LEABHARLANN CHOLÁISTE NA TRÍONÓIDE, BAILE ÁTHA CLIATH | TRINITY COLLEGE LIBRARY DUBLIN
Ollscoil Átha Cliath | The University of Dublin

Terms and Conditions of Use of Digitised Theses from Trinity College Library Dublin

Copyright statement

All material supplied by Trinity College Library is protected by copyright (under the Copyright and Related Rights Act, 2000 as amended) and other relevant Intellectual Property Rights. By accessing and using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you acknowledge that all Intellectual Property Rights in any Works supplied are the sole and exclusive property of the copyright and/or other IPR holder. Specific copyright holders may not be explicitly identified. Use of materials from other sources within a thesis should not be construed as a claim over them.

A non-exclusive, non-transferable licence is hereby granted to those using or reproducing, in whole or in part, the material for valid purposes, providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. Where specific permission to use material is required, this is identified and such permission must be sought from the copyright holder or agency cited.

Liability statement

By using a Digitised Thesis, I accept that Trinity College Dublin bears no legal responsibility for the accuracy, legality or comprehensiveness of materials contained within the thesis, and that Trinity College Dublin accepts no liability for indirect, consequential, or incidental, damages or losses arising from use of the thesis for whatever reason. Information located in a thesis may be subject to specific use constraints, details of which may not be explicitly described. It is the responsibility of potential and actual users to be aware of such constraints and to abide by them. By making use of material from a digitised thesis, you accept these copyright and disclaimer provisions. Where it is brought to the attention of Trinity College Library that there may be a breach of copyright or other restraint, it is the policy to withdraw or take down access to a thesis while the issue is being resolved.

Access Agreement

By using a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library you are bound by the following Terms & Conditions. Please read them carefully.

I have read and I understand the following statement: All material supplied via a Digitised Thesis from Trinity College Library is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of a thesis is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or for educational purposes in electronic or print form providing the copyright owners are acknowledged using the normal conventions. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone. This copy has been supplied on the understanding that it is copyright material and that no quotation from the thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

'Echoes traveling / Off from the Center': Contemporary Poetic Engagements with the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Maria Johnston

Ph.D.

School of English
Trinity College Dublin

September 2007

TRINITY COLLEGE
0 8 APR 2008
LIBRARY DUBLIN
THESIS
8348

DECLARATIONS

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at any university other than Trinity College, Dublin and that, except where otherwise stated, the material contained in this thesis is my own unaided work. I agree that the Library may lend or copy the thesis upon request.

Maria Johnston

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my most sincere thanks to my supervisor Stephen Matterson for his support and guidance. Thanks are also due to Gerald Dawe, Philip Coleman, Justin Quinn and David Wheatley for their generosity and encouragement at various stages over the past three years. Indeed, were it not for the initial encouragement of Gerald Dawe I would not have had the confidence to pursue this postgraduate career in the first place. I am thankful to have had such exemplary figures to look to for inspiration.

I am indebted to Karen V. Kukil, Martin Antonetti and the staff of the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Neilson Library, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, for their wonderful assistance and for showing every kindness to me during my research visit to the Sylvia Plath Archive in June 2006. I am also grateful to Paul Muldoon, Richard Murphy, John Redmond, Ernest Hilbert and Kathleen Connors for answering queries and honouring my requests for additional material for use in this research project. I am very grateful to have been the recipient of a TCD Faculty of Arts Studentship without which it would have been very difficult, if not impossible, to carry out this research degree. Thanks too to Hanna Hoorenman, Mary Roche and Rob Stacey for their invaluable assistance with proof-reading the final draft.

Lastly, I wish to express special thanks to my parents Una and Joe, to Mary Killoran, to Clare and Noel Stacey and to Rob Stacey for all kinds of moral support.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary		**i**
Introduction		**1**
Chapter One	**'A Working Partnership': Poetic Reciprocity and Sylvia Plath's Influence on Ted Hughes**	**8**
Chapter Two	**'The Indubitable Footprints': Sylvia Plath and Contemporary British Poetry**	**39**
Chapter Three	**'Richard Murphy in Whisper-Mutter with Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath': Plath's Presence in Contemporary Irish Poetry**	**74**
Chapter Four	**'The Poem has its Own Life': Sylvia Plath and Paul Muldoon**	**106**
Chapter Five	**'She Does Not Live in a Coffin': Contemporary American Engagements with Plath**	**138**
Conclusion		**185**
Appendix A	**Sylvia Plath, Collage (1960)**	**191**
Appendix B	**Sylvia Plath, 'Elm', Draft 1b, 12 April 1962**	**192**
Bibliography		**193**

SUMMARY

The introduction of the thesis makes clear the vital need for this study and explains how its methodology privileges poetic practice rather than critical narratives as it centres on close readings of a range of poems by many diverse poets who have engaged with Plath in a multitude of ways. The introduction also defines what is meant throughout by the often ambiguous critical term 'influence' and explains how the thesis proceeds by replacing the Bloomian model with a more inclusive and accurate one that comes by way of T.S. Eliot, Robert Frost and more recently by Paul Muldoon in his own mode of reading and textual analysis which is then applied in a sustained way throughout Chapter Four.

Chapter One is the pivotal chapter of the thesis. It reassesses the nature of the Plath-Hughes relationship, moving beyond the sustained biographical focus which it has received to examine instead the complex literary relations between Plath and Hughes. By focusing close attention on specific poems across the oeuvres of both poets this chapter reveals the mutuality of influence that exists between Plath and Hughes as poets; Plath's influence on Hughes having gone largely ignored in critical studies. The chapter concludes by reading *Birthday Letters* as a text where the work of both poets is present in particular ways and in which Hughes completes his career-long engagement with Plath's oeuvre. This chapter is highly important in the vital way that it turns the focus away from the biographical detail and directly onto the poetry, illuminating Plath and Hughes as two poets engaged in an endless poetic interchange with Plath as an enabler for Hughes in very significant ways.

Chapter Two expands on the scope of the first chapter by considering Plath's presence in British contemporary poetry. Here, issues concerning Plath and Feminism, her status as a 'woman poet' are addressed. In moving past these reductive labels this chapter shows the ways that male poets have engaged with Plath's work. Poets such as Paul Farley and Ismail B. Garba reveal Plath's status as an innovator, a challenging and stimulating enabler, while Douglas Dunn is an outstanding case of a male poet who was deeply taken with Plath's poetic achievement. Of the female poets who have engaged with Plath, Carol Rumens, a poet mindful of the feminist tag, looks past Plath's biography and pathology to the poetry itself, offering in the process an intelligent criticism of the work and Rumens' work points the way to understanding Plath as a deeply political poet very much of her time. This chapter calls on a wide range of British poets to open up Plath's work beyond limiting critical viewpoints and simplistic readings of the poetry.

Chapter Three moves across to Ireland and examines Plath's strong presence in the work of a wide range of poets who have all engaged with Plath in various ways. Particular focus is

granted to Seamus Heaney's collection *North* and the way that Plath may be seen as having enabled him to address the issue of the Troubles in his poetry here. This examination challenges critical narratives that have positioned Heaney within a certain poetic lineage. Again, both male and female poets, from North and South and from various schools of poetry, are seen to have learnt from Plath. The chapter ends with a sustained examination of the poetry of Caitriona O' Reilly who is in many ways an exemplary critic and reader of Plath's work as well as a poet who has learnt from her precursor in important and highly successful ways. Exploring Plath's influence on these Irish poets broadens the critical scope past narrowly-defined boundaries of language, gender and nationality.

Chapter Four turns the focus onto Paul Muldoon, an Irish post-modern poet living in America, to explore the recurring presence of Plath throughout his poem 'Yarrow' from his collection *The Annals of Chile*. The chapter moves through a close consideration of the very specific allusions to Plath's life and work that feature throughout Muldoon's 'Yarrow' which in turn lends itself to an exciting entry into the possibilities that present themselves when the poetry and poetics of Muldoon and Plath are brought together. In terms of their transnational impetus and interdisciplinary approach Muldoon and Plath, as this chapter brings to light, are kindred poets and Muldoon's mode of close reading makes another Plath available to us. What emerges, by reading Plath through the playful, erudite poetry of Muldoon is Plath's own similar technical mastery, inventiveness and transnational poetics.

Chapter Five moves neatly on from Muldoon into the vast and diverse landscape of American poetry and it effectively consolidates and develops on all that has emerged in the preceding chapters. This chapter forces a reconsideration of the term 'confessional' and, by examining the work of the many, diverse poets who have engaged with Plath, interrogates questions regarding art and moral responsibility and exposes the rigid categorisations within poetry that polarise contemporary poetic practice into opposing schools and theories. The chapter, in moving Plath's work out of the 'confessional' mode, foregrounds close readings of two of Plath's most complex and most controversial poems, 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus', and concludes by reading Plath's poetry in terms of postmodern poetic practice and Language poetry, revealing the innovative and far-sighted nature of her work and its relevance into the twenty first century.

The Conclusion expands on Plath as an interdisciplinary and endlessly relevant figure by gesturing beyond the thesis to other types of contemporary engagements with her work. It situates the thesis within what may be seen as the beginnings of a new phase in Plath studies as well as setting out the hope that the thesis, through its inclusive and wide-ranging approach, will broaden the study of contemporary poetry itself beyond reductive binaries and restrictive categories.

Introduction

This thesis argues for a new consideration of Sylvia Plath's poetry through a corrective reading of her poetry and poetics, a close reading which eschews the reductive biographical and pathological approaches that have prevailed in critical narratives by examining the poetry itself and asserting its profound centrality to contemporary Irish, British and American poetry. The examination proceeds by placing the focus on the poetry of Plath, on Plath as a poet, enlarging the figure of Plath by interrogating what her work means to poets today and reading it in the light of contemporary poetic practice. Critics have been narrowly short-sighted when it comes to evaluating Plath's work, privileging biographical and pathological or psychoanalytical approaches to her work rather than focusing on the poetry itself, compartmentalising it in reductive ways rather than expanding its contexts by acknowledging its formidable technique and range, its vast scope and interpretative possibilities. Many of today's poets, conversely, as I argue, have seen and continue to see beyond these reductive views and, as this thesis demonstrates, through their different modes of reading, interpreting and creatively engaging with Plath's poetry and poetics open up a new understanding of Plath to us as readers. Thus, her work, through this sustained reengagement, is enlarged, realigned and recontextualised in vital ways and the limitless possibilities of interpreting her language are thereby brought to light. The methodology of close reading which is the basis for this thesis forces a complete reconsideration of Plath's work to reveal its scope, richness and artistry. The examination of manuscript drafts of Plath's work is highly important to this process of close analysis and the drafts are consulted to shed further light on the poems themselves and the process of composition, directing much-needed attention to the deeply considered and artfully designed quality of Plath's work. The expansive range of Plath's techniques and concerns in her poetry is revealed out of examining her work with a wider array of contexts in mind and in doing so alongside the ongoing work of her contemporary successors.

Plath's presence in contemporary poetry is pervasive. In terms of twentieth-century poetry, however, it must firstly be noted that Plath's presence was initially as sensational and biographically centred as the critical narratives that have framed and restricted interpretations of her work. Elegised by Robert Lowell in *History*, in W.S. Merwin's 'Lament for the Makers', by a haunted John Berryman in his Dream Song No.172, by Charles Bukowski in 'Beasts bounding through time' with his vivid image of 'Sylvia with her head in the oven like a baked potato', Plath

has been Philip Larkin's 'horror poet',[1] Stephen Spender's 'priestess cultivating her hysteria'[2] and Derek Walcott's 'muse of aspirin' with her 'insomniac terrors'.[3] Plath has thus been rendered as truly the most enthralling poète maudit of Berryman's wrecked generation, Lowell's 'tranquilized fifties' and Anne Sexton's suicide club. Nowhere is this more apparent than in Sexton's poem 'Sylvia's Death' wherein Sexton addresses the recently dead poet, chiding her for her suicide and aligning herself with Plath; two tragic figures bound together by a shared death-wish:

> Thief! –
> how did you crawl into,
>
> crawl down alone
> into the death I wanted so badly and for so long [4]

Other instances of Plath as an outrageous presence include John Updike in his poem 'Upon Looking into Sylvia Plath's *Letters Home*' wherein he addresses her as, 'You, dead at thirty, leaving blood soaked poems/ for all the anthologies'.[5] Plath was unavoidable for the poets who lived on after her as they confronted an almost mythical figure and a poetry that is, in the now tired words of Lowell, 'playing Russian Roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder, a game of "Chicken", the wheels of both cars locked and unable to swerve'.[6] Richard Wilbur's 'Cottage Street, 1953' speaks ambivalently of Plath's 'brilliant negative/ In poems free and helpless and unjust', while Charles Tomlinson's poem 'Against Extremity' and Peter Davison's 'The Heroine' also concern Plath as a troublesome poetess (Davison's 'meanest spirit to claim a martyrdom/ since sainthood ended')[7]. Anne Stevenson, in her 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' addresses Plath directly as 'the fiercest poet of our time', elegising one who 'bought with death a mammoth name/ to set

---

[1] Philip Larkin, 'Horror Poet', in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Prose 1955-1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 278 – 281.
[2] Stephen Spender, 'Warnings from the Grave', in *The Art Of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. by Charles Newman (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1971), pp. 199 – 203 (p. 202).

[3] Derek Walcott, 'Ted Hughes', in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), pp. 176 - 181 (p. 178).
[4] Anne Sexton, 'Sylvia's Death', in *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Maxine Kumin (New York: Houghton Mifflin/ Mariner Books, 1999), p. 126.
[5] John Updike, 'Upon Looking into Sylvia Plath's *Letters Home*', in *Collected Poems: 1953 – 1993* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 253.
[6] Robert Lowell, 'Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*', in *Collected Prose* (London: Faber, 1987), pp. 122 – 125 (p.124).
[7] Charles Tomlinson, 'Against Extremity', in *Collected Poems*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 163. Peter Davison, 'The Heroine', in *Walking the Boundaries: Poems 1957 – 1974* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974), p. 68.

in the cold museum of fame'.[8] This is only a partial list of the most obvious instances of Plath's presence among her contemporaries but in terms of contemporary poetry it is far from the whole story as this thesis will bring to light. Indeed, one of the points that emerges throughout the thesis – most particularly in the chapter which looks at her influence on Irish poetry – is the way in which it is the younger poets who have been able to leave the Plath legend behind and engage with the work, Plath becoming for many of these poets an important precursor and a vital enabler.

Reading her poetry through the poets she has enabled in various ways allows us to see the scope and immense richness of her work and Plath is enlarged in new and exciting ways. This is seen most of all in the penultimate chapter where Plath is read through Paul Muldoon. Muldoon is an important exemplary figure in this thesis and his own inclusive and expansive mode of reading and critiquing poetry proves enormously helpful in seeing Plath's poetry anew and revealing the scope of her concerns and her poetic technique. It becomes clear as the chapter progresses that important similarities exist between Plath and Muldoon in terms of their poetics and their world views; both emerge as transnational poets who seek to traverse boundaries of art, nationality and theory. Indeed, Muldoon's type of close, open-minded reading inspires the methodology of close reading that is adhered to throughout the entire thesis and his own status as a transatlantic poet creates an appropriate bridge between the chapters which examine Plath's presence in British and Irish poetry and her influence on American poetry. This final chapter on American poetry is somewhat longer than the preceding ones as it is within this concluding chapter that all of the revelations from the examination of Plath's place in British and Irish poetry come together and are then extended out in crucial ways, bringing Plath's work very much up to the present moment and establishing her position as a post-modern poet above all; one who is very much of this century as well as of her own. Also, the chapter which examines her presence in British poetry is significant in the way it focuses necessary attention on ways in which Plath's deep interest and knowledge of politics and history inform her poetry, a point that is further developed and examined in closer detail in the final, concluding chapter.

Placing Plath alongside the contemporary poets whom she has influenced and inspired in profound and various ways brings many important points to light which have been hitherto overlooked by both Plath scholars and general critics of contemporary poetry. Her presence in American poetry, for example, demands a complete reconsideration of terms such as 'confessional' and provokes reconsiderations of larger issues regarding art and responsibility, an

[8] Anne Stevenson, 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', in *The Other House* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 18 – 21. Stevenson, famous for her biography of Plath, has referred to how she is universally recognised as a 'vindictive Plath basher', in Helena Nelson, 'Conversation with Anne Stevenson', *The Dark Horse* (Summer 2000), 52 – 60 (p. 55).

issue which is also central to her presence in Irish poetry. Her influence on American poetry also serves to debunk the rigid polarisation that exists in poetry between various schools, particularly between so-called Language poetry and 'confessional' poetry and between Formalist poetry and free verse. Furthermore, the first chapter, which focuses on Ted Hughes, contests the usual view of the marriage and creative partnership which has Hughes as the 'villain' and the dominant presence on Plath. Rather, as the chapter makes plain, there is a mutuality of influence in evidence and the profound significance of Plath's influence on Hughes is brought to light in its very many and complex ways. Also challenged is the accepted idea of Hughes' role as editor and critic of Plath's work as being a solely damaging interference and a hindrance to the proper reception of her work. As is revealed through this chapter, Hughes' comments can often be helpful and insightful in broadening the contexts for reading and interpreting Plath's work. Furthermore, the examination of Plath as a post-modern poet which concludes the final chapter on American Poetry is, I argue, in part made possible by the way in which Hughes arranged *Ariel*, as his inclusion of poems such as 'Words' and 'Edge' – poems which may be read as Language poems and which anticipate post-modern strategies – may be seen to highlight the way that Plath's poetry was constantly developing, always innovative and pushing out boundaries. Thanks to his arrangement, her late work is seen as developing naturally out of her early style and the integral continuity of the poetry, particularly unified as it is by her sophisticated use of imagery and symbol, of pivotal echoes and reverberations throughout, is pointed up. Thus it may be seen how her entire oeuvre, from beginning to end, is not concerned with her life in an unmediated, direct way but is instead preoccupied above all with language and the relationship between language and reality, questions which these late poems foreground so powerfully and in such complex and sophisticated ways.

The question of influence in poetry, what is termed at points throughout this thesis as Plath's 'influence' on poets, is often a term that eludes easy definition in poetry criticism. Indeed, as we discover throughout, 'influence', and Plath's 'influence' more particularly, is a term that is often used by critics in a loose and lazy fashion in reviews of contemporary, and almost always, women's poetry. This thesis, where it refers to influence, argues always for a mutuality of influence between Plath and later poets, evident most of all, as the first chapter details, in the creative partnership and exchange that exists in the work of Plath and Ted Hughes. The many poets examined throughout this thesis were chosen for the particular use they make of Plath's example in their own work, a distinction emerging between those poets who were enabled by Plath and forged their own individual voice and those who are merely imitators. It is, as the thesis reveals, the poets that have absorbed and worked through Plath's influence in their own ways that

are most successful and that have become gifted poets in their own right, their achievement reflecting back on that of Plath their precursor and influencing the way we may read her work. This fact of mutuality cannot be emphasised enough and so, although this work subscribes to no one narrowly defined theoretical position, it may be stated from the start that Bloom's linear model of influence is of no use here. Instead, the exemplary mode of reading and critical analysis is that practised by Paul Muldoon, by way of Robert Frost and T.S. Eliot; both of whom are seminal influences on Muldoon's work. Muldoon's recent collection of Oxford Lectures, *The End of the Poem*, is guided by Frost's assertion from his essay 'Poetry and School' (1951) that, as Muldoon quotes:

> The way to read a poem in prose or verse is in the light of all the other poems ever written. We may begin anywhere. We *duff* into our first. We read that imperfectly (thoroughness with it would be fatal), but the better to read the second. We read the second the better to read the third, the third the better to read the fourth, the fourth the better to read the fifth, the fifth the better to read the first again, or the second if it so happens.[9]

As Frost states elsewhere on the same subject; 'Progress is not the aim, but circulation',[10] and Muldoon's mode of reading and interpreting poetry stems from this understanding of poetry as an unending dialogue between all poems across time; all poems are inter-textual. In this way, his own readings of individual poems are close and attentive, revelling in possibility as they call up a staggering array of references to other texts and branches of knowledge, Muldoon showing himself to be acutely aware of the interactive and interdisciplinary nature of art. Influence, therefore, as Muldoon so persuasively demonstrates in his own work, does not necessarily follow a linear trajectory, rather, later poets may influence and change how a prior poet is read. In this way, Muldoon, in the chapter that is devoted to his relationship with Plath, may be seen to actively influence Plath's poetry, changing the way that we read it, thereby correcting and enlarging existing critical narratives.

This idea of the way in which a later poet's work influences and modifies the poetry that has gone before may be seen to go back to T.S. Eliot's landmark essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' wherein Eliot states:

---

[9] Robert Frost, quoted in Paul Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 60 – 61.

[10] Frost, 'The Prerequisites' [Preface to *Aforesaid,* 1954] reprinted in *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, ed. by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995) pp. 814 – 816 (p. 815).

> The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. The existing order is complete before the new work arrives; for order to persist after the supervention of novelty, the *whole* existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered; and so the relations, proportions, values of each work of art toward the whole are readjusted; and this is conformity between the old and the new. Whoever has approved this idea of order will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past.[11]

As Eliot puts it; 'No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists' and, crucially: 'You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead'.[12] This idea of 'influence', of 'tradition' as open, interactive, limitless and dynamic processes – 'that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past' – provides the basis for this thesis and it is in this spirit that the argument sets out. Muldoon's strategies of reading are a direct continuation of Frost's and Eliot's beliefs, brought up-to-date and remain highly relevant. It is too highly appropriate that such a mode of reading should be facilitated by a poet who has a close relationship with Plath, a relationship that has been largely ignored until now as it too frustrates the narrow critical narratives that would have Plath as influencing only female poets in terms of subject matter and which completely overlook her technical accomplishment, the innovative and far-reaching nature of her work. That Muldoon is an expert poet in terms of technique, a post-modern, experimental poet who also excels in forms and one who has a dual nationality as Irish and American ties him to Plath as a kindred spirit and thus enlarges our understanding of *both* poets. His mode of reading poetry is entirely suited to moving Plath's work away from reductive labels and one-dimensional biographical approaches, opening up the connections and resonances between them that make up this process of 'influence'.

Because this thesis proceeds with the knowledge that the existing criticism on Plath has, until very recently, been sterile and reductive, relying on biographical and pathological approaches and neglecting the poetry itself, it is, appropriately, poets that are summoned throughout to aid examination of contemporary poetry and lead the main argument. These unhelpful critical views are, for the most part, not summoned throughout in an effort to move Plath studies into a new era, through methods of close reading and poetic analysis. Certain, more recent critical studies are referred to where appropriate and these provide helpful views on particular aspects of the work, but it is the poets above all, their observations, criticism and their

---

[11] T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. and intro. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975), pp. 37 – 44 (pp. 38 – 39).
[12] Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', p. 38.

poetry itself that comprise this thesis. One of the most important aspects of this thesis is the way in which its very subject eschews boundaries in poetry – whether of school, nationality, language or genre – and this is testified to in the very arrangement of the thesis itself, particularly in the way that critical voices of all nationalities actively transcend the circumstances of their own nationality. Although the thesis is divided into chapters in terms of nationality these categories and divisions are actively broken down by the poetic and critical interchange which exists across all of the chapters. In this way, for example, Seamus Heaney is invoked in the chapter which examines Plath's presence in American poetry, the Australian poet-critic John Kinsella is helpful in the chapter which looks at Plath's position in British Poetry; a multitude of poets and poet-critics function throughout the thesis as necessary commentators whatever their nationality or theoretical position. Although poetry is typically fixed in terms of nationality or school, the fact that this thesis foregrounds the reality of exchange and engagement across national boundaries for poets is crucial. Poetic voices traverse boundaries of school and nationality to point up the artificial and limiting nature of these strictures.

This thesis seeks to bring the reader on a journey through contemporary poetry that passes over these same boundaries, recontextualising Plath as it goes, probing the possibilities of her poetry and forging connections between her own work and that of later poets of various nationalities. Indeed, Plath's influence has also crossed barriers in language as the chapter on Plath and contemporary Irish poetry makes clear in its consideration of the Irish language poet Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill. Plath's influence itself is international, interdisciplinary, as her legacy has crossed boundaries of nationality, gender, culture, language, tradition and school and she herself embodies this transnational spirit as a poet who described herself as one who 'straddles the Atlantic' and through a poetry that is far-reaching and immensely wide-ranging both in its formidable use of language, style and technique and in its boundless range of concerns. It is, above all, a poetry that only gains power and depth as its continuing influence is understood.

Chapter One

'A Working Partnership': Poetic Reciprocity and Sylvia Plath's Influence on Ted Hughes

> What's great is the concept of showing their work together – showing them as a collaborative couple who helped each other. That's what they did, and that's what got lost in the wash of my mother's death.[1]

That the literary life shared by Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes was a highly productive and mutually supportive one – as Frieda Hughes confirms in the above statement – is borne out by the many assertions made to this end by both partners, both during and, in Hughes' case, long after their marriage. Hughes, on the BBC's 'Two of a Kind - Poets in Partnership' programme broadcast in 1961 which had Plath and Hughes speak of their lives together as poets, described how 'theirs was such a "sympathetic relationship" that he could read her mind at any given moment' and of how both poets, as he saw it, 'felt they made up, in essence, one person, one single shared psyche', both were irrevocably bound up in what Hughes termed a true 'telepathic union'.[2] Two years after Plath's death Hughes commented further on the symbiotic nature of their union:

> It sounds trite but you completely influence one another if you live together. You begin to write out of one brain....It was all we were interested in, all we ever did. We were like two feet, each one using everything the other did. It was a working partnership and was all absorbing. We just lived it. There was an unspoken unanimity in every criticism or judgment we made. It all fitted in very well.[3]

Plath too spoke positively of their intense partnership, and of how 'the bonuses of any marriage – shared interests, projects, encouragement and creative criticism – are all intensified. Both of us want to write as much as possible and we do', but she was also keen to assert the individual nature of their writing styles: 'We do criticize each other's work, but we write poems

---

[1] Frieda Hughes, quoted in Erica Wagner, 'Ted and Sylvia Reunited', *The Times*, 10 September 2005, p. 6.
[2] Ted Hughes, 'Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership', interview with Owen Leeming, *Third Programme*, British Broadcasting Corporation, 18 January 1961, quoted in Paul Alexander, *Rough Magic: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1991), p. 255.
[3] Hughes, *Manchester Guardian,* 23 March 1965, quoted in Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift: A Commentary on Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 21.

that are as distinct and different as our fingerprints themselves must be.'[4] Indeed, for the 'Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership' programme Plath is quicker to emphasise the separate integrity of each of their poetries, emphasising how their poems are 'really quite, quite different' from each other.[5] Hughes displays much more of a propensity to highlight the element of collaboration between himself and Plath which suggests that Plath's influence on his work was more sustained and enabling. Looking back over his life with Plath in a 1995 interview Hughes told of how, when they met: 'quite suddenly we were completely committed to each other and to each other's writing' and of how 'our minds soon became two parts of one operation. We dreamed a lot of shared or complementary dreams. Our telepathy was intrusive.'[6] The extreme interconnectedness of their writing life is further in evidence as Hughes continues: 'Throughout our time together we looked at each other's verses at every stage – up to the Ariel poems of October 1962.' In the last interview he gave before he died, Hughes was still speaking of the importance of this unique, enabling poetic partnership:

> When there are two of you the atmosphere is supportive. It's easier to concentrate on what you're doing because both of you do the same thing. It's like singing together in the dark.[7]

In an environment such as this then, the question of shared influence is a necessary one yet it has been almost entirely overlooked. Instead, it is stated and often in tones that seek to disparage, that Plath was in every way a student of Hughes, neglecting the reciprocal nature of the relationship that had Plath exerting an equal if not larger influence on Hughes. Paul Alexander's biography of Plath places particular emphasis on Hughes' 'influence over Plath's creative life' which was, as Alexander asserts, carried out through 'mental exercises which Ted showed her how to do' and as a result of which 'she opened herself up to write more innovative – and better – poetry'.[8] 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' is a famous example of a successful product of these exercises. Elsewhere, the writer Al Alvarez, influential in the initial publication and promotion of

---

[4] Plath, quoted in Corinne Robins, 'Four Young Poets', *Mademoiselle*, January 1959 <www.emptymirrorbooks.com/images/poets/hart/mllereview.html> [accessed August 2007]
[5] Sylvia Plath, 'Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership', interview with Owen Leeming, *Third Programme*, BBC, London, 18 January 1961, quoted in Heather Clark, 'Tracking the Thought-Fox: Sylvia Plath's Revision of Ted Hughes', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28.2 (Winter 2005), 100 – 112 (p. 101).
[6] Hughes, in Drue Heinz, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI', *Paris Review*, no. 134 (Spring 1995), 54 – 94 (p. 77).
[7] Hughes, in Eilat Negev, 'My Life with Sylvia Plath, by Ted Hughes', *Daily Telegraph*, 31 October 1998, p. 4.
[8] Alexander, *Rough Magic*, p. 267.

both Plath and Hughes, has decribed Plath as the 'good student' who 'did what she was told.'[9] Hughes then is commonly viewed as the superior, dominant creative force in the relationship and it is true that Plath initially saw herself as very much a student of Hughes. The beginning of their relationship inspired Plath to open up in new directions as a poet and she described this new development in letters to her mother in exuberant fashion: 'I cannot stop writing poems! They come better and better. They come from the vocabulary of woods and animals and earth that Ted is teaching me', attaching 'Ode to Ted' and 'Song' – both to be 'read aloud' – as examples of this 'joy in discovering a world I never knew: all nature',[10] a world that Hughes had made possible. This idea of Hughes as Plath's mentor and guide does not hold true when Plath's later, developed poetic achievement is considered; rather, the question of Plath's influence on Hughes warrants sustained examination. Hughes has himself pointed up Plath's impact on his own career as a writer: 'I see now that when we met, my writing, like hers, left its old path and started to circle and search. To me of course, she was not only herself; she was America and American Literature in person.'[11] This calls to attention the huge significance of this co-existence for both poets as it opened up and broadened the creative imagination, the reading and writing life, of both partners.

'This whole business of influence is mysterious', Hughes remarked to Ekbert Faas in 1970, 'sometimes it's just a few words that open up a whole prospect. They may occur anywhere.'[12] Critics have commented very rarely on the subject of shared influence between Plath and Hughes, and when they have, their comments have too often been throwaway and underdeveloped, demanding proper interrogation. Faas, in a chapter which looks at Hughes and Plath's continuous 'mythology', has noted how 'Hughes' more recent development owes a great deal to Plath, and only if seen in this conjunction, does the plot connecting both appear to us strong and clear in retrospect', pointing by way of testimony to Hughes' poem from *Cave Birds* 'Bride and groom lay hidden for three days', and how it 'reintroduces some of the symbolism which Plath's "Wreath for a Bridal" used some twenty years earlier'.[13] William Scammell has also briefly opined that 'Hughes is influenced a little by her voice in *Crow*, and more obviously in the brief lyrics at the end of *Gaudete*', although Scammell's assertion that the 'stripped-down

---

[9] A. Alvarez, *The Writer's Voice* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), p. 35.
[10] Sylvia Plath, Letter of 21 April 1956 to Aurelia Plath, in *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950 - 1963*, ed. by Aurelia Plath (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 235.
[11] Hughes, in Heinz, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI', 77.
[12] Hughes, quoted in Ekbert Faas, 'Chapters of a Shared Mythology', in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), pp. 107 –124 (p. 115).
[13] Faas, 'Chapters of a Shared Mythology ', in *Ted Hughes*, p. 109. This essay quite unhelpfully traces Plath's continuing influence on Hughes in terms of subject matter rather than poetic technique.

shape and vivid imagery' of the latter are 'reminiscent of Plath' is unconvincing.[14] 'Tracy Brain, commenting on the reciprocity of influence between the two has noted the 'difficulty of pinpointing origin and echo' but finds 'similarities' between 'Lady Lazarus' and Hughes' 'The Wound'. Brain also writes of how '"Crow's Song about England" and "The Detective" find structural and textual mirrors in each other'.[15] Seeing the full and finished oeuvres of both poets as a 'common text', Neil Roberts asserts: 'their mutual influence is obvious [...] they created a common text, in which many important motifs cannot be straightforwardly assigned to one or the other writer / protagonist.'[16] He also regards the 'much looser, more ragged verse style in Hughes that remains the norm for the rest of his career, above all in his most celebrated volume, *Crow'* as one of the areas in which 'he is undoubtedly profoundly influenced by the late poems of Plath.'[17] Margaret Dickie Uroff who has done more than any other critic in setting out to examine the connections between the poetry of Plath and Hughes, has noted how Hughes' poetic style in *Crow* 'has many affinities with Plath's more sophisticated surrealistic techniques'.[18] In her treatment of how 'the achievement of *Crow* testifies to the importance of the creative relationship between Hughes and Plath, and to the energies it unleashed', Uroff lists the following points to exemplify Hughes' absorption of Plath's stylistic techniques:

> Like her, he began to break his poetic line, sometimes chopping the four-stressed line in two or into single words, other times expanding it to Whitmanesque lengths. He abandoned also the rigid structures of his early verse and began in *Crow* to organize his poems around incremental repetitions, catalogues, refrains. In *Crow* he shares with Plath a new colloquialism which, like hers, is not a relaxation but a stiffening of diction. The literary techniques of caricature, parody and hyperbole, new to Hughes, were employed by Plath from the beginning. Behind these rhetorical parallels, certain common thematic obsessions unite their work.[19]

Uroff's comments provide a useful starting point but real evidence of Plath's influence on Hughes is to be found through examination of the poetry itself and its composition as well as in comments made by Hughes himself over the years. A letter from Hughes to Lucas Myers in December 1959 has Hughes profess how 'Sylvia suddenly produced a bunch of about 12 remarkable poems a complete new stage [...] They're all monologues. I've already stolen several

---

[14] William Scammell, 'Burst Open under a Blue-Black Pressure', *Poetry Review*, 88.1 (Spring 1998), 82 – 87 (p. 86; p. 87).
[15] Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), p. 192.
[16] Neil Roberts, 'The Common Text of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 7.1 (April 2003), 157 – 173 (p. 157).
[17] Roberts, 'The Common Text of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', p. 168.
[18] Margaret Dickie Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979), p. 223.
[19] Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, p. 212.

things from them.'[20] His admission of stealing from her poems is one that opens up interesting linkages between the work of both and confirms the reciprocity of influence as a two-way process that existed between the two. As early as 1956 Hughes was writing to his brother Gerald of the fecund creative partnership between himself and Plath and of how 'as a result of her influence I have written continually and every day better since I met her. She is a very fine critic of my work'.[21] As the critics Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts have stated:

> Hughes is not an isolated individualist. The mutual influence between Sylvia Plath and himself contributed importantly to the development of both poets.[22]

In its very physical form, the ways in which their writing became woven together is to be seen in the manuscript drafts of their work. Steve Enniss, curator of literary collections at Emory University which is home to the papers of Ted Hughes, has described the way 'they reused paper' and how 'Ted, in particular, would pick up discarded copies, drafts of her short stories or poems, and just turn them over and start work on the other side'.[23] One example Enniss refers to is how a typewritten manuscript draft page of *The Bell Jar* has Hughes' poem 'Digging' on the reverse. Plath's 'Stings' also was written on the back of a poem Hughes wrote for their daughter's birth.[24] Ultimately, as Enniss recognises: 'The presence of a manuscript with each of them on opposite sides serves as a wonderful metaphor for that kind of collaborative enterprise.' Further specific study of the way pages carry imprints made by both poets has been made by Susan Van Dyne as she highlights how Plath's 'Burning the Letters' was drafted on the reverse of six of Hughes' poems from *Lupercal*, namely 'Toll of Air Raids', 'The Thought Fox', 'A Fable', 'Cradle Piece', 'Unknown Soldier' and 'Poltergeist'[25] describing how 'Plath incorporates scraps of his poems into the new fabric of her story'.[26] Also, as has been documented by Van Dyne, Plath used the

---

[20] Hughes, Letter of December 1959 to Lucas Myers, quoted in Hillel Italie, 'Ted Hughes' Papers Shed New Light on Sylvia Plath, Himself', *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 4 April 1999 <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-6706885.html> [accessed August 2007]

[21] Hughes, Letter of September 1956 to Gerald and Joan Hughes, quoted in *'No Other Appetite': Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and the Blood Jet of Poetry*, ed. by Stephen C. Enniss and Karen Kukil (New York: The Grolier Club, 2005), p. 15.

[22] Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 22.

[23] Steve Enniss, quoted in Michael Terrazas, 'Enniss Mines, Records the Evolution of Writers' Lives', *Emory Report*, 51.20 (15 February 1999) <www.emory.edu/EMORY_REPORT/erarchive/1999/February/erfebruary.15/2_15_99enniss.html> [accessed August 2007]

[24] Susan Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's 'Ariel' Poems* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1993), p. 103. Unpublished poem dated May 1960.

[25] Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, p. 182.

[26] Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, p. 34. Lynda K Bundtzen expands on the implications of this discovery in her article 'Poetic Arson and Sylvia Plath's "Burning the Letters"', *Contemporary Literature*, 39.3 (Autumn

reverse of a handwritten draft of Hughes' radio play *The Calm* – described by Plath as 'a dark opposite to Shakespeare's *Tempest*' – to write drafts of the poems 'A Secret', 'The Applicant', 'Daddy', 'Eavesdropper', 'Medusa', 'The Jailor', 'Lesbos', 'Lyonnesse' and 'Amnesiac'.[27] Most interestingly however, Enniss speaks of how these drafts of a developing body of work reveal significant points of influence in terms of poetic technique: 'While they were each individual and distinct talents, they influenced each other; you see shifts in Plath's subject matter and in the directness of her lines'. Hughes himself in a letter to Keith Sagar divulged how his 'Lines to a Newborn Baby' was 'the template for Sylvia's much superior "Love Set you Going like a Fat Gold Watch"' [sic].[28] Furthermore, an early draft of Hughes' 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' was penned on the reverse of a typescript of Plath's 'Tulips'.[29]

'Full Moon and Little Frieda', regarded by Hughes as a favourite among his poems,[30] has been described by Uroff as a 'transitional poem' in terms of Hughes' developing style, its difference from Hughes' previous work emphasised by Uroff as she exclaims how 'it seems hardly possible that this poem was written by the author of "Pibroch"'.[31] Similarly, Plath's 'Tulips' (March 1961) was recognised by Hughes himself as marking a new stage, 'a new standard' in Plath's poetic career – 'the first sign of what was on its way' as he notes how 'she wrote this poem without her usual studies over the Thesaurus and at top speed, as one might write an urgent letter. From then on all her poems were written this way.'[32] It is therefore appropriate that both of these poems – Plath's 'Tulips' and Hughes 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' – should appear on the same page. What is more, Uroff has stated how Hughes would have been working on his poem around the same period that had Plath writing 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' and 'The Rival',[33] the former being one of the poems that Hughes marks out in his essay 'On Sylvia Plath' as comprising the miraculous period that led to the '*Ariel* voice', poems which he praises and marvels at such as 'The Moon and The Yew Tree', 'Pheasant', 'Crossing the Water' and 'Among the Narcissi', all culminating in 'Elm' wherein, as Hughes professes, 'the voice of *Ariel*

1998), 434 – 451. For a similar approach see also Heather Clark, 'Tracking the Thought-Fox: Sylvia Plath's Revision of Ted Hughes', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28.2 (Winter 2005), 100 – 112.

[27] Van Dyne, *Revising Life*, p. 9.

[28] Christina Patterson, 'Ted on Sylvia, For the Record', *Guardian*, 18 August 2001, Saturday section, p. 3.

[29] *'No Other Appetite': Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and the Blood Jet of Poetry*, p. 39.

[30] Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, p. 12.

[31] Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, p. 178.

[32] Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. by Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), pp. 187 – 195 (p. 193).

[33] Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, p. 178.

emerged fully fledged'.[34] Another point to note is that Hughes' poem was first published in the *Observer* on 27th January 1963, appearing beside a negative review of Plath's *The Bell Jar* by Anthony Burgess. Diane Middlebrook, in her essay 'Plath and Hughes: Call and Response', has commented on how this was a 'bitter disappointment' for Plath in terms of the literary competition between the two, and how Plath's 'Edge', which was written just afterwards and employs similar imagery of the moon and of milk, must have been written as 'a response to the call she heard in "Full Moon and Little Frieda".'[35] Although this theory seems tenuous considering Plath's career-long employment of such imagery, it does testify to how the reciprocity between the two poetries may be seen as endless and enlarging, this creative poetic dialogue constantly engaging the two poets and enriching the imaginative possibility of their developing work. Hughes' 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' speaks of Plath's continuing presence in the symbolic world of Hughes' poetry:

> A cool small evening shrunk to a dog bark and the clank
> of a bucket –
>
> And you listening.
> A spider's web, tense for the dew's touch.
> A pail lifted, still and brimming – mirror
> To tempt a first star to a tremor.
>
> Cows are going home in the lane there, looping
> the hedges with their warm wreaths of breath –
> A dark river of blood, many boulders,
> Balancing unspilled milk.
>
> 'Moon!' you cry suddenly, 'Moon! Moon!'
>
> The moon has stepped back like an artist gazing amazed
> at a work
>
> That points at him amazed.[36]

[34] Here, Hughes praises Plath's 'three most purely beautiful, most free-spirited, most delicately elated poems "Crossing the Water", "Among the Narcissi" and "Pheasant."' Hughes, 'On Sylvia Plath', *Raritan*, 14.2 (Fall 1994), 1 – 10 (p. 7).

[35] Diane Middlebrook, 'Plath and Hughes: Call and Response', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 156 – 171 (p. 170).

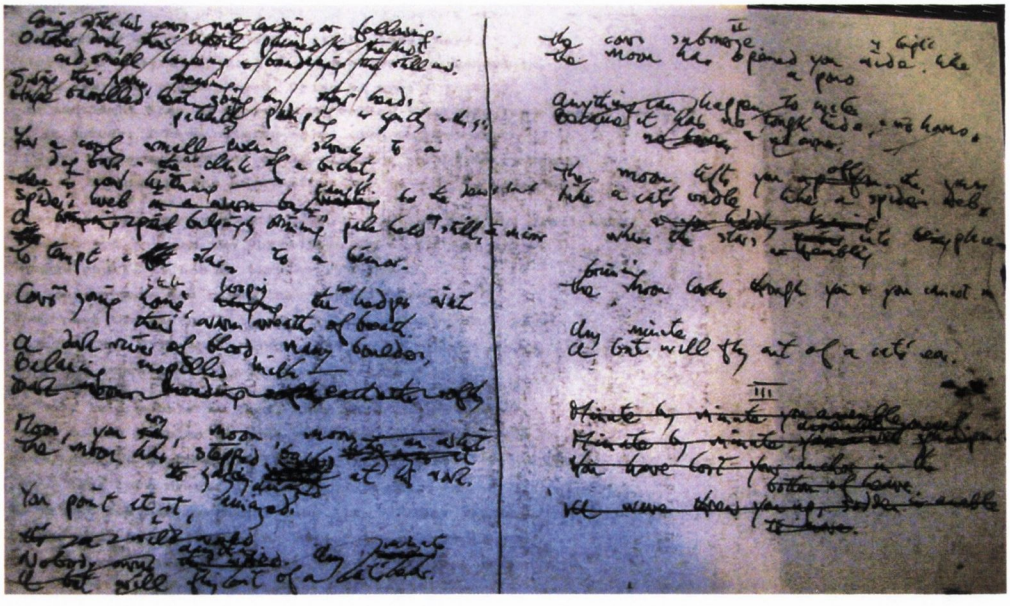
[36] Hughes, 'Full Moon and Little Frieda', in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2004), pp. 182 – 183.

Hughes' poem was originally titled 'Encounter' and was in two sections, as published in Chad Walsh's *Today's Poets* (November 1964). The second section, as it appeared there, was as follows:

> The cows submerge.
> The moon has opened you wide and bright like a pond.
> The moon lifts you off the grass –
> A cat's cradle of spider webs, where the stars are trembling into place.
> The brimming moon looks through you and you cannot move.
> Any minute
> A bat will fly out of a cat's ear.[37]

This poem is significant in Hughes' oeuvre as one that sees a move away from nature as an uncompromising and overpowering force to a more accommodating and gentler view of nature as providing an epiphanic moment for father and child. Critics often use the adjective 'tender' to describe this poem as one which provides a welcome counteract to Hughes' poetry of violence.

However, it seems that something more complicated and ambivalent is at work here beneath the seemingly benign surface. An examination of an early draft of this poem – the one which carries on its recto the typescript of Plath's 'Tulips' – reveals something far more complex at work. Through Hughes' draft, as the image below makes clear, one can see how Plath's handwriting on the reverse filters through, and casts its shadow onto his work in progress:[38]



[37] See Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 1252.
[38] Hughes, 'Full Moon and Little Frieda', autograph draft with typescript of Plath's 'Tulips' on recto. 'Encounter', the original title of Hughes' poem, is written along the side of Plath's 'Tulips'.

Here, as this draft makes clear, after the familiar stanzas quoted above, there follows the addition of a final stanza that Hughes was later to cross out. Decipherable however are the final two lines:

> You have lost your anchor in the
> bottom of heaven,
> A wave threw you up, sodden and unable
> to move.[39]

This concluding tragic note of loss and paralysis rings of Plath's own poems addressed to children on the absence or death of a parent such as 'To a Fatherless Son' written to her son Nicholas after Hughes' departure, or the 'dark ceiling without a star' that closes 'Child' or similarly the 'heaven' – a 'dark water' – that is 'starless and fatherless' at the end of 'Sheep in Fog'.[40] Overall, it is highly suggestive of the large-scale sea imagery that dominates Plath's work, most evocatively in the poem 'Lorelei' and in Plath's iconic prose-piece 'Ocean 1212-W'; both of these works are concerned with myths of origin. The forces of uncertainty and loss are deeply in evidence in Hughes' 'Full Moon and Little Frieda' as a close-reading and interrogation of the poem uncovers. Hughes' own description of the poem is as follows:

> This is just a description of a little girl – a two-year-old girl – looking at a full moon. And 'moon' being one of her first words – so she being very excited to use this word.[41]

The 'Frieda' of the title is the daughter of Plath and Hughes, born on 1 April 1960, and it is significant that her first verbal utterance as recorded here should be one of the most pervasive images in the symbolic language of Plath's poetry, that of the 'moon'. What is more, the first draft of Plath's 'Balloons' included the line 'Boons, you say, boons, boons', only to be crossed out later, but which echoes in a striking way Hughes' line, '"Moon!" you cry suddenly, "Moon! Moon!"', thus pointing up the rich and complex dialogue that existed between Hughes and Plath as poets and their shared concern with the child's acquisition of language.[42] For Hughes' Frieda it is the moon of her mother that shapes her initiation into language. Judith Kroll has recognised how 'the moon as image and symbol is one of the most striking elements in Plath's mythic system' the moon being her 'emblematic muse – her Moon muse – which symbolises the deepest

---

[39] Thanks to Karen Kukil, Associate Curator of the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, for her assistance with the transcription.
[40] Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 265; p. 262.
[41] Hughes, Commentary on the Poems from The Adelaide Festival Writers Week, March 1976, transcribed by Ann Skea < http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/Adelaide.htm > [accessed August 2007]
[42] 'Balloons', Draft 1, 5 February 1963, on verso of 'Thalidomide', Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

source and inspiration of the poetic vision, the poet's vocation, her female biology and her role and fate as protagonist in a tragic drama'[43] based on Plath's reading of Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*. Indeed, Hughes described Plath's poem 'The Rival' as one 'left over from a series specifically about that woman in the moon, the disquieting muse',[44] the same series of course that Plath was working on when Hughes began his own poem on their daughter's first naming and recognising the same moon. This then is Plath's moon, a potent symbol in her poetry as mother and muse. Furthermore, the moon would also feature in Hughes' poems for children; collections such as *The Earth-Owl and Other Moon People* (1963) and *Moon-Whales and Other Moon Poems* (1976) imaginatively describe life on the moon in often terrifying terms. Indeed *Moon-Whales* has been examined by one critic as Hughes' *apologia pro matrimonio suo* as it 'provides intimate insights into both the joys of the Plath-Hughes marriage and the unhappiness that led to its dissolution. What is more, according to this scholar: 'About a fourth of the poems describe the marriage. About a fourth portray Plath herself. Several refer to Plath's poetry or parody her techniques.'[45]

The moon then, along with other images in Hughes' 'Full Moon and Little Frieda', may be sourced to Plath's own developing oeuvre. To start with, the imagery of cows in Hughes' poem, directly echoes Plath's 'Morning Song', written on the birth of her daughter and the first poem in *Ariel*, which has the speaker as ambivalent first-time mother 'cow-heavy' in her floral night gown.[46] It points too to an earlier poem 'Metaphors' which, in describing the condition of pregnancy through a series of riddling metaphors, has the speaker profess: 'I am a means, a stage, a cow in calf'.[47] In 'Metaphors' the state of pregnancy before giving birth is rendered analogous to the composition of a poem. Cast wholly in metaphorical language as it becomes a text to be interpreted, the 'riddle in nine syllables' to be solved. Plath's 'Morning Song' is significant too as the poem which Hughes praised as being 'much superior' to his own piece on the birth of the same child, titled 'Lines to a Newborn Baby'. Furthermore, the latter was first drafted on the reverse of Plath's typescript of 'Metaphors', deepening the linkage between the two.[48] The 'milk' of the cows links suggestively back to the mother nursing her child in Plath's 'Magi' where 'Love' is 'the mother of milk, no theory', and in 'Candles' where the candle lights 'mollify the

---

[43] Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), p. 21.
[44] Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plaths's Poems', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, p. 194.
[45] See Sherry Lutz Zivley, 'Ted Hughes' *Apologia Pro Matrimonio Suo*', *New England Quarterly*, 55.2 (June 1982), 187 – 200 (p. 188).
[46] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 5.
[47] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 116.
[48] Middlebrook, 'Plath and Hughes: Call and Response', p. 160.

bald moon' as the mother nurses her child and wonders 'How shall I tell anything at all / To this infant still in a birth drowse?'.[49] This is the same 'milk' too of Plath's radio play 'Three Women'. This dramatic poem weaves together the voices of three pregnant women as they describe their various experiences in separate monologues. The first voice, having given birth, professes with some satisfaction; 'And I am a river of milk', breathing in the scent of the newborn babies in their cots as; 'They smell of milk'.[50] A terrifying ambiguity leads up to this birth however and it is through this image of milk – as both life-giving nourishment to a baby and as a verb that saps the same vital nourishment from the mother – that this ambiguity is conveyed, as the same voice earlier in the play, then going through the agony of childbirth, had asked: 'Can such innocence kill and kill? It milks my life.'[51] This ambivalence becomes Frieda's inheritance in Hughes' poem too, as she names her presiding 'moon' and is born into all that it signifies.

The vivid image of the 'dark river of blood' is a trope that must be inspired by Plath also, 'blood' being another pervasive image in her poetry, a vital symbol of birth and creativity as one of her most potent, vital images is that of poetry as unstoppable 'blood jet' from 'Kindness'.[52] The blood in 'Three Women' is associated, through the menstrual cycle, with the moon and its terrifying 'O-mouth' as the second voice cries out in terror: 'It is she that drags the blood-black sea around / Month after month'.[53] Also, the 'mirror to tempt a first star to a tremor' picks up on the 'mirror' motif in Plath's work, most notably there in her poem 'Mirror' which was prefaced by Hughes with the following note of threat and uncertainty: 'A safer place but not much safer, is the Mirror.'[54] Furthermore, this mirror is also reminiscent of the remarkable image from Plath's 'Morning Song' where the mother negates herself to her child: 'I'm no more your mother / Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / effacement at the wind's hand'.[55] The idea of a reflective mirror is an important theme in Plath's work in terms of the double or other that threatens the integrity of the self. This is picked up in Hughes' poem as Frieda, the moon's work, 'points back' at the moon, this process of reflection and double identity underscored by the parallel repetition of the word 'amazed' at each line end. Crucially, 'Morning Song' closes with a description of the baby's first attempts towards language: 'And now you try your handful of notes: / The clear vowels rise like balloons'. It can be no coincidence that here in Hughes' poem

---

[49] Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 148 – 149.
[50] Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 176 – 187 (p. 183).
[51] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 180.
[52] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 270.
[53] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 182.
[54] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath's *Crossing the Water*: Some Reflections', *Critical Quarterly*, 13.2 (Summer 1971), 165 – 172 (p. 169).
[55] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 5. See also Plath, 'Last Words', 21 October 1961: 'My mirror is clouding over – / A few more breaths, and it will reflect nothing at all'. Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 172.

the same '*oo*' vowels of Plath's 'ball*oo*ns' echoes what becomes the child's first word 'm*oo*n' in perfect rhyming harmony. Furthermore, the imagery of spiders, blood and mirrors in Hughes' poem calls to mind Plath's 'Childless Woman' where the speaker describes herself as:

> Spiderlike, I spin mirrors
> Loyal to my image
>
> Uttering nothing but blood –
> Taste it, dark red! [56]

This poem also contains the simile 'Ungodly as a child's shriek' pointing up something of the speaker's ambivalence towards motherhood in a poem that deals with issues of female sterility, impotence and lifelessness. Frieda's entry into language and the world then, takes place through the same sound patterns and symbols – the 'clear vowels' – of her mother's poetic language, the mother having created a world through words for the child as she has created the child itself as well as to the poems, many of which explore the condition of pregnancy and motherhood. Babies and poems as works of art are of course synonymous in Plath's view of creativity as her poem 'Stillborn' famously makes clear. That the moon, symbol of poetic inspiration as well as of an ambivalent maternal figure, should be compared in Hughes' poem to an 'artist' enforces the poem's theme of a birth into language and creativity and of nature as both a life-giving and a destructive force. It seems fitting that Frieda Hughes, the 'Frieda' of the poem, is now herself a poet and one whose work displays the overwhelming influence of both of her parents in terms of its diction and imagery.[57]

Hughes, as has been shown, interweaves symbols and tropes from the developing symbolism of Plath's oeuvre into this poem which records the birth of their daughter into language and into a world of nature as she grows into experience and begins to name. Moreover, the relationship between word and world through metaphor and simile which is so much a feature of Plath's poetry is imitated by Hughes here in lines such as 'warm wreaths of breath' and 'The moon has opened you wide and bright as a pond'. The surrealism of the lines 'The moon lifts you off the grass' and 'Any minute / A bat will fly out of a cat's ear' are typical too of Plath's effects, as well as echoing her 'Morning Song' where 'Your mouth opens clean as a cat's' as well as

---

[56] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 259. The 'spider' in Hughes' poem also echoes back to an early poem of Plath's titled 'Spider' (1956) glossed with the following note by Hughes which reveals Plath's huge interest in African folklore: 'Anansi is the famous trickster hero of West African and Carribean folklore.' Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 275. This use of the trickster figure becomes crucial for Hughes in *Crow*.

[57] As one reviewer put it, Hughes' poems, 'remind us of her mother in their directness of attack and of her father in their insistently violent diction.' Robert Nye, 'A New Poetry of Emotion', *Scotsman*, 15 September 2001, p. 13.

Plath's 'Tulips' which are described as predatory and threatening: 'opening like the mouth of some great African cat'.[58] The cat also appears in Plath's 'The Rival'. The sound patterns are Plath's too. The use of internal rhyme in such phrases as 'still and brimming', 'unspilled milk', 'wide and bright' are there in the opening of Plath's 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' from the same period; 'This is the light of the mind',[59] and in 'Tulips' where 'the light lies on these white walls'.[60] The repetition here also is a feature of Plath's poetry, the repeated 'oo' sound of 'you', 'moon', 'through', 'move', the incessant 'and' in the opening lines and the anaphora of 'The' in the second section echoing the same syntactic parallelism in the opening of, to give one example, 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'. So too are the alliterative effects of 'warm wreaths', the visual rhyme of 'wreaths of breath' and the wordplay between the almost identical 'blood' and 'boulders'. The opening syntax of 'a cool small evening' with its two monosyllabic adjectives imitates Plath's style entirely as does the view here of nature as being 'shrunk' to the perception of the subject. The straightforward colloquial tone and irregular line lengths and loose rhythm has no doubt also been influenced by the Plath of poems such as 'Barren Woman' or, again, 'Morning Song'.

Other poems from *Wodwo* such as 'New Moon in January' and 'Cadenza' reveal Plath's influential presence too. Indeed, Uroff has offered the following elucidation of *Wodwo*, as a work wherein,

> Hughes broke through the fixed focus of his earlier volumes, assumed a new poetic tone of questioning, developed a more colloquial style, and revealed the full impact of Plath's influence. [...] Hughes abandons the quatrain that had been his most persistent form, reducing his line sometimes to a single word, as Plath had done in *Ariel* [...] The assurance of Hughes' early stance has been seriously weakened, and his speakers seem more like Plath's early questioners.[61]

Uroff goes on to say how 'Much of the imagery is straight out of Plath, and the tone is a combination of her defiant voice and his own earlier assurance.'[62] Terry Gifford and Neil Roberts too have commented briefly on how 'it seems to us likely that the greater rhythmical freedom, compression and elliptical language of Hughes' poetry from *Wodwo* onwards owes much to the example of Sylvia Plath's later work.'[63] The tone, imagery and technique of 'Cadenza' with its

---

[58] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 19.
[59] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 172.
[60] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 18.
[61] Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, p. 221.
[62] Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, p. 222.
[63] Gifford and Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study*, p. 22.

eerily surreal perceptions voiced by an unstable, fragmented self and cast over unrhymed two-line stanzas is entirely reminiscent of Plath, most particularly in the following lines:

> And I am the cargo
> Of a coffin attended by swallows.
>
> And I am the water
> Bearing the coffin that will not be silent.
>
> The clouds are full of surgery and collisions
> But the coffin escapes – as a black diamond
>
> A ruby brimming blood,
> An emerald beating its shores,
>
> The sea lifts swallow wings and flings
> A summer lake open…[64]

Margaret Dickie (Uroff) has correctly described this surreal poem as 'highly indebted to Plath's subject and imagery'[65] while Anthony Libby has marked it out as being 'remarkably like a Plath poem, not only echoing "I am the arrow" (from "Ariel") but also directly echoing "Fever 103°"'.[66] Although Hughes' 'Cadenza' is certainly reminiscent of the closing lines of 'Fever 103°' – the 'coffin attended by swallows' repeats the 'virgin attended by roses' in Plath's poem – its imagery repeats tropes from right across Plath's oeuvre. In its phrasing and style of expression it strongly suggests Plath's 'Tulips' in which a speaker calmly declares: 'I have let things slip, a thirty-year-old cargo boat', or the 'long coffin of soap-coloured oak, // The curious bearers', of Plath's 'Berck-Plage'.[67] The 'ruby brimming blood' echoes almost exactly Plath's 'Nick and the Candlestick' and the speaker's address to her baby son: 'The blood blooms clean // In you, ruby.'[68] Emeralds, diamonds and other jewels and stones signify obduracy and stasis as well as an ambiguous value throughout Plath's oeuvre, imbuing her work with compelling, vivid colouration. The image of the cloud is a pervasive one in Plath's poetry, associated with a mostly sinister vagueness and ambiguity, dispersing and shape-shifting, as it appears in 'Morning Song', in 'Gulliver', in 'Little Fugue', in 'Elm' and 'Swarm' and in the poem for three voices titled 'Three Women'. The speaker of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' states: 'I have fallen a long way.

---

[64] Hughes, 'Cadenza', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 148 – 149 (p. 149).
[65] Margaret Dickie, 'Ted Hughes: The Double Voice', *Contemporary Literature*, 24.1 (Spring 1983), 51 – 65 (p. 56).
[66] Anthony Libby, 'God's Lioness and the Priest of Sycorax: Plath and Hughes', *Contemporary Literature*, 15.3 (Summer 1974), 386 – 405 (p. 390).
[67] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 18; p. 52.
[68] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 48.

Clouds are flowering / Blue and mystical over the face of the stars',[69] and the image pervades Plath's oeuvre in early poems such as 'Bucolics', 'Two Campers in Cloud Country' and the 'clouded mind' of 'Winter Landscape'. The word 'surgery' appears most memorably in 'Elm' preceded by the high-impact word 'radical' which creates a terrifying sense of the self as the victim of invasiveness and attack, under duress. Thus here, Hughes' clouds bear all of that sense of latent menace and a deeply uneasy vagueness. His speaker is dead, within a coffin, speaking posthumously of her condition, yet is also, mysteriously, the water itself that carries the coffin – the self as nebulous, capable of metamorphosis – thus deploying one of Plath's most crucial strategies. It is clear that Hughes' borrows Plath's most memorable effects in this poem to create a deep, surreal impression, a haunting musical experience; the cadenza itself of course being a virtuoso solo passage in a musical piece.

Similarly, in 'New Moon and January', first published in the *Observer* on 6th January 1963, Hughes again draws on Plath's most potent image; the moon. The opening of Hughes' poem: 'A splinter, flicked / Into the wide eye-ball / Severs its warning',[70] with its menacing tones, appears to draw on Plath's early poem 'The Eye-mote'. Plath's poem describes the attainment of a darker vision, of a type of blindness, as the speaker laments how 'the splinter flew in and stuck my eye, / Needling it dark.'[71] Nothing can reverse this affliction of the eyes, this loss of sight, as Plath's speaker compares herself to Oedipus – 'I dream that I am Oedipus' – and it is significant that it is the Oedipal theme which Hughes saw as pivotal in Plath's poetry, as he stated authoritatively how 'all her creative work tells just one story: her Oedipal love for her father [...]'.[72] Hughes, in 'New Moon in January', adopts Plath's style and tone to describe the moon as it is rendered thus:

> O lone
> Eyelash on the darkening
> Stripe of blood, O sail of death!

This construction, with its apostrophe to the moon and use of stark metaphor for surreal effects, is entirely Plath's own, employed in countless poems such as, for instance, in the early 'Moonsong at Morning' – 'O moon of illusion'[73] – in 'Thalidomide' with its opening cry, 'O half moon — //

---

[69] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 173.
[70] Hughes, 'New Moon in January', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 166 – 167.
[71] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 109.
[72] Hughes, in Negev, *Daily Telegraph*, p. 4.
[73] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 316.

Half-brain, luminosity —', and in 'The Other': 'O moon-glow, o sick one'.[74] Hughes' use of the apostrophe 'O' also points again to the 'O' of Plath's moon where, as in the 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' the moon is 'quiet / With the O-gape of complete despair'; the moon is rendered as an expressive face.[75] The image of the eye-lash too echoes Plath's 'Purdah' where the speaker proclaims to her audience: 'O chatterers // Attendants of the eyelash!' and refers to the moon as her 'indefatigable cousin' of 'cancerous pallors'.[76] The closing lines of Hughes' poem are disjointed and ambiguous:

> Frozen
> In ether
> Unearthly
>
> Shelley's faint-shriek
> Trying to thaw while zero
> Itself loses consciousness.

This describes the deathly aspect of the moon in strange, disjointed phrases. 'Ether' is a word Plath uses in her poetry to mark a life-denying force, such as in the poem 'Magi' where the abstracts, Plath's 'great absolutes of the philosophers' hover over the child in its cot having only faces that are 'ethereal blanks' as they are 'withdrawn from life'.[77] In 'The Bee Meeting', the hawthorn, a plant that has folklore associations with death, is seen 'etherizing its children',[78] and in 'Lyonnesse' a murderous God, lazy and apathetic, sits 'in his cage of ether, his cage of stars.'[79] The reference here to Shelley's 'faint shriek' may refer to Mary Shelley's mythological drama *Proserpine and Midas* wherein Arethusa recounts the moment of Prosperine's abduction by Pluto to her mother Ceres and how after hearing:

> [...] a faint shriek that made my blood run cold.
> I saw the King of Hell in his black car,
> And in his arms he bore your fairest child,
> Fair as the moon encircled by the night [...][80]

---

[74] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 9; p. 41.
[75] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 173.
[76] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, pp. 61 – 62.
[77] Plath, Introduction to 'Magi', in Typescript for 'New Poems', 13 December 1962, quoted in Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 289 – 290.
[78] Plath, *Ariel The Restored Edition*, p. 80.
[79] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 233.
[80] Mary Shelley, *Proserpine*, Act II, from *Proserpine and Midas: Two Unpublished Mythological Dramas*, ed. and intro. by A. Koszul <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/prsmd10.txt> [accessed August 2007]

Shelley's Proserpine has been described as one who 'inhabits a no-man's land between death and life' and 'a figure who disrupts mourning's consolation in concert with nature, who insists on insolvable, unending mourning'.[81] It is interesting to note that Shelley's use of the posthumous voice in *Proserpine* is analogous to Plath's own speakers' subversive strategies in poems such as 'Edge', 'Lady Lazarus' and other poems from *Ariel*. The myth of Proserpine, here cryptically alluded to by Hughes and concerned as it is with the themes of mortality, loss and the passing of time through the seasons of the year, is a theme which is at a basic level appropriate to Hughes' January setting in this poem. However, it is also, in a much larger sense, one that informs his later work, particularly in its similarities to the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, a myth that Hughes viewed as being analogous to his relationship with Plath but which, as he wrote in a letter to Keith Sagar after Plath's death, he almost completely evaded, regarding it as 'too obvious an attempt to exploit my situation'.[82] In the same letter, writing of Plath's death, Hughes concluded with the following: 'The shock twist was that Pluto answered: "No, of course you can't have her back. She's dead you idiot."' This myth dominates Hughes' poem 'A Picture of Otto' from *Birthday Letters*, as Hughes addresses himself to Plath's dead parent: 'a big shock / To meet me face to face in the dark adit / Where I have come looking for your daughter' and states how 'This underworld, my friend, is her heart's home'.[83] Indeed as J.D. Mc Clatchy put it in his review of *Birthday Letters*: 'Many myths are conflated and Plath's image superimposed on them. She is Eurydice, Ariadne, or Persephone.'[84] Hughes' *Alcestis* is also significant in this regard as it deals with the same myth of Orpheus. Here then, in the closing lines of 'New Moon in January' is pointed the way to an enlarged understanding of the deep layers of allusion and symbolism that make up the work of both Plath and Hughes. The work of both is wholly concerned with an imaginative engagement with literature, myth, folklore, religious and other texts and discourses, much of which they explored together in their shared life of reading and writing, as one creative mind influenced and enriched the other.

'He is my best critic, as I am his', wrote Plath in a letter to her mother in 1956.[85] That Hughes sets himself up as Plath's most committed critic and explicator is apparent from the large

---

[81] Claire Raymond, *The Posthumous Voice in Women's Writing from Mary Shelley to Sylvia Plath* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 41 – 42.
[82] Hughes, Letter to Keith Sagar, quoted in Patterson, 'Ted on Sylvia, For the Record', p. 3.
[83] Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), p. 193.
[84] J.D. McClatchy, 'Old Myths in New Versions', *Poetry*, 172 (Summer 1998), 159 – 160. See also Anne Whitehead, 'Refiguring Orpheus: The Possession of the Past in Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*', *Textual Practice*, 13.2 (Summer 1999), 227 – 241; Dianne Hunter, 'Poetics of Melancholy and Psychic Possession in Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* and Other Haunted Texts', *Partial Answers*, 1.1 (Winter 2003), 129 – 150 and Lynda K. Bundtzen, 'Mourning Eurydice: Ted Hughes as Orpheus in Birthday Letters', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23.3 – 4 (Summer 2000), 455 – 469.
[85] Plath, Letter of 29 April 1956 to Aurelia Plath, in *Letters Home*, ed. by Aurelia Plath, p. 243.

number of his critical writings on her work. However, Hughes' role in this as in other areas has been deeply problematic as he has constructed, with an authority and command that no other may possess, a particular reading of Plath's oeuvre that sometimes can seem too reductive, too determined to assign to her poetic oeuvre a sole, mythological structure. The following statement made by Hughes to Eilat Negev in 1996 is indicative of this tendency:

> All [Plath's] creative work tells just one story: her Oedipal love for her father, her complex relationship with her mother, the attempt at suicide, the shock therapy. The novel and the poems all tell one story, and she never wrote about anything else.[86]

As Edna Longley has rightly observed, pointing out the limits of Hughes' approach: 'He says, questionably, that Plath's creative work "tells just one story."'[87] However, as with every interpretation of a writer's work, elements of Hughes' readings and analyses are as open to criticism – be it negative or otherwise – as the individual reader sees fit. Hughes must be regarded as a critic like any other in terms of how his own critical writings and evaluations may be worked with or worked over. Seamus Heaney's opinion is that Hughes 'has been since her death her poetry's most important editor and interpreter: it was through him that Plath's achievement was first helped into existence and then had its essential poetic character defined'.[88] But for too long, Hughes' interventions as editor and critic have been treated in only negative terms by Plath scholarship. Much has been written about the damaging effects of his position in critical studies that are for the most part written from the point of view of feminist scholars and other parties with a specific agenda that privileges the biographical circumstances of each of the poets' lives. However, the possibility that many of Hughes explications and comments on Plath's work can actually lead us away from the reductive biographical or pathological approaches that have been so foremost in studies of Plath and towards a deeper understanding of her art must surely be attended to. In particular, the following description by Hughes of how Plath's deepest concerns in her work were pressing large-scale political and environmental matters points to a crucial subject matter that is integral to an understanding of many of Plath's later poems but which has been ignored by critics and scholars for decades:

> The chemical poisoning of nature, the pile-up of atomic waste, were horrors that persecuted her like an illness – as her latest poems record. Aushwitz and the rest were

[86] Hughes, in Negev, *Daily Telegraph*, p. 4.
[87] Edna Longley, 'Rough Magnificence', review of Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 December 2003, pp. 3 – 4 (p. 3).
[88] Seamus Heaney, 'A Wounded Power Rises from the Depths', review of Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* *Irish Times*, 31 January 1998, Weekend section, p. 11.

> merely the open wounds, in her idea of the great civilised crime of intelligence that like the half-imbecile, omnipotent spoiled brat Nero has turned on its mother.[89]

This statement forces a complete reconsideration of Plath's entire oeuvre, moving her work away from the 'confessional' or 'autobiographical' labels that it has erroneously inspired and instead positions her as a poet who addressed the larger and most important questions of her age, a poet concerned with nature, the world and the forces of war and inhumanity. Later chapters in this thesis will reveal the full extent of Plath's strategies in this important regard. That the universally-termed 'villain' in the Hughes-Plath legend should enable this corrective response and highlight one of Plath's most foremost concerns may at first seem unlikely to the numerous scholars who have been suspicious of Hughes' strategies and his handling of Plath's oeuvre, however it cannot be disputed that in many ways Hughes' criticism on Plath's work is full of helpful signposts to a fuller appreciation of her work.

Hughes has, for example, illuminated the rich imaginative tapestry of Plath's work, asserting how 'the poems are chapters in a mythology where the plot, seen as a whole and in retrospect is strong and clear', how 'the world of her poetry is one of emblematic visionary events, mathematical symmetries, metamorphoses'[90] and he often helpfully draws the readers' attention to the most remarkable aspects of Plath's poetic skill, as he points out: 'The coolness and economy of her observation is something to note'.[91] Many of Hughes' comments on her work open up richer possibilities for interpretation and shall be borne out here and elsewhere throughout this thesis. His insights often aid a more informed and sophisticated reading of her poetry, as he points out: 'Most readers will perceive pretty readily the single centre of power and light which her poems all share, but I think it will be a service if I point out just how little of her poetry is "occasional", and how faithfully her separate poems build up into one long poem'.[92] Most importantly in terms of an examination of Hughes' employment of symbols and specific words from Plath's poetry is the following statement from his essay 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*':

> The words in these odd-looking verses are not only charged with terrific heat, pressure and clairvoyant precision, they are all deeply related within any poem, acknowledging each other and calling to each other in deep harmonic designs.[93]

---

[89] Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, p. 190.
[90] Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', p. 187.
[91] Hughes, 'Introduction', Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), p. 13.
[92] Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', p. 187.
[93] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber, 1994), pp. 161 – 162 (p. 161).

This structuring principle of Plath's work is one which Hughes truly admires – in what he terms in this essay her 'incredibly beautiful lines' – and it is fundamental in understanding the inner logic of Plath's poems, the mythology that is developed through her artful use of symbolic language in this way. Elsewhere, Hughes has noted how the final piece of 'Poem for a Birthday' titled 'The Stones' marks a special point in her oeuvre, recognised by both Hughes and Plath as 'the turning point in her writing career, the point where her real writing began', and which as Hughes has professed, is 'quite unlike anything that had gone before in her work.' [94] Hughes continues by explaining the significance and originality of this poem: 'The system of association, from image to image and within the images, is quite new and – as we can now see – it is that of *Ariel*.' Furthermore, this system of association, these images, motifs and sound patterns operate as music, Hughes terming it 'the flight of her ideas and music' as the poetry is organised musically in 'harmonic designs'.[95] Sound and symbols in Plath's poetry are intertwined to create patterns. Hughes himself has attested to how 'one of her most instinctive compulsions was to make patterns – vivid, bold, symmetrical patterns.'[96]

As with any critic's view, Hughes' comments can also of course be limiting and sterile, as he forces Plath's work into a mythic framework. In his essay 'On Sylvia Plath', he explicates Plath's 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' in terms of the poet's biography, paraphrasing it into a pat sentence as a poem 'where her father lies under the roots and her mother mourns in heaven.'[97] That the moon represents a mother figure is correct, but that it can only be Plath's own mother Aurelia Plath and not for instance the moon goddess, the mother and muse of poetry or other maternal symbols has Hughes wielding his authority over Plath's life and work to preclude other interpretations. This reductive approach may also be seen to occur as Hughes writes simplistically of 'Little Fugue': 'This is exactly as if she had entered her father's coffin'.[98] Hughes explains the poem away as though it may only be about this and nothing else nor be made up of anything more sophisticated. Hughes, however, even as he may be seen to reduce certain poems to simplistic paraphrase, does reveal something of the poems' relation to Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* and provide an overall understanding of these poems in their development towards *Ariel,* describing the process thus:

> In other words, between the 2nd and the 19th, she has been traveling underground ('Crossing the Water') just like Osiris in his sun-boat being transported from his death in

[94] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath and her Journals', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, pp. 177 – 190 (p. 183).
[95] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*', p. 161.
[96] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath', *Ariel*', p. 161.
[97] Hughes, 'On Sylvia Plath', p. 5.
[98] Ibid.

> the West to his rebirth as a divine child (himself reborn as his own divine child in the form of a Falcon) in the East.[99]

Hughes goes on to offer an imaginative explication of 'Elm' and Plath's most dominant and potent symbols; 'The Moon, as always, corresponds to the nucleus of the artificial ego in its matriarchal regime, while the "soft, feathery" thing, the dark fierce bird that inhabits the tree, is the voice and spirit of the authentic self – the new voice and spirit of Ariel'.[100] Hughes, correctly, sees Plath's work as one that uses 'a genetic code of symbolic signs that has few equals for consistency and precision', but he goes too far in trying to assign to the life, what he terms 'the curve of the mythic drama' of the work. Contrary to what Hughes professed in the interview with Negev, Plath's work does not tell 'just one story'; there are many possibilities for interpretation. Because of this tendency to fix her life to myth, Hughes goes too far into melodrama in this essay, as in the following comment:

> Her materials were the real explosive experience of her own life and attempted suicide. Her bid to refashion these materials ritually, to recreate her history and remake herself, is brilliant with a kind of desperation, lit with the dazzling powers of an all-out emergency.[101]

Here, Hughes gives himself over to the framework of myth, to the realm of tragedy, speaking finally of a 'tragic shadow' which is the truth of her life and so it is mostly unhelpful in terms of understanding the poems themselves.[102] However, the wisdom of Hughes' idea of the ritual in her work, the deliberate fashioning, the transformation of life into a finely wrought and complex art can be an enabling one. Hers is the poetry of making. 'In Plath's mythology babies are always intensely positive creatures, of new life, fresh beginnings, vital and innocent force etc.'[103] Hughes, in his essay explicating the poem 'Sheep in Fog' reveals through his study of the manuscript drafts as he highlights the sheer thought, labour and, perhaps most significantly, connective references outside her own life's circumstances that Plath put into her poems. Here he unearths the 'coded meaning' of the imagery, the 'hieroglyphs' that are Plath's symbols and the importance of the myths of Phaeton and Icarus for her, the Phaeton myth in 'Ariel' and the Icarus myth behind the last eleven poems. As Hughes offers, by way of conclusion: 'Behind these bald

---

[99] Hughes, 'On Sylvia Plath', p. 7.
[100] Hughes, 'On Sylvia Plath', p. 8.
[101] Hughes, 'On Sylvia Plath', p. 9.
[102] Hughes, 'On Sylvia Plath', p. 10.
[103] Hughes, 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, pp. 191 – 211 (p. 192).

glyphs, we now understand, there lies a submerged, struggling and certainly terrible large-scale psycho-mythological drama.'[104]

The important point to be noted from these comments and analyses, questionable though some of these undoubtedly are, is the way in which Hughes does engage on a very deep level with the whole body of Plath's work, constantly expressing his profound respect for her poetry and for her later poetry in particular. His essay on *Ariel* rhapsodises about the ways her poetic ability reaches its full potential in this collection, as 'all the various voices of her gift came together' through 'the full power and music of her extraordinary nature' in a poetry made up of 'incredibly beautiful lines' as she 'controls one of the widest and most subtly discriminating vocabularies in the modern poetry of our language'.[105] This is high praise. Elsewhere he describes her poetry as 'like a mosaic, where every letter stands separate within the work, a hieroglyph to itself'.[106] This description is articulated later in an interview with Clive Wilmer as Hughes goes on to reveal the important influence of Plath on his later work, an influence which was further complemented by his work on the experimental play *Orghast* from 1971, as he explains here:

> I think it sharpened my sense of the mosaic quality of verse. I was already very, very aware of it because, for instance, Sylvia's poetry seems to me, almost in a unique way, a mosaic patterning of almost separate, distinctive units of meaning. Obviously words always are distinctive units of meaning, but in her world, they're particularly geographically arranged: each unit has a distinctive individuality of its own and is very pointedly contrasted and related to all the others around it, which is part of its beauty and its strength. So I was very aware of that [...][107]

Furthermore, it is important to recall at this point the following description by Hughes of Plath's compositional technique:

> The words in these odd-looking verses are not only charged with terrific heat, pressure and clairvoyant precision, they are all deeply related within any poem, acknowledging each other and calling to each other in deep harmonic designs'[108]

This technique, which Hughes clearly so esteemed in Plath's most masterful poetry must certainly have enabled his own adaptation of Seneca's *Oedipus*, as it is rendered by Hughes in similar tones:

---

[104] Hughes, 'The Evolution of Sheep in Fog', p. 207.
[105] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, pp. 161 – 162.
[106] Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', p. 188.
[107] Hughes, in Clive Wilmer, *Poets Talking*, p. 150.
[108] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, p. 161.

> Working toward the simplest most direct release of the energies in that strange play, I had reduced the original to a skeletal oratorio, and a vocabulary of a bare few hundred words. At the same time, I had tried to maintain, overall and in detail, a sense of pattern; patterns of rhythms, patterns of weight and of mood, patterns of cadences, just as in a piece of music.[109]

Furthermore the critic David Gervais, writing on Hughes' *Oresteia* sees it in terms that match so precisely Hughes' description above of Plath's intricately built patterns of interconnected words as structural devices: 'the form (the lineation, for instance) is directly, even ingenuously, determined by the sense. Each line is a unit of thought in itself, a unit upon which the next line is built as one brick is laid on another.'[110]

After a lifelong absorption of Plath's work, 1998 saw the monumental publication of Hughes' *Birthday Letters* and *Howls and Whispers*, both dealing with Hughes' relationship with Plath as Hughes 'shocked the literary world' by seeming to break his silence on the subject at last. *Birthday Letters* in particular generated much critical and popular interest, winning the Forward Prize for Poetry which was followed shortly by Hughes' death which would cement in the popular public consciousness what the media labelled the 'greatest literary love story of our time'. Much has been made of the way in which Hughes describes the trajectory of their relationship in *Birthday Letters* and some critics accused Hughes of seeking to rewrite history in order to set the record straight, what the critic James Wood termed Hughes' 'little epidemics of blame'.[111] These questions, however, bear little relevance to the work itself. What should be of interest is the fact of how the poems themselves abound with references to Plath's poetry and the sustained presence of Plath as poet throughout these poems. This aspect, as well as the way in which the poems make use of myth, folklore and superstition has received an interesting range of critical responses. [112] Lynda Bundtzen has commented on how the poems of *Birthday Letters,* display 'an inordinate amount of literary self-consciousness', and that:

> when Hughes is not borrowing titles directly from Plath's poems [...] he is engaging his wife's preoccupations with honeybees and Otto Plath, with the figure of Ariel and the other dramatis personae from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, and with Plath's overarching

---

[109] Hughes, 'Inner Music', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, pp. 244 – 248 (p. 245).
[110] David Gervais, 'Tragedy Today: Ted Hughes's "Oresteia"', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 31.2, 2002.
[111] James Wood, 'Muck Funnel', *New Republic*, 218.13, 30 March 1998, 30 – 33 (p.31).
[112] See Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift: A Commentary on Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); Carol Bere, 'Owning the Facts of his Life: Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*', *Literary Review* (Summer 1998), 556 – 561; Sarah Churchwell, 'Secrets and Lies: Plath, Privacy, Publication and Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters', Contemporary Literature*, 42.1 (Spring 2001), 102 – 148; John Daniel, 'Unveiled and Open: Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 2.1 (April 1998), 113 – 124; Alan Williamson, 'A Marriage between Writers: *Birthday Letters* as Memoir and as Poetry', *American Poetry Review*, 27.5 (September – October 1998), 11 – 13.

> themes of death and rebirth, mourning and melancholia. *Birthday Letters* are both companion poems and adversarial poems, in conversation and argument with Plath as a fellow poet of grief [and as the irretrievable wife Eurydice to Hughes' Orpheus].[113]

Hughes is addressing Plath as a poet, speaking back to the personae of her poetry. As Diane Middlebrook has rightly observed, Hughes 'has been prompted by her words to enter into dialogue with the self she made in language'[114] but it is more accurate to develop on Middlebrook's words here and point to the 'selves' rather than the 'self' that Plath 'made in language'. Plath's poetry is a play of various personae and a dynamic array of voices that struggle to articulate their sense of being through the increasingly unstable medium of words as her poetry develops towards its final stages.

Interestingly, certain critics have also seen Plath's presence as a poet in *Birthday Letters* as, somewhat ironically, serving only to point the reader back to the superiority of her poetry over Hughes' own, doing nothing to make Hughes' poetry more effective. Katha Politt, reviewing *Birthday Letters* has noted how poems which take titles from Plath's work and which appear 'as if to answer, or contextualise, poems of hers' do nothing to better Hughes' poetry. Instead their invocation serves to highlight Plath's superiority as a poetic precursor: 'But Plath's poetry is one of intense compression and musicality, its imagery complex and ambiguous, whereas *Birthday Letters* is lax and digressive, the symbolism all on the surface, so these allusions, quotations and re-renderings serve mostly to remind us of what a great poet she was'.[115] Or, as Neil Roberts states: 'It would need a very partial critic to assert that any of the poems in *Birthday Letters* use language as memorably as the best of Plath's work.'[116] These statements are helpful in the way in which they direct attention back onto the achievement of Plath's poetry and also onto that of its example for Hughes, placing the focus very much on issues of poetic style, themes and technique in this way. Diane Middlebrook, in an essay which explores Hughes' 'Caryatids' from *Birthday Letters*, reads it as a 'revisionary misreading' of Plath's 'Three Caryatids', focusing on the implications of Plath's technique, symbolism and her poetics of a female vision for Hughes' own poetic development which this later poem brings to light and reflects on.[117] Close readings of the

---

[113] Lynda K. Bundtzen, 'Mourning Eurydice: Ted Hughes as Orpheus in Birthday Letters', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23.3 – 4 (Summer 2000), 455 – 469 (p. 458).
[114] Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), p. 279.
[115] Katha Pollitt, 'Peering into the Bell Jar', *New York Times Book Review*, 1 March 1998, pp. 4 – 6.
[116] Neil Roberts, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 212.
[117] See Diane Middlebrook, 'Hughes, Plath and the Three Caryatids' in *'Fixed Stars Govern a Life': Transforming Poetics and Memory with Emory's Ted Hughes Archive* (Across Academe Series No. 6) ed. by Ronald Schuchard (Atlanta: Emory University Academic Exchange, 2006), pp. 47 – 56.

workings of imagery and symbolism in *Birthday Letters* are crucial then in coming to an understanding of how we are to interpret both Hughes' oeuvre and Plath's own.

It is important at this point to signal Hughes' own description of *Birthday Letters* and its conception:

> My book *Birthday Letters* is a gathering of the occasions on which I tried to open a direct, private, inner contact with my first wife – not thinking to make a poem, thinking mainly to evoke her presence to myself, and to feel her there listening. Except for a handful, I never thought of publishing these pieces until this last year – when quite suddenly I realised I had to publish them, no matter what the consequences.[118]

It seems clear from this statement that *Birthday Letters* cannot be read as a straightforward collection of poetry but neither can it be read as simply a memoir or biography of two lives. It is set out as an intimate, private correspondence – a textual correspondence – between two poets, one physically dead and one alive and between the work of both poets, the poems that will continue to live and generate meaning, transcending temporal circumstances, the past and present. It is in essence, a collection of the poet Hughes' own letters to Plath the poet and it is clear therefore that Hughes himself as poet is the speaker of these poems; there is no overt poetic persona intended apart from, one might say, Hughes' own projected mythologised version of himself as he speaks to Plath the poet. Hughes has described these poems of his as 'ragged dirty undated letters from remote battles and weddings and one thing and another'[119] and it is a description that echoes Emily Dickinson's famous declaration of the poem as 'my letter to the World', Dickinson being a poet whom Hughes very much admired and to whom he compared Plath.[120] The idea of the poem as a letter, as a communication then, applies here. As Hughes divulged, describing the composition of *Birthday Letters* in a letter to Seamus Heaney: 'I hit on the direct letter as an illegal, private transaction between her and me'.[121] These are the poet Hughes' letters to Plath the poet, letters cast in the format of poems, as poetry was their shared vocation and the form of writing that made up their 'literary life' as one of the poem's titles has it, and their own poems came out of this joint poetic partnership and the creative and imaginative bond that it induced between them. As it makes endless reference to Plath's work and to the work of other writers, *Birthday Letters* is a work of absolute intertextuality, the boundaries between the

---

[118] Hughes, quoted in Amelia Gentleman, 'Accolade for Hughes's Poems of Love and Loss', *Guardian*, 8 October 1998, p. 4.
[119] Hughes, in Ekbert Faas, 'Ted Hughes and *Crow* (1970)', in *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980), 197 – 208 (p. 205).
[120] Emily Dickinson, Poem no. 519, in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. by R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass.; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 235.
[121] Hughes, Letter of 1 January 1998 to Seamus Heaney, autograph letter signed, Emory University.

oeuvres of Hughes and Plath dissolving entirely to become one open, labyrinthine text, described by one reviewer as 'such a thicket or vortex of mutual myth-making, so lacking in outside language, as to become finally unreal, literary.'[122] As Hughes himself put it, *Birthday Letters* is a 'maze of interconnections'[123] and these connections link the poetries of Hughes and Plath making for an endless poetic dialogue that transcends human life and death for the immortal, living site of the poetic text.

One of the *Birthday Letters*, titled 'Life after Death', opens with a question directed to the dead poet: 'What can I tell you that you do not know / Of the life after death?' and goes on to detail the impact of Plath's absence on her children's day-to-day lives and on the life of Hughes: 'By night I lay awake in my body / The Hanged Man'.[124] The stark image of the loss and isolation felt by the surviving three is a lingering one:

> Dropped from life
> We three made a deep silence
> In our separate cots.

Here, as throughout *Birthday Letters*, Hughes alludes to and develops phrases and images of Plath's, weaving her words with his in various ways into this the new fabric of his poems as letters. The poem concludes with an image of wolves, a pervasive one in Hughes' poetry from the beginning of his poetic career, as the poem 'A Modest Proposal' from Hughes' first collection *The Hawk in the Rain* begins: 'There is no better way to know us / Than as two wolves, come separately to a wood'.[125] In 'Life After Death', Hughes draws on the folktale of the orphans who were left to be brought up by wolves, as he states, 'We were comforted by wolves'. Thus:

> The wolves lifted us in their long voices
> They wound us and enmeshed us
> In their wailing for you, their mourning for us,
> They wove us into their voices. We lay in your death,
> In the fallen snow, under falling snow.

This points directly back through decades of writing to his 1967 collection *Wodwo* and his poem 'The Howling of Wolves'. Written in the weeks after Plath's death it has been described by Neil

---

[122] Edna Longley, 'Rough Magnificence', review of Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 December 2003, pp. 3 – 4 (p. 4).
[123] Hughes, Letter of 22 June 1998 to Keith Sagar, British Library Deposit 10003 (9) quoted in Ann Skea, 'The Path of the Devil – A'Ain' <http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/Devil.htm>[accessed August 2007]
[124] Hughes, 'Life After Death', in *Birthday Letters*, pp. 182 – 183. All subsequent quotations from this poem are from this source.
[125] Hughes, *Collected Poems*, p. 27.

Roberts as 'among the earliest examples of a much looser, more ragged verse style in Hughes that remains the norm for the rest of his career, above all in his most celebrated volume, *Crow*', a style which Roberts sees as 'profoundly influenced by the late poems of Plath.'[126] Uroff too has recognised how here Hughes 'speaks through a different identity and adopts a new voice'.[127] Here, as Keith Sagar observes, 'the style has gone very cold, metallic' as 'the diction is a succession of blank monosyllables forced between teeth.'[128] After an initial statement made up in a disjointed, disorientating way of the poem's title and first line and with its reference to Martin Heidegger's *weltlos* – 'The Howling of Wolves / Is without world' – the speaker assumes a tone of questioning that is entirely new in Hughes and entirely in the style of Plath:

> What are they dragging up and out on their long leashes of sound
> That dissolve in the mid-air silence?
>
> Then crying of a baby, in this forest of starving silences,
> Brings the wolves running. [129]

The first two lines quoted above clearly echo the style of many of Plath's questioners, for example in the opening line of 'A Birthday Present': 'What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?'[130] Hughes' lines too have become freer; long lines juxtaposed against short. The theme of the poem must also echo Plath's 'The Manor Garden', a poem to their unborn child, described by Hughes as 'an apprehensive welcome to the approaching unborn', wherein the speaker states: 'You inherit white heather, a bee's wing, // Two suicides, the family wolves'.[131] The figurative language of Hughes' 'The Howling of Wolves', in phrases such as the 'forest of starving silences', the forest 'delicate as an owl's ear' is also very reminiscent of Plath's heavily metaphorical poetry, most evident perhaps in her poem 'You're' where the child is captured in a series of exuberant similes: 'Mute as a turnip', 'Vague as fog', 'Jumpy as a Mexican bean' and 'Wrapped up in yourself like a spool / Trawling your dark as owls do.'[132]

Indeed, another significant image in 'You're' is the description of the baby as 'moon-skulled'. The presiding spirit of the 'owl' also appears in 'You're', 'trawling [its] dark', as it does elsewhere in Plath in such poems as 'Burning the Letters' ('They are more beautiful than my

---

[126] Roberts, 'The Common Text of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', p. 168.
[127] Uroff, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes*, p. 198.
[128] Keith Sagar, *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), p. 119.
[129] Hughes, 'The Howling of Wolves', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 180 – 181.
[130] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 65.
[131] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 125.
[132] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 76.

bodiless owl') and in 'Poem for a Birthday' ('I am round as an owl / I see by my own light').[133] There are the same alert owls too in the soundless forest of 'Faun', an early poem, written, as Plath explained to her mother, 'about one night we [Plath and Hughes] went into the moonlight to find owls'[134]:

> Haunched like a faun, he hooed
> From grove of moon-glint and fen-frost
> Until all owls in the twigged forest
> Flapped back to look and brood
> On the call this man made.[135]

This early poem, written at the beginning of Plath and Hughes' relationship speaks so rapturously of the burgeoning creativity and productive promise in terms of poetry that the pair offered to each other; as Hughes has testified; 'when we met, my writing, like hers, left its old path and started to circle and search.'[136] The symbol of the 'owl' is a significant presence and it leads back to *Birthday Letters*, re-appearing in 'The Owl', a poem which also reflects on the rapt beginnings of Plath and Hughes' relationship and how the world became new and transformed in their eyes, opening as Hughes addresses Plath: 'I saw my world again through your eyes / As I would see it through your children's eyes'. It ends however with a violent image of Hughes being attacked by an owl, as he makes his world of nature 'perform its utmost' for Plath:

> I sucked the throaty thin woe of a rabbit
> Out of my wetted knuckle, by a copse
> Where a tawny owl was enquiring.
> Suddenly it swooped up, splaying its pinions
> Into my face, taking me for a post.[137]

As Ann Skea has pointed out, the owl is associated with Hecate, the Moon Goddess and Hag and so is a harbinger of death.[138] The owl image also points to a later poem in Plath's oeuvre 'Event' where the lovers lie in the same moonlight, now a 'chalk cliff / in whose rift we lie // Back to back' as the speaker lies awake, estranged from her lover, open only to the threatening sounds that surround her as one who 'cannot see' but only hears in the dark: 'I hear an owl cry / From its

---

[133] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 204; p. 132.
[134] Plath, Letter of 19 April 1956 to Aurelia Plath, in *Letters Home,* p. 234. Here the poem is titled 'Metamorphosis'.
[135] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 35.
[136] Hughes, in Heinz, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI', 77.
[137] Hughes, 'The Owl', in *Birthday Letters*, p. 33.
[138] Ann Skea, '*Birthday Letters*: Poetry and Magic' <http://ann.skea.com/BLCabala.htm> [accessed August 2007]

cold indigo'.[139] The themes of parenthood, of pain and of loss in Hughes' poem are taken from Plath's 'Event' too, as there:

> The child in the white crib revolves and sighs,
> Opening its mouth now, demanding.
> His little face is carved in pained, red wood.

This is the same 'crying of a baby' in Hughes' 'The Howling of Wolves' that 'brings the wolves running'. Plath's 'Event' is surely the source too of the following image in Hughes' 'Life After Death', where the child's eyes are – as Hughes addresses Plath – 'so perfectly your eyes' described as 'wet jewels' and 'the hardest substance of the purest pain', Hughes drawing on Plath's description of the child in 'Event' as he describes in metaphorical terms:

> Great hands of grief were wringing and wringing
> His wet cloth of face. They wrung out his tears.[140]

The folktale-forest 'Life after Death' and the forest setting of 'The Howling of Wolves' also points back to Plath's 'Childless Woman' which contains, as previously noted, the iconic imagery of the moon, blood, tree, rose and mirrors and the forest as a site of death:

> And my forest
>
> My funeral,
> And this hill and this
> Gleaming with the mouth of corpses.[141]

The 'corpses' in Plath's poem are picked up by Hughes in 'Life after Death' which ends with a similar image:

> As my body sank into the folk-tale
> Where the wolves are singing in the forest
> For two babes, who have turned, in their sleep,
> Into orphans
> Beside the corpse of their mother.[142]

---

[139] Plath, 'Event', in *Collected Poems*, p. 194.
[140] Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, p. 182.
[141] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 259.
[142] Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, p. 183.

The final image here recalls Plath's 'Edge' and the austere image of the perfected woman who has carefully folded both children – 'each dead child' – back into her body.[143] Also, the description, 'Ungodly as a child's shriek' from Plath's 'Childless Woman' resounds through Hughes' dreadful 'crying of a baby' in 'The Howling of Wolves'. It is significant too that Hughes himself in the final interview he gave before his death and which had him reflecting on his life with Plath in rare detail, spoke of the hurt that both of their children grew up with as a result of Plath's suicide, poignantly describing their son Nicholas as 'unmarried, a lone wolf'.[144] The image of the survivors of a great loss as abandoned wolves is clearly one that pervades Hughes' consciousness and makes up his sense of the identity of a widower and his children in his poetry. Thematically then, both Hughes' and Plath's poems deal with victims of loss and dark uncertainty. Hughes, across these two linked poems of his, draws primarily on two poems from Plath's work that are significant in the way in which one marks the positive beginnings of a relationship full of creative promise while the other describes the breakdown of that relationship and the unsettling figure of the child it has produced. Hughes draws on the same imagery that connects the poems throughout Plath's oeuvre and incorporates it into and develops it through his own art to create a living poetic relationship between both oeuvres, an intricately interwoven, reflexive set of poetic texts.

What emerges then through an examination of the complex literary relations between Plath and Hughes is a new mode of reading Plath's poetry, away from biography and instead with a sophisticated awareness of the elaborate, imaginative technique and rich symbolism of her poetry that Hughes' own poetry draws on and develops and which his own critical writing on Plath's work constantly acknowledges and points to. Hughes' poetry reflects and charts the various, profound ways in which Plath influenced his creative work, initially as they lived and work together in a deeply intimate creative environment as fellow poets and as readers, critics and mentors and later, when after Plath's death, Hughes would become sole authority over how her work would be mediated, as her editor, executor, and archivist but also as reader, critic and student, always learning from and engaging with her most exemplary art. The critically neglected topic of Plath's influence on Hughes and her enduring presence in his creative life is a vital one and Plath's continuous presence clearly functioned as a deeply enabling force. But the fact of Plath's creative superiority has not gone unnoticed by poets. As Peter Porter has observed: 'Hughes, though formidable, was not as strong and imaginative a force as Plath.'[145] An

---

[143] Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 272 – 273.
[144] Hughes, in Negev, *Daily Telegraph*, p. 4.
[145] Peter Porter, 'Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath: A Bystander's Recollections', *Australian Book Review*, no. 233 (August 2001), 21 – 28 (p. 25).

understanding of Plath's impact on Hughes' artistic development is vital in order to appreciate the heights of Plath's later poetic mastery and the full extent of her own achievement and the richness of her poetry in terms of subject matter and technique. This wide-ranging creative interchange culminates in *Birthday Letters* which exists as a text where both poets are present and in which Hughes openly unfolds his career-long engagement with Plath's oeuvre; theirs is an unending interchange. By placing the work of Hughes and Plath together and considering it in this way, a new, more advanced understanding of the work of both poets has been opened up.

Chapter Two

'The Indubitable Footprints': Sylvia Plath and Contemporary British Poetry

'Unusually for a female poet, Alice Oswald's major influence is Ted Hughes rather than Sylvia Plath', John Redmond asserts in the opening line of his review of Alice Oswald's collection *Woods etc.* [1] As Redmond's comment testifies, Sylvia Plath's presence in British women's poetry and poetics is an enduring and pervasive one. However, Plath's has been a complex and various legacy too, and she has often been an uneasy presence in critical narratives of British contemporary poetry. Sean O'Brien has observed how 'her legacy has been complex and indirect' noting how her name is 'strikingly absent' from a survey carried out by *Poetry Review* which had contemporary poets naming their influences.[2] Feminism has claimed her as one of its most notable enablers, as one who exposed the problems of being a woman and a writer and opened up the subject of women's experience to poetry. Anne Stevenson's essay 'Writing as a Woman', a personal account of her life as a poet, explores the cases of Plath – mainly through the character of Esther Greenwood in *The Bell Jar* – and that of Emily Dickinson, both models for the female writer. Plath, for Stevenson, in *The Bell Jar* 'implies all the way through that the roles of writer and woman are in some way incompatible. Yet, like so many of us she was damned if she herself was going to forego one to become the other.'[3] Stevenson sees this tension as the source of the poems' 'self-destructiveness' and her comments point up the way in which Plath has been framed by the feminist movement as an embodiment of that group's own limitations and grievances. This, coupled with the critical tendency to read her pathologically, has had a damaging effect on her reputation and has overshadowed her work as the century has progressed. O'Brien notes her absence from the introduction to Linda France's *Sixty Women Poets*, the guiding force behind which is, as O'Brien declares, that 'the woman poet need not be a casualty or a victim, a lunatic or a suicide'.[4] Plath then has come to embody the latter, wholly antithetical to the preferred image of the contemporary woman poet. O'Brien speaks further of the 'victim's role into which Plath

---

[1] John Redmond, Review of Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.*, *Tower Poetry: Poetry Matters*, June 2005 <http://www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/june2005/oswald.html> [accessed June 2007]
[2] Sean O'Brien, 'Introduction', *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland After 1945*, ed. by Sean O'Brien (London: Picador, 1998), p.xxxiv.
[3] Anne Stevenson, 'Writing as a Woman', in *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 159 – 176 (p. 160).
[4] Sean O'Brien, *The De-Regulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe,1998), p. 251.

seems to have been put',[5] recognising also the 'condition of pathological narcissism sometimes ascribed to Sylvia Plath'.[6] Jeni Couzyn too writing in her introduction to the *Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Woman Poets* asserts: 'The third and most contemporary image for the woman poet is *Mad Girl* - the tormented life and early suicide. Sylvia Plath is the most celebrated of this group of poets'.[7] Plath has been cast as something of a pariah in terms of critical evaluations, reduced to a mad or victimised and therefore marginal female figure in British poetry, her poetry fixed to one limited mode of reading.

Poets too have through the decades confronted the figure of Plath with deep ambivalence and even hostility. Charles Tomlinson's 'Against Extremity' denounces Anne Sexton and Plath as confessional poets in the same breath; Sexton as the one,

> who took
> her life almost, then wrote a book
> To exorcise and to exhibit the sin,
> Praises a friend there for the end she made
> And each of them becomes a heroine.[8]

Commenting on this poem as a statement of his poetics of 'moderation', Tomlinson has said that:

> I think my kind of poetry is utterly opposed to the sort of solipsism that weaves a fantasy between oneself and the world. Of course, people with various grouses and psychological hang-ups feast on their own view of things. Plath could imagine her own father, whom she had scarcely known, as a Nazi and then transfer this mania to her husband. She is, needless to say, a far more impressive writer than Sexton and with extraordinary verbal intuition. I don't really know 'what sense of self is necessary for poetry.'[9]

Although Tomlinson's objection to Plath is based on his limited view of her poetry as straightforwardly solipsistic and her subject matter as purely personal, he does at least concede that she is an 'impressive' writer in terms of her 'extraordinary' poetic technique. His criticisms, then, are based solely on his narrow reading of her poetics in pathological and biographical terms as he, like so many critics and readers, fails to separate the poet from the personae of the poems. The contentious issue of Plath's employment of Nazi imagery, which Tomlinson refers to here, is

---

[5] Sean O'Brien, *The Firebox*, p. xxxiv.
[6] O' Brien, *The De-Regulated Muse*, p. 128.
[7] *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers*, ed. by Jeni Couzyn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1985), p. 15.
[8] Charles Tomlinson, 'Against Extremity', in *Collected Poems*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 163.
[9] Tomlinson, in Willard Spiegelman, 'Charles Tomlinson: The Art of Poetry LXXVIII', interview with Charles Tomlinson, *Paris Review*, no. 149 (Winter 1998), 160 – 188 (p. 180).

examined in Chapter Five. Other poets such as Lavinia Greenlaw profess to having held Plath at bay as a dangerous force. Asked to comment on Plath's influence on her work, Greenlaw admits to how Plath has been 'an important - but dangerous influence', as 'her rage, unease and charisma disturbed me' and of how 'it has taken me years to see through Plath's nakedness and into the heart of her work, to admire the crackle (cackle?) of her voice.'[10] As Greenlaw has come to see it, Plath is 'a good model, but a bad influence. People are attracted to her heightened drama and don't realise that this intensity has to be matched by heightened technique'. Greenlaw has, as she concedes, 'learnt a lot from [Plath] about discipline and risk.'[11]

Less forgivingly, Selima Hill, castigating Plath as an 'impossibly hysterical, self-centred female poetess', spurns her entirely: 'I am always trying to disassociate myself from Sylvia Plath who, it seems to me, failed "as a woman."'[12] Hill's criterion for the successful poet seems alarmingly gender-based and short-sighted. What is more, Hill's critics have not been as vehemently opposed to the idea of Plath's presence in her poetry. Edna Longley, for example, has pointed out how Hill's 'psychic landscapes have points of contact with Sylvia Plath's.'[13] Another poet who relates to Plath with waryness and unease is Fleur Adcock. In an essay ambiguously titled 'Why Plath isn't (very) Important to Me', Adcock has written of her 'private discovery' of Plath in the early 1960s in New Zealand, admitting how *The Colossus* 'may have influenced' her writing. [14] However, as Adcock goes on to describe, on her arrival in England in 1963 Plath had by this time committed suicide and, as Adcock puts it, 'the cult began'. It is because of this sensationalist aspect to Plath that she disavows the American: 'I shy away from cults. She's too extreme, she's a bad influence' recognising how 'Plath has had a damaging effect on two generations of younger women poets too spineless to resist her powerful voice.' A recent poem by the new poet Karen Green, rebelliously titled 'On Not Reading Sylvia Plath', expresses something of the young poet's dilemma when faced with the overshadowing figure of Plath as a poetic precursor:

> I know I'll have to open your book
> and look down your throat someday,

---

[10] Greenlaw, in Tim Kendall, 'Interview with Lavinia Greenlaw', *Thumbscrew,* no. 8 (Summer 1997) <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=1038> [accessed August 2007]

[11] Greenlaw, quoted in Christina Patterson, 'In Search of the Poet', *Independent*, 6 February 2004, Arts and Books Review section, pp. 2 – 4 (p. 3).

[12] Selima Hill, 'God's Velvet Cushions', in *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, ed. by Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 28 – 29.

[13] *The Bloodaxe Book of Twentieth Century Poetry from Britain and Ireland*, ed. by Edna Longley (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 311.

[14] Fleur Adcock, 'Why Plath isn't (very) important to me', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), 2 – 3 (p.2).

but it's hard to compete with a good dead poet
as with a good dead baby.
Meanwhile I'll read some other names
and just finger your cover.
They lay such heavy burdens on me,
my mother and my lover.[15]

Similarly, Sue Wood has been criticised for her poem 'Sylvia Plath is Re-Incarnated as a Tulip', a playful tribute to Plath from her 2002 pamphlet *Woman Scouring a Pot.* As Jeremy Noel-Tod rightly observes in his review of Wood's collection: 'Wood attempts rather desperately to contain the influence of Plath', in what he deems 'her weakest poem.'[16] Elizabeth Lowry has written of how Plath's 'overwhelming nervous intensity and sheer technical virtuosity make her a difficult influence to avoid'.[17] This is the mark of a powerful voice indeed. Whether welcomed or shunned it is clear that Plath is a poet that cannot be ignored.

Anne Stevenson, herself the most controversial biographer of Plath, has had an equally troubled poetic relationship with her contemporary. Indeed Stevenson, whose biography of Plath has been central to the damagingly reductive biographical approach to Plath's poetry that has prevailed in critical studies, is an interesting case in her dual role as biographer and poet. Too often, it seems, Stevenson's knowledge of Plath's personality has hampered her view of Plath the poet. Stevenson's collection *The Other House* (1990) contains three poems dedicated to Plath, including a 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' which sets out 'to praise in rhyme / the fiercest poet of our time', as it elegises one who 'bought with death a mammoth name / to set in the cold museum of fame'.[18] As Stevenson addresses Plath directly in this poem:

Three springs you've perched like a black rook
between sweet weather and my mind.
At last I have to seem unkind
and exorcise my awkward awe.
My shoulder doesn't like your claw.

Plath's stifling influence becomes a creative impediment which Stevenson has to work through and although the poem may be seen to enact this struggle in the hope of achieving resolution, it is ultimately not successful:

---

[15] Karen Green, 'On Not Reading Sylvia Plath', in *Magma*, 28 (Spring 2004), 31.
[16] Jeremy Noel-Tod, 'Poetic Staples', *Poetry Review*, 92.4 (Winter 2002), 112 – 114 (p. 112).
[17] Elizabeth Lowry, '"Relentlessly Feminine": The Flawed Values of *Sixty Women Poets*', *Thumbscrew*, no. 2 (Spring 1995), 14 – 29 (p. 23).
[18] Anne Stevenson, 'Letter to Sylvia Plath', in *The Other House* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 18 – 21.

We learn to be human when we kneel
to imagination, which is real
long after reality is dead
and history has put its bones to bed.
Sylvia, you have won at last,
embodying the living past,
catching the anguish of your age
in accents of a private rage.

The poem is not a success in terms of technique or theme. The tone is portentous, the rhythm unvarying and inert, reminding us only of Plath's technical superiority as Stevenson can only offer the dead poet back her own images, rendered limp here where they are enduringly vivid and potent throughout Plath's oeuvre. As Helen Dunmore, reviewing Stevenson's *Collected Poems*, notes: 'the poems Stevenson writes for Plath are constricted things' recognising the obvious truth of how Plath is for Stevenson 'a figure who might throw a colossal shadow over another woman poet of the same age and nationality.'[19] A review of Stevenson's *The Other House* speaks of how Stevenson has 'sometimes seemed in thrall to Plath's cadences, if not her manner' singling out her 'Letter to Sylvia Plath' as stilted [...] in sloppy tetrametric couplets' as it 'lurches from uneasy praise to self-justification to "awkward awe" and back, to end in resounding irrelevancies.'[20] Stevenson's biography too is seen by this reviewer as an attempt to 'exorcise the anxiety of influence' to which Plath has subjected her predecessor.[21]

Another of the poems in *The Other House* dedicated to Plath and titled 'Nightmare, Daymoths' is an awkward, overdone imitation of Plath's keenly detailed style and linguistic ingenuity and it reads like a weak parody, as in the opening lines:

A glass jar rattles its split peas and pasta.
Those cysts look innocuous, but they weave
through the kernels, hatching into terrible insects.
Something's on the floor there,
buzzing like a swat wasp.
A belly like a moist rubber thimble
sucks and stings my finger. *Ach*,
my heel reduces it to sewage. [22]

---

[19] Helen Dunmore, 'Bare and Frondish', review of Anne Stevenson, *Collected Poems*, *Poetry Review*, 86.4 (Winter 1996 – 1997), 58 – 60 (p. 59).
[20] Alan Jenkins, 'Unemphatic Moments of Illumination', *Independent on Sunday*, 29 July 1990, Sunday review section, p. 30.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Stevenson, *The Other House*, p. 17.

Here, the glass jar rattling directly echoes the opening of Plath's 'Childless Woman': 'The womb / Rattles its pod'.[23] The 'terrible insects' in the third line summons up some of Plath's most visually arresting and memorable imagery; the 'terrible well' of Plath's 'Nick and the Candlestick', the 'terrible brains' of 'Getting There', or the 'terrible fish' of 'Mirror'. The phrase 'buzzing like a swat wasp' is also an imitation of Plath's sonic effects, her use of striking internal rhymes and simile, while the reference to 'stings' links the poem directly to Plath's masterful bee sequence. The exclamation 'ach' seems an attempt to mimic the 'O' of Plath's apostrophising speakers. Stevenson's poem continues in this way:

> They glisten there like fish, now softly
> lengthen into milliner's feathers.
> See, they are only moths, paper moths or horses,
> not even paper but the paisley curtain
> sifting ashy patterns from the winter light.

The simile 'they glisten there like fish' echoes Plath's 'gilled like a fish' from her tour-de-force of zesty figurative expression 'You're',[24] the verb 'glisten' closely imitative of Plath's striking 'glitter' which she uses as both verb and noun and as an evocative simile: 'I / Glitter like Fontainebleau' ('Gigolo') and 'masturbating a glitter' ('Death & Co.'). The word 'glitter' was underlined in Plath's Dictionary and features memorably in poems such as 'Private Ground', 'Berck-Plage', 'Mystic', 'The Munich Mannequins', 'Ariel' and 'Totem'.[25] Also, the line 'See, they are only moths, paper moths or horses' is wholly reminiscent of Plath's speaker in 'Three Women': 'See, the darkness is leaking from the cracks'.[26] Stevenson, in this poem, appears utterly infected by Plath's powerful imagery, poetic style and mode of delivery and fails to overcome Plath's heavily felt influence to create something new.

Stevenson herself has recognised how, as a result of her biography of Plath, her reputation has been established as that of a 'vindictive Plath-basher'[27] but as Andrew Motion has commented, Plath had long been an important example for Stevenson as a poet:

---

[23] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 259.
[24] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 76.
[25] Plath has underlined the following definition of glitter: 'To sparkle with light; to gleam', 'to be showy or striking', and the noun, 'A bright sparkling light; brilliant and showy luster; brilliancy.' See Plath's copy of the *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary* (1949), Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.
[26] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 182.
[27] Stevenson, in Helena Nelson, 'Conversation with Anne Stevenson', *Dark Horse* (Summer 2000), 52 – 60 (p. 55).

> Sylvia Plath was important to Anne long before she wrote the biography. You can hear that pure, Plath-like clarity in her lyrics – by that I do not mean to suggest they are derivative, but that there are such close similarities between the two poets' careers.[28]

Motion's comments here are helpful in terms of moving beyond the issues surrounding the biography of Plath and onto the poetic relationship between Stevenson and Plath and Plath as both Stevenson's contemporary and predecessor. Indeed, Stevenson's view of Plath's poetry when approached in an objective light and away from her own concerns as both a biographer and Plath's anxiety-ridden successor, can occasionally be perceptive. In an essay titled 'Sylvia Plath's Word Games' which examines Plath's vast literary knowledge and poetic models, Stevenson concludes on a note of deep appreciation for Plath's poetry and poetics, listing the central elements of the poetry as: 'her literary inheritance, those "good mouthfuls of sound", that wit with seriousness and the musical constrictions and forms of Plath's poetry', expressing her hope that a recognition of these elements may lead the reader to a deeper understanding of the work.[29] Elsewhere, Stevenson has conceded the following insightful remark which illuminates the crucial distinction between Plath's life and the work:

> But I will say this about Sylvia Plath: she always tucked that pocket of air between herself and her poems. Her poems are powerful because she was essentially an artist before she was a woman or an American or anything else. When she wrote, she had this wonderful hard-headed objectivity [...] That's why her poems are so powerful; they are much more, very much more, than self-expression.[30]

For Stevenson then the poems are 'wonderful', as she continues by stressing how 'the gap between the girl and the artist was enormous. To me, her talent was so much bigger than her personality'. Stevenson is in no doubt as to the power of Plath's poetry. It seems that her deep reservations are with Plath the person and the mythical status that has been foisted on her since her death as well as, perhaps more crucially, with the anxiety that Plath's influence has caused her as a lesser poet.

Reductive critical views – particularly of Plath as a predictable feminist figure, as a purely biographical or pathological poet – are slowly being replaced by more sophisticated and more inclusive readings and interpretations of Plath's position in British Poetry. This can be seen in recent critical studies such as Deryn Rees-Jones's *Consorting With Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets*. Jones discusses Plath along with Stevie Smith, Edith Sitwell and Anne Sexton as

---

[28] Andrew Motion, quoted in Alfred Hickling, 'Border Crossings', *Guardian*, 2 October 2004, p. 20.
[29] Stevenson, 'Sylvia Plath's Word Games', *Poetry Review*, 86.4 (Winter 1996), 28 – 34 (p. 34).
[30] Stevenson, in Cynthia Haven, 'Interview with Anne Stevenson', *The Cortland Review*, 14 (November 2000) <http://www.cortlandreview.com/issue/14/stevenson14.htm> [accessed August 2007]

the poetic predecessors of today's poets and, as the book's back cover states, explores how these poets whose 'perceived eccentricity – along with the suicides of Plath and Sexton' have become 'difficult acts to follow.'[31] The most up-to-date critical insight in this regard is Alice Entwhistle's essay 'Sylvia Plath and Contemporary British Poetry', a brief but authoritative survey of Plath's presence in contemporary British women's poetry. In this short piece Entwhistle notes that 'there is much work to be done on the ways in which later generations of male poets [...] draw on Plath's example', listing Douglas Dunn, Peter Redgrove, Tony Harrison, Hugo Williams among others in this regard. [32] It is in many ways the newer generation of British poets that seems to be more open to Plath as a poet and for her poetry not as a cultural or feminist icon or 'Mad Girl'. Reading Don Paterson's highly-acclaimed collection *Landing Light* Ruth Fainlight has identified: 'what seems to be a covert elegy for Sylvia Plath: "The Forest of the Suicides", based on Canto XIII of the *Inferno*' and which Fainlight describes as 'quite extraordinary'.[33] Paterson's poem, was, as Alan Brownjohn confirms, 'suggested to him by Sylvia Plath's "Winter Trees"', and the concluding lines of 'Winter Trees' provide the epigraph for Paterson's poem.[34] Ruth Padel too has termed Plath a 'permanent influence' on British Poetry but Padel goes further in recognising Plath's influence on British male poets also:

> Plath is deep inside most British poets today, both women and men. Not because she is a feminist icon, but because of her poetic brilliance: extraordinary linguistic control, wit, imagery and risk; how her poems move, laughter in the face of despair.[35]

Padel has signalled Plath as a vital formative influence on her vocation as a poet, listing Plath among the poets who are important to her, whom she has studied and whom she 'carries around' with her.[36] Elsewhere, Padel has, crucially, emphasised how Plath is important for today's poets because of her poetic technique and how the myth is 'just a nuisance': 'Poets don't care about the myth. They care about Plath's ability to say things in a new way, a blazingly new way.' Plath is, as Padel continues,

---

[31] Deryn Rees-Jones, *Consorting With Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005).
[32] Alice Entwhistle, 'Plath and Contemporary British Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 63 – 70 (p. 64).
[33] Ruth Fainlight, 'The Best Reads of 2003', *Independent on Sunday*, 21 December 2003, pp. 11 – 13.
[34] Alan Brownjohn, 'Variety is the Spice', review of Don Paterson, *Landing Light*, *Sunday Times*, 23 November 2003, Features section, p. 51.
[35] Ruth Padel, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem: A Poem for Every Week of the Year* (London: Vintage, 2004), pp. 44.
[36] Padel, 'Interview in Mexico 2004', *Ruth Padel* <http://www.ruthpadel.com/pages/mexico.htm> [accessed August 2007]

> absolutely vital for a lot of the current generation of poets. That's not do with the myth, it's the way she has fantastic formal control, her power of diving right into the heart of the metaphor and then to go beyond it, and also her power of cadence and movement forward in a completely free verse, which depends on her training in very formal verse.[37]

As Padel points out in her astute comments, Plath has been a major influential figure for British male poets as well as for female poets; a fact that has been almost completely overlooked in critical narratives of contemporary British poetry. Her influence has been noted by both female and male poets writing in Britain and the following remarks by poets highlight her importance for young, aspiring poets in ways that have gone unnoticed. A survey of the New Generation poets in 1994 saw Plath named as a major influence by the young poet Sarah Maguire[38] while in 1996 a *Poetry Review* special on post New-Generation women poets titled 'Beyond The Bell Jar' had Plath along with Elizabeth Bishop as the most-cited influences, Plath being important for Julia Copus, Jane Duran, Deryn Rees Jones and Tessa Ross Webster.[39] Plath is frequently an important precursor for the fledgling poet, enabling them to begin to write. Vicki Feaver has stated: 'It wasn't until I discovered women poets like Emily Dickinson, Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath that I got the confidence to begin to write seriously'[40] while Fiona Sampson too has acknowledged the importance of Plath to her work. The Welsh author Eigra Lewis Roberts won the prestigious crown competition at the National Eisteddfod in 2006 with a sequence of poems titled 'Fflamau' (Flames) inspired by the life and work of Plath. Roberts found Plath's poems 'difficult' to appreciate at first but expressed a hope that her winning collection would encourage others to explore Plath's work.[41] Kate Clanchy has professed: 'I love Robert Lowell, Anne Sexton and, yes, Sylvia Plath [...] They're great because they transformed their experience.'[42]

Hugo Williams has also spoken with deep enthusiasm about Plath: 'When you are young and drunk with words you want to read someone who is drunk with words too, and so you read Shelley, Hopkins, Dylan Thomas, Sylvia Plath.'[43] Plath also features in Craig Raine's 'In Modern

---

[37] Padel, quoted in Christina Patterson, 'In Search of the Poet', *Independent*, 6 February 2004, Arts and Books Review section, pp. 2 –4 (p. 3).
[38] See *Poetry Review*, 84. 1 (Winter 1994), 68.
[39] See *Poetry Review*, 84. 1 (Winter 1994), 68 and the complete issue of *Poetry Review* 86. 4 (Winter 1996 – 97). This trend is also noted in Jane Dowson, 'Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things', *Feminist Review*, 62 (Summer 1999), 6 – 20.
[40] Vicki Feaver, in Vicci Bentley, 'No More "Mrs. Nice": Vicci Bentley Talks to Vicki Feaver', *Magma* 13 (Winter 1998) <www.magmapoetry.com/poem.php?article_id=43> [accessed August 2007]
[41] 'American Poet Inspires Welsh Win', *BBC News Wales* (8 August 2006) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/wales/north_west/5255708.stm> [accessed August 2007]
[42] Kate Clanchy, 'Presiding Spirits: Kate Clanchy and the Influence of Andrew Marvell', *Magma Poetry*, 23 (Summer 2002) <http://magmapoetry.com/poem.php?article_id=30> [accessed August 2007]
[43] Hugo Williams. 'Leaping Versus Blabbing' in *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry*, ed. by W.N. Herbert and Matthew Hollis (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000), pp. 229 – 232 (p. 231).

Dress'. Raine remembers discovering Ted Hughes' *Lupercal* and *The Hawk in the Rain* in the sixties and regarding them as 'exemplary books'. It was Hughes who would become for him a 'major influence' however as he read Plath's *Ariel* 'with difficulty' deciding that 'Ted's poetry was easier'.'[44] However, Raine is clearly a descendant of both Hughes and Plath's in terms of his metaphorical imagination. As Edward Larrissy states, examining Raine's uses of metaphor: 'Raine has learnt this metaphorical poetry of domestic alienation from Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath', from Plath specifically, it is the 'schizophrenic's detached anxiety'.[45] A survey carried out by the Poetry Society for International Women's Day 2004 had women poets discuss their 'powerful influences'.[46] Plath was singled out again by Copus who spoke of how 'the first book I fell in love with was Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems*', Plath's poetry being in Copus's effusive words 'urgent, insistent, genuine, rhythmically supple'. Pascale Petit as a student at art school and an aspiring poet remembers how she 'revered' Plath among other poets 'for the vivid and entire visual worlds they created with words.' Plath stood out for her 'dramatic and idiomatic address', her 'boldness and originality something to aim for'. However, as Petit concedes: 'Her style, however, was frustrating to emulate – it was just impossible to write like her.' Michele Roberts also cites Plath as a formative enabling influence, testifying to her 'power and authority and control.' But as Maura Dooley advises: 'There is a lazy assumption that she's a very important writer for young women, but that most of them grow out of it. She's much more important than that. She was an extremely exciting writer, whose work was full of innovation. She's been just as important to the male poets, and why shouldn't she be?'[47]

Douglas Dunn was inspired by Plath as a young poet and his engagement with her work has been deep and complicated. Published in 1972, *The Happier Life*, Douglas Dunn's second collection of poetry, closes with the poem 'The Hour', an intriguing piece that Dunn would then go on to omit from his *Selected Poems* in 1986 and one that demands closer inspection. As the final poem of a collection that is mostly made up of straightforward observations regretfully detailing 'the lives of other people', the degenerate, urban culture of a post-war North of England city in all its gloom, 'The Hour', removed as it is from the quotidian world of human affairs,

---

[44] Craig Raine, 'Ordinary, Sacred Things – Ted Hughes and the Visionary's Double Vision', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 November 2006, pp. 11 – 13 (p.11).
[45] Edward Larrissy, 'Things, Description and Metaphor in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry', *Yearbook of English Studies*, 17, British Poetry since 1945 Special Number (1987), 218 – 233 (p. 227).
[46] This and further quotations until otherwise noted are in Janet Phillips, 'International Women's Day 2004: Powerful Influences', *The Poetry Society Website* <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/info/news/women/> [accessed August 2007]
[47] Maura Dooley, in Patterson, 'In Search of the Poet', p. 3.

comes as something of a strange surprise. The 'hour' of the title, as the third line of the poem discloses, is the 'Sylvia Plath Hour' and elements of Plath's style are apparent throughout:

Grey garden, tree-slag
At four o'clock,

The Sylvia Plath hour.
The daisies are like frost,

Deaths of many babies;
And daisies under dew,

Many unbirths in the frog-morning.
No shining is possible,

It is grey as matter,
Grey as tennis shoes.

It is grey-grey,
The opposite colour of whisky.

There is no sky at four o'clock,
Only light that oozes grudgingly

Ivy dark as guilt,
Hardware of the dawn;

Inert outline of trees,
A lighted window, slabs of wall,

Lifeless individuality,
Like saliva, like self-knowledge.

There is no world beyond that:
No absorbing frivolity,

No newspapers with columns
On how to know the best wines,

No cross-Channel ferries,
No banks and no bookshops.

You might say it is just negative,
Or free, a long-division sum forever.

Four o'clock, you blank,
I might even get to like you.

Will I see you often,

Your roomless world of headaches,

Stiffly vegetable?
You chirp like old doors opened,

You detach in surprising black birds.
Will you do something for me?

Don't be like the rest of the summer.
Summer's a sentimental mess,

Like being young.
And don't visit me; stay outside.

Keep me watching you.
Keep me cold. Keep me alive. Keep me.[48]

Although Dunn is commonly held before us as a disciple of Larkin's, Plath too exerted a considerable influential force on Dunn and one that is seldom remarked on. Dunn assiduously reviewed each of the last individual volumes of Plath's poetry – *Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees* – as they appeared in 1971, displaying in the process a keen and deep knowledge of her work to date, as well as a boundless appreciation for her poetic talent. Writing on Plath in the early seventies, Dunn recommended her as 'one of that handful of modern poets whom intelligent readers will feel, more and more, that they have no option but to try and understand.'[49] Also, writing on Plath in *The Review*, Dunn hailed Plath as 'one of the most remarkable talents in any art of the decade, if not of the century.'[50] Furthermore, in a 1988 article in the *TLS* titled 'Thinking About Women', Dunn singled out Plath as a crucial, formative influence on his work. As the one 'from whose poetry I learned much about narrative, imagery and rhythm' Plath was the poet who had taught him about 'the dilemmas of a daughter-poet and a wife-poet' and who had showed him to 'think of at least part of my poetic identity as a son-poet and a husband-poet.'[51] Indeed, the title of Dunn's review of Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* is instructive and confirms Dunn's respect for Plath's poetry over the heightened circumstances of her death: 'Remember the poet but forget her fate.'[52]

That the young poet Dunn was preoccupied with questions of posterity, highly conscious of his own poetic forebears and of his status as a poet within a literary tradition, is evident

---

[48] Douglas Dunn, 'The Hour', in *The Happier Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972), pp. 72 – 73.
[49] Dunn, 'Damaged Instruments', *Encounter*, 37 (August 1971), 68 – 70 (p. 70).
[50] Quoted in Elizabeth Hardwick, 'Sylvia Plath' in *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature,* intro. by Joan Didion (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), pp. 103 – 123 (p. 119).
[51] Dunn, 'Thinking About Women', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 June 1988, p. 612.
[52] Dunn, 'Remember the poet but forget her fate', *Glasgow Herald*, 5 March 1988, Weekend section, p. 13.

throughout *The Happier Life*. 'The Friendship of Young Poets' deals with Dunn's acute sense of the Scotland of the 1960s as a sterile environment for an aspiring poet, as he has said in interview 'Scottish poetry was pretty uninteresting from the point of view of a younger poet'[53] while 'A Faber Melancholy' is dedicated to poets Ian Hamilton and Philip Larkin. Larkin is commonly seen as Dunn's foremost mentor in this regard, a fact that Dunn attests to in his 1987 essay *Under the Influence* wherein he examines the subject of poetic influence, specifically that of Larkin, who is for Dunn the 'great poet whose work influenced my own' and one who provided Dunn with a wealth of 'hints and examples'.[54] This piece offers valuable insight into the question of poetic influence and the forms it takes for the poet as he sets about writing. It is, in Dunn's words, 'a memoir of sorts, one in which a younger poet shows the effect on him of the poetry and temperament of an older, more celebrated writer' (p.1) within which Dunn analyses the effect of Larkin's influence on him, contemplating the ways poetic influence operates, noting that: 'without readers knowing it, and the poet only half-aware of it, a poem can be an act of homage to other poems by other poets. Perhaps all poems are' (p. 3) and is deeply aware of the rites of passage that every young poet must perform, 'that internalising, tactile reading to which a young poet subjects the poetry that he or she feels to be immediate and exemplary' (pp. 1 – 2).

However, influence can be a limiting, destructive force too as Dunn verifies, mindful as he is of the high element of risk that goes along with it:

> When a young poet takes what he needs from an older one, then, clearly, he's looking for what he doesn't have in himself. He's seeking to emulate another poet and, in doing so, he risks the embarrassment of writing like someone else. (p. 2)

Remarking on what he recognises as the 'burden of influence', the perils of aligning oneself to one specific model, Dunn concedes: 'I have to confess that after several years I grew heart-sick of reviewers noting Larkin's influence where there was none [...] Nor was it a constant succession of delights to be thought of as "Hull's other poet"' (p. 10). Dunn, goes on to point out more of the troubling nature of influence, drawing on his own experience as a poet under focus: 'In answering questions about influence, I found myself playing down Larkin and playing up poets like Lowell [...] It was a shameful tactic, perhaps, but it might have been a necessary one' (p. 11). In fact, far from being Hull's 'provincial' poet, Dunn has consciously situated himself outside the sphere of

---

[53] Dunn, in Gerry Cambridge, 'Douglas Dunn in Conversation', *Dark Horse*, 20 (Autumn 1999) <http://www.star.ac.uk/darkhorse/archive/DunnInterview.pdf> [accessed August 2007]

[54] Dunn, *Under the Influence: Douglas Dunn on Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Library, 1987), p. 1. Further references to this source are given after quotation marks in the text.

British poetry, his literary models being remarkably far-ranging.[55] Having turned fully towards American Poetry throughout his early years as a poet – a time that saw him 'very much outside the Scottish literary scene' – he moved to America for a year in 1965, immersed himself wholly in American poetry and 'got very interested in American things in general', indicating a 'particular fondness' for Robert Lowell, John Berryman, Randall Jarrell and James Wright.[56] 'Britain bores me', Dunn remarks in this interview with John Haffenden, pronouncing himself a 'Francophile', as he testifies to admiring writers as 'classically European' as his own 'heroes' Camus, Nizan and Robert Desnos. The latter is the subject of Dunn's 'Homage to Robert Desnos' of 1979, and is regarded highly by Dunn for his 'surrealist poems in rhyme and meter', qualities that would have no doubt attracted him to Plath also and her vivid, surrealist imagery.[57] Interestingly, his relationship to the major Scots poet Hugh MacDiarmid is defined, in severe terms, as that of a sparring father and son, Dunn pointing up the potentially harmful effects of poetic lineage as he proclaims that 'the only way to survive with MacDiarmid is to be a prodigal son.'[58] As a poet then who is ever-conscious of the workings of literary influence and its complex, double-edged nature, 'The Hour' sees Dunn as an apprentice-poet summoning the formidable wraith of Sylvia Plath and working through her influence on him.

Dunn's poem is cast in two-line stanzas, a form that itself recalls Plath's own formal inventiveness in poems such as 'Edge', 'Totem', 'The Night Dances', and it opens on familiar Plath territory with a dawn landscape. The 'grey garden' – the alliteration here paying homage to Plath's use of sound patterns in her poetry – evokes the imagery of Plath's own oeuvre, where for example in 'The Thin People', 'the dawn / Grayness blues, reddens and the outline // Of the world comes clear and fills with color'.[59] 'The Hour', that of four o'clock, as 'The Sylvia Plath Hour', becomes for Dunn that mystical time of the morning described by Plath herself as 'that still, blue, almost eternal hour before cockcrow, before the baby's cry, before the glassy music of the milkman, settling his bottles'[60] and is so much a part of the Plath mythology, during which the poet famously composed the poems that were to make her name, her last poems of 1962 and 1963. These poems of that hour became the stuff of the Plath legend, as Robert Lowell wrote of

---

[55] See *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry*, ed. by Blake Morrison and Andrew Motion (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982). Dunn criticises this inaccurate label in Bernard O'Donoghue, Interview with Douglas Dunn, *Oxford Poetry*, 2.2 (Spring 1985), 44–50 (p. 50).
[56] Dunn, in John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 13. Dunn also edited *What Is to Be Given: Selected Poems of Delmore Schwartz* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1976).
[57] Haffenden, *Viewpoints*, pp. 28 – 30.
[58] Dunn, *Dark Horse*.
[59] Plath, 'The Thin People', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 64 – 65 (p. 65).
[60] Plath, Typescript for 'New Poems', 13 December 1962. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

the posthumously published *Ariel* and its poet: 'Sylvia Plath becomes herself, becomes something imaginary, newly, wildly, and subtly created – one of those super-real, hypnotic, great classical heroines.'[61] It was for Plath a time of boundless creative energy, of complete artistic mastery, wherein poems were, as Hughes later rhapsodised, 'rushed out at the rate of two or three a day', and during which, 'all at once she could compose at top speed, and with her full weight', as 'all the various voices of her gift came together'.[62] This is the hour of unstoppable creativity, the hour that brought into being what Hughes proclaimed as 'the inspiration and release of *Ariel*', the 'voice and spirit of the authentic self – the new voice and spirit of *Ariel*',[63] and what Dunn himself, in a more measured way, perceived as 'the obvious liberation of tone and freedom of movement in her later verse'.[64] Four o'clock then was indeed a miraculous hour for Plath, as she herself testified, writing in a letter to Richard Murphy in 1962:

> I am writing for the first time in years, my real self, long smothered. I get up at 4 a.m. when I wake, & it is black, & write till the babes wake. It is like writing in a train tunnel, or God's intestine.[65]

If we need proof that Dunn was alert to this it is there in his review of *Crossing the Water*, where, commenting on the development of Plath's 'final style', he refers to 'that legendary remark about writing three poems a day seven days a week at four in the morning.'[66]

The hour therefore becomes the occasion for invoking the dead poet whom the young Dunn so admires for her 'unique and powerful poetry'. The hour itself speaks of Plath and the young poet can be imagined imploring her to lend him her powers in the hope that Plath's numinous hour will be kind to him also, that it may enable him in a similar fashion to find his true voice as a poet and compose as though possessed by a higher, divine energy. The hour brings with it all of the circumstances of Plath's poems' making and Dunn's poem bears testimony to this, laden as it is with his own attempts at drawing on Plath's stylistic features as he enters her own particular brand of language and poetic style. Dunn responds to Plath's penchant for constructing unusual compounds from the start with the phrase 'tree-slag', the spondees here also suggestive of Plath's strong, relentless diction. The 'demotic kind of simile-making' that Dunn

---

[61] Robert Lowell, 'Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*', in *Collected Prose*, ed. by Robert Giroux (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), pp. 122 – 125 (p. 122).
[62] Ted Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*', in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 161 – 162.
[63] Hughes, 'On Sylvia Plath', *Raritan*, 14.2 (Fall 1994), 1–10 (p. 4; p. 8).
[64] Dunn, 'Damaged Instruments', 68.
[65] Plath, Letter of 7 October 1962 to Richard Murphy, reprinted in Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 358.
[66] This and all following quotations until otherwise noted are to Dunn, 'Damaged Instruments', 68 – 70.

appreciated in poems by Plath such as 'Wuthering Heights', 'Insomniac' and 'Private Ground' is imitated here with 'The daisies are like frost'. What Dunn praised too as the 'strange and startling expressions' of Plath's *The Colossus*, the 'zany, accurate and unexpected imagery that is so central to the style of Ariel, and also the first book', imagery that is 'Alert, nervous and often domestic' and regarded by Dunn as 'one of her peculiar strengths', all come into play here too as the hour is described: 'It is grey as matter / Grey as tennis shoes.' Here too Dunn mimics Plath's predilection for repetition, 'grey' itself of course being one of Plath's frequently employed symbolic colours, as in the marvellous description in Plath's 'Wuthering Heights' which has the sheep, 'Browsing in their dirty wool-clouds / Gray as the weather.'[67] The images of frost, dew and babies point to Plath, particularly calling to mind 'Death & Co.' from *Ariel* where 'The frost makes a flower, / The dew makes a star', and, more chillingly, 'He tells me how sweet / The babies look in their hospital / Icebox'.[68]

The somewhat bizarre 'unbirths' in line 7 seems a deliberate nod to Plath's characteristic inventiveness with language, in particular her effective use of the prefix 'un' to create new forms of adjectives, such as 'untenanted' in 'November Graveyard' while the 'frog-morning' must surely be a reference to Plath's poem 'Frog Autumn' from *The Colossus*, the 'ivy dark as guilt' also echoing the 'dark guilt' of Plath's early poem 'Pursuit'.[69] Dunn, in his review, praised Plath's 'Blackberrying' for its 'menacing description', 'In Plaster' too for its 'frightening statements' and it seems that he is trying to achieve the same macabre tone here with the bald pronouncement:

> There is no sky at four o'clock,
> Only light that oozes grudgingly
>
> Ivy dark as guilt,
> Hardware of the dawn;

'It is the mood', Dunn wrote of Plath's *Winter Trees*, 'that is so impressive',[70] and Dunn's descriptions here are quite reminiscent of Plath's. The image of 'Inert outline of trees, / A lighted window, slabs of wall' calls to mind the stark landscape of Plath's 'Winter Trees' where 'The wet dawn inks are doing their blue dissolve. / On their blotter of fog the trees / Seem a botanical drawing –'[71] and that of 'Waking in Winter' where 'Winter dawn is the color of metal, / The

---

[67] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 167.
[68] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, pp. 35 – 36.
[69] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 56; p. 99; p. 22.
[70] Dunn, 'King Offa Alive and Dead', *Encounter*, 38 (January 1972), 67 – 68 (p. 67).
[71] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 257.

trees stiffen into place like burnt nerves.'[72] Metaphor and simile abounds throughout, each startling image ousted by the next as Dunn labours under Plath's shadow.

Lines 21 – 26 describe the scene in terms of lack, the insistent negative 'no' enforced in line after line in this scene that permits 'no absorbing frivolity':

> There is no world beyond that:
> No absorbing frivolity,
>
> No newspapers with columns
> On how to know the best wines,
>
> No cross-Channel ferries,
> No banks and no bookshops.

Here there is no hope of a happier alternative as 'There is no world beyond that' at this hour of the morning where the poet must be entirely given up to his own solitary task of writing; what Plath's early poem 'The Ghost's Leavetaking' hauntingly terms 'the chilly no-man's land of about / Five o'clock in the morning, the no-color void'.[73] This is the hour before life stirs, where there is no other human presence: 'No newspapers', 'No banks and no bookshops.' Interestingly, this is also the hour that Larkin would later make famous in his 1977 poem 'Aubade', his so-termed 'in-a-funk-about-death poem'[74] which has him 'Waking at four to soundless dark' as 'The mind blanks at the glare.'[75] Interestingly, 'blank' is one of Plath's most often-used words, as 'Two Campers in Cloud Country' (1960) ends: 'We'll wake blank-brained as water in the dawn.',[76] Plath herself drawing on Dickinson's 'Pain - has an Element of Blank - / It cannot recollect / When it begun'.[77] Perhaps there is a three-way reciprocal influence at work here, working backwards and forwards, between Larkin, Plath and Dunn with Plath as the point of origin. Larkin, as is well-known, reviewed Plath's *Collected Poems* for *Poetry Review* in 1981 and was captivated by her talents, stating: 'As poems, they are to the highest degree original and scarcely less effective', captivated too by the 'extraordinary experience' of reading the later poems of this intriguing 'Horror Poet' as he speculates on the circumstances of their composition,

---

[72] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 151.
[73] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 90.
[74] Philip Larkin, Letter of 19 December 1977 to Barbara Pym, in *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940 – 1985*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1992), p. 574.
[75] Larkin, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), pp. 208 – 209.
[76] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 145.
[77] Emily Dickinson, Poem no. 760, in *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. by R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass.; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 339.

the 'destructive element' that she worked within.[78] Larkin's 'Aubade', as Dunn's before him, employs repeated negatives to define the void that is all around him: 'no sight, no sound, / No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with, / Nothing to love or link with,' a landscape where 'The sky is white as clay, with no sun.' as he confronts the truth of impending death, his own mortality and the nothingness that lies beyond this life:[79]

> [...] Not to be here,
> Not to be anywhere,
> And soon; nothing more terrible, nothing more true.

It is a comfortless hour, one that sees the lone human self confronting the appalling truths of life and death, reminding us of the necessarily darker side of Plath's 'black' hour of 4 a.m. which had her writing – 'in a train tunnel, or God's intestine' – poems that, after her death, would compellingly capture the public imagination as they took on the form of a suicide note.[80] The next line in 'The Hour' – 'You might say it is just negative, Or free' – must be a reference to the closing lines of Richard Wilbur's own poem about Plath's iconic life and death, 'Cottage Street 1953' and her 'brilliant negative/ In poems free and helpless and unjust', while the 'long-division sum forever' carries with it traces of Plath's references to mathematics and abstractions in poems such as 'Magi', 'You're' and 'The Night Dances'.[81] The hour is then once again summoned in line 29, 'Four o'clock, you blank', 'blank' re-appearing here. The repeated, demanding 'you' in these lines 29-31, as Dunn apostrophises Plath and the hour that brings her to him, is of course reminiscent of Plath's famous poem 'Daddy' and its inexorable 'oo' end-rhyme pattern as well as her many other apostrophic poems that have a speaker addressing an other, a 'you'. The playful 'Stiffly vegetable? / You chirp like old doors opened' must surely be inspired by Plath's 'You're', wherein she represents her child through a profusion of ingenious metaphors and similes, bursting with infectious internal rhyme and chiming assonance:

> Bent-backed Atlas, our traveled prawn.
> Snug as a bud and at home

---

[78] Larkin, 'Horror Poet', in Philip Larkin, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955 – 1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), pp. 278 – 281 (p. 281).
[79] The hour of four in the morning had also featured in Larkin's poem 'Sad Steps' of 1968. Larkin, 'Sad Steps', in *Collected Poems*, p. 169.
[80] Alvarez reductively interprets Plath's poem 'Edge' to be 'specifically about the act she was about to perform.' Al Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 58.
[81] Richard Wilbur, 'Cottage Street, 1953', in *New and Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 68.

Like a sprat in a pickle jug.[82]

Dunn, in his review of Plath's *Crossing the Water* remarked on the 'harrowing, vernacular directness of her best-known poems', specifically 'The Tour', 'Lady Lazarus', 'Daddy' and this mode of address develops now in the poem's closing lines as the apprentice-poet moves in to his conclusion, becoming more forthright, more colloquial and informal in tone:

Will you do something for me?

Don't be like the rest of the summer.
Summer's a sentimental mess,

Like being young.

Determined that this poetic dialogue should operate very much on his terms, he orders Plath as she appears to him during this hour, to remain 'outside'. The 'sentimental mess' of the summer and of 'being young' must refer to the fledgling poet himself, alert to his own callowness and faltering ineptitude. 'And don't visit me; stay outside' he instructs the ghostly figure of his poetic mentor. Here then is the voice of a young poet as he grapples with his own literary inheritance, knowing that he must escape the burden of total influence and find his own voice while also aware that he must learn the craft and seek inspiration from those who have preceded him. His final command therefore is an ambiguous one:

Keep me watching you.
Keep me cold. Keep me alive. Keep me.

The dead poet must keep her distance yet at the same time her empowering presence must be felt too if the young poet is to educate himself towards poetic success. Dunn looks to Plath as a necessary poetic guide but one that must be restrained for fear that her pervasive, consuming presence might overwhelm the struggling novice. The mythology that so inextricably binds Plath's life and work, as she is popularly conceived as the poet who died for her art – as Lowell stated, 'her art's immortality is life's disintegration'[83] – makes her a compellingly fascinating and even 'dangerous' poetic icon for any aspiring poet who wishes to be similarly dedicated to his craft; the young Dunn must take care not to surrender himself entirely.

Plath's influence on Dunn is seen in other poems in this volume, such as 'The Garden', 'Spoken to by Six' and 'The River Through the City' and echoes of Plath persist, even as he

[82] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 76.
[83] Lowell, *Collected Prose*, p. 123.

develops as a poet, in later collections such as in *Love or Nothing*'s 'Winter Orchard' and 'Going to Bed' of 1974. 'Going to Bed', cast in Plath's typical three-line stanzas, captures with eerie precision, the idiosyncratic diction, tone and rhythm of Plath's questioning speakers :

> Love, who is warm?
> Even at this hour, the motorbikes
> Gurgle their vehemences,
>
> All-night taxis huddle round the telephone
> Sonorous locomotives pull away from time
> Into the night of may-blossom,
>
> That subdues the verticals
> And leaves the world flat, its floating lights
> Pulsing, excited hearts of predators. [84]

Without labouring the point too much, it is readily apparent that the opening line here mimics Plath's apostrophe to 'love' in 'Nick and the Candlestick': 'O love, how did you get here?',[85] while the next phrase, 'Even at this hour, the motorbikes [...]', directly imitates, 'Even in this dull, ruinous landscape' of 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather'.[86] The startling imagery is deeply similar to Plath's original effects as the 'night of may-blossom' calls to mind Plath's 'throats of the night flower' from 'Edge',[87] while the 'pulsing, excited hearts of predators' combines Plath's 'Tulips', that are 'too excitable', 'like dangerous animals'[88] with her waves in 'Whitsun' that 'pulse and pulse like hearts.'[89] The word 'vertical' appears in poems such as 'I am Vertical' and 'Night Shift' and Dunn's use of 'vertical' and 'vehemence' as nouns here is exactly in line with Plath's similar, highly innovative linguistic strategies. 'Hush' from Dunn's *Elegies* (1985) also echoes Plath's style of delivery, particularly her use of internal rhyme and arresting metaphor: 'Shhh. Sizzle of days, weeks, months, years.../ How much of us has gone, rising and crying. / My skin seeps its pond of dew.'[90] Fittingly too, Dunn's *Elegies* provided a precursor to Hughes' own *Birthday Letters*. With 'The Hour', Dunn concludes *The Happier Life*, his second volume of poetry, with the weight of literary influence on his back, the future uncertain as the book closes and he looks forward to the working-out of his own poetic identity and the finding of his own voice. Dunn's early efforts here serve also to remind the reader and the poet of the expert, mature

---

[84] Dunn, 'Going to Bed', in *Selected Poems: 1964 – 1983* (London: Faber and Faber, p. 85.
[85] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 47.
[86] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 57.
[87] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 273.
[88] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, pp. 18 – 19.
[89] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 154.
[90] Dunn, 'Hush', in *Elegies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985), p. 63.

quality of Plath's poetic skill, the remarkable language and imagery of the poetry; qualities that Dunn here can only strive to emulate but always admires. Ultimately, Plath is a poet whose far-reaching influence has been seen to be both invigorating but at the same time an unrelentingly troublesome force for the young poet who cannot overcome the power of her voice.

Dunn's use of Plath does much to refute the idea of Plath as a enabler of women poets only, but although younger poets such as Padel can see how Plath has been an important influence on both men and women today, Dunn's contemporary, Carol Rumens has had to deal with the figure of Plath in terms of the limiting 'feminist' critical perspective. Rumens has stated how:

> A lot of the poems which deal with feminist or women's issues tend to be written in what I think of as my Plathy voice. It's a phoney voice for me to use and I don't like the poems because of the technique.[91]

Ultimately however, her work as a critic and poet may be helpful in moving on from this position and deepening our understanding of Plath as a poet. This dismissal of what Rumens seems to regard disparagingly here as a 'Plathy voice' is only a partial view and is more symptomatic of a critical tendency to label Plath as a 'feminist' poet, Rumens' comment born out of a frustration with that reductive label. *Making for the Open*, Rumens' anthology of late twentieth century poet-feminist poetry, was born out of her desire to do away with the idea of a feminist agenda being the prerogative in poetry written by women, describing her anthology as 'a small stepping-stone to the time when we do not feel obliged to think of writers in terms of gender at all.'[92] Post-feminism is her term for poetry by women, wherein, as Rumens explains, 'the poems proclaim only themselves' and are not concerned with communicating a reductive feminist political message.[93] As she has declared in interview: 'I just wish male critics would occasionally allow "women poets" to be considered under more interesting categories than gender'.[94] Rumens, as an astute critic is mindful of the ways in which Plath has been moulded to serve the feminist cause and how this necessarily reduces the possibilities of reading her.

That Rumens holds Plath in high esteem as a poetic precursor is evident. Elsewhere Rumens has referred to her own 'sadly inept apprenticeship' under Plath and of how her

---

[91] Rumens, in Marion Lomax, 'As Radical as Reality', interview with Carol Rumens, *Poetry Review*, 88.4 (Winter 1998 – 99), 77 – 83 (p. 80).
[92] Rumens, 'Introduction', *Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985), p. xviii.
[93] Rumens, *Making for the Open*, p. xv.
[94] Rumens, in Lomax, Interview, p. 80.

'admiration of [Plath's] work has not diminished'.[95] Indeed, Rumens has admitted how reading Plath as a young poet was, 'very important in enabling me to go on...In an odd way I felt I had met some version of myself...The imagery, the voice - I connected at once...I liked the way she could make personal subjects resonate and feel big.'[96] Rumens' poem 'Sylvia Plath' from her 1978 collection *A Necklace of Mirrors* has Plath speaking in a form that is perhaps too conventional in terms of metre and rhyme scheme:

> Scatter my words to Atlantis
> or the chill-lipped mills of the sea:
> I am full as the Taxcan mountains
> for the earth has married me.[97]

This attempt seems lacking in that 'quickfire colloquial diction' that Rumens admires in the *Ariel* poems. However, a later and more confident articulation from her 2002 collection *Hex* has Rumens addressing Plath in a knowing way, one poet to another:

> Dear Muse, my female first (apart from Sitwell
> Who charmed me hugely at the age of eight),
> Whose poems I re-hashed like Holy Writ, till
> I learned to honour, not to imitate,
> Forgive this impudence, I'm not pretending
> Your spirit spoke, dictating me your choice
> Of addressees. It's awfully English, sending
> Tirades by post. You'd never use this voice
> I've wished on you: compared to yours, it's tame.
> You're Sylvia Plath, you're almost my invention,
> A thing of words. And all words cloud your name.
> Yet fiction sometimes has a pure intention:
> And monologue, which seems a selfish ruse,
> May ring more true than monograph. Sing, Muse.[98]

The poem is cast in a sonnet form and is the first of a sequence of eleven sonnets titled 'Letters Back'. Thus, the first poem in the sequence invokes Plath as the muse and Plath herself speaks throughout the subsequent ten sonnets, addressing such diverse parties as her critics, the amateur Freudians, the Queen of England, her contemporaries Seamus Heaney and Adrienne Rich, her mother and Ted Hughes for his *Birthday Letters* as 'Mr Arachne of the Guild / Minerva

---

[95] Rumens, 'Sense and Sensibility', *Poetry Review*, 92.1 (Spring 2002), 53 – 54 (p.53). Furthermore, Rumens will speak on Plath's impact on the trajectory of her career as part of the Poetry Society Series *Under the Influence* at the London Review Bookshop, London, on 18 October 2007.
[96] Rumens, in Lomax, Interview, p. 78.
[97] Rumens, 'Sylvia Plath', in *Poems 1968 – 2004* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2004), pp. 82 – 83 (p. 82).
[98] Rumens, 'Letters Back', in *Poems 1968 – 2004*, pp. 425 – 430 (p. 425).

founded'.[99] It is a success in terms of style and technique and reveals much of Plath's often overlooked wit and humour. Rumens is making another Plath available, giving her a voice, the later poet illuminating the precursor one, allowing the reader to view the work in new ways. Here, in this first sonnet, Rumens opens up a dialogue with Plath displaying the openness and knowingness of a mature poet invoking her influential precursor. Rumens charts her own poetic development under Plath's tutelage, first as one who, in Rumens' words, 're-hashed', and then later as she developed and assimilated Plath's influence: 'I learned to honour, not to imitate'. As has been frequently noted by commentators on contemporary poetry – both by critics and by the poets themselves – many young poets fall too much under the influence of Plath to become nothing more than imitators. Rumens has learnt from Plath but has developed away from her too and become a poet in her own right. This gives her the licence and the authority to address her poetic mother in familiar and at times lightly-mocking tones as she asserts her own independence while also expressing her deep indebtedness to Plath's example. It is clear that this example was valuable in the area of poetic technique most of all, closer here to achieving that same 'quickfire colloquial diction' of Rumens' *Ariel*. Indeed, the success of this sequence is testified to by one appreciative reviewer who praises the poem as it, 'shows how, in the hands of a skilled practitioner, a jaunty colloquial voice can be accommodated by a strict traditional verse-form without a trace of strain or artificiality.'[100] That Rumens' awareness of Plath's dynamic and skilful poetic technique enables such a successful poetry is undeniable. As Plath herself instructs Rumens in the second sonnet of the sequence: 'Just try to get the scansion right. And don't come on all tragic. Keep it light.'

Rumens, in her review of Jacqueline Rose's study *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, has made a number of particularly perceptive comments on Plath which betray her deep admiration for the poetry, as she praises the 'pattern of contrasted images, colours and quantities so stunningly laid out in *Ariel*'.[101] *Ariel*, as Rumens has observed is an 'astonishingly cohesive work' wherein 'images echo one another richly, whole poems sometimes engage in dialogue'. Rumens goes on to explain how 'Red and colourlessness, black and white, ice and cloud, but above all, stasis and movement are the great underlying oppositions of the book'. Rumens reads Plath with a profound intelligence stating how the last poems which are too often regarded as straightforward statements of a self-destructive impulse that culminates with the poet's suicide, are in fact 'passionate meditations on a universal theme', the theme being death. Rumens

[99] Rumens, *Poems 1968 – 2004*, p. 428.
[100] Vernon Scannell, 'It Rhymes, It Scans', *Sunday Telegraph*, 29 December 2002, p. 14.
[101] Rumens, 'Ariel Manoeuvres', *Poetry Review*, 81.4 (Winter 1991), 66 – 67 (p. 66). Further quotations in the text refer to this source until otherwise noted.

correctly calls for new ways of reading Plath, away from biographical and pathological approaches, as she asserts: 'What still remains to be done, I think, is to interpret *Ariel* in a way that concentrates on the poetry rather than the pathology.' This is a valuable and necessary statement, as Rumens concludes: 'We deprive ourselves if we fail to rejoice in a woman's power to evoke the universal.' These comments which focus on the sophisticated and studied technique of Plath's poetry are invaluable in understanding the strategies which Plath employs and point the way to a more informed reading of Plath's *Ariel*.

Furthermore, the way in which Rumens' poem 'Thirst for Green' from her 1998 collection *Holding Pattern*, balances the personal and the political can be helpful in considering the overlooked subject of Plath's own political engagement. Rumens' poems, as she herself has stated, start from a personal experience and are then, through metaphor, expanded into the realm of political concerns, the personal and the public in the end becoming one. Reflecting on her poems and the shifting processes of their compositional development she emphasises how: 'They would always always start off as personal. I can't think of one that I wrote purely, or primarily, to give a political message.'[102] Of her poem 'Thirst for Green' Rumens has described how it originated:

> I just wrote that out of a really deep depression. I'm actually the elm that can't flourish. It really is a personal poem, and yet, as I was looking around at my images I had a very strong sense of where that poem was set...so...I'm seeing things that do have a public resonance like the shamrock and the tudor-rose. I did it knowingly, but I was initially looking for a description of the shapes in a stained-glass window and that's what they often resemble...then it occurred to me I could make some kind of statement...but that wasn't the prime intention of the poem.[103]

The elm here is immediately reminiscent of Plath's poem 'Elm' (titled 'The Elm Speaks' for its publication in the *New Yorker*) which is, as Rumens' poem is, spoken by an elm tree plagued by Dutch Elm disease. However, 'Elm' may be seen as much more than the personal expression of the poet's depression that many critics have reduced it to just as Rumens' poem is one that started in a personal mode but moved out into the larger public and political concerns of conflict-torn Northern Ireland. Rumens herself has asserted how for her as reader Plath's *Ariel* 'resists the tug of biography to an extraordinary degree' and this provides a crucial new entry-point into Plath's late poetry. Plath's 'Elm' is a complex and rich poem, a monologue spoken by the persona of the

---

[102] Rumens, in Lomax, Interview, p. 78.

[103] Rumens, quoted in Marion Lomax, 'Personal Politics in the Poetry of Carol Rumens: A Comparison with Denise Levertov', in *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, ed. by Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 173 – 188 (pp. 177 – 178).

elm which clearly articulates the self breaking up under threat of extinction, the self in a world beset by the very real fear of Cold War nuclear annihilation. Only months beforehand in October 1961 the Soviet Union had detonated the Tsar Bomba, the most powerful thermonuclear weapon ever tested and that same month Plath wrote of her fears in a letter to her mother: 'I hope the Strontium 90 level doesn't go up too high in milk. I've been very gloomy about the bomb news; of course, the Americans have contributed to the poisonous level. The fall-out shelter craze sounds mad.'[104]

Plath regularly read *Time, Life*, the *Nation*, the *Observer*, the *Radio Times* and everything from the *New Yorker* to the *Ladies Home Journal.* In the summer of 1960, Plath carefully put together a collage of images and slogans from these contemporary magazines and newspapers, a mosaic-like arrangement which is highly similar to the crafted, mosaic technique of her poetry and its careful arrangement of images and symbols to create networks of meaning.[105] As Jacqueline Rose points out, the collage, 'shows Plath immersed in war, consumerism, photography and religion at the very moment she was starting to write the *Ariel* poems.'[106] The collage is a clear indictment of Cold War America, its domestic ideology, the threat of nuclear war, the military-industrial complex and of political rhetoric and religious dogma. President Eisenhower sits at the centre wearing a badge marked 'sleep' with Vice-President Nixon at his shoulder in oratorical pose. Over Eisenhower's head a USAF Hustler strategic bomber collides into a half-clad female model in a swimsuit over the slogan 'Every Man Wants his Woman on a Pedestal'. Other newspaper cuttings speak of 'The Case of the Eagle's Bugged Beak' (pointing up the issue of surveillance as a carved Great Seal of the US, containing a hidden microphone, was a gift from the Russians to America's UN Representative in 1960), a report on fatigue build-up as America's growing health hazard, advertisements for automobiles (emphasising the connection between the military and big-business America) and the Evangelist Billy Graham preaching on the threat of Communism to the US.[107] Plath's political and cultural interrogations only deepened as the years went on and later, writing in a piece for the *London Magazine* in 1962 Plath voiced her own preoccupations:

---

[104] Plath, Letter of 30 October 1961 to Aurelia Plath, in *Letters Home*, ed. by Aurelia Plath, p. 434.
[105] See Appendix A.
[106] Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1992), p. 9.
[107] For further examinations of this collage see Robin Peel, 'Body, Word and Photograph: Sylvia Plath's Cold War Collage and the Thalidomide Scandal', *Journal of American Studies*, 40.1 (April 2006), 71 – 95. Also, Sally Bayley, '"I have your head on my wall": Sylvia Plath and the Rhetoric of Cold War America', *European Journal of American Culture*, 25.3, 155 – 171.

> The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and a documentary article on the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America— 'Juggernaut, The Warfare State', by Fred. J. Cook in a recent *Nation*. Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a sidelong fashion.[108]

Plath then lists the subjects of Hiroshima, the terrors of mass extinction, the testaments of tortured Algerians as not what her poems 'turn out' to be about – she goes on to express her dissatisfaction with 'headline poetry' that is nothing more than 'religious or political propaganda' – but it is obvious from this statement that these very subjects are part of her consciousness and must inform her poetry as she says 'in a sidelong fashion'. Even the title of her collection *Ariel* could refer to the joint US-UK space programme launched in April 1961. Plath had always been engaged with world affairs. As Robin Peel has shown, 'An ideological and political awareness [...] had been part of her consciousness since childhood.' Peel helpfully backs up this assertion with the following summary of Plath's formative years:

> As a twelve year old, Plath had recorded in her diary the news of the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. Five years later she had co-authored a published article protesting at the decision of the US to continue research into nuclear weapons. Later she corresponded with her admirer Eddie Cohen, whose long letters expressed anxieties about international events. As the Korean War unfolded she saw men in uniforms on the Smith campus, and read of the escalation of the war in newspapers and journals. During her college years she encountered a range of ideologies, in her classes and from talks given by guest speakers at Smith, that raised political questions that were to be asked more urgently and directly when she moved to England.[109]

Her *Journals* too revealed her early anxieties about living in a nuclear age, as she questions, 'what would happen to us all if the planes came, and the bombs', is anxious about the effects of nuclear fallout and is sickened reading the description of the victims of Nagasaki in 1951 and again 'sick to the stomach' when the Rosenbergs are executed in 1953, commenting with an impassioned and savage irony on the inhumane reality of the so-called 'democratic' United States:

> Two real people being executed. No matter. The largest emotional reaction over the United States will be a rather large, democratic, infinitely bored and complacent yawn.[110]

---

[108] Plath, 'Context', *London Magazine*, February 1962, 45 – 46.
[109] See Robin Peel, 'The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27.4 (2004) 59 – 72.
[110] Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 32; p. 46; p. 541.

As Rumens perceptively notes of *Ariel*: 'Plath's subject is not only herself, but a century with more blood on its hands than any other'[111] and 'Elm' should be read in precisely this way.

That Plath's poem is a considered and exceptionally crafted piece and not merely an unmediated expression of the poet's emotional state is attested to by the fact of its having been worked through many drafts through its composition. That these drafts point to Plath's concern with nuclear destruction is clear as the following lines bear out:[112]

> His forgetfulness is the beginning of all evil.
> He has forgotten the white men that shine like radium,
> Engineering another vision, engineering themselves back.
> He, like a phoenix, shall subside in fire.[113]

The subject here is the 'Creator' about whom in a previous line it is said: 'The remembrance of the Creator is very small.' The image then is of a world forgotten by its maker and of evil forces gathering strength in his absence. The 'white men that shine like radium / engineering another vision' suggest the military, corporate and political officials bringing into existence a terrifying apocalypse, radium itself being a highly radioactive substance. Only the creator, blind to the impending devastation, will live on like a phoenix regenerated. In its final version too 'Elm' contains references to the contemporary issue of nuclear destruction by toxicity and radioactivity spread through rain storms:

> Or shall I bring you the sound of poisons?
> This is rain now, this big hush.
> And this is the fruit of it: tin-white, like arsenic.
>
> I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
> Scorched to the root
> My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.
>
> Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
> A wind of such violence
> Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.[114]

The 'shriek' here seems the only fitting articulation of the isolated individual in the face of a world of war and chaos which places the self irrevocably under threat of breaking up of attack

---

[111] Rumens, 'Ariel Manoeuvres', p. 67.
[112] Robin Peel has also drawn attention to this draft and notes how its lines 'suggest the world of nuclear waepons'. Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Press, 2002), p. 128.
[113] Plath, 'Elm', Draft 1b, 12 April 1962, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College. See Appendix B.
[114] Plath, 'Elm', in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 27.

and invasion. In her study *The Other Sylvia Plath* Tracy Brain makes a similar observation about 'Elm' considering it alongside Rachel Carson's 1962 study of pollution *Silent Spring* to assert its interest with environmentalism. Brain also states how '"Elm" describes the effects of nuclear and chemical damage upon a tree and a woman' and evokes 'those now familiar photographic images of the visual aftermath of nuclear tests or bombs'.[115] Thus, 'Elm' stands as a powerful articulation of Cold War anxieties and the precarious fate of the individual in an antagonistic, unstable world divided by corporate politics and chemical warfare. Ted Hughes in an essay on Plath's poetry stated her deep preoccupations with the desecration of the environment and the destructiveness of contemporary humanity:

> The chemical poisoning of nature, the pile-up of atomic waste, were horrors that persecuted her like an illness – as her latest poems record. Auschwitz and the rest were merely the open wounds, in her idea of the great civilised crime of intelligence that like the half-imbecile, omnipotent spoiled brat Nero has turned on its mother.[116]

In terms of influence it is fitting too that 'Elm' was dedicated by Plath to a contemporary poet – Ruth Fainlight – making it into part of a symbolic dialogue between the precursor poet and her contemporaries as successors. The identity of 'poet' for these women poets has been paramount as Plath's relationship with the poet Fainlight testifies. Their friendship, though short-lived was a particularly close one. In a piece published in the *TLS* in 2003 which includes an account of Fainlight's time with Plath, Fainlight points to the sympathetic bond that existed between herself and Plath from their very first meeting: 'Sylvia and I had acknowledged each other as "sister-spirits" from our first encounter.'[117] Fainlight was, by the time she met Plath in person, already very familiar with Plath's poetry which she had 'read and admired' (p. 14). They quickly became firm friends, corresponding through letters and visiting each other at their homes whenever the opportunity arose. It was a poetic friendship in every sense, Fainlight attesting to the fact that they were poets first, not wives or mothers and that this shared sense of identity was their common bond: 'we were two poets Sylvia Plath and Ruth Fainlight, not Mrs. Hughes and Mrs. Sillitoe, and our friendship was centred on this crucial reality' (p. 15). Plath read her newly-composed 'Elm' to Fainlight on her visit to Court Green in 1963 after which she dedicated it to her poetic companion. Plath's death shortly afterwards troubled Fainlight greatly and the impact

---

[115] For this discussion of 'Elm' see Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), pp. 105 – 111.

[116] Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, pp. 187 – 195 (p. 190).

[117] Ruth Fainlight, 'Sylvia and Jane', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 December 2003, pp. 13 – 15 (p. 14). All further quotations are from this source until otherwise noted.

of the shock seems never to have left her. She has described herself as being 'haunted' by Plath's ghost long after, her imagination gripped by the potent figure of her friend:

> For months I dreamed of Sylvia. Often these dreams were nightmares, and she was a soil-stained, snail-encrusted revenant, intent on dragging me back to lie in the coffin with her, like a character from a story by Edgar Allan Poe. My tragically dead friend was not yet 'Sylvia Plath,' had not yet become a literary icon. But her power was already manifest to me, during those months after my return to England, when she drove me almost crazy.[118]

That Fainlight felt profound emotions of guilt and responsibility is clear, as she states: 'Could I have saved Sylvia? Perhaps – at least for that particular moment of crisis' (p. 15). The question of Plath's influence on Fainlight's poetry is rarely considered but Fainlight herself has attested to Plath's lasting influence on poetry: 'To be a woman poet was an issue then in a way that it isn't now. She was one of the energisers.'[119] Plath's role as a necessary enabler is undeniable but Carol Ann Duffy hears 'echoes of Plath' in Fainlight's 'The Crescent' from *The Knot*.[120] Evidence of Plath's lasting effect on Fainlight is there in the poem 'The Ghost' from her 1966 collection *Cages* which was included by way of a poignant coda to Fainlight's essay when it was reproduced in 2004 for the *Poetry Society of America*'s Journal *Crossroads*:

> A ghost woke me last night, eve of the Feast of the Dead,
> Rainy night in June, here on the African coast.
> Rattling shutters, fireworks, shots or thunder—
> Something broke into a blurred dream of myrtle,
> Blue-washed plaster, headstones and white robes.
> Defeated by neon the ghost faded;
> While rain, unconfined in its ancient courses,
> Unseasonable on the scrubby, stippled hills,
> Fell over the whole country, wet me
> As I stood on the terrace, rushed into her grave.[121]

Plath's legacy has been much more vital and substantial than many critical commentators have acknowledged and the huge impact of her poetry has had a profound effect right into the twenty-first century. Paul Farley's poem '11th February 1963' is a deftly constructed and fascinating poem set on the day of the title as it pivots on the confluence of two defining moments in the history of twentieth century art and culture. On that February morning which has the poet

---

[118] Fainlight, 'Sylvia and Jane', p. 15.
[119] Fainlight, in Patterson, 'In Search of the Poet', p. 4.
[120] Carol Ann Duffy, Review of Ruth Fainlight, *The Knot*, *Guardian*, 27 December 1990, Review section, p. 24.
[121] Fainlight, 'The Ghost', in Fainlight, 'Jane and Sylvia', *Crossroads*, no. 61 (Spring 2004) <www.poetrysociety.org/journal/articles/janeandsylvia.html> [accessed August 2007]

himself not yet born – a fact that gestures suggestively towards the future and the brink of a new era – Plath died in her flat on Primrose Hill while only a few miles across London at Abbey Road Studios the Beatles started recording their first album *Please Please Me* at 10 o'clock that morning, finishing it 585 minutes later. Plath's death effected her initiation into the pantheon of the century's poets with the high-impact arrival of her poetry and its large-scale publication into the literary and cultural world, securing her legacy and her lasting influence. The Beatles were similarly involved in bringing about a new age in British music and culture, which would also profoundly influence their generation and after. Thus, out of the freeze, the darkness – 'the worst winter for decades' as Farley has it – something new is being born. There are perhaps echoes of the nativity here, of a new era about to be ushered in, reminiscent of the opening lines of T.S. Eliot's 'Journey of the Magi' set as it is in 'the very dead of winter': 'A cold coming we had of it, / Just the worst time of the year / For a journey, and such a long journey'.[122] Farley has expressed his deep admiration for Plath's poetry, in particular for the poems 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' and 'The Moon and the Yew Tree'.[123] Indeed, in terms of poetic influence, Farley's '11th February 1963' closely echoes Philip Larkin's 'Annus Mirabilis' which also centres on the year 1963: 'Between the end of the *Chatterley* ban / And the Beatles' first LP.'[124]

Farley's poem is cast appropriately as a sonnet, traditionally employed for pronouncements on love but also on time and mutability, as his sonnet binds the temporal and the spatial together, holding the moment still as if frozen. The half-rhymes at each line end strive and strain towards that complete unison which is only achieved at the poem's end with the perfectly rhyming couplet of 'take / wake'; the connection complete, the points converging:

> The worst winter for decades. In the freeze
> some things get lost and I'm not even born,
> but think until you're many Februaries
> deep in thought with me and find London
> on that day as held inside a glacier;
> a fissure where two postal districts touch,
> its people caught mid-floe, at furniture,
> the contents of their stomachs, a stopped watch.
> At these pressures the distance has collapsed:
> the studio clock winds up over Primrose Hill,
> or the poet and her sleeping children crossed
> the mile to Abbey Road. This milk bottle

[122] T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963), p. 99.
[123] Paul Farley, in conversation with this author, 14 September 2007.
[124] Larkin, *Collected Poems*, p. 167. Farley has confirmed the connection between his poem and Larkin's 'Annus Mirabilis' in conversation with this author, 14 September 2007.

might hold what John'll drink for one last take;
that she'll leave out for when the children wake.[125]

The closing image of milk further links Plath with the Beatles as it points not only to the milk that Plath left out for her children before she killed herself but also to the milk which John Lennon famously had to drink while recording the album in order to keep his voice lubricated. Interestingly, Ted Hughes has also linked Plath with the Beatles. Commenting on the innovative forms that both created and came to represent in the sixties and long after Hughes has said:

> In the U.K. the shock of the sixties is usually tied to the Beatles. But as far as poetry was concerned, their influence was marginal, I think. The poetry shock that hit the U.K. in the sixties started before the Beatles. Sylvia responded to the first ripples of it. In a sense, *Ariel* is a response to those first signs, and she never heard the Beatles.[126]

This statement was made as part of a lengthy and detailed response to a question concerning the existence of a distinct British tradition of poetry in the late twentieth century. Hughes continues by detailing the development of British poetry in terms of two crucial movements, what he terms the 'two big simultaneous events in the world of poetry'. The first of these was 'the waking up of the world from the ice age of the war' – the wave of international poets and of poetry in translation – the second, coming from the US and the 'shockwave' of the Beat generation which hit England in the sixties by way of the Beatles who were its 'English amplifiers' in Hughes's opinion. Although Plath never actually heard the Beatles, according to Hughes, her poetry is a response to the 'first ripples' of this new 'poetry shock' that hit Britain in the sixties. It is interesting that both Plath as poet and the Beatles as musicians were engaged in formulating something very new in their own ways which would change and influence British culture irreversibly and, as Farley's poem illuminates with its connective strands, each only a matter of miles apart from each other in central London. In this way, as Hughes explains, poetry is now 'completely open, every approach with infinite possibilities', British poetry enriched by its interaction with international modes.[127]

Thus, it was the convergence of American and British influences – in which Plath and the Beatles exploding on British culture in the sixties is a crucial element – that brought this about. This particularly significant aspect of Plath's influence is always overlooked in favour of one that has her synonymous only with a 'female' poetry and feminist agendas. Redmond, reviewing an

---

[125] Farley, '11th February 1963', in *The Ice Age* (London: Picador, 2002), p. 5.
[126] Hughes, in Drue Heinz, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI', *Paris Review*, no. 134 (Spring 1995), 54 – 94 (p. 86).
[127] Hughes, in Heinz, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI', 88.

anthology of new British poets, knowingly derides the easily-categorised 'ubiquitous Cosmic Woman poem' as 'usually a narcissistic, sub-Plath cocktail of blood, moon and Universal Rhythms'.[128] Plath's influence was far deeper and more expansive that her legacy to women poets – many of whom are nothing more than bad imitators – allows, and the full measure of her influence that crosses boundaries of gender, of poetic form and content must be addressed. Martin Booth has rightly praised the sound-effects and performative elements of Plath's poetry and its particular influence on the poetry of the nineteen sixties, stating that, 'although she missed the main years of poetry performance, she prepared the seed-bed of it.'[129] Booth goes on to note her uniqueness and originality and its innovative achievement: 'In many respects Sylvia Plath's work was experimental to the British and the experiment, backed up with truth and the desire to be truthful, was a success in artistic as well as financial terms.' One review of the experimental poet Rosemary Norman has appreciatively signalled Plath's influence on her work. Reviewing Norman's multi-media collection *Life on Mars*, Marita Over notes that, 'Plath's ubiquitous presence is sensed from time to time', also comparing Norman's poetry to Plath in terms of its being 'similarly witty'.[130] It is crucial to reclaim these very potent truths about Plath's poetry and so make other readings of Plath's work available.

In this way, Plath's influence has been put to some exceptionally original uses. The work of the emerging British poet Ismail B. Garba testifies once more to the enduring, compelling nature of her poetry and in particular its power of innovation and experiment. Introduced as 'one of the most interesting poets' in the *New Writing 13* anthology in 2005, Garba's work, according to the editors, 'undermines notions of poetic originality by taking originals as templates and grafting different words onto their recognisable syntaxes and rhythmic structures.'[131] The editors' introduction also sheds light on Garba's 'unoriginal' strategies: 'Being unoriginal, in this case, leads to something more inventive and innovative than the "sincere" emotions of many other people who submitted work to us.' Among the 'templates' that he employs in a sequence titled 'The English Sequence' are Plath's 'Words' and 'Poppies in October', retitled 'Metaphors' and 'Batteries in April' respectively. 'Metaphors' is as follows:

Missiles

---

[128] John Redmond, 'Bloodbath', review of *New Blood*, ed. by Neil Astley, *Thumbscrew*, no. 15 (Winter – Spring 2000), 4 – 7 (p. 6).
[129] Martin Booth, *British Poetry 1964 – 1984: Driving Through the Barricades* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985), p. 189.
[130] Marita Over, Review of Rosemary Norman, *Life on Mars with accompanying video by Stuart Pound*, *Ambit Magazine*, no. 164 (Spring 2001), 84 – 85.
[131] Tobi Litt and Ali Smith, 'Introduction', *New Writing 13* (London: Picador, 2005), p. xi.

After whose strike the forest quakes,
And the shocks!
Shocks speeding
Off from the target like tsunamis.

The tap
Collects like ponds, like the
Sea attempting
To reposition its face
Over the steep

That falls and twists,
A brown branch,
Coloured by slimy germs.
Months later I
Meet them on the way –

Metaphors wet and colourless,
The indubitable footprints.
While
From the bottom of the earth, still clouds
Fix a stare.[132]

Garba updates Plath in a very knowing way by having metaphors as 'missiles', their shocks 'like tsunamis' – very relevant to our contemporary age of warfare and of the catastrophic certainty of global warming. Plath too, as has been discussed earlier in this chapter, was very engaged in the political and social realities of her own age. For Garba to utilise the same tropes, comparing, as Plath does, the potential power of language to corrupt with a similarly worsening reality – war, militarism, industry etc. – is a perceptive move.[133] In 'Batteries in April' Garba matches Plath's style image by image, word to word, the patterns of syntax and structure exactly complementary. This is in many ways an example of poetic influence taken to the very limit. But what is achieved by this practice? Garba infuses Plath's poem with a Middle Eastern imagery – the Islamic jinn and burka – the image of the moon also signalling Plath as does the apostrophe 'O my muse' and the existential enquiry 'What am I'. The carbon monoxides become a burka veil, the bowlers whips, the forest a jungle, the frost jinn, the cornflowers cornflakes as the images are updated, transformed:

And even the leave-shade this dawn cannot afford such robes.
Nor the man in the carriage

[132] Ismail B. Garba, 'Metaphors', in *New Writing 13*, p. 162.
[133] Plath strongly criticised the 'abstract double-talk of "peace" or "implacable foes"' which, she asserts, 'cannot excuse the jeopardizing of the conservation of life of all people in all places.' Plath, 'Context', p. 46.

Whose grey hair grows through his cap so astonishingly -

A peck, a friendly peck
Completely uncalled for
By a moon

Boldly and playfully
Removing its burka veil, by faces
Lulled to a slumber under whips.

O, my muse, what am I
That these last days should rise up
In a jungle of jinn, in a morning of cornflakes?[134]

What seems to emerge is that Garba's vocabulary, although contemporary and multi-cultural, is no more wide-ranging than Plath's own. The Australian poets John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan have together discussed Plath's presence in Australian poetry in a short essay which points out Plath's interest in colonialism and exotic experience, noting images such as the 'Chinese yellow' in 'Wintering' and the 'swarmy feeling of African hands' in 'The Arrival of the Bee Box' as part of Plath's strategic literary device in this regard.[135] Plath, through her poetry, interrogates discourses, languages and systems of representation and references to other cultural discourses and exotic realities feature strongly in Plath's developing oeuvre. There is a large-scale universality to Plath's poetry, as the majority of her poems are not fixed to a particular place or time, pointing up the sense of dislocation, ambiguity and multiple realities that underpins the deeply ontological questioning in her work. Plath's 'Purdah' in particular centres on the Muslim and Hindu practice of concealing women's bodies, segregating them and confining them to their homes as it is spoken by a speaker who is trapped in this way in a poem that is concerned with issues of gender relations, racial codes and with themes of surveillance, concealment and entrapment. Garba's innovative work then is valuable in the way that it returns the reader to Plath as the wide-ranging poetic innovator that she was, a point that has too often been missed by critics.

Through close readings and sustained analyses of a range of poems by British poets, this chapter reveals that it is British male poets – many of them less hampered that their female colleagues have been by Plath's position as a 'woman' poet – who have through their more liberated approaches used Plath's example in new and illuminating ways. Farley and Garba reveal

---

[134] Garba, 'Batteries in April', in *New Writing 13*, p. 164.
[135] John Kinsella and Tracy Ryan, '"Farther off than Australia": Some Australian Receptions of Plath', in *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), 43 – 49. Kinsella has also named Plath as one of his influences, in *The Poetry Kit Interviews* <http://www.poetrykit.org/iv98/kinsella.htm> [accessed August 2007]

Plath's status as an innovator, a challenging and stimulating precursor and provocateur while Dunn is an outstanding case of a male poet who was deeply influenced and overwhelmed in many ways by Plath's achievement and so stands as a good example of the young poet who must escape the power of her influence and assimilate it to move onwards and develop an individual style. Of the female poets whom Plath has influenced Rumens, as a poet mindful of the feminist tag, looks past Plath's biography, pathology and status as a 'woman' poet to the poetry itself, offering in the process an intelligent criticism and so making available another and often overlooked Plath. By focusing on the poetry of these poets whom Plath has presided over in various ways and with varying results, the power and skill of Plath's poetry comes to light along with the sheer range and breadth of her subject matter. Crucially, it is poets rather than critics, who have, through their engagement with Plath, revealed her presence as a vital force for generations of contemporary poets. These British poets, through their own poetry and as displayed in their insightful comments on Plath's presence in their work – much of which points away from the biographical approach and single-minded critical narratives that have prevailed – testify to the enduring inspiration of Plath's masterful example and to the unending possibilities for interpretation that her work continues to present to us as readers.

Chapter Three

'Richard Murphy in Whisper-Mutter with Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath': Plath's Presence in Contemporary Irish Poetry

In his autobiography *The Doctor's House*, James Liddy gives an account of the party held to launch John Jordan's *Poetry Ireland* in September 1962. Present among such important Irish literary personages as Michael Hartnett, Liam Miller and Ben Kiely was as Liddy recalls 'Richard Murphy in whisper-mutter with Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath.'[1] That Plath may have been in attendance at the launch of the nation's most long-standing poetry publication is itself symbolic but Plath's persistently continuing presence in the work of Irish poets may be seen as having begun officially with her fateful visit to poet Richard Murphy at his cottage in Connemara in September 1962. Murphy's well-known poem 'The Cleggan Disaster' had been chosen by Plath as one of the judging panel for the Cheltenham Prize in 1962 to win first prize in the Guinness Awards. Plath wrote to Murphy personally in July 1962 before the official result of the competition had been announced to tell him of his success in a letter that found the young Irish poet 'surprised and thrilled' and in which she expressed a strong desire to visit the poet at his West of Ireland home.[2] Plath had invested great significance for herself and Hughes in this holiday, hoping that it 'might be a possible renewal of their marriage.'[3] This by now legendary visit had Plath and Hughes pay their respects at Yeats' Coole Park and Thoor Ballylee; Hughes attempted, at Plath's suggestion, to climb up the copper beech in the Pleasure Ground and add his name to the autographs of famous literary figures. Thomas Kinsella came from Dublin to join the party, the four poets partaking in a late-night session over the ouija board. Murphy remembers how Plath, Kinsella and Hughes 'greatly enjoyed each other's company' and he himself found the company of Plath and Hughes an 'inspiration', grateful to both for having given him excellent advice on his poetry.[4] However the holiday was to end in disaster when Plath made a pass at

---

[1] James Liddy, *The Doctor's House* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 2005), pp. 82 – 83. Plath's attendance at this event has not, to my knowledge, been corroborated elsewhere. In an email correspondence to this author of 11 November 2006 Richard Murphy writes: 'All I can tell you truly is that I did *not* attend the launch of Poetry Ireland in 1962. Liddy is mistaken.'

[2] Murphy, *The Kick: A Life Among Writers* (London: Granta, 2002), p. 221.

[3] Elizabeth Compton, quoted in Elaine Feinstein, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2001), pp. 127 – 128.

[4] Richard Murphy, 'A Memoir of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes on a Visit to the West of Ireland in 1962', in Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Viking, 1989), p. 351.

Murphy and Hughes aborted the holiday prematurely leaving Plath alone. Murphy insisted on Plath's immediate departure and Kinsella drove Plath back to Dublin shortly afterwards. She spent two nights in his home before returning to England, confiding her troubles to his wife Eleanor. What is certain is that this highly-charged visit marked the end of the Plath-Hughes marriage and generated tension and unease between the Irish host and American poet.

The strained nature of Plath's departure after Murphy's rejection, followed by her death less than five months later, left the Irish poet with feelings of profound regret, as he himself has written: 'For a long time afterwards, guilt haunted me for not having given Sylvia the haven she needed in Connemara; and sometimes I felt angry at being made to feel guilty.'[5] Murphy last met Plath at the end of January 1963 in London and was relieved to find that Plath had 'no trace of ill-feeling' towards him.[6] However, she was to take her life shortly afterwards. Some years after her death, in May 1969, Murphy would visit Plath's grave at Heptonstall Church with Hughes during a visit to West Yorkshire.[7] Plath, and the lasting memory of the trip she made to Connemara before her death, has stayed with Murphy and is seems no accident that one of Murphy's most beautiful love poems, 'Mary Ure', contains a reference to Plath's late poetry. Ure, herself a beautiful actress married to the overbearing actor Robert Shaw, died by her own hand in 1975, and, as this beautifully-crafted elegy gently laments:

> Bare feet she dips across my boat's blue rail
> In the ocean as we run under full white summer sail.
> The cold spray kisses them. She's not immortal.
>
> Sitting in her orchard she reads 'Lady Lazarus'
> Aloud rehearsing, when her smallest child lays
> Red peonies in her lap with tender apologies.[8]

Here, apart from the obvious signal to Plath's iconic monologue 'Lady Lazarus', the use of sea imagery and the vivid coloration of red and blue, coupled with the bestowal of a child's ambivalent blessings in these lines are deeply reminiscent of Plath's symbolism. Also, the matter-of- fact statement 'She's not immortal' bringing with it a poignant stoppage in the lilting rhythm as well as breaking the pattern of pleasing end-rhymes, imitates Plath's attentiveness to matters of form and sound as well as her distinctively detached style of terse, impersonal statements. In an interview in October 2000 Murphy found himself some forty years on still being questioned

---

[5] Murphy, *The Kick*, p. 230.
[6] Murphy, *The Kick*, p. 229.
[7] Murphy, *The Kick*, p. 279. Hughes and Murphy were the next day joined by Douglas Dunn and Philip Larkin. Larkin insisted on taking a photograph of the four poets in the Heptonstall graveyard.
[8] Murphy, 'Mary Ure', in *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2000), p. 143.

over the contentious account he gave of Plath's visit for Anne Stevenson's biography of the American poet. Murphy stated that what had troubled him about the incident was the 'violation of hospitality' that Plath's pass at him signified, adding that, although he considered Plath 'a fascinating person', he would not have wanted to enter into any sexual relationship with her.[9] However, the up-front sexual aspect to this meeting between Plath and Murphy may be seen in itself as a metaphor for Plath's bold entry into Irish poetry and her enduring presence that is to be found in the work of the most gifted contemporary poets. These poets are now only too happy to offer hospitality to one of their most enabling precursors.

Although no sustained examination of Plath's influence on Irish poetry has been carried out, critics have long noted aspects of it. Edna Longley, discussing Plath and T.S. Eliot in her introduction to the seminal *Bloodaxe Book of Twentieth Century Poetry* has stated how: 'Their combined influence on British and Irish poetry is incalculable.'[10] Eamon Grennan, himself an Irish émigré poet living in the US, numbers Plath among a group including Lorca, Rilke, Eliot, Lowell and Milosz, who have all influenced greatly the century's Irish poetry. As Grennan puts it: 'We are fed by such poets, they have nourished us all.'[11] Alice Entwhistle, in an authoritative essay which asserts that 'without Plath, late twentieth century British poetics would look rather different', lists Seamus Heaney and Matthew Sweeney as the Irish poets among 'later generations of male poets [who] draw on Plath's example.'[12] In his *Poets of Modern Ireland* Neil Corcoran recognises Padraic Fallon's 'inheritance of the Plath rhythm and imagery', describing Fallon's poem 'Trevaylor' as a 'brilliant but altogether disconcerting pastiche of Plath'.[13] Brian Fallon, the poet's son, writing in the Afterword to Fallon's *Collected Poems*, remembers how his father in his sixties was 'excited by his discovery of Sylvia Plath'.[14] Elsewhere, Michael Longley's 'Christopher at Birth' from his first collection *No Continuing City* (1969) is seen to draw on Plath's 'Morning Song', its opening line 'clearly posing a challenge to the bleak world and

---

[9] Murphy, in Rosita Boland, 'Embracing the World', interview with Richard Murphy, *Irish Times*, 11 October 2000, p. 16.

[10] Edna Longley, 'Introduction', *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry*, ed. by Edna Longley (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000), p. 21.

[11] Eamon Grennan, 'Ten Out of Ten', review of Noel Duffy and Theo Dorgan, *Watching the River Flow: A Century in Irish Poetry*, *Irish Times*, 18 December 1999, Weekend section, p. 8.

[12] Alice Entwhistle, 'Plath and Contemporary British Poetry', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill (Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 63 – 68 (p. 64).

[13] Neil Corcoran, *Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999), p. 48.

[14] Brian Fallon, 'Afterword', Padraic Fallon, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Brian Fallon (Manchester: Carcanet; Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1990), pp. 265 – 272 (p. 267).

broken iambics' of same.[15] Longley reviewed Plath's *Ariel* in 1965 with apprehension and unease: 'I was so alarmed by the book that I have kept my review back for some time, reading the poems over and over.'[16] However, Longley's remarks betray the impact that Plath's work had on him as a young poet as he admits his inability to understand the workings of her startlingly new poetic technique. The more subtle nuances of Plath's distinct tone have been discerned by critics too. Michael Allen, discussing influences on John Montague's poetry, points out Plath's unassimilated presence in the last line of Montague's poem 'Sybille's Morning'.[17] More recently, the title poem of Kevin Kiely's second collection *Breakfast with Sylvia Plath* has been described as 'a psychic whirlwind that becomes an affecting rendering of Plath's suicide'.[18] However, the sensationalist aspect of Plath's life after death is allowed to take over to bad effect in this young poet's hands, for, as another reviewer has recognised, 'the dialogue from the Plath figure can also read as inaccurately confrontational, spoken by an archetype of the Plath-Hughes industry rather than by Plath herself.'[19] Plath's compelling, original style has proved so infectious that critics often run the risk of seeing her influence everywhere. It is the comments made by the poets themselves that often illuminate the full extent of Plath's persistent force in contemporary poetry.

Poetic engagements with Plath make themselves known in many various forms, some less successful than others. Paul Durcan's collection *Daddy, Daddy* (1990), much of which is concerned with his troubled relationship with his father, has obvious connections with Plath from its title alone. The blurb cites one reviewer's opinion of how 'Like Sylvia Plath's "Daddy", Durcan's father is often a terrifying figure of savage vindictiveness'.[20] In an essay that explores the links between Plath's poetry and Durcan's *Daddy, Daddy*, Peggy O'Brien sets out by questioning Durcan's use of what she terms 'the single most resonant phrase in women's poetry' as a title for his collection. O'Brien's essay concludes by asserting that Durcan is 'identifying with Plath both as a fellow suffering human being and as a poetic strategist'; Plath, in her view, being 'a poet sibling from a similar family drama'.[21] It is true that Durcan seems to be drawing on the kindred similarities between himself and the American poet, however the poetic achievement of this creative connection is rather more problematic than O'Brien allows. Durcan employs

---

[15] Michael Allen, 'Rhythm and Development in Michael Longley's Earlier Poems', in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 214 – 234 (p. 218).
[16] Michael Longley, 'Five Poets', review of Sylvia Plath, *Ariel, Irish Times*, 2 October 1965, p. 6.
[17] Michael Allen, 'Celebrations', *Irish Review*, 7 (Autumn 1989), 97 – 102 (p. 99).
[18] James J McAuley, 'Wit, Laments and Bodhrán Satire', *Irish Times*, 16 July 2005, Weekend section, p. 13.
[19] Val Nolan, 'State of the Art', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 86 (May 2006), 97 – 100 (p. 99).
[20] Paul Durcan, *Daddy, Daddy* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990).
[21] Peggy O'Brien, 'Your Daddy, My Daddy', in *The Kilfenora Teaboy: A Study of Paul Durcan*, ed. by Colm Tóibín (Dublin: New Island Books, 1996), pp. 75 – 101 (p. 100).

many of the obvious tropes of Plath's poetic father-daughter relationship to navigate the troubled relations between himself and his deceased patriarch; the father is at once lover, fascist, pedagogue and oppressor. However, as the poem 'Heptonstall Graveyard, 22nd October 1989' reveals – a poem which O'Brien overlooks – he calls on Plath mainly as one who provides him with an available thematic and symbolic framework for releasing his own emotional and psychological experience as an Irish male.

In this poem from *Daddy, Daddy* Durcan employs Plath's sea imagery to describe the occasion of his visiting the dead poet's grave. In a mode that seems to wish for intimacy and familiarity, Durcan addresses Plath on first name terms:

> In Heptonstall graveyard,
> Mid-ocean in Heptonstall graveyard
> I bob around Sylvia's grave,
> My flag of hope unfurled.[22]

While there he happens upon another admirer – 'another ancient mariner' – who has also come to pay homage at Plath's watery grave, to water her grave with tears and lay flowers. Durcan, as speaker, resents this other younger, attractive visitor for his 'discovery of Sylvia's grave', the implication being that he wishes for sole possession of the dead poet. Durcan is as a jealous suitor. The poem concludes with an image of carnal union between Plath and the younger man which appropriates the inscription on Plath's gravestone: 'His massive fierce-flamed penis between her tiny breasts / Flowering between her golden lotuses.' The speaker has by now conceded: 'I am put in my place. / You, and you, and you are put in your place.' But who is the 'you' that is being addressed in the forcefully repetitive and appropriate manner of Plath's dramatic monologue 'Daddy'? May these be interpreted as the many other poets who come to Plath looking for some form of guidance? The male poet, it seems, like an Oedipal son who has come upon his parents in the act of sex, has grown out of innocence into experience by confronting this knowledge that he cannot 'own' Plath. Plath may be viewed as his 'poetic mother' as the term goes, but only in the very limited, even incestuous terms of shared biographical experience, that is, in terms of theme but not poetic technique.

Thus, Durcan at her graveside is merely a kindred sufferer, Plath's poetic achievement in terms of her interrogation of the paternal figure operating as a readily available device as it provides Durcan with the freedom to articulate and enliven otherwise taboo psychological truths from his own life. It is her highly-charged poetic symbolism which he borrows from throughout.

---

[22] Durcan, 'Heptonstall Graveyard, 22 October 1989', in *Daddy, Daddy*, p. 41.

It remains that there is nothing of the technical mastery of Plath's poetry in Durcan's poem and nothing of its metaphoric power and impact. Durcan's looser, more journalistic form of prose-poetry is in no way similar to Plath's considered use of formal designs and attentiveness to technique. It is interesting nonetheless to note that the way in which Durcan calls upon Plath at a particular moment to provide him with an example that he can follow, is similar to the way she operates as an example for women poets, as one whom they see as a pioneer writing about issues pertaining to women's experience. The ways in which these poets take from Plath, reading or misreading her, each, as Durcan recognises in his poem, believing they 'own' her, testifies to her singular abilities, the myriad interpretations pointing up her dynamic forms of poetic expression, her rich poetic resource in terms of technique and theme and ultimately the rare uniqueness of her poetic voice.

The older generation of Irish contemporary poets has in no way remained untouched by Plath's pervasive influence. Paul Muldoon, as the next chapter will explore – although he refuses to mark out Plath in any straightforward way as an important influence on his poetry – navigates Plath as a poetic muse and precursor in complex ways throughout his poem 'Yarrow' from his 1994 collection *The Annals of Chile*, interrogating her legacy and her work to reveal much about ways of reading and misreading her poetry. Her power is unavoidable. Gerald Dawe has pointed out how certain early poems of his such as 'It Always Happens' (originally titled 'I'm Through') from *Sheltering Places* (1978) and more particularly 'Candlelight' were 'written in part under Plath's influence.'[23] As Dawe reveals, admitting to the lure and pull of Plaths' poetry: 'I could never get the first line of Plath's "Morning Song" out of my head.' In terms of the larger scope of Northern Irish poetry, Dawe has confirmed how Plath was introduced to future poets such as himself in the North of Ireland in the late 1960s as a result of her inclusion in the *Faber Book of Modern Verse* which was one of the set texts for A Level English Literature. Importantly, Dawe has recognised how for him and others growing up in the North in the late 1960s and early 1970s 'the violence of Sylvia Plath had a very strong echo' in the Troubles of the period. However, no published study of Plath's possible importance to Northern Irish poets has been carried out, apart from a recent conference paper given by the Irish poet and critic John Redmond.[24] Redmond's much-needed contribution to this neglected area is an examination of Plath as a dominant influence on the poetry of Seamus Heaney arguing that Heaney found in Plath two vital factors.

---

[23] Gerald Dawe, personal correspondence with the author.

[24] John Redmond, '"Unlikely as a Foetus": The Influence of Sylvia Plath on Seamus Heaney', unpublished conference paper, at the 'British and Irish Contemporary Poetry Conference: The Line of Poetry', St. Anne's College, Oxford, 22 – 24 September 2006. I am grateful to John Redmond for emailing me the script of this conference paper.

The first being 'representations of the self as violently compromised by others' and the second, as Redmond describes, is 'an awareness, violently represented, of how the self's repression is misunderstood by others'. Starting out on the understanding that Heaney is a much more inward poet than both he himself has admitted and critics have recognised, Redmond argues that there is a 'competitive relationship' between Heaney and Plath, the two poets having 'very similar inner worlds' as Redmond sees it. His paper goes on to unearth 'congenial local features and details' in the style of both poets. As Redmond observes:

> Both *North* and *The Colossus* (with Auden in mind) construct an early poem around a Breughel painting. Both *North* and *The Colossus*, amidst an array of poems about corpses, include one about a dead mole. Both poets [...] use 'root' as a key word and metaphor.[25]

Redmond concludes his study by carrying out an examination of Heaney's 'Exposure' and Plath's 'Nick and the Candlestick' – between both poems there is, as Redmond sees it, 'a deep coincidence of mood [...] a crossing of secondary worlds' – and a reading of Heaney's 'Funeral Rites' which takes on 'a different cast of light' as Redmond argues, when considered alongside Plath's 'Berck-Plage'.

As Redmond too recognises in his paper, critics have almost entirely neglected the question of Plath's influence on Heaney and it is one that begs proper consideration. Only fleeting references have thus far been made to Plath in the major studies of Heaney's work. Helen Vendler, examining Heaney's 'Bog Queen' from the collection *North* in her study of the Irish poet, sees how 'in that final rising the 'Bog Queen' owes something to Plath's 'Lady Lazarus'.[26] As Redmond asserts in his paper, it is in 'Bog Queen' that 'the link between Heaney and Plath slips into the spotlight'. Henry Hart, in his discussion of the poem 'North' from the same volume, quotes the opening stanza of 'North':

> I returned to a long strand,
> the hammered curve of a bay,
> and found only the secular
> powers of the Atlantic thundering.[27]

In these lines, as Hart opines: 'Heaney may recall a similar iconoclastic vision at the end of Sylvia Plath's 'Blackberrying', where she looks "out on nothing, nothing but a great space" of

---

[25] Ibid.
[26] Helen Vendler, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Harper Collins, 1998), p. 45.
[27] Heaney, 'North', in *New Selected Poems 1966 – 1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), p. 56.

ocean waves "like silversmiths / Beating and beating at an intractable metal."'[28] Neil Corcoran, also examining 'Bog Queen', notes how it is 'structurally indebted to Sylvia Plath's scarifying poem "Lady Lazarus", with its vengefully stampeding persona. Both are the monologues of unwilling female returnees from the dead.'[29] Corcoran, examining Heaney's 'Summer Home' from *Wintering Out*, also states how 'Plath is an unexpected but absorbed influence' on Heaney in terms of a technique in which 'personal material is deflected away from the confessional towards the metaphoric and symbolic' but offers no further insights into Plath's relationship to Heaney and why exactly this influence is so 'unexpected'.[30] What Corcoran does contribute is an assertion of the existence of strong echoes of Plath in Heaney's early work that demands further interrogation. Elsewhere, in his study of the use of fruits in literature, Robert Palter places Plath's 'Blackberrying' first published in the *New Yorker* in 1962 and Heaney's early poem 'Blackberry-Picking' from *Death of A Naturalist* (1966) along side each other, finding technical similarities between them – both are 'full of harmonious sounds' – as well as thematic ones: 'each poem culminates in bleak disappointment'.[31] Brian Fallon too has linked Plath and Heaney together – albeit emphasising what he sees as their inherent differences – when he remarks that 'poets as diverse as Sylvia Plath and Seamus Heaney have regarded myth and legend as active resources for poetry.'[32]

But these poets are not as 'diverse' as they may first appear. Real connections do exist to further the link between the two poets. Heaney's relationship with America, as a migrant and as a commuter between there and Ireland, along with American influences on Heaney's work, particularly the 'important influence' of Robert Lowell, have been examined by the critic Michael Allen.[33] Paul Muldoon may be the quintessential Irish poet in America but, as Allen recognises, Heaney is Muldoon's 'predecessor on the transatlantic route'.[34] Heaney was too a very close friend of Ted Hughes and both poets have signalled the influence of the other on their work. Heaney has always closely aligned himself with Hughes, professing in a recent interview how 'I

---

[28] Henry Hart, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992), p. 79.
[29] Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), pp. 70 – 71.
[30] Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, p. 51.
[31] Robert Palter, *The Duchess of Malfi's Apricots and Other Literary Fruits* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002), pp. 719 – 720.
[32] Brian Fallon, in Padraic Fallon, *Collected Poems*, p. 269.
[33] See Michael Allen, 'The Parish and the Dream: Heaney and America, 1969 – 1987', *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), 726 – 738.
[34] Allen, 'The Parish and the Dream', p. 737.

always thought of my voice as more akin to Ted Hughes's.'[35] Heaney also gave the eulogy at Hughes' funeral in 1998, describing the death as 'a rent in the veil of poetry'[36] and his poem in memory of Hughes, 'Stern' was published in *District and Circle* (2006). Importantly, Heaney was one of the first readers of Hughes' manuscript of *Birthday Letters* and Hughes, in a letter to Heaney responding to a letter from the Irish poet which had 'overwhelmed him', confided in him the very personal details for the book's origins. This letter to Heaney speaks of the crucial necessity of their personal and poetic friendship and their high mutual esteem: 'I dearly wanted to know what you would feel about all those pieces and about the niceties and not-so-niceties of publishing them – your opinion above everybody's'.[37] Later, in October of that year, Heaney's poem 'On First Looking into Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*' appeared in the *New Yorker*. This poignant poem, very much concerned with poetic tradition and the making of poetry itself – poetry being, as Heaney quotes Czeslaw Milosz, 'a dividend from ourselves' – is written in a style very different to Heaney's usual forms, made up of five sections of different lengths, unrhymed and at times elliptical, often questioning, creating a sense of staggering dumbfoundedness:

> Post-this, post-that, post-the-other, yet in the end
> Not past a thing. Not understanding or telling
> Or forgiveness.
> But often past oneself,
> Pounded like a shore by the roller griefs
> In language that can still knock language sideways.[38]

Plath and Heaney never met of course, but given the deeply close relationship between Hughes and Heaney, as poets and as friends, along with Heaney's being profoundly affected by reading *Birthday Letters*, it is certain that Plath would have been an important presence both in his conversations and correspondence with Hughes as well as in Heaney's own reading. Heaney, reviewing *Birthday Letters* in 1998 recognised Plath's position as 'one of the legendary figures of the century' as well as more personally for his friend Hughes as 'the other half of Hughes'

---

[35] Seamus Heaney, in *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines, 2000), p. 35.
[36] See Rachel Donnelly, 'Heaney Leads Valediction at Poet's Funeral', *Irish Times*, 4 November 1998, p. 11.
[37] Ted Hughes, Letter of 1 January 1998 to Seamus Heaney, handwritten. Hughes Archive (Woodruff Library, Emory University). Copy obtained courtesy of The Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.
[38] Heaney, 'On First Looking into Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*', *The New Yorker*, 5 October 1998, 64 – 65 (p. 64).

consciousness in more ways than one'.[39] Heaney goes on to describe the two poets with insight and affection for their vital, enriching poetic partnership, as 'in life together, both were mythopoeic writers, and understood the world in terms of archetypes and omens, dreams and revelations.'

It is above all Heaney's well-known essay 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps', a seminal examination of Plath's poetry, that confirms the Irish poet's deep engagement with Plath's work. Heaney sets out in this essay disparaging the biographical approach to Plath's work, stressing for example how 'Mussel-Hunter at Rock Harbour' may be read without recourse to biography, but aspects of this essay are problematic in terms of Heaney's tendency at times to read the oeuvre with the facts of the poet's pathology in mind. Indeed, Steven Matthews has put forward the opinion that Muldoon's references to Plath and her work in 'Yarrow' 'obviously question Heaney's conclusions about her' in his straight-forward reading of 'Edge', as Matthews puts it 'in order to resist Heaney's reading of "Edge" as a given as "being" in itself'.[40] Of course Heaney is not the only reader of Plath who reads her work at times through a single narrative that allows for no other possible modes of reading. However, for the most part it must be said that, as with Hughes whom Heaney references from time to time throughout this essay, much of what the Irish poet has to say about Plath is illuminating and worthwhile. Heaney does betray a deep knowledge of Plath's poems, tracing her 'astonishingly swift development' as a poet and a 'gifted writer'. From the first he speaks of her as a 'poet governed by the auditory imagination' and his awed admiration for her skill and recognition of her poems' 'high achievement' in terms of technique' is palpable throughout; Heaney persuades the reader of the music of Plath's poetry. [41] His description of 'Elm' in terms of its perfected technique, its rhythm and sentence-sounds, is effusive and deeply appreciative; for Heaney, the poem comes as an extraordinary breakthrough: 'the window glass is miraculously withdrawn and deep free swoops into the blue pool and into the centre are effected with effortless penetration once the new lines begin to run.'[42]

It is interesting that Heaney's negative remarks on Plath come towards the end of this essay when he addresses the question of moral responsibility in poetry. 'Daddy', as Heaney has famously described it, although a 'brilliant [...] *tour de force*' is a poem that 'rampages so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows that it simply overdraws its rights to our

---

[39] Heaney, 'A Wounded Power Rises from the Depths', review of Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, *Irish Times*, 31 January 1998, Weekend section, p. 11.
[40] Steven Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* (Basingstoke: Macmilllan, 1997), pp. 205 – 206.
[41] See Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath', in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber, 1988), pp. 148 – 170.
[42] Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath', pp. 161 – 162.

sympathy.'[43] Heaney grapples with this question in his discussion of Plath but it must be remembered that, most pertinently, it is a question that he himself has had to face in charges against his own poetry. The publication of *North* in 1975 provoked much criticism for similar reasons concerning irresponsibility with Ciaran Carson labelling Heaney 'the laureate of violence – a mythmaker, an anthropologist of ritual killing'.[44] Heaney has offered the following by way of explanation of the vehement critical response to this collection:

> What they objected to, so they said, was what they saw to be the book's aestheticization of violence. The claim was that I had somehow bought into the notion that the violence that was happening in the North was a cyclic, fated, on-going, predestined thing. I was simplifying and mythologizing and aestheticizing the violence, they felt. So there was a deep resistance.[45]

The impetus behind *North* came from a study of 'bog bodies' – thousand year old corpses found in Jutland that were victims of sacrificial violence – carried out by P.V. Glob. Heaney, looking back on his making of this collection has explained how 'there was a parallel between what was happening in Iron Age Jutland and what was happening in twentieth century Ulster in Ireland [...] I drew a rather large analogy between the idea of sacrifice to a goddess of the territory, between that and Irish republicanism.' With this in mind it is in many ways no surprise that this is the same collection in which Vendler and Hart have recognised traces of Plath's presence, particularly when one remembers Dawe's insightful comment regarding Northern Irish poets in the seventies finding an echo in the violence of the Troubles in Plath's poetry. The truth of Dawe's comment is borne out through the poetry of Heaney and in this collection most acutely.

Apart from 'Bog Queen' and 'North' referred to above, one of the most celebrated and most controversial poems from this collection is 'Punishment'. In this encounter with the corpse of a female victim Heaney adopts the pose of Plath in performance pieces such as 'Lady Lazarus' moving from detached observation into direct address. It is truly Plath's technical power that Heaney draws on here. The use of enjambed, terse four-line stanzas and the descriptive use of language here, as well as persuasive aural devices such as alliteration and repeated sounds – nipples like 'amber beads', 'the frail rigging / of her ribs' – is reminiscent of Plath's technique. As Heaney's speaker reports:

> she was a barked sapling

---

[43] Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath', p. 165.
[44] See Ciaran Carson, 'Escaped from the Massacre', *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (Winter 1975), 183 – 186.
[45] Heaney, in *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller*, p. 21.

that is dug up
oak-bone, brain-firkin:

her shaved head
like a stubble of black corn,
her blindfold a soiled bandage,
her noose a ring

to store
the memories of love.[46]

The perfectly balanced line, aurally as well as visually arresting – 'oak-bone, brain-firkin' – is typical of Plath's rhythmic effects as is the startlingly vivid use of simile and metaphor to identify the body and its accoutrements. Compare the compelling concluding lines of the second stanza quoted here – 'her blindfold a soiled bandage, / her noose a ring' – with the following from Plath's 'Lady Lazarus':

My right foot

a paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.[47]

The speaker then addresses the dead girl with the salutation 'Little adulteress' which is itself reminiscent of Plath, particularly in the opening lines to 'Poppies in July': 'Little poppies, little hell flames'[48] or the speaker's address to her injured thumb, 'Little pilgrim' in 'Cut'.[49] The mode of address continues:

My poor scapegoat,

I almost love you
but would have cast, I know,
the stones of silence.

The rhetorical repetition of the word 'I' is also famously employed by Plath in 'Purdah' with her exhortation 'I shall unloose'. 'Lady Lazarus' concerns itself too with the implications of witnessing an atrocity, a violation which makes for a horrific though compelling spectacle. This

[46] Heaney, 'Punishment', in *New Selected Poems 1966 – 1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990), pp. 71 – 72.
[47] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 14.
[48] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 203.
[49] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 25.

theme is developed further in 'Punishment' in the following lines which betray Plath's typical attentiveness to every apprehended detail:

> I am the artful voyeur
>
> of your brain's exposed
> and darkened combs,
> your muscles' webbing
> and all your numbered bones:

As Plath does in 'The Applicant', 'Lady Lazarus' and elsewhere, the body is dismembered, fractured and in pieces, the pieces scrutinized and catalogued as in an autopsy report after a violent death. In many ways this poem gains its considerable powers from Plath's example, without which Heaney would be without the means to recreate the shocking sensation of confronting the bodies to find a parallel with the violence in Northern Ireland and the barbaric practices that made up every-day life during the Troubles. Heaney himself has contemplated this confrontation in terms of the complications that accompany the realisation by the poet of a violent reality, and the extent to which art may be seen as a transformative, redemptive force: 'You are aware that you are looking at an atrocity which has been turned into a thing of beauty, almost.'[50]

This collection remains central to Heaney's work, singled out by more than one critic as having 'marked Heaney's artistic coming of age'[51] and Heaney himself has in no way disowned it from his oeuvre, quite the contrary, describing it as 'a book of great strangeness – great strangeness and great pressure',[52] professing that:

> Those poems about the bog bodies, I'm very fond of them still because they are so odd and I thought to myself they'll really get the hammer these things, but for once I was ready for it, I trusted them entirely [...] I still think they are poems about something, that is I believe in them still. I don't care what's said about them.[53]

That Plath should have provided the way for Heaney in *North*, a collection regarded by many as his best to date, is a testament to her influence on the Irish poet's creative process as well as to the inescapable power of her own distinctive voice and masterly technique. Plath's presence in Heaney's work also opens up new possibilities for understanding Heaney's poetry. As Redmond also realises; 'to admit the considerable influence of Plath on Heaney would change how we think

---

[50] Heaney, in *Nightwaves*, BBC Radio 4, 16 September 1998.
[51] Eileen Battersby, 'The Poet as Inner Émigré', *Irish Times*, 26 September 1998, Weekend section, p. 10.
[52] Heaney, in *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller*, p. 21.
[53] Heaney, in *Nightwaves*.

about his poetry's treatment of gender', but as Redmond correctly understands it; 'the story of Plath's influence does not fit easily into any of the dominant critical narratives of Heaney's poetry'.[54] A consideration of Plath's influence on Heaney challenges the easy, single-minded critical narratives that have shaped contemporary Irish poetry.

The relationship between Plath and Irish poets is often an uneasy one. Such is the various nature of poetic influence that it is not unusual for poets to deny certain important influences on their work, or shy away from them entirely for fear of being overwhelmed. Redmond sees Heaney's refusal to name Plath as an influence as attributed to the fact that 'in Bloomean style, his poetic self is being threatened by her as a powerful precursor'.[55] The truth of this seems even more likely when one remembers Heaney's response to the question of facing up to Yeats' influence as a precursor: 'I don't face up to him: I turn my back and run!'[56] This same refusal has been articulated by Medbh McGuckian. Although McGuckian in conversation with fellow-poet Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, mentions Plath as one whom she envies for her ability to have 'real things' in her poetry she has elsewhere dismissed what many critics have pointed out as her indebtedness to Plath.[57] A review of her *Selected Poems* noticed how 'her discreetly erotic poems bring to mind such original female talents as Sylvia Plath', McGuckian's 'Elegy for an Irish Speaker' marked out for 'all too clearly echoing Sylvia Plath'.[58] Peter Childs in his survey *The Twentieth Century in Poetry* regards McGuckian as 'in some ways [...] a descendant of Plath because they share concerns with logocentrism, patriarchy, relationships and parturition.'[59] Patrick Ramsey too in a review of McGuckian's *On Ballycastle Beach* discusses McGuckian's 'shocking imagery' in poems such as 'Lighthouse with Dead Leaves', which he rather unconvincingly points to as 'Plathian'.[60] McGuckian herself however reverts all too easily to the reductive critical view that fails to separate the much-mythologised circumstances of Plath's death from her work in order to facilitate her disavowal of Plath and deflect attention:

---

[54] Redmond, '"Unlikely as a Foetus": The Influence of Sylvia Plath on Seamus Heaney' (unpublished conference paper).
[55] Ibid.
[56] Heaney, in Robert Druce, '"A Raindrop on a Thorn": An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters*, 9.1 (1979), 24 – 37 (p. 26).
[57] McGuckian, in Laura O'Connor, 'Comhrá: A Conversation between Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill', with a Forward and Afterword by Laura O' Connor, *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), 581 – 614 (p. 608).
[58] William Pratt, 'Review of Medbh McGuckian, *Selected Poems 1978 – 1994*', *World Literature Today*, 72.4 (Autumn 1998), 836.
[59] Peter Childs, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999), p. 174.
[60] Patrick Ramsey, 'Quality and Quantity', *Irish Review*, 5 (Autumn 1988), 122 – 126 (p. 124).

> Plath's poetry and her life frighten me. Her ending in the gas oven terrifies me. She was much more of a socialite than Emily Dickinson but I find some of her poems more gross, more vulgar and in terms of an inner world I'm closer to Emily Dickinson.[61]

It is somewhat disappointing to encounter such an unintelligent approach to Plath's work in the words of one of contemporary Ireland's most gifted female poets, yet McGuckian's attitude is in many ways unsurprising and stands as proof of the stubborn persistence of lazy critical viewpoints where Plath's poetry is concerned. McGuckian's denial of Plath's influence on her work is not unusual where Plath is concerned and highlights the idea of Plath's influence as 'dangerous' that is so often expressed by poets who fear either being overwhelmed in their own creative work by the American or being labelled 'Plath-like' by critics. Both of these very real fears display even more the powerful and distinctive voice of Sylvia Plath's poetry. 'Dangerous' is an adjective often employed by poets and critics to describe Plath's powerful influence and its devastating effects when handled badly. David Wheatley, for one, has warned how Plath operates as a 'dangerously powerful influence' in contemporary poetry.[62] A review of younger poet Sinéad Morrissey's collection *The State of the Prisons* pointed out how 'one finds ready parallels with Plath in the thrill of a burned finger.'[63] Morrissey herself, although she does not dismiss Plath, has stated how, in retrospect, her early Kavanagh-Prize winning poems now seem 'far too Plath-influenced'. Plath was for her a formative influence, as she puts it: 'When I was fourteen I fell heavily under the dangerous spell of Sylvia Plath'.[64] Morrissey is therefore aware of the potential dangers that attend over-reliance on Plath as a poetic precursor.

In contrast to McGuckian, Eavan Boland has long been a champion of Plath and has professed time and again the ways in which Plath has functioned as a towering influence on her poetry: I'm very proud to be someone who read her and found a great fountain and source in her work, very glad to have lived into my life with her voice there.' *Ariel* is for Boland 'an absolute benchmark of the century in poetry.'[65] Having first come across Plath's work at Trinity College Dublin under the guidance of male critics who, symptomatic of their time, presented it as therapy or extremism, Boland at first – rather immaturely as she admits – 'flinched from this voyeurism and from the horrible story of her death' however later, as Boland declares, it was Plath as 'the superb nature poet' who 'helped me think about that world [of nature]'. This key realisation of

---

[61] McGuckian, in John Brown, *In the Chair*, p. 173.
[62] David Wheatley, 'Subjects Matter', *Poetry Review*, 89.2 (Summer 1999), 71 – 75 (p. 72).
[63] David Butler, 'Consolations of Observation', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 83 (July 2005), 102 – 106 (p. 106).
[64] Sinéad Morrissey, in Declan Meade, 'Interview with Sinéad Morrissey', *Stinging Fly*, 1.14 (Winter 2002 – 2003) <http://www.stingingfly.org/issue14/morrissey.html> [accessed August 2007]
[65] Eavan Boland, in 'A Giant at my Shoulder', Eavan Boland on Sylvia Plath, RTÉ Radio 1 Broadcast, 15 February 2004.

Plath's powerful talent came to Boland as an almost numinous experience brought about by her reading of *Winter Trees* as a young mother during which 'the point when the book and the world outside the room and the children inside it and the language of those poems began to establish some rich, shifting and shared boundary.'[66] Boland, after that awakening would, as she puts it, 'dismiss forever the views of [Plath's] work as hysterical or theatrical' railing against Plath studies where the poet is 'too often discussed as a character in an American melodrama.'[67] Of Plath's poetry, Boland has professed how: 'I want it to endure as language, music, challenge, poetry and not as legend.' Boland most admires Plath's 'path-breaking poems of motherhood' which she regards as 'extraordinarily affirmative poems'.[68] She singles out 'Nick and the Candlestick' for its 'freedom, dash and élan', noting its huge significance for her as a poet: 'When I was younger and I saw this poem and saw the subject of motherhood being brought in in this extraordinarily rigorous lyric way, this was where I found Plath very empowering.'[69] Plath's 'The Night Dances' too is marked out by Boland here with deep admiration as a 'very free, very improvisational, very unusual poem' and one of the 'excellent, affirming, innovative, optimistic poems' that deal with motherhood. Boland professes her indebtedness to Plath, saying of the American:

> She had gone into that room as a student and participant in this extraordinarily high canon of poetry which had been so reluctant to name children and she had named them all by herself and I had immense respect for that, immense respect for her. It's a life-long regret to me that she doesn't see that she gave this other woman in Dublin that courage.[70]

Plath's influence on Boland then gave her the 'courage' to write about motherhood and domesticity in her poetry, however her reading of these poems as overall 'affirmative' and 'optimistic' is as naïve as her simplistic statement that 'Edge' is 'the poem about her death that she wrote'. It is clear that Boland chooses not to see these poems in their complexity and she fails to see the deep ambivalence about motherhood that is so vividly expressed by the speakers in Plath's poems, preferring a more positive interpretation. She is therefore creating her own version of Plath through her own misreading of these poems and to enable her own poetic needs. Nor is this an entirely successful poetics for her. Reviewing Boland's *New Collected Poems* John

---

[66] Boland, in Jody Allen-Randolph, 'A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland', *PN Review*, 26.5 (May – June 2000), 43 – 48 (p. 45).
[67] Boland, in Elizabeth Schmidt, 'Where Poetry Begins: Eavan Boland in Conversation', *American Poet, The Quarterly Journal of The Academy of American Poets* (Spring 1997) reprinted in *Poets.org* <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15939> [accessed August 2007]
[68] Boland, 'A Giant at my Shoulder'.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Boland, 'A Giant at my Shoulder'.

Redmond, highlighting the derivative nature of her early work, sees the crucial turning point in Boland's poetic career as occurring in 1980 when, Boland's 'line drastically shortened, the full stops multiplied, the subject matter sharpened and a new voice was adopted: that of Sylvia Plath.' However, as Redmond continues, the collections *In her Own Image* and *Night Feed* are 'so closely modelled on Plath's *Ariel* that they are practically imitations.'[71] To illuminate his assertion Redmond offers the example of the poem 'Menses' and the lines: 'I am the moon's looking-glass / My days are moon-dials. She will never be done with me. / She needs me. / She is dry' but any number of other poems – such as 'Night Feed', 'Domestic Interior', 'Hymn', 'Energies' and 'Monotony' from *Night Feed* – present themselves as inferior imitations of Plath's effects to even the most cursory reader. Fiona Sampson also has pointed out how Plath 'casts a shadow over virtually every poem' throughout these collections.[72] It is true that in Boland's poems Plath's influence looms too large, serving only to remind the reader of the greater poetic talent that has enabled these lesser poetic attempts.

It is helpful at this point to consider a poem of Boland's from this period alongside one of Plath's late poems, these poems that have been for Boland 'the most inspiring'.[73] Boland's 'Night Feed' opens in a tone very similar to Plath's 'By Candlelight', addressing the small child as follows:

> This is dawn.
> Believe me
> This is your season, little daughter.
> The moment daisies open,
> The hour mercurial rainwater
> Makes a mirror for sparrows.
> It's time we drowned our sorrows.[74]

This is a tone very similar to the opening of Plath's 'By Candlelight' as it begins with the same emphatic address:

> This is winter, this is night, small love –
> A sort of black horsehair,
> A rough, dumb country stuff

---

[71] John Redmond, 'In the Heaven of Lost Futures', review of Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems*, *Guardian*, 18 February 2006, Review section, p. 20.
[72] Fiona Sampson, 'Behind the Linen Room', review of Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems*, *Tower Poetry: Poetry Matters*, January 2006 <www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/january2006/boland.html> [accessed August 2007]
[73] Boland, 'A Giant at my Shoulder'.
[74] Boland, 'Night Feed', in *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005), pp. 92 – 93.

Steeled with the sheen
Of what green stars can make it to our gate.[75]

However, while Boland's poem speaks of daisies and sparrows, the darker mood of Plath's poem to her child is there from the first with the rich image of 'black horsehair' and aurally in the thudding 'uh' vowel sounds in the assonantal line 'rough, dumb country stuff'. Later, the sky is a 'sack of black', the harsh 'k' sounds creating a persuasive, grating dissonance. There are no such harsh consonantal sounds in Boland's tender lines, whereas Plath employs hard 'st', 'g' and 't' sounds in her opening stanza alone. Plath's world in this poem is one of inevitable loss and threat. The shadows cast from the candle are as 'violent giants on the wall', the candle itself a 'yellow knife' and the closing lines focus in on the statue of 'Atlas' that is the child's only heirloom – a dubious inheritance, 'all you have' – as it stands perpetually 'hefting his white pillar', ever-burdened and ever engaged in trying to avoid extinction, to 'keep the sky at bay'. The most haunting statement comes with the final lines which begin with open, bright 'b' alliterative sounds punctuated with upbeat exclamation marks only to conclude in a terrifying image and all the more so for its rhyming-couplet simplicity, a tragically false reassurance:

Five balls! Five bright brass balls!
To juggle with my love when the sky falls.[76]

There is nothing of this masterfully executed sense of threat and fearful mortality in Boland's far more one-dimensional and unambivalent celebration of motherhood, a much more straightforward expression of uncompromised feeling. Here is described the suckling of her new baby, safe and warm in a 'rosy, zipped sleeper':

I crook the bottle.
How you suckle!
This is the best I can be,
Housewife
To this nursery
Where you hold on
Dear life.

The poem also contains strong echoes of Plath's 'Morning Song' with the symbolic images of mirrors and of roses, but where 'Morning Song' speaks of a deep ambivalence at the root of motherhood regarding fears of self-effacement, Boland's poem exalts her condition as 'the best I

[75] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 236.
[76] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 237.

can be', her identity happily secured as 'Housewife / To this nursery'. Unlike Plath's 'Nick and the Candlestick' this poem to a young child ends with the safely reassuring statement: 'I tuck you in'. Boland's is nothing more than a portrait of a night-feed, safe and warm with nature providing pathetic fallacy and a gentle, if mutable, world outside. Plath's on the other hand is a meditation on the human condition and on the forces that threaten the self that allow for no easy consolations. For Boland, Plath's influence remains too great throughout these collections, serving only to remind the reader of the greater poetic talent that stands over her lesser, imitative attempts. As Edna Longley has correctly commented, Boland 'signals rather than digests her debts to Sylvia Plath'.[77] The failure of Boland's poetry to assimilate Plath's effects in developing a style of her own is a regrettable flaw and one that the work of the younger Irish poet Caitríona O'Reilly does not suffer from.

Plath has been enabling in more successful ways for a poet such as Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill writing in the tradition of poetry in Irish. Ní Dhomhnaill, a self-confessed 'Plath aficionado', chose Plath's 'The Arrival of the Bee Box', regarded by her as a 'highly crafted' poem, as her 'favourite poem' for the bestselling *Lifelines* anthology.[78] Ní Dhomnaill admires this poem for its imagery and its wonderfully rich use of myth and has also singled out 'The Applicant' as a 'marvellous poem' for its exploration of gender politics, 'the woman behind the man'. Speaking of Plath's immediate impact on her as a young poet and reader, Ní Dhomhnaill has professed: 'I idolised her when I met her first in her poetry in the sixties. She was the poet for that generation.'[79]As a young poet Ní Dhomhnaill was often compared to Plath and she has commented on how this comparison was stated in negative terms, as excessive and undesirable: 'very good friends of mine actually said it in a bad way, "bit too much of Sylvia Plath there."' It is clear that Plath's example was not only highly important for Ní Dhomhnaill herself but also for her generation in Irish poetry and in particular in broadening the concerns of contemporary Irish language poetry, as Ní Dhomhnaill has testified: 'She was for our generation in many ways the great forerunner, she allowed me in poetry in Irish to actually bring in the personal which was not the strongest side of Irish poetry until then.'[80] Plath was clearly an enabling influence for Ní Dhomhnaill and not the 'bad example' that she might have been for another poet.

That Plath has been an important influence on a wide range of young Irish poets is undeniable. It is necessary here to distinguish between two generations of Irish poets where Plath

---

[77] Edna Longley, 'Irish Bards and American Audiences', *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), 757 –771 (p. 764).
[78] *Lifelines 1*, p. 144.
[79] Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill, in 'The Best of Rattlebag: Sylvia Plath', RTÉ Radio 1, September 14 2006, first broadcast January 2004.
[80] Ibid.

is concerned. While the older generation of contemporary Irish poets including McGuckian, Heaney and Boland have at times tended to regard Plath with either ambivalence or adulation – all affected in various ways by the now out-dated critical approach to Plath that spoke of extremism and confessionalism and which failed to separate the work from the suicide – the Irish poets of this generation, whom Bloodaxe in the twenty-first century has labelled 'The New Irish Poets', have moved on from the state of 'anxiety of influence' that Yeats in particular bequeathed to his successors. Their more unburdened state allows them the freedom to assimilate many, various influences – particularly American and European ones – while never being overwhelmed. Poets such as Justin Quinn, David Wheatley, Caitríona O'Reilly and others see past a reductive, one-dimensional view of Plath to something more sophisticated and therefore more enriching. These poets are also strong-minded, highly intellectual and often rigorous critics of poetry and as far as Plath is concerned Wheatley, as noted above, is alert to the ways in which Plath, as well as being an inspiration for poets, can more often exert too great an influence on their developing work. In a review of Philip Gross's *The Wasting Game* the knowing Wheatley sees how the title poem itself 'reeks of Plath'.[81] Wryly criticising Gross's poem 'That Grave, Heptonstall Churchyard' Wheatley's response is typical of this youngest generation of Irish poets who will not genuflect at the shrine of their poetic antecedents, as confident, even irreverent, he declares: 'Sylvia Plath's grave has to be at the top of anyone's blacklist of embarrassing subjects for poems'.[82]

Poets such as Collette Bryce and Matthew Sweeney have heralded Plath for her inspirational example. Bryce has noted how 'Larkin and Plath were important and led me forward in my own reading, and eventually into writing' describing herself as 'equally drawn to Larkin's rational process and Plath's exploration of the psyche, and to the perfect marriage of voice and craft in both.'[83] Sweeney also admires Plath among such company as Robert Frost and Charles Simic, exalting her above all others as 'the first contemporary poet who was important to me, and is still possibly my favourite'[84] and his poem 'At Plath's Grave' from the collection *Blue Shoes* pays tribute to the gifted American poet. The experimental poet Randolph Healy has stated how

---

[81] David Wheatley, 'Subjects Matter', *Poetry Review*, 89.2 (Summer 1999), 71 – 75 (p. 72).
[82] Ibid.
[83] Colette Bryce, in Brown, *In the Chair: Interviews with Northern Irish Poets* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 2002), p. 314.

[84] Matthew Sweeney, in *Lifelines 2: Letters from Famous People about their Favourite Poem*, ed. by Niall MacMonagle, forward by Paul Durcan (Dublin: Town House, 1994), p. 16.

'my heroes were Sylvia Plath [...]'[85] while Vona Groarke has named Plath as one of her favourite writers as one whom she reads for what Groarke terms the 'raw embroideries' that are unique to Plath's poetry.[86] Nodding to Plath's poetry, Conor O' Callaghan's poem 'Inland' from his recent collection *Fiction* (2005) – a work which displays the influence of American poets on his writing – has the opening line from Plath's 'Berck Plage' as its epigraph. 'The Flat Earth' also from this collection and addressed to the poet's young daughter, echoes Plath directly in its second stanza:

> The surface, love, is everything.
> It is plenty. The wallpaper ripens,
> the horizon plumbs its own depths
> and the flat earth warms to us.[87]

Drawing on Plath's celebrated poems of motherhood O'Callaghan pens a poem to his daughter, Eve, that captures the newness and freshness of an Edenic world which she is eager to embrace in all its fullness. There is none of the ambivalence of Plath's poems to her children here, yet the echoes are unmistakable, the 'surface', the 'horizon', the 'depths', the assured statement, 'It is plenty.' The interpolation 'love' too is one distinctive to Plath also, there in poems to her young son such as 'By Candlelight', 'Nick and the Candlestick' and in 'Letter in November'. O'Callaghan, in the closing lines of his poem, captures something of the fresh, playful quality of Plath's poem to her child 'You're'; his closing lines, 'You're as / full and round as it is and it is all yours' similar in its delighted use of simile to Plath's energetic, free-flowing profusion of similes and metaphors to describe the child in her poem.

The Irish poet and critic Justin Quinn, in a piece for *Thumbscrew* titled 'Plath as Exemplar', has put forward his own testament to Plath's formative centrality to his vocation as poet. Quinn describes how it was his discovery of Plath's work during his first year as an undergraduate at Trinity College Dublin that prompted him to abandon a degree in Engineering to read English instead and thus devote himself wholly to working at his own poetry. As Quinn admits cheerfully, 'It was Sylvia Plath's fault'. Quinn was, as he describes it, 'impressed with the disciplined approach she brought to writing poetry' and, inspired by what he terms Plath's 'diligent sonnets, quatrains and imitations', he set about learning from her example. As well as being a poet, Quinn is a shrewd critic. Referring to Seamus Heaney's oft-quoted comment on

---

[85] Robert Archambeau, 'The Poet in the Information Age: Randolph Healy', *Notre Dame Review*, 7 <http://www.nd.edu/~ndr/issues/ndr7/archambeau/interview.html> [accessed August 2007]
[86] Vona Groarke, in Fionnuala Dillane and John McAuliffe, 'Poets on Poetry: Interview with Vona Groarke', *Review of Postgraduate English Studies*, 5 (1997), 57 – 61 (p.61).
[87] Conor O' Callaghan, 'The Flat Earth', in *Fiction* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2005), p. 28.

how Plath in her Holocaust poems 'rampages so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows' Quinn knowingly rejects such a severely limited critical stance, stating correctively:

> Yes, at times she does, but that's hardly the whole story. Heaney gives in to the caricature of Plath as a poet whose sole theme is the depressed and suicidal self, erasing from the record the many moments of joy and open-mouthed wonder that occur in many of the poems.[88]

As Quinn astutely argues, 'James Fenton puts "Balloons" in the balance against "Edge", thus presenting us with a Plath capable of volte-faces as amazing as Yeats in his *Last Poems*.' It is therefore Plath's dynamic multiplicity, her ability to effortlessly move through a range of possibilities in terms of style and voice in her writing that is what Quinn terms her 'manoeuvrability' and which he as a poet-novice considered 'worth aiming for'. Quinn's poetry however displays the influence of other American and British poets – Wallace Stevens, Paul Muldoon, Edward Thomas – as he skillfully incorporates his masters to forge his own distinctive poetic voice, often using tradition for his own playfully clever ends.

Quinn, as well as discussing the crucial influence of Plath on his own writing life, has also perceived the ways in which his contemporaries have learned from her. In this regard Quinn writes of how fellow-poet Caitríona O'Reilly in her collection *The Nowhere Birds* (2001) 'seems to have learned this delivery from Plath, but unlike the many other poets who have been influenced by the American, O'Reilly is not overwhelmed.'[89] O'Reilly may seen as coming after a long line of major Irish poets who have been touched by Plath and for her Plath is a sustained influence on her work as O'Reilly, a poet and critic, sheds important light on the way Plath's poetry works. The connection between Plath and O'Reilly, by way of Melville, is pointed to by the following entry from Plath's *Journals*:

> I am rereading *Moby Dick* in preparation for the exam deluge tomorrow – am whelmed and wondrous at the swimming Biblical and craggy Shakespearean cadences, the rich and lustrous and fragrant recreation of spermaceti, ambergris – miracle, marvel, the ton-thundered leviathan. One of my few wishes to be (safe, coward that I am) aboard a whale ship through the process of turning a monster to light and heat. [90]

Plath's deeply appreciative response to Melville's *Moby Dick*, her shrewd, insightful comments regarding its redolent language and powerfully evocative images of the monstrous, unknowable,

---

[88] Justin Quinn, 'Plath as Exemplar', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), 11 – 12 (p.12).
[89] Quinn, 'The Irish Efflorescence', *Poetry Review*, 91.4 (Winter 2001 – 2002), 46 – 50 (p. 49).
[90] Plath, *Journals*, p. 370.

natural world is a fitting gesture towards Caitríona O'Reilly's rich and erudite 2006 collection *The Sea Cabinet*. Doubtless, O'Reilly in turn would be interested in Plath's statement as *Moby Dick* provides *The Sea Cabinet* with its epigraph and Plath herself is surely a most enabling influence here in these finely wrought poems with their knowing cleverness, use of richly varied, elliptical language and keenly observed, finely-detailed imagery.

Plath is clearly highly important to O'Reilly as a poet and O'Reilly's interest in the American's work goes back to her doctoral thesis, titled 'I Carpenter a Space for the Thing I am Given' – a line from Plath's poem 'Thalidomide' – in which she carried out an examination of influence and the consciousness of space in the work of Emily Dickinson, H.D. and Sylvia Plath. However, O'Reilly can in no way be numbered among the many contemporary fledgling poets who may be seen as nothing more than Plath imitators, overawed by and even afraid of their predecessor. She is too confident and informed a poet for that. Unlike a poet like Boland, O'Reilly has assimilated Plath's influence, learning from Plath and other precursors, in order to forge a voice of her own. The similarities between Plath and O'Reilly are striking, not least in the way that critics have responded to the work of both. Marita Over, reviewing O'Reilly's first collection *The Nowhere Birds* remarked on how 'O'Reilly's tone varies interestingly though: sometimes she exercises a kind of fine hysteria that remains controlled but threatens to overflow, and at other times she exudes a warm empathy and humour towards her strange subjects'.[91] These are much the same terms that critics have used to describe the tone of Plath's poetry, particularly of *Ariel*, as one of 'controlled hysteria',[92] but at the same time, as Al Alvarez recognised in an early review of *Ariel*, 'tender, open to things, and also unusually clever, sardonic, hardminded'.[93] Over's last word in her review of O'Reilly's *The Nowhere Birds* – 'superb, but definitely not one to read without the central heating turned up a notch or two' – is a testament to this poet's ability to discomfit as she impresses. Melville famously professed, 'I love all men who *dive*' and O'Reilly, as Dickinson and Plath before her, is a poet who is driven to probe beyond limits; to disturb, provoke and exhilarate.

---

[91] Marita Over, Review of Caitríona O'Reilly, *The Nowhere Birds*, *Ambit Magazine*, no. 168 (Spring 2002), 74 – 75.

[92] This term has been used to describe Plath's poetry by both Harold Bloom and Joyce Carol Oates. See Bloom, in Norah Vincent, Interview with Harold Bloom, *New York Press*, 1998, quoted in Stewart Clarke, Post of 30 April 1998, *The Sylvia Plath Forum* <http://www.sylviaplathforum.com/archives/plath6.html> [accessed July 2007] and Joyce Carol Oates, 'The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *Southern Review*, 9.3 (Summer 1973) reprinted in *Celestial Timepiece: A Joyce Carol Oates Homepage* <http://www.usfca.edu/fac-staff/southern/throes.html> [accessed July 2007]

[93] Al Alvarez, 'Poetry in Extremis', *Observer*, 12 March 1965, p. 26.

Writing on Plath's poetry, O'Reilly displays the kind of intelligent, considered critical mind that is often absent in Plath scholarship. Marking out the need to separate Plath's writing from her life O'Reilly has asserted how the poem 'Words',

> stands as a salutary reminder to those who would simplistically conflate Plath's biography with the personae of her writings. [...]the connections between a writer's life and her work are numerous, indirect and mysterious. Plath's poems stand as a poignant testament to the tragic loss of a remarkable talent, but they are also undeniably powerful and achieved works of art in their own right.[94]

A thoughtful and perceptive reader of Plath's work, O'Reilly has correctly realised that:

> A careful chronological reading of the poems indicates that Plath's themes are in fact remarkably consistent. While the *Ariel* poems may seem to represent a self that has emerged from the inimical reality in which it has been forced to exist, Plath's best poems illustrate, conversely, a troubling philosophical *acquiescence* to such realities.[95]

At a thematic level, O'Reilly has encapsulated the concerns of Plath's poetry as 'the terrible insecurity of the self, the reality of indifference and lovelessness, and the inevitability of death and loss' as she asserts how in Plath's best poems the self appears 'not as emergent but as fragmented, dissipated, obsolescent'.[96] Such knowing observations of Plath's work by O'Reilly lend themselves in turn to a deeper understanding of her own preoccupations in her collection *The Sea Cabinet*. In O'Reilly's poem 'Diffraction', light, as well as clarifying and making visible also warps and injures. Here, the speaker, vulnerable to the powerful forces of light and heat in a foreign location, is overexposed: 'And the light - / it fills my eye vessels // to overflowing' resulting in visual impairment, semi-blindness;

> A half-moon gone,
> half a sentence
> smudged from the page.[97]

The disorder is investigated by Argus – a reference to the Greek mythical watchman with one hundred eyes – and the poem ends with the assertion that 'there are limits to what / any eye can

---

[94] Caitríona O'Reilly, 'Sylvia Plath', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*, vol. 3, ed. by Jay Parini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 355 – 362 (p. 361).
[95] O'Reilly, 'Sylvia Plath', p. 360.
[96] Ibid.
[97] O'Reilly, 'Diffraction', in *The Sea Cabinet* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2006), pp. 17 – 18.

absorb'. O'Reilly's 'The Floater', displaying a true flair for simile, has the speaker articulate the unnerving effects of a loose particle in her eyeball as it attacks her field of vision:

> like a snaggle-toothed sea-beast
>
> submerged until now,
> jellied eel in my vitreous humour.[98]

Similarly, in 'X-Ray', the speaker, supine and 'unscrolled', is subjected to the invasive properties of light, the self under threat of exposure and fragmentation.[99]

The Sea Cabinet follows on from O'Reilly's critically-acclaimed, Rooney Prize-winning debut collection *The Nowhere Birds* which was concerned mostly with childhood experience. Hailed by Michael Longley on the book's blurb as 'formally versatile and linguistically copious' it continues the same reflective interrogation of the natural world and the rigorous examination of the self and its struggle to apprehend and make sense of a threatening, mutable environment. The sea is the central image throughout, what Plath termed 'this great abeyance' and indeed O'Reilly's evocative eight-line poem 'Hierophant' is reminiscent of Plath's 'Full Fathom Five' and 'Lorelei' with its sea imagery, here of 'hands white as cuttle bones' and 'the sea-shell curve of his lips' and use of archaic words such as 'fen' and 'hoard'.[100] There is the same 'drunkenness of the great depths' that is majestically orchestrated in Plath; here 'the dark pool'. Another poem, the imaginative 'Shortcut to Northwind' has the speaker on a deep-sea sojourn declare: 'The air's thickness / grew, and it was without fright // I knew that I was breathing water',[101] which is surely a direct reference to the evocative closing lines of Plath's 'Full Fathom Five': 'this thick air is murderous / I would breathe water.'[102] Plath's trope of bee-keeping also features in O'Reilly's 'A Deserted House' wherein noisy colonies of bees have taken over the chimney piece and are portrayed as architects and constructors of six-walled edifices or cell structures, in the spirit of Robert Frost's 'Design' which gives way to, as the poem concludes, '*less a haunted house than a population in the chimney piece?*'[103] Nature, unfathomable, has its own laws, a mind of its own. The poet can only use the full forces of words and poetic forms to create some sense of order, temporary though it must be. As Plath in a similar way professed her own poetic project in a 1956

---

[98] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 19.
[99] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 16.
[100] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 22.
[101] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 26.
[102] Plath, 'Full Fathom Five', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 92 – 93 (p. 93).
[103] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 37.

journal entry: 'I re-create the flux and smash of the world through the small ordered word-patterns I make.'[104]

Just as O'Reilly, in her reading of Plath's 'The Night Dances', draws attention to Plath's use of the word 'calla' lily for its relation to 'callous', here she comes across as a deserving successor to Plath as self-confessed 'Roget's trollope', a poet deeply interested in words themselves. Part V of the title poem, called *The Whale*, begins; 'The twenty-ninth letter of the Arabic alphabet / is *nun*, which means "a whale".'[105] There is a scholarly attentiveness to words and their meanings as the speaker of 'Calculus' declares: 'I collect fine words the way others collect birds' eggs', only to then archly catch out the unsuspecting reader with, 'the most beautiful word in the language // is *haemostasis*, which means the stopping of clocks'.[106] As one would expect in this age of Irish cosmopolitan poetry, this work encompasses a vast range of references to art, history, culture, science, the natural sciences, alchemy, falconry and of course whaling. All are unified by the use of motifs and images that reverberate throughout. Thus pivotal words such as 'eye', 'sea', 'edge', 'moon' and 'bees' sound repeatedly through the poems, making for a richly interwoven texture. This is the same 'interweaving of imaginative constants from different parts of the oeuvre' that Heaney celebrated in Plath's work and it is a device that O'Reilly has learned from the American. [107] Words continually call attention to themselves, set very deliberately in their places as the poet's control never falters. O'Reilly's inventiveness with language and with syntax is reminiscent of Plath's. Chillingly matter-of-fact pronouncements such as 'I am six months nearer the earth' and 'I have barely moved all winter'[108] imitate Plath's monological style, in particular her poem for three voices, 'Three Women' which is made up of statements such as 'I am dying as I sit' and 'I shall move into a long blackness'.[109]

The title poem of *The Sea Cabinet*, cast in free verse over five sections, is written in response to a visit to the Hull Maritime Museum and inspired by the display of whale skeletons and other artefacts from the deep as well as the story of the whaling ship *Diana* that sailed out of Hull in 1840 only to become trapped in ice. Quoting from historical documents, the poet meditates on the whaling industry and on the accompanying themes of obsolescence and extinction. Pulsating with opulent vocabulary, ranging from archaic, Latinate to more

---

[104] Plath, in *The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950 – 1962*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 232.
[105] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 44.

[106] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 55.

[107] Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath', p. 162.
[108] O'Reilly, 'Gravitations', in *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 13.
[109] Plath, 'Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 176 – 187 (p. 177; p. 182).

contemporary terms, the opening section itself puts forward a catalogue of whaling implements: 'flensing spades, blubber knives / and tongue knives, blubber pricks and seal picks, / trypots and pewter worms, gaffs and staffs and bone gear', clanging then chiming through bursts of internal rhyme to make up 'the whaleman's glossolalia and horizon'.[110] Indeed, Plath would be delighted to behold the word 'ambergris' in 'The Whale', even if her 'spermaceti' does not appear (although we do get 'Mysteceti'). The title poem closes with the following marvelously poignant realisation:

> The whale on which their world depended
>
> is elsewhere, free of history, and casts
> their antique lives adrift like ambergris.[111]

O'Reilly cleverly has the word 'depended' hang precariously off the edge of the line and of the stanza, drawing directly on the etymology of the word which comes from the Latin, *pendere*, to hang. Such attentiveness to matters of technique and erudition is a joy to behold as is the fierce alertness to detail, to experiences both real and imagined. Throughout the collection, the life of the mind as it encounters the world is meticulously conveyed.

It must be stressed that, as with Plath who has been seriously misread as a confessional in the most reductive terms, this is not the poetry of straightforward autobiography. Indeed, O'Reilly has been keen to mark out the distinction between life and art, particularly in the poetry of Plath, as she warns against the critical approach that would 'simplistically conflate Plath's biography with the personae of her writings'. As O'Reilly astutely realises where Plath is concerned: 'the connections between a writer's life and her work are numerous, indirect and mysterious.'[112] What is more, her statement in an interview for the *Irish Times* that, 'all my poems come out of immediate psychic or emotional experiences', [113] echoes Plath's elucidation of her own poetic project to Peter Orr: 'I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have'.[114] However, just as O'Reilly goes on in the interview to say that 'There are certainly fictional moments in most of the poems. They are not direct autobiography in any kind of way', as 'I'm aware of the artifice that went into writing them and the formal considerations which make them less direct and more mediated', Plath too followed up her statement with 'I

---

[110] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 39.
[111] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 44.
[112] O'Reilly, 'Sylvia Plath', p. 361.
[113] O'Reilly, in Yvonne Nolan, 'Alighting from Nowhere', *Irish Times*, 18 August 2001, Weekend section, p. 8.
[114] Plath, in *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*, ed. by Peter Orr, p. 169.

believe one should be able to control and manipulate experiences [...] with an informed and intelligent mind.'[115] O'Reilly, having learned from Plath, is mindful of the need to exercise the same intellectual control over her subject matter and she achieves this mastery in many of the poems in this collection.

Thus, for O'Reilly as for Plath, voices, masks and poses proliferate throughout. In the poem 'In the Deaf Man's House' the painter Goya speaks, lamenting his condition of old age, while in another, 'Netsuke', a Japanese woman describes herself and her world in beautifully mournful, pared-down diction over sparse two-line stanzas. With precise attention to detail, the act of her own self-mutilation is captured through highly symbolic, metaphorical expression as the enjambment itself spilling over the lines imitates the profuse over-flowing that is described:

> When I draw
> his blade across my
>
> arm it resembles
> water dripping over
>
> a stone lip
> in the stone garden,
>
> runny wax
> from a candle,
>
> the new moon's
> incised smile.[116]

O'Reilly's intricate use of subtle internal rhyme, words repeated over lines, assonantal and alliterative technique is reminiscent of Plath as is her highly developed metaphorical imagination. Indeed, Plath's 'Cut' with its acute scrutiny of a finger cut by a knife blade – 'The top quite gone / Except for a sort of a hinge/ of skin, / A flap like a hat' – that then imaginatively leads into a sustained conceit for American history must have been the source behind the ending of O'Reilly's 'Netsuke'.[117] 'Diffraction' too wherein the effects of light on the speaker's perception is meticulously scrutinised shows how it is the sustained gaze of the speaker that dominates, the process of observation as well as the objects perceived being mercilessly examined and analysed in this most watchful, most precisely detailed of poetries. O'Reilly has marked out Plath's mature poems as 'lyrics full of disturbingly powerful and suggestive imagery' and many of O'Reilly's

---

[115] Ibid.
[116] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, pp. 24 – 25.
[117] Plath, 'Cut', in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, pp. 25 – 26 (p. 25).

poems invite the same description. The tellingly-titled pantoum 'Persona' points, it seems, to the technique of taking on other voices in a play of fluid identities, what O'Reilly sees in Plath's own work as 'the personae of her writings', as she asserts:

> The consciousness of *Ariel* occupies many different masks and positions; part of the excitement of the volume comes from the restless dynamism of a voice which repeatedly insists on escaping from deadening enclosures.[118]

And here, it seems to be Plath's voice of detached questioning, of control in the face of uncertainty and terror that O'Reilly is deliberately taking over:

> And what can I do with these dark adhesions,
> These unmoored pieces of the night?
> They breathe their black into my day - [119]

Further on, the line 'See me there with the pained carved face' immediately suggests Plath's 'Event' with its vividly etched image of the child in the crib: 'His little face is carved in pained red wood'.[120] Also, the presiding images here of female self as puppet, manikin, or made of wood are Plath's own; the 'little unstrung puppet, kicking to disappear' in 'Lesbos' as well as in 'The Munich Mannequins' and in 'Virgin in a Tree'.[121] The speaker's attitude also seems to draw on Plath's 'The Applicant' and its ironic critique of the dehumanising institution of marriage and the gender inequality which has women paralysed within the restrictive domestic sphere:

> I cannot get these wooden limbs to work
> Until the lost loved one appears
> To shrink at the slyness of my puppet's smile.[122]

As Fiona Sampson too has recognised: 'If this sounds like Plath, it's perhaps not surprising; since O'Reilly's poetic project, too, is the appropriation of rich context, including Irish and British history, to personal meaning-making.'[123] 'Gravitations' with its use of imagery derived from chemistry owes much to Plath's original deployment of the same vocabulary of science and

---

[118] O'Reilly, '"I Carpenter a Space for the Thing I am Given": Influence and the Consciousness of Space in Emily Dickinson, H.D. and Sylvia Plath' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2001), pp. 247 – 48.
[119] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 14.
[120] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 194.
[121] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 38.
[122] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 14.
[123] Fiona Sampson, 'Stacking Myths, Making Meaning', *Irish Times*, 20 May 2006, Weekend section, p. 10.

alchemy, particularly in 'Nick and the Candlestick' ('Let the mercuric / Atoms that cripple drip / Into the terrible well') and the terrifying, final 'image' that, as 'The glass cracks across', 'Flees and aborts like dropped mercury' that closes 'Thalidomide':[124]

> March: the grey atom
> I've swallowed drops,
> element-heavy plumb line
>
> to this year's mood
> - as mercury might smash
> its instrument - [125]

O'Reilly's description here: 'Faces pass / as though their owners / went on wheels', echoes Plath's sustained preoccupation throughout her oeuvre with the blank or featureless face, a word that between its singular and plural usage sounds no less than ninety eight times in all throughout, most strikingly in the closing line of 'The Surgeon at 2 a.m.': 'Gray faces / Shuttered by drugs / Follow me like flowers.'[126]

O'Reilly has stated how 'Plath's most beautiful poems present images of absolute self-loss' and how 'The Night Dances' 'provides an image of self not as emergent but as fragmented, dissipated, obsolescent'.[127] The same theme of the self under threat of extinction or entrapment pervades O'Reilly's collection and is articulated in 'The Maze' where O'Reilly's speaker, calm and matter-of-fact, details the frighteningly enclosed nature of her existence:

> I live in a space that was bequeathed me
> a ziggurat of stepped spires and corridors.
> There is no road out.

Formal concerns dominate O'Reilly's poetics but such resources are used subtly. O'Reilly, having studied Plath's poetry closely, has recognised for herself the danger of over-reliance on such devices: 'Plath's early lyrics are rather stilted and self-conscious, demonstrating how heavily, at first, she relied on the formal poetic resources of rhyme and meter'.[128] Reflecting on her own use of poetic forms, such as the sonnet or sestina, O'Reilly has said how 'it acts as a stimulus to the poem. It's a test of how you can think within boundaries.'[129] These boundaries,

---

[124] Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, p. 48; p. 10.
[125] O'Reilly, *The Sea Cabinet*, p. 13.
[126] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 171.
[127] O'Reilly, 'Sylvia Plath', p. 360.
[128] Ibid.
[129] O'Reilly, in Nolan, 'Alighting from Nowhere', p. 8.

enclosures, confinements mirror O'Reilly's thematic concerns with the self and the structures it is contained by, under duress of entrapment, disintegration or obsolescence, concerns which Plath's own speakers share. A recent, uncollected poem, 'Ariadne', points up O'Reilly's continuing interest in the nature of formal structures and strictures. The poem, cast in Plath's typical three line stanzas, is spoken by another of O'Reilly's cast of personae, this time the mythical figure of Ariadne, appropriately, the weaver and mistress of the labyrinth. Here, the detached tone and terse, unsentimental language is typical of Plath's similarly enclosed, watchful and questioning speakers:

> What seemed
> a simple structure
> is not so now.
>
> O house –
> device to conceal
> the obscene;
>
> end-stopped corridors
> sprout like horns
> and shut me in [...] [130]

The apostrophe to the house – 'O house' – along with the subtle use of internal rhyme, 'conceal / obscene' and use of visually arresting similes, 'corridors sprout like horns' again speak of Plath's exemplary influence. The reference to 'end-stopped' suggests that this is a poem about poetic enclosures as much as about the ones in which humans may find themselves trapped. O'Reilly resembles Plath in her preoccupation with formal procedures and just as Plath, after her strictly formal and imitative beginnings grew into a poet of true originality and formal daring, O'Reilly is a poet who deftly handles her poetic resources while also sounding a unique, assured voice.

Thus, Plath's presence in Irish contemporary poetry is not to be overlooked. Her influence, taking many various forms, is there in the work of the major Irish poets of the latter part of the twentieth century, and the different modes it takes on for each poet are fascinatingly diverse. Some poets deny her influence entirely deeming it 'dangerous' and to be avoided. For Heaney, her influence comes at a crucial point in his career enabling a particular mode of poetry. For Durcan too, Plath's example allows him a certain freedom and to create certain effects from signalling her poetry throughout. For a poet such as Boland only one version of Plath is employed – that of the poet of motherhood – which, though limiting as it reads Plath simply and

---

[130] O'Reilly, 'Ariadne', in *Irish Times*, 27 January 2007, Weekend section, p. 13.

unambiguously, is again, for this poet, empowering and enabling, giving her the 'courage' as she terms it to pursue her poetic project. For a poet such as Ní Dhomhnaill, Plath has made possible a necessary enlargement of the scope of poetry written in the Irish language. Plath is needed at particular moments for these and for other poets. This idea of the Plath 'moment' in a poet's oeuvre may be seen to culminate and come to full fruition in the poetry of O'Reilly where Plath's influence is sustained across collections. For a young poet and critic such as O'Reilly it operates as a powerful, enabling force and O'Reilly's own engagements with Plath, both as a poet and reader, illuminate Plath's own work in significant, much-needed ways. But all of these poets, whether they admit to taking from Plath's poetry or not, have, through their differing approaches, interpretations, readings or even misreadings of her work and through their navigations around her legacy, revealed much about ways of reading Plath and have in many ways deepened our awareness of the richness and technical virtuosity of her work and the breadth of its poetic resource, thus challenging the reductive critical approaches that have reigned until now. In the same way, exploring Plath's influence on these Irish poets opens up contemporary Irish poetry and poetics to new possibilities of reading, broadening the critical scope past narrowly-defined boundaries of language, gender and nationality.

Chapter Four

'The Poem has its Own Life': Sylvia Plath and Paul Muldoon

As the previous chapter makes clear, Plath's presence in contemporary Irish poetry has been profound and enriching, her relationship with particular Irish poets testifying to her continuing status as a poet of immense value and range as it opens her work up to broader possibilities for interpretation while also enlarging the scope of Irish poetry itself. Plath's relationship with Paul Muldoon may at first appear to even the most interested reader as one which lacks any obvious points of contact, yet Muldoon, as this chapter examines, has engaged with Plath in a deeply intimate way, probing her work, its contexts and critical narratives to interrogate the ways in which her poetry has been read and understood. Thus, his engagement with her is unique in its approach and so must be granted an entire chapter of its own to allow for the breadth of exploration that Muldoon's mode of close textual analysis demands in considering both his own work and that of Plath. Much has been made of the influence of W.B. Yeats, Robert Frost and Seamus Heaney on the poetry of Paul Muldoon, both by attentive readers and by Muldoon himself. However, Muldoon's poem 'Yarrow' from his 1994 collection *The Annals of Chile* has been neatly described by David Wheatley as 'a remarkable sequence of what the poet has called "exploded sestinas" that channel-hop from decade to decade of the poet's life, circling such absent female centres as his prematurely dead mother, Sylvia Plath, and a woman identified only as S –'[1] and it is precisely this recurring presence of Plath throughout Muldoon's poem and what it signals to the reader of contemporary poetries that is of interest here. As John Redmond remarked in his review of *The Annals of Chile*, 'the reference to Plath is not casual',[2] yet no sustained critical attention has so far been granted to this crucial correspondence between Plath and Muldoon. A close consideration of these very specific allusions to Plath's life and work throughout Muldoon's long poem lends itself to an exciting large-scale exploration of the possibilities that present themselves when the poetry and poetics of Paul Muldoon and Sylvia Plath are brought together, these two poets brought into play with each other in particular ways.

Play has always been the central element in critical commentaries on Muldoon's work, as Adam Newey writing in the *New Statesman* in 2001 testifies: 'The word that critics love to apply

---

[1] David Wheatley, 'An Irish Poet in America', review of Paul Muldoon, *Hay*, *Raritan*, 18.4 (Spring 1999), 145 – 157 (p. 147).

[2] John Redmond, 'Indicting the Exquisite', *Thumbscrew*, no. 1 (Winter 1994 – 1995) <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=5408> [accessed August 2007]

to his style is "ludic". There are the often abstruse allusions, the casual, even cheeky tone, the endless wordplay'.[3] Stephen Romer has hailed Muldoon as 'the prince of ellipsis, obliquity and surprise, of the pun and the trouvaille',[4] while Langdon Hammer stresses the importance of Muldoon's 'trademark verbal play' as the means by which the poet addresses serious moods and subjects.[5] Indeed, Mark Ford, reviewing Muldoon's *Horse Latitudes* (2006) recognises the full implications of Muldoon's most distinctive poetic strategy:

> His wordplay enacts a fundamental or existential embeddedness, revealing over and again the impossibility of untangling individual words or actions from the dizzying webs of language and history.[6]

Muldoon is recognised as one of the most skilful, most achieved poets writing today, routinely lauded as the master poet of his generation, 'a master of modern English verse',[7] and 'the most sophisticated and original poet of his generation',[8] but he is too one of the most challenging and complex contemporary poets and 'dauntingly cerebral' as one reviewer put it.[9] As Peter Davison reminds us, 'no reader will find him wholly accessible'[10] and he may be 'too wilfully obscure'.[11] John Carey has put forward the oft-quoted allegation that Muldoon's poems 'stand around smugly, knowing that academic annotators will come running'.[12] Wheatley too asserts: 'Never mind the content, the very form of a Muldoon poem is likely to constitute a coded message', describing how the rhyme schemes of 'Yarrow' make it a poem – one of many in Muldoon's oeuvre – that is 'elaborately, even obsessively codified'.[13] 'How allusive should a poem be?' asks Helen Vendler, 'most of us [...] long for notes and even for explanations'.[14] Indeed, Muldoon himself, commenting on the tendency displayed by critics reviewing his work to emphasise over

---

[3] Adam Newey, 'Walking on Air', *New Statesman*, 11 July 2001, pp. 70–71.
[4] Stephen Romer, 'A Poet of Perfect Poise', *Guardian*, 16 June 2001 <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/poetry/0,6121,507435,00.html> [accessed August 2007]
[5] Langdon Hammer, 'Gamesmanship', *New York Times Book Review*, 18 February 2007, p. 24.
[6] Mark Ford, 'The Call of the Stallion', *New York Review of Books*, 53. 20 (21 December 2006), 78 – 80 (p. 78).
[7] Anonymous, Review of Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, *Virginia Quarterly Review: A National Journal of Literature and Discussion*, 79.2 (Spring 2003), p. 65.
[8] Mark Ford, 'At Arm's Length', *New York Review of Books*, 50.14 (25 September 2003), 68 – 71 (p. 71).
[9] Stephen Knight, 'More than Just Clever Dickery; Pyrotechnical Autism?', review of Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, *Independent on Sunday*, 20 October 2002, p. 15.
[10] Peter Davison, 'Darkness at Muldoon', *New York Times Book Review*, 13 October 2002, p. 22.
[11] Robert Potts, 'The Poet at Play', *Guardian*, 12 May 2001 <www.guardian.co.uk/saturday_review/story/0,,489406,00.html> [accessed August 2007]
[12] John Carey, 'The Stain of Words', *Sunday Times*, 21 June 1987, p. 56.
[13] Wheatley, 'In the Gasworks', *London Review of Books*, 22.10 (18 May 2000), 30 – 31 (p. 31).
[14] Helen Vendler, 'Fanciness and Fatality', review of Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes* and Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures*, *The New Republic*, 235 (October 2006), 26 – 33 (p. 26).

and again its dense complexity has observed how 'they do go on about difficulty'.[15] Plath's poetry is no less complex and allusive and by reading her poetry through Muldoon it may be shown how his elaborate working with words and sustained attentiveness to the semantic possibilities of language, along with his virtuosic technical command, are central to Plath's poetry also, as the deeply attentive focus on language that Muldoon's poetry demands of his readers in both his own poetry and in his reading of the work of other poets may here be granted to Plath's by re-examining her poetics alongside and reading her poetry through Muldoon. In response to the charge of unintelligibility often levelled against his poetry Muldoon has declared that 'one has to learn to read these poems, just as one has to learn to read a three-line, little imagist poem, just as the writer had to learn to write it'.[16] Muldoon, therefore, through his alert, sensitive approach to the possibilities of the text facilitates a complete reconsideration and new realignment of Plath's work within contemporary poetry. In bringing together the poetry and poetics of Paul Muldoon and Sylvia Plath in this way and examining the many moments of connection between these two poets a fuller understanding of the work of both of these most challenging poets comes to light.

Born in Armagh in 1951, Muldoon was something of a poetic prodigy, his first collection *New Weather* published in 1973 when he was aged only 21 and dedicated to his 'fathers and mothers', his precursors; a self-conscious sense of his own poetic lineage thereby in evidence from the start. Famously becoming a protégée of Seamus Heaney, he was first introduced to Heaney in a by-now legendary fashion as 'the boy who'll be even better than you'[17] and Irish poets such as Heaney, Louis MacNeice and Michael Longley are important antecedents for Muldoon; indeed Fran Brearton has commented on how Edna and Michael Longley along with Heaney became surrogate parents for Muldoon, his own poetic family.[18] The question of poetic influence and of his own poetic inheritance is one that Muldoon often addresses, his 1999 lecture 'Getting Round: Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*' began with Muldoon stating: 'This talk is mostly about influence, though, in so far as it's possible for a writer to detect, and then dissect, the influences on his or her work without seeming impossibly self-regarding.'[19] Deeply aware of influences on his own work, Muldoon has commented on how as a poet 'one really has to

---

[15] Ruth Padel, 'Paul Muldoon: "It's Not Painting By Numbers"', *Independent*, 5 October 2002, pp. 22 – 23 <www.independent.co.uk> [accessed December 2005]

[16] John Redmond, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon', *Thumbscrew*, no. 4 (Spring 1996), 2 – 18 (p. 7).

[17] Potts, 'The Poet at Play'.

[18] See Fran Brearton, 'For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents', in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. by Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), pp. 45 – 61.

[19] Paul Muldoon, 'Getting Round: Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*', *Essays in Criticism*, 48.2 (April 1998), 107 – 128 (p. 108).

struggle free of influences' and has often cited the influence of poets such as Louis MacNeice, T.S. Eliot[20] and John Donne: 'The biggest influence was John Donne, whom I read as a teenager'.[21] Muldoon has studied the art of poetry with a deep awareness of how his own precursors have been important mentors: 'I learn things from people like Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Frost'.[22] A 1986 interview with the late Michael Donaghy had Muldoon declare Frost as one of his favourite poets.[23] Frost's influence is vital for Muldoon as another interview, conducted by John Redmond, has Muldoon profess: 'I don't say it idly that Frost is a big influence on me – though there are other influences'.[24]

Yeats is another of the presiding figures in Muldoon's poetry. His most recent collection *Moy Sand and Gravel* ends with the long poem 'At the Sign of the Black Horse' which is, as Muldoon has pointed out, a remake of Yeats' 'Prayer for my Daughter', employing the eight-line stanza or stadium stanza which, as Muldoon reminds us, Yeats in turn took over from Cowley.[25] Muldoon has described this poem as 'an homage to the great man' even if he is elsewhere equally irreverent towards Yeats.[26] Speaking of Yeats as 'a major influence in the poem', Muldoon explains the younger poet's dilemma:

> This may of course be a supreme act of lunacy on my part or some dreadful hubris; at some level I just feel that one of these days I just have to go there, I have to go up to Yeats and say look you're in this poem and I'm in this poem too, and we're here together, I know I'm only a poor little mite compared to you, I know that, but please still allow me into the same room without taking all the oxygen out if it. Please allow me in I suppose is what I'm saying.[27]

Plath herself died in Yeats' house in 1963, having chosen the flat on Fitzroy Road for the very reason that the great poet had occupied it, excitedly anticipating how 'living in Yeats' house

---

[20] As Muldoon has stated: 'Initially, one of my major influences was T.S. Eliot', in David S. Hirschman, 'Paul Muldoon: A Poet for Our Time', *Media Bistro*, 22 July 2002 <www.mediabistro.com/content/archives/03/01/31/> [accessed August 2007]

[21] Muldoon, 'Write About What you Don't Know', *Lily: A Monthly Online Literary Review*, 1.2 (January 2004) <http://freewebs.com/lilylitreview/1_2interview.html> [accessed August 2007]

[22] Muldoon, in Hirschman, 'Paul Muldoon: A Poet for Our Time'. For an examination of Frost's influence on Muldoon see Rachel Buxton, 'Never Quite Showing his Hand: Robert Frost and Paul Muldoon', in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, pp. 26 – 44.

[23] Michael Donaghy, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon', *Chicago Review*, 35.1 (Autumn 1986), 76 – 85 (p. 84).

[24] Redmond, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon', p. 10.

[25] Muldoon, 'Work in Progress', BBC Radio 3, July 2001 <www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/speech/workinp/muldoon.shtml>[accessed January 2005]

[26] Muldoon, in James S.F. Wilson, 'Paul Muldoon: The Art of Poetry No. LXXXVII', *Paris Review*, no. 169 (Spring 2004), 53 – 91 (p. 61).

[27] Muldoon, 'Work in Progress'.

would be an incredibly moving thing for me'[28] and then, when at last settled within its walls: 'I feel Yeats' spirit blessing me'.[29] Muldoon and his family holiday yearly in Frost's former home at the Homer Noble Farm in Vermont.[30] Both Plath and Muldoon then appear to share a deep belief in this numinous, powerful force of poetic inspiration and both share a particular interest in Yeats. Again, with play always in mind, Muldoon, reflecting on his use of Yeats' 'Prayer for my Daughter' and the way it operates throughout the composition of his own poem, reveals how 'something of the tone of that poem and its stanzaic pattern are feeding into, playing into this poem I'm trying to write at the moment'.[31] Muldoon is highly conscious of influence and the ways in which it works into his own creative process.

The presence of Plath in Muldoon's poetry has received little more than a passing glance by literary critics over the years. Ivan Phillips in his brief study of Plath and Muldoon – the only one to date – titled 'A Mixed Marriage: The Strange Affair of Sylvia Plath and Paul Muldoon', addresses the subject of Muldoon's relationship to Plath and begins with the assertion that 'something was definitely going on between the spirit of Plath and the youthful poetic of Muldoon during the late 1960s and early 1970s'.[32] This article was published in a special issue of *Thumbscrew* dedicated to Plath's work which also included a review of Plath's *The Bed Book* by Muldoon's wife, the novelist Jean Hanff Korelitz. Indeed Korelitz, better known as a fiction wrtier, is mentioned by Phillips in his study as one of the contemporary poets that Plath has influenced. Phillips' conclusion that, in terms of Plath and Muldoon's poetic relationship, 'Yarrow' is 'as much about the severance of influence as its consolidation' certainly merits further interrogation.[33] However, in its treatment of the poetry itself, this study ultimately fails to persuade the reader of exactly how Plath's influence works through Muldoon's poetry, Phillips pointing ineffectively to poems such as 'The Inheritors', 'Stillborn', 'Unborn', 'Marble Orchard' and 'Aubade' as he makes vague statements about Muldoon's imagery being 'redolent of Plath'. Tim Kendall too, writing on Muldoon's first collection *New Weather*, points out how 'other voices, Plath in "The Waking Father" [..] occasionally intrude', but neglects to examine this cursory observation further, while Guinn Batten vaguely signals the way in which Muldoon's

---

[28] Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home, Correspondence 1950 – 1963*, ed. by Aurelia Plath (London: Faber and Faber, 1976), p. 481.
[29] Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 490.
[30] Peter Fallon, 'Grains of Lasting Truth and Beauty', *Irish Times*, 19 October 2002, Weekend section, p. 11.
[31] Muldoon, 'Work in Progress', BBC Radio 3.
[32] See Ivan Phillips, 'A Mixed Marriage: The Strange Affair of Sylvia Plath and Paul Muldoon', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997), 58 – 65.
[33] Phillips, 'A Mixed Marriage', p. 62.

'Brazil' from *The Annals of Chile* 'gestures to Plath's "Above the Oxbow"'.[34] Molly McQuade in her obituary for Plath and Hughes lists Muldoon as one of 'the writers sometimes cited as shaped partially by Plath' but does not expand on this assertion in any way.[35] More recently, Ian Samson reviewing Muldoon's 2003 collection *Moy Sand and Gravel*, has pointed to 'what seem to be informing echoes of Sylvia Plath's "Balloons"' in Muldoon's 'Cradle Song for Asher',[36] a title which must certainly nod also to Louis MacNeice's 'Cradle Song for Eleanor'.[37]

Muldoon himself as an intelligent writer and reader is astutely appreciative of the way in which all writings resonate through and are worked into others, firmly holding to an enriching sense of poetry as an unending, interactive art: 'I believe it to be a fact, that that all poems (to use a phrase Robert Frost used) are in dialogue, in conversation with all other poems ever written.'[38] His own poetry is deeply inter-textual and erudite, calling up a vast range of references to all branches of art and human knowledge, as critics often perplexed in the extreme, point to his 'allusive genius'.[39] Muldoon is too a wonderful close-reader of poetry, usually focusing within his lectures and critical writings on a single poem which he then opens up in many directions through a deep engagement with language and formal structures, a profound awareness of the possibilities of meaning and by locating a wide array of influences and inter-textual relations; it is a mode of reading that has become his trademark.[40] His Oxford lecture series, published as *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures*, includes an examination of what he sees as the three-way influence of Ted Hughes, Marianne Moore and Plath in Hughes's poem 'The Literary Life' from his 1998 collection *Birthday Letters*, regarding 'the interface of biography and bibliography' as it occurs in Ted Hughes 'The Literary Life' by considering it within the terms of the Bloomian models of influence.[41] As Muldoon repeats here by way of introduction to his own mode of critical reading:

---

[34] Guinn Batten, '"He Could Barely Tell One from the Other": The Borderline Disorders of Paul Muldoon's Poetry', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 95.1 (Winter 1996), 171 – 204 (p. 204).
[35] Molly McQuade, 'The Dead and the Rude: A Late Obit. for Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', *Booklist* 15 March 1999, 1280 <http://www.plathonline.com/articles.html> [accessed December 2004]
[36] Ian Sansom, 'Awesome in Armagh', review of Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, *Guardian*, 2 November 2002, p. 25.
[37] Louis MacNeice, 'Cradle Song for Eleanor', in *Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 209.
[38] Muldoon, 'Work in Progress', BBC Radio 3.
[39] Romer, 'A Poet of Perfect Poise'.
[40] Potts reminds us of how Muldoon's readings are not universally approved of, as, 'The Oxford professor Valentine Cunningham finds his use of analogy "extraordinary and misguided, purely associative, with crazy, contrived jumps [...] his literary criticism, or literary history, or cultural mapping – whatever you choose to call it – is no good. It's Bedlam; an associative madness."' Potts, 'The Poet at Play'.
[41] As Muldoon states: 'I refer to Harold Bloom, the author of *The Anxiety of Influence*, his great 1973 study which remains one of the most illuminating contributions to our understanding of the working of poets and poetry'. Muldoon, 'The Literary Life', in *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), p. 41.

'I'll try there to explore the idea of "The End of the Poem" in the sense of the tendency for one poem or one poet to influence another in a way that would suggest a certain illimitability or boundlessness, what Frost was thinking of when he insisted that "the way to read a poem in prose or verse is in the light of all the other poems ever written."'[42] This lecture also displays Muldoon's thorough, intimate knowledge of both Plath's life – he makes reference to Anne Stevenson's biography of Plath, to Plath's *Journals* and to her letters – and of all aspects of her work, both her poetry and prose.[43] Charles Bernstein has professed that 'There is no end to what you might need to know to read a poem'[44] and no contemporary poet is more aware of this than Muldoon himself as both reader and writer, his own poetry delighting in multiplicity and the boundlessness of human knowledge. Declaring himself as 'a person who can see some value in a great many of the theories that come floating by' but resists the 'superimposing of any particular world picture' Muldoon does not subscribe to any single theory or ideology and is against prescriptive reading.[45] With this in mind, the usual idea of poetic influence operating in a linear, chronological direction must now be turned on its head as it is time to consider instead how Muldoon can in turn be influential on how readers may read and come to a fuller understanding of Plath's work, through the dialogue that is on-going between these poets.

This brings us to 'Yarrow' from Muldoon's *The Annals Of Chile* (1994), the multifarious, virtuosic 1212-line poem composed, as Muldoon has disclosed, 'in four or five days, in a complete state',[46] a statement that cannot but bring to mind the by now legendary composition of Plath's own *Ariel* where poems were 'rushed out at the rate of two or three a day', and during which 'all at once she could compose at top speed'.[47] 'Yarrow' dominates *The Annals of Chile*, closing a collection of poetry that is over all concerned with 'sex and death' in a very personal, intimate way, pointedly dedicated as it is to the troubled memory of Muldoon's mother Brigid Regan, and containing also 'Incantata', a profoundly moving, open elegy to Muldoon's artist friend and some time lover Mary Farl Powers as well as poems marking the birth of the poet's first child, his daughter Dorothy Aoife, in poems that are themselves reminiscent of Plath's

---

[42] Muldoon, *The End of the Poem: All Souls' Night by W.B. Yeats: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered before the University of Oxford on 2 November 1999* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 2.

[43] On the subject of the Plath and Hughes soap-opera Muldoon has 'used the word "shitepokes" to describe the purveyors of tittle-tattle about Hughes and Plath.' David Wheatley, 'The Real Hughes Escapes', *Sunday Herald*, 15 November 2001, p. 9.

[44] Charles Bernstein, in Marjorie Perloff, 'A Conversation with Charles Bernstein', *Fulcrum*, no. 2 (2003) <www.ubu.com/papers/mp_cb.html> [accessed August 2007]

[45] Lynn Keller, 'An Interview with Paul Muldoon', *Contemporary Literature*, 35.1 (Spring 1994), 1 – 29 (p. 8).

[46] Potts, 'The Poet at Play'.

[47] Ted Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*' in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 161 – 162 (p. 161).

poems of childbirth and motherhood, making Muldoon into what Peter Fallon would later term as 'one of our laureates of marriage and fatherhood'.[48] This is then a volume of poetry where, as Heaney described it, 'personal grief and creative glee keep playing into each other's hands'.[49] Helen Vendler, reviewing Muldoon's book in the *New York Review of Books* in 1997, quite despairingly took 'Yarrow' to task for being 'difficult and oblique', 'a form of post-modern autobiography' and a 'random mosaic of memory' deriding its 'rather alienating monomania of form'. Vendler balks in the face of what she terms Muldoon's 'Joycean game of baffle the reader', welcoming the publication of Tim Kendall's critical study of Muldoon as it may 'at last permit American readers to understand the poet's basic references'.[50] Muldoon's own lecture on 'Yarrow', given before the Hay-on-Wye Festival in May 1994 has him as 'just another poor, dear reader trying to find the appropriate angle of entry to its atmosphere'.[51] 'Yarrow' has indeed exasperated critics, Hugh Haughton in an early review of *The Annals* terming it a 'mind-bogglingly cryptic palimpsest'.[52] Vendler too criticised Muldoon for writing poetry that lacked feeling, suggesting that there was 'a hole where the feeling should be'[53] – a complaint that this collection succeeded in disproving. Muldoon's own opinion of the book was set out as follows: 'I hope readers of *The Annals* will be moved by it, both to tears and laughter. I myself think it's my most engaging book, and my most engaged.'[54]

'Yarrow' is, as Muldoon makes clear,

> about my sense of loss when I drove through North Armagh one day in (as it happens) March 1992 [...] and found the house in which I was brought up so changed as to be barely recognisable [....] the last thing I glimpsed as we sped away was the 'frump of pampas grass' in which I had lain, open-mouthed, as I worked my way through Borges' beloved R.L.S. [55]

---

[48] Fallon, 'Grains of Lasting Truth and Beauty', p. 11.
[49] Seamus Heaney, 'Paul Muldoon's *The Annals of Chile*', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971 – 2001* (London: Faber, 2002), pp. 395 – 398 (p. 395).
[50] Helen Vendler, 'Anglo-Celtic Attitudes', *New York Review of Books*, 6 November 1997, 57 – 60 (p. 59).
[51] Paul Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo', the first Waterstones Lecture, delivered on 29 May 1994 at the Hay-on-Wye Festival of Literature (unpublished MS.).
[52] Hugh Haughton, 'Lord of the Red Herrings: *The Annals of Chile*', *Independent*, 9 October 1994, Sunday Review section, p. 40.
[53] Vendler, 'Anglo-Celtic Attitudes', p. 58. To this Muldoon has responded: 'I must say I'm amused by what I suspect is the subtext of this question. It is, of course, that it's only with "Incantata" that I've ever represented, perhaps even been capable of, "feeling". It's an idea that I've seen proposed by, for example, Helen Vendler. I have to say that when Helen Vendler goes on to complain of me that I display too much feeling in that same poem, I can only conclude that we're dealing here not with a dispassionate reader but a woman with a mission'. Muldoon, in Sebastian Barker, 'A Drink with Paul Muldoon', *Long Poem Group Newsletter*, no. 7 (November 1998) <www.dgdclynx.plus.com/lpgn/lpgn72.html> [accessed May 2007]
[54] Muldoon, in Patrick Barron, 'Smelling of Elderflowers', *Fortnight Review* (October 1994), pp. 42 – 44 (p. 44).
[55] Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo'.

It is above all 'a poem having to do with a deep-seated hurt' and is, as Muldoon has elucidated in the same lecture, 'an attempt to dress or redress it through what I term the "chrism of milfoil"'. It is an elegy to a past life that cannot be reclaimed, to losses sustained, to the important dead in the poet's life – his mother Brigid Regan who died when Muldoon was in his early twenties, to the drug-addicted ex-lover referred to only as S—[56] – and to other significant real and imaginary presences making for a constant stream of references to all of the myriad texts and characters that inhabit the poet's mind and that flit through the poem's vast cyclical structure. 'Yarrow' contains everything, Muldoon revelling in what he terms its 'grab-all form', as he states: 'It's like a huge waste disposal unit cum trash compactor'.[57] Moving with exhilarating force across the imaginative and intellectual life of the poet, a boy-hood given to adventure stories and action films, a reading life that has assimilated everything from Cicero to Michael Jackson, from *King Lear* to *Treasure Island* and *Rob Roy* and Plath in between; the whole imaginative terrain of a poet's mind unfolds as it is charted coming into being on the very physical terrain of Northern Ireland, the homeground of the poet's childhood in fields of kale, mushrooms and yarrow: 'The bridge. The barn. The all-too familiar terrain.'[58] The life of the mind, of the imagination is inextricably and inexplicably bound up with the actual circumstances of the poet's quotidian life, the poet's memory channelling the act of creation. It is deeply concerned with time, and theories of time, in the Borgesian sense of time being all time, in Muldoon's own words of commentary 'where several pasts coexist with several presents'. Muldoon quoted the following excerpt from Borges' *New Refutation of Time* during the course of his lecture on 'Yarrow' as a way of elucidating the ideas on time that are working into his poem:

> Time, if we can intuitively grasp such an identity, is a delusion: the difference and inseparability of one moment belonging to its apparent past from another belonging to its apparent present is sufficient to disintegrate it. Time is the substance I am made of. [59]

It is interesting in this regard that Plath's annotation to her copy of Eliot's *Four Quartets* – a work which, along with Frost's 'Directive', Muldoon has termed as being similar to 'Yarrow'[60] –

---

[56] Ibid. Here, Muldoon suggests that the identity of S---- is S.T. Coleridge's wife Sarah Fricker: "'Now wait a minute," I hear one or two of you say, "What on earth's going on? Who's S----? Surely not Coleridge's wife Sara(h) Fricker, whom we met not so long ago?'

[57] Muldoon, in Barker, 'A Drink with Paul Muldoon'.

[58] Paul Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), pp. 39 – 189 (p. 56).

[59] Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo'.

should also so effectively describe the concerns with time in 'Yarrow': 'We live by memory of the past (the dead) and we are born again by memory of events in the past...time is not unredeemable – past can exist in present: present can always be a fresh beginning'.[61] Furthermore, it is hardly mere coincidence that the same number of lines that make up 'Yarrow' – 1212 – was also famously the phone number of Sylvia Plath's grandmother's house and the title of her short story 'Ocean 1212-W'. This story details the birth of her poetic consciousness by the sea, the phone number itself deeply significant, operating as a magical spell that connects her back to a lost childhood that is now encased in her memory as a 'fine, white-flying myth':

> To this day I remember her phone number: OCEAN 1212-W. I would repeat it to the operator, from my home on the quieter bayside, an incantation, a fine rhyme, half expecting the black earpiece to give me back, like a conch, the susurrous murmur of the sea out there as well as my grandmother's hello.[62]

And so the poem opens, as, Muldoon himself explains: 'Here, the speaker in the poem is transported back to a scene from his childhood by the powerful scent of Yarrow: for the moment, we find him channel surfing':

> Little by little it dawned on us that the row
> of kale would shortly be overwhelmed by these pink
> and cream blooms, that all of us
>
> would be overwhelmed, that even if my da
> were to lose an arm
> or a leg to the fly wheel
>
> of a combine and be laid out on a tarp
> in a pool of blood and oil
> and my ma were to make one of her increasingly rare
>
> appeals to some higher power, some Deo
> this or that, all would be swept away by the stream
> that fanned across the land.[63]

---

[60] Muldoon, in Redmond, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon', p. 10. The image of Pampas grass, according to Muldoon, has, 'come to stand for something along the lines of Eliot's rose garden from the opening section of "Burnt Norton"'. Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo'.

[61] Plath, Annotation to *Four Quartets*, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College. This annotation is important in understanding Plath's use of the past and of history and memory in her own poetry, a strategy that has caused such controversy in relation to her employment of Holocaust imagery.

[62] Plath, 'OCEAN 1212-W', in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), p. 119.

[63] Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, p. 39.

These twelve end-words recur throughout the rest of the poem, modulating into their rhymes to create echoes and links which tie the poem together, forging aural and semantic connections to create 'intricate networks of sound, or mutuality, of association'.[64] As Tim Kendall has noted, the first end-word 'row' can be traced in the following manifestations: 'Pharaohs', 'arrow', 'sorrow', 'Row', 'sparrow', 'Cicero', 'marrow', 'barrow', 'cruizero', 'Pizarro', 'Navarro', 'Assaroe', 'Zorro', 'crow' 'yarrow' and in 'Cathedral of Ero- / tic Misery'. [65] The rhyming end-words of 'Yarrow' echo compulsively throughout, modulating and developing as they go, pointing backwards and forwards across time. Appropriately, rhyme is employed as a mnemonic device throughout this poem that comes into being precisely out of the forces of memory and the creative imagination. Repetition of words, sounds and even whole phrases occurs, the words transposed over time as the mind orders these signs in an attempt to make sense of reality and create order. Muldoon has said: 'Our tendency to find chimes in the language is intrinsic to us and to it'.[66] This aspect of Muldoon's poetics is often emphasised by the poet himself and has been noted by more than one commentator. Jeffrey Brown in an interview with Muldoon put the following to him: 'You love the play of words, of sounds, of connections, of things that don't necessarily seem to connect, but suddenly you make connect', to which Muldoon replied:

> Well, I think that's one of the great delights of attempting to write poems. And central, in fact, one might say to the activity is to find those likenesses between unlike things. [67]

Thus, 'Yarrow' is made up of 'twelve intercut-exploded sestinas', over 149 pages, the sestina form vital to the meaning of the poem as it allows for a very particular structure, as Muldoon elucidates: 'firstly, there's an inherent force in the repetitions and returns of the form that is, in its strictest sense, magical; secondly, and relatedly, the sestina is the perfect embodiment of obsessiveness and obsessiveness, particularly sexual obsessiveness, along with violence and death, drugs and rock and roll may justly be said to be a subject of "Yarrow"'.[68] Form then is Muldoon's way of controlling material that may be too painful otherwise, as he himself has put it: 'For me, rhyme and form are a way of dealing with the explosiveness of the subject matter',[69] similar to Adrienne Rich's 'asbestos gloves'. Similarly, Plath professed in an interview with Peter

---

[64] Tim Kendall, *Paul Muldoon* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996), p. 229.
[65] Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, p. 228.
[66] Muldoon, in Jeffrey Brown, 'Conversation: Award Winner', *PBS Broadcast: The News Hour*, 26 May 2003 <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june03/muldoon_05-26.html#> [accessed August 2007]
[67] Ibid.
[68] Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo'.
[69] Padel, 'Paul Muldoon: "It's Not Painting by Numbers"'.

Orr: 'I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrifying, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate those experiences with an informed and intelligent mind',[70] yet Plath's remarkable formal control is often overlooked. Her early poem 'Conversation among the Ruins' also expresses this formal necessity:

> With such blight wrought on our bankrupt estate,
> What ceremony of words can patch the havoc?[71]

Here, Plath's poem concerns the devastation of a house, the passing of an era as the conversation taking place within its 'appalling ruin'. Plath's assertion in this poem of how a formal 'ceremony of words' may enact some sort of stay against destruction resonates in a strikingly similar way with what Muldoon would later write of 'Yarrow':

> It struck me the other day that the fact that my last book was the text of a libretto that ends with Frank Lloyd Wright rhetoricizing and rhetoricating in the ruins of a beloved house is 'not unrelated', as Larkin might have put it, to this opening.[72]

Muldoon sees his poems as 'constructed things', comparing the process of poetic composition to architecture: 'I'm sure there are things I've written that are unintelligible because they're half-arsed, but generally I hope they are complex for reasons of *architecture*. I sincerely hope that the thinking and planning of these walls, especially the load-bearing walls, was a complex business.'[73] Indeed, Muldoon's 'I look on each poem as being a little world in itself'[74] is itself very similar to Plath's belief that 'a poem, by its own system of illusions, can set up a rich and apparently living world within its particular limits'.[75]

In trying to elucidate 'Yarrow', a poem he finds 'marginally less exasperating than entertaining', Tim Kendall has described it as consisting of 'a series of concentric circles, matching the smaller circles from part one of the *Annals of Chile*.'[76] The way in which the words in 'Yarrow' build towards designs of concentric circles calls to mind Plath's poem 'Words', wherein words are described through a network of successive metaphors as:

---

[70] Plath, in Peter Orr, 'Sylvia Plath', in *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*, ed. by Peter Orr (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1966), pp. 167 – 172 (p. 169).
[71] Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 21.
[72] Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo'.
[73] Padel, 'Paul Muldoon: "It's Not Painting By Numbers"'.
[74] John Haffenden, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 133.
[75] Sylvia Plath, Introduction to 'The Living Poet', BBC Radio (then the Third Programme) 8 July 1961.
[76] Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, p. 228.

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
Travelling off from the center like horses.[77]

The words in Muldoon's poem function in precisely this way, their rhymes making echoes that travel onwards, knowing no bounds, exactly like the concentric rings on the inside of a tree trunk that grow outward. There are many meanings at play in Plath's 'Words' too, as the phrase 'the wood rings' may point to both the wood of the tree as well as to the wood as forest in which case the 'wood rings' could also suggest the forest echoing with the sound of the axe's stroke after it is struck.[78] In Muldoon's 'Incantata' there is evidence that Plath's poem may have been in Muldoon's mind as he wrote, as in this address to his dead lover that deals with her belief in predestination and fate – 'your notion that nothing's arbitrary, nothing's random' – all is 'fixed like the stars in the Southern Cross'.[79] This closely echoes the closing lines of Plath's 'Words': 'From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars / Govern a life'. The second stanza of 'Words' depicts:

The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.

All is simile and metaphor here as words point to multiple possibilities, meaning constantly deferred and driven onward. The 'sap' may mean all of the feeling, or emotion that may go into the making of a poem – Muldoon's 'fears and doubts' – the feeling that must be contained, formed, or as Plath herself said 'controlled with an intelligent mind' to make a 'mirror' in which the world or the mind is reflected and to make out of life something permanent, immutable as art is, over the rock that will be consumed: 'A white skull / Eaten by weedy greens'. These words, their echoes as 'indefatigable hoof-taps', reach across a lifetime and beyond:

---

[77] Plath, 'Words', in *Collected Poems*, p. 270.
[78] See Helen Chau Hu, 'Negotiating Semantics and Figurative Language in Four Poems by Sylvia Plath', *WORD: Journal of the International Linguistic Associations*, 53.2 (August 2002), 197 – 215.
[79] Muldoon, 'Incantata', in *The Annals of Chile*, pp. 13 – 28 (p. 20).

Years later I
Encounter them on the road —

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.

It is Muldoon's use of rhyme and repetition, of aural patterns throughout 'Yarrow' that must constitute its most powerful structuring device and it is this which links himself and Plath together in a pervasive and integral way, revealing how their poetic practice and technique is in many ways identical. Sarah Hannah's study of sound and structure in Plath's late poetry notes how 'these later poems have received far more attention for what they are saying than for how they are saying it' and how 'only a very few articles deal specifically with the technical aspects of the later poems'.[80] Muldoon however, is celebrated as the most technically assured of poets, frequently singled out for his 'wonderful technical wizardry'[81] his 'technical flair', his 'linguistic exuberance' and 'swank virtuosity'.[82] It has been said of Muldoon that 'one suspects him, sometimes, of sleeping with the *OED* under his pillow',[83] himself testifying to how 'I always go out of my way to find just the right word'.[84] Plath too called herself 'Roget's strumpet'[85] and was wholly attentive to the craft of poetic composition, as Hughes has attested:

> In her earlier poems, Sylvia Plath composed very slowly, consulting her Thesaurus and Dictionary for almost every word, putting a slow, strong line of ink under every word that attracted her.[86]

As Seamus Heaney has acknowledged: 'Plath's tongue was itself governed by the disciplines of metre, rhyme, etymology, assonance, enjambment' from the first'.[87] It is interesting too that Plath's own elegy to her dead father 'Lament' is cast as a villanelle, a form very closely related to the sestina which Muldoon employs, in terms of its obsessive refrain and relentless repetition, the strict form containing this emotion that would otherwise be too much to bear. Like Muldoon,

---

[80] See Sarah Hannah, 'Something Else Hauls me Through Air', *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics*, 5.2 (Spring 2003), 232 – 66. Tim Kendall's 2001 critical study of Plath was born out of precisely this recognition of 'still too few concentrated examinations of the poetry' but Kendall nevertheless lapses into the biographical approach throughout.
[81] Alan Brownjohn, 'The Long and The Short Of It', review of Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968 – 1998*, *Sunday Times*, 22 July 2001, p. 43.
[82] Laura Quinney, 'In the Studebaker', *London Review of Books*, 25.20 (23 October 2003), 20 – 21 (p. 21).
[83] Padel, 'Paul Muldoon: "It's Not Painting By Numbers"'.
[84] Hirschman, 'Paul Muldoon: A Poet for Our Time'.
[85] Plath, *Journals*, p. 212.
[86] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*', in *Winter Pollen*, p. 162.
[87] Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath', in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber, 1988), pp. 148 – 170 (p.152).

Plath lacked no capacity for playful, formal resource as she remarked on her five fingers poem, 'Words for a Nursery', that it is 'spoken in the person of a right hand, with five syllables to a line, five stanzas, and ten lines to a stanza. *Very fingery.*'[88] While 'Metaphors for a Preganant Woman' was described by her as 'ironic, nine lines, nine syllables.'[89] Poetry is an organic process for both Plath and Muldoon, form developing naturally in hand with the content. Later, Hughes would remark on how Plath's 'obsession with intricate rhyming and metrical schemes was part of the same process [...] One of her most instinctive compulsions was to make patterns – vivid, bold patterns',[90] a comment that applies to Muldoon also who has been described as a 'maker and finder of patterns'.[91] 'Yarrow' itself has been noted for its 'intricate formal patterning'.[92]

Sylvia Plath is one of the significant dead figures who moves in and out of 'Yarrow' as it progresses; her spirit first enters as the speaker remembers:

> That must have been the year old Vladimir Vladimirovich
> smoked kief all the way from *Alamein to mon Zem-*
> *Zemblable* with *The Bride of Lammermoor*
>
> and *Ada, or Ardor*:
> that was the year, while Plath found solace in the *Bhagavad*
> *Gita*, Jim Hawkins and I were putting in at Nassau.
>
> While Jim and I were plundering the Spanish Main
> From the Grenadines to Grand Cayman
> She knew that even amidst fierce
>
> Flames she might yet plant centaury: [93]

1963 is one of the pivotal points in time, or more specifically as Muldoon has revealed, the winter of 1962 through 1963, the year that saw Plath commit suicide in Yeats' house in London, as Muldoon's roll-call of his important poetic dead reveals: 'that year MacNeice and Frost and Plath all kicked the bucket' (line 711) and later:

> it was twenty years to the month the water-main
>
> froze

---

[88] Plath, *Letters Home,* p. 410.
[89] Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 475.
[90] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*', in *Winter Pollen*, p. 161.
[91] 'Reasons for Rhyme', *Economist,* 6 February 2003
<www.economist.com/books/displayStory.cfm?story_id=1563685> [accessed December 2005]
[92] Kendall, *Paul Muldoon*, p. 226.
[93] Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, pp. 57 – 58.

> on Fitzroy Road and the *T.L.S.* had given the bum's rush
> to *The Bell Jar.*[94]

Circling the year 1963, Muldoon summons her spirit directly. His allusion to the epitaph Hughes chose to inscribe on her gravestone: 'Even in fierce flames the golden lotus can be planted' sees that one of the most potent trappings of the Plath death-cult is invoked here; the gravestone that became iconic in terms of the Plath mythology, famously desecrated by Plath's followers for bearing the name 'Hughes' as her remains were fought over.[95] Furthermore, centaury is used for the treatment of fevers which calls to mind Plath's 'Fever 103°'. Responding in interview to the question of whether Plath has been an influence on his work, Muldoon has stated, with characteristic equivocation:

> I don't think so, no. I suppose she is the classic case of the poet on the edge. It's terribly difficult to disentangle the circumstances of her death from the measure of her achievement, at least I find it is – it's all connected in that web. Living at that pitch, on that edge, is something which many poets engage in to some extent.[96]

It may be that it is precisely this invocation of Plath, her spirit breathing so pervasively throughout the *Annals Of Chile*, that enables Muldoon to achieve what he identifies as the breakthrough 'higher cruising altitude'[97] of this collection. Muldoon has said too that: 'I'm only ever interested as a writer in "pushing out the boat", only ever interested in riskiness'.[98] Plath is certainly an enabling force in this regard, being the recognised poet of this sort of risk-taking. The poet Lavinia Greenlaw, for instance, reflecting on Plath's influence on her own work, has stated how she 'learnt a lot from her about discipline and risk.'[99]

'To appease a *moon*-goddess, no?' Muldoon's speaker in 'Yarrow' questions. The moon-goddess is a direct reference to Graves' *The White Goddess* wherein Graves describes the muse of poetry as the white or moon goddess and it is a recurrent image throughout Plath's work. It may be that Plath also stands for Muldoon's troublesome muse of poetry, as the emblem of one who suffers and dies for her art. Fran Brearton says of 'Yarrow' that 'its overriding concern is with the female principle, with the Muse who is also mother and harlot simultaneously' and has Plath as

---

[94] Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, p. 150.
[95] For details of the controversy over Plath's grave see Jacqueline Rose, 'The Archive', in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), pp. 65 – 113.
[96] Muldoon, in Redmond, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon', p. 5.
[97] Muldoon has said how: 'several of the poems in this new book are written at a much higher cruising altitude than most of my things until now'. Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo'.
[98] Ibid.
[99] Lavinia Greenlaw, in Christina Patterson, 'In Search of the Poet', *Independent*, 6 February 2004, Arts and Books Review section, pp. 2 – 4 (p. 3).

'Ariel and Artemis' within.[100] Muldoon very much subscribes to the notion of poetry composition as a numinous, mystical act, one carried out through the powers of inspiration, the poem written through, not by, the poet, describing himself as poet of 'Yarrow' as 'the medium through which this poem was written'.[101] Furthermore, Muldoon has asserted: 'Without fears and doubts, no one ever arrives at the condition of being a writer. So much about writing is about giving oneself over to it. The language and poem uses you.' [102] Plath then, as Muldoon acknowledges, embodies the extreme ideal of the artist wholly surrendered to their craft:

> while Jim and I were sailing with Teach and Morgan
> she was fixing the rubber ring
>
> on a Mason jar;
> even amidst fierce flames, the expiapiaratory rush
> of poppies in July, October poppies.[103]

Here, Muldoon alludes to Plath's death in terms of her last poems, those of the *Ariel* collection that Ted Hughes reordered and published after her death and labelled her 'true death-songs'[104] and prefaced with an essay by Robert Lowell that set her up very definitely as the doomed poetess, the mythologised cult icon of a poetry that is 'playing Russian Roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder'.[105] The 'rush' from the poppies also connects Plath to the figure of S---, the glamorous, heroin addicted ex-lover of the poem's speaker and so again with a nihilism and recklessness. Helen Vendler in her review surmised how Sylvia Plath becomes for Muldoon in 'Yarrow' an 'emblem of a nihilism never far from Muldoon's thoughts.'[106]

Throughout 'Yarrow', Muldoon obsessively replays the moment of the poet's tragic end that has become so much a part of literary history, alongside his own boyhood reading of *Treasure Island* and other adventure stories, bringing the lives of both himself and Plath into a strange parallel. The borders between life and art, between fiction and reality are blurred throughout 'Yarrow' and it must be that Plath comes to stand for this too, as the famous epitome of the poet who is time and again the subject of biographical enquiry. 'Yarrow' is very much

---

[100] Brearton, 'For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents', p. 55.
[101] Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo'.
[102] Skye Dent, 'Poetry Makes Sense Of Key Moments In Life', interview with Paul Muldoon, *University of Connecticut Advance on the Web*, 26 January 2004 <www.advance.uconn.edu/2004/040126/04012611.htm> [accessed August 2007]
[103] Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, p. 58.
[104] See Hughes, 'On Sylvia Plath', *Raritan*, 14.2 (Fall 1994), 1 – 10 (p. 9).
[105] Robert Lowell, 'Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*', in Lowell, *Collected Prose* (London: Faber, 1987), pp. 122 – 125 (p. 124).
[106] Vendler, 'Anglo-Celtic Attitudes', p. 60.

concerned with this interface between life and fiction, between bibliography and biography – a subject that brings Muldoon even closer to Plath as he focuses obsessively on the biographical aspects of her life and more particularly her death:

> from *chlamys*, a cloak or cowl;
> the filthy mantle on the gas;
> again she renews her vows
>
> to the moon-goddess; again she turns on the oven;
> again the Agraviados begin to lay about
> them while their Captain cries, 'Avaunt ye curs, avaunt.'[107]

However, it does become apparent that Muldoon in 'Yarrow' wishes to go further than merely utilising Plath as an icon or cipher, as the cult figure that she has become, that he seeks to move beyond the usual approaches to Plath that are concerned only with her life and her life after death, towards a closer concentration on the poetry itself.

Yeats is another of the dead that is summoned in Muldoon's poem, irreverently as 'Old Hound Voice', but he too leads us very definitely to Plath, as here:

> Even as I lean forward to slacken Roland's martingale
> the moonlit road from Ghent
> to Aix
>
> goes up in smoke and mirrors and marsh-gas
> and a hound-spirit
> can be heard all the way from the Great
>
> Grimpen to Fitzroy Road; not since 1947
> had a winter been so bad;
> it seemed as though ice burned and was but the more ice.
>
> If only Plath had been able to take up the slack
> of the free rein
> lent her so briefly by Ariel:
>
> all I remember of that all-time low
> of January, 1963, was a reprieve from Cicero
> and the weekly hair-wash and bath.[108]

Muldoon has pointed out the influence of Yeats on Plath's poetry also: 'her indebtedness to Yeats was longstanding, evident as early as her 1956 poem "Pursuit"',[109] and this connection between

---

[107] Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, p. 172.
[108] Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, pp. 72 – 73.

Yeats and Plath binds all three poets together and is announced unequivocably in line 748 with: 'That was the year Yeats said to Plath, "*Mi casa es su casa*"'. Assuming the role of the child in revolt resisting the authority of his poetic parents, Muldoon is very pointedly subverting both Plath and Yeats in 'Yarrow'. Indeed, speaking on the 'debunking' of Yeats that occurs in his poetry Muldoon has explained this tendency in terms of parent-child relations: 'I think it's the way one's irreverent to one's parents. Nasty but necessary.'[110] Muldoon has parodied Yeats's 'September 1916' in his poem '7, Middagh Street' with the following lines spoken by 'Wystan': 'If Yeats had saved his pencil lead / Would certain men have stayed in bed.'[111] Furthermore, Steven Matthews has seen the whole form of 'Yarrow' as 'an attempted outdoing of Heaney's airily architectural "Squarings"'.[112] Heaney, of course, is another of Muldoon's precursors. Indeed, commenting on 'Yarrow''s postmodernist play around childhood experience and how it differs from Heaney's use of a 'childhood vision', Edna Longley has stated how this 'untranscendental' poem may be seen to 'shadow and question a prior Heaney text'.[113] Yeats' poetry is very wilfully misinterpreted and mocked by Muldoon in 'Yarrow' as he gives S–the refrain:

> The women that I picked spoke sweet and low
> and yet they all gave tongue, gave tongue right royally.[114]

Only to chide comically at himself later with:

> How dare you suggest that his 'far-off, most secret,
> and inviolate rose' is a cunt:
> how dare you misread
>
> his line about how they 'all gave tongue';
> how dare you suggest that *Il Duce* of Drumcliff
> meant that 'Diana Vernon' and Maud Gonne gave good head.[115]

This humorous display has Muldoon in what must be a parody of the Bloomian anxiety of influence deliberately 'misread' Yeats – his precursor poet – as Muldoon explores modes of

---

[109] Muldoon, 'The Literary Life'.
[110] Muldoon, in 'The Art of Poetry No. LXXXVII', p. 61.
[111] Muldoon, '7, Middagh Street', in *Meeting the British* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 39.
[112] Steven Matthews, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), pp. 205 – 206.
[113] Edna Longley, 'Irish Bards and American Audiences', *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), 757 –771 (p. 770).
[114] Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, p. 133
[115] Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, p. 145.

interpretation and literary theories. Plath comes under sustained scrutiny as a similarly complicated precursor and literary figure that Muldoon must wrestle with in all of her various manifestations.

Here is the key moment in 'Yarrow' that sees him probing her poetry and its very meaning, Muldoon interrogating the language of Plath's last poem 'Edge', as he asks of it:

> How to read that last line
> In that last poem? Does it describe
> The moon or the woman? I mean at the very end
>
> Of 'Edge'; 'Her blacks crackle and drag.'
> Whose 'blacks'? Is it the woman on the funeral urn
> Or the moon? Are they both 'masturbating a glitter'?[116]

This moment in 'Yarrow' may be initially seen as Muldoon being again somewhat subversive towards his precursor, engaged in a deliberately self-conscious 'poetic misreading' just as he also does with Frost's 'The Most of It'. But at a more profound level Muldoon is positing the question 'How to read?' this poetry, which he has already, as a reader himself, identified as being difficult to separate from the circumstances of its making and from the various reductive ways it has been mediated since the poet's death. Steven Matthews views 'Yarrow' as Muldoon's refusal of Heaney's too straightforward reading of Plath's 'Edge', what he terms, 'Heaney's reading of "Edge" as a given as "being" in itself'.[117] This mode of probing questioning, the focus always on close-reading and alternative interpretations provides a new way of entry into Plath's poetry, beyond the usual critical approaches that her work has invited by reading it away from the circumstances of her life. 'If only Plath had been able to take up the slack / of the free rein / lent her so briefly by Ariel', Muldoon has the speaker of 'Yarrow' lament, a comment which points directly to the skill and mastery of *Ariel*, described by Ted Hughes as the book wherein 'all the various voices of her gift came together'.[118] But here also, Muldoon, with his play on equestrian imagery – the 'free rein' of the horse 'Ariel' – draws attention to the sheer metaphorical power of Plath's work and in 'Ariel' in particular in which the thrusting horse-ride becomes a conceit for the process of poetic creation, as the poem itself, through its dynamic, propulsive rhythm and proliferation of imagery enacts the process it describes.[119] It is a meta-poem, about the act of

---

[116] Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, p. 59.
[117] Matthews, *Irish Poetry*, pp. 205 – 206.
[118] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*', p. 162.
[119] Christina Britzolakis also interprets the poem in this way: 'the experience of riding a horse becomes a metaphor for the process of writing a poem.' Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 184.

writing itself. Furthermore, 'Ariel' is also the sprite from Shakespeare's *The Tempest* described by W.H. Auden in a lecture which Plath herself attended as the 'creative imaginative'.[120] 'Ariel' then, refers to the horse, the poet's imaginative composition process and the poem itself as Plath plays with its multiple meanings to construct a rich conceit.

Muldoon has commented frequently on the importance of the metaphor in his own work: 'I think that the impulse to find the likeness between unlike things is very basic to us, and it is out of that, of course, which the simile or metaphor springs'[121] and often singles out John Donne and George Herbert as the major influences on his poetic technique. As Muldoon explains, Donne is 'the poet who excels in the farfetched metaphor, and the extended metaphor'[122] and 'the aspect of Metaphysical poetry that continues to exercise me most is that of the conceit'.[123] Donne's technique is central to Muldoon's own strategies as a poet: 'A huge number of my poems are conceits, taking two heterogeneous ideas and yoking them together'.[124] Plath's poetry too is the poetry of metaphor, and her strikingly original use of metaphor and simile is evident throughout her entire oeuvre. 'Fever 103°', for instance, is richly imaginative in its use of metaphor, as the experience of a patient suffering fever becomes the site for a Dante-esque journey through purgatory to paradise. As the poet explained 'It is about two kinds of fire – the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second.'[125] In 'Death & Co.' – also alluded to by Muldoon in 'Yarrow' – Plath imagined the 'double or schizophrenic nature of death – the marmoreal coldness of Blake's death mask, say, hand in glove with the fearful softness of worms, water and other katabolists' as 'two men, two business friends who have come to call'.[126] Metaphor is used by Plath to constantly point up both the disjunctions and gaps that occur in language itself – as meaning is constantly deferred and pluralised – as well as between language and reality, in a way that defamiliarises as it reveals the ambiguities of perception. This can be seen as the most ubiquitous poetic device employed throughout her entire oeuvre, making a poetic language that is strikingly original, highly charged, dynamic and endlessly rich in its interpretative possibility.

---

[120] Plath wrote of her experience of attending a lecture by W.H. Auden in April 1953: 'Auden tossing his head back [...] talking in a gravelly incisive tone about how Caliban is the natural bestial projection, Ariel the creative imaginative, and all the intricate lyrical abstruosities of their love and cleavage, art and life, the mirror and the sea.' Plath, *Journals*, p. 180.
[121] Muldoon, in 'The Art of Poetry No. LXXXVII', p. 75.
[122] Muldoon, 'Write About What You Don't Know'.
[123] Muldoon, 'Getting Round', 108.
[124] Muldoon, in Barker, 'A Drink with Paul Muldoon'.
[125] Plath, Introduction to 'Fever 103', in Typescript for 'New Poems', 13 December 1962. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College, quoted in Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 293.
[126] Plath, *Collected* Poems, p. 294.

The repeated rhyme words of 'Yarrow' lend the poem a remarkable musical structure. Muldoon's explication of its design, intended to give his audience 'some sense of its music' as he termed it, had him elucidate thus: 'If I were to pursue a musical analogy, I'd suggest that the movement of this poem is essentially that of a fugue, but a fugue played by Pink Floyd at Pompeii.'[127] This pattern of modulating words and images which create a musical, polyphonic structure may be seen as the structuring principle of Plath's poetry also, as Hughes has acknowledged:

> The words in these odd-looking verses are not only charged with terrific heat, pressure and clairvoyant precision, they are all deeply related within any poem, acknowledging each other and calling to each other in deep harmonic designs.[128]

The critic Eileen Aird avers: 'The more one reads the poetry the less possible it is not to seek echoes in other poems.'[129] Furthermore, Hughes, again reflecting on Plath's art, spoke of 'the flight of her ideas and music' and it is his employment of the word 'flight' here that is particularly significant, highly appropriate as it too suggests the 'fugue' – meaning 'flight' – leading us to Plath's own 'Little Fugue' from 1962. 'Little Fugue' can be seen in many ways as a kindred poem to 'Yarrow', dealing as it does with the loss of identity, of a past, with questions of history and memory and the speaker's own sense of being homeless, rootless, a self severed by the premature death of a parent. In 'Little Fugue' it is the father figure of Plath's poetry and of *The Bell Jar*, who cannot be traced, and who, as Esther describes: 'dead since I was nine, came from some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia.'[130] Muldoon too, ever-attentive to the multiple possibilities of words, cannot but be familiar with the other definition of fugue: 'a dissociative disorder in which a person forgets who they are and leaves home to create a new life; during the fugue there is no memory of the former life; after recovering there is no memory for events during the dissociative state'. It is also 'a dreamlike state of altered consciousness that may last for hours or days'. Thus, 'Little Fugue' opens with a desolate image of failed communication:

> The yew's black fingers wag
> Cold clouds go over.
> the deaf and dumb

---

[127] Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo'.
[128] Hughes, 'Sylvia Plath: *Ariel*' in *Winter Pollen*, p. 161.
[129] Eileen Aird, '"Poem for a Birthday" to "Three Women": Development in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *Critical Quarterly,* 21.4 (Winter 1979), 63 – 72 (p. 72).
[130] Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Heinemann, 1963), p. 33.

Signal the blind, and are ignored.[131]

Like yarrow the thousand-leafed plant known variously for its healing properties – used by Achilles' soldiers during the Trojan War to staunch blood but conversely too as the 'Devils' plaything' for its ability to start bleeding, also as an old love charm and used by the Druids to foretell the weather and bestow insight – laden in short with historical and mythological power, the yew tree is another diversely loaded signifier. As Robert Graves explains in *The White Goddess* – a text which Plath studied deeply and Muldoon has also read[132] – this ancient tree, 'known as the death tree in all European countries and sacred to Hecate', is connected with rebirth and immortality and associated with wisdom and with the Celtic system of communication involving ogham symbols, the Tree Alphabet. Furthermore, as Graves points out: 'In Brittany it is said that church-yard yews will spread a root to the mouth of each corpse'.[133] It is still more illuminating to consider Muldoon's own comments on his poem 'The Stoic' from his 2002 collection *Moy Sand and Gravel* and his own particular use of the yew as a symbol:

> This image of the yew has to do with a conventional description of the graves of Deirdre and Naoise [..] a yew stake was planted in each of their graves, and these two yew trees grew up and intertwined and made an arch. I suppose I'm getting there at the fact that there's some misconnection, there's not quite a moment of connection.[134]

Muldoon's 'The Stoic', itself influenced by Shelley's 'Ozymandias', deals with the loss of the poet's unborn child and with the poet's own troubled sense of history and his dual nationality, as it draws also on Irish and Native American mythology in a poem 'where things don't quite connect and don't quite rhyme.'[135] Plath considers all of the various connotations for the yew throughout 'Little Fugue', the yew tree itself coming to stand ultimately it seems for the vagaries and multiplicity of language in a poem that is concerned primarily with lost connections and slippages, linguistically and historically. It also winds back to an earlier poem by Plath that features the yew tree, 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' from 1961, wherein the tree becomes a

---

[131] Plath, 'Little Fugue', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 187 – 189. All further quotations from this poem are from this source.

[132] 'Read [...] a bit of "The White Godess" [*sic*] and unearthed a whole series of subtle symbolic names for our children whose souls haunt me.' Entry of Saturday 3 May 1958, in Plath, *Journals*, p. 377. Muldoon has written on Chapter 12 of *The White Goddess* and Graves' 'extraordinary analysis of the significance of this alphabet calendar.' Muldoon, *To Ireland, I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 5.

[133] Robert Graves, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961), p. 194.

[134] Muldoon, 'Presiding Spirits', *Magma*, 20 (Summer 2001) <www.magmapoetry.com/poem.php?article_id=53> [accessed August 2007]

[135] Ibid.

potent iconic symbol, its portent made clear as 'the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence'.[136] As Plath herself describes it, outlining the coming to prominence of what she playfully calls 'my obstreperous yew tree':

> That yew tree began, with astounding egotism to manage and order the whole affair [...] It stood squarely in the middle of my poem, manipulating its dark shades, the voices in the churchyard [...] – everything! I couldn't subdue it.[137]

'Little Fugue' then grows out of the freely associative thoughts of the speaker, a flow of images building up in this way, out of the presiding figures of the yew and the cloud; images depicting loss of connection and the tragic inability to communicate among figures that are deaf, dumb and blind. The 'black yew' and 'white cloud' create a landscape in monochrome where communication, sensorial awareness is impossible, limbs cut-off, the sense impaired, signs impenetrable, where nothing is black or white. Just as Muldoon has words chime, transpose themselves and forge connections, here, Plath has the yew modulate into 'you', its rhyme, creating a repetitious sonic link as it then becomes the 'yew hedge' of Beethoven's 'Grosse Fuge'; then the 'yew hedge of orders' of the father; the 'dark funnel' can be linked to the cone-shaped yew tree of Ireland as described in Graves' study; then the 'yew my Christ' – the etymology of *yew* has been traced back to the sacred word for Jehovah – and finally, death itself as the black tree, the yew as death tree. The 'cloud' also undergoes development, the very letters of the word moving around to make 'cold' – losing the 'u' in the process – and reflecting the action it describes, as 'Cold clouds go over'. Initially rendered 'white as an eye'; this leads then to the 'eye of the blind pianist'; then to Beethoven the deaf German composer and pianist; then forming into the clouds of forgetfulness as they are depicted 'spreading their vacuous sheets' and finally becoming the speaker's marriage dress. The fingers of the yew change into the fingers of the pianist and finally into those of the speaker: 'These are my fingers'. The 'Grosse Fuge' or 'Great Fugue' leads to the 'Great War', 'war' of course also being German for 'was' in this poem that is concerned with the severance of the past from the present, a past that language and memory cannot reclaim. The speaker pronounces, 'I am lame in the memory', language again confused as the psychic condition is expressed in physical terms.

Language provokes complications; prevaricating and indeterminate, it can offer no stability, no certainties. Plath plays with its inescapable vagaries in 'Little Fugue', as the speaker proclaims, 'I remember a blue eye'. In German, a 'blue eye' corresponds to the English for 'black

---

[136] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 173.
[137] Plath, 'A Comparison', in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, pp. 56 – 58.

eye' thereby suggesting further injury and disfigurement. The disjunction which occurs in translation is also pointed up here as the 'delicatessen', from the German meaning 'delicate eating' seems a stark contradiction of its translation in this particular context. The verb 'lopping' pivotally connects the sausages back to the yew tree as the *OED* definition is: 'To cut off the branches, twigs, etc.' To further mark out the theme of brokenness and disconnectedness, the body is seen dismembered, in parts – 'one leg', 'cut necks', 'a blue eye' – the faculties impossibly confounded as: 'I see your voice / Black and leafy'. The ninth stanza ends with 'There was a silence!', the stanza break here mimetic of this stoppage, this inability to proceed. Muldoon explains his own use of the stanza-break device in his poem 'At the Sign of the Black Horse':

> The word stanza means a stopping place, room, place where things come to a pause; one is suddenly introduced to this small expanse of white paper between the two stanzas which one must get across.[138]

Plath's use of the word 'pallor' to close must certainly be deliberate, incorporating as it does the word 'pall' as its root, that is, the cloth spread over a coffin. The *OED* gives a fuller meaning: 'something that covers or conceals, a 'mantle', 'cloak'; in mod.use *esp.* something, such as a cloud, that extends over a thing or region and produces an effect of gloom', thus another modulation of the opening 'cloud' image. Tumult is defined as the 'commotion of a multitude, usually with confused speech or uproar; public disturbance; disorderly or riotous proceeding.', thus calling to mind the 'Mule-bray, pig-grunt and bawdy cackles' of Plath's earlier poem 'The Colossus' which also has the speaker lamenting the fragmentation and collapse that remains after the death of the father figure.

Furthermore, this 'tumult of keys' refers perhaps not only to the piano keys of the blind pianist, but also to those of Plath's typewriter, as in Plath's 'Three Women', written in March 1962, just before 'Little Fugue' where:

> The letters proceed from these black keys, and these black keys proceed
> From my alphabetical fingers, ordering parts,
>
> Parts, bits, cogs, the shining multiples.[139]

This in turn, with its description of 'alphabetical fingers', brings us back to Graves' Tree Alphabet – and therefore to the yew tree and its fingers – which had the letters of the alphabet

---

[138] Muldoon, 'Work in Progress', BBC Radio 3.

[139] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 177.

correspond to parts of the fingers and hand. With this in mind, the 'vacuous sheets' spread by the clouds could also be the blank sheets of paper that the poet faces, in other poems termed as 'blanks' – the 'black' and 'white' of the page – while the adjective 'Gothic' suggests not just 'barbarous' but also is a type used in printing German text. This brings to mind Plath's *The Bell Jar*, where printed text in the German language of the father induces a shut down of the mental faculties:

> What I didn't say was each time I picked up a German dictionary or a German book, the very sight of those dense, black, barbed-wire letters made my mind shut like a clam.[140]

'Little Fugue' can be seen then as a poem that plays very much with the multiple possibilities within the meanings and sounds of words, very much concerned with the inability of language to suffice, with the impossibility inherent in the act of communicating and of the breakdown of the individual psyche; language and memory indisputably unstable.

Plath described her poems in a 1958 interview as 'good mouthfuls of sound which have meaning', professing: 'Technically I like to be extremely musical and lyrical, with a singing sound', yet the musical element in Plath's poetry is often overlooked, the attention to her poetry's aural quality rarely receiving critical notice. [141] As she goes on to say in the same interview: 'I'm much happier when I know that all my sounds are echoing in different ways throughout the poem'. Poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' have been noted for a relentless use of rhyme and repetition that drives the poems forward in a forceful, incantatory fashion. Nims in his study of Plath's poetry, identifies throughout *Ariel* the technique of 'rhyme at high noon' and how 'the same sound may run on from stanza to stanza, with much identical rhyme'.[142] Stanley Plumly too has recognised how Plath's poems 'reveal a poetry preoccupied with the inventions of rhythm, pattern, and an emphatic, sometimes excessive aural sense of the way words bond within the line or sentence.'[143] Testifying to the verbal music of Plath's poetry Frieda Hughes has said of 'Lesbos', her favourite of Plath's poems:

> I read it out loud and I found that rhythmically and with the power and energy it delivers – although it's the very poem that wasn't very nice about this Cornish couple – [...] it

---

[140] Plath, *The Bell Jar*, p. 33.
[141] Plath, Recorded Interview at Yale, 18 April 1958.
[142] John Frederick Nims, 'The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Technical Analysis', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. by Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970), pp. 136 – 152 (p. 143).
[143] Stanley Plumly, 'What Ceremony of Words', in Plumly, *Argument and Song: Sources and Silences in Poetry* (New York: Other Press, 2003), pp. 127 – 139 (p. 125).

> draws such an intricate and wonderfully bizarre picture of my mother's time with them, and it delivers itself with such musicality and it's so refined in its viciousness.[144]

Letters Home has her instructing her mother to 'Read aloud for word tones, for full effect'[145] and again as she writes: 'Listen: here are two lyrics; they are meant to be said aloud'.[146] In a letter enclosing 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor' Plath's directions were to 'Read it aloud for the sounds of it'.[147] This is the same poem that Seamus Heaney singles out for its 'dull, sea-clap music', 'beautifully tuned, half-rhymed and assonantal'.[148] This is too the poem that Plath sent to Marianne Moore for her opinion and which Muldoon examines in his Oxford Lecture series for its obvious influence of Moore, pointing to how certain images must be drawn from Moore's poem 'The Fish'. Muldoon is also deeply concerned with sound in his own poetry, as he has said in interview: 'I am particularly interested in the oral aspects of poems; it has something to do with the rhythms of speech; for the ear not the eye.'[149] Also, as he declares:

> What has to be said determines its own form, or should do...I don't scan, however, but use a purely intuitive process within each line. My only concern is that the lines are speakable. I have rather loose notions of what a line is since many of mine are assonantal.[150]

Seamus Heaney has said of Plath's 'Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor' that 'the reader's pleasure come from just this sense of being on a linguistic tour where the point of the outing is as much to relish the guide's vocabulary as to see what is being talked about'[151] – an observation that is very much true of Muldoon's poetry also.

Both Plath and Muldoon are deeply transatlantic poets – a strongly felt transnational momentum informs their work – and both are acutely linguistically aware, employing their linguistic and cultural heritages to the fullest, their openness to both an American and European, a cosmopolitan heritage and mode of discourse enriching their work. Muldoon's 'Yarrow', as has been examined here, traverses a vast topography of nationalities and has been hailed by one academic scholar for its richness on this account: 'no poem or poetic series of recent years attests

---

[144] Frieda Hughes, in 'Frieda Hughes on Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*', interview with Frieda Hughes, *The Diane Rehm Show*, WAMU Radio, 14 December 2004 < http://www.wamu.org/programs/dr/04/12/14.php > [accessed August 2007]

[145] Plath, Letter to Aurelia Plath of 2 February 1955, in *Letters Home*, p. 157.

[146] Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 235.

[147] Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 344.

[148] Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 154.

[149] Muldoon, in Hirschman, 'Paul Muldoon: A Poet for Our Time'.

[150] Muldoon, in Haffenden, p. 141

[151] Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 156.

so convincingly to the richness of contemporary, multinational experience.'[152] Muldoon himself has commented on 'the adventure that I feel myself on a linguistic front primarily sometimes caught I think between the language in which I was brought up, Hiberno-English, and the language which is now surrounding me, American-English'[153] and has gone on to describe the formative nature of this engagement:

> As a child I was always conscious of the US, and, culturally, we were brought up on American TV, books ,etc [...] I always go out of my way to find just the right word, and so I tend to appeal to a very large range of linguistic references.[154]

Muldoon emigrated to the US in 1987 and lives in New Jersey, working as poetry editor of the *New Yorker* and teaching at Princeton University. In terms of his dual identity as an Irish and American poet, Muldoon's collection *Horse Latitudes* may be seen as centring itself within particularly American concerns, specifically preoccupied with American foreign policy on the contemporary world stage. Fran Brearton, reviewing the collection, asks, 'Is this the book where Muldoon has finally "gone native" in America?' but nonetheless takes care to acknowledge, as one must, the 'double-anchoring' – between Ireland and America – that continues to ground Muldoon's poetry.[155] Plath also viewed herself as one who 'straddled the Atlantic' and was very much interested in themes of universal interest, of the languages, histories and cultures of the larger world outside national boundaries:

> Well, I think that as far as language goes I'm an American...Well now, you are talking to me as a general American. In particular, my background is, may I say, German and Austrian. On one side I am a first generation American, on one side I'm second generation American, and so my concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense.[156]

The modes of diction and register too employed by Plath range from Latinate words, formal speech and archaic poetic language to American and British colloquialisms and slang and ironic statement, dramatic pronouncements and theatrical apostrophe. There is no end to the breadth of her poetic resource.

---

[152] Jonathan Bolton, 'Irish Stew at the Café du Monde: Heterogeneity and the Emigré Experience in Paul Muldoon's "Yarrow"', *South Atlantic Review*, 64.1 (Winter 1999), 48 – 71 (p. 68).
[153] Muldoon, 'A Collegelands Catechism', *Princeton Courseware* <www.princeton.edu/~images/courseware/public/catechism/poemstart.html> [accessed August 2007]
[154] Muldoon, in Hirschman, 'Paul Muldoon: A Poet for Our Time'.
[155] Fran Brearton, Review of Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, *Tower Poetry: Poetry Matters*, January 2007 <http://www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/jan2007/muldoon.html> [accessed August 2007]
[156] Plath, in Orr, *The Poet Speaks*, p. 169.

Of the advice he has given to his students Muldoon has said: 'I encouraged them to continue to write as a way of making sense of their lives'[157] but more than that he also draws attention to the ways that we make fictions out of our own lives, himself fictionalising his own autobiographical details within his poems – the father figure especially – as he has said of his poems:

> While they draw on physically very viable locations and psychologically very viable reactions and responses to situations they are almost completely fictionalised. The figures who appear are characters of fiction [...] As it occurs in the poems, my family is from the earliest invented, invented brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers. The father who appears [...] is a fictitious character or characters. Sometimes he's illiterate and sometimes he's extremely literate, allusive and speaks in a way that the 'real' father would never have done.[158]

Muldoon says of the job of the writer that 'as far as any of us can, it's to be a free agent, within the state of oneself, or roaming through the different states of oneself'.[159] Critics have noted Muldoon's 'delight in double and multiple lives', Stephen Burt commenting on how 'poems such as "Twice" indeed depict copies without originals, dual and multiple chains of shifting selves whose narratives fail to reach clear ends'.[160] The existence of various states of self, of rich plurality in Muldoon's work goes to the heart of Plath's entire oeuvre, as her poems are concerned with existential anxieties regarding fragmentary selfhood, multiple selves and states of being. The creation of what Muldoon calls 'that place or imagined place' is also integral to the work of both poets. [161] Nicholas Jenkins' comment on the use of autobiographical details and the use of the personal pronoun 'I' in Muldoon's poetry are extremely helpful in understanding Plath's poetic strategies also:

> In fact, though, Muldoon has used his own life in the bourgeois sphere as material with which to probe the limits of autobiographical poetry in general, *Hay* is an amazing formal and thematic representation of the interchanges between self and other that go into making an identity, and of the ways in which the 'I' in a lyric poem is a mysteriously provisional quantity.[162]

---

[157] Muldoon, in 'Writing to Make Sense of Life', *Princeton Weekly Bulletin*, 90.25 (23 April 2001) <www.princeton.edu/pr/pwb/01/0423/6a.shtml> [accessed August 2007]
[158] Muldoon, in Kevin Barry, 'Q & A: Paul Muldoon', *Irish Literary Supplement*, 6.2 (Fall 1987), 36 – 37 (p. 37).
[159] Muldoon, in Barry, 'Q & A: Paul Muldoon', p. 37.
[160] Stephen Burt, 'Thirteen or Fourteen: Paul Muldoon's Poetics of Adolescence', in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, pp. 6 – 23 (p. 22).
[161] Muldoon, in Barry, 'Q &A: Paul Muldoon', p. 37.
[162] Nicholas Jenkins, 'For "Mother" Read "Other": The Finely Spun Web of Muldoon's Middle Years', *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 January 1999, pp. 9 – 10 (p. 9).

Muldoon has listed one of the advantages of being a writer as 'the extent to which it allows us to invent ourselves'.[163] 'Yarrow', in its very making, testifies to the way that autobiographical details, the facts of a life are transformed into art, becoming much more than straightforward autobiography as they are combined with the transformative power of the imagination, with the processes of memory and of invention. As one critic has noted of Muldoon's poetic voice, 'we cannot cosy up to this elusive "I",'[164] and the same could be said of Plath's poetry with its incessant play of voices, range of tonal varation, ironic mode of address and artful, performative style that disturbs and distances the reader. Plath's poetry is wholly conscious of its status as art and this is something that critics have continued to overlook when considering her highly crafted poetry. Muldoon's terms of reading and writing therefore enable Plath's work to be seen anew.

Of course 'Yarrow' cannot be considered in isolation, divorced from the other poems that make up the collection. Muldoon himself has pointed out the 'link' between the speaker of 'Yarrow' and that of 'Brazil' and how poems such as 'Brazil', 'Cows' and 'Testimony' are all related to 'Yarrow', describing them as 'several other poems within its planetary system'.[165] More than that, links are forged across volumes of poetry too, as Muldoon notes how in 'Yarrow', the '62 cadillac is almost certainly the same model as the mile long white Cadillac that came sweeping out of the distant past in "Immram"'.[166] Seamus Heaney recognises this echoic technique in Plath's poetry as a 'mark of high achievement', as he hails 'the interweaving of imaginative constants from different parts of the oeuvre. These hooves are related to the hooves of the runaway Ariel, just as they are also pre-echoes of the phantom hoof-taps of "Words".'[167] Furthermore, Ted Hughes has also made a very similar comment on Plath's poetry, referring to the 'careful sequence'[168] that was Plath's intended *Ariel* collection. Moreover, Hughes states:

> Sylvia's poetry seems to me, almost in a unique way, a mosaic patterning of almost separate, distinctive units of meaning [...] in her world they're particularly graphically arranged: each unit has a distinctive individuality of its own and is very pointedly contrasted and related to all the others around it, which is part of its beauty and its strength [169]

---

[163] Muldoon, in 'The Art of Poetry No. LXXXVII', p. 88.
[164] Quinney, 'In the Studebaker', p. 20.
[165] 'If you sense that there might be some link between the speaker of this poem and the speaker of Brazil, I'd be inclined to agree'. Muldoon, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo'.
[166] Ibid.
[167] Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-taps: Sylvia Plath', p. 162.
[168] Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 14 – 15.
[169] Hughes, in Clive Wilmer, *Poets Talking: The 'Poet of the Month' Interviews from BBC Radio 3* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994) p. 150.

This statement is echoed in Lachlan McKinnon's comment on Muldoon: 'Each book becomes a unit, and no poem is fully grasped alone'.[170] As Muldoon himself elucidates further:

> I think a poem should be intact in itself, but I think interesting things happen when a number of poems come out of a single, if dislocated personality. They're bound to have some kind of unity. I've become very interested in structures that can be fixed like mirrors at angles to each other – it relates to narrative form - so that new narratives can emerge from the setting up of the poems in relation to each other.[171]

Mirrors are enlarging, reflecting forwards and backwards and making for a form that resists closure and easy consolation, in favour of a myriad possibilities and transpositions. The critic Nicholas Jenkins sees how in Muldoon's poetry 'The well-wrought urn has been replaced by something that looks like a finely spun and potentially endless web'[172] and this idea of a web-like structure strikes very effectively to the heart of Plath's poetic technique, opening up new ways of understanding how Plath's poems operate. Most often, Plath's *Ariel* is read as a narrative that culminates with the poet's suicide, a 'suicide note' as Seamus Heaney for one acknowledges:

> The 'being' of this poetry, in other words, is constantly being pressed with meanings that sprang upon it the moment Sylvia Plath died by her own hand. Even an image like the dead crab [...] is retrospectively canvassed to serve the plot of the suicide's progress.[173]

The poem 'Yarrow' and the mode of reading it demands from the reader – one that with its frequent erratic shifts of time and place, of language and thought, its 'channel-hopping' forbids a sense of linearity or tidy chronology – makes possible a new way of reading Plath also, specifically *Ariel*, as it moves beyond the ordering of the *Ariel* sequence and of the *Collected Poems* to reveal richer interpretations and alternative contexts for reading. Furthermore, with the recent publication of Plath's *Restored Ariel* we may now at last hold the physical book that Plath had intended, her order and selection restored, and approach *Ariel* as embodying the tropes of death and rebirth, moving as it does from the words 'love' to 'spring'. The idea of a pattern, of a deliberate design of words and sounds, is integral to an understanding of the poetic strategies of

---

170 Lachlan Mc Kinnon, 'A Sceptic's Passion', review of Muldoon, *Why Brownlee Left*, *Telegraph*, 4 June 2001 <www.arts.telegraph.co.uk/arts/main.jhtml;?xml=/arts/2001/06/02/bopoem2.xml> [accessed August 2007]

171 Muldoon, in Haffenden, p. 136.

172 Jenkins, 'For "Mother" read "Other: The Finely Spun Web of Muldoon's Middle Years"', p. 10.

173 Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue*, p. 165.

both Plath and Muldoon and it gestures beyond the critical approaches to Plath's work that have privileged the life, the biographical facts as paramount.

What comes to light through a close examination of the poetic strategies and concerns of Plath and Muldoon is the very artful poetic trajectory of Plath's work, wherein the various reaches of the poet's consciousness work to create a sense of order and wherein meanings develop in a very particular and organised way, what Plath herself called her 'small ordered word-patterns.'[174] *Ariel* may then be read as it was designed, as an intricate web of sound, symbols and imagery that gestures towards various forms of rebirth or regeneration and not towards death as the life had it – and so emphatically not as a suicide note. The life of the poems, brought into being through the combined powers of the imagination and the intellect, ultimately exists independently of the poet, as Muldoon has helpfully emphasised:

> But that's one of the things about all poems which I think is absolutely vital to remember – I certainly think it's vital – and that is that the poem has its own life, that it has its own logic, that it makes its own way into the world despite, almost, despite the person through whom it was written. And that it has knowledge about itself which the person through whom it was written may not necessarily even take into account. The poem is much smarter than the poet.[175]

Reading Plath's work through Muldoon points up, most crucially, the importance of close textual analysis in readings of Plath's superbly crafted and technically assured poetry and reveals too the vital elements of patterns and play, of sound, structure, sense and subject matter that binds her immensely rich and polyvalent work. Plath and Muldoon are kindred spirits in the way that they are both, above all else, transnational, innovative and far-reaching poets as the next chapter will examine in depth in terms of Plath's presence in contemporary American poetry.

---

[174] Plath, *Journals*, p. 232.
[175] Muldoon, 'A Collegelands Catechism'.

Chapter Five

'She Does Not Live in a Coffin': Contemporary American Engagements with Plath

Plath's continuing presence in contemporary poetry is perhaps most pervasive in the poetry of the United States, the country of her birth. As William Logan has stated, Plath is 'a crucial figure in American poetry.'[1] Her influence here at a superficial level, particularly on younger neophytes attending the ubiquitous poetry-writing workshops across the U.S. is often signalled in negative terms,[2] yet it is precisely by examining Plath's work alongside that of the poets who have imitated her unsuccessfully that the accomplishment of Plath's poetic skill is revealed, revealing also the failure of those poets who have only absorbed her poetry at the rudimentary level of thematic and biographical matters, eg. death, suicide, torture, betrayal, and the similar failure of critics who continue to misread her in this way.[3] Adrienne Rich, speaking on her own experience of teaching creative writing, has been rightly critical of the way Plath is often read simplistically in terms of her suicide by 'women students who were cultists of Plath who assumed that the poetry drew its energy from the destructive urge.'[4] Rich was immediately struck by the high achievement of Plath's work when she read it in the sixties – deeming Plath's late poems 'absolutely dazzling' – and has recounted her own personal attempts as a teacher to counteract limited readings of Plath's work that overlooked the mastery of the poetic style: 'I kept trying to say in this flattening way that when someone has a gift for language like that it can be applied to any kind of experience.' Rich goes further in her appraisal of Plath's work, hailing it as 'a kind of post-modern breakthrough' and noting its control and, crucially, its 'impersonality', a term which is helpful in moving Plath way from the misleading 'confessional' label. Rich concludes that 'the energy in that poetry is incredible. Sylvia Plath is not a confessional poet. That term has done so

---

[1] William Logan, 'Soiled Desires', *New Criterion*, 16.10 (June 1998), 61 – 68 (p. 61).

[2] 'The American poet Jules Mann, now the director of the Poetry Society in London, saw a great deal of Plath's influence in the East and West Coast writing groups she attended in the late 1980s and early 1990s. In the women-only groups, she says, "so many people were attempting it that it became almost a parody of itself. In the mixed writing groups, women who tried to imitate her were just shredded."' Christina Patterson, 'In Search of the Poet', *Independent*, 6 February 2004, Arts and Books Review section, pp. 2 – 4 (p. 3).

[3] As Christian Wiman has recognised: 'Her overall influence has been terrible, promoting a kind of narcissistic despair that persists in many poems, novels, and movies today. That her work has survived all this ancillary frenzy, that it remains strange and original and troubling, is a testament to how good it really is.' Wiman, 'Influential Poets [They Made America]', *Atlantic Monthly*, 298.5 (December 2006), 75 (p. 75).

[4] Adrienne Rich, in Sarah Maguire, 'Storm Warnings: Adrienne Rich in Conversation with Sarah Maguire', *Poetry Review*, 84.2 (Summer 1994), 14 – 16 (p. 15).

much to diminish poetry in a certain way.' Rich's comments, drawn from her own close interactions with aspiring poets in creative writing classes, are instructive here and point to the ways Plath has been misread as a 'confessional' poet among other reductive labels that ignore the full scope of the poetry. In doing so, this sustained examination will redress a mode of poetry criticism that seeks to brand poetry in limiting, sterile terms that are predicated on the establishment of boundaries pertaining to traditions, gender, subject matter and ideology. Plath's poetry may be re-engaged with in a corrective way by exploring the various ways she has inspired and enabled both imitators and more gifted American poets throughout the decades.

A recent example of an engagement with Plath which is thoroughly biographically based is Stephanie Hemphill's *Your Own Sylvia: A Verse Portrait of Sylvia Plath* (2007) a sequence of poems, or a 'novel' as Hemphill has termed it, which sets out 'to illuminate Sylvia Plath's life and work', many of the poems spoken from the point of view of the various characters from Plath's life and described on the blurb as 'a portrait of her life, told in poems.' As the blurb states, in language that is portentous and inflated, Hemphill's poetry takes us 'on a harrowing journey deep into the heart of Plath's darkness'. Although Hemphill professes an appreciation of Plath's 'gifts of language and rhythm' the poetry within is careless in terms of technique, unsophisticated in its design and therefore thoroughly dissimilar to Plath's complex and highly crafted art. The poem 'Theodore', for example, is subtitled 'In the style of "Ode for Ted"', but it could not be more unlike Plath's early poem, as the first stanza demonstrates with its lazy rhymes and complete absence of the dense visual and aural effects that typify even Plath's early and less achieved poetry:

> She loves that he names the trees,
> All the creatures and leaves,
> Of the forest and fen, receives
> His knowledge like a corsage,
> Never has she known a man so large;
> She believes he's her Adam and she's his Eve.[5]

In many ways a book such as this serves only to point up all that has been wrong about Plath criticism as the author, with overblown sentiment, chooses to focus only on the circumstances of Plath's life with no intelligent attention paid to the technique and concerns of Plath's work. This is seen in a later poem 'Winter's End' which though subtitled 'In the style of "Edge"', completely fails to capture anything of the measured tone, rhythm and sophisticated sonic effects of Plath's

[5] Stephanie Hemphill, 'Theodore', in *Your Own, Sylvia: A Verse Portrait of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Knopf, 2007), p. 118.

compelling, existentialist monologue and is instead a straightforward description of the poet's imagined last moments. Employing limp similes such as 'happy as a rose' and 'ready as a knife' in an attempt to mimic Plath's potent effects of simile and metaphor, it ends predictably with: 'She unlatches the oven door. The gas / Fills her nostrils, sweet as blood, pungent as a sword.'[6] However, although the book has little aesthetic value and fails as a poetic achievement, it may be seen as a very interesting example of intertextuality, similar to Hughes' *Birthday Letters* in this regard, as each poem is accompanied with biographical information, supported by references to biographies of Plath, to Plath's *Journals*, her letters and to even Plath's poems, though these are read as straightforward chronicles of biographical fact. These biographical sources illuminate and complement the poems as the narrative develops and a bibliography is included at the end to further point up this studied, intertextual approach. Hemphill's project, although it may be seen as an interesting exercise in intertextual reading and a sustained engagement with biographical narratives of Plath, is not poetry, and it reveals the ongoing tendency among some younger poets to focus on Plath as a tragic icon rather than truly learn from her as a poet.

That there is far more to Plath's poetry than biographical subject matter and circumstance is evinced by Plath's presence in the work of the most talented American poets of the twentieth century and after. Many diverse poets have testified to the strength of Plath's presence in their work. Alicia Ostriker, as a poet and critic, has named Plath among a list of women poets who heavily influenced her work in the mid-seventies: 'I wrote essays on them, they changed my work'.[7] Amy Clampitt has professed: 'I was electrified by reading Sylvia Plath'[8] and as Jonathan Ellis in his review of Clampitt's *Collected Poems* has recognised: 'Her work welcomes the sounds of many poets inside it, almost as if her *Collected Poems* were a roomy guest house full of different voices: [...] Plath and Lorca and Vallejo and Woolf have all signed their names.'[9] A tribute to Plath at the New York Public Library in 1997 featured Jorie Graham and Jane Miller reading from Plath's work; writers who have in common with Plath, according to Jacqueline Rose, a great gift to move 'across the boundary between what presses from inside and outside the mind'[10]:

---

[6] Hemphill, 'Winter's End', in *Your Own Sylvia*, p. 233.
[7] Alicia Ostriker, in 'Interview with Alicia Ostriker', in Gary Pacernick, *Meaning and Memory: Interviews with Fourteen Jewish Poets* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001), p. 225.
[8] Amy Clampitt, in Elise Paschen, 'An Interview with Amy Clampitt', *Oxford Poetry*, 3.1 (Winter 1986 – 1987), 30 – 36 (p. 32).
[9] Jonathan Ellis, 'Mouthing Noises: Amy Clampitt's Use of Sound', *Thumbscrew*, no. 16 (Summer 2000) <www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=11902> [accessed August 2007]
[10] Jacqueline Rose, Introduction to 'Tribute: Sylvia Plath', *Poetry Society of America Journal* <http://www.poetrysociety.org/journal/articles/tributes/plath.html> [accessed August 2007]

> By writing on the edge of 'matter', 'spirit' (call it what you will), beyond the limits of the self: 'underneath, barely attached but attached, / like a runner, my body, my tiny piece of / the century--[....]' Jorie Graham sends back to Plath a question about the delusions of self-containment, about something which goes way beyond the energies – whatever their force – of any singular mind.[11]

Rose's identification of the way Graham picks up on Plath's overriding preoccupation in her poetry with the 'delusions of self-containment', with existential questions, is an important one as the examination in Chapter Three with its close reading of Plath and O'Reilly brought to light. Other critics have also noticed aspects of Plath's example in Graham's work. In his review of Graham's *The Errancy*, John Redmond sees traces of Plath's influence, along with that of Eliot and Bishop, noting how: 'At times, her serpentine visual sensibility has a quality as sinister as Plath's, for example when she describes light which has hooks or minutes which are like little, white worms.'[12] More recently, on 30th November 2004, the publication of the restored *Ariel* was marked with a ceremonious public reading of the entire book in New York city by Frank Bidart, Graham, Richard Howard, Katha Pollitt and Helen Vendler. The reading brought out the range of voices in Plath's work and highlighted the poems as performance-pieces, as one journalist reported: 'Different voices brought various aspects of Plath to Tuesday's reading, from Bidart's animated but conversational delivery to Pollitt's quiet humor to Graham's theatricality.'[13] Plath's influence on Rich has been signalled by Jahan Ramazani. Writing on the impact of 'Daddy' on American poetry, particularly on women's poetry, Ramazani gives the example of Rich as a poet 'who later analyzed her lingering rage toward her father in prose, began to articulate it in poetry under the sway of Plath's elegies reversing the earlier line of influence from Rich to Plath.'[14] Ramazani sees Plath's sustained influence on Rich in Rich's elegy 'After Dark' which was written less than two years after Plath wrote 'Daddy' and again in the later prose-poem 'Sources' wherein 'Rich's address to her dead father still echoes Plath's apostrophic "Daddy"'. As Ramazani contends, 'Rich draws strength from "Daddy."' Thus, particular poems by Plath have become iconic, fixed presences on the American poetic landscape and these bear out close

---

[11] Rose, 'Tribute: Sylvia Plath'.
[12] John Redmond, 'By Their Errata Shall Ye Know Them', review of Jorie Graham, *The Errancy*, *Thumbscrew*, no. 12 (Winter 1998 – 1999) <www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=12194> [accessed August 2007]
[13] Claudia La Rocco, 'Plath's *Ariel* Publicly Read for First Time', *Nashua Telegraph Online*, 5 December 2004 <www.nashuatelegraph.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20041205/BOOKS/112050035> [accessed August 2007]
[14] Jahan Ramazani, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 293.

examination. Her defining presence in American contemporary poetry cannot be disputed, however the many ways in which her overt influence is time and again signalled by critics and employed by poets, demands closer interrogation.

Louise Glück is also considered as part of a lineage of poets descended from Plath, a 'post-confessional poet', as the *Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Literature in English* authoritatively states: 'in her early work, the influence of Sylvia Plath is strongly felt.'[15] Glück's first collection *Firstborn* is often held up as a work that displays Plath's influence throughout. One scholar has remarked on 'the Plath-like elements of the aggrieved in *Firstborn*'[16] and as Bonnie Costello has also recognised in her discussion of *Firstborn*: 'It is the mid-1960s and Plath's powerful overstatement is the dominant aesthetic, exposing the grotesque underside of domestic routine.'[17] William Logan has written of how 'the disconcerting, morbid psychology of *Firstborn* seems heavily marked by the influence of Sylvia Plath (*Ariel* had appeared only three years before)' and how lines such as the 'moon as round as aspirin' and 'the click / Click of his brain's whirling empty spindle' are 'like shavings from Plath's workshop floor'.[18] It is interesting that Logan also states unequivocally that 'where Plath was a poet of melodrama and rude outburst, Glück is all pinched reserve'. In this way, it emerges that often, the signalling of Plath as a precursor takes the form of a derogatory critical remark on the work of the dead poet. Vendler, in her discussion of Glück, states how 'Glück has some of Plath's willed immobility; but her rhythms are not spiky and hysterical like Plath's'.[19] Despite Vendler's damning assertion, close analysis of many of the poems throughout *Firstborn* reveals that Glück mimics Plath's rhythmic effects exactly. Short lines, terse, matter-of-fact statements closed off by full-stops are frequently employed along with an over-reliance on the surprising metaphor or simile, as in the poem 'Wound', a first-rate example of the perils of imitation:

> The air stiffens to a crust.
> From bed I watch
> Clots of flies, crickets
> Frisk and titter. Now
> The weather is such grease.

---

[15] *The Oxford Companion to Twentieth Century Literature in English*, ed. by Jenny Stringer (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 251.
[16] Ira Sadoff, 'Louise Glück and the Last Stage of Romanticism', *New England* Review, 22.4 (Fall 2001), 81 – 92 (p. 82).
[17] Bonnie Costello, '*Meadowlands*: Trustworthy Speakers', *PN Review*, 25.6 (July – August 1999), 14 – 19 (p. 14).
[18] William Logan, 'God's Chatter', *New Criterion*, 25.4 (December 2006), 59 – 66 (pp. 63 – 64).
[19] Helen Vendler, 'John Ashbery, Louise Glück', in *The Music of What Happens* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 224 – 261 (p. 248).

All day I smell the roasts
Like presences. You
Root into your books.
You do your stuff.
In here my bedroom walls
Are paisley, like a plot
Of embryos. I lie here,
Waiting for its kick.
My love. My tenant.[20]

Glück has since developed away from such early derivative efforts and her later style is much more individual, consisting of long, fluid lines – as opposed to the fragmented, halting phrases in this example – and a much more dynamic and subtle use of voices. Glück has described her own process of becoming and how *Firstborn* was the basis of her career, out of which grew all of her subsequent books: 'each tried to respond to what I perceived as too-defining limitations'. Thus, she recalls: 'after *Firstborn*, I set myself the task of making poems as single sentences, having found myself trapped in fragments.'[21]

Glück herself, in an essay titled 'Invitation and Exclusion' has written on Plath as a poet whom she has valued highly and with whom she has had a very particular relationship with as one poet with another. This essay navigates the developing poet's experience of poetry, separating poets in terms of those that invite the reader to enter and collaborate in the poem – for Glück, T.S. Eliot is one such poet – and those such as Wallace Stevens and Plath, as Glück argues, who do not. Glück's self-aware examination of her own procedures of reading poetry begins with a very perceptive comment on Plath's poetics, specifically on Plath as a poet of exclusion:

> Plath's poems renounce human aid, human analogy – this contempt resembles not at all the proprietary obsessiveness of much contemporary poetry which stakes out territorial claims based on personal history; my father, my pain, my persistent memory. Plath invests almost nothing in circumstance; rather, she consciously distinguishes herself in her response, and so converts the ordinary to the heroic. [22]

Glück holds up Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' as an 'amazing poem', remarkable for its 'complete lack of hesitation and, in consequence, its complete authority' as a poem of 'masterful theater', a 'magic act' which is 'full of spectacular effects, sound effects'. Her comments on Plath's Lady Lazarus' are acute and insightful and she goes on to note persuasively what she regards as the

[20] Louise Glück, 'The Wound', in *Firstborn* (Northwood: Anvil Press, 1969), p. 11.
[21] Glück, 'Author's Note', *The First Five Books of Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997), p. xiii.
[22] Glück, 'Invitation and Exclusion', in *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999), pp. 113 – 123.

'great differences' between Plath and Sexton – Plath as the talented one – stressing the idea of control that Plath insists on, as she, unlike Sexton, is a poet who 'severs all ties'. Ultimately, the essay meditates on the nature of poetic influence and the qualities that poetic enablers must offer. Glück concludes with the assertion that the poets whose poems do not invite the reader into the poem can only produce awe-filled imitators who copy their effects badly. As Glück puts it:

> Those poems we passionately admire but never fully occupy have to be converted into tenanted space; they must be occupied to be points of departure. And the only means of conversion is dogged imitation, which is always deficient and never works and can go on indefinitely, because we so need to fend off the implicit judgement. And we work always facing the monument, so as to re-create it perfectly. But the monument remains the monument.[23]

Poems such as Stevens' 'The Idea of Order at Key West' or Plath's 'Lady Lazarus', remain as such 'monuments' that can never be entered fully and so, for the young poet trying to write, inspire only imitation and frustration. Plath then, for Glück, is one of those poets whom she could only admire greatly from a distance but who could not enable her to develop confidence as an aspiring poet in her own right. *Firstborn* bears out the truth of Plath's too-intimidating example. An examination of Glück's early work points up the masterful technique of her predecessor which she at that early stage can only strive to imitate. However, Glück's self-awareness as a poet is laudable and she has, from these promising beginnings under Plath's tutelage, grown into a poet of compelling style and artistry in her own right. Indeed, Glück's achievement is verified in the way that she is now almost as influential on poets as Plath herself was for Glück and many others. As David Baker has commented in a conversation with the American poet Meghan O'Rourke: 'I understand the need to absorb Plath and then get away from her. Glück, too, I think. Both are such strong stylists, with a kind of contagious power.'[24]

Plath's powerful, intimidating presence in poetry manifests itself in many diverse forms. Carolyn Forché's poem 'Soap Carvings' appeared in the *Centennial Review* in 1972 bearing the dedication 'For Sylvia Plath'.[25] The fact that this poem was never included in any of the poet's collections suggests that it is a poem of a particular moment which had to be composed in order to move on from that moment and facilitate poetic development. It is a very personal tribute, marking out the continuing presence of Plath in the life of this contemporary poet. The poet as

---

[23] Glück, 'Invitation and Exclusion', p. 123.
[24] David Baker,'Interview with Meghan O'Rourke', *Kenyon Review*, September 2006 <http://www.kenyonreview.org/interviews/orourke.php> [accessed June 2007]
[25] Carolyn Forché, 'Soap Carvings, For Sylvia Plath', *Centennial Review*, 16 (Winter 1972), 361 –362.

speaker of the poem, enters Plath's work so as to receive it into her own, thus Plath's life has not ceased:

I

I go to her work with my hands open.
She has been dead for several years
and I imagine her skin slitting,
bulging cold with its contents after her burial.
I can tell them that her hair and fingernails still grow,
but cannot find words to explain
that she cuts the window glass at night.
That she does not live in a coffin.
That she comes to me dangling closets and plans.

The second section of Forché's poem addresses Plath directly. The poet has forged soap carvings of a god which she allows to become 'set adrift' thus indicating that the carvings are temporary, mutable representations that may easily disintegrate or disperse. The figure of this god then is not one to be venerated or maintained, his presence is not lasting. Plath's presence, on the other hand, is strong, persistent and enabling, part of nature. The poet-precursor relationship here is depicted as a natural, parental one; the child helping the parent as the parent initiates the routine ritual:

II

My soap carvings of god
are asleep in paper boats set adrift
But you are on the window,
and morning beaks out if its shell
and the birds drag banners to announce
that stories were slept concerning you.
No one is more surprised than I at this.

I would carry you to the fire
rubbing your hands until they worked again,
and you would start my secrets with your thumb
and do the peeling.

Unlike the 'god' who is remote and unfeasible, Plath is approachable, part of the routine domestic environment and not a far-off aspiration. Forché's ambiguous language here is at times jarringly nonsensical; how, for example, does the verb 'sleep' relate to stories which are usually told or heard? Could, perhaps, the 'soap carvings' refer to the 'cake of soap' of Plath's 'Lady Lazarus' which was formed out of the human remains of Jews in Nazi concentration camps? Forché's own

poetry is deeply concerned with bearing witness to atrocity and issues of history and memory, and so it may be that this early poem points up her indebtness to Plath's example in this regard, as a young poet finding her way. The final lines of this stanza seem a statement of the poet's own sense of self:

> There was once this piece of fruit
> who would rather drop in the orchard
> than be picked
> and who didn't expect much of gods.

The closing section, comprised of three discreet sentences is the most oblique. The woman described here is perhaps a figure in one of Forché's poems who has now finally come to life, set sail; the poem has written itself at last it seems, helped into being by Plath's presence:

> III
>
> And so the woman wears beads of ice and iron
> over a dress of sails that have finally snagged wind.
> So many of her hours in the rented rooms
> have run screaming back to the cave.
> So she is not fragile, and with very little help
> she can picture herself alive.

This poem is a very personal and oblique tribute which does not make full sense either as a poem or as a statement on Plath's life. It is rather an imaginative and surreal response to Plath that remains inscrutable, at the level of one poet communing with another. Its value lies in the fact that it points up Forché's engagement with Plath and her deeply felt relationship to her. Like Glück, Forché has developed a style very much her own but Plath's influence is much less overt in Forché's work as a whole. Plath is, it seems, a poet who meant a lot to this poet, but who has remained a presence in the poet's imaginative life rather than in the poems themselves. The fact of the poem's publication in a journal – a loose, ephemeral format – rather than in an ordered collection suggests that Plath's influence was of a certain defining moment but was not to be made permanent or fixed as part of a book or sequence of poems. Plath, for Forché, lives on in indefinable, unfixed, ever-changing ways; as the poem states 'she does not live in a coffin'. Both Plath and Forché may be seen as kindred poets in the way that each makes innovative use of form and language and interrogate history and politics in their work.

Other American poets have signalled Plath's governing influence on their poetry continuously and in a more overt way. In her first book of poems, *The Witch and the Weather*

Report (1972), Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, now better known as a novelist, includes a lengthy free-verse piece titled 'Elegy for Sylvia Plath' and Plath's dominant presence is confirmed throughout the collection. The third section of the elegy addresses Plath directly on first-name terms:

> Sylvia, I opened the magazine,
> And there it was, your poem,
> Your name at the bottom,
> All those letters, eleven of them,
> Standing up like good soldiers,
> As if there had been
> No war, no battle,
> And no one had ever died.[26]

This poem was included again in Schaeffer's second volume of poetry *Granite Lady* which very deliberately locates her within a particular poetic tradition as the back cover advertises: 'If Susan Schaeffer's poetry calls to mind Emily Dickinson and Sylvia Plath (for whom she writes an elegy), it is not because of identity of style but because of a community of power.'[27] Tellingly, this statement was displayed prominently on the blurb of the book along with an endorsement of Schaeffer's poetry by Anne Sexton which spoke of the poems as 'completely original, associative and fascinating'. Schaeffer then is an example of a poet who signals Plath's importance on her work and thus defines herself as a writer in terms of this poetic lineage. Indeed, Schaeffer's 2006 novel *Poison*, 'inspired by the bizarre relationship of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', proves how Plath's influence has persisted into Schaeffer's work in other literary forms.[28] Jean Valentine has also addressed Plath as an influence on her work and is universally regarded as having been enabled by Plath; Lee Upton has noted the 'early absorption of Plath's influence' in Valentine's work. Upton, in her study, briefly examines poems such as Valentine's 'For A Woman Dead at Thirty' and 'Déjà-vu' as testament to how 'wittingly or not, Valentine in her early career was shadowed by strategies that are familiar from Plath's work'.[29] Valentine herself addresses Plath in her poem 'To Plath, To Sexton' and has enthused over Plath as a formative influence, recalling

---

[26] Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, 'Elegy for Sylvia Plath', in *The Witch and the Weather Report* (New York: Seven Woods Press, 1972), pp. 50 – 52.
[27] James A. Miller, quoted on back cover of Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, *Granite Lady: Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1974).
[28] Mary Houlihan, 'She Was Only Eight but Thought Rejection was "Something Special"', *Chicago Sun Times*, 23 April 2006, Books section, p. 10.
[29] Lee Upton, *The Muse of Abandonment: Origin, Identity, Mastery in Five American Poets* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1998), p. 90; p. 86.

how she was 'absolutely changed by reading Plath' as 'a woman writing out of a woman's life in a way I had never read before, or hadn't picked up on before.'[30]

Tess Gallagher has also stated her debt to Plath: 'I began in that generation of women writers who stepped forth out of the feminist revolution. That was very, very, formative. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were extremely important at the beginning to the forming of my mind.'[31] Diane Wakoski's 'The Water Element Song for Sylvia' from *Greed*, described as 'a poem that utilizes the Plath legend as a symbol of Wakoski's alter-ego' was written in part to answer 'male chauvinist' critics who compared her work to Plath's, even though they share little stylistic congruence—'as if all women of the world who write well must be similar' the narrator of which is 'by contrast to Sylvia, a survivor of men's betrayals, who can tough it out without a man, even though she feels deeply the pain of desertion.' [32] Wakoski is right to point out this reductive critical tendency. However, as we have seen throughout other chapters, Plath's influence transcends gender distinctions. Even though Plath was long considered as a strong example for women poets, one which they could either embrace or reject as they chose, her presence is strong in the work of male poets also. Allen Grossman speaks to Plath in his poem 'For Plath'. This highly stylised elegy mythologises Plath as it invokes the archetypal figures of Persephone, Pallas, Galahad; all 'gigantic questioners'.[33] Grossman, in a conversation with fellow-poet Mark Halliday on poetic theory and practice, has defined himself as 'a child of the same impulses which were so profoundly in conflict in the work of Sylvia Plath.'[34] More recently, but in a similarly elegiac tone, the May 2000 issue of the *Cortland Review* featured a poem by Wade Newman titled 'The Man Who Wanted to be Sylvia Plath'. Newman's poem, addressed to Plath, re-enacts Plath's own biographical movements and so, in its very composition, confirms Plath's continuing presence. The poem ends with the man's death as he cannot live up to Plath's example, his attempts at retracing her steps leading to his own demise; an obvious metaphor for the poet who strives too hard to emulate a too formidable predecessor:

---

[30] Jean Valentine in interview with Kate Greenstreet <http://www.jeanvalentine.com/interview1.html> [accessed December 2005]

[31] Danie Bourne, 'A Conversation with Tess Gallagher' <http://www.wooster.edu/artfuldodge/interviews/gallagher.htm> [accessed December 2005]

[32] Diane Wakosi, quoted in Fred Moramarco and Willliam J. Sullivan, *Containing Multitudes: Poetry in the United States Since 1950* (New York: Twayne Publishing; London: Prentice Hall, 1998) <www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/fmoramar/newmaps.html> [accessed August 2007]

[33] See Grossman, 'For Plath', in *The Woman on the Bridge over the Chicago River* (New York: New Directions, 1979), pp. 23 – 24.

[34] Allen Grossman with Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), p. 41.

He followed a corpse to its burial, whispering, 'Father.'
The rain washed his footprints away with the wreath.

Finally he stuck his head in your oven,
Letting your death sift through his bloodstream,

And vaguely sensed the second thoughts
You lost like a poem as you slept.[35]

A less straightforward and more hostile response to Plath's influence is to be found in the work of Betty Adcock. Adcock has admitted Plath's influence on her work – stating, 'I loved her gifts. The things she could do with language were simply marvelous, and I learned from that' – however, as she has declared, because of the circumstances of Plath's death it is not an easy relationship: 'I admire her work and dislike her in about equal measures. [...] Her poems were exquisite, but neither art nor woman could find a future in those poems as they stood.' [36] Declaring how 'any woman who was writing in the sixties and seventies had to come to terms with Plath in one way of another' she has written a poem 'titled' Plath which she has described as 'a way of getting her out of my system' and which sympathises with Plath's mother: 'I imagined what it would have been like to be the mother of Sylvia Plath. What grief that must have been because of Sylvia's absolutely unchanging wish to die.' Ironically, Adcock's poem, a largely dull, prosaic address to Aurelia Plath, only achieves its slight, sporadic moments of poetic interest by blatantly imitating Plath's style and imagery, as here, in the second section, where she recycles imagery from Plath's 'Daddy' and copies the compulsive, repetition of the ending of Plath's 'The Applicant':

I am ashamed of this anger, ashamed
that I can no longer feel sorry for her,
the American girl who made herself over,
made herself an Auschwitz to fit,
cobbling, cobbling the black shoe
until she could marry it, marry it.[37]

Adcock's opinion of Plath's work is typical of a limited and closed-off approach and her poem has inspired much reaction, as Adcock has noted:

---

[35] Wade Newman, 'The Man Who Wanted to be Sylvia Plath', *Cortland Review*, no. 11 (May 2000) <http://www.cortlandreview.com/issue/11/newman11.htm> [accessed August 2007]
[36] Betty Adcock, in *Southbound: Interviews with Southern Poets*, ed. by Ernest Suarez, T.W. Stanford and Amy Verner (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999), pp. 163 – 164.
[37] Adcock, 'Plath', in *Beholdings: Poems* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), pp. 36 – 37 (p. 36).

> Men often don't like my poem about Plath, but women often do. I've read it and had women come up to me afterward and say, 'I have thought about the same things.' One reviewer—a man—said there was absolutely no point in writing this dreadful poem. I've had a lot of negative reactions to it, which I knew I would get.[38]

The poem is indeed 'dreadful' in terms of its technique irrespective of its subject matter but the impetus behind its composition, as expressed by Adcock – 'a way of getting her out of my system' – is worth attending to. Adcock's view of Plath is a reductive one which is predicated on the nature of Plath's personality and circumstances of her death rather than on the strengths of the poetry. This reductive view hampers her own understanding of Plath's technique: 'One of the main points I wanted to make was that Plath's narcissism was so great that she could only see the natural world as reflecting her own emotions [...] it went against my own sense that the world is something that has its own character, that it must be discovered, not made into a mirror.' Adcock completely misreads Plath, failing to understand the complex strategies regarding the relation of self and world that underpin Plath's poetry. Her misreading of Plath is not uncommon however as too many critics have read Plath's work in terms of the suicide overlooking the craft and technique that governs the poetry above all else.[39] Teaching a course on contemporary poetry Adcock describes how she divided the women poets up and titled it 'Woman Poets: Dead or Alive?': 'I dealt with the live ones on one side and Plath and Sexton on the other. I wanted my students— all young women at a women's college—to see the energy for life that was present in so many women poets, whereas these two were getting so much more of the attention.' Plath then, as Adcock sees it, is narcissistic, self-involved and stands for death rather than life. Adcock seems ignorant of the fact that, whatever Plath's own human flaws, the poetry can in no way be viewed as inert or one-dimensional. In fact, the poetry is quite the opposite; fluid, dynamic and vital. Indeed, its major influence on and enduring presence in contemporary poetry testifies to its live-giving, endlessly rich qualities. Plath's presence is unending, whether reacted against or welcomed by the poet.

Adcock's misgivings are not untypical. Meghan O'Rourke, a younger American poet, has commented on Plath's heavy influence on her early poems. According to O'Rourke, Plath was the most 'overt model':

---

[38] Adcock, in *Southbound*, p. 164.

[39] Jeffrey Berman in his *Surviving Literary Suicide* examines teaching methods relating to suicide and literature. His chapter on Plath suffers from a tendency to reductively paraphrase the meaning of poems such as 'Edge' in these terms, ignoring other interpretations. See Berman, 'Sylvia Plath and the Charge of Art', in *Surviving Literary Suicide* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), pp. 137 – 175.

> It took me a long time to be able to read Plath carefully; I had always been distracted by the impudence of her emotions, and the way the myth of the life overshadows the work.[40]

However, as O'Rourke details, she grew out of her initial inability to read beyond biographical contexts and in doing so makes a valuable point about the necessity of close-reading Plath's work:

> But as I read more carefully I saw how she was able to compress an awful lot of torque into a few short lines. Consider 'Poppies in October'. It starts out with the poet in a mode of amazement — 'Even the sun-clouds this morning cannot manage such skirts', she says of the poppies. But the poem quickly becomes an exclamation of doubt: 'Oh my god, what am I...' (You've got to love those monosyllables.) I was fascinated by the way the apparent demureness of the opening gave way to such bald intensity, and how the mechanics of the verse powered that.[41]

This is in many ways the proper response to Plath's poetry – O' Rourke's reading is exemplary in its focus on the 'mechanics of the verse' – but it is precisely because of the power of Plath's compelling technique that, as O'Rourke concludes, her presence must not be allowed to dominate: 'especially as a young woman—you have to get away from Plath's influence.' Plath's talents ultimately transcend the facts of her life and its lurid after-life, making a poetry that never ceases to repay close attention, as O'Rourke's reading makes clear, but it remains that for many young, aspiring poets Plath's remarkable poetic gift can prove too overwhelming as O'Rourke has learned also.

Perhaps the most pertinent example of the complexities attending Plath's presence in U.S. poetry, as a poet who must be reckoned with, is in Richard Wilbur's 'Cottage Street, 1953'. Bruce Michelson in his discussion of the ambiguities of this poem muses: 'Perhaps Richard Wilbur had to orient himself, privately and in public, under the considerable and troubling shadow which Sylvia Plath has cast over poets for twenty-five years.'[42] Ian Hamilton has also picked up on the connotations of the word 'unjust' in Wilbur's poem: '"Unjust" is his last word on Plath's poetry; it could also be applied to the way in which his own glamour was eclipsed by hers.'[43] Wilbur's poem certainly reads as a troubled response to Plath and has received some attention from critics over the years and Wilbur himself has been drawn to comment at length on its composition and

---

[40] Meghan O' Rourke, in David Baker, 'Interview with Meghan O'Rourke', *Kenyon Review*, September 2006 <http://www.kenyonreview.org/interviews/orourke.php> [accessed June 2007]
[41] Ibid.
[42] Bruce Michelson, *Wilbur's Poetry: Music in a Scattering Time* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991), p. 157.
[43] Ian Hamilton, 'A Talent of the Shallows', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 September 1989, pp. 999 – 1000.

meaning, both in interviews and in his prose writings. Written in the seventies, it describes an afternoon in 1953 which had Wilbur and his wife invited to tea at the house of his wife's mother Edna Ward in New England. The poem is cast in very traditional regular stanzas employing a steady metre, very much in the style of Wilbur's poetry and very different, as more than one reader of the poem has pointed out, to the innovative forms and more instinctive rhythms that Plath came to use in her later poetry:

> Framed in her phoenix fire-screen, Edna Ward
> Bends to the tray of Canton, pouring tea
> For frightened Mrs. Plath; then, turning toward
> The pale, slumped daughter, and my wife, and me,
>
> Asks if we would prefer it weak or strong.
> Will we have milk or lemon, she enquires?
> The visit seems already strained and long.
> Each in his turn, we tell her our desires.
>
> It is my office to exemplify
> The published poet in his happiness,
> Thus cheering Sylvia, who has wished to die;
> But half-ashamed, and impotent to bless,
>
> I am a stupid life-guard who has found,
> Swept to his shallows by the tide, a girl
> Who, far from shore, has been immensely drowned,
> And stares through water now with eyes of pearl.
>
> How large is her refusal; and how slight
> The genteel chat whereby we recommend
> Life, of a summer afternoon, despite
> The brewing dusk which hints that it may end.
>
> And Edna Ward shall die in fifteen years,
> After her eight-and-eighty summers of
> Such grace and courage as permit no tears,
> The thin hand reaching out, the last word love,
>
> Outliving Sylvia who, condemned to live,
> Shall study for a decade, as she must,
> To state at last her brilliant negative
> In poems free and helpless and unjust.[44]

[44] Richard Wilbur, 'Cottage Street, 1953', in *New and Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 68

Reviewing Wilbur in 1962, Randall Jarrell described the poet and his work thus: 'His impersonal, exactly accomplished, faintly sententious skill produces poems that, ordinarily, compose themselves into a little too regular a beauty',[45] or, as William Logan more recently put it, Wilbur's verse is so 'elegant and well-mannered' that he now, in the twenty-first century, 'sounds like an old fussbudget sorry he threw out his last pair of spats.'[46] Plath's poems, as described here by Wilbur, are by contrast, 'free and helpless and unjust'. Questioned on what exactly he meant by this concluding statement Wilbur has given the following elucidation:

> The last lines are not intended as reproof. [...] The poems of Sylvia's last days were brilliant, and they were free in the sense that they came fast and well; they were helpless and unjust because she was writing out of an ill condition of mind in which she could not do justice to anything but her own feelings. There is a limit to the utility of a poetry so skewed and so personal, but I say that with regret and in no spirit of blame.[47]

Wilbur repeatedly states throughout the interview how the poem was not intended as a 'reproof' to Plath and the way in which he deliberately makes mention of the 'malign reviewer' who took the poem as an 'attack on Sylvia' betrays Wilbur's overriding preoccupation with the ways readers have interpreted the 'meaning' of the poem. What he the poet hopes is that readers will understand the poem as a 'balancing act': 'on the whole, those who have testified about "Cottage Street" seem to have understood what sort of balancing act I intended.' Wilbur's position seems very defensive throughout and his use of the verb 'testified' here as well as his assertion that the poem was meant 'not to make a case against Sylvia' implies that one or both of the poets is on trial for a crime. Elsewhere, Wilbur defends himself with: 'let the record show that I said *brilliant*'.[48] Why use such defensive legal terminology in a straightforward interview on poetry? And what exactly is the crime that is being suggested? Furthermore, the poem seems to have caused Wilbur considerable anxiety as the failure of his readers to grasp the true meaning of the poem becomes, as Wilbur, sees it, the poet's failure: 'I feel that a poem which doesn't largely control the responses of a trained reader has not done the job.' The poem itself speaks of similar failures; the failure of Wilbur as lifeguard to rescue the drowned Plath. Wilbur is the 'stupid

---

[45] Randall Jarrell, 'Fifty Years of American Poetry', in *The Third Book of Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970), pp. 331 – 332.
[46] William Logan, 'The Great American Desert', *New Criterion*, 23.10 (June 2005), 66 – 73 (p. 73).
[47] Wilbur, 'About "Cottage Street, 1953"', in *The Catbirds Song: Prose Pieces 1963 – 1995* (New York; London: Harcourt Brace, 1997), pp 147 – 152 (p. 149).
[48] Wilbur, in *Conversations with Richard Wilbur*, ed. by William Butts (Jackson; London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990), p. 193.

lifeguard' in the 'shallows' while Plath is akin to a character in a fable, 'immensely drowned', looking back at Wilbur through her 'eyes of pearl'.

The crime in question is of course what has been seen as Plath's reckless employment of subjects that are not permitted within the decorous realm of poetry. Interestingly, another poet of formal procedures, Anthony Hecht, who has admiringly described Wilbur as a poet of 'stately measures', 'formal elegance', 'grandeur' and 'polish',[49] has also raised his own objections to what he regards, in obvious contrast to Wilbur, as the 'glamour', the 'lure', the 'audacity' of the act of suicide that Plath and Sexton were, in his opinion, 'intrigued by'.[50] By way of supporting his assertion, Hecht quotes Sexton's account of her time with Plath in the Ritz Bar in Boston: 'we talked death with a burned-up intensity, both of us drawn to it like moths to an electric lightbulb'. This is of course Sexton's articulation and not Plath's. Hecht's utter distaste for such an attitude stems in large part from his own very personal experience of loss, as he explains, a friend of his, whose identity he takes care to protect in the interview, committed suicide after having been fascinated by the lives of both poets. There is therefore established in Hecht's mind an indissolvable link between the suicide of Plath and the tragically premature death of his own impressionable friend. Hecht continues by discussing 'Lady Lazarus' in terms of what he knows and dislikes about Plath's character in this regard. Quoting excerpts from the poem, he comments:

> With all allowances for the corrosive irony that this poem exhibits (in which she will go on to imagine herself as the resurrected, vengeful and retributive victim of concentration camp annihilation), I can't help feeling that the poem begins with an admission that death has its attractions, even if they consist of the chance to look back and destroy others.[51]

Hecht, owing to the fact that he served in the military during Word War II and was present at the liberation of Flossenburg extermination camp in 1945, has very personal and impassioned views on the issue of war and poetry and of the poet's responsibility in these matters. In a letter to *Poetry* magazine in 2003 on the subject of poetry and war, Hecht wrote:

---

[49] Anthony Hecht, 'Richard Wilbur: An Introduction', in *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), pp. 172 – 176 (p. 174).

[50] Plath's interest in formalism is evident in her early work in particular but she remained a poet who worked and experimented with forms. Indeed, her selection for the *Critical Quarterly* supplement *American Poetry Now* which she edited in 1961 included Hecht's 'More Light! More Light!' indicating her deep appreciation of traditional formal procedures and of Hecht's own work. Plath also corresponded with Hecht and Wilbur as part of an interview article, 'Poets on Campus', for *Mademoiselle* magazine in August 1953. See Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (Tucson: Schaffner Press, 2003), p. 108.

[51] Hecht, in *Anthony Hecht in Conversation with Philip Hoy* (London: Between the Lines, 1999), pp. 109 – 113.

> Some experiences are so devastating or traumatizing that we feel they ought to be spoken of only by those who have experienced them first hand, who have earned the right to speak by the forfeiture of enormous suffering; and that anyone else is simply exploiting their horror for personal literary advantage.[52]

Plath is, to Hecht's mind, one of those self-same poets and he goes on to quote approvingly Seamus Heaney's oft-quoted criticism of Plath's poem 'Daddy' and how it 'rampages so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows that it simply overdraws its rights to our sympathy'.[53] In the same letter, Hecht adds forcefully that he is himself 'indignant at Plath's appropriation of the Holocaust'. Hecht repeated this sentiment in a later interview, remarking: 'She appropriated the Holocaust so persuasively that the scholar Leo Braudy assumed she was Jewish, although she was not even partly Jewish, and her father was German.'[54] His problem with Plath then is largely due to the fact that her poetry was so persuasive in its dramatic strategies that readers, scholars and historians were convinced by it. This, in fact, is a true measure of Plath's poetic achievement but it does not sit well with Hecht's stringent ideas about moral responsibility in art. The question of poetic responsibility in times of war, issues of permission and adequate response to suffering are vastly complex and ultimately irreconcilable ones, mainly coming down to arbitrary ideas of 'good taste' and contemporary fashion, the subjective vagaries of what is acceptable. As a poet of a certain moral stance and one who clings to ideas of 'truth' and honour, Hecht professes: 'one has to be very tentative and careful and discriminating in writing about the war.' Hecht however, perhaps unwittingly does arrive at a much more lucid viewpoint when he concludes: 'Yet I know that, having myself been a distant witness to that vast suffering, I have little better title to write about it.'[55] His problem with Plath points up an endless debate about the boundaries between fact and fiction, art and the 'facts' of human experience.

Plath's poem 'Lady Lazarus', the subject of Hecht's criticism as well as that of other commentators, deserves close examination. It is a compelling monologue, spoken to a voyeuristic, apathetic, consumerist audience, by a self whose identity has been undone, whose body and language has been repossessed and for whom death of the self is the only comprehensible act in the face of such horrific existential realities:

---

[52] Hecht, 'Letter to the Editor', *Poetry*, 183.2 (November 2003), 105 – 106.
[53] Seamus Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath', in *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber, 1988), pp. 148 – 170 (p. 165).
[54] Hecht, in Bruce Cole, 'The Life of a Poet: A Conversation with Anthony Hecht', *Humanities*, 25.2 (March – April 2004), 6 – 54 (p. 50).
[55] Ibid.

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it —

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify? —

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grave cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty.
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them unwrap me hand and foot—
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first time it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

The second time I meant
To last it out and not come back at all.
I rocked shut

As a seashell.
They had to call and call
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

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

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
For the hearing of my heart—
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge
For a word or a touch
Or at bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

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

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,

A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.[56]

As Louise Glück has stated, this is a poem of 'masterful theater',[57] and it is declaimed by a speaker who pushes language to the height of its poetic effects. Plath's own recording of it has the poet emphasizing every sound and sonic effect, each consonant and vowel brought out with precision and emphasis, the voice controlled and authoritative. Plath introduced the poem in a very particular way, placing the emphasis very much on the 'speaker', thus: 'The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn.' She is, as Plath describes, 'the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will.' The poem is obviously a fantasia, a work of the imagination, the reader, as Plath makes clear, granted the freedom of 'what you will' as the poem takes off. The sound and structure of 'Lady Lazarus' is masterfully orchestrated, achieving a relentless momentum across twenty-eight three-line stanzas. The poem opens with a statement of what has been accomplished by the speaker 'I've done it again. / one year in every ten / I manage it' – the act itself circuitously described as 'a *sort* of walking miracle'. The speaker's monologue continues as she defines herself, her physical attributes in terms of other objects, employing the tropes of simile and metaphor:

[...] my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

The face is blank, 'featureless', foreign, articulating speaker's uncertain identity; she comprises both 'Nazi' and 'Jew', victim and oppressor in one. The fragmented, disparate body, catalogued in its separate parts – crucially always figured in terms of something else, something 'other' than and outside the self – puts itself on display for the 'peanut-crunching crowd' of public spectacle.

[56] Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, pp. 14 – 17.
[57] Glück, *Proofs and Theories*, p. 120.

Aural devices create a powerful propulsion, sonic links sounding across stanzas, as here, in the opening stanzas, the rhyme on 'again' and 'ten' is echoed further along in 'linen' the first syllable of which chimes appropriately back to 'skin'; linen and skin are interwoven, impossible to separate. Internal rhyme is omnipresent: 'bright' and 'right' the alliteration of 'face' with 'featureless, fine', the 'ay' sound of 'paperweight' sounding a forward thrust into the identical sounding vowel of 'face'. Thus this pattern of echoes creates links, pointing up the similarities between each of the body parts as one sound melds into another.

> Peel off the napkin
> O my enemy.
> Do I terrify? —
>
> The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
> The sour breath
> Will vanish in a day.

Again, the 'in' of 'napkin' is set up by the 'in' of 'linen' in the preceding line, the rhyming pattern unrelenting and persuasive. The propulsive force is charged further by the use of long dashes which propel the delivery of the address across stanzas, signaling onwards. Here the speaker is addressing an 'enemy' as she posits the question 'Do I terrify?' Again, a list of her body parts is obsessively stated as being the source of this terror. Off-rhymes on 'teeth' and 'breath', 'enemy' and 'terrify' signal disjuncture, the 'ay' of the stressed word 'day' echoing back to the previous sounds connected with the 'face' and the 'paperweight' of the previous catalogue. The speaker goes on to reveal more of herself, again rendered in simile, as 'like the cat I have nine times to die' – this, the poem itself, is 'Number Three', the third occasion of death – unusually, for someone endowed with such abilities, she is, as she divulges, an ordinary human woman, a 'smiling woman' of thirty. It is through language that Plath's speaker effects her reincarnation, the poem itself enacts her third rebirth: '*This* is Number Three'. Thus, the sonic effects here are hypnotic with the soporific repetition of the soft, sibilant 'soon, soon'. Once more, the internal rhyme on 'ay' of 'grave cate ate' echoes back once more to her dislocated body parts, the 'I' directly equated with its rhyme 'die' as the stanza closes with a full-stop which is ironically suggestive of a closure that the speaker herself persistently resists through her very act:

> And I a smiling woman.
> I am only thirty.
> And like the cat I have nine times to die.

The presence of the spectators, the audience – crucially, a crowd of listeners as well as viewers – is then granted attention:

> What a million filaments.
> The peanut-crunching crowd
> Shoves in to see
>
> Them unwrap me hand and foot—
> The big strip tease.
> Gentlemen, ladies
>
> These are my hands
> My knees.
> I may be skin and bone,
>
> Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.

The compulsive sonic patterns continue to proliferate, fixating the ear of the listener. In this way, the 'ee' of 'see' chimes with 'tease', 'ladies' and then 'knees'. The speaker, like a display piece, is being 'unwrapped' piece by piece for all to inspect, addressing her audience as 'gentlemen, ladies' as she points out her distinct limbs, now 'skin and bone' but still 'the same, identical woman'. This is a poem that is very much concerned with the representation of the 'self', with 'identity' and how 'identical' the speaker *may* be after undergoing such a transmutation, Lazarus-like from death back to the state of life.

The rhyme scheme is mimetic of the sense of inevitability; the inevitability of the woman's existence, of the ongoing cycle of her deaths and rebirths. In this way, the speaker obsessively outlines her history, aural linkages lending an inevitable structure and sense to the repeated process:

> The first time it happened I was ten.
> It was an accident.
>
> The second time I meant
> To last it out and not come back at all.
> I rocked shut
>
> As a seashell.
> They had to call and call
> And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

As is so pointedly audible, the 'en' of 'happened' thrusts forward to that of 'ten' and 'accident', reaching across the stanza break to 'meant' where the 'all' sound in turn creates a link forward to 'call and call'. These aural effects grow more powerful and compelling in the next stanzas:

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.
>
> I do it so it feels like hell.
> I do it so it feels real.
> I guess you could say I've a call.
>
> It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
> It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
> It's the theatrical
>
> Comeback in broad day
> To the same place, the same face, the same brute
> Amused shout:
>
> 'A miracle!'
> That knocks me out.

'Dying' – visually striking in its positioning, set off as the lone word on the line – is, as the speaker's artful monologue testifies to, 'an art' compared, through simile, to 'everything else'. 'Everything' then is art, indicating that, reality is a constructed thing, the self a fabrication. Even dying, the one universal certainty, is not 'real' – the speaker testifies to her routine as merely 'feeling' real, feeling, as simile is once again employed, 'like hell'. The act is, as the speaker informs us, 'easy enough' to do, requiring no physical effort or movement. The 'theatrical' element is reiterated. Ironically it is only the reaction that the speaker gets from her audience, and not the 'death' itself, that 'knocks [her] out'. Again, pronounced linkages of rhyme across lines create a sense of inevitability, of order: the 'el' of 'seashell' in the previous stanza leads into 'else' then 'well' and 'hell', driving forward across the stanza to 'cell'. The forceful, dramatic 'shout' is perfectly matched through end-rhyme by the conclusive 'out' which is then punctuated further by the full-stop that closes off the stanza. In this way sound creates sense as it is the 'shout' that directly causes the speaker to be knocked 'out'. Close repetition of the 'ay' sound lends force to the idea of 'sameness' that is being expressed, as, according to the speaker, it is the fact that the act occurs during the 'day', the speaker returning herself back to the 'same place' and 'same face' – appropriately, 'place' and 'face' rhyme perfectly to suggest that the self has no integrity apart from the specifics of location – that creates the necessary impact for both speaker

and audience. The horror intensifies as the speaker states the personal cost of her skilled performance. Here, the sound 'ar', repeated across the stanzas – in 'charge', 'scars', 'heart', 'large' – builds a powerful momentum as the poem steadily rises to a climax:

> There is a charge
>
> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
> For the hearing of my heart—
> It really goes.
>
> And there is a charge, a very large charge
> For a word or a touch
> Or at bit of blood
>
> Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.

'Clothes' links back to 'goes'; as the heart itself is catalogued in the same list as 'clothes', the outward, superficial and temporary coverings are thus equated with the integral, inner organs. Nothing comprising the identity, the self, then has integrity or permanency. The speaker turns now to address specific, male figures, the doctor and again her 'enemy': 'So, so, Herr Doktor. / So, Herr Enemy.' Here, the previously-articulated sibilant 's' pattern has an overtly threatening aspect to it. The speaker defines herself now as a possession of the male power figures:

> I am your opus,
> I am your valuable,
> The pure gold baby
>
> That melts to a shriek.
> I turn and burn.
> Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

The speaker does not possess her own self but is instead the product and property of the doctor, the enemy, her worth determined by him. Rhyme continues to produce a hypnotic effect in 'turn', 'burn' and 'concern'. Within the closing stanzas, as they build to a powerful finale, repetition proliferates: 'ash, ash' and 'beware, beware' sound ominously while the address to the male figures expands now to 'Herr God' and 'Herr Lucifer'; the rhyme of 'ring' and 'filling' connecting both articles in terms of their arbitrary value:

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

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

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

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

The 'phoenix' as Plath described her speaker, has risen from the ashes not to be dissected or possessed. Instead, the speaker, under threat in a world of power and violence, surveillance and invasion, has, through her linguistic performance, escaped, even as the performance itself enacts the impossibility of freedom or wholeness. The closing end-rhyme of 'air' and 'hair' as it harks back to 'beware' creates a strong closure, a final, ominously triumphant blow, as the speaker states her practice of consuming those who would consume her: 'I eat men like air'. The 'libertarian spirit' has set herself free through her linguistic act.

Such attention to poetic language and its effects testifies to the craft that is so central to Plath's poetics; this poem, as many others in Plath's oeuvre, is so self-conscious in its formal strategies that the reader is never allowed to forget that this is a 'poem', a dramatic set-piece. Plath's references to the Holocaust in this poem and others have been highly contentious. As Leon Wieseltier wrote of 'Daddy':

> Familiarity with the hellish subject must be earned, not presupposed. My own feeling is that Sylvia Plath did not earn it, that she did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place.[58]

It is interesting to note that the poet Paul Muldoon, the subject of the previous chapter, has also engaged with the holocaust in his own poetry. His poem 'At the Sign of the Black Horse' invokes his wife's Jewish relations and their experience of the Holocaust. Similar to 'Lady Lazarus' Muldoon's poem lists the particles of disembodied human remains, the 'clay, hay, hair, spectacle-frames' of the Holocaust dead,[59] as 'mixed up in the hurricane's forces are the histories of Irish

[58] Leon Wieseltier, 'In A Universe of Ghosts', review of Dorothy Rabinowicz, *New Lives: Survivors of the Holocaust Living in America*, *New York Review of Books*, 23.19 (25 November 1976), 20 – 23 (p. 20).
[59] Paul Muldoon, 'At the Sign of the Black Horse', in *Moy Sand and Gravel* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), p. 85. Laura Quinney, reviewing Muldoon's collection has pointed out his use of Holocaust imagery

emigrant labourers, bootlegging and the Holocaust'.[60] Like Plath, Muldoon had no personal experience of the Holocaust, indeed Muldoon writes at a further remove from the historical moment than Plath did, yet, unlike Plath, Muldoon's poem has at no point been the subject of negative criticism. Perhaps, it is precisely this historical distance that permits Muldoon to write about such a subject while Plath's similar treatment of it was, for most of the last century, seen by critics as unpermissible. It is clear that Plath was ahead of her time in speaking out about a subject that many preferred to forget; indeed her terrifying 1957 poem 'The Thin People' speaks of how those victims of Nazi concentration camps – Plath would have seen these horrific images on news-reels as a child growing up in post-World War II America – 'do not obliterate // Themselves', as the haunted speaker describes how the Holocaust dead cannot be repressed: 'They are always with us'.[61] Steven Axelrod correctly describes it as 'a new kind of historical poem – shocking, unfiltered and immersed in its topic'.[62]

Plath's strategies in terms of her language, imagery and themes are deeply considered and they serve to interrogate the large subjects of death, war, family, processes of interpretation, memory, the structures we live by, narratives of power and ultimately question what the nature of 'self' itself may be understood to be in a contingent world. As Axelrod asserts, these references to historical tragedy must not be disparaged as appropriation, but instead 'may be better viewed as commemoration. They resist the aesthetic drift to moral anaesthesia and political amnesia.'[63] Plath's speaker refuses to forget, but instead obsessively records her own history as she has experienced it. Her own existence, her own body, is nebulous, her identity fluid and vulnerable, the record of history has been one of the self under threat, mutilated, invaded, repossessed, traded, watched over and destroyed. The speaker's triumph is in the way that she shows awareness of the abuses that have been against her, using language, the language and codes of her victimization, against her oppressors. As Lisa Narbeshuber has observed, Plath, in poems such as 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy' 'unveils and critiques the private, the hidden, and the normalized by parodying various public discourses of power.'[64]

---

in this poem. Quinney, 'In the Studebaker', *London Review of Books*, 25.20 (23 October 2003), 20 – 21 (p. 21).

[60] Michael Kinsella, 'On Being Preposterous', review of Muldoon, *Moy, Sand and Gravel*, *PN Review*, 29.4 (March – April 2003), 70 – 71 (p. 71).

[61] Plath, 'The Thin People', in *Collected Poems*, pp. 64 – 65.

[62] Steven Gould Axelrod, 'The Poetry of Sylvia Plath', in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Jo Gill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 73 – 89 (p. 79).

[63] Axelrod, 'The Poetry of Sylvia Plath', p. 86.

[64] Lisa Narbeshuber, 'The Poetics of Torture: The Spectacle of Sylvia Plath's Poetry', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 34.2 (2004), 185 – 203 (p. 187).

Similarities have also been drawn between Sharon Olds and Plath. Olds' 'The Lisp', for example, has been compared to Plath's 'Mary's Song' in the way that it makes a connection between Sunday lunch and torture. [65] Another Olds' poem, 'That Year', has been described elsewhere as a 'post-Plath production' and Olds is frequently labelled as an heir of Plath's, a confessional poet after Plath, Sexton and Lowell. [66] A typical review of Olds' poetry states: 'If Sylvia Plath's father occasionally appeared in her poems as a vampire out of an old, cheaply elegant horror movie, the father in [Olds'] *The Gold Cell* seems to have emerged from a contemporary splatter flick', but this is a lazy and reductive view, and one which diminishes Plath's scope and talent by forging thoughtless similarities between the two American poets as intractable fact. [67] Indeed, Olds herself has stated how other poets were much more influential on her work: 'Although I felt, once I read her, that Plath was a great genius, with an IQ of at least double mine, and though I had great fellow feeling for Anne Sexton being the woman in that world, their steps were not steps I wanted to put my feet in.'[68] James Fenton, in a discussion of Plath's use of Nazi imagery, persuasively derides Olds in poems such as 'The Takers' and 'The Departure' as one of the many 'Plath imitators and admirers' who 'have given these procedures a bad name.' [69] Olds' poem 'The Departure' is, according to Fenton, an 'impertinent harangue', and it is, as Fenton asserts, a long way from this back to the argument of 'Daddy'. Fenton's comments are instructive in terms of showing the always overlooked discrepancies between the poetry of Plath and of a later poet such as Olds.

As Floyd Skloot has also observed, reviewing Olds' *The Unswept Room*: 'By temperament, subject and boldness of attack, she is kin to Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton. But Olds' achievement in *The Unswept Room* does not live up to the promise of this poetic lineage'.[70] Adam Kirsch, reviewing Olds' *Blood, Tin, Straw* goes further. Noting similarities between Olds and Plath he unequivocally hails Plath as the 'better poet', as he asserts: 'Olds's blasphemies and affirmations are always in deadly earnest, which is why they are devoid of two of the most appealing qualities of Plath's verse: wit and artifice.'[71] Kirsch recognises how Plath's poetry is far more technically accomplished than that of Olds', as 'it is here, at the level of style that Olds

---

[65] Vicki Feaver, 'Body and Soul: The Power of Sharon Olds', in *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, ed. by Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 140 – 156 (p. 141).
[66] Brenda Wineapple, 'I Have Done This Thing', review of Sharon Olds, *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems 1980 – 2002*, *Poetry*, 185.3 (December 2004), 232 – 236 (p. 232).
[67] Anthony Libby, 'Fathers and Daughter and Mothers and Poets', *New York Times,* 22 March 1987, p. 23.
[68] Olds, in Christina Patterson, 'Sharon Olds: Blood, Sweat and Fears', conversation with Sharon Olds, *Independent*, 27 October 2006, Arts and Books Review section, p. 20.
[69] James Fenton, 'Lady Lazarus', *New York Review of Books*, 44.9 (29 May 1997), 12 – 16 (p. 14).
[70] Floyd Skloot, 'The Unswept Room', *Harvard Review*, 26 (Spring 2004), 215 – 216 (p. 215).
[71] Adam Kirsch, 'The Exhibitionist', *New Republic*, 221.26 (27 December 1999), 38 – 41 (p. 41).

diverges from Plath'. Olds, as Kirsch understands, lacks the 'black comedy' that Plath displays. Ultimately, for this shrewd reviewer: 'Plath has also the excess of artifice, that margin of language beyond the subject, that defines true poetry'. Richard Tillinghast, reviewing Olds' *The Dead and the Living* also connects Olds back to Plath at the level of theme: 'Olds has without a doubt been influenced deeply by Plath's poetry. Love and hatred of the father are major preoccupations for both writers, and both equate violence within the family with violence within the state and between nations'.[72] But, as Tillinghast takes care to emphasise, 'there are important differences. The father in Plath is essentially a fantasy, a creation of a mind hovering on the edge of madness. Olds is, one feels certain, recording an actual story.' Their methods then are also very different and Tillinghast's comments reveal a crucial point about Plath poetry and its craft, its considered artifice. Plath's poetry, unlike Olds' lesser attempts, is not unmediated biographical experience. As Tillinghast asserts, commenting on the poem 'The Takers': 'Olds' attempts, however, to establish political analogies to private brutalization [...] are not very convincing. For one thing, Sylvia Plath did the same thing earlier, and did it better.'

With this in mind, Olds' poem 'That Year' bears out the vast differences between Olds' technique and that of Plath's 'Daddy'. The subject matter of both poems may be seen as relatively similar; both speak of a familial father figure in terms of large-scale human cruelty, with specific reference to the Holocaust concentration camps. Olds' poem centres on a particular year, bringing into focus certain private and public events that occurred within this time-frame. The poem opens with an image of Olds' father cast across an enjambed two line stanza in free verse which continues across the stanza break into a different image; the discovery of the body of a murdered rape-victim, a class-mate of the poet:

> The year of the mask of blood, my father
> hammering on the glass door to get in
>
> was the year they found her body in the hills,
> in a shallow grave, naked, white as
> mushroom, partially decomposed,
> raped, murdered, the girl from my class. [73]

Following this digression away from the poet's family life to the violence of the public locale, the next stanza returns to the familial scene, with the focus now on the mother and intimations of the torture that the family has endured at the hands of the father:

---

[72] Richard Tillinghast, 'Blunt Instruments', *The Nation*, 239.11 (13 October 1984), 361 – 363 (p. 361).
[73] Sharon Olds, 'That Year', in *Satan Says* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980), pp. 6 – 7.

That was the year my mother took us
and hid us so we would not be there
when she told him to leave; so there wasn't another
tying by the wrist to the chair,
or denial of food, not another
forcing of food, the head held back,
down the throat at the restaurant,
the shame of vomited buttermilk
down the sweater with its shame of new breasts.

The poet-as-child's suffering here is bound up with her entry into adolescence – the word 'shame' repeated across lines to enforce the linkage between humiliation and female puberty – and her developing awareness of her femininity is paralleled with the same femininity that has been violated in the figure of the murdered rape victim above, her kindred. In the next stanza, the poet's experience of her menarche flows into a class-room Social Studies lesson and her learning of the Holocaust:

That was the year
I started to bleed,
crossing over that border in the night,

and in Social Studies, we came at last
to Auschwitz, in my ignorance
I felt as if I recognized it
like my father's face, the face of a guard
turning away---or worse yet
turning toward me.

Here, Olds' father is implicated in the murderous crimes perpetrated within concentration camps such as Auschwitz; the concentration camp as familiar to her as her father's features which then seem to meld into the face of the camp guard. The last section binds together earlier themes and images – of breasts, whiteness, guards, the father, of family, of hunger, of ignorance – gesturing towards a sort of symmetrical pattern:

The symmetrical piles of white bodies,
the round, white breast-shapes of the heaps,
the smell of the smoke, the dogs the wires the
rope the hunger. This had happened to people,
just a few years ago,
in Germany, the guards were Protestants
like my father and me, but in my dreams,
every night, I was one of those
about to be killed. It had happened to six million

Jews, to Jesus's family
I was not in---and not everyone
had died, and there was a word for them
I wanted, in my ignorance,
to share some part of, the word *survivor*.

The poem ends with the poet-as-child's statement of her wished-for entitlement to the same identity of 'survivor' that Holocaust survivors have found definition in. Throughout, the obvious connective gesture – or 'symmetry', as the poem intends it – is between the familial cruelty and torture in Olds' own family and the murderous cruelty of the Holocaust towards 'Jesus's family', linked together by repetition and by the pivotal refrain 'that was the year'. But as Brenda Wineapple has recognised, 'she sacrifices her moral authority with this facile comparison'.[74] The comparison is a truly facile one, but whatever the moral failures of the poem it fails even more at the level of art. The voice of the poem is the same voice that sounds throughout Olds' oeuvre, the voice of the poet, unmediated, relating and revisiting her direct experience through memories. The poem fails to move beyond the level of a puerile narrative, articulating a too easy, too straightforward comparison with no element of intellectual questioning attempted. In terms of technique, there is no imaginative or intelligent reach displayed and the language is flaccid and prose-like, devoid of striking imagery. The only memorable aspect of the poem is the story of Olds' horrific upbringing that is suggestively recalled throughout. As Adam Kirsch has recognised correctly, 'Sharon Olds' poems are certainly everything that testimony should be: sincere, resounding, unambiguous, consolatory. But just as certainly they are not art.'[75]

Unlike Olds' work, the enduring power of Plath's poetry is due to her powerfully imaginative and strikingly innovative use of metaphor and image and her controlled use of voice, persona and elements of the dramatic performance. Plath, as she herself enthused in interview, was very excited by the development of speaking poems at poetry readings and recordings of the spoken voice in poetry: 'Well, I do feel that now and I feel that this development of recording poems, of speaking poems at readings, of having records of poets, I think this is a wonderful thing. I'm very excited by it.'[76] Plath wrote her poems very specifically to be read aloud, describing her late work as 'written for the ear, not the eye' as 'poems written out loud', and she very clearly introduced her poems before reading them as dramatic pieces spoken by particular

[74] Wineapple, 'I Have Done This Thing', p. 232.
[75] Kirsch, 'The Exhibitionist', p. 41.
[76] Plath, in *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*, ed. by Peter Orr (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1966), pp. 167 – 172.

characters and personae. [77] In this way, poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' are monologues employing a wide range of dramatic effects and rhetorical devices, shifts in tone and a range of diction from colloquial, slangy talk, nursery rhyme, bureaucratese to elaborate Latinate and anglo-saxon words. As Clive Wilmer has correctly described 'Daddy', stressing its design and artifice, its crafted use of the persona: 'far from being a rejection of impersonality, Plath's poem is a development of it. The speaker is as much a constructed persona as Larkin's tourist or Eliot's Magus.'[78] 'Daddy' composed on the 12 October 1962 is a tour-de-force performance piece:

> You do not do, you do not do
> Any more, black shoe
> In which I have lived like a foot
> For thirty years, poor and white,
> Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.
>
> Daddy, I have had to kill you.
> You died before I had time —
> Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,
> Ghastly statue with one gray toe
> Big as a Frisco seal
>
> And a head in the freakish Atlantic
> Where it pours bean green over blue
> In the waters off beautiful Nauset.
> I used to pray to recover you.
> Ach, du.[79]

Liam Rector has rightly hailed Plath's 'Daddy' as a 'masterpiece of voice'.[80] The poem is a virtuoso performance by a voice as it apostrophises the multivalent figure of 'Daddy' and the first three stanzas set up a driving propulsion of rhyme sounds on 'oo' that lend force and drama to the voice. As the pattern of carefully interlaced rhyme sounds proliferates the possibilities that hinge on this simple rhyme are endless and the effect is one of rising power and momentum over stanzas. A vast topography is laid out in the opening stanzas – from San Francisco, to Nauset and across the Atlantic to Germany and Eastern Europe:

---

[77] Plath, Typescript for 'New Poems', 13 December 1962. Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.
[78] Clive Wilmer, 'The Later Fortunes of Impersonality: Eliot's "Tradition" Essay in Post-War Poetry', *PN Review*, 30.5 (May – June 2004), 15 – 19 (p. 18).
[79] Plath, 'Daddy', in *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, pp. 73 – 75. All further quotations from this poem are from this source.
[80] Liam Rector, in Sarah Kanning, 'An Interview by Sarah Kanning', *American Poetry Review*, 34.5 (September – October 2005), 37 – 41 (p. 38).

In the German tongue, in the Polish town
Scraped flat by the roller
Of wars, wars, wars.
But the name of the town is common.
My Polack friend

Says there are a dozen or two.
So I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.
The tongue stuck in my jaw.

It stuck in a barb wire snare.
Ich, ich, ich, ich,
I could hardly speak.
I thought every German was you.
And the language obscene

What is being expressed in these stanzas is the problem of articulation. The use of sound is masterful in conveying the sense of stoppage and linguistic breakdown, exemplified in the stuttering line 'ich, ich, ich, ich' with its hard, spiky fricatives linking it directly to the hard 'k' of 'speak', of 'stuck' and of 'Polack'. It is important to note the way that here the word 'Polack' is clearly chosen over the more common 'Polish' for its particular sound quality. The next stanzas have provoked controversy due to the references made throughout to World War II concentration camps and to what has been perceived incorrectly as the poet's own immoral or unlawful appropriation of a Jewish identity:

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew.
I think I may well be a Jew.

The snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna
Are not very pure or true.
With my gipsy ancestress and my weird luck
And my Taroc pack and my Taroc pack
I may be a bit of a Jew.

The focus here is again on language and identity. Firstly, the speaker begins to talk 'like a Jew' – note the use of the simile – out of which she can then only conclude, 'I may well be a Jew'. Susan Gubar too has highlighted the way Plath here 'considers what her identification might mean,

rather than simply assuming that identification: "I think I *may well* be a Jew"'.[81] Plath's method is therefore highly self-conscious in terms of questions of articulating the self through language, of negotiating the implications of various identities, Jewish or female. It is specifically the figure of the father, the patriarch and wielder of terrifying power that is addressed here:

> I have always been scared of *you*,
> With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
> And your neat mustache
> And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
> Panzer-man, panzer-man, o You—
>
> Not God but a swastika
> So black no sky could squeak through.
> Every woman adores a Fascist,
> The boot in the face, the brute
> Brute heart of a brute like you.

'Daddy' then, as patriarchal figure, is a Nazi, a fascist, the typical dominant male figure of Western cultural narratives, comprising devil, husband, father, dictator, teacher:

> You stand at the blackboard, daddy,
> In the picture I have of you,
> A cleft in your chin instead of your foot
> But no less a devil for that, no not
> Any less the black man who
>
> Bit my pretty red heart in two.
> I was ten when they buried you.
> At twenty I tried to die
> And get back, back, back to you.
> I thought even the bones would do.

Images of containment and stasis are interlaced throughout; from the black shoe with its dark nursery-rhyme quality to the suffocating sack. The speaker is unable to reach the father figure as he is dead, 'buried', and so the poem itself, through its articulation and design seeks to form the father into something permanent so that he may be easier to repair and confront:

> But they pulled me out of the sack,
> And they stuck me together with glue.
> And then I knew what to do.
> I made a model of you,
> A man in black with a Meinkampf look

[81] Susan Gubar, 'Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14.1 (Spring 2001), 191 – 215 (p. 194).

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

The self then is something that can be constructed and broken down, like a figurine to be stuck back together just as the speaker can construct a 'model', a representation of the father through words and make the poem itself. The poem then is the replacement for the 'black telephone', a mode of communication that is direct, endless and open, that facilitates movement from one place to another, a point of entry; as the speaker declares at the end: 'I'm through'. Words are fashioned as a spell that can conjure the dead, the magical ritual of repetition creating out of words something that lives. There is therefore a nightmarish fairy-tale quality throughout which is emphasised further by the childish mode of address that is 'daddy'. Folk and fairy tales, narratives of power and of love are invoked throughout. Thus, the final stanzas incorporate the figure of the 'vampire' and the community of 'villagers' fighting back to win victory over the tyrant in a ritualistic dance:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two —
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now.

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.

What is revealed from a reading of 'Daddy' is the sheer range of Plath's concerns. Plath described herself as a 'political person', much of which has been detailed in Chapter 3, and in a late interview she stated her deep interest in history:

> I am not a historian, but I find myself being more and more fascinated by history and now I find myself reading more and more about history. I am very interested in Napoleon, at the present: I'm very interested in battles, in wars, in Gallipoli, the First World War and so on, and I think that as I age I am becoming more and more historical.[82]

[82] Plath, in Peter Orr, 'Sylvia Plath', in *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets*, ed. by Peter Orr (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966), pp. 167 – 172 (p. 169).

The way that Plath speaks here of ageing as a process of becoming 'more and more historical' is an interesting as it suggests the consciousness of the self and the process of history developing in tandem, intertwined in this way. 'Daddy' is a monologue in which the voice strives for self-definition through the processes of history, interrogating power-structures and systems of hierarchy within language and reality. As Susan Gubar has written in an essay which considers Plath's poems in terms of the trope of prosopopoeia: 'Like a number of poets in her generation, and not unlike Adorno, Plath viewed the Shoah as a test case for poetry and, indeed, for the imagination as a vehicle for conveying what it means for the incomprehensible to occur.'[83] History and memory are central themes and the processes of memory are signaled directly through the use of a deliberate rhyme scheme; rhyme itself being the most effective mnemonic device in language. The poem is an endlessly rich, pluralistic event – in terms of its rhyming technique that has sounds modulate and meanings build up – consisting of an unrelenting proliferation of dynamic images, discourses, languages and registers. This poem therefore can in no way be read as straightforwardly confessional or autobiographical; Plath herself described it as an 'allegory' of female identity struggling to escape from the strictures of its parentage. It is the statement of an individual as it confronts the world, its systems and codes head on and strives for an impossible freedom from these forces of entrapment. Furthermore, Orr's interview illuminates the too often over-looked fact of Plath's wide-ranging, transatlantic identity and transnational mindset and the importance of her sense of identity in terms of her far-sighted engagement with the vital issues of her time:

> Orr: You say, Sylvia, that you consider yourself an American, but when we listen to a poem like 'Daddy', which talks about Dachau and Auschwitz and Mein Kampf, I have the impression that this is the sort of poem that a real American could not have written, because it doesn't mean so much, these names do not mean so much, on the other side of the Atlantic, do they?
>
> Plath: Well now, you are talking to me as a general American. In particular, my background is, may I say, German and Austrian. On one side I am a first generation American, on one side I'm second generation American, and so my concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense. And then, again, I'm rather a political person as well, so I suppose that's what part of it comes from.

As Orr recognises, a 'pure' American could not have written 'Daddy' because the names did not mean so much to Americans at this time. Plath, through her work, made the names matter and

[83] Gubar, 'Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries', p. 203.

focused unrelenting attention on the most brutal and complex realities of the age. 'Daddy' is a crucial statement of the post-war generation and one which through its interrogation of timeless issues coupled with its masterful, memorable poetic technique continues to resonate into this war-torn century.

Prose written by poets has also opened up overlooked aspects of Plath's work. April Bernard's recent essay, titled 'My Plath Problem', documents the figure of Plath as it continues to attract and haunt the poet; Plath's continuing presence in contemporary culture. Drawing on the biographies and critical studies of the poet, on gossip, conjecture and Plath's journals, Bernard, as a young aspiring poet, navigates the 'riddle' that is Plath, pointing out the contradictions and fallibility of readers and commentators as she tries to untangle the Plath phenomenon as she sees it.[84] Bernard first read Plath as a child of eleven, and her experience of reading *Ariel* at that time was, typically, one that could not be separated from her knowledge of the circumstances of the poet's death and her life-after-death. As Bernard reveals:

> When I was eleven, I bought a copy of *Ariel*. [...] I know that I knew, before I read a single word, that these poems had been written by a beautiful young woman who had killed herself. Thus came the package: Woman / Poet / Suicide. What did I make of the poems? [85]

Bernard's account is a very personal one as it details her very intimate interaction with the poet and her difficult, interesting work as she poignantly remembers it. Pervading all, as Bernard explains, was the amazement that someone of such talent could decide to end their life:

> I remember being thrilled that they were so hard to understand, because puzzling them out was a way to interact with the poet. We were almost talking, she and I; I remember laughing with pleasure at my discoveries, that private delight at reading when you know the writer wrote it just for you. [...] More than anything else, I remember thinking: How on earth could anyone who wrote such amazing things kill herself? She could do anything; why did she want to die? [86]

Today however, although the historical facts of Plath's life and death will always invite speculation and interest as Bernard realises, it is the poetry that endures above all:

---

[84] April Bernard, 'My Plath Problem', in *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*, ed. by Molly McQuade (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2000), pp. 82 – 102.
[85] Bernard, 'My Plath Problem', p. 97.
[86] Ibid.

> Now when I read Sylvia Plath's poems I am struck all over again by their vitality, the way the words pulse on the page, so filled with their own energy that language seems pushed to its limits to contain them.[87]

It is time to move away from such biographical or 'confessional' readings of Plath and focus instead on the language of the poetry and the formal procedures that the poet employs. As Robert Hass has insightfully said of Plath's poem 'By Candelight', contrasting the perceived 'soap opera' of Plath's life with the profound complexities of her poetry: 'It's not like a soap opera; things stand for more than one thing, stand for opposite things at once. We're in the territory of poetry.'[88]

Within American poetry most especially, as the statements of poets and critics throughout this chapter has borne out, Plath has been constantly misread as a 'confessional' poet. Indeed, John Ashbery has dismissed Plath as 'confessional'[89] citing this as the reason for his dislike of her poetry. Ashbery's statement signals the critical myopia that has labelled Plath incorrectly in this way. Terms such as 'confessional' serve to polarise poetic practices in limiting and erroneous ways. By examining her poetry then in terms of Ashbery's seemingly 'impersonal' Language poetry Plath's work is moved beyond the reductive label of 'confessional' which her work has been seen to inspire and towards a view of her work as poetry that is itself acutely concerned with the relationship between language and the world, with words as the only reality. Many of Plath's poems are meta-poetical, are precisely 'about' writing and focus on the referentiality of words and the unstable idea of 'meaning'. Indeed, the fact that her poems have continued to generate such strongly biographical readings – as critics have opted to look outside the texts themselves to the narrative of the life instead for elucidation and easy explanation – testifies to their complex meanings and to their difficulty, their inability to be fixed or reduced simplistically. Late poems in particular such as 'Words', 'Edge' and many others display her preoccupation with language as the only reality and the troubling questions that accompany this truth. Indeed, even her *Journals* – so often used by critics as an instrument for further biographical enquiry – constantly point up her need to exist through words, her sense of words as the only means of forging reality for herself. Plath of course has rarely been viewed in this way by critics, indeed, the Language poet Juliana Spahr has written how:

---

[87] Bernard, 'My Plath Problem', p. 97.
[88] Robert Hass, 'Poet's Choice: A Poem by Sylvia Plath', *Washington Post*, 15 March 1998, Book World section, p. 2.
[89] John Ashbery, in 'John Ashbery: An Interview with John Murphy', *Poetry Review*, 75.2 (August 1985), 20 – 25 (p. 23).

> Women enter into poetry in the United States around modernism, with typical mixed results. But after modernism, they get tossed in the looney bin with Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath. So language writing's self-aware roots in modernism and, to use Hejinian's word 'inquiry', rather than confessionalism, felt to me to be a way out of the sad poetess model.[90]

In this way, Plath's work is set up as the direct antithesis to the concerns of Language poetry, she instead belongs in the 'looney bin' of American poetry as a model of the 'sad poetess'. However, Plath may easily be read as a language poet, in a similar way that Ashbery and other poets have been read. Indeed, Ashbery's poetry in exemplary in the way that it was at first held up by critics for its seeming complete eschewal of his own life's details in favour of more intellectual enquiries into language and discourses but later criticism has revealed its focus on the self. Indeed, Ashbery himself has noted the long-standing critical blindness to the 'confessional' element in his own poetry: 'I've probably written some confessional poetry myself only no one recognises it as such.'[91] To read Plath in view of Ashbery's negative labelling of her work opens up her work in new, hitherto unimagined directions. Stanley Plumly, alluding to Ashbery and Plath – in one of the few instances of their names being placed together in a sentence – has mentioned how 'Both evolve and combine rhetorics over a lifetime, crafting and recrafting' and how they might be seen as 'language poets'.[92] This undeveloped statement warrants further consideration than Plumly grants.

In her poem 'Lines Written to Bob Perelman in the Margins of *The Marginalization of Poetry*', the acclaimed Language poet Ann Lauterbach addresses fellow Language poet and critic Bob Perelman questioning the oppositional aesthetic and theoretical division between Language poetry and so-called 'confessional' poetry that he persuasively lays out in his study *The Marginalization of Poetry*:

> See for example, your note on page 171
> on Creeley in which you say, quote:
>
> Pieces *ends with Creeley and an*
> *unnamed woman having sex*
>
> *as his wife is getting his children*
> *off to school. This does not make*

[90] Juliana Spahr, 'After Language poetry', *Ubuweb Papers* <http://www.ubu.com/papers/oei/spahr.html> [accessed August 2007]
[91] Ashbery, in 'An Interview with John Murphy', p. 23.
[92] Stanley Plumly, *Argument and Song: Sources and Silences in Poetry* (New York: Other Press, 2003), p. 270.

Creeley confessional, however:
the difference between his writing

and Lowell's or Plath's is that
the focus of the poem remains

at the level of the syllable; nor
are the events presented as

subjects for agony. This strikes me
as an almost comical disclaimer

which you then modify by saying
Nevertheless, to ignore Creeley's

frankness and to regard his work
as purely formal seems a distortion. [93]

Lauterbach goes on to speculate on the reasons for Perelman's attitude of resistance:

What I understand you to mean

is that emotionally-charged subjects
like sleeping with another woman

or the death of a loved one are
admissible only if or when they are in some sense

objectified, made ironic, or held in cheek by
clearly demarcated formal structures.

The resistance isn't so much to
the unified subject, the lyric, or to narrativity *per se*

but to a certain *display* of subjectivity
in which the self is staged as either exemplary

or unique. O'Hara as the hero of
'Personism' gets away with it because his

tongue is in his cheek. But is it possible that
this bracketing of emotion

along with constant emphasis on the present

---

[93] Ann Lauterbach, 'Lines Written to Bob Perelman in the Margins of *The Marginalization of Poetry*', *Jacket Magazine,* no. 2 (January 1998) <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/laut.html> [accessed August 2007]

here nowness, materiality of language,

resistance to narrativity and so forth might be a
denial of mortality, literary as well as

actual, a fundamental resistance to change?
I think it is interesting that there can be

a logical lyrical mourning for the
degradation of the public sphere

which is unironic, but not a
lament for the lost maker.

Lauterbach's response to Perelman is helpful in thinking about the ways that Plath's poetry has been read as 'confessional'. Perelman, in his study, identifies the poetry of Plath, Lowell, Sexton, Berryman as the model for a 'mainstream' American poetry, itself being 'short, narrative, focused on small or large moments of crisis or optimism.' Perelman goes on to critique this mode of writing:

> Whether the form was free verse or rhymed iambic stanzas, the tone was conversational. Such work was often unambitious, and the steady production of books and MFA graduates bespoke a bureaucratised routine, but the breakdowns and suicides of the leading exemplars stood as guarantees of intensity.[94]

This type of poetry, as Perelman believes, is the opposite of the poetry that is sadly 'not to be found' in the 'mainstream', which, conversely, has the poet as 'engaged, oppositional intellectual, and poetic form and syntax as sites of experiment for political and social purposes'.[95] However, the close examination of key poems by Plath throughout this chapter shows that Perelman's argument is deeply inaccurate. Moreover, Perelman's dogmatic reduction of poetry to opposing schools and theories makes for a short-sighted and narrow-minded view. Lauterbach herself displays a more insightful and probing mind, as she reflects on the implications and nature of Hughes' *Birthday Letters* in her poem 'The Night Sky VI'.[96] As this poem recounts, Hughes himself was an important early mentor for Lauterbach, a fact that forges an interesting connection between the school of Language poetry that Lauterbach has been positioned within and what has been seen, albeit simplistically, by many as the more accessible, traditional or 'mainstream' poetry, which Hughes and Plath may be seen to stand for, thus dissolving the false boundaries

[94] Bob Perelman, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), p. 12.
[95] Ibid.
[96] Lauterbach, 'The Night Sky VI', *American Poetry Review*, 27.4 (July – August 1998), 15 – 20.

that are continuously erected between various school of poetry and theory, as well as those of nationality. Indeed, Lauterbach has described how, as a young poet, although she did not want to follow the Confessional poets she was 'awed by Plath'.[97]

The commonality between Plath and later, more experimental poets has received little critical attention and this important consideration may be further developed by examining Plath's procedures and her influence on an experimental poet such as Kathleen Fraser. Fraser has described her early work, somewhat dismissively, as 'girlish, Plath-fed lyrics' but Plath was clearly an early influence on Fraser's innovative poetics.[98] As an aspiring poet Fraser attended Stanley Kunitz's poetry workshop and, as she recalls:

> We began hearing of Sylvia Plath through Kunitz and Robert Lowell. In 1962, we read her poems; by 1963, she was dead. Plath was my first female role model in poetry. The male poets and editors were in love with her. Lowell read her poems at his reading. Not only did she have the superb craft and ear, but there was clearly something seductive for the male literary world in her 'madness' and her tragic end.[99]

Fraser's recognition of the technical mastery of Plath's poetry is strongly felt. That Plath should have been such an important initial influence on Fraser's development as a poet complicates the neat parameters that determine poetic schools and poetic lineage. Another so-called Language poet Fanny Howe in a retrospective piece for the journal *Ploughshares* which she edited in 1974 recalls Plath's presence in the poetry of this time and its influence, locating Plath as very much part of a particular moment in American poetry: 'When I look at the contributors, I see many of the people who influenced years of my life, and the kind of aesthetic we shared, which was Lowell-based in some cases, and Olson-based in others, with echoes of Creeley, Oppen, Levertov, Plath, and O'Hara in others.'[100] The experimental poet Catherine Wagner has described how as a teenager she was 'really into' Plath, along with Dylan Thomas and e.e. cummings and critics often compare her work to Plath's. [101] Rae Armantrout has described Wagner as 'a twenty-first century Plath who's stepped out from the shadow of Freud and Daddy'.[102]

---

[97] Lauterbach, 'John Ashbery - Mapping the Real: The Given and the Chosen', *Ashbery Resource Center* <http://www.flowchartfoundation.org/arc/home/special_features/lauterbach.htm> [accessed August 2007]

[98] For an examination of Plath's influence on Fraser which complicates easy notions of poetic lineage see Lynn Keller, '"Just one of / the girls: -- / normal in the extreme": Experimentalists-To-Be Starting Out in the 1960s', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 12.2 (Summer 2001), 47 – 69.

[99] Kathleen Fraser, 'The Tradition of Marginality', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 10.3 (1989) 22 – 27 (p. 23).

[100] Fanny Howe, 'Reflections', *Ploughshares*, 27.2-3 (Fall 2001), 252 – 269 (p.259).

[101] Catherine Wagner, in Nathan Smith, '*Jacket* Interview: Catherine Wagner in Conversation with Nathan Smith', *Jacket Magazine*, no. 33 (July 2007) <http://jacketmagazine.com/33/wagner-icw-smith.shtml> [accessed August 2007]

Another important avant-garde poet and critic, Hank Lazer, has also signalled Plath's importance in his work. Lazer's 2002 poem cycle *Days*, a large-scale commonplace book of poems written across 1994 and 1995, was hailed by critics for its rich innovation and endlessly various improvisatory skill – as one reviewer put it '*Days* is charged with this sense of possibilities, a passionate commitment to play and the chances each day brings, exploring the spaces from "lower limit speech / to upper limit / music"'[103] – and it makes very particular use of Plath's poetic style in its dynamic play of voices, as Lazer describes,

> I thought of these poems as constituting a kind of laboratory of the lyric. I looked to various predecessors and peers whose musicality I admired—Robert Creeley, Larry Eigner, Sylvia Plath, Harryette Mullen, Nathaniel Mackey, John Taggart, Louis Zukfosky, George Oppen, and others—along with two key models from jazz: Thelonious Monk and John Coltrane.[104]

Lazer is held up as a poet who easefully crosses boundaries of genre and form in his poetry, exploring poetic theory and practice as he goes, as Marjorie Perloff has recognised: ''Lazer has always wanted to bridge the gap between the two poetries: the more traditional lyric mode in which he came of age and the experimental "opposing" poetries generally associated with the Language movement.'[105] And as the poet Camille Martin observes in her review of Lazer's work: 'by incorporating the words of others, Lazer expresses a commonality of experience that alters the traditionally private self-expression of the lyric, and blurs poetic borders between self and other.'[106] Thus, in the poem dated '12/17/94' Lazer employs the technique of 'Daddy' both for its persuasive sonic effects and in order to make a contemporary statement about politics and poetics – as Martin reads it, it functions as a critique of the 'coercive, commercialized, and patriarchal celebration of Christmas' – in language that is memorable and compelling in its poetic address, as:

> we jews
> have gotten used
> to christmas

---

[102] Rae Armantrout,, 'Poet's Sampler: Catherine Wagner', *Boston Review*, 26.6 (December 2001– January 2002) <http://bostonreview.net/BR26.6/wagner.html> [accessed August 2007]
[103] Geraldine McKenzie, review of Hank Lazer, *Days*, *Jacket*, no. 21 (February 2003) <http://jacketmagazine.com/21/mckenz-lazer.html> [accessed August 2007]
[104] Hank Lazer, 'The People's Poetry', *Boston Review*, 29.2 (April – May 2004) <http://bostonreview.net/BR29.2/lazer.html> [accessed August 2007]
[105] See Marjorie Perloff, 'Triplespace', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 74. 2 (Spring 1998), 380 – 390 (p. 383).
[106] Camille Martin, 'Hank Lazer's Uncommonplace *Days*', *Moria: A Poetry Journal*, 6.1 (Summer 2003) <http://www.moriapoetry.com/martin20.html> [accessed August 2007]

oh euphony you
phony you
lead me
everywhere
with your Luftwaffe
and your gobbledygoo
happy new year [107]

Plath is employed here for her idiosyncratic poetic effects – her distinctive and postmodern mode of apostrophic address facilitating Lazer's project to enlarge the possibility of the lyric.[108] It is not surprising that Plath's innovative and wide-ranging technique should enable such avant-garde approaches. Plath herself edited a supplement titled 'American Poetry Now' for *Critical Quarterly* in 1961 foregrounding poets such as Robert Creeley, Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan and Barbara Guest in her selection. Revealingly, she had also wished to include some work by the Beat poet Gregory Corso but could not obtain permission to print his work. Her selection is wide-ranging and diverse, reflecting her own interests, as she wrote in the introduction: 'I'll let the vigour and variety of these poems speak for themselves.'[109]

Plath's 'Words', already considered in some detail in the previous chapter, is a late poem that most clearly anticipates the strategies of Language poetry, a poetry that is concerned over all with an escape from the 'I', the ego and consistent self of lyric poetry. As Marjorie Perloff explains: 'One of the cardinal principles – perhaps *the* cardinal principle – of American Language poetics [...] has been the dismissal of "voice" as the foundational principle of lyric poetry.'[110] Language poetry stresses the materiality of language and the non-transparency of the word. In this way, Plath's 'Words' calls attention to the signifiers themselves and to the processes of signification:

Axes
After whose stroke the wood rings,
And the echoes!
Echoes traveling
Off from the center like horses.

The sap
Wells like tears, like the

[107] Hank Lazer, '12/17/94', in *Days* (New Orleans: Lavender Ink Press, 2002), p. 27.
[108] Ann Keniston has also examined Plath's postmodern mode of apostrophic address in, Keniston, 'Recovering You: Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*', in *Overheard Voices: Address and Subjectivity in Postmodern American Poetry* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 27 – 49.
[109] Plath, 'Introduction', *American Poetry Now*, *Critical Quarterly Poetry Supplement* No. 2, 1961, 2.
[110] Marjorie Perloff, 'Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's *Albany*, Susan Howe's *Buffalo*' <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/langpo.html> [accessed August 2007]

Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock

That drops and turns,
A white skull,
Eaten by weedy greens.
Years later I
Encounter them on the road------

Words dry and riderless,
The indefatigable hoof-taps.
While
From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars
Govern a life.[111]

This can in no way be viewed as a poem in the 'confessional' mode. Marjorie Perloff has recognised how, in Plath's 'Words', 'the connection between language and self has been severed'.[112] The delayed presence of the personal pronoun 'I' – absent until the second-last line of the penultimate stanza – destabilises notions of identity and self-hood as language has by this point in the poem been rendered utterly arbitrary and uncertain. Plath's speaker articulates the fact that words are obdurate, material, elusive and the multiplicity of meanings that they elicit causes the distinction between signifier and signified to collapse entirely. Meaning is constantly deferred as the poem's structure – progressing from stanza to stanza, without resolution, each stanza introducing a new set of open-ended images to be processed – demands that the semantic possibilities accumulate. In a probing linguistic study of Plath's poems, Helen Chau Hu in her discussion of 'Words' analyses the semantic possibilities of the single word 'stroke' as follows:

(i) a blow, especially with the edge of a weapon,
(ii) the gentle pass of the hand over something,
(iii) a single movement that is repeated,
(iv) a sudden illness in the brain that causes physical immobility and
(v) a line made by a single movement of a pen or brush in writing or painting[113]

Words in Plath's poems are dynamic, changing, unending in their possibilities for meaning, and, as they can only be defined in terms of other words, the poem is therefore polysemous. The

---

[111] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 270.
[112] Marjorie Perloff, 'The Two *Ariels*: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon', in *Poems in Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*, ed. by Neil Fraistat (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986), pp. 308 – 331 (p. 330).
[113] Helen Chau Hu, 'Negotiating Semantics and Figurative Language in Four Poems by Sylvia Plath', *Word: Journal of the International Linguistic Associations*, 53.2 (August 2002), 197 – 215 (p. 201).

metaphorical nature of the poem which defines words themselves in terms of other words – axes, echoes, horses – makes it endless in its possible meanings, inviting an infinite possibility of interpretations as it resists any fixed meaning or any sense of closure; it constantly gestures beyond the page, beyond any one apprehendable reality, beyond life itself as the concluding stanza suggests. As Joshua Clover explains the impetus behind Language poetry:

> Once words become equivocal things, the chain of transmutation - the motive of metaphor - is nearly infinite, inconsistent, irrational. By this measure, Language poetry is indeed *more* poetic than other sorts of verse: confusions of kind bloom like roses and roses and roses, each with fold on fold, folding in on itself indefinitely: it's a chain of *implication* which binds everyone in the language-game.[114]

This preoccupation with words as objects, as discreet and mutable, is one of the most important aspects of *Ariel* in particular wherein certain words are repeated throughout, their semantic value constantly modifying, creating a network of fluid symbolism and meanings. But this structuring principle can be seen right across Plath's oeuvre, as can the preoccupation with the nebulous connections between language and self. In the playful, early poem, 'Metaphors', Plath cleverly casts this 'riddle' in nine lines and nine syllables, the voice of the poem – the poet and expectant mother – defining herself through the trope of metaphor. The very title itself 'metaphor' comes from the Greek meaning 'carrier' and so we may go further and say that the poet *is* the poem: language and identity cannot be separated. This is a precarious, unstable position – language being plural, duplicitous, ever-changing – and no more so than the state of pregnancy that is described throughout:

> I am a riddle in nine syllables
> An elephant, a ponderous house,
> A melon strolling on two tendrils.[115]

The image of the melon here is precarious, unstable in the extreme. As the riddle concludes, voicing a deep sense of existential anxiety through the vagaries of a string of metaphors: 'I've eaten a bad of green apples / Boarded the train there's no getting off'. What is revealed throughout Plath's oeuvre is a deep and troubling preoccupation with the nature of language and the relationship between language and self. The disjunction between language and reality and the resulting problems of articulating selfhood is registered by Plath's speakers throughout *Ariel* in

---

[114] Joshua Clover, 'The Rose of the Name', *Fence Magazine*, 1.1 (Spring 1998) <http://www.fencemag.com/v1n1/work/joshua_clover.html> [accessed August 2007]
[115] Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 116.

particular. The self is not a unified and simple entity but an unstable and contingent one defining itself through equally contingent and unstable systems of representation. Plath's poetry enacts the attempts and struggles of a self to write itself into being. This sustained focus on words – on the ways in which their plurality of meaning enables possibility as well as entrapment for the self – specifically on the slippage between language and reality, the bind of language and identity, the gaps between signified and signifier, testifies to Plath's far-sighted strategies as a language poet.

Examining Plath's presence in American poetry points up many aspects of her work that have been misread or overlooked by critics and commentators over the decades and shows how these readings have changed and developed over time. Her work never ceases to stimulate reaction and response, new readings and fresh engagements. It also brings to bear the extraordinary achievement of her poetry as it has inspired and continues to invigorate and interest the most gifted American poets, both male and female. She was, in many ways, as the comments and concerns of certain American poets and critics show, ahead of her time in terms of her strategies and approach to poetry. The full, extensive range of her work comes into focus as her poems and poetics are examined in the light of the American poetry that has come after, whether those poets have been enabled by her or that have reacted against her. This practice of reading Plath alongside American contemporary poets forces a reconsideration of terms such as 'confessional' and of questions regarding art and responsibility, art and life, and ultimately of language itself. It is not for nothing that Rich described Plath's poetry as a 'post-modern breakthrough'. Plath is truly the poet of her century and ours.

Conclusion

What emerges from this study of Plath's presence in contemporary poetry is the profound reach of her legacy to poets, the extraordinarily various ways in which she has enabled the most gifted poets of our time and the many different forms that these creative engagements have taken. It is the poets who have been deeply influenced by Plath, those who have engaged with her, learnt from her example and then developed a voice of their own, that have been most successful as poets and whose achievement has added much to the current state of contemporary poetry. Conversely, the poets who have merely imitated Plath's style and effects and who have signaled her influence overtly fail to break free of her powerful voice to forge an original statement of their own. Even their own failure in this regard, however, serves to point up the originality and formidable skill of the poetry of their predecessor. Her influence too, as this thesis has shown, has been as important to male poets as to female poets, to Irish poets as to American, and has penetrated all poetic forms and schools of poetic expression. Thus, examining her influence in this way through a sustained critical analysis of her poetry frustrates existing critical narratives that privilege the compartmentalizing of modern poetry under the rubrics of nationality, gender and school, as Plath's work and legacy time and again obliterates these boundaries. Not only has Plath influenced the course and concerns of contemporary poetry but reading Plath through these later poets forces a complete realignment of her work and a corrective view of her endlessly complex and technically brilliant poetry. Plath emerges as an innovative, postmodern, politically and historically conscious poet who speaks to all generations and whose voice continues to provoke, challenge and stimulate. It is only through close readings of her poetry and sustained attention to her sophisticated use of sound, structure, image and design, that the full extent of Plath's masterful work may be appreciated and understood. This thesis attests to the ways in which Plath's work necessitates wider contexts and interpretations and so is very much part of the new phase of Plath scholarship that is beginning to emerge at the present time.

Although the focus here has been on Plath's influential presence in contemporary poetry its purpose has been above all to enlarge the contexts in which Plath has been placed and so it is important at this point to broaden the view further and show how her work has inspired a multitude of other forms of engagement. Plath continues to be a powerful and vital presence in contemporary culture and her influence and impact is strongly felt in every genre. Indeed, Plath's influence on contemporary culture has been as profound and multiform as her influence on contemporary poets. Her continuing existence into the present day has been described by Jacqueline Rose as a phenomenon, in the following terms: 'Sylvia Plath haunts our culture. She is

– for many – a shadowy figure whose presence draws on and compels.'[1] Plath's legacy in this regard has spanned all media, traversing boundaries of genre, nationality, race, cultures and traditions. Even a cursory investigation into her ongoing presence in the present time shows something of the vast extent of her appeal and the diversity of forms that the multivalent figure of 'Sylvia Plath' embodies today. Most humorously perhaps, American novelist Jonathan Lethem's collection of short stories *Men and Cartoons* features what is termed 'the Plath Sheep', described as a sheep bred genetically by a Dystopianist which had 'the gift of communicating its despair' and which 'evoked suicidal thoughts in other creatures.'[2] More soberly, taking its inspiration from Plath's supposed emotional reality and her biographical circumstances Kate Moses' 2003 novel *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* weaves a narrative of Plath's last months while Robert Anderson's 2006 novel *Little Fugue* concerns itself with the relationships between Plath, Hughes and Assia Wevill. But Plath has also influenced genres that may be seen as non-literary, her work traversing myriad categories in this way. The acclaimed one-woman play *Edge*, based on Plath's life and written and directed by Paul Alexander is performed regularly across the United States as well as having toured Australia and New Zealand[3] while another dramatic piece titled *Cruel Miracle*, based on Plath's 'Three Women' was produced by Alchemy Productions in England in 2004. Plath's life continues to be of interest in cultural contexts, as Woody Allen's Alvy Singer wryly puts it in the 1977 film *Annie Hall*, Plath is the 'interesting poetess whose tragic suicide was misinterpreted as romantic by the college-girl mentality.'[4] More recently the popular American television show *The L-Word* had a character profess her love of the work of the poet Anne Carson, Carson being a similar 'culture hero' and described as 'a kind of post-Plath for an age that's left the haunted housewife paradigm behind.'[5] In this way the still-living figure of Plath has generated specific social and cultural meanings. But Plath's work has also inspired certain artists who see beyond the myth, the cult figure and look to the work itself. The American actress Julia Stiles is currently producing a film version of Plath's *The Bell Jar*. As Stiles opines:

> A lot of people think of Sylvia Plath as being this dark, brooding soul because of her history, actually, her writing was different. She writes with beautiful imagery, and I think

---

[1] Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 1.
[2] Jonathan Lethem, *Men and Cartoons* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), p. 113.
[3] 'Edge at the ArcLight Theatre', 17 July 2007 <http://www.newyorktheatreguide.com/news/jul07/edge17jul07.htm> [accessed August 2007]
[4] *Annie Hall*. Dir. Woody Allen. United Artists. 1977.
[5] Meghan O' Rourke, 'Hermetic Hotties', *Slate*, 11 February 2004 <http://slate.com/id/2095317/> [accessed August 2007]

> the vibrant images she describes in *The Bell Jar* are perfect for a film - maybe even more so than a novel.[6]

Stiles' astute comments here are valuable not only in terms of illuminating the technique of Plath's poetry and enlarging our view of Plath as a poet who was deeply interested in a wide variety of artistic forms, but it points up too the ways in which artists and performers from other genres – music, painting, and in this case drama and acting – are continuously engaging and reinterpreting Plath's work and are thus so inspired by and attracted to this rich and multidimensional art that they are compelled to present it anew for generations of the public in their own way.

Plath's influential presence is also deeply felt in music and is to be found across all forms and categories, from classical to more mainstream rock and within various strands of popular and folk music. Patti Smith, speaking as a musician and poet has professed the importance of Plath's influence on her own creativity:

> I've been slowly reading more contemporary poetry—someone like James Wright, or Sylvia Plath, who is probably my biggest influence among contemporary poets. I learned a lot from her rhythms, repetition and her strong sense of poetic structure.[7]

Again, Smith's comments direct much-needed attention onto the technique of Plath's poetry, its form, structure and sound. Oliver Knussen's 'Symphony No. 2' (1970 – '71) scored for soprano and chamber orchestra sets Plath's 'Edge' along with Georg Trakl's 'Die Ratten' ('The Rats') and 'An Die Schwester' ('To the Sister'), a pairing which highlights Plath's similarity to Trakl in her use of the stylistic elements of Expressionism in both her poetry and in her own paintings. Knussen is himself a composer influenced by Expressionism in music and in his symphony Plath's words are employed in a very particular way to enhance the expressionistic, dreamlike atmosphere of the work, as one critic describes it:

> As the dream images come into focus, Knussen uses Plath's poem, 'Edge', in English, with a smoother voice part and quiet sustained accompaniment.The change of language and mood is effective. This third section made the strongest impression.[8]

---

[6] Julia Stiles, in Francesca Martin, 'Revealed: Sylvia Plath's Unseen Art, Discovered in the Attic', *Guardian*, 15 August 2007 <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/art/news/story/0,,2149031,00.html> [accessed August 2007]

[7] Patti Smith, in Meghan O' Rourke, 'Patti Smith, Meet Sylvia Plath', *Slate* (11 January 2006) <http://www.slate.com/?id=2134082> [accessed August 2007]

[8] Ronald Crichton, 'Knussen', in *Musical Times*, 111.1533 (November 1970), 1130 – 1132 (p. 1131).

Mark Anthony Turnage's work for voice and players 'Lament for a Hanging Man' (1983) juxtaposes Plath's 'The Hanging Man' with one of Jeremiah's Laments (*Lamentations* 1:2)[9] while Sally Beamish's 'Winter Trees' for violin and piano has been described as a work which 'impressionistically characterizes a Sylvia Plath poem with gently pastel harmony and delicate ornament.'[10] Plath's 'Elm' has also been set successfully by the composer Brian Elias. Scored for soprano, tenor and piano 'Elm' (1969) has been praised for the way it 'sensitively catches the fearful, urgent, fragmented movement of the words'.[11] Again, it is the rhythm and dynamism of Plath's words that the composer strives to emulate in his music. The composer Kaija Saariaho has also spoken of how she found her inspiration in the work of Plath among other writers and her 1988 song-cycle of five duets for soprano, mezzo-soprano and electronics, 'From the Grammar of Dreams', is a compelling setting of excerpts from Plath's *The Bell Jar* and 'Paralytic' from *Ariel*.[12] Thus, composers, through their engagement with Plath's work, bring out important aspects of the poetry in terms of its sound and structure.

Other musical performers have looked to the more personal circumstances of Plath's life for inspiration, as country singer Nanci Griffith's 2005 album *Hearts in Mind*, features the song 'Back When Ted Loved Sylvia'. Plath has also had a Gansgter Rap song penned in her honour, a rap version of 'Daddy' which begins, 'Mack Daddy, Mack Daddy you do not do'.[13] The Mercury Music Prize-nominated band Bloc Party has a front man who cites Sylvia Plath as one of his biggest influences [14] while the band Nine Black Alps take their name from the Plath poem 'The Couriers'. British Indie rock band The Manic Street Preachers use Plath's instantly recognisable status as tragic icon in their song 'The Girl Who Wanted to Be God' and their song 'Motorcycle Emptiness' is accompanied on the album sleeve by a Plath quotation; 'I talk to God, but the sky is empty'.[15] Rock singer Ryan Adams regularly performs one of his most popular songs 'Sylvia Plath' and the words 'I wish I had a Sylvia Plath/ Busted tooth and a smile', Plath being invoked here as an alluring femme fatale, a literary sex, drugs and rock n' roll heroine. It is clear from the range of examples given here that Plath continues to have a presence in all aspects of

---

[9] Stephen Collison, Review of Mark-Anthony Turnage, 'Lament for a Hanging Man', *Tempo*, New Ser., 195 (January 1996), 51 – 52 (p. 51).
[10] See Malcolm Miller, 'New Consciousness', in 'Live Performance', *Musical Times*, 132.1778 (April 1991), 205.
[11] Dominic Gill, 'New Chamber Music', in 'Music in London', *Musical Times*, 110.1514 (April 1969), 396.
[12] Kaija Saariaho, quoted in Elizabeth Hinkle-Turner, Review of Kaija Saariaho, *Private Gardens*, *Computer Music Journal*, 23.3 (Autumn, 1999), 117-118 (p. 117).

[13] Jeremy Richards, 'Sylvia Plath's Gangsta Rap Legacy'
<www.thebigjewel.com/sylviaplathsgangstaraplegacy/> [accessed August 2007]
[14] Pete Paphides, 'Post-Punk Raiders Pick Up Their Guitars', *The Times*, 20 July 2005, p. 23.
[15] Mick Middles, *Manic Street Preachers* (London: Omnibus, 1999), p. 84.

contemporary culture, that contemporary life has appropriated her, mythologised her as a cultural icon, and although it is clear that too many of her manifestations stem from the sensationalized circumstances of her life it is evident too that certain artists – as evinced by the comments of Smith and Stiles and in the work of classical composers – have been able to look beyond the life to offer an illumination of Plath's work. These engagements are highly significant in the way that they testify to Plath's enduring power and point up aspects of her work that have been overlooked elsewhere.

Plath continues to be a vibrant, living presence and a highly valued figure into the present moment and this is no more evident than in the ways in which her work has continued to provoke discussion as the subject of a number of major conferences world wide. The upcoming Plath Symposium in Oxford 2007, appropriately subtitled 'Creative Process and Product', will feature along with academic speakers from all over the world, exhibitions, international artists and performers in the areas of photography, visual art, animation, film, composition and music. That Plath is a living, breathing force is testified to by an interdisciplinary, transnational event such as this which showcases the living artists who are in the ongoing process of reinterpreting and constantly revivifying her work. Most importantly of all in terms of current scholarship, this major event will showcase a selection of Plath's manuscripts and small press publications and will include the launch of a new study of Plath's work titled *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, a collection of essays edited by the scholars Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley which itself grew out of the 2001 Plath conference in Indiana. Plath was a gifted visual artist as this study brings to light through previously unconsidered and unpublished work such as Plath's Expressionist and Modernist paintings, photographs, doodles, illustrations for poems and childhood sketches connecting this visual sensibility to her poetry. As Connors writes of the poet: 'She worked in most forms of media, using a wide range of styles, an experimental approach to the arts also reflected in her writing genres', and this much-needed study illuminates Plath's identity as a 'multidimensional artist'.[16] *Eye Rhymes* is a very necessary contribution to what may be seen as the beginnings of a new phase of Plath scholarship.

In this way Plath scholarship is being expanded on in very important and enriching ways and this thesis embodies the new, more inclusive and pioneering spirit that is emerging in Plath criticism at the present time. Indeed, one of the most significant points made throughout this thesis is the fact of Plath's deep preoccupation with the political and social realities of her age and her growing interest in history. Only one sustained examination of Plath and the politics of the

[16] Kathleen Connors, 'Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath', in *Eye Rhymes*, ed. by Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Cold War exists and it is referred to throughout this thesis[17] but recent developments in Plath scholarship, such as *Eye Rhymes*, are beginning to point up this important fact and how it relates to her art. As Connors has outlined, speaking of the relationship between Plath's artistry and her political and social concerns: 'The limited life options for women, and the marriage of military and commercial cultures during the 1950s, for example, are beautifully depicted in her late artwork.'[18] Nor have these new developments in Plath studies taken place only within English language scholarship. A 2005 study, *Intellectual Foreigners and Deadly Identities* written in Turkish by Kamil Aydin, a Professor of English at Atatürk University, closely examines Plath's *The Bell Jar* along with Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, to show how, as one reviewer points out:

> Herzog and Esther, closely observe American society, which undergoes very fast radical social, cultural and political changes. There is the Vietnam War; segregation and gender discrimination peaks in society; modern urban life destroys warm relations among individuals [...] the traditional family structure disappears; and degeneration and otherness become a lifestyle in American society. Hence both Herzog and Esther strive to be 'sane' or strive to remain 'human' within this chaos of 'heavy social, political and cultural conditions'.[19]

Plath's political awareness has been completely overlooked by critics until recently and the extent of Plath's energetic interest in all genres of literature, art, history, politics, philosophy – in all schools of learning and creative endeavour – must be granted close, considered attention. Nor can the force of her influence across all genres of art and creativity, as it traverses boundaries of nationality, gender, tradition, genre and language, be ignored any longer. In this way, this thesis makes apparent that the way forward for Plath scholarship and for the study of poetry in general necessitates broader contexts and closer readings of the work itself. There is a very vital mutuality between Plath and contemporary poets; Plath is a poet of this moment as much as of her own, an innovative, interdisciplinary and transnational figure. The vast scope, sophisticated technique, profound influence and unending possibilities of her oeuvre must continue to be examined and appreciated.

---

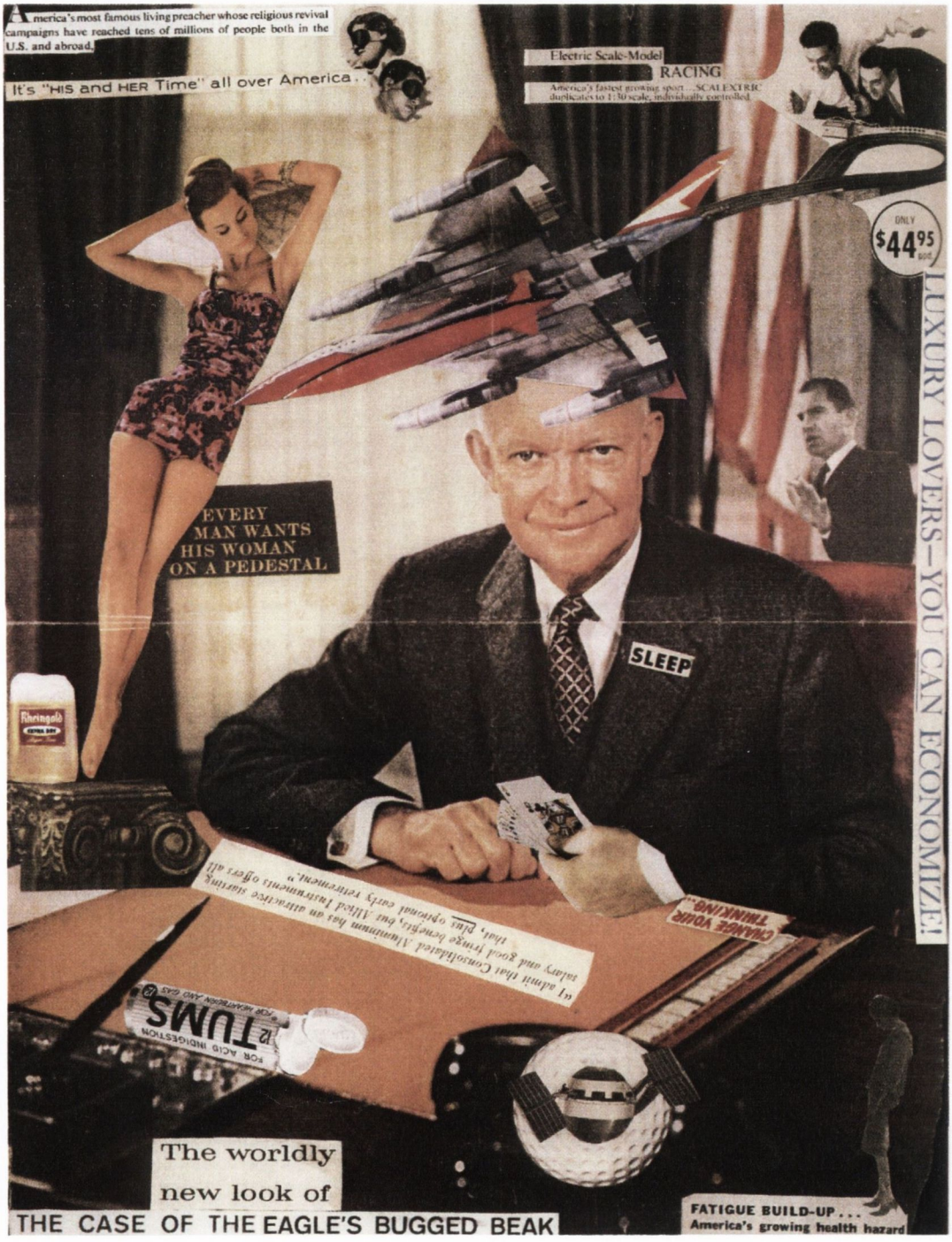
[17] See Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated Presses, 2002).

[18] Connors, in Martin, 'Revealed: Sylvia Plath's Unseen Art, Discovered in the Attic', *Guardian*, 15 August 2007.

[19] Dr. Ali Günes, 'Intellectual Identity and Human Alienation', review of Kamil Aydin, *IntellectualForeigners and Deadly Identities*, *Turkish Daily News*, 18 September 2007 <www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=83486> [accessed September 2007]

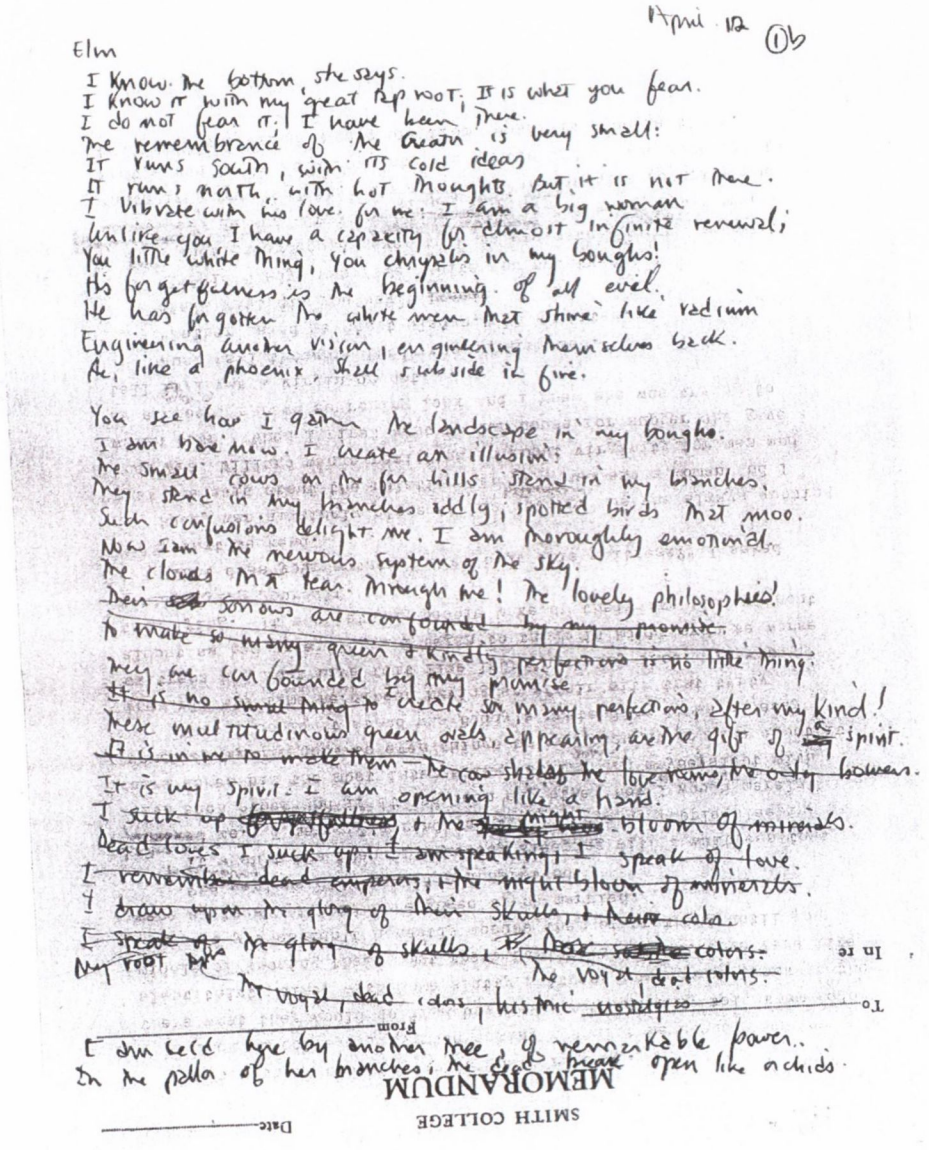
Appendix A

Sylvia Plath, Collage (1960)



Appendix B

Sylvia Plath, 'Elm', Draft 1b, 12 April 1962



April 12 (1)b

Elm

I know the bottom, she says.
I know it with my great tap root; It is what you fear.
I do not fear it. I have been there.
The remembrance of the earth is very small:
It runs south, with its cold ideas
It runs north, with hot thoughts. But it is not here.
I vibrate with his love for me: I am a big woman
Unlike you I have a capacity for almost infinite renewal;
You little white thing, you chrysalis in my boughs!
His forgetfulness is the beginning of all evil.
He has forgotten the white men that shine like radium
Engineering another vision, engineering themselves back.
As, like a phoenix, they will subside in fire.

You see how I govern the landscape in my boughs.
I am here now. I create an illusion:
The small cows on the far hills stand in my branches.
They stand in my branches oddly, spotted birds that moo.
Such confusions delight me. I am thoroughly enormous.
Now I am the nervous system of the sky.
The clouds are fear. Through me! The lovely philosophies!
~~Their sorrows are confounded by my promise~~
~~To make so many queen & kindly perfections is no little thing.~~
They are confounded by my promise.
~~It is no small thing to create so many perfections, after my kind!~~
These multitudinous green veils, appearing, are the gift of ~~my~~ spirit.
~~It is in me to make them~~ — the sap shining the love rooms, the ~~only~~ bowers.
It is my spirit. I am opening like a hand.
I suck up ~~[illegible]~~, & the ~~[illegible]~~ bloom of minerals.
Dead loves I suck up: I am speaking; I speak of love.
I remember ~~dead emperors~~, & the night bloom of anniversaries.
I draw upon the glory of their skulls, & their ~~[illegible]~~ colors.
~~I speak of~~ the glory of skulls, ~~the dear~~ colors.
~~My root~~ the void at dead rooms.
~~The void, dead rooms, hysteric~~

To
From
I am cold here by another tree, of remarkable power..
In the pelts of her branches, the eggs ~~[illegible]~~ open like orchids.

MEMORANDUM
SMITH COLLEGE
Date

Courtesy of the Sylvia Plath Collection, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

Bibliography

1. Works by Sylvia Plath

Ariel: The Restored Edition: a facsimile of Plath's manuscript, reinstating her original selection and arrangement, foreword by Frieda Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 2004)

The Journals of Sylvia Plath: 1950 – 1962, ed. by Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000); *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Anchor, 2000)

Collected Poems, ed. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harper and Row, 1981)

Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings, intro. by Ted Hughes (London: Faber and Faber, 1977; New York: Harper and Row, 1979)

The Bed Book (London: Faber and Faber, 1976)

Letters Home: Correspondence 1950 – 1963, ed. by Aurelia Plath (New York: Harper and Row, 1975; London: Faber and Faber, 1976)

Winter Trees (London: Faber and Faber, 1971; New York: Harper and Row, 1972)

Crossing the Water (London: Faber and Faber; New York: Harper and Row, 1971)

Ariel (London: Faber and Faber, 1965; New York: Harper and Row, 1966)

The Bell Jar (London: Heinemann, 1963 (under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas) London: Faber and Faber, 1966; New York: Harper and Row, 1971)

The Colossus and Other Poems (London: Heinemann, 1960; New York: Knopf, 1962)

Typescript for 'New Poems', 13 December 1962, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College

'Context', *London Magazine*, February 1962, 45 – 46

ed., *American Poetry Now*, Critical Quarterly Poetry Supplement, No. 2, 1961

Collage, 1960, Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College

with Ted Hughes, 'Two of a Kind: Poets in Partnership', interview with Owen Leeming, *Third Programme*, British Broadcasting Corporation, 18 January 1961

Recorded Interview at Yale, 18 April 1958

2. Books, Essays, Articles and Selected Criticism

Adcock, Betty, *Intervale: New and Selected Poems* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 2001)

_____, *Beholdings: Poems* (Baton Rouge; London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988)

Adcock, Fleur, *Poems: 1960 – 2000* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 2000)

_____, 'Why Plath Isn't (very) Important to me', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), 2 – 3

Aird, Eileen, *Sylvia Plath* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1973)

_____ , '"Poem for a Birthday" to "Three Women": Development in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *Critical Quarterly*, 21.4 (1979), 63 – 72

Alcobia-Murphy, Shane, *Sympathetic Ink: Intertextual Relations in Northern Irish Poetry* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2006)

Alexander, Paul, *Ariel Ascending: Writings about Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985)

Allen, Michael, 'The Parish and the Dream: Heaney and America, 1969 – 1987', *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), 726 – 738

_____, 'Rhythm and Development in Michael Longley's Earlier Poems', in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992), pp. 214 – 234

_____, 'Celebrations', *Irish Review*, 7 (Autumn 1989), 97 – 102

Allen-Randolph, Jody, 'Michael Longley in Conversation', *PN Review*, 31.2 (November – December 2004), 21 – 27

_____, 'A Backward Look: An Interview with Eavan Boland', *PN Review*, 26.5 (May – June 2000), 43 – 48

Alvarez, Al, *The Writer's Voice* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005)

_____, 'Ted, Sylvia and Me', *Observer*, 4 January 2004 <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,1115510,00.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'How Black Magic Killed Sylvia Plath', *Guardian*, 15 September 1999, Features section, p. 4

_____, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1971)

_____, 'Poetry in Extremis', *Observer*, 12 March 1965, p. 26

Andrews, Bruce and Charles Bernstein, *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984)

Annas, Pamela J., 'The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems', *Women's Studies*, 7.1 – 2 (1980), 171 – 183

Anonymous, Review of Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, *Virginia Quarterly Review: A National Journal of Literature and Discussion*, 79.2 (Spring 2003), p. 65

Archambeau, Robert, 'The Poet in the Information Age: Randolph Healy', *Notre Dame Review*, no. 7 <http://www.nd.edu/~ndr/issues/ndr7/archambeau/interview.html> [accessed August 2007]

Armantrout, Rae, 'Poet's Sampler: Catherine Wagner', *Boston Review*, 26.6 (December 2001 – January 2002) <http://bostonreview.net/BR26.6/wagner.html> [accessed August 2007]

Arnold, Martin, 'Making Books: Sylvia Plath, Forever an Icon', *New York Times*, 9 November 2000, Section E, p. 3

Ashbery, John, *Where Shall I Wander?* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005)

_____, *Selected Prose*, ed. by Eugene Richie (Manchester: Carcanet, 2004)

_____, *Selected Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1994)

Austen, Glyn, 'Life and Art: Context in Sylvia Plath's Poetry', *English Review*, 12.3 (February 2002), 12 – 15

Ayton, Richard, 'Plath's Daughter Condemns Movie', *Buenos Aires Herald* (February 2003) <www.buenosairesherald.com/entertainment/note.jsp?idContent=5009> [accessed August 2007]

Axelrod, Steven Gould, 'Robert Lowell and the Cold War', *New England Quarterly*, 72.3 (September 1999), 339 – 361

_____, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1990)

Bagg, Robert, 'The Rise of Lady Lazarus', *Mosaic* 2 (1968 – 69), 9 – 36

Baker, David, 'Interview with Meghan O'Rourke', *Kenyon Review* (September 2006) <http://www.kenyonreview.org/interviews/orourke.php> [accessed June 2007]

Balitas, Vincent D., 'A Celebrated Poet and the Manuscript she Left Behind', *Washington Times*, 2 January 2005, Books section, p. 8

Banner, Gillian, 'Sylvia Plath and Holocaust Poetry', in *Representing the Holocaust: In Honour of Bryan Burns* (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2003), pp. 231 – 248

Barker, Sebastian, 'A Drink with Paul Muldoon', *Long Poem Group Newsletter*, no. 7 (November

1998) <www.dgdclynx.plus.com/lpgn/lpgn72.html> [accessed May 2007]

Barron, Patrick, 'Smelling of Elderflowers', interview with Paul Muldoon, *Fortnight Review* (October 1994), pp. 42 – 44

Barry, Kevin, 'Q & A: Paul Muldoon', *Irish Literary Supplement*, 6.2 (Fall 1987), 36 – 37

Bartlett, Lee, 'What is "Language Poetry?"', *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (Summer 1986), 741 – 751

Batten, Guinn, '"He Could Barely Tell One from the Other": The Borderline Disorders of Paul Muldoon's Poetry', *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 95.1 (Winter 1996), 171 – 204

Battersby, Eileen, 'The Poet as Inner Émigré', *Irish Times*, 26 September 1998, Weekend section, p. 10

Bayley, Sally, '"I have your head on my wall": Sylvia Plath and the Rhetoric of Cold War America', *European Journal of American Culture*, 25.3, 155 – 171

Beam, Alex, 'Is The Legend Of Evil Ted Hughes About To Die?' *Boston Globe*, 29 March 2000, Living section, p. C1

_____, 'The Death, and Rebirth, of Sylvia Plath', *Boston Globe*, 4 September 2003, Living section, p. D1

Bennett, Paula, *My Life a Loaded Gun: Dickinson, Plath, Rich and Female Creativity* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1990)

Bentley, Paul, '"Hitler's Familiar Spirits": Negative Dialectics in Sylvia Plath's "Daddy" and Ted Hughes "Hawk Roosting"', *Critical Survey*, 12.3 (2000), 27 – 38

Bentley, Vicci, 'No More "Mrs. Nice"': Vicci Bentley Talks to Vicki Feaver', *Magma* 13 (Winter 1998) <www.magmapoetry.com/poem.php?article_id=43> [accessed August 2007]

Bere, Carol, 'Rising from the Ashes: The Restored *Ariel*', *Contemporary Poetry Review* (July 2005) <http://www.cprw.com/members/Bere/plath.htm> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Owning the Facts of his Life: Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*', *Literary Review* (Summer 1998), 556 – 561

Berman, Jeffrey, 'Sylvia Plath and the Charge of Art', in *Surviving Literary Suicide* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999)

Bernard, April, 'My Plath Problem', in *By Herself: Women Reclaim Poetry*, ed. by Molly McQuade (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2000), pp. 82 – 102

Berry, David, 'Ted Hughes and the Minotaur Complex', *Modern Language Review*, 97 (3 July 2002), 539 – 552

_____, '"Rough Magic": Ted Hughes' Translation of Jean Racine's *Phèdre*', in *French – 'Classical' – Theatre Today: Teaching, Research, Performance*, ed. and intro. by Philip Tomlinson (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 207 – 228

Blessing, Richard Allen, 'The Shape of the Psyche: Vision and Technique in the Late Poems of Sylvia Plath', pp. 57 – 73

Bloom, Harold, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973)

Blosser, Silvianne, *A Poetics on Edge: The Poetry and Prose of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Sylvia Plath's Poetic and Poetological Developments* (Bern; New York: Peter Lang, 2001)

Boland, Eavan, *Domestic Violence* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2007)

_____, 'Domestic Violence: An Argument in Ten Parts', *American Poetry Review*, 36.2 (March – April 2007), 33 – 37

_____, *New Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005)

_____, 'Ted Hughes: A Reconciliation', *PN Review*, 25.5 (May – June 1999), 5 – 6

_____, *Object Lessons: The Life of the Woman and the Poet in Our Time* (London: Vintage, 1996)

_____, 'A Giant at my Shoulder', Eavan Boland on Sylvia Plath, RTÉ Radio 1, 15 February 2004

Boland, Rosita, 'Embracing the World', interview with Richard Murphy, *Irish Times*, 11 October 2000, p. 16

Bolton, Jonathan, 'Irish Stew at the Café du Monde: Heterogeneity and the Emigré Experience in Paul Muldoon's "Yarrow"', *South Atlantic Review*, 64.1 (Winter 1999), 48 – 71

Booth, James, 'Competing Pulses: Secular and Sacred in Hughes, Larkin and Plath', *Critical Survey*, 12.3 (2000), 3 – 26

Booth, Martin, *British Poetry 1964 – 1984: Driving Through the Barricades* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985)

Boruch, Marianne, 'Plath's Bees', in *Poets Teaching Poets: Self and the World*, ed. by Gregory Orr and Ellen Bryant (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996)

Brain, Tracy, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Harlow: Longman, 2001)

_____, '"Your Puddle-Jumping Daughter": Sylvia Plath's Midatlanticism', *English*, 47.187 (Spring 1998), 17 – 39

Brearton, Fran, Review of Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, *Tower Poetry: Poetry Matters*, January 2007 <http://www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/jan2007/muldoon.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, *Reading Michael Longley* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2006)

_____, 'For Father Read Mother: Muldoon's Antecedents', in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. by Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), pp. 45 – 61

Britzolakis, Christina, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1999)

Broe, Mary Lynn, *Protean Poetic: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1980)

Brooks, Cleanth and Robert Penn Warren, *Understanding Poetry*, 4th edn (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976)

Brooks, Richard, 'Plath Daughter Puts All Her Pain in Poetry', *Sunday Times*, 3 December 2006, p. 6

Brooks-Motl, Hannah, Review of Dorothy Barresi, *Rouge Pulp*, *Rain Taxi: Review of Books* (Summer 2003) <http://www.raintaxi.com/online/2003summer/rougepulp.shtml> [accessed August 2007]

Brown, Jeffrey, 'Conversation: Award Winner', interview with Paul Muldoon, *PBS Broadcast: The News Hour*, 26 May 2003 <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/entertainment/jan-june03/muldoon_05-26.html#> [accessed August 2007]

Brown, John, *In the Chair: Interviews with Poets from the North of Ireland* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 2002)

Brownjohn, Alan, 'Variety is the Spice', review of Don Paterson, *Landing Light*, *Sunday Times*, 23 November 2003, Features section, p. 51

_____, 'The Long and The Short Of It', review of Paul Muldoon, *Poems 1968 – 1998*, *Sunday Times*, 22 July 2001, Features section, p. 43

Brownlow, John, 'Who's Afraid of Sylvia Plath', *Guardian*, 22 August 2003, Friday Pages section, p. 2

Buchanan, Barbara, '"Paul Muldoon: Who's to know what's knowable?"', in *Contemporary Irish Poetry: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. by Elmer Andrews (London: Macmillan, 1992)

Bundtzen, Lynda K., *The Other Ariel* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts, 2001)

_____, 'Mourning Eurydice: Ted Hughes as Orpheus in *Birthday Letters*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 23 (Summer 2000), 455 – 469

_____, 'Poetic Arson and Sylvia Plath's "Burning the Letters"', *Contemporary Literature*, 39.3 (Autumn 1998), 434 – 451

Butler, David, 'Consolations of Observation', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 83 (July 2005), 102 – 106

Butscher, Edward, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury, 1976)

Butts, William, ed., *Conversations with Richard Wilbur* (Jackson; London: University Press of Mississippi, 1990)

Buxton, Rachel, 'Never Quite Showing his Hand: Robert Frost and Paul Muldoon', in *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays*, ed. by Tim Kendall and Peter McDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004), pp. 26 – 44

_____, '"Structure and Serendipity": The Influence of Robert Frost on Paul Muldoon', in *Critical Ireland: New Essays in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Alan Gillis and Aaron Kelly (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2001)

Cambridge, Gerry, 'Douglas Dunn in Conversation', *Dark Horse*, 20 (Autumn 1999) <http://www.star.ac.uk/darkhorse/archive/DunnInterview.pdf> [accessed August 2007]

Caplan, David, *Questions of Possibility: Contemporary Poetry and Poetic Form* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)

Carey, John, 'The Stain of Words', *Sunday Times*, 21 June 1987, p. 56

Carson, Anne, *Decreation: Poetry, Essays, Opera* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006)

_____, *The Beauty of the Husband: A Fictional Essay in 29 Tangos* (New York: Vintage, 2001)

_____, *Autobiography of Red: A Novel in Verse* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1998)

Carson, Ciaran, 'Escaped from the Massacre', *Honest Ulsterman*, 50 (Winter 1975), 183 – 186

Chau Hu, Helen, 'Negotiating Semantic and Figurative Language in Four Poems by Sylvia Plath', *WORD: Journal of the International Linguistic Associations*, 53.2 (August 2002), 197 – 215

Childs, Peter, *The Twentieth Century in Poetry: A Critical Survey* (London: Routledge, 1999)

Churchwell, Sarah, 'Ted Hughes and the Corpus of Sylvia Plath', *Criticism*, 40.1 (Winter 1998), 99 – 132

_____, 'Secrets and Lies: Plath, Privacy, Publication and Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*', *Contemporary Literature*, 42.1 (Spring 2001), 102 – 148

Clampitt, Amy, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998)

Clanchy, Kate, 'Friends with the Brave', Review of Ted Hughes, *Euripides' Alcestis*, *PN Review*, 26.4 (March – April 2000), 50

_____, 'Presiding Spirits' *Magma*, 23 (Summer 2002) <http://magmapoetry.com/poem.php?article_id=30> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Seeing Red', Review of Erica Wagner, *Ariel's Gift*, *PN Review*, 26.6 (July –

August 2000), 60 – 61

Clark, Heather, 'Tracking the Thought-Fox: Sylvia Plath's Revision of Ted Hughes', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 28.2 (Winter 2005), 100 – 112

Clover, Joshua, 'The Rose of the Name', *Fence Magazine*, 1.1 (Spring 1998) <http://www.fencemag.com/v1n1/work/joshua_clover.html> [accessed August 2007]

Cole, Bruce, 'The Life of a Poet: A Conversation with Anthony Hecht', *Humanities*, 25.2 (March – April 2004), 6 – 54

Collison, Stephen, Review of Mark-Anthony Turnage, 'Lament for a Hanging Man', *Tempo*, New Series, 195 (January 1996), 51 – 52

Connors, Kathleen, 'Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath', in *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*, ed. by Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford University Press, forthcoming)

Conte, Joseph M., *Unending Design: The Forms of Postmodern Poetry* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 1991)

Copplestone, Fenella, 'Paul Muldoon and the Exploding Sestina', *PN Review*, 22.2 (November – December 1995), 33 – 36

Corcoran, Neil, *Poets of Modern Ireland: Text, Context, Intertext* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1999)

_____, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998)

Couzyn, Jeni, 'Sylvia Plath', in *The Bloodaxe Book of Contemporary Women Poets: Eleven British Writers*, ed. by Jeni Couzyn (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1985), pp. 146 – 148

Crichton, Ronald, 'Knussen', in *Musical Times*, 111.1533 (November 1970), 1130 – 1132

Crotty, Patrick, 'The Different Irelands of Personal Verse', *Irish Times*, 23 June 2001, Weekend section, p. 15

Crown, Sarah, 'Red Riding Hood's Rebellion', review of Vicki Feaver, *The Book of Blood*, *Guardian*, 30 September 2006 <http://books.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,,1882827,00.html> [accessed August 2007]

Curtis, Vanessa, 'Queen Bee Loses her Sting', review of Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, *Scotland on Sunday*, 7 November 2004 <http://scotlandonsunday.scotsman.com/review.cfm?id=1285112004> [accessed August 2007]

Dale, Peter and Ian Hamilton, *Anthony Thwaite in Conversation with Peter Dale and Ian Hamilton* (London: Between the Lines, 1999)

Daniel, John, 'Unveiled and Open: Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*', *Symbiosis: A Journal*

of Anglo-American Literary Relations, 2.1 (1998), 113 – 124

Davison, Peter, 'Darkness at Muldoon', *New York Times Book Review*, 13 October 2002, p. 22

_____, *Walking the Boundaries: Poems 1957 – 1974* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1974)

Dawe, Gerald, *The Proper Word: Collected Criticism: Ireland, Poetry, Politics*, ed. by Nicholas Allen (Omaha: Creighton University Press, 2007)

_____, *Lake Geneva* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2003)

_____, *The Morning Train* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999)

_____, *Sheltering Places* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1978)

Dawe, Gerald and Jonathan Williams, eds, *Krino 1986 – 1996: An Anthology of Modern Irish Writing* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1996)

Dent, Skye, 'Poetry Makes Sense Of Key Moments In Life', interview with Paul Muldoon, *University of Connecticut Advance on the Web*, 26 January 2004 <www.advance.uconn.edu/2004/040126/04012611.htm> [accessed August 2007]

Dickie, Margaret, 'Seeing is Re-Seeing: Sylvia Plath and Elizabeth Bishop', *American Literature*, 65.1 (March 1993), 131 – 146

_____, 'Ted Hughes: The Double Voice', *Contemporary Literature*, 24.1 (Spring 1983), 51 – 65

Dickinson, Emily, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*, ed. by R.W. Franklin (Cambridge, Mass.; London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999)

Diehl, Joanne Feit, ed., *On Louise Glück: Change What You See* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005)

Dillane, Fionnuala and John McAuliffe, 'Poets on Poetry: Interview with Vona Groarke', *Review of Postgraduate English Studies*, 5 (1997), 57 – 61

Dillon, Brian, '"Never having had you, I cannot let you go": Sharon Olds' Poems of a Father-Daughter Relationship', *Literary Review*, 37. 1 (Fall 1993), 108 – 118

Donaghy, Michael, 'A Conversation with Paul Muldoon', *Chicago Review*, 35.1 (Autumn 1986), 76 – 85

Donnelly, Rachel, 'Heaney Leads Valediction at Poet's Funeral', *Irish Times*, 4 November 1998, p. 11

Donoghue, Denis, 'Sylvia Plath', in *Reading America: Essays on American Literature* (New York: Knopf, 1987), pp. 296 – 301

Dowson, Jane, 'Older Sisters Are Very Sobering Things', *Feminist Review*, 62 (Summer 1999), 6

– 20

Druce, Robert, '"A Raindrop on a Thorn": An Interview with Seamus Heaney', *Dutch Quarterly Review of Anglo-American Letters*, 9.1 (1979), 24 – 37

Duffy, Carol Ann, Review of Ruth Fainlight, *The Knot* and Anne Stevenson, *The Other House*, *Guardian*, 27 December 1990, Review section, p. 24

Duhig, Ian, 'Annals Mirabilis', review of Paul Muldoon, *The Annals of Chile*, *Fortnight Review* (September 1994), 47 – 48

Dunmore, Helen, 'Bare and Frondish', review of Anne Stevenson, *Collected Poems*, *Poetry Review*, 86.4 (Winter 1996 – 1997), 58 – 60

Dunn, Douglas, 'Thinking About Women', *Times Literary Supplement*, 3 June 1988, p. 612

_____, 'Remember the poet but forget her fate', *Glasgow Herald*, 5 March 1988, Weekender section, p. 13

_____, *Under the Influence: Douglas Dunn on Philip Larkin* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Library, 1987)

_____, *Selected Poems: 1964 – 1983* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986)

_____, *Elegies* (London: Faber and Faber, 1985)

_____, ed., *What Is to Be Given: Selected Poems of Delmore Schwartz* (Manchester: Carcanet New Press, 1976).

_____, *The Happier Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1972)

_____, 'King Offa Alive and Dead', *Encounter*, 38 (January 1972), 67 – 68

_____, 'Damaged Instruments', *Encounter*, 37 (August 1971), 68 – 70

Durcan, Paul, *Daddy, Daddy* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1990)

Ebbets, Jan McCoy, 'The Perpetual Lure of Sylvia Plath', *NewsSmith* (Winter 2004) <http://www.smith.edu/newssmith/winter2004/plath.php> [accessed August 2007]

Eliot, T.S., *Collected Poems 1909 – 1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963)

_____, *Selected Prose of T.S. Eliot*, ed. and intro. by Frank Kermode (London: Faber, 1975)

Ellis, Jonathan, 'Mouthing Noises: Amy Clampitt's Use of Sound', *Thumbscrew*, no. 16 (Summer 2000) <www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=11902> [accessed August 2007]

Enniss, Stephen C. and Karen V. Kukil, *'No Other Appetite': Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and the Blood Jet of Poetry* (New York: The Grolier Club, 2005)

Ezard, John, 'Hughes in Hiding over *Birthday Letters*', *Guardian*, 14 April 2004, p. 5

Faas, Ekbert, 'Chapters of a Shared Mythology: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', in *The Achievement of Ted Hughes*, ed. by Keith Sagar (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1983), pp. 107 –124

_____, *Ted Hughes: The Unaccommodated Universe* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1980)

Fainlight, Ruth, *Moon Wheels* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2006)

_____, 'Jane and Sylvia', *Crossroads*, no. 61 (Spring 2004) <www.poetrysociety.org/journal/articles/janeandsylvia.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'The Best Reads of 2003', *Independent on Sunday*, 21 December 2003, pp. 11 – 13

_____, 'Sylvia and Jane', *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 December 2003, pp. 13 – 15

_____, *Burning Wire* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2002)

_____, *Selected Poems: Including Two Libretti and Translations from Jean Joubert and Sophia de Mello Breyner* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995)

_____, *The Knot* (London: Hutchinson, 1990)

_____, *Sibyls And Others* (London: Hutchinson, 1980)

_____, *Cages* (London: Macmillan, 1966)

Fallon, Padraic, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Brian Fallon (Manchester: Carcanet; Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1990)

Fallon, Peter, 'Grains of Lasting Truth and Beauty', *Irish Times*, 19 October 2002, Weekend section, p. 11

Farley, Paul, *The Ice Age* (London: Picador, 2002)

Feaver, Vicki, *The Book of Blood* (London: Cape, 2006)

_____, *Girl in Red and Other Poems* (Edinburgh: Scottish Book Trust, 2003)

_____, 'Body and Soul: The Power of Sharon Olds', in *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, ed. by Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 140 – 156

_____, *The Handless Maiden* (London: Cape, 1994)

Feinstein, Elaine, *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* (London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 2001)

Fenton, James, 'A Poke in the Eye with a Poem', review of Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes*, *Guardian*, 21 October 2006, Review section, p. 6

_____, 'Lady Lazarus', *New York Review of Books*, 44.9 (29 May 1997) 12 – 16

Fitzwilliams, Malcolm, 'Upbeat and Sunny Plath Emerges from New Book', *Independent on Sunday*, 12 September 2004, p. 15

Flynn, Leontia, *These Days* (London: Cape, 2004)

Forbes, Peter, 'British Poetry in the Last Thirty Years', *European Journal of English Studies*, 6.1 (April 2002), 9 – 18

Ford, Mark, *John Ashbery in Conversation with Mark Ford* (London: Between the Lines, 2003)

Forché, Carolyn, *Blue Hour* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2003)

_____, 'The Poetry of Witness', in *Giving Their Word: Conversations with Contemporary Poets*, compiled by Steven Ratiner (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2002), pp. 147 – 166

_____, *The Angel of History* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1994)

_____, *Gathering the Tribes*, foreword by Stanley Kunitz (London; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976)

_____, 'Soap Carvings, For Sylvia Plath', *Centennial Review*, 16 (Winter 1972), 361 – 362

Ford, Mark, 'The Call of the Stallion', *New York Review of Books*, 53. 20 (21 December 2006), 78 – 80

_____, 'At Arm's Length', *New York Review of Books*, 50.14 (25 September 2003), 68 – 71

France, Linda, ed., *Sixty Women Poets* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1993)

Frank, Michael, 'Plath and Hughes: Good Times, Bad Times and All the Rest of It', *New York Times*, 23 September 2005, p. 31

Fraser, Kathleen, *Translating the Unspeakable: Poetry and the Innovative Necessity* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 2000)

_____, *Il Cuore: The Heart – Selected Poems 1970 – 1995*, intro. by Peter Quartermain (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press; Hanover: University Press of New England, 1997)

_____, 'The Tradition of Marginality', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women's Studies*, 10.3 (1989) 22 – 27

Fromberg-Schaeffer, Susan, *The Rhymes and Runes of the Toad* (New York: Macmillan, 1975)

_____, *Granite Lady: Poems* (New York: Macmillan, 1974).

_____, *The Witch and the Weather Report* (New York: Seven Woods Press, 1972)

Frost, Robert, *Robert Frost: Collected Poems, Prose and Plays*, ed. by Richard Poirier and Mark Richardson (New York: Library of America, 1995)

Gammage, Nick, 'Reading Sylvia Plath: An Unrecorded Publication of "The Rabbit Catcher"', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), 55 – 56

Gentleman, Amelia, 'Accolade for Hughes's Poems of Love and Loss', *Guardian*, 8 October 1998, p. 4

Gerbig, Andrea and Anja Muller-Wood, 'Trapped in Language: Aspects of Ambiguity and Intertextuality in Selected Poetry and Prose by Sylvia Plath', *Style*, 36.1 (Spring 2002), 76 – 92

Gering, August, 'To Sing of '98: The United Irishmen Rising and the Ballad Tradition in Heaney and Muldoon', *Literature-Interpretation-Theory*, 10.2 (October 1999), 149 – 179

Gervais, David, 'Tragedy Today: Ted Hughes' *Oresteia*', *Cambridge Quarterly*, 31.2 (2002), 139 – 154

Gifford, Terry and Neil Roberts, eds, *Ted Hughes: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981)

Gilbert, Sandra M., 'Common Wealth', review of *New British Poetry*, ed. by Don Paterson and Charles Simic, *Poetry*, 184.3 (June – July 2004), 227 – 234

Giles, Paul, 'Double Exposure: Sylvia Plath and the Aesthetics of Transnationalism', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 5.2 (October 2001), 103 – 120

Gill, Dominic, 'New Chamber Music', in 'Music in London', *Musical Times*, 110.1514 (April 1969), 396

Gill, Jo, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

Glück, Louise, *Proofs and Theories: Essays on Poetry* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999)

_____, *The First Five Books of Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1997)

_____, *Firstborn* ((Northwood: Anvil Press, 1969)

Graham, Jorie, *Overlord* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005)

_____, *Never* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002)

_____, *Swarm* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2000)

_____, *The Dream of the Unified Field: Selected Poems 1974 – 1994* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996)

_____, *The End of Beauty* (New York: Ecco Press, 1987)

Graves, Robert, *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (London: Faber, 1961)

Greenlaw, Lavinia, *Minsk* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003)

_____, 'Interior with Extension Cord', *Thumscrew*, no. 16 (Summer 2000), 7 – 9

_____, *A World Where News Travelled Slowly* (London: Faber and Faber, 1997)

_____, *Night Photograph* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993)

Grennan, Eamon, 'Ten Out of Ten', review of Noel Duffy and Theo Dorgan, *Watching the River Flow: A Century in Irish Poetry*, *Irish Times*, 18 December 1999, Weekend section, p. 8

Groarke, Vona, *Juniper Street* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2006)

_____, *Other People's Houses* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1999)

_____, *Shale* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1994)

Grossman, Allen, with Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer: Two Works on Poetry for Readers and Writers* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992)

_____, 'For Plath', in *The Woman on the Bridge over the Chicago River* (New York: New Directions, 1979), pp. 23 – 24

Gubar, Susan, 'Prosopopoeia and Holocaust Poetry in English: Sylvia Plath and Her Contemporaries', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 14.1 (Spring 2001), 191 – 215

Guinness, Selina, ed., *The New Irish Poets* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2004)

Günes, Dr. Ali, 'Intellectual Identity and Human Alienation', review of Kamil Aydin, *Intellectual Foreigners and Deadly Identities*, *Turkish Daily News*, 18 September 2007 <www.turkishdailynews.com.tr/article.php?enewsid=83486> [accessed September 2007]

Haberstroh, Patricia Boyle, 'Woman, Artist and Image in *Night Feed*', *Irish University Review*, 23.1 (Spring – Summer 1993), 67 – 74

Haffenden, John, *Viewpoints: Poets in Conversation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981)

Hammer, Langdon, 'Gamesmanship', *New York Times Book Review*, 18 February 2007, p. 24

_____, 'Plath's Lives', *Representations*, 75 (Summer 2001), 61 – 88

Hamilton, Ian, 'A Talent of the Shallows', *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 September 1989, pp. 999 – 1000

Hannah, Sarah, '"Something Else Hauls me through Air": Sound and Structure in Four Late

Poems by Sylvia Plath', *Literary Imagination: The Review of the Association of Literary Scholars and Critics*, 5.2 (Spring 2003), 232 – 266

Hardwick, Elizabeth, 'Sylvia Plath' in *Seduction and Betrayal: Women and Literature*, intro. by Joan Didion (New York: New York Review of Books, 2001), pp. 103 – 123

Harrison, DeSales, *The End of the Mind: The Edge of the Intelligible in Hardy, Stevens, Larkin, Plath and Glück* (New York: Routledge, 2005)

Harrison, Tony, *Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2006)

Hart, Henry, *Seamus Heaney: Poet of Contrary Progressions* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992)

_____, 'History, Myth and Apocalypse in Seamus Heaney's *North*', *Contemporary Literature*, 30.3 (Autumn 1989), 387 – 411

Hass, Robert, 'Poet's Choice: A Poem by Sylvia Plath', *Washington Post*, 15 March 1998, Book World section, p. 2

Haughton, Hugh, 'Lord of the Red Herrings: *The Annals of Chile*', *Independent*, 9 October 1994, Sunday Review section, p. 40

Haven, Cynthia, 'Interview with Anne Stevenson', *The Cortland Review*, 14 (November 2000) <http://www.cortlandreview.com/issue/14/stevenson14.htm> [accessed August 2007]

Heaney, Seamus, *District and Circle* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)

_____, *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971 – 2001* (London: Faber, 2002), pp. 395 – 398

_____, 'On First Looking into Ted Hughes's *Birthday Letters*', *The New Yorker*, 5 October 1998, 64 – 65

_____, 'A Wounded Power Rises from the Depths', review of Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, *Irish Times*, 31 January 1998, Weekend section, p. 11

_____, *New Selected Poems 1966 – 1987* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990)

_____, 'Influences: The Power of T.S. Eliot', *Boston Review*, 14.5 (October 1989) <http://bostonreview.net/BR14.5/heaney.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988)

_____, *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)

Hecht, Anthony, *Melodies Unheard: Essays on the Mysteries of Poetry* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003)

_____, *Collected Later Poems* (New York: Knopf, 2003)

_____, Letter to the Editor', *Poetry*, 183.2 (November 2003), 105 – 106

_____, *Collected Earlier Poems* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991)

Heinz, Drue, 'Ted Hughes: The Art of Poetry LXXI', *Paris Review*, no. 134 (Spring 1995), 54 – 95

Helle, Anita, 'Lessons from the Archive: Sylvia Plath and the Politics of Memory', *Feminist Studies*, 31.3 (Fall 2005), 631 – 652

Hemphill, Stephanie, *Your Own Sylvia: A Verse Portrait of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Knopf, 2007)

Herbert W.N., and Matthew Hollis, *Strong Words: Modern Poets on Modern Poetry* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000)

Herd, David, *John Ashbery and American Poetry* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000)

Hibbett, Ryan, 'Ted Hughes: Authorship, Authenticity, and the Symbolic Work of *Collected Poems*', *Twentieth-Century Literature*, 51.4 (Winter 2005), 414 – 436

Hickling, Alfred, 'Border Crossings', *Guardian*, 2 October 2004, Saturday Pages section, p. 20

Hilbert, Ernest, 'Essay on Sylvia Plath, *Voice of the Poet*', *Bold Type* (November 2000) <http://www.randomhouse.com/boldtype/1100/plath/essay.html > [accessed September 2007]

Hill, Selima, 'God's Velvet Cushions', in *Contemporary Women's Poetry Reading/Writing/Practice*, ed. by Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (London: Macmillan, 2000)

Hilton, Nelson, 'Sylvia on Aurelia Plath', *Lexis Complexes: Literary Interventions* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995) <http://www.english.uga.edu/lexis/title.html> [accessed August 2007]

Hinds, Michael and Stephen Matterson, eds, *Rebound: The American Poetry Book* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2004)

Hinkle-Turner, Elizabeth, Review of Kaija Saariaho, *Private Gardens*, *Computer Music Journal*, 23.3 (Autumn, 1999), 117 – 118

Hirschman, David S., 'Paul Muldoon: A Poet for Our Time', *MediaBistro*, 22 July 2002 <www.mediabistro.com/content/archives/03/01/31/> [accessed August 2007]

Hoagland, Tony, 'Fear of Narrative and the Skittery Poem of Our Moment', *Poetry*, 187.6 (March 2006), 508 – 519

Hofmann, Michael, 'Stare at the Monster', review of Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems, Poetry*, 183.5 (February 2004), 278 – 289

_____, and William Logan, 'A Conversation on British and American Poetry', *Poetry*, 184.3 (June – July 2004), 212 – 220

_____, *Acrimony* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986)

Houlihan, Mary, 'She Was Only Eight but Thought Rejection was "Something Special"', *Chicago Sun Times*, 23 April 2006, Books section, p. 10

Howe, Fanny, 'Reflections', *Ploughshares*, 27.2 – 3 (Fall 2001), 252 – 269

Hoy, Philip, *Anthony Hecht in Conversation with Philip Hoy* (London: Between the Lines, 1999)

Hughes, Frieda, *Forty-Five* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006)

_____, 'Frieda Hughes on Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*', interview with Frieda Hughes, *The Diane Rehm Show*, WAMU Radio, 14 December 2004 <http://www.wamu.org/programs/dr/04/12/14.php > [accessed August 2007]

_____, Foreword, Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition: A Facsimile of Plath's Manuscript, Reinstating her Original Selection and Arrangement* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004)

_____, 'Charles, Ted Hughes and Conspiracy', [Letter to the Editor] *The Times*, 14 January 2004, Features section, p. 21

_____, *Wooroloo* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998; Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe 1999)

Hughes, Ted, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998)

_____, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Paul Keegan (London: Faber and Faber, 2003)

_____, 'Sylvia Plath as Poet and Novelist', *Thumbscrew*, no. 2 (Spring 1995), 2 – 11

_____, *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose*, ed. by William Scammell (London: Faber and Faber, 1994)

_____, 'On Sylvia Plath', *Raritan*, 14.2 (Fall 1994), 1 – 10

_____, 'The Place Where Sylvia Plath Should Rest in Peace', *Guardian*, 20 April 1989, p. 22

_____, 'Introduction', Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977)

_____, Commentary on Poems from The Adelaide Festival Writers Week, March 1976, transcribed by Ann Skea < http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/Adelaide.htm > [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Sylvia Plath's *Crossing the Water*: Some Reflections', *Critical Quarterly*, 13.2

(Summer 1971), 165 – 172

_____, *Seneca's Oedipus* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969)

Hunter, Dianne, 'Poetics of Melancholy and Psychic Possession in Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters* and Other Haunted Texts', *Partial Answers*, 1.1 (January 2003), 129 – 150

Holbrook, David, *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence* (London: Athlone Press, 1988)

Italie, Hillel, 'Ted Hughes' Papers Shed New Light on Sylvia Plath, Himself', *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, 4 April 1999 <http://www.highbeam.com/doc/1P2-6706885.html> [accessed August 2007]

Jacobson, Dan, 'Mirrors Can Kill', *The Listener*, 7 October 1971, p. 482

Jarrell, Randall, *The Third Book of Criticism* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1970)

Jenkins, Alan, 'Unemphatic Moments of Illumination', *Independent on Sunday*, 29 July 1990, Sunday review section, p. 30

Jenkins, Nicholas, 'For "Mother" Read "Other": The Finely Spun Web of Muldoon's Middle Years', *Times Literary Supplement*, 29 January 1999, pp. 9 – 10

Jong, Erica, 'An Art Like Everything Else', *New York Times Book Review*, 12 December 2004, p. 32

Kalstone, David, *Five Temperaments: Elizabeth Bishop, Robert Lowell, James Merrill, Adrienne Rich, John Ashbery* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1977)

Kanning, Sarah, 'An Interview by Sarah Kanning' (with Liam Rector), *American Poetry Review*, 34.5 (September – October 2005), 37 – 41

Kellaway, Kate, 'The Poet who Died so Well: The Real Sylvia Plath', *Observer*, 19 March 2000, p. 21

Keller, Lynn, '"Just one of / the girls: -- / normal in the extreme": Experimentalists-To-Be Starting Out in the 1960s', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 12.2 (Summer 2001), 47 – 69

_____, 'An Interview with Paul Muldoon', *Contemporary Literature*, 35.1 (Spring 1994), 1 – 29

Kendall, Tim and Peter McDonald, eds, *Paul Muldoon: Critical Essays* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2004)

Kendall, Tim, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001)

_____, *Paul Muldoon* (Bridgend: Seren, 1996)

_____, 'From the Bottom of the Pool: Sylvia Plath's Last Poems', *English*, 49.193 (Spring 2000), 23 – 38

_____, 'Interview with Lavinia Greenlaw', *Thumbscrew*, no. 8 (Summer 1997), 2 – 8

Keniston, Ann, *Overheard Voices: Address and Subjectivity in Postmodern American Poetry*, (New York; London: Routledge, 2006)

King, Florence, 'The Other Plath', *American Spectator*, January 1992, *Plath Online* <http://www.plathonline.com/articles/AS0192.html> [accessed December 2005]

Kinsella, John and Tracy Ryan: '"Farther off than Australia": Some Australian Receptions of Plath', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – '98), 43 – 49

Kinsella, Michael, 'On Being Preposterous', review of Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, *PN Review*, 29.4 (March – April 2003), 70 – 71

Kinsella, Thomas, *Collected Poems* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2001)

Kirsch, Adam, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2005)

_____, 'The Exhibitionist', *New Republic*, 221.26 (27 December 1999), 38 – 41

Knight, Stephen, 'More than Just Clever Dickery; Pyrotechnical Autism?' review of Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, *Independent on Sunday*, 20 October 2002, p. 15

Korelitz, Jean Hanff, 'An Inexcusable Thing', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), 5 – 9

_____, *The Properties of Breath* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1988)

Kroll, Judith, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper, 1976)

Krysl, Marilyn, 'Sacred and Profane: The Sestina as Rite', *American Poetry Review*, 33.2 (March – April 2004), 7 – 12

Lane, Gary, ed., *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979)

Larkin, Philip, *Selected Letters of Philip Larkin: 1940 – 1985*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1992)

_____, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Anthony Thwaite (London: Faber and Faber, 1988)

_____, *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Prose 1955 – 1982* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983)

La Rocco, Claudia, 'Plath's *Ariel* Publicly Read for First Time', *Nashua Telegraph Online*, 5 December 2004 <www.nashuatelegraph.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20041205/BOOKS/112050035> [accessed August 2007]

Larrissy, Edward, 'Things, Description and Metaphor in Contemporary British and Irish Poetry',

Yearbook of English Studies, 17 [British Poetry since 1945 Special Number] (1987), 218 – 233

Lauterbach, Ann, 'John Ashbery – Mapping the Real: The Given and the Chosen' [adapted from a lecture given at Poets House, New York, 25 March 2005] *Ashbery Resource Center* <http://www.flowchartfoundation.org/arc/home/special_features/lauterbach.htm> [accessed August 2007]

_____, *If in Time: Selected Poems 1975 – 2000* (New York: Penguin, 2001)

_____, The Night Sky VI', *American Poetry* Review, 27.4 (July – August 1998), 15 – 20

_____, 'Lines Written to Bob Perelman in the Margins of *The Marginalization of Poetry*', *Jacket Magazine*, no. 2 (January 1998) <http://jacketmagazine.com/02/laut.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, *On a Stair* (New York: Penguin, 1997)

Lazer, Hank, 'The People's Poetry', *Boston Review*, 29.2 (April – May 2004) <http://bostonreview.net/BR29.2/lazer.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, *Days* (New Orleans: Lavender Ink Press, 2002)

Lethem, Jonathan, *Men and Cartoons* (New York: Doubleday, 2004)

Libby, Anthony, 'Fathers and Daughter and Mothers and Poets', *New York Times*, 22 March 1987, p. 23

_____, 'God's Lioness and the Priest of Sycorax: Plath and Hughes', *Contemporary Literature*, 15.3 (Summer 1974), 386 – 405

Liddy, James, *The Doctor's House* (Co. Clare: Salmon, 2005)

Litt, Tobi, and Ali Smith, eds, *New Writing 13* (London: Picador, 2005)

Logan, William, 'God's Chatter', *New Criterion*, 25.4 (December 2006), 59 – 66

_____, 'The Great American Desert', *New Criterion*, 23.10 (June 2005), 66 – 73

_____, 'Stouthearted Men', *New Criterion*, 22.10 (June 2004), 60 – 67

_____, 'No Mercy', *New Criterion*, 18.4 (December 1999), 60 – 67

_____, 'Vanity Fair', *New Criterion*, 17.10 (June 1999), 60 – 67

_____, 'Soiled Desires', *New Criterion*, 16.10 (June 1998), 61 – 68

Lomax, Marion, 'Personal Politics in the Poetry of Carol Rumens: A Comparison with Denise Levertov', in *Contemporary Women's Poetry: Reading/Writing/Practice*, ed. by Alison Mark and Deryn Rees-Jones (London: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 173 – 188

_____, 'As Radical as Reality', interview with Carol Rumens, *Poetry Review*, 88.4 (Winter 1998 – 99), 77 – 83

Longley, Edna, 'Rough Magnificence', Review of Ted Hughes, *Collected Poems*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 December 2003, pp. 3 – 4

_____, ed., *The Bloodaxe Book of 20th Century Poetry* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2000)

_____, 'Irish Bards and American Audiences', *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), 757 – 771

Longley, Michael, *Collected Poems* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2006)

_____, 'Five Poets', *Irish Times*, 2 October 1965, p. 6

Lowell, Robert, *The Letters of Robert Lowell*, ed. by Saskia Hamilton (London: Faber and Faber, 2005)

_____, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Frank Bidart and David Gewanter (London: Faber and Faber, 2003)

_____, *Collected Prose* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987)

Lowry, Elizabeth, '"Relentlessly Feminine": The Flawed Values of *Sixty Women Poets*', *Thumbscrew*, no. 2 (Spring 1995), 14 – 29

Lucas, John, 'Martin Johnston and the Matter of Elegy', *Jacket Magazine*, no. 11 (April 2000) <http://jacketmagazine.com/11/johnston-by-lucas.html> [accessed August 2007]

MacMonagle, Niall, *Lifelines 2: Letters from Famous People about their Favourite Poem*, forward by Paul Durcan (Dublin: Town House, 1994)

MacNeice, Louis, *Collected Poems*, ed. by Peter McDonald (London: Faber and Faber, 2007)

Malcolm, Janet, *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (London: PaperMac, 1995)

Marken, Ronald, 'Paul Muldoon's "Juggling a Red-Hot Half-Brick in an Old Sock": Poets in Ireland Renovate the English-Language Sonnet', *Eire-Ireland: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 24.1 (1989), 79 – 91

Martin, Camille, 'Hank Lazer's Uncommonplace *Days*', *Moria: A Poetry Journal*, 6.1 (Summer 2003) <http://www.moriapoetry.com/martin20.html> [accessed August 2007]

Martin, Francesca, 'Revealed: Sylvia Plath's Unseen Art, Discovered in the Attic', *Guardian*, 15 August 2007 <http://arts.guardian.co.uk/art/news/story/0,,2149031,00.html> [accessed August 2007]

Matovich, Richard M., *A Concordance to the Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath* (New York; London: Garland, 1986)

Matthews, Steven, *Irish Poetry: Politics, History, Negotiation* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997)

McAuley, James J, 'Wit, Laments and Bodhrán Satire', *Irish Times*, 16 July 2005, Weekend section, p. 13

McClatchy, J.D., 'Old Myths in New Versions', *Poetry*, 172 (Summer 1998), 159 – 160

McCorkle, James, *The Still Performance: Writing, Self and Interconnection in Five Postmodern American Poets* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989)

McDiarmid, Lucy and Michael Durkan, 'Q & A: Nuala Ní Dhómhnaill', *Irish Literary Supplement*, 6.2 (Fall 1987), 41 – 43

McGuckian, Medbh, *The Book of the Angel* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2004)

_____, *Selected Poems 1978 – 1994* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1997)

_____, *On Ballycastle Beach* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

McKenzie, Geraldine, Review of Hank Lazer, *Days*, *Jacket Magazine*, no. 21 (February 2003) <http://jacketmagazine.com/21/mckenz-lazer.html> [accessed August 2007]

McQuade, Molly, 'The Dead and the Rude: A Late Obit. for Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', *Booklist* 15 March 1999, 1280 <http://www.plathonline.com/articles.html> [accessed December 2004]

Meade, Declan, 'Interview with Sinéad Morrissey', *Stinging Fly*, 1.14 (Winter 2002 – 2003) <http://www.stingingfly.org/issue14/morrissey.html> [accessed August 2007]

Melander, Ingrid, *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes* (Stockholm: Almquist and Wiksell, 1972)

Merwin, W.S., 'Lament for the Makers', in *Lament for the Makers: A Memorial Anthology* (Washington D.C.: Counterpoint, 1996), pp. 3 – 13

Meyers, Jeffrey, 'Terminator: The Legacy of Ted Hughes', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 80.2 (Spring 2004), 219 – 231

Michelson, Bruce, *Wilbur's Poetry: Music in a Scattering Time* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991)

Middlebrook, Diane, 'Hughes, Plath and the Three Caryatids' in *'Fixed Stars Govern a Life': Transforming Poetics and Memory with Emory's Ted Hughes Archive* (Across Academe Series No. 6) ed. by Ronald Schuchard (Atlanta: Emory University Academic Exchange, 2006), pp. 47 – 56

_____, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath - A Marriage* (New York: Viking, 2003)

Middles, Mick, *Manic Street Preachers* (London: Omnibus, 1999)

Miller, Karl, *Seamus Heaney in Conversation with Karl Miller* (London: Between the Lines, 2000)

Miller, Malcom, 'New Consciousness', in 'Live Performance', *Musical Times*, 132.1778 (April 1991), 205

Miller, Margaret, 'In His Own Words: Ted Hughes on Sylvia Plath', Review of Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, *Yale Review of Books*, 1.3 (Fall 1998) <http://www.yale.edu/yrb/fall98/feature2.htm> [accessed August 2007]

Milmo, Cahal, 'Stop Digging Up Mother's Troubled Past, Says Plath's Daughter', *Independent*, 30 November 2004, p. 15

Mitchell, Paul, 'Reading (and) The Late Poems of Sylvia Plath', *Modern Language Review*, 100.1 (January 2005), 37 – 50

Molloy, Dorothy, *Hare Soup* (London: Faber and Faber, 2004)

Montague, John, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 1995)

_____, *The Figure in the Cave and Other Essays*, ed. by Antoinette Quinn (Dublin: Lilliput Press, 1989)

Moramarco, Fred S. and William Sullivan, *Containing Multitudes: Poetry in the United States Since 1950* (New York: Twayne; London: Prentice Hall, 1998) <www-rohan.sdsu.edu/faculty/fmoramar/newmaps.html> [accessed August 2007]

Morris, Daniel, *The Poetry of Louise Glück: A Thematic Introduction* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006)

Morrisey, Sinéad, *The State of the Prisons* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2005)

_____, *There was Fire in Vancouver* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1996)

Morrison, Blake and Andrew Motion, eds, *The Penguin Book of Contemporary British Poetry* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982)

Moses, Kate, 'The Real Sylvia Plath', 30 May 2000 <www.salon.com/books/feature/2000/05/30/plath1/> [accessed August 2007]

_____, *Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2003)

Motion, Andrew, *Philip Larkin: A Writer's Life* (London: Faber and Faber, 1993)

Moulin, Joanny, ed., *Ted Hughes: Alternative Horizons* (London; New York: Rouledge, 2004)

Muldoon, Paul, *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006)

_____, 'Write About What you Don't Know', *Lily: A Monthly Online Literary Review*, 1.2 (January 2004) <http://freewebs.com/lilylitreview/1_2interview.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Presiding Spirits: Paul Muldoon on "Ozymandias" by Percy Bysshe Shelley', *Magma Poetry*, 20 (Summer 2001) <http://www.magmapoetry.com/poem.php?article_id=53> [accessed August 2007]

_____, *Moy Sand and Gravel* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002)

_____, 'A Collegelands Catechism', *Princeton Courseware* <www.princeton.edu/~images/courseware/public/catechism/poemstart.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, *Poems: 1968 – 1998* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001)

_____, 'Work in Progress', broadcast on BBC Radio 3, July 2001 <www.bbc.co.uk/radio3/speech/workinp/muldoon.shtml> [accessed January 2005]

_____, *To Ireland, I* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000)

_____, 'Getting Round: Notes Towards an *Ars Poetica*', *Essays in Criticism*, 48.2 (April 1998), 107 – 128

_____, 'The Point of Poetry', *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, 59.3 (Spring 1998), 503 – 516

_____, 'Between Ireland and Montevideo', the first Waterstones Lecture, 29 May 1994, Hay-on-Wye Festival of Literature (unpublished MS)

_____, *The Annals of Chile* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994)

_____, *Meeting the British* (London: Faber and Faber, 1987)

Murphy, John, 'John Ashbery: An Interview with John Murphy', *Poetry Review*, 75.2 (August 1985), 20 – 25

Murphy, Richard, *The Kick: A Life Among Writers* (London: Granta, 2002)

_____, *Collected Poems* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2000)

Muske, Carol, 'Women and Poetry', *Michigan Quarterly Review*, 35.4 (Fall 1996), 586 – 607

Myers, Lucas, *Crow Steered, Bergs Appeared: A Memoir of Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (Sewanee: Proctor's Hall Press, 2001)

Narbeshuber, Lisa, 'The Poetics of Torture: The Spectacle of Sylvia Plath's Poetry', *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 34.2 (2004), 185 – 203

Negev, Eilat, 'My Life with Sylvia Plath, by Ted Hughes', *Daily Telegraph*, 31 October 1998, p. 4

Neilson, Andrew, Review of Caitríona O'Reilly, *The Nowhere Birds* and Tracey Herd, *Dead Redhead*, *Jacket Magazine*, no. 19 (October 2002) <http://jacketmagazine.com/19/nei1.html> [accessed August 2007]

Nelson, Deborah, *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003)

Nelson, Helena, 'Conversation with Anne Stevenson', *Dark Horse* (Summer 2000), 52 – 60

Newey, Adam, 'Walking on Air', *New Statesman*, 11 July 2001, pp. 70–71

Newman, Charles, ed., *The Art of Sylvia Plath* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970)

Nguyen, Thanh-Binh, 'A Stylistic Analysis of Sylvia Plath's Semantics', *Language and Style*, 11.2 (Spring 1978), 69 – 81

Nims, John Frederick, 'The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Technical Analysis', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. by Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1970), pp. 136 – 152

Noel-Tod, Jeremy, 'Poetic Staples', *Poetry Review*, 92.4 (Winter 2002), 112 – 114

_____, Review of Paul Farley, *Tramp in Flames*, *Tower Poetry: Poetry Matters*, September 2006 <www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/september2006/farley.html> [accessed August 2007]

Nolan, Val, 'State of the Art', *Poetry Ireland Review*, 86 (May 2006), 97 – 100

Nolan, Yvonne, 'Alighting from Nowhere', *Irish Times*, 18 August 2001, Weekend section, p. 8

Nye, Robert, 'A New Poetry of Emotion', *Scotsman*, 15 September 2001, p. 13

Oates, Joyce Carol, 'The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *Southern Review*, 9.3 (July 1973), 501 – 22

_____, 'One for Life, One for Death', *New York Times Book Review*, 19 November 1972 <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/01/home/plath-winter.html> [accessed August 2007]

Oberg, Arthur, 'Sylvia Plath: "Love, Love, My Season"', in *Modern American Lyric: Lowell, Berryman, Creeley and Plath* (Rutgers University Press, 1978), pp. 127 – 173

O'Brien, Peggy, 'Your Daddy, My Daddy', in *The Kilfenora Teaboy: A Study of Paul Durcan*, ed. by Colm Tóibín (Dublin: New Island Books, 1996), pp. 75 – 101

O'Brien, Sean, *The De-Regulated Muse: Essays on Contemporary British and Irish Poetry*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Bloodaxe,1998)

_____, ed., *The Firebox: Poetry in Britain and Ireland After 1945* (London: Picador, 1998)

O'Callaghan, Conor, *Fiction* (Oldcastle: The Gallery Press, 2005)

O'Connor, Laura, 'Comhrá: A Conversation between Medbh McGuckian and Nuala Ní

Dhómhnaill', with a Forward and Afterword by Laura O' Connor, *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), 581 – 614

O'Donoghue, Bernard, '"The Half-Said Thing to Them is Dearest": Paul Muldoon', in *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. by Michael Kenneally (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1995)

O'Driscoll, Dennis, 'Lannan Readings and Conversations: Seamus Heaney with Dennis O'Driscoll, 1 October 2003', *Lannan Foundation* <http://www.lannan.org/lf/rc/event/seamus-heaney/> [accessed August 2007]

Olds, Sharon, *Satan Says* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1980)

O'Reilly, Caitríona, *The Sea Cabinet* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2006)

_____, 'Sylvia Plath', in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of American Literature*, vol. 3, ed. by Jay Parini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 355 – 362

_____, *The Nowhere Birds* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2001)

_____, '"I Carpenter a Space for the Thing I am Given": Influence and the Consciousness of Space in Emily Dickinson, H.D. and Sylvia Plath' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Trinity College Dublin, 2001)

O'Rourke, Meghan, 'Patti Smith, Meet Sylvia Plath', *Slate* (11 January 2006) <http://www.slate.com/?id=2134082> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Ariel Redux', *Slate*, 7 December 2004 <http://www.slate.com/id/2110754/> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Subject Sylvia', *Poetry*, 183.6 (March 2004), 335 – 344

_____, 'Hermetic Hotties', *Slate*, 11 February 2004 <http://slate.com/id/2095317/> [accessed August 2007]

Orr, Peter, ed., *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1966)

Osborn, Andrew, 'Skirmishes on the Border: The Evolution and Function of Paul Muldoon's Fuzzy Rhyme', *Contemporary Literature*, 41.2 (Summer 2000), 323 – 358

Oswald, Alice, *Woods etc.* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005)

_____, *Dart* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002)

Over, Marita, Review of Caitríona O' Reilly, *The Nowhere Birds*, *Ambit Magazine*, no. 168 (Spring 2002), 74 – 75

_____, Review of Rosemary Norman, *Life on Mars with accompanying video by Stuart Pound*, *Ambit Magazine*, 164 (Spring 2001), 84 – 85

Pacernick, Gary, *Meaning and Memory: Interviews with Fourteen Jewish Poets* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001)

Padel, Ruth, *52 Ways of Looking at a Poem: A Poem for Every Week of the Year* (London: Vintage, 2004)

_____, *The Soho Leopard* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2004)

_____, 'Interview in Mexico 2004', *Ruth Padel* <http://www.ruthpadel.com/pages/mexico.htm> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Paul Muldoon: "It's Not Painting By Numbers", *Independent*, 5 October 2002, pp. 22 – 23

_____, *Rembrandt Would Have Loved You* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998)

_____, 'She was Much More than a Wronged Woman: She was a Verbal Acrobat', *Independent*, 20 January 1998, p. 17

Palter, Robert, *The Duchess of Malfi's Apricots and Other Literary Fruits* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2002)

Paphides, Pete, 'Post-Punk Raiders Pick Up Their Guitars', *The Times*, 20 July 2005, p. 23

Paschen, Elise, 'An Interview with Amy Clampitt', *Oxford Poetry*, 3.1 (Winter 1986 – 1987), 30 – 37

_____, 'An Interview with Carol Rumens', *Oxford Poetry*, 3.1 (Winter 1986 – 1987), 76 – 83

Paterson, Don, *Landing Light* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003)

Patterson, Christina, 'Sharon Olds: Blood, Sweat and Fears', conversation with Sharon Olds, *Independent*, 27 October 2006, Arts and Books Review section, p.20

_____, 'The Trouble With Sylvia', *Independent*, 11 July 2006, Arts and Books Review section, p. 15

_____, 'In Search of the Poet', *Independent*, 6 February 2004, Arts and Books Review section, pp. 2 – 4

_____, 'Ted on Sylvia for the Record', *Guardian*, 18 August 2001, Saturday Pages section, p. 3

Peel, Robin, 'The Ideological Apprenticeship of Sylvia Plath', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 27.4 (Summer 2004), 59 – 72

_____, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics* (Madison: Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2002)

_____, '*The Bell Jar* Manuscripts, Two January 1962 Poems, "Elm" and "Ariel"', *Journal of*

Modern Literature, 23.3-4 (Summer 2000), 441 – 454

Perelman, Bob, *The Marginalization of Poetry: Language Writing and Literary History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996)

Perloff, Marjorie, 'A Conversation with Charles Bernstein', *Fulcrum*, no. 2 (2003) <www.ubu.com/papers/mp_cb.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Language Poetry and the Lyric Subject: Ron Silliman's *Albany*, Susan Howe's *Buffalo*' <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/perloff/langpo.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Triplespace', *Virginia Quarterly Review*, 74. 2 (Spring 1998), 380 – 390

_____, 'On the Road to *Ariel*: The "Transitional" Poetry of Sylvia Plath' in *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*, ed. by Edward Butscher, pp. 125 – 142

_____, 'The Two *Ariels*: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon', in *Poems In Their Place: The Intertextuality and Order of Poetic Collections*, ed. by Neil Freistat (North Carolina: Chapel Hill, 1986), pp. 308 – 333

_____, 'Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems*: A Review Essay', *Resources for American Literary Study*, 11.2 (Autumn 1981), 304 – 313

Phillips, Ivan, 'A Mixed Marriage: The Strange Affair of Sylvia Plath and Paul Muldoon', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), 58 – 65

Phillips, Janet, 'International Women's Day 2004: Powerful Influences', *The Poetry Society Website* <http://www.poetrysociety.org.uk/content/info/news/women/> [accessed August 2007]

Pollitt, Katha, 'Peering into the Bell Jar', *New York Times Book Review*, 1 March 1998 <www.nytimes.com/books/98/03/01/reviews/980301.01pollitt.html?_r=1&oref=slogin> [accessed August 2007]

Pollak, Vivian R., 'Moore, Plath, Hughes and "The Literary Life"', *American Literary History*, 17.1 (Spring 2005), 95 – 117

Porter, Peter, 'Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath: A Bystander's Recollections', *Australian Book Review*, no. 233 (August 2001), 21 – 28

Potts, Robert, 'The Poet at Play', *Guardian*, 12 May 2001 <www.guardian.co.uk/saturday_review/story/0,,489406,00.html> [accessed August 2007]

Plumly, Stanley, *Argument and Song: Sources and Silences in Poetry* (New York: Other Press, 2003)

Porter, Peter, 'Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath: A Bystander's Recollections', *Australian Book Review*, no. 233 (August 2001), 21 – 28

Pratt, William, 'Review of Medbh McGuckian, *Selected Poems 1978 – 1994*', *World Literature Today*, 72.4 (Autumn 1998), 836

Quart, Alissa, 'Dying for Melodrama', *Psychology Today Magazine* (November – December 2003) <www.psychologytoday.com/articles/pto-20031028-000004.html> [accessed August 2007]

Quinn, Justin, *Waves and Trees* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2006)

_____, 'The Weather of Irish Poetry', *Sewanee Review* (Summer 2003), 486 – 492

_____, *Fuselage* (Oldcastle: Gallery Press, 2002)

_____, 'The Irish Efflorescence', *Poetry Review*, 91.4 (Winter 2001 – 2002), 46 – 50

_____, 'Plath as Exemplar', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), 11 – 13

_____, *Privacy* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1999)

_____, *The O'o'a'a' Bird* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1995)

Quinney, Laura, 'In the Studebaker', *London Review of Books*, 25.20 (23 October 2003), 20 – 21

Raine, Craig, 'Ordinary, Sacred Things: Ted Hughes and the Visionary's Double Vision', *Times Literary Supplement*, 24 November 2006, pp. 11 – 13

Ramazani, Jahan, *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 1994)

_____, '"Daddy I Have Had to Kill You": Plath, Rage and the Modern Elegy', *PMLA*, 108 (1993), 1142 – 1156

Ramsey, Patrick, 'Quality and Quantity', *Irish Review*, 5 (Autumn 1988), 122 – 126

Rankine, Claudia and Juliana Spahr, eds, *American Women Poets in the 21st Century: Where Lyric Meets Language* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2002)

Raymond, Claire, *The Posthumous Voice in Women's Writing from Mary Shelley to Sylvia Plath* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006)

Reading, Peter, 'Private Lives and Public Enemies', *Sunday Times*, 1 July 1990, Books section, p. 14

Redmond, John, '"Unlikely as a Foetus": The Influence of Sylvia Plath on Seamus Heaney', unpublished conference paper, at the 'British and Irish Contemporary Poetry Conference: The Line of Poetry', St. Anne's College, Oxford, 22 – 24 September 2006

_____, Review of Alice Oswald, *Woods etc.*, *Tower Poetry: Poetry Matters*, June 2005 <www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/june2005/oswald.html> [accessed June 2007]

_____, 'Bloodbath', *Thumbscrew*, no. 15 (Winter – Spring 2000), 4 – 7

_____, 'By Their Errata Shall Ye Know Them', review of Jorie Graham, *The Errancy*, *Thumbscrew*, no. 12 (Winter 1998 – 1999) <www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=12194> [accessed August 2007]

_____, 'Interview with Paul Muldoon', *Thumbscrew*, no. 4 (Spring 1996), 2 – 18

_____, 'Indicting the Exquisite', *Thumbscrew*, no. 1 (Winter 1994 – 1995) <http://www.poetrymagazines.org.uk/magazine/record.asp?id=5408> [accessed August 2007]

Rees-Jones, Deryn, *Consorting with Angels: Essays on Modern Women Poets* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2005)

Rich, Adrienne, *The Fact of a Doorframe: Selected Poems 1950 – 2001*, new edn (New York; London: Norton, 2002)

_____, *What is Found There: Notebooks on Poetry and Politics*, new edn (London: Virago, 1995)

_____, *The Dream of a Common Language: Poems 1974 – 1977* (London; New York: Norton, 1980)

Richards, Jeremy, 'Sylvia Plath's Gangsta Rap Legacy' <www.thebigjewel.com/sylviaplathsgangstaraplegacy/> [accessed August 2007]

Richards, Sandra, 'Is there Humour in Sylvia Plath?' *English Review*, 4.4 (April 1994), 28 – 31

Riding-Jackson, Laura, 'Suitable Criticism', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 47.1 (Fall 1977), 74 – 85

Roberts, Neil, *Ted Hughes: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006)

_____, 'The Common Text of Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes', *Symbiosis: A Journal of Anglo-American Literary Relations*, 7.1 (April 2003), 157 – 173

Robins, Corinne, 'Four Young Poets', *Mademoiselle*, January 1959 <www.emptymirrorbooks.com/images/poets/hart/mllereview.html> [accessed August 2007]

Roman, C., 'Cold War 1950: Elizabeth Bishop and Sylvia Plath', *WPI Studies*, 18 (1999), 247 – 258

Romer, Stephen, 'A Poet of Perfect Poise', *Guardian*, 16 June 2001 <http://books.guardian.co.uk/reviews/poetry/0,6121,507435,00.html> [accessed August 2007]

Rose, Jacqueline, Introduction to 'Tribute: Sylvia Plath', *Poetry Society of America Journal* <http://www.poetrysociety.org/journal/articles/tributes/plath.html> [accessed August 2007]

_____, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991)

Rosenblatt, Jon, *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1979)

Rosenthal, M.L., 'Modern Irish Poetry: Some Notes by an Outsider', *Southern Review*, 31.3 (Summer 1995), 696 – 713

_____, 'Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry', in *The Modern Poets: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), pp. 69 – 76

Rosenthal, Sarah, 'Placing Silence', interview with Kathleen Fraser, *Jacket Magazine*, no. 33 (July 2007) <http://jacketmagazine.com/33/fraser-ivby-rosenthal.shtml> [accessed August 2007]

Rosslyn, Felicity, 'Plath and Hughes among the Psychiatrists', *PN Review*, 29.3 (January – February 2003), 30 – 33

Rowland, Anthony, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005)

Rumens, Carol, *Poems 1968 – 2004* (Tarset: Bloodaxe, 2004)

_____ , 'Sense and Sensibility', Review of Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*, *Poetry Review*, 92.1 (Spring 2002), 53 – 54

_____ , *Holding Pattern* (Belfast: Blackstaff Press, 1998)

_____ , 'Ariel Manoeuvres', *Poetry Review*, 81.4 (Winter 1991), 66 – 67

_____ , ed., *Making for the Open: The Chatto Book of Post-Feminist Poetry* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1985)

_____ , *A Necklace of Mirrors* (Belfast: Ulsterman Publications, 1978)

Russo, Linda, 'Mostly Experimental: Recent Writings By and About Contemporary Women Poets and Writers, *Jacket Magazine*, no. 22 (May 2003) <http://jacketmagazine.com/22/russo.html> [accessed August 2007]

Sagar, Keith, *The Laughter of Foxes: A Study of Ted Hughes* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000)

Sampson, Fiona, 'Stacking Myths, Making Meaning', *Irish Times*, 20 May 2006, Weekend section, p. 10

_____, 'Behind the Linen Room', review of Eavan Boland, *New Collected Poems*, *Tower Poetry*: *Poetry Matters*, January 2006 <www.towerpoetry.org.uk/poetry-matters/january2006/boland.html> [accessed August 2007]

Sansom, Ian, 'Awesome in Armagh', review of Paul Muldoon, *Moy Sand and Gravel*, *Guardian*, 2 November 2002, Saturday Pages section, p. 25

_____, '"I was there, I saw it"', review of Ted Hughes, *Birthday* Letters, *London Review of Books*, 20.4 (19 February 1998), 8 – 9

Scammell, William, 'Burst Open under a Blue-Black Pressure', *Poetry Review*, 88.1 (Spring 1998), 82 – 87

Scannell, Vernon, 'It Rhymes, It Scans', *Sunday Telegraph*, 29 December 2002, p. 14

Schmidt, Elizabeth, 'Where Poetry Begins: Eavan Boland in Conversation', *American Poet, The Quarterly Journal of The Academy of American Poets* (Spring 1997) reprinted in *Poets.org* <http://www.poets.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/15939> [accessed August 2007]

Schulman, Polly, 'Is Hell Satisfied', *Salon*, 25 August 1999 <http://www.salon.com/mwt/wild/1999/08/25/tedhughes/> [accessed August 2007]

Schultz, Susan M., ed., *The Tribe of John: Ashbery and Contemporary Poetry* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1995)

Sexton, Anne, *The Complete Poems*, ed. by Maxine Kumin (New York: Houghton Mifflin / Mariner Books, 1999)

Shelley, Mary, *Proserpine and Midas: Two Unpublished Mythological Dramas*, ed. and intro. by A. Koszul <http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext04/prsmd10.txt> [accessed August 2007]

Sherman, Kenneth, 'The Necessity of Poetry: Anthony Hecht's "The Book of Yolek"', *Partisan Review*, 68.4 (Fall 2001), 605 – 611

Simpson, Louis, *A Revolution in Taste: Studies of Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell* (New York: Macmillan, 1978)

Skea, Ann, 'The Path of the Devil – A'Ain' <http://www.zeta.org.au/~annskea/Devil.htm>[accessed August 2007]

_____, '*Birthday Letters*: Poetry and Magic' <http://ann.skea.com/BLCabala.htm> [accessed August 2007]

Skloot, Floyd, 'The Unswept Room', *Harvard Review*, 26 (Spring 2004), 215 – 216

Smith, Nathan, '*Jacket* Interview: Catherine Wagner in Conversation with Nathan Smith', *Jacket Magazine*, 33 (July 2007) <http://jacketmagazine.com/33/wagner-icw-smith.shtml> [accessed August 2007]

Sontag, Kate and David Graham, eds, *After Confession: Poetry as Autobiography* (Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2001)

Spahr, Juliana, 'After Language poetry', *Ubuweb Papers* (OEI Sweden 2001) <http://www.ubu.com/papers/oei/spahr.html> [accessed August 2007]

Spiegelman, Willard, 'Charles Tomlinson: The Art of Poetry LXXVIII', *Paris Review*, no. 149

(Winter 1998), 160 – 188

Stannard, Julian, 'An Interview with Fleur Adcock', *Thumbscrew*, no. 17 (Winter 2000 – 2001), 5 – 15

Steinberg, Peter, '"They Taste the Spring": A Review of *Ariel: The Restored Edition*', *Sylvia Plath Forum* <http://www.sylviaplathforum.com/reviews/ariel-restored.html> [accessed August 2007]

Stevenson, Anne, 'Sylvia Plath's Word Cage', review of Karen V. Kukil, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, *Thumbscrew*, no. 16 (Summer 2000), 19 – 23

_____, *Between the Iceberg and the Ship: Selected Essays* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998)

_____, *The Collected Poems of Anne Stevenson: 1955 – 1995* (Oxford University Press, 1996)

_____, 'Sylvia Plath's Word Games', *Poetry Review*, 86.4 (Winter 1996), 28 – 34

_____, *The Other House* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990)

_____, 'Sylvia Plath, Elizabeth Bishop and the Romantic Iconography of the Mind', *Poetry Review*, 79.2 (Summer 1989), 10 – 14

_____, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (Boston: Houghton, 1989)

_____, 'Writing as a Woman', in *Women Writing and Writing About Women*, ed. by Mary Jacobus (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 159 – 176

Strangeways, Al, *Sylvia Plath: The Shaping of Shadows* (Cranbury, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1998)

_____, '"The Boot in the Face": The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *Contemporary Literature*, 37.3 (Fall 1996), 370 – 390

Suarez, Ernest, T.W. Stanford and Amy Verner, eds, *Southbound: Interviews with Southern Poets* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999)

Summerscale, Kate, 'My Father was not a Monster, says daughter of Ted Hughes', *Telegraph*, 13 November 2004, p. 11

Sutherland, John, 'When Stephen Met Sylvia', *Guardian*, 24 April 2004, Saturday Pages section, p. 4

Sweeney, Matthew, *Blue Shoes* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1989)

Sword, Helen, 'James Merrill, Sylvia Plath and the Poetics of Ouija', *American Literature*, 66.3 (September 1994), 553 – 572

Terrazas, Michael, 'Enniss Mines, Records the Evolution of Writers' Lives', *Emory Report*, 51.20

(15 February 1999)
<www.emory.edu/EMORY_REPORT/erarchive/1999/February/erfebruary.15/2_15_99ennis.html> [accessed August 2007]

Thwaite, Anthony, 'Sylvia Plath', *Encounter*, 46 (June 1976), 64 – 67

Thorpe, Adam, 'Poetry, Primal Energies and Meddling Gods', *Observer*, 22 January 1995, Review section, p. 18

Tillinghast, Richard, 'Blunt Instruments', *The Nation*, 239.11 (13 October 1984), 361 – 363

Tóibín, Colm, ed., *The Kilfenora Teaboy: A Study of Paul Durcan* (Dublin: New Island Books, 1996)

Tomlinson, Charles, *Collected Poems*, rev. edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987)

Tyrell, Patricia, 'The Semtex Poet', *Thumbscrew*, no. 9 (Winter 1997 – 1998), 27 – 29

Updike, John, 'Upon Looking into Sylvia Plath's *Letters Home*', in *Collected Poems: 1953 – 1993* (London: Penguin, 1995), p. 253

Upton, Lee, '"I / Have a Self to Recover": The Restored *Ariel*', *Literary Review*, 48.4 (Summer 2005), 260 – 264

_____, *The Muse of Abandonment: Origin, Identity, Mastery in Five American Poets* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1998)

Uroff, Margaret Dickie, *Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1979)

_____, 'Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration', *Iowa Review*, 8.1 (1977), 104 – 115

Van Dyne, Susan R., *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath's 'Ariel' Poems* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1993)

Vendler, Helen, 'Fanciness and Fatality', review of Paul Muldoon, *Horse Latitudes* and *The End of the Poem: Oxford Lectures*, *The New Republic*, 235 (October 2006), 26 – 33

_____, *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003)

_____, *Seamus Heaney* (London: Harper Collins, 1998)

_____, 'Anglo-Celtic Attitudes', *New York Review of Books*, 6 November 1997, 57 – 60

_____, 'Jorie Graham: The Moment of Excess', in *The Breaking of Style: Hopkins, Heaney, Graham* (Cambridge, Mass; London: Harvard University Press, 1995)

_____, *The Music of What Happens* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1988)

Viner, Katharine, 'Desperately Seeking Sylvia', *Guardian*, 20 October 2003, Features section, p. 8

Wagner, Erica, *Ariel's Gift: A Commentary on Birthday Letters by Ted Hughes* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000)

Wagner-Martin, Linda, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003)

_____, ed., *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath* (Boston: GK Hall, 1984)

_____, ed., *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988)

Walcott, Derek, 'Ted Hughes', in *What the Twilight Says: Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1998), pp. 176 – 181

Whitehead, Anne, 'Refiguring Orpheus: The Possession of the Past in Ted Hughes' *Birthday Letters*', *Textual Practice*, 13.2 (1999), 227 – 241

Whittington-Egan, Richard, 'The Life after Death of Sylvia Plath', *Contemporary Review*, 272.1588 (May 1998), 238 – 243

Wheatley, David, 'Best Foot Backwards', review of Hugo Williams, *Dear Room*, *Guardian*, 10 June 2006, Review section, p. 18

_____, 'Changing the Story: Eavan Boland and Literary History', *The Irish Review*, no. 31 (Spring – Summer 2004), 103 – 120

_____, 'The Aistriúchán Cloak: Paul Muldoon and the Irish Language', *New Hibernia Review*, 5.4 (2001), 123 – 134

_____, 'The Real Hughes Escapes', *Sunday Herald*, 15 November 2001, p. 9

_____, '"That Blank Mouth": Secrecy, Shibboleths and Silence in Northern Irish Poetry', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 25.1 (Fall 2001), 1 – 16

_____, 'In the Gasworks', *London Review of Books*, 22.10 (18 May 2000), 30 – 31

_____, 'Subjects Matter', *Poetry Review*, 89.2 (Summer 1999), 71 – 75

_____, 'An Irish Poet in America', review of Paul Muldoon, *Hay*, *Raritan*, 18.4 (Spring 1999), 145 – 157

Wheeler, Lesley, 'Both Flower and Flower Gatherer: Medbh McGuckian's "The Flower Master" and H.D.'s "Sea Garden"', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 49.4 (Winter 2003), 494 – 519

Wieseltier, Leon, 'In A Universe of Ghosts', review of Dorothy Rabinowicz, *New Lives: Survivors of the Holocaust Living in America*, *New York Review of Books*, 23.19 (25 November 1976), 20 – 23

Wilbur, Richard, *The Catbirds Song: Prose Pieces 1963 – 1995* (New York; London: Harcourt

Brace, 1997)

_____, *New and Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989)

Wilmer, Clive, 'The Later Fortunes of Impersonality: Eliot's "Tradition" Essay in Post-War Poetry', *PN Review*, 30.5 (May – June 2004), 15 – 19

_____, *Poets Talking: The 'Poet of the Month' Interviews from BBC Radio 3* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1994)

Williamson, Alan, 'A Marriage between Writers: *Birthday Letters* as Memoir and as Poetry', *American Poetry Review*, 27.5 (September – October 1998), 11 – 13

_____, *Introspection and Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984)

Wills, Clair, *Reading Paul Muldoon* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe, 1998)

Wills, Claire, Nick Jenkins and John Lanchester, 'An Interview with Paul Muldoon', *Oxford Poetry*, 3.1 (Winter 1986 – 1987), 14 – 20

Wilson, James S.F., 'Paul Muldoon: The Art of Poetry LXXXVII:', *Paris Review*, no. 169 (Spring 2004), 53 – 91

Wiman, Christian, 'Influential Poets [They Made America]', *Atlantic Monthly*, 298.5 (December 2006), 75

Wineapple, Brenda, 'I Have Done This Thing', review of Sharon Olds, *Strike Sparks: Selected Poems 1980 – 2002*, *Poetry*, 185.3 (December 2004), 232 – 236

Wood, James, 'Muck Funnel', *New Republic*, 218.13 (30 March 1998), 30 – 33

Wroe, Nicholas, 'A Life in Writing: Leading Light: Don Paterson', *Guardian*, 25 November 2006, Review section, p. 11

Yeh, Jane, 'Tragedy Restoration', *Village Voice*, 24 – 30 November 2004 <http://www.villagevoice.com/books/0447,yeh,58651,10.html> [accessed August 2007]

Yenser, Stephen, 'Some Poets' Criticism and the Age', *Southern Review*, 30.1 (Winter 1994), 165 – 180

Yezzi, David, 'The Morality of Anthony Hecht', *New Criterion*, 22.8 (April 2004), 27 – 33

Zivley, Sherry Lutz, 'Ted Hughes' *Apologia Pro Matrimonio Suo*', *New England Quarterly*, 55.2 (June 1982), 187 – 200