ARIEL: PHASE OF FRUITION

“The woman is perfected.
Her dead
Body wears the smile of accomplishments,
The illusion of a Greek necessity”
Sylvia Plath: “Edge”.

By the time Sylvia Plath took her life at the age of thirty, she already had a following in her contemporary literary community. In the ensuing years, her work attracted the attention of a multitude of readers who saw in her singular verse an attempt to cataloguing despair, violent emotion, and obsession with death. It is in the final sequence of poems in each collection that is of particular interest. Plath concluded Ariel with the bee poems, and was thus paralleling The Colossus, which closes with 'Poem for a Birthday', the final word of which is 'new'. Both sequences focus on rebirth. By altering the closure of Ariel Hughes added a selection of the 1963 poems and omitting “The Swarm”. The parallelism along with the sense of hope engendered by “new” at the closure of The Colossus was lost. The same would have been repeated by “spring” at the closure of Ariel.

As in the earlier poem, the third person is used as a distancing device, although in the later poem the protagonist is female, a woman who “is dragging her shadow in circle/about a bald. Hospital saucer” in the Jungian Symbology, the shadow is representative of the 'other', the “inferior part of the personality” (355).
The hospital, having a personal significance for Plath in connection with her own breakdown, is often the setting for poems concerned with rebirth. This “other” has suffered, it is like a sheet of blank paper; it has no memories since they have been wiped out; it is flat, one dimensional. The shadow takes on personal problems, a sort of private blitzkrieg that the woman has suffered; then, but she has opted out living “quietly/with no attachments, like a foetus in a bottle”. She is like a dead one who has been born but has 'died' without ever growing to maturity; she is not at peace. “The future” for her “is a gray seagull/Tattling in its cat-voice of departure, departure”. The presence of the sea is implied in the image of the seabird, soaring over grey waters giving its lonely call, “departure”. The woman will be abandoned. While certain strong emotions no longer trouble her----grief and anger have been exorcised and age and terror “like nurses, attend her”. She has to live with the knowledge of growing old, perhaps of dying, and of this she is afraid. The natural process of old age death is perceived as fear-inducing, yet, in other poems, “death” sought deliberately is welcomed. We are being offered two different types of death: the natural, the ultimate end for all living creatures, through a fearful experience, and the metaphorical, which leads to rebirth, and is to be welcomed.

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.
God’s lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees!—The furrow
Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,
Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks—
Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else
Hauls me through air—
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.
White
Godiva, I unpeel—
Dead hands, dead stringencies.
And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child’s cry
Melts in the wall. (245)

In this poem, the individual appearing from the sea is male; in the Jungian parlance this equates with a meeting with her animus for Plath that is one of the undermentioned four processes involved in individuation:

1. Experiencing the shadow, the dark aspect of the self;
2. Meeting with the animus/anima, the image of the other sex carried within each individual;
3. Appearance of Magna Mater, an archetypal image, leading to liberation from the mother;

4. Appearance of the self in which the inner and outer realities are joined. (102)

This poem traces the I-speaker's rebirth experience, her admission to hospital where she is “learning peacefulness”, her treatment from which she distances herself: “I have nothing to do with explosions”; her journey into her unconscious: “the water went over my head”, and, her rebirth signaled by her awareness of the vividness of the colour of the tulips, her sense of sight, together with that of sound: the tulips fill up the air “like a loud noise”. The sea is a haven in 'Tulips', in direct contrast with the sea of “Blackberrying” and “Finisterre” (Poems, pp. 168 and 169). In “Blackberrying”, the I-speaker has gone through an alley of brambles towards the sea, one “more hook, and the berries and bushes end”. She is implying emptiness on which she elaborates in the final stanza:

The only thing to come now is the sea.
A last hook brings me
To the hills' northern face, and the face is orange rock
That looks out on nothing, nothing but a great space
Of white and pewter lights, and a din like silversmiths
Beating and beating at an intractable metal.(170)

As in earlier poems, stone rock and water are juxtaposed, here and as in “Suicide Off Egg Rock”, there is a linking up of the sea and light, along with a suggestion that an external force is endeavoring to shape the unconscious, “an
intractable metal”, into something other. In *Finisterre*, the sea is also perceived as a void: the view is of “the sea exploding/ with no bottom or anything on the other side of it”. In both of these poems the sea represents an absence. If the symbolism of the sea as a representation of the unconscious were to be used, then Plath’s suggestions that unconscious is an empty space. An unknown, and at this point an unknowable void. The two senses of sight and hearing are again involved as they were in “Suicide Off Egg Rock” and “Tulips”; rebirth being implicit in them. Perhaps the I-speaker is allowing for the possibility that rebirth may not occur, that the self may not be discovered. This is an element of the threat contained in the sea. During this period, the connection between the moon and the sea was becoming clearer to Plath as she explored the association between her own femininity and that of the moon. “The Moon and, the Yew Tree” (172) was an exercise suggested by Hughes who subsequently commented that “no poem can be a poem that is not a ‘statement from the powers in control of our life” (87). Hughes’s implication here is that there is some form of external force operating through the poet's voice. Kroll suggests that if “the poem began as an exercise, it was ultimately an instrument of discovery and commitment, providing a channel for those powers” (43). She, too, suggests an operative controlling force. In the poem, Plath takes an external experience and internalizes it. The light of the moon shining on the tree becomes a light in the mind: “This is the light of the mind, cold
and planetary. The trees of the mind are black. . .” (240)

The fumy, “spirituous mists” which “inhabit this place” describe the state of the I-speaker's mind: she “simply cannot see where there is to get to”. At this point, the moon appears:

The moon is no door. It is a face in its own right,
White as a knuckle and terribly upset.
It drags the sea after it like a dark crime. (250)

The link between the moon and femaleness here is obvious, but the moon does not offer an entrance into the self since it has its own symbolism. Equally obvious is the I-speaker's dislike of this femaleness.

The moon is my mother. She is not sweet like Mary.
Her blue garments unloose small bats and owls. (Ibidem)

The earlier association with the moon had been with women's monthly cycle. But association of the moon with bats and owls has the suggestion of the Universal Mother:

For bats and owls seem to be the creatures usually allotted to the two sexes . . . each man believes that not only his own life but the lives of his father, brothers, sons and so On are bound up with the lives of particular bats, and that therefore in protecting the bat species he is protecting the lives of all his male relations as well as his own. Similarly, each woman believes that the lives of her mother, sisters, daughters, and so forth, equally with her own, are bound up with the lives of particular owls, and that in guarding the owl species she is
guarding the lives of all her female relations besides her own.

(688)

The moon is perceived as controlling force. This image is repeated in “Three Women”

It is she that drags the blood-black sea around Month after month, with its voices of failure. I am helpless as the sea at the end of her string. I am restless. Restless and useless, I, too, create corpses.

The use of the verb 'drag' repeats the dislike felt by the I-speaker of her femaleness, and as of the sea which symbolizes the unconscious, she is suggesting that it is her femaleness that controls this unconscious, that she has no conscious influence. Perhaps, it is this “control” that Hughes suggests. Kroll hypothesizes that, for Plath, the moon is that which “symbolizes the deepest source and inspiration of the poetic vision, the poet's vocation, her female biology, and her role and fate as protagonist in a tragic drama” (21). The face in the pool was beautiful, but not mine “is that of the Third Voice, in “Three Women”. The reflection is other than the original, the unconscious other than the conscious. The speaker is aware of a duality within herself. This duality is also apparent in the First Voice, of the Wife:

I talk to myself, myself only, set apart---
Swabbed and lurid with disinfectants, sacrificial.
Waiting lies heavy on my lids. It lies like sleep,
Like a big sea. (245)
This is the image of the sea, full of terror for the insignificant woman. The empty and echoing shell lies on the shore. Unable to escape from the inexorable fate of the water advancing and unable to ignore the rebirth of herself which will occur with the birth of her child, she perceives herself on the edge of the tide line, the borderline between land and sea, between death and rebirth.

The Wife observes the newborn babies: 'I think they are made of water;' water is not only the medium of birth, it is creation -itself. 'And God said, Let the water bring forth abundantly the moving creature that hath life' (Genesis 1:20). Can we adopt a mythological interpretation of the poem, the three voices as three aspects of the female psyche? Sylvia's radio play can be seen as a fascinating attempt on her part to ritualize the three major selves that formed her own character (376).

Toni Wolff, an early disciple of Jung's, has sketched four structural forms of the feminine which she calls the Mother, the Hetaira, the Amazon, and the Medial. Every woman potentially has all four structural forms, although one or two are more readily accessible to her than the others and become her pattern of functional adaptation. Ulanova elaborates Wolff's definitions, pointing out that the forms may also refer to the masculine anima, and detailing the dominant archetype for each form, together with other aspects. These archetypes are as follows:

For the Mother type, the Great Mother;
For the Hetaira type, the Great Father;
For the Amazon type, the Virgin;
For the Medial Woman type, the Wise Woman (250).

While there are only three voices in the play, there is a fourth voice which is that of the poet herself; perhaps we should consider this as the, Medial Woman Medial means neutral, neither precisely one thing nor another. It is something in-between, intermediate, an agent, a mediator, a means, not an end (208). The medial voice is represented by the text itself. It is the means through which the other voices are heard. All are part of one, yet individual in their particular expression. If we use Wolff's definitions, then we are left with the Mother, the Hetaera and the Amazon as archetypes for the Wife, the Secretary and the Girl, and it would seem that the Wife, be fits the, type of Mother, the archetype of which “induces in a woman maternal cherishing” (P.).

A maternal woman, in this sense, can support people and ideas without condescension, can make space for that which needs to grow, can provide security for what is still unaccomplished, and needs room for psychic development. The Wife says of herself:

I am slow as the world. I am very patient,
Turning through my time, the suns and stars
Regarding me with attention. . . .
When I walk out, I am a great event.
I do not have to think, or even rehearse.
What happens to me will happen without attention.
She sees herself as a part of the universe, a part of the natural cycles of life (208).
Both the Secretary and the Girl comment on their separateness from men.

The Secretary says:

The faceless faces of important men.
It is these men I mind:
They are so jealous of anything that is not flat! They are jealous gods
That would have the whole world flat because they are.
She sees women as other than men who are 'jealous gods',
They are jealous of a woman's life-giving abilities. The Girl comments: I
am a mountain now, among mountaineer women.
The doctors move among us as if our bigness
Frightened the mind. They smile like fools (209).

They are to blame for what she is, and they know it. They hug their flatness
like a kind of health. She, too, sees women as other than men, but her view is that
men fear women for the same reason that they are jealous of them. It is not clear
which of the two can be defined as the Amazon, and because of the nature of the
model, one type will dominate and be easily identifiable, the others will be less
formed of the final type, the Hetaira, the companion. Ulanov notes that she relates
“to her children as individuals rather than as a group”. She is 'the puella aeterna,
the "father's daughter" and is symbolized in images of 'nymph, seductress, harlot,
or witch of her children”. The Secretary says:

The faces have no features.
They are bald and impossible, like the face of my children,
Those little sick ones that elude my arms (251).
She sees her children as a group in contrast to the Girl who speaks of her child: “I see her in my sleep, my red, terrible girl”, her 'daughter has no teeth' and “is a small island, asleep and peaceful”. This is a far more individual approach to a child than that of the Secretary. We can consider the Girl as the Hetaira and the Secretary as the Amazon. We should remember that, according to this model, “every woman potentially has all four structural forms” and that these types “form the stage on which a woman may live out her personal drama” (195). In exploring the theme of motherhood through these different voices, Plath was exploring her own psyche, and we should not expect a total differentiation between the types, rather there should be some overlap, some confusion, the edges of one blurring into another. It was suggested in the Introduction chapter that we need to remember the gender-based nature of Jungian theory, and that to interpret a female artist's work needed a slight shift in perspective. This shift is illustrated in Toni Wolff's four definitions of the female. Wolff worked with Jung for many years, and was aware of the need for an altered perspective. “Three Women” is a meditation on maternity and birth, and in this dramatic poem, the image of water is used as a metaphor for sleep, the sleep which precedes birth. Water is also perceived as a threat, a “terrible element”, prior to birth. Plath uses the image, together with that of the moon, as a metaphor for menstruation “the blood-black sea”, and besides, water is also perceived as the source of life. The First Voice, of the Wife asks:
What is it that flings these innocent souls at us?
Look, they are so exhausted.
They are all flat out
In their canvas-sided cots, names tied to their wrists, .
I think they are made of water; they have no expression,
Their features are sleeping, like light on quiet water” (252).

The babies are perceived as 'souls', and water becomes a metaphor for the soul. It had been suggested earlier that when Plath juxtaposes light and water, this implies the light that is to be cast on the contents of the unconscious. Whereas in “Suicide Off Egg Rock”, the contents of the unconscious were perceived as “damning”, and those of the babies peaceful, “like light on quiet water”. In “Lady Lazarus”, one of the most anthologized of all Plath's poems, there is one particular phrase “I rocked shut/As a seashell”, which is a description of the I-speaker's suicide attempt. The use of “rock” calls upon Plath's earlier use of this as a metaphor for a life-problem. The I-speaker's problems being overwhelming she could not overcome the psychic barriers in order to understand herself and thus avoid the repetitive suicide attempts. “One year in every ten” she speaks of managing it. “Shell” suggests the I-speaker as an empty hollow, an image used in “Three Women” in which the Wife perceives herself as “a shell, echoing on this white beach”. In “Ocean 1212-W” Plath refers to a collection of shells found on the shore as “garbage of shells” (120).

She considers them to be the sea's waste, that which is no longer needed, or
empty vessels that once housed a living creature. This is a repetition of the spatial metaphor occurring in “Poem for a Birthday”. A whole “can be something missing, a place to go into, a space to be filled” (88). We are to understand that the I speaker perceives herself, at the moment of suicide, as a void. She has to turn inwards on herself to find herself. A shell is also a shield, a protection for the living creature from the perils of living. As with other images, notably the stone and water, and as has Kroll suggested, the moon, there are a number of different interpretations. It is the death that exhibits birthmarks: clearly the I-speaker recognizes the close proximity of the two experiences that is in death is birth, or rebirth. The phrase “scald scar of water” is a paraphrase for “baptism of fire”, a link with birth and also the concept of passing through difficulties to emerge stronger and changed in some manner. The first visitor has been likened to a bird, with the I-speaker as the prey. “I am red meat” a reiteration of the theme of devouring. The second visitor chastised as a “Bastard Masturbating a glitter, He wants to be loved”. Has been despised for the ephemeral quality of his loving. He can only consider himself and his pleasure. One of the most significant aspects of this poem is that both visitors are seen as male. Plath viewed this poem to be:

This poem is about the double or schizophrenic nature of death--the marmoreal coldness of Blake's death mask, say, hand in glove with the fearful softness of worms, water and other katabolists. I imagine these two aspects of death as two
men, two business friends, who have come to call. (294)

The birth of personality in oneself has a therapeutic effect. It is as if a river having run to waste in sluggish side-streams and marshes suddenly found its way back to its proper bed, or, as if a stone lying on a germinating seed were lifted away so that the shoot could begin its natural growth. Here we have a link between water imagery, stone imagery, and the theme of rebirth.

The final phase of Plath's work is one which demonstrates a change in her use of imagery, both in terms of the stone, as already discussed, and of water. This may be considered as a change indicative of her awareness of the birth of herself. Hughes has suggested “Poem for a Birthday” as “a birth, but it is more appropriate to view this as the conception of the self, since it is not until the final months that the new self emerged in full strength expressed in her poetry. The final placing of the bee sequence in Plath's own ordering of Ariel indicates her knowledge of the struggle taking place within. We might expect a profusion of water imagery in this final phase, water being the medium of birth as well as representative of the unconscious. This expectation has come true in “sheep in Fog”:

They threaten
To let me through to a heaven
Starless and fatherless, a dark water.” (262)

It is not clear, to what “they” refers to. Is it the hills of the first line which “step off into whiteness”, the bones of the previous stanza, “holding stillness” or
“the far/Fields” which melt the I-speaker's heart? Perhaps, it is all the plural nouns occurring in stanzas preceding this final stanza, of marked significance. There is the contradiction between “threaten” and “heaven”, a heaven without light, without the god-figure, starless “and fatherless”, a heaven which is “a dark water”. The unconscious is truly the depths unfathomable and fear-inspiring, but it is the “dark water” which the I-speaker must explore. In “Paralytic” (266), the unconscious is preventing the I-speaker from being sensually aware, an awareness which, in other poems, is taken to be indicative of rebirth:

The still waters
Wrap my lips.
Eyes, nose and ears,
A clear
Cellophane I cannot crack (257).

In these late poems the I-speaker is ambivalent towards rebirth. In “Sheep in Fog”, she is aware of how close the rebirth is; in “Paralytic”, she is aware of her being yet unborn. If we use Plath's own definition of death, “inaccessibility to experience”, then at this point the I-speaker is “dead” to her physical sensations. In the final stanza, as noted in the previous chapter, she likens herself to the “claw of the magnolia”--there is a sense in which the threat in “claw” is drunk “on its own scents”. Plath had spoken to Alvarez that these late poems had to be read out loud, “I want you to hear them” (31); to obtain the maximum enjoyment from such wordplay as “its own scents”; we need to both hear and see the words.
The claw asks “nothing of life”; but “asks something of death”, asks to be reborn from death in the manner of the phoenix of “Lady Lazarus” that the petals of any flower form a bowl. This is symbolic another instance of woman as a vessel, woman as a womb capable of giving birth to herself (49). The I-speaker implies in the final stanzas of this poem that she sees herself as not being yet reborn and that like a Buddha, she has no wants or desires. It is her destiny as a woman to be reborn:

All great religious traditions hold out this essentially feminine promise of the possibility of rebirth. The work of woman is transformation: making something out of nothing: giving form to formless energy. (90)

Certainly for Plath motherhood created an awareness of “making something out of nothing”; when introducing “You're”, she commented that it was about a baby “developing from nothingness into a human being” In these last poems the I-speaker accepts in the different aspects of herself. Whereas in “Tale of a Tub” she sees “the stranger in the lavatory mirror”, in “Gigolo” (267), she no longer finds the image threatening:

All the fall of water an eye
Over whose pool I tenderly
Lean and see me (256).

Wordplay on “eye” and “I” is quite explicit. For the I-speaker the insight gained from seeing within the self is not to be feared, it is to be welcomed:
Tenderly' suggests a nurturing aspect.
The sea slides back,
The mirrors are sheeted. 'Contusion' (271)

The sheeting of mirrors has connotations of death. Frazer comments on the widespread custom of covering mirrors after a death:

It is feared that the soul, projected out of the person in the shape of his reflection in the mirror, may be carried off by the ghost of the departed, which is commonly supposed to linger about the house till the burial. (192)

The reflective surface, whether of mirror or of water serves as an analogy for the soul:

Mirrors, like lake surfaces, glass, and the eye of another person, are thought of as reflecting, abstracting, and containing the soul of the onlooker. (234)

There are different possible interpretations for these poems. The I-speaker has lost her shadow, her soul, and hence is unreal, 'dead'; alternatively, the other self has been integrated and the I-speaker has been reborn whole, which is the fourth process of individuation when the inner and outer realities are joined (115). The line: “The sea slides back” is suggestive of the unconscious having become part of the conscious. These late poems are an exploration of the psychic process through which Plath was passing during these months. They are highly significant and should be viewed as an announcement of the birth of the self. In “Words” (270), the I-speaker is aware of a new life:
The sap
Wells like tears, like the
Water striving
To re-establish its mirror
Over the rock
That drops and turns. .. (254).

There is now no sense of duality. The “other” has been integrated. In the poem “In Plaster” (158) this “other” was present; there were “two of me now”. While it is not apt to concur with Hughes’ statement that “her separate poems build up into one long poem” (81). The rebirth theme paramount in these last poems, forms a unifying image throughout. Plath wrote this in January 1958. It will take months to get my inner world peopled, and the people moving. How else to do it but plunge out of this safe scheduled time-clock wage-cherk world into my own voids. She recognized the necessity, of looking within herself. She perceived it as an empty spade. Her use of the diving metaphor suggests her recognition of water as a metaphor for the unconscious. The sea, the unconscious, is a threat because it is unknown, the “voids”. It is a haven because of the childhood associations, it “spoke of miracles and distances” (117). It is also by the sea that a supremely significant event occurs:

In "Tulips" in Ariel, Plath has used a personal experience as a setting to express the complexities that the idea of childlessness has for her. As Ted Hughes has it, she wrote "Tulips" after being hospitalized for an appendectomy in March
1961. She had miscarried just a short time before this operation. Probably, her second hospital confinement triggered associations with death and birth. These tulips are "like an awful baby." There is something wild and dangerous about them. She wants to reject them because she says they "eat my oxygen." She wants to reject the tulips as she wants to reject the trappings of her life and the family:

Now I have lost myself, I am sick of baggage--
My husband and child smiling out of the family photo;
Their smiles catch onto my skin, little smiling hooks (256).

Not tulips but death is the gift she wants as in "A Birthday Present" (Ariel), but in both cases the irony is that the gift is life. What she finds in her rejection of the gift here is freedom, a kind of perfection:

I didn't want any flowers. I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free--it is what the dead close on, finally... (282).

Her freedom is both wonderful and terrible because the price for it is so high. The woman must give up her man and her child hooking onto her as well as her things as her possessions. And the ultimate price--and reward--is death. The world of the hospital ward is a welcome one of snowy whiteness and silence in which the woman grasps eagerly at the ability to relax completely because nothing is required of her. She has moved beyond normal activity and relishes the opportunity to relinquish all responsibility in order to become a “body” with no
personal identity:

I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses.
And my history to the anesthetist and my body to surgeons
(254).

The renunciation of individuality also includes the reduction of others to a
depersonalized level so that they make no claims on her and she is aware of
making none on them. Consequently she sees the nurses hurrying about the ward
like as a flock of gulls flying inland. The tulips hurt because they require the
emotional response to rouse her from the numbness of complete mental and
physical inactivity. She feels that the flowers have eyes which watch her and
increase her sense of her own unreality: “And I see myself, flat, ridiculous, a cut-
paper shadow/ between the eye of the sun and the eye of the tulips” This sense of
unreality, of substancelessness, is not similar to the feeling of immersion in self
which she has cultivated. It is a sense of inadequacy and alienation also described
in "Cut": "I have taken a pill to kill/The thin/Papery feeling”. Eventually the tulips
force her attention into focus and she emerges from the world of whiteness and
silence to a not unpleasurable anticipation:

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea
And comes from a country far away as health (256).

Although “Tulips” is written in the present tense it has less of the immediacy
of some of the later poems in *Ariel* because the element of control exhibited in the meditative focus and the fashioning of thought and feeling into logically connected statements operates as a distancing device. One of the few poems she saved from this period is "Tulips," written in March, 1961, about some flowers she had perceived when she was in the hospital recovering from her appendectomy. Actually the flowers are only the occasion for a remarkable psychological journey into and out of anesthesia, the "numbness" the nurse brings her in "bright needles." The poem traces the stages by which the hospital patient sinks reluctantly into an anaesthetized "peacefulness," and equally reluctantly comes out of it, through repeating and reversing the imagery of the first four stanzas in the imagery of the last four so that the poem moves into and out from a central stanza with unusual symmetry.

The "too excitable" tulips and their explosions in the first stanza are what the patient awakes to finally in the last stanza, where she claims that the tulips "should be behind bars like dangerous animals." In the first, she has given her name and day-clothes away; in the last, she reclaims herself: "I am aware of my heart." In the second stanza, as she relinquishes herself to the nurses that "pass and pass," she is propped up "Like an eye between two white lids"; coming back to life in the penultimate stanza, she moves through the same stage where the tulips interrupt the air "Coming and going" and "concentrate" her attention. The nurses' tending in the
third stanza is matched by the tulips' watching in the seventh. The sensation that her possessions "Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head" just before she succumbs to the anesthesia in the fourth stanza is reversed in the sixth, when, awaking, she feels that the tulips "seem to float, though they weigh me down," "A dozen red lead sinkers round my neck." In the middle stanza she attempts, in Dickinson an style, to describe the state beyond consciousness: "How free it is, you have no idea how free-- /The peacefulness is so big it dazes you."

"Tulips" is an unusual poem for Plath because it does move inward toward a silent center and out again. The fear, shown in many of Plath's early poems, of losing control or the final reluctant relinquishment to unfathomable powers is absent in this process; where she claims, "I am learning peacefulness," "I only wanted/ To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty." Even more unusual than this acceptance of self-loss is the process of reversal, where the mind gradually takes hold again after the grim recognition that the tulips' "redness talks to my wound, it corresponds." The common strategy of Plath's poems early and late is for the mind to generate hyperboles that torment itself; but in "Tulips" this generative faculty has a positive as well as a negative function. "Tulips" is not a cheerful poem, but it does move from cold to warmth, from numbness to love, from empty whiteness to vivid redness, in a process manipulated by the associative imagination.
The speaker herself seems surprised by her own gifts and ends the poem on a tentative note, moving toward the far-away country of health. Because she has so exaggerated her own emptiness and the tulips' violence and vitality, she must then accept in herself the attributes she has cast onto the tulips, which return to her as correspondences:

Nobody in the lane, and nothing, nothing but blackberries,
Blackberries on either side, though on the right mainly,
A blackberry alley, going down in hooks, and a sea
Somewhere at the end of it, heaving. Blackberries
Big as the ball of my thumb, and dumb as eyes
Ebon in the hedges, fat
With blue-red juices. These they squander on my fingers.
I had not asked for such a blood sisterhood; they must love me.
They accommodate themselves to my milkbottle, flattening their sides.
Overhead go the choughs in black, cacophonous flocks—
Bits of burnt paper wheeling in a blown sky.
Their is the only voice, protesting, protesting.
I do not think the sea will appear at all.
The high, green meadows are glowing, as if lit from within.
I come to one bush of berries so ripe it is a bush of flies,
Hanging their bluegreen bellies and their wing panes in a Chinese screen.
The honey-feast of the berries has stunned them; they believe in heaven.

One more hook, and the berries and bushes end (249).

Plath reveals in this poem what she meant when she said that the manipulative mind must control its most terrifying experiences. The speaker here, responsive to inner and outer compulsions, is able to handle her situation. As the inner tensions intensified in the last months of her own life, Plath was forced to create a persona much more rigid than the speaker of "Tulips." At this point, however, rigidity is what she scorns. In "Tulips," the imagery of forced seeing, of vision itself as the source of the exacerbated sensibility, assaults us everywhere.

They have propped my head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff like an eye between two white lids that will not shut. Stupid pupil, it has to take everything in.

The comic, almost spitting disgust of the assonance in the phrase "stupid pupil" adds to the allusive parody of Emerson's "transparent eyeball" in Nature. But this painful, forced seeing is still, one feels, better than the anesthetized drift that constantly threatens to overtake the poet. But whatever the reader might feel, Plath seems consciously desirous of either the drift or the pained fixation, as long as it provides her with an extreme experiential locus:

I watched my tea set, my bureaus of linen, my books
Sink out of sight, and the water went over my head.

I am a nun now; I have never been so pure (286).
The openness to experience that some regard as one of the hallmarks of American literature becomes, in Plath's poetry, an ironically balanced pointer that can tip toward either salvation or annihilation.

I didn't want any flowers; I only wanted
To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty.
How free it is, you have no idea how free--
The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,
And it asks nothing, a name tag, a few trinkets.
It is what the dead close on, finally; I imagine them
Shutting their mouths on it, like a Communion tablet (287).

These alternatives, salvation and annihilation, are here joined in a single image-turned-simile; and the toneless quality of the lines parodies the transcendent religious structure that lies behind them, just as "stupid pupil" parodies Emerson. "So big it dazes you" and "you have no idea how free" both originate in the vocabulary of schoolgirl intensification, and Plath built her language almost exclusively out of various forms of intensification. Condensation, catachresis, metonymy, and the verbal strategies of riddles and allusive jokes----all these are devices both to record and to ward off the numbness that results when ordinary consciousness is faced with an overwhelmingly fragmented objective world, a flood of facility that simply will not submit to tenderness or mercy.

One of the standard critical cliches that sprang up around confessional poets
is that the language itself provided their salvation; that the redeeming word could set right what the intractable world of egos, projects, deceits, and self-destructions had insidiously twisted. This axiom still putatively left room for individual poets to develop personal styles and remain recognizably confessional. Oddly enough, however, when thrown back on a radically personal axis, the poetry often ended up being simultaneously god-haunted and narcotized, as if narcosis and transcendence were mirror images of each other. In the poetry of Plath and Sexton, we find not only the subject matter but also the very structure of their imaginations returning again and again to an irreducible choice: the poet either must become God or cease consciousness altogether. Haunted by the failed myth of a human, or at least an artistic perfectibility, they turned to a courtship of nihilism.

In "Tulips," there is a slow, reluctant acceptance of the tulips which means a slow and reluctant acceptance of a return to life. The poem dramatizes a sick state making it clear that it is sickness. The flowers are hateful, as emblems of cruel spring. They are also emblems of irrational fear. Science is brilliantly misused (as indeed in feeble and deranged states of many kinds) and phototropism and photosynthesis are used to argue the fear. The flowers really do move toward the light, do open out, do take up oxygen. The tulips are also inhabitants of the bizarre world of private irrational fantasy, even beyond the bridge of distorted science. They contrast with the whiteness of nullity and death. They are like a baby, an
African cat, like her wound (a real red physical wound, stitched so as to heal, not to gape like opened tulips) and, finally, like her heart.

The end of the poem is transforming, opens up the poem. The poem, like the tulips, has really been opening from the beginning, but all is not plain until the end, as in Nick. Moreover, in the end the tulips win that is a painful victory for life. We move from the verge of hallucination, hear them as noisy, or see them as dangerous animals. The poem hinges on this paradox: while most scientific, it is most deranged; while most surreal, it is most healthy:

And I am aware of my heart: it opens and closes
Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me.
The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,
And comes from a country far away as health (296).

It is the country she as to return to, reluctant though she is. The identification of the breathing, opened, red, spring-like tulips with her heart makes this plain. She wanted death as one certainly may want it in illness, or moving back from the poem to the other poems and to her real death, as she wanted it in life. But the poem enacts the movement from the peace and purity of anesthesia and feebleness to the calls of life. Once more, the controlled conceits and the movement from one state to another create expansion. The poem opens out to our experience of sickness and health, to the overwhelming demands of love, which we sometimes
have to meet. The symbolism of present giving and spring flowers makes a bridge from a personal death-longing to common experience.

A poem like 'Tulips' is a good illustration of Plath’s passion and her craft. Its origins lie in personal experience when the poet was taken into hospital and was sent flowers as a gift. The opening four stanzas recover her feelings of peace and release on entering the hospital ward. “Look how white everything is”, she exclaims:

how quiet, how snowed-in,
I am learning peacefulness, lying by myself quietly
As the light lies on these white walls, this bed, these hands,
I am nobody . . . (285).

The verse is nominally free but has a subtle iambic base. The lines, seven in each stanza, move quietly and mellifluously; and a sense of hidden melody ('learning' / 'lying', 'lying by myself quietly', 'light lies', 'white walls') transforms apparently casual remarks into memorable speech. What is more to the point is almost the sacramental terms in which Plath describes herself turn this experience into a mysterious initiation, a dying away from the world. “I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses”, Plath says, “And my history to the anesthetist and my body to the surgeons”. Everything that gives her identity, that imprisons her in existence, has been surrendered. She sinks into a condition of utter
emptiness and openness is associated at times here with immersion in water — a return to the fetal state and the matrix of being. The only initial resistance to this movement comes from a photograph of her husband and children she is having by her bedside. It reminds her, evidently, of the hell of other people, who cast “little smiling hooks” to fish her up out of the sea. In the next four stanzas, the tulips — mentioned briefly in the first line — enter the scene with a vengeance:

The tulips are too red in the first place, they hurt me.
Even through the gift paper I could hear them breathe
Lightly, through their white swaddling, like an awful baby.
Their redness talks to my wound, it corresponds (284).

The flowers are all that is the opposite of the white, silent, world of the hospital carrying associations of noise and pressure, “sudden tongues and . . . colour”. They draw Plath back to life conditioning forces that constitute existence. She feels herself “watched”, identified by “the eyes of the tulips”. Their gaze commits her to a particular status or role. What is more, this contrary impulse draws her back into the world and her identification “corresponds” to something in herself. It comes from within herself, just as the earlier impulse towards liberation did.

This probably explains why the conflict in the poem remains unresolved. The ninth and final stanza of the poem beautifully juxtapose images of
imprisonment and escape, the blood of life and the salt sea of death. “And I am aware of my heart”, Plath concludes:

It opens and closes its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me,

The water I taste is warm and salt, like the sea,

And comes from a country far away as health (289).

The alternatives, familiar ones in American writing, either to live in the world and accept the identity it prescribes, or to flee into a state of absolute freedom. What is less familiar is that, here as elsewhere, Plath associates these two alternatives, traditionally figured in the clearing and the wilderness, with the absolute conditions of being and not-being. Fixity, in these terms, is life; flight is immolation; freedom is the immediate metaphor of the hospital and the ultimate metamorphosis of death. Plath steeps the poem "Tulips" in a whiteness depicted as powerful, peaceful, and obliterating. The wintry whiteness of the white walls presses in on the speaker, both teaching her about tranquility and enforcing it on her.

The pressure results in eradication of herself and obliteration of the volatility of life. Van Dyne links this annihilation to "the speaker's fears of carnal and contaminating flesh" (Revising Life 92). Van Dyne suggests that the speaker enjoys the process of noting the body's drift into "anonymity and irresponsibility" (Ibidem). Hayman, too, claims that Plath luxuriates in the abdication of
responsibility in this poem (155). Significantly, the body that drifts into erasure in "Tulips" is a white body in a white world body confronted with entrapment in or escape from its own powerful signifiers.

The speaker in the poem claims to have understood the tulips as signifiers of a complicated sexual world intruding on the hallowed and clean white world of the hospital. She suggests that she might elude the seductiveness of the tulips by becoming a nun and regaining purity. When we read the poem with an eye toward racial signifiers, the poem situates the plight of many white women who ardently desire an escape from culpability in white dominance over others. Dyer argues that white women are partially responsible for white dominance, but because of their marginal status in relationship to white men, the only way they can maintain their own honor as white women is to do nothing about their role in domination (206). Thereby, the exquisite and languorous passivity that Plath demonstrates in "Tulips" marks white women as the culpable incapables that they are in the face of white dominance.

The Tulips remind the woman in the poem of other worlds, of other lives, of colorfulness outside herself; but the woman cannot acknowledge these worlds and maintain her white passivity simultaneously. She would have to sacrifice the peacefulness of whiteness. The tulips signify, by their glorious and bold colors, glaring Otherness. The frustrated speaker of the poem prescribes enslavement for
them uncannily linked to Africa: "The tulips should be behind bars like dangerous animals; / they are opening like the mouth of some great African cat.” Annas rightly notes that the speaker experiences an obligation to choose between the two worlds the white world and the colorful world. However, the speaker clearly wishes she did not have the choice.

She prefers to imprison the dangerous and colorful world, so that she may remain passively white. Perloff reads the white world of the hospital into which the colorful tulips intrude as a "dead," "dazed”, “and "empty" one. She reads the tulips as the entity that will force the speaker out of her whiteness (119). But what is to be contended in the final stanza is the image of the imprisoned tulips which permits the speaker to associate the redness of the flowers with the redness of her heart. Figuratively speaking, Otherness may only serve as a catalyst for white inspection once it is safely ensconced behind bars.