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Crossing the Voice, Crisscrossing the Text: Writing at the Intersection of Prose and Poetry in Sylvia Plath's "Sunday at the Mintons' "

The flights of fancy of Sylvia Plath's spinster in "Sunday at the Mintons' " unearth far more than just another tale of female bondage and tentative rebellion under the cold climes of New England. Plath's prize-winning story bears the ambivalent signature of a writing in the making, offering between the lines the quickening of a voice, the equivocation of a yet-to-be-delineated *persona.*

Pitting the down-to-earth male, enamored with maps, charts and calculations, against the dreamy unpredictable female, Plath crisscrosses the space of her short story, drawing stereotypical fracture lines only to blur them into a highly unstable geometry. Spacializing the dialectics between *genre* and gender, the narration wavers between the straightforward horizontality of prose and the mischievous verticality of poetry. As the guardian of a vectorial horizontality, Henry, the man with an innate sense of direction, drives the text forward, guaranteeing the tether between words and things which keeps the narration "in line" and counterbalances Elizabeth's poetic vagaries — at least for a while. Caught between the skies' inebriating defiance of a humdrum horizontality and the weighty conventions of a tedious referentiality, the narration hesitates, poised on a "perilous wire" ("Aerialist," CP 331, 8), until Elizabeth's last sigh of submission, "'I'm coming" (319). Would the text rather be horizontal after all?

In this early unduly neglected work, the outlines of a voice tentatively, and painfully, emerge at the intersection of the vertical and the horizontal; through the story's cracks, which breach the law of the *genre,* there dawns a restless voice racked by doubt, crossed by its inner contra-

dictions. Spacializing the tensions at stake in Plath's writing, "Sunday at the Mintons'" turns the space of the short story into a testing ground, exploring the twilight zone of gender ambivalence and generic indeterminacy.

Storming the Line: Bursting at its Seams

> If Henry were only, sighed Elizabeth Minton as she straightened a map on the wall of her brother's study, not so fastidious. So supremely fastidious. She leaned dreamily aslant his mahogany desk for a moment, her withered, blue-veined fingers spread whitely against the dark, glossy wood. (308)

Enter Elizabeth Minton, a sallow-cheeked, lavender-dressed New England spinster, soon to be followed by Henry Minton himself, her self-confident, matter-of-fact brother, whose commitment to order and straightness is only matched by Elizabeth's dreamy negligence. As "the late morning sunlight" draws "pale squares along the floor" (308) of this bourgeois cottage by the sea, spatial, metaphorical and typographical lines crisscross the diegetic space — the "fastidious" straight lines associated with Henry and the "curved," "blurred" (308), slanting lines cherished by Elizabeth — in a text that spatially elaborates the problematics of writing gendered identities. Henry, the amateur geographer, with a destination in mind, stands out as the champion of the line: the guardian of linearity, he keeps his fanciful sister, who would rather follow the meandering course of her dreams, "in line." As a lover of the clear-cut contours meticulously drawn on his maps, he also ensures that his sister will remain within the frame of his gendered expectations. There is then Elizabeth, who only superficially abides by his laws, bending the contour lines to break point. "I am writing with a blunt blue pencil tied on a mile-long stick, at something far off over the horizon line. Will I break through some day?" (*Journals,* March 1957, 155): like Sylvia Plath her-

self, Elizabeth Minton is in love with the remote. Looking *"through* the window" (308) of Henry's study when we first meet her, or later "star[ing] *out* of the kitchen window to the blinking flashes of blue water *beyond*" (311),[1] she strives towards the horizon, burning with the extravagant desire to get beyond the line and float on the "flat sheen of green September ocean that *curved far beyond the blurred horizon line"* (308). Confined, she pushes against the "black contours" (312) imposed by the masculine discourse and a complicit narrative voice.

Framed by a brotherly voice that scripts her comings and goings like a puppeteer — "Have you finished tidying the study?" (308); "Come here ... I have found a most interesting map of the New England states I want you to see" (312); "Come, it will be a fine afternoon for a walk" (315) — Elizabeth enters the stage as a character pulled by a language which is not her own. "Obedient and yielding" (308) to her older brother, she is *written* into — unless, through internal focalization, she paradoxically *"writes" herself into* — a new version of the figure of the spinster with a touch of the Gothic nun about her. Within a few lines, the bourgeois home of the Mintons is turned into a Gothic mansion crisscrossed with "cavernous hallways" (308), where "slow, ponderous footsteps" echo as ominously as Henry's "booming" voice. The stage is set for a Poesque tale of murder with Elizabeth-Madeline ushering the reader into an odd chiaroscuro, reminiscent of the gloomy adventures of pale heroines.

As a woman, Elizabeth Minton is, of course, deprived of the right to voice her desires or articulate her supposedly embryonic self. But if the silence is imposed through diegesis, her resistance is formulated in the free indirect speech which breaks through the contours of stereotype, the glass ceiling of the words of the other: "What inner murder or prison break must I commit if I want to speak from my true deep voice in writing and not feel this jam-up of feeling behind a glass-damm fancy-façade of numb dumb wordage?" *(Journals,* February 1959,297). These scribbles from Plath's journals might well be those words which Elizabeth Minton is unable to pronounce in spite of her desire to utter "something" that

would shatter the walls of her confinement.

> There would come a time, Elizabeth thought, as she had thought so many times before, when she would confront Henry and say something to him. She did not know quite what, but it would be something rather shattering and dreadful. Something, she was sure of it, extremely disrespectful and frivolous. And then she would see Henry for once nonplused, Henry faltering, wavering helplessly, without words. (311-12)

She, who, for the time being, is the one "without words," "untongued" (like the virgin in the tree of a later poem (CP 82, line 43)), fantasizes about the moment when her voice will come, when, refusing to bend meekly to the injunctions of the master (discourse), this voice will break through its confinement within an indirect speech free in name only. In order to find a place of her own, she, the always-already read figure, will have to resist reading, as well as being read, according to the laws, and along the lines, of male fictions.

> "You know, I never thought," she said, "of what direction I was going in on the map... up, down or across."
> Henry looked at his sister with something like dismay. (312)

Challenging the codes of good reading practices, Elizabeth Minton steps out of her role. What is at stake in her refusal to abide by the patriarchal reading code is more than a childish whim; dispensing with the cardinal points, she rejects the patriarchal fictions of a space under control, a thoroughly readable, transparent geography turned male dominion. Speaking in favor of a disoriented experience of space, she advocates a freedom of the eye that knows where it's going, but does not follow directions. "Really, I don't think directions matter so much. It's the place you're going to that's important" (313). Elizabeth favors a wandering, extravagant, instinctive apprehension of space. Whatever captions, keys, sym-

bols there might be on the map, Elizabeth is not so much interested in the normative signals as in the imaginary realms they may open for her; the keys on the map are keys to her dreams in which, regardless of any scale, she "imagine[s] herself wandering, small and diminutive, up the finely drawn contour lines and down again, wading through the shallow blue ovals of lakes and shouldering her way among stiff symmetrical clumps of swamp grass" (312). Between the lines of the male normative discourse (Henry "moralize[s]" (310); he lecture[s]" (310) and "direct[s]" (312)), she escapes into a "world of her own" (310) where the fossilized one-to-one relation between a signifier and its referent gives way to the language of dreams, where maps become "quartered apple-pies under the blue dome of a bowl" (313).

Words — the words on the map, or Henry's words — indeed quarter the "thing"; under his dissecting gaze, space is "symbolized" and turned into geography, no longer a living enigma but a dead fiction caught in the constraints of a signifying network. In Elizabeth's world however, words are free to wander away from their conventional assignments. Resisting the master discourse and the compact it implies, Elizabeth's reading is therefore a reading of her own, a reading against the plot that is also an oblique way of writing (herself) over the male text and out of the male script.

> In the blowing air Elizabeth's gray hair would loosen and flutter about her face in a wispy halo, damp and moist. But in spite of the healthful breeze she knew that Henry disliked to see her hair untidy and was glad to have her smooth it back in the accustomed bun and secure it with a long metal hairpin. (315)

In spite of Henry's desire to encircle his sister within the safe outlines of the spinster, something is coming undone that may require far more than a "long metal hairpin" to fasten up again. As the storm is brewing, contours are blurring and the narration itself mirrors the increasing tension between a rigid outline and a mounting unruliness.

> Down against the stone foundations the waves were breaking powerfully, the great green crests hanging suspended in a curve of cold glass, veined bluish, and then, after a moment of immobility, toppling in a white surge of foam, the layers of water flaring up the beach in thin sheets of mirrored crystal. (315)

Framed by the realm of the mineral, the immutable ("stone foundations," "sheets of mirrored crystal"), the sentence swells, bursting at its seams ("breaking powerfully"; "toppling in a white surge"; "flaring up the beach"), yet checks, strangely poised in a surreal "moment of immobility" — "hanging suspended" — between the organic (the waves are "veined bluish" like Elizabeth's hands) and the motionless rigidity of "cold glass." Reflecting Elizabeth's hesitation between her attachment to what-is, i.e. her dependence upon Henry's down-to-earth matter-of-factness, and her desire to let go, conveyed by the text's central image of the balloon, the narration wavers between the denotative and the connotative. The descriptive sentence — "In the distance she could see a small pile of dark clouds that might be a storm rising slowly on the far horizon" (315) — is immediately transposed into a poetic gesture that twists the linearity of prose with voluptuous connotations: "Like tiny grape clusters the purple clouds were, with the gulls wheeling in cream white flakes against them" (315). Writing may well remain cautious, flaunting the markers of self-questioning ("Breathing in the drafts of fresh air made her feel peculiarly light, *almost* inflated, ***as if*** at a slight puff of wind she would go lifting, tilting out over the water" (315)), but the metaphoric meanderings become increasingly difficult to resist: "Far, far out on the horizon the grape clusters were swelling, dilating..." (315). The demarcation lines are blurred; the contours, like the September sunlight, seem "diluted" as sound patterns almost gratuitously follow one another — "deflated" (314), "inflated" (315), "dilating," "diluted," "elated" (316) — and an unbearable lightness of writing suddenly sweeps away the narration:

> *The wind was wrong.* Blowing in impulsive, freakish gusts, the wind teased Elizabeth. It flickered at the edge of her petticoat. Playfully it blew a strand of

> hair in her eye. She felt strangely mischievous and elated, secretly pleased that the wind was wrong. (316)

However hard the text tries to maintain a solid frame, it swells from within, pushing off the limits, threatening to break through. Almost at a standstill and yet forever restless, the narrative voice turns in circles twisting its own line in the hopes of containing, of circumscribing once more. But words, like Elizabeth's skirt, "billowing and flapping about her legs" in spite even of her own efforts to "hold it down" (316), have the wind in their sails and the matter-of-fact prosaism of Henry is about to lose its dominion, as he "lean[s] over the railing at the end of the pier." The conservative suit is rippling, the crown (of hair) is dangerously vibrating (316): the story draws to a close and the narration stages a burlesque *fin-de-règne* that suggests far more than the mere ousting of a pathetic figure.

What is at stake in this precarious moment of suspension is no less than the defeat of a *genre* and its potential relief through another mode of writing. For, as Elizabeth prepares to burst out of the contours that have outlined her, she also threatens to exit the plot, the horizontality and linearity of a narration that can neither circumscribe nor hold her.

Through the Cracks of the Line, a Voice Out-of-Place

So, is there a place in this text for Elizabeth? Can the story-line accommodate her voice? Elizabeth Minton does not speak much in "Sunday at the Mintons'"; and when she does, her few conventional utterances, most of them mere echoes of her brother's voice, fit perfectly into the narrative sequence. But far from being confined within the narrow limits of her domestic persona, Elizabeth is possessed of a "private world of her own" (310), which the narration harbors between the lines, within the parentheses devoted to inner focalization, in between the interruptions of

phallological speech. Only there, "between the acts" as Virginia Woolf would say, can the other Elizabeth, outlawed by the Brother narrative, find a place. Her place is a no-place, a tear in the story line where the text opens out onto the unchartered regions of the feminine:

> There was a sudden tug at Elizabeth's arm. "Come along home, Elizabeth," Henry said. "It's getting late."
> Elizabeth gave a sigh of submission. "I'm coming," she said. (319)

This is not Henry's (and through him, the narration's) first tug at the fanciful spinster's sleeve. More than once, Elizabeth is called to order to walk the linearity of the story. Were it not regularly spurred on by Henry's intimations, the story would make no headway, tempted as it is by Elizabeth's poetic intermittences and repetitive humming which fold the text onto itself. "Sunday at the Mintons'" indeed alternates between *prorsus* and *versus*, the pushing forward of prose towards the horizon of completion and the ceaseless ruminations of what could be referred to as a voice over. Elizabeth's mis(s)placed silent voice disturbs the narrative line and throws doubts on the codified form of the short story, which is questioned from within and forced to accommodate the tentative emergence of an alternative mode of writing.

> Elizabeth lingered over washing the lunch dishes *while* Henry went to pore over some of the maps in his study. There was nothing he liked better than making charts and calculations, Elizabeth thought, her hands fumbling in the warm soap suds as she stared out of the kitchen window to the blinking flashes of blue water beyond. (311)

Here as in the rest of the story, the opposition is clearly established: the one who buys time to postpone the moment when she will (have to) join Henry for their Sunday walk, and the one who has not a minute to waste. If Henry literally makes sense from space, Elizabeth immerses in sensa-

tion; while he is charting routes on the surface of his maps, she drifts away from her kitchen "to the blinking flashes of blue water beyond" and plunges into the realms of memory. "Always when they were small Henry would be making charts and maps, copying from his geography book, reducing things to scale *while* she would dream over the pictures of the mountains and rivers with the queer foreign names" (311). As Elizabeth is carried away from the linearity of Henry's plotting, space opens up, becomes multidimensional; she breaks up the line, creates an opening, a no man's land where words are not simply captions but keys to her wildest dreams. Escaping "Henry's censure" (310), Elizabeth dishevels the story's line, adds a touch of randomness, "musing on anything that chanced into her thoughts" (310).

As a tribute to Virginia Woolf's "room of one's own," the text makes room within its linear progression for secret chambers, pauses in the diegesis devoted to remembrances and reflexivity. "She remembered now about how the horizon blurred pleasantly into the blue sky *so that, for all she knew, the water might be* thinning into air or the air thickening, settling, becoming water" (310). The reader too remembers, as the text obsessively takes up the motifs introduced before ("so that, for all she knew, the water might be washing in the leaves, or the leaves falling hushed, drifting down into the sea" (308)). *Versus:* to return. Frustrating the linearity of the plot, subverting the *telos,* the text circles back and ceaselessly returns before haltingly resuming its progression. But meanwhile, in between, a world has been created, a poetic vista that stretches time and disrupts the story's order:

> An hour, once lodged in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the time piece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation. *(Orlando,* chapter 2)

Investigating the elasticity of time, "Sunday at the Mintons'" pits "fastidious" Henry, the implacable guardian of clock-time, against day-dreaming Elizabeth, the mischievous procrastinator fleeing from "the caustic ticking of the clock" ("Cinderella," CP 304, line 14). "Henry ... was taking his massive gold watch from his waistcoat pocket. The tide, he said, should be high in fifteen minutes now. At seven minutes past four exactly" (316). Henry not only knows how to use a compass, he is also the master of time, "time on the clock." "It was thus that her mother had moved years ago... when was it? How long? Elizabeth had lost track of the time. But Henry could tell her. Henry would remember the exact day, the very hour of Mother's death. Scrupulously exact was Henry about such things" (309). Filling up the blank spaces of his sister's oblivious mind, Henry guarantees the continuity between past and present and re-writes the official genealogy over the dotted line of Elizabeth's memory. In Henry's continuous time, there are no blanks and no discrepancies, for time is not plural. Playfully picturing what would be in his mind if she could peer into it, Elizabeth imagines it full of "square substantial buildings with clocks on them, everywhere perfectly in time, perfectly synchronized. The air would be thick with their accurate ticking" (315). A paragon of punctuality, Henry makes sure "that the world revolve[s] on schedule" (313) and that the stream of time runs at a constant speed. So how could he ever grasp the fluctuations of emotional time, or the breaches generated by his sister's musings?

For Elizabeth, in order to build a "room of her own," has no choice but to space out the narrative timeline, to expand the text from within. Mis(s)placed in the linear temporality of clock time, she must force herself out of the prison of "homogeneous, empty time" (Benjamin 263) and teleological narration. For Elizabeth, like the poetic voice of Plath's "Sonnet: to time" (CP 311), "Time is a great machine of iron bars/That drains eternally the milk of stars" (13-14) and to drink the milk of stars, to let the moon of her "twilight world" "float ... up over the trees at night like a tremendous balloon of silver light" (314), Elizabeth has to open time's

iron bars, to find a gap. As she foolishly tries to stand up to Henry, she suddenly has an inkling of what it means to find a place for herself: "The very room seemed to take offence at this open insolence ... *The grandfather clock was gaping at her,* speechless before the next reproving tick" (313).

For a moment, it is as if she had succeeded in halting male linear temporality. Opening out the patriarchal time of the clock, she creates room for an alternative space-time, which the text repeatedly activates whenever the diegetic timeline is interrupted and gives free rein to her repetitive, time-redeeming humming. "She thought now how it would be in her mind, a dark, warm room, with colored lights swinging and wavering, like so many lanterns reflecting on the water, and pictures coming and going on the misty walls" (314). "Now": in this moment of suspension, "swinging and wavering" like the lanterns of her cherished twilight world, Elizabeth lingers. Projecting onto the misty walls of her imagination her own fluctuating geometry, she halts Henry's timeline to keep and hold her "moments of being" (Woolf), to prolong them into the rapture of a timeless present. Time is undone within these narrative breaches, through the emergence of an active atemporality or an inactive temporality that cannot be measured by the piling up of events; the narration instead turns inward, delineating within itself a distinctive utopian space, an in-between or uncharted territory for the creation of a feminine self. "I dwell in Possibility — / A Fairer House than Prose —" (Dickinson, Poem 657): in a way, the voice that can be overheard in the intermittences of the diegesis also tries to exit the House of Prose. Crazing the realm of the Symbolic mastered by the male voice, Elizabeth's fantastical parentheses slow the narrative pulse by joyfully yielding to the appeal of verticality:

> Elizabeth felt a mounting exhilaration as they walked out on the boards of the pier, which creaked and complained beneath them. Between the cracks she could see the deep green water winking up at her. The seething waves seemed

> to be whispering something mysterious to her, something that was unintelligible, lost in the loudness of the wind. Giddily she felt the moss-covered piles of the pier sway and squeak beneath them in the strong pull of the tide. (316)

Itself on the verge of unintelligibility, the text, through the ceaseless circulation of sound patterns, becomes a giddy transcription of the pull of the tide, as if the boisterous waltz of the signifiers sent the signified flying into the wind or to drown amongst the waves. Between Henry's cues, the narration, here focused on Elizabeth, is turned into a space to be crisscrossed—rather than traversed — , a web of sounds that defers prose's drive to get there quickly, in favor of a festooning space for poetic dwelling.

And yet, how restless the moment! As the foundations of the pier threaten to give way and a "mounting exhilaration" takes hold of writing itself, the horizontal is jeopardized. Not only is the imperative of the narration delayed, but the words threaten to cut their tether to their strict adequation to things:

> Elizabeth realized that the wave must have been coming for quite some time, but she had not noticed that it was so much taller than the rest. *There it was,* though, a great bulk of green water moving slowly, majestically inward, rolling inexorably on, governed by some infallible natural law, toward Henry... (317)

At this moment of "realization," the text surreptitiously changes its nature and the nature of the compact with the reader. "There it was," without a warning, the narration changes track and, flaunting a dubious deictic, forces us into Elizabeth's "private world of her own": we have unknowingly lost our footing and it is here that we stumble upon the text's' most amazing feat, its actual "take off."

> "Henry," she whispered in an ecstasy of horror as she leaned forward to watch the wave engulf the rock, spilling an enormous flood of water over the very

> spot on which Henry stood, surging up around his ankles, circling in two whirlpools about his knees ...
>
> With a growing peace, Elizabeth watched the flailing arms rise, sink and rise again. Finally the dark form quieted, sinking slowly down through level after level of obscurity into the sea. The tide was turning. (317)

The hour has come, but Elizabeth is no Cinderella and the bell's toll does not mark the end of an illusion. On the contrary, the turning of the tide permits the shady pleasures of the vertical, Elizabeth's taking off into the blue realms of weightlessness. Exit Henry, who has sunk "full fathom five" into the ocean, submerged by a wave of words, and words only, written large on the whiteness of the page. If Henry topples, it is under the strength of an inexorable iambic rhythm ("to watch the wave engulf the rock") that has no counterpart in "reality": the *sine qua non* of Henry's eviction is that the Law of the Father has *already* been transgressed and the reader will understand only too late that the last few pages of the story take place within the opening of the symbolic order, at the point of freedom and enjoyment.

Questioning the traditional referential economy, the story harbors within itself a space out of its space, a space of outlawry, where the seam between words and things, between words and deeds, has been unsown. Within the breach of the symbolic order, referentiality is put in reserve, suspended and deferred. The text is out of joint, free to indulge in the pure pleasure of creation. "She envisioned a green aquatic Henry dropping through layers of clouded water like a porpoise. There would be seaweed in his hair and water in his pockets" (318). And why not? Released from the gravity of their enslavements to deeds, "words no longer oblige" (Zizek, 36) and as the frame ("she envisioned," "she thought," "she pictured") dissolves, we are willy-nilly thrown into the Other scene:

> And then she thought of his study with all the maps and the sea serpents drawn decoratively in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean; of Neptune sitting

> regally on a wave with his trident in his hand and the crown on his blown white hair. Even as she meditated, the features of Neptune's kingly visage blurred, puffed, rounded, *and there,* turned to look at her, was the startled face of a much altered Henry. (318)

Interrupting her meditation, no longer encompassed by it, amphibian Henry, naked, pathetic indeed, is "there" and the text, through yet another deictic sleight of hand, sends us *crisscrossing into* "the looking-glass," or, in Plath's vocabulary, "through the wall of green." "When I was learning to creep," recalls the narrative voice in "Ocean 1212-W,"

> my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and was *just through the wall of green* when she caught my heels.
>
> I often wonder what would have happened if I had managed *to pierce that looking-glass.* Would my infant gills have taken over, the salt in my blood? For a time I believed not in God nor Santa Claus, but in mermaids. They seemed as logical and possible to me as the brittle twig of a seahorse in the Zoo aquarium... (21-22)

The "voyage out" of the narrative voice in this later sketch has much in common with Elizabeth's joyful wallowing in her own twilight world, the glaucous half-light between the Word and the world that allows for another (non-referential) logic to emerge. Under cover of the eclipse of the Symbolic, Elizabeth can taste the forbidden delights of making up; she enters the realm of *poesis.* Breaking off from the engagement of the word, the text, now free of frame, indulges in transgression, in a delightful suspension of disbelief: "Poor Henry. Her heart went out to him in pity. For who would look after him down there among all those slippery, indolent sea-creatures? . . . She thought sympathetically of Henry and how he never could digest shellfish" (318). Elizabeth's final take-off is near; but the words have already loosened their grip on things; they float

into the realm of gratuitous pleasure, into the forbidden country beyond good and evil. How to kill one's brother and escape unpunished?
By postponing the moment when referentiality calls Elizabeth to order, when words and deeds meet again, "Sunday at the Mintons" stretches as much as possible these blue regions of impunity, where desire knows no obstacle and pleasure no bounds. Offering the reader the chance to witness a passionate poetic voice in the act of performing the "possible-impossible task of becoming its own ground" (Wurst 22), these unstable moments, however, are short-lived; the female voice can "take place" but in parentheses, which define it only to confine it and cross it out. "And that was the last anyone saw of Elizabeth Minton, who was enjoying herself thoroughly, blowing upward, now to this side, now to that, her lavender dress blending with the purple of the distant clouds" (319). Out goes the "feminine giggle," however triumphant and gay.

By refusing her always-already assigned place in the symbolic order and yet unable to trade it for another, Elizabeth has condemned herself to be forever out of place within the order of the story, bound to disappear as a criminal, however free. As she ends her career "beyond the blurred horizon line" (308), crossed out, written out of a text that will not harbor her rebellious figure, Elizabeth may well have to pay the price for her storming of the line and breach of the symbolic order.

Crossroads: Two (Pr)axes of Writing

If Elizabeth may "enjoy herself thoroughly" once Henry has been turned into a (textual) plaything, her poetic extravaganzas will necessarily fizzle out. The swelling and surging wave crashes again onto the smooth, uneventful surface of a matter-of-fact ending, as if the breath-taking violence of her imaginative flights had to fall back in line. "I'm coming,' she said" (319). Elizabeth's last utterance is hardly ironic: there is a sudden rupture in the circle of enjoyment as if the release

from the ponderous constraints of reality triggered an encounter with the horror of the Real, what cannot be — and is not — put into words: Henry's murder, the murder of the Symbolic.[2]

If Elizabeth cannot free herself from the constraints of gender delineation without dispensing with the Law-giver, if her poetic license depends on symbolic violence, the text similarly cannot let go of referentiality without endangering its very foundations and condemning itself to an unintelligible giggle, itself a prelude to silence. "Sunday at the Mintons" eventually silences the troublemaker, or at least reduces her voice to a mere echolalic response to the master of the (narrative) game. Complying with the sexual, linguistic and cultural code, Elizabeth accepts encirclement once again within the (br)other's *sentence* — "shut up in Prose" (Dickinson, poem 613). On the face of it, then, we are back to pedestrian prose, heading towards an ending, at last. But the line curves again...

The ending of "Sunday at the Mintons'," or rather the postscript, is indeed an ending after an ending, undoing the possibility of closure, opening, one more time, a space of undecidability between two mock resolutions, between two voices.

> I write only because
> There is a voice within me
> That will not be still. *(Letters Home* 34)

This early poem, written when Plath was only sixteen, might serve as an *envoi* to her prize-winning juvenile story. The voice indeed will not be still in "Sunday at the Mintons'," a text that displaces onto two spatial axes the disturbances of its voice, a story written as a contrapuntal encounter of two praxes of writing battling in vain for dominance.

Following on the late 19th-century emergence of "the speaking woman as an articulate, desiring subject" (Kahane IX) but pitting it against another voice, that of the "frantic propeller" of the plot, the third

person narration finds it hard to take sides, never at a loss to illuminate the shortcomings of a voice doomed to parentheses. "Sunday at the Mintons'" is a discourse in crisis, experimenting with optative voices, in search of an optative, but improbable, subject position. Who wins in this contest of voices is not an easy question; it may even be a non-issue as the text, always on the verge of self-parody and role-playing, flaunts contrastive stereotypes, speaks in voices but hardly finds its own.

Hovering between wordlessness and words that are not her own, the female voice appears a poor alternative to Henry's assertive male discourse. Groping for words of her own, Elizabeth repetitively crashes against the indefinite "something" and it may be just as well for, when at last the narration allows the reader to "lift up the top of her head and peer inside," the stuff of her dreams has the all-too-predictable quality of prefabricated fancies: "the pink of the ladies' flesh would be the pink of the roses, and the lavender of the dresses would mingle with the lilacs. And there would be, from somewhere sweetly coming, the sound of violins and bells" (314). The text, then, becomes an opera of voices, alternating between scores that are dismissed as soon as they are born. Dramatizing a crisis of authority in the voice, the narration performs in textual symptoms two gendered identities at the crossroads of two modes of writing. Simultaneously propelled and halted by an ambivalent desire and identification, "Sunday at the Mintons'," as a *textuation* of gender ambivalence, is a text with a split, a hysterical text in search of a form that could contain the confusions of its utterance. "If we define the subject of a narrative as the one whose desire drives the action, the split subject of [this story] projects a contradiction in desire that blocks the story's development in a mimesis of hysterical paralysis" (Kahane, 82).

A text divided, a fantasized conversation between two voices tentatively framed by the unstable geometry of a third-person narration, "Sunday at the Mintons'" is increasingly torn between tensions that it can neither control nor resolve. "Her high-pitched, triumphant feminine giggle mingled with the deep, gurgling chuckle of Henry..." (319). Stretched

along two axes, the narration thwarts its own progress and, threatened by rupture as well as paralysis, unintelligible babble and suicidal silence, the line/sentence that might have been the *finale* of the story is turned into the febrile, vibratile envelope of prevailing tensions. As the unresolved result of contrary forces, it becomes a quivering space, an emotional tracing of an impossible motion, the necessary, impassable frame and birthplace of an impulse bound to out-frame it.

"Frustrated? Yes. Why? Because it is impossible for me to be God— or the universal woman-and-man — or anything much..." *(Journals, 1950,* 23). To those tempted to read this "triumphant" pseudo-dénouement as a fantasized recovering of a lost unity, such combination of horizontality and verticality as the long-awaited healing of gendered division, Plath's half-serious, half-derisive comment on the trials of writing would seem to give the lie. The incestuous "marriage of opposites" that Virginia Woolf hoped and prayed for at the end of *A Room of One's Own* (97) is not yet consummated. If the text explores the possibilities of togetherness and hypothesizes a writing that would be cross-gender and *cross-genre,* the inarticulate gurgling of the story's "first ending" seems to suggest how quickly such a dream may turn into a nightmare. Elizabeth's giggle partakes of the grotesque as well as the sublime. As she takes her revenge and forces the linear and horizontal man of the map to go vertical at last, that is, to fall into a poetical protean universe where distinctions are blurred and labels no longer qualify, Elizabeth's triumph indeed has a dying fall. Killing the teleological, referential male voice, she also dooms her own to a suicidal silence. Disposing of her "brother-sea god-muse," she is yet unable to find an alternative spring-board for her voice, which will only later painfully emerge in "Full Fathom Five."[3] In "Sunday at the Mintons" the voice does not yet spill out as separate and equal. It does not hold but fades out of the text in an "ecstasy of horror" (317), in a triumph tainted with terror and abjection. Abjection: "a desire for separation, for becoming autonomous and also the feeling of an impossibility of doing so" (Kristeva, 135-6). Caught between her desire to emerge as a speaking, autonomous subject and the terror of

cutting the tether, Elizabeth wavers, blowing upwards yet dragging along in her flight the pathetic remnants of the (br)other, suffering, as does the text itself, on the "cross of contradiction" ("Metamorphosis of the Moon," CP 307-8, line 47).

> The horror is the sudden folding up and away of the phenomenal world, leaving nothing. Just rags . . . when the paraphernalia of existence whooshes away and there is just light and dark, night and day, without all the little physical quirks and wars and knobby knuckles that make the fabric of existence. . . ("Cambridge Notes" 266-67)

If Elizabeth suddenly touches ground again at the end of "Sunday at the Mintons'," she does not wince, but sighs and complies with the demands of the *genre*, the urgency of the referential, to her (and the narration's) greatest relief. Indeed, Elizabeth may well be tempted to escape from a ponderous referentiality, to free herself from the burden of the material world; she also clings to safety, attached to her comfortable rooting in the realm of things, resting her hand securely on the arm of her sturdy brother. It is as if the wave that had been swelling throughout the story *had to* crash back on the rocks of the referential, with the complicity of the one who had let herself be carried away. "Sunday at the Mintons" yearns after the hard edges of things, for fear that "all the edges and shapes and colors of the real world . . . can dwindle in a moment of doubt, and 'suddenly go out' the way the moon would in the Blake poem" ("Cambridge Notes" 260). Eluding the dangers of poetic dissolution, the text re-anchors, ready to take up again the prosaic paraphernalia, to abandon the extravagant call of the skies and get back into the plain furrow of story-telling.

"Well, I always was interested in prose," says Plath in a 1966 interview:

> I feel that in a novel, for example, you can get in toothbrushes and all the paraphernalia that one finds in daily life, and I find this more difficult in

> poetry. Poetry, I feel, is a tyrannical discipline, you've got to go so far, so fast, in such a small space that you've just got to turn away all the peripherals. And I miss them! *(The Poet Speaks)*

In Plath's early story, as in her 1955 poem "Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea" (CP 327), the realm of imagination, the appeal of the vertical are bound to give way to the safe and lawful dominion of horizontal story-telling, where words are tethered to things and "that is that, is that."

> Cold and final, the imagination
> Shuts down its fabled summerhouse;
> Blue views are boarded up; our sweet vacation
> Dwindles in the hour-glass. (4)
>
> Water will run by rule; the actual sun
> Will scrupulously rise and set;
> No little man lives in the exacting moon
> And that is that, is that, is that. (24)

The impoverished scene of the actual is not a spring-board but a stumbling block... unless the extra awkward syllable at the end of the last line, the uncomfortable surplus, the deceptive tone of finality, re-open the "summerhouse" of possibility. On the blank page of the beach, the tide is turning, and if the voice grows silent, here, as in "Sunday at the Mintons'," it is but for a moment of precarious suspension. The wave is already swelling, "back home," as an easy but deceptive way out of the cross of the story's contradictions.

However brilliant, Plath's early story may, at first, appear a juvenile attempt to juggle with the stereotypical figures of the rebellious spinster and her fastidious brother, a fantasy on the same old theme of gender conflict and silent female resistance to patriarchal confinement. But the text unveils the hidden face of its inner contradictions and its highly unstable

crisscross geometry. Spatializing the tensions between gender polarities, Plath's writing dishevels the conventional linearity of teleological story-telling, and borrowing Elizabeth's inner voice, breaks up the line, spaces out narrative time, making room for vertical extravaganzas within the breaches of the symbolic order.

If nothing really happens in "Sunday at the Mintons'," something does happen to the story as *genre.* Torn between two modes of writing that also imply two praxes of language — a linear, transitive, forward-pushing prose versus a more ruminating, self-exploratory, poetics tempted by verticality, "Sunday at the Mintons'," a narration torn between two axes and two praxes, challenges the laws of story-writing itself, dramatizes its limitations and threatens to burst at its seams. Questioning the tether between words and things, suspending referentiality when Elizabeth, balloon-like, escapes into the blue realm of poetic pleasure, the text yields to the appeal of the vertical, hovering on the verge of dissolution. Or so it seems. For, however ecstatic the parting, however tempting the "mica mystery of moonlight" ("Metamorphosis of the Moon," CP 308, 37), Elizabeth is never quite out of bounds, circumscribed, or self-inscribed once again, within the painstaking lines of a narration that borrows Henry's voice to walk her home and make her "bid farewell to seem" ("A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem," CP 324)

So Elizabeth comes home at the end of the day, crossed in her tentative breakaway. But for how long? Sylvia Plath's "Sunday at the Mintons" challenges any closure and mocks any conclusion. Elizabeth Minton's homecoming is yet another lure, another twist of the line that leaves the reader "racked between the fact of doubt, the faith of dream" ("Metamorphosis of the Moon," CP 308, 47-48). If there is a voice dawning at the intersection of the horizontal and the vertical, it is a crossed voice, a voice in the making, an aerialist of a voice that cannot (yet) let go of its tether and is bound to emerge within its own cracks, in the ceaseless plying between its own splittings, in open conversation with itself.

NOTES

1. My emphasis, unless noted.

2. It is as if the narration could no longer accommodate such stretching out of its line, as if the text could not allow the poetic/pleasure principle to take over unrestrained. Something has to interrupt the close circuit of her intransitive ramblings and tether words and deeds, or the whole narrative economy will be shattered. Henry's last words do come handy as the reef, the obstacle that will put an end to such poetic storming of the narrative line. But one may suggest that the poetic interlude had already been derailed by an internal self-impediment, the Lacanian Real, or "objet a" — in this case, the unspeakable murder of the Brother: Would it be too bold to suggest that Plath's story contains within itself an *objet a* that derails the poetic (pleasure) principle and has the text eventually fall back into narrative line?

3. "what I consider one of my best and most curiously moving poems, about my father-sea god-muse" (CP "Introduction" 13).

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