

Finding Plath's Voice

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Critics and friends of Sylvia Plath typically agree that Plath found her voice in her later poetry. It is said that her early poems echo other poets and often rely more on traditional forms. In a collection of essays about Plath published in 1970, A. Alvarez writes, "Throughout *The Colossus* [Plath] is using her art to keep the disturbance, out of which she made her verse, at a distance. It is as though she had not yet come to grips with her subject as an artist. She has Style, but not properly her own style" (58). Many critics and readers of Plath still quote Alvarez¹ today when discussing *Ariel* and Plath's voice. Alvarez is known for praising *Ariel* and further stating that "the poems read as though they were written posthumously... Poetry of this order is a murderous art" (Alvarez 67). Alvarez explains in a postscript that he did not mean tragic poets produce better work; however, he links her later poems inexplicably with her death, stating they are more interesting and distinct—another popular remark since many writers focus on her life when looking at her poetry, quickly labeling her a confessional poet. The same year poet and friend Anne Sexton writes, "I felt she hadn't found a voice of her own, wasn't, in truth, free to be herself" (Sexton 177). Even Plath acknowledges that her work changed after the publication of her first collection, *The Colossus*. She began to write poems out loud, literally finding her voice in her work. Despite this, Plath's early poetry still has the same motifs, themes, energy, and attention to detail of her later work. Additionally, although Plath's poetry is known for its content about womanhood or madness, linking it with the circumstance of her marriage and death, her poetry has a passion and energy that have nothing to do the drama of her life; therefore, her art is not "murderous" at all. Perhaps the more important questions are: What did *she* value in her work? And where was this "voice" in her early poems?

In answering these questions, readers can look at the poems "Electra on the Azalea Path" and "The Colossus." In reading them closely, we can see that Plath's early poems are quite similar to her later ones. *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* cites Helen Vendler, who "identifies 'Electra' as one of the key poems which paved the way for the 'breakthrough' of 'The

¹ A. Alvarez was a close friend to both Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. He and Plath had spoken about their previous suicide attempts and struggles with depression. He also published some of Plath's early poems before he knew her. He reviewed both collections of her poetry as well as some of the Plath biographies. Plath was also included in his own memoirs (Malcolm).

Colossus" (Gill 37). A couple of paragraphs are given to trace the progression of this poem into the other. By furthering this examination of a poem developing into another, readers can understand Plath as a writer and editor. Additionally, if one reads her early work with a close eye, one can find the simple joy of her poetry, discovering beauty in her words and, thus, our world. Of course, we will never know what Plath really intended for *Ariel*. She was a continuous and careful editor and perhaps with more time, the book would have been different. However, when we examine her early work, we can get a better understanding of her and an understanding of what poetry of hers she liked over others.

When comparing these two poems, it is also important to note that her early poem "Electra on Azalea Path" was never included in a collection, while "The Colossus" became the title poem of her first book. Plath never incorporates "Electra on Azalea Path" in a collection because she felt it was "too forced and rhetorical" (Plath *The Collected Poems* 289). Biographically speaking, she had begun the poem after first visiting her father's grave as noted in her journals: "In abbreviated and almost defensive syntax ('felt cheated. My temptation to dig him up'), Plath discloses the personal impact of her return to the site... At the end of the following week, she declared her frustration with the process of revisiting the past, but she also notes that she has just finished the poem 'Electra on Azalea Path'" (Gill 38). Even without such knowledge of her journals, the poem clearly deals with Electra's father's death, Agamemnon. What is interesting about the poem is that it is always shifting from myth to play to personal. She uses common words between these topics in order to maintain the movement of the poem, proving that her personal emotions are intertwined with metaphors because they are both equally complicated. Thus, "Electra" has the energy of any Plath poem, early or late.

The *Introduction* cites Vendler's reading of this poem, which also indicates that the poem is not solely in the voice of Plath. Like other critics, Vendler states that the early poem echoes another poet: "The specificity of place, the first person narrative of self in mourning and the syntactic form (of which Vendler describes as 'an enjambed front-loaded sentence immediately brought up short by a subsequent curt sentence' as in stanza three) all indict Robert Lowell as an influence on the poem" (Gill 38). Although this can be true, the chaos created between metaphor and reflection gives the poem a forceful drive—a Plathian drive. The first lines of the poem reads as if the speaker is not Electra, but Plath herself:

The day you died I went into the dirt,

Into the lightless hibernaculum
Where bees, striped black and gold, sleep out the blizzard. (Plath 116)

The first line is straightforward, using simple diction. Readers might not only think of the death of Plath's father, but any death they themselves might have experienced. How can we not understand the feeling of loss expressed? The third line is distinctly Plath. She includes an association of her "father with the image of bees (a metaphor which reemerges in *Ariel's* sequence of bee poems and a coded biographical reference to the father's interests)" (Gill 38). If readers have any knowledge of Plath's life and they did not think of Otto Plath prior to this line, they certainly do here. Even if one did not have knowledge of her journals or her father's profession, the bee is still a common image in her poetry. Furthermore, Plath uses color and snow in this line. These are also common motifs she employs throughout all her poetry. As a former art major, Plath was always incorporating color into poems, painting with the same vivid colors she used in her art. As another critic of Plath claims, "The moon, the snow, the color black always have the same function" (Lavers 101). Black is associated with death, a common connection in our society, while the "blizzard" is a storm, a thing of violence, containing "snow, which is cold, white, made of regular units, and melts to nothing, thus revealing its kinship with absence, [also connected to] death" (Lavers 112). Death is obviously a common topic with Plath; it was even more common for Greek plays, which is why Plath chooses to "borrow the silts of an old tragedy" for the poem (Plath 117).

The first stanza in "Electra on the Azalea Path" is grave, indeed, using words with quite negative connotations, making readers feel its weight. The last four lines of the stanza read:

God-fathered into the world from my mother's belly:
Her wide bed wore the stain of divinity.
I had nothing to do with guilt or anything
When I wormed back under my mother's heart. (Plath 116)

Equating her birth with Jesus' here is not a miraculous metaphor, but a "stain." When it comes to religion, Plath was a pacifist and raised Unitarian, and she believed "the implication is that spontaneous hate is infinitely better than faked love" (Peel 44). Plath clearly felt that love for religion was often "faked." Thus, religious symbols are questioned frequently in her poetry. To further create this unsettling tone and image of a "stain," in the last two lines of this stanza, Plath uses the words "nothing," "guilt," and "wormed." In addition, "[the poem] implicate[s] the

mother in the loss of the father (significantly, in the slightly later poem 'The Colossus' the mother is absent)" (Gill 38). Clytemnestra is an important part of the Electra myth; Electra wants revenge on her mother for killing her father. Using the mother complicates the poem, grounding the myth and, thus, pushing Plath's personal life out of this more "confessional" poem. The daughter does not find solace with the mother but instead "worms" her way back to her. Through dirt and death, she moves toward her without human emotion.

The next stanza and the last stanza use the words "stage" and "actors" (116-7), allowing readers to envision not just the myth of Electra, but specific plays out of the *Oresteia*. Plath writes, "I lay dreaming your epic, image by image./ Nobody died or withered on that stage" (116). We are distanced from the play. It is more of a memory, a "dream," rather than an action. Both speaker and reader are just part of the audience. It also calls to the reader's attention that in plays, the action happens off stage; the blood of the imagination is crueler than any portrayal—Electra's imagination is bloodier. In the last stanza, the poem reads, "My mother said: you died like any man./ How shall I age into that state of mind?" (117). This question seems to be the most personal. Like the first line of the poem, it is both direct and emotional. We are reminded that the action is a child losing a father, and regardless of the rest of the play's story, that detail is imperative. Moreover, her "state of mind" continues to hold the violence of it, even if it is off stage. Likewise, the same stanza opens with, "The stony actors poise and pause for breath" (117). Here, actors are involved in the play, not the dream. They are just as part of the myth as Electra herself. Yet, actors can pause; whereas, the real players in the story cannot—the speaker cannot. The *Introduction* notes: "More dangerously, ['Electra'] implicated the self. In the closing lines of 'Electra,' the daughter seeks absolution; the father's abandonment of her is now read as a fault of her own" (Gill 38). Readers are pulled from myth to play and, perhaps here, to the personal, whether it is Plath's personal life or the readers'. The haunting final line of the poem reveals that fault: "It was my love that did us both to death" (117).

The poem is riddled with the guilt Plath herself felt at her father's grave, but more importantly it has the energy, the rush of words, that create myth and reflection simultaneously. As another literary critic points out, Plath "is becoming the myth herself" (Newman 48). This is something that Plath does in her own unique way. Using her own motifs and memory to re-envision the speakers of her poems, she creates something original as opposed to a mere echo of Lowell.

As previously mentioned, Plath came not to like the "Electra" poem. Perhaps because of the more personal and direct lines she felt it was "forced." However, in "The Colossus" Plath achieves what she wants while still using the "old tragedy" of the Electra myth. She uses similar diction in "The Colossus" as well, but the poem is certainly less clear than "Electra," using less of the myth and play references. This more acceptable poem (in her eyes) has one extended metaphor: the speaker cleaning the colossus. Yet, readers are kept at a distance, not fully sure who this speaker is: "Although 'The Colossus' opens with the first person speaker (an 'I' reverberates insistently throughout the poems both explicitly and in the I/y rhymes) is not at first, if ever, clear to whom this 'I' refers or to whom, exactly, it speaks" (Gill 39). In stanza four both the Oresteia and a father is mentioned (130), making readers think this is another Electra speaker. However, it is never stated if the "I" is male or female, in which case the speaker could be Orestes. Neither poem mentions the brother of the myth, nor does this one include the mother. In her later poem, "Daddy," Plath says that the speaker has an Electra complex; perhaps because of this we often equate her Oresteia poems to Electra. However, Orestes is the character who actually kills the mother, who has the blood on his hands. Why exclude him from *all* of the poems?

What *is* revealed, however, is that an unknown speaker is "caught in the position of guardian and caretaker to someone to whom she owes an unknown debt. Her task is ceaseless, thankless and seemingly pointless. She likens herself to an 'ant' and thus her own position is minimized in proportion to the way his is magnified" (Gill 39). Her task is futile; she is as small as an ant, insignificant and unheard. We may not know who feels this insignificance but the emotions evoked are direct enough even without that knowledge. Similarly, the poem begins with "I shall never get you put together entirely,/ pieced, glued, and promptly jointed" (Plath 129). A common theme in Plath's work, early or late, is this sense of dismemberment, displacement. Her speakers are constantly threatened by voiceless-ness or disembodiment. They have a desire for connection and purpose. In these instances, "The Colossus" is very easy to read.

Although frustrated with this futility, the speaker seems to attempt to take a stand. In the second stanza, "she seizes the opportunity at last to speak back to this colossus, to express her anger and contempt: 'Perhaps,' she mocks, he sees himself as 'an oracle' or as spokesperson for 'some god or other'" (Gill 39). She cannot piece him together and she is small in his shadow; yet "perhaps" does not show cowardice, but rather sarcasm and wit. The second stanza ends with a

short line of one complete sentence: "I am none the wiser" (129). This declarative sentence is similar to the direct and personal statements found in "Electra." It draws our attention *because* it is shorter than the other lines and closes on a complete thought. However, despite its straightforward diction and syntax, because we do not know who the speaker is or if they were hoping to gain wisdom initially from this task, we do not directly equate it with the personal in the same way. Moreover, even when the word "father" is mentioned, we are not sure if it is Otto or if it is even Agamemnon: "Stanza four refers for the first time to the colossus as 'father'. The term connotes both a spiritual authority figure (hence 'O father') and a biological one, and the rest of this stanza strives to reconcile the public image, or the 'pithy and historical' figure, with the domestic and private" (Gill 39). Because "father" comes after the line that includes "Oresteia," we might assume it is Electra's father. But as the *Introduction* notes, not even that is clear. Her duality of the word makes the poem an enigma, which is something most critics assess to be a strength in her later work.

Another theme found in her first collection, including this title poem, is "her occasional sense of being teased by glimpses of better worlds, also lurking just beyond the surface of things, but now in the realm of acknowledge fantasy" (Spender 207). This hope for a better world can be seen in the ending of the poem:

Counting the red stars and those of plum-color.
The sun rises under the pillar of your tongue.
My hours are married to shadow.
No longer do I listen for the scrape of a keel
On the blank stones of the landing. (Plath 130)

These last few lines still contain the negative diction of the rest of the poem and of the "Electra" poem. "Shadow" and "blank" certainly connote some type of dissatisfaction. The *Introduction* states, "The end of 'The Colossus' implies either surrender to an inevitable fate—abandonment, isolation, neglect—or a positive affirmation of the value, in poetic terms, of the speaker's own resources" (Gill 50). Although the darker imagery can imply a surrender, the positive words can provide a stronger sense of hope. (They certainly provide a more hopeful feeling than "Electra's" ending). Again, Plath uses color to describe the scene. Yet reds are hues that shift in meaning from poem to poem—unlike the obvious choice of black. One way to read her use of red: "The natural symbol of life is 'the beautiful red'. It is the color of blood, the life-fluid, which expresses emotion by its pulsating center, the heart, in its turn comparable to a wound which reveals life, or

to the mouth, which kisses and screams" (Lavers 108). Red is life, but what part? The kisses or the screams? Either way, they are beautiful because they represent living. Likewise, the stars in her poetry often represent imagination: "Like 'The Colossus' and 'Hardcastle Crag' it takes images of stars, sparks and fire to connote creativity, illumination or insight" (Gill 42). The speaker counts the stars, colored with life, and "no longer" does he or she "listen" or wait. This action can be linked to producing creativity, where the speaker takes matters into her own hands by counting rather than waiting. The stars can "also draw attention to the frustrating uncertainty of waiting, in the figurative darkness, for that inspiration to strike" (Gill 42). But here, it seems as if the speaker is giving up on waiting for something to happen; the speaker has found her "positive affirmation" in herself, regardless of the task at hand.

Then again, readers of Plath typically see the bleak without looking for any hope; therefore, they typically miss her voice. For example, the poems "Edge" and "Words" end Ted Hughes' edited *Ariel* as well as *The Collected Poems*. It often ends most anthology selections of hers as well, ("Edge" is famously read as a suicide poem). However, in the 2004 restored edition of *Ariel*, edited by Frieda Hughes, the poems are left out, showing that Plath did want them in the collection. The Plath critic Tracy Brain writes: "In doing so, [Hughes] helped to shape the still-prevalent idea that *Ariel* was the poetic confession of a suicidal depressive, rather than the narrative of female regeneration and emergence that [some] argue Plath intended" (17). Although these poems are later works of Plath, it proves that many readers of Plath do not go beyond her life nor her suicide. They seek a confession of despair. Looking for the desolate is easier than finding some light in Plath's poems. However, "The Colossus" might just include that light despite the speaker's failures in it, while "Electra," the poem Plath did not like, most certainly ended with the darkness of death.

Although "The Colossus" readers seem to know less, the metaphor is well implemented and obviously valued by Plath. She seems to have preferred poetry that keeps readers more at a distance while including a tightly controlled use of metaphor and myth. In this poem, readers do not go back and forth from myth to play to personal; they stay in this one moment with the speaker, "married" to her "shadow" (130). Although we can link this back to Plath's father's death, there is no indication that that is accurate; there are no bees to connect us to him. Plath's label as "confessional" does not seem to fit when she herself thought "Electra" was "forced." She preferred "The Colossus," a similarly themed poem with a different execution. So what "voice"

is missing in her more crafted poem? Where do we not see Plath's themes, motifs, tones in these as opposed to her later poems? Naturally, as she grew as an artist, her work developed, but so much of the beauty and mystery that we read in Sylvia Plath exists in her earlier work. Maybe Plath did not write these poems out loud and maybe she was discovering how best to deal with the content, but that "discovery" was not her suddenly striking gold or realizing her genius with her *Ariel* poems. She always had the same style—a voice to be heard, one that was, and always is, distinctly Plath.

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