

A DEVELOPMENTAL STUDY OF THE ART OF SYLVIA PLATH

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SYLVIA PLATH"

by

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the writings of Sylvia Plath from the point of view of a "schizoid diagnosis". The theories of three British ego-psychologists, W.R.D. Fairbairn, D.W. Winnicott, and H. Gunstrip, provide the psychoanalytic framework. Working within the theory of object relations and by focusing attention on early childhood ego development, they have contributed many remarkable insights into the 'motives' behind human activity.

The only collection published during the poet's lifetime, The Colossus; the three posthumous volumes, Crossing the Water, Winter Trees and Ariel; and the autobiographical novel, The Bell Jar, are examined chronologically to reveal the clear development of a schizoid perspective in Sylvia Plath's art. Her writings are shot through with an intense libidinal attachment to self-destruction, and point to the desperate attempts of a weak ego struggling to be born. In the end the violence of the false, destructive strategies of survival she chose became self-directed, and suicide resulted.

Sylvia Plath became mythologized with her death. A literary romanticization of suicide characterizes most critical studies on the poet. This thesis takes issue at some length with the influential British author, A. Alvarez, in particular, whose writings on the "extremist poets" have shaped in a most damaging way any critical perspective on Sylvia Plath in the decade following her death.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

One of the most significant events in Sylvia Plath's life was her decision to take that life in the early morning hours of February 11, 1963. Her critical recognition as a writer virtually dates from and has increased steadily since that tragic act. During her lifetime the one published collection of poetry, The Colossus, received only fair reviews as did The Bell Jar, first published under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. Plath's artistic reputation rests largely on the poems written in the last eighteen months of her life, although Ariel was not published until two years after her death, in 1965. On the basis of the praise and excitement this volume generated, The Colossus, now out of print in the original Heinemann edition, was reissued by Faber and Faber in 1967. The Bell Jar, having experienced a similar fate, was also reissued by Faber under her own name. By 1971, with the publication of the collections, Crossing the Water and Winter Trees, Plath's stature as a poetess was assured. While certain poems and various short stories have yet to be collected and published, a developmental study of her art from late 1958 to early 1963 may now be attempted.

The work we possess to date is remarkably unified. Ted Hughes, her husband, has written:

Surveyed as a whole, with attention to the order of composition, I think the unity of her opus is clear. Once the unity shows itself, the logic and inevitability of the language, which controls and contains such conflagrations and collisions within itself, becomes more obviously what it is--direct, and even plain, speech.<sup>1</sup>

From the quiet lyricism of The Colossus and the traditional probing of new material in Crossing the Water, to the final anguished statements in Winter Trees and Ariel, microcosm reflects macrocosm throughout as the suffering psyche constricted in an ever tighter death-grip on the poet's life.

Sylvia Plath grappled throughout her life with the experience of a hollowness of being, a fundamental weakness at the core of her identity. The poetry and The Bell Jar explore the lack of what D.W. Winnicott calls the primary I AM feeling, an unquestioned sense of acceptance into the human world. In an attempt to overcome the early failure in psychic development, Sylvia Plath's life and art became a means to express an overwhelming need to have a weak identity confirmed--even at the expense of involving others dear to her in her own death-circuit reasoning. R.D. Laing has described this condition as one of the characteristics of 'ontological insecurity'.

The Bell Jar relates the frightening, autobiographical details of Plath's own mental breakdown at the age of nineteen, through the figure of Esther Greenwood:

I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo...<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ted Hughes, "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems", in The Art of Sylvia Plath, edited by Charles Newman, (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1971), p.195.

<sup>2</sup>Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), p.3.

Esther is subjected to what Laing terms the 'degradation' of conventional psychiatry--insulin shock therapy and ECT--and the false socialisation that in the end forces her return to 'sanity', "patched, retreaded and approved for the world" (p.257).

Yet the essential, hollow condition within remains unchanged.

Like the victim of a mad experiment, the heroine feels herself irrevocably separated from the real world by the glass wall of an imaginative bell jar:

To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a  
dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream... (p.250).

But the 'real world' itself had failed to confirm identity.

This profound loss is emphasized in that magnificent scene in which Plath's heroine drops her clothes, one by one, over the penthouse balcony, to float, identityless, into the darkness of the New York night. We realize suddenly Esther's own psychological nightmare: neither in the frenzied daytime activity nor in this night-time gesture can she find meaning in existence.

Only the medium of this quest for identity has been shifted in the poetry, for Sylvia Plath's need remains the same though now more focused and ever more desperate. There are glancing admissions in The Colossus, lines which express the fear of de-personalization, the 'patched-up' feeling attendant upon an exhausting effort to preserve a weakened self:

A brief respite from fear  
Of total neutrality. With luck,  
Trekking stubborn through this season  
Of fatigue, I shall  
Patch together a content.

Of sorts.

"Black Rook in Rainy Weather"

By the time of Ariel, poems written a few months before her own suicide, Sylvia Plath is cataloguing like some knolling bell her diminishing sense of affect, as relationship with the outer world becomes ever more horrifyingly impossible. Only the brutality of self-immolation seems to promise any sense of personal reality:

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

I do it so it feels like hell.  
I do it so it feels real.

"Lady Lazarus"

Plath's sense of a hollow, identityless core of being, the plate-glass feeling, the horror of depersonalization, the 'patched-up' feeling, the disintegrating relationship with the world--these are characteristics, as R. D. Laing's illuminating study in The Divided Self makes clear, of the schizoid personality.

I suggest that there is little question that Sylvia Plath exhibited 'transient schizoid episodes', to use W. R.D. Fairbairn's term, throughout her brief life, and that a reflection of this state can be readily discerned in her work. The description, 'transient schizoid episode' is appropriate to Plath, denoting the almost casual quality of her illness. She obviously appeared to live well in the world with her brilliant academic successes; marriage to another poet, Ted Hughes; children; and her attractive, energetic personality. Yet there were also those persistent suicide attempts, and her writings which spoke more and more of a

desire to join her father in death. In the end this awful desire was finally acted upon.

The theories of certain ego psychologists can engender greater understanding of such a writer as Sylvia Plath. Freud himself wrote cautiously of psychoanalytic studies of artists, arguing that they "are not meant to explain the genius of a poet, but to show the [motives] which have stirred it up, and the topics imposed on it by fate."<sup>3</sup> Post-Freudian ego psychologists, however, working within the theory of object relations, have focused attention on early childhood ego development, an area that remained indistinct to Freud, and have contributed many remarkable insights into the 'motives' behind human activity, both creative and mundane. In expressing feelings of depersonalization before the threatening force of a dehumanized, materialistic society, Sylvia Plath is evoking emotions we all have. Indeed, the schizoid individual, being sensitive to those factors which shape our lives, and often possessing uncanny insights into the human condition, seems therefore to be speaking 'for' all of us.

This is especially true when the modern avant-garde itself seems obsessed with some of the most formative ideas of psychoanalysis. Enthusiasm for the Freudian pleasure principle has precipitated an easy acquiescence to the 'gratification' of instinctual energy release and all the permissiveness and violence of death-circuit modes of thinking. Susan Sontag expresses this fashionable malaise, barren of the reparative, redemptive 'truths'

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<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Foreword" to Marie Bonaparte, The Life and Works of Edgar Allen Poe (London:Imago, 1949).

of human existence. It is a rejection of sanity:

There are certain eras which are too complex, too deafened by contradictory historical and intellectual experiences to hear the voice of sanity. Sanity becomes compromise, evasion, a lie. Ours is an age which consciously pursues health, and yet only believes in the reality of sickness. The truths we respect are those born of affliction. We measure truth in terms of the cost to the writer in suffering—rather than by the standard of an objective truth to which a writer's words correspond. Each of our truths must have a martyr.<sup>4</sup>

But Sylvia Plath was no 'martyr' to society. Moreover, it is quite wrong to see her as one, as the avant-garde has done. Such a social theorist as R.D. Laing would have us vindicate endless hostility by blaming 'society' for our 'devastation'. Rather, Sylvia Plath needed the experience of what Harry Guntrip calls "the deepest thing about human nature...its togetherness",<sup>5</sup> though she seems never to have enjoyed this in life. Her art testifies that she reached a point where she could no longer experience a 'will-to-meaning', by what Viktor E. Frankl, a survivor of the concentration camps, describes as "by creative acts and by the experience of nature and culture or through the experience of love".<sup>6</sup> A sense of irresponsible despair and fatalism characterizes the final poems as Plath feels that, at the core, the irrevocable nature of one's early environment and 'inherited potential' determine all future existence:

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

<sup>4</sup>Susan Sontag, Against Interpretation (New York:Dell, 1961), p. 58.

<sup>5</sup>Quoted by David Holbrook, "R.D. Laing and the Death Circuit", Encounter 31, 2 August 1968, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup>V.E. Frankl, From Death-Camp to Existentialism (New York: Beacon, 1959) p. 105.

Even poetry is nothing but words

Echoes travelling  
Off from the centre like horses.

"Words"

In time, art mattered little one way or the other, except as an attempt to exorcise the anguish within, and to seek out what the schizoid individual craves--confirmation of identity in the eyes of others. So urgent was Sylvia Plath's need to be born again, or perhaps 'born for the first time' into her 'true self', that she wanted to die to win this end. The preoccupation with oral imagery in the poetry, the cellar of the first suicide attempt, the need to become the neonate, all symbolize ultimate schizoid withdrawal, 'being drawn back inside' in order to begin again. This chapter will explore the nature of Sylvia Plath's intense libidinal attachment to self-destruction which was not so much a manifestation of the Freudian 'death-instinct', as an expression of death-circuit ecstasy. Great joy is taken in hating and in the contemplation of suicide, because satisfaction through the joys of loving seems hopelessly barred. Herein lies one of the great 'tragedies' of the schizoid individual. Failing to find a way in which the embryonic true self might be born, he comes to deliver himself over to the Devil and says, 'Evil be thou my good'.<sup>7</sup> The moral and social implications of such a position are grave, and demand examination.

It is significant for us as readers that Sylvia Plath wants

<sup>7</sup>W.R.D. Fairbairn, Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality (London: Tavistock, 1952), p. 27.

our confirmation of her self, much as a persistent child demands his parents reflect him in their mirror image. Hence, we are prompted to consider the quality of her artistic utterance. Possessing schizoid tendencies, she looked to the culture around her and saw few opportunities for creative relationship. Writers of the avant-garde, such as Susan Sontag, Ted Hughes and Al Alvarez, her friend and literary critic, profess the same false solutions to the problems of identity which led Plath to suicide. Alvarez, for instance, finds the "internal fascism" of the artist, "healthy", "necessary", "marvellous" in fact<sup>8</sup> -- the direction "all the best contemporary poetry is taking."<sup>9</sup> Of Plath herself he remains convinced that "the achievement of her final style is to make poetry and death inseparable."<sup>10</sup> When R. D. Laing elevates this modus vivendi to the status of a psychotic social theory, art becomes but "acts of insurrection", love but subjection to the "forces of violence" and humanity "victims burning at the stake, signalling through the flames."<sup>11</sup>

In short, Sylvia Plath would have found among these forms of modern expression all too little to allow her 'true self' to be born, but much to lend support to the death-circuits of the schizoid individual's way of life. As the aesthetic philosophy of

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<sup>8</sup>Alvarez, "Epilogue: America and Extremist Art" in Under Pressure (Penguin, 1965), p. 188.

<sup>9</sup>———, "Sylvia Plath", in The Art of Sylvia Plath, p.62.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p.67.

<sup>11</sup>R.D. Laing, The Politics of Experience (Penguin, 1967), pp. 37, 50, 55.

the avant-garde vindicates hatred and violence and dehumanization, so Plath was encouraged to believe in the purity of an intellectual hate and her own self-destruction as artistic virtues. Thus in the end she also consciously seeks from us our 'confirmation' of psychotic art. Any examination of her work must be tempered with the realization that in her desperate bid to feel real, normal human values may well be inverted, and a most intelligent mind may advocate false modes of survival. The world of fashionable criticism, in many ways schizoid itself, both reflects and adopts Plath's death-circuit reasoning. It praises her most hateful work and implicitly condones her suicide. Others then must look beyond all that is 'cold and planetary' and destructive in her art, and come to appreciate her own great need to understand, her attempts to explore the fullness of experience in human, emotional terms, and her profound struggle with the problems of existence, in which we are all involved.

To recapitulate, I propose that Sylvia Plath's condition may be examined fruitfully from the point of view of a 'schizoid diagnosis' experienced in 'transient episodes' throughout her life. I shall discuss the theories of certain post-Freudian ego psychologists such as W.R.D. Fairbairn, D.W. Winnicott and Harry Guntrip, whose studies of schizoid individuals yield insights into the 'strategies of survival' employed by those of weakened identity. The tragedy is that, having a 'special need to confront the problem of existence', the schizoid's already weakened self encourages susceptibility to false, destructive solutions in life.

Finally, I shall also question the assertions and cultural implications of those avant-garde writers who recommend that "only a maladjusted, psychotic personality can faithfully interpret the maladjusted, psychotic personality of the age in which we live."<sup>12</sup> Such writers see in Sylvia Plath only a 'victim' of 'society' and so overlook the profound insights she does express.

### THE SCHIZOID DIAGNOSIS

In his brilliant study of schizophrenia in The Divided Self, R. D. Laing makes a clear distinction between 'sanity' and the schizoid condition. In the first instance:

The individual...may experience his own being as real, alive, whole; as differentiated from the rest of the world in ordinary circumstances so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question;...as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth...He thus has a firm core of ontological security.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, there are others who feel only a sense of 'ontological insecurity':

The individual in the ordinary circumstances of living may feel more unreal than real; in a literal sense, more dead than alive; precariously differentiated from the rest of the world, so that his identity and autonomy are always in question...He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable.<sup>14</sup>

This we recognize as the 'schizoid diagnosis'. However, it must be emphasized that everyone, without exception, experiences schizoid feelings at one time or another, as the studies of

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<sup>12</sup>C. B. Cox and A.R. Jones, "After the Tranquillized Fifties", Critical Quarterly, 6, 1964, p. 108.

<sup>13</sup>R.D. Laing, The Divided Self (Penguin, 1965), pp. 41-42.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 42.

W.R.D. Fairbairn make clear.

Fairbairn was a psychoanalyst of great originality who practised in Edinburgh from 1926 until his death in 1962. In his important theoretical work, Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality (1952), he postulates a scale, with perfect integration and absence of ego splitting at one end (only a hypothetical possibility), and complete disintegration at the other. The 'schizoid state or transient schizoid episode', common to many adolescent 'nervous breakdowns' and characteristic of Sylvia Plath is closest to the former, while schizophrenia proper distinguishes the latter. The term 'schizoid' derives its significance from the conception of splitting of the ego, an occurrence in varying degrees common to us all. But it is the earliness and severity of this splitting that determines its psychopathological importance.

#### Summary Review of Object Relations Theory

Fairbairn is important for having extended the theories of Freud and Melanie Klein regarding the origin of this split in the ego and later psychic difficulties, though all three placed emphasis on the infant's primary relationship with the mother. Freud and Klein postulated that the 'central position' originated at the late oral, biting stage, when the child is conscious of his mother as a whole, including her breast. The affect of depression or melancholy characterizes this ambivalent stage, the child believing that it is his hate (and not his love which can still remain good in his mind) that has destroyed his mother's

affection. Fairbairn, on the other hand, emphasized an even earlier stage of development, described as early oral, sucking and pre-ambivalent, when the child, in absolute infantile dependence, is conscious only of his mother's breast as a part object. This Fairbairn terms the central 'schizoid position', from which may develop later feelings of futility. As we shall see, these feelings originate because the young infant has come to believe that he has destroyed his mother's affection, not because of hate, an emotion he does not yet feel in his pre-ambivalent stage, but because of his own libidinal need: that is, he has come to regard his love as destructive and bad. The important distinction therefore is that the 'depressive position' always remains object-relational, while the special tragedy of the 'schizoid position' is that object relations necessary for successful living in the outer world have been broken off, although they are still needed.

In focusing on this early stage in the child's psychic development, Fairbairn postulates his famous theory of object relations, concluding that "man's need of a love relationship is the fundamental thing in his life".<sup>15</sup> Although Freud had written in 1929 that "Love seeks for objects", his earlier assertion (1920) that "the course of mental processes is automatically regulated by the pleasure principle", continued to be the accepted psychoanalytic theory.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, it is still very much in evidence

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<sup>15</sup>Quoted by Harry Guntrip, Schizoid Phenomena, Object Relations and the Self (London: Hogarth, 1968), p. 45.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted by Fairbairn, Psychoanalytic Studies, p. 83.

among the avant-garde which advocates the release of instinctual energy as 'healthy', and sees in the accelerating violence of our culture an expression of 'freedom'. By 1941, however, Fairbairn had formulated two important conclusions which are in strict opposition to the facile irresponsibility inherent in the classic libido theory of pleasure seeking.

The first conclusion is that the infant's primary relationship with his mother is based on a search for love, not pleasure. That is, "the ultimate goal of libido is the object."<sup>17</sup> Harry Guntrip writes:

From the starting point the psyche passes through the separation of birth into "aloneness" which would be insupportable unless, beneath it, as its foundation, there still persisted that oneness of the child with its mother, and through her with "mother-nature" in the sense in which Buber quotes, "In the mother's body man knows the universe, in birth he forgets it"...but he never forgets it.<sup>18</sup>

Guntrip affirms Fairbairn's conclusion, and asserts that the core of each man's identity is formed in this fundamental love relationship:

It is the starting point and permanent foundation of ego identity and ego strength, a quietness at the centre, a core of personality which must be preserved inviolable, beyond the reach of external world pressures.<sup>19</sup>

Of the Ego itself, Guntrip writes that it is

the psyche growing to self-realisation and identity, in the initial experience of identification with the mother.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Fairbairn, op. cit., p.31.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Holbrook, "R.D. Laing and the Death-Circuit", p.41.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 41.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

Explicit that the infant is a whole, if primitive, dynamic ego from the beginning, Fairbairn describes it best as a 'mouth-ego'. As the mouth, organ of desire and activity, searches out the mother's breast, the infant begins to discover and create his world. The child's early oral, suckling relationship with his mother as first object therefore is profoundly important, because it is his first experience of a love relationship and upon this rests all his subsequent relationships and future social attitudes. From this point of view, Guntrip claims

good personal relationship is not desired merely for the sake of pleasure but is in itself the basic need and aim of men, whose nature cannot be fulfilled without it, while aggression and pleasure-seeking only result from the frustration of this primary aim.<sup>21</sup>

Fairbairn's second major conclusion, following from his first, claims that the ultimate origin of all psychopathological conditions can be found in difficulties arising in the formation of object relationships by the developing ego. When an unsatisfactory emotional relationship, especially with the mother, is experienced by the child, the subsequent regressive phenomenon occurs for two reasons. The child comes to feel: (a) that his mother does not really love him for his own sake and (b) that she does not really value and accept his own love for her. In this highly traumatic situation in which the child feels rejected by his mother for the normal expression of his libidinal need, rather than suffer the destruction of his love object and his own ego structure, he feels compelled to break off object relations

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<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 38.

altogether, although he still needs them. Thus, to preserve his self, the child may engage in a radical withdrawal of libido, coming to regard his mother as a bad object because she appears not to love him, and to feel not only that any outward expression of his love is bad, but that all love relationships in the world are also bad, or at least most untrustworthy. It is this position which gives rise to the schizoid state, and in its extreme form it is characteristically not object relational.

As Fairbairn indicates, 'love made hungry' is the special agony of the individual with a schizoid tendency. The child is possessed by the terrible fear that, because his libidinal need has become so devouring, love itself is destructive. As we have seen, in an attempt to deal with and simplify this intolerable situation, the young child tends to transfer his relationships with external objects to his inner world. While this accounts for the schizoid's 'intense preoccupation with inner reality', it also involves a regressive reinstatement of the early oral attitude by the child, as relationship with the mother as a whole is shrunk to her breast as part object. The extent and effects of the splitting process within are now intensified, for the child has been forced to lock himself into a state of infantile dependence in a very enduring way. By withdrawing his libido from relationship with the world, he has also withdrawn the very energy his ego requires for normal development and the necessary satisfaction of his emotional needs. Hence, as the child matures an unalleviated need for mother substitutes is

set up, making it very difficult to form adult love relationships. The severity of the 'separation anxiety' experienced by such an individual when a relationship is for any reason threatened, confirms this.

D. W. Winnicott also has some important observations to make regarding the early development of the child. With experience of some 20,000 case histories as a pediatrician, Winnicott concludes that the "ordinary good home" is the basis of individual sanity, but "without good enough mothering the early stages of development cannot take place."<sup>22</sup> By acting as a "facilitating environment" for her child, the mother in her capacity 'to be' allows the "inherited potential" to become itself a "continuity of being".<sup>23</sup> This is the basis of ego strength and the origin of what Winnicott terms the central or True Self. Essential to this theory is that the 'true self' cannot become a viable, living reality unless the infant's spontaneous gestures are repeatedly and successfully met by the mother. Allowed a brief experience of omnipotence, the child can learn to abrogate it, and so achieve a consciousness of ambivalence, the normal mixture of love and hate in human relationships. If, however, some failure of supportive mothering characterizes the formation of this first object relationship, either through the mother's inability to meet the infant's gesture or through the impinging domination of her personality demanding compliance, then the development of a False Self invariably occurs. This 'false self' is born in an effort to

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<sup>22</sup>D.W. Winnicott, The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment (New York: International Universities Press, 1965), p. 74.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., p. 54.

protect the 'true self', by conforming with impinging, environmental demands. Normal ego development becomes distorted and severely weakened as a false set of relationships is built up and a conscious display of being real points to the lack of a genuine sense of being. Soon, even the child's cultural awareness becomes paralysed, as the capacity for symbol usage and spontaneous creative originality withers within. Hence, as Winnicott affirms, "schizophrenia or infantile psychosis or a liability to psychosis at a later date is related to a failure of environmental provision."<sup>24</sup>

With the development of a 'false self', a primary split in the ego has occurred, as Fairbairn points out, between the 'central ego' in touch with the outer world, and the withdrawn or 'regressed ego' of the inner world. This individual does not feel he possesses an assured core, an unquestioned sense of genuine selfhood derived from the female element of his mother. Forms of 'doing', including false socialisation, are therefore resorted to in an effort to patch an identity together, while all the time a neglected 'true self'--the 'regressed ego'--yearns to be born. But outer security has been purchased at the high cost of inner security. The environmental persecutors, now internalised, rage within. In an effort to erect ever greater defences to protect the self, further splitting takes place. Simply put, the maternal object is first split into the 'good' object of the outer world

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid., p. 49.

and the 'bad' object of the inner. This internalized 'mother', in Fairbairn's formulation, is then split two ways: into an excited, accepting (libidinal) ego that continues to strive for satisfactory good relationships; and a bad, persecutory (antilibidinal) ego which rejects them. Because these split egos are violently repressed through aggression they are not readily available to consciousness, which is where reparative and creative recovery through regression can take place. The intensity of the trouble within depends therefore on the earliness and severity of this splitting process.

It was Fairbairn who observed that the initial regression later gave rise to the three major characteristics of the schizoid individual. These are: (1) an attitude of omnipotence (2) an attitude of isolation and detachment, and (3) a preoccupation with inner reality, the last of which is defined as the most important. In emphasizing this, Fairbairn points to the startling inner vision often experienced by the schizoid personality:

schizoid individuals who have not regressed too far are capable of greater psychological insight than any other class of person, normal or abnormal--a fact due, in part at least, to their being so introverted (ie. preoccupied with inner reality) and so familiar with their own deeper psychological processes (processes which, although not absent in individuals who would ordinarily be classified as simply "psychoneurotic", are nevertheless excluded from the consciousness of such individuals by the most obstinate defences and stubborn resistance.)<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Fairbairn, Psychoanalytic Studies, p.3.

Sylvia Plath's work is remarkable for the psychological insights she brings to the schizoid state of being. I suggest that she lacked just these 'obstinate defences and stubborn resistances' of the average person as she strove to delineate the full nature of her troubled psyche. Her husband, Ted Hughes, points to this when he describes the language of her art as that "which controls and contains such conflagrations and collisions within itself", and Plath herself as possessing "none of the usual guards and remote controls to protect herself from her own reality".<sup>26</sup> We do not know the precise details of Sylvia Plath's earliest childhood and only limited biographical material is available. However, her mature life and final poems, as the following developmental study will show, attest fully to the fact that she at least fell victim to the schizoid affect of futility, when life held out little meaning for continued existence. Given the theories of the ego psychologists discussed above, we may say that such an adult manifestation finds its origins in the primary ambience, and in the infant's first relationship with his mother. Let us examine the autobiographical essay, "Ocean 1212-W",<sup>27</sup> in which Sylvia Plath reflects on the roots of her identity. I suggest that the three major schizoid characteristics described by Fairbairn may be clearly discerned in this essay, and that unconsciously Plath herself points to the 'early failure of environmental provision', of which Winnicott speaks.

The title of "Ocean 1212-W" refers to the maternal grand-

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<sup>26</sup>Hughes, "Notes on...Plath's Poems", pp. 195-197.

<sup>27</sup>Included in The Art of Sylvia Plath, pp. 266-272.

mother's telephone number. The essay itself can be read simply as the expression of young Sylvia's intense preoccupation with the sea along the coast of Winthrop, Massachusetts, as the dominant natural influence in her childhood years. But it also reveals a number of startling insights into this early universe.

Sylvia Plath has focused on the period immediately surrounding two highly significant events in her primary years, the birth of her brother when she was two and a half, and the death of her father when she was nine. Yet these figures, and especially the father whose image comes to dominate many of the final poems, are negligible in the early memories except to mark a single, abrupt and irrevocable change in the everyday world. Rather, it was the feminine element which was strongest in shaping the early years. Appropriately, the sea as Plath's image of the abiding maternal principle links her mother living on the bay to the grandmother on the exposed ocean side.

As an adult remembering her youth Plath regards herself as an "exile" in England, untimely forced to abandon this childhood ambience. This "beautiful, inaccessible...white flying myth" was not so much the 'real world' of Plath's experience as an intense imaginative construct. This 'preoccupation with inner reality', the most defining schizoid characteristic, is focused in her vision of the ever-changing sea. Paradoxically, it has engendered her greatest sense of security, it being the "clearest thing" she owns. The sea is clearly seen as a surrogate mother and, by implication, Sylvia Plath's own mother appears not to have been 'good enough'. This actual mother, described as a "sea-girl",

partakes of rather than is the larger maternal element herself, in the child's eyes. Hence, it is the sea, not the mother, which young Sylvia imagines breathes the breath of life. It is also the sea which teaches the growing child of ambivalence, a natural acceptance of love and hate in human relationships: "Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it could court, it could also kill" (p. 266). It appears that if Sylvia Plath internalized her real mother as 'bad' object, the sea came to fulfill the absolutely necessary function of internalized 'good' object within the ego-splitting system described previously. There is no fear in the young child's relationship with the sea, and poetry inspired by it makes her happy in a unique and enduring way, as The Colossus later affirms. Otherwise, the sea seems to possess "lights", is like some "huge radiant animal" or "watery cradle"--or even like a womb as Plath tells of crawling straight towards the coming wave, only to be rescued just in time.

What is of special significance, and our first example of her intense preoccupation with this image in her art, is Plath's repeated description of the sea as a "mirror" or "looking glass". D. W. Winnicott has written of the use of such images, and points out how the child's identity is confirmed

from being able to see himself or herself in the attitudes of the individual members or in the attitudes of the family as a whole. We can include in all this the actual mirrors that exist in the house and the opportunities that the child gets for seeing the parents look at themselves.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted by D. Holbrook, "The 200-inch Distorting Mirror", New Society, 11 July, 1968, p. 57.

Clearly, young Sylvia looked to the sea for a confirmation of an identity that her relationship with her mother and family failed to give. In turn, the mother especially is rejected, as many examples in The Bell Jar and the poetry serve to emphasize.

I propose that at least one major reason for this early rejection of the mother is given in "Ocean 1212-W". We learn that she has been in hospital for a period of three weeks during childbirth, a long time for a child of two and a half years, who in turn experiences only a profound sense of despair and abandonment: "Her desertion punched a smouldering hole in my sky. How could she, so loving and faithful, so easily leave me?" (p. 268) Even the grandmother appears oblivious to young Sylvia's despair, explaining nothing for days. Just as the mother is to arrive home, the child is not prepared for but is informed of the reason. Her reaction is immediate and violent:

I hated babies. I who for two and a half years had been the centre of a tender universe felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones. (pp. 268-269)

As Plath describes herself dealing with this highly frustrating situation, we may observe the manifestation of the important two remaining schizoid characteristics described by Fairbairn. One is the child's repeated awareness of a sense of 'isolation and detachment':

As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I...My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over. (p. 269)

The other is the schizoid 'attitude of omnipotence'. Again, it is the sea which, perceiving the child's need, confers identity: "a sign of election and specialness" (p.270). This is achieved through a "totem", a wooden monkey bequeathed by the sea to serve as the tangible, and magical, 'transitional object' the sea could never be. It allows Sylvia to accept the presence of her baby brother in the house that day. Interestingly, this "totem" is described as having the "noble pose of a simian thinker", and one can perhaps see in this the origin of the schizoid overvaluation of thought processes at the expense of emotional ones, certainly a characteristic of the mature Plath.

Only a most summary description is given of the following years from age two and a half until the age of nine, when this childhood world ends abruptly in violence. In two terse sentences Plath points to, essentially, the loss of both parents: one is her final memory of the sea, the pervasive maternal element, associated with great violence as the earlier "huge radiant animal" is now "heaving at its leash"; the other dully mentions the highly important move inland from the sea, following the death of her father. The essay closes on that 'plate-glass feeling' so much in evidence in The Bell Jar and elsewhere throughout Sylvia Plath's art. So, she describes her vision of these childhood years as "stiffening", "sealed...off like a ship in a bottle" (p. 272).

I have examined "Ocean 1212-W" in detail because I feel that distinct schizoid tendencies are evidenced in the young Plath's

reaction to her world; and that she herself points to difficulties in the early environment, and more precisely, a possible failure in supportive mothering. This may have caused the disfigurement of the adult life. However, as a developmental study will show, Sylvia Plath's art in toto elaborates and intensifies the kind of pattern adumbrated in this essay.

It may appear to the reader that we have come perilously close to 'Momism': that is, personally 'blaming' Sylvia Plath's mother for her daughter's later psychoses. Most certainly, that is not the intention. If a failure in 'supportive' mothering occurred--and given the views of those object-relations theorists discussed above, I suggest it did--such a 'failure' was in all likelihood quite unintentional. As John Bowlby has pointed out, "maternal deprivation" can run the gamut from a complete severing of any mother/child relationship, to over-indulgence or 'impingement' on the part of the mother.<sup>29</sup> Mrs. Plath was quite probably among the latter. Nevertheless, Bowlby concludes, like Winnicott, that "nurture rather than nature is the pathogenic agent".<sup>30</sup>

At any rate, Sylvia Plath clearly testifies in her art that at some (early) point in life she came to regard this mother as a 'bad object'. In light of the above theories a splitting of the ego and regressive reaction would then have taken place. Moreover, as an examination of the pervasive oral imagery reveals, Plath remained fixated on her mother as 'part-object'. In turn, false modes of dealing with the world would have been necessary.

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<sup>29</sup> John Bowlby, Maternal Care and Mental Health (Geneva: World Health Organization, 1952), p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 34.

I suggest that the poet's 'false self' is readily discernible in her frantic preoccupation with 'doing' and the patching together of an identity of sorts---best imaged in the broken, fragmentary colossus of her dead father. The 'true self' on the other hand, is the "baby" described so often, crying to be born, perhaps for the first time.

It appears that when the mother failed to satisfy the child's love requirements and hence became a 'bad object', young Sylvia turned to her father in an emotional way, as a satisfying love object. For a time she was probably very much a 'daddy's girl'. Fairbairn points out, however, that the child constitutes the Oedipus situation for himself by coming to equate one parent with an exciting or good object and the other with a rejecting or bad object, and that at bottom both are figures of the mother. Plath's situation was therefore complicated when this beloved father died just as she turned nine. Having, in effect, already lost a mother, she never recovered from the profound emotional loss suffered with his death. There also appears not to have been anyone else in the childhood world who might have fulfilled her need of a 'good object'. Sylvia Plath's vulnerability to 'separation anxiety' thereafter may well have accounted in some part for her desperate suicidal action soon after separating from her husband.

I suggest that after the death of her father, Plath's life took on the quality of mere survival. Al Alvarez for one writes of her conviction "to be an adult meant to be a survivor".<sup>31</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Alvarez, The Savage God (New York, Random, 1970), p.19.

Like the imperative of the magical chess game with death in Bergman's The Seventh Seal, Plath felt she had to meet death each decade if she was to continue living. This is the theme of "Lady Lazarus": "Dying/Is an art, like everything else./I do it exceptionally well." We have seen that it is the schizoid individual who has been forced to resort to 'strategies of survival' at some early point in life, in order to preserve an ego threatened with destruction. He therefore tends to break off relationships in the outer world altogether because he feels he must, though they are and will forever be needed. Never having experienced 'love' and 'togetherness' with the one person who alone can convince him, such an individual as an adult experiences the terrible agony of being unable to 'feel' in a normal sense; he simply cannot relate in a loving way with others. Nor can he find that 'confirmation' of his identity he longs for, for it is relationship with others in the world which is the source of this mirror-image. The art of Sylvia Plath clearly reveals that she came to suffer such an inability to participate in the experience of love. We have also seen that such a response originates in some failure in the 'facilitating environment' and more precisely, in some breakdown in the primary love relationship with the mother.

An examination of "Event"<sup>32</sup>, one of Plath's last poems, will serve to emphasize the full extent of her feelings of utter, desolate isolation. The horror vacui is too real not to have been experienced. As she describes her feelings about herself, others

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<sup>32</sup>Included in Crossing the Water (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 43.

and the inanimate universe around her, there is the awful realization that the whole world is dead to her and she to it. Hence the natural, sustaining commitment of relationship, as is marriage and motherhood, is deemed horrifyingly impossible. Lying in bed "back to back" at night, she imagines herself shut out from the natural world: "elements solidify", the cry of the owl enters her heart like "intolerable vowels" while stars burn "ineradicable, hard". An image drawn not from Raphael but from Grunewald dominates her perception of the sleeping child nearby, as it opens its mouth, "demanding...carved in pained, red wood". In fact, relationship with anyone becomes unbearable: "One touch: it burns and sickens/I cannot see your eyes". When lovers "touch like cripples.../Love cannot come". Thrown back on herself she becomes a prisoner of her own racked psyche, walking "in a ring/A groove of old faults, deep and bitter". Only death, that "black gap", offers release. Even hope in rebirth quickly dissolves as the new life is conceived as a "small white maggot". This nightmare vision fades as darkness melts into sunrise, leaving the poet prostrate, dismembered of a sense of 'being', essentially crippled in her ability to seek supportive relationship in the world.

In "Event" and other poems like it, as a profoundly suffering human being Sylvia Plath is attempting to explore the roots of her troubled psyche. But there are other poems much admired by the avant-garde, such as "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy", which are obsessed not with the desire to understand but with a purity of hatred. Significantly, this hatred is directed not against the

image of the mother, but against that of this once beloved father. As Alvarez has correctly observed, "Daddy" is also very much a love poem.<sup>33</sup> We may see in these hate poems a dangerous manifestation of the "three great tragedies" described by Fairbairn<sup>34</sup>, of the schizoid individual who has been forced to find false modes of survival at all costs. Such a person believes his inner contents to be bad, and although he is afraid of being emptied, nevertheless wants intensely to thrust his bad inner stuff onto others that he may be freed of his persecutors from within. The 'first great tragedy' thus involves the schizoid's fundamental conviction that his love is destructive to others. The second arises when, overcome by a compulsion to hate and be hated, all the while "he longs deep down to love and be loved". The 'third great tragedy' is the "amazing reversal of human values", of special relevance in our culture today. This latter 'tragedy' results from the distorted logic of two motives: (a) since the joys of loving appear utterly impossible, the schizoid may as well give himself over to the joys of hating; (b) if love involves destruction, it is more moral to hate, which at least frees one from the harmful potentiality of love. Hence, plagued by an unsatisfied hunger to be, the schizoid individual is adamant in his denial of human needs and human fallibility. He cannot bear ambivalence, that normal admixture of human responses. He therefore adheres fully to the 'taboo on weakness', that 'to be Big and Bad is at least to be Someone'. Unpossessed of ruth, his anguish is that he cannot

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<sup>33</sup> Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 66.

<sup>34</sup> Fairbairn, Psychoanalytic Studies, pp. 27-29.

feel either 'moral teething' or the sense of his own humanity. In turning from the world he tends to fear what Winnicott terms 'female element being', the I-Thou relationship, the realm of shared being and creative reflection; and to seek refuge in 'false male doing', the 'bustling' self activity of one who overvalues intellectual processes. The life of the intellect holds out a special appeal to the individual with a schizoid tendency because, already preoccupied with inner reality and internal object relations, ideas tend readily to become substituted for feelings and intellectual values for emotional responses in the external world. Descartes' philosophical statement, Cogito ergo sum, rather than 'I feel, therefore I am', is highly applicable to the schizoid consciousness.

Sylvia Plath herself seemed to believe absolutely in the efficacy of her intelligence, "a way of handling the unhandleable",<sup>35</sup> as Alvarez described her predicament. She writes:

I think my poems come immediately out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathise with those cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying--like madness, being tortured, this kind of experience--and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and intelligent mind.<sup>36</sup>

But of course the mind can never 'manipulate' madness, as Plath herself must have realized at last, before her own suicide. Because these manifestations by the schizoid individual are a

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<sup>35</sup> Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 66.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 64.

matter of life and death, on which his weak identity absolutely depends, he will seek to preserve his inverted relationships with the world to the point of extremity. Hence his tenacious-- and desperate-- adherence to false values and self-destructive impulses which are but a stranglehold grip on life. Indeed, there can be intense joy taken in this normal reversal of human values. Ivy, a schizoid patient of Dr. Fairbairn's and determined to commit suicide, expresses this 'death impulse'.

My aim is to sail as near the wind as I can to killing myself...I feel my life is interfering with my neurosis, instead of vice versa. When I began to be afraid of gas-ovens, I knew it was me that was wrong; but I did not want to be changed. Instead I wanted all gas-ovens removed. ... (to her analyst) if I have a relationship with you it interferes with my death-circuit...you interfere with my neurosis and my desire to destroy myself....I can't wait to get my hands on myself to destroy myself....The greater the frustration outside, the greater the ecstasies inside. I want to have no inhibitions in bringing about my own destruction.<sup>37</sup>

The tone of this statement clearly parallels the tone expressed in many of Sylvia Plath's final poems. Yet this tendency of the schizoid individual to 'maintain the inner world as a closed system' according to Fairbairn, pertains not to Freud's conception of the death instinct which would appear to be superfluous if the libido is truly object-seeking, but to the individual's masochistic relationship with his internalized bad objects. The schizoid's longing for death represents a need to withdraw from a world he can no longer cope with. This state of the 'regressed libidinal ego' is not in fact an impulse for self-destruction, but rather a desire to escape into a comforting,

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<sup>37</sup> Fairbairn, "On the Nature and Aims of Psychoanalytical Treatment", International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, Vol. 38, p.374.

passive condition where healing influences can come to bear, that the psyche may be reborn and a real ego begin to develop.

Guntrip writes that

Schizoid suicide is not really a wish for death as such, except in cases where the patient has utterly lost all hope of being understood and helped. Even then there is a deep unconscious secret wish that death should prove a pathway to rebirth...in some sense to return to the womb and be reborn later with a second chance to live.<sup>38</sup>

Sylvia Plath's art speaks again and again of a passionate, often unconscious, wish to be reborn. Side by side with her hate poems are others like the Bee series which are concerned with her 'compulsive need to understand' and a crying desire for life which in the end became distorted into the idea of rebirth through death:

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. "Getting There"

This 'death impulse' can be seen as a wish to return to the womb, to that primary identification with the mother. It is also often symbolised in the image of the gas oven. Harry Guntrip's patients speak of a "life-tiredness", a "needing to stop living but not wishing to die":

'I've often felt it would be lovely to put my head in the gas oven and go unconscious. But I couldn't do it, because I couldn't be sure of being able to turn the gas off at the right time, before it killed me.'

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<sup>38</sup>Quoted by Holbrook in "R.D. Laing and the Death-Circuit", pp. 38-39.

Another patient...on several occasions went down-stairs...and lay down beside the gas oven and turned on the gas....<sup>39</sup>

The resemblance here to Sylvia Plath is obvious. As Winnicott indicates, there are fantastic risks involved in persons facing their own weakness, and against this pain though genuinely seeking rebirth, such individuals act out their false solutions to the problems of identity as a death-circuit strategy of survival. The end may bring only stalemate, total withdrawal, or suicide. For Plath this meant not only a life-long fascination with and joy in suicide, but an unyielding decision to die--a decision she also clearly saw as a harbinger of a new life.

We have seen that a 'schizoid diagnosis' may be applied to Sylvia Plath and her art. If Plath had had the experience of psychotherapy--or someone who would have 'mothered' her as Leonard Woolf did Virginia--she might have experienced 'togetherness' and lived. As it was her life offered all too few opportunities either for reparative elements to come to bear on a weakened self, or for creative relationship in the world. The society around her failed to confirm identity because its more articulate speakers cannot see beyond mere survival themselves. But in the end we must hold both Sylvia Plath and the modish avant-garde accountable for their failure to meet the challenge of existence. Theirs is a view that reduces man to less than victim as he willingly partakes of the death-circuit that will end a life without

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<sup>39</sup> Guntrip, Schizoid Phenomena, p. 217.

hope. Alvarez' aesthetic philosophy is that "when suffering is there whatever you do, by inflicting it upon yourself you achieve your identity, you set yourself free".<sup>40</sup> Compare this mode of living with the writings of one who survived the concentration camps. "We have not only the possibility of making life meaningful by creating and loving", Viktor E. Frankl, author of From Death-Camp to Existentialism, writes, "but also by suffering: by the way and manner in which we face our fate, in which we take our suffering upon ourselves".<sup>41</sup> Freedom is won not by 'inflicting' suffering upon yourself, but by preserving the internal "will-to-meaning":

...everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms--to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.<sup>42</sup>

Neither Sylvia Plath nor many avant-gardists have preserved an 'internal will-to-meaning', and 'responsibility' has become a meaningless concept. Instead, it seems easier to deliver oneself over to the joys of hating than 'to choose one's own way'. I shall now turn to an examination of views expressed by certain avant-garde writers who, in praising all that is destructive and life-denying in Sylvia Plath's art, implicitly endorse the schizoid's way of life.

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<sup>40</sup> Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 66.

<sup>41</sup> V. E. Frankl, From Death-Camp to Existentialism, p. 105.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 66.

## CHAPTER II

### THE AVANT-GARDE

W.B. Yeats' famous axiom is sometimes applied to Sylvia Plath: 'We make out of the quarrel with others rhetoric, but out of the quarrel with ourselves poetry'. Plath certainly made poetry out of the quarrel with herself. But it has not yet been admitted the extent to which she wrote some of her most admired poems while quarrelling violently with others-- and was actually encouraged to do so by the intellectual ethos of her day. It is necessary therefore to place Sylvia Plath in a literary perspective.

Unconsciously she does this herself as she speaks of the catalyst which prompted that final burst of creativity, a marvellous Keatsian year that produced both Ariel and her death:

...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. Robert Lowell's poems about his experience in a mental hospital, for example, interest me very much. These peculiar private and taboo subjects I feel have been explored in recent American poetry---I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes also about her experiences as a mother; as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman. And her poems are wonderfully craftsmanlike poems, and yet they have a kind of emotional and psychological depth which I think is something perhaps quite new and exciting.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>From an interview and reading of poems made by her for the British Council. Quoted by Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 62.

In linking her own work with that of Lowell and Anne Sexton, although Sylvia Plath never precisely isolates what the 'taboo' was in artistic expression, 'breakthrough' is clearly and casually associated with 'breakdown'. Moreover, she praises that dualism so characteristic of the schizoid personality. As expressed aesthetically by T. S. Eliot, "the more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates".<sup>2</sup> It was important to Plath that these taboo subjects, of 'emotional and psychological depth' be explored in a 'wonderfully craftsman-like' fashion; that the mind always manipulate and control those troubled cries from the heart.

According to A. Alvarez, one of the leading representatives of the literary avant-garde, Robert Lowell's Life Studies 'proved' "that the violence of the self could be written about with control, subtlety and a passionate but undefended imagination".<sup>3</sup> It provided Plath with an example of "courage" and released her from the imprisonment of the "old poetic habits" explored in The Colossus.<sup>4</sup> Now, new frontiers of experience might be charted as the New Criticism of 'the tranquilized fifties' gave way to 'the psychotic verse of the sixties'. The centre of artistic interest had also shifted from that "curiously irrelevant...flight into Georgianism"<sup>5</sup> of the Movement in England, to the "genuinely advanced

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<sup>2</sup>Quoted by A. R. Jones, "Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton", Critical Quarterly, 7, 1965, p. 16.

<sup>3</sup>Alvarez, The Savage God, p. 25.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 23-24.

<sup>5</sup>Jones, "Necessity and Freedom", p. 11.

sensibility" in America, where "something new and rather marvelous is happening".<sup>6</sup>

What is the importance of an artist like Sylvia Plath in this 'new' and 'marvellous' American sensibility? In the influential essay, "America and Extremist Art", Alvarez has described Plath as an Extremist poet, a position she shares with Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Ted Hughes and Anne Sexton. He defines this term:

Extremism in the arts--the cultivation of breakdown and all the diverse facts of schizophrenia--ends not so much in anarchy as in a kind of internal fascism in which the artist, to relieve his own boredom, becomes both torturer and tortured.<sup>7</sup>

From the point of view of object-relations theory such an aesthetic position--or any such outlook on human existence--is horribly wrong. In the first instance, Alvarez's use of psychoanalytic terminology is confused, and reveals little sensitivity to the human realities of the discipline. One who is ill hardly 'cultivates' breakdown; instead, this is the desperate path taken by one who cannot find normal ontological security through creative relationship within the personal and cultural sphere in his life. Nor is it 'boredom' that has to be 'relieved'; rather, a 'true self' cries to be born. And this 'internal fascism', this becoming both 'torturer and tortured', is the agony of one possessed by his internal bad objects, who in his fierce desire to be rid of them seeks to thrust his own 'badness' onto others. As we have seen, the joys of hating come easily to the schizoid individual.

<sup>6</sup> Alvarez, "America and Extremist Art", p. 184.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 188.

Because it is the way he feels he must live, he will seek to preserve his inverted relationships with the world at all costs.

This schizoid, death-circuit mode of thinking is precisely what Alvarez and a certain segment of the avant-garde admit to and endorse. The wide-ranging influence of such beliefs cannot be underestimated. "America and Extremist Art" attests that Alvarez does not see in the gesture of the artist "inventing himself, endowing himself with an identity", the schizoid individual's fierce need to be, nor in "the complete internalisation of all phenomena" the schizoid's intense preoccupation with inner reality at the expense of outer reality. This is the true nature of that "utter indifference" experienced by a 'bored' self which "contains a great deal of destructiveness which it turns as equally against itself as against the outer world". Alvarez, moreover, lauds this "bored moral nihilism", this "ruthless, destructive, deeply self-involved, wildly self-gratifying" attitude towards life. He finds the 'internal fascism' of the artist "healthy" and "necessary"; in fact, the artist has a "positive obligation to make the worst of a good thing" (my emphasis).<sup>8</sup> Even the wording here reminds us of W.R.D. Fairbairn's description of the inverted ethical motive of the schizoid's desperate nihilism: 'since love is barred to him, he may as well deliver himself over to the joys of hating'.

Alvarez condones the dualism inherent in the schizoid personality, the severance of the intellect from the human, emo-

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<sup>8</sup>Alvarez, "America and Extremist Art", pp. 183-188

tional realities of life. He only dimly realises the destructive implications of this breach as he writes that "in a curious way intellectual energy becomes a means of promoting hopelessness".<sup>9</sup> Alvarez simply cannot see beyond 'hopelessness'. As he writes elsewhere, psychosis must be cultivated "because every more conventional response has been drained dry of significance".<sup>10</sup> In the end he finds it all "charming" and "objective", this horrifying self-indulgence in destructive powers beyond comprehension:

you acknowledge the sureness with which universal darkness buries all, the inevitability of the descent into blank chaos, and then you make a joke about it all--which is in itself the final nihilism, since it destroys even the force of your understanding of destruction.<sup>11</sup>

The fundamental problem here is that although one makes a vicious 'joke' about it all, man's need to feel real is threatened by his hatred and subsequent guilt, revealing the weakness of the regressed ego. To relieve this internal oppression, 'society' is blamed as the 'oppressor'. This is the huis clos of Alvarez's schizoid defence. As he admits in "America and Extremist Art", the reasons he gives are two clichés:

...the artist is thrown increasingly "in on himself" by the sheer size and engulfing blankness of "industrial society"; as life becomes more mass-produced, mass-organised and statistical the arts become proportionately, despairingly, more extreme and solipsistic. To this is added the second great cliché: the "crisis" situation--the inheritance of the concentration camps and the threat of a nuclear holocaust--is reflected in the personal extremism of the artists...the knowledge of total disaster...obtained by an endless series of underground tests on themselves.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 187.

<sup>10</sup> Alvarez, Beyond All This Fiddle (London:Penguin,1968),p.17.

<sup>11</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "America and Extremist Art", p. 188.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 186.

Alvarez appeals not to man's weaknesses and failures of maturation, but to our modern industrial society and to the example of the concentration camps, to explain and also to vindicate the rampant violence of our age. "The nihilism and destructiveness of the self", he writes, "turns out to be an accurate reflection of the nihilism of our own violent societies" (my emphasis).<sup>13</sup> Yet man is most often a victim of himself, not of 'society'. Alvarez, however, can see the artist only as scapegoat, endlessly hostile to himself and to 'them' who force this role upon him. Such an ethos is truly a death-circuit.

They (the artists) survive morally by becoming, in one way or another, an imitation of death in which their audience can share. To achieve this the artist, in his role of scapegoat, finds himself acting out his own death and vulnerability for and on himself.<sup>14</sup>

This is surely "the dimension of absurd death".<sup>15</sup> From the point of view of object-relations theory, this courting of death reveals the schizoid's desperate need to feel real when, tragically, self-immolation seems to promise rebirth.

While D.W. Winnicott speaks of 'the risks involved' by the schizoid individual in facing his own ego weakness, Alvarez speaks of another kind of 'risk'. His is one that is experienced and accepted in the 'nerve ends', "not the facts of life but the facts of death and violence: absurd, random, gratuitous, unjustified and inescapably part of the society we have created".<sup>16</sup> In the

<sup>13</sup> Alvarez, The Savage God, p. 258.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 262.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 258.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 262.

aesthetic philosophy of the avant-garde, the Extremist artist "gives himself over to his sickness for the sake of the range and intensity of his art".<sup>17</sup> Intellectual control is absolutely imperative for the risk is that, since art is not therapeutic, the artist may find himself living out the self-destructive impulses of his tormented psyche. In this nihilistic vision of life all the reparative processes of tradition and culture are jettisoned without compunction. Nevertheless, Alvarez speaks only with admiration of those artists who work in the 'tradition of traditionlessness',

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>18</sup>

Alvarez also misunderstands the nature of psychoanalysis itself as he defines it as that discipline from which the layman learns "to recognize and accept the irrational as the basis of his being".<sup>19</sup> This view originates in nineteenth century Freudian, biological psychology, in which a Hobbesian vision of man dictates the 'release' of primitive 'instincts'. Freud believed neurosis resulted from the suppression of instinct, and while recognizing the need for socialisation if man is to live in relative harmony with others, came to champion the release of repression. However, working from Fairbairn's analysis of the schizoid personality, Guntrip sees this whole preoccupation with the conflict between instinct and repression as "one of man's oldest self-deceptions".<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Alvarez, "America and Extremist Art", p. 185.

<sup>18</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, Beyond All This Fiddle, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted by Holbrook, "R.D.Laing and the Death-Circuit", p.37.

The real problem, he believes, is not in this war with one's instincts, but the fear of ego-weakness, the fear of emptiness at the core of being by those who are ontologically insecure. Society should therefore serve the necessary function as an avenue for the expression of normal human needs, while the family as the 'facilitating environment' nourishes individual potentialities. But in the ethos of a certain section of the avant-garde, society and the family are seen as agents of our 'devastation'. The appeal is made to Sartre's famous statement:

Take a living child, sew him up in a dead man's skin, and he will stifle in such senile childhood with no occupation save to reproduce the avuncular gestures, with no hope save to poison future childhoods after his own death.<sup>21</sup>

Guntrip and Winnicott find the origin of basic ego-weakness not with 'society' in league with the family as repressive forces, but with a failure of mothering at the earliest stages of a child's development, in an environment uncondusive to this. Our culture itself offers few opportunities to those of weakened identity to 'make good' this early failure in maturation, in terms of being by love and human relationships, by creativity and expression of the 'feminine element'. Instead, the problem of identity in a society adhering fully to the 'taboo of weakness' is attached to 'doing' and 'becoming', to a show of strength and material wealth, to 'false male doing'.

Why are certain members of the avant-garde so fascinated by the particular schizoid views we have been examining, and which Sylvia Plath herself clearly exhibited? A parallel may be

<sup>21</sup>J.P. Sartre, "Foreword" to The Traitor by André Gorz (London: Calder, 1960), p. 15.

drawn with the study done by the American psychoanalyst Leslie H. Farber in his Schizophrenia and the Mad Psychotherapist.<sup>22</sup> Farber writes of the gifted therapist who, in seeking to establish 'kinship' with his patients, finds himself caught in a subtle 'double bind'. Urgently needing to participate in their despair, he tends to exaggerate experiences of estrangement and the burden of responsibility relationships demand. But in his attempts to deny the normal confirmations of his own life and to convince the schizophrenics that he too, like them, is a victim of society, the therapist may come to regard the schizophrenic as a kind of oracle, and to champion his cause in the world. The effects of such an 'occupational risk' can be seen in R.D. Laing who as 'prophet' blames society and acclaims art as 'insurrection'; and in someone like Alvarez in the field of literary criticism, who appears all too willing to endorse Sylvia Plath as a victim of oppression. Yet as David Holbrook writes, such countertransference is but a "recourse to causality, 'I am this way because' which is a way of avoiding true despair, and thus of avoiding rather than confronting one's own humanness".<sup>23</sup>

Alvarez avoids completely Sylvia Plath's 'true despair'. Because he can confront neither his own humanness nor hers, he can praise only that which is most inhuman about her art. He overlooks her crying need for confirmation in life, and those poems which attempt to speak to us from the fructifying and emotional

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<sup>22</sup> See D. Holbrook, "The 200 inch Distorting Mirror", New Society, 11 July 1968, p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> Holbrook, Human Hope and the Death Instinct, p. 276.

sources of her being. The Extremist poets, he is convinced, 'salvage' their verse "from the edge of some kind of personal abyss",<sup>24</sup> but in the final work of Sylvia Plath there is not even the salvaging of possibilities. Nevertheless, Alvarez implicitly supports the way Plath lived, and ended, her life:

whether her involvement with suicide...was real or imaginary is beside the point so far as her art is concerned. All that matters is that the poetry should make a convincing imaginative reality.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, as David Holbrook has recorded,<sup>26</sup> Alvarez even admitted in a public lecture to receiving suicidal warning notes from Sylvia Plath--only to file them away in the hopes that they would be the origins of good poetry. Surely this striving after 'convincing imaginative reality' has become quite inhumanly divorced from the poet's own life. Pursuing this aesthetic philosophy elsewhere Alvarez writes that,

The very source of her creative energy was, it turned out, her self-destructiveness. But it was, precisely, a source of living energy, of her imaginative, creative power. So, though death itself may have been a side-issue, it was also an unavoidable risk....<sup>27</sup>

What is this absurdity about a 'source of living energy' when it eventually killed the poet herself? When death can be seen as nothing but a 'side-issue', an 'unavoidable risk', we perceive the extent to which Alvarez adheres to the inverted moral values of the schizoid personality. It is aestheticism carried to its

<sup>24</sup> Alvarez, The Savage God, p. 259.

<sup>25</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, Beyond All This Fiddle, p. 16.

<sup>26</sup> Holbrook, "Out of the Ash", The Human World, No. 5, Nov. 1971, p. 34.

<sup>27</sup> Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 68.

logical, inhuman conclusion as he praises Sylvia Plath for the detached intellectual control we have seen to be so characteristic of the schizoid individual:

It seems to me that it was only by her determination both to face her most inward and terrifying experiences and to use her intelligence in doing so--so as not to be overwhelmed by them--that she managed to write these extraordinary last poems....<sup>28</sup>

But we know that Sylvia Plath was 'overwhelmed' by her experiences. The mind alone, the I-IT relationship clearly is not enough: the problem of identity rests in being, in the I-THOU relationship. It is but a false strategy of survival to believe that intelligence can conquer 'being', and serves only to prompt compliance with death-circuit modes of behaviour.

Before Plath died, however, she turned with a hatred not often equalled in art against herself and those whom she might have loved in this world. Alvarez, we have seen, adheres fully to the destructive element in art, the need for instinctual energy release. Nevertheless, it is still frightening to see such a belief applied specifically. He writes that most of Sylvia Plath's later poems are "about the unleashing of power, about tapping the roots of her own inner violence".<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the "achievement of her final style" he assures us, "is to make poetry and death inseparable".<sup>30</sup> Alvarez seems willing to go so far as to endorse psychotic art as the only good art since he adds: "There is, of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 67.

course, nothing so very extraordinary about that. I think that this, in general, is the direction all the best contemporary poetry is taking".<sup>31</sup> Let us examine therefore the quality of the critical acumen focused, on Sylvia Plath's 'extraordinary last poems', in particular "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy", which the avant-garde has praised as examples of her best work.

In "Lady Lazarus" Sylvia Plath speaks from the psychotic core of one who can 'feel real' only by meeting the test of suicide each decade. Alvarez, as we might expect, writes that the subject of the poem is "the total purification of achieved death".<sup>32</sup> And, he continues, "what is remarkable...is the objectivity with which she handles such personal material". This same 'objectivity' and concern with 'total purification' characterised such violent, psychotic murders as engaged in by Charlie Manson and the Nazis: these crimes against humanity originate in the same false solutions to the problems of existence. Alvarez overlooks precisely the significance of the personal element in Plath's work. Instead, placed in a false, universal context, she becomes artist as scape-goat:

She is not just talking about her own private suffering... [She] gives it a general meaning; through it she assumes the suffering of all the modern victims. Above all, she becomes an imaginary Jew.

Above all, Alvarez chooses not to see that Plath indulges her own libidinal drive to self-immolation in "Lady Lazarus". She

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<sup>31</sup>Ibid., p. 62.

<sup>32</sup>The following quoted statements by Alvarez about "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" are taken from "Sylvia Plath", pp. 64-66.

becomes an 'imaginary Jew' only in so far as she may participate vicariously in pain--in order to feel real. Joyfully preoccupied with self-destruction, Sylvia Plath in fact remains quite insensitive to the sufferings of the camp victims. When she describes "my skin/Bright as a Nazi lampshade/...My face a featureless, fine/Jew linen", her easy, callow response is a dehumanised one, a frightening example of the schizoid diminution of affect. Yet Alvarez commends this death-circuit thinking:

Anyone whose subject is suffering has a ready-made modern example of hell on earth in the concentration camps. And what matters in them is not so much the physical torture--since sadism is general and perennial ...But when suffering is mass-produced, men and women become as equal and identity-less as objects on an assembly line, and nothing remains--certainly no values, no humanity. This anonymity of pain, which makes all dignity impossible, was Sylvia Plath's subject.

Alvarez actually seems to accept sadism as part of our normal experience--like God or the weather. While the dehumanising violence of the camps was indeed a psychotic manifestation of a wider pattern in our society, it also symbolised the schizoid's desperate need to exterminate the weak, ambivalent 'impurities' within us all--the false solutions of infantile regression. It was hoped that in this denial of humanity, an 'identity' and 'reality' would be confirmed. Thus, when Sylvia Plath participates in 'this anonymity of pain' in "Lady Lazarus", she does so in the same spirit of schizoid delusion that motivated the Final Solution.

As Alvarez has fully accepted these false solutions to the problem of identity within the public sphere in "Lady Lazarus", so he endorses them within the private sphere as well. His

admiration of "Daddy" makes this clear:

She seemed convinced, in these last poems that the root of her suffering was the death of her father, whom she loved, who abandoned her, and who dragged her after him into death. And in her fantasies her father was pure German, pure Aryan, pure anti-semite.

Sylvia Plath herself has a slightly more subtle version of the problem:

The 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.

Actually, the poem is about the internalised bad-object daddy, the broken 'colossus' within, and has nothing to do with whether or not her father was a Nazi. Otto Plath came to America at the age of fifteen, published his book, Bumblebees and Their Ways in 1934, and otherwise seems to have given no reason to believe he was 'pure anti-semite'. But to feel real, to hold a weak identity together, the schizoid individual gives way to 'false male doing' and to a purity of hatred. It is much easier to hate a daddy who is imagined as a Nazi, and hence can be conceived as 'all bad'. This is the nature of that 'purity' of description Alvarez so admires. It is also absorption in a psychotic, savage detachment from the human dimension. Alvarez, of course, finds strength in this:

What comes through most powerfully, I think, is the terrible unforgiveness of her verse, the continual sense not so much of violence--although there is a good

deal of that--as of violent resentment that this should have been done to her. 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.

Although Plath unquestionably expresses a desire for revenge in "Daddy", she has not actually been 'oppressed' by anyone. Clearly, the problem lies within, and that originating in an environment which somehow failed to engender a firm core of being, and in parents who had been internalised as bad objects. It is a closed system, and as Alvarez dimly realises, the hate became self-directed and suicide resulted. Blindly, however, he continues:

And this is the strategy of the concentration camps. When suffering is there whatever you do, by inflicting it upon yourself, you achieve your identity, you set yourself free.

This is most certainly not the strategy of the concentration camps, as the writings of Viktor Frankl confirm. In believing that 'freedom' can be found by inflicting suffering on oneself, Alvarez reveals his real fascination with the schizoid's terrible solutions to the problems of existence. It is an insane belief that identity can be found in acts of ultimate dehumanisation akin to Farber's mad therapists who came to participate in their own distorted views of normal existence. Yet such opinions are obviously wide-spread and deemed quite acceptable by many. A.R. Jones in his essay, "On 'Daddy'", fully supports the schizoid viewpoint as expressed by Alvarez, finding in Plath's death "not annihilation of the personality but the freeing of it from the humiliating persecution of love and violence".<sup>33</sup> In the end

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<sup>33</sup>A.R. Jones, "On 'Daddy'" in The Art of Sylvia Plath, p.236.

Jones advances even beyond Alvarez in endorsing the schizoid's false solutions within the cultural sphere. Alvarez is certainly willing to imply this as he finds in psychotic art

a source of creative strength, a way of handling the unhandleable, and presenting the situation in all its fullness....Poetry of this order is a murderous art.<sup>34</sup>

But Jones finds "Daddy"

committed to the view that this ethos of love/brutality is the dominant historical ethos of the last thirty years...which...can only manifest itself, today, in images of violence....The nursery rhyme structure of the poem lends this paradox the force of matter-of-fact reasonableness and an air of almost reasonable inevitability. In this we are persuaded almost to cooperate with the destructive principle--indeed, to love the principle as life itself. <sup>35</sup> (my emphasis)

We have seen that the literary avant-garde has applauded Sylvia Plath not for her attempts to understand or for her efforts to meet the challenges of life in a responsible way, but rather for her adoption of false, hateful solutions to the fundamental problem of a weakened ego. Such views can be extremely dangerous in the cultural sphere, encouraging the pervasive malaise of 'schizoid futility'. As both life and death are stripped of significance, the human dimension of compassion for suffering becomes meaningless. There can be little question that Plath was influenced to some degree by just such a cultural and aesthetic ambience. In the end it would have offered her reasons only for death. Perhaps, however, by disentangling her vision from its death-circuits we may bring to Sylvia Plath's art the understanding and compassion--the 'togetherness'--that she appears not to have experienced in life. The following chapters will attempt to do this.

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<sup>34</sup> Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", pp. 66-67.

<sup>35</sup> Jones, "On 'Daddy'", p. 236.

### CHAPTER III

#### THE COLOSSUS

Sylvia Plath's only collection of poetry to be published during her lifetime was The Colossus. These poems were written during the first three years of her marriage, between 1956 and the end of 1959. The volume is not arranged chronologically nor was the poet concerned with this, for The Colossus gains its power from the accumulation of images and tentative, probing suggestions. However, for the sake of a developmental study of Sylvia Plath's art, it is useful to follow Ted Hughes' article on the chronological order of the poems,<sup>1</sup> and to divide them into four groups corresponding to precise periods in her life throughout these years. Thus, the earliest group was written during the two years she was reading English at Cambridge, and includes "Sow", "Hardcastle Crags", "Faun", "Departure", "All the Dead Dears", "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows", "Black Rook in Rainy Weather", "Strumpet Song", "Two Sisters of Persephone" and "Spinster". Then came the return to America and those poems from the academic year 1957-1958 while she was teaching at Smith College. This group includes "Mussel-Hunter at Rock Harbour", written at Cape Cod during the summer before the start of the academic term; "Night Shift", "Lorelei", "The Thin People",

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes, op.cit., pp. 187-95.

"The Ghost's Leavetaking", "Full Fathom Five", "Snakecharmer", "The Disquieting Muses", "Frog Autumn", "Sculptor", and most likely "Maudlin", "The Companionable Ills" and "The Times are Tidy". The third group originated from the remaining months of 1958 to the summer of 1959 when the Hugheses were in Boston, at which time she attended Robert Lowell's poetry classes at Boston University. "Two Views of a Cadaver Room", "The Eye-Mote", "Point Shirley", "Aftermath", "Suicide Off Egg-Rock", "Man in Black", "The Hermit at Outermost House", "The Beekeeper's Daughter", and most probably "The Colossus", "The Bull of Bendylaw", "I Want, I Want" and "Moonrise", are included here. The fourth and final group of poems was written in the autumn of 1959, during the weeks at Yaddo.<sup>2</sup> From Yaddo the Hugheses left directly for England, Sylvia Plath pregnant with her first child, Frieda, born April 1, 1960. This group comprises "The Manor Garden", "Mushrooms", "A Winter Ship", "Blue Moles", "The Burnt-Out Spa", "Poem for a Birthday" and tentatively, "Metaphors", "Ouija" and "Medallion".

The Colossus was received favourably, if quietly, when it was published in 1960. The reviews on the whole were perceptive, focusing on the obvious talent of one who had learned her craft well. Yet the formality and discrete remoteness of the volume were in fact powerful defensive forces. Roy Fuller observed that Sylvia Plath's voice was still "ventriloquial": "too many poems have no point other than their own skill. For all the strangeness and power, the book exudes taste---taste in the tradition that

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<sup>2</sup>Yaddo is at Saratoga Springs, near Lake George, New York state.

puts a good poet in an academic sinecure".<sup>3</sup> This poetic self-consciousness shackled expression of the inner conflict, so that the trouble within often emerges only obliquely in a disturbing, undefined sense of menace. "Miss Plath's burden is", Richard Howard discerns, "throughout, the disaster inscribed within the surface of life and landscape".<sup>4</sup> In another review Alvarez confirms this impression, writing that

most of her poems rest secure in a mass of experience that is never brought out into daylight...It is this sense of threat, as though she were continually menaced by something she could see only out of the corners of her eyes, that gives her work its distinction.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, the hope expressed by one of these first reviews was that Sylvia Plath would "let things slip a bit without gushing"<sup>6</sup> in her next collection. It was a hope later fulfilled with ironic, tragic consequences for the poet herself.

This first volume, in its bright talented way, was derivative. Sylvia Plath was later to disavow these early poems, remarking in an interview that she couldn't "read any of the poems aloud now. I didn't write them to be read aloud. In fact, they quite privately bore me".<sup>7</sup> Her experience was coloured by the influence of strong male models, Theodore Roethke, Wallace Stevens, and undoubtedly too by her husband, Ted Hughes. The first two, largely literary models, were soon counteracted by the

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<sup>3</sup>Roy Fuller, Review of The Colossus (London, 1960), The London Magazine, vol. 8 no. 3 (March, 1961), pp. 69-70.

<sup>4</sup>Richard Howard, Review of The Colossus (New York, 1962), Poetry, vol. 101, no. 6 (March, 1963), pp. 412-413.

<sup>5</sup>Alvarez, Review of The Colossus (London, 1960), The Observer Weekend Review, no. 8, 842 (December 18, 1960).

<sup>6</sup>Fuller, Review of The Colossus, p. 70.

<sup>7</sup>British Council Interview, quoted by Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath" p. 57.

friendship of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton, and their examples of the 'intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience' which so excited her. The birth of her children, Frieda in 1960 and Nicholas two years later, also heralded fiercely creative periods. By then however, having found more than her own speaking voice, she was writing poems 'out loud' like some magical incantation to appease the disturbed psyche within.

We have seen that the schizoid individual finds 'giving' in an emotional sense extremely difficult. Fixed in an early oral stage himself, 'giving' and by extension creativity---in Sylvia Plath's case through the birth of children and the manifestation of genuine poetic powers--has the significance of 'loss of contents'. Focusing on this problem, Harry Guntrip has written of the profound oral concerns of the schizoid personality:

When you cannot get what you want from the person you need, instead of getting angry you may simply go on getting more and more hungry, and full of a sense of painful craving, and a longing to get total and complete possession of your love-object so that you cannot be left to starve. Fairbairn arrived at the view (1941) that love made hungry is the schizoid problem and it arouses the terrible fear that one's love has become so devouring and incorporative that love itself has become destructive.<sup>8</sup>

The schizoid individual is also possessed of an intense hunger to be, by his need for psychic rebirth and development of a real ego. This whole question is often worked out over food, or in the instance of Sylvia Plath, through the extensive mouth imagery which permeates her art, and is clearly evident in The Colossus. It is the 'libidinal orientation' of the schizoid attitude that is represented by these mouth impulses, recalling

<sup>8</sup>Guntrip, Schizoid Phenomena, p. 24.

Fairbairn's description of the infant's ego as above all, a 'mouth-ego'. This developmental study will show that there was a kind of frenzy associated with Sylvia Plath's creative element both in life and in art. She sensed she was devouring herself, as she describes this crying "mouth-hole" in "The Stones":

"Drunk as a foetus/I suck at the paps of darkness".<sup>9</sup>

Sylvia Plath tended later to dismiss the subject matter of the early poems. They were concerned with "nature" she thought, "all those subjects which are absolute gifts to the person who doesn't have any interior experience to write about".<sup>10</sup> In fact she already carried within her the 'interior experience' on which she was later to draw, but when writing The Colossus had not yet learned to express it directly. Instead, it is acknowledged only indirectly, as an ominous sense of threat lurking at the edge of the daylight world. Her consciousness was still unflooded by repressed material; the 'travelling companions' had yet to be faced. Fairbairn found that the schizoid's greatest resistance to overcome was his terrible fear of the release of bad objects from the unconscious: "when such bad objects are released, the world around the patient becomes peopled with devils which are too terrifying for him to face". The psychotherapist, Fairbairn adds, may thus be said to function as the "true successor to the exorcist", in that he is concerned, not only with "the forgiveness of sins", but also with "the casting out of devils".<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>From "Poem for a Birthday".

<sup>10</sup>British Council Interview, quoted by Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 57.

<sup>11</sup>Fairbairn, Psychoanalytic Studies, pp. 69-70.

While those poems written during the two years at Cambridge are often concerned with nature, it is a world red in tooth and claw, the Wordsworthian spirit gone rank. Nature is never simply 'there', but must be peopled with demonic presences as yet essentially undefined in their relation to the poet. Only later does Sylvia Plath, and the reader, come to perceive that the persecutors are within. Their supposed reflection in the environment exemplifies the schizoid's desperate need to thrust his sense of badness beyond himself.

#### I CAMBRIDGE POEMS

"Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows" conveys all the luminous delicacy of a watercolor painting. It is an idyllic universe that has been conjured up and the poet feels it can exist only in the innocence of a childhood universe: "It is a country on a nursery plate". Throughout her art Plath looks back to the childhood world as one of pristine happiness as compared with the malignancy of the adult world. It is the expression of a desire to return to a dimly remembered earlier safe place, although in reality the schizoid individual can only withdraw into greater isolation. So the sense of menace, in fact lurking within a weak ego, instead is conceived as just beneath the surface of nature: "The blood-berried hawthorn hides its spines with white" and hedges "meadows of benign/Arcadian green". Even the human realm is affected although the students, youthfully preoccupied with the intellect and with love, remain unaware "How in such mild air/The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out".

"Hardcastle Crag" pursues this theme as an inchoate, external menace as it threatens human existence. The poem describes the poet walking at night in a wide, rough-sculptured valley of the same name, which borders a small industrial town in her husband's native Yorkshire. Leaving the village she walks in the fields of the countryside, but as in the above poem feels surrounded by some ominous, unknown evil. Here the "humped in-different iron" of the surrounding hills--emblematic of the later 'bell jar' consciousness--has locked the landscape bowl into a vacuum of stony silence. Frightened by a premonition of impending disaster and

...before the weight  
Of stones and hills of stones could break  
Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light.

she returns to the village. Yet the town itself, like the surrounding landscape, seems to possess no human warmth. Only "dream peopled", it is described as "black/Stone built" with its echoing "steely" streets and "dark, dwarfed cottages". Clearly, the poem is expressing a state of psychic alienation as the poet's whole external world is conceived in images of stone, dead to any human response.

The importance of "Hardcastle Crag" lies in Sylvia Plath's unconscious use of 'interior experience'. As she describes herself walking in a "blank mood" there appears to be no solid core of self, her physical presence but a "paltry gift", "small heat" for the elements which quickly diminish her fragile sense of being. In a remarkable image at this time, the schizoid's

sense of 'lack of contents' is powerfully described. The wind has pared "her person down/To a pinch of flame", and in blowing around her ears seems really to be echoing in the emptiness within a head cut off at the top, "like a scooped-out pumpkin crown".

In "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" Sylvia Plath muses on the nature of poetic inspiration, the source of which in this case is a black rook arranging its sodden feathers in the rain. This is also the first poem in which she begins to explore the therapeutic nature of her art, seen as a transmutation into the permanence of artistic expression from a life imperilled by its own self-destructiveness. The moment of inspiration is described as "harrowing an interval/Otherwise inconsequent", which in a more profound sense offers "A brief respite from fear/Of total neutrality". The "love" the poet experiences at this moment is clearly bound up with an intellectual detachment from the world. In fact the actual, daily life she leads appears very like the 'false self' existence of the schizoid individual: a weak, numbed self has been fabricated in an exhausting effort to feel real. Thus, "wary", "skeptical" and "ignorant", the poet describes herself as "trekking stubborn through this season/Of fatigue", hoping to "patch together a content.../Of sorts".

"All the Dead Dears" is one of the most disturbing poems in this first group. A meditation on mortality and the transcendence of life, it was inspired by the fourth-century skeleton of a woman, a mouse and a shrew in the Cambridge Archaeological Museum. In

this difficult poem Sylvia Plath attempts to probe the menace she unconsciously felt inherent in the feminine principle, and perhaps more specifically isolated in her own mother. Feeling all things participate in the "gross eating game" of mortality, the poet is compelled to recognize kinship with this female skeleton. Yet in a schizoid twist, kinship, relationship with others in any sense, is seen as devouring or, at best, disturbingly ambivalent. The trinity of "mother, grandmother, great-grandmother" parallels the three disquieting muses of a later poem as they reach "hag hands" to haul the poet into life and creative activity, and ultimately again, back into death. An uneasy sense of evil pervades and closes this poem. The poet realises that unlike the masculine element, the drowned "daft father" divorced from the cycle of birth and death, the Janus-faced feminine element suffuses all of life and is one from which we cannot escape.

## II CAPE COD POEMS

"Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour" is the first of the second group of poems, and was written while the Hugheses were summering at Cape Cod before Sylvia began the 1957-58 academic term at Smith College. This poem, a fine and sensitive achievement, continues the interest in nature and man's alienation from it so characteristic of the earlier work. The poet's early morning trip to the deserted sea coast to gather the beached sea creatures, and her acute and questioning perception of the beauty and motives of these elemental organisms is described. Although

she attempts to understand their nature, she cannot. Able only to describe them externally, she feels utterly shut out from the essence of the natural universe:

I/Stood shut out, for once, for all,  
 Puzzling the passage of their  
 Absolutely alien  
 Order....

During her year at Smith College, Sylvia Plath made the decision to take poetry seriously enough to leave the safety of an academic sinecure. Hence, three of the best poems written at this time explore the nature and origin of the art to which she had given herself. "The Disquieting Muses" is one of these poems, and also one of the first of an autobiographical series which was to interest her the following year. The reference to the hurricane in the third verse recalls the 1938 hurricane of her childhood, which also figures in "Ocean 1212-W". The poem is important in focusing on the mother, and Sylvia Plath's consciousness of having turned from her at an early age.

The title of the poem refers to the troubled forces she knew lay behind her poetic intent. "Mouthless, eyeless with stitched bald head", she describes them, evoking the nightmarish three ladies of "All the Dead Dears", and the ghoulish figures of Dachau and Hiroshima of the later poems. Their 'patched-together' nature, a recurring metaphor throughout her art, looks back to "Black Rook in Rainy Weather", and heralds the importance of the title poem in the volume. These two qualities then, that of incubus and the stitched-together elements of the 'interior ex-

perience', emphasize the disquieting and, I suggest, the schizoid source of poetic inspiration. The poet has been conscious of these "dismal-headed" muses since earliest childhood, disrupting natural development and clearly pertaining to the feminine principle. Her own mother seems quite unconscious of their reality in her daughter's imagination, aware only of those witches which "always/Got baked into gingerbread". This ironic, well-crafted line suggests the poet's 'libidinal orientation', and her preoccupation with oral images and with food, because the primary love craved is always associated with these. Emily Dickinson expressed a similar need: "Affection is like bread, unnoticed till we starve, and then we dream of it, and sing of it, and paint it".<sup>12</sup> Sylvia Plath wrote poetry about it. As an aside, we note the parallel that as the mother fed Sylvia and her brother "cookies and ovaltine" the night of the New England hurricane, so Sylvia Plath left cookies and milk beside her own two children the night she committed suicide. "The Disquieting Muses" ends by implying that as Sylvia matured, her mother's frivolous, porcelain world and her own grew ever further apart. Although the poet feels her mother is in some way responsible for her predicament, with 'false self' courage and that stoical American smile she always wore, Sylvia Plath turned to face her "travelling companions".

"The Ghost's Leavetaking" is also concerned with the nature of poetic inspiration. In this poem Sylvia Plath examines that

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<sup>12</sup> Quoted by John Cody, After Great Pain: The Inner Life of Emily Dickenson (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971).

twilight state between sleep and the fully awakened mind:

At this joint between two worlds and two entirely  
Incompatible modes of time, the raw material  
Of our meat-and-potato thoughts assumes the nimbus  
Of ambrosial revelation.

The world of dreams is described as the more attractive and intense one. Art therefore is an attempt to retain something of this world, but because the mind must be fully conscious to give shape to it the result is something like Coleridge's "Kubla Khan": a mere shadow of its original self. However, Plath herself was clearly inspired at this dawning hour and spoke of her later poems as all being written -

'...at about four in the morning--that still blue,  
almost eternal hour before the baby's cry, before  
the glassy music of the milkman, settling his bottles.'<sup>13</sup>

"Sculptor" is the third poem in this group which explores more specifically Sylvia Plath's conception of art and the role the artist plays. The poem is dedicated to Leonard Baskin and was inspired by her admiration of his monster-like drawings and sculptures. For Plath, Baskin's art represented enduring creations salvaged from the transient, "bodiless...nightmare" souls whom he sculpted. This schizoid view of man combines with a belief, as in "The Ghost's Leavetaking", in the world of art as possessing an intensity and reality far beyond the human dimension. Yet the artist, able to confer unique identity, is himself a mere vehicle of the creative imagination since his art outlives him. The dualism inherent here exemplifies the schizoid's insistence on

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<sup>13</sup>From the introductory notes to "New Poems", a reading prepared for the BBC Third Programme but never broadcast.

the mind, on art, to engender the sense of being lacking within. So Sylvia Plath clearly sought in her own art to control the inner nightmare, and by embodying it to confirm now, and in a more permanent way, the value of her existence.

Two companion poems written during this year, "Lorelei" and "Full Fathom Five", were inspired by an account of Jacques Cousteau's underwater exploration. More importantly they focus on death as a pathway to rebirth in a watery universe reminiscent of that in "Ocean 1212-W". In these poems the two important early influences, the sea and the death of the father, converge. "Lorelei" describes a river in darkness and the Rhine nymphs singing "Of a world more full and clear.../Than can be". The poet sees in this watery universe what the schizoid individual longs for: "sure harbourage", and an eternal peace beyond the "mundane order" of a troubled life. Even though these nymphs are associated with "the pitched reefs of nightmare", with madness and with a profound silence so like the dead father who beckoned to her from beyond the grave, the poet wants only to join this world although, perforce, her own death is its passport.

"Full Fathom Five", the title of which refers to Ariel's song informing Ferdinand of his father's supposed death, continues the theme of "Lorelei". It emphasizes the poet's longing to join her real father in death. Here the "old man" surfacing from the sea is strangely disfigured, like the broken colossus of the title poem, a badly internalised daddy who in death's silence defies the questions of his daughter. She, however,

regards herself as exiled from him, and desires only to leave the oppressiveness of a life with which she found it increasingly difficult to cope:

Father, this thick air is murderous,  
I would breathe water.

### III BOSTON POEMS

In the first two groups of poems the poet has attempted to describe the menace she sensed inherent in the external world, gradually coming to suggest its deeply personal and internal origin. She begins to examine her role as an artist, and to formulate her conception of art as that which alone survives the forces of disintegration in life. A change can be discerned in the poems of the third group written between mid 1958 and the autumn of 1959 while the Hugheses were in Boston, following Sylvia's decision to abandon academia for a career as a poet. Many of them draw on autobiographical details, prompted no doubt by her proximity at this time to her birthplace. Disturbing, personal experiences, with obvious parallels in The Bell Jar, are resurrected and handled poetically. Of "Two Views of a Cadaver Room", "Suicide Off Egg Rock" and "Aftermath", Ted Hughes has written:

...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>14</sup>

This painful, internal experience is now explored with a new candour and insistence, and was encouraged throughout this year by her participation in Robert Lowell's poetry classes at Boston

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<sup>14</sup>Hughes, "Notes on...Plath's Poems", p. 191.

University, and friendship with Anne Sexton, both poets whom she admired and who too were examining the realities of inner disorder in their art.

"Two Views of a Cadaver Room" describes an experience similar to Esther Greenwood's visit to the laboratory of Buddy Willard in the novel. A view of students nonchalantly dissecting corpses is opposed to a Breugel painting in which two lovers are oblivious to the "carrion army" at their elbow. The poem conveys a horrifying sense of the extent to which the poet imagined human existence was threatened by nightmarish, uncontrollable forces. Little is spared, neither the body in death, only "a sallow piece of string" holding it together--Sylvia Plath's metaphor for physical weakness become reality--nor the lovers who, blind and deaf, choose to ignore death's leering head. Only art spares, stalling desolation in paint. Yet the power of love, though fragile, "foolish" and "delicate", is recognised as a source of eternal inspiration and a way in which man might meet life's trials with courage. However, as Sylvia Plath came to find relationship in the world increasingly difficult over the next three years, her later attitude towards love harbours only the bitter cynicism of "The Couriers": "A ring of gold with the sun in it?/Lies. Lies and a grief".

The remarkable poem, "Suicide Off Egg Rock" recalls the autobiographical detail described in The Bell Jar as Esther's attempted suicide by drowning while picnicing with Jody and her friends. The sense of unreal detachment which imbued "Two Views

of a Cadaver Room" becomes here a schizoid expression of loss of affect, a frightening inability to feel. In this poem nothing is spared, neither the landscape which has been brutalised by mankind into some hideous sore, nor nature herself which has no concern or pity for this man who wants to die. Sylvia Plath's description of the persona's emotional state at the point of death captures in a few brilliant lines the schizoid's reason for dying. We recall such an individual's wish, not in fact to die, but to retire to some numbed, protected state so that reparative processes necessary for psychic rebirth and the development of a real ego might come to bear. Hence, there is "no pit of shadow to crawl into" though clearly this--and not death--is the suicide's original desire in the poem. He is described in life as feeling dead inside, already "beached with the sea's garbage", a mere living machine. The world has lost all meaning for this man who views the rotting fish before him in lines that recall the cut-off pumpkin crown of "Hardcastle Crags", and convey all the horror of complete ego disintegration:

Flies filing in through a dead skate's eyehole  
 Buzzed and assailed the vaulted brainchamber.  
 The words in his book wormed off the pages.  
 Everything glittered like blank paper.

"Aftermath", the subject of which is the profound indifference of the crowd when tragedy strikes the individual, parallels the cruel stares Esther in The Bell Jar, and undoubtedly the poet herself, experienced on returning from the mental hospital. The isolation experienced as "the crowd sucks her last tear and

turns away", serves to confirm the poet's disillusioned view of humanity. The poem may also represent the anguished plea of Sylvia Plath herself who, in failing to find sympathetic relationship in her world, in the end chose the possibility of rebirth through physical death.

More specifically autobiographical is "Point Shirley". This poem is a eulogy to the grandmother of "Ocean 1212-W", and memories made keen by the poet's proximity to her birthplace this year. Her visit to the abandoned house of the dead woman, that had withstood the brutality of the 1938 hurricane, is described. The poem opens with a dramatic portrayal of the conspiring natural forces -- "such collusion of mulish elements"-- characteristic of so many of these early poems, and here concentrated in the rapacious sea. The poet tries to rekindle the spirit of her grandmother but finds she cannot: some internalisation process essential to this has not been completed. As a survivor she grieves, feeling herself irrevocably cut off from the love she associates with childhood, and deemed so necessary now for survival. Indeed, this love takes on religious implications as the poet believes the grandmother in death--"she died blessed"--has achieved the union described in "Full Fathom Five", whereas the poet in life imagines herself a worthless victim of the maternal sea:

And I come by  
Bones, bones only, pawed and tossed,

We know that it is the schizoid's life-long need for his parents--

or a beloved grandmother--that confers upon them their actual power over him. Thus, the persona here is willing to abase herself in an almost pathetic need for love:

I would get from these dry-papped stones  
The milk your love instilled in them.

The poem ends with the sad realisation that "stones are nothing of home", and by extension the first eight happy years of her life as described in "Ocean 1212-W" are gone forever, although in an essential, emotional way they have never been outgrown.

"I Want, I Want" extends the theme of "Point Shirley". The title, in light of the poem, echoes a child's cry to be loved and to be confirmed in his identity. With the uncanny insight of the schizoid individual, Sylvia Plath focuses on the origin of her now troubled psyche. Ego-psychologists attest that the schizoid state originates in the primary stages of infancy, in some breakdown of the child's earliest relationship with the mother. Thus the "baby god" of the poem cries out for his mother's breast, for her love, but finds his need completely unsatisfied:

The dry volcanoes cracked and spit,  
Sand abraded the milkless lip.

When relationship with the mother fails, the child turns to the father in an emotional way. In Sylvia Plath's case, when frustrated by his death, her own love must have appeared destructive. When the joys of loving seemed hopelessly barred there appeared little alternative but to deliver herself over to the joys of hating:

Cried then for the father's blood  
Who set wasp, wolf and shark to work,

The result is an adult engaged in false modes of existence--"the inveterate, dry-eyed patriarch"--of almost no genuine emotional feelings and a harsh, cynical view of life which the poet justifies by its imagined parallel in the natural universe.

In "The Beekeeper's Daughter" and "Colossus", Sylvia Plath attempts to an even greater extent to 'locate just what it was that hurt'. The influence of Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton has been significant for her. Ted Hughes has written that

"The Beekeeper's Daughter" is one of a group of poems that she wrote at this time about her father...This poem, one of her chilliest, recounts a key event in her Vita Nuova.<sup>15</sup>

This statement is as enigmatic as the poem itself. However, given Otto Plath's apiarian interests, the poem explores Sylvia's relationship with her father. The scene takes place in a garden, brilliant with flowers almost obscene in their fertility and with a richness threatening to the daughter: "a well of scents almost too dense to breathe in". The father, majestic "maestro of the bees", moves among the subjects of this garden, which also includes his daughter. As in "Point Shirley", the persona conceives of her love for this parental figure as a masochistic abasement of self: "My heart under your foot, sister of a stone". At the end of the second verse the poet suggests that in this fruitful ambience she may replace her mother in a love relationship with the father. This is affirmed in the third stanza:

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<sup>15</sup>Hughes, "Notes on...Plath's Poems", p. 190.

Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg  
Under the coronal of sugar roses

The queen bee marries the winter of your year.

Fairbairn points out that the child constitutes the Oedipus situation for himself, and that at bottom both are figures of the mother. I believe Sylvia Plath subconsciously realises this in the poem as she associates "burrows", "hole-mouth", "Easter egg" and the whole fecundity of the garden with the beloved father, all images exemplifying at the same time the significance of the feminine element. But in either case, the poet suggests, love is destructive; it is "a fruit that's death to taste".

An uncollected poem of the same period, "Electra on Azalea Path",<sup>16</sup> makes the above suggestion clear. The poem is concerned with this 'great tragedy' of the schizoid condition, and is the tortured admission of guilt by one who believes it was her love that caused her father's death:

Oh pardon the one who knocks for pardon at  
Your gate, father--your hound-bitch, daughter, friend.  
It was my love that did us both to death.

"The Colossus", the title poem, is perhaps Sylvia Plath's most accomplished expression in this volume of the troubled father/daughter relationship. It also looks forward to the hateful utterance in "Daddy", in which the father is again conceived as a kind of behemoth: "Ghastly statute with one grey toe/Big as a Frisco seal". "The Colossus" is a profound statement of internal turmoil as the poet speaks of her efforts to reconstruct a badly internalised daddy whose love she craves for confirmation

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<sup>16</sup>"Electra on Azalea Path", Hudson Review, 13, autumn 1960, p. 414.

of her own identity. She looks back over thirty years of incessant labour by one so diminished in selfhood as to be little more than an ant, attempting to patch together the monstrous figure of a father overwhelmingly important to her. But this toil, however desperate, is futile; neither the now inalterable conditions of childhood, nor the failure of the mother to engender a firm core of 'ontological security' can be changed. The poet realises the utter impossibility of her task, the folly of 'doing' when she has no sense of 'being':

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

Yet she cannot turn away from these false modes of survival because life seems to hold out no other alternative. The deeply personal though unfulfilled nature of her plight, as in "The Beekeeper's Daughter", is suggested in the acknowledgement that "my hours are married to a shadow", thereby rendering a love relationship with a real husband most difficult indeed. The poem ends on a note of despair. The jocular air of resignation is belied by the final lines which express all the sense of exile and isolation, of permanent abandonment, Sylvia Plath as an adult so painfully felt:

No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel  
On the blank stones of the landing.

#### IV YADDO POEMS

The poems of the fourth and last group in the volume, written while the Hugheses were visiting at Yaddo in the autumn of 1959, immediately prior to their return to England, differ--excepting

"Poem for a Birthday"-- from the disturbing autobiographical concerns of the third group, having instead an external, meditative focus. There was the ready influence of the contemplative exercises and series of invocations the Hugheses had devised together while at Yaddo. Sylvia Plath now turns to nature with a fresh eye, accepting its menace without needing to impose a personal malignancy. As she learned to face the real trouble within, and came to perceive the extent to which the inner world gave her inspiration for poetry, nature became a secondary consideration. Moreover, the new poems gained power and lucidity from being read aloud; the remarkable "Poem for a Birthday" especially marks this new speaking voice. Hence, the nature poems written at Yaddo are not especially interesting and tend to centre on the acceptance of life as described in "The Burnt-Out Spa": "The stream that hustles us/Neither nourishes nor heals".

A more perceptive response occurs in "The Manor Garden", the scene of which is most likely the decaying autumnal garden at Yaddo. Sylvia Plath was pregnant at this time with her first child and it seems likely, since the poem addresses in a casual, musing way the imminent arrival of another, that she would have been especially conscious of the ever-renewing cycle of birth and death. The poet appears to address the growing foetus within her as it progresses through the earliest stages of development, from its appearance as a fish and a pig, soon coming "clear of the shadow" to human form--a progression matched by the continual change in nature itself. The final lines marry this thought

with a statement of union between the natural and human realms:

The small birds converge, converge  
With their gifts to a difficult birning.

"Poem for a Birthday" can be considered Sylvia Plath's most notable achievement in The Colossus. It is a symphonic statement of a schizoid's intense inner world to the elucidation of which, perhaps unwittingly, the poet had dedicated her poetic gifts. Ted Hughes provides background information of the series:

She was reading Paul Radin's collection of African folk-tales with great excitement. In these she found the underworld of her worst nightmares throwing up intensely beautiful adventures, where the most unsuspected voices thrived under the pressures of a reality that made most accepted fiction seem artificial and spurious. At the same time she was reading--closely and sympathetically for the first time--Roethke's poems. The result was a series of pieces, each a monologue of some character in an underground, primitive drama.<sup>17</sup>

In imagery--the interest in the vegetable and insect world--and in form--the short, abrupt lines, the influence of Roethke can be seen. But above all, Sylvia Plath had become more confident in her poetic powers at the same time as she felt new life stirring within her. She was now able to give artistic expression to the 'underworld of her worst nightmares' with a lucidity and courage she had not previously revealed.

That the series is going to be a kind of self-portrait is made clear with the opening poem, enigmatically titled "Who". It begs the questions, 'Whose birthday?', and the greater one of identity that haunts Sylvia Plath's poetry, 'Who am I?' The first question appears to be answered as the poem begins with the

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<sup>17</sup>Hughes, "Notes on...Plath's Poems", p. 192.

mention of October, for the poet's birthday was in this month. The second question is never fully answered, for it remained the abiding enigma behind the poetry and the life itself.

"Who", the first section of "Poem for a Birthday" centres on October, the seasonal death of the year as the poet, having wandered to an old tool shed, begins her collage of reflections. The poem contains elements of the dying garden at Yaddo, of the poet's pregnancy, and memories of her experience in a mental hospital. She records feeling shut out forever from the bounty of the year as she describes, in intense oral imagery, the libidinal orientation of her starving emotional state: "The fruit's in,/ Eaten or rotten. I am all mouth". Conscious only of a profound uselessness and feeling of emptiness, she feels at home among the broken, rusty tools in the shed, and admits that even "the spiders won't notice" her presence. Lacking a sense of her own identity she can equate herself only with some inconsequential, inhuman, unfeeling object:

I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet,  
Without dreams of any sort.

This present condition is comparable, the final lines suggest, to Sylvia Plath's real experience in the mental hospital, of being one of the living dead subjected to shock treatments and the subsequent loss of memory.

As the poet probes her anguished inner world, she subconsciously realises that the problem is in some way intrinsically linked with her mother who failed to feed this daughter love

enough to confirm identity: "Mother, you are the one mouth/I would be a tongue to". Feeling identityless thereafter and unable to find in life the sense of 'ontological security' necessary to continued existence, the poet longs only for death. Appropriately, it is imagined as a kind of rebirth, a return to the mother figure, a hope that the weak ego might have a second chance to grow: "Mother of otherness/Eat me". In any event, the poet cries to be freed from the exigencies of a life with which she was finding it increasingly difficult to cope: "If only the wind would leave my lungs alone".

The second section of this longer poem, "Dark House", continues the theme of the first in its exploration of the schizoid desire to 'crawl back inside'. That Sylvia Plath herself was pregnant at this time adds a certain poignancy to her mental condition. As the poet describes herself "chewing at the grey paper,/Oozing the glue drops", we perceive this futile exercise in 'doing', these labours portrayed so often in her art to 'patch together' an identity. We know that the regressed ego of the schizoid individual often undergoes splitting at deeper levels, and in further alienating him from relationship in the world forces such a person always to be his own guide, to exist by false modes of survival. Hence, the persona speaks of the "many cellars" in this dark house, and while possible to "see by my own light" here, clearly direction has not been found because "more maps" must be made. As the poet imagines herself grubbing blind like a mole inside her psyche, she feels the

unborn child stirring within her belly and thinks of it as inhuman and devouring as it sucks life from her. The poem closes with the poet envious of this foetus, wishing herself to escape where

It is warm and tolerable  
In the bowel of the root.  
Here's a cuddly mother.

"Maenad", the third section, continues this thought as the poet looks back from the frenzied state of adulthood to childhood, a happy, fairy-tale world where love was enjoyed, at least from the father:

Once I was ordinary:  
Sat by my father's bean tree  
Eating the fingers of wisdom.

With the father's death the child felt acutely the lack of a mother's love and the poor internalisation of this beloved father:

"The mother of mouth's didn't love me./The old man shrank to a doll". She has survived with an unrequited need for love and confirmation of her identity. We have seen that the schizoid activity of trying to create a 'self' invariably meets with failure, since this gift is best bequeathed by the mother in earliest childhood. This never having been accomplished in the poet's case, she now rejects her mother outright: "Mother, keep out of my barnyard,/I am becoming another". The poet longs for the peace of death but realises that until then she can only swallow what time has allotted her. "Maenad" ends with a bleak utterance that is not even a question: "Tell me my name". It is also Esther Greenwood's numbed reaction in The Bell Jar

as she lies barren of memory following electro-convulsive therapy.

The fourth section of "Poem for a Birthday", "The Beast", also opens with memories of the father and those first eight happy years when he reigned omnipotent in his daughter's eyes:

Breathing was easy in his airy holding.  
The sun sat in his armpit.  
Nothing went mouldy.

Then came the move inland and the realisation: "I hardly knew him". Marriage was an attempt to find in another what the father had once been, but this too has proved ultimately disillusioning: "I've married a cupboard of rubbish./I bed in a fish puddle". Life now is 'mouldy' indeed as she imagines herself exiled to the bowels of the earth, without value, above all in her own eyes:

I housekeep in Time's gut-end  
Among emmets and molluscs,  
Duchess of Nothing,  
Hairtusk's bride.

The fifth section, "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond", describes this emotional slough of despond reached in the fourth section. It is portrayed as a cold, dank world at the bottom of a lily pond where "there is little shelter", and everything is numbed by Lethe's forgetful waters. The poet welcomes this state which, once more, is clearly not so much a desire for death as a wish to retreat from the incessant demands of life:

This is not death, it is something safer.  
The wingy myths won't tug at us any more.

In the final two sections of "Poem for a Birthday" the poet attempts to objectify her illness and to sum up her life

in this birthday month. The schizoid's inner world, fraught by nightmarish internal persecutors, is captured in "Witch Burning", the sixth section. The poet describes her efforts to control the bad objects within by turning an intellectual hatred upon herself; realising that she is both the witch and the wax doll, the persecutor and persecuted, she feels that "only the devil can eat the devil out". She perceives the futility of blaming the past or the death and inadequacies of parents. Yet she is caught in the schizoid double-bind: neither does she fully understand that her present feelings of life's futility and her longing to die do originate in this past; nor has she found possibilities for essential reparative ego growth in her present life. The only alternative seems to involve continuing her false, desperate efforts to fashion self-identity. We see now the first instance of the terrible anger so characteristic of Ariel, and here directed against this weak, recalcitrant self: "It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth".

"The Stones", the final poem in this series, was also the last poem Sylvia Plath wrote in America. It represents a sober return to reality and to sanity from the inner world peopled by the mad, nightmarish creations of "Witch Burning". It is also the courageous utterance by one who feels drained of any human response, indeed of life itself. The poet focuses on the suggestion above, of the failure of efforts to be reborn within life, of being allowed to regress under the care of at least one understanding person so that psychic healing and the growth of a real ego may begin.

Denied identity by the mother, the poet chose the womb-like cellar of her first suicide attempt, only to be removed to a mental hospital where smiling aliens 'do' things to her--such as electro-convulsive therapy--leaving the trouble within unmitigated by the experience:

The grafters are cheerful,  
 Heating the pincers, hoisting the delicate hammers.  
 A current agitates the wires  
 Volt upon volt. Catgut stitches my fissures.

The essential problem, the "mouth-hole" crying for love and confirmation of identity, meets only a "quarry of silences". Again and again throughout Sylvia Plath's art the persona returns to her perception of the origin of this inner weakness. With the death of the father, the full force of the mother's indifference is realized. A famine of love has blighted her existence:

...I entered  
 The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.  
 The mother of pestles diminished me.  
 I became a still pebble.

As an adult she has retained all the voracious oral need for food and affection of the young child. Her agony is that she cannot find fulfillment of this crying 'mouth-hole': "Drunk as a foetus/ I suck at the paps of darkness". Nor does the poet feel she can depend on love although it is essential to the reparative process, for its primary experience has been so scarred. In her schizoid perspective love can only be destructive: "Love is the uniform of my bald nurse../Love is the bone and sinew of my curse". The poem ends bleakly, the medical jauntiness of the final, ironic line accurately conveying the world's utterly indifferent response. Sylvia Plath, the survivor, could only endure a little longer:

"My mendings itch. There is nothing to do./I shall be as good as new".

The manifest unity and artistry of "Poem for a Birthday" sets it apart as a considerable achievement in The Colossus. The series is a marked advance over the academic remoteness of the earlier poems in its intense examination of the schizoid mental state. Sylvia Plath had rediscovered Roethke's poetry at an important stage in her poetic development and found in it, as she had also found in friendship with Lowell and Anne Sexton, kindred voices lending her courage to find her own. Although the poet always remained sensitive to the world of nature, the diffuse, external universe of the early poems is largely abandoned hereafter for the brooding concerns of a psyche tormented by a hatred of its own weakness.

## CHAPTER IV

### CROSSING THE WATER: THE TRANSITIONAL PHASE

The Colossus represents the culmination of the first phase of Sylvia Plath's artistic development; Ariel, her only other self-edited collection is clearly distinguished by a considerable advance in poetic stature. The Colossus had been long in gestation. Ready for publication in the summer of 1956<sup>1</sup> shortly after her marriage, it was finally published four years later. The volume was revised many times, Sylvia speaking with discouragement of "beginning to wither to one of my silent centers" as she repeatedly submitted the manuscript under ever-changing titles:

Nothing stinks like a pile of unpublished writing, which remark I guess shows I still don't have a pure motive (O it's-such-fun-I-just-can't-stop-who-cares-if-it's-published-or-read) about writing...I still want to see it finally ritualized in print.<sup>2</sup>

The Colossus was finally accepted by Heinemann at the end of January 1960 for fall publication. Thus Crossing the Water, published posthumously in 1971, represents a transitional phase from The Colossus to Ariel, from the final months of 1959 and the writing

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<sup>1</sup>Lois Ames, "Notes Toward a Biography", in The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 166.

<sup>2</sup>Quoted by Ames, op.cit., p. 168

of "Poem for a Birthday" until early 1962, for Winter Trees and Ariel are largely the achievement of her last year of life. During this period the Hugheses had returned to England (December, 1959), moved from London to their cottage in Devon (summer, 1960), and saw the birth of two children, Frieda (April 1, 1960) and Nicholas (January 17, 1962).

Many of the poems in Crossing the Water, reflecting the events of these years, were first published in magazines or in limited editions throughout 1961 and 1962. But as is also true of Winter Trees, they remained 'uncollected poems' in Sylvia Plath's mind; only three of them<sup>3</sup> were included in her selection of the Ariel poems. While containing a number of strong poems, this intermediary volume is uneven in quality, and lacks the unity of either The Colossus or Ariel. The poet herself found the life style she was leading with two very young children, housework and writing in shifts, frustrating and in the end not very productive: "a couple of poems I like a year looks like a lot when they come out, but in fact are points of satisfaction separated by large vacancies".<sup>4</sup> "Stillborn" points to the weakness of this transitional collection:

These poems do not live: it's a sad diagnosis.

But they are dead, and their mother near dead with  
distracted,  
And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.

Sylvia Plath's judgement of her work, even given her high standards of artistic excellence, was harsh. Ted Hughes has

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<sup>3</sup>"You're", "Tulips" and "Morning Song", cf. Hughes, "Notes on...Plath's Poems", p. 193.

<sup>4</sup>Quoted by Ames, "Notes Toward a Biography", p. 170.

written that when "she consolidated her hold on the second phase", two years after writing "Poem for a Birthday", "she dismissed everything prior to "The Stones" as Juvenilia, produced in the days before she became herself". This arrival at "her own centre of gravity", Hughes suggests, had largely to do with the birth of her first child, heralding fiercely creative powers which found their greatest expression after the birth of a son two years later. "The Stones", therefore, at least in Sylvia Plath's mind, marked a significant turning point. No longer were the usual labours over the Thesaurus necessary. In a note to the poem Hughes speaks of the powers, always stronger than she was, that compelled her to write so slowly but then "quite suddenly she found herself free to let herself drop, rather than inch over bridges of concepts".<sup>5</sup> "The Stones" centers on the conflict at the heart of Sylvia Plath's poetry hereafter. On the one hand there is what Richard Howard terms the 'lithic impulse',<sup>6</sup> the desire to escape the contingencies of life, a regressive state metaphorically described as an inert, unfeeling stone, "taciturn and separate...in a quarry of silences". On the other hand there remained the desire to live, and to testify in art to her inability to communicate with a world that ignored her particular schizoid vision. "She faced a task in herself", Hughes confirms "and her poetry is the record of her progress in the task".<sup>7</sup> Only

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<sup>5</sup>Hughes, "Notes on...Plath's Poems", p. 192.

<sup>6</sup>Richard Howard, "Sylvia Plath. 'And I Have No Face, I Have Wanted to Efface Myself...'", in The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 79.

<sup>7</sup>Hughes, op.cit. , p. 187.

in the poems written in the final days of life does she abandon all hope, welcoming death as the one absolute in a world of diminishing alternatives. Hence, as a transitional volume Crossing the Water elaborates upon the dichotomy noted in "The Stones", and marks the beginning of an increasingly personal record which culminated in Ariel, and in suicide.

At least two poems in Crossing the Water, "Private Ground" and "I am Vertical", pertain to the last group in the Colossus, originating from the holiday at Yaddo. Although published a year later than "The Manor Garden", "Private Ground" also explores the poet's reactions to the grounds at Yaddo. While the earlier poem focused on her melancholy sensitivity to the death of the year and to the wonder of her first pregnancy, the later one is much more introspective as the private estate becomes a metaphor for the poet's ensuing psychological regression. The descending bell jar consciousness is reflected in her vivid perception of the preparations for winter--these visual descriptions so characteristic of The Colossus--as the Greek statues are boarded up, the fishponds drained and all is packed away. The poet has a sense of being sealed off by a superhighway nearby in this progressively lifeless world where even "the day forgets itself". A schizoid awareness of the futility of any human gesture closes the poem. Though she collects the carp left to die in the drained pond, the lake

with its devouring maw to which she delivers them remains disturbingly ambivalent: "Morgue of old logs and old images, the lake/Opens and shuts, accepting them among its reflections".

In its preoccupation with death, "I am Vertical" closely resembles material in "Poem for a Birthday". The poet feels herself alienated from the natural universe, a metaphor in the poem for an unalterable separation from the parental love Sylvia Plath always craved. She imagines the roots of trees sucking up "minerals and motherly love", and beautiful flowers, as in "The Beekeeper's Daughter", gaining the "Ahs" of fatherly attention. The schizoid need to 'draw back inside' is imaged in the numb, identityless sleep which allows her to come closest to achieving a state of unity and 'ontological security' with her world. Nevertheless, it is an admission of failure to find relationship in the human dimension that makes death--and the possibility of a happier rebirth--so attractive: "And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:/Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me". The poem's quiet assertion of her longing to die both heralds the intensity of this decision in such later poems as "Lady Lazarus" and "Ariel", and at the same time effectively contrasts the pain and ferocity of the latter with its own lyrical beauty.

As in The Colossus, many of the poems in Crossing the Water reflect Sylvia Plath's great sensitivity to the natural world. Five of them are concerned with her reactions to specific places.

"Two Campers in Cloud Country" and "Sleep in the Mojave Desert" probably originated in the camping trip the Hugheses took in 1959 just prior to their visit at Yaddo, while "Wuthering Heights", "Finisterre" and "Parliament Hill Fields" pertain to the English landscape on their return. "Two Campers in Cloud Country" is concerned with the fleeing of a "polite" and stultifying Boston to a rugged wilderness--"the last frontier of the big, brash spirit"--but overpowering to a sense of human identity. Although attractive at first, the whole experience takes on menacing overtones far more disturbing than the ennui of Boston as the poet senses an insidious threat to self:

Around our tent the old simplicities sough  
Sleepily as Lethe, trying to get in.  
We'll wake blank-brained as water in the dawn.

We saw in The Colossus that the poet's consciousness of a disturbing menace lurking at the edge of the daylight world originated in her troubled schizoid self. Or as Richard Howard expresses it, "the spirit of place, for her, was her spirit in that place".<sup>8</sup> Hence, the incipient terror conceived in the natural landscape refers equally well to both the American and English environments. "Wuthering Heights" explores therefore the same schizoid fear of 'loss of inner contents' to the hostile elements as does "Two Campers in Cloud Country". The former is also something of a companion poem to the earlier "Hardcastle Crag". Both record the poet's intense reaction to the foreboding landscape of her husband's native West Yorkshire as it threatened to snuff

<sup>8</sup>Howard, "Sylvia Plath: 'And I Have No Face...'", p. 78.

out her "small heat" altogether. The personal dimension is emphasized in the poem, but unlike Emily Brontë who saw a fierce strength in this land, Sylvia Plath senses only the cold, inhuman dissolution of her weak self:

I can feel it (the wind) trying  
To funnel my heat away.  
If I pay the roots of the heather  
Too close attention, they will invite me  
To whiten my bones among them.

The ambivalence the schizoid individual hates characterizes these moors. "Tilted and disparate" they are "always unstable", offering neither warmth nor the possibility of relationship: "they only dissolve and dissolve/Like a series of promises, as I step forward". Even the grazing sheep who "know what they are" have a greater sense of personal identity than she, an experience that is "like being mailed into space,/A thin, silly message". The poet is expressing a state of frightening psychological isolation, in which other people are remembered by the muttering wind as the inanimate 'black stones' of "Hardcastle Crag". She feels herself being beaten to extinction as the poem closes, in lines that parallel the longing for death's unity in "I am Vertical": "The sky leans on me, me, the one upright/Among all horizontals". In these earlier poems Sylvia Plath still retains sufficient detachment to delight in certain aspects of her world, as she does here in describing the sheep, disguised as grandmothers, "All wig curls and yellow teeth/And hard, marbly baas".

In an effort to convey the increasing frailty and insubstantiality of a weak ego, the image of an inanimate paper

self fascinates Sylvia Plath from "Wuthering Heights" onwards. It occurs throughout Crossing the Water, most notably in the title poem in which she describes "two black, cut-paper people"; or as the "sheet of blank paper" in "A Life", the shadow of an identity the hospitalised woman drags behind her. The image gains in intensity and personal emphasis with the Ariel poems; the poet, following illness and despair describing herself in "Tulips" as "flat, ridiculous, a cut-paper shadow". It culminates perhaps in "Cut". Here the schizoid's desperate attempts to feel 'real' is expressed in her pleasure at having cut off the top of her thumb and then: "I have taken a pill to kill/The thin papery feeling".

The menace of the natural environment to a fragile sense of being is again the subject of "Finisterre". The poet's own insubstantial self finds a dramatic parallel in this ragged peninsula of land described as a giant's knarled hand, "cramped on nothing". As she watches the bottomless exploding sea beneath her, the glory of its past is lost in present despair: "Now it is only gloomy". Imagining the mists as composed of the hopeless souls of the dead she walks among them, but fails to retain a sense of personal identity: "they stuff my mouth with cotton".

The influence of Robert Lowell's "Our Lady of Walsingham", section six of his "Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket", can be seen in the description of "Our Lady of the Shipwrecked", in the third verse of "Finisterre".<sup>9</sup> But unlike Lowell's neutral divinity, Sylvia

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<sup>9</sup>Robert Lowell, "The Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket", Poems 1938-1949 (Faber, 1960), p. 18. See also E. Aird, Sylvia Plath (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), p. 42.

Plath's "Lady"--like the poet's father--is deaf to the prayers of her worshippers who believe in and depend on her, for "she is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea". Clearly, although the poem ends with a description of the vendors' stalls and trinket shells from the sea, akin to the frivolity of her mother's world as explored in "The Disquieting Muses", the poet's imagination has been captured by "the Bay of the Dead down there", her father's dark universe.

"Parliament Hill Fields", the last of those poems describing a particular setting in Crossing the Water, begins as a city scape although it is also quickly adumbrated as an innerscape. The poem was first published in August 1961, and appears to refer to the miscarriage the poet experienced the previous winter.<sup>10</sup> Suffering this loss, she feels herself ignored both by the natural and the human realms, in the latter instance by the "crocodile" of young girls opening to swallow her. More importantly, the schizoid fear of lack of identity has also been ignored: "Nobody can tell what I lack...I'm a stone, a stick". Her demands for relationship are met by "silence after silence". As in "Finis-terre" she is gagged in her efforts to communicate, the wind stopping her breath "like a bandage". The loss of the unborn child confirms her failure, and images cluster to convey a sense of infertility, of letting go: "Your cry fades like the cry of a gnat./I lose sight of you on your blind journey". Acknowledging that grief does fade although sorrow lingers, the poet remembers the nursery and her living daughter. But as she

<sup>10</sup>Aird, Sylvia Plath, p. 44.

turns to go in her own 'tale of old sorrow' beckons from the darkness:

The old dregs, the old difficulties take me to wife.  
Gulls stiffen to their chill vigil in the draughty half-light;  
I enter the lit house.

Three other poems in the volume are concerned with nature. These include "Blackberrying", "Crossing the Water" and "Pheasant". The first two extend the theme of nature as a disturbing menace to identity while the latter, exceptional for Sylvia Plath, is a joyous paeon.

The poet often contrasts the fecundity of nature with her own schizoid feelings of emptiness and sterility. Her mood is similar in its intensity to the anguish G. M. Hopkins expresses regarding his poetic abilities in a famous sonnet:

...birds build--but not I build; no, but strain,  
Time's eunuch, and not breed one work that wakes.  
Mine, O thou lord of life, send my roots rain.<sup>11</sup>

"Blackberrying" possesses this quality. A series of unspoken contrasts is implied between the abundant fertility of nature which takes on ominous Ionesco-like overtones, and the suggested assaults made on the poet's fragile sense of personal identity. The poem opens on a note of great stillness and unease: "Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries". The poet describes herself picking these colossal berries in a lane leading to the sea where "the only voice, protesting, protesting" is the noisy flock of black choughs overhead. An undefined sense of

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<sup>11</sup>G.M. Hopkins, "Thou art indeed just, Lord, if I contend", Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins, selected by W.H. Gardner (Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1953), p. 67.

urgency hurries her one more hook beyond the bush of flies gorged like lotus eaters, from the suffocating canopy of black-berry bushes to the openness of the sea--"the only thing to come" to. Yet her own strength of identity has been diminished even further in breaking from the "blood sisterhood" of the bushes to Vulcan's intractable presence, from silence to a furious, noisy nothingness:

...nothing but a great space  
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths  
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.

This same theme is continued in the title poem, one of the gloomiest in the volume as it speaks of two "cut-paper people" crossing a lake at night, their identities effaced by the foreboding "spirit of blackness" everywhere. By contrast, "Pheasant" is a happy exception to Sylvia Plath's disturbing nature poems as it expresses her pleasure taken in the simple beauty and presence of the bird. In this sense the poem is unlike the earlier "Black Rook in Rainy Weather", in which the rook acted as a catalyst for a discussion of the nature of poetic inspiration. The poet, in pleading for the bird's life in "Pheasant", joyously recognizes the essence of 'being' it possesses:

I am not mystical:it isn't  
As if I thought it had a spirit.  
It is simply in its element.

From "Poem for a Birthday" onwards, medical imagery associated with a frightening sense of loss of identity, illness and hospitals is a common element in Sylvia Plath's art, and notably so in these transitional poems. It is clearly evident in

"Parliament Hill Fields" discussed above: the settling gulls appear like an invalid's fluttering hands, the wind stops her breath "like a bandage", the moon's rictus appears "thin as the skin seaming a scar", and as the poem ends, gulls "stiffen" in the chilly night.

"The Surgeon at 2 A.M." is an obvious example of this preoccupation with medical imagery as the poet imagines a tired surgeon's thoughts. It is an artificial, hygienic world he functions in, yet he conceives of it in images drawn from the natural universe and which in turn diminish his own significance:

It is a garden I have to do with--tubers and fruits

The heart is a red-bell-bloom, in distress.

I am so small

In comparison to these organs!

I worm and hack in a purple wilderness.

Nevertheless, the impersonality of this world condemns the doctor's humanitarian interests. There is a horrifying sense of detachment in the description of the patient on the operating table: "As usual there is no face. A lump of Chinese white/With seven holes thumbed in...", as there is in the attitude that he has "perfected" the "statue" beneath his scalpel by cutting something away, a "pathological salami" he delights in preserving. Sylvia Plath remains ambivalent in her attitude as she suggests a comparison between the utter subjugation of self in her own unfulfilling relationship with her father, spoken of in "The Beekeeper's Daughter", and the doctor's omnipotence in the eyes of his dependent, vulnerable patients as he walks among them:

"I am the sun, in my white coat, / Grey faces, shuttered by drugs,  
follow me like flowers".

Loss of identity within a medical context is again the subject of "Face Lift". In this poem the image of the "gauze sarcophagi" of "The Surgeon at 2 A.M." converges more precisely into "mummy-cloths", and the suggestion that as the ancient Egyptians believed this embalming method would ensure new life in the future, so modern medical practices also fallaciously claim a kind of rebirth: 'You'll be as good as new!' "Face Lift" begins with a friend returning from a clinic, bandaged but happy with the success of cosmetic surgery. The poet is skeptical, remembering the frightening effect of anaesthesia at age nine, akin to later experiences in a mental hospital. In an effort to reassure, the friend innocently recounts a horrifying assault to her sense of being. She recalls the administering of anaesthetic by a "kind man" who fists her fingers:

He makes me feel something precious  
Is leaking from the finger-vents. At the count of two  
Darkness wipes me out like chalk on a blackboard...  
I don't know a thing.

For five days I lie in secret,  
Tapped like a cask, the years draining into my pillow.

Lacking a sense of identity associated with the face the persona saw daily in the mirror, she imagines it can be peeled away as easily as paper, that these healing stitches can reverse the process of growth. The friend actually believes "she's done for"-- a phrase echoed later in "Death and Co.", signifying Sylvia Plath's acknowledgement of the death of her own self--that the

old face and the old personality can be trapped "in some laboratory jar". Imagining herself reborn through surgery the persona can now engage in the wholly schizoid action of creating a new self: "Mother to myself, I wake swaddled in gauze,/Pink and smooth as a baby".

A more profound loss of identity within the depersonalised sphere of medicine is explored in "A Life". This poem may be divided into two parts, the world of sanity and health as opposed to the world of mental breakdown and hospitalisation. The poet admonishes those in the former to be aware of their oblivious, unconsciously identityless state, as their existence is little more than a parade of appearances and superficial conventions for, "Elsewhere the landscape is more frank./The light falls without letup, blindingly". In the poem's second section, suggesting Sylvia Plath's own mental-hospital experience, the life realized by an institutionalised woman has been stripped of identity, barren as the moon, "or a sheet of blank paper", following mental breakdown. Already dead in effect, "she lives quietly.../With no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle", an utterly one-dimensional existence from which all human emotions have been exorcised by the cold practicality of medical efficiency. Even so, advancing age and nightmare terrors remain to victimize a life whose only future is death itself.

These poems associating illness and the cold, impersonal medical arena foreshadow Sylvia Plath's angry response in Ariel, and above all in The Bell Jar, to those who smilingly professed

to help when she herself was overcome by a suicide attempt and mental breakdown at age nineteen. She discovered however that things were only 'done' to her without in any way engendering a sense of 'being', the real need. As the trouble within was ignored, so hope of mitigating it through relationship with the world was frustrated and eventually abandoned. Violent images cluster in Ariel: as the stitches and spare parts of "The Applicant"; as the deformity, horror and senselessness of ugly death in "Berck-Plage". The 'perfected statue' in "Edge" is a dark parallel to the doctor's statement in "The Surgeon at 2 A.M.": the terrible reality of the poet's decision to die an ironic condemnation of the depersonalised, fallible claims of medical practices.

Sylvia Plath also associates hospital imagery with fractured, troubled human relationships such as the schizoid individual invariably experiences. "In Plaster" exemplifies such, and was prompted by seeing a person next to her in an almost complete cast during one of the poet's own hospital stays. In imagining the nature of the relationship between the two she conceives of it in human, male/female terms, in such intimacy as to be a kind of marriage. The poem thus explores attitudes towards a marital relationship. At the same time it captures the 'amazing reversal of moral values' characteristic of the schizoid's false efforts to survive at all costs: the substitution of hate for love, since love is deemed too devouring and destructive to be endured. The male persona in the poem regards the cast as his feminine counterpart to whom he is unwillingly bound for

a time. He discovers the efficacy of love only to abuse their symbiotic relationship by his need to dominate it at the expense of the "slave mentality" of the other. Yet when this female other seeks to attain her own identity, he fears he will be devoured by this relationship just as he had hoped to absorb her. As the poem ends, survival at all costs is his sole concern: "I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her, / And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me."

This transitional volume marks Sylvia Plath's increasing concern with failure in human relationships. As she focuses more clearly on her own suffering the various strains of imagery begin to converge: of being irrevocably shut out to describe the profound alienation and sense of futility experienced; of blackness and stones to suggest the increasing repression of affect; of illness and amputation to give expression to the poverty of human responses. These elements combine in "Event", described in Chapter One. "How the elements solidify" it begins, as the poet attempts to convey a sense of the terrible isolation she is experiencing this night, cut off in her own suffering from the natural universe as she is from the human, from the child in the crib and the husband beside her: "One touch: it burns and sickens". It is her own disturbed psyche which barricades love out, while the internal persecutors, the "groove of old faults, deep and bitter", dismember the weak ego from within. The inner devastation is reflected in a frightening inability either to give or to receive love. As dawn breaks the poet acknowledges: "We touch like cripples." Yet even in extremity Sylvia Plath's

great sensitivity to language and to the world around her illuminates the despair, as does this phrase in the poem: "where apple bloom ices the night".

Most characteristic of Crossing the Water is "Apprehensions". This poem attempts to define a suffering schizoid state of mind in terms of four, coloured, prison-like walls--white, grey, red and black--colours which characterize the final poems. Here they represent an increasingly painful movement backward and inward from the world. The white wall represents the numbed, vegetating indifference of mere survival. As the regressive state ensues the grey wall of the mind becomes "clawed and bloody", suggesting attempts to ward off the internal persecutors. Steps spiralling into a well of sourness loom behind and herald the final plunge. The red wall of the third verse refers to the contractions of the heart and the automatic functioning of the lungs. Having crawled back inside from a life deemed unbearable, the poet is even more tormented by the terror of death: "Of being wheeled off under crosses and a rain of pietas". The black wall of the final verse represents this stark and absolute finality. There is no room for questioning or ambivalence here, a realisation the poet only expressed consistently in the poems written during the last few days of life. Clearly, "Apprehensions" foreshadows that suicidal fall into the red.../Eye, the cauldron of morning".

Finally, "Last Words" describes the kind of burial the poet wants: not the "plain box" of the modern service, but the sarco-

phagus of the Egyptian one, with all its associations of rebirth. Significantly, she wants this coffin decorated with symbols of power and identity: "With tigery stripes, and a face on it/Round as the moon, to stare up", such as she lacked in life itself that she may greet those who discover her in the future. The second verse explores the reason for her special concern with approaching death, and once again centres on the schizoid fear of loss of inner contents, of ultimate ego disintegration:

I do not trust the spirit. It escapes like steam  
 In dreams, through mouth-hole or eye-hole. I can't stop it.  
 One day it won't come back.

Unlike people however, material "things" in the outside world are not ambivalent, and possess for the poet the warmth and sympathy she failed to find in human relationships. She asks then that these real, domestic objects accompany her in death, that this pagan gesture of an individual's importance and identity in life may confer reality on her:

Let me have my copper cooking pots, let my rouge pots  
 Bloom about me like night flowers, with a good smell.

I shall hardly know myself.

Although this transitional collection is an uneven one, and despite Sylvia Plath's harsh judgement of this period, these poems 'do speak of her'. In their deeply introspective nature they represent an obvious advance over the world of The Colossus. The earlier, genuine interest in the natural universe has been limited in favour of its expression as a metaphor of the inner menace, while other poems point to the failure in human relationships that underlay the tragic sense of isolation she experienced.

With increasing clarity the poet seeks to convey the repressed material rising to consciousness, and to communicate the needs of her weak ego.

## CHAPTER V

### WINTER TREES

Sylvia Plath's fourth collection of poetry, Winter Trees, was published in 1971. It consists of two sections, the first of which is eighteen poems, written during the last nine months of her life. The second section is an extended dramatic piece, "Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices", and was written somewhat earlier than the lyrics, being pre-recorded for the BBC on August 2, 1962, for transmission on September 13, 1962.<sup>1</sup> For purposes of this developmental study it seems logical therefore to examine these two sections chronologically.

"Three Women" is Sylvia Plath's only poetic work written specifically for broadcasting. Its theme of pregnancy and child-birth in the form of dramatic monologues is an original one for a radio broadcast. It reflects too the development from The Colossus the poet spoke of in emphasizing that these new poems, coming directly from her own 'very serious, very personal emotional experiences', were now written to be read aloud. The autobiographical element is evident in the work but only in a generalised way. No doubt Sylvia Plath drew on her experiences of motherhood to create the figure of the Wife, while her own recent miscarriage

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<sup>1</sup>Aird, Sylvia Plath, p. 51.

would have engendered understanding of the Secretary's predicament. Moreover, as Eileen Aird has pointed out, the home of the Wife is a transparent description of the poet's own Devon home, and the University the Girl attends probably recalls the poet's two years at Cambridge.<sup>2</sup> However, as a sustained poetic expression it is not particularly successful.

The work is triadic in structure, describing three women who experience pregnancy, delivery and a return to daily life. They remain nameless, disembodied creations, voices over the crackling wire which do not discourse directly with one another, each describing her passion as an internal, self-contained monologue. A dual artistic purpose has been served: a particular, feminine experience has been universalised; while both the unrivalled joy as well as the alienation and isolation the poet herself felt in this creative process, is also explored. "Three Women" appears initially to be surprisingly conventional: a glorification of motherhood at the expense of other attainments in life. It is also a remarkable tribute for a schizoid individual such as Sylvia Plath, for whom the reality of children would tend to confirm the substantiality and worth of a mother who sincerely doubted these values in herself. We recall that the poet seemed liberated 'into her real self' with the birth of Frieda, while Nicholas heralded an exceptional creative outburst. Thus, Sylvia Plath brings to her creation of the Wife in this work a loving regard for maternal fulfillment. The Secretary and the Girl act as

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 51.

foils to this perfect state: the former cannot bring a child to term and following her miscarriage sadly retires to the routine of daily living, while the latter gives up her illegitimate daughter to return to university life.

The Wife as the central figure begins this dramatic work which opens in a maternity ward. With Copernican introspection she meditates on her pregnancy:

I am slow as the world, I am very patient,  
Turning through my time, the suns and stars  
Regarding me with attention.

So complete is her sense of unquestioned 'being', of being 'full' in a most original way, that even the mind may abjure its responsibility within this world of ordered, logical necessity: "I do not have to think, or even rehearse. What happens in me will happen without attention." Yet the Wife's self-sufficient absorption in pregnancy is soon revealed as a state of frightening isolation. Having previously abnegated her personality, she becomes "the centre of an atrocity" as labour begins, her very being undergoing a ritual death for the coming child envisioned as her new self. The opening image of the world is again used, this time to give expression to the terrible dissolution of self experienced as she is overwhelmed by the child's efforts to be born:

I am breaking apart like the world. There is this blackness,  
This ram of blackness. I fold my hands on a mountain.  
The air is thick. It is thick with this working.  
I am used. I am drummed into use.

At the birth of her "blue, furious boy" she gazes with wonder upon him and in lyrical, tender lines questions the paucity

of her previous existence. She determines to protect and shield him always. At the same time he is clearly the "hook" she hangs on, the restorer of her identity and solace in her life. Gone is the sense of self-security engendered by pregnancy and now, like the Secretary, she senses "the incalculable malice of the everyday". She wonders how long she may act as a buffer to her child when she herself is so profoundly vulnerable and he so tiny and defenceless:

How long can I be a wall, keeping the wind off?  
 How long can I be  
 Gentling the sun with the shade of my hand,  
 Intercepting the blue bolts of a cold moon?  
 The voices of loneliness, the voices of sorrow  
 Lap at my back ineluctably.  
 How shall I soften them, this little lullaby?

She is reassured though by a peaceful return home to normalcy, while her fears find expression in the relief that her perfect son has not been a thalidomide victim. However, the Wife's monologue ends on a rather banal note as she wills her son to be "common", presumably hoping thereby that he will escape the torments of the poet's own experience.

The Secretary regards her miscarriage as a reflection of a more general failure in her life. Unlike the Wife who fully accepts her pregnancy, who can 'be' for her child, the Secretary links her infertility with a life lived 'unnaturally', fraught by a desire to manipulate existence by mental processes. Her frequent miscarriages have engendered in her a schizoid sense of being devoured by external forces, and so she turns with vengeance upon the natural universe which she feels conspires against new life:

I lose life after life. The dark earth drinks them.

She is the vampire of us all. So she supports us,  
 Fattens us, is kind. Her mouth is red.  
 I know her. I know her intimately---  
 Old winter-face, old barren one, old time bomb.  
 Men have used her meanly. She will eat them.  
 Eat them, eat them, eat them in the end.

After the agony of her hospital experience she leaves, having lost both a child and a sense of her own identity. With lipstick she draws on a new mouth, a new mask to face the "incalculable malice" of the world. Protected by her cynicism she will survive as a "heroine of the peripheral", engaged in busy activity which ignores the inner sorrow:

I am myself again. There are no loose ends.  
 I am bled white as wax, I have no attachments.  
 I am flat and virginal, which means nothing has happened,  
 Nothing that cannot be erased, ripped up and scrapped,  
 begun again.

Nightmares now relieve the despair and the monologue ends on a note of optimism as she begins to hope again: "The city waits and aches. The little grasses/Crack through stone, and they are green with life".

Unlike the Wife and the Secretary who wanted their pregnancies, the Girl reiterates that she "wasn't ready". Nor could she deny the consequences of her actions as she perceives her pregnancy the result of "Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act", in ironic contrast to the Secretary's mode of existence. Surprised by life, the Girl finds the effects of love destructive, and wishes that she had "murdered this, that murders me". She gives up her "red, terrible girl" and is conscious of a hollowness within as she leaves the hospital:

...There is an emptiness.  
 I am so vulnerable suddenly,  
 I am a wound walking out of hospital.  
 I am a wound that they are letting go.  
 I leave my health behind. I leave someone  
 Who would adhere to me: I undo her fingers like  
 bandages: I go.

She returns to the university but the black gowns of graduation appear like funeral garb to her. Unlike the Secretary who sorrowed over her lack of attachments the Girl revels in her new freedom, though she too suffers the isolation conferred upon her by her experience: "I am solitary as grass. What is it I miss?"

There is a rich use of imagery in "Three Women". Eileen Aird has pointed out that a strong religious structure underpins the drama.<sup>3</sup> This imagery appears to be used only to give a more universal dimension to the work with the suggestion that child-bearing, in the individual woman's mind, rivals in importance the birth of Christ. As Aird suggests, neither any Christian nor philosophical conclusion appears to be the poet's intention. Instead, the significance of this religious imagery rests in its symbolic value, as does the image of the concentration camps in the later poems. However, neither of these images is used in its fullest sense: as there is no redemptive vision in the former, so there is little pity or compassion in the latter.

More important in "Three Women" are the images used to contrast the states of fertility and infertility. There is little doubt that the birth of her own children effected a great change in Sylvia Plath's perception of her world. Where previously she had used images drawn from the natural universe to convey most often a sense of its inherent malignancy, in this work she pays

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<sup>3</sup>Aird, Sylvia Plath, pp. 56-59.

tribute to a nature which bodies forth her conception of pregnancy and childbirth. She sees in the natural cycle an expression of the feminine principle in life, of growth and fertility, of a primary sense of 'being'. By contrast, infertility is associated with technology, with man-made death and destruction, with the masculine principle in life, with false intellectual 'doing' by those who cannot 'be'.

Plant imagery, and especially that of trees and flowers, is most often associated with fertility. It distinguishes the Wife's speeches as she happily accepts her pregnancy and her child, unlike the Secretary whose history of miscarriages breaks this cycle, and the Girl for whom fertility is a disgrace to be rejected. As the poem begins, the Wife expresses the wholly natural experience of her pregnancy: "Leaves and petals attend me", an image which is elaborated upon in the moments of labour:

I am calm. I am calm. It is the calm before something awful:  
The yellow minute before the wind walks, when the leaves  
Turn up their hands, their pallors.

She describes her old self as a brown seed about to break as the new self, her child, flowers forth. Hence the final, painful moments of labour are expressed in images of destruction: "The trees wither in the street, the rain is corrosive". In one of those startling Plathian images associated with blood that embellish these last poems, she describes the placenta: "a red lotus opens in its bowl of blood". Floral imagery also evokes all the precious wonder and frailty of the new-born infant: "His lids are like the lilac-flower/And soft as a moth, his breath". When first seen in the hospital nursery he turns sunward to his mother, "like a little,

blind, bright plant". The Wife's fears for her child and desires to shield him are expressed in terms of the harsher natural elements, but as she seeks reassurance in normality the tender beauty of the world is again evoked through floral imagery in a memorable way: "Dawn flowers in the great elm outside the house".

Far fewer plant images are affiliated with the Secretary and always, with a single, final exception, as emblems of death and sterility. With the beginning of her miscarriage she senses "death in the bare trees", and becomes at the moment of parturition, "a garden of black and red agonies". Her bereavement is described in the cold, sterile images of winter, and she notices as she leaves the hospital that "these little black twigs do not think to bud". However, her return to daily life and the coming of spring allows for an emotional healing and the birth of tentative hope: "The little grasses/Crack through stone, and they are green with life".

The few vegetative images pertaining to the Girl emphasize her solitary and defenceless state. She remembers that when her pregnancy was confirmed, "The willows were chilling." As she makes the decision to abandon her child, the hospital flowers, foreshadowing a later poem, "Tulips", become a metaphor for both her own great vulnerability and that of her daughter:

The flowers in this room are red and tropical.  
 They have lived behind glass all their lives, they have  
     been cared for tenderly.  
 Now they face a winter of white sheets, white faces.

She returns to the university, but the sound of a bird crying with sorrow in its voice reminds her of her loss and her great loneliness: "I am solitary as grass."

Whereas fertility is connected with images from the natural world, infertility is clearly related to the masculine principle and creativity in its most destructive forms. The Secretary's opening stanza as her miscarriage begins establishes this opposition:

I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were  
so flat!  
There was something about them like cardboard, and now I  
had caught it,  
That flat, flat flatness from which ideas, destructions,  
Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed,  
Endlessly proceed--and the cold angles, the abstractions.

There is also the rather commonplace strain throughout "Three Women" that fulfillment does not come to those who think too hard. More accurately perhaps, Sylvia Plath is sensitive to her own experiences of childbearing, and mindful of the extent to which they contrasted so greatly with her own schizoid tendency to intellectualisation. She was also very conscious of the emphasis placed on what Winnicott terms 'false male doing' in our culture, and the hatred of feminine qualities and a sense of 'being' in our lives. It is the natural 'true self' the poet wishes to recognize in this work, as opposed to the 'false self' existence she and many in the world around her were largely engaged in. Hence, through the dichotomous figures of the Wife and the Secretary, the ordered world of nature with its cycles of birth and death is effectively contrasted to the technological, celluloid

life in which man strives to dominate over these natural cycles. Elaborating on the ills of a man-made world, the Girl focuses on the Secretary's mention of a white chamber as she realises her own fears of the delivery room: "I have seen the white clean chamber with its instruments./It is a place of shrieks. It is not happy." The Girl functions as an intermediary creation in this opposition of fertility and infertility, since she experiences in her unwanted pregnancy both the maternal feelings of the Wife and the sorrow and loss of the Secretary.

"Three Women" represents a considerable advance over the earlier poetry, both in dramatic form and in its emphasis on specifically feminine experiences. The schizoid element emerges with something of Edvard Munch's 'The Cry' about it. The sense of personal alienation from the world and human relationships is unmistakable. Above all the work propounds the fallacy that the child confers identity on a mother who lacks this sense of her own reality. Her fulfillment comes in pregnancy, while the actual responsibilities of motherhood are conceived as nebulous and frightening. Descriptions of the horrors of the delivery room parallel similar utterances in The Bell Jar, and emphasize the accelerating violence in Sylvia Plath's view of the world.

The shorter eighteen poems of Winter Trees were, like the Ariel poems, written in the last nine months of Sylvia Plath's life. In a brief introduction to the volume, Ted Hughes describes

them as coming out of the same batch from which Ariel was "more or less arbitrarily" chosen. While such poems as "Child", "The Rabbit Catcher" and "For a Fatherless Son" rival anything in Ariel, the volume as a whole is uneven.

This final, 'marvellous year' saw an astonishing burst of creativity. Many of these last poems were written with great rapidity and intensity, sometimes two or three on the same day, and many in the same familial surroundings. The poems are increasingly personal in focus, often centering on domestic concerns, yet ultimately achieving the wider interest of poetry which galvanizes the nerve ends because of the raw, schizoid source from which it came. Certain images begin to recur in Winter Trees with an insistence that heralds the obsessive ferocity of Ariel. Her friends were correct in sensing danger in this artistic expression which seemed at the same time almost to consume the poet herself. "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it", Sylvia Plath described it later.

Three of the most beautiful and lyrical poems in Winter Trees are about the poet's children. "Child", "For a Fatherless Son", and "By Candlelight" form a group with five of the Ariel poems: "Morning Song", "The Night Dances", "Nick and the Candlestick", "You're " and "Balloons". They are all expressions of Sylvia Plath's love for her children, and a desire to protect and shield them from the despair and alienation she herself experienced as an adult. Given her own schizoid longing to retreat to the pristine happiness of childhood, she looks with wonder

upon its peaceful, untainted innocence. "Child" explores the sharp contrast between the innate clarity of the child, and her own dark and unhappy state:

Pool in which images  
Should be grand and classical

Not this troublous  
Wringing of hands, this dark  
Ceiling without a star.

While her world is quickly constricting, her children's world on the other hand is imagined as a bright pool of possibilities. Moreover, their utterly trusting eyes are quite unaware of their mother's troubled inner self. Sylvia Plath's imminent separation from Ted Hughes before Christmas, 1962, is suggested in "For a Fatherless Son". As the poet tries to imagine her son's reaction to this leave-taking, she marvels at his innocence to these happenings:

But right now you are dumb.  
And I love your stupidity,  
The blind mirror of it. I look in  
And find no face but my own, and you think that's funny.  
It is good for me

The two preceding poems reveal Sylvia Plath's increasing preoccupation with mirror imagery as symbols of 'being'. Her art is fecund with the meaning D.W. Winnicott has associated with mirrors in "The Mirror Role of the Mother and Family", in which he points out how the child's identity is confirmed by his reflection in the eyes of others as well as, of course, in the actual mirrors that exist in the house. Thus the mirror's calm face is a metaphor for life in Sylvia Plath's poetry. It is associated

most often with young children as in "Child", "For a Fatherless Son", or in "Brasilia": "O you (...) leave/This one/Mirror safe". By contrast, the shattered mirror is a symbol for death and often refers to her own suicidal wishes. "Last Words" in Crossing the Water emphasizes this, the poet speaking of her life's mirror as clouding over, soon to reflect "nothing at all". "Thalidomide" speaks of another kind of awful death:

The glass cracks across,  
The image

Flees and aborts like dropped mercury.

Poems written in the final days of life conclude the image. "The mirrors are sheeted" in "Contusion", and the process is completed in "Words", the last poem Sylvia Plath wrote, and for artistic reasons alone one of the most poignant. She felt her life could not continue, though

The sap  
Wells like tears, like the  
Water striving  
To re-establish its mirror  
Over the rock

That drops and turns,  
A white skull,  
Eaten by weedy greens.

For:

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

"By Candlelight", a third poem about the poet's children and a companion lyric to "Nick and the Candlestick", was probably written in the last three months of her life. The strong descriptive powers of The Colossus have been retained to shape with words a

painter's country:

This is winter, this is night, small love--  
 A sort of black horsehair,  
 A rough, dumb country stuff  
 Steeled with the sheen  
 Of what green stars can make it to our gate.

Typical now in the poetry is that this graphic scene of the mother holding her child and peering into the night should become a metaphor for the poet's own schizoid sense of lack of reality, as opposed to the natural reality of the child and the menacing, surrounding environment. She is delighted therefore that the mere lighting of the candle confers identity on her baby: "One match scratch makes you real." Not so with the poet herself who feels shut out from the world of light and beginning to suffocate under the descending bell-jar consciousness: "The sack of black! It is everywhere, tight, tight!" These poems give evidence of Sylvia Plath's great tenderness for her children. At the same time there is the awareness of being profoundly distanced from them, sealed off from relationship in the world by the ensuing regressive powers. "The Other" expresses this frightening schizoid state: "Cold glass, how you insert yourself.../ Between myself and myself!"

Since the source of one's mirror image is in relationship with others, as Sylvia Plath became increasingly isolated from her world so her 'compulsive need to understand' and to have a weak identity confirmed were vitiated. Moreover, we have seen that what Winnicott terms 'female element being', the I-Thou relationship, the realm of shared being and creative reflection, is feared by the schizoid individual who, in turning from the

world seeks refuge in 'false male doing' and 'bustling' self-activity. Hounded by an unsatisfied hunger to be, the schizoid individual adamantly denies human needs and human fallibility, adhering fully to the 'taboo on weakness', that 'to be Big and Bad is at least to be Someone'. Such an individual is prone to the 'three great tragedies' described by Fairbairn. We have examined Sylvia Plath's expressions of fear in the earlier poetry that her love was destructive. The death of her father, above all, seemed to confirm this. But in poems written in the last year of life, when fulfillment through love seemed hopelessly barred, she gives way to a compulsion to hate and be hated, though all the time clearly longing to love and be loved. Fairbairn writes of the 'amazing reversal of moral values' to which the schizoid individual is prone, when hating becomes both a joy and an end in itself, since in the schizoid's false reasoning it is better to destroy by hate than to destroy by love. In some of the late poems Sylvia Plath gives herself over to the joys of hating, as a fantastic amount of anger came to be directed outward at the world.

One of the most obvious examples in Winter Trees is "Stopped Dead". It expresses quite a different attitude towards babies than in the poems examined above. The poem describes a car with its two corrupted occupants stopped at a lookout point somewhere in the Pyrenees facing Spain, at which point the female passenger vents her fury at the world:

It's violent. We're here on a visit,  
 With a goddam baby screaming off somewhere.  
 There's always a bloody baby in the air.  
 I'd call it a sunset, but  
 Whoever heard a sunset yowl like that?

This extreme dislike of demanding children finds its parallel in The Bell Jar, in Esther's uncompromising assertions that she hated babies and, we recall, also in "Ocean 1212-W", in young Sylvia's attitude to the news of the imminent birth of her brother. To the schizoid individual who himself craves love and confirmation of identity from others, these same demands from a helpless, often stinking child, must appear at times overwhelming.

"Lesbos", "Purdah" and "Gigolo" are all expressions of the poet's fierce anger to the point of hatred at certain aspects of the world. They can also be described as 'feminist' poems. It is to Sylvia Plath's credit that she railed against the imposition of servitude: domestic, sexual and otherwise, that female relationships with men often consist in. It is false, however, to look upon the poet and her art as the martyred embodiment of the talented, middle-class, married housewife, incarcerated in the kitchen with two children and forced to stare at her university degree framed over the kitchen sink. To stereotype Sylvia Plath is clearly to misread her writings and to overlook the real forces of her creative powers. Household duties were shared, while Sylvia took the morning shift at writing, Ted the afternoon. During her last year of life, when she was too tired at night to cope with anything but 'music and brandy and water', she got up at 5 a.m. to work on Ariel. Yet her poetry flourished, and

drew its inspiration largely from domestic and personal sources. The kind of liberation Sylvia Plath sought did not consist in being relieved of the evening's dishes but rather to be freed of a terrible sense of non-being, of not being whole in some essential way. She died, not for lack of a specifically feminine identity, but because she felt she had no identity. Moreover, she died hoping to be reborn, believing that psychic regeneration leading to a real self existed somewhere on the other side.

"Lesbos" is important then for more than its angry (and all too necessary) retort to Hollywood's plastic dream-vision of domestic marital bliss:

Visiousness in the kitchen!  
The potatoes hiss.  
It is all Hollywood, windowless...

The poet spits out terse, colloquial lines with an acrid bite and honesty--"Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap"--rare concerns in poetry except in that written recently by women. But the poem is also about failures in relationship--"Even in your Zen heaven we shan't meet"--and that great tragedy of the schizoid individual, the consecration in the well-spring of hatred when love no longer seems possible, neither given nor received:

Now I am silent, hate  
Up to my neck,  
Thick, thick.

"Purdah" is a powerful expression of rage at the custom of isolating women from the world as mere sexual chattels of men. Mirror imagery is significant in conveying the quality of life experienced by one whose identity depends on reflecting the wishes

of another. The poem ends in a crescendo of crazed emotion as the persona vows retribution. Shattering her porcelain image and suggesting the violence of Judith, Charlotte Corday or Clytemnestra, she becomes a raging murderess:

The lioness,  
The shriek in the bath,  
The cloak of holes.

This quality of incipient, demonic violence directed against men looks forward to the devouring phoenix/harpy figure Sylvia Plath becomes in one of her best known and most hateful poems, "Lady Lazarus":

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

Increasingly so, the poems of the last nine months become powerful, dramatic expressions of outrage, as Sylvia Plath records the task she faced in herself in attempting to communicate the needs of a weak ego. We are left with the gift of her poetry: a rare, impassioned record of failure, of her very inability to communicate, in time with anyone; and of her unsuccessful attempts to find avenues of rebirth in life itself.

In "The Courage of Shutting Up", the violence and brutality the poet saw in the external universe becomes a metaphor to describe its counterpart within. Images which cluster throughout these last poems--armaments, surgeons, tattooing, mirrors, politics, the ills of being female--give concrete form to internal despair. The poem is a graphic example of what Fairbairn has discerned as the tendency of the schizoid individual to maintain the inner

world as a closed system. Instead of expressing rage directly at her environment--a healthier reaction--the persona chooses silence instead. Moreover, she finds courage in this. Although the brain records unrelieved grievances with the insistence of a metronome, the scarline of the mouth refuses utterance. The tongue has also retired from its efforts to communicate, and takes its place like some stuffed trophy in the library of the schizoid's intellectual retreat. Only the eyes, mirrors of the soul, allow access to the torture within. But even they, like the carved blank gaze of statuary, are dead to the joys of existence:

They may be white and shy, they are no stool pigeons,  
 Their death rays folded like flags  
 Of a country no longer heard of,  
 An obstinate independency  
 Insolvent among the mountains.

In advocating fantastic control, both intellectual and emotional, the poem recalls another famous statement of Sylvia Plath's:

"I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying--like madness, being tortured...with an informed and intelligent mind."<sup>4</sup> This is the false-self behaviour of the schizoid individual who, in over-emphasizing the mind and inner reality, vigorously denies human needs; and who in supporting the 'taboo on weakness' is all too prone to the joys of hating when he cannot fulfill his needs through love.

This theme is elaborated in "The Rabbit Catcher" which captures brilliantly a sense of the diminishing alternatives

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<sup>4</sup>Quoted by Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 64.

Sylvia Plath was left with in life. The poem begins without ambivalence. The violence experienced as the wind's fury snatches away her voice and the sea blinds her with its reflections is as much internal as externally occasioned: "It was a place of force--/The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair". When the schizoid's inner world is maintained as a closed system, the internal persecutors may become so much a part of existence that they may come to be loved as life itself. The poet appears to take just this kind of masochistic joy in her suffering:

I tasted the malignity of the gorse,  
 Its black spikes,  
 The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers,  
 They had an efficiency, a great beauty,  
 And were extravagant, like torture.

The fury of wind, sea, gorse has engendered a growing consciousness of the hollow center of pain within and the sense, increasingly so throughout these last poems, of being drawn inexorably to a fixed point of extinction: "There was only one place to get to". This mood foreshadows the later feeling of hopeless despair in "The Moon and the Yew Tree": "I simply cannot see where there is to get to". The poet compares herself to a hunted rabbit, outmanoeuvred at every turn by external, utterly uncontrollable forces, to convey the frantic desperation experienced when threatened by imminent ego dissolution. Though relationship with another would mitigate the terror, this avenue is no longer possible since love itself appears only brutally destructive:

And we, too, had a relationship--  
 Tight wires between us,  
 Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring  
 Sliding shut on some quick thing,  
 The constriction killing me also.

The intensely personal themes of violence and outrage so characteristic of this volume find their most universal utterance in "Mary's Song", one of the best known poems in the collection. Like "Lesbos", "Mary's Song" opens in the dominion of the kitchen. A lament rather than a song, the poem dissolves with great economy from one reflection to the next as the archetypal, suffering Mary beholds her son whose self-immolation serves only to unleash the repeated 'holocausts' of religious persecutions, from the Inquisition and pogroms to the concentration camps of Germany and Poland. The poem attempts to give an historical expression to Sylvia Plath's conviction in the malignancy of a world that "will kill and eat". It reveals too her growing preoccupation with concentration camps as emblems of her own suffering, and thus looks forward to the 'political' poems in Ariel -- "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy", "Fever 103°"-- and is included with them in the American edition of Ariel. Yet "Mary's Song" affords a sharp contrast to these final poems. It retains an honesty and haunting lyricism in the poet's attitude towards the camps not to be found later: "Grey birds obsess my heart/Mouth-ash, ash of eye." The poem also emphasizes the great development in artistic approach from The Colossus. Whereas the poet's imagination had focused on and remained largely in the external environment in this first volume, the reverse is true in Winter Trees and Ariel. In the

last poems universal themes and the natural environment are laid claim to by the suffering inner world as metaphors to express the rising tide of alienation and despair, waters in which Sylvia Plath was soon to die.

## CHAPTER VI

### ARIEL

Ariel, the volume on which Sylvia Plath's recognition as a poet largely rests, was published in 1965, two years after her death. Unlike The Colossus which represented the work of several years, most of the poems in Ariel were written in the last four months of the poet's life. In his chronological ordering of the poems, Ted Hughes<sup>1</sup> has noted that Sylvia Plath selected only three poems for this collection from the two years between 1960 and 1962, the period of Crossing the Water. "Tulips", written in March 1961 and recalling the poet's appendectomy, is one of these. Hughes remarks that the usual lucubrations over the Thesaurus were abandoned for this poem, and like those that were to follow was written with all the speed of some distressful letter. "Morning Song", about her daughter Frieda, also originates from this time, while "Little Fugue", inspired by Beethoven's Grosse Fugue, was written later in the year. "Elm", concerning a large tree in their garden in Devon dates from April 1962; it begins 'the final phase'. "The Moon and the Yew Tree" came soon after and was written at Ted's suggestion, when inspired by the visual effect of the moon above a yew tree in a graveyard nearby.

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<sup>1</sup>Hughes, op.cit., pp. 193-195.

"The Rival" was written sometime during the spring or early summer of 1962, "Berck-Plage" soon following in July 1962: it records a vacation the Hugheses spent in France the previous June and the death of a neighbour almost exactly a year later. October and November of 1962 were extremely creative months, and include all those poems in Ariel up to the end of the Bee sequence, though they were among the first to be written. The companion poems, "The Munich Mannequins" and "Totem", were written over two days in mid-January 1963, and were soon followed by "Paralytic". "Balloons", "Contusion", "Kindness", "Edge" and "Words" represent the work of the poet's last week of life.

Ariel most clearly evidences Sylvia Plath's schizoid perception of her world. In this volume the internal despair becomes paramount and peace is envisioned only in imminent suicide. Since life appeared to offer no avenues of rebirth, no opportunities for a weak ego threatened with dissolution to regress and reparative forces come to bear, death at least offered escape from the horror of existence. Whereas life is conceived as bleak and grotesque, "the black car of Lethe", and mankind its victimized, mutilated passengers; death is the destination, possessing all the beautiful nobility of classical Greek statuary, or envisioned "pure as a baby". When loving relationships in the world became impossible Sylvia Plath gave herself over to death-circuit modes of thinking, to a radical inversion of moral values in a futile attempt to sustain a weak identity. In these desperate efforts to feel 'real' she sought to endorse and justify

in some of her poems a purity of hatred and excoriating violence which inevitably became self-directed. Finally, there remained neither hope nor any way out of this libidinal attachment to self-immolation, that "blackout of knives" wherein she existed, except through death.

There is little hope in the world of Ariel . It is largely a domestic universe, the poet describing the marital relationship, her children, beekeeping experiences, her response to certain landscape scenes beyond the house. Yet when all is shot through with the violence of her longing to die, little remains of the comforting security of familial surroundings. Marriage itself is rejected with the bitter cynicism of "The Couriers": "A ring of gold with the sun in it?/Lies. Lies and a grief"; or the sardonic irony of "The Applicant", in which tenderness and love are scorned as hollow chimera:

A living doll, everywhere you look.  
It can sew, it can cook,  
It can talk, talk, talk.

Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

No longer do the children of Winter Trees offer a kind of talisman against the malignant world in these last poems. "Morning Song", describing the birth of the poet's baby daughter, serves to emphasize the profound alienation she experienced in marriage, and by extension, in relationship with the world:

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue.  
In a drafty museum, your nakedness  
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

Sylvia Plath sensed the tragedy of her terrible inability to receive love as she describes the irretrievable loss of her son's innocent, dancing joy in "The Night Dances".

Such coldness, forgetfulness.  
So your gestures flake off--

Warm and human, then their pink light  
Bleeding and peeling

Through the black amnesias of heaven.

At least she did not carry out the proposition suggested in "Edge", to fold these petal children to her and take them with her into death. The emotions are seared in Ariel. The corrosive violence and hatred in this world of maimed human relationships is as much directed against others, and notably against the husband and father figures, as against the poet's own self. Eventually, even art could no longer control and manipulate the maddened inner life, no longer was it a charm against the horrors of her own reality: "The blood jet is poetry,/There is no stopping it."

"Tulips", one of the earliest poems Sylvia Plath selected for Ariel "was the first sign", Ted Hughes writes, "of what was on its way."<sup>2</sup> Stylistically it differs from many of the other poems in the collection with its longer lines and stanzas, while thematically it relates to earlier poems in its preoccupation with the loss of identity experienced in a hospital environment, and with the image of flowers as threatening and devouring. But in the poet's clearly stated desire to be rid of all "loving associations", she gives expression to her suffering schizoid self

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<sup>2</sup>Hughes, "Notes on...Plath's Poems", p. 193.

with a new honesty and intensity.

Meditating on her hospital experience in its antiseptic, cadaverous stillness, the persona revels in this opportunity to be freed of all responsibilities. She gladly relinquishes her sense of personal identity to become a "body" only:

I am nobody;...

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

This is an expression of the schizoid individual's desire to fade into oblivion, to retire to a numbed, passive state that reparative processes might begin. As the persona readily accepts her own depersonalisation, so the presence of others becomes meaningless to her and she regards the white-capped nurses as impersonal as gulls flying inland. The stone imagery of The Colossus finds expression here as she equates herself to an inanimate pebble which does not want to be bothered by the "smiling hooks" of husband and child. She feels she possesses all the purity of a nun, in the sense of both isolation from and denial of human experience. Clearly, however, it is not in fact death that she wants, but rather to be freed from life's incessant demands. This is the 'life-tiredness' Guntrip describes, a 'needing to stop living but not wishing to die':

To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.  
How free it is, you have no idea how free---  
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,  
And it asks nothing...  
It is what the dead close on, finally....

Recalled to this world and to health by a bouquet of brilliant tulips in the hospital room, she finds their intense color painful and disturbing. Elsewhere in this volume, red, symbol

of blood and of life, is inimical in the increasingly black and white inner landscape. These tulips become a metaphor for all that the weakened schizoid individual finds unbearable in human relationships. Their vivid affirmation of life hurts her, while in breathing they seem to devour her oxygen. She feels herself trapped in mid view between the sun and these flowers, forced to recognize a debased opinion of herself, but above all called upon to commit herself to continued experience. She cannot meet this demand and desires only to be released to death:

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes  
 Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.  
 The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,  
 And comes from a country far away as health.

"Little Fugue", written a few months after "Tulips", also catalogues Sylvia Plath's enveloping schizoid despair. "I like black statements", she affirms as the poem describes the maimed, alienated experience of deficient human relationships, in which "the deaf and dumb/Signal the blind, and are ignored." The pervasive image of the yew tree, often planted in graveyards and hence associated with death, becomes a symbol of the poet's own suicidal desires to end a bleak, mechanical existence:

Death opened, like a black tree, blackly.

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

Tree imagery bodies forth the poet's experience of life as an agonized cry of despair in the two powerful lyrics, "Elm" and "The Moon and the Yew Tree". In "Elm", which Ted Hughes

describes as beginning 'the final phase', Sylvia Plath looks within her disturbed psyche to that "bottom" which is no longer feared, and describes the violence to the self of imminent ego dissolution. The outer world has been rejected as hope of attaining love through relationship is abandoned as chimerical:

Love is a shadow.  
How you lie and cry after it  
Listen: these are its hooves: it has gone off, like a horse.

Yet the intense inner world to which the schizoid individual may be forced to regress is even more frightening and violent than his experience of the external universe. In powerful lines the poet likens her internal persecutors, "the isolate, slow faults/ That kill, that kill, that kill," to corrosive poisons, to "the atrocity of sunsets", to explosion of the self into fragments brutalized by the wind, to being scorched and dragged by the moon. Her worst Gothic dreams have become a horrifying reality:

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.

As in "Elm", Sylvia Plath's natural ambience lent inspiration to "The Moon and the Yew Tree", an intensely introspective poem which conveys the schizoid depths of one in "complete despair". The persona compares the view of the moon over a yew tree in a neighbouring graveyard to her own efforts to control life by barren intellectual precepts: "This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary./ The trees of the mind are black." But the

mind has failed to assure direction or meaning in her life:

"I simply cannot see where there is to get to." The poet identifies herself with the moon, a symbol throughout this collection of unrelieved despair, and hence she cannot participate in the affirmation of resurrection the church bells ring out each Sunday. Neither the feminine moon nor religion offers Sylvia Plath the maternal love and sense of identity she always craved:

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.  
The blue garments unloose small bats and owls.  
How I would like to believe in tenderness---

Only black, demonic forces now have significance for her as she glimpses her own imminent death in the stark evening scene: "And the message of the yew tree is blackness--blackness and silence."

The sense of journeying towards an inexorable destination is also the theme of "Getting There", one of the most tormented poems in the volume. All the pain and suffering in the poet's experience of life is described through the graphic metaphor of a war train carrying badly wounded soldiers who survive the while despite their agony:

It is a trainstop, the nurses  
Undergoing the faucet water, its veils, veils in a nunnery,  
Touching their wounded,  
The men the blood still pumps forward,  
Legs, arms piled outside  
The tent of unending cries---  
A hospital of dolls.

Only death offers escape from these horrors of existence. It is clearly---and disturbingly---conceived as a schizoid metamorphosis into the peace and purity of rebirth:

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 conclusion of "A Birthday Present" similarly emphasizes the poet's growing belief in death as a way to escape a life she found unendurable. So great was the need to begin again as a child, to possess the integrated center that could sustain her, that she was quite willing to accept the violence of self-immolation:

And the knife not carve, but enter

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

What is disturbing from the reader's perspective is that such a psychotic viewpoint is argued so convincingly in poems of great talent and power. It is all too easy, as in the instance of certain advocates of the modern avant-garde, to be persuaded "almost to cooperate with the destructive principle--indeed, to love the principle as life itself".<sup>3</sup> This issue will be examined more fully in a later discussion of the volume's 'political' poems.

Ariel is characterized throughout by the translation of events in the external world into metaphors for the troubled inner experience. In "The Birthday Present", the physical death desired by the persona is the external counterpart to "the cold dead centre", the hollow sense of non-being of the schizoid individual: like the "stillness" held by her bones in "Sheep in Fog", or the "stasis in darkness" of "Ariel". "Cut" emphasizes the extent to which the schizoid personality simply does not feel

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<sup>3</sup>A. R. Jones, "On 'Daddy'", p. 236.

'real'. The poet describes the perverse pleasure taken in having deeply cut her thumb while peeling an onion---and then the pill to kill "The thin/Papery feeling." As the need to feel real became more desperate, so violence committed against the self is deemed a liberating experience. In "Ariel", one of the volume's most memorable poems, the exhilarating experience of riding her horse soon becomes the freedom to unpeel "Dead hands, dead stringencies" before the violence of suicide. The poet's own early morning death is foreshadowed in beautiful, galvanic images:

And I  
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies  
Suicidal, at one with the drive  
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

The Bee sequence, written in the fall of 1962, most clearly reveals the poet's concern throughout Ariel to give expression to her intense inner world by adumbrating domestic, personal experiences. "The Bee Meeting", the most significant of these poems, recounts a gathering with Devon village friends and a bee agent to remove the virgin bees from their queen, for there will be no killing this year. This event becomes a metaphor for the poet's great isolation and vulnerability. The villagers she meets appear strange and impersonal in their protective garb and veils while she feels defenceless, both physically and emotionally, in her sleeveless summer dress: "I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?" When given a smock herself she hopes the

bees will not smell her fear. The company then moves through a beanfield, observed as a sea of scarlet flowers menacing as blood-clots, to the location of the hives. As the persona dons a hat and veil the magical rite of initiation begins: "they are making me one of them." Images of illness and operation, so characteristic of these last poems, converge in this nightmare experience, though the terror that roots her is a state of mind: "I could not run without having to run forever." She stands aside, fearful of hostility and wishing to remain anonymous as "a personage in a hedgerow" as the hive is opened and the villagers search for the queen bee. At the same time she sympathizes and clearly identifies with this old bee who must live another year before the "bride flight,/The upflight of the murderess into a heaven that loves her." The virgin bees are moved by the villagers before the duel of death they would inevitably win but the old queen, ungrateful for their meddling, remains hidden away. As the villagers begin to remove their protective clothing the poet experiences the breaking of the magical spell. Yet so closely has this event paralleled her own narrow escape from death that she is overcome with its personal significance:

I am exhausted, I am exhausted---  
 Pillar of white in a blackout of knives.  
 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.

Most of the poems in Ariel are private, introspective statements of suffering. However, that brimful autumn of 1962 also saw

the mingling of private and public concerns in "Fever 103°", "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy", three of Sylvia Plath's most famous and 'political' poems. There are those who, noting her extension beyond the personal through such modern manifestations of brutality in the historical images of the concentration camps, Fascism, and the Hiroshima bombing, claim these poems define "the age as schizophrenic, torn between brutality and a love which in the end can only manifest itself, today, in images of violence."<sup>4</sup> Certain exponents of the modern avant-garde have annexed these poems as examples of the poet's best work, as instances of the 'fine frenzy' of the twentieth century. According to A.R. Jones:

the last poems of Sylvia Plath draw their compulsive intensity not so much from their element of naked confession but from this assumption that in a deranged world, a deranged response is the only possible reaction of the sensitive mind.<sup>5</sup>

It appears that psychotic art has become socially acceptable. But to accept the above 'assumption' is to support implicitly Sylvia Plath's increasingly violent, hateful perception of her world, indeed, to co-operate in her own death-circuit logic. This is precisely what A. Alvarez does in his praise of "Fever 103°", a poem which exemplifies the basic opposition in this volume between the pain and sickness of living and the purity and release of death. Sylvia Plath's description of "Fever 103°" parallels its own anti-human intellectual detachment:

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<sup>4</sup> Jones, "On 'Daddy'", p. 236.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 231.

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>6</sup>

Alvarez sees clarity in all this. Attesting that the movement of the poem is "also that of a personal catharsis", he adds: "She is clarifying not only an abstract death, but also her feelings about it, from the cluttered and insufferable to the pure and acceptable."<sup>7</sup>

In recounting her experience of a rising fever the poet has discovered a perfect mask behind which she can unleash her hatred of the world with impunity, adding, "I am too pure for you or anyone." Her efforts to link her own pain to more universal examples reveal all the 'purity' of an intellectual disdain horribly detached from the emotional realities of those who actually suffered and died in the Hiroshima bombings and in the concentration camps in Europe:

My head a moon  
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin  
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

It is this that both Sylvia Plath and Alvarez find 'cluttered and insufferable', while death--the poet's own suicidal aspirations--is regarded as 'pure and acceptable'. Yet to aspire to that 'purity' which transcends forever the problems of being human is to engage in the schizoid individual's false solutions to the problems of identity. Above all Alvarez ignores that she died in the process as he admires the artistic control and determination

<sup>6</sup>From the introductory notes to "New Poems", a reading prepared for the BBC Third Programme but never broadcast, Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 62.

<sup>7</sup>Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 63.

with which she faced her inward, terrifying experiences--"so as not to be overwhelmed by them."<sup>8</sup>

Alvarez persists in this dehumanized mode of thought in his praise of "Lady Lazarus", which he describes as "the total purification of achieved death."<sup>9</sup> The psychotic perspective of these political poems comes under the guise of what Sylvia Plath termed 'light verse': joking self-contempt at the expense of a more human response. As the nursery rhyme technique achieves this effect in "Daddy", so whimsical, grotesque impertinence is served up in the companion piece, "Lady Lazarus". This poem also seeks to universalize the poet's experience of pain as she equates her three suicidal crises with the horror of the Jewish massacres:

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen.

There is no hint of compassion in the poem for those who suffered. It evinces only the stale rhetoric and self indulgence of one thoroughly disengaged from the roots of feeling. In fact she "assumes the suffering of all the modern victims"<sup>10</sup>, only in so far as martyrdom confirms one's identity in a glorious way.

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

"Lady Lazarus" expresses Sylvia Plath's libidinal attachment to self-annihilation, in order that she might feel 'real':

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

I do it so it feels like hell.  
I do it so it feels real.

The poem ends by advocating a death-circuit based on hatred as the persona swears revenge in some impossible afterlife which demands, perforce, her own death.

Such death-circuit logic is expressed most clearly in "Daddy". The poem focuses on a persistent theme in Ariel, described by Alvarez as 'the root of her suffering' in the death of her father. Ignoring the autobiographical element of "Daddy", Sylvia Plath asserted that the persona is beset by an Electra complex and is involved thereby in hating a mother with whom she identifies as Jewish victim, and loving a Nazi father whom she rejects as murderous and brutal. She concludes that "in the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other--she has to act out the awful little allegory before she is free of it."<sup>11</sup> This ritual destruction of a father's memory exemplifies a schizoid false solution to the problem of identity. As we might expect, the demonic Nazi figure of "Daddy" has little to do with the real Otto Plath who emigrated to America in 1900 at the age of fifteen and died when Sylvia was nine. Though of Prussian descent her father could not actually have been implicated in the Nazi war crimes, nor was her Austrian mother, Aurelia Plath, among

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<sup>11</sup>From the introductory notes to "New Poems", Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 65.

those murdered Jews. These figures in the poem exist as the imaginary creations of one who demands revenge in a recreated past, though the poet herself has not in fact been oppressed by anyone. The mother's role having been appropriated long ago as we saw in The Colossus by her daughter, the opposition in the poem is between father and daughter. More accurately, the real conflict originates within the poet's troubled psyche, in the attempt to reconcile her desperate need to be mothered with the desire to love or to hate a poorly internalised father. Thus, while the lyric ends in excoriating fury, it is also a rare love poem.

"Daddy" opens with the ambivalent feelings of one who, believing she was responsible for her beloved father's death at nine, decides at the age of thirty to slay the troubled memories of this "God", this "ghastly statue" associated with the beauty of the sea: "Daddy, I have had to kill you./You died before I had time--". The sense of rootlessness as a first generation immigrant complements her internal feelings of lack of identity. Fantasyzing about her parents political associations had they remained in Europe, she allies her own suffering to that of the archetypal wandering Jew. The poet's long-time fear of her father, based on the child's fear that her love was destructive and caused his death, gives itself over to the joys of hating as an adult. Now the father is conceived as "Not God but a swastika." From a schizoid point of view she speaks with fascination of both private and public oppression:

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

This is not to say as A.R. Jones asserts that "brutality is not only a necessary part of love but is also a central and inevitable principle of life".<sup>12</sup> Nor is it to acquiesce in Alvarez's own specious argument in which he sees both freedom and creation of one's identity in Sylvia Plath's "self-inflicted oppression."<sup>13</sup> Such denial of one's humanity can never lead to 'freedom' or self-definition. In order to feel real those of weakened identity may seek out hateful, violent modes of existence. It is much easier therefore for Sylvia Plath to hate the internal, broken 'colossus' when this daddy is stereotyped as Nazi and thus 'all bad'. The husband in turn was to complement this hatefully conceived father:

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.

As the persona had felt responsible for the father's death, so she now experiences guilt at the dissolution of this marriage: "If I've killed one man, I've killed two---". "Daddy" ends with the savage rite of the townspeople joining the daughter in hatred. Soon this hatred became physically self-directed within the internal closed system and the poet's own suicide resulted.

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<sup>12</sup>Jones, "On 'Daddy'", p. 235.

<sup>13</sup>Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 65.

And the villagers never liked you.  
 They are dancing and stamping on you.  
 They always knew it was you.  
 Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

Sylvia Plath has been much praised for the masterful 'detachment' and 'control' with which she handles deeply painful, autobiographical material. It is also necessary to recognize in her art the element of intellectual disdain of one who has ceased to feel, either 'real' or a part of humanity, and who resorts to a radical inversion of moral values with an intense joy that can be highly persuasive. Sylvia Plath does not bring to these political poems a desire to understand the true roots of her suffering or her suicidal impulses. Dangerous cultural implications lie in her powerful insistence on the acceptability of her libidinal attachment to a false death circuit, to escape what is deemed the 'violence of love' in normal human relationships.

A significant and perceptible change can be discerned in Sylvia Plath's attitude towards death in the poems written in the final weeks of life. An earlier, angry ambivalence now gives way to a quiet, calm acceptance of the inevitability of suicide. Even in the companion poems, "The Munich Mannequins" and "Totem", written in mid January 1963, there is still some doubt: in the former because "perfection is terrible, it cannot have children"; while the latter expresses the desperation of being "Roped in at the end by the one/Death with its many sticks." "Kindness", "Contusion", "Edge" and "Words", all written in the last week of life, no longer dwell on the pain and suffering of existence or on a savage hatred but look to the peaceful serenity of death, 'that calm and neutral state in which being and nothingness

coincide'.

An air of resignation pervades "Edge" as the poet contemplates her imminent suicide. To die is to be perfected, the dead body pure as a classical Grecian statue, like the "Ionian/Death-gowns" of the two children in the earlier "Death and Co.". Gone is the revulsion expressed at the old man's death in stanza four of "Berck-Plage": "This is what it is to be complete. It is horrible." At the end of life's trials herself, she makes the frightening suggestion to take her babies with her into death. In an image of great natural beauty, reminiscent of the lyrical sketches in The Colossus, and freed of the later themes of sickness and violence, she describes herself as the petals of a rose closing with the coming night:

She has folded

Them back into her 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, symbol throughout the poetry of endless pain and despair, is not saddened by but fully accepts the poet's irrevocable decision to step over the edge into death.

Ariel is clearly Sylvia Plath's most complete and self-contained volume. In these final poems there is a sense of having come full circle as we remember "Tulips", the earliest poem saved for this collection and the description of death it gives:

The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,  
And it asks nothing...  
It is what the dead close on, finally....

There is no 'rage against the dying of the night' in these last poems, neither angry intensity nor any fear. The finality of death, the absolute nothingness of the yawning void, is contemplated from the utterly emotionless state of one who has abandoned all hope. Even the earlier idea of rebirth does not find expression in these poems. Only the art would remain, but it could no more contain the poet's living presence than she herself could escape the inexorable pattern of her life:

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

"Words"

## CHAPTER VII

### THE BELL JAR

The Bell Jar is Sylvia Plath's only published novel. In mid January 1963, less than a month before her suicide on February 11, it was published under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas. According to A. Alvarez, Plath used the pseudonym because she did not consider The Bell Jar a serious piece of writing, and partly because she realized too many people would be implicated and hurt by it.<sup>1</sup> He writes that "she spoke of it with some embarrassment as an autobiographical apprentice-work which she had to write in order to free herself from the past."<sup>2</sup> In light of the death that followed soon after, we may postulate that the past had loomed with particular significance in her life those last two years, and that in writing about her suicide attempt at nineteen, Sylvia Plath was clearly attempting to objectify and control those destructive energies to which she was soon to succumb again. The idea had interested her for some time. By April 1, 1961, Frieda's first birthday, she records being 'over one third through a novel about a college girl building up for and going through a nervous breakdown'. She wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 57. In this regard it is interesting to note that Sylvia Plath's mother thought The Bell Jar represented 'the basest ingratitude'.

<sup>2</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Prologue" in The Savage God, p. 21.

I have been wanting to do this for ten years but had a terrible block about Writing A Novel. Then suddenly in beginning negotiations with a New York publisher for an American edition of my poems, the dykes broke and I stayed awake all night seized by fearsome excitement, saw how it could be done, started the next day and go every morning to my borrowed study as to an office and belt out more of it.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, the circumstances under which The Bell Jar and the final poems were written were not easy. 1961 brought, in rapid succession, a miscarriage followed by an appendectomy and then pregnancy again. The following year was even more difficult. Repeated attacks of flu and high fevers plagued the summer, leaving Sylvia both physically and emotionally exhausted. After a vacation in Ireland she could not bear another winter in Devon and began commuting bi-weekly to London. Her deteriorating relationship with Ted Hughes prompted the separation and move to London just before Christmas 1962, in one of the coldest winters in over a century. Pipes froze; neither light nor heat were dependable; there was no telephone; and she was ill with a sinus infection and two very young children. The Bell Jar was published within a month, to reviews which were 'mostly illiterate', and caused only minor interest.<sup>4</sup> Most critics discovered only after her death that Sylvia Plath and Victoria Lucas were one and the same writer.

Although Sylvia Plath had written short stories previously, it is of interest to ask why she turned to the novel form at this stage in her artistic development. When interviewed by Peter

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<sup>3</sup>Ames, "Notes Toward a Biography", pp. 169-170.

<sup>4</sup>Mary Kinzie, "An Informal Check List of Criticism" in The Art of Sylvia Plath, p. 287.

Orr, she emphasized the attractive diversity of life that can be captured in prose, but which is more difficult in the adumbrated form of poetry:

I feel that in a novel, for example, you can get in tooth-brushes and all the paraphernalia that one finds in daily life, and I find this much more difficult in poetry. Poetry, I feel, is a tyrannical discipline, you've got to go so far, so fast, in such a small space that you've just got to turn away all the peripherals. And I miss them! I'm a woman, I like my little Lares and Penates, I like trivia, and I find that in a novel I can get more of life, perhaps not such an intense life, but certainly more of life, and so I've become very interested in novel writing as a result.<sup>5</sup>

Sylvia Plath was deeply interested in describing the intensity of her own life in The Bell Jar. The resemblances between Esther Greenwood's background and experiences and Sylvia Plath's own are many and obvious. Surfacing in both the poems and the novel are the same insistent snapshot memories of a New England seacoast with its Deer Island Prison and hot dog stands and garbage-littered strand. The poetry represents precisely focused, close-up shots whereas the wide-angle lens of the novel distorts everything like a crazy funhouse of mirrors. The tragic cry of the poems, the essence wrung from a life, is seen in its comic mask in the novel. Often reflected in the pervasive image of babies, the shock of smiles on pickled faces floats into vision like Pavel Tchelitchev's disturbing 'Hide and Seek'. But the novel is also about madness--and a very real suicide attempt--as the poems are not.

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<sup>5</sup>Peter Orr (ed.), The Poet Speaks, p. 167.

An extremely well-crafted novel, The Bell Jar is fecund on a number of levels. The wry humour of the protagonist allows for a perceptive American Graffiti : what growing up in the '50's was like from a young girl's point of view; a scathing indictment of psychiatric practices; and more specifically, the remarkable insights of the schizoid individual who, using her art as a therapeutic device, pointed to the roots of her suffering in an extraordinary way. The novel fleshes out and exposes the early environment, bridging the gap between the autobiographical "Ocean 1212-W" and the poems. Through the figure of Esther Greenwood it focuses fairly realistically on Sylvia Plath's mental breakdown and suicide attempt before her senior year at Smith. The novel recounts her subjection to what R. D. Laing terms the 'degradation' of conventional psychiatry: insulin shock therapy and ECT, and the demands of false socialisation placed upon her in a forced return to sanity. Her experience closely parallels Harry Guntrip's account of the environmental inadequacies often experienced by those who may need to be 'reborn', to regrow as a 'whole person':

If a patient needs a long regressed illness which cannot be coped with at home, he may find himself taken out of analysis and into hospital, and made the subject of concentrated efforts to suppress his illness forcibly by drugs or ECT and hospital discipline, while his deep problems simply cannot be glimpsed or understood by psychiatrists and nursing staff whose aim must of necessity be to get him well quickly.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup>Guntrip, Schizoid Phenomena , p. 318.

Sylvia Plath clearly needed someone 'to be' for her that she might experience a guided regression, resolving specific conflicts and perhaps enjoying a fundamental regrowing of the basic ego. It was a spiritual, authentic and human response that she sought in others; yet she experienced only the mechanistic, specious and inhuman techniques of conventional psychiatry. The Bell Jar records the poet's impression that there was no one who listened and no one who helped. Instead, Esther meets only the uncomprehending stares of those who should have been able to render assistance: Dr. Gordon who doesn't listen and asks like some macaw what college she attended; the custodial ills of mental institutions where patients become "shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life"; the reproachful mother who regards her daughter's illness as some kind of malicious juvenile prank. The irony behind the whole force of the novel is that the one person who best understood was Esther herself. The price Sylvia Plath paid though nearly cost her her life, while the "six month crash" that followed she described later as

A time of darkness, despair, disillusion--so black only as the inferno of the human mind can be--symbolic death, the numb shock, then the painful agony of slow rebirth and psychic regeneration.<sup>7</sup>

I believe however at the time of writing her novel Sylvia Plath strongly questioned whether there had been a 'rebirth and psychic regeneration' a decade before. Was the 'cure' she had

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<sup>7</sup>Quoted by Ames, "Notes Toward a Biography", p. 163.

experienced anything other than the conscious re-adoption of 'false self' conformity?

I had hoped, at my departure, I would feel sure and knowledgeable about everything that lay ahead--after all, I had been 'analyzed'. Instead, all I could see were question marks. (p. 257).

Serious doubts are raised at the conclusion of the Bell Jar. In the act of writing it Sylvia Plath must have been conscious of that hovering fluted shape above her head again, soon to isolate her irrevocably from a life in which there appears not to have been anyone who was capable and perceptive enough to help. What comes through in this novel is the lucid criticism of the sane world by one diagnosed as 'mentally ill'. Even now, more than a decade after her death, the insights Sylvia Plath provided as to the reasons for her suicide have still largely been ignored. Instead, her internal despair has been justified by Eileen Aird as the special vision of the artist who struggles to reconcile "the differences between the external world and that revealed by the creative insight."<sup>8</sup> A. Alvarez, on the other hand, argues that she gave herself over to her destructive impulses "for the sake of the range and intensity of [her] art",<sup>9</sup> and concludes that "the achievement of her final style is to make poetry and death inseparable."<sup>10</sup> In each case this literary romanticization of suicide ignores Sylvia Plath's real emotional problems.

Elizabeth Hardwick in her essay on the poet describes

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<sup>8</sup> Aird, Sylvia Plath, p. 92.

<sup>9</sup> Alvarez, Under Pressure, p. 185.

<sup>10</sup> \_\_\_\_\_, "Sylvia Plath", p. 67.

those who suffer such ego disintegration and stifling self-enclosure as surviving "their own torments only by an erasing detachment".<sup>11</sup> The Bell Jar was written from this perspective a decade after the experience. Having survived by the conscious re-adoption of the schizoid's false, tragic modes of existence, Sylvia Plath advocates in this novel the inverted moral of destruction to herself and others. This accounts for the examples of distorted pleasure and deliberate seeking of pain in the late poems and in The Bell Jar. Hardwick notes of the novel that Plath thinks of slashing her wrists in the tub and imagines the water "gaudy as poppies"--one of those brilliant, bloody images that stud the final poems. Unable to do the deed, she still wants to "spill a little blood" for practice:

Then I felt a small, deep thrill, and a bright seam of red welled up at the lip of the slash. The blood gathered darkly, like fruit, and rolled down my ankle into the cup of my black patent leather shoe. (p. 156)

This fascination with pain in order to feel 'real' points to Sylvia Plath's intense libidinal attachment to self-destruction and to her artistic expression of death-circuit ecstasy.

The Bell Jar is a remarkable record of psychic disintegration. The suffering Sylvia Plath records was genuine. At the same time, there is danger in such psychotic art that would have us support its author in her schizoid death-circuits, that we might confirm an inner identity she appears not to have possessed in life.

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<sup>11</sup>Elizabeth Hardwick, "Sylvia Plath" in Seduction and Betrayal (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 108.

The novel is tri-partite in structure. The scene is set in the first nine chapters, the main characters are introduced, and episodes from Esther's past give shape and dimension to the ensuing conflict. Esther's trip to New York is described and, in the kinds of demands placed on her, precipitates the breakdown foreshadowed in the memorable balcony scene in which she abandons her clothing and her sense of identity to the dark city night. This episode is both the logical centre of the novel and the defining gesture of Esther's growing inability to function in daily life. The remaining eleven chapters take place largely in the narrative present once the bell jar of the mind descends. They include section II, chapters ten to thirteen, to the point of Esther's unsuccessful suicide attempt; and section III, chapters fourteen to twenty, her mental hospital experiences and questionable recovery.

#### SECTION I

Just as Sylvia Plath had won the Mademoiselle contest to represent her college in New York City, so Esther Greenwood in the novel joins twelve other contestants on a New York fashion magazine for a month. There they are, with their patent leather shoes and matching handbags and their ptomaine feasts of caviar and avacado and crabmeat salad, squired about in a social whirl which becomes increasingly meaningless to Esther. The contrast between this American girl's dream and its reality for Esther is immediately apparent:

Only I wasn't steering anything, not even myself. I just bumped from my hotel to work and to parties and from parties to my hotel and back to work like a numb trolley-bus. I guess I should have been excited the way most of the other girls were, but I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully along in the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo. (pp. 2-3) (my emphasis)

This schizoid sense of hollowness of being adds to Esther's feelings of being cut adrift in a welter of strange circumstances. In an effort to provide the identity she lacks, she is attracted to three female characters, Doreen and Betsy, two other college girls on this trip; and Jay Cee, the literary editor of the magazine. But in each instance they are deemed deficient as appropriate models. Esther admires Doreen for her sophistication, her intuition, her humour, the opportunity she provides to gain social experience. However, the unintellectual, purposeless social existence she leads quickly limits her influence on Esther, just as Betsy's equally unintellectual, passive acceptance of the world restricts her, though Esther admires her gentle kindness and later recognition as a cover-girl. Unlike the college girls, Jay Cee is a much more formidable being and is respected for her intelligence and her success. At the same time Esther finds it difficult to imagine any kind of physical, sexual being behind the efficient public face.

In a disturbing interview with Jay Cee in which Esther is admonished to take full advantage of the work opportunities this trip has afforded her, she is "unmasked" of her 'false self' existence. Forced to admit "all the uncomfortable suspicions"

about a profound lack of meaningful direction in her life, she suddenly realizes that all her facile plans for the future are without substance. The academic world, which had previously given her a sense of identity and success--"fifteen years of straight A's"--was now coming to an end, and was at any rate quite divorced from the working universe. There is sardonic humour in the observation that she would spend her whole honours year "writing on some obscure theme"--twin images--"in the works of James Joyce". The social isolation experienced at college went hand in hand with academic pursuits. It also overemphasized abstract intellectual activity at the expense of human, emotional relationships: a characteristic of the schizoid individual.

This interview with Jay Cee also serves to reveal the acute isolation and detachment Esther experiences with regard to her family and Boston ambience. She wishes she had a mother like Jay Cee: "Then I'd know what to do". The lack of an appropriate female model in her development has been painfully felt. As it is her own mother, despite her daughter's obvious intellectual abilities, is forever after her to learn shorthand, clearly accepting and endorsing an inferior role in life for a woman. Insensitive to her daughter in the present, she also defaces the past by hating the father whom the child loved, for dying and leaving no money. This largely imaginary father appears to have been what the living mother implicitly was not: a loving, intuitive, guiding figure. As Esther suddenly realizes in the pleasurable company of Constantin:

I thought how strange it had never occurred to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old...I had never been really happy again. (p.78)

Although very unsure of her future role in life, Esther is adamantly opposed to marriage. The examples she knows have graphically not recommended it. Both her own mother and Mrs. Willard, despite their university degrees and professor husbands, became mere domestic drudges upon marrying and bearing children. To Esther the whole frightening prospect "was like being brain-washed, and afterwards you went about numb as a slave in some private, totalitarian state". Her boyfriend, Buddy Willard, confirms this impression in the present in his utterly insensitive attitude to the significance of poetry in her life-- "a poem is... A piece of dust"-- and his sinister assurance that with marriage and children she would not be interested in writing poems any more. Esther feels herself in revolt against the narrow existence her environment offers her, one in which her creative ambitions and motherhood seem mutually exclusive:

The last thing I wanted was infinite security and to be the place an arrow shoots off from. I wanted change and excitement and to shoot off in all directions myself, like the coloured arrows from a Fourth of July rocket. (p.87)

The sexual mores of this middle class milieu are equally repressive: the 'double standard' for men is fully accepted; and while "pureness was the great issue", as Esther rightly perceives of the Reader's Digest article sent by her mother, there was "no consideration how a girl felt". Thus, given this background, Esther justifiably suffers 'cultural shock' during her month in New York. But the intensity of her isolation and detachment from

those around her is of an extreme nature, as captured brilliantly in the simile she uses of an express train leaving Paris:

...every second the city gets smaller and smaller, only you feel it's really you getting smaller and smaller and lonelier and lonelier, rushing away from all those lights and that excitement at about a million miles an hour. (p. 17)

This characteristic schizoid reaction seems to point to an even greater 'failure of environmental provision'.

The 'false self' veneer cracks noticeably the day the photographer arrives as Esther breaks down and cries, relieved "to be free of the animal" inside for awhile. Decisions to do anything become increasingly difficult during the final days in New York. Her growing isolation and sense of futility is brought to a climax on her last night in the city, when she is persuaded by Doreen to attend a disastrous country club dance where, like a playing card, she is dealt out to Marco the-woman-hater. Her defiant action in striking him and the subsequent tears are a relief, but a dramatic gesture of regressive withdrawal from life follows immediately. In a powerful scene which signals Esther's own spiritual death, on returning to the hotel she drops all her clothes, one by one, over the balcony to float identityless as she herself feels, into the dark heart of the city. Images of death and darkness pervade this scene in its key phrases: "buildings blackened as if for a funeral", "failed", "batlike shadow sank", "a loved-one's ashes", "grey scraps", "dark heart". As the wind fails to carry the clothing up, so Esther can no longer prevent the spiralling descent of her own darkening psyche.

This is the most dominant expression of death imagery in the first section of The Bell Jar, yet on closer examination is seen to permeate the whole. While pickled fetuses gleam through-out, mention of the Rosenberg electrocutions bracket this section and herald Esther's own mental hospital experiences. Her early curiosity, about "what it would be like, being burned alive all along your nerves", foreshadows her later shock treatments:

Then something bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-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. I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done. (p.151)

Death fascinates Esther, and none more so than her own, as the skiing episode at Mt. Pisgah with Buddy makes clear. As she shusses down a slope, the happiness with which she greets the possibility of death is reminiscent of a similar happiness enjoyed in her father's company as a child. Her experience of the run was like rewinding a camera reel, "through year after year of doubleness and smiles and compromise", years of 'false self' existence into the past and beyond. Death is longed for because the need to be reborn, to find the 'true self' is so great. Hence, as though flashing through a dark tunnel, Esther

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. (p. 102).

Esther's manifestation of the schizoid desire to 'crawl back inside' is often clearly expressed in this first section, foretelling the attempted suicide in the dark cellar. There is

the story of the fig tree in Esther's Ladies' Day book prompting her desire "to crawl in between those black lines of print the way you crawl through a fence, and go to sleep under that beautiful big green fig-tree". Likewise, she wishes she could "crawl into" the female Russian interpreter she sees with Constantin. More often this regressive intent emerges, appropriately, through the imagery of babies. The day Esther discovers Buddy to be a hypocrite and the seriousness with which she regards this, centers on their mutual experience of seeing a child being born. The implication is that, at least in Esther's mind, the innocence and purity of the womb existence is preferable in our deceitful world. More specifically, she herself felt "pure and sweet as a new baby" when emerging from the hot bath, while Doreen's motherly tenderness and the soup broth after the ptomaine poisoning left her "purged and holy and ready for a new life". These images which focus on the idea of rebirth, often through death, body forth the protagonist's profound need to regress to find the roots of her being. Once this quest has been established and the bell jar of the mind descends, these image patterns occur much less frequently in the remaining two sections.

## SECTION II

The second and shortest section of the novel finds Esther on the train returning home to Boston. It is a return to what Elizabeth Hardwick describes as the sort of suffocating, entangling environment that unites the despair of place with the despair of feeling.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup>Hardwick, Seduction and Betrayal, p. 70.

It is also clearly associated with her own mother, to whom she is so antagonistic: "the motherly breath of the suburbs" enfolds her, laying "its soothing hand over everything, like death". Even the family car she rides in closes over her head like a "prison van", while the town itself resembles "a large but escape-proof cage". Moreover, the one bright hope in Esther's life, the expectation of attending a summer writing course, is smashed by an immediate announcement to the contrary by her mother.

(There is also the implicit admission that privacy in the home is minimal, since Esther's mail is read.) As breakdown ensues, Esther's regressive retreat from the world becomes radical. Feeling utterly alienated from the other inhabitants in this suburban teacup, from nosy Mrs. Ockenden, or Dodo Conway who tends to excess in the role of motherhood, she is soon crawling into the "dark and safe" area between the padded bedstead and the mattress, which falls across her "like a tombstone". Esther describes the psychological impasse in her life, beyond which she cannot go: "nineteen telephone wires, and then the wires dangled into space...." At this point she is recommended to Doctor Gordon, a psychiatrist.

All of Esther's encounters with psychiatric assistance prove not only unhelpful but essentially punitive. In this first instance the womb-like security she longs for is sensed in the windowless waiting room, but Dr. Gordon himself is hardly the intuitive, sympathetic figure she is seeking. There is great poignancy in Esther's plea for a human response as she hopes that

he could see something I couldn't, and then I would find words to tell him how I was so scared as if I were being stuffed farther and farther into a black, airless sack with no way out...And then, I thought, he would help me, step by step, to be myself again. (p.136)

In fact, Dr. Gordon does nothing of the sort. Esther correctly senses that he presumes her perception of the inner trouble wrong by virtue of her seeing him in the first place. At \$25 an hour he is callously, utterly indifferent to whatever she may say. Only an abstract curiosity prompts him to ask what college she attended. Once more, it is Esther's response that is the accurate one and the following week:

...I told him again, in the same dull, flat voice, only it was angrier this time, because he seemed so slow to understand... (p.142)

Nevertheless, after this second visit and understandably failing to note any improvement in Esther, Dr. Gordon recommends shock treatments.

Esther's first impression of psychiatric care is prophetically correct: "The figures around me weren't people, but shop dummies, painted to resemble people and propped up in attitudes counterfeiting life". The regressed psyche will not be recalled to life through the guiding response of others; rather, the body will be acted upon in an inhuman, mechanistic fashion as in some pagan exorcism. Esther is not prepared psychologically for the violence of the ECT she receives immediately, which "bent down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world...I wondered what terrible thing it was that I had done". She can relate it only to the childhood experience of being shocked by

a lamp cord in her father's study. But what once had been an incomprehensible, frightening accident was now a horrible reality, deliberately and consciously done to her by adults. As she emerges from the shock, her experience with Dr. Gordon who maddeningly asks again what college she attended heralds the truth of a later, sardonic observation: "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream". Clearly, the 'inexpressible emptiness' has not been recognized though the thought processes have been brutally disrupted, leaving one "dumb and subdued" for a time. Nor is Esther's mother of any assistance. As far as she is concerned it's just a matter of 'deciding to be all right again'. Esther has been abandoned to her own madness:

I hadn't slept for twenty-one nights.

I thought the most beautiful thing in the world must be shadow, the million moving shapes and cul-de-sacs of shadow. There was shadow in bureau drawers and closets and suitcases, and shadow under houses and trees and stones, and shadow at the back of people's eyes and smiles, and shadow, miles and miles and miles of it, on the night side of the earth. (p. 155)

It is Esther herself who perceives of her growing pre-occupation with suicide that it points to an inner trouble which cannot be rooted out by violence done to the self, either through a personal hatred of these weaknesses, or through the external 'doing' of certain psychiatric practices:

It was as if what I wanted to kill wasn't in that skin or the thin blue pulse that jumped under my thumb, but somewhere else, deeper, more secret, and a whole lot harder to get at. (p. 156)

She longs to be rid of the hollow core and the 'false self' mask which cloaks this deficiency, but the evidence of her recent ex-

periences and relationships has not provided her with avenues to be otherwise. Given these diminishing alternatives, she comes to participate in a schizoid justification of suicide. After toying with various suicide attempts Esther decides to "ambush" her body lest it be trapped in its "stupid cage" forever. In this schizoid separation of mental and physical processes lies the assumption that the real person might be freed, the 'true self' reborn, through death.

Counterpointing the funeral imagery at the conclusion of Section I, Section II ends with Esther's climactic visit to her father's graveyard. In the former, the needed regression had been foreshadowed in the conscious and symbolic abandonment of a 'false self' identity. In the latter, with the discovery of her father's grave, Esther finds the reason for her regression: she had discovered 'what it was that hurt'. The essential unreality of his death is remembered from the point of view of the nine-year-old child: he had died in hospital and the mother hadn't let the children attend his funeral; since then, his grave had never been visited. As the poems attest, the daughter felt she had supplanted the mother in the father's affections and now, "it seemed fitting I should take on a mourning my mother had never bothered with". Esther laments the loss to her of a teacher and intellectual companion, and the suggested deficiency of the mother in this respect. With the discovery of her father's gravestone, in a gesture of emotion the mother never expressed, Esther howls her loss "into the cold salt rain". It serves as a cathartic release, providing her with the knowledge of "just how to go about"

her own suicide. And so she seeks out her own grave in the black "hole mouth" of the cellar breezeway. Sleeping pills hasten the return to a watery, primal security as she leaves behind a troublous life on a shore "baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life".

### SECTION III

Discovered and revived, Esther's inner condition, as she affirms, remains "the same". This final section recounts her experiences in various psychiatric wards. One is struck by the sanity of her insights, her perception that it is the psychiatric world which is a 'bad dream'. She exposes the horrible, cramped, wholly custodial realities of the state medical hospital with the wit of a satirist. Rescued from this prison by her patroness and taken to a private hospital where, it is believed, the doctors will 'make her well', Esther remains indifferent to these proceedings. For they focus on her from without, whereas she is locked within an inner reality, "sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air".

Nor is this condition ever essentially mitigated under Dr. Nolan's care. However, it comes as a pleasant surprise to Esther that her psychiatrist is a woman, so conscious are we all of a dearth of 'successful' women in daily affairs. Sensitive to the importance of "tenderness" in human relationships, Dr. Nolan is not only much more sympathetic to Esther's perception of her difficulty than Dr. Gordon ever was, but is practical and realistic in the assistance she does give. She recognizes quickly the

antagonism in Esther's relationship with her mother and limits it in Esther's favour; recommends a doctor who will provide Esther with birth control; insists on Joan's own responsibility in her suicide; and while she exhibits 'faith' in Esther's 'recovery', bluntly and honestly warns her about the world's reaction to one who leaves a mental hospital.

What Dr. Nolan does well is to respond naturally in a warm, human fashion to Esther. What she does professionally, however, is to subject Esther once more to the punitive character of conventional psychiatry: insulin treatments and shock therapy. Such disruption of the physical and mental processes will inevitably effect some external change, but by inference Esther calls into serious question both the quality of the change and its permanence. On three insulin injections per day the weight gain makes her appear pregnant. The reaction that follows, though it leaves her "light and airy", reduces her initially to a state of near infantile dependence: when given hot milk she tastes it "luxuriously, the way a baby tastes its mother". Later she admits she felt better for awhile, but, "Now I'm the same again."

The shock therapy is of a more radical nature, for it also involves a question of strained trust. Although the possibility of treatments had been left open, Dr. Nolan had promised to warn Esther about it beforehand. Esther had already begun to suspect that, like Dr. Gordon, Dr. Nolan would reason 'a lack of improvement' and prescribe ECT when she is moved suddenly to Belsize, the best house from which people returned to the community and

where shock treatments were much less common. Esther wonders why because she knows no psychic regeneration has taken place. She remembers too having wryly suspected Dr. Nolan's calm assurance that one went to sleep during a shock treatment if she had never actually experienced it herself. Thus, when Dr. Nolan does not in fact give much advance warning, Esther panics at the treachery of the broken promise. Her experience of electrotherapy is that of a sacrificial victim acted upon by masked, identity-less attendants. She emerges to Dr. Nolan's presence and as in the insulin reaction, does feel better initially:

All the heat and fear had purged itself. I felt surprisingly at peace. The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air. (p. 227)

However, as the novel's concluding chapter makes clear, this specious change is not of a permanent nature. Since the fundamental weakness still remains, so does the ominous threat of imminent bell jar consciousness. Esther feels no more "sure and knowledgeable" about her life on leaving than she did on entering the hospital. And there is bitter irony in having been "analysed" and yet seeing only question marks ahead. One thing she is sure of though are the demands of a false socialisation forcing her return to 'sanity':

I felt the nurse had been instructed to show me my alternatives. Either I got better, or I fell down, down, like a burning, then burnt-out star, from Belsize, to Caplan, to Wymark and finally, after Doctor Nolan and Mrs. Guinea had given me up, to the state place next-door (p. 221)

Esther's early contacts with the 'sane' world are so fraught with 'bad dream' qualities that survival itself appears

to demand a conscious re-adoption of false self modes of existence. There is Joan, childhood acquaintance and fellow mental hospital patient who interests Esther as a "wry black image" of what she herself had been and gone through. Yet there is no personal giving of herself in Esther's relationship with Joan, unlike the latter who responds so deeply to Esther's haemorrhaging as to take her own life shortly thereafter. At Joan's funeral, Esther is very conscious of her own survival, virtually salvaged at the expense of another's. In the case of Irwin, that "pale, hairless mathematics professor", Esther decides "to practice [her] new, normal personality" in a clinical, utterly emotionless fashion. Determining beforehand to have no further contact with him, she 'seduces' Irwin and loses her virginity. Yet the 'perfect freedom' she enjoys has disastrous implications, including her own possible death as she begins to haemorrhage uncontrollably. There has been no deepening of Esther's emotional bonds with others. Indeed, she brings to her relationships with Joan and Irwin a frightening, inhuman detachment which is of a more profound nature than the isolation experienced before the breakdown, because now it is consciously chosen. She is a survivor of her past, in the same way as "Lady Lazarus" describes its author as a three-time survivor in life. Later, Esther wonders if "Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind snow, should numb and cover" these memories..."But they were part of me. They were my landscape".

The Bell Jar concludes with Esther about to go before the panel of doctors who will pronounce her ready to leave the hospi-

tal. Their judgement is supposed to confirm psychic regeneration, and accounts for her own great concern with the significance of this particular rite of passage: " There ought, I thought, to be a ritual for being born twice---patched, retreaded and approved for the road". The irony of this garage-mechanic imagery belies any genuine cure. Esther has only been 'worked on' by the mechanistic techniques of psychiatric practices largely divorced from human considerations. Given the evidence of the novel there has been no rebirth, for no opportunities were provided for the 'true self' to come into being. Hence, when only 'false self' modes of survival can find expression, Esther, like Theseus, must be guided by the "magical thread" of other people's impressions of what it means 'to be'.

As a record of psychic disintegration and the probable origin of this suffering in an early 'failure of environmental provision', through the premature loss of a beloved father and a mother who appears not to have been adequate, The Bell Jar is remarkably insightful. It is also very much an extended study of breakdown, not of recovery. The spiralling descent is not counterpointed by the forces of regeneration, despite all the punitive efforts of psychiatry. I suggest that in probing the events of a decade before, Sylvia Plath released to present consciousness much repressed material. Involved once again in the 'fantastic risks' of which Winnicott speaks in facing her own weaknesses, the appalling state of mental suffering was relived. But she would have known this time that her need of "an actual breakdown

into severe illness before turning the corner and getting well <sup>13</sup> could not be realized. She did not have recourse to psychotherapy, while the novel attests fully that both the environment and conventional psychiatry were inadequate to sustain her in convalescence. Thus, early in 1963 she saw no way out of that "black sack", that "blackout of knives", except through death. Nevertheless, there is the consideration that as readers we are invited to identify with the protagonist, to condone her suicidal ambitions as a pathway to rebirth, and that failing, to acquiesce in the masquerade 'false self' existence chosen as a strategy of survival. We must discern that these are the tragic modes of the schizoid individual who has a 'special need to confront the problems of existence'. To endorse Sylvia Plath's death-circuit thinking because she found no avenues to rebirth in life is to overlook the genuine insights she does provide in The Bell Jar, and to romanticize the suffering human being behind the mask of the artist.

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<sup>13</sup>Guntrip, Schizoid Phenomena, p. 318.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSIONS

This developmental study has explored the increasingly schizoid perspective evidenced in the work of Sylvia Plath. Her short life was marked throughout by mental instability perhaps best described by W.R.D. Fairbairn as 'transitory schizoid episodes'. We have examined the writings of other ego-psychologists which suggest that an early environmental deficiency, in particular, some breakdown in the primary relationship with the mother, may have been the origin of the later disorder. Sylvia Plath's art appears to confirm this. With remarkable insight she sought to understand her suffering, striving to convey and so 'manipulate'--immunize--it in her poetry. She does not engage in self-pity; but neither can she accept her own weaknesses. She came to jeer at her suffering with a gallows humour and then, as the darkness spiralled in, turned with a violence exceptional in art against herself and anyone she might have loved. The web of menace, envisioned first in the external world of The Colossus ends with the constricting 'black sack' of Ariel. Like many disturbed people, she turned with fierce dedication to her art, hoping to find release there. Elizabeth Hardwick writes that "this hope rests upon the canny observation, clear even to the deranged

and sequestered, that artists do not require the confidence of society to the same degree as other workers".<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there must be sustaining values somewhere if life is to continue.

In Sylvia Plath's case there appears not to have been any integrated centre during those last few months. The external props of her life were fast crumbling. Ariel records the profound isolation experienced---from friends, children, husband, all---while the marriage itself was mortally diseased by infidelity on one side and the impossible demand for a colossal, surrogate father on the other. Nor were there any reserves from the past on which to draw. As a melting-pot American she was cut adrift from the cultural heritage of her European parents. Unfair anyway to both of them--as The Bell Jar attests---she rejects her mother in the present while longing to join the long-dead father who beckons from her childhood memories of the sea. Moreover, the earlier experience of psychiatric care had hardly engendered enthusiasm for any further contact. Even her art, which previously had given purpose and design in her life, now came like lava from the volcano within as much repressed material was released to consciousness: "The blood jet is poetry,/ There is no stopping it."

The needs of the weak ego demanded attention. But Sylvia Plath could not find in her life, or in the ethos of the literary avant-garde, or in relationship with anyone, ways in which this necessary, guided regression might take place. Her quest for the 'true self', her passionate need to be reborn, centered instead on a schizoid justification of suicide. She describes her 'death-

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<sup>1</sup>Hardwick, Seduction and Betrayal, p. 95.

impulse' throughout her art as wish to become a child again, to return to a primary identification with the mother. We recall one of Guntrip's patients using the image of the gas oven to describe a Plathian 'life-tiredness', a 'needing to stop living but not wishing to die':

'I've often felt it would be lovely to put my head in the gas oven and go unconscious. But I couldn't do it, because I couldn't be sure of being able to turn the gas off at the right time, before it killed me.<sup>2</sup>

The evidence of Sylvia Plath's suicide in London, the knowledge that an au-pair girl was to come early in the morning to help with the children, the awareness that the neighbour below awakened early, the scribbled note to call her doctor and his phone number: these circumstances prompt Alvarez and others to question the genuine seriousness of the poet's wish to die. It is also much more than having 'risked' death and lost. To die was to be reborn. The phoenix image becomes Plath's own in the final months, as the realities of life and death are frighteningly distorted in an hallucinating imagination. But the 'inexpressible emptiness' could not be remedied by destruction of the self or violence directed against others.

Her late work galvanizes our senses in its love of violent sensation and longing for death. In the end it is not our pity or sympathy that was important but rather our confirmation of her decision to die. It also involves our participation in the death-circuits of one who could no longer confront the problems of human existence. Sylvia Plath's suicidal longings were in

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<sup>2</sup>Guntrip, Schizoid Phenomena, p. 217.

fact desperate cries for help. However, she, and later most of her critics, justified her death as the logical completion of self. Still, when life had slid from her side, the art remained as a pure gift:

...I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people. As it is, they go surprisingly far--among strangers, around the world even. Farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescriptions of a doctor; if they are very lucky, farther than a lifetime.

from "Context"

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