Inhabited by a Cry: The Birth and Rebirth of Ariel

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Abstract
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In her earlier poems, Sylvia Plath composed very slowly, consulting her Thesaurus and Dictionary for almost every word, putting a slow, strong line of ink under each word that attracted her.²

The repetition of 'slowly' and 'slow' highlights the dominant motif of Hughes’s account. The *Ariel* poems, he goes on to suggest, mark a sudden release from such painstaking efforts. It is their extraordinary velocity – in their creation as much as in rhythm and imagery – which sets them apart from Plath’s earlier work: ‘these are poems written for the most part at great speed, as she might take dictation’ (*WP.* p. 161). While avoiding absolute endorsement, Hughes’s chosen simile carries inescapable implications for the nature of Plath’s poetic gift: he intimates that her rational, conscious mind in these later poems is subservient to some deeper dictating force. By contrast the *Colossus* poems, forced out against immense resistance, are offered as little more than five-finger exercises preparing the ground for the unstoppably mantic inspiration of Plath’s mature work.

Hughes’s formulation of his wife’s creative processes has done much to foster the familiar legend of *Ariel*. With her marriage disintegrating and two young children to care for, Plath still managed to produce – at top speed – one of the most important poetry collections of the twentieth century. During October 1962 she finished at least twenty-five poems, getting up to write at four o’clock each morning before the children woke. Plath believed these compositional habits influenced the shape of her work, and she even singled out the poems’ early-morning origins, along with the fact they were written to be read aloud, as their most salient characteristics. *The Colossus* suffered by comparison. During a BBC radio interview of 31 October 1962 Plath admitted that her first collection now bored her: the aural qualities of *Ariel* made earlier work seem artificial and rhythmically inert.

Not all critics have accepted the value judgements of Plath and Hughes regarding the nature of her achievement. Jacqueline Rose, for example,
objects to the way in which, she claims, Hughes 'presents all Plath's work in terms of a constant teleological reference to Ariel, with the result that everything else she ever produced is more or less offered as waste'. Admittedly, dangers do exist in drawing too sharp a distinction between the genius of Ariel and the relative inferiority of Plath's earlier work. Difficulties even arise over the text and chronology of Ariel itself. There are, of course, two Ariel's: the collection selected and arranged by Plath, which she made no effort to publish (and which she may have substantially altered, had she lived); and the volume selected and arranged by Hughes and published two years after her death. In each case the earliest poem is 'You're', written in January or February 1960. Plath's arrangement of Ariel includes another six poems, and Hughes's published version five, written before the breakthrough of April 1962 when, as Hughes has argued, 'the Ariel voice emerged in full' (WP. p. 188).

The question of when - or whether - the Ariel voice can be said to end is equally problematic. The latest poem Plath includes in her Ariel manuscript is 'Death & Co.', dated 14 November 1962. Hughes tells us that Plath set aside 'Sheep in Fog' (2 December 1962, and revised 28 January 1963), and the other eleven poems written in late January and early February 1963, as the beginnings of a new collection which she considered different in tone, 'cooler' (as she described it) in its inspiration (WP. p. 189). But this chronology does not clarify her intentions towards the group of poems written between 'Death & Co.' and 'Sheep in Fog', several of which - 'Mary's Song', for example, or 'Winter Trees' - are among Plath's finest achievements. Although Hughes reports that Plath arranged her manuscript of Ariel 'some time around Christmas 1962' (WP. p. 172), his approximation may suggest uncertainty. It seems just as feasible that, having written 'Death & Co.', Plath felt satisfied in mid-November she had enough material for a volume. Consequently, poems written just two days after 'Death & Co.' may already have represented a fresh start, or at least a new direction. Because the published volume collects many poems which Plath did not consider to belong in Ariel, the transformations and re-inventions her style undoubtedly underwent in the last year of her life have generally remained inconspicuous, receiving considerably less attention than they merit.

These textual complications should undermine criticism which simply identifies the 'Ariel voice' with all Plath's later poetry. The poems Plath writes during the last year of her life are too many and varied to be grouped together en masse. The stylistic experiments, the diversity, the new directions and preoccupations which readers would expect to find developed through a major poet's body of important work have, in Plath's poetry, been condensed into the space of little more than a year. However, most of the Ariel manuscripts do confirm Hughes's emphasis on Plath's speed of composition as a unifying hallmark of her later poetry. Although it is impossible to judge whether earlier drafts have been lost, or how much Plath composed mentally before starting to write, it seems that sometimes a poem would come wholly formed: for example 'Gigolo', almost without
revisions, was written at such speed that rather than begin a clean sheet, Plath squeezed the final stanza up the side of the page, and in her haste went over the edge of the paper in several places.

Yet the Ariel drafts indicate a drama of creativity far more complex than is sometimes described by critics. Hughes’s keynote observation that Plath would look up and underline words in her thesaurus and dictionary while composing The Colossus may imply that these props became redundant amidst the free-flowing inspiration of her later work. Her Webster’s Dictionary and several of her manuscripts (held in the Plath archive of the Rare Books Room at Smith College) challenge this assumption. The words ‘Ariel’ and ‘purdah’, for example, both have their etymologies underlined: Ariel, from the Hebrew for ‘lioness of God’; and purdah, from the Hindu and Persian pardah, a veil. Plath writes these etymologies on the first draft of the respective poems, and even notes almost verbatim the dictionary entry for ‘purdah’ as a constant reminder: along the top of the first draft she has written ‘Hind. & Per. pardah – veil curtain or screen India to seclude women’ [sic]. Such examples highlight consistencies in Plath’s compositional habits between The Colossus and Ariel; what seems most extraordinary is Plath’s alchemical transformation, in her later work, of the same unexceptional resources.

This forethought and conscious deliberation in the making of Ariel qualifies the common image of Plath as a poet almost possessed, writing as if taking dictation. Nevertheless, her speed of composition is remarkable: the dates on the manuscripts reveal that in the eight days from 28 January to 5 February 1963, for example, Plath finished one poem and wrote eleven others. Hughes has raised doubts about the accuracy of manuscript dates, but only with regard to work before 1957:

In one or two cases [prior to 1957] the dates she left on the manuscripts contradict what seem to me very definite memories. [...] From early 1962 she began to save all her handwritten drafts (which up to that time she had systematically destroyed as she went along), and provisional final versions among these are usually dated as well. So throughout this period the calendar sequence is correct, and the only occasional doubt concerns the order of composition among poems written on the same day. (WP. p. 175)

There is nothing in the Plath archive to question Hughes’s confidence. However, the apparent authority of Plath’s manuscript dating has encouraged critics to view her writing procedures as less flexible and considered than archival evidence indicates. With the possible exception of Susan Van Dyne in her valuable study Revising Life, readers and critics have tended to assume that the poems existed in their final versions on the date quoted. Plath’s reading for BBC Radio on 31 October 1962 offers incontrovertible proof that this trust is misplaced. Almost all the poems she reads differ, in some respect, from their final published versions. Sometimes a line or just a word might be altered. More often, as in ‘Fever 103°’, ‘Stopped Dead’ and ‘Lyonnesse’ (the last of which, interestingly, Plath read
as the first part of ‘Amnesiac’), whole stanzas have been deleted before publication. The most substantial revision occurs in ‘Nick and the Candlestick’, where seven three-line stanzas which end Plath’s reading of the poem have been dropped from the finished version. Yet the draft of this final version is dated, like its lengthier predecessor, 29 October 1962 – two days before the radio reading. When revising days or even several weeks later, Plath seems to have kept using the original date on new drafts unless (as with ‘Eavesdropper’ or ‘Sheep in Fog’) she made major additions. This also raises the possibility that the composition of separate poems overlapped more often than their dates would suggest. ‘Lady Lazarus’ is dated 23-29 October 1962, and as such, it covers a period during which Plath wrote eight other poems. The time it took Plath to produce a working draft for ‘Lady Lazarus’ was uncommonly slow, and therefore worthy of note. Ted Hughes has remarked that there must have been many other times when Plath ‘worked on three or more [poems] without finishing them’ (WP. p. 168). It seems that, in line with her policy for dating revisions, Plath gave a single date to poems taking two or three days to write; clearly a tremendous effort would have been required to produce the 126 lines of ‘Berck-Plage’, and the tortuous drafts from which it eventually emerged, in just one day.

The Ariel manuscripts resist easy generalizations about Plath’s working methods because, like the poems themselves, each series of drafts tells a different story, and in each Plath employs varying techniques – with varying degrees of success – to arrive at a finished version which satisfies her. Despite this essential caveat, shared patterns do occasionally emerge from work written around the same time. Although her publication history has tended to disguise the fact, Plath often wrote poems in batches. Whatever their personal causes, the poetic silences which punctuate her otherwise prolific output during 1962-3 also mark the exhaustion of a particular style or set of preoccupations: one conspicuous example is the hiatus of two months preceding Plath’s ‘cooler’ style which from 28 January 1963 seems to have produced eleven poems in a week. A study of the Ariel manuscripts allows hidden connections within groups of poems to be uncovered.

One such group, pivotally important to Plath’s development, consists of the six poems she wrote during April 1962. After a burst of creativity in October the previous year, Plath ‘succumbed to “cowlike” pregnancy and wrote little’.4 This assessment is relative: apart from a short poem ‘New Year of Dartmoor’, over the next five months she took a break from lyric poetry to complete a radio play (‘Three Women’), a short story (‘Mothers’) and ten prose character sketches of her Devon neighbours. Returning to the lyric in early April, she produced in quick succession ‘Little Fugue’ (2 April), ‘An Appearance’ and ‘Crossing the Water’ (4 April), ‘Among the Narcissi’ (5 April), ‘Pheasant’ (7 April), and after almost a fortnight, ‘Elm’ (19 April). At this point, it appears, marital problems intervened: beginning over a month later with ‘The Rabbit Catcher’, several of Plath’s next poems explore a relationship in crisis, and their shift in tone distinguishes them from the April work. Therefore, from a chronological viewpoint, the poems of April
1962 lend themselves naturally to consideration as a discrete group. Plath intended to collect only ‘Elm’ in *Ariel*, and Hughes’s arrangement also includes ‘Little Fugue’. Nevertheless, despite earlier isolated auguries of her mature achievement, these six poems might justifiably be viewed as the gateway into *Ariel*.

Unlike her later work, the manuscripts of these poems do not always conform to Hughes’s emphasis on Plath’s speed of composition. Instead they reveal that she struggled desperately to break through to a new style. Plath complained of writer’s block during the early months of 1962, and manuscript evidence suggests that little was easily earned. While the drafts of many *Ariel* poems are almost pristine, these April drafts are filled with huge, messy excisions. Typically, Plath’s initial drafts of her 1962 poems are hand-written in ink on pink Smith College memorandum paper (obviously a precious resource — Plath had typed *The Bell Jar* on the reverse); when she felt close to a finished version, she would type the poem, revise in ink, then type again, until she was satisfied. The entire process normally used no more than four sheets; by contrast ‘Little Fugue’ took eight, and ‘Elm’, the most convoluted of all the *Ariel* drafts, twenty-one.

The drafts of the earliest April poem, ‘Little Fugue’, are worth examining in detail. They are fascinating documents, not only for intrinsic reasons, but also because they show Plath beginning to explore — often for the first time — many of the themes and images of her mature poetry. As might be expected after such a long hiatus, these manuscripts initially suggest hesitancy and a lack of direction. The first draft opens with an abandoned fragment, ‘on listening to laura riding’: ‘The lights are humming. How my small room rides’. Plath did not consider this inauspicious material worth pursuing: the title clearly harks back to a style exhibited in poems such as ‘On the Plethora of Dryads’ or ‘On the Decline of Oracles’ (both 1957) and long since outgrown. So she tries again, this time producing a more promising fragment:

The yew’s black fingers agitate
It is a tree of poems, of dead men;
A churchyard person, always sorry.
There is no truth in this.
How it flings up, like black blood.
This I consider. There is no truth,
Only the

Here Plath locates her proper subject: the real yew tree which cast its shadow over her house in Devon, just as the symbolic yew casts its shadow over her mature poetry. The yew, as Plath’s copy of Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess* would have informed her, is ‘the death tree in all European countries’. Plath’s earlier poem ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’, dated 22 October 1961, had begun to chart this dark territory, and her fragment is overly indebted to it: the yew ‘flings up’ where before it ‘point[ed] up’; its association with blackness recalls the ‘blackness and silence’ which was the yew’s message in the previous poem; and the references to ‘dead men’ and
'A churchyard person' attempt to capture, rather less subtly, the same morbid atmosphere.

These overwhelming similarities in subject, tone and imagery emphasize that 'Little Fugue' and the April 1962 poems represent a natural — albeit major — progression from earlier work. No doubt dissatisfied with the unoriginality of her treatment, Plath draws a line under this fragment and starts again, but this time without abandoning the source of her inspiration: she does after all consider the yew a 'tree of poems', potentially fruitful — though also, of course, deadly poisonous — in creative terms. However, whereas it shared central billing in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', the tree alone now fills Plath's gaze. Fittingly, her interim title is 'Yew Alone', soon replaced by 'Yew Tree in March' (which suggests the poem was begun at least several days before the manuscript date, 2 April). This single-minded focus initiates a psychodrama which animates 'Little Fugue' and the other poems of April 1962, and which 'The Moon and the Yew Tree' had ultimately left unexplored. The yew tree of the earlier poem remains aloof. It has a 'Gothic shape' and points up, but the speaker attends more to what it points at: the moon, which is the speaker's 'mother'. The poem ends with the yew keeping its mystery: 'And the message of the yew tree is blackness — blackness and silence'. By April Plath no longer finds this conclusion satisfactory: the drafts of 'Little Fugue' explore the nature of the 'blackness and silence', regardless of the psychological cost.

Plath's first task is to identify the yew and what it symbolizes. Resuming under the title 'Yew Alone', she preserves only the opening line of her fragment — 'The yew's black fingers agitate' — although now they agitate 'te &— fle back & forth'. This movement clearly fascinates Plath, and she expands the image with redundant similes which are soon deleted. Then the clouds appear, as they will in the final version. They pass disconsolately over a deathly landscape where a 'queer light', similar to the 'cold and planetary' light of 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', has 'Startle[d] the green out of the grass'. The speaker's response to this desolation conveys a sentiment typical to Ariel, but couched more in the language of Jacobean tragedy: 'O I am of a graveyard mind'. The fragment is clearly too disjointed and too derivative. So Plath begins again, with a new title 'Yew Tree in March', and starts to crystallize a new theme — the tree's struggle for communication:

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wig
The yew's black fingers agitate.
In a landscape of twigs, they make a plumpness.
A cartoon balloon rooted in the mouths of the dead.
They are making A fat black statement.
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The change from 'agitate' to 'wig' is significant: normally a finger wags in disapproval or prohibition, whereas 'agitate' can be read either as revealing the yew tree's own anxiety, or creating anxiety in the mind of the speaker. Despite its new censoriousness, Plath finds the yew more communicative
than in ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’. Its ‘statement’ is still ‘black’, but the deleted reference to a ‘cartoon balloon’ growing organically out of ‘the mouths of the dead’ offers the first indication that the yew might act as a go-between, connecting the living with the corpses buried among its roots.

Knowing that her discovery about the yew’s potential as a medium linking living and dead needs to be better prepared, Plath begins afresh once more, this time with a new sense of direction. Almost straight out she writes the poem’s opening stanza, different from the final version only in that the clouds are ‘disconsolate’ rather than ‘cold’:

The yew’s black fingers wag;
Disconsolate clouds go over.
The So the deaf & dumb
Signal the blind, & are ignored.

This portrays an apparently unbridgeable failure of communication. However, unlike the clouds the speaker is not ‘blind’; she ‘like[s] black statements’, and may therefore be equipped to decipher the yew tree’s message. Temporarily, her attention is drawn to the cloud, as it had been drawn to the moon in ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’. The cloud proves a welcome distraction, emphatically unpatriarchal: ‘It has no beard, no moral sensibility’. It looks ‘White as an eye’, and the combination of eyes, blindness, white and black leads analogically to ‘The eye of the blind pianist’, whom the speaker remembers watching ‘on the ship’.

The poet’s associative skills now take over, as the next three stanzas arrive almost perfectly formed:

He felt for his food.
His fingers had the noses of weasels.
I couldn’t stop looking.
He could hear Beethoven:
The blacks & whites of him, Black yew, white cloud,
The horrific complications.
Finger-traps – the a tumult of keys.
Empty and silly as plates –
So the blind smile.
I, too, lack
I envy the big noises,
The yew hedge of the Grosse Fuge.

Except for one minor change in punctuation, these stanzas remain unaltered in the finished version. They are the first sign of a contrapuntal technique which will eventually prompt Plath to rename the poem ‘Fugue: Yew Tree & Clouds’ and finally ‘Little Fugue’. Hughes’s note in the Collected Poems recalls that ‘Although never until now showing more than a general interest in music, about this time SP became keenly interested in Beethoven’s late quartets, the Grosse Fuge in particular’. The evidence of Plath’s journals indicates this is a slightly misleading account: in an unpublished entry for 2 September 1958, she lists Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas 11, 12, 26, 27 and 28,
presumably as works she enjoys or wants to buy; a fortnight later she reports that she and Hughes are 'both bogged down in black depression – the late nights, listening sporadically to Beethoven piano sonatas'; and an unpublished entry from 28 January 1959 announces, 'Listened to Beethoven's 2nd symphony. Maybe I will learn something.' Beethoven was for Plath the exemplary composer; 'Little Fugue' exhibits some of the fruits of her learning.

Plath underlined 'fugue' in her Webster's Dictionary, along with parts of its definition, as follows: 'A polyphonic composition, developed from a given theme, according to strict contrapuntal rules'. The figure of Beethoven embodies and resolves these contrapuntal voices – 'The blacks & whites of him, Black yew, white cloud' – just as the 'yew hedge' which the speaker detects in the Grosse Fuge may be capable of uniting living and dead. Having prepared the ground with three effortless stanzas, Plath hesitates before her new understanding:

Deafness is something else.  
See how the yew rounds itself, and  
A black ITS one foot stops  
The mouths of the dead  
The yew is many-footed.  
Each foot stops a mouth.  
So the yew is a go-between: it talks for the dead.  
A deaf man perceives this.  
He hears a black cry.  
The dead talk through it.  
O the voice of my masters!  
Such a dark funnel, my father!  
Such a dark funnel, my father!  
I see your voice  
Black & leafy, as in my childhood.

The first line arrives immediately: 'Deafness is something else'. This serves as a reminder of the pianist's blindness, and it also follows on from the allusion to the Grosse Fuge: Beethoven was suffering from deafness when he wrote the late quartets. The blind pianist playing Beethoven is therefore a successful example of communication between the deaf and the blind, reversing the failure of the poem's opening stanza.

At first Plath tries to close these channels: the yew 'stops' the mouths of the dead even while acting as a 'go-between'. Graves's The White Goddess reports the legend to which the draft undoubtedly alludes: 'In Brittany it is said that church-yard yews will spread a root to the mouth of each corpse' (WG. p. 194). Plath's use of 'stops' instead of 'spreads' reflects her underlying ambivalence. Although deleted from a later draft, this reluctance to communicate constitutes a moment of high drama: the speaker draws back before the prospect of beginning to explore the psychological depths which will come to characterize Ariel. The dead person with whom Plath would most like to communicate is also the person she most dreads: her
father. His voice is the voice of the yew hedge, ‘black and leafy’, and it is also the ‘pure German’ voice of Beethoven out of whose Grosse Fuge the yew hedge grows. The unjudgemental clouds have temporarily dissolved; there is no refuge from a voice which, Plath admits and then quickly scribbles out, ‘dominates me’ with its ‘orders’. ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ had avoided acknowledging the father’s presence, prepared only to identify the moon as ‘my mother’ to which the ‘Gothic’ yew points. Bravely exploring what the earlier poem shirks, Plath in ‘Little Fugue’ recognizes the father’s ‘Gothic and barbarous’ voice. (Gothicism, as she underlines it in her Webster’s Dictionary, is a ‘combination of sublime and grotesque’.) Against his vocal onslaught she can only plead ‘I am guilty of nothing’.

The father – absent from Plath’s poetry for the previous two and a half years – has now become inescapable, and he dominates the rest of the poem. Briefly Plath considers the tree again: ‘The one-legged yew, my Christ, then./ Is it not as tortured?’ However, this metaphor only serves to emphasize the father’s tyranny. Christ, like the yew, is an intermediary, who sacrifices himself so that the sinful might be spared the wrath of God the Father. Implicitly the yew plays a similar role, protecting the speaker from another kind of patriarchal fury. Although ‘Daddy’ is still over five months away, the drafts of ‘Little Fugue’ show Plath pre-empting that poem’s mindscape. She imagines her father as a butcher in ‘the California delicatessen’ during the Great War,

Lopping the sausages!
They color my nightmares, sleep
Red, mottled, like cut throats.
The throats of Jews.

This evokes a different war, but blatantly ties the father into the nexus of future Nazi barbarism. Nevertheless, Plath’s revision is fortunate: while she tries to associate the act of cutting (presumably pork) sausages with a later act of genocide, her own phantasmagoric switch from the cut throats of pigs to those of Jews – however sympathetic its intention – is deeply insulting.

From this image of the father as Nazi butcher, the speaker’s fugal techniques bring her forward suddenly to a childhood typified by a conspicuous absence of communication: ‘There was a silence’. The father’s death is viewed as an abandonment, leaving behind a seven-year-old daughter who ‘knew nothing’. Plath now runs into difficulties trying to describe the unreality of the aftermath, when ‘The world occurred, like a movie’. Although the syntax breaks down, a deleted line ‘Villian and lover’ seems to refer to the father figure, again foreshadowing ‘Daddy’. This ambivalence remains the key motif: the father is both ‘Bad man & good man’, his romantic image insidious as ‘poison in the rain’. Perhaps realizing that this portrayal spells out what would be more powerful for remaining latent, Plath draws a line across the page, and begins again with a simple description which connects the father through nationality and disability with Beethoven and the ‘blind pianist’: ‘You had one leg, & a Prussian mind’.
The poem's profound ambivalence in its depiction of the father is reinforced by the title, 'Little Fugue'. Her Webster's Dictionary does not list the secondary meaning of 'fugue', but Plath seems to have known and exploited its psychiatric connotations. The OED gives the following definition:

*Psychiatry.* A flight from one's own identity, often involving travel to some unconsciously desired locality. It is a dissociative reaction to shock or emotional stress in a neurotic, during which all awareness of personal identity is lost though the person's outward behaviour may appear rational. On recovery, memory of events during the state is totally repressed but may become conscious under hypnosis or psycho-analysis. A fugue may also be part of an epileptic or hysterical seizure. Also *attrib. as fugue state.*

This definition is crucial to a proper understanding of the poem's conclusion: Plath, in the drafts as in the finished version, begins to question whether the tortured past or the outwardly 'rational' present constitutes the speaker's true 'personal identity'. So having struggled with the father's posthumous presence, the poem reintroduces the clouds of forgetfulness, which 'spread their vacuous sheets' to return her to daily existence. Communication begins to fail: the draft has the deleted line 'I talk to stones', and the lack of a question mark after 'Do you say nothing' (an Eliotic moment) suggests that nothing else had been expected. Sharing something of her father's handicap, the speaker announces herself 'lame in the memory'. Her memory of events may have been repressed - except for tiny, random details like 'a blue eye,/ A briefcase of tangerines' - but there is still confusion over whether her present life represents real identity, or merely flight from it, into a world nothing more than a movie.

Some deleted lines about communication between 'this manic black' and 'these fool whites' follow. The return to successful contact now seems belated and out of place, and the poem's final stanza is less hopeful. Apart from a brief incursion by the same 'dead bell' which tolls in 'The Moon and the Yew Tree', 'Berck-Plage' and 'Death & Co.', the conclusion arrives without resistance, as Plath undoubtedly evokes the psychiatric associations of 'fugue':

I survive the while,
Arranging my morning.
These are my fingers, this my baby.
The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor.

This conclusion settles the ambiguity: it is the present, with its trappings of family life, which constitutes an escape from personal identity. The speaker's self-conscious deliberation, and her focus on immediate surroundings, represent a desperate struggle to establish a new domestic identity. She is describing a 'fugue state', a 'dissociative reaction' to the loss of her father, by which she has escaped into the 'unconsciously desired locality' of normal family life. This state is highly precarious: the speaker puns on 'morning'
and 'mourning', while the observation 'I survive the while', even without the accompaniment of the death bell, suggests a belated and unreal existence which will end imminently. The poem's final line – 'The clouds are a marriage dress, of that pallor' – may indicate some final union between the contrapuntal associations of the clouds and the yew tree; but it also suggests that marriage is merely a 'vacuous sheet', a refuge in amnesia and oblivion. Despite her trying to establish a new identity, the implication remains that the speaker cannot avoid eventually being drawn back through the yew towards her real self - a self belonging with the dead father buried among the tree's roots.

Although excluded by Plath from her arrangement of Ariel, 'Little Fugue' appears unmistakably an Ariel poem in theme and treatment. The implications of its drafts and finished version are psychologically devastating; like the title poem of Ariel, it exhibits the drive of a death-wish which is also a fulfilment of identity, overriding the small contentments and - it might even be implied - the dishonesty of continuing existence. This makes 'Little Fugue' an important breakthrough, mapping the psychological territory which Plath will now continue to explore until her death. Even so, the poem only represents the first part of a chthonic journey which runs throughout the poems of April 1962, and which later poems play out obsessively in a cycle of death and rebirth.

Ted Hughes's knowledge of the topography of Plath's Devon home has allowed him a brilliant insight into Plath's intentions during April 1962. Hughes has observed that the yew tree stood due west of Plath's house, in her sunset, and the elm due east. The manuscript date of 'Little Fugue', 2 April, fell in the dark phase of the moon, and 19 April, the date of 'Elm', fell on the first day of the Full Moon. From this information Hughes detects a larger patterning which links the poems of April 1962:

In other words, between the 2nd and the 19th, she has been travelling underground ('Crossing the Water'), just like Osiris in his sun-boat being transported from his death in the West to his rebirth as a divine child (himself reborn as his own divine child in the form of a Falcon) in the East. 8

There is convincing evidence throughout the April poems that Plath deliberately exploited the Osiris myth. Osiris was the tree-god, and tree-worship, according to The White Goddess, 'was one of the most important elements in Osirianism' (WG. p. 279). This befits a poetic sequence beginning with the yew of 'Little Fugue' and ending with 'Elm'. Furthermore, although 'Elm' makes no mention of a falcon, an unnamed bird of prey (a 'cry') does emerge nightly from the tree, 'Looking, with its hooks, for something to love'. The hesitancy of 'Little Fugue' disappears after the poet's underground rite of passage. As the elm confidently asserts:

I know the bottom, she says. I know it with my great tap root:
It is what you fear.
I do not fear it: I have been there.
The knowledge provides the foundation for much of Plath’s later work, granting it a terrible new authority. The elm’s pride is shared by the poet: writing to her mother in October 1962, Plath almost borrows the elm’s terminology as she insists that ‘What the person out of Belsen – physical or psychological – wants is nobody saying the birdies still go tweet-tweet, but the full knowledge that somebody else has been there and knows the worst, just what it is like’. 9 ‘Little Fugue’ marks the beginning, and ‘Elm’ the end, of a journey which awards Plath this poetic franchise.

Of the four poems framed by ‘Little Fugue’ and ‘Elm’, at first glance only ‘Crossing the Water’ seems to participate in this Osirian journey. However, other connections soon become visible. For example ‘An Appearance’, dated 4 April, takes up where ‘Little Fugue’ had ended, with the precarious reality of domestic life. The speaker of the previous poem had struggled to convince herself that ‘These are my fingers, this my baby’. In ‘An Appearance’ the sense of dissociation is even stronger, as the detached speaker observes the outwardly rational, even mechanical behaviour of her own separate self. That self is an icebox, a typewriter producing ‘ampersands and percent signs’ ‘like kisses’, a launderer of morals, or a ‘Swiss watch, jeweled in the hinges!’ The drafts also implicate her children, who appear, appropriately, ‘clear and innocent, like icecubes’. The speaker can only marvel at her own efficiency, but still detects an oncoming breakdown:

O heart, such disorganization!
The stars are flashing like terrible numerals.
ABC, her eyelids say.

The ‘disorganization’ refers to inner turmoil, and its juxtaposition with the self’s outward calm. Yet this superficial ‘appearance’ is under threat: the stars ‘flashing like terrible numerals’ sound not a little like the fluorescent light which, in ‘Lesbos’, ‘winc[es] on and off like a terrible migraine’; and although the eyelids continue to type out their perfect alphabets, they do so manically, as if battling to repress an enticing alternative.

‘An Appearance’ reflects Plath’s continuing obsession with doubles and split selves – an obsession already evident from the relationship between Esther and Joan in The Bell Jar, or from the speaker of ‘In Plaster’ who proclaims that ‘There are two of me now’. In a slightly different context Judith Kroll quotes Graves’s observation that the Muse must resist ‘the temptation to commit suicide in simple domesticity [which] lurks in every maenad’s and muse’s heart’ (CM. p. 48). ‘An Appearance’ indicates that Plath is no longer unsure which self must die: the clinical sloughing off of the false reality frees the speaker from the mundane domesticity incumbent on her superficial identity, and allows her to undertake a psychical journey unburdened by the pull of the present. It is arguable that this journey is formally signalled by Plath’s use of three-line stanzas. Having last adopted the form over a year previously, Plath employs three-line stanzas for ‘An
Appearance’ and the next four poems of the April group: although, admittedly, not in *terza rima*, the stanza may well acknowledge the Dantian tradition.

Certainly the imagery of ‘Crossing the Water’, dated the same day as ‘An Appearance’, exploits Stygian – as well as Osirian – echoes as Plath continues her chthonic exploration. She has now entered the domain of the yew tree, where everything has been contaminated with the same sinister blackness:

Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.
Where do the black trees go that drink here?
Their shadows must cover Canada.

This reference to Canada constitutes the only concession to the world inhabited by the poet’s domestic self: she and Hughes had toured North America during the summer of 1960, and ‘Crossing the Water’ may remember their stay at Rock Lake in Canada. Edward Butscher has argued, rather simplistically, that ‘Crossing the Water’ is a ‘token expression of the stock feeling of being lost in vast places’. However, whereas an earlier poem about the Canada trip, ‘Two Campers in Cloud Country’, does undoubtedly highlight the smallness of the human scale in the presence of such natural grandeur, in ‘Crossing the Water’ Plath locates this impression of vulnerability, even irrelevance, amidst a much more unearthly and sinister setting. The leaves of water flowers offer ‘dark advice’ and ‘do not wish us to hurry’; ‘Cold worlds shake from the oar’; and the ‘spirit of blackness’ – which ‘Little Fugue’ had established as the spirit of the yew tree and of death – penetrates the speaker and her silent companion. The poem’s conclusion also draws on imagery from previous poems, as if emphasizing that the journey begun with ‘Little Fugue’ is still ongoing:

Stars open among the lilies.
Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?
This is the silence of astounded souls.

The stars, which had been ‘flashing like terrible numerals’ in ‘An Appearance’, also possess morbid connotations for Plath. ‘Insomniac’ from May 1961, for example, describes the night sky as ‘a sort of carbon paper’, with its ‘peepholes’ letting in ‘A bonewhite light, like death, behind all things’. Now the stars are ‘expressionless sirens’, tempting the speaker to destroy herself, or to be ‘blinded’ like the pianist in ‘Little Fugue’. The ‘silence’ of the final line also evokes earlier work: the yew tree’s message had consisted of ‘blackness and silence’. Without alluding explicitly to the father, these cross-references effectively identify his underworld, the black world under the black yew, where the speaker journeys with a mysterious companion (who may or may not be Charon) past the ‘astounded souls’ of the dead.

Before returning to the subject in hand, a draft of ‘Crossing the Water’
unexpectedly introduces the next poem in Plath's quest, 'Among the Narcissi': the fragment reads, 'Percy, in his peajacket, walks our back hill, octogenarian/ A bent blue stick among the narcissi'. That Plath should conceive the germ of 'Among the Narcissi' while in the midst of another poem which, apart from the three-line stanzas, may otherwise appear very different, indicates an underlying affinity of inspiration which is shared by all her poems of April 1962. 'Among the Narcissi' returns to a more recognizable landscape, as it depicts Plath's Devon neighbour, Percy Key, walking on a nearby hill. Yet this landscape turns out to be hardly less sinister than the Stygian blackness of 'Crossing the Water'. Percy is sick and vulnerable, 'recuperating from something on the lung' and nursing 'the hardship of his stitches'. His physical handicaps link him with the deaf, dumb, lame and blind in previous poems, and the horrible implication lingers that he too may be a go-between, about to begin his journey underground. Plath charted Percy's decline with a fascinated precision in a character sketch which has been published in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. An entry for 17 April evidently describes the same scene as 'Among the Narcissi':

He had been walking in the wind among the narcissi in his peajacket a few days before [his stroke]. He had a double rupture from coughing. The sense his morale, his spirit, had gone. That he had given in with this.  

The poem may at first seem more hopeful, but reference to 'the man mending' fails to convince. Percy is 'quite blue', his breathing tried by 'the terrible wind'. Even the momentarily therapeutic narcissi, 'vivid as bandages', are disquieting: the image of the wind 'rattl[ing] their stars' recalls the stars opening among the lilies in 'Crossing the Water', and suggests that Percy is soon to undertake a similar crossing. The poem's drafts emphasize this imminent transition - as Percy stands on the shoreline of life - by referring to the narcissi as 'stars whip[ping] his ankles like a sea, frothing'. The expressionless sirens luring the speaker of 'Crossing the Water' to her destruction have now become more directly hostile. Even though Plath deletes this line, the poem's conclusion - 'The narcissi look up like children, quickly and whitely' - still suggests a malevolence only masquerading as innocence.

The hill where Percy crosses between worlds is also what 'Pheasant', dated two days later, calls 'the elm's hill' - the setting of 'Among the Narcissi', 'Pheasant' and 'Elm'. This shift from the yew in the west and the death of the false identity, through the black underworld of 'Crossing the Water', to a re-emergence on the eastern hill, follows a trajectory emphasizing the importance of the death and rebirth ritual in Plath's work. Yet as 'Among the Narcissi' demonstrates, the hill of the new dawn is also a hill of danger and fatality. 'Pheasant' embodies this dualism. The bird represents vibrant life: it is 'red' and 'vivid', a 'good shape', a 'little cornucopia', it 'unclaps, brown as a leaf, and loud', and it suns itself among
the narcissi. However, the previous poem gave the narcissi ominous connotations, and the pheasant’s life is in fact at risk: ‘You said you would kill it this morning. Do not kill it’, the speaker pleads. This bird is not the reborn Osiris – ‘it isn’t! As if I thought it had a spirit’ – but it has a certain ‘kingliness, a right’.

Perhaps the least interesting poem of the April group, ‘Pheasant’ still performs its larger function of contributing to Plath’s spiritual odyssey. The bird finally ‘Settles in the elm, and is easy’. Plath’s first version of ‘Elm’, published by Hughes in the notes to the Collected Poems, opens ‘She is not easy, she is not peaceful’ (CP. p. 292). This deliberate contrast between the pheasant and the elm is unsurprising for compositional as well as thematic reasons. The manuscripts prove that Plath was working on both poems simultaneously: what she has numbered as the second draft of ‘Pheasant in the New Year’ appears on the same sheet as her ninth draft of ‘Elm’, and the next sheet contains a further reference to ‘Pheasant’. Despite its single date of 19 April (one draft is dated 12 April), ‘Elm’ constitutes the crystallization of themes and images with which Plath had been struggling for weeks. Her breakthrough seems to have come when she understood how the elm might fit into the mythical schema mapped by the April poems. 

The White Goddess, from which Plath draws inspiration for her treatment of the yew in ‘Little Fugue’, dwells far less on the significance of the elm. However, Graves does refer to a curious etymological matrix, apparently prompting Plath to appropriate the elm as the tree of rebirth.

Graves observes that the silver fir, ‘a female tree with leaves closely resembling the yew’s’, is the prime birth-tree of Northern Europe (just as the yew is the death-tree); and that coincidentally its Old Irish form, *ailm*, also stood for the palm, which is the birth-tree and the Tree of Life in Egypt, Phoenicia, Arabia and Babylonia, the tree from which the phoenix is born and reborn. In modern Irish, Graves goes on to note, ‘ailm’ means elm (WG. p. 190). This confusion of trees may have been enough to sanction Plath’s adoption of the elm for her own mythical purposes. Further evidence in the poem also suggests that the elm has become a surrogate for the silver fir and palm, uniting their legendary connotations. The silver fir was sacred to Artemis the Moon-Goddess who presided over childbirth, and accordingly the moon appears in both the earlier fragment and the Ariel version of ‘Elm’; and a question the finished poem asks – ‘Is it the sea you hear in me, Its dissatisfactions?’ – remembers that the palm only thrives close to the sea, while also alluding to the sea’s status as universal mother. An early draft of ‘Elm’, titled ‘The Sea at the Door’, does not specifically identify the elm at all, perhaps hoping to evoke an archetypal birth-tree which borrows from several traditions. The references in The White Goddess and elsewhere may appear arcane, but Plath exploits and transforms them to suit her private topography, revitalizing their potency in the process.

The drafts confirm this focus on birth, albeit a birth accompanied by mementoes of death. The first draft of the ‘Elm’ fragment published in its finished form by Hughes contains a deleted line, ‘Skulls winter like bulbs in
the hill’, which perfectly encapsulates Plath’s cycle of death and rebirth.
Drafts of the version collected in *Ariel* also reveal a preoccupation with
rebirth. In a passage from a sheet dated 12 April, the elm announces,

> The remembrance of the Creator is very small.
> It runs south, with its cold ideas.
> It runs north, with hot thoughts. But it is not there.
> I vibrate with his love for me: I am a big woman.
> Unlike you, I have a capacity for almost infinite renewal –
> You little white thing, you chrysalis in my boughs!
> His forgetfulness is the beginning of evil.
> He has forgotten the white men that shine like radium,
> Engineering another vision, engineering themselves back.
> He, like a phoenix, shall subside in fire.

Some of this remains obscure, perhaps irretrievably so. However, the elm’s
‘capacity for almost infinite renewal’, the description of the moon as a
‘chrysalis’, and the ‘Creator’ subsiding in fire ‘like a phoenix’ – another
allusion to the palm tree’s legendary associations – all clearly point towards
the possibility of rebirth. The same draft goes on to speak of the dead
‘break[ing] open like orchids’; while in later manuscripts the elm declares, ‘I
renew myself —/ Quietly drinking the dawn hour’, and reports that its image
‘With every day so delicately resurrects itself’ in a nearby window.

Despite frequent references to ‘resurrection’, ‘renewal’, ‘the dawn’ and
‘the dawn hour’ throughout the manuscripts, the final *Ariel* version of ‘Elm’
omits these signs of optimism. The elm which, Ted Hughes confirms, stood
in Plath’s dawn sky, has become associated more with sunsets than
sunrises:

> I have suffered the atrocity of sunsets.
> Scorched to the root
> My red filaments burn and stand, a hand of wires.

Plath’s focus has shifted from the positive assertion of rebirth to its
necessary precursors, destruction and death. Yet even this stanza contains a
hidden potential: the elm’s death by fire in the sunset remembers the
phoenix’s death, and the ‘red filaments’ which survive after the superficial
self has been burned away represent the beginnings of renewal. Plath makes
similar use of the Osiris myth, avoiding the expected reference to the sun
rising once more, but alluding instead to the god’s destruction: the elm
‘break[s] up in pieces that fly about like clubs’, recalling the tearing to pieces
and scattering of Osiris’s body.

In ‘Elm’, as in *Ariel*, rebirth implies death and death rebirth. This cycle
necessitates continuous blood-sacrifice and horrific transmutations. The
‘vacuous sheets’ offered by ‘Little Fugue’ as an escape into a false identity of
marriage and family life now seem utterly irrelevant. The ‘dark thing’ which
nightly ‘look[s], with its hooks, for something to love’ clearly does not hunt
the kind of love represented in the clouds:
Clouds pass and disperse.
Are those the faces of love, those pale irretrievables?
Is it for such I agitate my heart?
I am incapable of more knowledge.
What is this, this face
So murderous in its strangle of branches?
Its snaky acids hiss.
It petrifies the will. These are the isolate, slow faults
That kill, that kill, that kill.

Plath’s powerful verb ‘agitate’ aligns the elm with the yew whose black fingers were ‘agitat[ing]’ in the opening draft of ‘Little Fugue’: the poems, like the trees, signal each other, to acknowledge that communication between living and dead has been irreversibly established. However, this communication, and its collateral fulfilment of identity, has come at a terrible cost. The medusa-face in its ‘strangle of branches’ must be recognized as part of the speaker, petrifying volition as it destroys both her and others.

Just as the masculine yew allowed the father to communicate in ‘Little Fugue’, so the feminine elm has become a mouthpiece for Plath at the end of her journey through the poems of April 1962. She, like the elm, ‘know[s] the bottom’ – the underworld which is her father’s domain – and the new understanding obsesses her: ‘I am incapable of more knowledge’. The malign ‘cry’, born out of this consuming knowledge, echoes the fate of the Osirian god reborn as a raptor, but it is also the uncontrollable voice articulated throughout Ariel. The poet who had been pulled desiring and resisting down to her dead father re-emerges possessed by a terrifying, murderous voice which, over the coming months, will regularly ‘flap out’ to kill what it loves.

NOTES

3. I am grateful to Karen Kukil and the staff of the Rare Books Room, Neilson Library, Smith College, Massachusetts, for their help with the Plath archive.