



## **Plath's Spanish poems and tropes: Turning landscape into mindscape**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Although critical attention has focused on *Ariel*, Sylvia Plath's earlier poems are also worth examining since they reveal significant details concerning the writer's evolution towards that final achievement. After getting married in June 1956, Plath and Hughes travelled to Spain and settled in Benidorm for their honeymoon. It is the poems derived from that period and Plath's response to the alien setting that are analyzed in this paper. The corpus of "Spanish poems" and its most salient motifs will be identified and examined to assess the emotional and artistic response of Plath's encounter with Spain in her work. A rhetorical analysis of these poems will be carried out but biographical data from Plath's journals, correspondence and prose will also be considered. Finally, two later poems will be examined to demonstrate that Spain left its imprint in Plath's mind, supplying suggestive imagery which turned the Spanish landscape into a violent mindscape.

**KEYWORDS:** Plath, Spain, culture shock, poetic development, imagery, landscape and mindscape.

### **1. INTRODUCTION: PLATH'S SPANISH POEMS**

Not much has been written about a small group of texts composed by Sylvia Plath in 1956 which make up what I will call Plath's "Spanish poems". The main reason is that, except for a few break-through pieces included in *The Colossus* (1960), these poems were either

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unavailable or considered of inferior quality. However, examining the 1956 poems resulting from the writer's engagement with Spain will afford greater insight into Plath's poetic development particularly when compared to later compositions in *Ariel*. This paper intends to shed some light on a number of poems few critics and reviewers have paid attention to.

I believe that Plath's Spanish poems deserve attention for several reasons. First of all, these compositions inspired by her visit to Spain illustrate the poet's efforts at shaping new subject-matter into suitable artistic form at an early stage, attesting Plath's stylistic accomplishment by the time of the *Ariel* poems. In addition, read in the light of her journal entries and letters, these pieces may reveal interesting details about the writer's expectations concerning her personal life and aspirations as a young writer. Yet, I am not proposing an overtly confessional approach to the reading of these poems, since that would imply that Plath lacked the ability to transcend strictly personal experience and relate it to the world around her, a statement widely contested in the last three decades. The varied bulk of criticism on Plath's work after the publication of *Collected Poems* (1981) has provided evidence of Plath's awareness of political, historical and cultural issues which are present in her work as Brennan (2000) and Brain (2001) have demonstrated, thus definitely rejecting prior claims to Plath being a confessional poet.

Reading the Spanish poems conveys a contradictory image of Spain: one finds a few celebratory texts next to a larger group characterized by sinister accounts of people, scenes and incidents. As will be evinced, the objects that call Plath's attention in the Spanish poems trigger a mixture of fascination and repulsion. The generally negative connotations of the Spanish imagery Plath starts exploring in 1956 will reappear, although in a more stylized version, in some of her later poems. However, as the reading of "Stopped Dead" will demonstrate, the way motifs are employed and the speaker's attitude will be radically different compared to the verse where Spanish imagery first appears.

The Spanish poems date back to the earliest period of composition of *The Colossus*. With few exceptions, the lyric "I" retreats from the mean reality of the foreign scene, indicating an utter inability to cope with it. In an enlightening chapter on Plath's landscape poetry, Kendall (2002: 27) states that the poet was deeply imbued with Emersonian philosophy, but that in *The Colossus* it was still difficult to put this world-view into practice. Instead of making the external landscape merge with the perceiving self in a benignant way, Kendall argues, the outer world still threatens to destroy the poetic persona who turns back. Nonetheless, this recoiling of the subject is overcome in *Ariel* where the speaker either openly confronts the menacing landscape or fuses with it in ecstasy.

Plath's poetic and personal development is particularly noticeable when the 1956 texts resulting from Plath's engagement with Spain are measured against "Stopped Dead" (1962), where similar motifs resurface. By then, Plath, in full command of her poetic voice, has managed to build a full network of tropes that allow her to turn the literal features of the

foreign topography into a powerfully symbolic mindscape. Spain, evoked as a terribly violent setting, is the perfect mindscape to stage a savage war the poet no longer avoids.

In the "Introduction" to Plath's *Collected Poems*, Hughes related the different stages in Plath's poetic development to an actual change of location: "Her evolution as a poet went rapidly through successive moulds of style, as she realized her true matter and voice. Each fresh phase tended to bring out a group of poems bearing general family likeness, and is usually associated in my memory with a particular time and place. At each move we made, she seemed to shed a style" (1992: 16). Seen in this light, it seems relevant to examine the Spanish poems to determine what emotions Spain stirred in Plath and how she shaped them. However, in following Hughes's chronology, I do not intend to claim one can identify Plath's "true matter and voice" only in her late poems, as a strictly confessional reading would suggest, but I am rather focusing on the developmental phases that Plath underwent in terms of style.

In this regard, Butscher sees in Plath's early poems (1956-60) a "continuing identification with poets such as Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop who, for all their technical brilliance, remained trapped within the context of defining reality rather than seeking a transcendental method of escape" (1976: 153). Perloff also identifies in *The Colossus* "a bewildering hodge-podge of influences: Hopkins and Yeats, Auden and Wilbur, Steven and Thomas, and a little later, first Lowell and then Roethke and Hughes himself" (1981, quoted in Wagner, 1988: 297). The Spanish poems do reveal that obsession with attaining formal control in order to objectify the external world.

As Kendall (2001: 28) notes, very few poems in *The Colossus* –where the Spanish poems belong chronologically speaking– succeed in creating a "fluid exchange between speaker and environment" or in shedding away her "initial stiffness". Both the perception of a menacing atmosphere and the need to withdraw from it are central features of the landscape poems in this period and that also applies to the Spanish poems. At this stage, Plath is still far away from "fully integrat[ing] the external world into the self, so that landscape and mindscape merge to create a new psychological reality" (Kendall, 2001: 45-46). Thus, it seems pertinent to start analyzing this small corpus of texts paying attention to the landscape since, as Kendall notes, Plath's "exploration of the relationship between the individual and the natural world is fundamental to the development of her mature work" (2001: 31).

I will first consider Plath's poetic approach to subject-matter in a specific place and time, Spain 1956, also focusing on the subject's rapport with the alien environment. Then, a stylistic comparison between the formal rigor of the Spanish poems and "Stopped Dead" will offer proof of Plath's poetic accomplishment by 1962. Plath's radical transformation of poetic technique involves a loosening of tight prosodic and stanzaic patterns and a more spontaneous diction, but also the use of specific tropes resulting from Plath's engagement with Spain. I contend that after testing those Spanish motifs in her early verse, the poet

polished that imagery to incorporate it into a fully personal system of symbols in her later poetry. Due to space limitations, I am only concerned here with the particular motifs resulting from Plath's encounter with Spain, so other tropes in her work will necessarily be left out of this study.

The Spanish poems are mainly set in natural landscapes, giving attention to the roughest and most unbearable qualities of the environment –the extreme heat of the sun and the aridity of the soil– which offer an interesting emotional subtext. Plath's reactions to the distressing peculiarities of the Spanish topography can be assessed by focusing on certain recurring images that re-emerge in Plath's more mature work. My purpose is to determine if, as Hughes argues, there is some "family likeness" within this group of texts as a result of the poet's response to a specific location.

I also contend that the Spanish-set poems articulate a deep sense of displacement and suggest Plath underwent a culture shock<sup>1</sup>. The poet's sudden encounter with a different way of life as well as her ignorance of the language and culture must have caused her great distress. These poems also reveal that Plath had been "building castles in Spain". Writing to her mother on July 14, 1956, Plath describes her first days in Benidorm and her intentions for the rest of their stay: "What has happened in the last two days is like a fairy tale, and I can hardly believe myself that our summer dwelling has surpassed my wildest, most exotic dreams. I feel our real honeymoon has at last begun, with our plan for simple living, writing and studying. . ." (Schober Plath, 1999: 262). Yet, despite Plath's initial excitement and the couple's wish to remain in Benidorm until the end of September, the Hughes returned to England in late August forced by the precariousness of their life in Spain (Butscher, 2003: 190). With a few exceptions, the disheartening mind-set that prevails in the Spanish poems reveals the poignancy of Plath's confrontation with Spain and her disappointment at the start of what she hoped would be the happiest and most creative period of her life.

Nevertheless, before analyzing the Spanish poems and tropes, I would like to justify the pertinence of the approach adopted in this essay since I follow some of Plath's biographers, including Hughes, and quote from her correspondence and notebooks to relate Plath's experience in Spain to her writing. It is true, as several authors have noted (Asotic, 2015; Brain, 2006; Van Dyne, 2006), that adopting a straightforward biographical approach can compromise the validity of our interpretation of literary texts. Brain (2006) offers several examples in which the reading of Plath's poems and stories is filtered through the sometimes biased lenses of the biographers, who offer misleading interpretations of her work. Likewise, Van Dyne's appraisal (2006) of six of the published Plath biographies to date (Butscher, 1976; Malcolm, 1995; Middlebrook, 2003; Rose, 1991; Stevenson, 1989; Wagner-Martin, 1987) attests to their partiality, some being visibly anti-Plath while others blame Hughes for Plath's tribulations, hence insisting on the limited perspective on factual events they offer, which may impinge on our interpretation of the texts. In addition, if we turn to Plath's

journals and letters as unfailing resources to access the author's mind, this may also be problematic since, as Asotic (2015: 57) points out, there are usually discrepancies between what she records in her notebooks and what is conveyed in her correspondence. Plath used both to register particular details and ideas she would develop in future compositions, so they "can hardly be a reliable source of information". Yet, in spite of the limitations outlined here, I resort to biographical information in order to show how Plath transforms her own experience into poetic matter. I would also like to insist on the fact that what her personas communicate in her poems must not be taken as her fixed views on any particular issue, but as stages visible in her work of an ongoing process of reflection and self-reformulation. As Van Dyne states, "we cannot simply dismiss biography; instead we need to situate the story of a life differently, as part of more encompassing narratives" because for Plath as well as for Hughes poetry was "an enabling fiction" (2006: 19).

## 2. PLATH'S ACQUAINTANCE WITH SPAIN

The first reference to Spain in Plath's *Journals* is dated 9 March, 1956, when the young writer declares her preference for a "living-writing life":

If I write this term (having whittled my program to a bare minimum: moralists and French, perhaps German) and live in Spain a month with Elly, then return to write for a month, and take off again, I should amass enough, what with my various prizes, might make me able to write a novel . . . and poetry to keep me in discipline. I'd rather write a novel, and I could live in southern France (Vence? Grasse?) or Italy or Spain for a year and forge my soul and just read French and German and soak up art, all on my own. (Kukil, 2000: 231)

Despite her plans, Plath came to Spain with Hughes, whom she had met on February 25, 1956, and married in less than four months. By the time Plath set foot in Spain, she had fashioned it as a perfect place to grow into a full-fledged artist.

Plath's first response (July 7, 1956) to Spain is ecstatic: "I have never felt so native to a country as I do to Spain" (Schober Plath, 1999: 261). Madrid is a "modern tooting city" observed from her "large private balcony with gay blue-and-yellow tiles on the floor and wall shelves, pots of geranium and ivy, and across, baroque towers and a blazing blue sky" (1999: 261). However, Plath prefers the rural landscape "all, bless it, utterly agricultural or sheep and bull country. . . ." (1999: 261). Her early letters seem to suggest Plath's kinship with the new setting: "Spain is utter heaven . . . with Ted and me . . . all is possible" (1999: 261).

Nonetheless, when Plath arrives in Spain, she is absolutely ignorant of the language and unacquainted with the undeveloped nation Spain was in the 1950s. Actually, Spanish culture

was entirely missing in Plath's curriculum, her only contact prior to 1956 being a course on European intellectuals she took at Smith (1953-54). She seemed fascinated by Ortega's ideas in *The Revolt of the Masses* (1929), pondering that "anybody who is not the everybody runs the risk of being eliminated" or annotating enthusiastically Ortega's description of life as struggle which required the need for will, resolution and inner strength<sup>2</sup>. Another allusion to Spanish authors is found in appendix 10 of Plath's *Unabridged Journals*, which contains class notes on the mystic writer St. Therese of Avila (Kukil, 2000: 247-249). Apart from these fleeting references, Plath was unaware of the harsh realities of a country still recovering from civil war, far removed in economic, social and cultural terms from Plath's New England background.

Before her arrival, Plath had a romanticized view of Spain, but she found the land and its people quite upsetting. As a result, the enthusiasm of her first letters, notes and poems soon gives way, except in Plath's reassuring letters to her mother, to a demoralized tone. Reading the varied palimpsest produced by Plath during this short period reveals a remarkable sense of ambivalence towards the otherness perceived in the Spanish setting<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. PLATH'S SPANISH POEMS: ESTABLISHING THE CORPUS

One of the difficulties of establishing Plath's "Spanish corpus" is the fact that, except for "Departure" and "Spinster," none of the poems under consideration was included in *The Colossus*. However, my contention is that the texts were mostly written in 1956, at the beginning of Plath's "second phase" spanning from early 1956 to late 1960 (Hughes 1992: 16). Yet, since most texts –"Alicante Lullaby," "Dream with Clam-diggers," "Wreath for a Bridal," "Epitaph for Fire and Flower," "Fiesta Melons"<sup>4</sup>, "The Goring," "The Beggars"<sup>5</sup>, "Rhyme," and "Spider"– only saw the light in literary magazines during Plath's lifetime, they remained virtually unknown until they were published in *Collected Poems* (1981)<sup>6</sup>.

Following Hughes's chronology, the Spanish series must have been written throughout the second half of 1956. Plath completed some of the poems in Spain but she continued writing new pieces of Spanish inspiration in England well into the autumn of 1956. Therefore, the cycle of "Spanish poems" opens with "Alicante Lullaby" (27) and closes with "Departure" (37)<sup>7</sup>.

Still, a further distinction should be made within this corpus of eleven poems. There is a first subset incorporating explicit references to a Spanish location or incident: "Alicante Lullaby" (27), "Fiesta Melons" (31), "The Goring" (32), "The Beggars" (33), "Spider" (34) and "Departure" (37). The second group includes poems lacking distinctly Spanish allusions –"Dream with Clam-Diggers" (28), "Wreath for a Bridal" (29), "Epitaph for Fire and Flower" (30), "Spinster" (35), and "Rhyme" (36). Yet, a close reading of "Wreath for a

Bridal” and “Epitaph for Fire and Flower<sup>8</sup>,” an *aubade*, indicates these are certainly colored by the thrill of the couple’s honeymoon in Spain. Likewise, the temporal clause, “after the tedious pilgrimages” or the reference to the “shabby travel garb” in “Dream with Clam-diggers” call to mind the various trips the couple took until they definitely settled in Benidorm, locating the lyrical I in a dreamscape that fuses Plath’s Winthrop summer home with the Benidorm bait-diggers’ description in the *Journals* (Kukil, 2000: 576)<sup>9</sup>. Although features exclusive to the foreign setting are missing, these three poems were most likely composed during the honeymoon. Equally elusive in this regard are “Spinster” (35) and “Rhyme” (36), which evoke the same period by means of oblique hints at the foreign setting, alternating in the sequence with texts of unmistakably Spanish inspiration.

In spite of their geographical elusiveness, this second subset of poems is relevant because it articulates Plath’s initial assessment of the bond she had established with Hughes. “Wreath for a Bridal,” with echoes of Auden and Dylan Thomas (Perloff, 1981, quoted in Wagner, 1988: 297-298), is rich in fertility images –“pollen,” “seed,” “sprouting fruit,” “flowers” and “children”–, indicating Plath’s high expectations about the poets’ life together and envisaging their union as the peak of their emotional and artistic fulfillment. *Letters Home* also underscores Plath’s conviction that this would be a rewarding union, for as she confesses on August 2, 1956, Hughes is making her “think and write deeply. . . . He is educating me daily, setting me exercises of concentration and observation” (Schober Plath, 1999: 267).

Nevertheless, most poems in the Spanish sequence rather reflect the subject’s anxiety over unexpected events and a hostile environment. Accordingly, “Spinster,” a non-geographically explicit text, expresses a yearning for the “frosty discipline” of wintry weather: “How she longed for winter then!–/ Scrupulously austere in its order/ Of white and black/ Ice and rock, each sentiment within border./ And heart’s frosty discipline/ Exact as a snow flake” (lines 13-18).

The poetic voice calls attention to the mismatch between the anarchic state of affairs in the boisterous foreign space and the quietness and order of the winter landscape of the native milieu. Hence, “the birds’ irregular babel” (line 5) is quite likely an allusion to the impenetrability of the foreign language, and the “burgeoning/ unruly enough to pitch her five queenly wits/ Into vulgar motley” (lines 19-22) may be hinting at the over-stimulating setting against which the poetic subject has to struggle to remain composed. A cause-effect relationship is established between the unmanageable external agents and the subject’s confusion, thus relating a chaotic external world to her psychological turmoil. As a result, the poetic persona “withdr[aws] neatly” (line 24) from the scene.

“Spinster” operates on the principle that the coldness and sternness of a winter landscape is a safer retreat for the self than the emotional extremes the unfamiliar setting provokes. Against the “mutinous weather” (line 27), the longing for its opposite makes plain

the dislocation of the subject. So in “Spinster” Plath is elaborating on the obstacles encountered having to adapt to a new environment, together with those inherent to starting a new stage in life.

A similar sense of disarray is noticeable in the notebooks written in Benidorm, where Plath considers “the emotional turmoil of the week at the widow’s [home]” (Kukil, 2000: 248) by pinpointing the awful condition of their accommodation run by a strange-looking woman, and her rage at being stared at by the natives while writing on her balcony. Moreover, another Benidorm entry (July 23, 1956) reveals some conflict already arising between Plath and Hughes: “Alone, deepening. Feeling the perceptions deepen with a tang of geranium and the full moon and the mellowing hurt; the deep ingrowing of hurt, too far from the bitching fussing surface tempest” (Kukil, 2000: 250).

What is evidenced in “Spinster” and the journal is Plath’s awareness of her being overwhelmed by the unexpected hostility and unruliness of the foreign setting. Consequently, the environmental conditions she associated with such emotions became metaphorical counterparts for Plath’s sense of displacement in these poems. “Rhyme,” another poem lacking geographical specificity, is based on a vexing situation the writer experienced in Spain. It presents a “stubborn goose whose gut’s/ Honeycombed with golden eggs,[...] won’t lay one” (lines 1-3), conveying the writer’s frustration over a creative block, and explaining her reorientation to the journalistic writing and sketching of “Sketchbook of a Spanish Summer”.

Despite lacking allusions to a specific geographical location, these poems should be considered as part of the “Spanish corpus” too. First, Hughes’s framing of these poems between “Alicante Lullaby” and “Departure” supports the hypothesis that they were written around the same time and, therefore, are related to Plath’s experience in Spain. In addition, “Dream with Clam-Diggers,” “Wreath for a Bridal” and “Epitaph for Fire and Flower” had been accepted for publication by September 30, 1956, so they must have been completed earlier in Spain.

In fact, I believe this second group of poems is crucial to understanding the significance of the whole sequence as it deals obliquely with a transitional stage in Plath’s relationship with Hughes, their adaptation to married life with its share of setbacks. Therefore, in contrast to the highly descriptive scene-setters, this second set of poems delves more deeply into the poet’s emotional life and elaborates on Plath’s desires and anxieties in the early weeks of marriage. The love poems, especially “Wreath for a Bridal,” indicate Plath’s idealization of the poets’ life together, while “Spinster” and “Rhyme” account for the lover-writer’s disappointment in this psychologically demanding period of 1956.



#### 4. ANALYSIS OF THE SPANISH-SET POEMS: SYMBOLS OF ALIENATION IN THE SPANISH LANDSCAPE

As already noted, the small set of poems derived from Plath's encounter with Spain has scarcely received critical attention. Butscher is among the few to have considered them, regarding "Fiesta Melons" as a plain "scene-setter" (1976: 190). He also mentions "Alicante Lullaby" and "The Goring," but no judgment is passed on the texts (1976: 191). The critic concludes that "Departure" is written many months after the event, "when Sylvia could look back upon the area and consider its local scenery in terms of manifest symbols for the human process of endless endings and departures" (1976: 190).

Butscher's observation is illuminating as it suggests that Plath had probably come to identify certain elements in the alien environment as the source for the disturbing and ambivalent emotions that pressed her while abroad. It was in Spain that she started exploring those specific motifs, eventually turning them into tropes suggestive of some deeper conflict. In addition, Butscher implies that the period of composition of these poems goes beyond Plath's stay in Spain. Hence, even if some of the texts were not written there, they should not be excluded from this analysis. On the contrary, Plath's revision of her notebooks to rework her observations into poems and stories indicates that her experience in Spain did leave a lasting impression on her. The artistic reshaping of her vicissitudes in this foreign space was not only an exploration of her troubling relationship with it but also implied her acknowledgment of a serious discrepancy between her emotional and creative expectations and the plain facts. As a result, some striking features of the Spanish topography turned into metaphors of alienation in Plath's verse.

Stevenson (1989) also offers a brief account of Plath's visit to Spain and provides detail about the incidents that inspired "The Goring" but is more concerned with documenting the gradual straining of the poets' relationship than with an actual assessment of that piece. To highlight the distressing effect Spain had on Plath, Stevenson states that "[d]espite the exaggerated panegyrics she sent to her mother, Sylvia was not at ease in Spain. Its intense heat and scorched hills, its mood of suppressed passion, the casual violence that emanated from its cities' streets were too close to her own nightmares" (1989: 92). Apart from these incidental remarks by Butscher and Stevenson, these poems have never been assessed as a whole.

At this point, it is worth considering Plath's mental configuration when she started writing *The Colossus*. According to Rosenblatt (1979: 56), by 1956 Plath had begun to organize her experience of the world "as split between two warring principles, death and life, that limit her desires and control the possibilities of existence in general." Moreover, Plath seemed inclined to classify the external universe into "objects or people that aid the self in its struggle to survive and those who attack and persecute the individual or race" (1979: 56). In my view, Plath approaches her encounter with Spain in a similar fashion, underlining a

strong antagonism between herself and a world characterized by its offensive loudness, extreme heat and dryness. Her facing a disconcerting reality in a once idealized territory mostly provokes feelings of repulsion and fear. Furthermore, since Plath describes her poetic vision at this stage as “inclined to be an impressionist blur” she intended to correct “by exercise and practice” (Schober Plath, 1999: 267), she concentrates on grasping reality through accurate depictions of the external world, the method mainly employed in the specifically Spanish-set texts.

Turning to a more detailed analysis of the disquieting effect Spain had on the poet, let us consider some of the specifically Spanish-set poems. The first poem, “Alicante Lullaby”, articulates the speaker’s distress at the noisiness of the resort town. The “lullaby” in the title mocks the subject’s failure to acclimatize to the piercing sounds of the Spanish town that make her insomniac. Alliterative sequences and internal rhymes create the sensation of fatigue: “the barrels/ Bumbling over the nubs of the cobbles/ Past the yellow-paella eateries” (lines 1-3). The second stanza also suggests a deafening clatter:

Kumquat-colored trolleys ding as they trundle  
 Passengers under an indigo fizzle  
 Needling spumily down from the wires:  
 Alongside the sibilant harbor the lovers  
 Hear loudspeakers boom  
 From each neon-lit palm  
 Rumbas and sambas no ear-flaps can muffle.

Technically, this poem illustrates Plath’s obsession with creating closely-knit patterns of image and sound. The flashy colors of the urban landscape overwhelm the observer with sharp stimuli while the constant use of onomatopoeic verbs underscores her maladjustment. The wish to stifle the sound of “rumbas and sambas” confirms an aversion to Spanish loudness. In contrast to the “susurrous lyres and viols”, the anarchy of foreign melodies repels the poetic persona: “O Cacophony, goddess of jazz and of quarrels/ Crack-throated mistress of bagpipes and cymbals” (lines 15-16).

The *Journal* pages on Alicante also reveal the writer’s loathing of Spanish noisiness and overcrowded spaces: “Beach, short, packed with people so thick under gaudy striped umbrellas that you couldn’t see water; cheap garages; noisy avenues of palms; shrunk to biteable size after nightmare of first arrival, traumatic night walk along quays, and sleepless blaring room” (Kukil, 2000: 254). Both sources relate loudness as a terribly disruptive element, stressing the writer’s failure to adjust to the new location.

By way of contrast, “Fiesta Melons” is inspired by an enjoyable visit to a peasant market. The rural scene with its profusion of “bright green and thumpable melons” excites Plath’s imagination, transforming the melon seeds into confetti, and villagers into fiesta-

goers. The pleasing rustic sight conveys a picturesque impression of Spain. "The Goring" and "The Beggars", on the contrary, pinpoint the writer's disapproval of the uncanny alienness perceived around, so "Fiesta Melons" must be regarded as an exception in the sequence. In this respect, Stevenson observes that "[a]lthough Sylvia could not like Spain, she was nonetheless fascinated. Passages in her journal exclaim over the wealth of color, the abundance of fruit in the market, the intense blue of the Mediterranean," while bitterly complaining of the widow Mangada's "bad dirty bathroom, ant-infested kitchen...to be shared with...the piggy Spaniards" (Stevenson, 1998: 93).

"The Goring" accounts for the bullfight the Hughes attended in Madrid. In this poem Plath seems to be trying to get rid of her "impressionistic style", which she considered to be her major stylistic flaw when compared to Hughes's "really photographic vision" (Schober Plath, 1999: 267). The speaker takes sides with the animal ("Instinct for art began with the bull's horn lofting in the mob's /Hush a lumped man-shaped" (lines 8-9)), underscoring the "crowd's truculence," (line 3) the "ill-judged stabs," (line 4) and the grossness of the whole act. The subject condemns the audience for their insensitiveness, but it is the *matadors* and the *picador*, engaged in an uneven struggle for survival, who are deprecated<sup>10</sup>.

Years later, Hughes offered his version of the poets' life in common in *Birthday Letters* (1998) "exposing the fundamental differences between them" (Basnett, 2009: 96). In "You Hated Spain," a poem where bullfighting is also present, Hughes underlines their divergent response to Spain, "the land of your dreams," as he ironically called it there. While Hughes felt "at home" in the "blood-raw light" and the "African/black edges of everything," Plath is depicted as a feeble creature beleaguered by uncanny sights (Hughes, 1998: 40). Although the tone is patronizing, Hughes's poem attests to Plath's apprehension: "You saw right down to the Goya funeral grin/ And recognized it, and recoiled/ As your poems winced into chill" (lines 14-16). However, I do not agree with Roberts (2007: 72) that it would be wrong to interpret Hughes's claims in *Birthday Letters* as a sign of his "superiority to Plath in terms of insight and spiritual strength". But, even if the poem were disregarded as Hughes's self-indulgent narrative, the range of primary sources consulted corroborates the idea that Plath experienced a cultural shock in Spain which left its trace in her verse.

Certainly, Plath's joyful approval of the rural scene in "Fiesta Melons" fades soon into the nightmarish vision of "The Goring" or "The Beggars", much sinister in tone, a dark undercurrent being always present in her Spanish poems. It was precisely to counter the impressionistic blur she feared would blemish her vision that Plath resolves to work to find suitable correlatives for the deeper psychic struggles: "We have figured that it would be good for me to write a series of stories for the women's magazines about Americans abroad, because I am very good at local color and also can write dramatic contrast plots where the native scene gives rise to a parallel in psychological conflict" (Schober Plath, 1999: 263). This applies to her short-story writing but also to the method employed in these poems. A

disquieting scene is thus minutely described in an attempt to mirror the poet's uneasiness as she confronts an alienating otherness.

Hence, when describing the toughness of the poverty-stricken and maimed individuals in "The Beggars," Plath is indirectly dealing with her own failure to cope with life's cruelty. The mutilated figures are depicted as "...goatish tragedians who/ Hawk misfortune like figs and chickens/ And, plaintiff against each day, decry/ Nature's partial, haphazard thumb" (lines 2-5). In a review, Dyson (1961) claims, "[t]he affinity which Sylvia Plath feels with the dead and the alien is not unlike a type of pity; a conviction of kinship with everything that lives or has lived, however inaccessible or sinister...the same may be said of her feeling for human outcasts in 'The Beggars'" (quoted in Wagner, 1988: 39). Nonetheless, I disagree with Dyson's interpretation, since Plath's reaction is not unambiguously one of commiseration. Despite the beggars' "lack and loss" (line 13), far from unconditionally sympathizing with the beggars, the observer perceives they "...encroach/ On spirits tenderer than theirs,/ Suffering-toughened beyond the fetch/ Of finest conscience" (lines 13-16). The poem ends on a note of bewilderment since their capacity of "outlasting their vilest star" (line 19) and the fact that "with a perfidious verve/ [they] Baffle the dark, the pitying eye" (lines 20-21) inspire mistrust. The speaker's ambivalence, trapped by the detail of a leg-stump on the crutch and such a brutal way of life, also derives from the beggars' conspicuous staging of their wretchedness. The scene proves entirely uncongenial to the subject, taken aback by a painful reality<sup>11</sup>.

Plath also draws on the observation of animal life to write her poems. An anecdote recorded on August 14, 1956, instigates the insect imagery of "Spider": "Saw two ants apparently stitched with cramp; trussing them up with invisible web; ants struggling, slower; spider quick, running clockwise, counterclockwise; we tossed him another ant, bigger, which he looped in" (Kukil, 2000: 256). The frenetic hunting of the spider is weighed against the vulnerability of the ants, which "Persevered on a set course/ No scruple could disrupt,/ Obeying orders of instinct" (lines 30-32). The ants are finally caught up and devoured, underscoring nature's unresponsiveness to the doomed creatures. Once again, a version of a past episode projects Plath's helplessness before a frightening external world, and echoes in the ants' self-destructive instinct an alarming fascination with death. By the time Plath writes "The Colossus" the ant imagery has become a forceful symbol of the poet's vulnerability: "I crawl like an ant in mourning/Over the weedy acres of your brow" (lines 12-13).

As for the closing poem of the sequence, "Departure," critics consider it to be one of the finest compositions in *The Colossus* (Butscher, 1976: 190; Myers, 1962: 42). This poem expresses the frustration at the impossibility of making a dream come true and signals, according to Butscher, "the writer's stylistic progress towards a more natural, less obvious form" (190) in the collection. The topography in "Departure" is recognizably Spanish –dry and hot. A number of tropes also recur in this poem –the metallic hue of the sun, the mineral

tinge of the rocky soil— underlining the merciless sterility of the scenery. Plath resorts to chromatic symbolism to offer her final assessment of Spain. The contrast between the green figs and grapes over the porch, symbols of vitality and fecundity, and the deadly quality of the “Sun’s brass, the moon’s steely patina/ The leaden slag of the world” (lines 10-11) emphasize the bitterness of defeat by a hostile environment. Once again, the poem shows a discrepancy between Plath’s prospects and a disappointing reality: life is unbearably hard in such a disconcerting milieu. The mineral shades of the smoldered terrain stand for barrenness, while the figs turn into a metaphor of the poet’s thwarted aspirations. The figs will resurface again in a famous passage of *The Bell Jar* as Esther Greenwood contemplates her life as a terrible waste (Plath, [1963] 1966: 73). In “Departure”, the goats, unmoved by the harshness of landscape, also offer a biting example of resilience and survival: “... gull-fouled, a stone hut/ Bares its low lintel to corroding weathers:/ Across the jut of ochreous rock/ Goats shamble, morose, rank-haired,/ To lick the sea-salt” (lines 16-20).

A similar association is triggered by the beggars in the poem of the same title whose “goatish” nature allows them to stay alive regardless of the nasty environment. Despite their humbleness, goats and beggars stand as foils for the poet’s maladjustment to the alien territory, pinpointing her shortcomings and foreshadowing her own destruction. Goat imagery recurs in other poems like “Goatsucker” and “The Net-Menders”, which suggests that the writer found in this motif an adequate trope for tragic resilience.

We may conclude that the specifically Spanish-set poems tend to be mainly descriptive because Plath focuses on external detail. Most of these are also quite heavily patterned —like “Alicante Lullaby”— reinforcing the idea that the poet is still too concerned with attaining formal control. However, only in “Departure” does Plath manage to increase the connotative potential of certain environmental features by establishing crucial sets of conflicting images.

## 5. SPAIN RE-SURFACING AS A TROPE IN PLATH’S LATER POETRY

Apart from the poems so far examined, two other texts are included here so as to demonstrate that Spain left its imprint on Plath’s work. These unmistakably draw on the perception of Spain as a disturbing place, with the Spanish-related motifs acquiring more subtle nuances.

“The Net-Menders” (1959) is set in a Mediterranean fishing village and retrieves some of the pleasant traits of the Spanish topography —“a little harbor of sardine boats” (line 1), the almond groves (line 2), the purple figs (line 8), and the “houses white as sea-salt” (line 11)— conveying at first a welcoming sense of place. Nevertheless, other details insinuate nature’s unresponsiveness to human life and strife: the sunlight corrodes colors and at night the moon “leans, a stone Madonna, over the lead sea/ And the iron hills that enclose them” (line 17). Yet, the poet’s attention concentrates on the net-menders, enigmatic women “dressed in black, everybody mourning for someone” (line 4). The speaking subject is equally captivated

and disturbed by these survivors of fatality. The fact that “nobody dies or is born without their knowing it” (line 14) casts these women in a mysterious light. Their witch-like aspect is underscored too by the fact that their “eyes revolve the whole town like a blue and green ball” (line 13). What makes the speaker feel so helpless is the women’s power to endure the loss of husbands and sons at sea. The poem closes with the net-menders’ invocation to make their loved ones return safely underpinning their strength to confront death. In the closing lines, the subject is silenced by the net-menders’ words as if acknowledging their superiority over her.

Finally, “Stopped Dead”, a 1962 poem intended by Plath to be in the *Ariel* book, must be brought up in this analysis<sup>12</sup>. Quite different in style and tone from the poetic exercises of 1956 and “The Net-Menders,” “Stopped Dead” is a clear example of how Plath recasts Spanish motifs, particularly features of the landscape, into compelling metaphors for violent confrontation. In this poem, Spain stands as a symbolic backdrop to the destructive clash between two foes. The allusions to Hughes’s uncle, a rich trousers factory owner, hint at Plath and Hughes’s financial disputes after their separation. Just as Plath had remodeled Hughes into the father figure of “Daddy,” Plath shapes him now into Hughes’s relative, fusing in a deprecatory image the meanness of both men.

The poem portrays the crucial moment of a quarrel with the contenders figuratively “stopped dead” over a cliff. The fall would unavoidably drag the adversaries to a hellish location, just sketched when compared to the detailed descriptions of previous poems. At first, the speaker is uncertain about the place: “Is that Spain down there?/ Red and yellow, two passionate hot metals/ Writhing and sighing, what sort of scenery is it?” (lines 7-9). The warm colors and the heat melting the metallic substance, common motifs in the Spanish topography of preceding poems, resurface so as to highlight the fierceness of the clash. The same may be said of the shrill loudness of the scene (“A squeal of brakes. /Or is it a birth cry?” (lines 1-2)), an echo of the experience in “Alicante Lullaby.” While trying to recognize the riotous emotions that have given shape to this dangerous mindscape, the speaker starts considering other locations but ironically discards them as those would never compel anyone to such extreme violence: “It isn’t England, it isn’t France, it isn’t Ireland” (line 10). Eventually, the speaker identifies the setting as Spain because “It’s violent. We’re here on a visit,/ With a goddam baby screaming off somewhere./There’s always a bloody baby in the air” (lines 11-13). Everything hints at a vicious and intimidating mindscape.

Formally, the poem is characterized by the spontaneous diction of Plath’s mature verse, although as the different manuscripts and typed versions of the *Ariel* poems held at Smith suggest “whether a poem was finished or not, and whether it has a ‘final’ form” (Brain, 2001: 26) is questionable and their existence indicates that Plath’s writing spontaneity was only relative to her earlier poetry<sup>13</sup>. As for the figurative language, this text offers recurrent images relating to a conflicting otherness, which by 1962 Plath had fully integrated into her

tropological system. In "Stopped Dead", the meticulous descriptions of the Spanish landscape have yielded a more impressionistic but stronger imagery based on a few recognizable features which help evoke a ferocious clash.

## 6. CONCLUSION

By examining these poems inspired by Plath's visit to Spain I hope to have shed some light upon several issues. Firstly, these poems allow us to ascertain Plath's response to Spain, revealing that, although the land afforded creative stimuli, the writer also felt the strain of a cultural shock which is somehow manifest in the work dating from this period. Secondly, the analysis corroborates that there is some "family likeness" within this group of texts. Although not homogenous in topic, tone and quality, the poems render the alien territory by motifs that evoke hostility and violence and suggest the impossibility of survival. As a result, Spain becomes a remarkable source for certain tropes, like the heat and the aridity of the landscape that expose its terrible barrenness and pinpoint the brutishness of life, or the resilience of doomed animal and human figures revealing the inability to cope with otherness and death. Hence, most of the Spanish poems dating from 1956 convey the subject's distress by the accumulation of disturbing landscape and climate features, causing the subject's withdrawal from the scene for the sake of survival.

However, by 1962, having distilled her poetic technique, Plath is able to avoid the itemization of truculent detail of former poems and, by focusing on a few elements of the topography, the poet manages to build the appropriate scenery to stage a vicious confrontation, condensing the emotional import of the experience. So it may be argued that the figurative space created in "Stopped Dead", characterized by the distressing loudness and oppressive heat Plath associated with Spain, stands as a poetic correlative for the psychological turmoil of Plath's last months. Instead of fleeing the scene, the speaker is now familiar with this violent space and seems more than willing to enter it to defeat her opponents.

A stylistic comparison between the Spanish-inspired motifs in those early pieces and the subtle imagery of "Stopped Dead" not only provides further evidence of Plath's stylistic accomplishment by 1962. The role of Spain as a source of imagery also acquires greater significance when we consider that several years after visiting the country Plath engaged again with Spanish motifs in her poetry. The poet looked back on her experience abroad and found it relevant to deal with the painful situation of struggling to endure a broken marriage. Therefore, it may be contended that by 1962 Spain was no longer just a geographical setting but had turned into a figurative mindscape, a suitable scenario in which to act out a struggle for survival.

## NOTES

- 1 The concept was coined by Oberg (1960). More recently, Furnham (2012: 14) has defined culture shock as “a serious, acute and sometimes chronic affective reaction to a new (social) environment.”
- 2 Plath writes in the margins of her copy: “my own philosophy –out of struggle, conflicts, hardship, comes a strong, vital creative nature” (quoted in Peel, 2007: 44).
- 3 Apart from the poems, the other sources consulted regarding Plath’s experience in Spain are the following: *Letters Home* (1975); the *Unabridged Journals* (2000); “Sketchbook of a Spanish Summer” published in the *Christian Science Monitor* (November 5-6, 1956); and “That Widow Mangada,” in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (236-256).
- 4 “Fiesta Melons” was published in 1959 in *Christian Science Monitor* and reprinted in a collector’s edition in 1971 (Hoberger, 1972; quoted in Wagner, 1988: 187).
- 5 The poem was left out of *The Colossus* but had been published in the *Critical Quarterly* before that date (Wagner, 1988: 39).
- 6 Some of these appeared in the Rainbow Press by 1971: *Fiesta Melons* (“Fiesta Melons”); *Crystal Gazer* (“Alicante Lullaby,” “The Beggars,” “The Goring,” “Stopped Dead”); *Lyoness* (“Wreath for a Bridal,” “Epitaph for Fire and Flower”); and *Pursuit* (“Spider”) (Butscher, 1976: 399). “The Net-Menders” was first published in *Collected Poems* (1981).
- 7 Numbers in parentheses indicate the order given by the editor (Ted Hughes) in *Collected Poems*.
- 8 Stevenson confirms this is a “love poem begun on the beach at Benidorm” accepted by the Chicago magazine *Poetry* together with “Two Sisters of Persephone,” “Metamorphosis” (published as “Faun”), “Wreath for a Bridal,” “Strumpet Song,” and “Dream with Clam-Diggers” (96).
- 9 Even though “the heat,” “the melted tar,” and the sea are present in the sketch of bait-diggers, it is clear from the March 11, 1956 journal entry that all the details were already present in a previous dream (Kukil, 2000: 235).
- 10 Plath retells the experience in *Letters Home*: “I am glad that Ted and I both feel the same way: full of sympathy for the bull . . . we felt disgusted and sickened by such brutality.” (Schober Plath, 1999: 263-264).
- 11 In “Thalidomide”, a 1962 poem Brain (2001: 128) mentions as an example of Plath’s environmental poetry *avant la lettre*, the writer will also look back on the subject of physical deformity.
- 12 The poem was first published in *Winter Trees* (1971).
- 13 See Brain’s (2001:27) analysis of the manuscripts, the final version (19 October 1962) and the BBC recorded version of “Stopped Dead”, which renders the finality of the poem uncertain.

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