

**Vision and Visual Art in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* and Last Poems**

**Submitted by Lucy Suzannah Tunstall to the University of Exeter**

**as a thesis for the degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy in English**

**June 2015**

This thesis is available for Library use on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

Signature: .....

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation is concerned with Sylvia Plath's late works. Engaging with critical discussion of what constitutes the corpus of *Ariel* I show that an appreciation of the editorial history reveals the beginnings of a third book (the last poems) and opens up those difficult and important texts to fresh enquiry.

Recent work in Plath studies has focused on visual art. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley's *Eye Rhymes* examines Plath's own artwork in an 'attempt to answer the question, How did Plath arrive at *Ariel*?' (1). I contribute to that discussion, but also ask the questions, How did Plath leave *Ariel* behind and arrive at the even more remarkable last poems, and how did visual art contribute to those journeys? I argue that *Ariel*'s characteristically lucid style is informed by the dismantling of depth perspective in Post-impressionist painting, and by the colour theory and pedagogy of the Bauhaus teachers. My work is underpinned by an appreciation of Plath's unique cultural moment in mid-century East Coast America. I show how Plath's knowledge of the theories, practice and iconic images of visual art, from the old masters to the Post-impressionists, offered new possibilities for stylistic development.

Working with archival materials including annotated works from Plath's personal library and drafts of her poems, as well as published material, I examine the synthesis of visual and literary influences. Demonstrating specific textual relations between Plath and the work of Emily Dickinson, T. S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats, as well as other poets, I show that Plath's visual poetics combine influences from the modern

poets with her New Critical literary training and with painting and sculpture. I offer new readings of rarely discussed poems such as 'Totem', 'The Munich Mannequins' and 'Child' as well as fresh insights into the well known works, 'Tulips', 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', 'Fever 103°', and 'Edge'.

## CONTENTS

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| Acknowledgements  | 5   |
| List of abbreviations and textual note  | 6   |
| Introduction.<br><i>Ariel</i> , the Last Poems and the Beginning of a New<br>Book         | 7   |
| 1. Planetary Light: Landscape, Perspective and Painting in 'The<br>Moon and the Yew Tree' | 51  |
| 2. Into the Red: Colour Theory in <i>Ariel</i> and the Last Poems                         | 97  |
| 3. Pure? What Does it Mean?: 'Fever 103°' and 'The Munich<br>Mannequins'                  | 145 |
| 4. One Absolutely Beautiful Thing: the Child's Eye in 'Berck-Plage<br>and 'Child'         | 172 |
| 5. Art Versus Magic in 'Totem' and the Last Poems   | 197 |
| Conclusion<br>Drag, Performance, Wit and the Neediness of the Poet                        | 245 |
| Appendix: Artworks  | 258 |
| Works Cited   | 284 |
| Works Consulted   | 297 |

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful to the English Department of the University of Exeter for a PhD Bursary to pursue this research, and for the unstinting support of my supervisors, Professors Tim Kendall and Jo Gill.

Many of the discoveries explored here began in the Sylvia Plath archive at the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Neilson Library, Smith College, the riches of which were made available to me by a British Association for American Studies Postgraduate Short-Term Travel Award. I am grateful to the staff of the Rare Book Room, especially Karen Kukil and Barbara Blumenthal who were so generous with their time and expertise.

For advice on colour and theories of late style, thanks are due to Professor Sam Smiles, and to Catherine Cleary and Victoria Chalmers for their knowledge of painting and visual composition.

## ABBREVIATIONS AND TEXTUAL NOTES

Unless otherwise indicated, poems cited in this dissertation are from Plath, Sylvia.

*Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.

All references to annotated volumes from Plath's personal library indicate those held in the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Neilson Library, Smith College.

Unless otherwise indicated all references to the writings of Johannes Itten are taken from *Elements of Color: a Treatise on the Color System of Johannes Itten Based on His Book, The Art of Color*. Ed. Faber Birren. London: Chapman & Hill, 1990. Print.

*CP* Plath, Sylvia. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. London: Faber and Faber, 1981.

*J* Plath, Sylvia. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*. Ed. Karen Kukil. London: Faber and Faber, 2000.

*LH* Plath, Sylvia. *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. Ed. Aurelia Plath. London: Faber and Faber, 1976.

*WP* Hughes, Ted. *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*. Ed. William Scammell. London: Faber and Faber, 1994.

*BF* Stevenson, Anne. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. London: Viking, 1989.

## Introduction

### ***Ariel*, the last poems and the beginning of a new book.**

Such has been the inevitable association of *Ariel* with Plath's early and violent death that the existence of post-*Ariel* work would seem, to those uninitiated in the vagaries of Plath's publishing history, an impossibility or a macabre joke. While Plath arranged her *Ariel* manuscript for the last time at some point in November or December 1962, she seems to have made no attempt to publish it (*WP* 164-5, 191, Kendall 187-88, *BF* 277). The poems remained on her desk in typescript in a black binder. Plath also left uncollected several poems written during the period of the *Ariel* poems, but not arranged with them; a further handful of poems written after 'Death & Co' (the last *Ariel* work) in 1962; and, lastly, a group of twelve poems all completed in January or February 1963 (*WP* 172-73). Few critics treat these 1963 works as a discrete group; and 'last poems' has sometimes been used to refer to everything in the 1965 *Ariel* or to everything written in 1962 or to everything written in the last year, or last two years, of Plath's life. In this thesis, 'last poems' refers specifically to the final twelve works completed in the first two months of 1963.

That Plath went on, after writing everything she would select for *Ariel*, to produce a group of poems which is stranger, more intriguing and perhaps even more successful than any of the previous work, is a surprising discovery and a matter for serious consideration. The concision, formal audacity and elliptical, leveraged imagery of her last twelve poems, from 'Sheep in Fog' completed on 28 January 1963 to 'Edge' and 'Balloons' both written on 5 February of the same year, sets them, as a group, beyond any earlier sequences. Both 'Balloons' and 'Edge' as well as perhaps 'Words' and 'Kindness' have been much discussed and widely anthologised (*The Faber Book of Twentieth Century Women's Poetry*, 1987, edited by Fleur

Adcock, is perhaps the most generous to the last poems, presenting 'Sheep in Fog', 'Paralytic', 'Kindness', 'Balloons', and 'Edge'). The same cannot be said for 'Totem', 'The Munich Mannequins', 'Mystic', and 'Contusion'. Where these very late works *are* discussed as a discrete group, they are often read simply as a waning of the dynamic, transcendent *Ariel* spirit, and of Plath's creativity. Few enquiries have examined the particular nature or genesis of these distinctive and important works; Tim Kendall's *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* is unique in devoting a whole chapter to the last poems. Far from a draining away of creative energy, the last poems represent an expansion of poetic possibility. Hughes and Plath herself (according to Hughes) regarded these last twelve works as a new departure and the beginning of the collection which would succeed *Ariel*.

There is very little evidence of Plath's own thoughts on the 1963 poems; almost everything that is on record is reported by Hughes. Her perfunctory introduction to a BBC recording of 'Sheep in Fog' gives nothing away:

In this poem, the speaker's horse is proceeding at a slow, cold walk down a hill of macadam to the stable at the bottom. It is December. It is foggy. In the fog there are sheep. (*CP* 295n)

Other than this perfunctory observation, Plath's only known commentaries on these important works are found in the notes to the *Collected Poems* and in various prose pieces by Hughes. He is consistent and insistent in repeatedly referring to both the more austere atmosphere of the 1963 poems and their status as a cohesive group; they are the beginning of a new collection with an energy quite distinct from the heat and velocity of *Ariel*. In 'Sylvia Plath and Her Journals', Hughes writes, 'She considered these poems a fresh start. She liked the different, cooler inspiration (as

she described it) and the denser pattern ... as they took shape' (*WP* 189); and in 'Publishing Sylvia Plath,' 'She herself regarded those last poems as the beginning of a new book' (*WP* 167) and '[Plath] herself recognising the different inspiration of these new pieces regarded them as the beginnings of a third book' (*WP* 172). The evidence in Hughes's essay, 'Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of Sheep in Fog', is more uncertain (*WP* 191-211). This important and helpful analysis uses the many drafts of 'Sheep in Fog' to begin to account for the stylistic metamorphosis of the last twelve poems. Hughes identifies within the drafts a retreat from, or suppression of, the glimpsed possibility of a 'mythic poem' that would express 'the full subjective drama of her fate' (211). Hughes's essay, however, is itself an ingenious retreat from some of the more antithetical implications of this late work, seeking to draw it back into his characteristic mythic-psychological readings of her earlier *Ariel* poems. Even in this conflicted essay he is clear that the last poems, as a group, are 'very different in mood from the earlier [*Ariel*] poems', amounting to 'twelve poems towards a new collection' (*WP* 192). When an opportunity arose after Plath's death (and before her celebrity) to see a volume into print, Hughes as editor omitted several of the poems from Plath's black-binder *Ariel* and rearranged the remaining texts. '[B]ecause they seemed too important to leave out' and it was far from certain that any later publishing opportunity would present itself, Hughes added nine of the final twelve poems to the published collection (*WP* 167).<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps because this policy smacks of a kind of censorship, or at least editorial interventionism, much critical debate has centred on those poems present in Plath's own black-binder *Ariel*, but omitted from the published versions.<sup>2</sup> Hughes admits to a selection process which could not be described as strictly literary. Of

---

<sup>1</sup> Hughes also added 'The Hanging Man' (June 1960) and 'Little Fugue' (April 1962) neither of which was included in Plath's black-binder *Ariel*.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. *Ariel* includes 'Lesbos' and 'The Swarm' from Plath's black-binder *Ariel*, as well as 'Mary's Song' written on 19 November 1962 and not apparently intended by Plath for that collection.

Plath's *Ariel* poems, he favoured those works he felt were likely to be less damaging to her family and friends or whose subjects could not easily be associated with Plath's personal history (*Letters of Ted Hughes* 324). Of those deselected by Hughes, 'The Rabbit Catcher' has become the 'most famous and perhaps most notorious' (Gill, *Introduction* 69). In this, the woman speaker feels the 'constriction' of the animal traps set by an unnamed man 'killing' her 'also'. 'The Rabbit Catcher' has attracted the attention of scholars and biographers such as Linda Wagner-Martin (203-04), Jacqueline Rose (138), Anne Stevenson (*BF* 244-45), and Diane Middlebrook (*Her Husband* 165), among many others. The idea of an estranged husband 'cutting' poems he found 'openly vicious' (*WP* 166), or that might be 'decoded' (167), has all the ingredients of a scandal. This is the story that has dominated discussion of the *Ariel* edit.

'The Rabbit Catcher', along with other deselected texts and the rest of the 1963 poems, 'Child', 'Gigolo' and 'Mystic', was eventually collected in *Winter Trees* in 1971. Contemporary reviews by Al Alvarez and Ed Homberger were critical of what appeared to be a piecemeal and incomplete publication of Plath's mature work. They speculated about the financial motivations of 'linger[ing] out' publication (Hughes 163) in the burgeoning market for Plath's poetry (Alvarez 36, Homberger 404-05).<sup>3</sup> Marjorie Perloff's 1984 article, 'The Two *Ariels*: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon,' was the first to bring wide critical attention to the existence of alternative *Ariels*, and the more hopeful narrative trajectory implied by Plath's selection and arrangement. Drawing on the manuscripts of the black-binder *Ariel* poems, Lynda K. Bundtzen's *The Other Ariel* (2001) asks 'But who authored *Ariel*?' and provides an answer:

---

<sup>3</sup> Hughes's response to Alvarez's article and further writings on the subject can be seen in *Letters of Ted Hughes* 190-92, and *WP* 169.

While it would be an exaggeration to argue that Plath's estranged husband and fellow poet, Ted Hughes 'authored' *Ariel*, we know now that it represents his, not Plath's, overall narrative intentions.

(3)

In 2004 the Plath Estate responded to calls like these with the publication of *Ariel: the Restored Edition: A Facsimile of Plath's Manuscript, Reinstating her Original Selection and Arrangement*. Far from closing down this line of enquiry, the publishing of a version which might be said to honour Plath's intentions for her second collection, as far as that may be discerned, has inspired further debate. Responding to the 'restored' *Ariel*, Buntzen laments the 'critical impact this forty-year-long delay has had in our understanding of Plath's work' (1). The malefic editorial influence of Hughes has become something of a given in Plath studies; it is this paradigm which is called into question by Tracy Brain in a recent discussion of the 'radical instability' of the *Ariel* texts. Her essay 'Unstable Manuscripts: The Indeterminacy of the Plath Canon' calls for an acceptance of multiple and evolving versions and readings, citing the equivocations and amendments enacted by Plath herself in recordings and re-writings (*Unravelling Archive* 17-38).

What all these textual investigations have in common is a concern with the body of work known as *Ariel*, be that Hughes's, Plath's or alternative and infinitely multiplying versions. In contrast to this sustained and flourishing critical interest in Hughes's exclusions and rearrangements, and in the canonicity of *Ariel*, little discussion exists of the projected later book which comes to light once Plath's own *Ariel* has been more clearly demarcated. The effect on our understanding of Plath's work *as a whole* of including, in the 1965 *Ariel*, poems clearly intended by Plath for a different collection, has been largely overlooked. The effacement of a projected post-

*Ariel* collection (and, in fact, the beginnings of that collection) may be as significant a story as the reshaping of *Ariel*. Hughes himself seems at least as troubled by his additions as his exclusions:

I added about nine of the last poems, because they seemed to me too important to leave out. The uncertainties around this cutting and adding were naturally very thick. I'm still not sure whether *Ariel* would not be a better book if I had kept out everything that followed the bee poems, as in her version. She herself regarded those last poems as the beginning of a new book. But I no longer remember why I did many things –.

(*WP* 167)

There is a Lear-like note of tragic resignation in the last sentence, and in the special circumstances of *Ariel*'s posthumous publication, a sense that the perpetration of grave error and mortal offence is part of the fabric of the exercise. Hughes describes the 'complications' of his task as 'absolutely without precedent' (*WP* 165). Leaving aside less honourable motivations, of which he has occasionally been accused, it cannot be often that an editor is concerned that including what he believes is an author's best work might hinder future literary reception and reputation, or damage the volume in hand. It is not just that Hughes's additions fundamentally altered Plath's *Ariel* – 'I'm still not sure whether *Ariel* would not be a better book if I had kept out everything that followed the bee poems, as in her version' – but they have made it difficult for readers to grasp, or even to see, the remarkable and substantive change of style which occurred at the start of 1963.

The two groups – *Ariel* and the last poems – conjure very different worlds. The soaring, sometimes incendiary, and always vivid world of *Ariel* has become

submerged, in those last twelve poems (or is threatened with an abysmal immersion) so that their movement and colour are often radically attenuated. Tim Kendall details the extraordinary prevalence of water imagery in the last works (187-208). 'Gigolo' is located in the 'lizardy crevices' underwater, 'Words' travels below the surface to the 'bottom of the pool' and the sinister bruising of 'Contusion' is associated with a hollow rock in which the 'sea sucks obsessively.' There is 'a dark water' in 'Sheep in Fog,' a disturbed and polluted ('troublous') 'pool' in 'Child,' 'Still waters / [that] 'Wrap' the 'lips' of the 'Paralytic' speaker, and the child of 'Balloons' is left 'Contemplating a world clear as water' (192-94). The 'drag' of 'Edge' implies not only the trailing garments of the moon figure, but the dredging of water after a drowning in order to recover a body. Even the 'bottomless Stolz' of 'Munich Mannequins', which translates as 'bottomless pride', evokes deep and dangerous waters. Appropriately, Kendall's metaphor for the dramatic stylistic shift represented by the last poems – a 'sea-change' – is Shakespearean and aquatic:

The publication of a makeshift *Ariel* after Plath's death, including nine poems from 1963, has prevented readers and critics from appreciating the sea-change her style underwent in those last poems. (189)

This is not to deny a relationship between the sequences; the last poems may even be said to respond to the dynamic transcendence of *Ariel* in certain ways. Ted Hughes has called 'Sheep in Fog', the first of the 1963 poems, the 'funeral cortege of the whole extraordinary adventure dramatized in the poems of *Ariel*' (WP 207), suggesting both the deathliness and the austere formality of the later poems. There is a new and profoundly marmoreal quality to the last works – the toga-gowned female figure of 'Edge', the 'white' 'rock' (or 'skull') of 'Words', the bleached palette of

'Sheep in Fog' and 'Contusion', and the dead wife of 'Paralytic' with her 'Mouth full of pearls'. This move away from the saturated colour and velocity of a poem such as 'Ariel' with its 'blue / Pour of tor and distances' and 'drive / Into the red // Eye', shows that the alchemical, transformative and painterly colour of *Ariel* has been broken down, in the last poems, into its nonreactive components. James Elkins has explained the connection of water and stone with artists' colours:

Water and stones. These are the uncompromising ingredients of two very different endeavours. The first is painting, because artists' pigments are made of fluids ... mixed together with powdered stones to give colour ... Painting and other visual arts are one example of negotiations between water and stone, and the other is alchemy. (1)

The colourlessness of the last poems is a sign that assimilation and transcendence are unavailable in the post-*Ariel* cosmos.

Classical statuary, white architecture and carved female figures feature in much of Plath's *Ariel* and pre-*Ariel* work, notably in the poems influenced by Giorgio de Chirico such as 'Conversation Among the Ruins' and 'The Disquieting Muses'. Fan Jinghua explains the development in Plath's use of visual art models and techniques in her later poetry as a move from 'the ekphrastic to the dynamic' (217). In the last poems, these sculptural motifs are less decorative and more structural in function, 'manifestation[s] of ... internalised visual thinking' (218), that enable and give shape to some pioneering investigations around style, aesthetics and artistic composition. Heather Clark hears a nostalgic note in the last poems and a grieving for poetic connection or companionship with Hughes: 'Some of the last poems, particularly "Sheep in Fog", "Words" and "Edge" look back to Hughes's poems with

longing, resignation and sadness' (153). By contrast, I read in these final works a dismantling of, and distancing from, Hughesian notions of mythology, magical inspiration (alchemy) and superstition around poetry and composition. There are leave-takings and revisiting in other areas, too. 'Kindness', 'Balloons' and especially 'Child' look back to earlier poems of childhood, for example. However, they recast ideas of motherhood and the child figure in poetry in unexpected ways, particularly with reference to the formal treatment of the child as observed subject and pastoral figure.

If we decide the last poems are the death throes of *Ariel* and the approach of silence, stillness and physical and creative death, what more is there to say? If we are able to experience them as a new, exciting departure *from Ariel*, we encounter the poems not just in the context of those earlier works, but with a wider sense of their literary and cultural 'conversations'. When an intensely stylised tableau such as 'Edge' is presented alongside highly-coloured, dynamic and dramatic poems such as 'Daddy', 'Purdah' and 'Fever 103°', common sense reads the later, 'cooler' text as a dissipation, a draining away of the imaginative intensity of *Ariel*. If, instead, 'Edge' is understood to exist in a sequence that begins with the austere 'Sheep in Fog', includes the insanely experimental 'Totem', the rarefied 'Contusion' and the Eliot-inspired 'Mystic', we begin to consider more complicated and rich interpretative possibilities. It becomes easier to read the 1963 poems not as the last work of a tragically curtailed life, but in terms of broad ideas of late style, for example. In the writings of Edward Said, following Adorno, artistic works exhibiting 'late style' are those that exhibit a renunciation of a previous mode of mastery:

constitute ... a moment when the artist who is fully in command of his medium nevertheless abandons communication with the established

order of which he is a part and achieves a contradictory, alienated relationship with it. (8)

Plath's last poems exhibit many of the characteristics of this idea of late style, not least 'intransigence, difficulty' and the 'refusal to "reconcile into a single image what is not reconciled"' (xv). By understanding the textual and publishing history of the later works and the move from the sure achievement of *Ariel* into the more fragmentary, unstable and discomfiting world of the last poems, we see Plath emerging as an artist 'fully in command of [her] medium [who] nevertheless abandons' that place of success and approbation for something much more uncertain.

It would be impossible to regret the early publication of nine of the late poems chosen by Hughes for the 1965 *Ariel*, and it was right that they were collected at the earliest opportunity. It is Hughes's notes in the *Collected Poems* in 1981 which gave us Plath's original *Ariel* selection, and the only known words by Plath herself on these last poems can be found here and in Hughes's essays. Nevertheless, the expansion of *Ariel* to include most of the poems written right at the end of Plath's career has had the effect of obscuring these late, post-*Ariel* works and flattening out their distinctive and absorbing features. If we see *Ariel* as the culmination of Plath's career (always annexed to the end of her life) we are missing a big part of the story of her poetic journey. The most miraculous thing about these last works is not their apparently posthumous composition, but the fact that they represent a remarkable example of creative reinvention by a poet who had already found her mature style and was certain of her achievement.

The self-dissatisfied W.B. Yeats of his later poems (and especially *Last Poems*) is an important model for Plath in the last months of her writing life. In fact, all the last poems were completed when Plath had moved from rural Devon to a flat at 23

Fitzroy Road, London, a house in which Yeats himself had once lived. Plath's letters of this time testify to her delight to be living 'in Yeats's house' (LH 488). More significant are the textual echoes and re-readings of the late works of Yeats in those of Plath, a practice which is further discussed, here, in Chapter One, where I compare Yeats's 'The Magi' and aspects of his representations of history and Christian iconography, with Plath's 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'; and in Chapter Five which explores Plath's re-readings in 'Kindness' of Yeats's 'Ancestral Houses'. Plath's own copy of Yeats's 1952 *Collected Poems* is heavily annotated. One tendency amongst these annotations is the frequent underlining of the last two lines of the last stanza, indicating, perhaps, Plath's general assent to the sentiment and argument of the poetry. While the work of many other poets is marked by Plath with stars, underlining, side bars or comments to the margin, this particular pattern – the underlining of the closing lines – is seen only in the work of Yeats. These readerly interventions become particularly intense in *Last Poems*. 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', for example, a work which self-consciously relinquishes 'masterful images' and other tools of the poetic trade, has underlining to almost every line (391-92). In 'An Acre of Grass' from Yeats's 1938 collection, *New Poems*, Plath has underlined the whole of the third stanza, in which the speaker vows to 'remake' himself on the model of 'Timon', 'Lear' and 'William Blake':

Myself must I remake

Till I am Timon and Lear

Or that William Blake

Who beat upon the wall

Till truth obeyed his call; (347)

In comparison with Yeats's sustained poetic engagement with ideas of lateness and stylistic revision in his later works and books, the last phase of Plath's creative output is slim. It is possible to argue, however, that Plath's is the more radical departure; the romance and heroism that can be heard in Yeats's concept of creative 're-making' in poems such as 'An Acre of Grass' and 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' are expunged from Plath's last poems. 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' concludes in – or retreats into – the essential and fundamental 'heart', a sort of inviolable poetic core: 'I must lie down where all the ladders start / In the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart' (392). In 'Sheep in Fog', by contrast, the speaker's heart is vulnerable to the point of dissolution ('the far /Fields melt my heart') and the lifeless 'bones' of Plath's poem are worryingly identified with the body of the speaker ('My bones hold a stillness'), rather than, as in Yeats, a gently self-deprecating epithet for an idea of the heart. Where 'The Circus Animals' Desertion' ends with a confident, ringing couplet, Plath's assonances and near-rhymes are more uncertain so that 'heaven' is allied with 'threaten' and the final word, 'water', performs a dissolving return on 'far' and 'heart' of the previous stanza:

My bones hold a stillness, the far

Fields melt my heart.

They threaten

To let me through to a heaven

Starless and fatherless, a dark water

Plath ushers in her new spare, attenuated style with the dissolution of all sureties or points of reference. The absence of protective boundaries is manifested in

the landscape of 'Sheep in Fog' where horizons and demarcations are no longer visible: 'The hills step off into whiteness'. The usual varying hues, where receding hills in a landscape appear increasingly pale, are wiped out as the obliterating fog merges 'far / Fields' and close detail, sheep and macadam, into one gloom. Hughes, who knew the country well, puts it like this:

From the Northern edge of Dartmoor, where she was riding, the whole panorama of North Devon seems to lie below like a different land – a sea undulating softly away to the Northern skyline behind which lies the true sea. As the rider looks out over this landscape in its dawn mists, those far fields both 'melt' their undulations and 'melt' her heart into themselves. (*WP* 206)

Boundaries between hill and horizon, farmland and moor, field and path can no longer be relied upon. There is a sense not only that horse and rider, may, like the 'hills', 'step off' the path and into an abyss, but also that perspective – of both space and time – has been destroyed. Distant horizon and deepest self collide as 'the far / Fields' overflow the line end and 'melt my heart'. What, in the normal course of life, has been kept far hence, is immediately at hand. One way, then, in which Plath's last poems can be contextualized is in relation to other artists, such as Yeats, who sought to transform their work even after the achievement of an effective and celebrated style.

### ***Ariel*: Fully in command of her medium**

The point cannot be overstated: the twelve poems beginning with 'Sheep in Fog' begun in December 1962 and completed 28 January 1963 and ending with

'Edge' or 'Balloons' on 5 February 1963, are the work of a poet who has left behind a supremely effective style (the 'techniques and apparatus that had worked in the *Ariel* poems') (Hughes, *WP* 210), and poetry which has fulfilled or exceeded her own weighty poetic ambitions. Those ambitions can be traced in several ways. The professionalism with which Plath pursued publication and remuneration for her writing has often been noted. She was assiduous in finding markets for her work, circulating her first book manuscript 'at every stage of its development' (*WP* 165), and submitting and resubmitting poems for journal publication in quick succession as well as tracking and recording acceptances and rejections.<sup>4</sup> But her ambitions were more than just practical and pragmatic. A March 1958 journal entry, flushed with the euphoria of writing a series of successful 'art poems', makes great claims: 'Arrogant, I think I have written lines which qualify me to be The Poetess of America' (360). In the same entry, her tally of literary 'rivals' includes not just the celebrated women poets of her own time, but all the established 'greats' as well: Sappho, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Christina Rossetti and Emily Dickinson. The hallmarks of the journal, however, as far as Plath's writing and career are concerned, are self-goading, disappointment and even self-disgust. A month after proclaiming herself a future 'poetess of America' she is doubtful and self-critical: 'how ... very far I fall short from writing – how many thousand publish in the *New Yorker*, the *Sat Eve Post*, who work, study, get material, and I, I dream & boast I could do it but don't and maybe can't' (374-75). Frustration with her writing is also a subject of the poetry. In 'Stillborn', written in the summer of 1960, the speaker despairs of 'These poems [that] do not live':

O I cannot understand what happened to them!

---

<sup>4</sup> Plath's records of works submitted for journal and newspaper publication are held in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College.

They are proper in shape and number and every part.  
They sit so nicely in the pickling fluid!  
They smile and smile and smile and smile at me.  
And still the lungs won't fill and the heart won't start.

This vaulting ambition and relentless self-attack are perfectionist traits ('proper in shape and number and every part'), as Plath acknowledged: 'I have this demon who wants me to run away screaming if I am going to be flawed, fallible' (J 619). With the completion of *Ariel* the demon seems to have been appeased.

The lifelong and self-confessed perfectionist whose work rarely (or only sporadically) reached her own viciously exacting standards does seem to have been sure, in the autumn of 1962, of what she had achieved. We have no journal entries recording Plath's attitude to her *Ariel* poems, but her letters are full of confidence. Plath's *Letters Home* should be treated with particular care, but the bright, shiny and eager-to-please 'Sivvy' of earlier days is less in evidence by late 1962.<sup>5</sup> In October, during the composition period of some of the most celebrated and characteristic *Ariel* poems such as the bee sequence, 'Daddy' and 'Fever 103°,' she writes to her mother, 'I am a genius of a writer. I have it in me. I am writing the best poems of my life. They will make my name' (LH 468); they are 'terrific stuff' (466) and 'great things' (473). To her brother and his wife she writes of having 'a considerable reputation over here' and of 'writing a poem a day and they are terrific' (467). She was also recording her work for the BBC and publishing in journals and magazines. Her readers may have been few (compared with the international audience for *Ariel* after her death), but she counted amongst them some influential broadcasters and critics. On 25 October 1962 she wrote excitedly to her brother:

---

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Perloff. 'Sylvia Plath's "Sivvy" Poems: a portrait of the poet as daughter'.

the critic of the Observer is giving me an afternoon at his home to hear me read all my new poems! He is *the* opinion maker in poetry over here, A. Alvarez, and says I'm the first woman poet he's taken seriously since Emily Dickinson! Needless to say I am delighted. (*LH* 476)

This is a very different poet from the one she seems to have been for much of her career, feeling she was neither sufficiently productive nor producing the quality of work of which she felt herself capable, and hampered by anxious perfectionism.

Despite all this new confidence and the fact that she was completing 'a poem a day before breakfast. All book poems' (*LH* 467), Plath made no effort, in succeeding months, to publish *Ariel*. This is a turn of events that Hughes seems to have found mystifying and quite out of character: 'She avoided the subject of when she was going to publish it, which I repeatedly asked her, or she made deliberately mysterious answers' (*WP* 165). Tim Kendall reads this uncharacteristic hesitancy or indifference as another sign of Plath's new self-assurance:

The ruthlessly ambitious poet she had been for most of her writing life, so concerned with her reputation and jealous of others', seems to have been replaced by someone assured of her achievement, and no longer dependent on external approval. (188)

There is textual evidence, too, of remarkable confidence, as Kendall also notes, in the condensed and extreme economy of the imagery and the fractured and unreconciled narrative movement of many of the last poems (200). In 'Totem' a peculiar sentence is enjambed across stanzas: 'The world is blood hot and

personal // Dawn says with its blood-flush'. It is not, as we might expect in a lyric poem, that the landscape expresses inner states of poet or speaker. Rather, any notion of a speaker has been expunged from poem and landscape. What sounded like a *cri de coeur* – 'The world is blood-hot and personal' (I see reflected in the red of dawn my own personal pain) – turns out to be, somehow, the words of dawn itself utterly disengaged from any identifiable subject or emotion. An apparently passionate, visceral and highly-coloured revelation jack-knives in the second stanza into something abstracted, linguistic and coldly impersonal. Dawn is not speaking to or for any sense of self. And dawn's arrival in the poem goes unexplained, though (s)he is perhaps related to the counterfeit 'eye' markings of the 'cobra', 'the mountains' and 'the sky' of previous stanzas. It is just this 'absence of elaboration' that 'awards Plath's work a powerful authority' (Kendall 203). The two hyphenated 'blood' phrases in two lines – 'blood-hot' and 'blood-flush' are awkward and unsettling: are we really invited to see a dramatic red sky, or something more sinister and bloody perhaps; is the image emptied out, made anaemic, as if the repeated 'blood' phrases have the effect of neutralizing any sign of life we might have tried to find in the poem? This work, like others of the last poems, is difficult to decipher, makes few allowances for an audience and does not seek approval. There is no individualised viewpoint with which the reader is invited to identify, and tone is difficult to discern. Absolute critical clarity and sureness are demonstrated in the flouting of compositional niceties and the radical self-sufficiency, or self-possession, of the work.

The response to *Ariel* when it was published several years after her death was, of course, sensational, but Plath's most virulent critic – herself – had already passed judgement. To comprehend the scale, rarity and achievement of Plath's 'sea-change' in her last poems, it is important to acknowledge that they were written not by a poet who had suddenly found an effective voice – a new facility and assurance –

but by one who was leaving familiar, mastered terrain for something much more unmapped. Seamus Heaney has identified in 'Elm', an early *Ariel* poem, a new state of 'poetic certitude' (163): 'There is an absoluteness about the tone, and a sudden in-placeness about the words and all that they stand for' (163-64). The rapidity of stylistic development in Plath's mature work is remarkable. This place of 'poetic certitude', to which many of the *Ariel* poems testify, is not the furthest point of Plath's journey. There is another, final poetic leap – to borrow Heaney's own terminology, a *fourth* 'degree of poetic achievement' (153) – displayed in the last twelve poems. One of the catalysing factors in this stylistic change is the discovery in the poetry that the point is not to 'get beyond ego' (Heaney 148), whatever that might entail, but to discover the 'infection' of the ego at every turn and in every poetic and stylistic refuge. Plath's last poems read to me as a good illustration of the words of Geoffrey Hill on self and ego in poetry:

However much and however rightly we protest against the vanity of supposing it to be merely 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', poetic utterance is nonetheless an utterance of the self, the self demanding to be loved, demanding love in the form of recognition and 'absolution'. The poet is perhaps the first to be dismayed by such a discovery and seek the conversion of his 'daemon' to a belief in altruistic responsibility. But this dismay is as nothing compared to the shocking encounter with 'empirical' guilt in the very texture of one's craft and pride. (19)

The poems of 1963 are knowingly mired in the 'texture' of their 'craft' and keenly aware of the ethical uncertainty of the enterprise. Earlier child poems tended

to mark out places of sanctuary and salvation for mother and child. In 'By Candlelight', for example, nursing mother and child 'meet each other' in a 'haloey radiance'. No such refuge, however precarious, is available in the 1963 poem, 'Child'. The space of the poem is both claustrophobic and dangerously exposed ('This dark / Ceiling without a star'). The last poems proceed from the premise of a poetic language which is everywhere and always fallen and tainted.

The 'texture' of the 'craft' is nowhere more startlingly apparent than in 'Totem', which Plath explained as 'a pile of interconnected images, like a totem pole' (*CP* 295n). The point of the poem, then, is its scaffolding, its organising principle, which is figured either as an integral carved post or a much more distraught 'pile' of images, or is somehow both at the same time. It is a poem that raises questions of cohesion, connection, organicity and the power of metaphor to reach out to a quality greater than the sum of its parts – to transcend. The mundane mechanics of the poem (perhaps all poems) are figured in the stanza:

Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors.

I am mad, calls the spider, waving its many arms.

'[S]hort circuits and folding mirrors' might be capable of producing a cheap conjuring trick, but nothing more transformative or magical than that. Not only is there no logical or comfortable connection between the lines of this stanza, but the insane spider is a parody of subjectivity which seems to be endangered (waving and drowning) in its own web. These poems step into a world that has no map and is without boundaries ('the far / Fields melt my heart' in 'Sheep in Fog'), and is 'bottomless' and disorientating ('One hollow the whole sea's pivot' in 'Contusion'). They are the work of a poet who knows the height of her achievement in poems like

'Elm', as well as many others, and has also found that place to be creatively unsatisfying.

### **New Directions in the Last Poems**

The post-*Ariel* volume has never been anything but a projected collection, and we only have Hughes's word for Plath's intentions, but the textual evidence and the stylistic discoveries and developments are persuasive. The *Ariel* poems were not tested on a reading public or widely reviewed, but the historical sweep of Plath's team of 'rivals' and her vicious perfectionism suggest that external validation had become, by 28 January 1963 (the date of the completion of 'Sheep in Fog'), beyond the point. This sort of wholesale shift after and beyond the achievement of a mature and celebrated style – after the satisfaction of personal ambition – is not common and is, in itself, worthy of critical attention and analysis. The last poems are exciting not just because of the strange brilliance of the work but because of the creative dissatisfaction that they represent. Writing of Geoffrey Hill's later work, Peter McDonald has described a poet 'wrestl[ing] against his own strengths', producing new work characterised by 'recalcitrant hostility, objection and doubt, all of which stand stubbornly in the way of any attempted lyric assimilation or transcendence' (191). While Plath's last twelve poems (except perhaps the supremely perplexing 'Totem') are doubtlessly *lyric* poems, their lyricism is menaced by dissatisfaction, dead ends, disconnection, separation, disorientation, distortion and divergence. They are obsessively focussed on form and continually interrogate the power of metaphor and simile to 'transcend' and 'assimilate'.

It is my view that this last phase represents Plath at her finest working at a sustained pitch of formal control and daring beyond anything she had previously achieved. Nevertheless, it is true that many earlier works stand up against these final

works; individual poems occasionally anticipate a style which is later more consistently realised. 'Little Fugue', a relatively early mature work, shows some of the contrapuntal chiaroscuro of those monochromatic last works, 'Contusion', 'Sheep in Fog' and 'Edge'. It is not difficult to identify brilliant poems from various periods from 1961 onwards. Seamus Heaney singles out 'Elm' for special praise, for example. Others have offered 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' as the moment when the *Ariel* voice was first heard in the fullness of its power. But for the consistency of their formal expertise and audacity, and the fact that (as far as such a claim might be made for any poem) they answer to no authority other than their own 'inner necessity' (Kandinsky viii), the 1963 poems occupy a special position in the oeuvre.

This concentration on the very last works risks bringing attention yet again to the end of Plath's life rather than the culmination of her career. Jahan Ramazani, like Jacqueline Rose before him, has warned against reading Plath's death as 'the telos toward which the last poems point, since it might not have happened' (288). My focus on Plath's last poems derives from their arrival after, and brilliance beyond, the achievement of *Ariel* (of which she was confident) and not their chronological proximity to the poet's death (her premonition of which will always be impossible to prove). I would not argue with a view that an awareness of death (always anyway attendant on lyric poetry) is intensified in these last poems. An atmosphere, or even a theme, of closeness to death or death in the midst of life, is difficult to deny. These poems exhibit a new energy, but the qualities of that energy are often sepulchral – cool, detached and austere. While the comparison of self-inflicted and war-inflicted death is risky, an analogy might be seen in the manner in which, in the best war poetry, death infuses the text and the speaker's world – 'Death could drop from the dark / As easily as song' (Rosenberg, 'Returning, We Hear the Larks' [100]) – but the value and interest of the poetry is not defined and accounted for by the poet's death.

The death of the poet (contemplated within the poem, or applied as biographical context to its reading) does not preclude, or make redundant, any further study.

The emphasis in this study is away from physical and psychological deterioration as theme and tone of the last poems and towards other areas which have not been the subject of sustained enquiry. As Plath's depression and death (or that close cousin, creative decline) has so often been assumed to account for these poems, leaving little to be said, some rebalancing of the scales might be allowed. Stevenson reads in these works a 'chilly disassociation from the world [that] held the risk of what came to pass' (*BF* 300). More sensationally, Sandra M. Gilbert in her essay, 'A Fine White Flying Myth', recalls the publication of three of the last poems a few days after Plath's death and their, perhaps inevitable, identification with that violent act:

'Edge', 'Contusion', and 'Kindness' appeared in the *TLS* ... Poems of despair and death. Poems with their heads in ovens ...The Plath Myth, whatever it meant or means, had been launched. (247-48)

It is almost inconceivable to imagine approaching the last works without knowledge of Plath's biography (and myth), or without reading cessation and deathliness in tone and register. However, in their unaccommodating preoccupation with form, their engagement with ideas of the visual in modern art and poetry, with her own earlier work as well as that of other writers, and with the nature of the human condition, the 1963 poems show Plath, *in her writing*, at her most creatively focused and transformative.

Many scholars do not differentiate between the poetic journey of *Ariel* and the even more intrepid adventure of the last poems. Indeed, the publishing history makes

any other approach awkward, requiring the imaginative disassembling of a cultural icon (the 1965 *Ariel*) and the construction of a projected collection (*Last Poems*) which was never completed by its author and is unlikely ever to exist. But the critics who locate these very late works squarely in terms of *Ariel*, and Plath's emotional decline, also register something else – a new self-reflexivity and an intense focus on form and linguistic strategy. Discussing the last poems in a general chapter on the poetry, Steven Gould Axelrod borrows for his subheading the terminology of terminal disease – 'The final stage' – which he describes as 'a brief time of depression and withdrawal [which] occurred in the last weeks of her life in early 1963':

Plath was writing (as one might expect) elliptical poems of resignation and despair, but she was also writing, almost compulsively, about poetry in general and her own poetry in particular. These poems reveal that even in her final days poetry was her most profound concern, her most enduring obsession ("The Poetry of Sylvia Plath" 87).

Self-referentiality and scrutiny of the binds and bounds of technique, especially the potency of figurative language, are the hallmarks – the compulsions, as Axelrod puts it – of the last poems.

My argument for the significance and achievement of the very last works may seem at odds with recent critical approaches which resist hierarchical judgements and the automatic elevation of the later work and of the more literary genres. Anita Helle has written of a new period in Plath studies:

a second stage of debate around Plath's canonicity and the terms we use to describe it. One generation of scholarly and critical activity, in the

wake of the *Collected Poems*, framed Plath's major and minor poems around a set of issues and references, establishing discursive boundaries of 'juvenalia' and 'mature' work. The present transition and regrouping of Plath studies in what I have generally termed 'archival matters' coincides with the turn toward historiographic, textual and material research. (2)

My work is clearly engaged with the long and enduring discussion of canonicity and of what constitutes the 'corpus' of *Ariel*, and what does not. My focus is Plath's poems, and of these, the well-known mature works that characterise *Ariel*, and the group I have found to be most interesting, challenging and perplexing: the last poems. My privileging of the later works over the earlier (on the whole), and the high art forms over the more commercial or domestic, are indications of the true capaciousness and tolerance of contemporary Plath studies. One area of recent interest has been with 'newly published, underutilized, and underrepresented material, with gaps, exclusions or omissions' (Helle 8). Although the poems addressed here have always formed part of the established Plath canon, many of them have also received little critical attention. 'Mystic', for example, rarely features in the index of any scholarly study. By taking seriously the reported intentions of Plath and the textual evidence of the last poems, scholars can appreciate these works as the beginning of a third book. That Plath's planned post-*Ariel* collection (or at least the beginning of it) has been so rarely and briefly discussed is a surprising omission. To find that we have, and have always had, a part of the answer to the question, 'What would Plath have written after *Ariel*, if she had lived?' is remarkable, as if the last sequence (or elements of it) had been hidden in full view.

## Visual Art, *Ariel* and the Last Poems

In 1961 Plath herself stressed the visual bent of her aesthetic and her poetry: 'I have a visual imagination. For instance, my inspiration is painting, and not music, when I go to some other art form. I see these things very clearly' ("Voice of the Poet"). The presence not just of a visionary quality, but of the resources of visual art in Plath's poetry has come to be more widely appreciated in recent years. The Indiana Archive in particular, with its substantial holdings of memorabilia and artworks from Plath's childhood, has given scholars a sense of the importance of the visual to the forming of Plath's sensibility. Many of these items – illustrated diaries and letters from Plath's childhood, cut-out dolls with extensive wardrobes, sketches copied from picture-books, as well as the many collages, and watercolour, oil and tempura paintings from her days on the Art Studios courses at Smith College – are reproduced in Kathleen Connors's and Sally Bayley's *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*. This volume, like Anita Helle's *The Unravelling Archive*, was published in 2007 following the 2002 Symposium at Indiana. *Representing Sylvia Plath* (2011), edited by Tracy Brain and Sally Bayley, collects some of the findings first presented at the Oxford Conference in 2007. This volume, like *Eye Rhymes* and *The Unravelling Archive*, seeks to position Plath in relation to a wider cultural landscape with emphasis across the three volumes on a range of visual media including photography, cinema, fashion and sculpture as well as painting. The first ever exhibition of Plath's drawings, held in 2011 at the Mayor Gallery in London, presented Plath's artworks to a wider, non-academic audience, as have accompanying essays by Plath's daughter, the poet and painter Frieda Hughes (*Sylvia Plath Drawings* vi-viii).

To state that Plath's imagination is informed by visual art, its techniques, theories, movements, works and history is not – since *The Unravelling Archive*, *Eye*

*Rhymes and Representing Sylvia Plath*, the recent exhibition of drawings, as well as the many articles on Plath's colour-symbolism and her eight avowedly ekphrastic art poems of 1957 and 1958 – to state anything new. There are, however, several important areas suggested by this recent scholarship which might be further explored. The areas for inquiry which seem to me to be most pressing fall into five broad categories. Firstly, the need to identify and explore borrowings from, and references to, specific artworks and their iconic images and composition techniques in many of Plath's mature poems. Secondly, some assessment of the influence of Bauhaus-derived colour theory, particularly in the dynamic and highly coloured October poems. Thirdly, an appreciation of the ways in which Plath's unique cultural moment gave her access to abstract expressionism and the New York art scene of the 1950s. Fourthly, a consideration of ways in which Plath synthesises literary and visual influences and conceptualises artmaking in her work; and, lastly, the importance of various aspects of visual art in modeling possibilities for re-thinking style, poetic structure and for the manipulation of metaphor, perspective, register and tone.

### **Artworks in the Poetry**

I address these areas in different ways. For example, allusion to visual art – its methods, properties or artifacts – is a thread which runs through each chapter and I discuss connections between particular poems and a wide range of artworks. References to specific artists, artworks, and artistic movements are made throughout the thesis with a different focus in each chapter. Plath's mental image-bank was rich in visual art of many periods, and she drew on it extensively in much of her work including those 'constellated lyrics' of *Ariel* (Heaney 151) and the austere and comparatively colourless last poems. In 'Sylvia Plath's Visual Poetics', Fan Jinghua

makes enlightening connections between female figures in Plath's 'Heavy Woman' and Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* and Raphael's Madonna paintings, and between 'Plath's 'Edge' and an imagined 'Greek sculpture or sarcophagus' (218). Jinghua also discusses the motifs of star and dark, coniferous 'Gothic' tree that Plath's poems 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' and 'Stars over the Dordogne' share with Van Gogh's iconic night paintings, *Starry Night* and *Stars over the Rhone* (220), showing that Plath's poetry draws on both visual design and a good knowledge of painting from the old masters of the Renaissance to the Post-impressionists. Moreover, Jinghua explains that the profoundly engaged connections with visual artists comes outside of, and after, the ekphrastic art poems of 1957 and 1958 which have previously dominated discussion of Plath and fine art:

After the art poems, Plath rarely writes poems speaking to specific artworks. Although no specific visual artworks can be identified from descriptive passages in her late works, her post-1958 poems may still provoke associations with visual artworks, in terms of image-formation, thematic borrowing, or compositional construction. *In some sense, it is this unidentifiability that shows Plath's internalized way of visual thinking as a working principle behind her writing.* [my emphasis] (218)

Jinghua makes the important point that it is in later works, works without any stated fine-art connection, that the techniques, lessons and iconic resources of visual art are fully animated in Plath's poetry. In Chapter One, I explore ways in which the astounding lucidity and visual impact of 'the Moon and the Yew Tree' draws on the radical shifts in ideas of representation and perspective that define Post-

impressionist painting. I discuss the painterly, expressionist use of blue in this early *Ariel* poem and its connection with the subject matter and restricted palette in Picasso's Blue Period paintings of waifs and outcasts.

### **Bauhaus Colour Theory**

A second area of enquiry suggested by recent scholarship on visual art and Plath's poetry is colour theory; this is the focus of Chapter Two. In "Coming to Terms with Colour: Plath's Visual Aesthetic", Laure de Nervuax-Gavoty identifies Plath's fascination with the work of the German expressionist painters such as Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Mark as key to her non-naturalistic use of colour. Nervuax-Gavoty is particularly interested in the 'expressionistic vocabulary of forms and colours' that characterise 'Event' and others of the 1962 poems:

The rhetoric of pain and dismemberment as well as the choice of vivid, sharply contrasted colours – indigo, red, black and white – turn the poem into the verbal equivalent of an expressionist painting. (121)

Nervuax-Gavoty, like many other scholars, such as Sherry Lutz Zivley ('Plath's Transformations of Modernist Paintings'), discusses Plath's use of red, linking it to ideas of excess and subjectivity and the female body. The prevalence of expanding or uncontainable red (bleeding in 'Cut', a sign of bodily resurrection in the 'red hair' of 'Lady Lazarus', immersing the speaker in 'Ariel', and so on) as well as the extraordinarily vivid and intense colour combinations of 'Ariel' and 'Poppies in October' are hallmarks of Plath's mature work. What has not been previously made clear is the adherence in *Ariel* and later work to the color theory of the Bauhaus artists and teachers. The imagistic charge and dynamism of those high *Ariel* works

rely on a thorough understanding of, and the application in the poetry of, Bauhaus notions of the properties, action, and interaction of colour. Plath's first practical art course at Smith (1950-51) was Art 13 'Basic Design' covering 'The visual properties of colour, light, volume, space, shape, line, texture through study of simple problems dealing with the nature of these elements, the use of materials and their creative application' (J 678n). The basic design course, so universally part of the experience of fine art students today was, in 1950, Plath's freshman year, a fairly recent arrival in American art departments. According to Elkins, the Bauhaus curriculum continues to be 'by far the most important influence on current art instruction' (32). The focus on the perception of colour and light and instruction in materials and their 'properties' given in the Smith College Art studios course outline is predicated on Bauhaus pedagogy. The basic, practical art course for all new art students was the invention of Johannes Itten, who had established the famous 'preliminary course' at the Bauhaus School in Germany (Droste 24-33). 'Itten's idea was to bring out the individual's capacity to respond to phenomena' (Elkins 34) and the course included exercises to 'train' the senses, emotions and mind (32). Though his book, *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color*, was not published until 1961, Itten's teaching principles, as well as several of his former students and colleagues, were firmly established in university art departments in North America by 1950. (See Albers p. 34-35 below). Among the famous artist-teachers of the Bauhaus who had taught alongside Johannes Itten in Germany were Paul Klee (whose work inspired several of Plath's 1958 'art' poems) and Wassily Kandinsky, whose seminal theoretical work, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, is a textbook for the symbolism of colour and shape in abstract and Post-impressionist painting; its influence can be felt throughout *Ariel*. Where colour does appear in the relatively colourless last poems it

is still deployed according to the tenets of early- to mid-twentieth-century colour theory.

### **Plath's exceptional cultural moment: East Coast America in the 1950s**

A comprehensive presentation of the New York art scene and general cultural landscape is beyond the scope of this study, but some appreciation of its uniqueness and unparalleled excitement for a young poet and artist (as Plath was in the early 1950s) underpins my research. For example, Clement Greenberg's influential championing of 'pure painting' like that of the mid-century American abstract expressionists, (crystalised in his 1961 essay 'Modernist Painting') was painting that was concerned primarily with its own materials, processes and defining characteristics. These ideas of aesthetic purity inform Plath's investigations into lyricism and transcendence in 'Fever 103°', as I discuss in Chapter Three ('Pure? What Does it Mean?'). The viability of purity as an essential quality, and the pre-requisite for poetic alchemy, comes under strain in this poem and others. 'Pure' is found to encompass not only the unmixed, light-filled colour and clean design of the Bauhaus artists, but also the barbarity of the Third Reich.

Several biographies including Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* and the recent *Mad Girl's Love Song* by Andrew Wilson have detailed Plath's access to New York during her time as a student at Smith from 1950 to 1954, and as a visiting editor at *Mademoiselle* magazine, but the emphasis is often Plath's romantic rather than cultural exploits. In 1954 and 1955, Plath saw modern European art and cinema at The Museum of Modern Art (BF 56) and work by living American artists at the Whitney Museum (Connors 95). Abstract expressionist painters were making New York, for the first time, the international centre of the avant garde. Nowhere, not even Paris, was a more exciting location for a serious art-lover at this time. An important

driving force of these developments were the same artists, theorists and teachers of the Bauhaus who had transformed the teaching of art in universities and introduced practical preliminary courses like Plath's Art 13. The most inspirational and celebrated of these, through the second half of the century, was Josef Albers, Itten's former student, who from 1950 to 1958 was Head of Design at Yale. Plath had strong connections with Yale; formal and informal social occasions were organised between the two colleges, and from 1954, Plath's companion in New York was Richard Sassoon, a 'sophisticated' Yale student with 'European tastes' (*BF* 50). The two young art-lovers spent a great deal of time together in the galleries and museums or watching European cinema. That Plath discovered artistic New York with a cultured Yale student with whom she seems to have discussed little but art, culture and philosophy, and who would eventually become a teacher of aesthetics, seems remarkable (Meyers 98). Albers is now generally considered the most important art teacher and colour theorist of the twentieth century. In 1970 he became the first living artist to have a solo retrospective show at the Museum of Modern Art (Albers, "Exhibition"). Albers had also previously helped to establish the now legendary Black Mountain College in Sassoon's home state (Drost 242), an experimental liberal arts school whose students and faculty from this period included the abstract expressionists Willem and Elaine de Kooning, Franz Kline and Robert Motherwell, the color field artist Kenneth Noland, and Robert Rauschenberg whose work is said to anticipate the pop art of the 1960s; as well as poets, choreographers, the composer John Cage and even Albert Einstein (Katz). The literary critic Alfred Kazin who taught Plath at Smith, and whose lectures Plath occasionally missed in favour of Leonard Baskin's sculpture course when she returned to Smith as a teacher, had been on the faculty at Black Mountain (Kazin x). It seems unlikely that the 'aesthete' Sassoon was unaware of the celebrated colour-theorist and artist at his own

institution. Tempting as it is to speculate, what is certain is that Plath in the mid 1950s is positioned, temporally and geographically at one of the most exciting and revolutionary moments of fine art in the twentieth century.

Plath also made visits to the churches and museums of Paris with Sassoon and it was with Sassoon that she visited the Matisse-designed chapel in the South of France that she had 'loved via pictures for years' (*LH 203*); however, Plath went alone to the Nicolas De Staël exhibition in Paris in 1956. Judging by her precise recall several years later, Plath's gallery excursions were immersive and with a technical and studious bent:

viewed his paintings, sitting, drawing line facsimiles & color notes of boats against a dark green sky, pale flavous and slender bumpy pears arranged, three, on a dark purple and green ground, blue squared Paris rooftops, black & white balancing brushstrokes, I adoring, alone lonely, absorbing all that paint. (*J 317*)

This suggests a sharp visual memory – the exhibition is recalled from a visit which had taken place two years before this diary entry was made. Not just the apparent detail of recall, but also the fact that Plath who, by the time of this gallery visit, no longer considered herself a painter or painter in training, should study the work with such practical absorption, is worthy of note. The drawing of line facsimiles and the taking of colour notes are the actions of a visual artist who has something practical to learn from the pictures she is viewing and which she plans to put in to practice at some time, and in some form, in her own artwork. De Staël, like Matisse, was a brilliant and striking colourist: 'All those hot reds & blues and yellows spurting from his fingertips' (*J 317*). It is with poems such as 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', 'Ariel'

and 'Purdah' as well as many others of the *Ariel* set that this wealth of visual knowledge, fascination and expertise finally comes into play in Plath's own creative work. When we are presented with the spare visuality of a poem like 'The Moon and Yew Tree' – its unequivocal rhetoric, strong horizontals and verticals, gestural geometric forms and restricted but luminous palette – or the resonant primary and secondary colours of 'Ariel', it is easy to see that visual source material, of the kind she was gleaning at the de Staël exhibition, had been deeply and productively absorbed.

When, in 1956, Plath arrived at Cambridge as a Fullbright scholar, she came armed with postcards and art books, not as a new-world tourist hungry for European art, but as a cosmopolitan bringing visual culture to an outpost. In a letter to Gordon Lameyer, Plath described the art books and postcards with which she had decorated her college rooms:

a flurry of vivid postcard modern art reproductions on door and wardrobe (memoirs of Art Galleries from NYC to Washington to London) a long, low coffee table holding art books ... Braque still life in fawns, rich russets, avocado green and highlights of yellow: forrest green, sun yellow, chestnut brown, plus accents of black and white are the colours I live among. (qtd. in Connors 97)

This extract displays Plath's characteristic 'color notes'. It is difficult to decide whether the 'Braque still life' is an image designed to convey the 'palette' of her Cambridge room, or a reference to a reproduction of a Braque's painting, or perhaps the cover of a book.

More than just a personal idiosyncrasy, Plath's intensely visual sensibility, her use of colour and her 'painterly' compositional technique are indispensable resources for her mature work. Ted Hughes has described Plath's 'painterly' method of composition which he associates with her love of drawing and an 'instinctive compulsion[...] to make patterns' (*WP* 161):

Our methods were not the same. Hers was to collect a heap of vivid objects and good words and make a pattern; the pattern would be projected from somewhere deep inside... My method was to find a thread end and draw the rest out of a hidden tangle. Her method was more painterly, mine more narrative, perhaps. ("Art of Poetry" 289)

This is partly, as Hughes suggests, a personal idiosyncrasy, a congenital and habitual way of thinking and seeing, but it is grounded in Plath's theoretical and practical training in visual art and the particular significance of Plath's time and place as an art student and art enthusiast in East Coast America. As a practitioner, or at least trainee, in visual art she was exposed to theories and philosophies of colour and composition, both conceptually and experientially in a way that may not have been possible for earlier generations of American art students. As a freshman at Smith, she was looking at paintings in reproduction and in galleries, and attempting to work with pigments in similar ways with her own hands. Plath's characteristic 'spectrum of ... color imagery' (*BF* 272) is not simply a personal inclination evolved in an ad hoc manner and influenced by her knowledge of modern art; it is a translation into poetry of some of the basic formal principles and compositional practices of twentieth-century visual art. The visual is not an optional method among others Plath might

have chosen; the visual is fundamental to the structuring and conceiving of Plath's mature work and to its remarkable lucidity and authority.

### **Literary influences and visuality.**

Chapter Four is concerned with *vision* rather than visual art, and in particular, the child figure in *Ariel* and the last poems. With the end of the adventure of *Ariel* in the winter of 1962, pure primary colour is much less in evidence in Plath's work. Bauhaus-derived faith (or hope) in the transcendent, transporting properties of pure, saturated colour in resonant combination is no longer available. 'Child', one of the last poems, returns to literary (rather than painterly) tropes of purity and innocence – infancy and whiteness, and I make connections between the imagery and landscapes of Plath and Emily Dickinson. Plath explores not only the purity of the child figure, but the penetrating vision of the poet whose elevation of a vulnerable subject as an *object* of perfect beauty – 'Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing' – endangers or threatens that child subject.

The recent acceptance among critics of the significance and range of Plath's interest in visual art and the beginning of enquiries into its influence in her poetry makes urgent some investigation of Plath's 'ways of seeing'. Questions suggest themselves not least because of Plath's own interest in creative power and responsibility as it is dramatized in the poems – 'Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free' in 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', and the muddying of the clear eye of the child by the speaker's 'troubled' 'Wringing of hands' in 'Child.' Adorno has written of the 'affinity of all beauty with death', and the idea of 'pure form that art imposes on the diversity of the living and that is extinguished by it' (72). Plath's poetry *stages* the tendency of art to turn the living into artifact. One of the ways she

achieves this is through the propensity for dead forms in her poetry to bristle with uncanny signs of life, as Angela Leighton has shown:

plaster casts, like other monuments, recall restless, living occupants.

...

Plath's lifelong interest in effigies, dummies, casts, and heads ...is the source of her power as well as her scandal. (254)

### **Methodology, visual models and thinking about form**

Recent scholarship by Fan Jinghua, Kathleen Connors, Sally Bayley, Anita Helle, Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty and others in the area of Plath's visual art, and the 2011 exhibition of Plath's drawings, have established unequivocally that, as Plath herself claimed, her imagination owed much to visual art ('Two of a Kind'). How, then does Plath employ drawing, painting and sculpture as models for poetic composition or formal experimentation? Can a better appreciation of her visuality contribute to our understanding of how and why Plath was able to make, in so short a time, the radical shifts of style that resulted, firstly, in the extraordinary poems of *Ariel* in 1961 and 1962 and, secondly, the quite different but no less remarkable work of 1963? In Chapter Five I explore Plath's search for, and discovery of, a post-*Ariel* stylistic direction and a visual lexicon equal to the very different world of the last poems. To this end, I trace references to monumental art, formal gardens and statuary, wood-cutting, metalwork and the plastic arts in 'Brasília', 'Totem', 'Gigolo', 'Words' and 'Kindness.' Compositional and stylistic strategies gleaned from visual art, or with a strong visual component, are traced in each chapter, however. The high energy, immediacy and sense of transcendent possibility of the October poems, the insistent blue-ness and patterning of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', the simplified geometry of

the bee poems and 'Berck-Plage', and the stony austerity of 'Edge', for example, all rely on visual models. There is a clear connection between Plath's 'compuls[ive]' (Axelrod) formal remaking, which can be seen in both the finding and the giving up of what Hughes called the 'masterful programme of *Ariel*' (205), and her intensely visual sensibility.

There is a trend in recent criticism, which approaches Plath's work through the lens of visual art, to position visual art in opposition to Plath's new critical 'training', or 'empirical-formalist protocols' (Britzolakis, "Conversation" 170). Christina Britzolakis reads Plath's fascination with Giorgio de Chirico's surrealist landscapes, broken perspectives and abandoned statuary as a way to critique "'classic" modernism' by way of its own tropes (182):

de Chirico's optic of dream and the uncanny enables Plath to recover the resources of modernism within the empirical-formalist protocols of the New Criticism, reshaping the latter into a surrealist method based less on narrative sequence than on a sequence of disjointed and psychically overdetermined images. (170)

In a similar vein, Kathleen Connors suggests that the surrealistic painting of de Chirico 'resonated with [Plath's] own visionary leanings', offering an antidote to her 'tendency to mimic poetic giants to the exclusion of developing her own style' (107). Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty reads 'Yadwigha, On a Red Sofa, Among Lilies: A Sestina for the Douanier,' Plath's poetic response to Rousseau's painting, *The Dream* (1910) (see appendix, fig 1) as symbolic of Plath the poet poised between 'genteel' and restrictive 'New Criticism and formalist poetry on the one hand' and the freedom of 'unexplored poetic vistas on the other':

The inbetweenness of the model, sitting on a sofa in the middle of the jungle, is also that of the poet herself, uncomfortably poised between the genteel, civilised world of the New Criticism and formalist poetry on the one hand, and the alluring savagery of 'no well-bred lillies' and unexplored poetic vistas on the other. The regular, highly crafted and constricting form of the sestina bears witness to Plath's difficulty to part from a tradition the inadequacy of which she fully perceives.

...

The strict forms of Plath's New Critical poems were used as a way of keeping pain and loss at a distance by enclosing them in a well-wrought urn of the poem. (119)

Plath's speaker addresses Yadvigha, perhaps rendering her less silent object than living subject. While this one-sided conversation might suggest an identification of poet with painter's model, 'poised' between stultifying tradition and expressive freedom, a cursory reading of the poem does not bear this out. In many later poems, such as 'Purdah' and 'Fever 103°,' as well as 'In Plaster,' 'The Earthenware Head' and 'Edge,' as Angela Leighton has shown, Plath does indeed engage with the uncomfortable relationship between female subject and art object: 'the subject of these poems cannot withstand the assumption from the 'antique' that a woman belongs on a vase, or perhaps in a poem' (49). What Plath's 'Yadvigha' celebrates in Rousseau's painting, however, is, very clearly, the uncompromising 'formalism' that is willing to depict a kind of narrative nonsense (a sofa in a jungle) in order to serve the painterly, compositional, *formal* imperative for 'red against green':

the couch stood  
Stubborn in its jungle: red against green,

Red against fifty variants of green.

...

He put you on the couch  
To feed his eye with red: such red! under the moon,  
In the midst of all that green

It is not surrealistic tropes and imagery, or a sense of female audacity, which impress the speaker; it is the painting's uncompromising, expressionist composition. The daring move is not, as Plath's poem sees it, the positioning of a genteel sofa in a savage jungle, but the usurpation of rules of narrative, subject matter and verisimilitude in the service of sheer colour: 'red against green / Red against fifty variants of green.' The rationale for the existence of the sofa in the jungle is, simply, to see intense colour in potent combination. Apart from the insistent repetition of 'red against green,' the final stanza of the sestina contains a short eulogy to red: 'he put you on the couch / To feed his eye with red: such red!' It is possible that Plath's sense of creative breakthrough and achievement on the writing of this and the other art poems was a response to the technical and compositional possibilities for her own poetry that Plath sensed in the artwork:

These are easily the best poems I've written and open up new material  
and a new voice. I've discovered my deepest source of inspiration,

which is art, the art of primitives like Henri Rousseau, Gauguin, Paul Klee, and De Chirico. (*LH* 336)

The punch and charge of saturated colour in dynamic relation is something Plath delivers in many of the *Ariel* poems, but in this early ekphrastic work, and in Plath's excitement, we can see a recognition or discovery of an indispensable creative resource.

It may be no coincidence that 'Yadwigha ...' features an early use of the repetition and exclamation point that would feature so strongly in *Ariel*: 'such red!' Another of the art poems, 'The Ghost's Leavetaking' based on Paul Klee's 'The Departure of the Ghost' also describes intense 'ringing' colour and that characteristic *Ariel* punctuation mark (see appendix, fig. 2):

A point of exclamation marks that sky  
In ringing orange like a stellar carrot.  
Its round period, displaced and green,  
Suspends beside it the first point, the starting

Point of Eden, next the new moon's curve.

How is it that this strange poem with the unfortunate 'stellar carrot' could seem to Plath to be among the best things she had written? Her delight begins to make sense if we read it, in part, as a response to her discovery in Klee's painting, of new stylistic possibilities for her own poetry – the bringing together of the literary and the visual, image and text, intense colour and emphatic verbal expression.

Many scholars agree that the paintings and etchings of Plath's favourite 'primitive' artists – Klee, Rousseau, de Chirico and others – offered Plath the motifs, subject matter and surreal juxtapositions which allowed her to escape the strictures of New Criticism (in de Nervaux-Gavoty), modernist masters (Connors) or to construct 'a devastating critique of the postwar formalist lyric and a recovery of the wider cultural resources of modernism as critique' (Britzolakis 107-08). However, I am not sure a reading of the poems can support these assessments. In the case of *The Dream*, Plath recognises a veneration for formal imperatives and an artwork which is seriously engaged with its own materials and processes of production. The absorption or creative satisfaction to be had in the manipulation of paint and pigment is easy to appreciate, even for the non-artist. A good example is the action painting of the abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock who poured and dripped house paint onto canvases spread out on the ground. It is more difficult, perhaps, to see how a preoccupation with the *stuff* of poetry (syntax, image, register, line, even punctuation!) could be so rich and rewarding a focus for a literary artist, but Plath's response to Rousseau and Klee suggest just this sort of identification and recognition. I would go so far as to say that a measure of her delight in these 'primitive' artists and their works is that they come with the blessing of the New Critical theorists and the modernist poets she so admired. Fan Jinghua explains that Plath's explorations in visual art are absolutely in keeping with her early literary 'training':

After being raised in the prevalent theoretical environment of New Criticism, it is no doubt that Plath was quite aware of textual viscosity or verbal icon in poetry. As a matter of fact, among the books she heavily annotates in her personal library are *The Well Wrought Urn* and

*Understanding Poetry*. The former of these two most popular [texts] of the New Critical canon derives its title from Keats's 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', the most famous of Romantic ekphrasis. New Criticism's *fastidious analysis of formal aspects of poetry prepares her for the coming maturity in poetic pictorialism* [my emphasis]. (211-12)

To Jinghua's citing of *The Well Wrought Urn* and *Understanding Poetry*, we could add W. K. Wimsatt's *Verbal Icon* and *T. S. Eliot: The Design of his Poetry* by Smith's own Elizabeth Drew. In fact, Plath's later poems exhibit a deeper entrenchment in formalism so that Heaney was able to describe the lyrics of *Ariel* as 'represent[ing] the furthest extension of the imagist mode' (151). Angela Leighton has explained the meeting of literary modernism and visual art:

Form for the modernists, is refreshed by an association with the visual arts, particularly cubism and post-impressionism, which gives the word an extra agenda and turns it into the messenger of newness. The main impetus behind this ... is Ezra Pound who, in 1916 for instance, declared that "So far as I am concerned, Jacob Epstein was the first person who came talking about 'form', not the *form of anything* '... Pound's own criticism constantly returns to the banner of form, for which abstract sculpture is now the prime example, "Brancusi, he points out, "is meditating upon pure form free from all terrestrial gravitation". (14)

Plath's use of visual art models (such as the vision of a monumental sculpture which she gives as the rationale for 'Totem': 'a pile of interconnected images, like a totem

pole') (CP 295n), can be understood as a sign of her rapport with New Critical thinking, rather than its dismantling. It is possible, however, that Plath, ever the alpha student, takes the modernist veneration of the visual to places it was never intended to go: her perfect artifacts such as the gold hammered head of 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>' or the woman/statue of 'Edge' or even the odalisque of 'Purdah' have a 'nerved', unpredictable and uncontainable 'live[ness]' about them, just as living women in the poetry have a chilling affinity with stone and monument (Leighton 242). Furthermore, this reading of Plath's formalism, bound up as it is with visual art, cannot be understood as a retreat into 'the confined space of the museum of tradition' (Nervaux-Gavoty 118), but proof, instead, of her creative engagement with the wider contemporary cultural landscape.

Similarly, my method here is broadly formalist, beginning in close reading of the published poems, but seeks also to take account of a wider artistic perspective. I have consulted manuscripts and drafts of poems held at Smith College as well as some of the annotated books of criticism and poetry from Plath's personal library. I have also drawn on the journals, *Letters Home* and prose works, reproductions of Plath's artwork and some of the drawings, etchings, paintings, sculpture, stained glass, architecture and film by other artists that inform her work (see appendix: artworks). It seems necessary, given the consensus in Plath studies away from formalist approaches, to go further to defend this methodology. Plath's handwritten notes on her copy of *The Well Wrought Urn* show a young poet enjoying discussions of 'rhetorical structure' and closely and productively engaged with the text. It is not sufficient to dismiss Plath's emphatic interventions (Bravo! or 'lovely', for example, applied to the main body or the footnotes) as a naive young woman and keen student diligently and obediently imbibing a required textbook of reactionary theory. 'Lovely' appears along with a sidebar in the margin against a comment in which Brooks

disparages a biographical critic's 'skittishness about any attempt to deal with rhetorical structure' (201). It is also sobering to see Plath's 'bravo' applied to Brooks's discussion of what he sees as the general contemporary misunderstanding of poetic form, 'our criticism' – the dominant biographical and narrowly historical literary approach of Brooks's day – is 'beset' by a fundamental 'error':

it conceives of "form" as the transparent pane of glass through which the stuff of poetry is reflected, directly and immediately. To state it in its crudest form, it conceives of form as a kind of box, neat or capacious, chastely engraved or gaudily decorated, into which the valuable and essentially poetic "content" of the poem is packed. (203)

A respect for form is indispensable, because form *is* the poem, and as readers of Plath's poetry we would be misguided to look for 'images pure and simple ... "Rather than words"' (McDonald 9). In this thesis, form is understood as a site of dynamic intersection with other poems, visual art and the cultural climate of Plath's day. In *The Well Wrought Urn*, Plath also underlined and marked, with her characteristic five-pointed star, Brooks's assertion: 'The question of form, of rhetorical structure, simply has to be faced somewhere' (202). This thesis looks carefully at the poems and demonstrates some of the rich interpretive possibilities which can come out of a close attention to these extraordinary texts.

## Chapter One.

### Planetary Light: Landscape, Perspective and Painting in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'

Robert Lowell's 'Foreword' to the 1966 American edition of *Ariel* described the 'irresistible blaze' of the poems written 'in the last two or three months of [Plath's] life'. While Lowell's image of heat and light captures something of the intense colour and volatility of the later works, it was Hughes's conception of an *Ariel* voice, first appearing in a 1965 article for the Poetry Book Society and revisited in the introduction to the 1981 *Collected Poems*, that would prove the more defining analysis in the reception of Plath's work in the following decades.

In Hughes's later article Plath is depicted as a sybil 'overtaken by the inspiration that produced the poems of the last six months of her life' (*WP* 172). This idea of a singular, prophetic, inspired voice, perhaps amounting to something close to psychic or supernatural possession, is one with which later generations of critics have engaged and in terms of which critical positions have tended to be oriented. It is a reading which has been treated, in more recent years, with increased scepticism, however, particularly as the editorial integrity of the *Ariel* collection has itself come to be understood as complex and undecided. Archival and editorial research by Marjorie Perloff ("The Two Ariels: The (Re)making of the Sylvia Plath Canon" (1984), Jacqueline Rose (*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1992)), and Tracy Brain (*The Other Sylvia Plath* (2001)) among others, demonstrate that Plath's *Ariel* texts 'exist in no pure form' (Brain 10). Christine Britzolakis's *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* takes issue with the unexamined assumption of 'breakthrough' in Plath's style and

career, and of the automatic elevation of *Ariel* and the last poems over earlier work. Close textual readings by Angel Leighton, Tim Kendall and Anne Stevenson ('Sylvia Plath's Word Play') illustrate Plath's critical acuity, technical skill and wit.

The notion of an inspired, mythopoeic *Ariel* voice has also been undermined by critical approaches which situate the work in the context of contemporary political and cultural issues. Tracy Brain's 'Plath's Environmentalism' (84-140) explores Plath's anxieties about pollution and ecological threat. Robin Peel's *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* and Deborah Nelson's *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* read *Ariel* in relation to state surveillance and domestic and international US politics of the 1950s and 1960s. Plath's negotiations with feminism and representations of gender continue to prove rich ground for many critics; Sally Bayley's 'Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity' (2007), for example, reads *Ariel*'s 'Lady Lazarus' as a 'monstrous inversion of the Hollywood screen siren' and a satirical take on the 'homogenized glamour of mid-century America' (*Eye Rhymes* 204).

There are, of course, many voices in *Ariel* (not least in the case of poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', which, while often identified with Plath's own biography, might also be understood as dramatic monologue). The work engages with all manner of subjects and themes, and exhibits a wide variation of mood from the quiet tenderness of 'Morning Song' to the murderous 'shriek' of 'Purdah'. Nevertheless, Lowell's 'blaze' and Hughes's 'voice of *Ariel*' (*WP* 186) both point, however approximately, to something distinctive about the style and energy of many of Plath's poems written in 1962 and some of the poems of 1961, but not evident in those written before. (The 1963 texts are divested of *Ariel*'s heat and velocity, but refine the spareness and authority of presentation first discovered in poems such as 'Elm' and 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' to an austerity and self-possession which is

all their own.) The *Ariel* 'voice' is sometimes a short-hand for those high-energy, primary-coloured poems of October 1962 such as 'Daddy', 'Ariel' and 'Fever 103°', but in terms of the full range of Plath's mature style represented in *Ariel* and the last poems, the unifying hallmarks are a new confidence, visual impact and astounding clarity of presentation. There is also an occasional theatricality which is less afraid of staginess than gentility and literary good manners. Seamus Heaney, whose assessment of Plath's work is not wholly admiring, nevertheless finds in many of the *Ariel* lyrics 'an irresistible given-ness':

There is the pressure of absolute fiat behind them: a set of images springs into presence and into motion as at whimsical but unignorable command. They represent the extreme extension of the imagist mode.  
(151)

In this assessment it is still not easy to find Plath as the creative intelligence of the *Ariel* poems. The images appear – 'spring into presence' – as if spontaneously and of their own volition, but Heaney allows, alongside inspiration, a sense of control, skill and power: the poet's command is 'unignorable' and the 'extreme extension of the imagist mode' suggests viscosity, economy of presentation and technical virtuosity.

These qualities appear in the poetry, perhaps for the first time, in October 1961, with the emphatic opening lines of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree': 'This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary. / The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue'. The sentences are short, simple and stripped of extraneous detail or explanation, and delivered with a cool offhandedness. The effect is compelling and the vision as indisputable as it is uncanny – we do not expect, in English poetry, a landscape so insistently blue. According to Anne Stevenson, the poem began as an

exercise to describe the immediate view from Plath's Devon home, of churchyard, tree and moon:

Ted Hughes had set [Plath] the subject as an exercise after they observed the full moon setting over the yew in the churchyard early one morning. By midday she had shown him the result. (*BF* 229)

Plath and Hughes's had moved only seven weeks previously from their London flat to Court Green, a 'very, very ancient' thatched stone house that stood in its own three acres adjacent to a churchyard complete with its traditional yew tree. One boundary was marked by a row of headstones and the plot contained what was believed to be either a prehistoric burial mound (*WP* 476) or the remains of a Roman fort (*BF* 222). It was a topography very different from that of Plath's New England roots. The natural environment of her childhood is remembered in the prose piece 'Ocean 1212-W (1962) where blue in the natural world meant the Atlantic Ocean rather than the cold, 'spiritous' mists of a Devon night:

My childhood landscape was not land but the end of the land – the cold, salt, running hills of the Atlantic. I sometimes think my vision of the sea is the clearest thing I own. I pick it up, exile that I am, like the purple 'lucky stones' I used to collect with a white ring all the way round, or the shell of a blue mussel with its rainbowy angel's fingernail interior; and in one wash of memory the colors deepen and gleam, the early world draws breath. (117)

The openness of the view of sea and sky from Plath's grandparents' seafront house on the Point Shirley peninsular is in pointed contrast to the seclusion of the Devon house with its enclosed, walled garden, mature trees and surrounding hills and church. There is an abundance of light and possibility in Plath's earliest memories of the ocean and a feeling that anything at all may be brought up out of the sea and into her experience: 'what mightn't the sea bequeath?' ('Ocean 1212-W')

The Devon garden by contrast was 'Waist-deep in history' ('Winter Trees'), with ancient empires and hundreds of years of human experience made visible in the ancient architecture of house and church and in the very shape and undulations of the earth. It is easy to see how, in such a landscape, the speaker of 'Event' (written in May 1962 at Court Green) might feel 'I walk in a ring, / A groove of old faults' or that, as in 'Letter in November' (November 1962), to 'squelch[...]' through the wet, red Devon mud is also to wade through the pull of the past with its battles, conquests and all manner of human suffering.

Presented with the English coast by well-meaning friends, Plath was disappointed: 'that is not it, that is not it at all. The *geography* is all wrong' ('Ocean' 118; my emphasis). Tim Kendall has shown how frequently landscapes appear throughout Plath's work as well as their increasing frequency in the years between *The Colossus* and *Ariel*: 'Her exploration of the relationship between the individual and the natural world is fundamental to the development of her mature voice' (31). It may be that Plath's immersion in the unfamiliar geography of North Tawton was an important spur to the stylistic adventure of a poem like 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'. Hughes has credited the onset of motherhood with a 'poetic development that has hardly any equal on record for suddenness and completeness' (*WP* 162), and the writing of *The Bell Jar* as an important model for dealing with personal history and

myth ('WP 466-81), but he has also repeatedly pointed out the connections between Plath's immediate landscape and the poems of this period:

The actual yew tree of the poem, from the front door of her house stood in the sunset, due west. On the opposite side, due East, filling her dawn sky as she saw it from the backdoor of her house, stood the elm. (WP 474)

It is possible, as Tracy Brain has suggested, that contemporary emergent ecological concerns give edge and urgency to this exploration in landscape (85). The unearthly blueness, and the sinister 'dark crime' of the sea in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' may well draw on fears of nuclear attack and environmental pollution, and the work of the biologist Rachel Carson with which Plath was familiar. As we might expect from a poet raised in the ideals of Emersonian philosophy and trained in a Bauhaus sensibility and in scientific and artistic observation, the desire or the creative need to render the natural world immediately about her seems to have been a catalyst for the discovery of rich, new stylistic resources. Plath's penetrating vision, informed by landscape, botany and visual art can be traced back at least as far as Smith College, as a letter to her benefactor, Olive Prouty, attests:

In art we sketch the same trees we analyze in botany...I don't just see trees when I bike across campus. I see shape and color outwardly, and then the cells and the microscopic mechanisms always working within are the same ones I study in biology and paint in art. (LH 61)

## **An exercise on a theme**

What is known of the genesis of the 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' has often coloured readings of the poem. Sally Bayley describes its origins as 'a poetic exercise assigned by her husband' (103). 'Assigned' has overtones of the schoolroom, and, for Bayley, a subjectivity without self-determination can be heard in the poem: 'the whole tone of the poem hints at automatic writing, forms that emerge from the somnambulist's dream world' (104). For Edward Butscher, the poem is an 'allegory of the lost little girl' (297), and for Christina Britzolakis 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is, like 'Little Fugue', a 'parodic exercise performed under male tutelage' (126): 'the childlike syntax mimes the dreamlike passivity of a hypnotic subject or of a pupil learning to write (125)'.

Hughes often made writing suggestions to Plath; the lists of his suggested titles and themes are held in the archive at Smith College. Plath made a mark in the margin next to the suggestions that appealed to her (Kukil). Some of Hughes's suggestions can be linked with completed poems – 'Surgeon at 2 am' for example, and 'The Stones of the City' which may be connected with Plath's 'Poem for a Birthday' in which 'The Stones' is the title of its final section. 'Change of vision of a maenad as she goes under the fury' may have something to do with the transfiguration of those volatile heroines in 'Purdah', 'Fever 103°' and 'Ariel'. Some of the suggestions, however, read as just a shade too prescriptive; 'Dancers coming down a street, each one more unbelievably dressed than the next' seems too elaborate ever to have provoked a lyric poem. This sort of creative interchange can be read in various ways. As husband, male poet and, at this time, the more established and recognised of the two, it might be tempting to understand Hughes's involvement as one of self-styled expert or instructor, in little doubt of his own creative bounty and fluency. Plath and Hughes were also, however, peers and fellow

poets involved in a continuing, mutually respectful and productive creative dialogue, as Frieda Hughes explains: '[Plath] frequently credited my father with inspiring her to creativity when she became stuck or felt herself to have lost direction' (vii). Heather Clark's *The Grief of Influence* is a study of borrowings, re-readings and poetic conversations between the two writers. In 'The Poetry of Plath and Hughes: Call and Response' Diane Middlebrook describes 'wide ranging and subtle influences' traveling between the writers in both directions, and the reciprocal nature of their creative partnership is now widely accepted (170).

There remains, however, some difficulty or, at least, incongruity in the fact that the poem which might be said to mark the beginning of Plath's maturity, a work of such confidence and lucidity as 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', has also the aspect of 'exercise' and even 'tutelage'. Karen Kukil in her lecture, 'The Hot Steamy Drench of the Day: Plath on Poetry', notes that it was only after the writing of this strange, new poem that 'Plath dated and saved all her poem drafts ... as if this poem marked the beginning of her self-confidence as a mature poet.' How can readers accommodate this new 'self-confidence', astounding self-possession and clarity of vision alongside the notion of poem as 'exercise' and poet/speaker as 'lost little girl'? I think the answer lies in a different understanding of the idea of 'exercise', one which accommodates the practice of the student-painter taking 'color notes' and 'drawing ... line facsimiles' (Plath *J* 317), or making copies of exemplary works by old masters. In *The Elements of Colour* Johannes Itten details many *exercises* for the student artist designed to train visual perception and increase sensitivity to colour and its actions. The brilliance of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is bound up with its painterly delineation of a scene, a compositional process which is focused on pictorial rather than narrative or thematic elements. Visual artists studying works of art (or indeed, the natural world) in this practical way are looking for horizontal and vertical lines and

forms, rhythms or patterns of repeated motifs of colour or shape, areas of coolness and warmth, light values, soft and hard edges, and so on. It is this practice, learned in Art Studios and in Mrs Van der Poel's art history and theory lectures at Smith College, that Plath brings to the writing of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', and that lends the poem much of its authority, immediacy and expressive potency. 'The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue' sounds very like the sort of notes that might be found in an artist's sketchbook, and also have something of the pictorial quality of Plath's jottings from the Nicholas de Staël exhibition: 'boats against a dark green sky ... pears arranged, three, on a dark purple and green ground, blue squared paris rooftops, black & white balancing brushstrokes' (*J* 317). 'The Moon in the Yew Tree' is, as Hughes suggested, 'a great poem', but its greatness is achieved precisely because it is also 'just an exercise.'

Many critics discussing the achievement of the poem cite its striking visuality. Christina Britzolakis sees the poem's 'landscape .. structured in a quasi-pictorial highly deterministic way around two images: the white, spherical outline of the moon starkly juxtaposed with the black, vault-like, 'Gothic' shape of the yew' (126). For Tim Kendall, the opening two lines, 'paint[...] a visual world which the reader is expected to witness (46)'. With 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' Plath achieves, for the first time, the emphatic delivery, visual patterning and expressionistic use of colour so characteristic of her mature style of which 'Ariel', and 'Poppies in October' (October 1962) represent the furthest trajectory. It is also the place where Plath first mobilizes the visuality of her thinking and her facility with visual art in important ways; firstly, by dispensing with naturalistic perspective and, secondly, by bringing to bear on her literary art the principles of Bauhaus colour theory. In this text, perspective, which in earlier landscape poems was under threat, has become wholly undone. The design of the poem draws on the 'evolution' in twentieth-century painting in which 'the

ineluctable presence of the surface' (Greenberg 87) came to be acknowledged, embraced and creatively exploited in place of traditional compositional rules of perspectival depth and naturalism. It is in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', partly by virtue of Plath's education in visual composition and a painter's sceptical attitude to naturalistic perspective, that mindscape and landscape become indistinguishable. It is also the first poem to make extensive use of the colour theories of Itten and Kandinsky, figurative resources which were to be of continuing importance in the later *Ariel* work and into the poems of 1963.

A key motif for Plath's landscape poems written before 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is a precarious balancing of the known and the unknown, stable and unstable, self and world, the sublime and the domestic. Typically, a speaker ventures into a hostile natural environment with which she interacts before withdrawing to a safer more familiar, more human place. In 'Hardcastle Crag' the speaker must, in the very last line, 'turn [ ...] back' from the moors to escape the 'hills of stones [that] could break / Her down to mere quartz grit'. 'Parliament Hill Fields' evokes a more urban and less aggressive landscape, but there is nevertheless a retreat from 'this bald hill' and the 'tin glints' that make 'my eyes wince' and a return to the domestic and the known. As in 'Hardcastle Crag', the poem ends on a surprisingly brief line of retreat – 'I enter the lit house' – as if something about the poem were being willfully curtailed or insufficiently explored. In 'Wuthering Heights', written just weeks prior to the 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', the signs of the domestic and human world have receded almost beyond the speaker's field of vision to the lights of the villages below the moors just glimpsed as darkness falls, or perhaps held only in the mind of the speaker:

Now, in valleys narrow

And black as purses, the house lights  
Gleam like small change.

This is one of Plath's most successful landscape poems and it plays the sublime and a sense of geological time against the relatively insignificant individual lifetime and the human enterprise which has produced the towns of the industrial revolution – those 'narrow', 'black' 'valleys' of the mill towns whose 'house lights / Gleam like small change'. In this poem, the sense of interchange between natural world and speaker, and the threat that the outside world embodies, is much more finely balanced. We feel that there is real danger in this sublime landscape, but the conflict is handled with some delicacy and wit and may after all be pondering only the destruction of one kind of speaker or poem to allow the coming into being of another, one that is at once more contrived and theatrical, and more exposed. There is a poised moment, a peering into the abyss, as the walker on the moors studies the heather underfoot:

If I pay the roots of the heather  
Too close attention, they will invite me  
To whiten my bones among them.

Several critics, including Luke Ferretter, have read a simple death-wish in lines such as these: 'the speaker feels that the moorland landscape is both trying to kill her and persuading her to kill herself' (86). For Helen Vendler '[m]elodrama and the depiction of violence ... were two of the stylistic results of [Plath's] traumatised view of existence' (*Last Looks* 48). These readings flatten the sentiment and suppress the playfulness that rhymes 'invite' with 'whiten', and the self-consciously prophetic tone

that whips a simple 'die' into the concoction 'whiten my bones'. A poem which has sheep in 'grandmotherly disguise / All wig curls and yellow teeth' is not one that asks to be taken entirely seriously. At the same time, the gaze of the speaker below the surface of the earth and beyond her own lifetime is nothing less than mind-expanding. The point is that contemplation of this extreme natural environment untouched by human innovation and industry presses on the observer the smallness of her individual experience and all the wonder and terror that accompanies such a thought. A landscape such as this, marked only by erosion and the centuries-old tradition of the grazing of sheep, generates a sense of time measured in aeons. This expansion of perspective is distilled in the action of the speaker peering at the moorland heather in fascination. She is rewarded with a new-found capacity of vision which penetrates to the roots underground and cannot keep quite at bay ('invite[s]') the comparison of those underground roots with her own bones after death. The vision is profoundly unnerving, but it is archeological as much as psychological, less a 'death drama' (Vendler, *Last looks* 49) than the dizziness and loss of equilibrium of an attack of vertigo: in the next line, the sheep, unlike the disoriented speaker, 'know where they are'. This is not an easy or comfortable interchange between speaker and nature, but it is profound and affective, enlarging and exhilarating as well as discomfiting. It represents a quality of experience which, because it is easily dismissed as wholly negative, gives rise to some unconvincing but persistent critical assessments of Plath's poetic relationship with the natural world – 'The poet's eye bounds the limits of her world, and all of nature exists merely as a vehicle for her sensibility' (Vendler, 'Crossing' 4). Perhaps, but it is as easy to read 'Wuthering Heights' as a homage to the undiminished sublimity of the natural world as an appropriation of it to figure some personal neurosis. The dismissive attitude to the industrial, commercial world implied in the concluding 'small-change' implies that, by

contrast, something of real value lies in the interchange (commerce) of speaker and heath. In 'Wuthering Heights' the bleakness and unfriendliness of the landscape draws out of the speaker a capacity for greater breadth of vision, detail of vision, and even self-forgetfulness.

In 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' there is no place for the human, familial or domestic protected and discrete from the wonder and terror of an unaccommodating natural world. There is no access to – not even the thought of – far-off house lights, because the alien and inhospitable natural world is all-encompassing: 'The moon is my mother' and 'I live here' says the speaker. It is as if the unstable distant horizons which 'dissolve and dissolve' as the walker approaches them in 'Wuthering Heights' have indeed, in this new kind of poem, become '[un]pin[ed]' and rushed into the immediate environment engulfing the speaker in 'fummy, spiritous mists' that occlude her vision: 'I simply cannot see where there is to get to'. The speaker can no longer take her bearings from the signs of home or civilization at the periphery of the scene (the family home of 'Parliament Hill Fields' or the valleys and villages of 'Wuthering Heights', for example). The peculiar blue light is 'of the mind' (internal, subjective) and, simultaneously, 'planetary' (global, cosmic). Another way to say this is that the integrity of perspective which was under strain in 'Wuthering Heights' with its horizons that are 'tilting and disparate, and always unstable' has, in this new kind of poem, entirely collapsed.

The dismantling of depth perspective and its apparatus – vanishing point, fixed eye-line, convergence – has been said to define modern painting. Its demise relates to particular ways of thinking about the relationship between artwork and natural world, and insists that the artist address, rather than obscure, the artfulness of her medium. These ideas, which inform Plath's mature work, were famously crystalized in the essay 'Modernist Painters' by the art historian Clement Greenberg:

Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art. The limitations that constitute the medium of painting – flat surface, the shape of the support, the properties of the pigment – were treated by the Old Masters as negative factors that could be acknowledged only implicitly or indirectly. Under Modernism the same limitations came to be regarded as positive factors, and were acknowledged openly.

...

One is made aware of the flatness of [Modernist painters'] pictures before, instead of after, being made aware of what the flatness contains. (86-87)

This essay was first published in 1960, but the idea, or rather, the understanding, of the 'ineluctable presence of the surface' (87) cuts through all twentieth-century movements in painting such as cubism, fauvism and surrealism which have sometimes been linked with Plath's poetics or with particular poems; and through the work of all Plath's favourite 'primitive' painters – Henri Matisse, Vincent Van Gogh, Henri Rousseau, Paul Gauguin, Paul Klee, Piet Mondrian, Juan Gris, Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso and many others. Giorgio de Chirico holds a special place in this assembly with his surrealistic parody of mathematical perspective and impossible vistas and architectures. Plath's knowledge of twentieth-century painting was sophisticated and she seems to have particularly enjoyed the theory and technicalities of composition. Mrs Van Der Poel's 1958 Modern Art course lectures are recorded in Plath's journal with great enthusiasm as if the vocabulary of visual analysis were a joy in itself: 'slides of colored Picassos & Juan Gris, a delight to eyes,

music of line motifs, color planes, vibrations: abstract language: interpenetration, synthetic, analytic cubism' (344).

What is at work in the painterly poetics of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is not a translating of a specific technique from one art to another, or the influence of one particular painter or artistic movement. The celebration of flatness in modern painting and the turn away from the pretence of naturalistic perspective is both more simple and more fundamental than that: it suggests an altogether new way of thinking about representation. Scale, proportion and distance, are all important concerns of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', but they are not organised along the lines of naturalistic perspective. The eye of the speaker is, in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', radically ineffective, unreliable and unstable: 'I simply cannot see where there is to get to', 'I have floated a long way'. Her observations are oddly unspecific or presented in negative terms: 'The moon is no door', 'It has a Gothic shape', 'the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence'. A painting which preserves the integrity of the picture plane is sometimes described as one through which the viewer is unable to imagine herself traveling. One of the reasons the speaker 'simply cannot see where there is to get to' is because there simply is no 'there':

The Old Masters created an illusion of space in depth that one could imagine oneself walking into, but the analogous illusion created by the Modernist painter can only be seen into; can be traveled through, literally or figuratively, only with the eye. (Greenberg 90)

In modern painting, the eye is guided by the articulating elements of the design. One of the significant organising forms of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is the strong, black, vertical 'Gothic shape' of the tree that leads the eye of the 'viewer' from the

grasses underfoot to the moon above: 'The yew tree points up. It has a Gothic shape. / The eyes lift after it and find the moon.' There are pockets of apparent depth in the poem, such as the line of headstones which for a moment appears to mark a boundary between house and churchyard, or between here and there. However, they cannot help the speaker to find her bearings, she still 'cannot see where there is to get to', and they are as likely to be an obstacle preventing her from reaching home as keeping from her home the sinister 'place' and the 'spiritous mists'. Their most determined function is as a strong horizontal balancing the verticals of tree and (in a different key) the spire of the church from which 'bells startle the sky'. What this landscape loses in depth it gains in pictorial patterning. A vertical triangle points up to a circular moon. Forms mirror, repeat and transpose and are geometric and gestural rather than particularised, sculptural or naturalistic – 'door', 'O-gape', 'Gothic shape'. The palette is radically restricted to 'blue', 'white' and 'black'. A kind of perspective is a preoccupation of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', but it is a perspective largely without depth. The humble grasses reach only to the feet of the speaker and treat her like 'God'. They are wet as if weeping (they 'unload their griefs') and their 'Prickling' tactility is shadowed by the longed-for maternal gaze of the Madonna Eleusa that rests with great 'tenderness' only on the infant in her arms. Those sensuous grasses and imagined maternal embrace are counterpoised with the ascetic retreat of the 'cold', 'stiff', hovering saints inside the church, the inscrutable silent yew and, compositionally superior to all, the extreme remove of the traumatised and traumatising moon.

This is a poem engaged with ideas of detachment, connection and communication. The speaker places her feet directly in the wet grass, a visceral experience suggesting a perfect meeting of poem and natural world, but by the final stanza, she has lost touch entirely with the earth having 'fallen a long way' and finds

everywhere about her only self-absorbed, absent or retreating figures. The undermining of naturalistic perspective raises, in poetry, questions of how and whether the poet may position herself in the poem or in relation to the poem. Tone and point of view come under scrutiny as do ideas of confessionalism and solipsism, the poem's and the poet's relationship to history, to the natural world and to the self. A lack of appropriate distance, that is, of perspective, is exactly the problem with Plath's mature poetry for some readers. Joyce Carol Oates, though disapproving of what she reads as egotism in Plath's presentation of the natural world describes well the flatness, an 'in media res' quality, which is also key to the extraordinary imagistic charge and 'given-ness' (Heaney 151) in the best of the *Ariel* work:

Plath's landscapes become pictorial without any intermediate stage, so that we discover ourselves "in una selva oscura where associations multiply endlessly, but where each tree looks like every other one ..."  
That is the danger risked by those minimal artists of our time whose subject is solely the agony of the locked-in ego: their agonies, like Plath's landscapes, begin to look alike. (518)

What Oates is missing is the painterly aesthetic at work that is seeking exactly something 'pictorial without any intermediate stage' and is delighted to discover itself in a dark forest 'where associations multiply endlessly'. Greenberg's notion of the '*integrity* of the picture plane' [my emphasis] implies a harmony or truthfulness in abstract or expressionist representation – or at least an honesty about artistic fabrication – which naturalistic representation cannot claim: 'Realistic, naturalistic art had dissembled the medium, using art to conceal art' (86). This understanding from the visual arts, calls into question critical disparagement of Plath's supposed

solipsism and narcissistic plundering of the natural world. Painters know that the evocation of naturalistic perspective and mimesis requires elaborate sleight of hand and that any painting is, first and finally, paint on a flat surface. By contrast there is, in literary criticism, a tendency to look for an impossible ideal in poetic treatments of the natural world: a connection between words on a page and 'out there' unmediated by the ego of the poet. Painters know such a text is impossible and are therefore untroubled by its absence.

Whether a discovery or an 'evolution' (Greenberg, above) in one art can be carried over into another quite so seamlessly is open to debate, but there is no doubt that perspective, as the term is understood in visual art, has been influential in twentieth-century poetry: it is even the subject of the ekphrastic poem, 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror', by Plath's contemporary, the poet and art critic John Ashbery. While they are very different kinds of writers, it should be noted that Plath was publishing her 1958 poems on paintings by Klee, Rousseau and De Chirico in *ARTnews* during the period that Ashbery was supplying monthly exhibition reviews to the same journal (*J* 324, *The Paris Review Interviews* 117). Ashbery's first piece for the magazine was a review of an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1957. Plath's 1954 essay for the Vogue Prix de Paris competition begins 'with the student planning her visit to the Whitney Museum the "mecca of Modern art"' (Connors 96), and her early poem 'Three Caryatids Without a Portico' was redrafted from 'Wayfaring at the Whitney: A Study in Sculptural Dimensions' (95). Though this aspect of Plath's cultural origins has not often been explored, both writers emerged in the East Coast of America at the high-point of Abstract Expressionism. A mix of high and low cultural reference and register, might be said to connect the work of both poets (perhaps associated with the fact that both produced, and Ashbery continues to produce, surreal and witty collage artworks). Like Plath,

Ashbery has sometimes been charged with solipsism or neurotic self-absorption. A riposte of sorts can be found in his 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror' which reminds us that 'words are only speculation / (From the Latin speculum, mirror)' (248), and contains an exposé of the artifice demanded of the artist by naturalistic perspective:

Tomorrow is easy, but today is uncharted,  
Desolate, reluctant as any landscape  
To yield what are laws of perspective  
After all only to the painter's deep  
Mistrust, a weak instrument though  
Necessary. (251)

It seems not only that 'realistic' perspective in painting is a cheap trick, but that the alternative – 'uncharted / Desolate, reluctant' 'today' – is the more interesting challenge. Appropriately, it is difficult to decide exactly how we might understand 'today', but we could hazard a guess that, whatever it is, it is offered as the proper focus of art and that it is not an entity which responds to standards of 'objective' naturalism. Ashbery's final qualification here that, whatever its weakness, the 'instrument' of 'perspective' (or possibly, of the 'painters ... / Mistrust') is 'Necessary' is made also by Greenberg:

The flatness towards which Modernist painting orients itself can never be an absolute flatness. The heightened sensitivity of the picture plane may no longer permit sculptural illusion, or trompe-l'oeil, but it does and must permit optical illusion. The first mark made on a canvas destroys its literal and utter flatness, and the result of the marks made on it by an

artist like Mondrian is still a kind of illusion that suggests a kind of third dimension. Only now it is a strictly pictorial, strictly optical third dimension. (8)

Colour is often seen as a force which works against the sculptural in painting, as in Impressionism, where painters moved away from chiaroscuro and the rendering of depth and dimension to capture instead the fleeting and changeable perceptions of colour and light. But colour itself is capable of the most unlikely of 'optical illusion[s]' (Greenberg, above). The colour theorist, Josef Albers, warns: 'In order to use colour effectively it is important to understand that it deceives continually' (*Interaction 1*). It is well known that many blues (though not all and not in every situation) appear to retreat as reds, oranges and yellows often appear to expand or advance towards the viewer. This sort of 'color action' (Albers, *Interaction 1*) is one way that a sense of depth persists in modern painting even in the most abstract and non-representational of artworks. Colours may move out from or recede behind the picture plane, or competing shades, hues and tones may suggest multiple planes within a painting space. In one of her most visually 'astounding[...]' *Ariel* poems, 'Poppies in October', Plath uses the expanding, advancing property of red to great effect: the red sunrise has bled expansively into the clouds, and the patient's wound 'blooms through her coat'. The whole involved and multi-layered image of sunrise, poppy, heart and wound relies not just on unbounded colour but on a 'pictorial ... third dimension' as well, in the overlapping, rippled and diaphanous 'skirts' of cloud and poppy petal.

### **Colour Theory in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'**

The 'Moon and the Yew Tree' is a poem which is undoubtedly of the *Ariel* set and of that grouping, one of the earlier in its composition. It relates to the previous landscape poems, 'Wuthering Heights', 'Hardcastle Crag', 'Stars over the Dordogne', 'Blackberrying' and 'Finisterre', as well as to the poems of April 1962 such as 'Among the Narcissi', 'Pheasant' and 'Elm' which, like 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', are set in the landscape immediately around Plath's home in Devon. The innovative use of colour and its theories in the design of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' anticipates the expressive rendering of the natural world in the October poems. As in Post-impressionist and expressionist painting there is, in these highly-coloured works, a sense of colour not just reflecting the natural world, but also liberated from it. 'Ariel' for example favours the generic terms and the primary colours, 'blue', 'Black', 'White', 'red': ('blue / pour of tor and distances', 'White / Godiva', 'Into the red // Eye'). In later landscape work, primary colours are avoided and terminology tends to be nuanced, graded, and, perhaps more naturalistic, such as the 'Horse the color of rust' in 'Sheep in Fog', or the 'dull purple' and 'body ... The color of pearl' in 'Confusion' (See my discussion of colour theory in *Ariel* and the last poems in Chapter Two). Kandinsky has explained the difference in attitude to colour and representation between abstract or expressionist painters and those whose object is the mimesis of minute details of light and colour effects in the natural world:

Van Gogh in his letters asks if he may not paint a white wall dead white. This question offers no difficulty to the non-representative artist who is concerned only with the inner harmony of colour. But to the impressionist-realist it seems a bold liberty to take with nature.

(Kandinsky 39n)

Like Kandinsky's non-representative artist, Plath in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' takes bold liberties with nature. The yew is a simplified – abstracted – 'black', 'Gothic shape', for example. The grammar of abstract art as it was first codified by Kandinsky, relies on colour and geometric form. Itten, after Kandinsky, associates the triangle and similar angular (and 'Gothic') forms with 'thought', as the square 'resonates' with matter and the circle with spirit: 'its acute angles produce an effect of pugnacity and aggression' (75). Kandinsky's reading of black, like the 'message of the yew tree' in Plath's poem, is 'silence':

A totally dead silence ... a silence with no possibilities has the inner harmony of black. In music it is represented by one of those profound and final pauses, after which any continuation of the melody seems the dawn of another world. Black is something burnt out like the ashes of a funeral pyre, something motionless like a corpse. (39)

Kandinsky's conception of the meaning of colour does not exist outside of cultural norms and biases so that associations of blackness with 'something burnt ... something motionless like a corpse' gives the reader at least a moment's pause for thought. The connections with Plath's dark, angular and silent yew, however, and with critical readings which interpret the tree as a symbol of her dead father, and of an authoritarian masculinity, are also difficult to ignore: 'But what was this yew tree in its churchyard full of graves in the light of a full "mother moon" if not the Man in Black, the dominant dead figure of her psychic landscape?' (Stevenson *BF* 229).

Plath's white 'knuckle' of a moon that is, 'quiet / With the O-gape of compete despair' may also be informed by Kandinsky's 1911 treatise:

white ... is a symbol of a world from which all colour as a definite attribute has disappeared. This world is too far above us for its harmony to touch our souls. A great silence, like an impenetrable wall, shrouds its life from our understanding. (39)

The austere remove of the moon in Plath's poem – compositionally, and in terms of human connection – would seem to owe something to Kandinsky's analysis. White as a 'great silence [that] ... *shrouds* its life from our understanding' [my emphasis] coalesces, in Plath's poetry, into the white moon as crone figure, 'hood[ed]' in 'Edge', and dressed in blue 'garments' in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'.

The poem exists in a pre-dawn world and that characteristic *Ariel* colour, the brilliant red of a rising sun, has not yet arrived in the poetry. It is not red but blue that dominates 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'. In earlier landscape poems the colour is often absent where we might expect it: neither sky nor ocean provide blue. In 'Wuthering Heights', there is only 'pale sky' and then a 'solider color'. In 'Blackberrying' the sea is 'nothing but a great space / Of white and pewter lights'; and although 'Finisterre', anticipating 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', has 'mists' and an effigy of the Virgin Mary, the 'tropical' 'blue' is only the imagined origin of the exotic shells, souvenirs from 'a place we have never been to'. Both 'Wuthering Heights' and 'Blackberrying' deploy a colour which is rarely found in Plath's later work – orange, the complementary partner of blue in the colour circle. In colour theory, complementary colours have an interesting relationship so that for example 'light of the two colours mixed together will yield white' and 'their pigments, mixed together, yield a neutral grey-black' (Itten 49). It is also the case that 'the eye requires any given colour to be balanced by the complementary and will spontaneously generate the latter if it is not present' (Itten 49). It is as if in these poems that pre-date 'The

Moon and the Yew Tree' by just a few weeks, blue is beginning to insinuate itself into the poetry and into the landscape. In 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.', written on the same day as 'Finisterre', blue is found not in a landscape but in a body upon which invasive surgery is being performed. It is manifested in human nerves, drugs and medical procedures: 'The intricate, blue piping under this pale marble':

Over one bed in the ward, a small blue light  
Announces a new soul. The bed is blue.  
Tonight, for this person, blue is a beautiful color.  
The angels of morphia have borne him up.

With 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' Plath discovers a way to reintroduce the most unearthly of colours into the landscape, but it is a use of blue which remembers the sickly, chemical and elusive qualities of the colour explored in 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.' rather than anything reminiscent of Matisse's sun-filled Riviera or even Plath's Cape Cod Atlantic. After the reticence around colour in 'Wuthering Heights' its ordering and identifying is now, in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', emphatic and unequivocal: 'The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue'.

Colour has become more essential and structural at this point in Plath's development and the variety of tones and shades of blue is remarkable. Plath's various blues, in this and in other poems, owe a great deal to the expressive properties given by Itten and Kandinsky. For Itten, blue is the most mystical of colours:

From the point of view of spiritual immateriality, blue seems active and red passive. Blue is always cold and red is always warm. Blue is

contracted, introverted. As red is associated with blood so blue with the nervous system ... Blue is always shadowy and tends in its greatest glory to darkness. It is an intangible nothing and yet present as the transparent atmosphere. In the atmosphere of the earth, blue appears from lightest azure to the deepest blue-black of the night sky. Blue beckons our spirit with the vibrations of faith into the infinite distances of spirit. When blue is dimmed it falls into superstition, fear, grief, and perdition, but always it points to the realm of the transcendental. (Itten 88)

This is a very rich discussion of the qualities of blue with wide relevance to a great many of Plath's various shades and applications of the colour in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' as well as other poems. From the 'spiritual immateriality' to the 'cold', 'infinite distances' and 'grief and perdition', Itten's analysis of the expressive properties of blue in painting is a useful gloss for Plath's 'cold', 'nervous', 'shadowy' and 'grief'-filled poem. Blue is present in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' in many guises, from insubstantial mist to the deep, doom-laden indigo of the night sky and the longed for, but absent, lapis lazuli of the robes of the Virgin Mary. The various properties are all related and involved so that the nebulosity of blue is associated in Itten's writings and in many of Plath's poems with ideas of dissolving distances, for example. Distance implies a kind of coldness and melancholy which is also linked to the unearthly, to amnesia, drugs, poisons and sickness. These linked and nuanced qualities cohere in the surprising and inspired word, 'planetary': 'This is the light of the mind, cold and planetary. / The trees of the mind are black. The light is blue'. The word is syntactically and formally prominent, placed at the end of clause, sentence

and line, and paralleled with 'blue' in the second line. Its cosmological tenor throws a new light on what had seemed, from its title, a poem of the natural, terrestrial world.

To say that 'planetary' *is* blue makes little sense, or at least suggests a subjective, whimsical reading. In fact 'planetary' connotes many of the properties of blue given by Itten and Kandinsky, and on which Plath draws extensively in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree':

1a. Of, relating to, or belonging to a planet or planets; of the nature of or resembling a planet; having a motion like that of a planet.

b. Chiefly Astrol. Caused by a planet; of or relating to the supposed influence of a planet over persons or events.

...

2. Wandering; erratic; itinerant. 3. Of or relating to the earth; terrestrial; worldwide, global. (O.E.D.)

The first definition, 'of the nature of or resembling a planet', gives distance, coldness, the unearthly – all attributes of blue expounded by colour theorists and clearly important in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' as well as many other of Plath's poems.

The astrological connotation (1b above) of malign cosmic influence is inherent in the unnamed but terrible 'dark crime' and the tragic 'O-gape of complete despair'. An example of this usage can be found in *Timon of Athens*: 'Be as a planetary plague, when Jove will o'er some hi-vic'd city hang his poyson in the sick ayre' (iv iii, ll. 1788–90). Both the wraith-like speaker and the 'spiritous mists' of Plath's poem might be described as 'wandering; erratic', and the blue planetary light is 'global' and all-encompassing, with not even the most precarious place of refuge from its grief and

melancholy. A special use of 'planetary' is as a short form of 'planetary nebula', 'an expanding shell of gaseous material surrounding a star which has ejected it' (O.E.D), something like the 'Clouds' that 'are flowering / Blue and mystical over the face of the stars' in the last stanza, and in line with the nebulous 'mists [that] inhabit this place'. At the same time, there is in the word a sense of substantial form and mass. Hughes's use of 'planetary' in a much later essay stresses 'physical mass' and 'fate': a monumental sculpture by the artist Leonard Baskin 'has immensity ... Its planetary, physical mass, so loaded with fate and momentum, and that draughty, flamey sun-scrap of glory are exacting their price' (*WP* 99-100). It seems likely, given their shared love of the plays of Shakespeare, that both Hughes and Plath are thinking of the tragic fate and curse of Timon, although Hughes's 'flamey sun-scrap' suggests that the work of Plath might also be feeding the image.

The amount of work done by 'planetary' in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is remarkable. The technique is reminiscent of Elizabeth Drew's description of the style of T. S. Eliot in his Ariel poems, as a 'telescoping of associations to get greater pressure'. In Plath's copy of Drew's *T. S. Eliot: The Design of his Poetry* held in the Smith archives the phrase is underlined (123). Even more pertinent to Plath's 'planetary', and also underlined, is a description by Eliot himself of elements of the style of Lancelot Andrewes:

Andrewes takes a word and derives the world from it;  
squeezing and squeezing the word until it yields a full juice  
of meaning which we should never have expected any word  
to possess (qtd. in Drew 126)

As is often the case in Plath's annotations to the poets and their works and criticism, the highlighted phrase has the strange quality of sounding more typical of the style of Plath herself than the writer in question.<sup>6</sup> 'Planetary' is indeed 'squeezed' for meaning and in a way that would not be possible without Plath's theoretical and experiential knowledge of Bauhaus colour theory. One of the achievements of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is the bringing of a sense of 'concrete actuality' (Itten 34) to intangible, transparent atmosphere. 'Planetary' does not quite establish a celestial body in the 'picture space' of the poem, but it does bring a sense of circular or spherical form. It is as if this strange, cold, blue light has travelled not from the moon or sun but from some distant planet at the outer reaches of the solar system. For Kandinsky and Itten the circle is the formal, geometric equivalent of blue: 'The incessantly moving circle corresponds among colours to transparent blue' (Itten 76). Itten claimed that, in an experiment in which students were presented with three simple shapes – a square, a circle and a triangle – and three primary colours, almost all coloured the square red, the triangle yellow and the circle blue. This insistent physicality and visuality of Plath's vocabulary and the tendency in the *Ariel* work for unlikely words to become embodied and three-dimensional can be seen in a smaller way in 'Burning the Letters' where the 'German cabbage' is 'Involved in its weird blue dreams'. Here 'involved' is 'squeezed' so that as well as the suggestion of inappropriate romantic involvements we see the enclosed form of the cabbage, its interlocked leaves and its 'Involved' architecture. The weird blue cabbage becomes a graphic (and sardonic) illustration of the abstract concept of involvement. Plath may also be recalling from Kandinsky the edict that blue has a tendency to appear to move concentrically and

---

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, 'She went, to plain-work and to purling brooks / Old fashioned halls, dull aunts and croaking rooks'. (Alexander Pope, 'Epistle to Miss Blount On Her Leaving Town, After the Coronation', in Nichol Smith, David, ed. *The Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1951).

away from the viewer: 'blue ... moves in upon itself like a snail retreating into its shell' (36-37).

Of the various, related densities and tones of blue which may be said to cohere in 'planetary', it is the intangible misty blue we encounter first. The 'Fumy, spiritous mists' of pre-dawn light in the first stanza and the 'Clouds [that] are flowering / Blue and mystical over the face of the stars' in the last are close to Itten's 'intangible nothing'. Often in the poetry, as in 'Ariel', blue has an elusive, 'substanceless' quality. Writing about the blue of Giotto's frescoes, Julia Kristeva explains this nebulousness as bound up with the mechanics of visual perception. She proposes that the apprehension of blue necessarily destabilizes, or effectively dissolves, the observed object:

One's first impression of Giotto's painting is of a blue substance, rather than form or architecture ... Such a blue takes hold of the viewer at the extreme limit of visual perception. In fact, Johannes Purkinje's law states that in dim light, short wave lengths prevail over long ones; thus before sunrise, blue is the first colour to appear ... A possible hypothesis would be that the perception of blue entails not identifying the object; that blue is, precisely, on this side of, or beyond the object's fixed form; that it is the zone where phenomenal identity diminishes. (224-25)

The 'planetary' 'light' of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' has a sense of both formlessness and mass not unlike the impression of 'substance' reported by Kristeva on approaching the frescoes in the 'semi-darkness of the Arena chapel' (224).

Something similar happens in Plath's 'Winter Trees', written after the *Ariel* poems and set, like 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', at dawn: 'The wet dawn inks are doing their

blue dissolve'. Here 'dissolve' becomes a noun, both embodied and liquefying, but also a piece of theatre – a dance or a disappearing trick, something akin to the 'placard of blue fog' that is daily 'wheeled into position' in 'The Jailer'. The blue of 'Ariel' is intangible and at the same time highly sensory with its 'substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances'. That 'Pour', its resonance drawn out by the rhyming 'tor', efficiently conveys an impression of rider and horse rushing at great speed through a landscape so that far distances seem to rush towards and engulf the rider. However, the effect is even more insistent than this; it is as if the colour of those distances is felt like liquid on the skin.

These dawn blues which are, somehow, palpably insubstantial are also related to the shadowy (or shadowing) forms that Helen Vendler has so accurately described in Plath's work:

The best of her poems illustrate both the fullness and the emptiness of the universe: how it is filled with complicated, rich, obdurate, and significant forms – yew trees, Gothic letters, blackberries – and how these forms are shadowed by others, diaphanous, elusive, obscuring, and blank, whether moonlight, fog, cloud, or ocean. (*Music of What Happens* 279)

Blue is the colour of those elements of the natural world which are unreachable or ungraspable, whether sky, atmosphere, mist, shadow, water or moonlight. Bound up with this idea of shadowy and 'elusive' blue is the notion of distance and of retreat. 'Blue draws away from the spectator', says Kandinsky; 'The power of profound meaning is found in blue, and first in its physical movements (1) of retreat from the spectator, (2) of turning in upon its own centre' (38). The cosmos always evokes

enormous distance in Plath's work as well as coldness, exposure, amnesia and human frailty. This is another attribute of 'planetary' that is drawn into 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' as the lost, abandoned speaker stands (or floats) alone and disoriented in a cold 'planetary' light. In 'The Night Dances', 'The comets / Have such a space to cross, // Such coldness, forgetfulness.' The night sky is sometimes associated with vertiginous height or disorienting descent: 'Let the stars / Plummet to their dark address' says the speaker of 'Nick and the Candlestick'. And blue, too, is so often paired with 'distance' or 'distances' or with deceptive or disorientating horizons or vistas, as to become an apparently natural epithet as in 'Ariel's 'substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances'. In 'Years', 'pistons hiss' 'In blue distance', and in 'Three Women', blue is apostrophised: 'O color of distance and forgetfulness!'

The ubiquitous coldness of blue (Itten: 'Blue is always cold')<sup>7</sup> has a visceral expression in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' in the hypothermic 'blue' of the barefoot 'saints' in the church whose 'hands and faces [are] stiff with holiness':

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

Christian piety – 'stiff' 'holiness' in Plath's poem – is identified with an absence of human warmth and compassion. These saints are all (as Itten might put it) blue nerve rather than red heart. They are 'contracted, introverted' (Itten, above) and their withdrawal from the earth ('Floating' ... over the pews') recalls Kandinsky's idea of the tendency of blue to retreat from the viewer. It is also a sceptical interpretation of his idea that 'blue is the typical heavenly colour'. Kandinsky notes that in Byzantine Art,

---

<sup>7</sup> Later denied by Albers and others.

'halos are golden for emperors and prophets (i.e. for mortals), and sky-blue for symbolic figures (i.e. spiritual beings)' (38n). A literary (if visionary) source for Plath's blue saints may be found in the notes to Yeats's 'The Dolls':

After I had made the poem, I looked up one day into the blue of the sky, and suddenly imagined, as if lost in the blue of the sky, stiff, imposing figures in procession. I remembered they were a habitual image suggested by the blue sky and looking for a second fable called them 'The Magi' [...] complementary forms of those enraged dolls' (*Complete Poems* 531n)

These lines are marked with a sidebar in Plath's copy of the *Complete Poems* held in the Smith College archives. 'The Dolls' and 'The Magi' are also annotated with textbook or lecture notes copied to the edges of the poem and referring to the birth of Christ. The blue saints of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' are an example of the way that Plath's imagination fuses modernist literary and visual art sources. Both Yeats's and Plath's saints are 'stiff', floating above the earth, utterly divorced from human suffering and incapable of earthly connection, the personification of Itten's 'contracted, introverted' blue. Furthermore, both Yeats's magi and Plath's saints recall ecclesiastical architecture and tomb sculpture. Yeats's 'pale unsatisfied ones' have 'ancient faces like rain-beaten stones' (141). There is a suggestion that Plath's saints 'inside the church' are tomb effigies, memorial sculptures or architectural details that are literally located above the pews of the church, just as, in the previous stanza, Mary is imagined as 'effigy'. These lines display a touch of the 'wild wit' Angela Leighton has found in 'Edge' in which a stylized figure is represented as effigy, or

effigy as woman, with a 'slightly uncomfortable adjustment and readjustment of stone and flesh, monument and body' (255).

Plath's blue saints inside the church are literally unearthly – they are 'Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews' – but they do not float very high. In comparison with Yeats's ranks of 'imposing' armoured patriarchs in procession across the blue of the sky in 'The Magi' ('all their helms of silver hovering side by side') (141), Plath's saints are performing something closer to yogic levitation or a party trick. Beneath the absolute superiority and remove of the 'bald' moon, they are less than impressive. Plath goes further, undercutting their ethereality with extremities that, like those of mortal man, are sensitive to the cold: 'Their hands and faces [are] stiff with holiness', their 'delicate feet' are exposed above 'cold pews' and 'the saints will all be blue'. There is a similar bathos in the tongues of the church bells that do not sound in praise of God but comically 'bong out their [own] names'. The molossus 'eight great tongues' has a music which cannot be said to lift heavenwards and a 'great tongue[...]' is not the most pious figure for the praise of God. The next line raises the subject of sobriety lending the whole tableau something approaching a Chaucerian bawdiness. It might be too much to read in this image Plath's dislike of the gossip (loose tongues) and social manipulations she associated with the church and its community events in North Tawton,<sup>8</sup> but a letter to her mother written six months after 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', makes clear Plath's 'scorn' for the rector:

I honestly dislike, or rather, scorn the rector. I told you about his ghastly H-bomb sermon, didn't I, where he said this was the happy prospect of the Second Coming and lucky we Christians were compared to the

---

<sup>8</sup> The short story, 'Mothers' tells of the exclusion of a divorcee, Mrs Nolan, from the church and its social events in a village that bears a striking resemblance to North Tawton.

stupid pacifists and humanists and 'educated pagans' who feared being incinerated, etc., etc. I have not been to church since. (*LH* 449)

The second coming of Christ is an important motif in such poems as 'The Magi' and 'Nick and the Candlestick' and as a background atmosphere of anxiety in many of the later poems about children. Plath's conception of the Second Coming is specifically Yeatsian, not the Anglican teachings of the coming of eternal heaven on earth, but the violent beginnings of another cycle of history. Plath's poetry is attuned to Yeats's conception of an uninterested spiritual realm unconcerned with the details of human suffering. In 'The Cold Heaven' Plath has underlined 'the injustice of the skies' (140), and in 'Byzantium', 'A starlit or a moonlit dome disdains all man is' (280) and this phrase is also copied out in her lecture notes for Elizabeth Drew's English 211 class with addition: 'man must struggle in "dolphin-torn, gong-tormented sea" of sex + time' ('Notes for English 211'). This early introduction to Yeats at Smith seems to have been foundational for Plath's later poetry. This influence is entrenched and seems to become more pointed in later poems and those written about children as if the contemplation of a living child (and perhaps the experience of motherhood) throws into sharp and painful relief those visions of global turmoil and upheaval. The continuing and increasing importance of Yeatsian ideas of transcendence can be seen in Plath's 1963 poem, 'Child' in which a mother/speaker regrets the ominous 'dark ceiling without a star' which must fill the eye of the infant. It is a slightly odd image recalling Yeats's even stranger version in 'A Nativity', a brief, late lyric which is styled as a catechism and also as an ekphrastic contemplation of a nativity painting:

What woman hugs her infant there?

Another star has shot an ear.

What made the drapery glisten so?

Not a man but Delacroix.

What made the ceiling waterproof?

Landor's tarpaulin on the roof. (387)

'Ceiling' is one of the many words annotated in Plath's dictionary: 'the height above the ground of a layer of clouds when over half the sky is obscured' is both underlined and marked by a star in the margin. The blue sky is, for Plath and for Yeats, the symbolic location of a spiritual realm which has no interest in (and in the case of Plath at least, provides no comfort for) the suffering individual.

As we might expect, Yeats's 'The Second Coming' (210-11) is another poem with very heavy underlining. Of the twenty-two lines, nineteen have some underlining and further annotations note 'child + history/myth' and 'new cycle begins in violence' (211). Yeats's 'blood-dimmed tide' is a concentrated image, both visionary and visual, which Plath has marked: 'The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere / The ceremony of innocence is drowned' (ibid). There is something of this (and of Homer's 'wine-dark sea') in Plath's 'sea' which is dragged by the moon 'like a dark crime' in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'. There are intimations of a tragedy or atrocity, of great human suffering, perhaps too terrible to be identified, which has been set in motion and cannot be forestalled. In these doom-filled images of a 'dark crime' and the moon's 'garments [that] unloose small bats and owls', the blues move towards indigo – 'the deepest blue-black of the night sky' (Itten 88). This is in line with Kandinsky's and Itten's dire warnings about 'dimmed' blue: 'Blue is the typical heavenly colour. When it sinks almost to black it echoes a grief that is hardly

human' (Kandinsky 38); and 'When blue is dimmed it falls into superstition, fear, grief and perdition' (Itten 88). This association of grief and fear with the darkest blue-black can also be seen in 'Event' where Kandinsky's 'grief that is hardly human' has a literal embodiment in the owl that cries 'From its cold indigo'. The cry (of the owl, the child, the speaker or all three) is inhuman and 'intolerable' like a pang of birth or grief, but, nevertheless, enters the heart of the speaker. The tenor of this poem is domestic, but it engages at the same time with Yeatsian ideas of gyres and cycles of history: the child 'revolves' in its crib, the speaker 'walk[s] in a ring, / A groove', things are falling apart and the light of the moon is also the 'rift' in which 'we lie'. These poems which deal with Yeatsian ideas of epochal upheaval are often marked in Plath by a very closely observed depiction of a child, like the 'little face ... carved in red, pained wood' in 'Event'. For better or worse, Plath's poetry does not accede as easily as Yeats's to the human implications of supernatural pattern and process.

Moreover, it is difficult to find in Plath's work, and particularly in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', the assurance of heaven that is so insistently part of the power of blue for Kandinsky and Itten. Blue may 'point towards the realm of the transcendental' (Itten 88), but there is no assurance of heaven in Plath's poems. Blues often bring with them not spiritual succour, but the unnatural, the unwholesome or the dangerously disorienting. In 'Gigolo' the speaker's narcissistic rapture is figured in the 'Glitter' of 'Fontainebleau'; 'The blue and red jewels' of 'Kindness' 'smoke' like a poisonous Jacobean plot device; in 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.' the bed of a hospital patient is lit in blue; and 'The Jailer[']s' captive has a 'sleeping capsule', 'my red and blue zeppelin [which] / Drops me from a terrible altitude'. Blue figures, in Plath's poetry, tend to be unearthly or unwell rather than heavenly. The new-born baby of 'Three Woman' is 'inhuman' until the blue of his complexion fades and the 'red' and 'blood' of his placenta offer proof of his earthly origins:

Who is he, this blue, furious boy,  
Shiny and strange, as if he had hurtled from a star?  
...  
The blue color pales. He is human after all.  
A red lotus opens in its bowl of blood;  
They are stitching me up with silk as if I were a material.

The possibility of not being bound by natural, earthly human cords ('hooks' in other poems) is retained in the 'immaterial' that can be heard behind the mother's 'as if I were a material'. There is a sense in which, according to Darwinian and Yeatsian ideas of generation and evolution, and the mythic, ritualistic diction of 'Three Women', the individual mother and this particular birth are insignificant.

The association of blue with sickness is made most closely in 'Among the Narcissi', where 'Percy', in 'his blue peajacket' is 'recuperating from something on the lung'. This is a phrase typical of an English gentility of the period that Plath seems to have found particularly sinister. It is quoted in a journal sketch on the illness and death of Plath's neighbour, Percy Key, in June 1962: 'he was in hospital for lung x-rays. Then in again for a big surgery for "something on the lung"' (671). The phrase is both polite and ominous – the disease is unnamed, but also *something*, a mass. By the end of the poem Percy is 'quite blue'. Despite his physical degeneration through the poem (judging by his blue appearance), and the octogenarian's painful stitches and difficult breathing, there is a 'dignity' and pleasing 'formality' to the scene as the speaker observes. Hughes has described 'Among the Narcissi' along with 'Crossing the Water' and 'Pheasant' as one of the 'three most purely beautiful, most free-spirited, most delicately elated poems' (WP 475). The speaker claims an artist's eye

which is pleased by the delicate palette of spring colour and the formal relation of Percy bent over his stitches with the flowers leaning in the March wind. The tenderness of the portrait may derive in part from Percy's Emersonian resilience and grace. Like a good shepherd and a good Christian, he 'loves the little flocks' and he has turned, in his sickness, to the beauty of the natural world. He 'Nurses ... his stitches' 'on the green hill' and 'walks and walks' among the spring flowers, as if, as Emerson contended, 'nothing can befall me in life, – no disgrace, no calamity, (leaving me my eyes) which nature cannot repair' (5). Plath's journals record Percy Key's kindness to her children: 'oddly sensitive about Frieda and the baby. Asks very right questions. Sings to Frieda' (664). In contrast to the blue, hovering saints of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', and the bigoted rector of the village church, Percy represents, in however ravaged and frail a form, a benign Christianity and a gentle paternalism.

### **Picasso's Blue Period Paintings and 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'**

The tenderness of Plath's portrait of Percy Key hints at another important visual art source for the stylistic peculiarities of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'. The monochromatic blueness of the poem is extremely unusual in poetry – an understanding of the implications of colour theory or of the influence of Yeats's disdainful skies and patriarchs makes it no less peculiar in this regard. Liberties are taken not only with nature but with the tradition of poetry of the English countryside. From Andrew Marvell's 'The Garden' to Plath's own 'Ode for Ted' where, 'under crunch of my man's boot / green oat-sprouts jut', any dominant colour is likely to be green. With the weird and all-permeating blueness of the 'Moon and the Yew Tree' we have entered a new and alien world. It is difficult to think of any poem in English of such insistent and varied blueness. Frost's 'Fragmentary Blue' deals with isolated

examples of blue in the natural world and the expansive but distant blue of the sky. D. H. Lawrence's 'Bavarian Gentians', is vividly blue, but has none of the nebulosity or the shades and variations of blue and its properties of Plath's poem. Closer in mood and theme is Wallace Stevens's 'The Man with the Blue Guitar', a homage to Picasso's Blue Period painting, 'The Old Guitarist' (see appendix, fig. 4). Stevens's poem is an extended improvisation around Picasso's apocryphal assertion that 'every act of creation is first an act of destruction': 'Is this picture of Picasso's, this "hoard / Of destructions", a picture of ourselves'. Stevens seems to agree that it is the job of artist and poet not to mirror, but to dismantle and reconstruct the world about him. His poem has something of the melancholia as well as the moonlight and the weird nebulosity of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree':

And the color, the overcast blue

Of the air, in which the blue guitar

Is a form, described but difficult,

And I am merely a shadow hunched

Above the arrowy, still strings,

The maker of a thing yet to be made;

The color like a thought that grows

Out of a mood, the tragic robe

Of the actor. (ix, 1-9)

Themes of colour, mood, an embryonic moment (like the time before dawn), shadow, 'form' and shape run through both poems. 'The moon shares nothing. It is the sea' (vii, 2) could be Plath, but it is Stevens in an earlier section of 'The Man with the Blue Guitar'. Both poems are interested in the possibilities of representing and transforming, in art, the 'real' world: 'Throw away the lights, the definitions, / And say of what you see in the dark' (xxxii, 1-2).

Plath's poem, however, is emphatic and strictly visual where Stevens's is diffuse, musical and reflective. In its astonishing visuality 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' may owe more to Picasso than to any literary precursor. Plath had studied Picasso's works with Mrs Van der Poel at Smith and twice visited the sensational Picasso exhibition at the Tate Gallery in London in the summer of 1960. On the second occasion Plath and Hughes secured private passes from Jack Sweeney, the art collector and curator of the Woodberry Poetry Room at Harvard University, to visit 'on Sunday morning when it was only open to a few people' (LH 394). The exhibition catalogue forms part of Plath's library held in the Smith archive. Plath's colour spectrum in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is exactly that of Picasso's Blue Period paintings: blue in many cool tones and shades, together with black and white (and perhaps the suggestion of green in the grieving grasses). The figure of the lost wraith of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', barefoot, isolated, abandoned and outcast in a cold and unfriendly landscape, might easily have graced a Picasso artwork of this period (see appendix figs. 3 – 6). The same could be said of the sick, frail and elderly Percy, or the blind pianist of 'Little Fugue' who 'felt for his food' like the figure in Picasso's *The Blind Man's Meal*:

White as an eye all over!

The eye of the blind pianist

At my table on the ship.

He felt for his food.

His fingers had the noses of weasels.

I couldn't stop looking.

*The Blind Man's Meal* has been owned by The Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in New York since 1950 (moma.org; see appendix, fig. 3). Given Plath's many New York gallery visits with Richard Sasso in the early 1950s during which much of her time was spent looking at modern art, it is extremely likely that Plath had the opportunity to view the picture. It was also loaned to the Tate Gallery for the Picasso exhibition of summer 1960 (*Picasso 16, LH 394*). According to Magdalena Dabrowski, the painting can be said to 'summarize the stylistic characteristics of the Blue Period: rigorous drawing that expresses essentials only, a simple hieratic composition; and a palette dominated by intense shades of blue' (60). In the painting a slender man sits at a meagre meal in a bare room. The shape made by the man's arms follow rigidly the right-angles of the painting edge, and the slender elongated limbs, twisted posture and deep vertical shadows on face and tunic suggest cold, hunger and poverty. The 'extension' of the man's sense of touch (and his vulnerability) is manifested in the elongation of his fingers and his slightly awkward gesture that reaches out towards the wine. Plath's strange metaphor 'his fingers had the noses of weasels' in 'Little Fugue' may be a response to this quality in Picasso's painting, as if the blind man's sense of touch has become so honed as to become a new way of 'seeing', or a new and different sense altogether. Plath seems to have shared with Picasso an interest in and a fear of blindness and of injured or blind eyes, which feature very frequently in her work: 'She is intrigued and appalled by damaged and unreceptive eyes,

whether they be 'bald', 'blank' or 'blind' (Kendall 36-37). Blindness is a recurring theme in Picasso's blue paintings; 'The Old Guitarist' of Wallace Stevens's poem is blind, and perhaps the most arresting image amongst all of the paintings of this period is *La Celestina* (1903), the procuress, who, like Plath's pianist in 'Little Fugue', has one blind, white eye (see appendix, fig. 6).

The motifs of bread and wine in *The Blind Man's Meal* imply a reference to Christian sacrament, as do the church, church-bells and saints of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', while the cold and bleak coloration gives up all hope of spiritual solace or bodily comfort. 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' shares with Picasso's Blue Period paintings a referencing of Christian myth and motifs and traditions of Christian imagery in visual art. This is seen most clearly in Picasso's many painting of mothers and children and in the wishing in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' for the 'tenderness' and compassion of 'Mary' in place of the 'bald and wild' moon. Picasso's Blue Period mothers were inspired in part by his visits to the women's prison and hospital, Saint Lazare, in Paris in 1901. Debrowski has described this 'unique Parisian penal institution':

Many of the inmates of Saint Lazare were prostitutes or criminals infected with venereal disease who had either given birth at the prison or, after being arrested, were allowed to keep their children with them as long as they were being nursed ... The visits which provided the artist with models at no cost turned him into a painter of 'human misery'.

(44)

It is a disturbing story to say the least, and it is difficult to weigh against the artist's eagerness to enter into, observe and profit from the human misery on display at

Lazare, the elevation of the models in his paintings. Picasso's Madonna images in the pictures of his Blue Period depict motherhood in various guises. Some paintings present an intimate human connection between mother and child isolated together in a cold and barren environment. Occasionally, Picasso's mother figures exhibit an exhausted or traumatised disregard for self, child and world reminiscent of Plath's unfeeling moon-mother who is also in 'complete despair', or an idealised suffering femininity. The women are sometimes placed next to a bleak seashore or the simplified, stony, gothic architecture of St Lazare. Picasso's paintings of the Lazare women and infants are deeply engaged with the artist's tradition of the nativity scene. One conventional pose features more often in these paintings than in any of his works painted before or after: Picasso's Blue Period mother and child paintings often make reference to the Madonna Eleusa images in which Mary holds the infant Jesus against her cheek, her face and gaze turned down and towards Him (see appendix, fig. 7). The Madonna Eleusa or the Virgin of Tenderness was first depicted in icons of the Eastern Christian Church, such as the *Theotokos of Vladimir* (see appendix, fig. 8), but was later adopted by Raphael and other painters of the High Renaissance. The tenderness associated with Mary or her 'effigy' in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' suggests that Plath also has in mind this artistic convention:

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.  
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls.  
How I would like to believe in tenderness —  
The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,  
Bending on me in particular, its mild eyes.

The gently touching faces and the 'Bending' of the Madonna's gaze protectively on her child are the defining characteristics of the Eleusa gesture in painting and religious art. Plath deploys a tableau borrowed from visual art to give physicality to the abstract concept of 'tenderness'. 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is emblematic of Plath's rounding out of abstract concept into palpable form, but as Julia Kristeva has said of the blue of Giotto's chapel, and Helen Vendler of Plath's poetry, these 'significant forms' are always in close company with what is 'diaphanous, elusive, obscuring and blank' (Vendler *Music of What Happens* 279). Tenderness, in Plath's poem, that maternal, spiritual quality, is both longed for and illusory – 'How I would like to believe in tenderness.' The moon's 'O-gape of compete despair' [my emphasis] is, as Tim Kendall explains, a pitiless rejection of the 'Christian notion of divine love, *agape*' (47); where the speaker wishes for the loving gaze of the Virgin, she sees, instead, something closer to Edward Munch's iconic expressionist painting of suffering and alienation, *The Scream of Nature* (1910).

It is not just the loving gaze and embrace of the Virgin Mary that the speaker wishes for in place of the 'O-gape' of the remote and callous moon, but the heavenly blue of her 'garments' in place of the indigo of the night sky. The blue that is pointedly missing from 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is the 'Mary-blue' of 'Heavy Women, the 'blue Mary [...] of 'Widow' or the blue 'dusk' that 'hoods' the expectant mother 'like a Mary' in 'Three Women'. This is also Kandinsky's 'heavenly' blue or Itten's 'Blue [that] beckons our spirit with the vibrations of faith'. It can be identified as that intense mid-blue, the ultramarine derived from lapis lazuli which the Renaissance painters reserved for the robes or veils of the Virgin Mary. The rarity, purity and tonal resonance of the pigment made it more valuable than gold (Gage 13). Painters understand ultramarine as a 'warm' blue belonging closer to the red portion of the colour circle than a colder, greener Prussian blue, for example. In Renaissance

depictions of the Virgin Mary, her 'garments' are sometimes painted in a combination of blue and red:

One often sees in such pictures the Virgin in a red gown and a blue cloak. It seems the artists wished to express the grace of heaven in terms of humanity, and humanity in terms of heaven. (Kandinsky 44)

'The Moon and the Yew Tree', like the paintings of Picasso's Blue Period, struggles to find and 'to express' 'heaven in terms of humanity and humanity in terms of heaven'; that ideal state of existence in which the speaker of Plath's poem 'would like to believe'. In the terms of the poem, such a reciprocal involvement is not possible – 'the message of the yew tree' that reaches from the wet grass on the earth and 'points up' to the austere, removed moon, is 'blackness and silence'. The various blues of the poem – retreating, cold, alien, tragic or distant, from insubstantial mist to the deepest indigo of the night sky – all serve to dissolve earthly bounds and sureties, whether topographical, familial or gravitational. Unlike the 'heavenly' blues described by Itten and Kandinsky and seen in classical depictions of the Virgin Mary, Plath's unworldly and undoing blues offer no compensatory promise of a heaven beyond. These ideas are manifested in the expressive use of colour and the dismantling of depth perspective in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', techniques and conceptions of visual art that continued to inform Plath's poetry through the rest of the *Ariel* work and into the last poems. The *Ariel* poems written after 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' go on to explore the compositional possibilities of different colours, and reds in particular, but it was not until the divesting of colour from the poems of 1963 that Plath would make a stylistic development as startling and wholesale as that represented by 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'.



## Chapter Two

### Into the Red: Colour Theory in *Ariel* and the Last Poems

It was some time after writing 'Yadwigha, On a Red Couch among Lillies' in 1958, Plath's poem of praise to the red of Rousseau's painting, *The Dream*, that Plath began bringing the colour red more emphatically into her own poetry. In 'Two Campers in Cloud Country', written more than two years later in July 1960, the speaker has left behind the 'labelled elms' and 'tame tea-roses' of Boston's 'Public Gardens' for the Canadian wilderness, where 'the colors assert themselves with a sort of vengeance. / Each day concludes in a huge splurge of vermillions' (17-18). This is an early example of those 'giant corona in the sky' that would feature so memorably in 'Poppies in October' and 'Ariel' (Itten 8), and also, in an anaemic, attenuated incarnation in the late poem, 'Totem'. 'Vermillions' in the context of a sublime sky-scape owes a debt to Hopkins's 'The Windhover' with its embers that 'Fall, gall themselves, and gash gold-vermillion' (132). Plath is drawn to the most intensely visual of images in the work of earlier poets, habitually synthesising literary and painterly influences.

The use of red in 'Two Campers in Cloud Country' lies somewhere between the observational ekphrasis of 'Yadwigha', and Plath's move, in 'Tulips', an early *Ariel* poem, towards a more stylised and functional deployment of colour. Vermillion is a brilliant red or orange-red pigment and 'splurge' suggests an extravagant, uninhibited application of paint to canvas. Rather than telling the story (or taking issue with the story) of a visual text as in the Rousseau poem, and the other art poems of 1957 and

1958, 'Two Campers in Cloud Country' displays a more informed and engaged connection with the techniques of visual art. Painting remains, however, at one remove from the poem. Rather than the 'dynamic ... internalized visual thinking' that Fan Jinghua identifies in the poems of *Ariel*, the 'splurge' of 'vermillion ...' in 'Two Campers' alludes to painting, its 'texts', processes and materials (221). Painting remains outside the poem, as a point of comparison, invoked in the interests of naturalistic representation of a sublime sight. 'Each day concludes in a huge splurge of vermillions' might be an ekphrastic rendering of a Romantic painting, something like J. M. W. Turner's many studies of the setting sun, which themselves have sometimes been seen to anticipate later experiments in abstraction.

'Tulips', written nine months after 'Two Campers in Cloud Country', is the first *Ariel* poem in which Plath works hard with red. In it, we can see Plath's drawing towards a new kind of composition, more stylized, and organised around a radically restricted palette of mainly red and white. The objectionably red ('too red') tulips are brought into a white hospital ward:

Look how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed in.

I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly

As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands.

The ward scene includes a great deal of observed detail, dwelling particularly on the many white items. Apart from the 'snow', 'walls', 'bed' and 'hands', the speaker's head lies between 'pillow and sheet-cuff / Like an eye between two white lids'; the nurses in their 'white caps' 'pass' like 'gulls'; the speaker gives up her 'bureaus of linen'; and the tulips are wrapped in 'white swaddlings'. Against this 'pure' 'quiet' whiteness, the red of the tulips is loud and threatening:

Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.  
They are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down,  
Upsetting me with their sudden tongues and their color,  
A dozen red sinkers round my neck.

The simplifying of the colour scheme around red and white suggests a self-consciousness of composition. There are many scene-setting details: 'pillow and sheet cuff', 'green, plastic-pillowed trolley' and the 'white caps of the nurses'; the woman's personal possessions: 'teaset', 'bureaus of linen', 'patent overnight case', 'family photo'); and information about daily life in the hospital ward – all elements usually associated with a naturalistic presentation. Pitted against this apparent naturalism, however, is a stylistic drive towards something much more spare and vital. Talking to Peter Orr in 1962, Plath explained that the 'paraphernalia' of daily life sit uneasily in her poetry:

I feel that in a novel, for example, you can get in toothbrushes and all the paraphernalia that one finds in daily life, and I find this more difficult in poetry. Poetry, I feel, is a tyrannical discipline, you've got to go so far, so fast, in such a small space that you've just got to turn away all the peripherals.

There is not quite a toothbrush in 'Tulips', but there is a catalogue of domestic miscellany (teaset, chests of linen, luggage, family photograph), as well as the wish to jettison these items and return the speaker and the poem to an ideal 'pure' state.

The desired divesting of 'trinkets' in the poem refers also to the economising of style and naturalistic detail which Plath's poetry is to undergo:

I watched my teaset, my bureaus of linen, my books  
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.  
I am a nun now, I have never been so pure.

The poems of October 1962 are empty of these domestic details often focusing on or moving towards a dominating, iconic image, such as the triumphal or suicidal flight of the queen bee in 'Stings', the devouring sun of 'Ariel', or the red hair of the risen 'Lady Lazarus'. In the last poems, domestic details re-emerge, but they have been transfigured into something quite different and unfamiliar. In 'Totem' the child's toy snake and pyrex kitchen bowl have become totemic or shamanistic; and in 'Balloons' the vaguely animal-shaped balloons in primary colours have something uneasy to say about naturalistic representation and a very tenuous relationship with the natural world.

It is not only observed details of domesticity and scene-setting which militate against the competing impetus of the poem towards a much more austere visuality. Emphatic pictorialism is at odds with temporality in this poem. The powerful and intensely visual poems of *Ariel* are the manifestation of a moment's action – the charge of rider into the onrushing scenery in 'Ariel' ('How one we grow'), the acetylene-fuelled ascent of the Virgin in 'Fever 103°' or the murderous 'unloosing' from the 'jeweled / Doll' in 'Purdah'. In 'Tulips' the reader discovers in the first stanza that the speaker has completed the hospital admissions procedure, changed into night clothes, given a medical history and undergone surgery: 'I have given up my name and my day-clothes to the nurses / And my history to the anesthetists and my

body to the surgeons'. A realistic sense of hospital routine is established; the progress of time is marked by the 'nurses' who 'pass and pass' tending their patients, and by the regular drug rounds and the movement of daylight across the ward: 'once a day the light slowly widens and slowly thins'. The poem feels episodic and captures, very accurately, the sometimes surreal, detached experience of passing time in a medical institution where patients eat, sleep and are nursed according to a set regime. In this enclosed, regulated environment the outside world can feel very distant – 'a country far away as health.' That is to say the success of the poem, in conveying realistically an experience of hospitalization, hinders the poem's competing drive to uncompromising visuality.

A very pressing concern of 'Tulips' is with clutter, the clutter of scene-setting, biographical information and narrative episode, variously described in the poem as 'cargo', 'loving associations', 'trinkets', 'baggage' and 'hooks'. The speaker is 'sick of baggage' and wishes to be 'swabbed ... clear of my loving associations', but accumulation of unnecessary detail is registered even in the figurative language of the poem. Tim Kendall reads 'Tulips' as a 'transitional' poem, citing the 'verbosity of its images' and the over-elaboration of similes (the 'white swaddlings' unnecessarily *explained* by 'awful baby' and 'what the dead close on, finally' clinched in 'Communion tablet', for example) (199). The last poems, by contrast, derive 'authority' and 'impact' by virtue of their 'images' absence of elaboration':

Their starkness awards Plath's work a powerful authority; the need to explain and expand, evident in a poem like "Tulips", has given way to an absolute confidence in the rightness and effectiveness of the later poems' metaphors. (203)

'Tulips' is a poem in which Plath begins to explore the expressive or figurative possibilities of colour vocabulary and metaphor, with some self-consciousness:

Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe  
Lightly through their white swaddlings, like an awful baby.  
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds.

Following immediately on the simile 'like an awful baby' which, as Kendall argues, weakens the impact of the 'white swaddlings', comes the terse and startling, 'Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds'. Here, 'corresponds' is not an unnecessary elaboration on the idea of red wound and red flowers in conversation; it intensifies, and introduces the idea of inquiry into metaphor itself. Nor is it without wit as the speaker, in her final clause (above), picks up the metaphoric 'talks' as if with the tweezers of 'corresponds' for empirical clarification. What does it mean, in a poem, for one image to 'talk[...] to' or 'correspond[...] with' another? How and why are the red of the wound and the red of the tulips connected? These are useful questions and one answer which comes to mind is the painterly notion that areas of similar hue in a painting (perhaps more so than brilliance, or warmth, or value, or texture) are inevitably and immediately in close relation, irrespective of any similarity or difference in perceived narrative or symbolic content, as Itten explains:

Human vision is such that we tend to join like to like, and see them jointly. The likeness may be of colors, areas, shades, textures or accents. During observation, a visual "configuration" is formed. I call this configuration a simultaneous pattern when it results from the presented relations of likeness. (92)

This compositional patterning is developed to brilliant effect in 'Poppies in October' (written October 1962) in the correspondences of poppies, sun-clouds, skirts, and wounded woman, but the possibilities for this sort of lucid and strikingly visual lyricism are first sensed in 'Tulips'.

That the tulips, in the subsequent line, 'seem to float' also points to 'internalized visual thinking' (Jinghua 218). The single common feature of the Post-impressionist painters that most influenced Plath (judging by references to them and their work in her poems, journals and letters – Gauguin, Van Gogh, Matisse, Mondrian, Dufy, Gris, Raoult, de Staël, Picasso, Rousseau, Klee, Kandinsky, and de Chirico) is a giving up of any attempt or desire to represent naturalistic perspective. When painting is no longer structured around vanishing point, foreground and background, modeling, and a mimetic reproduction of an observed scene from a fixed viewpoint, painted images can indeed 'seem to float', or to share a shifting picture space, or to recede from or advance towards the viewer in unexpected ways. One of the effects of bringing into the white and sanitary space of the hospital, the 'too red' tulips is an energising of space as if even the air around them is charged in some way:

Before they came the air was calm enough,  
Coming and going, breath by breath, without any fuss.  
Then the tulips filled it up like a loud noise.  
Now the air snags and eddies round them the way a river  
Snags and eddies around a sunken rust-red engine.

Sherry Lutz Zivley has found in 'Tulips' a 'visual borrowing' from Van Gogh's sunflower paintings, in the 'power, dominance [...] and aggression' of the flowers (50), but the 'air [that] snags and eddies round' them is also reminiscent of Van Gogh's dynamic skies, particularly in his night paintings. On her train journey through France with Richard Sassoon, Plath described the evening sky in terms of Van Gogh's 'spinning blueness' and 'spiral[ling]' stars:

the night landscape outside the window slowly, slowly coming alive in a chiaroscuro of shadows and stars. For we are leaving the thick clouds and smoky ceiling, we are plunging through into clear moonlight, first edging the thinning clouds like curdled cream, then breaking forth pure and clear in a spinning blueness ... Stars now too, against the sky, turning in spirals, growing to look like Van=Gogh [sic] stars (J 548)

Plath is particularly struck by the sense of movement in what is, presumably, a fairly stationary scene. An active, dynamic quality, which is not narrative or temporal, but inherent in the composition and relation of forms and colours of Van Gogh's paintings seems to be of interest to Plath. The movement and energy of Van Gogh's night skies in paintings like *Starry Night* (1889; see appendix, fig. 10) and *Starry Night over the Rhone* (1888) derive not from a narrative of movement, or imagery of movement, but by formal contrast and pattern, and intense colour in resonant counterpoint.

It is as if, once the tulips' redness has entered the poem, all established rules of representation are destabilized. They cannot remain an innocuous object, something that might be kept at a safe distance, because their ferocious, fauvist coloration brings into the space of the poem the Post-impressionist's refusal to paint the illusion of figure and ground; or subject and supporting or framing, but

*subordinated*, background. One of the most significant examples of this revolution in visual representation and visual thinking in the twentieth century are Cezanne's still life paintings, of which Picasso said:

When you look at Cezanne's apples, you see he hasn't really painted apples as such. What he did was to paint, terribly well, the weight of space on that circular form. (qtd. in Gilot 210)

The air of the hospital ward has become weighted or condensed in Plath's poem, so that it 'snags and eddies' and 'Snags and eddies' about the tulips. Plath's image for this is liquid, like paint: 'the way a river snags and eddies around a rust-red engine.'

A seminal painting in terms of these ideas of expressive colour, the dismantling of naturalistic (illusory) perspective, and the 'ineluctable flatness of the surface' is Matisse's 1911 painting, *The Red Studio* (Greenberg 87; see appendix, fig. 9)). Acquired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1949 to go on permanent display, this was one of the most influential European paintings for the American Expressionists; Rothko is said to have wept on first sight of it and visited it every day for months (Ashton 112). It is possible to say of this painting, of all twentieth century works, that it is one Plath must have known very well, given her love of Matisse, her interest in modern art in general, her many visits to the Museum, and the painting's status as a jewel in the crown of the MoMA collection. Like 'Tulips', 'The Red Studio' presents a busy interior space where ideas of 'ground' and 'figure' are destabilized, and paintings, sculpture and artist's materials jostle with barely demarcated domestic items, furniture or possible architectural features:

Matisse presents what can be read as a room, a studio with a number of identifiable objects – brushes, dishes, jugs, chairs, easels, stools, plants, sculptures, paintings and a clock. There are things that bespeak a human presence, things that are used in everyday life ... and yet these things are not really there – as Matisse was careful to emphasize, as things. Their barest outlines were merely absences ... as Matisse left the whiteness of the canvas around them (213).

We might say, viewing this painting, as Plath's speaker in 'Tulips' had once felt looking at her hospital ward, that our 'attention' is 'happy / Playing and resting without committing itself' on the 'paraphernalia that one finds in dally life'. The reproductions in *The Red Studio*, of many of Matisse's earlier pieces suggest, as I am suggesting of Plath's 'Tulips', that this work is creatively self-reflective and focused on process and stylistic development.

Furthermore, temporality is a prominent but uneasy presence in both *The Red Studio* and 'Tulips'. The powerfully pictorial impetus of 'Tulips' is in tension with the narrative of the hospital day. *The Red Studio* features the simplified form of a long-case clock in a compositionally dominant, central position. All of the 'objects' in the painting are simultaneously absent and present, described not by the artist's applied marks, but by the *absence* of pigment, the white lines of the bare underlying canvas. The profound unreliability of the forms of the painting is further underscored in the case of Matisse's 'clock' – it has no hands.

In terms of figure and image, the painting can be understood as an ensemble piece, but the focus, and really the dominating subject of the painting, is its red colour: 'when you looked at that painting ... you became that color, you became totally saturated with it' (Rothko qtd. in Ashton 212). Ashton explains the draw of red

for Matisse (and Rothko) in Plathian terms: '[Matisse] worked in thinly layered paint in impeccably modulated red ... to achieve the dreamed-of unity that could be found in *the light of the mind*' [my emphasis] (213) (See my discussion of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' in Chapter One p.75). There is a spaciousness in Matisse's *The Red Studio*, however, and its red is rarely understood to be threatening or ferocious. For Plath's speaker the 'too red tulips' that 'seem to float' also 'weigh me down' like 'lead sinkers'. They threaten to drown, suffocate, ('eat[...] my oxygen') or devour the speaker 'like dangerous animals'. This anxiety, sometimes amounting to panic, may be connected with another way in which, in comparison with those 'high' *Ariel* poems – 'Daddy', 'Poppies in October', 'Fever 103°', 'Lady Lazarus', and 'Purdah' – 'Tulips' is cluttered with distracting detail which can dissipate energy and impact. The real danger to the hospitalized woman is this: we know too much about the speaker for her to survive very long in the world of *Ariel*, or even to rise to the challenge of its trials and perils. *Ariel*'s heroines are 'supramundane' female figures (Itten 8), both heroic and anonymous. The waif of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', 'Purdah's decorative odalisque, the incendiary virgin of 'Fever 103°' and the death-defying Lady Lazarus, unlike the speaker of 'Tulips', do not have 'name[s]', 'family', or biography, and possess only the most iconic or unexpected of identifying possessions (which are never quite separate from the body of the woman) – a galloping horse, a gold tooth, red hair, bare feet, a lioness, a head of beaten metal. The speaker of 'Tulips' is trying peacefully to recuperate from surgery, but the more memorable women of *Ariel* are encountered in a moment of decisive and conclusive action, during which any vestige of domesticity or the mundane ('petticoats', 'dead stringencies') is cast off. It is remarkable, though very difficult to explain the fact, that 'Tulips' seems to understand that a new poetic world (a more visually emphatic style) in which an intensifying, painterly flatness overcomes naturalistic viewpoint and reasonable,

human subjectivity, will bring with it 'upsetting ... sudden tongues' and a drawing-out of woundedness ('Their redness *talks* to my wound'). It is as if the speaker has an apprehension of the confessional label, perhaps even the accusations of solipsism, the fetishising of psychic pain, verbal excess and self-indulgence, which, over the course of its existence, have indeed featured in the reception of Plath's later work.

The fate of the woman speaker in a poem driven by a visual compositional rationale – the fate that is anticipated and feared by the woman patient in 'Tulips' – is manifestly present in the October poems. All the female heroines of these works display 'splendour' and 'menace' as well as extreme vulnerability (Kandinsky). The predicament of the woman as, simultaneously, artistic subject and object, is laid out with clarity in 'Purdah'. Among the reproductions of earlier paintings that populate 'The Red Studio' is a sketchy copy of at least one study of a nude reclining in a decorative interior, one of Matisse's many odalisque paintings. 'Purdah' displays motifs and subjects which are familiar from these artworks and also relate to the history of the genre. The odalisque paintings of Matisse, as well as the other well-known works of the genre, such as the sumptuous and voyeuristic orientalist paintings of Delacroix and Ingres, are obvious sources for 'Purdah' (see appendix, figs. 12 and 13). Like Matisse, Delacroix was known as a brilliant colorist. It may be that an 'exotic' subject allowed for a licentiousness of presentation in terms of colour as well as subject; the painter feels he has the liberty to stray beyond a tame mimesis of the familiar natural world, while maintaining a kind of generic decorum. It is difficult to say how well Plath knew the work of the nineteenth-century orientalists, but slides of Matisse's highly-coloured and patterned odalisque paintings were shown by Mrs Van der Poel on her 1958 Modern Art Course, and made a strong impression:

Morning, too, of Matisse odalisques, patterned fabrics, vibrant blue-

flowered – tambourines, bare skin, breast-round, nipples – rosettes of red lace and the skirls & convoluted swirls of big palmy oak leaves (J 325)

The sketchy, elliptical syntax is an attempt to capture in words the vivid mix and clash of colour and pattern which seem to sing and move – ‘vibrant’, ‘skirls & convoluted swirls’ – in Matisse’s paintings. ‘Skirl’ is an interesting word, here. It is either an error (perhaps prompted by the dynamic, disorienting visual melee of the paintings) in which an ‘l’ has been typed for a ‘t’, or it is the intentional use of an unusual musical term denoting a high-pitched and shrill tone. The synesthetic representation of colour as musical tone is a Kandinsky trait: ‘In music, [red] is a sound of trumpets, strong, harsh, and ringing’ (40). There is a sense, in this journal entry, of the images intruding on Plath’s mental landscape beyond the confines of the lecture hall to dominate, or colour, her whole morning: ‘Morning, too, of Matisse odalisques’.

In nineteenth-century odalisque paintings, exquisite and exquisitely painted silk draperies clothe and reveal, like the ‘rustling appurtenances’ in ‘Purdah’. The motifs of peacock feather and jewels in Plath’s poem are derived from works such as Ingres’s *Grand Odalisque* where a naked, but heavily jeweled, concubine reclines on a couch holding a peacock-feather fan. A hookah for smoking hashish or opium further establishes the mood of languorous exoticism. Delacroix’s *Reclining Odalisque* is also known as *Woman with Parakeet*, and his harem pictures sometimes included attendant slaves, something like the ‘Attendants’ of ‘Purdah’ who help to stage-manage the finest details of the woman’s appearance (‘Attendants of the eyelash!’ ‘Attendants of the lip!’):

Priceless and quiet

Among these parakeets, macaws!

O chatterers

Attendants of the eyelash

I shall unloose

One feather, like the peacock

It is not just the motifs and subjects of Matisse's and other odalisque paintings – the odalisque herself, a 'chandelier', 'silk / Screens', 'mirrors' and exotic birds – that appear in 'Purdah', but also a concern with patterning, design and placement, and a characteristic Matisse colour – jade green:

Jade –

Stone of the side,

The agonized

Side of green Adam, I

Smile, cross-legged,

Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities.

The 'Jade –' that sets the scene for 'Purdah' not only orientates the woman and reader in an Eastern locale, but has the effect of laying out (it occupies the entire first line and extends an expansive dash) a swathe of intense 'Matisse' green which is picked up in 'green Adam' 'parakeets', and 'peacock'. The 'macaws' and 'rainbow'

bring in additional saturated hues, and this vivid colour-scheme, together with the particular items of interior furnishing, locate the poem in a specific visual tradition. Matisse's odalisque paintings are studies in colour and pattern (see appendix, fig. 11). A list of titles includes *Yellow Odalisque*, *Red Odalisque*, *Odalisque in Green Headdress*, *Odalisque in Green Trousers*, *Reclining Odalisque: Harmony in Red*, *Odalisque: Harmony in Blue*, *Odalisque with a Screen*, and so on. In these, the female figure functions as an element of design along with, but no more significantly than, a screen, a mirror, a decorated wallpaper or textiles, or a vase of flowers.

'Purdah' might be understood as a temporal text trying to escape from a spatial one, or a poem which cannot quite free itself from the orientalist and fauvist paintings that shape it. Placement, design and arrangement are paramount: the woman is 'cross-legged', she has a Mona Lisa ('Enigmatical') smile and a single shoulder is artfully revealed and lit: 'How the sun polishes this shoulder!' The stirring of the veil that covers the speaker's mouth and moves with her breathing, and the refractions and movements of light ('The chandelier / Of air that all day flies // Its crystals') enhance this sense of unnatural and claustrophobic stillness and silence. The vengeful shriek and attack, the 'unloosing' of the woman from her part in the tight and restrictive design of this interior space, are postponed beyond the narrative of the poem: 'I *shall* unloose / One note', 'At his *next* step / I *shall* unloose // I *shall* unloose –' [my emphasis]. Jade has been, for thousands of years, the pre-eminent material for Chinese sculpture, typically used for small and very finely decorated items or figures showing extraordinary craftsmanship. We might understand the 'jeweled / Doll' from which the woman must somehow be 'unloose[d]', as a priceless, timeless and exquisite work of art.

### **Red in *Ariel* and the Last Poems**

Jade is Matisse-green in material form, and what Plath takes from 'Tulips' into 'Stings', the poppy poems, 'Cut', and 'Ariel' is a similar sense of palpable colour. More noun than adverb, red is deployed as an active entity or force; the flowers possess a murderous 'redness' which has the capacity to 'breathe', 'eat' and speak ('Their redness talks to my wound'). Plath does not qualify or nuance the colour in order accurately to depict the precise shade of a real bunch of flowers, or to stress any mythic or traditional associations (though these could hardly be excluded and have been the subject of many other studies). Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty, in common with many scholars, details the 'association of the poppies with a wounded female body', but also describes a development in Plath's poetry towards the use of colour as stylistic strategy:

The evolution of colour motifs in Plath's work reflects both her reluctance and her desire to incorporate a principle that threatens the writing subject. Colour gradually becomes a literary device in its own right in her late poems, just like repetition or her use of the vernacular. (125)

In contrast to the emphatic and unqualified 'red' and 'redness' of 'Tulips', Ted Hughes's poem, 'Red', which is addressed to Plath, introduces many tints and gradations: 'carmine', 'burgundy', 'ruby' and 'crimson', as well as a range of epithets:

Blood red. Was it blood?  
Was it red-ochre, for warming the dead?  
Haematite to make immortal. (1169)

The speaker is seeking to understand what he sees as Plath's fascination with red ('Red was your colour'). Plath draws red away from representation towards abstraction; Hughes's anxious questions want to discover, categorically, its symbolic content: 'Was it blood? / Was it red-ochre?' Both poets are attuned to an active power in the colour. For Hughes, its magic is connected with ancient or alchemical knowledge, with ancient burial rites ('red-ochre for warming the dead'), human sacrifice ('Aztec altar'), and minerals and 'gems'. For Plath the magic is largely in the physics of light, visual perception and the observable phenomena of colour movement, expansion, attraction and interaction.

In 'Ariel', Plath uses familiar literary strategies to emphasize and to invoke a sensation of sheer, all-encompassing red. The enjambment across the last two stanzas of 'Ariel' suggests a burgeoning red sun expanding to fill the rider's (and the reader's) field of vision and blot out the rest of the vista: 'Into the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning'. At the end of penultimate stanza we have, for a moment, arrived in 'the red', as if encountering an experience of pure, unbounded vermilion. Immediately after the strong break (not just a line, but a stanza) we adjust our syntactical orientation seeing that the red belongs to 'Eye' and is a property of the sun. Even when readers have accustomed themselves to the continuation of the sentence into the next stanza, however, there remains a sense of red as tactile, enveloping and substantial, and unattached to any other referent. (This emphatic enjambment also has the effect of isolating the final line so that 'Eye, the cauldron of morning' might also be 'I, the cauldron of morning', merging speaker with rising sun.)

Plath is working, here, with Kandinsky's symbolism of colour. 'Ariel' vividly illustrates the artist and artist's assertion that 'A red sky suggests to us sunset, or fire, and has a consequent effect upon us – either of splendour or menace' (48). The poem is also capitalizing on his observation that clear red draws the eye:

the eye is strongly attracted by light, clear colours, and still more strongly attracted by those colours which are warm as well as clear; vermillion has the charm of flame, which has always attracted human beings. (24)

The rider's 'drive', her compulsion, 'Into the 'red // Eye' plays on the notion that there is a quality in red which 'has always attracted human beings'. Possessing properties not only of magnetism, but also of movement, vermillion, as Kandinsky explains, 'brings red almost to the point of spreading out towards the spectator' (41). Itten finds that 'Red is always active' (86). The 'active', expanding quality of fiery red, its tendency to expand and advance towards the viewer, is certainly apparent in the final immolation of 'Ariel'. Plath also brings this sort of colour action to bear in several poems, amplifying the advancing quality of red so that a range of colours is finally dissolved into an unstoppable scarlet finale. In 'Lady Lazarus', the monstrous heroine rises with her 'red hair' to 'eat men like air'; in 'Burning the Letters' a hunted fox is killed with 'A red burst and a cry / That splits from its ripped bag and does not stop'; after the genteel 'yellow', 'white' and 'pink' of 'Stings', the queen bee soars like a 'terrible' 'red comet', 'scar[ring]' the sky; and in 'Poppies in October', the mouths of the ranks of poppies 'cry open' in a chorus of mass accusation, grief, or terror. All of these images derive a degree of their extraordinary power from the application in the poetry of some of the basic tenets of colour theory – the emphatic, expansive and attractive properties of pure, saturated red. One of the reasons that, in comparison with the October 1962 poems, 'Tulips' lacks impact, despite its insistent redness, is that it attempts to play pure red against pure white, disregarding the counsel of both Kandinsky: 'vermillion rings dull and muddy against white' (39n), and Itten: 'Red looks

very dark on white, and its brilliance scarcely asserts itself' (17). Colour theory tells us that a poem founded on snowy whiteness ('Look how white everything is, how snowed-in' (2)) and objectionably intense red ('The tulips are too red in the first place' (36)) will never have the visual charge of red poppies or rising sun in counterpoint to the blues and blacks of the early-morning landscape.

Many readers associate Plath, her work in general, and *Ariel* in particular, with the colour red. Connections are often seen between redness and the female body:

The energetic properties of colour are closely linked to its bodily dimension in Plath's late poems. Blood is the ink of *Ariel*. It surges from the speaker's body in an ambiguous celebration in which pain and poetic renewal are inextricably woven. (Nervaux-Gavoty 124)

Red is perceived to be so dominant in *Ariel* not just because of the frequency of its appearance – 'Red was your colour' (Hughes, 'Red' *Collected Poems* 1169) – , but also due to the intensity of the particular 'pigment' that Plath employs. The characteristic red of *Ariel* needs no clarification. If we were, in a reversal of ekphrasis, to make a painting of 'Ariel' or 'Poppies in October' we would require a pure, saturated vermilion unmixed with any other colour. In fact, the red that Plath employs here is a very specific incarnation of a colour which, as Itten tells us, is 'extraordinarily flexible, bordering on diverse characters' (85):

red has a great wealth of modulations because it can be widely varied between cold and warm, dull and clear, light and dark, without destroying its character of redness. From demonic, sinister red-orange on black to sweet angelic pink, red can express all intermediate

degrees between the infernal and the sublime. Only the ethereal,  
transparent ariel is barred to it, for there blue rules supreme. (86)

'Ariel' has much of the 'sublime' and the 'infernal' about it and, reading Itten's words, one wonders whether the point of the pink things of 'Fever 103°' ('whatever these pink things mean'), is that what they *mean* is 'sweet angelic pink[ness].' An artist's understanding of red as a colour which can be widely varied across a spectrum that would include, for example, cool pinks and violets, oranges, browns and blackened reds, suggests that red is much more present outside *Ariel*, and in the last poems, than we might first expect. The last poems are characterized by their whiteness, but their telling touches of colour are often in the red family. In 'Tulips' Plath attempted to marry pure white and bright assertive vermillion (which according to Kandinsky, must only quench the latter's brilliance); in the last poems, to great effect, Plath deploys white with blackened or adulterated reds to work *with* rather than *against* the rules and observations of established colour theory.

The title of 'Sheep in Fog', the earliest of the 1963 poems, presents a rural scene, a concrete image of a winter landscape. It is insistently visual (if you look hard enough you will spot sheep emerging out of the fog, it seems to say), but it is also an obscured, inscrutable vision, almost a visual joke based on the absence of colour and form. As in 'Ariel', the speaker is riding a horse, but in pointed contrast to the intense colour, speed and heat of that earlier poem, here, rider and horse move slowly ('O slow horse', 'All morning the / Morning has been blackening') through a winter landscape where 'The hills step off into whiteness' and 'The train leaves a line of breath'. 'Blackening' where we might expect 'darkening' carries connotations of a remnant burnt by fire, of a flower touched by frost (like the 'flower left out' in the following stanza), or of a spoiled reputation, but it also refers to the painter's method

of darkening pigments by the addition of black. Adulterated or darkened red retains its 'essential character' better than yellow or blue, but Kandinsky warned that the addition of black substantially reduces its glow: 'It is dangerous to seek to deepen red by an admixture of black, for black quenches the glow, or at least reduces it considerably' (39). Itten gives a similar warning: 'black deprives colours of their quality of light. It alienates them from light, and sooner or later deadens them' (55-56). The last poems remember, but cannot generate, the heat and propulsion of *Ariel*. Ted Hughes finds in the drafts of 'Sheep in Fog' an intriguing, buried reference to the chariot of Phaeton, suggesting that its only surviving relic in the finished poem is the rust colour of the horse:

O slow  
Horse the color of rust,  
  
Hooves, dolorous bells —  
  
All morning the  
Morning has been blackening.

He suggests that 'rust' remembers the metal of the excised chariot (*WP* 200-02). The 'color of rust', is achieved by 'blackening' pure, warm red: 'Vermillion diluted with black gives a kind of burnt red-brown pigment' (Itten 55).

A different kind of darkened red can be seen in 'Contusion', written just a week after 'Sheep in Fog' and, like that poem, predominantly white. The muddying, enervating effect of red against white is not a problem in these poems and, in fact, exactly in keeping with the posthumous, sinister mood of these last works:

Color floods to the spot, dull purple

The rest of the body is all washed out

The color of pearl.

A contusion does not break the skin and the bleeding is withheld, hidden and, in this poem, lethal: 'The doom mark / Crawls down the wall'. In contrast to the violent combustion of 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>' and 'Ariel', or the murderous attack of 'Purdah', and especially the exhilaration of 'Cut', 'Contusion' presents a more hidden and insidious danger, or the grim aftermath of a catastrophic event. Kandinsky finds violet to be 'sad and ailing' noting that 'Among artists one often hears the question, "how are you?", answered gloomily by the words "Feeling very violet" (41). Itten's assessment of the symbolism of violet is much bleaker; he has much to say about purple, and 'dull purple' is particularly dire:

Violet is the hue of piety, and, when darkened, and dulled, of dark suspicion. Lurking catastrophe bursts forth from dark violet ... Chaos, death and exaltation in violet

...

"A light of this kind, cast upon a landscape," says Goethe, "suggests the terrors of the end of the world" (88-89)

Despite its brevity and apparent simplicity, 'Contusion' works a light-headedness upon the reader. There is a sense of physical disorientation as all the colour of the poem, and the blood of the 'washed out' figure, rush to the bruise site. One rock should not 'pivot the whole sea' and the sense of skewed perspective and physical collapse also registers in the downward crawling 'doom mark': like a drowning person

in a rough sea, the reader of the poem cannot be sure which way is up. The sudden drop of sheets over mirrors (as in a room in which a death has occurred) is an image of effacement, and although there is 'nothing to see here', we have already seen too much. The 'window square' that 'whitens' with tender stillness, quiet and open potential in 'Morning Song' and the 'clean slate' of 'You're' are recast here in sinister and posthumous aspect. Whatever is happening, or has happened in 'Contusion', it is chaotic and suspicious, an illustration of Itten's 'lurking catastrophe'.

### **Transcendent Colour in *Ariel***

In 1956 Plath visited La Chapelle du Rosaire at Vence in the South of France. Completed only five years previously, the chapel had been entirely designed by Henri Matisse from the simple white structure of the building to the altar pieces, priests' vestments and the stained glass windows in blue, green and yellow (Albers 449–54). The chapel is a late *tour de force* masterpiece by one of Plath's favourite modern painters, and one with whom she closely associated the light and colour of the Mediterranean coast. The precise hue of a Matisse painting is described in Plath's journal as 'Riviera blue' (324) and the explosions of colour and groupings of peach, yellow, green and blue of these artist's colour notes are also used in a notebook account of her arrival at Nice:

Red earth, orange-tiled villas in yellow and peach and aqua, and the blast, the blue blast of the sea on the right. The Cote d'Azur. A new country, a new year: spiked with green explosions of palms, cacti sprouting vegetable octopuses with spiky tentacles, and the red sun rising like the eye of God out of a screaming blue sea. (J 549)

The vivid, light-filled colours of sea, sun and sky were also part of Plath's Cape Cod childhood and adolescence remembered in 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor':

I came before the water –  
Colorists came to get the  
Good of the Cape Light that scours  
Sand grit to sided crystal

Brilliant coastal colours also feature in 'Daddy' where 'the Atlantic / ... pours bean green over blue'. In 'Whitsun', a 1961 poem, the medicinally bracing air of a comparatively colourless British beach is a terrible disappointment with its 'Lard-pale' 'Grownups confined in stockings and jackets'.

Plath's journey to Vence and the Matisse chapel began in the depths of a Northern European winter. A letter to Gordon Lameyer describes the scenery of the South of France as something to which her sunshine and colour-deprived eyes were highly sensitive so that the bright, saturated hues cause squinting or an ameliorating discomfort of a different order than the 'thin' 'medicine air' of an English resort:

I gritted my eyes on pastel villas, orange and olive groves,  
snow- capped Alps Maritime, violently green pines, and that blissful  
blast of the sea. God, what a blissful change from the gray of  
Cambridge, London and even Paris! I was so hungry for colour. (Qtd.  
in Connors 98)

Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty has described colour in Plath's poetry as harmfully intense: the vivid hues are 'autonomous entities the sheer intensity of which can hurt

the eye of the viewer' (110). In Louis Untermeyer's anthology of *Modern British Poetry* in the Smith College archives, Plath has underlined a phrase describing the ferocity of colour and natural beauty in Gerald Manley Hopkins's poetry: 'The world was not merely colorful, but prodigal, "barbarous in beauty"' (Untermeyer 31). The perception of intense, even aggressive, colour ('violently green', 'blast of the sea' in the letter to Lameyer, above) is understood as a physiological and perhaps a spiritual need. In this the Matisse chapel (or 'cathedral' as Plath recast it) did not disappoint (*LH 203*). At Vence, Plath was not just observing a Matisse painting or a Matisse-like landscape; she was entering a Matisse world.

The design rationale of the building was the manipulation of light and colour effects inside the chapel: 'The model was essentially a machine for making coloured light: a plain rectangular box with long windows on two sides and movable filaments for testing experimental effects' (Spurling 474). The white walls and stained glass of the chapel fill the interior with colour and light. Plath's visit was a baptismal moment – healing and purifying. A postcard and short story both testify to the epiphanic nature of the experience (*LH 204*, 'The Matisse Chapel'). Plath had arrived at a time when the chapel was closed to visitors and found the gate locked:

I began to cry. I knew it was so lovely inside, pure white with the sun through blue, yellow and green stained windows. Then I heard a voice, "Ne pleurez plus, entrez," and the Mother Superior let me in, after denying all the wealthy people in cars.

...

I just knelt in the heart of sun and the colors of sky, sea and sun, in the pure white heart of the Chapel. "Vous etes si gentille," I stammered. The nun smiled. "C'est la misericord de Dieu." It was. (*LH 204*)

Years later in 'Mystic', one of Plath's last poems written in February 1963, a very different cathedral vision is presented; instead of pure light and colour there are 'lengthen[ing]' 'stains':

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?

Here, light burns and stains, but does not uplift or heal. In this later text, rather than brilliant daylight, we find the lengthening 'stains' of a setting sun. Where the light that filled Matisse's chapel was purifying, the stained glass windows of 'Mystic' produce indelible and advancing impurity. In contrast to the pure heart of Rosaire, the 'ancient cathedrals' are not places of sanctuary, and there is, in 'Mystic', no sense of a speaker safely sheltered within. It is possible that the 'stains' are not the coloured light from the stained glass windows falling inside the building, but increasingly gothic (perpendicular) shadows cast by the cathedral onto the surrounding landscape. The God of 'Mystic' is not a God of colour and light dispensing mercy ('la misericord de Dieu') but the God of the medieval mystics who demands suffering and sacrifice. He is rapacious and unsparing – the initiate is 'used / Used utterly –', but there is an even more devastating banality in the place of limbo out of which the speaker asks

‘Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?’ There is as much absurdity as tragedy in the notion that an enlightened soul, one who has seen the face of God, need ask ‘what now?’.

This chapter explores the journey of colour in Plath’s poetry from the pure light and colour of the Vence chapel to the sombre impurity – the ‘stains / That lengthen’ – in ‘Mystic’. Plath’s training in colour theory, her immersion in the visual culture of 1950s New York and the work of the Post-impressionist artists who used colour in expressionistic rather than naturalistic ways, all inform her mature work in important ways. It is not until 1961 and ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ that Plath’s sense of visual design and the transcendent, assertive possibilities of colour and of intense hues in harmony and counterpoint, like those observed on the French Riviera and in the Matisse chapel, were fully articulated in her poetry. Many of the *Ariel* poems, including ‘Purdah’, the poppy poems and ‘Ariel’ itself, borrow visual art compositional devices, and owe some of the extraordinary economy of presentation, and the charge of their imagery, to techniques of painting and particularly to the actions and interactions of saturated colour. The waning of the dynamism and ‘blast’ of *Ariel* coincides in poems such as ‘Letter in November’ with a move away from the pure primaries and secondaries and towards admixtures and adulterations (Plath to Lameyer above). This late *Ariel* poem is lit not by white moon, scarlet sunrise or Riviera sunshine, but by sulfurous streetlight. Its impure palette anticipates the deceptive light and ‘stains’ of ‘Mystic’, and the radically subdued coloration, or colourlessness, of many of the 1963 poems.

### **Contrast of Hue**

Plath’s rapture at Vence, though heartfelt, was overdetermined. The idea of artist as prophet and of the spiritual power of the visible world communicated by the

eye are Emersonian. Anne Stevenson has described Plath's family background as 'culturally aspiring and ambitious, staunchly liberal in outlook, steeped in Emersonian ideals of loyalty, hard work, self reliance, and puritan optimism' (*BF* 4). Emerson's idealization of the human eye as a conduit for the healing light and beauty of the natural world is also fundamental to Plath's poetry as Tim Kendall has shown (36-37). Plath's personal library includes a heavily annotated copy of Emerson's *Basic Writings*, and Plath's mystical experience in the Matisse chapel is a version of Emerson's epiphany in the woods:

In the woods ... I feel that nothing can befall me in life, -- no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes), which nature cannot repair. Standing on the bare ground -- my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space -- all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part and particle of God. (5)

Like Emerson's innocent child, whose eye and heart together are illuminated by the sun, Plath is transformed by the 'pure white' light and the colours of sun, sea and sky in the Matisse chapel. However, Plath's moment of mystical oneness with a beautiful world occurs not in the woods but inside a work of art which is also a place of worship. As well as Plath's Emersonian tendencies and upbringing, her love of the work of Matisse and other twentieth-century painters known for their expressive use of colour (Van Gogh, Mondrian, Gauguin, Rousseau, de Staël and the other 'primitives', as Plath called them) (*LH* 336) and her practical training in colour theory and design, all feed into her profound experience at Vence. Plath's Bauhaus-inspired training in basic composition on her Smith College Art Studios course, together with

her frequent visits to the galleries of New York (and occasionally Europe as well) are powerful forces which help to shape the painterly poetics of *Ariel*. These elements – an experiential and theoretical grounding in colour and design, and the gallery and museum visits of Plath the art-lover – combine with an Emersonian inclination to experience light and vision as conduits of cosmic realms. This combination of factors helps to explain Plath's physical collapse ('I just knelt and wept') and spiritual transportation at Vence. The visit to the Matisse chapel was, in more than a metaphorical sense, a pilgrimage.

We cannot be certain that, as an undergraduate, Plath knew of Itten and the design and teaching philosophies of the Bauhaus School, but her Art Studios basic design course was shaped by those principles. By 1958 when, as a teacher at Smith, Plath audited a Modern Art lecture course, it is inconceivable that Itten and the other Bauhaus artists were unknown to her. It was during this period, and directly inspired by the modern art course, that Plath produced her eight art poems: 'I have got out piles of wonderful books from the Art Library (suggested by this fine Modern Art Course I'm auditing each week) and am overflowing with ideas and inspirations' (*LH* 336). Four of these poems – 'Virgin in a Tree', 'Perseus, or the Triumph of Wit Over Suffering', 'Battle-Scene From the Comic Operatic Fantasy *The Seafarer*' and 'The Departure of the Ghost' – are based on paintings or etchings by Paul Klee. Klee had held several positions in the Weimar Bauhaus including Master of the Stained Glass Workshop, and from 1921 to 1925 taught classes in elemental design as part of Itten's Preliminary Course (Whitford 91). Several books about Klee's work were required reading on Plath's Modern Art Course, as was Kandinsky's *Point and Line to Plane*. Furthermore, a mysterious art notebook kept for this modern art course points to Plath's familiarity with the life and work of Itten, and to her knowledge of Bauhaus notions of visual perception, spirituality and creative expression. Peter Steinberg,

describing Plath's Art Notebooks, is perplexed by one which seems to have no connection with art or artists: 'Though labeled by Plath 'Art', one notebook seems to be notes for subjects other than art. There were notes on child development, religion, and other topics'. In fact, these notes might very well belong to Plath's art studies; Itten followed an obscure eastern religion whose practices made use of fire and light, and prescribed meditation and 'oriental exercises' for his students (Whitford 53). He had originally trained and worked as a primary school teacher and his ideas about creative expression were influenced by his observations of children learning through play (Droste 24). An important aspect of the Bauhaus philosophy was the ridding of received and pre-conceived ideas of visual perception and artistic process so that the ideal of artistic endeavour is something like the open mind and free creativity of a child playing with materials. The influence of ideas like these can be traced in the creative practices of mid-century American Expressionist art such as the action painting of Jackson Pollock or the color field painters who dripped, poured or stained paint onto canvasses.

Along with ideas of childlike freedom of expression, the Bauhaus education, at least in Germany, focused on the acquisition of practical skills and artisan crafts such as weaving, metalwork, furniture-making and stained glass. This is a practical and craftsmanlike aesthetic which is likely to have appealed to Plath: Hughes's biographical poem 'The Rag Rug' describes Plath cutting and plaiting scraps of material (1130); in 'Totem' Hughes remembers her painting furniture with simple designs of birds, flowers, leaves and hearts (1148-49); and in a letter of December 1962, Plath bemoans the task of 'getting several acres of ancient floorboards painted by hand' (Saldivar 205). Although not exactly art or craftwork, the painting of floorboards and furniture is nevertheless a Northern European tradition suggesting (along with the rug-making) an affinity with a Bauhaus sensibility of simple, clean

design and artisan skills and processes. Like many of the Bauhaus artists and teachers, Itten worked in stained glass as well as paint and other media. Many of the examples he gives for the action and properties of colour in *The Art of Color* and *Elements of Color* use the medium of stained glass. Reminiscent of Plath's Venice experience is Itten's description of the transporting effects of the windows of Chartres:

Colors are forces, radiant energies that effect us positively or negatively whether we are aware of it or not. The artists in stained glass used color to create a supramundane, mystical atmosphere which would transport the meditations of the worshiper to a spiritual plane. (12)

Plath's 'Mystic' with its 'lengthening shadows' of 'ancient cathedrals' reads like a satirical revision of Itten's story of enchantment at Chartres: 'Anyone who ... has seen the setting sun kindle the great rose window to a splendid culminating chord, will never forget the supernal beauty of that moment' (9). Like Emerson, and like Plath in the Matisse chapel, Itten believed that visual experience was not purely sensory, but also spiritual: 'The deepest and truest secrets of color effect are, I know, invisible even to the eye, and are beheld by the heart alone' (7). He goes on to identify colour with life itself:

Color is life; for a world without colors appears to us as dead. Colors are primordial ideas, children of the aboriginal colorless light and its counterpart, colorless darkness. As flame begets light, so light engenders colors. Colors are the children of light ... Light, that first

phenomenon of the world, reveals to us the spirit and living soul of the world through colors. (8)

Many of Plath's writings illustrate her sense of the relationship of light and colour. Itten believed that 'Nothing affects the human mind more dramatically than the apparition of a gigantic color corona in the heavens' (8). Some of Plath's most successful mature poems such as 'Ariel' and 'Poppies in October' take place at dawn and present a vivid red sun and morning sky in counterpoint to the blues, blacks and whites of the terrestrial or the pre-dawn world. This kind of colour arrangement is one of the basic principles of artistic composition distinguished by Itten and classified as 'contrast of hue': 'the undiluted colours in their most intense luminosity' (Itten 33).<sup>9</sup> Itten explained the concept of contrast of hue in painting and stained glass using the examples of 'Matisse, Mondrian, Picasso' (36) among others of Plath's favourite modern painters. Some of the artwork Plath produced for her Art Studios course during her first year at Smith employs just this structuring principle, as Fan Jinghua has observed:

In many of her pastels and tempuras, bright colours are used in sharp contrast to each other with almost no neutral tones and perspectival depth. In the tempuras 'Two Women Reading' and 'Nine Female Figures' made for her Smith art classes, geometrical fragmentations of the picture planar, coupled with the color scheme create a visual rhythm in the compositional design ... it is the formal design and color scheme that is significant in these artworks. (208)

---

<sup>9</sup> Alternative compositional principles detailed by Itten include the pairing of warm and cool, light and dark, and the use of simultaneous contrast, which I discuss in Chapter One

There is an irony in the fact that, inspiring as this aesthetic environment was, the practical teaching in the 'usual properties of colour and form' and the example of her beloved 'primitive' artists were not elements Plath was able to absorb successfully in her own artwork during her time at Smith, and her end of year review for her practical art course was disappointing:

I took my first painting together with my last one up to be criticized ... Mr Swinton was hideously encouraging – thought the first much better, more naive and free – that the last was artificial and gaudy as bad wallpaper. (qtd. in Connors 31)

If Art Studios 13 had a detrimental effect on her painting, it would become crucial to the composition of much of her later poetry such as 'Event' and 'Poppies in October', its influence seen for the first time in 'the fullness of its power' in the restricted palette, the verticals and horizontals, and the striking geometry, the 'visual poetics' (Jinghua 210) of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'. It is in 'Ariel', however, that the intense lucidity, sensuousness and mutable, transcendent possibility which artists have always found in the combination of saturated hue, is deployed to blistering effect. Many readers from the earliest critics of Plath's work to contemporary Plath scholars have found 'Ariel' to be one of Plath's finest poems, and her most characteristic. In 1979, Jon Rosenblatt claimed it was 'Plath's finest single construction because of its depth of images':

The sensuousness and concreteness of the poem—the "Black sweet blood mouthfuls" of the berries; the "glitter of seas"— is

unmatched in contemporary American poetry. We see, hear, touch, and taste the process of disintegration: the horse emerging from the darkness of the morning, the sun beginning to rise as Ariel rushes uncontrollably across the countryside, the rider trying to catch the brown neck but instead "tasting" the blackberries on the side of the road. Then all the rider's perceptions are thrown together: the horse's body and the rider's merge. (131)

In a similar vein, Stevenson finds 'Ariel' to be 'supreme [in the canon of Plath's work], a quintessential statement of all that had meaning for her':

In it she rehearses the whole spectrum of her color imagery, moving from 'Stasis in darkness' into the 'substanceless blue' of sky and distance as horse and rider, 'God's lioness', rush as one through clutching hostilities.

...

As always – and this is one of the sources of Plath's extraordinary power – every image is grounded in some *thing*, depicted as if with verbal paint. (*BF* 272)

This is a remarkable and arresting combination of groundedness in Plath's portrayal of a landscape which is not only vividly observed but felt on the skin ('blue / Pour', 'dark / Hooks', and tasted ('black sweet blood mouthfuls'), combined with the much more fantastical flight into the rising sun. This combination of, on the one hand, physical connection with the observable world, especially the apprehension of colour;

and, on the other, something much more mystical, owes a great deal to what Itten has called 'the interplay of luminous forces':

The undiluted primaries and secondaries always have a character of aboriginal cosmic splendour as well as of concrete actuality ... Contrast of hue may alike express boisterous joviality, profound grief, earthy simplicity and cosmic universality. (34-36)

'Ariel's 'extraordinary power' (Stevenson) or 'luminous forces' (Itten), always 'grounded in some *thing*' (Stevenson) or 'concrete reality' (Itten), of the intense unadulterated colours in counterpoint to each other, is a fundamental creative resource for several of the October poems. These are qualities indispensable to a poet who was chasing lyricism and creative transcendence with all her imaginative power in the face of profound congenital doubt (as I discuss in Chapter Three) and who felt that in a poem 'one has to go so far in such a small space. You've got to turn away all peripherals' (Peter Orr Interview). Itten explains the potency of primary colours in combination:

just as black/white represents the extreme of light/dark contrast, so yellow/ red/blue is the extreme instance of contrast of hue. When the single colours are separated by black or white lines, their individual characters emerge more sharply. (33)

This is the palette of 'Ariel': the '*blue* / Pour of tor and distances, '*Black* sweet blood mouthfuls, '*White* / Godiva', 'seas' of yellow 'wheat' and the '*red* //Eye' [my emphases]. One of the achievements of 'Ariel' is the bringing over of properties and

effects from one art form into another. There is no attempt to grade or qualify colours in a naturalistic manner, and their naming is generic: 'black', 'brown', 'blue', 'white' and 'red'. It is as if they stand for something separate from, or beyond, berry, horse, sky, skin and sun. The effect is vigorous and startling, but the contrast of saturated hues in painting can also have a mutable, dissolving quality.

Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty, working with the Smith archive Art Notebooks has shown that Plath appears to have made notes on 'the autonomy of colour in Matisse's and Dufy's works': "color: like character in a book, assuming control of an author ... Objects in motion – colour overflows contours – Contours take place within area of colour" (115). These course notes, like 'Ariel', are interested in the potency of colour and its tendency to dissolve boundaries and exceed limits. The active, transcendent possibilities of colour were clearly of interest. According to Itten intense, contrasting hues are exceptionally powerful for delivering this sort of effect citing 'early stained glass' where the 'primordial force [of colour] actually assert[s] itself over the plastic form of the architecture' (36). In 'Ariel', distances rush towards the speaker ('the substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances'); the rider 'grow[s]' 'one' with her horse; 'dead stringencies' are 'unpeel[ed]'; like a terrestrial birth-of-Venus scene, the speaker 'Foam[s] to wheat, a glitter of seas'; and a 'child's cry // Melts in the wall'. These are all images of flux and diffusion, and they have a liquid, deliquescent quality; we 'witness the subject in fragmentation or dissolution' (Gill 53):

...

[The] poems enact various practices of self-sacrifice or martyrdom or engage in some form of *libation*. The title poem 'Ariel' *imbibes* 'sweet blood mouthfuls' on its passage from 'darkness' into the fierce 'red / Eye' of the morning. The 'cauldron' of morning might signify some kind

of crucible of life and thus rebirth or, alternatively, a *melting down* and thus *dissolution of self*. [my emphases] (Gill 57).

These images of fluidity and dissolution would seem to point to a possibility for a 'fusion' with the world that Plath remembers as a child and describes in 'Ocean 1212 W' (120); the speaker of 'Ariel' becomes a field of wheat, is drenched with the blue distances, swallows the landscape and becomes 'one' with her horse. It is also easy to see how so many readers have found in this poem, as Gill describes, a sense of rebirth or transcendence; the throwing off of 'dead stringencies.' These qualities of dissolution and transcendence are bound up with the liquid palpability of the scene, memorably described by Stevenson (above) as images 'depicted as if with verbal paint.' An understanding of the alchemical nature of paint, its materiality and mutability, fuels the poem. James Elkins in *What Painting Is* describes these properties – a tactile 'immersion in substances', instability, and boundless possibility – as the defining characteristics of the medium, facts which, to a painter, would seem 'very simple and self evident' (220):

Painting ... takes place outside science and any sure and exact knowledge. It is a kind of immersion in substances, a wonder and a delight in their unexpected shapes and feels. When nothing much is known about the world, anything is possible, and painters watch their paints very carefully to see exactly what they will do. (220)

The liquid, painterly property of colour in 'Ariel', as well as its sense of a colour symbolism or emotional potency unrelated to coloration in the natural world, suggests the influence of the Color Field artists who were working in New York in the 1940s

and 50s. Artists such as Mark Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler painted (or poured or stained) huge canvasses with blocks of colour with no determined figurative referent. The monumental scale of the canvasses was designed to allow the viewer's entire field of vision to be absorbed in the emotional experience of the colour. Rothko does not appear in Plath's *Journal* or *Letters Home*. This is a surprising absence of a hugely influential artist of mid-century America, and one who shared her own passion for the paintings of Matisse. A direct influence between Mark Rothko and Plath cannot be proved, but his sense of the capacity of pure colour to evoke the essential human states of 'tragedy, ecstasy, doom' are sympathetic to the telos of *Ariel* and 'Ariel' in particular. Art as immersive experience, and the structural rather than simply representational use of pure colour, connects the work of both artists:

The reason I paint big pictures ... is precisely because I want to be very intimate and human. To paint a small picture is to place yourself outside your experience, to look upon an experience as a stereopticon view or with a reducing glass. However you paint the larger picture, you are in it. It isn't something you command. (qtd. in Ashton 122)

The immersive quality of 'Ariel', the distances that rush at the speaker and pour over her, are particularly reminiscent of the monumental abstract work of Mark Rothko. The subject of 'Ariel' is said to be an incident in which Plath was almost thrown from a bolting horse during an early-morning ride (*CP* 294n). The not entirely voluntary loss of command described by Rothko is not unlike the unbidden and unstoppable release in 'Ariel' as the rider is stripped of everything that is inessential and becomes nothing but the drive into the sun. Something similar happens in 'Fever 103°' when the ascending speaker is divested of old selves like casting off 'old whore petticoats.'

A case could also be made for 'Poppies in October' written on the same day as 'Ariel', in which horizontal fields of red, white, black and blue open out one beneath the other: red sky over white ambulance and prone woman; black bowler hats over blue flowers and frost, with the red of poppy and heart bleeding through the various layers. Rothko's paintings are non-representational but their bands of colour are often suggestive of landscape while their vertical orientation is associated with portraiture, moving, not unlike Plath's *Ariel* mindscapes, between inner and outer realms (see appendix, fig 14). In Post-impressionist and abstract expressionist painting, images make no attempt to hide their materiality and their processes of production; marks may be gestural and suggestive of the world beyond the painting surface, but by the same token, elements of possible landscape or figure are always ready to undo themselves into sheer colour and paint. Something similar is happening in 'Poppies in October' where the 'sun-clouds' that are somehow also, and at the same time, 'skirts', and are chromatically linked to the red heart of the woman in the ambulance, reappearing in the poppies/mouths of the final stanza. Nothing is fixed or predictable. The consequences of this volatility in the natural world may be impressive and expansive like the 'astounding' red of heart, sky and poppy, or even an unsought 'gift'. The inversion of landscape, however, so that the sky is red and the ground blue with cornflowers – as well as the vulnerable and unseasonably 'late' poppies and the poisonous and flammable 'carbon monoxides' – all point to much more combustible and sinister possibilities.

A painterly use of colour contributes to the immediacy, intense sensuousness and the transcendent qualities of 'Ariel' and some of the other highly coloured October poems. Rothko's paintings, like Plath's 'Ariel' were designed as immersive, dissolving experiences. The 'supramundane', transcendent impulse of the poem, however, may well owe more to Itten's pre-eminent exemplum for the use of contrast

of hue in painting: Matthias Grünewald's *The Resurrection*, part of the Isenheim altarpiece (1512-16; see appendix, fig 15). Itten finds this work to be 'Perhaps the grandest example of [the] significant use [of contrast of hue] ... display[ing] all of its universalistic power of expression' (36). This work, showing the transfiguration and ascension of Christ is described by Joris-Karl Huysmans as a 'tour-de-force' of intense coloration and vivid contrasts of light and hue:

All round this soaring body are rays emanating from it which have begun to blur its outline; already the contours of the face are fluctuating, the features hazing over, the hair dissolving into a halo of melting gold. The light spreads out in immense curves ranging from bright yellow to purple, and finally shading off little by little into a pale blue which in turn merges with the dark blue of the night.

...

We witness here the revival of a Godhead ablaze with life: the formation of a glorified body gradually escaping from the carnal shell, which is disappearing in an apotheosis of flames of which it is itself the source and seat ... We glimpse, through the simulacra of colour and line, the well-nigh tangible emergence of the Godhead from its physical shell.

The connections between this description of Grünewald's painting (and the painting itself) and Plath's poem are marked. In 'Ariel', Plath's rider 'Foam[s] to wheat, a glitter of seas' as the hair of Grünewald's Christ 'dissolv[es] into a halo of gold'. Christ's 'soaring body' is something like the racing rider, the 'arrow' and 'The dew that flies' in 'Ariel'. Huysmans's reading of *The Resurrection*, and Plath's poem, both draw on vocabulary of dissolution: 'blur[red] ... outline', 'fluctuating contours', 'features hazing

over', 'hair dissolving, 'merges with the dark' in Huysmans; and, in 'Ariel' the 'substanceless blue / Pour', 'Foam', 'melt', and an outlived identity that 'Flakes from my heels'. The fieriness of 'a Godhead ablaze' is matched by Plath's 'drive / Into the red // Eye', the cauldron of morning.'

If we accept Huysmans's reading of the painting, both works share, as a narrative direction, the 'formation of a glorified body escaping from its carnal shell.' In Plath's poem, this is expressed in the 'unpeel[ing]' of 'Dead hands, dead stringencies' and the 'Suicidal' 'drive' of the 'dew' which is burned off by the morning sun. Characteristically, Plath here is fusing visual and literary sources; Tim Kendall has observed that 'Ariel' draws on a 'longstanding' 'association of dew with the soul', citing Andrew Marvel's 'On a Drop of Dew':

Marvell's poems ends in an ecstatic union with the divine, as the dew "does, dissolving run / Into the glories of th'Almighty sun". This same ecstasy is carried into 'Ariel', although Plath rewrites that image to assimilate a characteristic violence (183)

The transfiguration seems, in all cases, both involuntary and inevitable, but the interactions of intense colour in *The Resurrection* and 'Ariel' give a sense of extreme volatility and power (perhaps even 'violence') (Kendall above) – the guards at the feet of Grünewald's Christ are knocked to the ground by the blinding intensity of the vision before them. Recalling Stevenson's admiration for the 'extraordinary power' of 'Ariel' in which 'every image is grounded in some *thing*, depicted as if with verbal paint' (*BF* 272), 'Huysmans notes, with astonishment, Grünewald's ability to deliver through 'colour and line' a '*well-nigh tangible* emergence of the Godhead from its physical shell' [my emphasis].

The subject matter of *The Resurrection* – the ascension of Christ the man and His re-emergence as divine being – has resonance with several of Plath's vivid October poems where a charismatic heroine undergoes a process of transfiguration involving fire, speed, violence and danger in the service of illumination, liberation or a kind of transcendence. Just like Huysmans's description of Christ in *The Resurrection*, the speaker of 'Fever 103' 'is disappearing in an apotheosis of flames of which it is itself the source and seat':

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.

All by myself I am a huge camelia

Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush

'Lady Lazarus' concludes with its heroine rising 'Out of the ash' with fiery red hair (like Christ of *The Resurrection*), and 'Purdah's 'jewelled / Doll' 'unloose[s]' something powerful and terrible in the final stanza. Huysmans's work on Grünewald is well-known and given the supreme importance of this sixteenth-century painter to the Bauhaus teaching of colour theory, it is likely that Plath knew both the painting (in reproduction) and its best-known criticism. Whether or not Plath learned to 'set color against color' from Grünewald, 'the psychologically expressive power of his colors, their symbolic verity, and their realistic significance' are also, as Stevenson, Rosenblatt, and others have found, the defining characteristics of colour in 'Ariel' (Itten 36).

### **Adulteration, Discoloration and the end of *Ariel***

The volatility of paint and pigment, the ability of colours to appear to move and to act in unlikely ways, is harnessed by Grünewald to render spiritual illumination and

the moment of Christ's transfiguration from man to God. Plath uses unmixed primary colours in ringing, dynamic combination in 'Ariel' for similar ends – combustion, movement, transcendence and the evocation of a decisive, dramatic moment. The difficulty for Plath, as she nears the end of the *Ariel* set is that the potential for colour to uplift and heal (as in the Chapel of Rosaire, above) relies on its mutability and instability, and its absolute vulnerability to changes in the quality of light.

Furthermore, only the slightest change of tone, brightness, hue or combination, can deliver the less ameliorating effects of disharmony, enervation, or even queasiness. Colours act in different ways in different locations and combinations – 'painters watch their paints very carefully to see exactly what they will do' (Elkins, above).

A farewell to the vigour and heat of red can be found in 'Letter in November'. The speaker's 'beautiful red' refers not to saturated vermillion, but to the sodden mud of a late-autumn garden. Here, the advancing, assertive (and compositionally elevated) red of a dawn sky in 'Ariel' and 'Poppies in October' is refigured in the red mud through which the speaker is 'squelching and squelching'. Far from the heavenly ascent depicted, however archly, in 'Fever 103°' (which I discuss in detail in Chapter Three), or the mystical union with the rising sun in 'Ariel', this slightly later poem finds the subject both decidedly grounded and sinking further into the earth as she 'Walks the waist-high wet' through 'Golds' that 'bleed and deepen'.

A concern with colour, and a new chapter in its incarnation in the poetry, is signalled early in the poem as 'color turns' with the change of season and in the artificial glow of a streetlight:

Love, the world

Suddenly turns, turns color. The streetlight

Splits through the rat's-tail

Pods of the laburnum at nine in the morning.

'Letter is November' is a return to those pre-*Ariel* or early *Ariel* landscape poems set around Plath's Devon home – 'Among the Narcissi, and 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', as well as 'Pheasant' – and also returns to a more variable and complex palette ('tawn', for example, rather than the generic 'brown' of 'Ariel'). More observational, naturalistic colour reappears, and hues are shaded and nuanced ('gold-ruddy') in comparison with the strictly expressionist primaries and secondaries of the *Ariel* poems of the previous month.

The poem opens on a change of season – autumn to winter: 'Love, the world / Suddenly turns, turns colour.' Something sinister has happened to the natural world of this poem – colour has 'turned' not only with the season, but also in the sense that a bottle of milk left out of the fridge might 'turn' or spoil. The 'Split' light shining through the (poisonous) laburnum suggests something curdled, and 'rat's-tail' is an unattractive image for this golden yellow flowering plant. The golden apples (hanging on unseasonably late) become involved, in an unpalatable way, with the corpses in the neighbouring churchyard whose decomposition fed the bountiful crop. The 'beautiful red' which seems at first to be the ferrous Devon soil recalls, by the end of the poem, a scene of massacre at Thermopylae; the 'soft' 'green' in the air is not a Chaucerian herald of spring, but a wintry pea-souper.

There are many colour references – at least one in each of the seven stanzas including 'black', 'tawn', 'green', 'viridian', 'red', 'gold', 'golden', 'gold-ruddy' and 'golds'. Plath chooses a specific shade of green, 'viridian', and 'pure iron' to describe the precise shade of the evergreen holly. However, she is also using the reference to metal and to a spiky 'barbarous' plant to describe the qualities of an artist's pigment, rather in the way that representational forms in Post-impressionist paintings have a

tendency to undo themselves into materials and processes, pigment and brushstrokes. Viridian is one of the coldest colours of the artist's palette: 'Malachite and emerald green are also cold, but even they are friendly in comparison with the sour stain of viridian, which leaches its bitter tone into every colour it touches' (Elkins *What Painting Is* 67).

This is a poem in which colour has lost its power to energise and uplift and, under the influence of streetlight, the colours of the garden have suffered a sickly transformation. Sourness and 'bitterness' (Elkins, above) are found throughout the poem. The interdependence of light with colour and the potential for colour combinations to be discordant – even nauseating – is made clear when, in *The Bell Jar*, Esther suffers ptomaine poisoning after eating crabmeat as part of the Ladies Day banquet. The food had been left too long under hot lights in the 'celestially white kitchens'. Esther, in the delirium of her sickness, has a colourful 'vision' in which the nauseating thought of the toxic meal is expressed in a queasy chromatic combination of '*pink-mottled claw-meat*', '*bland, yellow pear*' and '*alligator-green*':

I had a vision of the celestially white kitchens on Ladies' Day stretching into infinity. I saw avocado pear after avocado pear being stuffed with crabmeat and mayonnaise and photographed under brilliant lights. I saw the delicate, pink-mottled claw-meat poking seductively through its blanket of mayonnaise and the bland, yellow pear cup with its rim of alligator-green cradling the whole mess. Poison. (45)

This is only a few tones away from the Matisse painting Plath described in her journal on 4 February 1958, but with radically different effect on the viewer: 'Today: Matisse exploding in pink cloths & vibrant rich pink shadows, pale peach pewter & smokey

lemon yellows, violent orange tangerines & green limes' (324). It is the same entry which details her letter from 'Art News asking for a poem on art' which would result in the ekphrastic poems of 1958. The writing tries to capture visual impressions in words and is full of enthusiasm for the fauvist works of Gauguin as well as Matisse in which Plath plans to be creatively immersed: I shall submerge in Gauguin ... I shall sit & stare at Gauguin in the library, limit field, try to rest, then write it' (324).

Itten declared colours to be '[p]rimeval luminous forces' and 'radiant energies that effect us positively or negatively' (12). That potential for 'negative' effects begins to be explored in 'Letter in November'. Artists' colours have a history of toxicity, being produced not only from exquisite materials such as gold leaf and lapis lazuli, but poisonous substances like lead and mercury. Van Gogh, one of Plath's beloved 'primitives', and a brilliant colourist, was well aware of the potential of strong colour to combine in jarring and unsettling ways, using disharmony for particular effects as in his painting of an all-night cafe frequented by society's unfortunates and outcasts (see appendix, fig. 16):

In my picture of the Night Café I have tried to express the idea that the café is a place where one can ruin oneself, go mad or commit a crime. So I have tried to express, as it were, the powers of darkness in a low public house, by *soft Louis XV green and malachite, contrasting with yellow-green and harsh blue-greens*, and all this in an atmosphere like a devil's furnace, of *pale sulphur*. And all with an appearance of Japanese gaiety, and the good nature of Tartarin. (399; my emphases)

There are echoes of these words in several of Plath's poems; Van Gogh's 'atmosphere like a devil's furnace, of pale sulphur' is close to the miasma of 'sulfur

loveliness' which surrounds the mannequins in 'The Munich Mannequins' (which I discuss in more detail in Chapter Three), for example. Yellows in Plath's work are particularly subject to 'turn', like the late autumn colours of 'Letter in November', into something suspicious or sinister; in 'Wintering' (written October 1962), the 'Chinese yellow' light of a torch reveals un-named but 'appalling objects'. (I discuss yellow in Plath's later work in more detail in Chapter Five, especially its tendency to lose its power of spiritual illumination, becoming with the smallest admixture of another colour, 'sickly and unreal' [Kandinsky 37]). A colour that 'turns', might not just turn bad, but turn *against* or turn *on* (threaten) the viewer.

At the Matisse Chapel, Plath found sublimity and spiritual transformation in the pure colours streaming through stained glass windows into the 'white heart' of the building. The painterly, expressive techniques and manipulation of saturated colour in volatile combination powers the potent visuality of *Ariel*. The possibilities of a compositional and structural use of colour in Plath's writing is first discovered in 'Tulips' and developed to startling effect in later poems. This sort of agency is only possible because of Plath's Emersonian (and Bauhaus) understanding of a dynamic interchange between the artist's eye and the natural world. Klee wrote that 'Color is the place where our brain and the universe meet' (*The Thinking Eye* 6); and for Itten, colours were 'luminous forces' and 'radiant energies'. The very intensity of colour experience for Plath, the 'commerce' of colour and body, is a dangerous concept allowing the transmission of infection, destruction and despair as well as healing, ecstasy and transcendence. Josef Albers, the pre-eminent colour theorist of the twentieth century, who worked at Yale during Plath's years nearby at Smith (as I explain in the Introduction to this study) gives the following warning:

In visual perception a color is almost never seen as it really is – as it physically is. This fact makes it the most relative medium in art.

...

In order to use color effectively it is necessary to recognize that color deceives continually. (1)

The unpredictable action of colour, its volatility and mutability, so essential for *Ariel's* incendiary flights and astounding visions, is also what threatens and curtails that creative adventure.

## Chapter Three

### Pure? What Does it Mean?: 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>' and 'The Munich Mannequins'

'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>' is one of the best known of the *Ariel* poems. Written during a spell of intense productivity in October 1962, it is part of the group of poems along with others such as 'Purdah', 'Cut', 'Daddy', 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Ariel' itself, which, in their ferocity and velocity, and their striking visuality, have often been seen to exemplify the qualities of the volume as a whole. 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>' begins with a question in the style of a catechism: 'Pure? What does it mean?' The baldness of the question implies a stock answer – 'Lead us not into Temptation. What does this mean?' asks *Luther's Little Catechism*, and 'But deliver us from evil. What does this mean?' Rather than a prescribed answer given by rote, Plath's speaker embarks on a spectacular display of physical suffering, disease and immolation all serving to purge the female speaker of her inessential 'selves' as she ascends, theatrically, to 'Paradise':

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.

The narrative of the poem is a familiar one from the lives of saints and martyrs; an early draft included a reference to 'auto-da-fe', the sentencing and burning at the stake of heretics during the Spanish Inquisition (Plath Papers). Plath's motifs and rituals have obvious sources in theology and hagiography as well as in alchemy and devotional painting and poetry. An important visual source is the film *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (Dreyer, 1928). According to Stevenson, Plath attended a screening in February of 1955 at The Museum of Modern Art in New York (BF 56) – an indication of its artistic and cultural importance. Said to be influenced by German expressionist painting, the film is shot to disrupt the usual visual clues to scale and location; close-ups are edited so that it is not always clear who is speaking to whom, and all the usual accoutrements of historical drama – lavish scenery, spectacular crowd scenes and set pieces – are absent. In their place is a spare, minimalist set and the consistent use of extremely close-range shots. The viewer struggles to establish a sense of perspective or distance from the action. Dreyer's film may have been influential in terms of design and composition as well as subject and material. Its intense immediacy and conflation of foreground and background – as in expressionist and Post-impressionist painting – may feed Plath's vivid *Ariel* style, that electrifying and painterly 'flatness' (the absence of 'naturalistic' perspective) first realised in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'.

Although Stevenson mistitles the film *The Temptation of Saint Joan* taking her cue, perhaps, from Plath's letter to her mother about the screening, she is accurate in her assessment of the importance of the film to the development of Plath's writing: this was an experience which 'impressed itself indelibly on her' and 'a scene ... that would recur in Sylvia's poems of the *Ariel* period' (BF 57). In the letter to her mother, Plath describes the film and its immediate cathartic effect.:

It was almost all faces — of Joan and her tormentors ... a picture image of Joan on a wooden stool with a paper crown and stick scepter in her hand contained all the impact of Christ and all martyrs. The burning at the stake was incredibly artistic and powerful, but the very lack of sensationalism, just the realism of fire licking at sticks, of soldiers bringing wood, of peasant faces watching, conveyed by the enormity of understatement the whole torture of the saint.

...

After it was all over, I couldn't look at anyone. I was crying because it was like a purge, the build up of unbelievable tension, then the release, as of the soul of Joan at the Stake. I walked for an hour round Central Park just thinking. (*LH* 135)

In a BBC broadcast, Plath said that 'Fever 103°' was 'about two kinds of fire': the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second' (*CP* 293n). 'Fever 103°' begins with the 'fires of hell', which are too 'dull' to 'lick[...] clean // The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin', evoking, in pathological detail, exactly the gruesome and terrible burning of a heretic presented in Carl Dreyer's film. It is possible that the 'tinder cries' of the poem recalls the 'fire licking at sticks' in Plath's description of the film, and the curious 'Japanese paper' head of the 'acetylene' 'Virgin' in 'Fever 103°' may owe something to that memorable 'picture image' of Joan in her 'paper crown'. Plath is not alone in her overwhelming emotional response to the film; many critics respond in similar fashion. Nevertheless there is something of the prescribed response to tragedy in the younger Plath – a textbook release of powerful emotion – that has a

ring of the ingénue responding as she feels a cultured sophisticate (or a passionate artist) ought, or at least spinning out her response as far as a recuperative carriage ride around the park: 'my date kindly took me for a ride in one of those horse cabs around the park, which was the slow-paced, black-and-white balance I needed to the picture' (*LH* 135). Nowhere in her response to the screening is there any sense of the complication of tone, or the setting aside of tone, that is achieved by the florid details and the mismatched lexicons of a mature work like 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>'. In the *Ariel* poem, the final, tragic apotheosis is not entirely assured; a suggestion of kitsch is retained in the 'cherubim' and 'pink things' that 'Attend' the speaker on her euphoric ascent, as well as the surprising clash of registers where the highly combustible industrial chemical 'acetylene' inserts itself between 'pure' and 'Virgin'. These lines are violently enjambed to parallel 'acetylene' with 'Virgin' in a tight relationship of terminal rhyme. The final, apostrophized 'Paradise', the destination of speaker and poem, suggests both 'high formality' (an ostentatious religiosity) and 'sudden emotional impetus' (the desire-fueled launch of the 'Virgin' into heaven) (Abrams 160–61). Personified 'Paradise' is chosen over the nameless male figures discarded below, the unindividuated witnesses, who are pointedly 'him' rather than 'Him':

Not you, nor him

Not him, nor him

(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) —

To Paradise.

The concluding conceit is an incandescent grand finale where the parenthesized undressing is a last purification before the uprush of the woman's acetylene-fueled lift-off. Here, cinematography, theatre, perhaps even the space race, meet Catholic dogma and devotional art. The 'roses', 'cherubim' and unidentified 'pink things' that 'Attend[...] the 'Virgin' are borrowed from 'Renaissance iconography', as Tim Kendall has shown (165). In painting, Italian renaissance and baroque depictions of the Assumption of the Virgin depict the mother of Christ borne bodily to heaven, surrounded by angels, and dropping to Thomas and the other apostles gathered below, her girdle, symbol of purity and chastity. The dropping of the girdle is one of the lesser known and more surprising traditional details of one of the official dogma of the Roman Catholic Church. It is the girdle, a short corset worn by almost every American woman until well into the 1960s, that gives the strictly geometric hourglass figures seen in Plath's diary doodles and in her cut-out dolls which form part of the Indiana archive (see appendix, fig. 19). A diary entry for February 24, 1962 shows Plath using the girdle as a kind of female armoury in preparation for the visit of a young woman rival: 'I managed a girdle, & stockings & heels and felt a new woman' (634). This detail of the Assumption, perhaps commemorated by Plath in the discarding of 'whore petticoats' in 'Fever 103°', makes an unlikely and indecorous connection between the Virgin Mary and corsetted contemporary femininity.

The striking and surreal vision of the Assumption has been painted by Titian as well as Rubens, Botticini, Andrea del Sarto, Poussin and many other painters of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The composition of these paintings follows a strict schema – gathered male figures in shadow reach for the falling belt (girdle) or shawl, or hold the shroud, of a levitating Mary. The Mother of God rises through the clouds attended by an army of cherubs into the brilliant golden light of heaven where God awaits to crown her Queen of Heaven (see appendix, figs. 17 and 18). This

design is so close to the choreography of Plath's last two stanzas as to suggest a direct borrowing. One of the most famous, and certainly one of the largest and most impressive Assumption paintings is the Titian that dominates the Basilica di Santa Maria Gloriosa Dei Frari in Venice ([metmuseum.org](http://metmuseum.org); see appendix, fig. 17). It is the largest altarpiece in the city and, like Plath's poem, it is full of movement with expansive gestures, and forced perspectives emphasising the vertical trajectory of the action. The resonant contrast of intense reds and blues of Mary's gown and veil, and the golden light which surrounds her, are the painter's vocabulary for purity and spiritual illumination. It is not known whether Plath ever saw this painting or any other representation of the Assumption, but she did visit Venice and Rome on the trail of Richard Sassoon (*J* 337). In Rome she was overcome by the 'ugliness' of St Peter's Basilica (*J* 583), feeling the 'mass of stone and gold and weighted jewels rise up in one massive fist to strike me' (*J* 336). Her receptivity to visual stimuli was intense to the point of physical discomfort, and even a single viewing of such a painting, from life or in reproduction, might well have lodged in Plath's remarkable visual memory. Plath's final image of the airborne 'Virgin', and, in particular, the strange and telling detail of the divesting of 'selves' like 'old whore petticoats', certainly makes sense as a re-imagining of visual representations of the Assumption of the Virgin and the perplexing dropping of the girdle.

There is another important devotional source for the content of the poem and for the figure of the 'acetylene' 'Virgin', as well as the baroque regalia of 'roses' and 'cherubim', in the writings and life of St Thérèse de Lisieux, a nineteenth-century saint. One of the appendices to Plath's *Journals* is transcribed from a notebook described by Karen Kukil as 'a copy book' used to 'record descriptions, creative writing ideas, poems, reading notes, and drawings' (700n). Of this, several pages are given over to quotations and notes from the life and writings of Thérèse (589–94).

Excerpts from her spiritual autobiography are copied out and copiously annotated with underlining, stars and commentary, suggesting a profound critical engagement with the text and the figure of Thérèse. Of the fasting, seclusion behind a veiled grid, early rising and various manifold deprivations of life in an early Carmelite order, Plath makes the amused observation, ‘proverbial gaiety’ (590). Thérèse’s complaint against the cold, made ‘On her deathbed’ (Plath’s underlining) is quoted:

“Throughout my religious life the cold has caused me more physical pain than anything else – I have suffered from cold until I almost died of it” (592). Kukil notes that in the original copy book, ‘this paragraph is bracketed, starred, and the word “COLD” is printed in the inner margin’ (701n). On this subject, Plath seems in complete accord with the Carmelite mystic. With particular relevance to the purgation, passion and ferocity of ‘Fever 103<sup>o</sup>’ is the starred epigram ‘\* Love will consume us only in the measure of our self-surrender \*’ (593). The absence of speech marks here makes it unclear whether these are the words of Plath or of Thérèse; the asterisks tell us it is certainly a phrase of some significance or resonance for Plath, and not inconceivably, given the context of a writer’s ‘copy book’, the kernel of an idea for her own writing. The phrase may relate to Thérèse’s Act of Oblation to Merciful Love, a divinely inspired petition to God to become ‘a martyr of Your love’:

I offer myself as a victim of holocaust to Your merciful love, asking you to consume me incessantly, allowing the waves of infinite tenderness ... to overflow into my soul, that thus I may become a martyr of Your love.  
(*Story of a Soul*, 276)

The 'waves of infinite tenderness' sound very like the radiating waves of heat and light that engulf and emanate from the speaker of 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>': 'All by myself I am a huge camellia / Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush'. While the theme of mysticism in 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>' could be said to draw on any number of theological texts, the minute engagement with Thérèse's words and the details from her life in Plath's copy book are remarkable; she is the subject of as sustained a focus as any other single figure or writer. There are many obvious parallels between the suffering of Thérèse and of 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>'s 'acetylene' 'Virgin', and the ardent and amatory imagery in each text. During an influenza epidemic in the convent, Thérèse is delighted to suffer more terribly, and for longer, than any of the other nuns:

Jesus treated me as a spoilt child for a longer time even than His more faithful spouses. After the influenza epidemic He came to me daily for several months, a privilege not shared by the Community. (J 592)

Thérèse not only welcomes bodily suffering as a mark of special divine favour, but expresses her sense of spiritual union with God in the extremity of disease as the flattering attention of an admired suitor who has chosen her over all the other sisters. This mix of registers, in which the divine is addressed in the vocabulary of a lover, relates to a long tradition which would include, for example the *Holy Sonnets* of John Donne, and much of the devotional poetry of Anne Bradstreet. To this already heady mix is added, in the writing of Thérèse and Plath, a large and disturbing measure of disease and hallucination. That uneasy propriety which casts God or penitent as lover cannot withstand the unwholesome suggestiveness of Plath's imagery, which is both lascivious – 'The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss', and 'auto-

erotic' (Kendall 164): 'All by myself I am a huge camelia / Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush'.

In her influenza delirium Thérèse seems to have been visited on occasion by the devil rather than Jesus; Plath copies two paragraphs in which Thérèse writes of her terrors and despair. Her hallucinations have a definite Plathian cast. On one occasion, her father's black hat assumed 'some terrible shape' (590). During another fever, nails in the wall appeared to turn into 'ghastly' 'huge coal-black fingers' something like those black hooks that recur repeatedly in Plath's later work. But it is not just the fevers and delirium of influenza and the expression of the esoteric by means of the erotic, however, that link Thérèse and 'Fever 103°'; the Carmelite saint is strongly associated with the emblem of the rose, and its image is bound up with her posthumous celebrity, as Plath notes:

Canonisation & after anniversary of St. Terese passing to God – “an aviator arching overhead showered roses on the moving mass below...”

...

In Carfin, Scotland: “Roses streamed from Venetian masts outside & inside the grotto itself, The Little Flower shrine was smothered in roses of every hue. The village itself was adorned for the occasion, & her picture was proudly displayed outside well-nigh every door. (J 589)

Thérèse's spiritual autobiography was titled *The Story of the Springtime of The Little White Flower*, and roses, both natural and artificial, form part of the cache of Thérèse relics:

The demand for first class relics is unprecedented & is, of course, impossible to satisfy. Her Carfin shrine is happy to possess a piece of bone; also some of her hair, her Immaculate Conception rosary, an autograph prayer, a rose petal, an artificial rose from her deathbed & various other secondary relics. (J 593)

This gives an edge, to say the least, to the traditional symbolism of the rose. The artificial rose *as relic* is eternal and incorruptible in a sense never imagined by Shakespeare or Yeats. Plath's notes make clear that Thérèse's great celebrity after her death ('Before the canonisation over 27 million souvenir copies of the "Little Flower" were distributed') (J 592–93) was bound up with a perception of her vulnerable and child-like femininity, and her relics. Amongst the quotations from Thérèse, Plath also makes notes about the remains of other saints: 'Padua: "venerated relic of St Anthony's tongue"' (591); 'Santa Croce, Rome: the relics of the true Cross, together with two of the thorns & one of the Sacred Nails' (591). While Thérèse's roses find their way into 'Fever 103°', other relics appear in another fiery poem of October 1962: 'Lady Lazarus', where 'The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see // Them unwrap me hand and foot.' and where 'skin', 'bone', 'a piece of hair or my clothes' exact and emit a 'very large charge'. The unwrapping is a very specific aspect of the gathering of saints' relics. After the opening of the casket, remains of body, clothing and other items, are divided and carefully wrapped in bundles before being placed in reliquaries to become divine objects of prayer and contemplation.

The insatiable 'demand for first class relics' has a ferocity about it, as 'Lady Lazarus' makes clear, but the appetite of Thérèse's followers matches the intensity of the saint's own temperament in matters of faith. The roses and little flowers with which she became associated after her death belie the passion and vitriol of her

devotion. Several alarming incidents from the autobiography attract Plath's pen. A passage describing the haemorrhage which indicated the onset of the tuberculosis that would end her life is also quoted at length:

“Scarcely had I laid my head on the pillow when I felt hot steam rise to my lips, and thinking I was going to die, my heart almost broke with joy. I had already put out my lamp so I mortified my curiosity till morning & went peacefully to sleep.

At five O' clock, the time for rising, I remembered immediately that I had some good news to learn, & going to the window I found, as I had expected, that our handkerchief was saturated with blood. What hope filled my heart!” (*J* 592)

Therésè's 'outbursts of affection' for others were no less alarming; as a child, she had devoutly wished for the death of her parents:

“Oh how I wish you would die, 'dear Mama!' Astonished at being scolded for saying such a thing, she will answer: 'It is because I want you to go to Heaven & you say that to get there we must die!'” In her outbursts of affection for her Father, she wishes him also to die.” (*J* 590)

There is no doubt that this is a psychology that interests Plath (whether she is primarily appalled or amused is difficult to judge), but it is also a text with which she maintains a clear critical distance – her emphatic identification with the nun's horror of the cold is the exception that proves the rule. In the pages of the spiritual autobiography of a nineteenth-century mystic, Therésè's claims and visions, though

remarkable, are not entirely unexpected; quoted in a poet's copy book, they are decidedly gothic and outlandish. What they offer Plath, as much as examples of an extremity of female heroism and daring, is stylistic possibility. Thérèse, in her autobiography, is as fond of the exclamation mark as Plath in full *Ariel* mode. More importantly, Plath's apparent astonishment at Thérèse's 'outburst[...] of affection' for mother and father adjusts the context of a 'family elegy' poem like 'Daddy' (Ramazani 262–92). In light of Plath's reading of Saint Thérèse, it is easier to appreciate many of the October poems, but 'Daddy' in particular, as dramatic monologue – closer to Browning's expositions of disturbing and disturbed psychologies, for example, than a Keatsian, romantic outpouring of sincere emotion. We might also begin to understand how it might be that when Plath read 'Daddy' aloud to her friend, Clarissa Roche, she used a 'spooky, comical voice that made both women fall about in laughter' (Stevenson *BF* 277).

Just as 'Fever 103°' cannot be described, categorically, as a poem of female revenge and psychological rebirth, nor is it a simple satire on religiosity, Catholic dogma, or emotional excess – for all its florid details and its theatrical wit. There is a real sense of released energy in the poem and an impressive marshaling of astounding surreal and visionary images. It is cinematic, incendiary, virtuosic and emphatic. None of this is lessened by the fact that the transcendence it stages is achieved by means of garish and unlikely props and tableaux. In terms of her own temperament, it is likely that a religion, such as Roman Catholicism, that offers prescribed processes and rituals to assist the penitent, is likely to have appealed to Plath, or at least might be one with which she had some sympathy. In *The Bell Jar*, in her illness and despair, Esther considers 'going into the Catholic Church' (158). Though unable to believe in any of the dogmas, Esther is attracted by the idea of the

spiritual direction and intervention offered by a priest, the ritual of confession and the acts of penance, only fearing the penance might not be sufficiently all-absorbing:

The only trouble was, Church, even the Catholic Church, didn't take up the whole of your life. No matter how much you knelt and prayed, you still had to eat three meals a day and have a job and live in the world.  
(138)

In her diary for 3 August 1958, Plath records 'a sudden ridiculous desire this morning to investigate the Catholic Church' despite there being 'so much in it I would not be able to accept' (*J* 412). The most terrible religious tenet, for someone of Plath's deep and constitutional atheism is, perhaps, a Lutheran requirement for absolute individual faith and direct personal connection with the divine, without the buttress of prescribed ritual and intercession.

Plath's doubt is such that her readings of the most spiritually confident of writers has the effect of emptying out their conviction and leaving despair in its place; what ought to comfort and console becomes, on occasion, a terrifying nihilism. Hughes has said of Emily Dickinson that 'despair' 'repeatedly opens under her ecstasy' (Introduction xv). To meet Dickinson by way of Plath, as Hughes is likely to have done is to experience a spiritual chill of arctic severity. In his *Paris Review Interview*, Hughes admits to knowing little of American poetry before meeting Plath: 'When I met Sylvia I also met her library, and the whole wave hit me. I began to devour everything American' (296). Plath was raised close to Dickinson's Amherst homestead, and Aurelia Plath, Sylvia's mother and early educator, described Emily Dickinson's poetry as her 'bible' (Introduction *LH* 5). Dickinson was both a foundational and continuing influence on Plath's poetry; in November 1962 Plath

recommended to the Jesuit priest and aspiring poet, Father Michael Carey, with whom she was in correspondence, 'the assonances & consonances in Emily Dickinson (beloved of me) for a subtlety far beyond exact rhyme' (qtd. in Saldívar 203). Plath's 'perfected' woman in 'Edge' draws out the real but oblique sense of threat in Dickinson's '1088':

I've dropped my Brain – My soul is numb –  
The Veins that used to run  
Stop palsied – 'tis Paralysis  
Done *perfecter* in stone. [My emphasis] (Franklin 441)

Plath's 'perfected' woman of 'Edge' (see the Conclusion to this thesis for a more detailed reading of this poem) shows us what it might mean for a living woman to be 'done perfecter in stone' and 'endowed with Paradise' with all the fear, and none of the spiritual succour, that phrase holds in Dickinson's poem.

In Emerson, another foundational writer and thinker for Plath, the interchange of man and nature is a source of endless comfort; for Plath it is a site of savagery and appetite, allowing not the healing of man in his frailty by the glory of nature, but the infection of the natural world with human ills and vice versa. Tim Kendall has demonstrated both the 'continuing influence' of Emerson in Plath's poetry (25) and the radical revision that Emersonian notions of resilience, comfort and grace undergo in Plath's work; for these two poets, for example, the night sky holds very different meanings:

Like Emerson, 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' finds its religion not in the traditions of the church, but in natural forces. However, the moon's

“O-gape of complete despair” is almost diametrically opposed to Emerson’s “city of God”, as revealed to him by the stars. (47)

Blake’s ‘Auguries of Innocence’ is a poem in celebration of child-like faith and wonder, but in Plath’s copy almost every mention of ‘doubt’ is annotated; ‘He who Doubts from what he sees / Will ne’er Believe, do what you please’ is marked with a side bar (152). ‘He who shall teach the Child to Doubt / The rotting Grave shall ne’er get out’ (151) is underlined. ‘If the Sun & Moon should doubt, / They’d immediately Go out’ (152) is both underlined and starred (Sylvia Plath’s Library). These are interventions which serve to invert the message of spiritual sustenance that most readers would find in a poem of such charm. In Plath’s annotations of Blake’s ‘Auguries of Innocence’ the emphasis falls not on the certainty demonstrated by the continuing presence and illumination of the celestial bodies, but on the possibility that personal doubt might be so damaging and infectious as to put out sun and moon. In response to the lines: ‘Joy & Woe are woven fine’ (151), which turn out very happily with the assurance that ‘Under every Grief & Pine / Runs a joy with silken twine’, Plath has added a quotation from John Keats’s ‘Ode on Melancholy’: “In the very temple of delight / Veil’d melancholy has her sovran shrine ...” directly reversing Blake’s sentiment (ibid).

### **Purity and Poetry**

The qualities and rituals of purity (‘Pure? What does it mean?’) are not of interest to Plath for theological and philosophical reasons alone. A state of absolute moral purity is essential for the illumination of the mystic; the alchemist must burn, transform and liberate his base material of all dross if he is to attain the philosopher’s stone; and if the aim of poetry is also to achieve transcendence, then a kind of purity

is the prerequisite. Post-modernism takes issue with, but has not dismantled, the notion that poetry is defined by its capacity to uplift, or to resolve contradictions, struggle and intransigent difficulty, by means of images which reach beyond time, place and quotidian experience; or that a poem is a complete and self-contained artifact from which all extraneous detail has been stripped away. It is not surprising, then, that Plath is not alone amongst modern poets in taking purgation as her theme. This interest in extremes of religious devotion, ecstasy and suffering, and in specific processes and rituals of purification is central to the late work of both Eliot and Yeats, perhaps the most imposing literary influences in Plath's mature work. Plath's 'two kinds of fire', the first 'suffer[ ...ing] itself into the second' during the course of 'Fever 103', have their source in Eliot's 'Little Gidding', where 'The only hope' 'Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre / To be redeemed from fire by fire' (196). Eliot's *Murder in the Cathedral* takes the martyrdom of Thomas Becket for its subject. After Becket's bloody murder, the chorus cries out for a radical intervention that will purge earth, stone, soil, water and air of the impurity: 'Take the skin from the arm, take the muscle from the bone and wash them' (276). In Plath's copies of the *Complete Poems and Plays* held in the archive at Smith College, the final speech of the Chorus is starred twice and underlined, and, unusually among Plath's books, the page has been carefully turned down. Like Plath's image of the purgatorial fire burning away flesh from the 'the aguey tendon', Eliot presents the process of purification in surgical detail.

While Eliot's interest in Becket, purgation and the pentecostal fire can be explained in large part by his own faith, Yeats's later poetry makes clear the connection of poetry and art with ideas of perfection, and of perfection with transcendence. Both 'Byzantium' (280-81) and 'Sailing to Byzantium' (217-18) can be heard in the purifying fire and the golden artifact (which is also the woman speaker)

in Plath's poem. 'Byzantium' is heavily annotated in Plath's own copy of Yeats's *Complete Poems*. She marks 'The unpurged images of day recede' (280), 'I hail the superhuman / I call it death-in life and life in death' (ibid), as well as several other lines and images including 'moon' (281) and the entire section describing the immortal golden bird of the emperor (280-81). There are tantalizing notes to the margin: 'outside time', 'moon disdains what man is', 'bird greets new rebirth in fire: life after death', 'The fire makes all simple' and 'Condition of spiritual fire'. Both the 'miracle', 'golden bird' of 'Byzantium' and the 'hammered gold' bird of 'Sailing to Byzantium' (218) inform Plath's migrainous 'head' of 'gold beaten skin' in 'Fever 103°': 'My head a moon of japanese paper, my gold beaten skin / Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive'. Donne's 'Like gold to aery thinness beat' from 'A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning' can also be heard in Plath's image of exquisite refinement (85). In Plath's poem, the exquisite object ('Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive') that exists outside the bonds of time, nature and generation, is also a delicate patient with a hammering headache. As Angela Leighton has observed and 'Fever 103°' demonstrates:

Aestheticism ... is rarely 'pure' aestheticism. It is almost always impure, tainted by something else: pain, ethics, economics, ideology. Moreover, for women the play of beauty is complicated by its long association with themselves. (47)

There is in Plath, as not in Yeats, that 'slightly uncomfortable adjustment and readjustment of ... monument and body' that Leighton has identified elsewhere in Plath's work (255).

'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>' is a work which makes vividly apparent the sometimes invisible or unexamined assumptions about purity and lyrical transcendence in poetry. This lyrical imperative is often expressed in terms of lightness, ascent, or a lifting out of and above the confusion, compromise and dissatisfactions of quotidian experience. In his general introduction to *The Government of the Tongue*, Seamus Heaney's definition of what a poem *is* relies on these images of uplift and elevation:

The achievement of a poem, after all, is an experience of *release*. In that liberated moment, when the lyric discovers its *buoyant* completion and the timeless formal pleasure comes to fullness and exhaustion, something occurs which is equidistant from self-justification and self-obliteration [my emphasis]. (xxii)

It is exactly these ideas of poetic 'release', 'self-obliteration', and buoyancy, and the kinds of moral and artistic 'purity' these notions demand, that are examined in 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>'. There is a fierce propulsion in the poem. The 'yellow sullen smokes' are dense and move close to the ground; they are dangerous to the poem because they will keep it earthbound and unrefined: 'I'm in a fright // One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel'. Titian surrounded the ascending Mary with intense and light-filled yellows and golds, but 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>'s 'sullen', sulfurous yellows are adulterated, tainted and incapable of illumination. The 'trundl[ing]', earth-bound movement of the scarves of smoke (recalling the death of the dancer Isadora Duncan whose scarves caught in the open-spoked wheels and axle of a car) throws the 'Virgin's' flight to 'Paradise' into high relief. The first half of the poem makes abortive attempts to rise and transform; the 'ghastly orchid / Hanging its hanging garden in the air' is a brilliant image of an aestheticism which is so fastidious and self-regarding as to need not even the

foundation of earth or tree. For all its rarefied exoticism, it is also weak and unsustainable, victim to the poisonous smokes. The repetition, here, of 'hanging' and the assonance and consonance that ties 'ghastly' with 'garden', is an expression of deathly self-absorption. The excessive internal rhyme may even relate to the 'homophonic symmetry' of the phrase, 'l'art pour l'art':

'Art for art' is also art for pleasure, art for scandal, art for sexual gratification. As a tautology it shuts itself into itself; as a *double entendre* it opens up to multiple possibilities. (Leighton 34)

There is nothing for it, if the poem is to reach its apotheosis, but for the woman herself to be transfigured, and the possibility of this is signalled exactly half-way through the poem where, like an unsteady electrical light, she begins to become illuminated ('all night / I have been flickering, off, on, off, on'). When the concluding uplifting and transcendent image arrives – the stock-in-trade of romantic and post-romantic lyric poetry – the reader is warned to expect it: 'I think I am going up, / I think I may rise —'. What is delivered is exhilarating, but also preposterous, melodramatic and close to comic. This theatricality works in tension with ideas of an elevated consciousness and rarefied emotion that are the more expected payouts of the lyric poem, the place where 'timeless formal pleasure comes to fullness and exhaustion, and something occurs' (Heaney xxii).

Heaney's *Government of the Tongue* is an important document in Plath studies not least because of the high regard it demonstrates for her work – the whole volume concludes with a chapter devoted to Plath's 'constellated lyrics' (151). Heaney's admiration for *Ariel* is clear, and his readings are astute, illuminating and generous. His assessment of the achievement and qualities of Plath's later poetry

steers clear of references to death and suicide which obscure the work for many critics:

There inheres in this poetry a sense of surprised arrival, of astonished being. The poems were written quickly and they transmit to the reader something of the unexpectedness of their own becoming. There is the pressure of absolute *fiat* behind them: a set of images springs into presence and into motion as at a whimsical but unignorable command. They represent the extreme extension of the imagist mode, which Pound characterized as expressing an emotional and intellectual complex in a moment of time. (151).

There is enormous respect here, as of an esteemed fellow practitioner, and an admiration which occasionally borders on wonder ('the pressure of absolute *fiat*'). Heaney's sense of the mysterious compulsion of the work rarely strays into the territory of the inspired sybil-goddess figure, but pays service to Plath's craft and control. Very few critics of Heaney's standing have paid such careful and public attention to her work. There are, though, moments of confusion and even frustration. Plath seems to have been both a productive and troubling figure for Heaney and several commentators have explored links between Heaney's own poetry and Plath's. John Redmond in his essay, 'The Influence of Sylvia Plath on Seamus Heaney', argues that the critics have tended to 'underestimate, or overlook, this literary relationship':

Plath's influence on Heaney is ... hard to detect because his poetic personality is, in Bloomian style, enabled and threatened by her role as a strong precursor. (111)

If Plath's influence on Heaney has been underestimated, it may also be the case that Heaney's assessment of his predecessor in 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps' has had the effect of closing down lines of critical inquiry with regards to Plath's work. There is a sense, perhaps, that where Heaney has ventured there is little left to say. A final withholding of approval by one so respected and so admiring of Plath holds great sway. 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps' may have helped to brand the work with a mark of self-indulgence – 'the intense personal need of the poet' (168) – from which it seems doubtful it will ever escape. With a note of exasperation in his emphasis, Heaney allows that there is nothing wrong with the poetry *as poetry*: 'There is nothing *poetically* flawed about it'. Plath falls down, in the end, according to Heaney, because:

what counts is the quality, intensity and breadth of the poet's concerns between the moments of writing, the *gravity* and *purity* of the mind's appetites and applications between moments of inspiration. This is what determines the *ultimate human value* of the act of poetry [my emphasis] (170)

'Purity', 'gravity' and 'ultimate human value' are words and phrases which are suggestive, but general, compared with the forensic enquiry into the meanings, implications and possibilities of such themes in 'Fever 103°'. The questions posed by the poem include: what is meant by purity; is it artistic, spiritual or carnal; and how

are these aspects connected? How might purity be achieved in a poem and what might it cost a woman speaker or a woman poet? How are ideas of purity in art bound up with material costliness, rarity and the rarefied object? What combinations of register are permissible in a poem, and how are notions of perfection in poetry associated with repression, oppression, extremism, neuroticism or tyranny? And not least: what exactly are we looking at when we find transcendence in a poem?

Plath's poem explores and makes room for a wide range of associations, sounding out, or performing, various and contradictory connotations. If the poem is the answer to the question, 'What is purity?', it is difficult, having read the poem, to give a clear answer, but we are in a position better to understand the urgency and complexity of the question. It is safe to say, however, that for Plath, for whom 'War, actual or imminent, was always in the background' (Hammer 147), its presence complicated by her German Austrian family heritage, the pursuit of 'purity' can never quite work free of its appalling manifestation in Fascist Europe. 'Daddy' remembers that 'The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna / Are not very *pure* or true', and in 'Little Fugue' the authoritative voice of 'my father', a voice that is *made of* 'barbarous' 'orders' is '*pure* German'. The speaker of 'Lady Lazarus', the '*pure* gold baby', is both infantilized and commodified, and she is also 'Herr Doktor's' work of art: 'your opus'. In 'Child', a later poem, the child's eye is 'the one *absolutely beautiful* thing', but to mark out the child as supremely exquisite, is also to place her under very great threat. 'Mary's Song' features a '*golden child* the world will kill and eat' and, in 'Edge', to be '*perfected*' is also to be 'dead' [all my emphases].

The elusory nature of purity, as a word and a concept; its inextricable involvement with art and aesthetics; and its political capital, can be seen in its use both by the artists of the Bauhaus in pre-war Germany in the rationale for their 'clean' 'modern' designs for living, and by their Nazi persecutors. The artists and

designers of the Bauhaus school made buildings, public art, furniture, textiles and typography characterised by clean lines and 'simple forms' (Drost 11). According to Walter Gropius, the school's founder, the Bauhaus artists sought to 'derive the form of an object from its natural functions and limitations' (qtd. in Whitford 6). This new style, exemplified by the reproducible and abstract grid, aimed to teach a skilled craftsmanship which would be compatible with the machine age and mass production. These ideals of simplicity, purity, cleanliness and efficiency were also cornerstones of the cultural agenda of the Third Reich, though, in this case, inflected towards ruralism, nostalgia for a supposed 'ideal of Aryan beauty' and a mythic, 'hyper realistic neoclassical style' (Farrell). When the Berlin Bauhaus was shut down, its teachers and artists banned from working, forced into exile or even suicide, it was on the grounds of protecting national cultural *purity*: the Bauhaus was 'unGerman, alien and Bolshevik' (Drost 230). The *entartete Kunst*, the *Degenerate Art* exhibition, that toured Germany and Austria in 1937, displayed the work of many of the Bauhaus masters, as well as other modern painters, as the diseased and debased products of mental degeneracy. Both artistic orientations – the crisp modernism of the Bauhaus and the kitsch conservatism of the Third Reich – assume purity as a guiding principle.

### **The Munich Mannequins**

One of the gaps in the published material on a life which is otherwise minutely documented is Plath's one visit to Austria and Germany with Gordon Lameyer in the spring of 1956. She travelled by train from Paris where she had hoped to meet Richard Sassoon, and left as quickly as possible after a single night in a 'surgical hotel' for Italy and a flight back to England (*J* 272). There are intriguing excisions in the published version of a letter to her mother, dated April 17 1956, which describes

the trip: 'We left Paris for Munich where I froze in a blizzard, and Gordon's utter lack of language ability ... horrified me ... We left the next morning ... through Austria and the Tyrolean Alps'. (LH 233). Although mentioned only briefly, it is an episode she returned to in her writing on several occasions. At Yaddo, the artists colony, in 1959, Plath's journal notes suggest she was trying to write about these travels: 'description of departure from Paris with Gordon [sic] ... grim train ride; snow in Munich, frightening, surgical hotel' (J 272). Robin Peel has examined the only known page of Plath's second (unfinished) novel, *Falcon's Yard*; this text also describes a train ride to Munich – 'chattering train wheels ... the train chuffing. Munich ...' (qtd. in Peel 80). Peel notes the use of the 'chuffing' train which will re-appear in 'Daddy': 'Chuffing me off like a Jew. / A Jew to Dachau, Aushwitz, Belsen.' 'Munich' seems to have been a word and a destination which, like the names of concentration camps in 'Daddy', evoked in Plath a visceral sense of horror. That we cannot know exactly what Plath found in Munich that so appalled her only intensifies the sinister atmosphere which surrounds all mention of the city in Plath's writing. There is even a sense of repressed memory, of something too horrible to face: trying, but failing to write about the episode at Yaddo, Plath admits, 'except for the snow I forget what the trip from France to Munich was like' (J 273). This is particularly surprising in the light of Plath's copious notes on her other travels: the pages of description of her honey moon in Spain, for example (J 239-64), or the train journey from Paris to the South of France with Richard Sassoon on New Year's Eve 1955 (J 547-51).

In 1963, almost seven years after her visit to Munich and four years after attempting to give a prose or novelistic account of the story at Yaddo, the city, the snow and the 'surgical hotel' are revisited, this time with great success, in 'The Munich Mannequins'. According to Peel, the page of the otherwise lost novel is headed 'Venus in the Seventh', an astrological reference, and the subject seems to

be a love story; 'The evidence suggest that this [page] is taken from a chapter which explores the heroine's relationship with a number of unsatisfactory men' (790). 'The Munich Mannequins' treats the same material in a very different manner. Plath fuses aspects of the train journey and overnight stay in Germany with Lameyer at Easter 1956, with a much happier European holiday taken just a few months earlier with Richard Sassoon. According to Stevenson, Sassoon had 'pointed out the "painted whores" in the Place Pigalle' (*BF* 67). Stevenson claims the women were 'of great fascination to Sylvia' (*ibid*), and this memory may be a source for the garishly-coloured, confectioned mannequins of Plath's poem – 'Orange lollies on silver sticks'; often in Plath's last poems the appetites for sex and hunger stand in for each other or are interchangeable.

The 'yew trees [that] blow like hydras, / The tree of life and the tree of life' also encode references to Plath's French vacation with Sassoon:

Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children.

Cold as snow it tamps the womb

Where the yew trees blow like hydras

The tree of life and the tree of life.

Unloosing their moons, month after month, to no purpose.

The highlight of the trip was the visit to the Matisse's chapel, the Chapel of Rossaire at Vence in the South of France, which proved to be an almost mystical experience for Plath (as I discuss in Chapter Two). One of the artistic glories of the building is the double window beside the altar which Matisse called 'The Tree of Life'. Based on a

flowering cactus which the artist saw as a symbol of life and endurance (McPhee 191), the blue and yellow stained glass depicts a repeated motif of curved forms. More aquatic than sylvan in appearance, like underwater weeds moving in water, these vaguely serpentine plant-forms might well be described as many headed or 'like hydras' – 'the yew trees blow like hydras'. It is an unexpected image for a work with the title 'Tree of Life' and is, of course, visually arresting, its intense primary colours flooding the inside of the white chapel with vivid colour. The repeated phrase in 'The Munich Mannequins' – 'The tree of life and the tree of life' – reflects female reproductive physiology, especially given the reference to pregnancy and 'the womb' in the previous stanza, but it may also recall the double-paneled window of Matisse's building.

The snowed-in landscape of 'The Munich Mannequins' could not be more different from Matisse's French Riviera, and the deadening impulse of the poem – 'Cold as snow breath it tamps the womb' – is the antithesis of the spiritual and creative rejuvenation Plath found in the Vence Chapel. People and signs of life are almost entirely absent from the poem where we would expect to find them. Instead of women, we find only mannequins; hotel guests are detectable only in the thought of 'Hands [that] will be opening doors and setting // Down shoes'; the only green leaves are 'confectionery'; 'Nobody' rounds out like absence personified, a stock character creeping about the hotel; and 'black phones' swallow ('digest[. .]'), rather than facilitate, human communication. The poem ends in 'Voicelessness.'

The horror of annihilating perfection, exemplified for Plath by Nazi Germany, seems to live on, in some way, in the modern hotel of 'The Munich Mannequins'. This late poem develops and intensifies earlier themes and responds to some of the questions raised in 'Fever 103°'. 'Perfection', a descriptor Plath might once have applied to Matisse's architectural masterpiece, is found in 'The Munich Mannequins',

to be both 'terrible' and unproductive – 'Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children / Cold as snow breath it tamps the womb.' This is a brilliant and appalling image of a uterus being tightly packed with ice or snow; there is a sense of physical effort thoroughly and efficiently applied to ensure barrenness. It is not only 'Perfection [that] is terrible', but also the processes by which perfection might be achieved.

## Chapter Four

### One Absolutely Beautiful Thing: the Child's Eye in 'Berck-Plage' and 'Child'

While sublimity, transcendence and rebirth have been found in *Ariel* from its earliest readings, the theme of purity has been less obvious. Renee Curry's exploration of ideas of whiteness and ethnicity in the poetry raises questions around purity and power relations. Recent studies that reconsider the relationship of 'high' and 'low' literary genres in Plath's oeuvre, the mix of visual as well as the literary media in which she worked, and the literary borrowings between Hughes and Plath in studies by Diane Middlebrook ("The Poetry of Plath and Hughes: Call and Response") and Heather Clark (*The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*) all touch on ideas of purity and impurity. Nevertheless, purity as a *theme* of *Ariel* has been far less explored than the linked, but different, idea of transcendence. Part of the reason for this may be that purity is figured in the poetry in a language more familiar from visual art than literature. The long association of purity with whiteness in poetry does not exist in visual art in the same way. The old masters used, instead, pure and expensive lapis lazuli to signal the divinity and chastity of the Virgin Mary, and gold leaf or brilliant yellows, often in resonant counterpoint to reds and blues, to paint the illumination of heaven. Early stained glass is a literal manifestation of transcendence: pure, intense colour gives perceptible form to invisible light, and the image expands beyond the bounds of its enclosing formal design, 'its primordial force actually asserting itself over the plastic form of the architecture' (Itten 36). The influence and transcendent possibilities of these aesthetic theories, and an alternative conception of purity based on intense unadulterated colour, can be seen in 'Ariel'.

The deep involvement of whiteness with purity in literature cannot easily be put by. The innocence and decorum traditionally associated with white come under

great strain in 'Berck-Plage' (written in June 1962). It is also a poem in which visuality and the grammar of abstract painting begin to be consciously tested and absorbed. Where 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' represents an unpremeditated exercise rendering the immediate landscape in terms of artists' colour notes, 'Berck-Plage' combines several events separated by time and place. The dominant images around which this 'long symphonic' poem (Stevenson *BF* 248) is built are the visual impressions of a beach and sanatorium on the Normandy coast and the death and funeral of Plath's Devon neighbour, Percy Key, a year later (*CP* 293n). It is a poem in which sight and vision are repeatedly emphasised: 'a green pool opens its eye / sick with what it has swallowed', and, anticipating the 'hysterical elastics' of the outriding bees in 'The Bee Meeting', 'The lines of the eye' 'Boomerang like anchored elastics'. In a phrase fraught with the aesthetics of depth and surface perception, and relations between literary and visual art, a priest 'plumbs the well of his book':

The bent print bulging before him like scenery.

Obscene bikinis hide in the dunes

Breasts and hips a confectioner's sugar

Of little crystals, titillating the light,

While a green pool opens its eye,

Sick with what it has swallowed —

The abrupt turn in a single two-line stanza from the priest's reading material that 'bulges like scenery' to the immediate landscape littered with 'obscene bikinis' and, in

the next stanza, 'titillating' 'breasts and hips', has the effect of confusing the devotional with the pornographic. The 'confectioner's sugar' conveys an intense crystalline whiteness, but also the possibility that 'confectioner' refers to the observing priest. Christian iconography and the sacrament of the Eucharist help to structure the poem. Its influence can be seen in the 'naked mouth' of red earth that receives the lozenge-shaped coffin and the mackerels that are 'like parts of a body'. The preparation of the bread and wine before mass is the '*confection* of the Eucharist'. To confection is to make (especially clothing, sweetmeats or a frothy piece of literature), but more importantly, it implies a sweet mixture sometimes designed to conceal bitter-tasting medicine or poison. Whiteness, in this poem is sweet, sickly, sticky, nauseating, an elaborate concoction designed to feign innocence, and decking out sexual appetite, death or putrefaction in sweetness and 'baby-lace' 'confectionery' ('The Munich Mannequins'). In 'Berck-Plage', the imagery of sweet confection is insistent. Ice creams are 'electrifyingly-colored *sherbets*'; the 'crystalized' mackerel on the beach and Percy's coffin are '*lozenges*', there is 'such salt-*sweetness*' at the sanatorium; Percy, laid out in the parlour of his house is presented as 'A *wedding-cake* face in a paper frill' [my emphases]. The description of the corpse relies on images of sweet stickiness: following close on the heels of the 'wedding cake frill', the 'glued sheet' and 'powdery beak' are knowingly distasteful, recalling the 'sherbets' and the powdered, 'confectioner's sugar' bikinis of the previous section. Nor is Percy's 'glued sheet' unrelated to the 'Two lovers' on the beach who 'unstick themselves'. The daffodils around the corpse are displayed not in vases, but in 'jelly-glassfuls'. The poem is replete with sweetness, taste and eating, and with whiteness.

Connected with this imagery of white sugariness are the sweet-scented gardenias with which the nurses' white uniforms are compared. The gardenias are

'touched', overblown, suggesting a strong floral scent just tipping into decay. The 'brideflowers' that 'expend a freshness' are surely the white blossom of the hawthorn which blooms in May and is traditionally associated with courtship and marriage, but must not be brought into the house for fear of death. The flowers do not give out, but 'expend' – use-up – a 'freshness'. A student of botany, Plath may have known that the blossom of the hawthorn contains the chemical trimethylamine, the first chemical found in animal tissue that has begun to decay. The blossom is said to give out a smell identical with London during the Great Plague. The stench of the hawthorn is one of many connections between 'Berck-Plage' and the Bee sequence: in 'The Bee Meeting', the 'sick'- smelling 'hawthorn is 'etherizing its children'; and in 'Whitsun' the speaker 'picnic[s] in the death-stench of the hawthorn'. In the context of this surfeit of sticky confection and the sweet, rotten 'stench' of the hawthorn and the 'touched gardenias', the pillow cases 'sweetening' on the washing line take on a stomach-turning corruption:

Now the washed sheets fly in the sun,  
The pillowcases are sweetening.

It is a blessing, it is a blessing:

The long coffin of soap-colored oak,

The curious bearers and the raw date

Engraving itself with marvelous calm.

'Sweetening' is a surprising verb and one which undoes the airy freshness of the preceding line. Rather than a fresh start, there is a sense that a permanent vestige of

death and decay inhere in the linen from the sick-bed, and cannot be washed away. All this sickening sweetness, the 'sherbets', 'lozenges', 'jelly-glassfuls', 'wedding-cake', and the panacea 'sugar' that, according to 'Kindness' in one of the last poems, 'can cure everything' extends also to the small snatches of dialogue in the poem. Helen Vendler senses the sweetness of the sentiment in the spoken words, but not their rottenness:

Plath does permit herself brief relentings into lyric farewell, "goodbye, goodbye", and into the lulling ritual words 'It is a blessing, it is a blessing'. Underneath that soothing music, however, lies a suppressed outcry: the 'raw' date that signifies extinction proclaims itself flayed into being. (Vendler 60)

Although it *is* a kind of ritual (or a cliché) there is little to be found 'lulling' or soothing' in the repeated phrase, 'It is a blessing'. This is the ubiquitous response of a particular British generation (and perhaps a particular social class) to a difficult, drawn-out death. The idea of solace or benediction is crowded out by the knowledge of terrible suffering from which the only relief is personal extinction. Like that other peculiarly British phrase, 'something on the lung', which Plath recorded in her journal (671) and incorporated into her previous poem about Percy and his illness, 'Among the Narcissi', the phrase 'it is a blessing' is not an expression of faith or gratitude, but an euphemism for something considered so horrible as to be unmentionable in polite society. And Percy's hands that shook as if waving 'farewell, farewell' were not giving a sign of grace and acceptance – 'a lyric farewell' – but exhibiting an uncontrollable and involuntary physical symptom of his condition.

Vendler describes 'Berck-Plage' as the first instance of a 'new style' in Plath's later work in which reticence, 'dignity' and 'formality' hold at bay her supposed propensity to the 'lurid' in poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' (54), but if lurid signifies something gruesome, disgusting, grotesque, and sallow or pallid in colour, then no poem in *Ariel* is more lurid than this. It is a poem replete with the tastes and smells of death, and sickened by the 'baby-lace' and 'confectionery' in which death is sometimes prettified. It is difficult to understand how 'Berck-Plage' might be held up as a model of a restrained 'new style', in which Plath 'put reins on her "I" and 'began to be morally capable of what she named' (Vendler 61) by the fact that it is written several months before the supposedly 'lurid', 'grotesque' and 'gothic' poems 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus'.

Any 'relenting' in the poem comes in the last section where the schoolchildren observe the interment of Percy, very cleanly, without fear or sentiment or sympathy, and what they see are shapes, colours and surfaces, the 'geometrized' bearers and coffin (Vendler 56):

Then, from the barred yard, the children

Smell the melt of shoe-blackening,

Their faces turning, wordless and slow,

Their eyes opening

On a wonderful thing —

Six round black hats in the grass and a lozenge of wood

And a naked mouth, red and awkward.

For a minute the sky pours into the hole like plasma.

There is no hope, it is given up,

There is no hope, but there is a kind of purity in the 'wordless' fascination of the children. They observe an undeniably 'wonderful thing' as the fore-shortened coffin-bearers are reduced to black discs against green grass, surrounding the lozenge-shape of the casket. Though fascinated, the children are not emotionally invested in the event and free of the need to bring (in the terms of the poem) false hope to the scene of a death. The purity of the children's vision, which sees cleanly in shapes and colours, is related to the notion, or presented in the terms, of 'pure painting'. Greenberg uses the phrase 'pure painting' to describe abstract pictures that are focused on their own materials and methods of production and lay no claims on the natural world (86). The children in 'Berck-Plage' read little or nothing *into* the funeral tableau (they are 'wordless'), appreciating instead its diverting pictorial elements. The poem claims a moment of epiphany, signaled by 'Then' ('Then, from the barred yard'), as the smell of shoe-blackening alerts the children to the unusual spectacle before them. Their unselfconscious and untroubled response to the scene, un sentimental to the point, perhaps, of savagery, has in it a refreshing honesty, such that hope and even wonder might be restored.

### **'Child'**

Plath wrote 'Child' on 28 January 1963, on the same day as the first of the last poems, 'Sheep in Fog'. By the time 'Child' was composed, Plath had already written and arranged everything she would include in her manuscript of *Ariel*. 'Child' was not among the 1963 poems selected by Ted Hughes for Plath's posthumous

collection. The exclusion of the poem from all versions of *Ariel* may begin to explain the surprising lack of commentary on 'Child'. The poem first reached a wide readership when it was published in *Winter Trees* in 1971, a little apart from the furore surrounding Plath's death, and the sensational reception of *Ariel* in 1965. Of the nineteen poems in *Winter Trees*, eight take mothers or children as their subject, and when 'Child' is discussed, it is usually grouped with the other poems of motherhood.

Children in poetry are often pastoral figures, representing something like innocence, purity, or 'savage Nature'. Plath's inclusion of pools, ducks and flowers pulls 'Child' in the direction of the bucolic, while the final descent into darkness and despair is closer to anti-pastoral. Pastoral is a broad church, well able to accommodate such opposed factions. For William Empson the term applies to any work of literature that celebrates honest simplicity; and in 'Pastoral Theologies', Edna Longley writes:

I see 'pastoral' as a capacious generic umbrella – covering anti-pastoral, too – rather than as synonymous with 'escapism'. Tensions between Nature and culture, Nature and agriculture, Nature and society, Nature and art, 'bee-loud glade' and invasive history, have long defined the pastoral tradition. (90)

Many of Plath's poems are concerned with just such themes: the protected bower threatened by the contaminating influence of a fallen world; the innocence of children and their vulnerability; the transformative powers of landscape and the persistence of loss and grief. Plath's relationship with the natural world is not a comfortable one,

and hers is a pastoral that accommodates the less idyllic qualities of isolation, brutality and guilt.

'Child' takes domesticity as its starting point. As the poem opens the scene is one of whimsical domesticity:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.

I want to fill it with color and ducks,

The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate –

April snowdrop, Indian pipe,

Little

Stalk without wrinkle[.]

A wholesome, nursery world of duck feeding and zoo-visiting is suggested. The snowdrop, the pipe and the stalk might be a list of trinkets or curiosities which have amused the child. Perhaps he is learning the names of new objects in his world. The sense begins to become clearer if we consider that Indian pipe is a wildflower, which is native to parts of North America, including the state of Massachusetts where Plath grew up. So snowdrop, pipe and stalk refer squarely to the natural world. The poem is drawing on the tradition that links the fleeting innocence and beauty of children with flowers. There is an echo of Marvell's 'A Picture of Little T. C. in a Prospect of Flowers':

In the green grass she loves to lie,

And there with her fair aspect tames

The wilder flowers and gives them names. (63)

There is also something of Blake's 'Auguries of Innocence', which sees 'a Heaven in a Wild Flower' (150)

'Child' is not the only poem in which Plath connects infants and flowers. In fact, it is a favourite conceit. In 'The Night Dances', the 'flesh of lilies' bears 'no relation' to the sleeping child. 'Letter in November' figures 'tawn silk grasses' in an autumnal garden as 'babies' hair'. In 'Among the Narcissi', 'The narcissi look up like children, quickly and whitely'. Famously, in her last poem, 'Edge', and also in 'Kindness', children are compared with roses.

Susan Bassnett – one of the few critics to mention 'Child' – notes the beauty of the images in the poems about children:

The poems written to her children reflect a passionate mother-love in the detailed beauty of imagery. The dead babies in glass jars have been transformed and the living babies are represented with love and tenderness. (95)

While these images of children as roses or lilies are certainly beautiful, they also convey fragility, and often, mortality. The child literary hero or heroine has two possible futures: loss of innocence and sexual maturity; or the bleaker prospect of not reaching adulthood at all. Marvell interposes his vision of a nubile T.C. enjoying amorous conquests against the more terrible possibility that an angry Flora should 'Nip in the blossom all our hopes and thee' (64). Plath's delicate, sensuous flower images are aware of, and share, this darker aspect. The comparison of 'tawn silk

grasses' with 'babies' hair' in 'Letter in November' may seem seductively tactile, suggesting a blond silkiness, but it appears in a poem concerned with empire, 'old corpses' and bloody historical events. The November mist is a 'thick grey death-soup'. In this context, the 'babies' hair' image is a very worrying one. It is haunted by the knowledge that the flora of graveyards is nourished by the decomposing bodies they contain, and perhaps also, the fact that the hair of corpses continues, at least for a time, to grow underground.

While Plath's use of flowers recalls the pastoral poetry of Marvell, particularly in its awareness of infant mortality, it has an awkwardness quite missing from Marvell's garden. Marvell's cultivated landscape, where wilder flowers are tamed, is appropriately and naturalistically adorned with roses, violets and blossom as well as the more exotic tulip. It is presented as a picture. It is not so easy to visualize the landscape of Plath's 'Child'. Is the child in a garden or a forest? In England or America? Is it day or night? While the snowdrop is in keeping with an English landscape and English pastoral traditions, the Indian pipe is an alien interloper, and to the English ear an *April* snowdrop is just not quite right. Part of this apparent awkwardness can be explained by the harsh springs of Massachusetts where it is usual for snowdrops to bloom as late as April.

This sense of displacement from an English landscape, and an uneasy relationship with English pastoral traditions, is something Plath shares with the early American poets. She was familiar with the English Romantic writers who make use of the flower-infant metaphor, and she knew the work of Marvell well enough to include, in a stream-of-consciousness journal entry from 1953, a quotation from 'To His Coy Mistress' (33). Tim Kendall has traced references to Marvell's 'On a Drop of Dew' in 'Ariel' and 'Getting There' (183). Plath was also well-acquainted with the: 'little princes and their rose bushes' and 'the slim-limbed flower sprites' of European fairytales (*J*

35). A more overlooked influence is the work of the seventeenth-century Americans. In a letter written to her mother when she was studying at Cambridge, Plath refers to her difficulty in dating English texts. She envies the girls in her practical criticism class their grounding in the periods of English literature: 'Occasionally I would like to catch them off-guard with our early American literature'. That possessive '*our* early American literature' suggests a thorough knowledge of the work of the settler poets, such as Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor. It also implies that Plath felt she had a connection with the early Americans that she did not have, in quite the same way, with the English writers of the period.

Bradstreet, like Plath, frequently wrote about children or addressed her poems to them. As well as a book of prose and verse contemplations left to her sons and daughters on her death, there are several achieved and moving elegies for lost grandchildren. In these, the bud or blossom untimely gathered is a recurring motif. Bradstreet's long poem 'Of the Four Ages of Man' includes the lines:

Childhood was clothed in white and green to show  
His spring was intermixed with some snow:  
Upon his head nature a garland set  
Of primrose, daisy and the violet.  
Such cold, mean flowers the Spring puts forth betime,  
Before the sun hath thoroughly heat the clime. (149)

These words illustrate the influence of English writers and traditions on Bradstreet's work, but they also register something of the more extreme seasons in the colonies, the sometimes impossible living conditions and the rampant disease, to which, of course, children were most susceptible. There is a sense here, as there is not in

Marvell, of childhood as a time of known suffering rather than innocent delight unaware of its own frailty. Plath's 'Child' picks up on this sense of extreme vulnerability, as well as the green and white colour scheme: 'April snowdrop, Indian pipe / Little // Stalk without wrinkle'. The point of 'stalk' is its newness ('without wrinkle') and its littleness ('little' has a line to itself): the first green shoot of spring. Another of Plath's early Americans, Edward Taylor, structures his poem 'Upon Wedlock, and Death of Children' around a conceit of grafted plants that produce buds and flowers, all of which are 'cropped': 'Christ would in Glory have a Flowre, Choice, Prime / And having Choice, chose this my branch forth brought' (344). The description of the fatal illness of the last child is graphic and distressing: 'But Oh! The tortures, Vomit, screechings, groans, / And six weeks Fever would pierce hearts like stones' (ibid). The blossom has an impossible burden of grief to carry, so that the pastoral comes close to grotesque or melodrama, and the poem concludes with the extraordinary vow: 'I joy, may I sweet Flowers for Glory breed, / Whether thou getst them green or lets them seed' (345). A transplanted English pastoral tradition is not quite adequate, or not quite appropriate, to the different landscape, the dreadful physical suffering and the unimagined scale of child loss amongst the settlers. This less decorous, but, perhaps, more emotionally charged, and certainly more brutal pastoral feeds into the poetry of Plath. It is also possible that many of her poems remember the fact that American recorded history begins amongst massive infant mortality.

While Plath's floral imagery and its association with a very young child locate 'Child' in an English or, more accurately, an Anglo-American pastoral tradition, the Indian pipe looks to a strictly North American tradition and a North American landscape. Botany interested Plath a great deal, and she mentions it several times in her journals. An entry written when she was on an artists' retreat includes a note to

self: 'Get out big botany book at home' (522). Another page records an evening spent with the sculptor Leonard Baskin and his wife, Esther Baskin, a writer and naturalist, where one of the highlights was an antique botany book: 'We looked, after midnight, toward two, through one magnificent volume of Flora Londonensis, or something like – magnificent flowers, queer & delightful writing about their use, habitats' (408).

Esther Baskin was later to publish *Poppies & Other Deadly Flowers*, a natural history of poisonous plants, with illustrations by her husband. The synthesis of fine art, literary reference, myth and empirical observation in Esther Baskin's work is remarkably close to the synthesising aesthetic of Plath's flower poems: 'Paper-thin is the flimsy, flickering petal of the poppy's red, red flower' in Baskin's essay may have suggested, or been suggested by, the 'flickering' 'clear red' of Plath's 'Poppies in July'. Baskin's poppy essay refers to *Flora Domestica* (1832), perhaps the antique botany book the name of which Plath guesses at in her journal. Baskin's essay closes with a quotation from *Othello* to which 'Poppies in July' seems to respond:

'Nor poppy, nor mandragora,  
Nor all the drowsy syrops of the world  
Shall ever medicine thee to that sweet sleep  
Which thou ow'dst yesterday' (qtd. in Baskin 25)

The direction of influence is difficult to determine. *Poppies & Other Deadly Flowers* was published only in 1967 after Plath's death and after the publication of *Ariel*; however, the two couples spent time together during the period that Plath taught at Smith, admired each other's work, and were in the practice of sharing work in progress. In August 1958, Plath read a version of at least one of the essays that

Esther Baskin would go on to collect in *Creatures of Darkness* (1962), a characteristically macabre natural history of animals:

a green afternoon with Esther Baskin & Tobias under the trees, apples fallen, rotting on the ground, *reading her essay of the bat*, Ted's proof of the pike poem ... an atmosphere of books, poems, wood engravings, statues. [My emphasis] (416)

Plath dedicates an early poem, 'Sculptor', to Leonard Baskin, in which the speaker records a visit to an artist's studio. Ted Hughes and Leonard Baskin would go on to collaborate for the rest of their lives, but Hughes also supplied a poem, 'Esther's Tomcat', for Esther Baskin's *Creatures of Darkness*. Some of the subjects of Esther's animal essays – the nightjar (or goatsucker), bat and owl – are also favourite creatures in Plath's poetry.

The Indian pipe, perhaps because it is said to have healing, rather than deadly properties, does not feature in Esther Baskin's work, but no amateur botanist could fail to be interested in such a curiosity. As they contain no chlorophyll, the pipes have pure white stems, and leaves that resemble scales. They grow in deep forest shade drawing nourishment, not from the sun and soil, but from rotting vegetation. They cannot be picked because they bruise and disintegrate if they are touched. This melting away on contact accounts for their common name, ice plant, but they are also known as ghost flower or corpse plant, presumably because of their whiteness and love of shade (see appendix, fig. 20).

There is literary as well as botanical source for this reference. The Indian pipe is very closely connected with Emily Dickinson. Dickinson's famous Amherst homestead, from which she rarely ventured, is only a few miles from Smith College,

where Plath studied, and later taught. Dickinson uses the pipes in two poems. In both, their whiteness is emphasised. The poem that begins “Tis whiter than an Indian pipe’, also expresses something of the ethereal quality of the flower:

‘Tis whiter than an Indian Pipe –  
‘Tis dimmer than a Lace –  
No stature has it, like a Fog  
When you approach the place –  
Nor any voice imply it here  
Or intimate it there  
A spirit – how doth it accost –  
What function hath the Air?  
This limitless Hyperbole  
Each one of us shall be –  
‘Tis Drama – if Hypothesis  
It be not tragedy. (564)

In another poem, Dickinson associates the Indian pipe with an unusual quality of light, or of a season, or with a particular time of day. The otherworldly pipes, like the scarlet cardinal flower – both summer flowering plants – seem truly ‘fabulous’ (out of this world) from the vantage point of a dark February afternoon:

White as an Indian Pipe  
Red as Cardinal Flower  
Fabulous as Moon at Noon  
February Hour – (474)

The flower is very closely associated not just with her poetry, but with Dickinson herself. In a well-known letter to a neighbour, thanking her for a watercolour of the Indian pipe, Dickinson calls it 'the preferred flower of life':

That without suspecting it you should send me the preferred flower of life, seems almost supernatural, and the sweet glee that I felt at meeting it I could confide to no-one. I still cherish the clutch with which I bore it from the ground when a wondering Child, an unearthly booty, and maturity only enhances the mystery, never decreases it. (367)

Dickinson recalls the moment of picking the flower: 'I still cherish the clutch with which I bore it from the ground'. This is also the instant at which it must have blackened and begun to disintegrate. It is easy to see how these strange flowers, that melt and vanish at the moment they are grasped, might have left a strong impression on the mind of the young Dickinson. An image of the pipes was chosen by her editors for the front cover and the spine of the first posthumous edition of her poems in 1890. This was popular with reviewers and readers who were quick to identify the tiny, reclusive, poet who always wore white, with the unusual, ghostly white flower. Domhnall Mitchell, in his study of Dickinson's manuscripts, writes at length about the use of the pipes' image as a marketing tool. He suggests that one of the reasons for this choice of cover design was to suggest the 'arrival of a "native" American talent':

[the book's] cloth binding ... was supplemented by ... a large design of Indian pipes. A similar but smaller Indian pipes ornament was repeated in gilt on the spine of the book and functioned both as decorative

promotional emblem and as a preemptive device for helping to shape responses to the book's contents ... the design suggests the arrival of a "native" American talent: the Indian pipes are at once an indigenous subject matter and an indigenous response to and representation of that subject. (39)

While the extreme fragility of the plant, specifically its resistance to touch, holds an appeal for both writers, Plath draws on an aspect of the flower that Dickinson does not. Plath is interested in the shape of the flower, its eye-like form, with a single bulbous bloom and a thick, white stem. The Indian pipe has long been associated with the human eye. Native Americans and the early settlers used its sap to treat eye problems, and it retains the folk name, eyebright. The flower, pipe and stalk relate to the child's eye of the first line. They are not simply, or not solely, diverting objects that a mother might show her child. They are also metaphors for the eye – the eyeball and optic nerve – of the child. The effect develops from the botanical to the anatomical. The vaguely eye-like snowdrop gives way to a linked image of Indian pipe with its convincingly ocular shape.

The logic of the syntax also insists on this reading. The punctuation at the end of line four is usually read as if it were a colon, which would indicate that the child is naming the flowers; in fact, it is a much more ambiguous dash:

Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing.

I want to fill it with color and ducks,

The zoo of the new

Whose names you meditate –

April snowdrop, Indian pipe,

Little

Stalk without wrinkle,

Pool in which images

Should be grand and classical.

The sentence begins, 'I want to fill it with color and ducks', taking 'it' (the child's eye) as its object. The syntactical unit, *and* the chain of metaphors for the eye, are resolved together in that familiar image for the eye, a pool: 'Pool in which images / Should be grand and classical'. What began as a transatlantic nature walk has become a dissection, an invasive examination, of the child's eye. It is not the outward appearance of the eye that is explored, but its internal physiological form.

Tim Kendall has conclusively demonstrated how frequently eyes and eyeballs feature in Plath's poetry, and the engagement with the work of Emerson that this reveals:

[Plath] is intrigued and appalled by damaged and unreceptive eyes, whether they be 'bald', 'blank', or blind'. This may be partly prompted by Emerson's well-known and curious assertion of union with God through nature: "I am become a transparent eye-ball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God." (37)

Plath's eyeball is every bit as curious as Emerson's, but they function very differently. For Emerson, the eyeball's letting in of light so that the brain can perceive natural objects is a literal illustration of his theory of the 'dynamic interchange' between man

and landscape. Emerson's eyeball represents continually available transcendence; there is 'no disgrace, no calamity (leaving me my eyes) which nature cannot repair' (5). There is little doubt that Plath is responding to these ideas, but it is not Emersonian transcendence, optimism and confidence that find their way into 'Child', but darkness, irreparable disgrace and calamity: 'This troublous / Wringing of hands, this dark / Ceiling without a star.' Plath's eyeball functions much more as a reminder of mortality, something like the memento mori of Jacobean drama, the difference being that what Plath uncovers – her flower-like eyeball – is far more vulnerable and perishable than Webster's 'skull beneath the skin'.

This penetrating vision, that does not respect surfaces or boundaries, is often found in Plath's work. Unleashed here, on the child subject, it delivers a cruelly reductive metonymy, as the idealised infant is reduced to a grotesque eyeball. This is objectionable and the speaker knows it: 'images / *Should* be grand and classical' (my italics). The little stalk adds to the grotesque so that we have a sense of cartoon eyes that are graphically out on stalks. There is a knowing breach of decorum, and a grim humour. A shadow is cast back on the apparent 'lyrical tranquility' of the first line – 'Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing' – so that we begin to worry about one eye alone being singled out for praise. Alongside the anxiety about protecting the delicate infant in 'Child', is an accompanying and opposite sense that the tenderness has gone wrong, so that the impression is one of physical discomfort, rather than cherishing care. This is a motif that features in Plath's writing of all periods: in a letter of 1956 she described the brilliant light and colour of the French Riviera as an exhilarating optical assault – I *gritted my eyes* on pastel villas, orange and olive groves, snow-capped Alps Maritime, *violently green* pines, and that *blissful blast* of the sea' (qtd. in Connors 98). In 'A Life' (written in November 1960) the speaker urges: 'Touch it: it won't shrink like an eyeball.' The extreme, wincing tenderness of

the exposed eyeball in 'Child' implies a speaker who is invasive and threatening, rather than gentle or cherishing.

In 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', tenderness and gentleness are desired but elusive maternal qualities (I discuss this further in Chapter One, 88-89). In *The Bell Jar*, when she is recovering from violent food poisoning, Esther is grateful for the 'great gentleness' with which 'the chairs and tables and the walls were withholding their weight out of sympathy for my sudden frailty' (43). Similarly, the speaker of 'Morning Song' is a model of awed reticence and respectful distance. Tenderness and gentleness are achieved, in that poem, through the holding back of the speaker's voice in an attempt to make room for the sounds of the baby. We hear his breathing in the onomatopoeic 'moth-breath', the parents' voices only 'echo' and 'magnify' his arrival, and the silence while he silently sleeps or feeds is preserved with visual images of emptiness and possibility: 'We stand around blankly'; 'The window square / Whitens.' Even in this supremely tender child poem, a note of qualification is sounded in the mildly humorous undercutting of maternal sentiment in the last lines: 'And now you try / Your handful of notes; / The clear vowels rise like balloons.' It is a doomed enterprise that seeks to hand over sound and sense to a newborn baby, and his meaningless cry is imagined as cartoon speech bubbles from which the words have been removed.

Not just in 'Child' but in many of Plath's poems about children, tenderness and gentleness are at odds with a need closely to depict or to 'pin down' the child. 'You're', a poem addressed to an unborn child, is full of ellipsis, coinage and freewheeling similes and metaphors. Images contain mechanisms for growth and change ('O high-riser, my little loaf'), allowing them to develop and beget new images with seeming autonomy. The poem is off and running (away with itself) before the title has been completed or the first sentence is properly underway: '**You're** // Clownlike,

happiest on your hands, / Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled'. The energy and sense of freedom is unmistakable, but there is also a concluding note of dissatisfaction. These clever, shape-shifting images add up to little: 'A clean slate, with your own face on'. The 'clean slate' erases what has gone before, like a board wiped clean. The subject remains indescribable and therefore insubstantial.

The child in Plath's poetry must be realised. In her copy of Drew's *T. S. Eliot: The Design of His Poetry*, Plath underlined a reference to Jung's 'miraculous child' symbol:

According to Jung the revelation of the beginning of new spiritual experience is usually heralded by the appearance in dreams of some sort of miraculous child, symbolising the new potentiality for growth and development which has awakened in the unconscious. "psychologically, the divine birth heralds the fact that a new symbol, a new expression of supreme vital intensity is being created." (127)

Plath's 'Mary's Song' (which I discuss in Chapter 5) written in November 1962 just two months before 'Child', which is concerned with repeating patterns of history and suffering, concludes with the sacrifice of a miraculous, 'golden child the world will kill and eat.' The child in Plath's work is a necessary symbol of innocence, beauty, or goodness, offering the possibility of a measure of salvation in a fallen world.

Introducing 'Nick and the Candlestick' for a BBC reading, Plath explained that 'In this poem... a mother nurses her son by candlelight and finds in him a beauty which, while it cannot ward off the world's ill, does redeem her share of it' (*CP* 294n). The poem makes reference not just to the birth of Christ – 'You are the one / Solid the

spaces lean on, envious. / You are the baby in the barn' –, but also his sacrificial death:

O embryo  
Remembering , even in sleep,  
Your crossed position.  
The blood blooms clean

In you, ruby.

For Plath, children often operate as talismans against a malevolent world. In 'Little Fugue' the distressed speaker includes 'my baby' in her comforting, compulsive cataloguing:

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

In her journal, echoing the words of 'Little Fugue', and at a moment of perceived threat, she writes: 'I held & arranged the baby, nosing him idly like a bunch of white flowers'.

Many of the *Ariel* poems work to establish a protective sanctuary around the mother and the precious, vulnerable child. 'Nick and the Candlestick', is set in a dark, womb-like bower: 'I have hung our cave with roses, / With soft-rugs - // The last of Victoriana'. Although the poem ends with the baby safe in the barn, we cannot forget

the horror to come for the infant Christ. In the strange and troubling 'Thalidomide', the speaker will 'carpenter / A space for the thing I am given'. The child of 'Candles' is enfolded in 'the mild light', but threatening shadows 'stoop over like guests at a christening'; and, although the mother and child of 'By Candlelight' meet each other in a 'haloey radiance', it is only this nebulous glow 'That keeps the sky at bay, / The sack of black! It is everywhere, tight, tight!'

These threatened, improvised shelters do at least retain the sense of innocence and goodness *within* the mother/child bower, and brutality or threat *without*. Such a discrimination is not possible in 'Child'. In this poem, images of pastoral charm dissolve into the grotesque or the gothic. The child becomes, with a tilt of the page, now a flower-like child, now a hideous eyeball. The tender mothering is also damaging invasion, and the sheltering nursery is also the site of trouble, grief and guilt: 'This troublous / Wringing of hands, this dark / Ceiling without a star.' The landscape of the poem is, finally, both claustrophobic (a ceiling) and exposed (without warmth or light), a dystopian vision. The poem begins as a blessing for the child's life – 'I want to fill [your eye] with color and ducks' – and becomes an ill-timed elegy for his future loss of innocence and his eventual, inevitable death. Those primary colours suggest a nostalgic and impossible wish for the kind of hope and innocence that Plath was able to experience in the Matisse Chapel (see Chapter Two), or for the exuberance of *Ariel*. In 'Child', bright (nursery) colour is lamented and absent.

'Child' can be understood as a kind of pastoral elegy in which the role of the grieving speaker is fused with that of the neglectful nymph. In a more classical pastoral elegy, we might expect to move from grief and calamity towards a measure of comfort, but 'Child' reverses that movement. We begin with duck ponds, wildflowers and colour – 'Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing. / I want

to fill it with color and ducks' - and arrive finally, at a dark ceiling that is resolutely without a star, or any sense of the consolations of the natural world.

Although she is always understood to be a mother, the speaker of 'Child' also has aspects of the mythological guardian who fails to protect the innocent swain, and is bewailed by the speaker for her neglect: 'Where were ye, nymphs when the remorseless deep / Closed o'er the head of your loved Lycidas?' (Milton 42) Plath's nymph is not simply neglectful or irresponsibly absent or insufficiently powerful; she is the agent and cause of the child's descent into darkness. It is her 'troubulous wringing of hands' which so poisonously fills the eye of the child. 'Troublous' denotes *causing* as well as *suffering* trouble. It is 'characterised by agitation or disturbance', and it particularly relates to water, so that water which is troublous is 'thick, turbid, muddy'. We have to fear for the clear pool of the child's eye. Where Emerson's eye was filled with the healing power of nature, the eye of Plath's 'child' is in danger of some sort of contamination. Like Lady Macbeth, the speaker is (literally or linguistically) 'wringing' her hands in a gesture of excessive distress. This is a stereotypical movement associated with acute anxiety or psychotic compulsive states. Hand-wringer has also become a term used to describe politicians who profess concern for the suffering of others but take no action. The best that could be said for hand-wringing (and perhaps, by extension, the writing of poetry) is that it is a formal and stylised manifestation of grief or guilt.

## Chapter Five

### Art Versus Magic in the Last Poems

A change of energy and direction from the fiery alchemy of many of the *Ariel* poems, to the chemical inertia of the last poems is signaled in the second draft of 'Sheep in Fog' where the word 'transfigurations' is struck through with a single black line, replaced with 'transformations', and this, too, excised:

I am not the one, this disgruntles them.

~~They were [are] expecting wanting~~

~~Stones, clouds, transfigurations [transformations] (WP 196)~~

'Sheep in Fog' is the first poem of the final set, and the spectacular, *transcendent* finales of the October *Ariel* texts cannot make their way into this new poetic arena. The speaker of 'Sheep in Fog' is a disappointment, although only the measure of disappointment that 'disgruntles' rather than devastates. The sense of inadequacy is retained in the final version ('People or stars / Regard me sadly, I disappoint them'), and in comparison with the screaming, murderous, fiery, ascending, galloping, transfigured or otherwise volatile and iconic women of the October 1962 texts, the speaker, here, presents herself as a passive anti-heroine. The movement of 'Sheep in Fog', in common with many of the last poems, is slow, sinking and subject to the inexorable pull of gravity; neither speaker nor poem soars into a fiery transcendence, but they may be allowed to fall into a watery afterworld:

They threaten

To let me through to a heaven

Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

Ted Hughes described 'Sheep in Fog' as 'a small, cool poem ... the epitaph and funeral cortège of the whole extraordinary adventure dramatized in the poems of *Ariel*' (WP 207). This 'cool' acceptance is hard won, however, and preceded by several post-*Ariel* poems which treat change and transformation in strange and disturbing ways. The poems that Plath wrote between the end of *Ariel* and the beginning of the last poems (and not apparently intended for either group) are characterised by images of appalling change – not transfiguration and transcendence, but mutation and holocaust. In 'Eavesdropper', begun on 15 October 1962, and amended on 31 December, the burning of a heretic is described as 'queer alchemy'. The first three stanzas move about an extended metaphor of malignant cell-change with a sinister and possibly cancerous 'Mole on my shoulder'; even at a cellular level something has gone terribly wrong with the natural processes of growth and change. The knowingly distasteful image of an embalmed body as confectionery – 'I saw your much sicker / Predecessor wrapped up / A six foot wedding-cake' – first presented in 'Berck-Plage', reemerges here, as does the unhealthy yellow of the poisonous 'laburnum' and sulfurous 'streetlight' of 'Letter in November':

But that yellow!  
Godawful!  
Your body one  
Long nicotine finger  
On which I,  
White cigarette,  
Burn for your inhalation,

Driving the dull cells wild.

Alchemy is the rendering of pure gold from base materials. According to Itten, 'Golden yellow suggests the highest sublimation of matter by the power of light' (Itten 85). The distinctive colour of 'Eavesdropper', however, is a darkened, 'nicotine'-yellow:

Just as there is but one truth, so there is only one yellow. Adulterated truth is vitiated truth, untruth. So the expressions of diluted yellow are envy, betrayal, falseness, doubt, distrust, and unreason. (Itten 85)

'Eavesdropper' is filled with 'vitiating' yellows: the neighbour's sun-tan is a 'urinous' 'stain', 'Godawful' and like a nicotine-stained finger'. The colour is indicative of physical disease, and that fairy-tale symbol of transformation, the toad, is used, here, to depict instead a yellow tinged with green or brown, and a narrow, cold-blooded mentality ('Toad-yellow', 'Toad-stone! Sister-bitch!').

The sickly yellows and insular pettiness of 'Eavesdropper' pastiche the pure saturated colour and the exhilarating, incendiary fury of the *Ariel* works. Although 'Eavesdropper' draws on colour theory, it lacks the astounding visuality and 'grounded[ness]' (*BF* 272), those 'complicated, rich, obdurate, and significant forms' (Vendler, *Music* 279), of the most achieved of the *Ariel* poems such as 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', 'Ariel' and 'Poppies in October'. Its vitiated colours cannot deliver the rage and energy to which the poem seems to aspire. The 'yellow, sullen smokes' of 'Fever 103<sup>o</sup>' threatened to stifle that poem before it had got off the ground ('they will not rise // But trundle round the globe / Choking the aged and the meek') and 'Eavesdropper' seems to have been regarded by Plath as a rare failure. The

poem was revised on 31 December and then apparently abandoned; according to Hughes, Plath left no final copy (CP 294n). Given the dates of composition ('Fever 103' was written on 19th October, four days after Plath began 'Eavesdropper') it may be that 'Fever 103' is a much more successful reworking of ideas and images first approached in 'Eavesdropper'.

If 'Eavesdropper' is underpowered, saying little that is new or arresting in terms of Plath's colour use or lyricism, 'Mary's Song' is much more successful, introducing its gruesome subject matter with a stylistic austerity and a clarity of diction which anticipate the 'objectivity' and 'perfected economy of line' of poems like 'Edge' and 'Child' (Heaney 164). Like 'Eavesdropper', this is a poem that is absolutely post-*Ariel* in its focus not on transcendence, rebirth or renewal (or any other kind of lyrical magic), but rather, dreadful change and purposeless suffering. The 'holy gold' of 'Mary's Song' is the rendered fat of the roasting 'Sunday lamb':

The Sunday lamb cracks in its fat

The fat

Sacrifices its opacity ....

A window, holy gold.

The fire makes it precious.

This text shares with the October poems a certain velocity and flammability, and it is also a dramatic monologue taking, like 'Fever 103', the Virgin Mary as its speaker; however, the poem depicts not a decisive epiphanic moment, but episodes in a continuing cycle of violence and suffering. If this is a kind of alchemy, and the

reference to purifying fire and making 'precious' suggest so, it is an alchemy that delivers, repeatedly, inescapable horror and suffering, the 'queer alchemy' that, in 'Eavesdropper', 'melts the skin / Grey tallow, from bone and bone'. One of the central motifs of 'Mary's Song', the Eucharist, is employed not in its aspect of mystical union with the divine, but as self-perpetuating sacrifice, the continual re-offering of the Son of God to feed the insatiable progress of appetite and destruction. Like 'Getting There' (one of the later *Ariel* poems, written in November 1962), 'Mary's Song' presents a wide geography, but here, the speaker is not moving across the 'Gigantic guerilla interior', but observing Europe and Palestine laid out before her like a map. The golden, translucent fat of the lamb is a 'window' through which, or within which, is revealed a panorama of human history. A single glance reveals the birth and death of Christ, the Inquisition, the long history of anti-Semitic persecution and the Holocaust, the apocalyptic landscape of post-Second World War Poland and the blitzed cities of Germany:

The same fire

Melting the tallow heretics

Ousting the Jews.

Their thick palls float

Over the cicatrix of Poland, burnt-out

Germany.

Tim Kendall writing on 'Getting There' finds that the poem reveals 'a consciousness which cares little for specifics of history, but concerns itself with the

recurrent nature of war. History, in fact, *is war*' (177). Similarly, in 'Mary's Song', the speaker's vision of history is that famously ascribed by Walter Benjamin in 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940) to Paul Klee's painting 'Angelus Novus' (1920). In this painting, Benjamin finds an angel looking down on all of human history as one undivided scene of war and suffering. He reads Klee's artwork as a commentary on human existence that undermines the notion of history as causal, progressive or developmental; rather, it is 'one single catastrophe':

A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. *This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet.* The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (49; my emphasis)

Plath's poem, Klee's painting and Benjamin's analysis of the painting share a theological and historical theme, as well as an angle of approach. There is something of the compositional viewpoint in 'Mary's Song', as in all three texts (poem, painting and commentary), that places the subject in a position of 'heightened detachment' (Kendall 208). The speaker of 'Mary's Song' is somehow at a remove

from the scene of suffering which she witnesses, and in which she suffers, and in which she is implicated. There is a similar distancing at work in 'Edge' as Kendall explains:

Manuscripts of "Edge" indicate that the poem had originally begun with the phrase, "down there", and this clinical examination of the terrible scene below ... is shocking because of its distance (195).

This elevation or bringing of a 'higher consciousness' (ibid) can be seen not only in 'Edge' and 'Mary's Song', but very clearly, too, in Benjamin's reading of Klee's painting. Like the 'Angel of History' (Benjamin, above), Plath's 'Mary' looks down upon 'wreckage' and 'debris'. Europe is scarred, burned and shattered ('burnt-out Germany', 'cicatix of Poland') and the 'thick palls' and 'ash' that irritate eye and mouth suggest the toxic smoke of the fire of a battle that continues to burn and of which we must all partake. Benjamin's description of an irresistible storm ('a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them') is so close to Plath's 'Elm' ('A wind of such violence / Will tolerate no bystanding') as to suggest a direct influence. It is likely that she was introduced to this section of the 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' as part of Mrs Van der Poel's Modern Art Course (1957-58) or came across it in her reading about Klee's work.

'Brasilia', another post-*Ariel*, pre-last poems text, may also relate to Benjamin's cultural analysis and, specifically, his critique of Marinetti's 'Futurist Manifesto' ('Let art be created, let the world perish'), in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' :

Instead of draining rivers, society directs a human stream into a bed of trenches; instead of dropping seeds from airplanes, it drops incendiary bombs over cities; and through gas warfare the aura is abolished in a new way.

...

'Fiat ars – pereat mundus', says Fascism and, as Marinetti admits, expects war to supply the artistic gratification of a sense perception that has been changed by technology. This is evidently the consummation of 'l'art pour l'art.' ... [Mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. (38)

'Brasilia' begins with an image whose source is the muscular, metallic angularity of futurist sculpture:

Will they occur,  
These people with torsos of steel  
Winged elbows and eyeholes  
  
Awaiting only masses  
Of cloud to give them expression,

These lines read as a description of one of the best-known of futurist artworks, Umberto Boccioni's striding, helmeted and winged human-like figure *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1912; see appendix, fig. 21). The title of the poem is a straightforward reference to the Brazilian city of Brasília which was entirely planned

and built between 1951 and 1961 on the design of architect Oscar Niemeyer, but whose creation was prophesied in the dream of a Catholic priest, Dom Bosco, in 1883 (Holston 62, 16). The modernist concrete buildings, enormous open squares and monumental sculptures make the entire city a futuristic fantasy on a super-human scale, variously described as utopian and progressive, or dystopian and alienating:

Brasília was built to be more than merely the symbol of [the] new age. Rather, its design and construction were intended as means to create it by transforming Brazilian society. (Holston 3).

The international symbol of the city of Brasília is an eight metre-tall sculpture of two figures, *Os Candangos* (Bruno Giorgi, 1959). Often translated as *The Warriors*, Candangos was a name given to the thousands of migrant construction workers who built the city, perhaps recalled in Plath's 'masses' and 'driven' 'nails'.

Like the visions of Dom Bosco and Oscar Niemeyer for the city of Brasília, Plath's poem looks to the future. What her poem imagines, however, is not Dom Bosco's 'land of milk and honey' and 'unimaginable wealth' (qtd. in Holston 16), but a breed of mechanised 'super-people' born for efficient warfare. What is so disturbing about Marinetti's writings and Boccioni's futuristic sculpture, and is reflected in Plath's 'Brasilia', is that the evolutionary shaping of generations in accord with the drive for efficient war is seen to possess a kind of awful beauty. Both dreadful and awe-inspiring, this drive to increasingly effective destruction is akin to (perhaps a perversion of) the aesthetically pleasing melding of function and form in art. The 'super-people' of Plath's poem are a dream-vision of perfect form, 'awaiting masses / Of cloud to give them expression'. This, it seems, is the evolutionary outcome of

man's instinct for war, the telos to which each new generation is leading, including the speaker's baby whose life contributes to the refining of humanity as a sleeker and more powerful engine of destruction: 'And my baby a nail / Driven, driven in'.

In this strange image of baby as a driven nail, we can see a move towards the extreme compression of figurative language in the last poems. Plath attempts in 'Brasilia' to pull two of the fundamental images of Western culture (the birth of Christ and the Crucifixion), along with Darwinian and Freudian theories of human existence, into a single unlikely scenario. What the image lacks is visual lucidity. In 'Ariel', for example, as Anne Stevenson has observed, 'every image is grounded in some *thing*, depicted as if with verbal paint' (*BF* 272). It is not easy for the reader to 'see' the 'baby' and 'nail' of 'Brasilia', and Plath has not yet found a visually expressive language equal to her post-*Ariel* imaginative landscape.

There *is* a compelling visual source for this image, but not one that Plath is able, in this poem, to translate. Paul Radin's *African Folktales and Sculpture* (1952), which Plath studied at Yaddo (*BF* 163), contains many extraordinary images of *minkisi* (fetish or power objects), including a *nkondi*, or nail fetish, made by the Bakongo people of the Congo (plate 79; see appendix, fig 22). This three-and-a-half foot wooden figure is so studied with nails and blades that the upturned head emerges from the onslaught as if from a high Elizabethan ruff. The face is finely carved and decorated, and the closed, upturned eyes invite the viewer to infer various human feelings or states – resignation, suffering, prayer, strength or innocence perhaps. There is an irony or a cross-cultural misreading at work, however – the *nkondi* were usually angry entities whose poses were intended to convey righteous rage or violent intent (MacGaffey, *Kongo* 106). According to Radin's 'Catalogue of Plates', each 'driven' nail or blade 'represents a petition' (346). The mother of 'Brasilia' makes a petition to a devouring deity to spare her child:

You who eat

People like light rays, leave

This one

Mirror safe, unredeemed.

There is something of the Medusa myth (a favourite motif of Plath's poetry) in the protecting mirror; however, 'Mirror safe' may also be inspired by the fact that the *minkisi* incorporated pieces of mirror or reflective glass, particularly to conceal 'medicine' or cover the eyes to allow the 'power object' to see into the spirit world (MacGaffey, 'Magic' 233). Many critics, not least Hughes, have associated Plath's poetry with Radin's book. However, they tend to look for sources in the tales, and the images of African *sculpture* are largely, or more often, entirely, overlooked:

Primitive sculpture has been one of the chief sources of modern sculpture; it certainly led out of the impasse. But somehow or other, primitive literature ... has not arrived, not fruitfully. The only instance I know was in the explosive transformation Radin's African collection worked on the poetry of Sylvia Plath. (*WP* 78)

Despite the mention of 'Primitive sculpture', Hughes finds no direct links between it and Plath's poetry, and the reference to Radin's 'collection' implies a book of stories. Linda Wagner-Martin, writing about Plath's stay at Yaddo, the writers' colony, in 1959, finds her 'much involved in reading Paul Radin's African folktales' (168). Stevenson also notes that Radin's book 'played a part in the work [...] produced [at Yaddo]', but

contracts the title to 'African Folktales' (BF 163). Edward Butscher believes that, '[Plath's] sense of myth and man's primitive roots was enlarged by reading Paul Radin's collection of African folktales' (251). All of these commentaries overlook the visuality of Radin's book, and no mention is made of James Johnson Sweeney who supplied the introduction to the sculpture section and selected the images. Sweeney had been curator at the Museum of Modern Art from 1935 to 1946 and, at the time of publication of *African Folktales and Sculpture*, was director of the Guggenheim Museum (dictionaryofarthistorians.com). If critics have overlooked the visual artistic credentials of *African Folktales and Sculpture*, Plath would not have done so. She encountered the book well educated in the significance of African sculpture in the work of her favourite modernist painters (or 'primitives' as she often called them), and with a painfully sharp visual sense of her own. In a 1958 radio interview with Lee Anderson in Springfield, Massachusetts, Plath stressed the visual aspect of her compositional practice: 'I have a visual imagination. For instance, my inspiration is painting, not music when I go to some other art form ... I see these things very clearly' (*Voice of the Poet*). Interviewed together with Hughes on the BBC in 1961, Plath again emphasized the visual element in her work: 'I'm [...] influenced by art, by paintings and sculpture. A lot of my poems describe a painting and take off from a visual image and go on from there' ('Two of a Kind').

Hughes's statement (above) suggests a rudimentary appreciation of the revolutionary impact of the sorts of objects presented in Radin's book on the field of western visual art, but he does not recognise any possibility of influence traveling from artwork/object to poem in Plath's work. If Radin's book worked an 'explosive transformation' on Plath's poetry it was surely the *images* of carved figures, bronze heads, whitened masks, casques, reliquaries, funerary objects, domestic items and other artifacts, rather than the folktales, that worked so potently on her imagination

(see appendix, figs. 22–24). The book is illustrated with one hundred and sixty-three pages of photographs. Masterly, beautiful, strange and sometimes unnerving or ghoulish, the objects are strikingly presented in full-page, high-contrast, black and white photographs. It is something like a source-book for the scenery and props of 'Totem', and may also be a significant influence on Plath's presentation of the moon in many of her poems, perhaps the defining symbol in her poetry. The round Fang moon-masks of whitened wood stare out of a black background (see appendix, fig. 23). Other items have evocative captions such as 'Ancestor Figure', 'Mortuary Figure', 'Funerary Figure', 'Fetish Figure', 'Cult Object' and 'Ritual Object'. There are animal masks, shamans' 'sceptres' and 'batons', and baskets and casques for carrying human remains (see appendix, fig 24).

Not entirely successful, 'Brasilia' is nevertheless a significant poem. It brings a primitivism, or sense of totemic culture, gleaned not via modern painting, Freud, Fraser's *The Golden Bough* or Hughes's interest in shamanism and anthropology, but by access to (images of) the kind of source materials that transformed the work of Matisse, Picasso, Gauguin and many other painters at the beginning of the twentieth century. Radin's book (scholarly as it is) exhibits little hesitancy in presenting the artifacts as high art and is devoid of anxieties about the aesthetic appropriation of domestic, sacred or power objects within the paradigms and classifications of Western culture. That is to say, Plath encountered these images as visual art, a habitual resource for her poetry. Furthermore, the use of monumental sculpture ('torsos of steel') in 'Brasilia', while imperfectly realised in the poem, may be seen as an important stylistic development. It reintroduces into the poetry, in a more 'dynamic' manner, sculptural and monumental motifs from *The Colossus* and earlier (Jinghua 218). As colour becomes attenuated in the last poems, modeling, images of architecture, and the materials and processes of sculpture or relief work assume

greater importance, providing an indispensable organising principle for many of the last poems.

Thematically, however, it is those notions of appetite (implicit in the 'Sunday roast' of 'Mary's Song') and instinctual predatory drive (indicated by the repeated 'driven' of 'Brasilia') that will be carried through to the last poems. By the end of 1962, the possibility of ascension, release and salvation as the stuff, the end, of poetry (however precarious, fleeting or testing) can no longer be contemplated. If lyric poetry relies on the saving, encompassing image, 'that liberated moment when the lyric discovers its buoyant completion and the timeless formal pleasure comes to fullness and exhaustion' (Heaney xxii), Plath is faced, in January 1963, when she begins work again on 'Sheep in Fog', with a dead end. Neither the backward glance of 'Mary's Song', nor the futuristic vision of 'Brasilia' offers any possibility for the 'buoyant completion' to which Heaney refers. The many re-draftings of 'Sheep in Fog' suggest, as Ted Hughes remarks, that Plath had to work hard to come to terms with that impasse, and to find a way to deal with it in her poetry: '[the drafts] are ... an open window into the poet's motivation and struggle at a moment of decisive psychological change' (*WP* 207).

One of the things the last poems do very well is to look closely at that dead-end: the 'terrible' 'Perfection' of 'Munich Mannequins' that 'cannot have children'; the death-in-life of the 'Paralytic' bound to his iron lung in suspended animation; the 'Gigolo's' tyrannical narcissism; the 'Mystic' who, despite achieving enlightenment, does not know how to go on living ('what is the remedy?'); the aftermath of a drowning or a violent crime in 'Contusion'; and the enclosing of a woman-artifact in formal patterns, antitheses and mathematics in 'Edge's' excessively stylised tableau. If 'Eavesdropper', 'Mary's Song' and 'Brasilia' depict appalling transformations, the last poems seem to have given up hope of active change of any kind; they are

subject, instead, to powerful forces of gravity and inertia. In contrast to the emphatic, driving, animating effects of repetition, rhyme and enjambment of *Ariel*, 'Sheep in Fog' uses these devices to impede movement: 'O *slow* / Horse the color of rust'; 'All *morning the* / *Morning* has been blackening' [my emphasis]. Here, the line break at an unemphatic 'the' strips the repetition of 'morning' of its expected momentum. 'Words' falls like a plumb-line over the precipice of a stanza break – 'Over the rock // That drops and turns' – to conclude at 'the bottom of a pool'; and 'Edge' is resolved in (or is absorbed by) the leaden resistance of 'drag'.

### **Sculpture and Animism in 'Totem'**

In a twist on the inertial pace of most of the last poems, 'Totem' is frenetic traveling frantically to no destination ('there is no terminus'). The engine that speeds through the first line 'eating the track' is reminiscent of those industrial, war-like futurist paintings that celebrate mechanised speed and industrial domination of the natural world. However, the poem is predicated not on pictorial art, but on monumental artifact: Plath explained it as 'a pile of interconnected images – like a totem pole' (*CP* 295n). The strict attention to form and methods of poetic production that such an explanation implies is unmistakable. The self-referentiality in the last poems, which has often been remarked upon, is bound up with the prevalence of sculptural motifs, techniques and artifacts in these late works. Classical Greek funerary sculpture and an engagement with art-historical ideas of repose inform the toga'ed female figure of 'Edge', and have a trashy incarnation in the orange and silver shop dummies (perhaps 'painted whores' (Stevenson *BF* 67)) of 'The Munich Mannequins'. The 'pearl'-coloured body of 'Contusion' also has something to say about classical ideals of repose and of feminine beauty. 'Child' wishes for the statues and fountains of a formal garden: 'Pool in which images / Should be grand and

classical'; and a more baroque vision of water and stone is the occasion of a rare simile in the Gigolo's grandiose tirade ('I / Glitter like Fontainebleau // Gratified'). The chateau of Fontainebleau, seat of the French monarchy and of Napoleon, is famous for its lavish and ornate interior decoration, especially its 'mannerist' stucco relief sculpture and walls and ceiling embellished with putti, gilding, carved picture frames and frescos (Knecht 425-61). The terraces of Yeats's 'Ancestral Houses' ('O what if gardens where the peacock strays / With delicate feet upon old terraces') (226) can be heard in 'Balloons' where 'Peacocks bless [...] / Old ground with a feather / Beaten in starry metals'. Plath's 'starry metals' also recall the golden bird and goldsmiths of 'Sailing to Byzantium' ('such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling') (218).

An early draft of 'Mystic' begins in ekphrastic mode, 'This little woodcut of the inquisition is so beautiful.' It also includes a reference to what appears to be 'Beswick animals', the little pottery figurines of farmyard animals often based on the illustrations of Beatrix Potter that were popular in the middle of the twentieth century (thereby encompassing, in a single draft, medieval devotional grotesque and contemporary kitsch) (Plath Papers 1). Perhaps more graphic than sculptural, a woodcut relief print is nevertheless produced by cutting into a wooden block, rather than (as in painting or drawing) the laying of marks onto a flat surface. A cruder version of cutting into wood is the occasion of 'Words', and, while not strictly concerned with artistic plasticity, an oblique reference to elemental erosion – 'Water striving / To re-establish its mirror / Over the rock' – suggests the geological shaping or sculpting of the landscape by natural forces.

Plath's explanatory remark – 'a pile of interconnected images, like a totem pole' – suggests that the idea of the totem pole functions as a kind of central trope, or architecture, around which or within which all the fragmentary and radically

compressed images and scenarios of the poem cohere. The only discernible *narrative* thread is the train which passes through a landscape of flooded fields at dusk taking farmers from Devon to the London meat market:

The engine is killing the track, the track is silver,  
It stretches into the distance. It will be eaten nevertheless.

Its running is useless.

At nightfall there is the beauty of drowned fields.

Dawn gilds the farmers like pigs,  
Swaying slightly in their thick suits,

White towers of Smithfield ahead,  
Fat haunches and blood on their minds.

Ted Hughes's brief notes give the train as an organising device linking Plath's rural home in Devon and her previous home in London from where 'she had been able to see from Primrose Hill the "white towers" of Smithfield' (*CP*, 295n). One way to make sense of the rapidly shifting scenes of the poem is to see them as split-second views of a landscape, and then a cityscape, seen from a speeding train, but this idea cannot be sustained beyond the move into the interior world of the farmers who have 'Fat haunches and blood on their minds', and the fantastic and eclectic collection of Darwinian, shamanic and mechanical references through the rest of the poem. 'Totem' depicts, as Tim Kendall explains, 'an hallucinatory world where ... everything preys or is preyed upon' (204). It is possible to go further and say that everything is

both hunter *and* prey, perpetrator *and* victim. The farmers are themselves pig-like ('Dawn gilds the farmers like pigs'), and we cannot be certain that the 'fat haunches' belong only to the livestock and not also to their keepers. The butchering cleaver is unsparing and indiscriminate, offering all varieties of killings ('how's this, how's this?'), and the fly-trapping spider also waves its arms hysterically as if suffocating in its own web. Plath delivers, in the final stanza, only 'the one / Death with its many sticks'.

No one and nowhere is safe from this devouring energy. The particularly unsettling image of skinned hare as a human foetus brings savagery into the heart of the domestic space: 'In the bowl the hare is aborted, / Its baby head out of the way, embalmed in spice'. Ted Hughes's brief notes in the *Collected Poems* suggest a special knowledge of 'Totem'. 'In the bowl the hare is aborted' is explained as 'a pyrex bowl, used on different occasions, for her son's afterbirth and the cleaned body of a hare', and the 'counterfeit snake' is 'an articulated toy snake of scorch-patterned bamboo joints' (295n). There is no sanctuary here, not even the nebulous 'haloey radiance' that cloaked mother and child in 'By Candlelight'. The nail fetish, ancestor figures and funerary objects of *African Folktales and Sculpture* are interspersed with domestic items – bowls, stools, headrests, jewellery and musical instruments – which are no less astounding or alarming in their design motifs. These images acknowledge no boundary between the family, the sacred and the diabolical. Hughes's emphasis on the personal and domestic tenor of the images of 'bowl' and 'snake' explains in part Plath's direct access to what are iconic symbols; however, both the snake and the hare are animals which enter any poem trailing unwieldy psychic, anthropological and literary associations. Like the ungainly articulated 'mirrors' of the poem, they will not 'fold' neatly into Hughes's points of reference – toy and utensil.

The insane chase of hunter and hunted in the first seven stanzas gives way to more elusive images and sudden disorienting moves from extreme close-up of the eye of the cobra to a vast panorama of land and sky presented as if in time-lapse photography: 'the eye of the mountains // Through which the sky continually threads itself.' The idea of narrative progress is ridiculed in the repeatedly unfolding 'self', the sky that 'eternally' passes over the mountains, the 'short circuits', tickets to nowhere and the final bathetic 'one / Death with its many sticks', and its echoes of Eliot's 'cunning passages' and 'contrived corners':

History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors  
And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions  
Guides us by vanities. ('Gerontion' 38)

A focus on movement and stasis is a familiar feature of ekphrastic poetry where a spatial medium is translated into a temporal one. Sculptural and monumental art has always been an important trope for these ideas in poetry. The mountain of Dante's *Purgatorio* with its spiralling path and carved relief figures has a similar quality of movement in stasis. Keats's 'overwrought' 'Grecian Urn' pictures movement and narrative progress permanently arrested: a heifer being led to a sacrificial altar, 'loth maidens' pursued by 'men or gods' and worshipers processing to the temple (344-45). For Leighton, this is 'an aestheticism with a catch to it':

If this depicted pursuit sometimes sounds, in its sweetness, like a game of tag, it only takes a little imagination (female imagination, perhaps), to hear in it a ravishment which the beauty of the decoration only stops in time. (41)

Plath's most disconcerting poetry seeks out the least comfortable elements of earlier poets, and it is not much of a leap to hear Keats's 'What mad *pursuit?*', 'What *struggle to escape?*', 'Who are these coming to the *sacrifice?*' and 'When old age shall this generation *waste*' in the general environs of 'Totem' [my emphasis].

There is no denying the nightmarish quality of 'Totem'. A letter written from Plath to Hughes in the early days of their marriage is reproduced in Frieda Hughes's Introduction to *Plath's Drawings*. Prefacing Plath's description of the comfort she finds in sketching plants and animals – 'it gives me such a sense of peace to draw' (3) – is a reference to 'the most terrible of nightmares', an affliction to which Plath was regularly subject: 'I am again having the most terrible of nightmares ... this gruesome series of Ethiopian tribal ceremonies all centering about totems, purifying rituals, and most terrible' (2). Even more disturbing is the *Journal* entry of 17 December 1958 which records a nightmare following Mrs Van der Poel's Modern Art lectures on the painters Georges Rouault and Juan Gris in February 1958:

In ... art class I had seen suffering Christs & corrupt judges & lawyers by Rouault (who died this last Wednesday night) ... then a black & white valentine from Elly with a photo-montage of lovers, of three men behind barbed wire at a Concentration Camp clipped from the Times [sic] from a review which I read about tortures & black trains bearing victims to the furnace – all this I traced into my terrible primitive-drawing dream, a series like flipped pictures in a book, of black line drawings (almost like cartoon stick figures) on a white ground of all varieties of tortures – hangings, flayings, eye-gouging, and, in a bright crude blood red, lines & spots indicating the flow of blood – all the stick figures having red

hands to the wrist & being depicted in crude animation with “La Torture” written in bastard dream French under the drawings. (330)

This dream narrative shares a verbal taxonomy with ‘Totem’; there are ‘flayings’, ‘blood’, eyes, ‘trains’ and victims. The structure of the dream as a series of sketchy ‘flipped pictures’ linked by trails of blood has something in common with the momentary glimpses of scenery and the sketchy glyph-like images of ‘Totem’, by turns macabre, bizarre and cartoonish, that make up the poem. The lines of blood in this journal entry (‘bright, crude blood red, lines & spots indicating the flow of blood’) are also suggestive of the bloodlines that feature in definitions of the anthropological concept of totem. Plath’s *Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, held in the archives at Smith College, gives the definition, ‘One of a class of objects regarded by a primitive people as having blood relationship to a specific family group’ and ‘A symbol or representation of a totemic being’. Plath has underlined the word ‘blood’. The entry is illustrated with a figure of a totem pole (898).

Like Hughes, who had studied anthropology, Plath seems to have been familiar with the idea and practices of totemism. Her copy of Elizabeth Drew’s *T. S. Eliot: The Design of his Poetry*, is marked with a side-note annotation, ‘Totem and Tabu, Freud!’ next to an introductory discussion of Eliot’s use of myth (1).<sup>10</sup> This is a reference (using the German spelling) to Freud’s *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics* (1913). One chapter seems particularly relevant to Plath’s work and especially to ‘Totem’; ‘Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thought’ compares the magical rituals of ‘savages’ with the creative practice of artists. It seems likely that, along with many other of Freud works,

---

<sup>10</sup> The relevant passage, underlined by Plath, is: ‘[Myth] is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history.’ Drew, 1.

*Totem and Taboo* was a text she knew well. A description of the ritual to 'injure an enemy' is remarkably close to the action of Plath's poem, 'Burning the Letters', and to all of the various prose accounts of the episode to which that poem is said to refer.

Here is Freud describing the practice:

One gets possession of some of his hair or nails, or other waste products or even a piece of his clothing, and treats them in some hostile way.

...

In the view of primitive man, one of the most important parts of a person is his name. So that if one knows the name of a man or of a spirit, one has obtained a certain amount of power over the owner of the name. (81)

Clarissa Roche's account in her memoir, *Sylvia Plath: Vignettes from England* (presented as a direct report from Plath herself), of Plath's burning of detritus and papers belonging to Hughes, includes the gathering of discarded hair and nail clippings and the revelation of a significant name:

when the moon was at a certain stage, she had skimmed from his desk 'Ted's scum', microscopic bits of fingernail parings, dandruff, dead skin, hair, and then, with a random handful of papers collected from the desk and wastebasket, she had made a sort of pyre in the garden and ... lit the fire with a long stick of a torch and paced around, incanting some hocus-pocus or another ... One charred piece settled at Sylvia's feet ... She picked it up and by the light of the moon read "A--," the name of a

friend. Sylvia now knew the woman with whom Ted was having an affair. (qtd. in Bundtzen, 'Poetic Arson' 239)

Susan Van Dyne notes that an excised section from an early draft of 'Burning the Letters' includes the lines 'There was nobody for me to know or go to. / So I burned the letters & the dust puffs & the old hair' (37).

'Burning the Letters' draws on anthropological motifs of totemism, and anticipates 'Totem' in some details. The torn, 'burst' and bloody fox whose suffering 'does not stop' anticipates the preyed upon, mutilated and devoured creatures of 'Totem'. The speaker's 'wishes' in 'Burning the Letters' are as useless and invalid as the 'pockets of wishes // Notions and tickets' (to nowhere) in 'Totem'. In 'Magic, Animism and the Omnipotence of Thought' Freud identifies primitive man consumed by his wishes with modern day artists who use illusion to call forth effects:

In only a single field of our civilization has the omnipotence of thoughts been retained, and that is in the field of art. Only in art does it still happen that a man who is consumed by desires performs something resembling the accomplishment of those desires and that what he does in play produces emotional effects – thanks to artistic illusion – just as though it were something real. People speak with justice of the "magic of art" and compare artists to magicians. (90)

In 'Balloons', one of Plath's final poems written on 5 February 1963, wishes, imagination and creative joy are associated with an old high romanticism, with Yeats's terraces and golden birds. In the poem, the speaker's children are playing with brightly-coloured balloons in the shapes of animals:

Globes of thin air, red, green

Delighting

The heart like wishes or free

Peacocks blessing old ground with a feather

The creative wish that Freud identifies with 'primitives' and artists is associated here with infancy. Visual art is also implicated in the abstracted or kitsch rendering of natural forms and the primary colours of the balloons – 'Yellow cathead, blue fish'. To the baby, but not his older sibling, the balloons are magical, squeaking like animals at his fingertips and turning the world pink:

Your small

Brother is making

His balloon squeak like a cat.

Seeming to see a funny pink world on the other side of it.

What the child is likely to discover at any moment, and at its own hands, is not magical creative power, but the absolute authority of natural law – the biting child holding 'A red / Shred in his little fist' is a figure of nature red in tooth and claw.

Elizabeth Bishop's wooden artifact poem, 'The Monument' (1946), has only one image of animalistic ferocity or threat – 'Once a day the sun goes round it like a prowling animal' (23) – but it shares with 'Totem' an interest in the nature of the creative or poetic will: 'The monument will do for a figure of a poem, which turns out

to be an allegory of what it is to *make* anything in the optative mood' (Bromwich 120). There is an emphasis on the materiality of the imagined artifact in Bishop's poem, its proportions and dimensions and, particularly, the substance of its construction: 'It is of wood', 'of weathered wood', 'long petals of board', 'jig-saw work hangs down', 'vaguely whittled ornament', 'A sea of narrow, horizontal boards', 'long grains.../ like floor-boards', 'palings', 'splintery sunlight', 'driftwood', 'wooden, grained with cloud', 'glistening splinters!' and so on. It is a poem about wood and also about 'would', and it is a nostalgic commemoration of a creative wish: 'It is the beginning of a painting / a piece of sculpture, or poem, or monument'. David Bromwich locates it in a guarded relationship with established poetic ideals (and the most grandiose wishes) of commemoration and posterity:

The poem's authority and weight have less in common with modern inventions like Joseph Cornell's boxes than they do with an older tradition of immortality – 'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlast this pow'rful rhyme'. (117)

For all its formal invention ('a pile of images'), its savagery and its non sequiturs, 'Totem', too, is interested in age-old poetic concerns of posterity and commemoration, and poetic and monumental structures. There is a quality in the last poems that does not want to 'live on air', as Plath once claimed poets tended to ("Peter Orr Interview"). There is a desire for substance and practicality – imperishable bones, edges, stone, 'a cup of tea', the slow plod of a horse, an axe falling onto wood or the 'absolute' beauty of the eye of a beloved child. Similes disappear; nothing is *like* anything else, it simply *is* or it is *not*. 'In the fog there are sheep', says Plath, by way of the most cursory of introductions; or, 'a pile of images, like a totem pole' (*CP*

295n). In an early poem, 'Sculptor', dedicated to the sculptor Leonard Baskin and set in his studio, Plath admires the 'weighty', 'obdurate', 'palpable', 'dense-grained', 'cumbrous', 'sure' and 'solider' materials and artworks: 'no vain / Images of light and air / But sure stations in bronze, wood, stone.' There is a Dickinsonian stoniness to the last poems, the sense of circumference, a feeling out to the outer limits of empirical knowledge (however discomfiting that might be), but no further. There is no place, here, for conjecture. There is a hope, at least, that art, especially the plastic arts, or their processes or materials, might offer a model for poetry that can no longer permit metaphysics or lyrical resolution. However, the unraveling, disparate, or dissolving nature of the images of poems such as 'Totem', 'The Munich Mannequins' and 'Sheep in Fog', implies a dismantling or undoing of structure. Many of the poems leave us only with the redundant and unreactive constituent alchemical materials of stone, water or bone.

In a 1961 joint interview with her husband, Plath identified 'a certain toughness and knottiness' in poetry that she and Hughes 'both admire[d]' ("Two of a Kind"). It seems to have been the visceral and unsentimental observation of the natural world that Plath admired in Hughes's work, and a similarly earthy quality in her own verse that she saw reflected in Hughes's appreciation of her own writing. In 1956, in the early days of her marriage, Plath wrote to her mother of Hughes's professional admiration:

Ted says he never read poems by a woman like mine; they are strong and full and rich ... they are working, sweating, heaving poems born out of the way words should be said (*LH* 244)

Angela Leighton has described this passage as both a 'birth metaphor' and a 'tautology'. It is possible to hear in it, however, not only 'the birth-work of women' (Leighton 253), but also the slog of manual labour. Geoffrey Hill's conceit of poetry as sculpture conveys a comparable sense of writing as physical work with a dense, recalcitrant material.

That commonplace image, founded upon the unfinished statues of Michelangelo, "mighty figures straining to free themselves from the imprisoning marble", has never struck me as being an ideal image for sculpture itself; it seems more to embody the nature and condition of those arts which are composed of words. (3)

Hill's conceit lets us hear, as Leighton has said of Plath's 'birth-metaphor', not only how much heavy work is required, but 'how much has to be got out of the way' so that the words can 'work on ... [their] own birth' (253) ('free *themselves* from the imprisoning marble') [my emphasis]. If the manual labour of the stone-breaker or mason seems as far as it is possible to travel from the cerebral work of the poet, this is not a fact which has deterred poets from making that comparison. In her copy of Yeats's *Complete Poems*, held at Smith College, Plath underlines the passages from 'Adam's Curse' (88-90) which compare the work of the poet first with needlework, and then with the manual labour of the skivvy and the stone-breaker:

A line will take us hours maybe;

Yet if it does not seem a moment's thought,

Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.

Better go down upon your marrow-bones  
And scrub a kitchen pavement, or break stones  
Like an old pauper, in all kinds of weather. (89)

The formal experimentation might be understood as a retrenchment in the new critical approaches of Cleanth Brooks and Elizabeth Drew that Plath discovered at Smith, reinvigorated by the visuality of Plath's imagination. The premise of 'Totem' is not a story, theme, idea, mood or a dramatization of a personality, but the building of a structure. This is the logical extension of Brooks's 'Imagery of a good poem must be functional; it cannot afford to be simply decorative' (219), which Plath starred and underlined in her copy of *The Well Wrought Urn*; and, 'The poet is a maker, not a communicator' (69). There are ways that 'Totem' might be said to take issue with New Critical ideas of figurative cohesion or organicity. Metaphors are unsatisfying or unexplained ('The world is blood-hot and personal // Dawn says, with its blood-flush') and uninterested in communicating 'the subtler shades of emotion' or any definable human emotion or personal experience (Brooks 15). It is a poem that plays with a phrase that Plath underlined in Brooks's essay on Macbeth: 'the proper limits of metaphor' (21). In that essay, Brooks accounts for apparently incongruous or ill-thought-out images by bringing to bear an overarching motif of concealment and authenticity. New critical ideals of the poem as knowable enclosed world where readings work to reconcile apparent disparities or contradictions are certainly tested by 'Totem'.

If 'Totem' emulates a monument, it is a monument built, destroyed and continually replenished from the victims of the infernal chase of prey and predator. What unites the various members of the tribe of living creatures, in Plath's poem, is the totem 'Death': the monotheistic 'one / Death with its many sticks'. The

enjambment capitalises 'Death' so that it has the aspect of prosopopeia. This concluding image begins to coalesce into an iconic, Shiva-like figure of death and destruction, many-armed and garlanded in skulls and serpents.

Ideas of posterity press upon the poem ('These are the people that were important'), although these luminaries or ancestors are now no more than relics or macabre puppets – a skull 'On a stick':

These are the people that were important –

Their round eyes, their teeth, their grimaces

On a stick that rattles and clicks, a counterfeit snake.

Shall the hood of the cobra appall me —

The loneliness of its eye, the eye of the mountains

Through which the sky eternally threads itself?

As elsewhere in Plath's poetry, eyes and vision are particularly important; the 'hood of the cobra' has 'counterfeit' eyes or eye markings on the back of its head as a warning to predators. This is perhaps an allusion to the superstition of the evil eye, or some sort of necromantic curse. Hughes claims in the autobiographical (or biographical) poem, 'The Rag Rug', to have read Conrad's novels aloud to Plath, and the atmosphere of these stanzas has something of *The Heart of Darkness* about them (*Collected Poems*, 1131). But there are also those astounding images from Radin's *African Folktales and Sculpture*. One of the 'funerary figures' in that book has a form suggestive of the rearing head and upper abdomen of a cobra. According to

Sweeney, these figures were made to be 'placed upon baskets or boxes containing the skulls of ancestors. Their purpose is to keep strangers away' (142n). On the facing page to the cobra figure, a carved, human-like head with the same staring eyes still sits on top of its reliquary basket. We are reminded of those earlier poems in which a speaker gathers relics of a father figure or seeks some kind of reunion or communication beyond death. 'The Colossus' is addressed to 'father', whose remains the speaker tries to piece together: 'I shall never get you put together entirely / Pieced, glued and properly jointed'). In 'Daddy' the monstrous patriarch of the title is, like a vampire, neither safely dead nor sufficiently alive: 'At twenty I tried to die / And get back, back, back to you. / I thought even the bones would do.' The personal is kept out of 'Totem'. The focus is historical and avoids subjectivity. The drafts of the last poems (except 'Sheep in Fog') indicate that they were written very quickly and with few amendments. One of the few excisions to an early draft of 'Totem', however, shows that 'the people who were important' was originally followed by 'Daddy & Mummy & Big Brother & Little Sis' and it is '*Their* round eyes, their teeth, their grimaces / On a stick that rattles and clicks' (Plath Papers 1). The finished poem dispenses with any sense of 'family elegy'; it is the distant and more anonymous 'important' 'people' whose remains make a sorcerer's kit of ghoulish accessories.

Primitive myth, shamanism, hidden psychic depths and transactions between the worlds of the spirit and earth, the dead and the living feature strongly in 'Totem'. For all this, any sense of wonder, transcendence or any other kind of lyrical magic is kept from it. Hughes has said of the *Ariel* poems, 'The poetry ... was no surprise to me. It was at last the flight of what we had been trying to get flying for years' (WP 165). The last poems, as Hughes recognised, present something quite different. Nothing *flies* in 'Totem'. Useless 'tickets' and 'wishes' and unsprung machinery spring cartoonishly from worn-out 'pockets'. In contrast to the supposedly inspired self-

actualizing *Ariel* voice, the only 'voices' in 'Totem' are non-human and without volition: the hiss of the striking cleaver ("how's this, how's this?"), dawn's bloody warning ('The world is blood-hot and personal // Dawn says, with its blood-flush') and the hysteria of the spider:

There is no terminus, only suitcases

Out of which the same self unfolds like a suit

Bald and shiny with pockets of wishes,

Notions and tickets, short circuits and folding mirrors.

I am mad, calls the spider, waving its many arms

Rather than an inspired voice or *soul*, there is a 'self' which is no more than a suit, a 'stick that rattles and clicks' and a Heath Robinson mechanical contraption of 'short circuits' and 'folding mirrors'. The spider and mirrors may derive in part from Eliot's 'Gerontion' in which the speaker has lost 'beauty in terror, terror in inquisition'. In the terms of Eliot's poem, 'pungent sauces' and ingenious artistry cannot pique the dulled appetite of extreme old age or advanced illness ('a dry brain in a dry season') (39) just as, in 'Totem', a grimacing skull cannot be animated with a sorcerer's 'rattles and clicks':

These with a thousand small deliberations

Protract the profit of their chilled delirium,

Excite the membrane, when the sense has cooled,

With pungent sauces, multiply variety

In a wilderness of mirrors. What will the spider do  
Suspend its operations, will the weevil  
Delay? (38-39)

A 'wilderness of mirrors' is a worrying image for metaphor and poetic invention suggesting infinitely deferred and powerless signification. Geoffrey Hill asks of Yeats's late poem 'The Circus Animals' Desertion', 'How is it possible ... to revoke 'masterful images' in images that are themselves masterful?' (5). Plath's images in 'Totem' perplex, discomfort and demonstrate their own powerlessness; they are lifeless, 'counterfeit', worn out ('bald and shiny') and malfunctioning ('short circuits'). In 'Child', written on the same day as 'Totem', the speaker regrets 'images / [which] Should be grand and classical', but are not, and 'image' does seem too grand a word for these piled up imaginings or diagrams of death-in-life. Compared with the nightmarish objects, animals and relics of 'Totem', Yeats's apparently anti-poetic 'mound of refuse' in 'The Circus Animals' Desertion'— 'Old kettles, old bottles, and a broken can / Old iron, old bones, old rags' (392) — is quaint and picturesque. The 'perfect horror' (Leighton 253) of Plath's creations is not in their lifelessness, but in their mocking or pastiching of life, creative individuality and volition. It is Yeats's 'The Apparitions' (386-87) with its spooky refrain '*Fifteen apparitions have I seen: / The worst a coat upon a coathanger*' (387) that is closer in feeling to the world of 'Totem'. Hart Crane's 'titters ... of death' and 'incunabula of the divine grotesque' from 'For the Marriage of Faustus and Helen' might also be mentioned. It is not Yeats, Crane, or even Dickinson (whose influence informs 'Child' and 'Edge') who is the guardian spirit of 'Totem', but Eliot. The 'eternal Footman' that Prufrock has seen 'hold my coat and *snicker*' (15) can be heard behind Plath's monstrous and banal figure of 'Death with its many *sticks*' [my emphasis].

'Totem' responds to Eliot, and especially, 'Gerontion' not just in its details and images, but also in its historical vision. Plath's 'glittering cleavers / The butcher's guillotine that whispers "How's this, how's this?" engages with Eliot's 'History' that 'deceives with whispering ambitions' (38). The butcher and his tools become, in 'Totem', a terrible image for history as a production line of death. Like 'Mary's Song' and 'Brasília', this is a poem written in the aftermath of the Second World War or in response to more immediate cultural reactions to that conflict. Picasso's war-time still-life paintings, which place skulls in arrangements of otherwise traditional and domestic items, or his piles of bodies in interior spaces in *The Charnel House* (1937), bring the menace and carnage of war into home and hearth. Plath found Picasso's works of this period unnerving and compelling enough to mention in her journals. Their imaginative landscape is very close to that evoked by Plath in 'Totem':

Don't like the mad distortions of his 40's with my deep self much –  
world of sprung cuckoo-clocks – all machinery & blare & schizophrenic  
people parceled out in patches & lines like dead goods: macabre visual  
puns. (J 339)

Like Picasso's 'visual puns', there is humour in 'Totem' of the most macabre kind. The malfunctioning automaton of 'short circuits' and 'folding mirrors' is comically bizarre. In the final couplet, a bathetic enjambment at the monotheistic 'one' is an example of the end-game humour identified in Plath's work by J. D. O'Hare: the experience of the poem leaves us 'more knowledgeably where we were: trapped' (95):

Plath's speakers are not comic because they can afford to be, because they see a loophole, an escape, a rebirth in the offing. Rather, they recognise a cul-de-sac, a fixed situation in which words cannot successfully conjure, supplicate, transform, or otherwise improve upon the status quo. (94)

None of this seems very far from the absurdist vision of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* which also has 'Charnel Houses' and the reductive, nihilistic aphorisms: 'They give birth astride of a grave'; 'the grave-digger puts on the forceps' (82, 83). The paraphernalia of Beckett's play, the rope and suitcases also feature in 'Totem': ('out of which the same self unfolds'; Roped in at the end').

### **Bitterness, Violence and Art in 'Totem', 'Gigolo' and 'Kindness'**

There is a moment, in 'Totem', when the speaking subject makes a rare appearance:

Shall the hood of the cobra appall me —  
The loneliness of its eye, the eye of the mountains  
  
Through which the sky eternally threads itself?

A pattern discernible in the drafts of the last poems is the removal of personal pronouns. The line 'Shall the hood of the cobra appall me' is the only point in the poem where any sense of subjectivity or dramatized speaker emerges. How should I look at these objects, she seems to ask, what should I make of them, and what are they likely to do to me? The connotation of 'appall' with whiteness suggests an

engagement of some sort with a notion of otherness, colonisation or even racial politics. (Robert Frost's poem, 'Design' may be a model for the yoking of whiteness and horror together in the verb, 'appall' [302].) We cannot endow Plath's writing with a sense of moral culpability as a member of a dominant power: her nightmare is set in Ethiopia, Africa equals darkness and barbarity, and there is no attempt to present a non-white perspective or experience. Renee Curry has taken issue with what she reads as a complacent and unexamined 'whiteness' in Plath's poetry (*White Women Writing White*). It is true that representations of Africa and blackness in the poems can occasionally jar even in the most successful of poems. 'Ariel's 'Nigger-eye / Berries [that] cast dark / Hooks' is objectionable however effective the visual and tactile image of hedgerow brambles as 'dark / Hooks'. '[T]he swarmy feeling of African hands' ('The Arrival of the Bee Box') is, at the very least, uncomfortable, and a usage that cannot be subsumed in a supposed critique of slavery. 'African hands' are not just presented sympathetically as commodity ('Minute and shrunk for export'), but monstrously dehumanised and disembodied. 'Swarmy' (though visually superb in its context) is close to the rhetoric of anti-immigration propaganda.

Curry's accusation of a focus on 'color aesthetics' rather than 'color politics' is a fair assessment of Plath's work, but while Plath's poetry cannot be said to encompass non-white subjectivity or experience in any meaningful way, it does look hard at her own whiteness (Curry 25). In 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', the energy and animation of the black bees is set against the deadness of the 'coffin'-like hive. The white hive becomes increasingly sinister in succeeding bee poems – it is a 'mausoleum' in both 'Stings' and 'The Swarm', and the 'wax house' from which the queen/self must escape in 'Stings'. White, in Plath's poetry, is the most sinister colour of all; Hughes's poem, 'Red' pictures her hiding 'In the pit of red' 'from the bone-clinic whiteness'. Far from unconsciousness about her own 'whiteness', the speaker of

'The Arrival of the Bee Box' is dramatized as a stereotypical antebellum Southern belle with blond, tumbling tresses and frothy white petticoats: 'There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades / And the petticoats of the cherry'. The most transfiguring Ovidian magic – the speaker's imagined transformation from speaking subject into silent tree (like a classical muse of the woodland nymph variety) – only intensifies the speaker's unmistakable signs of whiteness and privilege.

Questions about power, violence, art and tyranny that begin to be asked in the Bee poems come under more testing scrutiny in 'Totem', and are also concerns of 'Gigolo' and 'Kindness'. In 'Totem' the speaker asks 'Shall the hood of the cobra appall me ... ?' The question is difficult to understand, but the emphasis on eyes, sight and looking is impossible to miss. Looking at these objects, animals, figures, totems or landscapes wrests some kind of change in the viewer/speaker. The relics and images of 'Totem' stare back, unnervingly, at the viewer ('Their round eyes, ... their grimaces'). For all their strangeness and eeriness and their dealings with skulls and relics, the kinds of totemic and animistic objects presented in Radin's book and featured in 'Totem' tell a story of vulnerability and disinheritance; they manifestly failed to keep strangers at bay:

The process by which an African object becomes art includes removing it from its context of origin to the accompaniment of varying sorts and degrees of violence. Beside the literal violence of theft, confiscation and the like, we must include violence done to the object itself, which is often stripped of its accoutrements, varnished or even remodelled.

(MacGaffey. 'Magic' 223)

This kind of analysis is not present in the Radin book, but Sweeney's introduction to the sculpture section does briefly present arguments about the reclassification of 'religious' 'products' as 'art' (324-25), and describes in some detail the wholesale looting of 'the entire artistic remains of a great culture' (Ancient Benin) by British colonial powers in Nigeria (330).

One of the discoveries of the last poems is the 'darkness' that, for Plath, is present not just in the idea of Africa, or African art, but in any creative act. Far from releasing poet and reader from of the limitations of time and natural law, and the more reptilian of human traits, the last poems present artistic endeavour at one with these things. Art might even be said to have its foundation in an animalistic drive to control, destroy and consume. The infant who 'bites' his 'Oval, soul-animal' balloon and is left with nothing but a blood-coloured 'shred' is a figure for these sorts of ideas. 'Gigolo' written 29 January 1963, just one day after 'Totem', draws on the excess and extravagance of the French Ancien Régime for its underwater 'palace of velvet' and themes of carnal and militaristic consumption. The Gigolo's 'windows of mirrors' suggests the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles, where arcaded windows are reflected in 357 mirror-filled arches. There are intimations of infidelities and assignations, of courtesans' apartments discretely situated out of the way of 'family photographs', and a reference to the magnificent baroque Chateau of Fontainebleau ('I / Glitter like Fontainebleau // Gratified'). Fontainebleau was established by Francis I of France (1497–1547) whose emblem was the salamander. The salamander is amphibious like the Gigolo, inhabiting 'lizardy crevices' and as happy under the surface of the pool as 'tenderly / Lean[ing]' over the edge to gaze at his own reflection. Gilded salamanders in carved wood or stucco grace the walls and fireplace of the Gallery at Fontainebleau. Francis was a patron of the arts and is credited with beginning the French renaissance by bringing the greatest Italian

painters (including Leonardo Da Vinci, complete with the 'Mona Lisa'), sculptors, furniture makers and goldsmiths to decorate Fontainebleau. Francis promoted absolute monarchy and established the military and economic conditions for the expansion of the French colonial empire (Knecht 425-61). There is a strong case for seeing him as a model, or at least the inspiration for the Gigolo. The draft of 'Gigolo' contains a reference to 'Fontainebleau energy' and the poem certainly seems to capture some of the luxury and power of the French kings and their court (Plath Papers 1). Francis's motto – *nutrisco et extinguo* – translates as 'I nourish and destroy', although it is usually expanded, with parentheses, to 'I nourish (the good) and extinguish (the bad)'. The Gigolo eats 'Eggs and fish, the essentials, // The aphrodisiac squid' in order to '*nourish*' the cries of his sexual or violent conquests [my emphasis].

The excessive consumption of the Gigolo, and some of the poem's rather opaque images, have their source in Plath's childhood seascape and her knowledge of marine biology. Her journals contain several pages of notes on the destructive and voracious appetite of the echinoderm, or sea star, a creature that also featured in her prose memoir 'Ocean 1212 W' (1962). This detailed research filling, in the published *Journals*, two and a half pages, appears originally in a copybook used to 'record descriptions, creative writing ideas, poems, reading notes, and drawings' (583). There are many echoes in 'Gigolo' of this zoological information: 'Can squeeze supple body through incredibly narrow crevices'; 'live among seaweeds, eelgrass, in chinks and crevices of rocks'; 'shun light, hide or bear cloak of seaweed by day'; just as the Gigolo, in his 'snazzy blacks', 'hide[s]' in 'lizardy crevices' avoiding the 'bright fish hooks' (584-85).

Plath's interest in these creatures, however, centres on their voracious appetites and the great destruction wreaked on their prey: 'One less than 3/8 in.

across ate over 50 young clams of half that length in 6 days' (585). She records in detail the method by which a sea star will prise open an oyster shell 'then extrudes stomach through mouth, digests oyster & after finished meal withdraws stomach' (ibid). In this way sea stars are able to kill and eat prey that is larger than themselves, digesting bivalves in-shell before ingesting the liquefied nourishment. This becomes, for Plath, a horrific image of gross consumption so excessive as to cause physical distention:

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

There are echoes, here, of the 'piranha / Religion' of 'Nick and the Candlestick' 'drinking / Its first communion out of my live toes'. The 'Gigolo's 'way of turning / Bitches to ripples of silver', or 'mill[ing] a litter of breasts like jellyfish' may also refer to this special adaptation that involves the liquefying of prey. Part of the compelling horror of this process is the sheer efficiency of killing and eating: 'Engine' has the connotation of 'machine of war', and the subject of mass human destruction is not absent from the poem. The Gigolo's grandiose invincibility ('I shall never grow old'), and his narcissism, may be informed by the remarkable shared traits of the salamander and echinoderm – the ability to regenerate limbs and organs, and to reproduce asexually by parthenogenesis.

The 'Fixed stars [that] / Govern a life' 'From the bottom of the pool' at the end of 'Words' take on a new aspect in the light of Plath's interest in these ancient marine creatures. Under the heading 'Geological History', Plath notes that echinoderms were, at one time in their evolution, 'immobile', 'fixed to sea-floor, mouth turned

upward to food-bearing waters' – a point that is illustrated with a labelled sketch. The drawing is just about all mouth like a Beckettian image of hunger or appetite, or meaningless communication (*J* 585). The 'Fixed stars' of 'Words' are usually understood as an image of the constellations reflected in the water of a pool, signifying vague, astrological notions of fate and destiny. Plath's interest in sea stars, and marine biology in general, introduces the possibility that what the speaker sees in the pool are, in fact, sea stars literally fixed to a submerged rock. This complicates the closing sentiment of 'Words' and casts an empiricist, Darwinian shadow over its apparent astrological leanings. What governs an individual life, the poem might be saying, is not the influence of the planets, or a romantic notion of tragic fate, but eons of evolutionary imperative and animal appetite. A lyric poem might appear to represent a transcendent individual effort, a special, expressive moment that reaches beyond time, gravity and natural law. Plath's image for this is the raising and striking of an axe into wood to release significant 'ring[ing] 'words'. The difficulty is that 'wood rings' implies not only the resonance of a poetic voice, but the growth rings which are visible in a split tree trunk, and allow for scientific dating and other kinds of empirical analysis. In other words, the creative act only illustrates more clearly the inevitability of natural laws and the inexorable, 'indefatigable' progress of impersonal forces:

Axes

After whose stroke the wood rings,

And the echoes!

Echoes traveling off

From the center like horses.

The geological, evolutionary slant applied to the last three lines by allowing sea stars as well as astral stars into a reading is important because, without it, the conclusion of the poem has an extravagance it has not earned, 'a final epiphany that costs ... nothing' (McDonald 8). 'While' arrives with a fanfare, comprising the entire first line of the last stanza, a suspicious entry at this point in any poem:

While

From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars

Govern a life.

The sudden, unexplained change of location, focus or perspective implied by 'While' might indicate a reluctance to think through the implications of what has gone before or a failure to complicate or expand on preceding lines in interesting ways. Here, however, the motif of the passage of time has been established through the rest of the poem: the rings of a tree trunk that reveal its age; 'echoes' which signify lateness, repetition or a moment in time coming back on itself, and are encountered by the speaker 'years later'; the ripple that travels out 'from the center' of a pool like the ramifications, through time, of a single action; and the erosion of rock by water over centuries. The 'indefatigable hoof-taps' say something about metrical feet in poetry, the counting of time in music or even the ancient muses' spring, the Hippocrene, formed by the crashing of Pegasus's hooves into rock and, traditionally, the source of poetic inspiration. 'While' is deployed with accuracy gathering up the previous references to time and duration and balancing these, at the poem's fulcrum, with the image of the 'immobile' prehistoric creature, pathetically bound to his rock in an attitude of continuous consumption, 'mouth turned upward to food-bearing waters' (J 585).

Hippocrene means 'horse's spring' or 'horse's fountain'. Springs and fountains, water and rock or stone, are the dominant elements of the last poems appearing in 'Child', 'Paralytic', 'Gigolo', 'Words' and 'Edge'. But for the cry of a rabbit, the 'landscape' of 'Kindness' is entirely domestic and interior, but it encodes references to the fountain ('the glittering abounding jet') of Yeats's 'Ancestral Houses', the opening section of 'Meditations in Time of Civil War' (1923) (225-32). 'The Blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it' from 'Kindness' is one of the best-known and most thoroughly discussed phrases in all of Plath's work. This gnomic declaration is inspired by and reworks ideas about art and creativity in 'Ancestral Houses', as well as its key conceit. Yeats's poem begins with an extended image of the apparently effortless and self-sustaining jet of a fountain ('The abounding glittering jet') that seems to 'choose whatever shape it wills'. It is a figure of untrammelled freedom of expression and self-directed creativity born of, and dispensing, joy and nobility:

Life overflows without ambitious pains;  
and rains down life until the basin spills,  
And mounts more dizzy high the more it rains  
As though to choose whatever shape it wills  
And never to stoop to a mechanical  
Or servile shape, at others' beck and call. (225)

Succeeding stanzas of 'Ancestral Houses' go on to probe these assertions, which now begin to seem naive or disingenuous: 'dreams, mere dreams!'. Like the splendour of Versailles and Fontainebleau, the enchanting beauty of the fountain is built by money, power and ambition. The dancing, mutable shapes of the water-jet depend on stony foundations and a supporting structure which were commissioned

by powerful men, planned by architects and built by the hard physical labour of mason and sculptor:

Some violent bitter man, some powerful man  
Called architect and artist in, that they,  
Bitter and violent men, might rear in stone,  
The sweetness that all longed for night and day,  
The gentleness none there had ever known. (225)

'Kindness' demonstrates, like 'Ancestral Houses', an interest in the 'violent bitter' actions and motivations which might be involved in the making of art but are obscured by the beauty of the finished artifact. Where Yeats uses the image of the fountain of a great house, Plath's more feminine image suggests a woman securing a brightly-coloured silk scarf or gown: 'Japanese silks' and 'desperate butterflies' 'that may be pinned any moment'. The naturalist's albums of pinned butterflies comes in here, the association of art with female beauty, and perfection with silence, stillness and death. There is also something in the 'desperate butterflies' that cannot quite forget the violence of the silk production process that renders exquisite textiles from the boiling of live pupae.

'Kindness' also responds to the 'bitterness' of 'Ancestral Houses' by virtue of its antonym, sweetness:

Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says.  
Sugar is a necessary fluid,  
  
Its crystals a little poultice.

O kindness, kindness

Sweetly picking up pieces!

It is easy to understand that the gathering of the wealth and power to build a grand ancestral house with its peacocks and fountains is very likely to have involved, at some point in history, the perpetration or threat of violence. Bitterness is the more surprising and more interesting concept, suggesting not just that beautiful architecture might be built from the proceeds of violence, but that bitterness inheres in that creative act: in 'Ancestral Houses', it is not just the 'powerful man', but 'architect and artist' who are 'Bitter and violent men'. The 'sugar' of 'Kindness' is a panacea – 'Sugar can cure everything, so Kindness says' –, but 'Kindness' is not to be trusted. It is not sugar as she insists, but blood, that is 'a necessary fluid'. The logical progression and compression of these ideas and discoveries refigures Yeats's 'abounding glittering jet' ('the sweetness that all longed for day and night') as a jet of blood: 'The blood jet is poetry, There's no stopping it.'

Plath's 'jet' is *of the body* in a way that Yeats's is not, but the association of the symbol of the fountain with art and with physiology does feature in Yeats's essay, 'The Thinking of the Body':

Art bids us touch and taste and hear and see the world and shrinks from what Blake calls mathematical form, from every abstract thing, from all that is of the brain only, from all that is not a fountain jetting from the entire hopes, memories, and sensations of the body. (292–93)

Blood, issue and generation and the image of the fountain also come together in *Macbeth* (Act II iii), when Malcolm and Donalbain are told of their father's murder:

'The spring, the head, the fountain of your blood, / Is stopped; the very source of it is stopped' (984). Christian iconography sometimes depicts the fountain of life flowing with the blood of Christ from Heaven into a basin on earth from which the worshipful drink and receive grace. Grace, in its aspects of both divine benevolence and elegant movement is related to the 'longed for' 'sweetness' of Yeats's poem and the insistent 'kindness' that (gracefully) 'glides about my house' in Plath's.

Christian benevolence and the poetry and life of Yeats were very much on Plath's mind during the writing of 'Kindness' and the rest of the last poems. Plath's home at this time was a flat at 23 Fitzroy Road, a London building in which Yeats himself had once lived. Many letters testify to her delight in living in 'Yeats' House' (LH 477, 480, 488). Plath's copy of Yeats's *Collected Plays* has an annotation dated 13 November, 1962, the day before the writing of 'Death & Co, the last of the *Ariel* poems when Plath was hoping to secure the Fitzroy Road house. A speech from *The Unicorn from the Stars* is starred and underlined:

Go, then, get food and drink, whatever is wanted to give you strength and courage ... We have a great thing to do, I have to begin ... Bring them in, bring them in, I will make the house ready. (347)

Plath has added the comment 'A prophecy – true?' She had opened the book at random, as a fortune-teller might consult the *Bible* or other sacred text, looking for a message. Although the divination began 'as a joke' (or so she claimed in a letter to her mother), Plath was truly delighted with what she found (LH 480).

She was also in correspondence with a Jesuit priest and aspiring poet, Father Michael Carey, who had written to Plath asking for advice on his poems. Only Plath's side of the correspondence is available so that it is not always possible to connect

references, but she seems to have sent him a draft of 'Mary's Song' ('I will send you a poem of my own, very rough, but about the Christ-ness in all martyrs') (qtd. in Saldívar 203). The letter, dated 21 November 1962, was written two days after the poem's completion. She also expresses a fascination for 'Theology & philosophy': 'I am myself ... an atheist. And like a certain sort of atheist, my poems are God-obsessed, priest-obsessed' (ibid). In a letter of 16 December 1962, Plath appears to answer an enquiry from Carey about the nature of her own spiritual beliefs with the example of the Troll King in *Peer Gynt* who believes only in himself:

My answer to the 'what' question is the Troll King's answer out of Peer Gynt – 'Myself'. Very much so, thank God. Now you will surely think I am unredeemable, but do go on blessing me nonetheless! (qtd. in Saldívar 205)

Amongst recommendations on style and poets to study, and notwithstanding her own atheism, Plath asks the priest for a blessing for herself, and then for her new home. In the last line of the last letter to him, written three days after 'Kindness' and one day before 'Edge' and 'Balloons', her very last poems, she signs off with the suggestion: 'How about Yeats for the lyrical?' (qtd. in Saldívar 206).

The paradox that 'Ancestral Houses' establishes, and that 'Kindness' responds to, is that the making of art and the writing of poetry require a belief in the possibility of a kind of lyrical purity (or grace), which the artist also knows to be 'mere dreams':

Yet Homer had not sung  
Had he not found it certain beyond dreams  
That out of life's own self-delight had sprung

The abounding, glittering jet. (225)

Plath's reworking of these ideas is perhaps a shade more sceptical. For Yeats, the poet's necessary faith in a place of poetic purity 'beyond words', in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, has a heroic note (something like Cuchulain fighting the incoming tide). The *glittering* of the abounding jet of 'Ancestral Houses' seems to have signaled, for Plath, the more dubious qualities of illusion, deception or duplicity. In Plath's poetry, 'glittering' is the most sinister of words and one that appears many times in the last poems. In 'The Munich Mannequins' 'black phones' are 'Glittering / Glittering and digesting'; 'Totem' has a 'glitter of cleavers'; the 'Gigolo' 'Glitter[s] like Fontainebleau // Gratified; and in 'Mystic', some sort of interrogation involves torturous 'hooks' or unanswerable 'Questions' that are 'Glittering and drunk as flies'. It is a word that seems always to have interested Plath. Annotations in the books of her personal library include underlining to Swift's 'Vice in all its glittering dress' in 'Stella's Birthday' (*Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse* 70), Marlowe's 'The flattering sky glitter'd in often flames' from *The First Book of Lucan*, (*Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse* 459) and Yeats's 'Their ancient glittering eyes are gay' from 'Lapis Lazuli' (339) and 'The glittering eyes in a death's head' from 'Demon and Beast' (209) as well as the 'abounding, glittering jet' of 'Ancestral Houses'. It is a word that carries, for Plath, implications of deception and danger, and it is also associated, especially in the last poems, with consumption or eating. The worry in 'Totem', 'Gigolo', 'Words' and 'Kindness' is not just that all that glisters might not be gold, but that art itself – the palace of Fontainebleau and its treasures, the rich man's fountain, and her own poems – are equivalent to a decorated death's head. Art, these poems seem to say, does not offer epiphany, transcendence, rebirth or any other kind of lyrical magic. Rather, art tells us more accurately the nature of our 'fixed',

earthbound condition and our animal nature, but it performs this function in glittering dress.

## Conclusion

### The Woman is Perfected: Drag, Performance, Wit and the Neediness of the Poet

'Edge', one of Plath's final poems written on 5 Feb 1963, bears out the importance of the publishing history of Plath's work in beginning to understand the nature of her achievement in the last poems. 'Edge' has been particularly badly served by the lack of attention to the editorial story of the works which succeeded Plath's *Ariel* selection. There is widespread critical agreement on the insistent textuality of the poem: 'The depiction of the dead protagonist brims over with references to now-terminated inscription: ("Greek necessity", "scrolls", "folded")' (Axelrod, 'Poetry of Sylvia Plath' 88); and 'The speaker of the poem continually textualizes herself, viewing her body as if it were already vanishing into the poems that will survive it' (Ramazani 289). Nevertheless, 'Edge' continues to be contextualised in terms of the 1965 *Ariel* and Plath's suicide. For Middlebrook the poem is straightforward in its imagery and action:

simple imagery depicts the corpses of a mother and two children laid out in a moonlit garden. The poem was written in the aftermath of a bitter disappointment' ("Call and Response" 170)

The 'bitter disappointment' to which Middlebrook refers is a poor review for *The Bell Jar*. A minor issue with a reflex turn to the circumstances of the poet's life (and death) in an attempt to clarify these very late poems is the danger of conjecture. A more

important problem is that a masterly and important poem such as 'Edge', one intimately engaged with the nature of lyricism and artistic representation, with the work of Emily Dickinson and T. S. Eliot, and with notions of the classic and the Gothic for example, becomes obscured by, on the one hand, the bright lights of *Ariel* and, on the other, the shadow of the poet's decline and death.

What has been largely left out of the story of *Plath's* oeuvre and its editorial history (as I discuss in the introduction to this study) is the beginning of the new book that Plath envisaged, a third collection to include, of the extant works, only the poems written in 1963. This necessary re-positioning of the last poems opens up the work for new and richer readings. While we should be wary of mystical notions of inspiration and breakthrough, a rational and factual understanding of Plath's true career trajectory and the editorial peculiarities and elisions her work has undergone is a helpful starting place for interpretation. Specifically, it is as important to consider what was 'added' to Plath's *Ariel* from the 1963 set, as what was left out. Only then can we appreciate the scale of Plath's achievement and development in the last few weeks of her career

My approach to the last poems engages with the growing scholarly interest in Plath's visuality. Connors and Bayley in *Eye-Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual* set out to review Plath's own artwork and the visuality of her imagination in 'an attempt to answer the question, How did Plath arrive at *Ariel*?' (1). This study contributes to that enquiry, but also explores Plath's creative relations with visual art. My work is an attempt better to understand, not just how she 'arrive[d] at *Ariel*', but how she was able, in January 1963, to *leave* that mastered territory and arrive at the last poems.

Read as a narrative with mythical and biographical content, 'Edge' seems to be detailing the scene of the death of a mother and two children with apparently

obvious connections with Plath's personal life and death, as Middlebrook suggests. An appreciation of the exhaustive use of visual art models in Plath's mature work, however, and her habitual compositional strategy of synthesising visual with literary sources, brings the poem closer to ekphrasis than melodrama:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga.

Fan Jingua has suggested that 'Edge' 'may remind the reader of a Greek sculpture or sarcophagus' (218). The first few lines seem unambiguous and horribly clear about what exactly is being presented here – a dead woman. It is immediately apparent, however, that as a scene of crime or tragedy, 'Edge' is uncharacteristically bloodless compared with Plath's readiness in 'Cut' and 'Contusion' (and perhaps 'Kindness with its 'blood jet' of poetry) to depict bleeding and the physicality of injury. Furthermore, an appreciation of Plath's earlier work, her connections with Emily Dickinson (as I discuss in Chapter Four) and Plath's tendency to think and write in terms of, and with recourse to, visual art all point to a more nuanced reading

In 'Sculptor', written in 1958 and dedicated to the sculptor Leonard Baskin, Plath uses 'dead' to describe the carved figures of an artist's workshop: 'Bronze dead dominate the floor'. For Plath, 'dead' is perhaps more often used metaphorically than literally. That odd construction, 'is perfected' also signals an interesting complexity.

The woman is not only perfect, she is in the process of, or has undergone a process of, being *made* perfect, or at least the necessity for such a process is made visible. Woman as traditional poetic muse arrives as already 'perfect'; light-footed, timeless and otherworldly; her perfection is innate and effortless. Wordsworth's 'Perfect Woman', for example, is 'a moment's ornament':

She was a Phantom of delight  
When first she gleamed upon my sight;  
A lovely Apparition, sent  
To be a moment's ornament;  
  
A dancing Shape, an Image gay,  
To haunt, to startle, and way-lay.  
I saw her upon nearer view,  
A Spirit, yet a Woman too!

'Perfected' in 'Edge' works on the body of the woman and the atmosphere of the poem in a very different manner. Womanly perfection, for Wordsworth, is associated with ethereal, 'dancing' gaiety; for Plath it has a cold, heavy, and marmoreal stoniness. There is a feeling of exhaustion in the long break from 'dead' of stanza one to 'Body' of stanza two. Plath's 'is perfected' recalls Dickinson's, 'done perfecter in stone' an awkward construction which also alerts the reader to the work which must be done to the woman to *render* her perfect, and the density of the finished article:

I've dropped my brain – My Soul is numb –

The Veins that used to run  
Stop palsied – 'tis Paralysis  
Done perfecter in stone.

Vitality is carved and cool  
My nerve in marble lies –  
A Breathing woman  
Yesterday – endowed with Paradise. (No 1088)

'The illusion of a Greek necessity' is redolent of the history of aesthetics and visual art, the mathematics of perspective (discussed in Chapter One), classical statuary and ideals of proportion and architectural simplicity, although it is usually understood as reference to the Medea myth. 'Greek necessity' is also suggestive of Pythagoras's 'numbers' that in Yeats's 'The Statues' were used to calculate and then to carve a 'plummet-measured face'. Plath underlined the stanza from Yeats's 'The Statues' which makes reference to just this practice:

Pythagoras planned it. Why did the people stare?  
His numbers, though they moved, or seemed to move  
In marble or in bronze, lacked character.  
But boys and girls, pale from the imagined love  
Of solitary beds, knew what they were,  
That passion could bring character enough,  
And pressed at midnight in some public place  
Live lips upon a plummet-measured face. (375)

Mathematical and classical ideas of perfect form also illuminate the perplexing image that presents the body of a woman wearing a smile of accomplishment. How is it possible for a body (rather than a face) to wear a smile, to be pleased and pleasing? One answer would be in a piece of sculpture in which figures and attitudes are perfectly and harmoniously arranged. In Michelangelo's 'Pieta', for example, the figures of the grieving Virgin Mary and the body of Christ are said to form an ideal 'Golden triangle'. In this iconic sculpture, the drapery of Mary's robes and the stunningly life-like rendition of physiology are bravura exhibitions of artistic excellence. The 'illusion of a Greek necessity' that, in 'Edge', 'flows in the scrolls of [the woman's] toga' knows that the rendition of flowing textiles in stone (or in paint) is a measure of artistic accomplishment.

The 'dead' woman/statue of 'Edge' also has connections with the classical statues in the rose garden at Yaddo, the artist's colony that Plath visited in 1959. Several scholars including Kathleen Connors and Karen Kukil have pointed out connections between 'Edge' and the poems written at Yaddo, and between the poem and Yaddo's formal gardens (*Eye Rhymes, Hot Steamy Drench of the Day*). The formal garden at Yaddo had been laid out as a memorial to the children of Katerina Trask, the philanthropist who had owned the manor and established it as a retreat for artists and writers. Trask 'left her symbol, a rose, carved on the building's lintels and mantels' (Connors 135). Plath's synthesising vision typically joins natural observation, with visual art and literary sources and the Yaddo grounds, like the garden of her Devon home two years later, were important spurs to poetry judging by 'The Manor Garden' and other work from *The Colossus* as well as 'Edge'.

'Edge's' rose garden statuary, and even the reference to dead children do seem to suggest the influence of Yaddo, but as Kukil points out, Plath was also re-reading Eliot during her Yaddo stay, and considered naming her first collection with a

phrase from 'Ash Wednesday' – 'The Devil of the Stairs'. 'Edge' can be understood in part as a response to Eliot's poem; its aura of silence, exhaustion and a kind of fraught reworking of 'repose' in a 'Garden / Where all loves end' ("We have come so far, it is over'). In Drew's *T S Eliot: the Design of his Poetry*, Plath underlined references to the key images of 'Ash Wednesday':

The new dominating figure is a lady, but inseparable from her is a garden, a rose, a fountain and two yew trees (98);

...

Then the feeling of the procession of the years melts into that of the formal garden which again is partly that of medieval allegory, partly that of a new symbolic centre of vitality in his being. (112)

The 'dead' woman of 'Edge' clearly relates to classical sculpture as well as to artistic traditions which figure a woman as an ideal of beauty and perfection. It does not take long, however, for the excessively stylised tableau to fold in on itself, something like Yeats's gyres, or like the formalist's tenet of 'Art for Art' which, as Angela Leighton has shown, so easily collapses into decadence:

"Art for Art" is also art for pleasure, art for scandal, art for sexual gratification. As a tautology it shuts into itself; as a *double entendre* it opens up to multiple possibilities. (33-34)

These ideas are discussed in Chapter Three with reference to 'Fever 103°'. In 'Edge' but the *function* of classical statuary as funerary objects is indecorously prominent in the poem:

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 odors bleed

From the sweet, deep throats of the night flowers.

A sinuous sentence moves firstly *inward*, back into the body of the woman and the still silence of stone as 'folded' gathers up and enfolds the increasingly heavy repetition, rhymes, assonances and consonances of 'perfected', 'dead', 'dead', 'child' and 'coiled'; and then *outward*, as an ethereal scent from the throats of the night flowers into the garden. The florid assonance of 'bleed, sweet deep' and the detail of 'night flowers' (rather than roses) have something of a Swinburnian excess about them. Somehow, from the white austerity of the formal garden, and in the space of a single sentence, we have arrived in an altogether more highly-coloured situation.

Stony, strictly textual and mathematical as it is, 'Edge' cannot keep Gothic, romantic excess at bay. In a letter of November 1962, Plath recommended 'the assonances & consonances of Emily Dickinson (beloved of me) for a subtlety far beyond exact rhyme' (qtd. in Saldivar 203). The final image of 'Edge' may be suggested by Dickinson's 'witchcraft':

Who wrought Carrara in me  
And chiselled all my tune  
Were it a witchcraft – were it Death  
I've still a chance to strain  
  
To being somewhere – Motion – Breath  
Though centuries beyond. (No. 1088)

In this poem, as Leighton has said of 'Edge', a living woman rounds into and against the calcifying marble: 'I've still a chance to strain // To Being'):

'Edge' suggest the hard outline of a thing, in particular the way that a poem is a shape, a set of lines or a frontier on what is not said. But it is also a 'woman', rounding into those flows in her toga. Like the word 'form', which etymologically contains both the idea of outline and the idea of a physical body, so 'Edge' signals the very edge of formality to which a poem might go. (255)

Dickinson's 'witchcraft' is rounded out, in 'Edge' into a charismatic female figure, who with her hood of bone and black garments, could hardly be more witch-like:

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.

The cadence of that final phrase is remarkable and Axelrod has memorably compared it with radio static: 'the sound of silence registering not as language at all but as noise, as radio static' (21). In its simplest sense 'drag' is already complicated and oppositional, meaning both to move and to resist movement. Plath's dictionary entry for 'drag' is heavily underlined and yields such rich meanings as 'to draw slowly or heavily', 'to pass slowly, painfully or tediously', 'to catch with a dragnet or trawl', 'a device for dragging under water esp. along the bottom', 'anything used to drag a body with' (all underlined; see appendix, fig. 25). Also underlined is 'draggle' meaning 'to wet and soil by dragging on wet grass', and 'dragnet', 'a net to be dragged as in fishing or in clearing out small game'. To these already Plathian connotations, the positioning of the word with 'crackl...[ing] blacks' and an unfeeling female figure brings in further implications. While 'drag' always means for Plath the indefatigable pull of the moon, as in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', and the dragging pains of labour, in this placement, the moon is transformed by 'drag' into a vampy femme fatale, giving the scene an atmosphere of stagey noir. 'Drag', as Plath dresses it, might even be said to anticipate contemporary questions of identity, performativity and gender. For a poem which is repeatedly locked in with Plath's biography it would be difficult to imagine a more archly theatrical note on which it might end.

Like 'planetary' in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' which I discuss in Chapter One, Plath's polyphonic use of 'drag' relates to the modernist notion of the word as a 'nexus or cluster of meaning':

But the word as the poet uses it, has to be conceived of, not as a discrete particle of meaning, but as a potential of meaning, a nexus or cluster of meanings [Plath's underlining] (Brooks 192)

In Plath's copy of *The Well Wrought Urn*, this passage is marked with a sidebar. The most striking moments in Plath's later works occur where the competing 'potential[s] of meaning' in a word are embodied simultaneously and with great veritas. This quality – 'a quality of deliberated alertness in the use of a word or a phrase, in which even the intended meaning has taken stock of the misconstructions to which it is liable' – has been used by Geoffrey Hill in his criticism of Eliot, and by Peter McDonald in his writing on Hill (McDonald 25). This 'deliberated alertness' to 'misconstructions' is nowhere more in evidence than in the signing off from 'Edge' with a word that implies that the whole exercise has been one tedious longeur.

Tone will not do here, because we would need to decide whether 'drag' is playful and arch or, alternatively, visceral and heartfelt. 'Pitch' is more useful because it is happier to accommodate (in fact, insists upon) this bizarrely catholic and self-opposing range of meanings. In an essay titled 'Sylvia Plath's Wordplay' Stevenson described a 'vein of wit [that] runs through all [Plath's] work (47): 'I'm much happier when I know that all my sounds are echoing in different ways throughout the poem'. (qtd. 'Stevenson Plath's Wordplay' 51). Similarly, Leighton insists that 'The point about Plath, for all the horror of her "rigid forms", is that their "affinity with death" is figurative, verbal, playful' (254).

There is, however, something devastating about Plath's wit. It is painfully aware of the neediness and self-seeking which cannot be disentangled from poetry or from a poet's motivations:

However much and however rightly we protest against the vanity of supposing it to be merely the 'spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings', poetic utterance is nonetheless an utterance of the self, the

self demanding to be loved, demanding love in the form of recognition and “absolution”. The poet is perhaps the first to be dismayed by such a discovery and to seek the conversion of his “daemon” to a belief in altruistic responsibility. (Hill 19)

Some of the awkwardness or inelegance of tone and register in Plath’s late work, like the stylistic awkwardness required by Dickinson in the phrase, ‘Done perfecter in stone’ relates to the impulse to tell awkward truths. This kind of necessary awkwardness manifests itself in Plath’s work in clashes of register, excessive rhyme or repetition, and the staging of extreme states and actions. The difficulties that Heaney finds in Plath’s work are also difficulties inherent in any artistic enterprise, which Plath’s poetry seeks to display: ‘The poet is perhaps the first to be dismayed by such a discovery and to seek the conversion of his “daemon” to a belief in altruistic responsibility’. Heaney’s final assessment of Plath baulks at the ‘self-justification’ and the display of ‘intense personal need’ he finds there:

In ‘Lady Lazarus’ ... the cultural resonance of the original story is harnessed to a vehemently self-justifying purpose, so that the supra-personal dimensions of knowledge – to which myth typically gives access – are slighted in favour of the intense personal need of the poet. (168)

Plath’s last poems demonstrate the fact that mankind’s more reptilian traits – the drives of hunger, sex, and power – are implicit, perhaps even revealed in their most startling aspect, in poetry and art. Plath’s work might exhibit (or stage) ‘personal need’ but their focus is broader than that; this is work passionately engaged with

artistic representation in many forms, the cultural climate of Plath's day, and the legacy of the modernist poets and critics. The last poems demonstrate an interest in, and commitment to, 'expressiveness rather than self-expression' (Hill, "I know thee not"). The last poems do not represent the tail-end of *Ariel's* creative surge, but a new adventure as daring and astounding as anything in Plath's iconic collection.

Tim Kendall asserts that 'we are still learning how to read Plath's later work. Poetry offers few more challenging and unsettling experiences' (208). This study illustrates some of the cultural and expressive richness of Plath's *Ariel* and last poems with the hope that the rarely discussed last poems ('Totem', 'The Munich Mannequins', 'Paralytic', 'Child' and 'Mystic') in particular might be the focus of further archival and textual scholarship, alongside the current interest in juvenalia and the more commercial genres. The scholarly paradigm which positions Plath's visuality in opposition to modernist poets and approaches is questioned in this work demonstrating that a more inclusive appreciation of these complementary elements is a fertile ground for the study of Plath's mature work.

Some of the findings of this study demonstrate a need for further investigation. My contention that the dismantling of naturalistic perspective in visual art is a catalysing element in the achievement of *Ariel's* emphatic style suggests wider questions about negotiations between visual and literary arts. I mention John Ashbery, but have other twentieth-century poets drawn on developments in visual art to transform their own work, and how does this understanding complicate notions of tone and point of view in poetry? I have made assumptions about the 'reading' of colours in text and in images – does reading the word 'red' work in the brain in the same way as seeing red in a painting? The absence of an empirical understanding of the mechanics of light and colour perception is an obvious gap in my work, but also an opportunity for continuing research.

## Appendix: Artworks



Fig. 1. Henri Rousseau. *The Dream*. 1910. Oil on Canvas.

"Henri Rousseau: The Dream, 1910." *Collections*. moma.org. MoMA, n.d. Web. 6/5/15.



Fig 2. Paul Klee. *The Departure of the Ghost*. 1931. Watercolour.

"Paul Klee: Artworks." *the Athenaeum.org*. The Athenaeum, n.d. 1. Web. 6/5/15.



Fig. 3. Pablo Picasso. *The Blind Man's Meal*. 1903. Oil on canvas.

"The Blind Man's Meal." *The Collection Online*. metmuseum.org, n.d. Web. 6/5/15.



Fig. 4. Pablo Picasso. *The Old Guitarist*. 1903-04. Oil on panel.

"The Old Guitarist." *Art Access: Modern and Contemporary Art*. artic.edu. Art Institute of Chicago, n.d. Web. 6/5/15.



Fig. 5. Pablo Picasso. *The Tragedy*. 1903. Oil on wood.

“Pablo Picasso’s *The Tragedy*: Metamorphosis of a Painting.” *The Collection*. [nga.gov](http://nga.gov). National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., n.d. Web. 16/5/15.



Fig.6. Pablo Picasso. *La Celestina*. 1904. Oil on canvas

“Building the Collection.” *The Collection*. museepicassoparis.fr. Musée Picasso Paris, n.d. Web 16/5/15.



Fig. 7. Pablo Picasso. *Mother and Child*. 1901. Oil on Canvas.

"Pablo Ruiz Picasso: Mother and Child Paintings." [harvardartmuseums.org](http://harvardartmuseums.org). Harvard Art Museums, n.d. Web 6/5/15.



Fig. 8. *Our Lady of Vladimir*. C. 1130. Tempura on wood. (Unknown artist)

“Our Lady of Vladimir.” *Collection*. [tretyakovgallery.ru](http://tretyakovgallery.ru). The State Tretyakov Gallery, n.d. Web. 6/5/15.



Fig. 9. Henri Matisse. *The Red Studio*. 1911.

"Henri Matisse: *The Red Studio*, Issy-les-Moulineaux, fall 1911." *Collections*.  
moma.org. MoMA, n.d. Web 16/5/15



Fig. 10. Vincent van Gogh. *The Starry Night*. 1889.

“Vincent van Gogh: *The Starry Night*, Saint Rémy, June 1889.” *Collections*. [moma.org](http://moma.org). MoMA. n.d. Web. 16/5/15.



Fig.11. Henri Matisse. Odalisque with Red Trousers. 1924-25.

“Henri Matisse (1869 - 1954): Odalisque with Red Trousers.” *musee-orangerie.fr*. Musée de l’Orangerie, n.d. Web. 16/5/15.



Fig. 12. Jean August Dominique Ingres. *La Grande Odalisque*. 1884.

“Une Odalisque” *Department of Paintings: French Painting*. [louvre.fr](http://louvre.fr). Musée du Louvre, n.d. Web. 16/5/15.



Fig. 13. Jean August Dominique Ingres, *Odalisque with a Slave*. 1939-40

“Jean – August – Dominique Ingres: *Odalisque with a Slave*.”  
harvardartmuseums.org. Harvard Art Museums, n.d. Web 6/5/15.



Fig 14. Mark Rothko, *No. 46, Black, Ochre, Red Over Red*. 1957. Oil on canvas.

“1957, Mark Rothko, *No. 46, Black, Ochre, Red Over Red*.” Collection. moca.org. *Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles*, n.d. [Web.16/5/15](http://www.moca.org).

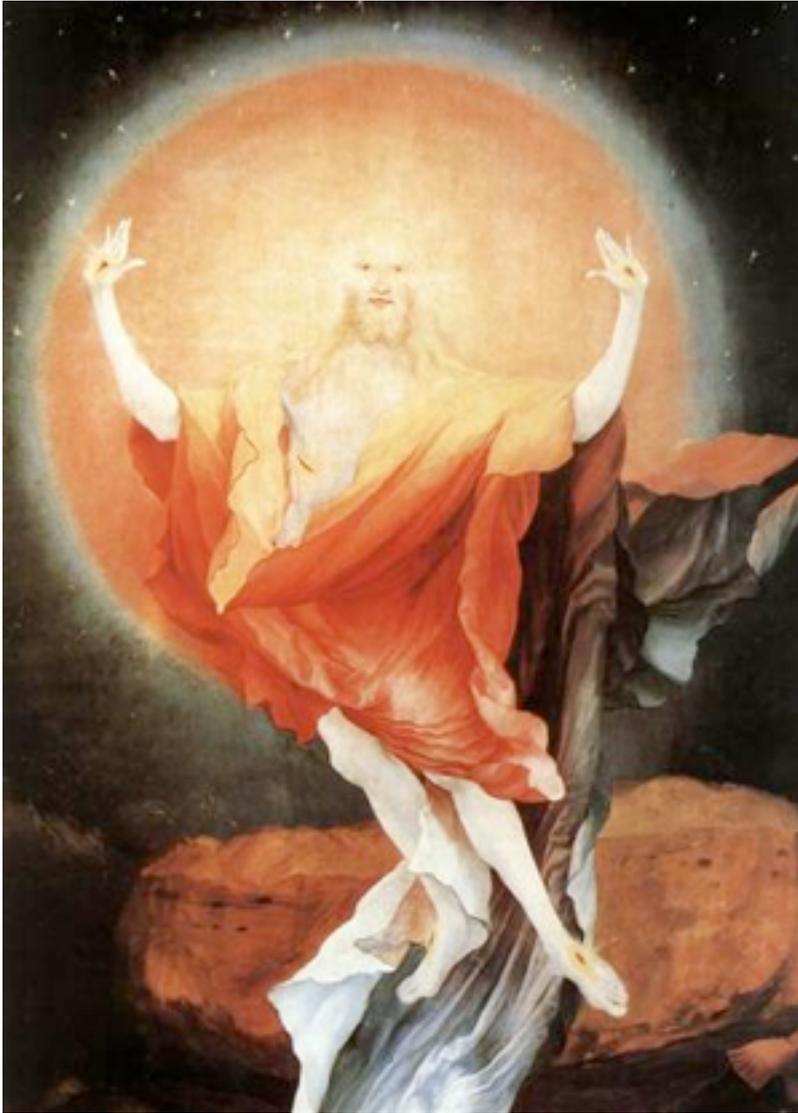


Fig 15. Matthias Grünewald, *The Resurrection of Christ* (Detail from the right wing of the *Isenheim Altarpiece*). c.1512-16. Oil on panel.

“Jasper Johns: Perilous Night.” *Visual Archeology*. nga.gov. National Gallery of Art, Washington. n.d. Web 16/5/15.



Fig. 16. Vincent Van Gogh, *The Night Café*. 1888. Oil on canvas.

"European Art." *Collections*. yale.edu. Yale University Art Gallery, n.d. Web. 16/5/15.



Fig. 17. Titian. *The Assumption of the Virgin*. 1516-18. Oil on panel.

"Titian's Assunta." *artandcritique.com*. Art & Critique. n.d. Web. 16/5/15.



Fig. 18. Sabastiano Mainardi. *Assumption of the Virgin with the Gift of the Girdle*. 15th Century. Fresco.

“Florence: The Basilica di Santa Croce (Basilica of the Holy Cross).” *Art in Tuscany*. [poderesantapia.com](http://poderesantapia.com). Podere Santa Pia. n.d. Web.16/5/15.





Fig. 20. Indian Pipe Wildflower. Photograph by Charles Webber @ California Association of Sciences.

"Indian Pipe. *Monotropa Uniflora*." *Study of Northern Virginia Ecology*. fcps.edu. Fairfax County Public Schools. n.d. Web 16/5/15.



Fig 21. Umberto Boccioni. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. 1913. Bronze.

“Umberto Boccioni, *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913.” *The Collection*. [moma.org](http://moma.org). MoMA, n.d. Web. 16/5/15.



Fig. 22. Nail Fetish. Bakongo, Congo. Wood. h. 42'.

Plate 79. *African Folktales and Sculpture*. Ed. Paul Radin, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1952.

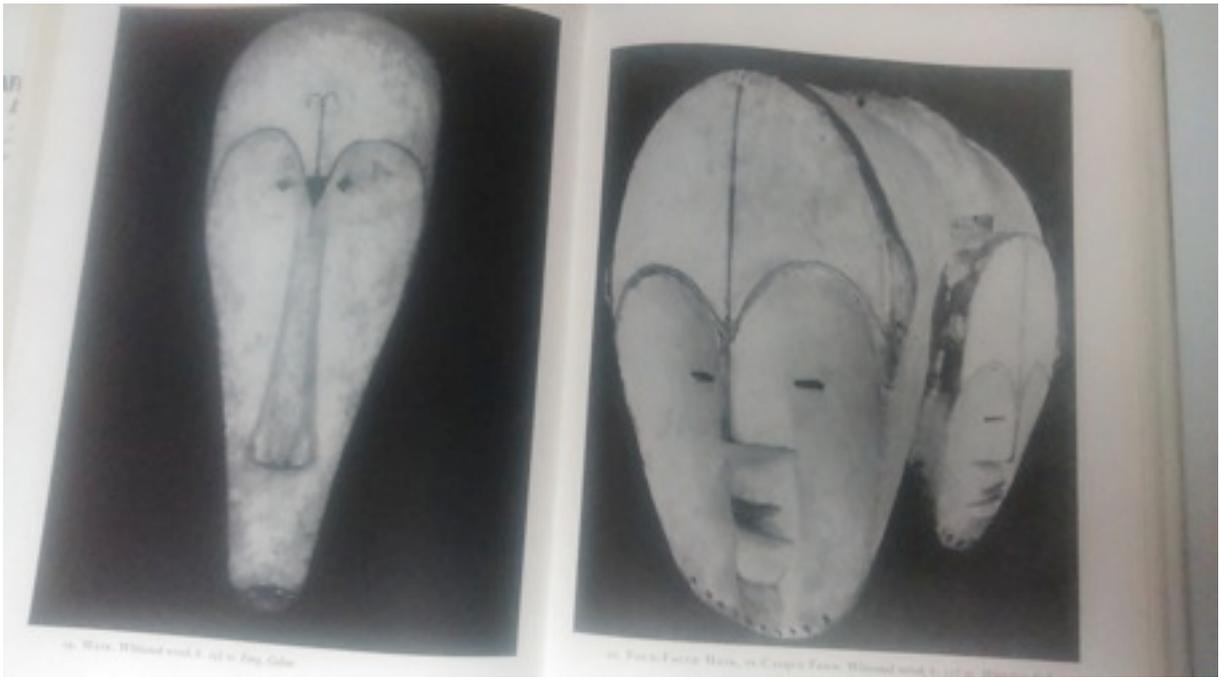


Fig 23. Mask. Fang, Gabon. Whitened wood; and Four-faced Mask in Casque Form. Mpongwe, Gabon. Whitened Wood.

Plates 19 and 20. *African Folktales and Sculpture*. Ed. Paul Radin, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1952.



Fig 24. (Left) Funerary figure in form of a cobra. Bakota, Gabon. Wood and copper.  
(Right) Funerary figure and relic basket. Bakota, Gabon. Wood and copper.

Plates 142 and 143. *African Folktales and Sculpture*. Ed. Paul Radin, New York: Bollingen Foundation, 1952.

drag

**drag** (drăg), *v. t.*; DRAGGED (drăgd); DRAG'GING. [ME. *dragen*, fr. ON. *draga*, or perh. dial. fr. AS. *dragan*.] **1.** To draw slowly or heavily, esp. along the ground or other surface; haul. **2.** To draw along, as something burdensome; hence, to pass slowly, painfully, or tediously; as, to *drag* out one's life. **3.** To dredge or search with or as with a drag, grapnel, etc. **4.** To catch with a dragnet or trawl. — *v. i.* **1.** To be drawn along on the ground; trail. **2.** To fish, or search, with a drag. **3.** To lag behind. **4.** To move, pass, or proceed tediously; to be tiresomely protracted. — **Syn.** See PULL. — *n.* **1.** Act of dragging. **2.** Anything dragged; as: **a** A heavy harrow for breaking up ground. **b** A device for dragging under water, esp. along the bottom, as a grapnel, a dredger, etc. **3.** A sledge for conveying heavy bodies. **4.** A heavy coach with seats on top. **5.** Anything used to drag a body with, as a dragrope of a gun. **6.** Anything that retards; a clog. **7.** A dragging movement, as of the feet in walking. **8.** *Slang.* Influence; "pull"; special favor. **9.** *Aeronautics.* The component parallel to the relative wind of the total force on an airfoil or aircraft due to the air through which it moves. **10.** *Hunting.* **a** The scent trail. **b** Something drawn over the ground to leave a scented trail.

|| **dra'gée'** (dră'zhă'), *n.* [F.] **1.** A sugar-coated fruit or nut. **2.** A

Fig 25. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary showing Plath's annotations.

Sylvia Plath's Library, Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts

## Works Cited

**Sylvia Plath Collection. Mortimer Rare Book Room. Smith College.**

### **Plath Papers. Series 1. Writings: Poems**

---. 'Edge'. *Plath Papers 1*. Poems. Holograph.

---. 'Fever 103°'. *Plath Papers 1*. Poems. Holograph.

---. 'Mystic'. *Plath Papers 1*. Poems. Holograph.

--- 'Totem'. *Plath Papers 1*. Poems. Holograph.

### **Plath Papers. Series IV. School Papers: Smith College**

*Notes for English 211 (1951-52)*. Holograph.

### **Sylvia Plath's Library.**

Baskin, Esther. *Creatures of Darkness*. Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown, 1962. Print.

Blake, William. *The Portable Blake*. Ed. Alfred Kazin. New York: The Viking Press, 1953.

Brooks, Cleanth. *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1947. Print.

Drew, Elizabeth A.. *T.S. Eliot, the Design of His Poetry*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1950. Print.

Eliot, T.S. *The Complete Poems and Plays*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952. Print.

Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *The Basic Writings of America's Sage*. Ed. Eduard C. Lindeman. New York: Penguin Books, 1947. Print.

Moore, Marianne. *Collected Poems*. New York: Macmillan, 1953. Print.

*The Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse*. Ed. David Nichol Smith. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951. Print.

*The Oxford Book of Sixteenth Century Verse*. Ed. E.K. Chambers. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950. Print.

Picasso, Pablo. *Picasso*. London: The Arts Council of Great Britain, 1960. Print.

Sexton, Anne. *All My Pretty Ones*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1962. Print.

Untermeyer, Louis, ed. *Modern British Poetry*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1950. Print.

*Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. Springfield, Massachusetts: G & C Merriam & Co, 1949. Print.

Yeats, W.B. *The Collected Plays*. London: Macmillan, 1953. Print.

---. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Macmillan, 1952. Print.

### **Other Works Cited**

Abrams, M. H.. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. 5th Edn. New York: Cornell University Press, 1988. Print.

Adorno, Theodor, W.. *Aesthetic Theory*. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2013. Print.

Albers, Josef. *Interaction of Color*. 2nd ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975. Print.

---. "Exhibition History." *The Josef & Anni Albers Foundation*. Web. 30 April 2015.

Alvarez, A.. "Publish and Be Damned." *Observer*. October 3, 1971. 36. Print.

- Ashbery, John. 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror.' *Poetry*. August 1974. 247-261. Print.
- . "The Art of Poetry." *The Paris Review Interviews Volume IV*. New York: Picador, 2009. 174-202. Print.
- Ashton Dore. *About Rothko*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983. Print.
- Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. Print.
- . "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath." *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Jo Gill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 73-89. Print.
- Baskin, Esther. *The Poppy & Other Deadly Plants*. New York: Delacorte, 1967. Print.
- Bassnett, Susan. *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*. 2nd edition. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. Print.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot: A Tragi-Comedy in Two Acts*. London: Faber and Faber, 2010. Print.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. Great Ideas Series. Trans. J. A. Underwood. London: Penguin, 2008. Print.
- Bishop, Elizabeth. *Complete Poems*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1983. Print.
- Bradstreet, Anne. *The Works*. Ed. Jeannine Hensley. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2010. Print.
- Brain, Tracy. *The Other Sylvia Plath*. London: Longman, 2001. Print.
- Brennan, Claire, ed. *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*. Cambridge: Icon, 2000. Print.
- Britzolakis, Christina. *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1999. Print.
- . "Conversation Among the Ruins: Plath and de Chirico." *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*. Eds. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 167-182. Print.

- Bromwich, David. "Elizabeth Bishop's Dream Houses." *Skeptical Music*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2001. 116-31. Print.
- Bundtzen, Linda K. *The Other Ariel*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001. Print.
- Butscher, Edward. *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*. New York: Seabury Press, 1976. Print.
- Clark, Heather. *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. Print.
- Coffey Timothy. *The History and Folklore of North American Wildflowers* (New York: Harcourt Mifflin Harcourt, 1993. Print
- Curry, Renée R. *White Women Writing White: H. D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath and Whiteness*. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood, 2000. Print.
- Dabrowski, Magdalena. *Picasso in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2010. Print.
- Dickinson, Emily. *Letters*. Ed. Mabel Loomis Todd. Dover, 2003. Print.
- . *The Poems*. Ed. R. W. Franklin. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: Harvard University Press, 2005. Print.
- . *Poems Selected by Ted Hughes (Poet to Poet Series)*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. Print.
- Donne, John. *The Complete English Poems (Penguin Classics)*. London: Penguin, 1976. Print.
- Drost Magdalene. *Bauhaus 1919-1933*. Berlin: Taschen, 1990. Print.
- Elkins, James. *What Painting Is*. London and New York: Routledge, 2000. Print.
- . *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001. Print.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo. *Nature and Selected Essays*. London: Penguin, 1985. Print.

- Empson, William. *Some Versions of Pastoral*. London: Hogarth, 1986. Print.
- Farrell, Simos. "The Janus Coin of Artistic Vision: Construction, Craftsmanship and Class in the Bauhaus and the Nazi Aesthetics." *University of Tampa Journal of Art History* 3.1 (2008). Web. 6/5/15.
- Forbes, Deborah. *Sincerity's Shadow: Self-Consciousness in Romantic and Mid-Twentieth-Century American Poetry*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004. Print.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Totem and Taboo." *The Complete Psychological Works Vol XII: Totem and Taboo and other Works 1913-1914*. Eds. James Strachey and Anna Freud. Trans. The Institute of Psycho-Analysis. London: Vintage, 2001. 1-162. Print.
- Frost, Robert. *The Poetry*. Ed. Edward Connery Latham. New York: Henry Holt, 1979. Print.
- Gage, John. *Colour and Meaning: Art, Science and Symbolism*. London: Thames & Hudson, 1999. Print.
- Gilbert, Sandra M.. "A Fine White Flying Myth: the Life/Work of Sylvia Plath." *Shakespeare's Sisters: Feminist Essays on Women Poets*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979. Print.
- Gill, Jo, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.
- . *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge Introductions to Literature). Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Print.
- Gilot, Françoise and Carlton Lake. *Life With Picasso*. New York: McGraw Hill, 1994. Print.

- Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." *The Collected Essays and Criticism Volume 4: Modernism with a Vengeance 1959-1969*. Ed. John O'Brian. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995. 85-93. Print.
- Hammer, Langdon. "Plath at War." *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*. Eds. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007. 145-57. Print.
- Heaney, Seamus. *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T. S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1988. Print.
- Helle, Anita, ed. *The Unravelling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006. Print.
- Hill, Geoffrey. *Collected Critical Writings*. Ed. Kenneth Haynes. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008. Print.
- . "I know thee not, old man, fall to thy prayers." University of Oxford. Oxford. 5 May 2015. Lecture.
- Holston, James. *The Modernist City: An Anthropological Critique of Brasília*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989. Print.
- Homberger, Eric. "The Uncollected Plath." *New Statesman*. September 22, 1971. 404-05. Print.
- Hopkins, Gerald Manley. *The Major Works*. Ed. Catherine Phillips. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print.
- Hughes, Ted. "The Art of Poetry." *The Paris Review Interviews Volume III*. New York: Picador, 2008. 268-304. Print.
- . *Collected Poems*. London: Faber and Faber, 2003. Print.
- . "Introduction." *Emily Dickinson: Poems Selected by Ted Hughes (Poet to Poet Series)*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. Print.
- . *Letters*. Ed. Christopher Reid. London: Faber and Faber, 2007. Print.

- . *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*. Ed. William Scammell. New York: Picador, 1994. Print.
- Huysmans, Joris-Karl. "The Grünewalds in the Colmar Museum from *Trois Primitifs* translated by Robert Baldick, Phaidon Press Ltd., 1958." Eldritchpress.org. Web. 16/5/15.
- Itten, Johannes. *The Art of Color: The Subjective Experience and Objective Rationale of Color*. Ravensburg, Germany: Otto Maier, 1961. Print.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. Trans. M. T. H. Sadler. New York: Dover, 1977. Print.
- Katz, Vincent, et al. *Black Mountain College: Experiment in Art*. Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2013. Print.
- Kazin, A. *Journals*. Ed. Richard M. Cook. New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2011. Print.
- Keats, John. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. John Barnard. London: Penguin, 1988. Print.
- Kendall, Tim. *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*. London: Faber and Faber, 2001. Print.
- Knecht, R. J.. *Renaissance Warrior and Poet: The Reign of Francis I*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994. Print.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Giotto's Joy." *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*. Eds. Leon S. Roudiez and Alice Jardine. Trans. Thomas Gora. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. 210-36. Print.
- Kukil, K. "The Hot Steamy Drench of the Day: Plath on Poetry." Cathedral of St John the Divine, NYC, 4 November 2010. Lecture transcript.
- Leighton, Angela. *On Form: Poetry, Aestheticism and the Legacy of a Word*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. Print.

- Lane, Gary. "Influence and Originality in Plath's Poems." *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*. Ed. Gary Lane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. 116-37. Print.
- Longley, Edna. *Poetry and Posterity*. Highgreen: Bloodaxe, 2000. 90-133. Print.
- Luther, Martin. "The Small Catechism". *BookofConcord.org*. 6/5/15/ Web.
- MacGaffey, Wyatt. "Magic, or as We Usually Say, Art: A Framework for Comparing European and African Art." *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*. Eds. Enid Schildkrout and Curtis A. Keim. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998. 217-35. Print.
- . *Kongo Political Culture: the Conceptual Challenge of the Particular*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000. Print.
- Malcolm, Janet. *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*. London: Picador, 1994. Print.
- McDonald, Peter. *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002. Print.
- Marvell, Andrew. *The Complete Poems*. Ed. Elizabeth Story Donno. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985. Print.
- McPhee, Laura. *A Journey Into Matisse's South of France*. California: Roaring Forties Press, 2006. Print.
- Meyers, Jeffrey. "Sylvia Plath's Mysterious Lover." *The Yale Review*. 98.4. (October 2010): 88-102. Print.
- Middlebrook, Diane. *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage*. New York: Viking, 2003. Print.
- . "The Poetry of Plath and Hughes: Call and Response." *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 156-71. Print.

- Miller, Ellen. "Sylvia Plath and White Ignorance: Race and Gender in 'The Arrival of the Bee Box.'" *Janus Head: Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies, Literature, Continental Philosophy, Phenomenological Psychology and the Arts* 10.1 (2007): 137-56. Print.
- Milton, John. *The Complete Poems*. London: Penguin, 1998. Print.
- Mitchell, Domhnall. "Packaging Emily: Dickinson in Books." *Measures of Possibility: Emily Dickinson's Manuscripts*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005. 19-55. Print.
- Nervaux-Gavoty, Laure de. "Coming to Terms with Colour: Sylvia Plath's Visual Aesthetic." *Representing Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 110-28. Print.
- Oates, Joyce Carol. "The Death Throes of Romanticism: the Poems of Sylvia Plath." *Southern Review* IX (July 1973): 501-22. Print.
- O'Hare, J. D. "Plath's Comedy." *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*. Ed. Gary Lane. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. 75-96. Print.
- Painter, Theresa. "Indian Pipe." *Study of North Virginia Ecology*. [fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology](http://fcps.edu/islandcreekes/ecology). 16/5/15. Web.
- The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Dir. Carl Theodor Dreyer. Perf. Renée Maria Falconetti. Société Général des Films. 1928. Film.
- Peel, Robin. *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*. London: Associated University Presses, 2002. Print.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "The Two Ariels: the (Re)making of the Sylvia Plath Canon." *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodern Lyric*. Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1990. 175-97. Print.

- . 'Sylvia Plath's "'Sivvy' Poems: a Portrait of the Poet as Daughter.'" Ed. Gary Lane. *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979. 155-78. Print.
- Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. London: Faber and Faber, 1965. Print.
- . *Ariel: The Restored Edition: A Facsimile of Plath's Manuscript Reinstating Her Original Selection and Arrangement*. London: Faber and Faber, 2004. Print.
- . *The Bell Jar*. 2nd ed. Faber and Faber: London, 1966. Print.
- . *The Colossus*. London: Heinemann, 1960. Print.
- . *Drawings*. Ed. Frieda Hughes. Faber and Faber. London: 2013. Print.
- . *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other Prose Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977. Print.
- . "Ocean 1212-W." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other Prose Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977. 117-24. Print.
- . "Peter Orr Interview." *The Spoken Word*. British Library Publishing, 2010. Original recording 1958. Track 21. CD.
- . "Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership." *The Spoken Word*. British Library Publishing, 2010. Original recording 1961. Track 3. CD.
- . *The Voice of the Poet*. Random House Audio Recordings, 1999. Original recording 1958. Side A. Cassette.
- . "Mothers." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other Prose Writings*. London: Faber and Faber, 1977. 106-16. Print.
- Radin, Paul, ed. *African Folktales and Sculpture*. Bolingen Foundation Series XXXII. New York: Pantheon, 1952. Print.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *The Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994. Print.

- Redmond, John. "The Influence of Sylvia Plath on Seamus Heaney." *Poetry and Privacy: Questioning Public Interpretations of Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*. Bridgend: Seren, 2013. Print.
- Rose, Jacqueline. *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. London: Virago, 1991. Print.
- Rosenberg, Isaac. *Selected Poems and Letters*. Ed. Jean Liddiard. London: Enitharmon Press, 2003. Print.
- Rothko, Mark. "A Symposium on How to Combine Architecture, Painting and Sculpture." *Interiors* 10 May 1951:104. Print.
- Said, Edward. *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain*. New York: Vintage, 2006.
- Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux*. Trans. John Clarke. Washington: ICS Publications, 1996. Print.
- Saldívar, Toni. *Sylvia Plath: Confessing the Fictive Self*. (Writing About Women: Feminist Literary Studies.) New York: Peter Lang, 1992. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Complete Works*. Ed. Stanley Wells. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992. Print.
- Spurling, Hilary. *Matisse the Master, A Life of Henri Matisse: The Conquest of Colour, 1909-1954*. New York: Knopf, 2005. Print.
- Steinberg, Peter. "13 January 2010: Update from the Archive Day 3. (Box 11, Folder 4)." *Sylvia Plath Info Blog*. [sylviaplathinfoblogspot.co.uk](http://sylviaplathinfoblogspot.co.uk). Web. 6/5/15.
- Stevens, Wallace. *Collected Poems*. New York: Vintage, 1982. Print.
- Stevenson, Anne. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. London: Viking, 1989. Print.
- . "Sylvia Plath's Word Games." *Between the Iceberg and the Ship: Selected Essays*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998. Print.
- Sweeney, James Johnson. "Introduction: African Negro Sculpture." *African Folktales and Sculpture*. Ed. Paul Radin. New York: Pantheon, 1952. 323-36. Print.

- Taylor, Edward. *The Poems*. Ed. Donald E. Stanford. Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1989. Print.
- Van Dyne, Susan. *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1993. Print.
- Van Gogh, Vincent. *The Letters*. Ed. Arnold Pomerans. London: Penguin, 1997. Print.
- Vendler, Helen. *The Coming of Age of the Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2004. Print.
- . *Last Looks, Last Books: Stevens, Plath, Lowell, Bishop, Merrill*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007. Print.
- . *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989. Print.
- . "Sylvia Plath Playing Pygmalion to her own Galatea." Rev. of *Crossing the Water*, by Sylvia Plath. *New York Times*. October 10 1971: 4, 48. Print.
- Wagner-Martin, Linda. *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* New York: Vermillion, 1987. Print.
- Whitford, Frank. *Bauhaus*. World of Art Series. London: Thames & Hudson, 1984. Print.
- Wilson, Andrew. *Mad Girl's Love Song: Sylvia Plath Before Ted*. London: Simon and Schuster, 2013. Print.
- Wimsatt, W. K. *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*. Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1954. Print.
- Yeats, W. B.. *Essays and Introductions*. London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989. Print.
- . *A Vision and Related Writings*. Ed. A. Norman Jeffares. London: Arrow, 1989. Print.
- Zivley, Sherry Lutz. "Sylvia Plath's Transformations of Modernist Paintings." *College Literature* 29. 3. (Summer, 2002): 35-56. Print.



## Works Consulted

- Bayley, Sally. "‘The trees of the mind are black, the light is blue’: Sublime encounters in Sylvia Plath’s tree poems." *Representing Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 91-109. Print.
- Bloom, Harold (ed.). *Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*. New York and Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1989. Print.
- Bundtzen, Linda K. *Plath’s Incarnations: Woman and the Creative Process*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1983. Print.
- Ford, Karen Jackson. *Gender and the Poetics of Excess: Moments of Brocade*. Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1997. Print.
- Kandinsky, Wassily. *Point and Line to Plane*. New York: Dover, 1980. Print.
- Klee, Paul. *The Notebooks of Paul Klee Volume I: The Thinking Eye*. New York: Overlook Press, 1992. Print.
- . *The Notebooks of Paul Klee Volume 2: The Nature of Nature*. New York, Overlook Press, 1992. Print.
- . *Pedagogical Sketchbook*. Trans. Sibyl Moholy-Nagy. London: Faber and Faber, 1953. Print.
- Kroll, Judith. *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York and London: Harper & Row, 1976. Print.
- McMullan, Gordon. *Shakespeare and the Idea of Late Style: Authorship in the Proximity of Death*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Print.
- Merivale, Patricia. "The Raven and the Bust of Pallas: Classical Artifacts and the Gothic Tale." *PMLA* 89. 5 (1974): 960-66. Print.
- North, Michael. "The Ambiguity of Repose: Sculpture and the Public Art of W. B. Yeats." *ELH* 50. 2. (1983): 379-400. Print.

Pater, Walter. *Studies in the History of The Renaissance*. Ed. Matthew Beaumont.

Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. Print.

“Sweeney, James Johnson.” *Dictionary of Historic Scholars*.

dictionaryofarthistorians.org. n.d. Web. 6.5.15.

Sylvester, David. *Interviews with American Artists*. London: Pimlico, 2002. Print.

