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## Sylvia Plath's Greek Tragedy

In a parodic allusion to her history of psychoanalytic treatment, Plath's introductory note for a reading of "Daddy" (CP 222-4) describes the poem as "spoken by a girl with an Electra complex" (AR 193-4). Invited, in part, by this statement, the poetic speaker's adoption of an Electra persona in the earlier poems "Electra on Azalea Path" (CP 116-7) and "The Colossus" (CP 129-30) has been similarly framed by critics with reference to psychoanalysis. When Jung glossed the Electra archetype in *The Theory of Psychoanalysis* as a girl who takes revenge on her mother for murdering her father, he did not cite a source for the narrative but assumed the reader's familiarity with the eponymous mythological figure ("As everyone knows...") (Jung 69). One effect of the extensive cultural impact of psychoanalysis in the twentieth century is that for many of Plath's readers today, Electra is more readily recognizable from Jung than from her incarnations in the ancient Greek tragic source texts to which Jung refers: *The Oresteian Trilogy* of Aeschylus and the *Electra* plays of Sophocles and Euripides. Plath herself, however, studied "all [three] Electras" (J 224-5) while reading for the English Tripos Tragedy paper at Newnham College, Cambridge.<sup>1</sup> While the presence of Jung's Electra in Plath's poems cannot be dismissed, this essay explores some of the ways in which an understanding of the critical and pedagogical contexts of Plath's literary training in Greek tragedy at the University of Cambridge in the mid-1950s enriches a reading of Plath's allusive poetry beyond the psychobiographical. At the same time, I recognize that Plath's self-mythologization in her poetry is one of the distinctive

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<sup>1</sup> SCSC holds Plath's inscribed, dated, and annotated copies of Vellacott, *Aeschylus, The Oresteian Trilogy* (1956), and Watling, *Sophocles Electra and Other Plays* (1954); it has not been established which edition of Euripides's *Bacchae* Plath read while at Newnham. Plath's reading notes from Cambridge are contained in Plath Mss II, Box 13, boxes 5-7, Lilly.

features and principal innovations of her poetics.<sup>2</sup> This biomythographical conceit is discernible in embryonic form in the juvenilia that engage with characters and tropes from fairytales; but during and after studying ancient Greco-Roman literature at Cambridge, Plath's poetic speakers metamorphose from Cinderellas into Electras. My argument here is that the tension between Plath's explicitly autobiographical readings of ancient literature in her poetry and her New Critical training in "impersonality" and "objective criticism" focalizes a double movement of complicity and critique that runs throughout Plath's poetry: a conservative modernist impulse towards classicism coincident with a burgeoning subversive impulse towards subjective poetic expression.

The English Tripos was introduced as a discrete honors degree at Cambridge in 1917 as part of a wider University enterprise in the early twentieth century to expand its bachelor's degree awards from mathematics, theology, and classical philology. The ordinances of the new degree course focused on post-medieval writing in English and held an explicit aim to situate this writing as an inheritance of the Greco-Roman classics via the literatures of the Romance languages French and Italian. This assumption of the existence of an inherited transhistorical canon of works and genres necessitated the creation of comparative examination papers to fulfil the regulations' requirement for a "special subject in the general history of literature, ancient and modern, in connection and comparison with English literature" (Qtd. in Collini n.p.). The nineteenth-century Cambridge syllabus had been shaped by elite public school curricula, which

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<sup>2</sup> Rose has observed that it is a truism of Plath scholarship to comment on the poet's constitution as a myth by critics and to state an intention to bypass that myth (11). My reading, then, is in part a return to the mythological approach to Plath's writing most notably represented by Kroll in *Chapters in a Mythology*, and as described by Gill in *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (117-19), but one that resists the biographical reductionism and anti-historicist modes of the earlier criticism.

supplied Cambridge with a stream of boys trained predominantly in ancient Greek and Latin; a University syllabus which simply required “more of the same” at degree-level ensured success for these students (Stray 41). The persistent influence of the public schools on the Cambridge syllabi of the twentieth century is detected in the first principles of the two compulsory comparative elements of the modern two-part Tripos instituted in 1926, which acclimatized the elite student to English: the Tragedy paper began with the ancient Greek dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, and the English Moralists paper began with the ancient Greek philosophers Plato and Aristotle.<sup>3</sup>

The primacy of ancient Greek tragedy in the new English Tripos was reinforced by the prominence of the genre in the aesthetic theory of one of its first teachers, I. A. Richards, famous for his development of “practical criticism” (and whom Plath had met the previous year at Smith College).<sup>4</sup> When Plath arrived in Cambridge in 1955, the Tragedy and practical criticism (“Criticism and Composition”) papers were associated with Richards’s contemporary and fellow proponent of the New Criticism, F. R. Leavis, whose lectures Plath audited after applying for special permission to do so (*Red Comet* 380).<sup>5</sup> The New Critics, heavily influenced by the essays of T. S. Eliot, had formulated and taught a mode of criticism which attempted to unite aesthetic and moral concerns and to articulate and justify a response to a work of literature on objective

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<sup>3</sup> The comparative Tragedy paper remains a compulsory element of Part II; the Moralists paper has been discontinued from the 2020 matriculation cohort.

<sup>4</sup> Plath attended Richards’s lecture, “The Dimensions of Reading Poetry,” and an evening reception in his honor on March 3, 1954 (*LI* 702).

<sup>5</sup> According to “Lectures proposed by the Board of the Faculty of English, 1955-56” (611), Leavis presented the lecture series “Appreciation and Analysis” (Wednesdays and Fridays at 10am, Michaelmas Term 1955; Wednesdays at 11am, Lent Term 1956), “Critics and Critical Theory” (Fridays at 12pm, Lent Term 1956), and “Critical Approaches to Fiction” (Wednesdays and Fridays at 12pm, Easter Term 1956). On the shift in Plath’s attitude towards practical criticism, from this early enthusiasm to a later belief that it was “paralyzing” for poetry, see *Annotating Modernism*, 47-48.

grounds. Eliot's criticism employed close readings of literary texts "[t]o divert interest from the poet to the poetry"; but its criteria for "classic" literature relied on the acceptance of a shared canon of literature stretching back to ancient Greece against which individual quality could be measured (*Selected Prose* 44). Leavis's version of this "objective criticism" was similarly founded upon the assumption that an accepted tradition or canon of texts existed (Wimsatt 82). His subjective aesthetic value judgements were therefore expressed as an assessment of a text's placement in this tradition of texts objectively paradigmatic of "the human situation" (Richards 63). While Leavis disagreed with Eliot that poetry should be "Impersonal" ("completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates"), Eliot's disciples in the United States, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren (whose works had structured Plath's formal introduction to criticism as an undergraduate at Smith College) followed Eliot in discarding the social context in which literature was generated (*Selected Prose* 40, 41).<sup>6</sup> Notwithstanding the individual modulations among the New Critics, they were united by an acute social conservatism that reinforced the cultural hegemony of "the classics."

Plath's letters home to the United States from Cambridge in her first year as a Fulbright Scholar frequently express an anxiety about finding herself in a cultural and critical environment which assumed a shared knowledge and valuation of the Greco-Roman classical canon. A few weeks into Michaelmas Term, Plath writes, "my enormous ignorances appal [*sic*] me... Grace here is said solemnly in Latin, and everybody seems to have a classical background..." (*LI* 976,

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<sup>6</sup> See also Brooks and Warren, *Understanding Poetry* and Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn*. Plath's copies of *Understanding Poetry* and *The Well Wrought Urn* are held by SCSC. For an account of the classroom contexts in which I. A. Richards and Cleanth Brooks produced their touchstone works of New Criticism, see Buurma and Heffernan, *The Teaching Archive*, chapters 3 and 5; Buurma and Heffernan argue that the curricula of Richards and Brooks were more expansive and collaboratively generated than the canon espoused in their published books.

978) or have “already... ‘picked up’ Greek” (*LI* 1093). Plath cringes at having “never read the classics” (*LI* 1004) and “shockingly enough, never touched” the ancient dramatists Aeschylus, Sophocles, or Euripides (*LI* 1085). She expresses an anxiety that this lack of classical Greek literary training makes her appear “uneducated” (*LI* 1004) to her Director of Studies among Newnham’s classically-educated upper middle class grammar school “glib girls” (*LI* 1006). Plath’s complaints draw our attention because she had read Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* in translation in high school and again at Smith for a paper on “Modern Tragedy in the Classical Tradition” (Lilly). Plath’s anxieties may be located in a perceived lack of grounding in the ancient languages, or in having studied ancient texts only in a comparative context and never *per se*, or simply, perhaps, in the passing of time since she had last read a Greek play; but they reveal a complicated nexus of desires—both to learn and to assimilate.

Plath read steadily and widely to “remedy” (*LI* 1005) the disparity between her American education and the knowledge required for the Tragedy paper. She recorded her intention to attend three of the 1955-56 lecture series that fall, in the history of tragic theory (from “Aristotle to Volkelt”), tragedy from Racine to the present, and Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedy, and to focus on ancient tragedy in the new year (*LI* 975).<sup>7</sup> By late January 1956, Plath was immersed in ancient Greek tragedy, reading “all 7 [extant] plays by Aeschylus” (*LI* 1092) and writing a paper on “The Character of Zeus in [Aeschylus’s] Prometheus Bound” (Lilly) for her tragedy

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<sup>7</sup> According to “Lectures proposed by the Board of the Faculty of English, 1955-56,” *Cambridge University Reporter* (610-12), Plath is referring to the lecture series “History of Tragic Theory: Aristotle to Volkelt” with Theodore Redpath (Wednesdays and Fridays at 9am, Michaelmas Term 1955), “Tragedy from Racine to the Present Time” with Muriel Bradbrook (Tuesdays and Fridays at 11am, Michaelmas Term, 1955), “Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy” with Enid Welsford (Wednesdays at 11am, Michaelmas Term 1955; Wednesdays at 10am, Lent Term 1956), and “Greek Tragedy” with Leonard Potts (Fridays at 10am, Michaelmas Term 1955—although as Plath planned to concentrate on ancient tragedy “next year” (1956), she may have intended to skip these lectures and self-study in the new year.

supervision on February 8 (LI 1098). In late February and early March, Plath moved on in her reading from Aeschylus to Sophocles (J 210) and Euripides, reading “all Electras” (J 224) for a supervision (her copy of Sophocles’s *Electra* bears an ink note in Plath’s hand, a reminder of a paper assignment, to compare the three ancient Electra plays with Eugene O’Neill’s *Mourning Becomes Electra*).<sup>8</sup> Plath also took the opportunity to see two performances of Greek tragedies in February 1956, attending a production of Sophocles’s *Philoctetes* in English at the ADC Theatre on the 10<sup>th</sup> (LI 1102), and the Cambridge Greek Play at the Cambridge Arts Theatre on the 21<sup>st</sup>, a performance of Euripides’s *Bacchae* “[i]n Greek (!)... performed here every 3 years (even Oxford gave up plays in Greek in 1932!),” “complete with Cambridge students chanting Greek choruses, [and] modern original music” (LI 1122-3).<sup>9</sup> In contrast to these effusive February letters, by late March Plath is coolly alluding to the Greek Play to two American correspondents as a cultural highlight of her time so far in Cambridge (LI 1150, 1152). After six months in Cambridge, Plath’s anxious epistolary positioning as one lacking a classical background has transformed—via an ingenuous enthusiasm—into a sophisticated self-presentation as “a Cambridge girl now,” fully assimilated into its classicizing culture.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Watling, 9 (SCSC).

<sup>9</sup> Emphases Plath’s own. The 1956 Cambridge Greek Play, produced by Alan Kerr, took place 20-24 February and was the first production with a major female cast, including seven of Plath’s peers at Newnham. It was only the second production to have included female cast-members; prior to 1950 only one woman, Janet Case, Virginia Woolf’s ancient Greek tutor, had appeared in a Cambridge Greek Play. The actors’ text and translation is published as Lucas, *The Bacchae of Euripides. The Greek Text Performed at Cambridge at the Arts Theatre 20-24 February, 1956, by Members of the University, With an English Prose Translation Made for the Cambridge Performance of 1930*. Plath’s annotated copy of the performance text is held by SCSC.

<sup>10</sup> As she had earlier declared “I’M A SMITH GIRL NOW” (LI 180). For an account of the ways in which Plath extended and redefined her modernist and New Critical templates in her pedagogy and poetry, see *Annotating Modernism*.

Plath's *Triplos* reading and her immersion in this culture of classicism is reflected in a poem written around this time in the spring of 1956, "Conversation Among the Ruins" (*CP* 21).<sup>11</sup> The poem borrows its title from a 1927 neoclassical painting by Italian artist Giorgio de Chirico (the painting's Italian title is *Colloquio*, "interview"), "a postcard reproduction of which was pinned to the door of the poet's room" at Whitstead (*CP* 275). In de Chirico's painting, a woman wearing a chiton, an ancient Greco-Roman tunic, and who is seated with her back to the viewer, meets the gaze of a man in a modern suit. The man appears to have risen from his seat and now inclines towards the woman and the viewer of the painting from behind a table. Their conversation takes place in a ruined house, the freestanding doorframes and pillars of which now resemble the columns of an ancient temple. Between the columns the viewer glimpses a barren landscape of dusty mountainous terrain. The man's lips are closed, as if listening to the woman; or perhaps both figures have been captured by the painter in a moment of silent stand-off. Plath's sonnet can be read as an ekphrasis in the mode of prosopopeia, spoken in the persona of the woman in de Chirico's painting—and the sestet that comprises the second half of the poem explicitly responds to details from the painting ("Fractured pillars frame prospects of rock," *CP* 21).<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the sestet's allusions to the genre of Greek dramatic tragedy and its

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<sup>11</sup> There are no extant dated manuscripts for "Conversation Among the Ruins" nor a record of its composition date in Plath's journals or calendars. Hargrove dates the poem to spring 1958, placing it among Plath's other "art poems" (66); Steinberg (*Sylvia Plath Archival Documents Hub*, available online: <http://www.sylviaplath.info/collections.html>) postulates spring 1956. The presence of allusions to Euripides's *Bacchae* in the poem provides evidence, alongside the biographical details, to support Steinberg's proposed composition date.

<sup>12</sup> On "Conversation Among the Ruins": Rose examines the poem's placement by Hughes as the opening poem of *Collected Poems* (89-90), arguing that it is used to signal "the start of a tragic play" (90) and a battle between Apolline [Plathian] and Dionysiac [Hughesian] modes of poetry; Britzolakis, in *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*, argues that Plath's poem transforms de Chirico's *mise-en-scène* into an excessive mourning ritual (196-197); Sagar suggests that the ruins the poem's speaker finds herself among are "the ruins of her poem ["Three Caryatids Without A Portico," by Hugo Robus. *A Study in Sculptural Dimensions*]" demolished by



tragic heroes signals that the poem is drawing on an additional source text; and three specific concordances of character, plot, and image in the opening octave suggest that the first half of the poem responds more clearly to elements of Euripides's *Bacchae*, which Plath had recently seen performed, than to de Chirico's painting.

In the ancient Greek play *Dionysus* (Bacchus) is the first character to speak, and his opening gesture is a unique act of metatheatre, summoning on to the stage his Chorus of singing and dancing bacchae—his maenads, or priestess-followers (Dionysus is the god of wine and altered consciousness, and a god who confounds dichotomies, presiding over the genres of tragedy and comedy).<sup>13</sup> In Euripides, the god enters and overturns the decorous life of Pentheus, king of Thebes, who represents a too-narrow version of civic order and conventional logic. When Pentheus refuses to honor the god or accept him into the Greek pantheon, Dionysus conjures an earthquake which “shatter[s] the house of Pentheus” (Lucas 42) (a recurring image in the Greek text is of breached walls, symbolic of the irrational forces of ecstatic chaos that the god represents entering the ordered city of Thebes).<sup>14</sup> Rereading “Conversation Among the Ruins” with the *Bacchae* in mind, we find Plath's speaker observing a man who is a Dionysiac force, identified in the poem by his divine attributes of intoxicating grapes, music, and an entourage of ecstatic bacchae. His entrance into the speaker's life is a catastrophic event, and she finds, like

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[Daniel] Huws” in a review published in *Broadsheet* in February 1956 (49-50); and Hedley discusses the poem in relation to the gendered dynamics of the ekphrastic tradition (81-84). Hargrove provides a formal and metrical analysis of the poem (65-68). Although Kroll discusses at length the importance of de Chirico's imagery for the “moon Muses” of Plath's 1958 ekphrastic poems, “The Disquieting Muses” and “On the Decline of Oracles” (23-40), she does not examine “Conversation Among the Ruins,” which resists her thesis.

<sup>13</sup> It is the only instance in extant ancient Greek tragedy in which the Chorus are summoned on to the stage by a character in the play.

<sup>14</sup> *δατινάζαντος*, *diatinaxantos*, “shakes asunder,” Euripides, *Bacchae*, 606; the translation provided in the body of the essay above quotes from the play text Plath saw performed.

Pentheus, that her meeting with Dionysus unsettles all sense of order in her life and overturns the familiar conventions of society (and poetry). Finally, just as Pentheus observes the wreckage of his palace, so does Plath's speaker survey the ruins of her house, its walls destroyed by the man's earthshaking entrance—a demolition literalized in the poem by the off-rhymes which shatter the sonnet's rhyme scheme.

Reading "Conversation Among the Ruins" biographically suggests that the poem stages the chaotic shock of Dionysus's entrance into the life of Pentheus as a mythic parallel to the emotional and poetic disturbance of Ted Hughes's entrance into Plath's life in February 1956. Taking its cue from Dionysus's metatheatrical gesture in the *Bacchae*, the poem also metapoetically reflects on Plath's impulse towards classicism and to be "classic" in drawing this mythic parallel. Both the biographical and the metapoetic are in play, for example, in the ambivalent gazes of the poem/painting's two figures ("Rooted to your black look," CP 21). The reader wonders whether the speaker sees herself in the classicizing mode as reflected in the male gaze (Hughes entered her life as Plath was immersed in tragedy), or whether she has adopted the dress of a maenad to reveal to the man/Dionysus her intention to become his myth-invoking follower. Yet the poem also seems to be reflecting on the interpellating effect of Plath's modernist, New Critical training at Cambridge, which has written her into the garb of the maenad—a follower of the "classic" tradition, "[c]omposed in Grecian tunic" (CP 21). The poet thus observes the speaker/herself in the classicizing mode, concurrently writing herself into a literary tradition and self-consciously scrutinizing the effects on her poetry of this "classical" training at Cambridge, both in ancient Greek and in modes of Eliotian "classic" literature.

Plath's metapoetic self-awareness in "Conversation Among the Ruins" works to some extent to temper the conservative nature of its mythic parallel by adding a complexity to what

might otherwise be a facile classicizing gesture. The poem's modernist classicism is also modulated by Plath's explicitly biographical parallel, which evidences a resistance to her training in "classic" impersonal poetry. In his definition of "classicism," Eliot had included personal "living material" ("the emotions and feelings of the writer") as part of "the material at hand" which an artist might draw upon and synthesize; but he had also earlier clarified that a "classic" artistic creation was achieved in an impersonal way ("this Impersonal theory") (*Selected Prose* 177, 40). Eliot argued in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" that the poet must "self-sacrifice," that is, erase any trace of personality in order to gain access to the "historical sense" which informed "classic" literature—a special awareness of the past that perceives the simultaneity of "the pastness of the past" and its "presence" (*Selected Prose* 40, 38). "Conversation Among the Ruins" evidences an attempt to make material Eliot's conception of the simultaneity of the past, the present, and its tradition in the poet's layering of an ancient Greek play, a modernist neoclassical painting, and a contemporary event. At the same time, Plath's foregrounding of the autobiographical "I" as a further textual layer within that palimpsest withstands the subjective effacement and homogenization that cultural hegemony—the legitimizing "tradition"—effects. Paying attention to the allusive practice of "Conversation Among the Ruins" captures an essential tension that runs throughout Plath's poetry between a conservative impulse to write objective, impersonal classicizing poetry (reinforced by the conservative, male gaze of the poetry editors to whom she submitted work), and a burgeoning impulse towards subjective lyric expression.<sup>15</sup> Plath's innovative palimpsestic structure, composed of ancient and modernist cultural texts overlaid by a biographical scene and completed by a metapoetic layer of self-

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<sup>15</sup> On Plath's compositional practices as responsive to her correspondence with editors, see Steinberg, "Sincerely Yours": Plath and *The New Yorker*."

reflection, actively resists the false universalizing of New Criticism's "classic" literature; yet the poet remains bound by the cultural conservatism to which she had been acculturated through her critical and literary training at Smith and Cambridge in her impulse to be "classic" and align herself with a masculine poetic tradition. Plath recognizes that it is her use of a mythic parallel to place herself in a masculine canonical tradition that distinguishes her as a poet, "certainly not another 'poetess'" ("Foreword" vii).<sup>16</sup>

"Conversation Among the Ruins" stages an ambivalent double movement of complicity in modernist classicizing modes and resistance to New Critical objectivity and impersonality, focalized around the poem's classical Greek allusions. This early poem's blend of myth and autobiography foreshadows in important ways the poetic citation practice Plath employs in her later Electra poems, to which I'll return, and illustrates some of the ways in which she was beginning to transform modernist forms of "classic" and classicizing poetry. A review essay commissioned by the Cambridge literary journal *Gemini* the following spring (1957) reveals Plath writing in a stricter New Critical mode, but it sheds further light on Plath's developing classicizing practice. The poetry collection under review, *The Stones of Troy* by C. A. Trypanis, a scholar of ancient and modern Greek at Exeter College, Oxford, is dense with allusions to Greco-Roman literature, invoking, translating, or refiguring scenes and myths from Homer, Herodas, and Ovid, among many other ancient texts. After allusively noting that the book employs the "mythical method," Plath explicitly introduces the critical framework for her review with a quotation from the final paragraph of Eliot's essay on James Joyce, "*Ulysses*, Order, and Myth": "In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and

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<sup>16</sup> Parody must invoke and so reinforce the discourse it seeks to subvert, embodying a "mixture of conservative and revolutionary impulses in both aesthetic and social terms" (Hutcheon 115).

antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him.... It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot’s argument—that *Ulysses* uses myth to bring order to chaos—and his triple repetition of the “parallel” between the past and the present [*Selected Prose* 177], suggest that Plath already had this essay in mind when she composed “Conversation Among the Ruins”; Plath was familiar with Eliot’s essay from Elizabeth Drew’s lectures in twentieth-century literature, which she attended at Smith).<sup>17</sup> Although Plath quotes Eliot on Joyce’s ethical achievement at the outset, the body of her review is concerned with the aesthetic achievement of *Trypanis*’s “parallel.” She does not quote from Eliot directly, but she uses his criteria of success, that is, a “use of appropriate styles and symbols to each division:” an organic use of myth that is not simply a ruse (“an amusing dodge”) or “scaffolding erected by the author . . . of no interest in the completed structure” (*Selected Prose* 175).

Throughout the review, Plath engages in a practical criticism exercise, demonstrating a close reading of the specific use of language in the poems and consistently drawing attention to the moral relevance of the poems as she sees them. In her analysis, we learn that she disapproves of moments in which the poet’s tone is nostalgic or sentimental, lamenting the loss of a heroic past; and she criticizes poems in which the verb or adjective choice is incongruous or unwittingly

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<sup>17</sup> Plath’s class notes from Drew’s lectures quote from and paraphrase Eliot’s *Ulysses* (“Holograph Notes for English 211”; qtd. in *Annotating Modernism* 61-62). Anthony Cuda, in a paper presented at the 38<sup>th</sup> Annual T. S. Eliot Society Meeting, St. Louis, Missouri, September 2017, dates these notes to 1955, when Plath attended Drew’s lectures in her final year at Smith for the Honors Review Unit (cited in *Annotating Modernism*, 86 n152). The poet’s copy of Drew, *T.S. Eliot: the Design of His Poetry*, which includes annotations and underlining on the book’s introductory discussion of Eliot’s use of myth (1), is held by SCSC.

bathetic, or where the interplay of epic and colloquial diction jars.<sup>18</sup> She finds some metaphors too literal (“[o]ften, meditations on the past are occasioned by the digging up of some ruins”); and she argues that the moral lessons proposed by the poems, while offering novel readings of ancient myth (“For only in giant disasters / True-born and bastards count for the same”), are undercut by their lack of subtlety (“Stones of Troy” 99).<sup>19</sup> The reader learns that Plath prefers the subtleties of Homer himself, and she recommends Richmond Lattimore’s 1951 translation of the *Iliad* over that of Trypanis, whose versions are riddled, she argues, with awkward imitations of Homer’s epic epithets (“foam-stung sail,” “foam-clawed sand,” “sky-tall trees”).<sup>20</sup>

Plath highlights Trypanis’s use of literary and material intertexts to engage with the ancient literary, social, and cultural past (epigraphs from ancient tombs, Byzantine church frescoes, and late antique works of historiography), arguing that such intermediary texts do not necessarily reduce the vividness of feeling expressed by the poem or prevent the poet from meditating on “war, love, death, etc.”<sup>21</sup> She also praises the moments where space-time folds and the ancient and the modern are collapsed, such as when a vivid modern speaker observes the ancient myth play out. Plath selects the poem “Icarus” to illustrate the ways in which the finest poems of the collection use ancient myth as a metaphor for a contemporary observation. The poem eschews the narrative method and instead “chooses to view the shadow cast by the winged man and draw a private inference from the myth” (“Stones of Troy” 102):

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<sup>18</sup> Plath, “Review: *The Stones of Troy* by C.A. Trypanis” (1957).

<sup>19</sup> Trypanis, *Stones of Troy*, qtd in Plath, “Stones of Troy,” 100.

<sup>20</sup> Plath quotes Lattimore, *The Iliad of Homer* (296) on the slaughter of Imbrius by Teukros at *Iliad* 13.178-81 (“one turns at random to a modern translation of the *Iliad*...”); Trypanis, *Stones of Troy*, qtd in Plath, “Stones of Troy,” 101.

<sup>21</sup> Trypanis, *Stones of Troy*, qtd in Plath, “Stones of Troy,” 100.

I did not hear the cry, nor the splash.  
I did not see the waxen tears. Only the shadow  
Of wings moving across the landscape,  
Hollow footfalls of those we loved,  
Who passed so strangely beyond our life. (Trypanis, qtd. in “Stones of Troy” [102])

“Every poet has his own Icarus,” Plath observes (“Stones of Troy” 102). In moments such as this one, the poet “transforms the material” and provides “fresh insight and impact to history and legend”—an implicit reference to Eliot’s argument in ‘Tradition and the Individual Talent’ that “the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past” (“Stones of Troy” 100, 103; *Selected Prose* 39). She concludes her review in the Eliotic mode, remarking that the weakest poems are those where the “parallel between old and new is pointed at, rather than realized in the poems’ shape and texture”—poems where the mythic scaffolding is conspicuous (“Stones of Troy” 103).

The *Gemini* essay provides an insight into some of the qualities that Plath thought identified an achieved classically-allusive poem: a colloquial register, but not one unwittingly bathetic or light; an anti-nostalgic mood, absent of any obvious metaphors or unimaginative classicizing (“marble Ephebes,” “marble sleep,” “marble stage,” “marble steps”); a moral expressive of a private inference implicitly relevant to the grander human experience (“war, love, death, etc.”); and while she cautiously appraises the uses of intermediary texts, she celebrates a focus on an element of or an image from the myth, rather than a recontextualization its narrative entire.<sup>22</sup> Re-reading “Conversation Among the Ruins” in light of this review reveals Plath’s

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<sup>22</sup> Trypanis, qtd in “Stones of Troy” (101); Plath, “Stones of Troy” (100).

earlier experimentation with some of the successful qualities she pinpoints in *Trypanis*: the use of an intermediary text (de Chirico's painting) that enables her to stage a moment from a myth (the aftermath of Dionysus's earthquake); and the positing of a relation between her ekphrastic meditation and the greater human theme of love and the shock of a personal encounter—although the poet had not yet mastered the use of a colloquial diction, nor rid herself of the too-obvious modernist ruins.

Plath reflects in a letter to her mother after filing her review:

It was a difficult job, as I felt most of the poems were weak, & fought hard to be positive & quote a lot in my 7-page review. But also graphically showed in detail why I felt such worn adjective-noun combinations as “haunted gardens”, “golden toys”, “jasmine throat”, “dusty grey”, “ivory chariots”, etc. did little to re-awaken the vigor of the greek myths [*sic*] or transform the greek legends [*sic*] vitally in the context of modern poems. Honestly, when I pick up The two British monthlies: Encounter & The London Magazine, I shudder & grit my teeth at the cheap, flat “new movement poetry”, which never commits itself, but talks about and about: the meanings are dull, often superficial “top-of-the-head” philosophizing, and there is no music, no sense picturing. It is hogwash; not even that good. Both Ted & I are alone, really alone, I feel among young modern poets . . . to treat the great subjects of life: love, death, war, etc. (L2 94)<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Emphases Plath's own.



Plath's final comments here ("Honestly...") broaden from a critique of a single collection of contemporary poetry to an expression of her wider dissatisfaction with the Oxford Movement poets Kingsley Amis, Donald Davie, Thom Gunn, John Holloway, Elizabeth Jennings, Philip Larkin, and John Wain, who commanded the British postwar poetry scene.<sup>24</sup> The distinction that Plath draws between the poetry she and her husband were writing in 1957 and that of the Movement poets centers on their respective uses of myth, and it is a distinction that both poets figured in terms of a duel between Dionysiac (Plath and Hughes) and Apolline (the Movement) modes of poetic expression.<sup>25</sup> While the Movement poets had rejected myth, Hughes and his poetry circle embraced myth, mysticism, and anthropology—Plath's classicizing impulse was now additionally reinforced by a wish to assimilate to a Hughesian mythopoetics.<sup>26</sup> In her own work, Plath was attempting to achieve an organic use of myth that dealt with the subjects of now, "love, death, war" (*L2* 94; she quotes from her own essay), and she may have hoped to find another ally in the classicizing Trypanis. She ultimately judged that his endeavor had failed. Plath's dissatisfaction can be attributed as much to the criteria with which she judged Trypanis as to the collection's dullness or lack of musicality. For despite her theoretical espousal of a New Critical framework and her employment of Eliot's value-system for classic literature in this review, Plath may have been searching for an unspoken quality, one which tested the boundaries

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<sup>24</sup> The Movement poets had recently published two anthologies, *Poets of the 1950s: an Anthology of New English Verse*, edited by Enright and *New Lines: an Anthology*, edited by Conquest.

<sup>25</sup> On their shared antipathy toward the Movement poets, see Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (16-20).

<sup>26</sup> Hughesian mythopoetics are also marked by their anti-Movement language of violence; in a section from Plath's fragmentary unfinished early novel *Falcon Yard*, "Venus in the Seventh," the Plath character Jess recites the poem "Conversation Among the Ruins" for the Hughes character, who approves of its violent one-syllable words: "Squab, patch, crack" (qtd. in *Red Comet* 435).

and qualities of the mythical method, and it was this she failed to find in Trypanis; but she lacked the critical framework to express or validate her dissatisfaction. In “Conversation Among the Ruins”, Plath’s particular strategy to reawaken the vigor and vitality of myth was a striking experimentation with a metapoetic self-reflexive mode and an autobiographical lyric “I”; she had not found this validated in Trypanis. In a series of Electra poems composed two years later in 1959, Plath would return to and extend this experimentation.

“Electra on Azalea Path” and “The Colossus” have both been routinely discussed as narrative works of biomythography in which Plath adopts the persona of the daughter-in-mourning in the family romance of psychoanalysis.<sup>27</sup> While the best of this mode of scholarship recognizes Plath’s reflexivity and her conscious placement of the poetic speaker as an analysand in a “theatre of mourning,” paying additional attention to Plath’s literary training in Greek tragedy and the critical and discursive contexts in which she encountered those texts nuances these psychoanalytic readings in significant ways.<sup>28</sup> Namely, by challenging the assumption that Jung is the primary source text for Plath’s allusions to Electra and by adding complexity to the assumed directionality and chain of transmission of the Electra myth from Greek tragedy to Jung to Plath. Important here are the discourses of classical scholarship to which Plath was exposed at Cambridge. In the first half of the twentieth century, anglophone classical scholarship was experiencing a transformation in scholarly voice and mode under the belated influence of nineteenth century German scholarship, accelerated by the influx of German refugee scholars to Oxford and Cambridge in the late 1930s. One significant and broad change of approach within the discipline was a movement away from purely philological readings of ancient texts towards

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<sup>27</sup> Notably, Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*; see also, more recently, Bakogianni, “Electra in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry.”

<sup>28</sup> Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*; Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning*.

readings that were socially and historically contextualized; that is, a shift from simply establishing what it was that Euripides said to enquiring what it was that Euripides meant. A second and specific change in discourse revealed the influence of Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), which had used Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* to formulate a model for the psycho-sexual development of children. Freud's work had a pronounced impact on the discipline, and classical commentaries and critical editions began to explicitly employ a psychoanalytic framework to elucidate readings of ancient literature. In the early 1930s, for example, Euripides's *Bacchae* had been read as a study in religious (read fascist) fanaticism; by the late 1950s, the play was presented as a study in psychological repression (Oakley 96). One consequence of this psychoanalytic turn in classics was that the translations of Greek tragedy Plath read at Cambridge already had a psychoanalytic lens in place. To illustrate the impact of this psychoanalytic turn on the discipline of classics at Cambridge—that is, its embrace of self-reflexive and biographical modes of scholarship—and its implications for Plath's *Electra* poems, I have chosen three examples from a text that Plath owned and read, Phillip Vellacott's 1956 Penguin Classics translation of Aeschylus, *The Oresteian Trilogy*.

In the text of *The Choephoroi* (*The Libation Bearers*)—the central play of *The Oresteian Trilogy* which narrates the murder of Clytemnestra by her children Electra and Orestes—Plath has underlined and marked with a black star in the left-hand margin the lines: “None from outside can help; we must ourselves / Cure our own case” (Vellacott 120).<sup>29</sup> Vellacott's words compress and translate *Choephoroi*, lines 470-3: “Except this way, the house can find no

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<sup>29</sup> Plath's copy of Vellacott is inscribed “Sylvia Hughes, 1957,” suggesting that the book's annotations date from April or May 1957 when Plath was revising for her Tripos examinations (SCSC); Plath completed her review essay on *The Stones of Troy* in late March 1957 as her final task of the term before the revision period began.

stanching [ἄμμοτον] of its wound [ἄλγος]. Not from without must find its cure [ἄκος], but from itself”.<sup>30</sup> In ancient Greek, ἄλγος (*algos*, *Cho.* 470) in the singular, as here, refers primarily to bodily pain, and secondarily—typically in the plural ἄλγεα, *algea*—to grief, and so the metaphor Aeschylus employs “is that of an incurable wound, which breaks out at intervals, like the sore of Philoctetes” (Tucker 111), unable to be stanchied (ἄδυσκατάπαντον ἄλγος, *iō duskatapauton algos*, *Cho.* 478).<sup>31</sup> The use of psychoanalytic language by Vellacott in his translation of these lines—transforming a “wound” to a “case,” invoking the “case” studies of Freud’s psychoanalytic practice—is therefore a striking interpolation. This shift in emphasis is reinforced by Vellacott’s elision within his translation of ἄκος (*akos*, *Cho.* 472), “cure,” and the specified form of that cure, the ἄμμοτος (*emmetos*, *Cho.* 471), a type of lint “plug” dressing used for gaping wounds (a word which occurs elsewhere only in medical texts). This elision encourages a reading of “cure” that is suggestive of the “talking cure” employed by Freud, prompted by Vellacott’s use of “case.” Vellacott’s psychoanalytic phrasing may represent an attempt to reflect the linguistic oddity of the medical term ἄμμοτος in translation; but his shift from a suppurating physical wound in the Greek (ἄλγος) to a psychological trauma in English (“case”) reveals the influence of the broader psychoanalytic turn of the discipline.<sup>32</sup> Plath’s black star in the left-hand margin indicates her attention to this psychoanalytic phrase and marks a moment in the text where her (autobiographical) interest has been piqued (“no one has the power to cure you but yourself,” *J* 186).

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<sup>30</sup> Vellacott’s translation uses the Greek text of Tucker’s critical edition, *The Choephoroi of Aeschylus*; the translation here is Tucker’s (111).

<sup>31</sup> s.v., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 61 (hereafter *LSJ*).

<sup>32</sup> s.v., *LSJ* 542.

A second moment of psychoanalytic framing occurs at the beginning of the first play of *The Oresteian Trilogy*, *Agamemnon*, with the return of the eponymous king of Mycenae from the Trojan War. His wife Clytemnestra appeals to the king's vanity to convince him to enter the palace in defiance of a divine taboo by stepping on a carpet of purple-crimson cloth—this moment seals Agamemnon's fate. Clytemnestra argues that Agamemnon should not be concerned by an illogical prohibition (is the sea not inexhaustibly full of dye? is he not rich enough to afford its vast stores of purple-crimson?), particularly on a day of celebration (Vellacott 74). The queen declares that Agamemnon's return is like that of Zeus, who brings warmth in spring after winter and coolness in autumn after summer: "when Zeus / From the unripe grape [□μφακος] presses his wine, then through the house / Heat dies, and coolness comes, as through this royal door enters its lord, perfected [τελείου] to receive his own" (Ag. 970-4; Vellacott 74).<sup>33</sup> In the introduction to the text, Plath has marked with a vertical line in black ink Vellacott's explication of Clytemnestra's wry metaphors which reveal her murderous intentions to the audience: the sea is her hatred, inexhaustible in its desire for crimson blood to avenge Agamemnon's slaughter of their daughter Iphigenia. Contemporary commentaries on the *Oresteia* were in fact divided on the issue of whether Clytemnestra is talking in metaphors here, with one scholar using his critical edition of the *Agamemnon* to disparage the "unwarranted psychological niceties" (Fraenkel 440) in another scholar's reading of the double entendre of this speech.<sup>34</sup> For his translation and critical notes, Vellacott has therefore chosen to employ a psychoanalytic reading that emphasizes the sub-surface discourse of Clytemnestra's words. In Greek, Vellacott continues, an "unripe grape" (□μφακος, *omphakos*, 970) euphemistically—

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<sup>33</sup> Vellacott used the Greek text of Campbell's *The Agamemnon of Aeschylus*.

<sup>34</sup> Fraenkel commenting on Thomson's and Headlam's reading of Ag. 970-4: "This is another passage couched in language of deliberate obscurity for the sake of double meaning..." (101).

invoking its ancient metaphorical usage—refers to a virgin girl “not yet ripe for marriage,” and “perfected” (*τελείου, teleiou*) is the word used of an unblemished, ritually cleansed sacrificial victim; Plath has underlined the word “perfected” in Clytemnestra’s speech.<sup>35</sup> The sexual imagery and the incest narrative suggested by this metaphor—the father has pressed wine (blood) from the unripe grape of the daughter—alludes to an earlier moment in the myth, in which Iphigenia was taken from Clytemnestra under the pretext that she would be married to the Greek hero Achilles. When Agamemnon sacrifices his daughter Iphigenia she is dressed as a bride, and Clytemnestra makes a gruesome pun here on the anticipated blood-letting from a broken hymen that was forestalled by Agamemnon’s offering of Iphigenia’s life blood to the gods in an inverted wedding ceremony. The latent incest imagery uncovered by a psychoanalytic reading of the Greek is signaled to the reader of the translation by Vellacott’s framing of this moment in the play in his introduction; but it is also reinforced by the translator’s (Freudian) mistranslation of a later moment in the play linked to this one by another metaphorical reference to Iphigenia. In a speech in which Clytemnestra defends her “treacherous” murder of Agamemnon to the Chorus, Vellacott compresses five lines of Greek (“for what he did to my own green shoot [*ἄρνος, ernos*], sprung from him—the much-grieved Iphigenia—in being slain by the sword [*ξίφοδηλήτ, xiphodēlētoi*] he has paid the price in death for what he started,” *Ag.* 1525-9), into two lines in English. He also creates a Freudian sexual subtext by translating the verb “slain by the sword” as a noun (“sword”), switching the object of the sentence from Agamemnon to Iphigenia, and reprising the imagery of the bloodied virgin: Agamemnon was the first party to deceive, Clytemnestra argues, “When on my virgin daughter / His savage sword

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<sup>35</sup> Vellacott, 26, 74; s.v. *LSJ* 1229. Plath has also underlined Clytemnestra’s repetition of this ritual formula after Agamemnon’s murder: “By Justice, guardian of my child, now perfected” (92).

descended” (Vellacott 95).<sup>36</sup> Plath has marked these two lines in the left-hand margin of her copy of the *Oresteia* with a vertical line in black ink, indicating her alertness to the psychoanalytic themes (in the translation) and incestuous subtext (in the ancient text)—anticipated by her close reading of Vellacott’s critical introduction—that circulate around Aeschylus’s tragic heroines.

An understanding of the ways in which ancient Greek tragedy was already framed in psychoanalytic terms when Plath read the plays at Cambridge challenges a facile reading of the presence of Electra in Plath’s poems as an autobiographical “identification.” The lens of the translation and its paratextual apparatus demonstrate that it was as impossible for Plath as it is for her twenty-first century readers to read the figure of Electra neutrally “after Freud.” Moreover, it reveals that Plath’s Electra-persona in “Electra” and “The Colossus” is not a transposition of the ancient tragic heroine into a modern setting, but a blend of elements and themes from the tragic narratives and mythic characterizations of Electra, her mother Clytemnestra, and her sister Iphigenia. These allusions are concentrated in the conclusions of both poems. It is Clytemnestra, for example, who is a “hound-bitch” (“Electra,” *CP* 117) in *Agamemnon*, and the ambivalence of the phrase at the close of Plath’s poem is heightened by the term’s twofold employment in the Greek text: while Clytemnestra refers to herself as a loyal “watch-dog” (κύνα, *kyna*, 607), Cassandra returns the term as a “vile... she-hound” (μισήτης κυνός, *misētēs kynos*, 1228) (Hughes may borrow Plath’s phrasing here for his translation of the *Oresteia*: his Cassandra rebukes the “houndbitch” Clytemnestra).<sup>37</sup> And at the close of “The Colossus,” the daughter-speaker is “married to shadow”—that is, she is the virgin daughter who has been married to death in an inverted wedding ceremony—and no longer listens “for the scrape of a keel / On the

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<sup>36</sup> ἄρνος, “young sprout, shoot” is also used metaphorically for “offspring,” s.v. *LSJ* 691.

<sup>37</sup> Vellacott, *Aeschylus*, 64, 85; Hughes, trans. *The Oresteia*, 59.

blank stones of the landing” (CP 130), reversing the extended metaphor Clytemnestra uses to liken the joy of Agamemnon’s homecoming to the sight of a long-lost son to a father or the “sight of land to men long at sea” (as Clytemnestra also re-uses the image of a watch-dog (*κῶνα*, *kyna*, 896) in this speech, here, of Agamemnon, Plath may be creating a further allusive link between the loyal speaker of “The Colossus” and the “hound-bitch” of “Electra on Azalea Path” [CP 117]).<sup>38</sup> Vellacott’s translation of Aeschylus’s *The Oresteian Trilogy* also bears upon a reading of Plath’s “Full Fathom Five” (CP 92-3). Recalling Vellacott’s emphasis on the subtext of incest in the Greek play, we find “the old myth” (“archaic”) in Plath’s poem in an incestuous relation with the father-sea that blurs the subjectivities of Electra and her sister Iphigenia (“Waist down. . . . Your shelled bed I remember” [CP 93]). This allusion to the imagery of Aeschylus’s Greek—via Vellacott—is reinforced by the poem’s reference to the breaking of the divine taboo that sealed Agamemnon’s downfall at a key moment of action in the play: “you defy other godhood. / . . . / Father, this thick air is murderous” (CP 93). The double presence of the incest narrative and the extended imagery of the sea-murder of the father-husband from Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon* 970-4 suggests that “Full Fathom Five” should be read alongside “Electra on Azalea Path” and “The Colossus” not only as a meditation on “the old father-worship subject” (UJ 518), but also as an Electra poem that engages explicitly with Aeschylus’s *Oresteia*. Re-reading “Electra on Azalea Path,” “The Colossus,” and “Full Fathom Five” after Aeschylus reveals that the poems go beyond the brief plot sketch and characterization provided in Jung’s

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<sup>38</sup> “There is no dearer sight than shelter after storm; / No escape sweeter than from siege of circumstance. / Now, after siege and storm endured, my happy heart / Welcomes my husband, faithful watch-dog of his home, / Our ship’s firm anchor. . . . as dear, as to a father’s hope / His longed-for son, a spring to thirsty travellers, / Or sight of land unlooked-for to men long at sea” (Vellacott 73) (Ag. 895-901).



gloss of the Electra archetype, and borrow specific details and vocabulary from the ancient trilogy.

As with the palimpsestic construction of “Conversation Among the Ruins,” Plath’s Electra poems overlay an ancient text with its adaptation in a psychoanalytic archetypal template which in turn is filtered through a layer of personal biography. One key distinction between the earlier poem and “Electra on Azalea Path” and “The Colossus” is the tone of the final metapoetic layer of self-reflexive analysis, as the speaker observes herself in the act of classical allusion. In these later poems, the voice is explicitly parodic and draws attention to its breaking of the New Critical rules: where Eliot advised that myth should not appear as “scaffolding” in the modern text, Plath’s speaker erects “stilts” (*CP* 117) and “little ladders” (*CP* 129); and where Plath criticized Trypanis for his too-obvious use of ruins and marble, her poems foreground the “necropolis” (*CP* 117) of their setting, a ruin like the “Roman Forum” (*CP* 129) filled with “stony actors” (*CP* 117) and shattered statuary—“fluted bones and acanthine hair . . . littered // [. . . To the horizon-line” (*CP* 130). This parodic tone may signal Plath’s admission of the compromise she has made in her Electra poems. Electra is, after all, in one reading, a myth in which the daughter upholds the law of the father—the phallic order that Clytemnestra attempted to resist—and shepherds the triumph of the patriarchy over the matriarchy. The self-reflexive mode may therefore represent an attempt to resolve the tension between a culturally conservative impulse to write modernist “classic” poems and a nascent subversive impulse towards subjective expression; but the poet’s classicizing impulse remains conservative—a wish to assimilate into the cultural hegemony of patriarchal poetic tradition. Where Plath found confidence in her earlier classicizing poetry—a mark of her assimilation into Cambridge life and a Hughesian

mythopoetics—she now mocks the earnestness of “Conversation Among the Ruins” as much as she parodies Eliot.

The altered tone of “Electra on Azalea Path” and “The Colossus” foreshadows the bitter burlesque of modernist classicism in Plath’s *Ariel* poems. In “Daddy,” for example, the symbolic father is the shattered *Colossus of Constantine*, displayed, as Plath would have seen it, in the courtyard of the Capitoline Museum overlooking the Roman Forum (“Marble-heavy . . . / Ghastly statue with one gray toe” [CP 222] ). While in “Edge” (CP 272-3), the woman’s body is at its most abject when it is most explicitly classical—as Clytemnestra says in *Agamemnon*, “perfected” (τελετε, 974; CP 272). An understanding of the scholarly framework through which Plath engaged with ancient Greek tragedy does not detract from the innovations of her classicizing poems; it reveals a poet self-reflexively, ambivalently, observing her complicity in an academic poetic tradition founded in social and cultural conservatism.