

A TESTIMONY OF THE MISBEGOTTEN :
TENSION AND DISCORD
IN THE POEMS OF SYLVIA PLATH
WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO
POEM FOR A BIRTHDAY

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1. INTRODUCTION

"Novelists and poets, *qua* novelists and poets, do not really have ideas at all, they have perceptions, intuitions, emotional convictions," says J. Middleton Murry in *The Problem of Style* (1976: 5).

To interpret these perceptions, intuitions and emotional convictions and to give meaning to them is the problem that confronts the literary critic. When the poet is Sylvia Plath, the problem is greatly complicated because of the apparent obscurity of her poems. Some of her poems have been interpreted in conflicting ways, especially those with a high emotional content. A cult has grown up around her name, and she is proclaimed by feminists as the embodiment of their ideal.

A glamour of fatality hangs over the name of Sylvia Plath, the glamour that has made her the darling of our culture. Extremely gifted, her will clenched into a fist of ambition, several times driven to suicide by a suffering so absolute as to seem almost impersonal, yet in her last months composing poems in which pathology and clairvoyance triumphantly fuse - these are the materials of her legend. It is a legend that solicits our desire for the heroism of sickness that can serve as an emblem of the age, and many young readers take in Sylvia Plath's vibrations of despair as if they were the soul's own oxygen ... (Irving Howe in Butscher, 1977: 225).

Sylvia Plath committed suicide on 11 February 1963, when she was thirty years old. Towards the end of 1959 she had reached a crucial turning point in her work. She transformed the episode of her attempted suicide and nervous breakdown in 1953 into a sequence of seven poems which she called "Poem for a Birthday". These seven poems constitute a symbolic narrative by central figures, dramatic creations that serve to unify Plath's numerous techniques for amplifying her personal history. Further events in her life were later added to the "Poem for a Birthday" story, but as it stands it has become the narrative scaffolding for her late poems.

On studying Plath one immediately becomes aware of the intangible inner atmospheres of the self, and the private religion of larger-than-life restatements of its crucial predicaments which the self projects outwards. At some levels there are the ecstatic expansions of the 'I', and at others there is the wish to be free from the implications of having an 'I' at all. Her poetry is a very specific autobiography, and many of the details acquire their full resonance only when a personal context is provided, whether by hints from the poems themselves, or by interlocking passages from *The Bell Jar*. Williamson (p. 27) sees this as giving her work a tragic wholeness, a sense of unity of mind, personality and fate. Plath also has the ability to create in the reader a trance-like, floating sensation, vividly attuned to and at the same time alienated from the outside. The tension and discord caused by these incompatible concepts are aspects of her work which will be investigated in this dissertation.

Like most of her late poems, the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence was written at speed. On 22 October 1959 she wrote in her note-book: "Ambitious seeds of a long poem made up of separate sections. Poem on her Birthday. To be dwelling on madhouse, nature: meanings of tools, green-houses, florists' shops, tunnels vivid and disjointed. An adventure. Never over. Developing. Rebirth. Despair. Old women. Block it out." On 4 November, less than a fortnight later, the note-book entry reads: "Miraculously I wrote seven poems in my 'Poem for a Birthday' sequence ..." (Plath, 1981: 289).

Because "Poem for a Birthday" is the only sequence of poems Plath ever wrote, I have chosen to analyse this sequence to illustrate the tension and discord in her poetry. Initially it seemed a good idea to explicate and analyse the poems according to the precepts of New Criticism, but a closer acquaintance with the poetry soon revealed that this method would be inadequate to cope with the ambiguities, subtleties and riddles in her poems. Something more was needed, something which would open up her highly personal or "confessional" poetry. I have therefore decided on a psychological approach drawing on Freud's psychoanalysis and Jung's idea of the "collective unconscious". I shall further draw on critical principles laid down by critics who have built on and expanded these ideas.

In scrutinizing the poem I shall have to relate to two languages: that of literary criticism and that of those disciplines which investigate the meaning of the unconscious. Through these I hope to come to a clear understanding of Plath's intuitive groping towards a philosophy of existence.

A poet should not be considered in isolation. He should be seen with his compatriots and contemporaries as the product of a specific time, cultural background and environment. Whatever the problem of his particular age, the artist, by his very vocation, has to make himself into the articulate conscience of the problem. The artist does not create the problem, but he does create the myth of the problem, that is, the form by means of which the problem may in some sense be understood and felt by his own age and by subsequent ages. The mythical form given to this problem by Plath in "Poem for a Birthday" is precisely that form which will permit the problem to be understood in the context of the general hierarchy of all human problems.

Plath was born in 1932, and by the time she reached her teens World War II had just ended. Although the war left the United States of America virtually unscathed, its aftermath which blew over from Europe, left its mark on the American people. Post World War II poetry is preoccupied with negation, darkness and death, and Plath's poetry is no exception.

"Poem for a Birthday" ought not to be viewed in isolation. It has echoes and repetitions in both her early and late poems, and I shall refer to some of these to clarify points I wish to make. Also, since *The Bell Jar*, her only novel, illustrates themes similar to her poetic motifs, material from the novel will occasionally be used to illuminate particular parts of the poem.

2. PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM

2.1 History and development

The formal psychological criticism of literature is a development of the twentieth century. Informally, criticism has been psychological from its very beginning, in the sense that all critics obviously attempted to apply what they knew or believed about the operations of the human mind. With the recognition of the role of the unconscious by Sigmund Freud just before the turn of the century, psychology acquired a dimension from which it could contribute insights otherwise unobtainable into the origins and structure of works of literature.

2.2 Aristotle

The oldest informal psychological critic known is Aristotle. His empirical psychology can be found throughout his work, and is the central topic of *De Anima* and of the *Parva Naturalia*, short treatises on memory and reminiscence, on dreams, and on prophesying by dreams. He applied his psychological ideas to poetry in *The Poetics*, answering Plato's psychological fallacy in *The Republic*, that poetry feeds the passions and is thus socially harmful, with the much sounder psychological theory of *catharsis*, which postulates that poetry arouses the passions of pity and terror in a controllable symbolic form and then purges them through its operations. Also, such concepts as *hamartia*, the tragic flaw that comes from the hero's imperfect insight into his situation; *peripeteia*, the shock of change; the preference of the probable impossible over the improbable possible, and many other concepts are anticipations of basic psychological truths.

2.3 Coleridge

Aristotle's psychological insights into art were extended and developed by later classical writers such as Longinus and Horace, but the next major step in psychological criticism came only with Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* in 1817. Coleridge took Aristotle's psychological

speculations as modified by Aquinas, Descartes, Hobbs and Hartley, and applied them to poetry. The only thing that kept Coleridge from achieving fully-fledged psychological criticism was the vagueness of psychological concepts at the time. Coleridge actually anticipated the theory of the unconscious, referring to "those flights of lawless speculation which, abandoned by *all* distinct consciousness, because transgressing the bounds and purposes of our intellectual faculties, are justly condemned as transcendent" (quoted in Hyman, p.151).

2.4 Charles Lamb

Lamb, a contemporary of Coleridge's, also had no formal schooling in psychology, but his sister's insanity and his own disturbed mental states made him particularly sensitive to the relationship between psychology and art. He actually anticipated Jung's theory of archetypes and the "collective unconscious" when he wrote:

Gorgons, and Hydras, and Chimaeras - dire stories of Celaeno and the Harpies - may produce themselves in the brain of superstition - but they were there before. They are transcripts, types - the archetypes are in us, and eternal. - These terrors - date beyond body - or, without a body, they would have been the same (quoted in Hyman, p. 152).

2.5 Analytic psychology or depth psychology

2.5.1 Freud and psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis is not merely the discovery of the unconscious. It is not dedicated solely to disease or symptoms or primitive experiences, but offers instead a theory and a method for studying how the whole mind works, for understanding another human being as he tries to describe his world and to draw on all his resources, both conscious and unconscious, in doing so. The unconscious should not be seen as a separate part of the mind, existing unknown to him who owns that mind. It is merely that part of the mind which harbours irrational, primitive and repressed thinking,

and these thoughts are not as "unconscious" as they have been made out to be. Freud himself discarded the dichotomy between this part of the mind and the conscious mind which offers rational, acceptable meaning. Nothing that is offered in speech or writing has a specific conscious or unconscious meaning, but there are different ways of being aware of things, and different aspects of a text which compel a different kind of awareness.

Skura (p. 14) puts it this way:

Freud himself thought of psychoanalysis as simultaneously a therapy, a theory of the mind, and a method of investigation. The theory alone, the "metapsychology", contains four distinct "points of view" or ways of explaining experience: the dynamic (what is struggling for expression and what is repressing it?); the economic (what is the distribution of energy?); the genetic (which phases of childhood are playing roles?); and the adaptive. None of these, Freud cautioned, is adequate in itself to explain the mind's extraordinary intricacy. Nor can they be reduced to one another.

The play between these different aspects of psychoanalysis is one source of the difficulties in applying it to literature, but it is also a source of strength, allowing it to keep in touch with the many human stories it studies.

It is necessary first to consider the main concepts of psychoanalytic theory: the models of the psyche, the concept of repression, the role of sexual instincts, and the phenomenon of transference.

Sigmund Freud (1856 - 1939) gives a genetic explanation of the evolutionary development of the human mind as a psychical apparatus. He regards such an explanation as providing a scientific basis for the theory of the unconscious, by which he relates it directly to the needs of the body. He looks at the mind from three points of view: the dynamic, the economic and the topographical (1953: XX, p. 265). These are not mutually exclusive interpretations but emphasize different aspects of the whole. All three are evidence of Freud's attempt to prove that the mind emanates from the body.

The dynamic point of view stresses the interplay of forces within the mind, arising from the tensions that develop when instinctual drives meet the necessities of external reality. The mind comes into being out of the body. The needs of the body at the start are inseparably connected to feelings of pleasure and pain.

From the economic point of view pleasure results from a decrease in the degree to which the body is disturbed by any stimulus. Displeasure results from an increase in disturbance. In the interaction of the body with the external environment, a part of the mind which Freud calls the ego evolves to mediate the actions of the body so as to achieve the optimal satisfaction of its needs. In particular the ego is concerned with self-preservation. This facet of its nature implies that there has to be control of these basic instincts if there is to be an adjustment to reality. The economic model is viewed as a struggle between the reality principle and the pleasure principle, in which the body has to learn to postpone pleasure and accept a degree of displeasure in order to comply with social strictures.

The third point of view is the topographical of which there are two versions. The physical apparatus is here conceived of in a spatial metaphor as divided into separate sub-systems, which together mediate the conflict of energies. In the first of the two versions Freud sees the mind as having a three-fold division, viz. conscious, preconscious and unconscious. Consciousness he equates with the perception system, the sensing and ordering of the external world. The preconscious covers those elements of experience which can be called into consciousness at will. The unconscious is made up of all that has been kept out of the preconscious/conscious system. The unconscious is dynamic, consisting of instinctual representatives, ideas and images originally fixated in a moment of repression. But these do not remain in a fixed state. They undergo a dynamic interplay in which associations between them facilitate the shift of feeling from one image or idea to another. In Freud's terminology they are regulated by the primary process, a type of mental functioning where energy flows freely by means of certain mechanisms. These mechanisms are of crucial interest to psychoanalytic criticism.

The second version of the topographical scheme was introduced by Freud in 1923, when he came to view the mind as having three distinct agencies: the id, a term applied retrospectively to the instinctual drives that spring from the constitutional needs of the body; the ego as having developed out of the id to be an agency which regulates and opposes the drives; and the superego, as representative of parental and social influences upon the drives. This model of the psyche is often called the structural model.

With the appearance of these agencies the picture of dynamic conflicts becomes clearer. The id wants its wishes satisfied, whether or not they are compatible with external demands. The ego finds itself threatened by the pressure of the unacceptable wishes. Memories of these experiences, that is, images and ideas associated with them, become charged with unpleasurable feeling, and are thus barred from consciousness. This is the operation known as repression: "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance from the conscious" (XIV, p. 147).

Unfortunately this theory is far from simple. If the notion of there being unconscious mental processes is to be seen as the key concept of psychoanalysis, it must of necessity be linked with the theory of repression, "the cornerstone on which the whole structure of psychoanalysis rests" (XIV, p. 16). Freud makes a distinction between the two senses of the term. Primal repression initiates the formation of the unconscious and is ineradicable and permanent. Although the forces of instincts are experienced before socialization, such experience is neither conscious nor unconscious. Freud cannot account for the way in which such forces find representation in the mind. He has to hypothesize that these instincts have become bound to thoughts and images in the course of early (pleasure/pain) experience. Primal repression consists of denying a "psychical representative" (that is an idea attached to an instinct) entry to the conscious. A fixation is thereby established, splitting conscious from unconscious. Without these initial imprintings the later entrance into language that establishes personhood could not be achieved. For Freud primal repression marks a prelinguistic entry into a symbolic world.

The term "repression" in its second and more generally known sense is used by Freud to designate repression proper or "after-pressure" (XIV, p. 148). It serves to keep guilt-laden wishes out of conscious experience. The symptoms, dreams and parapraxes ("Freudian slips") that turn up in the course of this process represent the "return of the repressed", a mechanism that marks both the emergence of the forbidden wish, and the resistance to it. Within the unconscious, the flow of energy becomes bound up with certain memory-traces, developing the character of unconscious wishes that strive continually to break through against the counterforce exerted by the ego. Where the primary process allows the psychical energy to flow freely, the secondary process transforms it into "bound energy", in that its movement is checked and controlled by the rational operations of the ego. The censorship of the ego can be subverted, however, precisely because of the free shifting of energy in the primary process. The drives or wishes can get through in disguise, as the so-called "compromise formations" of the return of the repressed. It is the nature of these disguises that has occupied classical psychoanalytic criticism. Where the earlier "instinct-psychology" emphasizes that which gets through the disguise, that is the content of the wish, the later "ego-psychology" concentrates on that which "controls" the wish, the work's formal devices.

Freud's theory of the instinctual drives is dualistic throughout his work. He always opposes one drive with another. In his earlier theory sexual instincts are opposed to the instincts of self-preservation. The sexual instinct plays a major role in psychical conflict. Freud calls the total available energy of the sexual instinct "libido", and it is essential to realize that it is not solely directed towards sexual aims *per se*. Sexuality is to be understood as not specifically limited to the process of reproduction: "Sexual life includes the function of obtaining pleasure of zones of the body - a function which is subsequently brought into the service of reproduction. The two functions often fail to coincide completely" (XXIII, p. 152). The prime example is the infant, who gets the pleasurable stimulation of the zone around the mouth. The infant later, in sucking his thumb, is fantasizing the repetition of the sensual pleasure of feeding in the absence of nutritional need.

The concept of what is sexual is thus greatly extended and complicated. Freud shows that sexuality is not a mere matter of biological urge but involves the production of fantasies under pressure of external circumstances. There is thus a disjunction between mere physical need and mental satisfaction. In Freud's view human sexuality is to be understood as what he calls in 1910 "psycho-sexuality" (XI, p. 222).

The libido is checked when it comes up against the environment and can achieve only partial satisfaction. In the course of an infant's development those instinctual drives which Freud came to designate sexual or "libidinous" in nature are channelled into zones. At each stage the infant has to give up a part of its bodily satisfaction: the breast, the faeces (its first product), and the unconditional possession of a penis. Its selfhood will depend on its assumption of a sexual identity, not merely anatomically determined, but psychically constructed. Until this is achieved, the infant's sexuality is "polymorphous". It is at the mercy of the "component instincts", functioning independently and varying in their aim, their object and their source (VII, pp. 191 and 167 ff.). Only gradually and with difficulty do they become organized into what our culture considers to be adult sexuality. The matching of biological sex with the sexual role determined by society is thus achieved, not given.

For Freud this matching is accomplished via the combined workings of the Oedipus complex and the castration complex. Discussing this theory in detail would be out of place here. A general summary of Freud's later position should serve the purpose of this study.

Freud sees the child's relationship with its parents as critical for the achievement of its proper sexual identity. The difficulties begin with the child's dependence on the nurturing mother. Not only are there problems specific to the very formation of a self-concept in the initial separation from the mother's body, but the love of the mother remains dominant in the early formative years. Inevitably, according to Freud, a perception of the father as a rival in this love becomes an insistent prompting for the boy-child, to the point where he is drawn into fantasies of killing this rival and possessing his mother. This is the Oedipus complex. The way out of it is provided by the fears of the castration complex. The father is preceived as the source of all authority, all direction of

desire, and thus capable of castrating the boy-child, who unconsciously believes that this is the reason for the absence of the penis in the girl. The boy thus abandons his love for the mother and moves towards identification with the father, with the understanding that he too can in time occupy such a position of power.

The path of development in the girl-child is not so straightforward. In her case the complexes work in reverse, and the castration complex ushers in the Electra complex. She interprets the absence of a penis as a failure in provision on the part of the mother. Under the influence of this disappointment she turns away in hostility from the mother, but in the unconscious the wish for a penis is not abandoned. It is replaced by the wish to bear the father a child. In this manner the girl becomes the rival of the mother for the father's love. Freud saw the fading of the Electra complex in the girl-child as a more uncertain process, because the identification with the father, facilitated for the boy-child by the anticipation of power, is not so secure. He also does not have an adequate explanation of how the girl overcomes her jealousy of the mother and attains identification with her.

The Oedipus complex is for Freud the nucleus of desire, repression and sexual identity. Its residue is a life-long ambivalence towards the keeping and breaking of laws and taboos. As the complex declines, the superego is formed and becomes part of the topography of the psyche. The struggle to overcome the complex is never quite resolved. It is the cause of neurotic illness and the *raison d'être* of the psychoanalytic process, where the patient is offered a chance to emancipate himself anew by means of a better compromise with authority. The psychoanalytic encounter restages the old drama through "transference". The process of transferring the patient happens while the patient is unconscious of its happening. At its worst it leads to futile reaction and counterreaction, but at its best it may lead to shifting of old agreements and the making of new ones that better satisfy desire.

The managing of these phenomena in the clinical situation is directed towards restarting this process. The "free associations" of the patient, his saying whatever comes to mind, gradually reveal that which determines him. Freud distinguishes between two kinds of transference. In the first

place transference is for Freud the displacement of feelings from one idea to another. In the analytic situation intense feeling, or affect, is transferred to the analyst, and becomes organized as a group of hostile and loving wishes. The patient's wishes and demands are devices of resistance, attempts to win over the analyst by undermining his authority, so that the repressed wish may at last be granted. The interpretation of the resistance, that is, the words and actions which block off access to the unconscious, is thus the key technique of psychoanalysis. The mechanism of transferring past experience onto the figure of the analyst is set into motion just when the repressed wish is in danger of emerging. Psychoanalytic reader-theory looks for just such points of resistance in both readers and texts, as manifestations of the compulsion to repeat.

The second kind of transference develops in the course of the treatment. Freud calls it "transference neurosis". The nearer the analyst gets to the repressed complex which induced the illness, the more the patient's behaviour becomes pure repetition and divorced from present reality. He is in the grip of the "repetition compulsion", the uncontrolled return of the repressed. Freud's fascination with art is partly due to his admiration of the artist for the ability to control the return of the repressed (see his essay on "The Uncanny" in Vol. III).

If one applies Freud's theories to the reading of a text, the reader should be seen as the analyst, and the text as the patient's representation of his experience. One should allow, however, for the text having a definite manipulative influence on the reader, just as the patient might influence his analyst. The value of Freud's theory of the unconscious is that it led to the realization of the universality of the endless conflict and adjustment that people engage in to reach social compromise.

2.5.2 The implementation of psychoanalytic criticism

Psychoanalytic criticism has generally followed Freud's initial orientation as developed in two seminal papers. The first of these is "Delusion and Dreams in Jensen's 'Gravida'", and the other "The Relationship of the

Poet to Daydreaming". Both these papers have been collected in the Standard Edition of Freud's works.

In these writings, Freud uses the dream and the daydream as a paradigm for the literary work: forbidden wishes from unconscious, infantile fantasies of the oral, anal, phallic, and genital stages of development are given disguised expression. Whereas the dream affords this disguised expression through the dream work or mechanisms of the primary process so that the forbidden wish is rarely recognizable in the manifest content, the work of art accomplishes the same end through using elements of aesthetic form to distract the observer. In both cases the superegoes of dreamer and reader are partially circumvented. The greatness of art, then, lies in the communication of powerful forces and fantasies within the artist's unconscious to the reader without his fully realizing it. Given this analogy of the dream to art, the psychoanalytic critic endeavours to ignore, or at best to search through elements of form in a work, attempting to find the "deeper" and more pertinent psychological content and meanings.

With this basic orientation as the point of departure, the psychoanalytic critic has explored literature in three basic directions. The more familiar undertaking has been to elucidate the universality in works of art of unconscious fantasies derived from the psychosexual stages of development (an interpretation of *Hamlet* in the light of the Oedipus complex, for instance). An early variation of this was the analyses of myths in literature as shared unconscious fantasies of particular sociocultural groups. Among the pioneers of this group were Otto Rank and Geza Roheim. These critics are to be distinguished from a large number of critics who use mythic analysis as derived from anthropology, religion, ethnology, and linguistics. Still another dimension of the psychoanalytic search for universal conscious fantasy in art via the route of mythic exploration was added by Jung and his followers, the best known among these being Maud Bodkin, Leslie Fiedler and Northrop Frye. The Jungian interest in archetypal figures and themes from the racial unconscious has been a major influence on literary criticism over the past four or five decades, and will be discussed at greater length later on.

A more recent preoccupation with universal unconscious fantasies in art is to be found in English schools of Freudian psychoanalysis, particularly in Melanie Klein and her followers. They view unconscious fantasy as stemming from the interaction of a person's libidinous and aggressive drives with early familial interpersonal experiences. These early experiences are internalized in the psyche as internal objects and become the basis of unconscious fantasies supplementary to those derived from the psychosexual stages of development.

The second major direction in psychoanalytic literary criticism has been to investigate the unconscious motivation or psychopathology of a character in the work of art in order to penetrate to the underlying meanings of a literary work. While earlier interpretations concentrated mainly on character formation and motivation derived from the psycho-sexual stages of development, later analyses have become far more detached and sophisticated. Recent leaders in this field are Phillip Weissman and Kurt Eissler. Their approach differs considerably from the older one of seeing a character in literature as a completely real, living person.

The third direction that psychoanalytic criticism took, starting with Freud's work on Leonardo da Vinci, has been to relate the hidden psychological meanings in a work of art to the author's life. Treating a work of art as a chapter in the author's psychobiography led to the reductionistic position that art itself is a manifestation of psychopathology, and can be understood simply by understanding the changes in the author's childhood. This method, although full of pitfalls, can help shed additional light on an author's work, as has been demonstrated by Leon Edel in his book on Henry James.

Psychoanalysis began as a study of the instincts, then broadened to include the defensive battles about instincts, and has progressed to encompass the whole person and his relation to the natural and the social world.

The cornerstone of Freud's psychoanalysis, viz. the battle between wish and defence, is now seen to be only part of a larger experience. When Freud kept finding self-serving fantasies in his patients' "memories"

of childhood, he concluded that children lived by their wishes at the price of destroying reality. What was not realized at the time was that Freud was examining memories from a time when wish and reality were not yet differentiated from one another. But Freud attributed all content, all the strange modes of representation in dream work and primitive thinking, and all rhetorical strategy, to the agents of repression.

Critics who base their work on the older theory of repression carry on Freud's work of seeing all tensions, ambiguities and rhetorical strategies in literature as the result of repression. Critics who base their work on the newer developmental theories instead of looking for the repressed meaning of specific symbols, tend to see literary ambiguities in the context of the whole development of symbolic discourse. They look for peaceful evolution instead of violent repression and revolutionary eruption.

The relation between man's pervasive bent toward symbolism and indirection on the one hand, and his defensive conflicts on the other has not yet been fully explored. No system can fully account for the full range of mental experience and its literary representation.

The most obvious way to apply psychoanalysis to literature is to begin with the fact that "the human nature of Freudian psychology is exactly the stuff upon which the poet has always exercised his art" (Skura, p. 19). The literary text should not be seen as a case history, but should be treated like the raw material of an actual analysis, like a succession of stories which make up free associations. The critic imitates the analyst when he ignores the literal story and tries instead to see into it or through it, and to relate its structure and conflicts to a drama within some human mind, a mind located ambiguously between the people or objects mentioned in the text and the speaker himself. This does not mean that the critic can solve any problems concerning human nature, but it enables him to compare human nature as Freud represented it to human nature as the poet represents it, and to draw his inferences from this comparison.

The unconscious experiences which the analyst traces are less coherently organized and less comprehensible than even the most irrational passions in any poetic schema. But poet and analyst are dealing with different

aspects of human nature and different manifestations of the unconscious. The poet makes maps of the mind, which the critic then has to read. The psychoanalyst not only identifies strange behaviour, but also locates a source for behaviour in something beside the current experience. The experiences the analyst deals with are independent of and often alien to current experience. They derive from fixations to periods sometimes so distant that they are not only not remembered, but also not even recognized as a memory of them. Both analyst and critic must slowly unravel all the forgotten or disowned ideas and experiences leading from the forgotten past to the present manifestations.

The most common psychoanalytic activity is the search for unconscious wishes. These wishes tend to become unconscious fantasies which incorporate the wishes. When the critic uses the psychoanalytical approach, he has to determine what the fantasy is and what role it has in the text. Freud virtually equated fantasy with text. He certainly equated fantasy with the crude daydream text, and he implied that the fantasy had a similar intimate connection with the more artful manifest story in a literary text. At most, he suggested, the fantasy was distanced by an easily understood symbolism.

Fantasy can range from the primitive unconscious fantasy which is a set of ingredients or a structure of conflict rather than a finished product, to varied derivatives of fantasy which can range from the most primitive obsessive images in dreams all the way up to the most rationalized misinterpretations of reality in everyday life.

There is a continual play between fantasy and the surface of the poem, and there is a battle between the latent and the manifest defensive disguise. The wish itself is much more primitive than its sophisticated disguise.

The critic must realize that defences are as important as wishes in shaping a work of art, and he must be sensitive to the activities involved when the poet not only defends himself against these fantasies, but also responds to them.

Often the story in literature is not merely wish fulfilment but the reworking of an entire experience. Hence literature can be seen in part as an attempt to give an intelligible picture not only of the present but of the past as well.

Like the analyst, the critic should start with a theory about fiction based on one particular view of human existence - Freud's view that man must cope with wishes and fears in a world that denies them relief. Human beings "cannot subsist on the scanty satisfaction which they can extort from reality" (1922: 322). Every fiction is a substitute for reality, an alternate world in which the poet works out his quarrel with the "reality principle". The fiction links him to reality, if only by offering an alternate version of it to keep him from escaping altogether.

But the analyst tells the critic nothing new when he tells him that in literature the poet fights out his trial battles between his divided selves. The conflict between self and society, wish and repression is, after all, what stories have always been about. Iris Murdoch defines a good novel as "therapy which resists the all-too-easy life of consolation and fantasy" (1959: 258); bad novels, she suggests, merely work out the author's "personal conflicts in a tightly conceived . . . myth" (1961: 20), with no respect for things as they are, rather than as the author might wish them to be.

Even the more specific attempts to isolate fundamental narrative structures must inevitably build on the same essential conflict between wish and the reality which resists it. Northrop Frye's universal myths may have seasonal titles, but they may also be viewed as a set of relationships between wish and reality, with romance being all positive wish and no reality, comedy as positive reality, irony the negative wish, and tragedy as negative reality. "In terms of narrative," says Frye in *Anatomy of Criticism* (p. 136), "myth is the imitation of actions near or at the conceivable limits of desire".

There are two opposing theories about fantasy's role in literature. In the first, the fantasy is taken to be part of the manifest story which

has been repressed and must be brought back if the critic is to understand the text properly. The tension between the manifest and the latent fantasy is then said to explain all the text's ambiguities and all the conflicts and tensions which the ordinary reader detects.

In the second case, fantasy is allowed no role at all in the manifest text, even as a disrupting force. "There is no unconscious irony," Wayne Booth says in his survey of that mode (p. 241). The fantasy is said to exist on some level separate from the manifest text, and there are various suggestions about what role it may play. However, the fantasy may not belong to the text but to the reader only, and the only plot which really matters is the one in the text.

Fantasy does not replace adult experience but instead brings the intensities of childhood experience to bear on adult life. It adds depth by evoking the unconscious remnants of infantile experience, without substituting that experience for an adult one. It evokes the feeling itself, not the mundane literal situation which created the feeling. "The conventional critic tells us how [literature] *means*," says Holland, and "the psychoanalytic critic tells us how it *moves* us" (p. 320). The "meaning" revealed by psychoanalytic interpretation is not only an unspoken motive but also a special kind of unspoken metaphor, though these contexts are emotional and not literal.

Psychoanalysts begin with the assumption that words can mean more than they seem to mean, and that they can certainly do more than serve as the bearers of referential statements. It is therefore imperative that the interpreter should read beyond the words. For one thing, words can be intended as lies and as such are designed to mislead. Or they are intended as the only truth the reader can bear or can grasp. Whichever way they are intended, there is no expression into words without the presentation of the inner self.

The psychoanalytic process is designed to dismantle less rigorous modes of consciousness, to break up the distorted versions of inner and outer reality that cramp the writer's life and his language. Likewise, when reading a poem the reader can gain a renewed appreciation of the way

language and literature work, not only in creating fictional scenes, but in creating significance apart from any scene at all. This is done by diverting, displacing, or elaborating meanings, expanding an image into a web of associations or condensing a flow of statements into a single focussing insight, and by shifting meanings by shifting perspectives or by changing the rules of interpretation.

To sum up: the critic practising psychoanalytic criticism should share a sensitivity to all the ways in which a conventional, naturalistic, literal-minded expectation about meaning is defeated. He must look to other dimensions of the text besides the seemingly obvious literal meaning to which it refers. He should also look for primitive material, not only fantasies but primitive levels of organisation. 'Primitive' in this sense means not only that it has a primitive form, but also that the material is shaped by primitive drives and conflicts rather than by cooler and more objective and detached aims. Awareness of the primitive material can be extremely helpful to the critic, so long as he does not use it reductively. Once the primitive material and the fantasy it embodies are identified, they can help the critic to understand the way literature works. The fantasy is never presented nakedly, but is seen in the light of sophisticated ways of thinking, and it is the interplay between surface sophistication and primitive fantasy that matters.

2.5.3 C.G. Jung and the "collective unconscious"

Jung (1875 - 1961) thought of the artist as a visionary, and of art as a manifestation of the artist's vision. "It is essential that we give serious consideration to the basic experience that underlies art - namely, to the vision" (1949: 159). Jung also names the Freudian opposite: "The psychologist who follows Freud will of course be inclined to take the writings in question as a problem in pathology ... to account for the curious images of the vision by calling them cover-figures and by supposing that they represent an attempted concealment of the basic experience" (pp. 160-1). The critic may recognize this "basic experience" as a vision rising from the depths of the unconscious and given form through the medium of the artist. He may then explicate the symbol, and this symbol suggests the vision.

Jung's major theories are primarily intuitive. They are founded upon what he believed to be a human sharing, common from culture to culture, in the visionary.

Jung at no point in his work intended to associate himself with the profession of literary criticism. He intended to use literature as evidence of a commonly held vision. Although he did not found a school of criticism, he created a climate in which criticism of the last fifty years has flourished.

Jung had a forerunner in Nietzsche, who voiced the following opinion:

I hold, that as man now still reasons in dreams, so men reasoned also when awake through thousands of years; the first *causa* which occurred to the mind to explain anything that required an explanation, was sufficient and stood for truth... This ancient element in human nature still manifests itself in our dreams, for it is the foundation upon which the higher reason has developed and still develops in every individual; the dream carries us back into remote conditions of human culture, and provides a ready means of understanding them better (Nietzsche, p. 25).

Jung puts it more briefly: "We mean by collective unconscious a certain psychic disposition shaped by forces of heredity; from it consciousness has developed" (1949: 165).

The collective unconscious is "all the contents of the psychic experience of mankind. These contents acquire value and position through confrontation with consciousness, of which reason is a function. The following theory then emerges: individual consciousness is born mysteriously of the hereditary psychic disposition, from the totality of the experience of the race. The true genesis of consciousness is not in the experience, but in the inheritance of disposition. If the literary critic wishes to be faithful to Jung, he must recognize the disposition of the unconscious as it urges the conscious towards making images and symbols to present its material. The content of the material depends on the creative ability of the artist.

In Jungian theory, the nature of the unconscious is recognized in the archetype. Jung employs this term in the radical Greek sense: the primal

image, the original form, the model. Hence the material of the collective unconscious is a collection of archetypes, and these cannot be named until they are represented by symbols. The archetype is inherited, but not the representation of it. The impossibility of inherited representation is expressed in Jung's contention that:

The archetype as such is a psychoid factor that belongs, as it were, to the invisible, ultra-violet end of the psychic spectrum ... We must ... constantly bear in mind that what we mean by "archetype" is in itself irrepresentable, but it has effects which make visualizations of it possible, namely, the archetypal images (1953: Vol 8, pp. 213-4).

It must be understood that Jung is speaking of a pattern from the conscious rather than of an image in the consciously designed metaphor of a poem. The image is inherited, in the Jungian sense. The archetypal image is a primary model which repeatedly reaches expression in the history of a race, such as, for instance, the dying and rejuvenating god with all its mythological forerunners.

Jung admits to a direct "openness" in dreams. He regards the dream as

a series of images, which are apparently contradictory and nonsensical, but arise in reality from psychologic material which yields a clear meaning... Dreams are symbols in order that they cannot be understood, in order that the wish, which is the source of the dream, may remain unknown (1941: 9, 12).

The symbols in dreams are not the same as the symbols formed by the conscious mind, which are beyond the nonsensical and open to rational inspection. In dream symbols there is no conscious artistry. The poem, on the other hand, stands as a symbol, fusing the inner and the outer states of human existence.

Jung defines archetypes most fully in his article "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetic Art" (1972: 65-83). To him archetypes are unconscious primordial images, the "psychic residua of numberless experiences of the same type" shared by ancestors going back to primitive

times, which are somehow inherited in the structure of the brain. They are thus basic, age-old patterns of central human experience, and Jung's hypothesis is that these archetypes lie at the root of any poetry possessing special emotional significance.

These archetypes are thus part of a collective unconscious bearing the racial past, which generated mythic heroes for the primitive and still generate similar individual fantasies for civilized man. It finds its chief expression in a relatively familiar and timeless symbolism, endlessly recurring. In his article "Psychology and Poetry", Jung singles out the poet as "the collective *man*, the carrier and former of the unconscious and active soul of mankind". With this goes the idea that in the last analysis art is an autonomous complex of whose origin we know nothing, the expression of which baffles the ingenuity of science, and that all psychoanalysis can do is to study the antecedent materials and describe the creative process without explaining it. In keeping with this view, Jung has written very little on specific artists and works of art.

Jung does not want to subject works of art to the psychoanalyst's clinical scrutiny, and he does not want to equate art to neurosis. He exalts the creative process, and in doing so removes the artist from the central position. The poet becomes the mouthpiece for a universal language of symbolism:

The unborn work in the psyche of the artist is a force of nature that achieves its end either with tyrannical might or with the subtle cunning of nature herself quite regardless of the personal fate of the man who is the vehicle (Jung, 1941: 75).

He sees the creative process as split off from the consciousness, as a central force in the mind, manifesting itself through the archetypes of the collective unconscious. The collective unconscious is the pure source of art, although it is interfered with by the personal conscious. Too much interference causes the art produced to become a symptom rather than a symbol. Readers respond to art the way they do because of the psychological effect of the reactivation of the archetype in themselves. What Jung fails to tell us is whether the archetypes are in the genes, which are naturally determined, or whether they are picked up in the

course of experience. Even so, the search for the recurrences of symbols has been fruitful for literary criticism.

2.6 Northrop Frye

Objectivity in criticism is one of the declared aims of Northrop Frye. He sees in archetypal criticism a possibility for the scientific understanding of texts according to a classified system of modes, symbols, myths and genres. The strength of his approach is that his categories can be seen as pointing out historically established patterns across texts. The order of words found in literature is structured by archetypes spread out over a series of "pregeneric" elements, four narrative categories which he calls "mythoi". These genres are the romantic (summer), the tragic (autumn), the ironic or satiric (winter), and the comic (spring), and they are to be seen as "four aspects of a central unifying myth" (Frye, p. 192). Conflict supplies the basis or archetypal theme of romance, catastrophe of tragedy, confusion and anarchy of irony and satire, and rebirth of comedy. Each of these aspects has a succession of phases. In the case of romance the quest myth is central. The four stages of the quest are conflict, death, the disappearance of the hero, and the reappearance and recognition of the hero. He sees these as the "mythopoeic counterpart" of Jung's individuation process where "the heroic quest has the general shape of a descent into darkness and peril followed by a renewal of life" (Denham, p. 122). For Frye the task of poetry is to "illustrate the fulfilment of desire" and also "to define the obstacles to it" (p. 106). Art must project "the goals of human work" so that desire may be satisfied (p. 115). Frye envisages an apocalyptic end for this desire, an "anagogic" mystical exalting phase. He finds this in key works such as *The Tempest* which concern themselves with poetry's own striving to apply words to the whole of nature via its imaginative projections (pp. 117 - 19). This represents the wished-for union of desire and nature, and takes on a symbolic form in which nature and poet become one in complete harmony.

Frye maintains that there are no private symbols, and he stresses the fact that all symbols can be communicated. The artist is not an original genius but merely a medium for transmitting archetypal myths and

images. The poet "is at best a midwife, or more accurately still, the womb of Mother Nature herself: her privates he, so to speak" (p. 98).

Frye's mode of criticism leads to an understanding of recurring structures in literary works, creating the possibility of a systematic reading, as distinct from a criticism which applies a set of psychic categories in order to identify recurring themes.

Not all critics and academics seem to go along with Frye's theories on archetypes. Elizabeth Wright voices the objection most have against this type of criticism when she says:

To make archetypes objective, "autonomous verbal structures", is to exclude the operations of intersubjectivity at the start of the enterprise. To turn the communal into the universal... is to sidestep the problem of the relation of human bodies to those societies which mould them. This disinclination is traceable back to Jung, who sees the unconscious as a common reservoir of highly charged symbols rather than as something that has its ground in a particular body, the character of which must come into equation (Wright, 1984: 76).

The discussion of psychological criticism in this chapter has only a limited bearing on the examination of the poem chosen for analysis in this dissertation. This is mainly due to the fact that Plath has used many direct borrowings from Roethke and Radin whose poems and stories influenced her strongly at this stage of her career. What one could take to be manifestations from the dark recesses of her mind are phrases from Roethke or Radin which appealed to her. It would be interesting to investigate the reasons why she chose these specific expressions from the material available to her, but that would be outside the field of this dissertation.

Useful material from this chapter is Freud's theory on the Electra complex, since Plath lost her father before her sexuality was fully developed. Her incestuous yearning for the father lies behind many of her poems.

Jung's theory of the "collective unconscious" is perhaps more applicable to "Poem for a Birthday", as are Nothrop Frye's theories on myth and myth-making. These might explain to a great extent the manner in which Plath's poems are constructed, and the pattern of thought behind them.

3. PLATH'S LIFE

When one intends to investigate poetry by means of depth psychology, it is necessary to familiarize oneself with the life and background of the poet. Various incidents and elements in a child's life may impair his capacities to acquire strength of identity: the birth of a sibling, a parent's illness or death, or even his own hypersensitive expectations may contribute to feelings of emptiness or weakness. In the case of Sylvia Plath it is impossible to avoid noticing that "her protagonists tend to blame others, especially the mother, and later ... the father" (Holbrook 1976: 9). What follows is an account of the main incidents in Plath's life that may have a bearing on her poetry. As the poem under scrutiny deals with her attempted suicide at the age of nineteen but was only written some six years later, a brief résumé of her life will be given up to the end of 1959 when the poem was written. Most of the facts derive from Butscher's biography of Plath (1976).

Plath's father came to the United States at the age of fifteen from a town called Grabow in the Polish corridor. Entomology, ornithology and ichthyology were his subjects, and he held several degrees from American Universities. He was professor of biology at Boston University, where he also taught scientific German. Plath's mother, Aurelia Schober, was born in Boston, Massachusetts, of Austrian parents. As a student for her master's degree in German she met and married Plath's father, who was 21 years her senior.

Plath was born on 27 October 1932, and grew up in the seaside town of Winthrop, Massachusetts. She was a lively baby, full of curiosity.

When I was learning to creep, my mother set me down on the beach to see what I thought of it. I crawled straight for the coming wave and was just through the wall of green when she caught me by the heels (quoted in Newman, p. 21).

Her brother was born when she was two and a half years old. She felt a keen sense of competition for this rival to her parents' affection. She describes the intrusion of a younger brother with amused vehemence in *Ocean 1212-W* (in Newman, p. 268):

A baby! I hated babies. I who for two and a half years had been the centre of a tender universe felt the axis wrench and a polar chill immobilize my bones. I would be a bystander, a museum mammoth. Babies!

The wound inflicted is thus mocked, but no amount of analysis or sophisticated detachment could conceal this obsessive absorption with a tainted paradise.

On the surface it seems that her early years were normal enough, with her mother reading stories and poetry to her children, and in doing so instilling in Plath the love for the written word from an early age.

Plath claimed that Arnold's "The Forsaken Merman" was the spark that set her poetic imagination aflame, but said, "I guess I liked nursery rhymes, and I guess I thought I could do the same thing". Only later in her life would she write poetry with a nursery rhyme ring to it.

She went out of her way to please her father, who was more or less indifferent to her efforts. The heights of excellence he had set for her performance, linked with his consistently paternal attitude towards the whole family, created a certain amount of hidden hostility which was transformed into anxiety by Plath's awareness of her need to repress the negative emotion of fear and of losing her father's love. To ensure his attention, Plath had to be on stage for him, demonstrating her own worth, earning affection which should have been hers by birthright. It was an unhealthy climate for growth, encouraging false values.

When reading her later poems one often wonders whether Professor Plath was anything like the German tyrant, the Nazi panzer man his daughter made him out to be. A former student and colleague confirmed his stubborn streak, and said that he had a certain rigidity about organizational matters. Another recalled how vehemently he had detested his Calvinistic schooling in the Midwest and the rise of Adolf Hitler in Germany. If he had been a tyrant, he had been a petty, rather benevolent despot who restricted his tyranny to the home, a somewhat typical *pater familias* far more interested in writing monographs and his book on bumble-bees than in the existence of a precocious daughter.

Despite his indifference, it seems that for Plath the central obsession from the beginning to the end of her career was her father. He would become part of the myth projected by the poetry, and would surface again and again in various disguises: as Freud's pivotal father figure, as icon and divinity, as totem or demon, and as the ultimate modern monster, a Nazi "panzer man".

The manner of his death alone was bound to have a traumatic effect on a girl of Plath's sensitivity and imagination. Somehow she had to struggle with the fact that he had forsaken her, just as Margaret had forsaken her family in "The Forsaken Merman". She had to accept that his death was truly final, but to her his departure was in some way a deliberate act of betrayal. Though she was only eight at the time, she had to fall back on the only defences available to her. Unfortunately, they were neurotic in intensity. One such defence was to seek compensation in other realms, and public approval became a substitute for lost parental love. The drive for success also served as a sort of emulation of the dead father's own discipline and ambition.

Plath did not attend her father's funeral. Her mother took what was in her view the sensible position that the children should remain at home in order that their grief might be ameliorated and that they might adapt more easily to their father's loss. In later years, Plath regarded this as one of her mother's major sins, a sign that she did not really love her husband or care for her children.

In *The Bell Jar* (p. 177) the mother is condemned for not having mourned her husband's death sufficiently, and for persisting to search for a silver lining in the darkest clouds:

Then I remembered that I had never cried for my father's death.

My mother hadn't cried either. She had just smiled and said what a merciful thing it was for him that he died, because if he had lived he would have been crippled and an invalid for life, and he couldn't have stood that, he would rather have died than had that happen.

Yet the father, while alive, was a remote figure, taking very little notice of his children. Outings Plath described with her father - playing games and swimming - were in reality expeditions with her grandfather. According to his wife, he did not take an active part in tending to or playing with the children, although he took great pride in their attractiveness and progress (Simpson, p. 85).

It is not very surprising that Plath early on showed an ambivalent attitude towards both parents, for her mother's seeming passivity encouraged her father's potential as a tyrant king. As Plath developed a more specialized sexual consciousness and began to concentrate her feminine attentions upon her father, this also meant a more negative concept of the mother as a rival. A cycle had begun, but it need not have become disabling if the father had lived long enough for his daughter to transcend this crucial phase and shift her sexual energies outside the home.

Another defence which fits Plath's behaviour in later years would be a greater dependence upon her mother for emotional security. But this was eventually to prove an unhealthy relationship, and the fierceness of the disguised attacks on the mother in *The Bell Jar* and several later poems such as "The Disquieting Muses" and "Medusa" imply negative feelings too long held in check for fear of losing her mother's essential affection.

Whatever complex psychological forces were at work upon Plath in the years immediately following her father's death, a further defence has to be considered. The idea of poetry itself as a defence mechanism does not seem to be too far-fetched. In a child's hands it becomes an instrument of fantasy, and it was no accident that Plath's poetry emerged shortly after her father's death. Her first poem was published when she was eight and a half years old, just six months after her father had passed away.

The protagonist of Plath's late poems is a heroine who has been exiled from paradise by the death of a much-loved, authoritarian father. His death left her unable to revise a sense of herself in relation to him ("You died before I had time," she says in "Daddy"), disrupting her history and marking the point after which nothing was ever the same.

Her childhood thereafter became fixed and isolated in time. An image in "The Eye-Mote" conveys the inaccessibility of her psychic wound to the healing process of time: she was "fixed... in this parenthesis". Her childhood seemed a different world, with a quality of existence that was closed forever, and at the same time it gave to her later life a quality of incompleteness and unreality, as if there were two unintegrated sets of parentheses, one enclosing the child and one the adult. This split in psychic time is linked with her attunement to the mythic level of existence. Herbert Fingarette puts it this way (p. 209):

... the mythic always has a special and definite relation to time. The central events of myth always occur in a strange and distant past, a past hospitable to marvelous beings and miraculous doings. Mythic time reflects the ... paradoxical quality ... that it is both continuous and discontinuous with the present time-order. The mythic time is connected to historical time by the familiar genealogies of gods, biblical patriarchal lines, royal family descents, and other totemistic identifications. And indeed mythic beings often operate in present time, but always in conformity with their destinies and natures as established in the mythic past. Myth is dramatic yet timeless in the way that the unconscious is: "Gods moving in crystal," "for ever panting, for ever young".

It has also been observed that:

... in all inner disturbance the time factor is a cardinal point. There is always primarily a search for past time, for the obscure and forgotten crisis or the might-have-been; it is an attempt at recapturing it and working it out differently, usually more happily, or for simply dwelling on it (Meerbo, cited by Fingarette, p. 209).

Plath's father's death both caused and came to represent the fundamental division in her sense of herself, or at least that is how her poetry expresses it. The self that she had defined through her deep attachment to her father continued to press its claims without any possible satisfaction of development. If her relation to her father was of central

importance in her life, then life without him had the character of absence, unreality and stagnation. On the other hand, life with him, the suspended time of childhood, had no hope of fulfilment. This is the basis of the sense of suspended time and stasis that pervades her later poetry. When she separated from her husband, his absence was experienced in a similar manner.

After her father's death her childhood became fixed and isolated in time. As she put it, it was as if "sealed... off like a ship in a bottle - beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth" (*Ocean 1212-W*), and discontinuous with the rest of her life.

Her adolescence was "not too happy", causing her to become introverted and to write "diary poems" between the ages of nine and sixteen or seventeen (Butscher, 1976: 76). Though she never specifically mentioned her father's death, she must have been aware of the link between her initial artistic efforts and that traumatic effect.

Alone with her two children, Mrs. Plath moved in with her parents to reduce expenses, and she went to work as a teacher to support her family. In the aftermath of the depression life was not easy for them. They could not leave economics out of sight for long, and this, combined with the family's Nordic reluctance to express emotion, made life for Plath rather hard. She satirizes the family's mores in *The Bell Jar* (p. 27):

It is not that we hadn't enough to eat at home, it's just that my grandmother always cooked economy joints and economy meat-loafs and had the saying, the minute you lifted the first forkful to your mouth, "I hope you enjoy that, it cost forty-one cents a pound," which always made me feel I was somehow eating pennies instead of Sunday roast.

But another momentous, threatening change was in store for Plath. Her mother had decided that a move inland was desirable, if only to help alleviate Plath's sinus condition and her brother's asthma. For a child any change in residence is disturbing, and for Plath, still upset by the death of her father, the move must have been dreadful to envision. Friends would be left behind forever, along with the comforting security

of familiar places. Worst of all, she would lose the sea for which she had had a passion since she was big enough to remember.

For Plath, losing her entire childhood in this way, the response was another recourse to art and the reassuring order it brought about. Her mother regarded Wesseley, Boston, from the beginning as a paradise of bourgeois respectability. The attitudes of this environment would be constantly on display in Plath's early poetry and stories, particularly the latter, where the heroines are middle-class Americans to their fingertips. This attitude would later be attacked vehemently in *The Bell Jar*. This was the environment which provided the essential moral and social framework for her life. It not only provided the main features for her surface masks but the foundations as well. These included domestic cleanliness, Spock-inspired motherhood and other virtues expected by the community.

She was raised in a "mentally ambitious" family (Bedient in Lane, p. 4) in which worth was measured by accomplishment and in which intellectual rigour and competitiveness were the keynote. Plath did extremely well at school, bringing home report cards with straight A's even in subjects she intensely disliked. Teacher after teacher from elementary through junior and senior high school attested to her academic brilliance and sweetness, though here and there small reservations crept in regarding her social life outside school, suggestions that she might be a "loner" despite many surface friends, that she was a girl who frightened off boys with her mental gymnastics. But these were never concrete enough to warrant any major controversies in the life of such a motivated student.

At junior high school she earned a unique recommendation for bringing home straight A's during her three years there. This kind of recognition was public confirmation that she was a golden girl destined for great things. Despite the unrest she might have felt below the surface she maintained her friendly mask with studied concentration and dutifully followed her mother's guidance in cultural and social arts. There were no outward signs that she was in any way unhappy. She wanted and needed, though, to be sexually attractive, but the idea of sex itself was somewhat disconcerting because of her strict upbringing and her mother's attitude. So it was in her poetry that she found a means of discharging

at least some of her secret anxieties. Her poems appearing in the school's literary magazine are typical adolescent attempts to find images for the standard phenomena of nature, very few of them showing any of that special aptitude for metaphor for which she was later to become famous, but all of them remaining clever demonstrations of a highly intelligent mind at work on the problem of method.

In an interview, Wilbury Crockett, an English teacher at Bradford High School, spoke with genuine warmth about the brainy, beautiful young Plath he had introduced to so many classic authors, emphasizing the unique, almost breathless enthusiasm she had brought to bear upon the works of T.S. Eliot, Dylan Thomas, Thomas Mann, Leo Tolstoy, and others. And yet he also admitted that he had always been aware of a certain amount of play-acting behind her extroverted personality, and that she was probably manipulating people to suit some private need and design. "I had the feeling that she was going along for the ride even then," he said. In his view, she possessed the capacity both to "seal herself off" from others and to manipulate them "for what they could give her". Although only a teenager, she was already "very adept at role playing" (Butscher 1976: 35).

Plath's mother, loaded down with good intentions, pushed her to perform. A few years later, while in a pit of schizophrenic depression after her unsuccessful suicide attempt, Plath would complain to a friend that her mother had never allowed her to be a normal young girl. This does not seem to be quite true, for although she spent a lot of time on writing, she found time for normal teenage pursuits such as basketball, tennis, summer camps, dating, and editing the school newspaper.

To friends, relations, and adult observers she was a pleasant, pretty, imaginative girl who was modest about her talent and was a sure critic of her own work. In later years she was to write that she was a "rabid teenage pragmatist" dressed in "a uniform - the pageboy hairdo, squeaky clean, the skirt and sweater, the 'loafers', those scuffed copies of Indian moccasins, pursuing the likeness of All-round Student which seemed so essential in the 1950's" (Sexton in Newman, p. 159).

Plath went to Smith College in September 1950. At that time, Smith was the biggest college for girls in the United States, catering for an "elite" group. As she could not rely on any money from home, she had to work desperately hard to be awarded a scholarship. Once there, she felt strange as "she didn't have the right kind of clothes, felt gawky and awkward, which she was, and she had an astonishing lack of a sort of general know-how" (Butscher 1976: 43).

Plath's patron for her scholarship was a Mrs. Olive Prouty, a popular novelist. Plath was appalled by her sloppy writing and undiluted sentimentality, and once more found herself in an ambiguous relationship with a mother figure on whom she had to depend for financial aid. The patron-scholar relationship, as an echo of the symbolic relationship with her mother, had to increase Plath's frustration and bitterness at not being able to express her feelings for fear of the consequences.

Plath remained intensely concerned with her career as a writer, since it offered the best chance for her to achieve popular, intellectual and financial success - all three of equal importance. With typical energy she attacked the task of writing poetry as if it were an alien fortress. Day after day, page after page, she constructed villanelles, sonnets and rondels, shaping poem after poem with the same joyless persistence she gave to her studies. The result was a collection of artificial, frequently shallow verse that displayed a lot of cleverness but no real substance. But they were deliberately the type of poem most likely to influence literature professors and the judges of the many competitions for which she entered. As she had judged, they did not fail to impress.

These early poems are too obviously constructed around reading, and their remoteness suggests that Plath refused to regard art as a valid method of giving voice to either her father obsession or her inner rages. Her poems had to be and were socially acceptable artefacts, crafty, superficial vehicles of linguistic excellence created almost solely for the purpose of gaining recognition and attention.

Despite her inner turmoil, Plath managed to fool most of the people she came into contact with, wearing the mask of a dedicated student with no

inward struggle. Professor George Gibian who taught her Russian literature, remembered her dedication and amazing thoroughness as a student, along with her lack of neurotic tendencies. A member of the English faculty, R.G. Davis, remarked how refreshing it was to have a completely wholesome, healthy, yet creative student like Plath, and how he had never had a talented writer in his creative writing class who was not a little neurotic or something, except Sylvia. She could and did deceive the best of them, creating an image of herself as she wanted to be seen.

But contemporaries who knew Plath more intimately recollect a more complex and credible personality, a driven girl obviously torn between a constant need for public admiration and a less acceptable compulsion to leave her mark upon the world at any cost. They also remember the occasionally neurotic, often affected girl with an enormous ego and an imagination to match.

A visit to the Boston Lying-In Hospital during her junior year at Smith proved crucial for both Plath and her poetry. It was upsetting in a way that would leave deep emotional and psychological scars long after. For a repressed, sensitive and sexually unsure girl it was devastating. The cadavers, an array of bottled foetuses (featuring later in poem after poem), interviews with seriously ill patients, and finally the witness of a live birth with the infant delivered in a stream of blood unsettled her more than she was ready to admit. The birth, especially, intensified her hostile feelings towards infants (left over from the arrival of her brother) and the whole process of childbearing.

As for her writing, getting published was not merely important, it was crucial. She would continue to manufacture whatever she believed her specific audience wanted, whether college professors or the readers of *Seventeen*. She wrote poetry on a precise schedule, laboriously looking up words with exactly the quality she wanted in a Thesaurus which had belonged to her father. Hard work paid its dividends. In her junior year at Smith she was awarded two Smith poetry prizes, and was elected not only to Alpha, the Smith College honorary society for the arts, but also to Phi Beta Kappa. These made up for the absence of a serious boyfriend. The young men she had been going round with were not really strong

enough for her, and as a result they could never recreate the father-daughter tyranny she so obviously wanted. Worse, their middle-class respectability reflected her mother's dull world which she continued to hate with a secret passion.

Butscher (1976: 67) sees Plath's life at this stage as follows:

To understand Sylvia at this point is to understand the complex nature of her divided personality. Though not yet schizophrenic in any medical sense, she was three persons, three Sylvias in constant struggle with one another for domination: Sylvia the modest, bright, dutiful, hardworking, terribly efficient child of middle-class parents and strict Calvinist values who was grateful for the smallest favour; Sylvia the poet, the golden girl on campus who was destined for great things in the arts and glittered when she walked and talked; and Sylvia the bitch goddess, aching to go on a rampage of destruction against all who possessed what she did not and who made her cater to their whims. In the last role she was contemptuous of weaklings and passionately despised her own flesh-and-blood ties.

Like other complex personalities, of course, there were other Sylvias as well: Sylvia the sad little girl, still hurting from the profound wound of her father's rejection and abandonment of her and wanting to crawl back into her mother's cave-safe womb; Sylvia the ordinary teenager who yearned for a kind husband, children, and a house like her grandmother's by the seashore. But these were only shadows of the three main configurations, subconscious fragments that never conquered the world for very long.

In the light of her later poems, the name "bitch goddess" is an apt name for Plath. The bitch is a familiar enough figure - a discontented, tense, frequently brilliant woman goaded into fury by her repressed or distorted status in a male society. The goddess conveys the opposite image, a more creative one, though it too represents an extreme. As a combination, "bitch goddess" has the additional advantage of a long metaphorical

association with fierce ambition and the ruthless pursuit of success.

At Smith, she never talked about her mother although they exchanged letters daily and Plath went home as often as was possible. But she often rhapsodized over her dead father, saying what a terrible blow his death had been and how she had been his adored darling. Despite this professed love, she found it difficult to learn German, the language of her father. Possibly the language itself subconsciously suggested her hidden hatred of her father and his authority. Rejecting his language was a defensive gesture, a fairly safe way for her unconscious to vent its real feelings against him. Her relationship with her mother was deep and mutually wounding, and her total rejection of the mother becomes quite evident in *The Bell Jar* and some later poems. On the surface, however, Plath wore the mask of dutiful daughter who wrote witty and amusing letters home.

To Plath, public acclaim was most important. Her talents and undaunted efforts secured for her a much coveted position: she won a month-long guest editorship at the magazine *Mademoiselle*, being one of twenty national winners in the Mademoiselle College Board contest. At this stage, her letters had "only one tonality, an ingenue's starstruck hyperresponsiveness" (Williamson, p. 39), but from *The Bell Jar* it is clear that at this stage she was experiencing horror or a numb inability to feel.

Outwardly, there was nothing to distinguish Plath from the nineteen other girls who arrived with her in New York as guest editors. Yet Miss Abels, the managing editor, sensed something terribly wrong in the very stiffness of Plath's mask, in its unrelenting light pleasantness. "I never found anyone so unspontaneous so consistently, especially in one so young. She was simply all facade, too polite, too well-brought-up and well-disciplined" (Butscher 1976: 104).

In New York depression seemed to grow in her. Part of the problem was probably New York itself, because in this huge and impersonal city she was alone in a new and frightening way. She was supposed to be an adult, but she was separated from her mother whose reassuring banalities and

middle-class solidity she needed. A vicious cycle had propelled Plath's life since her father's death. It drove her towards success and a suppression of hostile emotions that created a continuous sense of insecurity. Now it had reached the point where her secret rage against the world and her dead father was being turned inward. Her self-centred personality found that its uniqueness was easily lost amid a crowd of other egos, all on a par with her own. She found the most common tasks increasingly difficult to complete. Her store of energy seemed depleted. When she left New York at the end of June she was numb inside, trapped in the hurricane eye of mental paralysis and heading for destruction.

Back home her mother persuaded her to see the town psychiatrist, but Mrs. Plath's hypersensitivity to her daughter's mental condition and her heavy sentimentality had the worst possible effect. Plath felt herself sinking into a vegetable state. Conscious that her illness was getting out of control, she tried helping herself by studying abnormal psychology, but to no avail. Her symptoms grew more pronounced. She barely stirred from the house, and complained that she could not sleep at night, that her body resisted her brain's simplest commands, that her fingers could not hold a pencil, or when they did, scrawled nonsense across the page. Her psychiatrist recommended shock treatment, accompanied by intensive psychotherapy. The shock treatments resulted only in the addition of new fears, as she linked it with the execution of the Rosenbergs which had occurred during her New York venture. She began to associate the treatment with her dead father, for she somehow held him responsible for what was happening to her. She visited the graveyard where he was buried, and the unassuming tombstone intensified her sense of depression. Rage over her mother's callous "neglect" of her husband was revived, and she had a sharpened awareness of loss and guilt. She collapsed at last into a psychotic extreme called "schizophrenia melancholia". After a vague attempt at slitting her veins with a razor blade and attempting suicide by drowning, she decided on sleeping pills as a way out. These she found in her mother's bedroom. She left a note, explaining that she had gone on a long hike and that she would be back the following day. Then she concealed herself behind some logs in the basement, swallowed forty sleeping tablets, wrapped herself in a blanket and waited for the inevitable, well knowing that she had left the door open for a dramatic rescue. Three days later she was found unconscious and rushed to hospital.

One wonders what was it that kept her alive after she had swallowed a fatal dose of sleeping pills. According to Menninger (pp. 24 - 25) every suicide appears to involve three, not one, persons or personalities: the one doing the killing, the one being killed, and the one who is dying. There are thus one active attacker and two passive victims. For a terminal suicide, ruling out chance, all three must function in unison. In those cases where the suicide is saved from himself, it would probably mean a refusal to die by one of the passive personalities. In Plath's case, one might speculate that the bitch goddess would not take kindly to the idea of being murdered by an alternative self, that it would, in fact, fight back fiercely and remain alive to go on manipulating the world and its puny inhabitants.

Plath spent five months at a mental hospital, the McLean Hospital in Belmont. Initially she complained that she could only speak in monosyllabic words and could not think properly. Insulin treatment was tried and discarded, followed by electro-shock therapy and intensive psychotherapy. She slowly came to understand the emotional and rational truth behind her ambivalent attitudes towards her mother and father. A year later she could say about her father, "He was an autocrat. I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he was dead. When he obliged me and died I imagined I had killed him" (Steiner, p. 45). This seemingly open attitude might probably have been another side of the old mask, put on in order to convince her audience what a long way she had come towards self-understanding.

This is how she described psychiatric treatment and shock therapy: "A time of darkness, despair, disillusion - so black as only the inferno of the human mind can be - symbolic death, and numb shock, then the painful agony of slow rebirth and psychic regeneration" (quoted by Ames in Newman, p. 163). The mood and incidents during this period of her life form the subject matter of "Poem for a Birthday" which will be discussed in full later.

What drives a successful, seemingly happy girl with no immediate serious problems to attempt suicide? In *The Savage God* Alvarez voices the opinion that in a prospectively suicidal person, suicide is always very prominent

in his thoughts. In a letter to her mother dated 22 November 1950 Plath wrote that she had no date for the weekend and was miserable about it. Then suddenly she received an invitation to go out, so she threw on her clothes, "all the time ranting... on how *never* to commit suicide, because something unexpected always happens..." (Plath, 1975: 58).

Simpson (p. 95) interprets these words in the following way:

It is the casualness of the idea that surprises, as though to think of suicide were the most ordinary thing in the world, the first thing one thinks of when one hasn't a date. It is a definite slip; for a moment the mask has been lifted and we see into her mind. People with a secret vice reveal it in this way, by assuming others share it.

Because Plath was a scholarship student, she lived in constant fear that the scholarship might be taken away from her. Her elation at having a story published should suddenly vanish as she thought of "the black, immovable wall of competition" (p. 59). In a letter closely following the one above, she casually writes of "practically considering committing suicide" in order to get out of a science assignment. "My whole life is mastered by a horrible fear of this course" (p. 63).

Was it simply the exaggerated, flippant talk of a college girl, or was she really serious about seeing the college psychiatrist about her fears and bouts of depression? These are mentioned in an off-hand way (pp. 107-8), but this side of her personality she normally kept safely locked away from others.

Williamson (p. 28) is of the opinion that Plath lived in a number of different worlds. As a bursary student, she was never allowed to forget harsh economic realities for long, while at the same time she came into contact with a "storybook world" while going to friends' coming-out parties. Then there was the reluctance of her mother and grandparents to express emotion, so different from the characters she created in her fictional stories with a happy ending, just as the editors of the magazines wanted it. It is possible that the friction between these worlds caused Plath to develop a neurosis. For Jung, one of the signs of a neurosis, and still more of a psychosis, is a confusion of personal with archetypal figures. Such an archetypal figure then acquires a life of

its own, rendering a perception of the individual possible. Jung puts it as follows:

The child's instincts are disturbed, and this constellates archetypes which, in their turn, produce fantasies, that come between the child and its parent as an alien and often frightening element. Thus, if the child of an over-anxious mother regularly dreams that she is a terrifying animal or a witch, these experiences point to a split in the child's psyche that predisposes into a neurosis (1959: 336).

An interfering screen develops between the neurotic person and the true personality of others. Plath's father is represented in her poems either as godlike but fragmentary and inaccessible (as in "The Colossus" and "Full Fathom Five") or as the dark father, the Nazi and torturer. That the latter image is archetypal is borne out by the fact that Otto Plath, far from being a Nazi, left Germany partly because he was a militant pacifist (Williamson, p. 25). What Plath really feared were indifference and abandonment. She would much rather have preferred ill-will or persecution, since these imply involvement and presence on the part of the other. Having lost her father when she was eight, Plath often steps into the shoes of a hurt little girl, desperately wishing for the presence of her father, but, feeling deserted, she hurls abuse at him so that he becomes a negative omnipresence.

In the same way, the mother figure in Plath's poetry is both opposed and connected to her more realistic picture of the mother. The archetypal mother in the poems is an embodiment of Plath's own deep sense of purposelessness. The archetypal mother is connected with and embodied by the moon, since the moon is not affected by outside influences. This ties in with Plath's picture of her own mother, whose stoical practicality struck her daughter as inhuman, unfeminine, and oblivious of feeling. By taking the mother as an example, Plath herself becomes incapable of true maternal understanding, and like the moon, she is incapable of generating warmth.

Plath's feeling of connection to powerful negative forces both expressed and compensated for a deep sense of lack, of the unsupportedness of her identity. The sense of unsupportedness greatly constricted the possibilities of personal relationships. This also accounts for her persistent imagery of being turned into an object, and being dismantled, by the emotional claim of others.

Laing (p. 42) points out that reality threatens people in two ways: the person can be "engulfed", thus losing his identity in the other when his love is understood, or he can be "petrified" or put to use and made into an object by others. As people are often treated impersonally, this threatens their ontological security, yet being understood and loved makes the position no safer. Against both dangers, the easiest and safest defence is to hide from view, and turn the other person into an object first. The person himself then creates a surface personality or "false self" in order to prevent the expression of any authentic feeling. The poem "Fever 103°" is a good illustration of how Plath creates a new self to meet each new threatening demand.

The other self-defence, turning the other person into an object, is accomplished either by an active preference for mechanical relationships, or by a contemptuous intellectual understanding of the other. Laing is of the opinion that intimacy saps one's vital forces. Plath therefore preferred not to become involved. Her imagination with its schizophrenic concreteness discovered the possibility of being turned into a thing. In "Cut", the finger which has almost been severed by a knife is turned into a pilgrim, an Indian, a Kamikaze man so that it is no longer a part of her body but takes on a life of its own and is thereby distanced from her own being. She even turned actions into things, as in "The Night Dances" where "your gestures flake off -".

After having missed a year, Plath returned to Smith to complete her course. Ostensibly she was "cured", but she emerged from McLean's as disoriented as ever, still committed to disguise as a fundamental mode of behaviour and composition. She returned to the manipulative role that had placed her in the sanatorium in the first place. If anything, she was less capable of real human relationships than before her admission. A close friend observed that she had turned from a "loner" to a boisterous extrovert, a strange turn after her unsettling experiences.

An important change was her attitude towards sex. While under treatment, her psychiatrist convinced her that true escape from her mother's domination had to include a rejection of the mother's narrow Puritan strictures regarding the importance of chastity. She lost her virginity at the earliest opportunity and started looking upon sexual intercourse as another wholesome sport for the human body to enjoy, just like tennis or bicycle riding. Butscher (1977: 11) underwrites the opinion that much of her newfound freedom in the sexual arena did not reflect her own desires, but was another aspect of a mask's performance to please her psychiatrist.

As part of her honours programme before her breakdown, Plath had decided to write her thesis on James Joyce's use of twin images, which probably reflected her keen and consistent insight into her own dual nature. After her return, Joyce and his twin images were out. Dostoevsky seemed a better subject with his frequent use of split or double personalities. She was very much involved in the subject. The psychological side interested her as much as, if not more than, the literary. She read a lot of psychoanalytical and also anthropological literature on the mirror image, the twin image and the double. The subject seemed to mean a great deal to her, as it reflected her continued intellectual awareness of her own schizophrenic nature. She wanted to move outside herself in search of literary, historical and social instances of the existence of the double. The major thrust of her search would seem to have been for external confirmation of her own dual reality.

In May 1955 Plath graduated from Smith *summa cum laude* and won a Fulbright scholarship to Cambridge University in England. There she started her studies at Newnham College in October of the same year. Before she left the United States, three important prizes were awarded to her for her poetry. In April she had won the Glascock Poetry Contest, sponsored by Mount Holyoke College, and in May she won the Academy of American Poets Prize and the Ethel Owin Corbin Poetry Prize. This made her more determined than ever that she would one day be remembered as a great poet. At Cambridge she followed the same pattern as she had done for years, by getting up early in the morning to work at her poetry.

Her studies at Cambridge were marked by continued academic success. She also did some acting, and was eager to help with college publications, as she vaguely thought of journalism as a career. As always, she seemed a happy, carefree person. She pedalled her way through Cambridge on a bicycle brought over from the United States, and embarrassed her fellow American students with her gaudy extravagances and easy candour about sexual matters. And as always, she played up to her audiences. There was still more than one side to her personality. Her selves were distinct and equally real, and they emerged from the same narcissistic source.

She met Ted Hughes in February 1956 at a party in London and wrote home that he was "the only man I've met yet who'd be strong enough to be equal with" (Plath, 1975: 221). The romance progressed rapidly, and they were married on 16 June 1956 in a private ceremony attended only by her mother.

Hughes's influence on Plath will be discussed fully in the next chapter. Enough to say here is that she found in him an all-powerful figure who could control her absolutely. Her poems from this period demonstrate the extent to which he magnetized her feelings. "In Hughes she found an image of physical strength that matched her own," says Uroff (p. 70). (Plath had previously expressed admiration for a man who lacked "athletic" physique.) Her letters home display her sense of joy in finding in him a counterpart to herself, an equal in poetry and in passion. She wrote to her mother, "To find such a man, to make him into the best man the world has seen: such a life work!" (Plath, 1957: 252). The contradictions in this sentence betray the complicated psychology of its writer. The "life work" mentioned came into effect when she took upon herself the task of typing his work and finding publishers for it.

With her Fulbright scholarship renewed for the second year and with Hughes teaching at a secondary school, Plath completed her English Tripos and M.A. degree. In June she returned to the United States with her husband where she had a teaching post waiting for her at Smith College.

Plath was bothered by the fact that she did not fall pregnant straight after having completed her studies. She sought medical advice, initially

to no avail. She must have felt a little desperate by her apparent barrenness. To prove that she was a complete woman, babies were absolutely essential. Perhaps this helps to explain the insistence upon herself as a stone, an arid thing, in her poems from this period, the stone being an extension of the bald infant heads that had always dominated her imagination.

Although Plath might have assumed that she would have a permanent teaching career at her old college, she gave up teaching after just one year as she found that teaching and marking assignments and scripts did not leave her enough time and energy for writing poetry. The next year, however, was not a period of great poetic productivity for her. She worked part-time at Massachusetts General Hospital and edited Robert Lowell's poetry course at Boston University. By the end of the academic year the Hugheses had decided to move to England, but before going they spent the summer on a cross-country camping tour of the United States and the final two months before their return at Yaddo.

To her joy Plath found herself pregnant. Although this was what she wanted, she found herself assailed by new anxieties. For one thing, her child would be born in England, a "natural" birth, something about which her mother had warned her. Despite her new fears, the two months at Yaddo allowed her to produce a fair number of poems which were to form part of her first volume *The Colossus*. Among these were the seven poems in the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence.

What has emerged from this chapter is a portrait of a very complex personality. Although Plath is treated by most critics with tolerant sympathy, there are also those who view her in a less favourable light. One of the latter is Marjorie Perloff, who expresses herself as follows:

But who is the "real" Sylvia Plath: the girl who wrote so solicitously to her mother or the author of *The Bell Jar*? The obvious answer... is that Plath had a schizoid personality, a divided self - the "poetic" or inner self that composed *The Bell Jar*... was thoroughly masked when she presented herself to others. But what is less well understood... is that the various roles Plath assumed - Dutiful Daughter, Bright

and Bouncy Smith Girl, Cambridge Intellectual, Adoring Wife and Mother, Efficient Housekeeper - were so deeply entrenched that they determined the course not only of her life but also of her writing... (her poems emerged) for a large part, from Plath's false self-esteem (in Lane, p. 156).

4. INFLUENCES ON PLATH'S POETRY

Every poet, initially, searches for his own voice. In the process of searching, he anxiously digests and reconstitutes the voices of his precursors, especially those with whom he finds points of contact. Plath took a long time finding her voice, and it was only in her final poems, published posthumously, that her very own terrible voice was heard.

Plath had her first poem published at the age of 8½. Later she would describe her childhood poems as being about

nature, I think: birds, bees, spring, fall, all those subjects which are absolute gifts to the person who doesn't have any interior experience to write about. I think the coming of spring, the stars overhead, the first snowfall and so on are gifts for a child, a young poet (Aird, p. 5).

At junior high school her poetry made quite an impact on her teachers, the audience she wanted to impress at that stage. A poem she wrote at the age of fourteen made her English teacher say, "Incredible that one so young could have experienced anything so devastating" (Simpson, p. 92). At this stage she was still short on technique, but long on imagination.

While at senior high school she kept submitting stories and poems to the "It's All Yours" section of the magazine *Seventeen*, and just before she entered Smith College in 1950 her first story was published, followed shortly afterwards by a poem. It was not as if it had been success at the first try. Her first story was published after 45 previous rejections, but Plath was not to be discouraged and kept doggedly on, writing and submitting poems and short stories to popular magazines. She was infatuated by the idea of becoming a professional writer of short stories for the slick magazines, which paid well and could give her the independence she needed.

Elegance was what the period of her early student years called for. The New Critics emphasized the qualities in poetry that lent themselves to explication. Irony and ambiguity were especially favoured. So Plath's early poems were written to meet those requirements. She used traditional forms and a language removed from actual speech.

Unlike most young poets who took themselves seriously, Plath had no ambition to be published in *Kenyon* or *Hudson* or *Partisan Review*. Her aim was to be accepted by magazines with a large circulation. Although she admired poets with a great following such as Robert Lowell, Richard Wilbur and Auden, her hero for the moment was Phyllis McGinley, at that time a much published author and quite famous. This was the kind of success Plath coveted for herself.

But Plath did not write for popular taste only. Not all her poems followed the course of her stories for the popular magazines, much as she wanted them published. There was a more serious side to her work. She wrote scores of poems miming the style of others, casting around for her own voice. But it was only later, after her studies at Cambridge and after she had met and married Ted Hughes, that the influence of other poets became less obvious and she found her own distinct voice.

"Plath's gift for poetic mimicry was always exceptional," says Gary Lane (p. 116). She learned to write poetry by reading poets, imitating their styles, experimenting in set forms, studying the Thesaurus. Only after a long apprenticeship did she begin to improvise and to explore her inner life.

Perloff (in Lane, p. 163) says that Plath was peculiarly impervious to what Harold Bloom called the anxiety of influence. For Plath, it was not a case of beginning in the shadow of a strong poet, of absorbing that poet's influence and then swerving away from him in the act of finding her own voice. Rather, she imitated a series of poets who had little in common with one another beyond their status as "major" poets.

In her senior year at Smith none of her poems emerged as a complete and satisfying experience. Rather, they were "academic" in the worst sense. She identified with Marianne Moore and Elizabeth Bishop, women poets who reinforced her own inclination for dry cleverness in spinster-like fashion and an unremitting allegiance to the well-made poem above everything else. The results were poems without blood or power. In Ann Sexton's opinion she was constrained by "her preoccupation with form... Those early poems were all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that). I found she hadn't found a voice of her own, wasn't, in truth, free to be

herself" (in Newman, p. 177). Uroff's criticism of Plath's early work is caustic in the extreme. Though she considers the poems technically polished,

her poems are not without obvious shortcomings. She usurps the language of other poets; she shamelessly copies rhythms and styles; she frequently lapses into dullness or borrowed archaic language; she veers between an arch literary style and prosaic emptiness. Her imitation of Dickinson suggests that her fine ear and facility with words place her always in danger of plagiarizing, and much later Plath was still borrowing the techniques of any poet she especially liked (in Lane, p.84).

In considering these "borrowed techniques", some Plath poems will be discussed and the influence of other poets pointed out. These influences are not arranged in chronological order as they often overlap and some poets influenced Plath for a longer period than others. The influence of surrealism on her work will also be considered.

4.1 Emily Dickinson

The first very obvious influence to be discerned in Plath's poetry is that of Emily Dickinson. She absorbed Dickinson's attitude, and perfectly caught her off-rhymes and psalmbook rhythms, as can be seen from the third poem from her "Trio of Love Songs".

If you dissect a bird
to diagram the tongue,
you'll cut the cord
articulating song.

If you flay a beast
to marvel at the mane,
you'll wreck the rest
from which the fur began.

If you assault a fish
to analyse the fin,
your hands will crush
the generating bone.

If you pluck out my heart
to find what makes it move,
you'll halt the clock
that syncopates our love.

As in all her early work, this poem is well crafted, correct, poised and written on an interesting theme: the perils of being too analytic. But there is very little behind the poem and Dickinson would hardly have placed the flaying of beasts in the same category as the dissection of birds. But Dickinson is present all the same in the verse forms, slant rhymes, characteristic images and metaphysical themes.

Dickinson's influence is not limited to Plath's early poems. Plath returned to her again and again, as is borne out by two later poems. She is behind the structural reversal of "Lorelei" (1958). The speaker of "Lorelei" begins by asserting that "It is no night to drown in", but the seductive muses beneath the water lay siege to that intention, and in the end she asks, "Stone, stone, ferry me down there". In the last week of her life Plath would return to Dickinson, whose permanently fixed heart, closing "the Valves of her attention - / Like Stone," is the mechanical weight behind "Contusion". Here, "the heart shuts".

Newman, in the first essay in his book, draws a parallel between Dickinson and Plath. He points out that the essential difference between their approaches binds them all the closer, for "while Emily was obsessed with the paradox of *giving* love in a Christian context, Sylvia Plath, in her day of abstract philanthropy and evanescent relationships, dramatizes the difficulty of *accepting* love" (p. 27). The two poets are also dramatically juxtaposed when Newman sees Emily as choosing "to pose as an angel to emphasize her witchcraft; Sylvia adopts witchcraft to approach heavenly perfection {as in "Witch Burning"}" (p. 47).

4.2 W.H. Auden

In March 1953 Auden spoke in the chapel at Smith. Plath was "absolutely wild" for Auden at that point in her life. He was her conception of the perfect poet. For a while she tried writing like Auden, copying his general tone and structure. He represented the kind of high art and solid popularity she so desired for herself.

In "Doom of Exiles" she imitates Auden, treating the attempt to kill herself in an impersonal manner, turning private experience into a public statement. Like Auden, she represents the state of mind through landscape and architecture, while the manner is grave and discursive:

Now we, returning from the vaulted domes
Of our colossal sleep, come home to find
A tall metropolis of catacombs
Erected down the gangways of our mind.

Auden influenced Plath's style and choice of subjects over a long period. "Two Views of a Cadaver Room", published in 1959, represents a scene in Auden's detached manner, alongside a vivid bit of reporting. It is especially in the second half of the poem that the similarities between the two poems are rather obvious. The Auden poem that she had in mind is "Musée des Beaux Arts" which describes Breughel's painting "The Fall of Icarus". Plath chose another Breughel, "The Triumph of Death", but she follows Auden's poem closely. She twists the Auden line "In Breughel's Icarus, for instance..." around to "In Breughel's panorama". The imitation of Auden is so close that she even describes the country as "delicate", as in Auden's poem. The Icarus in Breughel's painting and in Auden's poem comes back in the lover in Plath's poem: "He, afloat in the sea of her blue satin / Skirts", echoing the boy falling into the blue water of the sea.

One cannot always separate the influences that come together in any one of Plath's poems. "Faun", for instance, is a blend of Auden, Hopkins, Thomas and Hughes.

Haunched like a faun, he hooded
From grove of moon-glint and fen-frost
Until all owls in the twigged forest
Flapped back to look and brood
On the call this man made.

No sound but a drunken coot
Lurching home along river bank.
Stars hung water-sunk, so a rank
Of double star-eyes lit
Boughs where those owls sat.

An arena of yellow eyes
 Watched the changing shape he cut,
 Saw hoof harden from foot, saw sprout
 Goat-horns. Marked how god rose
 And galloped woodward in that guise

Formally and tonally, "Faun" recalls such early Auden poems as "Consider", "Never Stronger" and "No Change of Place", which begins:

Who will endure
 Heat of day and winter danger,
 Journey from one place to another,
 Nor be content to lie
 Till evening upon headland over bay,
 Between the land and sea
 Or smoking wait till hour of food,
 Leaning on chained-up gate
 At edge of wood?

· (Auden, p. 23).

Like Auden Plath uses a conventional rhyming stanza in which the consonance is frequently substituted for full rhyme (coot / lit / sat); like his, her sentences are long and complex, clausal units regularly overriding line end; like him, she creates a tightly packed verse by aligning heavily stressed monosyllables and omitting definite articles and subject pronouns as in "saw hoof harden from foot, saw sprout / goat horns; heard how god rose / and galloped woodward in that guise". "Faun" also recalls Thomas as its heavy compounding, alliteration and assonance bring to mind his elaborate sound structures.

4.3 Wallace Stevens

Another style from which Plath borrowed freely belongs to Wallace Stevens. His elegant, gaudy, cool voice suited Plath at specific times. It suggests a mind calmly taking stock of itself, and it implies the idea of order. Plath was also intrigued by his philosophic subject matter.

Stevens... was a man deeply threatened by emotional fragmentation; in the gorgeous play of the mind in poetry, in his rage to order existential chaos by "ghostlier demarcations, keener sound", he protected himself from the domination of black (Lane in Lane, p. 124).

Plath was also beset by a fear of blackness, and she found in Stevens a useful weapon to counteract this fear.

Both the fear and the defence are illustrated in "Night Shift". For this poem she is indebted to Stevens's "Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself", which it echoes in plot and language. In the Stevens poem, the external noise seemed at first "like a sound in his mind". But "It was not from the vast ventriloquism / Of sleep's faded papier-maché; instead, "it was coming from outside. / ... It was like / A new knowledge of reality". Plath used Stevens's poem to order her own chaos from its strategies:

It was not a heart, beating
That muted boom, that clangor
Far off, not blood in the ears
Drumming up any fever

To impose on the evening.
The noise came from outside.

What she really touches upon in this poem is the overwhelming loss she feels in the absence of her father, but this she does not elaborate upon. She brushes past the terrors of internal experiences and counterpoises them to the brutal sounds and movements of the machines, ceaselessly "hoisted ... / Stalled, {and} let fall".

Another aspect of Stevens's influence lies in his endless exploration of poetry as subject, in his devotion to the relationship between creative imagination and the word. Plath, too, thought constantly about that relationship. It is the subject of "Mad Girl's Love Song", one of her first published poems, and "Words", her last. She found in Stevens a model whose strategies she could usefully incorporate in her own work. "Black Rook in Rainy Weather" is a case in point. In her concern for the poet in a dry spell, Plath echoes "The Man Whose Pharynx Was Bad". There,

The time of year has grown indifferent.
Mildew of summer and the deepening snow
Are both alike in the routine I know.

In Plath's poem we hear a similar "fear / Of total neutrality". Plath's metaphor for the appearance that suspends this neutral condition also echoes Stevens.

Plath composed "A Winter Ship" at Yaddo in 1959, roughly at the same time as "Poem for a Birthday". This poem is a less obvious example of Stevens's influence. The poem she had in mind was Stevens's "The Man on the Dump". "Winter Ship" seems static, but read against the Stevens poem it has movement. Stevens's poem yearns for the renewal of imagination by an exposure to unmediated reality, by an abandonment of metaphor. The man on the dump is the poet perched upon the rubbish heap of stale images:

Day creeps down. The moon is creeping up.
The sun is a corbeil of flowers the moon Blanche
Places there, a bouquet. Ho-ho ... The dump is full
of images.

The poet's renewal is a purification:

Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
(All its images are in the dump) and you see
As a man (not like the image of a man),
You see the moon rise in an empty sky.

Achieving this, he would be reunited with the naked earth, with the raw reality of the phenomena. Plath's poem turns on a similar desire. Amid the metaphors that had become easy and stale for her - "The sea pulses under a skin of oil", "A gull holds his pose ... / ... in a jacket of ashes", "A blimp swims up like a day-moon or tin / Cigar over his rink of fishes" (this last wholly derived from Stevens) - the speaker misses the primacy of things. The poem proceeds through twenty-odd lines of metaphor when, for the first and only time, the speaker talks of herself: "we wanted to see the sun come up / And are met, instead, by this ice-ribbed ship". Posing the unmodified sun against the iceribbed ship, Plath encodes her disappointment with the masked, rigid Thesaurus poems she had been writing, and voices her desire for direct and vulnerable poetry.

4.4 W.B. Yeats

Yeats was the idol of both Plath and her husband. Since she had been introduced to Yeats's work at senior high school, she never stopped reading him. In a letter home (Plath, 1977: 223), she calls him "my beloved Yeats".

Plath herself admitted her indebtedness to Yeats:

I first learned changing in sound, assonance, from Yeats, for instance, assonance and consonants which, acutely, I mean, is technical. I was very excited when I discovered this. I read Dylan Thomas a great deal for the subtlety in sound. I never worked at anything but rhyme before, very rigid rhymes, and I began to develop schemes and patterns for sound which were somehow less obvious, but you get them through your ear if not through the eye. I just happened to learn this from Yeats, and Thomas too, in a way (Butscher, 1976: 229).

The influence of Yeats on Plath has been admirably set out by Barnett Guttenberg. Plath, he argues, "Builds a complete system, with a Yeatsian antithetical vision and consistent clusters of Yeatsian imagery. In addition, she seems to offer a series of rejoinders on various points of disagreement" (in Lane, p. 141).

Plath uses Yeats's voice in an early poem, "Spinster", a poem in the thrall of Yeats's glimmering nineties. His Maud/Helen figure in "The Sorrow of Love" disrupts

The brawling of a sparrow in the eaves,
The brilliant moon and all the milky sky,
And all that famous harmony of leaves.

She plays havoc with natural order. Plath's spinster fears a similar disruption. Her formal adjective carries Yeats's sense of tradition, of ritual as a defence against chaos "During a ceremonious April walk / With her latest suitor". She is "intolerably struck / By the birds' irregular babel / And the leaves' litter". It is the subjectivity of passionate involvement that apprehends Yeats's sparrows and Plath's birds as discordant twitterers, that makes litter of harmonious leaves. Plath's persona longs for winter, "Scrupulously austere in its order / ...

each sentiment within border"; like Yeats's Sligo hermit,

She withdrew neatly.

And round her house she set
Such a barricade of barb and check
Against mutinous weather
As no mere insurgent man could hope to break
With curse, fist, threat
Or love, either.

Yeats scorned the Ireland he misunderstood before the Easter Uprising, and lived "where motley is worn". Plath's spinster scorns April love, "a burgeoning / Unruly enough to pitch her five queenly wits / Into vulgar motley".

A somewhat later example, "Heavy Women", echoes the more mature Yeats. The glimmer is gone, replaced by the ominous shadow of historic inevitability. Plath's pregnant women, "Irrefutable, beautifully smug / As Venus", are

calm as a moon or cloud.

Smiling to themselves, they meditate
Devoutly as a Dutch bulb
Forming its twenty petals.

Both within and without, however, "The dark still nurses its secret". "Looping wool" on the bobbin of the self, the women are bound by the skein of history. They "listen for the millennium, / The knock of the small, new heart", but the twenty-petalled Christ children within them can accomplish "nothing in particular". "On the green hill" waits "the thorn tree". Against the warmth of a desired future, the historic "axle of winter / Grinds round, bearing down with the straw, / The star, the wise grey men".

All is diminished here, mechanical, threatening. The straw was once grass, the wise grey men are Yeats's pale, rigid magi, unsatisfied by Calvary's turbulence. Behind "Heavy Women" is Yeats's "The Second Coming", a spectre of savagery and recurrence:

but now I know
 That twenty centuries of stony sleep
 Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
 And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
 Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?

In Yeats's poem, "The darkness drops again", a falcon is "Turning and turning" in the widening gyre, and the troubling image comes "out of *Spiritus Mundi*". In "Heavy Women" there is a similar language. "The dark still nurses its secret," the women are "looping" wool, and they step "among the archetypes". In both poems, history is an iron wheel, a juggernaut crushing petty men beneath it. Yeats's rough historical beast is an ancestor of Plath's colossus, but Yeats's beast is public, Plath's colossus quite personal. Although in "Heavy Women" the colossal father is abstracted, made "pithy and historical", he is there all the same. Plath's historical voice is another mask, an investment against the risk of private confrontation. Yeats made great poetry in such a voice, surveying the human scene from the lofty slope of his vision. Plath's vision was far more narrow. It never encompassed much more than the arc of herself, and its poetic fulfilment required that she speak from a less elevated vantage point.

4.5 Dylan Thomas

Ted Hughes introduced Plath to the poetry of Dylan Thomas. She had studied Thomas's poetry during her final year at Smith, but at that time he failed to strike a vibrating cord in Plath. In 1958 she set out reading Thomas in earnest, and started writing under his influence. One hears his rhetorical assonance, the clicking consonants, and the syntactic swells in many of the poems in *The Colossus*. In "Hardcastle Crag" she mimics him perfectly:

The long wind, paring her person down
 To a pinch of flame, blew its burdened whistle
 In the whorl of her ear, and like a scooped-out pumpkin crown
 Her head cupped the babel.

Plath found Thomas's gigantic scale fitting to the greatness of her need. She was drawn to his grandeur. From this she would ultimately build her colossus, and then confront and exorcise it.

"Maudlin" is a Plath poem in Thomas's grandest and densest manner. In this poem Plath mixes "If I were Tickled by the Rub of Love" and "Alter-wise by Owl-light".

Mud-mattressed under the sign of the hag
In a clench of blood, the sleep-talking virgin
Gibbets with her curse the moon's man,
Faggot-bearing Jack in his crackless egg:

Hatched with a claret hogshead to swig
He kings it, navel-knit to no groan,
But at the price of a pin-stitched skin
Fish-tailed girls purchase each white leg.

Plath here undercuts the spiritually invulnerable Christ, "Faggot-bearing Jack in his crackless egg", and humanizes both his physically distressed mother and the "Fish-tailed girls" waiting for evolution.

Plath was probably drawn to Thomas because of his elegiac voice of mourning for his lost Eden of Fern Hill. Plath also mourned for something lost, which was her childhood. Her nostalgia merged and blended with that of Thomas, and while they were two "adults who know they can't go home, both beat nonetheless upon the door" (Lane in Lane, p. 121).

In a love poem started on her honeymoon, "Epitaph for Fire and Flower", Plath sounds like "Thomas rewriting Donne's 'The Canonization'" (Perloff in Lane, p. 167).

You might as well haul up
This wave's green peak on wire
To prevent fall, or anchor the fluent air
In quartz, as crack your skull to keep
These two most perishable lovers from the touch
That will kindle angels' envy, scorch and drop
Their fond hearts charred as any match.

The "two most perishable lovers" are so special that nothing can separate them. To break them asunder would be as impossible as stringing up a wave on wire or "anchor(ing) the fluent air in quartz". Angels envy them and an "astounded generation" of museum goers regard these "statues" locked in their embrace and "Secure in museum diamond" with envy and admiration. But though the lovers try to "outflame the phoenix", "the moment's spur / Drives nimble blood too quick" (an echo of Thomas's "The Force that Through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower"), and "a languor of wax congeals

the vein / No matter how fiercely lit". In language reminiscent of Thomas's "A Process in the Weather of the Heart", the poem concludes that "Dawn snuffs out star's spent wick", that no matter how passionate their nighttime love, the "altering light" of morning brings the lovers back to earth, to their daytime selves. In this neo-metaphysical poem, with its ingenious conceits and elaborate sound structure, Plath seems to define what love is supposed to be, rather than what it is for her.

Thomas did not instigate, but certainly contributed to, Plath's love for form, for technical perfection. "Metaphors", a poem about her pregnancy, consists of nine nine-syllable lines. "Aftermath" is an even more intricately shaped poem, a sonnet in syllabics, nine to the line. It is as if Plath were proving how successfully she could handle the difficult modern form so brilliantly exploited by Thomas in "Poem in October" or "Fern Hill". Both Hughes and Plath broke away from the traditional metrical patterns, Plath by trying something more difficult, crafty, and consciously contrived. She shied away from the inevitable high emotional charge of powerful, closepacked rhythms, and rather chose the quieter, more intellectual and detached mood generated by these carefully spaced syllabics.

4.6 Robert Lowell

While teaching at Smith College, Plath attended poetry classes given by Robert Lowell. Lowell's generation had been taught by masters such as Yeats, Eliot, Pound and Joyce to look for archetypes, patterns of mythology, the Jungian "racial unconscious" that were said to underlie the surface of appearances. This was the new way, Eliot said in a review of *Ulysses*, to organize narrative. He thought that Joyce had discovered "the continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity", a way of shaping the futility and anarchy of modern life (quoted in Simpson, p. 145). After World War II, writers frequently used a plot based on myth to give their poems a deeper significance. This is what Plath, too, did in her "Poem for a Birthday", although her poem "illuminates the anti-human side of negative mysticisms" (Libby, 1984: 126).

For Plath, the central event of her stay in Boston in 1959 was her decision to edit Robert Lowell's course in poetry-writing at Boston University with Anne Sexton and George Starbuck. Lowell, Sexton, Snodgrass and Ginsberg had started utilizing very private, often humiliating aspects of their lives to illuminate and revitalize the romantic projections of the self. Called "confessionalism" by admirers and detractors alike, this new mode was Catholic in its fundamental commitment to the concept of salvation through agonized purgations of naked ego, although the invention of a new self was certainly more important than the apparent concern with clinical revelations. The so-called confessional poets remained quite traditional in their approach to problems of craft, the excesses of content rarely violating well-learned lessons of technical restraint.

Poetically, Plath's exposure to Lowell's greater psychological honesty was decisive in demonstrating the need for her own poems to break through their disguises, their remoteness, their ironic rationalities. Besides promoting the advantages of a conversational voice, they also left little doubt that true emotional intensity, which her poems largely lacked, would emerge only if she should plunge into the cauldron of childhood. She still had the obsessive compulsion to deal with her father, but now she could contemplate a different, more efficient way of handling it, transforming her poetry into a joyous, fulfilling experience.

This did not come about immediately, but the seeds were planted by Lowell and their harvest lacked only the completion of the last steps in her dual task of providing a poetic analogue for modern evil, and for erecting a myth upon the grave-altar of her father.

Afterwards Plath said how "very excited" she had been by the new breakthrough which came with *Life Studies*, "this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo" (Orr, pp. 167-8). For Plath, this new, more nakedly personal poetry dealing with experiences of mental disorder helped free her for the creation of a newly uncompromising style of verse which dealt more directly with the subject matter she felt was closest to her, and which she was to explore increasingly in her last poems. The emergence of this new kind of poetry already occurs in "Poem for a Birthday", the sequence exploring different points of view just like Lowell, Eliot and Pound had done.

Lowell... had a greater effect on Sylvia than he could have realized, not only by encouraging her awareness of the possibilities inherent in confessional verse, but in further enlarging that "Massachusetts' low-tide dolor" he talks about. The dolor, for Sylvia, was real (Butscher 1976: 243).

Plath not only imitated Lowell's themes, but often, like art students copying the old masters to perfect their art, consciously wrote poems in Lowell's style. One such poem is "Point Shirley" which Ted Hughes describes as "a deliberate exercise in Robert Lowell's early style" (Hughes, 1966:86). "Point Shirley" is very close to Lowell in subject, mood and manner of Lowell's elegies on his family, of the shock of verbal inventiveness which dominates, for instance, his "Quaker Graveyard in Nantucket".

But the biggest change Lowell brought about in Plath was the attitude towards her subject matter. From him she took the encouragement she needed to develop in her own way. Her poems are unlike the open autobiographical work of Lowell, Sexton or Ginsberg. Marjorie Perloff (in Uroff, pp. 181-3) makes an interesting comparison between Lowell and Plath. She characterizes Lowell's poetry as realistic or documentary or metonymic lyric which is at once highly personal and highly factual, a combination of Wordsworthian confessionalism and Chekhovian realism. In contrasting Lowell's "Walking in the Blue" to Plath's "Stones", Perloff says that the shift is from "a world of concrete personalities and realistic events to one of pure being". She continues:

Sylvia Plath's "I", unlike Lowell's, is not subordinated to its attributes or surroundings. Rather, like the "I" of Rimbaud... the self is projected outward; it seems to utter rather than to address anyone; it can recount only what is happening *now*, at this very moment... The tension in "The Stones" is thus not between self and the world as it is in Lowell's... but between what Richard Howard has aptly called "the lithic impulse - the desire to reduce the demands of life to the unquestioning acceptance of a stone - and the impulse to live on."

Further differences between Plath and other "confessional poets" will be pointed out in the next chapter.

4.7 Roethke and Radin

Just before returning to England towards the end of 1959, Plath was profoundly influenced by two writers. Ted Hughes tells:

She was reading Paul Radin's collection of African folktales with great excitement. In these, she found the underworld of her worst nightmares throwing up intensely beautiful adventures, where the most unsuspected voices thrived under the pressures of a reality that made most accepted fiction seem artificial and spurious. At the same time she was reading - closely and sympathetically for the first time - Roethke's poems. The result was a series of pieces, each a monologue of some character in an underground, primitive drama. "Stones" was the last of them, and the only one not obviously influenced by Roethke. It is full of specific details of her experience in a mental hospital, and is clearly enough the first eruption of the voice that produced *Ariel*. It is the poem where the self, shattered in 1953, suddenly finds itself whole. The series was called "Poem for a Birthday" (Hughes, 1966: 87).

Libby suggests that while Plath was reading Roethke, "what she must have experienced then was a sense not so much of discovery as of recognition" (1984: 103), and to him it is evident that "the two poets are dipping almost together in Jung's dream pool". It is almost as if Plath's most distinctive voice was liberated by Roethke's influence.

Plath's affinities with Roethke are evident in poems she wrote before close contact with his work, if Hughes's chronology is accurate. Her "Disquieting Muses" he places in late 1957 or early 1958, but the image of the three leathery women which dominates the poem is strangely suggestive of Roethke's "Frau Bauman, Frau Schmidt and Frau Schwartz".

After Plath had actually studied Roethke closely, the sounds of her lines were similar to his. Her characteristic assonance and child's play with the language echo the idea he developed in *Praise to the End*. In the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence her use of phrases like "mummy's stomach", "dead heads" and "rusty tusks" in "Who", or names like "Mumblepaws, teary and sorry" and "Fido Littlesoul, the bowl's familiar" in "The Beast" seem like a very literal response to Roethke's expressed preference for internal rhyme and nursery rhymes. Plath, like Roethke, created a poetic sequence about death and rebirth, and in these poems she reveals for the first time the direction her mature work was to take.

"All the Dead Dears" (1956) amalgamates several of Roethke's first poems, "The Premonition", "Prognosis", and "Feud". In Plath's poem, a sixteen-hundred-year-old museum skeleton suggests the grinding of "Our own grist down to its bony face". Like the devouring mother in Roethke's "Prognosis" and her own later "Medusa" the skeleton will "suck / Blood and whistle my marrow clean" in claiming kinship. Roethke had grappled with a similar ferocious past and found, in "Feud", that "The spirit starves / Until the dead have been subdued". "The Premonition" suggests the origin of Roethke's spiritual haunting. Walking in an Edenic field with "my father", the poet foresees death and paradise lost:

He dipped his hand in the shallow;
Water ran over and under
Hair on a narrow wrist bone.

The discovery of the skull beneath the skin in the passage just quoted is borrowed from Donne's "Bracelet of bright haire about the bone", but it is Roethke's treatment of this mortality theme that gives strategic direction to "All the Dead Dears". Moving, like him, from the shapeless, kinclaiming dead to the event that animated them, Plath echoes his enactment of first loss. In Roethke's poem, the father's

... image kept following after, -
Flashed with the sun in the ripple.
But when he stood up, that face
Was lost in a maze of water.

In Plath's poem, behind "Mother, grandmother, greatgrandmother / ... an image looms under the fishpond surface / Where the daft father went down". Sharing father-loss as a crucial event, Plath and Roethke shared its fragmentation, and both longed for a coherence, a coherence associa-

ted with the absent father and one that might be regained by a process of psychic reconciliation with him.

It was Roethke's new kind of poetry that overwhelmed Plath's birthday sequence. She had been in a habit of composing laboriously, the Thesaurus on one knee. Now the confluence of Roethke, her first pregnancy and Paul Radin brought her to a turning point. She would discard her academic manner, free herself, and would hear the archetypal language of the subconscious. But the major changes in her poetry did not come until she had learned to control her own voice, and that was still a long way off. However, Roethke's influence in her "Poem for a Birthday" sequence will be discussed later in greater detail.

4.8 Surrealism

There is yet another aspect of Plath's work that merits investigation. Libby (1984: 123) comments on Plath's "surrealistic vision" which is often difficult to follow, while Hughes, in describing Plath's poetic activity, says:

Her poetry escapes ordinary analysis in the way that clairvoyance and mediumship do: her psychic gifts, at almost any time, were strong enough to make her frequently wish to be rid of them. In her poetry, in other words, she had free and controlled access to depths formerly reserved to the primitive ecstatic priests, shamans and holy men, and more recently flung open to tourists with the passport of such hallucinogens as LSD (Hughes, 1966: 82).

Alvarez (1971:14,24) recalls that Plath, in describing to him her period of rapid production, made it sound like "demonic possession". Williamson (p. 54) comments on her "surrealist cadenzas", Simpson (p. 126) on her "surrealist images", and Uroff, in her introduction (pp. 5 - 17) stresses the overall surrealistic quality of her work.

Could one describe Plath's poetry as surrealist? Libby (1984: 69-70) finds surrealist visions in the poetry of Roethke and Bly, visions rooted in the exploration of the unconscious. Lowell also appears on Libby's list of surrealist poets. His vision is "animistic, and frequently surrealist, as one form of matter or energy flows into others in ceaseless and often violent transformation" (p. 83).

Surrealism was invented as an antidote against the condition when "what is called 'real life' ceases to have any meaning, or presents a trap for the human spirit" (Fowlie, p. 18). It is a literature of absolute sincerity. It is really the belief that the conscious states of man's being are not sufficient to explain him to himself and to others. His subconscious contains a larger and especially a more authentic or accurate part of his being. It was found that conscious speech and daily actions are usually in contradiction with the true self and deeper desires. The neat patterns of human behaviour were found to be patterns formed by social forces rather than by desires of temperaments of inner psychological selves.

The anti-realism of the subconscious has an overwhelmingly positive aspiration. Although it contains a refusal of what is considered logical intelligence, it elevates the subconscious of man into a position of power, magnitude and surreality.

The true poet is often an unadaptable man who taps the power of his subconscious mind. There he finds the power and magnitude he needs, and he is then given to illogical action. He represents what psychologists would define as the schizoid temperament. His method is continual introspection. He feels an attraction towards death and self-destruction. Fowlie (p. 18) sees prophecy, doom, destiny, occultism and suicide as manifestations of the pessimistic or nihilistic aspects of surrealism.

Surrealism at all times seems to offer suicide as one way out of an unbearable life. But the other alternative has fortunately been believed in and practised more often than the suicidal interpretation. Belief in suicide has been strongly counteracted by belief in the miracle of art, and in the magical qualities and properties of the artist. The role of the writer

is seen as usurping more and more the prerogatives of the priest or the miracle-worker, of the man endowed with supernatural vision. The work of the writer, and particularly of the poet, is seen more and more to be a magical incantation, an evocative magic or witchcraft whose creation and whose effect are both miraculous. The artistic work might be compared to the "host" of sacramental Christianity which contains the "real presence" (Libby, 1984: 24). The poet then is the priest who initiates the miracle by a magical use of words, by an incantation which he himself does not fully understand. The work, thus brought into being, is a mystery which can be felt and experienced without necessarily being understood. Rosenthal (Newman, p. 75) finds that these poems "make a weird incantatory black magic against unspecified persons and situations". Such poems were not resolved by artistic process, and often seem to call for biographical rather than poetic explanations.

When writing surrealistic poetry, the poet must not intervene too consciously. He must make himself into an echo of his subconscious and follow his inner life, as if he were an observer. He must learn to experience his conscious states in the same way he observes his dreams when he is asleep. The resulting work of art will then be a product not of real life, but of the imagination. This was what Plath evidently did when she wrote "Poem for a Birthday", as she and Hughes "devised exercises of meditation and invocation" during their stay at Yaddo (Newman, p. 191).

The above seems closely allied to what Libby sees as contemporary negative visionary poetry, which seems fixed on the ideas of nothingness and death. Both generate an equally paradoxical ecstasy. Some definition of this idea can be had from Heidegger (see Scott, pp. 64ff.), who began his career with the examination of the medieval philosopher Duns Scotus, for whom the dark night of the soul had to precede revelation. The poet trying to produce the impression of mystical vision finds himself open to a stormy world, and darkness and illumination may become not sequential but simultaneous.

There are critics such as Kroll (p. 210) who see Plath as a priestess in search of absolute transcendence. But for Plath, to whom the mystical

way of seeing became an actual way of being, mystical visions caused or accompanied psychic disintegration.

4.9 Ted Hughes

The final person who exerted an influence on Plath's poetry was her husband, Ted Hughes. One can easily discover characteristic Plath images in Hughes's later poetry, and his images in her poems from the time she met him. The stylistic and philosophical influence each exerted on the other is very interesting. According to Libby (1984: 132), they shared "a vision of elemental mythic conflict". Images and motifs, often identical or only slightly altered, crop up continuously, and are obviously borrowed from or inspired by the other's efforts, with Hughes initially leading the way. When she envisions a gull with "The whole flat harbour anchored in / The round of his yellow eye-button" ("A Winter Ship") she seems directly influenced by Hughes's hawk, who "hangs his still eye. / His wings hold all creation in a weightless quiet" ("Hawk in the Rain"). Also compare the following:

... I
Am the pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses ("Fever 103°")

and

... I am the cargo
Of a coffin attended by swallows ("Wodwo").

Also, Plath's "I am the arrow" from "Ariel" is repeated in the Hughes poem. Many such examples can be cited. However, it is quite natural and more or less unavoidable for two people living and working together criticizing one another's work, to influence one another constantly.

Lane (p. 118) describes the echoes of Hughes in Plath's poetry as "mimicries ... nods of acquaintance, hats tried and returned to the shelf". That Hughes at times felt uncomfortable about Plath's continual presence is noted by Kotzé: "Hughes's expressed anxiety over the massive English 'maternal corpus' which threatens his poetic individuality suggests that Sylvia Plath's stylistic independence symptomizes a similar fear of depersonalization by intimacy" (p. 40). This brings the realization that

"the female can no more survive destruction of the male principle, external or internal, than man can survive the ongoing destruction of the subconscious" (Libby, 1974: 404). In Hughes's *Hawk in the Rain* the sense of "ongoing destruction" is already apparent; Hughes's *Supereal* reveals the "great stylistic and philosophical influence each of them exerted on the other" (Libby, 1974: 387).

Hughes also exerted another influence on Plath's poetry. Being used to the rough folkways of Yorkshire, where farmers and millhands accepted violence as a natural expression of the wildness all around them, he could not adjust to Plath's facility for the refined and frequently remote mores of an academic society generations removed from nature, at least not without rebelling from time to time. His own poetry is riddled with rebellion, and he was attempting to instil the same vigorous directness into Plath's work.

Alvarez's cosmological study, Butscher's literary biography and Uroff's work on the correspondences in the works of Plath and Hughes provide additional information on the poets' shared interests in magic, mysticism and the cult of the Great Goddess, but in these works the enchantment of Plath's poetic personality obscures the significance of the philosophical impact of one poet upon the other. Hughes also was guide and partner in the meditation and exercises that released Plath's rush of poems during the Yaddo period. "Mayday on Holderness" shows his own experimentation with the Roethkean technique that Plath used in "Poem for a Birthday". Like Plath, he too reverted to the underworld, but at that point he was not prepared to explore it any further. Although he was to return to this technique later in *Wodwo* and *Crow*, at that time his poetry remained much more attached to real life, or to natural cycles, than to psychic experiences.

Hirschberg (p. 7) has the last word on their mutual influence: "Ultimately the poetry of Ted Hughes and the poetry of Sylvia Plath... are reciprocals of each other; each moves towards the condition of the other".

5. PLATH'S MYTH-MAKING AND "POEM FOR A BIRTHDAY"

Perhaps the most difficult technical problem for the artist who wants to compose a poem that represents the shape of the psyche itself is that of structuring the poem. If the experience for which the poem is a metaphor is a pure flowing of surplus energy, as Blessing suggests (in Lane, p. 68), then the poem must have a structure flexible enough to contain that energy and firm enough so that the force is not dissipated by running off in too many directions.

Yeats, in the introduction to his edition of Blake's poetry, says, "The chief difference between the metaphors of poetry and the symbols of mysticism is that the latter are woven together into a complete system". Perhaps the most common structural device for a twentieth-century writer has been what Eliot called "the mythic method", and indeed many critics have spoken of Plath's use of myth, the "force of her myth" or her "unified mythic vision".

Blessing (in Lane, p. 68) says of myth-making:

The advantage of a "mythic structure" is that, in a sense, it is no structure at all. A myth is itself pure action, the motion of the hero through time and space, usually toward a more abundant life. What counts is not the sequence of particular events falling into a chronological order, but the urge, wrestle, and resurrection, the thrust toward the light, which drives the hero onward. The power of the myth is not a matter of plot, but of tropism, not a function of structure, but of energy and direction. The "structure" of the myth, like the "structure" of the atom, is a kind of artificial construct, a graspable metaphor created to stand for the unstructured flowing that is life itself.

As has been pointed out in the previous chapter, Plath's poems are not purely confessional. Rather, they are the articulation of a mythic system which integrates all aspects of her work, and into which autobiographical or confessional details are shaped and absorbed, to a

large extent qualifying how such elements ought to be viewed. Ted Hughes says of them:

The autobiographical details in Sylvia Plath's poetry work differently [from those of Lowell and other confessional poets]. She sets them out like masks, which are then lifted up by *dramatis personae* of nearly supernatural qualities (quoted in Kroll, p. 2).

In Plath the personal concerns and everyday role are transmuted into something impersonal, by being absorbed into a timeless mythic system. Although many narrative details of her mythic system are drawn from her life, the emphasis is more on expressing the structure of her state of being. Confessional poetry usually comprises a plurality of concerns, but in Plath's poetry there is only one overriding concern: the problem of rebirth or transcendence. Nearly everything in her poetry contributes either to the statement or to the envisioned resolution of this problem.

Although a mythic system accommodates the personal element, the voice of her poetry is detached from the personal in a sense that it is not in confessional poets, whose strategy depends partly on convincing the reader of a lack of such detachment. For them mundane life overflows into art, but with Plath it is just the other way around. She has a vision which is complete, self-contained, and whole, a vision of mythic totality, which confessional poets do not have. Much of the vitality in their poetry arises from the very incompleteness of the vision, from a sense that there exist possibilities of discovery and change, from the interest and pleasure one may have in observing the self in encounters whose outcome is not foreclosed, or from confronting a future which is open-ended. Plath's late poems, on the other hand, convey a sense that the future is foreclosed, that no substantial change can be brought about by experience, and that only rebirth or transcendence would be a resolution.

The mythic, having absorbed the personal, has brought the latter to a different level. Both her detachment from the personal and her absorption in the mythic are suggested by a remark she made towards the end

of her life about writing poetry:

I feel like a very efficient tool or weapon, used and in demand from moment to moment... (Biographical note to *The Bell Jar*, p. 295).

If her poetry is understood as constituting a system of symbols that expresses a unified mythic vision, her images may be seen as emblems of that myth. Red, white, and black, for example, the characteristic colours of her late poetry, function as mythical emblems of her state of being, much as they do in the mythologies which she drew upon. A great many other particulars of her poetry are similarly determined by her system, and personal and historical details are subordinate to it. While a confessional poet may alter details to make them more fitting, Plath's alteration of details has a deeper significance. Her protagonist in "Daddy" says, "I was ten when they buried you", but Plath was only eight when her father died. A magical "one year in every ten" cycle, however, conveys the mythic inevitability necessary to define her state of being. It is such details that Plath most frequently alters or eliminates, when they are not sufficiently mythic. Neither Lowell nor the other confessional poets write poems in which mythic inevitability and cyclical orderliness are as important, for they do not have the kind of vision to which such considerations are relevant.

In Plath's poetry, the subordination of details to her mythical vision goes beyond alterations of matters of fact, for the significance even of "occasional" poems about small events like "Cut" or "Poppies in October" lies in their evocation of her pre-existing primary concerns. While the details in confessional poems stand on their own, there is hardly a detail in Plath's poetry that is not connected with and does not encompass her entire vision.

To a reader unaware of this unity, Plath's poetry will seem to contain a collection of haphazard images, bearing more or less the significance they do have in daily life. A few critics, however, have gone beyond this in noticing certain recurrent patterns of association between some of these images. Annette Lavers, for example, observes that white is

in some cultures a symbol of death, and that this, "coupled with the other attributes of death, makes the moon a perfect symbol for it". Therefore, "Words like 'Pearl', 'silver' or 'ivory', which can be used to describe moonlight, always announce some untoward event". (It is interesting to note that for psychologists, white points to psychic emptiness and the tendency towards schizophrenia.) Lavers goes so far as to suggest the existence of some "code" in which "objects and their qualities are endowed with stable significations" (in Newman, p. 101). But beyond that there is a mythical system that is encoded, in which virtually every image, especially in the late poems, participates.

Other misapprehensions arise if one ignores the more impersonal or mythic dimension in Plath's poetry. Without this awareness, the elements of suffering, violence, death and decay might be seen as aspects of a self-indulgent stance that is merely nasty, morbid and decadent. Had she been a confessional poet, this might have been the case. But her poetry is of a different order, and these details are absorbed into a broader system of concerns. To see the autobiographical details only as such is to regard Plath's vision of suffering and death as morbid, but to appreciate the deeper significance of her poetry is to understand her fascination with death as connected with and transformed into a broader concern with the themes of rebirth and transcendence.

There is a similar danger of missing the meaning of her poetry in regarding the themes and imagery as illustrations of pathological symptoms, as if what is of significance in her poetry were reducible to the representation of a case history. To see a theme or image merely as a symptom of schizophrenia is to dismiss the meaning with which one is confronted.

To deal with the structure of Plath's poetry is primarily to deal with the voices, landscape, characters, images, emblems, and motifs which articulate a mythic drama having something of the eternal necessity of Greek tragedy (Kroll, p. 6).

Plath's myth has its basis in her biography, but it in turn exercises a selective function on her biography and determines within it an increasingly restricted context of relevance as her work becomes more symbolic and archetypal.

Ted Hughes has made this valid but rather cryptic statement about her poetry:

Most readers will perceive pretty readily the single centre of power and light which her poems all share, but I think it will be a service if I point out just how little of her poetry is 'occasional', and how faithfully her separate poems built up into one long poem. She faced a task in herself, and her poetry is the record of her progress in the task. The poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear - even if the origins of it and the *dramatis personae* are at the bottom enigmatic... The world of her poetry is one of emblematic visionary events, mathematical symmetries, clairvoyance, metamorphoses, and something resembling... biological and racial recall. And the whole scene lies under the transfiguring eye of the great white timeless light (Hughes, 1966: 82).

In primitive society the theme of rebirth often finds concrete representation in the ancient and widespread notion of the separable or external soul. This theme, mentioned in Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*, is perhaps the major theme in Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, the golden bough being the embodied representation of the soul of the sacred priest-king at Nemi. The bough was plucked by a challenger for the sacred office, who would only succeed the ruling priest-king by slaying him. The defeat of the old king in a duel to the death demonstrated his inadequacy to continue the kingship and gained the victor the right to succession. The sacred kingship continued unaffected through this change and thus it continually renewed itself, just like its embodied representation, the golden bough.

The office of kingship, rather than the individual bodily or ego form of the incumbent, was the incumbent's true self. Faith in his sacred office was faith in his true immortality. A priest-king would fight for his life as a sacred duty, but not, if he had faith, out of fear for his life, for even if he were defeated, the immortality of his true self, the sacred kingship, was guaranteed. Whether he lived or died, it was an equally sacred event. The meaning of such a life is transcendent.

Plath's work contains several instances in which, as a means of expressing her mythical sense of rebirth, a separable or external soul embodies the true self. Allusions as well as direct references to this idea occur throughout her poetry. The use of this idea to express the notions of the true self and rebirth does not of course require a belief in literal immortality.

Plath's interest in this theme was established as early as her undergraduate thesis in which the idea of a separable soul was an organizing principle. In it she treated the theme as a variation on the interrelated motifs of false and true selves, and death and rebirth. Her thesis cited Otto Rank's essay "The Double as Immortal Self", "which traces the origin of the double as harbinger of death to - and finds it a degenerate form of - belief in the double as one's immortal (and separable) soul" (Kroll, p. 137).

Something like a separable soul appears in "The Stones":

The vase, reconstructed, houses
The elusive rose

The myths of *The Golden Bough* also appear in *The White Goddess*, and both are based on major motifs shared by Plath's mythology. But while Graves focusses on the White Goddess as both "emblem" and "real agent" of a characteristic drama which he regards as the one true theme of poetry, Frazer, in discussing many of the same types of myths and rituals, focuses on death and resurrection of the god who generally has two aspects or selves: a new, resurrected form and an old, dead form. Thus, where for Graves the White Goddess is always central, for Frazer it is the gods of the waxing and waning year.

The White Goddess encompasses love and death. The anima

occasionally ... causes states of fascination that
rival the best bewitchment, ... The Witch has not
ceased to mix her vile potions of love and death...
(Jung, 1941: 312, 310).

Jung's writing offers an explanation, in terms of his concept of archetypes, of the source of the mythic and of its pervasiveness in everyday life. It asserts that life *is* mythic:

In dealing with the shadow or anima it is not sufficient just to know about these concepts and to reflect on them ... Archetypes are complexes of experience that come upon us like fate, and their effects are felt in our most personal life. The anima no longer crosses our path as a goddess, but it may be, as an intimately personal adventure, ... When, for instance, a highly esteemed professor in his seventies abandons his family and runs off with a young red-headed actress, we know that the gods have claimed another victim. This is how demonic power reveals itself to us. Until not so long ago it would have been an easy matter to do away with the young woman as a witch (1941: 314).

Since what appealed to Plath in the White Goddess myths was not merely the single image of a muse-as-witch, but the entire structure of the mythology, with the Moon-goddess muse as emblem of it, a discussion of the White Goddess material will shed light on the structure of the mythicized biography as a whole, as well as on the nature and evolution of the Moon-muse.

The White Goddess is organized around views similar to those expressed by Frazer, who wrote:

... we may well conclude that a great Mother Goddess, the personification of all the reproductive energies of nature, was worshipped under different names but with a substantial similarity of myth and ritual by many peoples of Western Asia; that associated with her was a lover, or rather a series of lovers, divine yet mortal, ... we may surmise that the Easter celebration of the dead and risen Christ was grafted upon a similar celebration of the dead and risen Adonis ... The type, created by Greek artists, of the sorrowful goddess with her dying lover in her arms, resembles and may have been the model of the *Pietà* of Christian art... (pp. 385, 401).

The myth essentially concerns a Triple Moon goddess, associated with poetic inspiration. Each individual manifestation of her (Hecate, Juno, Diana) encodes some phase in the life, death and rebirth cycle of which the goddess is the cumulative concrete symbol. In a number of her incarnations, the goddess has a consort. He may be a Sun-god, a king or hero. When he dies, he is mourned by the goddess. Sometimes, when the god is killed, a substitute takes his place. This is the motif of the dying god and the mourning goddess of which Graves considers the Virgin mourning Christ to be a variation. (Plath would have found the parallel between the dying god and the mourning goddess motif especially significant in her mourning for her father.)

The note on the cover of the 1966 edition of Graves's book summarizes its content in this way:

The earliest European deity was the White Goddess of Birth, Love and Death, visibly appearing as the New, Full and Old Moon, and worshipped under countless titles ... she continues as the Ninefold Muse, patroness of the white magic of poetry.

Mr. Graves' proposition is that "true poetry" or "pure poetry"... has only a single language and a single variable theme... this theme is inseparably connected with the ancient cult-ritual of the White Goddess and her Son. The language is called myth and is based on a few simple magic formulas... Poetry is "true" or "pure" to the degree that the poet makes intuitive use of the formulas.

According to Graves, "the capricious and all-powerful Threefold Goddess" is "mother, bride and layer-out" of the "God of the Waxing Year" (p. 24), the Sun-god, whose "death" and "rebirth" are entailed in the cycle of seasons:

The Triple Muse, or the Three Muses, or the Ninefold Muse... or whatever else one may care to call her, is originally the Great Goddess in her poetic or incantatory character. She has a son who is also her lover and her victim, the ...

Demon of the Waxing Year. He alternates in her favour with... the Demon of the Waning Year, his darker self (pp. 390 - 91)... One succeeds the other in the Moon-woman's favour, as summer succeeds winter, and winter succeeds summer; as death succeeds birth and birth succeeds death. The Sun grows weaker or stronger... but the light of the Moon is invariable. She is impartial: she destroys or creates with equal passion (p. 386).

All true poetry... celebrates some incident or scene in this very ancient story, and the three main characters are so much a part of our racial inheritance that they not only assert themselves in poetry but ... in the form of dreams, paranoic visions and delusions... a true poem is necessarily an invocation of the White Goddess, or Muse, the Mother of all living, the ancient power of fright and lust - the female spider or the queen bee whose embrace is death (p. 24).

{The Triple Goddess} was a personification of primitive woman - woman the creatress and destructress. As the new moon or Spring she was girl; as the Full Moon or Summer she was woman; as the Old Moon or Winter she was hag (p. 384).

The "White Lady of Death and Inspiration" (p. 67) is also a goddess of destiny:

The three Fates are a divided form of the Triple Goddess, and in Greek legend appear also as the Three Grey Ones or The Three Muses (p. 224).

Many aspects of Graves's historical analysis of the White Goddess, and his view of the evolution of poetry and its relation to the poet would also have appealed to Plath:

Poetry began in the matriarchal age, and derives its magic from the moon... "to woo the Muse"... [refers to] the poet's inner communion with the White Goddess, regarded as the source of truth... The poet is in love with the White Goddess, with Truth... (p. 446).

The true poet must always be original, ... he must address only the Muse... and tell her the truth about himself and her in his own passionate and peculiar words (p. 442).

I cannot think of any true poet from Homer onwards who has not independently recorded his experience of her. The test of a poet's vision, one might say, is the accuracy of his portrayal of the White Goddess (p. 24).

The fundamental White Goddess myth embraces virtually all of the major motifs of Plath's biography, and organizes them into a similar drama, thus providing a narrative model for her myth complete with a fully developed network of interrelated meanings and images, countless examples of which are to be found in a wide range of subsidiary mythologies. The White Goddess material demonstrated to Plath how a myth comes into being and how it becomes embodied in its own particulars, that is, in its narrative forms, its personae and its incidental details. In doing so, it provided an example of how her own myth could be given convincing and compelling form.

Graves's view that all the aspects of the White Goddess myth ultimately reveal a connection with poetry, and that poetry was and ideally ought to be a way of worshipping the goddess in one or another of her forms, probably held great significance for Plath. That the act of creating poetry was closely associated with a Moon-goddess meant that the White Goddess myth claimed parallels with her life not only in terms of her family history but also asserted a connection with her vocation as a poet.

Kroll's assessment of Plath's myth is that it is a variation of the archetypal patterns of death and rebirth. The heroine has a true self and a false self. The false self is frequently called forth by a strong male. The false self (and sometimes the male) must die so that the true self can live. "Life lived by the false self is death-in-life," Kroll writes, "while the rebirth of the true self promises life-in-death, expressed in the poetry in images of purgation, purification, and transcendence" (p. 17).

Towards the end of 1959, just before leaving the United States to settle permanently in Britain, Plath had absorbed a great many influences. Those of Graves and Frazer compelled her to formulate her own mythology. In addition, she was engaged in a series of meditations and invocations. Hughes described these exercises to Kroll (pp.227-27), claiming that Plath's common procedure was to concentrate on a topic, explore its associations, hand it over to a speaker or persona, then put it aside, and come back to it to write a poem. In this way, preliminary deliberation was combined with spontaneous associations developed in the writing of the poem. Also, Plath was reading Roethke's poems closely for the first time during this period. His association of the human and natural world, his search for his own identity through this association, the uncertainty and vulnerability he admits, as well as his poetic confrontation of his own insanity - all these attitudes and interests of Roethke find expression in the poetry Plath wrote at this time. They are especially evident in "Poem for a Birthday".

One reason why she found Roethke so useful was that she had herself, in much less startling ways than Roethke, been attempting to express an awareness of the other world of nature and at the same time to understand her own inner world. These two kinds of efforts were combined in Roethke's poetry. But "Poem for a Birthday" is a much more fear-ridden sequence than any Roethke wrote. A reduction to the 'minimal', for which Roethke felt a special sympathy, did not allow Plath clearly to celebrate the life force. At the roots she felt danger, strange spirits, red tongues, and other eaters and thrivers. Also at the roots in her poems another life was forming: that of the child she was carrying.

The reduction to the child, which in Roethke's poems is a strategy for developing his own identity, has a double implication in Plath's sequence, since in "Poem for a Birthday" she is giving birth both to herself and to another being. Images of pregnancy add a different dimension to Plath's poem. Also, it is clear that many of the dense associations in "Poem for a Birthday" derive from her earlier explorations of the life force and from Hughes's poems on that subject. For example, the eating game that has been played from the beginning in the poems of Plath and Hughes is absorbed into Roethke's eating imagery in poems such as "I Need, I Need".

demoralization, that cruelty and wanton murder loom so large in many of their tales, and yet to judge from the very tales where cruelty and murder are the main themes, the author-raconteur felt it necessary to attach to them a clear cut moral: death is the inevitable fate of those who fail to resist disorganization, and that outward disorganization is followed remorselessly by inward disintegration.

So much for Radin's African folktales. Roethke's poetry, on the other hand, and particularly his "greenhouse" poems, is elegiac, celebratory, and nostalgic. Many of the poems deal with his childhood and with his dead father (whose Prussian background, pastoral inclination, and even name - Otto - are shared by Plath's father, a coincidence she would have found meaningful). Many of the "greenhouse poems" expressed in an extremely open and vulnerable way an empathy with what he called himself "the minimal". Just such vulnerability and openness, combined with the matter-of-fact presentation of the violent and the miraculous, characterize much of "Poem for a Birthday".

In many of his poems, Roethke had surmounted the voice of the public persona which Plath had been struggling to break down. Roethke uses the frank and innocent language of childhood, and this is also one of the things that Plath took over from him, especially in her later poems.

Considering the extent to which Roethke's strategy and actual images find their way into Plath's poems, the whole process of meditation that Hughes described apparently failed to free Plath from literary influences. Perhaps she found Roethke a poet so akin to her own sensibility that she could absorb his insights directly, making his underworld her own, but the later development of her poetry suggests her wide divergence from Roethke. He provided her, at this point, with a model she scrupulously followed, and she eventually abandoned that model after it had served its purpose.

It is easy to see how "Poem for a Birthday" evolves as one image calls forth another. In these poems Plath's manipulating mind seems less active than in anything else she wrote, although it makes itself felt in odd places where the speaker draws back from a vivid image to comment

on it. She took from Roethke's poetry certain images, rhythms, and a general idea of how she might handle madness as a subject for poems. But "Poem for a Birthday" shares neither Roethke's participation in nature nor his driving sincerity and openness. Plath's poems are much less celebratory than Roethke's, as at every point in her effort to go backward she is threatened. The poems celebrate not an identification with plant and animal life, but a desire to escape human life and her captors by hiding in the potting shed or underground.

Apart from the last poem, "The Stones", which is drawn from Plath's experience in a mental hospital, every poem in the sequence except perhaps "The Dark House" depends on the events of her mental breakdown. The drama that is enacted is the fierce battle between life and death in which neither life nor death seems a simple alternative. Something of the confusion of madness obtrudes in these poems. Life seems a kind of repulsive forcefeeding, and death a tolerable hibernation. Plath's familiar tormentors appear in these poems. The father who has shrunk and the mother who does not love her are there to shove her out into the dark. The mother is the chief devourer, now turned a repellent, nosey, obtrusive presence whom the speaker would defy by accepting nourishment from someone else. The husband, "Mudstump, happy sty-face", is also there. He is the metamorphosed father, "King of the dish". The mother is also the "black-sharded lady" who keeps her in a parrot cage, denying her freedom.

Running counter to these exterior oppressors is the image of an inner force that pushes against her. Plath was pregnant when she wrote these poems, and the image of pregnancy takes on a surrealistic aura as it becomes associated both with giving birth and with being born. When she says, in "Who," "I must remember this, being small", she refers both to her own diminishment in the potting shed and to the small life that is nourished within her. The dark house, which she has made herself, similarly becomes both the cells of the new life she harbours and the "marrowy tunnels" into which she eats her way towards darkness. Her sense that she is becoming another is also a recognition both that another grows inside her and that she would give herself a new gestation and birth. Sinking into the cauld of forgetfulness in "Flute Notes from a

Reedy Pond", she seems to accept the birthing, free from the myth that "a god as flimsy as a baby's finger / Shall unhusk himself and steer into the air". In "Witch Burning" she enacts the fears of the birth throes by claiming that "If I am a little one, I can do no harm," and then discovers that littleness, like tiny, inert grains of rice, is full of starch and hurts when it grows. She finally accepts the pain: "The red tongues will teach the truth".

Plath's pregnancy seems to have opened a precarious psychic space between the tormentors without and the foetus within. Between the mother she would escape and the mother she would become, the battle is often exhausting. It calls forth a desire to be fed by the berries of the dark, even as the "hoops of blackberry stems" make her cry. The compulsion to eat is also countered by an alien eater, "Dogbody"; "Dog-Head", "All-mouth", "a fat sort" who is to blame. At the "bowel of the root" where she would feed, she finds others gnawing away. The desire to clear this space of nourishment so that she may feed and be fed, so that she may sustain the small life within her and to return herself to that smallness, is the complex force behind these poems.

These first six poems are frequently obscure, and although individual images stand out with particular brilliance, the poems as a whole lack the force of their parts. The abrupt shifts of tone between defiance and despair, exultation and complaint, humility and disdain dissipate the impact of the individual poems.

The final poem, "The Stones", takes place in the "city where men are mended". It is not a greenhouse, but a place where the "grafters are cheerful" and the "storerooms are full of hearts". Falling out of the light into the "stomach of indifference", the speaker has been born to an "after-hell". Although this poem owes some apparently realistic details to Plath's first and unsuccessful suicide attempt, it also uses the imagery of pregnancy as developed in the other poems. But the pregnancy and birth are inverted. It is not the birth tract but the "mouth-hole" that gives her a reluctant life. The "importunate cricket", the lively life-lover, "drunk as a foetus", alerts those who hunt her out of the "stomach of indifference", her hiding place. In the end she is

restored to life not by the throes of birth, but by the tender caresses of medical attention: the "embrace" of the food tubes, the sponges that "kiss" away her lichens, the water that "mollifies" the flint lip. What motifs are found in the other poems - the association with earth, the longing for roots, the parallels with seasons - are all cast off. In this city of men, not women, the only production is an artefact, good as new but not new. The life that has come out of the mouth, not the birth tract, is a shape, a vessel, a hollow space. It is a poem, not a baby. The speaker has not grown again, but has simply been mended by what she calls, ironically, love. It is not a personally felt emotion, but something applied to her like an electric current. Throughout this sequence, whenever she has felt herself sinking into darkness, someone has applied the electric current to light her up, blow out her sparkler, recharge her, volt upon volt. Persistently the speaker has sought to resist the application of the current by hiding, diminishing, retreating, but in the end she succumbs to it. "I see the light", she says reluctantly and ironically. She is not even mildly grateful for her rescue. Her birth has been forced. She has not been allowed to hibernate and grow again by becoming another. She reappears in the same old shape, repaired and renovated.

As a conclusion of a volume that opens with "The Colossus", "Poem for a Birthday" shows the movement of Plath's poetic persona towards a new identity. "The Colussus" had imaginatively carried the aims of creating the bitch goddess, her artistic persona and her secret self into a bleak fruition. She had made the resemblance to modern evil in the ruined colossus of her dead father. She had inherited myths, classical and Freudian, and found herself mummified inside a stilborn Titan, incapable of further art. Now her own myth-making could take on a direct drive for control, the erection of the deity of the self, a female self with a very masculine will to power. The attendant at the ruined statue has become the centre of her own attention, and the ruins that have to be mended are her own. But she does not attain the oracular and godlike status of the colossus. She has been consumed in flame, reduced to a pebble, inadequately revived by mechanical means, and now rests uneasily in the "reconstructed" vase into which she has been cast. But there is also a new defiance and strange exultation in this poem, in such admissions

as "I am lost, I am lost in the robes of all this light". Plath's reading, meditation, and experimental exercises, which make many of these poems derivative and confusing, finally forced her inward to create a spokesman for the rage and drive for dominance at the centre of her psyche.

Ted Hughes thinks that most of Plath's early poems turn on "the opposition of a prickly, fastidious defence and an imminent volcano" (quoted in Lane p. 24), an antagonism between the disciplines of her art and the demands of her experience. "Poem for a Birthday" seems her first calculated effort to discover rather than impose the form of her experience. Despite its reliance on Roethke, there is a new assurance and freedom to the verse that permit strong tonal effects and interesting elliptical cuts. Perhaps that is because these poems are not dominated by the representational eye but by the presentational whims of the unconscious. This was the time when Hughes turned her attention away from studying poetry toward mystical and anthropological texts, away from formal literary exercises toward horoscopes, the tarot, the ouija board, improvisations, meditational devices, and free association games. In its own way, each is a ritualistic yet unstructured procedure to release experience from the unconscious, to which one would give voice rather than shape. This corresponds with Plath's own sense of poetic strength, which was bound up with the notion and sensation of release.

In "Poem for a Birthday" Plath had sunk a shaft into her inner life allowing its turmoil and chaos to erupt at the surface. "It is as if the stoat had licked the stylist out of her skull, and what we have is the red unmanageable life spilt onto the page" (Uroff, p. 120).

6. A CLOSER LOOK AT "POEM FOR A BIRTHDAY"

Hughes stated:

The immediate source of "Poem for a Birthday" was a series of poems she began as a deliberate exercise in experimental improvisation on set themes. She had never in her life improvised. The powers that compelled her to write so slowly had always been stronger than she was. But quite suddenly she found herself free to let herself drop, rather than inch over bridges of concepts (Hughes 1966: 87).

Plath had the habit of jotting down notes on possible topics for future poems. Nearly every poem in the "Birthday" sequence involves at least one of the themes on her list of topics. They include

"flute notes from a reedy pond", "person walking through enormous dark house", "change of vision of a maenad, as she goes under the fury", "the stones of the city - their patient sufferance (requisitioned as they are)", "owl mobbed by birds"; and perhaps also, less obviously, "roots, roots, roots", "the hibernants", "ants", and "bird in unexplored valley" (Kroll, p. 89).

These themes she then explored to serve her poetic purposes. Quite possibly they were not even specifically marked out for the "Birthday" poems, but fell into place spontaneously. Doubtless, too, the concentrated effort to break down the discursive public persona - which inhibited, if it did not nearly strangle, some of her earlier poems - also helped these themes to bear fruit.

The problem of interpreting this sequence lies in its extreme and obscure nature. From Hughes' information we know that it deals, among other things, with her experiences in a mental hospital and her slow progress to recovery. This, at least, gives one a starting point.

6.1 Who

The month of flowering's finished. The fruit's in,
 Eaten or rotten. I am all mouth.
 October's the month for storage.

This shed's fusty as a mummy's stomach:
 Old tools, handles and rusty tusks.
 I am at home here among the dead heads.

Let me sit in a flowerpot,
 The spiders won't notice.
 My heart is a stopped geranium.

If only the wind would leave my lungs alone.
 Dogbody noses the petals. They bloom upside down.
 They rattle like hydrangea bushes.

Mouldering heads console me,
 Nailed to the rafters yesterday:
 Inmates who don't hibernate.

Cabbageheads: wormy purple, silver-glaze,
 A dressing of mule ears, mothy pelts, but green-hearted,
 Their veins white as porkfat.

O the beauty of usage!
 The orange pumpkins have no eyes.
 These halls are full of women who think they are birds.

This is a dull school.
 I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet,
 Without dreams of any sort.

Mother, you are the one mouth
 I would be a tongue to. Mother of otherness
 Eat me. Wastebasket gaper, shadow of doorways.

I said: I must remember this, being small.
 There were such enormous flowers,
 Purple and red mouths, utterly lovely.

The hoops of blackberry stems made me cry,
 Now they light me up like an electric bulb.
 For weeks I can remember nothing at all.

"Who", the first poem of the sequence, is spoken by a quiet, numb, stripped-down, nameless voice. It starts with the image of fruit being eaten or rotten, and then says: "I am all mouth". The speaker seems to be both the devourer and the fruit that is in storage. Images of eating or being eaten / devoured / consumed abound in the sequence.

Clearly the personae stress the oral stage of development which Malkoff (p. 4) says deals with the dualism of subject and object. The speaker in "Who" feels itself alienated from its environment. There is no sense of unity. This is also a shattered identity, the self at rock-bottom. The title poses the question of the speaker's identity, which appears to be minimal. The voice is disembodied, like that of a homeless spirit. The lack of developed and consistent imagery to characterize the persona confirms the lack of wholeness. Instead there is a multiplicity of minimal identities ("I am all mouth", "I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet") to answer "Who".

A withdrawal, a shrinking inward or regression, has taken place. There is the sense of being buried, or stored away and forgotten. This is the "symbolic death" and the "numb shock" of her breakdown, but there is also the intimation of the eventual rebirth which is promised in the title of the sequence. This poem is not only a celebration of her former psychic rebirth of 1953 (written on the occasion of her twenty-seventh birthday), but the anticipation of a literal birth. The latter has a private meaning. While working on the poem Plath was pregnant with her first child, thus about to give birth to a new person separate from herself. The poem for "a" birthday obviously had several meanings for her, and perhaps this accounts for her use of the indefinite article.

The storage shed is a tomblike place inhabited by "dead heads", but it is also womblike, "a mummy's stomach", suggesting not only a corpse, but a baby inside the stomach of a real "mummy", an embryo in the state of prebirth. Since Egyptian mummies were stored and preserved for eventual resurrection, the association of death with the promise of rebirth is introduced.

The dreamless "pellet" suggests a dead or traumatized and benumbed condition, as well as the state of an embryo, or the consciousness of prebirth. The subsequent development of "Poem for a Birthday" continues the central identification of "symbolic death" with prebirth.

The setting for the prebirth is seemingly a mental hospital. The other residents are referred to as "inmates" who think that they are birds.

The birds will reappear later in the shape of "molts" who sing voicelessly. The image of a hospital conveys the same sense of suspended activity conveyed by the images of the storage shed and the mummy's stomach. There are signs at the end of the poem that this suspended animation is receding: the reference to amnesia-inducing shock treatment ("Now they light me up like an electric bulb. / For weeks I can remember nothing at all") nonetheless implies that life may eventually replace deadness and darkness. The image also offers a new perspective on the blank and numb consciousness, which may be seen as a sign of cure as well as a symptom of illness.

Towards the end of the poem, there are lines which imply a split between the past and the present. Yet there is no clear demarcation between past and present. They seem to blend, to merge as the speaker is both adult inmate in the hospital and "small", remembering the "utterly lovely" flowers with their enormous mouths. Other poems of the sequence further develop the contrast between past and present.

In this strange poem, then, Plath seems to record the sensations of a highly articulate insane person whose desire to be small and grow again is threatened, both by the decay around her and by her awareness that she will not be allowed either to grow or to decay.

6.2 Dark House

This is a dark house, very big.
 I made it myself,
 Cell by cell from a quiet corner,
 Chewing at the grey paper,
 Oozing the glue drops,
 Whistling, wiggling my ears,
 Thinking of something else.

It has so many cellars,
 Such eelish delvings!
 I am round as an owl,
 I see by my own light.
 Any day I may litter puppies
 Or mother a horse. My belly moves.
 I must make more maps.

These marrowy tunnels!
 Moley-handed, I eat my way.
 All-mouth licks up the bushes
 And the pots of meat.
 He lives in an old well,
 A stony hole. He's to blame.
 He's a fat sort.

Pebble smells, turnipy chambers.
 Small nostrils are breathing.
 Little humble loves!
 Footlings, boneless as noses,
 It is warm and tolerable
 In the bowel of the root.
 Here's a cuddly mother.

Because one is aware of Plath's unstable mental condition, it is very tempting to read into "Poem for a Birthday" more than Plath might have intended putting into it. As it is, it has been the subject of extensive psycholiterary study, notably by David Holbrook, who regards the sequence as the key document in understanding Plath's "regressed libidinal ego", her Electra complex, her longing to return to the womb, and her split identity. Yet there are too many imitations of Roethke in this poem to take Holbrook's findings at face value. Her imitations of Roethke are so expert, she so perfectly assumes his voice, his image patterns, his aphorisms, that one must regard with some scepticism the notion that here the poet is revealing her inner mental anguish. Roethke appears in the previous poem as well. The line "My heart is a stopped geranium", for instance, is read by Holbrook as signifying the "lifeless aridity" experienced by the schizoid individual (p. 37), yet in Roethke's "Meditation of an Old Woman" there is the line: "My geranium is dying, for all I can do". Roethke, to whom Plath refers as "my influence" (Plath 1975: 407), is the central influence of the sequence.

Marjorie Perloff (in Lane, p. 168) has made a list of all the probable sources in Roethke used in the first two stanzas of "Dark House". The Plath poem is on the left. The lines on the right are mostly from Roethke's "Praise to the End!".

"Dark House"

Roethke, *Collected Poems*

This is a dark house, very big.

It is dark in this wood, soft
mocker. (p. 85)

I made it myself,

Sat in an empty house
Watching the shadows crawl
Scratching. (p. 53)

Cell by cell from a quiet corner,

Chewing at the grey paper,

Went down cellar
Talked to a faucet
The dripping water
Had nothing to say. (p. 74)

Oozing the glue drops,

Whistling, wiggling my ears,

Thinking of something else.

Whisper me over. (p. 74)

It has so many cellars,

I'm all ready to whistle. (p. 84)

Such eelish delvings!

Went down cellar. (p. 74)

I'm round as an owl,

Such owly pleasures! (p. 87)

I see by my own light.

I know it's an owl. He's making
it darker. (p. 72)

Any day I may litter puppies

Was it light within?
Was it light within light?

Or mother a horse. My belly moves.

Sit and play
Under the rocker
Until the cows
All have puppies. (p. 71)

I must make more maps.

A deep dish. Lumps in it.
I can't taste my mother. (p. 74)

Despite these borrowings, Plath does not really resemble Roethke. Her use of nature imagery, for instance, seems oddly willed. When she writes "Pebble smells, turnipy chambers. / Small nostrils are breathing. / Little humble loves!", one recalls the climax of "A Field of Light" where Roethke's speaker declares:

I touched the ground, the ground warmed by the killdear,
The salt laughed and the stones;
The ferns had their ways, and the pulsing lizards,
And the new plants, still awkward in their soil,
The lovely diminutives.
I could watch! I could watch!
I saw the separateness of all things! (p. 63)

For Roethke, this world of "lovely diminutives" - ferns, tendrils, leafmould, moss, worms, snails, otters, moles - constitutes a "green-house Eden". In such manifestations of plant and animal life, he found the continuity of life and death and understood the organic nature of the universe. It is a vision that Plath did not really share. There was no room for passiveness in her response to nature. Rather, she had to conquer it, to become one with her horse Ariel, flying like an arrow "Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of the morning". When, in the Yaddo poems, she talks of "little humble loves" and "turnipy chambers" or declares "I bed in a fish puddle" or "Nightly... I enter the soft pelt of the mole", she is still playing a part, in this case that of a celebrant of dark, instinctive life.

Apart from the more obvious influences of Roethke and Radin in this sequence, there is also some evidence of Dostoevsky as noted by Kroll (p. 237). Some of Plath's images may have been influenced by Dostoevskian imagery in *The Double*, on which Plath wrote her thesis at Smith College. Compare the following lines from "Dark House":

This is a dark house, very big.
I made it myself,
Cell by cell from a *quiet corner*, ...
It is *warm* and tolerable
In the bowel of the root ...

and from "The Beast":

I've married a *cupboard of rubbish* ...

with the following passage from *The Double*:

What he must try to think of, was some *quiet little corner* which, if not altogether *warm*, would at least be convenient and concealed ... earlier ... he had spent over two hours ... standing between a *cupboard* and some old screens amidst all sorts of ... *rubbish* (p. 233).

In "Dark House", an amorphous, underground voice speaks from the "house" which it has built. This voice, like the speaker of "Who", seems almost

without memory, history, personality, or gender, but is now active and possesses a coherent form and consciousness. The speaker in "Who" felt *like* a root, a stone, an owl pellet", while the one in "Dark House" *lives* in "the bowel of the root", *smells* "pebble smells, turnipy chambers", and *feels* "round as an owl".

"All-mouth" is apparently Plath's version of a character in "Mantis and the All-Devourer", one of the folktales collected by Radin. In Radin, "The All-Devourer licked up the meat and the bushes with it" (p. 94). In "Dark House" "All-mouth licks up the bushes / And the pots of meat".

"All-mouth", the father, has driven the speaker underground: "He is to blame" for this. Yet the dark house represents not only the state of breakdown, but also a safe, womblike place of healing.

Imagery from biological (specifically, insect) metamorphosis is used to describe the prenatal stage, which also appears or is implied in most of the remaining poems. Hughes confirmed the likelihood of Plath's knowledge of entomology, and since it was a link with her father, it is not surprising that she should use it in this sequence. The use of the extended metaphor (larva / pupa / imago) in the sequence shows that Plath was searching for a symbol to represent as interdependent the ideas of death and rebirth, and false and true selves, a symbol which would present the promise of rebirth as inherent in the death of the false self. This requirement is met by the symbol of metamorphosis. However, since this symbol does not include a way of referring to her other major motif, that of the male god, she needed another class of imagery as well, and for this purpose she relied on imagery she had, to a limited extent, already developed in slightly earlier poems such as "The Bee-keeper's Daughter" and "Full Fathom Five". This anticipated the dying god and mourning goddess motifs of the late poetry which included, in the one pattern, both the death of the god and the rebirth of the heroine. Together, these two classes of imagery fully defined the outlines of the story she wanted to tell, but because the story is fragmented and divided among seven poems, it is not presented as a unified whole.

Among her reasons for using the symbol of insect metamorphosis must have been that the poetic truth of her psychic death and rebirth was validated by an actual biological phenomenon which associated dormancy, or "symbolic death", with a process of "slow rebirth". Specifically the metamorphoses she alludes to are those of the firefly beetle in "Dark House" and the caddis fly, the ostensible subject of "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond". The metamorphoses of both firefly and caddis fly, like those of most insects, are marked by the differentiated phases of larva (the caterpillar), pupa (also nymph or chrysalis) and imago (or adult). All three phases appear in "Poem for a Birthday", and each corresponds to a phase of psychic regeneration.

Although the clues are not obvious, the speaker of "Dark House" is probably a firefly larva, an identification which at least coordinates many of the disparate details in the poem. The firefly larva or glow-worm is often luminous, and the speaker of "Dark House" does apparently glow: "I see by my own light". The firefly larva "lives in the ground... and transforms to the pupa in an oval earthen cell", according to Henderson & Henderson (pp. 202, 493). Perhaps this is the "dark house" to which the speaker refers.

"Larva" derives from a word meaning "ghost, spectre, mask", because the "larval stage of an insect masks or hides the true character or imago of the species" (ibid). This describes the speaker of "Dark House", who is certainly quite unlike the adult persona of "The Stones", yet the structure of metamorphosis promises the birth of the adult, just as the symbolic death of the psyche anticipates its rebirth.

Because through metamorphosis one in a sense gives birth to oneself, it is clear why the speaker of "Dark House" feels pregnant:

Any day I may litter puppies
Or mother a horse. My belly moves.

The larva is about to give birth to a new form of itself, the pupa.

6.3 Maenad

Once I was ordinary:
 Sat by my father's bean tree
 Eating the fingers of wisdom.
 The small birds made milk.
 When it thundered I hid under a flat stone.

The mother of mouths didn't love me.
 The old man shrank to a doll.
 O I am too big to go backward:
 Birdmilk is feathers,
 The bean leaves are dumb as hands.

This month is fit for little.
 The dead ripen in the grapeleaves.
 A red tongue is among us.
 Mother, keep out of my barnyard,
 I am becoming another.

Dog-head, devourer:
 Feed me the berries of dark.
 The lids won't shut. Time
 Unwinds from the great umbilicus of the sun
 Its endless glitter.

I must swallow it all.

Lady, who are these others in the moon's vat -
 Sleepdrunk, their limbs at odds?
 In this light the blood is black.
 Tell me my name.

When Plath in her notes jotted down "change of vision of a maenad, as she goes under the fury", she probably had in mind Graves's remark:

No poet can hope to understand the nature of poetry unless he has had a vision of the Naked King crucified to the lopped oak, and watched the dancers, red-eyed from the arid smoke of the sacrificial fires, stamping out the measure of the dance, their bodies bent uncouthly forward with a monotonous chant of: "Kill, kill, kill!" and "Blood, blood, blood!" (p. 446).

Graves also writes:

An English or American woman in a nervous breakdown of sexual origin will often instinctively reproduce in faithful and disgusting detail much of the ancient Dionysian ritual. I have witnessed it myself in help-
less terror (pp. 449 - 50).

In "Maenad", the speaker is torn between hopelessness and expectation. "O I am too big to go backward", she despairs, but at the same time she senses a new life forming. The speaker identifies herself as a woman, and for the first time discloses and relates to the present a crucial past event, that of her childhood when her father was still alive. The death of her father has divided the golden age and "ordinary" magic of her childhood from what came after. An unloving mother caused her father to shrink away to a doll, a plaything of memory, bringing her childhood to an end. She cannot "go backward", having suffered an irreversible loss, and having, in consequence, suffered a blow to her integrated self. Because of the split caused by her father's death, she regresses to a symbolic death which nevertheless has also the masked character of pre-birth, a prefiguration of a newly integrated self.

The bean plant, in Graves's book, has magical qualities. As it grows, it spirals upwards, becoming a symbol of resurrection. Before the father's death, it produced "fingers of wisdom"; after he had died, the leaves became "dumb". Variations on this theme occur widely in Plath's early poems. In "On the Decline of Oracles", her oracular vision has gone "dull" and "worthless", and the once-heroic world resembles "a gross comic-strip". The bean plant also is a major symbol in "The Bee Meeting".

The lines "The mother of mouths didn't love me. / The old man shrank to a doll" suggest that since she was not loved by this mother, the father's death was in some sense her own fault. Such guilt is implicit in the line "The birds made milk" which comes from the title of the Xhosa tale, "The Bird that made Milk", collected by Radin. In this story the father makes his children swear not to reveal that he owns a milk-making bird which provides food for the whole family while there is famine in the country. But the children's playmates persuade them to tell the secret,

and as a result the bird escapes. The children are therefore to blame for ending the magic. Plath's reference to this tale distinguishes the magical "before" and the sorrowful "after" of her childhood. While the father lived, magic was commonplace and "The birds made milk". But now that he is dead - for which she is somehow to blame - the magic has died with him, and "Birdmilk is feathers".

In "Maenad", the speaker is a worshipper of Dionysus. She feels "The dead ripen in the grapeleaves" as the grape, the symbol of the god the maenad serves, is taking seed. At the first stirring of a new life she says:

Mother, keep out of my barnyard,
I am becoming another.

To understand the image of the barnyard, one has to go back to "The Colossus" which describes the broken statue of the dead father which she is frantically trying to mend. In "The Colossus" the speaker says: "I crawl like an ant in mourning / Over the weedy acres of your brow". If at first the statue seems absurd, with "bawdy crackles" proceeding from its great lips and sounding "worse than a barnyard", one realizes there is something deeply serious and disturbing underlying this. It is as if the careless, busy domestic creatures represent a mockery of the impotent dead, an idea which obscurely relates to her mother's real or imagined unconcern over her father's death. The possibility of there being such an undercurrent of resentful, even aggressive emotions in "The Colossus" is reinforced by her allusion to the *Oresteia* in stanza four, indirectly suggesting bloody, familial conflict and murder.

Worshipping Dionysus symbolizes her relationship with her dead father, who has changed from a father-god to a malignant ghost, an "all-devourer".

"A red tongue is among us" seems to refer to All-mouth in "Dark House" and to Radin's All-Devourer, who, like the father in "Maenad", is called "the Old Man" (p. 93), although the phrase is of course common enough. The epithet also appears in *The Golden Bough*. In both contexts, "the Old Man" is a godlike figure or surrogate.

Dog-head, devourer:
 Feed me the berries of the dark.
 The lids won't shut. Time
 Unwinds from the great umbilicus of the sun
 Its endless glitter.

I must swallow it all.

Once again the devouring metaphor appears, and here the speaker's desire to be consumed is thwarted by her sense that she must digest the "endless glitter". The attraction to darkness is resisted by the life force, and in this struggle she is exhausted.

By the end of the poem the maenad has been caught up in the bloodrites, the last line acknowledging both her loss of identity and her hope of recovering it:

Lady, who are these others in the moon's vat -
 Sleepdrunk, their limbs at odds?
 In this light the blood is black.
 Tell me my name.

An earlier line, "I am becoming another", also intimates that she will recover her wholeness. The line may also allude to "The Sun and the Children", another of the African folktales:

The sun actually pierces the moon with his knife and that is why it decays ... [the moon] went home to become another, a moon which is whole. He again comes to life although it had seemed that he had died (Radin, p. 43).

In both this poem and "The Beast" which follows it, Plath develops the theme of the loss of her father in terms which often parallel the imagery of dying god and mourning goddess. While developing this imagery, she temporarily puts aside the theme of metamorphosis.

6.4

The Beast

He was bullman earlier,
 King of the dish, my lucky animal.
 Breathing was easy in his airy holding.
 The sun sat in his armpit.
 Nothing went moldy. The little invisibles
 Waited on him hand and foot.
 The blue sisters sent me to another school.
 Monkey lived under the dunce cap.
 He kept blowing me kisses.
 I hardly knew him.

He won't be got rid of:
 Mumblepaws, teary and sorry,
 Fido Littlesoul, the bowel's familiar.
 A dustbin's enough for him.
 The dark's his bone.
 Call him any name, he'll come to it.

Mud-sump, happy sty-face.
 I've married a cupboard of rubbish.
 I bed in a fish puddle.
 Down here the sky is always falling.
 Hogwallow's at the window.
 The star bugs won't save me this month.
 I housekeep in Time's gut-end
 Among emmets and mollusks,
 Duchess of Nothing,
 Hairyusk's bride.

"The Beast" seems to be written out of a strange kind of terror, the calm centre of hysteria. While the first part of the poem centres on the past, it ends on a note of despair as the speaker views her present circumstances. Also, another kind of devourer is introduced.

In a number of earlier poems, Plath expresses her relationship with her dead father as a marriage. In *Graves*, the dying god is often the consort. The marriage theme naturally reinforces the identification of the female partner as a White Goddess type who mourns her absent god. In her later poems, she either takes this marriage more or less for granted or she tries to cancel it. Plath's relationship to her dead father obviously found confirmation in many of the myths and rituals discussed by Frazer and Graves, and which precede the death (and often the resurrection) of the "dying god".

Early poems about her relationship with her father reveal her instinct to make of it something far greater than an ordinary personal event. To have portrayed it otherwise would have violated her sense of his overwhelming importance. These poems contain embellishments of her father's figure with allusions to Greek tragedy, or suggest that he is a heroic figure. Poems in which the marriage theme is central include "Full Fathom Five", "The Colossus", "The Eye-mote", "On the Decline of Oracles", and "The Beekeeper's Daughter". In these poems, the marriage is sometimes dramatically enacted and sometimes only alluded to, but in any case the speaker's identity is defined primarily in relation to her father. She is not a heroine in her own right, as in later poems.

In "Electra on the Azalea Path", she survives and mourns her father, just as Electra survived and mourned Agamemnon:

I lay dreaming your epic, image by image.

"The Colossus" more explicitly identifies her father as a Greek god to whom she has an Electra-like attachment:

I crawl ...
Over the weedy acres of your brow
...
A blue sky out of the Oresteia
Arches above us.

"The Beekeeper's Daughter" presents him as a priestly king:

Hieratical in your frock coat, ...
You move among the many-breasted hives,
...
Here is a queenship no mother can contest -

In "The Beast", her father is a god manifested in animal form:

He was bullman earlier,
King of the dish, my lucky animal.

In "Full Fathom Five" she remembers his "shelled bed". In all of these cases, she is sentenced to living out her life in terms of her daughterhood - as her father's priestess, votary, bride, queen.

This "marriage" has many elements in common with the sacred marriages described in *The Golden Bough* and discussed to a lesser extent in *The White Goddess*. Frazer speculates about the motives underlying the sacred marriages, or "magical dramas" which occur at Whitsun, the beginning of spring:

... our rude forefathers personified the powers of vegetation as male and female, and attempted, on the principle of homeopathic or imitative magic, to quicken the growth of trees and plants by representing the marriage of the sylvan deities in the person of a King and Queen of May, a Whitsun Bridegroom and Bride, and so forth (p. 156).

Since the married deities personify spirits of vegetation, like vegetation they are subject to death. So conceived, they are thought "to pass a certain portion of each year underground", and they "naturally come to be regarded as gods of the lower world or of the dead. Both Dionysus and Osiris were so conceived" (p. 452). In virtually all the dying god and mourning goddess myths, two gods marry or are divine lovers. Then one dies and the survivor mourns and often searches for the lost "underground" partner, who is eventually reborn. In some myths the goddess "dies" along with the god, or she may herself be the dying vegetation spirit.

The theme of the fixed term of the sacred king as discussed by both Frazer and Graves is clearly relevant to the "marriage" to her father. Like Persephone, part of her life is given to a dead god. The priestess in "The Colossus", "married" to her god, tends the ruined remains of her dead father: "My hours are married to shadow".

"The Beast" is ambiguous and overly private, but its general outline may be identified. Like "Maenad", it expresses the dying god and the mourning goddess motif, contrasting an initially idyllic past with a present fall

from grace. The split between past and present manifests itself as the difference between living above ground and living under water:

I bed in a fish puddle.
Down here the sky is always falling.

A similar contrast appears in "Full Fathom Five":

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

One could also compare "I've married a cupboard of rubbish" with "My hours are married to shadow" which appears in "The Colossus" in a similar context.

"The Beast" also contains a reference to Radin. "The sun sat in his armpit" echoes "The Sun and the Children", in which the Sun is a man whose light comes out of his "armpit". Plath's image therefore presents the "bullman" as even mightier than the Sun.

The many types of beasts may be incarnations of the godlike father, but might also represent the men in the speaker's adult life, in whom she tries but fails to find a substitute for her dead father. In either case, her father remains identified as the origin of her eventual breakdown and her marriage to "a cupboard of rubbish" means that part of her self remains buried with him.

After "The blue sisters sent me to another school", that is, after the death of the fabulous "Bullman" (obviously a creature like the bull-god Dionysus or the Minotaur), the beasts degenerate to "Monkey", "Mumblepaws", "Fido Little soul", "Hogwallow" and "Hairtusk". The images represent in a sense the transformation of her father into the "rubbish" to which she is nonetheless married. If these less noble animals represent the other men in her life, they are no less substitutes for her father, who fall so short of him that they only emphasize his irreplaceability. A similar theme occurs in other early poems. In "All the Dead Dears":

... O I'd
 Run time aground before I met
 His match.

and in "Lament", Plath's first step in the direction of a myth:

O ransack the four winds and find another
 man who can mangle the grin of kings:
 the sting of bees took away my father ...

Plath draws together her images of the world as hell and the world as intestine in the concluding stanza. "I housekeep in Time's gut-end", she says.

For Guttenberg (in Lane, p. 143) the penultimate line alludes to the serene assertion of order and identity with which the Duchess of Malfi rises above her imminent destruction: "I am Duchess of Malfi still". But the speaker in "The Beast" finds herself a "Duchess of Nothing, / Hairtusk's bride". This might be another echo from Roethke in "Praise to the End!" where his speaker says: "I am duke of the eels". However, monster, death and intestine come together here, with little hope of emergence into light. The speaker finally regresses to living among emmets and mollusks in a subterranean or underwater world.

6.5 Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond

Now coldness comes sifting down, layer after layer,
 To our bower at the lily root.
 Overhead the old umbrellas of summer
 Wither like pithless hands. There is little shelter.

Hourly the eye of the sky enlarges its blank
 Dominion. The stars are no nearer.
 Already frog-mouth and fish-mouth drink
 The liquor of indolence, and all things sink

Into a soft caul of forgetfulness.
 The fugitive colours die.
 Caddis worms drowse in their silk cases,
 The lampheaded nymphs are nodding to sleep like statues.

Puppets, loosed from the strings of the puppet-master,
 Wear masks of horn to bed.
 This is not death, it is something safer,
 The wingy myths won't tug at us any more:

The molts are tongueless that sang from above the water
 Of golgotha at the tip of a reed,
 And how a god flimsy as a baby's finger
 Shall unhusk himself and steer into the air.

This fifth lyrical poem reflects the speaker in a more peaceful state. The poem returns to the imagery of metamorphosis, where dormant forms of underwater life await their new births. The poem evokes the somnolent approach of winter, when pondlife begins to die, to hibernate, and, as in the case of the aquatic caddis worms, to enter into the quiescent pupal phase, the period of dormancy immediately preceding the final stage of adulthood.

Whereas the larval phases are usually active, the pupal phase is a "state of rest and insensibility" while "an elaboration is going on" (Hocking, p. 781). "Pupa" derives from a word meaning "a girl, a doll, a puppet", and the poem speaks of the pupae as "Puppets, loosed from the strings of the puppet-master". "Nymph", another name for the pupal phase, derives from a word meaning "young wife" or "bride", which applied to Plath at that time of her life, and "chrysalis", still another common synonym for pupa or nymph, comes from the word meaning "gold" and thus is "also called ... aurelia". Since Aurelia was the first name of Plath's

mother, this etymology would support, in a private way, the symbolism of giving birth to herself, of being her own mother. However, this reasoning is purely reductive. "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" marks a break in the narrative. It makes no explicit reference to the story being told. According to Hughes it might have been written a little earlier than the other poems in the sequence, though it is sufficiently related to have been included as part of the sequence. In contrast to the other poems, it is elegiac and impersonal, the only one in which the pronoun "I" never occurs. Its mood is of great quiet, the cessation of motion and thought, "indolence", "forgetfulness", waiting, imminence, all of which constitute not death but "something safer" than death, a phase in which the creature awaits only the infusion of an animating force. The pupae of caddis worms particularly suggest readiness for new birth, since they "are very much like mummified adults" (Wigglesworth, p. 611). The "mummified" pupae which are to be born recall the "mummy's stomach" in "Who", which implies a resurrection. Possibly some other insect is alluded to in this poem about metamorphosis. Some caddis flies are also called mayflies. The "lamp-headed nymphs" might be an aquatic type of firefly (*Lampyridea*) but from the context, it seems more likely that the poem remains focused on the caddis fly, following it through a complete cycle of metamorphosis.

The last two lines of the poem refer to an actual image of rebirth, shifting the perspective from the womblike pond to the larger world above. The mention of Golgotha introduces a reference to a dying and reviving god, and the caddis worms themselves, following their ageless pattern, emerge from the apparent death of pupation as flimsy gods.

Since the overt reference to Christ ("golgotha") is one of the few direct references to Christian religion in Plath's work, this might be the right place to investigate her attitude towards it.

Plath displays a mocking attitude towards transcendent mysticism and its source, orthodox Christianity. In "Fever 103°" she uses them to describe sickness. The speaker becomes the central figure in a gaudy picture of the Assumption, defaced by the image of a modern mechanical flame:

I think I am going up,
 I think I may rise -
 The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene
 Virgin
 Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,
 By whatever these pink things mean.

Amused by her own feeling of elevation caused by the high fever, she is flippant about the myth of Christ's ascension. "Years" describes him as "Christus ... dying to fly and be done with".

In "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" the whole scene of the cross is described in negative terms. Those singing about the crucifixion are "molts", birds that have lost their feathers, and they are "tongueless" so that their song cannot be heard. They sang from "above the water", thus some distance removed from the speaker. The remoteness is stressed by the use of the past tense. The god is likened to an insect, unhusking himself before flying away. Christ sheds his old body to enter into a new life, but the negative terms in which the scene is described leave the impression that the speaker has lost hope in death as the beginning of a new life. Old ideas and beliefs are described as "wingy myths" that "wouldn't tug at us any more". The phrase "wingy myths" also brings to mind the myth of Icarus, who failed in his ambition to reach the sun, stressing once again the negative connotation to the redeeming quality of the cross. The wingy myths that do not "tug" create the impression of complete nullity. With the frogs and the fish the speaker becomes sluggish, having drunk the "liquor of indolence". She sinks into "the soft caul of forgetfulness". Like a foetus, covered by a caul, she gently rocks with the movement of the water seen as amniotic fluids around her, and this is echoed by the caddis worms drowning in their silk cases. She feels secure from tension and obsession.

This feeling of nullity could also refer to the state of unawareness caused in mental patients after being drugged or after shock treatment. There seems to be a complete loss of the self, like in "Tulips":

I didn't want any flowers. I only wanted
 To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
 How free it is, you have no idea how free -
 The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
 And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
 It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
 Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet.

Here she evokes death, and presents it as a state of absolute freedom, also from the self. The hands are posed to fit the traditional iconography of mysticism. There is a reference to the union with God in Communion, but it is presented as a dead end, with no hope of transcendence. Similarly, in "Paralytic", the speaker achieves an enforced and empty transcendence, like a "buddha", asking "nothing of life". In poems from this period the mystical contact is frequently dominated by the loss of the self in landscape, insects or animals.

6.6 Witch Burning

In the marketplace they are piling the dry sticks.
 A thicket of shadows is a poor coat. I inhabit
 The wax image of myself, a doll's body.
 Sickness begins here: I am a dartboard for witches.
 Only the devil can eat the devil out.
 In the month of red leaves I climb to a bed of fire.

It is easy to blame the dark: the mouth of a door,
 The cellar's belly. They've blown my sparkler out.
 A black-sharded lady keeps me in a parrot cage.
 What large eyes the dead have!
 I am intimate with a hairy spirit.
 Smoke wheels from the beak of this empty jar.

If I am a little one, I can do no harm.
 If I don't move about, I'll knock nothing over. So I said,
 Sitting under a potlid, tiny and inert as a rice grain.
 We are full of starch, my small white fellows. We grow.
 It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth.

Mother of beetles, only unclench your hand:
 I'll fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth
 Give me back my shape. I am ready to construe the days
 I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone.
 My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs.
 I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.

What Plath said about "Fever 103°" is in a way also true about "Witch

Burning":

This poem is about two kinds of fire - the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort suffers itself into the second (quoted in Newman, p. 62).

"Witch Burning" also represents through metamorphosis the psyche on the verge of a new birth. At the beginning of the poem, the speaker acknowledges her affliction, and then submits, in various guises, to a ritual of purification by fire. Her readiness to "construe the day / I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone" indicates that she has begun to come to terms with her past. She understands that she has coupled with mere dust, that she has been enthralled by a ghost.

The firefly beetle about to become "a true representation or image of the species" (Hocking, p. 783), "the last and perfected stage of insect life when the pupa case is dropped and the enclosed image or being comes forth" (Parrish et al., p.143), on the verge of escaping the clenched fist of the "mother of beetles" (also the "black-sharded lady"), represents the self on the threshold of finding itself whole. The "black-sharded lady" appears to be the "mother of beetles" as a shard is the wing-cover of a beetle. The epithet "mother of beetles" comes from a Zulu tale collected by Radin, "Untombine, the Tall Maiden", in which the monster Unomabunge, the mother of beetles, devours a king's daughter. The monster is eventually slain and the daughter disgorged, 'reborn' from this 'mother'. This could probably be the source of the request, in "Who", for a "Mother of otherness" to "Eat me", to devour her so that she can be reborn. Similarly, in "Witch Burning", the persona has been under the spell of a malevolent maternal force. All the mothers in "Poem for a Birthday" have a certain ambiguous hostility to the persona and seem to represent the world in which the persona lives after her father's death.

With "They've blown my sparkler out", the state of breakdown, the dead self is symbolized. The image of the doll's body expresses the prior unwholeness, an experience of the body as an alien thing. These images,

together with the grain of rice which grows as the flames "teach the truth" and the witch is purified by fire, embody the moment of breakthrough.

The poem ends with images of light and air, where the earlier poems in the sequence had dwelt in darkness and submersion.

6.7 The Stones

This is the city where men are mended.
I lie on a great anvil.
The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll
When I fell out of the light. I entered
The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard.

The mother of pestles diminished me.
I became a still pebble.
The stones of the belly were peaceable,

The head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing.
Only the mouth-hole piped out,
Importunate cricket

In a quarry of silences.
The people of the city heard it.
They hunted the stones, taciturn and separate,

The mouth-hole crying their locations.
Drunk as a foetus
I suck at the paps of darkness.

The food tubes embrace me. Sponges kiss my lichens away.
The jewelmaster drives his chisel to pry
Open one stone eye.

This is the after-hell: I see the light.
A wind unstoppers the chamber
Of the ear, old worrier.

Water mollifies the flint lip,
And daylight lays its sameness on the wall.
The grafters are cheerful,

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

A workman walks by carrying a pink torso.
 The storerooms are full of hearts.
 This is the city of spare parts.

My swaddled legs and arms smell sweet as rubber.
 Here they can doctor heads, or any limb.
 On Fridays the little children come

To trade their hooks for hands.
 Dead men leave eyes for others.
 Love is the uniform of my bald nurse.

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.
 The vase, reconstructed, houses
 The elusive rose.

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

That "The Stones" marked the first phase of her development was a milestone that Plath herself recognized:

When she consolidated her hold on the second phase, two years later, she dismissed everything prior to "The Stones" as Juvenilia, produced in the days before she became herself (Kroll, p. 90).

This is a poem in which the persona reveals a weird detachment. It has the same effect as the horror story told in "Daddy" for which she uses an insistently jaunty tone, and which is as ritualistic as a nursery rhyme. She seems almost amused that her suffering should be so extreme, so grotesque. The technical psychoanalytic term for this type of insistent gaiety to protect one from what, if faced nakedly, would be insufferable, is "manic defence". But what, for a neurotic, is a means of avoiding reality can become, for a poet, the source of creative strength, a way of handling the unhandleable, and presenting the situation in all its fullness.

In "The Stones", the last and most successful poem of the sequence, "where the self, shattered in 1953, suddenly finds itself whole", the speaker appears as her adult self, her true representation. Her sense of self, formerly dispersed and rootless, has found a home. Her shape

has been restored, and she finally has an answer to the question posed by "Who", the first poem of the sequence.

Unlike the other poems, the imagery in "The Stones" successfully embodies complex themes, without straining the sense of how the poem legitimately may develop. Many of the images in the earlier poems crowded one another, making conflicting claims. In "The Stones" the imagery, even when grotesque, is unitary and coherent, reflecting the coherence of the speaker, who has understood and ordered her experience. The earlier poems did of course reflect a still-traumatized and confused speaker, yet sometimes not only she, but also the poem itself, seemed confused.

Radin's book provided Plath with a ready-made analogy for "The Stones". From "The City Where Men Are Mended", she took the first line of her poem and the basic idea upon which she then improvised. In Radin's tale, a girl has accidentally been killed, and her mother, a good, generous woman, takes the bones to "the city where men are mended". Along the way she undergoes various tests which prove her goodness, and as a result her daughter is flawlessly repaired. The mother's jealous co-wife competes by actually murdering her own daughter (she pounds her to death in a mortar, which probably suggested to Plath the "mother of pestles" named in the poem), so that she can take the bones to the same city. The tests which proved the goodness of the first mother reveal the badness of the second, whose daughter, mended accordingly, receives only half a body.

This tale may also illuminate the line "Mother of otherness / Eat me" in "Who". One of the tests undergone by each of the mothers is a series of encounters with various pots of food, each of which invites the mothers to "Eat me". The proper response is to decline. The bad mother not only gobbles up each potful of food, but rudely tells it, "do you need to invite me to eat you?" (p. 252).

A "city where men are mended" is not very different from a hospital, and so the city of Plath represents a place where the broken self is reconstructed. The dispersed "stones" of the speaker's shattered self

are gathered together and reconstructed, reenacting the myths of Dionysus (alluded to in "Maenad"), Osiris, and other gods who undergo dismemberment and resurrection:

... Dionysus ... resembled Osiris ... and was said like him to be torn limb from limb (Frazer, p. 439).

... Osiris in his triple aspect is seen as dead, dismembered, and finally reconstituted by the union of his scattered limbs (p. 435).

In the case of Osiris, the parts of his body were widely scattered and his sister Isis made a long journey in order to collect them. The people in Plath's poem similarly collect and reassemble the parts of the speaker's self.

In her depiction of this theme, Plath may also have been echoing Eliot, whose work she knew well. Eliot's "Ash-Wednesday", like "The Stones", deals with death, resurrection and spiritual rebirth, though to a different purpose. Eliot's poem contains these lines:

Under a juniper-tree the bones sang, scattered and shining
We are glad to be scattered, we did little good to each other,
...
Forgetting themselves and each other, united
In the quiet of the desert.

(*Collected Poems*, pp. 62 - 63).

Like these bones, the stones of Plath's poem speak:

I became a still pebble.
The stones of the belly were peaceable,

The head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing.
Only the mouth-hole piped out,
Importunate cricket

In a quarry of silences.

Like the cricket mouth in "The Stones", in "Ash-Wednesday" "the bones sang chirping".

"The flat blue sky-circle" in "The Stones" links up with "The Colossus", but now there is no large, metaphoric indirection. This is a private world in which there are many puzzling things. One way of solving these puzzles is to return to other poems, to typical clusters of imagery. The doll, for instance, is a common image in Plath's poetry. This object with comfortable, homely and childish associations often becomes unpleasant and sinister. In "The Disquieting Muses" she sees her childish powers of imagination represented in three dolls nodding their heads around her crib, three women "Mouthless, eyeless, with stitched bald head". The three muses are of course classical deities of creativity, but more important is the fact that her title is precisely that of a painting by De Chirico, the Italian surrealist. Like primitive art, the surrealists excited her, but only as far as they stimulated her to tap her own nightmares. The shattered figure on a landscape in "The Colossus" is reminiscent of Dali, the bald heads in "The Disquieting Muses" of De Chirico, the free-floating parts of bodies in "The Stones" ("city of spare parts", "hearts", "legs", "any limb") of Yves Tanguy. But the experience of personal disintegration is her own. Her madness brings a nightmare distortion to reality, although help is at hand: "The grafters are cheerful", and "Catgut stitches my fissures".

In "Maenad" the speaker's worship of her dead father suggests the ritual enactment of Dionysus's death. The speaker in "The Stones" uses similar imagery to describe her own death and resurrection. In the late poetry the governing myth unites these two aspects: the Moon-heroine is now conceived as a dying and reviving goddess, and mourning (or celebrating) the death of her god is a part of her moon-myth, though the emphasis is on *his* death and *her* resurrection. "The Stones" foreshadows the mythology of the late poems in several ways. It organizes and interrelates the ideas of psychic death and reconstruction, of false and true selves, and relates them to her father's death.

The "bald nurse", presumably at her bedside, clearly parallels the "disquieting muses" standing at the side of her crib. Both presences are later connected with the Moon-muse. Like the muses, the bald nurse is an ambivalent figure, both welcome and unwelcome. Like the later

Moon-muse, she is associated with both life and death. The bald nurse who has power over life and death also appears in "The Tour", a late poem which also suffers from a maniacal jauntiness:

... don't trip on the nurse! -
 She may be bald, she may have no eyes,
 ...
 she's pink, she's a born midwife -
 She can bring the dead to life ...

The moon in "Barren Woman" is connected with a nurse and with birth and death, and also with fertility and barrenness. In a gesture which ambiguously suggests both protection and the imprinting of a mark, the moon "lays a hand" on the barren woman's forehead.

Though a nurse supposedly aids recovery, her uniform - love - is also the speaker's curse. Plath further develops the connection between the bald nurse and the moon in *Three Women*, where the moon, associated with barrenness and its cure, is "luminous as a nurse" whose white uniform "glows", therefore the moon's white glow is a kind of uniform. The interconnections between moon, muses, and nurses, all bald and all ambiguously threatening as well as proprietary, are reflected throughout her poetry.

The image of the bald nurse is not the only way in which Plath qualifies the absoluteness of the recovery. "I shall be good as new" sounds a wry if not ironic note, and raises the question whether being "reconstructed" is really being "good as new". Images in *The Bell Jar* suggest the same qualification:

There ought ... to be a ritual for being born twice -
 patched, retreaded and approved for the road (p. 275).

But being "retreaded" does not quite amount to "being born twice". The description of the reconstruction of the self in terms of mechanical repair falls short of the symbol of new birth. Later, when in "Daddy" she refers to her suicide attempt and breakdown, she writes that "they pulled

me out of the sack, / And they stuck me together with glue". Being stuck together suggests a temporary repair that may again become unstuck.

The irony of the claim, "I shall be good as new" is reinforced by images which are not really images of newness, and which, because they express a degree of doubt or tentativeness appropriate to a period of convalescence, calls the cure in question:

The vase, reconstructed, ...

...

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.
My mendings itch.

There is a similar ambiguity and tentativeness in *The Bell Jar*. At the end of the novel, as Esther enters the room to be interviewed for release from the hospital, she walks in "as by a magical thread" (p. 275). This still necessary mental crutch signifies that the patient is not really restored to complete health.

In "The Stones" Plath once again refers to electro-shock treatment:

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

Kenner (in Lane, p. 40) calls electro-shock treatment "the unpardonable insult". The "grafters" are mending the vase of her physical body so that the spirit may once again find a home. The devoured rose of "The Bull of Bendylaw" here clearly becomes a symbol of the spirit.

Plath might easily have ended "The Stones" with a more dramatic image of rebirth, such as that of a newborn baby, for which she had prepared by her earlier use of foetal imagery (the "stones of the belly"). The image of the vase shows a more literal, almost physical regeneration. This ties up with the imagery in "The Stones", but not quite with the images in the rest of the sequence.

However, psyche and body blend in the final line:

I shall be good as new.

7. MYTH, THE FATHER-GOD, TRUE AND FALSE SELVES, DEATH AND REBIRTH

Lameyer (in Butscher, 1977: 144) states that, according to modern psycho-analytic theory, it is the narcissist's failure to fulfil love needs in childhood that causes the personality to split, projecting onto others the deep feelings of guilt and the destructive forces within the self. This unfulfilled love is one of the main causes of the tension so evident in Plath's work, especially the early poetry. In an attempt to resolve the tension, she built up the White Goddess myth around herself and the father figure. One of the most overt poems celebrating the White Goddess idea is "The Beekeeper's Daughter", a poem full of explicit incestuous allusions. The father, "hieratical" in his frock coat, is a father-priest who initiates the daughter into holy mysteries. The beehive is seen as the boudoir, a place rich in sexual suggestion and appealing immensely to Plath's imagination because it ironically inverts the double standard, making the queen bee the goddess of the harem, the males all drones. Incestuous suggestions are found in the lines,

Here is a queenship no mother can contest -
A fruit that's death to taste; dark flesh, dark parings.

Phillips (in Butscher, 1977: 195) suggests that the latter word is a pun, conscious or unconscious, on dark "pairings", pairings which can only end in insanity or death. That Plath sees the poem's sacred marriage as an incestuous one cannot be doubted:

Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg...
The queen bee marries the winter of your year.

The voice in "The Beekeeper's Daughter" is very far removed from the one that triumphantly cries out in "Daddy":

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

In order to see how she came to terms with her true and false selves, and how she eventually accepted the death of her father, it will be necessary to consider some of Plath's late poems.

The moon-muse of the late poems is a kind of witch, resembling the witch-goddess Hecate. Like the other goddesses in a wide range of related mythologies, she is muse, prophetess, and hag, portending death or doom. The witch or hag is a single aspect of a more inclusive traditional moon-goddess whose full symbolism includes the cycles of birth, life, death and rebirth, and the female functions of menstruation, and fertility or barrenness. She is also a symbol of the origins of poetic inspiration. The "life" of the moon-goddess typically includes the death of the male god, whose loss she either mourns or celebrates, depending on the story. In this and in several other notable particulars, the "life" of the goddess parallels that of Plath and her mythic protagonist.

It was Ted Hughes who introduced Plath to Graves' writings on the White Goddess. Later in their marriage, they had as a wall decoration in their flat a poster enlarged from an astrology book depicting the great Moon-goddesses Isides and Magnae Deorum Matris, and listing various of her epithets, including Hecate, Proserpina, Diana and Luna (Kroll, p. 40). For Plath and Hughes the White Goddess of poetic inspiration, their common muse, may have symbolized their marriage as a similar cooperative venture.

Plath saw the White Goddess as far more than the symbol of poetic inspiration which she and her husband shared in their capacity as poets. The myth of the White Goddess seemed to be her very own myth. Most important was the parallel between the goddess mourning her god, and the poet her father. Also, the great variety of details, including histories, dates and names, especially to a mind attuned as hers was to coincidences and symmetries, must have seemed uncanny. The significance of coincidences would have become increasingly meaningful. Hughes was interested in astrology and the Tarot, and Plath took these and related bodies of symbolism very seriously. She wrote to her mother that she was planning to become a "seeress", that she was getting a Tarot deck and was learning to read horoscopes. She also mentioned to her publisher how superstitious she was.

The White Goddess myth, when Plath first encountered it, seemed to her to order her experiences. It continued to do so, and was more and more

completely appropriated by her, so that she increasingly saw her life as defined by it. Her further experiences, particularly of pregnancy and motherhood, were very readily absorbed into this framework. The culminating confirmation of her identification with the White Goddess would come later, through her separation from her husband, an event that she saw as a repetition of abandonment and bereavement. By that time her hunch must have been that the White Goddess mythology had appropriated *her*, as her fate, that her life was magically entwined with the myth.

But once again, this was only a mask behind which the real Plath found it convenient to hide. Sooner or later she would have had to face her real self, and when she did, she could not handle it. Her final breakdown ended in suicide.

Laing speaks of the breakdowns of certain patients as casting off the false self-esteem. They display a determination to express their true experience, even if it is an experience of a vacancy. Jung speaks of the unconscious as seeking wholeness by generating an opposite to whatever is unbalanced in the conscious self.

A man cannot get rid of himself in favour of an artificial personality without punishment. Even the attempt to do so brings on, in all ordinary cases, unconscious reactions... To the degree that the world invites the individual to identify with the mask, he is delivered over to influences from within... An opposite forces its way up from inside; it is exactly as though the unconscious suppressed the ego with the same power which drew the ego into the persona (Jung, 1959: 164).

The self left back in childhood, "sealed... off... in a bottle", had to be recaptured and rejoined in order for Plath to live fully in time. Yet because part of herself and her history had remained suspended, everything that had happened to her since that rupture had, in effect, happened to an incomplete person. All subsequent experiences had added to the false foundation, had happened to someone not fully integrated with her own history.

This is, in terms of the myth, the original split into false and true selves. The true self is the child she was before things went wrong. That part, as "Electra on Azalea Path" makes plain, lies buried with her father. The part which has continued to live after her father's death is incomplete, a kind of false self, and the life lived by it is, to that extent, unreal. This is precisely the situation expressed in "Daddy":

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

This tension between false and true selves, initially determined by her relation to her father, is the basis for further development, and consequently pervades all future manifestations of the self, whether in relation to others or in her image of herself. In "Daddy", for example, the figure of husband as Nazi takes over the burden of suppressing the true self. The same structure recurs in her portrayal of female roles, which include false self-images such as the "drudge" in the bee-poems and the veiled, submissive doll-woman in "Purdah". The false self of the heroine is ineffectual, dominated, and powerless, essentially the same kind of false self as the one who "lived like a foot".

The true self (the positive, whole, reborn self) is associated with artistic creativity, and with the autonomy possible only if one is not defined primarily in terms of someone else. When the true self has emerged fully, the heroine will not be defined primarily in relation to a man, particularly since she considers her attachment to (now-absent) males to be responsible for the origin of the false self. When wife-hood, daughterhood, and motherhood appear primarily as male-defined roles, when simply being a man's wife ("The Applicant"), daughter ("Daddy"), the mother of his children or his domestic overseer ("Stings") cripples a woman and makes her subservient, then these roles are negative and may be considered forms of the false self. Lady Lazarus, the lioness and the queen bee are not male-dependent, and they represent triumph over the negative, male-defined aspects of these typical female roles. They constitute the bitch goddess, the strong female who will not settle for anything but complete power.

Insofar as motherhood is part of the male-dependent and entrapping domesticity, it constitutes a negative kind of creativity. One might celebrate being devoured by art ("The blood jet is poetry") but not by self-sacrificing childcare and domestic drudgery ("for years I have eaten dust / And dried plates with my dense hair. / And seen my strangeness evaporate"). But motherhood also appears, not so much an exalted form of creativity like writing poetry, as a mythic or heroic attribute. Even poems which centre on an abandoned or isolated mother and child ("For a Fatherless Son", "By Candlelight", "Nick and the Candlestick") emphasize a self-sufficient maternal universe. The autonomy of the queen bee may be seen in this, so that while the mother in "Nick and the Candlestick" speaks with a note of mournfulness as she contrasts the messy complexities of adulthood with the purity of infancy ("The blood blooms clean / In you, ruby, / The pain / You wake to is not yours"), she ends by stating: "You are the baby in the barn".

Motherhood and fertility are implicitly celebrated when barrenness appears as a despised or frightening quality (as in "Childless Woman", "The Fearful" and "The Munich Mannequins"), and this contrast is a significant element in the mythic drama, where barrenness often characterizes malevolent or baleful female forces (such as the "barren" moon in "Elm"), and where biological fertility is the province of the heroine.

The true self, most often revealed in the process of awakening from or the overthrowing a state of suppression, is usually seen as coexisting with a false self: the lioness masked by the doll-bride in "Purdah"; the queen bee sleeping in the guise of a drudge, a worker bee, in "Stings". This co-existence of the false and the true selves, the feeling of being at once helpless and trapped while truly powerful and free is, in the late poems, the heroine's intolerable state of being.

The late poems represent various attempts to resolve the conflicts between true and false selves. In trying to assert the true self over the false self that has evolved in relation to her father's (and then husband's) absence, the heroine undertakes suicide, reunion by proxy, and finally exorcism through ritual killing, all of which is summarized in "Daddy".

As this poem spells out, the husband in the poetry is sometimes perceived as a surrogate father, and the same conflict between true and false selves is re-enacted in relation to him. In poems such as "The Detective" and "Purdah", the speaker has in different ways been made unreal by a man. In "The Detective" the husband is by implication the killer. In "Purdah" the bride describes herself as an art-object belonging to her bridegroom. Here and in other poems the basic relationship is that of master to slave, oppressor to oppressed, torturer to victim, object to its creator. A familiar pattern directs the fate of the heroine. The true self is deadened or repressed. There is unreality in the life lived by the false self, and there is always the struggle of the true self for rebirth.

The rebirth which the true self sometimes achieves usually entails the ritually enacted destruction of the male. The new or reborn true self appears as a victor or rebel, as when it throws off the disguise of "drudge" and emerges as queen bee ("Stings") or rises from its own ashes to "eat men like air" ("Lady Lazarus"). Either directly or indirectly the drama in which the true self and false self struggle for dominance is expressed by the double-sided process of death and rebirth. Conflict, transition and resolution between true and false selves are all enacted in terms of these motifs. Where the false self appears to be dominant, there is almost always promise of rebirth.

The pervasive imagery of suicide and personal death should be seen in the light of this duality. Virtually all the apparent "death-wishes" in her late poems have the ambiguity of a simultaneous wish for rebirth, which can only be achieved through some kind of "death". It is not that life itself is unacceptable, "that life, even when disciplined, is simply not worth it" (as Robert Lowell says in his foreword to *Ariel*), but that life on the wrong terms, a life lived by the false self, is not life but an intolerable death-in-life which can be overcome only by dying to that life. The late poems are really exploratory attempts to release the true self and to establish an authentic existence.

To recap, the crucial motifs of Plath's myth can be identified as three sets of polarities: the male as 'god' and as 'devil', the false self

and the true self, and death and rebirth. The motif of a dominant male figure includes the heroine's father, and other male figures who may appear as husband, lover or bridegroom. This dominant male may appear in godlike guise as a colossus, "bag full of God", or "Lord of the mirrors", or in the guise of a "devil", "Nazi" or "vampire". The protagonist, rejected by her personal "god", characteristically attempts to resolve the resultant death-in-life by transforming him into (or exposing him as) a devil or similar figure as a basis for rejecting him.

The motif of the false and true selves derives from the heroine's relation to the male figure, from which her true self has been alienated, thus giving rise to a false self. Either the false self or the male (or both) must be killed to allow rebirth of the true self. The motif of death and rebirth also provides the terms of conflict and resolution in this matter: life lived by the false self is death-in-life, while the rebirth of the true self promises life-in-death, expressed in the poetry in images of purgation, purification and transcendence.

The central motifs of Plath's myth are so closely parallel to motifs that occur universally in the history of myth, religion, and literature (and, according to Jung, do so because they are expressive of structures that are constituents of the human psyche), that they might be identified as archetypes. It is not surprising that this should be the case, given Plath's personal and poetic history. In respect to the theme of father as "god" or "devil", for example, one might point out that Plath was, after all, writing about an elemental relationship, in her case made critical by the fact of her father's untimely death. One would expect such a relationship to be prefigured in universal structures of meaning. Further, she was familiar with literary and psychoanalytic archetypes and symbols, both through the psychotherapy she had undergone and through her readings, which included Jung, Frazer, Rank, Freud, and Graves, and her college honours thesis on the "double personality" in Dostoevsky. This multitude of similarities between universal archetypes and the major motifs of her work helps to explain the power of her late poems.

What Plath attempted in "Poem for a Birthday" provides the perspective for viewing the later mythology. The image of metamorphosis, for instance, was used to render accurately the experience of what she had described as her time of darkness, despair and disillusion, and her symbolic death and psychic rebirth. Although metamorphosis and the image of a reconstructed vase do suggest psychic regeneration, their use precludes the mythic import of her experience, and this may explain why she abandoned the imagery of metamorphosis as an organizing device. While metamorphosis is cumulative and transitional, the protagonist in the late poetry has two different aspects. In a sense she already *is* the queen bee, even when she acts the drudge. Her true self is always present and not merely a promise for the future, only it is suppressed, buried, or disguised. Eventually it is revealed or released, and not just evolved into.

Plath needed a myth which would allow her to express more than does the mere image of repair, the result of which *The Bell Jar* clearly describes. When Esther is about to leave the mental hospital, her mother says:

"We'll act as if all this were a bad dream" ...

A bad dream.

I remembered everything.

I remembered the cadavers and Doreen and the story
of the fig tree and Marco's diamond and the sailor
on the Common and Doctor Gordon's wall-eyed nurse...

Maybe forgetfulness, like a kind of snow, should numb
and cover them. But they were part of me. They were
my landscape (p. 267).

In her late poetry she no longer wants to claim her "landscape" but to transcend or discard it along with her false self. She wants to be, not "good as new", but really new, "Pure as a baby" ("Getting There"). A god such as Dionysus is not stitched and mended, but torn apart and revived. His myth no more celebrates his "reconstruction" than Christi-

anity celebrates Christ's "reconstruction". Plath's later poems are as absolute as this in their images of rebirth.

The evolution of the firefly imagery illustrates this movement towards absoluteness. An imitation of the firefly had appeared earlier in "The Disquieting Muses", where the "muses" had intervened to prevent the speaker from taking part with her schoolmates in a pageant:

Blinking flashlights like fireflies
And singing the glowworm song, ...

Then, in "Dark House", the speaker appears as an actual glow-worm, the first stage of metamorphosis. In "Witch Burning", the adult firefly beetle is about to emerge, but it shares the reader's attention with the witch and the rice grain. Despite the first person voice in the poem, all of these images stand apart from and are referred to by the speaker of the poem. In a poem such as "Lady Lazarus" there is no such distance. The real speaker and the ostensible speaker are one. It is toward the persona of "Lady Lazarus" - a phoenix, burning goddess, firebird, who engenders her own death, purification and rebirth - that the earlier firefly images steadily progress.

The use in the earlier poetry of such a variety of metaphors to express the themes of false and true self, and death and rebirth, conveys the urgency behind her impulse to transform her biography into myth. In the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence, this impulse comes closest to fulfillment in "The Stones", which echoes the myths of dead, dismembered and resurrected gods, not as an extraneous allusion, but as an integral aspect of the vision. In doing so it prefigures the late mythology in which, typically, mythological structures are completely appropriated into the poetic vision, and the speaker does not stand apart from the poem, but, rather, discloses her mythic character.

8. CONCLUSION

Roethke's influence on Plath, especially during her stay at Yaddo, has been discussed in Chapters 4 and 6. Apart from "Poem for a Birthday", Roethke's influence is clearly felt in a poem such as "Mushrooms", which Plath also developed from an invocation, but with a vocabulary borrowed from Roethke. In this poem she celebrates the life force that nudges and shoves through the earth in the plant's overnight underground growth. Her later poetry, however, shows her wide divergence from Roethke's open intertwining of the self and other. When Roethke was no longer needed, she simply discarded him, but he was instrumental in forcing her inward to create a spokesman for the rage and drive for dominance at the centre of her psyche. For this no model existed. She had to create her own.

In the British edition of *The Colossus* (1960, London: Heinemann), all seven poems in the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence are included. In the American edition, however, all are omitted except for "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" and "The Stones". Perloff (in Lane, p. 177) suggests that Plath sensed that the others were too imitative. But Roethke might not have objected to her borrowings. As he said himself, "Eliot said, 'Bad poets imitate; good poets steal'" (Libby 1974: 268), and one would certainly not steal phrases from a poet one did not admire.

There has been much speculation about Plath's suicide, and whether or not this, her final action, gave validity to her poetry. Explanations have been offered from all sides. Alvarez, seven years after her death, sees the risk of suicide as a by-product of poetic commitment:

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

If the road had seemed impassable, she proved that it wasn't. It was, however, one-way, and she went too far along it to

be able, in the end, to turn back. Yet her actual suicide ... is by the way; it adds nothing to her work and proves nothing about it. It was simply a risk she took in handling such volatile material (quoted in Schwartz and Bollas, p. 147).

And from this suicide a cult has grown. Anthony Thwaite (p. 40) makes the following observation:

That mystery and obfuscation, as well as pregnant misreading, have helped to create a Plath cult is undoubtedly true. That there *is* a cult-like interest in her life and work (the two often seen as inextricable) can't be denied.

Perloff recalls having seen, in

the Savile Book Shop in Georgetown, D.C., ... a huge window display in which copies of *The Colossus*, *The Bell Jar*, *Ariel* and *Crossing the Water* encircled a large photograph of Sylvia Plath, which rested against a copy of A. Alvarez's *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*, that ultimate tribute to Sylvia Plath as our Extremist Poet *par excellence* (Butscher, 1977: 125).

Blodgett (p.104) sees the Plath cult as originating in commiseration. Another very concomitant reason for the rise of the cult is the way that declining humanists support each other in their pursuit of the poet who has abandoned the esthetics of humanism and become modern. Cult also implies a participation the basis of which lies "in the first reader and the first words. Then the happy *amateurs* flock together like old friends, united in their memory of the great myth ...".

Alvarez also sees her suicide as the beginning of a myth about Plath:

I don't think she would have found it much to her taste, since it is a myth of a poet as a sacrificial victim, offering herself up for the sake of her art, having been dragged by the Muses to that final altar through every kind of distress ... The pity is not that there is a myth of Sylvia Plath but that the myth is

not simply that of an enormously gifted poet whose death came carelessly, by mistake, and too soon (Alvarez, 1971: 55).

To steer her away from the poetry she composed with the open Thesaurus on her knee, Lowell had opened a gate toward her inner self with his *Life Studies*, and along the lonely road leading from that gate she had to gather the material to express that part of her which had hitherto been hidden. Although it gave a completely new direction to her poetry, some critics are of the opinion that she took confessionalism too far.

[Sylvia Plath] chose, if that is the word, what seems to me the one alternative advance position to Lowell's along the dangerous confessional way, that is of committing her own predicaments in the interest of her art until the one was so involved in the other that no return was possible. It was the old romantic fallacy, if you will, of confusing motive and art, or the real with the ideal. But in this instance the conception has no real meaning because the long, escalating drive toward suicide and the period of extraordinary creativity ... actually coincided, or were at least two functions of the same process. The commitment was violent, excluding all possibilities ... Under all the other motifs of Plath's work, however, is the confusion of terror at death with fascination by it. The visions of the speaker as already dead are so vivid that they become yearnings toward that condition (Rosenthal, 1976: 79, 83).

Alvarez, on the same topic, sees Plath's poetry as a logical extension of Lowell's exploration, but

she simply went further in the direction he had already taken. For her, it turned out to be a one-way street from which there was no turning back. So she went to the extreme, far edge of the bearable and, in the end, slipped over (Alvarez, 1969: 17).

From her poetry it would seem that Plath saw her sojourn on earth as very temporary. Her poetry manifests that she was passionately in love with death, which she saw not as a final ending to a transitory life and world, but a transcendence to a life where she would no longer be touched by her fragmented world and by her own fragmented personality. She failed to "integrate her inner world sufficiently to make a coherent sense of identity possible" (Schwartz and Bollas, p. 149). She suffered from an inability to repress disturbing childhood memories, especially those that had to do with her father, and went through a repetitive ritual of her object world.

In order to exert self-control, especially when besieged by suicidal impulses, she mobilized compulsive action as in "Lesbos":

Now I am silent, hate
Up to my neck,
Thick, thick.
I do not speak.
I am packing the hard potatoes like good clothes,
I am packing the babies,
I am packing the sick cats.

At other times this action takes on a machine-like quality, as in "The Applicant":

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

Her poetry became a world in which there was no possibility of survival. She was always departing for somewhere, though she displayed a deep sense of having no destination. It is only in "Getting There" that she envisages rebirth at the end of a journey, a rebirth which is similar to the metamorphosis in "Poem for a Birthday".

The carriages rock, they are cradles.
And I stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces,

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

Even this vision was cancelled in other poems such as "Totem", written in the final weeks of her life:

There is no terminus, only suitcases
 Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit
 Bald and shiny, with pockets of wishes.

She felt that she had accomplished nothing. Her final poems reflect her inner emptiness. She no longer had prospects. Life no longer held anything for her. She viewed her surroundings with great restraint, resignation and objectivity, although her worthlessness is reflected in the alien nature of her landscape. The following examples are taken from her last poems:

They threaten
 To let me through to a heaven
 Starless and fatherless, a dark water. ("Sheep in Fog")

From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
 Govern a life. ("Words")

The size of a fly,
 The doom mark
 Crawls down the wall. ("Contusion")

For her, the future was no longer in the balance. The only way out was to end this death-in-life, and when it had been done, even then it would have no earth-shattering impact:

The moon has nothing to be sad about,
 Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.
 Her blacks crackle and drag. ("Edge")

This misfit, this misbegotten Plath, at odds with herself and with her environment, would transcend this life and this world, would even transcend love; she would "unhusk [her]self and steer into the air". Her poems seem poised between life and death, almost as if they are a prepa-

ration for death. She was "literally committing her own predicaments in the interests of her art, until the one was so involved with the other that no return was possible" (Rosenthal, p. 83).

Without historical distance "influential" is almost as difficult to define as "great". Plath only really came to notice in 1965, two years after her death, upon the publication of *Ariel*, but already her last poems have passed into legend as both representative of the present tone of emotional life and unique in their implacable, harsh brilliance.

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10. SUMMARY

At the age of thirty Sylvia Plath died by her own hand. When she was nineteen and a student at Smith College, she had a nervous breakdown and tried to take her own life. She was dramatically rescued, and several years later she wrote a sequence of seven poems entitled "Poem for a Birthday" in which she used her attempted suicide and subsequent stay in a mental hospital as subject matter. This sequence of poems can be considered the watershed between her early poems which she herself dismissed as "juvenilia" and her later poems which were published posthumously and upon which her reputation as a poet rests. A discussion of "Poem for a Birthday" forms the main body of this dissertation.

Chapter Two deals with psychological literary criticism. It begins with a brief history of informal psychological criticism, and includes a discussion of the theories of Freud and Jung as applied to literature. Northrop Frye's archetypal criticism is also considered.

Events from her early childhood up till the time "Poem for a Birthday" was written are discussed in Chapter Three, since they have a bearing on the poem. Attention is given to the duality of her personality and her spurious self-esteem.

In Chapter Four poets who influenced Plath in her poetic development are discussed. Surrealism and Paul Radin's collection of African folk-tales which interested her greatly while she was writing "Poem for a Birthday" are also looked into.

Chapter Five offers a discussion of Robert Graves' *The White Goddess* and Sir James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, both of which form the basis of the myth Plath created in her poetry.

In Chapter Six the seven poems in the sequence are analysed. The metamorphosis of the persona in every poem is traced, and is linked to the spiritual regeneration of the poet herself. However, instead of being completely regenerated at the end of the sequence, she finds herself only temporarily repaired, hoping to be "good as new".

Plath's myth-making is considered once again in Chapter Seven, and here some of her late poems are referred to, viz. those which strengthen the idea of the dying god and the mourning goddess. Her true and false selves and the idea of death and rebirth or transcendence are also discussed.

"Poem for a Birthday" is not really one of Plath's best poems. Its importance is that it clearly indicates the direction the later poetry, on which her reputation really rests, was to take.