

## "An efficiency, a great beauty": Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* Titles

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No contemporary writer's literary reputation is quite as enmeshed with her biography as is Sylvia Plath's. It is impossible to discuss her work, especially the *Ariel* poems, without reference to her suicide, her estrangement from her husband and collaborating editor Ted Hughes, or her status as the subjugated mid-century wife signified—now add to that the prolicide/suicide of Shura and Assia Wevill and the death of Nicholas Hughes, and there seems to be no end to the tragic life story that starts with *The Bell Jar* or even further back, when the poet was eight years old. In addition to noting Plath's brilliant and/or shocking imagery, her critics often take sides in a literary and social gladiatorial battle over influence and biographies. Ted Hughes is said to have detested the genre of biography because it aims to demonstrate how geniuses are just "like the rest of us" (Middlebrook 271). In Plath's case, the intrusion of biography has not so much humanized her as it has incorporated her and Hughes, the Wodwo, into Feminist-Sylvan folklore. It is impossible to critique Plath's work apart from her life, but it is intriguing to imagine the critical inquiry her literature alone might have engendered, had the tragedies attendant not been so widely known.

In the *Ariel* manuscript itself, for example, we have fledgling evidence of Plath's own editorial choices, and that is a good place to begin looking for evidence of Plath's own vision for her work. Scholars with access to the extensive Plath collections at the Lilly Library in Bloomington, Indiana; the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College, or the Hughes trove at the Robert W. Woodruff Library at Emory University can study the dated drafts that Plath and Hughes preserved with an eye on posterity, but what about students of Plath's work who are confined to the published record? There are scholarly questions to be asked of those materials as well. For example, by looking at the titles Plath considered for her *Ariel* collection, we can admire her editorial choices without a manuscript or rare book reading room library card.

A review of the literature surrounding *Ariel* reveals an overwhelming focus on Hughes' posthumous editing, an interrogation of the unusually private collaboration between author and editor. Comparatively little critical attention has focused on Plath's

own revision and editing of the tidy manuscript she defacto-bequeathed to her heirs on February 11, 1963. Before Hughes edited *Ariel*, Plath herself made substantive changes to her evolving manuscript, and these are of interest to scholars. Plath's draft pages as revealed in 2004 in Frieda Hughes' publication of *Ariel: The Restored Edition* show that the author considered "The Rival," "The Rabbit Catcher," "A Birthday Present," and "Daddy" as titular poems, before selecting "Ariel." In her review of the re-constructed book, Alicia Ostriker notes that the three of these that were printed in the Hughes version (1965/1966) are all "poems ripe with gender-inflected anger" (369), but, if considered apart from the narrative of betrayal and suicide that preceded the book's 1965 British release, would that be their ostensible subject? The surrounding biographical drama has robbed audiences of a primary reading of *Ariel*, one without a tabloid back-story. How would we read this book as poetry in its own right? How, for example, might each of Plath's choices of title for the book have affected the perceived focus of the manuscript she left intact, and how might the final choice, "Ariel," have affected Hughes' editing and the book's critical reception? If we are ever to examine *Ariel* on its own merits, we must start by examining, not Plath's editors' manipulation of the text, but her own.

Debate over Hughes' posthumous edits, both deletions and additions, has been at the center of criticism about the collection Plath left on her desk on the day she died. After Hughes released a list of Plath's manuscript contents in his *Collected Poems* in 1982, critics have accused him of subverting Plath's thesis, protecting himself, and denying critical attention to the dozen poems withheld from the British edition. Marjorie Perloff's reading of the re-constructed original *Ariel* in 1983 set the tone for much of the criticism to follow. Perloff argued that Hughes' editing of the manuscript, omitting what he called, "some of the more personally aggressive poems" (Hughes, "Introduction" 15), had changed the published book from an ultimately hopeful text about depression and moving on after a failed marriage, to a descent into madness, self-loathing, and suicide (Perloff 10-18). Hughes has been vilified and defended, both for his personal conduct and his role as Plath's literary executor. In 1998, when his intertextual response to Plath's poems, *Birthday Letters*, was reviewed, critics again took sides, some to argue that they demonstrate his long-standing remorse or victimization while others scoffed at the "open secret" of Hughes' publication. Only very recently have writers like Stephen Enniss or

Diane Middlebrook defended Hughes' right to extend his collaborator's role beyond Plath's death (Enniss, 63-71).

Hughes himself tried periodically to point critics away from his and Plath's personal lives and toward insight that drafts of Plath's work reveal about her remarkable creative powers. He even suggested that her decisions in titling collections were revealing. Answering A. Alvarez's suggestion that the Hughes family planned to release Plath's oeuvre slowly to increase revenues, Hughes recognized for readers of the *Observer* in 1971 that Plath's true "scholars want the anatomy of the birth of the poetry," distinguishing them from her "vast potential audience" who wanted "her blood, hair, touch smell, and a front seat in the kitchen where she died" ("Publishing" 164). In that essay, he said he believed that Plath owed neither audience anything but pledged that some day scholars would have access to "the fragments and variants and cancellations of her bristling manuscripts" ("Publishing" 163). With the 1981 release of *Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, Hughes revealed that her book named *The Colossus* had been variously titled in draft, *Two Lovers and a Beachcomber*, then *Circus in Three Rings*, followed by *The Earthenware Head*, *The Everlasting Monday*, and *Full Fathom Five* before she gave it the title by which readers know it ("Collecting" 170). In the same essay, he lists the titles Plath considered for *Ariel*, along with his recollections of when she favored each. In 1972 he reiterated the fruitfulness of textual study of Plath's work, telling readers of *Grand Street* that while "Few poets have disclosed in any way the birth circumstances of their poetic gift, or the necessary purpose these serve in their psychic economy . . . . Sylvia Plath's poetry, like a species on its own, exists in little else but the revelation of that birth and purpose" ("Sylvia Plath and Her Journals" 178).

Explication of Sylvia Plath's work without concomitant inclusion of Hughes' writing about it would be short-sighted. During the 35 years that Hughes survived Plath, he revealed considerable information about her creative process, at least as he witnessed it. Hughes, with his limitless access to Plath's papers, modeled a scholarly approach to discovering the palimpsest of her successive revisions of the *Ariel* poem "Sheep in Fog" in an essay he wrote at the behest of Sotheby's Manuscript Department Head, Roy Davids, in 1988 (Hughes, "Sylvia Plath: The Evolution" 191). The essay combines biography, literary criticism, and textual analysis to explicate the last poem Plath wrote during the

creative burst she experienced in the fall before her death, dating the first completed draft, December 2, 1962, although Hughes reports that she began work on it on the day of her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday. Holographs of Plath's drafts for the poem accompany the published version of Hughes' essay, and readers are encouraged to examine those specimens carefully. Hughes reveals that "Sheep in Fog" is one of two poems Plath wrote about riding the horse, Ariel, and it takes in her surroundings on Dartmoor, from which she saw "the whole panorama of North Devon [lying] below like a different land" (206). This gave Plath an other-worldly vantage point on the setting of her own life.

Hughes thoughtfully details Plath's mythological allusions to Phaëton and Icarus as well as her recurrent theme of fatherlessness, arguing that the surviving "drafts are not an incidental adjunct to the poem, they are a complementary revelation and log-book of its real meanings" (206). By example, Hughes urged Plath scholars to consider the poet's own editorial decisions to construct a narrative of the evolution of themes and recurrent images, not just in individual poems, but in the direction of her career. But there is no separating Plath's work from herself. Hughes' analysis of "Sheep in Fog" includes his observation that the successive drafts of the poem reflect his wife's "calamitous change in mood, the sinister change in inspiration" that preceded her death (192). The separation between Plath's work and her biography are a false dichotomy for Hughes; his study of her drafts is suffused with his memories of the drafting. He, like the best of Plath's critics, cannot tell the dancer from the dance.

However, because the poems remain fresh and topical half a century later, it remains useful to interrogate the choices Plath herself made in assembling the collection that she finally called *Ariel*, and as much as possible to examine the poems themselves without recourse to reference to her mood or situations, if we are to understand the work on its own merits.

One of Plath's important choices that was undisturbed by her editors, was the naming of her book. At various times, she apparently considered five different title poems. The placement of these titles on the manuscript cover pages suggests that she favored each in the order it was composed, first calling the manuscript "The Rival," then, "The Rabbit Catcher," but then replacing that (perhaps as much as four months later) when she wrote "A Birthday Present," and again two weeks after that with "Daddy."

Finally, she must have selected "Ariel" shortly thereafter when she wrote it. These changes leave us to wonder whether, given another four-month interval, if "Ariel" might have been supplanted by the title of a later poem. Tracy Brain wisely speculates that had Plath survived to submit her own manuscript to a publisher, the public might have received a far different book (20-21). Given what we have, then, let us consider Plath's own title choices and the effect each might have had on the reception of the book.

### ***The Rival***

Criticism of "The Rival" has made "rival" and "Assia Wevill" synonymous. Plath's first title poem for the collection has been explicated as her premonition that Hughes would have an affair with Wevill before it happened. Our biographical lens has been so carefully trained on this that critics rarely offer other readings of the poem. "The Rival" dates from an earlier period than the Wevills' visit to Court Green, the event to which many critics have attached it—the weekend during which Hughes is alleged to have kissed their houseguest. If Plath's "rival" was anyone human, it was likely Dido Merwin. In July of 1961, Plath and Hughes visited the Merwins at their French home in Lacan, where Plath began to exhibit jealous and possessive tendencies (Merwin 337-42). It was the last time the Merwins saw Sylvia Plath, whose suspicions were further aroused in October of 1962 when Hughes, having left Plath, accepted Dido Merwin's offer of her recently-deceased mother's flat in Montagu Square, which Hughes accepted (334). Merwin claims that Plath accused her of being romantically involved with Hughes in an hysterical telephone conversation, followed by Plath's writing to Bill Merwin and accusing Dido of living with Ted at Montagu Square (342-44). Shortly after Frieda was born, Plath had asked the Merwins to be her daughter's godparents as a result of Dido's many kindnesses to the Hughes (Alexander 253), but a little more than a month before she died, she asked David Huw and his wife to accept the honor, replacing the Merwins (Wagner 234). By that time, Plath knew about Wevill, too, of course.

It is quite possible to read the "rival," not as Dido Merwin or Asia Wevill, but as depression, death, or the urge to end one's life—an ever-present menace whose smile "leaves[s] the same impression" (73) as the moon's, who is always nearby (yet "in the daytime . . . ridiculous") (73), transforming any space into a "mausoleum" (73), while

nervously "Ticking [her] fingers on the marble table, looking for cigarettes" (73). The mistress in the poem may well be Plath's own attraction to suicide, the insistent seductress who is undeniable at night and nervously lingering throughout the daytime, impatient to get on with the spectacle she has come for.

If we read Plath's "rival" as her own darker nature, Hughes too, editing the collection posthumously, might have understood that as the context for this poem, rather than its presumed focus on Merwin or Wevill. It may very well be that Plath's first choice of "The Rival" as a title for her collection influenced Hughes' decision to retain the poem and to shape the book as a portrait of Plath's struggle with mental illness, because he might likely have read it as being about a suicidal urge. The speaker's "rival" is the side of herself that would defeat her. Plath herself might have changed the title of her collection a year later, knowing that, because of her jealousy of Assia Wevill (Koren and Negev 81-83) and Dido Merwin (Merwin 337-42), the word "rival" had taken on a more obvious connotation in her life.

### ***The Rabbit Catcher***

"The Rabbit Catcher," Plath's next choice, gives the collection a slightly broader focus. If Perloff is correct, and Plath envisioned a collection about her domestic problems, the dissolution of her marriage, and her emerging hope for a new spring, "The Rabbit Catcher" would direct readers to the tragic climax of that narrative. Its speaker realizes that a relationship is constricting, threatening her life.

Like "Ariel," "The Rabbit Catcher" is set in a beautiful, violent landscape where spiked flora threatens humans. In "Ariel" berries set "Hooks—" and taste like "Black sweet blood mouthfuls," while in the earlier poem the speaker "taste[s] the malignity of the gorse" (33). Both poems describe breathlessness; the horse, Ariel, darts toward hills and rocky peaks, its speaker "haul[ed] . . . through the air," and in "The Rabbit Catcher," the speaker is gagged by a wind so strong it "tear[s] off her voice" (7). In both of these poems, the speaker is fearfully yet excitedly propelled headlong through the English landscape, coincidentally where Ted Hughes felt most at home. The speaker in "The Rabbit Catcher" is being drawn down a narrow path, while the rider in "Ariel" is driven head-long into the sunrise; one is the story of entering a dark place, and the other of

emerging from one.

Sporadic use of rhyme in "The Rabbit Catcher" lends it a feeling of mystery or uncertainty because of its unpredictability. The first line of the poem ends in "force," which rhymes with the first line of the second stanza's "gorse" (7). The first line of the third stanza shares a short, stressed "o" sound: "to"/"perfumed" (7). Similarly the first two lines of the fifth stanza end in consonance with "intent"/"blunt." The final stanza delivers the end rhymes of "ring" and "thing" (7, 8).

The narrative is mysterious, too. The speaker is compelled into the thicket, tripping snares without getting caught in them, and imagining the rabbit catcher himself, feeling "a vacancy" (7) at the closing of his empty traps, his hands strangling a tea mug, anticipating his catch. In the final stanza, the speaker reveals herself, not a rabbit, but a partner in a relationship with the huntsman, herself in perpetual danger. The relationship between them, finally, is characterized as a trap, a construction made of "tight wires," "pegs" (7) and a mind that constricts like the jaws of a trap. Many critics have read this as a foreboding of the ending of the author's marriage, and Claire Raymond goes a step further, arguing that the rabbit/speaker is the dead partner who cannot be harmed further in death (187). I would argue that the speaker in the poem is a partner in a relationship. As the tenor in a clever metaphor, she is also the elusive, hunted rabbit. The poem ends in surprise because its speaker realizes she has, as half of the dangerous relationship, helped construct the trap that will bring about her own demise—not because it will catch her, but because of the anxiety it induces. The constriction that threatens the speaker is psychological, "a mind . . . sliding shut on some quick thing" (7). The speaker is menaced by her own thoughts. The poem is neither about a literal rabbit nor its catcher; it embodies a conceit, one of the tropes for which we admire Plath's poetry, independent of her biography.

Had Plath left this as the titular poem in her collection, could any editor have struck it from the published edition as Hughes did? That is unlikely, especially given that the speaker in the poem recognizes her own culpability in constructing her trap. Titling her collection "The Rabbit Catcher" might have complicated the biographical back-story of the collection in fruitful ways, but Hughes apparently did not see that. His own inter-textual response, his poem "The Rabbit Catcher," published in *Birthday Letters*, turns the

tables on the victim, portraying the wife as illogically angry and hateful toward the whole English countryside, deliberately, literally springing and smashing some poor hunters' traps, mistakenly aligning herself with the wild rabbits, while her helpless husband identifies with a trapper who cannot feed his family (Hughes, "The Rabbit Catcher" 144-46). In contrast, Plath's "The Rabbit Catcher," in which rabbit and trapper are inextricably linked, is more complicated and presents an intriguing metaphor as subject for her collection.

### ***A Birthday Present***

It would seem that "A Birthday Present" resonated with Hughes, since his response to Plath's work is a book called *Birthday Letters*. Plath's poem expresses its speaker's longing to die. The veils that separate the speaker from death evoke the "vale of tears," the Earthly cares that she will shed when she enters an existence as "big as the sky" (66-68). The poem shares imagery in its "black eye-pits and a scar" with "Lady Lazarus," which Plath composed nearly a month later. The lasting popularity of the latter poem suggests that Plath made a sound choice in crossing out *A Birthday Present* as a potential title for her book. The poem's narrow focus on suicide makes it inadequate to express the complex personal and gender issues conveyed in the book.

### ***Daddy***

Hughes reveals that Plath changed the title of her manuscript to *Ariel* "only a short time before she died" (Hughes, "Collecting" 172), so "Daddy" must have seemed, for a while anyway, like a firm choice for the titular poem. History has confirmed that Plath knew her own work and her audience when she selected "Daddy," what would become her most-recognized poem, as her title. Plath readers are familiar with "Daddy," the text that George Steiner in 1965 famously called the "Guernica" of modern poetry (331). We know that Plath cloaked herself in a persona when she planned to introduce it to a BBC audience, saying:

The poem is 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 marry and paralyze each other—she has to act out the awful little allegory once before she is free of it. (Plath 196)

This is familiar behavior: writers distancing themselves from the lyric voice for protection of their and their family's privacy or even perhaps because they believe their audience values the invention of fiction over confession. It stretches credulity to suggest that Plath might even have guessed the controversy about her appropriation of Nazi imagery, or that she might have been putting on a bit of Assia Wevill's identity in calling herself "a bit of a Jew" (74). Plath's choice to read "Daddy" on air, coupled with her denial of its *roman à clef* origins, makes us want to believe that she recognized the poem's power but could not publicly embrace it as her personal statement. Furthermore, while "Daddy" is an entirely apt title for the poem, which seems to be addressed to Otto Plath as its "You" (74) in the first word, as the title for her book, it might mislead readers, suggesting that they blame an Electra complex for the trauma the book explores, when it is about far more endemic issues concerning gender and the conditioned female response to masculine hegemony. Readers can readily surmise why Plath considered "Daddy" and why she rejected it. Had the collection been titled *Daddy*, it would have focused readers on a Freudian analysis of the death of Otto and left an arrested image of the author as a wounded eight or ten year old.

### *Ariel*

By now it is hard to imagine that this book by any other name could feel as bitter-sweet. Fifty years after its composition, the *Ariel* collection has been associated with its Hebrew and lunar connotations, images that are themselves central to Plath's poetry. The poem, which describes a morning gallop on the poet's horse, signifies so much about her and her collection of poems—danger, infatuation, desire, excitement, inevitability, escape, and death. If we take the title as emblematic of, or pointing to, the collection's themes, most seem to be here. Absent are betrayal and loss, the themes identified by Perloff as central to the collection as edited by Hughes. If the restoration of *Ariel* published by Freida Hughes eventually supplants the version released in 1965 this title will be consonant with the book's contents. Although it is interesting to speculate why Plath attached such significance to "The Rival," "The Rabbit Catcher," "A Birthday Present," and "Daddy" in

turn, readers will most likely agree that "Ariel" was the best choice, even as we concede that disagreeing with Plath on this is fundamentally unthinkable to most scholars; it would be committing the same offense for which Hughes has been tarred.

It is not surprising, then, in agreeing that "Ariel" is an apt title for the book, critics agree with Plath's most intimate editor. For the record, Hughes himself believed that "Ariel" was:

the quintessential Plath *Ariel* poem in that the speaker, the I, hurls herself free from all earthly confinement and aims herself and her horse—as the poem says, "suicidal" directly into the red, rising sun. The overt sense here is that the liberation from earthly restraints (earthly life) is a rebirth into something greater and more glorious but which is still some kind of life—a spiritual rebirth perhaps. (Hughes, "Sylvia Plath: The Evolution" 199)

Even in trying to avoid Hughes' influence, we might find ourselves agreeing with his opinion that "Ariel" is the germane title poem for Plath's collection.

It would be stultifying to name the astonishing accomplishment of the *Ariel* collection after marital discord, or suicide, or mental illness, or an Electra complex. It is the expression of all of that and more, including a reckless spirit and a dramatic break from the past, both personally and professionally. With the restoration of Plath's intended contents, we can fully appreciate the accuracy of her vision and the aptness of her artistic choices. "Ariel," therefore *Ariel*, it is. Plath herself recognized that, but it means only that she had chosen a good title for a book, not a metaphor for her whole life or the ending of it.

Many readers have approached the *Ariel* Collection as an enigmatic suicide note, a final summation that will tell us who or what to blame for the tragic loss of a talented writer at age 30. But in reality it is the professional work of a full-time poet. It represents the composing, editing, winnowing, and revision that was Plath's job. Read alongside the work of her contemporary American Confessional Poets, *Ariel* seems to offer some insight into the poet's daily life and psychological states, but no more clearly than it demonstrates her creative process or the final reason she titled it *Ariel*. As critics, we are better suited to judging the efficacy of a writer's decisions than the reasons for them. The Intentional Fallacy is the foil in second-guessing a writer, a wife, a mother, a suicide. Now, fifty years after Plath's death, we can turn our attention to the written record of the

poet who wrote this striking collection and to appreciating the brilliant choices she once made.

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