I Ride Earth's Burning Carrousel

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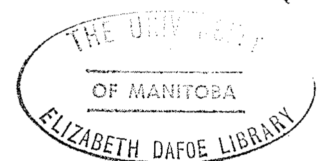

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Introduction

The intention of this paper is to come to terms with Sylvia Plath: the woman, the writer, the human being. Clearly, Plath is an artist whose development is plotted as much by emotion as by intellect. She many times re-works the same several themes, which are dealt with with such accumulating compulsion that they finally refuse to be contained within her art, and rise to confront her in life experience. Unperceived by most critics, Sylvia Plath manages to achieve, or perhaps more simply is forced to acknowledge-- that art is life, that the "madness" and death of art are the "madness" and death of life experience, that their realities are one and the same.

Above all, it must be remembered that Plath's art is the product of a real person; sensitive, strong, passionate, perceptive, the poet is in her work more imaginatively alive upon every reading. Moreover, it is disillusioning to observe how many scholars either overlook or ignor her presence with a technical approach which sadly reflects upon their roles as teachers of literature. From such illumination let us be spared!

Plath's art is not, as so many critical accounts imply, a puzzle which happily yields to the usual analytical break-down. The only categories into which it can be possibly divided seem not arbitrary,

but organic, and are delineated by those five concerns to which the poet repeatedly returns. Developmental in nature, these help to provide some insight into Plath's artistic and psychological progress. Yet finally, such discussions are no substitute for the entire published body of her work, which contradicts and reinforces itself into that unique and intense unity for which it has become "revered."

Chapter 1 The Awful Birthday Of Otherness

I learned not to fear infinity,
The far field, the windy cliffs of forever,
The dying of time in the white light of tomorrow,
The wheel turning away from itself,
The sprawl of the wave,
The on-coming water.

Theodore Roethke[1]

In "Ocean 1212-W" Sylvia Plath tells how upon the death of her father she and her family moved inland:

> My father died, we moved inland. Whereon those first nine years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle- beautiful, in- accessible, obsolete, a fine white flying myth.[2]

In The Bell Jar, an autobiographical account of her nervous break-down, the poet observes during the process of the fragmentation:

> how strange it had never occured to me before that I was only purely happy until I was nine years old.[3]

Of the numerous aspects of the poet's relationship with the sea, the most significant is the maternal quality which she attbributes to it. Initially, it appears to have been conceived of as an organic extension of the self, yet, not without its own individual existence which served to reinforce, and comfort what must have been an acutely sensitive and imaginative child. The sea had its mysteries which most overwhelmingly attracted and compelled her to explore its being. Plath describes how as a mere infant she crawled on hands and knees, attempting to enter the waves only to be rescued by a more vigilant earthly mother. She questions the possibilities of experience which might have ensued had she succeeded in her attempts:

> I often wonder what would have happened if I had managed to pierce the looking glass. Would my infant gills have taken over, the salt in my blood?[4]

When first encountered, the sea and its poetry evoked a response of utter awe. Having heard Arnold's "Forsaken Mermaid" read aloud by her mother, Plath describes her response of chill and emotion as a "new way of being happy." The imaginative potential which the sea contained was herein acknowledged; however, the intellectual and emotional objectivity necessary to poetic articulation were not as yet achieved. It would come inadvertently and suddenly with the violence of her father's death and the separation from her spiritual mother. Then, the sea would become "otherness" in the most fully defined sense of the term.

Plath explains that through her earliest observations she perceived how the sea swallowed all extraneousness: "tea-kettles, bolts of cloth, the lone, lugubrious shoe, tea-sets tossed in abandon off liners."[5] Almost immediately she codified this body of self and "otherness" which the sea represented to her when she attributed to it the verbal equivalent, "Ocean 1212-W." She describes telephoning her grandmother:

> I would repeat it (the exchange Ocean 1212-W) to the operator from my home on the quieter bayside, an incantation, a fine rhyme, half expecting the blonde ear-piece to give me back, like a conch, the susurrous of the sea out there as well as my grandmother's Hello.[6]

Although aware of the "otherness" which the sea contained, it was not until the birth of her brother that Plath conceived of herself as severed organically from the body of its form. Proceeding from

a relationship in which she could first barely detect the difference between her breathing and the sea's motion:

> Breath, that is the first thing. Something is breathing. My own breath? The breath of my mother. No something else, something larger, farther, more serious, more weary.[7]

she explains the violent reversal of her world-order:

> 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!

and:

> As from a star I saw, coldly and soberly, the separation of everything. I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things was over.[8]

In what Plath terms the "awful birthday of otherness," she became totally aware of her organic separation from external reality. What occured in its place was an imaginative substitute, namely that she balanced the reality which her brother's being focused with the presence of an imaginative equivalent, a piece of driftwood in the form of a monkey:

> Not a real monkey, but a monkey of wood. Heavy with water it had swallowed and scarred with tar, it crouched on its pedestal, remote and holy, long-muzzled and oddly foreign. I brushed it and dried it and admired its delicately carved hair. It looked like no monkey I had ever seen eating peanuts and moony-foolish. It had the noble pose of a Simian Thinker. I realize now that the totem

> I so lovingly undid from its caul of kelp (and have since, alas, mislaid with the other baggage of childhood) was a Sacred Baboon.
> So the sea, perceiving my need, had conferred a blessing. My baby brother took his place in the house that day, but so did my marvellous and (who knows) even priceless baboon.9

The remaining description of the sea is here concerned with verbalizing its mechanical aspects: learning to swim, entertaining family visitors on the shore, and finally, most significantly its violence:

> My final memory of the sea is of violence- a still, unhealthily yellow day in 1939, the sea molten, steely-slick heaving at its leash like a broody animal, evil violets in its eye. Anxious telephone calls crossed from my grandmother, on the exposed ocean side, and my mother, on the bay. My brother and I, kneehigh still, imbibed talk of tidal waves, high ground, boarded windows and floating boats like a miracle elixir. The hurricane was due at nightfall. In those days, hurricanes did not bud in Florida and bloom over Cape Cod each autumn as they now do- bang, bang, bang, frequent as firecrackers on the Fourth and whimsically named after women. This was a monstrous speciality, a leviathan. Our world might be eaten, blown to bits. We wanted to be in on it.10

Plath was indeed a "bystander," an observor who was to describe, and provide accounts of her environment and experience. Thus, through her violent withdrawal, the sea did at last become "otherness". It was not that an emotional reaction was now lacking in the poet, but rather, that the energy of what was once an organic relationship with external reality was modified, and re-channelled into an essentially imaginative response to all life experience. Clearly, the energy, thus

the response, was more vehement than ever before.

Plath's "new way of being happy" was intensified by this imaginative energy, and transformed into the active experience of poetic creation. Not only did the poet attempt to articulate this "otherness" as did Arnold in "Forsaken Mermaid," but also strove to emulate its forces, oftentimes setting herself up as a competitor. Well aware of the danger, that, "if it could court, it could kill," Sylvia Plath spent the remainder of her life mentally and emotionally repeating that infant experience, holding the "edge", and occasionally penetrating the depth of "otherness," emerging and returning until her death.

Chapter II The Edge

I have come to a still, but not a deep centre,
A point outside the glittering current;
My eyes stare at the bottom of a river,
At the irregular stones; irridescent sandgrains,
My mind moves in more than one place,
In a country half-land, half-water.

I
Theodore Roethke

The creative process required that Plath maintain the "edge" between self and "otherness" which the experience of "Ocean 1212-W" had defined. In order to write, she must first achieve an artistic equilibrium between her own imaginative responses and the reality of the external world. At her creative best she is similar to the "man in black" whom she presents in The Colossus. Like her subject here, the poet manages to recover herself from a complex and cluttered landscape of "breakwaters," "hen-huts," and "trim piggeries," to stand as a human absolute. With "black coat, black shoes," and "black hair" she is a:

> Fixed vortex on the far
> Tip riveting stones, air,
> All of it, together.[2]

Through creative expression the articulate poet holds together all the diverse elements of her experience.

Having at least imaginatively re-established the honored seat of her infancy, "the centre of the universe,"[3] Plath is well aware of the destructive potential which the vortex contains. In "Hardcastle Crags" she provides an account of the self's confrontation with nature's vital forces. As a description of a "Wuthering Heights" landscape in York County, England, the poem focuses a vision of sterile nature, hostile to the invading self:

All the night gave her, in return
For the paltry gift of her bulk, and the beat
Of her heart was the humped indifferent iron
Of its hills, and its pastures bordered by black stone set
On black stone. 4

With its:

...incessant seethe of grasses
Riding in the full
Of the moon, manes to the wind,
Tireless, tied, as a moon-bound sea
Moves on its root...5

the "otherness" of landscape "looms absolute." Yet, perceiving the danger, Plath recovers herself in time to avoid the violent consequences of confrontation:

Enough to snuff the quick
Of her small heat out, but before the weight
Of stones and hills of stones could break
Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light
She turned back.6

Charles Newman points out how, as in her childhood, Plath frequently indulges in the possibility of extinction, in "the courting of experience that kills."[7] By assuming the fulcrum between dynamic opposites, the poet can test her endurance and psychic energies. And it is this straining out of uncertainty, this emotional tension, which constitutes one of her most stimulating experiences. For a compulsive poet like Plath, obsessed in her art with several predominant concerns, the question is whether it is possible for her to psychologically

survive the converging forces which the creative process evokes. The responses of her own psyche may react against the forces of her environment, and the ensuing conflict result in a poorly coordinated artistic product, if not in a dolorous experience for the poet.

In poems like "Lorelei," "Full Fathom Five," and "Suicide Off Egg Rock" Plath is drawn to what becomes for her the incisive "edge" of experience, whereupon imaginative and experiental realities unite. Ted Hughes in his notes says that these poems seem to:

> ...steer in quite masterfully toward some point in her life that had been painful.8

Furthermore, it is apparent that under emotional stress, delicately controlled which that "painful" point arouses, the poet most effectively transforms the intensity of experience into salient imaginative expression. For Plath, then, every new poem is conceived as a product of this dynamic of experience and imagination.

The "edge" whereon opposites converge seems always in Plath's writing to produce an essential simplicity, more or less satisfying to the exploring self. In the course of The Bell Jar, we see how Esther Greenwood retreats from the appalling complexity of civilization, and seeks the "edge" of land and sea. Here, she senses the presence of death's simple truth which can resolve her dilemma, but which the moment refuses to yield:

> I shivered.
> The stones lay lumpish and cold under my bare feet. I thought longingly of the black shoes on the bench. A wave drew back, like a hand, then advanced and touched my foot.
> The drench seemed to come off the sea floor itself, where blind white fish ferried themselves by their own light through the great polar cold. I saw sharks' teeth and whales' earbones littered about down like gravestones.
> I waited, as if the sea could make my decision for me.
> A second wave collapsed over my feet, lipped with white froth, and the chill gripped my ankles with a mortal ache. My flesh winced, in cowardice, from such a death.
> I picked up my pocket-book and started over the cold stones to where my shoes kept their vigil in the violet light.[9]

Unaware that the completion which she desires lies most accessibly on the border of life experience, Esther mistakingly attempts to penetrate, and drown in the waters of "otherness." In leaving the "edge," the equilibrium which she seeks to violate instantly re-establishes itself. Her being retaliates, and asserts itself against the great weight of ocean which would "ferry her down."[10] Her efforts fail.

> I thought I would swim out until I was too tired to swim back. As I paddled on my heartbeat boomed like a dull motor in my ears.
> I am I am I am.[11]

In "Lorelei," Plath expresses this same equilibrium by providing a double vision of her own being. As in "Ocean 1212-W", she is again

prompted by the impulse to enter the ocean's glass. The poem functions upon the balance between an active, rational, and earthy pysche which perceives, and the passive image of itself which the water contains. Clearly, the ideal focus is that point where creative vision and objective reality fuse, in that "well-steered country" of the creative consciousness. Nevertheless, the compulsive artist is forced beyond by the coercion of her imaginative energies, and envisages herself many times multiplied. Once the "edge" is passed, the "balanced ruler" is swept away:

> O river, I see drifting
>
> Deep in your flux of silver
> Those great goddesses of peace. 12
> Stone, stone, ferry me down there.

In "Suicide Off Egg Rock," the poet reports the annihilation of a self not her own. The death portrayed is excuriating in its mechanical details, yet, again we remark that, when confronted with the possibility of extinction, the being, as in The Bell Jar, exhibits a heightened state of awareness. Thus, it becomes clear that the self is not easily given up. Departing from the shore, the repulsive mechanics of life experience become the more addled and incomprehensible, while the victim's own being is indisputably strengthened:

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

Rippled and pulsed in the glassy updraught.
Sun struck the water like a damnation.
No pit of shadow to crawl into,
And his blood beating the old tattoo
I am, I am, I am.13

By the use of the third person Plath is able to fearlessly narrate the process of a death meticulously described. The destruction is total in face of an omnipotent and merciless nature. The dead man's body "beached with the sea's garbage," and his decaying, "vaulted brainchamber" are mutable elements which constitute part of that "everything" which "shrank in the sun's corrosive ray." "Egg Rock" poetically symbolizes the seat of rationality which is able to survive the "creaming surf." Through the incessant and controlled release of its energy the surf works with the "rock" to represent nature's absoluteness. Man in contrast, spasmotic and emotionally unpredictable, is inevitably diminished.

Plath here has her subject entirely in hand. The "Egg Rock" victim, though clearly associated with the poet's own death-wish, seems to be comfortably outside the ring of her immediate experience. She maintains the vital artistic "edge," and describes the incident so far as to frankly concede the potential of a mechanical universe which ultimately conspires to eliminate the human presence.

"The Bee Meeting" provides another example of how skillfully the narrative technique can be employed to carry the poet to the essence of

experience. Through her identification with the aging queen-bee, we see Plath participating in her own ostracizism from society. Like the "queen," her usefulness has expired, and she must be replaced. Through its suspenseful build-up the poem slowly delineates the ultimate reality, the inevitability of death.

From the beginning, the poet's artistic, and thus her emotional isolation are established. She is separated from the agents who are determined to implement the transformation, the "outriders on their hysterical elastics." And her initial failure to intelligently identify them, betrays her state of intense anxiety. She is, in contrast to her acquaintances, virtually defenceless:

> I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?
> Yes, here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock
> Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to
>   my knees.
> Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice.
> They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear.[14]

Plath is aware that her emotional turbulence makes her highly susceptible to metamorphosis. As the poetic tension increases, she assumes many forms in order to avoid being trapped like the "queen;" she is "a chicken neck," "milkweed silk," "cow parsley," and finally, "the magician's girl." Moreover, the narrative itself pivots round the speaker's tightly repressed responses to the efficiently executed efforts of the bee committee. Her vision oscillates between confusion and

momentary illumination:

> Is it some operation that is taking place?
> It is the surgeon my neighbours are waiting for,
> This apparition in a green helmet,
> Shining gloves and white suit.
> Is it the butcher, the grocer, the postman, someone I know?[15]

She knows only, that she must remain,"I could not run without having to run forever."[16] Whatever knowledge the poet possesses is intuitive, and her concerns are in no way similar to those of the ingenious "bee people." Plath is like the "queen:"

> ...very clever.
> She is old, old, she must live another year, and she knows it.[17]

The speaker's similarity to her subject also exists in her refusal to cooperate with the hive attendants. She too "does not show herself." This irrational stubborness enables both Plath and her "queen" to survive the experience, yet, the reader is struck by the inescapable outcome. The poet concedes, "I am exhausted, I am exhausted," and her death, although delayed, is already beginning to set in. Her resistanne has failed:

> I am the magician's girl who does not flinch.
> The villagers are untying their disguises, they are shaking hands.
> Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold?[18]

Once again, a set of forces, rational and mechanized, has succeeded in destroying the self, yet, by the narrative technique Plath manages

to contain the experience within the confines of imagination. Consequently, the psychic energy which might frustrate her expression is channelled into a presentation of which the poet is the perceiving centre.

Temporarily assuming and maintaining the "vortex," Plath is able to envisage all artistic possibilities. At once subjective and objective, she can freely manipulate the details of an experience otherwise too painful to verbalize. Such a desirable focus centres the presentations of "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy." In these poems, Plath works through comic objectivity to achieve this same end. The apparent recklessness of tone should not mislead the reader into overlooking their systematic structure. And although we are impressed by the easeful art at work in these poems, their inherent gravity never eludes us. Indeed, it is underlined by the very casualness of their expression. In one of her most famous passages, Plath talks about suicide:

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.
>
> I do it so it feels like hell.
> I do it so it feels real.
> I guess you could say I've a call.
>
> It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
> It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
> It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!' [19]
That knocks me out.

Here, in her elucidation of death and re-birth Plath succeeds in regaining the psychological and artistic "edge" from which she has fallen. Through the complementary elements of fire and air the poet re-establishes the intricate balance of experience and imagination, and re-emerges from chaos to once again begin generating her own creative energy:

Ash, ash-
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there-

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair[20]
And I eat men like air.

In "Daddy," Plath embarks upon a similar artistic excursion, which proves conspicuously inferior to that of "Lady Lazarus." The difficulty lies in the first eleven stanzas with the description of her father. Plath's ferocity peeps through a comic foreground literally jammed with contrived dexerities of witticism, imagery, and rhyme. In the

first half of the poem, she exhibits what must be termed strained efforts at attempting to fuse fantasy and reality. Her father is a German tyrant, and "engine," a "black man," and finally a"vampire." We see Plath compulsively plunging from one portrayal to the next in an almost desperate effort to light upon one adequate comparision that will imaginatively coordinate all the associations which "daddy's" memory evokes. Thus, in here attempting to articulate his person and influence, Plath is confronted with that same "speechless" inadequacy which she encountered in life experience:

> I never could talk to you.
> The tongue stuck in my jaw.
>
> It stuck in a barb wire snare.
> Ich, ich, ich, ich, 21
> I could hardly speak.

Her disturbed response, so the poet confesses, literally carries her away from her subject:

> I thought every German was you.
> And the language obscene
> An engine, an engine 22
> Chuffing me off like a Jew.

She feels discriminated against, a captive of her own emotions, who is unable to organize her visions. Memory experience has indeed taken over, and her art suffers.

It is not until stanza twelve, when by her train of thought Plath is forced into a stream of narrative, that she regains her artistic composure. With the recollection of her father's death, she stumbles

upon a point of departure:

> I was ten when they buried you.
> At twenty I tried to die
> And get back, back, back to you. 23
> I thought even the bones would do.

From here, her subject rapidly assumes mythical proportions. He is made a model of, and, as a vampire, is promptly destroyed. The creative-destructive power of the artist is once again recovered. Plath is in control, and can safely assert, "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through."

In a careful consideration of her work it becomes apparent that Plath is increasingly concerned with achieving and maintaining a focus wherein all experiental possibilities are accessible to the imagination. Most frequently it is by means of a calculated objectivity that the poet succeeds in confronting even the most elusive material; by narrative and use of comic distance, she can transcend the emotional "knots" which may hinder expression.

One of Plath's most curious experiments in this regard is her use of the moon symbol. Generally in her writing, the moon functions as an extension of the self which literally expresses the Plath which is out there, scattered, and often despairing of re-integration. The presumed relationship between herself and the moon may be seen as a cable upon which the poet leans for support. It is a symbol to which Plath compulsively returns again and again.

As a recurring motif in her work, we discern what for the poet must have at first seemed its ability to restore the organic link between self and "otherness" which her childhood experience had so ruthlessly severed. Finally, however, we must concede that Plath finds herself both deceived, and confounded by this bewitching body. In "The Moon And The Yew Tree," which the poet herself describes as "an exercise on a theme,"[24] she clearly expresses her disappointment at the moon's failure to inspire a despairing self.

In this poem the speaker is abducted from life experience, and led into the depressing atmosphere which the moon creates. There, amid the "grieving" grass, "fumey spiritous mists," and "the light of the mind, cold and planetary," is the ever-pervading presence of death. The poet literally moves within the possibility of completion, within the "blueness" of the poem's tone which operates in the same way as the "whiteness" of an earlier work, "Moonrise." In this latter poem, it is also the moon which generates the "complexion of the mind."

Although its presence is frequently clandestine, and eludes the less sensitive perceivor, in "Moonrise," Plath tells how the poet is conscious of, and utterly susceptible to lunar forces:

> I smell that whiteness here, beneath the stones
> Where small ants roll their eggs, where grubs fatten.
> Death may whiten in sun or out of it.
>
> Death whitens in the egg and out of it.
> I can see no colour for this whiteness.
> White: it is a complexion of the mind.[25]

The moon throughout Plath's writing exhibits great power. As in these two poems it is envied for its ability to coordinate processes of universal transformation, of birth and death. It, like the sea to which it is organically linked, consistently exerts energies by which the poet is both inspired, and exhausted. In fact, it is apparent that "Lucina," the "bony mother," will yield no substantial returns. And Plath is forced to conclude:

> The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
> White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
> It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet
> With the O-gape of complete despair.26

Although the dynamic of inspiration and exhaustion is ceaseless, and inspite of the negative atmosphere which the moon evokes, the poet totally indulges herself in its sphere of influence, and concludes, "I live here."

In "The Moon And The Yew Tree," we see at work that syndrome of inspiration-exhaustion which is the essence of ~~the~~ her creative process. Plath is inspired by the moon,yet, imaginatively reaching out to it, returns unfulfilled. And still, thrust back upon herself, the poet's own imaginative-emotional energies take over in an effort to compensate for that of which she has been deprived. Thus, her preoccupation seems in part justified.

Although Plath professes to long for an organic re-integration with her lost "mother," we cannot help but believe that the utter

honesty and appropriateness of her "Yew Tree" account rests upon her very role as "bystander." The poem provides a solitudinous landscape which must indeed prove rehabilitative to an artist like Plath, so submerged in a melange of extraneous social responsibilities. Far from being confessional, the poem presents a vision of that state within which the poet is most genuinely herself. It contains all the sorrow and grief of a psyche which has many times imaginatively progressed through the cycle of human experience, through its death and resurrection, until Plath herself admits, "I simply cannot see where there is to get to."[27]

The landscape of the poem, with its "row of headstones" and its "eight great tongues affirming the Resurrection," comes to represent various phases of the cycle which Plath's memory experience embodies. Thus, as an expression of her mental state, the poem's description fuses the subjective and objective forces of her vision: subjective, in that she virtually moves within the realm of her own mind, and objective, in that she as creator controls, and coordinates its various processes. The yew tree and the moon respectively symbolize her schizoid self, what is here, and what is out there. The "tree" within the realm of her immediate perception, with its "Gothic shape," leads the consciousness to that other part which is outside, focusing all the scattered vestiges of sacredness and love which have been long relinquished by the inner self.

The self-imposed isolation which"The Moon And The Yew Tree" describes, though desirable, creates a psychic pressure, a straining out of the active self toward the object which may possibly complete it. There is also a counter-process in operation which attempts to reconcile the self to this seclusion. By striving to integrate the "in" and the "out" of experience, the subjective and objective, the imaginative and the real, Plath is deceived into using this symbol as a substitute for the point at which opposing forces converge. Consequently, the moon proves to be a shadowy, misleading agent, and at times is conceived as blatantly demonic:

She is not sweet like Mary. 28
Her blue garmets unloose small bats and owls.

Still, as an extension of the powerful female consciousness, the image and its potential associations are difficult for Plath to abandon. Afterall, as the poet herself confesses, "I have fallen a long way," and what was once artistic choice, is now psychological compulsion.

The moon's forces, "bald and wild" as they are, have violated the self's autonomy. It is in this sense an intruder whose presence is finally unwelcome. Within the boundaries of her psychic confinement, Plath is everywhere confronted with the dessicated and sterile remnants of a world once meaningful:

> I have fallen a long way. Clouds are flowering
> Blue and mystical over the face of the stars.
> Inside the church, the saints will be all in blue,
> Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
> Their hands and faces stiff with holiness.[29]

from which the only exit is the oblivion of "blackness and silence."

While in the above poem Plath submits to the moon's forces, occasionally the encounter can become the site of violent contention. In "Elm" the poet combats the destructive momentum of "otherness" which assumes many forms. The moon image in this poem functions to assist Plath in focusing a terrifying and ambiguous threat which seeds in experience, and grows deep with a "great tap root."

At first, the poet concedes that the threat may germinate within the self:

> Is it the sea you hear in me,
> Its dissatisfactions?
> Or the voice of nothing that was your madness?[30]

And later, by her image, Plath implies the inner and outer dimensions of this terrible entity. The threat, lodged within the perceiving psyche, is outwardly expressed through imaginative creation, and thus attributed an objective reality. It is the "dark thing" which the poet feels with "its soft, feathery turnings, its malignity," and yet, the moon literally "dragging" the psyche, forces it to confront the outer aspect of the horror; the whole reality:

> What is this, this face
> So murderous in its strangle of branches?-

> Its snaky acids kiss.
> It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
> That kill, that kill, that kill.[31]

Inspite of her brutality, the moon's most attractive quality is that she refuses to yield. She is virgin, and remains impenetrable. She traditionally witholds. Here, then, Plath aspires to this lunar autonomy, and attempts to emulate its capacity to resist and endure. The moon's emotional sterility goes hand in hand with its ability to evolve through various phases toward a state of perfection. This cyclical existence is comparable to the phases of poetic creation which incessantly repeat themselves in the consciousness of the compulsive poet.

Ultimately, however, the separation of moon and self is inevitable. The poet, unlike the moon, lacks the absolute intellect which constitutes the lunar essence. Plath's emotional responses are vast, and frequently uncontrollable, whereas the moon, perpetually the seat of reason, is the head which provides only an "O-mouth" that "grieves," or the "O-gape of complete despair."[32] These are useless to the despondent self. They connote not only the sterility of intellect, but the passivity of an observor whose absoluteness prohibits involvement. Thus, the lunar symbol which so preoccupies Plath, fails her. It lends no assistance in time of distress, but aggravates an already despairing psyche. We detect repeatedly the poet's frustration at attempting to

re-define, and re-articulate the various associations of what proves finally to be an inadequate symbol.

For Sylvia Plath, then, it can be concluded that the creative process requires the transformation of experiental reality into that equally valid and autonomous reality which constitutes the artistic product. Occupying the vital "edge" between imagination and life experience, she is actor and bystander, subject and object, but most significantly the creator who coordinates the data of her experience into the unique and absolute form which art implies. This sentence could be put better.

shapes chaotic experiences

Chapter III The Fragmented Reality

<u>The wind rocks my wish; the rain shields me;</u>
<u>I live in light's extreme; I stretch in all directions;</u>
<u>Sometimes I think I'm several.</u>

Theodore Roethke[1]

To Sylvia Plath the artistic consciousness like the product of its creation is the sum of its many parts. Ever in the process of evolving, the self and its visions demand the most earnest concentration of energies, and must be patiently arranged and structured until some conception of unity is attained. And yet, the perfect poem, and the psychic completion which it implies cannot be attained. Like the work of art, the psyche is absolute since it contains within itself the forces of its own becoming. Man must at last concede that art and the intricate components of his own mind coordinate an autonomy to which he can aspire, but never attain. True of Plath not true of greater artists - Beethoven

The ambiguity of cause and the inadequacy of effect make the process of experience Plath's chief preoccupation. Life and art are at their most satisfying when dynamic and malleable. The manipulation of artistic constituents within a work, or the re-ordering of a memory's fragments provide the poet an undeniable challenge. Relentless in her efforts, Plath again and again returns to verbalize certain elements of life experience with what can be termed only an accumulating compulsion.

The artistic motive underlying the poems of her first volume, The Colossus, seems this very need to re-organize the scattered realities of her youthful experience. Plath is concerned with gathering these memories, and through the imagination, transforming them into some

coherent pattern which will guide her back to that unaccomodated, essential state wherein she was most complete. The poet must carefully study the "maps"[2] of her experience in order to gain some sense of her artistic direction.

Therefore, in much of The Colossus the process of the re-construction is tedious and painstaking. In his notes, Ted Hughes describes Plath's composition of her early poems:

> She wrote her early poems very slowly, Thesaurus open on her knee, in her large, strange handwriting, like a mosaic, where every letter stands separate in the work, a hieroglyph to itself. If she didn't like a poem, she scrapped it entire. She rescued nothing of it. Every poem grew complete from its own root, in that laborious inching away, as if she were working out a mathematical problem, chewing her lips, putting a thick dark ring of ink around each word that stirred for her on the page of the Thesaurus.[3]

In the title poem, "The Colossus," Plath admits from the outset the impossibility of ever satisfactorily achieving a coherent vision:

> I shall never get you put together entirely,
> Pieced, glued, and properly jointed.[4]

Moreover, the greatness of the poem turns upon this very admission of an inadequacy which is artistically transcended by the successful process of her attempt. Although the poem's main focus is the memory of her father, it expresses in symbolical terms the complexities of the poet's own psychic experience, of her life and of her art.

"The Colossus" is a poem about the creative process, about the

coordination and integration of apparently disparate elements. The source of the poetic inspiration, as in "Ouija" and "Black Rook In Rainy Weather," is embodied in an object outside the creative psyche. This does not imply that the artist is merely a medium through which creative vibrations are transmitted and recorded. The process of poetic creation here envisaged is not only relentless and demanding, but frequently unrewarding. The poet is but a char-woman in the presence of a vast, oracular centre:

> Thirty years now I have laboured
> To dredge the silt from your throat.
> I am none the wiser.
>
> Scaling little ladders with gluepots and pails of lysol
> I crawl like an ant in mourning
> Over the weedy acres of your brow
> To mend the immense skull-plates and clear
> The bald, white tumuli of your eyes.[5]

Plath's feeling of frustration with her poetic attempts stems from the fact that her organic link with cosmic rhythms has been severed by the presence of her father. In this poem, she is deprived of that "old barnacled umbilicus" to which she refers in "Medusa." The poet has no way of getting back to the "red stigmata at the very centre"[6] where a unified vision awaits her. In its place there is only this archaic and inept substitute, "pithy and historical as the Roman Forum."

The fragmented memory of her father and the social stringencies which he represents, and at last, Plath's own responses to these, produce a chaos not in the least conducive to creative activity:

I open my lunch on a hill of black cypress.
Your fluted bones and acanthine hair are littered

In their own anarchy to the horizon-line.
It would take more than a lightning-stroke
To create such a ruin.7

The overwhelming presence of this decadent memory hinders Plath's artistic expression by literally blocking out the light which would directly inspire her. Consequently, the subject towers outside her vision:

The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow.
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing.8

The poet is isolated, and grounded by her unsuccessful attempt. From the first line to the last, the admission of futility is sustained in what attributes the poem a cyclical structure. Plath has despaired of attaining the creative centre from which she can focus her poetic vision; and yet, through her compulsive energies, she will, as in this poem, again engage in repeated attempts at "piecing together" the chaotic remnants of her experience.

In "Poem For A Birthday," embarking from ubiquious chaos, Plath attempts another integration, this time of the fragments of a psychic explosion. As the interrogative "who" of the first section, the self lacks its own identity. It is an organic part of the putrifying terrain:

The month of flowering's finished. The fruit's in.
Eaten and 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.[9]

The earthy environment has enforced upon the self a state of inertia. She writes, "My heart is a stopped geranium,"[IO] or later describes:

> I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet,
> Without dreams of any sort.[11]

Totally without will, the psyche would be ingested by the force of "otherness" which is elsewhere terrifying. Since her susceptibility to universal forces is so incredibly acute, the speaker hopes to be silenced and completed within the body of earth. Although incapble of responding, she is aware of "the wind (that) will not leave (her) lungs alone" and "the hoops of blackberry stems (that) make (her) cry."[12] She is "lit up like an electric bulb," and so subject to every stimulation that she lapses into oblivion, "For weeks I can remember nothing at all."[13]

In 2. "Dark House" the speaker burrows downward in an effort to escape the harrowing forces of air. Within her "cuddly mother," Earth, she finds it "warm and tolerable," and the psyche, under the pressure of its environment, is prompted to multiply:

> Any day I may litter puppies
> Or mother a horse. My belly moves.
> I must make more maps.[14]

The self now apprehends the manyness of its own structure and the

"otherness" which contains it. Its convoluted habitat has "many cellars," "pebble smells," and "turnipy chambers." And although the psyche tries with its "maps" to make some progress, it is all the while "in the bowel of the root,"[15] unactualized and multiple.

3. "Maenad" finds the self confronting the fragmented remains of its experience, its memories of father and mother, of which it concludes, "O I am too big to go backward."[16] "Piecing together" second-hand experience is, as we have seen, utterly futile. The speaker, therefore, threatens her memories if they should impose themselves upon her, and like a great open receptacle, seeks to swallow all the "otherness" of past, present, and future experience:

> Time
> Unwinds from the great umbilicus of the sun
> Its endless glitter.
>
> I must swallow it all.[17]

Herein, this great energizing link with reality may, she hopes, draw her to the unified root of her identity, "Tell me my name."[18]

4. "The Beast" is a portrait of her father, "Fido Littlesoul," who "won't be got rid of," and has, as a result, driven her down into the earth. Because of him, she is forced to "bed in a fish puddle," and "housekeep in Time's gut end." And at last, in 5. "Flutes Notes from a Reedy Pond," the psyche reaches the ultimate, unaccomodated state which Plath describes:

This is not death, it is something safer.
The wingy myths won't tug at us any more: I9

In the last two sections the poet provides an account of the psyche being repaired by the mechanical forces of "otherness." First, in 6. "Witch Burning," the dissicated self is expanded, and made malleable by fire:

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 pot lid, tiny and inert as a rice grain.
They are turning the burners up, ring after ring.
We are full of starch, my small white fellows. We grow. 20
It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth.

Then, in 7. "The Stones," its various injured parts are "pieced together" by impersonal hands. Here, Plath confronts us with all the implements and mechanisms which will later appear throughout Ariel. Retrieved from what she terms the "quarry of silences," the speaker is gradually drawn together. She is nourished, and restored by that "mother of otherness" whose organic being has been now transformed into one wholly mechanistic:

Drunk as a foetus
I suck 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. 2I

The psyche is thus re-unified by those same mechanical forces which first provoked its fragmentation, by those "pincers" and "hammers"

whose impact can be both creative and destructive. And the ultimate irony of the poem rests upon Plath's inherent uncertainity as to the validity of her new state. The last stanza:

> Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadow.
> My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.
> I shall be as good as new.[22]

implies the termination of an energy-demanding process which leads to the hated stasis. The futility which surrounds Plath's reconstruction of fragmented realities everywhere pervades her expression. If futility does not emanate from the inadequacy of the attempt, it confronts her, as in "Poem For A Birthday," in the final outcome of process.

Clearly, Plath's own complex psychic structure manifests one of her major artistic concerns. In "Two Sisters Of Persephone" and "In Plaster," the poet deals with the multiple psyche. These poems present very similar visions of a schizoid self, exhibiting two distinct and contrasting personalities, ultimately irreconcilable. In "Two Sisters," we are provided with what may be termed a poetic tableau. The poet's primary concern focuses upon depicting her subject as articulately as possible, without making any effort to re-integrate its constituents.

The poem, through its symmetrical presentation of opposites, describes the schizoid structure, the "two girls," which are organic

relations within the "house" of the same body. The one "within"is, we feel, the real Plath, the self with which she is always inescapably confined. This personality, like that "old yellow one" of "In Plaster," is "ugly and hairy," and represents her rationally oriented part. Although it is described as being engaged in a "barren enterprise," intellectual pursuits obviously prove satisfying to Plath's vigorous mental capacities. Intellection is necessary.

This "wry virgin," nevertheless, does lack the fertility of her counterpart. In the tableau, the poet associates her with hues of "shade," since she is withdrawn from the artistically inspiring energy of the sun's light. Her existence, so mechanically coordinated by "a mathematical machine" and the "dry ticks of time," is set in stark contrast to the emotional susceptibility of her "sister."

The latter is the "sun's bride." Passive and receptive to the fructifying forces of her environment, she "bears a king." For her, even time itself is regenerative, and blows past"like pollen in bright air." The portrait is endowed with the passionate colours of her personality: with reds, greens, and golds. She is above the earth, and glorified by air, while her opposite "turned bitter," is, by the poem's end, nearly subterranean, and:

> Goes graveward with flesh laid waste,
> Worm-husbanded, yet no woman. 23

Based upon the contrast of colour and textural description, the entire tableau with its clean duality implies again the futility of

ever achieving psychic unity. The self in the process of its actualization requires the active presence of both rational and emotional faculties. And clearly, it is the well-coordinated interaction of these which provides the being its most satisfying experience.

Unfortunately, Plath is unable to accept the presence of what truly becomes more than a psychic bifurcation. Her two personalities, though organically related, emerge like two individualized entities, each exerting its own will. The result, ofcourse, is contention, and "In Plaster" explicitly asserts the impossibility of reconciling, "This new absolutely white person and the old yellow one."[24]

The poem, like "Two Sisters," works on contrast. Again, there is the antagonism between personalities, between the public and the private. The "white person", the social persona, is, Plath concedes, "certainly superior." She is not real, needs no food, and is "unbreakable," yet, the poet relates her earnest attempts at making the "marriage" work. The "wry" self is again engaged in a "barren enterprise," this time of adapting to her glamorous but unproductive opposite whose presence becomes increasingly destructive:

> She wanted to leave me, she thought she was superior,
> And I'd been keeping her in the dark, and she was resentful-
> Wasting her days waiting her days waiting on a half-corpse!
> And secretly she began to hope I'd die.
> Then she could cover my mouth and eyes, cover me entirely,
> And wear my painted face the way a mummy-case [25]
> Wears the face of aPharaoh, though it's made of mud and water.

Efforts at cohabitation fail. The speaker knows that she must remove her rival who is, with her static, dead nature, like a "coffin." In what foreshadows a violent psychic upheaval, Plath in this poem explicates the necessity of the inner personality's elimination of the extraneous social"mould" within which it has been forced to live:

> Now I see it must be one or the other of us.
> She may be a saint, and I may be ugly and hairy,
> But she'll soon find out that that doesn't matter a bit.
> I'm collecting my strength; one day I shall manage without her,
> And she'll perish with emptiness then, and begin to miss me.[26]

Indeed, to be essentially oneself, enjoying the psychic unity of being "altogether" is the most vitally pleasing of all experiences for Plath. And after only a limited consideration of the poet's concern with the multiple reality, it becomes possible to predict under what conditions the psyche and its visions begin to disintegrate. The most conspicuous factor is the presence of some external pressure, yet, not merely unqualified, since pressure controlled and selected, can prove psychically cohesive. As we have seen, Plath, under the influence of certain emotion-provoking recollections can attain a state of unity through the balanced fusion of imagination and experience. When engaged in a poetic process which is working in her favour, the poet is the cohesive centre, the nucleus round which orbit all external realities. Truly, the pressure which fragments and scatters must be first, unanticipated and more intense, and should emanate

from a mechanical source. The "wry virgin" and the "white torso" are impediments to psychic unity because they function in a rational, unresponsive way which frustrates the creative impulse.

Disturbing though it may be, the well-toned intellect is nevertheless a vital part of the psychic structure. If an actualized self is to be achieved, the rational faculties must be allowed to exercise their powers to analyse and process the data of the senses, to yield objective conclusions which would remain otherwise interred in experience. The problem emerges when the intellectual faculty usurps the seat of imagination. The equilibrium between intellect and emotion thus violated, the psyche forfeits its creative autonomy.

In two poems of The Colossus Plath imaginatively expands this concept of intellectual domination. "The Thin People" and "Mushrooms" present quite literally the invasion of emaciated yet resilient hordes whose sporey tenacity allows them to "inherit the earth."[27] Above all, they possess that pure rationality, undiluted by emotion, and symbolically represent our own intellectual potential which has, in time of crisis, conceived and implemented destructive innovations. Once invoked, these forces flourish under pressure, and begin to work against us:

> it was only
> In a war making evil headlines when we
>
> Were small that they famished and
> Grew so lean and would not round

Out their stalky limbs again though peace
Plumped the bellies of the mice

Under the meanest table.
It was during the long hunger-battle

They found their talent to persevere
In thinness, to come, later

Into our bad dreams, their menace
Not guns, not abuses,

But a thin silence.[28]

The power of these creatures emerges from our very own apathy. We make no effort to resist them, and consequently, they will thrive. As they themselves observe in "Mushrooms:"

Nobody sees us,
Stops us, betrays us;[29]

Moreover, of all factors assuring their victory the most potent is their strength of number. Through their capacity to multiply and the sheer volume of their presence, they achieve substance. They occupy space, and no longer shadowy, "persist in the sunlit room."[30] The manifestation of their terrible flurry comes in their capacity to isolate us from all regenerative influences. They now create their own darkness:

We own no wildernesses rich and deep enough
For strongholds against their stiff

Battalions. See, how the tree boles flatten
And lose their good browns

If the thin people simply stand in the forest,

Making the world go thin as a wasp's nest
And greyer; not even moving their bones.[31]

Here, in these poems Plath has provided a vision of fragmented, multiple "otherness" which, recovering from the force that assailed it, assumes an existence independent of the self.

Elsewhere, we have evidence of a similar phenomenon. In "Cut," the poet describes how an unexpected slip of the knife over her thumb can create a new being, a "homunculus," whose startling presence ambushes the self, and evokes that "thin papery feeling" which Plath finds so psychically stimulating. Now I'm getting it

From the trauma of illness or accident the poet frequently emerges regenerated. The threats imposed upon the body's forces, afterall mechanical, drive toward the centre the more elusive psychic energies. In "Tulips" and "Fever 103°" we observe how physical suffering, through a process of purgation culminates in a state of acute awareness. Therefore, what is at first a fragmented, wounded being becomes gradually drawn together by the gravitation of its own psyche.

The process of her illness in "Tulips" at first leads Plath to believe that she has nearly attained that impersonal anonymity to which the cosmic integration of death is the logical completion. She indulges herself in inertia:

> I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions.
> I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses
> And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons.[32]

Having shed, so she thinks, all the extraneousness of her being, she is outside the mechanical routine which has so wearied her. Neither male nor female, she is only the "stupid pupil" which observes life experience, exhibiting no response to it.

Although Plath boasts of her new-found essentialness, "I have never been so pure," she must soon concede that she has not managed to transcend her environment. Her being has been scattered about her by the force of the "vortex." First, it is the objects of her identity which call her back:

> My patent leather overnight case like a black pillbox,
> My husband and child smiling out of the family photo; 33
> Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks.

and finally, the "tulips," like the attentive mother of "Ocean 1212-W," prevent the poet's submersion in the comic "otherness" which moves near-by.

Consequently, "Tulips" presents Plath with an unsatisfying state. She is neither here nor there. The heightened awareness of completion is present:

> I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes 34
> Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.

yet, the longed-for "otherness," "like the sea," is only spasmotically apprehended through the imagination. The "health" of a totally unified fusion of imaginative and experiental energies is beyond the self:

> The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
> And comes from a country far away as health.[35]

The experience of "Fever 103°," on the other hand, proves more satisfactory. The poet embarks from a chaos of fragmented visions fabricated by her own imagination- a virtual hell:

> The tongues of hell
> Are dull, dull as the triple
>
> Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus
> Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
> Of licking clean
>
> The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.
> The tinder cries.
> The indelible smell
>
> Of a snuffed candle![36]

During the process of her illness, she passes through the physio-emotional suffering of fever and delirium, and experiences a series of hallucinations significantly associated. The "hothouse baby," "ghastly orchid," "devilish leopard," and finally, the "bodies of adulterers" rapidly explode and multiply the poet's vision, carrying it through a cycle from birth to death.

The process of her sickness, lasting "Three days, Three nights,"[37] focuses a drive to Plath's psychic centre wherein she asserts:

> I am too pure for you or anyone.
> Your body
> Hurts me as the world hurts God.[38]

Under the cohesive forces of her psyche, we see how readily Plath can metamorphize. She is no longer separated from the objects of ex-

ternal reality, but literally becomes them. Assuming enery-releasing forms, she is first "a lantern" which has required ~~must~~ much skill and expense in the making. And still evolving in her whiteness like "a huge camellia," the poet moves toward the extreme, pure heat of "acetylene," by which epithet she rises to ultimate perfection:

> 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.
> Not you, nor him
>
> Not him, nor him
> (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats--
> To Paradise39

Here, in this re-integration with cosmic unity, the several selves are eliminated. The mystical process described trims off the psychic excess which prevents Plath from being altogether. The poem's artistic intensity expresses her compulsive drive to get back into that energy nucleus from which all things proceed, and must inevitably return. religious or deadly

Once released from stringencies, the self attempts to prolong this state of psychic perfection. However, efforts to this end not only prove frustrating, but may also prompt an unhealthy withdrawal from external reality. The psyche may solidify in its attempt to resist fragmentation. In a later poem, "Paralytic," Plath articulates this state:

My mind a rock,
No fingers to grip, no tongue,
My god the iron lung

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

Let me relapse
While the day outside glides by like ticker tape.
The night brings violets,
Tapestries of eyes,

Lights,
The soft anonymous
Talkers: 'You all right?' 40
The starched, inaccessible breast.

We are reminded here of the distorted, curious world of Esther Greenwood, a psychic realm vast in dimension, animated by the sensitive, wounded mind which contains it. She, like the speaker of "Paralytic," is acutely aware of the dynamic environment away from which she has burrowed. Similarly, Esther's perceptions are beyond her power to control them, and multiply into a confused mélange of visions. The experience of "Paralytic," in which external forces are remotely perceived by an inoperative psyche, provides a poetic equivalent to Esther's shock treatment in The Bell Jar:

> I climbed after Doctor Gordon's dark-jacketed back.
>
> Downstairs, in the hall, I had tried to ask him what the shock treatment would be like, but when I opened my mouth so words came out, my eyes only widened and stared at the smiling, familiar face that floated before me like a plate full of assurances.

no

At the top of the stairs, the garnet-coloured carpet stopped. A plain, brown linoleum, tacked to the floor, took its place, and extended down a corridor lined with shut white doors. As I followed Doctor Gordon, a door opened somewhere in the distance, and I heard a woman shouting.

All at once a nurse popped around the corner of the corridor ahead of us leading a woman in a blue bathrobe with shaggy, waist-length hair. Doctor Gordon stepped back, and I flattened against the wall.

As the woman was dragged by, waving her arms and struggling in the grip of the nurse, she was saying 'I'm going to jump out of the window, I'm going to jump out of the window, I'm going to jump out of the window.'

Dumpy and muscular in her smudge-fronted uniform, the wall-eyed nurse wore such thick spectacles that four eyes peered out at me from behind the round, twin panes of glass. I was trying to tell which eyes were the real eyes and which the false eyes and which of the real eyes was the wall-eye and which the straight eye, when she brought her face up to mine with a large, conspiratorial grin and hissed, as if to reassure me, 'She thinks she's going to jump out the window but she can't jump out the window because they're all barred!

And as Doctor Gordon led me into a bare room at the back of the house, I saw that the windows in that part were indeed barred, and that the room door and the closet door and the drawers of the bureau and everything that opened and shut was fitted with a keyhole so it could be locked up.

I lay down on the bed.

The wall-eyed nurse came back. She unclasped my watch and dropped it in her pocket. Then she started tweaking the hairpins from my hair.

Doctor Gordon was unlocking the closet. He dragged out a table on wheels with a machine on it and rolled it behind the head of the bed. The nurse started swabbing my temples with a smelly grease.

As she leaned over to reach the side of my head nearest the wall, her fat breast muffled my face like a cloud or a pillow. A vague, medicinal stench emana-

> ted from her flesh.
> 'Don't worry,' the nurse grinned down at me. 'Their first time everybody's scared to death.'
> I tried to smile, but my skin had gone stiff, like parchment.
> Doctor Gordon was fitting two metal plates on either side of my head. He buckled them into place with a strap that dented my forehead, and gave me a wire to bite.
> I shut my eyes.
> There was a brief silence, like an indrawn breath.
> Then something bend down and took hold of me and shook me like the end of the world. Whee-ee-ee-ee, it shrilled, through an air cracking with blue light, and with each flash a great jolt drubbed me till I thought my bones would break and the sap fly out of me like a split plant.41

To the details of the "inaccessible breast" and the attempt to smile, the writer in both instances describes a state of schizophrenic withdrawal. Esther's shattered visions have reduced her to a state of psychic stasis which she later attempts to complete by suicide. She is now only a fragment of the whole that she once was, and like:

> The claw
> Of the magnola,
> Drunk on its own scents,
> Asks nothing of life. 42

The epilogue of The Bell Jar passage here quoted, "I wondered what terrible thing it was I had done,"43 focuses, in one line, all the pathos and grief of a psyche literally gutted by the mechanisms of an efficient but sterile "otherness." Moreover, in the whole body of Plath's writing, we gradually see that "fragmentation" emerges as

merely symptomatic of that more pervasive, rudimentary horror of the mechanical universe which perpetrates it.

Chapter IV The Mechanical Universe

The cause of God in me- has it gone?
Do these bones live? Can I live with these bones?
Mother, mother of us all, tell me where I am!
O to be delivered from the rational into the realm of pure song,

Theodore Roethke[1]

The account of "Ocean 1212-W" exemplifies Plath's innate sensitivity to the dynamic universe in which she moves. Her first environment, "the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic," exposes her to forces, apparently innocuous. She writes:

> -I'm a small sea captain, tasting the day's weather-battering rams at the seawall, a spray of grapeshot on my mother's brave geraniums, or the lulling shoosh-shoosh of a full, mirrory pool; the pool turns the quartz grits at its run idly and kindly, a lady brooding at jewellery. There might be a hiss of rain on the pane, there might be wind sighing and trying the creaks of the house like keys.2

And yet, asserts Plath:

> I was not deceived by these. The motherly pulse of the sea made mock of such counterfeits. Like a deep woman, it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances; if it could count, it could kill. 3

The sea serves as an archetype of which all other dynamic forces are but variations. From the experience of "Ocean 1212-W," the poet's first conception of "otherness" concerns the natural processes of her environment, of sea, and land, and sky. And it is the creative-destructive potential of these forces which most fascinates and concerns her. For example, the sea with its puissant momentum can pose a threat to an entire community as related in "The Bull Of Bendylaw." Here, the ocean's forces are associated with an impassioned bull whose might utterly overwhelms Man's civilized state:

> The bull surged up, the bull surged down,
> Not to be stayed by a daisy chain
> Nor by any learned man.

> O the king's tidy acre is under the sea,
> And the royal rose in the bull's belly,
> And the bull on the king's highway.[4]

while, elsewhere, as in "Ocean 1212-W," the aquatic realm holds significant secrets which Plath feels compelled to explore. In "Full Fathom Five" and "Lorelei" she is inescapably impressed by that same watery "mirror" encountered in childhood. The "flux of silver"[5] awakens the poet to a new world of vision, of the imaginative reality which reflects and enhances life experience.

Clearly, the creative and destructive aspects of her environment synthesize to produce a universe of unlimited resource. In the creative process the artist learns to manipulate this potential, and to channel it to her own purposes. Moreover, she utilizes this energy to create her own realm of imagination of which she is the ruler. In "Snakecharmer," Plath provides an account of this artistic imperium. He is the ideal creator, outside the spheres of both gods and men, and has absolute autonomy within a domain of his own creation:

> As the gods began one world, and man another,
> So the snakecharmer begins a snaky sphere.
> With moon-eye, mouth-pipe, He pipes. Pipes green.
> Pipes water.[6]

Like the traditional creator, the charmer starts from void, separating earth from water, from which proceed "snaky generations" until with "reedy lengths and necks and undulatings,"[7] "nothing but

snakes is visible." The snake as a symbol of fecundity helps Plath to articulate a vision of a well-coordinated universe over which the "snakecharmer," the artist, has absolute control.

Lacking spatial and temporal dimensions, the realm is sustained within the confines of the creative imagination which has conceived it:

> And he within this snakedom
> Rules the writhings which make manifest
> His snakehood and his might with pliant tunes
> From his thin pipe.[8]

The creative experience, with its intense concentration of imaginative energy, permits the poet to invoke forces which transcend the present, and she imaginatively re-constructs that primordial state of Eden wherein creative potential was first actualized:

> Out of this green nest
> As out of Eden's navel twist the lines
> Of snakey generations: let there be snakes!
> And snakes there were, are, will be-[9]

Here, during the process of most active imaginative exertion the psyche is able to effect a harmony among the various cosmic rhythms which confront it. Through her creative faculties the artist modifies that otherwise destructive force which "kills,"[10] and attributes it creative direction.

The difficulty arises for Plath when for one or another reason the dynamics of her environment, of "otherness," exceed her own energies

this too abstract for me

so that she is confounded by a contrast between stasis and flux, between the inoperative psyche and the potent "otherness" which denies penetration. Plath describes this phenomenon in "Poppies In July." Of the lush, vital flowers the poet writes:

> You flicker. I cannot touch you.
> I put my hands among the flames. Nothing burns.
>
> And it exhausts me to watch you
> Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.
>
> A mouth just bloodied.
> Little bloody skirts!
>
> There are fumes that I cannot touch.
> Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?
>
> If I could bleed or sleep! ---
> If my mouth could marry a hurt like that!
>
> Or your liquors seep to me, in this glass capsule,
> Dulling and stilling.
>
> But colourless. Colourless.[11]

The "snakecharmer" represents Plath's ideal. Easeful in his pursuit, creation is a process in which he engages at his leisure. He is in control. When he bores of his art, he ceases his piping. Reducing his imaginative product to its constituents, he returns it to void, to once again assume a state of contented repose:

> he tires of music
> And pipes the world back to the simple fabric
> Of snake-warp, snake-weft. Pipes the cloth of snakes
>
> To a melting of green waters, till no snake

Shows its head, and those green waters back to
Water, to green, to nothing like a snake.
Puts up his pipe, and lids his mooney eye.12

There is no doubt that Plath envies the "snakecharmer," as she does the "man in black" and the "hermit;" these personae all possess and exercise the capacity to confront "otherness." The subject of "The Hermit At Outermost House" is effectively poised against nature's mechanisms:

Sky and sea, horizon-hinged
Tablets of blank blue, couldn't, 13
Clapped shut, flatten this man out.

"The great gods, Stone-Head, Claw-Foot,"[14] are the brute agents who order this potential in an attempt to annihilate the human presence.

The poem's predominant contrast lies in its imagery. The gods and the universal forces are closely associated with stony, blues and greys, while, quite late in the work, we have introduced the "hermit's" "certain meaning green." Plath assures that he has "thumbed no stony, horny pot,"[15] but rather, with this specialized energy, exerts a life-force which enables him to combat the natural forces of "rock-face, crab-claw." The "certain meaning green" evokes connotations of fertility and regeneration, of a dynamic resilient psyche as opposed to the stasis of the archaic "old despots."

The universe which these creatures rule is dynamic, but only in a wholly mechanized sense. It was set in motion by them, yet, for all their potency, they lack the creative essence which renews. Their

"rock-bumping" and "hinge-clapping" is unprogressive. The "hermit's" existence, though outwardly static is intrinsically dynamic. Through its concentrated potential,his life-force of "green" contains a universe of unactualized creativity. Like the "snakecharmer" who "pipes green," the "hermit" is in possession of that vital key which enables Man not merely to survive, but to flourish in the face of this mechanized "otherness."

Plath, on the one hand, displays great contempt for anyone who shuns this confrontation. Wendy Campbell writes of her:

> Sylvia felt that a drawing back in the face of any aspect of life was nothing less than horrible, a voluntary courting of deformity. It disgusted her, filled her with an angry contempt.[16]

And yet, on the other hand, there exists a paradox in that the poet herself describes in The Bell Jar her own efforts to escape reality. Descending into the cellar of her home, Esther Greenwood literally buries herself by crawling into a hole, and consuming a bottle of sleeping pills:

> Then I went downstairs and into the kitchen. I turned on the tap and poured myself a tall glass of water. Then I took the glass of water and the bottle of pills and went down into the cellar.
>
> A dim, undersea light filtered through the slits of the cellar windows. Behind the oil burner, a dark gap showed in the wall at about shoulder height and ran back under the breezeway, out of sight. The breezeway had been added to the house after the cellar was dug, and built out over this secret, earth-bottomed crevice.
>
> A few old, rotting fireplace logs blocked the hole mouth. I shoved them back a bit. Then I set the glass of water and the bottle of pills side by side on the flat surface

> of one of the logs and started to heave myself up.
> It took me a good while to heft my body into the gap, but at last, after many tries, I managed it, and crouched at the mouth of the darkness, like a troll.
> The earth seemed friendly under my bare feet, but cold. I wondered how long it had been since this particular square of soil had seen the sun.
> Then, one after the other, I lugged the heavy, dust-covered logs across the hole mouth. The dark felt thick as velvet. I reached for the glass and the bottle, and carefully, on my knees, with bent head, crawled to the farthest wall.
> Cobwebs touched my face with the softness of moths. Wrapping my black coat round me like my own sweet shadow, I unscreweed the bottle of pills and started taking them swiftly, between gulps of water, one by one by one.
> At first nothing happened, but as I approached the bottom, red and blue lights began to flash before my eyes. The bottle slid from my fingers and I lay down.
> The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life. Then, at the rim of vision, it gathered itself, and in one sweeping tide, rushed me to sleep.17

In "Spinster" we are again impressed with this paradox. Here, the poet presents the arch example of one who refuses to cope with her dynamic environment. She is disturbed:

> By the birds' irregular babel
> And the leaves' litter.18

More aggressive still are the actions of her lover which "unbalance the air." Nevertheless, for all the obvious disdain with which the portrait is presented, it is impossible to ignore the poet's presence therein. The "spinster" is, like the "wry virgin" of "Two Sisters Of Persephone," one facet of a complex psyche. The sensitive poet attempting to maintain her artistic equilibrium in the face of all external

pressures is similar to the "spinster."

As we have seen in the preceding chapter, Plath oscillates between two psychic extremes, between a passionate drive to yield to her universe and an equally powerful urge to withdraw. If the "snake-charmer" and the "hermit" can be taken to express her former drive, the "spinster" focuses all the dread which the poet attaches to the incessant potential of "otherness." In order to preserve herself, the persona is compelled to remain totally uninvolved. She shuns the unpredictably of her environment, of nature and of Man, and seeks the absolute safety of stasis:

> How she longed for winter then!
> Scrupulously austere in its order
> Of white and black
> Ice and rock, each sentiment within border,
> And heart's frosty discipline
> Exact as a snowflake.19

This extreme vision of order implies the poet's attraction and repulsion for the rational and sterile existence which leaves no room for emotion. Indded, Plath realizes the impending danger. The creative self, so earnestly striving for order in its expression may be led into assuming in life experience that clearly defined order which it imposes upon the products of its imagination. The result is ofcourse a stasis utterly destructive to the psychic energies. By the termination of the poem, we have the portrait of an isolated being who, unlike the "man in black" and the "hermit," fails to

confront, and transform the mechanical universe in which she finds herself. She neither assumes the "vortex", nor does she possess the creative essence of "green."

Like all practising artists, Plath is fiercely intimidated by the possibility of psychic withdrawal. The conflict here revolves around the poet's contempt for the stasis which paralyzes the creative faculties and her attraction to the imperishable order which it promises. The most satisfactory solution for Plath is ofcourse to effect some middle way between these extreme possibilities of her experience.

As Plath explores, this threat of "otherness" grows more undeniable. In her earlier work, the poet's vision of a dynamic universe is more closely confined within the realm of nature. The Colossus contains many poems in which land and seascape assert themselves as powerful forces against the wandering self. We have seen how the absolute landscape of "Hardcastle Crags" with its "incessant seethe of grasses" and the "humped indifferent iron of its hills," proves potentially destructive. So too, the "outer sea" of "Departure" is brutal endlessly. Nature in this poem is oblivious to Man's "leavetaking." He goes away "ungifted, ungrieved."

An earlier poem, "Night Shift," presents a glimpse of a future pre-occupation. Here, Plath transforms the dynamics of a hitherto natural environment into an "otherness" wholly mechanized. The poet's

fascination for mechanical precision draws her into an atmosphere so overpowering that she is compelled, as in "Ocean 1212-W," to quickly differentiate between the inner and outer forces of the experience:

> It was not a heart, beating,
> That mueted boom, that clangour
> Far off, not blood in the ears
> Drumming up any fever
>
> To impose on the evening. 20
> The noise came from the outside:

The "metal detonating," "hammers hoisted," and "wheels turning" foreshadow the mechanisms of poems such as "Getting There" and "Totem" in which, within a few years, the mechanical momentum has surpassed the poet's creative capacities. The "blunt indefatigable fact" is that Man is confronted and contained by inescapable forces which may eventually culminate in his alienation, if not in complete destruction.

Her posthumus volume, Ariel, is literally threaded together by Plath's expanding awareness of the mechanical existence which she is being compelled to accept. The very phases of the sosmic cycle, of birth, sex, and death, forfeit much of their spiritual significance, and are envisaged in purely impersonal terms. In "Morning Song," written after the birth of her daughter, the images used in reference

to the infant are devoid of human association. The baby is compared to "a fat gold watch." Like a "new statue," it enters a domestic atmosphere similar to a "drafty museum." The maternal role is embellished by a series of animal associations. There is a reference to the baby's "moth-breath" and its mouth which "opens clean as a cat's." Similarly, Plath describes herself as being "cow-heavy" as she climbs from her bed to attend the child.

For the poet, the essence of the relationship is articulated by the image of the cloud upon the mirror:

> I'm no more your mother
> Than the cloud that distills a mirror to reflect its own slow
> Effacement at the wind's hand.21

Here, Plath asserts her absolute independence. As the woman who conceived and bore the child, she is merely participating in a mechanical process. Birth is a cosmic experience which transcends the individual identity. The "far sea" which "moves" in her ear represents the cosmic motion of an eternally dynamic cycle in which the self is contained. It poetically fuses the imaginative and physical fecundity which woman embodies.

The impersonal and cosmic experience of regeneration is articulated by the juxtaposition of two associated visions. Plath writes of her offspring, "Your mouth opens clean as a cat's," and then, rapidly effects an imaginative leap to "the window square" which

"whitens and swallows its stars." And so for Plath the heightened state which birth inspires is soon dissipated by the mechanical processes of every day experience. She is forced to re-assume social stringencies in order to fulfill a role which no longer satisfies.

Generally in her work, Plath looks upon the child as the unaccomodated being who may possibly guide her back to the state wherein she was herself once a cosmic centre," the centre of her own universe." Clearly, the child is conceived as being significantly closer to the creative nucleus. In "The Night Dances," the poet describes her infant son as he engages in a kind of cosmic dance which expresses the rhythmical vibrations that he senses. In his notes, Hughes explains the movements as:

> ...an errie set of joyful, slow prancing movements which must be called a dance, and which he used to go through when he woke up at night.22

Although intrigued and stimulated by the infant's behavior, Plath by her insistent questions foreshadows the eventual loss of the child's sensitivity to such forces. As she describes, the infant's movements should "travel the world forever." Yet, ultimately they will diffuse into "otherness." Plath knows that it is simply a matter of time until the baby is reduced to a mundane and rational existence, the state of maturity. So she speculates:

> A smile fell in the grass
> Irretrievable!
>
> And how will your night dances 23
> Lose themselves. In mathematics?

Plath's apprehension of the separateness of self and "otherness" grows more intense, and she compulsively aspires through these infantile motions to effect a kind of imaginative re-integration. Furthermore, the poet's failure to achieve this end, confronts her with that truth which she ought by now to have internalized, namely that:

> Their flesh bears no relation.
> Cold folds of ego, the calla,
>
> And the tiger, embellishing itself--
> Spots, and a spread of hot petals.
>
> The comets
> Have such a space to cross,
>
> Such coldness, forgetfulness.
> So your gestures flake off--
>
> Warm and human, then their pink light
> Bleeding and peeling
>
> Through the black amnesias of heaven.[24]

The motions are scattered, and like "planets," become rooted in the universal order. Yet, the poet, the evolved, mature psyche, has been for a time inspired by their presence. They are "lamps" which illuminate the oblivion of her mechanical existence. Through their energy, they provide a momentary refuge from the stasis of the "black amnesias:"

> Falling like blessing, like flakes
>
> Six-sided, white
> On my eyes, my lips, my hair

> Touching and melting.
> Nowhere. 25

Like snow, the infant's rhythmical responses are swiftly diffused, and absorbed into the atmosphere, and lost perhaps forever.

In the poetic experiences of Ariel, the organic "otherness" of Plath's early visions is transformed into a universe of routinized predictability. Life experience, having been exhausted of all new possibilities, becomes stale. In The Bell Jar, Esther Greenwood describes the outcome of this same phenomenon:

> If Mrs. Guinea had given me a ticket to Europe, or a round-the -world cruise, it wouldn't have made one scrap of difference to me, because wherever I sat- on the deck of a ship or at a street cafe in Paris or Bangkok- I would be sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air. 26

In Ariel, this mechanical aspect of experience so takes over that time itself becomes alien "otherness," distinct from the self. In "Years," Plath describes how the measurements of time are independent of the perceivor:

> They enter as animals from the outer
> Space of holly where spikes
> Are not the thoughts I turn on, like a Yogi,
> But greeness, darkness so pure
> They freeze and are. 27

Of all the poems in which Plath attempts to articulate the horrors of her mechanical universe, "Berck-Plage" is perhaps most comprehensive. Here, the poet represents herself as the inept agent, the "priest," whose being has been spiritually dissipated by the mechanics

of an utterly rational, objective existence. The forces of a cluttered, chaotic world are depicted in the first three sections of the work. The perceivor has been driven by these to relinquish the vital centre of experience. Her realm is a "sandy damper (that) kills the vibrations,"[28] while she herself is reduced to a wholly physical and brute representation:

> The black boot has no mercy for anybody.
> Why should it, it is the hearse of a dead foot,
>
> The high, dead, toeless foot of this priest
> Who plumbs the well of his book,[29]

The poet, unable, and now also unwilling to coordinate the mélange of her visions: the "obscene bikinis," the "limbs, images, shrieks," and the "sea-crockery" of "things, things," maintains her autonomy upon the ground that she is no longer capable of creative cohesion, "my heart is too small to bandage their terrible faults."[30]

Here, the observing intellect is conceived as the negative of an emotional response which, inspite of everything, Plath cannot manage. As in The Bell Jar, the mechanical world has forced the speaker to live in a mechanical way. Although moving about and observing, the "priest" is merely the embodiement of a walking death whose potential is actualized by the presentation of the old man's dying. This latter account, depressing in its accuracy, articulates a purely mechanical conception of death, uncorrupted by the spiritual and emotional extraneousness traditionally associated with it. In a world of "things,"

death's shiny efficiency simplifies human existence by eliminating all complexities:

> Is he wearing pajamas or an evening suit
>
> Under the glued sheet from which his powdery beak
> Rises so whitely unbuffeted?
>
> They propped his jaw with a book until it stiffened
> And folded his hands, that were shaking: goodbye, goodbye.
>
> Now the washed sheets fly in the sun,
> The pillow cases are sweetening.
>
> It is a blessing, it is a blessing:
> The long coffin of soap-coloured oak,
>
> The curious bearers and the raw date 31
> Engraving itself in silver with marvellous calm.

The poet reports the predictable behavior of the man's wife whose unimaginative thoughts fail to even momentarily detach themselves from the materialistic realm. They are like:

> Blunt, practical boats 32
> Full of dresses and hats and china and married daughters.

Similarly, Plath's contempt for her own participation in death's ritual is obvious. She too is "a member of the party," and "behind the glass of this car," is as shielded and incapable of an emotional response as those whom she condemns.

In the last lines of the poem, the earth, like the "sandy damper" of section I, stifles the dynamic potential of death's experience. Thus, the eyes that momentarily open in awe to the presence of "a wonderful thing," namely death's completion, may comfortably look

away. Not even a desperate transfusion of cosmic energy can re-vitalize the dead possibility. It is lost forever:

> For a moment the sky pours into the hole like plasma.
> There is no hope, it is given up.33

Herein, Plath envisages the death and burial of her life experience, which through earnest and incessant exertions has been totally gutted of its substance. And she herself the "priest," empty as a "vessel," "sorry and dull," efficiently performs the ritual of its committal.

With its increasing mechanization, Plath's life experience prompts and fosters her obsessive need for completion. Clearly, the unity with "otherness" which once existed in childhood is, as the writer implies in "Ocean 1212-W," ever sought after by the creative self. The dread which Plath comes to associate with "otherness" is evoked only by the separation which circumstance imposes. The poet is a victim of a process which has removed her from the cosmic centre from which she came. What is out there becomes fearful, yet, its potential inspires. Thus, if the poetic concern of The Colossus is Plath's re-construction of valuable experience, her second volume, Ariel, transcends this structure to re-achieve a state of primal unity, of self and of all that is not self.

In the sudden and brillant poem, "Ariel," we see that Plath's vision of "Berck-Plage" is somewhat premature. Her wearied self

is still able to enjoy the excitement of process. In this poem, Plath is seized up, and by the experience of horseback riding, literally carried away from the chaotic, mechanistic world which she so despises. As the culmination of the Ariel experience, the title poem terminates in the fusion of imaginative and experiental realities. Beginning, "Stasis in darkness,"[34] the account proceeds rapidly, so that by the second line, the self has been shaken from its inert state, and is passing through the landscape at such intense velocity that the speaker has barely time to describe:

> the substanceless blue [35]
> Pour of tor and distances.

The poetic greatness of "Ariel" is in its evolution toward an utterly lucid and penetrating vision of unity which never again occurs in Plath's writing. Here, as nowhere else, she is "God's lioness."[36] Mate to the creative centre, she is wholly in control of the entire universe of her experience. Her capacities enable her to transcend the dimensions of time and space, since the experience is of neither past nor future, but of becoming. Stasis and flux gravitate, and Plath, through the sheer momentum of the experience which she has initiated, begins to yield up all extraneousness. Assuming mythical identities, she is "God's lioness" and "white Godiva." And finally, expelling her physical "stringencies," she merges with the force which propels her:

Something else

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

White
Godiva, I unpeel--
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.[37]

The poet is now part of that aquatic "otherness" of "Ocean 1212-W," so that she imaginatively becomes the infant who sought, yet, was prohibited from penetrating the sea's "looking-glass." Now finally, in the physio-emotional experience of horseback riding, in the memory of this, Plath momentarily re-lives that moment of infantile exploration:

The child's cry

Melts in the wall.[38]

Yet, the perfection of the experience lies in the imaginative autonomy which permits the poet to pursue its intensity to the ultimate termination. Losing her appendages, she becomes clean as an "arrow;" then, suddenly diffuses like:

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

Eye, the cauldron of morning.[39]

By the poem's end, Plath has been evaporated, and absorbed into

the sun, the "cauldron" of most intense creative energy. Here, at last, she is within the dynamic universe which has been so long outside her. Plath in "Ariel," has achieved that state of being for which she so earnestly longs in a much earlier poem, "The Eye-Mote:"

> What I want back is what I was
> Before the bed, before the knife,
> Before the brooch-pin and the salve
> Fixed me in this parenthesis;
> Horses fluent in the wind, 40
> A place, a time out of mind.

After the fulfillment of "Ariel," Plath herself provides an account of the dilemma which faces her as she embarks upon the last phase of her life:

Mystic

> The air is a mill of hooks--
> Questions without answer,
> Glittering and drunk as flies
> Whose kisses sting unbearably
> In the fetid wombs of black air under pines in summer.
>
> I remember
> The dead smell of sun on wood cabins,
> The stiffness of sails, the long salt winding sheets.
> Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?
> Once one has been seized up
>
> Without a part left over--
> Not a toe, not a finger--and used
> Used utterly, in the sun's conflagrations, the stains
> That lengthen from ancient cathedrals,
> What is the remedy?
>
> The pill of the Communion tablet,
> The walking beside still water? Memory?
> Or picking up the bright pieces
> Of Christ in the faces of rodents,

The tame flower-nibblers, the ones

Whose hopes are so low they are comfortable--
The humpback in her small, washed cottage
Under the spokes of the clematis?
Is there no great love, only tenderness?
Does the sea
Remember the walker upon it?
Meaning leaks from the molecules.
The chimneys of the city breathe, the window sweats,
The children leap in their cots.
The sun blooms, it is a geranium.
41
The heart has not stopped.

Sylvia Plath (1963)

Chapter V The Death

I am renewed by death, thought of my death,
The dry scent of a dying garden in September,
The wind fanning the ash of a low fire.
What I love is near at hand,
Always, in earth and air.

Theodore Roethke[1]

For the self which has been "used utterly," courted all danger, passed through all phases of the cosmic cycle, death remains the only fresh and unpredictable experience. The sensation which death inspires titillates Plath, so she is compelled to explore its possibilities. In "A Birthday Present," the poet portrays her ardent fascination for this undefined experience that promises absolute completion. Clearly, the very ambiguity of its nature excites her psychic energies in a new way. She concedes at least, "I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want."[2]

Death operates here in a dynamic way in that it functions, as always in Plath, as a complement to life experience. It is an "annunciation" which predicts revolution, the birth of a new age, and literally "shimmers" with dynamic energies. It is sensous in its approach. Plath suggests that, like a lover," I think it wants me." Death, then, is not in the least the negative of life experience- the dark, static oblivion which annihilates the self- but rather, it is associated here, as so frequently in Plath's writing, with a state of re-birth, with the "diaphanous satins" and ivory of "babies's bedding."

Death promises a series of unpredictable possibilities. The poet speculates that it may be "small," or conversely, may yield "enormity." Whatever the case, its organic presence eclipses the body of life experience which, having reduced itself to a purely mechanical nature, still sttubornly refuses to bestow the longed-for completion. Moreover,

in an effective inversion, it is life's refusal to complete the self which causes the poet's suffering, which "kills her days," while only death is able to re-vitalize:

> If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.
> To you they are only transparencies, clear air.
>
> But my god, the clouds are like cotton.
> Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide.
>
> Sweetly, sweetly I breathe in,
> Filling my veins with invisibles, with the million
>
> Probable motes that tick the years off my life.
> You are silver-suited for the occasion. O adding machine---
>
> Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go
>   whole?
> Must you stamp each piece in purple,
>
> Must you kill what you can?
> There is this one thing I want today, and only you can give it
>   to me. 3

We sense the poet's culminating frustration as the body of death omnipresent, even breathing from her bed-sheets, irritates the already "cold dead centre" of her existence, "where split lives congeal and stiffen to history."[4] The completion of death is desired with such intensity that Plath asserts her inability to wait out the duration of a natural lifetime. It must be immediate:

> Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty
> By the time the whole of it was delivered, and too numb to
>   use it. 5

Again, the motif of child-birth occurs. Infancy, as the state nearest cosmic unity, here, as in "Ocean 1212-W," expresses an essential

state to which Plath aspires. Relentless in her efforts, the poet seems firmly convinced that had she in her babyhood penetrated the sea's "glass," she would have been made complete. Therefore, in "A Birthday Present" the baby's cry, "pure and clean" serves as a protest against an existence which impedes and delays this ultimate fulfillment. As Plath differentiates, the "edge" of life experience merely "carves" and shapes, while the absoluteness of death incisively "enters," sinks deep into the layers of being, to release from within the "universe" of Man's potential:

> Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.
> If it were death
>
> I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.
> I would know you were serious.
>
> There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.
> And the knife not carve but enter
>
> Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,
> And the universe slide from my side. 6

The completion which death implements is finally the recapitulation of Man's experience. Since we all must die, we are, therefore, as Plath suggests in "All The Dead Dears," united by a strange bond of kinship. Every man is subject to death's "gross eating game." Herein, Plath inverts the traditional conception of relation by birth, so that all men become organically related by the fate which they share. Describing a decaying corpse which she encounters in the Cambridge Museum, Plath writes:

> How they grip us through thin and thick,
> These barnacle dead!
> This lady here's no kin
> Of mine, yet kin she is: she'll suck
> Blood and whistle my marrow clean
> To prove it.7

Our dead relations haunt us. "Riddled by ghosts," we pass through the various phases of existence, "wakes, weddings, childbirths," and the "family barbecue," to inevitably take "root as cradles rock."

Death's absolute and inescapable presence pursues Plath throughout life. Her apprehension often focuses upon her inability to clearly define its forces. "Death & Co. " presents a vision of death comprised of two distinctly opposed agents. The one, utterly mechanical and rational in his concerns, obliterates process. He delights in the state of captivity into which he can force his victim. His primary goal is to reduce animation to stasis: he "freezes" the babies, and "photographs" the speaker. Yet, despite his many skills, Plath resists, "I am not his yet."

Indeed, the poet is repelled by death's mechanical aspect. In <u>The Bell Jar</u>, we remember Esther's varied attempts at suicide, and how dying by means mechanical proved unsatisfactory. Her several efforts treated comically, nevertheless shimmer with desperation. To slash her wrists, attempt drowning, or hang herself are all virtually impossible despite her psychotic state. The young woman who has already rejected the mechanical forces by which she has been so callously

injured, refuses to embrace a completion also mechanical. Her being instinctively musters its energies in order to preserve itself from such a possibility:

> Then I saw that my body had all sorts of little tricks, such as making my hands go limp at the crucial second, which would save it, time and again, whereas if I had the whole say, I would be dead in a flash. 8

In "Death & Co.," Plath exerts this same resistance against the mechanics of the death experience. Death's other part is envisaged as a sensual, demanding lover who basks in the luxuriance of process. His need, in contrast to the parasitical drive of his opposite, seems genuine. Like the poet, he is alone, a:

> Bastard
> Masturbating a glitter,
> He wants to be loved.9

As in all Plath's experience, this polarized conception of death constitutes an essential balance of which the artistic consciousness is the fulcrum. Here, pursued by disparate forces of the same essence, the poet is driven to the centre of all processes, of the destructive which is at last creative, and of the earthly which becomes cosmic:

> I do not stir
> The frost makes a flower,
> The dew makes a star, 10

The refrain:

> The dead bell, 11
> The dead bell.

expresses the ultimate fusion in which all substantial variety, of the "condor" and the "bastard" of death, of the earth and the cosmos, of the self and "otherness," become one.

The absoluteness which death promises dispels the compulsion to create, which is after all in itself only an imaginative substitute for actual submergence in creative reality. Consequently, the "complete" self, having yielded to death, can enjoy a state of perfected being. Like the dead bell, the poet is no longer compelled by her frustrating imperfection to construct verbal totems of life experience. The most disturbing aspect of such articulation is that artistic form tends always to impose an artibrary order which denies the infinite phases of process, only one of which is presented. Although the direction of process can be suggested, artistic order does in fact deny vital motion.

The creative imagination, itself a dynamic entity, is proceeding every second toward the culmination of its artistic product. In what is clearly an energy-releasing process, that which is the fully actualized and coordinated vision of one moment, in the very act of transcription moves past its perfection. As Plath herself observes of human experience in general, "meaning leaks from the molecules." Although for all practical intents and purposes this loss is neglible, to a poet uncompromisingly committed to perfecting her art and her life, this realization is devastating.

Inherent in her last poems is Plath's explicit acknowledgement of the inadequacy of artistic expression. Here, we observe how aptly her poetic articulation accomodates itself to the severely disturbed condition of her psyche. The most conspicuous difference between works like "Balloons," "Kindness," "Contusion," and "Words," and their predecessors lies in their verbal constriction. It is as though, with her culminating anxiety, the poet's expression is compelled through an additional phase of refinement in which the creative product becomes severely condensed. Or, that the poetic faculty itself is restricted by her emotional state to such a degree that Plath finds it increasingly difficult to articulate her poetic visions.

Both "Contusion" and "Words" reiterate her concern over the problems of artistic creation. Although in their diction dense and tightened, the poems' images grow more incisive, and sharply etched than ever before. In "Contusion," for example, Plath sets out to articulate the process which leads to artistic sterility. Embarking from the wounded self, "Colour floods to the spot, dull purple,"[12] the poem organically proceeds outward in repeated expressions of a similar destructive impact, "the sea (that) sucks obsessively," and "the doom mark (that) crawls down the wall."[13]

From the terse, contracted style, it is obvious that Plath is incapable of imaginative expansion upon these examples. Yet, finally,

the unique power of the poem turns on its coherent progression through several precise images. And within three lines:

> The heart shuts,
> The sea slides back, 14
> The mirrors are sheeted.

is an adequate account of the creative process come to stasis. In order to save the psyche, the emotional response of the "heart" is repressed. However, with the withdrawal of emotional energies those imaginative are also sucked back, and the "sea" of the creative consciousness so turbulent, can no longer "mirror" experiental reality into its poetic product.

If "Contusion" articulates the death of the creative faculties, another poem, "Edge," also written in the last week of Plath's life, expresses the impending finality which threatens her whole being. At the transition between consciousness and oblivion, the self, emptied by its experience, presents a summation which must have been acutely painful to verbalize. The "perfected" woman described, is virtually a dead creature. Her life has circled a complete revolution, and is finished:

> Her bare
> Feet seem to be saying: 15
> We have come so far, it is over.

Even her offspring, woman's ideal fulfillment, fail to be of any importance. It is as though they were returned into her body from which they emerged. We are therefore drawn back beyond the beginning

of time to that point which constitutes also its termination. And ultimately penetrating beyond both beginning and end, the vision of a "garden" emerges as an essential state which precludes human existence:

> Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,
> One at each little
>
> Pitcher of milk, now empty.
> She has folded
>
> Them back into her body as petals
> Of a rose close when the garden
>
> Stiffens and odours bleed 16
> From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The poem's ultimate reality is of a universe which functions without Man. For the loss of self, there is no grieving. And it is possible that Plath's apprehension of Man's puny and irrelevant existence constituted one of her final intellectual confrontations. Although one strains every energy toward self-actualization within a frustrating and complex world, existence is ultimately irreconciable and inconsequential. After all:

> 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. 17

And so for Sylvia Plath:

> This is what it is to be complete. It is horrible. 18

Conclusion

Sylvia Plath lives her art. Her emergence and alienation from the cosmos creates the duality of an "otherness" nearly inaccessible, and a self which compulsively rejects separation. Plath's experience revolves around her earnest attempts at getting back to "otherness," at effecting a re-integration which will render her unified and strong. She tries to achieve this end in every conceivable way: by embracing all experience, by two attempts at suicide, and most significantly, by ardent and exhaustive efforts at artistically and imaginatively re-constructing the conditions which the unity requires. To this process, The Colossus is preparation, The Bell Jar a helpful documentation, and Ariel, with its title poem, the culmination.

Herein, Plath returns to "otherness" in a physio-imaginative experience which need not, and cannot be duplicated. She achieves the perfection of human existence, of mind and body, an absoluteness which transcends physical dimensions. Her vision will no longer concede to the extraneous tedium of existence, wholly inadequate and mechanical. In keeping with her ultimate confrontation, of a universe in which Man is inconsequential, the poet choses to perpetuate her "Ariel" experience, her completed state. And in her third suicide she actually becomes her art. Sylvia Plath, totally aware and responsible, yields herself up to the "great abeyance," "the black amnesias," "the cauldron," and is gone!

Footnotes

Chapter 1

[1] Theodore Roethke, "The Far Field," The Collected Poems of Theodore Roethke, ed. by Ralph B. Mills, (Doubleday, Garden City, New York, 1937) p. 200

[2] Sylvia Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," The Art Of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, ed. by Charles Newman, (Indiana University, Bloomington, London, 1970) p.272

[3] Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar, (Faber, London, 1963) p. 78

[4] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," p. 266

[5] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," p. 268

[6] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," p. 267

[7] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," p. 266

[8] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," p. 269

[9] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," P. 270

[10] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," p.p. 271-72

Chapter II

[1] Theodore Roethke, "The Far Field," p. 201

[2] Sylvia Plath, "Man In Black," The Colossus, (Faber, London, 1960) p.54

[3] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," p. 269

[4] Plath, "Hardcastle Crags," The Colossus, p.16

[5] Plath, "Hardcastle Crags," The Colossus, p. 16

[6] Plath, "Hardcastle Crags," The Colossus, p. 16

[7] Newman, "Candor Is The Only Wile: The Art of Sylvia Plath," The Art Of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, p. 21

[8] Ted Hughes, "Notes On The Chronological Order Of Sylvia Plath's Poems," The Art Of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, p. 191

[9] Plath, The Bell Jar,p. 162

[10] Plath, "Lorelei," The Colossus, p. 22

[11] Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 167

[12] Plath, "Lorelei," p. 22

[13] Plath, "Suicide Off,Egg Rock," The Colossus, p. 33

[14] Sylvia Plath, "The Bee Meeting," Ariel, (Faber,London, 1965) p.60

[15] Plath, "The Bee Meeting," p. 60

[16] Plath, "The Bee Meeting," p. 60

[17] Plath, "The Bee Meeting," p. 60

[18] Plath, "The Bee Meeting," p. 60

[19] Plath, "Lady Lazarus," Ariel, p.16

[20] Plath, "Lady Lazarus," p. 16

[21] Plath, "Daddy," Ariel, p. 54

[22] Plath, "Daddy," p. 54

[23] Plath, "Daddy," p. 54

[24] Hughes, in Newman, p. 194

[25] Plath, "Moonrise," The Colossus, p. 66

[26] Plath, "The Moon And The Yew Tree," Ariel, p. 47

27 Plath, "The Moon And The Yew Tree," p. 47

28 Plath, "The Moon And The Yew Tree," p. 47

29 Plath, "The Moon And The Yew Tree," p. 47

30 Plath, "Elm," _Ariel_, p. 25

31 Plath, "Elm," p. 25

32 Plath, "The Moon And The Yew Tree," p. 47

Chapter III

1 Theodore Roethke, "What Can I Tell My Bones?," p. 173

2 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," _The Colossus_, p. 82

3 Hughes, in Newman, p. 188

4 Plath, "The Colossus," _The Colossus_, p. 20

5 Plath, "The Colossus," p. 20

6 Plath, "Medusa," _Ariel_, p. 45

7 Plath, "The Colossus," p. 20

8 Plath, "Thw Colossus," p. 20

9 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 80

10 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 80

11 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 81

12 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 81

13 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 81

14 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 82

15 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 82

16 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 83

17 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 83

18 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 83

19 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 85

20 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 86

21 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 87

22 Plath, "Poem For A Birthday," p. 88

23 Plath, "Two Sisters Of Persephone", The Colossus, p. 63

24 Plath, "In Plaster," in "Appendix Of Poems And Prose By Sylvia Plath," Art Of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, p.p. 252-

25 Plath, "In Plaster," p. 253

26 Plath, "In Plaster," p. 253

27 Plath, "Mushrooms," The Colossus, p.34

28 Plath, "The Thin People," The Colossus, p. 30

29 Plath, "Mushrooms," p. 34

30 Plath, "The Thin People," p. 31

31 Plath, "The Thin People," p.p. 31-32

32 Plath, "Tulips," Ariel, p. 20

33 Plath, "Tulips," p. 20

34 Plath, "Tulips," p.22

[35] Plath, "Tulips," p. 22

[36] Plath, "Fever 103 ," Ariel, p. 58

[37] Plath, "Fever 103 , p. 59

[38] Plath, "Fever 103 , p. 59

[39] Plath, "Fever 103 , p. 59

[40] Plath, "Paralytic," Ariel, p.78

[41] Plath, The Bell Jar, p.p. 150-51

[42] Plath, "Paralytic," p. 79

[43] Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 152

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[1] Theodore Roethke, "What Can I Tell My Bones?", p. 174

[2] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," p. 266

[3] Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," p. 266

[4] Plath, "The Bull Of Bendylaw," The Colossus, p. 26

[5] Plath, "Lorelei," p. 22

[6] Plath, "Snakecharmer," The Colossus, p. 55

[7] Plath, "Snakecharmer," p. 55

[8] Plath, "Snakecharmer," p. 55

[9] Plath, "Snakecharmer," p. 55

[10] Plath, "Totem," Ariel, p.76

[11] Plath, "Poppies In July," Ariel, p. 82

[12] Plath, "Snakecharmer," p. 56

13 Plath, "The Hermit At Outermost House," The Colossus, p. 57
14 Plath, "The Hermit At Outermost House," p. 57
15 Plath, "The Hermit At Outermost House," P. 57
16 Wendy Campbell, "Remembering Sylvia," in Newman, The Art Of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, p. 183
17 Plath, The Bell Jar, p.p. 178-79
18 Plath, "Spinster," The Colossus, p. 68
19 Plath, "Spinster," p. 68
20 Plath, "Night Shift," The Colossus, p.11
21 Plath, "Morning Song," Ariel, p. 11
22 Hughes, "Notes On The Chronological Order In The Poems Of Sylvia Plath," in Newman, The Art Of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, p. 194
23 Plath, "The Night Dances," Ariel, p. 27
24 Plath, "The Night Dances," p. 27
25 Plath, "The Night Dances," pp. 27-28
26 Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 196
27 Plath, "Years," Ariel, p. 73
28 Plath, "Berck-Plage," Ariel, p. 30
29 Plath, "Berck-Plage," p.p. 30-31
30 Plath, "Berck-Plage," p. 32
31 Plath, "Berck-Plage," p.p. 32-33
32 Plath, "Berck-Plage," p. 33
33 Plath, "Berck-Plage," p. 35
34 Plath, "Ariel," Ariel, p. 36

[35] Plath, "Ariel," p. 36
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[37] Plath, "Ariel," p. 36
[38] Plath, "Ariel," pp. 36-37
[39] Plath, "Ariel," p. 37
[40] Plath, "The Eye-Mote," The Colossus, p. 15
[41] Plath, "Mystic," in "Appendix Of Poems and Prose By Sylvia Plath," in Newman, The Art Of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, p. 260

Chapter V

[1] Theodore Roethke, "The Far Field," p. 201
[2] Plath, "A Birthday Present," Ariel, p. 48
[3] Plath, "A Birthday Present," p.p. 49-50
[4] Plath, "A Birthday Present," p. 50
[5] Plath, "A Birthday Present," p. 50
[6] Plath, "A Birthday Present," p. 50
[7] Plath, "All The Dead Dears," The Colossus, p. 27
[8] Plath, The Bell Jar, p. 168
[9] Plath, "Death & Co.," Ariel, p. 38
[10] Plath, "Death & Co.," p. 39
[11] Plath, "Death & Co.," p. 39
[12] Plath, "Contusion," Ariel, p. 84

[13] Plath, "Contusion," p. 84
[14] Plath, "Contusion," p. 84
[15] Plath, "Edge," *Ariel,* p. 85
[16] Plath, "Edge," p. 85
[17] Plath, "Edge," p. 85
[18] Plath, "Berck-Plage," p. 32

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