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The Art of Coming-in-this-World

On Sylvia Plath's "Elm"

Abstract

Sylvia Plath's posthumously published Ariel *has generated a plethora of responses. While critics have tended to focus on the biographical aspects of the poet's work, lay reviewers have simultaneously emphasised their lack of understanding and the strength of their perceptual and affective responses. The present article, which focuses on Plath's "Elm," has a threefold aim. First, it seeks to present "Elm" as a work of verbal art; secondly, it endeavours to expose the features which may be responsible for readers' responses; thirdly, it considers the potential of "Elm" for mental health. To this end, the study mobilises concepts and methods drawn from stylistics, (Systemic Functional) Discourse Analysis, psychology, and philosophy. Research findings show that the following features may allow for an internally lived rather than an externally cognised aesthetic experience: the dissolution of the signifier-signified pair, the use of intersensory-physiognomic language and the introduction of* atopia *as a* topos. *These salient features enable readers to privilege significance over signification and to be confronted with jouissance, an experience that grounds them in the flow of (be)coming.*

Keywords: *American studies, Sylvia Plath, Ariel, "Elm," poetics*

1. *Ariel* and the death of the signified

I like a music that reaches where speech
is forbidden unless it speaks in wonder.
(Gregory Leadbetter, "Consistori del Gai Saber," *Maskwork*)

As "[Sylvia Plath's] poetic material encourages biographical or psychoanalytical readings, […] students and critics alike [have tended] to bypass the carefully structured text in favour of the raw experience it purportedly contains as they link the poet's life and her work in a locked and fatal embrace" (Uroff 1979, 121). Such fallacious approach poses at least two issues. Firstly, it blends two different ontological levels together: the "discourse-world" (Gavins 2007, 9), i.e. the world inhabited by the poet, and the textual world, i.e. the world created by the poetic voice. The separation between the poet as a full-fledged human being and the "I" of the poems

is embodied in the term 'persona.' Borrowed from the Latin *personare*, which means 'speaking through,' a persona corresponds to the voice or mask the poet calls into being in order to communicate with their readers. As such, all poetry (and art more generally) acts as a mediator between two real-world entities. Secondly, and relatedly, considering the poet and the poetic persona as a unique entity has prevented critics from appreciating the poem as a poem, i.e. as a work of verbal art. As Gill argues, "the death of the author [is] a necessary first step in perceiving […] any artist's identity as a textual phenomenon" (2008, 46). For this reason, psychoanalytical, feminist, and biographical readings will not be considered in the present essay. For the same reason, I shall focus on one poem, "Elm," posthumously published in *Ariel* (1965).[1] Because the *Ariel* poems were written before Plath's suicide, they have received far more attention "for what they are saying than for how they are saying it" (Hannah 2003, 232-33). At the same time, critics have described the *Ariel* collection as an "experiment with voice and persona" (Gill 2008, 107), "a form of verbal sympathetic magic, privileging the regressive, incantatory level of language" (Gill 2008, 112) and a "destructive a-textual force" (Mitchell 2009). Such statements lead me to believe that, in Plath's *Ariel*, the expressive and poetic functions of language prevail over the referential one. In other words, relationships between the signifier and signified—i.e. the double-sided units of the Saussurean sign—are blurred. The signifier is a word, a "sound-image" (Allen 2000, 8) which is used to present a signified, that is, an idea or a concept. For instance, the eponymous poem "Ariel" ends on the following words:

> And I
> Am the arrow,
>
> The dew that flies
> Suicidal, at one with the drive
> Into the red
>
> Eye, the cauldron of morning.[2]

The poetic "I" first becomes object ("the arrow"), then natural phenomenon ("the dew"). Both the movement of the "arrow" and the appearance of the "dew" depend on external agencies or events—respectively, someone shooting the arrow and the process of condensation. This reliance on external agencies takes yet another meaning with the phrase "flies suicidal," which evokes Thanatos, and "the drive," which introduces Eros. "Fly" and "drive" both resist stasis. However,

[1] The poem is available in the appendix of this essay.
[2] For ease of accessibility, the poem "Ariel" is taken from *Poetry Foundation*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49001/ariel.

because the action carried out by the verb 'fly' may prove to be short-lived, due to its characterisation as "suicidal," one could argue that movement is simultaneously introduced and annihilated. As a result, attributing a 'signified' for each 'signifier' would prove to be but a vain attempt to understand the text: the prevalence of the expressive and poetic language in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* suggests that meaning may not be the end. As such, I intend to eschew a structuralist approach which would lead me to seek to fix the meaning of the poem. To this end, my analysis favours a hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricoeur 1974) which embraces unknowing and negotiates rather than obliterates conflicting interpretations. The present article exposes the poetic complexity of "Elm," inasmuch as it invites post-interpretation and suspicion. Suspicion seems to be espoused by contemporary readers, as the following Goodreads reviews indicate:[3]

> As a total poetry novice, I might be way off base with some of my impressions—I didn't even come close to understanding everything I read. But I *do* know that she shared some of her deepest, most intense feelings with me. She made me absorb them. (Tara, Goodreads, 2018)
>
> What do I think? I honestly don't know. My favorite poems were Elm, The Moon and the Yew Tree, and Edge. I admit that Sylvia Plath's poetry may be beyond my ability to fully understand. I have The Collected Poems, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1982, on my to-read shelf. Maybe the more I read the better I will understand. There is an aura about Sylvia Plath that I find fascinating. (Duane, Goodreads, 2013)
>
> I picked this up last night, wanting to read just one poem, The Moon and the Yew Tree specifically, but I ended up reading all of them, the entire book. I won't pretend to understand what most of her poems were about, but they left me in goosebumps and shiver. I enjoyed them. (Ashgar, Goodreads, 2015)

All three reviewers draw attention to the fact that they did not understand *Ariel*. Far from diminishing their aesthetic experiences, this lack of conscious understanding—or rather, this immanent unknowing—seemed to have enabled a perceptual *episteme* of the oeuvre. In fact, the reviews foreground feelings and sensations, both of which are being experienced from within. The reviewers state that Plath "shared some of her deepest, most intense feelings," that there is "an aura that [they] find fascinating" and that their readings left them "in goosebumps and shiver." These reading experiences indicate that readers *feel* rather than *think* the poems. As such, it appears that Plath's poetry presents readers with a perceptual aesthetic experience that defies cognition. Such experience depends upon the dissolution or the blending of the

[3] All three reviews can be found in the upper half of the first page of the Goodreads website. I looked for reviews that did not link Plath's *Ariel* to her personal life—these reviews abound, hence the selection of three of the first Goodreads reviews. I was not looking for a particular type of review. https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/395090.Ariel.

signifier/signified. According to Knickerbocker, Plath's ecopoetic writing, which reveals "her desire for transcendence in and through nature" (2009, 5), blurs the binary opposition between the word (i.e. signifier) and the concept it represents (i.e. signified). Gill suggests that, throughout Plath's oeuvre, this dissolution is enacted by "the act of writing [itself, which] is represented synecdochally by metonyms of fingers, arms, mouths, lips and other body parts" (2006, 42). My preliminary quantitative linguistic analysis of *Ariel* seems to verify both of these hypotheses:

noun (1,675 items | 3,317 total frequency)

	Lemma	Absolute Frequency
1	eye	36
2	hand	24
3	man	23
4	body	20
5	baby	20
6	sea	19
7	heart	19
8	face	18
9	nothing	17
10	moon	17

Fig. 1: Frequency list of nouns in Plath's *Ariel*—retrieved from SketchEngine

As shown in the above figure, the ten most frequent nouns in *Ariel* are the followings: 'eye,' 'hand,' 'man,' 'body,' 'baby,' 'sea,' 'heart,' 'face,' 'nothing,' and 'moon.' The words highlighted in yellow also occur in Plath's "Elm." These findings both hint at the plurality of the signified and at the significance of Nature (at least linguistically). I would add that the signified loses its *signification* because the reader's experience with the signifier is immanent, i.e. inwardly-oriented, rather than transcendent, i.e. outwardly-oriented. However, the loss of signification should be celebrated since it facilitates the reader's entry into the realm of *significance*.

2. "Elm": The sterility of cognition

The vanished letter *Elm*
is voiced in tacit.

(Gregory Leadbetter, "Tree Script," *Maskwork*)

Like Goodreads readers, I first experienced "Elm" as a work of verbal art which, although "voiced in tacit"—or perhaps *because* "voiced in tacit" through dissonance between the phonetic, lexical, and semantic levels—startled me. In the above quotation, the alliteration in the voiced consonant [v] expresses "the voice of nothing." Similarly, Plath's "Elm" disrupts the 'letter' of

the word by opening up its perceptual and significant possibilities. According to Deleuze and Guattari, "writing has nothing to do with signifying. It has to do with surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come" (1987, 4-5).

The poem "Elm" features half of the most frequent nouns used in *Ariel*: 'sea,' 'heart,' 'face,' 'nothing,' 'moon,' and 'tree.' Nature is thus conceived as a tripartite organism comprising the earth (the 'tree'), the sky (the 'moon'), and the seas (the 'sea') and possessing a countenance (a 'face') and feelings (a 'heart'). The emergence of "realms that are yet to come" stems from these words. Plath's "Elm" features a "being-in-this-world as a constitutive and unsayable relationship between everyone and everything" (Sartre 1983, 277-278). Plath's use of expressive language presents poetry as a medium for a special, intransitive communication between text and readers, which suggests that words do not act on an object but rather leave it to readers to decide who or what may receive the action of the words, and in which manner. Such approach disrupts the transitive, conventional orientation to reception, which expects readers to passively receive a message. "Elm" thus encourages intransitive perceptual rather than transitive intellectualised responses:

> Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
> A wind of such violence
> Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.[4]

Here, the eponymous tree semantically suffers from a process of disintegration. Phonetically, it seems that the elm's "voice of nothing" could not be louder. The assonance in /ai/ in the words 'I,' 'fly,' 'like' and 'I' reinvests the elm as a living subject. A similar assonance is to be noted in the first stanza—although exclusively realised by the repetition of the pronoun 'I'—in which the elm tree speaks with a serene, post-abyssal voice: "I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root. […] / I do not fear it: I have been there." The serene voice fears the imminent threat posed by "a wind of such violence," which allows the elm to reveal her immanent will ("I must shriek") by making a prediction about the future using the modal 'will.' As a modal, 'will' can here be considered as a *hapax legomenon,* and its latent nominalisation ("it petrifies the will") in the last stanza precipitates its 'petrification,' thus fixing its uniqueness:

> Its snaky acids hiss.
> It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
> That kill, that kill, that kill.

[4] For ease of accessibility, "Elm" is taken from the website *Poetry Foundation*. https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/49003/elm.

A Heideggerian perspective could possibly advance that the petrification of the will, because of its nonrelational possibilities, offers a "potentiality-for-being" (Heidegger 1962, 294). However, a stylistic approach could point out that, because the 'will' is followed by three occurrences of the verb 'kill,' it is phonetically annihilated. Additionally, because the transitive verb 'kill' has been deprived of its object, the killing appears not to be oriented toward an external (inter-) but rather toward an internal (intra-) object, thus condemning it to silence or to being "voiced in tacit" both within the elm tree ("the sea you hear in me") and within the reader. In fact, the latter has no choice but to share the elm's 'I,' which, as its quantitative prevalence (seventeen occurrences in total) would suggest, serves as the linguistic manifestation of the elm's ontological presence. Readers' responses to Plath's *Ariel* concur with the idea of a shared 'I.' One reviewer stated that Plath "shared some of her deepest, most intense feelings with [her]. She made [her] absorb them" (Goodreads). It is worth pointing out that the reviewer has used a passive causative structure of the type 'make someone do something' to describe a perceptual affective transference from the poem to the self. Moreover, the verb to 'absorb' hints at the substantiality of the aesthetic experience. The poetics of the text resists criticism, i.e. the Kantian imperative to aesthetic judgement which *a priori* claims universality and invites "post-critical" (Stinson and Driscoll 2020, 3) responses. The latter emphasise the idiosyncratic experiences of readers, who reject a cognitive knowing in favour of a perceptual knowing, lived and experienced from within. As Chavis argues, fixing the text's meaning through "mental prowess" lessens "personal reactions" (2011, 23). My preliminary analyses have attempted to show that "Elm" allows for the deployment of a multiplicity of (non-)meanings. I have suggested that such multiplicity emanates from the dissolution of the binary signifier-signified, which leads to the birth and development of what one may call a "one-world ontology" (St. Pierre 2018, 2), i.e. an externally and internally connected universe that gathers under the same sky the world and the underworld, Eros and Thanatos, the elm's being and the reader's immanent becoming. For the sake of my argument, the elm tree lives both in the underworld—hence its prominence in cemeteries—and the world of the living, thanks to its "great tap root[s]" which ground it in life.

This world—which is all and nothing, everywhere and nowhere, exterior and interior—defies the idea of *topos*. What little *topos* there is has to be found in movements and sensations—in other words, in an ever-changing flux. A transitivity analysis (Halliday 1973) reveals that, in "Elm," Nature alternates between the linguistic role of "Actor"[5] and that of "Senser" (Eggins

[5] In Systemic Functional Linguistics, roles within transitivity processes begin with a capital letter.

2004, 214). In the phrases "I shall gallop," "I break up," "I have caught her" and "I let her go," Nature takes on the role of Actor of several "material verbs" (Eggins 2004, 211). As such, while the idea of a majestic tree with "strong roots" conveys stasis, transitivity patterns reveal otherwise. Similarly, in "I know," "I do not fear," "I have suffered" and "I am inhabited," the elm tree senses her internal and external life through "mental verbs" (Eggins 2004, 213), thus construing affect. These observations recall the personification of Nature, which is endowed with a "face" and a "heart." In "Elm," Nature has a feminine face and heart—the poetic voice uses the pronoun 'she' to refer to both the elm tree and the moon, and it is widely acknowledged that the sea is perceived as "a feminine force and flux" (Helmreich 2017, 29). While such associations may lead readers to expect Nature to nurture, in Sylvia Plath's "Elm," Nature exudes its nemesis. The "destructive forces […] are expressed in all their emotional rawness" (Hakeem 1974, 535), hence the attitudinal lexis of violence and pain: "poisons," "atrocity," "shriek," "merciless," "cruelly," "malignity," "murderous," and "snaky." The words I have just mentioned, which show the manifold phases and faces of nemesis, respectively qualify "the rain," "sunsets," the elm ("I"), "the moon," "this dark thing," and the "clouds." In other words, and as the transitivity patterns demonstrate, Nature's actions (see Actor role) and sensations (see Senser role) preclude sense while appealing to senses. In fact, the above-mentioned words all spark intersensory-synesthetic and affective-physiognomic responses. They generate immanent and pregnant attitudes—or rather, to borrow a word used by one of the reviewers, an 'aura.' According to Lindauer, "words on a page of literature […] go beyond their dictionary definitions by transmitting a penumbra of feelings and moods" (2009, 122). The literary stimulus calls for an inner response.

3. "Elm": immanent physiognomy and call for recognition

Now the sun is the shining stone of a moon
cool on the skin and film of the eye.
(Gregory Leadbetter, "Solstice, Midwinter," *Maskwork*)

The concepts of 'aura' and affective and perceptual responses form the basis of physiognomy. The term physiognomy comes from the Greek *physiognōmia* which means 'the judging of a person's nature by his features.' It is composed by the word-forming elements *physio* 'nature, natural, physical' and *gnōmōn* 'a judge, interpreter, indicator' (*Online Etymology Dictionary*). As such, "physiognomy refers to the affective perception of persons, places, objects, and actions—yes, even words" (Lindauer 2009, 118). While I have only just defined the term

'physiognomy,' I have on several occasions throughout the essay relied on my readers' physiognomic sensibility. For instance, when I mentioned the "post-abyssal, serene voice" of the elm tree in the first stanza, I expected readers to experience positivity and smoothness, the latter of which may have been reinforced by my alliteration in /s/ ("post-abyssal, serene voice"). Physiognomic responses are immanent and primitive. In fact, Lindauer (2013) argues that primordial objects of awareness are face-like. Because physiognomic—i.e. affective responses—cannot be avoided, they do not trigger cognition but rather recognition as an immanent state of awareness that awakens "a part of [us] […] that was originally asleep" ("City or Country?"). Plath's "Elm," for instance, consists of fourteen stanzas of three lines each and, as Dobyns argues, "the presence of symmetrical stanzas can create a reassuring sense of control. We feel that nothing can go wrong with such an imposition of order" (2006, 56). Dobyns's argument is physiognomic-affective in that it foregrounds reassurance.

The two most frequent nouns in "Elm" are 'face' and 'root.' While 'root' refers to the elm, strongly grounded into the earth, the 'face' corresponds to Nature's multiple phases and manifold faces, as lived and witnessed by the elm tree. Because of its physiognomic endowment, the 'face' calls for a recognition. "Faces are a ubiquitous part of everyday life" (Barrett et al. 2019, 1)—they can be considered as the decipherable pictures of human identity, hence the concept and development of facial recognition programs, for instance. According to Martin S. Lindauer, "physiognomic messages from the face […] attract-repulse, invite-discourage, arouse-calm, welcome-reject, interest-bore" (2009, 119). In "Elm," the poetic voice begins by introducing a sense of identity, stability, and closure with the repetitions of the pronoun 'I' and the cognitive verb 'know' in the first stanza:

> I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
> It is what you fear.
> I do not fear it: I have been there.

While this stanza implies that the poem adopts the perspective of one speaker positioned as a knower, the following stanza annihilates this conventional onto-epistemological orientation to 'knowing.' Inherited from Descartes, such orientation presupposes the existence of a subject 'who knows' and an object 'which is known.' Plath's "Elm" privileges a cosmic form of knowing which refers readers to their "singular universality" and "universalising singularity": "being-in-the-world" (Sartre 1983, 275) does not solely manifest in external significations but necessitates a sheer presence, pregnant with significance.

> Is it the sea you hear in me,
> Its dissatisfactions?
> Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

For instance, the use of the definite article in "the sea you hear in me" and "the voice of nothing" "implies that the real-world and/or textual-world referent shall be clearly identifiable" (Doche 2020, 21). While readers can connect the exophoric reference to its real-world entity, i.e. the sea, it seems that the poetic persona calls for an inward recognition rather than an outward connection. Here, recognition remains within the reader. The preposition 'in' indicates that the sea—which tends to be associated with the soul—is somehow contained within the elm tree. Two opposite and perhaps conflicting messages emerge: (i) the sea as boundless, because it connects all of the Earth's oceanic water and (ii) the sea as bounded. The first message derives from our "discourse-world" (Gavins 2007, 9) knowledge of the sea while the second message emerges from "Elm." According to Roger Shepard, "the mind is stocked with innate knowledge of the world and this knowledge figures prominently in the way we see the world (Kubovy and Epstein 2001, 618). The disruptive connection between the "text-world" (Gavins 2007, 10), i.e. the poem, and the "discourse-world" (Gavins 2007, 9), generates undefined, confused responses which can hardly be verbalised. In "Elm," the Earth and the sky do not simply meet on the sea-level horizon line: they abolish the boundary between earthly and celestial elements. Thus, the horizon has merged, and the reader enters—or rather, experiences from within—a/the world in which "the virtual and actual exist on the same plane, the plane of immanence" (St. Pierre 2018, 3). In "Elm," the plane of immanence abounds with intersensory-synesthetic and affective-physiognomic associations. For instance, the second stanza entangles seeing and hearing. The sea, because of the internal ternary rhythm comprised in the assonance in /i:/ in "the sea you hear in me," pleases the ear. According to Turner, "the sounds of words affect feeling more than meaning" (1990, 154). Assonances create moods, and moods, similarly to atmospheres and sensations, are experienced from within. The painter Kandinsky, for instance, felt "blue as a concentric movement, suggesting something far as well as deeply calming" (qtd. in Lindauer 2013, 74). Congruently, the elm demands a synesthetic and physiognomic response from readers. While the assonance pleases the ear—hence the use of sea and ocean sounds for meditative purposes—on a semantic level, the sound of the sea disturbs the elm tree with "its dissatisfactions" and "voice of nothing." Cautious and vague language enables readers to project their own perceptual understandings on the "dissatisfactions" and nothingness. Like palimpsests, which facilitate erasing and (re-)writing, Plath's "Elm" facilitates the recognition of various sensations and emotions through the (re-)presentation of different faces/phases.

Physiognomic, figurative, and literal meanings play against each other—such verbal play neutralizes signification and epitomizes significance. While signification appears as sterile, significance seems pregnant. The sea, contained within the elm, cannot escape being "dragged" by the moon whose "radiance [both] scathes [her]" and creates the ebb and flow of the tide, which give the sea its intrinsic quality. Similarly, the life-giving "rain" does not offer renewal but rather engenders fruits that are not edible by humans: "tin-white, like arsenic." Because of the introspective 'I,' readers may experience the tension between their discourse-world schematic and physiognomic knowledge and that which are presented in "Elm." "Physiognomy [can apply] to objects, places, and events" (Lindauer, 2009 121). Although the elm's experience of the world seems to be marked by pain and death, the readers' experience of the world contradicts their immanent aesthetic experience, thus leading to the emergence of conflicting physiognomic responses. Such tensions enable readers to accept 'unknowing' and embrace their perceptual experiences, as the Goodreads reviews suggest.

4. "Elm": *atopia* and *jouissance*

I woke under dew
in open ground. I had no home.
*(*Gregory Leadbetter, "Musician," *Maskwork)*

The physiognomic conflicts experienced by both the elm tree and readers create *atopia*, which can here be understood as 'placelessness.' According to Barthes, "from this *atopia* the text catches and communicates to its reader a strange condition: at once excluded and at peace" (1975, 29). Plath's "Elm" brings language to a crisis. "Elm" does not seek to overcome but rather to maintain a state of crisis. This critical state is both undefined ('a') and long-lived ('state'). Because the crisis is experienced internally, it inhabits both the internal and external worlds, which are in fact one and the same. Barthes argues that crises help to differentiate between a "text of pleasure" and a "text of bliss":[6]

> Text of pleasure: the text that contents, fills, grants euphoria; the text that comes from culture and does not break with it, is linked to a *comfortable* practice of reading.
>
> Text of bliss: imposes a state of loss, the text that discomforts (perhaps to the point of a certain boredom), unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, psychological assumptions, the

[6] In the original French, "text of bliss" corresponds to "texte de jouissance." Because of the sexual connotations contained in the word 'jouissance,' the English term fails to convey the potentialities of the word.

> consistency of his tastes, values, memories, brings to a crisis his relation with language. (1975, 14)

I have previously exposed discrepancies between the "discourse-world" (Gavins 2007, 9) and the "text-world" (Gavins 2007, 10). While the text of pleasure resembles the discourse-world—i.e. outward connections between the text and the real world are permissible and acceptable—the text of bliss departs from it. This departure allows for *atopia* and *jouissance*, both of which cannot be expressed. Attempting to express these sensations would compress them, reducing the aesthetic experience to pleasure. Thus, the Goodreads reviews do not express but hint at loss and the subsequent jouissance it engenders:

> I admit that Sylvia Plath's poetry may be beyond my ability to fully understand. [...] There is an aura about Sylvia Plath that I find fascinating. (Duane, Goodreads, 2013)

> I won't pretend to understand what most of her poems were about, but they left me in goosebumps and shiver. I enjoyed them. (Ashgar, Goodreads, 2015)

According to Barthes, "luxury of language belongs with […] total loss" (1975, 23). Indeed, such metaphors as 'being lost in a book' or 'being lost in thought' show that total loss necessitates both full attention and full immersion. Similarly, in French, Barthes's *jouissance* connotes orgasm. Joyous sex demands of participants to be fully there (i.e. be attentive) and let their sensual responses be led by the activity (i.e. be immersed). I believe that Plath's language in "Elm" requires full attention and immersion in order to create greater loss and *jouissance*. In the third stanza, the elm declares that "love is a shadow." This type of clause is considered as a descriptive attributive intensive process of being, i.e. a sentence of the type 'X is Y' in Systemic Functional Linguistics. A transitivity analysis would lead me to describe 'Love' as the "Carrier" (Eggins 2004, 214) of the following "Attribute" (240): 'shadow.' The essential characteristic of the Attributive intensive is that "the Attribute clause is not reversible" (Eggins 2004, 240). Moreover, this type of process entails a generalisation—here, the present tense denotes "eternal truth" (Leech 1971, 2-6). This use of the present tense may thereby be "regarded as generic because it expresses an omnitemporal proposition implying that something has been, is, and always will be so" (Verdonk 2013, 34): in other words, "love is a shadow" first generates a *topos*. Love, however, does not remain a shadow. The generic present is followed by a vision: "Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse." The verb 'listen,' together with the demonstrative pronoun 'these' "signifies an event occurring simultaneously with the present moment and in a definable context" (Verdonk 2013, 34). Such impression increases with Plath's

conventional use of the colons, which are first used to describe love/the shadow: "these are its hooves" and then to explain the event: "it has gone off, like a horse." A similar *topos*/*atopia* tension occurs toward the end of the poem, where the elm witnesses that "clouds pass and disperse," and wonders "are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?" While the first line describes an iterative event, the second line foregrounds the "face[s]" the persona sees in the clouds. The clouds, like the moon and the sea go through different phases. These phases are not contingent upon the observer. Nevertheless, the phases' perceived "face[s]" differ depending on the prevalent intersensory-affective inner and outer environments inhabiting/surrounding readers (Lindauer 1991). In other words, while clouds "pass and disperse," one will imagine different pictures or faces represented in the clouds depending on their moods and inner landscapes. In "Elm," the state of loss that is imposed upon readers come from the to-and-fro movement between feelings of home and feelings of homelessness, which both include the reader in an immanent spatio-temporal context (see non-generic present) and exclude them from the seemingly transcendent co-text (see generic present). The encounter between *topos* and *atopia* embraces disorientation and ontological confusions. Such encounter provokes an "ontological force of creation" (Siffrinn 2019, 21).

In the fourth stanza, the speaker introduces the *atopic* metaphor "your head is a stone":

> All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
> Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
> Echoing, echoing.

The source domain of the metaphor, i.e. the 'stone,' refers to an inanimate object, which is made of hard, compact minerals and tends to have a round or oval shape. The target domain of the metaphor, 'head,' shares some of the above-mentioned features with the stone. The combination of the 'head' and the 'stone,' together with the 'little turf,' recalls Thomas Gray's "Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard": "Beneath those rugged elms, that yew's tree shade, / Where heaves the turf in many a mould'ring heap" (*Poetry Foundation*). Death lexically permeates the stanza, therefore creating a sombre atmosphere. The 'head' carries the 'face,' the centre of human emotions. When no such emotions are visible, one would deem the other person as 'stone-faced,' i.e. expressionless. In this stanza, the physiognomic message "discourages" and "rejects" (Lindauer 2009, 119) social interaction. The 'head' provokes *atopia*: while faces allow for recognition, a face without emotions creates confusion. If there is recognition, it comes from the reader's/viewer's awareness of their own projections onto this emotionless face, functioning as a blank page. The attitudinal lexis 'impetuously' and 'little,' however, respectively denote drive

and affection. In fact, the sense of intimacy and simultaneity arising out of the word 'impetuously' and the present participle 'echoing, echoing' disrupt the atopic nothingness invoked in death. While Plath's language signals a presence, an immanent being, her words are oriented toward a flow of becoming, the "as yet unnamable which is proclaiming itself" (Derrida 1996, 293). And indeed, the last line of the poem "that kill, that kill, that kill," by virtue of its nonreferentiality, instantiates a becoming, i.e. yet-to-come "virtuals or potentials or forces or singularities moving at different speeds that produce but do not condition the actual" (St. Pierre 2018, 3). In "Elm," immanent beingness defies *topos* and thus allows the reader to 'come' (i.e. '*jouir*') because the "dark thing / that sleeps in [them]" is both perceivable ("the"), unidentifiable ("thing") and pregnant with possibilities and indeed life ("sleep in me"). The assonance in /i:/ in the phrase 'that sleeps in me' recalls the assonance in /i:/ in 'the sea you hear in me.' One cannot but contemplate the emergent character of experience in Plath's "Elm": sounds, feelings, and moods all emanate from and perform an unnameable otherness, immanent in the living subject, that is, the reader. "Elm" may leave readers "in goosebumps" because "being-in-this-world [is presented as] a constitutive and unsayable relationship between everyone and everything, and between each [living thing] and all others" (Sartre 1983, 278). The text of *jouissance* enables an inwardly-oriented otherness, a recognition of the Other in us and of us in the Other through physiognomic projections.

5. Conclusion and reflection: could "Elm" be used as therapeutic material?

and you lean from the slant-bright sky
unreal as a remedy
and heal me, still, though you
are the sky that begins to chew
(Gregory Leadbetter, "Sky Burial," *Maskwork*)

I began this article by mentioning that Sylvia Plath's personal life has led critics to focus on the confessional aspect of her work and, as a result, to link her life and her poetry in a "locked and fatal embrace" (Uroff 1979, 121). While this approach has enjoyed some popularity amongst critics and readers alike, it does not remain uncontested. My own reactions to Sylvia Plath's "Elm" concur with the impressions developed in the three Goodreads reviews I have introduced. I was "inhabited by a cry," escaping significations, yet truly significant. Such responses may be considered as 'suspicious' in the Ricoeurian sense of the word, in that they both privilege feelings

and sensations over cognition and accept confusion, non-knowledge, and conflicting interpretations as ends and means.

As a result, my analyses have endeavoured to present the features which may have triggered these suspicious responses. While I have identified a few, I need to point out that the present article certainly does not offer an exhaustive description. The expressive language used in Plath's *Ariel* threatens the signifier/signified dichotomy, thus opening the text to the *intentio operis* (Eco 1979). The latter concept essentially signifies that a text's polysemy and polyvalence present (non)meaning(s) which can never be fully reached by readers. In "Elm," this pregnant absence/presence reinforces the impossibility of cognition, the call for immanent intersensory-affective responses, the loss of (spatio-temporal) bearings and the subsequent *jouissance*. As the Goodreads reviews suggest, Plath's words are experienced from within. For this reason, I would like to briefly explore the potentiality of Plath's "Elm" for the soul.

The relationship between poetry and medicine goes back to ancient Greece. In fact, Apollo, the patron god of poetry and music, "[was] recognized as the divinity of medicine and healing" (Chavis 2011, 14). The Romantics later reasserted the medicinal function of poetry by stating that poets had the ability and the responsibility to "pour out a balm upon the world" (Keats 1819), should they decide to "incorporate [pain] in [their] work and transform it through the alchemy of [their artistry]" (Chavis 2011, 15). The potentiality of poetry for mental health has enjoyed interesting and fruitful discussions during the Covid-19 pandemic. Writing for the *New Statesman*, Katy Shaw said that "at a time when we are all struggling for words to make sense of wholesale change in our personal and professional lives, poetry offers comfort by imposing order on otherwise seemingly random events." In other words, poetry (i.e. the "text-world") provides comfort if and when it helps human beings explain and overcome events occurring in the real world (i.e. the "discourse-world"). Similarly, according to the poet Jonathan Davidson, "poetry is about getting to know each other." This statement has been endorsed by Healey et al.'s research in nursing homes, which finds that poetry "act[s] as a catalyst for discussion and self-disclosure" (2017, 163). While these narratives foreground comfort and outward connections, Sieghart's *The Poetry Pharmacy Returns* hints at the fact that poetry therapists either seek poems which "provide a 'sense of connection and security'" (2019, xiii) or "confront people with a poem […] [that] would startle them" (2019, xvi). As both the reviews of online readers and my previous analyses have suggested, Plath's "Elm" belongs to the latter category. According to Poetry therapist Chavis, to be considered as a therapeutic material, a poem should enable spontaneous rather than intellectual reactions, feature ambiguous and figurative language (2011, 26-27). "Elm" meets all these characteristics.

> I am inhabited by a cry.
> Nightly it flaps out
> Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

The tenth stanza, for instance, foregrounds a tactile synaesthetic metaphor. The indefinite article, together with the 'cry,' creates ambiguity while the verb 'flap out' and the noun 'hooks' introduce a figurative language that does not make sense but speaks to the senses. Richard R. Kopp argues that figurative language is a powerful vehicle for therapeutic work because "it combine[s] two modes of cognition—logical and imaginal" (1995, 97). In Plath's "Elm," the metaphors "your head is a stone," "love is a shadow" and "Nature is nemesis"—the latter, although not explicitly stated, is realised in such expressions as "the atrocity of sunsets," and "the moon is merciless"—demand an immanent ekphrastic response on the part of the readers. Plath's use of physiognomically-endowed language, coupled with synesthetic and metaphorical expressions, awakens the imaginal.

Chavis adds that "effective materials often depict quite a bit of life's pain and contain only a faint modicum of hope" (2011, 26-27). The significance of pain in "Elm" cannot be overlooked. The words 'cry,' 'poisons,' 'arsenic,' 'violence,' 'merciless,' 'malignity,' 'murderous' certainly denote pain. The "modicum of hope" emanates from the to-and-fro movement between life and death. The life-giving rain does enable the elm to produce fruit—however, the latter are "tin-white, like arsenic." Similarly, while the moon is depicted as "barren" and sterile, it simultaneously moves the elm's soul, "the sea," and irradiates her (the "elm"). Because texts of *jouissance* evoke, provoke, and invoke sensations, one cannot measure their therapeutic potential. Nonetheless, it seems fair to argue that Plath's "Elm" has the power to *give something it does not have to someone who does not need it but may accept to experience it*. In other words, "Elm" confronts readers with their existence, their sheer presence, and the mutability of becoming. Significance is latent in the text and may be performed and actualised if readers accept to immerse themselves in the poem and to give the words the attention they deserve. Sieghart advises to "read [poems] almost like a prayer" (2019, xviii). While dominant discourses about poetry and mental health privilege comfort, (be)coming begins with loss and all its potentialities.

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Appendix

"Elm"

By Sylvia Plath

For Ruth Fainlight

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:

It is what you fear.

I do not fear it: I have been there.

Is it the sea you hear in me,
Its dissatisfactions?
Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?

Love is a shadow.
How you lie and cry after it
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,
Echoing, echoing.

Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
This is rain now, this big hush.
And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
Scorched to the root
My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
A wind of such violence
Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me
Cruelly, being barren.
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.
How your bad dreams possess and endow me.

I am inhabited by a cry.
Nightly it flaps out
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.

I am terrified by this dark thing
That sleeps in me;
All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?

I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches?——

Its snaky acids hiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.