

Pan/Pun:

Doubletake and Double Exposure in “Daddy” by Sylvia Plath

by Christopher Nield

Abstract

My essay examines the many faces of Pan in Sylvia Plath’s poetry and prose. I begin with an apparently simple question: why is the phrase “panzer-man” repeated in “Daddy”? I argue that this repetition asks us to look twice at the phrase – and to see that, in conjunction with the line, “a cleft in your chin instead of your foot,” Plath offers the reader a pun on the ancient Greek god Pan. I identify this as the Pan/pun: a ludic principle that elucidates key literary strategies in *Ariel*, specifically panic as an expression of the Romantic sublime and the use of satire to construct a drama of fertility versus sterility.

Introduction

Why is the phrase “panzer-man” repeated in Sylvia Plath’s “Daddy”? “Panzer-man, panzer-man, O You—” she chants.¹ On the face of it, the repetition evokes obsession,

1 Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), 223. All references to “panzer-man” relate to this source. In this essay, all quotations from Plath’s poems are taken from *Collected Poems* and are referred to parenthetically by page number.

and momentarily possessed by the poem’s incantatory momentum, we are unlikely to pause and probe deeper – yet it follows another puzzling repetition. When Plath says, “And my Taroc Pack and my Taroc Pack” (223), are we supposed to picture two decks of cards? This seems doubtful. Perhaps she is merely maintaining the rhythm of the opening line, “You do not do, you do not do” (222), which propels the blitzkrieg of rhyming that takes us on a nightmarish tour of wars, mass-murder, vampirism and the joys of modern marriage. But why does the poem begin with this repetition? Is it simply to dramatise the psycho-analytical category of repetition-compulsion? In search of further explanation, any close reader of Plath is likely to turn to her obsession with the double or doppelgänger. Plath’s undergraduate thesis *The Magic Mirror*² explored the double in Dostoevsky, for instance, and according to Plath’s notes, her *Ariel* poem “Death & Co” is about the “double or schizophrenic nature of death.”³ Is there doubling at play in “Daddy”? Seeking textual confirmation, we look again

2 Sylvia Plath, *The Magic Mirror: A Study of the Double in Two of Dostoevsky’s Novels* (Llanwddyn, Powys: Embers Handpress, 1989).

3 Plath, *Collected Poems*, 294.

perhaps at the reference to the “black man who/ Bit my pretty red heart in two” (222-23). In two?

Plath explained that “Daddy” was spoken by: a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the *two strains* [my emphasis] marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.”⁴

It could be argued, therefore, that the opening repetition of “You do not do” announces the theme of doubleness, explored in the battle between these “two strains” for supremacy. Certainly, the poem is constructed around opposites such as white/black, woman/man, Jew/Nazi and psychological/political, although these contrasts do not map neatly onto each other. Can we add exoteric/esoteric or literal/ludic? Plath’s mysteriously vanishing second novel was called *Doubletake* and then *Double Exposure*⁵: can we perform our own doubletake at this double “panzer-man” to see if there is more to this figure than meets the eye?

On the face of it, “panzer-man” has a single meaning. The speaker depicts her father as the driver of a Panzer tank as part of the Nazi war machine – and this image forms part of the poem’s fascist iconography that includes the Luftwaffe, the swastika and Hitler’s autobiography *Mein Kampf*. In German, “panzer” means “armour” so we could also relate this to the emotional armour worn by a domestic or political tyrant. Yet the repetition of “panzer-man” encourages us to look for a double meaning.

If we were to see (and hear) a pun on the Greek

4 Ibid., 293.

5 Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume 2: 1956–1963*, eds. Peter K. Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), 814.

god Pan, for instance, our interpretation would be immediately strengthened by the following lines, “a cleft in your chin instead of your foot/ But no less a devil for that” (223), which aptly describe the cloven-footed god of myth. Note that the “panzer-man” is “a devil,” not “the devil”; nor is “devil” capitalised. This is both a Pagan fiend as well as a Christian conception of Satan.

The free play of the signifier (“panzer-man”) is released by this possible new signification (Pan) that moves away from what is literally signified (Nazi tank-driver) and, as we shall see, all semantic hell breaks loose. In fact, pursuing the multiple textual clues to the Pan/pun will reveal a fundamental organising principle hidden within the work of one of the 20th century’s major poets, one found in, among others, *The Colossus* (1961), her notes to her abandoned novel *Falcon Yard*, her curious experiment with drama, *Dialogue Over a Ouija Board*, her short story “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams,” and the *Ariel* poems.

Pan/pun as Supernatural Fiend

To discover how Plath saw Pan, it is worth turning to her guide to the Tarot, *The Painted Caravan* by Basil Ivan Rákóczi, which she bought in October 1956.⁶ The book begins: “Symbols are doors leading to the hidden chambers of the mind.”⁷ The “esoteric key” to these doors is owned by the “Master Gypsy” who “is generally a woman in spite of her title.”⁸ Plath claims this authority, referring to her “gypsy ancestress” (223). To use the Tarot is also to step into the role of great poet, with T.S. Eliot

6 Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg, *These Ghostly Archives* (Stroud: Fonthill Media, 2017), 167.

7 Basil Ivan Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan: A Penetration into the Secrets of the Tarot Cards* (The Hague: L.J.C. Boucher, 1954), 7.

8 Ibid.

as the key literary precedent. *The Painted Caravan* praises the “prophetic work” of “The Waste Land,” composed from “consciously cultivated, but subjective, obsession with archetypes of occult law”⁹ and the book’s climatic illustration is of Eliot’s “drowned Phoenician Sailor.”¹⁰ Rákóczi says of the Devil card:

To the Initiate this card represents the hidden face of Osiris, the true face of the Dark Sun, and corresponds to *Pan, the Goatfoot God* [my emphasis], who was the son of Hermes, said to be the originator of the Tarot.

Rákóczi describes how the Initiate and the Master (the Lady Isis) then marry:

They enter the deepest sanctuary and behold him whom we call *Pan or Faunus* [my emphasis] seated upon the High Altar, with a torch of fire between his horns, a beneficent power to those who love him, *striker of panic dread* [my emphasis] and even death to those that hate him. Pan was a God before all Gods came forth and is beyond all Gods.”¹¹

Rákóczi glosses the card as “The Devil, Satan, Baphomet, Lucifer or the Master of the Coven,”¹² so this figure is multiple, ambivalent. In the context of Nazism, seeing Pan in “panzer” would present fascism as a horrifying, death-dealing perversion of Paganism, as well as Satanic from a Christian perspective. However, that puzzlingly doubled Taroc Pack insinuates that no symbol is singular, and while Pan is akin to the Grim Reaper in one context, he is the bringer of poetic inspiration in another. The Pan/pun is a skeleton key to not just one secret room in Plath’s work, but many – starting with the library.

9 Ibid., 24

10 T.S. Eliot. “The Waste Land” in *Collected Poems 1909–1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 2002), 54.

11 Ibid., 55.

12 Ibid.

Pan/pun as Canonical Conversation

As a figure from mythology, Pan connects Plath to the literary canon via possible allusions to “Universal Pan”¹³ in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, the Pan who sings of “the giant wars”¹⁴ in Shelley’s “Song of Pan” and, in particular, Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “A Musical Instrument,” with its teasing opening, “What was he doing the Great God Pan/ Down in the reeds in the river?”¹⁵ The simple answer is that he is fashioning a pipe from a reed. Barrett Browning refers to the story of Pan’s failed seduction of the nymph Syrinx, where in frustration, Pan “bound together reeds of unequal length, since their love was unequal, and so invented a new musical instrument, the reed pipe (Greek *syrinx*).”¹⁶ Curiously, even the myth of Pan the piper is founded on a pun. In the poem, this action forms a parallel with the muse singling out a man for his poetic vocation, one that promises ecstasy and alienation, as the reed pipe can never more return to the ordinary reeds around it – a sense echoed in “Mystic” by Plath, in which she asks, “Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?” (268.)

Look twice, however, at Pan’s instrument. Pan “hacked and hewed as a great god can” with his “hard bleak steel.”¹⁷ His call is “piercing sweet.”¹⁸ What we see is one of the most pornographic of all Victorian poems. The parallel between Pan’s ravishment of the reed

13 John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. John Leonard (London: Penguin, 2003), iv. 266.

14 Percy Bysshe Shelley, “Song of Pan,” in *The Major Works*, eds. Zachary Leader and Michael O’Neill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 27.

15 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, “A Musical Instrument,” in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1993), p.1048, line 1.

16 William Hansen, *Classical Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 255.

17 Barrett Browning, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2*, p. 1048, lines 15-16.

18 Ibid., p.1049, line 32.

and Pan “making a poet out of a man”¹⁹ creates a jolt of pansexual ambiguity, one true to his origins: “ancient art depicts him engaged in making a pass at Aphrodite, chasing after a shepherd lad, or having sexual intercourse with a goat.”²⁰ The relevance of this to “Daddy” is in Plath’s depiction of the man with a “love of the rack and the screw” and her transgressive assent to these desires: “And I said I do, I do” (224).

Can we do a double-take at that repeated “I do”? On the one hand, the repetition suggests the eager submission of the bride. On the other, it evokes the “I do” spoken by both bride and groom, with the previous “I” incorporating both. In this sense, the speaker, who “made a model” of her father to marry recognises that, at the wedding, she played the role of both the bride and the groom – and, in that realisation, asserts her *Pandrogyny*, her integration of the warring elements within herself. As Rákóczi writes in his passage on Pan: “the Initiate and the Master are now mysteriously become one entity.”²¹ Absorbing the male principle, the speaker no longer seeks it in the external world and is ready to assert, “So daddy I’m finally through” (224).

Pan/pun as Confessional Code

If “Pan or Faunus,” as referred to by Rákóczi, was significant to Plath, we would expect to find this “Goatfoot God” elsewhere in her prose and poetry. Indeed, there is an extraordinary chain of associations around Pan in Plath’s notes for her abandoned novel *Falcon Yard*, which Heather Clark dates to late 1958.²² Plath writes:

19 Ibid., line 39.

20 Hansen, *Classical Mythology*, 255.

21 Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan*, 55.

22 Heather Clark, *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020), 541.

Denise Peregrine: Heroine, kinetic. Voyager, no Penelope. Leonard: Hero. God-man, because spermy, creator. Dionysiac. Pan. How to lead pan into world of toast and nappies. Falcon Yard: Love, bird of prey. Victors and victims. A fable of faithfulness. Risen out of depravity and suffering.²³

Falcon Yard was named after the place where Plath met her husband, the poet Ted Hughes in 1956 – and Clark states that the novel was driven by Plath’s desire “to write celebratory prose about her Cambridge experience and love for Hughes.”²⁴

In Plath’s notes, therefore, the imaginative links between Hughes as Hero, the God-man, Pan and Dionysius are laid bare. If these links exist in a “fable of faithfulness” and an escape from “depravity” it is not surprising that in a poem like “Daddy,” responding to Hughes’s unfaithfulness, the “God-man” hero reverts to a Pan-man in his cruellest, darkest form, a “Panzer Man” of armoured cruelty in a wartime landscape of “victors and victims.”

Pan as “Faunus” also appears in Plath’s poem “Faun” (1956). Here “stars hung water-sunk, so a rank/ Of double star-eyes lit/ Boughs where those owls sat” (35). These “yellow eyes”, “watched the changing shape” of a man: “Saw hoof harden from foot, saw sprout/ Goat-horns; marked how god rose/ And galloped woodward in that guise” (35). Note those “double star-eyes”: we are in the realm of the doubletake and double exposure, where a man becomes Pan. Diane Middlebrook argues that the faun is a reference to Hughes: “he turns into a goat-footed god before [Plath’s] very eyes.”²⁵ As readers, too, we are being told to see beyond the obvious, that poetry is metaphor and metamorphosis, a way of transforming

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Hughes and Plath – A Marriage* (London: Little, Brown, 2004), 37.

reality. Look again and the closing lines contain a striking blasphemy, disguised by the lower case “g” of “god”. The lack of an article prior to “god” implies that this man is the incarnation of God Himself, like Christ, but in the figure of Pan or even Satan.

Curiously, Plath looked twice at this poem – twice. First, at some point after reading Rákóczi, she changed the original title from “Metamorphosis” to “Faun.” Secondly, in “Daddy,” she evokes the Satanic reading of the Faun at the moment her marriage was breaking down – “no less a devil for that” (223). She also returns Hughes, in his guise as god of poetry, to mere mortal: “panzer-man” could be read as “Pan zer/the man” in a cod-German accent – this sounds absurd until we remember Plath recited “Daddy” to her friend Clarissa Roche in a “mocking, comical voice”.²⁶

“Daddy” provides an even plainer example of intertextual subversion in the phrase “a man in black” which alludes to her poem “Man in Black” (1958), where the man is described rapturously as the “fixed vortex” (109) that holds reality together. In “Black Coat,” Hughes sees this man as himself; he speaks of “that double image” and Plath’s “eye’s inbuilt double exposure.”²⁷ Yet there are more such images.

Within two days of meeting Hughes, Plath had written “Pursuit,” which begins: “There is a panther stalks me down/ One day I’ll have my death of him” (22). In her diary entry for 6th March 1956, she states this is the poem “which I wrote about Ted.”²⁸ In the prankish spirit of the Pan/pun is it too much to hear the near homophone of “panzer” and “panther”? How much separates the voiced alveolar sibilant and

26 Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989), 277.

27 Ted Hughes, “Black Coat,” in *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 103.

28 Sylvia Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950–1962*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), 225.

the unvoiced interdental non-sibilant fricative? Very little it seems for Plath.

We find evidence she links Pan and “panther” in the version of “Nick and the Candlestick” recorded for the BBC in 1962. In lines cut from the final draft, she says:

The brass Atlas you inherited is hefting his milk-pillar. He kneels, head bent, a panther head on a panther pelt, gnawing his forehead, each incisor a wide, bright *horn* [my emphasis], the panther mane squirming, a million gold worms down his back, a bearded Greek. Under the gold bowl of his navel, where his phallus and balls should be, a panther claw – I leave you the mystery. It is not the firmament that makes him look so sick, this philosopher; maybe it’s the panther jaw, the beastly lobotomy.²⁹

As if in a surreal painting, Pan’s horns are glimpsed in the panther’s incisors. The teeth enact a “beastly lobotomy” that links Barrett Browning’s “Great God Pan” who is “half a beast”³⁰ with the inmates of the asylum in *The Bell Jar*. Even the “brass Atlas” undergoes a metamorphosis, this “bearded Greek” deep in an “Old cave” (241) is more “philosopher” than hero, more Plato than Atlas.

What this all confirms is Hughes’s description of Plath’s “super-charged system of inner symbols”(16), providing us with insights into the personal content of “Daddy” and how she transmutes it into poetry through fiendish wordplay. Indeed, the confessional is but one turn of the Pan/pun. “Pursuit” begins with a quotation from Racine: “*Dans le fond des forêts votre image me suit*”, which translates literally as: “In the heart of the forest, his image follows me.” (22). Read in the light of “Faun,” the image of the panther pursues her in the woods

29 Stephen Tabor, *Sylvia Plath: An Analytical Bibliography* (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd, 1987), 143. Tabor sets the text as prose.

30 Barrett Browning, *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2*, 1048.

where Pan is said to dwell. Plath's "picture" (223) of her father, cleft in chin, will continue to take on meaning, as the panther's voice "spells a trance" (23).

Pan/Pun as Muse/Metaphor

Plath's most explicit reference to Pan is in "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board" (1957-58). This verse drama is based according to Hughes on the "actual 'spirit' text"³¹ of one of the ouija board sessions he conducted with Plath from late 1956 onwards in which they conjured up a spirit called Pan.³² This is how Plath writes about Pan in her journal on 4th July 1958:

Last night Ted & I did PAN for the first time in America. We were rested, warm, happy in our work & the overturned brandy glass responded admiringly, oddly, often with charming humour. Even if our own hot subconscious pushes it (It says when asked, that it is 'like us') we had more fun than a movie. There are so many questions to ask it. I wonder how much is our own intuition working, and how much queer accident, and how much 'my father's spirit.'³³

She adds, "Kolossus is Pan's 'family god'."³⁴ Note that they "did" Pan (echoed in "you do not do") and that Pan is seen as, possibly, her father's spirit, ruled over by "kolossus" which Plath returned to a year later in "The Colossus," where the shattered figure deems itself a "Mouthpiece of the dead" (129) This becomes the "Ghastly statue" in "Daddy" (222).

More "fun than a movie": the Pan/pun is a ludic spirit of intuition, chance, superstition and art, one that Plath neither takes as literally true or false, but useful as a prompt for

31 Plath, *Collected Poems*, 276.

32 Ted Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*. Edited by Christopher Reid (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), 87-88

33 Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950-1962*, 400.

34 Ibid.

writing. In April 1958, Ted Hughes described how he and Plath "pool resources, you know, psychically" before stating, "it's like in a ouija board"³⁵. In "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board," Pan is indeed linked to verse, will sometimes "jog off" in "jabberwocky" (279) but is "a bright/ Boy, prone to compose queer poetry/ In apt iambs" (280), rather like a raddled, Renaissance Peter Pan.

In her introduction to her *Living Poet* broadcast of 1961, Plath states her poems are "quite emphatically about the things of this world", but goes on to say "when I say 'this world' I include, of course, such feelings as fear and despair and barrenness, as well as domestic love and delight in nature. These darker emotions may well put on the mask of quite unworldly things, such as ghosts or trolls or antique gods."³⁶

Pan is certainly one of these gods, but in "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board," what "darker emotions" does he represent? The figure seems to embody LeRoy and Sibyl's hopes they have been elected, like the reed in "A Musical Instrument," by the spirit of poetry. Yet he also represents the struggle for psychic dominance between them. The board between the couple, Sibyl and LeRoy, becomes a "battlefield" in which as "rival parents" they each want to claim "Pan's prowess" as their "own creation" (284).

The drama's relevance to "Daddy" is evident from its obsession with doubleness, twoness:

Sibyl claims that "Pan's a mere puppet/ Of our two intuitions" (279) and that he is "our first-breached brat/ Fusing two talents, a sort of psychic bastard." (280).

35 Hughes made these remarks on April 18 1958 at the end of a poetry recording in Springfield, MA. This can be heard at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CqIhR4QIweQ>

36 Sylvia Plath, 'Introduction,' 1961, track 8 on *The Spoken Word: Plath*, The British Library Publishing Division, 2010, compact disc

LeRoy says, "Pan's laugh/ Is on the two of us" (282).

Sibyl accuses Pan of telling "two lies" (283).

LeRoy counters: "Call them two plucked/ Fruits of your willful [sic] tree" (283).

Sibyl says: "we two glower from our separate camps" (284).

As the dialogue draws to a close, Leroy states: "Let us stake/Death's two dreams down with the body that bled the vein,/ As is the use with vampires" (285). Plath enacts the same ritual in "Daddy": invoking the "panzer-man" in order to stake him through the heart like Dracula. The drama echoes "Daddy" at several moments, notably when the spirit spells out: "A plumage of raw worms" (279) and when Sibyl comments how tedious she finds this idea of "rot/ Feeding at the root of things" (279). We hear the same images in "Daddy": "the black telephone's off at the root/ The voices just can't worm through" (224).

Suitably for a work dominated by doubleness, "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board" can be interpreted in broadly two ways. Firstly, the couple come to a realisation of Pan's perversity and shock themselves back to life. Secondly, they retreat from the impish imagination and wake to the desolation of reality. In this sense, the work dramatises the doomed search for a transcendental signifier to grant ultimate singularity to meaning. The letters form words but what they signify is riddingly multiple: the sign, the clear flash of meaning from beyond, is never glimpsed. At first Pan claims to live "I-N-G-O-D-P-I-/ E" (282) then "I-N-/ G-O-D-H-E-A-D" (282) and finally, as Sibyl exclaims, "In core of nerve!" (284). The search for presence leads to absence. After the couple dismiss his messages, Pan insults them as "A-P-E-/ S" (284), leading them to smash the glass.

If God within a Christian universe is the transcendental signifier, then the principle of the Pan/pun is the opposite: it is the deferral of meaning that the LeRoy and Sibyl fail to accept. In their final shared chant, the couple wish: "When lights go out/ May two real people breathe in a real room" (286). Yet darkness suggests ignorance, not wisdom. LeRoy announces that: "the dream/ Of dreamers is dispelled" (286). By breaking the glass and "dispelling" or unspelling the assembled letters, the poets may have vanquished their muse. The fact that the "table looks as if would stay a table/ All night long" (286) leaves the couple subject to brute fact, recalling Plath's poem "The Ghost's Leavetaking," which depicts the moment of waking as "this joint between two worlds and two entirely/ Incompatible modes of time" (90). The "lunar conundrums" which seem to mean "so profoundly much" (90) disappear from "the dreaming skull" (91) and joy is replaced by the "no-color void" (90) of despair. The Pan/pun, with its perpetual doubleness, slides to a halt.

Pan/Pun as Spirit/Magic

One line in "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board" does rather chill the blood. Sibyl remarks mockingly, "who'll/ Come on call like that but Pan?" (277). Does this line gloss Plath's use of address in "Daddy"? If so, calling out to the "panzer-man" Plath turns poetic apostrophe into preternatural invocation. She is, in effect, summoning the same spirit conjured up in the Ouija board sessions with Hughes to take decisive control of their shared muse. The "dispelling" of Pan is revoked and Pan is spelled out once more in the letters that make up the poem – and we, too, are implicated in the ritual when we recite the words ourselves. In this guise, the phrase "panzer-man" signals a profound shift in the nature of the text. Poem as political commentary or poem as confession

transforms into poem as spell, curse or charm.

If we think of a spell as a genre, Northrop Frye's comments on its strategies apply remarkably well to "Daddy":

The rhetoric of charm is dissociative and incantatory: it sets up a pattern of sound so complex and repetitive that the ordinary processes of response are short-circuited. Refrain, rhyme, alliteration, assonance, pun, antithesis: every repetitive device to rhetoric is called into play.³⁷

Nearly all of these are packed into "panzer-man" itself; there is the pun on Pan; the repetition of the phrase acts as a rhythmic refrain of the opening line; "pan" and "man" chime in sound but clash as an antithesis, and there is a possible pun of "pa" or daddy in "panzer". The poem begins with the macaronic pun of do/du and is full of assonance: with "foot" "root" and "brute" (223) all carrying the vowel-sound of the "oo" rhyme. Frye helps us see that Plath aims to paralyse our will and then to free it with these devices, so that we experience the speaker's predicament. If Plath, in Rákóczi's terms, is the Master of the coven and we the Initiate, then we too become one in the moment of reciting the poem.

Pan/Pun as Johnny Panic

Pan is, as Rákóczi puts it, the "striker of panic-dread". This is backed up by classical sources. The Greek traveller Pausanias writes: "Causeless fears, they say, are inspired by Pan."³⁸ This meaning lives on in the etymology of the English word "panic," which derives from

37 Northrop Frye, "Charms and Riddles," in *Spiritus Mundi: Essays on Literature, Myth and Society* (Bloomington & London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 126.

38 Pausanias, *Pausanias' Description of Greece, Volume 1*, trans. James. G. Frazer (London: Macmillan:

Pan³⁹. In Plath's short story "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" (1959), panic is pandemic. The speaker begins: "Well, from where I sit, I figure the world is run by one thing and this one thing only. Panic with a dog-face, devil-face [my emphasis], hag-face, whore-face, panic in capital letters with no face at all – it's the same Johnny Panic, awake or asleep."⁴⁰ Pan, God and the Devil converge again. Johnny Pan/Panic is the Lord of all, who suffuses all of the patients' dreams and fears, "injecting a poetic element"⁴¹ the speaker salutes.

The story offers a tragic vision of life split between the neurotic life-force of Johnny Panic and the bolts of the ECT machine. Madness or numbness. Poetry or conformity. Panic sees through the lies of authority, spread by the "false priests in surgical gowns and masks whose one lifework is to unseat Johnny Panic from his own throne,"⁴² but also leads to suicide: Johnny Panic's "love is the twenty-storey leap, the rope at the throat, the knife at the heart"⁴³. Throughout, the forces of society are trying to prevent the very breakthrough that the speaker is working towards in "Daddy". This is echoed in *The Bell Jar*, when Esther Greenwood is given electric shock treatment at the hospital. She says of the "cadaverous"⁴⁴ woman who attends her, "she set something on my tongue and in panic I bit down,"⁴⁵ as if she were being given communion. Esther's mind is wiped out "like chalk on a blackboard"⁴⁶; as if rendered blank by the father who stands "at the

39 *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.)

40 Sylvia Plath, "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams," in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 17.

41 *Ibid.*, 22.

42 *Ibid.*, 32-33.

43 *Ibid.*, 33.

44 Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 225.

45 *Ibid.*, 226

46 *Ibid.*

blackboard" (223) in "Daddy."

The speaker of "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" compares the people around her to animals who "can't see the slaughter house at the end of the track."⁴⁷ The soothing "talk, talk, talk" of these "psyche-doctors"⁴⁸ is like the "obscene" language, "an engine, an engine / Chuffing" (223) the speaker off to Auschwitz in "Daddy", where the doubled "engine" exposes the transition from rhetoric to reality – a terse rebuttal of the idea that language is a closed-system of signs.

One of the doctors' victims, Harry Bilbo, is returned to the "crass fate these doctors call health and happiness". He is a "changed man", "the pure Panic-light had left his face."⁴⁹ Pan returns to man, in a reversion of the metamorphosis in "Faun". Harry's name suggests a double-nature, both man and fairytale creature: the everyday "Harry" contrasts with the unusual surname "Bilbo" which recalls Bilbo Baggins, the hero of *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. Plath was reading Tolkien at the time; in a letter to Lynne Lawner on March 11th 1959 she mentions both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*; she had recently finished "the last of the Tolkien trilogy."⁵⁰ This overlaps with the same period she wrote *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, which by December 16th 1958 she thought ready to be submitted for publication.⁵¹ In her journal entry for March 20th she writes:

Finished the Tolkien trilogy. A triumph. A battle of the pans and kevas. I don't know when I

47 Ibid., 26.

48 Ibid.

49 Ibid., 27.

50 Sylvia Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume 2: 1956–1963*. Edited by Peter K Steinberg and Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2018), 302.

51 Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950 – 1962*, 441.

have been so moved.⁵²

Here impish "pans" personify Tolkien's forces of chaos, his orcs and goblins, and the fair-skinned Keva from Irish mythology (daughter of Fionn mac Cumhaill) personifies his elves and other heroes.⁵³ Curiously, this reference to devilish "pans" follows on immediately from Plath's confession that her "old panic" is "back"⁵⁴. If we look at the passage through the ludic principle of the Pan/pun, what we can perhaps infer is that Plath was deeply moved precisely because she saw in the rout of Tolkien's "pans" a symbolic defeat of her own "panic".

The nod to Tolkien in "Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams" reinforces Harry Bilbo's descent from imaginative delirium to mundanity, although this transition is expressed with drawling irony: the speaker herself might be deranged. Reading Plath's story one enters "one of those endless perspectives between two mirrors"⁵⁵ the speaker finds in a patient's dream. At the finale, Johnny Panic's "top priests" tied up in strait jackets try to communicate with her but they only manage "queer croaks and grunts, as if their tongues were locked in their jaws"⁵⁶ reminiscent of the "tongue stuck" in the speaker's "jaw" in "Daddy" (223). In the looking-glass world of the story, only panic sets us free.

Pan/pun as Panic Attack/Holy Dread

In "Daddy" the speaker's experience of panic is double: she is both victim and victimiser.

She begins in a state of extreme fear, "barely

52 Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950 – 1962*, 475.

53 The English "Keva" is derived from the Irish Caoimhe or Cébha, meaning "of the Fair Skin." See: Peter Berresford Ellis, *A Dictionary of Irish Mythology* (Oxford: Oxford Paperbacks, 1991), 57.

54 Plath, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath 1950 – 1962*, 475.

55 Ibid., 22.

56 Ibid., 31.

daring to breathe or Achoo" (222), her heart "in two" (223) yet it is she who aims to inspire fear – and stop her daddy's heart with a stake. This panic is felt by the reader in the relentless rhyme, which is likely to make the heart beat faster, followed by the shock of the Holocaust imagery. In "Lesbos," the face of the screaming young girl is "red and white, a panic," seemingly both angry and ashen with fear. She is "schizophrenic" (227) or double.

In poems like "Lady Lazarus" and "Purdah," silenced women rise to cause terror to their oppressors. Lady Lazarus warns "Herr God, Herr Lucifer" (another double-faced Pan?): "Beware/ Beware" (246); the veiled woman produces Clytemnestra's deadly "cloak of holes"; the male hero is reduced to the "shriek in the bath" (244). Plath's biographer Anne Stevenson even claimed that she "picked up something of the terrorist in Sylvia's extreme personality."⁵⁷ This is tasteless hyperbole; I would argue instead that in her work Plath is practising an aesthetics of panic – poetry as panic attack – with links to the Romantic cult of the sublime. Indeed, Lady Lazarus stridently echoes Coleridge's poet-visionary in "Kubla Khan" ("Beware! Beware!") who inspires "holy dread."⁵⁸ Such dread is also found in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*:

Like one who, on a lonely road
Doth walk in fear and dread,
And, having once turned round, walks on,
And turns no more his head;
Because he knows a frightful fiend
Doth close behind him tread.⁵⁹

57 Diehl, Madeline Strong. "A Biographer's Dilemma." *Michigan Today*, April 1990 Vol. 22, No.2. Accessed 02 January, 2020. <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu>

58 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kublai Khan," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2*, p. 349, line 49.

59 Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2*, p. 342, lines 446-51.

It features, too, in Shelley's "Mont Blanc," with its vision of humanity's subjection to nature's brute power:

The race
of man flies far in dread; his work and
dwelling
Vanish like smoke before the tempest's
stream.⁶⁰

Such dread is visionary, granting the poet access to what Shelley earlier describes as "a trance, sublime and strange,"⁶¹ and later culminates in a celebration of "the human mind's imaginings" which redeem nature's "vacancy."⁶²

For Edmund Burke, the sublime is a "mode of terror, or of pain."⁶³ For Plath, this exultation of pleasure/pain not only relates to the sadomasochistic drama of "Daddy," but could be seen as her Romantic rejection of the "gentility principle" identified by A. Alvarez in *The New Poetry*.⁶⁴ Assessing British poetry, Plath said:

I think it is in a bit of a strait-jacket, if I may say so. There was an essay by Alvarez, the British critic: his arguments about the dangers of gentility in England are very pertinent, very true.⁶⁵

Plath intends to untie the knots of the strait-jacket worn by Johnny Panic's devotees – to

60 Percy Bysshe Shelley, "Mont Blanc," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2*, p. 669, lines 117-19.

61 Ibid., p. 667, line 35.

62 Ibid., p. 669, lines 144-45.

63 Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (Dublin, Graisberry & Campbell, 1779), 187.

64 A. Alvarez, "The New Poetry or Beyond the Gentility Principle," in *The New Poetry*, ed. A. Alvarez (London: Penguin 1962), 17.

65 Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 168.

confront what Rákóczi describes as Pan's "panic dread"⁶⁶ and manipulate "madness" and "torture" with an "informed and intelligent mind"⁶⁷. Such panic not only induces the terror and wisdom of the sublime, as with Coleridge and Shelley, but shrieks of laughter too.

Pan/Pun as Satyr/Satire

The dance of Pan/pun continues, as the free play of the signifier suggests another figure in our pantheon. This is the braying, ithyphallic satyr. In classical mythology, the half-god half-goat Pan merges with the half-man half-horse. "Pans and satyrs become difficult to distinguish from each other, since satyrs come to be represented with goat features."⁶⁸ In "Daddy," this figure is recognisable from his "love of the rack and the screw" (223); Plath's original draft even read: "A man in black with a sexy look"; "sexy" then became "Meinkampf."⁶⁹ For confirmation, we see that in "Gigolo" the "man in black" appears again as a roué dressed in "snazzy blacks." The "smiles of women/ Gulp" at his "bulk" (267). In the earlier poem "Ouija," the figure that rises from the glass is less the disembodied spirit of the "Dialogue Over a Ouija Board" and more akin to the drunken satyr Silenus, sexually voracious and the bearer of wisdom, who "godly, doddering" spells out his "amorous nostalgias" (76). And as the figure of Pan is crucial to understanding the aesthetics of terror in "Daddy," so the Satyr helps us appreciate its style, its satirical iconoclasm. Satyr and satire are bound by literary precedent – see, for instance, Rochester's "Satyr Against Mankind."⁷⁰ Indeed, Plath's description "a cleft

66 Rákóczi, *The Painted Caravan*, 11.

67 *Ibid.*, 170

68 Hansen, *Classical Mythology*, 256.

69 Plath's first draft of "Daddy" is photographed here: <https://sinaqueyras.com/2018/04/12/sylvia-plaths-daddy/>

70 John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester. *Collected Works of John Wilmot Earl of Rochester*, ed. John Hayward

in your chin instead of your foot" (223) is similar to Flanders and Swan's introduction to their satirical 1963 revue, "At The Drop of Another Hat": "satire squats, hoof in mouth, under every bush."⁷¹

To grasp Plath's method, it is useful to refer to Northrop Fry's definition of "satire of the high norm,"⁷² likened to Jonathan Swift. This satirist, "will show us society suddenly in telescope as posturing and dignified pygmies, or in a microscope as hideous and reeking giants."⁷³ Such distortions are found throughout *Ariel*. In "Daddy" we see the father as colossus, whereas the sky can only "squeak" (223) like a mouse. In "Stopped Dead" the millionaire "fatso" is sunk in his "seven chins" (230); in "Amnesiac" the husband is tucked in by "a minute doctor" (234). Plath nods to Swift in "Gulliver," where the giant male hero is held down by "spidermen" the size of "inchworms" (251). Satirical techniques in "Daddy" also include paradox, epigram and sarcastic baby-talk: "Daddy I have had to kill you. / You died before I had time" (222); "Every woman adores a fascist" (223); and "gobbledygoo" (223).

The spirit of satire, focused on the vices of society, may appear to contradict the supernatural associations of the Pan/pun, but the two converge in Plath's use of apostrophe within the tradition of the satirical peroration, the ritualistic casting out of stupidity or evil. Warren Chernaik speaks of the "terrible powers of the satirist to kill or maim" and "the curse, or the exorcism of the troubling demon" at which point "narrator and poet merge."⁷⁴

He compares the final line of "Daddy" with
(London: Nonesuch Press, 1926), 35-39.

71 Cited by John T. Gilmore, *Satire* (London: Routledge, 2017), 38.

72 Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 234.

73 *Ibid.*

74 Warren Chernaik, *Sexual Freedom in Restoration Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 77.

passages from Rochester's "A Ramble in Saint James's Parke,"⁷⁵ Sir Thomas Wyatt's "My Lute Awake" and John Donne's "The Apparition."⁷⁶ Another example would be Pope's attack on the double-natured Sporus in "Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot": "His wit all see-saw, between that and this, / Now high, now low, now Master up, now Miss."⁷⁷ As discussed, such perorations are found in "Lady Lazarus" and "Purdah". Plath's *modus operandi* is caught too in "The Other" when she says, "I have your head on my wall" (202). Plath lines up her enemies and hexes them, one by one.

Celebrating the satyr in the Pan/pun allows us to see Plath's poetry afresh: as visionary satire, in the manner of William Blake, combining sublimity with scorn. *Ariel* is another *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*. The context of "Daddy" is a sequence in which Plath controversially identifies her freedom as a woman with her fertility. Thrown into chaos, she confronts the forces of sterility that imperil her, depicted as mocking exaggerations: the patriarchal "God-man" who is no longer "spermy" or a "creator"⁷⁸ but a murderous fascist ("Daddy"); the mother as smothering jellyfish ("Medusa"); the husband as tyrant ("Jailor"); the greedy capitalist ("Stopped Dead") and the figures of conformity (the villagers in "The Bee Meeting"). Identifying both this theme and its satirical delivery allows the modern reader to understand the context of such poems as "Lesbos," where homosexuality is sardonically evoked and rejected, and "Amnesiac," where the proto-feminist sister is seen in hallucinatory terms as a barren prostitute, driven by money – poems that could otherwise be dismissed as homophobic and misogynistic. Against sterility, Plath cherishes life in the shape of her children

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 234.

77 Alexander Pope, "Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot," in *Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 323-324.

78 Heather Clark, *Red Comet*, 541.

in "Morning Song", "Nick and the Candlestick" and "The Night Dances." At the centre of this procession of masks is the child in "You're": the one who has her "own face on" (141). In their original order, from "Morning Song" to "Wintering," the poems not only move from "Love" to "spring," they trace a pilgrim's progress from the Magnificat – "magnifying your arrival" (157) – to the blossoming "Christmas roses" (215).

Pan/pun as Domestic Bliss/Ruin

Ted Hughes provides a poignant coda to the Pan/pun in his poem "The Pan". Placed after "The Minotaur" in *Birthday Letters*, the reader is primed to meet the Pan of pipe and forest; instead, Hughes writes about an apparently trifling moment, when he bought a saucepan before moving into his Devonshire home Court Green with Plath. However, this ordinary scene is transformed by a supernatural touch: Hughes is being watched by his own doppelgänger and a woman who possibly represents Assia Weevil, his future lover and rival to Plath. We have entered a world of doubles and double-meanings.

Remarkably, not only does Hughes evoke the "panzer-man" with his internal rhyme of "pan" and "man," but his imagery of "baby things"⁷⁹ is strikingly close to Plath's notes to *Falcon Yard*, in which she ponders: "How to lead pan (sic) into world of toast and nappies." The mundane image of the saucepan insinuates that Pan, as their shared poetic muse, has been sacrificed to marital chores. In a letter in 1957, Hughes states, "I read the spirit of the Lord as the King of the ouija-board Pans, i.e. the one who does not come until you have walked through the fire."⁸⁰ In fact, the poem appears to play on the phrase, "out of the frying pan

79 Ted Hughes, *Birthday Letters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1998), 121.

80 Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes*, 100-01.

and into the fire." If the pan, "to heat milk and babyfood,"⁸¹ represents his domestic life with Plath that Hughes is about to reject in his love affair with Assia, then he ruefully intimates the hellish consequences. As Hughes squeezes back behind "the wheel" of his "Morris Traveller"⁸², the Tarot's Wheel of Fortune is about to take a sudden turn.

Two poems later, in "The Lodger," Hughes writes about a force "hid" in his "heart," causing "pangs" and "poundings,"⁸³ an "alien joker"⁸⁴ leading him to believe he is about to die of a cardiac arrest. I read this as Pan in his guise of panic-dread. Seeking textual confirmation of this interpretation, I note that the lapping of "loose blood" in Hughes's "throat" is compared to "a bird escaped,"⁸⁵ which in the image world of *Birthday Letters* recalls Plath's "Panic-bird."⁸⁶ In "The Bird," Pan/ ic is the force that finally breaks free, smashing the "glass dome"⁸⁷ of the bell jar with the clarion song of *Ariel*.

Conclusion: Panorama of Pan

"Pan" as a prefix means "all"⁸⁸ and, indeed, the signifying power of the Pan/pun appears dizzying: Panzer-man, Pan the man, Panther man. Pan as fascist, Pan as Hughes, Pan as god of poetry, Pan as devil, Pan as panic, Pan as the sublime, Pan as satyr, Pan as satire, Pan as kitchenware. Pan is Pa, Pan is the Daddy. The Pan/pun elucidates the technique and content of Plath's "Daddy" and the *Ariel* poems, their exploration of sublime states of terror with the

81 Hughes, *Birthday Letters*, 121.

82 Ibid.

83 Ibid., 124.

84 Ibid., 126.

85 Ibid., 125.

86 Ibid., 77.

87 Ibid., 78.

88 *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.)

satirical intent to break free of psychological and societal paralysis through laughter – confronting personal fears as part of an attack on the absurdity of the modern world at the very moment satire was booming in Britain post-Suez.⁸⁹

After "Daddy," the Pan/pun is glimpsed in "Cut," where the speaker's "thumb stump" evokes a goatishly jumping "trepanned veteran" [my emphasis] (236) – a lobotomised asylum inmate thrashing, perhaps, on the point of death. Later, in Plath's book review of *Lord Byron's Wife*, Byron's sister Augusta is characterised as "the hectic if unsuccessful Pandarus."⁹⁰ This allusion teasingly connects Chaucer's seedy procurer Pandarus in *Troilus and Criseyde* with both Augusta and Ted Hughes's sister Olwyn. In her letters, Plath states that Augusta "is the dead spit of Olwyn"⁹¹ and that, in *Lord Byron's Wife*, "so much is relevant, even Ted's attachment to his sister who never wanted him to marry."⁹² The reference to Pandarus, punningly twinned with the "panzer man", insinuates that Olwyn is a meddling influence on her Byronic brother's relationships with women.

In Plath's final letter, she writes heartbreakingly of "slipping into this pit of panic and deepfreeze,"⁹³ but where the Panic-bird defeated her in life, it soars in her work as muse, magical being and metaphor. The Pan/pun magnifies the myriad aspects of her poetry, rather than reducing it to any one category: we see it intermingling the political, autobiographical, classical, literary,

89 See Christopher Booker on satire in the 1960s in *The Neophiliacs* (London: Collins, 1969).

90 Sylvia Plath, "Suffering Angel", *New Statesman* (7 December 1962): 828-9; review of Malcolm Elwin, *Lord Byron's Wife* (London: Macdonald, 1962).

91 Plath, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath Volume 2*, 923.

92 Ibid., 936.

93 Ibid., 968.

psychological, and supernatural, exposing these as distinctions that exist only in the conscious mind. For a moment, reading Plath, we glimpse the Panthalassan Ocean of the unconscious.

Ultimately, the Pan/pun celebrates the godlike power of poetry to connect: to wreak pandemonium on singular meaning as a panacea for what Plath terms "the separateness of everything."⁹⁴ The pun goes down to the smallest constituent of language, the phoneme, and fetches up a *Pantasmagoria* of semantic possibilities, putting the signifier rather than the signified at the "core of nerve" (284). Plath writes, as Jacqueline Rose says, "at the point of tension – pleasure/danger, your fault/my fault, high/low culture – without resolution or dissipation of what produces the clash between the two."⁹⁵ Plath's words are always double, always ready for the doubletake, the double exposure.

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94 Plath, "Ocean 1212-W," in *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, 121.

95 Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago Press, 1991), 10.

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