

A TERRIBLE FISH IS BORN: INESCAPABLE FEMININITY IN SYLVIA PLATH AND W.B. YEATS

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RESUMO

A beleza que perpetuamente se desvanece e regressa, beleza terrível e beleza como arte trágica; estes são os três princípios essenciais que enformam a interpretação da poesia de W. B. Yeats e Sylvia Plath neste artigo. A impossibilidade de atingir a imperfeição é representada no seu trabalho através de multifacetada entidade do espelho, uma barreira e também um meio para as reconstruções e reflexões acerca da beleza, ela própria dividida na luta entre dois eus, um masculino e um feminino.

ABSTRACT

Beauty that perpetually vanishes and returns, beauty terrible and beauty as tragic art; these are the three main tenets informing the reading of W.B. Yeats and Sylvia Plath's poetry in this paper. The impossibility of perfection is represented in their work through the multi-layered entity of the mirror, a barrier and a medium to reconstructions or reflections of beauty, itself divided in the struggle between two selves, masculine and feminine.

W.B. Yeats's and Sylvia Plath's concept of the beautiful is associated closely with visions of the emergence of terrible femininity. The 'terrible beauty' born in Yeats's 'Easter, 1916', an Ireland 'utterly changed' and 'transformed', is a frustrated vision of the impossibility of complete representation but also the terrible image that launches the beginning of a new cycle through terror. Plath's 'terrible fish' emerging out of a watery mirror, as well as the 'terrible' queen bee with her 'lion-red body' and her 'wings of glass', address and shatter the female preconceptions of her era and her poetry with the sounds of irregular shrieks she inherited from the Irish poet. Yeats, Matthew Spangler suggests, manipulated language for its 'potential as sound', the aural component of his work based more on carefully placed rhythms and beats than on harmony or melody.¹ As Terry Eagleton

¹ Matthew Spangler, "'Haunted to the Edge of Trance": Performance and Orality in the Early Poems of W.B. Yeats', *New Hibernia Review*, 10:2 (Summer, 2006), pp. 140-156 (pp. 141, 144).

notes, the unstressed *ty* in ‘beauty’ incorporates two phonemes from ‘terrible’ thus granting us ‘the momentary delights of equivalence and identity within a stimulating play of difference’ in the oxymoron that is ‘terrible beauty’.² Plath’s different beats appear in poems such as ‘Elm’ (1962) where we are offered, Scott Knickerbocker notes, the sound of the ‘sea’ or the ‘voice of nothing’, the sound of ‘hooves’ or the ‘sound of poisons’ and the ‘rain now, this big hush’ contrasted with ‘Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs’.³ This presents her poetry as a shattered mirror where her constantly partial representation is reconciled with her self-division echoing Yeats’s verse:

From mirror after mirror,
No vanity’s displayed:
I’m looking for the face I had
Before the world was made.
(1929)

Plath’s ‘Mirror’ (1961) depicts a woman seeing herself both in and as mirror when having to face the ‘uncompromising veracity’ of it.⁴ Plath replicates here the passive images caught on the mirror’s surface and through these images she defends its female representations. The female repressed speech comes to the surface through a speaking mirror and the woman acquires the power of manipulating her language and the evidence that the mirror provides: ‘she becomes the writer who writes of the mirror in which she perceives herself and of the mirror she is. She becomes the text in which that recording occurs.’⁵ The ‘terrible fish’, Plath’s ‘fantasy

² Terry Eagleton, *Against the Grain: Essays 1975-1985* (London: Verso, 1986), p. 174. See also Terry Eagleton, ‘Politics and Sexuality in W.B. Yeats’, *The Crane Bag*, 9:2 (Irish Ideologies, 1985), pp. 138-142.

³ Scott Knickerbocker, “‘Bodied Forth in Words’: Sylvia Plath’s Ecopoetics”, *College Literature*, 36:3 (Summer, 2009), pp. 1-23 (pp. 9, 13). Similarly juxtaposing two sets of symbols with two different rhythms, ‘The Couriers’, Sarah Hannah notices, ‘shatters its own mirror’ when the symmetrical end-rhymes of the first stanza are broken and the ‘violence of the “sea shattering its gray one” is somehow reconciled across the great white space of the second double stanza break with “season”’ in the final rhyming couplet. See Sarah Hannah, “‘Something Else Hauls Me Through Air’: Sound and Structure in Four Late Poems by Sylvia Plath”, *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics*, 5:2 (Spring, 2003), pp. 232-266 (pp. 256-257).

⁴ William Freedman, ‘The Monster in Plath’s Mirror’, *Papers on Language and Literature*, 29:2 (Spring, 1993), pp. 152-169 (p. 152).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 156.

A TERRIBLE FISH IS BORN: INESCAPABLE FEMININITY
IN SYLVIA PLATH AND W.B. YEATS

figure', is not, Maud Bodkin suggests, 'some great prophet or hero who tends to assume control of the personality', yet is compensatory for an incomplete self produced out of a repressed hostility for an over-idealizing love.⁶ The woman resists the mirror's definitions and chooses for herself the image of the 'terrible fish'.

Now I am a lake. [...]

I am important to her. She comes and goes.
Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.

The 'terrible fish' is the result of an attempt at self-definition, a 'fearful image of herself that has been mysteriously inscribed on the surface of the glass' or, as William Freedman puts it, the 'demonic form that threatened to tear the fragile membrane'.⁷ A turning point in her development, 'Mirror' represents a 'middle-ground between the extremes of passivity and action, numbing self-cancellation and aggressive self-assertion', a two-dimensional angel with the 'terrible fish' its 'concealed opposite and its concealed self'.⁸ In 'Face Lift' (1961), the mirror reflects the 'death of an old, meretricious identity, and the birth of a seemingly second self'.⁹ In this case, the desirable spiritual renewal is not achieved, because the emergence of this promising 'second self' is described in exclusively 'material terms'. The woman of 'Face Lift', who is all body, is transformed to the woman of 'Kindness' (1963), for whom there is also poetry: 'The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it.' The equation of poetry to

⁶ Maud Bodkin, *Archetypal Patterns in Poetry: Psychological Studies of Imagination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1934), p. 18.

⁷ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New York: Knopf, 1986), p. 76. Freedman (1993), p. 157.

⁸ Freedman (1993), pp. 161-2. Jenijoy la Belle links the image of the fish with the 'psychological presences hidden in the depths of the mirror experience' as explained by Carl Jung whose reading of the 'fish symbol' as a guide into the 'realm of experience where the unknowable archetypes become living things', archetypes sharing an 'antinomial character' Plath had read. See Jenijoy La Belle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass*, 2nd ed., (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1989), p. 95. See C. G. Jung, *The Collected Works, Volume 9, Part II*, trans. by R. F. C. Hull (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1959), pp. 182, 225.

⁹ Steven Gould Axelrod, 'The Mirror and the Shadow: Plath's Poetics of Self-Doubt, *Contemporary Literature*, 26:3 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 286-301 (pp. 289-90).

blood makes the spirit course ‘unstoppably through the blood stream’, thus showing, Axelrod argues, a unity of spirit and body.¹⁰

A woman does not want to ‘reincarnate one individual in another’, Simone de Beauvoir notes, but to ‘reconstruct a situation: that which she experienced as a little girl, under adult protection [where] she knew the peace of quasi-passivity.’¹¹ In this light, the meaning of the poem ‘Tulips’ (1961) is not restricted to the poet’s desire to be delivered from the body of this earth; the poetic narrator feels ‘swabbed’ of her ‘loving associations’ and the emptiness she experiences fills her with ‘peacefulness’ until she feels as if she has no face: ‘I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself. / The vivid tulips eat my oxygen’. As Beauvoir describes, ‘profound self-abandonment’ is required of the woman, who finds herself ‘back on earth, on a bed, in the light; she again has a name, a face’ when the man moves from her.¹² The tulips are reminders of ‘loving associations’ yet the speaker wants to ‘efface’ oneself, an action that dictates a breaking away from human relationships. In this way Plath, Christina Britzolakis suggests, actively refutes and struggles against a despairing female ‘voicelessness’.¹³

In ‘Purdah’ (1962) Plath describes the horror of a woman ‘contained both within the walls of the building in which she has been placed by her bridegroom and within the boundaries of her own consciousness’.¹⁴

My visibilities hide.
I gleam like a mirror.

At this facet the bridegroom arrives
Lord of the mirrors!

The woman moves from being a ‘doll’ and acknowledging the master’s total control (‘I am his’) to a gradual breaking away from her image as a precious possession (‘I shall unloose’), until she becomes her master’s destruction. The submissive doll becomes a ‘lioness’, symbol of female strength, and she unleashes upon him ‘The shriek in

¹⁰ Axelrod (1985), p. 293.

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Picador, 1988), p. 655.

¹² Beauvoir (1988), p. 658.

¹³ Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 214.

¹⁴ Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to her Poetry*, 2nd edn. (China: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. 111.

the bath, / The cloak of holes', alluding to female revenge, namely the murder of Marat in his bath by Charlotte Corday and the stabbing of Agamemnon by Clytemnystra.¹⁵ The docile silence has been replaced by a shriek and the customary covering of the face (purdah) is now nothing more than a 'cloak of holes'.¹⁶

Plath's merging of inertia and energy was also structured in her 'Queen Bee' poems, in which, according to Mary Lynn Broe, she sustains an 'authority of diminishment' and transforms inertia to a dominant mode of power.¹⁷ The ambivalent symbolical power of the queen bee is unique in its combination of sacrifice and a deceptive power status based on her absence from the productive apiary. The real power of the hive resides in the occupational unity of the workers and the climax of the queen's mission is her 'tragic nuptial flight', which is a combination of life and death. In 'Stings' (1962), the poet notices how easy it is for the worker-drudges to be deceived by an interloper and die while by the end of the poem the queen emerges from the hive "More terrible than she ever was".

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead? Is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

Rathi Raman notices that the recovery of a 'self' is at the beginning neutral in the power game, but shortly after 'it is a "queen" to be recovered – not just a female self, but a female self in a position of power' and even though it seems 'dead' at first, beyond recovery, it is revealed as 'sleeping', that is 'merely unconscious of its potential [...] The female self must now awaken to redefine her loss, if not retrieve her true position'.¹⁸ The queen's image becomes realistic by both conquering and recognizing her limitations: 'her wings of glass' reveal her vulnerability, which is combined with her ferocity, 'her lion-red body.'

Creatively existing in and as mirror, Yeats's woman, as Eagleton notes, is 'the impasse, the illegible text, the stumbling block to

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁶ Mary Lynn Broe, *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980), p. 136.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 126-7.

¹⁸ Rathi Raman, 'Consciousness in Conflict: An Analysis of the Poetry of Sylvia Plath' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Glasgow, 1993), p. 194.

interpretation, the unmake of man, Cordelia to his Lear, Desdemona to his Othello'.¹⁹ Yet something is accomplished for the mirror invites performance and encourages a return to beauty, however terrible it may be. 'Beauty always takes place in the particular,' Elaine Scarry suggests, so that what is beautiful 'prompts the mind to move chronologically back in the search for precedents and parallels, to move forward into new acts of creation, to move conceptually over, to bring things into relation'.²⁰ In 'Easter 1916' Yeats therefore becomes the 'dark matrix anterior to history', an impotent 'deathly spectatorial mother', utterly divided to connect to the 'terrible beauty' that was Maud Gonne.²¹ Plath returns to the animate abyss of the mirror in an effort to find the terrible beauty connected not only with 'Disquieting Muses' but also with the 'ghastly' beauty of 'Daddy'. A poem spoken by a girl whose father died 'while she thought he was God', as Plath herself noted, 'Daddy' (1962) presents a 'marble-heavy' image of a 'ghastly statue' while also associating this with the beauty of the sea.²² The last line, 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through', is moreover ambiguous since it can be interpreted both 'communication *as* ending, or dialogue *without* end'; 'through', Jacqueline Rose suggests, is found two stanzas previously ('So daddy, I'm finally through') meaning both ending and the condition for communication to be possible ('the voices just can't worm through').²³

Considering Yeats as one of her poetic mentors, Plath used a line taken out of his autobiography in her first journal: 'We only begin to live when we conceive life as Tragedy'.²⁴ 'Why should women be relegated to the position of custodian of emotions, watcher of the infants, feeder of soul, body and pride of man?', she added in 1951; 'Being born a woman is my awful tragedy [...] to have my whole circle of action, thought and feeling rigidly circumscribed by my inescapable femininity.'²⁵ Rose suggests that Plath's 'personal battle' was transforming itself into 'a battle over the meaning and possibility

¹⁹Terry Eagleton, 'Politics and Sexuality in W.B. Yeats', *The Crane Bag*, 9:2 (Irish Ideologies, 1985), pp. 138-142 (p. 140).

²⁰Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999), pp. 18, 30, 47.

²¹ Eagleton (1985), p. 142.

²² Eileen M. Aird, *Sylvia Plath* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), pp. 79-80.

²³ Rose (1996), p. 234.

²⁴ One of the epigraphs in Plath's original notebook. See *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York: Ballantine Books, 1982); W.B. Yeats, *Autobiographies* (London: Macmillan, 1955), p. 189.

²⁵ *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982), p. 29-30.

of poetry, of culture, as such' and finds in her poem 'Conversations Among the Ruins' (1956) the beginning of a 'tragic play to which words will, and will not, [...] be adequate' in a ceremony taken as 'the figure for the always inadequate, the always partial, nature of representation in relation to subjectivity itself': 'Rooted to your black look, the play turned tragic: / With such blight wrought on our bankrupt estate, What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?'²⁶ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that Plath's style and personal dilemma echo Yeats's explorations of the relations between male authority and female identity and creativity, in his poem 'He and She' (1934, 'She sings as the moon sings; / 'I am I, am I'), when she wrote: 'perhaps I am destined to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I – I am powerful – but to what extent? I am I.'²⁷ The mirror became therefore a symbol of her 'Sisyphean labor [...] to inscribe an unfinishable poem of the self' never being able to achieve wholeness.²⁸ 'I must get back into the world of creative mind', Plath wrote in her journal in 1957, 'otherwise, in the world of pies and shin beef, I die.'²⁹

In the shards of mirror after mirror Yeats found his 'character in action', the body of a dancer, faceless yet feminine – 'O body swayed to music, O brightening glance, / How can we know the dancer from the dance?' ('Among School Children', 1927) – captured in the mirror's units and reborn, like the poet himself, 'as an idea, something intended, complete' and part of the poet's own phantasmagoria born out of his personal tragedy.³⁰ Yeats's definition of tragedy can be understood in terms of limits. As Ronald Schleifer suggests, 'limits are realized by being approached, just as the tragic hero realizes his unity in the struggle with an obstacle that obstructs it. Tragedy pushes that confrontation to its furthest extent and creates definition [...]

²⁶ Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, 2nd edition (London: Virago, 1996), p. 90.

²⁷ *Sylvia Plath: Letters Home: Correspondence, 1950-1963*, ed. by Aurelia Schober Plath (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 40.

²⁸ Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1990), pp. 199-200.

²⁹ *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982), p. 157.

³⁰ In 'An Introduction for my Plays' Yeats wrote: 'I had begun to get rid of everything that is not, whether in lyric or dramatic poetry, in some sense character in action; a pause in the midst of action perhaps, but action always its end and theme.' In 'A General Introduction for my Work' he wrote: 'A poet writes always of his personal life, in his finest work out of its tragedy, whatever it be, remorse, lost love, or mere loneliness; he never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria.' See *Essays and Introductions* (1961), pp. 530, 509.

creates articulation.³¹ This was inherent in Yeats's 'ontological homelessness'; the human condition is tragic in essence, that is why one is made 'an unwelcome guest of life'.³² In 'The Cold Heaven' (1912) we see, for example, as Vereen Bell argues, 'the real inhumanness of existence itself', since even in its form – a sonnet that lacks two lines – it is about 'partial knowledge and our incompleteness'.³³

In 'Among School Children', the dancer's choreography is being progressively conceived at every step to suggest, Helen Vendler argues, that we are the 'perpetual inventors of our own selfhood'.³⁴ The female body is gradually phased out but not obliterated. The poet, Yeats argued, may have to 'endure the impermanent a little, for these things return, but not wholly, for no two faces are alike' so that all things are perhaps made out of the struggle 'of the individual and the world, of the unchanging and the returning'.³⁵ To find a poetic image that would purify the imagination and the intellect with pity and terror, the poet should then, according to Yeats, aspire to tragic ecstasy, 'the best that art – perhaps that life – can give,' and, as in tragedy, drown and break the dykes that separate man from man.³⁶ It is that same unity and fluidity of motion that Sylvia Plath aspired to create when she added a lake to the versatility of the mirror and a terrible fish to its forgetful depths filled with the shrieks of female voices. 'Write for the ear,' Yeats had instructed himself, 'so that you may be instantly understood as when actor or folk singer stands before an audience'.³⁷

In a constantly changing medley of images designed to create a passion that could 'strike down an enemy, fill a long stocking with money or move a girl's heart' ('Personality and the Intellectual Essences'), Yeats explored the interplay of a visual and musical phantasmagoria.³⁸

³¹ Schleifer (1979), p. 221.

³² George Steiner, "'Tragedy,' Reconsidered', *New Literary History*, 35 (2004), pp. 1-15 (p. 2).

³³ Vereen Bell, 'Yeats's Nietzschean Idealism', *The Southern Review*, 29:3 (Summer, 1993), pp. 492-493.

³⁴ Helen Vendler, *Poets Thinking: Pope, Whitman, Dickinson, Yeats* (U.S.A: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 97-107.

³⁵ *Discoveries* (1970), p. 33.

³⁶ *Essays and Introductions* (1961), pp. 239-241.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 530. From the essay 'An Introduction for my Plays' (1937).

³⁸ *Discoveries: A Volume of Essays by William Butler Yeats* (Shannon: Irish University Press, 1970), pp. 11, 6.

A TERRIBLE FISH IS BORN: INESCAPABLE FEMININITY
IN SYLVIA PLATH AND W.B. YEATS

‘A girl has been playing on the banjo. She is pretty and if I didn’t listen to her I could have watched her, and if I didn’t watch her I could have listened. Her voice, the movements of her body, the expression of her face all said the same thing. A player of a different temper and body would have made all different and might have been delightful in some other way. A movement not only of music but of life came to its perfection.’³⁹

In *Discoveries*, his 1907 volume of essays, Yeats wrote that it was the poet’s duty not to seek what is ‘still and fixed’ but focus on what is ‘for ever passing away that it may come again, in the beauty of woman, in the fragile flowers of spring, in momentary heroic passion, in whatever is most fleeting, most impassioned, as it were, for its own perfection, most eager to return in its glory’ (‘In the Serpent’s Mouth’) and found in the ‘heroic discipline of the looking-glass’ one of ‘the most difficult of the arts’ (‘The Looking-Glass’).⁴⁰ Previously he had criticised in his essay ‘The Theatre’ (1900), the modern theatre of art, debased in the city, for appealing to ‘the most hurried glance’ with productions lulling the mind by letting the eye take pleasure ‘in the magnificence of velvet and silk and in the physical beauty of women’.⁴¹ It is only tragic art, Yeats wrote, that ‘moves us by setting us to reverie’ setting before our eyes that which ‘perpetually vanishes and returns again in the midst of the excitement it creates, and the more enthralling it is, the more do we forget it’ (‘Tragic Theatre’, 1900).⁴² The poet’s duty to seek ‘whatever is most fleeting’ made the ‘discipline’ of the looking-glass a tragic art because it resisted the ‘hurried glance’, invited repetition and defined the self through a constant confrontation of and impossible desire for the image of an ideal other.

Jenijoy La Belle names Yeats one of the ‘mutineers against the mirror’ when in ‘The Hero, the Girl, and the Fool’ (1922) he presented the woman angry at her ‘own image in the glass’, so unlike of herself ‘that when you praise it / It is as though you praised another’.⁴³ His voice, however bold, La Belle argues, failed to realize that self-consciousness is a cultural phenomenon that has made even women forget that when they ‘look at themselves in the mirrors, they

³⁹ Ibid., p.10.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 32, 11.

⁴¹ W.B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions* (London: Macmillan, 1961), p. 169.

⁴² Ibid., p. 245.

⁴³ La Belle (1989), p. 147.

participate in a largely ignored panoply of body/self interactions'.⁴⁴ Yet even sexual union was in the Yeatsian system, as David Clark notes, a 'Day of Judgment' depicted as black, a 'microcosmic imitation of the end of the world', so that even in nakedness 'we are still hidden, the day is black, we cannot be fully known or shown to the lover.'⁴⁵ His phantasmagoria entailed the impossibility of complete representation and disclosure and the non necessity of absolute representation, since this would lull the senses and the intellect; the poet, Yeats wrote, 'never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table, there is always a phantasmagoria.'⁴⁶

Constantly vacillating between opposites, Yeats was set against self-defining limits, torn as he was between himself as a 'white, male, middle-class, Protestant citizen of the British Empire' and a 'colonized Irishman' acutely conscious of repression and exclusion, and the product of this confrontation repeatedly found an articulation in the feminine.⁴⁷ By the 1880s, when he began to write, the male-dominated literary tradition of poetic love reached a crisis with the concurrent exploration of sexual identity and the 'Woman Question' and Yeats became sympathetic to the cause of women's emancipation.⁴⁸ In 'The Adoration of the Magi' (1897) he built on the idea that history moves in cycles and through terror: 'the new age cannot be said to advance on the old because each age values opposite things, and because the new age brings back certain values rejected by the old. The values of the new age terrorize the old.'⁴⁹ The face the magi encountered of the dying woman, 'the porcelain-like refinement of the vessel in which so malevolent a flame had burnt,' had a look of 'unquenchable desire' and had given birth to something seemed to be born 'dancing', the beginning of a new cycle predicated again on the image of a dancer.⁵⁰ In *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), Yeats tried, like

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 172. In 'The Stones', Plath's 1959 poem, the female body is 'violated, taken apart, and put back together by medical operators' and is associated with the rose, a symbol for the poet, Britzolakis notes, of the 'cultural construction of femininity' not embodying a 'harmonizing divine or natural force, as in Dante or Yeats'. See Britzolakis (1999), p. 163.

⁴⁵ David R. Clark, "That Black Day": *The Manuscripts of "Crazy Jane on the Day of Judgement"* (Portlaoise, Ireland: The Dolmen Press, 1980), pp. 47-48.

⁴⁶ See *Essays and Introductions* (1961), p. 509.

⁴⁷ Elizabeth Butler Cullingford, *Gender and History in Yeats's Love Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 6.

⁴⁸ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

⁴⁹ Robert Langbaum, 'The Exteriority of Self in Yeats's Poetry and Thought', *New Literary History*, 7:3 (Spring, 1976), pp. 579-597 (p. 579).

⁵⁰ W.B. Yeats, *Mythologies* (London: Macmillan & Co Ltd, 1959), pp. 311-12.

other writers of the same period, to convert the 'normative tropologies of gender disjunction, exclusion and stratification', upon which nineteenth-century imperialism relied for its ideological strength, by focusing, Joseph Valente notes, on the 'phallogocentric' locus of Irish myths of sovereignty countering the 'British image of Ireland as wife' with an image of Ireland as 'sexually pure Mother'.⁵¹

His desire for a free nation was presented in his Rose poems as a beautiful woman in accordance with its depiction in Irish tradition while in post-1922 Ireland he could protest for the regressive social policies of the Catholic Free State, from which women would mostly suffer, with figures like Crazy Jane who became for him, Barbara Hardy suggests, a wise figure placed 'below hierarchies, establishments and heroisms'.⁵² In 'Leda and the Swan' (1924), where Yeats retold the Greek myth of Zeus's rape of Leda, he concluded with a question mark to question 'how exchanges of power between self and other might be conceptualized beyond domination' so that his poetics enact 'how we compose ourselves through our often unrequited desires for others'.⁵³ We need an 'unrequited desire' for an other so that we can create ourselves but this desire should be predicated on the creed of the hurried glance, otherwise, Yeats seems to suggest, it becomes stale. Through Red Hanrahan, for example, one of Yeats's early alter egos, the poet rendered himself incapable of imaginative change by desiring 'sidhe' (gaelic for 'wind'), an unchanging image journeying around the country 'in whirling wind' ('The Hosting of the Sidhe', 1893).⁵⁴ In 'The Death of Hanrahan' (1897), however, Hanrahan meets Winny Bryne, an old woman living

⁵¹ Joseph Valente, 'The Myth of Sovereignty: Gender in the Literature of Irish Nationalism', *ELH*, 61:1 (Spring, 1994), pp. 189-210 (pp. 189, 195-96). On the figure of Cathleen ni Houlihan in Yeats's play see also Henry Merritt, "'Dead Many Times": "Cathleen ni Houlihan," Yeats, Two Old Women, and a Vampire', *The Modern Language Review*, 96:3 (July, 2001), pp. 644-653.

⁵² Barbara Hardy, 'The Wildness of Crazy Jane', in *Yeats, Sligo and Ireland* (1980), pp. 31-55 (pp. 33, 7-9). A. Norman Jeffares suggests that the rose becomes in Yeats a symbol of intellectual beauty echoing the rose as a symbol for Ireland and written to Maud Gonne. See *The Circus Animals: Essays on W.B. Yeats* (London: Macmillan, 1970), p. 82.

⁵³ Janet Neigh, 'Reading from the Drop: Poetics of Identification and Yeats's "Leda and the Swan"', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29:4 (Summer, 2006), pp. 145-160 (pp. 147-148, 154).

⁵⁴ See Lester I. Conner, 'A Matter of Character: Red Hanrahan and Crazy Jane', in *Yeats, Sligo and Ireland: Essays to Mark the 21st Yeats International Summer School*, ed. by A. Norman Jeffares (Gerrards Cross, Buckinghamshire: Colin Smythe Ltd., 1980), pp. 1-16.

up on the hillside with ‘wrinkles in her face’, grey hair and ‘broken teeth that were black and full of gaps’, one that used to be wise but whose wits were stolen by the Sidhe.⁵⁵ By the end of the story, arms ‘as white and as shadowy as the foam of river’ encircle Hanrahan’s body who is united with ‘the broken and the dying, and those that have lost their wits’ to forever dwell in the lakes and the mountains, an act anticipating the cyclic emergence and disappearance of Crazy Jane.⁵⁶

By 1927, Red Hanrahan had become Yeats’s ‘horrible splendour of desire’ (‘The Tower’, 1927, ll. 41-47) and Crazy Jane emerged as one of Yeats’s alter-egos in a series of eight poems from 1932 until 1939. Crazy Jane, ‘promiscuous and open to sexual adventure’ became ‘a highly articulate example of Irish anti-clericalism’ combining ‘sexual offensiveness with theological debate’.⁵⁷ By creating a tragic heroine who sustained man’s inhumanity emerging alive, even if not completely unscathed, Yeats did not aim at tragic catharsis – we do not witness a world of moral disorder to feel the terror of the hero fighting evil – but ‘tragic ecstasy’, as the reader can relate to the heroic psychology of self-surrender and self-assertion.⁵⁸ Crazy Jane’s tragic play reaches its climax in ‘Crazy Jane on the Mountain’ (1939), the last of the Crazy Jane poems, when confronted with the form of contingency that is nationalism – predicated on the argument that ‘no nation can imagine its own death’ – and she creates the articulation of Ireland neither as wife nor sexually pure Mother but as a famous country beauty, such as Mary Hynes, grown old and legendary, like Winny Bryne, and singing for a new Ireland now playing with all masks.⁵⁹ In her final act, Jane kisses a stone and lies

⁵⁵ *Mythologies* (1959), pp. 255, 258. Cullingford sees Winny Bryne as another ‘Cailleac Beare’ figure from Irish folklore. See *Gender and History in Yeats’s Love Poetry* (1993), pp. 56, 66.

⁵⁶ *Mythologies* (1959), p. 260.

⁵⁷ Hardy (1980), pp. 42, 50.

⁵⁸ Walter E. Houghton, ‘Yeats and Crazy Jane: The Hero in Old Age’, in *The Permanence of Yeats*, ed. by James Hall and Martin Steinmann (New York: Collier Books, 1961), pp. 327-348 (pp. 344-5).

⁵⁹ In his Nobel Lecture Yeats referred to a poem by the Gaelic poet Raftery that gave Mary Hynes great fame: ‘O star of light and O sun in harvest, / O amber hair, O my share of the world, / It is Mary Hynes, the calm and easy woman, / Has beauty in her body and in her mind.’ For the ‘metaphysics’ of nationality see Peter Bien, ‘Inventing Greece’, *Journal of Modern Greek Studies*, 23 (2005), pp. 217-234 (pp. 218, 226). For the argument that ‘no nation can imagine its death’ see Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1996), p. 15.

stretched 'out in the dirt' dissolving into the earth in a tragic self-surrender from a heightened level of aesthetic imagination so that she can become part of 'that unfashionable gyre again' ('The Gyres', l. 24).

Combining the maternal power of rebirth ('My body in the tomb - / Shall leap into the light lost / In my mother's womb', l. 10-12, in 'Crazy Jane and Jack the Journeyman') with sexual desire and death ('Nor grave nor bed denied', l. 10 in 'Crazy Jane talks with the Bishop'), Crazy Jane assimilated the traits of the dancer and thus represented, as Elizabeth Anderson suggests, unity of being but also 'the other side of ecstasy, the complete abandonment that leads to dissolution of self in madness, chaos and fragmentation'.⁶⁰ Like the crazed girl 'dancing upon the shore, / Her soul in division from itself' (in 'A Crazed Girl', 1937, l. 2-3), that mask of a crazed female embodied Dionysian inspiration found in madness together with a breaking down of boundaries as symbolized, Elizabeth Muller notes, by the god's 'constant intoxication, laughter, and wild dancing'.⁶¹ Crazy Jane confronts her desires. She does not identify passively with an other nor does she allow her desires to be fulfilled only by that other – in this way, an active space is created as that necessary distance between self and other.

In the 'discipline' of the looking-glass Yeats's woman became both text and reader, product and interpreter, disciplined reader or critic. The mirrored image borrowed features of the subject mirrored but the latter was constantly conscious of the former as a mask, the materiality of the mirror serving as a reminder of the distance between them. When the mirror was broken, however, or, as in Plath's poetry, when it became animate, then it was not a protective mask anymore but an alternative presence of an other existing in and as mirror, an open space allowing various voices to be heard. A wholeness was achieved through complexity and a beauty was acknowledged that was not harmonious or perfect but only achieved in death, the ultimate transformation involving the phantasmagoria of female and male others. Marjorie Perloff suggests that Yeats's 'terrible beauty' was

⁶⁰ Elizabeth Anderson, 'Dancing Modernism: Ritual, Ecstasy and the Female Body', *Literature & Theology*, 22:3 (September, 2008), pp. 354-367 (p. 364).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 364. Elizabeth Muller, 'The Cult of Dionysus in the Work of W.B. Yeats', in *Re-Embroidering the Robe: Faith, Myth and Literary Creation since 1850*, ed. by Suzanne Bray, Adrienne E. Gavin and Peter Merchant (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2008), pp. 210-227 (p. 216).

that of death itself, presented in 'Easter 1916' in John MacBride's utter transformation.⁶²

For Plath, '[t]he woman is perfected' in stasis, when '[h]er dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment' ('Edge', 1962) or when she makes '[t]he absolute sacrifice. / It means: no more idols but me, / Me and you.' ('The Munich Mannequins', 1962) '[N]o more idols but me, / Me and you' is an inflection of 'I am I, am I' (Yeats, 'He and She', 1934) beckoning a reply from the mirror. The movement '[f]rom mirror after mirror' in Yeats's 'Before the World was Made' (1929) echoes the 'movement not only of music but of life' he had previously found in the 'girl playing the banjo' image in 1907. For Yeats, beauty equals impossible perfection not restricted to the visual image as offered by the one-dimensional mirror; it means continuous movement with the possibility to evolve: 'A player of a different temper and body would have made all different and might have been delightful in some other way. A movement not only of music but of life came to its perfection.' For Plath, '[p]erfection is terrible, it cannot have children' ('The Munich Mannequins', 1962), it means only death and offers no development. The perfectly still female body presented in her poem 'Edge', however, 'wears' the smile of accomplishment and the 'illusion of a Greek necessity' that '[f]lows' in the scrolls of her toga makes her a willing agent of the perfection she embodies. Reconciling life and death, much like Yeats's 'cult of the dead face' found in the image of the dancer, Plath's poetry reads as a warning to resist passive imitation of an other.⁶³ 'I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences,' she commented in a 1962 interview, 'even the most terrific, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience [...] I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience.'⁶⁴ The looking-glass entails the intention of looking for or remembering a pre-existing image or condition of the

⁶² Marjorie Perloff, "'Easter 1916': Yeats's World War I Poem", in *The Oxford Handbook of British and Irish War Poetry*, ed. by Tim Kendall (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 227-241 (p. 235).

⁶³ On the 'cult of the dead face' to which Yeats found a representation of his poetic image, see Frank Kermode, *Romantic Image*, 2nd edition (London: ARK editions, 1986), pp. 64-67.

⁶⁴ Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press, and Ian Scott-Kilvery* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966); the interview was conducted by Peter Orr on 30th October, 1962 (January 2010) [Date of access]

<http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm>

A TERRIBLE FISH IS BORN: INESCAPABLE FEMININITY
IN SYLVIA PLATH AND W.B. YEATS

self and, by resisting the transformation of desires into ‘mirror-looking, narcissistic’ experiences, Plath’s poetry intends to unveil these imagined images in a dreamlike sequence aspiring to become tragic art. Her ‘terrible fish’ thus becomes Charlotte Corday, Clytemnestra, queen bee and daddy.

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A TERRIBLE FISH IS BORN: INESCAPABLE FEMININITY
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