

The Severance in Two Worlds: Sylvia Plath's Three Ekphrastic Poems on Giorgio de Chirico's Art Works

("Conversation Among the Ruins," "The Disquieting Muses," and "On the Decline of Oracles")

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1. Abstract

Sylvia Plath's three ekphrastic poems on Giorgio de Chirico's paintings—"Conversation Among the Ruins," "The Disquieting Muses," and "On the Decline of Oracles"—construct distinctive visions of a two-world division. De Chirico's paintings are media for Plath to convey the psychological landscape. She borrows the surrealistic images, or subject matter, from his art works to manifest three basic themes: the victimized female under the devastating male dominance, the persistence of negative elements in her life, and the loss of an intellectual mentor. All three poems are an enigmatical representation of severance. The two worlds present in these poems indicate the gap between the speaker and her relatives—the agonizing male-female, mother-daughter, and father-daughter relationships. By portraying, or alluding to, de Chirico's paintings, Plath suggests a possibility to reclaim the relationship and undertake a symbolic rebirth.

2. Introduction

--Sylvia Plath's Ekphrases: A Two-World Division

Sylvia Plath's three ekphrastic poems on Giorgio de Chirico's paintings construct distinctive visions of a two-world division—an ancient, mythic, fairytale world and a modern, dull, sinister world. The three poems, "Conversation Among the Ruins," "The Disquieting Muses" and "On the Decline of Oracles," are based on de Chirico's three early paintings in the period of *pittura metafisica* (metaphysical painting). The Chiricoesque metaphysical landscape provides Plath with a way to reveal the landscape of the mind in her poems. All three poems are an enigmatical representation of severance. The two worlds present in these poems indicate the gap between the speaker and her relatives—the agonizing male-female, mother-daughter, and father-daughter relationships. While Plath's ekphrases may or may not explicitly relate to the loss and depression she experienced in these relationships, it is apparent that her poems reveal her anxiety. De Chirico's paintings evoke the nostalgic past that she misses and can never attain. Thus her ekphrastic poems not only describe the severance of the idealistic world and the realistic world, they also depict the severance of the solitary speaker and her environment.

--Giorgio de Chirico's Art: A Metaphysical Myth in Familiar Scenes

Giorgio de Chirico uses classical myth and mythic imagery in art; yet he "depicts myth not directly but as the modern mind must perceive it, as a monumental relic" (McNeil 490). In the three paintings that Plath uses for the essential images in her poems, de Chirico creates familiar scenes—the Ferrara City, the ruins of an ancient Greek temple, and a room with contemporary furniture. On the one hand, the viewer

is not alienated from the familiar reality; on the other, the surrealistic landscape, which is restrained and held carefully, creates a disturbing relationship to the known. Faerna notes that de Chirico once described the formative moment of his metaphysical paintings: it was a sunny autumn afternoon in 1910, in Florence's Piazza Santa Croce. The painter was recovering from an illness. In the square was a sculpture of the great Italian poet Dante. The autumn sun, which was strong and warm, brightened the statue and the facade of the church. All of a sudden, the painter had a strange impression of looking at those things for the first time. The setting was familiar, but by seeing it through his altered state of mind at that time, he had transformed the familiar (Faerna 5). The significance of this event was to be explored over and over again during the following years in his metaphysical paintings, which present a city with frozen cityscapes, mysterious arcades, elongated shadows, featureless mannequins, high towers and chimneys. All appear transfigured and ambiguously menacing, as if the objects and places have lost their comfortable familiarity to obtain a strange and spectral life. "The term 'metaphysical' represented to de Chirico a search for the essential meaning hidden behind the surface of objects. He believed that objects acquire various meanings when imbued with the memory of their viewer. If that which de Chirico called the 'chain of memories' is broken, the objects acquire a new and disquieting guise, 'a ghostly and metaphysical aspect that only a few individuals can see in moments of clairvoyance and metaphysical abstraction.' The architecture of Turin and Ferrara, with their solemn porticoed streets and wide piazzas, was for de Chirico the most appropriate setting for these images—locomotive trains, statues, silhouettes—which are frozen and outside the flow of time. The depth of perspective in these vistas is often fictitious, and the canvases often contain contradictions that subtly underscore the sensation of estrangement and anguish" (Faerna 14). Yet de Chirico never paints dreams or attempts to express the world of the unconscious. It is certain, Faerna further suggests, that he intends to get closer to the dreams, in order to divest objects of their burden of meanings. Thus the Chirico city appears to be a phantom city. And it is because of this detachment that de Chirico transforms his images into disturbing, even sinister omens, by breaking up the relationship of meaning among objects (Faerna 6).

3. Conversation Among the Ruins

--The Painting: Order vs. Disorder

Plath's "Conversation Among the Ruins" is a poem on de Chirico's 1927 painting with the same title. The painting presents contrasting views: a man in coat and tie looks at a woman, who is sitting before him, in a Grecian gown and her hair in a psyche-knot. They are in a room with an open door and some furniture. There are no

walls. And outside the room is a barren landscape. The blurred boundaries create a disturbing atmosphere. While the inside is also the outside, the landscape becomes part of the room. De Chirico uses the view to reveal a male-female relationship. Just like placing an elegant room in a sterile landscape, the female would not find affectionate agreement with the male. While they are both in the same room, the view suggests their psychological disharmony. Although the viewer cannot see the woman's facial expression, since she turns her back, Scigaj interprets that the "lady...looks nostalgically beyond the suitor in the ruffled suit toward the Greek hero in the clockface above; the hero's head is tilted in the same position as that of her suitor below. She sees a desolate landscape beyond, which appears to represent the irretrievable distance between Greek hero and modern counterpart" (225). The man represents an inferior demonstration of the Greek hero. And the discrepancy between modern and ancient indicates the conflict between the man in his untidy contemporary suit and the woman in her tasteful Grecian garment. Female order is in contrast with male disorder. These differences reflect an inevitable failure of the conversation. The metaphysical elements in the painting represent the inner mind of the figures.

--The Poem: Victimized Female vs. Destructive Male

Plath's ekphrastic poem expands the theme of the painting and establishes a contrasting vision of two worlds to indicate the destructive effect of a male lover on the female persona—a conflict between the female elegant, orderly, Grecian world and the male devastating, disordered, boisterous world. Both de Chirico's painting and Plath's ekphrastic poem indicate similar themes about male-female relationships, yet the focus is definitely different. The painting portrays the irretrievable affinity. However, the poem not only illustrates the barren landscape to reveal the mind of characters, as the painting presents, but also emphasizes images of a destructive, powerful male and an oppressed, fragile female. While Plath adds other imageries (such as "garlands," "lutes," "peacocks," "whirlwind" and "rooks") to reinforce a two-world division between the lovers, she actually presents a suffering female under the dominant male. By referring to Greek mythological sources ("Grecian tunic" and "psyche-knot"), the poem implicitly implies Plath's feminist perspective—the woman as a victim in patriarchal society.

The poem begins with an active description of male destruction. Opposite images and comparisons demonstrate the contrasting two worlds. The first part of the octave goes swiftly with three powerful words, "stalk," "disturbing," and "rending," in a breathless, pressing manner to portray the male destructive force. Images, such as "elegant house," "garlands of fruit / And the fabulous lutes and peacocks," "rich order of walls," which represent female elegance, contrast with images of male vulgarity, such

as "wild furies," "whirlwind," and "stormy eyes." While the "elegant house" is replaced by the "appalling ruin," the "peacocks" are substituted with the "rooks." The conception of the blasting whirlwind denotes the male lover's ravaging power. The first word of the stanza, "Through," indicates its rebellious invasion and the last word of the stanza, "break," demonstrates its irrecoverable destruction. Also, with a further suggestion of a fairytale dreamland ("magic," "witch" and "castle") the speaker depicts the consequence of the damage: "magic takes flight / Like a daunted witch, quitting castle when real days break." The man destroying the woman's dream of love is like breaking a childlike fantasy.

The sestet of the poem mirrors both the exterior and the interior, two equally barren landscapes. The man who stands "heroic in coat and tie" finds no emotional interaction with the woman who sits "Composed in Grecian tunic and psyche-knot." Different postures and garbs portray their differences. The speaker uses costumes of disparate historical periods to indicate a gap between the lovers. It is noteworthy that "psyche-knot" not only illustrates a hairstyle, but also suggests a mythological source. Psyche is the personification of the human soul as the being beloved by Eros (Cupid)—the god of love. She is represented as a young maiden with butterfly's wings, sometimes as being pursued by Eros, or revenging herself on him, or united with him in the tenderest love. On the one hand, the speaker presents the man as a god-like figure and herself as a frail human being; on the other, she also manifests the suffering she experiences, as Psyche, for their love. Also, the "Fractured pillars" and "bankrupt estate" not only illustrate the destructive consequences caused by the male lover, but also allude to the outcome of their difficult relationship. There is no communication between them, since no "ceremony of words can patch the havoc." The poem is not a conversation between two persons; rather, it is a resentful monologue of a female speaker.

Furthermore, form and diction also intimate the conflict. Plath uses the juxtaposition of the conversational sonnet with the irregular meter and off-rhyme to reflect the contrast. The active voice of the male lover represents his strength, while the passive voice of the female speaker suggests her fragility. Also, the sounds of "k" and "t" that go through the whole poem demonstrate not only the breaking noise of the devastating damage, but also the hard relationship between the lovers. Significantly, the surrealistic images, which Plath borrows from de Chirico's painting, help to reveal the psychological world of the characters. A wall-less room amid a desolate landscape suggests their hopeless love. But Plath does not simply portray the image in words; rather, her description focuses on a motion of male destruction. While Plath mainly uses verbs ("stand," "stalk," "disturbing," "rending," and "break,") and

adjectives ("wild" and "stormy") to illustrate the man's power, she symbolically uses stilted nouns ("portico," "elegant house," "garlands" and "decorum") to suggest the woman's orderly world.

The male lover in the poem, in fact, reflects similarities with Plath's description about Ted Hughes in her letters and journals. The word "stalk," which Plath likes to use in many 1956 poems, also appears in her other poem about the dark forces of lust, "The Pursuit"—a poem that is dedicated to Ted Hughes after their first encounter (Journals 131, 133). The panther in "The Pursuit" also wants to invade the female speaker's world with his destructive love. Moreover, the wind image and its devastating allusion are often related to Ted Hughes in her journal entries: "He said my name, Sylvia, in a blasting wind which shot off in the desert behind my eyes, behind his eyes," "I dream of banging and crashing in a high wind in London," "Ted can break walls" (Journals 114, 115, 142). The "black look" of the male lover in the poem mirrors the black features that Plath used to portray Ted Hughes: "that big, dark, hunky boy" (Journals 112), "Ted...black-coated, black-haired" (Journals 189), "Ted...wears always the same black sweater and corduroy jacket" (Letters Home 243). In a letter to her brother, Warren, Plath pictured Ted Hughes as an omnipotent male figure with energetic power: "His voice is richer and rarer than Dylan Thomas, booming through walls and doors. He stalks into the room and yanks a book out of my case: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Thomas, and begins to read. He reads his own poems which are better than Thomas and Hopkins many times, better than all I know: fierce, disciplined, with a straight honest saying....He is 25 and from Yorkshire and has done everything in the world: rose-grafting, plowing, reading for movie studios, hunting, fishing....He is a violent Adam" (Wagner Biography 133, *italic added*). In a letter to Olive Higgins Prouty, Plath's patroness, she described Ted Hughes as "a breaker of things and people" with his "ruthless force" (Wagner Biography 133). Whether Ted Hughes is the model of the male lover in Plath's "Conversation Among the Ruins" or not, the black, powerful, destructive male figure becomes a patriarchal image in her later poetry after this ekphrastic poem. And the female speaker is always a victim who struggles against the patriarchal obsession.

Unlike de Chirico who uses blurred boundaries and hallucinatory timelessness to indicate an ambiguous relationship, Plath, on the contrary, demonstrates a two-world division with her diction, juxtapositions, and added images. The discrepancy of the two worlds represents the disharmony of the lovers. Dynamic male destruction in stanza one is transformed into static female re-creation in stanza two. The poem thus portrays a process from a devastation of the female orderly world by the god-like male to a re-creation of the female restrained world by the suffering female. The

diction suggests the process of destruction and re-creation. In stanza one, while "Through," "disturbing," "rending" and "break" illustrate male destruction, "fallen" and "ruin" portray the damage of the female world. Yet in stanza two, while "Composed" and "Rooted" depict a stagnant female order, "frame" and "patch" further suggest female re-creation. Like most of Plath's earlier poems, the female speaker in this poem identifies herself as a victim; even the female reconstruction is passive and stagnant.

4. The Disquieting Muses

--The Painting: Idyllic vs. Mythic

Plath's "The Disquieting Muses" was inspired by de Chirico's 1917 painting with the same title. Although the background is located in an Italian city, Ferrara, de Chirico, actually, creates a hallucinatory, and even ominous, timeless space. The three muses in the painting stand on a stage, with castles and towers behind them. They have different postures, though their long dark shadows all extend out of the painting. A maternal seated figure sits on a blue box with a black hole in her body and a head (or a mask?) beside her. A more phallic figure with a head like a stitched egg is set upon a pillar and turns her back to the viewer. The other draped figure stands in the shadow. They are all featureless, bald, cold and sterile mannequins. And they all have bodies made of stone columns. The bright colors of ivory and orange do not provide them with liveliness; on the contrary, the colors make the muses much more unhuman-like. And their postures—standing in the shadow, sitting with a black hole in the body, and turning the back to the viewer—suggest their indifference.

The Disquieting Muses creates a metaphysical landscape in a familiar place. Although the faraway castle, the pale mannequins and the geometric objects construct a dreamlike vision, yet the turquoise sky, the red castle, the red chimneys, the orange ground, the unseen setting sun, and the long dark shadows provoke a kind of tense, disturbing, and even sinister atmosphere. Soby suggests that the setting with mannequins in a metaphysical landscape creates an effect of placing motionless protagonists on a haunting and timeless stage: "...the [Disquieting] Muses...attracts and repels, beguiles and frightens, conveys a warm nostalgic aura but at the same time suggests an impending catastrophe. There is no action; the piazza is still; the figures wait. What will happen? There is no answer, for this picture is the exact opposite of those seventeenth-century paintings of banditti in which a specific, disastrous outcome is foretold. De Chirico's image—his early art as a whole—appeals directly to the counter-logic of the subconscious, to those swamp-like regions at the edge of

the mind where ecstasies bloom white and the roots of fear are cypress-black and deep" (136).

--The Poem: Fairytale Mother vs. Evil Muses

While de Chirico's painting strips the objects of meaning and portrays an enigmatic vision between surreal subconscious and inaccessible memories, Plath's ekphrastic poem uses the haunting figures in the picture as a representation of the dark force of life. Reading this poem on a BBC radio programme, Plath commented: "It borrows its title from the painting by Giorgio de Chirico—The Disquieting Muses. All through the poem I have in mind the enigmatic figures in this painting—three terrible faceless dressmaker's dummies in classical gowns, seated and standing in a weird, clear light that casts the long strong shadows characteristic of de Chirico's early work. The dummies suggest a twentieth-century version of other sinister trios of women—the Three Fates, the witches in Macbeth, de Quincey's sisters of madness" (Collected Poems 276). Plath borrows the images of de Chirico's three muses as the inspiration of her poem to explore her dark concerns. And these bare, indifferent mannequins become not only delegates of ominous women, but also representatives of the bad fairies and the evil mothers, who are the opposites of the well-meaning natural mother. By portraying a two-world division, the poem therefore suggests a contrast between light and dark, ideal and familiar. The three muses are surrogates of a cold, indifferent, painful, realistic world. These evil mothers overshadow the natural mother, who lives in a fairylike, cartoon world and is not aware of the presence of them. Like the good fairies in "Sleeping Beauty" and the muse of Greek mythology, the muses in the poem are the speaker's patrons; but unlike the good fairies, the three muses do not give her good gifts. On the contrary, these malicious muses cause her to be "heavy-footed," "tone-deaf" and "unteachable." And they let her live in a kingdom with "their shadows long in the setting sun / That never brightens or goes down." Plath's muses "symbolize, on the one hand, the indifference, harshness, and evil of the world and, on the other, the protagonist's inclination to despair and depression, feelings of failure, awareness of death" (Hargrove 151).

What the muses present is the disillusionary world; it is in contrast with the natural mother's childlike world where she cannot admit tragedy, where evil has no place, where "witches always, always got baked into gingerbread." Unlike the muses' haunting kingdom, the natural mother lives in a Never-Never Land, in which she can float in "bluest air / On a green balloon bright with a million / Flowers and bluebirds." The mother's world is like a "soap-bubble," that can easily bob away. It is

a dreamlike idealistic world that the speaker never reaches. With many details from her childhood, the first-person speaker describes her growing awareness of the conflict between two worlds, and later realizes that she belongs to the dark, ominous one. By reducing the mother to a fairylike world, which contrasts with the realistic world, the speaker is actually accusing the mother of being unaware of the dark side in her life. And by accepting the existence of the dark side in her life, the speaker thus symbolically destroys the natural mother's idealistic world and creates her own world, with the three muses as her company. The poem therefore implicitly presents Plath's perspective about the mother-daughter relationship. But it is certainly not a conventional viewpoint. The natural mother is not a role model for the daughter; on the contrary, the three muses replace her. Unlike a traditional daughter who would accept the mother's value and position in society, the speaker rejects the mother's fairytale reality and constructs her own.

The literary and autobiographical allusions in the poem inevitably relate to Plath and her family—the father's death, the loss of irretrievable childhood happiness, and the loss of an intellectual mentor who is replaced by the sinister muses. In the opening stanza, the speaker blames her mother for letting the sinister elements enter into her life from infancy. Like "Sleeping Beauty," she is cursed with three ominous, inescapable godmothers. While the five negative prefixes ("illbred," "disfigured," "unsightly," "unwisely" and "Unasked") demonstrate negative elements of the world, the repetition of "Mother, mother" indicates the speaker's anger and accusations against her mother. Stanza two suggests the bedtime stories centered on Warren's (Plath's younger brother) favorite teddy bear, "The Adventures of Mixie Blackshort," which Mrs. Plath invented, and "which ran into nightly installments for several years" (Letters Home 19). But the mother's heroic stories do not expel the evil muses; on the contrary, she is unable to perceive their presence and powerless to drive them away. The hurricane episode in the next stanza is also a private event from Plath's childhood. In a BBC essay on the memory of sea, Plath recounts a hurricane in 1939: "The rain set in, one huge Noah douche. Then the wind. The world had become a drum. Beaten, it shrieked and shook. Pale and elated in our beds, my brother and I sipped our nightly hot drink. We could, of course, not sleep" (Johnny Panic 123). The Thor song, which the mother teaches the children to help them forget the danger at present, is also a song that relates to the father. In a short story about her father, "Among the Bumblebees," Plath describes how the protagonist's father teaches her to sing the Thor song: "Alice learned to sing the thunder song with her father: 'Thor is angry. Thor is angry. Boom, boom, boom! Boom, boom, boom! We don't care. We don't care. Boom, boom, boom!' And above the resonant resounding baritone of her father's voice, the thunder rumbled harmless as a tame lion" (Johnny Panic 263-4). The mother in the

poem idealistically instructs the children that the thunder is only a mythological god who is harmless, yet the wicked muses rupture the father's study windows as easily as breaking bubbles. Their destructive power is more vicious than the hurricane. By destroying the father's bubble-like windows—a symbol of the paternal intelligence and the fragility of the mother's protection—the speaker affirms the persistence of negative elements in her life.

In order to display the differences of two worlds, Plath carefully organizes the diction of the poem. She uses the nursery rhyme and the flat conversational tone. Repetitions like "to nod / And nod and nod," "whose witches always, always / Got baked into gingerbread," "Thor is angry: boom boom boom!" "Thor is angry: we don't care!" "you cried and cried," "I learned, I learned, I learned," "flowers and bluebirds that never were / Never, never, found anywhere," are in contrast with the dialogized lines. Also, vocabularies are divided into two groups. One group describes the idealistic world—Mixie Blackshort the heroic bear, gingerbread, bubbles, cookies, and Ovaltine, fireflies, glowworm, twinkle-dress, balloon, flowers and bluebirds, and soap-bubble. The other group intimates de Chirico's muses and their sinister world—darning-eggs, mouthless, eyeless, stitched bald head, shadow, heavy-footed, dismal-headed, tone-deaf, gowns of stone, blank faces, and the setting sun. Furthermore, the word "mother" repeats in the poem nine times. The repetitions of "Mother, mother" that appear in the first and last stanzas explain an eagerness to arouse the mother's attention. But it also carries a sarcastic intensity, especially the "dear mother."

Plath uses the figures in de Chirico's painting to convey an understatement about a difficult mother-daughter relationship. It is an accusation about the mother's unawareness of dark side in the daughter's life, a complaint about the mother's inability to protect the daughter from despair and misfortune, and a daughter's desperate wish to arouse the mother's attention. Beside autobiographical elements, the use of a first-person speaker also reinforces Plath's eagerness. She uses a two-world division to indicate different perceptions about failure, pain, and death between the mother and the daughter. While the poem presents shifting images between an idealistic fairytale world and a realistic sinister world, the disagreement of these two worlds suggest an intense struggle to destroy one and create the other. The poem thus undergoes a process from destruction of the mother's traditional values to construction of the daughter's own values. When Plath lets the three ghostly muses replace the

maternal role, she actually reveals regret for the loss of an intellectual mentor—the muse.

5. On the Decline of Oracles

--The Painting: Idyllic vs. Mythic

"On the Decline of Oracles" is a poem based on de Chirico's 1910 painting, *The Enigma of the Oracle*. The painting, as de Chirico said, intends to evoke the "lyricism of Greek prehistory" (Kroll 216). Typical of the artist's early period, the painting describes a classical setting in a rather mysterious manner: in the left portion, a headless figure, like a stone statue, turns his back and faces an idyllic, cloudy landscape with the sea in the distance, while on the right above a black curtain appears a white head, which Scigaj and Greene interpret as the severed part of the left figure (225, 111). The severed head "conveys a haunting sense of irreparable separation—a disconnected, vacuous metaphysical realm" (Scigaj 225). The separation of head from body alludes to the theme of severance between past and present. The viewer is left to wonder what is concealed behind the curtain. The mystery remains unsolved. Also, the bricked wall, at the center of the picture, reinforces the bright outside and the gloomy inside. The stillness indoors at the right, the blown curtain, the isolated figure, and the shiny landscape at the left create a disturbing disharmony. Soby notes the work conveys "an atmosphere of malaise" and "the impression of uneasy suspense." The meaning of the work is ambiguous (33). De Chirico calls this moment of revelation—and the work derived from it—an enigma. While the white head above the curtain indicates the revelation of a god, the draped figure is the man who craves the oracle. As his isolation demonstrates his uneasiness, the self-secluded figure also reflects a detachment from the dim inside, from the mysterious head, and even from the enigma of the oracle. Besides, the painting also reveals an influence from the late Romanticism of Arnold Böcklin, a late nineteenth-century Swiss painter of gloomy landscapes and macabre vision. Inspired by Böcklin, *The Enigma of the Oracle* reflects de Chirico's inclination to reinvent the mythological scene in *Odysseus und Kalypso*, where the draped Ulysses at the left is a reference for the draped figure in de Chirico's picture (Faerna 10, Greene 115). Both paintings present a mysterious atmosphere.

--The Poem: Ancient Oracle vs. Modern Prophecy

Although Plath's ekphrastic poem is based on de Chirico's painting, she does not literally use the visual image in the painting, but instead presents its viewpoint about severance. While the painting portrays an ambiguous revelation of severance, Plath's

poem is about the inaccessible past, the loss of an intellectual mentor, and the loss of prophetic vision. Using the theme of the painting as her inspiration, Plath creates her own visual world by adding imagery about the father, the sea, the Old Bocklin, the peasants, the seashell, and the three "gossiping" men, to reinforce a severance in the father-daughter relationship, in the past and the present (and the future), and in the ancient oracle and modern prophecy. Like her two previous poems on de Chirico's art works, Plath also uses a first-person speaker to convert the exterior references—personal or mythic—into an interior landscape. There is a contrast between two worlds—the intelligent, oracular, ancient world where the father and Bocklin belong, and the trivial, dull, contemporary world where the speaker dwells—to emphasize the isolation of the speaker and the environment.

Thenceforth, the poem presents a connection between the speaker's deceased father and Arnold Bocklin. Both of them represent figures of wisdom. Although de Chirico's painting reflects an extended influence from Bocklin's *Odysseus und Kalypso*, it seems like Plath's poem contemplates more about Bocklin's life in his old age, which is mirrored in the poem. Soby illustrates a vivid description about old Bocklin: "Toward the end of his life...Bocklin has sat for hours in his garden, paralyzed and near death, but holding to his ears great shells so as to hear the roar of an ocean he could no longer visit" (25). Bocklin's withdrawal from society and his yearning to visit the sea must have stirred Plath's memories about her father, Otto Plath, who died of diabetes mellitus. In the introduction of *Letters Home*, Aurelia Plath, Sylvia's mother, describes an event which happened during the time of Otto's illness about his inability to participate in a family activity: "On the nurse's first day off, Otto suggested that I get out into the sun with Sylvia for an hour; he had all his needs supplied on the table next to his bed. She and I ran along the beach together for only about a half hour, because I felt uneasy about having left my husband.... On my return home I found Otto collapsed on the staircase. He had left his bed to go downstairs into the garden to look at his flowers" (*Letters Home* 23). The sick father who could not visit the beach and had to stay inside the house waiting for death echoes the tale about old inactive Bocklin. And the father's "vaulted conch" reflects Bocklin's seashell. Bocklin was an artist and Otto was a scholar. They are representatives of intellectuals. The word "oracle" in the title not only means a shrine where the ancient Greeks consulted a god, but also a person who gives wise guidance. Therefore, an artist and a scholar become delegates of the prophetic vision.

Characters in the poem exemplify comparison and contrast between two different worlds. In contrast with the intellectual world that Otto Plath and Bocklin represent, the first two stanzas portray the dull world where Plath and peasants reside. Stanza

One begins with "My father kept a vaulted conch," and ends with "but no peasants know." These two lines indicate the two different worlds and the noncommunication between them. Stanza Two starts with "My father died," and concludes with "The peasants feast and multiply." The two lines further portray the loss of wisdom from the (fore)father which makes the world tiresome and unintelligent. The speaker who is incompetent to fulfill her prophetic heritage is like the headless figure who is severed from his head—the symbol of wisdom. Instead of imposing oracles, the speaker stresses the triviality of her vision by comparing the three men in the next stanza with comic strip images. The three men might be a modern reflection of the Magi, or another suggestion of three muses in the previous poem. While the speaker describes them as comic pictures, she also demonstrates a creation of modern prophecies out of a destruction of ancient oracles. The three men manifest a modern inspiration of art. However, the speaker seems powerless about the contemporary dreary life, since "toward / The happening of this happening / The earth turns now." She eventually realizes that the decline of the ancient past is like "Troy's towers fall[en]." The modern vision is worthless and prophetic eyes are now dull.

Meanwhile, the diction of the poem also efficiently reinforces the contrast between two worlds. The first stanza contains seven words that are about prophetic vision: listened, hear, hear, spoke, ear, knew, know. The second stanza includes four words: voices, ear, eye, and sight. The third and the fourth stanza have only two prophetic words in each: see, eye, and vision, eyes. Plath not only writes about the decline of the ancient past, she also let the reader "see" and experience the decline of prophetic vision. Verb tenses also represent the difference between two worlds. While past tense verbs illustrate the dead father, old Bocklin, and ancient past, present tense verbs portray the speaker and peasants. Plath uses the present progressive tense—entering, coming, gossiping, and happening—to describe the three men. The reader can even perceive their advancing movement. And it helps to emphasize the continuity of triviality in the modern world.

The evocation of lyricism of Greek prehistory in de Chirico's picture is transformed into a comparison of two worlds in Plath's poem. The loss of ancient prophetic vision evokes her meditation on the loss of an intellectual mentor—the father as the kindred muse. And it is the loss that makes her, the contemporary poet, lose her inspirational vision. Like "The Disquieting Muses," de Chirico's painting enables Plath to illustrate a severance from the intellectual inheritance. Plath borrows the theme, but the landscape in the poem is absolutely her own visual world. In order to reinforce the severance, the shifting images about two worlds suggest not only a disagreement, but also a struggle to create the modern prophetic vision out of the destroyed ancient

oracular vision. Thenceforth, the process from destruction to creation indicates Plath's eagerness to discover inspirational sources in the contemporary world. And through the making of the poem—a creation of modern prophecy—Plath suggests the view of a modern poet. In any case, the father image in this ekphrastic poem continues in Plath's later poems about the father, who becomes a cold, indifferent and unreachable "father-sea god-muse" (Journals 243).

6. Conclusion

Plath's three ekphrastic poems on de Chirico's art works reveal one main subject—an anxiety about the irretrievable severance. While de Chirico's paintings portray a detachment of meanings among objects, Plath's poems reflect a detachment of the isolated speaker and the alienated environment. While de Chirico's paintings depict a contradiction between the classical background and modern elements, Plath's poems demonstrate how an idealistic world is at odds with a realistic world. Indeed, de Chirico's paintings are media for Plath to convey the psychological landscapes. She borrows the surrealistic images, or subject matter, from his art works to manifest three basic themes: the victimized female under the devastating male dominance, the persistence of negative elements in her life, and the loss of an intellectual mentor. By portraying, or alluding to, de Chirico's paintings, Plath suggests a possibility to reclaim the relationship and undertake a symbolic rebirth. Thus the solution for the anxiety of the irretrievable severance is to destroy the old values—the conventional culture—and to construct another one. Therefore, the female lover in "Conversation Among the Ruins" begins reconstructing her orderly world after the male destruction by cutting off communication between herself and the man. The despairing daughter in "The Disquieting Muses" establishes her concept of life and the maternal role by erasing the natural mother's illusory reality. And the unsatisfied poet in "On the Decline of Oracles" discovers modern creativity out of the destruction of ancient inspiration. While the autobiographical details might reflect the angst, failure, and depression Plath experienced before, her three ekphrastic poems on de Chirico's paintings suggest an expectation to find a way out, if not to destroy the distress of severed relationships with her kindred.

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