

Architectonics: Sylvia Plath's *Colossus*

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WHEN Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton met in 1958-1959, while both were auditing one of Robert Lowell's classes at Boston University, they made a weekly ritual of going to the Ritz cocktail lounge, in the company of George Starbuck, to drink martini after martini and to reminisce again and again over their attempted suicides. Poetry stayed in the never-never-land of Robert Lowell's spectacles and the B.U. classroom; suicide belonged in the posh, alcoholic dreamland of expensive stemware and the Ritz bar. Sexton has attempted to explain: "Poems left behind were technique — lasting, but, actually, over. We talked death and this was life for us, lasting in spite of us, or better, because of us . . ." ¹ But despite all the talking, all the taunting death, Sylvia Plath in the coldly sober hours of the years while she was building *The Colossus* ² chose to concentrate on the "technique" of writing poetry rather than the expectant "life" of dying, fixed on the *how* not the *what* to do.

Anne Sexton has joined the mainstream of Plath criticism by saying that in those days of the late 'fifties, when the first book of poems was still a work-in-progress, Sylvia Plath was constrained by "her preoccupation with form." Of the works which Plath submitted to Lowell, Sexton says, "Those early poems were all in a cage (and not even her own cage at that). I felt she hadn't found a voice of her own, wasn't, in truth, free to be herself." ³ This notion has become a convention of commentary on *The Colossus*. Reviewers including A. Alvarez, Peter Davison, A. E. Dyson, Marjorie Perloff, and Eleanor Ross Taylor have propounded the idea that Plath was not sure

of herself, was not mature as an artist, until she could declare to "Daddy" in *Ariel*,⁴ "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through," and warn as "Lady Lazarus":

Herr God, Herr Lucifer,
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air.

A reader excited by *Ariel* would not be much encouraged to look back to *The Colossus* by the rather scornful dismissals of the volume, even by those who raved about *Ariel*. Richard Howard simply pronounces the poems "well-behaved, shapely"; Peter Davison terms them "advanced exercises." The judgment of Alvarez seems typical: "Throughout *The Colossus* she is using her art to keep the disturbance, out of which she made her verse, at a distance. It is as though she had not yet come to grips with her subject as an artist. She has Style, but not properly her own style."⁵ A portrait of the young poet takes shape from such review sketches: poor Sylvia hammers out her spondees, iambs, and trochees to keep from going crazy or killing herself.

What results from the generally distorted commentary on Sylvia Plath is an exaggerated division, an oversimplified, schizoid picture of Plath in her two books: we have in *The Colossus* the monolithic, formal, self-conscious Sylvia Bound (but alive and well); in *Ariel*, the demonic, fearlessly casual, fiercely candid Sylvia Unbound (but psychoneurotic and suicidal). Fortunately a few men have been incisive enough to resist the tendency to superimpose divisions and have been sensitive enough to perceive the continuity in her work.

Foremost among these more perceptive critics is John Frederick Nims, a considerably talented poet himself, who recommends *The Colossus* as a model of a well-served poetic apprenticeship. But, even while he is pointing out the fact that the first book is structural and stylistic ground-

work for the second, he hedges by remarking, "[W]ithout the drudgery of *The Colossus*, the triumph of *Ariel* is unthinkable."⁶ Denoting the work "drudgery" is quite likely too severe. If the poems are merely prosodic warm-ups for the virtuoso performance of *Ariel*, then they might fairly be termed "drudgery." Some of the poems, the failures of the first book, are unquestionably just that. "Aftermath," for example, is a poem which makes cynical observations of a crowd of sensation-seekers gathered at the site of a fire. Sickly fascinated, the mob watches the pathetic behavior of a lady who has lost everything in the blaze. The technical problem is that there is absolutely no reason for the poem to be a sonnet: the poem is narrative rather than lyric, dispassionate rather than involved. "Aftermath" as a sonnet is almost as ludicrous and inappropriate as Karl Shapiro's "Auto Wreck" would be were it a triolet.

Although Nims does not mention them, a reader would be likely to notice that at least two of the syllabic poems in *The Colossus* similarly appear to be mere technical exercises, interesting only as shows of skill. "Departure" is constructed of a stanzaic pattern of 11-9-7-5 syllables in each quatrain — presumably intending to reinforce by a numerical arrangement the idea of leavetaking in the poem, with the 5-syllable line at the end of the stanza a tense, difficult but determined goodbye: "The money's run out." But, even with that going for it, the poem does not really work. Another poem which depends on technical trickery is "The Companionable Ills," an eight-line poem on the subject of how nice it is to learn to live with one's idiosyncracies, "the old imperfections." The poem, though it is suitably short for its small subject (an off-hand bit of folk-wisdom), is too reliant on its cleverness of form. The rhyme scheme of each quatrain is *abba*; the syllabic pattern is 12-10-9-6 then 6-9-10-12 — in we go, out we go. The poem, if typed as shape, would take the form of George Herbert's "Easter Wings" or Dylan Thomas' Part II selections in "Vision and Prayer." All this, yes, is cleverness, but it does not redeem the metaphoric

confusions of the poem in which a nose twitch and facial moles inexplicably become horses (described as some sort of fallen Houyhnhnms) which go to their barn stalls as "Bed-fellows of the spirit's debauch, fond masters." If all the poems of *The Colossus* were only such mathematical displays, then they would indeed be drudgery. But if some of the poems combine Plath's mastery of metrics, syllabics, rhyme, sound, puns, and metaphor with fitting subjects — and I submit that most of the poems in the collection do — then *The Colossus* emerges as something more significant than a poet's workbook, more than some literary equivalent of the Hanon exercises for piano.

Despite the misleading remark about "drudgery," Nims has been the only one so far to discuss at any length Plath's excellence at the craft of poetry. That excellence deserves some scrutiny before one can fully sense how the charges were set for the explosion in *Ariel*. One thing that is certainly obvious from *The Colossus* is that Sylvia Plath spent a great deal of time experimenting with metrics and syllabics, trying to make those forms belong to her, trying to make them suit her poetry. Nims observes, "In *The Colossus* there are ten poems that read themselves naturally, if freely, in the folk line."⁷ By the "folk line" he means the four-stress line characteristic of Anglo-Saxon alliterative verse, complete with its mid-line caesura. Citing "Suicide Off Egg Rock" and "Blue Moles" as prime examples, Nims ignores her most meaningful and inspired use of the rhythms of Beowulf and Grendel in "Faun," a poem in which a lusty drunk looping through the woods transfigures into a wood-troll.

Nims further notes that up to two-thirds of the poems are loosely iambic and that eight of the poems are in iambic pentameter "in the organic, not the metronomic sense." (The iambic pentameter is so organic and so non-metronomic that scanning the lines is exasperating; Plath more often than not turns iambs into spondees, trochees, anapests, and dactyls.) His discovery (dubious as it sometimes is) prompts Nims to praise Plath for her use of *the*

English meter for its mimicry of the human heartbeat and breath rate. But Nim's observation unfortunately enlightens very little about Plath's poetry except to note that Plath knew how to write iambic pentameter and that, by the time she published *The Colossus*, she knew that she had to disarrange and derange it to express herself.

Plath likely shared Nim's conviction that "iambic is the *lub-dúbb* of the heartbeat, perhaps the first sensation that we, months before our birth, are aware of."⁸ She, however, uses the iambic foot with deliberate irony — a point which utterly escapes Nims. The man at Egg Rock gets ready to walk into the water, "his blood beating the old tattoo / I am, I am, I am," making his existential declaration (*lub-dúbb*: I am) as he resolutely sets forth to drown himself. That suicidal "I am"/iamb holds the key to Plath's use of iambs. The *lub-dúbb* of the heartbeat becomes the "I am" of a man realizing his own death.

With similar irony the iambic "Two Views of a Cadaver Room" is Plath's *memento mori*. In the first section of the poem, a girl visits her boyfriend, a medical student, in the laboratory where he is dissecting his cadaver. As if that setting for lovers were not grisly enough, Plath turns the affair inside-out by its lovers' keepsake: "He hands her the cut-out heart like a cracked heirloom." (A less grotesque account of the same incident is given at the beginning of Chapter Six in Plath's autobiographical novel, *The Bell Jar*.)⁹ In the second part of the poem, she describes a detail from the lower right-hand corner of Brueghel's "The Triumph of Death." The two lovers in the corner sing together, totally oblivious to the plague-wasted men, the hanged men, the mortifiers of the flesh, and the death-dancers all around them in a scene as hair-raising as that of the frenzied penitents at plague time in Bergman's film *The Seventh Seal*. Plath concludes, in a perfect line of iambic pentameter, that, like the coed and the medical student, "These Flemish lovers flourish; not for long." In another iambic poem, "Water-color of Grant-

chester Meadows," the Cantabrigians are likewise unaware of the terror, the doom, immanent in their surroundings. They see innocently that "spring lambs jam the sheepfold," but, amid all the pretty peace of a spring day, they miss the Darwinian activity of nature red in fang and claw:

Droll, vegetarian, the water rat
Saws down a reed and swims from his limber grove,
While the students stroll or sit,
Hands laced, in a moony indolence of love—
Black-gowned, but unaware
How in such mild air
The owl shall stoop from his turret, the rat cry out.

In both poems the "I am" that the students apparently need to learn is that survival is murderous and that learning life is really learning death.

"The Beekeeper's Daughter," an iambic poem which fluctuates between pentameter and hexameter, darkens the "I am"/iamb. The poem, obsessed with the death of Plath's father, implies the Electra complex displayed in her contemporaneous (but uncollected) poem, "Electra on Azalea Path," in which the daughter makes her retreat into the beehives on the day of her father's death and, blaming herself, tries to commit suicide: "It was my love that did us both to death."¹⁰ With that primitive taboo coursing through auricles and ventricles, the daughter offers herself, "My heart under your foot, sister of a stone," to her father, the beekeeper. Into the dark fertility and all the happy fecundity of pollen ("The anthers nod their heads, potent as kings / To father dynasties") and the sweetness of honey-making, death intrudes. A flower brings forth poison, "A fruit that's death to taste: dark flesh, dark parings." The *lub-dúbb* of this iambic poem is, once again but more profoundly, a vision of death-in-life and life-in-death, replete with poison flowers, sacrificial drones giving their all to the queen bee, an incestuous daughter, and a death-fixation with its implicit wish to join the father in death:

Father, bridegroom, in this Easter egg
 Under the coronal of sugar roses
 The queen bee marries the winter of your year.

Sylvia Plath's use of iambic pentameter, however moribund it may be, is not left merely to declaring the "I am" of the dark and death-bound. It is also associated with a sense of impossible otherworldliness and with the ends of things. "The Ghost's Leavetaking," a highly irregular poem, is a sleeper's work, a lament for the loss of dream and nightmare, a driven longing (without the glad comfort of "intimations of immortality") to comprehend and find some way back forever to "A world we lose by merely waking up." "Snakecharmer" is a sad chronicle of a yogi's piping which turns into a multi-poem about the futility of day-to-day life, about the fatigue of the artist, about Creation giving way to millenium, about a tired-out God:

And snakes there were, are, will be — till yawns
 Consume this piper and he tires of music
 And pipes the world back to the simple fabric
 Of snake-warp, snake-weft. . . .

Then there is the whole "I am"/iamb of universal guilt. "The Thin People" is a poem about the "persistence of memory," a poem in which the eyes of the emaciated millions of Jewish scapegoats stare their accusations:

They persist in the sunlit room: the wallpaper
 Frieze of cabbage-roses and cornflowers pales
 Under their thin-lipped smiles,
 Their withering kinship.

The memory is there, in the spare stanzas, the jarred couplets, insisting on itself as unforgettably as the limp watches and the beached embryo on a Dali shore.

Only two more or less iambic pentameter poems, "Moonrise" and "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond," express anything like hope. And in "Moonrise" the hope, addressed to the moon by a chanting lunatic, is that "The white stomach may ripen yet," based on the belief that living and dying (like the lilies of the field and the birds of the

air) is "Vocation enough: opening, shutting / White petals, white fantails, ten white fingers." In the poem, the hope, the wish, seems to be to join company with the mulberries that redden, then purple, then bleed, to feed on death as the ant eggs and grubs do, to trail along after hoary, tired Father Time, knowing that "Death may whiten in sun or out of it. / Death whitens in the egg and out of it." The urge is to taste and see ("The white stomach may ripen yet") until satiation; therefore the iambic *lub-dúbb* of this poem (fibrillating now and then) is not the heartbeat continuous and life-promising, but the *lub-dúbb* of the heart wanting fulfillment so its valves can slam shut at last. "Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond" is similar to "Moonrise" in its visual movement from the underworld underground, where plant and animal encase themselves for winter, up to the sky, the air, the heavens above. But this poem is a statement, so unlikely in Plath, of faith in the life-cycle. In a rare moment, she envisions the Blakean ideal: "To see a World in a Grain of Sand / And a Heaven in a Wild Flower" (in "Auguries of Innocence"). As the "Caddis worms drowse in their silk cases" and the "Puppets, loosed from the strings of the puppet-master / Wear masks of horn to bed," she foresees fruition, dehiscence, seed-dispersal:

This is not death, it is something safer.
The wingy myths won't tug at us any more:

The molts are tongueless that sang from above the water
Of golgotha at the tip of a reed,
And how a god flimsy as a baby's finger
Shall unhusk himself and steer into the air.

The "I am"/iamb of that unhusking is the only real life-hope Plath ever seems to have.

Sylvia Plath's use of syllabic count for lines of poetry is quite another thing, neither ironic nor obviously symbolic. Yet the syllabic count is more than a simple mathematical exercise. As noted before, she intends the syllabics of "Departure" and "The Companionable Ills" to be diagrammatic of meaning. Nims says, "Writing in sylla-

bics can be a salutary exercise in countering the sing-song — and this is the importance of the syllabics in *The Colossus*. They tend to be the colder poems: objective, intellectual, descriptive.”¹¹ This is probably true of “Departure,” “The Companionable Ills,” “Frog Autumn,” and “Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbor.” But for a quartet of poems, poems also written in Plath’s modified *terza rima*, there is also an intrinsic, organic cause for her use of syllabics, a reason much more complex and meaningful than Nim’s notion of “countering the sing-song,” a reason only vaguely associated with the seasonal swing of Oriental syllabic verse forms like haiku and tanka. In this quartet there is a deliberate, purposeful meaning for Plath’s syllabics: she wants to make each breath, each syllable, count.

“Medallion,” “Man in Black,” “Full Fathom Five,” and “Lorelei” are all poems breathing their last. Their *terza rima*, interlocking though somewhat askew (where moon-sun, wood-dead-crooked, jaw-arrow-eye are rhymes), seems to signify the entanglement of death, life’s entanglement in death, man’s entanglement in his own mortality. The snake in the garden in “Medallion,” sunstruck, afire with life, is caught in the violence of survival and ensnared as he is surprised by his own death. In lines that are enjambed, in stanzas that spill into one another (as guts spill from a snake when a hurled brick hits), an onlooker recounts the scene:

And I saw white maggots coil
Thin as pins in the dark bruise
Where his innards bulged as if
He were digesting a mouse.
Knifelike, he was chaste enough,
Pure death’s-metal. The yardman’s
Flung brick perfected his laugh.

“Man in Black,” though vague and dreamy-nightmarish, is a poem which brings death horrifically closer. In a poem which tries to be as distant and uninvolved as a still life, the mortician-man, the devil-man (a sinister Emperor of Ice Cream), rears up, proud, irresistible, to make a black

joke of the breakwater, the prisons, the henhouses and cattle — all man's silly attempts to preserve himself from the threats of the sea, criminals, starvation. The "Man in Black" is death the conqueror, the eternal seducer, drawing, overpowering his feeble victim:

And you, across those white
 Stones, strode out in your dead
 Black coat, black shoes, and your
 Black hair till there you stood,
 Fixed vortex on the far
 Tip, riveting stones, air,
 All of it, together.

Everything is locked up in the formal (though disrupted) *terza rima*; everything is run together, phrase after phrase, in this poem which is, in its twenty-one lines, just one sentence long. The man in black, the haunter, brings "All of it, together" into the only sentence there is, the inescapable period of death.

"Full Fathom Five," like "Man in Black," is set at sea, comprised of tercets which are syllabically, as they rise and fall (7-9-5), the figure of "A dragnet, rising, falling, as waves / Crest and trough." Again, the *terza rima* entraps (a dragnet) in undeniable but uncomfortable rhymes: seldom-foam, coming - far-flung - miles long, waves-sheaves -survives. Death is recognized but put off in "Medallion" and "Man in Black," represented in one as natural phenomenon or biological drama, abstracted in the other as a flat, faceless figure beckoning from the mist. In "Full Fathom Five," however, Plath brings the idea of death into proximity with herself. The "old man" addressed at the beginning of the poem is at once Alonso and Prospero of *The Tempest*, Neptune, Father Time, God, and her own "Daddy," the deceased Otto Plath. Here, as in "Lorelei," Sylvia Plath expresses the suicidal urge, the deathwish, that inspires and racks *Ariel*. Fascinated by death, attracted to its dangers and its human figure, driven herself to put "All of it, together," to clarify as "vapors / Ravel to clear-

ness on the dawn sea," she aspires: "Father, this thick air is murderous. / I would breathe water."

"Lorelei," the most anguished and suicidal of the poems in this quartet, appears to be based on two tales from the Rhineland, "St. Goar: Lorelei" and "Oberwesel: The Seven Maidens."¹² Both legends, significantly, are stories of fatherless siren-temptresses who frustrate and destroy the men they enrapture until the sirens themselves are punished by drowning. It is noteworthy that the concept of Germany (the native soil, the guilty fatherland of *Ariel*) is presented in Plath's "Lorelei" in an orderly style, the intellectualized seven-syllable lines, the *terza rima* which is a figure for "a well-steered country / Under a balanced ruler." But the rhymes are also gone manic enough (in-sheen, lapsing-dropping-sleeping, fishnets-turrets-float, glass-face-ponderous, etc.) to be a representation of the insidious, satanic power (the *geist* of Hitler?) of the seven sisters of Schönberg castle and the siren of the Lorelei rock, "Deranging by harmony / Beyond the mundane order, / Your voices lay seige." "Lorelei," in its combination of two tales from Rhineland folklore, thus reiterates the longing for death expressed in "Full Fathom Five" as the poet here insists "I would breathe water." But the poem moves closer to the spirit of *Ariel* by connecting the longing for death with fatherlessness, a contempt for men, a submerged impulse to incest, and an obsessive sense of national guilt. Like the German tales which are its prototypes, Plath's "Lorelei" is decidedly suicidal. Identifying with the siren who purposefully strides into the river (to join her "father dear" in the German tale) when captors threaten to throw her into the Rhine, envying the seven maidens who are taken unaware and drowned for their cruelty to suitors, Plath, as *persona* of the poem, invokes a river in a cold-blooded, determined, absolutely orderly way:

O river, I see drifting
 Deep in your flux of silver
 Those great goddesses of peace.
 Stone, stone ferry me down there.

In this poem the syllabics are especially significant: each breath wants to be a last gasp.

Plath's syllabics are probably best understood by way of Dylan Thomas, who used syllabics more than anyone seems to have realized — and then almost always in his most death-conscious lyrics. In "Especially When the October Wind," a poem wholly composed of ten-syllable lines (shrewdly appropriate to October, the tenth month), Thomas says, "My busy heart who shudders as she talks / Sheds the syllabic blood and drains her words."¹³ For Sylvia Plath, as for Dylan Thomas, syllabics are the slow drip, as unstoppable as the bleeding of a hemophiliac, of words expiring syllable by syllable — breathing out and dying.

Plath's structures, though possibly too contrived and practiced in *The Colossus*, are metaphorically important to her poems. Even in the midst of fixation on death (cosmically and personally) she was puzzling out her poems with meticulous, almost disinterested care. At the same time she was wildly aware of the things of this world, and her sensory perceptions, like her poetic structures, are vital to her meanings. Her visual sensations, her images, are incessantly vivid and exact, and, as a result, her poetry is particularly pictographic — as in the description of Brueghel's "Triumph of Death" in "Two Views of a Cadaver Room," in the verbal reproduction of a Rousseau painting in "Snakecharmer," in the pointillism (as infinitesimal as a Seurat) in "Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows," in the impressionism of "Man in Black," in her endless seascapes and landscapes. Ted Hughes has revealed the importance of art to her perpetual theme:

In THE DISQUIETING MUSES, as in SNAKECHARMER, THE GHOST'S LEAVETAKING and several poems not collected, she shows clearly how native she was to the world of the Primitive Painters. Her vision, particularly in its aspect — strong at this time — of the deathly para-

dise, belongs with theirs perhaps more readily than with anything in poetry, but these poems are, ultimately, about her world, not theirs, and it is not a world of merely visual effects.¹⁴

As vital as her vision is, the sensations of sound inform even more, both supportively and metaphorically, the substance of her poems. Her consciousness of sound — and her masterful, inspired use of sound effects — is likely something she learned while she was practicing and publishing through the 'fifties. The sound effects of Plath's poems are evidently indebted to Lowell and to Richard Wilbur (a contact she made through collegiate work with *Mademoiselle*). Plath's uses of sound, even if they are in principle imitative, are in practice original and brilliant. Nims remarks, "The sound of words — any page of Sylvia Plath shows her preoccupation with it. *The Colossus* shows a concern almost excessive . . ." After commenting on some of her onomatopoeic effects in "Night Shift," Nims continues, "More interesting than such onomatopoeia are those words whose sound is an analogy for, a little charade of, their meaning: *smudge* is smudgy to say; *globe* is a roundness in the mouth; *sling* hisses and then lets go. The thousands of hours Sylvia Plath spent with her thesaurus must have considered words as embodiments."¹⁵

Her fascination with the poetry of words themselves is nowhere better seen than in her petrified (both frightened and turned to stone) "Hardcastle Crag." The opening of the poem with its clicking consonants ("racket," "tacking," "crooks," "black," "firework") sounds itself like flint and steel striking up a fire:

Flintlike, her feet struck
Such a racket of echoes from the steely street,
Tacking in moon-blued crooks from the black
Stone-built town, that she heard the quick air ignite
Its tinder and shake

A firework of echoes from wall
To wall of the dark, dwarfed cottages.

Throughout the poem phrase after phrase sounds like itself: the irritating, restless "incessant seethe of grasses,"

the dull, underfoot sand-shuffling of "the sandman's dust / Lost luster under her footsoles," the hollowing out of "In the whorl of her ear, and like a scooped-out pumpkin crown / Her head cupped the babel," the snuffing of "Enough to snuff the quick / Of her small heat out," the grittiness of "mere quartz grit," and the end balking as the girl (runaway or potential suicide) makes her about-face: "She turned back."

"Point Shirley," a remembrance of her grandparents' seaside home which becomes a lament for the damage done in a hurricane and an elegy for her grandmother, fairly sums itself up in one despairing, antagonistic, stubbornly articulated phrase: "Such collusion of mulish elements." Sylvia Plath piles sound on sound as rapidly, passionately, and perhaps excessively as Hopkins heaps sight on sight and sound on sound in his ecstatic poetry; she makes her own "mulish elements" a "collusion" of substance and style. Again and again, she accomplishes what Richard Eberhart, lacking her super-charged sensitivity, implores: "If I could only live at the pitch that is near madness."¹⁶

Over and over, Plath's sounds almost become the things they are: the teat-pulling piglets in "Sow" who are "a litter of feat-foot ninnies / Shrilling her hulk / To halt for a swig at the pink teats"; the low-slung, filthily hungry goats of "Departure" which "shamble, morose, rank-haired, / To lick the sea salt"; the belly of the snake in "Medallion" where "white maggots coil / Thin as pins in the dark bruise / Where his innards bulged." Plath also has a handy ability of impersonating those infamous, clipped New England sentences. With all the plain small-mindedness of the man in Frost's "Mending Wall" who assures "Good fences make good neighbors," with all the terrifying terseness of the conversations in *Ethan Frome* or the chilling old saw in Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery" — "Lottery in June, corn be heavy soon" — Plath turns out her own witch-burning poem, "The Times Are Tidy." The last stanza recounts "The last crone got burnt up /

More than eight decades back" and then, with a bewildered shake of the head, gives its brief, shrugging approbation of the witch-hunts: ". . . the children are better for it, / The cow milk's cream an inch thick." The line jerks out of a laconic Green Mountain throat to stick in the reader's craw.

While Plath uses sound effects to intensify her meanings, she puns, creates ambiguities (mostly of the third type, for Empson enthusiasts), to extend them. Although she prudishly avoids sexual puns (no doubly-meant "dyings" here) she makes macabre ones reminiscent of Dylan Thomas' frequent play on "grave" (inherited, no doubt, from Shakespeare's Mercutio). Sylvia Plath's great favorite for word-play in *The Colossus* is "stiff." Without abandoning the ordinary denotations of "stiff" as adjective, she double-plays it as the slang noun for "corpse." The doomed queen in "The Bull of Bendylaw" gazes from her mulberry bower "Stiff as a queen on a playing card"; the skeleton of the woman in the Cambridge Museum in "All the Dead Dears" is "Rigged poker-stiff on her back"; "The Thin People" intrude in "stiff battalions"; the dead "Blue Moles" lying on a roadside "stiffen in a family pose." Similarly, museum-goers are "deadlocked" before the skeletons of women, mouse, and shrew, and the frogs of "Frog Autumn" slowly "croak" as winter comes on.

More notable, however, than any of her displays of skill with rhyme, metrics, syllabics or her facility with sound effects and puns is her gift for astounding but peculiarly apt metaphor. Nims has catalogued a number of her more striking metaphors:

In *The Colossus* we find "The pears fatten like little buddhas"; a corpse is "black as burnt turkey"; "Sun struck the water like a damnation" and "Everything glittered like blank paper"; dead moles are "shapeless as flung gloves . . . blue suede" and they have "cork-screw noses"; a dead snake lies "inert as a shoelace" and the maggots are "thin as pins"; burnt wood has the "char of karakul."¹⁷

Aside from these obvious ones, it seems to me that Plath's most surprising metaphors are made of or for parts of the body. For the runaway in "Hardcastle Crags" who is confused in the wind, "like a scooped-out pumpkin crown / Her head cupped the babel"; at Plath's grandmother's house at "Point Shirley," "The sea in its cold gizzard" grinds away at shore stones; sheep sleep "in their tussocks of wool"; in the woods a drunkard is watched by "An arena of yellow eyes"; and in "The Colossus" the simple, workaday girl creeps around the giant ruins brushing "The bald, white tumuli of your eyes" and rests "in the cornucopia / Of your left ear . . ."

The metaphors of *The Colossus*, themselves as distinctively powerful as the whole poems, announce most of the themes that become the madness and the ecstasy of *Ariel*. The restrained anger over social abuses ("Night Shift," "Strumpet Song"), the sense of shared guilt in history's ugliness ("The Thin People"), the love-hatred for the father ("The Colossus," "The Beekeeper's Daughter"), resentment of the tyrannical baby ("I Want, I Want" — her own Frieda?), the discomfort of the alien body, the sense of terror in nature and the attractive-repulsive identification with animals, the fascination with illness and hospitals ("The Stones"), the inescapable presence of "These barnacle dead," and, repeatedly, the drawing toward death, the urge to suicide — all are themes abundantly evident in *The Colossus*. But in this early work the poems keep their distance all the while they are struggling to say something definite. Thus, perhaps through mortal dread, perhaps through inconclusion, the mad stuff of Sylvia Plath's poetry is, in *The Colossus*, controlled — strait-jacketed, possibly — in learned, practiced method.

The obtrusive methodicalness of her poetry probably explains the recurrent uneasiness among her reviewers who, even when impressed by *The Colossus*, talk almost exclusively of Plath's expert craftsmanship. Judson Jerome, Guy Owen, Gilbert Philips, and John Simon are all

somewhat too much struck by her "architecture," her "obsessive fiddling with certain forms and devices" and not enough arrested by what is lurking in and behind the poems. Roy Fuller best sums up the general reaction: "And though the themes of these poems are the traditional deep ones of poetry — time, death, and the curiousness of the physical world — the poet is always well in control. Possibly too well."¹⁸ What Fuller implies is that Plath's impeccable workmanship is compulsive — as deliberate and tense as her habits of composition. "Writing poetry on a precise schedule," says longtime friend Lois Ames of Sylvia's days at Smith College, "she sat with her back to whoever entered the room, as she circled words in the red leather Thesaurus which had belonged to Otto Plath."¹⁹ She persisted in this practice, stiffly fixed on forms, calculating her words, writing "in her large, strange handwriting, like a mosaic, where every letter stands separate within the work, a hieroglyph to itself,"²⁰ Ted Hughes attests, throughout the writing of these early poems.

So careful, so conscious as to be self-conscious, Sylvia Plath constructed *The Colossus* out of everything she knew: literary tradition and her chosen poetic masters (Thomas and Lowell, most often), visual art, the vivid, heightened sights and sounds of the natural world, the vast, eerie otherworld of her imagination, and consummately skilled poetic craftsmanship. As E. Lucas Meyers has said of the first work, "[T]here is not an imperfectly finished poem in Sylvia Plath's book."²¹ But her formality, her obscurity, is sometimes artificial, often sedative. The manic and destructive imagination of Sylvia Plath which breaks out in *Ariel* is still too much what Sexton calls "technique" and too little "life." As of the writing of her first book, Sylvia Plath had yet to begin to "put together entirely" her life and her art and, as their end, her death. Which probably explains why, when an interviewer questioned her about *The Colossus* poems less than four months before

her suicide, she responded, "They, in fact, quite privately, bore me."²²

NOTES

- ¹Anne Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to Sing," in *The Art of Sylvia Plath: A Symposium*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970), p. 175.
- ²Sylvia Plath, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968). Quoted with permission of Alfred A. Knopf and Miss Olwyn Hughes.
- ³Anne Sexton, "The Barfly Ought to Sing," p. 177.
- ⁴Sylvia Plath, *Ariel* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966).
- ⁵"Sylvia Plath," in Newman, p. 58.
- ⁶"The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Technical Analysis," in Newman, p. 136.
- ⁷*Ibid.*, p. 146. The ten should include: "Manor Garden," "Night Shift," "The Eye-mote," "Faun," "The Bull of Bendylaw," "Suicide Off Egg Rock," "I want, I want," "A Winter Ship," "Blue Moles," and "Sculptor."
- ⁸*Ibid.*
- ⁹*The Bell Jar* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), p. 69. The similarity is remarked on in Lois Ames, "Notes Toward a Biography," in Newman, pp. 222-223.
- ¹⁰Sylvia Plath, "Electra on Azalea Path," *Hudson Review*, 13 (Autumn 1960), pp. 414-415.
- ¹¹Nims, in Newman, p. 147.
- ¹²William Ruland, *Legends of the Rhine*, 11th ed. (Kölm Am Rhein: Verlag Von Hoursch & Bechstedt, n.d.).
- ¹³*The Collected Poems* (New York: New Directions, 1957), p. 21.
- ¹⁴Ted Hughes, "The Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," in Newman, p. 189.
- ¹⁵Nims, in Newman, pp. 140-141.
- ¹⁶*Collected Poems, 1930-1960* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), p. 53.
- ¹⁷Nims, in Newman, p. 139.
- ¹⁸"Book Reviews," *London Magazine*, OS 8 (March 1961), 70.
- ¹⁹Ames, in Newman, p. 160.
- ²⁰Hughes, in Newman, p. 188.
- ²¹"The Tranquilized Fifties," *Sewanee Review*, 70 (Spring 1962), 216.
- ²²Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1966), p. 170.