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### Wendell Berry's Metaphysics of Sabbath

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**PLATH'S POEM FOR A BIRTHDAY:  
FORGING A NEW SELF**

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From 9 September to 19 November 1959, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes resided at the artists' colony of Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York. Pregnant with her first child, despite a gloomy prognosis of infertility the previous June, Plath was particularly sensitive to the autumnal beauty of the estate, where the decaying year contrasted with the new life within her. Her attitude toward her pregnancy was highly ambivalent, for her positive feelings clashed with fears about the child's wellbeing, about childbirth, and about her ability to combine motherhood with a writing career. Further, although her time was entirely free to write, she suffered bouts with her old nemesis, imaginative sterility, making such comments in her journal as "Paralysis again. How I waste my days. I feel a terrific blocking and chilling go through me like anesthesia" (J 326).<sup>1</sup> In an effort to coax her inspiration back to life, Hughes gave her set assignments on which to write and urged her to explore her past as another source of subject matter. Fortunately, during several periods of intense creativity, her inner conflicts, her memories, her condition of pregnancy, her immediate surroundings, and some of the set themes combined to produce a number of haunting poems, the most significant of which is the series entitled "Poem for a Birthday."

In a journal entry for 22 October Plath writes that she is beginning work on a new long poem in which she will experiment both with highly personal subject matter and with a freer, more jarring style:

"Ambitious seeds of a long poem made up of separate sections: Poem on [her] birthday. To be a dwelling on madhouse, nature: meanings of tools, greenhouses, florists shops, tunnels, vivid and disjointed. An adventure. Never over. Developing. Rebirth. Despair. Old women. Block it out" (J 324).

Carrying out the new commitment to reject her preoccupation with the father implied at the end of "The Colossus," the series focuses on the protagonist's own experiences and emotions as she battles to reconstruct herself rather than her father. The new style, as she notes, is "vivid and disjointed." An entry written the next day reveals her enthusiasm about what she has produced so far:

Yesterday: an exercise begun, in grimness, turning into a fine, new thing: first of a series of madhouse poems. October in the toolshed. Roethke's influence, yet mine. (J 325)

On 1 November she indicates her uncertainty about the worth of the content and her discomfort with the freer form with which she is experimenting: "I wonder about the poems I am doing. They seem moving, interesting, but I wonder how deep they are. The absence of a tightly reasoned and rhythmized logic bothers me. Yet frees me" (J 326). However, she completed it by 3 November when she sent it out to the *Kenyon Review*,<sup>2</sup> noting in a journal entry for 4 November, "Miraculously I wrote seven poems in my Poem for a Birthday sequence" (J 327).

As Plath herself acknowledges, Roethke is her major influence. Indeed, in March 1961 her editor at Knopf, which was going to publish the American edition of *The Colossus*, urged her to omit the entire poem as too derivative of Roethke's "Lost Son" both in imagery and rhythmic structure.<sup>3</sup> In addition, it resembles other Roethke poems. However, Plath notes that it bears her own original stamp too: "Roethke's influence, yet mine" (J 325; emphasis added). She echoes his terse, staccato style, his interest in the animal and vegetable world as reflected both in imagery and persona, his abandonment of logic, and his intimate subject matter. However, her vision is bleak and sinister rather than celebratory, her tone is depressed and weary rather than energetic and vibrant, and, while both write of mental instability, relationships with parents, and the search for identity, the details are distinctly her own. And she adds the specifically personal and female aspect of pregnancy.<sup>4</sup> Although many critics assert that Roethke's influence allows her to make a new breakthrough which leads directly to the brilliance of the late poems, I would argue that his was simply one more voice, style, and content that she tried, learned from, and then abandoned.

Other important influences are those of Lowell and Sexton, Radin, and Hughes himself. Her use of "madhouse" experiences reflects the first two, with whom she had constant contact during the previous spring while auditing Lowell's course in creative writing at Boston University, while echoes of stories from Radin's *African Folktales and African Sculpture* can be heard in several poems: "Mantis and the All-Devourer" in "Dark House," "The Bird That Made Milk" and "The Sun and the Children" in "Maenad," "Untombine, the Tall Maiden" in

“Witch Burning,” and “The City Where Men are Mended” in “The Stones.”<sup>5</sup> As in Roethke’s poetry, animals play a large part in these ancient tales, which, according to Hughes, Plath had read “with great excitement. In [them], she found the underworld of her worst nightmares throwing up intensely beautiful adventures.”<sup>6</sup>

Hughes made out for her lists of possible topics on which to improvise in the hopes of releasing her from the grip of imaginative paralysis. On the left-hand side of a sheet of paper located in the Plath Collection of the Smith College Library Rare Book Room is a long list of twenty-nine topics in Hughes’s handwriting; this original or master list includes the set themes that directly inspired six of the poems—“Witch-burning,” “The pathetic beast, whose tearful mumbblings I feed three times a day,” “Change of vision of a maenad, as she goes under the fury,” “The stones of the city—their patient sufferance (requisitioned as they are),” “Person walking through enormous dark house,” and “Flute notes from a reedy pond.” Nineteen are marked in the left margin with large dots, dashes, or asterisks. At the top right-hand side of the sheet is a short list in Plath’s handwriting containing the topics which she apparently selected from the master list to use in “Poem for a Birthday”: “Maenad,” “The Beast,” “Flute notes from reedy pond,” “Stones of city (The city where men are mended),” “Ants,” “Witch burning,” “Moult,” and “Old Newspapers.” She later dropped “Ants,” “Moult,” and “Old Newspapers” and added “Dark House (which appears on the master list) and “Who” (which does not). To the left of this list she wrote “Mother of Beetles” and “Dancers.” Clearly, Hughes’s attempt to spur her imaginative powers was successful, and his description of the work as a “deliberate exercise in experimental improvisation on set themes”<sup>7</sup> is entirely accurate as regards its origins.

“Poem for a Birthday” is highly ambiguous and difficult. Kroll notes that its inadequate logic produces incoherence and a lack of continuity both within poems and from poem to poem, its “several systems of imagery” are fragmentary and undisciplined, and its first-person speaker does not function effectively as an organizing device because she assumes so many different personae.<sup>8</sup> While I am in partial agreement with Kroll’s assessment, I believe that the poem is both logical and unified (often brilliantly so) if the narrator is seen as a single person who attempts to reconstruct a new self from the old, adopting various *metaphorical* identities to convey her conditions and feelings at various stages of her evolution. The seven poems trace her movement from a state of total emotional/psychological deadness,

through painful confrontations with and rejection of problems centering on parents and husband, to the verge of a transformed self dedicated to life and emotional health. This process involves a complexity of intensely personal subject matter, including not only the search for identity but also mental breakdown, family relationships, and pregnancy, conveyed in part by an equally complex pattern of imagery, much of which reflects stages in that process: "turnipy chambers" in an underground nest, the larva of the caddis fly, a grain of rice about to burst open, for example. Also suggestive of the speaker's psychological states are the disjointed, fragmented style, which largely abandons set meter and rhyme, and the various settings, which are surreal, nonhuman, nightmarish, and/or mythological in place of the realistic scenes of Winthrop, Benidorm, Cambridge, and Yaddo appearing in the majority of the 1959 poems.

The title has at least three meanings. It refers to Plath's own October 27th birthday, which always had great significance for her; the work, composed over a two-week period which included her birthday, was in one sense a present to herself, proving that her imaginative powers were alive and well. It also refers to the birth of the baby that she was expecting in five months and indicates her ambivalent feelings about the mysterious forces of life within her, and it is perhaps a tribute or gift to him or her. Finally, it alludes to the birth of a new or transformed self.

The first poem "Who" presents "the self at rock-bottom,"<sup>9</sup> emotionally dead and empty. Since the speaker feels that she has no identity, as indicated by the title, she cannot define herself in any human sense but only as a plant in a flowerpot, "a root, a stone, an owl pellet,/Without dreams of any sort," all of which convey her lack of self-esteem, her feelings of blankness and worthlessness. Because her "heart is a stopped geranium,"<sup>10</sup> she belongs in the "fusty" potting shed with its smell of mildew, its rusty tools, and its moldering cabbageheads: "I am at home here among the dead heads." Although not directly apparent, Plath takes these images of decay from the autumnal setting of Yaddo, specifically a greenhouse which she describes in the October 22 journal entry: "That greenhouse is a mine of subjects. Watering cans, gourds and squashes and pumpkins. Beheaded cabbages inverted from the rafters, wormy purple outer leaves. Tools: rakes, hoes, brooms, shovels" (J 325). The speaker has no desire to live ("If only the wind would leave my lungs alone"), but wishes either to die ("Mother of otherness/ Eat me") or to exist in a mindless state, thus escaping the dreams and memories which torment

her.<sup>11</sup> Two of the latter are obliquely evoked. The first is of her father in a garden of enormous purple and red flowers ("There were such enormous flowers,/ Purple and red mouths, utterly lovely"),<sup>12</sup> while the other is of the shock treatments she received during the time of her breakdown ("Now they light me up like an electric bulb./ For weeks I can remember nothing at all"). Thus the sequence begins at the lowest point, but from this nadir rebirth will slowly and painfully come.

In "Dark House," an improvisation on the set theme "Person walking through enormous dark house" contained in Hughes's master list, the house serves as a triple symbol of the speaker's earlier breakdown, of her current state of depression and artistic paralysis, and of her pregnancy.<sup>13</sup> Her personal responsibility for each is indicated in that "I made it myself." She describes herself metaphorically (not literally, as most critics suggest) as a mole-like creature who lives underground in a nest or den with "many cellars," "turnipy chambers," and "marrowy tunnels." This "dark house" is more sinister than comforting, more a labyrinth from which to escape than a shelter or refuge: "I must make more maps./ These marrowy tunnels!/ Moley-handed, I eat my way." At the end, however, she implies that escape is not possible, that she is trapped by her responsibility for some little creatures (apparently her offspring); thus she resigns herself to her fate, her role as mother: "It is warm and tolerable/ In the bowel of the root./ Here's a cuddly mother."

As a symbol of the speaker's (and Plath's) earlier breakdown, the house metaphor, like the bell jar in her novel, suggests entrapment in this psychological state, for which she was at least partly responsible; however, the loss of her father was a contributing factor, as indicated by the lines, "he lives in an old well,/ A stony hole. He's to blame," in which the well and hole refer to the grave. The details of the house also evoke the dark, clammy crawl-space beneath her house in Wellesley where Plath attempted suicide in 1953. That the speaker is "round as an owl" no doubt alludes to the weight gained by many mental patients as a result of their medications. As Esther notes in *The Bell Jar*, "I just grew fatter and fatter....I looked just as if I were going to have a baby" (BJ 157). The speaker rationalizes her failure to recover (to escape) from her breakdown by presenting it as a numbed, undemanding, and thus desirable condition, echoing Esther's description of her early period in the private mental hospital: "I woke warm and placid in my white cocoon....I was beginning to resign myself" (BJ 171).

As a symbol of the speaker's (and Plath's) current state of depression resulting from writer's block, the metaphor reflects an

atmosphere of gloom and melancholy (external as well as internal, since Yaddo appears particularly gloomy and foreboding on cloudy autumn days); her feeling of imprisonment (Plath felt trapped both in Yaddo itself, which she refers to as a monastery and a nunnery, (J 327-8), and in imaginative sterility, J 321); and her futile efforts to escape. The images of pregnancy suggest that she feels full of potential in terms of producing poetry ("Any day I may litter puppies/ Or mother a horse. My belly moves"), but ironically nothing happens. She partially blames a male figure called "All-mouth" who "licks up the bushes/And the pots of meat," who does have robust mental health and/or is artistically productive (a reference perhaps to Hughes). This aspect of the symbolism is brilliant in its similarity to the human brain ("cell by cell," "such eelish delvings," "marrowy tunnels"), the source both of mental functions and of the imagination.

Finally, as a symbol of pregnancy, the house reflects the complex formation of the foetus, the rounded belly of the pregnant woman, the anxiety over childbirth, the feeling of entrapment in an inescapable situation, and the resignation to being a "cuddly mother" once the baby is born ("Small nostrils are breathing"). Thus it effectively catches up the complex feelings of expectant mothers in general and of Plath in particular, especially her extreme apprehension about delivery and her concern that becoming a mother might end her career as a writer, that she might, as the last lines suggest, succumb to the all-encompassing and artistically numbing demands of tending a child. Here the person to be blamed is the man who made her pregnant and who perhaps will accept none of the responsibilities of child-care: "He lives in an old well,/ A stony hole," that is, in isolation from her and the baby.

"Dark House" is an amazingly complex poem whose interpretation depends a great deal on biographical information. While directly borrowing a good deal from Roethke,<sup>14</sup> it is, as Plath says, very much her own. Indeed, the first two poems might well be called Plath's psychological version of the dark night of the soul.

"Maenad," equally dependent on biography, is somewhat less complex. Written on the set theme "Change of vision of a maenad, as she goes under the Fury" in Hughes's master list, the poem has as its speaker a frenzied woman, though her frenzy emanates not from her participation in the orgiastic cult of Dionysus but rather from her attempts to escape the harmful influences of childhood and of parental figures, to reject her current identity, and to find a new one. Thus this poem, while full of anguish, takes the first small, though positive step toward the birth of a new, stronger self.

The two opening stanzas describe the speaker's childhood as an idyllic time of wonder and security. But things changed: "When it thundered I hid under a flat stone./ The mother of mouths didn't love me./ The old man shrank to a doll." She realizes that she cannot return to that earlier happy world ("O I am too big to go backward"), but must accept the painful, insignificant one in which she now lives and forge an independent adult identity. She dismisses the domineering mother who would prevent her from attaining that goal: "Mother, keep out of my barnyard,/ I am becoming another." While she yearns to elude this difficult undertaking by sleep or death ("Feed me the berries of dark./ The lids won't shut"), she knows that she must confront her past, present, and future: "Time/ Unwinds from the great umbilicus of the sun/ Its endless glitter./ I must swallow it all." Thus she enters a bizarre nightmare world along with others on a similar quest, asking an unidentified Lady (perhaps the moon, whom Plath often associates with a substitute mother-figure), "Tell me my name."

While in "Dark House" the speaker rejects the mother's negative influence, in "The Beast," a topic which appears as "The pathetic beast, whose tearful mumblings I feed three times a day" on Hughes's list of assignments, she rejects, or at least recognizes, that of a male who seems to be a composite father/husband figure, although the poem can be read as referring to either one or the other. Many details echo earlier poems on the two.

In a disillusioned, bitter tone, the speaker describes her former positive view of this male: "He was bullman earlier,/ King of the dish, my lucky animal." Whether father or husband, she saw him as powerful, kingly, and virile. If "dish" is given its ancient meaning of female genitalia, the husband seems the more likely choice (Plath often comments in letters and journal entries on her great luck in finding such a superior mate as Hughes). The next lines, however, with their echoes of "The Colossus," seem to refer to the father with whom, in effect, the sun rose and set and in whose presence life was easy. But she was separated from him, or from her concept of him, a reference to the father's death or to some disillusionment with the husband. Another possible reading is that, when she was sent away from the father, she met a lowly, inadequate substitute, a monkey who courted and married her.

In the second stanza she expresses her desire to get rid of the husband and/or the memory of the father, degrading him bitterly by calling him humiliating names such as "Mumblepaws" and "Fido Littlesoul" (shifting from bull to dog metaphors), reducing him to excrement or garbage ("the bowel's familiar/ A dustbin's enough for



him”), and revealing his fall from a kingly, authoritative figure to a fawning lackey with low self-esteem: “Call him any name, he’ll come to it.” To demonstrate, she addresses him as “Mud-sump” (a cess-pool) and “happy sty-face” (a dirty or infected face.)

She ends the poem with a barrage of degrading natural, domestic, and nursery-rhyme images reflecting her horrified realization of the low level of their relationship: “I’ve married a cupboard of rubbish./ I bed in a fish puddle./ Down here the sky is always falling.” The first line with its echo of “The Colossus” (“My hours are married to shadow”) and the second with its echo of “Full Fathom Five” (“Your shelled bed I remember”) suggest through the marital/sexual imagery an intimate relationship with the father; however, the husband is evoked as well. In both cases she expresses disgust for the male as a low form of life and for her intimacy with him. The closing lines in which she describes herself as doing her housework in the bowel of time with ants and shellfish for companions present a chilling portrait of domestic entrapment and marital disillusionment:

I housekeep in Time’s gut-end  
Among emmets and mollusks,  
Duchess of Nothing,  
Haitusk’s bride.

Having confronted her problems with mother, father, and husband, the speaker in “Flute Notes from a Reedy Pond” (a topic appearing both on Hughes’s and Plath’s lists) addresses yet another problem, the indifference of the universe in which she lives, and then indicates that she has freed herself from all illusions of meaning and comfort in human relationships or in this uncaring world. This poem is different from the others in the sequence in that the speaker uses the plural rather than the singular, the tone is more serene, the imagery is unified (creatures associated with ponds), the lines are longer and the meter less jarring, and there is a rhyme scheme. Plath may well have written it at Yaddo prior to her decision to do the series, including it once the latter was underway.

As in the previous summer’s “Frog Autumn,” the narrative voice speaks collectively as creatures living in a pond “at the lily root,” depicting the coming of winter, a symbol for the harshness of nature even toward its own: “There is little shelter./ Hourly the eye of the sky enlarges its blank/ Dominion. The stars are no nearer.” They go into hibernation, a state safer than death because they will no longer be

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tantalized by the “wingy myths” of a savior who will come to redeem them:

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.

Through this metaphor of pond animals, the speaker suggests that she rejects all consoling myths as false—those of a loving mother and protective, powerful father, of a glorious, kingly husband, of a redeemer who would save humanity from suffering and bring comfort into a bleak, indifferent universe. Since, therefore, she must rely solely on herself for meaning, she turns in the last two poems to the task of forging a new self, independent and meaning-bearing.

In “Witch Burning,” a subject appearing on both lists, fire is the agent of a painful but worthwhile purgation, a significant element of the process of transformation of the self. The speaker's agitated, apprehensive tone reflects both her fear and her excitement over the coming ordeal, whose outcome is clearly desirable. In describing herself, she shifts frenetically from metaphor to metaphor: a witch, a creature in a parrot cage, a grain of rice, a winged insect. While they appear entirely disparate, they are similar in that each is on the point of bursting free of some form of imprisonment.

The speaker first identifies herself as a witch who is to be burned at the stake, combining Hughes' interest in witches (J 219) and Plath's fascination with Joan of Arc (J 227; see also LH 147): “In the marketplace they are piling the dry sticks.” To avoid the pain of being burned alive, she has concealed herself in a false self (“I inhabit/ The wax image of myself, a doll's body”), but she realizes that this has only created or exacerbated her sickness. The only way to restore her health is to destroy the old self and create a new one; therefore, during this October, she climbs willingly “to a bed of fire.”

In the obscure and difficult second stanza, she acknowledges that it is easier to “blame the dark,” to justify and excuse her condition as the result of external forces, than to take action. The “mouth of the door” recalls the “shadow of doorway” in “Who” and the “cellar's belly” the cellars in “Dark House.” The three following lines evoke other justifications: a sinister “black-sharded lady” (the mother) keeps her in a cage; she is afraid of the dead (the father); she is married to a “hairy spirit” (the husband). While the caged creature to which she compares herself is not identified, Plath may have in mind the death-in-life figure

of the Sibyl at Cumae to whom Eliot alludes in the epigraph to *The Waste Land*.

The speaker then shifts to a most unassuming domestic image, a grain of rice in a pot on a stove. As the burners heat up "ring after ring," the grain swells until it is at the point of bursting: "It hurts at first. The red tongues will teach the truth." From a psychological viewpoint, she seems to suggest that looking at herself honestly is extremely painful, but leads to a meaningful transformation.

Finally, she either begs or challenges the "Mother of beetles" (the "black-sharded lady" of stanza two) to set her free.<sup>15</sup> Once released from her clutches, she will "fly through the candle's mouth like a singeless moth." Assuming an assertive stance quite different from the timid one of the previous stanza ("If I am a little one, I can do no harm"), she demands, "Give me back my shape" and insists with new confidence that she is prepared to analyze, understand, and thus free herself of her past: "I am ready to construe the days/ I coupled with dust in the shadow of a stone." The lines refer to her obsession with the father, echoing the stone imagery of "The Colossus," as well as the line "My hours are married to shadow," and/or to her marriage, with which she seems to be disillusioned. At the poem's end, she returns to the witch metaphor as the flames of purgation ascend to her ankles and her thighs and then engulf her entirely. It is highly significant that the darkness which has dominated the sequence gives way to bright light, symbolic of hope and renewal.

Perhaps because it is more accessible, "The Stones" is generally lauded as the best of the sequence by critics following Hughes's lead; however, it seems to me less intense, less complex, less challenging and exciting than several of the others. Making use of numerous concrete details from Plath's 1953 breakdown to trace the final stage of the speaker's psychological biography, it is the most directly autobiographical of the series. While that personal experience is its major source, another is Radin's folktale "The City Where Men are Mended," in which the daughter of a good mother is perfectly restored after her accidental death while the daughter of a bad mother is only partially reconstructed after her mother "pounds her to death in a mortar."<sup>16</sup> This set theme appears in Hughes's list as "The stones of the city—their patient sufferance (requisitioned as they are)," but is altered in Plath's list to "Stones of city (The city where men are mended)" with its direct allusion to the tale. With the exception of the personal subject of mental collapse, this final poem reflects little of

Roethke's influence, indicating that Plath was already moving out of his poetic shadow.

In describing herself, the speaker again chooses several disparate metaphors (a ruined stone statue, a foetus, a patient in a hospital, and a vase), but they seem less difficult because they are more conventional and because by now the reader is prepared for them. He/she is perhaps less prepared for the speaker's strangely passive tone rather than a strong, celebratory one more appropriate to this climactic moment of rebirth toward which the sequence has steadily progressed.

Lying on "a great anvil" to be painfully hammered into a new shape in the "city where men are mended," the speaker begins by recalling the past when she "fell out of the light" into a mental breakdown culminating in attempted suicide, for which she blames the "mother of pestles [who] diminished me." Echoing both Radin's bad mother and the "Mother of beetles" of the previous poem, this figure appears to be the speaker's mother, a negative force throughout the sequence. Merging Plath's own experience and the folktale, the speaker defines her condition of mental emptiness and paralysis in terms of a stone statue reduced to "a still pebble." Similarly, in *The Bell Jar* Esther associates pebbles with her suicide attempt beneath the house: "The silence drew off, baring the pebbles and shells and all the tatty wreckage of my life" (BJ 138). As Plath's unconscious moans led to her discovery beneath the house, so the "mouth-hole piped out" until the "people of the city" found the speaker.

As the shift to the present tense in line 15 indicates, the remainder of the poem focuses on the long three-part process of reparation and recovery in the present. First, after being in a coma, like a "foetus/[Sucking] the paps of darkness," the speaker returns to consciousness, adding the metaphor of the patient to those of foetus and statue; she is like a baby who, at the moment of birth, first sees, hears, and tastes as well as like a statue carved from stone by the chisel of the jeweler. In *The Bell Jar*, Esther relates her return to consciousness in similar terms, suggesting the closeness to Plath's own experience: "A chisel cracked down on my eye, and a slit of light opened" (BJ 139). However, as in "Lady Lazarus," the speaker is not joyous about her "resurrection," for the life to which she returns is dull and monotonous: "And daylight lays its sameness on the wall."

Second, she tells of the painful process of being repaired, of receiving skin grafts, electric shock treatments, a new heart; her wounds, described as cracks in a stone statue, are stitched back together:

The grafters are cheerful

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Heating the pincers, hoisting the delicate hammers.  
A current agitates the wires  
Volt upon volt. Catgut stitches my fissures.

Third, covered in bandages, she waits passively as the slow healing process takes place: "My swaddled legs and arms smell sweet as rubber." The bandages which swaddle her reinvokes the baby metaphor, while the comparison to rubber suggests that she is patched and retreaded like a tire, as is Esther after her stay in the mental hospital (BJ 199). She describes love both as her nurse, a positive, healing force, and as her curse, a negative, destructive force partially responsible for her breakdown in the figures of mother, father, and husband. Turning to a new metaphor, she compares herself to a "vase, reconstructed, [which] houses/ The elusive rose," the latter a symbol for the soul, the will to live, and/or poetic creativity; however, its positive qualities are immediately undercut in that it may be only a "bowl for shadows." This elegant, romantic metaphor so foreign to the tenor of the sequence as a whole gives way to the dominant recovering patient image as she indicates that the healing process is nearing its end: "My mendings itch. There is nothing to do./ I shall be good as new."

The passive, weary, even depressed tone is surprising, as the reader expects the voice to convey happiness, anticipation, or at least relief that the long ordeal is almost over and the new self is about to become a reality; Aird notes its similarity to the ending of Lowell's "Home after Three Months Away": "Cured, I am frizzled, stale, and small."<sup>17</sup> It is as if the speaker is resigned to something which she no longer desires, reluctantly accepting it almost against her will. Thus the sequence ends on an ambiguous, puzzling note.

Despite its difficulties, "Poem for a Birthday" can be read as a unified, forceful work depicting the anguished evolution of its female speaker from a condition of self-abnegation and emptiness through painful confrontations with troubled relationships in her past and present to the verge of the emergence of a new, more confident self. The numerous, abruptly shifting, and disparate metaphors seem intended to reflect the complexities of this psychological process, while the disjunctive form mirrors its fragmented, often illogical nature. The poem is important in the Plath canon for several reasons. First, it is among her earliest attempts to incorporate highly personal material more directly into her work, an influence of Roethke, Lowell, Sexton, and Hughes; it reflects her attempts during 1959 to deal with her past and present problems with parents and husband in sessions with her psychiatrist, her bouts with imaginative sterility, her ambivalent

feelings about her pregnancy, and her continuing search for her true identity, both personal and poetic. Second, it is among her earliest deliberate attempts to break away from the highly structured verse that she had always written in favor of a freer, more associative form. While it is overstating the case to assert, as have a number of critics, that the poem is a direct breakthrough to the spectacular poems of her last five months since several years as well as several poetic styles intervene, there is no doubt that it is a herald of their more open forms, their disparate metaphors, and their intimate subject matter, though not of their passion and fury. In the final analysis, however, "Poem for a Birthday" is significant not solely or even largely as a harbinger of things to come but in its own right for the psychological complexity of its themes, the inventiveness of its metaphors, and the demands it makes of and the insights it offers to its readers.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>References to the following works by Plath will be abbreviated in parenthetical documentation in the text: *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough (New York, 1982) as J; *The Bell Jar* (New York, 1978) as BJ; *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York, 1981) as CP; *Letters Home*, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (New York, 1975) as LH.

<sup>2</sup>List of poem submissions for the Fall of 1959, Plath Collection, Smith College Library Rare Book Room.

<sup>3</sup>This letter of March 29, 1961, from Judith B. Jones to Plath is in the Plath Collection of the Smith College Library Rare Book Room.

<sup>4</sup>See Marjorie Perloff, "Sylvia Plath's 'Sivvy' Poems: A Portrait of the Poet as Daughter," *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore, 1979), pp. 167-69, on the similarities and differences between Plath and Roethke. She concludes that, despite numerous borrowings, "Plath does not really resemble Roethke."

<sup>5</sup>Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York, 1976), pp. 96-97, 238, 240.

<sup>6</sup>"Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath's Poems," *The Art of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Charles Newman (Bloomington, 1970), p. 192.

<sup>7</sup>"Notes," p. 192. I am indebted to Ruth Mortimer, Curator of Rare Books in the Smith College Rare Book Room, for pointing out to me that the short list is in Plath's handwriting.

<sup>8</sup>Kroll, p. 91.

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<sup>9</sup>Kroll, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup>The line may echo Eliot's "Rhapsody on a Windy Night": "Midnight shakes the memory/ As a madman shakes a dead geranium."

<sup>11</sup>The references to "all-mouth" and eating apply to various figures, including the speaker herself, the father/husband, and perhaps the mother. Plath records in a journal entry for 4 October her realization upon reading Jung that many of the images he discusses appear in her dreams. One is "the image of the eating mother, or grandmother: all mouth, as in Red Riding Hood (and I had used the image of the wolf). All this relates in a most meaningful way my instinctive images with perfectly valid psychological analysis" (J 320).

<sup>12</sup>See the early version of "All the Dead Dears," the short story, "Among the Bumblebees," and "The Beekeeper's Daughter."

<sup>13</sup>There may be an echo of Tennyson's "Dark House" passage (VII of "In Memoriam"), although the two share nothing more than the speaker's depressed state.

<sup>14</sup>See Perloff, pp. 168-69, and Gary Lane, "Influence and Originality in Plath's Poems," *Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry*, ed. Gary Lane (Baltimore, 1979), p. 123, on Plath's borrowings from Roethke in "Dark House." In addition to their findings, there are also echoes from the poems in *The Lost Son*, *Praise to the end*, and *Words for the Wind*.

<sup>15</sup>The phrase "Mother of Beetles" is written beside Plath's list of topics. Kroll notes that "the epithet 'mother of beetles' comes from a Zulu tale collected by Radin—'Untombine, the Tall Maiden,' in which a monster, 'Onomabunge' ('mother of beetles'), devours a king's daughter. The monster is eventually slain, and the daughter disgorged—'reborn' from this mother" (p. 240).

<sup>16</sup>Kroll, p. 241.

<sup>17</sup>Eileen M. Aird, "'Poem for a Birthday' to Three Women: Development in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (London, 1988), p. 99.