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The Space of Motherhood

Sylvia Plath's "Morning Song" and "Three Women"

Topoanalysis, then, would be the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate lives. In the theater of the past that is constituted by memory, the stage setting maintains the characters in their dominant roles... To localize a memory in time is merely a matter for the biographer and only corresponds to a sort of external biography... For a knowledge of intimacy, localization in the spaces of our intimacy is more urgent than the determination of dates. (Bachelard, 1969: 8-9)

To live an entirely private life means above all to be deprived of things essential to a truly human life; to be deprived of the reality that comes from being seen and heard by others, to be deprived of an "objective" relationship with them that comes from being related to and separated from them through the intermediary of a common world of things, to be deprived of the possibility of achieving something more permanent than life itself. The privation of privacy lies in the absence of others; as far as they are concerned, private man [sic] does not appear, and therefore it is as though he did not exist. Whatever he does remains without significance and consequence to others, and what matters to him is without interest to other people. (Arendt 2000: 205)

Perhaps because she often overlaps women's apparently private spaces (the home, the kitchen) with what is considered the collective sphere of life (art spaces, such as theaters and museums, the marketplace, nature and the outdoors, Sylvia Plath is sometimes accused of both a kind of exhibitionism, and a concomitant lack of interest in the general human condition (Vendler, 1985: 5). However, the opposite claim may well be made. Plath, I will argue,

has positive and outward looking reasons for presenting putatively public and private spaces as in fact overlapping, “constantly flow[ing] into each other like waves in . . . the life process,” in Hannah Arendt’s terms (1958: 33). That is, the space that contains women’s private lives, including the work of motherhood, is at the same time a historical space with “public implications,” as Nina Baym suggests (1995: 70).

As a writer who was also a wife and mother, Plath struggled to achieve notice and power from this complicated nexus; this essay will explore how her poetry contests the idea of fixed borders in gender-marked worlds, even for mothers. In “Morning Song,” the speaker-mother is situated beyond her presumed private boundaries in the public world of writing. In “Three Women,” the discussion among the women about motherhood is a public debate with public ramifications.

Plath’s poetry generally features a rather routine transgression of presumed spatial limits on women’s lives. Applying the terminology of the French feminist critic Helene Cixous, that of a binary system or scheme in which women are negatively defined in terms of their relationship to men, Plath may be seen as openly flouting the system; her poetry depicts both the “passivity” and “burial” of women within this scheme—Cixous’ figures for the oppression of women (1994: 37-39)—but also a crossing of the divide. That is, while gender is clearly depicted as a force that structures experience for men and women (Wolosky, 2001: 130), women are not merely located or locked within the borders of space traditionally gendered as women’s; in Plath’s poetry, women are everywhere, and wherever they are, even the nursery, *is* everywhere, a space where writing makes women’s lives public and therefore valuable.

Plath illustrates this transgression of gendered spatial boundaries in several ways in “Morning Song” and “Three Women.” She uses the “characteristically feminine figures” and sites noted by Shira Wolosky: “female speaking voices; female actors; domestic imagery and spaces, traditionally the domain of women; traditionally female roles, such as daughter, wife, sister, mother; feminized experiences, such as birth, childcare and sickcare; traditionally female undertakings, such as sewing, cloth-making, cooking; gendered sexuality” (2001: 120). At the same time, I will show, she extends and distorts these spaces, and also exits them, until the “tradition[al] . . . domain of women” is no longer delineated by a clear dividing line from the rest of the world. In order to disrupt the idea of women’s location in a fixed place, apart from men, Plath uses imagery of the crossing of thresholds, blurred borders and related images of fragmentation and dissolution. To this end, Plath also conflates spaces that might be assumed to exist in a clear opposition to one another; for example, she locates the moment of new motherhood in private and public spaces at the same time.¹

It may be that the imagery of crossed borders represents, in a general way, a connection to the culture and society around one; whether or not a poet seizes upon this imagery depends upon his or her particular needs in relation to

society, an area in which gender plays a role. A male poet comfortable with his authority as a poet may choose to reject becoming part of the larger society. A woman poet, in order to gain authority, may seek that connection. For example, the critic Dan Miron notes a dominant imagery of borders placed between the individual and the world in the poetry of Yehuda Amichai, interpreting it as a representation of the need of an individual artist to protect himself from the assimilation process demanded of an immigrant to Israel (2000: B14).

Plath, however, in my view a seeker of power and authority in the literary world, favored an imagery of blurred and crossed boundaries in her work, in part in order to enable her women speaker-writer-mothers to become members of the Anglo-American literary canon. Of course there is a danger in the conflation of spaces: a dangerous exposure to the loss of individuality. This threat to the self which is involved in crossing borders into public spaces in a bid for power is perhaps the source of the great amount of aggression in Plath's work, rather than an indication of her personal psychological problems: the best defense of her power-seeking speakers is to be on the offensive.

In "Morning Song" Plath conflates a decidedly female gendered space—motherhood—with a surprising space in the public world, a museum, so that even this experience is shown as not taking place only within the fixed borders of gender-marked worlds. Motherhood overlaps other kinds of boundaries as well: it is depicted as a technical sexual matter, and a natural process which nonetheless must be learned. It should be noted that while there is a pronounced imagery of blurred borders, there is also an imagery of differentiation and the reestablishment of borders, perhaps to redress the loss of self that is threatened by childbearing.

"Morning Song" is about the process of separation from a child that begins with its physical birth, and the concomitant process of bonding: maintaining individuality in a situation where the body itself is a border that is crossed. The poem questions the spatial boundaries of motherhood in particular, and parenting in general; parenting is depicted, not as a private experience, but rather as a collective one, at the same time that it restricts private space. The negativity involved in spatial limitation is somewhat undermined: sound and rudimentary language are portrayed as comprising a positive location—a song—where the relationship between mother and newborn begins. The poem contains some hard truths in its time imagery as well; becoming a parent makes one extremely conscious of the passage of time, and of the unhappy physical changes caused by giving birth and by aging.

The title of the poem raises expectations of a cheerful use of language at the beginning of the day: a song in the morning that might be the child's or the mother's, or both. This song crosses several boundaries—the physical separation imposed on mother and child by the birth process, and the artistic gap between home and workplace. The child's cry in the morning is made into a song; that is, it is worked into a poem, enabling the speaker-mother-writer to fill domestic, maternal and literary space at the same time.

In the first line, the baby in the poem is presented with humor as the product of love, albeit a mechanical object, which can be “set...going,” and as having the function of a timekeeper: “Love set you going like a fat gold watch.” The mechanical nature of conception may be interpreted as undermining the concept of love as a spontaneous experience, or it might serve as a recognition of the sometimes blurry borders between love and sex, or between sex and conception; still, the result is well-nurtured and valuable.

The child, having crossed the borders of its mother’s body to emerge into the world, crosses the borders of its own self with its voice and enters space—the physical and social world, represented by “elements,” fundamental parts of a larger entity: “your bald cry/ Took its place among the elements.” Connotations of the periodic table imply order, but the connotations of (inclement) weather hint at disorder, as does the synaesthesia of the “bald cry,” mixing sight, touch and sound. In addition to these unsettling effects, the influence of the child on its parents seems to be an enlargement of their space, now big enough to provide an echo: “Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival.” Yet the child continues to be depicted as an inanimate object (even if a work of art and even if already larger than a watch): “New statue/ In a drafty museum.” The image of home as museum is one of a serious cultural space, a repository of tradition or artistic heritage.² Yet the draftiness connotes coldness and a lack of protection from the elements, a theme continued in the way the naked infant is said to cast a shadow on the parents’ safety, making them more vulnerable, perhaps because the space of their vulnerability is enlarged to include another human being. “We stand round blankly as walls” also hints at a certain amount of helplessness, for walls, although they may protect one from the elements, are lifeless, and their blankness seems the very opposite of nurturance. Finally, walls divide; they are boundaries. But parents figured as walls are moving away from privacy and towards responsibility, moving out of their own interiority to become boundaries for their children.

The denial of motherhood in the third stanza (“I’m no more your mother”), and the cloud metaphor, because of its ephemeral nature, may be construed as shocking attempts to deny all maternal responsibility. But they may also be understood as a denial of the restriction solely to mothers of responsibility for children, and recognition of the context of motherhood as taking place within a larger world of (changing) natural forces, the elements of the universe. Borders between the world of nature and the mother’s body are blurred, perhaps because giving birth makes one into a phenomenon of nature, reducing individuality, but connecting one to basic natural processes.

Borders between the space of motherhood within the home, and the outside world, are also crossed. The child’s breath, part of its fledgling voice, seems to take up space in a garden, an outdoor space: “All night your moth-breath/ Flickers among the flat pink roses.” Yet the flatness of the roses locates them indoors, as depictions of flowers, decorating the mother’s nightgown and perhaps the bedroom wallpaper as well. The mother herself takes on the

qualities of the outdoors—a garden; she is “floral.” Listening to the baby’s breath connects inside and outside too: it brings external elements—the baby’s life breath, the sea—to a place within the mother’s body: “A far sea moves in my ear.” The baby’s cry gets the mother, despite her misgivings, out of a very private place, out of her bed to feed the child. The mother’s space, paradoxically restricted by its enlargement, that is, made clumsy by pregnancy (“cow-heavy”), is also restricted by her maternity clothes: “floral/ In my Victorian nightgown”—the infant’s metaphorical garden. These images connote the sexual limitations imposed on the mother by her post-partum condition; her intimate life is curtailed. “The window square” represents the narrowing of her world at this time as well. Trapped indoors, she may watch the stars only through a limiting window frame.

The small, open mouth of the child may also be seen as a narrowing of space. The mother’s body fits into this space in a functional way. Paradoxically, the instrumentality of the mother, her usefulness to the child, may make even this private experience impersonal, much as conception is presented as a mechanical action in the first line of the poem.

What saves “Morning Song” from becoming a mourning one, a mother’s grieving for her lost freedom and her individuality, is the shared territory of sound. The child cannot speak, but its “notes” (a “handful”) and “vowels [that] rise like balloons,” fill space rather than reduce it, ending the poem in a hopeful tone. A morning love song, an aubade, is a literary genre publicly expressing private feeling. The connection between the ostensibly private space of motherhood and public space also works against the essentialism of the idea of mother love as instinctual. In the poem the mother does not automatically bond with the child; she struggles to make her own unique bond, making use of sound, voice and language rather than an inner, essentialized femininity. In fact, femininity is seen as a cultural accessory, like a nightgown and flowered wallpaper, rather than an internal or basic characteristic of women. The mechanical nature of the child’s conception (“Love set you going like a fat gold watch”) also works against a putatively feminine, presumably irrational approach to love.

Plath treats the intimate subject of pregnancy and motherhood in relation to public spaces and crossed boundaries again in “Three Women,” a radio play written for the BBC and broadcast in August 1962. The women of the title contemplate their different experiences in turn: the birth of a boy to a married woman; the miscarriage of a secretary, a working wife; and the birth of a girl, the result of a rape, who is given up for adoption by her single, college-student mother.

The maternity ward setting is surely a woman’s space; that is, the ward is defined by women’s experience in it; it is revealed, however, as hardly a private place. The writing of a poem depicting intimate after-birth situations is itself a movement away from privacy. The fact that the women are not named further de-personalizes the scene; the numbering of the three voices creates the

impression of archetypes and therefore of collective proportions rather than a personal narrative.

In the opening verses, the moon, earth and sea are described with feminine pronouns, so that what might have been thought of as a small, merely feminine space is extended to the cosmos. The first maternal voice, that of the woman who successfully gives birth, is characterized in two similes in terms of the world's rotation on its axis ("I am slow as the world") and geological phenomenon ("I am breaking apart like the world"). This may signify that women comprise separate worlds. However, the world of childbirth overlaps with the workaday world in this poem.

For example, while miscarriage is a part of women's bodily experience, it has cosmic effects: the face of the dead fetus is, surprisingly, a reminder of the world of organized political structures, gendered male: "The faces of nations,/ Governments, parliaments, societies,/ The faceless faces of important men." In terms of physical space, the loss of this child has impact outside the home, in spaces where gender is not marked: "...empty offices,/ Empty schoolrooms, empty churches. O so much emptiness!" Furthermore, male gender is not something fixed; a woman may "catch" it:

I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!
There was something about them like cardboard, and now I had
caught it,
That flat, flat, flatness from which ideas, destructions,
Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,
Endlessly proceed...

Death is aligned with ideology and organization in the concatenation "ideas," "destructions," "bulldozers," "guillotines," and "white chambers of shrieks." Yet the "white chamber of shrieks" is also the labor room itself, figuring women's (maternal) and men's (public) space in the same location, rather than in mutually exclusive locations.

The woman who loses her baby feels a sense of guilt for destruction on a mass scale, which may be construed as a sense of responsibility for historical processes: "I am accused. I dream of massacres." Yet the mother who has not suffered a loss feels the same identification: "I am the center of an atrocity./ What pains, what sorrows must I be mothering?/ Can such innocence kill and kill?" While these lines may refer to the pain of childbirth and to the ordinary human suffering newborns may eventually experience in life, they also recognize that reproduction of the human race is accompanied by responsibility for human action.

The third woman, who has been raped, is also concerned with the idea of evil in the world, and not only in relation to herself. The rape is depicted (and somewhat distanced) in terms of the mythological rape of Leda by Zeus in the form of a swan. The swan in the poem is a mythological figure but also a

historical one, as Leda gives birth to Helen of Troy. The use of the myth raises an issue of ethics and gender; while women are often mistakenly assumed to be historically inert, in this case, traditionally only the woman (Helen) has been blamed for the historical consequences of her birth (the destruction of Troy). Perhaps the rapist is to blame?

Rape is tellingly revealed as an abuse of power rather than an entirely sexual (and private) issue of desire:

I remember a white, cold wing

And the great swan, with its terrible look,
Coming at me, like a castle, from the top of the river.
There is a snake in swans.
He glided by; his eye had a black meaning.
I saw the world in it—small, mean and black[.]

Rather than a domestic image of home, the castle represents an enlarged field of power, either of money or of governmental authority. While the personal experience of women is important to the poem, Plath's point of view about birth, and in this case conception, is social and historical. It would seem that the very moment of birth is the moment of entrance into an inevitably public space: "How long can I be a wall around my green property?" the first voice asks plaintively. The woman who miscarries ironically notes near the end of the poem that, failing to have delivered a live child, "There is a great deal else to do." She sits at home sewing, but returns to work on Monday. Pregnancy and miscarriage, the products of women's biology, do not exist outside history, and do not limit women's engagement with the world outside the home.

¹While the meaning of the terms "public" and "private" is contentious and slippery, Plath's public spaces are for the most part literary—relating to publication—rather than any civic space in the poems under discussion in this chapter. Yet sometimes she does use images of civic or political life. Her private space is usually the home and often the kitchen.

²Stan Smith finds this image historical (1982: 201-202). I think it is more accurate to relate the museum to art and culture.

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