

## Towards a Homeopathic Erotics: Sylvia Plath's "Nick and the Candlestick"

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What is it that we want Sylvia Plath to be? A virgin goddess, evidently; a woman who has not had to do with men, and beside whom all men can appear only as brutes and liars. A blazer of trails, also, someone who has had a close encounter, and whose lamp might still light our way to particular shores.

And on these shores, she still lingers; for behind these wishes lies a further one, which is to keep Plath alive, to continue to treat her as our contemporary. So it is, of course, with those who die young, stay pretty; in a different rhetoric, "age shall not wither them ...". It is as though also through Plath we seek a kind of inoculation: as though contact with this peculiarly sacred body, sacred in its taboo status, in its hiddenness, its secrecy and in its exposure, will grant us some boon which will go beyond the trammels of materiality and give us a glimpse, a *soupcou*, some tiny but infinitely precious amount of a substance which is, as it were, homeopathically related to death, and just this tincture will enable us to rest easier, to preach our gained wisdom and experience without having to be present ourselves on the fatal bank where alone that wisdom and experience can be validated.

Homeopathy, of course—the passion of similarity, if you like, although other readings are possible—is one of the great secrets of text. Administered in the right dosage, literature can cure us of most of our ailments, so the myth runs, and so the poet-healers, emblematised in Keats, have been pressed into service along this line of argument: the wound, the gap from which creativity flows or pours, the loss which we then seek to assuage, all these manifestations can be dealt with by the patient application of surrogate equivalents. This myth itself is soaked and steeped in passion, in the notion of the suffering artist, of Dylan Thomas, Brendan Behan, Francis Bacon; a romantic myth, of course, but one with a longer mythic backdrop, at least as far back as Epicurus.

The inoculation with which we come face to face in our dealings with

Plath is, however, more complicated, more many-sided, more undecidable: because of the nature of suicide. Suicide—of which many things may be said—has intrinsically to do with excess and the imagination but in a doubled and undecidable way; it has to do with excess *of* imagination, with a flood of impressions of what the future might bring; or at what distance the present might be standing from a sanely apprehensible and rationally manageable life; or the ways in which the past might not desist from rising up against us; or a combination of these three temporally-located terrors. It has also to do, however, with an excess of the will to defeat imagination—for these very reasons, but also because of a lack of faith in imagination itself, and thus at least one route towards suicide lies through a denigration of creativity, with a willed destruction of the capacity to change. Suicide is the last and most extreme of uncreative acts, or perhaps we should say it is simply the most desperate, it is the end—the goal, the perfection and the closure—of alchemy, the final and fatal attempt to convert the dross and base metal of quotidian life into the blushing silver of memory and reputation: it is an attempt to strike out beyond the world through a movement within and a movement without time: “without” in the sense of the purported possibility of removal to a higher sphere, “within” in the sense of history, an attempt to move beyond the petty disregardings and slights of the present and find salvation beyond the grave. It is therefore an attempt at a premature opening of the crypt, or the psychic reverse of premature burial; it is premature awakening, it is saying that the time spent underground is not too long but too short, it looks forward with a weird expectancy to a time when the record will be set straight, when the crypt will yield its secrets and one will be proved to have been what one had claimed to be all along ...<sup>1</sup>

The tenses, perhaps, are getting confused here, and that is as it should be for suicide is an act which presupposes its own special tense, the *future perfect*, in all the senses of that phrase. In order to hypothesise the future perfect, it is necessary to call into being another, stranger tense, perhaps not fully representable micro-linguistically, which we may call the “present absent”. It is this symbolic tense, this sign, under which we are fated to read Sylvia Plath: she has indeed set up a “cemetery guard”, as Derrida puts it, she has encapsulated an Althusserian “life in mourning”,<sup>2</sup> yet what she has also done is to conjoin this with a zest and an energy in her writing which continually involves us in further, unwelcome dialectics: the *jouissance* is still there, it pokes out at us, vulgar and agog, between almost every line: it embarrasses us and we do not know what to do with it.

One thing we can do with it is to refer it to a kind of childlikeness, and in doing so we further reinforce the myth, for this virgin child that we now invent is precisely she-who-is-to-be-reborn, and is precisely also further valorised by the sense of life-promise with which she is now invested. Plath has not invented, or left us, a crypt: she has invented and left us a machine for the reproduction of death, one which continually implicates us regardless of the careful dealings we

try to have with it. We choose our stance towards it carefully—biographical, diagnostic, mythic, aloof. It makes no difference, for the present absent is always already there, guarding the remains: we cannot approach without paying our dues, and once we have paid we are automatically sucked into the *topos* of the poetry, the paying customers who want only to see a head of flame-coloured hair rise from the dead, the “peanut-crunching crowd” who have nowhere to go unless we confirm our role as the customers of death’s brothel, clients of the spectacle which devalues the body beyond recall.<sup>3</sup> For what lies behind this is a conniving, ironic hatred of the (female) body: in these poems and in our readings the body is martyred again and again while psyche winks and encourages us in our mock transcendences, which are the very image of the dry salvages, couplings without the pull and tremor of flesh on the bone, geometric consummations.<sup>4</sup>

The body is thus martyred as it so frequently is in nursery rhymes, fairy stories, with their continually coded messages about the gap between the latent and the manifest; for whereas all narrative may be forced to exist on both of those levels, only in the materials specifically “cooked up” for those between the ages of six and twelve will the notion of latency itself become the topic and substance of narrative, the ramifications of hiding and hiddenness the very stuff from which the discourse is woven; and this combined with a *purpose* so shrill as almost to rise above the levels of normal hearing, which is that the body must be disavowed, its promptings stilled, and that in the name of this stilling, this calming of the prohibited passions during the period of psychological and biological latency, even the sacrifice of Struwwelpeter’s fingers is to be seen as but a minor part of an essential national curriculum.<sup>5</sup>

I want to turn to a specific poem of Plath’s, “Nick and the Candlestick”.<sup>6</sup> “Jack be nimble, Jack be quick / Jack jump over the candlestick”; but *not* Jack, Nick: Plath’s son Nicholas, of course, but what other Nicks or nicks, namings or markings? The jumping demon, creature of fire who may nevertheless be terrified by fire: this might be an equal game, for there are many creatures of the night which can be scared away by the candlestick, yet there are others who seem to come specifically to crouch in the shadows candles cast, who can never be made out with complete clarity but whose eyes, scarlet and green, flicker and blink in the light reflected precisely from this “stranger” flame by whose means we seek to banish them.<sup>7</sup> The candlestick is capable of conjuring its own “Old Nick”.

We can perhaps surmount some of these problems by a sense of measure, for the candle in its slow burnings is also an instrument of measurement, it bears a precise correlation to the passing of time, one which can be measured in a series of nicks down its side, mock attempts to halt the flow and seepage, but which also remind us that psyche can at least do something to measure if not to retard the passing unto death, unto the guttering of the candle, the moment when night irredeemably comes. Yet does rhyme, the transition from “nick” to “stick”, really mark mastery or, instead, a submission to blind forces, forces

beyond meaningful control? Do we pass on from this rhyming title with a sense of something clever having been achieved, or with a sense of the failure of cleverness before more massive pressures—the conundrum, again, of a life which ends in suicide, the act of supreme self-control which signifies its equivocal other, submission before the uncontrollable, an over-hasty lowering of the (cemetery) guard leaving us with a flood of unrealised intentions which are the very substance of hauntings, of the attempt to pretend that the dead continue to live, that Plath still cares about her reputation, that her divinity is not to be assailed?

“The butcher, the baker, the candlestick-maker / Cast them out, knaves all three”; so goes the nursery rhyme. Knaves, presumably, because of their power: the bringers of sustenance and light, or rather, because the rhyme deals with a maker of candle-*sticks* and not of candles, those who handle these sources and bring them to us safely, free from the possibility of being burned by the nightly fires or contaminated by bad blood. This power can be readily feared and reviled, these were the *men* who had society by the throat, their wares were non-negotiable. Simple Simon, to continue with the nursery rhymes, got nowhere with the pieman; nor could Old Mother Hubbard find any way of pleasing her all-consuming dog, or even of interpreting or foreseeing his wayward and (structurally) endless desires.

I am a miner. The light burns blue.  
Waxy stalactites  
Drip and thicken, tears

The earthen womb  
Exudes from its dead boredom.  
Black bat airs

Wrap me, raggy shawls,  
Cold homicides.  
They weld to me like plums.

We can begin by bifurcating this “I”, creating—as is the business of the poem—a forked animal. On one side, the “I” is the unborn baby—“the” and not “an” unborn baby because of the directness of the address, the non-necessity of explanations, the consequent absolute assurance that this is the harbour of centrality, the giver of meaning, not one among many but the signifier, the exemplum of life. On the other, because it is a “miner” and thus purposive, seeking, looking inwards for clues, endowed consequently with consciousness which is here being transferred from outside to inside, it is the maternal psyche, inhabiting in the realm of the imagination the insides of its own body, a messenger from higher levels which has moved down from its lofty station to explore those deeper, darker regions “where the body will blacken and turn into coal”.<sup>8</sup> Thus the two halves of this forked beast are searching for each other

(perhaps it is no accident that this is a major trope of Ted Hughes's *Crow* sequence<sup>9</sup>) but in doing so they adopt the imagery of the third, the real Other, bifurcation becomes triangulation, for miners are not babies, they are not for the most part mothers, they are adult males, the arbitrators and dominators of language, and thus paradoxically the only meeting point; the only meeting point especially if the other participants in this monodrama are in a state of ironic alienation, are in any case discoursing precisely about the separations within the supposedly integral organic body.

And thus in this potential meeting there is danger, poison in the air, although the blue of poison takes up its station also as the blue of the candle's heart and thus the very centre of this projected meeting, of this coming together which already reverses the notion of birth as an outgoing, is poisoned, dangerous, freighted with death. We are in the wrong zone. Where the fertility of the underground ought to be, we come across only the chthonic depths, the stilled underworld.<sup>10</sup> The heart has been infected, perhaps cut out: passion and anima remain forever elusive through these whispering halls, in this long-closed mine; *she* gives off no clues to her whereabouts, and has been absent for ages as the stalactites "drip and thicken", slowly flood down like the candle over the candlestick, obliterating all mark of distinction, engulfing whatever directional signs should be here to guide our explorings.

If these are tears (rather than "tears" in its alternative pronunciation, in the sense of rips or rents in the fabric, which is also part of the discourse) then they are tears of fatigue; they mourn, but what they mourn is the forgetting of the mourning process and of the object of the mourning.<sup>11</sup> This "earth" is the earth shovelled and shaken over the coffin, not the earth from which all things spring; the "dead boredom" promises no cyclical turning, nor renewal, but a ghostly repetition, "all passion spent", a lack of affect which cannot be bothered even to expunge slangy hints ("dead boredom") from a language which otherwise seeks to operate in a different dimension. It may be that some of the tunnels of this superannuated mine are still open, but even they are in "grave" danger of closure: some clotted, swelling substance, which is not grief although it pretends to be a simulacrum of grief, is flowing slowly along the passageways and will in the end block off all avenue of escape. Like a cold lava flow, perhaps; or like the sterility of pointless blood; like candle wax, of course; like all the nameless fluids of the interior of the body, which is resigned to non-acceptance and which cannot therefore be relied upon to put in its share of the effort to achieve a clean or felt birth.

This is a malignant heritage; it is the malice of revenge upon the body, which will respond to being imagined as the cave of death by *becoming* a cave of death, which will react to being referred to as poisoned by *becoming* poisoned and by poisoning that which falls within its borders. The body will not "naturally" kill; but if it is to become a killer, then it will be of necessity a *tueur sans gages*, for such reasonings are not its province.<sup>12</sup> These are the ragged hangings of the insulted womb; but what is withheld in this labyrinth is the agency, the

hovering between introjection and paranoia: as so frequently we are here in the realm of the threshold, of the question of what happens to the woman-when-she-writes, of the masculinisation of the female writer such that this interiority becomes something to be spurned, a sign of inner weakness, an implantation of a demonised Hades at the source of life. These misinterpretations, these negative transformations of psyche as it takes up the pen and thereby becomes other than itself, it is these which weld to us like plums; not, of course, really like plums, but *like* those which to a superficial glance are *like* plums, like surely leaches, bloodsuckers, which grow fat on the poisoned blood, which mock wellbeing and good health and which cannot be prised apart from us; like therefore, of course, the bloodsucking health and vitality of the foetus considered in its negative incarnation in these caves of death.

Old cave of calcium  
Icicles, old echoer.  
Even the newts are white,

Those holy Joes.  
And the fish, the fish –  
Christ! they are panes of ice,

A vice of knives,  
A piranha  
Religion, drinking

Its first communion out of my live toes.

From the blue of the Davey lamp and of the candle's heart, through the red of the appropriated blood of the plums/leaches, and now into the white, the calcium/chalk, icicles, newts which have spent too long underground: there is nothing living here and yet this absence is itself friendly, or at least it is to be hailed in friendly terms – "old cave", "old echoer". If this is indeed alienation, then it also bears within itself the pallid seed of its own replacement; the harbinger of an intimate acquaintance with whatever it is the organic body has become, with the fossilised form which has arrived to replace and succeed the physical. The narrator here is one of the undeceived: not taken in by these vestments of purity, she can see the hypocrisy of nothingness yet she can also admire the hypocrites, admire the putting on of the semblance of death as a gesture which outweighs in its commitment the more febrile earthside emotions of the upper world.

The white coverings of the newts are the white robes of friars, the whited sepulchre, the whiteness of a sexless avocation; their very pretence bears a deeper truth than, presumably, the other pretences which have produced this effect, the passions which have relentlessly produced this coming birth. So this world of the cold, the white and the sharp is violent and threatening, but it is

also welcome: in its purity it revalidates the repulsiveness of the body, reaffirms the crucial disavowal, provides a vivid imagistic counterblast to a discredited discourse of the organic. The words here overflow in a kind of panic ecstasy: “Christ!” the expletive and Christ as symbol for torture of the body; “panes” and “pains”, the coupled imagery of smashed glass and the blood flowing; “vice” and “vice”, held fast by the double dilemma of sin and sinlessness—we need to ask which here is indeed the “vice”, the succumbing to sexual domination which is here assumed as the blameworthy origin of this inner death, or the religion of purity which forces us continually against the body, which has produced this evacuation of inner space, the endless deferral of this projected “meeting” which will, perhaps, never now take place?

As the words overflow, so the syntax also breaks and bubbles—like wax. Singulars and plurals mix and confound; qualifiers shift and sway (“A piranha / Religion”); agents and those acted upon change their roles in a parody of the polymorphous. Perhaps these are the dislocations attendant upon drowning, the fate of swimming about in the insides of oneself and finding the interior waters cold beyond recall. Perhaps they are also, however, the graph of the sapped body, a revelation of imminent replacement, a myth about the birth of the Other inside the self which does not shirk the moment of emptying, the moment when the self becomes only a functional cover, a cover-story, for whatever is new and which will, by its own life, retrospectively invalidate the monologues which one has told—which one is indeed, even now, struggling to continue to tell—oneself in order to maintain balance in this flooding world of old caverns and tunnels; which is surely by now also recognisable as the cold, pathic realm of dream in which change does not really occur, only a series of incarnations which figure as revelations of that which can never be truly surprising.

The candle  
Gulps and recovers its small altitude,

Its yellows hearten.  
O love, how did you get here?  
O embryo

Remembering, even in sleep,  
Your crossed position.

Where change does not really occur, perhaps, yet a realm also where further depths will not be consonant one with another, and there is always the possibility of crossover from one personality to another, from one severed element of psyche to a different one, as happens here at the midpoint of the poem. Let us traverse this midpoint, inspect whatever lies beneath this threshold, by means initially of a recapitulation.

We can see the poem as negotiating a problem of scale, questions about proximity and distance, an opening of the solid shape of the body (a re-forming

of the body's own openings) so that light can be seen between the "shutters", the formation of a latticework which sets one perspective off against another so that a "third" can appear through the shapings. The intimacy of connection figured by the umbilical cord (although if this has appeared within the imagery, it has been only as a thing of bits and pieces, to be strung, artificially, together from rags, shawls, plums which might be leeches) is drawn out to an impossible length by the fictions of unknowing and non-recognition. This is a struggle to the end, a sickness unto death; and then we change the perspective, we turn the chart, as it were, on its side; we feel the alternative intimacy of the old cave and the old echoer and we are looking at a picture reversed, where light is shadow and shadow springs into focus as the intimate, the proximate, the close, so that the bonding of living bodies recedes to a distance to be transited only by the artificial means of long-distance communications, symbolic communions. What is close now, what is pressing and friendly, what takes us by the arm as we too slap it on the back and hail it in the accents of an old sharing, is death; not the substance which tries to fill the space but the *space itself*, the vast and cheery camaraderie of emptiness.<sup>13</sup>

And, of course, the ramifications are much greater than this. For if this massive shift in perspective (and it is here emblematised in the "crossed position", the cross over the threshold which has a curious warding function which we shall need to go on to elaborate further) confronts us with the emotional solidity of emptiness and relegates this physical fullness of pregnancy to the immaterial distances, as the chart, the lattice, the slats of the shutter swing through ninety degrees, then we are left also with questions about the *new form of the "non-existent material"* which will come to "fill" the emptinesses which we now celebrate. Whose voice do we hear as we shout through the echoing halls, what replaces the forgotten baby now redistributed in fleshly abandon at the ends of the earth?

One voice, one voice only: our voice, our one and very own, dependent on our readerly gender *but* automatically and always "discounted" through the recurrence of Echo. What is an "echoer"? Is it a device which mechanically makes echoes; or a being who/which echoes our words; or a stimulus, an activator of echo? There is no set route through this triangular structure which, you will see, sets also in motion the further triangulation of machine, follower and leader; let us cast these second and third positions in terms of the mother and the foetus, and then, in first position, as the device which makes echo, we shall find that we return to the problematic masculine we come across in any triangulation—and triangulation, of course, is also etymologically the process we use when we are trying to find out where we stand, whether our feet are on the ground; or alternatively under, we might say, the apparently stable earth.

And so this voice which is the only possible source of stability, reliability, emerges also by this point in the poem as radically undermined, the monologic myth is overturned and we are in the labyrinth, in the "gallery" among the contradictory and self-serving images of the Other.<sup>14</sup> The "opening" between



mother and foetus, the gaps in the ragged curtain or shawl, these are also the gradual forcing apart of that-which-had-been-at-one, the reopening of the birth experience of separation, which in the context of this *pre-birth* poem therefore doubles back on itself, birth as a memory of the birth which is to come, all births superimposed one upon another so that one cannot tell what is memory and what prefiguration, whether every birth is not a rebirth. Who in these caves could deny that to emerge from them—at all—is to be *reincarnated*, and thus that reincarnation, the well-publicised and well-advertised secret of Lady Lazarus, is a show-woman's trick, but crucially a trick whose final trickiness consists in the fact that it conceals from our startled gaze an eminently non-tricky truth, a truth which is *exactly identical with the trick itself ...*

And so, to return to the poem at the point of its own reincarnation, its own "recall", not entirely unreminiscent of the rebirth of Heathcliff which bears a similar relation to a descent to Hades, but differently "crossed", as we might expect:<sup>15</sup> we return with a "gulp", a gulp of air with which we try to recover all at once from the dislocations of the nightworld. We gulp also with fear, with surprise, with anxiety, we try with a gulp to get enough substance suddenly inside us to cope with the exigencies of the outer, the gulp is a symbol for reincorporation with all its attendant difficulties and the impossibility of reincorporation's final project, the engulfment of the world, the gulp which reveals only a gulf, the gulp which feeds on and in the gulf, the eminently solid substance of emptiness, and the yawning, the desire ...

Yet the problem of scale is upon us and will not go away. Are we dealing here with the earth-shattering, the breaking apart of volcanic tunnels under the pressure of this chilly lava which is also the throbbing blood, or just with another birth, another baby, another mine on the brink of closure, another closure which will put an end to all that is ... "mine"? In other words, are we dealing here in the pomposities of "altitude" or in the ironisation produced by "small", by what "measure", by what nicks in the candlestick shall we remember or reinvent a sense of (human) proportion when the human itself threatens to overwhelm the small candle of reason by which we have elected to measure its indefinitenesses? Well, by and only by the heart, comes one answer: by the heartening which stands over against the excavations of the centre, the mining which is also an "un-mine-ing"; through this "heartening" we may be able to put back something of what we have mined, reinvent some kind of "infeel" to compensate for the never-ending trope of "output" (for yes, although this is always discounted this *is* also, inevitably, a poem about that most unlikely of topics for Plath: mining. Quite aside from all the puns. Of course it is).

And to the presence of that continuing slight movement of the heart, guttering and potentially poisoned as it might be, there is no clear question to put, and therefore the address to love in the next line slips away necessarily from separation of persons—falling again into a triangular structure, an address to the god, an address to the foetus, an address to some darkened other, perhaps even masculine, whose presence here can be recognised only as part of

the globalisation, the rejection of separatenesses, represented in the heartening; although to allow its presence within this halo, this gentle flame, is not at all the same as to allow its naming: some things are still forbidden, some wounds must be permitted more time to heal, and that itself is a cover-story for the necessity of keeping the wound open, because otherwise ... well, apart from many other things, Hephaestus, the wounded god, would cease to “inspire” us, we would find we have no breath, it would be terminally useless to gulp ...

Anyway. In the next line this undecidable can be left lying around no longer and is fined down to the embryo, but only in order that a parallel set of undecidabilities can be placed within the embryo’s purview, a catalogue of difficulties which there is no space to plumb here; but at least we need to make mention again of the “crossed position”, the implication of the foetus through Christian imagery in the world of the “holy Joes” so that in this newly emerging world where love has a place an expansion occurs which paradoxically but inevitably leads to the potential inclusion of that other side, of the shadow of the cross, of physical torture and the torture *of* the physical represented in the holy Joes, in the sharp-edged but spreading whiteness, in the removal of colour and vigour (according to Western imagery of the “white”) as love sows the seeds of its own demise or transformation. And so when we hear that “The blood blooms clean / In you, ruby”, we remember that every statement is itself crossed by an alternative statement which is not the less real because its incarnation is in the shadows; and therefore the possibility of polluted blood, of an unreflecting crystal, of an impure stone, is something also that is with us in this crossed, tangled, slatted world which is still gaping wide as we seek to bring its contours together into a single withheld and deferred image, deferred as the birth itself, deferred as the potential realignment, recapitulation of humanness might be under these circumstances where birth and death are struggling over their spoils, fighting for a bloody trophy.

And so, perhaps, even more determinately with the next sentence, “The pain / You wake to is not yours”: the negative indicates with precision what is hidden here at the first level, which is that this pain is *nevertheless* not to be escaped. Yet at the next level down, the “yours” comes into a different and more complex tension with the evacuated “mine”, for when we are dealing in these realms of disavowed jealousy, which is the mood pervading this part of the poem, then we discover to our consternation—or we choose not thus to discover, or on occasion it is discovered *in us*—that it is more than possible to be jealous of another’s suffering, pain, and that the need to preserve our individuality might render it even necessary to deny that dark grace of the Other whereby a character, an undeniable co-inhabitant of the world, can be conjured into ineradicable existence exactly by her/his pain; and what, then, if we feel the beginnings of this pain that will guarantee the existence of the Other and thus produce pressure on our own living space, our own room to be, what if we feel this pain beginning *inside ourself* and yet simultaneously *inside the Other*, who is also inside ourself ... whose pain is this anyway (and I mean the birth process

here as an image for the housing of the multiplicities of psyche; or of anima)? By what homeopathic process might we now banish the inquietude, the simmering “memory” of this “cross” between the generations which does not, quite, seem to be assuaged by the friendliness of our commerce with old death, the menacing (to others) big brother by whose assistance—or simply by the force of whose silent threat—we had hoped we could bring the rest of the world to heel as easily as, many years ago, we seem to recall that we could in the school playground?

However: if you can’t beat them, join them: and so, “Love, love, / I have hung our cave with roses, / With soft rugs— / The last of Victoriana”, and here in this haven of domesticity we will find our refuge, our shelter, our recourse from the debt, from *Schuld*,<sup>16</sup> and we will hug each other close, will we not, and not even suffocate, although we shall know—or at least the “I” shall know—that in doing this we are living out a myth, the underside of which we have always already known and which may yet still rise again to “engulf” us. For this is after all the *last* of Victoriana; and if it is at one level Victoriana’s trade, its great and signifying skill (“last”) then it is also a refuge at the end of the world; whither I have come, such is my love, or so *you* must believe, to re-gather you from my previous scattering of your identity, to bring you back together, baby, and back to me, as a comfort closer than death; or *as* the problematic incarnation of death, as figure for the (“Victorian”) repression which looms larger in its fascination than the very thing it purports to quell, and thus brings into the very home, brings into a soft chair by the very hearth, precisely the array of feelings and fears it wished to leave shivering on the porch outside.

But this, again, is undecidable. All will be saved, all shall be well, and this consummation, even with the ironically implicit secondary knowledge of all the primary knowledge which is hidden away behind these soft rugs which have been woven with care from the remains of certain raggy shawls whose existence we prefer now to forget—this consummation will be such that we shall neither see nor hear the stars plummeting, although we may at some other level appreciate and sigh over the parallels between this evidence of their precariousness and the precariousness of our own psychic plight, still and always on the threshold of the world, never quite moving into it, covering the walls of the caves with the soft and the already inscribed.

Let the mercuric  
Atoms that cripple drip  
Into the terrible well.

We can best read these lines in terms of an oscillation between the decidable and the undecidable, evidenced in features of form; and we can begin from the first of them, “Let the mercuric”, and allow this *line* itself to expand and yield meaning. A set of tricks informed and circumscribed by a double doubt: the first doubt summarised in the ambiguities of the term “let”, allow or prevent, the

second always present when we are speaking of the mercuric, the mercurial, the hermetic, that which flows and yet stays the same, that which proffers beauty and also offers poison, that which promotes communication and always keeps secrets—we are here in the realm of Hermes, which is inevitable, for this is the world of the trickster, although probably what the narrator is up to here is a self-trickery which is redoubled as we, the readers, try to make up our mind about our status as co-conspirator or as butt of these tricks. Are we to prevent all from sliding away into the realm of Hermes, where nothing will ever be the same again; or are we to allow this to occur, to connive at this slippage, on the grounds that even this is better than a cold confrontation with the coming night?

And is one of the principal illusions to which we are here being subjected by a “master” conjuror the illusion that we have any choice in this matter anyway? There are no real bodies and no real psyches, only atoms: this has been the burden and heresy of atomism down the ages. The very thought of atoms is crippling; alternatively, in order to cripple (others or ourselves) we may need to think of atoms, to think of the body or of the Other *as* “mere atoms”; and then we shall find that many of these knots of pain go away, are decently covered over and we can no longer hear the drip into the well, the “well of death” into which the misplaced canal may lead us but from which we can perhaps be saved by the operations of the heart and by the full investiture of another with human dignity, even if this involves making over all body to the Other and abandoning liquidity for the “one / Solid”; and there is of course a financial metaphor here again which follows from the cave as a “conversion” into a kind of “tax shelter”, so that if we leave ourselves with no personal reserves, if we have always already avoided paying death duties by passing on our wealth, such as it is, to our child, then we cannot be in debt and we have in any case no “liquid” capital left with which to repay if we are summoned. After that, there may be continuing life, but it is elsewhere; for us, there is only bankruptcy; and/or suicide.

You are the one  
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.  
You are the baby in the barn.

Much could be said, and much has been said, about this ending, with its intensification of Christian imagery and the confusing blankness/bleakness which cohabits in the final line with a rhetorical certainty. I want to use it only to return, as I promised above, to the question of the threshold and what lies buried beneath it. It is in passing interesting to note that the Oxford English Dictionary, as well as sharing (or originating?) the customary uncertainty about the derivation of the second component of the word “threshold” and thus of the word itself, also deems the number of times on which it has been used mistakenly to mean not threshold but lintel, not that *over* which we putatively pass but that *under* which—sufficient to warrant a separate entry; and so we are here also perhaps in the presence of the lintel, the great beam over the barn-

door on which the spaces lean, the taker of weight which is also that which comes down on our head if the door-gods have not been placated and ruins family, home, dynasty.

What lies beneath the threshold, what signifies the real-because-hidden entrance to the barn, what underpins, underlies, underscores our attempts at linear progression from outer to inner? Many things. A hank of hair, fetishised or totemised, signifying a bar on the approach route, a family not to be admitted. A relic of the grandfather, which sanctifies the approach, which ensures the transformation of all who pass over it but also ensures that they are never the same again. A double activity of "letting", a prevention and a permission, thus a separation, like the signs daubed on the lintels of the Jews, a salvation predicated against the dark background of slaughter. But outward signs can so easily be confused, repainted, substituted; to dig up the threshold is altogether a more difficult and serious matter and might even result in an accident involving a fallen lintel ...

So what get buried under the threshold are past passions, and here we are between the realms of psychopathology and homeopathy; which is a disturbing and uncomfortable place to be, for it is not clear whether these burials have to do with the continuation of memory (stasis, no change, the cold pathic) or with the will to forget (curing, healing, inoculation); and we sense that this will never become clear. Under the stone lie the lusts, greeds, angers towards which we have to rearrange our feelings each time we pass them; and how can we avoid passing and repassing them when they lie beneath our front door, when they bar our approach road, when they mark our passage as securely as any other *rite de passage* does on our journey through life, guard us as securely and ambiguously as Cerberus or any other cemetery guard—and perhaps we can now see a little more clearly who this cemetery guard really is. No, he is not Cerberus, he lacks the mythic backdrop, and the graveyard he guards really leads almost nowhere, out here in the chill and the rain; neither is it a *she*, the nanny or the governess, although their occupancy of the midway position (Nelly Dean, or the "guardian" of Miles and Flora) frequently gives them too much, and the wrong kind of, acquaintance with the family burial plot for their own good. Instead he is the zombie, pure body without soul, the derepression of all the repressed within his care, and he is thus quite alien, quite foreign, beyond mania and melancholy alike, the soul of *differance* or the *differance* of soul, quite mad and dangerous out there in the open night; as are our own late-night and sleeping memories when those ancient passions seep up from under the threshold and remind us how shaky are the patterns with which we surround our lives, how thin the borderline between the Vedic and Tantric gods, how important it seems to have been to so many peoples that there be door-gods *but also* that those door-gods be not strong, that they permit some movement, some interplay, some transgression between within and without, some transgression in the end based on gender—but how much is enough? How often will (the boy) Nick jump over the candlestick and when will he be burned? How

many times can we perform the trick, take on the unequal contest with our own passions and survive? Where will the (female/sacrificial) suicide be buried except under the threshold, at the undecidable point at which all human life is opened and closed and displays the ineradicable possibility of its own opposite?

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### Notes

1. See, of course, A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London, 1971); but also, for background to these reflections on the crypt, Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok, *The Wolf-Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, trans. N. Rand (Minneapolis, 1986).
2. See Jacques Derrida, Foreword to Abraham and Torok, pp. xxxv ff.; and Louis Althusser, *L'avenir dure longtemps, suivi de Les faits*, ed. O. Corpet and Y.M. Boutang (Paris, 1992).
3. See Sylvia Plath, "Lady Lazarus", in *Ariel* (London, 1965), 17.
4. The references here are to T.S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages" (1941), in *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London, 1963), 205-13, and to J.G. Ballard, *The Atrocity Exhibition* (London, 1970).
5. See, e.g., Marie-Louise von Franz, *Shadow and Evil in Fairytales* (Zurich, 1974).
6. See *Ariel*, 40-41.
7. The reference is to Coleridge, "Frost at Midnight" (1798), in *Poetical Works*, ed. E.H. Coleridge (London, 1967), 240-42.
8. In the all too appropriate words of "Dark as a Dungeon", an American industrial folk-song.
9. See Ted Hughes, e.g., "A Childish Prank", in *Crow: From the Life and Songs of the Crow* (London, 1974), 19.
10. The reference here is to James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld* (New York, 1979), esp. 23-45.
11. See Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" (1917), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. J. Strachey et al. (24 vols. London, 1953-74), XIV, 243-58.
12. The reference is to Eugene Ionesco, *Tueur sans gages*, in, e.g., *Theatre complet*, ed. E. Jacquart (Paris, 1991), 467-535.
13. Or, perhaps we might say, the "huge and birdless silence" being towed by the "black- / Sailed unfamiliar" in Philip Larkin's "Next, Please" (1951); see Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. Anthony Thwaite (London, 1988), 52.
14. The reference is to Marvell's poem "The Gallery", in, e.g., *The Complete Poems*, ed. E.S. Donno (Harmondsworth, Middlesex., 1985), 40-41.
15. I am thinking of Heathcliff's curious disappearance and his return, changed in wealth and culture, in Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (1847).
16. See, e.g., Jacques Lacan, *The Language of the Self: The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis*, trans. A. Wilden (New York, 1968), 66-67.