"Light Borrowing" from *The New Yorker*

David Trinidad

Sylvia Plath had an absorbent imagination. She took in the books and poems she read, the art and films she saw, what she observed and experienced firsthand, and appropriated what was useful in her own writing—transforming it in the process. In this way, she was a "great light borrower," as she says in "The Rival" (*Collected Poems* 166). She freely borrowed words, phrases, images, and ideas from other poets. In the texts she read and studied, evidence of her "light borrowing" abounds. When I read the first line of Thomas Hardy's "On the Esplanade"—"The broad bald moon edged up"—I can't help but hear Plath's "bald and wild" moon from "The Moon and The Yew Tree" (Hardy 39, *Collected Poems* 173). When I read Wallace Stevens, a poet Plath venerated, and come across "Herr Doktor" in his "Delightful Evening," it's impossible not to hear the voice of Lady Lazarus (Stevens 162). Many critics have pointed out that Plath borrowed "blood-jets" from D.H. Lawrence for "Kindness": "The blood jet is poetry, / There is no stopping it" (Lawrence 242, *Collected Poems* 270). There are numerous other examples.

Beginning in 1961, Plath had a yearly first-reading contract with *The New Yorker*. This meant she submitted any new poems to then poetry editor Howard Moss before showing them to other magazines. "I had to laugh," wrote Plath when she was initially offered the contract, "as I send all my poems there first anyway" (*Letters Home* 411). As a result of the contract, she received a complementary subscription to the magazine. Since we know for a fact that Plath regularly read the magazine, and would certainly have scrutinized the poems published between its covers, I thought it might be interesting to take a look at the poems that appeared in *The New Yorker* during the last months of Plath's life. A "listening tour," as it were. Did Plath borrow anything from these poems? Did she know any of the poets? Would such a survey reveal any secrets, tell us anything new?

What follows is a list of the poems published in *The New Yorker* between September 29, 1962 (just before Plath's prolific *Ariel* output) and February 9, 1963 (two days before Plath's suicide). For the most part, they are a pretty staid lot; I can't imagine Plath being impressed by many of them. My comments are in bold. Keep in mind that,

with her subscription, Plath might have received each issue prior to the cover date (current *New Yorker* subscribers receive the magazine a week early; I'm not sure this was the case in 1962).

<u>September 29, 1962</u>

"For Nicholas, Born in September," Tod Perry

On September 26, Plath wrote "For a Fatherless Son," addressed to her infant son, also named Nicholas. If Plath had read Perry's poem, it may have moved her to address her son in a poem of her own (she would do the same a month later in "By Candlelight" and "Nick and the Candlestick"). Perry's poem ends with two stanzas about trees: "Today, I saw a red oak tree . . . its leaves, / stubborn as winter . . . The tree in time / collapsed among the barren, upright elms"; the speaker likens his son to "a sapling among these barren trees" (44). Plath's poem begins with an image of a "death tree, color gone . . . gelded by lightning" that represents the absence of the baby's father (Ted Hughes). This tree is "an illusion," and may be an ironic response to Perry's hopefulness (*Collected Poems* 205). I should also point out that the word "barren," which Perry uses twice, is one Plath will echo many times in her last months, in reference to Hughes's lover Assia Wevill, one of a "set of barren women which includes Dido Merwin" (W.S. Merwin's wife and Plath's former friend) (Stevenson 345).

<u>October 6, 1962</u>

"Crane," Joseph Langland

"Aunts and Uncles," Harold Witt

In "Aunts and Uncles," Witt uses the word "homunculi." On October 24, Plath would write, in "Cut," "O my / Homunculus, I am ill" (*Collected Poems* 235). An unusual word, it may have stuck with Plath after reading Witt's poem.

On the opposite page from Langland's poem is a cartoon by Robert Kraus that pictures a Gulliver figure, tied to the ground on his back. Beside him, two Lilliputians are conversing. One of them says to the other, "Well, either he's a giant or we're awfully tiny" (53). Could this cartoon have planted the seed for Plath's poem "Gulliver," which she would write in the first week of November?

"*Well, either he's a giant or we're awfully tiny.*"

<u>October 13, 1962</u>

"Pigeon Woman," May Swenson

"Ocean," Adrien Stoutenburg

May Swenson's poems appeared profusely in *The New Yorker* during this period. Compared to most of the poems Howard Moss published, her poems shine. Plath had met Swenson at Yaddo in 1959, and liked her poems. She had wanted to include several in *American Poetry Now*, the supplement of American poetry she

edited for *The Critical Quarterly* in 1961, but was unable to obtain permission in time. Plath would have read Swenson's *New Yorker* poems with interest.

October 20, 1962

"Raking Leaves," Robert Pack

October 27, 1962

"The Cot," Grover Amen

"The Great Scarf of Birds," John Updike

November 3, 1962

"A Spell Before Winter," Howard Nemerov

"The Alyscamps at Arles," May Swenson

November 10, 1962

"Another Autumn," Babette Deutsch

On page 23 of this issue, in an advertisement for Brentano's bookshop, there is a photograph of a replica of the bust of Queen Nofretete (Nefertiti). The text reads: "Egyptian, about 1350 B.C. Symbol of womanly beauty the world over, the original painted limestone was discovered in the workshop of Thutmosis, sculptor to King Amenhotep IV." On November 16, less than a week after the cover date, Plath would write "The Fearful," which includes these stanzas:

> **The thought of a baby—**
> **Stealer of cells, stealer of beauty—**
>
> **She would rather be dead than fat,**
> **Dead and perfect, like Nefertit (*Collected Poems* 256)**

Here Plath portrays Assia Wevill as a vain and barren beauty. Like the Gulliver cartoon, could the Brentano's ad have been the source of this image?

<u>November 17, 1962</u>

"After Reading a Child's Guide to Modern Physics," W.H. Auden

"Monsoon," David Wevill

"The Skull," Gene Baro

Plath, who admired Auden, must have agreed with his line: "Marriage is rarely bliss" (48).

It would not have pleased Plath to see a poem by David Wevill, her rival's husband, among the pages of her favorite magazine. Strangely enough, the first line of Wevill's poem closely resembles the first line of Plath's "The Night Dances," which she had just written (she composed it November 4-6):

> **A snake emptied itself into the grass. (Wevill 56)**

A smile fell in the grass. (*Collected Poems* 249)

Could Plath have previously read this poem, or heard Wevill read it? The authors of Assia Wevill's biography say that Ted Hughes "promised Assia that he would help David get his poems published in the *New Yorker*" (*Lover of Unreason* 111). It seems likely that Plath would have been aware of Hughes's efforts on Wevill's behalf, and even encouraged them, before she and Hughes separated.

Gene Baro's "The Skull," a meditation on the skull as a symbol of death, may have provided Plath with the image of the white skull in "Words," which she would write in February:

What moves one
beyond their terrible
aspect is their beauty,
the delicate sutures
of the bone, its whiteness,
the domed vacancy
that offers the silence
of abandoned temples. (Baro 160)

<u>November 24, 1962</u>
"The Dial Tone," Howard Nemerov
"Sire," W.S. Merwin
"The Needle," Gene Baro

W.S. Merwin's poems appeared often in *The New Yorker*. Plath admired his work, and would have read his poems closely—possibly with a sense of the bittersweet. Plath and Hughes had been close friends of Merwin and his wife Dido when they lived in London in 1960-61. The couples had a falling out after Hughes and Plath

visited the Merwins at their farm in France in July 1961. The rift, according to Dido decades after the fact, was caused by Plath's outrageously immature behavior.

I'm not a fan of Merwin's work, but his language and imagery is much looser than, say, a poet like Howard Nemerov. It's easy to see why his poems made such a fresh impression at that time. Plath included three of Merwin's poems in *American Poetry Now*. The admiration was mutual: Plath may or may not have known that it was Merwin who suggested to Howard Moss that he give her a first-reading contract.

<u>December 1, 1962</u>
"Poems of North and South Georgia," James Dickey

<u>December 8, 1962</u>
"Lemuel's Blessing," W.S. Merwin

<u>December 15, 1962</u>
"Five Birds Rise," William Hayward

<u>December 22, 1962</u>
"Sonneteering Made Easy," S.B. Botsford

<u>December 29, 1962</u>
"My Reflection in the Study Window," M.L. Rosenthal
"The Way to the River," W.S. Merwin

Yet another Merwin poem. It could not have made Plath happy to see the dedication (it was rare for *The New Yorker* to include dedications) "For Dido"—her former friend-cum-nemesis.

<u>January 5, 1963</u>
"Morning," Hilary Corke

"Above the Arno," May Swenson

January 12, 1963

"The Queen," Kenneth Pitchford

January 19, 1963

"Me to You," Alastair Reid

January 26, 1963

"Sacrifice of a Red Squirrel," Joseph Langland

"A Pool," Thomas Whitbread

It is possible that Whitbread's poem inspired the image of the pool at the end of Plath's "Words," which she would write the following week:

> **This is a pool which bears deep looking into**
> **Beneath moon-shadow trees, beneath the mud**
> **I imagine at its bottom, and beneath**
> **All its appearances as just a pool. (Whitbread 35)**

Plath's poem ends:

> **From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars**
> **Govern a life. (*Collected Poems* 270)**

February 2, 1963

"Notes Made in the Piazza San Marco," May Swenson

"Lobsters in the Window," W.D. Snodgrass

At the end of "Notes Made in the Piazza San Marco," Swenson compares the Venetian gondolas to tethered horses:

> **Black, saddled with red, riderless, restless, they**
> **are touching hips and shifting on the single-footing waves. (32)**

Note the use of the word "riderless" in the penultimate line. Plath's words, in her poem of that title, written on February 1, turn into horses at the end:

> **Words dry and riderless,**
> **The indefatigable hoof-taps. (*Collected Poems* 270)**

The same metaphor and use of the word "riderless" make for a good argument that Plath did receive this magazine prior to its cover date.

Connections can also be drawn between Snodgrass's "Lobsters in the Window" and Plath's "Paralytic," written on January 29. Through "rainstreaming glass," the speaker of Snodgrass's poem watches a lobster "Struggling to raise one claw / Like a defiant fist"; the lobster falls back, defeated (36). This brings to mind the image at the end of "Paralytic":

> **The claw**
> **Of the magnolia,**
> **Drunk on its own scents,**
> **Asks nothing of life. (*Collected Poems* 267)**

Snodgrass's lobsters cannot "Hear what the newsboys shout, / Or see the raincoats pass," just as Plath's speaker, confined to an iron lung, cannot participate in worldly activity: "the day outside glides by like ticker tape" (Snodgrass 36, *Collected Poems* 266). Plath had selected two of Snodgrass's poems for *American Poetry Now*.

February 9, 1963

"The Figures on the Frieze," Alastair Reid

"The Lovers Go Fly a Kite," W.D. Snodgrass

Perhaps I am reading too much into the tea leaves, but I see a number of similarities between Snodgrass's "The Lovers Go Fly a Kite" and Plath's "Balloons." ("Balloons" and "Edge," Plath's last poems, were written on February 5). Snodgrass's poem begins:

> **What's up, today, with our lovers?**
> **Only bright tatters—a kite**
> **That plunges and bobs where it hovers**
> **At no improbable height.**
>
> **It's shuddery like a hooked fish**
> **Or Stallion. They reel in string**
> **And sprint, compassing their wish:**
> **To keep in touch with the thing. (36)**

Plath's begins:

> **Since Christmas they have lived with us,**
> **Guileless and clear,**
> **Oval soul-animals,**
> **Taking up half the space,**
> **Moving and rubbing on the silk**
>
> **Invisible air drifts,**
> **Giving a shriek and pop**
> **When attacked, then scooting to rest, barely trembling.**
> **Yellow cathead, blue fish (*Collected Poems* 271)**

Like Snodgrass's kite, one of Plath's balloons is likened to a fish. The kite plunges and bobs, shudders; the balloons move and rub, scoot and tremble. Both poems contain the words "wish" ("wishes" in Plath's case), "heart," "air," and "invisible." Both sport a striking simile:

> **Like some exquisite sting ray**
> **Hauled from a poisonous deep**
> **To explore the bright coasts of day. (Snodgrass 36)**

> **. . . like wishes or free**
> **Peacocks blessing**
> **Old ground with a feather**
> **Beaten in starry metals. (*Collected Poems* 272)**

And I can't help but equate the "bright tatters" at the beginning of Snodgrass's poem with the popped red balloon at the end of Plath's.

I also see a similarity, a somewhat haunting one, between Alastair Reid's "The Figures on the Frieze" and Plath's "Edge." Reid's figures are an unhappy couple, a man and woman "Wild with their misery." The man conjures, from a book he is reading, "Great goddess-figures" (32). At the end of "Edge," the moon, "from her hood of bone," stares down like such a goddess; the dead woman and children she impassively observes are like figures in a frieze on the edge of an ancient temple: "The illusion of a Greek necessity / Flows in the scrolls of her toga" (*Collected Poems* 272). Reid uses the word "bone" in his poem; could this have contributed to Plath's ingenious "hood of bone" image? If Plath did not read "The Figures on the Frieze" shortly before writing "Edge," it is an eerie coincidence that this poem appeared in *The New Yorker* only two days before her death.

Works Cited

Auden, W.H. "After Reading a Child's Guide to Modern Physics." *The New Yorker* (November 17, 1962): 48. Print.

Baro, Gene. "The Skull." *The New Yorker* (November 17, 1962): 160. Print.

Hardy, Thomas. *Hardy: Poems*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1985. Print.

Koren, Yehuda and Eilat Negev. *Lover of Unreason: Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes' Doomed Love*. Cambridge, Mass.: Da Capo Press, 2006. Print.

Kraus, Robert. Gulliver cartoon. *The New Yorker* (October 6, 1962): 53. Print.

Lawrence, D.H. *The Complete Poems*. Eds. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts. New York: Penguin, 1971. Print.

Perry, Tod. "For Nicholas, Born in September." *The New Yorker* (September 29, 1962): 44. Print.

Plath, Sylvia. *The Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1981. Print.

---. *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950-1963*. Ed. Aurelia S. Plath. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992. Print.

Reid, Alastair. "The Figures on the Frieze." *The New Yorker* (February 9, 1963): 32. Print.

Snodgrass, W.D. "Lobsters in the Window." *The New Yorker* (February 2, 1963): 36. Print.

---." The Lovers Go Fly a Kite." *The New Yorker* (February 9, 1963): 36. Print.

Stevens, Wallace. *The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1954. Print.

Stevenson, Anne. *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989. Print.

Swenson, May. "Notes Made in the Piazza San Marco." *The New Yorker* (February 2, 1963): 32. Print.

Wevill, David. "Monsoon." *The New Yorker* (November 17, 1962): 56. Print.

Whitbread, Thomas. "A Pool." *The New Yorker* (January 26, 1963): 35. Print.