

## An “I” Elated: The Ecstatic Self as Creative Process and Product in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

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Ekstasis in illumination as the transformation from “Stasis in darkness” (Plath Collected Poems 239)<sup>2</sup> is a fundamental movement in several of Plath’s poems, her later work in particular. An exploration of the ecstatic self, the key figure in this progression, demonstrates the centrality of the concepts of creativity and change to Plath’s poetic process and product. My analysis of the ecstatic self in three of Plath’s most acclaimed, works, “Fever 103°,” “Lady Lazarus” and “Ariel,” draws on the original meaning of the Greek word ekstasis,<sup>3</sup> meaning “the self standing outside the self,” or “displacement.” It also draws on the concept of depersonalisation as understood in the fields of psychiatry and psychology, namely, the experience of a profound sense of detachment from one’s everyday, “personalised” self, replete with full individual personality and character traits. This detachment generally takes the form of the perception of oneself as being at a distance from oneself, of existing outside of one’s own body, and observing the former self. Its strength is such that one’s typical or normal self is often felt to be “the false, showpiece self” (Simeon and Abugel 59). My use of depersonalisation differs from any idea of a Cartesian mind-body dualism, a Freudian split between the conscious and the unconscious, or a schizoid division, mirroring or doubling of the self, such as that discussed by R.D. Laing, David Holbrook and Carmen Birkle. I interpret it, rather, as the detachment and transplantation of the ontological core of the individual from his or her personalised aspects to a new locus of identity. As such, it constitutes the abstraction and transformation or evolution of the self into a new form. It is not to be regarded as

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<sup>2</sup> All future quotations from Plath’s poems in this paper are taken from this edition.

<sup>3</sup> The etymological route which led to the present-day word “ecstasy” is, to be precise, and working retroactively, the Old French term extasie, from the fourteenth century, which itself stems from the medieval Latin extasis and the Greek ἐκστασις (ekstasis), which is derived from ἐκ (ek, meaning “out”) + ἵσταναι (istanai, meaning “to place”) (“ecstasy,” Oxford English Dictionary Online). The OED Online states, furthermore, that

The classical senses of ἐκστασις are ‘insanity’ and ‘bewilderment’; but in late Gr. the etymological meaning received another application, viz., ‘withdrawal of the soul from the body, mystic or prophetic trance’; hence in later medical writers the word is used for trance, etc., generally. Both the classical and post-classical senses came into the mod. langs., and in the present fig. uses they seem to be blended. (“ecstasy,” Oxford English Dictionary Online).

the individual's loss of personality, but rather personality's loss of the power to be the sole defining aspect of the individual. This loss is caused by acute self-observation, and the depersonalised, distanced, extremely self-aware mind comprises the essential aspect of the individual's new identity.

Plath's poetry is rich with manifestations of the ecstatic self in the form of the disembodied, elevated, self-observing speaker. The emergence of this figure commences with a process of abstraction of self from self; a struggle subsequently arises between forces of discord in the old, personalised ontological state and the experience of harmony potentially inherent in the depersonalised self. This tension frequently takes the form of a conflict between dullness and incandescence, death and sexual fever, corporeality and spirituality, stasis and motion. The depersonalised, metamorphosed self which emerges victorious in this conflict is characterised by the speaker's rapturous pleasure at her attainment of a new, extreme locus of power and possibility and the emotional, spiritual and cognitive benefits that this affords her. Foremost in these are the evocation of an ecstatic love of self and the emphatic self-assertion of a resoundingly vocal individual. Plath's ecstatic speakers' new ontological states, while ostensibly involving death, namely the death of the self, subvert this self-destruction by rendering it the metamorphic origin of an apocalyptic, apotheosis-like experience which is inherently creative and life-affirming. Central to this portrayal is the constant displacement of genesis onto metamorphosis. In this way, Plath deconstructs the concept of creation by mapping it onto the idea of change; the point of creation of the self is repeatedly revealed as the threshold of the evolution of one identity into another. Plath thus highlights the latent fecundity of the ecstatic movement of displacement. Her evocation of the transformative energy and activity of the ecstatic self reveals a distinctly Nietzschean *Übermensch*-like figure of self-overcoming, one which, as Schopenhauer also posits, gains pleasure from the will to power, the thrust forward and upward into a higher self. Heideggerian inflections of transcendence are also rife in this figure, the ecstatic self being akin to Heidegger's *Dasein*. These combined philosophical inflections are merged, finally, with Derridean concepts of the dissolution and transfiguration of the self through a creativity-enabling death. Plath diverges from Derrida, however, in that the human subject does not disappear entirely from her scheme, since the emergence of the ecstatic self is contingent upon the prior existence of the personalised self; its creation can only stem from the change of this figure through the event of death.

My work on Plath is allied to Judith Kroll's mythological reading of Plath in the similarities between our conceptions of "false self," "essential self" and the process of "transcendence" in Plath's later poetry. My interpretative scheme differs, however, in that its philosophical focus posits an ecstatic union of the self with the self, rather than with the universe, as Kroll suggests. It also infers less a ritualistic, controlled willing of death than the ecstatic reception of a state of ekstasis which reflects and embodies the process and product of literary creativity. More a pure motion than a Krollian ritual, it is not "the dissolution of the ego into a larger Self" (Kroll 173), but the evolution of the ego into a higher self.

In "Fever 103°," the process of displacement of the speaker's identity becomes explicit in the final section of the poem, starting with the fifteenth stanza:

I think I am going up,  
 I think I may rise –  
 The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I  
  
 Am a pure acetylene  
 Virgin  
 Attended by roses,  
  
 By kisses, by cherubim,  
 By whatever these pink things mean  
 Not you, nor him  
  
 Not him, nor him  
 (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats) -  
 To Paradise. (232)

The speaker looms large in the remaining half of the poem, "I" appearing ten times more frequently here than in the former half, as she describes the effect of her fever in terms corporeal and spiritual:

Three days. Three nights.  
 Lemon water, chicken

Water, water make me retch.

I am too pure for you or anyone.

Your body

Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern –

My head a moon

Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin

Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive. (232)

The “flickering” of the tenth stanza signifies the start of the process of depersonalisation, constituting an abstraction of the speaker’s essential self from her “old,” personalised self, with its “aguey tendon, the sin, the sin” and its fraught state of malaise as symbolized by the “tinder cries,” the weighty, stultifying “yellow sullen smokes” and the “ghastly orchid” (231). Rather than the water of the eleventh stanza bringing any cleansing experience of purity, it is the “heat” and “light” inherent in the symbols “moon / Of Japanese paper” and the sexually suggestive camellia (232) which signify the purification of the speaker’s identity in an experience of ekstasis which is akin to that experienced by religious mystics such as Teresa of Avila, whose autobiographical work *The Interior Castle*<sup>4</sup> Plath had read. The theme of displacement of identity is compounded by Plath’s use of Christian (specifically, Catholic) imagery of the Virgin Mary in her portrayal of the ascension of the speaker to an elevated plane. The speaker’s defiant assertion of her new identity, culminating in her attainment of an elysian existential state, clearly represents the supremacy of harmony in this depersonalized state.

The inherently creative nature of this experience is enhanced by the reference to the “beads of hot metal” and “acetylene” (232), substances not symbolic of “modern and mechanical flame,” as Anthony Libby maintains (128), but rather materials emphasising transfiguration and transformation. The final four stanzas feature, arguably, the metamorphosis of the elements found earlier in the poem. The

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<sup>4</sup> In her journal entry on December 15 1959, she writes: “Am reading St. Therese’s autobiography: a terror of the contradiction of “relic and pomp admiration” and the pure soul” (*Journals* 454). She notes later that St. Teresa “is calle [sic] the Doctor of Mystical Theology because of her writings on the relations of the soul with God” (*Journals* 591). Plath cites several sections of St. Teresa’s autobiography and makes her own notes on the saint’s life, the material varying from incidents from her early life to aphorisms from her work to descriptions of supernatural cures attributed to her.

“beads of hot metal” (232) represent the transmuted moisture in the “lecher’s kiss” (231), while the final ascension is the transfiguration of “the low smokes” and the “yellow sullen smokes” which “will not rise” (232). This ascension also represents the transformation of the leaden drooping of “[t]he ghastly orchid / Hanging its hanging garden in the air” (231). The purifying fever of sexual fervour, whereby the speaker bears “gold-beaten skin” and astounding “heat” and “light” and is heralded to a higher plane of existence by “The beads of hot metal” (232), represents the transfiguration of the Christian and Greek mythical imagery of hell found in the first four stanzas (“The tongues of hell,” “The tinder cries,” “The indelible smell / Of a snuffed candle!” [231]). Plath thus manipulates transcendental mysticism and orthodox Catholicism by using them not simply to “describe a sickness,” as Libby avows (128), but rather to create the emergence of the ecstatic self against a backdrop of conflict between sexual decadence and purity, self-destruction and self-assertion.

The explicit use of the trope of performance in “Lady Lazarus” is, arguably, Plath’s chief tool in portraying the abstraction of that poem’s speaker from her typical, “personalised” self. The images of the “Nazi lampshade,” “paperweight,” “fine / Jew linen” and the skeletal head (244), in their evocation of a being reduced to inanimate objects, all serve to emphasise this abstraction of self. The suggestion of trauma and death in the simile of “rocked shut / As a seashell” and the “sticky pearl”-like worms (245), in conjunction with the ensuing images of imprisonment and hell, convey the discord in the speaker’s typical, performed self. These find their culmination in the images of bodily injury and torture in Stanzas 20 to 24, the “scars,” the “bit of blood,” the turning and burning of the “pure gold baby / That melts to a shriek,” concluding in the imagery of the literally reduced body in the “ash,” “cake of soap,” “wedding ring” and “gold filling” (246). As in “Fever 103°,” this ecstasy features clear religious overtones of ascension and resurrection, which are then rendered problematic by being compounded with the suggestion of sexuality and associated issues of illness, masochism, sadism and vengeance. The final stanza, with its evocation of the phoenix ascending, bodily and spiritually, out of the ashes of its former self to an incipient state of euphoric existence, embodies the ecstatic self as creative process and product; sadistic and masochistic self-exposure transmutes into pleasurable self-revelation. From the performance of the everyday self the speaker has moved to the even more emphatic performance of an escalating drama of self-

realisation which has at its core the spectacular and rich generative potential of metamorphosis.

While the appearance of the speaker in “Ariel” is initially in the context of wholesome unity with the horse which she is riding (“God’s lioness, / How one we grow, / Pivot of heels and knees!” [239]), the fracturing of this unity is implied in the very same line, in the phrase “— The furrow / Splits and passes” (239). This furrow, with its counterpart image of “The brown arc / Of the neck” which the speaker “cannot catch” (239), heralds the abstraction of the speaker from her foregoing state of unity and marks the point from which the movement of displacement of her identity proceeds. The discord within the speaker surfaces in the evocation of darkness and pain in the “Nigger-eye berries which “cast dark / Hooks —— / Black sweet blood mouthfuls, / Shadows” (239); her movement away from her previous self is rendered yet more explicit in the subsequent reference to that vague, menacing “other,” the “Something else” which propels her from her previous position (239). The evocation of her unpeeling of excuviae of self, “Dead hands, dead stringencies” (239), makes it clear that the process of depersonalisation is now well underway. The following stanza, with its suggestion of transmutation in “Foam to wheat” (239), presages the explicit change in her existential state which is presented in the ninth stanza. In this burgeoning existence as an “arrow, / The dew that flies / Suicidal” (239-40), the speaker has clearly moved from an earthly, corporeal physicality, as evidenced by the “Pivot of heels and knees! — The furrow [...] Nigger-eye berries [...] Thighs, hair; / Flakes from my heels” (239), to a more abstract, spiritual mode of existence. This intensely metaphorical imagery in the final two stanzas, concluding with her “drive / Into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning” (240), reveals her achievement of an ecstatic state of being “beside” or “beyond” herself. The imagery and metaphors of suicidal self-immolation render her old identity most definitively annihilated. Simultaneously, the repeated phoneme “T” in “flies,” “Suicidal,” “drive” and “eye” underlies her pulsatingly self-assertive new existence (240), one which is inherently life-affirming in its quality of insistent vocal self-presentation and its evocation of the optimism of the dawn of a new existence. The depiction of this new state of being as a fiery, liquid repository of creative and generative possibilities can be interpreted as the metamorphosis of the “substanceless blue / Pour of tor and distances” (239).

From the “stasis” of the opening line, therefore, the poem moves irrevocably to a mode of motion, of constant flux which, to use Dave Smith’s words, “is all fluid feeling” (45). The speaker occupies once again an existential locus characterised by harmony; her being “at one with the drive” (240) constitutes the transformation of “How one we grow” (239), the crucial difference being that she is now entirely self-defined. The ecstasy inherent in her climactic unity with her own existence, her own purpose and action in her “drive / into the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning” (240) is, as in “Fever 103” and “Lady Lazarus,” imbued with multi-layered sexual and quasi-religious inflections. Foremost among the latter are the alternative name for Jerusalem in the Old Testament book of Isaiah, “Ariel,” meaning, as Kroll points out, “lion (lioness) of God” or “altar [...] of God” (181). It bears, furthermore, as Margaret Dickie Uroff observes, the imprint of Egyptian mythology in the figures of the warrior-, lioness- and sun-goddess Sekhmet, called variously “Scarlet Lady” and “Lady of Flame,” associated with blood and arrows of fire, and Bast, goddess with the same roles as well as goddess of pleasure, named “Eye of Ra” and “Lady of Flame” (Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes 164-65). This culmination of the speaker’s experience of displacement is, therefore, emphatically apotheosized and apocalyptic, aligning her with the awesomely creative and verbally self-actualising divine being of Coleridge’s “infinite I AM” (304) whose being is suffused with “the eternal act of creation” (Seigel 444).

While Plath’s poetry of the ecstatic self is imbued with elements of the divine, the mystical, the mythical and the fantastic, it is, nevertheless, grounded in the realm of the mundane, in that it endorses the continued effort at the basic human endeavours of human survival and human speech. Her ecstatic speaker’s capability for speech is, paradoxically, innately human; her ecstatic flights of self-displacement are not merely dramas of self-aggrandizement, of an egotistical power-trip into the realm of self-exalted, pseudo-divine creative ability, but an emphasis of the human ability for self-creation and change. In her repeated conjunction of human physicality (e.g. “kisses” [232], “red hair” [247], “eat men” [247] and “red / Eye” [240]) with speech-enabling ecstasy, Plath simultaneously highlights the pleasure of otherworldly ecstasy and the pleasure in the achievement of ordinary, yet paradoxically extraordinary, human existence. She echoes the “poor potsherd, patch, matchwood” yet “immortal diamond” (66) which is the flawed, but gloriously redeemed, mortal of Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the Comfort of the

Resurrection.” I reject, consequently, Anthony Libby’s claim that Plath’s poetry, in its similarities with the religio-mystical writings of the *via negativa*, features “few avowals of love for humanity” which “balance the desire for immersion in otherness” (144). I maintain that Plath celebrates the condition of humanity for its very ability to provide experiences of otherness which, paradoxically, involve self-assertion; she promulgates ordinary humanity as a potential source of enlightening mystical vision.

Plath’s ecstatic speaker contrasts, therefore, with the “omnipotent self” of the artist as described by Kristeva (50), a figure of “[a]esthetic exultance” which is “plunged into mourning” by “ordinary social and linguistic usage” (50-51). More applicable in this context is Kristeva’s description of ekstasis as a process whereby “[i]n the place of death and so as not to die of the other’s death, I bring forth – or at least I rate highly – [...] a “beyond” that my psyche produces in order to take up a position outside itself” (98-99). Ekstasis represents for Plath not a “cauldron of mourning” as Christina Britzolakis suggests (101), but rather the fiery furnace of the forging of fresh creative possibilities of life and speech; death functions as a platform for the speaker’s launch to new heights of existence, rather than the plunge to depths of damnation or existential despair. Plath displaces and replaces death with the ecstatic self, but, crucially, not to escape death, but rather to defeat it; hence, death becomes the genesis of new life. The ecstatic self is an “I” elated because it is an “I” which has been annihilated, and yet survives; arguably, in a purer form than before. Marjorie Perloff, among others, has shown that Plath’s structuring of *Ariel* is testament to a pervasive desire to emphasise “rebirth and continuity” (16). Her poems are, as Dave Smith avers, “ectoplasmic with the will to live” (46). “Tulips,” for instance, also deeply infused with the concept of depersonalisation, concludes with the speaker’s persistent heartbeat, indicative of survival and self-love, and her recuperative tasting of health. “Poppies in October” also closes its drama of contrasting self-abnegation and self-elevation with the prominent image of a “red heart” blooming and the dawning of a new day (240). “Mystic,” meanwhile, concludes its depiction of a mystical self-immolation with the intertwining of these three images of the sun, flowers and the heart, defiantly asserting the continuation of life: “the heart has not stopped” (269). These portrayals give the lie to Daphne Simeon and Jeffrey Abugel’s claim that the “tendency to self-observation” which is inherent in depersonalisation “continuously rejects the tendency to live” (59). In Plath’s scheme of ekstasis, self-observation is the vision which enables self-



transformation and the resultant ability to live life to the full. This ekstasis is what Maurice Blanchot describes in The Space of Literature as “an experience of death” which is, essentially, “[t]o see properly,” to find that “things then offer themselves in the inexhaustible fecundity of their meaning which our vision ordinarily misses – our vision which is only capable of one point of view” (151). In occupying a position of detached elevation, an aerial/“Ariel” view, the ecstatic self is afforded a much greater plenitude of perspectives than the personalised self; the change in the “I” creates a change in the eye.

This advantage of perspective, when allied with Plath’s interest in the generative power of displacement and metamorphosis, suggests that she is more fundamentally concerned with the role of the ecstatic self in the eradication of distance between concepts, the conflation of opposing ideas such as life and death, self and other, speech and silence, than in the connotation of negative valencies of alienation, isolation and detachment. The displacement inherent in the ecstatic self is, after all, not merely a matter of distancing, but also the enactment of rapprochement to a new locus, a remapping, and one which does not implicitly preclude a return to the original points of departure. To invert Robert Duncan’s phrase and say “to transform is to form” (Ellmann and O’Clair 992), we approach the poetic act being carried out by Plath in her poetry of the ecstatic self; every time she depicts the move from the so-called “normal” self to the ecstatic self, she effects, essentially, the generation of a new mode of being. Change becomes creation; metamorphosis and genesis become indelibly intertwined. Her ecstatic female personae are not engaged in Margaret Dickie Uroff’s conception of “subversions of the creative act,” since they are “anxious to make a breakthrough back into life” (“Sylvia Plath” 115). Their “performances” are less “stagey” (“Sylvia Plath” 115) than fervently, self-glorifyingly theatrical, and comprise those very acts of self-revelation which Uroff claims they are attempting to prevent (“Sylvia Plath” 115). Their subversion is, more accurately, their revelation of creation based on change rather than on the sui generis genesisic.

Similarly, Plath conflates personality and impersonality; the figure of the ecstatic self in her poetry is, arguably, both the “the expression of personality” and the “escape from personality” (48-49) to which Eliot refers in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” This effulgent new ontological state constitutes another version of Eliot’s poetic doctrine as advocated by Steven K. Hoffmann; a personality which is “properly objectified and thereby transformed” (691). In privileging this transformed

subjectivity's life-affirming self-expression, Plath reaffirms her belief in the value of creative poetic endeavour; she postulates a connection between the ecstatic self, the supremacy of the human will to live and the supremacy of the poetic voice. It is to such a connection between poet and reader that Diane Middlebrook refers when she asserts that Ariel's excellence consists "in having found a poetic mode that [...] conveys an instantly recognizable subjectivity, one that matters to readers" (227); the significance of the ecstatic self to readers lies, arguably, in its familiar otherness. Plath immerses her readers in a Stevensian "tune beyond us, yet ourselves" (165); the ecstatic self is her muse and her music.

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