Otherness beyond the self: an analysis of water imagery in the woods of Sylvia Plath.

Mara. Gottler
University of Windsor

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OTHERNESS BEYOND THE SELF: AN ANALYSIS
OF WATER IMAGERY IN THE WORKS
OF SYLVIA PLATH

BY

MARA GOTTLER

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies through the
Department of English in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts at the University
of Windsor.

Windsor, Ontario
1975
ABSTRACT

Sylvia Plath's poetry has caused her to be categorized as belonging to the Existential school of thought, to the Confessional mode of poetry and to the Extremist type of literature. But one must not hesitate in asking "Do many of these labels apply?" My thesis is a study of this artist's works to determine to which philosophies or which literary codes she adhered. In my opinion, her literature belongs to the Romantic Aesthetic tradition and bases itself on the poetry of experience.

The second function of this paper is to interpret Sylvia Plath's poetry through a thematic analysis of the water imagery in her writings. By using this approach, my opinions and discoveries are either validated or disqualified depending on their corresponding relation to the thematic intent located within the poet's own poems.

A question asked by many critics is whether there is a chronological development within the content of Plath's volumes, and to this, I answer an emphatic yes. One must remember that until 1971, the critical world had only The Colossus and Ariel to consider. And the contents of these two volumes seemed vastly different in their technique. The disparity in these works caused the critics to believe that these collections were unique stages in Plath's literary development. The reasons for the difference in their
style will be treated at length in a later chapter. What is pertinent here is the fact that in 1971, two posthumous volumes were published by Plath's husband, Ted Hughes. *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* represent the previously unknown section of the transitional period between the poet's other collections. *The Colossus* and *Ariel* were then accepted as the introduction and culminating of a larger range of work. And by studying the occurrence of a singular central symbol—water imagery—and by tracing it throughout all of her collections, I found that there is a definite movement from *The Colossus* through *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* to *Ariel*, a movement based on the natural progression of Plath's presentation of a divided consciousness.

Thematically, there is also a corresponding development. And it is in Plath's lucid presentation of the dilemma of the isolated Self striving to locate a position for itself in the world of Otherness. How her imagery with its vastly associational tendencies aided in elaborating such a theme is also an important aspect of this thesis. Piaget's transductive relations are incorporated into Plath's rigid code so that, once formulated, her scheme remains constant. Her approach is syncretic. She links seemingly incongruous elements in her image patterns, yet a careful analysis of such clusters will indicate a deliberate and well-planned "hierarchy" of meaning.

To conclude, this study was developed with the express
desire to decipher, delineate and comprehend what is known as Sylvia Plath's private mythology.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to thank Dr. Eugene McNamara, the chairman of my thesis committee, for his patience in seeing me through the duration of my thesis. I would also like to thank my two readers, Ms. Dorothy Farmiloe and Dr. Roy Amore for their assistance in the final stages of my study.

I would at this point like to indicate my gratefulness to my family and close friends who offered me their moral support and encouragement. And finally, to Nadia and Les, I extend my warmest thanks. Without their concern, this thesis might never have attained completion.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. SELF AND OTHERNESS</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. &quot;OCEAN 1212-W&quot; AND THE BELL JAR</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&quot;Ocean 1212-W&quot;</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Bell Jar</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. THE COLOSSUS</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. CROSSING THE WATER</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. WINTER TREES</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. ARIEL</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VITA AUCTORIS</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps,
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.

("Words" in Ariel)
The suicide of Sylvia Plath in 1963 was followed by a new surge in criticism. Although the publication of her poetry in The Colossus and of her novel, The Bell Jar, (published under the pseudonym of Victoria Lucas), brought her little acclaim at the time, her death and the posthumous publication of three remaining books of poetry intensified her literary appeal; the critical reviews multiplied. Her later poems were considered in a new light; she was deemed a Confessional, an Existentialist and an Extremist whose work exhibited a suicidal tendency. Her individual poems became "shricks" and "cries from the heart", and the death-wish intruded itself between all of her lines.

These impressions and interpretations, although basically valid, are too exaggerated in their claims. Why should the convenient factor of her death immediately indicate the presence of such extreme characteristics in her work? Why must it label her poetry as suicidal? A careful review of The Colossus will reveal that the seeds of Plath's later poetry had already been inseminated into her first work and that she had perfected her technique in Ariel. The anguish which most critics instantaneously associated with her style was inflated beyond its original intent—her death was considered her "last complete poem". While this is an interesting social and psychological interpretation, it
appears neither a proper nor a precise literary appraisal of her poetry. 1

Plath herself rejected extremism of this sort. In an interview with Peter Orr, she once stated:

I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be relevant, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on. 2

This statement indicates that the poet herself thought she was in control of both her medium and her thematic intent. Her assertion negates the presence of the "Doppelgänger" of Extremist Art, that "murderous, dead thing inside human beings". 3 The definition of such an art is confining. It exists where "destruction is all turned inward and the artist deliberately explores in himself that narrow, violent area between the viable and the impossible, the tolerable and the intolerable." 4 Since Plath insisted on the externalization and simultaneous generalization of the individual

1 It is only in more recent reviews that there has been a trend to reverse these techniques and focus upon the actual "aesthetic" function of Plath's poetry. See J.D. McClatchy's "Staring From her Hood of Bone: Adjusting to Sylvia Plath" and also Harriet Rosenstein's "Reconsidering Sylvia Plath". None, however, have exclaimed on her use of sea imagery as this present study intends to.


4 Ibid., p.247.
experience, then her art is not purely Extremist in type. It does, however, embrace elements of the Romantic Aesthetic type, a literature which M.L. Rosenthal defined as "the Self seeking to discover itself through the energy of its insights into reality and through the sensuous excitement generated in it by its experience of reality". Perhaps this "excitement" could be substituted as a term to redefine the "hysteria" which most critics claim is Plath's trademark.

W.H. Auden's *The Enchafed Flood*, a text subtitled *The Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, seeks to "understand the nature of Romanticism through an examination of its treatment of a single theme, the sea". Since Plath's work shares in the Romantic tradition and since she, too, possesses a keen interest in water, or more specifically, the sea, then some relationships should be drawn between her work and that of the Romantics.

Auden refers to other artists and their views of the sea; Byron's Childe Harold felt that man's social control stopped at the shore; Verne's Captain Nemo felt a certain freedom and independence beneath its surface; and Bizet's Carmen saw it as being absent of limitations. But because


the sea is considered a "free place", it is also a place of alienation to these men. Auden himself interpreted the water as "the Alpha of existence, the symbol of potentiality." And one has but to read Whitman to realize that he, too, embraces all these and many more attitudes to the sea. It is this poetic and sensitive awareness of the sea's beneficent and also menacing nature which is further elaborated in Romantic literature so that from "this state of barbaric vagueness and disorder", a new life or order must emerge. Plath continues such a tradition within her own poetry so that when she is considered to create works in the Romantic Aesthetic mode, she is not being named incorrectly.

Yet another term seems more apt in describing the poetry which Plath wrote. Langbaum called it the poetry of experience, for it

seeks to appropriate and assimilate external reality by imaginative identification with it, but the act of self-projection cannot always end in sympathetic knowledge of, or unity with the object.

Here, then, lies the poet's descriptive technique minus the aesthetic "wailing" which many critics feel is present in

7 Ibid., p.19.
8 Ibid., p.6.

10 See the list of repetitive "adjectival" applied to Plath's style in The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium. (p.289)
her literary works.

This definition seems more judicious than most of the others; it minimizes the hysterical tone in Plath's poetry by stressing the poetry's themes and literary relevance. Rather than conclude that the poet seeks her own death, it emphasizes her search for literary perfection through her deliberate quest into the Otherness surrounding her, whether it be nature, other human beings or the elements of society. This view lends a positive note to Plath's endeavours by focusing on the literary value of her works while limiting those social sentiments which tend to project themselves beyond their meaning in the poetry.

The continuity of Plath's poetry raises another question among the critics. Often enough, her posthumous collections are separated from her first book of poetry because of their rather different poetic style. Although the former were not developed with the laborious references to the thesaurus as the latter was, the thematic content and image patterns are such that prove the continuity in her work rather than indicate a "taking-on" of a unique topical matter. Newman makes this interesting point in his comment on the poet's posthumous works:

Actually, they struck me then as a culmination of prior themes and techniques rather than a new departure, and my personal reaction, insufficient perhaps, was that a poet had perfected

Newman calls it the "desperate vocabulary" of critics who can sense the poet's importance but who cannot verbalize it.
ted her art, not that a brilliant young woman had died.

Sustained throughout each volume of poetry is the notion of the individual Self, surviving and experiencing a world of strangeness exterior to itself and therefore uncontrollable as well as uncontrolled.

Plath's reaction to this Otherness was intense and penetrating—often frightening and horrifying. But beneath these sensations was an underlying calm, a latent comprehension of her situation so that she needed to experience Otherness in order to act upon it. This makes it relatively impossible to perceive any absolute "screeching-out" in her poetry. Lucie-Smith presents an opinion which encompasses the views mentioned above:

To put all the emphasis on the emotional extremism of her late work is perhaps understandable, but it tends to distort certain important characteristics of her poetry...the same images recur again and again throughout her work. The shorebound spectator looking out at the formless, beckoning chaos of the sea is one of the most frequent. 12

This is the very image pattern which I intend to study in order to ascertain what Plath's attitudes were to Self and Otherness, how these attitudes presented themselves


within her unique imagery, and how the continued use of such patterns could prove the ultimate continuity of her literary works. Also, by analysing her deliberate treatment of a standardized scheme of images (part of what Ted Hughes named her "private mythology") I hope to forward the possible view that Plath's poetry is not necessarily one of "derangement" but potentially, to use Melander's term, one of merely "estrangement".

The technique which I feel lends itself most aptly to such an exploration is the thematic approach. An exact, internal analysis of all the poet's works, dealing especially with those involving water imagery, is a sensibly accurate method of discovering exactly what the poet meant. Consistency in thought and verification of ideologies can be more readily demonstrated when references are made to the works themselves. I hope to contribute some insight into the functional meaning of Plath's water-poetry and to add to past

13 Barbara Hardy also argues this point in her article "The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: Enlargement or Derangement?" found in The Survival of Poetry. She concludes that it is the objectivity of Plath's language which renders her poetry into one of enlargement rather than derangement. Ingrid Melander, on the other hand, employs the term estrangement to define not only Plath's poetic response to her personal condition but also to define the stylistic pattern in the poems which fostered the dual themes of "hostility and threat." It is in her thesis, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes, that Melander relates these two aspects to the primary theme of estrangement located within Plath's nature poetry and more often, in her water poems.

14 Initially, I employed the thematic approach in analysing the content and style of Plath's poetry; however, I felt the need to expand upon this technique. Because I believed that my own critical conjectures and opinions should be re-
studies another perspective and dimension of understanding. By employing these procedures, I intend to elaborate the premise that Plath's poetry was a search for self-realization rather than for death—after all, "poetry is not an escape but a confirmation, an approach to completion."\(^{15}\)

In analysing the development of Plath's use of water imagery and in attempting to simultaneously provide evidence of the continuity in her works, I found the most efficient approach to be that of an analysis of the poems in the chronological order in which Plath herself had written them. The chapters in this thesis thereby deal with her collections not as they were released by their publishing firms but as they were created by the poet. Such an approach should afford a truer picture of her poetic growth. This is obvious when one recalls that *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* were both published in 1971, six years after the publication of *Ariel* even though the poems in the former two volumes were written prior to the poems of the latter.

Before turning to the actual poems, however, I shall introduce in Chapter I Plath's notion of Self and Otherness. Next, I will refer to Plath's prose works. And because I

believe that some biographical information is necessary to illuminate, validate or clarify any literary interpretations, I am analysing the short story "Ocean 1212-W" to understand how the sea influenced her from childhood on. In the subsequent section, I focus on The Bell Jar because it details specific experiences of trauma in Plath's youth. Here, I deal particularly with those incidents relating to the sea. It is after such an overview that I can feel justified in turning to the actual poetry itself. Chapter III therefore deals with, appropriately enough, The Colossus, Plath's first volume published in 1960. In attempting to follow the true chronological order of the poet's collections, I then deal with Crossing the Water in Chapter IV and with Winter Trees in the next division. This study corresponds to the transitional period in which these poems were created and it is within such a scheme that I believe they should be studied. Ariel concludes the analysis of Plath's poetry since it was her final volume.
As I paddled on, my heartbeat boomed like a dulled motor in my ears.
I am I am I am.

(The Bell Jar)
CHAPTER I

SELF AND OTHERNESS

What almost every artist ultimately presents in his work is his interpretation of Self as it is inextricably related to, attracted to or antagonized by the existence of some form of Otherness. In a world concerned with the individual within his society or more explicitly, the artist within his Art, this final result is inevitable.

Plath is interested in the private Self. True, she universalizes and generalizes her own experience, but it remains essentially that—her own experience. Her interpretations and observations extend beyond the actual realm of her own dilemma into a more common perspective, what A.R. Jones calls an elevation from "private facts to public myth."^1

The varied techniques which Plath employed all serve to expand upon this approach. The poet incorporates distanciation and objectivism^2 to create either a temporal or a

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^1 A.R. Jones, "On Daddy" in The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium, London, Faber and Faber, 1970, p.234. This article is a concise elaboration of the love/brutality paradox which exists not only within the mind of the persona, but also by extension, within the minds of those in the concentration camps. The divided emotions evident in this review can also be applied to those poems dealing with water imagery which contain "the man in black". Chapters III-VI provide a detailed analysis of Plath's ambivalent reactions.

^2 These terms were intended for use as aesthetic and/or
spatial separation between the subject of her poetry and the object involved, between the poet herself and the reader. This causes the incident being described to extend beyond its original significance, multiplying itself by Plath's associational metaphors. The personae, the "I's, the "you"s inserted into her work also serve to dissociate the experience from its actual source into a universe of diverse, varied meanings. Dialogue is used in much the same manner. The conversations rebounding between the poet's protagonists simultaneously attract and repulse the speakers, bringing them closer together in psychic understanding while also emphasizing the real rift between their physical boundaries, their bodies. I shall expound these techniques in succeeding chapters in which I will be analyzing the poems themselves.

The Self is portrayed in many ways: a reflection of Otherness; a victim of Otherness; a multiple of itself; an internalization inside itself of external objects; an inani-

literary values rather than as any sort of philosophical or psychological viewpoints. Both indicate an attempt on the part of the poet to remain aloof and detached from the action of the poems, although mentally very much involved.

3 This universe of diverse, varied meanings has often been interpreted as that of the schizophrenic. For intriguing psychological investigations of this nature, see Gordon's "Saint Sylvia" and "Who is Sylvia: The Art of Sylvia Plath," Cox and Jones' review, "After the Tranquilized Fifties", is a portrait of Plath as a psychotic personality.

4 Newman first employed this term in his fascinating article "Candor is the Only Wile." He claimed it from Plath's short story "Ocean 1212-7" in which the poet, as a child, recognizes and names the element of Otherness as that existing outside of her own consciousness, whether animate or inanimate.
mate object. Hers is the “protean identity” capable of transformation, variation, pluralization, projection, isolation and effacement. Plath’s Self is further capable of unique metamorphoses, identity shifts and even, at times, sexual changes. It possesses a chameleon-like nature able to adapt itself to the external landscape or to the presence of Otherness. But inevitably, it flows into another identity, another being. The Self is as capable of complete stasis as the poet is of attaining her dream of perfection. This proposition will be further elaborated in later chapters where it will be more readily understood once it is applied to the poems which exemplify it.

The structure of imagery which Plath developed is unique. Its very sense rests on its associational value. Image clusters are grouped so that each key word elaborates then maintains its specific meaning. The poet never deviates from this pattern, reinforcing it throughout the remainder of her poetry. This process of interdependence was first propounded by the psychologist Jean Piaget. He termed it the “syncretic approach” with an attempted reconciliation of

5 Jan B. Gordon, “Saint Sylvia”, Modern Poetry Studies, II (1971), p.285. Gordon establishes Plath’s varied roles in her presentation of the Self, a Self obviously involved in protean experiences. Interestingly enough, the characteristics which allow such a malleability of form are those associated with the water god Proteus, a figure who evolves the essential nature of the father-beings in Plath’s water poems, "Full Fathom Five", "All the Dead Dears", and "Ouija" are only a few of the poems belonging to this category. (An analysis of these works will be found in the following chapters of this thesis.)
diverse and opposite practices. This is possible where "qualities are associated, not substances or concepts."  

A study of water imagery in Plath's poems will immediately reveal such a pattern of association. Among the other image clusters which one can discern in her works, the sea—and water in general—is obtrusive and evident. Because of this technique, objects such as the water, the moon and mirrors can be related not because they are apparently similar in their form, structure or nature, but because they are all glittery; they shine and can reflect light; they are sometimes tenanted with inhabitants (the sirens in the sea, the face in the moon, the reflection in the mirror); and they are often personified as animate beings. Even the presence of death can be seen within this scheme, though not necessarily as the threat which most critics envision. Death's sterility and coldness can be qualified in the "white" bodies of the drowned (cold and impotent), the "white" O-mouth despair of the moon as it relates to the fertility cycle of women ("blood-bag" of

6 See Piaget's The Child's Concept of Physical Causality and also An Outline of Piaget's Developmental Psychology. Both Lavers in "The World as Icon" and Gordon in "Who is Sylvia?: The Art of Sylvia Plath" insist on the relevance of Piaget's discoveries and incorporate them into their reviews.


8 I specifically chose water as the central image of this discussion not only because of its obvious recurrence in Plath's poetry but also because of a personal attraction for such an element. This is not to say that other image clusters are not as important to Plath; she also employs other symbols such as hooks, eyes, trees and animals, to mention only a few. These forces indicate a similar fragmentation of personality with a simultaneous confrontation with Otherness,
sterility), and the obvious unreality of the mirror's "white" opaqueness in reflecting only an image and not the essence of the person staring into it (cold in its superficiality, sterile in its authenticity). Colour evidently has a major influence too, Plath's view of Death no.2, from "Death and Co.", as "masturbating a glitter" will recall the shimmering gleaming quality found in all of the above. Lavers calls this process "fluid symbolism" for obvious reasons.

A fundamental overview of Plath's technique can then best be summarized by Lavers' proposition that

...the poems are essentially emblematic. They derive their meaning, both profound and sometimes literal, from an underlying code, in which objects and their qualities are endowed with stable significations, and hierarchized.

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10 Lavers' article, "The World as Icon", a strictly analytical approach to Plath's poetry, offers numerous examples and detailed formulations of this use of "image clusters" with precise references to the poetry though not specifically to the poems dealing with the sea.

I have often wondered what would have happened if I had managed to pierce that looking glass.

("Ocean 1212-W")
"CHAPTER II: "OCEAN 1212-W" AND THE BELL JAR

"OCEAN 1212-W"

The influence of the sea or more generally, water, stemmed from Plath's early childhood life at the seashore. Immersed in this environment for nine years, she was touched by its subtle effect upon her senses and emotions. The sea, which later became an important element in her adult life and her poetry, was one of the poet's earliest recollections. In her autobiographical short story, "Ocean 1212-W", the poet focuses upon her early memories: "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." 1 The sea seems to have acted as the sponsor of her idyllic youth. It presented her with a treasury of pottery, weeds, shells and even sea-creatures, as she expected it to, for "what mightn't the sea bequeath?" 2 She readily accepted the richness of a seashore life.

Plath's sensibility as a child seems to have reached beyond the limits of average children. She perceived the water of the Atlantic as being more than a mere benefactor and en-


2 Ibid., p.268.
tertainer. It also represented a life-giving force with its "motherly pulse". She elevates it above her own existence and even above that of her mother's. Its origins coincide with that of the earth's:

The early world draws breath.
Breath, that is the first thing. Something is breathing. My own breath? The breath of my mother? No, something else, something larger, farther, more serious, more weary...the breath of the sea then.

The sea had impressed itself upon Plath's consciousness from the very beginning as an attestation of an impressive and generously yielding nature.

When Plath experienced a crisis in her childhood with the birth of her baby brother, it was the sea to which she turned not to the human comfort of her family. And she was consoled and rewarded by two unique events. The water introduced her to her first acknowledgement of individualism thereby presenting her with a Self, an identity: "I saw, coldly and soberly, the separateness of everything. I felt the wall of my skin; I am I...My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over."

Having thus severed the child from her previous kinship

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3 Ibid., p.266.

4 Plath's reaction to this event was violent and vehement enough for her to have named it "that awful birthday of otherness". Her unique phraseology corresponds with her simultaneous discovery of Self.

5 Ibid., p.269.
with itself, the sea next offered her a gift of amendment, a "sign of election and specialness, a sign that she was not forever cast out." Plath thus accredits the sea with human perceptivity. The wooden baboon which it deposits at her feet is interpreted not as the result of the waves' natural rush, but as the water's empathetic concern for a newly-dispossessed child. She appropriately discerns how "the sea, perceiving [her] need, had conferred a blessing."

This is not to say that the poet saw only the calm, stilled nature of the sea. Even as a child, she was well aware that the gentle waves could quickly and recklessly become a threat. Her final memory of the sea, as she herself admits, is that of violence. A hurricane sweeping over Cape Cod had destroyed the vegetation, felled buildings and disrupted the land. She was greatly impressed by the wreckage littering the beach following the storm's aftermath.

Soon afterwards, the death of Plath's father forced the family to move to the city for economic security. This traumatic upheaval proved to be paramount to the child's consciousness:

And this is how it stiffens, my vision of that seaside childhood. My father died, we moved

6 Ibid., p.270.

7 Ibid.

8 In her poem "Point Shirley" in The Colossus, Plath depicts this very episode with detailed emphasis on the savage, carnivorous nature of the sea. A further elaboration of this theme is developed in Chapter III.
inland. Whereon those first nine years of my life sealed themselves off like a ship in a bottle—beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete, a fine, white flying myth.\(^9\)

Although this short story was written by the mature Plath, it appears to forward a conscientious reproduction of the crucial dilemmas and experiences of her youth. The glimpses which the reader obtains of the child's mental faculties seems to duplicate the impressions of a perceptive girl sensitively responding to her environment. Her amazing kinship with the sea entered into her adult consciousness and into her poetry.

This understanding of the duality of the sea's character reflects itself strongly in her later works. Another of her shrewd observations will aptly prove this point: "Like a deep woman, it [the sea] had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils. It spoke of miracles and distances: if it could court, it could also kill."\(^10\) Plath was well aware of the transformational capacity of the sea. She recognized its unstable nature, how its stillness, its "silenced edge", its glittery mirror-surface could become disrupted, how it could then "bellow and buck", crash and collapse. The living could be sucked into its core and drowned; the drowned could be spewed out of its depths and resurfaced.

These images of her childhood vision were retained in

\(^9\) Ibid., p.272.

\(^10\) Ibid., p.266.
her poetry. The poet's combined fear/attraction for the sea reveals itself and she faces the sea in poem after poem always returning to the landscape of her youth, to the scenery of her childhood mind. All of her poetry indicates this movement.
One jump, and the water would be over my head.

(The Bell Jar)
THE BELL JAR

The early reminiscences of a seaside belonging to a happy childhood shifted into the tragic memories of Plath's adolescent attempts to drown herself in that same water. Her ensuing depressions, her forlorn state of mind and her unsuccessful endeavours at suicide are presented in the novel she published under a pseudonym.

The Bell Jar is essentially a novel concerned with the maturation and development of an adolescent girl named Esther Greenwood. The majority of the events related bear semblance to events in Plath's life hence lending credibility to the theory that this is actually an account of her young adult life. It is Chapters Twelve and Thirteen which are of import in this consideration of the relevance of Plath's seaside memories as they predestined later patterns of water imagery in her poetry.

Esther's desire to kill herself had led her to the seashore. Her mind remained quite rational during the procedure and she self-ironically pointed her shoes at the sea as she advanced toward it, thinking how they would act as a "soul-compass" after she was dead. The anticipation with which she so eagerly approached the water immediately dissi-

11 For an accurate, detailed and interesting account of Plath's biography, see Chapter One in Aird's Sylvia Plath. Certain of the events mentioned here parallel those in Esther's life.
pated when the first wave touched her. Then, eagerness was abruptly transformed into revulsion:

...A wave drew back, like a hand, then advanced and touched my foot.
The drench seemed to come off the sea floor itself, where blind, white fish ferried themselves by their own light through the great polar cold...
I waited, as if the sea could make my decision for me.
A second wave collapsed over my feet, lipped with white froth, and the chill gripped my ankles with a mortal ache.
My flesh winced, in cowardice, from such a death.\[12\]

The waters infected with the cold, moist grip of a death-hand attempted to draw her in, a once-willing victim. However, it was their very chilliness which shocked the girl into a realization of the actuality of death by drowning; and she retreated.

Later, Esther again returned to the sea. This time she tried to submerge herself beneath the surface but she was repeatedly pushed up by the thrusts of the water. She acknowledged the supremacy of the sea and returned to the shore "her heartbeats booming like a dull motor in her ears. I am I am I am."\[13\] Again, it was the sea which had accentuated Plath's identity, first with her wooden baboon and now with her very life.

The sea, beach and sky in this episode are those found


\[13\] Ibid., p.167.
in Plath's poem "Suicide off Egg Rock." This is the same rock towards which she refused to swim to safety in the novel. The experiences in these two scenes are identical. Both deal with the notion of the sea as an entrance into another and more beneficial world, though not specifically as an escape from life into death. Here, it serves as the completion of existence.

The tone of both works is related—an atmosphere of indifference, of cold rationality and of passiveness predominates. Both Esther and her counterpart in the poem are struck by the force of that acknowledgement of existence, the heart-beat of the Self. Their identities are strengthened by the repetitious booming of the "I am I am I am." Unmindful of the landscape of imperfections, except for the static appeal of Egg Rock itself, both are nevertheless magnetized by the force of the water. To Esther, it represents an oblivion, a release from the sordid, mediocre details of human life; a similar impression is indicated by the man. The last sound he hears is "the forgetful surf screaming on those ledges," a surf capable of obliterating his humanness or his Selfness and offering him the Lethe-like security of a bifurcated goal—the death of his physical body with the awakening of his soul.

Melander adds another dimension to the hopelessness of


15 Lucie-Smith, on p.19 of his article "Sea-Imagery in the Works of Sylvia Plath," reinforces such an attitude when he writes that "where the sea is not hostile...it represents nothingness, oblivion, abeyance—things which the poet both seeks and fears."
the individual as it is reflected in the nature of the surrounding landscape.

The circumstance that nobody is witness to the quiet departure of the suicide puts strong emphasis on life's indifference to the tragedies of man. However, a certain consolation, perhaps even a kind of reconciliation may be gained from the concluding lines.  

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This is a restoration of sorts, a return to some positive and unique aspect of identity—a re-affirmation of Self. The waters offer Esther and the man what life does not, something valuable, an emphasis on self-worth and personal dignity and value. In this poem, the strength of nature lends its power to the admission of human relevance especially to that of the solitary individual, the isolated ego.

In "Suicide off Egg Rock", Plath hints at the presence of death with its "glitter". It is the seductive Death no. 2, the masturbator of "Death and Co.",  

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who hides in the background of the scene. Hence, his appearance presumes that death by drowning is an enticement, a pleasurable adventure rather than a desperate clutching at life. A certain peace exists in the general tone of this poem which is arrested in Esther's experience: her peacefulness dissipates with the coldness of the water. The man responds to the lure of the water; Esther, however, is twice thwarted by it. Perhaps it is a question


17 Ariel, op. cit.
of will and the bending of one's will to an awesome destiny exterior to oneself. Esther "waited as if the sea could make her decision for her",\textsuperscript{18} whereas the man simply entered the water "stone-deaf and blindfold." His is not an assault but an acceptance.

The incident in this poem and in the novel are what Howard terms "urges toward homeostasis". He quotes Freudian principles in paraphrasing this concept: "the effort of the mortal self is to...return to the inanimate condition."\textsuperscript{19} Call it death, call it peace, call it stasis.\textsuperscript{20} It is nevertheless a primal instinct in Plath's quest inside the boundaries of Self. Stasis attracts her toward itself because of its own perfection, yet she readily and ironically admits that "Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children."\textsuperscript{21} This duality of thought exists throughout Plath's poetry. Her ideals are constantly warring with one another.

This attraction, appeal and antagonism forwarded in all of her poems demonstrates her treatment of subjects which

\textsuperscript{18} The Bell Jar, p.162.

\textsuperscript{19} Richard Howard, "And I Have No Face: I Have Wanted to Efface Myself" in Poetry, CI (1962), p.81.

\textsuperscript{20} A certain distinction should be raised between Stasis and Rebirth. While they may entail essentially the same ultimate experience, Rebirth indicates a more spiritual epiphany while Stasis, in my view, encompasses a less exuberant elevation. It tends to imply a somewhat lessened force, a force capable of repeatedly attacking the limits of the human situation in what Howard sees as "ecstasy", or standing outside of oneself.

\textsuperscript{21} "The Munnich Mannequins" in Ariel.
press ambivalent responses from her. Plath's reaction to a force such as the sea indicates a deliberate codification of a larger scheme of relevance, a scheme outlining her personal respect and also disgust for nature and for life, for Self and for Otherness. Her poetry displays the shifting, ambiguous perspectives of a life as equally confused and confusing as her works. Ted Hughes indicates as much in his "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems":

The poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect, is strong and clear—even if the origins of it and the dramatis personae, are at bottom enigmatic. The world of her poetry is one of emblematic visionary events, mathematical symmetries, clairvoyance and metamorphoses.22

It seems appropriate at this stage to turn to Plath's four volumes of poetry in order to examine, comprehend and elaborate her private mythology23 as it is centralized within the meanings of water imagery and its associations.

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23 Such a term seems highly appropriate since, as Northrop Frye indicates, the importance of a work lies in "the fact that every poet has his private mythology, his own spectroscopic band or peculiar formation of symbols, of much of which he is quite unconscious."
O she is gracious and austere,
Seated beneath the toneless water,
It is not I, it is not I.

("The Burnt-out Spa" in *The Colossus*)
CHAPTER III

THE COLOSSUS

Alvarez once pointed to the revelations proffered by a poet in his interpretation of the specific conditions surrounding him: "when an artist holds up a mirror to nature, he finds out who and what he is; but the knowledge may change him irredeemably so that he becomes that image." Plath is such an artist. In holding up a mirror to the sea, she often became the reflection of what she perceived.

Her landscape and her mindscape, or what Gordon calls her psychescape, are interdependent. Each influences the other in a reciprocal arrangement. Plath's feelings and emotions could ultimately be projected into the essence of the object she regarded; similarly, the nature of her surroundings might instill its peculiar reverberations into her own consciousness. If a mutualism existed between the two, the I and the non-I, then the poet's perceptions became blurred allowing her to transmogrify into the thing or person being perceived.

This, in essence, is the threatening aspect of Otherness—its ability to magnetize the poet toward itself, to

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sieve her Selfness into its own being. Plath's multiple selves and shifting identity changes are all attempts to both accept the beauty of such a union and to escape the nullity it truly represented, the loss of essential Self. When Plath regards completion as an unresolved stasis or as a sterile centre of stillness, then it represents a void lacking fluid existence.

In *The Colossus*, Plath attempts to exorcise the influence of such forces. It is obviously a difficult task since part of her ironically desires an immersion into the watery Otherness. Time and again in these poems, Plath becomes the thing or person imagined or described, so that culminatively the poems evolve an image not of a single human victim, but of a monstrous abstract victim whose condition is general and unavoidable.2

Her strange encounters with the sea are almost predestined; in most of her poems in *The Colossus*, she eventually faces the water.

The poet's sea-scapes are often endowed with a permeating stillness. The scenes in each of these poems where quietness predominates are heightened in their significance because of this quality. Stillness thereby sets the drama of the scene by increasing the tension until a disturbing climax is reached.

In "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour", the sea seems reserved. It is alien to the persona who has dared to transgress beyond its boundaries. This threatening mood is amplified by the element of stillness. The "queer crusty scrabble" which the persona first heard abruptly ceases with her approach and the pool-bed becomes a "silenced edge". The elements in this environment also assume a foreboding appearance: the mussels appear "conspicuous", the grass "puts forth claws", and the crabs become "sibilant, mass-motived hordes". These images reinforce the persona's role as an intruder, thus intensifying her sense of isolation and alienation and she interprets this "wary otherworld" as deliberately shutting her out: "A sly world's hinges had swung/ Shut against me. All held still."³ Undaunted, the persona remains until the crabs finally emerge from their hiding places. Then she attempts a reconciliation, but it is this very pitiful move which severs all possible ties between the Self and Otherness.⁴ In her endeavours to identify with the sensations of the crabs, she inadvertently stands "shut out, for once, for all, puzzling the passage of their absolutely alien order." Proje-


⁴ This move is vital since Plath is trying to assume the feelings of the crabs by associating their reaction to mud with hers. Ironically, the very impossibility of an actual identification causes the distinct separation of their two worlds.

⁵ See the footnote on p.50 in Melander's book. I am in complete agreement as to when the poet and the persona she places in her poetry are equalized as the same identity. External evidence would indicate that Plath's personal self is also her literary self.
tion into Otherness is now impossible and the poet/persona
the "I" in the poem, must remain content to watch the crabs
"losing themselves/ Bit by bit to their friendly élément" as
she remains stranded on the beach.

Plath's desire to enter the peaceful stillness of this
world indicates her yearning to attain perfection, a peace
which is sometimes interpreted by critics as a death-wish.
Melander explains the apparent incongruity of such a reaction:

Here, nature, notably the sea, is indeed very far
from being regarded as a threat; instead, it is
seen as a benevolent principle, the origin of life
to which everything created will finally return.
This common archetypal image of the sea (or water)
is not infrequently recognised as a longing for
death by water.\(^6\)

The purification associated with death, a cleansing of the
Self, is also extended to water thereby exemplifying the
theory of "death by water" as a means of realising Self in
complete and perfect Stasis.

Silence is also the predominating mood in "Watercolour
of Grantchester Meadows." In this poem, the atmosphere of
"air/Stilled, silvered as water in a glass" provides the tone
of the entire setting. The animals are contented, the vege-
tation is lush and the river is smooth and sheer. The sac-
charine quality of this scene diminishes it to "a country on
a nursery plate." However, the peacefulness of the Granta is

\(^6\) Ingrid Melander, The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study
of Themes, p. 52.
extremely misleading. As the reader is ignorant of the latent menace behind this view, so also are the students preoccupied in their "moony indolence of love". This calculated deception magnifies the final shocking act in the poem; its unexpectedness exaggerates the cruelty and ugliness sometimes found in nature, and here, on the river. Disaster can still occur in a world of idyllic contentment and in "such mild air/ The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out."
The other world is capable of concealing its rawness beneath a soothing layer of calm.

The internal dialogue of "Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour" externalizes itself in "Lorelei". Here, the question asked is no longer a silent one—"but a verbal, exuberant plea. Again the silence of the setting controls the mood of the poem while acting as a deceptive cover for the unknown element's lurking beneath the water's surface. The night, the moon, the castle turrets and the mirror-sheen of the river reinforce the feeling of "all stillness."

The world in which the poet walks is a relaxing one, silent and undisturbed. But a disruption soon shatters this peace—"shapes float up" toward the surface of the lake "troubling the face of quiet", shapes which are personified as female creatures, the enchanting sirens of mythic legend. These beings represent the attractiveness of the other world to Plath; their magic songs promise "a world more full and clear/ Than can be." The poet is emotionally disturbed by the power of their voices and the lure of this other existence proves
too great for her. It eventually pervades her own existence
"by day, descant from borders/ Of hebetude, from the ledge/
Also of high windows." Their calling is then a movement to-
ward a "death", toward the fruition of the individual life,
toward the peacefulness and "drunkenness of the great depths."
No longer is Plath alien to such an order. Now she is com-
pelled and controlled by it. The urgency of her desire to
plunge into this world is indicated by the resolution of the
final line: "Stone, stone, ferry me down there."

A change has occurred in the poet's attitude throughout
the poem. She reacted with mild apprehension when she first
glimpsed the "shapes" beneath the water; then, as she became
more attracted to their singing and felt a kinship with them,
she addressed them as "Sisters"; finally, near the conclusion,
she elevated them to "great goddesses of peace" because of
their magnificent promises of a perfect world.

In these early poems, Plath is striving to become the
Otherness she views. An allegorical interpretation\(^7\) of these
poems is possible. It rests on Plath's ability to summon up
the "genius loci",\(^8\) the spirit of the place. Since the poet's

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\(^7\) Allegory can assume the same definition as reification.
(See Lavers' article "The World as Icon" for one interpretation
of Plath's use of reification.) According to the Random House
Dictionary of the English Language, both involve the conversion
of an abstract quality into a concrete form. The allegory, how-
ever, can be further defined as containing a spiritual meaning.

Howard feels that "in her modesty, Niss Plath is best content
to let the event disclose itself without too much prompting,
and when "nothing happens" she still has submitted the world
to order."
view of Otherness oftentimes shows it as inhabited by indigenous creatures, Plath is indicating the emblematic purpose of the settings she uses. The "spirits" are employed as totems of the entire experience of interaction between Self and Otherness. The significance of the encounter thereby focuses upon the personified form of what the poet feels is the central force of nature or existence in general. In "Lorelei", the spirits are sirens; in "Full Fathom Five", it is the old man of the sea; and in "The Bull of Benylaw", it is the black bull. In such poems, the description of this other realm is one of beneficence and majesty. The frightening aspects of a brutal sea are negated and overpowered by the intensity of Plath's need to reach the static core centred inside the sea's flux. The inner stability is enough to attract the Self to it.

Other poems in The Colossus emphasize the destruction of which the "formless" sea is capable. In "Departure", the disappointment experienced by the persona who is forced to leave an idyllic haven because of economic reasons is exaggerated by the brutality of the sea. The endless, cruel beating of the waters against the bay mocks the harshness of her situation. The individual's domination by a world which is exterior to her and yet is insistent upon controlling her, demonstrates the lack of effective choice and direction in the Self. The sea, as an image of social pressure, is able to debase the individual identity.

The colour "green" is repeated several times not only
in "Departure" but also in "Snakecharmer" and "The Hermit at Outermost House", two poems which further describe the varied character of the sea. If as Melander believes, "it [Green] applies to some hidden creative sources that further life and help to withstand and perhaps even conquer nature", then the tone of deficiency and despair in "Departure" is unfortunately unnecessary. Both the snakecharmer and the hermit are capable of overriding the hostility of the elements and in particular, the waters. The former develops what Aird terms the "formulation of an obscure mystical insight" while the latter employs courage and humour in facing the rawness of the natural world. The sea is not only incapable of destroying these men but it is also itself controlled by one of them—the snakecharmer who pipes his own watery world of greeness. It is these traits which the persona in "Departure" lacks. She is unaware of the "certain meaning green" which could prevent her self-effacement and dejection, and she is mocked by the incessant beating of the waves as they crash against the land. The final stanza in this poem focuses on the sea, leaving the persona behind just as she leaves the countryside behind her. She departs, incomplete and unfulfilled.

Another poem which elaborates the sea's destructive tendencies is "Point Shirley". The view depicted in this poem recalls the poet's childhood and her love for the grandmother


10 Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath, p.27.
who once lived here. The acute sorrow at the loss of a loved one has been mellowed into a feeling of resignation and it is with such a tone that Plath now faces the sea.

The poet describes the water as an extremely volatile substance. Its nature changes and each stanza of the poem becomes more savage with each image that it evokes. There is a violent, thrashing movement throughout the entire work. The immediate response that Plath offers is one of finality. Incorporating phrases such as "the sea's collapse" and "the gritted wave leaps...onto a bier," Plath depicts the water as a harbinger of death. Its power is amplified by the cruel relentless motion of the waves. The aggressive drive of the sea is then shown as a form of sexual urge and the water is personified as "sluttish" and "rutted", dancing through the windows it has destroyed. Because of the corrosive force of water, Plath also depicts the sea as a vulture whose "cold gizzard ground those rounds" in the bay. Each of these images denotes an absence or an abandonment of sorts—death brings a loss of life; lust results in the forfeit of rationality; and decay fragments the matter it attacks. In a similar manner, when the poet portrays the waters as elements of religious ceremonies, as "masses in the wind," she also indicates a loss. The "relics" spewed out by the waves are displaced, lost in the foam of the sea. The crimson sunset designating the blood of the carnivorous feast of a "dog-faced" sea also indicates the viciousness of the waves. Bones, the remains of many and the tangible symbol of his deeds are "pawed and tossed"
with carelessness and indifference and "the sea/ Eats at Point Shirley." It is the persecutor; all else is its victim.

This power stands by itself unthreatened, mocking the temporal existence of human beings. It is evident that the poem contains the "sombre theme of contrast" which explores the "fragile transience of man's experience and the obstinate survival of nature."\(^{11}\) By maintaining its theme of opposition, the poem heightens the impact of Otherness in its crushing attempts to annihilate the Self. And it is only through memories and recollections that human deeds and achievements can be raised from the depths of the unknown. Plath's grandmother transcends death because of her strength of mind and her willpower which were constantly battling against the adverse effects of the sea. It is these qualities which the poet recalls in "Point Shirley."

A series of poems in *The Colossus*, although not technically sequenced together, has a common focus. Plath's treatment of the subject matter, the repetition and variation on the main theme and the imagery incorporated in them are the unifying aspects linking these poems.

These works deal with a strange masculine figure who is always situated near or in the water. He is often clothed in dark apparel and is reminiscent of the man whom Plath later calls that "black man" and a "black shoe/ In which I lived like a foot/ For thirty years."\(^{12}\) His is the "head in the


\(^{12}\) "Daddy" in *Ariel*. 
freakish Atlantic" and he is, in reality, the poet's father. His appearance initiates the associational pattern of water, death and stasis. Although there are threatening aspects in this "collection" of poems, their intent is often the opposite and Plath manages to insert a strange appeal into their meaning. Dual polarities can thus evolve and the love/hate paradox which Dyson amplified becomes even more evident. Plath's unique view of Self and Otherness is responsible for this disparity.

Using the father as their central motif, these poems expand upon Plath's divided perspectives. They encourage an "apprenticeship" with Otherness and the poet's portrait of Self becomes malleable and plastic, shaping itself to the capricious whim of the other essence.

An analysis of "All the Dead Dears" will serve to introduce the significance of Plath's father and will then identify further references to the "man in black", "old man" and "a chilly god" as all being the same entity as the "image looming under the fishpond surface" of the poem. The poet describes how humans are powerless to escape the inevitable approach of death and how those long dead can still attract their

13 These references are located in "Man in Black", "Full Fathom Five" and "Ouija", respectively. It is these poems which jointly comprise the "father-collection". Although the bull in "The Bull of Bendylaw" is considered to be Plath's father, he is dehumanized into animal form and as such, does not correspond to this series where human characters are the primary element expanding the water/death motif. SeeRobert Philip's interesting interpretation of this latter poem in his chapter, "The Dark Tunnel" in The Confessional Poets.
living descendants toward them, whether by emotional ties or by an actual death. The tenacity of such a pull, personified as a living force, is evident in the phrase "barnacle dead". The appropriateness of this phrase is obvious when one considers the absolute finality and irreversibility of death—barnacles then become an exact imagistic symbol of this persistent clinging. By subtly introducing a water image and then aligning it with a seemingly unrelated value, Plath continues this association using her typical transductive standard. The coffin case in the museum takes on a peculiar shine so that the "mercury-backed glass" into which the poet gazes becomes a mirror. In it, she sees the past as a frightening reflection where "Mother, grandmother, great-grandmother/ Reach hag hands to haul me in." 14 This manoeuvre conjures up macabre visions of the numerous myths in which hands rise up from watery places to drag in unsuspecting victims. 15 The sensation of uneasiness which Plath experiences at such an abrupt

14 The notion of familial ties found in "Lorelei" where the sirens who attempt to draw the poet into the river depths are called Sisters is reinforced here where the lady in the coffin is not a kin of Plath's "yet kin she is". She easily transfigures herself into the closer relations of matriarchal positions, again with the intent of hauling the poet into herself or by imagistic extension, into the watery world of a deathly Otherness. This familiarity tends to lessen the reluctance which the poet might feel in losing herself to another reality.

15 Melander brings out Steiner's intriguing reference to "The Duchess of Malfi" with the related lines: "When I look into the fish-pond in my garden,/ Methinks I see a thing armed with a rake." Unfortunately, neither follows the congruity in this pattern other than in the appearance of the hand and in the mystery of the underwater world. To handle this topic would prove too lengthy at present and this reference is mentioned only as a point of interest.
transition from present to past, from life to death is reinforced by the water imagery. The mirror transforms into a lake surface and beneath it "looms" the image of the "daft father". Although Plath is allowed no choice in entering this realm, she nevertheless expresses little fear. She and the father can inhabit the same element, water. The two worlds are seemingly reconciled; they are "deadlocked". To advance or recede is impossible and a form of stasis is reached.

Philips goes one step farther when he postulates that "in the world of her private mythology, the sea and the father and herself become one." Kosenstein also offers a plausible explanation for this multi-self, this plurality of being. She notes that "to like is to be like, to resemble. In the ex-

16 That this is indeed her father whom Plath is referring to and not merely a form of figurative speech can be ascertained by a reference to the original volume of this poem in the Cambridge manuscript (an unexpurgated volume). Two stanzas, deliberately deleted from further editions contain a description of this father as Otto Emil Plath, the renowned academic and apianist. Placed after stanza three, the lines read:

A man who used to clench
Bees in his fist
And out-rant the thundercrack,
That one: not known enough: death's trench
Digs him into my quick:
At each move I confront his ready ghost.

Glaring sunflower-eyed
From the glade of hives,
Antlered by a bramble-hat,
Berry-juice purpling his thumbs: O I'd
Run time aground before I met
His match. Luck's hard which falls to love

Such long gone darlings...

17 Robert Philips, "The Dark Tunnel", p.58.
treme, it is to become the other and to lose identity altogether. 18 The boundaries of the Self appear so translucent that they can merge with Otherness and sense no invasion of this false-self. Dying then becomes as natural and inevitable as being born and living.

There is a similar elaboration of associational technique in "Ouija". The figure beneath the fishpond surface is only slightly altered: "It is a chilly god, a god of shades, / Rises to the glass from his black fathoms." Death, in the nature of a Lethe-like existence, is suggested by the poet's use of shades, black and chilly. The idea of a drowned man resurfacing 19 is also denoted causing an eerie, upsetting atmosphere to pervade the poem. The coldness of the sea bottom is amplified by the insertion of another image. Again, it is a mirror in which "the glass mouth sucks blood—heat from my forefinger." The hags of the previous poem are unified into the single entity of this old god. Their powers are not diminished and he, too, is sticky with death: "wormy couriers are at his bones."

In "Full Fathom Five", the god retains his antique age. Although he diminishes in stature by regressing to human form, he gains distinction by his mystery. He is stranger and more


19 This slightly variant interpretation of "death by water" is more prevalent in Crossing the Water where the dead of the deep float up to confront the poet. See "Finnisterre", "A Life" and "Crossing the Water". These poems indicate a deliberate encounter between Plath and certain beings.
enigmatic than his predecessors of the previous poems. His coming matches the tide's and the foam-capped seas alters into his "white hair, white beard, far-flung,/ A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves/ Crest and trough." The relationship of the old man to the sea causes both to merge so that the secrets of the deep render him equally "unimaginable" and "not fathomed."

There is a timelessness in this poem which parallels the cessation of time as brought about by death. Rumoured dead, the old man resurfaces unconquered by time and thereby rendered timeless. Just as the "unbeaten channels/ Of the ocean" are besieged by time, so also do the "trenched lines of [his] grained face" shed time. He possesses the godlike power of permanency and awesomeness. It is to these marvels that the poet is drawn. The final line denotes resolution in a kinship with Otherness: "Father, this thick air is murderous,/ I would breathe water." The identity of the old man is finally established and the poet, by seeking a return to his "kingdom", ends her "exile" of the Self. She expresses a distinct wish to join him and since human beings are incapable of surviving underwater, this wish translates into a longing for death. In appealing to the god as father, Plath enters into what Howard defined as "a transaction with Otherness" where the "negotiations are taking the form of a dialogue."20 The plea which the poet forwards here is that expressed in

20 Richard Howard, "And I Have no Face: I Have Wanted to Efface Myself", p. 81.
"Lorelei" where she begs to be ferried down to the depths of
the other realm. In both, she assumes the capability of ex-
isting in such an environment. The reversal of the natural
order in which a human breathes water, not air, indicates
the reversal of a stable existence where the Self can no
longer realize its own limits and attempts to merge with that
surrounding it. Since the sea and the father are one, and
the poet intends to unite with this oneness, then a sort of
'negative capability' occurs where Plath "overcomes the ten-
sion between the perceiver and the thing-in-itself by liter-
ally becoming the thing-in-itself."\(^{21}\)

Newmwn expands this statement saying that "such an identification represents the
poet's triumph over Otherness."\(^{22}\) In that she remains complete
as an individual although swallowed up by the dissolution of
an alien order.

The poet's description of the worlds beneath the water's
surface shifts to the shoreline when she portrays the "Man in
Black". His appearance disrupts both the setting and the at-
mosphere of the poem. He represents a disturbance to the
scene and his "blackness" ultimately dominates the entire
beach: his "dead/ Black coat, black shoes, and \[his\] / Black
hair" draws the natural world toward him and he becomes the
"fixed vortex" on the cliffs "riveting stones, air,/ All of
it, together." Everything revolves around him even the vio-

\(^{21}\) Charles Newman, "Candor is the Only Wile", p.33.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p.34.
lent sea breaking and unfisting on the headland. He is the
magnetic core of Otherness and his power is obvious: like the
ture vortex, he is capable of sucking Self toward him. The
man in black is the static core within the principle of flux.
Lucie-Smith sees this poem as "anticipating" the subtleties
of the later work" by its vague allusions to death and sta-
sis.

All of these poems display the poet's confrontation with
a specific form of Otherness, her dead father, and a subse-
quently urge to join him in his watery domain.

Of the remainder of the poems found in The Colossus,
only a few others incorporate Plath's use of sea imagery.
These display a unique strain setting them apart from the
rest. Thematically, they are related; they are, however,
unique in their respective stylistic interpretation of the
poet's personal code.

In "Hardcastle Crags", Plath exhibits a rare attitude
to the sea. Here, it is manipulated by another force and lacks
the determination and drive it previously demonstrated in
other poems. Now it is "tireless, tied...a moon-bound sea"
moving on a root. Its discontent at its encumbrance is evi-
dent and a certain passivity and helplessness is suggested by
these lines. The dominance of the moon regulates the water's
flow and the latter is subjugated by the lunar pull. This
manipulation corresponds to the ineffectualness experienced
by the persona as she herself is reduced by her natural envi-
ronment. She too is threatened by the starkness of the moon
and by the menacing bulk of the hills. Both are unquestioning victims in the natural order.

Another poem which elicits a tone of dejection is "The Burnt-out Spa." The emotional response of the poet at seeing her reflection in the water is one of self-denunciation. The reality of her world opposes that of the quiet perfection of the still world which duplicates her image. Negation exists throughout the poem and the persona refuses to admit that there is a link between herself and her watery twin. The woman she sees is "blue and improbable," "gracious and austere, seated beneath the toneless water." And Plath repeats "It is not I, it is not I." She will not admit that this perfect image is herself nor can she enter this realm of false reality: "her dead, watery Self--the Other transformed into an identity--is located in a Byzantium of still perfection, beyond the process of vision."23 In this poem, the old yearning is beyond both her desire and her capability. This same antithesis is evident in the natural landscape as it contrasts with the human world. "The ichor of spring", that ethereal fluid of the immortal gods, flows into "the marshy lip" that falls below the bridge into the domain which houses the persona's reflection. Because she herself can never attain the completion and lifeless perfection of her image, her physical human Self is therefore nurtured by the sacred mead. Yet the stream of life that hustles human beings is ironically

23 J.D. McClatchy, "Staring from Her Hood of Bone: Adjusting to Sylvia Plath", p.158.
insufficient and cannot approximate the ichor's strength. It "neither nourishes nor heals." It is on this note of disappointmen t and discontent that the poem concludes.

It seems obvious from this examination of Plath's first collection that her attitude and reactions to the sea were varied. She oscillated from appeal and desire to horror and rejection depending on the corresponding nature the sea displayed. Whether tantalizing or disturbing, water maintained its singular, vital influence on the poet's achievements. It continued to subject her to an intense exploration of the Self.
CHAPTER IV

CROSSING THE WATER

During the intermediary period between the publication of The Colossus and the writing of Ariel, Plath wrote many other poems. Written during the last three years of her life, they remained unpublished until recently, when in 1971, Ted Hughes selected poems from this period and collected them into two volumes entitled Crossing the Water and Winter Trees. These poems are highly indicative of the transitional stage Plath experienced in her work: she no longer required the use of the thesaurus, relying instead on a spontaneous outburst of creative energy; she moved from a withdrawn and almost secretive, codified style to that of a more precise and specific manner; and she displayed a sensitive awareness without the restraint evident in her earlier work. Eleanor Ross Taylor sees these poems as "bursting with self, and, unlike the comparative classicism of her first book, highly romantic in their lack of reserve."¹ Another point of interest is the fact that these poems, unlike those of The Colossus, were meant to be read aloud. Their meaning depended upon their verbalization and pronunciation. Plath indicated as much in

her interview for the British Council in 1962.\footnote{2}

The continuity of Plath's thematic foundation maintains itself through her early work and through this intermediary stage which is represented in \textit{Crossing the Water}. The poet continues the use of sea imagery in this volume although her points of departure are somewhat varied from those in \textit{The Colossus}.

The introductory poem "\textit{Wuthering Heights}" seems to determine the mood of the remainder of the collection in which the isolation of the individual Self is reinforced by the desolate landscape. Aird also insists "that when the natural world appears in the poems... it serves as a reflection of the poet's emotions."\footnote{3} The entire poem stresses the act of dissolution of the particular; the horizons evaporate as the persona approaches; the wind funnels the heat from her body; and the air's sounds are moaning recollections of human existence. When Plath thrusts herself into such a gloomy atmosphere, she immediately calls attention to herself, the "one upright, / Among all horizontals," the lonely Self standing out in a world of Otherness. Nature, by assaulting her senses and attempting to diminish her, emphasizes the notion of the frailty of the individual sense of Self, a recurrent theme in

\footnote{2} Plath is quoted as having remarked: "May I say this: the ones I've read are very recent, and I have found myself having to read them aloud to myself. Now this is something I didn't do. For example, my first book, \textit{The Colossus}-- I can't read any of the poems aloud now. I didn't write them to be read aloud... Now these very recent ones--I've got to say them, I speak them to myself. Whatever... lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them aloud."

\footnote{3} Eileen Aird, "Introduction" in \textit{Sylvia Plath}, p.5.
this volume. And water, her occasional source of comfort and release, fails her being "limpid as solitudes/ That flee through [her] fingers." The ravages of nature are too cruel to allow her any respite and she remains a lone and threatened Self at the conclusion of the poem.

There is a short series of poems which corresponds to that section in the previous chapter dealing with the sea as the realm of strange creatures. Drowned men resurface and signs of another sort of existence beneath the water are evident. The sea is animated with living entities and Plath is dangerously aware of the illusiveness of such elements and of the strange, alien deeps from which they rise. Spender sympathizes with her "occasional sense of being teased by glimpses of better worlds, also lurking beyond the surface of things."  

Such is the situation in the title poem "Crossing the Water." Plath's immediate sense of Self is revealed in the introductory line. Everything is shrouded in black and she is one of "two black, cut-paper people." A certain substancelessness or lack of reality is suggested by this description. The inanimate nature of the lifeless dolls denounces their humanistic traits rendering them useless, defenseless and ineffectual. The insistent repetition of black is reminiscent of the father image in The Colossus, that

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"black man" who easily could accommodate himself to such a setting. Darkness is prevalent here except for the "little light...filtering from the water flowers" and the pale, valedictory hand of a snag in the water. The rest of the scene is curtained by a sombre veil of darkness mingled with the sensations of coldness and silence. This sombreness amplifies the dejection sadly professed by the poet who resigns herself to reality knowing that there is a more vibrant appeal in the other world. Its pleasures, however, are ambiguous. Although the water houses "cold worlds" of the "spirit of blackness", it also conceals "expressionless sirens" whose silence is that of "astounded souls". Aird determines the reason for such a divided reaction when she remarks: "the persona's reactions to her surroundings are so raw and immediate that all extremes of feeling are merged into one complex sensation both painful and beautiful."

The quiet mood of "Crossing the Water" is reminiscent of the song of the Lorelei whose "silence is worse/ Even than [their] maddening song." The water-nymphs in both poems possess a magnetic ability, drawing in those people who remain on the shore or surface of the water. The silence in the landscape duplicates the emotional response of the poet, thereby compounding the isolation of the Self. Undecided and tempted by two worlds, the Self remains static choosing neither.

In "Finnisterre", the second poem, the sea is the embodiment of shapeless flux. Formless and boundless, it asserts

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5 Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath, p.66.
its nature by sheer force. Exploding against the black cliffs "with no bottom, or anything on the other side of it," it cannons into the ears of the drowned who whiten the water with their faces. The Bay of the Dead is the resting place of the dead who inhabit both the white foam of the bay and by extension, the white cilling mists of the cliffs. Death and the sea are further linked by the "souls, rolled in the doom-noise of the sea." These are the dead sailors buried in their watery graves.

In allowing herself to be victimized by the mists which stuff her mouth with cotton, the poet is indicating her submissiveness to the natural forces and her correspondingly sombre view of Self. Although she is attacked by the mists, she is an obliging victim who refuses to struggle. Hence, her self-esteem is lowered. She allows the Self to be manipulated and antagonized by the cruel carelessness of the environment. The bleakness of both the setting and the persona's plight are identical so that each expresses an affinity for the other.

Without a victim, there can be no persecutor. Lavers, in analysing this point in more detail, decides that "subject and object, torturer and victim are in her poetry finally indistinguishable, merely lending the depth of their existence to all powerful entities and symbols." The drops of moisture of the mist become the tears on the persona's face thereby uniting the two essences. A harsh interdependence is then indicated; when the persona is offered trinkets from the tropical

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6 Annette Lavers, "The World as Icon", p.102.
blue place, she ignores them preferring instead the "beautiful formlessness" of the Bay of the Dead. She is similar to the statue which overlooks the cliffs, silent and powerful, unconcerned with human affairs and intent only upon the turbulent motion and chaos of the sea. The waters can efface the persona's uniqueness just as easily as they obliterated the identities of the dead. It is this anonymity which the austere madonna loves and which the persona craves. This yearning for effacement is according to Boyer's opinion, "the expression of a determined wish to be, occasionally, nothing at all, and thereby to inhabit a various universe according to the principle of negative capability." 7

The topical blue place in "Finnisterre" recalls that part of the tapestry in "A Life" which is the static, less frank version of reality. In one corner, the waves "bow in single file,/ Never trespassing in bad temper:/ Stalling in midair,/ Short-reined, pawing like paradiground horses." They are controlled and tamed, as inactive and artificial as the tedious human life they correspond to. Their attractiveness is reduced by the overworked propriety of the too idealized tapestry. They are unreal because they do not typify the true essence of sea-waves which are moving, violent, thundering assaults. However, another area in the rug depicts a truer scene somewhat akin to the Bay of the Dead. It is full of motion and feeling: this "landscape is, more frank." Although

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the sea here is also "flattened to a picture", its crucial values are accentuated. The gulls over it cry in a "cat-voice of departure" and from its depths "a drowned man, complaining of the great cold, / Crawls up out of the sea." The horror implied by this sea is obvious—it does not conceal its nature beneath a stagnant tropical blueness. Instead, it seethes and shoves. However static this part of the tapestry actually is, its emotive quality is powerful enough to imitate the movements of a real sea. Plath calls attention to this sea rather than the other by focusing a light on it which "falls without letup, blindingly." Her preference for the active water is obvious. Its nature is truer.

Plath's metamorphic ability is retained in this volume. Gordon qualifies the poet's technique of transfiguration as she creates "a different world that involves a plurality of selves where... the poet must undergo successive transformations of self in order to fulfill her continual demands of being relevant." 8 "Private Ground" depicts such an event. The first frost brings with it the evacuation of a goldfish pond of an estate at which the poet is staying. The water is the vital force of the pond so that once emptied, the pond "collapses like lungs", a strangely animal personification. And the water attempts to return to the pond bottom. When the poet sympathetically "collects" all the floundering carp, her action acquires a dual connotation. Just as the water is a sympathetic environment for the fish, Plath's reaction is an

equally protective one. It is at this point that the two entities can merge. The object of empathy being the same, Plath and the water exchange identities and the poet becomes the inanimate lake, the "morgue of old logs and old images." It too "opens and shuts" accepting the carp among its reflections. The familiarity and natural ease with which the two can respond to each other allows such a transmutation to occur. By rescuing the glittery fish from an airy death, somewhat akin to Plath's cry in "Full Fathom Five" of "this thick air is murderous, I would breathe water," Plath is duplicating the life-saving quality of the lake. Their ties are the bonds of kinship.

Plath resorts to the use of dialogue in "Mirror" when she speaks from within the confines of a mirror. By equating the real woman with her image, she becomes inanimate and outside of herself. Her function is clear and unswerving: "whatever I see I swallow immediately/Just as it is." There are no emotions involved here, only precise reflections and unerringly cold images. By assimilating the nature of the mirror, the persona artfully takes on its purely reproductive function. Her existence is then based only on duplicating the world exterior to herself. When the mirror imagistically transforms itself into a lake, the persona shifts her identity once more. She feels herself truer than candles or the moon for they disguise the awful reality of the woman's appearance while the mirror/lake does not. But the cold sterility of such a life is frightening. By reducing her human traits to
an emotionless life where she can only exist in the presence of others, and then, only to reflect them, the persona develops a horrible barrenness. As the woman gazes into the mirror, she sees an old woman rising up from the depths "like a terrible fish." Plath aptly introduces the notion of the drowned resurfacing when she concludes: "In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman/ Rises toward her day after day." These lines recall the wondrous, strange change in the old man of "Full Fathom Five" who also rises out of the still sea. Here, it is time which is dangerous to the persona for, like nature, it controls and mocks mankind's brief lifespan and meaningless efforts of attaining grandeur. Unlike the poem "Point Shirley", "Mirror" concludes with the natural order's success in ravaging the human world. The woman lacks the grandmother's stamina and courage in opposing the elements which can reduce human individuality and worth to nothingness; the poem terminates in fear and frustration.

In many of the poems dealing with the sea, Plath often sustains the impact of the thematic core by bringing the poem to a climactic conclusion. This deliberate protraction is obvious in "Blackberrying." An element of anticipation grows throughout the entire poem until its strange outcome at the end. Alone in a blackberry lane, the persona is aware of only two things: the bushes of blue-black fruit and a "sea/ Somewhere at the end" of the alley. It is "heaving". Its groans intensify as the poet moves past the hooks of the bushes and her anxiety is founded on the fear that "the sea will not
appear at all." She bestows great value on the sea, anticipating it with every step down the path until finally, she approaches the end and "the only thing to come now is the sea." Her desire to view the water becomes an actualization of a need for she focuses so strongly on reaching the edge of the cliff. With a strange release, she finally sees the water but it is "nothing, nothing but a great space/ Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths/ Beating and beating at an intractable metal." It is with a shock that the poet faces the "noisy nothingness" of the sea. And the irony of her anticipation increases. The void and oblivion are a disappointment, but more so, the clamouring incessant din of the water. It affronts her sense and disturbs her inner being. In the conclusion, the focus turns solely to the water and Plath is excluded, having been assaulted by "the pressure of natural forces which reduce her being to complete insignificance."

Reduction occurs because she allows herself to temporarily weaken in the face of Otherness.

There is another poem of anticipation which concludes on the opposite cord of reaction to "Blackberrying". "Whitsun"

9 Eileen Aird, *Sylvia Plath*. Aird sees this "noisy nothingness" as a vague threat, an attack upon Plath's precarious sense of Self.


11 Joyce Carol Oates interprets "Miss Plath as an identity reduced to desperate statements about her dilemma as a passive witness to a turbulent world." I disagree with this view because I do not see Plath as passive even though she was often a victim of the natural universe. Her strength is based on her repeated and persistent interaction and involvement with Otherness.
also describes the poet's eagerness to view the sea, now presumably after a long illness. The ordeal, however, is not sustained. The confrontation occurs in the introduction and Plath's reaction is bleakly evident: "This is not what I meant." Disappointment is again her reaction. It is not the clamouring void which offends her now but rather the tamed, corrupted degeneration of a seashore tainted by human society. Her disgust at the carnival-like atmosphere of the beach also extends itself to the water which the poet describes as a "weed-moustached sea/ Exhibiting its glaucous silks,/ Bowing and truckling like an old-school oriental." This ludicrous portrayal is appropriate in considering the now-blemished environment. Her disgust at such a diseased and meaningless destruction of the natural landscape is emphasized by the "ill" grownups who sip "the thin/ Air like medicine" and who are "idle/ As if in hospital." A malady infects the vegetation and the hawthorn has a "death-stench". This social decay affects the persona too: she lies "seasick and fever-dry" mocked by the waves which "pulse and pulse like hearts." The distress in this poem is total; it pervades the theme, the content and the intent.

These are the poems in *Crossing the Water*, a collection which "measures the poet's capacity to endure limited distance and Otherness,"\(^\text{12}\) a volume which again displays Plath's ambivalent reactions to the forces exterior to her own existence.

The clear, green, quite breathable atmosphere,
Cold grits underfoot,
And the spidery water-dazzle on field and street.

("Lyonnesse" in Winter Trees)
CHAPTER V

WINTER TREES

The entries in this third collection of Plath's poetry are related to Ariel in that the poems in these volumes were composed during the last nine months of her life; their thematic crux will therefore hinge on the same patterns and techniques. A shift, however, is evident in the associational scheme of Plath's later works, and her focus moves from a determined arrangement of multiplying associations (with the corresponding linkage of the sea to the moon, glitter, her father, death and mirrors) toward a more delineated view of these images as independent units. This is not to imply that the syncretic/transductive approach is absent—it has merely been translated into a less complex code. Because of this alteration, imagistic values are more often paired than expanded into a diversity of meaning.

McClatchy contends, and I am in complete agreement, that in Winter Trees, "that moon—the dead, silent stone, chilled with false light and shadowed scars—comes to dominate the later poems, as the sea had her earlier work." However, it should be noted that sea imagery is not absent but merely subordinated to other tropes which were previously an integ-

ral part of her own codified mythology. A study of these poems will demonstrate a consistent return to the sea.

The poems which elucidate the poet's use of sea imagery are relatively few in *Winter Trees*. However, when the general theme of this volume is considered, this deficiency seems appropriate. Departures\(^2\) and absences are the central acts in these poems. The emotional emptiness and spiritual void they incur leave the poet with little to detail or dramatize in her delineation of her clear perceptions. They focus instead on interior, mental examinations, almost rationalizations of the condition described in the poems.

In the majority of these poems, an image is repeatedly recalled. It is reminiscent of the central ideology in both "Mirror" and "Ouija"; that is, they deal with the strange denizens of the mirror/water world of Otherness.

In "Child", the infant's eye is the tiny mirror, the clear pool which the poet wants to fill with "grand and classical" images "not this troublous/ Wringing of hands, this dark/ Ceiling without a star." The child's eyes, then, reflect the mother's image with its discouraged confusion rather than its own perfection of untainted and uncorrupted innocence. The poet's Self is incapable of dominating this new Otherness.

\(^2\)In Raymond Smith's review of *Winter Trees*, he professes that absence and narcissism are the dominant themes presented in this collection, for in exploring the state of womanhood, the poems deal with the absence of the father/husband and the narcissism of the male principle. Gordon also agrees that Plath's "withdrawal from the physical creates the presence of an absence". See p.283 in her article "Saint Sylvia" for a more detailed analysis of this point. The poet's own interpretation of departures is often mistakenly interpreted as social or personal escapism.
the baby's existence.

"Gigolo" incorporates these identical symbols twisting them to another purpose. The solipsism which Plath expressed in attempting to manipulate and intrude into her child's life alters into a divergent perspective of that same self-beati-

fication. Now, however, it is narcissistic in its intent and masculine in its displacement. Each stanza draws emphasis on the "I", a self-important and hence restricted individual. His home is appropriate; each window is a mirror reflecting his image. His acts are self-worshipping; he can turn women into "ripples of silver", mirror duplicates of himself. Each sexual encounter transfixes him in exactly the same manner, "gratified,/ All the fall of water an eye/ Over whose pool I tenderly/ Lean and see me." Even the ultimate union of coi-

tion is but the generation of his own self-love. Self-grati-

fication is of the utmost importance and the insertion of the word "glitter" is tropically appropriate. It recalls both death and the symbolic function of death as "masturbating a glitter." This is the most obvious form of physical self-love.

3Many critics have accused Plath of being solipsistic. Her emphasis on the "I" in her poetry, her use of the persona as an extension of her true self and her repeated attempts to intercalate herself into the other world exterior to herself are the various reasons she is deemed "egotistical." Indeed, this theory that "Self-existence is the only certainty" is a valid point to consider in lieu of the poet's insistent urges to clarify and solidify her view of Self. Oates, Gordon and McClatchy use the very-term solipsism to define Plath's empha-

sis on self-existence while other critics such as Aird, Cooley, Feldman and Boyers employ the classifications of self-contain-

ment, narcissism, extreme subjectivity and self-enclosure. Whatever the term, Plath remains intensely concerned with her personal interior world.
And yet, it also carries connotations of a sterile deathliness. The gigolo's sordid emphasis on Self with the complete exclusion of others is a small death in itself. Sole inhabitant of his select domain, he is incapable of conferring life into someone else's existence by bestowing a self-less love upon them. This type of narcissism is also deadly because it stops with itself— it cannot propagate other beings; reproduction of a second self then ceases with the individual. 4

In "Childless Woman" there is also this same incapacity for reproduction. Here it is not the narcissistic impulse which prevents any offspring. The mirrors which the poet spins are "loyal to her image" but are apparently used to reinforce her notion of Self since, in this poem, there is no child to substantiate her identity. Nullity and blankness are the empty associations inferred by the images of the empty womb, the discharged moon and the lineless hand. And the woman, sensing her infertility, interprets it as a deathly stagnancy.

The mirror is again employed as an extension of Self in "Purdah". Female Self is depicted here as an imaging of the masculine Otherness, the two worlds being separate yet dependent upon each other. Although the persona, the woman personified as a purdah, has a "gleam like a mirror", it is the bridegroom who is the "lord of mirrors" thus indicating his

4 The characteristics of narcissism are those which Plath often exposes in "perfection", that condition which, although grand in its completion and wholeness, lacks a vibrant life of its own. It is terrible because it is sterile and boringly absolute in its infinite nature. See "The Munnich Mannequins" and "Years" in Ariel for Plath's poetic interpretation of this sort of perfection.
sovereignty in this domain of veils and screens. The statement that "I am his. / Even in his/ Absence, I/ Resolve in my/ Sheath of Impossibilities" indicates the unresolved nature of the persona's identity which is extremely feeble and depends on the male's existence for an affirmation of its own worth and value. The Self is but the empty surface-glitter of the mirror when the bridegroom is absent; his presence alone resolves the situation by impressing an identity on the female looking-glass.

Rather than attract the persona with its female kinship, the moon serves to alienate her further so that "her visibilities hide." It treats its own subjects with cold debase-ment and silent reproof. Only the bridegroom is able to assert the woman's identity thereby surpassing the deficient feminine principle, that lunar body, the moon. The woman herself is incapable of self-actualization.

Mirror imagery incorporates another quality into its meaning in "The Courage of Shutting Up." The looking glass with its visage recalls the world of "Ouija," the domain of that dark god of shades who rises up from the fathoms. Her,

5 Much discontent is expressed in this volume in regard to women's position in life. This poem in particular empha-
sizes the "small jewelled doll" which to Plath's mind is the singular identity of all women. It is worshipped, glorified and then hidden from view in the hearts of men, requiring them for their release. Yet in the conclusion, the poet indicates that such a restriction will eventually result in a disastrous, rejection of the male principle. This theme also occurs in "Lesbos", "The Applicant", "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" to mention only a few poems. It is in these final poems of her life that Plath focused emphatically on the plight of the female in modern day society.
"the face that lived in this mirror is the face of a dead man." As in "Child", it is the eyes which are the initial instigators of this associational pattern; they mirror and reflect the outer world in the eyes of the Self. Life, as viewed in a mirror, then becomes a terrible room "in which a torture goes on one can only watch." Intervention is impossible because admission into this other reality is impossible. "Mirrors can kill and talk" only within their own specific domain for they are capable of destroying the warm essence of reality; their duplication of it is only a cold, passive pictorial echo. They can reproduce only expressions, not the emotional vibrance beneath them. And mirrors, although silent, speak a non-verbal language in which they reveal disturbing information in their mocking reprint of the true situation.

"The Other" treats this theme by subjecting the persona to the presence of Otherness. The mirror represents an unidentifiable concern for Plath. And she rebels against the frigidity of such contact: "Cold glass, how dare you insert yourself// Between myself and myself." Her dual identities which can unite into a more complex entity are now separated by the thin glass of the mirror. The other is then the collective symbol for all the traits of the vague otherworld, the indeterminable quality of its essential centre.

Some poems in this collection deal more specifically with the sea. "The Rabbit Catcher" parallels the other two poems in Crossing the Water which present a hostile environment where the poet is victimized and held captive. The gagging and "tear-
ing off" of her voice is reminiscent of a similar incident in "Finnisterre" where the mists stuff the persona's mouth with cotton and in "Parliament Hill Fields" where a wind stops her breath like a bandage. In each, the hostility tends to decrease the amount of breathable air available. This is interesting in lieu of the fact that the persona often elsewhere expressed the wish to breathe water because the air was too thick and murderous. The ferocity in the setting permeates every object and even the sea attacks, blinding her with its lights, "the lives of the dead/ Unreeling in it, spreading like oil." Again there is an exchange between the two worlds: the dead resurface into the air and the living must therefore plunge into the depths, breathing water. By referring to the denizens of the deep, this poem links itself to the drowned-man series in Crossing the Water.

McClatchy's comment on the poet's use of the double views of experience aptly applies to this poem: "...most often, Plath is careful to modulate one view into the other; the natural world is internalized, its contours and meanings shifting into new significance." The viciousness of the natural elements of the scene are evidently the externalized concretion of the turmoil of her inner conflict. Her relationship with the man is like a trap; it is destructive in its constriction just as the wind is suffocating in its strength. The poem becomes cyclic so that the "place of force" mentioned is located in

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6 J.D. McClatchy, "Staring from her Hood of Bone: Adjusting to Sylvia Plath", p. 156.
both the mental and the actual condition. Victimized on dual levels, the persona is trapped within her loveless social relationship and within her lifeless natural position in the universe.

An analysis of "Lyonnesse" will reveal a great similarity to "The Bull of Bendylaw." In both, a town is swamped by the sea and the inhabitants manage to survive beneath the water. Both poems transform the sea into a living force, the latter as a bull and the former as a masculine entity. In this poem, the vitality of the being is such that it pervades the entire water-surface in the way that the old man of "Full Fathom Five" typifies the deeps. The atmosphere in all of these related works is breathable, an inversion of the natural order. And human beings are attracted to and advance toward an immersion into such a strange environment.

The strange authority figure of God is introduced in "Lyonnesse" as a powerful, severe, heedless being who deserts his own subjects. Yet his omnipotence is incomplete for he too is helplessly enclosed. His cage is not the sea but the black heavens and brilliant stars. Plath admits her repugnance for such a condition; if this submergence into another sort of life typifies the attainment of stasis as a completion of the individual life, then she is indicating as in "Years", that "what is so great in that!"

In "Lesbos", the presentation of a figure related to the sea repeats the theme of the drowned father. The futility of an uneventful, tiring domestic life elicits the corresponding
dejection and dissatisfaction necessary to arouse the detested man who "is hugging his ball and chain down by the gate/ That opens to the sea/ Where it drives in, white and black,/ Then spews it back." He is representative of the monotony and mediocrity of everyday existence but he also encompasses an additional significance. When Plath calls him a "blood-loving bat", she is suggesting the vampiristic traits of the man in "Daddy". These are the men who suck the "soul-stuff" from their women, disrespectful and mindless of their needs. Thus, they are related to the men in "Purdah" and "Gigolo" who constantly seek self-gratification, narcissistically ignorant of what injury or neglect they impose upon their lover/victims.

The hate revealed by the poet for such self-centred maleness is that same mistrust often expressed for the hostile elements of the natural world. The absolutism of such rejections is, as Oates suggests, horrifying in its implications:

if the self is set in opposition to everything that excludes it, then the distant horizons of the wilderness will be as terrible as the kitchen walls and the viciousness of hissing fat. 7

The constancy of Plath's situation and determined wish to confront Otherness continues throughout all of her poetry. The awesomeness of such a task is extreme in its finality. Dissolution of the personality can sometimes result when the poet strives to approximate or enter into the essence of this other world. As Oates summarizes, "...her awareness of a lost Cos-

mos involves her in a perpetual questioning of what nature is, what the Other is, what does it want to do to her, with her, in spite of her...?" 8

In retrospect, the poems of Winter Trees deal with the harsh actuality of human relationships which the sea in its intensity and the mirror in its luminosity aid in intensifying. The question of a true reality and that reality based on an exteriorized inner vision, or a false-reality often termed Introjection by some critics, is Plath's major concern. In deciphering the nature of such an existence and the intrinsic value of individual life within it, the poet continued her ambiguous quest for completion, for a pure whole subsistence.

It is in Ariel, the last collection before her death, where one will find the most mature indication of how Plath expressed her view of Self and Otherness. The use of water imagery in the poems of Crossing the Water and Winter Trees, intriguing as they are and revealing her on-going concern for Self and Otherness and her corresponding use of water imagery were, after all, edited and collected by Ted Hughes. Plath herself oversaw the entire publication of Ariel through to its final draft.

8 Ibid., p. 512.
They threaten
To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.

("Sheep in Fog" in Ariel)
CHAPTER VI

ARIEL

As has already been demonstrated, "the sense of 'the separateness of everything' was to become the basic predicament of Sylvia Plath's life and also one of the main themes of her poetry."¹ The poet sought to define the boundaries of Self indicating where it collided with Otherness, intermingled with it and either remained enveloped by it or else attempted to escape. The resolution attained depended on Plath's attitude to stasis, whether it was envisioned as a completion, the reward of her search for perfection, or whether it was seen as the inert, immobile force of a mundane stagnancy.²

In Ariel, the poems, as I have noted in my chapter Win-


² Plath's attitude to stasis is determined by its underlying significance or by what it can offer her. Her ambivalent views are evident in the following excerpts, making her antithetical perspectives self-explanatory. In "Edge", she states "The woman is perfected, / Her dead// Body wears the smile of accomplishment." The peaceful acceptance in this poem contrasts strongly with her conclusion in "Years":

O God, I am not like you
In your vacuous black,
Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti.
Eternity bores me,
I never wanted it.

What I love is
The piston in motion—
ter Trees, are the final works Plath created. They insert and incorporate diverse thematic attitudes within the general framework of her typical associations. The previous images are still maintained but now others are added. Health and illness are introduced in this volume, meshing their significance with that of the original notion of the sea. These various images "coalesce harmoniously" and can be described as "repertoires of a theme."

The images concerned with illness, bruises and disablement possess an air of unreality and a lack of substantiality. "Paralytic" describes the utter physical powerlessness of a man tapped in an iron lung. Although his paralysis is severe, it drugs him into an unquestioning acceptance of his condition so that he is content to survive in this numb world where nothing is demanded of him and where even his breathing, that life-force humans are so conscious of controlling, is manipulated by an exterior device. His predicament is obvious in his own deliberately misconstrued rationalization of his life: "the still waters/ Wrap my lips,/ Eyes, nose and ears,/ A clear/ Cellophane I cannot crack."

If a man is intended as the masculine identification of Plath's personal attitude, then she too should be recognized

My soul dies before it

And you, great Stasis
What is so great in that?

3 Annette Lavers, "The World as Icon", p.100.
as unaffected by and undemanding of life. By acquiescing to the stagnancy of her predicament, she causes herself to be reduced to a depersonalized, mechanistic level and in attempting to protect her "maimed self", a becomes like the man's buddha whose "wants, desire[s]" fall from him. Both enjoy the passivity of their existence.

"Contusion" deals specifically with the symbolic value of the bruises. Its relevance is emphasized by its analogy to the sea in the body, the "colour floods to the spot, dull purple. The rest of the body is all washed out," and in the imagistic recreation of this wound, "the sea sucks obsessively, / One hollow the whole sea's pivot." That the inclusion of water in this poem is important is evidenced by the poet's numerous references to the varied types of tidal activity— colour "floods", the body is all "washed out" and "the sea slides back." The natural movements of the sea in rushing out, being trapped in a pit of rock and then rolling back parallel the body's reaction to the physical bruise. The mortality of the contusion is indicated when it is called "a doom-mark" and later, the "heart shuts" and the "mirrors are sheeted." Whether the poem is to be interpreted solely on the physical or the emotional level of meaning is irrelevant. What matters is that the persona eventually succumbs. Her identity disappears with the act of death, the cessation of her heartbeats, and with the figurative loss of her image in

4 Ibid., p.127.
the mirror. If her features are absent in the glass, then she quite literally ceases to exist.

"Tulips", the final poem in this sequence on disease and malady, re-affirms the feeling of the paralytic who resents any interference with his ordered life. Plath also resents the intrusion of the life-force which the tulips signify. Their vivid redness is an assault on her senses and an invasion on her room where everything is wintery with white walls, white lids and white caps. The peacefulness which the poet was "learning" before the arrival of the flowers is actually a negating principle; it is not peace but nullity which she strives for. Because she desires oblivion, disturbances and disruptions are excruciatingly unbearable to one who had been tended as "a pebble", gently smoothed by the waters of care. Here the notion of water implies a lack of conscious awareness; the nurses deadened her senses with needles and the surgeons obliterated her identity with anaesthetics until everything sank "out of sight, and the water went over her head." Plath refuses to commit herself to reality. Like the man in the iron lung, she is drugged by this undemanding life in which she has no need to "concentrate her attention." She wants to be "utterly empty."

The false peacefulness of this clinical existence is similar to that of death; Plath decides that probably "it is what the dead close on, finally: I imagine them/ Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet." The mystical
quality of this sacramental departure no doubt prompted Melander's statement that "water and death by water are looked upon as a means to peace, and by extension, perhaps salvation." Plath's despair at the persistent intrusion of the tulips is then understandable. She reinforces this feeling by demonstrating a corresponding change in her use of water imagery. The waters of her relaxed consciousness, once peaceful and soothing, are now twisted by imagined "snags and eddies" and the flowers weigh the poet down with "a dozen red lead sinkers." The demands they make on her become more vicious as she continues to retreat from their influence; they eat up her oxygen; they disturb the calm air "filling it up like a loud noise"; and they open like "the mouth of some great African cat." She proves as insistent as the flowers and at the conclusion, it is she who conquers.

In seeking to deaden the demands of life, the poet chooses to live in a world of immobility, almost becoming an inanimate object like the shell of the man in the iron lung. She is as sterile as the ward he resides in. Gordon interprets this "disguise" as a convenient "mode of preventing the epistemological imprisonment" which she insists is the legacy of modern man. The tone at the outcome of the poem is vaguely upsetting for the poet realizes that a rejec-


6 Jan B. Gordon, "Who is Sylvia: The Art of Sylvia Plath", p.10. This epistemological imprisonment is the result of a feeling of tight confinement within a larger, empty, linguistic vacuum. Gordon also calls it emotional concentricity.
tion of commitment to life is impossible while she is still alive. The water she tastes at the end is "warm and salt, like the sea," And comes from a country as far away as health."

In "Elm" the poet refers back to the experience captured in the poems on illness. This poem forms a part of the section dealing more specifically with the moon and its relationship to both the water and the poet. "Elm" constitutes the steppingstone founded on the emotional submission evident in "Tulips".

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root.
I do not fear it; I have been there.

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

Water is surcharged with emotive capabilities. It is the unifying agent of all of Plath's attitudes to Self and Otherness, and at the moment in the poem, its collective response is "dissatisfaction." But this is the same response issuing from the elm tree, the form which Plath adopted to express her discontent and anguish. Contained within the heart of the tree, she is besieged by the waters of "this big hush" of rain, the tin-white "sound of poisons." And other elements also threaten her: she suffers the "atrocities of sunsets," the "violence" of the wind, and the merciless "drag of the moon." As in "Finnisterre", she stands opposed, and isolated, alienated from the order of the natural universe. Whereas she once allowed herself to be subdued by these elements, she now at-
tempts to retaliate. A new attitude is evident in this poem and it is with antagonism that the poet now reacts. She first suffered the scathing radiance of the moon, which "being barren," cruelly assualted her. However, reaching up outside of herself, she now clutches at the moon and finally releases it "diminished" and "flat."

Unfortunately, the drama which pervades her daily existence also inhabits her night life and she is possessed by "bad dreams." They dwell in her as the "dark thing" resides in the elm, flapping out at night searching for something in which to release its hooks. Because the intrusion of Otherness is, therefore, overwhelmingly total, the elm/persona ultimately weakens and succumbs, unable to maintain her singular identity. It remains threatened by a "face/ So murderous in its strangle of branches." The moon, undaunted, returns to haunt the persona just as it returns to its nightly position in the black sky. And if this poem shows, as Feldman believes, "a universe infected with the self, as a devilish will," then the outcome is one of defeat since the moon with its snaky acids "petrifies the will."

A related attitude is expressed in "The Moon and the Yew Tree." Here the landscape is described as a realistic one although it, in essence, belongs to the mind: "the trees of the mind are black. The light is blue." Internal and external perspectives are thereby rendered the same. The moon again

7 Feldman qualifies this view by his definition of Plath’s poetry as lyric in nature. He believes that it therefore possesses the subjectivity and narrowness of lyric verse which "tends to view the world as an aspect of the Self."
acts as a forceful antagonist with a slight difference:

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right, white as a knuckle and terribly upset. It drags the sea after it like a dark crime; it is quiet with the gape of complete despair. I live here.

Now the animosity is turned inward toward the Self, so that the despair of the moon, like the "dissatisfaction" of the sea, is again representative of the condition of the persona's Self. This opinion holds true especially when the moon is later referred to as the persona's mother. The kinship expressed here recalls the hag's relationship to the poet in "All the Dead Dears" so that they fuse their singular identities into one compounded characterization. The persona in this poem metamorphosizes achieving what Cooley sees as "a kind of self-transcendence of momentary identification with various states and objects," absorbing one of the moon's traits when she states "I have fallen a long way." Her movement is that of the lunar descent. This transformation, however, is temporary and the Self soon returns to its isolated position back into the mystical blue light entering the church. The moon also regains its "cold and planetary" nature so that it "sees nothing" of which the persona is aware. The final statement in the poem is cyclic, bringing the emotion of the poet and the "message of the yew tree" back to the silence and blackness of the mindscape in the introduction.

The moon's dragging of the tidal flow in "The Moon and

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the Yew Tree" is also found in "Stings" although here, it is mentioned merely as a descriptive technique. It reinforces the moon's dominant nature while emphasizing the inter-relationships between the two: "the moon, for its ivory powders, scour[s] the sea." This poem is relevant because it connects the moon-poems with the father-poems. The "third person" glimpsed in "Stings", the original apianist of Plath's poetry, is her father. His skills are alluded to in a remark first mentioned in "Elm" and now repeated here in "Stings." Here, it is his efforts and not the moon's which are "a rain/ Tugging the world to fruit." The cold sterility of the planet can be easily transferred to the man whose personality was as chilling and formidable as the moon's nature. The bees, acting as figurative symbols of death, "found him out,/ Moulding onto his lips like lies,/ Complicating his features." 9

The man in "Stings" is amply delineated in "Daddy", clarifying both his identity and his importance in the latter poem. He is "the man in black with the Mein Kampf look" who bit the heart of the persona in two. And he is also "the head in the freakish Atlantic" thus sealing his true identity as Plath's father and furthering the imagistic pattern of death.

9 In Ariel, it is the bee-poems in particular which reintroduce and firmly establish Plath's relationship with her father. Whereas, in the previous volumes, these father-poems were interwoven with the motif of the sea, they are now aligned with the notion of beekeeping and also puppetry and concentration camps. The terminology of apiany techniques along with the mention of mannequins, dolls and puppets and the Germanic references all intensify the previous portrayal of the father as an authority figure. Although "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus" and "Little Fugue" still maintain the father/sea relationship, it is obvious that this pattern is being replaced by this newer scheme.
by water as previously expressed in "Full Fathom Five", "Man in Black" and "Ouija". His presence is threatening and violent in this poem; he assumes the character of a German Nazi, a devil and a vampire. However, there is irony in this poem resulting from Plath's use of a nursery-rhyme tone; it mockingly exaggerates the serious and traumatic experiences expressed in the verses. This technique serves to reinforce the thematic impact, heightening the poet's fear and awe for her father and it continues to the end until a rift separates the two individuals. In "Lady Lazarus", the tone is slightly altered. The poet expresses anger and ridicule for a society which enjoys mocking her individualism. Now, however, her hate is more subdued and by discussing her attempted suicide with extreme deliberation, she achieves the same result as in using the rhyme pattern in "Daddy." Both simultaneously underestimate and exaggerate the real meaning of the poet's personal situation. Again, there are references to Germanic tyranny in the "Herr Doktor", "Herr Enemy" who then becomes "Herr God" and "Herr Lucifer" after he resuscitates the poet as his great opus.

Although the poet "rocked shut/ As a seashell" and was covered with the sticky pearl-worms of "Ouija", she is forced to return to her everyday existence. Finally, in trying to elude the persistent demands of a relentless and dehumanizing life of "A cake of soap,/ A wedding ring,/ A gold filling," the poet transforms herself into the immortal phoenix, rising up from her ashes into another life. When one considers how
Plath's selves or masks peel off her one essential Self, then the symbol of the phoenix becomes even more appropriate: with each regenerative plunge into its funeral pyre, the bird is continuously reborn, repeatedly assuming a new life and yet intrinsically possessing the same one. This is Plath's intended wish at the conclusion and it is this determination which enables her to endure the demands of both herself and Otherness.

One of the poems in Ariel stands alone as the culminating example of the poet's thematic intent, incorporating many of the meanings singularly associated with water. "Berck-Plage" seems, at first, merely a descriptive poem depicting a beach scene and then moving along with the poet to a hospital and then to a hilltop cemetery. But its true relevance is concealed beneath symbols and key images.

In the introduction, the setting contributes to the emotional response and expectancy of the poet: "this is the sea, then, this great abeyance." The water is in a state of suspension and lies dormant and still just as the poet stands calm and tranquil. Her confrontation with the man who "puts on dark glasses" and "affects a black cassock" is reminiscent not only of her own father—clothed in blackness but also of the nightmare Plath once presented in "Dream with Clam-diggers."10 Here it is he who confronts the men of the beach. The environment in both poems is similar. An intruder enters the scene in each and a certain hostility is evident in both the clam-diggers and

the mackerel gatherers; the former advance with threatening intent toward the girl while the latter turn their backs on the man in a single row of bodies. The frightening conclusion of "Dream with Clam-diggers" intrudes its uneasiness into the scene in "Blerck-Plage" and the landscape again simulates the condition of Plath's mindscape: "The sea, that crystalized these, / Creeps away, many-snaked, with a long hiss of distress."

This distress is amplified by the mention of a black boot, "the hearse of a dead foot" which immediately recalls the black shoe of "Daddy" in which the poet was trapped for thirty years. This interruption is a mental one, for the poet is still on the seashore watching the beach and especially the green pool which seems to "open its eye, / Sick with what it has swallowed —// Limbs, images, shrieks." Plath's reaction to her view of sherbets, fishes, bikinis and weeds is a similar one of revulsion and she is propelled "through a still virulence." Her movement then becomes physical when she, or "the onlooker" as she calls herself, moves on toward the convalescent home.

Attracted by the many "glitterings" of things on the balconies of the hospital she approaches, the poet mentally enters the building to see what eventually becomes a death, the "vanishing" of an old man. It is the "superiority" of the man's rigid, dead body which Plath now finds repulsive: "This is what it is to be complete. It is horrible." The sterile realism of the situation is unnerving and her next movement is to the funeral itself from the church to the
graveyard. The poet's mindscape shifts with the actuality of the location—she becomes a member of the funeral party in the car, shut off from the world as a silent observer.

The ambivalent atmosphere of the beach continues at the graveyard and the mood is at once beautiful and ugly. As the sea changes from abeyance to a hissing crawl, so the "wonderful" aspect of the procession and the man's demise changes and becomes "awkward" and hopeless. "Berck-Plage" terminates on this note of dejection. It appears as if the stagnant heat of the beach and the white sterility of the hospital have increased the cold cruelty of death. The mood, thus maintained by both the poet's mental state and by the actual landscape, remains one of acute misery.

The resignation in this poem continues in two of Plath's poems which emphasize a certain finality in their rejection of human value. Strangely enough, the poet placed one of these, "Words", at the very outcome of Ariel thereby sealing off the entire collection inside the meaning of the final poem. Both "Sheep in Fog" and "Words" exhibit what Aird defines as a "sense of unwilling but inevitable progression toward a fixed doom." 11 The motion in these poems is a pull toward Stasis, the attractive principle forwarded in the title-poem itself. It represents the completion of existence and the perfection of the individual life. Stasis is a desirable outcome here; it is not envisioned as the rigid, unfulfilling void of God trapped in his cage of stars, or the sterility of mannequin-

11 Eileen Aird, Sylvia Plath, p. 66.
women incapable of bearing children or of an old man, white and awful in his death-gown. Yet the pull toward such an unknown, awesome force is nevertheless frightening and in "Sheep in Fog", Plath still sees this advance as a threat. The heaven which tugs at her is "starless and fatherless, a dark water" and the blank darkness of such space is rather upsetting to her. In "Words", the poet transcends this fear by a realization of the true meaning of Stasis and she submits to its attraction. The dark water of the previous poem is now mirrored in "the bottom of the pool" where "fixed stars/ Govern a life,"

Howard acknowledges Plath's acceptance of Stasis in Ariel; indeed, he insists that she has been moving toward what he recognizes as "the wedding between the self... and the system, between the victim and the vortex" since her earliest writings in The Colossus. It is only in her last volume that he believes she has attained "that true stillness which is at the centre", inertia which is "inherent in organic life,"

Howard carries his theories to an intriguing conclusion; he shows evidence of understanding the essence which supports

12 See the analysis of "Years", "The Munnich Mannequins" and "Blerck-Plage" for the elaboration of Plath's rejection of unresolved Stasis.

13 Richard Howard, "And I Have no Face! I Have Wanted to Efface Myself", p. 84.

14 Ibid. Howard applies the Freudian theory of the "urge toward homeostasis" in an exceedingly convincing manner, indicating the purpose and path of the poet's quest for Self within the bounds of Otherness.
Plath's view of Stasis when he translates her sense of self-being, her seemingly narcissistic and solipsistic attitudes, as belonging to a grander scheme:

All these yearnings towards deadlock, towards stasis, then are indeed beyond the pleasure principle; they tend rather to that great kingdom of alienation, of otherness we call ecstasy (standing outside oneself) which is not a matter of moving around but of being encircled, of being the centre of an orbit, of being transfigured, standing still.15

In considering the burden of Plath's personal experiences and its influential impact on her literary themes, Howard's analysis offers an encouraging glimpse into how the poet, as an individual, managed to elevate herself above the mundane restrictions of a mediocre domesticity. It explains Plath's continued attempts to locate her ultimate Self. And his theory clarifies the poet's metamorphic persistency in adapting or obtaining other selves, whether masculine, plural, inanimate, or exterior to her original Self.

Ariel is a literary collection depicting Plath's quest into Otherness, a search which often drew her so completely outside of herself that it permitted her to enter the other world, the inner core of stillness, Stasis. The poems of the last volume present "an environment for an embattled Self, the space of woman secreting her nothingness. Even when she speaks of the external loss, it is only a mirror of the departure within".16 This coincides with Gordon's view that an

15 Ibid., p.82.
identification with the Other meant a corresponding loss of Self by "ontological discontinuity" rather than ontological insecurity. 17

This last volume is the true representative of Plath's final departure, of an individual Self bound for the world of Otherness.

17 Ibid., p. 286.
Like a big sea. Far off, far off, I feel the first wave tug
its cargo of agony toward me, inescapable, tidal.
And I, a shell, echoing on this white beach
face the voices that overwhelm, the terrible element.

(The wife in Three Women)
CONCLUSION

The poetry of Sylvia Plath, beginning with *The Colossus* through the transitional period of *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* and culminating in *Ariel*, related a private journey. This personal quest for individualism and relevance was indicated in the poet's presentation of a dramatically defined Self—a Self capable of withstanding the antagonism and obstacles set forth by a world of Otherness. Plath was not reticent in indicating her frailty. Although she often disliked and feared her Selfness, she persistently submitted herself to the presence of the other world of social decrees, people and nature. By transforming herself into a metamorphic being capable of tremendous protean power, Plath hoped to attain the necessary strength crucial for the actualization of Self. Her numerous identifications with the natural universe, with other beings of either sex, with inanimate objects or with pluralized forces were not means of escaping her situation but of attempting to cope with her own reality.

Plath's poetry is the literary vehicle for such a search. But her quest is sequestered, hidden beneath symbolic and imagistic meanings, beneath the endlessly multiplying associations. Because these metaphors retained a consistent rigidity through all of her volumes, one has but to trace their original value to further determine their completely inter-
dependent significance. This is the "underlying code" of which Lavers speaks. It is these syncretically ordered images which are "endowed with stable significations, and hierarchized"¹ according to their emblematic function. To unravel this code is to find the true message within Plath's poetry.

My purpose in writing this thesis was similar to that of Lavers—"to examine Sylvia Plath's poetry by analysing a common image and then expanding it to suit those poems related to and by this central image."² As did Lucie-Smith, I chose sea imagery or more generally, water imagery, to decipher Plath's private mythology.³ Water proved to be an important aspect of the poet's literary universe—she endowed it with exact attributes, enlarging its relevance as it joined with other images. In this way, image clusters developed; the symbolism of water was interwoven with that of the moon (and therefore with whiteness, coldness and sterility), with her father (and hence death and darkness), with mirrors (and thereby with glitterings and surfaces) and with a multiplicity of other key images. Yet what Plath was describing extended beyond the merely literal meaning of her poems—the impact of her real statement remained concealed within each poem until all of the interlocking values of the

1 Annette Lavers, "The World as Icon", p.101.
2 Ibid., p.100.
3 Lucie-Smith, however, tends to merely comment on central patterns relating the water poems. Rather than analyse each individual work, he issues a general statement on the meaning of water within Plath's codified scheme.
central image of water were revealed. Then her poetry was charged with a very vibrant appeal.

In tracing water imagery as the symbol most often employed by the poet throughout all of her volumes of poetry, I have attempted to demonstrate how one image could typify, represent or indicate by its very complexity and association- al ability, Plath's expressed view of the personal Self. Because water tended to signify the varied meanings and levels of Otherness, I was able to elaborate on the poet's unique reaction to the sea by assessing Plath's perception of it. In other words, water imagery was but the symbolic manifestation of the poet's overt attitude to Self as it interacted with the entire scope of the Otherness outside of itself— with nature, with people, with social ideals and systems.

Plath was constantly exposing the variance between Self and Otherness even when their boundaries merged, and "her burden is, throughout, the disaster described within the sur- face of life and landscape." Her predicament, and that is how she actually interprets the situation, is due to her often self-imposed isolation. Gordon feels that this solipsistic trend is due to "her higher degree of particularization. Her real isolation is her individuality, her sense of self-being."

Yet such an interpretation of her alienation is an iro-

nic miscalculation of Plath's true desires. Although apprehensive as to the demands of Otherness and as to the capabilities of her own Self, the poet continually reached beyond her individual bounds in an attempt to assimilate the awesome element which she faced. Most of the poems containing water imagery indicate such an attempt. It is evident where the personae, her distanced selves, enter the breathable atmosphere of watery worlds; where they see themselves already reflected in the water's surface; where they alone hear the mysterious calling of the denizens of the deep. Whenever Plath attempts any transformations, it is with the intention of approaching, understanding and often becoming Otherness. This "ontological discontinuity of Self" as Gordon terms it, is the poet's ultimate method of achieving perfect resolved Stasis. J.C. Oates aptly summarizes such an approach:

So unquestioning is the division between selves accepted, and so relentless the pursuit of the solitary isolated self by way of the form of this poetry, that stasis and ultimate silence seem inevitable.6

Indeed, this is the very message of "Words", the poem which Plath deliberately chose to conclude her final volume of poetry.

Such Stasis needs to be fully analysed in order to understand Plath's attraction to it. Its most supreme and authentic meaning is clarified in the title-poem of the poet's last collection, Ariel. It is the "something else" which

hails her through the air and which transforms her itself, "The dew that flies/ Suicidal, at one with the drive/ Into the red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning." In Plath's moments of lucidity and awareness, the times which also exhibit her submission to such a force, Stasis indicates an elevated perfection. However, when the poet is discontented, she interprets such cosmic stillness as the boredom of eternity and prefers instead, "the piston in motion," any movement which will remove her from the stagnant inertia she now interprets Stasis as being. Plath is obviously ambivalent in her reactions to this Otherness: it represents both completion and nullity to her, a termination and yet a regeneration of her unique existence. If such a Stasis is understood to mean death, then Plath's attitudes are those of Eliade who insists that "death...is not an extinction, but a change—and generally a provisional one—of one's level of existence. Death belongs to another kind of life."  

This, then, was the dilemma Plath presented in her poetry. Her quest for self-fulfillment along with a simultaneous initiation into Otherness became the underlying foundation of all of her literature. And such a search can never be concluded for the Self is constantly at odds with both itself and the other realm. As long as an individual exists, he or she is forced to undergo such experiences. This is the problem McClatchy attempts to resolve in concluding that:

7 See "Years" in Ariel.
Sylvia Plath's suicide, which some critics read as her last, inevitable poem, has led most critics to assume a greater degree of fulfillment and completion in her work than it can justly claim. Her consistency, instead, lies in her experimentations with voice, and in her reworkings of the dilemma of the divided mind.

This study began as an aesthetic interpretation of the poet's literary achievements and it is with this same approach that I wish to conclude. Although Plath's collections are interesting when viewed socially or psychologically, I feel that one should remain within the aesthetic bounds of a critical analysis in order to justly and accurately delineate the writer's ultimate purpose and intention. Sylvia Plath's poetry typifies an individual artist's literary quest into the Otherness beyond the Self.

9 J.D. McClatchy, "Staring from her Hood of Bone: Adjusting to Sylvia Plath", p.166.
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88


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VITA AUCTORIS

1950 Born in Yugoslavia.
1969 Graduated from Leamington District High School.
1971 Received Bachelor of Arts Degree at the University of Windsor. On the President's Roll of Scholars.
1972 Received Honours Degree at the University of Windsor.
1974 Completed requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts at the University of Windsor. Currently working on Doctoral Degree at the University of Western Ontario.