

## The Smoke and Mirrors of "The Couriers"

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"The Couriers" may be one of Sylvia Plath's most confounding poems. My work, as explained in past articles in *Plath Profiles* volumes 3, 4 and 5, explains how the tarot and Qabalah (the framework upon which the modern tarot has been made to correspond) unlocks Plath's poetry to reveal its mirrors as they reflect six facets and their corresponding mystic symbolism. To follow is an excerpt from my work-in-progress, *Fixed Stars Govern a Life: Sylvia Plath's Qabalah Code*, revealing what is behind the smoke and "disturbance in mirrors" (*Ariel* 6)<sup>1</sup>.

**Card #1      The Magician      Corresponding Poem: "The Couriers"**

### First Facet: The Tarot/Qabalah



When the Magician tarot card is read in reverse (its upside-down meaning), as Plath intended for "The Couriers," it denotes a trickster or a con-artist. He is a man with all the tools (the elements on his table) for trouble. He is sometimes considered to be a gypsy, like the Hungarian *Czigany*—a nomad, a tinker, and a thief of the first order (Borrow). Today, gypsies in Hungary are known as the Roma people. According to Plath's own tarot book, *The Painted Caravan* (1954), by Basil Ivan Rákóczi, the Hungarian gypsies are the couriers of ancient mystical knowledge throughout Europe.<sup>2</sup>

The Golden Dawn attributes the Hebrew letter for the Magician card, *Bet*, as: "the letter with which the creative act can take place" (Regardie 588). Alchemists believe that we all begin as the Magician in the tarot, representing sometimes cocky and overconfident youth, as we learn to manipulate the elements physically and energetically. The Magician is often viewed as a shaman, and each element: fire, earth, water and air, has a specific movement and properties, which are represented by the tarot's suits of Wands, Pentacles, Cups

<sup>1</sup> All citations of Plath's poem "The Couriers" are from *Ariel: The Restored Edition* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Many tarot scholars today will dispute this.

and Swords. These are the instruments pictured on the Magician's table. The Magician holds one arm up to the heavens, indicating that he draws his power from above and not from himself, feeling like Plath's refrain of lack of ownership in "The Couriers."

Even readers not looking for tarot references will interpret the gypsy con-artist of this poem to be a metaphor for Plath's husband, Ted Hughes, with his infidelity and lies during their marriage. But it goes much deeper than that.

Qabalists have a saying: "What is outwardly solar is inwardly corrosive" (Gray 202). This means that the false front shone to the world is actually destroying the soul. The maxim instructs the Initiate to put one's energy on the inner self. This explains a lot about the mirror symbols throughout Plath's work, as outward reflections of what's going on within. The word *solar* also however fits Plath's reference to the sun which opens the third stanza.

Plath's golden ring is most easily the metaphor for a wedding ring. RING, in Hebrew, refers to the pupil or iris within the eye of God, also connected with the Sun. This image is also a fine description for the Pentacle lying on the Magician's table on the tarot card. The color gold and the Sun are both important symbols for the Golden Dawn, Freemasons and Rosicrucians, representing the Truth and the highest power of God. Gold, of course, is also the symbol for the Sun and the purified state, the Philosopher's stone, sought in alchemy.

Plath's sixth line stating lies and grief are surely representative of Plath's feelings over her cheating husband and his abandoned marital promises. In this poem, it is quickly ascertained that this ring of gold is just a lie. The proceeding alchemy facet of this poem addresses the Hebrew wordplay of "Tin" and "Grief."

The Emerald Tablet, one of the most famous and important documents of Hermeticism, has as its very first precept (and, most importantly, correlating with this Magician card number of One), "True, without falsehood, certain, most certain" (Emerald 1). This means that Hermeticism is universally true at all levels.

To receive the Magician card reversed in a tarot reading is a warning. To be warned not to accept something, and that it is not genuine portends to these Gypsy couriers, with their bleak news, propensity for thievery, and bad gifts.

The image of frost on leaves symbolizes the change in seasons. For the Magician card, this represents the coldness of the world as the innocent Fool is born "immaculate," as Plath references, only to become hardened in the ways of the world. The Magician picture shows him

standing erect and looking straight ahead, possibly explaining why one of Plath's earlier drafts of this poem included the idea of standing straight before she chose "immaculate" (*Ariel* 6) This image is also said to gesture toward manna from heaven, considered to be sweet dew, resembling Plath's frost.

Emotion is represented throughout the tarot's Cups suit, sometimes called Plath's image of "cauldrons." Here, Plath's cauldron talks and crackles alone, expressing her feelings of abandonment.

Plath's "nine black Alps" refers to the nine cards of the Major Arcana featuring the symbolic Rosicrucian mountaintops in the Rider-Waite tarot deck scenery: The Fool, The Lovers, The Hermit, Death, The Tower, Temperance, The Star, Moon, and Judgement.<sup>3</sup> Looking at the storyline these nine cards present in their numeric order, we see Plath's own tale as she might have cast it: innocence; union with a lover; knowledge of the truth; the end of a past life; complete destruction of her relationship; evaluating and recreating her life; dreaming; mysticism and the inner world; and redemption.

In the Hermetic Sciences, the Magician card represents the second step of man's journey. As the Neophyte (or The Fool- tarot card number 0), the first step is to begin the search for the Philosopher's stone, the Great Work or *magnum opus*—one's self-actualization, individuation (in Jungian alchemical terms), or purpose in life. This turns failure into success, along with providing the Elixir of health and well-being.

Therefore, the Magician begins the Initiation, on a quest to obtain that knowledge and art of making perfect that which either nature has left imperfect, or man has degraded by the misuse of his free will. This poem is about the latter. The Magician will apply this power to the benefit of himself first and then to his fellow-man, recognizing that man's first duty to the self which empowers him to do greater work for all.

Hermetic text says of the Magician stage: "...the strength of his desires was far greater than his reason. [...] He must subdue those unruly passions which controlled his very being. From thence sprang the first idea of the sage, to be free-man and master of himself" (Clymer).

### **Second Facet: Alchemy**

Alchemists consider the Magician to be the mythological Hermes (known to be one of the

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<sup>3</sup> British spelling of "Judgement," in accordance with the Rider-Waite Tarot deck.

naughtier gods), who delivered the secrets of alchemy to man. Hermes gestures "as above, so below," indicating the way of Heaven on Earth. Hermes is light and dark, deceitful and ambiguous, and therefore considered to be a trickster (Garstin 35). He begins his work as an alchemist does, separating the elements and experiencing each on all levels, so that he might truly know them.

A snail's word could only be slime. This slime is the *litharge* of alchemy, the left-over scum, spume or ashes from a metallic operation. Plath's plate, now, is read as a plate in a laboratory, although it is also important to consider that plates in ancient art were also often meant to represent sacrifice.

In the Hermetic Sciences, the lowest form of man is like elemental lead; in the tarot, this barbarian is represented by the Magician. The first object for an alchemical Initiate, or one who enters the process in search of physical, mental and spiritual transmutation, is to leave the state of barbarity and walk toward the light. In other words, base man, the con artist of "The Couriers," is equivalent to the trickster of the Magician, believed to be lost or fallen. He must return back to his first, perfect and true nature.

When Plath refers to acetic acid, this is the alchemical element that gives vinegar its sour taste and pungent smell. Vinegar was sometimes mixed with mineral acids by some fraudulent dealers—a great example of the trickster nature of the Magician—in an effort to make the vinegar appear stronger than it was. Vinegar, or acetic acid, is the second stage of alchemy in which the saccharine juices of vegetables appear, heated to around 80 degrees Fahrenheit, as fermentation takes place. Plath wrote in her journals of having to know the difference between alcoholic and acetic acid fermentation for her chemistry classes at Smith College (*Journals* 33).

In alchemy, Plath's word "sealed" in "The Couriers" means "hermetically sealed"—an airtight closing of a vessel. In ceremonial magic, a seal, or *sigil*, is a design, initial or device traced in the air during invocations/evocations. Medieval alchemists and magicians believed that each spirit had a corresponding seal, or hand movement, as a sort of signature.

Acetic acid is corrosive, and the "sealed tin" is also a Biblical reference, to the Old Testament *Book of Amos*, Chapter 7, verses 7-8:

*Now the Lord was standing by a wall of tin and tin was in this hand.  
YHWY said to me, "What do you see, Amos?" and I said, "Tin."  
And the Lord said, "I am going to put tin within my people Israel.  
I shall never again forgive them" (NetBible).*

In the context of this Bible story, "tin" represents a hardening. Tin is one of the seven metals of the alchemists, associated with the operation of Dissolution (an important metaphor, given the state of Plath's marriage at the time) and the element of water. Tin is the flimsiest of metals, not to be relied upon, and its name holds a Hebrew wordplay with the word *grief*.<sup>4</sup> Plath acknowledges these feelings within herself about her husband, but she wants to rise above them, to a higher spiritual place and refuses to accept them.

In the third century BC, Greek philosopher Theophrastus observed how vinegar's effect on metals to produce pigments useful in art, including *white lead* and *verdigris*—an important alchemical symbolic terms. In alchemy, tin, one of the seven metals, is attributed to the planet Jupiter. This is the planet designated for the Magician tarot card, as Jupiter is considered to be aligned with manifestation, due to its central position in the solar system. The symbol for the planet Jupiter is reflected in the symbol for the material form of tin. Tin is an alchemical symbol representing mediation and a balance between hot and cold (situated between Mars/Iron and Saturn/Lead).

In the first of Plath's handwritten drafts of this poem, dated November 4, 1962<sup>5</sup>, shows her trying out ideas of a vinegar tin and wine. These are important to know, because alchemy practitioners believe in *The Archidoxa Medicinae* or, "Elixir of Life." This elixir, believed to have been made from gold, is a cure-all for purifying blood, preventing miscarriages, keeping the devil away, and strengthening the heart. A 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> -century recipe claims that to make potable gold, one must begin with three pints of red wine vinegar and the ashes of a block of tin, burnt in an iron pan (Cavendish 189-95).

Finally, "Tin" is the Hebrew name for Raphael, an angel that came in human disguise (another form of the Double, which appears often in the *Ariel* poems and was a favorite subject of Plath's) in the *Book of Tobit*. Whether used for good or evil, this character is the Magician in reverse, with his trickery and fast-talk. The image echoes again and again, through its many stories and symbols.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> [From the Net Bible, [www.netbible.com](http://www.netbible.com)] **tn** The Hebrew word אֲנָךְ ('anakh, "tin") occurs only in this passage (twice in this Bible verse and twice in the following Bible verse). The tin wall of the vision, if it symbolizes Israel, may suggest weakness and vulnerability to judgment. The term אֲנָךְ in v. 8b may be a homonym meaning "grief" (this term is attested in post-biblical Hebrew). In this case, there is wordplay, as אֲנָךְ ("tin") of the vision suggests the אֲנָךְ ("grief") that judgment will bring upon the land.

<sup>5</sup> Drafts of "The Couriers" and other poems may be found in the Sylvia Plath Collection at the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College.

<sup>6</sup> See my *Fixed Stars Govern A Life* interpretation of Plath's poem "Elm" for more about Tin.

### Third Facet: Mythology

Hermes, the messenger of the gods and the figurehead of Hermeticism, was said to have one day come upon an empty shell on the beach, fitting Plath's snail reference. From out of the shell he fashioned a small harp like instrument, the lyre. The lyre is a nice echo of Plath's word "liar," which feels like Plath's sixth line of "The Couriers." When in the right hands, the instrument produced the most beautiful music ever heard by either gods or mortals. Hermes gave this instrument to the Sun-god, Apollo, fitting Plath's sun imagery. Later, Apollo presented the lyre to his son Orpheus. Upon hearing Orpheus play, Pluto, the Lord of the Underworld, was said to have wept tears of iron, which feels like Plath's disturbance of mirrors and the grey, shattered sea of the sixth stanza. Ultimately, Orpheus was killed by the maenads: mad, uncontrollable women who tore men apart. After his death, Zeus sent an eagle to retrieve the lyre, and placed both the eagle and the lyre permanently in the sky.

The fourth stanza's frost and cauldron are also a nice parallel to the Germanic pagan tale of Buri. Buri, the *first* Norse god (in correlation with the first card of the tarot), was born when his mother licked the salted frost from Ymir, the great creator ("immaculate"). Ymir himself was said to have sprung from a seething cauldron out of which flowed twelve streams into the great void. This tale shows up again in the poem for the Emperor card, "The Applicant."

An early version of this poem followed the reference to the Alps with the idea of a "tremor"—a possible reference to both Ymir's volcanic appearance, as well as the nervous flinch of a liar.

Plath probably also enjoyed loosely connecting the Alps to her own German heritage, suggesting the dark Norse mythologies full of wizards, sorcerers and tricksters from the Black Forest region of Germany and its great Alps. Plath was a lover of all mythology, and also had toured the Tyrolean Alps region by train in April 1956.

Hungarian mythology embraces a Tree of Life, as does the Qabalah. Their folklore tells that the sky was thought to be a big tent, full of holes, which were the stars. Plath used this same image in her poem, "Insomniac."

The mirror is a metaphor again for the Double, a symbol that had intrigued her since her undergraduate days, and it is an important emblem of Aphrodite/Venus. In ancient times, mirrors were made of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin. In alchemy, the "Venus mirror" sign, a cross

under a circle, signifies copper. In astrology it represents the planet Venus, and in Biology, the symbol is apposite to the female sex.

Finally, mythology from across the world, to which Plath was no stranger, uses the mirror as a symbol of death and a trapped soul. Plath wants to rise above it all and to choose positive emotion as her element, her eternal, never-dying season of Love. This matches the lemniscate symbol of infinity over the Magician's head. The earlier version of this poem masculinized Love (as the Magician is male), proclaiming the season a man.

#### **Fourth Facet: History and the World**

With "nine black Alps" in mind, the mountainous province of Montenegro, meaning "Black Mountain," has been part of Hungary or occupied by Austria-Hungary at different times. Aluminum ("tin") makes up most of Montenegro's industrial production. Alfred, Lord Tennyson, the British Poet Laureate, celebrated Montenegro with his poem "Black Mountain" about the country's warriors during the Balkan crisis.

The flower Edelweiss grows in these mountains. While the outside petals are pure white, its center grows in a ring with a sun-shape inside. It grows in cold, high altitudes and means "noble purity," like Plath's immaculate leafy frost. Edelweiss was supposed to cure all forms of ailments, ward off evil, and to be the ultimate love charm (Emerson qtd. in Auerbach). The idea of any gypsy-like charm of course arouses suspicion and distrust, and fits with Plath's suggestion to reject. Dozens of men were said to perish each season attempting to collect it from hard to access ledges and crags, to win the hearts of their lady friends, fitting Plath's last line.

The influence of Hungary and Hungarians was all around Plath and Hughes, beyond the gypsy lore of her tarot book. In 1956, while Plath was married to Hughes, Hungary had risen up in revolution and Soviet troops had overrun the country. This was the leading news story throughout that winter and *Time Magazine* had made the Hungarian freedom fighter its Man of the Year. Hughes wrote to his sister, Olwyn, asking about life in Hungary as he discussed translating one of the best known Twentieth Century poets, Attila József. In a letter dated November 8 that year, Hughes was also asked to join the guerillas and become a Hungarian freedom fighter. Plath wrote to her mother of her shock over the request. At this time, Hughes (and likely Plath as well, since she was such a devoted disciple of her husband's) was reading Hungarian authors such as Christine Arnothy, and poet, János Csokits, who later became a friend

and collaborator of Hughes's. In Paris meanwhile, Olwyn had made friends with a tight group of Hungarian émigrés, one of which would later marry Hughes's good friend, Lucas Meyers (Hughes 35).

The *Magyars* (echoing the word *Magi*) are the ethnic Hungarians from Hungary and its predecessor states, the Kingdom of Hungary and the People's Republic of Hungary, as well as its seven neighbor countries which include Romania, Slovakia, Serbia and Ukraine. Plath wrote of reading Magyar folk tales out of the university library in 1956.<sup>7</sup> As with other central Asian tribes, the earliest Magyars practiced shamanistic forms of worship, a subject in which Ted Hughes had an early interest. Like both the Jewish and Roma (Gypsy) minorities that have lived in Hungary since the Middle Ages, shamans have been viewed as nomads and travelers. The Magyars were led by poet-healers and ritual singers who passed myth and legend down through the generations, along with their incantations, curses and blessings. Occultist Alan Moore claims that magic was first called "The Art," and was considered a science of manipulation using symbols to change consciousness, making an artist or writer the closest thing to a modern-day shaman (TTBOOK).

The practice of climbing the toroo tree is a shamanistic path to ecstasy. By symbolically ascending the representation of the World Tree, or the Tree of Life alone, the shaman, "All to itself on the top of each," leaves this world and enters the world of spirit (*Ariel* 6). The toroo tree has nine steps, "nine black Alps," and as the shaman climbs higher and higher, he sings. Most Eurasian shamans speak of passing nine landmarks (*olohs*) during a journey, regardless of which world they believe they are traveling in. One of the most important tools of a shaman is the toil, a metallic, circular mirror. Many are worn, but there is one placed over the chest to deflect spirit attack: "The Couriers" mirror disturbance image.

Lake Balaton, also known as "the Hungarian Sea" and Central Europe's largest freshwater lake, sits at the base of the Black Forest Alps. During the Roman Empire, Lake Balaton was called "Lake Pelso," meaning "shallow" in Illyrian —and a good fit for the Magician's personality. Lake Balaton is known for reflecting sunlight to the neighboring vineyards like a mirror. The first version of this poem had an additional line claiming that the sea mimicked before her first words of the last full couplet; this was Plath's awareness of the

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<sup>7</sup> In an unpublished excerpt of a letter to her mother, Sylvia Plath wrote of reading Magyar folk tales and Siberian fairy-tales on May 10, 1956. The letter may be found in Sylvia Plath Mss. II held by the Lilly Library at Indiana University-Bloomington.

smoke-and-mirrors trick, and the mystic's need to recognize that what is wrong outside of her is also wrong within her. She recognized the truth. And so, despite trickery and things to watch out for, despite poor choices in the past, despite her own troubles with depression and self-image, she would be strong. Or so she believed.

Perhaps the most famous magician of all time was Harry Houdini (aka, Erich Weiss), coincidentally born in Budapest, Hungary and raised as a Jew in Appleton, Wisconsin. Harry Houdini was one of the iconic masculine figures of early twentieth-century pop culture, who also had a movie career with two Hollywood pictures, a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and he was President of the Society of American Magicians. In one 1908 daredevil stunt, Houdini famously jumped the Harvard Bridge in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Handsome, strong and seemingly unable to be outwitted, America clung to Houdini as a true-life superhero, and *The New York Times* regularly featured articles about him from the 1930s to the 1950s. In 1953, the year of Plath's first suicide attempt at twenty years old, a movie was made of his life starring the famous Hollywood actors Tony Curtis and Janet Leigh. Houdini was a freemason, yet he spent a great deal of his adult career out to battle spiritualists and mediums by exposing them as frauds. The master showman Houdini was an escape artist of great notoriety, known especially for being sealed in a tin in an act called "The Milk Can Escape." He believed that psychics, spiritualists and mediums preyed on grief and he toured the world, educating the masses of fakery and encouraging them not to believe, as Plath's poem advises not to accept.

In 1904, over what is now considered to be one of the greatest publicity stunts, Houdini had London's *The Daily Mirror*<sup>8</sup> newspaper commission a special set of handcuffs from which he would escape. Houdini made a huge production of the effort, claiming bloody knees, tearing red eyes, and more than an hour's struggle before a crowd of over four thousand in London's Hippodrome Theatre. This kind of publicity demonstrates the Magician card's ego. If Plath had disapproved of Harry Houdini's great ego, then she would certainly match his hunger for publicity alongside an untrustworthy tabloid known for its lies and famous grief column by the "Agony Aunt," Dear Marje. The masthead of *The Daily Mirror* included a ring with the three-letter abbreviation of the day of the week—the SUN-day paper being the most popular edition. In Houdini's time, *The Mirror* cost a penny. The British penny of Plath's era looked like a gold ring

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<sup>8</sup> See *Fixed Stars Govern a Life's* interpretation of Plath's poem "The Courage of Shutting-Up" for more about *The Daily Mirror*.

with an image of the Queen inside—but the likeness of the penny's queen greatly resembles Apollo, the sun god, pictured on older Celtic British coins. In the famous escape, Houdini adjourned alone into his secret chamber to remove the specially-designed manacles with nine circular tumblers befitting Plath's fifth stanza.

In 1914, the only known recording of Houdini's voice was made on wax cylinders that fit the eighth line.

The celebrated author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, had been friends with Houdini, believing Houdini to be a spiritualist of great power. Houdini broke off their friendship and declared Doyle was going a bit senile, also fitting the poem's eighth and ninth lines. Doyle wrote of the relationship in his 1931 book, *The Edge of the Unknown*.<sup>9</sup> Houdini, meanwhile, published a famous debunking book, *A Magician Among Spirits* (1924), and seven other books using ghost writers such as author, H.P. Lovecraft. Lovecraft was said to have realized that Houdini's adventures for the book *Imprisoned with the Pharaohs* were largely fictional, not accepting them as genuine, to use Plath's language in "The Couriers." Nevertheless, Lovecraft enjoyed the embellishments, casting Houdini as a kidnap victim who is taken to a secret vault under the Great Pyramid (Joshi, 189-90).

Harry Houdini died on Halloween night in 1926 of peritonitis from a ruptured appendix, like acid bursting from a tin. He was said to have promised his wife that if there was life on the other side, he would say to her the words, "Rosabelle, believe" (Kalush 539). It has been a topic of dispute as to whether the late Houdini did communicate to his wife, but it is known that she held séances for ten years after his death, with no luck reaching him.

Slightly less famous than Houdini, but the most important Hungarian to the Twentieth Century and one of the most important men of modern times was Nikola Tesla, developer of the alternating current electrical system, among other great inventions. Tesla, who was alive in Plath's childhood, truly embodied the Magician card with the real-life magic he created, and the alternating current is also a fine match to the Magician's ambiguous and variable nature. Almost everything we use and touch today is related to at least one of Tesla's inventions and patents. Once on the cover of *Time* magazine, Tesla was also said to be a master showman and performer when demonstrating his inventions to the public. The famous Tesla Induction motor looked like

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<sup>9</sup> See *Fixed Stars Govern a Life's* interpretation of Plath's poem "The Detective" for more about Sir Arthur Conan Doyle.

"A ring of gold with the sun in it," and the Tesla Coil resonant transformer looked like the crackling cauldron of which Plath wrote (*Ariel* 6). With the coil's applications also used for sound, it could be compared to words from a snail.

Plath would certainly have had a soft spot for Tesla. In addition to being brilliant, he was fragile in his youth and suffered from depression and a nervous breakdown. Eccentric and celibate ("immaculate") Tesla was widely considered mad and was taken advantage of, and publicly attacked, suffering the lies and grief of the poem's sixth line. His greatest adversary was most famously Thomas Edison, who fought for his direct current electrical system against Tesla's alternating current. The modern battery, which is essentially Plath's acetic acid once again sealed in a tin package, operates on a direct current system. Many inventors made their names from inventions and patents Tesla had first conceived and not gotten the credit for, including Marconi, who won the 1909 Nobel Prize in Physics for the radio. Plath knew that the idea was not Marconi's and he should not have accepted the award, and "The Couriers" echoes this. Tesla's closest friends were artists and poets, and he became fascinated by Hinduism. It is said that Tesla's ideas came to him in shamanic dreams and flashes of insight, with visions of perfectly formed machines in detail and blinding light. Tesla spent a good deal of his time trying to communicate with life on other planets, and wrote, "I base my faith on the feeble planetary electrical *disturbances*<sup>10</sup> which I discovered in the summer of 1899, and which, according to my investigations, could not have originated from the sun, the moon, or Venus" (10). Tesla was attempting to send signals with mirrors. The atmosphere was the chief obstacle to contacting Mars, and Tesla wrote that "locating our observatories one mite above sea level" significantly reduced his ability for communication (10). Plath's metaphorical sea is shattering once again.

Tesla was known to love animals quite obsessively, especially pigeons. He took injured birds into his room to care for them. An altruist, Tesla had wanted all peoples of the earth to equally benefit from his gift of electrical power, living from principles of peace and love that resonate with the ending of "The Couriers." Greed had other ideas: Tesla's Wardenclyffe Tower was squashed by investor JP Morgan, because it could not be metered or gain profit.

In 1943, when Plath was ten years old, Nikola Tesla died alone and penniless in room 3327 at the New Yorker Hotel, close to Penn Station, Macy's, and parts of New York City that Sylvia Plath would have known well. The New Yorker Hotel's Art Deco style is designed in such

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<sup>10</sup> Italics mine.

a way as to have nine peaks in its set-back, black brick pyramid-style tower that once again feels like the tenth line of "The Couriers." The fight over Tesla's estate and especially his research papers continued in the public eye for many years. In 1952, 5,000 papers on experiments were released, but much of it blacked-out by the United States Federal Government. Scores of biographies and non-fiction works have been written about this great inventor.

### **Fifth Facet: Astrology and Astronomy**

*"The brightest he, but sign to mortal man  
Of evil augury."* —Homer, *The Iliad*, Lord Derby's 19<sup>th</sup> century translation

The brightest star in the sky is Sirius, also known as the Dog-Star. It has been given the traits of being "Restless, Impetuous and Blazing, well characterizing the marked scintillation and color changes in its light"—and also well characterizing the Magician (Allen 123). Chinese astrologers believed that when Sirius, which they called "Lang Hoo" or "Tseen Lang," the Heavenly Wolf, was unusually bright, it portended attack from thieves, a trait of the Magician in reverse.

Egyptians and Hebrews have also claimed it devilish and akin to a "He Goat" (Allen 117-131)

Lyra is the constellation for Hermes, the Magician. Its brightest star was also called Lyra by Ptolemy. A lyre is a harp said to be created by Hermes, but the Sumerians and Babylonians saw the constellation of Lyra not as the musical instrument of mythology, but as a vulture. This is suggested by early records of the constellation as a harp being carried by a vulture, or an eagle in Greek myth. The Arabs also saw either an eagle or vulture here, and named the constellation's brightest star Vega, meaning either bird swooping from the sky. Therefore, instead of being the Harp star, Lyra is sometimes called "The Vulture Star." The Lyra constellation holds the Ring Nebula, which has a central condensation of light, like a star, in its center. It is another mirror of Plath's sixth line, and the idea of lies in the seventh is now a play on the word *lyre*. Lyra is known for its double stars, and even "the Double Double," a quadruple star. Also in the Lyra constellation, Beta Lyrae, is a celebrated variable star (changing in degrees of luminosity). Both the doubling and the variability lend support to the theme of lies in "The Couriers" poem.

### **Sixth Facet: Humanities and the Arts**

Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes learned from the best. When William Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It*, his character Jaques gives the famous speech which begins, "All the world's a stage"

(Shakespeare 677).<sup>11</sup> Beginning with the 21<sup>st</sup> tarot card, the World, Shakespeare circles back through the Major Arcana to card #0, the Fool, as an infant, and then moves into the Magician card with these lines: "And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel / And shining morning face, creeping like snail / Unwillingly to school." Shakespeare's inspiration for the Magician is the source of Plath's snail image for "The Couriers" (Shakespeare 677).

Perhaps one of the most famous gypsies in literature is *Wuthering Heights'* dark, brooding, passionate Heathcliff, of whom Ted Hughes has been compared in both looks and character. In a 1956 letter, Plath compared her relationship to a happier version of Heathcliff and Cathy.<sup>12</sup> Plath has fondly mentioned the book and movie often in her journals and letters, and she has a poem by the same name. In Emily Brontë's novel, many of Plath's "Couriers" images are present. The book opens with the narrator saying, "I shrunk icily into myself, like a snail," the area is "full of snail-shells and pebbles," and Heathcliff jokes about a lame horse being reared on "snails and sour milk" (Brontë 405, 483, 555).

The question of paternity, character, and ownership is throughout *Wuthering Heights*. Memorable lines are "They are not mine," and "my father's character is not mine" (Brontë 410, 593). It also seems that accepting invitations gets one into trouble at *Wuthering Heights*, and there are three instances where one is forced to accept an invitation, reminiscent of the second lines of Plath's first two couplets.

Heathcliff is said to be "sealed in an expression of unspeakable sadness," and his vinegar-sour personality is most definitely congruent with Plath's symbol of acetic acid (Brontë 534). In another scene, the servant Joseph is called "Vinegar-faced" (remembering that acetic acid is a main component of vinegar) (Brontë 410). In Chapter XXI, Heathcliff pronounces, "Don't you think Hindley would be proud of his son, if he could see him? almost as proud as I am of mine. But there's this difference; one is gold put to use of paving-stones, and the other is tin polished to ape a service of silver. *Mine* has nothing valuable about it" (Brontë 565). This quote has Plath's denial of ownership in the second line, as well as her tin and the gold of the third and fifth lines.

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<sup>11</sup> The Major Arcana runs through lines 143-170 in *As You Like It*, Act II, Scene VII, ending with the Tower card for the words "sans everything." It resumes with a change of speaker, Duke Senior, covering the Star card in lines 171-174; Adam, for the Moon card, in lines 175-176; Duke Senior for the Sun card, lines 177-179, Amiens (the song) for Judgement, lines 180-196; and Duke Senior returning to the World card for lines 197-207.

<sup>12</sup> An unpublished excerpt of a letter dated September 2, 1956 from Sylvia Plath to Aurelia Plath. The letter may be found in Sylvia Plath Mss. II held by the Lilly Library, University of Indiana-Bloomington.

Heathcliff's great love, Catherine, has long golden ringlets and he watches the sun on her hair. In another scene, his wife, Isabella, takes off her gold ring and throws it on the floor. The book contains many instances of message carriers (couriers) and a continual waiting for messages.

The story of *Wuthering Heights* is full of lies and grief, with lines like "Your bliss lies," "She lies with a sweet smile," and "now you believe the lies your father tells" (Brontë 486, 525, 610). In the settings, the English country air is often frosty, and the coals in the fire are crackling like Plath's cauldron.

The nine principle characters in *Wuthering Heights* are all alone in their way, tormented and depressed like Plath's fifth couplet states. Additionally, *Wuthering Heights* is in the hilly Yorkshire moors, with mountainous stony black "Alps," perhaps not comparable to the Austrian Alps, but mountains all the same. There is talk of "the serious disturbance of Catherine" as well as other disturbances (Brontë 444). Catherine stares at her reflection in a mirror, terrified of faces in mirrors that are not her own. Images of the sea are also in *Wuthering Heights*, where "the whole hill-back was one billowy, white ocean," and in Catherine, "the sea could be as readily contained in that horse-trough as her whole affection be monopolised by him" (Brontë 425, 511).

In one memorable scene, Heathcliff stands outside a window, watching Catherine inside the Linton's home. He later tells Nelly, "I intended shattering their great glass panes to a million fragments," sounding like Plath's last full couplet of "The Couriers" (Brontë 441).

Finally, in *Wuthering Heights* it is a "season of deliverance," and a season of "cold reflection," like Plath's season and mirror images. Heathcliff the gypsy is also said to be an "unseasonable visitor" (Brontë 530, 524).

There are other significant Hungarian-Magician fits with "The Couriers" Humanities facet: the prolific Hungarian writer, Mór Jókai, wrote many novels and plays in the Magyar language, with titles befitting the Magician tarot card and Plath's poem, "The Couriers." Like the Magician card's properties right-side-up and upside-down, Jókai's characters were either romantics or unmitigated scoundrels. Just a few of Jókai's titles include: *The King of the Pirates*, *Halil the Pedlar*, *The New Squire*, *The Heartless Man's Sons*, *The Golden Man*, *An Infamous Scoundrel from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century*, *The Gipsy Baron*, and more.

Yet another influence might include Petar II Petrović-Njegoš, who was a Prince-Bishop of the Serbian Orthodox Church of Montenegro, and is considered to be among the greatest poets of the Serbian language. Serbia has been a part of Hungary at several different times in history. Njegoš' notable works include the *Light of Microcosm*, *The Mountain Wreath*, the *Serbian Mirror*, and the *False Tsar Stephen the Little*. Njegoš' poem, "The Ray of the Microcosm" has been considered to be one of the finest Serbian philosophical poems, loosely based upon Milton's *Paradise Lost* about man's first sin—a fine fit for the tarot Magician's naughty side as well as his number one. Also, in that same year of 1845, Njegoš published a collection of sixty-one folk poems, entitled *Serbian Mirror*. *Serbian Mirror* was dedicated to Pushkin and is said to contain some of Njegoš' best patriotic poems.

*The Mountain Wreath*, fitting both Plath's ring and Alps imagery, is said to be Njegoš's greatest work. It is a poetic drama of mountain people and their feuding. His book, *The False-Tsar Stephen the Small*, was said to be inspired by Njegoš's irritation with frauds and fakes; again, characteristics of the Magician's domain. His purpose in writing this and all of his work was to enlighten the people and to protect them from trickery and schemes (Njegos).

In 1960, an art film by director Pierre Kast called *The Season of Love* was released. It is the story of a playboy novelist named Sylvain, who meets his true love Genevieve. They decide they must move to the country, where he can settle down with her with less temptation from other women and write. The marriage slowly crumbles. Plath loved artistic foreign films and saw as many as possible. If she saw this one, the irony would not have been lost on her.

Plath's poem, "The Couriers," therefore faces this darker, base side of man and the higher desire for self-mastery. Both the poem and the Magician card are in accordance with the second Emerald Tablet scripture: What is above is like what is below, and what is below, like that which is above. To make the miracle of the one thing.

While Plath saw lies in her trickster husband's behavior, she also knew it was a reflection, a mirror of her inner self, as *Wuthering Heights'* Catherine exclaimed, "I am Heathcliff!" (Brontë 465). Sylvia Plath was not yet whole and united with the Infinite Continuum—the sea had shattered its grey "one" (*Ariel* 6). Finally, this poem is a fine tribute to Hungary, redeeming the idea of the gypsy/magician, as we can identify and learn from him, good and bad, on our separate journeys toward spiritual growth.

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