IMAGES OF THE POET'S *PERSONAE* IN SYLVIA PLATH'S *THE COLOSSUS*

A study of the images through which Sylvia Plath expresses the theme of conflict between an inner sense of unease and a desire for normality — the struggle between the poet's two selves, that self which in 'In Plaster' *(Crossing the Water)* she calls 'white' and 'saint', and the other self which in the same poem she calls 'hairy'—is, I feel, fundamental to an understanding of her poetic output. The object of this paper, therefore, is to examine and analyse the relation of images with each other and with the duality theme in some of the poems in *The Colossus*, with reference also to later maturer poems where the imagery is less tortuous and obscure and the above-mentioned conflict more directly, and incidentally more effectively expressed. The theme or the presence of 'otherness' in Plath's poems has led Charles Newman to see her entire body of work as a dialogue with an 'Other' [1]. Nancy Hunter Steiner, Sylvia's room-mate at Smith College, describing episodes of their life at college, also refers indirectly to this 'otherness' or other *persona* in Plath when she comments on her difficulty in believing that Sylvia, who was so eager to create the impression of the wholesome American girl, had ever felt a self-destructive impulse [2]. Proof of the existence of this otherness is also evident from Plath's letters to her mother and to her friends, in which several of her comments on her work and life are important from the point of view of this study. It is also significant that the subject of the theses for her degree at Smith College is twin images in two of Dostoevsky's novels, i.e. in *The Double* and in *The Brothers Karamazov*, and that she describes it as:

1. 'Candor is the only Wile: The Art of Sylvia Plath' in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A symposium*, Charles Newman (ed.), Faber & Faber, London 1970. p. 25.

2. Nancy Hunter Steiner, *A Closer Look at Ariel, a memory of Sylvia Plath*, Faber & Faber, London 1973. p. 18.

..... about the ego as symbolized in reflection (mirror and water), shadows, twins — dividing off and becoming an enemy, or omen of death, or a warning conscience, or a means by which one denies the power of death, (e.g. by creating the idea of the soul as the deathless double of the mortal body).

In 'Ocean 1212W' she says:

As from a star I saw, coldly the *separateness* of everything. I felt the wall of my skin. I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over [4].

During her scholarship years at Cambridge, the struggle between her two «selves» is evident both from her letters to her mother as well as from her Cambridge notes of February 1956:

I want to get back to my more normal intermediate path where the *substance* of the world is permeated by my being: eating food, reading, writing, talking, shopping; so all is good in itself, and not just a hectic activity to cover up the fear that must face itself and must duel itself to death, saying: A Life is passing! [5].

Plath's attempts to suppress her unease was detrimental to her early poetry. Alvarez comments that in *The Colossus*, her first volume of poems, she was using her art to keep the disturbance out of which she made her verse at a distance, and that when the efficiency in keeping back the violent unease that made her write failed, her world collapsed [6]. Her best poetry was written just before her suicide, when her interior struggles and terrors were fra-

3. Letter dated Oct. 15, 1954; see *Sylvia Plath: Letters Home, Correspondence 1950-1963*, selected & edited with a commentary by Aurelia Schober Plath, Faber & Faber, London, 1973, p. 146 (in future referred to as *Letters*)

4. 'Ocean 1212W', in *The Listener*, Aug. 29, 1963, p. 269, reprinted in Sylvia Plath, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and other prose writings*, with an introduction by Ted Hughes, Faber & Faber Ltd., London, 1977, p. 126.

5. Sylvia Plath, 'Excerpts from Notebooks' (Feb. 20, 1956, Monday), in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, op. cit.*, pp. 216-17.

6. A. Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath' in *The Art of Sylvia Plath, op. cit.*, p. 58.

med in the perfect poetical form she had been striving so hard to arrive at since when she had started writing her poems «very slowly Thesaurus on her knee» [7]. Alvarez notes her determination to face, through her poetry, her inward terrifying experiences, and to be overwhelmed by them [8]. But the confrontation with her other submerged self, her sense of uncase, the achievement of a style that was «to make poetry and death inseparable» [9], to her physical death, so that finally

> The woman is perfected
> Her dead
> Body wears the smile of accomplishment,
> The illusion of a Greek necessity [10].

An attempt will be made in this work to steer as clear as is possible of biographical data, but one must keep in mind that in an analysis of Sylvia Plath's poems, it is often difficult to make a clear cut distinction between the poet and the *persona* or *personae* in the poems. Ted Hughes seems to assert the indivisibility of life and fiction when he says that:

> In her, as with perhaps few poets ever, the nature, the poetic genius and the active self, were the same. ... She had none of the usual guards and remote controls to protect herself from her own reality [11].

The poems in *The Colossus* were written in the first three years

7. TED HUGHES, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

8. A. ALVAREZ, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

9. A. ALVAREZ, *op. cit.*, p. 67.

10. SYLVIA PLATH, 'Edge' in *Ariel*, Faber & Faber, London, 1965.

11. TED HUGHES, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems', in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

M.L. ROSENTHAL in his article 'Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetr' also comments that: «She chose, if that is the word, what seems to me the one alternative advance position to Lowell's along the dangerous confessional way, that of literally committing her own predicaments in the interests of her art until the one was so involved in the other that no return was possible». *op. cit.*, p. 71.

of Plath's marriage (1956-59) and are not what Alvarez calls «the real poems» [12]. Although in these early poems she has not yet launched on that profound analysis of her divided self which we find in her later poems, the theme of duality is brought out even here through certain recurring images. In the introduction to her degree theses Plath says:

.... By seeking to read the riddle of his soul in its myriad manifestations, man is brought face to face with his own mysterious horror image, an image which he confronts with mingled curiosity and fear. This simultaneous attraction and repulsion arises from the inherently ambivalent nature of the Double, which may embody not only good, creative characteristics but also destructive ones [13].

This mirror image is of the utmost importance in most of Plath's poems. In the first three stanzas of 'Lorelei' [14], the poem in which Hughes sees the first acceptance of «the invitation of her inner world»[15], the «mirror sheen» of the river water reflects a normal world — presumably an adequate setting to her normal or rather to her normality-accepting self. Everything is as it should be: a full moon, blue water, mists, fishermen sleeping. Yet the reflection of this normal world or floating «shapes» manages to trouble «the face/Of quiet». These «shapes» are later transformed into the

12. A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide*. Of the poems in *The Colossus* Alvarez says: «*The Colossus* was the culmination of her apprenticeship in the craft of poetry». *op. cit.*, p. 40, whereas of her later poems he says: «A combination of forces, some chosen deliberately, others chosen for her, had brought her to the point where she was able to write as from her centre about the forces that really moved her: destructive, volatile, demanding, a world apart from everything she had been trained to admire». *op. cit.*, p. 40.

13. Sylvia Plath, *The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels*, unpublished thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of Special Honours in English, Smith College, 1955, p. 1.

14. Lorelei or Lurlei is the name of a rock which rises steeply on the river base of the Rhine near St Goar, in the Rhineland, Germany. There are many legends associated with the L. Which possesses a wonderful echo. According to one of these, a maiden sits upon this rock combing her glorious hair and tempting fishermen to death by the sweetness of her song. According to another, the rock is the hiding place of the Nibelungen treasure. Eichendorff, Lueben, Heine, etc., have used the legend in stories, songs, etc.

15. Ted Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

more personal «they» and finally to «sisters» who, like the mythological sirens, have the role of calling seamen to their death as

> .....They sing
> Of a world more full and clear
> Than can be .....

This note of unease or threat had been introduced by the very first line of the poem, «It is no night to drown in»; the colon indicates that what follows, a description of the normality of the surroundings, must be interpreted as a reason against drowning. This conflict between the two *personae* in the poem — the «I» above and the «they» beneath the water — is explicit:

> Here, in a well-steered country,
> Under a balanced ruler. Deranging by harmony
> Beyond the mundane order,
> Your voices lay siege....

«siege» being particularly significant of the strategies employed by the «I» against exposure to, presumably, an enemy.

The poem expresses indecision between choosing the «well-steered country» of an orderly existence, and its double which is «too weighty/For the whorled ear's listening». «Whorled» bears a phonic resemblance to 'whore' and 'whored', implying the presence of corruption in a world which is «well-steered». The «I» in the «well-steered country» and the «they» «beyond the mundane order» are two possible ways of being. The sirens («they») seem to offer her «sure harbourage» from a passive existence in a «well-steered country», but the poet («I»), looking down at the water, although realizing that their perilous descanting «from the ledge/Also of high windows» can only lead to wreckage on the «pitched roofs of nightmare», chooses to be «ferr [ied]... down there» to partake of a newly-discovered peace.

The «they» reflected in the water in 'Lorelei' give place to a «she» in 'The Burnt-Out Spa', and the need is felt for an assertive denial («It is not I, It is not I»), on the part of the *persona* «lea-

ning over» the bridge, of identification with her who is «.... gracious and austere, / Seated beneath the toneless water!».

In 'All the Dead Dears' the world mirrored both in the «fish-pond surface» and in the «mercury-backed glass» is that of the dead. We can draw a parallel between the mirrored world in 'Lorelei', with its «ice-hearted calling», and that of 'All the Dead Dears' in which the dead «reach hag hands to haul [her] in». It is noteworthy that in all the above mentioned poems, the beckoners are portrayed sympathetically. In 'Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond', the fifth section of 'Poem for a Birthday' the «I» which up to now has only looked on, joins its beckoners («*our* bower») and experiences the peacefulness which it had imagined existed on the other side of the mirroring surface. This section, however, expresses only an attenuation or a numbing of the conflict of duality as clearly seen by the choice of images describing the existing state of being: «coldness», «liquor of indolence», «forgetfulness», «nodding to sleep like statues», «not death but something safer».

The theme of duality or of the double is expressed not only through reflection or mirroring, but also through co-existence or an attempt at co-existence between the «mundane order» (see «mundane order» in 'Lorelei') and a world of vision, fantasy or revelation, the two worlds representing, of course, two modes of being. This double vision of the world or of two possible ways of being is represented in 'The Ghost's Leavetaking' by two kinds of images: those used to describe «the mundane order»:

> .....the ready-made creation
> Of chairs and bureaus and sleep-twisted sheets.

and the images representing this mystery land, or other, yet still not experienced, mode esistence («the chilly no-man's land», «the no-colour void»; absence of colours is also used to describe the underwater world in 'Flute notes from a Reedy Pond'), which is also described in infernal images («sulphurous»). The image of the sisters in 'Lorelei' which had been mysterious and alluring as well as dangerous, is here substituted by that of the ghost, going

.....not down
Into the rocky gizzard of the earth,
But towards a region where our thick atmosphere
Diminishes, and God knows what is there.

The poet or the *persona* in the poem catches these two words at the point of their intersection, before the «mundane order» takes over completely, when the boundaries separating them are still blurred; she calls this point

.....joint between two worlds and two entirely
Incompatible modes of time.....

a state similar to that in which Yakov Petrovitch in Dostoevski's *The Double* finds himself, and to wich Plath draws attention in her thesis:

.....Yakov Petrovitch lies in bed in the state between the «real and actual» and his «confused dreams». Gradually the dirty, smoke-stained, dust-covered furnishings of his Petersburg room become familiar. The day greets him with a «hostile, sour grimace »[16].

In another poem, 'The Eye Mote', this state of suspension of being is described as being «fixed in a parentheses». This poem, written in the period in which Plath lived in Boston with her husband (late summer 1958 — mid 1959) after what Ted Hughes considers her first acceptance of her inner world [17], opens with the poet feeling «blameless as daylight» and ends with her dreaming that she is Oedipus. The style, although narrative, is personal (the pronoun «I» is used throughout) and accentuates the feeling that the pain felt after the splinter accident goes much beyond the physical. The poet is now able to see the outer world only in a «warped manner», as if reflected in a distorting mirror. The «blameless as daylight» self had been able to see

16. Sylvia Plath, *The Magic Mirror. A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels, op. cit.*, pp. 8-9.

17. Ted Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 190.

> .....horses, necks bent, manes blown,
> Tails streaming against the green
> Backdrop of sycamores.

whereas now a maimed self-punishing Oedipal self sees

> Horses warped on the altering green,
> Outlandish as double-humped camels or unicorns,
> Grazing at the margins of a bad monochrome.

— «monochrome» again accentuating the absence of vivacity in the description of one of the modes of being, and adding to the feeling of its unreality. The result is an existence described as «Fixed .. in this parentheses». The confrontation between the two *personae*, in this poem personified by the «blameless» self with its normal vision and the Oedipal self with its warped vision of things, is evident, as is the desire for a return to a former undivided blameless self and vision of life.

> What I want is what I was
> .....
> A place, a time gone out of mind.

In 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather', Plath seems to express resignation to and acceptance of the outer, realistic objective world of «kitchen table or chair», but images referring to another world or vision still suffuse the poem. Here, however, there is no opposition between the objective and subjective world («incompatible modes of time»), and therefore there is no tension between these two as in 'The Ghost's Leavetaking' where one world slowly gives place to the other. In the latter poem ordinary things («chair and bureau») possess a significance beyond the merely material («the hieroglyphs of some godly utterance») however, this significance is put aside by the too definite reassertion of the objective world («wadened heads ignore»). In the former poem the solid imagery of objective reality is illuminated, even if sporadically, by a vision from the other mode of being, and «the ambrosial revelation» of 'The Ghost's Leavetaking' — which is there apprehended only at

the «Joint between two worlds and two entirely/Incomparable modes of time» — here becomes a «celestial burning now and then taking «possession of the most obtuse objects». These moments of vision, however, lack continuity («spasmodic», «now and then», «random descent») and intensity («a certain minor light»). The «celestial burning» does not assume the proportions of a miracle or revelation («to set the sight on fire»), but is considered only as «a brief respite from fear/Of total neutrality», the fear of «the crass fate these doctors call health and happiness» [18]. In this poem this fear seems to be allayed, but there still persists a sense of regret for the lack of total vision, and in spite of the poet's desire to reconcile the two worlds (to «patch together a content/Of sorts»), in the last stanza she leads us to understand that this compromise does not convince her:

> .....miracles occur
> If you care to call these spasmodic
> Tricks of radiance miracles.....

Plath's use of the image of light, which recurs in most of these 'vision' poems, can be illustrated from her short story 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams' [19]. In this story inner conflict is personified in Johnny Panic who, says Sylvia Plath, is the «maker of dreams». His «congregation» consists of those subject to this inner conflict, who are identified by a «pure panic light» on their faces. Here she expresses fear of the lack of that Fear, result of inner struggle and source of the inner light of which dreams are a manifestation, even though it may lead to madness or desath, since Johnny Panic's «love is the twenty-storey leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart» [20]. The descripition of the electro-shock treatment at the end of the short story is tranformed and transfigured into the description of a heavenly vision, and the electric charge of the electro-shock machine into that of

18. S. PLATH, 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams', *op. cit.*
19. S. PLATH, 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams', *op. cit.* p. 33.
20. *op. cit.*, p. 39.

a divine revelation. The narrator opposes her inner light to the material or exterior light, an opposition to be found also in 'Poem for a Birthday. In 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams' the inner light prevails and the story ends on a note of hope («He [Johnny Panic] forgets not his own») [21].

In 'Poem for a Birthday' the same double meaning applied to light in the short story serves to emphasize the presence of the double *persona*: the one self which apprehends the inner light or is in search of its meaning, and the other self which apprehends only the exterior, material light. These two lights often converge and conflict in the references to the electro-shock charges which are the source of her light imagery [22]. It is in the description of electro-shock treatement that the conflict between the two *personae* and the ambiguity of the imagery reaches its climax.

In 'Witch Burning', in the lines

> My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs
> I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.

«light» may refer both to the light of revelation and the material light (electro-shock) which makes her lose her inner vision. So too, in 'The Stones', in the line

> When I fell out of the light

falling out of the light may refer both to the loss of the inner light and to the loss of material light (near loss of life) following her suicide attempt. In the same section of the poem, «I see the light» may refer both to a return to the «daylight» and normality («sameness on the wall») as well as to an apprehension of her inner vision. In «I see the light», the ambiguity is highly charged with a note of irony since 'I see the light' is often used with reference to revelation whereas the context stresses the surface meaning of

21. *op. cit.*, p. 39.

22. a reference to electro-shock in light imagery is also evident in «Now they light me up like an electric bulb» in 'Who', 'Poem for a Birthday'.

material seeing as against the «I see by my own light» in 'Dark House'.

The contrast between the material objective world and Plath's interior world is also treated in 'The Disquieting Muses' [23], in which she is not visited by «whatever angel may choose to flare» as in 'Black Rook in Rainy Weather', but by three ladies «with heads like darning eggs». These do not, as the shining rook had done, offer only «a brief respite from fear / Of total neutrality» but are ever present and «stand their vigil in gowns of stone, / Faces blank as the day I was born». These three disquieting muses, who resemble the witches of fairy stories, accompany her through everyday life, disrupting the effect of the loving and placating care of her mother and making her unable to float with her «on a green balloon bright with a million / Flowers and bluebirds that never were / Never, never found anywhere». The muses in « gowns of stone» anchor the poet down to her inner world, a world seen through their disquieting influence, preventing her from joining the mundane material world of her mother which is described here in fantastic imagery; and is indeed fantastic to her in so far as she can never form part of it completely because of «the company she keeps» which makes her «heavy-footed» and so unable to float. Yet in a later poem [24] she is able to 'float' but only through the air in her «soul-shift», that is she is able to 'float' not in her mother's sphere but in her own, since she says that, «if I'm alive now, then I was dead» [25].

George Stade says that [26]

> Sylvia Plath's mother ..... in the poems and in *The Bell Jar*, is associated with the antithetical go-getter's plaster saint of a self, that stiff, driven and spinsterish achiever of goals set for her by other people.

23. «These poems — ['The Disquieting Muses', 'Snakecharmer', 'The Ghost's Leavetaking'] — are ultimately about her — [inner] — world, ... and it is not a world of merely visual effects». TED HUGHES, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

24. 'Love Letter', *Crossing the Water*, p. 44.

25. *Ibid.*

26. GEORGE STADE, 'Afterword', in NANCY HUNTER STEINER, *A Closer Look at Ariel: a memory of Sylvia Plath*, London, 1974, p. 53.

The fantastic quality of the mundane material world of dancing and «piano lessons» is emphasized by the role allotted to the mother in the poem: that of fairy-story teller who, by relating fairy stories, tries to shield her children from the harsh material reality of a hurricane [27] but cannot protect them from the influence of «witches» who continue to «stand their vigil» in spite of the fact that in her stories they get baked in gingerbread. At this point I must express disagreement with David Holbrook [28] who says that these muses « are preventing her from becoming a woman and have killed her creativity», since it is the world of these witches, the world of her interior drama, and not that of her mother, which is the fount of Sylvia Plath's creativity, and it is only when she explores it completely that she writes her best poetry. The very title of the poem testifies to the veracity of Alvarez's statement that «What made her write [was] an underlying sense of violent unease» [29].

Plath's changing or alternating attitude towards these «disquieting muses» — the source of her inspiration — becomes clear when one compares the use she makes of the image of stone in these early poems. In 'The Disquieting Muses', where she is still weighing the possibility or perhaps seeing the advantages of forming part of her mother's world, the image of stone is used to describe her inner vision, in this poem personified by the «disquieting muses» who in «gowns of stone» are weighing her down, unabling her «to float». At the end of the poem a decision is taken not to «betray the company I keep».

In 'Hardcastle Crags' the stone image is employed to describe the surroundings. The town is «stone-built» and the air «ignites its tinder». Nature is just as hard, «its pasture bordered by black stone set / On black stone». This hard quality is transmitted also to the softest animals. The sheep drowse «stoneward» and the birds wear «granite ruffs». Here, the problem of the double self emer-

27. See account of real life incident in S. Plath, 'Ocean 1212W', *op. cit.*, pp. 271-72, as well as in 'Point Shirley', *The Colossus*.

28. David Holbrook, *S. Plath: Poetry and Existence*, London, 1976, Ch. 9, p. 239.

29. A. Alvarez, 'Sylvia Plath' in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, *op. cit.*, p. 58

ges in spite of the use of the personal pronoun «she» and the impersonal tone of a narrative-descriptive technique. The *persona* in the poem at first forms part of this hard world, and when she makes a tentative effort to shake off the hardness in her and expose her more vulnerable self,

> All the night gave her, in return
> For the paltry gift of her bulk and the heat
> Of her heart was the humped indifferent iron
> Of its hills.....

The result is a retreat, presumably into hardness

> .....before the weight
> Of stone and hills of stone could break
> Her down to mere quartz in that stony light

In 'Hardcastle Crags' she therefore makes an effort to explore a frail self she knows to exist, but expresses fear of its being crushed by a hard world of which she has, by necessity, to form part. In 'The Disquieting Muses', written later [30] there is an inevitable acceptance of her unease which she now recognises as her inspiring muse, but her reluctance to accept it is evident from the fact that the stone image with connotations of hardness and heaviness is used in this latter poem to describe her muses who alienate her mother's world which she has regretfully come to regard as inaccessible. This regret is absent from her later poems where the suppression of her «otherness» is associated to a non-life or petrified life. As regards *The Colossus* this is especially evident in 'Poem for a Birthday'. In 'The Stones' parts of the body are compared to stones or are made to assume a stony quality («the stones of the belly», «the headstone», «stone eye», «flint lip»), building up the image of «I became a still pebble». The go-getter mother,

30. 'Hardcastle Crags' belongs to the group of poems written before the Hughes's departure for the United States, whereas of 'The Disquieting Muses' and other poems, Ted Hughes says that they «belong to the time she was teaching» in the English faculty at Smith College. TED HUGHES, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

the destroyer of the inner life or self, becomes «the mother of pestels»; the landscape is a «quarry of silences» and the city is made of «stones, taciturn and separate».

In 'Who' the lack of an inner self turns her into «a root, a stone, and owl pellet». In 'Dark House' «All-Mouth», whom she blames for her present condition, «lives in a stony hole», while in 'Maenad', at the moment of revelation, «when it thundered» she tries «hiding under a flat stone» or retreating into a state of non-life. In 'Witch Burning', to escape the burning which obviously stands for shock treatment, in desperation she promises «to construe the days / I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone» — «dust», «shadow» and «stone» indicating infertility or the impossibility of conception resulting from this coupling.

The connotation of the stone image with a state of non-life, or rather of non-spiritual life, is made explicit in 'Love Letter':

> Not easy to state the change you made.
> If I'm alive now, then I was dead,
> Though, like a stone, unbothered by it,
> Staying put according to habit [31].

and in 'The Rival'

> And your first gift is making stone out of everything [32].

In her first poems, as we have seen, Plath tries to defend herself against the «violent unease» [33] or «imminent volcano» [34], as Hughes calls her inner creative, yet destructive world, by, to use Hughes's own terms again, opposing to it «a prickly fastidious defence» [35]. In *Two Sisters of Persephone* Plath disparagingly de-

31. *Crossing The Water*, p. 44.

32. *Ariel*, p. 53.

33. A. Alvarez, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

34. Ted Hughes, 'Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's poems' in *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

35. Ted Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

scribes her poetic activity through the arid image of someone working on «a mathematical machine» and at a «barren enterprise». In this poem Plath personifies her two selves or *personae* by the «two sisters» of the title and the «two girls» of the first line, splitting in this way that projection of herself which we habitually find in her poems. In other poems she employs this device through the use of the first person and second person singular (I - you); in this poem instead the poet adopts the point of view of an outside observer watching the personification of her two selves or *personae*. In this poem she seems to express a preference for the «balloon» world of her mother which is here, however, not described in fantastic terms but in earthy, sensuous inages of fruit-bearing vitality. The keatsian image [36] of her being «lulled/near a bed of poppies», however, is significant in that it seems to hint that the poet can only enter this world by dulling her intellectual faculties. Material fertility can only be arrived at through intellectual sterility and through drowsing that «violent unease» or inner conflict which is the mainspring of her poetry. When she accepts this violent unease and faces it squarely and unequivocally, she finds herself beyond the reach of this dulling effect, as she says in a later poem:

> Where are your opiates, your nauseous capsules?
> If I could bleed or sleep!
>
> .....
>
> Or your liquors seep to me in this glass capsule,
> Dulling and stilling [37].

The figure of Persephone in 'Two Sisters of Persephone' is emblematic of her divided self, of her *personae* («Daylong a duet of shade and light/Plays between these»): in the same way that Persephone or Proserpine was allowed to spend half the year with her mother Demeter, goddess of the earth («light», «bronzed as earth»), and the other half of the year with her husband Pluto, god of the underworld, who had abducted her («shade», «dark wain-

36. See KEATS's 'Ode to a Nightingale'.

37. 'Poppies in July', *Ariel*, p. 82.

scotted room»), so too is Plath torn between the seductiveness of her mother's world and her calling as a poet.

The imagery which Plath uses to describe her mother's world in this poem seems to indicate that she is attracted to it since she describes it as being carefree, instinctive and fruit-bearing:

> .....the latter
> Grows quick with seed
> Grass couched in her labour's pride,
> She bears a King.....

whereas elsewhere this mode of being is considered

> The wax image of myself, a doll's body [38].

that is, artificial and a parody of the inner creative or authentic self. However, in spite of the earthy quality of the imagery used to describe the mother's world, this continues to remain out of the reach of the poet because of the excessively idyllic picture it presents. On the other hand the imagery of aridity and barrenness used here to represent the world of her poetic creativity («as she calculates each sum / At this barren enterprise», «.. wry virgin / .... / Worm-husbanded and yet no woman») is that used elsewhere to describe her «plaster self» whose «tidiness.....calmness.....patience» makes «old yellow» or her inner self «feel like living with her own coffin» [39].

It is well to remember that 'Two Sisters of Persephone' was written after the other poems in *The Colossus* [40], and the apparently negative attitude she adopts in this poem towards poetry writing or at least towards her concept of poetry writing so far (the image of her working «problems on / A mathematical machine» is very similar to that used by Hughes to describe her way of composing the early poems: «in that laborious inching way as

38. 'Witch Burning' in 'Poem for a Birthday', *The Colossus*, p. 85.
39. 'In Plaster' *Crossing the Water*, p. 30.
40. G. Stade, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

if she were working out a mathematical problem») [41] agrees with the judgment she expressed on the poems contained in *The Colossus*:

> I can't read any of the poems aloud now. I didn't write them to be read aloud. In fact they quite privately bore me [42].

What she is condemning here, therefore, is not her genuine creativity, product of her sense of unease, but the mechanical poems inspired by her mundane calculating self.

The problem of the division of self or of the *personae* of Sylvia Plath is represented in 'Moonrise' through colour imagery. The colour white predominates in the poem, and the fact that we are told explicitly that it is not merely an objective correlative of «a complexion of the mind», or of a state of mind or mode of being indicates that the poet had had such a correlation in mind. A parellel is drawn between the white colour of the berries and the 'whiteness' of the poet («white stomach»). The colour white seems to stand for apparent innocence, purity and ease:

> I'll go out and sit in white like they do,
> Doing nothing.....
>
> A pidgeon rudders down. Its fan-tails white.
> Vocation enough.....

as well as for death and corruption:

> .....a body of whiteness
> Rots and smells of rot under its headstone
>
> I smell that whiteness here,.....

The allusion to whited sepulchres links further the objective world to the state of mind or of being. At the end of the poem

41. T. HUGHES, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

42. Quoted by A. ALVAREZ, *The Savage God. A Study of Suicide*, *op. cit.*, p. 39. Alvarez goes on to say that 'She could only 'write poems out loud' when she had discovered her own speaking voice; that is, her own poetic identity.

the berries «ripen», mature and therefore become «purple and bleed» — red being the colour of «labour», «bruises», «blood» [43], therefore of that «violent unease», source of her authentic poetic voice. White or whiteness in the poem is the prevailing mode of being as can be seen not only from the title itself (moonrise = *pale* light of the noon), but also from the higher incidence of white in relation to red. White is referred to 21 times («white», 16; «whiteness», 3; «whiten», 2;) and red 7 («purple», 1; «bleed», 1; «ripen», -; «redden», 4). Both from the relative incidence of these two colours and from the context in which these words are used we are made to understand that the colour white refers to the actual state, whereas the colour red refers to a lack of a state («no labour reddens») or to a future potential state («may ripen yet»). We come across a similar use of the colour white in 'In Plaster' [44], one of the most explicit poems dealing with Plath's *personae* («I shall never get out of this! There are two of me now:»), where white is the colour of the «saint» or saintly part of her which constricts «old yellow» or the «ugly and hairy» side of her:

> Living with her was like living with my own coffin.

Plath's reluctance to face squarely the conflict between her two *personae* in *The Colossus* can be further exemplified by comparing the ending of 'In Plaster' with that of 'Moonrise'. In the former she looks forward to the time when «the white person» would «perish with emptiness»; in 'Moonrise', she still believes in the possibility of fusion and synthesis. In fact in 'In Plaster' she says:

> I used to think we might make a go of it together

Yet the impossibility of the co-existence or fusion of the two *personae* is the theme of a poem as 'Spinster'. Suppression of one of the *personae* as a remedy to her problem of identity is the conclu-

43. In 'Two Sisters of Persephone' the petals of the poppies are referred to as 'petalled blood' thus introducing a note of unease in an otherwise idyllic picture.

44. *Crossing the Water*, p. 30.

sion she already reaches in this poem, one of the earliest in *The Colossus* [45]. The *persona* to be suppressed here, however, is not the one equivalent to the plaster saint but that equivalent to old yellow, the ugly, hairy uneasy self, source of her true poetic voice, whose existence in this poem she seems to have just discovered and, realising the dangers that accompany it, decides to «check».

The «particular girl» in this poem oscillates between two opposing modes of being, ending up by choosing the barren mode of being already suggested by the title. Spring is the setting of the poem, an apt setting for the awakening of awareness of both the vivacity and the turmoils of life. The physical setting allows Plath to develop the theme in terms of nature imagery throughout.

The theme of the poem is developed in five movements, and the imagery used in each movement corresponds to either one or other of the two modes of being or *personae*. In the first movement the neatness and tidiness pertaining to the 'plaster saint' in 'In Plaster' invest this «particular girl» and the physical setting («ceremonious April walk», «suitor»). Then this subjective and objective tidiness breaks down, and the images of order give way to images of disorder («ceremonious walk» becomes «gait stray uneven»; «suitor» becomes «lover»; everything is a «tumult»; «irregular babble», «litter», «unbalance», «uneven», «sloven»). Subsequently she rejects the troubling luxuriousness of «rank wilderness of fern and flower», and expresses a desire, through the use of wintry nature imagery, for a return to order and «ceremony», for the orderly simplicity of a «black and white» setting and state of being:

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

45. Written circa 1956; first published in *Gemini*, an Oxford-Cambridge university magazine, in 1957, see *Letters*, p. 302. «The opposition of a prickly fastidious defence and an imminent volcano is in one way or another an element in all her early poems». T. HUGHES, *op. cit.*, p. 188.

In the next movement the tumult of the objective spring setting — representing exhuberant, creative, fruit-bearing life—breaks in upon the girl's consciousness again, and its exuberance and the menace it brings with it are expressed by such words as «burgeoning», «vulgar motley», «treason», «bedlam spring». Finally there is a definite retreat and flight from the objective world of spring lushiousness and the subjective state of mind for which it stands («she withdrew neatly»). Spring weather and the corresponding state of mind or mode of being is called «mutinous» — because it disrupts a tidy existence — much in the same way and for the same reason that T. S. Eliot calls April «the cruellest month» whereas «winter kept us warm» [46]. The dangers of facing the instinctive side of life or her creative «unruly» *persona* are considered so insidious (they may lead to madness: «unruly inough to pitch her five queenly wits/Into vulgar motley..... Bedlam spring») that a mere retreat is not enough and she has to «set/Such a barricade of barb and check».

When it was first published in *Gemini*, Harold Hobson saw this as a poem on the theme of love:

> The young ladies of Cambridge, it appears, know all about love. On my way from Liverpool Street, I read in the new university magazine, *Gemini*, a poem 'Spinster' by Sylvia Plath, twelve times no less. Here sharp-edged, memorable, precise, is a statement of the refusal of love, a firm, alarmed withdrawal of the skirts from the dangerous dews [47].

As this analysis has hopefully demonstrated, this is a superficial reading of the poem which does not take into account all the allegorical implications. The poem is doubly allegorical: winter's austerity and spring's unruliness stand for chastity and love or passion respectively, and the barricade she sets against unruliness stands for the defence of chastity; on another allegorical level the theme of chastity versus love or passion stands for the conflict between Plath's two modes of being or *personae:* her 'plaster-saint self' and her creative 'ugly hairy self'.

46. T.S. Eliot, 'The Burial of the Dead' in *The Waste Land*, II. 1,5.

47. Harold Hobson, *The Sunday Times*, London, March 17, 1957.

Tidiness is considered the characteristic of modern life in the 'Times are Tidy'. George Stade sees in this poem only one of the *personae* of Sylvia Plath: the 'plaster saint' the hard ambitious woman; he quotes the middle stanza of the poem as proof of «how well she learnt the lessons of her tidy times and how thoroughly her rabid pragmatism applied them» [48]. Stade here misses the whole point of the poem, for what is striking in this poem is its irony. The first line of the poem, «Unlucky the Hero Born», is reminiscent of heroic poetry, and is followed by «In this province of the stuck record», thus setting a mock heroic tone. The hero, who symbolizes hazard, has been defeated by history which has brought about our present age of mechanisation, an age in which no eccentricities or deviations from normality are accepted. In fact the «last crone got burnt up/More than eight decades back». The irony in the poem is also evident from the fact that the poet tells us that the suppression of abnormality and the depersonalization of life so that creativity is no longer needed and «cooks go jobless» has only had the banal result that

> .....the children are better for it,
> The cow milk's cream an inch thick.

Here Plath is not, as Stade says, stating that one should make use of the tidy times to one's advantage; she is deploring through irony the events in history which has killed the possibility of, or desire for being creatively different, so that «eccentricities, the peril of being *too* special, were reasoned and cooed from us like sucked thumbs» [49] and «the rebel, the artist, the odd remains only an embryo» [50] Here Plath is most probably comparing herself, or rather her creative *persona*, to the last crone who «got burnt up»; in her case, since the times are now tidy, this *persona* was not eliminated through death by burning — as in the case of witches

48. G. Stade, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

49. S. Plath, 'America, America' in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams, op. cit.*, p. 42.

50. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

in other times — but through rehabilitation and through being «doomed to the crass fate those doctors call health and happiness» [51].

The last poem in *The Colossus*, 'Poem for a Birthday', gathers in it most of the themes and images of the other poems in this collection. The theme of the poet's two *personae* is central even in this poem which, as has often been pointed out, is about Plath's nervous breakdown and her internment in a mental hospital [52], as is her autobiografical novel *The Bell Jar*. The poem deals with a particular result of her violent unease, with a tangible consequence of the conflict caused by her dual *persona* that is with her attempted suicide and subsequent hospitalization, rather than with the duality itsef and the inner conflict caused by it. The poem therefore has a violent subject, but the violence has been externalized through her suicide attempt, and largely exorcised, so that, as in the novel, we are not presented with a direct experience but rather with the narration of a past experience, and in spite of the subject matter this poem lacks the force and horror contained in the later poems. A comparison between two descriptions of flowers exemplifies this point:

> I said: I must remember this, being small,
> There were such enormous flowers,
> Purple and red mouths, utterly lovely.
> The hoops of blackberry stems made me cry [53].

> O my God, what am I
> That these late months should cry open
> In a forest of frost, in a dawn of cornflowers [54].

'Poem for a Birthday' gives the impression that the poet is not directly involved in the tragedy of loss of identity. Just as in

51. S. Plath, 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams' *op. cit.*, p. 33.

52. T. Hughes, *op. cit.*, p. 192; A. Alvarez, *op. cit.*, p. 58; E. Aird, *Sylvia Plath*, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 32; D. Holbrook, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

53. 'Who' in 'Poem for a Birthday', *The Colossus*, p. 81.

54. 'Poppies in October', *Ariel*, p. 29.

The Bell Jar everything that comes before the attempted suicide seems to be leading to this climactic or cathartic act, so too in *The Colossus* the latent unease in the poems seems to converge in 'Poem for a Birthday'. Both relate in retrospect such a catharsis and its aftermath, giving the impression that they were written when

> The bell jar hung, suspended, a few feet above my head. I was open to the circulating air [55].

The fact that in *The Colossus* Plath has not yet resigned herself to the existence of her dual personality attenuates the dramatic effect of the poems contained in this volume, and of their imagery, and even the poem which is more specifically about her attempted suicide lacks the tragic ineluctabilty of the later poems where the inner conflict gives place to an acceptance of and resignation to her dual *persona* and the resultant tragic consequences.

> Two, of course there are two.
> It seems perfectly natural now
> .....
> .....
> Somebody's done for [56].

In her thesis on the double in Dostoevsky, talking of Golyadin she says:

> The mystery of the second self becomes a menace; the inner duality becomes a dual to death [57].

As Alvarez points out:

> now she was beyond the reach of anyone. In the beginning she had called up these horrors partly in the hope of exorcising them, partly to demonstrate her omnipotence and invulnerability. Now she was shut in

55. S. PLATH, *The Bell Jar*, *op. cit.*, p. 227.

56. 'Death & Co'. *Ariel*, p. 38.

57. S. PLATH, *The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in two of Dostoevsky's Novels*, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

with them and knew she was defenceless..... I think she must in the end have accepted the logic of the life she had been leading and come to terms with its terrible necessities [58].

The title 'Poem for a Birthday' expresses a desire for birth or rebirth or for the discovery of identity. The title itself indicates that at least at the start of the poem the poet feels hopeful of making this discovery, in spite of the title 'Who' of the first section, which suggests uncertainty as to identity [59]. 'Who' describes the state of lack of identity. Eileen Aird sees the opening imagery in the poem as referring to Plath's own pregnancy at the time of writing the poem [60], but it is probably more correct to say that the poet is alluding to a metaphorical pregnancy, that is to her expectancy of a new identity. The quasi-inanimate state she finds herself in due to her loss of identity, is expressed by imagery of inanimate objects whose world she would share.

> Let me sit in a flowerpot,
> The spiders won't notice,
> My heart is a stopped geranium.
> .....
> I am a root, a stone, an owl pellet [61].

This state of suspension of being is objectified through her surroundings («I am at home among the dead heads»), yet even in this state of death in life and in spite of her desire for complete nullity she is still capable of feeling («if only the wind would leave my lungs alone»). The way the image of the wind is used suggests that she considers her very breath as something extraneous to her, and that in spite of herself life goes on around and in her even

58. A. ALVAREZ, *The Savage God*, *op. cit.*, pp. 47-52.

59. The missing question mark has led Holbrook to think that Plath has «no hope that the question may be answered... Has no hope of reflection and therefore no sense of I am». D. HOLBROOK, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

60. E. AIRD, *Sylvia Plath*, Edinburgh, 1973, p. 33.

61. In her theses she says: «Golyadkin continually identifies himself with low forms of animal life and wishes for oblivion or death». S. PLATH, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

though seen in a distorted manner («they bloom upside down»). The thwarting of her desire for annulling herself and for putting an end to her participation in life is similarly expressed in a later poem, when some tulips introduced into her sick-room,

> .....concentrate my attention, that was happy
> Playing and resting without committing itself [62].

when all she wanted was

> To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty [63].

The above mentioned state of being often finds expression through a description of a state of sleeplessness or dreamlessness («without dreams of any sort»). The absence of sleep and dreams indicates the lack or suppression of an interior world, and hence of personality and identity:

> He lives without privacy in a lidless room [64].

The bleak description of Plath's mode of non-being is rent by the 'mouth' image which on one semantic level is the visualization of a cry of pain, an eloquent expression of the silent horror of her condition [65]. 'Mouth' is also cavity, symbolizing a void to be filled in, expectancy. In this sense it is also related to the other image of «mummy's stomach» , where «stomach» also stands for cavity and mummy both for the deadened condition she is in as well as for mother and for pregnancy [66].

62. 'Tulips', *Ariel*, p. 20.

63. *Ibid.*

64. 'Insomniac', *Crossing the Water*, p. 21. References to sleeplessness are frequent in *The Bell Jar*, see e. g. Ch. H, p. 135. Dreams play a central role in 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams', the title being already significant, and in 'The Wishing Box', another short story in the same volume, in which the heroine commits suicide following a period of dreamlessness.

65. see also 'Poppies in October', *Ariel*, p. 29.

66. Pregnancy both in the sense that SYLVIA PLATH was pregnant at the time of writing the poem (Yaddow, 1959, see *Letters*, p. 356) and in the sense of expectancy.

These two meanings of the image suggest the presence of hope since a cry of pain is a reaction, and expectancy indicates the possibility of a birth. On this semantic level 'mouth' as cavity is the poet herself («I am all mouth») who feels herself as a void waiting to be filled in. On yet another semantic level 'mouth' as cavity is an image applied to her mother («Mother, *you* are the one mouth / I would be a tongue to»), and symbolizes a desire to return to the womb, and therefore for self effacement and for complete identification with her mother (...the *one* mouth / I would be a tongue to'). The only alternative to annulment therefore is a return to the 'plaster saint' self, pertaining to her mother's world which now, however, she considers foreign to her («mother of otherness»). The poet expresses a desire to be devoured by this cavity, to return to the womb and be reabsorbed by her mother's world. The imperative «eat me» denotes a paralysis, a continuation of her passive role, while «shadow of doorways» suggests that one reason for this paralysis could be the overshadowing influence of her mother and the world she represents. In the last two stanzas she goes back to a past conception of her mother's world. Seen through past memories

> I said: I must remember this, being small.

this world appears awesome («enormous flowers») but not ominous («utterly lovely»). In the state she is in at the moment, even this view of her Mother's world is denied her:

> Now they light me up like an electric bulb [67].
> For weeks I can remember nothing at all.

The second section of the poem 'Dark House', is also built round cavity imagery, and continues with the description of the condition of gestation. The dark house of the title is her dark sta-

67. Literally of course this refers to the electro- shock treatment she received following her suicide attempt in 1953 (*Letters*, p. 125). Note that the imagery is derived from experiences far removed in time one from the other, see note 1, p. 72.

te of mind or of being for the creation of which she assumes full responsibility («I made it myself»). The images here, however, refer to underground cavities («cellars», «delvings», «Marrowy tunnels» etc.), so that, if we interpret the poem as representing a journey towards rebirth, this section would correspond to the descent into the underworld or Hades, and to the inhabitants of this world [68], to the shadows that inhabit the underworld; here the poet sees herself as one of them. In 'Dark House', as against in 'Who', there is a decision to try to come out of this dark state of being or underworld not by going back to her mother's world, but by a personal search for an identity («I see by my light») even though the consequences of taking on a new identity might be grotesque:

> Any day I may litter puppies
> Or mother a horse [69].

During this journey of self discovery the poet is tempted to remain in the underworld which would therefore become a tomb [70]:

> It is warm and tolerable
> In the bowel of the root,
> Here's a cuddly mother.

«All-mouth» refers us back to «I am all mouth», that is to the void which in 'Who' she wanted to fill by reabsorbing (actually by being absorbed by) her mother identity. In this section she bla-

68. Mention of underground creatures is to be found also in 'The Blue Mole', *The Colossus*, p. 49.

69. Several critics have noted the influence of Theodore Roethke (1908-1963) in this poem as in other poems. A. ALVAREZ, 'Sylvia Plath', *op. cit.*, p. 58; T. HUGHES, *op. cit.*, p. 192; E. AIRD, *op. cit.*, p. 34. Plath herself admitted to his influence to ANN SEXTON, 'The Barfly Ought to Sing', *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

70. It is in a cellar that Plath makes her suicide attempt (*Letters*, p. 125). In *The Bell Jar*, before her attempted suicide, Ersther Greenwood tries other less drastic ways of self-effacement: «I crawled between the mattress and the padded bedstead and let the mattress fall across me like a trombstone. I felt dark and safe under there, but the mattress was not heavy enough. It needed about a ton more weight to make me sleep». *op. cit.*, p. 130.

mes All-mouth for her present state («He's to blame»), and varies her imagery so as to contrast All-mouth's hardness and voracity («he lives in an old well / A stony hole») with the softness of the underground creatures («small nostrils are breathing. / Little humble loves»!) which are mentioned with regard to her journey through the underworld in search of an identity.

The third section of 'Poem for a Birthday', 'Maenad', operates on two time levels expressed by the initial «once» and by the «this month» of the third stanza, and by the use of the past and the present tenses, as in the case of «was» and «am». The past is linked with memories of the poet's childhood

> Once I was ordinary: sat by my father's bean tree [71]

and symbolizes a state or mode of being both normal and fantastic, similar to the balloon world of her mother in 'The Disquieting Muses'. The present is linked with the rejection of this world, with the desire of facing her other *persona*:

> O I am too big to go backward:
> .....
> .....
> Mother, keep out my barnyard,
> I am becoming another.

and with the despair at the impossibility of doing so. The desire to forget her despair is expressed in bacchic imagery («feed me the berries of dark», «vat», «sleepdrunk, their limbs at odds»), and by the very title 'Maenad': votary of Bacchus, also meaning wineloving.

Plath operates the passage from the chronological past, corresponding to one mode of being, to the chronological present corresponding to another, chiefly through the last line of the first stanza:

71. The image of the bean tree is probably derived from the folk tale 'Jack and the Beanstalk' in which there is a giant.

When it thundered I hid under a flat stone.

The preceding lines describe a normal («ordinary») and yet fantastically idyllic existence, and the above line is an extension of this description. But it also introduces the idea of power and might already be hinted at by the totemic image of the bean-tree. The image of thunder, however, carries the meaning of this section of the poem beyond the meaning of a power present in this edenic existence, to that of both the exile from this sort of existence as well as to that of the transformation of this power into inner light of revelation. This further extension of meaning, the chronological passage and the semantic ambiguity is expressed through the connotative and associative richness of the last line. The autobiographical character of this poem allows for the line to be read: 'When my father was angry I used to be very frightened'; at the same time the imagery used («thundered» and «hid»), with its mythological and biblical associations, allow for the reading: 'I was exiled from this edenic existence'. But exile from an edenic existence and loss of innocence is equivalent to sin, and therefore to that unease which is the source of dreams, imagination, inner light and therefore of poetic inspiration. In fact Johnny Panic, personification of unease or inner light, is described in similar imagery:

His beard is lightning. Lightning is in his eye. His work charges and illuminates the universe [72].

He is sudden as thunder... He simply can't resist melodrama. Melodrama of the oldest, most obvious variety [73].

As can be seen a father figure is involved in all the interpretations given, and the semantic extension and transformation in these lines is in fact expressed through the transformation of this father figure. In the same way that according to psychoanalytic theory the father is interiorized into the super-ego, while the

72. 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams', *op. cit.*, p. 39.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 28.

once omniscient and omnipotent father shrinks to human dimensions [74], so too in this section the totemic «father's bean tree» becomes «the old man shrunk to a doll» and «the bean leaves.... dumb as hands», while the mighty «thunder» of a power external to the poet becomes her inner light.

The fourth section of 'Poem for a Birthday', 'The beast', continues on the same two chronological levels. The beast, the «he» of this section, could refer to the father in the first two stanzas where the imagery is idyllic. Here the past tense is used and we are reminded of the opening line of 'Maenad': «I was ordinary». In the second part of this section the imagery becomes that of degradation and the tense changes to the present. The «he» thus degraded could refer to a present day revaluation of the poet's father, as well as to her husband («I've married a cupboard of rubbish») where «married» could here have lost its legal connotations and could refer to living in a state of degradation following the realization in 'Maenad' that «() I am too big to go backward:»[75]. If the «he» in the two parts of this section are interpreted as being objectivizations of subjective states, they could refer to different states or modes of being attributable respectively to an idyllic past and a degraded present.

As we have seen, the 'Lorelei' mirror-water image, reintroduced in 'Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond', the fifth section of 'Poem for a Birthday' does not express a birth or rebirth of the other self, nor does it offer a solution to the problem of duality, although the *persona* in the poem has accomplished the death by water, in many poems seen as a means of putting an end to her psychological misery. This section expresses only an attenuation of the conflict, a moment of calm.

74. D. Stafford Clark, *Che cosa ha 'veramente' detto Freud*, Roma, 1967, p. 99.

75. «The persona realizes that she is both tormenting and tormented and the only escape from such a condition is to live through the exorcism of it for only 'the devil can eat the devil out'. The protagonist has finally accepted that the condition of her illness is one in which she is both the witch and the wax doll, the persecuter and the persecuted». E. Ann, *op. cit.*, p.36.

In 'Witch Burning' which reminds us of «The last crone got burnt up» of 'The Times are Tidy', there is a conflict between an «I» and a «They»; the «I» recognizes itself in the witch, and the «they» in the act of burning the witch:

> I climb to a bed of fire.
> They are piling the dry sticks.
> They are turning the burners up, ring after ring.

In spite of this apparent exteriorization of the conflict (I-they) and its exorcism, the conflict is still an interior one between her two *personae:*

> I inhabit the wax image of myself
> I am intimate with a hairy spirit

This act of exorcism of the 'hairy self', the apparent agents of which are the «they» of this section, can only be effective in so far as one of her *personae* allies itself with the «they» for «only the devil can eat the devil out». The section ends on an ambiguous note which does not specify the outcome of this act of exorcism:

> My ankles brighten. Brightness ascends my thighs,
> I am lost, I am lost, in the robes of all this light.

We are left in doubt as to whether this brightness and light liberates the poet from her uneasy, 'hairy spirit' and restores her to her «wax image» and «doll's body» self, or as to whether it represents the prevalence of her interior light and «hairy spirit» over the «doll's body» self (i.e. over the «I» allied with the «they»). This ambiguity in the light and burning imagery used is further supported by the ambiguity of the phrase «the red tongues teach the truth» which echoes a similar phrase in 'Maenad': «a red tongue in among us». In the first phrase quoted, the tongue image is associated with the tongues of flame of the witch-burning, while in both phrases it has also the biblical associations of revelation.

In 'The Stones' [76] the ambiguity in 'Witch Burning' gives way to the irony of a rebirth («foetus», «suck»), that is only a return to the «doll's body» self.

The ample use of body imagery in 'Poem for a Birthday' reaches paroxystic levels in the last section of the poem. Undoubtedly the fact that in 'Poem for a Birthday' the poet makes use of images connected with the experiences resulting from her suicide attempt contributes to the choice of such imagery, but it seems reasonable to suppose that this utilization of body imagery is purposely resorted to so as to bring out the state of suspended animation which is the mode of being this poem describes.

In all the other sections of the poem, except in the very last, the body imagery is both particular and highly symbolic, whereas in the last section 'The Stones', most of the parts of the body mentioned are bereft of this symbolic value, and assume quite simply the global meaning that the poet is now being, almost literally, put together again.

A closer examination of the use of this body imagery will illustrate the point much more clearly. In the first five sections of the poem, we find the following body images used:

mouth, 6;	stomach;	tongue, 4;	heart(ed);
body, 2;	belly;	hand(ed);	bowel;
(dog)head;	(sty)face;	gut;	eye 2;
hair(y).			

In the last section, 'The Stones', the body images used are:

stomach;	belly;	head(stone);	mouth(hole) 2;
foetus;	eye, 2;	ear;	lip;
torso;	hearts;	legs;	arms;
limb;	hand;	fingers.	

In the first section the images connected with cavity predominate, whereas in the last section there is a closer adherence to the literal meaning of the words listed above; in the last section

76. Ted Hughes tells us that: «she dismissed everything prior to 'The Stones' as Juvenilia, produced in the days before she became herself». T. HUGHES, *op. cit.*, p. 192

that is, most of these words are more of a list of anatomical parts of the body. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that whereas in the first six sections the function of body imagery is that of expressing the throes inherent in the search for a spiritual identity, in the last section the images represent the construction of a merely physical identity, and represent the abandonment of the poet's of being able to «inhabit» anything more than «the wax image of myself, a doll's body» [77].

The title of the whole poem therefore, 'Poem for a Birthday', is justified in that the poet does indeed describe a rebirth, but only a physical rebirth; that is all the poet's travail results only in survival from her suicide attempt. Her efforts to discover something more than a merely physical identity have not yet been successful— her «wax image» has been recuperated.

In spite of the use of the first person singular throughout the last section, the division in Plath's personality is equally brought out. This section is more narrative in style and the division between the narrator — 'I' and the narrated'I' — more evident. The poet adopts the detached tone of an ironic observer, looking on the salvaging operation which is putting her together again.

Her dismembered physical self is separate from her spiritual narrator-observer self, and this process of material rebirth is described in terms of a mechanical reassembling of parts by «workmen», while the observed 'I' lies passively «on an anvil» subjected to what she had so much feared in 'Night Shift' [78]: a process of mechanization of the self. There, she had felt the need to objectify this fear and camouflage «the beating of a hear» [79] under the clang of a factory at work. In «The Stones» the process is complete and she has resigned herself to it; one part of her 'I'resigns itself to this process while the other part looks on with detached irony.

The title of the poem, 'Poem for a Birthday', and the reference to the month of October, suggests that Plath wrote it with

77. 'Witch Burning', in 'Poem for a Birthday'.

78. *The Colossus*, p. 11.

79. *Ibid.*

her own birthday in mind [80], and this serves to stress and enrich the associations with birth and rebirth. The poem develops the idea of rebirth on two different levels: the material and the spiritual. The poet is 'reborn' or brought back to life in the last section of the poem, and so the material birth or rebirth does take place. The spiritual rebirth, on the other hand, remains in the state of gestation, and the «foetus» who «sucked at the paps of darkness» is born to an «afterhell», and therefore is born into spiritual death. There is therefore the physically cured 'I' which seeks the light or is born, and the 'I' which «falls out of the light» into the «stomach of indifference». Viewed from the point of view of spiritual rebirth, the title is ironical. In the last two lines of the poem there is a final ironical twist in that the affirmation of a successful physical rebirth implies an unsuccessful spiritual rebirth.

> .....there is nothing to do.
> I shall be as good as new.

The penultimate line is ironically ambiguous, since it may both mean that the job of putting the poet together again has been completed, as well as resigned acceptance of the completed work resulting in her 'plaster-saint' self, and therefore acceptance of a death in life. The irony further stengthened by the final mock-heroic rhyme, and by the ambiguity of the final statement. «I shall be as good as new» may mean 'I shall behave as well as I did before my suicide attempt', that is 'return to my previous plaster-saint self'; it can also mean 'I shall be *as* good as new', that is whole and healthy in body and mind but bereft of imagination and dreams.

The theme of this paper can be summed up in Yeats' words: «Out of the struggle with ourselves we make poetry». I have tried to conduct a close textual analysis of the images associated with the theme of Plath's dual personality and her search for a definite identity in those poems in *The Colossus* pertinent to the theme, while referring also to later poems and other works indispensable

80. Sylvia was born on October 27, 1932, *Letters*, p. 12.

to a clearer understanding of the imagery whenever the need for further clarification demanded it. My aim has been that of portraying and explaining the complexities of a poet who, even in the early poems, considered not her best, shows signs of genius and of that love of perfection which, alas, she was to employ even in dying.

> Dying is an art, like everything else
> I do it exceptionally well [81].

One is left mourning the end of a struggle for «the strenght to claim the right to be unhappy together with the joy of creative affirmation» [82].

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81. S. PLATH, *op. cit.*, p. 224.

82. *Letters*, *op. cit.*, p. 224.