

The Influence of African Folktales on Sylvia Plath's "*Ariel* Voice".

Jennifer Earl

ERLJEN001

A minor dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of  
the degree of Master of Arts in English Language and Literature

Faculty of Humanities

University of Cape Town

2013

Declaration

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank whole-heartedly my supervisor, Dr Sandra Young, for her insightful criticism, her constant encouragement and for the generosity with which she gave of her time. Also, thank you to the staff of the UCT Library for their efficient and cheerful help whenever required.

To James, William, Andrew and Elizabeth – thank you. This work would not have been possible without your love and patient support.

### Abstract

In this study I trace the influence of Paul Radin's collection of African folktales on Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* poems. Elements from these tales have been identified by various critics in Plath's "Poem for a Birthday" sequence which, according to Hughes, she wrote around the same time as she was reading the African tales. However, the importance of the tales to her later poetry has not yet been fully explored in Plath criticism. "Poem for a Birthday" marks an important stage in the emergence of what has become known as Plath's "*Ariel* voice" and it is my contention that the influence of the African tales is significantly present even in this later work.

The *Ariel* poems manifest a preoccupation with motherhood which merges thematically with creative fruitfulness. I examine how Plath adopts and uses the concept of "the African" in *Ariel* to represent repressed aspects of the human psyche which must emerge into consciousness in order for creative expression to attain a level of deep resonance. This engagement is repeatedly presented as a vital "primitive" force emerging from beneath a stony silent reality. The African folktales provided Plath with a novel set of imagery and resources with which to portray this explorative process. I therefore explore Plath's interest in "primitivism". I also argue that the orality of the African tales inspired Plath to focus on the oral nature of her later writing.

I hope in this study to free Plath's *Ariel* voice from the shadow of her suicide. More importantly, I hope to show that her own collection of *Ariel* poems represented an important moment in her creative development that envisaged a vital spirit of possibility, activated dramatically by an engagement with Radin's African tales.

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements	ii
Abstract	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter 1. "Poetry ... is a tyrannical discipline."	15
Chapter 2. "That is not my mother's voice."	31
Chapter 3. "I want someone to mouth me."	69
Conclusion. From "The Stones" to "Words".	87
Works Cited	91

## Introduction

The primary objective of this study of the poetry of Sylvia Plath is to explore the impact of the influence of primitivism and specifically “the African” on her work. Ted Hughes, the poet’s husband, states in his notes on *The Collected Poems* that Plath’s interest in African folklore began towards the end of 1956 and “can be detected throughout the rest of her work” (in Plath, *Collected Poems* 275). His words point out a major influence on the entire body of Plath’s work but this influence has not been explored by critics thus far. This study aims to redress this neglect.

My use, in this study, of the term “the African” needs clarification. I do not use the term to represent a particular ethnological or cultural group of people. This would be as meaningless as presenting “the European” as a homogenous unit. Instead, “the African” is, like Edward Said’s “Oriental”, used here to represent a complex formulation of the imagination rather than a fixed reality. I use the term “the African” in this study to refer loosely to an imaginative, almost mythic, entity that serves as a literary device depicting darkness and shadow. It bears very little relation to the actual continent or real people. Said explains that the artistic use, even appropriation, of a concept such as “the Orient” need not be based on any direct or personal engagement with the place or the people: “Orientalism is premised on exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West .... The Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact” (20). Plath biographies and Plath’s own writings indicate that her only direct encounter with the continent of Africa was through her reading of a collection of

folktales published in 1952 by the American anthropologist Paul Radin.<sup>1</sup> Hughes's descriptions of the couple's honeymoon in Spain suggest that they felt strongly that country's long association with, and geographical proximity to, North Africa but Plath's response was one of fear and withdrawal. Plath was therefore writing from "outside" Africa, both existentially and morally, a position similar to Said's Orientalist writer, but she simultaneously utilised the idea of "things African" in her writing to represent something explicitly internal. By exploring the African influence, I hope to enhance the scope of understanding of Plath's creative oeuvre. More importantly, I hope to redirect attention to the poems themselves and away from the life and psychobiography of the poet, an obsession that tends to plague Plath studies.

Radin is best known for his in-depth study of the Winnebago tribe of North America which Christer Lindberg has described as "perhaps the most complete and detailed recording of an American Indian tribe" ever undertaken. Radin was known for his controversial commitment to preserving the original nature of the tales, texts and oral accounts he recorded, interfering editorially as little as possible. He emphasised in his preface to *The Winnebago Tribe* that "[i]t is principally the raw material that is presented here. Throughout the work, the Indian has been allowed to tell the facts in his own way" (qtd. in Lindberg). Despite evidence here of his viewing "the Indian" as a unitary, undifferentiated entity, Radin was sensitive to the creative individuality inherent in the cultures he studied and respected the authenticity of the original voice in which data was proffered for recording. This set him apart from mainstream early twentieth-century anthropology which tended to present "primitive" societies as homogenous

---

<sup>1</sup> It is interesting to note that in her final days in London it was a South African couple, Jillian and Gerry Becker, who made a great effort to help Plath (Hayman 10-13).

cultural units. Radin's collection of African folktales reads very differently to that which was widely considered a rich source of anthropological and ethnological material in the early twentieth century, Sir James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough* which Plath had read for her Honours thesis (*Letters* 145). *The Golden Bough* is written from the perspective of superior Western culture and is a rambling collection of anecdotes and second-hand reporting of "savage" rituals and beliefs. Radin's narrators speak for themselves and the tales are presented as transcriptions of the original stories related orally, without commentary or editorial interference, other than Radin's introduction. Plath recorded in a few of her poems a sense of the stultifying tradition of the Western literary archive and my argument here is that this body of African literature served as an inspiration to move beyond it into an original voice of her own.

Plath can be said to be grappling in her *Ariel* collection with the concept of the Freudian "Unconscious", and aspects of the mind that are repressed but may express themselves through the creative impulse. She does so poetically by presenting these abstractions as a dark African presence which is both unavoidably alluring but at the same time frightening. In his essay *The Unconscious*, Freud acknowledges the difficulty of defining such a state. He settles on this working definition: "The unconscious comprises, on the one hand, acts that are merely latent, temporarily unconscious but otherwise no different from conscious ones, and, on the other, processes such as repressed ones, which, if they were to become conscious, would contrast starkly with the conscious ones" (*Unconscious* 55). The process of repression is thus closely entwined with the unconscious. Freud states that repression's "essence consists simply in the act of turning – and keeping – something away from the conscious" (36). The

“something” Freud refers to here is what he terms a “drive representative” which “proliferates in the dark, so to speak, and finds extreme forms of expression, which, when translated and presented to the neurotic, not only are bound to appear alien to him, but also frighten him by making the drive seem so extraordinary and dangerous in its intensity” (38). The drives are the psychic forces representative of the Id which constantly challenge the stability of the Ego. In my study of Plath, I have used the term “the unconscious” to represent this aspect of the psyche that hovers beneath the surface of consciousness but threatens to emerge, or does emerge, in unpredictable and unsettling ways.

Freud’s ideas are critical in elucidating how I see Plath engaging with the idea of “the African”. Julia Kristeva’s theories, particularly of those of abjection and the semiotic, have recently been found useful by those Plath critics interested in the female “body” of her work.<sup>2</sup> These studies tend, however, to focus heavily on feminist and psychoanalytical interpretations of the poetry. Freud’s concepts of the “Unconscious” and the “repressed” are more appropriate to a study of the African influence on Plath’s work because Plath herself may be perceived as deliberately engaging with this aspect of Freudian psychology in her use of African imagery.

The focus of my study is on the manuscript which Plath herself put together for publication under the title “Ariel”, and not that published after her death under the same title by her husband, Ted Hughes.<sup>3</sup> The original manuscript is a collection of 40 poems compiled by the poet and placed on her desk ready for publication just before she committed suicide on 11

---

<sup>2</sup> A typical example of such an application of Kristevan and Lacanian theory to Plath’s work is Marilyn Boyer’s “The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*.” Pamela Ryan has also applied Kristevan theory to elucidate “A Birthday Present”.

<sup>3</sup> All references to *Ariel* will therefore be to Plath’s own collection, published by Collins in 2004, unless Hughes’s version is specifically mentioned.

February 1963, an act of violence which has served to influence and overshadow interpretations of the poetry ever since. Hughes altered the nature of the collection dramatically on first publication by excluding some of the poems and replacing them with others of his own choice, including those written in the poet's last desperate days. His interference with the contents has done much to feed the myth that these are the poems of a woman fighting personal psychological demons, writing poetry as a sacrificial ritual and finally succumbing to a tragic end as moving and inevitable as that of a Greek drama.<sup>4</sup> Ironically, the removal of the more violently aggressive poems from the collection, perhaps an attempt to reduce its potential reading as the work of a victimised woman, only serve to reinforce this interpretation by its act of silencing. It is imperative, however, if one is committed to doing justice to the poetry itself, to free oneself as a reader from the knowledge of the poet's immanent death that hovers over the poems. The publication of Plath's original manuscript by HarperCollins in 2004, with the poems *in situ* as she originally intended, has served more than any other document relating to the *Ariel* poems to allow the collection to speak for itself. The voice which emerges from *Ariel* is haunted by a sense of a dark presence threatening the stability and mood of many of the poems. This shadowy enigma is often represented as explicitly African, the significance of which I will consider in my discussion on primitivism in Chapter 2.

Little seems to have been written about the specific references to Africa that appear in Plath's poetry, journals and letters, not because they are deeply hidden, but perhaps because the eye

---

<sup>4</sup> Hughes's alterations have been carefully mapped by critics, particularly by Marjorie Perloff as well as the poet's daughter, Frieda Hughes (Perloff, "The Two Ariels" and F. Hughes, Foreword).

of criticism and analysis has been blinded thus far to the significance of these elements in her work. Uncovering these will not only enrich Plath studies but will also hopefully serve to awaken criticism to an area of failure in its own vision.

Jacqueline Rose has referred without further comment to “the primitive underside” of Plath’s work (63) and Christina Britzolakis has noted the dialogue between the *Ariel* poems and the legacy of modernist primitivism (118). However, neither of these eminent Plath critics examines this element in any depth and it is my intention to do so here. Ted Hughes claimed that Plath was reading Radin’s *African Folktales* at the time of the emergence of what he refers to as her “*Ariel* voice”, a term I have adopted to refer to the poetic voice for which Plath is most famous and through which she speaks in the *Ariel* collection.<sup>5</sup> Judith Kroll is one of the few critics who has explored this body of African literature as a source of imagery in Plath’s early poem, “Poem for a Birthday” (*Collected Poems* 131). My contention here is that this influence did not end in 1959 when Plath wrote “Poem for a Birthday”, but that the influence of the African folktales can be traced through to her *Ariel* poems. There is a progression in Plath’s poetry from “The Stones” (the final poem in the “Poem for a Birthday” sequence) to *Ariel*. This progression is manifest in a preoccupation with the elemental barrenness of stones in the early poem which transforms into a vital, violent and painful process, pursued poetically in *Ariel*, in which stones are upturned, disclosing the organic vitality beneath. This dark underside is at times explicitly described in relation to Africa whilst Western thought is portrayed as locked in lapidarian coldness. The conflict between the two represents the painful confrontation between the conscious and unconscious mind, between an aloof Western “enlightened” Ego and the dark,

---

<sup>5</sup> I have borrowed this term from Frieda Hughes who uses it in her foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*.

“primitive” Id. It is the moment at which the two meet and engage that Plath repeatedly represents poetically in *Ariel* and, in so doing, she presents her reader with her interpretation of her own aesthetics.

The enigmatic line “Walking about in Africa, maybe, but thinking of me” which concludes Plath’s poem “The Rival” (*Ariel* 73) first drew my attention to the possible importance of the African element in Plath’s poetry. My claim here is twofold. Firstly, the African folktales provided Plath with an original repertoire of poetic imagery with which to represent elements relating to deeply sensed psychological forces. Hitherto she had been limited by the hackneyed Western literary conventions at her disposal. Secondly, it can be argued that they inspired in Plath a powerful desire to shift away from lyrical poetry as primary medium and stimulated an interest in a more oral form of creative expression. In oral form, words are a more direct means of communication than writing and therefore the self is less masked or protected by the crafted form of the written word. The total alienation from words expressed in one of her final poems, “Words” (not included in *Ariel*), captures this sense of an end to a relationship between the self and the words that define it.

I will explore in this study how the dialogic interaction between dark and light, or between an unsatisfactory, barren self and its fecund and fruitful “other”, is presented in Plath’s *Ariel* as a confrontation between an unsatisfactory, limiting Western set of ideals and a threatening but alluring African presence. This thematic thread is lost in Hughes’s version of the collection, not least because he removed some of the poems that present this engagement, such as “Thalidomide”, “The Courage of Shutting-Up” and “Purdah”.

Plath spent October and November of 1959, as a guest with Hughes, at the Yaddo Artist's Retreat in the United States. It was here that she wrote her sequence of seven poems entitled "Poem for a Birthday", the forerunners of her later *Ariel* poems. They are notable for their surrealist quality and shift in style away from the literary ponderousness of her earlier work. Hughes refers to this sequence of poems as "an underground, primitive drama" and singles out "The Stones" as "the first eruption of the voice that produced *Ariel*" (Notes 192). I hope in this study to re-establish the link to "the primitive" that Hughes suggests the *Ariel* poems share. The "*Ariel* voice" to which Hughes here refers is that of Plath's own manuscript and not the morbidly defeatist one of his compilation. In re-connecting this "*Ariel* voice" with its origins, one is both granting Hughes credit for identifying a fundamentally important element within these poems, but ironically, also uncovering the very aspect of the poetry that his version destroyed.

Rose identifies and admires a willingness on Plath's part to live with anxiety and uncertainty with regard to the enigmatic concept of truth (Rose xvi). She thus places Plath herself well within the camp of those who would deny the interpretation of her "*Ariel* voice" as a final expression of achieved perfection. This sense of finality is the impression of *Ariel* that Hughes created by concluding his version with Plath's poems "Edge" (*Collected Poems* 272) and "Words" (*Collected Poems* 270), which emphasise the finality of perfection and morbid fatalism. The first line of "Edge" ("The woman is perfected") and "fixed stars / Govern a life" which end the poem "Words", have in particular served to deny Plath a vision of a creative future beyond *Ariel*. Robert Lowell's foreword to the edition published in 1966 compounds this impression by emphasizing the "appalling and triumphant fulfillment" that the *Ariel* poems represent (xv).

This may be a valid assessment of Hughes's *Ariel* collection but it does not apply to Plath's own *Ariel* which I read as a manifesto of her creative aesthetic and a moment of transition. Frieda Hughes, Plath and Hughes's daughter, has pointed out in her foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, that Plath intended her collection to begin with the word "Love" and end with "spring" (xiv). *Ariel* presents love in a challenging and often disturbing array of lights, but is at its most tender in its portrayal of the mother/child relationship. In the final poem, "Wintering" (89), a woman's body is a "bulb in the cold and too dumb to think" (line 45) but the promise of spring brings renewal in terms of an oral sensation: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring" (line 50). They will feed off the "fires" which will emerge from the dormant bulbs. This preoccupation with motherhood, which serves also as a metaphor for creative expression, and the emergence of a new orality are the characteristic features of *Ariel* which I will explore.

Reasons posited by critics for the breakthrough in poetic expression at Yaddo include Plath's ability to write separately from Hughes for the first time since their marriage seven years before, that she was newly pregnant at the time and that she was dabbling in "exercises of meditation and incantation" in order to free her creative spirit (Notes 191). Hughes describes Plath as "reading Paul Radin's collection of African folktales with great excitement. In these, she found the underworld of her worst nightmares throwing up intensely beautiful adventures, where the most unsuspecting voices thrived under the pressures of a reality that made most accepted fiction seem artificial and spurious" (Notes 192). Hughes here seems to associate aspects of Plath's deeply repressed psyche, "the underworld of her worst nightmares", with the sea, from which emerge voices that are authentic and real. Thoughts, images and ideas are thrown up as if by the tides or waves and forced into consciousness in forms which are

recognisable and tangible. The “accepted fiction” of Western literary conventions he refers to appear, in contrast, to represent only superficial layers of reality. Plath herself stressed the connection between her deeply repressed consciousness and the sea, and in her later writing she repeatedly expressed this fusion of ideas in terms of an African presence. My claim here is that the emergence of Plath’s authentic voice, speaking from this deep centre, was facilitated by the new set of metaphors, personae, imaginative resources and alternative cosmology of the African folktales.

In an essay she wrote in 1962 entitled “Ocean 1212-W”, Plath describes what she calls the “awful birthday of otherness”, or the experience of hearing (in 1935, at the age of almost 3) the news of the birth of her brother (117). Her descriptions of the sea suggest a boundary space, separate and enticing, from which she is exiled. Although it is “like a deep woman” and has a “motherly pulse” (117), its light nonetheless “spider[s] over [her] lids” (119) and “it hid a good deal; it had many faces, many delicate, terrible veils” (117). She expects to hear its sinister susurrations through a black telephone and is both drawn and repelled by it: “if it could court, it could also kill” (117). This ambivalent, even contradictory portrayal of the sea, incorporating a sense of oneness with a sense of alienation triggers a violent response. The narrator, throwing a starfish furiously at a rock, recalls her longing at that moment for the sea to present her with a sign of her own “election and specialness” (121). Instead of a mermaid or similar romanticised fairy tale figure, (“I believed not in God nor Santa Claus, but in mermaids” [117]) it disconcertingly spews out at her feet a wooden monkey which seems in the story to be a furry brown kelp creature. In his biography of Plath, Andrew Wilson has drawn attention to what he deems to be the “real” incident that served as the source for this fantasy (63). The carved

African monkey, flotsam from the war at sea, was apparently found by Plath and some friends on the beach in 1945. Whatever the reality, Plath transformed the experience into a highly charged encounter with a monstrous totemic figurine, a “simian Thinker” and a “Sacred Baboon” (Ocean 121). In this study, I will trace the disturbing symbolic presence of this African monkey in the *Ariel* collection, a Caliban to Shakespeare’s Ariel, perhaps.

From early in her intellectual career, Plath was fascinated by the figure of the double. Her Honours thesis explored the double in two of Dostoevsky’s novels and she concludes that the double takes its form “from the darkest of human fears and repression” (qtd. in Wagner 17). In “Ocean 1212-W”, the “other” against which the semi-autobiographical narrator forms her identity (in the “awful birthday of otherness”) is an African figure which reaches out a little brown hand. The double and the African merged at this point, I would argue, and the “*Ariel* voice” is the poetic rendition of this fusion of the African and the repressed unconscious. In “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (*Ariel* 84) written in October 1962, “the swamy feeling of African hands / Minute and shrunk for export” (lines 13-14) threatens the speaker’s sense of control and masterful subjective reality. The reduced African has been imported into the speaker’s personal space, threatening her identity but also creating an extraordinary tension which generates creative energy.

The title of Chapter 1, “Poetry ... is a tyrannical discipline”, is taken from an interview Plath recorded in October 1962, at the time she was writing most of her *Ariel* poems (Orr 171). In this chapter I trace Plath’s disillusionment with lyrical poetry and analyse her choice of title for what became her *Ariel* collection. In so doing, I posit the possibility that she was considering a shift in

genre into a more oral mode of expression, inspired by the example of the oral narratives in Radin's folktales. In proposing that Plath was, in fact, exploring new avenues in her writing at this time and actively viewing the possibility of change within her chosen art, recognition of the African influence helps to dispel the myth that her final poems are a meticulous, poetically rendered suicide note. It allows the poetry to transcend the limits imposed on it by most criticism thus far and grants the poetry a life beyond the death of the poet. No longer is it reduced to explorations of an exhausted self or subjectivity, the violent expression of an overwhelming death-drive or the vengeful assertion of a transcendent feminist voice against patriarchal dominance. Instead, the *Ariel* poems become the fruit of a new engagement with the repressed unconscious and an examination of the creative process itself. If one recognises that it was Plath's engagement with Africa that inspired this moment of profound change and re-assessment, one acknowledges a new spirit of awareness in her late poems. Importantly, one also draws attention to the neglect the African influence on her oeuvre has suffered in the hands of literary critics preoccupied by her psychobiography.

I will discuss Western perceptions of the "primitive" briefly in Chapter 2. Said, amongst others has pointed out how the concept of the primitive is appropriated by Western writers in order to serve "as a sort of surrogate and even underground self" (3). Against this foil, aspects of Western subjectivity can be explored. The powerful ambivalence of the relationship Plath expresses in *Ariel* between the self and this African representative form of "otherness" suggests that she was similarly engaging in such a dialogue.

I also point out in this chapter how in *Ariel* Plath seems to move away from the thematic preoccupations of her previous poetry, such as the over-powering influence of the father-figure (“Daddy”), and into explorations of alternative areas of thought, such as mother consciousness (“Medusa”, “Morning Song”, “Thalidomide”) and self-reconstitution (“Lady Lazarus”). This coincides with a sense of dissatisfaction with her entrapment within a predominantly male literary canon. Plath’s earlier writing manifests a strong sense of the “anxiety of influence” and registers a desire to free herself from her personally constructed myth of Freudian dependency on her dead father. Explorations of motherhood in the later poetry were to be no less vexed and fraught with anxiety, Plath’s merciless insight being brought to bear as strongly here as with the father subject, but the result was a body of work which made her famous. Two factors have been recognized as influencing Plath in this poetic engagement with motherhood: she had undergone a process of psychoanalysis in 1959 during which she had been given permission to hate her mother (*Journals* 429) and she gave birth to her first child in 1960. In addition, however, a powerfully evocative tale, “The City where Men are Mended” in Radin’s collection of African tales, which she read at this time, combines a dramatic depiction of ambivalent motherhood, both loving and cruel, with the concept of a reconstructed daughter. In this chapter, I will trace the specific details of this and other African tales that I have identified in certain poems in *Ariel*.

In Chapter 3, I examine Plath’s strong preoccupation with the oral nature of the poetic voice, proceeding from a sense of exhaustion with the traditional form of lyrical poetry and with her own, at times tortuous attempts at perfecting a style. Plath’s insistence that “I want others to

mouth me" (*Journals* 92) suggests not only an ambition to establish herself within the literary canon, but also a desire to be heard, not merely read or analysed in print. Much has been written about the prevalence of imagery of mouths, ingestion and abjection in Plath's poetry, but it is the tongue, the organ most directly associated with speech itself that represents the ability to articulate meaningfully in language. Plath's urgent desire to break into her own voice seems to have been satisfied with the writing of the *Ariel* poems. In a sense, she had found her tongue. In this section, I trace the links the poem "The Courage of Shutting-Up" shares with an African tale through this recurrent trope of the tongue and the concepts of voice or silencing. I examine "Purdah" in which an exotic entity breaks through a boundary space in a moment of powerful release. I point out an African connection here too and suggest this indicates a growing interest in Plath's imagination in a more oral form of expression. Hughes's removal of these two poems from Plath's original manuscript meant that an important thematic thread was lost which I hope to some extent to restore.

## CHAPTER 1

### “Poetry ... is a tyrannical discipline”<sup>6</sup>

The need to break her writer's block became increasingly urgent to Plath before her stay at Yaddo. Journal entries and letters written in early 1959 express a despairing dissatisfaction with the style, form and content of her writing and with the limitations to her creativity with which the tradition of lyrical poetry confronted her. A few excerpts illustrate this increasingly alarmed refrain. On January 27, she writes, “I'm not working, only studying to change my ways of writing poems. A disgust for my work” (*Journals* 465). On June 6 her entry shows a further desire to change style but sensing an impasse in this process: “I have no champions. ... How few of my superiors I respect the opinions of anyhow. ... How ironic, that all my work to overcome my easy poeticisms merely convinces them that I am rough, anti-poetic, unpoetic. My God” (492). Her indignation is directed at her being judged “unpoetic” whilst she recognises that it has hitherto been her tortuous commitment to stylistic convention that has prevented her from expressing herself precisely as she desires. Her disdain towards those she refers to as her “superiors” suggests a desire to search elsewhere for inspiration or admiration. A possible solution appears on September 28: “I must go in search of times past. Then all time present will be endowed with special form and meaning” (509). She continues the next day, September 29: “I neither write work nor study.... My interest in other people is too often one of comparison, not of pure intrigue with the unique otherness of identity. ... I know the horror of primal feelings, obsessions....If only I could get some horror into this mother story” (512-3). The references here to “times past”, and the need to delve more deeply into “otherness” and

---

<sup>6</sup> Plath qtd. in Orr 171.

“primal feelings”, are significant pointers to how she may have been drawn, as a way out of this perceived literary impasse, to the literature of what early twentieth century anthropology and ethnography regularly referred to as “primitive”. The repetition of the term “horror” echoes Kurtz’s words “The horror! The horror!” in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (100). Whatever Kurtz’s disturbing inner vision, in Plath’s world, the word is used in relation to a deep exploration of subjective awareness, “otherness” and motherhood, suggesting a merging of these concepts in the poetic imagination which will find expression in the violent imagery of the *Ariel* poems.

On October 10 she writes: ““Feel oddly barren. My sickness is when words draw in their horns ... When will I break into a new line of poetry?” (516). By this time she was at Yaddo which is when Hughes claims she was reading the African folktales. Suddenly, interspersed now in her entries are indications of a shift towards a more optimistic outlook. On November 4, she writes: “Miraculously I wrote seven poems in my POEM FOR A BIRTHDAY sequence.... But my manuscript for my book seems dead to me” (523). The ambivalent rebirth from stony silence in “The Stones”, which ends the “Poem for a Birthday” sequence, marks a point of entry into the innovative style of the *Ariel* poems. It is significant that it is the poem which most strongly presages the emergence of a powerful new poetic voice that is so heavily influenced by the African folktales, specifically the tale “The City where Men are Mended”.

The poem begins with the line “This is the city where men are mended” which suggests that the speaker is identified with one of the African girls in the tale of that title. The story begins by relating how a young girl is imprisoned in a baobab tree by the devil. Her mother feeds her in her tree prison but a hyena manages to trick the girl by imitating the mother’s voice with the

help of a blacksmith. The girl responds with the words “That is not my mother’s voice” each time the hyena attempts to trick her until the blacksmith perfects the imitation (Radin 250). The hyena devours her, leaving only her bones which the mother gathers together and takes off to the city where people can be mended and returned to life. The girl is finally mended well because her mother is kind and selflessly refuses the offer of food along the way and feeds the repairers’ cattle with choice ripe fruit, eating only the unripe herself. The second part of the story is one of deception and, at worst, cruelty. A rival wife is envious of the beautifully restored daughter of the other wife and pounds her own uglier daughter to death in a pestle and mortar. She then takes her to be mended and improved but due to her selfishness with regard to food, gains a monster of half pieces in return. The mother attempts to disown her but eventually is forced, by the piteous pleading of the half-creature, to acknowledge the hideous daughter as her own.

In Plath’s “The Stones” (*Collected Poems* 136), the speaker claims “the mother of pestles diminished me. / I became a still pebble” (lines 7-8). Like the African maiden, she is cruelly reduced by a maternal presence to an essential lifelessness. The space she and other “stones of the belly” (line 9) inhabit is “the stomach of indifference”, and a mute “wordless cupboard” (line 6). It is a womb-like world of silences and cold inaction from which only a voice finally “pipe[s] out” (line 11) from the “quarry of silences” (line 13) leading to the systematic construction of a body to house the voice, beginning with the mouth, then the ears and eyes, the lips, building up to the whole body. It is an externally imposed reconstruction, the subject being the passive recipient of the attentions of “grafters” (line 27) and “workm[e]n” (line 31). The violence of this birth out of stony silence and ambivalently peaceful indifference is

reminiscent of the violent forging of William Blake's "Tyger".<sup>7</sup> The speaker in Plath's poem is spread out on a "great anvil" (line 2), the workers wield hammers and pincers and administer "Volt upon volt" (line 30) to heart and "bone and sinew" (line 40). Her sex is administered finally when "The vase, reconstructed, houses/The elusive rose" (lines 41-42). Like Blake's tyger, the awesome power of this newly constructed creature is both beautiful and terrifying. The voice is eventually embodied, but it is an uncertain and tenuous merger. The passivity of the subjective speaker, who is also the constructed object, disguises beneath her words "There is nothing to do" (line 44) a latent energy. Suggested is a rebirth into an as yet unknown or unrecognised consciousness, as if the nature of the voice which will emerge from this new corporeal being has yet to be tested. It is in the reconstructed body of the original African daughter of the tale that this new voice begins life: The speaker falls "out of the light" in line two of the second stanza and emerges in the end of the poem as a "bowl of shadows" (line 43) in which the new voice echoes. This shadowy woman will re-emerge as a presence in the *Ariel* poem "The Rival" (*Ariel* 73), who is "[w]alking about in Africa, maybe, but thinking of me" (line 17). She is a combination of dark and light forces, like the moon, and representative of voice and silence. The importance of the poem "The Rival" will be considered shortly, further supporting my hypothesis that this character from the African tales was of great symbolic significance to the *Ariel* collection.

Within a few days of "The Stones", Plath also wrote "Mushrooms" (*Collected Poems* 139). In this poem one reads of the emergence of a powerful, sinister force which is at first "voiceless"

---

<sup>7</sup> In her 1962 interview with Peter Orr, Plath stated when questioned about literary influences: "Now I begin to go backwards, I begin to look to Blake, for example" (Orr 170).

(line 16), feeding “On crumbs of shadow” (line 20) and hiding behind a meek show of domesticity. Within rooms, mushrooms “make room” (line 9) and impose their presence: “Our foot’s in the door” (line 33). From the dark underworld of the “leafy bedding” (line 12), a white collective entity forcefully births itself into darkness: “Overnight, very / Whitely ... [we] /Acquire the air” (lines 1-6). These sinister creatures are the forerunners of those imprisoned in the bee box which similarly “overnight” (line 7) threaten the domestic space of the narrator in *Ariel*’s “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (84). In the *Ariel* poem they are identified explicitly as black and dark, like “African hands ... angrily clambering” (line 13-15). The new imaginative presence, born of the dark underground world of “The Stones” and “Mushrooms” is fundamental to *Ariel* and it originally took its form directly from Radin’s African tales.

Plath’s final collection of poems was variously entitled “Daddy”, “The Rabbit Catcher”, “A Birthday Present”, “The Rival” and finally “Ariel”. Original copies of the early manuscript show her handwritten changes to the title page, the only typed title being “The Rival” (*Ariel: Restored Edition*). This suggests that the poem was deeply significant to Plath and that its message was somehow relevant to the collection as a whole. It seems at first to be an odd choice as a titular poem. It lacks, for instance, the resonant potency of “Daddy” or “The Rabbit Catcher” and the beauty of “Ariel”. The rival persona has been interpreted in many ways, but a major theme running through *Ariel* emerges if one recognises the important connection made in the final line between Africa and this rival other.<sup>8</sup> *Ariel* then becomes a body of work in which Plath is seen

---

<sup>8</sup> Ronald Hayman for instance maintains that the poem is embroiled in Plath’s antagonistic relationships with two women, Dido Merwin and Assia Wevill (202). Hughes and Wevill became sexually involved at the time Plath wrote the poem. Hughes refers to it as a poem about “that woman in the moon, the disquieting muse” (Notes 194). The published poem is a shortened version of an earlier draft which does seem to focus on womanly rivalry in, for instance, its comparing creeping wrinkles to “a steel complexion”. Nevertheless, the fact that Plath

to be engaging from beginning to end with her deeply repressed unconscious, which is repeatedly expressed in terms of negritude or specifically an African conception as a manifestation of the “primitive”. This is tied in fundamentally with the process of creativity.

The poem “The Rival” (*Ariel* 73) bases its meaning on the fact that the dark side of the moon hovers over Africa while the reflective side (the pun intended, I am sure) coldly presides over the “civilised” North. There are three imaginative personae in the poem. The negating, reductively cold moon is stationed in opposition to an abased subject who “wake[s] to a mausoleum” (line 7). There is also the “you” persona, the rival, who resembles the moon but is more sinister and omnipresent. The moon and the rival are both “beautiful, but annihilating” (line 3), and both make “stone out of everything” (line 6), but whilst the moon grants reprieve during daylight hours, as it floats over the Southern hemisphere, the constant petrifying attention of the rival never lets up: “No day is safe from news of you” (line 16). The rival figure and the self may be interpreted as doubles of one writing persona, one productive, the other not, the latter “dying to say something unanswerable” (line 10). The “white and blank” message that enters lethally through the mailslot (line 15) serves as a metaphor for a lack of creative productivity, the tyranny of the blank page, and the publishers’ rejections Plath so hated. A similar analogy occurs in an earlier poem “A Life” (*Collected Poems* 149) written in 1960, in which the moon is likened to “a sheet of blank paper” (line 23) around which a woman “drags her shadow” (line 21). By implication, in “The Rival”, the true state of the moon and the rival,

---

discarded this version and ended her poem instead with this reference to Africa serves to expand the interpretive scope of the poem. The earlier draft is included in *The Collected Poems* (291).

which only borrow sunlight, is also darkness or shadow and it is this aspect that counters the blankness and despair of a lack of productivity.

Plath's reference to Africa at the end of the poem seems to appear from nowhere and is a line that is seldom focused on by critics who study the poem. Plath seems to be drawing into association Africa and her creativity. The lunar, barren self banishes the fecund "other" to walk about in Africa while she reigns coldly and austere over the imagination of the petrified "I". The fecund rival cruelly flaunts her dark secrets in a space so distant that they seem unfathomable. The final line associates the dark figure "walking about in Africa" with life and creativity, as opposed to the coldness and distance of abstract thought. It is only through a uniting of the two, the Apollonian intellectual ("thinking") self with the richly imaginative and intuitive "other", that poetry can be born. The poem ends on a note of impasse, intimately infused with a sense of the African as a potential alternative, but which, in itself and alone, can be just as "annihilating". This womanly figure I believe is drawn from the cruel mother of "The City where Men are Mended".

Plath did not settle, however, on "The Rival" as a title for her collection, but changed it finally to *Ariel*. An analysis of this new title shows that its choice by no means negates my hypothesis that Plath viewed *Ariel* as a collection of poetry which reflects the powerful moment of engagement between the conscious and the unconscious, a moment which frees the creative spirit from stony silence. "Ariel" is a poem which, as if in answer to Hughes's "The Thought-Fox", captures Plath's theory of her own aesthetics.<sup>9</sup> As a title to the collection, it shows Plath viewing her *Ariel*

---

<sup>9</sup> I will elaborate on the link between Hughes's poem and "Ariel" in Chapter 2.

poems as a break away from obsolete literary constrictions, and as a possible bridge to a new form of creative expression.

In his foreword to the first edition of *Ariel*, published in 1966, Robert Lowell makes the connection with Shakespeare's Ariel, the "slightly chilling and androgynous spirit" in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but states that "the truth is, this *Ariel* is the author's horse"(Lowell xiv). This is too simple an explanation, however. Plath chose her title with a deeper sense of the significance of the word "Ariel".

Although Plath was generally disdainful of Christian dogma, most critics settle for the interpretation of Ariel as the alternative name in Isaiah 29 for the city of Jerusalem which is destroyed by fire.<sup>10</sup> This certainly relates to the imagery of immolation and rebirth in poems such as "Lady Lazarus", "Ariel" and "Fever 103°". Significantly, however, a careful reading of Isaiah 29 shows that the destruction of Jerusalem is not, in fact, wrought initially by fire, but by entrapment within structures. In the King James version of the Bible, the verse reads: "And I will camp against thee round about, and will lay siege against thee with a mount, and will raise forts against thee" (Isa.29.3). These images are heavily reminiscent of Plath's own depictions in her earlier collection, *Colossus*, of entrapment within monumental forms and stony ruins: "stones are nothing of home ...Against bar and tower the black sea runs" (line 46-48, "Point Shirley" in *Collected Poems* 110). In "The Colossus" (*Collected Poems* 129), furthermore, "The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue. My hours are married to shadow" (line 27). Picking up on these

---

<sup>10</sup> Britzolakis, for example, refers to Jerusalem as "the city destined to be destroyed by fire" (185). For an exploration of Plath's religious views, see Luke Ferretter's paper entitled "'What Girl Ever Flourished in Such Company?': Sylvia Plath's Religion." In her journal on Feb 19 1956, Plath herself records often boasting that she "would rather live with [her thesaurus] on a desert isle than a bible" (*Journals* 196).

images, Britzolakis has described Plath's psychic landscapes as "often organized ... around the central image of a crypt" (110). She accurately interprets the deadly restrictive bulk of marmoreal structures in the poetry as symbolic of the constrictions of the literary canon or the lyrical poetic form: "Literary tradition itself becomes a tortuous and labyrinthine structure [in which] poetic discourse is haunted by the threat of imprisonment in the words of others" (110). In her interpretation, the poet appears as a muted ghost-like figure, lost beneath the entombing weight of history, culture and memory. This is the same impression left by the journal entries and letters, quoted earlier, that Plath wrote before breaking into her "*Ariel* voice".

The suffering inflicted by the siege of the Biblical city, Ariel, similarly manifests itself quite explicitly in terms of verbal oppression:

And thou shalt be brought down, and shalt speak out of the ground,  
 and thy speech shall be low out of the dust, and thy voice shall be,  
 as of one that hath a familiar spirit, out of the ground,  
 and thy speech shall whisper out of the dust. (Is.29. 4)

There are distinct echoes of these words in Plath's "Poem for a Birthday" in which the enigmatically mutating narrator dwells in a surrealist underground world, speaking from "the bowel of the root" (line 27) in "Dark House" (*Collected Poems* 132). The distress suffered in the Biblical city is also described in Isaiah in terms of soul-destroying hunger: "And it shall be as when a hungry man dreameth, and, behold, he eateth, but he awaketh, and his soul is empty"

(Isa. 29. 8). In the first poem of Plath's sequence, "Who" (*Collected Poems* 131), the enigmatic figure "all mouth" likewise seems to represent the ingestive urge but it later becomes a desire to find verbal expression: "Mother, you are the one mouth / I would be a tongue to" (lines 25-26). In the Biblical passage, after Ariel has been reduced to a constricted silence, God destroys both the city and its enemies in a holocaust of "tempest and flames of a devouring fire" (Isa. 29.6). Echoing this passage, in "Witch Burning" (*Collected Poems* 135), metaphors of flame merge with metaphors of speech in a subtle mutation: "red tongues will teach the truth" (line 18). As the speaker's "ankles brighten" (line 23), she claims to be "ready to construe the days / I coupled with dust in the shadow of stone" (lines 21-22). This is a crucially important line which reinforces the importance of "Poem for a Birthday" as anticipating the new voice of *Ariel*. It suggests that a marriage of sorts occurred in the dark and underground world beneath the weight of stones, which would result in the birth of some new form of life. The verb "construe" in this line is a clue to understanding how Plath viewed her *Ariel* collection as a bridge towards a more oral form of expression. It means to combine as words, or to translate, especially orally ("Construe"). The voice born in the dust, restricted by the weighty presence of stony structures and conceits, is freed through immolation specifically to speak orally. The existence of the "primitive" world of dark fecund life is acknowledged beneath the lapidarian coldness and emptiness of the dust and stone. It is only through a fusion of the two elements that a new voice can emerge. Like the dark presence in "The Rival", this birthing place is intrinsic to the later *Ariel* poems and manifests as variously as "the gorilla interior" in line three of "Getting There" (*Ariel* 57) from which the speaker emerges in the final line "Pure as a baby",

or in the “dark, dark” (line 12) box of bees in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (*Ariel* 84). It is the blackness of this mental space that is significant here.

A fact that seems to have been given no attention by critics is that the title “Ariel poems” had already been used by T.S. Eliot for a group of poems published by Faber and Gwyer in their “Ariel” pamphlets between 1927 and 1931 (Pearce 17).<sup>11</sup> He later listed these poems under this title in his *Collected Poems 1909 -1962*, published in 1963. First published soon after Eliot’s conversion to Anglican Christianity in 1927, they are poems markedly different from those of “The Wasteland” (published in 1922), manifesting a distinctive change in form and style. In fact, with the exception of *Four Quartets*, Eliot wrote comparatively little poetry after his conversion, concentrating far more seriously on drama. His “Ariel” poems mark a turning point in his literary career and a beginning of a new phase of writing, one which focuses primarily not on lyrical poetry as written genre, but on the spoken word and the more public audience. He stated at this time: “Every poet would like, I fancy, to be able to think that he had some direct social utility .... He would like to be something of a popular entertainer, and be able to think his own thoughts behind a tragic or a comic mask. He would like to convey the pleasures of poetry, not only to a larger audience, but to large groups of people collectively; and the theatre is the best place in which to do it” (154). As if weary of the insular, internal quality of lyrical poetry, of “turning blood into ink”(154), he explains here his desire to engage actively at a community rather than at only an individual level, and to make poetry useful, to have it make a difference in a broad social context. His description of theatre as a mode of expression which allows the

---

<sup>11</sup> These publishers later became Faber and Faber, also Plath’s publishers.

poet to hide behind a mask suggests a need to move beyond the intense subjectivity of lyrical poetry, to reach beyond the painfully honest self and instead enjoy sharing “the pleasures of poetry”. Plath too explicitly expressed a commitment to having her poetry reach beyond the merely personal and find its place as a public as well as a private voice. In an interview with Peter Orr in October 1962, she states: “I cannot sympathise with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife or whatever it is. I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences ... with an informed and intelligent mind” (qtd. in Orr 169). She insists that personal experience “shouldn’t be a kind of shut-box and mirror-looking, narcissistic experience” but relevant to wider issues of historical significance (170). These words suggest that she too shared Eliot’s sentiments about needing to break out of the insular, reflective mode, in which she was most adept, in order to establish a place for herself in the world and in history. The imagery she uses here, that of the needle, the knife, the shut box and the mirror, appear in “The Courage of Shutting-Up”, a poem which I will explore in detail in Chapter 3. It is a poem, I will argue, about the danger of enforced silence and the necessity of freeing the tongue.

Plath claimed emphatically that her *Ariel* poems were a new development in that they were written to be listened to rather than to be read in silence: “I’ve got to say them, I speak them to myself, ... and whatever lucidity they may have comes from the fact that I say them to myself, I say them aloud” (Orr 170). T.S. Eliot concluded his series of the Charles Norton Lectures at Harvard by stating that “it may ... be that poets only talk when they cannot sing” (156). In a poignant echo of Eliot’s words, as well as of Hughes’s description of her response to reading the African folktales, Plath states in the interview that she is “very excited” by the new trend of

recording poetry readings: “In a sense, there’s a return ... to the old role of the poet, which was to speak to a group of people, ... [t]o sing to a group of people” (Orr 170-1). In the same lecture, Eliot declared that “[p]oetry begins, I dare say, with a savage beating a drum in a jungle” (155), and that he would very much prefer “an audience which could neither read nor write” (152). In the childish rhythms and repetitions that pervade the *Ariel* poems one gains a sense of the oral and aural “primitivism” that Eliot associates with the “savage”, but which more accurately describes a return to a direct form of expression, divested of the sheath of language. In “Death and Co.” (*Ariel* 35), for instance, “The dead bell / The dead bell / Somebody’s done for” (lines 29-31) echoes the nursery rhyme line “atishoo, atishoo, we all fall down” and returns it to its sinister origins in the Black Death. In her poem “Daddy” (*Ariel* 74), the sound of the words “the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you” (line 50) evokes a sense of pathological repetitive behaviour without needing any extraneous explanation. In many of the *Ariel* poems’ regression to a more primal medium, Plath’s new poetic voice comes through and it is one that is musical, rhythmic and oral. I concur with Marjorie Perloff that Plath was naturally inclined towards the poetry of *ecstasis*, in which the poet speaks as a medium, without overt didacticism (*Angst* 110). I expand on this point in Chapter 3 in my discussion of the poem “Purdah”.

At the same time that Plath was writing her *Ariel* poems, she also wrote one of her most beautiful pieces of work, a script for a radio play entitled *Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices* (*Collected Poems* 176). It is a sensitive and compassionate exploration of three possibilities of motherhood, expressing pain and loss, joy and resignation, in the absolute form of voice alone – no names are given and the voices simply flow as if emerging from a single

body. It is unusual for Plath in its gentleness and its lyrical beauty and, according to Hughes, was specifically intended as an oral piece, to be read aloud on radio.<sup>12</sup> Through its vocal beauty, Plath first fully explores the possibility of a new direction in creative expression, of engaging orally with a collective audience.<sup>13</sup>

Radin's collection of African folktales is a compilation of the written renditions of tales originally shared orally and use the techniques of repetition, musical refrains and allegory to reach a communal audience. Specific details of these tales and how they manifest in Plath's *Ariel* poems will be discussed later, but at this point in my argument, I refer to them as examples of a powerful oral medium, coming from a space steeped, for Plath, in connotations of the deeply repressed unconscious and poetic imagination. According to Marianna Torgovnick, in some African societies, the blacksmith is associated with the artist or diviner (133). In the African tale "The City where Men are Mended", Plath encountered this figure of the blacksmith. He transforms a voice, thus setting in motion a train of events in which motherhood operates in a loving, nurturing way while simultaneously presenting the possibility of terrifying cruelty. It also tells a tale of feminine rivalry and the idea of re-created daughters, themes of crucial importance to Plath personally at this time and which she proceeded to explore in depth in her *Ariel* poems. As she found herself increasingly drawn to the role of wordsmith, the magical diviner and imparter of messages, it seems that she, like T.S. Eliot, felt a desire to move into a new realm in which to pursue her gifts.

---

<sup>12</sup> Hughes makes this point in his notes on Sylvia Plath's *The Collected Poems* (292).

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of *Three Women* as a creative experiment, see Leah Souffrant's article entitled "Mother Delivers Experiment: Poetry of Motherhood: Plath, Derricotte, Zucker, and Holbrook."

Taking one's cue, perhaps facetiously, from Rose who calls Plath "a fantasy" (8), it is interesting (and in this context not pointless) to speculate about what might have been. The vision of "Poem for a Birthday" combines the Biblical conceit of a resurgent voice (the immolation of "Witch Burning" in which "red tongues will teach the truth") with the vivid imagery of the African tales. The *Ariel* poems grew from this vision, presenting the searing vocabulary of transcendence along with hints of the possibility of a break into a new medium. After *Ariel*, Plath's creative energies may well have been re-directed, like Eliot's before her, to focus on a different form and style, such as drama, as indicated by her experiment with *Three Women*. In this light, the *Ariel* poems lose the morbid psychobiographical aura of a suicide note and become instead a collection of final words to a genre and an emergence from a literary prison. By choosing the same title for her collection as that under which Eliot collected his last few lyrical poems, Plath aligned herself with a transitional moment in literary history. Moreover, she incorporated in the work that marks this decisive shift, original and novel elements from an alternative literary resource, that of African folklore, and in so doing, she avoided the irony of merely shifting sideways within the Western literary canon. Most significantly, for Plath studies, through such an interpretation as this, the poet's corporeal death becomes irrelevant to readings of the poetry. I will explore the distinctive features of the African tales that can be traced in *Ariel* in the next two chapters. In so doing, I hope to show that the details Plath chose to incorporate are those which serve as tropes and metaphors for her expression of a frustration with voicelessness and entrapment within obsolete literary structures. Simultaneously, she presented in *Ariel* her perception of the dynamics of her aesthetic practice

and, as I will show in the next chapter, this entailed an active engagement with the unconscious which she associated with “the African”.

## CHAPTER 2

### “That is not my mother’s voice”<sup>14</sup>

This chapter explores Sylvia Plath’s poetic shift into a focus on motherhood in her *Ariel* collection and how this is linked to an interest in “the primitive”. In this poetry, Plath portrays an engagement with two entities, described in terms of black and white, which I interpret as referring to the unconscious and conscious minds. A resolution of the conflict between these entities is presented as creatively fertile and productive, hence sustaining the thematic link with motherhood.

The *Ariel* manuscript was dedicated to Plath’s two children, Frieda and Nicholas, aged two and a half and a year respectively at the time of the poet’s suicide. Childbearing, children and motherhood feature strongly in the collection, in terms of both being a mother as well as being a daughter herself. This exploration of maternity was a new direction for Plath. In an interview in which she was asked to explain her poem “Daddy”, written in October 1962, Plath claimed that it was written in an attempt to exorcise the ghost of the father. She states in the interview, “Here is a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it” (Plath, *Collected Poems* 293). Of interest here is the final statement – that the daughter must re-enact the drama she has inherited and in doing so through her poem, become free of its paralysing effect. Plath’s

---

<sup>14</sup> Radin 250.

creative energy had been driven for years by what she regarded as her over-riding preoccupation with the death of her father. In “Full Fathom Five” (written in 1958), “Electra on Azalea Path” (1959) and “The Colossus” (1959), the influence of the ghost of her dead father shows itself most clearly. In “Electra on Azalea Path” (*Collected Poems* 116), she lives as “the ghost of an infamous suicide” (line 42); in “Full Fathom Five” (*Collected Poems* 92), the desire to join him is deadly: “Your shelled bed I remember. Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water” (lines 43-45). During 1962, this ghost is not entirely laid to rest but it is certainly displaced by another intense focus. In its place, a surge of interest in motherhood and womanhood flows through the poems. No doubt the fact that Plath became a mother herself in 1960 plays a large part in this, but at this time she was also “given permission to hate her mother” by Ruth Beuscher, her young and arguably inexperienced psychoanalyst (*Journals* 429).<sup>15</sup>

Although the *Ariel* collection includes some tender descriptions of maternal moments, it is also characterised by vociferous hatred of the maternal figure, bordering on misogyny. This is variously directed at barren women, or mothers or sexual and literary rivals. The *Ariel* poems are far more heavily laden with references to women and mothers than to men or fathers. Those relating to men, such as “Daddy”, “The Jailer” and “Stopped Dead”, are angry, accusatory or dismissive rather than exploratory, suggesting a new direction and new focus in this collection. In the last poem, “Wintering” (*Ariel* 89), the bees who “are all women” (line 38), have finally “got rid of the men” (line 40). Indeed, in a canny return to the poem “The Stones”

---

<sup>15</sup> “Beuscher was only a psychiatric resident, in effect a trainee” (Wilson 279). History, of course, confirms that tragically, Beuscher’s brief psychoanalysis did not seem to have achieved much in the way of healing.

(the birthplace of the “*Ariel*” voice) and by extension its African source, the men are “mende[a]d” or “[m]ended” in *Ariel*. Pursuing this connection, it is my contention that Plath’s fascinated exploration of the African folktales provided her with original literary resources with which to express this new imaginative direction into motherhood and womanhood. More importantly, they represented, the “primitive”, or the dark unconscious, the world of her dreams, as Hughes was later to describe them in his poem “You Hated Spain” (*Birthday Letters* 39). Instinctively she sensed that it was this element that had been missing in her poetry and which would give it life. She felt, through her reading of D.H. Lawrence and T.S. Eliot especially, that she would be able to harness this through the mother, or the feminine, more successfully than she had previously done through the father.

Torgovnick, referring specifically to D.H. Lawrence and Joseph Conrad, has pointed out the deeply ingrained link between the female and the “primitive” often made by the early Modernists. Plath portrays women ambivalently in *Ariel*. They may be powerful avengers, such as in “Lady Lazarus”, as well as victims, such as the missing persona in “The Detective”. The mother in “Nick and the Candlestick” is both loving as well as distant. This representation of women is shadowed by an interest in primitivism. Dismissing her previous obsession with the father, Plath seems to have embarked on an exploration of “the female” which she associated, following Lawrence especially, with the deeply repressed and darker recesses of the psyche. This is not undertaken, however, without the hyper-reflexivity and ambivalence that haunt the impressions of the sea presented in her short story “Ocean 1212-W” or the “other woman” in “The Rival”, discussed earlier. This intensely ambivalent tone, I would suggest, is indicative of a sense of awareness, even fear, of the process of engaging with the unconscious.

Rose has remarked on Radin's folktales as a source for "Poem for a Birthday", positing that they "could be read as mythic narratives of which Plath's poem is the modern and Westernized variant" (63). Her reference here to "Plath's poem" in the singular suggests that she sees Radin's influence as limited to either just "The Stones" or to the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence, a limit which I would wish to extend. She does recognise that the drama in a couple of the tales can be linked to various moments in Plath's work and I intend to expand on her few examples in this study. In parenthesis, Rose seems to warn against "representing [the African tales] as the primitive underside of [Plath's] work", for fear perhaps of accusations of ethnocentricity (63). I agree that it is important to respect Radin's own presentation of the tales as literature rather than as "primitive" myth, but a tendency on the part of criticism to overlook the influence of these tales on Plath's later work in effect serves to deny them their rightful place as a valid literary resource and significant influence on an important poet's major work. It is therefore imperative to identify specific elements in the tales that Plath drew on and bring them to light, not merely as vague shades of blackness, but as visible and active literary devices in her most influential work.

Rose claims that Radin's influence on "Poem for a Birthday" shows the sequence of poems to be "surrounded by a debate about origins in relation to violence as 'primitive' or politically – that is, externally – imposed" and states that, though "Plath seems to empty this second meaning out of the African folktales ... it would not be true to say that it does not form part of her concerns" (63). This implies that Plath's work leans towards an interpretation of violence as "primitive", the residue of the "emptying out" process Rose refers to. Rose chooses to focus on the latter aspect of Plath's work (the "second meaning") but my interest is in the former. My

assessment of Plath's work is that there was a very strong ethnocentric element to it, born of a fascination with the "primitive" which she interpreted as representative of the deeply repressed unconscious, the darker side of human consciousness. As I will show, she perceived this as intrinsic to her creativity and felt a strong urge to engage with it, sensing that it was through such an encounter that her unique voice would be freed.

Plath harboured an abiding interest in folktales. In a letter to her mother dated May 26 1956, she mentions reading aloud to Hughes from her "dear *Märchen der Brüder Grimm*" and "getting very excited" (*Letters* 256). On 26 May 1960, heavily pregnant, she wrote to her mother from London stating with enthusiasm that "a marvelous folklore library is just down the street from us" (371). These comments suggest a fascination with cultures other than the Western or specifically Anglo-American one to which she so uncannily seemed in tune. Most tellingly, however, in a journal entry dated January 1959, she states "Read Aino tales: primitive: all penis-fetish, anus-fetish, mouth-fetish stage. Marvelous untouched humor, primal: bang, bang you're dead. Stories of alter-ego: same thing done by two people, only one is rich by it, other poor and dead: difference, attitude of mind only. NB" (*Journals* 457). Here Plath labels these tales as "primitive" at the same time as she equates them with Freudian stages of early childhood development. One might assume that this is also how she responded to the African tales, but not without a strong respect for their intrinsic depth. Most interesting is her viewing as very important ("NB") the way a character's attitude towards an event shapes that character's future ("rich" or "poor and dead"). Judging by this journal entry, the "primitive" held for Plath a promise of something powerfully transformative and it is her eventual engagement with it that did, indeed, create the "Ariel voice". Her specific reference to a tale

which features the figure of a double, or “alter-ego”, reflects the same interest she showed in the story of the mother and daughter pairs in “The City where Men are Mended”.

Radin emphasises in his introduction that those who harbour perceptions of the African as primitive have failed to take into account the continent’s history of enslavement and that for centuries its population have for the most part been “compelled to live a life impoverished economically, spiritually, and intellectually” (Radin 1). These words resound when read alongside Plath’s stanza in “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (*Ariel* 84):

I put my eye to the grid.

It is dark, dark,

With the swarmy feeling of African hands

Minute and shrunk for export,

Black on black, angrily clambering. (lines 11-15)

Lines like these have led to accusations of racism and ethnocentrism being levelled at Plath.<sup>16</sup>

The bees represent a deep engagement with the repressed and a threatening but alluring “other”, depicted in explicitly racial terms. However, the Bee poems generally manifest such a deep mistrust of the master position that its power is almost negated. A sense of the unconscious is expressed elsewhere too in the *Ariel* collection in terms of the African. The

---

<sup>16</sup> For example, Malin Walther Pereira identifies “an unacknowledged racial (and racist) dimension in Plath’s poetry” (527). Renée Curry has devoted a chapter to this subject in her book entitled *White Women Writing White*.

notorious “Nigger-eye / Berries” (lines 10-11) of “Ariel” (*Ariel* 33) and “the great African cat” (line 59) in “Tulips” (*Ariel* 18) are further examples, to be discussed more fully later. In “Thalidomide” (*Ariel* 9), also discussed later, the note of self-reflective irony with regard to a binary racial vision, is developed to a point of actual self-condemnation.

The concept of the “primitive” was explored extensively by Freud and the Modernist poets such as D.H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats whose work fascinated and greatly influenced Plath. Her journals and letters make frequent enthusiastic references to Eliot, Lawrence and Yeats. Her reading of Freud and her commitment to psychoanalysis exposed her to the current views of her time which equated the primitive and the mythopoeic imagination with the repressed unconscious, the dark Id which perpetually threatens the Ego with its barely acknowledged horrors, violence and sexuality. A discussion of Plath’s interest in African folklore must be undertaken, therefore, within the context of the growing interest during the early to mid-twentieth century in ethnography, anthropology and cultural myth. The term “primitivism” is applied to Western perceptions of, and interest in, tribal cultures and art; it does not accurately describe these. As Said so succinctly puts it, conceptions of the Orient (also applicable to the African) emerge “according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections” (Said 8). Plath’s engagement with, and responses to, the African and the African tales must be regarded as manifestations of a fantasy in which the “primitive” represents all that is repressed but not

consciously identified or acknowledged in her own, as well as the “civilised” Western psyche, of which she was a product.<sup>17</sup>

Toni Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, has claimed a central position for Africa in American literature, suggesting that what she identifies as this literature’s major features, including “an obsession with figurations of death and hell”, may in fact be “responses to a dark, abiding signing Africanist presence” (5). In Plath’s later poetry, an “Africanist presence” is depicted as fundamental to the formation of subjectivity and the creative process. For instance in “Tulips” (*Ariel* 18), the hospital patient is obsessively attracted to a death-like state of total withdrawal and self-negation, specifically described as white: “Look how white everything is” (line 2). It is the dark, insistently vital presence of the blooms, with mouths like hungry “African cats” (line 59) that forces her instead to re-attach herself to her own existential reality. Beyond the explicitly white world of heavenly self-effacement, the land of the exotic tulips beckons, a country “as far away as health” (line 43), the word “health” embodying the word “hell”. Here is the same subtle connection being made that Morrison makes between the hellish and the African, although the white/black binary presented by Plath is not limited to racial interpretation. Morrison moreover claims that self-reflexive energy is what characterises this encounter between whiteness and blackness: “Images of blackness can be evil *and* protective, rebellious *and* forgiving, fearful *and* desirable – all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless, implacable” (59). In Plath’s poem, the exotic tulips are threatening yet

---

<sup>17</sup> This projection of all that is dark and frightening onto the black or the African, is as dangerous as its inverse in which for a black person, all that is white may come to represent a hated enemy, an oppressor, or all that is perfect. Neither state of consciousness is conducive to harmony, either political or personal.

represent recovery. In her poem “The Rival”, the dark rival who walks around in Africa is both beautiful but annihilating. The unavoidable dark must be explored and confronted but it is a fearful and dangerous process. Without an engagement with it, however, whiteness is valueless.

Morrison’s various descriptions of whiteness quoted above (“mute, meaningless” etc.) can be readily related to other poems too, in which Plath’s poetic personae are positioned explicitly as white: in “Nick and the Candlestick” (*Ariel* 47), the maternal figure in her “cave of calcium” (line 10) in which “Even the newts are white” (line 12), is stiff in frozen paralysis; in “A Birthday Present” (*Ariel* 66), the enigmatic pillar of ivory is unfathomable and shrouded in mystery; in “The Bee Meeting” (*Ariel* 81), the speaker is a veiled “pillar of white” (line 52). Whiteness for Plath was never simply a matter of race, but represented a static, inorganic state of consciousness, one in which creativity was curtailed. The racial language she uses to express these contradictory states did not go unquestioned, however, as I will show shortly in my discussion of “Thalidomide”.

Morrison claims in her preface to be fascinated by “the way black people ignite critical moments of discovery or change or emphasis in literature not written by them” (viii). Plath’s exposure to the often violent and powerfully evocative tales in Radin’s collection provoked just such a reaction in Sylvia Plath. The tales allowed her to engage with alterity at the level of literature and language, not just in the context of societal engagement, the few black people she may have met, or within a limited range of racial terms. African darkness, and all it represented in terms of psychic exploration, could be incorporated into her creative repertoire

through its own literary representatives gleaned from the tales. Plath regularly transformed the characters that feature in her best poetry into archetypal figures (her father into a colossus, her mother into Medusa, the grieving daughter into Electra). Similarly, it is possible to identify how she gleaned certain features from the African tales and transformed them into symbolic representations of significant concepts in her poems. For instance, the sinister rival wife in the tale “The City where Men are Mended” represents both a sexual rival as well as the debilitating aspect of the psyche which withers all creativity in her poem “The Rival”. The once lethal tongue of the tale “Mantis and the All-Devourer”, cut off and disempowered, appears in her poem “The Courage of Shutting-Up” as a symbol of enforced silence. These are powerful, original and evocative images which suggest that Plath had discovered a vital new source of imagery in the African tales.

Critics who have discussed Plath’s alleged racism usually do so in terms of her anti-semitism,<sup>18</sup> but a few venture, as noted above, to claim a racist attitude towards African-Americans. In so doing, the latter group fail to recognise Plath’s own critical awareness of the intellectual and emotional impoverishment such an attitude engenders. Plath’s encounter with African narratives triggered a poetic voice that explores and challenges boundaries of consciousness and even condemns racism itself at one point in “Thalidomide”. Plath enlisted the tropes of darkness and light to represent the absorption of the two in a conflicted but mutually dependant and potentially fruitful relationship within the whole. This is illustrated in her poem “The Rival” in which the dark and light side of the moon co-exist yet are fundamentally

---

<sup>18</sup> For an overview and analysis of the critical responses to Plath’s use of Holocaust imagery, see Al Strangeways. “‘The Boot in the Face’: The problem of the Holocaust in the poetry of Sylvia Plath.”

estranged, to their mutual impoverishment. In “Thalidomide” (*Ariel* 9), the “Negro, masked like a white” (line 3) may appal through its sinister duplicity, but is in fact a depiction of dual elements within one person. Ted Hughes chose to remove the poem “Thalidomide” (written in November 1962 and in draft form entitled “Half Moon”) from the first *Ariel* publication. However, this is a very important poem in the collection, as I will show, and its removal a shocking amputation.

The poem portrays the moment of confrontation between self and other, conscious awareness and the unacknowledged repressed. This is presented in terms of black and white, shadow and substance, two halves of a duality likened to a half moon, one side lit up and the other in darkness. The possibility of wholeness is balanced against its opposite, that of mal-proportioned, half-formed imbalance, and intrinsic to the pursuit of wholeness is the concept of fruitful creativity and motherhood. The merging of moon imagery and the split human subject relates strongly to stories of the personified moon in the African tales, and even more particularly, to the tale of the “City where Men are Mended” in which a frightening half creature is constructed which returns to haunt her appalled mother.

The poem begins with an aghast address to the half moon which becomes a half-brain, a depiction of the split human mind, conscious and unconscious, but here portrayed as half negro and half white. The word “masked” (line 3) leaves the uncomfortable impression of subterfuge, as if the negro half is a sinister presence that has crept into white space. The dark half is said to “crawl and appal” (line 5) and the speaker identifies herself as positioned on the opposite side, only tenuously “protected ...from that shadow” (line 9-10). The self and the other, the white

and the black, the perfect and the imperfect, confront each other in this poem in a fearful moment of recognition and this occurs within the context of motherhood. As in the African folktale, the mother who has acted misguidedly in the quest for beauty and perfection in her child finds herself face to face with a grotesque half-creature of her own making, so the speaker of this poem considers the possibility of her own behaviour resulting in the birth of a monstrosity of half proportions. The behavioural failure in question is the mother's inability to accept imperfection in her child. Plath's poem adopts this idea and shows this failure of vision to be bred of irreconciled conflict within the mother herself. A layer of self-protection, a leathery glove, has prevented her from touching the dark, the "primitive" side, so the poem's speaker harbours the possibility of horror within her own being. The deformed creature thus birthed can also only be a malformed poetic product, born of a division between black and white. These colours do not signify race, but the unresolved unconscious and conscious mind which can only create inherently imbalanced perceptions of the world.

In line 23, the words "The dark fruits revolve and fall" rhythmically echo the earlier line "Amputations crawl and appal" (line 5) and create the only end rhyme in the poem. This draws together the concepts of fruit and violence or cruelty, a link also established in the African tale. In an early draft of "Thalidomide", the words "Nothingness! Black ox!" are inserted between "White spit / Of indifference" and "The dark fruits revolve and fall" (Newman 274). It is a strange line, but if one reads it in conjunction with "The City where Men are Mended", its significance becomes clearer. It is a moment of intense self-condemnation, specifically targeting white racism which is presented as a symptom of a fundamental psychic lack. When each African mother in the tale is judged on her goodness in sharing the fruit, the fate of her

daughter is decided by “the biggest bull [which] began bellowing” (Radin 251-2). Judgement then is thus passed down by a formidably accusatory bovine creature. In Plath’s poem, the speaker is accused by a black ox of a derisive lack of humane empathy (“Nothingness!), expressed in racial terms, but extending beyond them. The punishment for this failure of vision, for the “white spit of indifference”, will be “dark fruits”, or deformed people and poems.

The reference to racial blackness (“Negro, masked like a white” [line 3]) followed closely by the sinister word “spidery” (line 6), also points to the African tales. One of the prominent characters that feature repeatedly in Radin’s tales is that of Ananse the Spider. In the opening tale to Radin’s collection, *African Folktales*, Kwaku Ananse manages to buy the sky-god’s stories by selling his own mother in part payment and from thenceforward, the sky-god announces, “No more shall we call them the stories of the sky-god, but we shall call them spider-stories” (Radin 27). An anthropomorphic manifestation of a god, Ananse mingles with both men on earth and the gods in the sky. Plath herself refers directly to Ananse as the “Black busybody of the folktales” (line 1) who “spun the cosmic web” (line 7) in an early poem “The Spider” (*Collected Poems* 48) which Hughes dated as written in 1956.<sup>19</sup> Plath recognised the central role the spider plays in the world of the tales: he is said to “squint from center field” (line 7). This creature reappears in *Ariel* in “Thalidomide” as the dark, “Spidery, unsafe” (line 6) underbelly of influence which threatens the balance of the maternal cosmos. Yet the spider image also harbours the

---

<sup>19</sup> It was possibly the combination of a re-reading of the tales and an urgent need to break into a new mode of poetic expression that bore the fruit that is the *Ariel* collection.

promise, if the maternal is successfully manipulated, of the making of an entirely new creative narrative.<sup>20</sup>

Plath felt a deep affinity with the work of D.H. Lawrence, stating in her Journal on 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1958, “why do I feel I would have known and loved Lawrence ...?” and “I felt mystically that if I read Woolf, read Lawrence – (these two, why ? – their vision so different, is so like mine) – I can be itched and kindled to a great work” (*Journals* 337). She emphasises a mystic element connecting her with the two authors and speaks of a shared “vision”. Her language here suggests strongly that the work they may inspire in her will be born of a physical, sensual response: an “itch” which will develop into a burn in the same way a fire is kindled. Torgovnick (in relation to Lawrence) refers to an “idealized primitive state ... an oceanic state of cosmic oneness ... a state beyond subject and object, through the perfect balancing of opposites – male and female, sun and moon, primitive and modern” (170). However it is ultimately a state of critical impasse as “to recognize such oppositions as “primitive” and “civilised” is antithetical to the oceanic state which recognises no such boundaries” (170). Plath may be said to have produced her “great work”, her *Ariel* poems, when she undertook to explore the “primitive” in a quest for this state of “cosmic oneness”. Her premature death tragically meant that the only enlightenment she achieved was a powerful awareness of precisely the impasse Torgovnick identifies. She died before she had time to shed the leathery glove of white indifference that held her captive in the binary vision of the “civilised” and the “primitive”. Her *Ariel* poems show

---

<sup>20</sup> There is a further connection between the spider and the sky-god worth exploring in the poem “Daddy” (*Ariel* 74). The image “Not God, but a swastika / So black no sky could squeak through” (lines 46-47) incorporates so closely the three elements of a sky-god, a black spider (the swastika) and voice that it calls for deeper examination.

her to be actively engaged in confronting her projections and recognising the significance of elements of the unconscious mind in the creative process.

Plath's ambivalent relationship with the sea presented in "Ocean 1212-W" has been noted earlier. The story ends on a note of great loss which is expressed in terms of mythology. The recognition of individuality and otherness, "I am I. That stone is a stone" (Ocean 120) is associated, along with the end of Edenic childhood, with the loss of a "fine, white flying myth" which has become "beautiful, inaccessible, obsolete" (124). The "Sacred Baboon" appears as a primitivist totem and the sinister aspect of the sea is dark and threatening. The white sea-spray seems, in contrast, to represent that which is "civilised" and no longer useful or relevant. The ending of the story suggests a moment of separation from a state of limited white consciousness, not merely racially defined, but as a form of virginal "not-knowing". The encounter is sexually charged in the stereotypical language of white vulnerability and black sexual voraciousness, but it moves beyond this to represent a split from an old set of values, myths, literary resources and metaphors (the "stilts of an old tragedy" (line 33) to which she refers in "Electra on Azalea Path" [*Collected Poems* 116]) that must be replaced by another. It is the primitivist figure of the African baboon that represents the possibility of change and greater imaginative depth.

"Ocean 1212-W", written at the same time as most of the *Ariel* poems, seems to suggest dramatically that the literary figures and tropes of old, which had generated and supported much of Plath's creative output up to this point, were needing to be discarded and new avenues for poetic expression uncovered. Said points out that "at most, the 'real' Orient

provoked a writer to his vision; it very rarely guided it" (22). In Plath's case, the images and ideas derived from the African tales may seem to diverge from their specific roles in their original context, and Plath cannot be credited with any great knowledge of Africa, but to overlook its role in the creation of her vision is a critical oversight. Plath's African references do not only reflect typical American 1950s racial bias. In fact, like everything else, she did not accept a binary racial vision with complacency, but questioned it in, for instance, "Thalidomide". In "Magi" (*Collected Poems* 148), also cut from Hughes's *Ariel* collection, Western thought and ideals are depicted as "pure as boiled water" (line 7) and impeccably white. The poem points out the inadequacy and problematic nature of western aesthetics, especially in relation to women: "lamp-headed Plato" (line 16) and the "papery godfolk" (line 15) have nothing to offer the child in the poem, which ends with the question "[w]hat girl ever flourished in such company?" (line 18)

"No Fantasy without Protest" is the title of a chapter in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* in which Rose examines aspects of sexuality in Plath's work. I would like to use that phrase here in relation to Plath's sense of the concept of the African. If fantasy takes its form from some element of protest, this is not to say that it is necessarily only fantasy that emerges. The reality of the cause against which the protest is expressed by way of fantasy must finally come to light if sufficient self-reflective energy and insight is expended in trying to uncover and understand it. The repressed will manifest through fantastical symptoms only until it breaks through to the surface in its own painful, inimitable truth. In an earlier chapter, Rose quotes an entry written in 1950 from Plath's unpublished journal:

...while America dies like the Great Roman Empire died, while the legions fail and the barbarians overrun our tender, steak-juicy, butter creamy, million dollar stupendous land, somewhere there will be the people that never mattered much in our scheme of things anyway. In India, perhaps, or Africa, they will rise. (qtd. in Rose 64)

Plath describes here the underlying presence of another “scheme of things” beneath the soft surface of an as yet untested, superficially comfortable reality. The use of the word “our” to qualify this set of values suggests a recognition of an alternative world, here specifically identified as Eastern or African, which offers the possibility of change and challenge. Rose responds to this extract in terms of its politics, but it can also be interpreted as a metaphor for the largely ignored unconscious, festering beneath the fragile consciousness, which inevitably “will rise” and manifest itself. This journal entry is the prose version of what later emerges poetically in “Mushrooms”, “The Arrival of the Bee Box” and “Purdah”. Significantly, in her journal here and increasingly in the later poems, Plath expresses this sense of a deeper presence beneath surface reality explicitly in terms of the Orient and the African.

Torgovnick claims that “[A] state of exile – literal or metaphoric – often accompanies an interest in the primitive” (188).<sup>21</sup> Plath was, like T.S. Eliot, an American who spent the richest periods of her creative life in England. She traced her origins from displaced European immigrants, her father was German and her mother’s parents both Austrian. At the time of the writing of *Ariel*, Plath was acutely conscious of a sense of displacement and the need to establish a new home for herself and her children: the semi-autobiographical narrator refers to herself as the “Exile

---

<sup>21</sup> It is interesting to note that Radin himself was of Polish descent, the son of Jewish immigrants who settled eventually in New York in 1890. He has been described as something of a wanderer and exile by Lindberg: “Radin himself seems to have been on the move throughout his lifetime.”

that I am”, in “Ocean 1212-W”(117). She expressed a strange but urgent desire to move to Ireland at the time of writing most of her final poems, and went so far as to sign a lease on a house there before changing her mind and moving into “Yeats’ house” in London (*Letters* 488). Ireland held associations for Plath with her memories of the idyllic oceanic childhood presented in “Ocean 1212-W”. Her journal entry of October 16 1962 reads: “The life in Ireland is very healthful; the place, a dream; the sea, a blessing” (*Journals* 469). On hearing of her marital and financial woes at this time, her mother tried to urge her to return “home” to America but Plath responded on October 9 1962 by insisting that “if I start running now, I will never stop” (*Letters* 465). This anxiety re-appears in her poem “The Bee Meeting” (*Ariel* 81) in the line “I could not run without having to run forever” (line 33). I will discuss, at the end of this chapter, the crucial significance of the Bee sequence in the context of an engagement with the “primitive”.

The overriding sense evoked in Plath’s writing at this time is movement and restlessness, a need to find a resting place for the troubled soul and a desire for calm and wholeness of being. In the *Ariel* poems, motion is generally negative and circulatory, searching and pessimistic, as if the “*Ariel* voice” speaks from a state of exile. In the poem “Getting There” (*Ariel* 57), for example, “All the gods know is destinations” (line 17) and progress is a “train...screaming – / An animal / Insane for the destination” (lines 55-57). The gods are heartless in their refusal to pay attention to the pain of the journey. They ignore the agony of those caught in the process of self-actualisation, leaving them abandoned and exiled from any source of succour. In this poem, the speaker is not moving towards death, but towards a state of consciousness which is the destination reached when the speaker has moved, significantly, through “The gigantic gorilla

interior" (line 3) of the mind to emerge "Pure as a baby" (line 68).<sup>22</sup> I interpret this image of the gorilla to be a variation of the "Simian Baboon" of "Ocean 1212-W", internalized now in the *Ariel* collection, as if the confrontation between the self and "other" has become a psychic battle, still expressed in terms of a primitive gorilla and a painfully alienated product of Western historical circumstance.

Having explained the significance of the fundamental presence of the "primitive" in the *Ariel* collection, I will proceed to explore the specific manifestations of the African tales I have identified in some of the poems.

The poem "Medusa" (*Ariel* 60) is a bizarre, visually grotesque protest against a creatively stifling mother figure. The mother is a "barnacled umbilicus" (line 14), a "fat and red ... placenta" (line 25) heaving its way across the Atlantic to suffocate the daughter with her attentions. "Navel cords, blue-red and lucent" (line 18) appear in "The Other" (*Ariel* 41) as well, as accusatory projectiles aimed at a hated, barren rival: they "shriek from my belly like arrows, and these I ride" (line 19). This imagery, I would argue, originates in the African tale entitled "How an Unborn Child Avenged its Mother's Death" in which a foetus crawls out of its mother's womb, chases and then leaps at the murderous father "a little red thing....still [with] the umbilical cord hanging on" (Radin 188). The reason for the stabbing of the woman, who was newly filled with "the joy of being with child" (186), is a dispute over fruit in a time of famine. The father climbs a tree and drops the fruit which then leads to conflict and the woman's murder. Supporting Hughes's claim that images from the African tales resembled those of Plath's dreams, there are

---

<sup>22</sup> Kroll in particular questions Eileen Aird's interpretation of this as a movement towards death, seeing it more as a birthing into a state of purity (Kroll 158).

echoes here of Esther Greenwood's fantasy (inspired perhaps by "the profound void of an empty stomach" [74]) that Plath records in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*. The fruit of this fig - tree become deadly in its offer of multiple creative choices, including that of a famous poet: "I saw myself ... starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose" (Plath, *Bell Jar* 73). Also, earlier in the novel, a fig-tree features in a story in which a man and a woman fight over picked fruit, "and the man was furious" (52).

Repeatedly in the African tale, the foetus/child sings a pitiful refrain:

*"Father, wait for me,*

*Father, wait for me,*

*The little wombleless.*

*Who is it that has eaten my mother?*

*The little wombleless . . . !*

*How swollen are those eyes!*

*Wait till the little wombleless comes."* (Radin 186)

The story merges the eating of fruit with an eating of the mother, as if the murderer (himself possibly belittled as "wombleless") had eaten the mother's body away, leaving the foetus homeless. The child is repeatedly resurrected in the tale and in the refrain, it is certainly identified as the little one removed from the womb, but it may also be the one who has eaten the mother, an action resulting in its own "wombleless" or barren state. At the end of the tale,

the African baby is said to approach the father at speed “with its mouth wide open” as if to devour the father in turn. In “Medusa” (*Ariel* 60), the speaker/daughter, addressing the mother, insists “I shall take no bite of your body” (line 34). The mother seems to have offered herself as the sacrament promising redemption, but she is scornfully rejected. Freud claims in *Totem and Taboo* that “the Christian communion ... is essentially a fresh elimination of the father” (155). The poetic persona’s rejection of the sacrificial body offered as a substitute by her mother reinforces the sense of her imprisonment within the “Ghastly Vatican” (line 56) which demands only the flesh of the male son of God. By referring to itself as “the little wombless”, the African infant attributes to itself a sterility, a barrenness, resulting from the actions of the parents. Plath’s admonition in her poem of the mother as a presence that paralyzes and suffocates creativity or fruitfulness (“stony mouth-plugs” (line 1), “paralyzing the kicking lovers” (line 26), “Cobra light / Squeezing the breath” (lines 27-28), “Green as eunuchs, your wishes” [line 58]) echoes the deathly effect of the parental actions portrayed both in the African tale as well as in Esther’s vision in *The Bell Jar*. The father who drops the fruit from the tree in the African tale and kills the mother for wishing to share it can also be related to Plath’s sense of only sharing the spoils of literary recognition with Hughes and his stifling of her own poetic voice.

In introducing the folktales, Radin claims that Western concepts of what constitute fantasy and imagination have since Romanticism been defined narrowly “in terms of Shakespeare’s and Aeschylus’s imagery” (6). His collection of tales presents to the reader an alternative strange and elaborate fantasy world, rich in character and texture. Alicia Ostriker, in an essay entitled “The Americanization of Sylvia Plath”, has pointed out the diminishing classicism in the titles of three of Plath’s poems based on her paternal relationship, from “Full Fathom Five” to “Electra

in *Azalea Path*” to, finally, “Daddy” in *Ariel* (102). This regression towards a simple, direct, and undiluted personal title illustrates a shift from Plath’s investment in the traditional Western literary resources (specifically Shakespeare and Aeschylus) into a new dimension. In my analysis of “Daddy” (*Ariel* 74) below, I draw attention to aspects of Radin’s African tales that prevail in this poem, indicating that Plath envisaged in them the possibility of a rich set of new literary resources on which to draw.

“Daddy” was written on 12<sup>th</sup> October 1962, just four days before “Medusa”. Violent imagery features in “Daddy” (similar to that in the African tale “How an Unborn Child Avenged its Mother’s Death”) in which the elimination of the father is systematically portrayed. This supports the impression that Plath was clearing a way towards a stronger emphasis on motherhood. The murderer in the African tale is surrounded and killed by the villagers “all assegais ... poised together in one direction” (Radin 189). In the final stanza of “Daddy”, the poem refers to “the villagers” who “are dancing and stamping” (line 78) on the corpse of the cannibalistic “black man who / Bit my pretty red heart in two” (lines 55-56). The villagers seem to crowd the final stanza with their collective presence and invite the association between themselves and the enigmatic “they” of the poem. “They” play a significant role in the physical handling of the dead – they bury the father and reconstruct the body of the daughter. “They stuck me together with glue” (line 62) is a patchy reconstruction of the “I”, strongly reminiscent of the hideous mending that takes place in “The City Where Men are Mended” and which is poetically re-worked earlier by Plath in “The Stones” (*Collected Poems* 136). Whilst “The Stones” ends with the speaker passive: “There is nothing to do” (line 44), the process of reconstruction brings enlightenment to the speaker of “Daddy”: “And then I knew what to do”

(line 63). This suggests a progression in the development of Plath's imaginative world that emerges from beneath stones and moves towards an awareness of unconscious forces beneath the conscious mind. At this stage, however, the process only breeds and depicts violence which indicates a state of unresolved conflict rather than resolution. The violence is explicitly depicted in terms of a "primitive" force killing a murderer, but, as in the African tale, the result is tragically fruitless. Ironically, Plath's representation of this process of engagement nevertheless produces her most famous (or infamous) poem.

The villagers are accorded special understanding of the drama that the poem enacts: "They always *knew* it was you" (line 79, italics in original). This linking of knowledge or enlightenment with the "I" and the "they" of the poem ("then I knew" and "They always *knew*") suggests a deeply shared consciousness. There is a transfer of knowledge across a temporal boundary: the villagers have always possessed the knowledge which they then transfer to the narrator. This represents the speaker's now tapping into a knowledge base previously overlooked or unavailable to her. It is evident that the African tales served Plath as a new set of resources with which to represent and explore poetically the emergence of the repressed unconscious and the progress towards more conscious subjective awareness. The anticipated reward was a more richly satisfying creative output associated with the fecund concept of motherhood.

Plath indicated that "Daddy" is a poem written about the desire to exorcise the power of patriarchal influence.<sup>23</sup> However, as William Schultz points out in psychobiographical terms, this threat is not simply externally projected, but is aimed as ruthlessly at "the father image, the

---

<sup>23</sup> Dianne Hunter has explored the significance of the recurrent black male figure in Plath's poetry in her paper entitled "Sylvia Plath's Man in Black."

introject inside her, born of loss" (170). Hence any sense of rebirth or revival born of the killing is countered by the internal death which takes place. The violent note of ambivalence on which the poem ends also suggests a conscious realization of the dearth inherent in the process represented in the poem. There is no harmony, no end to protest, in other words, until the boundary between the "villagers" and the speaker herself dissolves. Their attentions cannot be deflected forever, either via the father or the mother, and until they (the projection they represent) is recognized and confronted, it is only in ironic tension, not harmonious beauty, that creativity will manifest itself. Both "Medusa" and "Daddy" end, therefore, on a note that is heavily ambivalent. "I'm through" (line 80) in "Daddy" could mean a final break from the grip of the patriarch but it could also mean a breaking through to a new level of consciousness or channel of communication. In "Daddy" the connection between father and daughter, which is finally snapped, is described as a "black telephone... off at the root" (line 69). It is not too great an imaginative leap if one reads this poem with the African tales in mind, to interpret the black root here as relating to "primitive" roots. The speaker insists that "the voices just can't worm through" (line 70) but two stanzas later, the villagers enter the poem, "dancing and stamping" (and, one imagines, chanting too). By the end of the poem, the certainty of "I'm through" as meaning a disconnection is in doubt, and it seems as though the black voices have indeed forced a way into the poem.

Similarly, the final line of "Medusa" (*Ariel* 60), "There's nothing between us" (line 61), can either mean a splitting of a connection or a total merging, all barriers finally removed. The medium of connection here is a miraculously preserved "barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable" (lines 14). The second image resonates with connotations of the Middle Passage and the

Atlantic slave trade, a similar connection to “primitive” roots as that in the black telephone in “Daddy”. This link is reinforced by the line “You steamed to me over the sea” (line 24). The “Atlantic cable” is directly juxtaposed by Plath in her poem to the umbilical imagery which I have identified as originating in the African tales.

The gaze and influence of the mother in “Medusa” is compared to “Cobra light / Squeezing the breath from the blood bells / Of the fuchsia” (lines 77-79) and the speaker claims “I could draw no breath” (line 79). In “Daddy” the father is a tyrannical presence who stultifies speech: “The tongue stuck in my jaw” (line 24) and “I could hardly speak” (line 28). In both poems, such monstrous imagery places the speaker in a deathly parental grip in which all possibilities of expression and communication are stifled. However, the ambivalence of the final lines of the poems suggests an awareness of, or at least a yearning for, the possibility of an alternative vision, of a fruitful resolution in the conflicted relationships portrayed, and this seems to emerge through links with African folklore.

Ingeniously, Rose points out the dual meaning of the word “stake” in the “fat black heart” of “Daddy”: wooden spike or “continuing investment” (233). Although Plath’s ending of this poem (“I’m through”) seems to mark an excisional moment in her relationship with the father-figure, the word “stake” suggests an on-going emotional attachment to the process of psychic repetition. I would argue, however, that it also represents a literary investment in an alternative set of cultural values, freed up as a result of this ritualistic killing, or emanating from the heart of the black father.

“The City Where Men are Mended” is followed directly in Radin’s collection by one entitled “The Woman who Killed her Co-Wife” in which, after killing her superior rival, a woman repeatedly unearths the dead wife who proceeds to work corn at a grinding stone, singing a refrain in which she hands over all her valuables and begs the other to “break [her] in two, yes” (Radin 190). The tropes of doubleness, food, resurrection and violent revenge appear almost uncannily familiar when read alongside Plath’s *Ariel* poems. The grotesque resurrection in “Lady Lazarus” (*Ariel* 14) could be that of the African wife, who is repeatedly dug up and, with the barely conceivable nonchalance of Plath’s “peanut-crunching crowd” (line 26), is invited to share a meal with her murderess who accepts the refusal with the scornful words: “Well! ...Where are the people who are going to look at you the whole day long? You died long ago” (Radin 191). Eventually, as the dead woman moves away from the grinding stone, the murderess is seized and the villagers: “made a heap of firewood, dug [the murderous wife’s] heart out, and burned her over the fire” (192). This ending resonates with the line in “Lady Lazarus” in which a third party coldly analyses the remains of immolation: “Ash, ash - / You poke and stir. / Flesh, bone, there is nothing there -” (lines 73-76). It is possible to interpret this tale as presenting an internal conflict between dual elements within a single woman, or wife. The two wives are referred to as mates throughout the tale, one superior to the other. The repeated cycle of death, resurrection and murder before the gaze of onlookers and within the vague presence of an uninvolved husband is the same as that presented in “Lady Lazarus”.

The “black telephone” (line 69) of “Daddy” and the “blood bells” of “Medusa” (line 28) represent literary expression tapping into its creative source. The consistency with which blackness and blood emerge as symbolic of such creative expression in Plath’s poetry suggests

an affinity with D.H. Lawrence's merging of "blood consciousness" and primitivism.<sup>24</sup> In a letter to Bertrand Russell in 1915 in response to reading Frazer's *Golden Bough* and *Totem and Exogamy*, Lawrence wrote, "It is very important to our living that we should realise that we have a blood-being, a blood-consciousness, a blood-soul, complete and apart from the mental and nerve consciousness" (*Letters* 393). His concept of blood consciousness is "one half of life, belonging to the darkness" (393). As early as "Maenad" (*Collected Poems* 133), the third poem in the "Poem for a Birthday" sequence, Plath makes the connection. The speaker asks: "who are these others in the moon's vat - ? Sleepdrunk, their limbs at odds? / In this light the blood is black. Tell me my name" (lines 22-25). The act of naming signifies a moment of identity recognition only possible in relation to an "other". This occurs here in the presence of the moon, blackness and blood as the speaker announces, "I am becoming another" (line 15). Kroll has pointed out that the poem is redolent with references to Radin's tales: "Birdmilk is feathers" comes from the tale "The Bird That Made Milk" (Kroll 96) and "A red tongue is among us" refers to "All-Mouth", the all-devourer in "Mantis and the All-Devourer" (Kroll 238). The "Poem for a Birthday" sequence marks the birthplace of the "Ariel voice" and it seems to be born at the moment that the poetic persona is fed "the berries of dark" (line 17).

Lawrence specifically mentions Plato as representative of the "tyranny" that the mental consciousness exerts over this sexually and creatively charged blood-consciousness. (*Letters* 393). In her poem "Magi" (*Ariel* 37), Plath unites mathematics, "lamp-headed Plato" (line 16) and the abstracts as the hostile antipathy to feminine depth and knowledge. The question

---

<sup>24</sup> Britzolakis draws attention to an "impassioned defence of Lawrence's blood-consciousness" in one of Plath's tutorial essays (169).

“What girl ever flourished in such company?” ends the poem. The affinity with the feminine, the poetic voice, blood and blackness is as strong in Plath here as it is in Lawrence.

“Ariel” (*Ariel* 33), the title poem of the *Ariel* collection, can be read, like “Thalidomide” (*Ariel* 9), as also representing a confrontation between light and dark, conscious and unconscious. Whilst the boundary between symbolic dark and light is not crossed in “Thalidomide”, only appearing as a fleeting vision which is quickly aborted, (“The glass cracks across, / The image / Flees and aborts like dropped mercury” [lines 24-26]) in “Ariel” the two merge in a climactic moment of transcendent beauty in which an internal boundary breaks down. The darkness of the beginning transforms into the light of morning but the pun on morning/mourning includes the blackness within the emergent red light: there is no split, but a merger. The poem circles back to its beginning, the early sunrise embodying the possibility of the darkness inevitably to follow, caught in the repetitive cycle of time. The stasis likewise dissolves into movement as the arrow or the dew flies but it is a suicidal flight, a turning in on itself which implies death intrinsic to the transfiguration. Thus although there is powerful movement in this poem, it is a circular, fixed motion, a trajectory outwards that is ultimately bound to turn inwards at its outer limit. A powerful beauty may transcend the boundaries of this circular closed system of time, space and motion, and this beautiful entity is the poem itself, but it remains locked within the written word.

The similarities between Ted Hughes’s “The Thought-Fox”, (published in 1957) and the vocabulary of Plath’s poem “Ariel” have been noted by Heather Clark. Hughes’s poem is a rendition of his impression of the creative moment and Plath’s can similarly be said to capture

hers. Both poems begin in a moment of darkness (Hughes – “this midnight moment”; Plath – “Stasis in darkness”) and end with a piercing through to a source of internal creative energy. In Plath’s poem it is “drive / Into the red / Eye” (lines 28-30), with Hughes, “an eye” emerges from the deep and “enters the dark hole of the head” (line 22) which too could readily be an eye. In the process, poems are printed and both poets establish their place within the literary canon. Black and white, shadow and self, are placed in stark contrast in both poems. Hughes’s poem ends in a moment of triumph and literary achievement (“The page is printed” [line 24]) but the flight of Plath’s creative spirit is more subtle. Hughes describes a return to space, time and reality after his poetic visitation (“The window is starless still; the clock ticks” (line 23) but Plath’s depiction of the process engages the reader more deeply by not being so explicit. Unlike “Thalidomide”, this poem was born and lives (triumphantly as the title poem) because it harnesses the very creative energy it describes. Significantly, it does so with explicit references to white and black forces which surge finally into a sexually and creatively charged red zone, giving birth to this poem.

As in “Thalidomide”, Plath uses racial blackness to represent the shadow-side, the darkness in “Ariel”: “Nigger-eye berries cast dark hooks – Black sweet blood mouthfuls, / Shadows” (lines 10-14). This line carries echoes of D.H. Lawrence’s “blood consciousness” which he attributes to “the primitive”, the instinctual and the sexual. Plath is making a similar connection here, as by Lawrence, between blackness, blood as life-force, and poetry. The speaker of “Ariel” is hooked by the allure of the “nigger” eyes and does not fight them off, but tastes their sweetness. She ingests them and merges with the shadows before taking flight. It is at this point that “Something else / Hauls me through air” (lines 15-16). The creative surge coincides precisely

with the moment at which the “nigger” is ingested, in other words, when the boundaries between the conscious and unconscious dissolve. The protagonist, a “White / Godiva” (lines 19-20), foams then to white heat (merged in the word “wheat”, but wheat also being a symbol of fertility) and reflects “a glitter of seas” (line 23).<sup>25</sup> As “dead hands, dead stringencies” (line 21) are cast off and a cry is freed - a “child’s cry” (line 24), a new voice - it melts into the walls as boundaries dissolve. The pun on “I” and “Eye” in the last few lines may suggest limited movement within unity and singularity but it simultaneously confers vision and insight upon the “I”. The engagement with the self entails an internal confrontation between dark and light, conscious and unconscious, and ends with a powerful moment of absorption and creative release. Unlike the unresolved conclusion of “Thalidomide”, in which a vision cracks and disperses, the end of “Ariel” reaches a climax of new vision, which produces a poem of intense balance and beauty.

Perloff claims that in the poem “Tulips” (*Ariel* 18), “the red flower finally absorbs the world of selfhood into its strange domain” (*Angst* 119). She is premature, however, in seeing this merger accomplished here. The tulips threaten the speaker by “opening like the mouth of some great African cat” (line 59), a vivid image suggestive of fascination with the threatening allure of alterity. The vacuous white patient is trapped “Between the eye of the sun and the eyes of the tulips” (line 47) whilst the tulips roam like dangerous animals “and should be behind bars” (line 58). The immanent danger they present, however, triggers an instinctive withdrawal from the encounter. The next words “And I am aware of my heart” (line 60) signify resuscitation and survival. The speaker seems to have dived into the sea to escape from the cats: “The water I

---

<sup>25</sup> See also my discussion in Chapter 3 on African possessions.

taste is warm and salt, like the sea" (line 62). The absorption into redness that Perloff describes only occurs, as I have shown, in the poem "Ariel" (written a year later) with the flight "Into the red / Eye" (lines 29-30). At this stage in Plath's engagement with the unconscious through the "primitive" and Africa in particular, the boundary between the self and the "other" was still very much in place, and Plath knew instinctively that her poetry had not yet broken through to match her true genius.

As an exposition of her aesthetic practice, "Ariel" indicates that for Plath, writing poetry entailed a total engagement, however painful, with the darkness, the repressed underbelly of consciousness, which she repeatedly associated with blackness, blood and Africa. This engagement was unforgiving in its relentless pull, its hooks and its threats to sanity and stability. However, in *Ariel* Plath showed herself to be prepared to confront this relationship and the result is a collection of poetry intensely and painfully honest, bitterly self-aware and relentlessly explorative. The process, I would argue, was facilitated by the poet's exposure to the powerfully evocative African tales in which the black "other" she had before identified as an enemy external to her own subjectivity became internalised and confronted at great emotional risk, hence the merciless flow of the "blood jet" of poetry (line 18 in "Kindness", *Collected Poems* 269).

In his poem "You Hated Spain" in *Birthday Letters* (39), Hughes claims "the African / Black edges to everything, frightened you .... The welding light / Made your blood shrivel" (lines 3-9). It was "the land of your dreams: the dust-red cadaver / You dared not wake with, the puckering amputations / No literature course had glamorized" (lines 24-26). Furthermore, it was "The juju

land behind your African lips. / Spain was what you tried to wake up from / And could not” (lines 27-29). It is crucial to note that these projections are Hughes’s and not Plath’s but they are an indication of a very powerful response to a place which was associated with Africa by both Hughes and Plath. The response described is so powerful, in fact, that it seems unlikely to have gone unexamined by so acutely self-analytical a poet as Plath. She herself refers to Spain in “Ocean 1212-W” as a “fantastical” place on the other side of the ocean (121) and this is an interesting word when read with Rose’s phrase “no fantasy without protest” in mind. Plath identifies here the fantasy (in her use of the word “fantastical”) of Africa as a projection and the angry element of protest in her “*Ariel* voice” is the product of an active engagement with the underlying cause. Hughes’s words quoted above from his poem could be describing much in the *Ariel* poems. The “welding light” (line 8) in “You Hated Spain” is as cold and merciless as Plath’s moonlight, the amputations are those of “Thalidomide”, the “black edges” become the sharp yet uncertain delineation between black and white in “Negro, masked like a white”. Most importantly, whilst Hughes claims in “You Hated Spain” that the “welding light” of Spain-cum-Africa shrivelled Plath’s blood, she, I would argue, took her impressions of Africa very seriously, knowing that the poetry that engaged with what it represented for her would flow in a “blood jet”.

The two poems discussed above, “Thalidomide” and “*Ariel*”, share a common engagement with a feared yet irresistible “other” and illustrate Plath’s perceptions of the connections between creativity, motherhood and Africa. In its portrayal of maternal love and language, “Morning Song” (*Ariel* 5) also belongs with these two poems. All three merge considerations of death,

literary creativity and maternity and all are haunted by a shadow of darkness which threatens hope and possibility unless acknowledged and embraced.

The auditory pun in the title of "Morning Song" establishes the ambivalent tone of this poem and, being placed first, the tone of the *Ariel* collection as a whole. Inasmuch as it is a celebration of new motherhood, a song in the morning of new birth, the poem is simultaneously a song of mourning in which the new birth represents the death of an old existence and of past consciousness. Any sense of the joy and primal naturalness of motherhood is therefore countered by a strong ambivalence which acknowledges the separation and loss inherent in birth. There is a sense of a need to establish a balance between these two poles.

The remarkable simile in the first line in which new life enters temporality at conception, as a "fat gold watch", combines both value as well as limitation. Spatial corporality entails encasement within time, independent of the mother's body or her time. Despite the positive note of the opening word "Love", the ominous juxtaposition with the watch sets a temporal limit to it, and there is a hint of cynical irony in the tone of "fat gold", as if in recognition of the fleeting nature of corporality and materiality. This idea is pursued in the following two lines in which the baby's cry is described as "bald" (line 2), a disembodied object, not unlike Plath's recurrent bald moon, placing itself within the stark void of "the elements" (line 3). Her awareness of the harsh reality of entrapment within the clutches of Time is captured in the same way the "clear vowels" (line 18) of language are caught within the thin film of the balloon. This suspicion of Time suggests a yearning for an alternative mode of being in which

temporality is more organic, fluid and merciful, ideas associated by many early Modernists with “the primitive”. However, the speaker does not resort to sentimental nostalgia: it is a “far sea” (line 12) that is heard. The recognition of the distance of the sea now is suggestive of the renunciation of the pull of the watery depths which had been so tempting in “Full Fathom Five”.

The parents in “Morning Song” are introduced not as people but as voices which echo in an elemental draughtiness. They respond with the cold impartiality of walls, their humanity dissolved by the incursion of a new arrival into their space, the child itself nothing more than a naked “new statue” (line 4), a visual manifestation of human form without the flesh and feeling of true existence. The frightening absence of warmth and physical responsiveness captures the moment of separation and loss of birth, the splitting from the womb and the entry into spatial existence. One may extend the reading of this poem to interpret the birth depicted as the metaphoric arrival of a new set of literary resources. The stony presence of “The Colossus” is remembered as the “new statue” of this poem replaces it, yet not without characteristic Plathian ambivalence. The new mythology that Plath engages with in her *Ariel* collection is thus not without its horrors too.

In “Morning Song”, the only human engagement that takes place is vocal and auditory: echoes and cries and silence. The role of sound, speech and language in transcending physical and spatial barriers is therefore primary to this poem, hence the title “Morning Song”. The shift from one state of conscious existence to another, both celebrated and feared, is accompanied solely by sound and linguistic expression. Hence Plath begins what was to be her final collection of poems not solely with a celebration of new life and rebirth, but also with an exploration of

the role of language in navigating states of existence within space and time. Existence is ephemeral and fleeting. Motherhood is only as substantial as a reflection, a passing cloud, an evaporating vapour, an image as tenuous and rarefied as the “moth-breath” (line 10) indicating life in the newborn.

The heavy, fecund physicality and orality which enters the poem in stanza 5 in the form of a Victorian nursing gown is reminiscent of the museum of the second stanza. Past meets present in an uncomfortable, clumsy merger. The baby feeds with the sharp clean precision of a cat while morning light enters the window as white and engulfing as the swallowing of maternal milk. The bleakness of the window square mirrors the blank walls of the museum and the indifference of the dwindling “dull stars” (line 16) reflect back to the insubstantial parental shadows hovering around the child. Ingested maternal substance is transformed into sound and expressed. With the word “now” (line 16), the present establishes itself in language in the final line as “clear vowels” which “rise like balloons” – air captured in spatial boundaries. The poem ends, then, as a song, a celebration of sound and words but tainted with the hint of mourning. Language is the means of engaging with reality, but it is never free of its unnerving unpredictability and instability. This quality is expressed most poignantly in one of Plath’s last poems, “Words” (*Collected Poems* 270), with which Hughes chose to end his version of *Ariel*.

Plath, however, intended to end her *Ariel* manuscript with the sequence of five Bee poems she wrote in quick succession in October 1962. In these poems, the primitive ritual which features in “Daddy” reappears. In this sequence, she converts the innocuous processes involved in bee-keeping, familiar to her from her father’s study of bees, into a disturbing interplay between

white and black in which the white-clothed speaker is confronted by a sinister dark presence as if she were a sacrificial victim in an ancient or primitive ritual. Plath introduced this trope in “Daddy” but in that poem, the father figure is the object of an attack (“I have had to kill you” [line 6]) and there is ostensibly a fiercely ironic distance between him and the speaker. In this sequence, Plath presents her poetic persona as deeply ensconced within the ritual, as both sacrificial victim and willing, if fearful, participant. In “The Bee Meeting” (*Ariel* 81), the first poem of the sequence, she appears “nude as a chicken neck” (line 6) as if passively awaiting the knife. The strangely anonymous and faceless “villagers” (line 1) each nod “a square black head” (line 13), as if preparing for a Medieval tournament. They dress her in a white robe as their “smiles and their voices” (line 15) begin to change. By the ninth stanza, the villagers have become a more savage, united body, a “hunting” (line 42) and “killing” (line 49) creature which probes into the hive to extricate its virgins. The formal tameness of the Medieval tournament has metamorphosed into a terrifying ordeal of a real murderous ritual, which is described in racialised terms of white and black: the speaker, in a subjective merging with the bees, perceives herself as a “Pillar of white in a blackout of knives” (line 52).

It is in the next poem of the sequence, “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (*Ariel* 84), that the threat is explicitly described in African terms: “It is dark, dark, / With the swarmy feeling of African hands / Minute and shrunk for export, / Black on black, angrily clambering” (lines 12-15). Here, the horror of otherness is contained within the coffin-like structure of a box, the owner externally placed in relation to it. Yet she hovers in rapt fascination, unable to “keep away from it” (line 8). There is a fearful sense of possession that permeates the poem, the concept of ownership ironically and ambivalently settling on the speaker as her obsessive interest

increasingly takes possession of her. The imagery of the slave trade (“African hands / Minute and shrunk for export”) suggests the importation of a dangerously exotic presence into the domestic environment which is depicted explicitly as white, Western and female: “There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades, / And the petticoats of the cherry” (lines 29-30). The echoes of slavery are unmistakable here too in the suggestions of the plantation house colonnades and the blonde southern belle. This box of angry Africans is therefore described in racially loaded and stereotypical terms. Hungry for the blond flesh that wanders amongst colonnades, and to explore the petticoats of Western women, they need to be kept locked up. However, the speaker separates herself from this Western stereotype as much as she regards the African as “other”. She is a planetary creature in her “moon suit” (line 32), hovering in a sphere at one remove from this racialised encounter. Hence she feels there is no reason for the “maniacs” (line 23) to turn on her. The irony lies in the nature of the possession: the anxiety of the final line “The box is only temporary” indicates awareness that avoiding an encounter between the possessed and possessor is not indefinitely sustainable. It cannot be permanently avoided because there is in fact no boundary between the two; they are one and the same and are located within the psyche of the speaker herself. The moon suit suggests this embodiment of both light and dark – a subtle link to the dominant imagery in “The Rival” (*Ariel* 73).

The Bee poems have a dream-like quality to them, and considering Hughes’s comment that Spain was the feared land of her dreams, and that Radin’s tales presented to her the world of her nightmares, it is as if Plath, in writing these poems quickly in October 1962, had entered this world of the repressed unconscious, expressed in terms of a dichromatic drama. The bees

are black and white, the priest-like beekeepers are draped in white but there is a dark “man in black” hovering on the fringe. Plath planned to end her *Ariel* collection with this sequence and if one accepts the hypothesis that she was heavily influenced by “the primitive” and African folktales at this time, and that this collection was to be a reversal for her from old norms and poetic conventions, it is appropriate that the collection ends with a set of poems which depicts a total absorption into a dream-like world of the “other”. Hughes’s interference with the manuscript completely destroyed this intention.

### CHAPTER 3

"I want someone to mouth me."<sup>26</sup>

Thus far I have discussed Plath's interest in the "primitive" and identified details of Radin's *African Folktales* in *Ariel*. I suggested, moreover, that Plath was eager to exorcise the stifling influences of the past and seemed to have explored a new set of themes with the help of this excitingly original repertoire of literary resources. It may be argued, however, that these tales served a further purpose by stimulating a move away from the conventional bounds of lyrical poetry into a more oral form of poetic expression altogether.

In her interview with Orr quoted earlier, Plath spoke in late 1962 of her new collection of poems as primarily auditory, as meant to be read aloud. The auditory puns she enlists, such as that on "I" / "eye" in "Ariel" and "morning" / "mourning" in "Morning Song", reflect this expectation. This indicates a desire to return to the original role of poetry as song, as the means of communication in an oral tradition. In many of the African tales, characters chant and sing refrains which bind the story together musically. As in the African folktales, orality is celebrated in *Ariel*. The return to child-like rhythms, those of the nursery rhyme, and simple repetition, (for example, "The dead bell, / The dead bell. / Somebody's done for" in lines 29-30 of "Death & Co." [*Ariel* 35]), suggest a shedding of the weight of language and literary convention. Alicia Ostriker goes so far as to describe the language and tone of *Ariel* at times to be like "a child having a tantrum" or as rising "gap-toothed from the waves" (102,103). She acknowledges, nevertheless, that Plath's prosody and her musical ear remain "dead keen" (104). Christina

---

<sup>26</sup> *Journals* 92.

Britzolakis rightfully claims that there is a “subterranean text of orality” in Plath’s late poetry (182).

Rose remarks on the “oral passion” of much of Plath’s work, using the word “passion” suitably, it seems, in the original sense to mean suffering (32). She claims there is risk, vacuity and vulnerability attached to Plath’s perception of language, words and poetry, drawing attention to Plath’s perception of the vampire-like quality of the writing or linguistic process (33). The slaying of “the vampire who said he was you” (line 72) in “Daddy” hence becomes embroiled in the process of speech, or voice, and language production. If the poem “Daddy”, Rose states, “is in some sense about the death of the father ... it is no less about the death of language” (225). Plath seems to have been actively considering a shift away from old styles and forms of expression, represented by the rejection of the symbolic order of the father. Much of her *Ariel* poetry explores the breaking of boundaries and shifting of veils, which may be interpreted as indications of this linguistic transition. With regard to cultural (and personal) memory and identity, Rose states: “Take metaphor out of language and there is no memory, no history, left” (213). Perhaps Plath’s engagement with alternatives to Western metaphor and fantasy answered her need to re-construct, however painfully, her identity and history at a time when the “old whore petticoats” of “Fever 103°” and “old bandages, boredoms, old faces” of “Getting There” had become obsolete for her.

As if she were searching for alternative sources of inspiration, her journal entries show her fascination with the work of the sculptor, Leonard Baskin, noted for his primitivist themes.<sup>27</sup> In 1958, she expresses an interest in translating Grimm’s fairytales and claims to be “plowing

---

<sup>27</sup> Hughes states that “Leonard Baskin’s work struck her very hard” (Notes 189).

through penguin [sic] books on Aztecs, the personality of animals" (*Journals* 399). She refers in the same journal entry to a poem entitled "Incommunicado" (*Collected Poems* 100) in which she gives a very clear sign of her response to folktales. This is a poem in which a state of incommunicability is represented as creatively stultifying. The speaker feels unheard despite her connection with nature and a sense of the beauty and compassion of her words. The groundhog of the poem is "love-met" (line 9) but responds with fear and hostility. The world of *Märchen* is nostalgically referred to in the poem as one in which "straight talk is the rule, whether warm or hostile, / Which no gruff animal misinterprets" (lines 10-11). In contrast, the world which the poetic persona inhabits is one in which "Tongues are strange, / Signs say nothing" (line 12-13). There is no communication between the external world of objects and animals, and the speaker, who cries in isolated anguish, "From what grace am I fallen" (line 12). Like the ending of "The Bee Meeting", ("Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, / why am I cold") this is not a question, but a piteous statement of fact. These are quasi-questions which seem to be directed inwardly and fall short of truly engaging the reader. Unlike the distinctive question "Must it be cut out?" (line 18) which so alarms and implicates the reader in the later poem, "The Courage of Shutting-Up" (*Ariel* 45), these circle passively as inner musings and demand no response, as if not expecting to be heard. Identifying with the falcon which was able to speak to, and so be healed by, Canacee (a character in Chaucer's "Squire's Tale") the speaker of "Incommunicado" feels unheard by "coarsened ears" (line 14) despite the persistent clarity of her voice. She yearns for the reciprocity and exchange between speaker and audience she feels exist in *Märchen*. There is a strong sense in this poem

of needing to find an alternative audience for a voice which has become obsolete, or to alter the voice itself to establish a much yearned for connection.

In another of Plath's earlier poems entitled "A Sorcerer Bids Farewell to Seem" (*Collected Poems* 324), the speaker imagines disappearing to an "authentic island where /cabbages are cabbages; kings: kings" (lines 13-14).<sup>28</sup> The poem expresses strong disillusionment with the world of metaphor or "seem", the old sources having become obsolete or worn out: "mad hatter's hat yields no new metaphor, / the jabberwock will not translate his songs" (line 10-11). Whilst Andrew Wilson claims Plath was here envisaging a bleak and pointless future in which she could no longer write poetry, "a time when ... she renounces her old magic"(297), this interpretation misses the hopeful note on which the poem ends. The speaker recognises that her (or his) "native sleight of hand is wearing out ... it's time to vanish like the cheshire cat" (lines 9-12) to a new more real and "authentic" place of linguistic possibilities. As in "Incommunicado", this is not a rejection of metaphor or creative expression *per se*, but of the old forms and resources, which need replacing. The need to return to a more direct, frank and clear means of expression is of paramount importance, just as in *Märchen* "straight-talk is the rule". Plath's excitement on reading the African tales may thus be explained by their promise of imagistic novelty, originality of style and power of voice.

"The Courage of Shutting-Up" (*Ariel* 45) is the poem in *Ariel* which most angrily addresses the distress of enforced silence, or the inability to find expression within stultifying boundaries. One usually expects courage to be associated with speaking out, but Plath is here attributing

---

<sup>28</sup> This poem was placed by Hughes in the collection of *Juvenilia* and dated between 1954 and 1955 (Plath, *Collected Poems* 324).

courage to a stoical endurance of the pain induced by imposed silence. It is significant here in that it engages with these themes with an explicit reference to British colonialism and through a trope gleaned from the African tales, as I will show in a close reading of the poem below.

Before moving into the poem itself, however, it is interesting to note that, unlike any other in the final manuscript of *Ariel*, this poem was typed repeatedly under another title, which was only changed, in handwriting, on the final draft. Until the last moment, it seems, the poem was entitled “The Courage of Quietness”, the word “Quietness” being finally crossed out with deliberate, firm strokes and replaced with the word “Shutting-Up” in bold, clear script, an act of personal censorship which seems to mimic almost theatrically, the very content of the poem.<sup>29</sup>

Quietness is, in fact, violently eliminated. Linguistically, the abstract noun “quietness” is changed into the verb “shutting-up”, which administers agency and action and demands the acknowledgment of ownership and responsibility from a subject. There is a calm composure to the word “quietness”, a stillness which implies acceptance and contented passivity, which is conquered by its replacement “shutting-up”, an act of literary or linguistic imperialism.

There are echoes in Plath’s first title of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” (*Complete Poems* 282) – of the “unravish’d bride of quietness” (line 1) – which ironically tells its story silently, locked as it is in time and the realm of representation. Plath’s poem depicts a silenced form which nonetheless speaks, with bitter anger at its ravishment, hence the more appropriate term “shutting-up”. The dramatic shift away from Keats and his Romantic softness to a modern and violent verbal signifier also symbolises a deliberate break with the traditional literary canon.

This now vacant poetic space is filled, as I will demonstrate, with a set of imaginative tropes

---

<sup>29</sup> This is evident in the facsimile printed in the 2004 restored edition.

that emerge from an African folktale. Britzolakis identifies the “unleashed tongue” in the poem as signifying “anarchy because it belongs to a prehistoric era in the evolution of the ‘I’” (182). She also refers to the “linguistic primitivism” of Plath’s later poems (183). She fails, however, to explore the origin of the tongue trope, a process which would add substance to her observations.

“The Courage of Shutting-Up” is a poem about power and expresses this in terms of imperialist conquest. The first line seems to be spat out volubly and yet it is ostensibly celebrating, with a triumphant exclamation mark, the courageous moment at which the mouth is clamped shut at the point of verbal retaliation.<sup>30</sup> The triumph is short-lived, however, as the closed mouth is next described as “The line pink and quiet, a worm, basking” (line 2). Although this is described as a quiet moment, the colour pink disconcerts as it comes so soon after the word “artillery” (line 1), also associated with lining up. This is a representation of a violent attack in which words, as thoughts, are fired like cannon balls but the mouth closes, not releasing them. The onslaught is met internally, leaving the wounded, so to speak, bleeding beneath the outraged sky of the brain. The phrase “lined brain” (line 4) suggests militaristic rule or censorship. It relates to speech as well as to the written line, thus fusing the concepts of orality and poetry. The message here is that poetry, or art, has a responsibility to speak out against the outrage on behalf of the silenced mouth, and if it fails to do so, agonised stultification, both personal and cultural, ensues.

---

<sup>30</sup> The first line ends with an exclamation mark which is unusual for Plath who seems to have removed many, by hand, from final typed drafts of many poems (more so, in fact, than any other punctuation mark) an act suggestive of a careful editing and adaptation of tonal impact.

Throughout the poem, black revolving discs carry associations with both gramophone records and the round, dark open ends of cannons. They are “loaded” (line 6), like artillery, but they also revolve beneath the point of a needle. In this visual combination, Plath draws together sound or voice and its silencing. They are also linked to the concept of artistic representation as gramophone discs record original sound which is transformed into a resemblance of itself. These revolving discs are Plath’s version of Keats’s urn, which also seems to revolve under inspection and emits its message. The pun on “cannon” and literary canon in stanza four reinforces this link. The famous final two lines of Keats’s ode suggest, I would argue, a recognition and celebration of the beauty and success of his poem whilst the defeated tone at the end of Plath’s poem expresses despair, ironically, at its failure as a form of protest. The final stanza ends with folded flags, insolvency, isolation and the silence of “a country no longer heard of” (line 33). The poem seems to be registering a sense of defeat by, or self-imposed surrender to, its own murderous form, that of the lyric.<sup>31</sup> This interpretation reinforces my hypothesis that Plath was moving towards relinquishing this genre and was searching for an alternative medium. In a further ironic twist which could almost be comic if it were not so tragic, Hughes cut this poem from his version of *Ariel*.

Following on from the reference to the fantastical figures of mermaids in stanza three, the poem shifts to a macabre description of a fierce tongue which has flayed and killed in its time. Both mermaids and this tongue are associated with the ability to speak. The juxtaposition of mermaids and this tongue is reminiscent of Plath’s short story “Ocean 1212-W” in which the

---

<sup>31</sup> I would agree with Britzolakis that Plath’s “rhetoric is founded on the recognition of a chronic lack of solace in figurative language” (190). Janine Rogers and Charlotte Sleigh discuss how bees were significant to Plath in the process of “rethinking her poetic practice” (293). These authors examine Plath’s sense of her “doubtful ownership of language” (301), particularly within the lyrical form.

sea does not present the narrator with a hoped for mythical mermaid but rather, a grotesque primitivist fetish. The strange tongue emanates directly from the African folktale “Mantis and the All-Devourer” in Radin’s collection and appears first in “Poem for a Birthday” (*Collected Poems* 131) as “All-mouth” who “licks up the bushes” (line 17 of “Dark House”) or the “red tongues” which “will teach the truth” in “Witch Burning” (line 18). In “Mantis and the All-Devourer”, a ravenous seemingly prehensile red tongue tyrannises a community until his belly is cut open, releasing all those whom he has devoured. For a reason that is not made clear, Mantis states he cannot talk until the All-Devourer is invited to share food with him, against the remonstrance of his daughter, Porcupine. He seems to speak incessantly and unwisely in the tale until he is engulfed by the great tongue, at which point he falls silent, in the stomach of the beast. Up to this point, all he says leads to misery and destruction; he is clumsy and listens to no advice. This suggests that the tale depicts a moment in the history of the community in which the old order must be replaced by the new. Porcupine impressively orchestrates the death of the murderous tongue, even though it entails torturing her younger brother and son to test their resilience to pain, which is judged according to the response in their eyes. Young Mantis finds his voice once the All-Devourer is slain and peace is restored to the community which moves off to a new home: “Thus Young Mantis spoke. He felt he truly resembled his father, that his speech resembled his father’s speech” (Radin 98). It remains unclear who is responsible for the final speech in the tale in which leadership is assumed and new direction given to the community. It could either be the woman, Porcupine, or one of the newly empowered young men, but the old patriarchal order is certainly overthrown.

The ambivalence with regard to the power of speech and the dangers of a wildly loose tongue underlie both this tale as well as Plath's "The Courage of Shutting-Up". The tongue is a merciless weapon of destruction but it also frees the new voices to speak. Cutting and piercing feature in both texts with equal ambivalence. In the tale as well as the poem, slicing open frees that which has been silenced, but it also inflicts pain – the same spear that cuts the stomach open is that which is used to burn and pierce the boys to test their courage. There is no avoiding the tongue, however. Its power must be entertained and negotiated – the African father is insistent that "All-Mouth" must be invited into the community. In Plath's poem, the mouth is both shut forcefully, in a reflex action, as an act of defence against some external threat, but it is also closed voluntarily, by an act of personal volition, as a reflective action, and a stunned, furious silence is the result. The power of the trapped tongue is spent internally, doing violence to the body, the mind and the head in which it exists. If one bears the African tale in mind, one can interpret this to mean that impoverishment, even death, will follow a refusal to allow the tongue to speak in a new voice, as that of a new order.

There is an important pun on the word "cannon" and its homophone "canon" in Plath's poem which reinforces the underlying subtext of poetic voice and literary output. A pruning knife, the "billhook", is said to be "antique" (line 17), like the literary canon, carrying the weight of history behind it. Equated here with the tongue, it cuts and reduces and censors. However, in so doing, it invites censorship, or cutting out. Thus the tongue both censors and is censored in turn itself.

The question "Must it be cut out?" (line 18) is the first direct address in the poem. It is a startling moment which catches the reader unawares with its immediacy, as if hooking him or

her, with a lash of the tongue, into an awareness of the voice behind the closed mouth. The tone is at once interrogative, accusatory, ironic, and cautionary. It demands attention but in so doing destroys communicative harmony in the poem, unlike Keats's urn which seduces the reader into its world. The force of the question seems to be directed outwards, off the page, as it were, but in fact the question remains locked behind the closed mouth and is never uttered. Its only possible trajectory seems therefore to be inwards, just as the cannons are turned inwards, revolving ominously internally, in bitter irony. Nevertheless, the very existence of the poem defies this closed, internal system of expression. The reader, as an external entity, is drawn into its world, is given access to it and therefore breaks down its defensive parameters. The answer to the question, "No", lets the reader off the hook, so to speak, but remains a disembodied voice as it is spoken by a mouth whose tongue has already been voluntarily dismissed or "put by" (line 21). The voice that speaks is the voice of surrender. It becomes an object "Hung up in the library" (line 22) along with other hunting trophies. The library, a place for book collections and reading, becomes here a macabre repository of dead animal heads, an unpleasant association of cerebral pursuits with dry, stuffed heads, and a stark representation of the deathly grip of the traditional literary canon.

It is at this point in the poem that it becomes clear how Plath's exploration of silencing and representation is imbricated with concepts of imperialism and colonisation. The reference to "the engravings of Rangoon" (line 22) indicts British Imperialism in Burma as nothing less than further killing – a placing of people in graves. The relevance to this poem of another of the African tales must be noted here. In "The Origin of Death", the giant whose name is Death, has hair that "resembled that of white men in that it was silky rather than woolly" thus linking the

violence in the tale explicitly to that of colonial racism (Radin 60). A boy is forced to serve the giant as master but becomes trapped in a dependent relationship with him. Although the villagers almost manage to kill the giant, the boy saves one of his eyes. Every time the giant shuts this one eye, a man dies and “unfortunately for us, he is forever blinking and winking” (Radin 61). The weight of responsibility (or blame) for bringing death and destruction into the world is therefore shared between the giant, the villagers and the boy. Plath too presents in her poem an ambivalent scenario in which the source, object and focus of violence are unclear, being both inwardly and outwardly directed. Whilst she mentions Rangoon here as representative of death and imperialist destruction, or violence “externally imposed” as Rose puts it, it is embedded in a poem which focuses mainly on the danger of internally trapped violence (63). The boundary between the two forms of violence therefore becomes vague and uncertain.

The rather weary, methodical rhythm of stanza five with its dogged repetition of the word “heads”, contrasts sharply with the confrontational tone of the first line of the poem. The collection of heads on display in close association with imperialist activity and nationalism (pursued in the final stanza) creates an association with accounts of primitive rituals of head-hunting. Intertextual connections can be made between Kurtz’s collection of heads in *Heart of Darkness* (82) and T. S. Eliot’s depiction of his poetic persona in line 16 of *Gerontion* as “A dull head among windy spaces” (*Poems* 21). The references to the dead fox and the otter may be interpreted as a quick snipe at the poetry of Ted Hughes, hung up in the library of the literary

canon.<sup>32</sup> There is, in this stanza, both a canny critique of the stuffy dead-end of literary pursuits alongside a wearily ironic recognition of the poet's participation in precisely the same pursuit. The mirror in the penultimate stanza suggests the self-reflexive quality of this vision.

Although it is tempting to read the silencing of women by masculine powers in the hunting imagery and in the dominance of the male voice in the literary canon, it is not as simple as that because the tongue is "put by" before it is "cut out". The willing corroboration of the speaker in this act is explicit and to ignore it would be to misread the complex internal tensions that have built up in the poem to this point. This is further supported by the final two stanzas in which attention is diverted from the object of the tongue to the subject of the eyes, a progression already hinted at earlier in the word "marvellous" (line 24) where the trophies' value depends entirely on the presence of a gaze. This torture of instability in which subject and object ("one can only watch" [line 28]) are trapped in a mutual, painful dependency is further confused by the paradoxical line "The face that lived in this mirror is the face of a dead man" (line 29). The eyes are mirrors that "can kill and talk" (line 27), like the tongue that shares similar skills. They are "terrible rooms /In which a torture goes on" (lines 27-28). In the African tale, "Mantis and the All-Devourer", Porcupine watches the young men's eyes intently as she tortures them to test their ability to kill the all-devouring tongue (Radin 97). In the story of the giant, "The Origin of Death", it is a blinking eye that kills. In Plath's poem, the eyes seem blinded, "Their death rays folded like flags" (line 32), and yet their power has been turned inwards and killed the face in which they exist.

---

<sup>32</sup> I refer here to two of Hughes's poems: "The Thought-Fox" published in 1957 in his first collection *Hawk in the Rain* and "An Otter" which appeared in 1960 in *Lupercal*.

The poem's extended metaphor of lost nationhood, of conquest, the folded flags, the loss of identity ("a country no longer heard of" [line 33]) re-establishes the significance of the mention of Rangoon earlier and is a reminder of the violence in the beginning of the poem. Imperialist plunder and domination are seemingly the cause of the "Insolvency" and emptiness which echo through the open vowels of the final stanza, the many "o's" reminiscent of the revolving discs and the mountains the fellows of the grooves and canyons of earlier. The poem's ending on a note of national displacement or destruction mimics that of the African tale in which the community, ravaged by the tongue, "travelled to a new home, and left the hut at which the Man who had devoured the people was lying" (Radin 99).

The inwardly circulating direction of the violence in the poem is ultimately self-defeating and all that remains is the text itself, an artefact reminiscent of Keats's urn, dependent on the action and eyes of the reader to untether its tongue. There is a dream-like quality to this poem in the way images merge and boundaries seem unclear: cannons become gramophone discs, surgeons become tattooists, tongues become trophies and eyes turn inwards yet peer outwards. If one traces the connections with the African tale, one is able to perceive where the images may have originated and how they combine. The Western literary canon may indeed have been displaced by these vibrant new metaphors. The cannons/canon seem to have turned inwards and into the void has swept new literary life. The silencing or muzzling of an old voice has enabled the creation of a uniquely original poetry which, like the African tales, exhibits a consciousness of the violence of its own production.

One of the most striking features of the *Ariel* collection is the focus of many of the poems on a climactic moment of transcendent release, or the breaking of imagined boundaries. Most powerful of these poems are “Ariel”, “Lady Lazarus” and “Purdah”. This may appear as a process of breaking *out of*, but it is also a desire to break *through to*. Although there is a strong enough sense in these poems of an identification of the trap, or the nature of the oppression that must be escaped, accompanying this is an equally strong degree of ambivalence and fear as to what comes next. There is a disconcerting recognition of a shared measure of responsibility for the entrapment and thus a breaking *out of* merely results in a return to an inner oppression. As stated in Plath’s poem “The Jailer” (*Ariel* 23), “That being free” (line 41) is an impossibility. A breaking *through to*, on the other hand, would offer the hope of a new state of consciousness or an alternative trajectory. It is my claim that in the *Ariel* poems, Plath was formulating a transition from a mode of literary output which for her had reached a point of exhaustion and which demanded a shift in direction. The oral and oracular nature of the African tales provided the impetus to push her poetry to its extreme limit as poetic language and her giftedness as wordsmith to its most painful and critical ascendance. This could then end its awful tyranny over her and free her to explore other genres and forms of writing. Her association of a primitive energy with the deep “blood jet” of poetry (line 18 in “Kindness”) meant that this process of exploration of the outer and inner limits, the boundaries, of her poetic consciousness was a threatening and dangerous one. The cruel African “other” of her poem “The Rival” was insistently “thinking of [her]” (line 17) and she of the other.

Of the poems which portray this boundary dissolution, “Purdah” (*Ariel* 62) is the most beautiful and evocative. It is another that Hughes chose to exclude from his publication of *Ariel*, thus

diminishing significantly potential readings of the collection. Plath's linking of the oppressed feminine and the exotic is nowhere clearer than in this poem. At the start, she presents the shifting world of life behind the veil from the perspective of the "valuable" (line 8) secluded behind its enveloping, diaphanous silks – "Enigmatical" (line 6) and "Priceless and quiet" (line 34), the woman appears to sit motionlessly within her limited world, her "Sheath of impossibles" (line 33). She glows with an energy expressed in terms of specular or visual shimmer and reflection, which is simultaneously a recognition of the fragmentary and fragile nature of the self as formed in the gaze of another. In this there is a still tension threatening release, an eruption which is awaited with extreme anxiety as it could be directed either inwards or outwards. This is the violence of the final stanza into which the motionless quiet of the first few stanzas breaks, shattering the tension, tearing away the veil. The murder of the tyrannous "bridegroom" (line 19) entails, however, also the destruction of the "small jeweled/ Doll" (line 53-54) that he guards.

The final stanza elicits associations with the Oresteian tragedy in which Agamemnon is stabbed to death through a cloak in his bath by his vengeful wife, Clytemnestra, the mother of Electra. The unleashing of "the lioness" (line 55) is a moment of rupture in which anger, revenge and betrayal merge to fracture and annihilate power. Below I will offer an alternate interpretation of the murderous leonine figure which reinforces the connection the *Ariel* poems shares with Africa.

Plath draws one into the sensuous world behind the veil. There is a shifting of agency between female temptress, reader and male volition ("It is himself he guides / In among these silk

Screens" [lines 21-23]) which serves to float the power dimension in the poem, having it hover as if embodied somewhere in the silks themselves, in the "rustling appurtenances" (line 23). An appurtenance implies possession, an accessory, but here it seems to respond (to purr animalistically) with its own voice and move independently: "I breathe, and the mouth / Veil stirs its curtain" (lines 24-25). There are echoes in this of the "mouth of some great African cat" (line 59) which threatens the vulnerable patient in "Tulips" (*Ariel* 18), thus drawing "Purdah" into conversation with the earlier poem's African associations. In "Tulips", the speaker's "body is a pebble" (line 15) which is disturbed by the flowers' "sudden tongues and their colour" (line 41). Similarly, the persona in "Purdah" is the "stone of the side" of Adam (line 2), exposed with the movement of the colourful veil: "My eye / Veil is / A concatenation of rainbows" (lines 26-28). The word "concatenation" means to be linked, as by a chain. The merging and splitting of rainbow colours is hence not a gentle image here but one of forced connection, as threatening as the red of the tulips. There is, moreover, a sinister similarity in the sound of "My eye / Veil" to "my evil" which is picked up more clearly if the poem is heard rather than read. There is thus a sharing of responsibility acknowledged in this state of veiled seclusion.

In contrast to the apparently silent and "priceless" presence behind the veil, the outer world is inhabited by the incoherent and valueless squawks and screeches of "parakeets, macaws" (line 35). The emptiness and cheapness of the chatter ostensibly enhances the value of that which is secluded, its voice ironically silenced in order to retain this value. The noisy, exotic chatter of the birds is reminiscent of the "unintelligible syllables" (line 18) emanating from the imprisoned bees in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" (*Ariel* 84), written a few weeks after "Purdah". This link suggests that in "Purdah" too, Plath was examining the processes of text production and the

mastery of language. The poem portrays and then attempts to break through the restrictive nature of poetry and perhaps even language itself.

The red lioness is a recurrent motif in Plath's poetry. It appears in "Stings" (*Collected Poems* 214) as the resurgent queen bee with a "lion-red body" (line 55), in "Ariel" (*Ariel* 33) as "God's lioness" (line 4) who sweeps the speaker into the "red eye" (lines 29-30) and here, in "Purdah", as the liberated embodiment of exotic energy and creative expression. This lioness image is generally accepted to have emanated from its link to the Hebrew word "Ariel". It is a combination of the word "ari", meaning lion(ess) and "el", meaning God.<sup>33</sup> They merge to become "Ariel", the altar hearth of God. Whilst accepting this interpretation, I would like to point out another possibility. On Thursday, 28<sup>th</sup> August, 1957, Plath assiduously copied down an anecdote in her journal about "Animal possession from Central Africa" which she had read in *Possessions: Demoniacal and Other* by Oosterreich (*Journals* 417). In the anecdote, an African man claims to be transformed into a lion and feels compelled to commit murder. He is "in the habit of lurking in the long grass" and then leaping out, stabbing his victim before mutilating the body. This "primitive" man is mirrored in Plath's "green Adam" (line 4) possessed by a demonic lioness, similarly screened before murderously bursting forth. Immediately following the anecdote Plath recorded, Oosterreich refers his reader to a later chapter about states of possession in the "higher civilisations" of India and Asia, thus drawing together Africa and Asia, as Plath does in her poem. In this later chapter, he describes how the demon speaks "a divine language" through the possessed, in the form of "incoherent shrill sounds" which are

---

<sup>33</sup> For a fuller discussion of the word's etymology, see *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* Vol. 1.

reminiscent of the “macaws and parakeets” of “Purdah” (Oosterreich 360).<sup>34</sup> The lioness which is released at the end of “Purdah” seems to have more in common with the phenomenon of primitive possession described in Oosterreich than with the figure of Clytemnestra. If this is understood, then the poem loses its spirit of revenge and moves beyond being a poem about feminine fury. Instead its true worth is revealed as a poem about the process of writing poetry. Intrinsic to this vision for Plath is the figure of the exotic and the African. In the surge of energy at the end of the poem, there is a union of sorts which is simultaneously a violent division, just as a demon is exorcised when an oracular or divine voice is released from a possessed person.

In this chapter I have focused mainly on two poems which Ted Hughes removed from his collection of *Ariel*, “The Courage of Shutting-Up” and “Purdah”. I have shown their importance to Plath’s own *Ariel* and their links with the African tales, or the concept of Africa as she interpreted and used it. Both poems seem to suggest an intense frustration with the means of creative expression at the poet’s disposal, or the ability to speak and be represented. Most significantly, however, they point towards the need for an alternative medium of expression in which the mouth speaks directly and the tongue is freed, and they do so through substantial links to Africa and the Orient.

---

<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, Oosterreich describes, on page 357, a demoniacally possessed person “foaming at the mouth” which could explain Plath’s line in “Ariel”: “I foam to wheat”. This supports my reading of both “Ariel” and “Purdah” as presenting Plath’s engagement with her creative impulse and her sense of breaking into a new poetic voice.

## Conclusion

### From “The Stones” to “Words”.

Finally, it is worth examining how Radin’s collection of African folktales relates to the last poems Plath wrote. These are poems which she did not include in her own *Ariel* collection but are significant in that they reflect her preoccupation with “primitive” art.

Alluding to the way primitive objects evoke responses in the modern Western mind, Torgovnick states:

Examining these materials is a bit like turning over stones, revealing the insects beneath. Unturned, the stone looks simple, cold, and solid – pure fact or pure form; once turned, the stone reveals a mass of swarming life – instinctual, irrational, out of control. Western tropes encourage us to identify the ‘lower,’ the ‘irrational,’ the ‘instinctual,’ the ‘swarming’ with the primitive. (80)

I have traced, in Plath’s *Ariel* poetry, this vision of something vital and deeply significant beneath the cold surface of Western form and convention. Torgovnick also remarks that Western artists fascinated by African masks felt a participation in the “diviner’s magical power” through the artefacts, as “‘the primitive’ becomes a means of access to the ‘essential’” (151). What is important in this statement is the recognition of a yearning on the part of Western artists for access, however problematic, magical or imaginary, to an enigmatic and evasive core of knowledge (referred to here as “the ‘essential’”). Plath’s interest in folklore, in particular her

incorporation of elements of African tales in her poetry, suggests that she too was fascinated by the possibilities such “primitive” art had to offer.

A quotation appears in her journal that suggests the extreme isolation and cold inertness of stone: “The only thing that is all its own and is essential to its being is the stone: it possesses nothing beyond ...” (*Journals* 594; ellipsis in orig.).<sup>35</sup> Whilst there is, in this depiction, a degree of admiration for the solid, independent presence of a stone, Plath also recognises the limitations of such an existence. The stone “possesses nothing beyond” itself and cold isolation. I have traced in this study the vital exploration of poetic voice and consciousness that Plath portrays in *Ariel*. From the transitional moment of the writing of “The Stones” (*Collected Poems* 136) in 1959, through to the poem “Words” (*Collected Poems* 270), written two weeks before her death in February 1963, Plath rejects marmoreal formalism and isolation and embraces, however fearfully, the swarming depths of her instinctual voice. I have shown, in this study, that this process was intrinsically linked to an interest in the “primitive” which took the form of an engagement with Radin’s *African Folktales*. “*Ariel*” is the creative product of Plath’s desire to merge “the primitive”, the swarming hidden life, with the cold surface of stony “civilised” existence.

“Words”, one of the last poems Plath wrote, unites the concepts of the inorganic, painless existence of stones with the vital but disturbing life seething beneath. Words, language and poetry are the go-between offering both the promise of access to either world, but at the same time being unreliable, inaccurate and unstable, splitting rather than joining. In this poem, her

---

<sup>35</sup> This is unfortunately difficult to date or source, appearing as it does simply as a fragment in the appendix of the published edition.

words linger in a realm at one remove from both stones and “weedy greens” (line 13) as well as their source, the poet herself. The poem ends with “the rock / That drops and turns” at the “bottom of the pool”, a return to the silent isolated world of “The Stones” but now with the underside upturned, revealing all that lies beneath. The rock mutates into “a white skull/ Eaten by weedy greens” (lines 12-13) while words, as “dry and riderless” (line 16) as the disembodied echoes of a ghostly horse, distance themselves from their source.

Written three days before “Words”, the poem “Totem” (*Collected Poems* 264) strongly supports the supposition that Plath was preoccupied with the relationship between notions of “the civilised” and “the primitive” at the time of the compilation of *Ariel*. The “counterfeit snake” (line 18), representing male figures like Plato and Christ, is juxtaposed to an alternative world which is “blood-hot and personal” (line 22). An African presence to the last, the vocal spider re-appears here “waving its many arms” (line 28) and crying out to be heard.

In the African images of revenge in the various tales to which I have referred earlier, both a man and a woman are killed, the woman being burnt, having first had her heart removed. Images of bleeding hearts and sacrificial burning are some of the most pervasive in Plath’s *Ariel* collection. Examples are: “The red heart blooms” (line 3) in “Poppies in October” (*Ariel* 44); “The balled /Pulp of your heart” (lines 33-34) in “Cut” (*Ariel* 25); the “bowl of red blooms” (line 61) in “Tulips” (*Ariel* 18). Plath’s poem “Lady Lazarus” (*Ariel* 14) describes the hideous spectacle of a burning body which “melts to a shriek” (line 70). It is an incorporeal entity, a voice only, which speaks through language at the end of the poem. Like the transcribed voices of the African tales which speak so powerfully of cycles of violence and revenge, the voice of “Lady

Lazarus” emerges from a “disturbed and insecure world” and claims no substantial certainty in the present (Radin 9). The voice embodies within itself its own physical demise, as the fresh flame will in turn burn out, but its artistic life, in the poem, is assured.

Radin’s determination as an anthropologist to transcribe as originally as possible the tales he listened to meant that they entered the Western archive as authentic oral representatives of their world. I have postulated that these tales inspired in Sylvia Plath a desire to move into a more oral form of creative expression, a desire inspired by a similar drive towards authenticity of voice.

Since the 2004 publication of the *Ariel* manuscript in its original form, it is possible now to explore Plath’s later poetry in innovative and original ways, free of the obsessive preoccupation with the poet’s death. As this study suggests, it is a body of poetry that rewards such exploration.

Works Cited

Bell, Michael. *Primitivism*. London: Methuen, 1972. Print.

Britzolakis, Christina. *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*. Oxford: Clarendon, 1999. Print.

Boyer, Marilyn. "The Disabled Female Body as a Metaphor for Language in Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*." *Women's Studies* 33 (2004): 199-223. Print.

Clark, Heather. "Tracking the Thought-Fox: Sylvia Plath's Revision of Ted Hughes." *Journal of Modern Literature* 28.2 (2005): 100-12. Print.

Conrad, Joseph. *Heart of Darkness*. New York: Penguin, 1973. Print.

"Construe." *The Living Webster Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language*. New York: Delair, 1977. Print.

Curry, Renée R. *White Women Writing White: H.D., Elizabeth Bishop, Sylvia Plath, and Whiteness*. Connecticut: Greenwood, 2000. Print.

Eliot, T.S. *The Complete Poems and Plays 1909-1959*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1950. Print.

---. *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*. London: Faber, 1933. Print.

Ferretter, Luke. "'What Girl Ever Flourished in Such Company?': Sylvia Plath's Religion." *The Yearbook of English Studies* 39. 1 / 2 (2009): 101-13. Print.

Freud, Sigmund. *The Unconscious*. Trans. Graham Frankland. London: Penguin, 2005. Print.

---. *Totem and Taboo*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1950. Print.

Freedman, David Noel, ed. *The Anchor Bible Dictionary. Vol.1*. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Print.

Hayman, Ronald. *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Birch Lane, 1991. Print.

*The Holy Bible*. Uhrichsville: Barbour, 2002. Print.

Hughes, Frieda. Foreword. *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. By Sylvia Plath. London: Faber, 2004.

Print.

Hughes, Ted. *Birthday Letters*. London: Faber, 1998. Print.

---. *Collected Poems*. Ed. Paul Keegan. London: Faber and Faber, 2003. Print.

---. "Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems." Newman 187-195.

Hunter, Dianne. "Sylvia Plath's Man in Black." *European Journal of Women's Studies* 12. 45

(2005): 45-60. Print.

Keats, John. *Complete Poems*. Ed. Jack Stillinger. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982. Print.

Kendall, Tim. *Sylvia Plath. A Critical Study*. London: Faber, 2001. Print.

Kroll, Judith. *Chapters in a Mythology. The Poetry of Sylvia Plath*. New York: Harper and

Row, 1976. Print.

Lawrence, D.H. *The Collected Letters of D.H. Lawrence: Volume 1*. Ed. Harry T. Moore. London:

Heinemann, 1962. Print.

Lindberg, Christer. "Paul Radin: The Anthropological Trickster." *European Review of Native*

*American Studies* 14. 1 (2000). N. pag. Web. 27 July 2013.

Lowell, Robert. Foreword. *Ariel*. New York: HarperPerennial, 1999. Print.

Morrison, Toni. *Playing in the Dark. Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. Cambridge:

Harvard UP, 1992. Print.

Newman, Charles, ed. *The Art of Sylvia Plath. A Symposium*. London: Faber, 1970. Print.

Oosterreich, T.K. *Possessions: Demoniactal and Other*. London: Kegan Paul, 1930. Print.

Orr, Peter, ed. *The Poet Speaks*. London: Routledge, 1966. Print.

Ostriker, Alicia. "The Americanization of Sylvia Plath." *Wagner* 97-109.

Pearce, T.S. *Literature in Perspective. T.S. Eliot*. London: Evans Brothers, 1967. Print.

Pereira, Malin Walther. "Be(e)ing and 'Truth': Tar Baby's Signifying on Sylvia Plath's Bee

Poems." *Twentieth Century Literature* 42.4 (1996): 526-34. Print.

Perloff, Marjorie. "Angst and Animism in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath." *Wagner* 109-124.

---. "The Two Ariels: The (Re)making of the Sylvia Plath Canon. *The American Poetry Review*. 13.6 (1984): 10-18. Print.

Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. New York: HarperCollins, 1999. Print.

---. *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. London: Faber, 2004. Print.

---. "Ocean 1212-W." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. London: Faber, 1977. 117-124. Print.

---. *Letters Home*. London : Faber, 1975. Print.

---. *The Collected Poems*. New York: Harper, 2008. Print.

---. *The Journals of Sylvia Plath. 1950 – 1962*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. London: Faber, 2001. Print.

Radin, Paul, ed. *African Folktales*. New York: Princeton UP, 1952. Print.

Rogers, Janine and Charlotte Sleigh, "'Here is my honey-machine': Sylvia Plath and the Mereology of the Beehive." *The Review of English Studies, New Series*. 63. 259 (2011): 293-310. Print.

Rose, Jacqueline. *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. London: Virago, 1991. Print.

Ryan, Pamela. "'A Prisoner of Affect': Julia Kristeva talks to Sylvia Plath." *Scrutiny2: Issues in English Studies in Southern Africa* 18.2 (2013): 7-17. Print.

Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print.

Schultz, William Todd. "Mourning, Melancholia and Sylvia Plath." *Handbook of*

*Psychobiography*. Ed. William Todd Schultz. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2005. Print.

Souffrant, Leah. "Mother Delivers Experiment: Poetry of Motherhood: Plath, Derricotte,

Zucker, and Holbrook." *Women's Studies Quarterly*. 37. 3/4 (2009): 25-41. Print.

Strangeways, Al. "'The Boot in the Face': The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia

Plath." *Contemporary Literature* 37. 3 (1996): 370-90. Print.

Torgovnick, Marianna. *Gone Primitive*. Chicago: Chicago UP, 1990. Print.

Wagner, W. Linda, ed. *Critical Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Boston: G.K.Hall, 1984. Print.

Wilson, Andrew. *Mad Girl's Love Song*. London: Simon & Schuster, 2013. Print.