

# Fragments for the Whole:

## Synecdoche and Recovery in *Ariel*

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In the opening lines of "The Colossus," Sylvia Plath gestures toward the trope of synecdoche, the "part for the whole,"<sup>1</sup> with "I shall never get you put together entirely / Pieced, glued, and properly jointed"<sup>2</sup> and continuing in the familiar poem to describe the statue/father through various parts as an attempt to assemble the whole. This trope also appears throughout the poems in Plath's subsequent book, *Ariel*<sup>3</sup>, to describe the speakers' selves, notably to describe a body through its parts in poems such as "Lady Lazarus," "The Applicant," or "The Detective." Some instances of the trope go beyond the merely figurative definition of

synecdoche, depicting parts literally dismembered from the physical body. These examples of severing are significant because they are extreme, turning linguistic trope into violent act. To understand synecdoche's role in Plath's poems, I begin with Kenneth Burke's ideas of the "noblest synecdoche," one in which "the individual is treated as a replica of the universe" to allow us to "look through the remotest astronomical distances to the 'truth within' or [to] look within to learn the 'truth in all the universe without.'"<sup>4</sup> The part (Lady Lazarus's "right foot"<sup>5</sup> as a paperweight, for example), that is, stands in for both the whole (Lady Lazarus herself) and for something larger (a piece in the poem's theme of phoenix-like rebirth and resurrection through destruction, dissolution, or vaporization). Keeping

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<sup>1</sup> Burke, Kenneth. "Four Master Tropes." *The Kenyon Review*. 3.4 (Autumn 1941). 426.

<sup>2</sup> Plath, Sylvia. *The Colossus*. New York: Vintage, 1998. 20.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout, I refer for all quotations and, as a basis of which poems I consider as part of this volume, to Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2005.

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<sup>4</sup> Burke. "Four Master Tropes." 427.

<sup>5</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 14.

with the conference title's final word—"fragments"—I will present synecdochic images of fragmented parts of wholes from *Ariel* to examine the destructiveness for which Plath's late poems are well known. However, I lead toward a conclusion that echoes Frieda Hughes's claim that this book—or at least the restored edition of it—progresses towards "the resolution of a new life"<sup>6</sup> in the volume's concluding bee poems.

Let me offer a very brief note on my analysis and the problematic practice of reading the poems against Plath's biography that all of us who study Plath wrestle with, whether consciously or unconsciously. The above quote from Hughes of course invites a biographical criticism, as a full reproduction of the sentence describes the *Ariel* manuscript as "clearly geared to cover the ground from just before the breakup of the marriage..."<sup>7</sup>; elsewhere in the "Foreward," Hughes asserts: "I saw poems such as 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Daddy' dissected over and over, the moment that my mother wrote them being applied to her whole life, to her whole person, as if they were the total sum of her experience."<sup>8</sup> Others address problems of Plath's biographies and biographical readings of her work more fully than I might begin to. (See especially Tracy Brain's *The Other Sylvia*

*Plath*.<sup>9</sup>) Here, though, I will point out that Hughes's exact complaint describes how synecdoche functions: a moment of writing represents an entire life; a poem as single utterance represents a poet's entirety of emotion. Of course, we see the flaw in that logic (e.g., though I am happy to be writing this essay, that doesn't mean my entire life is a happy one—it generally is, don't worry for me). If, however, we think of the flawed synecdoche Hughes sees in many of Plath's readers' perspectives, we can consider the use and limits of this literary trope and its role in art.

To return to Burke, "the well-formed work of art is internally synecdochic, as the beginning of a drama contains its close or the close sums up the beginning, the parts all thus being consubstantially related."<sup>10</sup> As Burke speaks about art, not life, we could rephrase the Hughes quote above to assert that readings of any *Ariel* poem could be applied to the whole book, or perhaps with some extension to Plath's entire *oeuvre*. The trope, however, works on an even smaller level than the poem: a line or less; a singular image. Even on this small scale, synecdoche asserts something about the entire work of a poem. John Crowe Ransom argues the trope "is a way of indicating the irreducibility of the object as a whole by

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<sup>6</sup> Hughes, Frieda. Foreward. *Ariel*. xiv.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. xiv.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. xvii.

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<sup>9</sup> Routledge, 2014. 1-43.

<sup>10</sup> Burke. 427-428.

citing some perfectly intractable part."<sup>11</sup> Yet Ransom also considers synecdoche as a way the poet can "see that his [or her] object is unique."<sup>12</sup> Put simply, the trope works like most great poetry: it establishes a universal truth from a singular particular. Yet positing a relation of a single poem or single image from a volume to the whole presents a problem, especially if I am to argue, like Hughes, for a thematic progression. Thus, we should consider the poems and images of Sylvia Plath as scientific synecdoches as well as a literary ones. As Jay Jin writes: "A basic line graph of an object's velocity...charts relations between points of data—no single data point is synecdochically representative of the whole graph."<sup>13</sup> Or, as he puts it in literary terms: "The micro view sees words, parts of speech, and phrases not as microcosms of some 'greater' whole, but in relation to other words, parts of speech, and phrases."<sup>14</sup> I argue, therefore, we not only see the following examples of synecdoche within individual poems, but also in the pattern and development of the forty poems Plath arranged in her *Ariel* manuscript.

<sup>11</sup> Ransom, John Crowe. "The Irish, the Gaelic, the Byzantine." *The Southern Review*. 7.3 (Winter 1941). 528.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 528.

<sup>13</sup> Jin, Jay. "Problems of Scale in 'Close' and 'Distant' Reading." *Philological Quarterly*. 96.1 (2017). 117.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 117.

As I consider the *Ariel* poems and synecdoche, it is worth noting that my approach to that trope above begins with New Critical definitions. Christina Britzolakis notes that Plath's earlier writing explored "the possibilities and the limits of the academic mode promoted by the New Critics during the 1950s," and with *Ariel*, "her poems move towards a mode of surrealism, replacing narrative sequences with a series of hallucinatory images, in language marked by a new rhythmic and colloquial freedom."<sup>15</sup> Such a shift in her "breakthrough" poems leads me to see Plath's use of figurative language as loosely, not rigidly, defined. Some of what I examine may not be, according to the strictest literary definition, synecdoche, as we will see in the first example I offer: Plath's well-known, often anthologized "Lady Lazarus."

A sort of walking miracle, my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade.  
My right foot

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen.<sup>16</sup>

These body parts standing in for the whole of the speaker—the skin, the foot, and the face—introduce a

<sup>15</sup> Britzolakis, Christina. "Ariel and Other Poems." *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Jo Gill. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. 107.

<sup>16</sup> Plath, Sylvia. *Ariel*. 14.

character described through body parts in later lines:

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?  
The sour breath  
[....]  
These are my hands  
My knees.  
I may be skin and bone.<sup>17</sup>

Plath employs, at first, imagery of Holocaust torture and atrocity, the whole body described through its parts so that, as Steven Gould Axelrod writes, "[t]he torturers reduce their victims to mere 'skin and bone,'" and these lines and their device "evoke the annihilated flesh" of the victim.<sup>18</sup> For the Holocaust victim, such horrific separating of the body into its parts exists beyond mere literary trope. Plath, as Axelrod's essay argues, surely was aware of the genocide's facts. Britzolakis summarizes one school of criticism on such poems: "Feminist readings of Plath's later poems have dwelt on their recurrent tropes of woundedness, bleeding and mutilation as signs of an internalized violence."<sup>19</sup> To return, then, to the synecdoche that opens "Lady Lazarus," after telling us that she has died and revived in the opening stanza and becomes "A sort of walking miracle,"

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<sup>17</sup> Plath. *Ibid.* 14, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Axelrod, Steven Gould. "Cultural Contexts for Plath's Imagery of the Holocaust." *Representing Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. 71.

<sup>19</sup> Britzolakis. "Ariel and Other Poems." 116.

the speaker presents herself as only her "skin." The enjambment makes us pause before the descriptive simile, "Bright as a Nazi lampshade" (emphasis added).<sup>20</sup> The simile, like the next image of the foot as a paperweight, makes us see the synecdoche as extreme, as beyond literary device and becoming an actual severing of the part from the whole it represents. I am, the speaker tells us, only these parts you have seen and preserved, the parts that later appear after the repetition of the word "miracle" with at least three purposes in the poem.

There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge  
For the hearing of my heart—  
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge  
For a word or a touch  
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.<sup>21</sup>

Here the pieces—scars, the heart, the hair, or (a metonymy) the clothes—are (one) purchased erotic thrills ("The big strip tease"<sup>22</sup>), (two) proof of the speaker's phoenix-like resurrection (think of the doubting disciple Thomas), and (three) relics as if of a saint. All items, because of the pun, both charge for and provide the buyer with a

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<sup>20</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 14.

<sup>21</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 16.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* 15.

"charge" or thrill. Throughout the poem, then, synecdoche breaks the speaker into parts, parts which we—both as the "peanut-crunching crowd" at her sideshow strip tease resurrection scene and as readers—witness as a moment of restoration and "resolution of a new life" as Frieda Hughes describes the book. Therefore, this poem works as Burke describes synecdoche in a New Critical light, one poem standing in for the whole of the book. Especially noteworthy is the fact that the rebirth appears with a synecdoche: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair."<sup>23</sup> We see her through one part of her body, flame-colored as if carrying the fire of her own destruction, a stark contrast to the earlier synecdoches where the body parts emphasize severing, victimization, destruction, and commodification. Thus, the ending is powerful, to quote Axelrod again: its "identificatory power...resides in the female victim, her body destroyed and commodified, yet her spirit defiant and deviant as she rises."<sup>24</sup>

Whitney Naylor-Smith, writing about "Lady Lazarus," argues that "references to body parts"—listing some of those I explore above—"point to the invitation of the speaker for all women to recognize themselves, their bodies, and their roles as victims.... Lady Lazarus could be any woman who

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Axelrod. "Cultural Contexts for Plath's Imagery of the Holocaust." 71-72.

is or ever was a victim of oppression."<sup>25</sup> Likewise, a victim reduced to her parts forms the case under investigation in "The Detective," described by the investigator as "a case without a body."<sup>26</sup> "It is," the Sherlock Holmes speaker tells us, "a case of vaporization."<sup>27</sup> After mentioning the body's entire destruction, the speaker suggests not a sudden elimination of the woman, but a slower process: "The mouth first, its absence reported / In the second year," and "The breasts next."<sup>28</sup> She has disappeared slowly over time, victim of someone also described through parts: "the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong" or "fingers...tamping a woman into a wall."<sup>29</sup> While the examination of evidence connects to synecdoche—a detective like Holmes, after all, forms a deduction of the whole crime scene out of its parts—the actual crime represented through the trope here goes beyond the "dismembered corpse" imagery present in many *Ariel* poems.<sup>30</sup> As "The body does not come into it all," and the house still smells of "polish," has "plush carpets" and "sunlight" while "the wireless talks to itself," the disappearance of the woman

<sup>25</sup> Naylor-Smith, Whitney. "Refiguring Women: Metaphor, Metonymy, and Identity in Plath's Confessional Poetry." *Plath Profiles*. 6(2013). 325.

<sup>26</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 31.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 32.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Britzolakis. "Ariel and Other Poems." 115.

by mouth then breasts emphasize her loss of two ways of identifying herself: first she has been silenced and then her ability to nourish her children has been taken away from her.<sup>31</sup> The detective's observation of "the deceits, tacked up like family photographs"<sup>32</sup> suggests the dissolution of the woman's family coinciding with her vaporization, one part of her standing in for her whole and she, a part of the family, stands in for its whole. Britzolakis reads this poem as connected to "The Courage of Shutting-Up," as both have "symbolic" crimes in which a "woman's voice and identity...and her soul have dried up and died."<sup>33</sup>

The woman's vaporization beginning with her voice follows from the sarcastic advertisement in "The Applicant," where the woman offered as a wife "can talk, talk, talk," and we might think of her (though the poem describes her as "it") as a stereotyped nag whom the husband will want, eventually, to stop talking.<sup>34</sup> The titular applicant would be best suited here if he were missing something, described by his lack of parts:

Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth, or a crutch,

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<sup>31</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 31.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 31.

<sup>33</sup> Britzolakis, Christina. "Story, Body, and Voice: Dating and Grouping Sylvia Plath's Poems." *Critical Insights: Sylvia Plath*. Ed. William K. Buckley. Ipswich: Salem Press, 2013. 86.

<sup>34</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 12.

A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch?<sup>35</sup>

"The husband," Deborah Nelson argues, "becomes a symbol of lack, a 'hole,' while the wife supplements him prosthetically to make him whole."<sup>36</sup> As the poem begins "listing the qualifications of the applicant," it appears that he has been reduced to only his C.V.-line parts. As these are absent parts, the poem drips with irony. The crushing irony of the poem, though, is that his lack will be filled by the wife, the "living doll" first seen as only one of her parts when the applicant is instructed to "Open your hand. / Empty? Empty. Here is a hand // To fill it and willing / To bring teacups and roll away headaches."<sup>37</sup> Reduced to her parts in order to replace what he lacks, the woman (always described in the poem as "it,") will soothe him, becoming her own lack and giving up her identity: "You have a hole, it's a poultice."<sup>38</sup> The wife surrenders her hand to become something else, just as the victim in "The Detective" lost parts of herself. In Naylor-Smith's words about "Lady Lazarus," "The speaker's focus on body parts represents the dismemberment of the female body under domestic oppression and

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Nelson, Deborah. "Plath, History, and Politics." *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 12, 11.

<sup>38</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 12.

functions"; these words, it seems, apply to many other examples of body parts as synecdoche in *Ariel*, including "Thalidomide," "Tulips," "The Jailer," "Cut," "Ariel," "A Birthday Present," "Daddy," and elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> In "The Applicant, it seems the male character begins in parts and is reassembled through addition of the part—the hand—of the depersonalized woman. In contrast to this poem from early in the book, the later "Daddy" begins with the female speaker in parts ("a foot") and then proceeds to describe the father in parts, as if disassembling the figure put together in "The Colossus." We hear of his toe, head, tongue, foot, mustache, eye, chin, and, finally, his heart. The daughter, though, is the one assembled, "stuck...together with glue."<sup>40</sup> The earlier use of the trope—to describe the feminine self in parts and as coming apart and disappearing—ceases. Though selves will dissolve two poems later in "Fever 103°," there will be further restoration, as that speaker becomes "pure acetylene / Virgin."<sup>41</sup>

As we come then to the book's concluding sequence of "bee poems," we see what I describe as synecdoche in reverse, parts forming into a whole. In "Stings," the speaker tells us: "I / Have a self to recover, a queen."<sup>42</sup> The queen bee in the poem's conclusion

rises like "Lady Lazarus," the images of flying, her red color, her terrifying revenge, and resurrection from what killed her echoing that earlier poem:

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her—<sup>43</sup>

Still, though, the queen is only one part of the hive, and *Ariel's* final poem, "Wintering," reunites many parts into one whole, as the line of bees "Filing like soldiers / To the syrup tin" from which they are fed eventually "ball in a mass. / Black / mind against all that white."<sup>44</sup> Instead of being individual parts, the bees become one whole. Though questions remain—

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas  
Succeed in banking their fires  
To enter another year?  
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?<sup>45</sup>

—the poem ends optimistically in the season of rebirth: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring."<sup>46</sup> As the bee poems work towards "Wintering," they depict "a narrative rite of rebirth.... forging a personal mythology of survival."<sup>47</sup>

I hope to have shown a progression by examining only a few

<sup>39</sup> Naylor-Smith. 326.

<sup>40</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 76.

<sup>41</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 79.

<sup>42</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 88.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 89, 90.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 90.

<sup>47</sup> Britzolakis. "Ariel and Other Poems." 119.

*Ariel* poems and their use of the same trope. (Incidentally, all of the poems I examined in depth were written during Plath's remarkable creative month in October 1962.) Looking at the poems as related and echoing each other across the pages of the book allows us to see them as parts of the metaphoric graph Jin describes. We could also think of another body part synecdoche from Plath, her description of "this one thing" she wants in "A Birthday Present": "Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger."<sup>48</sup> Taken out of context, this desire not to have something formed one body part at a time belies Plath's description of her own work in the short essay "Context," while using that essay's language. There, Plath suggests something similar to Burke's sense of the "noblest synecdoche," as she addresses "the real issues of [her] time," which "are the issues of every time—the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms—children, loaves of bread, paintings, buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places."<sup>49</sup> "To look within" for the "truth without," as Burke says synecdoche must, Plath writes poems that "do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming

itself finger by finger in the dark."<sup>50</sup> Whether writing about that child, a queen bee, a daughter, a wife, or resurrecting strip tease artist, the individuals in Plath's poems have whole selves to recover one separated part at a time.

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<sup>48</sup> Plath. *Ariel*. 68.

<sup>49</sup> Plath, Sylvia. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2008. 65.

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<sup>50</sup> Burke. "Four Master Tropes." 427. Plath. *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. 65.