Lacan's infant, of its own accord, clambers up to behold itself in isolation in the mirror (Lacan, 1949; p.2). Pines (1984) has described how development requires a fluid interchange between inward and outward looking/object representation, and using Plath's poem *Mirror* (1961), Pines illustrates how becoming locked in a fixed and narcissistic gaze results in a depressing and *desolate inscape* (Pines, 1984; p.30).

In summarizing, one might say that Plath's writing was not so much an attempt to *represent* her loss, in the case of her father, but an attempt to *retrieve* what is lost, reflecting her isolation and loss of the other, ever beyond her desire; "...disillusioned with meanings and words, she took refuge in lights, rhythms and sounds: a refuge that already announces, for those who know how to read her, her silent departure from life" (Kristeva, 1986; p.157). In suicide, Plath returns to her inorganic state, her truth lying in matter, cortex and tissue where the bristlings of neurology and electric flashes are transformed into colourful glitches on an EEG machine like a scene from *The Bell Jar* as she is anaesthetized. This is Plath on course to wipe-out, switching "on-off, on-off", dying in a roller-coaster technological world of splitting atoms (Hiroshima) and holocausts - a "supercharged inner cosmic circus" as Hughes described (1981, p.16). Her poetry, then, becomes a timeless captive of classical intention. Her signifiers are meant for preservation in the formaldehyde of memory. She cannot bear to lose anything more so she constantly fuels the future, each fragment building her illusion of the permanent object, each written word a flimsy reminder that she exists.

But she flounders when the object, like her past, becomes irretrievable and so her words fail. She implodes with fury in *The Bell Jar* as Joyce's words crumble before her into a mesh of signifiers; "My eyes sank through the alphabet soup of letters to the long word in the middle of the page/ bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbrontonnerronnruonnthu/- nntrovarrhounawnskawntooohooordenenthurnuk!". (1963; p.130). Joyce³ symbolizes the break with form and tradition and in *The Bell Jar* Plath quotes from Joyce's (1939) *Finnegans Wake*; "riverrun, past Eve and Adam's.....". The text begins without an upper case letter suggesting that there is not really a beginning here at all, life will re-cycle. But Esther gives up on the book, it makes an unpleasing dent on her stomach (a inverted pregnant repulsion, inward folding creativity?). In Joyce's story the dead father is recalled to repair the damage to the universe that the warring children have caused. But the recall of Father Finnegan from the dead represents no relief

³ According to Eagleton (1983), Joyce is the writer who most closely exemplifies Kristeva's theories.

for Plath at all, possibly it serves to compound her loss even further.

Like Joyce, Plath did make a radical break with form and tradition in the last years of her life, producing her most poignant poems. Silverman and Will (1986) contest that it was this break with traditional form that caused Plath to lose the containment of the traditional structure in her writing. However, it may not be so much the loss of structure or form that was her downfall, but more the sense of futility she experienced as her words themselves appeared to her as empty and meaningless signifiers. This is the transformation that was her undoing. Continually longing for fulfilment in the return of the object; the loss of her mother, father, her husband, and finally the loss of herself, she realized that salvation in words was beyond her. With the emptiness in her mouth and on her lips, her creativity was submerged by disillusion, articulation became an inward folding project as she slipped into the emptiness from the (Lacanian) rim. In her last poem, seemingly exemplifying this slippage; *Edge* (1963) she announced her death; "a perfected dead women...of Greek necessity...each dead child folded back into her body. The milk pitcher is empty...dry to the bone...blacks crackle and drag".

THE DEATH OF HER FATHER - SUICIDE BY EXAMPLE

Plath was greatly influenced by the life, writings and death of Virginia Woolf with whom she closely identified. Woolf's suicide by drowning appears to be the influence of the underlying theme of suicide in *The Bell Jar*. Esther's overdose is described as a drowning; "The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep" (p. 179). It is known that during the last few weeks of Plath's life she had been reading Woolf (Wagner-Martin, 1988, p.223) and her method of suicide by gas in the end was, according to Stevenson (1989, p.46), a certain type of drowning. Likewise, Pines (1984) describes her death as drowning in the "depth of her mind" (p.30). During the final part of *The Bell Jar* there is a prophetic case of suicide by example. When Esther is recuperating in the hospital following her suicide attempt, she discovers that her friend Joan has been admitted too. It transpires that Joan had tried imitate Esther's suicide after reading about her in the newspapers, reverently collecting cuttings about Esther, before running away from home to kill herself (p. 207). Indeed Joan does go on to kill herself. Joan may have represented a part of Plath, who having been split off, was subject to a suicide contagion effect. This is a description of a model of suicide as a self murder. An object relations discourse places

suicide in the realms of social determinism because it conceives suicide as an attack on the hated object, an external other inside - a self murder⁴ (Freud, 1917; Klein, 1935; Kernberg, 1993; Jackson & Williams, 1994). A measure of the type of murderous rage that may be a pre-cursor to suicide is exemplified in particular at one point in *The Bell Jar* when Esther expresses fury about her mother; "The room blued into view, and I wondered where the night had gone. My mother turned from foggy log into slumbering, middle-aged woman, her mouth slightly open and a snore travelling from her throat. The piggish noise irritated me, and for a while it seemed to me that the only way to stop it would be take the column of skin and sinew from which it rose and twist it to silence between my hands." (Plath, 1963; p.129-130).

But it was the death of her father which became the central template, at least in Sylvia's mind, for her own suicide. Sylvia was eight years old when her father died from the complications of Diabetes. The centrality of the death of her father is indubitably considered as the most significant antecedent of Plath's suicide that prompts unanimity among her biographers. Although her father did not kill himself Sylvia believed that he had brought about his own death by failing to seek medical attention for his mystery illness; "Sometimes, when contemplating suicide, as she often did, Sylvia felt as if her father was trying to drag her down into the grave; he had, though he didn't quite kill himself, set a suicidal example" (Hayman, 1991). Plath's identification with her dead father reaches its most condensed form in the poem *Electra on Azalea Path* (1959) where she recalls a visit to her fathers grave, exploring her feelings about his death; "It was the gangrene that ate you to the bone/ My mother said; you died like any man/ How shall I age into that state of mind?/ I am a ghost of an infamous suicide/ My own blue razor rusting in my throat/ O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at/ Your gate, father - your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. /It was my love that did us both to death". (p.116-117).

The setting for the poem is also described in a scene in *The Bell Jar* when Esther visits the grave of her father. She finds that his grave has been unattended; "I had a great yearning, lately, to pay my father back for all the years of neglect, and start tending his grave". (Plath, 1963. p.175). The notion of "paying her father back" can be read in two ways; a "double entendre" as Stevenson (1989; p. 152) has described - Esther feels guilty for her neglect, that she or someone should have tended the grave over the years, her wish to tend the grave therefore may represent an attempt at

⁴ In "Hamlet" (Act V, Scene I) the first clown refers to Ophelia's suicide by drowning: "It must be se offendo, it cannot be else". It is believed that Shakespeare is making deliberate use of the term **se offendo**, which in Latin means justifiable killing, rather than the more familiar legal term of **se defendo** which means self defence. Shakespeare therefore represents Ophelia's suicide as one of a justifiable killing, placing it in the context of an offensive or attacking act.

reparation. However, the paragraph could be read that Esther feels anger at her father for neglecting her, and so she wishes to pay him back, her desire to tend the grave in this case may represent a *reaction formation*, disguising her unconscious rage. If the rage that Sylvia felt towards her father was not expressed consciously then it is possible that it became unconsciously turned inward, thus by attacking herself she was able to protect her idealized internal father. Yet in the poem *Daddy* (1962), Plath is able to articulate some of this rage, finishing; "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through". Plath's suicide then can not be explained entirely as an unresolved grief reaction to her father's death. The poem *Electra Azalea Path*, a play on her mother's name, Aurelia, and based on the myth of Electra and Orestes, is a clue to the deeper conflicts in Plath's psychohistory.

ORESTES - THE RETURN OF THE AVENGING BROTHER

Plath was familiar with Aeschylus's trilogy; *The Oresteia* - she had a copy of the play in her personal library⁵. Sylvia used the myth in a very direct way to represent herself in the constellation of her own family. By signifying herself as Electra she evoked the events of the myth of Electra and Orestes, applying them to her own family situation. Briefly, in *The Oresteia*, Clytemnestra, mother of Electra and Orestes (Electra's brother), kills her husband Agamemnon when he returns from the Trojan war. Electra and Orestes then conspire to kill their mother to avenge their father's death. With Electra's help Orestes kills their mother. Orestes then becomes overcome with abominations in the form of the furies which haunt him continually. Eventually he is called to trial in Athens when Athene presides over a court hearing. During the case the jury are split and Athene has the casting vote. She acquits Orestes.

Plath's *Electra* poem is underpinned by the notion that the death of the father is caused by the murdering impulse of the mother; "The flat sea purpled like that evil cloth/ My mother unrolled at your last home-coming....My mother dreamed you face down in the sea" (p. 117). Plath goes on to suggest that it is the daughter's love for the father that caused the mother to kill him, possibly in a jealous rage; "It was my love that did us both to death". Plath's coverage of the events of *The Oresteia* appear to offer a classical Freudian representation of the Electra Complex where the daughter wishes to kill the mother to possess the father - a straight reversal of the male/female roles in the Oedipus complex. Brown (1994) has pointed out that Plath subsumes a psychoanalytic complex by adopting a knowing position - "unconscious exhibitionism" he calls it -because she

⁵ Wagner-Martin (1988, p. 262-263) lists the books in Plath's personal library collection.

pre-empts any interpretation of unconscious motives.

However, Orgel (1974) suggests that primitive identifications involving fusion and identification with the *pre-oedipal* mother need to be considered. The accuracy of Plath's psychoanalytic reading of the Electra complex then is questionable, if only because she was limited by the psychoanalytic knowledge at her disposal at the time. Klein (1963), unbeknown to Plath, re-read the myth of Electra and Orestes and saw it as representation of a pre-Oedipal drama because Athene, who has a pivotal mediating role, escapes the Oedipus complex because she has been born out of her father's head. In Klein's reading, the death of Agamemnon is almost incidental insofar as it serves as precursor to the dramatic events of that focus on the relationship between Clytemnestra, Orestes and Electra (the focus being mother-child relations). Klein interpreted that the psychotic furies that visited themselves upon Orestes after he has killed his mother, were manifestations of an internal world struggling at the paranoid/schizoid level of development. Klein believed that the myth showed how difficult it was for the self to achieve an integrated state in reaching the depressive position. The role of Orestes therefore central to the myth of Electra. Plath did plumb some psychological depths in her poem, but what is strikingly absent from *Electra on Azalea Path* is the role that Orestes plays. Indeed in her poem he makes no appearance at all. In Sylvia's autobiographical style of transforming life experiences to print, one might have expected that Warren, her younger brother, could have appeared as Orestes. We might be drawn to ask; where was the Sylvia's avenging spiritual Orestes?

Plath sets her *Electra* poem at a point when Electra is awaiting the return of Orestes, events portrayed in the second of Aeschylus' trilogy of plays *The Libation Bearers*. In this part of the trilogy there is some of the most crucial drama and dialogue between Electra and Orestes, arguably the crux of the whole play. Orestes has returned from exile to avenge his father's death. He lays two locks of hair upon his father's grave. Electra enters with a procession bearing libations and Orestes hides behind the grave. Electra spots the locks of hair and recognizes them as identical to hers. She declares hesitantly that the hair must belong to Orestes. She sees some footsteps and places her own in them saying; "Two outlines, two prints, his own, and there a fellow traveller's. The heel, the curve of the arch, like twins". The drama at this point is masterfully composed as the fraternal meeting is suspended as Electra follows Orestes footsteps, one by one, until she reaches the grave. Orestes then shows himself. Electra cries; "We meet - oh the pain of labour - this is madness". Electra has doubts about their destiny - the task of matricide that lies ahead of them - Orestes reassures her by seizing a piece of cloth that he is wearing and reminds Electra that she wove it for him when he was born. The cloth appears to be symbolic of their swaddling unity,

signifying the weaving together of a conspiracy, but also that Electra at some level sees Orestes as her own baby in so far as she describes their meeting as "the pain of labour".

Marsack (1992) is uncertain whether the *Electra* poem works or not, suggesting that Sylvia is self ridiculing in her choice of subject matter when she admits that; "I borrow the stilts of an old tragedy". But the choice of subject matter is delicately apt when we consider that in Mycenae, the setting of the play, the royal tombs were shaped as beehives, one of the best known of them being the tomb of Clytemnestra (Marsack, 1992). We know that Plath referred to her father as the 'bee keeper king'⁶ and the next poem after *Electra* was *The Beekeeper's Daughter* (1959). So having gone to such lengths in constructing the framework for the poem *Electra* why was it that Sylvia did not embrace Orestes at all? Was Warren not the heroic character that could share her burden at the tomb of her father and conspire with her to overthrow their mother? Indeed, it would seem important to ask why it is that Warren is otherwise quite absent from the rest of the body of Sylvia's poetry. Sylvia's feelings about her brother are briefly represented in other writings, but not enough to draw any inferences from. Neither is Warren discussed in much detail in any of the biographical studies. I explore the following material then, rather speculatively.

BABIES IN BELL JARS AND THE DAMAGED PARENTAL COUPLE

The theme of a damaged parental coupling recurs throughout *The Bell Jar* and has the quality of presenting a recurring dream-like imagery and sequelae. In the very beginning of *The Bell Jar*, Esther admits that she always has had difficulties imagining people in bed together (p.6). Later she tells a story of how a seemingly harmonic couple is disturbed in the "The fig-tree story" (p.57) where a priest and a nun pick fruit together before the good nun is supplanted by a bad nun, and thus the harmony is disturbed. And then immediately before we reach the Bell Jar scene Esther experiences her first sexual encounter when she kisses Buddy which turns out to be a kiss that is "uninspiring" with their lips "chapped from the cold." (p.64). Esther's next sexual encounter culminates in a scene where she is violently attacked. Esther prevents herself from being raped by kneeing her assailant in the groin (p.115). The next image of a heterosexual couple is a story of a father "fooling around with unclean women" (p.163) which results in a son being born with a brain disease. Perhaps repulsed by heterosexuality, Esther next flirts with the image of homosexual love but when her friend Joan makes a pass at her Esther says; "I don't like you, you make me puke if you want to know" (p.232). The final sexual coupling in *The Bell Jar* is Esther losing her virginity which ends disastrously with torrents of blood and an urgent visit to a hospital casualty. (p.241-2).

⁶ Otto Plath was a leading authority on bees having published *Bumble Bees and Their Ways* in 1934 which was an authoritative book at the time.

It would seem Plath is on an origins project of sorts here, phantasizing about intercourse and *where little babies come from* (Klein, 1929). But the intercourse in each case is re-constructed as a damaged one and therefore the offspring are damaged too. This notion forms the nub of the book when in chapter six, Esther sees babies pickled in bell jars and then observes a birth. Interestingly the birth features a Lacanian cum Kleinian coupure of sorts; "As soon as the baby was born the room divided up into two groups, the nurses tying a metal dog-tag on the baby's wrist and swabbing its eyes with cotton on the end of a stick and wrapping it up and putting it in a canvas-sided cot while the doctor and Will started sewing up the woman's cut with a needle and long thread" (p.69). So what was the basis of Plath's violent caricature of intercourse and birth.

The year when Warren was born was a traumatic one for Sylvia. In the same year her father's mysterious illness began. Plath was 2.5 years old at the time. She was sent away from home during the time when Warren was born to be cared for by her grandmother by the sea (see: *Ocean 1212-W*, 1958 [1977]). Otto Plath's health had begun to deteriorate but he was reluctant to seek help because he had recently lost a friend who had died of cancer after several unsuccessful operations. Otto feared that he would suffer the same fate and so he chose not to seek medical help despite Aurelia's attempts to persuade him to do so. In 1940 Otto stubbed his toe and it became gangrenous resulting in his leg being amputated. Otto was eventually diagnosed as suffering from diabetes mellitus but by then the disease was far too advanced for recovery. He died when Sylvia was eight years old. Sylvia's identification with the stubbed toe incident is apparent in *Ocean 1212-W* when she describes stubbing her toe on a "round blind stone" (Plath, 1977. p.121). The six years of Otto's illness must have been confusing for Sylvia. He was often too tired to play. Sylvia must have felt an array of unexplainable feelings, as if something unseen was happening, something which felt like a numb blindness. When her father died, she and Warren were not allowed to attend the funeral. Later when she read Freud's (1917) *Mourning and Melancholia*, she recognized her own unresolved grief.

The coincidence of Otto's illness with the birth of Warren left an indelible mark. She articulated her feelings about this event; "I hated babies. I for two and a half years had been the centre of a tender universe felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones" (from *Ocean 1212-W*, p.120). Her brother was ill from birth and required much of her mother's time. "Whenever her mother fed Warren, Sivvy became her most demanding. Special toys were purchased for her. Scarcely three, she read letters arranged into words, sometimes in newspapers. Her mother recalled that - before three - she read the STOP sign on the corner as "pots".". (Wagner-Martin,

1988. p.22). Words even then for Sylvia became the distraction for her bitter loss and envy perhaps. *The Bell Jar* depicts the rage that Sylvia felt about the birth of her brother where at an unconscious level the birth is associated with the death of her father. Like Electra who phantasized that she was Orestes mother, Plath may have phantasized that she was the pregnant mother and that Warren was her baby ("oh the pains of labour" Electra cries when she finally meets Orestes). Might Sylvia then have constructed a dangerously omnipotent blue print in which she felt herself to not only have given birth to Warren, but also to her father's mystery illness?

The traumatic circumstances of these childhood years stayed with Sylvia and were uncannily re-enacted in the years leading up to her suicide; "Part of her depression (*in 1962*) was a natural aftermath of the birth of a second child. Nick's birth had, in effect, re-created her own family situation as a child. Sylvia had been two and a half when her brother Warren was born; her children were somewhat closer in age, but the girl's birth first, followed by the boy's set up the same kind of pattern she had known - and disliked as a child". [Wagner-Martin, 1988. p.200]. Shortly after Sylvia gave birth to her own son her husband left her for another woman (Thomson, 1988). The situation was a recapitulation of her original family situation, like her mother Sylvia was alone with the children, abandoned in a foreign country during the coldest Winter in memory. Sylvia's feelings towards the birth of her own son are described in the poem *Nick and the Candlestick* (1962). She describes Nick as the baby in the barn (the new Saviour?). However, this idealization would seem to be the inversion of her phantasy that she had given birth to anti-christ ("old Nick" being another name for the devil). Her idealization of her son as the saviour would perhaps represent an inversion of her murderous feelings towards her child/brother (Silverman and Will, 1986). It is known that Plath used the Greek myth of *Medea* as the template for her final poems, a tale which climaxes in a mother murdering her two children [see; Wagner-Martin (1988) p.211]. Sylvia's suicide, in this way, may have been a gesture of protecting her children from herself - if she had not killed herself she may have killed them. The signification she produces in *The Edge* (1963) is on the one hand a description of her own death, exalted, pure and unbound, but on another level the poem articulates her confused feelings towards her children which were inextricably linked to her unresolved feelings about the birth of her brother. Unfortunately, Sylvia was unable to recognize the forces that shook her, her circumstances during those chilling months of January and February 1963, resonated so profoundly and so painfully that her feelings became unbearable. It is a nebulous project to look to assign blame, it is more helpful, perhaps, for us to understand how *confused beyond words* the experience of a small child can be when the world is turned upside down by loss.

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