

Mourning, Melancholia, and Sylvia Plath

Writing an essay on Sylvia Plath is a lot like taking up the subject of Marilyn Monroe or Hitler. One has the feeling of arriving late or, worse, uninvited to a party packed with people, all nursing finely wrought opinions of one sort or another for which they might even be willing to die. There is, one quickly senses, an enormous amount of catching up to do. What's left to say that can be the least bit unexpected, the slightest bit revisive? And when one combs the margins, and as the margins grow ever more marginal, so too do most ideas residing there. In fact, the more limited the aim, the more precise the question asked, the more jejune it proportionally becomes. Slim chance for a large statement, in other words.

Plus, there is so much to canvas—multiplying mountains of opinion, some worth thinking about, some not at all. Even a partial list of required reading includes Plath's (1993) first journals with their elliptical taint (editorial excisions); the newly released (2000), unabridged journals (excisions restored); Plath's "letters home" to her mother (more ellipses); the poems, of course (Plath, 1999; 1981b); the stories; the one novel *The Bell Jar* (1981a); Ted Hughes's occasional reluctant weighings-in, along with his last book of poems, *The Birthday Letters* (1998); the blizzard of memoirs and reminiscences written by intimates and mere acquaintances alike, some who scarcely knew Plath; and the numberless biographies, each with its own barely concealed agenda. Maybe the best book of all is Janet Malcolm's masterful and delightfully debunking *The Silent Woman* (1995), a sort of un-biography on the perils of biography that somehow says

more about Plath than the various prior versions of her life put together.

In classes I steer students away from essays on thoroughly ransacked lives: the James Deans, Charlie Mansons, Kafkas, and Poes of the psychobiographical universe. Everything surprising about them has long passed into boredom. Try something more manageable, I always say. Or find someone who's so far evaded the peeping eyes of the body-snatchers. Well, in this instance I did not follow my own advice. And luckily enough, against the odds I came across a question about Plath that to my knowledge has not been sufficiently explored (or, if so, only glancingly). The question also seemed anything but marginal. In fact, it was central. It concerned not only Plath's art, but also her personality organization and her suicide.

In a 1998 special issue of the journal *Death Studies*, these subjects—the art, the personality, and the suicide—receive exhaustive treatment. Lester (1998), for one, applies fifteen theories of suicide to Plath, finding Shneidman's, Murray's, and Beck's each to fit her case especially well (Beck's was most successful, with a score of 8.5 out of a possible 10).¹ But strangely, given the facts of Plath's case, Lester sets aside Freud, with his central focus on loss—even though "the major traumatic event for Plath in her early years was the death of her father [Otto Plath]," and despite the fact that half of the suicides in Lester's sample had experienced "the loss of a parent or significant other before the age of 15" (p. 663). He goes on to note, while still avoiding the idea's obvious ramifications vis-à-vis Freud, that Plath

seems to be conscious of psychodynamic processes that many people remain unaware of—for example, her resolution of the Oedipal conflict by marrying a father-substitute . . . Plath's poems (and her novel and journals as well) provide a rich source of clues to her psychodynamic processes, such as her identification with her father. (p. 659)

An additional weakness of Lester's essay is its penchant for diagnosis. Because Plath in the last months of her life was writing "at a frantic pace," she was "probably in a manic state" and would "probably be diagnosed today as having a bipolar affective disorder" (p. 659). Later that "probability"—already easily contestable, since (a) frantic writing hardly equals mania and (b) in reality Plath showed almost none of the cardinal symptoms of a manic episode—transmogrifies into fact, as Lester informs us that "*as a manic depressive*, Plath may also have been anticipating a really severe depressive episode after the manic state she had been in recently" (p. 660; emphasis added). These are surmises—weak ones—masquerading as truth. We might also reflect on the fact that naming something does not of itself constitute an explanation for the thing named. Psychobiography by diagnosis almost always leads nowhere except directly back to the labeled "condition."² As a strategy, it must be identified and then rejected. (See, for more on the perils of psychobiography-by-diagnosis, Schultz, chap. 1 this volume.)

In the same special issue, Runco (1998) applies what he calls a "psychoeconomic" hypothesis to Plath's art and suicide, proposing the use of "temporal and psychic investments" of creators to predict behavior. Closer to the point, the more an individual has invested in something—say, poetry—the more she has to lose and the less likely she is to remain flexible and creative. Plath started to write at age nine, in the wake of her father's death, and worked single-mindedly and uncompromisingly at her art right up to the days immediately preceding her suicide, so clearly she had "invested a large amount of time and energy in her work" (p. 641). This investment was perhaps unusually personal, too, given the confessional nature of her poems and of the novel *The Bell Jar* (plus assorted stories). A little confus-

ingly, Runco also brings in his concept of "discount rates," or the "interest rate that a person uses to discount benefits received in the future [from creative works]" (p. 641). One who discounts the future heavily "would be unwilling to make costly investments today in exchange for benefits to be received only gradually in the future" (p. 641). There exists, in simpler words, an inability to delay gratification, or even to keep at one's work when not meeting with hoped-for approval because of it. But this does not jibe with what we know about Plath. If she was "discounting the future [so] heavily," why was she writing like a demon in the days before she killed herself? Runco asserts: "She clearly was unwilling to invest any more in her creative potential" (p. 641). Yet isn't this manifestly untrue? She was making precisely this investment every morning when she rose in the wee hours while her children still slept in order to scrawl out the blistering poems of *Ariel* that made her name. These grinding investments stopped only when she died, not before. Like Lester does, Runco notes the correlation between loss and creativity (the early loss of one parent is common among creative persons) but considers more important Plath's immersion in and devotion to her writing—that is, again, her degree of "investment" in her work and the sense in which she had quite a bit to lose because of this investment. The stakes were high, Runco reminds us.

Shulman (1998) follows a psychoanalytic line in his assessment of Plath's suicide. Yet while noting that "her life was greatly affected by her father's death when she was 8, such that it initiated a chain of events [including, most notably, a symbiotic attachment to her mother combined with a compulsive drive for achievement and praise] eventually resulting in her own death," and while duly recording the established link between early parental loss and later suicidal behavior, he stops just short of zeroing in on the precise meaning of these facts for Plath, though his essay contains plenty of hints as to what that meaning might be. Predisposing suicide factors he lists include a wish to join her father in death, alienation, perfectionism, self-hate, and the failure of her marriage to Ted Hughes.

In this necessarily truncated review I'll include one more effort to size up Plath's art and suicide,

partly in order to give a sense of the range of opinion existing on the subject, and partly to show just how bad the occasional bad psychobiography can be. In what is doubtless one of the most reductionistic and irresponsibly inferential case studies I've ever had the misfortune to discover, Thompson (1990) finds that a close reading of Plath's poems, journals, and letters reveals that "she was almost certainly [sic] suffering from a severe form of the hormonal disorder now recognized as premenstrual syndrome, or PMS" (p. 221). This summary judgment arrives on the heels of an earlier assertion to the effect that "the 'Electra-complex' hypothesis offered Plath by traditional psychology was, and is, finally inadequate." In point of fact, this was Plath's own hypothesis (as we shall shortly see); it was not foisted on her by "traditional psychology," whatever that means. And if the "Electra-complex" hypothesis is "finally inadequate," Thompson's paper does little to show us why or how—she assumes instead that credulous readers will take her word for it.

In due course, we discover that PMS produces no less than 150 physical and psychological symptoms (p. 222).³ Was Plath occasionally irritable, tense, anxious? Indeed. Therefore, she suffers from "all the major symptoms of PMS." What about her "sore throats"? PMS. Her "clumsiness"? PMS. Her "backaches"? PMS. Her "itchiness"? PMS. That irritating "ringing in her ears"? PMS. For as we know, a "lowered resistance to infections during the premenstruum [is a] hallmark of the condition" (p. 223). Thompson seems to possess a preposterously uncanny ability to know exactly when Plath is entering the late luteal phase of her menstrual cycle. When Plath writes her letters to her mother—missives marked by the disguised alacrity so typical of "letters home" to parents—she is in the "symptom-free phase of her cycles" (p. 226). When she toils as a guest editor for *Mademoiselle*—a stint famously described in *The Bell Jar*—"Plath's hormonal balance was in a state of serious disruption" (p. 226). As she comes upon Ted Hughes in suspiciously whispery conversation with a Smith coed about which she later vents her jealous rage—that, the journal entry on the incident, was "probably [written during] her premenstrual week" (p. 229).⁴ As so often happens in bad psychobiography,

these assorted "probably's" gradually lose all qualification. Plath in her poems makes frequent use of the metaphor of the moon (hardly unique to her). Well, for Thompson, this is because "the power of the menstrual cycle to control Plath's psychic landscape was an absolute reality" (p. 232). In a similarly amusing aside, Thompson judges poet A. Alvarez's admittedly "correct assessment" of Plath (as someone crying out for help) to be fatally marred by the fact that "he could not have known that Plath's reality had a biochemical basis" (p. 231). In short, if Plath in her work speaks of rising with her "red hair," if she invokes the moon, if she notices the petals of poppies (labias all), if the dawn landscape finds itself perturbed by a "splash of red"—such imagery reveals these to be "menstrual poems" (p. 237).

Maybe the most disturbing aspect of this article occurs at its end. We learn there that Plath in her last letter to her mother mentions being referred to "a woman doctor" by her very good local doctor. Of course, nobody has any way of knowing who this woman doctor was. Thompson, however, presumes her to be a psychiatrist (some evidence for this does in fact exist), then even suggests a name, Katharina Dalton—a London physician, apparently, who at the time was "successfully treating severe cases of PMS with progesterone therapy" (p. 244). Plath, needless to say, never saw the doctor to whom she had been referred. On February 11 she committed suicide. Thompson's final sentence—so self-assured, so judgmental of Plath's previous treaters, so pompous in the context of an essay riddled with utterly unconvincing "probably's"—informs us, sanctimoniously, that Plath thus "died in the only city in the world where she could have received effective medical treatment" (p. 244). Thompson's special knowledge, it appears, would have saved Sylvia's life.

What I want to do here, in this chapter, is take Plath's word very seriously and see where it leads us. I agree with Lester—she was unusually insightful about her own moods and their source. Her doctor calls her a "model patient" with a rare ability to "understand her own struggle against suicidal depression" (Stevenson, 1989, p. 297). In her journal she works extremely hard and with characteristic diligence to apply insights

emerging out of psychotherapy, in short, to make sense of herself, her life and mind, and her relationships with her mother and father especially. In late December 1958 she reveals a fact and an opinion that together provide this chapter's direction. She writes: "Read Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' this morning after Ted left for the library. An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide" (Plath, 1993, p. 279). Now, I agree with the always wise Janet Malcolm. Plath in her journals tends to portray herself as "the heroine of a great drama"—in this case of an Oedipal variety, one of the greatest dramas ever (Malcolm, 1995, p. 100). Regardless, the fact that Plath finds Freud's model of depression so uniquely serviceable—an "almost exact description"—remains exceptionally striking (as does the fact that Plath in one respect misread the essay, for reasons I discuss later). And so, like I said, I suggest we listen to Plath herself and discover to what degree Freud's words in the essay cited work to illuminate not only Plath's depression and suicide but also her poetry. The best place to start is where Plath did. What exactly does Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia" (1915) propose?

The Shadow of the Object

To begin with, it is remarkable that Plath picked up this essay at all, unless it was recommended to her by her treating psychiatrist, Ruth Beuscher, who attended her at McLean, where she spent three months after her suicide attempt, and with whom she had gone back into psychotherapy (Malcolm, 1995, p. 151). Freud was a brilliant writer, but this short piece is Freud at his most densely metatheoretical, laboring to develop a connection between melancholia and the oral stage of libidinal development, the way in which the ego picks out an object and cannibalistically devours it. (The essay, then, is more accurately concerned with pre-Oedipal than with Oedipal conflicts. It has nothing at all to do with what Thompson disparagingly calls the Electra-complex hypothesis.)

Freud starts as he often does, by treating mourning as a prototype for melancholia (much as he took hysteria to be a prototype for dreams,

and dreams to be a prototype for the whole of mental life). He also drops any claim for the essay's general validity; he speaks only of melancholias of an "indisputable psychogenic nature" (1915, p. 243). Why compare melancholia to mourning? Both frequently develop out of the same exciting cause: loss. For Freud, mourning is not pathological (but expectable) and is generally overcome after a lapse of time. Also, mourning lacks melancholia's aspect of self-reviling. In mourning, "it is the world that has become poor and empty," whereas in melancholia, this sorry fate falls to "the ego itself" (p. 246).

In what does the work performed by mourning consist? The loved person gone, the mind must now relinquish all attachments to him. Not an easy task, however. It is in the nature of the mind never to willingly abandon any "libidinal position" (or, emotional fixation), even when a substitute love object beckons. The "id" prefers to cling; libido is adhesive. Still, in the end reality "gains the day" (p. 244). It takes time, but bit by bit we detach from lost loved ones. Reality defeats romantic imagination.

"Dissatisfaction with the ego on moral grounds is the most outstanding feature" of melancholia, Freud observes (p. 248). One part of the mind sets itself over and against the other, judges it critically—takes it, in other words, as its object. Here Freud ventures a speculation on which the rest of the essay turns. His contention is this: The self-accusations met with so frequently in the melancholic do not apply to the patient himself, but to someone else, someone the patient has loved or should love. What looks to be self-reproach is in fact reproach against a loved object (i.e., person). The dynamics may be reconstructed as follows. Plath, for instance, loved her father Otto. This love was shattered when Otto died (under circumstances to be explored later). Plath, at age eight, responded by identifying with her father, devouring his image rather than fully displacing her love onto someone else, a substitute. As Freud explains, "[T]he shadow of the object falls upon the ego, and the latter can henceforth be judged by a special agency [that Freud later called the superego], as though it were an object, the forsaken object" (p. 249). Also, by taking flight into the ego, erecting an image of the person now gone, love—as it always

aims in its pleasure-seeking to do—"escapes extinction" (p. 257). It persists, in a sense psychotically, in its loving of a thing dead.

An alteration such as this of the usual course of mourning requires, first, an especially strong fixation to the loved object and, second, a disposition to narcissistic object choice (i.e., a regressive substitution of identification for object love). The first condition is self-explanatory. What does Freud mean by the second? That some people never quite give up a very early form of ("oral") loving characterized by ingestion, as it were, of the person loved. They carry with them in a mental mausoleum the history of their loving, a psychical congress of romantic attachments. Death of love is the birth of the image. And these images (introjects, as they are called) are not simply left alone like buried mementos. Hate born of the ambivalence characteristic of all love relationships, and of mental life in general, now comes into the open; we set about abusing and debasing the substitute internal object. Via this circuitous path of self-punishment, the melancholic takes revenge on the person who, by dying, refused his love.

Sadism, for Freud, solves the riddle of suicide. (And it is a riddle for the reason that the immensity of the ego's self-love would appear to rule out self-destruction.) We can succeed in killing ourselves only when we take ourselves as an object. In other words, we don't so much kill ourselves as we kill the hated introject. All suicide, then, in this formulation, is really murder-suicide. Murder is the primary aim; suicide is achieved by indirection. The introject has become a part of us. When we kill it, we unintentionally kill ourselves. It really does seem to be true: In Freud, the suicide doesn't quite want to die. He wants, rather, to kill.

What brings this hatred to a close? Three eventual possibilities. The melancholic kills herself, for one. Second, the fury simply spends itself. Or, third, the fixation of the libido to the object loosens through the act of disparagement and denigration. The object, in this last scenario, is "abandoned as valueless" (p. 257). Freud's prescription for the melancholic would seem to be just this: go on raging. Free yourself from the object's hold by hating it into worthlessness. When Plath writes "Daddy, I have had to kill

you," in a poem ("Daddy") called by one critic the *Guernica* of modern literature, she follows Freud's advice to the letter. This realization in fact suggests our next step. How closely does Freud's model fit Plath's case? To what degree is she correct in calling it an "almost exact description" of her feelings? A very high degree, in my opinion (with one important caveat).

The Girl Who Wanted to Be God

Asking what the reading of this essay meant to Plath requires, first, that we explore the nature of Plath's relationship with her father prior to his death. We need to revisit her first seven years, in other words—a difficult job. Data will be scarce and of uncertain accuracy, yet not, as it turns out, utterly nonexistent. In a long historical introduction to *Letters Home*, Plath's mother, Aurelia Plath, tells us Otto wanted his first child to be a daughter since "little girls are usually more affectionate" (1976, p. 11). When this girl obligingly arrived, Otto was hard at work on the expansion of his doctoral thesis into a book. It appeared in 1934 under the title *Bumblebees and Their Ways*. Next came an invited chapter called "Insect Societies" (Aurelia wrote the first draft). Her father thus preoccupied, Sylvia "attached herself to Grampy," becoming his "greatest delight" (p. 13). In Aurelia's eyes Sylvia was a healthy, merry child—"the center of attention most of her waking time" (p. 13).

The year after Sylvia's birth, Otto fell ill. He was losing weight, had a chronic cough and sinusitis, and was "continuously weary" (p. 15). He refused steadfastly, however, to consult a physician, fearing a diagnosis of lung cancer. Moaning in pain from cramped leg muscles, he deteriorated both physically and emotionally. The children were mostly kept away out of concern Otto's condition might frighten them, but before bedtime Sylvia would occasionally play piano for her father, improvise dances, show him her drawings, or recite rhymes or poems for him. From early on, words were used by Plath as a poultice, rhymes and poems as medicine.

At last Otto's sickness was diagnosed: a "far-advanced state of diabetes mellitus" (p. 19). Sylvia helped with his care. A home health nurse

altered an old uniform for her and called Sylvia her assistant. She would bring her father cool drinks now and then, and show him drawings she made for him, as before. In October, a few weeks before Sylvia's eighth birthday, Otto's gangrened leg was amputated. On November 5 he died from a pulmonary embolism.

Aurelia Plath waited a day to tell the children. On getting the news, Sylvia apparently looked at her mother sternly for a moment and then exclaimed, "I'll never speak to God again" (p. 22). (Considering how in her adult poetry Plath would stress Otto's godlikeness, this comment may apply as much to her father as to any diety.) Later she made her mother promise never to remarry. Viewing her husband at the funeral parlor and finding him unrecognizable, looking like a "fashionable store manikin," Aurelia chose not to take her children to the funeral (a decision Plath found fault with in her writings). By October 26, 1942 (a day before Sylvia's tenth birthday), Aurelia Plath had sold the family home in Winthrop and purchased a small, white frame house in Wellesley, Massachusetts. With this, Plath once wrote, her Edenic life by the sea came to an inglorious end. "This is how it [her vision of her seaside childhood] stiffens. My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth" (p. 272). In the myth's place Plath inserted a substitute romantic world—poetry. "There is a voice within me," she wrote in 1948, "that will not be still" (1993, p. 31). A diary entry from 1948 records her wish to be omniscient. She muses, "I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be God'"—more merciful, perhaps, than the one who took her godlike father from her (p. 37).

The above is Plath's mother's version of Sylvia's first years, brought out, along with *Letters Home*, to elide. The idea behind the book, Janet Malcolm (1995) explains, "was to show that Plath was not the hateful, hating ingrate, the changeling of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*, but a loving, obedient daughter" (p. 33). As such salvage efforts often will do, this one backfired. A fresh new harpy appeared on stage: that "barnacled umbilicus" and paralyzing placenta of the mother, as Plath later described her in the poem

"Medusa," grasping with "eely tentacles" across the Atlantic. Aurelia Plath says in the same introduction: "Between Sylvia and me there existed—as between my own mother and me—a sort of psychic osmosis which, at times, was very wonderful and comforting; at other times an unwelcome invasion of privacy" (p. 28). The generationally derived narcissistic symbiosis implied by this aside will come up again soon.

To return to the question of Plath's father, we can look past her mother's perceptions to Sylvia's as reported in her journal, many of these nurtured by several years of intense analysis. But even before her psychotherapy, Plath possesses clear insights. She ruminates on her "dead father who is somewhere in you [meaning Plath herself], interwoven in the cellular system of your long body which sprouted from one of his sperm cells uniting with an egg cell in your mother's uterus." She goes on: "You remember that you were his favorite when you were little, and you used to make up dances to do for him as he lay on the living room couch after supper" (pp. 25–26). She guesses that, had her father lived, she would have been made to know botany, zoology, and science. In the event, she leaned abnormally to the humanities personality of her mother instead, feeling the "echo of her voice, as if she had spoken in you [again, in Plath herself]" (p. 26).

Recall the two preconditions set by Freud for pathological mourning: an intense fixation to the love object, and a predilection for narcissistic object choice. Plath helped in her way to nurse her father; she thinks of herself as his favorite, her mother calling her the center of the family's attention; she associates Otto with an idyllic seaside childhood brought to abrupt terminus by his death. As Malcolm (1995) relates, the death of Plath's father is perceived by many as "the shadow-event of her life, the wound from which she never recovered" (p. 34). Plath's fixation to Otto's memory is lent further support by the intensity of her later need to see his headstone. This graveyard visit I've described as Plath's "prototypical scene," a blueprint constellating the core parameters of her life story (Schultz, 2003; see also Schultz, chapter 3, this volume). It is dutifully recorded in *The Bell Jar*, in her journal, and in the poem "Electra on Azalea Path." The poem is particularly declarative.

Among other things, in it Plath tells us, "the day you [Otto] died I went into the dirt"—along with the bees sleeping out a blizzard "like hieratic stones." Otto's death was also Plath's. Her fixation rises to identification. Small as a doll, she lay dreaming his epic, image by image and with grim fastidiousness. She concludes self-judgmentally: "I brought my love to bear, and then you died"—not like a god, but "like any man" will. "It was my love," she feels, "that did us both to death" (Plath, 1981b, pp. 116–117).

Under usual circumstances, a daughter's intense fixation on the object of her father would seem axiomatic; parents are our first love objects, and subsequent refindings of objects simply recapitulate dynamics active in the parent-child relationship. But what about Freud's second precondition, narcissistic object choice? Is there reason to believe self was problematical for Plath, that ordinary boundaries between her and significant others tended defensively to blur? The answer is yes on both counts. Shulman (1998) devotes a section of his essay on suicide to Plath's narcissism, noting that her diaries reveal a grandiosity protecting self-esteem; a tendency on the part of Aurelia Plath to treat her daughter more like an echo than an autonomous being (as Aurelia's mother had treated her, too); and felt needs for perfection along with a corresponding sense of shame for weakness (pp. 604–606). However exaggerated, mawkish, or histrionic Plath's journals may be, especially early on, and however much she used them as an vehicle for unchecked self-mythology (beliefs many critics endorse), the simple quantity of passages centered on identity and its various crises argues against hyperbole. Hughes is doubtless right when he describes his wife as a "person of many masks," some "camouflage cliché facades," some "involuntary defensive mechanisms," and understands the journal's story to be one of the "death of the old false self in the birth of the new real one" (see introduction to Plath, 1993, p. xiv). The sense of hollowness and/or artificiality so core in narcissism is everywhere. "And I sit here without identity: faceless," Plath wrote in 1950. "Now I know what loneliness is, I think. . . . It comes from a vague core of the self. . . . I am lost. . . . Life is loneliness, . . . despite the false grinning faces we all wear" (pp. 17–19). In

another, even more apposite section Plath tells herself,

I do not love; I do not love anybody except myself. That is a rather shocking thing to admit. . . . I am, to be blunt, in love only with myself, my puny being with its small inadequate breasts and meager thin talents. I am capable of affection for those who reflect my own world. How much of my solicitude for other human being is real and honest, how much is a feigned lacquer painted on by society, I do not know. I am afraid to face myself. (Plath, 2000, p. 98)

She wants to know, and asks over and over, "Why is my flow of inner life so blocked? How can I free it? How can I find myself and be sure of my identity? . . . How can I know who I am?" (pp. 288–289).

This vexing emptiness Plath filled with prizes, awards, scholarships, grades—in short, with tangible achievements never quite silencing the abyss's howl (and Plath was keenly aware of the roots of her perfection seeking, as well as its dead-endedness). The psychic osmosis of Aurelia's own mother relationship was extended, as it usually will be, to her daughter. Francis McCullough, editor of the first journals (1993), sizes up Plath's struggle: "Sylvia often fused her life with her mother's," she wrote, a fact complicating her efforts to "feel a separate person, an individual self." (264–265) The lure of symbiosis was felt in her relationship with her husband, too: "It's rather as if neither of us, or especially myself, had any skin, or one skin between us." Reaching her own power required "breaking out of the symbiosis" (Plath, 2000, pp. 264–265).

These things, then, are clear: Plath's intense devotion to her father's image, along with a regressive ("oral") tendency toward the narcissistic object choice to which Freud in his essay refers. In loving, Plath sought and devoured reflections (in some ways like Diane Arbus; see Schultz, chap. 8 this vol.). She perceived this. Love objects—father, mother, husband—she introjected and also fused with. The question Plath obviously focused on in her therapy (implied by the portion of Freud's essay she pointed to as an exact description of her suicidal feelings)

is this: what to do about these introjects and how to waylay them?

The final sections of her journal record that struggle—the effort to apply lessons learned in therapy to her life. Principally she devotes herself, starting around December 1958, to practicing hatred for her mother, letting the hatred out, a vocation she undertakes with terrible single-mindedness after getting her therapist's permission and, one guesses, encouragement. For the moment she feels "terrific." She takes the position that she can't love this "walking vampire," but only pity her. She—Aurelia—gave herself to her children; now she wants them to return the favor. Her mother killed her father, Plath reasons, "the only man who'd love me steady through life" (Plath, 2000, p. 431). She hates her for that, for sure. He was an ogre, he was old, but "it was her fault" he died. She is, for all that, an "enemy," a "murderer of maleness" (p. 433). Lying in her bed Plath thinks what a luxury it would be to "kill her, to strangle her skinny veined throat" (p. 433). But for murder she's too nice. "I tried to murder myself instead," she says, "to keep from being an embarrassment to the ones I loved and from living myself in a mindless hell" (p. 433). Of her mother's narcissism Plath retains zero doubt: "I want to grab my life from out under her hot itchy hands. My life, my writing, my husband, my unconceived baby. She's a killer. Watch out. . . . She wants to be me: she wants me to be her: she wants to crawl into my stomach and be my baby and ride along" (p. 433). In between the vitriol she keeps wondering "what to do with hate for mother. . . . how to express anger creatively?" (pp. 437–438).

Plath would sometimes write in response to a prompt provided by her husband or by herself. These journal sections have the same feel to them. They read like an essay assignment (situation: you hate your mother; now say why and how much and what you'd like to do to her in return). The mother hate crowds out all other loci of anguish, the analysis taking the form of an inverted pyramid, everything leading back ineluctably to the vampire node at bottom. This is why, when Plath later records her reading of the Freud essay, she seems in her interpretation of it to go surprisingly astray. As I said earlier, it's a difficult piece, dense and metatheoretical. But

stripped to its essence, it speaks of loss, followed by introjection of the lost love object, followed by self-hatred. However, Plath, so consumed with her mother hate, misses the essay's central point. Rather than relating it to the loss of her father—the most obvious line to take—she (mis)understands the essay as suggesting "a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself" (p. 447). She cites a "vampire" metaphor Freud used when, in fact, nowhere in the essay does such a term even appear. What she has lost, she implies tortuously, is not a father but a mother's love. Her grief is over that, not over her father dying and "deserting me forever" (p. 447).

That Plath commits this error, twists the essay's meaning according to her own idiosyncratic demands of the moment, in effect reaching a recondite conclusion in place of a far more obvious one—these considerations raise the question of the error's motive.⁵ The journal entry in which she discusses the Freud piece is filled with thoughts of the father—how she identifies Hughes with Otto, how Otto deserted her. Still, when it comes to the essay's value for her, Plath returns once more to the mother theme, leaving the father suspiciously out of the picture. This is psychological defense, its aim the substitution of one hate for another easier to avow. In one of the journal's earlier sections, Plath even asks, "What do I know of sorrow? No one I love has ever died" (p. 33)—a very odd remark that she fails to correct, its oddness revealing an obvious blind spot.

The shadow of the father in fact haunts many of the journal's therapy-related sections, despite the more explicit attention paid to vampire Aurelia. He appears many times in dreams. In the first—a dream of her mother's that Plath records in careful detail—Plath is dressed as a chorus-girl prostitute. Otto, brought alive "to relive the curse of his old angers," slams out of the house enraged, ostensibly to bring Plath home. But in his fury he drives off a bridge and is seen "floating dead, face down and bloated, in the slosh of ocean water by the pillars of the country club." Everybody was then "looking down from the pier at them. Everybody knew everything" (p. 432). What Plath means by the cryptic last line she reveals later, confessing that her dreams are

"guilty visions of him or fears of punishment" for having "killed and castrated my father" (p. 476). Plath's recklessness, her sexuality—Aurelia's dream tells us—precipitated her father's drowning. Another dream—this one Plath's—has Plath dragging gravestones away with a rope, then finding herself in a corridor filled with corpses, half-decayed yet clothed in coats and hats. She wakes screaming at the "horror of the deformed and dead," standing among them "in the filth and swarming corruption of the flesh" (p. 459). She observes, "A cold corpse between me and any work at all," referring no doubt to the dead and deformed Otto.

Still more dreams follow. In one Otto makes an iron statue of a deer that comes alive, though with a broken neck. It must be shot. "Blamed father for killing it," she says, "through faulty art" (p. 510). Another depicts men in costume, one with his back turned and a great phallic sword in his hand, with which he hacks off legs at the knees, "men falling down like ninepins with their legstumps and lower legs scattered" (p. 470). The legless are meant to dig their own graves with the stumps. "This is too much," Plath tells herself. The assorted deformities implicate the father, who lost his gangrened leg before dying. In dreams he beats at the door of Plath's consciousness, and she resists by focusing instead on her vampire mother, repressing by means of distraction. As long as she preemptively keeps only her mother in her sights, training attention on this one source of anger to the exclusion of others, the lost father is spared and by implication redeemed. For the time being, the "father worship" Plath refers to in the journals is simply too valuable to explode.

If in dreams Otto returns as a reminder of a debt unsettled, he also appears in Plath's art. On New Year's Eve, 1958, Plath summarizes a story she's working on, later named "The Shadow," about a "complicated guilt system whereby Germans in a Jewish and Catholic community are made to feel, in a scapegoat fashion, the pain, psychically, the Jews are made to feel in Germany" (p. 453). She wonders, "How does her father come into this? How is she guilty for her father's deportation to a detention camp?" In the story itself a girl named Sadie—a name suggesting sadism, according to Plath—bites a boy's leg

in self-defense—a bout of rough-housing has gotten out of hand. Sadie and her family are scorned by their neighbors. All of a sudden no one talks to them anymore. The reason why is finally revealed to center on Sadie's atheist German father. "My mother says it's not your fault for biting Leroy," the boy's sister tells Sadie on their way to school. "My mother says it's because your father's German." Sadie confronts her mother with this news. Mother tells her that her father "may have to go away from us for a while" because, during wartime, people get frightened of enemies in their midst. "There are places out West for German citizens to live in during the war. . . . Your father has been asked to go to one of those" (Plath, 1980, 150). God won't let it happen, Sadie exclaims; her mother overrides her, "God will let it happen." Sadie answers dully: "I don't think there is any God, then. . . . Not if such things can happen" (p. 151).

The story thinly disguises Otto's death, here represented as deportation ("going away"), and Plath's having been the innocent cause of it, just as she was in the chorus-girl prostitute dream. The last few lines about God even mimic Plath's reaction on being told of her father's dying: "I'll never speak to God again." Plath knows her guilt is the story's true motor, but in the journal, at least, she never makes the connection between "The Shadow"'s surface and its depths. She sees it as political allegory instead.

The Bell Jar (1981a) was also written during this time period. There the father-shadow looms, as well. The book's centerpiece is a visit to Esther's father's grave, prefaced by this aside:

I thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be shadow, the million moving shapes and cul-de-sacs of shadow. There was shadow in bureau drawers and closets and suitcases, and shadow under houses and trees and stones, and shadow at the back of people's eyes and smiles, and shadow, miles and miles and miles of it, on the night side of the earth. (p. 120)

At the graveyard she thinks of all the things her father would have taught her if he hadn't died (things she was actually studying on her own at the time—botany, German, and a little later, bees).

She says with interesting ambiguity, "I had a great yearning, lately, to pay my father back for all the years of neglect, and start tending his grave" (p. 135). It's Plath herself who is the victim of neglect, not the grave; her father does need paying back, but for dying and deserting her, not for having his stone ignored. She remembers she never cried for her father's death, nor did her mother, who just smiled and said "what a merciful thing it was" (p. 137). She laid her cheek "to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain" (p. 137). The very next line lands sharply on the page: "I knew just how to go about it." "It" refers to suicide. Proximity of content implies psychological causality: Her father's death is what makes her suicide necessary. She visits his grave, and then she makes her attempt, in a way closely paralleling her real first suicide effort. As Plath wrote in the poem "Daddy," "At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do" (Plath, 1981b, p. 224).

Something else, inessential out of context, seems noteworthy. A few paragraphs after the section on shadow, and when mulling over various means of suicide—one being cutting—Plath muses, "It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, a whole lot harder to get at" (p. 121). Then later, imagining shooting herself, she realizes, "I wouldn't have a clue as to what part of me to shoot at" (p. 127). These two asides I find peculiarly significant. They have everything to do with the true target of Plath's self-hate. They refer to something inside her, a *part*, a deeper, secret shade she feels she must kill. Here we circle back to Freud's essay, which Plath partly misunderstood, but in other ways understood perfectly well. Suicide is murder. The self dies indirectly. What we really aim to kill is the introject, that lost object now inside us, that part we took in as an appeasement for loss. The bull's eye was not Plath's mother, but her dead father, the man crowding his way into her dreams, the man at the center of her art, the shadow under the stone, at the back of her smile.

The journal inches its way toward these insights, though without quite rising to explicit awareness about them. At one point Plath theo-

rizes, "If you are angry at someone else, and repress it, you get depressed. *Who am I angry at?* Myself. No, not yourself. Who is it?" (p. 437). (Her answer is her mother again, though father seems equally likely.) She thinks back to a run-in with her husband—a case of his being gone when she needed him—and the "furious access of rage" she knew in response. "Isn't this an image of what I feel my father did to me? . . . It was an incident only that drew forth echoes, not the complete withdrawal of my father who deserted me forever" (p. 447). (This entry occurs on the same morning Plath read Freud's essay.) She realizes that all her life she has been "stood up emotionally" by the people she loved most: "daddy dying and leaving me . . . Why do I feel now I should be guilty, unhappy: and feel guilty if I am not?" (p. 455). Then again: "the guilt, need for punishment is absurd" (p. 468). Most tellingly, perhaps, she wonders, "What good does talking about my father do? It may be a minor catharsis that lasts a day or two but I don't get insight talking to myself. What insight am I trying to get to free what? . . . I may have all the answers to my questions in myself but I need some catalyst to get them into my consciousness" (p. 474). Finally, she records what I think is the central question, the one most vital regarding her art, which she feels intermittently to be blocked, unrealized: "What inner decision, what inner murder or prison-break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing?" (p. 469).

The question of "what inner murder" is where we turn our attention next. But before heading in that direction, let's review briefly. With the appearance of the unabridged journals in 2000, a more fully developed picture of Plath became possible. Many of the cuts previously made by Hughes served, one can now see clearly with the two versions side by side, to protect Aurelia Plath, Sylvia's mother. Excisions restored, it is she who emerges as Plath's cobra-headed "Lady Death," even, in Plath's fantasy world, a witch. But despite the fierce interest in accessing her mother rage, and though Plath goes so far as to partly misread an essay by Freud in order to hate her mother still more deeply, Otto has his way of worming into what Plath called her Greek drama. We have seen that she dreamt of him

repeatedly through the year 1959 and regarded those dreams of deformity and death as punishment for her feeling of having loved her father to death, as she put it in the poem "Electra on Azalea Path." She wrote a story, "The Shadow," symbolizing father loss and her reaction to it. She visited her father's grave and then incorporated that experience into both a poem and her novel. Throughout it all she keeps wondering, Who am I angry at? Why do I keep punishing myself? What part do I seek to kill? What inner prison break must I commit? And indeed, "What insight am I trying to get [in order] to free what?"

This chapter has been a pursuit of the question of how reading Freud's essay helped Plath to understand her feelings of suicide and her art. There is very good evidence that Plath fixated on the image of her father, that she was prone to making narcissistic object choices, and that the father introject was an unusually active complex in Plath's mental life—the part, as I said, she was really trying to kill as she sought to "get rid of the accusing, never-satisfied gods" surrounding her "like a crown of thorns" (Plath, 2000, p. 502). All that established, we look now at how Plath with her poetry actually seemed to apply recommendations made in the last section of Freud's essay, the one concerning what to do with the introject and how to advance beyond melancholia. Or, to quote Plath: the need Freud saw in the melancholic for "inner murder."

Killing Daddy

One can read in sequence the poetry written between winter 1958 and winter 1959, the period during which Plath was back in psychotherapy (she read the Freud essay in December 1958). On February 19, 1959, she begins "Suicide Off Egg Rock," about a man who walks into the water to die, "his blood beating the old tattoo / I am, I am, I am . . ." (Plath, 1981b, p. 115). The sun striking the water like a damnation, everything shrinking in the sun's corrosive ray, he finds "No pit of shadow to crawl into."

One month later Plath finishes "Electra on Azalea Path," the poem she wrote to do "justice" to her father's grave (though in the end she rejected it as too forced and rhetorical). It is a story

of identification and of guilt. The day her father dies Plath does too—for twenty years, in fact, she went into the dirt, into the "lightless hibernaculum" with the bees, worming back toward her mother's heart. But in a durable whiteness she dreams Otto's epic, just as, at the time, she was dreaming of him in life. She even refers in the poem to one such dream (about the chorus-girl prostitute), writing "My mother dreamed you face down in the sea" (p. 117). (That dream is described in the journal entry dated December 12, 1958). As described above, the poem's final stanza has Plath asking for forgiveness from her dead father, a request made necessary by her realization that, when a child, she believed like children do that she had magically killed him: "O pardon the one who knocks for pardon at / Your gate, father—your hound-bitch, daughter, friend. / It was my love did us both to death" (p. 117). The final line is interesting in context. With it she ties her love for her father not only to his death but also to hers as well. Loving him is killing her or even has already done so. But she says the same thing later, too, in "Daddy" (i.e., I died to get back to you).

In early March she finishes "Man in Black," preceded by "The Beekeeper's Daughter," an Oedipal allegory in which Plath speaks of "My heart under your foot, sister of a stone" (p. 118). The former poem inaugurates a preference to surface later, also: Otto is always in black and, again, shadowy. Majestically and more godlike than ever, Plath's father strides out, straddling the ocean itself in his "black coat, black shoes" and "black hair." "Till there you stood," she wrote, "fixed vortex on the far / Tip, riveting stones, air, / All of it, together" (p. 120). In her journal Plath calls this a "love poem." She also speculates that the "dead black" in the poem "may be a transference from the visit to my father's grave" (p. 478).

"The Colossus" has Plath piecing her father together, "a blue sky out of the Oresteia" arching above them (p. 129). Maybe he is an oracle? A mouthpiece of the dead or of some god or other? Whatever the case, her labor has taken thirty years, and she is "none the wiser." She says with striking appositeness: "My hours are married to shadow" (a shadow that, as she writes in "Poem for a Birthday," has been shaped by ten fingers into a bowl).

The man in black lends all these poems his thundering pulse, and he returns expectably in a series of efforts called by Plath critics "the bee sequence"—a set of five poems on the father, followed in short order by Plath's most famous poem of all, "Daddy." In "The Bee Meeting," the first of these poems written in October 1962, the month of Plath's birthday, she is taking part in a dark ritual, or being initiated, more specifically, by "villagers" who resurface with murderous intent at the end of the poem "Daddy"—the rector (spiritual head of a church), the midwife, the sexton (church maintenance man, alternate meaning, a "gravedigger"), the agent for bees. "That man in black" Plath takes to be the rector. All in fact nod their "square black" visored heads in fields of creamy bean flowers with "black eyes" (p. 211). Plath is given an Italian straw hat and a black veil: "they are making me one of them," she observes eerily. Though exhausted, a "pillar of white in a blackout of knives," she does not flinch.

"The Arrival of the Bee Box" puts Otto in a coffin too heavy to lift—just as, in "Daddy," he is "Marble-heavy," a "bag full of God" (p. 222). When seen into through a grid the box—locked, dangerous, "dark, dark" and exitless—conveys the "swarmy feeling" of African hands shrunk for export, "black on black." The noise is most appalling, like a Roman mob—in "The Colossus" Plath had compared her father to a "Roman Forum"—but Plath "can't keep away from it." She has, she concludes, ordered a "box of maniacs." Yet they can die; she need feed them nothing; she in her moon suit and funeral veil is the owner (an assertion she will complicate later).

In another of these poems, "The Swarm," the bees, now out of the box, which after all was "only temporary," swarm in a "black ball" with their "black intractable mind" near a "black pine tree" seventy feet high. They must be shot down; the "knives are out for" them. At last they fall dismembered to a tod of ivy, walking their plank into a "new mausoleum" (tod means death in German).

With the last poem in the sequence, "Wintering," Plath's six jars of honey winter in "a dark without window" next to rancid jam and bottles of empty glitter—a lightless hibernaculum recalling the one Plath "wintered" into when her father

died. The "black" is bunched into this room like a bat. If in "Daddy" she barely dares to breathe or "achoo," having lived in Otto's "black shoe" for thirty years, in this room too, the one with the honey, she "could never breathe in," so filled it is with appalling objects, "black asininity" and decay (p. 218). She says, very tellingly, "It is they [these black objects] that own me" (reversing her earlier judgment). The cold sets in. The bees, all women, one ball of "black mind," carry their dead. They have "got rid of the men." Still the question lingers: "Will the hive survive to enter another year?"

Plath is ordering a very dark world here. The man in black, the shadow daddy Plath married—I'm referring to Otto, not Hughes—has become a ball of bees, black-minded, black-eyed, swarming seventy feet up in a black pine. But Plath owns the blackness. It can die for lack of food. It can be shot or stabbed. Or maybe not. In the final poem the black owns her, and a matter of months before her suicide she wonders will she survive.

It's hard to think of a better metaphor for the father introject than a ball of black bees that Plath both owns and doesn't own. In "Daddy" he is a ghastly statue with a gray toe big as a Frisco seal. As before, she prays to recover him from the waters he straddled, and in which, in dream, he drowned. "I have always been scared of you," she says—his Aryan eye, "not God but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through" (p. 223). She pictures him at the blackboard, the "black man" who bit her heart in two. She reminds us how, at twenty, she tried to die to get back to him: "I thought even the bones would do." But she survived: "They pulled me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue."

Next comes a transition of great import. Plath says, "then I knew what to do. / I made a model of you, / A man in black with a Meinkampf look. / And a love of the rack and the screw. / And I said I do, I do" (p. 224). This model Plath made, most critics have taken to mean, without the least bit of complication, her husband Ted Hughes, to whom, of course, she had said I do. But there's another possibility, suggested by knowledge of Plath's having read Freud, and by the modeling of Plath's father in the bee sequence and before.

The "man in black" she made and married was not Hughes, or not only Hughes, but the menacing introjected father; it was the introject to whom she said I do. As she declares in "The Colossus," a poem in some ways "Daddy's" precursor, "my hours are married to shadow." Plus, when Plath very deliberately calls this model a "man in black," referring to an earlier image she considered a transference from her visit to her father's grave, here again Plath tips us off as to subtext.

She says, Daddy, I'm through. "If I've killed one man, I've killed two—/ The vampire who said he was you / And drank my blood for a year, / Seven years, if you want to know" (p. 224). As before, others have taken the two murders to refer to Otto and Hughes, respectively. But again, there's an alternative way to read the line. We already know about how Plath feels she killed her father—she loved him to death—and how her dreams of deformity and death constituted punishment for the act. That is, by way of the kind of irrationally egocentric omnipotence young children often assume in relation to death, Plath fantasized having murdered her father in life. He is the one who drank her blood, he is the "vampire" who died when Plath was seven. The other man Plath kills—the one who, when he was a ball of bees, she thought of starving, shooting, and stabbing—is once more not Hughes, or not only Hughes, but the father image, the introject inside her, born of loss. In fact, that message is clear. The villagers from the first bee sequence poem even return, this time to dance and stamp on daddy, who lies back with a stake in his heart.

"Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," Plath concludes. But with what? As Plath says in a reading of the poem prepared for the BBC, with "the awful little allegory" she "has to act out" before she "is free of it" (Plath, 1981b, p. 293). What Plath is doing with "Daddy," and also to some extent in the bee sequence as well, is just what Freud recommended to the melancholic in the last pages of "Mourning and Melancholia." She is hating the introjected object into valuelessness and getting "through with it" (i.e., abandoning it) thereby. The image must be murdered for self-hate to come to an end.

Hardly coincidentally, four days after "Daddy" Plath tries working the same psychic magic with

her mother. She writes "Medusa," another act of poetic murder. Steaming over the sea, squeezing the breath from the blood bells of the fuchsia, Plath's mom leaves her gasping for air, dead and moneyless, overexposed like an X-ray. "Green as eunuchs," her mother's wishes hiss at her sins. "Off, off, eely tentacle," she says. But this time the ending remains ambiguous (whereas in "Daddy," daddy is doubtless dead). When Plath writes in this case, "There is nothing between us," we don't know if she means the relationship is finally mercifully over, or if she's simply noting an ongoing symbiosis. Whatever the case, in "Medusa" as in "Daddy," Plath is after what she called "inner murder," a prison break from the stranglehold of the introjected object.

"The Jailer" came a day later, five days after "Daddy," in that white hot fever-filled several months of poetry writing the results of which led Plath to tell her mother she was a genius, not without good reason. She has been "drugged and raped," knocked out of her mind, she writes, "into a black sack where I relax, foetus or cat" (p. 226). She dies "with variety—/ Hung, starved, burned, hooked." The tables have turned. If before she shot, starved, and stabbed the "black ball" of bees, the maniac in a box connoting the daddy introject, now it is Plath in the black sack, being drugged, raped, hung, starved, burned, and hooked. She can kill the introject—that shadowy *part*—but it can kill her, too.

Two men people this poem. One, the jailer of the title, rattles his keys. The other is of more interest in light of the task of inner murder. This man she imagines "Impotent as distant thunder/ In whose shadow I have eaten my ghost ration" (p. 227). (In "Electra on Azalea Path" she calls herself the "ghost of an infamous suicide.") Then with two simple lines Plath suggests "daddy" may have survived the poetical stake in the heart, the villagers dancing and stamping on him, and that perhaps she isn't quite "through" with him after all: "I wish him dead or away / That, it seems, is the impossibility" (p. 227). On the other hand, she asks, "What would he do, do, do without me?," echoing "Daddy's" opening line, "You do not do, you do not do." Again, the message seems to be this: The inner object she sometimes owns,

and sometimes she is its minion, like with the bees.

"Lady Lazarus," with its recitation of Plath's suicide history and its famous line "Dying / is an art, like everything else," was written during the week of Plath's birthday, late October 1962. It is directed to an unnamed antagonist, an "enemy" that at first seems like an anonymous, imagined audience of people, but who then becomes "Herr Doktor, Herr God, Herr Lucifer." Since the Germanic Otto Plath was a professor with a Ph.D., and since Plath in earlier poems had referred to him repeatedly as both a god and a devil, in this poem her invisible interlocutor is doubtless her father. It is he whom she tells, at the end, to "beware." It is to him she says, "I eat men like air," utilizing a metaphor suggestive of narcissistic devouring, the "swallowing" of the dead love object.

If Otto is the nuclear core of Plath's poetry, he is also the major figure in Ted Hughes' book of poems about his wife, titled *Birthday Letters* (1998), written over a period of twenty-five years and addressed, with two exceptions, to Sylvia. As the book jacket explains, Hughes is largely concerned with "the psychological drama that led both to the writing of [Plath's] greatest poems and to her death." And it's true: Hughes' book is his own psychobiography of his late wife, in poetic form. It makes available the beliefs he had guarded closely for so long, against all biographical body-snatchers (except, notably, Janet Malcolm (1995), the first to approach Hughes sympathetically, and the first to put his voice front and center).

"The Shot" provides an early indication of what's to come. Hughes tells his wife "Your worship needed a god. . . . Your Daddy had been aiming you at God / When his death touched the trigger" (Hughes, 1998, p. 16). In the resulting flash, Hughes says, Plath saw her whole life. She "ricocheted . . . with the fury of a high-velocity bullet." But Hughes knows, and I agree, that he—Hughes—was never the bull's eye the undeflected, "nickle-tipped" god-seeking missile sought. He was not who Plath wanted to kill. Her real target, says Hughes, "Hid behind me. Your Daddy, / The god with the smoking gun. For a long time / Vague as mist, I did not

even know / I had been hit. / Or that you had gone clean through me—/ To bury yourself at last in the heart of the god" (p. 17). Elsewhere, Hughes refers to the mystery of Plath's hatred, how she had danced for her father "to sweeten his slow death and mix yourself in it" (p. 26).

"Dream Life" registers Plath's nightly terrors, her dreams, many reviewed above, "of a sea clogged with corpses, / Death-camp atrocities, mass amputations" (p. 141). In each night's sleep Plath descended unafraid, Hughes writes, into her father's grave, harboring a truly Orphean heartache, and fighting the same urge to look back. "Your sleep was a bloody shrine, it seemed. / And the sacred relic of it / Your father's gangrenous, cut-off leg. / No wonder you feared sleep" (p. 141). Calling to mind "The Jailer," discussed above, Hughes says "You were the jailer of your murderer—/ Which imprisoned you" and "you wanted to be with your father in wherever he was," "you walked in the love of your father."

In one of the book's final poems, "A Picture of Otto," Hughes movingly confronts the shade who not only haunted his dead wife—his body "full of [her] arrows" though it was her blood "that dried on him"—but his own life, as well. They meet in a dark adit, an almost horizontal entrance to a mine that is Otto's family vault. "I never dreamed, however occult our guilt / Your ghost inseparable from my shadow / As long as your daughter's words can stir a candle" (p. 193). "I understand," Hughes says, "you never could have released her. / I was a whole myth too late to replace you" (p. 193).

The poems tell this story: Plath "mixed" herself in Otto's death, the imprisoned jailer of her own murderer, her life of father worship requiring the invention of substitute gods who, being too mortal to take the fury of her love, "more or less died on impact, . . . sound-barrier events along [her] flight path" (p. 16). But Daddy was her actual target, the man behind all the other men, with Plath's prison break possible only when the jailer killed her murderer. Hughes, when writing about the poem "Daddy," understands with terrible clarity that Plath's healing was also her demise: "Healed you vanished / From the monumental / Immortal form / Of your injury: your Daddy's / Body full of your arrows.

/ Though it was / Your blood that dried on him" (p. 180). When we kill the introjected object, when we murder the murderer, since he is really only us, and we his owner, then we die too—the murder becomes a suicide. Our blood dries on the object.

Summary and Conclusions

Plath's life and death struggle was with inner objects or introjects—of both her mother and her father—that, being a writer, and being prone to self-mythologizing and self-dramatizing as most writers by definition are, she invested with qualities serving to make these objects even more powerful and more destructive. Her mother, as we saw, was a witch, a vampire, an eel, a "barnacled umbilicus," her father a god and a demon, a black ball of bees, a "man in black," a "shadow." Hate got the best of Plath. She was a peculiarly angry writer. When she asked of herself in her journal what to do with her hate for her mother and how to use her anger creatively, these were questions of terrific import. Really, Plath's life depended on how she answered them. And in the end, whatever else may have been happening in her life, she seemed to have no answer.

Though she partly misapplied it, Plath lived Freud's essay to the letter. Early loss resulted in the introjection of the lost love object (Otto); introjection resulted in self-hate driven by ambivalence toward the object (more on this in a second); and the effort to murder the object—that *part* Plath despaired of naming—led to suicide. Plath also—I think consciously—tried taking up Freud's recommendations to the melancholic. Perhaps to get his advice was her reason for reading the essay in the first place; at the very least, it must have derived from a wish to better understand her predicament. In several of her poems, but especially noticeably in "Daddy" and "Medusa," written days apart, Plath clearly aimed to hate her father and mother into valuelessness, at the same time to allow her fury to spend itself. At "Daddy's" finish she even exclaims, "Daddy, Daddy, you bastard, I'm through," as if death by effigy—creative murder—might once and for all declaw or even forever silence this introject (although a matter of days later, in "The Jailer,"

Plath finds this task impossible). There were rational reasons for Plath to hate her father, most centering on the manner of his death. Putting it simply, Otto Plath did not have to die. Had he acted more reasonably and less cravenly in response to emerging symptoms—if he had seen a doctor—chances are he would have lived, or at least stood better odds of doing so. His was a death by indirection, maybe even what suicidologist Shneidman calls a "sub-intentioned death" (death hastened by inaction or immoderation). For Plath this must have been hard to understand, and even harder to forgive. It must have seemed that Otto did not love her enough not to die, or that he died on purpose. In murdering him—"Daddy, I have had to kill you"—she's saying goodbye to a parent she tried at first to worship but decided was unworthy and deeply disappointing, not worth the effort.

When Plath turned on the gas taps and lay her head in the oven on February 11, 1963, as her two small children slept in a nearby room—which Plath had sealed against the fumes—she placed her head on a "little folded cloth" (Stevenson, 1989, p. 296). In "Stings," part of the bee sequence written in October 1962, Plath has assembled her honey machine. About halfway through the poem, she stops abruptly to note: "A third person is watching. / He has nothing to do with the bee-seller or with me. / Now he is gone / In eight great bounds, a great scapegoat" (p. 215). It seems the bees sting this scapegoat, finding him out, "molding onto his lips like lies, / Complicating his features." Plath says: "They [the bees] thought death was worth it, but I / Have a self to recover, a queen." At the time Plath judged suicide's payment for murder too high. But what strikes me about this third person, this scapegoat, especially in relation to the "little folded cloth" Plath set her head on while preparing to die, is that on his head, instead of a hat, he wore a "square of white linen." So did Plath, it seems, when she died.

Notes

1. The shallower the theory, the higher its score. Shneidman is without doubt the world's leading authority on suicide. Still, to falsify his primary motivational factor—escaping *psychache*, or unbearable psychological pain/anguish—requires no

less than the discovery of a set of improbably cheerful self-murderers. At times he seems to be positing little more than the fact that unhappy people kill themselves more than happy people (although I'm simplifying). And Beck's high score benefits from a good deal of murky decision making. For instance, the rationality of Plath's thinking in the days preceding her suicide is unguessable. Underterred by lack of evidence, Lester opines: "It seems likely that a cognitive therapist would have judged her thoughts to be irrational and the conclusions drawn from them invalid" (p. 661). An overly generous determination, to say the least.

2. I once had the pleasure (or displeasure) of witnessing this exchange between a patient's attending psychiatrist and her family: "Doctor, can you tell us why X hears voices and why she does such strange stuff?" Doctor: "Well, it is because she has a disease called schizophrenia." Family: "Oh, I see. But, how do you know she has schizophrenia? For sure, I mean?" Doctor: "Because she hears voices and does strange stuff."

3. Naturally, Thompson is unaware of the fact that the more "symptoms" a disorder possesses, the less adequately understood it is, and the less likely it is to actually be a disorder at all. In fact, for a crushing debunking of the entire PMS syndrome, see Caplan (1995).

4. This dating of cycles is based on journal entries referring to things like cramps and faintness, and on Plath's periodic references to her period. We are meant to be reassured by tabulations such as these: "Taking April 21 as Day 1 of her cycle, May 22 would have been Day 32. She probably began menstruating shortly thereafter (the moods of her journal entries at this time indicate a cycle of thirty to forty days). The incident on June 11 probably occurred at, or shortly after, ovulation" (p. 247). Equally "probably," none of these assertions is correct.

5. There is another possibility, though it still points to a misreading, and an even more glaring one at that. The only time Freud in his complete psychological works uses the word "vampire" occurs in his book *Totem and Taboo*, in a section devoted to the "taboo upon the dead" and its virulence among most primitive peoples. There he discusses taboos against handling a corpse and uttering a dead person's name. He reviews prohibitions applying to mourners, whose "presence is unlucky. If their shadow were to fall on anyone, he would be taken ill at once" (Freud, 1950, p. 53). In some cultures, Freud says, whoever looks upon a widow dies a sudden death, so to prevent this fatal catastrophe "the widow knocks with a wooden peg on the trees as she goes along, thus warning people of her dangerous proximity" (p. 53).

The essence of taboo is a fear of demons, according to Freud, on the supposition that a dearly loved

relative at the moment of his death "changes into a demon, from whom his survivors can expect nothing but hostility and against whose evil desires they must protect themselves by every possible means" (p. 58). (In a remark that seems suspiciously on point, Plath in May 1959 records a decision to change the title of her poetry collection to "The Devil on the Stairs," feeling that it better "encompasses my book and 'Explains' the poems of despair," Plath, 2000, pp. 482-483.) The dead, filled with a lust for murder, seek to drag the living into their train. All the dead are "vampires," in fact, with a grudge against the living, and a desire to injure them and "rob them of their lives" (Freud, 1950, p. 59). Why this transformation of the dead into demons? The "true determining factor," Freud says, "is unconscious hostility" (p. 63). The demons are projections of hostile feelings harbored by survivors against the dead; projection thus "turns a dead man into a malignant enemy" (p. 63).

Perhaps what Plath really read by Freud is the above work (clearly relevant), not "Mourning and Melancholia" which, like *Totem and Taboo*, makes use in its title of alliteration. If so, that would require the presumption of two errors: She mistakenly names the title of the work she was reading, and once again, she mistakenly applies Freud's ideas on projection, unconscious hostility, and mourning to her mother, not her dead father. Whatever the case, the point remains: Plath reaches a recondite conclusion in place of a far more obvious one, and the error made is defensively motivated.

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