

THE IMAGERY OF SYLVIA PLATH

The Imagery of Sylvia Plath

Nicholas Ruddick B.A.

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

In Partial Fulfilment of the Requirements

For the Degree

Master of Arts

McMaster University

(December) 1975

Master of Arts (1975)  
(English)

McMaster University  
Hamilton, Ontario

Title: The Imagery of Sylvia Plath

Author: Nicholas Ruddick B.A. (London).

Supervisor: Dr. R. Hyman.

Number of Pages: vi, 158.

## ABSTRACT

The thesis consists of six chapters. Chapter I, the Introduction, examines critical approaches that have been made towards the poetry of Sylvia Plath and tries to show their limitations. Chapter II discusses the essentially allusive nature of the poetry and proposes a different method -- extensive analysis of the imagery -- whereby a greater understanding of what the poet is trying to communicate may be obtained. Each of the next three chapters examines, in a roughly chronological way, a particular group of recurring symbols and images. Attention is paid to the body of as yet uncollected poetry and, where appropriate, the prose works are mentioned. Chapter VI, the Conclusion, summarises the implications of the analysis, and provides an example of the insights that may be made into the meaning of some of the apparently impenetrable obscurities that face the reader of Plath's poetry. Implicitly throughout, the view is adhered to that the poetry itself rather than the poet is of the greater importance.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I should like to thank Dr. Ferns, Dr. Brink and Dr. Hyman for their assistance in the preparation of this thesis.

To a Good-time girl

From a fancy man

As evidence of some compulsion, no more.

Waking, our Spring garden flourished. March's  
Green tongues along our naked limbs inflamed  
Us. Haloed by the roses' trellised arches  
We were Summer's fiery angels: now shamed  
By Fall. \_\_\_\_\_

"My Sister, my Spouse"

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS.....vi

I. INTRODUCTORY: SOME CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SYLVIA  
PLATH'S POETRY.....1

II. METHODS.....20

III. CHROMATIC IMAGERY.....36

IV. IMAGERY RELATING TO THE HUMAN BODY.....69

V. IMAGERY RELATING TO 'OTHERS'.....101

VI. CONCLUSION.....132

FOOTNOTES.....137

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....152

## ABBREVIATIONS

Throughout the body of the text, an abbreviated form is used to locate the source of poem-titles and quotations taken from the four major published collections of Sylvia Plath's poetry. The reference consists of the underlined initial(s) of the title of the volume followed by the page number, all contained within parentheses.

The abbreviations are as follows:

A = Ariel. London: Faber and Faber, 1965.

C = The Colossus. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.

CW = Crossing the Water. London: Faber and Faber, 1971.

WT = Winter Trees. London: Faber and Faber, 1971.

For example, (A.,21) refers to page 21 of Ariel.

## I

### INTRODUCTORY: SOME CRITICAL APPROACHES TO SYLVIA PLATH'S POETRY

Since her death, Sylvia Plath's literary remains have become everyone's property. For some, she has become the cause célèbre of their theories of how the states of literature, or of psychology, or of women, or even of society are progressing. For others, she has been a prime target of attack, a symptom of the sickness that seems to them to lie at the root of modern life. She has been the idol of several cults. She remains central to any discussion of contemporary poetry.

Her centrality and contemporaneity make it difficult to view her from any broad perspective, and make even a temporary and perfunctory estimation of her literary worth almost impossible. This study will nevertheless attempt to show where to look in order to discover her positive literary qualities which are, in the long run, the only things that can justify all the attention. Whatever the circumstances of her life, whatever her mental state, her writings alone remain as a testament that literature was the most important aspect of her existence, in that it is her chosen medium



of expression for the part of her that she wanted to survive. My approach to her poetry will concentrate chiefly on its aesthetic implications as an art-form. It will be a study of poetry as poetry, that is, as part of a poetic tradition with which it shares certain features. More particularly, I shall be looking at her poetry as a form of verbal communication that employs imagery and symbolism and aims at a certain universality of meaning. In the past, Sylvia Plath's literary, aesthetic qualities have been rather overlooked and her poems read rather as a concealed psychological or sociological casebook. I do not choose to disagree with much of the valuable work done in these fields, nor shall I ignore in this study the deliberately-planted psychological and sociological references or allusions in the poetry, nor the uses to which Sylvia Plath puts them. However, my ultimate aim will be to correct an imbalance, and hopefully to place the poetry (and to a certain extent the prose) on a more secure literary footing. The justification for my approach will, I hope, become more obvious as my analysis progresses. Briefly, though, I believe there is a richness of meaning in Sylvia Plath's poetry, created through her complex use of allusions and the construction of a dense web of imagery and symbolism, that has yet remained undiscussed. I hope to enable the reader of

Plath to understand with a little more ease what the poet is actually creating by an analysis of her imagery that becomes, in the end, an examination of one poet's associative processes and which becomes the synthesis of an imaginative web. Moral judgements have already been made about Sylvia Plath's work, judgements I believe that should be reserved until the work is fully understood. My implication is that Plath's work is often obscure, but never impenetrable.

Initially, however, a brief survey of the critical approaches already employed in the discussion of Sylvia Plath's work is necessary, if only to demonstrate the comparative neglect which the elements of her unique poetic voice, cross-connected in a labyrinthine synthesis, has suffered. The following statements by two of her more perceptive critics contain my theme and will be borne continuously in mind during the course of my discussion:

The timeless excellence of Sylvia Plath lies in . . . the sense of language and of metaphor; the throat-produced sounds of her poetry; the physical rhythms that invigorate it.<sup>1</sup>

. . . her separate poems build up into one long poem. She faced a task in herself and her poetry is a record of her progress in the task. Her poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear--even if the origins of it and the dramatis personae are at bottom enigmatic.<sup>2</sup>

Finally, there is a statement of her own that unequivocally reveals her commitment to poetry as a craft that is perfected by practice and is able to transmute the most personal experience into art as an experience universalized:

I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these 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 experience, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured. . . . with an informed and intelligent mind. I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant.<sup>3</sup>

A lot is known about Sylvia Plath. Without yet any official biography or even any memoir longer than fifty pages, it is possible to construct a fairly detailed account of her life, and of her relationships to her parents, grandparents, brother, husband, children and friends. There are several descriptions of her appearance, and a few available photographs<sup>4</sup> which are however, "misleading" according to one account.<sup>5</sup> Her childhood until the age of eight, her father's death, and the importance of the sea to her as a symbol of a lost happiness, is given to us by herself in "Ocean 1212-W",<sup>6</sup> and corroborated by such poems as "On the Decline of Oracles".<sup>7</sup>

The story is then taken up by Lois Ames, who deals with the period between Plath's first poem at the age of eight and a half in the Boston Sunday Herald, and her Junior Year at Smith College.<sup>8</sup> The Bell Jar (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), Plath's only novel, tells of her breakdown and attempted suicide in 1953 in a narrative that is only thinly disguised autobiography. This is made clear by Anne Sexton who, in her reminiscences of her death-obsessed talks with Plath later in Boston, says: "She told the story of her first suicide in sweet and loving detail and her description in The Bell Jar is just the same story."<sup>9</sup>

Lois Ames' "Notes. . ." remind us that memoir, as long as it is "fairly accurate", need have no further justification than the barely-argued one that writer offers us. That is, the vague quest for a "truth" in what has been transformed by others into a "legend" by one who is a self-admitted "superficial" acquaintance of the poet, during the brief period of time "we had seemed to share."<sup>10</sup> In other words, not just the work of the deceased, but also her "life" has become common property. Nancy Hunter Steiner's memoir,<sup>11</sup> covering Plath's last year at Smith College and her spell at the Harvard Summer School (1954-55) reminds us further that the publishers of Harper's Magazine are entitled to purvey

gossip about one of their contributors' <sup>12</sup> traumatic loss of virginity. Steiner's justification is possibly that she does not want to be confused with Joan Gilling in The Bell Jar, who assists in the equivalent episode, but "truth" has naturally more appeal to the prurient than fiction.

Wendy Campbell <sup>13</sup> is the present authority for the Cambridge years and the meeting with Ted Hughes, and then Anne Sexton gives a rather self-indulgent account of the death-talks in Boston of 1958-59. <sup>14</sup> Ames gives the outline to the sensitive area of the last years, although A. Alvarez, in his prologue to The Savage God gives us a description of the poet that is highly coloured by hindsight, especially in the scene in the "drab, damp" coroner's court after her death, with its very Plath-like description of the corpse that only serves to strengthen the myth; "The coffin was at the end of a bare, draped room. She lay stiffly, a ludicrous ruff at her neck. Only her face showed. It was grey and slightly transparent, like wax." <sup>15</sup>

It is this sort of myth-making that is most destructive to the ability of the reader to discern what is true and valuable in Sylvia Plath's poetry, whatever she herself did to encourage the myth-- and she did much. In the same way, Byron and Oscar Wilde, two

other purveyors of very different personal myths while they lived, have both suffered from critical underestimation, when the immediacy of their respective scandals died down. Despite the fundamental seriousness they shared with Sylvia Plath in the creation of their art, their work could not be seen unclouded by their biography. Robert Lowell's description of the poet of Ariel can only do her harm and her readers an injustice, whatever she herself did to promote this sort of charisma: "In these poems. . . Sylvia Plath becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly and subtly created-- hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess', but one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines." <sup>16</sup>

Lowell hardly knew Plath personally. For him, she was a barely-remembered face at his Boston University poetry seminars. <sup>17</sup> For her, however, Lowell was with Anne Sexton the prime mover of the new "breakthrough" in American poetry that influenced her own move into "peculiar, private and taboo subjects." <sup>18</sup> The myth is thus perpetuated by a sort of mutual consent, but it must be seen through, or at least laid aside, if the critical process is to be brought to bear upon the work. <sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, it is often upon these personal impressions that much criticism has been based. Alvarez, the arch-myth-maker and mystifier

by his superimposition of memoir on criticism, has nevertheless been very influential. In "Beyond All this Fiddle",<sup>20</sup> he argues that Sylvia Plath is the ultimate figure in "Extremist Art", a phenomenon which is a result of Lowell's "extension of the Romantic Agony into modern, analytical terms."<sup>21</sup> The artist has become, or turns into, a psychic "Jew", alienated from, but courageously responding to a fragmented society by "internal confusion transmuted into new kinds of artistic order [which becomes] the only possible form of coherence."<sup>22</sup> In his "Epilogue" to his book Under Pressure, Alvarez puts it more succinctly. "The modern artist seems more often to create his sickness in his work, giving himself over to it for the sake of the range and intensity of his art. He cultivates not his own garden but his psychosis or, at very least, his psychopathic tendencies."<sup>23</sup>

Cox and Jones, in "After the Tranquilized Fifties", would more or less agree with this, "that in a deranged world, a deranged response is the only possible reaction of a sensitive mind."<sup>24</sup> Alvarez's theory suggested that the modern artist fights to keep his individuality against society's depersonalizing forces and its psychoanalytic methods of formulating people. As a corroboration of this, A. R. Jones in "Necessity and Freedom" speaks of Lowell's example, followed most notably by Plath,

in making the dramatic monologue (as a lyric rather than, as in Browning, a dramatic projection of a persona) "the predominant poetic mode".<sup>25</sup> This is a personal confession that might be based upon Kafka's advice to Oscar Pollak, "a book should serve as an axe for the frozen sea within us."<sup>26</sup> Alvarez, Cox and Jones would all see Plath's poetry as the latest and most "extreme" manifestation of a strain of Romanticism ( that Freud noted as the confusion of eros and thanatos), wherein "love is completed by death and can only be perfected in death."<sup>27</sup>

Freud takes us naturally on to psychologically-based studies of Sylvia Plath. David Holbrook, in three essays, has pointed out the inherent dangers in Plath's poetry that threatened the poet herself and, potentially, the reader also. In "The 200 Inch Distorting Mirror", Holbrook calls Plath "a clear example of the schizoid writer "who," hollow at the core of her personality", seeks a remedy for the Laingian "ontological insecurity" through her poetry."<sup>28</sup> In "R. D. Laing and the Death Circuit",<sup>29</sup> Holbrook shows how Plath's suicide attempt, as described in The Bell Jar was a typically "schizoid" action, and was motivated by hope for a rebirth, not death-- an attempted regression to the womb. Moreover, in her poetry, Plath seeks an even more deeply symbolic



rebirth, taking the form of a demand upon the reader to confirm her identity by, as it were, sharing her madness -- as the Laingian psychotherapist seeks an analogous empathy with his patient. As critics, we may be involved in "a psychotic detachment from reality" because of the poem's sheer schizoid power, having the "insights which in a neurotic are repressed and blocked".<sup>30</sup> Alvarez's diagnosis of Plath as a neurotic<sup>31</sup> was therefore mistaken, and Holbrook implies that the former critic's theory of her art's "creative strength" as Plath's substitute for the neurotic's "manic defence" is quite wrong on the psychoanalytic count. Holbrook's latest judgement, in The Penguin Guide to English Literature,<sup>32</sup> is ambivalent in the extreme: "Each such endorsement of pathological morality merely encourages both art and criticism to take flight even farther from human dignity and reality-- and even from the courage Sylvia Plath showed, in her anguished exploration of her humanness, at best, when she was being true to herself."<sup>33</sup> The overwhelming question here is: if being true to oneself results in a morally unacceptable art when practised by the "schizoid" writer, what sort of art should that writer aim at?

The answer, I believe, is that to classify the work of an artist as "schizoid" or "psychopathological" tells the reader little about what the artist is trying to create, but classifies how he is trying to create

it in a terminology not immediately relevant to what the artist had in mind when he created it. To write a good poem, the poet needs a strong grasp of the literary, aesthetic rules that govern the art of poetry before any coherent creation can take place. Good art is therefore always more than masked confession, but Sylvia Plath's has not been often treated as such. It is probably partly the fact that she is contemporaneous with great developments in psychoanalysis, partly the availability of her life-history, that has made her vulnerable in this way.

Moreover, there are separate moralities governing the artist and his art. "Schizoid" (and this has been Laing's chief contribution to psychiatry) should no longer have moral overtones as the judgement of a personality, any more than "cancerous" should be a moral judgement of a limb. Artists will, of course, continue to be diagnosed psycholanalytically, and their work demonstrated to be symptomatic of their mental "abnormalities" even though, ironically, their work may be an attempt to resist formulation in this way. In Sylvia Plath's case critics, in pursuit of the personality, have neglected the art, which has often served as nothing more than proof positive of a diseased psyche. If criticism still has as its business to enhance a judicious appreciation of the literary work,

then it should primarily concern itself with that work's positive aesthetic qualities. As for the morality of a work, that is independent of either the morality or immorality of the artist, or his sanity or insanity, and can only be judged by the work's relationship to its tradition (an aesthetic consideration) or to its socio-political milieu (always very dangerous, shifting ground which involves the whole controversial field of censorship). The critic's role should be only analogous to the psychotherapist's, who does not condemn his patient for his illness but seeks to diagnose it and build upon those strengths that remain.

Sylvia Plath saw her own poetic taste, and stated it, quite lucidly, in this extract from "Context":

My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima; but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over yew trees in a neighbourhood graveyard. Not about the testaments of tortured Algerians, but about the night thoughts of a tired surgeon. . . surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure--not its influence as religious or political propaganda. Certain poems and lines of poetry seem as solid and miraculous to me as church altars or the coronations of queens must seem to people who revere quite different images.<sup>34</sup>

The poetry, then, is important as poetry, above all; as a particular art form involving intricately interrelating words, images and rhythms. It has been said, that all

poetry, indeed all art makes a political statement. However, the critics' initial focus must be on the individual **statement** that was made by the particular artist.

The power of Plath's poetry lies not only in the subtly created organic structure of each poem (to provide an integrated vehicle of verbal expression), but also in the close unity of the whole opus, representing a development as continuous, rapid, impressive and as abruptly curtailed as that of Keats. As William F. Claire has said, "Her poems resist line extractions, build steadily, word by word, image by image."<sup>35</sup> The impact of her poems is cumulative, and often comprehension of one image in one of them is dependent on its echo in another.

I allow myself the adjective "obsessional" to describe Plath's technique of often insistent repetition of a number of words and images, which, by their reverberation in different contexts, unify her work and take on a remarkably rich and suggestive power. "Obsessional", I realize, is a term that falls within the province of the psychoanalyst, a province I have generally chosen to avoid. However, it is the "manipulative" characteristic of an obsession, the "ritual" control (or overcontrol) evident in its application to art as noted by Andrew Brink<sup>36</sup> that relates it to my

aim, and also to the statement of Plath's quoted on page 12.

The hardest personal fact to separate from the poetry of Plath, if it is possible at all, is that she was a woman. Female poets of distinction, even nowadays, are not common-- only Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton appear in Alvarez's New Poetry anthology.<sup>37</sup> Plath is the most original, most distinctive female poet since Emily Dickinson, and possibly also the only major female poet in literature in English besides her. Criticism, a male-dominated province, has perhaps attempted to compensate for its inability to locate her work within a clearly-defined tradition by excessive concentration on the biographical elements, informed with a curiosity the unusual always breeds. There is a groping for analogies, (as in Lowell's effusions about "super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines" -- q.v. n<sup>16</sup>) that becomes rather patronising. Plath herself, by virtue of the fact that even in mythology, women have a secondary role, is forced upon the limited number of personae available to a woman, but distorts them in totally original and disturbing ways. In doing so, she has mythologized herself, and become the model for the Plathian imitator.. Harriet Rosenstein, in an intelligent and perceptive essay, summarizes the achievement of Plath as a female poet: ". . .no other woman, at least in the history of English verse, has had the audacity

to mate the least "feminine" aspects of the female sensibility -- the capacity for sheer brute anger, for example-- with the least 'poetic' aspects of the female experience-- striking diapers or menstrual blood."<sup>38</sup>

So then, while male critics like Cox and Jones would make the obvious assumption that Ariel or The Bell Jar is the result of the general feeling "that in a deranged world, a deranged response is the only possible reaction of the sensitive mind,"<sup>39</sup> Rosenstein wittily shifts the focus to a female point of view. Thus, given the social background of the 'fifties and the position of women in those years, "its [The Bell Jar's] world of elitist colleges and slick women's magazines and genital fumbling and familial pieties where everyone seems lobotomized already, is hardly the place to 'get well enough' to want to return to."<sup>40</sup>

Recent criticism has seen a growth of antipathy to Plath, because of what has been judged her deleterious effect on English poetry. Largely, its liberating effect (as Rosenstein showed, it gives expression to whole new areas of female experience) has been ignored. Alvarez's theory of Extremist poetry has gained general currency but has taken on highly pejorative overtones which he did not originally intend. Some views from a recent critical anthology, British Poetry Since 1960:

A Critical Survey<sup>41</sup>, serves to illustrate this point. Peter Porter, the poet, tells in an interview that "there's nothing in Plath and [Ted] Hughes that gives anyone a chance to go anywhere,"<sup>42</sup> despite the fact that, like Eliot and Dylan Thomas by previous generations, these two poets are the ones most highly imitated by would-be poets. Anne Cluysenaar is scarcely any less vague in her discussion of the sources of Plath's poetic inspiration (though equally determined to link her with her husband): "The poetry of the British 'sixties in its most extreme representatives, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes, shows the influence of a dual crisis: an emotional crisis following the war and the revelations of psychology, and an intellectual crisis dating back, probably, to the second half of the nineteenth century."<sup>43</sup>

Another poet, Alan Brownjohn, offers support to what may be construed as a view similar to Holbrook's, only without the same psychological interest to justify itself. "So most poetry. . . becomes literally uninteresting to those critics who find it legitimate only when it deals in images of extremity, when it can be seen to represent an unquestionable personal anguish (the Plath syndrome)."<sup>44</sup> There is more than a hint of petulance in that final phrase-- "the Plath syndrome"-- almost as if something dishonest had been done by the poet to draw attention

to herself and divert it from worthier causes-- a conspiracy that even the critics participate in. Finally, and more dangerously misleading, the quest for neatly apposite analogies continues. Plath is called "a survivor in the psychiatric sense" and a long allusion to Robert Jay Lifton's Death in Life: The Survivors of Hiroshima serves to point an apparent parallel between those who lived through the atomic devastation of the Japanese city, and Plath's persona as "Lady Lazarus" (A., 16), who suffers from an equivalent trauma, it is claimed-- her father's death. The parallels are these:

. . . extreme vulnerability to danger, a sense of being bound to the dead and of guilt at having survived them, an attraction towards a masochistic life-pattern, and a liability to suffer bodily complaints. End-of-the-world imagery is frequent as is a tendency to assert mastery over death (and assuage guilt) by repeating the process of dying in an imaginary form so that its outcome is a miraculous survival.<sup>45</sup>

This is an attempt, through 'diagnosis', to show that a recognized pathological condition is embodied in Plath's work, to render it thus more commonplace. It encourages the reader to confront it as a psychiatrist would a typical case; and moreover, there is even an implicit mockery here, a tendency to point out the absurdity of one individual's attempts to compare her mental anguish with the physical suffering of hundreds of thousands. It fails to take into account that a poem like "Lady Lazarus" is a lyric, an individual's association



of self with a community of suffering. Lyric poetry is both an assertion of the uniqueness of all individuality (and as such, no one individual's agony, mental or physical, is lessened or heightened merely because they suffered alone or together with others), but also a movement outwards, from the individual's experience towards universal truth. "Hiroshima" is merely a symbol, not just of the community of suffering of which the poet feels herself a part, but also of man's seemingly hopeless self-destructiveness. But if life were just a process of negation without counter-forces, there would be no subject for art, whose essence is conflict. Faced with this hopelessness, Plath's poems are still able to offer the most tenuous of hopes. "My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark"(see n<sup>34</sup>), the secret processes of creation continue despite everything.

Finally I would like to cite a recent essay (significantly by a distinguished female critic) that offers the promise of a forthcoming reevaluation of Sylvia Plath's poetry, once the biographical elements have diminished in importance as the immediacy of her death fades. Barbara Hardy, in "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: Enlargement or Derangement?", sees Plath's poetry basically as one of rejection and non-affirmation of life,

yet simultaneously a poetry rooted in love. <sup>46</sup> Far from being an expression of a "private sickness", a powerful universalising force is seen to be present in Plath's work. Death and suffering, as symptoms of modern life, are ubiquitous, but at the base of all experience is the possibility of a togetherness at the very personal level, symbolised by the mother/baby relationship in "Nick and the Candlestick" (A., 40-41) -- a strong elemental communion undetected by Holbrook. Nevertheless, Sylvia Plath's great achievement is her exploration of the community of suffering, of the pain that is prevalent at all levels of existence, or, in Barbara Hardy's words, ". . .how to dwell in and on the knives and needles of the personal life without shutting off the knives and needles in Biafra, Vietnam, Dachau and Hiroshima". <sup>47</sup>

## II

### METHODS

The full extent of the lesson Sylvia Plath learnt from T.S.Eliot has by no means been fully comprehended by the critics. Charles Newman cites "Lesbos" as "Mademoiselle's very own Prufrock"<sup>1</sup>, but this is the limit of the recognition that has been made of this poem's extraordinary debt to Eliot. The lines

I should sit on a rock off Cornwall and comb my hair.  
I should wear tiger pants, I should have an affair.  
We should meet in another life, we should meet in air,  
Me and you.

(WT.,34)

are more than just a parodic allusion to the hero of "The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock"'s wistful fantasies.<sup>2</sup> Both Eliot's device of bathetic juxtaposition<sup>3</sup> and his nightmarish urban settings<sup>4</sup> are employed in the lines that follow:

Meanwhile there's a stink of fat and baby crap.  
I'm doped and thick from my last sleeping pill.  
The smog of cooking, the smog of hell  
Floats our heads, two venomous opposites. . . .

lines that are a homage to, and a continuation of, a tradition of allusiveness Eliot and Pound founded between them. Sylvia Plath's use of allusions that are often every bit as recondite in origin as parts of The Waste Land have caused much, often ludicrous misrepresentation of her poetic aims by critics who have failed to appreciate that an allusion has been made. It is a situation that is only just beginning to be remedied. Thus, Ingrid Melander

has pointed out that "The Disquieting Muses" (C., 58-60) is not, as one critic has it, a poem referring to Greek Mythology, but a precise allusion to a painting by a founder of modern Surrealism, Giorgio de Chirico.<sup>5</sup> The influence upon Plath of exponents of what may be termed 'paranoic painting' (e.g. the German Symbolist Arnold Böcklin) can be seen in her poem "On the Decline of Oracles"<sup>6</sup>, which also bears an epigraph from de Chirico's writings. While Eliot's fragmented allusions to literary works in The Waste Land represent cultural dissolution and incipient chaos, Plath chooses her often non-literary references to evoke a sense of disquiet, paranoia and threat. So, in "All the Dead Dears" (C., 28), the Cardinal's nameless terror in Webster's Duchess of Malfi<sup>7</sup> is fused with an image of a drowned father-figure -- who reappears in "Full Fathom Five" (C., 46-47) with further allusions to The Tempest and The Waste Land<sup>8</sup> -- to represent death's ever-present menace. The effectiveness of the image depends on both the reader's awareness of the Jacobean dramatists' style of versification and of the obsession with death found in Webster and his contemporaries. It also depends on his familiarity with the symbolic archetype of the drowned father:

How they grip us through thin and thick,  
 These barnacle dead!  
 This lady here's no kin  
 Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck  
 Blood and whistle my marrow clean

To prove it. . .

And an image looms under the fishpond surface  
 Where the daft father went down  
 With orange duck-feet winnowing his hair. . . .  
 (C., 27-28)

The father is a loved one, one of "All the long gone darlings" who, having declined into death and therefore apparently lost to the living, nevertheless are able to return to haunt them, as Hamlet was haunted by his father's Ghost. The juxtaposition in "All the Dead Dears" of Ariel's lyrical account of Duke Alonso's 'death' by drowning and the Cardinal's "thing arm'd with a rake" in the fishpond suggests a bizarre duality in the poet's response to the death of her loved ones -- a mingled attraction and repulsion that will be seen to permeate references to death in much of Plath's poetry.

There is a third allusion in the lines quoted above that is much less obvious, and possibly even subconscious in origin. The phrase "winnowing his hair" puts one in mind of Keats' lyrical personification of the season, itself symbolic of a slow decline into death, in his ode "To Autumn" -- "Who hath not seen thee oft amid thy store, / Thy hair soft-lifted by the winnowing wind." In Plath, however, the autumnal colour "orange" becomes the lurid tint of the duck's feet. Birds' feet have for Plath a particular, personal horror, yet one that is communicable, as in that terrifying image in "Death & Co.", "The nude/

Verdigris of the condor" (A.,<sup>10</sup>38). In the following chapter Plath's use of colour and texture as a crucial part of her poetic diction will be discussed. Provisionally, however, it must be said that it is not only through the allusion to a literary source but also through the intensely personal reference that can nonetheless be given universal significance that Sylvia Plath works with great effectiveness. Her diction is compounded of words that often have private associations at origin, but which, given appropriate context and carefully-judged repetition, take on a unique suggestive power that enables the reader to share in their privacy. Her literary forebears in this field are James Joyce, who transformed mundane events or banal conversation into the 'epiphanies' that make up the episodes of Dubliners, and T.S.Eliot, who uses images deriving from personal memories to illuminate the most archetypal situations, as for instance the appearance of the ruffians and the water-mill in "Journey of the Magi"<sup>11</sup>.

Sylvia Plath uses repetition, by reechoing her more personal images from poem to poem, to intensify the evocative power of these images. The process is one of contextual inter-association. The function of birds' feet and their association with violent death is an example of this. It is only by examining groups of imagery in their context that the obscure centre of Plath's meaning may be attained. Hers is a poetry of such concentrated

statement that the key to understanding one poem may lie only in the recurrence of certain images in other contexts in other poems. The failure to appreciate the inter-relations between Plath's poems has led to as much bewilderment and misunderstanding as the failure to note her allusions to external sources. At the end of "Lady Lazarus", the speaker foretells menacingly her vengeful resurrection:

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

(A.,19)

This appears to be an allusion to a sort of malevolent phoenix emerging from the human ash of the concentration-camp victims to avenge the suffering she has experienced in common with them. In the God of "Brasilia", however, addressed as "You who eat/ People like light rays" (WT.,13) a similar figure appears externalized as a symbol of the dehumanizing forces at work within humanity itself. Lady Lazarus' similarity with this God adds more than a touch of ambivalence to her self-portrayal as 'victim'. Instead she becomes, as a Nemesis-figure, the other half of a vicious circle of destruction, an embodiment of revenge terrible as the original sin, and hardly a sympathetic figure.

The real origin of the common imagery in these two poems can perhaps be found in "Stings":

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red

Scar in the sky, red comet  
 Over the engine that killed her--  
 The mausoleum, the wax house.

(A., 67)

Full comprehension of this imagery depends on the reader's awareness of the allusion being made to bee-lore. Most readers of Plath realise, through the strong biographical element in critical approaches to her work, that the 'bee-poems' in Ariel and "The Swarm" in Winter Trees have a personal significance in that Sylvia Plath's father was an expert on bees. Most readers will appreciate the association, in the lines quoted above, of the hive with death through the pun "wax house". However, these lines' main function is to express the merging of the (poetic) self with a reincarnated but phantom (and therefore invulnerable, having no tangible existence) embodiment of vengeful destruction, similar to that which appears at the end of "Lady Lazarus". The poem takes place in the insect-world of the bees, but the poet, as queen-bee, forms the linking agent with the human world which, it is implied, is as devoid of mercy and compassion as that of the insects. Women's hatred of men, symptomatic of mankind's hopelessly self-destructive aggression, is symbolically sublimated in a description of the way real queen-bees behave, ascending to a height over the hive where only the strongest drone (or male bee) will be able to mate with her, ensuring the continued strength of the species.



After this, all the male bees are driven out of the hive and destroyed by the workers -- infertile females whose job it is to feed the queen, and who appear in "Stings" as "These women who only scurry,/ Whose news is the open cherry, the open clover" (A.,66).

To see bee-imagery in the 'bee-poems' as merely referring to Otto Plath, author of Bumblebees and their Ways (New York, 1934) is to miss their universal significance altogether. The personal experience (for presumably Sylvia Plath's interest in and knowledge about bees does derive from her father) has been turned into something more than just confession or the outpourings of a private obsession into a statement about man's relationship to man, but a statement that can only be understood if the rather abstruse allusions are appreciated. Pound and Eliot demanded no less of their readers; it is imperative that Sylvia Plath be not dismissed as sick, immoral, self-fixated or impossibly obscure, until the poetry itself has been closely studied as a form of literary expression, rather than for what it tells us about its creator.

As a preliminary example of how I mean to approach Sylvia Plath's imagery, and how I wish to demonstrate her ability to create through it a poetry at once personal and yet with an intense, almost physical power to communicate universally, I will examine her use of the word 'hook',

and show how its connotative effect increases as her poems are considered chronologically, and her poetic skills develop. 'Hook' first appears in "The Stones", the last part of "Poem for a Birthday" in The Colossus. Of this latter poem, Richard Howard, in his review of the first edition of The Colossus for Poetry, spoke prophetically. "The last poem in The Colossus, "The Stones", is what I take to be a new departure. Here is more than the Pythoness' expectancy as she broods over a broken landscape.<sup>12</sup> . . . I look forward to hearing more about that".<sup>13</sup>

"The Stones", as befitting the last poem in the book, forms a transition between The Colossus and Ariel. The relevant quotation is as follows: "On Fridays the little children come/ To trade their hooks for hands" (C.,88). A 'hook' is inanimate. Its function is to catch and hold (coats, for example) or to catch, hold and draw towards oneself, often for the purpose of killing -- like a fish-hook. It is metallic and sharp; it is dangerous and causes pain. It has been associated with a hand, especially as a substitute for an amputated one. In "The Stones" the children, in common with the speaker, are reinvested with human characteristics they lack in "the city of spare parts". However, their spiritual desolation remains, and the poem ends heavily ironically:

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.  
My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.  
I shall be good as new.

(C.,88)

In "Blackberrying" (CW.,24-25), the thorns of the berries are "hooks", tiny hands that attempt to hinder the poet's progress towards the nothingness of the sea. These semi-animate hands are invested not just with purpose but with love. This is symbolised by the "blood-red juices" of the berries themselves: "I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me." (CW.,24). Similarly, in "The Munich Mannequins", "The blood flood is the flood of love" (A.,74) -- the association is between the menstrual cycle and the "blood sisterhood" it represents among women. Returning to "The Stones", it is found here that love is personified as the "bald nurse", the agent that keeps alive the patients that need "mending" (C.,88). It is only one step from this to "Tulips", a monologue spoken by a patient who lies recovering in hospital: "And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes/ Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love for me." (A.,22).

In "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.", 'hooks' gain another layer of meaning. They are the surgeon's implements, used to hold the patient's organs in place during operations. The tired surgeon experiences a sort of vision or hallucination, a distortion of the operation in hand: "The heart is a red-bell-bloom, in distress." (CW.,48). 'Hooks' may also be instruments of torture, able to produce a humiliating pain that comes from exposed hanging -- the helplessness of a carcass or of a caught fish. Thus, the prisoner

in "The Jailer"<sup>14</sup> is "Hung, starved, burned, hooked", while "The Eavesdropper"<sup>15</sup> is told by the poet, "I had you hooked", only to discover the hated intruder is really a disconcerting doppelganger, and that her victim, "Toad stone! Sister bitch! Sweet neighbor!", is merely another incarnation of herself. For these ejaculations, representing the discovery that one is both ~~tortur~~er and victim (perhaps the ultimate humiliation), form an allusion to Baudelaire's famous outburst against his reader (also quoted by Eliot in The Waste Land.<sup>16</sup>

'Hooks' are ubiquitous in the later poems. "The Applicant" is asked whether he wears "A brace or a hook" (A.,14), for the assumption is that he has something missing. In "Tulips", the 'hook' assumes clear emotional connotations: "My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;/ Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks." (A.,20). The symbol of human warmth, the smile, is thus transformed by the speaker into a menacing demand, an attempt by life to claw her back from her descent into oblivion into a real world of pain, symbolised by the tulips: "The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals;/ They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat. . ." (A.,21). Here is an intimation of what this study aims ultimately to reveal -- the existence of a dense scheme of images and symbols with death at their centre, that Sylvia Plath elaborated

as her poetic powers developed. While death represents release and freedom for the patient in "Tulips":

. . . I only wanted  
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.  
How free it is, you have no idea how free --  
(A., 21)

life, on the other hand, is symbolised by caging or imprisonment, and even by conventional symbols for death itself -- the jaws of a wild beast. It is the desire to escape the pain of existence that has caused the reversal of symbols. Thus, in "Elm":

I am inhabited by a cry.  
Nightly it flaps out  
Looking, with its hooks, for something to love.  
(A., 26)

The "hooks" here are analogous to the smiles in the family photograph in "Tulips". It is a craving for love seen through a distorted perception, that transforms it into something destructive, a 'hook'. The "cry" in "Elm" becomes one of the "wolf-headed fruit bats/ Hanging from their scorched hooks" in Zoo Keeper's Wife (CW., 58), repelling by its appearance the love it seeks. For in "Elm", "love is a shadow" (A., 25), something perpetually dark, receding and unattainable, that may be embodied by a vanishing horse<sup>17</sup> or clouds: "Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?" (A., 26).

"Elm" introduces another image central to Plath's poetry, the moon. The moon is closely identified with the images of blood and menstruation. In "Elm" it becomes an

object for the futile 'hooks' of the love-craving speaker:

The moon also is merciless: she would drag me  
Cruelly, being barren.  
Her radiance scathes me. Or perhaps I have caught her.

I let her go. I let her go  
Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery.  
(A., 25-26)

The "moon" is the unfertilised ovum released during menstruation. If "The blood flood is the flood of love" (A., 74), then love itself is barren like the moon, "Diminished and flat" like a woman after a miscarriage. In this way, the conventionally life-affirming associations of the words 'blood' and 'love' disappear, and are replaced by a system centered around sterility and death.

It is the constant and painful demands life makes that renders human contacts 'hook'-like. In "Berck-Plage", "These children are after something, with hooks and cries, / And my heart too small to bandage their terrible faults." (A., 31-32). The terrible craving for love results in a kind of mutual laceration. In "Ariel", the "hooks" of the "Nigger-eye/ Berries" (A., 36) are escaped only by a head-long and suicidal plunge towards death and freedom. Here again conventional symbols are turned on their head. While the "hooks" represent life's exigencies, they are "dark" in colour, and the berries are "Black sweet blood mouthfuls, / Shadows. . ." (A., 36), epithets usually connected with death. The promise of death, on the other hand, is treated in apocalyptic terms, becoming a sort of culmin-

ation and then a transcendence of life's purpose:

And now I  
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.  
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.  
And I  
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies  
Suicidal. . . . (A., 36-37)

The imagery is echoed in The Bell Jar, on a more mundane level but still expressive of human purpose and ambition:

What a man is is an arrow into the future  
and what a woman is is the place the arrow  
shoots off from.<sup>18</sup>

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.<sup>19</sup>

In "Ariel", however, the positive, life-affirming "rocket" has been distorted into a symbol of a flight towards self-destruction, and suicide has been invested with the image's positive qualities.

'Hook'-imagery permeates Winter Trees. In "Gigolo" the 'hook' as smile is identified with sexual demand, and has a dual function. For while the "Bright fish-hooks, the smiles of women" (WT., 14) are used to attract the gigolo's attention, it is the women who are ultimately 'hooked', victims of his ruthless, almost inhuman sexual efficiency. In "The Courage of Shutting-Up", the tongue is "that antique billhook", an organ that in attempting to

communicate instead flagellates. As a 'hook', the tongue demands attention, and its insistent noise makes it another painful symbol of life. The figure of the "surgeon", on the other hand, ". . . does not speak./ He has seen too much death, his hands are full of it." (WT.,20). He maintains a stoic calm, an almost Buddhist transcendence of life. As a priest of death, he is able to "put by" the tongue, and thus remain unscathed by the 'hook'-like life it represents. His achievement is depicted as admirable, for the tongue ". . . is a marvellous object--/ The things it has pierced in its time." (WT.,20). For "The Mystic", "The air is a mill of hooks" (WT.,26), a constant, unbearable series of physical and mental stresses, like persistent insects from which there is no relief. The only "remedy" to this intolerable situation is a passive recognition of the blind love the organism displays in its determination to perpetuate its existence: "The sun blooms, it is a geranium./ The heart has not stopped." (WT.,27).

Finally, 'hooks' lie at the root of how the world itself is structured, in that they connote both pain and compulsion. In that difficult poem "The Other"<sup>20</sup> the poet asks of her doppelganger,

Open your handbag. What is that bad smell?  
It is your knitting, busily

Hooking itself to itself. . . ,  
(WT.,22)

and this grotesque image for life's dogged, elaborate



and unwelcome habit of perpetuating itself has its counterpart in "Three Women", as the Third Voice, remembering her child's conception, assumes the persona of Leda, and sees the world embodied in the swan's eye: ". . . small, mean and black,/ Every little word hooked to every little word, and act to act." (WT.,42). Here is an inescapable chain of necessity that is barbed like a series of hooks. The First Voice has been able to come to terms with the demands of her newly-born son, nevertheless. His being becomes the sustaining force enabling her to justify her own existence to herself, although she realises that in her baby's eyes she is nothing more than a purveyor of the means of life. The 'hook' here represents a mutual need: "One cry. It is the hook I hang on./ And I am a river of milk." (WT.,48). For the Third Voice, who must give up her child, there is an imbalance of need, and the 'hooks' are thus able to wound:

She is crying, and she is furious.  
Her cries are hooks that catch and grate like cats.  
It is by these hooks she climbs to my notice.  
(WT.,47)

I did not choose the word 'hook' at random. In its dual function of 'drawing-towards' and 'hurting' it makes available a wealth of imaginative associations that give it an important place in the web of Plath's imagery. I speak of her imagery as a 'web' because, as I have briefly tried to show, it is very closely-knit. Analysis of one part involves the consideration of other, closely-connected

parts, and in the centre lies the spider, death, Sylvia Plath's obsessive theme, to which all the parts are joined for the purpose of illuminating it. Indeed, it would be possible to draw a web-like diagram showing how all her recurrent images and symbols, through associative strands, are inexorably linked with death. As succeeding chapters will consider in turn major groups of images, these strands will become more clearly defined.

### III

#### CHROMATIC IMAGERY

This chapter will be concerned with Sylvia Plath's use of colour in her imagery. This is a large subject, and one that eludes clear definition. To give a specific colour to an object is to attribute to it one of the commonest of epithets, but also, depending on the context, to draw on an almost limitless symbolic wealth of association identified with that colour. To demonstrate the different uses of colour made by two poets of known influence on Sylvia Plath, it is only necessary to recall D.H. Lawrence's use of blue to evoke profound, almost mystical emotional depths in "Bavarian Gentians"<sup>1</sup>, or the symbolic variations made on the same colour by Wallace Stevens in his philosophical masterpiece "The Man with the Blue Guitar"<sup>2</sup>.

In Sylvia Plath's poetry, the most important colours (though 'shades' or 'tones' is a more exact description) are 'black' and 'white', often placed in juxtaposition. In her early work, both these shades often stand for a menace whose achromatic hue serves to render it more terrifying. Thus, in "Complaint of the Crazy Queen"<sup>3</sup>, the pursuing giant, an embryonic 'colossus'-figure, has "Looks fierce and black as rocks", with which he gains mastery over the "pale queen". In "Pursuit"<sup>4</sup>, the panther is "The black

marauder" that pursues the helpless maiden through a "hot white noon". In "The Snowman on the Moor"<sup>5</sup>, the colours prove reversible, and the pursuing 'colossus' is an "Austere, corpse-white/ Giant" in a white, snow-covered landscape that is given spatial definition only by "stiles of black stone". These three poems enact similar, primal dramas in which a woman is pursued and caught by an embodiment of violent masculinity who then rapes her into submission. The protagonists and their backdrops are thus arrayed in suitably primal tones. Furthermore, in Plath's earliest poetry the symbolic values invested in 'black' and 'white' may be seen to be equally inauspicious, as for example in "The Temper of Time"<sup>6</sup> where, in a landscape drawn from nightmare, "white evil stars" serve only to illuminate "black birds of omen".

The poems of The Colossus make much use of the contrast between 'black' and 'white'. "The Spinster", despairing at the "sloven" disorder of April, longs for a Winter that is "Scrupulously austere in its order/ Of white and black. . ." (C., 68), and sets about creating an equivalent purity of definition in herself, which renders her safe from "mere insurgent man" and the violence, or love, he hopes to offer her. Already the colours have become identified with a stark, life-denying barrenness. "The Man in Black" makes much use of the visual qualities of the contrast between the two colours, assembling a

composition as a painter might. The solitary and mysterious figure of the title, who

. . . across those white

Stones, strode out in your dead  
Black coat, black shoes, and your  
Black hair. . . ,

(C.,54)

becomes the mystical "fixed vortex" of the seascape, a point harmonising the oppositions of black and white, sea, sky and land. The triple repetition of the word 'black' in the quotation above is an incantatory device Plath uses with increasing frequency and subtlety as her skills develop. Increasingly, both 'black' and 'white' become closely identified with death. In "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" (C.,10), the corpses are "black as burnt turkey" around which "white-smocked boys" cluster.

The poems in Crossing the Water concerned with landscapes are permeated with an inhuman or dehumanising darkness, as in the "Black/ Admonitory cliffs" of "Finis-terre" (CW.,15), the "Black stone, black stone" of "Wuthering Heights" (CW.,12), or the "Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people" of "Crossing the Water" itself (CW.,14). It is possible to draw a parallel between Sylvia Plath and her husband here. Both share an idea of 'blackness' as symbolic of the terrifying, underlying emptiness that the concrete, visible world serves only to mask. One is reminded of Ted Hughes' vision of "The Bull Moses":

. . . a sudden shut-eyed look  
Backward into the head.

7                      Blackness is depth  
Beyond star.

All visible 'blackness' seems to provide an intimation of this universal void. In stark contrast to it is the 'whiteness' of physical death, of "the faces of the drowned" against the black cliffs in "Finisterre" (CW.,15). In "Insomniac" (CW.,21), this contrast is given a universal context as the speaker describes starlight, against "Blue-black" night, as "A bonewhite light, like death, behind all things". Things of colour, like the "red, purple, blue" sleeping pills become "worn-out and silly", fanciful, futile trivia compared to the primal interplay of 'black' and 'white'.

These two colours characterise the dual aspects of death, the 'spider' central to Plath's web of images. In "Widow", the image of the 'spider' is itself used by Plath to point the contrast between the 'blackness' of the cosmic void and the 'whiteness' of mortality -- of the skin's death-pallor and of exposed bone:

Widow. The bitter spider sits  
And sits in the centre of her loveless spokes.  
Death is the dress she wears, her hat and collar.  
The moth-face of her husband, moonwhite and ill,  
Circles her like a prey she'd love to kill.

(CW.,38)

Here, death's centrality to the human experience turns it into a dark planet, a "shadow-thing" (CW.,39) in the robes of mourning circled by a corpse-white satellite. The shadow

of death runs like a chasm through the heart of life, hindering human contact and love. The lovers in "Event" lie "back to back" in the moonlight, sundered by this shadow:

Love cannot come here.  
A black gap discloses itself.  
On the opposite lip

A small white soul is waving, a small white maggot.  
(CW.,43)

Only when morning comes do the lovers touch, but then "like cripples", mentally mutilated by the knowledge of the hopeless, now internalised darkness that separates them. That 'whiteness', a quality referred to in twenty-six of the thirty-four poems in Crossing the Water, intensifies rather than relieves the hopelessness of the surrounding darkness, may be seen in the landscape of "Sleep in the Mojave Desert" that is "white as a blind man's eye" (CW.,47): in "Apprehensions" (CW.,57), the "white wall" of day moves through the temporary colorations of grey and red, becoming finally the "black wall" of night towards which the "cold blanks" of death advance, no escape having been offered.

The same pattern pervades the later poetry. In "The Night Dances" (A.,27-28), the "pink light" of the child is an ephemeral beauty, impermanent a blessing as snowflakes descended from the "black amnesias of heaven". The priest in "Berck-Plage" is a descendant of "Man in Black" (C.,54) as he stands before the sea, a dark

memento mori for the "white sea-crockery" of the lovers' bodies in the dunes (A., 30-31). Only the tentative yellow glow of the candle-flame briefly tinges the "Black bat airs" enfolding the mother in "Nick and the Candlestick" (A., 40-41) in her cavern where "Even the newts are white". This dark cave symbolises the interior of her skull, within which she is an exploratory "miner". The imagery works on three levels here -- there is the mother and her child sustained against the overwhelming darkness only by the candlelight; there is the poet as "miner" descending into a cave with flimsiest protection against the threat of entombment; and finally there is the poet plumbing the depths of a depression caused by hostile circumstance, a mother who is sustained only by discovering in her baby the potential for Christ-like salvation, while conventional "piranha-religion" can only demand blood and death. The structure of this highly condensed poetic statement is based on the contrast between three different colour-tones -- the surrounding, threatening 'black' of night, the similarly threatening but internal 'white' of bone that death reveals, and the 'blue-yellow' of the life-affirming but precarious candle-flame. In this way the poem taps the suggestive power of one of the most primitive human situations, that of the mother and child (with all the concomitant Biblical associations) protected from the hostile universe by the fire in their rudimentary shelter,



be it cave or "barn" (A.,41) in Bethlehem. A similar situation is found in "By Candlelight" (WT.,28-29), where it is only the white pillar of the candle, held aloft by a brass model of Atlas, that provides a brief respite from the suffocating "sack of black" of the night sky. Atlas' mythological burden, the world itself, has been metaphorically assumed by the poet, labouring under the terrible weight of knowledge man must bear in his full consciousness of his situation.

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" (A.,47) presents an even more complex symphony of tones. A poem of utter despair, it expresses it by showing that 'black' and 'white', apparently extreme opposites, really imply the same thing, the ever-presence of death. The moon is an embodiment of this despair: "The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,/ White as a knuckle and terribly upset." Silhouetted blackly against it is the yew tree, traditional symbol of death. The clouds over the stars are "blue and mystical", but, like the saints' images in the church, bear a colour to show that they are merely transient and irrelevant, like the sleeping pills in "Insomniac" (CW.,21): "The moon sees nothing of this. She is bald and wild./ And the message of the yew tree is blackness -- blackness and silence."

In "Daddy" (A.,54-56), personal relationships prove also to be pervaded with the 'black'/ 'white' contrast.

In a sense the poem is the consummation of the theme of 'pursuit' in the three early poems discussed at the beginning of this chapter. The figure of "Daddy" is a personification of the universal darkness that haunts the poet. He is a "black shoe", a swastika "so black no sky could squeak through", a "black man" at a blackboard who communicates with his daughter via a "black telephone". Dead, he is still able to pursue his "poor and white" victim in his vampire-like reincarnation. Even when his alter-ego's "fat black heart" is finally staked, "Daddy" will still continue to haunt his daughter through his sado-masochistic grip on her, and her only recourse is to embrace death itself in the hope of rejoining him. The poem's final "I'm through" implies that the next suicide-attempt will render all possibility of reassembly futile, unlike the last time when "they stuck me together with glue".

In "The Bee Meeting" (A., 60-62) the speaker's vulnerability is shown in her description of herself as "Pillar of white in a blackout of knives", where 'whiteness' in association with a candle-image similar to that in "By Candlelight" (WT., 28) characterises mortality and clothes death's imminent victims. "The man in black" reappears in "The Bee Meeting" as high priest of the sinister ritual, and is attended by white virgins (the worker bees). The ritual culminates in the magical transformation of the "white hive" into a coffin, the "long white box in the

grove". In "Wintering" (A., 68-69) the swarm of bees itself, as "Black/ Mind against all that white. . . ", becomes in its Winter room so dark it is as if the blackness was ". . . bunched in there like a bat" an embodiment of the malevolent spirit of death. The 'whiteness' of the snow serves not only to intensify the horror of the bees and what they represent by means of a colour contrast, but also in itself as a symbol for bleak coldness, the death of the year. Similarly, in "The Swarm" (WT., 37-38) the snow's "brilliant cutlery" forms a background for the "black intractable mind" of the bees.

In the counterpoint of 'black' and 'white' in "Little Fugue" one is reminded of Whistler's chromatic 'symphonies', analogous in that here another artist in a different media from music composed colours in a quasi-musical way. In this poem, the "black fingers" of the yew are again silhouetted against a white background:

I like black statements.  
The featurelessness of that cloud, now!  
White as an eye all over.

(A., 71)

The 'white eye' is that of the blind pianist, who mentally visualises Beethoven's "Grosse Fuge" as contrasting "Black yew, white cloud", full of Teutonic morbidity. The German theme is developed through a reference to the poet's father, whose death is seen as an assumption of blackness, the symbolic yew tree claiming its own. The poem ends with

the grotesque image, "The clouds are a marriage-dress, of that pallor." (A.,72). The daughter has survived her father, but retains her spiritual virginity and fidelity to him. She sees in the clouds' whiteness an emblem of this fidelity, but it is a "pallor" that also shows her sickness, her vulnerability, and her mortality.

"Three Women" (WT.,40-52) makes much use of 'whiteness' as a quality of sterility. The Second Voice, confronted with a vision of death as she contemplates the trees of Winter, turns ". . .so white, suddenly" (WT.,41), white as the sky that mirrors her inner barrenness as it ". . .empties of its promise, like a cup." The Third Voice remembers the conception of her child as a visit by "a white, cold wing", an allusion both to the dove of the Annunciation and to Leda's swan -- but here the "cold wing" is another intimation of death, the "black meaning" in the swan's eye (WT.,41-42). In this poem as in others, 'black' and 'white' carry equally baleful connotations. Pain may come in either shade: the "white clean chamber" of the delivery room is "a place of shrieks" (WT.,44) for the Third Voice, while for the First Voice her labour pains are "This ram of blackness", an image of sexual horror intensified by its allusion to Iago's description of the Moor in Othello.<sup>8</sup> It is as if the baby, in the pain it causes to its mother at birth, exacts payment for the pleasure she experienced at its conception. The Second

Voice finds no relief from her own anguish at her sterility even of the tentative sort represented by the candlelight in "Nick and the Candlestick" or "By Candlelight", poems to which this speech of hers is connected by echoed imagery:

I hold my fingers up, ten white pickets.  
See, the darkness is leaking from the cracks.  
I cannot contain it. I cannot contain my life.  
(WT., 46)

The remarkable unity of imagery that binds together Sylvia Plath's poetry is evident also in her prose works. In The Bell Jar, Esther, on her first visit to a psychiatrist, tries to explain in symbolic terms the way her insomnia is connected to her depression:

I saw the days of the year stretching ahead like a series of bright, white boxes, and separating one box from another was sleep, like a black shade. Only for me, the long perspective of shades that set off one box from the next had suddenly snapped up, and I could see day after day glaring ahead of me like a white, broad, infinitely desolate avenue.<sup>9</sup>

If black offers relief to the insomniac, it is the black of a death-sleep, an all-encompassing darkness that lies behind the coloured shows of the world. As Esther stands on the beach, she wonders ". . . at what point in space the silly, sham blue of the sky turned black".<sup>10</sup>

Against this merciless interplay of 'black' and 'white', other colours gleam fitfully. Of these, 'red' is the most important. An early villanelle, "To Eva Descending

the Stair"<sup>11</sup>, already establishes it as the colour of blood, of the heart, and of flowers like the rose that are intimately connected to 'blood'-imagery: "Red the unravelled rose sings in your hair:/ Blood springs eternal if the heart be burning." 'Red' may also be a colour of threat, as in the "ruddy" wax mannequins of the de Chirico nocturne "Main Street at Midnight"<sup>12</sup>. Red hair distinguishes a Nemesis-like woman, and it is certain that Lady Lazarus' hair really is red, the colour of blood, the emphatic hue of life itself, as she arises from the dead (A.,19). The sister "The Amnesiac"<sup>13</sup> "never dared to touch" was also red-haired, while the vengeful queen-bee in "Stings" bears the same colour:

Now she is flying  
 More terrible than she ever was, red  
 Scar in the sky, red comet. . . .  
 (A.,67)

Life and pain are two almost synonymous entities in much of Sylvia Plath's poetry, and 'red', the colour of shed blood, serves to knit the connection more closely. "The Eye-mote" (C.,14-15) itself is a "red cinder" that enables the poet to associate herself with Oedipus, that most agonised of existences. In "Two Sisters of Persephone", the sister who embraces the poppies

. . . sees how their red silk flare  
 Of petalled blood  
 Burns open to sun's blade.  
 (C.,63)

Only then is she able, through her profound insight into

life's pain, to give life in turn, and bear "a king". The other sister, "Root-pale" and "Sallow as any lemon" (C., 63-64) through her bloodless complexion betrays her avoidance of life and her subsequent barrenness. In "Who", the first part of "Poem for a Birthday" (C., 80-81), the flowers of the poet's childhood were "red mouths", and this half-<sup>14</sup> allusion to Julius Caesar's wounds foreshadows the whole series of 'flower'/'blood'/'mouth'/'heart'/'wound' images in Ariel, all linked by the colour red. So, in "Tulips", the flowers form a vivid contrast to the whiteness and purity of the hospital sheets: "Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds" (A., 21). They are associated with the blood and pain of lost virginity -- the episode of Esther's<sup>15</sup> defloration in The Bell Jar is brought to mind here -- but the end of the poem brings a sudden reversal. For while the patient desires the white, nun-like withdrawal from life into oblivion, finally, "I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes/ Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me." (A., 22). The tulips then are symbols of life's dogged determination to perpetuate itself, a painful but unquestioning love the heart displays to the organism it sustains. The poem ends optimistically, with suggestions of a forthcoming recovery.

In "Poppies in October" (A., 29) the matchless colour of the flowers is "a love gift", a cry of painful joy from "these late mouths", in violent contrast to the

dull, moribund season. In "Poppies in July" (A.,82) however, the pain the flowers represent has now become unbearable; the poppies are "little hell-flames", "Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth." It is a "mouth" that, when "bloodied", becomes a symbol for the poet's craving for an oblivion that is erotic in its promise of a relief from pain: "If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!" In "Ariel", the orgasmic consummation of the lust for death, and the poet's transfiguration into

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

Eye, the cauldron of morning.

(A.,37)

has the colour red, colour of extreme passion, desire and danger appearing at the climax, the ultimate objective of the speaker being a transcendence of the pain 'red' symbolises by seizing it in total embrace.

'Red' may provide a clear visual contrast to the interplay of 'black' and 'white' but often serves to intensify the pessimistic view of the universe seen in these monochromatic terms. So, in "Event" (CW.,43), the only clearly-defined object standing out against the 'black'/'white' aridity and impossibility of human contact is the "pained, red wood" of the baby's face, who "opens its mouth now, demanding." This redness seems to confirm for the poet, undergoing a true 'dark night of the soul',



that this new being's life, for which she is responsible, is nothing but a burden of pain. A similar image occurs in "Lesbos" (WT.,34), as the speaker describes her own child as ". . .schizophrenic,/ Her face red and white, a panic." When it is the colour of the earth itself, 'red' seems to demonstrate the very fundamentality of pain to existence. In "Brasilia" (WT.,13), the mother's plea to what she envisages as a destructive Divinity to leave her child unharmed is made from an earth that is itself the colour of blood, testament to that Divinity's power. It is the mud of "Getting There", "Thick, red and slipping. It is Adam's side,/ This earth I rise from." (A.,44). Although in "Letter in November" the speaker, in an elated mood, is able to embrace lovingly the earth's "beautiful red" (A.,51) in the same way that the fertile sister in "Two Sisters of Persephone" (C.,63-64) embraced the poppies and became richer for her knowledge of life's pain, in most of Plath's later poetry it is a pain that becomes increasingly intolerable and from which an escape is ever more urgently sought. In "Stopped Dead" the Spanish landscape, "Red and yellow", is itself identified with an all-pervasive violence, manifest particularly in the sexual sphere of human activity. Here the terrain is, with its lurid coloration, ". . .two passionate hot metals/ Writhing and sighing" (WT.,24). The 'redness' has become not just the pain that characterises mortal existence but the urge to destroy that that pain

provokes. In "The Swarm", Napoleon's destructive urge turns his army into "a red tatter" (WT.,38), while at the other human extreme the baby in "Balloons" pops his "guileless and clear" plaything and then sits back to contemplate "A red/ Shred in his little fist." (A.,81).

For Sylvia Plath, 'blue' is the colour identified with both memory and oblivion, in the clarity of the sea and the sky or the obscurity of mist and fog. The blue sparks of electricity, especially those connected with the psychotherapeutic technique of Electro-Convulsive Therapy (E.C.T.), serve to stand as a dividing line between what is remembered and what is forgotten. So, life's obscure origins are symbolised by the "blue mist" that enfolds "The Manor Garden" (C.,9), while the malign figure of "The Jailor"<sup>16</sup> works upon his prisoner by clouding her memory: "The same placard of blue fog is wheeled into position. . .".

'Blue' may represent an obliviousness, even of death itself, as much as an oblivion. Thus, the lovers depicted in Brueghel's painting "The Triumph of Death", described in the second part of "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" (C.,10) are

. . . blind to the carrion army;  
He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin  
Skirts. . . .

More often, however, it is the visual clarity of the blueness of the sky and sea that is itself disturbing. The

very featurelessness of the "Sky and sea, horizon-hinged/  
Tablets of blank blue. . ." (C.,57) threatens the sanity of  
the "Hermit at Outermost House", and in "Mussel Hunter at  
Rock Harbour", another poem of confrontation with the  
elements, this image is developed through the "blue  
mussels" which, being bivalvular, become a symbol for the  
trap the speaker feels herself in:

. . .it seemed  
A sly world's hinges had swung  
Shut against me.  
(C.,71)

For the poet's Electra-persona in "The Colossus" (C.,20-  
21), it is "A blue sky out of the Oresteia" that betokens  
an archetypal memory linking all daughters who have lost  
their fathers, and 'blue' provides thus a suitable back-  
cloth for any tragic drama. In "Electra on Azalea Path",<sup>17</sup>  
a poem on a similar theme, 'blue' is the colour of the  
instrument of suicide, the razor, which again provides the  
linkage between daughter and father as the agent of a  
hoped-for reunion in death. As the colour of memory, 'blue'  
is associated with things that stimulate the imagination,  
and enable it to produce visions: often these things take  
obscure forms, like the "blue water-mists" that herald the  
appearance of the "Lorelei" (C.,22), or the "blue dissolve"  
of the fog in "Winter Trees" (WT.,11) that creates a  
medium wherein memories are able to coalesce. Moreover,  
'blue' is the colour that for Sylvia Plath seems best able

to stimulate the creative act itself. Alvarez quotes her in an unpublished note for the B.B.C. in which she talks of her poems written in 1962: ". . .they were all written at about four in the morning -- that still, blue, almost eternal hour before the baby's cry. . .".<sup>18</sup>

'Blue' is also the traditional colour associated with the Virgin Mary. In "Heavy Women" (CW.,37) Plath skilfully identifies her pregnant subjects, as they "step among the archetypes", with Mary, by colouring them with light passed through the blue filter of memory: "Dusk hoods them in Mary-blue." The First Voice in "Three Women" uses an almost identical image as her labour pains begin: "Dusk hoods me in blue now, like a Mary./ O colour of distance and forgetfulness!" (WT.,43). Like 'red' then, 'blue' has two faces: it may console, the colour memory employs to connect itself with gentle archetypal images -- the motherhood of Mary -- but more often, it may intensify pain. In that bizarre poem "The Tour" this latter face may be seen:

Morning Glory Fool!  
The blue's a jewel.  
It boils for forty hours at a stretch.

O I shouldn't dip my hankie in, it hurts! (CW.,62)

Here the blue plant's hallucinogenic properties make it a potential source of pain as a stimulant of unwelcome memories. "Bright blue" is also the colour of "Daddy"'s

Aryan eye (A.,55), condemning the poet as "Jew", but, like the "blue eye" of "Little Fugue" (A.,72) a product of a distorted memory that evokes recurrent images of paranoia to an alarming degree. In "Ariel" the initial movements of the horse seem to liberate the memory from its obsessional paths:

Stasis in darkness.  
Then the substanceless blue  
Pour of tor and distances.

(A.,36)

but this only serves to create an illusion of a loss of spatial and temporal relativity in order that the deadly singularity of purpose may be put into effect; to create, as it were, an easier climate for the organism to lose its self-preservation instinct and destroy itself.

The short story "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle" <sup>19</sup> provides what is perhaps the key link between the colour blue and the theme of memory. The narrator, having fainted in the tattooist's shop, now awakens to the sound of the electric needle used to make the tattoos, ". . .the tiny sound of a bee spitting blue fire." <sup>20</sup> Blueness may be the colour of the indelible patterns left by the needle on the surface of the skin, or it may be that of the ineradicable scars painful existence leaves on the memory; in the words of "The Courage of Shutting-up", "Bastardies, usages, desertions and doubleness. . . / Tattooing over and over the same blue grievances." (WT.,20). Finally, it is the

colour of the electric sparks the needle gives off, that link it to the "blue volts" that assault "The Hanging Man" (A.,70), emitted by the E.C.T. electrodes, those inducers of oblivion. Further references to this in the poetry are guarded and often couched in very obscure imagery, but may be discerned in the "blue lightning" of "The Other" (WT.,22), the blue sparks of "Lesbos" (WT.,35), and in "Stings" where the speaker sees ". . .my strangeness evaporate,/ Blue dew from dangerous skin." (A.,66). In the prose, however, the subject is treated with far less equivocation. "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams"<sup>21</sup> ends with a nightmare vision of electrocution that forms a fitting culmination to this short story about Kafkaesque persecution: "The air crackles with the blue-tongued, lightning-haloed angels."<sup>22</sup> The Bell Jar too is haunted by images and instances of electrocution, from the reference to the Rosenbergs on the first page to Esther's description of her shock treatment and its effect on her memory that forms what is perhaps the emotional centre of the novel.<sup>23</sup>  
<sup>24</sup>

If 'blue' is associated with death by electrocution, be it a real death or the figurative death of an old self, wiped from the memory, then 'yellow' is the colour of the being that death has not only marked for his own, but is on the point of claiming -- the skin colour immediately preceding 'white'. George Stade has noted the  
<sup>25</sup>

distinction made in "In Plaster" as the patient, lying in her hospital bed, states: "There are two of me now:/ This absolutely white person and the old yellow one" (CW.,30). The "white person" is the plaster, encasing the damaged body, but the patient sees it as a doppelganger, who by its whiteness tells of her forthcoming death. 'Yellowness' is age and decay, the last shows of mortality, seen in the sheep in "Wuthering Heights" who ". . .stand about in grandmotherly disguise,/ All wig curls and yellow teeth." (CW.,11). Here is a witty variation on the story of Little Red Riding Hood -- only the "black slots" of the sheep's pupils reveal that they are death-wolves in sheep's clothing. The doppelganger theme is continued in "Eavesdropper", where the inquisitive neighbour who is the poem's subject becomes, in the paranoid vision of the poet, "urinous", "toad-yellow", "Chink-yellow" or a "yellow/ Weasel", and the contrast between the two parts of what is finally revealed to be the same self in the final merging of personae, is similar to that in "In Plaster":

But that yellow!  
 Godawful!  
 Your body one  
 Long nicotine-finger  
 On which I,  
 White cigarette,  
 Burn. . .27

Like 'blue' and 'red', 'yellow' has its more hopeful aspects. It is the "tentative" colour in "Candles" (CW.,41-42), an ephemeral, "mild light" that speaks of

the mortality of what it illuminates, but, as in "Nick and the Candlestick" (A., 40-41), is able to "hearten" if only because it affirms the presence of a new life, also a dim light in the surrounding darkness yet invested with the Christ-like hope of mankind that each baby bears with it into the world. In Plath's poetry generally, however, 'yellowness' is baleful, as in the "yellow sullen smokes" of the candles in "Fever 103" that choke like "Isadora's scarves" (A., 58), or the torchlight in "Wintering":

"Chinese yellow on appalling objects -- / Black asininity. Decay." (A., 68). More specifically, the gorse in "The Rabbit Catcher" (WT., 25) shows a "malignity" that perhaps has its origins in the "yellow gaze" of the panther in "Pursuit"<sup>28</sup> or in the gull's eye in "A Winter Ship" (C., 44) as it embraces the scene of decay, desolation and despair provided by a hostile nature. In "The Rabbit Catcher", however, the "malignity" of the gorse is blended with the ephemerality of a candle-flame in one complex image of pain- and death-bearing nature that depends for its effectiveness on the total connotative implications of the colour 'yellow':

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. (A., 25)

'Green' is Nature's colour, the colour of mother- ✓



hood and generation. In "Metaphors" the colour occurs in the "bag of green apples" that when eaten by a woman traditionally induce pregnancy. In "Aftermath" (C.,29) "Mother" Medea wears a green smock, a latter-day goddess of fertility transformed, by contrast with her ruined house, into a tragic, embittered figure. In "Snakecharmer" the piper, playing at god,

Pipes water green until green waters waver. . .  
And as his notes twine green, the green river

Shapes its images. . . . (C.,55)

He is a figure, derived from the painter Henri Rousseau,<sup>29</sup> who is apparently able to engender the Serpent as God engendered man, a highly fertile but imperfect Creator:

Out of this green nest

As out of Eden's navel twist the lines  
Of snaky generations.

(C.,55)

In "Heavy Women" (CW.,37) the "green hill" is the stomach of a pregnant woman, another symbol of fertility, while on the other hand, the "Widow"'s thoughts, sterile, bitter and death-obsessed, are like dark trees, ". . . shadows about the green landscape" (CW.,39). In "Purdah", the woman behind her veil has become a petrified mockery of truly fertile greenness, and the pain of generation, by rights hers, has been assumed by the male. She describes herself as

Stone of the side,  
The agonized

Side of green Adam. . . , (WT.,17)

a precious stone rather than a living human, whose very creation was dependent, like Eve's, upon the existence of her husband. Ultimately, however, the woman delivers a Lady Lazarus-like threat, that the "small jewelled/ Doll" will avenge her sterility by becoming a murderous "lion-ess" (WT.,19).

In "Three Women", the Second Voice, who has suffered the miscarriage, ends the drama with an image of life's dogged persistence, and finds in it an affirmation that to a certain extent alleviates her despair: "The little grasses/ Crack through stone, and they are green with life." (WT.,52). In the Ariel poems, the greenness of burgeoning Nature is not always so auspicious a sign, however. In "Medusa", that grotesque blend of phallic imagery (derived from the Gorgon's snake-hair) and petrification (deriving from the property of her eyes), 'greenness' is at the centre of a vision of horror at sexuality, of which the Gorgon herself is an embodiment:

I am sick to death of hot salt.  
Green as eunuchs, your wishes  
Hiss at my sins.

(A.,46)

Only in "Letter in November" does 'green' invoke an image of gentle, motherly care, in a poem where, almost uniquely in Ariel, the poet seems prepared to embrace the world's

pain, being in a state of almost mystical elation:

There is a green in the air,  
Soft, delectable.  
It cushions me lovingly.

(A.,51)

'Grey', that uncertain tone between 'black' and 'white', has nonetheless similar associations with death as those two opposed extremes, in this case a specifically spiritual death, a monochromatic aridity of the soul. "The Thin People" are "Meagre of dimension as the grey people/ On a movie screen" (C.,30), while the skin of the "Eavesdropper" is mere "grey tallow"<sup>30</sup>, once her yellow hue has been consumed by fire and thus exhausted of all emotion, even her characteristic malice. 'Greyness' pervades the mind of the "Insomniac", that "little interior of grey mirrors" (CW., 21) caught in a perpetually self-defeating, draining psychological bind: for an imagination suffused with 'grey' allows shapes and forms to be envisioned only in half-tones, but deprives them of colour and renders them lifeless and meaningless. Similarly, the mind of the "Widow" is a "grey, spiritless room" (CW.,39) that rejects, in its obsession with death, any illumination from without. For "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." it is he, sunlike in his megalomaniac hallucinations, who provides such illumination for the "grey" faces of his patients (CW.,49). 'Grey' may also be the colour of the sea or sky in dull weather, when they seem to reflect the inner desolation of the watcher,

as in "The Couriers" (A.,12) and in "Berck-Plage" (A.,33). It may also be that of Autumn fog, the "thick grey death-soup" that threatens the fragile, moribund tints of the falling leaves in "Letter in November" (A.,52). Finally, grey is the colour of ash, of the airborne remains of the Jews who perished in the Nazi ovens, and thus the colour symbolic of a humanity exhausted with self-destruction and caught in a terrible fall-out of its own making, as in "Mary's Song":

Grey birds obsess my heart,  
Mouth-ash, ash of eye  
They settle.

(WT.,39)

'Brown', a colour often associated with decay, is seldom used in this way by Sylvia Plath -- a single example may be found in "Berck-Plage", as the old man's nurses seem to be ". . .browning like bruised gardenias" (A.,32) but in fact serve as indices of his own decay. Usually, 'brown' appears as a solid, reassuring colour that is nevertheless vulnerable to malevolent agencies. In "The Thin People", it is the universal 'greyness' and sterility that makes the tree-trunks themselves "lose their good browns" (C.,32). Twice, the colour is used of the pheasant: it is the hue of the "good shape" of the bird in "Pheasant" (CW.,13), a shape equally reassuring for the First Voice in "Three Women", who associates the bird "arranging his brown feathers" on a nearby hill with the slow, inevitable,

natural process of a successful pregnancy (WT.,40). Finally, in "Ariel" 'brown' is the colour of the one tangible reality the poet is able to perceive -- the neck of her horse -- but it is a reality that has become beyond her grasp (A.,36).

'Pink', the colour traditionally associated with innocent health, is one Plath finds ripe for some bizarre variations. The woman in "Face-Lift" (CW.,17-18) emerges from her operation "pink and smooth as a baby" but in doing so has achieved the ultimate act of incest in being "Mother to myself", a highly distasteful metaphor in the context. Her attempt to cheat death is reduced to a gesture of futility and absurdity, and she recognises that her life is still remorselessly "leaking from the finger-vents". Plath finds in the colour pink a bright artificiality and superficiality, possibly deriving from the fact that it is the characteristic colour of plastic, itself man's impermanent, impoverished mockery of naturally created matter. 'Pink' then is identified with man's artifices, the first victims of his destructive will, as in "The Swarm": "The gilt and pink domes of Russia melt and float off/ In the furnace of greed." (WT.,37). Here "gilt" too is a mockery by man of a natural phenomenon, in this case gold. In its artificiality, 'pink' is the colour of the mannequins and dummies that haunt much of Plath's earlier poetry, man's attempt to emulate a natural skin-tone. Thus, "The Surgeon

at 2 a.m." (CW., 48-49), himself a mock-deity, provides a "clean, pink plastic limb" for his patients. The "spare-part" torso in "The Stones" (C., 86-88) is pink, as is the nurse in "The Tour" (CW., 62), herself a dummy who can "bring the dead to life". As Russia yields to Napoleon in "Stings" so the body succumbs to death in "The Night Dances" (A., 27-28), as the superficial "pink light" of human warmth peels off, like skin, and gives way to "the black amnesias of heaven." The same process may be detected at the end of "Fever 103", taking the form of an Assumption of the "acetylene/ Virgin" who is

Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,  
By whatever these pink things mean.  
Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him  
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)--  
To Paradise.

(A., 59)

Finally, "Balloons" (A., 80-81) is a clever microcosmic portrayal of man's propensity to destroy the artificial, superficial structures of his own making, as the baby, already displaying instinctively destructive tendencies, pops the "funny pink" world of the plastic balloon.

'Purple', a colour Plath often uses as a verb, is a grim intensification of 'red' especially when associated with bleeding or bruising. In "Electra on Azalea Path" the purple sea alludes to the 'wine-dark' one of Homer, but it

is a darkness coloured with the blood of Iphigenia for Plath's Electra-persona. In "Moonrise" (C., 66-67), the berries that "purple/ And bleed" offer little relief from the bleak whiteness that pervades this poem. The choice is between painful life or the anaesthetised sterility of death. Lastly, 'purple' is identified with the regular bruising that time and experience inflict on the body and on the psyche, as in "A Birthday Present":

O adding machine --

Is it impossible for you to let something go and  
have it go whole?

Must you stamp each piece in purple,

Must you kill what you can?

(A., 49-50)

Sylvia Plath also uses 'silver' and 'gold' frequently as part of her symbolic colour scheme. These colours have the advantage of having clearly-defined associations with a qualitative value and a texture, but have an equal disadvantage in being less open to manipulation because of the very precise connotations they bear. The preciousness of gold is however invested with powerful irony in "Mary's Song" (WT., 39) where the cherished "golden child" shares its hue with the interior of the ovens that incinerated the Nazi victims in the concentration camps. The implication is that even gold cannot retain an untarnished symbolic value in the face of the degrading horrors of twentieth-century life. 'Gold' then is as

double-faced as any of the previously-considered colours: it may represent the truly priceless value of the baby in "Morning Song" (A.,11), a "fat gold watch" as yet unsullied by experience, or the deceptive glitter of the wedding-ring in "The Couriers" (A.,12), now a symbol of "Lies and a grief." Both "The Applicant" (A.,14-15) and "Lady Lazarus" heighten the ironic contrast between the esteem that gold is held in and what it has come to symbolise. Thus, in the former poem "gold" means, in terms of the sort of marriage the 'applicant' desires, fifty years of mindless servitude from his spouse. In the latter poem the "gold filling" that is all that remains of value for the slaughterers of the concentration-camp Jew is a horrifying symbol of man's greed and viciousness:

So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.

(A.,18)

Finally, gold's old associations with 'value' and its new ones with 'pain' are knit in "Fever 103" as the patient, suffering from a fever that intensifies her sense of her own fragility and mortality, speaks ironically of ". . .my gold beaten skin/ Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive." (A.,59).

'Silver' is the icy tranquility of moonlight on ✓



water, an atmosphere that stimulates a strong death-wish for the poet of "Lorelei" (C., 22-23), or it is a colour latent in the calm of air that nevertheless conceals death's harbingers in "Watercolour of Grantchester Meadows" (C., 37-38). The origins of Plath's use of 'silver' in imagery seem in part to lie in a personal experience of her own. Perhaps the intolerable noise of a real silver-factory gave rise to similar images that appear in both "Night Shift" (C., 11-12) and "Blackberrying" (CW., 24-25). At any rate, the intractability of the metal and its ability to reflect clearly when polished are universally comprehensible attributes that Plath fits neatly into her symbolic scheme. Thus, in "Insomniac", the final vision of urban desolation caused by human incommunicability is founded on silver's reflecting quality: "And everywhere people, eyes mica-silver and blank/ Are riding to work in rows, as if recently brainwashed." (CW., 22).

'Silver' has a certain ruthlessness that is seen in the poem "Mirror", the utter truth in the reflection of the image of oneself the silvery surface of the mirror provides, ". . . unmisted by love and dislike" (CW., 52). This ruthlessness, combined with the innately silent quality of the colour (deriving perhaps from its association with moonlight) can be seen in "Gigolo". Here the utterly egoistical gigolo's self-description shows, in its movement from 'gold' to 'silver' imagery, the linkage

between extreme Narcissistic self-esteem and total extra-  
 spection:

The tattle of my  
 Gold joints, my way of turning  
 Bitches to ripples of silver  
 Rolls out a carpet, a hush.

(WT.,14)

In "Getting There" the train wheels are fixed in their path and rhythm by "The silver leash of the will --/ Inexorable" (A.,43), but the "will" here is not that of their human creators, but that of Time, of which their speed is merely a function. Time's ruthlessness is seen in its appearance, "silver-suited for the occasion" in "A Birthday Present" (A.,48-50), where it propels the mortal towards death, measuring out each painful step in the progression. In doing so, it dehumanises in depriving its victim of will. Thus "The Munich Mannequins", zombie-like, are "Orange lollies on silver sticks,/ Intolerable, without mind." (WT.,74).

In her later poetry at least, Sylvia Plath rarely uses colour for an effect which goes no further than enhancing a specific description. When she desires a comparatively neutral result, she is likely to employ a relatively unemotive shade like 'magenta' or 'plum', or, if a complex descriptive effect be required, to use a compound colour, like the "Greeny-blue-black brocades" of the mackerel in "Ocean 1212-W"<sup>32</sup>. All the colours that have been discussed -- the achromatic tones or shades of

'white', 'black' and 'grey', the three 'primaries' 'blue', 'red' and 'yellow', the 'secondaries' 'green', 'pink', 'brown' and 'purple' and the 'textured' chromatic metals 'gold' and 'silver' -- are an integral part of a dense web of symbols the existence of which has been hinted at earlier. To fully appreciate Plath's symbolic usage, be it concerned with images based on colour or on other objects or ideas discussed in later chapters, each individual image and symbol must be considered in the context of all the poetry, and as being part of a cumulative effect. Each image, when broken down into its simplest units, illuminates another image in another poem which has corresponding units, even though the two images' precise symbolic or emotive function may be different. Through analysis of her imagery, Sylvia Plath's own associative processes as a creative artist may have some light shed on them, and the often apparently impenetrable centre of her meaning attained. Succeeding chapters will aim to unravel more of the highly complex web she wove.

## IV

### IMAGERY RELATING TO THE HUMAN BODY

This chapter will explore Sylvia Plath's usage of imagery deriving from specific parts of the human body. As will become clear, this system of imagery relates very closely to the one based on colour discussed in the previous chapter, for Plath makes much of the identification of, for instance, the colour red with 'blood', 'heart', 'mouth' or 'tongue', the colour white with 'bone' or 'eye', the colour black with 'pupil' (of the eye), and the colour pink with 'skin' or 'flesh'. Adjectives like 'bare' and 'bald', closely associated with the physical appearance of the body, will also be briefly considered as an important part of Plath's densely-woven web of images. Finally, the aim of this chapter is also to demonstrate how central the theme of death is to all of Plath's poetry.

The prominence of imagery of a chromatic nature gives a strong visual element to Plath's work. It is perhaps hardly surprising, then, that the 'eye', with all its symbolic associations as the most important sensory organ, has the principal place among the parts of the body that this chapter is concerned with. In Sylvia Plath's early poems, an 'eye' often

appears as a symbol of an external menace, bears a colour that reinforces that menace, and seems to dominate the vision of she who is threatened -- all perhaps symptomatic of the poet's own almost obsessive concern with the visual. In "Dream with Clamdiggers"<sup>1</sup> the sinister figures from the dreamer's past emerge at the poem's climax, and ". . . advance, flint eyes fixed on murder." The eyes of cats appear in two early poems of the same year, as a "yellow glare" of the real animals in "Ella Mason and her Eleven Cats"<sup>2</sup>, and as a "yellow gaze" of the metaphorical 'panther' in "Pursuit"<sup>3</sup>. For she who beholds them, the eyes of these cats combine danger and sexual excitement, and she becomes a quarry stalked by a hunter whose eyes seem to reflect her own weakness and helplessness. So, for the panther's victim in the latter poem, her own eyes become "snarled thickets", useless for the purpose of concealment and disclosing her bewilderment and lack of self-possession in contrast with the clarity of the panther's stare.

In other early poems, the poet who sees herself as failure or victim expresses herself through images of personal visual difficulty, often comparing the distortion or cloudiness of her own vision with the penetrating clarity of others', in which she feels herself formulated. So death, in "Circus in Three Rings"<sup>4</sup>, proves impossible to vanquish, disappearing like a magician "in a smoke that sears my eyes" when he seems within reach. In "On the Difficulty of Con-

juring up a Dryad"<sup>5</sup> the poet's "threadbare eye" remains unilluminated despite her attempts to employ it to impose a transcendent order on perceptible reality. The poem suggests that the chaos that characterises this reality may only be contemplated fruitfully with the "cold vision" of sober objectivity, but even then the eye is still a prey to the malevolent agents of chaos. So, in "The Beggars"<sup>6</sup>, the mendicants cannot be formulated by the "cold eye" of nightfall -- that is, the apparent lucidity of vision granted to the observer when the colourful dazzle of day is reduced to the monochromatic clarity of definition of the world by moonlight. Invulnerable to what, in their "suffering-toughened" state, they consider the spurious charity of the virtuous, the beggars "Baffle the dark, the pitying eye". Their indifference to pity, furthermore, renders them invulnerable even to time itself, having achieved in their degradation a total indestructibility of will.

One of the best poems in The Colossus, "The Eye-Mote" (C., 14-15), is a further development of the themes in these earlier poems. The poet, half-blinded by the speck in her eye that turns the visible world into "A melding of shapes", dreams that she is Oedipus. Her semi-blindness moves from a literal to a metaphorical level as she realises that lucidity of vision will never be restored to her, neither as a part of the purgation her Oedipal sufferings may provide, nor through the solace others may offer her: "Neither tears

nor the easing flush/ Of eyebaths can unseat the speck". The pain she has experienced is simply that of life itself, the indelible scars of an irredeemable past: "A place, a time gone out of mind".

If the poet's own eyes are acutely suffering victims of a hostile visible reality, then the eyes belonging to others about her, menacing or blankly indifferent, serve only to intensify the threat she feels. The gigantic figure of her father in "The Colossus" (C., 20-21), another Oedipal poem, has "bald white tumuli" for eyes, an allusion to the way that Greek statuary typically lacks the depiction of a cornea, but also an image suggesting the terrifying blankness of response she feels while at her diminutive, ant-like task. This indifference can also be seen in the "eyeless" "Mushrooms" (C., 34-35) in their slow but sinister, remorseless progress. This poem exhibits not only paranoia but also the poet's alienation from Nature, whose progeny seem to lack the sensory channels of communication that ought to typify a living thing, and appear alien and threatening. The feeling of paranoia is intensified in "The Disquieting Muses" (C., 58-60). Here, the de Chirico mannequins are "Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head", and have the role of sinister ghosts the memory can never exorcise, part of the bad dreams of childhood that persist into adulthood. As has been seen in "The Colossus", 'baldness' connotes more than just hairlessness. It is descriptive of a blank

featurelessness that provides no relief for the eye that beholds it. The eye, discovering no external form upon which to play and in turn stimulate the imagination, finds indifference instead or, worse, a reflecting surface that forces it back on itself, making it contemplate its own emptiness. In Sylvia Plath's web of images, 'bald' is very closely connected to 'blank', 'white' and 'mirror'.

Many other poems develop these ideas. In "The Sculptor", the artist's skill is seen as his ability to give form and tangibility to the primordial terror men feel when confronted with the black nothingness that lies behind the artifices of both man and Nature -- to embody that most elemental fear in his sculpture:

Our bodies flicker  
Toward extinction in those eyes  
Which, without him, were beggared  
Of place, time, and their bodies.

(C., 79)

"Poem for a Birthday" (C., 80-88) is full of 'eye'-imagery. The pumpkins that "have no eyes" in "Who" (C., 80) are a further example of the poet's alienation from Nature, demonstrated in an image whose prototypes are the orange dummy-heads in de Chirico's 'Metaphysical' painting "The Disquieting Muses"<sup>7</sup>. In "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" the oncoming Winter is seen in another image of indifference: "Hourly the eye of the sky enlarges its blank/ Dominion" (C., 85). In "Witch-Burning" (C., 85-86) the dead have abnormally large eyes, that is, eyes that threaten to engulf



the onlooker in a similar fate, while in the spare-part city of "The Stones" (C., 86-88) de Chirico mannequins are blended with 'blind' Greek statuary in the "one stone eye" that the jewel-master attempts to pry open. The imagery connected with eyes that Plath uses is similar in aim to that of many of the Symbolist and Surrealist painters -- witness, for example, Odilon Redon's many depictions of disembodied eyeballs -- and, perhaps, in its bizarre juxtapositions, is an imagery that derives more directly than has hitherto been supposed from those painters' obsessive, <sup>8</sup>paranoic visions.

"Insomniac" (CW., 21-22) is a glimpse into a distorted perception viewed from the outside rather than through a first-person persona. Here a reciprocal blankness is seen between the internal viewpoint of the insomniac himself and the external world of 'others'. The insomniac's eyes are "bald slots", ever-open and vulnerable, able only to perceive the "eyes mica-silver and blank" of the urban populace that surround him. The implication is that the eyes, traditionally 'mirrors of the soul', serve in this case only to reflect the hopeless lack of communication between people, and become testaments of a massive, universal indifference. <sup>9</sup>

"Widow" (CW., 38-39) alludes both to Oedipus' self-mutilation <sup>10</sup>and Gloucester's fate in King Lear in a simile that might be described as 'incestuous'. The fires of self-martyrdom with which the widow racks her soul are described as those "That

will put her heart out like an only eye." The image is 'incestuous' because, by means of a deliberate (but effective) infringement of the rules that govern the use of figurative language, two things -- 'heart' and 'eye' -- are likened to each other that both come from the same group of images, in this case the group deriving from the human body. The effect of this simile is to elevate the 'eye', or the visual perception of reality, to a central, or 'heart'-like place of importance in the hierarchy of pain that runs through all levels of existence for Plath. The allusion to the culminating points in the tragedies of Gloucester and Oedipus that lies at the centre of this simile serves to lend added authority for this elevation of the 'eye'. Lastly, of the transitional poems of Crossing the Water, "Mirror" (CW.,52) provides the most elaborate variations on the reflecting properties of the eye. The mirror itself is "The eye of a little god", presenting an image perfectly true to the reflected object as God made man in his own image. The mirror disclaims cruelty, being merely passive, but its very passivity seems a terrifying indifference to those who, looking into it, see death relentlessly steal upon them.

Plath's later poetry, while often reinforcing already established associative links, moves occasionally in a more hopeful direction while still emphasising the centrality of the eye and the visual world. In "Child", the infant is addressed by the mother:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful  
 thing. . . .  
 Stalk without wrinkle,  
 Pool in which images  
 Should be grand and classical. . . .  
 (WT.,12)

Here, the hope is expressed that salvation may possibly be found in the world of visual objects. The child, if allowed to experience the appropriate visual stimuli, could not only avoid developing the blank "eyeholes" of the "super-people" in "Brasilia" (WT.,13), where the future of humanity seems to demand a denial of all man's characteristically human qualities, but also avoid the misery that comes from man's burden of knowledge, in his awareness of the starless, unrelieved void underlying all things. In "The Courage of Shutting-Up", however, self-destruction is offered as the only relief from the eyes' malevolence. Here the incantatory, triple repetition that is a characteristic of the style of the later poetry is used to emphasise the importance of the sensory organs that form the theme of this poem's culminating stanzas:

But how about the eyes, the eyes, the eyes?  
 Mirrors can kill and talk, they are terrible rooms  
 In which a torture goes on one can only watch.  
 (WT.,20)

Eyebeams are seen as "death rays" that kill themselves and others, and only in death itself is their force spent.

In "The Applicant" (A.,14-15), in the tone of menacing gaiety often found in the poems of Ariel, the terrible indifference that pervades interpersonal relationships -- in

this case, that between husband and wife -- is expressed through an extension of the imagery deriving from dummies that haunts the poems of The Colossus. The association of 'eye' with 'mirror' to emphasise that organ's properties of reflection or internalisation rather than its powers of communication is seen when the applicant is told, "You have an eye, it's an image", the "it" being his wife, not a person in her mindless servitude but a mere reflection of her husband's desire.

The patient in "Tulips" (A.,20-22) describes her head, between the pillow and the sheet of her hospital bed, as being like "an eye between two white lids that will not shut", a simile that draws together the imagery of "Insomniac" (and the insomnia-imagery of The Bell Jar)<sup>11</sup> and the juxtaposition of 'black' and 'white' discussed in Chapter II. Moreover, in that it likens a head to an eye, the simile is another 'incestuous' one of the sort already seen in "Widow". It may also be noted that in "Tulips", 'eye' and 'I' have become almost synonymous, as the 'eye' of the speaker, remaining obsessively open, becomes the central focus of the pain of experience. This pain is disembodied in "Ariel" (A.,36-37) as ". . .the red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning", into which the poet makes her headlong, suicidal dash, hoping thus to escape this burning, cyclopean menace.

In "Death & Co." (A.,38-39), the cornea-less  
12  
subjects of the paintings of William Blake provide a proto-

type for one of the two personifications of death described in the poem. The 'eyeless' partner is he who is overtly destructive, the unsubtle, visible aspect of death that stimulates the instinct of self-preservation. Death's true subtlety may be seen in its employment of the power of eyes to deceive. In "The Moon and the Yew Tree" (A.,47) the "mild eyes" of the saints' effigies are, ironically, mere shows of tenderness to the afflicted soul. The terrible truth lies in the face of the moon, no painted idol but "bald and wild", having "the O-gape of complete despair". The message of the eye is death. It may be the threat of the dead snake's eye in "Medallion" (C.,61-62) that arouses the fear of death in the beholder, or it may be the "loneliness" innate in the "counterfeit" cobra's eye in "Totem" (A.,76-77) -- a poem whose illusory exits "Multiplied in the eyes of the flies" all ultimately end at the same place -- that seems to confirm death's dominion over all things. As ever, Sylvia Plath offers the choice between the "loneliness" of eternal oblivion or the insupportable pain of the world, temporary though it may be. The eye, the organ of the cardinal sense, is as such most acutely able to perceive death's omnipresence. It thus becomes a focus of pain, inflicting and receiving it with equal intensity. As a mirror, the eye enables its sustaining organism to visualise this pain and to give it greater immediacy, but never to support it. The unceasingly tortured prey to illusion, the

eye seeks but finds no relief in other eyes, finding in them only reflections of its own blankness, indifference or menace.

As the 'eye' is linked to 'black' and 'white', so the 'mouth' is to 'red', although as the eye has its pupil, so the mouth has its interior darkness. 'Mouth'-imagery receives its most complete development very late in Plath's work, though two of its chief functions may be seen in a pair of poems from The Colossus, "I Want, I Want" (C., 36) and "Strumpet Song" (C., 51). In the former, the 'mouth' is a symbol of need and demand (especially when associated with a baby) that is perhaps more passive than a 'hook', but quite as exigent. In the latter, it is a symbol of female sexuality that may be, as here, "made to do violence on", or, as in "The Beekeeper's Daughter" (C., 75) can become "A fruit that's death to taste". As 'death-fruit', the 'mouth' becomes a part of a Lady Lazarus-like threat to potential lovers born of one whose sexual desires are exclusively Oedipal in nature. One may perhaps detect here Plath's indebtedness to essential Freudian symbolism.

It is in "Who" (C., 80-81) that 'mouth'-imagery receives its first expansion. The poem, written on the occasion of the poet's birthday, speaks of October, month of decay, as a "Mother", to whom "I am all mouth", that is, a dependent child. Later in the poem, the poet as 'consumer' desires to be consumed in turn by this "Mother", to find relief from the "otherness" her birth made her heir to.

The image of this "Mother" as ". . .the one mouth/ I would be a tongue to" derives from the poet's memory of the mouth-like, "utterly lovely" flowers of her childhood. Her identification with these flowers is both sexual and emotional, because the "Purple and red mouths", reminiscent of wounds, imply a shared pain. She wishes to be reabsorbed into these 'mouths', a yearning for death that is simultaneously a desire to return to the womb of her mother. The poem that follows "Who" in the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence, "Dark House" (C., 81-82), takes the form of a vision in utero, a land of "All-mouth" who is at once the poet's own embryonic child and the poet herself, imagining herself within the warmth and security of her own mother's womb. The last three parts of the sequence reinforce the associations between 'mother' and 'mouth', culminating in "The Stones" (C., 86-88) where the 'mother/mouth' betrays the foetus that sucks at "the paps of darkness" by delivering it into the "after-hell" of the spare-part city.

The auto-erotic potential of the mouth is disturbingly realised in "Gigolo" (WT., 14-15), where, instead of being used for interpersonal contact, it merely serves to indicate the narcissistic ecstasy of the gigolo, an ecstasy the reader is invited to associate with blasphemy:

My mouth sags,  
The mouth of Christ  
When my engine reaches the end of it.

The gigolo's partner becomes a mirror to intensify his self-

delight, and the poem is a savage satire on male sexual complacency. In "Childless Woman" (WT.,16), the quality of redness links menstrual blood and the "mouths of corpses" that haunt the speaker in her barrenness. The "mouths" here are to be associated with the womb, "corpse"-like in its sterility. In "The Rabbit Catcher" (WT.,25), the speaker's mouth is gagged by the wind ( a similar image appears in "Finisterre" (CW.,15-16)) but there are strong undertones of rape,-- "It was a place of force" -- a theme full of erotic fascination for Plath since the early poems "Pursuit"<sup>14</sup> and "Complaint of the Crazy Queen"<sup>15</sup>, and one always closely allied to death. In "Three Women" (WT.,40-52), the Second voice seems obsessed with mouths. To explain her miscarriage, she invents a doppelganger whose "mouth is red" and who is "the vampire of us all" (WT.,45) and who will "eat" men, (like Lady Lazarus), for having sexually abused her. She describes her barrenness in imagery that fuses the moon, rape, and a painful gynaecological operation:

I feel it enter me, cold, alien, like an instrument.  
And that mad, hard face at the end of it, that O-mouth  
Open in its gape of perpetual grieving.

(WT.,46)

Finally, free from the hospital, she merges with her double and becomes sexually available again: a tentative affirmation is offered in her resolution to continue her existence despite her interior 'deformity': "I draw on the old mouth./ The red mouth I put by with my identity" (WT.,48).

In Ariel, much the same development takes place in



the case of 'mouth'-imagery as with 'eye'-imagery. In the few poems that celebrate unsullied infancy, 'mouth' becomes associated with that quality of innocence, like the baby's mouth in "Morning Song" (A.,11) that opens "clean as a cat's". Otherwise, there is an intensification of the negative connotations of the word, seen especially in the 'flower' poems. In "Tulips" (A.,20-22) the vivid blooms, becoming quasi-animate and hostile in the distorted perception of the patient, "eat my oxygen": it is as if their red colour is a result of having consumed the life-blood of their victim, leaving her dead white and helpless to prevent the tulips' complete assimilation of her body as they open "like the mouth of some great African cat". "Poppies in October" (A.,29) is a poem in a different mood, and here the "late mouths" of the flowers do not consume but "cry open" in a painful but ecstatic act of defiance to the dying year. "Poppies in July" (A.,82) returns to the mood of "Tulips". Here the flowers are as mouths "just bloodied" and as such reflect the now intolerable pain of existence as well as the almost erotic craving for oblivion or death as a release from that pain, as the speaker, addressing them as traditional symbols of oblivion, expresses the wish, "If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!"

The final image in "Berck-Plage" (A.,30-35) is that of a "naked mouth" belonging to a corpse, a mouth whose still-red lips form the solitary contrast, with their lurid

colouring, to the white flesh of the body and the black apparel of the mourners. This mouth is no more than a "hole" however, symbolic of the impossibility of resuscitation:

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

For a minute the sky pours into the hole like plasma.  
There is no hope, it is given up.

(A.,35)

The "naked" appearance of the mouth gives it associations with (female) sexual vulnerability and inexperience, reinforced by the adjective "awkward". As a "hole" which is "red" it is also a 'wound' that receives the "plasma" of the sky, but in vain, for this mouth is a product of Death who employs it as a sign that all hope has departed and his victory is complete. The image is the result of an apprehensive but still overwhelmingly strong sensual craving for death on the part of the poet that she superimposes upon essentially neutral evidence of its leavings. In "Ariel" (A.,36-37), the "Nigger-eye/ Berries" with their "Black sweet blood mouthfuls" are surely an allusion to "Joy's grape" of Keats' "Ode on Melancholy"<sup>16</sup>. In both poems, the mouth's function is to embrace the sensual taste of death and is a climactic sensory experience beyond anything a more life-affirming force can provide (but see footnote <sup>16</sup>). In "The Rival" (A.,53) is a similar 'moon'/'mouth' image to that quoted from "Three Women" on page 81. Here is a wide-mouthed expression of total grief and despair, devoid

of the 'redness' that characterises the mouth in its erotic and 'woundlike' roles. Finally, in "Paralytic" (A.,78-79)<sup>17</sup> a half-allusion to Ariel's song in The Tempest gives another variation to imagery based on the mouths of corpses: the paralytic's wife is "dead and flat" in the photograph, her mouth "full of pearls", and these teeth, in their whiteness, become a symbol of the paralytic's inner deadness and despair, a revelation of his relationship to the visible world.

Three other parts of the body are very closely connected to 'mouth' in Sylvia Plath's web of images; 'blood', 'heart' and 'wound'. All share the quality of 'redness' already noted in discussion of the 'flower' poems in Ariel. In Plath's early poetry, the presence of two or more words from this group within a single poem occurs regularly, suggesting that the associative connections were already present in embryo, if more subconsciously employed than in later work. Thus, for example, the presence of 'heart', 'wound' and other basic 'red' symbols may be noted in the 1955 poem "Circus in Three Rings"<sup>18</sup>. In The Colossus a fully-conscious pattern has begun to emerge. "Night Shift" (C.,11) introduces the insistent heartbeat that runs like a refrain throughout Plath's work -- the triple pulsing beat of "I am I am I am" by which the organism asserts its determination to prolong its existence.<sup>19</sup> In "All the Dead Dears" (C.,27-28) the dead are vampire-like,

determined to change living 'red' to deathly 'white' in order to prove the kinship of all mortals as subjects of the tyrant Death. So, the poet feels the dead woman's skeleton will ". . .suck/ Blood and whistle my marrow clean/ To prove it", while in "Ouija" (C., 52-53) the pale "unborn" and "undone" are hungry for "the blood-heat that would ruddle or reclaim".

In "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." (CW., 48-49) the patient's heart is "a red-bell-bloom" and his blood a "sunset" and here, as in other poems in Crossing the Water, may be seen the seeds of the 'blood'/'flower' imagery in Ariel. As a "sunset" or a bleeding to whiteness, the imagery is already heavily shadowed with associations with death ("Apprehensions" (CW., 57) is another good example of this). The heart's dogged, rhythmic beat is the only answer offered in reply to the great, metaphysical questions about the nature of existence posed in "Mystic" (WT., 26-27): "The sun blooms, it is a geranium.<sup>20</sup>/ The heart has not stopped." In these two lines the complexity of the relationships between the images (still linked by 'red') begins to reveal itself. Here is a sunset (with its associations with death); "blooms" with their links to red flowers (the geranium) and thus to vegetative or involuntary growth that occurs despite the mind's death-wish; and the whole coloured with blood and moving to a rhythm for which both the sun and the heartbeat provide symbols. "Mystic" is a rejection of a religion or

philosophy based on the intellect as a suitable means of explaining the purpose of existence. It finds a justification of life's pain in the mysterious unity in which all the quintessential phenomena of existence seem to harmonise. In one way, all Plath's imagery is employed to explore this unity, and is an often almost obsessive drawing of parallels and connections between the most elemental symbols language provides in order to weave a single web.

In the poems of Ariel the anguish of existence rises to the forefront, but from the relentless rhythm of the heart in its mindless persistence, there arises the promise of an ecstatic transcendence. While in "Getting There" (A., 43-44) the wounded men are "Pumped ahead by these pistons, this blood. . ." into ever-increasing agony like a train "Insane for the destination,/ The bloodspot", in "Ariel" (A., 36-37) there is a sensual delight and a wilfulness in the poet's total abandonment to the drive towards an inevitable destruction. It is a feeling most clearly expressed in "Years", where the hoofbeats of the horse Ariel are transformed into the heartbeats of one in a partly sexual, partly spiritual climactic experience, one that might be described in Freudian terms as an ultimate fusion of Eros and Thanatos:

What I love is  
 The piston in motion --  
 My soul dies before it.  
 And the hooves of the horses,  
 Their merciless churn. (A., 73)

"Daddy" (A., 54-56) represents a return to the vampire-figures of The Colossus, although here the characteristic colour of the pursuing demon is black rather than white. Eros and Thanatos are still very closely linked, for the "black man who/ Bit my pretty red heart in two" was clearly performing a kind of rape that seeks the complete emotional enslavement of the victim, a defloration that slew her independence. This macabre poem has been much analysed for its psychological implications (especially those relating to sado-masochistic dependency) and praised for the originality of its mode of expression, having a tone of manic gaiety and the form of a gruesome nursery-rhyme. The fundamental key to its success as a work of art, however, lies in Plath's refinement of her imagery down to elementals. She marries a visually precise series of images (that have the archetypal impact of one of the more horrific Germanic fairy-tales) to a wonderfully apposite poetic vehicle.

Other parts of the body are used as the basis for imagery by Plath, if less consistently. 'Bone' and 'skull', with their traditional symbolic associations with death, have a central place in this area of her web of imagery. Their colour is 'white', the colour of physical death and bloodlessness (see Chapter III). In "The Colossus" (C., 20-21), the "immense skull-plates" and the "fluted bones" of the monstrous figure of the dead father are more than just

the inevitable testament of death's legacy. They are part of the Graeco-Roman allusion in the poem, a range that includes Electra, Agamemnon, the Roman Forum, the Colossus of Rhodes and "fluted" Greek columns. The whole provides a picture of the irretrievable physical destruction of the past and also reveals the threat to the present that such memories of greatness represent. For the decline of past might is a perpetual memento mori to the beholder. Bones provide a similar reminder of the fragility of humanity's grip on life in "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" (C.,10), in "All the Dead Dears" (C.,27-28), and in "Point Shirley" (C.,24-25), where they have become the obsessive playthings of the sea. Sylvia Plath's affinities for the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists have already been hinted at in Chapter I, as they were revealed in the style of part of "All the Dead Dears". In the more Gothic of the poems of The Colossus, skulls or bones as the conventional apparatus for dramatic treatment of death appear frequently as testaments to this affinity. Hence, in "The Ghost's Leave-taking" (C.,39-40), man is portrayed as a "dreaming skull", while in "Full Fathom Five" (C.,46-47) skulls form the lowest layer on the sea-bed, a metaphor for the deepest part of the unconscious mind.

"Moonrise" elucidates the connections between 'bone', 'white' and death, the moon, as Lucina its goddess, providing the necessary linkage:

. . . bony mother, labouring  
 Among the socketed white stars, your face  
 Of candour pares white flesh to the white bone.  
 (C., 67)

In later poetry, however, the more excessive Gothicisms connected with 'bone'-imagery are dropped and new coinages made. Thus, Nature in "Wuthering Heights" (CW., 11-12) seems to demand an absorption, a sacrifice of individual existence in order to come to terms with the elemental forces at work in the landscape. Here on the Brontes' moor the death-urge is strong, and the very roots of the heather seem "to invite/ Me to whiten my bones among them". As the sheeps' eyes on the moor seem entrances into a universal darkness, so the world of the "Insomniac" (CW., 21) is filled with "A bonewhite light, like death, behind all things" -- a symptom of sleeplessness being a distorted perspective that here transforms the darkness of true oblivion into its chromatic opposite, the terrifying whiteness of physical death and of exposed bone that offers no solace to the mortal beholder.

In "Sheep in Fog" (A., 13) the speaker's bones have become an organ able to provide profound insight (as in the idiom 'to feel something in one's bones'), but what is felt is an intimation of death. It is as if the "stillness" of the bones reflect the larger deadness of the void. Ironically, however, in "A Birthday Present" (A., 48-50), the poet would welcome a gift of bones. For her, their whiteness



would be precious like a "pearl button" because of their innate quality of peace in a death already achieved. On the other hand the knife, as a potential suicide weapon, offers only the terrible challenge of pain. In Plath's later poetry, 'bone' seems to lose its potency for the poet as a symbol for death. She seems to find bone too static, too tangible a presence to invoke the combination of horror and urgent desirability that the idea of death has become for her -- for death becomes increasingly the chief inspiration behind her poems and the kinetic force running through them. Thus, the "durable whiteness" of "Electra on Azalea Path"<sup>22</sup> is the blankness behind the mind itself rather than the prosaic remains of the body that are transient as the snow that covers the landscape. In "Daddy", "the bones don't do" (A.,55), for they lack emotional content: the daughter finds it necessary to construct a "model" in order to give her desire meaning. Finally, the static tranquility of the dead woman in "Edge" (A.,85) is reflected in the face of the moon, who, devoid of her characteristically agonised expression, now merely ". . .stares from her hood of bone./ She is used to this sort of thing". 'Bone', the traditional symbol of death, has been turned by Plath into an almost comforting image of dearly-achieved restfulness, free from the worst pain, that inflicted in the course of life.

The tongue first makes its appearance in "The Colossus" (C.,20-21) in an image more grotesque than it may

seem at first sight. In the last stanza the tiny figure of the daughter, crawling over the face of the dead giant, watches as "The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue". 'Tongue' would normally be linked by the colour red to the 'blood'/'heart'/'mouth' group of images. Here however the colossus' tongue is white, associated with the Greek ruins through the word "pillar", and is the tongue of a dead man, that the rising sun, staining it red, can only give the illusion of life. The very lifelessness of this tongue, (for the tongue is one of the most mobile and life-asserting of organs in the living) suggests that all hope must be abandoned, that the daughter's self-ordained task of rehabilitation is futile. Another dead tongue of significance is that of the snake in "Medallion" which is an "arrow" (C., 61),<sup>23</sup><sup>24</sup> once full of deadly motion and purpose, but now betraying its recent demise in its "rose" colour, a faded form of red.

The living tongue may also be an active agent of death. In "The Burnt-Out Spa" (C., 77-78) the wreck of the old buildings (personified as the corpse of an "old beast") is being assimilated by natural forces, embodied in the "little weeds" that ". . . insinuate/ Soft suede tongues between his bones". Here the contrast is made between both texture and relative movement, between the soft, sinister progression of the living grass and the inertia of the 'dead' building's skeleton. In "Maenad" (here closely allied to 'mouth'-imagery) the tongue is seen as an agent of the omniverous

season, for the poet views the month of her birthday as one that seems to involve a desire (concomitant with the autumnal waning of Nature) to surrender to the inevitable processes of decline, be reabsorbed within the earth, and await, in the 'womb' of this 'Mother', a possible rebirth:

This month is fit for little.  
The dead ripen in the grapeleaves.  
A red tongue is among us.

(C.,83)

In "Witch Burning", the "red tongues" (C.,86) are those of flame, which, bearing the colour of life and pain, will "teach the truth" to the witch on the pyre. The imagery is reversed, however, in "Leaving Early" (CW.,33-34) as the poet's corpse-persona finds his tongue wooden and helpless to avoid being "swamped by flowers" -- the funeral-offerings that will gain their nourishment at the expense of his body.

Plath offers a great variation of texture in her imagery based on the tongue. The organ may be wooden, stone-like or rigid in death, or when living may be "suede" or even "chenille" as in "Eavesdropper"<sup>25</sup> and an organ obscene in both appearance and purpose, for the poem's subject sports a "little whore tongue". In "The Courage of Shutting-Up" (WT.,20-21) the tongue is described as a dangerous instrument, an "antique billhook" that grapples attention to itself, heedless of the pain it causes and "purple" with indignation. It is also an active element of the mind's self-lacerating potential, inoperative only in death. In

"Tulips" the flowers are "sudden tongues" (A.,21) that unsettle the 'white' peace of the patient with their lurid redness, a colour related to both the pain of fire and the imposition of a loud noise upon silence. As an unwelcome clamour, 'tongues' appear in "The Moon and the Yew Tree" (A.,47) as the church-bells that "startle the sky" -- unwelcome to the poet because they seem to make a crass and futile attempt to find affirmation in what is to her patently utter negation. In "Daddy" also the tongue when producing sounds proves dangerously refractory:

I never could talk to you.  
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.  
Ich, ich, ich, ich,  
I could hardly speak.

(A.,54)

The tongue thus becomes the agent of the self-destructive forces in the self ("Ich") which betray their sustaining organism. The association of the image with 'self' and 'body' renders the "tongues" of the hell-flames inadequate to eradicate the sins of the sufferer in "Fever 103" (A.,58-59) -- a greater, non-corporeal "acetylene" heat is required before the final transfiguration may take place and the purged sinner be elevated to "Paradise".

The final series of images based on the human body to be considered will be that concerned with 'flesh', 'skin' and 'scar'. "Moonrise" (C.,66-67) shows that for Plath, the characteristic colour associated with 'flesh' is 'white', and

it is a sort of papery substance. Upon it is written time's painful message, the "blotch, dint, scar/ Struck by each dour year" of "Strumpet Song" (C.,51). In "Parliament Hill Fields" (CW.,19-20) the baleful light of the moon is like "the skin seaming a scar", a white, thin light that causes the bitter happiness of the New Year's Day to evaporate. It is as if the angle of the moonlight allows barely-hidden traumas to rise to the surface of the mind as illuminated scar-tissue. For the "Widow", her dead husband's letters used to be a sustaining shield of love, giving warmth ". . .like a live skin./ But it is she who is paper now, warmed by no-one" (CW.,38). Her dead, white skin is cold and vulnerable, associating her with the "immortal blankness between the stars". This dead skin peels, but for Plath the layers underneath are of no more hopeful a colour. Thus, the peeling skin of the patient in "In Plaster" (CW., 30-32) is a metaphor for the death-wish expressed by the Other Self in that poem, the one who wishes to be "absolutely white". In "Amnesiac"<sup>26</sup>, however, the "Old Happenings" that "Peel from his skin" are the memories that made up the amnesiac's former personality, without which he has nothing to stop his decline towards a 'white', 'blank' death.

In "Lady Lazarus" (A.,16-19) is the culmination of this particular group of images. The speaker, (her name alludes to both leprosy and resurrection), unites all the tribulations of the flesh in her sufferings: she describes

herself as merely "skin and bone", an idiom representing the fragility of mankind's existence. She calls her revival after her failed suicide attempts "A sort of walking miracle, my skin/ Bright as a Nazi lampshade", a grisly image that refers to the lampshades the Nazis made from the skins of concentration-camp Jews -- in both cases the skin has a deathly whiteness that is the only visible trace of the pain that caused the colour. It is like the skin of Lazarus' corpse, decayed by his disease and by death, before his resurrection, leprous-white "flesh/ The grave cave ate". But Lady Lazarus will not accept her pain meekly, nor go happily into white oblivion: "There is a charge/ For the eyeing of my scars". This "large charge" is her own vengeful resurrection as Nemesis, no longer hampered by the lineaments of mortality: "Flesh, bone, there is nothing there. . . ", nothing but the remains of the annihilated Jews (soap, gold fillings), symbols of a transcended horror and pain as well as the worthlessness in which man holds the life of others.

Throughout Ariel there is a close correlation between the 'flesh'/'skin' group of images and the colour white, with all its previously-discussed connotations. The wound in "Cut" (A.,23-24), as the red blood forsakes it, becomes a symbol of a confrontation with death as the thumb turns "Dead white", a physical reflection of the "papery feeling" that indicates death's tightening hold on an organism. In "The Night Dances" (A.,27-28) the child's breath

forms a defence against the "black amnesias of heaven",  
smelling of lilies -- whose actual "flesh" (petals), how-  
ever,

. . . bears no relation.  
Cold folds of ego, the calla,

And the tiger, embellishing itself--  
Spots, and a spread of hot petals.

(A.,27)

Manifestations of real human warmth, it is implied, are all quite ephemeral and, 'skinlike', peel off into the void. In "Getting There" there is a craving for death as a transcendence or release already seen in such poems as "Lady Lazarus" and "Ariel". In this poem the need is a physical one, a desire for the sort of 'purity' previously expressed in "The Eye-Mote" (C.,14-15), a purity that only death seems able to provide:

And I, stepping from this skin  
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black ear of Lethe,  
Pure as a baby.

(A.,34)

The image here is derived from the fact that a snake is able to slough off its skin, but the replacement or renewal of merely superficial surfaces acts as a symbol for a much more profound transmutation.

Across the surface of the skin, a scar forms a visible and ineradicable reminder of the pain that inflicted it. 'Scar'-imagery has probably a very personal significance for Sylvia Plath. Nancy Hunter Steiner recounts that her

unsuccessful suicide attempt at the age of twenty had left Plath with a "deep brown scar jutting across one cheekbone".<sup>28</sup> It is perhaps this scar that is reflected in the blade of the knife, that potential instrument of suicide, in "A Birthday Present", by way of a macabre annunciation: "Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?" (A., 48).

Every recurrent image Sylvia Plath uses has multiple reverberations. For the sake of conciseness, some of these must be ignored. It is necessary to point out, however, that images based on other parts of the human anatomy have as integral if not as central a part in Plath's web as the ones discussed in detail. By way of a brief example, when the poet, speaking through the patient in "Tulips" says, "And I have no face, I have wanted to efface myself" (A., 21), the master-image is still that of the de Chirico dummy, the associated adjectives still 'bald' and 'blank' despite the fact that in "face", a different, less commonly-employed bodily image appears. Moreover, death is as implicit in this 'face'-image as it is in, for example, the "hands" of the patient in the same poem, white as the hospital walls -- hands that have become "dead stringencies" for the horse-woman of "Ariel" (A., 36).

Similarly, a brief survey of adjectives derived from bodily phenomena reveals that they too demonstrate an equivalent integration within Plath's web of images. The



epithets 'bald' and 'blank' have already been discussed. A trio of adjectives have much in common with them and with each other: 'bare', 'naked' and 'nude'. The bare feet of the dead woman in "Edge" (A.,85) speak of her as having arrived at death as at the end of a journey, an objective attained. Again, in "Tulips", the speaker relates: "They have swabbed me clear of my loving associations./ Scared and bare on the green plastic-pillowed trolley" (A.,20). Here, "clear" and "bare" are both identified with the whiteness of death, in that both imply an object devoid of distinguishing features or emotions. Both the subject of "The Applicant" (A.,14-15) and his doll-wife are "naked" at the start (she is "naked as paper", which is both 'white' and 'thin'), but both are ultimately to be clothed in death's black apparel. The victim in "The Bee Meeting" is "nude as a chicken neck" (A.,60), plucked of mortal plumage in preparation for death. Here death has taken the lover's role, and the body is stripped not for sexual encounter but for sacrifice. Plath makes little distinction between 'naked' and 'nude' of the sort made by Robert Graves,<sup>29</sup> for to her the body divested of clothing becomes in any context simply more demonstrative of human vulnerability to the one implacable adversary, death. The "White/ Godiva" of "Ariel" (A.,36-37) implies that it were better, then, to meet death as if one were greeting a lover, and to be responsible for one's own unclothing and motion towards it, rather than let it steal

upon one unawares.

Some of Plath's adjectival oppositions are also highly significant; of which perhaps 'fat' against 'thin' or 'flat' is the most notable. "The Thin People" (C., 30-32) are those who destroy life by making it as insubstantial and attenuated as themselves -- agents of lovelessness and death who haunt bad dreams. On the other hand, the baby in "Morning Song" has in his rotundity a testament to the forces of life and optimism: "Love set you going like a fat gold watch" (A., 11). 'Flatness' is a quality that typifies barrenness, as opposed to the fullness of pregnancy and motherhood. This may be seen in "Elm" (A., 25-26) where the moon, a symbol Plath often uses for unproductive womanhood because of its white, blank appearance and its association with the virgin goddess Artemis (or Diana or Lucina),<sup>30</sup> is associated with the rhythmically released ova of the menstrual cycle, betokening infertility: "I let her go. I let her go/ Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery." (A., 26).

This chapter has been concerned with imagery and symbolism relating directly or indirectly to the human body, which is in itself a suitable source for the very basic, one might say archetypal, physical processes at the root of Plath's poetry. It has been said that a woman is more directly aware of her physical processes and their accompanying pain -- in puberty, menstruation, defloration,

childbirth, menopause and so on. On the other hand, a poet like Emily Dickinson used a wholly different, far more cerebral approach to the expression of anguish. What is more, the so-called Confessional school of poetry was, as Sylvia Plath herself recognised, founded by a man:

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 personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. . . .31

Probably the prominence of imagery relating to the body is partly the result of female body-consciousness, partly the association of physical pain with mental suffering (for the sake of creating more intense analogies), and partly the centrality of death as a thematic obsession -- the fascination Plath found in both bodily and mental disintegration.

## IMAGERY RELATING TO 'OTHERS'

The aim of this final chapter is to consider Sylvia Plath's use of imagery derived not from her own sense-perception nor from the human body but from external beings and their symbolic functions. These images fall into several groups, each of which is as closely linked in her associative web as are, for example, the parts of the body discussed in the previous chapter. The first group contains images derived from family relationships. The poet herself often switches personae, and may appear as either 'daughter', 'wife' or 'mother'. Analysis will be made not only of these female roles but also of their male counterparts, 'father', 'husband' and 'baby' (or 'child'). The second group contains images derived from some other female roles, especially 'nurse', 'nun' and 'virgin', while the third group concerns what may be termed religious imagery, with its allusions to 'God', 'Christ' and 'Mary'. Aside from these key words, others closely connected with them will also be discussed briefly, and close attention paid to the links with images considered in earlier chapters, in order that a more com-

plete analysis of the complex structure of Sylvia Plath's imagery may be made.

Death is the poet's central theme, and her dead father is the most important death-evoking image of the sort pertaining to the subject of this chapter. This obsessive figure appears throughout Plath's work, from the colossus-figure of her first volume to "Daddy" in Ariel. In "The Colossus" (C., 20-21) the father's monstrous figure embodies the forces of irretrievable destruction the poet sees at work within herself, and the noise emitted by the colossus represents the emotional havoc the still-potent memory of her father creates in the daughter. The daughter casts herself in the role of Electra, and attempts to salvage something from the wreck which, despite its state of advanced decay, seems to hold the key to a nameless wisdom. The endeavour is clearly in vain, and the speaker's mood becomes one of disillusionment: "Perhaps you consider yourself an oracle, / Mouthpiece of the dead, or of some god or other". Despite her bitter realisation she is unable to abandon the image, for her "hours are married to shadow"<sup>1</sup>, a fatal alliance that is a result of her loss of hope. For this 'marriage' is an irrevocable commitment to death, the only means by which her father may be reached and the promise attained that his image seems to hold. The same theme recurs in "On the Decline of Oracles"<sup>2</sup>. Here the promise is concealed in the sound of the "ambiguous sea" the daughter once

heard in a conch-shell that disappeared at her father's death. The impression it left on her was, however, indelible:

But I, I keep the voices he  
Set in my ear, and in my eye  
The sight of those blue, unseen waves <sup>3</sup>  
For which the ghost of Bocklin grieves. . . .

As in "The Colossus", the oracular promise has now declined into nothing but an intimation of the speaker's own death. The future holds only the visitation of the "Three barely-known men", prototypes perhaps of "Death & Co." (A., 38).

This paternal ghost reappears as the "daft father" of "All the Dead Dears" (C., 27-28), one of the "barnacle dead" whose grip will never be released on the living even when the latter join them and ". . . lie/ Deadlocked with them, taking root as cradles rock". The 'father's dual attributes of horror and unattainability are mingled in the allusion to The Duchess of Malfi and The Tempest (here the <sup>4</sup> 'father' is the counterpart of the 'drowned' Alonso). In "Full Fathom Five" (C., 46-47) the reference to the latter <sup>5</sup> play is taken up and developed. In this poem the 'father' is both the drowned king and Poseidon the sea-god, whose 'daughter' is "exiled" on dry land. The sea (as was explained <sup>6</sup> in 'Ocean 1212-W') is for Plath a symbol of a lost childhood happiness, an ineradicable memory of something no longer possible to experience. The poem ends with a suicidal wish to rejoin the father:

Your shelled bed I remember.  
Father, this thick air is murderous.

I would breathe water.

Here, life's air has become the hostile element, death the welcoming one (by drowning). "The Beekeeper's daughter" (C., 75) continues the grim alliance of marriage and death as the poet transforms herself into a queen-bee who "marries the winter of your year", that is, joins herself in death to a bridegroom synonymous with her father. This is the earliest of Plath's poems in which the father appears as a sadistic figure, to whom the daughter offers a passive, even masochistic response: "My heart under your foot, sister of a stone".

In "For a Fatherless Son" (WT., 33) Plath has altered her persona from 'daughter' to 'mother', but the emphasis remains the same. The mother speaks to her child from the bitterness of her own experience of fatherlessness, that has given her an inner sterility which is a manifestation of death in its cruellest form, the progeny of indifference:

You will be aware of an absence, presently,  
 Growing beside you like a tree,  
 A death-tree, colour gone, an Australian gum-tree --  
 Balding, gelded by lightning -- an illusion,  
 And a sky like a pig's backside, an utter lack of  
 attention.

In a sense, the "death tree" is a product of death's apparently limitless capacity to mock the living by chromatic distortion and by a show of virility in decay. "Balding" and "gelded" are adjectives which also suggest the featurelessness of an indifferent universe and show an expansion

of imagery deriving from de Chirico dummies.

The closeness of symbolic value between 'father' and 'God', an association originating no doubt in traditional Biblical imagery, is much employed by Plath to heighten the emotional impact of paternal loss. The omnipresent void that lies behind all things in "Sheep in Fog" (A.,13) seems to imply a similar spiritual one to the poet, ". . . a heaven/ Starless and fatherless, a dark water". The featurelessness of the terrain here seems to speak to the poet of an utter hopelessness and a loss of her faith in the belief that death will reunite her with her father, seen here as a godlike embodiment of paternal love. "Electra on Azalea Path"<sup>7</sup> unites all the themes already mentioned, except that by an allusive twist characteristic of Plath, the daughter-Electra becomes a suffering Christ-figure in a world that is as if her father ". . . had never existed, as if I came/ God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly". Her anguish is a direct result of her fatherlessness -- and here once again Agamemnon becomes, briefly, Alonso "face down in the sea" -- and the final stanza of the poem reveals that Electra is already dead by her own hand, hoping thereby to fulfil her unconsummated passion:

O 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 last line is a tardy confession of the guilt-element in



the daughter-father relationship. It is the guilt arising from the incestuous passion the daughter conceives for her dead father, a passion that in its unattainability becomes a death-wish that seems to be at least partly the result of the feeling of responsibility the daughter feels for causing her father's death.

This sentiment finds fuller expression in the poems of Ariel. In "Daddy" (A., 54-56) and "Little Fugue" (A., 71-72) the father, reflecting the cruelty the daughter feels he inflicts on her by his inaccessibility, becomes in her eyes a sadistic Nazi, enabling her to take on the persona of both the suffering concentration-camp Jew and his ancestor, Christ.<sup>8</sup> The "death tree" of "For a Fatherless Son" is now the yew of "Little Fugue":

A yew hedge of orders,  
Gothic and barbarous, pure German.  
Dead men cry from it.

In "Daddy" the image is developed even more violently. The father's voice is now "a barb wire snare./ Ich, ich, ich, ich". In both poems, death is everywhere: in "Little Fugue" the poet creates a surrogate to suffer for her ("The yew my Christ") but her denial of guilt and her claims of survival both deliberately ring hollow. The meaning to her of time present, of her own existence, and even of that of her child are as nothing to the white marriage-gown the clouds represent to her, symbolising the troth she has plighted to death.<sup>9</sup> "Daddy" presents the incarnation of death as

sadist, fascist and rapist, a Nazi who proves even Christ to be a masochist -- if the poet is a "Jew" and it is true that "Every woman adores a Fascist". The staking of Dracula-Daddy's heart at the end of the poem rings as false as the denial of guilt in "Little Fugue", for it is certain that the damage he has done to his victim is irreparable -- he has bitten her "pretty red heart in two". The phrase "I'm through" at the end of the poem refers either to a resolve to commit suicide or, as in the case of "Electra on Azalea Path", an already completed self-murder performed in order to free her from the remorseless spectre of her father.

The role of 'mother' in Plath's work is more complex than that of 'father', and not so clearly defined. From the earliest poems, the mother's child-bearing role makes her a natural victim of the pain of existence and vulnerable to those who inflict it. So, in "The Death of Myth-Making",<sup>10</sup> the "muddling devil" of superstition "Scared mothers to miscarry", that is, before those other prototypes of "Death & Co.", "Reason" and "Commonsense" turned their hands to establishing a different kind of inner deadness. In "Aftermath" (C.,29) the latter-day "Mother Medea" is another victim as her mythical archetype's tragedy is acted out by her in the burnt-out dwelling. In "All the Dead Dears" (C.,27-28), however, the 'mother' becomes yet another of the "barnacle dead" who limpet themselves to the living and "Reach hag hands to haul me in". The theme here is

expressed in a way that foreshadows the intermingling of images of birth and death in the later poems, in which the figure of the mother plays a central role. While here the ghosts of the dead "take root as cradles rock", so in a more personal poem, "The Disquieting Muses" (C., 58-60), which is addressed to the poet's mother, the de Chirico dummies likewise seem to haunt the child's crib from earliest infancy. It is a poem of deep resentment for the mother for having given birth tormented by such spectres, a resentment that overcomes the false stoicism at the end:

And this is the kingdom you bore me to,  
 Mother, mother. But no frown of mine  
 Will betray the company I keep.

The mother, having given shape to what has become merely a terrible awareness of life's agony and the ubiquity of death, turns into an object of loathing.

This hatred manifests itself in various ways. In "Moonrise" (C., 66-67) the mother is identified with the leprous moon, of which even the father (as an incarnation of a benevolent but defunct god) has become a victim. Her white colouring is highly ironic. Instead of wearing the green of fertility (also made ironic use of in "Aftermath") she is clothed in the white not only of virginity, but also of disease and death. Nature herself becomes "cold-blooded mother" in "Frog Autumn" (C., 70) who, instead of allowing her subjects to reflect her poison with a well-fed appearance, causes them to "thin/ Lamentably". In the various

parts of "Poem for a Birthday" (C., 80-88), as has been mentioned in the previous chapter, the 'mother' becomes associated with a 'mouth', which represents at once an all-consuming death (in the year's remorseless progression towards winter) and the womb. Birth and death are united in this imagery: the corpse in "Dark House" (C., 81-82) views death as a maternal figure in what is a bizarre variation upon the theme of 'Mother Earth':

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

A similar image may be seen in the death-wish poem "I Am Vertical" (CW., 26) where the speaker's desire to be "horizontal" is a result of her alienation from Mother Earth, a feeling made more intense in comparison to a tree "sucking up. . . motherly love", in close harmony with Nature.

For Plath, externalised 'mothers' may be either utterly hostile or unquestioningly welcoming, depending upon whether they are forcing a child out into life, or embracing it with death. More variations occur when the poet adopts the persona of a real or figurative mother herself. The speaker in "Facelift" (CW., 17-18), having undergone the operation referred to in the title, becomes a figurative "Mother to myself" in her complexion's 'reincarnation'. However, there is a deliberate ambivalence in her reawakening "swaddled in gauze" as if, in her self-deluding flight from death's tightening grip on her body,

she has merely exchanged one shroud for another. In "Still-born" (CW.,35) the poet as poet is similarly a 'mother', yet again one who engenders a sort of death, despite "mother-love", in her feelings of creative failure. It is a death that rebounds on the 'mother' herself:

These poems do not live, it's a sad diagnosis. . .  
 . . .they are dead, and their mother near dead with  
 distraction,  
 And they stupidly stare, and do not speak of her.

The poems in Crossing the Water introduce the figures of 'nun' and 'nurse', who are closely associated to the child-bearing mother, but offer her neither spiritual nor medical aid. The moon, as a 'white virgin', unifies this group of imagery. The mother, as "nurse" to her child, finds in the "nun-souled" "Candles" (CW.,41-42) a light that softens that emitted by the "bald moon". They provide little lasting comfort for her, however, in her knowledge that she nurses her infant as a prey for death. In "Small Hours", the poet's spiritual desolation is expressed in a cluster of similar images. She describes her creative powers as being like a fountain, "Nun-hearted and blind". Even her imagination is only "Mother of a white Nike and several bald-eyed Apollos" (CW.,16) -- white, dead-souled impersonations of life are its sole progeny. Instead of giving birth to live 'offspring'. . .

. . .the dead injure me with attentions, and nothing  
 can happen.

The moon lays a hand on my forehead,

Blank-faced and mum as a nurse.

(CW., 46)

The poet as 'mother' is capable of begetting only statuary, that mockery of life which is coloured white like her baleful ministering angels the moon (as virgin goddess), the nun and the nurse. The hatred of the external 'mother' has developed into the self-hatred expressed by adopting the 'mother' as a poetic persona.

In her later poetry, Plath interrelates this area of her web of images more closely. In "Amnesiac"<sup>12</sup> the subject of the poem is brought his oblivion by "nurses the size of worms" and he rejects human relationships for that oblivion:

O sister, mother, wife,  
Sweet Lethe is my life.  
I am never, never, never coming home!

The amnesiac's nurses, transformed into white angels of death, ". . . rise on either side of him like stars." "Three Women" (WT., 40-52), set in a maternity ward, is Sylvia Plath's most comprehensive examination of motherhood, in its portrayal of three different women as they give birth. The moon, a reflector of light, becomes for each of the women a mirror in which their emotional states are revealed to them. The First Voice, for whom parturition is a semi-mystical experience, finds no menace in the moon: "The moon's concern is more personal:/ She passes and repasses, luminous as a nurse". The Third Voice, an unmarried mother, cannot find in it the same reassurance, as she knows she

will have to give up the child to continue her education: her monologue centres on the pain of labour, that colours all she sees: "The night lights are flat red moons. They are dull with blood". The Second Voice has a miscarriage, and her monologue portrays the moon as a malevolent force, one which is a reflection of her own self-destructive will, seen manifest in her barrenness:

It is she that drags the blood-black sea around  
Month after month, with its voices of failure.  
I am helpless as the sea at the end of her string.  
I am restless. Restless and useless. I, too, create  
corpses.

(WT., 46)

As "mother of death" in the aftermath of her miscarriage, the Second Voice becomes "white", the moon's colour, and even associates herself directly with the moon itself, calling herself "flat and virginal" as she feels herself deathly and incapable of issue.

In Ariel the poet retains her 'mother'-persona which is usually placed in relation to a baby or small child. Images of 'birth' and 'death' remain as inseparably linked as in the earlier poetry. In "Morning Song" (A., 11), the mother sees in her child an intimation of her own death, for it seems to her a symbol of a new generation that is rising to replace hers:

I'm no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its  
own slow  
Effacement at the wind's hand.

In "Tulips" (A., 20-22) the patient has replaced the child-

bearing mother as central victim-figure. In the 'white' hospital, and wishing to slip into the 'white' oblivion represented by the hypnotic movements of the nurses that "pass and pass, they are no trouble", the patient finds she has become "a nun now, I have never been so pure". Only life itself, of which the violent redness of the tulips is a symbol, is a threat to this sterile peace.

In many of Plath's poems it is the child rather than the mother who is the central focus. In the early poem "Wreath for a Bridal"<sup>13</sup> the child is a potent emblem of the forces of renewal and hope, a figurative warrior whose purpose is to "slay spawn of dragon's teeth" -- the agents of pessimism, destruction, death and the threatening void. However, the "incense of death" that hangs over the birth-process in "The Manor Garden" (C.,9) seems to pervade the poems in The Colossus. In "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" (C.,10) the babies are dead ones, pickled in jars where they "moon and glow", reflecting the lunar aura of death. In "I Want, I Want" (C.,36) the monstrous "baby god" screams in perpetual and insatiable demand, while the earth itself in the role of 'mother' is left barren. The poem is given a freakish twist in the last stanza where the baby is associated with the Christ-child whose demands upon mankind, it is implied, were equally destructive and who was destroyed by his Father, the "inveterate patriarch" (perhaps the jealous God of the Old Testament), who used men as his agents.



The complete self-centredness of the newly-born child becomes destructive to the mother and intolerable to the father, and here the Biblical events are related to this archetypal pattern. The implacability of the baby is<sup>14</sup> closely linked to Nature's intractable progression towards death, as seen in the last line of "Metaphors" (C.,41). The pregnant woman has "Boarded the train there's no getting off", and 'train'-imagery here and in later poems like "Getting There" (A.,43) represents this remorseless drive towards death.

The cries of a baby reflect both the pain of its mother in bearing it and the pain of existence generally, as opposed to the silence, peace and security of the womb. For the mother in "Event" (CW.,43) the cries intensify her own feeling of inadequacy in fulfilling her baby's demands, in her inability to give the amount of love required to lift the inner darkness:

The child in the white crib revolves and sighs,  
Opening its mouth now, demanding.  
His little face is carved in pained, red wood.

In later poems, such as "Child" (WT.,12), the infant offers an eye like the unsullied "Mirror" of "Brasilia" (WT.,13) that reflects an innocence perpetually threatened by the outside world. A frail strand of optimism runs through this type of imagery, but one so fragile it seems almost insubstantial. For the speaker in "Mystic" (WT.,27) the children that "leap in their cots" provide one of the few images

that satisfy her need to know why life must continue, while in the nocturne of mother and baby in "By Candlelight" (WT., 28-29) the child, illuminated by the soft glow, provides another image of tentative affirmation in contrast to the surrounding darkness. In "Lesbos" (WT., 34-36), however, the children merely serve to increase the poem's mood of hysteria and madness. The child on the floor becomes, for the speaker,

Little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear --  
Why she is schizophrenic,  
Her face red and white, a panic. . . ,

while the infant, in the inanity of his smile, becomes an object of hatred, a reflection of the contemptible father in the eyes of the manic mother. In a similar way, the newly-born babies in "Three Women" reflect in their appearance and behaviour the attitudes of their mothers to them. The First Voice transforms what appears to be an inauspicious delivery into a symbol for her faith in untrammelled innocence: "I have never seen a thing so clear" (WT., 46). On the other hand, the cries of the Third Voice's baby seem like a reproach to the mother who must abandon her:

And from the open mouth issue sharp cries  
Scratching at my sleep like arrows,  
Scratching at my sleep, and entering my side.  
(WT., 47)

As figurative 'babies', the blooms in "Tulips" (A., 20-22) seem to reproach the patient with their insistent embodiment of the life-principle (seen in their red colour). "Lady Lazarus" (A., 16-19), moreover, turns herself into a

" . . . pure gold baby/ That melts to a shriek", an image both of reproof for the forces of destruction for which she was 'mothered' (forces personified in the "Doktor" of the concentration camp), and at the same time an evocation of what seems to her to be the ultimate pain, that suffered by the child thrust into the world after so long in the peaceful, silent womb. It is the same birth-cry that in "Ariel" (A., 34-36) "melts in the wall" and provides the impulse towards death as an escape from the painful memories it summons up. But while the baby's cry can provide the intolerable sense of anguish that induces the death-impulse in the hearer, the image of the dead baby, in its very silence, is of equal horror. The babies in "Edge" (A., 85) are each a "white serpent" (an allusion both to Cleopatra's asp and to Eve's seducer), while in "Death & Co." (A., 38-39) one of Death's partnership tries to persuade the poet to suicide by pointing out

. . . how sweet  
The babies look in their hospital  
Icebox. . . .

In "A Birthday Present" (A., 48-50) the imagery comes full circle. The speaker views the knife, an object that seems an incitement to suicide, as a thing that would prompt a cry "Pure and clean as the cry of a baby". In this image death is given the attributes of a hopeful simplicity as natural as birth, and becomes the more tempting for it. Only occasionally in Ariel does this joy in death's potential

transfer itself to a delight in one of life's phenomena. "You're" (A.,57) is one of these exceptions, as the mother rejoices in her infant and ends with a celebration of natural innocence: "Right, like a well-done sum./ A clean slate, with your own face on".

The relationship of 'husband' and 'wife' is central to a smaller group of images based on the idea of 'marriage'. Only in the early poetry, such as in the lyrical desires of the fishermen's wives in "The Netmenders"<sup>15</sup> or in the rather brusque but sincere epithalamion "Wreath for a Bridal"<sup>16</sup>, is the marital state the source of any positive value. In "The Colossus" (C.,20-21), however, the speaker is "married to shadow", or irrevocably pledged to the death her father seems to demand of her. In "All the Dead Dears" (C.,27-28), weddings, like funerals and child-births, are merely one of the means through which the dead impose their presence on the living. In "The Beast", the poet's marriage-partner is death, personified as a bridegroom:

I've married a cupboard of rubbish.  
 I bed in a fish puddle.<sup>17</sup>  
 Down here the sky is always falling.  
 (C.,84)

The first of the "Two Sisters of Persephone" (C.,63-64) is like her mythological prototype, wedded to death and "worm-husbanded". Death, it seems, is the only true husband for Plath's women, one who never breaks his bond, and with whom marriage involves a literal abandonment of the body's 'single'

state in its union with the earth.

Mindlessness characterises the relations between husband and wife in many of Plath's poems. Thus, the jeweller in "On Deck" is creating

A perfectly faceted wife to wait  
 On him hand and foot, quiet as a diamond.  
 Moony balloons tied by a string  
 To their owners' wrists, the light dreams float. . . .  
 (CW.,56)

This female subservience is expressed by a further extension of the 'mannequin'/'dummy' imagery of The Colossus. In it, the wife is seen as not just the property, but also the creation of the husband. It is an attitude ruthlessly satirised in "The Applicant" (A.,14-15), in which the wife, a "living doll" is referred to as an "it", more humanoid than human:

It works, there is nothing wrong with it. . .  
 My boy, it's your last resort.  
 Will you marry it, marry it, marry it?

This mindlessness is not the wife's sole province. It is shown equally by the husband in "Eavesdropper", who, as one of the "cow-people", returns home each evening to the "wifey" and the "big blue eye" of the television.

Marriage always seems to involve a closing-in of death, as an invasion of either the inner spirit or the corporeal self. So, the "Zoo-Keeper's Wife" (CW.,58-59) finds symbols of death in all her husband's animal-charges, and is rendered insomniac by the horror of it. A similar process is undergone by Agnes Higgins in that other soulless

19

marriage described in "The Wishing Box". The woman in "In Plaster" (CW.,30-32) speaks of her relationship with her doppelganger, the "new absolutely white person" as "a kind of marriage, being so close". It is obvious, though, that she is mistaken when she believes that she can triumph over this spectre who is, in its whiteness, a harbinger of her own death. Whiteness haunts the marriage of the visited friend in "Lesbos" (WT.,34-36) in images of impotence and frustration, for Oedipal longings torment other minds than the poet's own: "You say your husband is just no good to you./ His Jew-Mama guards his sweet sex like a pearl". Only in utter extremity, like that of the Second Voice in "Three Women" (WT.,40-52), is any solace to be found in the marriage-relationship. Here it is in an unspoken "tenderness" that she finds in her husband's silent companionship, rather than in any spoken communication.

The 'ring', symbol of matrimony, is made much use of as an image with a capacity to embrace multiple meanings in the later poetry. In "Event" (CW.,43), for instance, it represents the vicious circle of non-communication, the "groove of old faults", that characterises the poet's relationship with her husband. "Winter Trees" (WT.,11) is a sustained conceit upon the word 'ring'. Firstly, the 'ring' is a symbol of the passage of time, in the rings that tree-trunks accumulate each year. These "rings" become "a series of weddings", a complex succession of memories,

which, despite the neutralising effect of time, offer no solace to the present: they are "The shadows of ringdoves chanting, but easing nothing". The circlet of marriage is identified with the circles of hell. The 'ring' that symbolises the poet's relationship with her husband in "The Rabbit Catcher" (WT.,25) is associated with the 'ring' that trips a rabbit-trap, for both seem to be murderous snares impossible to escape from. Here the 'ring' is also a zero or cipher, "a vacancy" which is yet able to constrict to death. Being gold, a 'ring' can show deceptive value, but its true quality is the nothingness it symbolises; hence the image in "The Couriers" -- "A ring of gold with the sun in it?/ Lies. Lies and a grief" (A.,12).

The remainder of this chapter will be concerned with Sylvia Plath's use of religious motifs in her poetry. Some mention of this has already been made, in, for instance, the discussion of the Christ-imagery in "I Want, I Want" on pp.113-114 above, or of the association of the 'father'-figure with God on p.105 above. A poem like "Nick and the Candlestick" (A.,40) provides a good example of how Plath uses religious allusions to universalise a particular situation by drawing on its archetypal qualities, often latent. Here in this tableau of mother and child, is a re-depiction, with countless devotional paintings as models, of the Madonna and Child by candlelight. In the "blue" light (this is Mary's colour) of the imaginary cave, the agents of

conventional religion appear rapacious and incapable of providing any spiritual consolation. Christ, whose symbol was the fish for the early Christians, has now become both cold and "piranha"-like. Nevertheless, the candle's uncertain light offers (an albeit equally uncertain) possibility of faith, a situation found at the end of the poem. "Love" is not to be discovered in the deeds of a benevolent God, but in the mother-child relationship, an interpersonal emotion perhaps the least frail of all human feelings. The child who in sleep remembers its "crossed position" instinctively returns to the attitude of the foetus in the womb; but the allusion is also to Christ, whose suffering also connects humans by His assumption of this archetypally symbolic posture of pain. Thus, despite modern man's powers of self-destruction (seen in the pollution-imagery of the penultimate stanza), the child sustains his mother in her agonies of doubt, with the promise he embodies of an alternative to the path of suicide:

Let the mercuric  
 Atoms that cripple drip  
 Into the terrible well,

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

(A., 41)

There is as much a statement about Christ here as there is about baby Nick. Both babies "in the barn", exposed and vulnerable, nonetheless form a "Solid" that gives form and



definition to what would otherwise be a chaotic void. This solidity is a tangible, human quality, and if Nick sustains his mother's faith, then Christ sustained that of His followers by that same solidity -- His appeal was through His human qualities. This poem as much as any shows Sylvia Plath's mature power, in the controlled allusiveness of the imagery, in the assured use of interplay between the specific and the archetypal to achieve a universalisation of statement, and most of all in the emotional force of her utterance, that here lies in the contrast of light and dark, in images relating directly to the senses, and in the depths of feeling that are plumbed with utter sincerity.

Religious and mythological imagery plays a large part in Plath's earliest available work. In "Doomsday" <sup>21</sup> God is destructive, throwing a spanner in His own works: "God's monkey-wrench has blasted all machines", but this image has an element of artificiality and seems to be for the most part a result of the exigencies of the form of the villanelle. In another villanelle, "Mad Girl's Lovesong" <sup>22</sup> Heaven and Hell are seen to be simply creations of man's visual imagination:

God topples from the sky, hell's fires fade:  
Exit seraphim and Satan's men:  
I shut my eyes and all the world drops dead.

If there is a God for Plath at this stage of her development, He must be either the "drunken" one of "Circus in Three Rings" <sup>23</sup> (who is responsible for the manifest chaos in the

world), or the "madman" of "On the Decline of Oracles"<sup>24</sup>. In "Faun" (C.,18) a deliberate reversal of the usual sequence of apotheosis is made. Here man becomes a god not by divestiture of his human, mortal trappings but through his assumption of an animal-form, including the "goat-horns" conventionally associated with the Devil and other attributes symbolic of satyr-like sensuality. In a more serious poem, "Ouija" (C.,52-53), God appears as an obsolete and rather sordid phenomenon, a figure reduced to making "doddering" appearances at seances:

The old god, too, writes aureate poetry  
In tarnished modes, maundering among the wastes,  
Fair chronicler of every foul declension.

In "Hermit at Outermost House" (C.,57) the anchorite resists even the power of the "Hard" primitive gods in his cell by the shore, affirming the superiority of man's will over the divine even in the state of utmost deprivation. If, as in the beginning of "Snakecharmer" (C.,55-56), ". . .the gods began one world, and man another", then man is more secure in his than the gods in theirs: so, the house-bound children in the hurricane in "The Disquieting Muses" (C.,58-60) shout, "'Thor is angry:we don't care!'". If God is a potent force in The Colossus, then it is as an irresponsibly destructive one. It is a force often seen in a microcosm, in the death's head of the Columbus crab in "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour" (C.,71-74), or in the "golgotha at the tip of a reed" in "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" (C.,84-85).

In Crossing the Water also, God or gods appear in numerous disguises. The sleeping-pills of the "Insomniac" (CW.,21) are ". . .worn-out and silly, like classical gods", an allusion to the fact that a god becomes defunct, despite his apparently elevated status, when he no longer serves men and answers their prayers. That man has become truly his own god may be seen in "Facelift" (CW.,17-18) where the surgeons performing the operation are "Jovian" in their ostensible ability to create life anew. The ludicrous, "three times life size" figure of "Our Lady of the Shipwrecked" in "Finisterre" (CW.,15-16) is patently deaf to the prayers of the Breton peasantry. Her indifference to their fate cannot be excused by her trance-like distraction caused by the fact that she ". . .is in love with the beautiful formlessness of the sea", for this, it is made clear, is only a projection of the poet-observer's feelings. The grotesque statue is in fact a now redundant product of man's need for reassurance, and for the poet serves only to point the contrast between man's ugly and ultimately futile systematisation of the world and Nature's "beautiful formlessness". Religion, then, is a product of man's lack of self-confidence: Heaven, however, is a product of his greed. It is the sensual paradise of "final surfeit" in "Blue Moles" (C.,50-51), or the 'Heaven' of the flies on the fruit-laden bush in "Blackberrying" (CW., 24-25).

"Heavy Women" provides the first really controlled

use Plath makes of religious imagery. The pregnant women are identified with Mary for they are, like her, bearing within them what is already marked out for destruction -- a death here ironically personified by a sinister band of magi that have much in common with "Death & Co." (A.,38-39):

Dusk hoods them in Mary-blue  
 While far off, the axle of winter  
 Grinds round, bearing down the straw,  
 The star, the wise grey men.  
 (CW.,37)

This deathly greyness appears also in "Widow", where the woman's fear of the life-force is shown in a passage that takes its imagery from the Annunciation, as the widow's dead husband visits her in the form of a dove:

His soul may beat and be beating at her dull sense  
 Like blue Mary's angel, dovelike against a pane  
 Blinded to all but the grey, spiritless room  
 It looks in on, and must go on looking in on.  
 (CW.,39)

For the widow, "The voice of God is full of draughtiness", but the blankness he announces merely ensures that she remains emotionally closed up, hermetically sealed off from any human contact in her embittered solitude. In "Magi" (CW.,40), the sinister figures that emerge at the end of "Heavy Women" reappear as de Chirico dummies, "papery godfolk" who bring no consolatory pronouncements. They, "the abstracts", are contrasted with genuine love and warmth, for "Love the mother of milk, no theory" is the reality that sustains the helpless child in the cradle. Like "Nick and the Candlestick" (A.,40-41) this poem is a profession of

faith in a love that is human rather than divine in origin. In "Love Letter" this human love is shown to have the capacity to deify the recipient, or at least turn her into a truly convincing angel:

Now I resemble a sort of god  
 Floating through the air in my soul-shift  
 Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift. (CW.,45)

While the surgeons in "Face Lift" were merely "Jovian" in their quasi-divine creative skill, the subject of "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." (CW.,48-49) is a fully-fledged secular god in the operating theatre where the "white light" is "hygenic as heaven". He identifies himself with nothing less than the sun itself, central to his own universe, and believes himself to have attained the peak of man's aspiration in this centrality. The price to pay for this substitution of the human for the divine is the almost insupportable responsibility for one's own salvation, or in Plath's terminology the "Apprehensions" (CW.,57) that derive from a destruction of belief in an Almighty protector. In this poem, heaven is seen to be unattainable -- "Angels swim in it, and the stars, in indifference also" -- and the flimsiness of human purchase on the earth appalls the poet. Moreover, there is an added fear, originating in precedent, of what may occur when man sets himself up as a god, "A terror/ Of being wheeled off under crosses and a rain of pietas".

"Mystic" (WT.,26-27) is a sustained attempt to work

out how one may continue living, and where it may yet be possible to progress to, once "one has seen God", that is, when one has taken the burden of one's suffering upon oneself, and every man is his own Christ. Conventional faith has to be rejected in the face of massive indifference -- "Does the sea/ Remember the walker upon it?" -- and in the same way other "remedies" man has used to console himself in his isolation are listed and laid aside:

The pill of the Communion tablet,  
The walking beside still water? Memory?  
Or picking up the bright pieces  
Of Christ in the faces of rodents,  
The tame flower-nibblers, the ones

Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable. . . .

"Pill" has connotations of something inducing numbness or narcosis, while humility links Christ and the rodents, but excludes man, for whom it is an alien virtue. The only resort is to revert to the secular world and to the small faith it is possible to find in life's dogged will to continue. To search for a God in the external universe is to find only indifference and an issueless death, as in "Lyonesse":

The Lyonians had always thought  
Heaven would be something else. . . .

It never occurred that they had been forgot,  
That the big God  
Had lazily closed one eye and let them slip. . . .

They did not see him smile,  
Turn, like an animal,

In his cage of ether, his cage of stars.  
He'd had so many wars!

The white gape of his mind was the real Tabula Rasa.  
(WT.,30)

"Mary's Song" (WT.,39) is a warning by a latter-day mother to her child, an admonition of the immense suffering the growing being will have to undergo, now that each man's redemption must be bought by himself. Christ is alluded to in both the cooking "lamb", cracking in its fat, and the Jew cremated in the concentration camp. The mother is raised to the level of an archetypal figure, "Mary", who warns her 'Christ'-child of the terrifyingly destructive forces at work in the world: "O golden child the world will kill and eat". These forces are personified by Plath in "Lady Lazarus" (A.,16-19) as "Herr God, Herr Lucifer", both equal culprits as justifiers of man's monstrous cruelty to man.

The Ariel poems sustain the attack upon conventional religious figures and concepts. In "The Night Dances" (A.,27-28) heaven succeeds in destroying human warmth by enveloping it in its "black amnesias", while in "Getting There" (A.,43-44) the train's wheels show an insatiable hunger for destruction, "Fixed to their arc like gods". In "Medusa" (A.,45-46) the same destructive forces are now personified as "stooges" of Medusa the Gorgon (a literal 'death's-head') and they are "Riding the rip tide to the nearest point of departure/ Dragging their Jesus hair". The poem is one of violent revulsion from death, which the poet feels to be working like a disease in her own organism. The intensity of the revulsion is demonstrated in a violent outburst in which

religious symbols are placed in macabre juxtaposition with ones relating to death:

Who do you think you are?  
 A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?  
 I shall take no bite of your body,  
 Bottle in which I live,

Ghastly Vatican.

"The Moon and the Yew Tree" (A.,47) provides an extension of the imagery deriving from the effigy of "Our Lady" in "Finisterre" (CW.,15-16). In the later poem the saints' figurines are slightly ludicrous in appearance and completely ineffectual against the menace symbolised by the moon. The representation of Mary is "sweet", the saints are depicted with "delicate feet" and are "stiff with holiness", but both are helpless in the face of the "blackness and silence" of the moon silhouetting the yew tree. "Daddy" (A.,54-56) is "a bag full of God" but it is a God who is ". . . a swastika/ So black no sky could squeak through". The girl in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" (A.,63-64) ironically ends with the promise that she will be "sweet God" and set the bees free, despite the fact that the swarm is "Black on black", a dangerous "box of maniacs". Man, in adopting God's role, has His power but not His control, and turns this power into a self-destructive urge, a barely-understood force unleashed upon the owner. This is clearly seen in "The Hanging Man" (A.,70), where the force takes the form of electric shock treatment administered by a god to a



human victim and becomes a symbolic instilment of a nameless wisdom by an inconceivable power into an incomprehending prophet. The result is a "vulturous boredom", a profound ennui that is the only possible reaction of a human in full confrontation with eternity. In "Years" the speaker asserts human superiority over immortal, divine figures in that mortals are at least able to avoid this everlasting boredom:

O God, I am not like you  
 In your vacuous black,  
 Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti. (A.,73)

In this poem God appears as either a "great stasis" (as opposed to the poet's, and humanity's, beloved dynamism) or, in His Incarnation as Christ, as a self-destructive force of even less sympathetic characteristics:

Is it a tiger this year, this roar at the door?  
 Is it a Christus,  
 The awful

God-bit in him  
 Dying to fly and be done with it? (A.,73)

For Plath, in the end, a man's true god is whatever loves him unconditionally and sustains him through the world's pain and doubt. In "Mystic" (WT.,26-27) it was simply the persistence of natural rhythms that kept death at bay. In "Paralytic" (A.,78-79) it is something even more specific:

My god the iron lung

That loves me, pumps  
My two  
Dust bags in and out,  
Will not

Let me relapse. . . .

The paralytic thus becomes a symbol of man's utter helplessness in the face of the responsibility he has gained in having attained his own godhead. Nevertheless, Plath offers the reader a clue to the whereabouts of the seeds of a new faith to replace the now defunct one in paternalistic, authoritarian intangibilities. The new faith must spring from the human viscera, and be rooted in love of an interpersonal sort. For Plath, its potentialities seemed limited as a candle flickering against the vastness of night has power to illumine or console. Yet while the individual heart lovingly and unquestioningly continues to sustain its organism, despite the overwhelming odds to the contrary there is a glimmer of hope.

## VI

### CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study has been, in essence, interpretative. Through an analysis of the sorts of images Sylvia Plath uses, and the way she uses them, a guide to her associative processes may be provided. The reasons why she used certain images and symbols, and what connotations these had for her are, to a certain extent, made evident. A study of this sort is valuable because, as was stated in Chapter I, past critical approaches to Plath have more often than not been made through non-literary disciplines. A result of this has been the comparative neglect of what the poetry itself, often difficult to comprehend at first reading, actually seems to be saying. Many of the apparent obscurities to be found in the works have been dismissed as being personal allusions, and have been left for biographers, working alongside psychologists, to elucidate.

That specific personal experiences may lie behind the creation of much of Plath's poetry is not in dispute: such things have always provided the stimulus towards the lyric utterance. However, to see Plath's work as naked confession, with the persona of the poet and Sylvia Plath being

synonymous, and to see the problems the poems present merely the result of their containing private references as yet unavailable to the general reading public, is seriously to belittle her achievement. As this study has tried to show, the images Plath uses in one poem are dependent for their full effect upon their context within her poetry as a whole. The function of like images in separate poems is remarkably consistent, and similar images and symbols recur with almost obsessive regularity throughout her work. To understand her 'difficult' poems, one turns to those that are easier to follow and seeks analogous images. The body of Plath's work has within it the keys to all the difficulties the individual poem may pose.

"The Other" (WT., 22-23) is one of Plath's most 'difficult' poems, a fact tacitly attested to by critics who have without exception avoided it, presumably being unwilling to compromise themselves with an interpretation. In fact, the poem is a superb example of the concentrated power of Plath's imagery in expressing the self-defeating complexities of a disturbed mind. In the brief analysis of the poem that follows, references are given to the fuller treatment of the elements of the imagery to be found in the body of this thesis.

The poem's title is the first clue towards reaching an understanding of what it is trying to convey. "Other"

suggests the presence of a doppelganger, a familiar figure in Plath (q.v. pp. 29, 33, 56, 81 and 119 above). In this poem this figure begins as a literal 'other woman' (hence the title), that is, a sexual rival. The "You" in line 1 refers to the speaker's husband who, by his tardiness and his attempt to remove the incriminating evidence of embraces, betrays his infidelity. By the end of the poem the other woman, the external source of the speaker's feeling of alienation, has become internalised, causing a sundered personality in which the betrayed victim and the cause of her anguish coexist within the same psyche. The conflict thus aroused creates a strong self-destructive urge. This mental state is evoked by a visual and tactile image based upon the idea of a mirror (q.v. pp. 65-67, 74-76 above) before which the speaker stands. Her self-laceration is an attempt to bridge the gulf between the two selves:

Cold glass, how you insert yourself  
 Between myself and myself.  
 I scratch like a cat.

The poem moves consistently on two levels. The "cat" is the wronged woman, trying to mutilate her rival in the traditional feminine manner, but ironically scarring only herself. The blood's "dark fruit" (q.v. pp. 83-86 above) bears the tempting savour of death, and the speaker's experience of this taste breeds her secret smile at the end of the poem, the smile of one who is Death's intimate, even his lover.

The adulteries that motivate this foreplay with suicide are "sulphurous", coloured with the yellow brimstone of an earthly Hell. It is a hue that marks the dreamer-victim for an inevitable and imminent death (q.v. p. 57 above).

Theft is the keynote of the central part of the poem. The husband's mistress seems to confess everything eagerly. Her smile is a "meathook" (q.v. pp. 27-35 above), a graphic image for the aggressive projection of sexuality that seems to grapple her lover's "parts" to her. Ironically, the speaker casts herself in the role of "White Nike" -- the statue of the Winged Victory -- an image which contains within in simultaneously the ideas of fecundity and sterility, victory and defeat. The veiled allusion to milk in line 2 suggests that the speaker is either pregnant or lactating (this is one aspect of 'white'). As a piece of statuary, however, she is barren and helplessly immobile, a "womb of marble" lit by a "moon-glow"; in this case whiteness augments the sense of aridity and desolation (q.v. pp. 36-46 above). Plath maintains the tension in the poem brilliantly by allowing the speaker and her rival to merge only gradually into one.

The references to pregnancy suggest the realistic, even banal background to the triangular situation. The arrow-like "navel-cords" that symbolise the speaker's life-giving powers are aimed instead at impelling her towards death (q.v.

pp. 31-32). Only with the line "I have your head upon my wall" does the metamorphosis of two human rivals into a single internalised conflict begin. The "stolen horses" (q.v. p. 86 above) continue the theft theme and are thus symbols of illicit, climactic sexuality, as is the rapid breathing that on another level is the physically expressed anguish of the woman before the mirror.

Out of its context, namely, the whole body of Plath's work, "The Other" remains almost impenetrable. In it, it may be understood to be an example of Plath's highest poetic achievement, a style that is highly allusive and uses images as a sort of shorthand. Far from being deliberately or perversely obscure, Plath constructs her poems from elements never completely detached from a vast and complex web of images. It is the reader's duty to reconstruct this web for himself.

## FOOTNOTES

### I

1

J. F. Nims, "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: a Technical Analysis", in The Art of Sylvia Plath: a Symposium, ed. C. Newman (Bloomington, 1971), p. 136.

2

T. Hughes, "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems", in C. Newman, ed., op. cit., p. 187.

3

"The Poet Speaks: an Interview", ed. P. Orr, in 20th Century Poetry and Poetics, ed. G. Geddes (Toronto, 1973), p. 545.

4

See, for example, the frontispiece to C. Newman, ed., op. cit., and the photographs illustrating H. Rosenstein, "Reconsidering Sylvia Plath", Ms, I, 44-51, 96-99.

5

See N. H. Steiner, A Closer Look at Ariel (New York, 1973), p. 40.

6

C. Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 266-272.

7

Poetry, XCIV (1959), 368.

8

L. Ames, "Notes Towards a Biography", in C. Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 157-162.

9

A. Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to Sing", in C. Newman, ed., op. cit., p. 175.

10

All words and phrases in quotation marks up to here in this paragraph are from L. Ames, op. cit., p. 155.

11

N. H. Steiner, op. cit.



12

Harper's Magazine published several poems of Plath's, including "Doomsday", "To Eva Descending the Stair", "Go Get the Goodly Squab" (all in 1954); "Mushrooms" (1960); "You're" (1961); "Sleep in the Mojave Desert", "Private Ground" and "Leaving Early" (all in 1962). Q.v. E. Homberger, "A Chronological Checklist of the Periodical Publications of Sylvia Plath" (Exeter, 1970).

13

W. Campbell, "Remembering Sylvia", in C. Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 182-186.

14

A. Sexton, op. cit., pp. 174-181.

15

A. Alvarez, The Savage God (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 56. For the "hindsight" I mention, compare Alvarez's description here with Plath's portrait of the dead woman in "Edge" (A., 85), a poem which, significantly, is quoted by Alvarez on p. 51 of The Savage God.

16

S. Plath, Ariel (New York, 1966) contains this Introduction by Robert Lowell,

17

Descriptions of Sylvia Plath by acquaintances writing after her death tend to speak of her as a sort of visiting deity who briefly illuminated their lives and then was suddenly gone. Here are a selection: ". . .intense, skilled, perceptive, strange, blonde, lovely, Sylvia" (Sexton, op. cit., p. 177); ". . .she was charming to look at. Tall and slender and delicate wristed, she had pale honey hair, fine, thick and long, and beautiful dark brown eyes. And her skin was pale gold and waxy, the same even colour. . .Sylvia's quality, her personal style of being, her vitality, are summed up in an image of the Winged Victory. . .she strides, her robes fly out, beautiful and huge" (Campbell, op. cit., p. 182); "She was a tall, spindly girl with waste-length sandy hair, which she usually wore in a bun, and that curious, advertisement-trained, transatlantic air of anxious pleasantness" (Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", in C. Newman, ed., op. cit., p. 56); "Her photographs are misleading: Sylvia was a remarkably attractive young woman. She was impressively tall, almost statuesque. . .her yellow hair, which had been lightened several shades from its natural light brown, was shoulder length and had been trained to dip with a precise and provocative flourish over her left eyebrow. . .except for the penetrating intelligence and the extraordinary

poetic talent she could have been an airline stewardess or the ingenuous heroine of a B-movie" (N. H. Steiner, op. cit., pp. 40-41).

Note the eagerness with which these writers transform Plath into a visual object either of mythical proportions -- Campbell's "Winged Victory" is probably another example of "hindsight" (q.v. n 15) based on images of Nike in "The Small Hours" (CW., 46) and "The Other" (WT., 22) -- or of insultingly stereotypical ones, like air hostesses or movie starlets. Few serious writers can have been treated in this way, not even Lowell's "poetesses" (q.v. n 16) who are by definition not to be taken seriously. It appears that Sylvia Plath may have acted out the grandiose roles that her friends cast her in. What is dangerous to the reader of her works is the extent to which descriptions of the sort quoted above (widely differing as they are, even with reference to physical details) have been allowed to influence critical appraisal of those works. Alvarez, as the author of both memoir and criticism, is by far the worst culprit of this sort in, for example, his description of the last months of Plath's life in The Savage God, in which the poet appears clothed in her own characteristic epithets: ". . . her pale and gaunt figure. . . a curiously desolate, rapt air, like a priestess emptied out by the rites of her cult. . . her hair gave off a strong smell, sharp as an animal's" (p. 46).

20

A. Alvarez, "Beyond All This Fiddle", in Beyond All This Fiddle: Essays 1955-1967 (London, 1968), pp. 3-21.

21

Ibid., p. 17.

22

Ibid., p. 21.

23

A. Alvarez, Under Pressure (Baltimore, 1965), p. 185.

24

C. B. Cox and A. R. Jones, "After the Tranquilized Fifties", Critical Quarterly, VI (1964), 108.

25

A. R. Jones, "Necessity and Freedom: the Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton", Critical Quarterly, VII (1965), 14.

26

Quoted ibid., p. 14.

27

Quoted ibid., p. 23.

28

D. Holbrook, "The 200 inch Distorting Mirror", New Society, XII (1968), 57.

29

D. Holbrook, "R. D. Laing and the Death Circuit", Encounter, XXI (1968), 35-45.

30

D. Holbrook, "The 200 inch Distorting Mirror", 58.

31

Alvarez, "Sylvia Plath", p. 66.

32

D. Holbrook, "Sylvia Plath, Pathological Morality and the Avant-Garde", in The Penguin Guide to English Literature Vol. VII, ed. B. Ford (Harmondsworth, 1973), pp. 433-449. This essay is a new inclusion in the revised edition of the final volume of The Penguin Guide. It replaces one on Dylan Thomas in the earlier edition and may therefore be taken as an editorial endorsement of Plath's importance as a literary figure, with the implication, however, that her significance is due to the psychological interest of her work.

33

Ibid., p. 448.

34

S. Plath, "Context", London Magazine, No. 1 (Feb., 1962), 45-46. An extract is quoted by C. Newman, "Candor is the Only Wile", in Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 33, 320.

35

W. F. Claire, "That Rare, Random Descent: the Poetry and Pathos of Sylvia Plath", Antioch Review, XXVI (1966), 557.

36

A. Brink, "On the Psychological Sources of the Creative Imagination", Queen's Quarterly, LXXXI (1974), 1-19. This essay is an interesting justification of the use of psychoanalytic techniques in literary criticism. It is implied that the imagination (and thus creative ability) relates to a weakness in the personality's ego-structure that is a result of certain experiences in infancy, and that this imbalance is compensated for, in the case of creative artists,

by the art itself that they produce. If art is an attempt to define ego-conflict that has roots deep in the psyche, then Holbrook's scruples at artists of abnormal psyche are rather undermined, for the art could not exist without the weakness. Though I would agree with Brink's final statement that ". . .for the sake of the humanities, for the sake of preserving their credibility in a living way, we must introduce the maker into discussion of his art" (p. 19), in Sylvia Plath's case the art has been ignored while the personality scrutinised and even morally condemned by some critics.

37

A. Alvarez, ed., The New Poetry (Harmondsworth, 1966).

38

Rosenstein, op. cit., p. 44.

39

Cox and Jones, op. cit., p. 108.

40

Rosenstein, op. cit., p. 48.

41

M. Schmidt and G. Lindop, eds., British Poetry Since 1960: a Critical Survey (South Hincsey, Oxford, 1972).

42

"A Poet in the 'Sixties: Vices and Virtues", a recorded conversation with Peter Porter, in Schmidt and Lindop, eds., op. cit., p. 243.

43

A. Cluysenaar, "Post-Culture: Pre-Culture", in Schmidt and Lindop, eds., op. cit., p. 216.

44

A. Brownjohn, "A View of English Poetry in the Early 'Seventies", in Schmidt and Lindop, eds., op. cit., p. 243.

45

A. Cluysenaar, op. cit., p. 219.

46

B. Hardy, "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: Enlargement or Derangement", in The Survival of Poetry: a Contemporary Survey, ed. M. Dodsworth (London, 1970), p. 164.

47

Ibid., p. 171.

## II

1 C. Newman, "Candor is the Only Wile", in C. Newman, ed., op. cit., p. 44.

2 The speaker in "Lesbos" imagines herself as one of Prufrock's mermaids. Q.v. T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", in The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot (London, 1969), pp. 13-17.

3 Compare the lines quoted above from "Lesbos" and these from "Prufrock":  
 Shall I part my hair behind? Do I dare to eat a peach?  
 I shall wear white flannel trousers and walk upon the beach.  
 I have heard the mermaids singing, each to each.  
 (ll. 122-124)

4 Compare the lines from "Lesbos" quoted below with the episode with the "familiar compound ghost" in "Little Gidding" II, to be found in Eliot's Complete Poems and Plays, pp. 140-142.

5 As noted by I. Melander, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: a Study of Themes (Stockholm, 1972), pp. 18-20. A reproduction of this painting may be found in I. Far, de Chirico (New York, 1968).

6 Poetry, XCIV (1959), 368.

7 Q.v. J. Webster, The Duchess of Malfi, V. v. 5-7:  
 When I looke into the Fish-ponds in my Garden  
 Me thinkes I see a thing, arm'd with a Rake  
 That seemes to strike at me.

8 Q.v. W. Shakespeare, The Tempest, II. 1. 397. Also, T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, I. 47-48; II. 125; III. 191-192, 257.

- 9 J. Keats, "To Autumn", stanza II, line 2.
- 10 Q.v. Alvarez, The Savage God, p. 47 for discussion of this motif.
- 11 T. S. Eliot, "The Journey of the Magi", ll. 23-28, in The Complete Poems and Plays, p. 103.
- 12 Howard's allusion is to the epigraph of Eliot's Waste Land, ibid., p. 59. "The Stones" (C., 86-88) describes a waste land peopled by de Chirico dummies that are the 'disquieting muses' that preside over much of The Colossus and are forebears of later poems like "The Applicant" (A., 14-15).
- 13 R. Howard, "Review of The Colossus", Poetry, CI (1963), 412-413. This is a review of the New York, 1962 edition.
- 14 Encounter, XXI (1963), 51.
- 15 Poetry, CII (1963), 298.
- 16 T. S. Eliot, The Waste Land, I. 76. In his note on this line, Eliot draws attention to Baudelaire's Preface to Les Fleurs du Mal.
- 17 The association of 'horse'-imagery and love is clarified in the third stanza of "Years" (A., 73).
- 18 S. Plath, The Bell Jar (London, 1966), p. 74.
- 19 Ibid., p. 87.
- 20 Q.v. Conclusion to this thesis.

## III

- 1 D. H. Lawrence, The Ship of Death and Other Poems (London, 1941), pp. 66-67. Q.v. also M. Dodsworth, "Introduction: the Survival of Poetry", in M. Dodsworth, ed., op. cit., pp. 32-33.
- 2 W. Stevens, The Palm at the End of the Mind, ed. H. Stevens (New York, 1971), pp. 133-149. Q.v. also C. Newman, "Candor is the Only Wile", p. 53.
- 3 T. L. S., MMDXVIII (1969), 855.
- 4 Atlantic Monthly, XCIC (1957), 65.
- 5 Poetry, XC (1957), 229-231.
- 6 The Nation, CLXXXI (1957), 119.
- 7 T. Hughes, Lupercal (New York, 1960), p. 37.
- 8 W. Shakespeare, Othello, I. i. 88-89: "Even now, now, very now, an old black ram/ Is tuppung your white ewe".
- 9 S. Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 135.
- 10 Ibid., p. 166. In "The Wishing Box" (Atlantic Monthly, CCXIV (1964), pp. 86-89), an early short story, Plath describes the incipient insomnia of Agnes, her heroine, in similar terms: "The curtains of sleep, of refreshing, forgetful darkness dividing each day from the day before it and the day after it, were lifted for Agnes eternally, irrevocably". Her only escape is death through suicide.
- 11 Harper's Magazine, CCIX (1954), 63.

- 12 The Spectator, CCII (1959), 227.
- 13 The New Yorker, XXXIX (1963), 29.
- 14 W. Shakespeare, Julius Caesar, III. 1. 259-261:  
Over thy wounds now do I prophesy  
(Which, like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips  
To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue). . . .
- 15 S. Plath, The Bell Jar, pp. 239-246.
- 16 Encounter, XXI (1963), 51.
- 17 Hudson Review, XIII (1960), 414-415.
- 18 Quoted by A. Alvarez, The Savage God, p. 37. C.f. "The  
blue hour before sunup" in "Sleep in the Mojave Desert" (CW.,  
47)
- 19 Sewanee Review, LXVIII (1960), 602-618.
- 20 Ibid., p. 611.
- 21 A short story collected in The Naked 1: Fictions for the  
Seventies, eds. F. R. Karl and L. Hamalian (London, 1971),  
pp. 251-264.
- 22 Ibid., p. 264.
- 23 S. Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 1.
- 24 Ibid., pp. 151-152.
- 25 G. Stade, "Introduction", in N. H. Steiner, op. cit.,  
pp. 5-10.



- 26 Poetry, CII (1963), 296-298.
- 27 Ibid., 296-297.
- 28 4  
Q.v. n .
- 29 I. Melander, op. cit., p. 21.
- 30 Poetry, CII (1963), 297.
- 31 17  
Q.v. n .
- 32 A short reminiscence of the poet's childhood to be found in C. Newman, ed., op. cit., pp.266-272.

## IV

- 1 Poetry, LXXXIX (1957), 232-233.
- 2 Poetry, XC (1957), 233-234.
- 3 Atlantic Monthly, XCIC (1957), 65.
- 4 Atlantic Monthly, XCVI (1955), 68.
- 5 Poetry, XC (1957), 235-236.
- 6 Critical Quarterly, II (1960), 156.
- 7 Q.v. Chapter II, n<sup>5</sup>.

8 Allusions to Rousseau, de Chirico, Blake, Bocklin and Redon suggest that the influence upon Plath of certain painters may be more profound than is at first obvious. Plath was an accomplished artist herself, to which the pen drawings reproduced in Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 280-282 testify. There is, as is suggested in this thesis, a strong visual element in Plath's use of imagery. There seems to be adequate material for a study by a discerning art critic, perhaps entitled "Sylvia Plath and the Visual Arts".

9 Eyelessness as an image for indifference, and the reverse of this, multitudinous eyes as an image for paranoia, occur so often in the poetry of Plath's middle period as to become the central, obsessional images in Crossing the Water. Note particularly five almost consecutive poems in that volume where one image or the other may be found: "Magi" (CW., 40); "Event" (CW., 43); "Love Letter" (CW., 44); "Small Hours" (CW., 46); "Sleep in the Mojave Desert" (CW., 47).

10 C.f. Sophocles, Oedipus the King, lines 1245 ff; Shake-



23

The extremely rapid motion of a live snake's tongue is evoked in "Snakecharmer" (C., 55-56).

24

Q.v. Chapter II, p. 32.

25

Poetry, CII (1963), 96-98.

26

New Yorker, XXXIX (1963), 29.

27

St. John, xi. 1 ff. Q.v. also T. S. Eliot, "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock", lines 94-95.

28

N. H. Steiner, A Closer Look at Ariel, p. 45.

29

Q.v. R. Graves, "The Naked and the Nude" in Collected Poems (London, 1965), p. 242.

30

Plath's symbols are not 'pure' -- one thing standing for another -- but have a cloud of associations relating them to their context in the larger web of images. The moon is one of the only two symbols commonly used by Plath that is examined in any detail by a critic (the other is the sea -- q.v. Edward Lucie Smith's essay in Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 91-99). Eileen Aird, in her book Sylvia Plath (Edinburgh, 1973) speaks in her final chapter of what she considers "perhaps the central symbol" of Plath's work and goes on to make an interesting but not very profound study of 'moon'-imagery in the poetry. Aird's sensitivity to allusion is limited -- she totally misses the point of "The Disquieting Muses" (C., 58-60) by failing to note de Chirico's influence on the poem. She does however make the initial proviso that Plath's images become "concentrated allusions to associations and references beyond the immediate range of the individual poem. However, to analyse in detail the symbolism and imagery would be a major study in itself" E. Aird, Sylvia Plath, p. 101.

## V

- 1 Q.v. p. 106.
- 2 Poetry, XCIV (1959), 368.
- 3 The reference is to the sinister Symbolist painting  
"The Isle of the Dead" by Arnold Böcklin. Q.v. Chapter IV,  
n 8.
- 4 Q.v. Chapter II, n 7 & 8.
- 5 Q.v. Chapter II, pp. 21-22.
- 6 C. Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 266-272.
- 7 Hudson Review, XIII (1960), 414-415.
- 8 Q.v. below, pp. 127 ff.
- 9 Q.v. below, pp. 118-120.
- 10 Poetry, XCVI (1959), 370.
- 11 Q.v. Conclusion for elucidation of this image. Also see  
Chapter I, n 17.
- 12 New Yorker, XXXIX (1963), 29.
- 13 Poetry, LXXXIX (1957), 231.
- 14 Q.v. below, pp. 120-122.

- 15 New Yorker, XXXIX (1963), 29.
- 16           13  
Q.v. n .
- 17 Presumably the sky is falling to a "marriage with the mire" of "Ouija" (C., 52-53).
- 18 Poetry, CII (1963), 96-98.
- 19 Atlantic Monthly, CCXIV (1964), 86-89.
- 20 Blue was the traditional colour of the Virgin Mary's robe in artistic depictions. It signified modesty.
- 21 Harper's Magazine, CCVIII (1954), 29.
- 22 In Lois Ames, "A Biographical Note" appended to S. Plath, The Bell Jar (New York, 1971), p. 285.
- 23 Atlantic Monthly, CXCVI (1955), 68.
- 24           2  
Q.v. n .
- 25 'Paper' or 'papery' is a common epithet of Plath's and is tangential to images based on 'black', 'white' and 'skin'. The word connotes two-dimensionality, artificiality, fragility and vulnerability.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### A. PRIMARY SOURCES -- Works by Sylvia Plath

#### 1. Collected Works: Poetry

Ariel. London: Faber and Faber, 1965.

Ariel. New York: Harper and Row, 1966.

The Colossus. London: Faber and Faber, 1960

Crossing the Water. London: Faber and Faber, 1971.

Uncollected Poems. London: Turret Press, 1965.

Winter Trees. London: Faber and Faber, 1971.

#### 2. Uncollected Works: Poetry

"Amnesiac", The New Yorker, XXXIX (3 August 1963), 29.

"Battle-Scene from the Comic Opera Fantasy The Seafarer", in Charles Newman, ed., The Art of Sylvia: A Symposium. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971, pp. 246-247.

"The Beggars", The Critical Quarterly, II (Summer 1960), 156.

"Circus in Three Rings", Atlantic Monthly, XCVI (August 1955), 68.

"Complaint of the Crazy Queen", Times Literary Supplement, MMMDXVIII (31 July 1969), 855.

"The Death of Mythmaking", Poetry, XCVI (September 1959), 370.

"Dialogue en Route", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 239-240.

"Doomsday", Harper's Magazine, CCVIII (May 1954), 29.

- "Dream of the Hearse-Driver", Times Literary Supplement, MMDXVIII (31 July 1969), 855.
- "Dream with Clamdiggers", Poetry, LXXXIX (January 1957), 232-233.
- "Eavesdropper", Poetry, CII (August 1963), 96-98.
- "Electra on Azalea Path", Hudson Review, XIII (Autumn 1960), 414-415.
- "Ella Mason and her Eleven Cats", Poetry, XC (July 1957), 233-234.
- "Epitaph for Fire and Flower", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 244-245.
- "Go Get the Goodly Squab", Harper's Magazine, CCIX (November 1954), 47.
- "The Jailor", Encounter, XXI (October 1963), 51.
- "A Lesson in Vengeance", Poetry, XCIV (September 1959), 371.
- "Letter to a Purist", Times Literary Supplement, MMDXVIII (31 July 1969), 855.
- "Mad Girl's Love Song", in Lois Ames. "A Biographical Note", appended to Sylvia Plath. The Bell Jar. New York: Harper and Row, 1971, p. 285.
- "Main Street at Midnight", The Spectator, CCII (13 February 1959), 227.
- "Miss Drake Proceeds to Supper", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit., p. 241.
- "The Net Menders", The New Yorker, XXXIV (20 August 1960), 36.
- "On the Decline of Oracles", Poetry, XCIV (September 1959), 368.
- "On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad", Poetry, XC (July 1957), 235-236.
- "On the Plethora of Dryads", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit., pp. 242-243.



- "Pursuit", Atlantic Monthly, XCIC (January 1957), 65.
- "The Snowman on the Moor", Poetry, XC (July 1957),  
229-231.
- "Stars over the Dordogne", Poetry, CIC (March 1962),  
346-347.
- "Temper of Time", The Nation, CLXXXI (6 August 1957),  
119.
- "To Eva Descending the Stair", Harper's Magazine, CCIX  
(September 1954), 63.
- "Words for a Nursery", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.,  
pp. 248-249.
- "Wreath for a Bridal", Poetry, LXXXIX (January 1957), 231.

### 3. Miscellaneous Prose Works

- The Bell Jar. London: Faber and Faber, 1966.
- The Bell Jar. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- "The Fifteen-Dollar Eagle", The Sewanee Review,  
LXVIII (1960), 602-618.
- "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams", in Frederick R.  
Karl and Leo Hamalian, eds., The Naked i: Fictions  
for the Seventies. London: Picador, 1971, pp. 251-  
264.
- "Ocean 1212-W", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit., pp.  
266-272.
- "The Wishing Box", Atlantic Monthly, CCXIV (October  
1964), 86-89.

### B. SECONDARY MATERIAL

- Aird, Eileen. Sylvia Plath. Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd,  
1973.
- Alvarez, A. Beyond All This Fiddle. London: Allen Lane

- the Penguin Press, 1968.
- , ed. The New Poetry. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1966.
- , The Savage God. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974.
- , "Sylvia Plath", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- , Under Pressure. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.
- Ames, Lois. "A Biographical Note", in Sylvia Plath. The Bell Jar. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.
- , "Notes Towards a Biography", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Brink, Andrew. "On the Psychological Sources of the Creative Imagination", Queen's Quarterly, LXXXI (Spring 1974), 1-19.
- , "Sylvia Plath and the Art of Redemption", Alphabet, No. 15 (December 1968), 48-69.
- Brownjohn, Alan. "A View of English Poetry in the Early 'Seventies", in Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop, eds., English Poetry Since 1960: A Critical Survey. South Hinksey, Oxford: Carcanet, 1972.
- Campbell, Wendy. "Remembering Sylvia", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Claire, William F. "That Rare, Random Descent: The Poetry and Pathos of Sylvia Plath", Antioch Review, XXVI (Winter 1966), 552-560.
- Cleverdon, Douglas. "On 'Three Women'", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Cluysenaar, Anne. "Post-Culture: Pre-Culture", in Michael Schmidt and Grevel Lindop, eds., op. cit.
- Cox, C. B., and A. R. Jones. "After the Tranquilized Fifties", Critical Quarterly, VI (1964), 107-122.
- Dodsworth, Martin. "Introduction: The Survival of Poetry", in Martin Dodsworth, ed., The Survival of Poetry: A Contemporary Survey. London: Faber

and Faber, 1970.

Dyson, A. E. "On Sylvia Plath", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.

Ellman, Mary. "The Bell Jar -- An American Girlhood", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.

Far, Isabella. de Chirico. New York: Abrams, 1968.

Graves, Robert. Collected Poems 1965. London: Cassell, 1965.

Hardy, Barbara. "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: Enlargement or Derangement?", in Martin Dodsworth, ed., op. cit.

Holbrook, David. "R. D. Laing and the Death Circuit", Encounter, XXI (2 August 1968), 35-45.

----- "Sylvia Plath, Pathological Morality and the Avant-Garde", in Boris Ford, ed., The Penguin Guide to English Literature Vol. 7. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973.

----- "The 200 inch Distorting Mirror", New Society, XII (11 July 1968), 57-58.

Homberger, Eric. "A Chronological Checklist of the Periodical Publications of Sylvia Plath". Exeter: American Arts Documentation Centre, 1970.

Howard, Richard. "Review of The Colossus", Poetry, GI (March 1963), 412-413.

----- "Sylvia Plath: And I Have No Face, I Have Wanted to Efface Myself", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.

Hughes, Ted. "The Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.

----- Lupercal. New York: Harper Bros., 1960.

Jones, A. R. "Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton", Critical Quarterly, VII (1965), 11-30.

----- "On 'Daddy'", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.

Kinzie, Mary. "An Informal Checklist of Criticism", in

- Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Lavers, Annette. "The World as Icon -- On Sylvia Plath's Themes", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Lawrence, D. H. The Ship of Death and Other Poems. London: Faber and Faber, 1941.
- Lucie-Smith, Edward. "Sea Imagery in the Work of Sylvia Plath", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Melander, Ingrid. The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes. Stockholm: Almqvist and Wiksell, 1972.
- Newman, Charles, ed. The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1971. [The individual essays that form this work are listed separately in this bibliography under the authors' names.]
- . "Candor is the Only Wile", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Orr, Peter. "Sylvia Plath: An Interview", in Gary Geddes, ed., 20th Century Poetry and Poetics. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1973.
- Nims, John Frederick. "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Technical Analysis", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Roethke, Theodore. The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke. New York: Doubleday and Co., 1966.
- Rosenstein, Harriet. "Reconsidering Sylvia Plath", Ms. I (September 1972), 44-51, 96-99.
- Rosenthal, M. L. "Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Sexton, Anne. "The Barfly Ought to Sing", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Spender, Stephen. "Warnings from the Grave", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Steiner, George. "Dying is an Art", in Charles Newman, ed., op. cit.
- Steiner, Nancy Hunter. A Closer Look at Ariel: A Memory of Sylvia Plath. With an Introduction by

George Stade. New York: Harper's Magazine Press, 1973.

Stevens, Wallace. The Palm at the End of the Mind.  
Edited by Holly Stevens. New York: Alfred A.  
Knopf, 1971.

Webster, John. The Complete Works of John Webster, II.  
Edited by F. L. Lucas. London: Chatto and Windus,  
1927.

References to the works of T. S. Eliot are from The Complete Poems and Plays of T. S. Eliot. London: Faber and Faber, 1969. References to Shakespeare are taken from The Complete Works. Edited by A. Harbage. Baltimore: Penguin, 1969.