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Past, Loss and Nostalgia in Louise Bourgeois' and Sylvia Plath's Oeuvre

Pasado, Pérdida y Nostalgia en la Obra de Louise Bourgeois y de Sylvia Plath

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Everything I do is inspired by my early life

Louise Bourgeois (Bernadac & Obrist 133)

I need my memories. They are my documents Louise Bourgeois (Jaussaud 162)

Resumen

El peso del pasado y la presencia de la pérdida en la vida de cada individuo son innegables. Éste es claramente el caso de Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) y de Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), para quienes el sentimiento de pérdida se va a convertir en el motor de gran parte de su producción. La recreación de momentos dolorosos en la vida de Bourgeois es clave para comprender la mayor parte de su trabajo, especialmente sus famosas "Celdas". En el caso de Sylvia Plath, la muerte de su padre y la posterior ruptura de su matrimonio se traducen en poemas que se encuentran entre los mejores de su producción literaria.

Este artículo analiza la presencia de la pérdida y la nostalgia en el trabajo de la artista y la escritora, poniendo énfasis en las similitudes existentes entre ambas y haciendo alusión a los paisajes a los que Douglas Porteous se refiere como "paisajes mentales" (*Landscapes of the Mind*).

También hay una reivindicación en el artículo del sentimiento de pérdida como una poderosa herramienta creativa que invita a la acción. En este sentido

apoyamos el punto de vista de Alastair Bonnett sobre la importancia de reconocer el sentimiento de nostalgia (*The Geographies of Nostalgia*).

Palabras clave: pérdida, nostalgia, figura paterna, paisajes mentales, espejos.

Abstract

The weight of the past and the presence of loss in each individual's life are undeniable. This is clearly so in the cases of Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) and Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010), as loss is the driver of most of their production. The recreation of painful moments in Bourgeois' life is the key to understand most of her work, especially her 'Cells'. In Sylvia Plath's case, her father's death without a possible mourning and the later break-down of her marriage are drivers for some of the writer's best poems.

This article analyses the presence of loss and nostalgia in the artist and the writer's work, focusing on the many similarities between the artist and the writer and pointing out the psychic landscapes they give place to (Douglas Porteous's *Landscapes of the Mind*).

Finally, there is also a vindication in the article of the feeling of loss as a powerful creative tool that stimulates action. In that respect, the article supports Alastair Bonnett's point of view about the importance of acknowledging the feeling of nostalgia (*The Geographies of Nostalgia*).

Keywords: loss, nostalgia, father figure, mental landscapes, mirrors.

1. INTRODUCTION

Longing for the past, homesickness, nostalgia and yearning are all feelings human beings experience in their lives. As mentioned in this volume's introduction, nostalgia is becoming especially well spread as we live in a world that is rapidly changing for the worse: we are endangering species, destroying nature and starting to feel that there is a serious menace about the possibility of losing our homes. In fact, the landscape we used to see around in many of our communities is dramatically changing, and literature and other art manifestations are echoing as well. Douglas Porteous speaks about "the growing placelessness of our civilization" and "the sense of loss that placelessness generates" (*Landscapes of the Mind* 142). Porteous also explains that place-loss is "a kind of self-loss which comes from our loss of childhood" (142).

Even if these negative feelings are connected with pain, artists often manage to use them and make them into pieces of art. In doing so these uncomfortable feelings and memories are "housed". In this sense, we would like this article to be a vindication of the feeling of loss as a powerful creative tool that moves into action. In this respect we follow Alastair

Bonnett's point of view about the importance of acknowledging nostalgia (*The Geography of Nostalgia, Left in the Past: Radicalism and the Politics of Nostalgia*, The Dark Mountain Project) against the point of view of recent theories that consider that yearning for what has been lost is negative and even the subject of medical treatment (anti-nostalgics and ecocide followers).

In particular, we have chosen to focus on how the weight of the past and the feeling of nostalgia are the drivers for most of the work produced by Louise Bourgeois (1911-2010) and Sylvia Plath (1932-1963). Only after having studied the artist and writer separately, we realised how many similarities they have in common. Both needed to write down everything that happened in their lives in an attempt to exert some sort of control over their existence; artist and writer left their native countries to live abroad; there is an obvious confessionalism in their works as these speaks openly about them; the father figure plays an enormous part in their lives and works; the relationship with their mothers (more positive in Bourgeois' case than in Plath's one) is decisive; their suicidal tendencies and proclivity towards depression are present in both; there are many references to their childhood in their oeuvres; artist and writer rebel against the domesticity values of their time, etc.

Following Gregory Nagy, Greek 'nostos' is connected to the Indo-European root 'nes', meaning return to light and life (qtd. in Boym 7). Svetlana Boym specifies that the concept of nostalgia is "a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy" (92). This is the fantasy that Sylvia Plath and Louise Bourgeois try to reenact in their work, especially Bourgeois, whose work contains a continuous evocation and reenactment of her childhood in an attempt to reconcile herself with that period of time. In fact, Bourgeois was well aware of the importance of the past in her work. Being unable to accept it, she was condemned to symbolically repeat it, and this continuous re-creation was a sort of cure for her:

*You just have to abandon every day your past.
And accept it. An if you can't accept it, then
you have to do sculpture! [...] If your need is to refuse
to abandon the past, then you have to re-create it.
Which is what I have been doing."
(Bernadac & Obrist 2)*

The same can be said about Sylvia Plath. As Steven Gould Axelrod maintains in his book, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*, her words became her cure. That is the

reason for her incessant writing. She writes with a special intensity in the periods of her life when her world seemed about to collapse, for instance, before her final suicide attempt, when she wrote the best poems of her life. Those poems would give her a name in literature and most of them would be included in *Ariel*, her last poetry book.

If we pay attention to the two types of nostalgia described by Boym (191), we could say that Bourgeois' was restorative, as this type of nostalgia attempts a reconstruction of the lost home, while Plath's had more of a reflective character. All in all it is indispensable to acknowledge the presence of nostalgia and the weight of the past in both artists in order to understand their lives and work, and this article is a contribution to that thesis.

2. COMPULSIVE WRITERS

There was a compulsive way of working and writing in both women. Sylvia Plath was a frenetic writer. For her, writing was vital: she wrote to 'herself' in her journals, wrote letters to her mother with unusual frequency, wrote in notebooks and on pieces of paper that she sometimes destroyed. Writing was a way of bringing order to the chaos of sensations, emotions and desires that daily events brought to her life; a way of putting order to her experiences. As she herself admitted: "It is the articulation of experience which is so necessary to me; even if I never publish again, I shall still have to write, because it is the main way I give order to this flux which is life" (*Letters* 1113; vol. 1, February 24, 1956). Also, as Steven Gould Axelrod explains, for Plath writing was a way to heal inner wounds (*The Wound and the Cure of Words*), those that revealed an unstable and sensitive nature, a fragile ontology (García Ráyego 19). However, her fears, uncertainties and ontological fragility always were disguised behind a public image of enviable efficacy and firmness, something that Plath always tried to keep up in front of others (Martín Castillejos *Cartografías* 278).

Plath wrote 856 letters to her mother Aurelia Schober and other family members in a period spanning from February 1940, when she was seven years old until seven days before her death on February 4th 1963 (*Letters* vi; vol. I). Nevertheless, as the last edition of *The Letters of Sylvia Plath* explains, there were more than 1,400 letters published and addressed to more than 140 correspondents (xxvii; vol. 2). Besides that there were about 700 letters more "that were destroyed, lost or not retained" (*Letters* xxix; vol. 2) and that were originally addressed to family friends, acquaintances, teachers, publishers, etc.

As for Louise Bourgeois, there was a trend in her to accumulate all the remains of her past in an effort to keep track of everything and to remember all the details. She admitted she felt trapped by the need to collect pieces of memory (Bernadac & Obrist 141). In such a

way she left behind letters, photographs, pieces of cloth, family albums, pieces of furniture, bags and papers. All of them were inspirational for her and tell us about her life. This obsession to remember everything also explains her fascination with newspapers and diaries. Since she began her first diary when she was only twelve, she did not stop recording everything about her life: her trips, encounters, emotions, impressions and daily tasks. Bourgeois suffered from insomnia which also explains the innumerable drawings, sketches and notes made at night. Besides a written journal she had an oral one with recorded interviews, reflections and conversations. As Bourgeois herself recognized, all this was part of an effort to keep her life under control: "Having several journals means that I like to have my house in order. It is essential for me to keep them updated to make sure that life does not escape me " (Bernadac & Obrist 156). It is this material, memory in short, the one that Bourgeois uses again and again in her production and especially in *Cells*, her last work. In that last stage of her life as an artist, Bourgeois even uses pieces of cloth because, as she explains: "A piece of clothing is like a memory exercise. It invites me to explore the past. What did I feel when I was wearing it? Dresses are like indicator panels in the search for the past "(Neri 78).

3. CHILDHOOD: THE ETERNAL COME-BACK

My name is Louise Joséphine Bourgeois. I was born on december 25, 1911, in Paris. All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood. My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama. (Jaussaud 8)

"My childhood landscape was not land but the end of the land—the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic ..." (Sylvia Plath, Johnny Panic 123).

Louise Bourgeois and Sylvia Plath left their countries of origin when they were young to live abroad. The French born artist left Paris to travel to New York and Plath left Boston to live in Cambridge, and on a second journey, she left Boston again to live in London, then Devon (North Tawton, England) and later London again. Following Douglas Porteous' theories, their travels when they were young can be interpreted as a self-loss linked to the loss of their childhood (142). Years after, there was a need in both women to go home again, a journey that as Porteous explains, is always impossible because "Childscape is really our childhood home (143), a landscape impossible to recreate because it belongs to the past."

In his book *Landscapes of the Mind*, Douglas J. Portuous writes about the work of Graham Green to explain the close relationship that exists between the landscape, the environment in which an individual moves, and their character and personality. On how the first is forged and defines the second, Portuous explains,

... Greene's characters are, as it were, creatures of their environment, made by it, subordinate to it, illustrative of it. [...] They are, like starfish stranded in a drying pool a half-inch from low-tide mark, utterly unable to assess their environment context. As is true of those in Kafkaland, characters in Greenland have no control over events or environment. (112)

Indeed, the environment in which the individual lives is in most cases, if not absolutely decisive, of great importance in their life. It is character building and usually a determinant in their future in that it gives them access to certain possibilities which at the same time are denied to others. The first years of life of an individual are without doubt the most formative in developing the individual's character. They are the most decisive in defining what their personality and creativeness will evolve into (Portuous 156).

For this reason, many biographers take great interest in the landscape that surrounds an individual during their childhood in that it can be evocative and reveal relevant information to better understand the person's character in question. Portuous cites Georges Gusdorf when he states that the landscape in which an individual has lived "assists him to structure the metaphoric terrain in which his life is lived, and gives life its ultimate shape, 'so that landscape is truly, in Ariel's phrase, «a state of the soul».' We are back, of course, to Inscape" (Portuous 154)¹. This 'Inscape' can clearly be seen in both Plath's and Bourgeois' work. In both cases, and especially at the end of their lives, their work is an expression of their mental state and vice versa. Mind and landscape are in the end, the same and only reality.

Childhood is so important, according to writers, psychologists, educators and all kinds of scholars, that our natural tendency in life is to return to our origins, to an abstract idea of what was our first home, when and where we were still naive and ignorant enough to be happy. "Life is a ceaseless journey home", says Portuous and also, "Childscape, is really our childhood home" (1989 120), and so 'the greatest instinct [for everyone of us] is to go home again' (Sillitoe 41). With this in mind, Sylvia Plath writes to her mother in a letter dated 5th July 1958 saying:

¹ Read G. Gusdorf's article about the topic: "The conditions and limits of autobiography", in *Autobiography*, ed. J. Olney, 1980.

I am going back to the ocean as my poetic heritage & hope to revisit all the places I remember in Winthrop with Ted this summer: Johnson Avenue, a certain meadow on it, our beach & grammy's. Even rundown as it, the town has the exciting appeal of my childhood & I am writing some good poems about it, I think. I'll enclose that poem "Night-Walk," the other one The New Yorker accepted, which I think you've read ..."
(Letters 259; vol 2)

There is a similarity in the case of Bourgeois. Most of her work represents an effort to recreate her childhood and to interpret that period of her life. Like Plath, Bourgeois tried to return to her childhood landscape. In 1955 or 1956 she travelled with her children to Aubusson, where her grandmother had already worked in the family's tapestry business and Louise herself had also worked as a *dessinateur* (Bernadac & Obrist 153). However, her old house had changed completely since fifteen or twenty families had lived in the building after the Bourgeois. Once again, as Portuouss explains, going home is always a useless effort because it is impossible to revisit one's childhood (143).

4. THE DESTRUCTION OF THE FATHER

Louise Bourgeois was haunted all her life by the same ghost that originated from her childhood: her father and the governess' betrayal. The governess had been hired to teach the children English, but instead, she became Louise's father's lover. Bourgeois wrote in her journals:

She had been hired to teach me English. I was betrayed not only by my father, but also by her, damn it. It was a double betrayal. (Bernadac & Obrist 69)

The spiral is important to me. It is a twist. As a child, after washing the tapestries in the river, I would turn and twist and ring them with three others or more to ring the water out. Later, I would dream of getting rid of my father's mistress. I would do it in my dreams by ringing her neck. The spiral – I love the spiral – represents control and freedom. (Jaussaud 49)

The feeling of violence towards her father's lover was amplified even more because of the love she felt towards her mother, who was a hard-working and entrepreneurial woman who Louise deeply admired. These turbulent feelings pursued the artist all her life and they are openly represented in many of her pieces of work.

Regarding Plath, in a short autobiographical story, "Ocean 1212-W" she recalls the end of her own childhood as being closely connected to her father's death:

I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over. . . My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those nine first years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth. (Johnny Panic 126)

Her childhood was over and Otto Plath's death remained forever in the writer's memory. The feeling of unreality towards her father's death continued as a constant in the writer's life, as "My mother hadn't let us come to his funeral because we were only children then, and he had died in the hospital, so the graveyard and even his death had always seemed unreal to me" (*Johnny Panic* 135).

If we analyse Plath's life in Freudian terms we can interpret that the writer felt that she had been robbed of her childhood by her father's death. As a result, Plath hated her father because he had died and made the whole family unhappy; as a consequence, the poet even declared her rebellion against God for letting her dad die (Wagner-Martin 13). The young Sylvia also resented him because she lacked a male role model and because, after his death, Aurelia Plath had to work very hard and was unable to spend much time with her and her brother.

Years later the writer ventilated her resentment towards Otto Plath in what would become one of her most famous poems, "Daddy". In fact, in Plath's life there is a never-ending search for a father figure (Ted Hughes, her future husband, would be one) that appears reflected in all her work but, at the same time, there is also a feeling of hatred towards Otto Plath for his abandonment of the family. The writer describes him in cruel terms as a nazi, a panzer-man and a vampire:

*You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.*

*Daddy, I have had to kill you.
You died before I had time——*

.....

*I have always been scared of you,
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat mustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You——
Not God but a swastika
So black no sky could squeak through.
Every woman adores a Fascist,*

*The boot in the face, the brute
Brute heart of a brute like you.*

.....

*If I've killed one man, I've killed two——
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.*

*There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.*

*They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.
(The Collected Poems 222)*

In the case of Louise Bourgeois, in some way we could also say that her father stole her childhood. Besides the hatred she felt towards her father for his irrespective behaviour towards her mother, Bourgeois had been born a girl while her father wanted a son. This situation produced an inner conflict in Louise that would condition her all her life, since she was always thinking about how to make herself useful and indispensable to her father. As a result, she decided to dedicate herself to the family business, dropping out of school at 15 and becoming the family's tapestry designer, a task that had never been performed by a woman before (Bernadac & Obrist 61).

In fact, the difficult relationship with her father is the origin of some of her more acclaimed works, for example, Bourgeois' "The Destruction of the Father" (1974), that expresses a childhood fantasy in which she takes revenge on her father, who always bragged at the dinner table. In fact, "The Destruction of the Father" represents the symbolic death of Louis Bourgeois. The artist describes the way she fantasized with the idea of getting rid of her father in these terms:

What frightened me was that at the dinner table, my father would go on and on, showing off, [...]. Suddenly there was a terrific tension, and we grabbed him – my brother, my sister, my mother – the three of us grabbed him and pulled him onto the table and pulled his legs and arms apart – dismembered him, right? And we were so successful in beating him up that we ate him up. It's a fantasy, but sometimes the fantasy is lived (Jausaud 106).

Yet, as Bernadac points out (95), the sculptor carries out one more act of exorcism after the death of her husband by getting rid of the stove that the couple had owned for years. In

this way by freeing herself from her role as wife and mother, she also gets rid of the omnipresent image of 'the fathers', the figures of authority.

5. SETTINGS

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston and attended Smith College until she travelled to Cambridge with a Fulbright grant; there, on February 25th 1956 she met Ted Hughes her future husband. A year later, in June 1957, she returned to the USA and settled down in Northampton where she worked as a teacher at Smith College from 1957 to June 1958. After that short teaching experience she returned to Europe with Hughes and lived in Devon until the couple split up. Immediately afterwards Plath moved to London where she later committed suicide on 11th February, 1963. Except for Devon, the writer lived most of her life in cities. Nevertheless, we hardly ever find any description of an urban setting in her work. With the exception of the description of New York in *The Bell Jar*, most of the descriptions we find in Plath's writings are related to the natural world, both in her prose and poems (Martín Castillejos 2002 51-66). With regards to her poetry, beside noticing that the natural element becomes progressively important in her verses we also appreciate an evolution in her style from a first period when the natural sceneries are depicted mostly in a naturalistic way ("Conversation Among the Ruins", "Southern Sunrise", "Prospect", "Firesong", "Faun", all of them written in 1956) to a final stage where the description of the sceneries is done through brushstrokes that reflect her emotional state ("Lady Lazarus", "The Night Dances", written in 1962 "The Munich Mannequins", "Contusion", written in 1963). These latter poems are an example of what Porteous describes as Inscapes or psychic landscapes (87) where nostalgia is a main component. Other examples with natural settings where there is a nostalgic reference to Otto Plath's death are "Electra on Azalea Path", "The Colossus" and "Poem for a Birthday", the three of them were written in 1959.

The day you died I went into the dirt

.....

... This is Azalea Path
A field of burdock opens to the south.
Six feet of yellow gravel cover you
(*"Electra on Azalea Path"*, *The Collected Poems* 117)

I shall never get you put together entirely,
Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.

.....

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,
Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.
Thirty years now I have labored
To dredge the silt from your throat.
I am not the wiser.
(“The Colossus”, *The Collected Poems* 129)

Once I was ordinary:
Sat by my father’s bean tree
Eating the fingers of wisdom.
The birds made milk.
When it thundered I hid under a flat stone.
(“Poem for a Birthday”, *The Collected Poems* 133)

As mentioned before, Plath's poetry has a strong biographical character so that we can easily identify the natural world she was surrounded by while reading the poems. Some good examples are “The Burn-out Spa” (11 November 1959), “Mushrooms” (13 November 1959), “Sleep in the Mojave Desert” (5 July 1960), “Two Campers in Cloud Country” (July 1960), “Parliament Hill Fields” (11 February 1961), “Stars Over the Dordogne” (July 1961), “Wuthering Heights” (September 1961), “Finisterre” (29 September 1961), “The Moon and the Yew Tree” (22 October 1961) and many others. By reading them we can easily identify the settings Plath was describing.

As for Louise Bourgeois, her work is generated as the result of the spaces she inhabited and the memories they brought to her. Through her writings and her compulsive need to record everything, we know about her childhood in Paris, Aubusson, Choissy and her country house in Easton, Anthony (Connecticut, EE.UU), her studio in Brooklyn and the apartment where she lived until her death on West 20th Street (New York). According to Beatriz Colomina, all of them domestic spaces associated to trauma ([louise-bourgeois-memoria-arquitectura](#)). Colomina also says that Bourgeois uses spaces and architecture as a means to reconstruct painful moments of her life with the aim to overcome the pain and fear she suffered ([louise-bourgeois-memoria-arquitectura](#)). The spaces she creates in the series *Lairs* in the 60's and 80's or in her *Cells*, like *Arch of Hysteria* (1992-1993), *Red Room* (1994) or *Spider* (1997), also tell us about pain. Bourgeois was conscious of the difficulty of distinguishing between one type of pain and another: “When does the emotional become physical? When does the physical become emotional? It’s a circle going round and round” (Bernadac & Obrist 32). She explains that pain can begin at any point and turn in any direction.

Starting in 1989 Bourgeois created a total of 60 *Cells* in a period of two decades that contain all types of references to her past, amongst them innumerable allusions to her childhood and her family's business like the pins, needles, thread and other tools they used to restore tapestries. About that, Bourgeois said: "You have to tell your story and you have to forget your story. You forget and forgive. It liberates you" (Bernadac & Obrist 362). And this is precisely what Bourgeois does again and again in her *Cells*: reenacting childhood memories. Beside that, when Bourgeois was over eighty she started working on her first spiders, in which the inspiration of her mother and her never-ending work when repairing tapestries is made obvious. Her mother is in fact, the spider she recreates with her never-ending work of weaving and unweaving: "My best friend was my mother, and she was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat and useful as an araignée" (*An Intimate Portrait* 42).

6. MIRRORS

[...]
 I am a mirror.
 I'm there.
 I'm not there.
 You want to know
 I'm only your image, king, rage,
 I offend you, mollusk."
 (Louise Bourgeois *An Intimate Portrait* 115)

*The heart shuts,
 The sea slides back,
 The mirrors are sheeted*
 (Sylvia Plath "Contusion", Ariel 83)

In 1998 Bourgeois makes the cell, *Twelve Oval Mirrors*, that appears to be quite simple: twelve concave mirrors of oval form appear arranged in a circle with the same number of small wooden chairs in front of each one. Once again, there is a reference to Louise's childhood as the imagery of the chairs seen throughout the hologram series may have been influenced by Bourgeois' father and his antique furniture business.

The mirror, which appears in many of Bourgeois' *Cells*, is a metaphor of the artist's vulnerability. It is a symbol of fragility and of the passage of time. It also represents self-knowledge and self-acceptance; as Bourgeois herself admits: "The mirror means the acceptance of the Self". She also declares "I have lived in a house without mirrors because I could not stand, could not accept myself. The mirror was an enemy. But the mirror cannot be your enemy, it has to be your friend. So, instead of seeing it as a symbol of vanity (there

was no danger on that side), I began to see it as a symbol of acceptance"(Bernadac and Obrist 260).

With regards to Sylvia Plath, as Eileen M. Aird confirms, the mirror image appears frequently in her transitional period (1960-61) but it is not exclusive of that time span but appears rather sporadically in all her poetic work and has a wide variety of interpretations. So that, while in a poem from her early days like "In Midas' Country", the mirror is a visual image that refers to the surface of the river, in "The Couriers" the destruction of the mirrors alludes to the alteration of the state of equilibrium and inner peace; in "Totem" on the other hand, the concept of the mirror appears to be associated with the monotony of everyday life and in "A Birthday Present" it is nothing but a symbol of death (Aird 106-07). Also in "Private Ground" the writer highlights the indifference of the lake that swallows dead fishes that she throws into the water: "the lake / Opens and shuts, accepting them among its reflections" (*Crossing the Water* 23-24). In this poem Plath uses images reflecting glitter and frost that make a clear allusion to death:

First *frost*, and I walk among the rose-fruit, the marble toes

 All morning, with smoking breath, the handyman
 Has been draining the goldfish ponds.
 They collapse like lungs, ...

 They *glitter* like eyes, and I collect them all.
 Morgue of old logs and old images, the lake
 Opens and shuts, accepting them among its *reflections*.
 ("Crossing the Water" 21) (*my emphasis*)

In "Last Words" Plath employs the mirror image again, this time in combination with the colour white, thereby alluding to the void that represents death: "My mirror is clouding over- / A few more breaths, and it will reflect nothing at all. / The flowers and the faces whiten to a sheet" (*Crossing the Water* 40). And again, in the poem "Mirror" there is a direct relationship between candlelight, moonlight, silver, water and white lilies, that is to say, whatever is white or gives off flashes of this colour, and death:

I am *silver* and exact. I have no preconceptions.
 Whatever I see I swallow immediately
 Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.

 Now I am a *lake*. A woman bends over me,
 Searching my reaches for what she really is.
 Then she turns to those liars, the *candles* or the *moon*.

I see her back, and *reflect* it faithfully.

.....

Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.
(*Crossing the Water* 34) (my emphasis)

“Mirror” is a very similar poem to the ones we see in *Ariel*. The most notable difference with those of the later era of the writer is that here there is a greater formal control about what is written. However, Plath does still not write with the visceral necessity that she will use in *Ariel*, neither is she so emphatic as in her later poems. The image of the mirror in which she has always tried to see herself remains definitely ‘closed’ during the later stage of her poetic production, in which the mirrors either no longer reflect anything or they are covered in sheets, as in “Contusion”, one of her last poems. In such a way, the mirrors in which Plath wanted to see herself reflected appear at the end of her life, all covered in sheets as a sign of mourning (Axelrod 211-12).

All in all, there is an evolution in the writer’s poetic style from the first period when the natural sceneries are depicted mostly in a naturalistic way to a final stage in which landscapes appear in a more symbolic manner as a reflection of Plath’s own mind (Martin-Castillejos, *All by Myself* 2000). Following Douglas Porteous we could even say that the landscapes described in her poems become her mind (104). There is also in her verses the increasing presence of a new component that constitutes an excellent example of what Sigmund Freud defines as “uncanny” (“unheimlich” in German). That presence turns the natural setting into an aggressive, inhuman and sinister place where the human being does not feel comfortable but threatened and powerless. Plath’s final attempt to fuse with the natural elements and become integrated into nature, in order to diminish the pain produced in her by the world (Rosenblatt 150-51), finishes in a complete failure.

The body may be replaced and revitalized, as in “The Stones”; or burned down, as in “Lady Lazarus”; or vaporized, as in “The Detective”; or magically transformed, as in “Fever 103°.” There are many methods, but the goal remains the same: union of the body with the objects that surround it. (Rosenblatt 150-51)

As a result of the failure to ‘fuse’ with nature her last poems turn more pessimistic than ever and deal with different topics where the idea of death and loss constitutes an unalterable presence (Martin-Castillejos, *All by Myself* 2000).

7. THE ART OF FALLING

My early work is the fear of falling
 Later on it became the art of falling
 (Louise Bourgeois *An Intimate Portrait* 96)

Dying
 Is an art, like everything else.
 I do it exceptionally well.
 (Sylvia Plath *Ariel* "Lady Lazarus" 7)

Peter Davison, in a book dedicated to various Bostonian poets between 1955 and 1960, tells us that the writer visited her hometown at Christmas in 1957, having already made the decision not to teach again the following year at Smith College and having notified the English Department where she worked on the 5th January 1958 (165). We know that Plath was very depressed at this time and most probably she revisited the landscape of her childhood when the idea of death possibly tormented her again. The month of January, feeling sick and depressed, was especially difficult for Plath as we can deduce from the way she began one of her notes in her diary: "Codeine, opium, drawn from opiates, took me from my cough and aches and lifted me ..." (8th January 1958); "A small draft of deadly night air seeping through the white-painted metal slats of venetian blinds sets me coughing, wheezing, with ominous click and whistle deep in my lungs" (14th January 1958); "Wicked, my hand halted, each night at writing, I fell away into sleep, book unwritten in" (20th January 1958); "Absolutely blind fuming sick. Anger, envy and humiliation" (22nd January 1958); "A blank day of cooking & gusts of drowsiness" (26th January 1958) (*Journals* 308-18). The comments about her state of mind are combined with others about her colleagues in the Department, her classes and students at Smith College, about whom she has terrible nightmares (*Journals* 317-18; 348-50, 357-58).

Plath only revealed her depressive state of mind in her diaries and to her psychiatrist, Doctor Ruth Beustcher, with whom she had psychiatric sessions from the end of summer 1958 until the writer left the United States with her husband to settle in England in December 1959. Her malaise worsened even more after her separation from Ted Hughes in 1962 and culminated in her suicide on the 11th February 1963 when she was only 30 years old.

Louise Bourgeois' depressive tendency is also expressed in multiple personal writings. In one occasion she affirmed that fighting depression was an "art" that she had practised all

her life (Bernadac & Obrist 97). In fact, after her father's death the artist suffered from serious bouts of depression and agoraphobia. In the early 1950s she began to attend psychoanalysis and would continue to do so for thirty years (Bernadac & Obrist 163).

While Plath had at least two clear attempts at suicide in her life Bourgeois also refers to suicide, citing specifically Plath, amongst many other creative women (writers, artists, etc.).

Seven easy ways to end it all
 Hang yourself
 Jump off the bridge
 (I jumped in the Bièvre River)
 Take pills (I took Gardenal)
 Cut your veins
 Drink poison
 Put your head in the oven
 Jump in front of an oncoming train

"Anne Sexton, Antigone, Diane Arbus, Electra, Héloïse and Abélard, Marilyn Monroe, Medea, Opheliam Paolo and Francesca, Sylvia Plath, Virginia Woolf, Vivienne Eliot, Zelda Fitzgerald." (Bernadac & Obrist 74).

Nevertheless, in Bourgeois' case the continuous revision of her own life became her best therapy. The recreation of painful moments helped her, in her own words, to get her out from the bottom of the well where she sometimes was (Bernadac & Obrist 27). In fact, remembering those moments was the engine that moved her into action. Her celebration of pain, so clearly reflected in works such as her 'Cells' allowed her to overcome her panic attacks and find the necessary strength to reach her 91st birthday. That would not be the case of Sylvia Plath. Her father's death and the break-down of her marriage were drivers for poems written at the end of her life, such as "Daddy", "The Rabbit Catcher", "Ariel", "Contusion" and "Edge", that would give her a name in literature. The writer had the time to come to terms with the pain produced by her father's death but not with that caused by her husband's desertion. In such a way death images flood Plath's last verses. Nature is still present in her last poems but in a more abstract manner and often associated to death (Martin Castillejos 132). In this way, in her last work we see "desperate butterflies" ("Kindness"), the sea sliding back ("Contusion"), her children coiled white serpents ("Edge"), this is, a universe where death reigns and where nature attends impassively to Plath's premature death.

The woman is perfected.
 Her dead
 Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

.....

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
 Staring from her hood of bone.
 She is used to this sort of thing.
 Her blacks crackle and drag.
 (Ariel, "Edge" 84)

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