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# Psychotic perception and literary construction of the self: Some Plathian images of an ordered chaos

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE ISSUE OF IDENTITY AND PERCEPTION OF THE SELF

As several critics have discussed[1] the question of identity is such a crucial element in Sylvia Plath's works that any kind of interpretation – whether we consider psychoanalytical, feminist, phenomenological, or text-bound approaches – cannot take place without mention of the self.

Accordingly, Britzolakis considers Plath's production as an on-going process of personality rehearsal where the writer attempted different representations of the self, often contradictory. In her view, underlying this split of Plath's personality there is a need to conform to the standards of conventional values "as a product of a gendered literary market, which assigns the production of 'high' culture to men and that of 'low' or 'popular' culture to women" (17). Although hers is one of the most far-reaching interpretations of Plath's work, I think that it is still insufficient to explain the fascinating nature of Sylvia Plath's poetical meditations on her one particular self.

It is well-known that this American poet has also been identified by many as a psychotic writer. This is the case of some researchers interested in drawing connections between extraordinarily creative individuals and different kinds of psychosis. Thus Gordon Claridge, Ruth Prior and Gwen Watkins[2] argued "that creativity and psychotic symptomatology do indeed reflect equivalent forms of cognitive processing" (22-23). In their study of Plath's case they concluded that she "would probably now be diagnosed as suffering from schizoaffective psychotic disorder, with predominantly depressive features" (211), despite the opinions of one of her biographers, Linda Wagner-Martin, who reports that "her

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[1] D. Holbrook in *Poetry and Existence*, London: University of London, 1976; and Christina Britzolakis in *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, Oxford /New York: Clarendon Press, 1998.

[2] *Sounds From The Bell Jar: Ten Psychotic Authors*, London: Macmillan, 1990. The authors also analyse the cases of Antonia White and Virginia Woolf, among others.

psychiatrist found no trace of psychosis or schizophrenia" (quoted in Claridge et al., 211). So there seems to be no agreement as to Plath's mental condition. However, what seems clear, as the authors of *Sounds from the Bell Jar* highlight, is that "like many psychotic writers she felt herself separated from life by a 'transparent envelop'; even the nine years she saw as happy before her father's death 'sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle'".

Whether she was truly psychotic or not, one has to agree that she perceived the "world" as something disconnected from herself, hostile and inaccessible. This feeling of being severed from reality, being "under the bell jar", led Sylvia Plath to feel terribly confused about herself and ambivalent in her relationship to others. But in spite of the overwhelming impression of confusion, I believe that especially in her prose she tries to impose some kind of coherence both on that "outer reality" and herself, although with a complex – perhaps even a reversed – logic to that of the "non-psychotic" person.

Perhaps it is due to the fact that she seems to be engaged in a constant quest to make compatible her different identities, her "outer" selves with her "inner" self – perhaps that of poet? – that the idea of a split personality turns out to be a relevant point to discuss in relation to Plath's literary production and her different versions of the self. As I hope to make evident Sylvia Plath tries to impose in writing some kind of internal coherence on the chaos she perceives about her "selves". To that purpose she resorts to some basic primary metaphors and elaborates on some complex conceptual metaphors which may be identified at least in the examples given below as "The Self is a Container"[3] – a variation on "The Self as Location metaphor" – and "The Self as a Physical Object", denominations coined by cognitivist to refer to particular mappings normally used to speak metaphorically about "the self". Cognitive researchers Lakoff and Johnson[4] (267-289) have stressed the fact that these metaphors are quite widespread conventional ways of schematising our perception and knowledge of the self. In fact they suggest that those mappings of the self belong to a "shared world view" found across cultures. According to this theory, depicting the self as isolated by an invisible crystal jar from the rest, for instance, is by no means an original mapping of the experience of the self exclusive to Sylvia Plath, and it is not by any means peculiar to poetic expression. Quite on the contrary it is found in other schizoid or psychotic writers as well but also in everyday speech.

Now, following Lakoff and Johnson's "theory of metaphor"[5], my aim is to trace in some of Plath's short stories from *Johnny Pannic and the Bible of Dreams* some of her images of the self so as to illustrate how she conceptualises her own self in a very "consistent" way and to what extent she elaborates on the basic metaphorical mappings we all share. This may shed some light on the distinct quality of her view of reality and, as I intend to give proof of, on the fact that a closer analysis to her metaphorical mappings of the "self" provides a much more ordered picture, at least coherent with her view, than she makes us believe in her despairing entries of the *Journals*. What is clear to me is that she perceives her own self and her relation to the external world in a more sensitive and intense way, and as a consequence she needs to build up, starting from conventional mappings, a whole network of intricate images that, although depicting a disturbing inner turmoil, provide a somehow "sensible" but terrible picture of what lies outside and inside the self, whether we agree with the logic of it or not. It is surely this

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[3] The person (Subject) being in control of the Self is conceptualised as the Subject being located in the Container (the Self), that is, Subject and Self are in the same place. On the other hand, being out of control is implied when the Subject is not located in the Container, so it lies out of control of the Self.

[4] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 1999. They claim that: "Primary metaphors are part of the cognitive unconscious" (57); "These primary metaphors counted by the hundred provide "subjective experience" with extremely rich inferential structure, imagery and qualitative 'feel', when the networks for subjective experience and sensorimotor networks neurally connected to them are coactivated" [...] "We have a system of primary metaphors simply because we have the bodies and brains we have and because we live in the world we live in, where intimacy does tend to correlate" (58).

[5] Developed mainly in *Metaphors We Live By*, Chicago/New York: Chicago University Press, [1980] 2003; and *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*, New York: Basic Books, 1999.

tendency to seeing the self as "usually" disconnected from others and reality what allows her (a psychotic writer?) to depict the self in such fascinating but frightening ways.

## 2. COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SELF

Cognitivist assume there is a physical basis in our experience of the world on which meaning, imagination, and reasoning are built. Lakoff and Johnson (267), provide a comprehensive list of types of experience of reality and many examples from everyday language in which a complex system of metaphors is used to conceptualise the self. Just to mention a few, the experience may relate to different ways of controlling (or not) our bodies, or of feeling the conflict between our conscious values and values implicit in our behaviour.

The problem is that, although all these experiences can be postulated to be universal, there is not, according to these authors, "any single, monolithic, consistent way of conceptualising our inner life that covers all the cases. Instead, we have a system of different metaphorical conceptions of our internal structure. There are inconsistencies in the system" (267). However, what seems to be clear to cognitive researchers is that the metaphorical system of our "inner life" is based on a fundamental distinction between what has been called the "Subject" and "one or more Selves". In this paradigm, there is a Subject, that is, "the *locus of our consciousness*, subjective experience, reason, will, and our 'essence'". But while there is only one Subject, "there is at least one Self (and possibly more). The Selves consist of everything else about us – our bodies, our social roles, our histories, and so on." This means "there is not one Subject-Self distinction, but many" (268). These distinctions are all metaphorical.

The Structure of the Subject-Self Metaphor system is quite complex and organised in several levels. The basic schema of the subject-self metaphor reveals we experience ourselves as split. So it seems this is not exclusively a psychotic way of thinking about the self since in our world-view, and, according to that schema, a person is divided into a Subject (the locus of a person's Essence) and one or more Selves (body, social roles, past states, and actions in the world). While the Subject is always conceptualised as a person the Self may be conceptualised as either (1) an object, (2) a location, or (3) a person.

Let us now go deeper into specific cases of this metaphor and focus our attention on the two metaphors consistently found in Plath's prose writings. The first one may be identified as *The Self as Physical Object*[6] and is based on manipulation and control of objects as source domain. The primary metaphor is SELF CONTROL IS OBJECT CONTROL, as in "I have to control myself". A more complex form of this metaphor being SELF CONTROL IS FORCED MOVEMENT OF THE SELF (an Object) BY THE SUBJECT. This complex metaphor may have in turn two different versions. One reads BODY CONTROL IS THE FORCED MOVEMENT OF AN OBJECT as in "I dragged my self out of bed", or "You're pushing yourself too hard". The other alternative is SELF CONTROL IS OBJECT POSSESSION which may have positive connotations, as in "let yourself go", or negative, as in "you are seized by anxiety".

This type of mapping, picturing the self as a physical object that cannot be moved or that seems possessed, is quite recurrent in Plath's accounts of loss of control of the Self (her own body) to the Subject's will. Lakoff and Johnson do in fact remind us that "in American culture, possession – loss of control to another Subject – is mostly seen as evil and scary" (274).

The second metaphor I would like to mention for its relevance in Plath's essays and stories, the so called *Self as Location* (or *the Locational Self*), conceptualises control of the Subject over the Self as "being in a normal location", and by the same token, loss of control as not being in the expected place. A variety of this metaphor is based on the notion that SELF CONTROL IS BEING IN ONE'S

[6] I follow Lakoff and Johnson's typography in *Philosophy in the Flesh. The Embodied Mind and its Challenge to Western Thought*. Each type indicates different levels of the subject-self metaphor.

NORMAL LOCATION. Along with this conception goes the notion of THE SELF AS CONTAINER. This implies that a Subject that is out of control is conceptualised as being out of a container (home, earth) or out of the part of the Self where the Subject is normally (the body, the head, or the skull) as in "He is out of his mind". SELF CONTROL AS BEING ON THE GROUND stands as another possible form of *The Self as Location*. Accordingly, "being in the ground" means being in control of the effects of gravity as the expression "he's back down to earth" said of someone who has lately been "off the clouds" implies.

## 3. METAPHORS OF THE SELF IN PLATH'S PROSE WRITINGS

Hence, when it comes to the conceptualisation of "self-control" we can see there are two productive metaphors: the Possession metaphor – which views the Self as an object to be possessed – and the Location metaphor – which identifies the Self with a location. Both are extremely recurrent and merge in Plath's conceptualisation of the self in *The Bell Jar* and in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* but also, and perhaps more prominently than anywhere else, in the *Journals.* This is a clear indication of her obsession with self-control and her feeling that lack of self-control was her usual way of being, as opposed to what the non-psychotic person experiences normally – a prevailing sense of control with exceptional, if any, bouts of "insanity" throughout one's life.

Of course, there are other very significant metaphors, such as the ones discussed and labelled by Lakoff and Johnson as "The Scattered Self" – indicating lack of attention of the Subject –; "The Social Self metaphor" – which offers a frame to relate our judgement of ourselves with other people's judgement so the Subject and the Self as seen as adversaries, father and child, friends, etc. –; "The Multiple Selves metaphor" – concerned with different values attached to different roles (mother, daughter, friend) assumed by the self –; and "the Essential Self metaphor" – which says that each one of us has an Essence that makes us unique, and equates the Subject with the Essence. The later is particularly significant in Plath because it allows us to conceptualise the self as split into two incompatible selves: The True Self – Plath's unconventional behaviour, being a poet – and the other self – Plath assuming a conventional role –. All of them seem to me equally persistent in her work and eloquent in explaining Sylvia's patterns of the self. However, devoting the time each one of them deserves would require much more space than I am allowed to use here.

In her analysis of "split selves" in literary narrative texts, Catherine Emmott (153-182)[7] clearly shows, following Lakoff (1980), there is a common denominator in the fictional and medical narratives of individuals with problems of identity or splits of personality. In Plath's work the conundrum of identity has usually been associated specially, in her poetry, with the mirror and other specular images – such as reflections in water, for instance. But this search for a "true self" in trying to understand the incompatible nature of the multiple selves she recognises when looking at the mirror in her poem of that name is also present in her prose.

But first, let us bear in mind that her non-fictional material provides good evidence that there is a significant disparity between what she writes down for herself in *The Journals*, and what she writes down for others, either to be published – short stories, essays and the novel – or to be addressed to a very close circle of relatives and friends – to be found in *Letters Home*. The critics have agreed that in the *Letters*, Sylvia Plath struggles to forge a positive image of herself, based, as I see it, on the "Essential Self Metaphor", just intended to reassure her mother of her filial love and her achievements

[7] "'Split selves' in fiction and in medical 'life stories': Cognitive linguistic theory and narrative practice" in Semino, Elena & Jonathan Culpeper. *Cognitive Stylistics.Language and cognition in text analysis,* Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 2002, pp. 153-182.

as a young woman and poet. The *Journals* and the bitter narrative found in *The Bell Jar*[8] do on the other hand offer (a) different version(s) of Sylvia. Although when reading Plath's body of writing one ends up with an overwhelming feeling of confusion about the subject's identity – she is so many different things and takes on so many personalities – analysing specific metaphors of the self from the perspective of cognitive poetics may shed some light on the kind of order she imposes in her inner, and why not say it, chaotic reality through different modes of writing.

In contrast to the aim of the *Letters*, the *Journals* get written to allow her to give vent to her obsessions and cope with her inner ghosts. So they were for no audience. The short stories and essays collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* were instead meant to make Plath earn money by imitating a kind of prose that would sell, asserted Hughes. But what remains true is that all of them are based on autobiographical material as it happens with the poems.

I agree with Britzolakis that "the different and often contradictory versions of 'Sylvia Plath' constructed by letters, journals, short stories, and *The Bell Jar*, are entangled with myths of selfhood, femininity, and nation attendant upon a particular place and time" (12). Plath's accounts of her different selves turn out to be often incompatible with one another, especially when the question of social roles and true self are at the stake. As a consequence, the metaphor of the scattered self combines with others in the *Journals* and thus the (Self) body as a container of the subject (the Essence) is rejected or unrecognised. Her diaries show that body and mind never seem to correspond to each other, while at the same time she strives to achieve an ideal version of the self (the imago) as a unified "whole".

We may conclude that in Plath's existence only the "writing" stood for her true voice, and, therefore, for presence and reality. As a result, creative writing turns into the only way to assert that she is and has real existence. In this sense it is worth noticing her constant allusions[9] to the vital need to have a powerful imagination so as to be able to write and hence to survive. Her feeling of utter despair at her creative blockages is manifest in the following words:

> "What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination. When the sky outside is merely pink, and the rooftops merely black: that photographic mind which paradoxically tells the truth, but the *worthless truth*, about the world. It is that synthesizing spirit, that "shaping " force, which prolifically sprouts and makes up its own worlds with more inventiveness than God which I desire. If I sit still and don't do anything, the world goes go beating like a slack drum, without meaning. We must be moving, working, making dreams to run toward; the poverty of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine: it is that kind of madness which is worst: the kind with fancies and hallucinations would be a Bosch-ish relief" (272)

All of Plath's writing is plagued not only by the presence of mirrors, and blank, faceless reflections – which do not allow her crossing to the other side – but with invisible barriers like the bell jar of the novel that isolate her from the rest. As the analysis of a poem like "Ariel" suggest Plath's aim is to transcend the barriers that separate herself from otherness. Hence the images of fusing and melting in "Ariel". In other poems there is a determination towards "disembodiment" – in the form of suicide – which seems to be Plath's natural drive.

It seems obvious by now, that Plath's understanding of reality is dominated by an internal perspective of the self, an extremely subjective point of view. What seems real to her is her inner self

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[8] In reference to *The Bell Jar*, Aurelia Plath (Sylvia's mother) wrote in her biographical note to *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*: "Practically every character in *The Bell Jar* represents someone – often in caricature – whom Sylvia loved. As the book stands by itself it represents the basest ingratitude. That was not the basis of her personality!" (294-295)

[9] In an extract from the journal written at Smith College and collected in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, London: Faber, 1977.

hidden under the outer shell of the body (the container). Thus, she can not see her essence – her true self is not really visible to the eye. However, she needs confirmation of the self by self-reflection, or identification with others but what she gets back in return are only outer shells, deadly masks, images of her body as inert objects, containers or locations and not an image of her true self – located in her exceptional mind.

This duality of mind and body belongs to an inherited Cartesian conception. This is the way the self has been traditionally codified in language – so it belongs to a particular world view – but the peculiar insistence on Plath's utter failure to connect mind and body, Subject and Self, seems somehow unusual, and probably distinctive of the psychotic mind. It is in this persistence on duality where Plath offers a very clear picture of what means a split self.

## 4. SYLVIA'S SPLIT SELVES

To illustrate how specific metaphors of the self pervade her writings, I have selected only a few examples from two of Plath's short stories and essays in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. The first one is "Tongues of Stone" (1955). Retold by a third person narrator, it is the story of Plath's own process of recovery after her crisis and suicide attempt in the summer of 1953. The story is set in a mental hospital where the protagonist gradually returns to her senses. A clear signal of her inability to cope with reality is her failure to knit. From the very beginning the disconnection between her will (the conscious Subject) and her body (the Self as an Object) strikes as obvious:

> "She had caught the loop but *her finger* was stiff and far away and would not make the yarn go over the needle" (274)
> "There was nothing to her now but the body, *a dull puppet of skin and bone* that *had to be washed and fed day* after day after day" (274)
> "There were safe outside the dream, so they could jargon away. But she was *caught in the nightmare of the body, without a mind*, only the *soulless flesh* that *got fatter* with the insulin and *yellower* with the fading tan" (274)
> (The emphasis is mine).

In the first two quotations we find the body as object that does not obey the orders of the subject, thus suggesting "lack of self-control". In the third quotation, the feeling of being "caught in the nightmare of the body" is expressed in terms of the Self as a Location metaphor, an idea emphasised by similar images of enclosure and imprisonment in: "she would drag out her night and days *chained* to a wall in a dark solitary *cell* with dirt and spiders" (274). The body is seen as "cell" and "as a dark cavern". That part of her that should serve as link with the sensible world, the body, is numb and does not react. She comes to see the body (the Self as Container) dissociated from her mind as if the two belonged to two different people. Her irrational emotions take shape in the body as material substance which in her imagination accumulates as "waste" and "poisons", "swelling her full".

The "dead face that greeted her, the mindless face" (276) is what she sees when she looks into the mirror. The girl needs to see in order to understand herself and her reality, both in such a chaotic state. But the only useful mirror at hand is her own imaginative writing. There she writes herself out. She can only escape the prison of flesh and skin she inhabits – where her instincts are repressed – by making use of the "mind's eye", which provides her with a powerful and lively "in"-sight.

In "Snow Blitz", an essay written in 1963 just weeks before she died, now in the first person Plath uses her imaginative potential to give literary form once again to her own schizoid perception of herself. Most of us share this traditional dualistic view of the self, normally perceiving the split self as an exceptional condition, and considering mind and body as two parts of a continuum. By contrast, in the light of her insistence on split selves and lack of control, it may be suggested that Sylvia Plath thinks about her self as usually split, as a scattered self, with multiple selves: the mind severed from the body, the invisible and the visible parts of the self wide apart, the true self in conflict with and the false selves.

Once more the story in "Snow Blitz" relies on the metaphor "the Self as a Container (a house)" and "the Subject (the tenant) who is out of control, is the content". The episode narrated by Plath opens with a deceiving description of the snow as "white, picturesque, untouched", conveying the false idea of purity, peacefulness and stasis. However, the snow hardens and freezes in sidewalks and street "becaming a rugged terrain of ice over whose treacherous crevices [old] people teetered, clutching dog leads or steered by strangers" (28). The snow is a symbol that stands for the disease (=madness) that makes the sick person (unstable=teetering) dependent on others (dogs, strangers=doctors, relatives) who lead them to their destination through a dangerous path. Despite the narrator's concern to get her steps – the "outer" part of the house – cleaned off snow, she surprisingly discovers one morning "the bathtub half full of filthy water" (29). She waits expecting it to be drained through the gutters but the amount of water increases "both in depth and dirtiness" (29) and it escapes its normal course. This (inner) domestic problem – a metaphor for her psychic turmoil and lack of control of emotions – makes itself visible in the form of a "stain" in her "beautiful new white ceiling".

> "As I looked, the ceiling *discharged*, at various spots, drops of *viscous liquid* that plopped onto the rug. The ceiling paper sagged at the seams." (30).

The contradictory symptoms of the subject's inner disorder are identified, on the one hand, as a "leakage", (a leak being "an unintended hole, crack, or the like through which liquid, gas or light *enters or escapes*", that is, indicating an uncontrolled flux of ideas, feelings); and on the other, as "stagnation" (that is, an unplanned and untimely death, inactivity or lethargy) of dirty waters in the bathtub. Both are indication that there is something not working properly, out of order. The water (feelings, emotions) is qualified as "black", "dirty". According to the catalogue of metaphors of the self provided, the fact that dirty water escapes its usual location implies lack of self-control. Nonetheless, neither the stagnant water nor its dirtiness are perceived at first as produced by the tenant (the narrator), whose unconscious self probably betrays her into believing that the damages in the flat are not her fault when she asserts:

> "My ceiling is leaking and my bathtub is full of dirty water."
> Silence.
> "Not *my* dirty water," I hastened to add. "Water that floods up into the tub of its own accord. I think there is snow in it. Maybe it's roof water." (30)
> (The emphasis is Plath's).

The unintended/unconscious nature of this domestic catastrophe is emphasized throughout the story, for instance in "I could not understand it. I do not understand plumbing" (30). Other metaphors are added to this central one. For instance, "Plumbing", (repairing pipes and drainage systems) obviously stands for a "mechanical" kind of psychiatry, and plumbers for psychiatrists, who take care of the well-functioning of the pipes and gutters (invisible paths from where the waters of the mind overflow or freeze). The "faulty gutter" localised "just over [the narrator's] bed" (31) stands for her impaired mind. The narrator wants to get it fixed for she fears to "wake up in a mess of plaster. Or maybe I won't even wake up" (31). She fears extinction, death.

Once again the cold detachment, and the mocking irony characteristic of many Plath's stories appears as the narrator tells us of her breakdown through an elaborated imagery on the Self as Container. She sees the plumbers "holding a yellow plastic bucket to a geyser [i.e., a spring that throws forth intermittent *jets of heated water and steam*] of ceiling water with the embarrassed air of covering some obscenity" (31). This geyser is obviously an unexpected burst of the uncontrolled self.

However, the worst threat the tenant of the flat faces is anticipated by the house agent who admonishes her: "You realize, though, that you are in danger of having no drinking water" (31)… "when the water in the upstairs cisterns is finished, that's the end." Death of the imagination is the worst death of all. What Plath really values is her true self, her essence as a writer, as a poet because it allows her a kind of transcendence.

As Semino and Swindlehurst (1996:147)[10], point out "at an individual level, the systematic use of a particular metaphor (or metaphors) reflects an idiosyncratic cognitive habit, a personal way of making sense of and talking about the world: in other words, a particular mind style" (147). I hope to have given enough evidence of the fact that Sylvia Plath consistently uses in her prose writing images of the self as normally split in order to define what Roger Fowler[11] defined as the "distinctive linguistic representation of an individual mental self" (103).

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