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## Sylvia Plath's "Lyonnesse"

### Wordplay and Mythical Meaning

#### 1. History of the Text

According to the edition of her *Collected Poems*, Sylvia Plath composed "Lyonnesse" on October 21, 1962.<sup>1</sup> On the same day she also wrote "Amnesiac," which precedes "Lyonnesse" in the *Collected Poems*.<sup>2</sup> However, the data available on the history of composition and publication of the poem make it clear that Sylvia Plath originally regarded these two poems as an integrated whole which was to be published under the title of "Amnesiac," with the text of "Lyonnesse" coming first, followed by "Amnesiac." On October 30, 1962 she went to London for a reading of her new poems and an interview with Peter Orr, recorded by the British Council for the BBC.<sup>3</sup> The poem she read there under the title of "Amnesiac" consisted

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<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (London: Faber & Faber, 1981), p. 234.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>3</sup> A broadcasting date of the session is not given in Stephen Tabor, *Sylvia Plath: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: Mansell, 1987), p. 143.

Both interview and reading have subsequently been published in print and on record, cf. Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), "Sylvia Plath," pp. 167-72. For the records cf. S. Tabor, pp. 144 f.

of "Lyonnesse" plus "Amnesiac," the text of "Lyonnesse" differing slightly from the version published in the *Collected Poems*.<sup>4</sup>

During this time, Sylvia Plath had a "first reading" contract with *The New Yorker*, a slick, glossy, weekly magazine full of advertisements, cartoons, society and sports news, but also containing prose and poetry by leading contemporary authors. The publishers paid her an annual sum for the privilege of having a "first reading" plus subsequent publishing rights to her new poetry. From October 1962 to early February 1963, she sent large groups of new poems to *The New Yorker* (among them presumably "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus"). Much to her distress she mainly received rejections during November and December 1962.<sup>5</sup> At the end of December only the second part of the recorded version of "Amnesiac" (i.e. the "Amnesiac" of the *Collected Poems*) had been accepted. The first part (i.e. "Lyonnesse") was rejected by the publisher on the grounds that there was no visible connection with the second part.<sup>6</sup> On August 3, 1963, *The New Yorker* posthumously published under the title of "Amnesiac" only the text of "Amnesiac" itself, together with six other poems by Sylvia Plath. With the exception of "Mystic," none of them dated from her last period of writing, namely autumn/winter 1962/63.<sup>7</sup> Sylvia Plath had intended to include "Amnesiac" (i.e. "Lyonnesse" plus "Amnesiac") in her collection of *Ariel* poems assembled together before her death.<sup>8</sup> The *Ariel* collection, however, published by Ted Hughes in 1965,

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Eileen M. Aird, "Variants in a Tape Recording of Fifteen Poems by Sylvia Plath," *Notes and Queries*, NS 19 (1972), 59-61. Variants in "Lyonnesse": line 3 "of" for "on," l. 17 "Gold" for "Cold." After line 13 (line 2 of the fifth stanza) the recorded version has two extra lines:

The same shells on the same mantel,  
Next to the same pot dog, the same clock.

For the recorded text of "Amnesiac," differing also slightly from the version of the *Collected Poems*, cf. Aird, p. 61. Line 6, for instance, has "cocker" for "cooker." In a letter of October 4, 1988, to the authors of this article Ted Hughes's sister, Olwyn Hughes, literary agent for the Estate of Sylvia Plath, states that the correct version "is of course 'cocker', ... 'cooker' being a typo which I will again ask the publishers to correct in future editions."

<sup>5</sup> Cf. S. Tabor, p. 129, and Linda W. Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1987; London: Chatto & Windus, 1988), pp. 12, 232 ff. Due to various circumstances there is as yet no "authorized" biography of Sylvia Plath. According to Olwyn Hughes in her letter to the authors, the new biography by Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (London: Viking Press, 1989), is "a better book in every way."

<sup>6</sup> Cf. L. W. Wagner-Martin, p. 232.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. *The New Yorker*, 39 (August 3, 1963), 28 f. "Amnesiac" is on p. 29 and has, as in the version given by E. M. Aird (cf. n. 4), "cocker" for "cooker" in line 6. The poems *The New Yorker* had rejected, Sylvia Plath presumably sent to *Encounter*, an English monthly cultural and literary magazine edited by Stephen Spender and Melvin J. Lasky, where they were posthumously published in the October 1963 issue, with an introductory note by Ted Hughes stating her death on February 11, 1963, and maintaining in a short appraisal of her personality that "inspite of the prevailing doom evident in her poems, it is impossible that anyone could have been more in love with life, or more capable of happiness, than she was." Cf. *Encounter*, 21, no. 4 (October 1963), 45.

<sup>8</sup> For a table of contents of Plath's planned *Ariel* collection cf. Plath's *Collected Poems*, p. 295.

contained neither text, perhaps because "Amnesiac" belonged to the "personally aggressive poems."<sup>9</sup> Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath had separated during the first half of October 1962.

It was not before 1970 that the first part of Plath's recorded "Amnesiac" was published under the title of "Lyonnesse" in *The Observer*, May 10, 1970. In the following year, however, it became the title poem of a beautifully edited selection of hitherto uncollected Plath poems, published in a limited edition by Olwyn Hughes's Rainbow Press.<sup>10</sup> For the wider reading public "Lyonnesse" became accessible in a British (1971) and an American (1972) edition of *Winter Trees*.

"Amnesiac," however, the second part of Plath's recorded poem, was omitted from the British edition and published only in the American one, for which the publishers had requested more poems.<sup>11</sup> No British publication of "Amnesiac" is recorded until 1981 in the *Collected Poems*.

The question arises as to whether it was legitimate to publish "Lyonnesse" and "Amnesiac" as two separate poems, and, so to speak, in the wrong order of composition ("Amnesiac" preceding "Lyonnesse" in the *Collected Poems*). A tentative answer to that question might be: Firstly, Sylvia Plath often reworked her poems before publication. Thus, after October 30, 1962, she seems to have omitted the two additional lines in stanza 5 of "Lyonnesse" that are contained in the recorded text.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, she usually complied with publishers' suggestions. It was *The New Yorker* which split up her "Amnesiac" in its two halves, and with good reasons: The central image of the sunken city which dominates the first part of her poem (i.e. "Lyonnesse"), is not resumed in the second part (i.e. "Amnesiac"); and although there are certain connections between the two parts (the theme of forgetfulness and the blue and green colours), they can hardly be called a thematic unit. Thirdly, Ted Hughes's testimony has to be taken into account. In several introductions to Sylvia Plath's poetry and prose he indicates his reasons for omitting or delaying publication of the "personally aggressive" texts, e.g. the protection of the survivors of the Plath-Hughes drama, and this sounds absolutely convincing. Thus his procedure of ending up with two separate

<sup>9</sup> S. Plath, *Collected Poems*, Introduction, p. 15. In her letter to the authors (cf. note 4) O. Hughes states that "Amnesiac" "plays undoubtedly on the marriage break up," "but at a heavily decorated remove." She thinks that many other poems included in *Ariel* are much more "personally aggressive." Thus, according to O. Hughes, the reason for leaving out "Amnesiac" was just that "with the wide choice of poems she [Sylvia Plath] left unpublished, this ["Amnesiac"] seemed perhaps marginal in theme and force."

<sup>10</sup> Cf. S. Tabor, pp. 31-33. Copies 1-100 contain a facsimile of Plath's "Amnesiac." The British Library copy is no. 299; we have not seen the facsimile. "Lyonnesse" is the final poem (p. 31) of the selection. The date of composition given there is 1963.

<sup>11</sup> After publication in *The New Yorker* it had been republished in the US as a "printed offset from typescript" (probably without copyright permission) in 1971 for a university seminar. Cf. S. Tabor, pp. 24 f. Only 100 copies were printed.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. note 4.

texts seems acceptable on the whole, although Plath's original intention would have to be taken into account in an interpretation of any of the two texts – and would at least have deserved a note in the *Collected Poems*.

## 2. The Legend of Lyonesse and its Poetic Tradition

For the non-English reader the first difficulty with "Lyonesse"<sup>13</sup> arises from the poem's title and its first line. A Continental audience is especially bound to think first of the French city of Lyon and its inhabitants, when the poet speaks of "Lyoniens" later on in the poem (l. 11). The fact that the French city is quite far away from the sea, however, makes it clear that this association would be totally misleading. *Lyonesse* is a kind of English (or rather Cornish) Atlantis, a legendary land and city drowned by the sea off the coast of Cornwall near Land's End. Tales about the sunken city are still very popular in England, and especially in Cornwall, as exemplified by a collection of old stories and legends published by the Great Western Railway Company in 1922, obviously with the aim of giving their customers an incentive to travel to the sites of "legend land" by railway.<sup>14</sup> The fictitious narrator of the tales is even called "Lyonesse" in the title of the booklet.<sup>15</sup> The foreword speculates upon the reasons why "the western parts of our country are richer in legends than any other part":

Perhaps this is because of the Celtic love of poetry and symbolism inherent in the blood of the people of the West ...<sup>16</sup>

Through Ted Hughes, who had studied anthropology at Cambridge, Sylvia Plath had developed a keen interest in folklore and mythology. Thus she probably came into contact with a lot of Celtic stories. The fact that the Hughes family was partly of Celtic descent may have enhanced this interest. If she had not known the story of "sunk Lyonesse" before, she might have come across it when she visited Cornwall one mid-October weekend in 1962, immediately after separating from Ted Hughes.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> The name of that legendary land and city is usually spelt with only one <n>. There is, however, no consistent spelling. For the history of the myth cf. Adrian D. H. Bivar, "Lyonesse: The Evolution of a Fable," *Modern Philology*, 50 (1953), 162-70.

<sup>14</sup> *Legend Land*: Being a collection of some OLD TALES told in those western parts of Britain served by THE GREAT WESTERN RAILWAY, now retold by LYONESSE. Published by The Great Western Railway (Felix J. C. Pole, General Manager) (London: Spottiswoode, Ballantyne & Co., 1922), vol. II.

<sup>15</sup> According to the British Library General Catalogue, LYONESSE is the pseudonym of George Basil Barham.

<sup>16</sup> *Legend Land*, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> She called this visit "her first independent act" in a letter to her mother from October 16, 1962. Cf. Sylvia Plath, *Letters Home*, Correspondence 1950-63, ed. Aurelia Schober Plath (1975; London: Faber, 1978), p. 469.

She and the two children had been invited to St. Ives, Cornwall, by a young writers' couple that

Like the legend of Atlantis, the story of "The Lost Land of Lyonesse" is said to be based upon historical fact:

There is a lot of truth mingled with the old legends that tell of THE LOST LAND OF LYONESSE, A FERTILE AND PROSPEROUS COUNTRY THAT once extended west from Cornwall as far as the Scillies. According to those old traditions a vast number of villages and 140 churches were overwhelmed on that day (November 11, 1099) over eight hundred years ago, when the angry sea broke in and drowned fertile Lyonesse, and now, as an old rhyme has it:

Beneath Land's End and Scilly's rocks  
Sunk lies a town that ocean mocks.

To-day all that is left of the lost land are the beautiful Scilly Islands and the cluster of rocks between the Scillies and Land's End, known as the Seven Stones. These rocks are probably the last genuine bit of old Lyonesse, for their old Cornish name is Lethowsow, which was what the old Cornish called Lyonesse. Even now the local fishermen refer to the Seven Stones as "The City," for tradition tells that there was situated the principal town of the drowned land, and stories are told how on calm days ruined buildings may be discerned beneath the waters near Lethowsow, and that in times past fishing nets have brought up old weathered domestic utensils from the sea bottom near at hand.<sup>18</sup>

Apart from the popular tales surrounding "sunk Lyonesse" there are also literary traditions connected with it. Lyonesse is Arthurian country. It gave its name to "Sir Tristram of Lyones," who is said to have been born there.<sup>19</sup> In Malory's *Morte Darthur*, Gareth sets out on a quest for a lady in distress, Dame Lyonesse. He succeeds in rescuing her from the Red Knight – who besieges her castle – and wins her hand.<sup>20</sup> Their love was so hot that they would have consummated it before their marriage, had it not been for the watchfulness of Lyonesse's virtuous sister, Dame Lynet. Thus, in Malory, the female figure of Lyonesse is that of a love-seeking woman, ready to surrender herself to a valiant lord.

In modern Arthurian literature the land of Lyonesse becomes the place of the downfall of the Arthurian world, the battlefield where the knights of the Round Table, once united by Arthur's dream of an ideal society, slaughter one another, with their king mortally wounded amongst them. Tennyson's opening lines of his unfinished epic on King Arthur's death probably belong to the verses best known to the older generation in Britain:

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had previously stayed as guests at the Hughes' house in Devon, cf. Plath, *Letters Home*, p. 459. The description given by Plath of the young woman here identifies her as the model for the woman in Plath's poem "Lesbos" (Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 227-30) written on October 18, 1962. This poem mentions a visit to the beach and its "silk grits" (p. 229); in "Lyonnesse" she uses "cold grits" (l. 17). In the letter to her mother the poet speaks of "heavenly gold sands" (p. 469).

<sup>18</sup> *Legend Land*, pp. 29 f.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Norris J. Lacy, ed., *The Arthurian Encyclopedia* (New York and London: Garland, 1986), pp. 344 f.

<sup>20</sup> Sir Thomas Malory, *Works*, ed. Eugene Vinaver, 2nd ed. (Oxford, London, and New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 175-226.

So all day the noise of battle roll'd  
 Among the mountains by the winter sea;  
 Until King Arthur's table man by man  
 Had fallen in Lyonesse about their lord ...<sup>21</sup>

There are certain reasons to believe that Sylvia Plath knew all of these popular and literary associations connected with the name of Lyonesse.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, the second line of her poem testifies that she also knew one of the more recent poetic treatments of the legend of the drowned city, Walter de la Mare's poem "Sunk Lyonesse," where the first line reads:

In sea-cold Lyonesse ...<sup>23</sup>

With the repetition of the adjective, "sea-cold," in her second line, Plath affirms de la Mare's description, and deliberately acknowledges ("certainly") the literary tradition:

Sea-cold, sea-cold it certainly is.

In de la Mare's poem, the "foundered town" (l. 4) becomes a symbol of life turned into art. This transformation petrifies life. Thus, the Nereids "make minstrelsy in the streets" (l. 8) "with motionless eyes at gaze" (l. 7). The (essentially romantic) juxtaposition of life and art is evoked at the end of the poem, where "in the sullen courts of sleep" (l. 16)

... marble flowers bloom for aye:  
 And – lapped by the moon-guided tide –  
 Mock their carver with heart of stone  
 Caged in his stone-ribbed side.

(ll. 17-20)

The carver or sculptor has eternalized the beauty of the flowers (and probably himself in a statue of his likeness), but his art has transformed them (and himself) into stone. The artist becomes a prisoner of his own art. The dilemma of the artist is, then, that life immortalized in art is as remote from "real life" as "sunk Lyonesse" from life upon earth.

<sup>21</sup> Alfred Lord Tennyson, "Morte d'Arthur," in *Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 64, ll. 1-4.

<sup>22</sup> Susan Bassnet, *Sylvia Plath* (London: Macmillan, 1987), whose study contains a short treatment of "Lyonesse" (pp. 98 f.), was among the first to point to Arthurian references in Plath's poetry (cf. also p. 136). An excellent study (and breaking away from the habit of interpreting Plath's poetry in solely "confessional" terms) of Plath's own mythology is Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York and London: Harper & Row, 1976).

<sup>23</sup> Walter de la Mare, "Sunk Lyonesse," in *The Penguin Book of Contemporary Verse, 1918-60*, ed. Kenneth Allott (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1950; 2nd ed. 1962, rpt. 1978), p. 57. To our knowledge, the reference given here to de la Mare's poem has not been mentioned before.

The symbolic use of *Lyonnesse* in Sylvia Plath's poem is a far cry from de la Mare's imagery, but what may have attracted her to the late Victorian poem is the cool, distant voice of the narrator, creating an atmosphere of "green translucency" (l. 6) for the unearthly world under the sea. Certain images seem to have stuck in her mind, such as the "eyes at gaze" (l. 7) and the image of the sculptor "caged" in his own work of art (l. 20), from which she took an inspired leap in her own poem.

### 3. Sylvia Plath's "Lyonnesse": Wordplay and Levels of Meaning

#### Lyonnesse<sup>24</sup>

- No use whistling for Lyonnesse!  
Sea-cold, sea-cold it certainly is.
- 3 Take a look at the white, high berg on his forehead –  
There's where it sunk.  
The blue, green,
- 6 Gray, indeterminate guilt  
Sea of his eyes washing over it  
And a round bubble
- 9 Popping upward from the mouths of bells  
People and cows.  
The Lyonians had always thought
- 12 Heaven would be something else,  
But with the same faces,  
The same places . . .
- 15 It was not a shock –  
The clear, green, quite breathable atmosphere,  
Cold grits underfoot,
- 18 And the spidery water-dazzle on field and street.  
It never occurred that they had been forgot,  
That the big God
- 21 Had lazily closed one eye and let them slip  
Over the English cliff and under so much history!  
They did not see him smile,
- 24 Turn, like an animal,  
In his cage of ether, his cage of stars.  
He'd had so many wars!
- 27 The white gape of his mind was the real Tabula Rasa.

21 October 1962

<sup>24</sup> From: S. Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 233 f. Reprinted by permission of Olwyn Hughes.

### 3.1. The Title of the Poem

"Lyonnesse," the title of the poem taken from its first line, is obviously a homophone of *lioness*, 'the female lion'. The image of the lioness plays an important role in Plath's late poetry. It is best known from the title poem of her second collection of poems, written on October 27, 1962, her thirtieth birthday: "Ariel."<sup>25</sup> "God's lioness" from the second stanza is a synonym for "Ariel," as this name means the 'lion (lioness) of God' in the Old Testament. The (female) speaker of the poem, the lyrical "I," identifies herself with "God's lioness." Other connotations of "Ariel" are the 'airy spirit' from Shakespeare's *Tempest*, set free at the end of the play; it was also the name of a horse that Sylvia Plath rode at a riding school on Dartmoor. It has been stressed that wordplay and different levels of meaning are intentional with Plath:

Her etymological usages are usually quite deliberate; there may be irony (as in "Lesbos") or deliberate distortion or "iconotropy," but not vagueness or inaccuracy.<sup>26</sup>

The other uses of the *lioness* image point to the connotation of a female avenger. Sylvia Plath may have got the inspiration for this symbolic meaning of the female lion from an English translation of Greek classical plays which she was reading during the summer of 1962.<sup>27</sup> In Euripides' *Medea*, the heroine is described as a "lioness" by her husband, Jason, after he has discovered that she has killed their children to avenge his desertion.<sup>28</sup> In Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*, Cassandra calls Clytemnestra, who murders her husband for his sacrifice of their daughter, Iphigenia, a "two-footed lioness."<sup>29</sup> The menacing ending of Plath's poem "Purdah" clearly refers to the Medea and Clytemnestra myths: "I shall unloose . . . / The lioness, / The shriek in the bath, / The cloak of holes."<sup>30</sup> Finally, the female lion may be an allusion to Ted Hughes's astrological sign, leo.

<sup>25</sup> Posthumously published in 1965. Plath, *Collected Poems*, pp. 239 f.

<sup>26</sup> J. Kroll, p. 159. For the interpretation of "Ariel" cf. Kroll, pp. 180-85. The name of Sylvia Plath's horse is mentioned in Plath, *Collected Poems*, Notes, p. 294, no. 194.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. L. W. Wagner-Martin, p. 211.

<sup>28</sup> In a personal memoir, very ambivalent and stressing the darker sides of Sylvia Plath's personality, Clarissa Roche calls her friend, whom she visited in the autumn of 1962, this "New England Medea." The memoir is published in Edward Butscher, ed., *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work* (1977; London: Peter Owen, 1979), pp. 81-96, here p. 85. Butscher's own introduction "In Search of Sylvia" is gossipy, narcissistic, egocentric, and full of misinterpretations. It should be ignored along with his – now anyway outdated – biography, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976).

<sup>29</sup> Cf. J. Kroll, pp. 157 f.

<sup>30</sup> S. Plath, "Purdah," in *Collected Poems*, p. 244. Another reference to a lionlike avenger occurs in "Stings," where the speaker likens her "self," which she has to recover, to the queen bee with her "lion-red body" (Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 215). Cf. L. W. Wagner-Martin, pp. 217 f.



### 3.2. The Mythological Level of Meaning

The first level of meaning of the poem deals with the sunken land of Lyonesse and God's responsibility for letting it "slip/ Over the English cliff" (ll. 21 f.). The poem opens with the emphatic statement that it is useless to seek Lyonesse any longer. It has vanished under the sea, and the place where it sunk is described in metaphoric rather than geographic terms: "the white, high berg<sup>31</sup> on his forehead" (l. 3) is at first puzzling, but at the end of the poem one realizes that the male pronoun in the third line refers to the "big God" (l. 20), who has simply forgotten Lyonesse. The city has been submerged in the depths of God's mind, and the iceberg "on his forehead" is an image of his amnesia. This interpretation is corroborated by the fact that Sylvia Plath intended to subsume the whole poem under the title of "Amnesiac." The image of the metaphoric place of the catastrophe is expanded in the following lines when the poet speaks of the "sea of his [God's] eyes" washing over the flooded land. Plath uses the poetic adjective "gilt" (l. 6) at the end of a series of intensifying adjectives to describe the colour of the sea. This epithet gains further significance by its homophone *guilt*, and thus "indeterminate guilt (guilt)" assumes a very ambivalent meaning. That the "guilt" of the God is, however, not the perspective of the inhabitants of the foundered town becomes clear in the stanzas following. Under the sea, the life of the "Lyonians" goes on as if nothing had happened and they even surmise to be living in a kind of Heaven. The cruel truth, unknown to the blissfully ignorant inhabitants of Lyonesse, is revealed in the last three stanzas of the poem. The creator of the world, the "big God," has turned away from his creation. He is no longer interested in his work and simply lets catastrophes happen, "lazily clos[ing] one eye" (l. 21), as if in tacit collusion with the destructive forces of the universe. Moreover, the God-figure is not only oblivious to his creation, he has become its prisoner: "like an animal, / In his cage of ether, his cage of stars" (ll. 24 f.). In his mind there is only a white blank, and he is like a patient suffering from amnesia, a thought elaborated in "Amnesiac," the second part of the poem which was to follow "Lyonnesse." A similarly negative God-image is presented in Plath's poem "Years," written on November 16, 1962:

O God, I am not like you  
In your vacuous black,  
Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti.<sup>32</sup>

There are echoes of the vacuously "gaping" God in Ted Hughes's *Crow* poems,<sup>33</sup> and it may well be that his acrimonious pun on "agape" ('staring with open mouth' or 'love-feast') stems from the couple's discussions of their poetic conceptions.

<sup>31</sup> "Berg": short for 'iceberg'.

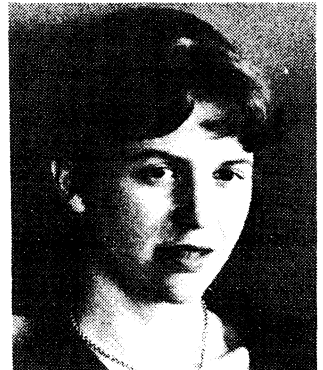
<sup>32</sup> S. Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 255.

<sup>33</sup> E.g. "Crow Communes," in Ted Hughes, *Crow* (1970, 1972; London: Faber paperback, 1985), p. 30.

The representation of God as impotent, unconcerned and weary is, of course, radically different from the traditional medieval image of God as omnipotent, all-pervasive, and all-loving. After the scientific revolution at the end of the sixteenth century, the medieval world picture broke down; it became a "discarded image." New ideas, like that of God the 'watchmaker', replaced the medieval ones. A new philosophy reshaped the image of man. Empiricism became the religion of the age. There is an allusion to this in Sylvia Plath's last line: "The white gape of his mind was the real *Tabula Rasa*." The idea that man is born with a mind completely empty, a *tabula rasa*, was put forward by the seventeenth-century philosopher John Locke. He rejected the Christian (and neo-platonic) notion that ideas and conceptions are part and parcel of the human heritage and claimed that knowledge (*Erkenntnis*) could only be obtained through the process of experience. The importance of divine revelation is thus reduced or even denied, and though Locke did not explicitly deny the existence of God or of a divine soul, his philosophy was a step in that direction.

Sylvia Plath takes the image of the *tabula rasa* one bold step further and transfers it to God himself: his mind is the **real** *Tabula Rasa*.<sup>34</sup> This is certainly a far cry from the traditional Christian notion of an omniscient God. Instead, sadness and bitterness prevail in Plath's image of God. The poem conveys the feeling that man has been deserted by divine Providence, which does not exist any longer or has indeed never existed. Man has been left in the lurch.

Brought up in a Methodist surrounding,<sup>35</sup> Sylvia Plath described herself as an "agnostic humanist" during her undergraduate years.<sup>36</sup> As an adult woman and mother she called herself "a pagan-Unitarian at best,"<sup>37</sup> but in spite of this she stressed the importance of a Christian upbringing and the efficacy of prayers. That is why she wanted her children to be baptized and to attend Sunday School.<sup>38</sup>



<sup>34</sup> Susan Bassnet thinks that the "Tabula Rasa contrasts ironically with the idea of the Round Table, symbol of knighthood and perfection," thus symbolizing the loss of idealism. Bassnet, *Sylvia Plath*, p. 99. This is a far-fetched idea; the allusion to Locke comes to mind first.

<sup>35</sup> Her father was a Lutheran Protestant, her mother, who was raised as a Catholic, had broken with her faith as an undergraduate and become a practising Methodist. Cf. L. W. Wagner-Martin, p. 19.

<sup>36</sup> W. Wagner-Martin, p. 75.

<sup>37</sup> Plath's letter to her mother, October 22, 1961, *Letters Home*, p. 433.

<sup>38</sup> Plath's letter to her mother, March 12, 1962, *Letters Home*, p. 449.

The image of God as a vacuous non-entity in poems like "Lyonnesse" or "Years" is not the poet's last comment upon the subject. During the last three months of her life Sylvia Plath regained a new interest in religious matters. She started a correspondence with "a Roman Catholic priest at Oxford, also a poet," and consulted him about questions of faith.<sup>39</sup> Religious allusions occur frequently in her last poems.<sup>40</sup> She collected notes on St. Thérèse, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, and other Christian mystics,<sup>41</sup> and she herself had visionary experiences.<sup>42</sup> She left this world with more questions than answers:

Once one has seen God, what is the remedy? <sup>43</sup>

### 3.3. The Personal Meaning of the Poem

On a second level the poem is about a female being called "Lyonnesse" or "lioness," who is deserted by a male God-like being.<sup>44</sup> Here the allusions to Arthurian romance, to Tristram of Lyones and to Malory's Lyonesse, fall into place. This second level of meaning is also inextricably interwoven with Plath's biography, particularly with the events of the last autumn of her life. As in the "Ariel" poem, the speaker identifies herself with "God's lioness." We are probably justified in assuming that in "Lyonnesse" the female speaker is identical with that of "Ariel." The male being has eradicated the female from his mind, and this amnesia, whether pretended or real,<sup>45</sup> is his personal, "indeterminate" guilt. For the deserted woman life must go on, but it assumes an unreal, artificial character, articulated in the image of living under water or under a bell jar ("... a round bubble/ Popping

<sup>39</sup> Plath's letter to her mother, December 14, 1962, *Letters Home*, p. 490; L. W. Wagner-Martin, p. 226.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. "Nick and the Candlestick," "Years," "Mary's Song," "Brasilia," "Gigolo," "Mystic."

<sup>41</sup> L. W. Wagner-Martin, p. 240.

<sup>42</sup> J. Kroll, p. 177.

<sup>43</sup> "Mystic," written February 1, 1963, Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 268.

<sup>44</sup> In her letter to the authors (cf. note 4) O. Hughes calls attention to the fact that Sylvia Plath experienced a fundamental feeling of loss and desertion at a very early stage in her life, when she lost her father at the age of eight: "From her response to her mother on hearing of her father's death, 'I'll never speak to God again!' (Plath, *Letters Home*, Introduction, p. 25), she seems to have been disappointed in Him [God] – though [she] would have dearly liked to believe." This statement is corroborated by Plath's line in her famous "Daddy" poem: "I used to pray to recover you" (Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 222). The green and blue colours of the sea in "Daddy" (l. 12) constitute a further link to "Lyonnesse" and underline O. Hughes's remark that "her [Plath's] conception of her father and his replacement – her husband – both ... bled into her conception of God – both in grandeur and indifference."

We would like to extend our sincerest thanks to Olwyn Hughes for her cooperation and helpful comments.

<sup>45</sup> In the poem "The Jailer," written on October 17, 1962, the narrator speaks of the man's "high cold masks of amnesia," Plath, *Collected Poems*, p. 227.

upward from the mouths of bells . . .," ll. 8 f.), an allusion to the central title-giving image of Plath's novel. The speaker's voice remains subdued, with the diction highly formalised; and yet, the sad poignancy of loss prevails throughout the whole poem.

### 3.4. Poetic Technique

"Lyonnesse" belongs to the group of mature poems from Plath's late period of writing. One of her favourite verse forms was the three-line stanza. Other examples are "Fever 103°," "Ariel," "Nick and the Candlestick," "Purdah," "Lady Lazarus," etc. There is no set pattern of rhythm or rhyme, the speech rhythm rather follows the pattern of spoken language, thus bearing witness to Plath's comment on her late poetry in the interview with Peter Orr that these poems are meant to be read aloud, as she herself recited them aloud before she wrote them down.<sup>46</sup> The rhythm of speech is at once natural **and** highly artificial, and it is proof of Plath's accomplishments as an artist that she succeeded in making her best poems sound so intriguingly natural. Occasional rhymes or assonances, though always unobtrusive, serve as accentuation: *gilt/it* (ll. 6-7), *faces/places* (ll. 13-14), *forgot/God* (ll. 19-20), *stars/wars* (ll. 25-26). The technique of run-on lines and stanzas is used very efficiently: "The . . . indeterminate *gilt/ Sea of his eyes* . . ." (ll. 5-7), "...let them slip/ Over the English cliff . . ." (ll. 21-22).

There is no lyrical "I" in the poem and this serves as a means of distancing the tone of the speaker. Although the audience is addressed in the exclamation of the first and the imperative of the third line, it is as if the speaker's voice reaches us from very far away. This is due to the impersonal and often elliptic sentence structures. Though the speaker's voice is unemotional, a sadness of tone clings about the whole poem. This is the result of the speaker's height of vision: he, or, rather, she has seen it all happen, has witnessed the course of history, and knows better than the "Lyonians" and even the "big God," who has only a beast-like existence. The speaker is even capable of excusing him feebly ("He'd had so many wars!", l. 26), before, however, casting a cold, analytic light on the state of his mind in the last line of the poem.

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In conclusion it may be said that in "Lyonnesse" a historical myth becomes the symbol of desertion and loneliness. "Sunk Lyonnesse" is Sylvia Plath's "Waste Land." Rich in mythological, poetic and personal allusions, the poem's impersonality comes up to T. S. Eliot's postulate that poetry should integrate private sensibility into a tradition larger than any individual suffering.

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<sup>46</sup> P. Orr, p. 170.