Jon Rosenblatt's *The Poetry of Initiation* belongs to a new movement in Plath criticism which insists on looking at the poetry for its own sake, not in relation to the life or as evidence in a pathological case study. In his introductory chapter, “Misconceptions,” the author attacks three schools of Plath criticism that appear to him wrong. He argues against Alvarez that, far from leading her to suicide, poetry was therapy for Plath. (She herself remarked it was as necessary to her as bread and water and as sustaining.) Rosenblatt disagrees with Rosenthal and others that Plath’s poetry is confessional; though highly personal, it is not direct self-revelation or exposure but a reordering or patterning of her experience. Finally, against the claims of Robin Morgan, Phyllis Chesler, and others, Rosenblatt maintains Plath is not a feminist.

Rosenblatt’s own thesis, expressed in his title, is that Plath’s poetry originates in ritual and that the poems enact a process of transformation from a static, trancelike, deathly state into metamorphosis. Customarily a descent into darkness is followed by an ascent into light. (There are poems in which this movement is reversed.) Rosenblatt’s central argument is reminiscent of Judith Kroll’s in *Chapters in a Mythology*, if you substitute Rosenblatt’s initiatory ritual for Kroll’s mythology. Rosenblatt refers to Kroll, taking her to task for confining Plath’s poetry to too rigid a scheme, but his own is little less confining. After reading Kroll’s book one may


concede Plath had her own personal myth, but not that she had worked out an entire mythological system that was a recasting of Robert Graves’s White Goddess myth. (That Graves was an influence is undeniable.) Similarly, one sees that many of Plath’s poems enact a drama of initiation, but others do not; Rosenblatt’s thesis, like Kroll’s, is too restrictive to accommodate all the poems.

Rosenblatt describes well the peculiar qualities of Plath’s poems, their drama, visionary brilliance, speed, and impact. He derogates the early poems of The Colossus unduly, finding them “contrived and sterile,” noting that their true subject (like Plath’s authentic voice) is still latent. He observes that the immediacy of the Ariel poems is achieved in part through a shift from third to first person, but is overstating the case when he calls all Plath’s poems dramatic monologues. As Gary Lane notes, some poems have no persona at all; the voice that utters them is almost inhuman. This is true of the very last poems, “Contusion,” “Edge,” and “Words,” all of which revert to the third person. Rosenblatt is closer to the truth when he describes Plath’s poems as internal monologues between self and other.

Like Kroll and many other critics, Rosenblatt perceives duality and polarity as distinctive features of Plath’s poetry. Birth and death, creation and destruction fuse. The death wish is almost always accompanied by the desire for rebirth. Vision is habitually double: consider “Two Views of a Cadaver Room” and “Death & Co.” Rosenblatt writes interestingly about two distinct modes of perception in Plath, one involving objectification—in which objects appear discrete, hard-edged, and separate—the other involving identification—in which objects blur, melt, and fuse. “Hardcastle Crags” exemplifies the first mode, while the “substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances,” the foaming wheat and glittering seas of “Ariel” are a fine example of the second. In a searching essay in Lane’s collection, Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry, Murray Schwartz and Christopher Bollas speculate that Sylvia Plath’s sense of identity was so precarious she could not bridge the gap between absolute alienation and total identification. Thus she oscillated between the modes of perception Rosenblatt remarks, alternately afraid of losing and longing to lose her identity.

In the introduction to his collection of essays, Lane announces the need for a new, balanced appraisal of Sylvia Plath. He is at work on his own Sulphur Loveliness: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath. Meanwhile, New Views on the Poetry provides a conspectus of con-

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temporary reactions to Plath and raises interesting questions about her work.

One overarching question is the extent to which the poetry can be divorced from the life. Rosenblatt insists Plath’s poems are self-contained and can be understood without recourse to biography, which is certainly true of the best, indeed, of most of them. It seems to me untrue of such poems as “The Other,” “Berck-Plage,” “Medusa,” “Lesbos,” and “The Rival,” among others. At least three of the essays in Lane’s collection (those by Bernetta Quinn, Marjorie Perloff, and Schwartz and Bollas) show how much biographical reference can illuminate such difficult and obscure poems as “Medusa,” of which Sister Quinn offers an intensely biographical and personal reading that may violate most canons of critical decorum but works.

The question Rosenblatt and Kroll both confront—to what extent Plath is a mythological poet—is also tackled by a number of critics in New Views. Barnett Guttenberg makes an unconvincing case for Plath’s having worked out a personal symbology/cosmology as complete as Yeats’s, drawing largely on Yeatsian antitheses between solar and lunar, primary and antithetical. (Like Kroll’s similar argument about Plath’s adoption of Graves’s White Goddess, the thesis is too sweeping and doctrinaire.) A number of critics (it is interesting that they are mostly male) find Plath’s poetry distasteful because, as Bedient puts it, she uses historical and mythological material as “a vanity mirror.” For a decade now readers have been objecting to Plath’s comparisons of herself with victims of the Jewish death camps and Hiroshima as unearned and presumptuous. Similarly, the Greek tragic background she uses in her early poems (projecting herself as Electra, Antigone, Medea and her father as the Colossus of Rhodes) may seem out of scale as context for her personal myth. Here is Plath’s personal myth and the stations of her passion as summarized by Calvin Bedient: In Act I, she finds herself “married to shadow.” Trying hopelessly to reconstruct her lost, dead father, she flirts with the idea of killing herself “to get back, back, back to you.” In Act II, she actually tries to kill herself to be reunited with the lost, loved parent who died when she still thought him God, but she fails. Act III: she re-enters life through marriage and childbearing with a man who is the spit and image of her dead father. But in Act IV, husband, like father, abandons her. Enraged and grief-stricken, she wills to assert her independence of men, freedom to be for herself alone. But Act V reveals her dependence; men are impossible, but so is life.
without them. Still seeking the old, lost love, she finally succeeds in killing herself. Bedient sums up: “Plath’s is a tragedy of weakness, of a fatal vulnerability to the sense of injury. . . . We feel pity and even terror before such sensitivity, but it has nothing to teach us.” Maybe not, but poets are no longer required to be didactic or morally exemplary. Yet Bedient’s judgment is moderate and compassionate compared with those of Hugh Kenner and David Shapiro. Kenner and Shapiro demonstrate the risk and injustice of permitting biographical considerations to cloud the poetry, so that Plath’s suicide overshadows what she achieved as a poet before taking her life. To grapple with the life in order to understand the poetry is a worthwhile enterprise. To reverse the process, using the poetry as the occasion for trying to come to terms with the life seems an illicit critical stratagem. Kenner’s admiration for The Colossus on the grounds that it was better for Plath to imitate other poets than to plumb her own depths seems misguided; even more so is his dismissal of the finer Ariel poems as sick petit-Guignol, “full of bogus spirituality” and bad for anyone’s soul.

There is no doubt Plath’s mind had a mythological cast. She mythologized her life, but that she consciously worked out a whole mythology like Yeats’s or Graves’s I do not believe. The consensus seems to be that Plath’s mythologizing of her subject, instead of enlarging it by placing it in a larger context, rather points up the disproportion between figures and background, dwarfing them. Bedient pronounces her a late romantic or “unhatched Platonist,” pursuing a very narrow personal quest for salvation “fitted to a single Massachusetts grave.” When she strove to be a public poet concerned, as she said, with “the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and . . . the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America” (even if only obliquely), most critics did not and still do not quite believe her, reading her instead as an intense but very narrow and personal poet, the twentieth century’s Emily Dickinson. I do not agree with such judgments of Plath or of her stature, yet must admit that her use of history, mythology, and religion often appears more willed and less integrated or authentic than one could wish. The religious symbolism in such poems as “Nick and the Candlestick,” “Mystic,” or “The Moon and the Yew Tree” seems, as Marjorie Perloff says, mere Gothic décor—but surely that is how Christian symbols in the poems of an agnostic or an atheist must appear? Plath would like to believe in God and an afterlife, but in place of God she knows only a vortex or space, “vacuous
black, / Stars stuck all over, bright stupid confetti,” instead of an afterlife, “a heaven / Starless and fatherless, a dark water.”

The value of psychoanalytic criticism, when tactfully carried out, is attested by Schwartz and Bollas’ essay, “The Absence at the Center: Sylvia Plath and Suicide.” The authors argue for the unity of Plath’s life and work. Perhaps you cannot really dissever one from the other, her own experience being her whole subject, once she left behind the apprentice pieces and Gemäldegedichte of The Colossus. The overall impression Rosenblatt records on reading that volume is one of invocation followed by “absent response.” Schwartz and Bollas identify the loss of her father as the absence at the center of Plath’s universe. This exacerbated the loss of that “beautiful fusion with the things of this world” Plath recalls in “Ocean 1212-W.” In place of that beautiful fusion she was left confronting “the cold dead centre.” The death of her father was particularly devastating because it occurred at an age when Sylvia still identified him with God and before she had learned to temper her love for him. To understand the baffled longing, guilt, and terror that seized her on his death one should read Alvarez’ portrait of the poet in The Savage God. The child felt responsible for the father’s death. Calvin Bedient remarks the extraordinarily visual quality of Plath’s poems and the fact that in life she craved to see and be seen. Like Schwartz and Bollas, he believes this hunger stems from the fact that the eyes she most desired to be mirrored in were extinguished. Like many of Auden’s, many of Plath’s poems enact a journey. She is “insane for the destination,” but “cannot see where there is to get to.” Schwartz and Bollas observe that, because of the early emotional stage at which she was arrested, Plath’s poems locate her dead father within the mother. The sea (which she loved as ardently as Virginia Woolf) is the great mother; the father is drowned in it, as in “Full Fathom Five” or “Medusa.” “Medusa” is, as Quinn shows, a kaleidoscopic succession of images of the mother— as red and white jellyfish (Aurelia aulita), moon, womb, umbilicus, and placenta— but the father is to be found within these or surrounding them in the curious fourth and final stanzas, where he appears as a phallic fountain or the cool, salt tides beyond the warm, maternal, amniotic waters. As these two critics express it, Plath locates the lost father within a maternal matrix, an area she associates with birth or transformation from death into life. This is her destination. “To identify with the father is both to join in incestuous union with him (for he is unconsciously imagined to be in the mother’s body) and to be his child again free from maternal retribution.” In
descriptions of the first suicide attempts in The Bell Jar and the poems, Plath pictures herself hurtling back toward the womb.

Schwartz and Bollas are probably right in believing Plath’s suicidal impulses to be, at bottom, more matricidal than parricidal. (She felt she had already killed her father: “I brought my love to bear, and then you died.”) The theme is picked up in Marjorie Perloff’s “Sylvia Plath’s ‘Sivvy’ Poems: A Portrait of the Poet as Daughter.” Perloff perceives how symbiotic, vicarious, and precarious was the relationship between Plath and her mother. Like Quinn, Perloff believes in using those bright, banal Letters Home to illuminate the very dark late poems. She asks who was the “real” Sylvia Plath—the bright, beautiful, dutiful all-American gal or the sardonic sibyl in love with death? The obvious answer, she replies, is that Plath had an essentially schizoid personality. For many years she was wholly dependent on her mother, not only physically but intellectually. It was Aurelia who shared, nurtured, and encouraged her literary interests and gifts. As Perloff says, Mrs. Plath was a kind of literary collaborator. Thwarted herself and aching for her daughter’s recognition and success, she prodded Sylvia to keep turning out stories for slick magazines like Seventeen, Mademoiselle, and Ladies’ Home Journal. When Sylvia found her true voice and subject, her mother could only have been appalled. Thus, The Bell Jar was published pseudonymously in England and Sylvia forbade its publication in the United States, where it first appeared eight years after her death. Ariel, says Perloff, was predestined to be published posthumously, for Sylvia “could not have permitted her mother . . . to see the self revealed in poems like . . . ‘Medusa.’” Perloff would appear to agree with Alvarez that Plath wrote herself into an impasse, that the pursuit of poetry led to suicide.

Perloff’s whole point is the irreconcilability of Plath’s life and art. Their unity was schizophrenic. Ted Hughes dates the onset of Plath’s final poetic phase from March 1961 when she was hospitalized and wrote “Tulips,” as she had never before composed a poem “at top speed, as one might write an urgent letter.” Perloff points to the astonishing difference between the experience of being hospitalized as Plath recorded it in her letters to her mother and as she presents it in “Tulips.” Sylvia knew what her mother wanted to hear; her letters home prattle about the bright, springlike pink and green furnishings of the hospital, the “young, pretty, and cheerful” nurses, and her tall, handsome, smiling husband visiting her daily with gifts of flowers and fruit—scarcely recognizable raw materials for the stark scarlet and
white anesthetized world of the poem, the nurses transformed into impersonal, nunlike gulls bearing needles, husband and child reduced to “little smiling hooks,” and the patient successively presented as nobody, an eye compelled to watch everything, for it cannot close, a beached boat, and, finally, a faintly revived presence brought reluctantly back to life by scarlet tulips more alive than she is. One is tempted to conclude it was Plath’s whole sensibility, her way of seeing things that not only helped produce such brilliant poems but made it impossible for her to go on living. In the later poems Bollas and Schwartz find a magical attitude to naming, an almost paranoid confusion of words with objects. After the birth of her son and abandonment by her husband, which reactivated the child’s overwhelming sense of loss, grief, and guilt at her father’s death, it is probable that Sylvia Plath “could no longer maintain the boundary between the needs, aims, and fears of the mother [still herself essentially a child] and the needs, aims, and fears” of her children, “without absolutely splitting her nurturant self from her incandescent inner world. For several months this split took the form of caring for her children when they needed her and confronting her murderous psychic reality alone.” Schwartz and Bollas, believing that poetry finally failed her and led to suicide, also agree with Alvarez. They say, “It seems to us that her actual suicide was an attempt to enact and to be rescued from an inner torment that she could no longer speak without intensifying her pain.” Lane’s Sylvia Plath: New Views on the Poetry is a fine collection of critical essays. It reminds us that no single critical study of Plath provides as valid or comprehensive a view of this highly original poet as the collections of essays edited by Charles Newman, Edward Butscher, and now Gary Lane.

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