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PETALS: The Aestheticisation of Death
in Sylvia Plath's "Edge" and in the Illustrations
of Adriaan van de Spiegel's *Frucht in Mutter Leibe*

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Abstract

This article investigates the aestheticisation of death in Sylvia Plath's poem "Edge" in relation to other poems by her and marginally by Seamus Heaney and Charles Baudelaire, and to the short story "The Oval Portrait" by Edgar Allan Poe. Such aestheticisation, I contend, partakes of the spirit of the anatomical illustration of early modern tracts such as the joint volume by Giulio Casserio and Adriaan van de Spiegel, and of western culture's necrophilia.

Keywords: Sylvia Plath, "Edge," "The Munich Mannequins," "The Oval Portrait" (E. A. Poe), perfection, petals, death, aestheticisation, anatomical illustration, Adriaan van de Spiegel

The "Perfected"-ness of Death, or the West's Aestheticised
Necrophilia

Sylvia Plath's famous "Edge," which debuts with an image of the "woman [who] is perfected" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 272, l. 1),ⁱ is a haunting paean to the beauty qua perfection of death. While there is a lot to gloss on the "perfected" *female* suicide, it is noteworthy that the participle also occurs in the description of a dead *man*, the 'protagonist' of Seamus Heaney's "The Grauballe Man." This article does not aim to unravel – psychologically, religiously, aesthetically, or otherwise – the underpinnings

of such a morbid mindset as Plath's or Heaney's in the respective poems. Rather, I am interested in how a number of writers indicate their – and create – aesthetic fascination with death, itself partaking of western culture's necrophilia.

Plath's and Heaney's sensitivity to the aesthetic dimension of death was hardly unprecedented in the realms of poetry. Indeed, "The Digging Skeleton: After Baudelaire" (*North*, 1975) is Heaney's explicit tradaptation of Charles Baudelaire's "Le Squelette laboureur" (1861),ⁱⁱ a protracted (and religiously cynical) ekphrasis of an anatomical drawing. For Baudelaire, the anatomical illustration of the whole body skeleton communicates Beauty: "Dessins / . . . / Ont communiqué la Beauté" (ll. 5, 8). Like Michel Foucault's clinical gaze (*Birth of the Clinic* 108-21) in its capacity to organise knowledge also as an aesthetic (121), Baudelaire's lingering gaze acknowledges "la Beauté" (l. 8), (absolute) Beauty, to which the anatomical plates testify. Baudelaire's was already a time heading for the early twentieth-century watershed in the West's relation to death: the occultation of death intended to spare individuals and society as a whole from confronting "the ugliness of dying" and "the presence of death in the midst of a happy life," according to Philippe Ariès (87). For Heaney, however, "an odd beauty" permeates the drawings (l. 5) *as if* (l. 6) in grave response to the sad (ll. 6-7) "[m]ementoes of anatomy" (l. 8)ⁱⁱⁱ – which demotes Baudelaire's abstract Beauty to but contingent beauty.

It would be facile to interpret the two male poets' appraisal of beauty rendered visible in the least expected *locus*, anatomical illustration, purely by reference to the latter's genesis, i.e., as owing to the painters' aesthetic sensitivity and skill.^{iv} Centuries of Christian martyrology and religious iconography, as well as of representations of torture unrelated to religion, testify to a morbid fascination with horrendous torture and/or death and to the aestheticisation of (counter-)exemplary death. Think only of the many Passions, Crucifixions and Depositions painted since the Middle Ages, of the torturous Gothic crucifixes gracing central and western European churches, or of less typical approaches such as Andrea Mantegna's *Lamentation over the Dead Christ* (c. 1483, Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan). Such iconography readily supports Grace M. Jantzen's definition of *necrophilia* in a broadened psychoanalytical sense: "a

cultural fascination and obsession with death and violence, a preoccupation with death which is both dreaded and desired” (5). Jantzen rightly argues that this obsession, which “characterizes the habitus of western modernity” as “a constitutive feature of the western symbolic,” is the legacy of the classical and Christian past (5). Furthermore, Thanatos (as death drive) is not simply a human universal, as Sigmund Freud contends, but rather “a gendered construction of western modernity” (Jantzen 6): “the preoccupation with death . . . is largely a male preoccupation,” even as the androcentric “symbolic connects death, sex and the female” (16). To re-state Jantzen’s thesis, Thanatos is *en-gendered*, i.e., generated in gendered terms (in Teresa de Lauretis’s sense), as masculine enquiry into a progressively more feminised/ obscured death. Furthermore, this game of power may indicate, as Jantzen contends, a displacement, through repression and silencing, of the male fear of the maternal body (17).

Plath was definitely no stranger to such gruesome representations of death as Christianity’s and generally to western necrophilia. Her journal entry for 17 Feb. 1958 records a nightmare she had had the previous week, informed by the events of the day, as Plath states (*Journals* 330). Such is the association of a Mrs Van der Poel (an arts instructor invited by Ted Hughes to dinner) with the dream’s cornucopia of images of torture. Whilst “in her art class I had seen suffering Christs & corrupt judges & lawyers by Rouault” (*Journals* 330), Plath writes, the dream produces

a series, like flipped pictures in a book, of blackline drawings (almost like cartoon stick figures) on a white ground of all varieties of tortures – hangings, flayings, eye-gouging, and, in a bright crude blood red, lines & spots indicating the flow of blood – all the stick figures having red-hands to the wrist & being depicted in crude animation with “La torture” written in bastard dream-French under the drawings. (*Journals* 330)

The verb “to flay” – with the nightmarish image it conjures – actually recurs throughout Plath’s *Journals*. Plath mentions the “flayed whiteness” of the sea (8 Aug. 1952, *Journals* 133) and “the flayed oak” (10 Aug. 1952, *Journals* 135). Even more startlingly, Plath the Smith College student acknowledges her own flaying consciousness: “I have such a damned puritanical conscience that it flays me like briars when I feel I’ve

done wrong or haven't demanded enough of myself: I feel I've cheated myself on languages" (27 Feb. 1956, *Journals* 215). In like vein, a married Plath ponders the circumstances antagonistic to her flaying herself into a great poet: "O, only left to myself, what a poet I will flay myself into. I shall begin by setting myself magic objects to write on: sea-bearded bodies" (11 May 1958, *Journals* 381). (What Plath would have loved to strip off were her part-time teaching job at Smith College, house chores and the pressure to save money, among others.) Metaphorical self-flaying is no less gruesome than the actual one.

Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait"

At this turn, I find it instructive to examine the memorable intertwining of art, beauty, and death in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Oval Portrait" (1845). This short story about "an artist too busy to notice that his wife is dying" arguably "betray[s] domestic anxieties" (Kennedy qtd. in Poe xxi). Notwithstanding, its ending showcases the artist's *horror sacrum* before his own work:

for one moment, the painter stood entranced before the work which he had wrought; but in the next, while he yet gazed, he grew tremulous and very pallid, and aghast, and crying with a loud voice, "This is indeed *Life* itself!" turned suddenly to regard his beloved: – *She was dead!* (Poe 154)^v

Poe's vampiric painter is a reversed, or rather perverted, Pygmalion. He can create Beauty qua Life in art only at the cost of denying, indeed killing, actual, if lower-case, beauty in actual, if lower-case, life. Nathaniel Hawthorne's "The Birth-mark" (1843) depicts a similarly destructive character in Aylmer, the scientist obsessing about his wife Georgiana's birthmark; his potion manages to remove both birthmark and life. Furthermore, "[t]he subdued horror of the observer's situation" in Poe's "The Oval Portrait" can "be related to the murderous conditions in Browning's 'My Last Duchess'" (Frank and Magistrale 265). Such texts appear to give the lie to Jantzen's contention that *natality* qua "hope for life" – largely ignored – as the solution to the West's obsession with death, *grounds* "every other form of freedom and creativity" (6). It may largely

be so, but it is not ipso facto. Let us not forget one seminal (I use the adjective advisedly) masculine appropriation of the feminine at its most creative: in the related metaphors of *brainchildren* and parthenogenetic *paternity* of works of art or systems of thought. Arguably, it is not the hope for – or even genuine interest in – life which drives the painterly or scientific pursuits of Poe's or Hawthorne's 'creators.' Notwithstanding, Jantzen rightly notes that "the fundamental imbalance of attention and emphasis [in the destruction/creativity binary] is part of the violent pattern of the west" (6), of symbolic violence.

What precedes the artistic epiphany in Poe merely psychologises the process: "lost in reveries," the "passionate, and wild, and moody" painter "*would* not see that the light which fell so ghastly in that lone turret withered the health and the spirits of his bride, who pined visibly to all but him" (Poe 153). Despite growing "daily more dispirited and weak," his wife-sitter "uncomplainingly" accommodated his "fervid and burning pleasure in his task" (153). The guests' early awareness of the likeness of the portrait (in progress) to its sitter, phrased as "a mighty marvel" (153), gave way to a doubly reclusive move by the painter in the concluding stage: he neither admitted anyone into his studio-turret, *nor looked at his sitter any more*. Absorbed in his work as he was, the painter "would not see that the tints which he spread upon the canvas were drawn from the cheeks of her who sat beside him" (153; emphasis added). Poe's turn of phrase sounds ominously like a literal and wilful transfer of life from the sitter onto the canvas: any tint on the latter is literally and absent-mindedly (at the very least) drained from the woman – a point more Gothic than in the Gothic novels that had inspired Poe. Briefly, for Poe art equals death. The reverse is also true for Baudelaire and Heaney, and especially for Plath: death equals art.

Perfection: Plath's "Edge" and "The Munich Mannequins"

In anticipation of her own suicide (11 Feb. 1963), Plath's "Edge" (5 Feb. 1963) depicts a scene of death: a young woman lies dead, with her two dead infants "coiled" – "white serpent[s]" (Plath, l. 9) – at her breasts. The poem has often been interpreted "as deadly and nihilistic" (Gill 63): for

Karen Jackson Ford, “‘Edge’ kills off Plath the woman” (qtd. in Gill 63). It has been discussed with respect to the ethics of infanticide (Brink, qtd. in Holbrook 276) – as the poem “idolizes infanticide” (Holbrook 272) – in preparation for the young mother’s “*schizoid* suicide” (Holbrook 277, original emphasis); to the “stately portrayal of the infanticide scene,” chillingly “reminiscent of a ritualistic suicide” (Boev 34); or to separateness caused by the splitting of self and consciousness (Kendall 153-154). I do not wish to dispute or even appraise the cogency of such critical approaches. Rather, I am concerned with a heretofore unexplored avenue which “Edge” suggests: the clinical edge (I use the phrase advisedly) apparent to those readers familiar with the illustrations of early modern anatomical tracts. I would argue that such splitting of consciousness – since “‘Edge’ separates voice from subject” (Holbrook 277) – evokes, if in reverse, the *écart* apparent in a lot of anatomical illustration of the dead specimen poised nevertheless in lively, sometimes even autoptic, poses (e.g. Vesalius 203, 204, 205; Valverde 94). What is more, the poem’s vegemorphic imagery – its petal metaphor – for the dead infants further contributes to this anatomical semblance.

Quite tellingly, “Edge” views the woman’s body not just as severed qua dead through the stanzaic (de-)structure, but also as having reached accomplishment – “Her dead / Body wears the smile of accomplishment” (Plath, ll. 2-3) –, the “perfected”-ness announced in the first line. Interestingly,

in the draft [of “Edge”], the perspective is of viewers high above the scene, looking down on the body of a dead woman. At that time the poem was titled “Nuns in Snow” and the observers are nuns, traveling as if on a pilgrimage to view the dead woman. From that perspective, the later countless images of a woman’s being nunlike, being pure, coalesce in the impact of this tautly crafted work. (Wagner-Martin 104)

The draft’s perspective tallies with a major debate on perfection: that propounded by religion and broadly speaking, systems of spirituality. Ironically, Christianity – ever since Apostle Paul – typically relegates perfection to the divine and, as a concession, to human saintliness qua withdrawal from the world, yet also bodily mortification (see, for instance, St Teresa of Ávila’s *The Way of Perfection*, 1583). By contrast, in the

Tibetan Buddhist tradition the teachings and practices of Dzogchen (the Great Perfection, aka the Great Completion or Great Exhaustion) “are regarded as the pinnacle of the teachings and as the most direct path to realizing the nature of mind and the reality of the world” (Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche in Third Dzogchen Rinpoche vii). Dzogchen avers that “the nature of mind is endowed with all enlightened qualities and everything is complete within it,” hence the Great Completion; that “the nature of mind and the nature of the world is perfect from the beginning,” hence the Great Perfection; and that “all the mind’s impurities are exhausted and consumed” for “these impurities have never had any true existence” since “they have no true essence,” hence the Great Exhaustion (Dzogchen Ponlop Rinpoche vii). Whatever the Dzogchen teachings and practice of enlightenment may entail (e.g., meditation, contemplation, refuge, bodhichitta, mantra recitation, guru yoga), and whatever detachment from bodily and worldly pursuits may be enjoined, Dzogchen never encourages bodily mortification. Especially the thesis of the Great Perfection renders Dzogchen alien to the Christian deprecation of the flesh qua human condition as a fall from grace. Perfection as spiritual attainment entails, in these two religious systems, different takes on what I would call the-body-in-life.

Yet, whilst nowadays perfection is no longer, or at least not primarily, otherworldly (as encapsulated in the traditional perfection-is-not-of-this-world view), its secularisation is hardly a smooth, one-way process. Ironically, the quest for perfection(ism) in sports (e.g. Hofmekler and Salzman) and, if less so, in ballet, puts a premium on the body in terms of recalling Christian asceticism. The body is at a (debatable) premium also in the controversial practices of medical enhancement (see Mehlman) and genetic engineering (see Sandel), which subtly echo the Judaeo-Christian deprecation of the body as inherently imperfect through the human alienation from God in the Fall. Conversely, some authors are intent on debunking the myth of perfection – where socially enjoined perfectionism concerns anything from the body to traditional gender roles (see Domar and Kelly) – as unwholesome. Such perfectionism is often manifested as “rejection of *failure*, rejection of *painful emotions*, and rejection of *success*” (Ben-Shahar xix). Framed within these rejections,

the body appears to be a machine crafted to work seamlessly – reminiscent of both Rene Descartes’s *res extensa* divorced from the mind (or affects) and capitalism’s conveyor belt.

To revert to Plath’s “Edge,” the core, and earliest (c. 1398), meaning of the verb *to perfect* is “to complete or finish successfully; to carry through, accomplish” (*OED*, s.v. “perfect, v.” sense 1a); almost as early (c. 1440) is “[t]o make perfect or faultless; to bring to perfection” and, in a weakened sense, “to bring nearer to perfection, to improve” (sense 2). Although not grammatically applicable in Plath’s “Edge,” another transitive sense (c. 1540) of *to perfect*, to “make (a person) fully accomplished in, informed of, or knowledgeable about, a subject, activity, etc.” (used chiefly with *in*) (sense 3), nevertheless squares ironically accurately with the statement in line 1. Whilst sense 2 of *to perfect* is consistent with the notion of accomplishment which “Edge” invokes explicitly in line 3, sense 1 is nevertheless warranted extra-textually by certain early modern anatomical images, as I will argue shortly. If the poem’s woman can (only) be perfected in death,^{vi} this is consistent with the 11 May 1958 entry in Plath’s journal, already quoted, to the effect that “without distractions she [Plath] will be able to ‘flay’ herself into some kind of supreme poet” (Gill 108). Effected in literal terms, flaying results in death; metaphorically, though, it pares down ‘excrescences’ to reveal the perfect(ed) core.

Another Plath poem, “The Munich Mannequins,” also refers to perfection as a state/condition, rather than the passive act of being enabled (or pushed) to reach it. The first line (again!) ends sententiously with a full-stop: “Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.” “Mannequins” (28 Jan. 1963) precedes “Edge” by a week, and the first-line focus on perfection in both poems indicates Plath’s strong concern with the topic in relation to women, child-birth (as creativity), and death. The noun *perfection* names “[t]he most complete or perfect stage of growth or development of a person or thing; maturity; ripeness” (*OED*, s.v. “perfection, n.” sense 1b, c. 1398) and “[t]he condition, state, or quality of being free from defect; flawlessness, faultlessness; purity” or, in a weakened sense, “supreme or comparative excellence” (sense 3a, c. 1350). Ironically, although obsolete, the earliest (c. 1225) sense of *perfection* in

English, “[t]he fact, state, or condition of being completed or perfected; consummation, completion, end” (sense 1a), makes perfect sense in “The Munich Mannequins” and aligns the poem even better with both “Edge” and anatomical illustration. The eponymous protagonists of “Mannequins” are life-size female models – hence faux women – used to showcase fashionable clothes. Described as “[i]ntolerable, without mind” (l. 15), the poem’s mannequins arguably point to the patriarchally expected masquerade of femininity, to femininity as artificially constructed – as is also the case, however differently depicted, in “Lady Lazarus” (see Gill 60).

What femininity, though? For Plath,

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.
Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydras,
The tree of life and the tree of life

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.
The blood flood is the flood of love,

The absolute sacrifice.
It means: no more idols but me,

Me and you. (Plath 262-3, ll. 1-9)

Plath’s mannequins are women who have wasted away their fertility (ll. 2, 5), who have refused (abjured?) “[t]he absolute sacrifice” (l. 7) of love and imminent conception. It is an ambivalent sacrifice, though, for it is linked to “[t]he blood flood” as “the flood of love” (l. 6), i.e., to menses as the index of non-conception (l. 5). Does this imagery indicate Plath’s patriarchal intolerance of non-procreative women, seen as dead/mannequins, or rather her intolerance of patriarchal intolerance of non-procreative women since the poet metaphorises the couple as *sole* idols unto themselves (ll. 8-9)? The intra-textual (not simply biographical) answer rests with how we interpret the exclamation “O the domesticity of these windows” (l. 21) – for the windows exhibit more than fashion (ll. 22-24) – and the line identifying Munich as “morgue between Paris and

Rome” (l. 12). Domesticity as women’s morgue is an apt metaphor for Plath’s ill-feelings towards domesticity (Gill 27), especially her own, as other late poems indicate too (Gill 64-72, 10-11). After Hughes had left their Devon house for London, Plath assessed enthusiastically, in a letter to her mother (12 Oct. 1961), her new writing routine, which had produced “book poems. Terrific stuff, *as if domesticity had choked me*” (Plath, *Letters Home* 466; emphasis added). Domesticity as an impediment to expressing her creativity also features in a letter to poet Ruth Fainlight: “I am fascinated by the polarities of muse-poet and mother housewife. *When I was happy domestically I felt a gag in my throat*” (Plath, qtd. in Gill 12, my emphasis).

Perfection and death, however, may not necessarily always triangulate with women. So demonstrates Heaney in “The Grauballe Man.”^{vii} The male bog body “now . . . lies / *perfected* in my memory” (Heaney, ll. 37-8, emphasis added) – an aesthetic object (O’Brien 36),^{viii} thus shaped by the *memory* of the lyric I. In Plath’s “Edge,” the “perfected” woman (l. 1) also suggests a body aestheticised either artistically or on the canvas of the mind’s eye.

Plath’s “Edge” vis-à-vis Adriaan van de Spiegel’s *Frucht in Mutter Leibe*

“Edge” may be regarded as a faux (i.e., inadvertent) ekphrasis of certain illustrations in Adriaan van de Spiegel’s obstetrics tract, *Frucht in Mutter Leibe* (*Fruit in Mother’s Body*), appended to the German translation, *Anatomische Tafeln* (Frankfurt, 1656), of Giulio Casserio’s *Tabulae anatomicae*.^{ix} I do not wish thereby to argue any direct influence of anatomical illustrations on Plath, who may have been unaware not only of the above-mentioned obstetrics tract, but of early modern anatomical illustration at large.^x Rather, I find the affinities interesting for what they suggest about the western collective imagination of death, women, babies and beauty. On the other hand, Plath is aware of certain medical images as highly appropriate for her poetic creation, as “Bluebeard” attests: “in his eye’s darkroom I can see / my X-rayed heart, dissected body” (ll. 5-6).

Plath hardly shies away from an anatomical imaginary historically associated with aggressive masculinity.

Yet, it is the description of the infants which, arguably, introduces the most startling image in “Edge”:

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals
Of a rose close . . . (Plath, ll. 9-14)

Plath’s baby-petals metaphor recalls a series of four illustrations in *Frucht in Mutter Leibe*, Spiegel’s anatomical tract published as *Adriani Spigelii Bruxellensis . . . De humani corporis fabrica libri decem* (Frankfurt, 1656) alongside Casserio’s *Anatomische Tafeln*.

Spiegel’s first four plates show the layer-by-layer anatomy of a woman’s pregnant uterus (even if the woman depicted is different from one plate to another). Plate 1 (p. 3) shows the woman with her right leg propped on a slab to balance her; it is the most neutral rendition of the four. Plate 2 (p. 5) shows her in a bare natural setting, save the dwarf tree in the background; she seems to be peeling/pulling away two corners of the four-‘petal’ section of her abdomen. Plate 3 (p. 7) repeats the propping posture of plate 1, yet in a natural setting, with a tree trunk shown in the foreground, close to her right knee, and a flower held in her left hand. The cruciform section of her abdomen is now more complex than in plate 2, with the coiled foetus already apparent in relief, if not fully exposed, and the peeled layers even better resembling a flower than previously. Plate 4 (p. 9) repeats the propping posture of plate 3 (rather than of plate 1), with the right knee propped on an empty-looking tree stud – appositely so, if we consider her and her foetus’s dead condition; the woman holds a flower in her left hand, behind her back, and her pudenda is covered, unlike in the early plates, by an iris. Her abdomen is so sectioned that it not only fully reveals the baby, but also folds the layers back in a flower shape – almost a rose.

Plath's "rose" metaphor and the remainder of this sensuous floral imagery in "Edge" may be indebted, as Hristo Boev shows, to Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale" and to Wilde's "The Nightingale and the Rose" or the opening of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, however "oddly jumbled" (Boev 34) they appear in Plath. Nonetheless, to me the rose and petals metaphors are equally reminiscent of Spiegel's anatomical illustration, itself as much able to defamiliarise anatomy as it concealed death by recourse to beautiful trappings of 'natural' femininity.

Conclusion

Is human – or specifically female – life perfected in death? Christians would readily answer "yes." So would aesthetes. Yet, as my reading of Plath's "Edge" alongside a number of male-authored texts and also illustrations in Spiegel's obstetrics tract has suggested, the juxtaposition of death, perfection/perfected-ness and the female body may work in less straightforward terms. The "perfected" body in death, in Plath's "Edge," partakes of the aestheticisation of death that Spiegel's female specimens also 'enjoy.' Such aestheticisation, moreover, mystifies the contrived pose of the dead person/specimen to make the body look alive and especially meaningful. What meaning can the dead impart to the living, though, by what means and to whom? Plath poises the dead/suicidal woman of her "Edge" not just on the thin borderline between life and death, choice and non-choice, beauty and repulsiveness, but also on the tight rope of necessity – the ancient Greeks' *Ἀνάγκη* (the personification of inevitability, compulsion and necessity) – demystified in the poem as mere "illusion" (l. 4): the necessity to be meaningful. Not death in itself – or of itself – is subject to *ἀνάγκη* ("force, constraint, necessity," *LSJ*, s.v. *ἀνάγκη*), but its cathected representation is: society expects an investment of emotions in the beauty (or in the concealment of ugliness) of how death appears. Accordingly, in Plath's "Edge" the woman necessarily displays a "dead / Body [that] wears the smile of accomplishment" (ll. 2-3), no different from "The illusion of a Greek necessity / [that] Flows in the scrolls of her toga" (ll. 4-5) – a toga (of necessity) itself perfected. Likewise, in Spiegel's illustration the woman/specimen displays a dead

body that wears the coy smile of accomplishment: she has enabled the male scrutiny of the mystery of human genesis (one much more multi-layered – or petal-patterned – than the cosmogony of the Book of Genesis 1).

Both representations of dead women, Plath's and Spiegel's, aestheticise death in relation to the Pauline pronouncement along the Freudian line that anatomy is, if not destiny, at least redemptive capacity: "Yet she will be saved through childbearing, provided they continue in faith and love and holiness, with modesty" (NRSV, 1 Tim 2.15). In this epistle traditionally ascribed to the Apostle, woman's conditional salvation is posited as the undoing of her original damnation (1 Tim 2.14), or at least fall from grace, for following the exhortation of the serpent to taste the forbidden fruit of the knowledge of good and evil. The soteriological discourse is framed by the prohibition of women's speech, lest men's authority be jeopardised: "Let a woman learn in silence with full submission. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she is to keep silent" (1 Tim. 11-12). This pastoral epistle not only delimits gender prerogatives relative to epistemic/spiritual authority, but indicates early Christianity's silencing and repression of women, hereafter consigned, through a man's God-like fiat, to the place of mere reproduction of the species and of the Christian society. Ironically, in 1 Timothy, childbearing, not faith, saves woman – unlike in Galatians ("yet we know that a person is justified not by the works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ," 2.16) and Romans ("it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith," 1.16). Childbearing also saves by aestheticising – through lyrical or pictorial depiction – the dead women of "Edge" and of Spiegel's obstetrical tract. Yet these latter-day women, unlike 1 Timothy's generic 'woman,' do teach, silent though they may be in death: Spiegel's offers a literal in-sight into maternity; Plath's into the liberation brought about by choice, which renders necessity illusory. Never mind Spiegel's naturalisation of death in childbirth and Plath's naturalisation of death chosen to end postpartum and matrimonial depression.

Notes:

ⁱ All subsequent references to Plath's poetry will identify exclusively the poem's line number in this edition. I will proceed similarly with other poets' works in the respective editions.

ⁱⁱ The poem belongs to the *Tableaux parisiens* section, newly added by Baudelaire to the second edition (1861) of his *Les Fleurs du mal* (1857).

ⁱⁱⁱ The Irish poet's choice may owe to the various literary influences on Heaney, amongst which T.S. Eliot's with the essay "What Dante Means to Me" (Cavanagh 82).

^{iv} Anatomy books had been illustrated by painters until the turn of the twentieth century, when a painter, Max Brödel, instigated the specialisation of the activity by creating the first school of medical illustration (the Department of Art as Applied to Medicine) at Johns Hopkins University.

^v The ending actually quotes the hi/story of the genesis of the oval portrait, penned in "a small volume which had been found upon the pillow"; the volume "criticise[d] and describe[d]" the "very spirited modern paintings in frames of rich golden arabesque" (Poe 151) which graced the walls of the chateau apartment housing the homodiegetic narrator-traveller.

^{vi} Linda Wagner-Martin quotes Mary Kurtzman on the participle "perfected" in "Edge." Familiar with the Tarot cards, Plath used them "as an organizing principle" of her final works; "Edge" is informed by the High Priestess, whose role "was to experience the 'highest possible union with the Goddess or God (Tarot divinities are both female and male)'" (Kurtzman qtd. in Wagner-Martin 105). Known as "Isis perfected," this union appears to have been inscribed as "ISIS on the final typescript of the poem 'Edge'" (Wagner-Martin 105).

^{vii} The poem was published in the volume *North. Poems* (1975) and also in the collected *Bog Poems* (1975).

^{viii} Dennis Gouws (113-14) interprets the imagery of Heaney's "Grauballe" lines 17-38 as rather abstracting the male body's originary trauma. He quotes Anthony Purdy on how aesthetic effect pre-empts empathetic affect when the critical distance from the body creates "a context of aesthetically distanced anatomical display" (Purdy qtd. in Gouws 113).

^{ix} Casserio's (c. 1552-1616) anatomical tract was published posthumously in the original Latin, as Iulii Casserii Placentini's *Tabulae anatomicae LXXIIX omnes novae nec ante hac visae* (Venice, 1627; Frankfurt, 1632), and subsequently in German translation, *Anatomische Tafeln* (Frankfurt, 1656).

^x Plath dated a medical student, Richard "Dick" Norton, in 1951-53, whom for a while she thought she would marry. His letters to her from Harvard in 1951 "were full of anatomical drawings, details of X-ray and cadaver clinics" and diagrams of muscles, in the paternalistic belief that she should acquaint herself with his world. "Yet Dick's letters may have sent another 'chilly whisper' up her spine" (Clark 181). Soon Plath started dating other young men, if without immediately breaking up with Dick (with whom she visited a maternity ward in Boston Lying-in Hospital, a fateful encounter with formaldehyde-preserved fetuses in jars, which

would inform *The Bell Jar* and fuel her maternity-related anguish), as she needed “a vivid contrast to her anatomy clinics” with him (186).

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