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INHABITED BY A CRY: A thematic study of  
Sylvia Plath's Ariel.

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in English at  
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Patrick Spillane

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## PREFACE

This thesis will mainly concern itself with a thematic study of Ariel tracing motifs and imagery in the hope of a deeper understanding of the poetry of the volume. Emphasis, then, will be on the artistry and objective control of a poet such as Plath, while at the same time not ruling out the elements of extremism, and the threatening dangerous element contained in poetry of this nature. Along with this emphasis on artistic merit there will be an effort made to 'place' the poet and to discuss her positive value in literature for our present age. Above all the thesis will concern itself with Sylvia Plath's authenticity both as an artist, and as a person with individual and unique perception.

All quotations and references to the poetry will be taken from the American, Harper and Row, edition of Ariel, an edition not normally sold in New Zealand. This volume, unlike the Faber edition, contains an interesting preface by Robert Lowell, and several poems, such as 'Lesbos' which are not contained in the English edition. There are some textual discrepancies such as the singular noun being used in the 'Lady Lazarus' line 'Gentleman, ladies'. The English edition reads 'Gentlemen, ladies', but here, and elsewhere, the Harper and Row version will be followed.

I wish to thank Mr. Peter Alcock for his perceptive comments and advice regarding the manuscript of the thesis and particularly for his introducing me to the poet's work. His help with reference texts, his knowledge of the modern literary scene, and arrangements to supervise the thesis have been an immense help. Thanks also to Del, my wife and all who encouraged me in completing this thesis.



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CHAPTER I

IN PRODUCTION

Tall and slender and delicate wristed, she had pale honey hair fine, thick, and long, and beautiful dark brown eyes. And her skin was pale gold and waxy, the same even colour. She seemed to be delighted with her little girl and played the role of mother with casual competence.<sup>1</sup>

So Sylvia Plath is described in a Cambridge Review article, 'Remembering Sylvia', and her sheer normality is stressed often in the hesitant biographical sketches that have emerged up to the present. Wendy Campbell in her memoir underlines the effortless perfection of Sylvia's actions, from writing through to cooking and cleaning house, what Alvarez terms her 'ruthless efficiency'.<sup>2</sup> She registers her surprise at Sylvia's eventual self-destruction:

Suicide often seems to be a very reasonable means of leaving a disastrous life but it was very difficult to connect Sylvia with self-slaughter.<sup>3</sup>

The fact of suicide is irrelevant to this poet's achievement, 'it is by the way; it adds nothing to her work and proves nothing about it.'<sup>4</sup> What is important is the insistence by biographers on Sylvia Plath's common sense and mature poise, for this control and poise is expressed throughout Ariel in the artistry of the poetry. Not that the biographers give an unbalanced picture. Robert Lowell adds a hint of inner recoiled tension to his picture of her:

She was willowy, long-waisted, sharp-elbowed, nervous, giggly, gracious - a brilliant tense presence embarrassed by restraint. Her humility and willingness to accept what was admired seemed

at times to give her an air of maddening docility that hid her unfashionable patience and boldness.<sup>5</sup>

And two quotations from letters written while she was at Cambridge, in 1955, perfectly capture these double strands of normalcy and potential inner violence:

Cambridge is heaven. I sat myself down at the window last night, turned off the gas fire and the light and looked out at the white mists rising in the moonlight.

It is very cold here: the wind comes straight off the russian steppes and the cobbled streets are paved with the blue frost-bitten fingers that have dropped off people's hands.<sup>6</sup>

Surprise amongst her contemporaries at her death, and at her last poems, must surely stem from a failure to look closely at the poet's early writing, and a refusal to open the mind to the potentialities of this writing. In 1957 Sylvia Plath submitted a manuscript of poems 'Two Lovers and a Beachcomber' for the English Tripos, containing poems which showed a savage lack of reserve, as clear a forecast as was possible for the extremism that was to follow in Ariel:

Nobody blinks a lid, gapes,  
Or cries that this raw flesh  
Reeks of the butcher's cleaver,  
Its heart and guts hung hooked  
And bloodied as a cow's split frame  
Parceled out by white-jacketed assassins.

'Street Song'.<sup>7</sup>

The diction is more contrived and self-conscious than in the Ariel poems, a trifle less taut and condensed, but an objective deliberate exercise on a horrific theme nonetheless, as is common in the later volume.

For, however much one weighs up Sylvia Plath's early conventional literary career with its list of poetry prizes and guest editorships on magazines, and the well-drilled verse of The Colossus, she must ultimately be considered an extremist poet. George Steiner terms her last poems

... an act of extremity, personal and formal, obliging one to try and re-think the whole question of the poet's condition and of the condition of language after modernism and war.

It is the group of so-called Confessional poets, chiefly American, and typified by Robert Lowell, Plath, John Berryman and Anne Sexton, Plath's American counterpart, who have forced this question and who have perhaps been thrown into sharper prominence due to sheer contrast with British poetry since the war, the poetry of the Movement, typified by Philip Larkin. It was academic, efficient and polite, without a sense of urgency, insisting on a 'status quo', a belief that modern traditions and beliefs have not altered radically. Alvarez quotes two lines from Larkin's 'Church-going' to show the Movement's wry belief in the poet as a very normal person, an interpreter of the contemporary scene, not an innovator, even reactionary in a whimsical way:

Hatless, I take off  
My cycle clips in awkward reverence.<sup>9</sup>

Alvarez neatly states why he considers poetry of the Movement variety of little relevance to the twentieth century:

What, I suggest, has happened in the last half century is that we are gradually being made to realize that all our lives, even those of the most genteel and enislanded, are influenced profoundly by forces which have nothing to do with gentility, decency, or politeness.<sup>10</sup>

The old established standards have been confronted with two world wars, the concentration camps, genocide and the threat of nuclear war. As well as mass evil impinging on our consciousness, however, there has been a parallel recognition and facing up to inner violence. The age of psycho-analysis is upon us, and very much a part of the modern scene. To be modern, though, Alvarez warns, does not necessarily mean to make these things one's subject matter. In fact Plath, in 'Ariel' and other poems, is like Samuel Beckett and other modern writers in that there is a certain substancelessness, a lack of geographical and factual setting, to her work. What is necessary is a serious honest approach to poetry, an approach which will drop the pretence that life's social mores and traditions have remained intransigent.

The extremist artist in pursuing his own insights to the utmost, is able to fulfil this function admirably. He rejects the rigid idea of 'impersonality' stemming from Eliot, and writes about the very core of his own experience. If an immense amount of skill and talent is present, the writing can be of importance and relevance to people in the same era. Alvarez sees this as a return to the 'intense subjectivity of the Romantics', but a return which is accompanied by a new coolness and objectivity. The modern artist is:

... involved not simply in his emotions but in their sources, in his hidden motives and compulsions, in his own internal power politics and the roots of his own violence. His clinical awareness of all this has been created by his growing intimacy with psychoanalysis; so, too, has his cool, analytic attitude to his own distress. But he shares this cool with his audience; so the more ruthless he is with himself, the more unshockable the audience becomes. This pushes the artist into what I would call Extremism. He pursues his insights to the edge of breakdown and then beyond it, until mania,

depression, paranoia and the hallucinations that come in psychosis or are induced by drugs become as urgent and as commonplace as Beauty, Truth, Nature and the Soul were to the Romantics.<sup>11</sup>

George Steiner by the title he gives his article in the 'Cambridge Review' - 'In Extremis' - places Sylvia Plath where Alvarez does. He confirms the modernity and relevance of her subjectivism elsewhere in his Newman anthology article 'Dying is an Art':

Sylvia Plath's last poems have already passed into legend as both representative of our present tone of emotional life and unique in their implacable harsh brilliance.<sup>12</sup>

He questions, however, in his Cambridge article the validity of the persona she adopts, her identification with the persecuted Jews and the concentration camp horrors of World War II:

What extra-territorial right had Sylvia Plath - she was a child plump and golden in America, when the trains actually went - to draw on the reserves of animate horror in the ash and the children's shoes? ... Do any of us have license to locate our personal disasters, raw as these may be, in Auschwitz?<sup>13</sup>

He sees the adoption of this persona as absolutely basic to the final poems, the core of the poetry which now matters. One could initially take arms against this statement as it seems that Ariel contains a large sector of poetry which is impervious to the death-camp horrors, and which employs a wide variety of personae. 'Ariel', 'Elm', 'Death and Co.', 'Contusion', 'Edge', 'Nick and the Candlestick', 'Words', and many other major poems are independent of this strain for a start. 'Elm', in some ways the highlight of her inner savagery, uses the persona of a huge tree, while 'Edge', a vision of the poet's own death, and a haunting exquisite high-point of the

volume, is completely a product of the poet's personal mental landscape. Her feelings of threat, vulnerability and doom stem from many kinds of stimuli - the moon, a cut, hospitalization, a cadaver room, a birthday present, and even children. The holocaust of mass-murder is an important, but only a partial component of her image-making materials.

In any case, Auschwitz, Belsen, and modern mass slaughter are very much the mental property of any modern person. Preservation of the death-camp sites as memorials, and frequent T.V. and film documentaries seem to encourage the present-day man to take personal mental possession of these horrors. In addition, the poet's personal experience, her break-downs and suicide attempts, were of such intensity and pain that there seems to be no question of her drawing an 'overdraft' on human suffering. She describes her first experience of mental recovery thus:

A time of darkness, despair, disillusion -  
 so black only as the inferno of the human mind  
 can be - symbolic death, and numb shock then  
 the painful agony of slow rebirth and psychic  
 regeneration ...<sup>14</sup>

In fact, as has been mentioned earlier, the mass public evil of modern times has been matched by a growing consciousness of the potentialities for evil contained in the human mind. The death-camp material of Ariel can be interpreted almost purely as metaphor, or as a vehicle for enlarging private suffering to public dimensions. Charles Newman states this expertly, and Steiner's case diminishes to a minor, if justified, quibble:

For in absorbing, personalizing the socio-political catastrophes of the century, she reminds us that they are ultimately metaphors of the terrifying human mind.<sup>15</sup>

Sylvia Plath's modernity consists far more in this sphere of 'the terrifying human mind', in giving expression to her inner torment, the modern cult of unpleasure and masochism that may be discerned in Keats and the Romantics. Alvarez simply quotes the huge number of twentieth century suicides by writers and artists as evidence of the dominance of this trait in the arts this century.<sup>16</sup> Dostoevsky, an early proponent of interior disease, articulated it perfectly in his Notes from Underground:

I am a sick man ... I am a spiteful man.  
I am an unattractive man. I believe my liver  
is diseased. However, I know nothing at all  
about my disease and do not know for certain  
what ails me.<sup>17</sup>

It is the illness of 'The Applicant' in Ariel:

First, are you our sort of a person?  
Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,  
A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch.

And the illness of the poet herself 'Overexposed, like an X-ray' (Medusa), just 'as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns / On a screen', as in Eliot's 'Prufrock'. Her own reality was her illness, an illness she couldn't control, as Ted Hughes her husband writes in 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', in the criticism anthology:

She had none of the usual guards and remote controls to protect herself from her own reality. She lived right in it, especially during the last



two years of her life. Perhaps that is one of the privileges, or prices, of being a woman and at the same time an initiate into the poetic order of events.<sup>18</sup>

Lionel Trilling in his article 'On the Teaching of Modern Literature', questions whether students should be exposed to the modern literature of self-annihilation, terming the urge towards losing oneself as the central element in literature today:

I venture to say that the idea of losing oneself up to the point of self-destruction, of surrendering oneself to experience without regard to self-interest or conventional morality, of escaping wholly from the societal bonds, is an 'element' somewhere in the mind of every modern person who dares to think of what Arnold in his unaffected Victorian way called 'the fulness of spiritual perfection'.<sup>19</sup>

Sylvia Plath seems to have a completely modern representative quality both in terms of Dostoevsky's espousal of sickness:

I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses  
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to the surgeons.

'Tulips'.

I am inhabited by a cry.

'Elm'.

and of Trilling's idea of losing oneself, surrendering to experience:

... I only wanted  
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.

'Tulips'.

Dead egg, I lie  
Whole  
On a whole world I cannot touch.

'Paralytic'.

Whereas Trilling has doubts about teaching a counter-culture Alvarez goes all out for 'adversary culture' and extremism. He goes 'beyond the gentility principle' to view the 'Extremist style' as 'the most courageous response',<sup>20</sup> to the modern scene. In fact it is the only response possible in an age which has produced Wilfred Owen's description of the faces of soldiers he encountered in France:

It was not despair or terror, it was more terrible than terror, for it was a blindfold look, and without expression, like a dead rabbit's.<sup>21</sup>

This look sums up present-day alienation for Alvarez and he records this in 'The Art of Suicide', his Partisan Review article:

That numbness - beyond hope, despair, terror and, certainly, beyond heroics - is, I think, the final quantum to which all the modish forms of twentieth-century alienation are reduced. Under the energy, appetite and constant diversity of the modern arts is this obdurate core of blankness and insentience ...<sup>22</sup>

The poetic movement towards Extremism derives from Robert Lowell and Sylvia has acknowledged her debt to his break-through\*. Alvarez sees Lowell as extending the Romantic's agony, only in modern analytic terms, and Sylvia Plath as extending Lowell's explorations. It is with her:

... that the Extremist impulse becomes total and, literally, final. ... In the mass of brilliant poems which poured out in the last few months of

---

\* 'I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's Life Studies. This intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience, which I feel has been partly taboo.' (From an interview and reading of poems made by her for the British Council).<sup>23</sup>

her life she took Lowell's example to its logical conclusion, systematically exploring the nexus of anger, guilt, rejection, love and destructiveness ...<sup>24</sup>

And these traits for Alvarez are not only personal but manifested in society as well. The poet is a product of the 'society' he is writing in, in that he often, consciously or otherwise, mirrors its ailments.

David Holbrook rejects Alvarez' view<sup>25</sup> and looks on Sylvia Plath's work as containing schizoid logic and solutions of an individual, non-typical nature. Her courage and clarity lie in facing up to her own individual problem of existence. The result is not insights which are universally valid, but a confusion, an inability to 'distinguish between black and white, life and death'.<sup>26</sup> He warns:

We need to learn what we can from schizoid writers, without rejecting them on one hand, and yet not falling in love with their schizoid ethos on the other.<sup>27</sup>

Holbrook's attitude, firmly grounded in traditional social mores, seems less tenable than that of Alvarez'. He seems to view Sylvia Plath and Ariel as something to be kept at arm's length, an unfortunate case study, of which, luckily, there is ample documentation. A dangerous denizen of present-day literary waters to be viewed and analyzed from the edge of the aquarium. Alvarez goes 'beyond all this fiddle' to refuse to see the extremist artist as alienated, as there are now no traditional values to be alienated from. He is simply lost, a mirror, more than a victim, of society:

He lacks altogether the four traditional supports upon which every previous generation has been able, in one degree or another, to rely: religion, politics, national cultural tradition, reason.<sup>28</sup>

Both views, however, seem to be rather ultimate, although Alvarez is far closer to Sylvia Plath's real essence. A median stance would appear to be a more useful and non-hysterical position to take up as it seems quite possible that the extremist artist's very act of confronting his sickness can in the long run be of benefit to society. This benefit does not necessarily derive, however, from erecting an extreme like Sylvia Plath's into a norm, claiming utter typicality and truth for her point of view. A dialectic is involved whereby extremism becomes not a cult for its own sake, a nursing of hysteria, but an essential part of man's self-recognition. For man to fully encounter truth and maturity it may be necessary to negate a false thesis about his true nature, such as that of the poetry of the Movement, to discover a true synthesis. It seems that Sylvia Plath admirably supplies this negation and although she herself got trapped in the anti-perspective, her work has an essential part to play in the artistic process of establishing perspective and equilibrium. Her poetry makes its point through personal actuality and is extremely typical and representative as can be seen from Trilling's and Dostoevsky's view of the modern element in literature.

A.E. Dyson writing 'On Sylvia Plath' in The Art of Sylvia Plath, backs this typicality:

In Sylvia Plath's last poems, as in the work of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, we are reminded that the Modern Movement, as Kafka himself exemplified it, is not dead, but still with us; ... an art which does confront our present nuclear world fully and totally must be an art on the brink of the abyss; that perhaps the creative mind exploring its own inner anguish is the only mirror art can hold up to us today.<sup>29</sup>

If Sylvia Plath's reactions to her anguish can be proven authentic, then her art is a healthy and vital part of the modern literary scene, rather than 'murderous' in Alvarez' terms, or overwhelming and confused, in Steiner's terms. She herself did not survive this essential process of facing psychic instability, the risks involved are deliberately great for the extremist artist, but if there is potential failure, there is also potential success, and a chance of restored equilibrium. Art such as Sylvia Plath's does not end in itself. It is an exaggerated reaction, the poet's death in some ways guaranteeing its authenticity, but it can be rehabilitative and a positive contribution to literature and a total view of man's nature.

There is nothing self-indulgent about the true extremist artist, however. His or her heightened fringe experiences are not substitutes for creativity or art as Alvarez notes in Beyond all this Fiddle:

Clearly it takes a highly disciplined and informed art to probe dispassionately and successfully into the extremes of inner space.<sup>30</sup>

It will be seen from the richness and diversity of syntax, imagery and theme weaving, that illness in itself does not make Sylvia Plath's poetry, but art and control. The sheer clinical detachment needed for the handling of extremely personal 'confessional' type poetry reduces many of the themes to a state almost of neutrality. Suicide, psychic break-down, bodily mutilation, and nightmarish fantasy become almost normative in Ariel. Plath's critical assurance can be gauged simply from the sheer consistency of the poetry in Ariel. The quality of her work does not fluctuate violently as does Anne Sexton's

Sylvia's colleague and Lowell's gifted protege. Her ability to make her private obsessional themes public and available to 'enlarge' them in Barbara Hardy's terms ('The Poetry of Sylvia Plath', in The Survival of Poetry, ed. Martin Dodsworth), is another feature of her artistic control. The concentration camps, Nazism, Christianity, Bee-keeping, and other public material lift her work in the main well away from the 'morbid secretiveness' and 'weirdly incantatory black magic against unspecified persons and situations',<sup>31</sup> that M.L. Rosenthal claims she is often guilty of.

The ensuing chapters, then, will be largely concerned with viewing the authenticity of Sylvia Plath's reactions to her own savage insights. This authenticity will chiefly be apparent in the artistic detachment she displays, the order and control she brings to bear on her material, which, along with the process of 'enlargement', make her insights available to the reader. In a modern age, without obvious external standards, the artist has to create his own framework for expressing his internalised experience, he has to use his art to create his own identity. That Sylvia Plath achieves her own authentic poetic voice will become obvious from the tracing of her skilful thematic weavings, and the completely individual poetic frame of reference she sets up. A dedicated, professional apprenticeship should become obvious from references to poems from The Colossus, and sections from The Bell Jar, for Ariel in many ways grows, at least artistically, out of these. Ted Hughes emphatically backs up this unified view of her work, and the value of motif-hunting of a thematic study of Ariel:

Most readers will perceive pretty readily the single centre of power and light which her poems all share, but I think it will be a service if I point out just how little of her poetry is 'occasional', and how faithfully her separate poems build up into one long poem. She faced a task in herself, and her poetry is the record of her progress in the task. The poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear - even if the origins of it and the *dramatis personae*, are at bottom enigmatic.<sup>32</sup>

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Footnotes:

- 1 M.W.C., 'Remembering Sylvia', Cambridge Review, Feb. 7, 1969, 254.
- 2 'Sylvia Plath', The Art of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman. (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 57.
- 3 Cambridge Review, 185.
- 4 A. Alvarez, 'The Art of Suicide', Partisan Review, No. 3, 1970, 357.
- 5 Sylvia Plath, Ariel. (New York: Harper and Row), p.IX.
- 6 Cambridge Review, 244.
- 7 *ibid.*, 244.
- 8 *ibid.*, 247.
- 9 A. Alvarez, Beyond all this Fiddle. (London: The Penguin Press, 1968), p. 37.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 39.
- 11 *ibid.*, pp. 12-13.
- 12 Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 211.
- 13 Cambridge Review, 248.
- 14 Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 163.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 53.
- 16 Partisan Review, 339.
- 17 Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, ed. Walter Kaufmann, p. 53.
- 18 Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 187.
- 19 Lionel Trilling, Beyond Culture. (Peregrine, 1967), pp. 40-41.
- 20 Beyond all this Fiddle, p. 20.
- 21 Partisan Review, 342.
- 22 *ibid.*, 343.
- 23 Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 62.
- 24 *ibid.*, 357.



- 25 David Holbrook, 'The 200-inch distorting mirror', New Society, 11 July, 1968.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 'Sylvia Plath and the problem of violence in art', Cambridge Review, Feb. 7, 1969.
- 26 Cambridge Review, 250.
- 27 *ibid.*, 250.
- 28 Beyond all this Fiddle, p. 7.
- 29 Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 210.
- 30 Beyond all this Fiddle, p. 13.
- 31 M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 88.
- 32 Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 187.

CHAPTER II

## DADDY

If my mouth could marry a hurt like that

'Daddy', the most famous poem of the Ariel volume, presents the complex attitude of the poet to the memory of her father. Diagnostic, in the main, it explores the motif from sexual, psychological, and religious angles. From the outset, ambivalence is maintained, the ambivalence of these lines from 'Poppies in July':

If I could bleed, or sleep! -  
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

Although primarily these lines evince a sexual desire bordering on the masochistic, and contain the poet's recurrent ambiguity regarding pain, they capture what is at the core of 'Daddy'. In this poem, perhaps her most powerful in terms of immediate impact, she explores a love / violence motif in which internal psychological phenomena are raised to a level at which they can become public property. Although the heroine registers a complex insight into her own being, she is at pains to associate herself with historical events, with Dachau, Auschwitz and Fascism. This in itself helps to make her private tormented conscience a measure for the public social conscience. That she was conscious of the need to inform even intense inner experience with outward relevance is obvious from one of her own statements quoted by Alvarez in his article in the anthology:

I think that personal experience shouldn't  
be a kind of shut box and mirror-looking

narcissistic experience. I believe it should be generally relevant to such things as Hiroshima and Dachau, and so on.<sup>1</sup>

It is this feature of her work that Barbara Hardy terms 'enlargement' rather than derangement:

We are never enclosed in a private sickness here, and if derangement is a feature of the poetry, it works to enlarge and generalize, not to create an enclosure. Moreover its enlargement works through passionate reasoning, argument and wit. Its judgement is equal to its genius.<sup>2</sup>

In a reading prepared for the B.B.C. third programme Sylvia made the following bald comment with regard to 'Daddy':

This poem is spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other - She has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.<sup>3</sup>

The persona of the poem, then, is trapped by a classical Electra complex. At the heart of this is a rejection of the dominant paternal figure who is seen as life-denying and vicious, far removed from such feminine attributes as gentleness or empathy. This rejection is obvious:

Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You -

The impulse that sustains the persona, however, although rejecting the father, is also ~~t~~ turned in on herself. She torments herself, outdoing her persecutors:

I made a model of you  
 A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.  
 And I said I do, I do.

For at the core of the poem is the essential insight that the speaker achieves into her own divided state of mind. She is aware of her own torture but does not adopt an unadulterated attitude of hatred towards her persecutors. Her attitude encompasses both love and hatred, an attitude captured by the savage repetition of the words of the marriage service. Her condemnation is sardonic, so insistent, and couched in such jaunty rhythms that there is almost amusement at suffering which can prove to be so intense:

Ich, ich, ich, ich  
 I could hardly speak.  
 I thought every German was you.

Alvarez comments:

What she does in the poem is, with a weird detachment, to turn the violence against herself so as to show that she can equal her oppressors with her self-inflicted oppression.<sup>4</sup>

This process is a necessary accompaniment to 'marrying the hurt', to seeing the father as an object of desperate love. He is 'a bag full of God', a 'You' with a capital letter, a reality so desperately longed for that Sylvia 'thought even the bones would do', if they could be found through self-destruction. Hence the brutality that the father-figure encompasses cannot be separated completely from the love felt towards this figure. The persona vacillates between violent rejection of Daddy, whose victim she is, and whom she has had to relinquish as a love-object, and a strangely

detached recognition that the violence is an essential part of her love for him:

Every woman adores a Fascist,  
The boot in the face, the brute  
Brute heart of a brute like you.

The diction of love (adores, heart) in association with that of violence (boot, brute) breaks down traditional associations of love with tenderness and warmth. The longing, the romantic diction (my pretty red heart) and the jack-hammer rhythms also hint at an expansion of the love feeling to include sexual attraction and union.

This love / brutality ethos seems to be given universal implication in the line:

Every woman adores a Fascist,

and in the ritualistic violence of the last stanza when the villagers join the heroine in 'dancing and stamping' on the 'man in black'. Violence seems to be asserted as an essential component of love, and perhaps of life. A.R. Jones goes so far as to claim that because this poem is placed historically it:

... is committed to the view that this ethos of love / brutality is the dominant historical ethos of the last thirty years.<sup>5</sup>

Whatever the relevance of this type of speculation Sylvia Plath certainly avoids excessive use of 'narcissistic experience' in this poem. Although the persona is presented as suffering uniquely and personally, Plath, the artist, creates a form within which this suffering is controlled and given meaning. She seems to have fulfilled Yeat's Maxim:

We make out of the quarrel with others,  
rhetoric, but of the quarrel with ourselves,  
poetry.<sup>6</sup>

It is partly by means of this 'quarrel' that the apparent exorcism of the poem occurs. 'Marrying the hurt', confronting pain and terror head on, has also been part of the exorcism. She has 'made a model of you / A man in black with a Meinkampf look' in an attempt at exorcism, the whole poem in fact is a type of model, an exercise. That she fails, that she is not through with the desire for death is obvious from 'Death and Co.', 'Birthday Present', and the major poems that follow.

'Daddy', however, ends on a note of purification, the fantasy seems to have been mastered for the present:

The black telephone's off at the root,  
The voices just can't worm through.

If I've killed one man, I've killed two —  
The vampire who said he was you

The heroine of 'Daddy' 'tried to die / And get back, back, back to you', and has attempted exorcism of her self-created devil of the imagination. She can finally show compassion and warmth for her victim:

Daddy, you can lie back now.

The poem ends with an extension of the persona's fantasies and indulgences to the community at large, a feature which may add weight to Jones' claims:

There's a stake in your fat black heart  
And the villagers never liked you.  
They are dancing and stamping on you.  
They always knew it was you.

In the final line the fantasy Daddy of the Electra complex is dismissed with all the violence of love:

Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

The heroine of the poem has acted out 'the awful little allegory once over' in an effort to be 'free of it'. The exorcism has been of an ambivalent kind, however. An erotic masochistic communication with the father which has been indulged absolutely. The malevolent spectres of the mind's private suffering have been expressed and ordered through the creative control of the poet. Personal experience of a threatening nature has been transmuted through Plath's artistic control into a myth for her times.

black shoe / In which I have lived like a foot

The first and one of the most unforgettable images that explodes in 'Daddy' is that of the 'black shoe', an image which evolves from the poet's earlier work. It also raises immediately the question of nursery rhyme and rhythm and the poet's employment of these in the poem. It was Robert Frost who referred to the use of rhythms as 'momentary stays against confusion' and it is in this manner that the rhythm of 'Daddy' works although here, as in most of her poems, Sylvia Plath lets in a lot of terror. The basic technique of the poem consists in a marriage of jaunty ritualistic-type rhythm akin to nursery rhyme, with a brutal and horrific theme.

The initial effect of this technique is to give a sense of security against threatening forces:

You do not do, you do not do  
 Any more, black shoe  
 In which I have lived like a foot  
 For thirty years.

This element can be seen at work in actual nursery rhyme. In the original 'Old Woman in a Shoe' there is an air of finality about the solution she arrives at for her overpopulated shoe even though the problem remains unsolved:

She whipped them all soundly and put them to bed.<sup>7</sup>

The Scottish version masks much more gruesome events:

There was a wee bit wifie;  
 She had so many bairns,  
 She kenn'd na what to do.  
 She gaed to the market  
 To buy a sheep-head;  
 When she came back  
 They were a' lying dead.  
 She went to the wright  
 To get them a coffin;  
 When she came back  
 They were a' lying  
 laughing.  
 She gaed up the stair,  
 To ring the bell;  
 The bell rope broke,  
 And down she fell.

The same sort of interaction is set up in 'Daddy'. The rhythmic patterns Jones says:

are extremely simple, almost incantatory,<sup>8</sup>  
 repeated and giving a very steady return.

Consisting largely of repetitive sounds and phrases ('Panzer-man, panzer-man') they help keep terrifying material at a distance. The persona is able to assume a sardonic tone, attacking both her persecutors and herself. This of course is only one aspect, as it is



through the strong rhythms from stanza nine onwards that much of the violence erupts:

I have always been scared of you,  
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.  
And your neat moustache.

The echoing 'ou' sound dominates 'Daddy' and is almost used as a spell to drive out the father-spectre, 'The vampire ... who ... drank my blood for a year'. There is variety in its employment, however. The rejecting and spell-casting 'You do not do, you do not do' line, for instance, seems to nullify in anticipation the pseudo-marriage service enacted in the third last stanza ('And I said I do, I do'). The italicized 'you' of stanza nine and the fact that the 'you' and his alien 'gobbledygoo' are an unknown quantity is used to express the persona's awed and bewildered hatred of this figure. At the same time the rhythm and rhyme work against the diction to convey a sense of tenderness:

I used to pray to recover you.  
Ach, du,

the soothing sound pattern modifying the resentful nature of the heroine's statements. The rhythms and rhyme, then, and their nursery overtones, have a large role to play in the establishment of the love / hate ethos mentioned earlier.

An article by Mabel P. Worthington in The Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics (Princeton University) makes this comment on Joyce's use of nursery rhymes in Finnegan's Wake:

The author uses them to reinforce his concept of ever-recurring motifs in human existence; he sees the rhymes as embodying myths which express the experience of the human race.<sup>9</sup>

And Theodore Roethke, a disciple of nursery rhyme, notes in his lecture  
Some Remarks on Rhythm:

Everyone knows that poetry is shot through  
 with appeals to the unconscious, to the fears and  
 desires that go far back into our childhood,  
 into the imagination of the race.<sup>10</sup>

He backs this up with careful and sympathetic analyses of folk-rhyme and nonsense-verse. It may not be too far-fetched to see Plath's employment of nursery-type rhythms as helping put her poem into a more universal and widely-applicable context. As enlarging it to give it a public voice, an aspect dwelt on previously. The poem certainly deals with the 'fears and desires that go back into our childhood' although they are personalised vividly in Plath's poem. The grim elements of experience embodied in Nursery Rhyme and its primitive use of language and symbol are admirably suited to the poet's integrity and sincerity, and the elemental nature of her experience.

There is nothing inventive about the actual rhythms Plath uses - iambic lines interspersed with anapaestic and spondaic - and it is indicative of her artistry that she achieves such power within this framework. Much of this power derives simply from her choice of symbol and colour. One can catch echoes of nursery rhyme in the use of the 'black shoe' in which the speaker has 'lived like a foot / For thirty years'. However, as a symbol it backs up both the nursery rhyme idea of embodying 'the experience of the human race', and the Freudian basis of the poem. Freud writes:

The foot, is a very primitive sexual symbol  
 already found in myths.<sup>11</sup>

In fact, 'the name Oedipus, it should be noted, means "the swollen footed"<sup>12</sup>.

The foot symbol bears these initial connotations plus, of course, the obvious idea of confinement and repression of the speaker by her Electra complex. It is varied as the poem progresses and in stanza five encompasses the idea of origins:

So I never could tell where you  
Put your foot, your root, ...

Here the symbol expresses a double aspect of the persona's make-up - a desire to reach back to her father, the 'bag full of God' whom she prayed 'to recover'; and a complicating feeling of nausea at the possible German (and Nazi) origins of her father. In stanza eleven it is the foot that is used to typify the satanic quality of the father:

A cleft in your chin instead of your foot  
But no less a devil for that, ...

It seems worth noting that in the final stanza this devil of the imagination is exorcised through a ritual of dancing and stamping, a neat climax to the foot imagery of the poem.

The description of the dead father in stanzas two and three contains a magnificent combination of Plath's recurrent sea and stone imagery:

Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one grey toe  
Big as a Frisco seal

And a head in the freakish Atlantic  
Where it pours bean green over blue  
In the waters off beautiful Nauset.

'Marble-heavy', 'bag full', and 'statue', are all admirable in their expert communication of the torpor of death, and, especially through the use of 'ghastly' and 'freakish', a feeling of absurdity and disgust that the father should die while the speaker 'thought he was God'. Throughout her poetry, however, Plath knits images and themes together forcing one to look beyond single poems for deeper insight.

The dead father as 'marble heavy', as 'statue with one grey toe', appears to originate in 'The Colossus', the title poem of her earlier volume. Death and illness in association with stone is common in this volume:

The moles look neutral as the stones.  
 Their corkscrew noses, their white hands  
 Uplifted, stiffen in a family pose.

'Blue Moles'.

The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry  
 Open one stone eye.

'The Stones'.

It is in the title poem, 'The Colossus', that the stone-like nature of death and the father as a fallen statue come together. The image of the father is shown from the outset to be subjective (as it obviously is in 'Daddy'), one built up in the persona's mind's eye:

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

Here is the same mocking derision of the father as occurs in 'Daddy':

Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle,  
 Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other.

and the same bewilderment:

Thirty years now I have laboured  
 To dredge the silt from your throat.  
 I am none the wiser.

But the all-encompassing yearning for the father and domination by his memory is also very much in evidence. As in 'Daddy' where the persona is 'poor and white, / Barely daring to breathe or Achoo', in 'The Colossus' she squats at night 'in the cornucopia / Of your left ear, out of the wind', and is obsessed with getting back to, recreating this god-like Colossus, the memory of her father:

I crawl like an ant in mourning  
 Over the weedy acres of your brow  
 To mend the immense skull-plates and clear  
 The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.  
 ... O father, all by yourself  
 You are pithy and historical as the Roman Forum.\*

In conclusion the heroine places herself in a world where daily life and its demands, or even the intrusion of something unexpected and unusual, are all excluded:

My hours are married to shadow.  
 No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel  
 On the blank stones of the landing.

In an Ariel poem, however, we find that eternity without a father is also out of the question, a continuation of insecurity:

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\* 'Gulliver' in Ariel contains no explicit link to 'The Colossus', but boldly captures this idea of immensity, of a personality too expansive for ordinary beings ('The spider-men') to comprehend:

How they hate you.  
 They converse in the valley of your fingers, they are inchworms.

... the far  
Fields melt my heart.

They threaten  
To let me through to a heaven  
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

'Sheep in Fog'.

Death is often, in Plath's poetry, 'a dark water' and her fascination with the sea is in evidence throughout her work. In Ocean 1212W, a prose piece, this fascination is directly associated with death by water:

When I was learning to creep, 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.<sup>13</sup>

It was the death of her father that ended her childhood associations with the sea:

My father died, we moved inland.<sup>14</sup>

It is in 'Full Fathom Five' in The Colossus that the direct link between the father and the sea is made:

Old man, you surface seldom.  
Then you come in with the tide's coming

As in Ariel's song in The Tempest, the sea here is a transforming medium entirely suitable to the dream-like transmutation that occurs in 'Full Fathom Five': 'Miles long / Extend the radial sheaves / of your spread hair', and an apt setting for the fantasy figure that emerges in 'Daddy'.

The main impulse that informs 'Full Fathom Five', however, is the desire to retrieve the father, to return to him:

I walk dry on your kingdom's border  
 Exiled to no good.  
 Your shelled bed I remember.  
 Father, this thick air is murderous.  
 I would breathe water.

This impulse is evident in 'Daddy':

I used to pray to recover you.  
 ... I was ten when they buried you.  
 At twenty I tried to die  
 And get back, back, back to you.

The content of the latter differs in that it uses the past tense. The heroine of the poem is putting these desires and imaginings behind her and attempting total, even if illusory, exorcism. In the handling of the sea-imagery, also, a more complex note is sounded. Not only does it register the desire to return to the father, but also a helpless petulant anger at the loss of the father. The epithet 'freakish Atlantic', it has been noted, seems to suggest an element of absurdity, an element magnificently captured in a stanza from 'All the Dead Dears', a Colossus poem:

And an image looms under the fishpond surface  
 Where the daft father went down  
 With orange duck-feet winnowing his hair -

The all-enveloping darkness of the father's 'black shoe' which Sylvia has lived in 'like a foot', belongs very much to the earlier poetry as well as to 'Daddy'. The presence of these images in 'Daddy' is all the more forbidding because of this build-up, this foreshadowing.

the black man who / Bit my pretty red heart in two.

This figure of 'the black man', the embodiment of the Electra complex, is, of course, central to 'Daddy'. Appropriately enough, it appears to originate from the poem 'Man in Black' in The Colossus, and is seen in a striking sea setting:

Where the three magenta  
Breakwaters take the shove  
And suck of the grey sea

The man in black, and the hostile sea, are inextricably linked:

And you, across those white  
Stones, strode out in your dead  
Black coat, black shoes, and your  
Black hair till there you stood,  
Fixed vortex on the far  
Tip, riveting stones, air,  
All of it, together.

These lines capture the essence of 'Daddy'. The hardness of stones is again associated with death, as is 'white', the absence of colour, of life. The colour black is traditionally death-like as in 'Little Fugue':

Death opened, like a black tree, blackly.

Here the father wears the attire of death ('your dead black coat') and is a 'fixed vortex' attracting the poet to himself, sucking her into death. Where the poems differ radically is in the tone of the speaker. The persona of 'Daddy' strikes a sardonic incantatory note, whereas in the 'Man in Black' a dramatic pose is adopted:

And you, across those white  
Stones, strode out ...



The antithetical setting of the colours black and red against one another in 'Daddy' is typical of Plath's use of colour. Red is a dominant colour in Ariel, usually used as an affirmation of life, of the emotions, of everything essential and vital. Its use, we shall see, varies considerably but in 'Daddy' it conveys this essential idea of a warm natural emotional life, as in 'Tulips':

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes  
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.

or in 'Totem':

The world is blood-hot and personal

It is, however, a condition which has been denied the poet by 'the black man who / Bit my pretty red heart in two'. Fuller connotations of the colour red in relation to life emerge from the figure of the father in 'Little Fugue':

And you, during the Great War  
In the California delicatessen  
Lopping the sausages!  
They colour my sleep,  
Red, mottled, like cut necks.

The father is seen as executioner and although a less subjective portrayal of him emerges than that in 'Daddy', he has the brutal aspects given him in the latter. This poem in fact has many traces of the impulse that informs 'Daddy'. The sensibility of the persona is not a balanced and informed one, but one in which fragmentation dominates. Although a girl / father relationship is the topic it is far removed from the norm, far from typical. The speaker is perverse in her response, a prey to the nightmare world that lies beneath the skin of reality and preoccupies Sylvia Plath in Ariel. It is a world in which:

... the deaf and dumb  
Signal the blind, and are ignored.

The 'blind' are particularised in the grotesque picture of:

... the blind pianist  
At my table on the ship.  
He felt for his food.  
His fingers had the noses of weasels.

And like a rabbit frozen under the stare of a weasel the persona of 'Little Fugue' is bewildered by the memory of her father, a psychological reality so intense that the memory of his voice is concretised by a neat use of synesthesia:

I see your voice  
Black and leafy, as in my childhood, ...

She is fearful, a victim of her own complex:

Such a dark funnel, my father!

and hypnotized by his memory:

I remember a blue eye,  
A briefcase of tangerines.  
This was a man, then!

The father is a 'yew hedge of orders' but as is stated elsewhere in Ariel:

... the message of the yew tree is blackness - blackness and silence.  
'The Moon and the Yew Tree'.

This, then, is the father spectre in all its fascination and horror that Sylvia Plath indulges and attempts to exorcise in 'Daddy'. Her conclusion in 'Little Fugue' is not so definitive, but the intense mental conflict is kept momentarily at bay through a conscious effort

by the heroine to recognise and order the realities about her:

I survive the while,  
 Arranging my morning.  
 These are my fingers, this my baby.  
 The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor.

The man in black of The Colossus volume walking towards the sea appears to find an echo in Ariel in the first section of 'Berck-Plage':

Is it any wonder he affects a black cassock?  
 Here he comes now, among the mackerel gatherers

The 'black cassock' endows the father with the additional attributes of a priest, an impression confirmed in the second part of the poem where the imagery of the opening of 'Daddy' is directly paralleled:

This black boot has no mercy for anybody.  
 Why should it, it is the hearse of a dead foot,  
 The high, dead, toeless foot of this priest  
 Who plumbs the well of his book, ...

In stanza ten of 'Daddy' the father is given elements of omnipotence, or at the very least, through the nazi terminology employed, a paranoiac hold over the speaker:

Not God but a swastika  
 So black no sky could speak through.

The revolt against the father is made more absolute and total through his being raised to a position not far removed from God. A revolt against the deity itself can perhaps be implied from the more explicit rejection of the related black priest figure in 'Berck-Plage'. In addition the all-encompassing hold of the father over the daughter in 'Daddy' links him to the spider of 'Totem'. In this poem later in

the volume all forms of deity are rejected, although holding infinite attraction for the speaker. The spider has all the negating and pervasive presence of the 'swastika / So black no sky could squeak through':

I am mad, calls the spider, waving its many arms.  
 And in truth it is terrible,  
 Multiplied in the eyes of the flies.  
 They buzz like blue children  
 In nets of the infinite, ...

-ooOoo-

The terror of such material as is recruited for use in 'Daddy' is explicit in the poem but additional notions can derive from a pursuit of related themes, symbols, and images in Plath's other work. This can help build up a more complete picture, as here in the case of 'Daddy', where sexual, psychological, and religious aspects have unfolded. It helps demonstrate also the emblematic nature of her poem, the artistic unity stressed earlier. Such an exercise in addition can show the manner in which Sylvia Plath's artistry helped her to control and manipulate her savage inner experiences. However, it falls a long way short of grasping and expressing her peculiar gift, her keenly-felt perspective on life. Ted Hughes notes that:

Her poetry escapes ordinary analysis in the way  
 clairvoyance and mediumship do.<sup>15</sup>

Her own voice in a passage from The Bell Jar may capture elements of the painful sense of loss that informs 'Daddy'; it certainly employs the same brand of imagery:

I couldn't find my father anywhere.

Low, shaggy clouds scudded over that part of the horizon where the sea lay, behind the marshes and the beach shanty settlements, and raindrops darkened the black mackintosh I had bought that morning ...

... I laid my face to the smooth face of the marble and howled my loss into the cold salt rain.<sup>16</sup>

-ooOoo-

Footnotes:

- 1 Quoted, The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 64.
- 2 Barbara Hardy, 'The Poetry of Sylvia Plath', The Survival of Poetry, ed. Martin Dodsworth. (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), p. 164.
- 3 Quoted, The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 65, from the introductory notes to 'New Poems', a reading prepared for the B.B.C. Third Programme but never broadcast.
- 4 A. Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath', *ibid.* p. 66.
- 5 C.B. Cox and A.R. Jones, 'After the Tranquillized Fifties', Critical Quarterly, VI, 1964, 112.
- 6 'Per Amica Silentia Lunae', Mythologies V. (Macmillan, 1959), 331.
- 7 The Oxford Nursery Rhyme Book, p. 45.
- 8 Critical Quarterly, VI, 110.
- 9 Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics, ed. Preminger, A., et al. (Princeton Univ. Press, 1965), p. 580.
- 10 Critical Quarterly, VI, 333.
- 11 Quoted, Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, p. 79.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 266.
- 14 *ibid.*, p. 272.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 187.
- 16 Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), pp. 176-177.

CHAPTER IIILADY LAZARUSGentleman, ladies

In 'Daddy' Sylvia Plath went to the heart of her trouble, the source of her disease. Now, in 'Lady Lazarus', she turns her attention more fully in on herself. She moves to the arena of actual personal experience - her suicide attempts - but still provides a flamboyant public gesture - 'Gentleman, ladies'. The effect of her obsessions, as revealed in 'Daddy', on her life are explored intimately, but still in a more public way than the more enclosed poems such as 'Elm' which will be discussed in Chapter 5. The patient unfolds her personal predicament, her symptoms, the consequences of her attitudes and complexes.

The howl of loss, the pained love / hate emotion that found expression in 'Daddy' was raised to artistic heights through the commitment Sylvia Plath made to her medium. Her imagination, unleashed in poetry, conferred on the concentration camp setting of the poem a degree of realism perhaps lacking in eye-witness accounts of war-time atrocities. George Steiner sees 'Daddy' as extremely public in its powers of generalization, and 'one of the very few poems I know of in any language to come near the last horror'.<sup>1</sup> The ability of the poet to rendezvous so intimately with horror, especially horror in which she has not been involved, hints at a sensibility that craves for the austere. The 'trash' that Sylvia

has 'to annihilate each decade' is not only the personal clap-trap of a sensitive being who is both human and feminine, but the trash of former generations. Ted Hughes notes in Newman's symposium:

The chemical poisoning of nature, the pile-up of atomic waste, were horrors that persecuted her like an illness - as her latest poems record. Auschwitz and the rest were merely open wounds, in her idea of the great civilized crime of intelligence that like the half-imbecile, omnipotent, spoiled brat Nero has turned on its mother.<sup>2</sup>

Primarily there is the suggested setting of a Beautician's parlour in 'Lady Lazarus'; the peeling off of the 'napkin' seems to refer to the artificial abrasion of the surface skin of the face - an extremely suitable background for a sardonic look at rebirth. The poem also contains the death-camp trappings of 'Daddy', their abhorrent reality being built up through an intensified use of detail - 'The nose, the eye-pits, the full set of teeth? / The sour breath'. This stinking unwanted resurrection is the background to Sylvia's personal utterance on self-destruction which in turn mouths a cry of defiance on behalf of the unjustly massacred victims of the camps:

Beware  
Beware.  
  
Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

Again the whole subject of personal suffering is given general meaning and relevance through the technique of enlargement, through relating it to the well-known death-camp horrors. However, in essentials, 'Lady Lazarus' remains very personal, and Alvarez attempts to pin it down with a biographical note:

The deaths of Lady Lazarus correspond to her own crises: the first just after her father died, the second when she had a nervous breakdown, the third perhaps a presentiment of the death that was shortly to come.<sup>3</sup>

Whatever the actual facts the poem is an exercise in self-exposure of the poet's, or persona's, sensibility:

This is the side of a man: his red ribs,  
The nerves bursting like trees,...

'Berck-Plage'.

as in Eliot's Prufrock:

... as if a magic lantern threw the nerves in patterns  
on a screen:

In the face of this self-revelation certain artistic safety-valves are brought into play. The language and beat have a nagging nursery-rhyme plainness about them that seems to control the wildness of the subject-matter, as in 'Daddy':

I turn and burn.  
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.  
Ash, ash -  
You poke and stir.  
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there -

The vulnerability of a sensitive being indulging in self-exposure is countered head-on by the tremendously positive and urgent opening to the poem, and the self-mockery that gathers momentum throughout:

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it -

A slow release of energy follows as the expression of contempt for her imagined audience grows, the contempt of a brazen side-show stripper:



O my enemy.  
 Do I terrify? - ...  
 ... The peanut-crunching crowd  
 Shoves in ...  
 ... Gentleman, ladies,  
 These are my hands,  
 My knees. ...  
 ... Herr God, Herr Lucifer,  
 Beware  
 Beware.

And an accompanying mockery of herself and her nerve-end vulnerability:

There is a charge  
 For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge  
 For the hearing of my heart -  
 It really goes.

The compression and mastery of language, the 'perfect control' that Robert Lowell talks of in his introduction to the American edition of Ariel ('the desperate practicality of her control') results in an artistic restraint that resolves any thematic problems of obscurity or personal secretiveness. As in so much of her poetry images are bred out of each other. Her 'skin' suggests 'lampshade', 'paperweight', 'linen', 'napkin'. There is also the easy blending of a modern technological image ('a million filaments') and striking, almost slick epithets ('peanut-crunching crowd') with naturalistic imagery ('pick the worms off me like sticky pearls'). Hints of religious relic-worship enter briefly into Lady Lazarus' self-exposure, a natural outcome of the persona adopted by the heroine:

And there is a charge, a very large charge,  
 For a word or a touch  
 Or a bit of blood  
 Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

The sweep of the poem, however, can accommodate just as easily the surrealistic image of horror that follows:

The pure gold baby  
That melts to a shriek.

The image typifies Plath's ability to distill to a psychological essence concrete aspects of reality. The 'pure gold baby' is the alchemist's ideal. Lady Lazarus has been transformed to a real thing of beauty and the melting 'to a shriek' is a more devastating image in view of this.

Whatever the overtones of 'Lady Lazarus' the theme is predominantly suicidal. A suicide, the unpleasantness of which is captured in expertly tactual, sensuous language:

Pick the worms off me like sticky pearls ...  
... the flesh  
The grave cave ate will be  
At home on me

These latter lines, and others ('full set of teeth'), physically enact their sense in utterance. The heroine, however, perceives her proclivity towards suicide and calmly notes her despair:

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.

From this clarity and the ordered setting of the poem arises its strange affirmation, the Phoenix-like liberating note of the last stanza:

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

M.L. Rosenthal quotes Sylvia's personal comment on this strain:

The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman.<sup>5</sup>

The mood of the persona adopted does dominate finally. She is supremely in command in her self-mocking tone, in her impertinent declaration of suicidal skill, the language and rhyme backing this authority.

And like the cat I have nine times to die

The urge to be 'rocked shut / As a seashell', the attraction to death, especially death by water, is apparent throughout The Colossus and The Bell Jar. But this symptom of over-concern with death produces a response that is ambivalent. This ambivalence is clear in both the earlier volumes and in certain poems in Ariel such as 'Death and Co.', where there is concurrent attraction and repulsion, and 'A Birthday Present', where death finally appears attractive.

A suicide attempt off 'A big round grey rock, like the upper half of an egg'<sup>6</sup> is recorded in both The Colossus and The Bell Jar. Each records a similar landscape stressing the commercialization of life:

A smoke seemed to be going up from my nerves  
like the smoke from the grills and the sun-  
saturated road.

The Bell Jar.

Behind him the hotdogs split and drizzled  
 On the public grills, and the ochreous salt flats,  
 Gas tanks, factory stacks - that landscape  
 Of imperfections his bowels were part of -

'Suicide off Egg Rock'.

The same formula is used in both to capture the self-affirmative aspects of the suicidal act:

... his blood beating the old tattoo  
 I am, I am, I am.

'Suicide off Egg Rock'.

As I paddled on, my heartbeat boomed like  
 a dull motor in my ears.

I am I am I am.

The Bell Jar.

The crab, 'innards bleached and blown off / Somewhere by much sun and wind',<sup>7</sup> of The Colossus, who died 'recluse or suicide', is also seen in this affirmative way. He is seen as a 'relic' who 'saved / Face, to face the bald-faced sun'. Unlike his companions who returned 'to their friendly Element' he asserted himself in death.\* This assertiveness is present in 'Lady Lazarus' but in the Ariel volume as a whole any honour that might be accorded self-destruction is merely hinted at, as in 'A Birthday Present'. There is no direct statement in the dramatic, and perhaps superficial, terms of 'Suicide off Egg Rock'.

\* Ted Hughes notes regarding this poem:

This was one of her first poems in syllabics, which were her first step, technically, in her self exploration.<sup>8</sup>

And later notes of 'Aftermath', 'Two Views of a Cadaver Room' and 'Suicide off Egg Rock' that they:

Come clear of the domination of heavy iambic lines, have the casual fluency of her syllabic poems, yet a greater naturalness of tone and a warmer fullness of phrasing than anything she had done before. Also, they steer in quite masterfully towards some point in her life that had been painful. For the first time, she tried deliberately to locate just what it was that hurt.<sup>9</sup>

The kinship in theme, form, and mood, of poems like these with the Ariel poems is striking.

Annette Lavers, notes this in her anthology article 'The World as Icon':

At the most, it (death) has a kind of saving nobility which favourably contrasts with a prosaic life.<sup>10</sup>

Death takes on a new threatening dimension in Ariel.

'The elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar' is part of the overall feeling of threat that pervades the volume. At times as in 'Lady Lazarus' there is a masochistic complacency regarding death; it is the old acquaintance of 'Death and Co.', but for the most part the obsession with it is far removed from Romantic prototypes, as Annette Lavers notes:

... this intimacy with death never gives rise to positive, fundamentally religious, feelings.<sup>11</sup>

She claims also that 'death always appears as a terrifying conclusion'.<sup>12</sup> However, it seems impossible to ignore the double nature of death as it is presented in this volume. It retains some of the allurements it had in the earlier poems, and is not always pure terror. Although usually dealt with in horrific terms, repulsion by death and fascination with it is one of Sylvia Plath's most striking motifs.

Sylvia does not so much oscillate between the two poles of repulsion and fascination as present a fusion of them in much the same manner as she identifies with both torturer and tortured in 'Daddy'. 'Lady Lazarus' briefly suggests this double attitude to death with its simile comparing the worms of death to pearls:

They had to call and call  
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

The Lady actually performs the suicidal act so that it 'feels like hell',

it is a deliberate choice of pain, and at the same time something that can obliterate the hurt of daily activity:

I rocked shut  
As a seashell.

A sentence from late in The Bell Jar captures perfectly this ambivalence the poet maintains towards pain (and, of course, death):

A heavy naughtiness pricked through my veins,  
irritating and attractive as the hurt of a loose  
tooth.<sup>13</sup>

A stanza from 'Poppies in July', quoted earlier, is equally striking:

If I could bleed, or sleep! -  
If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!

She encounters pain head-on and would turn it to a thing of beauty and tenderness ('marry'), even fuse herself to death and suffering in an ultimate sexual sense ('mouth').

'Death and Co.' provides 'one of several nearly perfect embodiments of this deeply compulsive motif of hers',<sup>14</sup> says Rosenthal in his section on Plath in The New Poets. The grimacing 'samurai death mask' face of the dead crab in 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour' was nonetheless noble, salvaged by its choice of death.

... - this relic saved  
Face, to face the bald-faced sun.

But in 'Death and Co.' both the faces of death are repellent.

Sylvia's comment is recorded by Rosenthal:

This poem ... is about the double or schizophrenic nature of death - the marmoreal coldness of Blake's death mask, say, hand in glove with the fearful softness of worms, water and the other katabolists. I imagine these two aspects of death as two men, two

business friends, who have come to call.<sup>15</sup>

It is typical of her to see these two aspects concretely and not in any generalised sense. Her muse is 'mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head'.<sup>16</sup> Rosenthal rightly terms her a 'true literalist of the imagination', and Ted Hughes in a note to her later poems said:

There is a strange muse, bald, white and wild  
in her 'hood of bone', floating over a landscape  
like that of the primitive painters, a burning  
luminous vision of a Paradise. A Paradise which  
is at the same time eerily frightening, an unalterably  
spot-lit vision of death.<sup>17</sup>

Death and Company, the two business friends, are seen in this extreme literal sense. 'The one who never looks up, whose eyes are lidded' fuses life and death so as to make life part of the process of death. 'Birthmarks' are his 'trademark'. He is the predatory condor whose beak 'claps sidewise', who has narrowly failed to claim the poet. Repulsive as he is, especially in cultivating his taste for the beauty of dead babies, there is an element of attraction behind his mask of terror. His description of how 'the babies look in their hospital / Icebox' is paradoxically gracious and precise:

... a simple  
Frill at the neck,  
Then the flutings of their Ionian  
Death gowns,  
Then two little feet.

But the description is not alleviated by any human gestures:

He does not smile or smoke.

It is the other face of death, the alluring aspect, that affects these earthly attributes. These, however, are only affectation.

He is a self-centred prospective lover, 'His hair long and plausible'.

A:

Bastard  
Masturbating a glitter  
He wants to be loved.

The use of the broken line containing the single word 'Bastard', captures both the contempt of the poet and the precise controlled egotism of the second face of death.

Rosenthal seems to be correct in tracing a foreshadowing of this poem to a poem from The Colossus, 'Two Views of a Cadaver Room':

In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow.  
He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom.

A visit by Esther Greenwood to a cadaver room with her boyfriend Buddy, is recorded also in The Bell Jar:

I started out by dressing in a white coat and  
sitting on a tall stool in a room with four cadavers,  
while Buddy and his friends cut them up.<sup>18</sup>

The reference in 'Death and Co.' to the 'babies in their hospital / Icebox' does seem to complete a line of reference through Plath's works, but Rosenthal may be stretching the point by seeing the 'romantic lover in the Brueghel painting' as a foreshadowing of the second face of death in 'Death and Co'. The poem from The Colossus with the lover handing his girl the cadaver's heart seems to suggest in a general way the grisly romantic interest both aspects of Death have in the poet. Especially the predatory horrific aspect, to whom Sylvia is 'red meat'.

Both faces are seen in the final section of the poem in relation to a projection of herself as being already dead, part of



non-human life. She does not stir, she is part of a series of delicate inanimate patterns produced by the processes of nature:

I do not stir  
The frost makes a flower,  
The dew makes a star, ...

The incantatory note continues:

The dead bell,  
The dead bell.

and the poem ends with the tolling of a blank austere line, a vision of her own death:

Somebody's done for.

That this death envisaged in the last line is at times positively longed for, becomes clear in 'A Birthday Present'. The cellophane-wrapped gift becomes the focal point for her yearnings, the 'enormity' that her finely-tuned spirit reaches towards:

What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?  
Is it shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?  
I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want.  
When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking  
"Is this the one I am to appear for,  
Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?"

The wrapped present, the unknown object 'behind this veil', triggers off thoughts on the stifling weight of the unknown generally:

If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.

and the stultifying march of time:

... the million  
Probable notes that tick the years off my life.

The 'enormity' that Sylvia is ready for stands at her window 'big as the sky' and breathes from 'her sheets, the cold dead centre / Where spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history'. It is in the concluding stanzas that she specifically denotes her wish that the 'enormity', the gift, be death:

If it were death  
 I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.  
 I would know you were serious.  
 There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.  
 And the knife not carve, but enter  
 Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,  
 And the universe slide from my side.

This seems to be the most precise statement in Ariel on death as a positive value and is an exception to Annette Laver's claim that death is invariably a thing of terror in this volume.\* The ugliness of the word 'carve' is nullified by the fact that it is expressed as a negative. Death is identified as being a beginning - 'there would be a birthday' - as something timeless and deeply serious. The release provided by death is captured supremely in the last stanza, the momentary pain before tranquillity, when the knife enters:

Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,  
 And the universe slide from my side.

Apart from these features, however, the poetry is not of the finely-finished, well-pruned quality of 'Death and Co.' As a minor essay on the unknown, a wordy venturesome ramble it has merit, and its refined irony and use of contradiction is skilful. 'I do not mind if it is small' the poet claims, and follows this immediately with:

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\* Note A.R. Jones: 'These poems are continually enacting death, its peace and its terror.'<sup>19</sup>

Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity.

The contrast of the homely setting to the poem, the feminine touches ('Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus'), with the intensity of the thematic material is another aspect of the use of contradiction.

The ironies:

You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle,  
No falling ribbons, no scream at the end.

are light and skilful but at times threaten to become top-heavy and reduce the serious themes of the poetry to the ridiculous:

The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it,  
Bossed, brazen, an antique shield,  
A marvel to your great-grandchildren.

The dramatic over-emphasis of much of the tone:

Is this the one for the annunciation?

also threatens to become exaggerated and preposterous:

... O adding machine -  
Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go whole?

But generally it is a daring and unusual poem, feminine and dramatic. Dramatic in its slow self-argument, its humble questionings, and slow unfolding (in marked contrast to the rapidity of poems like 'Cut' and 'Getting There'). Its feeling of painful burden and nagging threat and Lady Lazarus' obsession with death, death with its ambiguous masks, are a source of intrigue and repulsion throughout most of the volume. They are a part of the compelling sense of doom and vulnerability that dominates the Ariel poems:

Your dissatisfactions, on the other hand,  
 Arrive through the mailslot with loving regularity,  
 White and blank, expansive as carbon monoxide.

'The Rival'.

-oo000oo-

Footnotes:

- 1 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 218.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 190.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 64.
- 4 Sylvia Plath, Ariel. (New York: Harper and Row), p. vii.
- 5 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 70.
- 6 The Bell Jar, p. 164.
- 7 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour', The Colossus, p. 71.
- 8 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 189.
- 9 *ibid.*, p. 191.
- 10 Annette Lavers, 'The World of Icon', *ibid.*, p. 104.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 The Bell Jar, p. 193.
- 14 M.L. Rosenthal, The New Poets. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 88.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 82.
- 16 *ibid.*, p. 85.
- 17 *ibid.*
- 18 The Bell Jar, p. 65.
- 19 A.R. Jones, 'Necessity and Freedom', Critical Quarterly, vii, 1965, 23.

CHAPTER IV

STARING FROM HER HOOD OF BONE

Stone, stone, ferry me down there.

A major aspect of the double attitude to death in Ariel is the reversion to imagery relating to the moon and to stone, in moments of intensity. These aspects deserve special attention. Most critics reviewing Sylvia Plath's poetry see Ariel essentially as setting up a dialectic between life and death, between 'breath' and the stone-like 'great stasis', the presentation of death which some see as most typical of her work. Annette Lavers, for instance, is definite, perhaps over-definite:

Broadly speaking, we can say that the dialectic of life and death is the sole subject of the poems. The poet's existence is presented as a cosmic drama in which these two great principles are confronted, and their struggle is expressed in patterns whose structure is accordingly antithetic. The life-principle is colour, pulsating rhythm, noise, heat, radiance, expansion, emotion and communication. Death is the other pole: darkness, stasis, silence, frost, well-defined edges and the hardness of rocks, jewels, and skulls, dryness, anything self-contained and separate or which derives its positive attributes from some other source, instead of generating them freely - for death is absence, nothingness.<sup>1</sup>

Arthur Oberg<sup>2</sup> sees a movement in both volumes of poetry towards stasis and purity, death and perfection. What is preferred is the 'elemental' and 'pure', 'Making stone out of everything'. He sees Sylvia as akin to the jewelmaster, stone cutter and sculptor

of her early poems, distilling all to the hardness of flint and to the fixity of mannequin and statue. In The Colossus the encounter with death and 'otherness' is often grasped in marbled impermeable imagery. The poet's bald muses, who 'lodge / On the pitched reefs of nightmare', trouble her repose in 'Lorelei':

They rise, their limbs ponderous  
With richness, hair heavier  
Than sculpted marble. They sing  
Of a world more full and clear  
Than can be.

'Poem for a Birthday', a series of 'experimental improvisation on set themes',<sup>3</sup> contains the poem 'The Stones', of which Ted Hughes notes:

It is full of specific details of her experience in a mental hospital, and is clearly enough the first eruption of the voice that produced Ariel. It is the poem where the self, shattered in 1953, suddenly finds itself whole.<sup>4</sup>

The drop into mental illness, 'When I fell out of the light', is described as an entrance into 'The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard'. In magnificent extended metaphor she captures the death-in-life state of the mentally-ill. She became:

... a still pebble.  
The stones of the belly were peaceable,  
The head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing.  
Only the mouth-hole piped out,  
Importunate cricket  
In a quarry of silences. ...  
... The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry  
Open one stone eye.\*

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\* Note, The Bell Jar, p. 180 ff., in relation to the treatment of mental illness:

A chisel cracked down on my eye, and a slit of light opened, like a mouth or wound, till the darkness clamped shut on it again.

Obviously, even from this example, Laver's statement on the life / death dialogue in Plath's poetry is somewhat oversimplified. Imagery of hardness and vacuity is used also for capturing deranged states of mind, death-in-life situations and other aspects of existence. The spinster of The Colossus would reduce everything to elemental order and austerity rather than upset the 'heart's frosty discipline / Exact as a snowflake':

How she longed for winter then! -  
 Scrupulously austere in its order  
 Of white and black  
 Ice and rock, ...

'Spinster'.

Leonard Baskin's art is able to confer on his statues a 'life livelier than ours, / A solidier repose than death's' ('Sculptor'), and the new life, the new babe of Ariel's opening lyric 'Morning Song', is given a completely frozen aspect - 'Your bald cry ... New statue / In a draughty museum'. 'The Hanging Man' provides an echo to the sort of treatment given mental illness and consequent therapy in 'The Stones':

The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:  
 A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.  
 A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree.

The same sort of nothingness, an extended hiatus in the flux of living is at the core of many of the Ariel poems about sickness:

They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations ...  
 ... And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow ...

'Tulips'.

Photographs visit me -  
 My wife, dead and flat, in 1920 furs,  
 Mouth full of pearls, ...

'Paralytic'.

Richard Howard in an interesting article<sup>5</sup> designates this thread in Sylvia Plath's poetry as 'the lithic impulse - the desire, the need to reduce the demands of life to the unquestioning acceptance of a stone'.<sup>6</sup> It is the state typified in a passage from 'The Munich Mannequins':

So, in their sulphur loveliness, in their smiles  
 These mannequins lean tonight  
 In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome,  
 Naked and bald in their furs,  
 Orange lollies on silver sticks,  
 Intolerable, without mind.  
 The snow drops its pieces of darkness,  
 Nobody's about. ...

A taciturn quality of acceptance is adeptly captured by the prosaic lines which follow, lines reminiscent of T.S. Eliot's early poetry, and which provide a welcome counter-poise to the brilliant suggestion - packed conceits which precede them ('The snow drops its pieces of darkness'):

... In the hotels  
 Hands will be opening doors and setting  
 Down shoes for a polish of carbon  
 Into which broad toes will go tomorrow.

Howard invokes Freud in his pursuit of a concept of stasis:

In the experience of the original self,  
 then, it is true as Freud says that the aim of  
 all life is death: the effort of the mortal self  
 is to reduce stimuli to an equilibrium, to cancel  
 out tension, to return to the inanimate condition.<sup>7</sup>

There is an urge towards stillness and repose inherent in animate life as this poet envisages it, a tendency to quiescence ('Mouth-ash, ash of eye'.<sup>8</sup> '... my bones hold a stillness'<sup>9</sup>).



The stripping of the individual self like 'the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind's hand' ('Morning Song'), the impulse traced above, is so often at the heart of Sylvia Plath's hospital and illness poems. The conclusion of 'Paralytic', for instance:

The still waters  
 Wrap my lips,  
 Eyes, nose and ears,  
 A clear  
 Cellophane I cannot crack.  
 On my bare back  
 I smile, a buddha, all  
 Wants, desire  
 Falling from me like rings  
 Hugging their lights.  
 The claw  
 Of the magnolia,  
 Drunk on its own scents,  
 Asks nothing of life.

The stultified chopped lines containing harsh sudden rhymes ('crack / back') build up a compelling sense of muscular prostration and the possibility of painful spasms. The 'claw' is magnificent in its overtones of envelopment, threat, and prospective pain. It works against the natural beauty of the magnolia shrub it is associated with and the warmer overtones of the verb 'hugging'. The egotism of the magnolia 'Drunk on its own scents' conveys the individualism of the paralytic, his attention completely on himself ('My wife, dead and flat'), the self living its own life, which is to say, dying. Like the Buddha and the magnolia he 'Asks nothing of life' but surrenders to the inertia inherent in that life, a smiling and almost joyful acquiescence.

The experience of 'Fever 103°' is almost identical, if less

attractive, with its mixture of technological, religious, and low-life imagery:

... I  
 Am a pure acetylene  
 Virgin  
 Attended by roses,  
 By kisses, by cherubim,  
 By whatever these pink things mean.  
 Not you, nor him  
 Not him, nor him  
 (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) -  
 To Paradise.

At the heart of both poems is a need for purgation, a purification through suffering suggested by the 'claw / Of the magnolia', and the paralytic's 'god the iron lung' which 'Will not / Let me relapse'. Of 'Fever 103<sup>0</sup>' Sylvia says herself, quoted by Alvarez in his article 'Sylvia Plath':

This poem is about two kinds of fire - the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second.<sup>10</sup>

And your first gift is making stone out of everything

The moon 'Staring from her hood of bone' ('Edge') pervades many of the Ariel poems. She is the presence which dominates the poet:

The moon is my mother,  
 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'.

an irreligious ('She is not sweet like Mary') figure, perfect as a symbol of death in her absence of colour (she is a great light

borrower), her regular shape, and the indifference and vacuity she perpetrates:

And your first gift is making stone out of everything.

'The Rival'.

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,  
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.  
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet  
With the O-gape of complete despair. ...

'The Moon and the Yew Tree'.

Multiple associations spin out from Sylvia Plath's use of the moon. It is a major part of the lithic impulse under discussion, not only in its death associations and the lifeless light it sheds on the universe but also in the paralysing hold it has over the poet. The moon 'abases her subjects' the poet declares in 'The Rival' where she also displays a delightful resistance to its influence:

But in the daytime she is ridiculous.

In 'Elm' there is no such levity:

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me  
Cruelly, being barren.  
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.  
I let her go. I let her go  
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.

The moon is barren, and female sterility is thematically very much an aspect of the impulse towards nothingness in Ariel. She is 'bald and wild', however, a defiant childless woman who has elected to be unfruitful. In 'Lesbos', included in the American edition of Ariel, and 'The Munich Mannequins', the moon is seen as ruling the menstrual cycle:

That night the moon  
 Dragged its blood bag, sick  
 Animal  
 Up over the harbor lights.  
 And then grew normal,  
 Hard and apart and white.

'Lesbos'.

In addition, in 'The Munich Mannequins', the sexual cycle is seen as sterile:

The tree of life and the tree of life  
 Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.  
 The blood flood is the flood of love,  
 The absolute sacrifice.

The sexual act becomes absolute egotism and self-centredness:

It means: no more idols but me,  
 Me and you.

But the sterility contains a paradoxical bravery, an existential element of choice by which the individual plumps for aridity and remains particularised, living his own life only:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.  
 Cold as snow breath, it tamps the womb  
 'The Munich Mannequins'.

Annette Lavers is perceptive in her analysis of the use of the moon in Ariel. She sees the unfruitful flux of menstrual blood as a death-in-life theme,<sup>11</sup> and borrows a phrase of Baudelaire's to describe this motif as 'the cold majesty of sterile womanhood'.<sup>12</sup> The feminine self-reliance and primitive contact with the life of nature that Sylvia Ashton-Warner's Spinster displays:

The day rising before me is a mountain too,  
 with crests of effort, ravines of failure, and

the cold snows of loneliness; but I am still,  
 amazingly, a part of all this shining living  
 and there is yet another day.<sup>13</sup>

In 'Edge', one of the last poems there is a denial of new life, an ultimate statement on the choice of aridity. The woman of the piece reclaims her offspring, offspring which have been seen in 'The Night Dances' as 'cold folds of ego'. Death, the sense of stone-like repose, and the theme of sterility, all meet in 'Edge':

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,  
 One at each little  
 Pitcher of milk, now empty.  
 She has folded  
 Them back into her body as petals  
 Of a rose close when the garden  
 Stiffens ...

To cap this cluster of motifs, the moon, which encompasses them all, is included in the final stanzas, an indifferent despot, but nonetheless a pervading presence:

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

Richard Howard's tracing of the lithic impulse in The Art of Sylvia Plath ('Sylvia Plath: And I Have No Face, I Have Wanted to Efface Myself ...'), provides an extremely useful framework for a general interpretation of Ariel. He claims:

Her entire body of work can be understood best as a transaction out of silence, into the dark - with otherness: call it death, or The Stone, or, as she came to call it, 'Stasis in darkness' (Ariel), 'great stasis' (Years).<sup>14</sup>

He attempts to elevate the 'yearnings towards deadlock' found in Ariel to a philosophical, almost metaphysical, structure. They are:

... beyond the pleasure principle; they tend rather to that great Kingdom of alienation, of otherness we call ecstasy (standing outside oneself).<sup>15</sup>

The tendency of the poetry towards quiescence he labels as a type of Nietzschean joy:

Not movement but ecstasy, then; not pleasure but - joy. We shall best realize the goal and the gain of Sylvia Plath's poetry if we reckon with Joy as Nietzsche accounts for it:

... All that suffers wants to live, longing for what is farther, higher, brighter. 'I want heirs' - thus speaks all that suffers: 'I want children, I do not want myself.'

Joy it is that wants itself - the ring's will strives in it ...

Joy, however does not want heirs, or children - joy wants itself, wants eternity, wants everything eternally the same.<sup>16</sup>

This is an attractive background note to the theme of sterility and sheer individuality, to the magnolia 'drunk on its own scent'. Howard explicates 'Words', one of the difficult last poems in Ariel, using this framework:

'Words', is that poem of Nietzschean Joy which dispenses with heirs, with children, which wants itself, wants eternity, wants everything eternally the same:

Words dry and riderless,  
The indefatigable hoof-taps.  
While  
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
Govern a life.<sup>17</sup>

The woman of 'Edge' reclaiming her children, recoiling them into her womb is similar, as are the paralytic and the woman of 'Tulips':

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.  
 I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted  
 To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.  
 How free it is, you have no idea how free -

Howard's theory is worthy of Sylvia Plath's artistic proportions, it goes some of the way towards unfolding her keen individual perception. She was 'ready for enormity'. In reading the volume as a whole, however, seeing it as a continuation of The Colossus, Howard appears to overlook some poems which take up an antithetical stance as regards the tendency to inertia. He claims that in her last volume of poetry:

... she is speaking from a point of identification with stasis which is complete, resolved, irreversible ('the cold dead center / Where spilt lives congeal and stiffen to history') - she is on the other side, within the Deathly Paradise.<sup>18</sup>

'Ariel' and 'Years' seem to directly contradict this although admittedly by a strange kind of synthesis their precipitate action becomes a part of the inertia:

O God, I am not like you  
 In your vacuous black,  
 Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti.  
 Eternity bores me,  
 I never wanted it.

What I love is  
 The piston in motion -  
 My soul dies before it.  
 And the hooves of the horses,  
 Their merciless churn.

And you, great Stasis -  
 What is so great in that!

'Years'.

Headlong activity and movement are a form of release also in The Bell Jar. Esther Greenwood sheds the domination of a New York

fashion magazine's sponsorship by jettisoning her wardrobe from the hotel roof, and when faced with an unwanted birthday visit in the mental home, she hurls a gift of roses into the wastepaper basket. Out skiing with Buddy Willard the urge towards a precipitate suicide forms coolly out of the everyday experience:

The thought that I might kill myself formed  
in my mind coolly as a tree or a flower.<sup>19</sup>

And the exhilarating ecstatic awareness that follows is a foreshadowing of the marvellous creation 'Ariel', the title poem of the volume that was to follow:

I plummeted down past the zigzagers, the  
students, the experts, through year after year of  
doubleness and smiles and compromise, into my own past.

People and trees receded on either hand like  
the dark sides of a tunnel as I hurtled on to the  
still bright point at the end of it, the pebble at  
the bottom of the well, the white sweet baby cradled  
in its mother's belly.<sup>20</sup>

Shakespeare's marvellous embodiment of restless energy,  
Hotspur, declares in Henry IV part I:

I had rather hear a brazen canstick turn'd,  
Or a dry wheel grate on the axle-tree,  
And that would set my teeth nothing on edge,  
Nothing so much as mincing poetry -  
'Tis like the forc'd gait of a shuffling nag.<sup>21</sup>

The mastery of movement and image in 'Ariel', what Rosenthal calls the 'mastery of the dynamics of a poem',<sup>22</sup> would surely prove a defence against Hotspur's abhorrence of 'mincing poetry' and capture even this unreflecting lover of instant action. Ariel, the poet's horse, far from being a 'shuffling nag', becomes 'God's lioness' within four lines of the beginning of the poem. The exploration of the elements



that make up the horse-riding experience behind 'Ariel', is done sparingly and at breath-taking speed.\* The gradual movement from 'stasis' and a mental landscape of 'darkness' to a steady opening out into movement, into the 'blue' of the horizon, is achieved through the long vowel sounds and rhyme of 'pour' and 'tor' helped by the vagueness of the word 'distances'. The tawny colour of the horse and its marvellous rhythmical movement, is captured in the one metaphor, 'God's lioness'. The whole of life seems to be enveloped, encompassed, in the exhilaration of the ride. The sexual angle given the description contributes towards achieving this effect:

How one we grow,  
Pivot of heels and knees! ...

There is a tremendous sparseness and lack of detail in the description of the experience which is already suggestive of something 'other', something foreboding:

Nigger-eye  
Berries cast dark  
Hooks -  
Black sweet blood mouthfuls,  
Shadows.

Hints of the death-wish which is to conclude the poem emerge from the poet's use of 'black' and 'sweet' together, and 'dark Hooks', words which are very much a part of the poet's formulae for terror and death.

\* Ted Hughes fills in the background to the poem and its inspiration:

'Ariel was the name of the horse on which she went riding weekly. Long before, while she was a student at Cambridge (England), she went riding with an American friend out towards Grantchester. Her horse bolted, the stirrups fell off and she came all the way home to the stables, about two miles, at full gallop, hanging around the horse's neck'. (Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 194).

The experience has already been distilled from something nominal, and physical presences have disappeared:

Something else  
Hauls me through air -  
Thighs, hair;  
Flakes from my heels.

The rider, the horse, the furrow of the earth, the shadows and the blurred landscape are all one, there is no separation of elements.

The traditional sexual and apocalyptic overtones of the barbaric horseman, say as used by Yeats, and the deliberate use of a transcendent type of metaphor ('God's lioness', 'Godiva') must also be a part of the poem's transforming subjectivism. Alvarez states the transformation well:

The detail is all inward. It is as though the horse itself were an emotional state. So finally the poem is not just about the stallion 'Ariel'; it is about what happens when the 'stasis in darkness' ceases to be static, when the potential violence of the animal is unleashed. And also the violence of the rider.<sup>23</sup>

The suicidal wish, naturally, does unfold from the rider's own inner violence, but it also emerges superbly from the subject of the poem. The intoxication of riding, the 'Pivot of heels and knees' is suggestive of the fullness of life and movement, as has been mentioned. This very awareness leads logically, in Sylvia Plath's terms, to the concluding lines. The elation of self-destruction grows out of the elation of a full human experience, and they are even one and the same thing:

And I  
 Am the arrow,  
 The dew that flies  
 Suicidal, at one with the drive  
 Into the red  
 Eye, the cauldron of morning.

'Ariel' is one of the highlights of this volume, the poet's ultimate statement on self-destruction, and throws the absoluteness of Howard's claim that she is already in the 'Kingdom of alienation', of stasis, into some doubt. Although, as has been mentioned, the wild dynamics of 'Ariel' and 'Years' do in a sense belong to her conception of stasis. Lowell claims she is 'Almost pure motion'.<sup>24</sup> He sees the poem as a metaphor for the poet:

Dangerous, more powerful than man, machinelike from hard training, she herself is a little like a racehorse, galloping relentlessly with risked outstretched neck, death hurdle after death hurdle topped. She cries out for that rapid life of starting pistols, snapping tapes, and new world records broken.<sup>25</sup>

The 'hood of bone', the lithic impulse, must remain an element in her poetry, a mode of expressing her nightmarish fears, a possibility, but not an absolutely achieved state.

Footnotes:

- 1 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 107.
- 2 Arthur Oberg, 'Sylvia Plath and the New Decadence', Chicago Review, XX, 1968.
- 3 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 192.
- 4 *ibid.*
- 5 'Sylvia Plath: And I have no Face, I have wanted to Efface Myself', *ibid.*
- 6 *ibid.*, p. 79.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 81.
- 8 'Mary's Song', Ariel.
- 9 'Sheep in Fog', Ariel.
- 10 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 62.
- 11 *ibid.*, p. 110.
- 12 *ibid.*
- 13 Sylvia Ashton-Warner, Spinster. (Penguin, 1961), pp. 180-1.
- 14 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 81.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 82.
- 16 *ibid.*
- 17 *ibid.*, p. 87.
- 18 *ibid.*, p. 81.
- 19 The Bell Jar, p. 101.
- 20 *ibid.*, p. 102.
- 21 Henry IV, part I, (Arden, 1966), Act III, sc. I, l. 125-129.
- 22 The New Poets, p. 86.
- 23 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 61.
- 24 Ariel, p. vii.
- 25 *ibid.*

## CHAPTER V

INHABITED BY A CRY

The nerves bursting like trees.

There is more to Sylvia Plath's response to her predicament than the recording of an attraction towards death, ambivalent as this attraction is. The more public expression of personal ills in 'Lady Lazarus' (chapter ~~two~~<sup>three</sup>) is also not completely typical. A whole range of nightmarish reaction, an unbelievable 'angst' unleashes itself throughout the poetry. The personal experiential response boldly dealt with in the early part of chapter three ('Gentleman, ladies') is developed more fully and subjectively in the private and personal aspects of such poems as 'Elm', the Bee poems, and the abstract final poems.

The general impression that emerges from Ariel is one of a tremendous vulnerability. The poet, her 'gold beaten skin / Infinitely delicate' ('Fever 103<sup>o</sup>'), is a victim of natural and unnatural fears, attracted at times to the infernal aspects of things:

I like black statements.

'Little Fugue'.

A piranha  
Religion, drinking

Its first communion out of my live toes.\*

'Nick and the Candlestick'.

---

\* A rueful, humorous aspect, admittedly, cannot be excluded from this quote.

Her vulnerability is intensely subjective and yet strangely linked with the public available world, as can be witnessed from her effortless adoption of different personae in poems of sickness, human waste, public torture, and children. Ted Hughes notes this acute susceptibility:

Her reactions to hurts in other people and animals, and even tiny desecrations of plant-life were extremely violent.<sup>1</sup>

'Elm', the first poem of the final frenetic period of Sylvia Plath's writing, a poem inspired by an enormous tree that dominated the yard of her English home, is in many ways the high-point of her personal terror. The poet adopts the persona of a protective elemental tree:

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:  
It is what you fear.  
I do not fear it: I have been there.

She is maternal at the outset, soothing the crying child who is still inexperienced enough to 'lie and cry' after love, love which is only a shadow. She makes her fingers gallop 'like a horse' to distract the child, and speculates on the possibility of bringing her own heightened experience within the child's grasp:

All night I shall gallop thus, impetuously,  
Till your head is a stone, your pillow a little turf,  
Echoing, echoing.  
Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?

A staggering eruption of personal suffering, of internal and external violence, follows. An account of nerve-end exposure to searing experience emerges in brilliant technological imagery:

I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.  
 Scorched to the root  
 My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

The long 'scorched', the abrupt 'stand' rhyming with 'hand' and the unexpected sense of pain that accompanies the use of this latter word backs up the initial impact due to the choice of metaphor. The terror grows:

Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.

intensified by the presence of the moon:

The moon, also, is merciless: she would drag me  
 Cruelly, being barren.

which introduces a quieter note, a contrast to the violent movement which has preceded:

I let her go. I let her go  
 Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.

The climax of the personal terror of the poem comes by medium of eerie and intensely physical language:

I am inhabited by a cry.  
 Nightly it flaps out  
 Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.  
 I am terrified by this dark thing  
 That sleeps in me;  
 All day I feel its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity.

It is impossible to paraphrase the malevolence of these lines, their expert use of darkness, soft noisome animal life, and an elongated insidious type of rhythm that appal the reader. The high priestess of inner savagery writes her manifesto in these two stanzas. The 'face / So murderous in its strangle of branches?' and the rest of the poem appears anti-climactic after their intensity.

'The Moon and the Yew Tree' followed chronologically from 'Elm' and provides a marked contrast to the concretized inner terror of the first poem. The use of a long line and a matter-of-fact tone induces a mood of dense and familiar depression. Ted Hughes provides a lengthy background note to this poem:

Opposite the front of our house stands a church.  
 Early one morning, in the dark, I saw the full moon  
 setting on to a large yew that grows in the churchyard,  
 and I suggested she make a poem of it. By midday, she  
 had written it. It depressed me greatly. It's my  
 suspicion that no poem can be a poem that is not a  
 statement from the powers in control of our life, the  
 ultimate suffering and decision in us. It seems to  
 me that this is poetry's only real distinction from  
 the literary forms that we call 'not poetry'. And  
 I had no real doubt that this was a poem, and perhaps a  
 great poem. She insisted that it was an exercise on  
 the theme.<sup>2</sup>

Sylvia's insistence on the poem as an 'exercise', and her husband's talk of 'powers in control of our life' are substantiated in the poem. The opening lines baldly herald utter dejection. In the universe of the poet, ideas, the life of the mind, are already felt to participate in the nature of death. The intellect is not life-enhancing, uplifting:

This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary.  
 The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue.

The pseudo-religious fantastic lines that follow:

The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God,  
 Prickling my ankles and murmuring of their humility,

are quickly placed and controlled by the direct factual reference to the setting and inspiration of the poem:



Fumy, spiritous mists inhabit this place  
 Separated from my house by a row of headstones.

In fact the generalized aspects of the poem, the references to Christianity, complement this particularisation and, through enlargement, prevent mere idiosyncratic statement. Matter-of-fact utterances of quiet despair such as:

I simply cannot see where there is to get to.

must be seen in relation to the overall spectacle of the mind questing in the sphere of Christianity for spiritual comfort. The mood, however, is not one of intensity. Tiredness, and a whimsical, artless brand of humour are evident. The moon is, 'white as a knuckle and terribly upset', the bells 'Eight great tongues' affirm the Resurrection and with self-conscious dignity 'soberly bong out their names', while:

Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,  
 Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,  
 Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.

Religion is seen as a possible refuge from the poet's own nightmare world, but the quiet fatalism with which this possibility is stated indicates its uselessness to her:

How I would like to believe in tenderness -  
 The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,  
 Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes.

The same flat rejection of religious institutionalism as being too low-gearred, too removed, not life-consuming, appears in The Bell Jar:

The only trouble was, Church, even the Catholic Church, didn't take up the whole of your life. No matter how much you knelt and prayed, you still had to eat three meals a day and have a job and live in the world.<sup>3</sup>

The moon is the poet's patron and she doesn't bring spiritual comfort. Her garments 'unloose small bats and owls', and in league with the yew tree she heralds unlimited nightmarish possibilities:

The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild.  
And the message of the yew tree is blackness - blackness and silence.

As such, the ending to the poem seems to approximate roughly to the opening lines. The meditation has been circular and low-keyed without a full working-out of the significance of the moon and the yew-tree. The generalizing aspect of the poem has not been as entirely successful as other poems such as 'Daddy'. Barbara Hardy in an extremely illuminating article on this subject, however, defends Sylvia Plath against possible accusations of enclosure and subjectivism in her poetry. Most of the poems of Ariel she sees as 'poetry of enlargement, not derangement':<sup>4</sup>

I want to stress this breadth and completeness. The poetry constantly breaks beyond its own personal cries of pain and horrors, in ways more sane than mad, enlarging and generalising the particulars, attaching its maladies to a profoundly moved and moving sense of human ills.<sup>5</sup>

The private world of, for instance, 'The Hanging Man', which appears to relate to personal experience of electric shock therapy for mental illness:

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.  
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.\*

---

\* See The Bell Jar, p. 151:

Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air crackling with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant.

is not typical of Ariel. The 'desert prophet' in proclaiming her own aridity, her individual love affair with pain and death, usually associates this proclamation with similar phenomena in the world exterior to her. Often the association grows from her peculiar power of breeding image from image as in 'Fever 103°'. The 'Hothouse baby in its crib', suggests the 'ghastly orchid', whose spots suggest the 'Devlish leopard' turned white by atomic radiation, and suggestive in turn, as a beast of prey, of adultery. The feverish patient's feeling of sin and its 'indelible smell', links with the universal guilt that is the lot of an atomic age; fever becomes atomic radiation. The impossible linking of metaphor (Isadora's scarves, Hiroshima ash), the flashes of fact ('Lemon water, chicken / Water, water make me retch') and the indeterminate gropings ('By whatever these pink things mean'), are also brilliantly effective in their dramatization of the persona's state of feverish delirium. They do, however, give the poem wider powers of reference than, say, 'In Plaster' a companion piece. And yet the personal strain is still kept separate, the patient achieves her hallucination, her escape into purity, the 'licking clean' of 'the aguey tendon':

... I  
 Am a pure acetylene  
 Virgin  
 Attended by roses,  
 By kisses, by cherubim,  
 By whatever these pink things mean.  
 Not you, nor him  
 Not him, nor him  
 (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) -  
 To Paradise.

The desire to dispense with the 'old whore petticoats' of the familiar self is a feature of the poet's extreme sensitivity. This is the straining for purification that can be found at the end of 'Paralytic', the yearning for completion through movement in 'Years' and 'Ariel', the urge to be whole:

... like the  
Water striving  
To re-establish its mirror  
Over the rock

'Words'.

For the physical being and psyche of the human person is seen by the poet as vulnerable to an impossible extent. Annette Lavers states this aspect of Sylvia Plath's poetry colourfully:

The living flesh is felt as essentially vulnerable, a prey to axes, doctor's needles, butchers' and surgeons' knives, poison, snakes and tentacles, acids, vampires, leeches, bats and bees, jails and brutal boots. Small animals are butchered and eaten, man's flesh can undergo the final indignity of being cut to pieces and used as an object.<sup>6</sup>

'The Applicant' conveys this thread in far more enthralling fashion than any string of generalisations could ever manage:

First, are you our sort of a person?  
Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,  
A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,  
Stitches to show something's missing? ...

This poem is extremely successful in terms of Hardy's idea of enlargement. The satirical use of the language of the commercial traveller and advertiser, is forceful and apt:

Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.  
 Well, what do you think of that?  
 Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver, ...

'Sweetie' backs up the light allegorical references to marriage earlier,  
 the offer of a hand

To bring teacups and roll away headaches  
 And do whatever you tell it.  
 Will you marry it?

and the cynical shrugging off of predictable marital emotion:

It is guaranteed  
 To thumb shut your eyes at the end  
 And dissolve of sorrow.

But there is a whole range of satire in the poem. A diminishing of life itself ('We make new stock from the salt'), and death-in-life references like that to the 'suit - / Black and stiff' to cover up nakedness, are part of this range. In the same vein is the dig at the welfare-state's ability to play the protector and give help only where there is apparent physical deficiency - 'Do you wear / A glass eye?' The use of question and answer, patter and jargon, and dulling repetition, along with obvious rhyming ('crutch / crotch; hand / hand; proof / roof') make the poem a brilliant aural piece. It is also a cutting and relevant social comment made from a detached point of view without descending to triteness or smartness.

'Cut', a droll little poem of light-hearted dimension, takes a similar stand-off look at human actuality, and has the same life-reducing qualities:

What a thrill -  
 My thumb instead of an onion.  
 The top quite gone  
 Except for a sort of a hinge  
 Of skin,  
 A flap like a hat, ...

It spins out its conceits in much the same way as 'Fever 103°':

Little pilgrim,  
 The Indian's axed your scalp.  
 Your turkey wattle  
 Carpet rolls  
 Straight from the heart.

At times perhaps threatening to degenerate into obscure mumbo-jumbo:

Saboteur,  
 Kamikaze man -  
 The stain on your  
 Gauze Ku Klux Klan  
 Babushka  
 Darkens and tarnishes ...

Although too clinical and precise in its opening to be really amusing the poem does register a complex reaction of fascination at the cut, tenderness, and a self-protectiveness which spirals out into a heightened perception of personal fragility and fear:

O my  
 Homunculus, I am ill.  
 I have taken a pill to kill  
 The thin  
 Papery feeling.

If life is reduced somewhat in these poems, it scores albeit in faltering fashion, in the marvellous poem 'Tulips':

Tulips belongs to March 1961, and records some tulips she had in hospital where she was recovering from an appendectomy.<sup>7</sup>

But the transformation of the tulips in the poetic process from mere predictable gift to surrealist beings is astonishing.\* From the outset the tulips are seen as alive, contrasting with the deadness of the sick-room:

The tulips are too excitable, it is winter here.

One of the most striking expressions of the impulse towards anonymity to be found in Ariel, follows:

I have given my name and my day-clothes to the nurses  
And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to the surgeons.

The traditional associations of death and sickness with stone reappear, but in a delicate exquisite fashion:

My body is a pebble to them, they tend it as water  
Tends to the pebbles it must run over, smoothing them gently.

And the ability to make a scene not only concrete but actually sensorily present is once more brilliantly realised. Her husband and child smile from a family photo, and:

Their smiles catch onto my skin. little smiling hooks.

She has been 'swabbed' clear of memories of loved familiar things, submerged into a submarine world of dislocation and peace:

I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

---

\* Ted Hughes sees this poem as 'the first sign of what was on its way. She wrote this poem without her usual studies over the Thesaurus, and at top speed, as one might write an urgent letter. From then on, all her poems were written in this way'. (The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 193).

The tulips, primary red and emblems of spring, are unwanted:

I didn't want any flowers, I only wanted  
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.

but they gradually impinge with more and more urgency on the sufferer's  
consciousness. The natural process of photosynthesis is enlarged:

Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe  
so that the flowers become emblems of vivid irrational fear, 'A dozen  
red lead sinkers round my neck,' which 'eat' her oxygen. Their life  
qualities are so real that they fill the air 'like a loud noise' and  
at all points threaten the anaesthetic impulse towards nonentity:

... I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow ...  
And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself.

The fantasy grows until the tulips are seen as voracious jungle  
predators:

They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat, ...

The tulips, the representatives of love, of vital life, do  
in the end triumph. The progress from the peace and self-enclosure  
of illness to the demands of life is recognised and recorded:

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes  
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.

The imagery of redness, of the flower, is carried over in this  
acceptance of recovery. Similarly, the water which before signalled  
oblivion ('the water went over my head'), is now tasted, 'is warm and  
salt', belonging to the available real world. Although this world,  
this recovery, is still a long way off ('And comes from a country far



away as health') there is a reluctant acknowledgement of life's victory. David Holbrook's exegesis of the poem is extremely illuminating but he does seem to ignore the ending:

The flowers are a 'get-well' gift. She does not want to be brought back from the hospitalisation: to lie as if dead with one's hands turned up is to be 'free'. The reference to the Communion tablet is important: it reveals that unconsciously she regards death as a means to be reborn, as Christ's body is a token of resurrection. Half of the logic of the poem leads towards the kind of suicide which expresses an unconscious desire for the regressed ego to be reborn.<sup>8</sup>

Barbara Hardy points out his error:

... but the tulips win, and that is the point.  
It is a painful victory for life.<sup>9</sup>

She claims that 'this is not a sick poem but a poem about being sick',<sup>10</sup> and expertly refutes the accusation of Holbrook's that the 'schizoid tendencies'<sup>11</sup> in the poem dominate:

The poem opens out to our experience of sickness and health, to the overwhelming demands of love, which we sometimes have to meet. The symbolism of present-giving and spring flowers makes a bridge from a personal death-longing to common experience.<sup>12</sup>

### Stings big as drawing pins

The unusual and gripping group of Bee poems in Ariel make more obvious use of a bridge; a common area of experience is used as a type of objective correlative for personal preoccupations:

... the solid facts and documentations of beekeeping act as a symbolic base for irrational and frightening fantasy and as a bridge into the everyday and ordinary explanations and existences.<sup>13</sup>

It is an activity the poet was right at home with, for as Ted Hughes points out, her father was 'a specialist in bees, and wrote a book called Bumblebees and their Ways.'<sup>14</sup> Anne Sexton, also tells of the poet's first-hand experience of beekeeping.<sup>15</sup> The poems provide entry into a foreign, almost ritualistic world, all the more nightmarish because of their use of technicalities and literal fact:

The white hive is snug as a virgin,  
Sealing off her brood cells, her honey, and quietly humming.  
Smoke rolls and scarves in the grove.  
The mind of the hive thinks this is the end of everything.  
Here they come, the outriders, on their hysterical elastics.

'The Bee Meeting'.

It is the sudden choice of phrase such as 'hysterical elastics', the choice of an epithet like 'fingerjoint cells', that builds up the 'frightening fantasy' out of the ordinary and prosaic. The poems are able to move off into the fantastic and return to the available recognisable environment with consummate ease:

I am the magician's girl who does not flinch.  
The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.  
Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold?

'The Bee Meeting'.

The fear that permeates these poems is so exaggerated and grows out of such commonplace roots that in many ways they are more effective than the more esoteric poetry of the volume. The mundane completely innocent meeting of the bee-keepers for instance, is given a sinister aspect:

In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection,  
 And they are all gloved and covered, why did nobody tell me?  
 They are smiling and taking out veils tacked to ancient hats.

'The Bee Meeting'.

The mild panic of the question (due to a wrong choice of clothing), and the word 'tacked', contribute chiefly to this effect. The 'long white box', the hive, being suggestive of a coffin, works this way also. In fact the hive, suggestive of rural serenity, the security of the family unit; and the honey, sweet, warm-tasting, fulfilling in its seminal suggestiveness, becomes a real object of terror through the poet's transformation of its ordinariness. Even a walk through a bean-field is made horrific through the personifications used, and the employment of black and red, although the last line of the description tends towards the obvious and pseudo-dramatic:

Strips of tinfoil winking like people,  
 Feather dusters fanning their hands in a sea of bean flowers,  
 Creamy bean flowers with black eyes and leaves like bored hearts.  
 Is it blood clots the tendrils are dragging up that string?  
 No, no, it is scarlet flowers that will one day be edible.

Sickness and sterility make their way even into this stronghold of natural life:

Is it the hawthorn that smells so sick?  
 The barren body of hawthorn, etherizing its children.

And the same strange vulnerability and over-exposure to hurt so evident in 'Tulips' also finds a place:

I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me  
 With its yellow purses, its spiky armoury.

'The Arrival of the Bee Box', a box so ordinary ('clean wood box') and precisely defined ('Square as a chair'), triggers off a

colossal, almost hallucinatory, expression of fear and threatened security:

It is dark, dark,  
With the swarmy feeling of African hands  
Minute and shrunk for export,  
Black on black, angrily clambering.

Conceits are spun out as in many of the poems already discussed:

It is like a Roman mob ...  
... I am not a Caesar.

But in fact the paranoia eventually matches the fear:

They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner,  
to mellow into an unsteady but humane playing of God:

Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.  
The box is only temporary.

In 'Stings' the opening is once more measured and leisurely until the conceits are loaded on to the framework to shape a cry of personal longing. The hive becomes 'a teacup / White with pink flowers on it', a work of personal devotedness:

With excessive love I enamelled it  
Thinking "Sweetness, sweetness."

The latter line seems to parallel the pitiful desire in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' for a belief in tenderness or the cry that comes at the end of 'The Couriers' after a list of portents:

Love, love, my season.

It was not Sylvia's season, any more than sweetness. In fact the care and love lavished on the hive does not bring enormity or perfection of any kind. The queen bee's body is 'Rubbed of its plush - / Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful', while the poet becomes one of the worker-bees, part of a line 'of winged, unmiraculous women'. The 'vulturous boredom' of 'The Hanging Tree' is re-enacted in domestic imagery:

Though for years I have eaten dust  
And dried plates with my dense hair.

The terror grows, however, with the emergence of a strange, unplaced, hallucinatory-type figure:

A third person is watching.

The fearful 'cry' of the 'Elm' poem finds an echo here in the physical attack on this imaginary male. Despite his sweetness:

The bees found him out,  
Moulding onto his lips like lies,  
Complicating his features.

The poem ends with a full movement away from degrading drudgery and ordinariness in much the same manner as the desperate climax of 'Lady Lazarus'. The poet reincarnates her own queen bee 'with her lion-red body, her wings of glass' who triumphs in death over the domination of the hive, the 'honey-machine':

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her -  
The mausoleum, the wax house.

The ending is strangely reassuring in its assertion of the poet's imaginative power, power capable of mastering the threatening mundaneness seen earlier. She had 'a self to recover, a queen' who scores a final terrible hallucinatory victory. The movement in this group of poems oscillates between what Barbara Hardy calls 'a larger terror' and 'the common and solid world'<sup>16</sup> a world so often absent from Ariel. It produces peaks of fear, a fear that arises from the everyday, more malevolent than the bizarre, and moments of familiarity and reassurance.

The poem 'Wintering' instances both threads. The honey has been collected and the season is now one of recouping and waiting. The six jars of honey, however, quickly become transformed:

Six cat's eyes in the wine cellar,

while the empty bottles of the cellar signal vacuity:

And the bottles of empty glitters -  
Sir So-and-so's gin.

In the following stanza the cellar becomes a place of suffocation and rottenness:

This is the room I have never been in.  
This is the room I could never breathe in.  
The black bunched in there like a bat,  
No light  
But the torch and its faint  
Chinese yellow on appalling objects -  
Black asininity. Decay.  
Possession.  
It is they who own me.

The use of yellow and black and the abrupt presentative sentences in the latter stanza, evoke the feeling of being trapped by the enveloping

putrescence.

The focus shifts quickly, however, to the bees' ordeal of wintering, their ponderous tired movement crystallized in long vowel build-ups:

... the bees  
 So slow I hardly know them,  
 Filing like soldiers  
 To the syrup tin

The massing together for survival, even mental suffering ('Black / Mind against all that white') is depicted, as is the lone stolidity of the women who:

... have got rid of the men,  
 ... The woman, still at her knitting,  
 At the cradle of Spanish walnut,  
 Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think.

The final stanza is full of reassurance, and the re-affirmation of life. A series of worrying tentative questions - 'Will the hive survive', - are followed by the simple but marvellous closing line:

The bees are flying. They taste the spring.

Life and the urge to survive score positively at the close.

This Bee-cycle of poems, poems of terror and mastery, drudgery, murder, and survival, form a completely individual sector of Ariel. They are a striking part of the 'cry' which inhabits the poet and the volume. They terrify in their use of the commonplace as a launching-pad for at times appalling fantasy, and in their very transformation of the ordinary into something sinister:

Now they are giving me a fashionable white straw Italian hat  
 And a black veil that moulds to my face, they are making me one  
 of them.

'The Bee Meeting'.

The 'cry' of this series of poems is set in a recognisable framework, and even the terror of 'Elm' evolves from a definite persona being adopted. A direct contrast is provided by 'Getting There', a long precipitant poem which assails the reader with its sheer piling up of language. The questions, conceits, rapid change of metaphor, and the constant dislocation of place make it a fine poem of derangement. A social context is merely suggested:

The terrible brains  
 Of Krupp ...  
 ... It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other.  
 ... The tent of unending cries -  
 A hospital of dolls.

In addition, of course, there is the overall suggestion of riding on the death train. The movement is akin to common nightmare with its fruitless struggle to reach a destination, a pin-point of light:

How far is it?  
 It is so small  
 The place I am getting to, why are there these obstacles -

The agony and the confusions are grotesque and primeval:

There is mud on my feet,  
 Thick, red and slipping. It is Adam's side,  
 This earth I rise from, and I in agony.  
 I cannot undo myself, and the train is steaming.  
 Steaming and breathing, its teeth  
 Ready to roll, like a devil's.

The entire movement and noise of the train is captured in the 's' and 'r' sounds of these lines, the long 'ea' sounds, and the frequent



alliterations. In fact, the derangement of the poem is presented in a precise language that is frightening in its skill and logic. Animal life and the machine join in a particularly appalling image early in the poem:

The gigantic gorilla interiors  
Of the wheels move, they appal me -

Working in reverse fashion, a similar fusion occurs later:

The train is dragging itself, it is screaming -  
An animal  
Insane for the destination,

and a human element is added to the terror-producing combination:

The bloodspot,  
The face at the end of the flare.

The death train of the poem transports a huge amount of pain - the pain of wars, wounds, sickness, the treadmill of daily life, of labour and the industrial factory, of religious nightmare ('Let their souls writhe in a dew, / Incense in my track,') and of death. The huge complex of cross-reference and suggested context creates a vehicle, a medium, for an expression of unalleviated suffering, while also providing a type of enlargement and a wider relevance. The nightmare seems to finally crystallize, or should one say congeal, into an account of dying. An escape into vacuity and forgetfulness is recorded, the train, or the carriage that houses the 'I' of the poem being labelled finally as 'the black car of Lethe':

And I stepping from this skin  
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces  
Step to you from the black car of Lethe,  
Pure as a baby.

The shedding of the self as known in life, like the butterfly spurning its chrysalis, can be the only outcome of the immense confusion and struggle registered earlier. Esther Greenwood undergoes a similar purification in a far lower key in The Bell Jar when she soaps the moral grime of New York off her person in the bath:

The longer I lay there in the clear hot water  
the purer I felt, and when I stepped out at last  
and wrapped myself in one of the big, soft, white,  
hotel bath-towels I felt pure and sweet as a new baby.<sup>17</sup>

-oo000oo-

Footnotes:

- 1 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 190.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 194.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 174.
- 4 The Survival of Poetry, p. 165.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 164-5.
- 6 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 104.
- 7 *ibid.*, p. 193.
- 8 Cambridge Review, Feb. 7, 1969, p. 250.
- 9 The Survival of Poetry, p. 178.
- 10 *ibid.*, p. 177.
- 11 Cambridge Review, p. 249.
- 12 The Survival of Poetry, p. 179.
- 13 *ibid.*
- 14 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 190.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 179.
- 16 The Survival of Poetry, p. 179.
- 17 The Bell Jar, p. 22.

CHAPTER VI

HOTHOUSE BABY IN ITS CRIB

O high-riser, my little loaf.

The particularly feminine aspects of Sylvia Plath's response to her predicament are not obliterated by the sheer extremism of the position she takes up. Reference has been made to her use of the sterile menstrual cycle and the feminine fragility of her hospital poems. The Ariel volume contains an obvious strain of intense femininity, a parallel to Robert Lowell's masculine note in Life Studies:

I grin at 'Stanley', now sunk in his sixties,  
Once a Harvard all-American fullback,  
(if such were possible!)  
Still hoarding the build of a boy in his twenties!  
  'Waking in the Blue'.

George Steiner is perceptive in his comment on this element in her poetry:

She was haunted by the piecemeal, strung-together mechanics of the flesh, ... This brokenness, so sharply feminine and contemporary, is, I think, her principal realization. It is by the graphic expression she gave to it that she will be judged and remembered. Sylvia Plath carries forward, in an intensely womanly and aggravated note, from Robert Lowell's Life Studies, a book that obviously had a great impact on her. This new frankness of women about the specific hurts and tangles of their nervous-physiological make-up is as vital to the poetry of Sylvia Plath as it is to the tracts of Simone de Beauvoir or to the novels of Edna O'Brien and Brigid Brophy. Women speak out as never before.<sup>1</sup>

She takes on the female condition wholly ('They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations.') at times enlarging the condition to a point at which the human aspect recedes into the background:

I am too pure for you or anyone.  
 Your body  
 Hurts me as the world hurts God ...  
 ... my gold-beaten skin  
 Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive ...  
 ... I  
 Am a pure acetylene  
 Virgin  
 Attended by roses,  
 By kisses, by cherubim.

'Fever 103°'.

She has the unique ability of extracting inner savagery out of the most mundane and homely situations, as in 'Mary's Song', 'A Birthday Present', and 'Lesbos':

Viciousness in the kitchen!  
 The potatoes hiss.

'Lesbos'.

It is her feminine absoluteness which seems to be behind her powerful use of the primary colours red and black. The 'beautiful red' of 'Letter in November', the colour of blood, often menstrual blood, and the red flowers of many of the poems, are evocative of intense life and vitality. Blackness is death and silence, as has been seen in 'Daddy'. But as usual the poet's code is ambivalent and the redness of the flowers in 'Tulips' can also be seen as threatening, while the 'Poppies in July' are 'little hell flames'. In 'Berck-Plage' the primary colours are cleverly inverted. The mourners, from the land of the living, are seen in terms of death's blackness, while the open grave is red and vital:

Six round black hats in the grass and a lozenge of wood,  
And a naked mouth, red and awkward.

In 'Nick and the Candlestick' Sylvia terms her son 'ruby' and certainly the child as theme is a major and precious part of the positive warm strain in Ariel. 'You're', a riddle-type poem about her unborn son reveals the poet's effervescent common-sense and searching imaginative powers. The baby is 'Wrapped up' in himself 'like a spool', and partaking of the poet's exuberance:

Jumpy as a Mexican bean.  
Right like a well-done sum.

She captures the warm anticipation of the expectant mother with amazingly original metaphors:

Vague as a fog and looked for like mail.  
... Snug as a bud and at home  
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.

And shows her wry sense of self-deprecating humour:

O high-riser, my little loaf.

The same humour that she applies in describing her maternal duties after the birth of Frieda, her second child:

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral  
In my Victorian nightgown.  
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. ...

'Morning Song'.

In 'Balloons' the child's enclosed world of ~~sur~~prise and absolute novelty is archly detailed:

Your small  
 Brother is making  
 His balloon squeak like a cat.  
 Seeming to see  
 A funny pink world he might eat on the other side of it,  
 He bites,  
 Then sits  
 Back, fat jug  
 Contemplating a world clear as water,  
 A red  
 Shred in his little fist.

'The Night Dances' reveals a tender and exciting insight at work:

... I shall not entirely  
 Sit emptied of beauties, the gift  
 Of your small breath, the drenched grass  
 Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies.

The poem spirals out into an elaborate cluster of conceits, but 'Nick and the Candlestick' stays closer to its subject. Barbara Hardy in a remarkable 'tour de force' has made a brilliant analysis of this poem in Dodsworth's The Survival of Poetry. She quotes it as an example of her claim that Plath's poetry is a poetry of enlargement. She sees the poem as being 'lucidly open to a Christian mythical enlargement.' The lightly-touched Christian reference:

Remembering, even in sleep,  
 Your crossed position.

prepares for the strong climax to the poem which gives all that has gone before great weight and significance:

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

Her baby is Christ. Hardy sums up:

When we look back, when we read again, the  
 whole poem is pushing towards that last line,

'You are the one baby in the barn'. The symbol holds good, though at first invisibly, for the cold, the exposure, the dark, the child, the mother, the protection, and the redemption from a share of pain. Each sensuous and emotional step holds for the mother in the poem and for Mary.<sup>2</sup>

But essentially the poem remains one of finely-tuned maternal love. Even though the polluted world threatens humanity ('the mercuric / Atoms that cripple'):

The blood blooms clean  
In you, ruby.

And here the redness of the child is gentle and endearing, not bringing the urgent and exhaustive demands of the tulips, or the wounds, of her other poems. The protectiveness of the mother is summed up beautifully by the 'cave' hung with 'roses' and 'soft rugs', and is made more effective through the poem's balancing awareness of the world's terrors. The religious overtones take on added meaning also, through this balance:

It (the poem) uses - or, better, feels for - the myth of Redemption not in order to idealize the particulars but rather to revise and qualify the myth, to transplant it again cheerfully, to praise only after a long hard look at the worst. The love and faith and praise are there, wrung out and achieved against the grain, against the odds.<sup>3</sup>

There is the same retrieved type of faith in 'Poppies in October' where, beneath a menacing sky 'Palely and flamily / Igniting its carbon monoxides' appear the unexpected poppies. They are a gratuitous gift of beauty 'Utterly unasked for', and even 'the woman in the ambulance' shares in their life-giving vitality. Her 'red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly -'. Life and natural

beauty flash into the persona's own frozen life in superlative fashion:

Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts.

The reaction is an unadulterated cry of joy, perhaps the purest in the volume, the cry of a Christian to her God, thanking him for the unexpected:

O my God, what am I  
That these late mouths should cry open  
In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers.

The anguished overtones of the mouth image, and perhaps the 'forest of frost', seem to make the lines more poignant, the joy a retrieved and precious kind.

'Letter in November' provides another moment of personal contentedness in the volume. The initial scene-setting is neat and effective:

... The streetlight  
Splits through the rat's-tail  
Pods of the laburnum at nine in the morning.

The poet's mood is well-integrated; she is one with her surroundings, confidently alone and whole:

There is a green in the air,  
Soft, delectable.  
It cushions me lovingly.  
I am flushed and warm.  
I think I may be enormous,  
I am so stupidly happy,  
My Wellingtons  
Squelching and squelching through the beautiful red.

As usual in Plath's work, however, the mood of the poet is not exclusive. The threatening element is still there. The 'holly' is 'barbarous' with 'viridian / Scallops, pure iron', and the apple trees



are seen 'In a thick grey death-soup'. Similarly the child theme, in spite of the positive aspects it possesses in Ariel, can become a part of the guilt and the despair of the volume. The children in 'Kindness' are seen as real and life-giving ('two roses'):

What is so real as the cry of a child?

But inner compulsion, the drive to write about the extremities within one, is stronger:

The blood jet is poetry,  
There is no stopping it.

Hence there is a desperate negativism behind the assertiveness of the lines:

Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says.  
Sugar is a necessary fluid.

The husband, also, is 'Wreathed in steam' and the children become surrealistically transformed by the 'blood jet' of poetry to 'two roses'. And the 'Hothouse baby in its crib' in 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>' is an image of absolute guilt and despair grown out of a nuclear over-technologised age. The new-born child in 'Morning Song' also, immediately reinforces the spiritual poverty of the adults who welcome it. He is a 'fat gold watch', with a 'bald cry' and a 'New statue' whom the adults stare at as 'blankly as walls'. The baby is a part of the mechanical frozen aspect of adult life, and in fact his sheer nudity and lack of material possessions serves to remind the adult world of its impoverishment:

... your nakedness  
Shadows our safety. ...

The poetry is nonetheless precise and sensitive:

All night your moth-breath  
 Flickers among the flat pink roses. ...

and the image that concludes the poem is incisive in its capturing of the basic world of the infant. The 'balloons' here, could possibly be read as the comic-book variety of frozen speech, a clever touch if this is the case:

... And now you try  
 Your handful of notes;  
 The clear vowels rise like balloons.

Sylvia's feminine frankness, and the commitment she makes to her sex is obvious throughout Ariel. It provides many of the more tranquil and positive moments, and moments of sheer joy as in 'Poppies in October', where the stimulus of the flowers is so simple and the response so completely feminine. It is this femininity which produces the marvellous poems about children and the corresponding refusal to be trivial. Hence the child, and female attributes such as menstrual blood, become a part of the poet's undaunted facing up to her illness, if such a sensitivity as Plath's can truly be termed 'illness'. The secretary in Three Women, her radio play written for the B.B.C., displays the attitude of the woman poet who refuses to become a victim of the obvious and mundane, who uses her femininity for a full commitment to her own insights, even if the latter are dark and unnerving:

I shall be a heroine of the peripheral.  
 I shall not be accused by isolate buttons,  
 Holes in the heels of socks, the white mute faces  
 Of unanswered letters, confined in a letter case.  
 I shall not be accused, I shall not be accused.  
 The clock shall not find me wanting, nor these stars.  
 That rivet in place abyss after abyss.<sup>4</sup>

The doom mark / Crawls down the wall.

The feminine positive strain in Ariel must remain a very minor thread of the volume. The blood jet of poetry is directed almost single-mindedly in the last handful of poems towards the 'abyss'. Plath seems to be completely bent on the 'mouth' of her poetry marrying the 'hurt', coping with, synthesizing her sickness and fear. In 'Kindness' she almost implies that her poetry is neurosis. She fears that the 'Japanese silks, desperate butterflies' that are the crystallization of her neuroses will be 'pinned any minute, anaesthetized' by 'Kindness', by the milk of human nature, human kind. She does seem to place her art in the destructive realm that Trilling speaks of. Poetry is the 'blood jet', her own psychic blood, and there is every possibility that she is dying here on these pages in these last poems which seem to directly foresee her own death. This possibility of a 'murderous art' must be considered despite the talk of objective artistic control earlier.

The 'axes' that are the words of poetry in her poem 'Words' bring a 'sap' which 'Wells like tears'. The writing of poetry, an art like this, can destroy the tree, the self. The 'rock / That drops and turns', the 'white skull' that seems to signify her father complex prevents the water re-establishing its 'mirror', its completeness. Poetry, and its axe-like language refuses rest to the individual, its art can be inimical and destructive, an 'adversary culture' in Trilling's terms.

The last poems are basically concerned, however, with the vision of doom, the visulent foreboding and fear discussed in Chapter five. This strain has been present mainly in a sensory vital manner in Ariel but in the last poems looms in a visionary personalised manner speaking of a death a destiny, as it were, already accomplished. ('Balloons, Contusion, Kindness, Edge and Words, belong to the last week of her life.'<sup>5</sup>) In 'Edge' the pitchers of milk are 'now empty', the children folded back into the woman's body:

... as petals  
Of a rose close when the garden  
Stiffens and odours bleed  
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon betrays no wonderment:

She is used to this sort of thing.  
Her blacks crackle and drag.

And in 'Words', intellectual life, the effort at communication, the words that are its tools, are compared to:

Echoes travelling  
Off from the centre like horses.

They are met again years later 'dry and riderless', having failed to master the complexities of life, to 'patch together a content / Of sorts'<sup>6</sup>:

... like the  
Water striving  
To re-establish its mirror  
Over the rock.

The conclusion is fatalistic, inevitable:

From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars  
Govern a life.

'Contusion' must be the ultimate statement of the poet's vulnerability, her sense of doom. There is no sentimentality, just a type of pride in the face of certain decay and recession into death and otherness. The colours are no longer the red plush of a cut, a wound, or a flower, but the muted spectrum belonging to the dull blow. They are also the colours of non-life, the absence of life ('pearl', 'mirrors', 'sheeted'):

Colour floods to the spot, dull purple.  
The rest of the body is all washed out,  
The colour of pearl.

The conceits spin out to capture magnificently the feeling of an insistent doom, an irresistable vacuuming into the bag of death:

In a pit of rock  
The sea sucks obsessively,  
One hollow the whole sea's pivot.  
  
The size of a fly,  
The doom mark  
Crawls down the wall.  
  
The heart shuts,  
The sea slides back,  
The mirrors are sheeted.

The mirrors are sheeted

Here, then, is the convincing imaginative reality of Ariel, deservedly, it seems 'one of the most marvellous volumes of poetry published for a very long time' (The Times Literary Supplement). A structural study of a volume of poetry of this nature where themes and motifs are assiduously hunted, holds certain dangers, however.

It may promote misreadings and impose a false framework on the poetry, but nonetheless it can contribute to deeper insights and serve to demonstrate the considerable artistry of the poet who, as her husband notes, 'faced a task in herself, and her poetry is the record of her progress in the task'.<sup>7</sup> The tracing of themes and imagery through from The Colossus serves to demonstrate to what extent Sylvia Plath found her true poetic voice in Ariel, in its taut, unique, conceit-ridden poems. Anne Sexton notes of the former volume and earlier poetry:

Sylvia hadn't then found a form that belonged to her. Those early poems were all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that). I felt she hadn't found a voice of her own, wasn't, in truth, free to be herself.<sup>8</sup>

In Ariel, the mental universe is completely her own, with its moon and stone-dominated imagery, its hooks and crys, and clever bizarre conceits spinning out one from the other as in 'Fever 103°'.

Such a study can also provide a useful safeguard against the 'myth' and 'cult' building that ensued after the death of the poet, and dominated many reviews. The cool neutrality and frequently self-deprecatory tone of the poet should have insured against hysterical uncontrolled interpretations of the poetry, but often this has not been the case. Sylvia Plath in Ariel is always at pains to avoid excessive narcissistic experience, to avoid slipping into what Alvarez terms 'the witless morals of confessional verse'.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps the most extreme of extremist artists she provides an astonishing balance by the artistry of her poems. The sheer ability to 'enlarge' personal themes through linking them with larger social and cultural phenomena

is a major part of the artistry, as Rosenthal notes:

... a genuine confessional poem has to be superbly successful artistically if it is to achieve this fusion of the private and the culturally symbolic.<sup>10</sup>

Not only does she display artistry, however, but a complete sincerity in confronting her own reality, a sincerity often evidenced in a refusal to compromise. Poems like 'Elm', 'Daddy', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Death and Co.' and the more gentle 'Edge', are completely authentic in the intense subjective reactions they record. Alvarez recognises the genuine feeling behind her brilliant self-explorations, the authenticity which is her trademark:

It is as though she had decided that, for her poetry to be valid, it must tackle head on nothing less serious than her own death, bringing to it a greater wealth of invention and sardonic energy than most poets manage in a lifetime of so-called affirmation.<sup>11</sup>

And much of her affirmation lies paradoxically in the bold assertion of the negativism implicit in many of her themes. As has been pointed out in the introduction Sylvia Plath's predicament is extremely representative of modern Everyman as envisaged by Dostoevsky and Trilling. While her personal agonies are not by any means to be erected into a modern norm they are a healthy and vital part of the modern literary scene. Through the ordered expression of her own personal predicament she provides an anti-perspective for the eventual placing of modern man in a true perspective.

Not that Ariel presents an unrelieved negative front. A positive thread of optimism is often present as in 'Poppies in October' and the children poems, but an optimism which contains a

curious sense of the retrieved; a joy all the more intense because it is achieved in the face of terrible psychic threat. It is the assertiveness of Lady Lazarus rising from the ash with her red hair, or the queen bee's flight at the conclusion of 'Stings'. It is the positive confidence of the bees after their terrible 'Wintering', who 'taste the spring', or the momentary spasm of contentment recorded in 'Letter in November', 'Poppies in October', and 'You're'. It is small, achieved against the odds, but a definite thread nonetheless.

Sylvia Plath's poems do, it seems, 'build up into one long poem'; her peculiar extreme experiences and the clear-headed expression given them do have a positive part to play in modern art; and a study of her common themes and motifs and her marvellous power to choose startlingly original metaphor does convince us of her superior powers as an artist, but ultimately her essence evades us. As Ted Hughes says:

Her poetry escapes ordinary analysis in the way clairvoyance and mediumship do: her psychic gifts, at almost any time, were strong enough to make her frequently wish to be rid of them.<sup>12</sup>

'The mirrors are sheeted' inevitably in any attempt at analysing Ariel, her core of meaning becomes blurred in the process of paraphrase and discussion.

Her reality and the true nature of her considerable talent must remain locked in the actuality of her own life, now terminated and only unevenly recorded by friends and acquaintances. Such an acquaintance is Wendy Campbell who draws attention to Sylvia's overriding contempt for anyone who appeared to refuse the full range of human experience, and her bitter resentment of the pain caused by



being human, both for herself and others. Most tellingly of all she records Sylvia's habit of assessing her own experience subjectively:

Her point of reference was always firmly fixed within herself. She seemed to use her mind as a set of antennae with which she assessed her experience and felt it over. She wanted 'to know' for her own subjective purposes. Her intellectual traffic was largely with herself and related ultimately to her vision of the world and her experience.<sup>13</sup>

And from this indiscernible point within her, a storm-centre of absolute authenticity and calm, spiral out the unique incisive poems of Ariel. Poems which despite the self-destruction of their author and the negativism of much of their content seem to score a paradoxical assertive victory. The 'queen bee' of Ariel, the 'great classical heroine' as Lowell terms her, recovers her self, defiantly:

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her -  
The mausoleum, the wax house.

Footnotes:

- 1 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 215.
- 2 The Survival of Poetry, p. 16.
- 3 *ibid.*, p. 169.
- 4 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 262.
- 5 *ibid.*, p. 195.
- 6 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather', The Colossus, p. 42.
- 7 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 187.
- 8 *ibid.*, p. 177.
- 9 Partisan Review, <sup>No. 3, 1970, p.</sup> 357.
- 10 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 69.
- 11 Partisan Review, 357.
- 12 The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 187.
- 13 *ibid.*, p. 183.

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