

THAT STILL, BLUE, ALMOST ETERNAL HOUR

Touching the Sacred and the Profane in Sylvia Plath's Last Poems

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Introduction: “Of Christ in the faces of rodents”¹

For more than 50 years, Sylvia Plath’s poetry has been analyzed and criticized through myriad lenses and theories, not the least of which are psychoanalytical, feminist, historical and cultural. Together with a propensity to categorize her work as confessional, Plath’s personal life has been the primary path to interpreting her work. While it may be tempting to join the bandwagon, I propose that it is more intriguing to approach Plath’s last poems in particular outside these usual avenues, to consider them hermeneutically with the aid of deconstructionism and reader-response criticism. The poems Plath wrote in the last two weeks of her life lend themselves to close examination with regard to elements of the sacred and the profane not in a dualist or opposing viewpoint—so as to contrast—but from an expansive and blurred perspective where these elements are distilled and commingled. Furthermore, these last poems mark a significant shift from the rest of Plath’s oeuvre, and she considered them to be a fresh start. They have a “different, cooler inspiration” and a “denser pattern” (Hughes, Winter Pollen 189). Where the majority of her writing, from adolescence through the Ariel poems, shows a progression from death to gestation or regeneration into birth or rebirth, her last twelve poems dissolve the boundary between life and death. It is in this evanescent state where the sacred and the profane become entwined.

According to Mircea Eliade, the sacred and the profane are two modalities of experience, each with its own world (14). The former takes place in a sacralized cosmos, while the latter desacralizes the world in order to assume a profane existence (17). In general, the sacred is concerned with religion or religious rites whereby respect and reverence are accorded to that which is considered holy, blessed, consecrated or

cherished. When something is regarded as sacred, one holds a sense of justice against any defamation, violation or intrusion. On the other hand, what is considered profane is not connected with religion or religious matters and is held as secular. The profane has contempt or shows disrespect for sacred things and revels in the earthly, mundane, vulgar or terrestrial elements of being. Nonetheless, the sacred and the profane are neither mutually exclusive nor are they so easily defined. What is sacred or hallowed and set apart to be honored by one person is subsequently considered profane or disgusting and discarded as repulsive by another. Émile Durkheim states emphatically that the dichotomy sacred/profane is not equivalent to good/evil. In fact, the sacred can be good or evil and the profane can be either as well (as quoted in Pals 99). The sacred and the profane necessarily coexist and inhabit both worlds of experience. In Plath's last poems, this fluid dichotomy finds its greatest expression in the erasure of duality. It is in this free play of language where the reader and poet co-create a valuable complexity of meaning and understanding embodied in shared symbols or totems alongside mundane individual concerns.

Together with Plath's innate distillation of the sacred and the profane in her last poems, Derrida's concept of *différance* as a key aspect of deconstructionism allows for "an endless string of connotations" (Murfin & Ray 95). Subsequently, each text is viewed as radically heterogeneous and open to being seen in the light of new contexts. Therefore, "any given text can be different each time it is read" (Murfin & Ray 98). From this understanding, there is a natural connection between deconstructionism and reader-response criticism, which supposes an active reader and the blurring of the boundaries between reader and text (Murfin & Ray 425). As a result, the reader's active participation

invites further heterogeneity. As if Plath anticipated the commingling of these approaches to her work, she foreshadows, in one of her last poems, “Words,” the premise and the critical approach of this paper:

Axes
 After whose stroke the wood rings,
 And the echoes!
 Echoes traveling
 Off from the center like horses.

.....

Years later I
 Encounter them on the road—

Words dry and riderless,
 The indefatigable hoof-taps. (Collected Poems [CP] 270)

After writing feverously for two months in October and November 1962 to produce what became the bulk of the Ariel poems, Plath put down her pen and did not pick it up again until January 28, 1963. Then, in the span of two weeks, she revised her last poem from December 2, 1962 and wrote eleven new poems. These twelve poems would become the final chapter in her diverse, expansive creative life. Admittedly, throughout her poetry, Plath employs sacred and profane images, metaphors and language, but it is her last poems that illuminate the pursuit for transformation from conventional definitions toward what Virginia Woolf calls “incandescence” (Room 56). It is in “that still, blue, almost eternal hour” where Plath burns away any trace of foreign matter and touches the core of her creative mind to write her last poems (Plath, Ariel 195).

Demons and Gods: “People or stars / Regard me sadly, I disappoint them.”²

Even though Plath’s last poems will not be viewed primarily through the lens of her life, it is important to establish some context and background of her philosophical and theological experiences and expressions to appreciate the skill with which she articulates the incandescent commingling of the sacred and the profane in these texts. Born to Otto and Aurelia Plath on October 27, 1932 in Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, Plath was raised Unitarian, which espouses a monotheistic theology. Throughout her life, her mother taught Sunday school, and Plath was active in the Unitarian church for much of her childhood and adolescence. Plath’s parents expressed to her and her younger brother, Warren, the belief they held concerning the “importance of aiming and directing one’s life toward an idealistic goal in order to build a strong inner life” (Letters 31).

When she was eight years old, Plath’s father died as a result of untreated diabetes. This devastating loss prompted Plath to assert that she would never speak to God again (Letters 25). Nonetheless, she continued to talk about God, to contemplate her religious and existential beliefs and to write about God in her journals, letters, school essays, poetry and prose. By age seventeen, Plath had transformed her anger at God into a personal quest for omniscience and to call herself, “The girl who wanted to be God” (Letters 40). The next summer, before starting her freshmen year at Smith College, Plath told her pen pal, Eddie Cohen, in a letter that she was a Unitarian by choice yet she did not go to church much because she believed each individual was responsible for working out his own purpose and destiny. Even if this meant she was an atheist, she still held a deep respect for life and for human potential (“Cohen” 2). A few months later during her freshmen year at Smith, Plath elaborated in her journal:

... I don't believe in God as a kind father in the sky. I don't believe that the meek will inherit the earth, [...] I don't believe there is life after death in the literal sense. I don't believe my individual ego or spirit is unique and important enough to wake up after burial and soar to bliss and pink clouds in heaven. [...] No: perhaps I will awake to find myself burning in hell. I think not. I will be snuffed out. [...] I love Exupery;^[3] I will read him again, and he will talk to me, not being dead, or gone. Is that life after death—mind living on paper and flesh living in offspring? (Journals 44–45)

Plath's constant struggle to apprehend meaning for herself, within herself, inexhaustibly pushed the ontological question: "And who am I, God-whom-I-don't-believe-in? God-who-is-my-alter-ego? [...] If he [God] lives in my head or under my left ventricle, maybe he's too uncomfortable to know much of anything" (Journals 91–92). By the end of her sophomore year at Smith, in a Religion course, Plath expressed her beliefs in a more confident, humanistic manner as indoctrination into man-made laws and moral customs emanating from one's particular cultural context. Plath continued this line of thinking in her essay, "Religion, As I See It," for the same course, where she expressed her affinity with Nietzsche's celebration of power, will and strength ("Religion" 5). Likewise, in her History 38b course she expounded the virtues of Nietzsche's Thus Spoke Zarathustra⁴ as our bible of individualism at the moment" ("Age" 7).

Plath's philosophy was influenced further by José Ortega y Gasset's disdain for the conformity of the masses and his description of life as a Darwinian struggle. She wrote her own philosophy of life in the margin of her copy of Ortega's The Revolt of the Masses, where a strong, creative nature comes from struggle, conflicts and hardship (72). Together with the philosophies of Nietzsche and Ortega, Plath found confirmation of her belief system in the writing of D. H. Lawrence and his synthesis of literature and religion. In particular, Plath felt Lawrence gave license "to her own intensity of feeling, with an

ability to love and hate in equal measure” (Peel, “Education” 44).

By her junior year at Smith, Plath wanted to escape “to a convent, [...] into religious mysticism, [...] anywhere where the burden, the terrifying hellish weight of self-responsibility and ultimate self-judgment is lifted” (Journals 150). She hopelessly concluded that, “A psychiatrist is the God of our age. But they cost money” (Journals 151). The next summer, just a month before her failed suicide attempt, Plath was grasping desperately for something outside herself upon which to rely. “Believe in some beneficent force beyond your own limited self,” she wrote in her journal. “God, god, god: where are you? I want you, need you: the belief in you and love and mankind.” But just as quickly, she banished this quest and admonished herself, “You must not seek escape like this. You must think” (Journals 187).

Having weathered her suicide attempt and six months of hospitalization, Plath returned to complete her bachelor’s degree at Smith, graduating in June 1955, and she went on to study abroad under a Fulbright fellowship to Newnham College in Cambridge, England. While at Cambridge, she wrote a letter to her former boyfriend, Richard Sassoon, expressing times of spiritual desire that were met with absence. “I talk to God,” she told him, “but the sky is empty” (Journals 199). It was during this time that she met Ted Hughes, and they were married a few months later in June 1956. As if her internal struggle to hold the center of her personal beliefs was not enough, Plath was introduced to Hughes’s practice of the occult. On at least one occasion, she wrote to her mother that Hughes was a competent astrologist and that she was a tarot-pack reader with aspirations of becoming a crystal-gazer (Letters 280). A few months later she told her mother about their experience with the Ouija board (Letters 294). Plath seemed to have embraced this

dimension of mysticism in part because of Hughes's interest. She and Hughes spoke often about astrology, dreams and magic. However, she also discovered her own psychic gifts, which influenced her writing so much that Hughes claimed posthumously of Plath:

... her psychic gifts, at almost any time, were strong enough to make her frequently wish to be rid of them. In her poetry, in other words, she had free and controlled access to depths formerly reserved to the primitive ecstatic priests, shamans, and Holy men ... ("Chronological" 82)

Nevertheless, Plath's constant vacillation between a belief in some god outside herself and her dogged self-determination would not subside. In early 1957, now balancing the role of wife alongside that of scholar and writer, Plath tried to come down solidly on the side of individualism:

But: I know & feel & have lived so much: and am so wise, yes, in living for my age: having blasted through conventional morality, and come to my own morality. Which is the commitment to body & mind: to faith in battering out a good life. No God but the sun, anyway. (Journals 269)

Despite Hughes's assertion that Plath's "initiation into this spiritual world was inevitable" ("Chronological" 82), she did not abandon mainline religious exploration. In fact, her pursuit to reconcile with the god of her mother's faith led her to meticulously annotate and exegete the writings of St. Thérèse of Lisieux in December 1958 (Journals 454, 589–593). A few weeks later, Plath made a postscript in her journal that she was "reading the book of Job: great peace derived therefrom. Shall read the Bible: symbolic meaning, even though the belief in a moral God-structured universe not there" (462). By the time their daughter, Frieda, was one year old and they had moved in August 1961 to their home in Devonshire, Plath began attending the local Anglican church and participated briefly in the monthly mothers' group. She liked the idea of her daughter going to Sunday school, and Plath expressed to her mother "how incredibly powerful the

words of that little Christian prayer, ‘God is my help in every need,’” had been for her, and she hoped they would be helpful for Frieda, too (Letters 432–433). In addition, Plath frequented the Anglican chapel evensong, which she described as “a peaceful little well” where she enjoyed the “organ, bellringing and hymn singing” as well as musing “on the stained-glass windows during the awful sermons” (Letters 435).

Drifting ever closer to apprehending some faith in a god outside herself, and with the arrival of another child in early 1962, Plath told her best friend from college, Marcia Brown Stern, that she felt it was better for a child to have a religious upbringing in order to have a faith to break away from and to prevent the child from feeling curious and outcast (December 1961). Subsequently, in March 1962, following the birth of their son, Nicholas, on January 17, Plath announced to her mother that she and Hughes were “arranging to have the children baptized” even though she loathed the rector’s sermons (Letters 449). Then, just when it seemed Plath had settled into motherhood and returned to writing with renewed focus and fervor, she discovered Hughes was having an affair. They separated that fall, and Plath moved to London with the children in December. By the end of 1962 and into early 1963, Plath established a relationship with Father Michael Carey, a Jesuit priest, with whom she corresponded. While their letters focused on writing poetry, Father Michael did offer blessings for Plath, and she shared some of her religious beliefs:

I am myself, ironically, an atheist. And like a certain sort of atheist, my poems are God-obsessed, priest-obsessed. Full of Marys, Christs and nuns. Theology & philosophy fascinate me [...] I think I will send you a poem [...] about the Christ-ness in all martyrs, and written by a mother of a son. (Saldívar 203)

It seems that her marital separation had, as Robin Peel suggests, “intensified her search for spiritual support from within the Christian church” (Writing Back 212). Yet, despite her separation from Hughes, they continued to talk amicably, if not about their writing then for the sake of the children. Subsequently, in the last few weeks of her life, Hughes noted that several times Plath said she had seen God, “and he keeps picking me up [...] I am full of God” (Kroll 186). Nonetheless, early in the morning on February 11, 1963, after placing a plate of bread and butter with two mugs of milk in the children’s room as they slept, Plath sealed up the kitchen, put her head inside the oven, turned on the gas and killed herself (Alvarez 52).

Despite her countless struggles to find faith, hope and love within herself and of her own making, she fought equally to apprehend these truths outside herself. What remained constant were the things she held sacred: the sea, her father, her children, writing, individualism and hard work. Conversely, Plath was unapologetically clear about those things she considered profane: male-defined society, compulsory womanhood, conformity, Communism and war. With deliberate intention, the sacred and the profane are thoroughly explored and intertwined in the last poems crafted during the numinously banal time and space of “that still, blue, almost eternal hour” in her study with the crude, wooden plank desk on the third floor of a home once occupied by W. B. Yeats at 23 Fitzroy Road, London (Plath, Ariel 195).

January 28, 1963: “The snow has no voice”⁵

When Plath began writing again after a two-month hiatus, she returned to a poem begun on December 2, 1962, which was originally titled, “Fog Sheep.” Specifically, Plath made extensive revisions to the poem’s last stanza. This dramatic alteration signaled the

shift from a vision of new life or rebirth in her previous poetry to one of hopeless resignation that permeates her last twelve poems. In the final stanza of “Fog Sheep,” what began as,

Patriarchs till now immobile
In heavenly wools
Row off as stones or clouds with the faces of babies. (Hughes, Pollen 193)

becomes,

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

Plath’s original ending to “Fog Sheep” mobilized patriarchs, those ancestral pillars of faith and family, and clothed them with the innocence of lambs to guide them toward new life. In its final form as “Sheep in Fog,” the patriarchs become hostile toward the poem’s speaker and do not promise innocence or tranquility but “a heaven” void of light and familial connection. Furthermore, “a heaven” suggests some place other than the heaven one reads about in the Bible or other sacred texts and raises the possibility that it is not heaven at all. Instead, as the last few words imply, this heaven is actually an abyss that will dissolve the speaker into nothingness (Libby 395).

In the rest of the revised poem, which remains largely intact from its original draft, the speaker presents a scene that falls quickly from hope to despair. The sheep, blanketed in foggy whiteness, fade into the background as the speaker confesses her failings before heaven and earth. In what may be a resigned exhale, the speaker watches as, “The train leaves a line of breath.” She is alone and abandoned in a blurred landscape. Then, the pace of the poem thickens with the presence of a “slow / horse the color of rust.” Unlike Plath’s other references to horses, particularly “Ariel,” where they are full

of energy and create exhilaration in the speaker, this horse is prodding and all but lifeless in its corroded state. Its hoof-steps pound the pavement in time to “dolorous bells” presumably emanating from around the necks of the lost, invisible sheep while the “morning has been blackening.” This horse ride is not a carefree trot on a crisp December morning.⁶ It is a grinding cadence toward death. In fact, the horse resembles the second horse of the Apocalypse, which is red and brings bloodshed.⁷ From a seemingly innocent, pure start, all life is sucked from the scene, and darkness wraps a dawning day. A flower shrivels, and the speaker’s body grows still. What she sees in the distance melts her heart. It is not the patriarchs come to lead her into new life; it is death threatening “to let me through to a heaven / starless and fatherless, a dark water.”

Written the same day as her revised poem, “Sheep in Fog,” “The Munich Mannequins” criticizes the objectification of women and the plasticity of a male-defined culture. As the title suggests, these articulated dolls live in the storefront windows of Munich, Germany’s Nazi stronghold during World War II. As a pacifist, Plath held a particular disdain for war, yet many of her poems, including several of her last, unleash merciless violent acts with little or no balm (Rose, “Daddy” 50). What adds another layer of eeriness to Plath’s mannequin metaphor is the fact that mannequins were used during the 1950s to illustrate the effects of nuclear weapons on human beings (Luce 58).

Originally, Plath titled this poem “The Bald Madonnas” (Ts. 3) perhaps to amplify the virginal qualities of perfect women. A Madonna, with her religious overtones, is undefiled, saint-like, pure and innocent as the Virgin Mary. However, from this sacred metaphor, Plath launches into a chilling exploration of the female reproductive system. In order for a woman to be perfect, she “cannot have children.”

Perfection, like the deadly breath of winter snow, “tamps the womb.” Yet, from her icy uterus, the perfect woman is forced to expel her menstrual life-force each month “like hydras ... to no purpose.”⁸ As Jon Rosenblatt suggests, human life continues to release seeds, represented here as “moons,” but the world of death is already perfect and has no need to grow (134). Consequently, unlike Plath’s nature poems where winter means a time of rest preceding rebirth, the winter in the male-defined social world of “The Munich Mannequins” is sterile (Annas, “The Self” 180). It is the lifeless, frozen and mindless woman that achieves perfection in the sinister, winter city where death, not hibernation, is the goal.

For Plath, perfection has little to do with excellence or proficiency and everything to do with disempowerment and silence. “Naked and bald,” wrapped only in furs, the mannequins, symbol of the perfect woman, are impaled like candy on malleable, silver sticks. Those who have relegated the perfect woman to this putrid hell, this “sulfur loveliness,” are asleep in their pride while disembodied hands polish shoes that will be filled with their “broad toes” in the morning. Seemingly out of place when first read, “the black phones on hooks / glittering / glittering and digesting” magnify the isolation the perfect woman experiences. There is no communication. As Tim Kendall suggests, the word “glittering,” which is prominent in several of Plath’s last poems, almost always implies some kind of deceit or threat (“From the Bottom” 159). Here, together with “digesting,” another of Plath’s recurring concepts, the reader senses the terror that is all-consuming for the perfect woman. The same snow that seals the womb “drops its pieces of darkness” into a dissected, dehumanized world to cover the perfect woman in silence, rendering her voiceless and invisible. As a result, she is trapped in a dead zone between

the city of enlightenment—Paris—and the city of faith—Rome.

Building upon Plath's twists of the sacred and the profane in "The Munich Mannequins," the third poem she wrote on January 28, 1963, "Totem," stacks up interconnected layers of hopelessness and resignation accompanied with gruesome details of blood-lust and greed. A totem, often associated with shamanism, is typically an animal that spiritually represents a person or group of people. However, this poem presents six different animals within its seventeen couplets. It is not clear which of these animals is the totem or if together they form a totem pole of sorts. What is more obvious at the outset of the poem, though, is Plath's immediate return to eating imagery, blood and the glittering threat of death.

Whether symbolic of machinery and reminiscent of the artificial world of "The Munich Mannequins" or recalling the line of breath emitting from the distant train of "Sheep in Fog," Plath begins "Totem" with a powerful engine "killing the track." Despite its long length, the track will be consumed by the engine. It is a fate not unlike that of the rabbit, which is decapitated with the merciless "glitter of cleavers" and "flayed of fur and humanity" just like one of Jesus' disciples.⁹ To this horrific scene, Plath introduces ritualistic cannibalism through the ancient, sacred practice of placentophagy. Instead of warding off postpartum depression or increasing lactation for nursing mothers, the one who consumes Plato's afterbirth hopes to achieve immortality. Plath echoes this possibility by repeating the admonition, "let us eat it," followed by another simile for eternal life: Christ. It is in the Eucharist, where the body and blood of Christ are symbolically consumed, that Christians receive the promise of everlasting life. In addition, Plath's original holograph of "Totem" equated the "butcher's guillotine" with

the whisper of a lover, which brings a sexually-charged element to the blood-letting and ritualistic consumption (Item 1).

Together with the fact that the bowl Plath references, into which the aborted hare is placed and then “embalmed in spices,” was actually used, according to Hughes, “on different occasions both for her son’s afterbirth and the cleaned body of a hare” (CP 295), the mixing of the sacred and the profane is overwhelming. New life and fresh death blend almost indistinguishably, blurring one’s vision and erasing any trace of a dividing line between divine intervention and human transcendence. Fortunately, before the reader can fully grasp these jarring images and concepts, Plath has all but cancelled them out in the next line by referring to Plato and Christ as important people of the past. Together with the next couplet, Judith Kroll contends that,

Redemption cannot be found through metaphorical eating of Plato and Christ—through mystically participating in the being of ‘important’ men—because their importance is empty, dead, counterfeit, and harmless: devoid of essential power, just as they are. (197)

In fact, these gods are reduced to a child’s plaything. What matters more is the present moment, which is “blood-hot and personal.” For Plath, as she originally wrote in the draft manuscript, the people who once were important included her parents and her brother (Item 1). However, she drew a line through these, leaving no reference to any specific people. In the end, all anyone has is the self forever unfolding “like a suit” filled with “wishes” and other useless things. From this eternal hell on earth, humanity is caught in a vicious trap “like blue children” and reeled in by “Death with its many sticks.”

The fourth poem Plath wrote on January 28, 1963, “Child,” initially reverses the doomed fate of humanity that runs through the previous three poems. Quite like the salvation promised through Jesus’ humble beginnings, Plath celebrates the child’s “clear

eye” as something “absolutely beautiful.” Here is the potential for a new, untainted vision of the world, and the poem’s speaker wants to “fill it” with a rainbow of promise and innocence. Just like the dawn of creation, when Adam set about naming all the animals and plants, the poem’s speaker announces “The zoo of the new / whose names you meditate.” But almost immediately, the color begins to fade and the air grows cold with the pronouncement of “April snowdrop,” a white flower that blooms mostly in winter. This is reinforced with “Indian pipe,” which is also known as corpse or ghost plant because it is white and does not contain chlorophyll. Instead, this flower is a parasite that grows in very dark environments and feeds on fungi. Hope drains quickly into a “pool” that does not reflect the pure, new vision but rather a disturbing, restless, stormy existence filled with worry and dark, starless nights, not unlike the starless, dark water that points to engulfment in nothingness at the close of “Sheep in Fog.” Originally, however, the last stanza of “Child” was reworked more than three times from,

Not this
Grubby dishcloth, this
Sudden death among planets.

to,

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands and dishcloths
This black paper, without moon or planets.

and,

Not this troublous
Wringing of hands, this dark
Ceiling with no constellations. (Rougemont)

Seeing her progression from the more outwardly domestic world of “dishcloths” to the interior world of heightened anxiety, the “this troublous / wringing of hands,” accentuates the loss of “moon and planets” and a “ceiling without a star” (Rougemont). There is no vision left and no hope of escaping the turmoil and darkness.

These four poems contain within them and between them the restless undulation of what Fanny Howe calls *bewilderment*. They create a full “collapse of reference and reconcilability” that “breaks open the lock of dualism to peer out into space” (Wedding Dress 15). From this muddled state, Plath binds the sacred and the profane together so tightly that life and death—darkness and light—become enmeshed, each bearing the likeness of the other as mixing mediums that reveal muted hues of white and black.

January 29, 1963: “The still waters wrap my lips”¹⁰

Written on January 29, 1963, “Paralytic” and “Gigolo” are two of only seven poems in Plath’s oeuvre that assume a male persona (Rose, Haunting 134). They stake opposite ends of the continuum from the emasculated, impotent male to the misogynistic, sexually obsessed man. One has utterly given up all desires while the other is consumed by them. As with “The Munich Mannequins” and “Totem,” Plath draws attention to man’s profane existence, his blood-lust and self-indulgence while weaving aspects of spirituality and sacredness into his carnal desires. For the paralytic, trapped inside an iron lung and being kept alive through mechanical means, life and death are ever-present. He is no longer a human being but has been transformed by technology into an instrument. As Tracy Brain suggests, the paralyzed man is “like a vacuum cleaner,” which is associated with the feminine and the domestic. He “sucks dirt and pollution out of the air

and into his lungs” (120). His forced breaths are augmented by the steady click of the machine as it rolls out the day “like ticker tape.” What might have been viewed as providing life-sustaining oxygen is equally responsible for a tortured existence.

In Plath’s original draft, she lingers over the movement of the “iron lung” as it pumps oxygen in and out of the lungs like the ebb and flow of the sea. She also indicates a sense of relief that the rhythmic, mechanical “iron lung” can prevent the paralytic from dying. Yet, the final version of the poem is ambiguous at this point whether the speaker is relieved or frustrated that his life will not end. Nonetheless, encased and artificially maintained, the paralytic has only his senses of sight, sound and smell to guide him. He welcomes a bouquet of violets, their elusive scent temporarily desensitizing his olfactory senses, but their dark centers become “tapestries of eyes,” watching him. Plath embellished the “tapestries” with the imagery of animal eyes as lights in her earlier draft of the poem. She drops the modifying eyes and allows the “lights” to perform a double service. Together with nightfall and the brilliance of overhead, artificial light blinding him from above his “sleeping couch,” the paralytic prefers to forsake the eyes and listen to the “soft anonymous / talkers” asking if he is all right. Instead of comfort, he encounters deeper frustration with not being able to reach out and touch “the starched, inaccessible breast” of a nurse. There is no nourishment for him, and he becomes a “dead egg” with no possibility of new life. In her second draft, Plath added a resignation that the paralytic was yielding to death, and this resignation ushers in the tone of the poem’s final version of hopelessness and drowning.

In this “white, tight” sterile, confined world, the paralytic’s mind flashes memories, like photographs, and even these provide no respite. He is alone and about to

join his “flat” wife and daughters in death. The paralytic can feel the fluid rise in his lungs—“the still waters”—and cover his “lips / eyes, nose and ears.” In this moment, he chooses to relinquish all “wants, desire” to become like “a Buddha.” Plath reworked these lines several times to elaborate on “wants, desire” in a dazzling kaleidoscope of jewels slipping off dead fingers and losing their value (Item 2b). Yet, just like the Buddha, Plath deletes attachments to help the paralytic let go of personal identity so he can achieve Nirvana.

As with many of her last poems, Plath wrestles with the last stanza of “Paralytic” to arrive at a specific conclusion: transcendence. But to get there, she modulates from the image of a sleeping hermit’s claw, to a relaxed saint’s claw, to the shut claws of a saint (Item 2c). Her amplified modulation from the profane hermit to the sacred saint accentuates the transcendence from mortal human to divine being. In the end, while the eyes of the violets offer no comfort, it is “the claw / of the magnolia,” with its androgynous, self-propagating qualities, that spirits the paralytic from earthly confinement to blissful contentment.

Where the paralytic transcends his emasculated, impotent state and finds peace in spite of his affliction, the gigolo can never feed his wants or desires enough to be satisfied. Yet, the gigolo shares a similar sense of entrapment to his self-aggrandizing cycle of selling himself day after day. Instead of an iron lung ticking his existence, the gigolo is a “pocket watch” slinking through the streets for a suitable meeting place to indulge his sexual appetite. As flamboyant as he is, he wants to avoid detection. His preference for a “cul-de-sac” implies further confinement, however, because it is a dead end.¹¹ Even better, the gigolo finds greatest safety within a grand residence that has

mirrors for its windows and “no family photographs” to remind him, or his lovers, of the people they are hurting by their lascivious behavior. Barely into this safe, emotionless environment, “the smiles of women” surround the gigolo, and they eagerly vie to snag him like “bright fish hooks.” The sexual tension explodes into “a litter of breasts like jellyfish” as he grinds through them. But like the brainless jellyfish, the gigolo has no resolve or stamina. He has to feed his insatiable lust with “eggs and fish.” Symbols of the female ovum and religious deities, the gigolo consumes “the essentials” as a devote Catholic during Lent.¹² His sacred addiction to sex drains him like the sagging “mouth of Christ” dying on the cross. Kendall affirms that the proliferation of mouths in Plath’s poetry is directly related to her exploration of religion and sacrifice (“Piranha” 51).

In his sexual release, the gigolo’s entire being is galvanized and shining like gold, eager to tell the world of his conquests. His sexual partners, those “bitches,” turn to waves of “silver” not unlike “The Munich Mannequins” on their lollipop sticks. They undulate and flow from him like plush “carpet” being rolled out to a satisfied “hush.” Even so, the momentary tranquility exposes insatiable desire with “no end.” The gigolo is trapped in a perpetual state of adolescence like “new oysters” that never mature. They “shriek in the sea” with ecstasy and laughter while the gigolo “glitters” like the largest French royal chateau, “Fountainbleau.” Everything points to the gigolo’s gratification, and here Plath uses a familiar play on the eye/I rhyme to suggest all-seeing, all-consuming self-centeredness. She couples this with water imagery that fulfills its primary function as a reflecting “pool” from which the gigolo can admire himself. Contrary to the paralytic who “asks nothing of life” and transcends his desires, the gigolo asks everything of life to indulge his endless cravings. Plath accentuates this point in her draft of this

poem, where she had first included a string of five “me’s” to end the last line (Item 1).

Self-effacing and self-aggrandizing dominate “Paralytic” and “Gigolo” to blend the sacred and the profane into a martyred transcendence with wildly sexual overtones. Whether deprived of carnal desires through paralysis or insatiable greed, the pleasures of the human world can never provide lasting peace. For this, the paralyzed man and the prostitute need divine intervention not unlike the healing and forgiveness Jesus offered to the same types of people in his day.¹³

February 1, 1963: “The blood jet is poetry”¹⁴

After a two-day hiatus, Plath wrote three new poems on February 1, 1963: “Mystic,” “Kindness,” and “Words.” Taken together, these poems express the ecstasy and agony of writing. However, what initially seems to be a dramatic shift in theme from her previous six poems is easily resolved through her choice of words in the opening lines of “Mystic.” In a familiar expression, the women’s smiles that appear in “Gigolo” as “bright fish hooks” are replaced with “hooks” that hang in the air like “questions without answer.” Again, Plath uses “glittering” as she does in three of the previous poems to suggest a threat, which is imposed this time by questions. The reader feels the heavy, unbearable, repulsive “air” pressing in and promising hopelessness. In addition, the questions are erratic and produce “stings” as well as foul-smelling breath that hangs stillborn in the heavy summer heat.

The mystic, who has an ecstatic experience capable of transporting the self beyond the mundane, is fated to return to the physical world where the vision—the memory—of having touched the divine fades away. The prevailing question, which has

no answer, hovers dead and stiff: “Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?” There are contradictory biblical references to persons having seen God;¹⁵ however, the general consensus is that a human being would die as a result. So, in one sense, “Mystic” asks a rhetorical question, yet the question presses further than a visual encounter with God. The poem’s speaker wants to know what happens when “one has been seized up ... / ... utterly” as if to be consumed in spiritual ecstasy like the saints in “ancient” times.

Kroll suggests that the poem explores the dark night of the soul featured in the mystical writings of St. John of the Cross. She contends that this “dark night is brought on by the deprivation felt when the mystical state of illumination ceases” (208). It is not enough, the speaker says, to receive communion like a “pill” or to seek tranquility “beside still water.” These are mere sense memories that do not hold the full experience. No less helpful are the bits and pieces of divine presence in “the faces of rodents” despite their humble estate. One can have compassion or sentimental consideration for such things, but the “great love” of ecstatic union with God remains a mystery as perplexing as “the sea” remembering “the walker upon it.” Slowly “meaning” drops away, and the mystic returns to the temporal world where one “breathes, sweats and leaps” to face a fiery red day dawning.

When Plath first wrote this poem, she entitled it “Woodcut” and originally began with the line “This little woodcut of the Inquisition is so beautiful” (Kroll 206). She elaborated on the Inquisition theme by seeing the figures as Bewick¹⁶ creatures that were lifeless and deafened by silence.

Again, Plath relentlessly rewrote the last stanza to accommodate references to the face of the raptured mystic reflecting the sun and offering hope. However, Plath

concludes that there are many ways to achieve rapture, yet it is the sun that lives on to see another day (Item 1b). As with “Paralytic,” transcendence brings peace, but in the case of the mystic, “the heart has not stopped.” Even so, it would seem that the heart will stop eventually, and that the polarities of faith and despair will not be bridged within the human world.

Where “Mystic” plunges to the depths of agony to recover the ecstasy of ancient, creative energy, “Kindness” situates itself in the center of modernity. The “tenderness” one is resigned to attain in “Mystic” finds its partner in “Dame Kindness” as she “glides about my house” providing comfort and “a cup of tea.” Originally, Kindness was personified as a royal godmother perhaps to imply a benevolent guardian who will take an interest in the speaker’s personal development (Item 1). Instead Plath draws a clearer reference to Kindness’s spiritual role by personifying her as an ethereal being who wears the “blue and red jewels” of Christian iconography typically associated with the Virgin Mary (Kroll 40). Brilliant, precious stones blaze reflectively “in the windows” like stained glass, and once again “smiles” appear in “the mirrors.” Kindness brings happiness and joy. Nonetheless, as with “Child,” the tone of the poem shifts from this upbeat introductory stanza to questioning on its way to sarcasm, despair and hopeless finality. A similar rhetorical question—“What is so real as the cry of a child?”—causes the poem’s speaker to wish she could comprehend an authentic moment. Like the ecstatic experience of the mystic, the wildness of “a rabbit’s cry” seems preferable except “it has no soul.” The closest one can come to rapturous reality is “the cry of a child.”

For her part, Kindness offers sugar to “cure” whatever ails the poem’s speaker. As if to foreshadow the “blood jet” of poetry coursing through the speaker’s veins, Kindness

liquefies the sugar crystals into a “poultice” hoping to improve the speaker’s circulation. Then, Kindness continues to tidy up the place, but her sweetness begins to turn bitter as the speaker fears Kindness will “pin” her “Japanese silks” like “desperate butterflies” and paralyze her creativity. Ever trying to appease, Kindness brings “a cup of tea / wreathed in steam” to calm the speaker, who seems frantic to write. In spite of the nice acts of Kindness, real life and real passion come from poetry: “The blood jet is poetry.” In fact, as Axelrod points out, the equation of blood to poetry creates a symbiotic relationship instead of one of opposition. There is a unity of body and spirit, and poetry courses unstoppable through the bloodstream (“Mirror” 293). Nonetheless, Kindness gets the last word, symbolically, by handing the speaker “two children, two roses.” It is a cruel reminder of her imperfection, as was previously realized in “The Munich Mannequins,” and foreshadows a line from one of her last poems written on February 5, 1963, “Edge,” where the speaker folds her dead children “back into her body as petals / of a rose close when the garden / stiffens ...” (CP 272–273).

The third poem Plath wrote on February 1, 1963, “Words,” makes the strongest claim about writing. An author’s penned words are like “axes” leaving murderously indelible marks on the body. They reverberate in “echoes” emanating from a charged nucleus. Plath returns to the horse metaphor here to describe the echo of words “traveling / off from the center ...,” and later words become “dry and riderless, / the indefatigable hoof-taps.” In this way, she uses the horse as a vehicle, not to flee from but to enter into darkness where all opposing forces become one. Furthermore, her draft of the poem included references to commoners encountering stale, haughty words that dripped with perspiration (Item 1). Here, Plath’s original imagery further melds the horse’s hoof-taps

with persistent verbiage that oozes from every pore. Nonetheless, once words are unleashed, they are sticky as “sap” and bubble up “like tears” distorting one’s face and blurring one’s vision. In what Kendall calls “an overwhelming sense of fatalism,” the words transform from axes to echoes to sap, then tears and water falling over rock into a pool where a “white skull” is “eaten by weedy greens.” This rapid migration gives the impression “of the poem writing itself” (“From the Bottom” 162).

Similar to her other revisions of poems, Plath tinkered with the last stanza to arrive at “stars” and to eliminate her first impression of small stones at the bottom of the pool (Item 1). Even so, as the final version of the last stanza suggests, words take on a life of their own, and they cannot alter their creator’s final destiny: death. Whether through mystical experience, god-motherly care or infinite axed echoes, the writer’s inspiration and curse cast shadows upon the blank page that beg for meaning. The sacred life-force combines with profane scribbles to fill a limitless void.

February 4, 1963: “The mirrors are sheeted”¹⁷

Once again, Plath pauses from writing for two days and then pens just one poem on February 4, 1963: “Contusion.” Here, Plath opens with a rush of colorful energy that settles to a “dull purple” and leaves everything else “washed out / the color of pearl.” The poem describes the surface effects of an internal trauma. Blood, the life force, races subcutaneously to the sight of injury; but in its mission to save one part of the body, the rest is deprived. Like “Paralytic,” Plath uses the rock as a metaphor for the mind and returns to the familiar imagery of the sea—prominent in her earlier poems—that is reflected in “Mystic.” Together, these two symbols create a hydraulic turbulence that

“sucks obsessively” from every direction.

In the next stanza, though, Plath struggled to find the right description for the “doom mark” as she revised this section extensively in her draft. She originally wrote the mark had a blooming quality and then revised this to reflect a darker, ominous presence (Item 1). Reminiscent of Virginia Woolf’s “The Mark on the Wall,” Plath’s mark turns out to be a “the size of a fly” instead of Woolf’s snail. Nevertheless, the mark is as maddening and menacing because even though the wound—the contusion—is only the size of a fly, it is powerful enough to stop the heart. The blood flow, so essential to healing, has formed into a clot and killed the very life it was trying to revive.

In the custom of many cultures and religions, “the mirrors are sheeted” when a death occurs so the living do not have to look upon their grief. Some believe this practice also prevents the ghost of the departed from carrying away other souls (Frazer, as quoted in Axelrod, Wound 212). Plath makes another point, though, in sheeting the mirrors, which have come to reflect the reality of the self in many of her poems. She strips them of their life-showing quality and presents them shrouded in darkness. Not only has the self died, but it is no longer reflected in the world. It is as if it never existed.

In “Contusion,” Plath tackles one of the most sacred of all elements: blood. But even the reverence of blood, with its life-giving oxygen, functions equally in repulsive ways to remove waste from the body. Consequently, the “dull purple” mark shows life and threatens to take it away in the same breath. Whether one is inhaling or exhaling does not matter because either could be the last, or the first.

February 5, 1963: “The woman is perfected”¹⁸

On February 5, 1963, Plath wrote her last two poems: “Balloons” and “Edge.” They serve as bookends, perhaps, for her twenty-two years of writing poetry. On the one hand, “Balloons” appears to be a carefree observation of a little boy playing with these “globes of thin air, red, green” that have been floating around the house “since Christmas” (CP 271). It is reminiscent of Plath’s first published poem in 1941 where she explained to the editor of the *Boston Herald*, “I have written a short poem about what I see and hear on hot summer nights” (“Poem”). Yet, unlike the melodious sound of “crickets chirping / in the dewy grass” from her early poem, Plath turns to shrieks and pops that culminate in the shred of a dead, red balloon clutched in a little boy’s fist.

What gives the poem its loudest pop, however, is the fact that the deflated balloon the boy clinches did not break of its own accord. “He bites” it, and this willful act washes away any residue of playfulness to reveal the consuming nature of reality. Furthermore, “Balloons” implies a sacredness of breath that is wasted in selfish entertainment. Despite the initial delight of colorful balloons against the monochromatic tones of the previous ten poems, the speaker cannot stay forever in this bubble world. Not even the “peacocks blessing / old ground with a feather” will revive what has been destroyed. The sanctity of natural innocence slides up against mundane harshness and conflates into “a world clear as water.” Subsequently, what becomes of life in a balloon-popped existence has yet to be revealed.

On the other hand, it is hard not to read finality into Plath’s other poem from February 5, 1963. “Edge” is the last millimeter of difference between life and death, and the poem hangs in this infinitesimal balance. From its perspective, high in the sky, “The

moon has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone” (CP 273).

Nonetheless, its serenity also speaks of the foreboding reality of death for it is only in death that “The woman is perfected.” As such, the dead woman’s “body,” void of life and spirit, “wears the smile of accomplishment.” This smile is reminiscent of the one in “Paralytic,” which can only be worn after all human striving is transcended. Likewise, as with “Kindness” and “Words,” the joy of having accomplished anything in life is an illusion, and one must reel it all back into oneself like the closing petals of a rose at night. The speaker’s dead children, perhaps symbolic of her poetry as imaged in the “scrolls of her toga,” lie at her drained breasts. As Rosenblatt indicates, the death process reverses the process of birth and everything is assimilated into nature (137).

“We have come so far, it is over,” says the poem’s speaker. At first, Plath included another stanza here that indicated a paralysis or stillness that was permanent (Item 1). In addition, Plath initially explained that the poem’s speaker intended to take her children with her into death (Item 1). However, in its final form, the poem lets the reader infer this point. Through this cycle of life into death, the speaker inhabits the night like the “moon.” Her bone white “hood” is draped with the black night sky like a cloak. The dryness of death “crackles,” and its omnipresence “drags” along the earth.

For Pamela Annas, “Edge” has a calm, peaceful, incantatory rhythm and bears the quality of a still photograph (Disturbance 122). The contradictory implications of an “edge” that is calm and peaceful weaves the sacred and the profane together in an inseparable embrace. As Kroll suggest, it is a tableau of the final scene of a ritualistically staged tragedy revealing the outcome (150). In both of these framed snapshots of the same image, the woman perfected in death enters into the darkness where all dichotomies

are fused.

By their very nature, Plath's last two poems run the gamut of sacred and profane symbols, metaphors and meanings from their initially playful shrieks to tragically murderous grips. Balloons, floating on a breath of air, collide violently with the edge of darkness and dissolve in a child's hand. And, the woman who wishes to be perfect is driven to sacrifice her children, silence her voice and haunt the world forever.

Conclusion: "We have come so far, it is over."¹⁹

Plath's last poems, written over the span of nine days in early 1963, are filled with the profaneness of the sacred and the sacredness of the profane to such a degree that the two become blurred and indistinguishable. This does not occur by chance; it is inevitable. Nor does it seem to be a coincidence that Plath ended with twelve new poems. Her interest in astrology and religion support the significance of both theories. Likewise, with the exception of "Sheep in Fog" and "The Munich Mannequins," each of Plath's last poems has a one-word title. This brevity punctuates the cooler, denser aspects of her final writing. From the close reading, annotations and explorations that defy single interpretation or meaning, Plath's final 1,542 poetic words come down to a few extraordinary blends of the sacred and the profane: blood, water, breath, body and nature.²⁰

In her last twelve poems, Plath refers to blood in four poems specifically and in another four metaphorically. The Apocalyptic "horse the color of rust" from "Sheep in Fog" brings war, not peace. Blood "is the flood of love" in the otherwise artificial and sterile world of "The Munich Mannequins." It is on the minds of farmers in "Totem,"

where “The world is blood-hot and personal” and dawn speaks “with its blood-flush.” Perhaps most famously, “Kindness” proclaims “The blood jet is poetry,” while “Edge” expresses its sanguineness as “odors bleed.” Conversely, “Mystic” imagines blood where “the sun blooms, it is a geranium” to signify a vibrant new day. Overwhelmingly, though, Plath’s use of blood implies death and destruction as with “Contusion,” which siphons blood to a single spot and sends its clotting powers racing to shut the heart. Then, as “Balloons” illustrates, life is nothing more than “a red / shred” clutched in a little boy’s fist. These references to blood personify its necessity, its passion and its unstoppable thirst for giving and taking life simultaneously. Blood is worshipped as the life-force of creation, and just as quickly it is spilled to satisfy selfish gain.

Even more essential to all life forms than blood, water is associated with purification in most religions. In fact, baptism—either through sprinkling, pouring or immersing the person in water—symbolizes the washing away of sins. Ritual washing also signifies cleansing in preparation for worship or after a person is deceased. Both the Bible²¹ and the Qur’an²² state that earth and life are created from water. Not surprisingly, eleven of Plath’s last poems reference water in an array of forms that crisscross the vanishing line between the sacred and the profane. The most straightforward treatments of water are in “Paralytic” and “Mystic” where the “still waters” drown or imply calmness with reference to Psalm 23.²³ In addition, “Contusion” presents the sea as a turbulent hydraulic that “sucks obsessively” to devour life. Once, the water is described as “dark,” and another time it is described as “clear.” Elsewhere, water vaporizes as fog to shroud the sheep in whiteness or wreathes “a cup of tea ... / ... in steam” to express kindness. In other cases, water’s presence is implied in “snow” and “hydras,” “drowned

fields” and “tears.” More often than not, however, water is a reflecting pool to mirror images, the poem’s speaker or fixed stars. It is not difficult to experience the ebb and flow of Plath’s water imagery, which washes away any lines in the sand as the sacred sea rolls in and is pulled back out again to profane, unfathomable depths.

In Latin, breath is *Spiritus*, and this connotation is represented in some religious traditions as the breath or spirit of God imbuing creation with life.²⁴ In six of her last poems, Plath uses breath to signify the fleeting presence of life and its carefree existence. Breath is personified in a train’s exhaust and snow’s coldness as well as the city’s chimneys. In the first and last instances, breath implies that life goes on in spite of loss or death; however, in the second instance, the “snow breath”—a metaphor for perfection—is capable of filling up a woman’s womb to prevent her from having children. In “Paralytic,” breath is artificially induced whereas for “Mystic,” the air is “a mill of hooks” compounded by the heavy, repulsive *spirit* pressing in and promising hopelessness. In contrast, “Kindness” casts blue and red rings of smoke “in the windows” that suggest a fiery aliveness reflected in “smiles.” For its part, “Balloons” contains breath within its colorful orbs and forces it to escape with a pop, leaving a lifeless husk. While the life is in the blood, it must carry oxygen to keep the body alive. Conversely, a body without breath has no spirit. Plath’s exchange of sacred and profane uses for breath, or the absence thereof, expel any hint of division. Seamlessly, she expands and contracts its meaning in life and death.

Rarely does Plath represent the body as a whole entity in her last poems. Rather, she presents disembodied parts to signify disconnection and to accentuate their profane and sacred aspects. “Sheep in Fog” and “Edge” highlight bones that are stiff and skinless

while “The Munich Mannequins” puts hands to work polishing shoes for “broad toes.” In several poems, the “eye” or “eyes” figure prominently and serve a double purpose with the rhyming “I.” It is in “Paralytic,” however, where the most body parts are used to overstate fragmentation and the loss of a whole self. With his mind, fingers, tongue, lungs, eyes, an “inaccessible breast,” mouth, lips, nose, ears, or back, what is left of the paralytic is rendered inhuman and grotesque. Not to be outdone, “Gigolo” fixates on breasts and the mouth, along with joints and the eye. Here, the body parts are disassembled to be objectified. “Mystic,” like “The Munich Mannequins,” isolates the womb and equates it with disease or barrenness. In addition, “Mystic” is concerned about the body’s individual parts being consumed by God and fears the heart’s stopping. “A white skull” decomposes in “Words,” and “the rest of the body” is separated from the “doom mark” in “Contusion.” It is the action of teeth in “Balloons” that leaves a “shred” in a “fist.” Yet it is the stilled “feet” in “Edge” that speak an end to the vivisection. A whole, complete, vital body does not exist in Plath’s last poems. Instead, the body is parceled out to perform specific functions that hasten its death and torment it in life. When it is nourished, the body consumes gluttonously and is never satiated. The closest Plath comes to expressing the sacredness of the body is when children are folded back into it in death. Then, it has been utterly extinguished and incapable of new life.

Known for her skillful use of nature imagery, Plath imbues eleven of her last poems with an array of animals, including sheep, horses, hydras, pigs, a hare and a rabbit, a snake and a cobra, a spider, flies, ducks, a lizard, fish, a squid, oysters, jellyfish, and rodents. Evenly distributed between metaphor or simile and actual representation, her use of animals, particularly reptiles and sea creatures, highlights her appreciation for creation.

To this, Plath adds trees, flowers, rocks, gemstones and metals, the sun, the moon and the stars. For the girl who “wanted to be God,” she makes a strong case for the sacredness of her handiwork. However, Plath often does not deal benevolently with living creatures, such as the aborted and flayed hare in “Totem.” She uses jellyfish to describe women’s breasts in the same way that she sees Christ “in the faces of rodents.” Trees and flowers offer shade and comfort just as quickly as they wreak havoc and close to death’s clutches. Precious metals, like silver and gold, are hallowed for the ways they can impale women and announce sexual conquests. The sun, with its bright oppressiveness, dries up blooming life. Likewise, her celebration of stars and the moon to light the darkness, also serve to signal one’s fated destiny in death. Not surprising, Plath stands as Ananke, Mother Goddess, at the beginning of the cosmos to dictate the fate of all created life. Whether through whimsy or wisdom, all things pass through her hands as sacred and profane in equal measure. There is no dividing line; they have become one.

In The Second Common Reader, Virginia Woolf writes:

I have sometimes dreamt, at least, that when the Day of Judgment dawns and the great conquerors and lawyers and statesmen come to receive their rewards—their crowns, their laurels, their names carved indelibly upon imperishable marble—the Almighty will turn to Peter and will say, not without a certain envy when he sees us coming with our books under our arms, “Look, these need no reward. We have nothing to give them. They have loved reading.” (270)

As a young woman, Plath wondered how to achieve immortality, to wend the sacred and the profane so tightly together that one could live forever. The closest she came was to write her poetry and give birth to two children. The sacred and the profane, distilled and commingled as they are within the reader and upon the printed page, are themselves a manifestation of life after death and yet nothing more or less than crude

markings. As for her children, both have followed in her footsteps through sacred and profane acts. Her daughter, Frieda, writes poetry and children's books; her son, Nicholas, once a professor of fisheries and ocean sciences, committed suicide at the age of 47. Words and life are a mystery, but it is the meaning one makes of them that places them somewhere along the continuum of blessed and blasphemous.

On Plath's gravestone in Heptonstall, West Yorkshire, England, is engraved the epitaph, "Even amidst fierce flames the golden lotus can be planted." These words come from a 16th century text by Cheng'en Wu, and their full context, along with the knowledge that they are imparted by a patriarch to his pupil in pursuit of the Secret of Long Life, provide a fitting epigram to this survey of the sacred and the profane in Sylvia Plath's last poems:

To spare and tend the vital powers, this and nothing else
 Is sum and total of all magic, secret and profane.
 All is comprised in these three, Spirit, Breath and Soul;
 Guard them closely, screen them well; let there be no leak.
 Store them within the frame;
 That is all that can be learnt, and all that can be taught.
 I would have you mark the tortoise and snake, locked in tight embrace.
 Locked in tight embrace, the vital powers are strong;
 Even in the midst of fierce flames the Golden Lotus may be planted,
 The Five Elements compounded and transposed, and put to new use.
 When that is done, be which you please, Buddha or Immortal. (24)

In this incandescent light, one apprehends "that still, blue, almost eternal hour", which touches the sacred and the profane simultaneously (Plath, Ariel 195).

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¹ From "Mystic" (Plath, Collected Poems 268).

² From "Sheep in Fog" (Plath, Collected Poems 262).

³ Antoine de Saint-Exupéry (1900–1944), author of The Little Prince.

⁴ Described by Nietzsche himself as "the deepest ever written," the book is a dense and esoteric treatise on philosophy and morality, featuring as protagonist a fictionalized prophet descending from his recluse to mankind, Zarathustra. A central irony of the text is that Nietzsche mimics the style of the Bible in order to present ideas which fundamentally oppose Christian and Jewish morality and tradition (Source: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thus_Spoke_Zarathustra).

⁵ From "The Munich Mannequins" (Plath, Collected Poems 263).

⁶ Plath gave a cursory explanation of this poem for possible BBC reading: "In this poem, the speaker's horse is proceeding at a slow, cold walk down a hill of macadam to the stable at the bottom. It is December. It is foggy. In the fog there are sheep." (Collected Poems 295).

⁷ Revelation 6:3–4.

⁸ A hydra is a genus of simple predatory animal found in most unpolluted fresh-water. Having a regenerative ability, the hydra appears not to age or die of old age. [Source: Wikipedia, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydra_\(genus\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hydra_(genus)).]

⁹ St. Bartholomew, one of Jesus' twelve disciples, is believed to have been beheaded and then flayed. He is the patron saint of tanners.

¹⁰ From "Paralytic" (Plath, Collected Poems 266).

¹¹ In ancient times, the cul-de-sac was used to prevent slave workers from escaping, whereas in modern times, the cul-de-sac is used in conjunction with pedestrian paths to separate man from machine. (Source: Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cul-de-sac>.)

¹² Eggs and fish are permitted during Lent, on all Fridays of the year, and for fasting days in pre-Vatican II Roman Catholicism. Considered kosher, eggs and fish also figure prominently in Jewish tradition, especially during Passover.

¹³ Mark 2:1–5 tells of Jesus healing a paralytic. Luke 7:36–50 tells of Jesus offering forgiveness to a woman presumed to be a prostitute. In addition, Mary Magdalene, one of the prominent female followers of Jesus, has been identified as a prostitute by many, including the Roman Catholic Church (Source: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mary_Magdalene).

¹⁴ From “Kindness” (Plath, Collected Poems 270).

¹⁵ In the Old Testament, God “appeared” to several of the patriarchs, and Moses was permitted to see God’s back (Exodus 33:20). But according to the New Testament, no one has ever seen God (John 1:18, 5:37; 6:46).

¹⁶ Thomas Bewick (1753–1828) was an English woodcarver and ornithologist. (Source: Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Bewick.)

¹⁷ From “Contusion” (Plath, Collected Poems 271).

¹⁸ From “Edge” (Plath, Collected Poems 272).

¹⁹ From “Edge” (Plath, Collected Poems 272).

²⁰ Interestingly, 1,542, when added together as individual numbers, 1 + 5 + 4 + 2, equals 12.

²¹ Genesis 1:2.

²² Sura 21 The Prophets, ayat 30.

²³ Psalm 23:2b–3a says, “He leadeth me beside the still waters. / He restoreth my soul.” (Source: King James Version of The Bible.)

²⁴ Genesis 2:7.