

A Note on Plath's *Ariel*: Death of the Body, Rebirth of the Soul

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Sylvia Plath's final collection of poems, edited and published by her husband after her death, is remembered for its haunting subject matter. This version evokes a sense of darkness, but Plath's intended inclusion and sequence of poems creates a remarkably different experience for the reader. In its author-intended sequence, the poems of Plath's *Ariel* display something quite different from Hughes' compilation. Her poetics suggest that although death is inevitable, purity and rebirth follow, and her use of Holocaust imagery and metaphors asserts this sentiment most powerfully. While Holocaust elements in the restored edition of Plath's *Ariel* poetry create an inescapable awareness of impending death, the subsequent spiritual revival is peaceful and has a cathartic effect.

Plath's poems beautifully articulate complex emotions, allowing a disturbing theme of mortality to emerge. The ability to choose her destiny is out of her control, and she welcomes death. Surprisingly, fear is markedly absent from many of these poems, as she writes to describe death in "A Birthday Present": "I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes" (68). There is no chaos, just respect. She expresses the powerlessness she feels in fate transporting her knowingly to death.

Plath believes that she has no alternative, but death is still not final because spiritual enlightenment and happiness follow. Rebirth is critical in the *Ariel* poetry as "a descent into darkness is followed by an ascent into light" (Eder 301). So much of the material is dark and suicidal, but some sort of transcendence always accompanies physical death. Plath presents death as inevitable; it is as a strangely "pure" force "because it brings escape from conflict" (Aird 72). The overarching theme of the text is acceptance of death and awakening. O'Rourke points out that *Ariel: The Restored Edition* ends with the bees anticipating spring, which is a seasonal rebirth. Since Plath's father was an entomologist, and she associated him with bees, it seems likely that they refer to a reunion with her father (Steinberg). What this theme of rebirth signifies is liberation through death; a death that Plath accepted and that she had no control over. She had to die to be with her father and remove herself from the pains she encountered in life. It is a death of her physical presence, but a spiritual awakening. While Plath embraces this, she does not believe that she can resist it.

Plath frequently alludes to an authority figure that controls death in her Holocaust poetry. The speaker is powerless to act against his wishes. In "Lady Lazarus," Plath identifies this devilish character as "Herr Doktor" and "Herr Enemy," whom are both intimidating figures. Yet as the poem progresses, the appellations transform into "Herr God" and "Herr Lucifer" (16-17). The significance here is that while the doctor and the enemy are daunting, God and Lucifer are inescapable entities. They dictate Plath's destiny, much like a similar individual who materializes in "Daddy." In this poem, the dictatorial figure represents both her father and her husband. Plath repeatedly refers to her father who died when she was very young. She felt compelled to "get back, back, back to [him]" and attempted suicide, but was revived and brought back from death (76). Since she lost him and could not get back to him, she tells him:

I made a model of you,
A man in black with a Meinkampf look

And a love of the rack and the screw.
And I said I do, I do. (76)

This evolution represents Plath's husband, Ted Hughes. Whether or not Plath disliked her father is unknown, but she evidently felt drawn to him. Perhaps she felt that he controlled her even in death, as if fate permanently linked them. This is how Hughes reflects Plath's father. Her father was controlling in death, and Hughes embodied that control in life. Her father absolutely haunted her, while Hughes completely controlled Plath and her art. She is left immovable with her "tongue stuck in a barb wire snare. / Ich, ich, ich, ich" (74). She is helpless to validate her own ideas, and the "convulsive repetition of 'ich' here gives the impression of a violent retching, of what is felt to be the speaker's painful effort to speak, to assume a self . . ." (Bentley 22). Plath is reliant on these authority figures in her life, which she associates with Nazis in this poem. As the Nazis did with Holocaust victims, Plath's father and husband restrained her; the Holocaust elements are paralleled with her own life.

These powerful people in Plath's life left her helpless to make decisions, and she believed that Holocaust victims felt the same inability to control their destinies. Her poem, "Getting There," creates feelings of a loss of control that dominated Plath's life. It is a story of being powerless in transportation to death. She feels that elements in her life are propelling her to meet her end, and she feels vulnerable as she imagines those Holocaust victims on those trains. The speaker of this poem recounts the transportation of a victim who wishes to know: "How far is

it?" (57). Knowledge of the trip is privileged information, and the speaker has questions that build anxiety. Fear increases gradually as the violence in the poem escalates. Plath personifies the train, this vessel of hatred, as it begins "[s]teaming and breathing, its teeth / Ready to roll, like a devil's." Alive, it rushes them to death against their wills. As the destination, the "bloodspot," approaches, the intensity of the hopelessness thrusts the poem forward. Insatiable for death, the "train is dragging itself, it is screaming— / An animal" (58). At the end of the journey, arriving at death itself, the speaker professes:

And I, stepping from this skin
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
Pure as a baby. (59)

Hurtled towards death, the speaker "is stripped of her possessions, her clothing, her previous life, her identity" (Gubar 195). They throw her into the frightening unknown, and Plath feels that this aspect of the Holocaust experience mirrors her own. She expresses "horrified compassion for captive shades being hurtled by the on-rushing fatality of history toward an irrevocable, incomprehensible death sentence" (Gubar 194). Although the poem creates feelings of vulnerability, it ends in a rebirth that characterizes the restored edition of Plath's *Ariel* poetry. The speaker steps from the train car of Lethe, the mythological river of forgiving and forgetfulness, which symbolically cleanses her of sin and prepares her for a pure death. Violence dominates the poem, but rather than pain or hysteria at the end, there is only a gentle peace represented by the baptismal innocence of Plath's "pure" baby.

Plath feels a connection with and an affinity for Holocaust victims because their choices were similarly taken away from them. The Nazis forced death upon Holocaust victims as Plath felt it was fated to her, but she only viewed this as a physical death. She had a feeling that there must be some sort of solace in the end.

Death is an escape from the pain and suffering of life. For Holocaust victims, death was an escape from persecution, while for Plath it was a removal from the trials of wifehood, motherhood, and womanhood. Through her poetry, Plath symbolically cradles the Holocaust victims into the afterlife, this heavenly place of rebirth. She includes several references to spiritual awakening, or less specifically, a movement toward peace from these fears that plagued life.

"Mary's Song," even though it is published in Plath's *The Collected Poems*, is one of the clearest examples that death is purely physical and not spiritual. Though the Nazis murdered the Jews, "[t]heir thick palls float" and "[t]hey do not die," the ashes drift away from the pain like "[g]rey birds" while the "ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent" (257). Death is not the end for Plath, but a path to freedom and stasis. The glowing embers are heavenly and peaceful. No sign of the physical pain remains. While elements of Plath's poetry may be violent in context, the overall message and effect are soothing.

Plath's use of Holocaust elements in *Ariel's* restored edition portrays death in a beautiful manner. Though neither she nor the Holocaust victims she writes about may have chosen death, the images she associates with it are comforting. Spiritual tranquility after passing makes coping with the fate of Holocaust victims, as well as her own perceived destiny, more bearable. Plath was able to take an event such as the Holocaust, and make peace with its horrors, which in turn helped her to make peace with the idea of her own death. The poetic language may initially be violent, but softens into a rejuvenating conclusion. With this in mind, and *Ariel* complete, Plath "gassed herself in the oven-chamber of her own kitchen" (Smith 328). After her experiences with the Holocaust in her poetry, her suicide carries distinct symbolism. She took her own life quietly, accepting physical death peacefully in return for the rebirth of her soul.

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