Angst and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

When Sylvia Plath was a little girl spending her summers at Cape Cod, she loved the suppers her grandmother made of cod chowder, "buttery steamed clams," and "lobster pots." "But," she recalled in a BBC broadcast made shortly before her death in 1963, "I never could watch my grandmother drop the dark green lobsters with their waving, wood-jammed claws into the boiling pot from which they would be, in a minute, drawn—red, dead, and edible. I felt the awful scald of the water too keenly on my skin." The little girl who could suffer so profoundly for a lobster was, however, the same child who felt a "polar chill immobilize" her bones when she found out that she would no longer be the only child in the family: her baby brother was born. "I would be a bystander, a museum mammoth," she remembers feeling. "I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of the world was over."¹

The vision of reality that informs the imagery of Sylvia Plath's mature poetry is contained in this casual autobiographical memoir. It has two poles: (1) human beings are, in themselves, simply things, objects, machines—"Museum mammoths," but (2) such "thingness" can be transcended either in the joy or in the suffering that results when man identifies imaginatively with the life of animals, of plants, or of inanimate objects. The central paradox at the heart of Sylvia Plath's poetry is thus that human beings are dead, inanimate, frozen, unreal, while everything that is non-human is intensely alive, vital, potent.

When one examines the recurrent imagery of Sylvia Plath's Ariel poems in the light of poetic convention rather than as an expression of

¹ "Ocean 1212-W," The Listener, LXX (August 29, 1963), 312.
the poet's painful and tragic drive toward suicide,\(^2\) it becomes apparent that hers is "oracular poetry" in the tradition of such later eighteenth-century poets as Smart, Cowper, Collins, and Blake, the poets of what Northrop Frye has called "the Age of Sensibility."\(^3\) Both in his essay on this period and in the *Anatomy of Criticism*, Frye makes the distinction between the Aristotelian view of literature as *product* or aesthetic artifact and the Longinian view of literature as the poetic *process* itself. *Catharsis*, he argues, is a concept valid only for the literature of product, in which pity and fear are detached from the beholder by being directed toward objects. But where there is a "sense of literature as process, pity and fear become states of mind without objects, moods which are common to the work of art and to the reader, and which bind them together psychologically instead of separating them aesthetically." Fear without an object is a state of Angst or anxiety; Frye cites Cowper's "The Castaway" and Blake's Golden Chapel poem in the Rossetti MS as examples. Pity without an object, on the other hand, "expresses itself as an imaginative animism or treating everything in nature as though it had human feelings or qualities." It ranges from the "apocalyptic exultation of all nature bursting into human life that we have in Smart's *Song of David,*" to the "curiously intense awareness of the animal world" found in Burns's *To a Mouse*, in Cowper's exquisite snail poem, in Smart's superb lines on his cat Jeoffrey... in the opening of Blake's *Auguries of Innocence.*\(^4\)

In the poetry of process, *catharsis* is replaced by *ecstasis*: the poet as "the medium of the oracle" as in a "trance-like state"; "autonomous

\(^2\) Most of the reviews of *Ariel*, which was published posthumously in London by Faber and Faber in 1965 and in New York by Harper and Row in 1966, have regarded the poems as thinly veiled autobiography, revealing the mind of a seriously deranged woman. John Malcolm Brinnin, for example, writes, "Many of these poems are magnificent; a whole book of them is top-heavy, teetering on that point where the self-created figure threatens to topple over into self-expression and the diversions of psychopathology," *Partisan Review*, XXXIV (Winter 1967), 156. See also Dan Jaffee, *Saturday Review*, XLIX (October 15, 1966), 29; Francis Hope, *New Statesman*, LXIX (April 30, 1965), 687; *Time*, LXXXVII (June 10, 1966). The foregoing reviews are generally unfavorable; the following praise Sylvia Plath's work enthusiastically but still stress its autobiographical rather than its formal qualities: George Steiner, *The Reporter*, XXXIII (October 7, 1965), 51-54; C. B. Cox and A. R. Jones, "After the Tranquilized Fifties," *Critical Quarterly*, VI (1964), 107-22. A. R. Jones, "Necessity and Freedom: The Poetry of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, and Anne Sexton," *Critical Quarterly*, VI (1965), 11-30; Charles Newman, "Candor is the Only Wile: The Art of Sylvia Plath," *Tri-Quarterly*, No. 7, Sylvia Plath Issue (Fall, 1966), 39-64. All further references to articles in *Tri-Quarterly* are to this issue.


voices seem to speak through him, and as he is concerned to utter rather than to address, he is turned away from his listener, so to speak, in a state of rapt self-communion.” Metaphor, in such poetry, is accordingly not a way of describing or of evoking an observed world; it is a “direct identification in which the poet himself is involved.” Thus, in Cowper’s “Castaway,” the stricken deer does not have the symbolic status of, say, the albatross of “The Ancient Mariner”; rather, the poet becomes the stricken deer.5

The poetry of process is not an isolated historical phenomenon; in the late nineteenth century, it is brilliantly revived by Rimbaud, whose “Bateau Ivre,” in which the poet’s self is projected as the drunken boat of the title, is a paradigm of the oracular mode. Rimbaud himself described the form when he insisted that for the oracular poet, “C’est faux de dire: Je pense. On devrait dire: On me pense.”6 After Rimbaud, the “primitivism” of Cowper and Smart reappears in such poems as Dylan Thomas’s “Fern Hill” and Theodore Roethke’s “Praise to the End!”, but the outstanding modern practitioner of the mode is surely D. H. Lawrence, especially the Lawrence of Birds, Beasts, and Flowers.

Contemplating his fellow men as they go about their daily tasks, Lawrence is apt to respond as the poet of angst. “City Life,” for example, is a vision of the paralysis and pointlessness of the modern urban world. In a hallucinatory state, the poet sees “iron hooks” growing out of every face he meets, and he senses that “invisible wires of steel” pull the city dwellers “back and forth to work.” Dehumanized, they become “corpse-like fishes hooked and being played by some malignant fisherman on an unseen shore.”

The poet’s imaginative animism, on the other hand, creates such superb animal poems as “Swan,” “Bat,” and “Tortoise Gallantry,” poems in which the birds and beasts do not represent something else—Lawrence is not a symbolist poet—but which show us what it is like to be a bat or a swan. Jessie Chambers wrote in her memoir of the poet that a “living vibration” seemed to pass between Lawrence and “wild things,” a vibration that led him to explore what Vivian De Sola Pinto has called “the divine otherness of non-human life.”7 “A Doe at Evening,” for

example, is a modern version of Cowper's "Castaway." The poet, aimlessly wandering through the marshes, suddenly notices a doe, silhouetted against the sky, and he becomes so obsessed by the animal's "nimble shadow" that he seems to enter her very being:

Ah yes, being male, is not my head hard-balanced, antlered?
Are not my haunches light?
Has she not fled on the same wind with me?
Does not my fear cover her fear?

The process of self-communion found in the poetry of Rimbaud and of Lawrence is precisely that which occurs in the later poetry of Sylvia Plath. The poet's angst or floating fear is expressed in her dehumanization of herself and her fellow men; persons including oneself are objects, things associated with a nameless fear. But the human qualities lacking in persons are found everywhere in the outer world: the poet's "I" can thus become a blue mole, an elm tree, a cut thumb, a race horse. Contrary to the charges levelled against them by Marius Bewley and Stephen Spender, Sylvia Plath's poems do have a "shaping attitude toward experience," a "principle of beginning or ending," but the principle is that of the oracular poem, the poem of process, rather than of the more firmly established symbolist mode of Yeats, Eliot, and Stevens or even that of the elegiac autobiographical mode of Robert Lowell.

II

It is no coincidence that every poem in Ariel is written in the first person. The oracular poem, the poem of ecstasis, is by definition one that centers on the self, a poem in which "objectivity" is impossible because the seer, unable to detach himself sufficiently to describe the things outside himself, can give voice only to his own emotional responses. If Sylvia Plath's early poetry strikes the reader as being too "careful" and "seldom exciting," it is no doubt because prior to 1960, the date that she herself considered the dividing line between Juvenilia and her real poetry, she did not yet understand that third-

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9 See Bewley, Hudson Review, XIX (Autumn 1966), 491; Spender, New Republic, CLIV (June 18, 1966), 23.
11 Ted Hughes, Sylvia Plath's husband, observes that in 1961 she "dismissed everything prior to The Stones written in, 1959 as Juvenilia, produced in the days before she became herself" ("Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," Tri-Quarterly, 86). My chronology of Sylvia Plath's poems is based on this article.
person description, narrative, or ironic observation were alien to her poetic vision.

The early descriptive mode may be exemplified by "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows" (1956), perhaps the best known poem in Sylvia Plath’s first volume, The Colossus. The poem uses a fixed rhyming stanza with an elaborate network of full and approximate terminal rhymes, internal rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and onomatopoeia. The verse line is basically iambic, but the preponderance of monosyllables and compounds produces much secondary stressing and slows up the rhythm decisively as in "Clóudráck and owl-hollowed willows slánting over / The bland Gránta double their white and green ... ." All in all, the sound structure is highly formalized and rather precious.

The same formality characterizes the orderly presentation of the poem’s images. Cambridge’s Grantchester Meadows, immortalized by Rupert Brooke, is viewed as a tame, pretty place, a subject for a watercolor. In the first stanza, the meadow itself is described: “spring lambs jam the sheepfold,” “Each thumb-size bird / Flits nimble-winged in thickets” — “Nothing is big or far.” The second stanza in turn centers on the image of the “bland” Granta River, in whose waters “owl-hollowed willows” are reflected; here “The punter sinks his pole” and “Cattails part where the tame cygnets steer.” The picture is generalized in Stanza III: “It is a country on a nursery plate,” the narrator observes, too “benign” and “Arcadian green” to be quite real. Even the “Black-gowned” students who people the landscape in the final stanza seem implausibly pastoral; they stroll about, “Hands laced, in a moony indolence of love.” The reader is unprepared for the sharp reversal of the last three lines: abruptly the narrator informs us that the students are unaware

How in such mild air
The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.

The orderly arrangement of precise visual images and the carefully organized sound pattern cannot dispel the reader’s uneasy sense that the ambiguous quality of nature, alluded to in the final lines, is never

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12 The Colossus was originally published in London in 1961 by Heinemann, and in New York in 1962 by Alfred A. Knopf. All references in this essay are to the Knopf edition, reissued in 1967. All references to Ariel are to the Harper edition of 1966.

13 Each of the poem’s four stanzas has the rhyme scheme asbsasaabcas. In the first stanza, all the rhymes except “heard” / “bird” are approximate. The first line contains internal rhyme: “lambs jam”; the second line has alliteration and consonance: “Stilled silvered as water in a glass; the fourth has an example of onomatopoeia in “chitters,” and the seventh has heavy assonance: Flits nimble-winged in thickets, and of good color.”
defined or explored. Why is it that the seemingly pastoral landscape is full of menace? Because the individual images in the poem have no larger context, no frame of reference, it is finally impossible to know just what it is that the cry of the mutilated rat portends. Sylvia Plath is, in short, no sort of Imagist; the objective, impersonal poem in which the juxtaposition of images establishes a central meaning is not her mode. It is as if she cannot keep in check the voice that longs to interpret the images, to show what they mean to the perceiving self.

Third-person narrative presents similar problems. "Hardcastle Crags" (1957)\textsuperscript{14}, for example, is a chronological account of a mysterious walk taken by a nameless young woman through the deep, narrow valley in the Pennines in West Yorks, the southern boundary of the moorland made famous by Emily Bronte in Wuthering Heights.\textsuperscript{15} As the poem opens, the girl leaves behind the "dark, dwarfed cottages" and "steely street" of the "stone-built" mountain village above the valley and makes for the open moor with its "incessant seethe of grasses / Riding in the full / of the moon, manes to the wind, / Tireless, tied, as a moon-bound sea / Moves on its root." As she walks through this strange, lonely landscape, a "blank mood" invades her mind; the "long wind" assaults her, "paring her person down / To a pinch of flame" and whistling in the "whorl of her ear" until her head, "like a scooped-out pumpkin crown," "cupped the babel." The next stanza contains the poem's central theme:

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

Despite the carefully selected metaphors (black hills that look like iron and are "humped" above the wanderer like black cats), this assertion of nature’s indifference to man remains inert. It is difficult to believe that a person in an utterly "blank mood," a trance-like state, could formulate the contrast between man and nature so neatly. Similarly inappropriate precision spoils the end of the poem: the black, ominous silence of the stone landscape was evidently "Enough to snuff the quick / Of her small heat out," but "before the weight / Of stones and

\textsuperscript{14} The Colossus, pp. 20-21.
\textsuperscript{15} For this background information, see Hughes, Tri-Quarterly, 83.
hills of stones could break / Her down to mere quartz grit in that stony light / She turned back."

"Hardcastle Crags" suffers from irresolution because its point of view hovers uneasily between that of a detached narrator and that of the character herself. The landscape as seen through the girl's eyes is appealing in its mystery (e.g., "the dairy herds / Knelt in the meadows mute as boulders"), but the third-person narrator intervenes to explain that this landscape "Loomed absolute as the antique world was / Once" and that its stark silence was so oppressive that, in the moment of crisis, the girl "turned back." One senses that Sylvia Plath does not really believe in her chosen theme: the alien and hostile quality of nature.

Moreover, the orderly chronological sequence of images in the poem does not accord with the mental and emotional states that are portrayed. The girl's experience is phantasmagoric, dream-like, and mysterious, but it is conveyed in a straightforward narrative, divided into nine fixed stanzas, whose rather obtrusive sound patterns, as in the case of "Grantchester Meadows," draw undue attention to themselves. The first stanza, for example, has repeated alliteration of s's and consonance of k's and t's, not to mention such internal rhymes as "rake-Tack-" / "black", such assonance as "moon-blued," and the use of phonetic intensives as in "flint," "struck," "steely," and "tinder."16

"Hardcastle Crags" is typical of the third-person symbolic narratives that Sylvia Plath was writing in the mid-fifties. Thus, "The Snowman on the Moor"17 is the story of a girl's reaction to a bitter argument with her husband and of the hallucinatory incident that leads to their reconciliation. Abandoning her husband by the fireside, the young wife runs out into the snowy night and begs the elements to take her part, but, as it turns out, it is once again nature that rebukes and admonishes the speaker, this time in the shape of a mysterious snowman:

To the world's white edge
She came, and called hell to subdue an unruly man
And join her siege.

It was no fire-blurtting fork-tailed demon
Volcanoeed hot
From marble snow-heap of moor to ride that woman

16 The poem has nine five-line stanzas rhyming a3b4a4b6a2.
17 Poetry, XCIX (July 1957), 229-31. This and a score of other uncollected poems await Ted Hughes's permission for book publication. In his article on Sylvia Plath in Tri-Quarterly, Charles Newman lists the most important uncollected poems.
With spur and knout
Down from pride's size: instead, a grisly-thewed
Austere, corpse-white

Giant heaved into the distance....

In the first stanza above, the point of view is that of the girl, whereas in the second, a knowing commentator tells us what happened to “that woman.” The effect, as in the case of “Hardcastle Crags,” is that the validity of the experience is undercut; the mystery is patiently explained away.

A third poetic mode, found in Sylvia Plath’s poetry prior to 1960, is that of ironic understatement, the third-person poem that sets up an Audenesque contrast between two ways of looking at the same phenomenon. The best example of this mode is “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” (1959), a poem that foreshadows Sylvia Plath’s later disease and death imagery but is quite unlike the oracular poems of Ariel. The poem presents two contrasting views of death: the scientific and the artistic. The girl who visits the dissecting room in Part I sees death simply as decomposition. Four men are “laid out, black as burnt turkey / Already half unstrung.” The “white-smocked boys” work on these pitiful cadavers while, elsewhere in the room, “In their jars the snail-nosed babies moon and glow.” As if such horror were not enough, “He” (evidently one of the doctors who is her special friend) “hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom,” a morbid token of his affection. The second “view of a cadaver room” is a description of a Brueghel painting that graphically depicts the horrors of war (it can be easily identified as The Triumph of Death in the Prado), in whose bottom right-hand corner the painter has placed two lovers who are making music together and are completely unmindful of their surroundings. In Brueghel’s vision, the narrator argues, “desolation, stalled in paint / Spares the little country / Foolish, delicate, in the lower right-hand corner.” The artist, in other words, shows us the irony of life: although the death cart is not far off, someone is enjoying a brief moment of joy and beauty.

The second part of the poem is highly reminiscent of Auden’s famous “Museé des Beaux Arts,” in which the speaker observes that “In Brueghel’s Icarus, for instance: how everything turns away / Quite leisurely from the disaster.” But whereas Auden introduces this example

18 The Colossus, pp. 5-6.
as an illustration of his larger theme: "About suffering they were never wrong, / The Old Masters: how well they understood / Its human position; how it takes place / While someone else is eating or opening a window," Sylvia Plath's "two views" of the cadaver room are actually unrelated. The reader's response is not controlled; one wonders how the image of the lovers in the second part is related to the pitiful "snail-nosed babies" of Part I. Which is the more correct view of death?

Auden's detached ironic statement is no more Sylvia Plath's forte than is the symbolic narrative of "Hardcastle Crags" or the imagistic mode of "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows." Her "real voice," as Ted Hughes calls it, does not appear until the late autumn of 1959, when Sylvia Plath and her husband were writers-in-residence at Yaddo and she was pregnant with her first child. Hughes observes that "at this time she was concentratedly trying to break down the tyranny, the fixed focus, and public persona which descriptive and discursive poems take as a norm" (pp. 85-86). In the "exercises of meditation and invocation" which she and her husband practiced, Sylvia Plath's poems of angst and animism were born.

III

The poems in The Colossus that were written at Yaddo in 1959—"Mushrooms," "Blue Moles," "The Burnt-out Spa," "Flute-notes from a Reedy Point," and "Stones"—are interesting transitional works that forecast Sylvia Plath's later direction. One immediately notices that the new rhythms are much more flexible. "Blue Moles," for example, is written in unrhymed nine-line stanzas whose lines range between three and five stresses. In this poem, the "I" is squarely at the center. Coming across two dead moles "shapeless as flung gloves" on the road, the speaker contemplates the meaningless of their fate: the moles resemble bits of "blue suede"; they look "neutral as the stones" as "Their corkscrew noses, their white hands / Uplifted, stiffen in a family pose." Gradually, the speaker becomes obsessed with the death she has witnessed. Entering "the soft pelt of the mole," she imagines what it would be like to be one of these creatures, "moving through their mute room" and "Palming the earth aside." Perpetually, endlessly, the moles are "delving for appendages / Of beetles, sweetbreads, shards—to be eaten / Over and over." And still "the heaven / Of final surfeit is just as
far / From the door as ever." The daily night journey of the mole is futile and so, the speaker implies, is the dark journey of her own life.

"Blue Moles," undoubtedly influenced by Sylvia Plath's reading of Theodore Roethke, is perhaps too self-consciously conceived as an oracular poem. The reference to "little victim" in line 6, the rather heavy-handed pun on "duel" in line 8, and the slightly affected announcement, "I enter the soft pelt of the mole," indicate that the poet is still struggling with her new form. But the poem does explore the unusual states of mind to be found in Sylvia Plath's mature work, particularly her acute sensitivity to non-human life.

The title poem of Ariel carries the process of identification with the animal kingdom one step further. In the simplest sense, "Ariel" merely relates a morning ride from the moment when the speaker mounts her horse, poised for movement ("Stasis in darkness"), to its culmination in the violent and destructive flight through space. But the poem is not about the speaker's favorite horse Ariel nor about the morning ride; rather, girl, horse, and the movement of galloping merge to create something quite different. In the first tercet, for example, it is not certain whether it is horse or rider that is aware of the "substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances," so that we are immediately prepared for the ecstatic assertion, "God's lionness, / How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees!" As the motion accelerates, the speaker cannot distinguish the brown furrow ahead from the brown neck of the horse: both are oddly felt to be beyond her, out of her reach, and she cannot catch up. Vaguely, the new being that is both girl and animal is aware of "Nigger-eye / Berries" on the side of the road, "Black sweet blood mouthfuls" that "cast dark / Hooks" to catch her, but she is immune to their touch. In her new, trance-like state, she sheds the empty shell of her body, her thighs and hair:

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

Taken out of herself, she can be part of the foaming wheat, the "glitter of seas" before her. Thus the identity not only of the rider but also of the horse is dissolved: the newly created self is an "arrow" or

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19 Ted Hughes comments that during this period Sylvia Plath was reading "closely and sympathetically for the first time—Roethke's poems" (85). Sylvia Plath said in an interview for the London Magazine (New Series, I [February, 1962], 46) that she particularly admired Roethke's "greenhouse poems." The question of Roethke's actual influence falls outside the area of this essay, but "Blue Moles" is clearly reminiscent of "The Lost Son" and "A Field of Light."
The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red
Eye, the cauldron of morning.

A. Alvarez has observed that "Ariel" is "about what happens... when the potential violence of the animal is unleashed. And also the violence of the rider." A. M. Rosenthal writes that the poem ends with the "desolate realization of the plunge into death that is going on." The emphasis of these readings does not seem quite right: surely the ending of the poem recalls Keats's "Now more than ever seems it rich to die," and, in fact, "Ariel" can be read as a modern variant of the "Ode to a Nightingale." At its most intense, life becomes death but it is a death that is desired: the "Suicidal" leap into the "red / Eye" of the morning sun is not only violent but ecstatic. Both horse and rider become disembodied spirit—they are "Ariel."

The poem thus dramatizes what it is like to be taken completely out of one's self, to transcend one's ego in a moment of animistic communion. The structure of the poem, moreover, perfectly renders the experience: the explosive shift from "Stasis in darkness" to the "Suicidal" leap into the "cauldron of morning" is given a formal counterpart in the open tercets, whose abrupt, breathless run-on lines range anywhere from one stress ("Hooks") to four ("Pivot of heels and knees!—The furrow"). There is much less alliteration and assonance than in Sylvia Plath's earlier poetry, the predominant form of sound repetition used being occasional rhyme that creates a kind of echo structure, mirroring the galloping movement: "Pour of tor," "grow"/"furrow", "arc"/"dark", "air"/"hair", "I"/"cry"/"eye". The oracular process is completed as the "I" and the "eye" merge; for Sylvia Plath, joy comes in those moments when the human and the non-human, here the self and the sun, are one.

"Ariel" represents one pole of Sylvia Plath's poetic vision; the opposite, the mode of angst, has received more critical attention. Such poems as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" have been praised for their "strange kind of terror," their "clear perception of despair," their insight into the "schizophrenic situation." But Sylvia Plath does not, as some critics suggest, exploit the bizarre for its own sake. The grotesque elements in these poems must be seen in their larger context.

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“Morning Song,” the first poem in Ariel, is a good example of the way autobiography can become art. One might note, in the first place, that the poem turns the aubade convention inside out: the speaker’s dawn is not one of love or joy but one of dimly felt anxiety—motherhood both frightens and fascinates her. The arrival of her baby is utterly puzzling to this young mother: sardonically, she tells the sleeping infant that “Love set you going like a fat gold watch.” It is as if the sex act simply set into motion a mechanical process; the clock is wound up and the baby is born. Its initiation into life similarly sounds like an assembly-line process: “The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry / Took its place among the elements.” The infant’s cry, in other words, immediately becomes so much dead matter. What should be most living is most dead. Yet it is important to note that the speaker is not simply hostile toward her child. The persistent second-person address, the close bond established between the “I” and the “you,” implicate the mother in the child’s drama. If her infant is merely a mechanical thing, the poem suggests, it is ultimately because she is one also.

The poet’s angst transforms the baby into a “New statue” in a “drafty museum,” whose parents, their voices emptilyechoing the infant’s cry, “stand round blankly” like museum walls. The speaker is at a loss to understand her relationship to this new object, whose “moth-breath / Flickers among the flat pink roses” embroidered on his quilt or painted on the nursery wallpaper. She responds mechanically to the baby’s cry, stumbling out of bed “cow-heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown.” Automatically, the infant’s “mouth opens clean as a cat’s,” as the mother begins to nurse. Even the light of dawn is unreal: “The window square / Whitens and swallows its dull stars.” In the gray morning hour, the infant, now fully awake, begins to cry:

And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

Even the human cry becomes an object, a rising balloon. And one feels that both mother and child, the I and the you, are inside the balloon, unable to get out, to have contact with the “normal” world of living creatures.

Whether or not the reader shares Sylvia Plath’s response to motherhood is surely irrelevant here. The point is that the images are most carefully chosen to dramatize the speaker’s tension, the pull between love and anxiety. It is not that the mother of “Morning Song” does not
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want to love her baby—clearly she identifies completely with the child and feels totally responsible to it—but that she cannot believe that she herself is human. If one has no identity, the poem implies, having a baby cannot be more than winding a “fat gold watch”; the new world of motherhood is a frozen one where breath is as ephemeral as the life of a moth. “Morning Song” is thus a movingly ironic version of the trite slogans in the so-called “Baby Magazines,” which inform the pregnant woman that having a baby is the best thing that will ever happen to her, the greatest miracle on earth. For the self that fears the human condition, however, the “miracle” is not the one that is expected.

“Ariel” and “Morning Song” embody animism and angst respectively in relatively pure form. Sylvia Plath’s more usual strategy, however, is to combine the two. In “Tulips,” for example, the anguish of the “I” is inextricably bound up with the personality with which she endows a bunch of flowers. The speaker is a hospital patient who is recovering from surgery.22 The world of her white hospital room is a “winter” one; it is perfectly quiet, snowed in, peaceful:

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

The patient’s head, propped “between the pillow and the sheet-cuff,” is “Like an eye between two white lids that will not shut.” Her body is merely a “pebble,” and the nurses tend it “as water / Tends to the pebbles it must run over.”

Into this white, dead world, in which the speaker’s self has become “a thirty-year old cargo boat,” intruders come in the form of red tulips, flowers sent to the patient to brighten up her room. And now an odd metamorphosis takes place. The seemingly mindless tulips come alive and threaten the dazed emptiness of the white hospital world. Their redness begins to hurt the speaker: it “talks to my wound.” The tulips now “breathe,” they have “tongues,” their red petals become “red lead sinkers round my neck.” As the red flowers become larger and more ominous, the frightened ego withdraws and shrinks. The flowers watch her and eat her oxygen while she becomes a “cut-paper shadow”; they have “eyes” but she has “no face.” In the final stanza, the “peace” of the hospital world is exploded:

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22 According to Hughes, the poem was written in March 1961 and “records some tulips she [Sylvia Plath] had in the hospital where she was recovering from an appendectomy,” Tri-Quarterly, 86.
The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals; 
They are opening like the mouth of some great African cat, 
And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes 
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me. 
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea, 
And comes from a country far away as health. (p. 12)

The drama is complete: because they become flesh and blood in the speaker's imagination, the tulips force her out of her earlier whiteness, her passive extinction, and she hates this active intrusion. In her anxiety, she equates the tulip petals with the “red blooms” of her heart which insists on beating despite her desire for death. Finally, life returns with the taste of her hot tears; health is a “far away” country but at least now it is remembered. The spell of the hospital room is broken.

In this poem, the tulips are not symbols in the conventional sense; the focus is not on the tulips as natural objects with such and such connotations, but on the process whereby the “I” finally becomes the hated tulip so that her heart “opens and closes/ Its bowl of red blooms.” The whole poem is organized around two central images: white and red—the white of human extinction and the red of living matter, of non-human vitality, or again, the white of angst and the red of animism. Like a “great African cat” opening its mouth, the red flower finally absorbs the world of selfhood into its strange domain: flower petal and human blood become one. The seven-line unrhymed stanzas with their five, six, and seven-stress lines are full of halting repetitions as the consciousness of the “I” comes to grips with the situation:

I didn’t want any flowers, I only wanted 
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty. 
How free it is, you have no idea how free....

Only at the end of “Tulips” when the tension is resolved do the wrenched accents, the caesuras, and the word repetitions give way to what are almost regular iambic pentameter lines:

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

In the poetry of angst and animism, not only flower and animals but even an object may become endowed with human traits. “Cut,” one of Sylvia Plath’s most remarkable poems, begins with an everyday incident: the speaker cuts her thumb “instead of an onion.” But from the opening line— “What a thrill—” —we know that her response to this accidental “Cut” will be quite unusual, that somehow
she wants the injury. It is immediately not her thumb that is bleeding but a new being outside herself with which she can sympathize. In a series of extraordinary transformations, the bleeding thumb becomes a “Little pilgrim” whose scalp “The Indian’s axed,” and whose “turkey wattle / Carpet rolls / Straight from the heart,” and then “a bottle / Of pink fizz.” The “pink fizz” in turn becomes a platoon of soldiers, “Redcoats” running “Out of a gap,” and the speaker, fascinated by the spectacle, wonders irrelevantly, “Whose side are they on?”

This line, coming precisely at the midpoint of the poem (line 21), is almost unbearably poignant. The girl is so absorbed in the drama of the bloody thumb that she imaginatively enters its self, losing her sense of identity, her rational awareness that this thumb is simply a piece of flesh and blood, a part of her body. She knows what it is to be the bleeding wound and her seemingly random question turns out to be the crucial one: whose side are the “Redcoats” on, hers or the side of death? This thought brings her back with a jolt to her own “wounded” condition:

O my
Homunculus, I am ill.
I have taken a pill to kill
The thin
Papery feeling.

The series of identifications that follow are more hostile: the thumb now becomes a “Saboteur,” a Japanese suicide pilot (“Kamikaze man”), a woman whose “Gauze Ku Klux Klan / Babushka / Darkens and tarnishes.” As the poet watches the “balled pulp” of the thumb’s “heart” escape, she suddenly understands the truth:

How you jump—
Trepanned veteran,
Dirty girl,
Thumb stump.

A trepan is a “surgical instrument in the form of a crown-saw, for cutting out small pieces of bone, especially from the skull” (OED); the stanza thus presents the image of the thumb as a miniature man with a wounded skull. But “Trepanned” also means “trapped” or “snared” and so the little “veteran” is doubly doomed. The image is particularly effective because the thumb is, of course, literally a trepanned veteran: it survives its battle with the knife but is severely injured, maimed. And now the poem comes full circle: as the blood gushes forth, the images of “Little pilgrim,” of the “bottle / Of pink fizz,” even of the “Kamikaze man” give way to the more frightening reality: the “Homunculus” who
has been addressed so intimately is, in fact, nothing but a “Thumb stump” (the rhyme “jump” / “Thumb” / “stump” emphasizes the ugly truth), and, the poem implies, this “Thumb stump,” this “Dirty girl,” is none other than the speaker herself.

“Cut” accomplishes a great many things within the space of its ten abrupt four-line stanzas with their run-on lines of two and three stresses and their occasional rhyme. A cut thumb will never be the same after one has read this strange poem in which angst and animism are fused, in which an unspecified fear of being alive and an imaginative projection into something alien—a piece of thumb—coalesce. The structure of the poem depends upon the speaker’s subtly developing awareness: when the blood begins to flow, the “I,” detached from the “you” (her thumb), is fascinated by the spectacle, but, as the wound deepens, the intimately known “you” becomes the “I’s” enemy, a “Saboteur,” a “Dirty girl”—ultimately a hideous “Thumb stump.” “Cut” may be read as a sardonic parody of “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock”; here too the world of “you and I” is a closed one.

The mode of “Cut” and “Tulips” is the basic mode of the Ariel poems. In “Fever 103°,” for example, the terrified poet becomes an artifact: “I am a lantern— / My head a moon / Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin / Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.” She seems to attach no value to her life, yet her “Words,” as the poem by that name testifies, are living creatures; they are “Axes / After whose stroke the wood rings, / And the echoes! / Echoes travelling / Off from the centre like horses.” Despite their anguish, the Ariel poems also have moments of elation and splendor. The poet as “Paralytic,” who is weighed down by the “iron lung / That loves me” and that “pumps my two / Dust bags in and out,” is also the ecstatic “woman in the ambulance / Whose red heart blooms through her coat so astoundingly” at the unexpected sight of late-blooming, flaming red poppies, etched against an unpromising, gray autumn sky, “Igniting its carbon monoxides”:

O my God, what am I
That these late mouths should cry open
In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers.

(“Poppies in October,” p. 19)

Despite its intensely personal quality, its stress on selfhood, Sylvia Plath’s poetry is emphatically not, as is often argued, similar to that of
Robert Lowell. In *Life Studies*, the poet is obsessed with his own past, a past he must recover if he is to come to terms with the present and, by implication, with the future. The sense of history, both personal and social, found in a poem like “For the Union Dead” is conspicuously absent from the *Ariel* poems. This is not mere coincidence: for the oracular poet, past and future are meaningless abstractions; emotion, as Northrop Frye has observed, is “maintained at a continuous present.”

For Sylvia Plath, there is only the given moment, only now.

Again, in the poetry of process, persons and places outside the poet’s own self have only peripheral interest; one therefore finds little of Lowell’s documentary realism in *Ariel*. As in the case of D. H. Lawrence, whom she resembles more than any other poet of our century, Sylvia Plath’s “I” would rather be with poppies than with people. It is Lawrence’s flower poems—especially his “Andraitx—Pomegranate Flowers”—that stand behind “Poppies in October,” and his “November by the Sea” contains in embryo the imagery of Sylvia Plath’s “Letter in November,” in which the poet is quite literally enchanted by the colors of the autumn leaves:

O love, O celibate.
Nobody but me
Walks the waist-high wet.
The irreplaceable
Golds bleed and deepen, the mouths of Thermopylae.

(p. 47)

The less successful poems in *Ariel* are, to my mind, those like “The Swarm” and “Getting There” that try to make a comment on the horrors of war or the viciousness of the Nazi ethos. In an interview of 1962, Sylvia Plath insisted that, although she was naturally concerned about such issues as the “genetic effects of fallout,” these contemporary problems were not the mainspring of her poetry: “For me, the real issues of our time are the issues of every time—the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its form, children, loaves of bread, paintings, building; and the conservation of life of all people in all places . . . . Surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure—not its influence as religious or political propaganda.”

Didacticism is essentially alien to this “ecstatic” poet, whose paradoxical view of life is summed up in an especially touching poem, published in *Critical Quarterly* in 1962 but not reprinted in *Ariel*, which ex-

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23 *Fables of Identity*, p. 133.
presses the poet's distaste for the life of a person and her complementary yearning for union with that more intense life that is death.

I AM VERTICAL
But I would rather be horizontal.
I am not a tree with my root in the soil
Sucking up minerals and motherly love
So that each March I may gleam into leaf,
Nor am I the beauty of a garden bed
Attracting my share of Ahs and spectacularly painted,
Unknowing I must soon unpetal.
Compared with me, a tree is immortal
And a flower-head not tall, but more startling,
And I want the one's longevity and the other's daring.

Tonight, in the infinitesimal light of the stars,
The trees and flowers have been strewing their cool odors,
Sometimes I think that when I am sleeping
I must most perfectly resemble them—
Thoughts gone dim.
It is more natural to me, lying down.
Then the sky and I are in open conversation,
And I shall be useful when I lie down finally:
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time
for me.25