

Stockholm University
Department of English

Space and Infelicitous Place in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Cecilia Ahrfeldt
MA Degree Project Literature
Supervisor: Paul Schreiber
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Sylvia Plath's poetry has received considerable critical attention with respect to a wide range of themes and critical approaches. Variouslabeled feminist, political, mythical and suicidal, Plath has been subject to enormous biographical scrutiny but the critical responses available today offer increasingly nuanced understandings of Plath's work. However, sufficient attention has not been given to the significant prevalence of images of places and spaces in Plath's poetry. With particular focus on a selection of poems from *The Collected Poems*, this thesis argues that the personae in the poems confront "infelicitous places" and that the poems resonate with a tension between place (here referring to a space that is delimited by certain values) and space (in the sense of an expansion without the restrictions of place). What I here refer to as infelicitous place can be understood as an inversion of Gaston Bachelard's conception of "felicitous space" and accounts for the way in which places in Plath's poetry are marred with anxiety and ambivalence as opposed to Bachelard's benevolent, protective spaces. The places and spaces in the poems are dealt with in relation to the notion of infelicitous place, as well as the significance of walls and the affinity between place and poetics.

Sylvia Plath's poetry abounds with images of places and spaces. The shattered house in "Conversation Among the Ruins," the shop windows and rooms on the icy cold streets of Munich in "The Munich Mannequins" and the hellish, smoggy kitchen in "Lesbos"; the reader is guided to a multitude of places as diverse as the personae of the poems and just as essential for our appreciation of Plath's dynamic oeuvre. While we can feel the narrow place of the bedroom in "Morning Song" where "[t]he window square / Whitens and swallows its dull stars,"¹ in "Contusion" the tiny bruise "crawls down the wall" of an immobile body conflating the interiority of the body with spatial exteriority. In "Parliament Hill Fields," the speaker muses on the panoramic view of London only to end by entering "the lit house," whereas in "The Detective" the topicality of the house seems to leak out into the undefined space of a desolate landscape where "[t]here is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus / There is only a crow in a tree."

Certain aspects of space in Plath's poetry have been critically appraised before, yet these readings have so far primarily focused on oppressive domestic relationships (Dobbs), the creation of "psychic" landscapes out of natural settings (Lindberg-Seyersted), or the fusion of

¹ Sylvia Plath, *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. Harper Perennial Modern Classics. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. All further references to the poetry will be to this edition.

natural settings and self (Rosenblatt)². However, the full significance of spatial configurations in terms of space and place has not been thoroughly investigated. Jacqueline Rose writes about Plath thus: “What she wants is not a room of one’s own, the now classic feminist demand of the woman writer, but the road, field and tavern, the expansion of a world crucially located outside” (118). Keeping in mind that Rose draws on a journal entry by Plath and that the comment is in this sense a comment on what Rose deduces from Plath’s personal writing and not the poetry, we can nevertheless sense the poet’s aspirations to negotiate the predefined places and explore the expansion of a space *outside*. In Plath’s poetry the speaker confronts what I will here refer to as “infelicitous places” (in brief a negation of the *topophilia*³ in Gaston Bachelard’s *The Poetics of Space*) and the poems resonate with a tension between notions of space and place.

Upon reading the poems presented here, the reader confronts many different themes that would make for plausible readings of each individual poem. “Conversation Among the Ruins” portrays the breakdown of a relationship or a clash of conflicting poetic visions, and “Parliament Hill Fields” can be read solely as a meditation on loss. Jon Rosenblatt even argues that “the speaker [in “Parliament Hill Fields”] is a mother who apparently has lost a child through miscarriage” and that the speaker thus “finds solace in the pale, fog-bound landscape because it so closely mirrors her feelings of loss and isolation” (95). “Lesbos” certainly provides enough references to the two women’s frustration to support a reading focused on two housewives’ failure to communicate. Furthermore “The Detective” evokes notions of patriarchal oppression and even marriage as an act of murder, which would fit neatly into a feminist reading. The ominous presence of the mannequins in “The Munich Mannequins” could, as Annas has suggested, be understood as men’s transformation of “woman into a puppet, a mannequin, something that reflects both his disgust and fear of women” (114). “Contusion” can be read as a poem about death and “Morning Song” as a poem about ambivalent motherhood without particular attention to the significance of walls. This is just to give a few examples of the different directions that readings of these poems

² See Marsha Bryant’s “Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising” (2002), Jeanine Dobbs “Viciousness in the Kitchen: Sylvia Plath’s Domestic Poetry” (1977), Brita Lindberg-Seyersted’s “Sylvia Plath’s Psychic Landscapes” (1990) and Jon Rosenblatt’s chapter “Landscapes and Bodyscapes” in *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (1979).

³ Shands, drawing on the work of Yi-Fu Tuan in *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values* (1974), explains the concept thus: “Topophilia is a neologism with roots in ancient archetype [...] signifying attachments and attractions between humans and places, and affections that may include aesthetic or physical aspects, memory, and the familiarity of home” (4).

might take. The point here, however, is that infelicitous places and the tension between place and space run parallel to these themes and thus enable us to trace a spatial dynamic which is significant for our appreciation of Plath's poetry since this dynamic eludes the categorization which readings focused solely on the individual poems' subject matter would promote (I recognize that what constitutes the poems' "subject matter" is far from unequivocal, especially in a poem like "Apprehensions" which, as we will see, has been read in radically different ways).

In what follows, I will begin by giving a brief overview of how the author Sylvia Plath can be positioned in relation to biographical criticism and "confessional" poetry before turning to the concepts of space and place in conjunction with Bachelard's notion of felicitous space. Following this, the different sections address first the representation of infelicitous places, second the use of spatial elements to build metaphorical places, and third the significance of walls as complex spatial demarcations. Finally, the last section discusses place in relation to poetics and traces a trajectory from "Conversation Among the Ruins," (1956) the earliest poem included here, to "Contusion" (1963) to suggest that the treatment of places developed into an increasingly complex relationship between speaker and place. The selection of poems was based on the pattern of infelicitous places that I register, and a tension between notions of space and place. The poems are grouped here in accordance with the dominant representation of elements such as infelicitous places or significant images of walls, however, several elements can be actualized within the same poem which in some cases contributes to the overall configuration of spaces and places.

Positioning Plath

Sylvia Plath's work has been subject to enormous biographical scrutiny related to the well-documented periods of mental illness and her suicide at the age of thirty. While early readings of Plath's poetry tend to pivot on biographical interpretations, the wide range of critical responses available today offers varied and nuanced understandings of Plath's work. As a poet, Sylvia Plath has often been labeled "confessional" and her poetry thus perceived as founded on and primarily dealing with autobiographical material to such an extent that the private life of the poet and the images and narratives in her poems have almost become inseparable. Confessionalism, according to Jon Rosenblatt, "suggests that the writer has written so directly out of his personal experience and memory that he does not separate his autobiographical self

from his projection in the poem” (16). However, Rosenblatt points out that while several of Plath’s poems begin with an autobiographical situation, these experiences are transformed into “imagistic and thematic elaborations” and “Plath’s poetry suggests that the poet’s experience is only the raw material with which she operates” (15, 16). From this perspective Plath is perhaps better understood as a *personal* poet since the personal elements in her poetry can be allowed to surface when warranted by a particular reading, but the poet and the speaking subject of the poems are not one and the same. More importantly, the biographical information relating to the historically situated person Sylvia Plath does not provide any final key to the poetry. Even though this might seem self-evident the tendency to “read” the person Sylvia Plath through the poems and, conversely, read the poems through Sylvia Plath, the person, has dominated much of the criticism.

However, in positioning the poet in relation to her work, we also need to distinguish between Sylvia Plath (the author, figure, or even a cultural commodity?⁴) and the personae appearing in her poetry. When I refer to Sylvia Plath in relation to the poetry, I refer to an author in the sense of the person whose name stands for the act of composing the poetry. This author presumably coincides with the historical, physical person Sylvia Plath into whose life we might peer retrospectively through assumptions and biographical notes, but never know or gain access to. Thus the historically situated person Plath is ultimately inaccessible (that is, as a living person who we might confront with questions regarding her work) whereas the author Plath is suggestive of Foucault’s author function, meaning that the author can be recognized as a concept that allows certain texts to be read in a certain way within a given discourse. Furthermore what I refer to as the speaking subject, the speaker, or simply the subject, in the poems is not to be confused with either Plath the author or Plath the historical person.

Spaces and Places

As concepts, space and place are interdependent. However, in order to establish an understanding of the tension between space and place in Plath’s poetry, it is imperative to attempt to establish a distinction between “space” and “place”. Andrew Thacker, in his exploration of geography and spatiality in literary modernism, refers to a distinction commonly made by geographical theorists in which “*space* indicates a sense of movement, of

⁴Marsha Bryant in “Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising,” has referred to Plath as “not only one of America’s major poets, but also literary culture’s ultimate commodity” (17).

history, of becoming, while *place* is often thought to imply a static sense of location, of being, or of dwelling”⁵ (13). While this division provides a conceptual point of departure, the multifaceted representations of space and place in the poetry require further distinctions.

The concept of space in literary texts has been approached by narrative theorists and while certain poems presented here can be viewed as containing a narrative, albeit minimal in its scope, narratological models do not necessarily provide wholly satisfactory answers to questions that arise from representations of space and place in poetry. In Gabriel Zoran’s model of the structuring of space in narrative texts, place refers to one of the basic units composing space, and may refer to a wide range of locations (Zoran lists houses, cities, streets, fields, mountains, and forests). Moreover, “[a] place is a certain point, plane, or volume, spatially continuous and with fairly distinct boundaries, or else surrounded by a spatial partition separating it from other spatial units” (Zoran 323). In this structure, place is a scene on the topographic level of structuring which is the “highest level of reconstruction” (followed by the chronotopic level and the textual level⁶). Here space in the narrative is a static entity where “the world is perceived as existing for itself, with its own ‘natural’ structure, cut off entirely from any structure imposed by the verbal text and plot” (315, 323). The level of topographic structure can be likened to a complex map of elements in the text, and place is in this sense a point on the “map”. In addition to the unit of place, Zoran adds the units “zone of action” and the “field of vision” (323). The “zone of action” depends on the event, such as a conversation, occurring in it rather than spatial continuity or topographical borders whereas the “field of vision” can encompass any spatial unit (Zoran 323, 324). In this way, a scenic description is an instance of a field of vision but the field of vision is not reducible to scenic description. For the purpose of my discussion of the poetry proposed here, the full range of meanings assigned to the field of vision in Zoran’s model is perhaps less relevant. However, the field of vision is similar to Marie-Laure Ryan’s notion of “spatial

⁵ Heidegger’s conception of “dwelling” as it was presented in his 1951 lecture “Building, Dwelling, Thinking” appears as “[m]an’s relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, thought essentially” (Heidegger 335). The ability to inhabit space in this way is thus inextricably connected to human beings: “To say that mortals are is to say that in dwelling they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations” (Heidegger 335). However, Heidegger speaks of spaces yet his pronouncements on this subject has been interpreted as relating to a notion of place due to the emphasis on “static dwelling in a particular location” (Thacker 14).

⁶ Zoran points out that these three levels are not separate but simultaneous levels of reconstruction of space in a verbal medium, thus “the reader does not begin at the textual level and then pass on to the others, or vice versa; rather, he is continually moving back and forth among the three levels and, moreover, he perceives them at once without being able to separate them” (315).

frames” which can be understood as “various locations shown by the narrative discourse or the image” and are “shifting scenes of action [which] may flow into each other” (421). The notion of spatial frames is fruitful for distinguishing between spaces that appear as locations and the spaces that can be conceived of as “metaphorical” in the sense that the spatial elements build metaphors. The house in “Dark House,” for instance, can be seen as metaphorical in its affinity with the speaker’s psyche rather than a spatial unit like, for instance, the kitchen in “Lesbos”.

Yet these distinctions are not clear-cut but merely a way to approach the varied configurations of spaces in the poems by pointing to how space denotes the environment in which the speaker moves and suggests certain spatial units, and in other cases also spatial elements that make up metaphorical spaces. This then, provides a distinction between two ways of viewing spaces in the poems, but we also need to consider the concept of place. In the poetry, place is a space but delimited by its predetermined, projected or recollected values. Here predetermined should not be understood as universally inherent but rather values presented by the speaker as determining the character of a certain place. A kitchen like the kitchen in “Lesbos” is a room with spatial delimitations while also connoting domesticity and is thus a spatial unit attributed with the unity and values of place. Space, on the other hand, is experienced or imagined by the speaking subject but not unified under the “placeness,” or topicality, of places. Thus space is an expansion without the restrictions of place; it is felt but not predefined. This is not to say that space carries no values, but in its relation to the topicality of place comes to stand for an absent dimension of what constitutes a place. In this sense the phenomenological space is felt by the speaker without integrating it with place. “The far sea” that moves in the ear of the speaker in “Morning Song,” for instance, resonates with this notion of space since it signifies an absence of the restrictions of place (in this particular poem the confines of the bedroom) as an undefined space which here is valued as freedom from restraint in relation to the topicality of the room.

Gaston Bachelard, in his seminal work *The Poetics of Space*, introduces his exploration of the phenomenology of space thus: “the images I want to examine are the quite simple images of felicitous space. In this orientation, these investigations would deserve to be called topophilia. They seek to determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love” (xxxv). Bachelard primarily focuses on domestic space, in the sense of inhabited space since “[s]pace that has

been seized upon by the imagination cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor. It has been lived in, not in its positivity, but with all the partiality of the imagination. Particularly, it nearly always exercises an attraction. For it concentrates being within limits that protect" (xxxvi). In Bachelard's topoanalysis (a term he gives to "the study of the sites of our intimate lives," 8), the "felicitous" spaces, houses, rooms, cellars, attics etc, are consistently referred to as spaces rather than places⁷. As is often the case with Bachelard's pronouncements on the phenomenology of spaces, and perhaps inevitably so given the elusive character of the subject, this might be difficult to grasp, especially in relation to the poetry discussed here. Casey explains Bachelard's view thus: "To come to terms with the inner life, it is not enough to constitute a biography or autobiography in narrative terms; one must also, and more crucially, do a topoanalysis of the places one has inhabited or experienced" (289). Topoanalysis then, pertains to the "systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives" and focuses on the spatial aspects of images such as the image of the house (Bachelard 8). As Casey points out, here "psychological" is meant in its widest sense (457). Moreover, Bachelard speaks of the topophilia that resides in "felicitous spaces" as a prerequisite for topoanalysis; "topoanalysis bears the stamp of topophilia" (12). If topoanalysis can be seen as a way to approach "inner life," then we might consider the preoccupation with spaces and places in Plath's poetry as alluding to the notion of topoanalysis, albeit a topoanalysis which would involve infelicitous places and thus radically departs from Bachelard's topophilia.

Nevertheless Bachelard's spaces seem closer to my conception of place given the sense of affection connected to a certain space and its fixity in relation to the perceiving subject. Thacker points out that despite its thorough investigation of the realms of intimate space, Bachelard's account provides "a conception of place as wholly benign, one which is unable to imagine conflict" (16). "Felicitous space" is conspicuously absent in Plath's poetry as the places are frequently marred by anxieties and ambivalence. The "lit house" in "Parliament Hill Fields" is not simply a safe haven but appears as intimately connected to "the old dregs, the old difficulties" of the speaker. Intimate, domestic places in Plath's poetry are thus often far from comforting and blissful and are therefore perhaps better understood as "infelicitous place" as a way of inverting Bachelard's conception of felicitous space while also

⁷ Bachelard refers to "l'espace," which has been translated as space and does not discuss potential conceptual differences between "space" and "place".

acknowledging that it is “space that has been seized upon by the imagination” albeit with ambivalence or anxiety rather than felicity.

Confronting Infelicitous Places

According to Kerstin Shands, women writers’ images of home often have positive connotations, as a safe place to return to and reflect on (8). This, however, is rarely the case in Plath’s poetry where the speaker rather recognizes and confronts images of home, be it lit houses, kitchens or bedrooms, as places pervaded with anxiety and ambivalence. While Bachelard’s “images of felicitous space” provide us with a conceptual point of departure for how the experience of place can be connected to the poetic images of places, particularly rooms and houses, images of *infelicitous* places are not part of Bachelard’s endeavor to “determine the human value of the sorts of space that may be grasped, that may be defended against adverse forces, the space we love” (xxxv). Indeed Bachelard even points out that “hostile space” will hardly be mentioned and that the “space of hatred and combat can only be studied in the context of impassioned subject matter and apocalyptic images” (xxxvi). In Plath’s poetry, however, the reader often encounters what we might refer to as apocalyptic images (in “Apprehensions” and “The Detective” for instance).

Upon reading Plath’s poetry, and particularly the poems I will discuss here, one may thus notice that felicity is quite rare in the characterization of domestic settings such as a house or a home. In “Lesbos,” one of the late poems composed in 1962, the kitchen constitutes the setting for a deceitful sisterhood where the two women act out their lies and disappointments. The title can be viewed as an allusion to the Greek island of Lesbos commonly associated with lyric poetry and in particular the poet Sappho. In this way the title of the poem places the poet in a historical and literary context while also alluding to the association between Sappho and female homosexuality. However, in Plath’s poem the relationship between the two women is not explicitly sexual and the title rather serves to emphasize how the island of Lesbos as place for poetry is contrasted to how the poet finds herself in the painfully dull setting of the kitchen⁸. The island of the poet is thus contracted

⁸ In a similar vein “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” brings to the fore this contrast between a setting that connotes domesticity and life idealized in art. The depiction of the “dissecting room” is suggestive of domestic activities such as the preparation of food, and the cadavers are referred to as “black as burnt turkey, / Already half unstrung,” their smell described as “vinegary” as if the orderly “white-smocked boys” were preparing a meal and not in fact dissecting a corpse. However, the second section is devoted to a description of a detail in

into a claustrophobic “windowless” room where “the potatoes hiss” and it is “all Hollywood” :

Viciousness in the kitchen!
 The potatoes hiss,
 It is all Hollywood, windowless,
 The fluorescent light wincing on and off like a terrible migraine,
 Coy paper strips for doors –
 Stage curtains, a widow’s frizz.
 And I, love, am a pathological liar,
 And my child – look at her, face down on the floor,
 Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear –
 Why she is schizophrenic,
 Her face red and white, a panic,
 You have stuck her kittens outside your window
 In a sort of cement well
 Where they crap and puke and cry and she can’t hear
 You say you can’t stand her,
 The bastard’s a girl.
 You have blown your tubes like a bad radio
 Clear of voices and history, the staticky
 Noise of the new.
 You say I should drown the kittens. Their smell!
 You say I should drown my girl.
 She’ll cut her throat at ten if she’s mad at two.
 [...]

 Meanwhile there’s a stink of fat and baby crap.
 I’m doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.
 The smog of cooking, the smog of hell.

On the one hand, “It is all Hollywood” implies glamour, which is sharply contrasted by the “stink of fat and baby crap” in the next stanza. On the other hand, that the domestic setting is “all Hollywood” also suggests that it is somehow fake, staged in a studio rather than a space for lived experience. Thus the doors of the kitchen are ironically “stage curtains” as the women perform the roles directed by a society that demands of women that they should be good mothers and wives. In this sense the kitchen is not only a setting for female frustration but also a stage where domesticity is characterized by its performativity rather than

Peter Brueghel the Elder’s painting “The Triumph of Death” which sets up a curious contrast between the seemingly idealized love of the two “Flemish lovers” in the painting and the dissecting room where the speaker is given “the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom”.

authenticity. Marsha Bryant notes in her reading of Plath's poetry in relation to 1950s advertisements that "Plath explores performative as well as mechanical dimensions of domesticity. She draws the reader into the intimate spaces of the home (kitchen, bedroom, nursery), only to reveal a stage." (22). In this way the infelicitous place of the kitchen in "Lesbos" becomes a place where domestic bliss is sharply undercut by images of a kitchen that is not only hellish but also ultimately devoid of the affection associated with felicitous spaces. In addition, the reference to Hollywood is related to the speaker's description of the other woman: "Once you were beautiful / In New York, in Hollywood, the men said 'Through? / Gee baby, you are rare' / You acted, acted, acted for the thrill". Here the other woman is described as used-up, possibly an actress once, she is now far from the idealized setting of Hollywood productions and if she once "acted for the thrill" she has now assumed the role of mother and wife.

"Lesbos" primarily takes place in the kitchen but there are also references to other spaces and places though the speaker merely mentions them, or explores them mentally. Towards the end of the first stanza, the speaker switches to the optative:

I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair.
I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.
We should meet in another life, we should meet in air,
Me and you.

This appears to be the speaker's reflections on the conversation with the other woman, talking or thinking about a life outside of the confinement of the kitchen as the various things that the speaker "should" do. Here the speaker moves from a location to bold clothing to an illicit relationship, only to conclude by saying that they "should meet in another life" or "in air". While "another life" points to the wish for something other than the claustrophobic domesticity manifested in the kitchen, the notion of meeting in air points to an undefined space where the two women could meet in the sense of being free from the domestic roles imposed on them. Here the rhyming of "hair," and "affair" leads up to the final "air" as if the ideas of another life ultimately disappear into thin air. Significantly, in the last line of the poem the speaker says "Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet" thus indicating that their differences are ultimately irreconcilable⁹. The speaker also seems to emphasize that it is *your*

⁹ Judith Kroll also makes this observation and points out that "even in the most radical and complete state of

“Zen heaven,” that is, an ideal state of final spiritual enlightenment imagined by the other woman but not necessarily shared by the speaker. In relation to the overall configuration of space in the poem, we can see how the transition from the kitchen, a place, to the imagined and undefined space of “air,” which seems to carry values of independence and freedom, points to the tension between place and space. The speaker thus finds herself in the kitchen yet recognizes the possibilities of a space crucially located outside in an undefined space of simply “air”.

The notion of domestic space as infelicitous place is also particularly apparent in “The Detective” where the house appears as relentlessly sinister, a place for illusory domesticity where deceptions are “tacked up like family photographs”¹⁰ and the lies are “shaking out their moist silks” in the garden. As Lisa Nabeshuber points out “[t]he spatial orderliness lies, and the more or less straight-forward narrative of the poem, with its emphasis on hypothesis (theory), floats over a missing emotionally volatile order, expressed most violently” (54). The speaking, questioning subject initially locates the spatial relations of the house by positioning it in “the valley of death, though the cows thrive” thereby establishing a deceptive rural setting; a valley where the cows are grazing, but also specifically the valley of death¹¹. “The valley of death” also reflects the speaker’s assumptions that a murder has been committed. In the house a smile is connected to the possibility of a death weapon¹²; the sunlight provides no comfort and is perceived as a “bored hoodlum,” its rays of light mere “blades”. “The Detective” opens with the inquiries of the implied detective figure, or the detective voice: “What was she doing when it blew in / Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain? / Was she arranging cups? It is important. / Was she at the window, listening?” The specificity of these questions emphasizes the importance of domestic chores, the woman could be

enlightenment, where all opposites are reconciled, the speaker and her friend will still not ‘meet’ [...] Plath’s usage is quite precise. It would, by contrast, be meaningless to say ‘Even in your Christian heaven we shan’t meet’ because there would be nothing particularly significant about not meeting there.” (278)

¹⁰ For the use of family photographs as potentially threatening objects see also “Gigolo” where the exterior of the meeting place turns into the interior of the character depicted as “A palace of velvet / With windows of mirrors. / There one is safe, / There are no family photographs”.

¹¹ The notion of the speaking subject as a detective figure pivots on the implied relation between the title of the poem and the poem itself, but also the authoritative inquiries associated with the archetypal detective figure of Sherlock Holmes alluded to in the last stanza with the line “We walk on air, Watson”. Nabeshuber asserts that the “detective” of the poem is thus “Sherlock Holmes, the very image of detached, egotistical certainty” (53). If we are to locate the voice of the “detective” I would rather suggest that it is the haunting rationality of the detached self, coming to terms with the trauma somehow contained in the house space.

¹² Janice Markey notes that “the smile is a weapon” in “The Detective” and points out that “smiles become synonymous with deception and malicious intent” in several of Plath’s poems (122).

engaged in a number of things in or around the house but the house space is nevertheless immediately identified as a setting for domestic chores. When a body is mentioned it offers no explanation to the supposed murder:

A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising
This is the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen,
These are the deceits, tacked up like family photographs,
And this is a man, look at his smile
The death weapon? No one is dead.

While the body confined in a pipe, possibly burning, resonates with the Holocaust imagery further developed by Plath in poems like “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus,” the kitchen here specifically becomes a place associated with the destruction of a past; the “years burning”. The detective persona attempts to confront the trauma that seems to linger in the rooms of the house by registering details and locating the body of the victim, yet:

There is no body in the house at all.
There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.
There is the sunlight, playing its blades.
Bored hoodlum in a red room
Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative.

The house shows traces of domestic care but there is nobody present, not even the body that the speaker expects to find. Thus the speaker/detective asserts that “[t]his is a case without a body / [t]he body does not come into it at all” because “[i]t is a case of vaporization”. Ultimately the detective finds that the house itself has been vaporized and states: “We walk on air, Watson. / There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus. / There is only a crow in a tree”. Thus the house as a place is dissolved into the undefined space of an apocalyptic, barren landscape and the final words of the detective, “Make notes,” appear as an attempt to negotiate the tension between the loss of place and the new, undefined space by putting it into words.

In contrast to the cramped domesticity in “Lesbos” and the dissolving house and landscape in “The Detective,” “The Munich Mannequins” has an urban setting. The city is “Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome” (presumably in winter, given the multiple references to snow) which provides a reference to place, here the location of the city. This also foregrounds how the speaking subject conceives of the city as a “morgue” which resonates

with the inanimate mannequins, seemingly dead in their shop windows, and the “thick Germans” in their deathlike stupor. The poem opens with the observation that “Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children / Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb,” which relates to the perfection seemingly achieved through the artificiality of the mannequins. If the mannequins are indeed life-size dummies (which the shop window seems to suggest) then they will not be capable of childbirth. David Holbrook argues that the “mannequins are both yew-trees and idealized woman figures, or idols: they resemble the stone muses” (159)¹³. Still the yew-trees are not necessarily the mannequins themselves but rather significant as the imagery related to sterility brought out in the first three stanzas:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew-trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
The blood flood is the flood of love

Here “The tree of life and the tree of life” could even be suggestive of ovaries if we are to follow the imagery introduced by the “womb” in the previous stanza and how the trees of life, the yew-trees, are “unloosing their moons” which can be viewed as an allusion to the female menstrual cycle¹⁴. Holbrook points out that “[t]he yew trees are, ironically, called the tree of life. They ‘release’ their ‘moons’ – it is as if they have a menstrual flow which is sterile.” (159). Since yew trees connote churchyards and death, the womb thus metaphorically becomes a place not only sterile as a result of “perfection” but also of death. In this way the womb is, metaphorically, a place but the spatial frame of the poem is that of the city, Munich, which is conceived as a morgue. The city is also positioned between two other places, Paris and Rome,

¹³See Kroll or Rosenblatt for further discussions of the significance of the “muses” in Plath’s poetry inspired by the surrealist paintings by Giorgio de Chirico (1888-1978), particularly “The Disquieting Muses” named after a painting by de Chirico. Kroll also provides an exhaustive discussion of the prevalent use of the moon which in Kroll’s view takes on the significance of the moon-muse. The image of the yew tree also appears in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” and “Little Fugue” and is associated with blackness and in extension death, particularly in “Little Fugue” where “The yew’s black fingers wag,” and later as the speaker says “Death opened, like a black tree, blackly”.

¹⁴ Kroll has suggested that “there may be an analogue implied between the self-sufficient purposelessness of the menstrual cycle and the self-sufficiency and perfection of the cycle which brings to completion a work of art; for art itself is barren, even if the artist is ‘productive’” (35).

as if the speaker is mapping geographical space. This enables us to see the city as a stop on a greater itinerary, which connects to the hotels where “hands will be opening doors and setting / Down shoes for a polish of carbon / Into which broad toes will go tomorrow”. Here the toes that will go into shoes suggest movement and the travels of the hotel guests. Munich is thus a temporary stop on the way to something else, located between two cities and not a final destination for the travelers staying in the hotels of the dismal city populated by the inanimate mannequins and “thick Germans”. Yet as a morgue and thus a place for death, the speaker conceives of the city as quite literally a final destination as a place for storing the dead. In this respect, the city is a place one travels through but paradoxically without ever getting anywhere.

The ominous sterility of the inanimate mannequins with their ambiguous “sulfur loveliness” is somewhat contrasted by the activity of the people of the city “opening doors” and the “thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless Stolz”. The proudly sleeping people of the city thus seem securely tucked in sleep oblivious to the cold, unpleasant streets outside. Still the city has already been referred to as a morgue and the sleeping people are thus, at least metaphorically, dead or in a state of deathlike stupor. They are even reduced to metonymic descriptions which further serve to depersonalize them, leaving only the mundane actions of the hotel guests “opening doors” and “setting / Down shoes for a polish of carbon”. The speaking subject observing the shop windows suggests no satisfaction or affection as the neatly arranged domesticity is inevitably connected to the sterility of the mannequins and the morgue-like city. When the speaker says: “O the domesticity of these windows / The baby lace, the green-leaved confectionery” the house space is recognized not only as a space where domesticity is put on display but also refers back to the artificiality and sterility of the mannequins as they too are perceived as confectionery, namely “Orange lollies on silver sticks”. The artificiality of the mannequins is thus extended to the domestic space as the speaking subject perceives how the female body is displayed as a commodity intended for consumption¹⁵. However, the domesticity projected onto, or perceived by the speaker in the shop windows, the sweetness of “baby-lace” and “green-leaved confectionery,” is crucially perceived from the outside, as the speaker is presumably looking in, observing the domesticity without affection. The city, Munich, is thus a place where one dwells, disembodied, without

¹⁵Georgiana Banita refers to the treatment of the female body in “The Munich Mannequins” as spectacle and commodity (8).

affection and where a home-like space can only be observed from the outside.

Unlike the stripped, unidentifiable landscape in “The Detective,” the title of “Parliament Hill Fields” alludes to a specific landscape, namely an area in London. This is presumably where the speaker is located, and the point from which the solitary speaker relates her impressions of the surroundings. The spatial frame here a landscape and a place in the sense of a location, emerges from the poetic imagination as bleak and dreary, the sky is “faceless and pale as china” in the first stanza and the hill is a “bald hill” suggestive of barrenness on which “the new year hones its edge,” by the sixth stanza the hill is referred to as a tumulus that “even at noon, guards its black shadow”. Even the sun is described as “wan” and a group of schoolgirls in the distance is perceived as the shape of a crocodile, threatening to swallow the speaker. While the setting seems to reflect a sense of desolation the speaker still places herself in it, finding herself in this context saying “I’m a stone, a stick” thus identifying herself with seemingly insignificant and inanimate objects. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted recognizes the influence of the speaker’s psyche on the depiction of landscapes and argues that Plath creates psychic landscapes out of concrete places, scenes and objects (510). Lindberg-Seyersted’s readings draw attention to the way in which certain poems establish a landscape in relation to the speaker’s mental state, that is, “poetic landscapes [that] embody association between scene and mood” (513). While Lindberg-Seyersted only refers to “Parliament Hill Fields” briefly as “one of the rare poems with a London setting,” the speaker’s reflections on the natural surroundings imply that the landscape is filtered through the speaker’s emotional turmoil (511). In this respect, “psychic landscapes” could perhaps be understood as an explicitly subjective spatial frame. However, the images through which the speaker relates the natural world are particularly significant. On one level the image of the sky as “faceless and pale as china,” and the gulls “setting and stirring like blown paper” present the speaker’s perceptions in terms of man-made objects (Rosenblatt 95). But more importantly, these perceptions refer, or point to the house presented in the last stanzas. As a space with certain delimitations and attributed with certain, primarily negative, the house here is a place, to which the speaker returns. While china is a commonplace item that connotes the domestic setting of a house or home, the paper too can be viewed as a commonplace object but also sets up a connection with the picture, presumably a drawing, on the wall of the nursery room in the eighth stanza.

Conversely, the picture perceived through the window on the nursery wall points to the outdoor space of Parliament Hill Fields:

The day empties its images
Like a cup or a room. The moon's crook whitens,
Thin as the seeming of a scar.
Now, on the nursery wall,

The blue night plants, the little pale blue hill
In your sister's birthday picture starts to glow
The orange pompons, the Egyptian papyrus
Light up. Each rabbit-eared
Blue shrub behind the glass

Exhales an indigo nimbus,
A sort of cellophane balloon.

The "birthday picture" shows a landscape that transfers, or leaks, into the setting in which the speaker finds herself with the hill, the vegetation (here plants and shrubs, earlier grass and cypresses) and the raincloud (in the fifth stanza the speaker reflects on "an ashen smudge" in the distance, that "could be a snowfield or a cloudbank"). The emphasis on the color blue here, while reflecting the appearance of the picture is also suggestive of the dusky bluish light as night falls, thus the picture appears as a nightly version of the speaker's depiction of the landscape. The speaker's perception of the landscape in relation to man-made objects is mirrored in the nightscape picture as the blue cloud, the indigo nimbus, becomes a cellophane balloon. The emphasis on the moon that whitens suggests that the day is coming to an end and the night is approaching, also in the last stanza we find a reference to the "half-light," presumably dusk.

However, the notion of the day emptying its images bears additional significance. On one level the cup sets up a connection between the depiction of the sky in the first stanza being "pale as china," and the room alludes to the nursery. Thus the day pours out its contents like a cup would be emptied of its contents, or a room empty of people. On another level the reference to a cup and a room can also be read as the images that the day "empties," in this way it is not the day that empties itself as it turns into night, but these objects or spatial delimitations are the images of the day, spilling out onto the speaker. While the detective persona in "The Detective" observed how the infelicitous place of the house was dissolved, the speaker in "Parliament Hill Fields" perceives how the landscape and the house are

conflated. Yet conflation does not entirely account for what is rather a complex transfer, perhaps better understood as a kind of osmosis. In his discussion of the dialectics of outside and inside, Gaston Bachelard writes, referring to a poem by Rilke, that “limitless night ceases to be empty space” and “[i]n order to experience it in the reality of the images, one would have to be the contemporary of an osmosis between intimate and undetermined space” (230). This notion of osmosis is suggestive of the speaker’s relation to the transfer between landscape and nightscape in “Parliament Hill Fields” where the leakiness of place is brought to the fore.

The speaker’s feeling of loss, mourning and of being detached from the human world, or at least a world of the living is intensified in the sixth stanza. Here the speaker refers to herself as “Ghost of a leaf, ghost of a bird / I circle the writhen trees” and the sense of a fleeting existence, of floating through the air like a leaf or a bird is intensified in relation to the imagery of burial as the speaker is not merely a leaf dancing in the wind or a bird, like the gulls in the second stanza, but a ghost of these¹⁶:

The tumulus, even at noon, guards its black shadow:
You know me less constant,
Ghost of a leaf, ghost of a bird.
I circle the writhen trees. I am too happy.
These faithful dark-boughed cypresses

Brood, rooted in their heaped losses.
Your cry fades like the cry of a gnat.
I lose sight of you on your blind journey,
While the heath grass glitters and the spindling rivulets
Unspool and spend themselves. My mind runs with them,

Pooling in heel-prints, fumbling pebble and stem.

The hill, in the first stanza simply bald, is now perceived as a tumulus and the trees are significantly cypresses (which traditionally connote mourning and are often found in cemeteries)¹⁷. In this way the watchful tumulus guarding its shadow and the cypresses “rooted in their losses,” form a grave-like setting. However, the notion of the speaker’s mind running

¹⁶ One may note an echo of Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”: “the leaves dead / Are driven like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing”.

¹⁷ This is not to neglect the significance of Plath’s use of images of baldness and things bald, which according to Robin Peel “suggest a nightmarish vision of either vulnerable exposed bodies or complete dehumanization” (170). Here, however, the baldness of the hill seems to signify its barrenness rather than other, sinister, implications.

with the “spindling rivulets” provides a moment of escape from the confinement manifested in the images of the natural surroundings and later, the house, associated with “old dregs, old difficulties”. The break between the seventh and the eighth stanza, “My mind runs with them, // Pooling in heel-prints, fumbling pebble and stem” can be thought of as mimicking the motion of the streams as the line is not confined but runs on into the next stanza. Significantly it ends when “the day empties its images” which is also the moment when the speaker turns her attention towards the house. Among the “dark-boughed cypresses” where the speaker seems to float like the ghost of a leaf, or a bird, the speaker suggests that she is “too happy” which might seem as a contradiction given the pervasive sense of loss and detachment. While this reflection on her emotional state resonates with the speaker's ambivalence towards the supposedly blissful setting of the “lit house” which she enters in the last stanza, it can also be viewed in relation to the fleeting, momentary spatial freedom as her mind “runs” with the spindling rivulets and that she in fact experiences happiness yet she is “too happy” since this momentary freedom is inevitably conditioned by her return to the house.

The lit house is suggestive of a safe haven in the “drafty half-light”; yet, to be returning to the house is not a return to comfort and protection as it is preceded by the suggestion that “the old dregs, the old difficulties take me to wife”. This indicates the speaker’s return to unspecified difficulties associated with the house and possibly related to a troubled marriage given the implied reference to marriage in the phrase “take me to wife”. However, this is suggestive of more than a troubled marriage as it also emphasizes the speaker’s passivity in relation to the problems that she is facing. In this sense the speaker’s return to the house is an involuntary return to deep-rooted despair and the speaker ultimately abandons the spatial freedom momentarily glimpsed when her mind ran with the “spindling rivulets”. The mind running free with the rivulets in this way suggests that this is a freedom from restraint valued over the restrictions associated with the house, and that being free spatially is also a freedom of the mind.

The question of the significance of the speaker’s confinement in infelicitous places which can be found in the poems discussed here, might lead us down what has become the conventional path of feminist criticism. Shands writes that “the material limitations women have experienced are often metaphorized in literature by women and in feminist discourse as images of enclosure, while freedom from restraint is visualized in terms of escape or as images of fluidity and boundarylessness” (72). A poem like “Parliament Hill Fields” certainly

evokes this dichotomy in the notion of the speaker's mind following the "spindling rivulets" in a fluid motion away from the house which stands as an image of involuntary confinement. However, the personae in Plath's poetry are not always gendered and thus to say that the tension between place and space stems from a specifically feminine predicament would inevitably suggest that we are reading the poetry through Plath, the person. In this respect, I would rather suggest that while Shands' observation might inform our readings of Plath's poetry, the spatial dynamic should not be viewed as an essentially "female" dimension to the writing but rather as a self-reflexive dimension of the poetry.

Psyche as Place

The infelicitous places confronted by the speaker in poems like "Lesbos" and "The Detective" are rooms or houses experienced, felt or explored by the speaker but they are not necessarily images of the speaker's mind in the sense of a "place" interior to the speaker. The affinity between the house image and that of the psyche is discussed by Bachelard, and he argues that "[o]n whatever theoretical horizon we examine it, the house image would appear to have become the topography of our intimate being" (xxxvi). In this sense the house can function as a spatial figure for the human psyche¹⁸. Moreover, as Casey points out, the "placiality of the psyche" is central to Bachelard for the "poetic images flare up somewhere, and the place in which they do so is psychical in nature" (288). In "Dark House" (the second poem in the sequence "Poem for a Birthday") we can see how the image of the house is conflated with a notion of the psyche as an interior place.

Carole Ferrier has referred to the metaphorical use of houses and rooms in Plath's poetry as "analogies for the unconscious" in her reading of the so called Bee Sequence poems¹⁹ (qtd. in Brennan 61). However, in "Dark House" the description of the house through the extended metaphor of an insect's dwelling becomes more than an analogy to the

¹⁸ Here Bachelard draws on a comparison by C.G Jung between the structure of a house and that of the human mental structure and suggests that "there is ground for taking the house as a *tool for analysis* of the human soul" (xxxvi). Bachelard writes that the word "soul" is not synonymous with "mind" as the soul "is an immortal word" and seems to associate the soul with intimate meaning as close to being as breath itself: "[I]t is a word born of our breath". The soul "possesses an inner light" and gives rise to the poetic image whereas the "mind" connotes the construction and the crafting of poetry (xx, xxi).

¹⁹ The bee sequence consists of five poems written in 1962: "The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm" and "Wintering" (Walter-Perreira).

unconscious, as the image of the house posits the speaker as simultaneously outside and inside itself. The spatial dynamic at work here is thus one that pivots on the division outside-inside yet also dissolves this division. However, in the case of “Dark House” this is further complicated by the way in which the speaker eludes any notion of a “unified” subject. Rose points out that “[o]ne of the reasons why the poem is so difficult to read is that this instability works at the level of the most fundamental physical identity of the speaker. We simply never know from where, or rather what body, she is speaking. The ‘I’ enters into its objects, confounds the limit or distinction between them” (53). Despite the difficulty in establishing the “identity” of the speaker here, the image of the house is important as the image through which the speaker “constructs” itself:

This is a dark house, very big
I made it myself,
Cell by cell from a quiet corner,
Chewing at the gray paper,
Oozing the glue drops,
Whistling, wiggling my ears,
Thinking of something else

It has so many cellars,
Such eelish delvings!

The speaker constructs the dark house out of paper, like a wasp would build the house for its eggs, while also burrowing within the house (Strangeways 145). Kroll also reads the dark house as a possible reference to the pupa of the firefly larva as the pupa can be described as an oval earthen cell (99)²⁰. However, whatever insect we might find relevant for the house and the speaker, we should rather ask what the insect metaphor might signify here. The speaker made the house “thinking of something else” which suggests that the construction did not require specific contemplation. If we are to think of the speaker as a wasp, for instance, then this certainly makes sense as the wasp would most likely not have to consider the construction of the house through “thinking”. Thus the house appears from within the speaker as the result of what seems to be an inherent capability of constructing the dark house. The third stanza

²⁰ Kroll elaborates on the insect metaphor thus: “Although the clues are not obvious, the speaker of ‘Dark House’ is probably a firefly larva, an identification which at least coordinates many of the disparate details in the poem. The firefly larva or glowworm is often luminous, and the speaker of ‘Dark House’ does apparently glow” (99).

opens with the speaker exclaiming: “These marrowy tunnels! / Moley-handed, I eat my way”. Here “moley-handed” suggests a mole-like creature and echoes the merging of self and other in “Blue Moles”²¹. Furthermore the “marrowy tunnels” resonate with the moles’ “opening of veins” in “Blue Moles”. However, the violent movement through the interior of the dark house via the marrowy tunnels is also a movement through the interior of the speaker. In his discussion of the dialectics of outside and inside, Bachelard has suggested that “sometimes it is by being outside itself that being tests its consistencies” (215). Bachelard’s observation resonates with the position of the speaker in “Dark House” where the speaker is both outside and inside itself and by confusing the boundaries between what constitutes the subject seems to test, or at least negotiate, the character of its being. Outside since the speaker is positioned in the house which the speaker also has constructed, and inside as the house simultaneously constitutes the speaker.

“Dark House” ends with what appears to be a retreat to an earthy, almost prenatal state where it is “warm and tolerable”:

Pebble smells, turnipy chambers.
 Small nostrils are breathing.
 Little humble loves!
 Footlings, boneless as noses,
 It is warm and tolerable
 In the bowel of the root.
 Here’s a cuddly mother.

Here the “eelish delvings” and cellars seem to have been replaced or evolved into something almost pleasant. However, as Strangeways points out, in the last stanza “it is unclear whether the speaker is referring to herself or something inside herself” (145). Thus the last stanza rather resonates with the playfulness of the speaker hinted at in the first stanza as the speaker constructs the house while “whistling, wiggling my ears”.

While “Getting There” departs from the other poems discussed here, in that there are no apparent images or references to a domestic setting, the notion of confinement and the (im)possibility of escape surfaces in the image of the train. Unlike the personae in “Lesbos,” “The Detective” and “Parliament Hill Fields,” who find themselves inside or at least in the

²¹ In “Blue Moles” the speaker observes two dead moles and reflects on nature’s cruelty only to “enter the soft pelt of the mole” and follow the moles in a dreamlike state as “outsize hands prepare a path”.

vicinity of houses and rooms, the speaker in “Getting There” is trapped inside a train violently moving across the land as the speaker is dragging her body “quietly through the straw of the boxcars”. “Getting There” has been subject to some debate as to whether it should be viewed as a personal or political poem. In Kroll’s view the speaker’s “nightmare journey through entanglement, confusion and, suffering culminates not in a death seen as birth into purity, but in a purification which prepares her for rebirth (of her true self) and her return, purified of her past history, to the ‘you’ addressed at the end of the poem” (165). This notion of the journey as a movement towards a purification of the self is challenged by Strangeways who argues that: “Because the ending of ‘Getting There’ does not constitute an unambiguous positive transformation, the poem is not so much a personal account of the journey through life to rebirth, but is concerned with making a wider political and moral point about the importance of cultural memory” (104). However, whether one reads “Getting There” as a reflection on the possibility of purification through rebirth or a complex account of the perilous tendency to forget history in the name of progress, there is an underlying spatial dynamic here that should not be overlooked. The train, and the boxcar where the speaker is located, is suggestive of a place without place as it perpetually rushes forward, across a space initially identified as Russia: “It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other”²². Curiously, the speaking subject de-emphasizes the importance of a temporal reference and explicitly refers to the geographical location of the journey as if to point to the possibility that the images of terror and desperation which intensify the war imagery are also the struggle of the individual and thus not only “war” on a larger scale. However, the landscape through which the speaker travels is barely a natural landscape, but rather a battlefield with “The men the blood still pumps forward, / Legs, arms piled outside / The tent of unending cries”. In the third stanza the speaker says:

It is so small
 The place I am getting to, why are there these obstacles -----
 The body of this woman,
 Charred skirts and deathmask
 Mourned by religious figures, by garlanded children.

²² This can also be viewed in relation to the war imagery Plath deploys here, the wheels of the trains are, for instance, associated with the “terrible brains /of Krupp,” presumably referring to the Krupp family, influential German family of weapon manufacturers. The image of a violent, painful wartime train journey also resonates with the Holocaust imagery frequently used by Plath in the late poems, and is suggestive of the subject being transported to a concentration camp.

And now detonations -----
 Thunder and guns.
 The fire's between us.
 Is there no still place
 Turning and turning in the middle air,
 Untouched and untouchable.
 The train is dragging itself, it is screaming -----
 An animal
 Insane for the destination,
 The bloodspot,
 The face at the end of the flare.

Here the destination, the place the speaker is "getting to" is conceived as a "small place" which resonates with the notion of the bloodspot and the face at the end of the flare (as if the train is now a bullet about to be discharged from the barrel of a gun). Moreover, when the speaker finally "arrives" at the destination as she steps from "the black car of Lethe" in the last two lines of the poem, the arrival seems conditioned by forgetfulness. Yet the speaker also questions if there is a still place, "untouched and untouchable," which is not necessarily the destination. Instead this still place seems suggestive of being suspended in air, and in a sense of being undefined. This place is not a state of motionlessness but rather a state of being removed, of being outside the pressing confinement of the boxcar and in extension the body itself which has become an obstacle. This place that is "turning and turning," the repetition here emphasizes the perpetual motion, would not lead towards a destination but allow the speaker to be removed from the horrors associated with the confinement of the boxcar. Even though "Getting There" is thematically dominated by notions of war, birth and rebirth, memory and loss, it is thus worth noting the tension between the movement towards a destination and the possibility of escaping the assigned route (whether it is the individual subject's "journey" through life or the "journey" of societies through history) articulated through the spatial dynamic it evokes.

Walls

Walls take on a particular significance in several poems as they constitute a spatial demarcation that serves to construct boundaries exterior to the speaking subject while also disrupting these boundaries. According to Pamela Annas, Plath from late 1960 and on began

increasingly to “image her world as made up of walls” (70). This is expressed perhaps most extremely in “Apprehensions” where four walls govern the speaker’s existence and simultaneously constitute her very being. In “The Detective” the detective persona suggests that “The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall” which appears as an extreme manifestation of being confined within the domestic setting. One may also note the allusion to Edgar Allan Poe’s short story “The Black Cat” in which the narrator murders his wife and disposes of the body by placing it in a wall²³. Thus the image of the woman tamped into a wall evokes an extreme image of patriarchal oppression which is further intensified when the detective observes that the mouth of the woman was the first part of her body to disappear: “It had been insatiable / And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit / To wrinkle and dry”. Here the metonymy between mouth and speech suggests that the woman was somehow punished for speaking too freely and the punishment, to be murdered or, as the detective finds; “vaporized,” is a result of this.

In “Morning Song” the mother and bystanders witnessing the arrival of the newborn child “stand round blankly as walls” which could suggest that the witnesses’ presence provides the infant with shelter²⁴. Still the reference to the witnesses, as walls here, rather seems to imply marginalization and distance from the birth of the child especially as it is related to the blankness suggestive of indifference²⁵. This sense of distance, emotional as well as spatial, within the confines of the room surfaces again as the child is welcomed as “New statue. / In a drafty museum”. In “Barren Woman,” composed shortly after “Morning Song,” both the image of the museum and the echo appear again but now in sharp contrast to the reference in “Morning Song”. The speaking subject in “Barren woman” states: “Empty, I echo to the least footfall, / Museum without statues, grand with pillars, porticoes, rotundas”. The sterility of the speaker (implied by the title “Barren Woman”) makes her empty and thus a museum without its artifacts. In “Barren Woman,” the interior of the speaking subject is presented from the onset in spatial terms and the description serves to emphasize emptiness and sterility. The “fountain leaps and sinks back into itself” in perpetual eruption as an

²³ Confinement and premature burial are of course recurrent motifs in Poe’s fiction, the point here is that the allusion emphasizes the act of disposing of the woman’s body by “tamping it into a wall” as murder and an image of extreme patriarchal oppression in its marginalization of the woman. The oppressive domestic sphere manifested in walls also echoes another short story, namely Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper”.

²⁴ Similarly in “Three Women,” the first of the three voices says referring to the protection of her newborn child “How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off”.

²⁵ Images of things “blank” and blankness are often negative in Plath’s poetry, cf. for instance the reference to “cold blanks” as a part of the imagery of death in “Apprehensions”.

allusion to the sexual act without actual consummation and pregnancy, and even the flowers are “marble lilies”. Moreover, “Barren Woman” also provides an example of how Plath deploys spatial metaphors to represent the body; we are presented with a description of the elaborate museum without statues, but the space here is that of the body, conceived in spatial terms. This can be viewed as a peculiarly explicit notion of being in one’s place, that is, the body is conceived as room (in this case a museum) in which the speaker is contained, thus she is always already in her *place*.

In “Morning Song,” however, the spatial frame established in the poem is initially exterior to the speaker as that of a room, presumably a bedroom. “The flat pink roses” surrounding the baby are suggestive of wallpaper in the room where the baby’s “moth-breath / Flickers”. The flowers are referenced again as the speaker, presumably the child’s mother, says “I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown”²⁶. This connection between the speaking subject and the wallpaper suggests a certain affinity between the speaker and the walls of the room, and to some extent expands the reference to the witnesses as walls and possibly shelter for the newborn child, as the specific quality of the walls is now extended to the mother who stumbles from bed to see to her child. However, since the notion of the bystanders, and now the mother, as “walls” also connote marginalization and distance this affinity can be seen as reflecting the mother’s emotional distance to the child. This is not to say that the room is associated with solely negative values, when the child’s “clear vowels rise like balloons” the speaker seems to marvel at the beauty of the newborn child, and the child’s voice is a “handful of notes” rather than the cry that initially woke the mother. Nevertheless, the ambivalence towards motherhood expressed by the speaker who is no more the child’s “mother / Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind’s hand” complicates the notion of the bedroom as a positive place.

The morning comes as “The window square // Whitens and swallows its dull stars” which evokes the arrival of a new day; as the sun rises the stars fade and light comes through

²⁶ One may note that the association between roses and Victorian design also appears in “Nick and the Candlestick,” another poem dealing with the relationship between mother and child: “I have hung our cave with roses, / With soft rugs ----- / The last of Victoriana”. Here the rugs also connote domesticity in the face of the “Old cave of calcium / Icicles” with its “Waxy stalactites” where a “Black bat airs” as the speaker construes a room of comfort for the child. However, in “Morning Song,” where the speaker refers to herself as “cow-heavy and floral,” the Victorian nightgown can also be seen as the speaker’s reflection on a sense of sexlessness associated with the shapeless, old-fashioned nightgown and in extension the role of motherhood.

the window. The emphasis here is on the window, thus the window square functions as the agent of dawn and even though the stars presumably belong to the vast expanse of the sky they are attributed to the window. The dull stars belong to the window square which indicates how the space confined within the walls of the bedroom governs the speaker's existence and in this way is a place of confinement contrasted by the space, the far sea, felt by the speaker. The speaker says "I wake to listen: / A far sea moves in my ear" which is suggestive of a notably different space from the confinement of the bedroom. That the sea moves in the ear of the speaker suggests that she is listening to the sound of a sea, (possibly a metaphor for the baby breathing) but also that it is so close, so internalized that it moves inside her. The "far sea" also indicates that this is an expansion of space beyond the confinement of the bedroom. Yet this space is perceived as located inside the speaker as if she affirms the pull of an undefined space as an integral part of herself.

Unlike "Morning Song" which moves through concretized settings of the "museum" and the bedroom, "Apprehensions" presents the reader with only walls as the four stanzas each present a different colored wall; white, gray, red and black ²⁷. The title is suggestive of the subject's fears projected on the four walls possibly constituting a room though not explicitly referred to as such. While describing the walls the speaker is moving into the mind and into the body, the exteriority of the walls is thus juxtaposed with a movement through the interiority of the speaker's perceptions. Moreover the mind of the subject becomes a place from which there is no escape. The white wall in the first stanza is associated with an expansion of space outside the confined place within the four walls;

There is this white wall, above which the sky creates itself –
 Infinite, green, utterly untouchable.
 Angels swim in it, and the stars, in indifference also.
 They are my medium.
 The sun dissolves on this wall, bleeding its lights.

The green sky above the white wall can be viewed as an inversion of the sky and a sea, almost as if we are seeing the world upside down thus reversing the spatial relation between the sky and the sea. In this way the angels and stars are swimming in the sky, as if the vast expansion of the sky was an ocean. Interestingly, the sky "creates itself" which is suggestive of the sky as separate from the speaker and not primarily a projection. Thus the sky creates itself in a

²⁷Robin Peel points out that the poem even had the title "Walls" in an early draft (181).

shape indifferently and independently from the speaker. Still, the speaker refers to the angels and the stars as “my medium” which on one level suggests that the speaker reflects on herself as a celestial body, quite literally a body in space. However, the speaker acknowledges that the angels and stars are inevitably remote, and like the expansion of space that is the sky, “utterly untouchable”. Moreover the sun “bleeding its lights” is not merely a reference to sunshine or possibly sunset,²⁸ but also foreshadows the gray wall of the mind in the second stanza which appears as “clawed and bloody”.

A gray wall now, clawed and bloody.
Is there no way out of the mind?
Steps at my back spiral into a well.
There are no trees or birds in this world,
There is only a sourness.

Here the speaker questions whether one can escape the mind as if the mind itself, like the room, offers nothing but confinement. In this way, with the appearance of the gray wall the mind appears as a place from which the speaker cannot escape²⁹. The steps spiraling into a well are suggests that the spine is a spiral staircase into the body. The trees and birds, associated with the natural world, are absent since the world is the internal world of the speaker. In the third stanza, the red wall reflects what the speaker is “made” of, which suggests that we are now presented with images of the body:

This red wall winces continually:
A red fist, opening and closing,
Two gray, papery bags –
This is what I am made of, this and a terror
Of being wheeled off under crosses and a rain of pietas.

Here the “red fist” and the “gray papery bags” seem suggestive of a heart³⁰, the “opening and

²⁸Rosenblatt suggests that “the colors reflect the changing light patterns during the course of a day, from early morning (white) through afternoon cloudiness (gray), sunset (red), and nightfall (black)” (99).

²⁹ In “Insomniac” (1961), composed prior to “Apprehensions” (1962), the speaker describes a sleep-deprived man whose “head is a little interior of gray mirrors” and that “He lives without privacy in a lidless room”. While this poem is significantly different from “Apprehensions,” it too deploys the notion of consciousness as a lidless room and the mind as a gray interior.

³⁰ Cf. “Tulips” where the speaker says “And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes”.

closing” indicating heartbeats whereas the “gray papery bags” can be thought of as lungs³¹. However, the Christian imagery of the crosses and pietas connects the speaker’s terror to a religious context of death and suffering. In this way the speaker in this stanza brings together images of the body and of the mind within the “room” implied by the four walls. The final, black, wall where “unidentifiable birds / Swivel their heads and cry” has been read as an image of death (Rosenblatt 99). Here, the “I” of the previous stanzas has been replaced by “us” which, according to Rosenblatt, indicates “the universality of the death world”. From this perspective the last stanza would thus include the reader who, like the “I” of the previous stanzas, will ultimately and inevitably face death. However, given the reference to the birds, the first-person plural could also refer to the speaker and the birds, both confined in the mind of the speaker towards which death moves rapidly³²:

On a black wall, unidentifiable birds
Swivel their heads and cry.
There is no talk of immortality among these!
Cold blanks approach us:
They move in a hurry.

The “cold blanks” here seem to imply death as an absence (of color, warmth, objects) and while the confinement of the walls indicate the speaker’s fears, bodily and spiritual, the blank death that might extinguish the speaker’s fears appears as even more frightening. Moreover, the poem ends with an image of death which would be the end of the speaker, and simultaneously becomes the end of the poem. In this sense the cold blanks also reflect the absence of writing. The room of the four walls is thus permanently “closed,” to the speaker as well as the reader.

If the walls in “Morning Song” connote the speaking subject’s affinity with the room

³¹ In Rosenblatt’s reading of “Apprehensions” the red fist “suggests the contractions of the uterus” and the two gray papery bags are the ovaries (99). This, however, is based on Rosenblatt’s reading of the poem as dealing with the fear of death in childbirth, an interpretation that becomes problematic given that the subject is never referred to as a woman, or a man for that matter. Interestingly Robin Peel offers a different reading of the poem and points out that while the poem can be read as addressing “marital apprehensions” it is also “consistent with the fears raised by contemporary newspaper reports” (181).

³² The different colored walls and the final wall, or room, of death could potentially be read as suggestive of another Poesque reference, this time to the story “The Masque of the Red Death” where the prince who believes that he is safe within the confines of his castle is finally confronted with death in a black room after moving through several different colored rooms. Thus that which the walls would serve to exclude inevitably appears on the *inside* and thereby questions the possibility of excluding a destructive force like death.

and suggest confinement, in “Contusion” the walls of the room have become the walls of an immobile body. The analogy between body and room here pivots on the notion of the skin as walls for the body, and conversely, the walls of the room. Similarly Shands writes that “[a] body is separated from other bodies by its exterior, that is, the skin, just as the brain is a boundary between outer and inner worlds, both physically and functionally (having developed from the same tissue as our skin)” (38). In “Contusion” there is no “I” of the poem, and the speaking subject is present as a body whose pallor is contrasted by the appearance of a bruise: “Color floods to the spot, dull purple. / The rest of the body is all washed out, / The color of pearl”. The bruise, or contusion, is identified as a “doom mark” and suggests that the body is dying. Relating the bruise to a fly³³ also serves to emphasize the appearance of the bruise as a memento mori motif: “The size of a fly, / The doom mark / Crawls down the wall”. However, the contusion only resembles a fly in size and the walls that it crawls down are those of the body, thus the body is constructed in spatial terms further developed in the last stanza: “The heart shuts, / The sea slides back, / The mirrors are sheeted”. In this sense there is no distinction between an external world subject to the speaker’s perceptions and the interiority of the speaker. However, as Annas has pointed out, the sea imagery holds the poem together (119). Thus the sea which in poems like “Morning Song” points to a vast expansion of space, unattainable to the speaker, is now a unifying image for the subject, its perceptions and the writing itself.

Place and Poetics

When paying attention to the infelicitous places in Plath’s poetry and the way in which notions of place take on a particular significance, one may also note how certain poems evoke an affinity between place and poetics (the latter referring to the writing of poetry and the role of the poet in relation to her writing). The allusion to the Greek island of Lesbos in the title of “Lesbos,” for instance, is suggestive of a place of poetry that is inaccessible to the speaker who finds herself in the claustrophobic setting of the kitchen. In “The Detective,” the detective’s last words “Make notes” appear as a commentary on the potentially elusive character of poetry itself as it in a sense refers to the poem itself. To make notes is to attempt to fix the events in writing, yet the detective acknowledges that it is a case of “vaporization”

³³ Anna Svensson identifies the echo of Emily Dickinson’s poem 465, “I heard a Fly buzz – when I died” as “a hint that death is near” (56).

which undermines the possibility of fixing anything. Yet, on another level, the detective's notes constitute the poem and the imperative to make notes thus in a sense refers back to the poem itself. However, while poems like "Lesbos" and "Morning Song" present the reader with the kitchens and bedrooms as concretized settings, the house of eloquence in "Conversation Among the Ruins" is somewhat different. Here the house is a spatial frame but also metaphorical in its affinity with the poetic imagination. By playing with double meanings and mythical imagery Plath brings the affinity between house spaces, poetry and the poetic imagination to the fore. The "elegant house," excessively luxurious with its "garlands of fruits," "fabulous lutes" and peacocks is turned into a ruin as an intruding presence causes the "rich order of walls" to fall:

Through portico of my elegant house you stalk
 With your wild furies, disturbing garlands of fruit
 And the fabulous lutes and peacocks, rending the net
 Of all decorum which holds the whirlwind back.
 Now, rich order of walls is fallen; rooks croak
 Above the appalling ruin; in bleak light
 Of your stormy eye, magic takes flight
 Like a daunted witch, quitting castle when real days break.

The house, initially attributed with items associated with classical beauty and art, crumbles under the intrusion, and as exquisite as the house was, as desolate is the ruin. The intruder brings not only the wild furies, but by destroying the net of appropriate behavior also causes the whirlwind to tear down the house. While he does not necessarily bring the whirlwind, the reference to "your stormy eye" sets up a connection between the intruder and the unrestricted force of the furies unleashed on the house. Here Plath plays with the dual meaning of furies being both goddesses of vengeance, which adds to the veneer of Greco-Roman mythical imagery employed throughout the poem, but also referring to the rage of the presumably male figure who stands "heroic in coat and tie" in the last stanza.

Moreover, the "decorum" suggests appropriate, socially correct behavior which relates to the notion of an elegant house, but also echoes classical poetics and Horace's *Ars Poetica* in particular. In this respect the principle of decorum would mean conformity of style (something the poem refuses to employ by introducing the, in this respect, anachronistic coat and tie, which to some extent clashes with the more conventional style in the first stanza).

Christina Britzolakis notes that “[a]s in de Chirico's painting of the same name, the ruin is the scene of a 'metaphysical' clash of interior and exterior, culture and nature, classicism and modernity; 'fractured pillars' are juxtaposed with domestic furniture, the speaker's 'Grecian tunic' with the male figure's 'coat and tie’” (196). Moreover, the decorum is referred to as a net, thus permeable and easily torn down by the whirlwind. In this way the whirlwind seems suggestive of unrestrained poetic imagination as opposed to the conventional construction of the house that while being exquisite is still dependent on the order of walls. Here the reference to “magic” is also particularly interesting; the speaker’s “magic” disappears in the presence of the intruder as if deprived of her poetic inspiration.

In the second and last stanza, the house has fallen and the speaker appears to be defeated by the intruding other:

Fractured pillars frame prospects of rock;
While you stand heroic in coat and tie, I sit
Composed in Grecian tunic and psyche-knot,
Rooted to your black look, the play turned tragic:
With such blight wrought on our bankrupt estate,
What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?

Playing on the meaning of the word “composed,” referring on one level to the speaker’s calm but also the composition of a poem, the speaker in her Grecian tunic and psyche-knot (a conventional hairstyle for women but also alluding to the mythical figure Psyche) is cast in the conventional poetic style associated with the house. More importantly, this suggests that the speaking subject is now subject to the poetic imagination of the other, the figure in coat and tie. That the play has turned tragic suggests, on one level, that the playfulness of the elegant house has now been replaced by seriousness. Yet on another level, this also seems to suggest that they are enacting a tragedy, thus placing the conversation of the poem in a wider literary context. The ceremony of words points to the conversation between the two characters who find themselves among the ruins, but it is also suggestive of poetry and of the poem itself³⁴. As Britzolakis points out, “[t]he poem inscribes itself as a 'ceremony of words' which

³⁴ Rose observes the connection between the last line of “Conversation Among the Ruins” and a similar phrase from a passage in Plath’s journals where Plath comments on her relationship with Ted Hughes, Rose notes that the ceremony of words can be viewed as a “figure for the always inadequate, the always partial, nature of representation in relation to subjectivity itself (no one, true, voice of Plath behind the ordering and censoring of her writing)” (89, 90).

strives in vain to 'patch' the 'havoc' that has been visited upon the subject" (196). However, in a way the poem has patched the havoc by fixing the image of the mock-elegant house in writing yet at the same time the poem significantly ends by questioning whether poetry can indeed "patch" the ruins of classical order.

"Conversation Among the Ruins" is the earliest poem included here, and the opening poem of the *Collected Poems*. As we have seen, the house here is associated with classical poetics and potentially conflicting poetic visions. In this way the house image is metaphorical in a way that departs from the concretized settings in certain later poems. However, the house also functions as a spatial frame, since within the poem it is in a sense the speaker's environment. If we compare this house to the insect's dwelling in "Dark House" (1959), we can see how the house in the latter takes on a different significance as an image of the psyche as an interior place. This enables the speaker in "Dark House" to negotiate the character of its being by taking a position both inside and outside itself as the exteriority and interiority of place meet in the figure of the house. In "Conversation Among the Ruins" the speaker becomes subject to the intruder's poetic vision as she sits "composed" in "Grecian tunic and psyche-knot" after the house has fallen, while in "Dark House" we find a subject persistently constructing its "house" without the intrusion of another presence.

With the exception of "Conversation Among the Ruins" and "Dark House," the selection of poems discussed here were written between 1961 and 1963. Beginning with "Parliament Hill Fields" (1961) and ending with "Contusion" (1963) the treatment of space and infelicitous place appears to have developed into a complex relationship between speaker and place where the speaker is ultimately conflated with the "placeness" of a confined, delimited space. Despite the leakiness of place in "Parliament Hill Fields" and the speaker's return to a house that seems defined by "old dregs and difficulties," the configuration of space and place is still one where the speaker is positioned as a subject who is able to relate her impressions. Moreover, the speaker glimpses a momentary freedom in the "spindling rivulets". In "Contusion," the speaking subject is reduced to an immobile body and the conflation of the body with a metaphorical room appears as a curious manifestation of being in one's place in the sense that the body is ultimately a place of confinement from which one cannot escape by other means than death. Similarly in "Barren Woman" (1961) the sterile body is conceived as a museum, although in this case there is still a speaker, an "I" to present the place. In "Morning Song" (1961), on the other hand, the museum is figuratively the room in which the

mother and bystanders witness the birth of the child, and the poem then primarily takes place in concretized setting of the bedroom but the speaker reflects on the open space of the “far sea” that moves in her ear. In “Apprehensions” (1962) the four walls can be seen as constituting a metaphorical room in which images of the body and mind meet and foregrounds a sense of confinement. More importantly, the notion of existing within the confines of the room, or behind the walls, points to the way in which the body and mind are conceived as places, outside yet inside the speaker. However, “The Detective” (1962), composed after “Apprehensions,” shows how the placeness of the house is dissolved, or vaporized, into an undefined space. Here we can sense the leakiness of place from “Parliament Hill Fields,” but this time the landscape is stripped, strict and formal with its “seven hills,” “red furrow” and “blue mountain” and the house is not only associated with the difficulties of the speaker but has become a sinister crime scene. The detailed depiction of domestic frustration in “Lesbos” (1962) presents the kitchen as a particularly infelicitous place, similar to that of “The Detective” (composed a few weeks earlier) but now focused on the two women’s inability to escape the place assigned to them by their social context. In “Getting There” (1962) the speaker’s confinement does not pertain to the domestic sphere, but the spatial dynamic evokes the tension between dwelling in a place while journeying forth towards a potentially unattainable space of becoming something, or someone, else. “The Munich Mannequins” (1963) deploys the spatial frame of the city but draws in the domestic, and points to the notion of being confined yet paradoxically part of a spatial expansion in the sense of a journey, or an expansion of geographical space (which in its turn would be made up of places).

In the later poems we do not necessarily see an increased use of metaphorical places and spaces as opposed to concretized spatial frames (I would argue that they alternate throughout Plath’s oeuvre) but rather, as the reading of “Contusion” suggests, an intensified awareness of “being in one’s place”. The pull of an undefined space in relation to this is significant as an attempt to negotiate the speaker’s experience of being fixed, confined in a place. The trajectory here is not to be viewed as a successive development towards a final stage of completion where the speaker succumbs to the frustration of infelicitous places, or transcends topicality to a “pure” space, but rather as a way of acknowledging that there is a chafing tension, one that is not harmonized.

Moreover, by reading a selection of Plath’s poems with a focus on the preoccupation

with what I have termed “infelicitous places” and the tension that arises between notions of space and place, it seems as if I have implicitly suggested that these poems can be viewed as a unity. This, however, calls for further explanations. As Rose points out: “Plath is not consistent. It has been the persistent attempt to impose a consistency on her which has been so damaging – whether as diagnosis or celebration of her work” (10). While I do not wish to impose a unity on a wide range of themes and personae that do not fit into narrow categorization, I am suggesting that there is a unifying factor in the chafing tension between being in one’s place and negotiating a space of becoming manifested in the poems.

Richard Allen Blessing reflects on the motivating forces behind Plath’s writing thus:

Perhaps the act of writing poetry might be seen as an act of freeing the self, of affirming that one is not gagged or bound. Looked at in that way, Sylvia Plath’s poems become the poetry of an escape artist, the only strategy she had for releasing the energy of her psyche from the mortal wrapping against which she had struggled until the end (72)

While this is certainly an interesting reflection on the poet’s reasons for writing, one may wonder how the act of freeing oneself through writing relates to the way in which the personae in Plath’s poetry confronts restrictions of place and the potentially liberating expansiveness of space. Considering the elusiveness of space, and the way in which “space” as soon as it is defined, run the risk of being restricted or delimited, and in this sense a place, writing poetry might be a way of exploring the limits that define and aspire towards a space of becoming, regardless of whether this is attainable.

In conclusion, the personae in Plath’s poetry confront the walls, houses, and rooms of a poetic world in which the speaker never ceases to sense the pull of an undefined space. Blessing writes that “[Plath] is fascinating because the “shape” of her psyche is peculiarly bottomless, a world of infinite plunge” (59). Here Blessing does not necessarily refer to the poet’s psyche in terms of the psyche of the person Sylvia Plath, but rather the poetic vision as it is articulated through poetry. Following this, I would argue that Plath’s world as it comes to us through her poetry rather than being an infinite plunge presents the reader with a constant positioning and re-positioning in relation to an inevitable topicality of the world.

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