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Patterns in the Poetry
of
Sylvia Plath, Denise Levertov, and Howard Nemerov

A Thesis
Presented to the
Department of English
and the
Faculty of the Graduate College
University of Nebraska at Omaha

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Cameron G. Northouse
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Accepted for the faculty of The Graduate College of the University of Nebraska at Omaha, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts.

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Chapter One

Patterns in Contemporary Neo-Romantic Poetry

Nearly all would agree that the first purpose of literary criticism is to determine the artistic merit of a written work. Of course, this general agreement founders when it is carried to its next logical step: deciding on the criteria for this aesthetic evaluation. The multiplicity of critical approaches currently appreciated creates a morass of aesthetic criteria that largely leaves the initial purpose of literary criticism without any definitive statement. We all know the purpose of criticism is to discern art from non-art, but the subjectivity of this intended purpose, coupled with its sheer simplicity of expression, leaves the critic with his own basic dilemma. This dilemma arises since the general agreement that criticism should be the determination of art is lost _a priori_. For why would the critic, excluding extreme personal prejudices or messianic attitudes, bother in the first instance to expend his talent on a work devoid of artistic merit? The answer is self-evident: he would not. Therefore, the general agreement on the first purpose of literary criticism is only tenable insofar as the determination of art is made solely through the critical effort and the desires that initiate it. The literary critic has determined in his own mind that a particular work, or collection

of works, is art before he begins to examine it from a specific critical viewpoint.

From the more general aspect of his subjective response to the more particular and objective endeavor of writing criticism, the literary critic makes a significant change in focus. Both the subjective and objective stages are discriminating attitudes toward a written work, but the action of the critic moves from a general determination of artistic merit to an analytical justification of his response. In the subjective stage, the critic reaches a conclusion on the artistic merit of a work, while in the second stage he justifies his conclusion according to his critical criteria. In all of the diverse methods of criticism, there is one clear element that this justification is based on, the matter of form. The form of a literary work is the total expression of its artistry, including thematic meaning, syntactical structure, and the external influences that act within the work to enhance the meaning. The only end that literary criticism can realistically serve is an understanding of the form, in whole or in part, of a work of art. The understanding of form, however, is an extremely broad goal and in itself accounts for the quantity of critical approaches. Each of these critical methods in their own way attempts to reach this formal understanding and differs only according to the narrowness or expansive nature of their criteria.

The approach which this essay attempts to offer is quite

narrow in its initial application, but expansive in the general conclusions it seeks to draw. The two primary assumptions that form the base of this approach are quite traditional. First, it is assumed that a literary work of art is a symbolic construct. The meaning of a particular work, at least in part, is dependent on the function of the organic symbol, that representation which is consonant with the total body of the work, interdependent on other symbols, and consistent in application. Following naturally from the first assumption, the second is a conception of the poet as mythmaker. The expression of the organic symbol within an individual literary work is seen in comparison with the similar constructs in other work of the same poet. When these organic symbols begin to appear in parallel and harmonious manners throughout a poet's work, the pattern of these symbols constitutes a definitive archetypal motif.[1]

As the poet develops and extends the archetypal patterns throughout his <u>mythos</u>, he creates an individual myth of the

[1]It is necessary to differentiate the use of the terms "archetype" and "archetypal motif" from their similar usages in other critical approaches, because the application of other definitions for these terms here is not wholly warranted. An archetype denotes a symbolic construct that is manifest in the general work of an author and is the larger pattern that develops from the repetitive use of organic symbols. It seeks its referent from within the work of an author and does not depend on external forms for definition. Thus, the poet is the creator of the archetype through imaginative expression and not a transmitter of a pre-existing cultural pattern. By this definition, an archetype is similar only in part to the use of the term in Jungian psychology and much of the literary myth studies, but finds the closest parallel use in the critical applications of Northrop Frye.

modern world. This myth is a personal creation, dependent on the internal patterns of the poet's work. It is the interrelation of these archetypal patterns that forms the poet's individualized mythological framework. Through the development of a poet's mythology, his work gains an organic context of meaning that informs the integrated nature of the organic symbols and the poet's narrative meaning. This individual mythology provides a unification of the thematic strands within a poet's work and depicts the formal necessity for his work to be organic. The context of meaning expressed in this mythological framework furnishes an increased understanding of the organic symbols functioning in a particular work. The organic symbol within a single work, being the initial formation that progressively expands to an archetypal pattern, assumes an increased capability for expression from the association of its meaning with the implications of the mythological framework. The organic symbol is the integrated particular within the general context of meaning provided by the analysis and delineation of the mythological framework.

The scope of this method in its initial applications is restricted to the internal workings of the organic symbols and is quite narrow regarding the source material for defining the meaning of these symbols, since it relies solely on evidence within a poet's work. The expansive application of this approach lies in the attempt to see similar myth patterns that evolve in more than one poet's mythological framework.

In the following three chapters, the concern is to determine the central myth that informs an individual poet's work and outlines a consistent mythological framework. In each chapter a single contemporary poet is dealt with in terms of the central myth that informs his poetry. Sylvia Plath creates a full mythological framework that moves from a state of innocence to a state of experience and finally to a rebirth of innocence (Chapter Two). The analysis of the poetry of Denise Levertov (Chapter Three) and Howard Nemerov (Chapter Four) shows a slight change of focus. Instead of explicating the entire mythological framework of these poets, these sections depict the central myth that informs their poetry and is the basic context of meaning that unites their poetical themes. Among the three poets certain recurrent, or archetypal, themes appear. These themes are that (1) modern man lives in a world of chaos,[2] (2) the meaning of life appears to be fragmented, (3) a primary problem of man in the modern world is a reliance on reason to the exclusion of imagination and intuition, (4)

[2]In the terms of modern poetry and psychology, chaos is a state of being in which man is separated from both the essence of the self and the natural life force. The mechanistic tendencies of the modern world are barriers preventing the individual's realization of self and the life force. Thus, in a very real way, the mechanical theories of order are false conceptions of life, because they separate man from his true capacity for fulfillment. Inflexible and contrary to dynamic growth, mechanical systems produce a temporary security of order, but then degenerate into disorder and confusion because they are incapable of a flexible response to life's variable circumstances. At the point of degeneration the rigidity of the mechanical system betrays its false nature, and the individuals who have grasped this system lose their sense of order and see the world as an abyss of confusion.

modern man is separated from the essence of life, (5) there is a need in the modern world of psychological integration and rebirth, and (6) because he possesses a greater perception of truth, it is the poet's role to show the organic nature of life. It is the determination of these general characteristics that forms the second stage of this essay's approach. From the narrowness of the initial focus on the poet's work, the recurrent archetypal themes are determined and the approach becomes more expansive in its purview.

I. Chaos in the Modern World

In the beginning was the scream[3]

Ted Hughes' line from <u>Crow</u> expresses the representative attitude of the contemporary poet toward the modern world. Outside of himself the poet finds a world confused and chaotic, a world where man lives a nightmare dreamt by Kafka, a world without apparent meaning or direction. It began with a scream of anguish at finding himself separated from the essence of his existence. The amount of contemporary literature that bears witness to this feeling of alienation is massive. But the pervasiveness of this attitude does not begin with such intensity and depth in American poetry until after World War II. The postwar poet differs significantly from his predecessors in one important aspect. T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, if

[3](London: Faber & Faber, 1970), p. 10.

it can be assumed that they are the zenith of ante-bellum twentieth century poetry, viewed the growing chaos of the modern world from a vantage of almost total objectivity. In the postwar period, however, the poet himself responds to the chaos from the intimate position of his own reaction. We cannot assume that it is the voice of Eliot speaking through Prufrock, but can we doubt the personal voice that characterizes the poetry of our own times? Only the most insensitive would attempt a defence of the proposition that Sylvia Plath in "Daddy," Denise Levertov in To Stay Alive, or Howard Nemerov in "The Salt Garden" are objective to the same degree as Eliot. It is true, of course, that to build conjectures from the works of three poets and attempt to say that they are representative is a precariously narrow road, but the same intense personal involvement characterizes a much longer roll of poets, including Roethke, Lowell, Ginzberg, Merrill, Hughes, Gunn, and an apparently never-ending list of others.

From a cultural standpoint, several reasons could be offered as explanations for this widespread phenomenon. Among the brighter prospects of these are World War II itself and the feelings of mechanization and horror that naturally arose out of it; the atomic bomb; the tension of the Cold War; a depressing societal influence to conform to mediocrity; and a host of other debilitating qualities often attributed as the cause for the decline of the modern condition. Perhaps because these are such well-worn cultural shibboleths or because

they are too narrow in their perspective, none of these explanations is quite satisfactory. What they do possess though is an element of unity. Each of the common explanations offered for the chaotic state of modern man implies a lessening respect for life, both individual ("my life") and general ("the life force"). If an inclusive symbol were to be picked for the twentieth century lifestyle, the machine, with all of its inherent potentialities, seems to be the most appropriate. We may be living the myth of the eighteenth century *philosophes* with one glaring gap. The universe and life appear to function as a machine, but the immutable laws that govern it are beyond comprehension.

Contemporary literature has focused almost exclusively on the plight of the individual within this mechanistic framework. Several systems of ontological import are variously employed as touchstones in the discussion, but none appear to be so predominant in contemporary poetry as the return to Romanticism apparent in the work of Plath, Levertov, and Nemerov. Given the proposition of a mechanical universe and man's relative subjugation to it, the Romantic attitude is a natural opposing point of view for the contemporary poet to work from. The tradition of Romanticism possesses inherent antipathies for mass culture, conformity, and mechanization, and it offers strong impulses toward individualism, imagination, and an intuitive understanding of nature and God. The three poets under study in this essay view man's condition as the deplorable

outgrowth of his dependence on the mechanistic theories of the rationalist's view of the world. To these poets the appearance of immutable mechanical laws is misleading and indicative of the frailty of man's rationalistic faculties for the understanding the meaning of life. Plath, Levertov, and Nemerov feel that it is rationalism, whose primary extension is the scientific attitude, that has brought man to a belief that all things can be understood by logic alone and that there is no real need for man to develop faith in the spiritual. In a practical fashion this view of rationalism demonstrates a broadening gap between C. P. Snow's two cultures. Whatever the case, modern man is seen as an internal schizophrenic, separated from the life of emotion and imagination by his reliance on rationalism. In The Hero With a Thousand Faces Joseph Campbell describes the split character of modern man: "One does not know toward what one moves. One does not know by what one is propelled. The lines of communication between the conscious and the unconscious zones of the human psyche have all been cut, and we have been split in two."[4] Modern man is left in the wake of his own rational achievements, the rationality that destroys his faith in mythological explanations. He is without the confidence inspired by a belief in forces higher than himself and must rely upon his own character and being for strength. The resulting effects of this condition are the feelings of

[4](Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 388.

alienation and the lack of self-identity that appear as recurrent themes of contemporary poetry.

The modern neo-romantic poet[5] attempts to overcome the modern disparities between rationalism and intuition and the conscious and unconscious by creating a new myth for modern man. C. G. Jung writes in <u>Psychology and Religion</u> that since the scientific revolution became extended by the demythologizing influence of the Protestant religions, western civilization has been in search of an apocalyptic myth to replace the discarded images of ritualistic Christianity.[6] In this same line of thought, Mircea Eliade in <u>Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries</u> says that the disappearance of myth has occurred only on the broad cultural level. "For at the level of <u>individual experience</u> it has never completely disappeared: it makes itself felt in the dreams, the fantasies and the longings of modern man; and an abundant psychological literature has now accustomed us

[5]The neo-romantic poet is the intellectual descendant of nineteenth century Romanticism. Numerous common characteristics are shared between the poets of neo-romanticism and the traditional Romantic attitude: the belief that the poet has a greater insight into life; a singular trust in nature as the only valid expression of the life force; an antipathy for scientific rationalism; an adulation of the individual man and the unique; and the transcendental outlook of dynamic organicism. The neo-romantic poet, even more than the traditional Romantic, relies on his personal experience and involvement in the world for the basis of his poetry. The poetry of neo-romanticism is a counterbalance against the scientific attitude of its age, just as traditional Romanticism was in large part the opposing force to eighteenth century New Science and rationalism.

[6](New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938), pp. 58-59.

to rediscoveries of both the big and little mythologies in the unconscious and half-conscious activity of every individual."[7] The neo-romantic poet depicts within his poetry examples of this "half-conscious" mythology, and, through its application on a poetic level of communication, he attempts to relate the elements of his mythological framework to the culture. A more detailed discussion of the poet's role in this context follows, but here it is important to note that the first example of mythic import that can be generalized from the poetry of Plath, Levertov, and Nemerov is the realm of chaos.

Through the works of all three poets, a number of characteristic images of the chaotic world recur. The most important of these is the image of war. With each poet, war evolves as the all-inclusive symbol of modern chaos. Plath finds herself in a constant and unabating struggle against the "Thin People" who attempt to draw her into submission before the altar of conformity. Her war is one for the integrity of self-identity. Both Levertov and Nemerov relate the image of war to a more abstract and monolithic external force. Levertov sees herself pitted in a life and death struggle for existence against the static and inhumane armies of the rationalistic world. Nemerov, however, sees the origin of war as beginning from the mechanical apologists, who have no regard for the individual being. Significantly differing from both Plath and

[7](New York: Harper and Row, 1957), p. 27.

Levertov, he does not make war on the mechanizers, but they on him. In all three cases, the conflict is between the individual and a greater, more massive external force. Other characteristic images of chaos are man's blind acceptance of traditional truths without the benefit of his own belief, the unthinking and static people who have met with a virtual living death, science and its attempts to control the mind, and the lack of value that modern society places on nature, imagination, and art.

II. Three Archetypal Patterns: Fragmented Meaning, Reason and Imagination, and the Separation of Modern Man from the Essence of Life.

The realm of chaos that appears in the mythological frameworks of Plath, Levertov, and Nemerov is built upon three basic archetypal patterns: fragmented meaning in the modern world, the conflict of reason and imagination, and the separation of modern man from the essence of life. The first two of these patterns are factors in the origin and perpetuation of chaos, while the third is the effect of the chaotic world on the individual. Each of these patterns relates to the basic constitution of chaos through the characteristic split nature of their expression. Meaning is split into fragmented partial truths or is completely degenerated to falsehood. The conflict between imagination and reason displays the divided

nature of the human psyche and the breakdown of a homogenous society that values the integrated revelations of both the rational and imaginative realms into a state divided into two cultures. The separation of modern man from the essence of life is symptomatic of the earlier two patterns. The individual existing in the chaotic state of confused meaning and conflict of the two realms of human nature has little security to afford him strength and no external standard of values against which to compare and analyze his life. In a mythological context great gaps exist between the reality of the modern chaos and the reality of nature and the life force that the contemporary poet is forced to deal with. It is of necessity that a viable myth in the modern world, first, depict the conflicting and split nature of chaos, second, show the conflict to be the superficial result of allegiance to chaotic patterns, and, third, provide a mythological explanation that synthesizes the contraries of chaos and illustrates the natural harmony of the world.

Plath, Levertov, and Nemerov, working from the neo-romantic purview, expend a great deal of their poetry on the delineation of chaos and its three primary patterns. Plath develops the archetypal pattern of fragmented meaning in a more detailed and structured manner than either Levertov or Nemerov, and it is more instructive to use her poetry as an example in this area. In turn, Nemerov is a clearer example of the reason and imagination conflict, and Levertov is representative of

the separation of modern man from the essence of life. Of course, such illustrations are only a matter of convenience, because all three patterns appear in the poetry of each, and whatever differences exist are only in the nuances of application.

Within Plath's poetry the mythological framework is developed in three distinct stages: an unfallen world of innocence and harmony, the fallen world of chaos and fragmentation, and a world of reborn innocence in which man is redeemed from chaos. In the first stage, the meaning of life is completely harmonious and recognizable in its organic unity to the innocent eyes of unfallen man. During this stage man experiences the full splendor of the Romantic vision's concept of transcendental harmony. Everything is meaningful and interdependent, and man is wholly cognizant of his position in nature and of the meaning of life. As the individual moves out of this unfallen harmony, he progressively encounters experiences that do not correlate with his previous conceptions of truth and meaning. As these encounters increase, the individual moves farther into the state of experience and finds the meaning of his life to be increasingly more fragmented and the world around him more chaotic. In the state of experience, man loses the stability and security that was his in the unfallen nature of innocence. After describing these general characteristics of the division between harmony and chaos, Plath outlines two possible stages of the individual's growth that determine

whether he succumbs to chaos or transcends it and is redeemed in a post-experience world of innocence. Dependent on the individual's free choice and strength of self, he either comes to a final end of submission to chaos and death of the self, or he undergoes a purgative death of that portion of the self alien to harmony and is reborn into a state of innocence. Within Plath's framework the individual is presented with these divergent courses of action. The first course, chaos, is opposed to the very nature of man's being and demands that the individual accept a false and superficial existence. The second, offering the hope of a release from chaos, obligates the individual to resist the temptation of accepting the oppositions as truth and to rely on the imaginative and intuitional elements of his character as the source of meaning.

The conflict of reason (or rationality) and imagination (or intuition) has a long tradition in literature. With the exception of such scientific apologists as C. P. Snow, this tradition normally conforms to a categorical rejection, especially in the twentieth century, of the scientific attitude toward life. Representative of the contemporary poet's common attitude toward science is a statement by Robert Graves that "Technology is warring openly against the crafts, and science covertly against poetry."[8] Howard Nemerov discusses this conflict from a different point of view than most of his

[8] "The Secret War Between Science and Poetry," Intellectual Digest, II, viii (April 1972), 54.

contemporaries outside of neo-romanticism. The central unifying myth of Nemerov's poetry is that all things in the universe are organically related to one whole and that oppositions between elements of the whole are superficial manifestations of an incomplete view. From this context, Nemerov would reject the view that science and reason stand in opposition to poetry and imagination. The realm of chaos in his framework has its origins in man's susceptibility for believing that the world is governed by dialectical tensions, because each man that assumes the dialectics to be true denies nature's organic unity. Most of Nemerov's poems are variations on this single theme, the myth that unites his poetry into a single corpus. Through all of these, the difficulties and obstacles that appear to be inherent in the modern world are seen to have roots in the falsity of opposition. War, materialism, pride, greed, and inhumanity are only the symptoms Nemerov depicts of a much larger and more subtle underlying problem. The individual becomes involved in the confusion of chaos as he accepts the teachings of the chaotic world that tell him science and reason can solve his problems. As this malign tendency overtakes the individual, he goes farther into the alienated state of chaos. For the perceptive man, the growth of this one-sided view of truth reaches its culminating point when he comes to a recognition of his alienation from the life force and despairs with the incompleteness of his rational quest for truth. Nemerov does not suggest that the road back to a more stable character is easy,

but finds that man's only chance for salvation from chaos is to return to a balanced viewpoint and eventually come to a perception of the dynamic organicism of the natural world.

The fragmented state of meaning in the modern world and the superficial conflict between reason and imagination result in a situation where modern man is separated from the essence of life. Denise Levertov accepts this proposition as the most indicative example of how chaos and confusion have debilitated the general condition of mankind. She sees man as the constant combatant in an unrelenting war for life, a war against the forces of chaos that attempt to dehumanize the individual and isolate him in a mechanical and static life system. Levertov believes that in the modern world man must make a conscious effort to escape from his chaotic enemies. It is the proclivity of the modern world for systems that receives the major thrust of Levertov's critique. In almost every case, the system that becomes more identifiable than the individual is illustrative of the extreme degenerative menace of chaos. To Levertov, a man must remain a free agent, responsible to himself for his actions and dependent on nature only as the source of truth and stability, in order to overcome the influence of chaos. Of the three poets dealt with in this essay, Levertov is the only overt political revolutionary, and in large part this practice of her ideas speaks to the faith she places in them. Any system is to be rejected as an absolute fountain of truth, because as the individual

loses his freedom to the mass, he becomes separated from the essence of his existence. Man's true perception of himself and the world depends on a life uncluttered with superficial allegiances to static ideals and on the freedom of each man to express and discover his unique position in nature and the validity of his own existence.

III. Modern Man's Need for Psychological Integration and Rebirth

A necessary element in any mythology is a utopian vision, a hope for redemption from the fallen world to a realm of harmony and stability. This utopian element appears to be the quality that provides the attraction of the myth for the individual, but also the seeds of destruction when the vision is demythologized. A utopian vision that is felt (or "proved") to be false holds no attraction and often results instead in a violent rejection of the entire mythology. Contemporary poetry has had to deal with the mythological wasteland of the twentieth century where all of the stable myths of the past have degenerated into static rituals or meaningless pastimes. Apart from a theological discussion of the vitality of religion in the modern world, Christianity has largely undergone this degeneration process of the worn-out myth. Its replacement on a grand scale has not yet arrived, despite the claims of numerous cultural activities that attempt to usurp Christianity's

old position. The contemporary poet cannot rely on any external mythological framework to draw, consciously or unconsciously, material that has widespread cultural acceptance. The poet is left to his own devices regarding myth, and the myth existing in contemporary poetry is dependent only upon the poet's interpretation of current cultural patterns.

With remarkable consistency, Plath, Levertov, and Nemerov all view the element of the utopian vision in the same terms. The origin of the vision and the necessity for its creation lies in the pervasive feeling in the works of these three poets that the world is in a state of chaos. To assume that modern man is doomed to a chaotic world with all of its confusion and fragmentation is a more pessimistic attitude than can be expected from contemporary poetry. In nearly every case of twentieth century criticisms of the modern world and the state of mankind there is always a quality of redemption: science holds forth the possibility of a completely ordered and peaceful world; the vision in existential philosophy is that man, being solely responsible for the essence of his existence, can achieve an internal harmony and stable being regardless of external forces. The neo-romanitcism of Plath, Levertov, and Nemerov postulates the utopian vision that the individual and, in turn, the culture can transcend the chaos of the split natured modern world and recognize the organic harmony of nature and the validity of the self.

In order to accomplish this vision, the individual must

purge himself of chaotic attributes. He must resist the temptation to accept chaos as valid, reverse his lifestyle away from rationalism, and begin to look deeply into the self and recognize (instead of use in the materialistic sense) the rhythm of the natural world. These strictures placed on man's normal existence in the modern world form the basic ritual of the neo-romantic mythology. It is by performing this ritual in good faith that the individual comes to a redemption from chaos. The parallels between these strictures and the mysteries and rituals of other cultural mythologies are obvious and demand no further comment beyond recognition in the scope of this essay. The primary thrust of the redemptive quality in the mythological framework of contemporary poetry is to reevaluate man's position. From an initial base in an excessive dependence on rationalism and science, the new ritual attempts to seek and direct modern man to an equilibrium of reason with imagination, both on the individual and cultural levels. By achieving an equilibrium modern man will broaden his perception of the world and begin to find bridges between the fragments extant in chaos. The progression of growth extends beyond the assimilation of fragmented meaning to man's eventual cognizance of his place in the world and a reunion of man with the essence of life. At this reunion, man is in a very real fashion reborn out of chaos and achieves recognition of nature's organic design, the utopian vision of neo-romanticism.

IV. The Role of the Poet

Throughout this introduction, Plath, Levertov, and Nemerov have been referred to as neo-romantic poets. This designation arises from two elements of their poetry which are held commonly with traditional Romanticism. First, the attitude toward man in their work is that the individual must be brought to a recognition of the natural world, be purged of chaotic tendencies, and be reborn in a new light of perception into the organic processes of life. This same impulse is demonstrated in the traditional Romantic attitude toward mankind, from Rousseau's _Emile_ to Mary Shelley's _Frankenstein_. The second element of similarity is likeness of the traditional and neo-romantic views of the poet's role. The most often quoted and generally accepted Romantic definition of the poet's role is Shelley's "A Defence of Poetry," which ends:

> It is impossible to read the compositions of the most celebrated writers of the present day without being startled with the electric life which burns within their words. They measure the circumference and sound the depths of human nature with a comprehensive and all-penetrating spirit, and they are themselves perhaps the most sincerely astonished at its manifestations; for it is less their spirit than the spirit of the age. Poets are the hierophants of an unapprehended inspiration; the mirrors of the gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present; the words which express what they understand not; the trumpets which sing to battle, and feel not what they inspire; the influence which is moved not, but moves. Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world.[9]

[9] _The Complete Works of Percy Bysshe Shelley_, ed. Roger Ingpen and Walter E. Peck (London: Gordian Press, 1965), VII, 140.

If we compare Shelley's statement to two comments by Denise Levertov the similarities are quite apparent. Levertov writes in "Some Notes on Organic Form" of the poet's initial step in creating a poem. She views this creation as an unconscious activity aroused by a peculiarly meaningful experience in the poet's life, which compares to Shelley's "unapprehended inspiration:"

> . . .the condition of being a poet is that periodically such a cross section, or constellation, of experiences. . .demands, or wakes in him this demand, _the poem_. The beginning of the fulfillment of this demand is to contemplate, to meditate; words which connote a state in which the heat of feeling warms the intellect.[10]

Levertov also sees a more expansive nature to the poet's role in society, a stance close to one of "the unacknowledged legislators of the world."

> I believe poets are the instruments on which the power of poetry plays.
>
> But they are also _makers_, craftsmen: It is given to the seer to see, but it is then his responsibility to communicate what he sees, that they who cannot see may see, since we are "members one of another."
>
> . . . .
>
> I do not believe that a violent imitation of the horrors of our times is the concern of poetry. . ... I long for poems of an inner harmony in utter contrast to the chaos in which they exist. Insofar as poetry has a social function it is to awaken sleepers by other means than shock.[11]

The areas of comparison between the traditional and

[10] _New Directions 20_, ed. J. Laughlin (New York: New Directions, 1968), p. 124.

[11] "Statements on Poetics," in _The New American Poetry_, ed. Donald M. Allen (New York: Grove Press, 1960), pp. 411-12.

neo-romantic views of the poet are clear. Each assumes that the poet stands above the common state of mankind because of his innate ability to perceive the harmony of the natural world. The origin of a poem is seen in each view to be a creation of the unconscious whereby the poet intuitively responds to organic nature and creates in a state of virtual selflessness, being only slightly aware, if at all, of the depth of meaning that exists in the poem. The last major point of comparison is the commonly shared belief that the poet is obligated to communicate his intuitive insight to society, due to his unique qualities of perception and because a faith in the organic nature of the world and mankind would necessitate the communication of its truth.

Although Levertov's comments on the poet's function are the most cogent of the neo-romantics, Nemerov and Plath demonstrate similar views. The true test of a poet's belief in his role is his practice, and the practice of the neo-romantics displays one marked difference from the traditional Romantic stance. The poetry of neo-romanticism extends the reliance on the individual's subjective response to heightened experiences, both internal and external, within his life to an even greater degree than is apparent in the traditional Romantic practice. Sylvia Plath describes this element as "deflection." The poet responds tangentially to dramatic events of the world outside of himself. He speaks in the basic terms of the life force and not in the "abstract doubletalk of 'peace' or 'implacable

foes.'"[12] "My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighbouring graveyard. Not about the testaments of tortured Algerians, but about the night thoughts of a tired surgeon."[13]

Through his poetry the neo-romantic poet communicates a new mythological framework to the modern world that attempts to compensate for man's presently unequal and separated position and offer imaginative insights into the nature of truth and man's position in the world. From the poet's introspection into his own character, he demonstrates a way of redemption out of chaos and communicates the progression of his discoveries within his poetry. By relying on the internal structure of the mythological framework for the context of meaning of his poetry, the neo-romantic poet does not fall prey to either the harsh polemics of one extreme of contemporary poetry (Ginsberg, LeRoi Jones), or the unnecessary obscurity characteristic of the other extreme (Richard Wilbur). Plath, Levertov, and Nemerov create poetry of deep meaning and significance for the modern world that is communicated with a style of true artistic expression.

[12]"Context," London Magazine, I, 11 (February 1962), 46.

[13]Ibid.

Chapter Two

Waiting for the End: Sylvia Plath

In recent years the image of Sylvia Plath has grown into a depiction of the modern tragedy. Most of the exhortations devoted to this image by the Plath cultists center around her last poems and her suicide. The major emphases of this cult movement are Plath's *angst* as an individual facing society, a psychological reduction of Plath's poetry as a case history of mental deterioration, the artist Plath as a sensitive outsider in an insensitive society, and the poet as both the depiction and depictor of the woman's exploited position in American culture. The creation of this cult is understandable in terms of the impact of the later poems and their literal statement coupled with a feeling that Plath's suicide somehow confirms the tortured and agonized mentality that is believed to have produced such poems as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." The cult believes that Plath's poetry can be read only as a unique extension of biographical data. This current unwillingness to separate her poetry from her life may be the greatest tragedy of all for Plath's poetic brilliance, because her poetry is often forced into an unnatural framework of biography and denied critical examination on its own terms, metaphor and symbol. If this latter basis is established for interpretation, Plath's

poetry is seen to be of a consistency far greater than the biographer's details would imply. The late poems are consistent with the mythological framework that is begun in The Colossus. This internal poetic myth is centered in one primary pattern, symbolic death and rebirth. The minor themes, the seeming chaos of the world, innocence and guilt, separation of the conscious and unconscious portions of the psyche, the extension of the self in a shadow figure, and the malign male figure, are all subordinate, yet necessarily integrated, to the major archetypal pattern.

To be sure, all of the writings on Plath's poetry are not totally misguided, but the term "confessional" has tended to diminish criticism in favor of biographical reduction. The first clearly critical step toward the analysis of this poet's work is in Annette Lavers' "The World as Icon--on Sylvia Plath's Themes."[1] Focusing interpretation on Plath's recurring themes, Lavers shows the poet's symbol to be associational in quality and not substance. Therefore, the moon, a negative symbol connotating a death image, extends by association to the multitude of moon-like qualities (silver, pearl) and still retains the original "death" connotation in all instances. By tracing the imagistic patterns and their connotations, Lavers determines most of the thematic outlines of Plath's poetry. The consistency

[1] In The Art of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman (London: Faber and Faber, 1970), pp. 100-35. All subsequent references to this source will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Lavers, Sylvia Plath, p. --)."

of the images' qualitative associations creates a rigid framework of meaning derived from the poetry as a complete corpus. Thus, the obligation toward biographical interpretation is destroyed. Lavers believes that Plath's "mood is virtually always negative . . .and ranges from mere foreboding to hopeless revolt and utter despair" (Lavers, Sylvia Plath, p. 104). The feeling that the overriding mood is negation, however, denies the central death-rebirth archetype Plath creates and subverts the meaning of the organic myth. The myth of rebirth becomes clear through an assimilation of the subordinate themes with the transcending symbols of regeneration. The poetry's mood thereby escapes from the passivity of despair, seemingly apparent in isolated poems and the biographical readings, and becomes the hope of cathartic genesis.

I

The world portrayed in Plath's poetry is surrealistic and tortured by a chaos of unbelievable magnitude. The descriptions repeatedly concentrate on the sterility of life caused by "Lantern-jawed Reason" and "squat Common Sense"[2] and the cluttered material things that keep an individual from spiritual interaction with nature and another individual. The world, then, becomes a place where man unwittingly lost sight

[2] "The Death of Mythmaking," Poetry, XCIV, vi (September 1959), 370.

of meaning and life goes on in a turbulent hurricane of nothingness. This facet of the Plath mythology is the most readily apparent, surface element of the poems, but beyond this surface lies the necessity of the individual to attempt an ordering resolution. For Plath, no easy answers to the dilemma are to be found. It is not simply a matter of introspective analysis, as the poetry of Robert Lowell suggests, nor does she find stability in the conventional truths of western culture. The myths of the past fail to bring order to the present, because they have become structured fables about unbelievable dead gods. The poet's "cold vision" rejects the extant shells of the former myths and "Will have no counterfeit/ Palmed off on it."[3] The path toward order, also, is not simply a matter for "my fantasy alone," but is created by

> Ravening through the persistent bric-a-brac
> Of blunt pencils, rose-sprigged coffee cup,
> Postage stamps, stacked books' clamor and yawp,
> Neighborhood cockcrow--all nature's prodigal backtalk,[4]

to unify the mind with nature and transcend the chaos of reason.

The mythical explanation for the beginning of chaos is that man created this state by placing shackles upon his own freedom in the attempt to rationalize the irrational (spiritual) and oppose nature. The genesis of chaos and man's separation from nature is caused by his prideful act of obstructing nature for

[3]"On the Difficulty of Conjuring up a Dryad," Poetry, XC, iv (July 1957), 235.

[4]Ibid.

his own ends. " Lesson in Vengeance,"[5] the poem relating the birth of chaos, tells that it came about "In the dour ages/ Of drafty cells and draftier castles,/ Of dragons breathing without the frame of fables." In this natural time, the fantastic existed as a living myth within the mind of man, but then the "saint and king" became so powerful that they intruded on the freedom of nature and tried to obstruct its course. Cyrus went further and took vengeance on nature for the death of another by splitting the River Gyndes "into three hundred and sixty trickles/ A girl could wade in without wetting her shins." In this manner, two elements of Plath's symbolism are given their significance: the circle signifies the rational existence of Cyrus and the quality of mathmatical perfectibility; in opposition to the circle is the natural life symbol of water. Both of these symbols retain these qualitative associations throughout Plath's poetry, and their opposition continually brings chaos. The contemporaries of Cyrus recognized what had been created by their power, but the "latter-day sages,/ Smiling at this behavior, subjugating their enemies/ Neatly, nicely, by disbelief or bridges,/ Never grip, as their grandsires did, that devil who chuckles/ From grain of the marrow and the river-bed grains." As in the Christian myth of the fall of man, Plath's mythology is galvanized to the problems of man's lack of harmony, both physical and mental,

[5]"A Lesson in Vengeance," Poetry, XCIV, vi (September 1959), 371.

that impede spiritual growth and awareness. Of course, this is not to say that Plath is consciously directing her private mythological view along any particular external religious or philosophical grounds. However, the similarities between Plath's mythical structure and the Christian myth, and most other mythological patterns, work to substantiate her framework as a true myth in the archetypal sense.

Inherent in the fall of man is the birth of antagonistic forces into the world, which cause disharmony and faults. In the world before the fall, man, myth, and nature coexisted in mutual harmony. After the fall, man is still capable of realizing harmony, but there are external factors which mitigate against fulfullment. Lacking the recognition of this change, the world appears to man as being cast from opposites that are continually struggling and, thus, producing discord. Men are active while being static, innocence exists in the same being with guilt, nature both comforts and destroys, and chaos can be order. The individual seen in "Night Shift" stands between the crashing and booming of the mechanical life and the deaf passiveness of other men who fail to see the chaos about them. The world is filled with the deafening sounds of activity, but in

> These stilled suburbs: nobody
> Startled at it, though the sound
> Shook the ground with its pounding.[6]

[6]Sylvia Plath, "Night Shift," The Colossus (New York: Vintage, 1968), p. 7. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Colossus, p. --)."

The individual searches for the origin of this constant "clangor" and finds it to be "Main Street's/ Silver factory," ("Night Shift," Colossus, p. 7) where large

> Hammers hoisted, wheels turning,
> Stalled, let fall their vertical
> Tonnage of metal and wood;
> Stunned the marrow. Men in white
>
> Undershirts circled, tending
> Without stop those greased machines,
> Tending, without stop, the blunt
> Indefatigable fact. ("Night Shift," Colossus, p. 8)

Lavers shows that white and silver imageries are always negative symbols denoting sterility and stasis (Lavers, Sylvia Plath, pp. 108-12). This, coupled with the circle symbols formed by the men and machine, produces the larger metaphor of meaningless activity accomplishing "the blunt/ Indefatigable fact" of nothingness. This same duality exists in "The Times are Tidy," where men do nothing, but activity is carried on by machine. The natural result of this type of passive withdrawal is the death of the spirit, but, also, a recognition of the futility of fighting against this force, and thereby producing more chaos, is made clear:

> There's no career in the venture
> Of riding against the lizard,
> Himself withered these latter-days
> To leaf-size from lack of action:
> History has beaten the hazard.
>
> The last crone got burnt up
> More than eight decades back
> With the love-hot herb, the talking cat,
> But the children are better for it,
> The cow's milk's cream an inch thick. ("Times are Tidy,"
> Colossus, p. 75)

Above the world, "The abstracts hover like dull angels"[7] waiting to descend upon innocence and destroy it. As the child enters the world, she is stable, secure, and whole; "she is able/ To rock on all fours like a padded hammock."[8] In contrast the adult recognizes the chaos existing about her and cries in her struggle:

> The gigantic gorilla interiors
> Of the wheels move, they appal me--
> The terrible brains
> Of Krupp, black muzzles
> Revolving, the sound
> Punching out Absence! like cannon.
> It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other.
>
> I am dragging my body
> Quietly through the straw of boxcars.
> Now is the time for bribery.
> What do wheels eat, these wheels
> Fixed to their arcs like gods,
> The silver leash of the will--
> Inexorable. And their pride!
> All the gods know its destinations.
> I am a letter in this slot--.[9]

As the innocent grows older, she begins to "know your estate so well/ I need hardly go out at all."[10] Her innocence and nature become sealed off by pride's "superhighway," where

[7]"Magi," The New Statesman, LXI (March 31, 1961), 514.

[8]Ibid.

[9]"Getting There," Ariel (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 36. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Ariel, p. --)."

[10]"Private Ground," Crossing the Water (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 36. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Crossing, p. --)."

> Trading their poisons, the north and south bound cars
> Flatten the doped snakes to ribbon. In here, the grasses
> Unload their griefs on my shoes,
> The woods creak and ache, the day forgets itself.
> ("Private Ground," Crossing, p. 36)

Assuming the "grief" of nature into her own spirit, the individual gathers up the "Morgue of old logs and old images" ("Private Ground," Crossing, p. 36) and rids her spirit of them because they have become only "reflections" in life. Therefore some resilience of individual identity can be gained and a degree of stability and viable order is allowed to continue.

Plath's mythology contains an underworld area people by the non-living mass that has succumbed to the stasis and sterility imposed by the abstract forces of chaos. This world is the land of the "Thin People," a race "meagre of dimension as the grey people/ On the movie screen" ("The Thin People," The Colossus, p. 32). These underworld creatures exist as if they were enclosed in a glass ball that keeps them away from life. "The inhabitants are light as cork,/ Everyone of them permanently busy" ("A Life," Crossing, p. 53) doing the tasks of idleness and despair. They are "wrapped up in themselves as in thick veiling/ And mute as mannequins in a dress shop" ("On Deck," Crossing, p. 55) and stand isolated from each other. The Thin People play at life as if it were a game of bingo, while "At their feet, the sea waves bow in single file,/ Never trespassing in bad temper" ("A Life," Crossing, p. 53), because the inhabitants "fly too fast to feel the wet" ("On Deck," Crossing, p. 55) surge of the life force. Individual

members are united only through their common isolation from each other and from the life cycle. One woman "lives quietly/ With no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle" ("A Life, Crossing, p. 53); a man stands in his Ionian death gown with "his hair long and plausive . . .Masturbating a glitter" ("Death & Co.," Ariel, p. 28); another complains "of the great cold" and "Crawls up out of the sea" ("A Life," Crossing, p. 53); "And everywhere people, eyes mica-silver and blank,/ Are riding to work in rows, as if brainwashed" ("Insomniac," Crossing, p. 22). This mass of living death is produced by the forces of chaos, and in turn the Thin People allow chaos to grow uninhibited amongst them. Being in this underworld is the most extreme denial of the life cycle, but, even among those who are not yet condemned to this state, obstructions exist which bar their path to fulfillment. By lowering the defenses of the self, the individual finds that he is liable to chaos' intrusion. Such poems as "The Applicant," "Stopped Dead," and "Blue Moles" refer to the mechanization of love and the consequent separation of one person from another. The social necessity of marriage and the plentitude of reasons offered for its usefulness all dwindle in "The Applicant" to an invitation for man to enter into the modern form of the marriage of convenience, for thereby he will gain another valuable possession that will work for him.

> Now your head, excuse me, is empty.
> I have the ticket for that.
> Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.

Well, what do you think of that?
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she'll be silver,
In fifty, gold.
A living doll, everywhere you look.
It can sew, it can cook,
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image.
My boy, it's your last resort.
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.
("The Applicant," Ariel, pp. 4-5)

"Stopped Dead" and "Blue Moles" deal with the frustration seen in a feeling, emotionally alive individual who physically encounters the cold austerity of the Thin People. "Uncle, pants factory Fatso, millionaire" in "Stopped Dead"[11] sits by the poem's speaker, but is unconscious of her presence, the activity around him, and her emotional outpourings.

You are sunk in your seven chins, still as a ham.
Who do you think I am,
Uncle, uncle?
Sad Hamlet with a knife?
Where do you stash your life?

Is it a penny, a pearl--
Your soul, your soul?
I'll carry it off like a rich pretty girl,
Simply open the door and step out of the car
And live in Gibralter on air, on air.
("Stopped Dead," Winter Trees, p. 24)

Similarly, the individual in "Blue Moles" realizes that "What happens be-/ tween us/ Happens in darkness, vanishes/ Easy and

[11]"Stopped Dead," Winter Trees (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), p. 24. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Winter Trees, p. --)."

often as each breath" ("Blue Moles," Colossus, p. 50). She lays with one of the Thin People as "two/ Moles dead in the pebbled rut,/ Shapeless as flung gloves, a few feet apart" ("Blue Moles," Colossus, p. 49). Throughout Plath's poetry the disaster of separation is always the outcome of encounters such as these. Therefore, it becomes no more than a meaningless destruction for the individual to meet the Thin People on any grounds.

II

In keeping with the archetypal pattern of the fall of man from harmony and the creation of the underworld, Plath's mythology involves the concepts of innocence and guilt. Beginning with the discussion of the innocence-guilt theme, Plath's mythical view of life becomes far more concerned with the individual movement toward rebirth. The quality of innocence, as we have seen, is associated with the child. The mother is the central symbolic repository of guilt. The child begins life with an ambiguous nature:

> Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
> The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
> Took its place among the elements.
> ("Morning Song," Ariel, p. 1)

The capacity for innocence in the child is symbolized by the metaphor of the "gold watch" and the "bald cry" signifies the propensity toward evil (Lavers, Sylvia Plath, p. 112). But soon the contrast between the mother's guilt and the child's

innocence becomes so clear that the mother says,

> I am no more your mother
> Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
> Effacement at the wind's hand.
> ("Morning Song," Ariel, p. 1)

The child is "A clean slate, with your own face on" ("You're," Ariel, p.), while the mother has lived in the midst of chaos and has been changed by experience from light and vital innocence to "cow-heavy and floral/ In my Victorian nightgown" ("Morning Star," Ariel, p. 1). Plath further extends the individual's problem of guilt by compounding the existence of the true, valid guilt a sensitive individual must feel in succumbing to the forces of chaos with a false guilt. This pseudo-guilt is produced by the reactions of the Thin People to the sensitive person:

> The hills step off into whiteness.
> People or stars
> Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.
> ("Sheep in Fog," Ariel, p. 3)

The dichotomy of innocence and guilt combines with the oppositions producing chaos to cause the individual to lose the security and harmony of innocence.

A dominant theme in Plath's poetry and an intrinsic factor in the mythological framework is the one to one relationship established between the psyche of the individual and external chaos. This factor is the central concern of The Bell Jar[12] and gives the poetry the quality of nightmarish surrealism.

[12] (London: Faber and Faber, 1966).

Also, this stage of psychic progression is often given by the biographical critics as evidence of Plath's mental deterioration. The element of mental breakdown, however, is lessened, if not totally rendered meaningless, as a significant interpretation when the seemingly tortured psyche is viewed with reference to the entire mythology that Plath creates. There can be no other recourse, in terms of her mythical system, but to respond to the surrounding turmoil of chaos. The first stage of Plath's response is the identification of the psyche with the external chaos: "It is a heart,/ This holocaust I walk in" ("Mary's Song," Ariel, p. 45).

"Wuthering Heights" is the clearest expression that Plath provides of the identification of the psyche with the external world. The world, in fact, becomes translated into the image of the speaker. The world is seen as decaying around her:

> The horizons ring me like faggots,
> Tilted and disparate, and always unstable.
> ("Wuthering Heights," Crossing, p. 11)

Within this instability, she momentarily hopes to find the warmth and solidity of vital life amongst the chaos:

> Touched by a match, they might warm me,
> And their fine lines singe
> The air to orange
> Before the distances they pin evaporate,
> Weighting the pale sky with a solider colour.
> ("Wuthering Heights," Crossing, p. 11)

But "as I step forward," the hope for this external solution fades as the horizons "only dissolve and dissolve/ Like a series of promises" ("Wuthering Heights, Crossing, p. 11). Nature and

the psyche are both formed from two opposing orders, fulfillment and growth and conformity and deadness:

> There is no life higher than the grasstops
> Or the hearts of sheep, and the wind
> Pours by like destiny, bending
> Everything in one direction.
> ("Wuthering Heights," _Crossing_, p. 11)

"The sheep know where they are," but the speaker appears by contrast to be inadequate, "like being mailed into space,/ A thin silly message." However, this comparison is not altogether valid because the sheep wear the "grandmotherly disguise" of the chaotic forces, the "wig curls and yellow teeth/ And hard, marbly baas" ("Wuthering Heights," Crossing, p. 11). This disguise keeps the chaos from their innocence and allows them to exist in the freedom of stability. The individual, though, does not wear this protective disguise and becomes allied in spirit to those forms of nature that remain open to the elements of chaos:

> The sky leans on me, me, the one upright
> Among all horizontals.
> The grass is beating its head distractedly.
> It is too delicate
> For a life in such company;
> Darkness terrifies it.
> ("Wuthering Heights, _Crossing_, p. 12)

The identification of the individual with external chaos becomes personified by Plath in the internal psychic opposition between the conscious and unconscious. This opposition carries the mythological portents of the fall of man. Pride, man's original sin against nature's harmony, becomes associated with the conscious psyche, while the unconscious retains the

natural archetypal configurations of the unfallen state. Pride forms the "cold glass" that comes "Between myself and myself" ("The Other," Winter Trees, p. 23) and is a solid barrier that blocks the unification of reason (conscious) and emotion (unconscious) at every turn.

Plath speaks of life in terms of a journey of progression toward the center of the life force. This voyage begins in the black of the unconscious on the "Black lake" with the "black boat" and the "two black, cut-paper people," representing the conscious and unconscious ("Crossing the Water," Crossing, p. 14). This is the state of child innocence and harmony between the two segments of the psyche. Through experience, the conscious portion becomes tainted by the forces of chaos and begins an attempt at domination of the psyche. In this stage the individual describes his mind as

> A red flat, opening and closing,
> Two grey, papery bags--
> This is what I am made of, this and a terror
> Of being wheeled off under crosses and a rain of pietas.
> ("Apprehensions," Crossing, p. 57)

The two elements of the psyche are given the dark advice of the "round and flat" Thin People, who "do not wish us to hurry" ("Crossing the Water," Crossing, p. 14) to rebirth and fulfillment. As the prideful "stars open among the lilies," the unconscious asks the conscious, "Are you not astounded by such expressionless sirens?" And the answer "is the silence of astounded souls" ("Crossing the Water," Crossing, p. 14. This answer of silence becomes the prideful basis for the disintegration

of psychic harmony.

The two halves of the psyche form the oppositions of individuals much in the same manner as the elements of chaos produce turmoil in the external world. The conscious portion retains the qualities of pride and reason, which caused the original fall of man. It describes itself:

> I am silver and exact. I have no preconceptions.
> Whatever I see I swallow immediately
> Just as it is, unmisted by love or dislike.
> I am not cruel, only truthful--
> The eye of a little god, four-cornered.
> Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
> It is pink, with speckles, I have looked at it so long
> I think it is part of my heart. But it flickers.
> Faces and darkness separate us over and over.
> ("Mirror," Crossing, p. 52)

The picture of the world and the false sense of power that the consciousness produces is appealing to the innocent, but after its acceptance and the result of experience "A sense of absence" develops "in its old shining place."[13] Opposed to this ally of chaos stands the unconscious, retaining the values of the pre-fall harmony. The psyche reflecting on the unconscious says,

> Now I am a lake. A woman bends over me,
> Searching my reaches for what she really is.
> Then she turns to those liars, the candles or the moon.
> I see her back, and reflect it faithfully.
> She rewards me with tears and agitation of hands.
> I am important to her. She comes and goes.
> Each morning it is her face that replaces the darkness.
> In me she has drowned a young girl, and in me an old woman
> Rises toward her day after day, like a terrible fish.
> ("Mirror," Crossing, p. 52)

[13] "Stars over the Dordogne," Poetry, XCIX, vi (March 1962), 346-347.

These two segments of the whole psyche confront each other in "Elm," formerly titled "The Elm Speaks." The tree, united with the sea as a life force, speaks with the authority of truth to the individual:

> I know the bottom, she says, I know it with my great tap root:
> It is what you fear.
> I do not fear it: I have been there.
>
> Is it the sea you hear in me,
> Or its dissatisfactions?
> Or the voice of nothing, that was your madness?
>
> Love is a shadow.
> How you lie and cry after it.
> Listen: these are its hooves; it has gone off, like a horse.
> ("Elm," Ariel, p. 15)

The poem's speaker then reflects on the conscious and how she has "suffered the atrocity of sunsets" and the cruelty of the moon at its hands, "scorched to the root/ My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires" ("Elm," Ariel, p. 15). The meeting of these two separate manifestations of the mind brings the individual to the point of despair:

> Now I break up in pieces that fly about like clubs.
> A wind of such violence
> Will tolerate no bystanding: I must shriek.
> ("Elm," Ariel, p. 15)

In an effort to quell this internal storm, the speaker rejects the conscious influence, but, at this point, does not give herself over to the unconscious: "I let her go, I let her go/ Diminished and flat, as after radical surgery" ("Elm," Ariel, p. 16). Thus, her psyche remains "terrified by this dark thing/ That sleeps in me" ("Elm," Ariel, p. 16).

The acceptance of the harmonic influence of the unconscious

is the crux of Plath's progression of self and the resolution of the inner chaos of the individual psyche. This resolution redeems man from his prideful fall from innocence and provides the equilibrium of wholeness. Two symbolic figures are active in this process of salvation. The first, Plath's inner woman, corresponds to C. G. Jung's concept of the shadow figure. The second figure, Plath's Prince of Death, performs a role similar to Jung's concept of the negative animus figure. The inner woman takes on numerous physical characteristics: she is the daughter that "is schizophrenic,/ Her face red and white, a panic" ("Lesbos," Ariel, p. 48); the rival with a smile that resembles the moon ("The Rival," Ariel, p. 48); the "vast Brobdingnag bulk/ Of a sow lounged belly-bedded on that black compost,/ Fat-rutted eyes/ Dream-filled" ("Sow," Colossus, p. 10); a widow, the mother, and the women meditating "Devoutly as the Dutch bulb/ Forming its twenty petals" ("Heavy Women," Crossing, p. 37). The Inner Woman in all of her forms has an all-important message to give to the individual psyche. Most often, the message is a warning of the dangers of conscious envelopment. In "Medusa," however, the Inner Woman works to lead the persona toward rebirth. The classical image of Medusa is fear-inspiring, and in this poem Medusa's external appearance is analogous to the fear of the persona. The fear causes the individual to escape the Inner Woman, but always

My mind winds back to you

Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,
Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair.
("Medusa," Ariel, p. 39)

The imagistic association of the Inner Woman with the Atlantic cable reinforces her capability as a bridge between the two continents of the psyche. More frequently, the Prince of Death, or animus figure, carries on the unification process, while the Inner Woman is normally concerned with depicting the dangers of reason and the conscious.

The Prince of Death is a character of ambiguous proportions, because he is the central focus of Plath's denunciation of the Thin People's reliance on the conscious and the inner turmoil caused by the separation of the conscious and unconscious, but he also offers the quality of death. The death factor in Plath's mythology is often interpreted as a negative element in her poetry. But, as we shall see, rather than a negative force, death is the necessary prelude to Plath's mythical vision of salvation. The most famous of Plath's poems, "Daddy," deals with the Prince of Death in his most blatant extreme. The speaker's father and husband become the arch-evil fiends that arouse tremendous fear:

I have always been scared of you
With your Luftwaffe, your gobbledygoo.
And your neat moustache
And your Aryan eye, bright blue.
Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You. ("Daddy," Ariel, p. 50)

But the animus figure is also numinous in his death association:

But they pulled me out of the sack,

and stuck me together with glue.
And then I knew what to do.
I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw,
And said I do, I do.
So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

I've killed one man, I've killed two--
The vampire who said he was you
And drank my blood for a year,
Seven years, if you want to know.
Daddy, you can lie back now. ("Daddy," Ariel, p. 51)

The importance, of course, is not only the depiction of the evil figure, but also what lies in the poem's resolution:

There's a stake in your fat black heart
And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always knew it was you.
Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through.
("Daddy," Ariel, p. 51)

By the individual's initiative the evil representative of the Thin People's underworld is done away with, and the speaker becomes free to engage in the symbolic ritual of death and rebirth. This same figure is killed in "The Snowman on the Moor," "Lady Lazarus," " All the Dead Dears," "Suicide off Egg Rock," "Full Fathom Five," and "The Burnt-out Spa." The number of times this figure is murdered corresponds to the significance his death holds for the individual's evolution toward the center of life, because, prior to his death, the poet looks to this figure of death, rather than the unconscious, for salvation. This reliance on the animus figure leads, not to rebirth of the self, but to a release from the turmoil of chaos

by a complete submission to the conscious state. The Prince of Death only gives the individual the appearance of order and stability and deals only with externals:

> "Come lady, bring that face
> Fallen from luster;
> Time's soot in bleared eye
> Can be made to glister
> For small charge.
> No form's gone so awry,
> Crook-back or bandy-leg,
> But Tinker Jack can forge
> Beauty from hag."[14]

But if the individual resists this false salvation and seeks a viable progression toward the life force, the Prince of Death blocks the way.

> Plucked back thus sudden to that far innocence,
> She, in her shabby travel garb, began
> Walking eager toward water, when there, one by one,
> Clam-diggers rose up out of dark slime at her offence.
>
> Grim as gargoyles from years spent squatting at sea's border,
> In wait amid snarled week and wrack of wave
> To trap this wayward girl at her first move of love,
> Now with stake and pitchfork they advance, flint eyes fixed
> murder.[15]

The death of the animus removes these obstacles and gives the poet the possibility of rebirth.

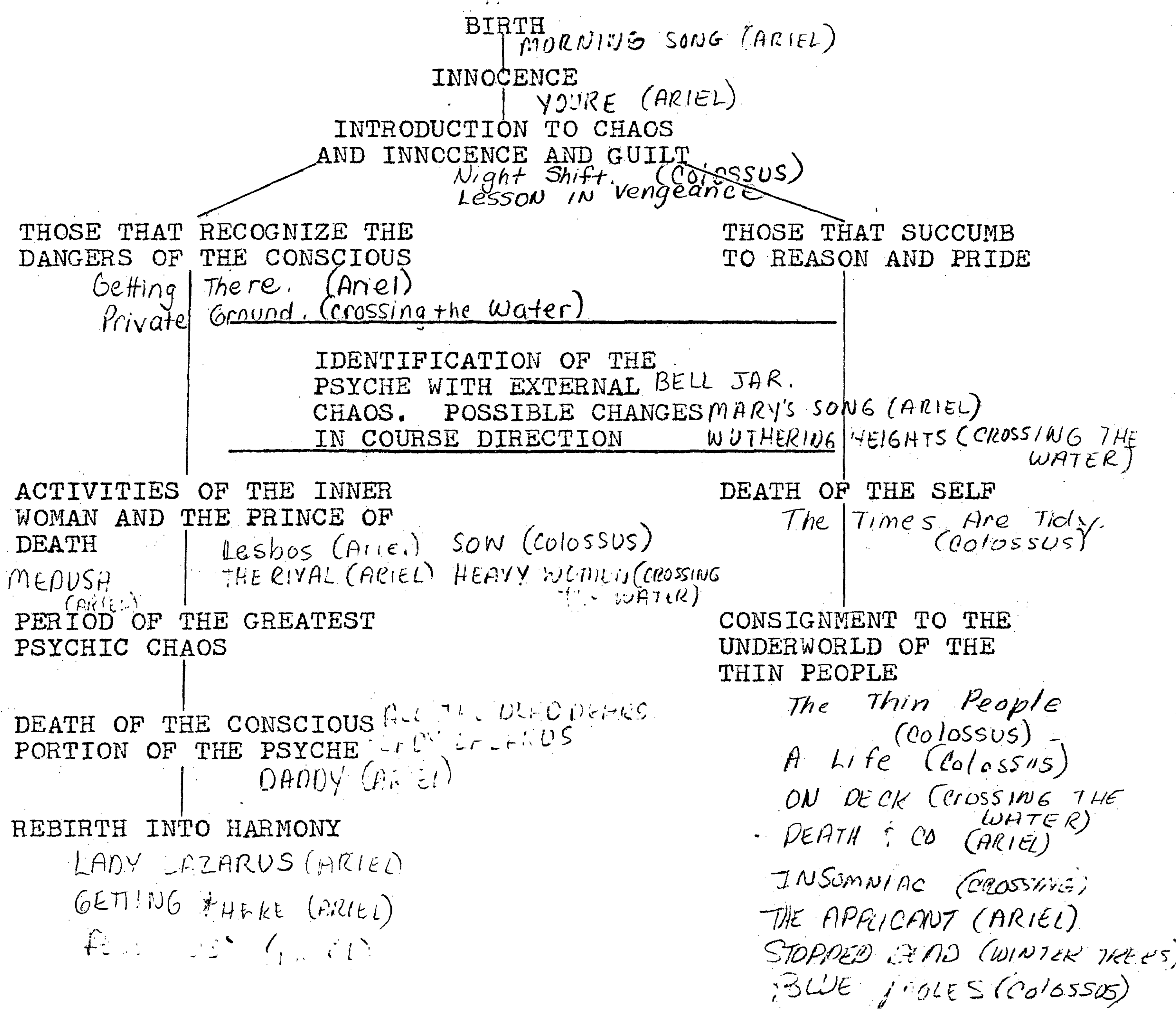
III

In Plath's mythology the individual undergoes various

[14]"Tinker Jack and the Tidy Wives," Accent, XVII (Autumn 1957), pp. 247-48.

[15]"Dream with Claimdiggers," Granta, LXI (March 9, 1957), p. 5.

stages of growth. The outcome of this evolvement is determined by the strength of the self in the refusal to succumb to chaos. So, depending upon the individual choice, the end that the person waits for is either the finality of the self's death in defeat to the conscious forces, or the regenerative death of the conscious portion of the psyche that allows the pre-fall harmony retained in the unconscious to be reborn into wholeness. The following diagram of Plath's system will help display the stages of life open to the individual at birth.



The two divergent aspects of death are well portrayed in the poems. The creation of the underworld and the psychic stagnation, which result in the death of the self, have been shown above. Therefore, we need only to see how the self undergoes the regenerative symbolic death and rebirth.

"Lady Lazarus" is one view of the rebirth event. The movement of this poem traces the individual from despair, where she sees herself as

> A sort of walking miracle, my skin
> Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
> My right foot
>
> A paper weight,
> My face featureless, fine
> Jew linen. ("Lady Lazarus," Ariel, p. 6)

From despair she attempts the false rebirth of external change offered by the Prince of Death, but only remains "the same, identical woman" in her psychic being. She then forecasts the true symbolic death of the conscious and warns the animus of her eventual phoenix-like rebirth:

> Herr God, Herr Lucifer
> Beware
> Beware.
>
> Out of the ash
> I rise with my red hair
> And eat men like air. ("Lady Lazarus," Ariel, p. 9)

But before this regeneration takes place the conscious forces must be eliminated. The despair of the individual reaches its peak immediately before this symbolic death. It is as if "The train is dragging itself, it is screaming--/ An animal/ Insane for the destination,/ The bloodspot,/ The face at the end of

the flare" ("Getting There," Ariel, p. 37). After the death of the conscious, the individual recognizes the symbolic death and then begins looking forward again to rebirth:

> I shall bury the wounded like pupas,
> I shall count and bury the dead.
> Let their souls writhe in a dew,
> Incense in my track.
> The carriages rock, they are cradles.
> And I, stepping from this old skin
> Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces
>
> Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
> Pure as a baby. ("Getting There," Ariel, pp. 37-38)

In "The Manor Garden," the psyche recalls the past evolutions of life that took place up to the time of rebirth and particularly the interlude since the death of the consciousness:

> The fountains are dry and the roses over.
> Incense of death. Your day approaches.
> The pears fatten like little buddhas.
> The blue mist is dragging the lake.
>
> You move through the era of fishes,
> The smug centuries of the pig--
> Head, toe and finger
> Come clear of the shadow. . . .
> ("The Manor Garden," Colossus, p. 3)

The external world reflects the changed condition of the psyche and also waits for the end of the life cycle:

> . . . .Some hard stars
> Already yellow the heavens.
> The spider on its own string
>
> Crosses the lake. The worms
> Quit their usual habitations.
> The small birds converge, converge
> With their gifts to a difficult borning.
> ("The Manor Garden," Colossus, pp. 3-4)

The "difficult borning" is a cathartic genesis that will expunge the last traces of turmoil from the psyche and the

individual will "wake blank-brained as water in the dawn" ("Two Campers in Cloud Country," Crossing, p. 51). Rebirth is accomplished by the self rising up as

> . . .a pure acetylene
> Virgin
> Attended by roses,
>
> By kises, by cherubim,
> By whatever these pink things mean.
> Not you, nor him
>
> Not him, nor him
> (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)--
> To Paradise. ("Fever 103°," Ariel, pp. 54-55)

As with most areas of mythical salvation, the paradise of Plath's mythology is not defined, because the mythical view is primarily concerned with the explanations and solutions to the problems of the world and leaves paradise shrouded as a glorious mystery.

Chapter Three

Denise Levertov and the Myth of Becoming

From The Double Image (1948) to her latest book To Stay Alive (1971), Denise Levertov creates a poetic myth of man and his world. This myth, an allegory of life, is the gradual unfolding of life's mysteries gained by man's developing awareness and perception. The role of the poet in this mythology is the prophet and seer of the universal truth's organic design. Through the interaction of life's tensions, death and life, hate and love, innocence and experience, and stasis and creativity, the organic design unfolds and reaffirms the mysteries of the life force. The whole cosmos is in a state of perpetual growth and becoming, and it is the poet who discovers and reveals the design. The poet-prophet has the "responsibility to communicate what he sees, that they who cannot see may see, since we are all members of one another."[1] Therefore, Levertov's vision of the poet's function is much the same as that of the English romantics and Victorians, particularly Shelley and Browning. The poet is the translator of nature's dynamic organicism. Since all mankind is united by a bond of existence, the life of one individual becomes an important and necessary link in

[1]Denise Levertov, "Statements on Poetics," New American Poetry, ed. Donald M. Allen, p. 412.

the chain of humanity, and the poet, due to an innate capability for perceiving reality, is the bridge that unites humanity with the natural life force. In Levertov's view, man, nature, and the life force share a mystical communion of vital becoming, an unfolding of need for each other.

Levertov says in "Some Notes on Organic Form" that the creation of poetry is a natural allegory of the "method of apperception," the recognition of perception "based on an intuition of order, a form beyond forms."[2] The creative process grows by a number of stages: it begins with an experience significant to the poet which "demands, or wakes in him this demand, the poem."[3] The next stage is to contemplate the experience and leave the self open to natural responses, or inspiration. This openness is followed by a crystalization of insight into the meaning of the experience, and the response of the poet "occurs as words."[4] By close attention to these responses from the unconscious inspiration, the poet "must follow through, letting the experience lead him through the world of the poem, its unique inscape revealing itself as he goes."[5] The poet's whole being is active in the creation and communes intuitively to produce "accurate" truth. The technical

[2]New Directions, 20, p. 124.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Ibid.

devices of the poem suggest themselves and interrelate with the complete, organic nature of the poem's meaning. This process of poetic creation is the allegory of man's simultaneous discovery of meaning in nature and in the self.

Levertov's poetry is primarily concerned with the ritual of discovery, the creative act from which order and harmony are found in a seemingly chaotic world. The central metaphor for this discovery is the quest. The first stage of the quest is the individual's feeling of doubt about the meaning of life and an emotional angst caused by separation from the harmony of nature; this stage of the quest is analogous to the poet's significant experience. The doubt of the individual motivates him into a trial-and-error journey through various experiential circumstances, where movement and action become reliefs from a passive acceptance of chaos; this stage parallels the poet's receptiveness of natural responses. As the quest progresses, the mysteries of the life force gradually unfold concurrently with the individual's increasing perception, flexibility, and awareness (the poet's crystalization). The ultimate stage of the quest comes with the individual's perception of his unity within the harmony of nature and the concomitant recognition of selfhood, the inscape of the natural design. Thus, Levertov's theory of poetry parallels and exemplifies her thematic development of man's awareness of meaning in life. In respect to Levertov's theory of poetry and the major themes, the underlying inscape is the mythical quest of becoming.

I

Central to man's developing unity with the life force are the tensions inherent in the living organism of nature. It is the responsibility of mankind, beginning initially with the poet, to actively search out meaning in life, but before this quest begins a desire must be felt. The desire, or motivation, for meaning most often is elicited by a feeling of separation from the core of the self, humanity, and nature. It impels the individual toward a course of trials that bring him into participation with life. The time of separation is a period of chaos, because the individual stands in the midst of his own void of meaning and in conflict with the life force. This dual separation is caused by a lack of perception and awareness. In "Biafra," Levertov depicts the lack of sympathy and feeling found in people after they have been repeatedly bombarded with war's horrors. The "small stock of compassion"[6] they could arouse when faced with "photos of napalmed children" ("Biafra," Relearning, p. 17) in Vietnam has degenerated into "sluggishly . . .'getting used to'" ("Biafra," Relearning, p. 17) when they fail to respond to the brutalities of Biafra. They have been poisoned by repeated insanity and allow:

> . . .no room
> for love in us: what's left over
> changes to bile, brims over: stain on the cushion:
> And the news from Biafra (doesn't make the headlines,

[6]Denise Levertov, "Biafra," Relearning the Alphabet (New York: New Directions, 1970), p. 17. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Relearning, p. --)."

> not in today's paper at all)
> doesn't even get past oureyes.
> ("Biafra," <u>Relearning</u>, p. 17)

The poison destroys their willingness to respond to human needs. The individuals feel separated and cry collectively "We don't know/ what to do," so they "Do nothing" ("Biafra," <u>Relearning</u>, p. 17). The individual is unwilling, or incapable, to take any positive action to correct difficulties and attempt to make an ordering of chaos. An earlier poem, "The Dead," intensifies Levertov's portrait of the individual who feels the pain of chaos, but is unable to release himself. Here, Levertov shows a person recognizing this state of incapacity for action and incapability for perceiving the lesson of death. The speaker of "The Dead" looks "earnestly" into the "abandoned faces" of the near-dead,

> but just like everyone else I learned
> each time nothing new, only that
> as it were, a music, however harsh, that holds us,
> however loosely, had stopped, and left
> a heavy silence in its place.[7]

Thus, the individual here is able to recognize that the music stops and the harmony of life is canceled by death, but feels incapable of perceiving why.

A submission to chaos results in the complete separation of man from the life force. The submissive individual sees nature and harmony as a "world/ he had no part in and has no

[7] <u>5 Poems</u> (San Francisco: White Rabbit, 1958), p. 4. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(<u>5 Poems</u>, p. --)."

power to imagine."[8] Instead of a harmonic world, another is imposed on the non-perceptive individual. It is a world of malign force where time is an obsessive confusion, "where men are walking/ jostled, in dirty light/ (reflected light) are running"[9] and where "An atomistic bleakness drags on students" ("Report," Here, p. 15). In "Merritt Parkway" men are controlled by the cars they drive in the "dreamlike continuum:"

> As if it were
> forever that they move, that we
> keep moving--
> Under a wan sky where
> as the lights went on a star
> pierced the haze and now
> follows steadily
> a constant
> above our six lanes
> the dreamlike continuum.[10]

The people "vanish" into their cars "forever, to/ keep moving" ("Merritt Parkway," Overland, p. 10) away from responsibility and unity. They are "apparent/ only at gasoline stops" where they begin "eyeing each other" ("Merritt Parkway," Overland,

[8] "The Old Adam," O Taste and See (New York: New Directions: 1964), p. 48. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(O Taste, p. --)."

[9] "Poem from Manhattan," Here and Now (San Francisco: City Lights, 1957), p. 32. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Here, p. --)."

[10] Overland to the Islands (Highlands, N.C.: Jargon, 1958), p. 8. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Overland, p. --)."

p. 10) fearfully, afraid of their common humanity. Man here is more a part of a machine than of the living. Other abnormalities arise from this separated condition. Man becomes "a prisoner of pride"[11] living in a hard shell of egotistical selfhood, from which he talks incessantly, "saying/ 'I,' and 'I,'/ meaning 'Anybody'./ No one" ("People at Night," Here, p. 11). Between two of these "shell" people "no meeting was possible," because they lacked a common ground and "could not speak" ("The Bereaved," Overland, p. 14). These people deny the fluidity of nature by "an energy/ baffled in the stillness" that "gives an edge to the shadows" ("Lonely Man," Overland, p. 30). Of course, the most prevalent and profound bond between individuals, love, is a catastrophe for those who feel no harmony in the world. Barriers to love's fulfillment are erected by pride, and people become unable to see each other:

> If now I cannot see you, or be sure
> you ever stirred beyond the walls of dream,
> rising, unbroken battlements, to a sky
> heavy with constellations of desire,
> it is because those barricades are grown
> too tall to scale, too dense to penetrate,
> hiding the landscape of your distant life
> in which you move, as birds in evening air
> far beyond sight trouble the darkening sea
> with the low piping of their discontent.
> ("The Barricades," Double, p. 14)

Perversions of natural human qualities produce a non-living

[11]"The Dreamers," The Double Image (London: Cresset, 1948), p. 15. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Double, p. --)."

race of men, a race without hope for life. In "Hypocrite Women," Levertov outlines the three primary sins against the life force, which produce the death of the self. The first of these deadly sins is the denial of self identity.

> Hypocrite women, how seldom we speak
> of our own doubts, while dubiously
> we mother man in his doubt!
> ("Hypocrite Women," O Taste, p. 70)

The women fail to expose and admit their own doubts about life and only "dubiously" comfort man's reflections. The second is a denial of sexuality and an effort to disregard its existence altogether:

> a poet told us
>
> our cunts are ugly--why didn't we
> admit we have thought so too? (And
> what shame? They are not for the eye!)
>
> No, they are dark and wrinkled and hairy,
> caves of the Moon. . . And when a
> dark humming fills us, a
>
> coldness toward life,
> we are too much women to
> own to such unwomanliness.
> ("Hypocrite Women," O Taste, p. 70)

By the first two transgressions against the life force, the women have denied the conscious recognition of the self and the physical emotions. The final denial of any response to life activity is the rejection of the unconscious, the imagination:

> And our dreams,
>
> with what frivolity we have pared them
> like toenails, clipped them like ends of
> split hair. ("Hypocrite Women," O Taste, p. 70)

By rejecting these three aspects of life, the "hypocrite women" become players in a false life game, who "Whorishly" respond to life by "play and plead" rather than in creative growth ("Hypocrite Women," O Taste, p. 70). This halfway involvement with life denies any hope for improvement and only hardens the shell of chaos. "The Gulf" also deals with the initial denial of the creative life force, but shows a final awareness of its viability. In this poem a young black boy steals flowers, representing "the flesh of dream" in his hope for life, rubs "his sweating face/ into flower faces,"

> But all at once an absence
> makes itself known to him--it's like
>
> a hole in the lungs,
> life running out. They are without
>
> perfume! ("The Gulf," Relearning, pp. 15-16)

The boy dies in his effort to capture part of the dream of life. The poem compares the response of the black boy and those still in the garden:

> We'll live out our lives
>
> in our garden on the edge of a gulf,
> and he in the hundred years' war ten heartbeats long
>
> unchanging among the dead flowers,
> no place to go. ("The Gulf," Relearning, p. 16)

The primary difference between the people of the "Hypocrite Women" and "The Gulf" is the submissive denial of life in the first poem compared with the violent grasp for life in the second. The women see nothing in life, but the boy intuitively

knows that life exists. He attempts to steal life rather than create it. The boy perceives the futility of his theft of life as he dies:

> Cheated, he drops them.
> White men's flower's. ("The Gulf," Relearning, p. 16)

The boy's intuitive recognition of life in "The Gulf" is the first step in the quest for harmony between the self and nature. The boy's attempt at stealing life obviates his further progression and results in psychic (as well as physical) death, but in Levertov's myth of becoming this is a significant forward step. The boy rejects a passive submission to the non-living chaos and attempts to act. The intuitive recognition of life harmony beyond chaos occurs while the individual lives in a separated state. In itself, the recognition does not bring harmony, only a possible motivation for the quest. In "A Window" the speaker sees the "hundred windows shining/ dully in the vast side" of conformity and nothingness, but there is one that "burns/ these several years, each night as if the room were aflame."[12] This flame of the life fire comes through the window, because there is "some fault in the glass," ("A Window," Jacob's, p. 24), a fissure of meaning in the dull world. The speaker knows that the reason the one window appears to flame is a combination of the window's fault, "the precise

[12] The Jacob's Ladder, (New York: New Directions, 1961), p. 24. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Jacob's, p. --)."

distance and/ my faulty eyes" ("A Window," Jacob's, p. 24), but

> yet still I'm ready to believe perhaps
> some lives
> tremble and flare up there, four blocks away
> across the sooty roofs and
> the dusk,
> with more intensity than what's lived
> behind the other windows,
> and the glowing of those brands of life
> shows as seraphic or demonic flames
> visible only to weak and distant eyes.
> ("A Window," Jacob's, p. 24)

In order to make use of this intuitive recognition of life and produce an increased awareness and perception of the natural design, the individual is obligated to release himself from the submissive tradition. Of course, the purgation of past life is a difficult task, but the death of the old self is a necessary prelude to the quest. The choice involved in this action is portrayed by Levertov in "Snail" as a contrast between the worm and the snail. The worm has the "freedom that can go/ under the earth and whose/ slow arrow pierces/ the thick of the dark" ("Snail," Relearning, p. 77). Conversely. the snail is entrapped within his shell, which he describes as

> Burden, grace,
> artifice cold
> brittle on my back, integral.
> ("Snail," Relearning, p. 77)

The most complete statement of the death of the snail and the rise of the worm, the death of chaos and rise of the quest, occurs in "The Cold Spring." This poem reflects the struggling psychological progression out of the shell into the free self's ability to explore life. In the first of the poem's seven

sections, the speaker despairs the lack of vitality in life that kills the spirit:

> Life is nibbling us with little
> lips, circling our knees, our
> shoulders.
>   What's the difference,
> a kiss or a fin-caress. Only sometimes
> the water reddens,
> we ebb.   ("The Cold Spring," <u>Relearning</u>, p. 5)

The ebbings of life, the emotional responses, become mere trials to be endured, events "checked" "off our list." In a state of despair an individual is at war with life. After emotional traumas, men

> . . still stand here
>
> tiptoe on the mud,
> half-afloat,
> water up to the neck.
>
> It's a big pond.   ("The Cold Spring," <u>Relearning</u>, p. 5)

In the second section, the speaker feels that what he has known "(flowers, not leaves,/ bearing intricately/ little winged seeds/ to fly in fall)" is "not enough" ("The Cold Spring," <u>Relearning</u>, p. 6). All of the known images of nature are transient:

> Swing of the
> birch catkins,
> drift of
> watergrass,
> tufts of
> green on the
> trees,
> (flowers, not leaves,
> bearing intricately
> little winged seeds
> to fly in fall)
> and whoever
> I meet now,
> on the path.   ("The Cold Spring," <u>Relearning</u>, pp. 5-6)

None of these images portray an organic design in nature, which presumably would be "enough," but speak only to the movement and possible rebirth (the seeds in the wind) that typify the quest. Therefore, the quest is only a transitional stage of development and not organic fulfillment. Section three restates the despair of chaos, further defines it, and manifests the motivation for the quest. The internal conflict of the speaker is caused by the force of chaos and its intellectual counterpart, rationality, in battle with the validity of the self. Chaos "implies/ we're obsolescent,/ we who grew up/ towards utopias" ("The Cold Spring," Relearning, p. 6). The speaker wonders at this proposition born from "Biology and the computer" and says,

> I almost believe him.
> What do I know?
> A poem, turn of the head,
>
> some certainty
> of mordant delight--
> five notes, the return
> of the All Day Bird--:
>
> truces, for the new moon
> or of the spring solstice,
> and at midnight the firing resumes,
>
> far away.
> It's not real. ("The Cold Spring," Relearning, p. 6)

The feeling that the imagination and living qualities of the speaker's life are "not real" is the production of a totally rational outlook imposed by the chaotic force. Life without imagination becomes a dull, humdrum affair from which we can look back on the past and lament the lost desire to live fully.

We wanted
more of our life to live in us.
To imagine each other.
("The Cold Spring," Relearning, p. 7)

Implicit in this lamentation is the destruction of imaginative "utopias" built on mechanization of the psyche and its concurrent separation from internal life and harmony. In section four, the attitude "to live in the present" is seen as a futile effort at fulfillment. The harmony this life style offers is not the dynamic growth of organic unity with nature, but a false escape into which chaos intrudes to destroy silence:

the place of pilgrimage curiously
open, not, it turns out,
a circle of holy stones,

no altar, no
high peak,
no deep valley, the world's navel,

but a plain,
only green tree-flowers
thinly screening the dayglare

and without silence--
we hear the traffic, the highway's
only a stonesthrow away.
("The Cold Spring," Relearning, p. 7)

The realization of this end to the quest leads the speaker to ask, "Is this the place?" The answer, "This is not the place," because "The spirit's left it" ("The Cold Spring," Relearning, p. 7), begins the further progression of section five. At the poem's end, the speaker's perception has markedly increased since the poem's beginning, from despair with life's magnitude to an awareness that the spirit, or imagination, is the central concern of the quest. The escape held only the "flat plain"

barren of "holy stones," "altar, "high peak," or "deep valley" and covered with a thin veneer incapable of shutting out the "dayglare" and the highway's mechanized movement. The progression of perception and awareness from the first to the fifth sections are depicted also in the speaker's response to the entirety of life. In the first, the speaker was afraid of drowning as he tiptoed "half-afloat" on the mud. By the fifth section the precarious position changes to an acceptance of the life force of water and its redeeming influence:

> Back to that mud my feet felt
> when as a child I fell off a bridge
> and almost drowned, but rising
>
> found myself dreamily upright,
> water sustaining me,
> my hair watergrass.
> ("The Cold Spring," Relearning, p. 8)

However, in the next section the speaker reverts back to a despairing outlook:

> Fishes bare their teeth to our flesh.
> The sky's drifting toward our mouths.
> Forty years redden the spreading circles.
> Blink of an eyelid,
> nothing,
> obsolete future-- ("The Cold Spring," Relearning, p. 8)

Important here is to note that even though this is a retrogression of spirit, it is not the total despair found early in the poem. Life here is at war, not submission. The "Blink of an eyelid,/ nothing" viewpoint is an attempt to end the war by withdrawal, not a negation of the self, but a denial of an antagonistic nature--the fish that bite--a nature in itself lacking peace. The advance and regression of the speaker

reaches a point of resolution in the last section of the poem. The death of tradition is accomplished:

> I who am not about to die,
> I who carry my life about with me openly,
> health excellent, step light, hungry,
> my starwheel rolls. Stops
> on the point of sight.
> Reduced to an eye.
> I forget what
> I
> was. ("The Cold Spring," Relearning, pp. 8-9)

As the adherence to the tradition of chaos and the submissive self dies, the speaker looks forward to the unfolding of life's meaning and rebirth of the self:

> Not Spring is unreal to me,
> I have the tree-flowers by heart.
> Love, twenty years, forty years, my life,
> is unreal to me.
> I love only the stranger
> coming to meet me now
> up the path that's pinpricked with
> yellow fallen crumbs of pollen.
> ("The Cold Spring," Relearning, p. 8)

The willingness to meet the stranger, the bearer of life's meaning and the fertility of spring, and the death of the chaotic tradition combine to produce a desire for harmony within the speaker. He feels that his poem may be the death-song of the old self, the creative act from which rebirth and fulfillment will emerge. The truth of the poem is to be the statement of nature:

> Asking the cold spring
> what if my poem is deathsongs.
> ("The Cold Spring," Relearning, p. 9)

The maintenance of the quest is dependent on keeping the self open to the meaning of nature. Nothing life has to offer

can be rejected before it is experienced, because the individual, moving from a separated state, feels that "The world is/ not with us enough," and he must begin "living in the orchard and being/ hungry, and plucking/ the fruit" ("O Taste and See," O Taste, p. 53). The first approach to full knowledge of life is through sensual involvement. Primarily, Levertov sees this involvement in two spheres, the physical exhiliration of tasting and seeing nature and sexuality. The sensual envelopment becomes a communion with the vitality of life and the movement it creates within the person produces a desire to capture more of the life force. Physical exhiliration causes "an accord" between movement and nature, each supporting the other's dynamism.

> Leap
> frog, to a lake: leaves
> support the lilies, water holds
>
> erect the long, strong stems,
> reflects gleaming
>
> rosy petals, pollen-yellow lily-buds,
> clouds lilac-tinted and dissolving.
> Back to the plums--
>
> eggs in a blue nest--the squat
> peaked assembly of towers.
>
> What is it?
> An accord.[13]

The dynamic movement disregards social restraints and allows

[13]"The Communion," With Eyes at the Back of Our Heads (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 30. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(With Eyes, p. --)."

the individual to fill his capacity for emotional union with nature. The movement is not intellectual, but emotional, and relies on knowing by feeling. Thus, the first creative step in transcending chaos is through an emotional vitality that makes the senses come alive and be charged with the force of nature. On this first level of natural response, sexual union becomes the only meaningful communication between individuals. Through a marriage of emotion, the joy of further awareness is found in the pain of discovery.

> We look for communion
> and are turned away, beloved,
> each and each
>
> It is leviathan and we
> in its belly
> looking for joy, some joy
> not to be known outside it
>
> two by two in the ark of
> the ache of it.
>
> ("The Ache of Marriage," O Taste, p. 5)

By increasing the self's openness to sensuality the discovery process unfolds new meaning to the individual. He becomes aware of the vital life force by "plucking/ white petals away from their green centres" and sees his desire for life reveal "the stripped green" center of life, "Alert, hard/ on a thick stalk" ("Continuing," Overland, p. 20). By peeling to the core of life, sensuality becomes less necessary as a controlling factor in the individual quest. Desire produces an awareness of natural vitality and the life force's general scope of meaning. As awareness increases, the individual

begins to recognize that "There still are forests we must penetrate" ("Fable," <u>Double Image</u>, p. 40) beyond sensuality to discover the depths of the psyche and the problems of spiritual communion between the individual's imagination and the life force. In the sensual stage of the quest, the central conflict is between the will to actively respond to nature and a decision to passively submit to chaos. The active response is a purgation of the chaotic influence and an opening of the self to natural phenomena. In the quest's second stage, the individual becomes discriminating in his awareness and perception and attempts to understand his emotional response to nature. The unfolding of meaning from the state of sensual awareness to psychic awareness involves an obligation for the individual to create a wholeness within himself. In "The Jacob's Ladder," the progress of this transition with in the individual is seen as a stairway that is not

> a thing of gleaming strands
> a radiant evanescence
> for angel's feet that only glance in their tread, and need not touch the stone.
>
> It is of stone.
> A rosy stone that takes
> a glowing tone of softness
> only because behind it the sky is a doubtful, a doubting night gray.
>
> ("The Jacob's Ladder," <u>Jacob's</u>, p. 37)

Man's rise up the stairway is a difficult task for he "must scrape his knees, and bring/ the grip of his hand into play" ("The Jacob's Ladder," <u>Jacob's</u>, p. 37). Thus, to gain the transcendence of "angels" and "the poem" ("The Jacob's Ladder,"

<u>Jacob's</u>, p. 37), which easily ascend the ladder to organic harmony with nature, man is obligated to undergo the hardships of creation. Because his fulfillment depends on the creative act, the individual must increase his perception of the natural order and bring himself into harmony with it, relying only on the solidity of the ladder's "cut stones" ("The Jacob's Ladder," <u>Jacob's</u>, p. 37) to console his groping feet. The symbolic structure of "The Jacob's Ladder" reveals the essential qualities of the psyche, whose harmonization is necessary to the becoming of the self. The angels and the poem symbolically represent the imaginative realm of the psyche, the unconscious, that is unfettered by a reliance on reason and logic. Symbolizing the touchstone of the self, that inner core that responds to the reality of archetypal configurations, are the stone steps. Repeatedly, Levertov uses the stone to symbolize the constant reality, "the diamond set/ solitary and forlorn/ in a coronet of thorn" ("Ballad," <u>Double Image</u>, p. 31). The individual's stumbling pain as he climbs the ladder is caused by the conscious segment of the psyche in its attempt to conform the creative power of the imagination into a rational framework.

The object of the individual's becoming, a harmony of the conscious and unconscious, begins its formation in man's willingness to perceive the conflicting nature of each of the psyche's realms, accept their dual nature, and work toward integration. In "A Dream" the conflict of the conscious and

unconscious is allegorized in a story of two men who fight over the best manner to save themselves during a storm at sea. Antonio and Sabrinus develop a hatred for each other that leads to the destruction of the ship. The few survivors of the crew swim to shore and disperse, separated now from each other and the ship. The two men re-appear, greatly changed by their ordeal but still recognizable, on another ship filled with dying and diseased sailors. The day after their reappearance, both men die simultaneously. After their deaths, the story's narrator could not go near the sea for a very long time, but as he ends his self-inflicted isolation and returns to the sea, he expects to find Antonio and Sabrinus once again. This story is an allegory of man's progression to wholeness. The narrator views the fatal conflict of the conscious and unconscious that destroys the harmony of the ship and causes psychic disintegration. He then closes himself off from life to reorganize himself after the destruction. The narrator's expectation of finding Antonio and Sabrinus on his return to life reflects his quest to cause a rebirth of harmony between consciousness and unconsciousness. The harmony will come through an equilibrium of the two segments and will allow the individual to clearly see "the single ocean, the one moon" ("Equilibrium," _Relearning_, p. 69).

By opening the self to sensual responses and resolving the psyche's conflicts the individual becomes capable of making the creative act of the poet, to

> Relearn the alphabet,
> relearn the world, the world
> understood anew only in doing, under-
> stood only as
> looked-up-into out of earth,
> the heart an eye looking,
> the heart a root
> planted in earth
> ("Relearning the Alphabet," Relearning, p. 19)

The efforts of creation work to produce a total realization of the self by uniting it in transcendental oneness with nature. Of course, the quest's end never comes to the living individual, but continues in the state of becoming, through which the awareness and perception of man's unity with nature becomes clearer and more meaningful. As the unified structure of man's life is built, the cumulative result is foreseen as a crystalization of wholeness:

> Let the young queen sit above, in the cool air, her child in her arms; let her look with joy at the great circle, the pilgrim shadows, the work of the sun and the play of wind. Let her walk to and fro. Let the columns uphold the roof, let the storeys uphold the columns, let there be dark space below the lowest floor, let the castle rise foursquare out of the moat, let the moat be a ring and the water deep, let the guardians guard it, let there be wide lands around it, let that country where it stands be within me, let me be where it is.[14]

II

The quest motif of Levertov's myth of becoming reaches its most extended expression in her latest book To Stay Alive. The

[14]"Psalm Concerning the Castle," The Sorrow Dance (New York: New Directions, 1966), p. 67.

entire thematic movement of this book is concerned with the quest for meaning in modern life. Not only is the book united by this one theme, but, by reprinting pertinent selections from her past work that are united in this single quest, *To Stay Alive* is an organic extension of her whole corpus. The special organic unity apparent in this book is explained by Levertov in the "Author's Preface:"

> As one goes on living and working, themes recur, transposed into another key perhaps. Single poems that seemed isolated perceptions when one wrote them prove to have struck the first note of a scale or melody. I have heard professors of literature snicker with embarrassment because a poet quoted himself: they thought it immodest, narcissistic. Their attitude, a common one, reveals a failure to understand that though *the artist as craftsman* is engaged in making discrete and autonomous works--each of which, like a chair or a table, will have, as Ezra Pound said, the requisite number of legs and not wobble--yet at the same time, more unconsciously, as these attempts accumulate over the years, *the artist as explorer in language of the experiences of his or her life* is, willy-nilly, weaving a fabric, building a whole in which each discrete work is a part that functions in some way in relation to all the others. It happens at times that the poet becomes aware of the relationships that exist between poem and poem; is conscious, after the act, of one poem, one line or stanza, having been the precursor of another. It may be years later; and then, to get the design clear--"for himself and *thereby* for others," Ibsen put it--he must in honesty pick up that thread, bring the cross reference into its rightful place in the inscape, the Gestalt of his life (his work)/ his work (his life).[15]

The cumulative organic form, which transcends individual poems, creates *To Stay Alive* as an epic poem of the modern experience. It is "a record of one person's inner/ outer experience in

[15](New York: New Directions, 1971), p. vii. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(*TSA*, p. --)."

America during the '60's and the beginning of the '70's, an experience which is shared by so many and transcends the peculiar details of each life, though it can only be expressed in and through such details. The poem To Stay Alive begins with the "Preludes" and proceeds through a prologue and four sections, four distinct evolutions of the quest for meaning.

Throughout, the individual is placed in a life-or-death conflict with chaos, and each of the quest evolutions explores the individual's response to the need for creating a meaningful existence.

In her latest book, Levertov unites her present point of view with her past intellectual development by reprinting selected poems from earlier books in conjunction with newly collected works. In each section of To Stay Alive, there is an interdependence of thought and development that is enhanced through the earlier poems, the intellectual roots of her later development. The overall design of To Stay Alive is a movement beginning with the Olga Poems in the "Preludes" that provide the poet's recollection of her first encounter with intense living. In the "Prologue" poem, "An Interim," Levertov demonstrates the dual effect of modern society's chaotic environment, which imprisons the individual into narrow interims of freedom and happiness and the mass of society into an unrelenting war for life. The first section of To Stay Alive primarily concerns the poet's realization that individual action is the essential force needed to change society, rejecting any

form of passive acceptance of the status quo. Section two begins the speaker's progress toward the becoming of self. Levertov concludes that before she can undertake any positive action to benefit society, she must know her own identity and relative position in the world. This process of becoming increases in the third section as the poet begins to discover the roots of her being, and she finds that through the act of artistic creation she is capable of transcending chaos and discerning the malignant qualities of society. In the final section, the poet begins to take an active role in changing society and becomes aware of the harmony that can exist between the self, society, and nature. The evolution of the poet's self-awareness and perception is the central key to the meaning of To Stay Alive. In this book Levertov consciously presents the progression of poems in terms of the myth of becoming, which had previously been only an underlying force in her earlier collections. Although the mythic importance of becoming was a thematic strain in her earlier poems, it was not until To Stay Alive that Levertov accomplishes a complete progression of the myth from a state of disintegration to a state of synthesis.

The "Preludes," all poems which were published earlier, precede To Stay Alive. Each of these poems involves a dramatic experience in the poet's life, such as the death and remembrance of her sister or the brutalities of the Vietnam War. The first part of the "Preludes" is the "Olga Poems" (originally

published in The Sorrow Dance) that begins the poet's feeling for humanity and the sancitity of the active life. Through the image of Olga the poet first perceives the mutability of human life and the violent results of death:

> Sixteen. Her breasts
> round, round, and
> dark-nippled--
>
> who now these two months long
> is bones and tatters of flesh in earth.
> ("Olga Poems," TSA, p. 3)

Olga saw the insanity of chaos in the world and with "The high pitch of/ nagging insistence" attempted "to shout the world to its senses" ("Olga Poems," TSA, pp. 3-4). Olga's reforming desire failed, but within her heart burned the "white candle" ("Olga Poems," TSA, p. 4) of compassion. Olga's attempt to reform life "by the lash of her will" ("Olga Poems," TSA, p. 4) shut her off from perceiving the true meaning of life. Her very existence became an obsessive desire to create an unnatural order of life alien to nature:

> . . .To change,
> to change the course of the river! What rage for order
> disordered her pilgrimage--so that for years at a time
>
> she would hide among strangers, waiting
> to rearrange all mysteries in a new light.
> ("Olga Poems," TSA, p. 5)

Olga's creation was an all out war against the natural life that separated her from organic oneness and produced a fear of the natural existence, but still she retained the quality of burning compassion. Olga is the image of the humanistic reformer, who attempts to cure the symptoms of life's disease,

but fails to cure the cause. The remaining poems of "Preludes" are reflections of Olga's legacy to the poet. They all deal with the horrors of war and their insanity. But these observations only realize the symptoms and not the underlying causes that are producing chaos and separation in humanity.

The "Prologue" that begins _To Stay Alive_ states the central concern of the poem's four quest evolutions, the necessity for man as individual to fight for freedom to live a full life. The prologue poem, "An Interim," which first appeared in _Relearning the Alphabet_, explores the condition in which the individual must fight for this freedom of movement. The desired goal of reaching a state of wholeness is imperiled by the forces of an impinging society:

> While the war drags on, always worse,
> the soul dwindles sometimes to an ant
> rapid upon a cracked surface.
>
> ("An Interim," _TSA_, p. 21)

Levertov shows throughout this poem how society conditions the individual to accept its "normal," dogmatic standards of behavior. Exemplary of the social insanity chaos creates are the malicious language games that people play with each other to prove superiority:

> A five-year-old boy addresses
> a four-year-old girl. 'When I say,
> _Do you want some gum?_ say _yes!_'
> 'Yes . . .' 'Wait!--Now:
> Do you want some gum?'
> 'Yes!' 'Well yes means no,
> so you can't have any.'
>
> ("An Interim," _TSA_, p. 21)

or to cover-up inhumanity:

'"It became necessary
to destroy the town to save it,"
a United States major said today.
He was talking about the decision
by allied commanders to bomb and shell the town
to rout the Vietcong.'

("An Interim," TSA, p. 21)

"An Interim" is a contrast between the free life, symbolized by the sea, and the immensity of chaos that life can be, portrayed by the situation of a sixty-five day fast of a war resister, who was given an eight month sentence and $650 fine for sitting in front of a police wagon, while others arrested received thirty-day suspended sentences for the same offense. The reason for the disparity between sentences is that the war-resister said in court, "'I don't think there should be roles like judge and defendant'" ("An Interim," TSA, p. 22). The lack of justice given to the protestor is in contrast to the sea's waves that express a peace and harmony "attuned/ to the great pulse" ("An Interim," TSA, p. 23) of nature. This harmony comes from the early stages of life, before the conscious assimilation of society's dogma. It lies in the beginning majesty of "The Story of My Heart" ("An Interim," TSA, p. 23).

Radically departing from the perception of the sea's harmony, the speaker becomes separated from the sea of life by "a hundred years of trees, bushes, and buildings" which "cut the breeze" ("An Interim," TSA, p. 24) from her life. In the dream sequence of this departure, Levertov depicts the battleground of her war for life as "half Berlin, half Chicago"

("An Interim," TSA, p. 24), the daemonic centers that attest to the world conflicts and gross materialism. The warning to the individual of the impending peril of the city comes from the serpent-tongued cocks that crow throughout the night, "hoarse with expectation" ("An Interim," TSA, p. 24). The expectation is fulfilled as the speaker, with many others, is jailed in the city and paraded before the public,

> and the people watched us pass
> and waved to us, and gave us
> serious smiles of hope. ("An Interim," TSA, p. 24)

In the last portion of the poem, the truth of the imprisoned condition becomes clear as the speaker realizes the collective battle for freedom:

> While we await your trial
> (and this is no dream). . . .
> ("An Interim," TSA, p. 24)

Through this recognition the people's "smiles of hope" become an ironic statement of their own dull perception, because they view the prisoners from inside the jail and will stand trial along with the dream prisoners. These people have failed to recognize that it is the collective responsibility of all people to fight for freedom, a necessary act because everyone is jailed in the modern society with only the vaguest hope for the release to personal freedom. But until mankind loses all freedom,

> . . . we are
> free to come and go. To rise
> from sleep and love and dreams
> ("An Interim," TSA, p. 24)

and be reborn through an acceptance of the pulse of life "into the blue day" where "The sea awaits us." In these interludes

> the city grayness has been
> washed off our skins, we take pleasure
> in each other's warmth of rosy brown.
> ("An Interim," TSA, p. 25)

But these brief interims of peace will soon be over, and the war for life will resume. The only hope offered in the poem is that there will be some people who recognize the outlandish horror that the chaotic society has unleashed on

> the great savage saints of outrage--
> who have no lawyers,
> who have no interim
> in which to come and go. ("An Interim," TSA, p. 27)

The fasting war-resister states the need of the collective people, so that they might regain part of the life lost to chaos:

> 'I have a medical problem that can be cured
> only by freedom.'
> ("An Interim," TSA, p. 28)

In the first evolution of the freedom quest, the poet is "Beginning to learn" the fact of the world's insanity. She sees that her poetry has become a reflection of the decaying world and the destruction of nature:

> Is there anything
> I write any more that is not
> elegy?
> Goldengrove
> is unleaving all around me; I live
> in goldengrove; all day
> yesterday and today the air has been filled
> with that hesitant downwardness;
> the marigolds, the pumpkin, must be sought out
> to be seen, the grass

> is covered with that cloth, the roads'
> margins illuminated.
>
> ("Part I," TSA, p. 33)

The perception of the death around her causes the poet to search for a meaningful course of action through which she can help to save the world. The initial response is that the choice becomes narrowed to either revolution or death. "Of course I choose/ revolution," because death is only a passive acceptance of the world's condition, while revolution is at least a place to begin and not just hoping and "waiting for demolition and reconstruction" ("Part I," TSA, p. 29). There are two types of revolutionaries attempting to create a better world: the social activists and the martyrs. The activists are working to build a tangible order responsive to human needs; the martyrs die to make people realize the enveloping chaos. Even though the poet declares her affinity with the revolutionaries, she vacillates on the course of action to take until she recognizes that she cannot begin to help the world before she knows herself:

> I choose
> revolution but my words
> often already don't reach forward
> into it--
> (perhaps)
>
> Whom I would touch
> I may not,
> whom I may
> I would
> but often do not.
>
> My diction marks me
> untrue to my time;

change it, I'd be
untrue to myself.
I study
a face intently.
Learning.
Beginning to learn.
("Part I," TSA, pp. 34-35)

The second evolution is the poet's introspective analysis of the self, the act "To dig down,/ to re-examine" ("Part II," TSA, p. 40). In this stage, the poet begins to become aware of the natural life force. She is compelled to action by the "toneless constant" of life that begins to alter her outlook,

It's in the air: no air
to breathe without
scent of it,
pervasive:
odor of snow,
freshwater,
stink of dank
vegetation recomposing.
("Part II," TSA, p. 40)

Life begins to be a vital force as the poet sees the individual spirit rise as her own life becomes involved in the world. As the poet becomes aware of her own self-identity, she can then begin to communicate with others and work for the world need to "resist the war,/ disdain to kill,/ try to equate 'human' with 'humane'":

This is your only life--live it well!

No one man can bring about a social change--
but each man's life is a whole and necessary part of his society,
a necessary step in any change,
and a powerful example of the possibility of life for others.
("Part II," TSA, p. 42)

She finds communication between her feeling for life and other

people in the act of clearing a small park clean of garbage and creating "a green place." But the next day,

> Thursday, May 15th
> At 6 a.m. the ominous zooming, war-sound, of helicopters
> breaks into our sleep.
>
> To the Park:
> ringed with police.
> Bulldozers have moved in.
> Barely awake, the people--
> those who had made for each other
> a green place--
> begin to gather at the corners.
>
> Their tears fall on sidewalk cement.
> The fence goes up, twice a man's height.
> Everyone knows (yet no one yet
> believes it) what all shall know
> this day, and the days that follow:
> now, the clubs, the gas,
> Bayonets, bullets. The War
> comes home to us. . . ("Part II, TSA, pp. 44-45)

This stage of the quest evolution ends with the poet's awareness of life's changing reality. The park she and others had turned into a clean sanctuary within the city is destroyed in just a few hours. However, within the changing world are the times of human communication and harmony.

The third evolution continues the process of self discovery. Knowing the outlines of her identity gained in the second evolution, the poet now attempts to discover the origins of the self, the roots of her being. Her return is to England where her perspective draws a distinct contrast between the English and American lifestyles:

> there is a gentleness
> lost in anxious Amerika--

it's in the way
three young workmen in the Tube
smiled to each other
admiring their day-off purchases,
new shirts--

it's in the play-talk
of children, without irony:
not cool, not
joshing each other,

and in the way
men and women of any age maintain
some expectation of love,

(not pickups, but love) and so
remain beautiful:
there
'in merry London, my most kindly nurse,
that to me gave this life's first native source.'
("Part III," TSA, pp. 65-66)

From England the poet moves on, having gained some insight into the change of life that American society has brought about. Importantly, she loses the earlier passionate belief in revolution as the healer for human separation. She becomes aware that through living she can see that the false picture of life produced by chaotic tensions is caused by a lack of joy in the hope for life. In America the poet can have the same kind of experiences, but they are "more frantic, a sense of stolen time, of pleasure only taken in recognition of desparate need sometimes to let up, a respite from the chills of fevered Amerika" ("Part III," TSA, p. 69). From her vantage point, the poet questions her response to America's lack of hope--

when I go back into the writhing lava,
will I rejoice in
fierce hope, in
wanhope, in
'righteous' pleasurable hope?

Could struggle be enough, even
without hope?

("Part III," TSA, p. 70)

At the end of this third evolution, she returns to England and discovers that her image of America can be changed by the creative act:

Make a place for yourself
in the darkness
and wait there. Be there.
. . . .
Dream it that way.
Imagine.

Your being, a fiery stillness,
is needed to TRANSFORM
the dogs.

And Bet said to me:
Get down into your well,

it's your well

go deep into it

into your own depth as into a poem.

("Part III," TSA, p. 72)

In the fourth evolution of To Stay Alive, the poet returns to America and becomes aware of an underlying rhythm to American life:

I went back.
Daily life
is not lava.
It is
a substance that expands and contracts, a rhythm
different from the rhythm of history,
though history is made of the same
minutes and hours.

("Report," TSA, p. 75)

The poet finds that happiness exists in the common humanistic bond of the people trying to create order from chaos. She

enters numerous confrontations with the chaotic forces, where the active individuals are united by a common sorrow: "We can never forget ourselves and our problems involve/ others and deform them" ("Daily Life," TSA, p. 79). To Stay Alive ends on a note of the continuing quest for meaning, motivated by the desire to stay alive. The poet still remains in doubt about her value in creating a new order, but she has begun to be aware of the interacting role of the self, society, and nature:

> O holy innocents! I have
> no virtue but to praise
> you who believe
> life is possible. . .

("Report," TSA, p. 84)

Chapter Four

Synthesis Without Dialectic:
The Poetic Myth of Howard Nemerov

In "The Swaying Form: A Problem in Poetry," Howard Nemerov defines poetry as existing "only by a continuing revelation in a world always incarnate of word and flesh indissoluably, a world simultaneously solid and transpicuous."[1] Underlying this view of poetry is Nemerov's belief that life exists and functions as an organic, unified body. To the untrained eye, life would seem to exist as a result of natural oppositions, a series of dialectical forms as day-night, war-peace, squalor-splendor.

Nemerov instead forms in his poetry a thematic myth of organic transcendence, a harmony that rises above the seeming oppositions to constitute a unifying element. These higher forms of life, the unifiers, are largely the result of creation, by either God or man, and find their consummate expression in religion and art. The role of poetry is seen in a mythical context as a bridge between oppositions and a stabilizer of chaos. Poetry is a transcending epiphany that moves beyond dialectic to an intuitive knowledge of life's organic

[1] Poetry and Fiction: Essays (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1963), p. 13.

rhythm. Within Nemerov's poetry the belief in a transcendent unity of life is much more than a poetic theme. It becomes a guiding principle of organization, a myth, against which all things are judged.

The explication of this mythic principle in Nemerov's work points to a consistent and quite formal progression of the theme of unity. The first stage is a fragmentation of meaning into false dialectics that produces the pseudo-oppositions of a seemingly chaotic world. The second concerns the bewilderment of an individual, or society, that accepts the dialectics as valid. Third, the role of the artist is seen as a transcending and revelatory force capable of moving man out from chaos. In the fourth stage, the dialectic is dismissed, chaos declines, and the basic rhythm and harmony of organic life appear. As this quest progresses beyond the acceptance of fragmentation, Nemerov expresses the poet's role as the interpreter of life's meaning in near-religious terms. The poet intuitively recognizes and reflects through his work the organic harmony of life. This view of the poet-as-priest allies Nemerov with the romantic tradition of Keats and Browning, but perhaps Nemerov is more closely within the legacy of Dante, the poet who experiences the transcendent state and creates in the afterglow.

The first stage of the quest is a recognition of the cause for fragmentation of meaning. In Nemerov's view this breakdown of unity is an enveloping myopia caused by man's desire

to analyze the complexities of life into their component parts, a result of the scientific and rational attitude. "The Rope's End" metaphorically describes this analyzation as "unraveling a rope," where "You begin at the end" of its existance instead of at the beginning.[2]

> Taking the finished work
> You pick it to bits,
>
> Straightening out the crossed
> Deriving many from one
> Moving forward in time
> And backward in idea.
>
> ("The Rope's End," Swallows, p. 75)

The rope loses its organic existence and begins to revert back to its constituent elements. The rope is no longer capable of forming a line,

> Incapable of knot or wave
> Or tying things together
> Or making anything secure,

and becomes an insignificant fragmentation of its former organic unity "that will blow away/ Before a little breath" ("The Rope's End," Swallows, p. 75). At the end of the poem the nature of the rope metaphor is directly stated:

> All this
> In the last analysis
> Is crazy man's work,
> Admitted, who can leave
> Nothing continuous
> Since Adam's fall
> Unraveled all.
>
> ("The Rope's End," Swallows, p. 75)

The desire to find the components of being, the Adamic apple

[2] The Blue Swallows (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 75. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Swallows, p. --)."

eating, subverts man's view of life as a whole entity and causes him to destroy the complexities and organic nature of existence.

The scientific immersion in analyzing the composition of being loses the capability of recognizing life's total unity and determines that the truth of existence lies in the sum of its constituent parts. This process fragments the harmony of nature into the parts that can specified by the rational, scientific attitude and destroys the creative product of their combination.[3] The cause for man's desire to analyze the world originates in the prideful belief that his reason is capable of understanding the world's meaning. Pride separates man from nature, dilutes the emotions, and makes life hard and uncomfortable. The pride of science gives man the false belief that he can classify accurately the components of nature and promotes a feeling that all things in life can be rationally explained. The effect of this over-reliance on reason in its cumulative outcome is not the confident complacency of the scientific dream of reason, but instead a feeling of corrupted life, nothingness--

> Once more
> He comes to stand before
> The window and the screen,
> Framing as in a graph
> The view he has of flowers,
> Or fields beyond the flowers,
> The hanging hill, the blue
> Distance that voids his vision
> Though not as tears might do.

[3]See "The Dream of Reason," Bennington College Bulletin, XXVII (February 1960), 10-22.

He has no tears, but knows
No one will come, there's no
Comfort, not the least
Saving discrepancy
In a view where every last thing
Is rimed with its own shadow
Exactly, and every fall
  Is once for all.

("The View," Swallows, pp. 16-17)

Nemerov feels that society keeps the scientific attitude toward life alive through two means, history and education. History attempts to tell us how life really was and helps to diminish the realm of fantasy and imagination by imposing factual interpretations of human events. In "To Clio, Muse of History," the author laments the passing of a childhood dream of power and superhuman splendor that could be found in a statue of "The Etruscan Warrior," even though it "is proved to be a modern forgery."[4]

One more casualty,
One more screen memory penetrated at last
To be destroyed in the endless anamneis
Always progressing, never arriving at a cure.
My childhood in the glare of that giant form
Corrupts with history, for I too fought in the War.

("To Clio," Next Room, p. 3)

The speaker identifies himself with the warrior as a casualty of the war against human dignity and imagination. Science will destroy the statue's image for the future, will "Smash the idol, of course" ("To Clio," Next Room, p. 3), but will be incapable of sterilizing the statue's imaginative fertility for the

[4]The Next Room of the Dream (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 3. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Next Room, p. --)."

speaker. The warrior was the representation of life vitality, the "great male beauty/ That stood for the sexual thrust of power" ("To Clio," Next Room, p. 3). For those who follow in the wake of science's decision on the statue, the warrior will only represent "another lie about our life" ("To Clio," Next Room, p. 3), but the speaker will "remember how

> We children stared, learning from him
> Unspeakable things about war that weren't in the books;
> And how the Museum store offered for sale
> His photographic reproductions in full color
> With the ancient genitals blacked out.
> ("To Clio," Next Room, p. 4)

His memory of the Etruscan warrior retains the imaginative vitality of the life force. The poet feels that the scientific, historical view is merely another way of viewing the statue. The rational and imaginative interpretations of the warrior become united through its image and coexist in a state of sublime relativity. Their opposition is false; there is no real war between science and imagination, because both the speaker and the rationalist only through their own narrow visions,

> As with a dream interpreted by one still sleeping,
> The interpretation is only the next room of the dream.
> ("To Clio," Next Room, p. 3)

This belief in the relative truth found in interpretation is the central facet of Nemerov's view of life. All of the seeming oppositions in existence are merely segments of the total view. Interpretation is never capable of determining all of the complexities of a situation, because, by its very nature,

interpretation attempts to define the limitless and impose rational attitudes upon irrational quantities.

The problem with interpretation is not that it exists, of course, but that it will be accepted blindly by those who, for whatever reason, refuse to think. This misuse of interpretation feeds on the desire for categorization and simple definitions to complex problems. In numerous poems Nemerov satirizes this misuse in institutionalized education, which produces a great deal of indoctrination, but very little learning. A typical expression of Nemerov's distaste with the penchant for indoctrination is "To David, about His Education." In this poem David is told the truths of the world are "mostly invisible things" ("To David," Next Room, p. 54), which can become known through education. Of course the only way to find these truths is by "putting the mind's eye,/ Or its nose, in a book," because here he can learn

> Things like the square root of Everest
> Or how many times Byron goes into Texas,
> Or whether the law of the excluded middle
> Applies west of the Rockies.
> ("To David," Next Room, p. 54)

Although the speaker admits that he does not have the least notion of why these things are important, he does know that "such things are said to be/ Good for you, and you will have to learn them/ In order to become one of the grown-ups" ("To David," Next Room, p. 54). What David will learn are the mistakes of the narrow past, the truths that lack meaning for his own life. Education, in this sense, becomes a propagation of

the chaos that the past invented for its progeny. After David ingests all of the education, he then will have the dubious privilege of becoming one of those

> Who sees invisibly things neither steadily nor whole
> But keeps gravely the grand confusion of the world
> Under his hat, which is where it belongs,
> And teaches small children to do this in their turn.
> ("To David," Next Room, p. 54)

The outcome of this forced ingestion of interpretations denies the individual capacity for imagination. In another poem, "The Triumph of Education," an unitiated child, whose "eyes were like lakes of the sea," is told a number of "grown-up" interpretations of life as if they were absolute truths.[5] Progressively the child is educated that "There is no Santa Claus," "Man couples like the beasts," "There isn't any God," and "There is no Life after Death" ("The Triumph of Education," Image, p. 17). After the first three revelations the child grows more withdrawn and apathetic until told in the fourth that because death is the definite end there is no need "For moral care" to stint your breath" ("The Triumph of Education," Image, p. 17). Upon hearing this

> The children's eyes grew hot, they glowed like stoves.
> Ambitious, and equipped with all our proofs,
> They ran forth little women, little men,
> And were not children then.
> ("The Triumph of Education," Image, p. 17)

The child accepting interpretations of others denies his own

[5]The Image and the Law (New York: Henry Holt, 1947), p. 17. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Image, p. --)."

individuality and becomes the myopic extension of chaos, a hedonist.

Nemerov, as almost every other contemporary poet, finds the deepest manifestations of chaos in materialism and war. For Nemerov each of these evils of modern society poses a direct threat to the life of the individual, because they misdirect him away from the life force. Materialism tempts man to be concerned more with the accumulation of things, the creation of progress idols, and conformity; war favors a group or national enterprise over individual action and, more than any other facet of modern life, depicts the individual's entrapment in the web of dialectics. Both materialism and war tend to enforce focused attention on their own concerns and provide man with little opportunity, or desire, for perceiving a broader view of life.

Materialism has encroached so much on modern life that in itself it has been a process of education, extending the absolute truths and "invisible things" of chaos. Santa Claus becomes the "overstuffed confidence man" ("Santa Claus," Next Room, p. 5) created by merchandising greed; religion declines to an adjunct of economic prosperity;[6] modern man becomes the "average consumer of the middle class," who can measure the worth of his life only by the "lengthening trail/ Of empty

[6] "Boom," New and Selected Poems (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), pp. 18-19. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Poems, p. --)."

bottles and bones, of broken shoes,/ Frayed collars and worn out or outgrown/ Diapers and dinner jackets, silk ties and slickers" ("Life Cycle of Common Man," Poems, p. 16). These three examples portray Nemerov's central arguments against materialism. The lust for things destroys, in the first instance, the childhood myth of Santa Claus and produces in its place an ogre of the dollar sign. Religion no longer concerns itself with the problems of man's salvation or spiritual need, but is an economic institution whose purpose is to reflect economic prosperity. The individual ceases to have a life of personal accomplishments. Instead, he litters his lifetime with the goods he consumes and is little more than a mechanized disposal for the economy's ever-increasing production.

Nemerov's early war poems in The Image and the Law and A Guide to the Ruins deal with war as a direct and immediate experience that forces society's chaotic destruction into his life. These poems show man as an ignorant, inferior pawn that allows himself to be moved about by the ambiguities of nationalism. Just as David is told to learn the "invisible things" for no other reason than they are "good" for him, people die in war "By the failure of a cotter pin/ Who believed they were fighting for truth" ("The Place of Value," Image, p. 21). Representative of Nemerov's early attitude is "A Fable of the War." In the first stanze of this poem, the speaker finds himself isolated in a strange land, a railroad "station whose

name I do not know."[7] Even before his company is to be moved, he finds that everyone is spiritually dead, but their bodies were "too corruptible for the high work of death" ("A Fable of the War," Guide, p. 21). The war they fight in has the purpose of carrying out some grand design, a modern temple-building, that will give them release only through a second death. In this poem the individual views war with a cynicism that leaves him without any hope to change his imprisonment, though the battle has yet to begin. The after-effects of this controlled behavior are, for Nemerov, even more depressing. "The Hero Comes Home in His Hamper and Is Exhibited at the World's Fair" concerns the brutality, both physical and mental, that war brings to the manipulated. The individual is decimated physically to "A protoplastic epigram" and mentally,

> Though I was broken by the mighty fist,
> By healing Nature all my wounds were kissed
> And I was made the utter solipsist.
> My happy state! These thoughts, within their bound,
> Although they go not out, go round and round.
> ("The Hero Comes Home," Guide, p. 22)

Although war's destruction of the individual is a central theme in his poetry, the particularized experience of war becomes universalized in Nemerov's later work. The arena of warfare expands to include the entire scope of human existence. Just as the conventional war theme was clearly the central

[7] Guide to the Ruins (New York: Random House, 1950), p. 21. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Guide, p. --)."

focus of Nemerov's first two books, the expanded theme, the war for individual freedom, becomes the later works' dominant concern. This expanded war is the result of the individual's submission to the dialectical interpretation of life, the chaotic battle of false oppositions. The dialectics surround man, convincing him that life progresses through competition. But this view leads to a spiritual death, because the dialectics are a "dead river" "Beginning no where, never/ Arriving, ever to be done" ("Dead River," Swallows, p. 74). In this war, existence is meaningless and man founders continually in a search for a constant principle of being that will be permanent and add stability to his life. The dialectical war for life gives man the principle and spirit of competition and progress as his goal. "A Way of Life" indicates the result of man's participation in this universal war. In this poem, television, a reflection of the war situation extended into areas not conventionally viewed as a battleground of life and war, depicts one grotesque corruption after another with interludes of vapid blonde beauties

> Smoking a filter cigarette beside a mountain stream
> Brief interlude, before the conflict of love and duty
> Get moving again, as sheriff and posse expound,
> Between jail and saloon, the American Dream
> Where Justice, after considerable horsing around,
> Turns out to be Mercy; when the villain is knocked off,
> A kindly uncle offers syrup for my cough.
>
> And how these clean-cut athletic types
> In global hats are having a nervous debate
> As they stand between their individual rocket ships
> Which have landed, appropriately, on some rocks
> Somewhere in Space, in an atmosphere of hate

> Where one tells the other to pull up his socks
> And get going, he doesn't say where; they fade,
> And an angel food cake flutters in the void.
> ("A Way of Life," Swallows, pp. 41-42)

The speaker of the poem "used to leave now and again" this picture of violence, but fails to any more because it has become his whole existence. He sits by the television enraptured in its truth, and

> Still, I keep my weapons handy, sitting here
> Smoking and shaving and drinking the dry beer.
> ("A Way of Life," Swallows, p. 42)

Just as the individual in "A Way of Life" keeps tuned to the false image of truth in competition and hate, others wander about "dreaming/ Idolatries to alphabet the void" ("The View from Pisgah," Next Room, p. 30). All of these attempts are in vain within Nemerov's context of meaning because they try to form static pockets of life around themselves. Since nature and life are by their own terms evolving and growing, these entrepreneurs of stasis create the chaotic war in which they find themselves bewildered. Their images of life work to narrow man's perception of existence by "idolatrously confirming human beings day after day in the habit of mean delusion as their sole reality."[8] By limiting his existence to a static reality of absolutes, man separates himself from natural harmony and condemns his being to a death of the self, a cessation of growth and expansive becoming. Acceptance of the

[8]Howard Nemerov, "Attentiveness and Obedience," in Poets on Poetry, ed. Howard Nemerov (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p. 247.

dialectic idols imprisons man into the meaningless motion and despair described in "Goldfish:"

> The bearded goldfish moves about the bowl
> Waving disheveled rags of elegant fin
> Languidly in the light; their mandarin
> Manner of life, weary and cynical,
>
> Rebukes the round world that has kept them in
> Glass bubbles with a mythological
> Decor of Rhineland castles on a shoal
> Of pebbles pink and green. Like light in gin,
>
> Viscous as ice first forming on a stream,
> Their refined feathers fan them on to no
> Remarkable purpose; they close their eyes
> As, mouths reopening in new surprise
> About their long imprisonment in O,
> They cruise the ocean of an alien dream.
>
> (Next Room, p. 28)

In "Genius of the Shore: The Poetry of Howard Nemerov," Julia Randall says of the individual living in the "alien dream" of the dialectical world that the poet is only able to be descriptive of his state, pointing out the brutalities and chaos:

> Indifference and rigidity characterize the room; complacency or confusion, the roomers. Any red-blooded American boy can buy a passport to the war, a subway ticket to Suburbia, even an access to the Academy of Fine Ideas. He can make like Ike, Santa Claus, Don Juan, Professor Publish, or any number of free-trial examples (and if not satisfied in 20 years, double your hypocrisy back). The monuments of his aching intellect resemble the stark angularities of Steinberg, and the poet can only serve as wry guide to such ruins, which include, for instance, New York, the 'frozen city'; the statues in the public gardens; the stacks of the university library; the pulpit; the motel; the segregated cemetery; the packaged meat in the supermarket; the loyalty oath; the Indian head nickel, and so on.[9]

[9]In The Critical Reception of Howard Nemerov, ed. Bowie Duncan (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1971), p. 16.

The poet is a reflector of the ruins of fragmentation of meaning and chaos, but he is also capable of transcending these stages and providing insight into the organic unity of life. By removing the false truths of the dialectical oriented society the poet is able

> To see clearly, not to be deceived
> By the pretended burial of the dead,
> The ears of the bereaved,
> The stopped clock
> Or impenetrable lock,
> Or anything that was possibly said
> Simply to see who might have been misled.
> ("Private Eye," Next Room, p. 53)

According to Nemerov, the poet's task is to displace society's traditional false truths in order to make "invisible things" visible and, through artistic creation, to express the ever-changing harmony of nature. To accomplish this task this poet must overcome two primary barriers that impede the originality and truth of his creation. First the traditions of the past tend to subvert, rather than inspire, the poet's creative present if he succumbs to them in adoration.

> Whole traditions existed
> For which the strict imitation of the predecessors
> And not originality, was the matter of pride.
> The poet then is seen as bearing a priestly part
> In the ritual, confirming the continuance
> Of this that and the other thing, humbly
> Refreshing the hearer with his ceremony.
> ("Praising Poets of that Country," Guide, p. 45)

The debilitating influence of tradition causes the poet to view those of the past as monuments to which he must give adoration through imitation. Second, the poet's ego must be killed, because with the ego the poet will begin to write for

money, pride, or a desire to advertise himself as a martyr of the modern world, those who "slop their ketchup in the statue's wounds/ And advertise that blood as from the heart" ("To the Bleeding Hearts Association of American Novelists," Next Room, p. 59). Oliver, the subject of "Make Big Money at Home! Write Poems in Spare Time!" exemplifies all three of these of the ego's destructive effects. Oliver's inspiration is, as the title implies, that he sees poetry as an easy way to make quick money. He begins with the ambiguous desire to write about reality, "And attempted to think about agony/ And history, and the meaning of history,/ And all stuff like that there" ("Make Big Money at Home!" Next Room, p. 62). The subject of his poem is to be a tree, a thought Oliver believed to be inspiration "And to be dealt with," that he hoped

> Would turn out to be fashionable,
> The axle of the universe, maybe,
> Or some other mythologically
> Respectable tree-contraption
> With dryads, or having to do
> With the knowledge of Good and Evil, and the Fall.
> ("Make Big Money at Home!" Next Room, p. 62)

Oliver is able to write the full expression of his imagination--"'A Tree,' he wrote"--but then must sit back and wait "For what would come next to next" ("Make Big Money at Home!" Next Room, p. 62). Oliver's problem is that he sees poetry as an easy, passive act of non-creation, a money-making act of prideful self-gratification.

Nemerov regards the poet, the artist who moves beyond

the tradition and ego barriers, as capable of producing through the creative act a statement of natural truth, an expression of harmony and unity. The poet must strive to create

> Just for the sake of getting something right
> Once in a while, something that could stand
> On its own flat feet to keep out windy time
> And the worm, something that might simply be,
> Not as the monument in the smoky rain
> Grimly endures, but that would be
> Only a moment's inviolable presence,
> The moment before disaster, before the storm,
> In its peculiar silence, an integer
> Fixed in the middle of the fall of things,
> Perfected and casual as to a child's eye
> Soap bubbles are, and skipping stones.
> ("Lion and Honeycomb," Next Room, pp. 68-69)

In these moments the poet transcends the dialectical chaos and forms an epiphany of the natural order; he presents the natural synthesis existing beyond the false dialectic of rationality. The poet stands midpoint between the natural synthesis and society's manufactured chaos, and, because of the poet's unique ability to perceive the natural unity and express it in his role of prophet-priest, he causes "the great tree of speech to flower/ Between the two realms of heaven and earth,"[10] acting as a bridge to natural harmony for those of lesser perception. The creative action of the poet works forward from idea in the attempt to depict order, rather than the destructive action of the rope-analysts who begin with the "finished work." In this respect poets stand in opposition to the rational scientist because the poet builds outward from

[10] "To Lu Chi," Mirrors and Windows (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), p. 94.

moments of perception, while the scientist attempts to increasingly narrow his vision to smaller units of nature that are well ordered in restrictive classifications.

These two attitudes of interpretation are contrasted in "The Salt Garden." In the first part of this poem the speaker tells how he has worked on a small, restricted piece of ground, which has been reclaimed from the ocean floor, to make a green garden and lawn where

> Turnip and bean and violet
> In decent order set,
> Grow, flourish and are gone;
> Even the ruins of stalk and shell,
> The vine when it goes brown,
> Look civil and die well.[11]

In contrasting what he has made with the wildness of the ocean, the contrast of the restricted scientific and expansive artistic attitudes, he finds that he despises his planned and ordered plot because it appears insignificant in relation to uncivilized nature. He laments that "Every work of the hand" seems futile in the changing state of nature, "For what can man keep?" ("The Salt Garden," Salt Garden, p. 41). The second part begins with the same man awakening at dawn to find a gull on the lawn, who, after looking about at the man's orderly garden,

> spreads out his sail,
> Leaving to savage men
> Their miserable regimen;

[11] The Salt Garden (Boston: Little, Brown, 1955), p. 41. All subsequent references to this volume will be cited parenthetically within the text of this essay as "(Salt Garden, p. --)."

So did he rise, making a gale
About him by his wings,
And fought his huge freight into air
And vanished seaward with a cry--
A strange tongue but the tone clear.
He faded from my troubled eye
There where the ghostly sun
Came from the mist.
("The Salt Garden," Salt Garden, p. 42)

The cry of the gull awakens the speaker to a recognition of why his planned and orderly garden frustrated him and did not satisfy his need for harmony. The man attempted to impose a rational system of order upon nature whose essence lies in its fluidity, and, thus, his attempt was futile and resulted in the despair he experienced in contrasting his garden with the fluid ocean. Robert Harvey in "A Prophet Armed: An Introduction to the Poetry of Howard Nemerov" says of "The Salt Garden:"

> In reclaiming a bit of what was "once the shore and once, maybe, the ocean floor," this amateur naturalist from the city is bringing his limited human skill in contact with the great reservoir from which that very skill--his human consciousness--appears to separate him. That separation constitutes the fall of man; that contact, his salvation. The feeling of helplessness, of nonentity, while seen to be invalid as a total response to the encounter, is not wholly denied by the poem's resolution. Man's garden is sowed with salt; his only hope, and that a limited one, is in his own effort that makes it anyhow green.[12]

At the poem's conclusion, the speaker sees himself as a "Green fellow" and a "tenant" ("The Salt Garden," Salt Garden, p. 43) in the natural realm, because he came into it with the desire of subduing nature to a civilized and rational order. But he

[12] In The Critical Reception of Howard Nemerov, p. 45.

learns from his experience and recognizes that his "salt dream lies" in attempting to bring himself into the natural harmony and dismissing his false rational superiority. His green garden can coexist with the "wild/ Wave" ("The Salt Garden," Salt Garden, p. 43) of nature and overcome the seeming oppositions between them as the man, through reflection on his creation and the natural order, perceives the essence of nature and the limited scope of his rational conceptions.

The concept that the individual begins to realize at the end of "The Salt Garden" is that the truth of life's harmony is a synthesis of natural qualities where seeming oppositions lose their false antithetical qualities and exist in a state of mutual correspondence. The false oppositions that plague the individual and cause his life to be chaotic are destroyed in Nemerov's conception of the synthesis of nature. This natural synthesis unites seemingly opposed elements in complementary relationships. Thus, an opposition such as black versus white is viewed by Nemerov as a complementary relationship where black and white are mutually defined and enhanced by juxtaposition. The complementary relationship occurs because the "opposing" elements are not two separate entities existing in separate spheres, but two segments of the entire condition of nature, which is never at war with itself. The realization of this synthesis of natural harmony involves the whole being of the individual, and integration of emotional

and rational responses, so that he acts "as an orchestra to accept,/ Making an answer, even if lament,/ In measured dance, with the whole instrument" ("Unscientific Postscript," Image, p. 69). Thus, the harmony of the self comes concurrently with the perception of harmony in the natural order. Man's fulfillment arrives when he sees beyond the false dialectical formation that causes conflict in his life to the subtle harmony of nature.

Nemerov's most sustained exposition of the harmony in nature is in "Runes." This poem, whose title implies the communication of the secret magical power of life, depicts the organic harmony and unity that exist below the surface of life. The first line, "This is about the stillness in moving things" ("Runes," Poems, I, p. 4), is emblematic of the poem's theme that between all of life's seeming oppositions there is a common correspondence which synthesizes the false contraries by delineating their basic unity within the total framework of life. Nemerov repeatedly constructs images that unify oppositions: "silence has begun to storm" ("Runes," Poems, III, p. 5), "The seed sleeps in the furnaces of death" ("Runes," Poems, IV, p. 5). Water as a symbol of the total life of nature is the central unifying image, because "To watch water, to watch running water/ Is to know a secret" ("Runes," Poems, XV, p. 11) of the common harmonies of life and death, movement and stagnation, good and evil, and spiritual wealth and poverty. All of these harmonies exist

simultaneously within the organic form of nature in an evolving progression and retrogression, the ebb and flow of life's pulsating rhythm. The last of the poem's fifteen sections states that the runic communication of life's mysteries itself exists as a reflection of this rhythm, a state of being both deprived and in possession of the essence of nature:

> Knowing the secret,
> Keeping the secret--herringbones of light
> Ebbing on beaches, the huge artillery
> Of tides--it is not knowing, it is not keeping,
> But being the secret hidden from yourself.
> ("Runes," Poems, XV, p. 11)

Through his creation the poet transcends the false impression that life exists and evolves through the tensions caused by dialectical opposition. His creation, if it is truly natural expression, is dominated by the organic rhythm of life and depicts the connective links of the natural essence. Nemerov, in the stance of the poet-priest of the natural order, creates the statement that the frustrations of man, caused by an over-reliance on reason, will be diminished as man brings himself to a closer harmony with nature, man's salvation from the fragmented state of chaos. This theme and its basic mythical characteristics provide the context of meaning in which Nemerov's poetry exists and finds its basic meaning.

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