

“NOT GOD BUT A SWASTIKA”: POWER, TRANSCENDENCE AND HISTORY IN
PLATH’S POEMS

by

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(Under the Direction of SUSAN ROSENBAUM)

ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the critique of power, transcendence and the individual’s relationship to history posed by Sylvia Plath primarily in her later poems. By implicating the position of God in the same field of relations and exchanges as any other position, Plath undermines the metaphysical authorization that makes power appear natural and transcendence possible. In the process, she moves toward an understanding of the self as historically and linguistically constructed from the start, through and through—never the self-engendering essence or “soul” that experiences outside influences as contamination of a transcendental purity. Ultimately, she gestures beyond transcendence as a solution to the problem of the self in history, towards a diligent living in the world that recognizes and supports the existence of the other.

INDEX WORDS: Sylvia Plath, *Ariel*, “Daddy,” “Fever 103°,” Transcendence, Power, History, 20th Century American Poetry, Confessional poets

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SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

Everyone knows, by now, about the ways in which a cultural obsession with Sylvia Plath's biography has often limited and misdirected the critical response to her work. The initial response to *Ariel*, in particular, was famously dominated by the awareness of her suicide and its dramatic proximity to her last burst of creativity. Texts such as A. Alvarez's memoir of his acquaintance with her or Robert Lowell's preface to the American edition of the book laid the groundwork for her considerable mythos, and have become almost legendary additions to the Plath canon themselves. A similar position has fallen to Ted Hughes's several articles and prefaces about Plath, in which he suggests a mythic narrative of her life that has heavily shaped the most prevalent understanding of her poetry for decades.¹ Hughes tends to emphasize the apotheosis of voice he perceived in the *Ariel* poems over the event of Plath's suicide; yet the two easily blur into a single, annihilating *telos* towards which Plath's life and career alike are imagined to hurtle, like the "suicidal" dew of her poem "Ariel."²

The consequences of this mytho-biographical account's wide influence can easily be seen in two of the earliest book-length studies of Plath's work. Accepting more or less Plath's identification as a "confessional" poet, David Holbrook pathologizes the poems.

¹ See in particular his "Notes on the chronological order of Sylvia Plath's poems," in addition to the various prefaces to her *Journals*, *Collected Poems* and *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, among other writings.

² This relates directly to the too common sense that somehow "the poems killed her." As Hugh Kenner pithily puts it, "the...error that adheres in our easy preference for *Ariel* is its overlooking of the fact that as long as she worked in the manner of *The Colossus* she kept safely alive" (41).

He writes almost fearfully, as if Plath's suicide were the conclusion of a syllogism of which her poems provide the premises—as if to treat seriously the “schizoid” logic of the latter would be necessarily to approve to the former. In doing so he goes so far as to make Plath almost a harbinger of moral apocalypse: “The poem ‘Edge’ is beautiful but psychotic...Its appeal lies in the delusive purity of the logical inversion of all human values, that is logical only according to a morality based on hate” (271). Though Judith Kroll protests strenuously against precisely such biographically driven readings, her adherence to Hughes's mythic story-line leads into the same sort of teleological trap, paring the complexities of the poems down to an unfaltering march towards transcendence. The problem with Kroll's reading lies not so much in the claim that “the problem of rebirth or transcendence” is the “one overriding concern” in Plath's poetry, which is basically correct at least for the later poetry; rather, it is with her conviction that Plath's treatment of this problem amounts to a “unified mythic vision” in which “only rebirth or transcendence of the self would be a resolution” (3-4).

Thus Plath's thought is reduced to a single dimension by an overdetermining narrative, or it is treated as dangerously pathological and thus something to be neutralized rather than explored. Such trivialization and simplification have continued to be the most common pitfalls of Plath criticism, and though the last ten or fifteen years have seen something like the beginning of a new era in Plath studies—particularly through the influence of Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*—the fact still bears repeating.³ This is true because the mythic aura of Plath's biography remains the monolithic presence against which any serious reading must push, and it is doubly true

³ The work of Christina Britzolakis, Susan Bassnett and Tracy Brain provides some other good examples of this shift.

because of the profundity of the limitations that presence can impose. The Hughesian narrative of Plath's life as a quest for transcendent self-realization tends to assume in Plath a naïve acceptance of both the possibility and the desirability of such a goal. Furthermore, it tends to stabilize and de-politicize her struggle with the figure of authority by depicting it as a strictly internal, psychological struggle with the demon of her father. Read as "confessional" gestures of transparent sincerity, Plath's poems might seem to support such an understanding; however, the tropic structures and tonal ambiguities of the poems constantly occlude their discursive surfaces, interposing a ravaging critique of just those notions the poems ostensibly assert. While Plath's poems superficially appear to be presenting fantasies of a self-destroying transcendence or a sadomasochistic symbiosis with power, they are on a second level simultaneously staging intimately related deconstructions of power and transcendence both. In fact, it is exactly on this rhetorical level, minimized by critics such as Kroll, that Plath's poems acquire their real complexity and value.

If that value is to be fully recognized, we must continue to treat Plath as a serious poet, rather than as a psychiatric case study, even where her poetry genuinely does flirt with the image of total self-annihilation. She is, after all, hardly the first poet to suggest a seductive appeal in death; in fact, she could be placed in a line that includes several of her favored influences—Shakespeare, Dickinson, Yeats, Stevens—as well as Keats and Whitman. Though the image of a death-obsessed, schizoid Plath has been subject to repeated, devastating assaults over the past decade and more, it remains a dominant part of the popular image with which most readers are likely to first encounter her poetry. Thus, it once again bears repeating that even if Plath is at times nearly guilty of the

“nihilism” of which Holbrook accuses her, no amount of diagnosis can rightly exempt us from dealing with the moral and philosophical difficulties that may have driven her thinking to such an embattled state.

Plath’s poems admit no received notions of the sacred—they level the field of Christian cosmology and demand with Jobian vehemence that any supreme being abide by the same moral and existential rules as his creation. This uncompromising skepticism draws the position of God into the same field of relations and exchanges as any other position, and in so doing undermines the metaphysical justification that makes power appear natural and transcendence possible. In the process, the poems move towards an understanding of the self as historically and linguistically constructed from the start, through and through—never the self-engendering essence or “soul” that experiences outside influences as contamination of a transcendental purity. This leads to a vision of existence that may undeniably be called pessimistic, if not nihilistic—a universe in the care of no supreme benignity, in which every individual stands on an equal footing of implication in a history marred by oppression and violence, from which it is impossible to escape without falling out of existence. Ultimately, however, Plath gestures beyond the failure of transcendence as a solution to the problem of the self in history, towards a diligently lived reconciliation with history that acknowledges and supports the rights of the other.

SECTION 2

“A BAG FULL OF GOD”: POWER IN “DADDY”

In connection with the Hughesian mythic account of her life and poetry, Plath has commonly been seen as cowed by a sense of authority almost supernaturally concentrated in the person of her father. Voicing this increasingly questioned position succinctly and with typical condescension, Calvin Bedient writes of her as the victim of a “[c]rushing, almost Kafkaesque...father worship,” and concludes on this basis that “if she drank dismay from history as we all do, she has nothing of interest to say about it” (4-5). In fact it is in the nature of such readings that they separate Plath’s poetry from any historical context or consequence, reducing her use of Holocaust imagery to mere self-aggrandizement and her anger at male figures to a sort of childish petulance—arguably it is precisely their function to do so. So, for Joyce Carol Oates, Plath “exhibits only the most remote (and rhetorical) sympathy with other people” because she does “not essentially believe they exist,” and her use of Holocaust imagery is designed “only to define herself, her sorrows, and not to involve our sympathies for the Jews of recent European history” (29). Or, to return to the most notorious example, Holbrook declares that Plath “does not speak for all women, unless we are to suppose all women schizoid,” and is not speaking of what he in quotation marks describes as ““the subjection of women”” (154).⁴

⁴ Pamela J. Annas offers one of the most direct answers to this claim to come out of the more recent reevaluation of Plath. She argues that “while for a white male in America, schizophrenia may be a psychological abnormality, for a woman it has been a reality based on the doubly bound conditions of her

Yet it is a fundamental mistake to imagine that a poem can employ some element strictly as “a figure” without being in some way also “about” that thing (Young 127-8). Even as a poem like “Daddy” insistently returns to the figure of the father, its tropes tend to distribute that figure’s attributes over the widest possible field, one which is historical and political as well as mythic and personal. Even the famous device of its single, hammering rhyme falls not on the name “Daddy” but on the more mobile deictic “you.” If we nonetheless choose to regard Plath’s attention as turned strictly inward toward a phantasmic image of her father, then this network of figurations can only be regarded as melodrama or narcissism, as what Seamus Heaney calls a “rampag[ing]... permissively in the history of other people’s sorrow” (165). If, however, we accept these devices as meaning-bearing as well as rhetorical, our understanding of Plath’s concerns necessarily turns outward, toward an unfolding and dramatic analysis of the basic structure of power.

In this analysis, Daddy is not so much the subject under consideration as he is a sort of master-trope, an individual and thus malleable symbol capable of attaching to a massive range of signification. It should also be noted that, despite its justifiably central position in the Plath canon, “Daddy” is only one poem. Though a similar father figure appears in a number of poems throughout Plath’s career, in the October 1962 burst of angrier poetry with which the figure is most commonly associated there are actually a number of villains. The figures of the mother, the husband, and the “other woman” are also prominent in these poems, along with a number of male oppressors whose identification with any actual person in Plath’s life is strictly metaphorical. This should underscore the point that it is more the position of power with which the poems are

everyday life: of being defined rather than defining herself, and of being defined in contradictory ways” (44).

concerned than any individual holding that position. However, because the poem “Daddy” is one of Plath’s most sustained and explicit examinations of the subject, and because of Daddy’s capacity to serve as an archetype of the Plathian authority figure, an extended reading of the poem will be extremely useful.

“Daddy” may indeed mark “the last stage in [a] devolution of discursive integrity” that Jahan Ramazani tracks through Plath’s elegies to her father (1150); nevertheless the poem’s seemingly chaotic shifting of metaphors is skillfully managed to create important thematic and rhetorical effects. The chaos itself is staged, with the intention of blurring the boundaries between a number of representative centers of power, creating analogies that quickly take on moral and political implications as well as figurative ones. A reader familiar with the poem may be surprised, upon a close reexamination, to realize that, the title aside, Plath does not begin with a clear identification of the all-important “you” figure. The first stanza describes him only as the “black shoe / In which [the speaker has] lived like a foot / For thirty years,” a metaphor that describes the relative positions of the speaker and “you” while implying little about the dramatic situation. It is only after this broad structural relation has been established, the theme upon which the poem will work its dizzying series of variations, that the name Daddy is provided almost as a sort of shorthand for lines 1-5. Immediately the name begins accruing figurative connections, each implicating its vehicle with the tenor it represents and finally with the total network of associations. The first return to the mythical and classical associations of earlier father poems such as “The Colossus”—“Marble-heavy, a bag full of God, / Ghastly statue.” However, this quickly shades into the series geographical images that, by laying Daddy’s

toe in the Pacific and his head in the Atlantic, turn the slumbering colossus himself into an image of Plath's home country.

The poem's most powerful motif—that of the Nazi persecution of the Jews—enters quietly at the end of the third stanza by way of the father's native language (“Ach, du”), a detail that does not yet take us beyond the realm of Plath's personal history. Another three stanzas of anxious investigation into this heritage transform the language into “An engine, an engine / Chuffing [the speaker] off like a Jew,” introducing the Nazi motif fully and moving, by a seamless transition, into twentieth century history. What happens in those intervening stanzas is that the speaker—like many of Plath's critics—attempts to locate, to centralize, the force she has called Daddy in the literal person of her father, by seeking out his native village. The result of her investigation is the immediate discovery that there are “a dozen or two” villages of the same name, so that she can never find Daddy's “root” and soon finds herself mistaking “every German” for her father. Rather than a verifiable origin that could be used to fix and contain Daddy, her search locates his trace spread throughout the country to which his heritage binds her—a heritage that takes on a horrifying aspect in the recent historical reality of Nazism. Nazi imagery dominates across the next four stanzas with a consistency matched by no other image in the poem, becoming a keynote to which all the rest of the motifs will relate. It also moves back, through the figurative matrix that is Daddy, to implicate the mythic and personal associations of the first few stanzas.

The rest of the poem runs rapidly and at times subtly through a series of further associations—mythic and personal but also cultural and social—which are now immediately implicated not only with Daddy but with the historical reality of fascism.

Daddy is depicted as an abusive male lover—the “brute” to whom women are masochistically bound in the notorious line “Every woman adores a Fascist.” He then appears as a teacher at the blackboard, who transforms immediately into an image of the “black man” reminiscent of Hawthorne’s Puritan devil. Psychiatry and medicine are more distantly implicated in the brutal image of the speaker “stuck...together with glue” after her attempt to “get back” to Daddy. The reference to “Meinkampf” efficiently suggests not only the earlier appearance of Hitler but the prison in which that book was written, while “the rack and the screw” gestures towards an undefined but massive history of penal torture and inquisition. Finally Plath weaves in the Christian marriage ceremony (and probably her real husband and his infidelities) before producing a kitschy, b-movie Dracula to receive, ostensibly, the exorcism of all these accumulated forces.

Plath has assured that the motifs clustering around Daddy will take on a certain life of their own—each becoming the subject of commentary from the whole as well as commenting on the whole in turn—by blurring the line between figurative comparison and literal identification. The most infamous and obvious example of this is the transformation of the second man in the poem into “a model” of Daddy, an identification so intimate that to kill one is to kill both (line 71). The direction of this identification is reversed in the final stanza, when the vampiric qualities that first belong to the husband rebound to the father. Daddy can become a vampire by his identification with the husband just as the husband can become devil and Hitler (“A man in black with a Meinkampf look”) by comparison with Daddy. The lines of figuration travel in both directions and are also subject to something like the transitive property, so that the husband’s identification with the devil can be traced back to connect him with the teacher

and the connection of each with Daddy can place “God” and “a swastika” in ambiguous proximity. Effectively, every social position suggested in the poem—teacher, doctor, husband, most obviously father—is placed in the same compromising position.

What emerges finally from this analysis is an image of seemingly all types of human interrelations—not only social relationships but the cosmic relationship of God to humanity—as instances of power, the basic structure of power being recognized as a relation of inequality. The Holocaust functions in the poem as the horrific, absolute realization of the this structural model. The relationship of the totalitarian dictator to the scapegoated victim denied even the right to existence is the ultimate extreme of inequality, and by its very extremity tends to force on anyone who contemplates it a temporary recognition of the real mechanics of power. It is not, that is, an absolute property that could be attributed to an individual in isolation; any power is necessarily a power *over*, a power that must be exerted over another in order to exist, and is thus held relative to that other’s disempowerment. As in Michel Foucault’s Panopticon, it “has its principle not so much in a person as...in an arrangement whose internal mechanisms produce the relation in which individuals are caught up” (*Discipline* 202). This is easily recognized by the outside observer of an extreme case such as Nazism, but from the inside tends to be naturalized in all cases by the assertion of some form of biological right, social contract or divine authorization (all of which are potentially reducible to the latter, as we will see later). By implicating so many modes of authority with fascism in the single figure of Daddy, Plath’s poem reveals their foundation on the same structure of inequality and suggests a potential for authoritarian violence in all of them—even the divine authority itself.

The poem meanwhile models this structure in several ways. Its various metaphors seem less to function cumulatively than to seize control of the poem's direction at one another's expense, even at the speaker's expense, as the logic of her own metaphor forces her into the role of Jewish victim. Running across this series of smaller displacements is the central exchange of power between the speaker and Daddy—ostensibly, as Margaret Dickie Uroff aptly describes it, the speaker's move “from booted to booter as her father reverses the direction” (160). This shift of power plays out rhetorically across the length of the poem—diminishing Daddy from God-like giant to authoritarian machine to film vampire, while the speaker rises from synecdochic body part to persecuted Jew to the spectator who watches safely while the villagers dispose of the monster. It is significant, however, that after the initial move from the mythic to the historical, the poem returns to the mythic in a diminished, popular form. Daddy's dominance is figured by historical fact, the speaker's revenge by Hollywood fiction. In fact, the moment at which the balance of power shifts never actually appears. Instead, the speaker's victory is smuggled in by a rhetorical sleight: the “So” of line 68 asserts a causal source for the statement that she is “finally through” that is difficult to find in what immediately precedes. This gap in the poem's action only underscores the frequently observed ambiguity of the declaration of victory itself, which may mean that the speaker is through *with* Daddy or through *to* him, or even that she is simply *through*—as in finished, ruined, destroyed. Plath has allowed so much force—social, historical, religious and personal—to gather behind the name of Daddy that any victory that is neither Pyrrhic nor fabricated is difficult to imagine. Despite the rhetorical appearance of a change in positions, what is in effect is what Foucault describes as “a state of domination,” a

situation in which “an individual or social group”—or in this case an omnipresent mass of human and inhuman forces—“succeeds in blocking a field of power relations, immobilizing them and preventing any reversibility of movement” (*Ethics* 283).

The individual exists in the ultimate relation of inequality to this totalization of power, the scope and influence of which dwarves and fragments the speaker’s sense of individual self in spite of her desperate efforts to force coherent boundaries on the whole and to position herself beyond it. The speaker attempts to stake out a personal sphere for her archetypal struggle with the father by calling on the particularizing details of his national heritage—yet in doing so she is inevitably drawn into a confrontation with the historical reality of the Holocaust, a reality of such force and magnitude that it presses her awkwardly into the position of Jewish “other” and affects the entire poem with a sense of disproportion. Similarly, each attempt to pinpoint Daddy through figurative representation only reveals further the scope of his own figurative signification, just as the attempt to fix him in the form of a “model” only creates a second man who must be killed. Despite the rhetorical illusion of her final triumph, this gradual accretion of attributes to Daddy also seems to effect a complimentary vacating of the speaker. By the poem’s final stanza her very agency—represented in the act of recognizing and killing Daddy—has been shifted to the insubstantial villagers, leaving the “I” of the final line starkly isolated and with no sense of a continued existence—distinctly “through.”

The accumulated mass of power relations Plath denotes by the name Daddy threatens to accumulate the speaker herself, who struggles to maintain some individual integrity apart from it. We might refer to this mass as history in a broadened sense of the word—encompassing all the past relations, both personal and political, that have led to

the alignment of power in which the speaker currently finds herself trapped. As Stan Smith writes, Plath understands the personal life of the individual as a “historical secretion, the precipitate of an order that precedes and will re-absorb it” (202). Thus the apparition of the Holocaust in the poem is not self-indulgent melodrama but an absolutely indispensable context if Plath is to represent her sense of the personal present as “engendered...by the drama of a fully historical past” (Rose 222). It is a part of the individual’s dilemma, as Plath presents it, to be the “precipitate” of an order too large to lay claim to as an element of personal identity without engendering the feeling of disproportion experienced in “Daddy,” and also too large to register the reciprocal influence of the individual. Thus the Holocaust is a part of the history to which the speaker must relate, as well as a frightening image of the individual’s relationship *to* history: the speaker imagines herself as a Jew caught up in the inexorable machinery of the Nazi death camps, the “engine” chuffing her off “to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen,” which is also the engine of language and of history.

The poem, then, offers a structural critique of power in which the main source of anxiety is one’s immobility within the system—relative to Daddy’s monolithic collation of God, history and myriad social forces the speaker is, like virtually anyone, trapped on the bottom. This leads directly, however, to a more post-structural critique in which one’s mobility within the system becomes an equal source of anxiety. In order to take on a sense of legitimacy, any concentration of power obviously must be able to appeal to some authorizing force beyond its own advantage in a structure of inequality. The simplest example of such an appeal is the “divine right” that validates the position of the king in a traditional monarchy—the direct authorization of a supreme being whose own

power is naturally valid because of his absolute goodness and purity. The traditional theology of many religions founds male privilege on exactly the same basis. The appeal to biology or “natural order” that has become a predominant post-Enlightenment justification for inequalities of race, gender or sexuality can be reduced to a similar claim—the innate rightness of the creation being founded on the innate rightness of the creator. Even the concept of the “social contract” on which our modern democracy rests ultimately grounds its legitimacy on inalienable rights with which we are supposedly endowed by our creator. Regardless of whether the existence of a literal supreme being is asserted, any legitimization of power must be grounded in the structurally identical assertion of an authority whose legitimacy is a priori, its power based not on structural inequality but on the innate nature of the source, and thus able to confer the same legitimacy on its surrogates and inferiors.

Plath’s analysis of power, however, leaves no space open outside the system. No special stability is imputed to God in “Daddy”—he appears not even as an autonomous entity but only as one of the many avatars of Daddy, as subject to substitution and conflation as the simplest. He is thus drawn within the system and, rather than conferring any of his own supposed innate justice on its relations, becomes equally implicated in its apparent injustice. He is replaced at the center of the poem’s cosmology by the encompassing figure of Daddy—yet because of his very scope Daddy is no center at all but the embodied entirety of the system itself. He is not a transcendent ground that justifies the lesser authorities but a site of power to be temporarily occupied by them, not the authority exterior to the dialectic of inequality but an incarnation of the operation of that dialectic. Thus the center is not only inside the system but at the same time identical

with it. Daddy becomes an ideal trope for Derrida's understanding of the center as a function rather than an entity, as well as for the Foucaultian understanding of power as a position rather than a property, because he himself is only a function and a position.

In this Plath has depicted something like what Derrida calls "the structurality of structure" with regards to systems of power (247). This analysis implies, at least in theory, the potential for infinite mobility within the system: the ground being cut from beneath the existing order, any alignment appears equally possible and equally natural. However, it also eliminates the possibility of legitimizing any potential realignment. No right to power is conceivable, and any claim to power takes on the aspect of a usurpation. To have power is innately to occupy the position of Daddy. As a result, the prospect of the speaker's mobility within the system becomes as great a source of anxiety as the apparent reality of her immobility. This anxiety is exasperated by the unstable minglings and identifications we have already seen—with no transcendental ground to found it, the speaker's position relative to Daddy seems just as prone to slippage and even reversal as are other relations. The poem's vampire motif suggests this potential for contagion in Daddy's abusive power. As Tracy Brain writes, vampires "make their victims what they themselves are," spreading the guilt of Daddy's violence until every character in the poem is "filled with other people's blood" and "no identity is left untainted" (62). The anxiety caused by this unmanageable mobility plays out alongside the competing anxiety of immobility in the poem's double-narrative—the one in which Daddy crushes the speaker, the other in which the speaker puts on Daddy's evil with his power.

It is worth noting that, despite many critics' accusations, this anxiously divided identification with both the holders and the victims of power is thoroughly grounded in

Plath's own historical situation. Aside from the often overlooked fact of her German heritage,⁵ there is the real ambivalence of her conflicting positions in various structures of power. On the one hand, as an American woman in the 1950's she was subject to a program of discrimination that, though never so horrifically extreme as that imposed on European Jews by the Nazis, was similarly pervasive. On the other, as a white American of the same era, she would have enjoyed a position of technological and social privilege virtually unprecedented in human history. Plath's journals suggest that even at a much earlier age than that at which she wrote "Daddy" she was already aware of both these positions and uneasy with each.⁶ This awkward status, much more than her relationship with her father, may be read as the vital biographical subtext of "Daddy," for which the speaker's improbably divided heritage serves as a metaphor. As Plath described it in introducing the poem for a BBC reading, the speaker's "father was...a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish" (qtd. in *Collected Poems* 293).

The anxiety with which the speaker experimentally identifies with each side of this heritage reflects on Plath's historical situation as well as on the larger critique of power posed in the poem. Her identification with the Jewish victim appears by a passive, almost accidental process—beginning as a figurative comparison and slowly developing into a sense of identity complete with its own set of props—that suggests both her reluctance to make the identification and the loss of agency to which it subjects her. To

⁵ In an interview, Plath herself seems to have argued that this heritage provides the biographical link to the Holocaust some critics have demanded as a justification of her writing about it: "In particular, my background is, my I say, German and Austrian. On one side I am a first generation American, on one side I'm second generation American, and so my concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense" (qtd. in Orr 169).

⁶ She writes, for example, of her privileged position "going to one of the most outstanding colleges in America;...living with two thousand of the most outstanding girls in the United States" (33) but also, and only a few entries later, of her bitterness toward "most American males" who "worship woman as a sex machine...who shouldn't have a thought in her pretty head except cooking him a steak dinner" (36).

accept this position is to be on the train with its inevitable destination, caught on the pre-determined track of history with no room for the assertion of an individual will. To defy it, however, to somehow seize agency, is necessarily to identify with Daddy by returning his acts of violence point for point—the stake through his heart for hers bitten in two, his body lying back in the coffin for hers living in the black shoe. The system of power has been rearranged without being fundamentally improved: the position of power, though now occupied by the daughter rather than the father, still needs “a scapegoat—Jew or vampire—to legitimize itself” (Bentley 33). Just as a woman in Plath’s situation would be compelled to identify with the same culture that oppresses her in order to claim unambivalently her access to privilege as a white American, the speaker is compelled to adopt Daddy’s strategies in order to overthrow his position.

Thus her field of agency remains fatally limited. Whether she accepts her current status within the structure or attempts to defy it, the speaker becomes complicit in the processes of power Daddy represents—either by surrendering to them or by taking them up herself. It is for this reason that her desire to kill Daddy blurs into a desire to “get back to” him and that the “through” of the final line takes on its double meaning. What appears as an effort to overturn the structure of power is in reality the ultimate acceptance of that structure through an active participation in its dynamics—and the only other alternative is a passive subjection to the same dynamics. Just as there is no position outside the structure for a transcendental authority that could validate the arrangement within, there is no such position in which the speaker can stand exempt from participation in the system. Though the distribution of power is revealed as arbitrary and potentially mutable, the basic structure of power remains unavoidable.

SECTION 3

“PURE? WHAT DOES IT MEAN?”: TRANSCENDENCE IN “FEVER 103”

What this amounts to is a statement of the inescapable involvement of the individual in history and of the impossibility of innocence—a surprising conclusion to emerge from a poet who has commonly been seen as concerned exclusively with an intensely limited private sphere and with the achievement of an even greater degree of purity within that sphere. But early critics were not necessarily mistaken to see the quest for a transcendent purification of the ego as the major subject of Plath’s poems; they only tended to oversimplify Plath’s relationship to that subject. Many accepted Hughes’s implication that the *Ariel* poems themselves represent its accomplishment, confusing the achievement of a distinctive poetic style with the achievement of an elevated state of being. Others less sympathetic to Plath saw her suicide as a final judgement on the fundamental narcissism of her investment in the project, as if she had literally been living in a Shakespearean tragedy in which an individual’s fate could be read as poetically fitted to the moral quality of her existence.⁷ Few critics, until much later, considered the possibility that Plath herself was not uncritically committed to the pursuit of personal transcendence. In fact, virtually all of her poems that address the subject treat it in a profoundly ambivalent manner. On the one hand, they express forcefully the necessity of delivering the ego to a plane removed from the tainted level of history; on the other, they simultaneously demonstrate the naivete and final impossibility of such a hope. It is from

⁷ The earlier examples of Kroll and Holbrook again serve to illustrate this rough classification of early responses.

the collision of this irresistible emotional force with its immovable intellectual object that these poems derive their frequent tone of desperation and the often strained pitch of much of their rhetoric.

Such an impasse is already evident in a poem like “Daddy,” with the forced and possibly fatal triumph of its last line. Even where there is not, however, the direct presence of an oppressive figure such as Daddy, Plath’s poems of transcendence still incorporate the monumental resistance against which the ascendant ego must push. Poems such as “Fever 103°” deal more traditionally and explicitly with transcendence, modeling it not as the suppression of a monolithic, malevolent other but as the cleansing of internal impurities from the self. This cleansing is expected to allow a communion with the supreme other of the sublime or divine—in a sense, it is the difference between overcoming the Devil and seeing God. However, because the same undermining and blurring of both those positions apparent in “Daddy” remains at work, the entire process is fatally imperiled and finally doomed. Key concepts such as purity and the integrity of the ego come under extreme pressure along with the notion of divinity, finally leaving intact little of the philosophical and theological apparatus on which the possibility of transcendence is founded.

Because “Fever 103°” offers an such a comprehensive performance of this critique, a close reading of the poem will be an important part of the following discussion. Kroll recognizes in this poem “the trappings of a farce,” but argues that “the farce ends in an image of transcendence” (178). Yet if even the reference to Paradise, the final word of the poem, “may be a joke at the farcical level of the poem” while “at the serious level it indicates transcendence” (180), it is difficult to see at what point the one

level supersedes the other. Rather, it would seem that both persist throughout—the poem mocking its own religious fervor by casting it as delirious fever. Yet ultimately purity of the type apparently aspired to in the poem must be an all-or-nothing proposition: partial purity in this context is a description of contamination. In “Fever 103” Plath has depicted the process of transcendence as itself contaminated—by selfish motives, by internal contradictions, by foundations in gross contingency, by an unavoidable recourse to historically-determined language and by the precariousness of the concept of purity itself where boundaries remain so unstable.

The poem begins with the most fundamental unit of deconstructive analysis: a question. Thrusting the reader into a train of thought *in medias res*, the sharply asked question of what “pure” means gains the propulsive force of an exclamation and, because it receives no immediate answer, appears as a focused point of departure for the entire poem. Though a workable definition of this term will be absolutely necessary to the transcendent flight of the poem’s final movement, no such definition is ever explicitly posed. Instead, the language of the poem produces a performative representation of instability in all kinds of constructed boundaries as intense as that of “Daddy.” This instability greatly threatens the hope of disentangling any one object “purely” from any other, including the hope of disentangling the self from history. The opening lines alone demonstrate that history as acquired through language is subject to a functionally random mesh of connections and potential substitutions that render it undelimitable and thus inescapable. Beside this dense network any organized, centered topography of existence that would allow for notions of a distinct self or of a free space outside history can only appear as an inadequate schematization.

These lines unleash a dizzying blur of puns, transferences, distorted allusions and plain obscurities that disorient the reader on significant points. The “tongues” of fire in the second line are compared to the literal (yet mythical) tongues of Cerberus in what amounts to a combined simile and pun that compromises, with remarkable economy, concepts of identity and difference. In effect, the reader is tricked into momentarily questioning whether the comparison of “tongues” with “tongues” is valid or tautological, and then forced to recognize that it *is* valid because in this instance “tongues” and “tongues” are not the same thing. At the same time the adjective “dull” slides across the poles of the simile, from the tongues of hell to Cerberus’s tongue to Cerberus himself. Here another simple but disorienting fact is at play—that Cerberus and Cerberus’s tongues are not identical; an adjective applied to one might not apply to the other and must thus be repeated for each. Meanwhile, less unusual and rhetorically elaborate devices are also at work, indicating the ways in which such distortions are native to our linguistically determined understanding of the world. Placing Cerberus at the gate of a penitential hell blurs Christian and Classical images of the afterlife in a fashion that has its own historical roots at least as far back as Milton; while the inversion of the traditional attributes of both produces a subversion of the referential qualities of allusion hardly striking in the wake of Joyce and Eliot.

Throughout these opening stanzas there is no direct indication of who is speaking or in what context. Instead, the object of purification appears only as an undefined space towards which the process of purification addresses itself—as the “aguey tendon” or as the “tinder” that “cries.” It is only with the speaker’s direct address to her “love” in line 11 that any sense of a dramatic situation or of a clearly defined subject begins to emerge

out of the unattributed speech of the first stanzas. This sense begins to appear simultaneously with the figure of the “low smokes” that roll from the speaker to create a Daddy-like pandemic oppression of “the aged and the meek.” On the instant that the speaker first declares her subjectivity, using the words “I” and “me,” she also assumes this position of God-like centrality and extension, and in the same action implicates herself in a violence like Daddy’s. As the smoke image gradually resolves into an image of nuclear holocaust and the bombing of Hiroshima, it also becomes clear that she has accepted her implication in what one critic calls “the agonized history of mankind’s sinfulness” (Sanazaro 92). Once again, just as with the speaker’s identification with the Holocaust Jews in “Daddy,” the careful working out of an incidental metaphor slowly pushes the speaker of the poem into an uncomfortably intimate relation with the tragedies of history. Paradoxically, the speaker’s emergence as a distinct self only solidifies the blurring of that self’s boundaries suggested by her absence throughout the miasmatic opening lines, as the smokes draw her presence around the globe and into both the past of Hiroshima and the potential future of nuclear holocaust.

The second direct address solidifies briefly the speaker’s dramatic position and with it, by extension, her implicated selfhood. Immediately she begins a concentrated effort to transcend both, launching the poem into a second flight of figurative language that ostensibly seeks to restore and strengthen the boundaries of the self undermined by the first. However, this effort is suspect from the start. It begins with the assertion that the speaker is “too pure for...anyone,” a term that the poem itself has already labeled as elusive and has yet to define. Furthermore, the statement seems to be immediately inspired in the speaker by her inability to keep down food: because her body rejects

“Lemon water, chicken / Water” and even “water” as if they were contaminants, she imagines it to be exceptionally pure. This is obviously an unglamorous and even comically absurd catalyst for a moment of religious rapture, but more importantly it is a historically contingent circumstance—the result of an illness that anyone could have contracted, itself a literal contaminate—and thus self-defeating as the basis for a transcendently self-identical ego. At the very moment that the speaker is asserting her God-like autonomy, we are reminded that she has been in bed for three days with a severe fever, actually in a position of extreme dependence on the care of others. Her thinking at this point is a literary impersonation of the logic of a fever, and the central trope of the poem seems to be a parodic merging of this fever logic and the logic of religious vision.

The speaker attempts to isolate her ego from the contaminants of contingency and history by withdrawing into a pair of metaphorical transformations, first into a lantern with “Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive” skin and then into “a huge camellia.” These metaphors themselves, however, cannot escape the implication they are meant to resist. As Paula J. Annas has pointed out, both are contaminated by “their connection to earlier images of social horror” lingering from the speaker’s meditation on hell and nuclear holocaust—the lantern recalling the “indelible smell // Of a snuffed candle” and the camellia the “ghastly orchid / Hanging its hanging garden in the air” (135-136). Even without the context of the first half of the poem, though, these lines leave an impression of tainted beauty that belies the speaker’s claims for herself. The first suggests a state of objectification and commodification that is too familiar in poetry about women’s bodies, together with an uncomfortable image of violence and physical attenuation (“my gold

beaten skin / Infinitely delicate”). The second is perhaps ironically suggestive of masturbation (“All by myself”) and also contains too forceful a reminder of the speaker's physical state of fever (“flush on flush”).

The final four stanzas of the poem relate the speaker's actual ascent, and also form a bizarre syntactical unit. The final line, following the dash in the preceding line, would seem to complete the sentence begun in line 44, before another dash. The nine lines between then function as an appositive, yet these lines are so spectacularly distracting in their rhetorical fireworks and dense punctuation that the reader has little chance of connecting the “I” who “may rise” grammatically with the “Paradise” she hopes to reach. In fact, the intervening lines include a period—so that it is a sort of grammatical impossibility to make the connection at all. Yet the only alternative reading is to treat the last four lines, following the period, as a separate sentence, in which case it is a sentence literally without a subject—without *the* subject. The closest the speaker comes to appearing in the sentence is in the form of her rejected “selves,” almost giving the effect that it is not the speaker who is rising to Paradise but the “old whore petticoats” that are “dissolving” there. Just as in the first several stanzas, the self as object of purification is strangely absent, broken up in a second miasma of shattered grammar and displaced signification (“whatever these pink things mean”). The effort to extract herself from history drives the speaker to exclude the linguistic templates that allow for comprehension and signification from the poem, and finally to cut out even her own presence. “Paradise” stands in isolation at the end of the poem as an emptied sign like the Nazi props of “Daddy,” with no real meaning as a point of destination and no subject to reach it.

In order to elaborate this analysis further we must first return to the critique of the structurality of divinity we found in “Daddy.” Just as in that poem, Plath here treats the concept of the divine with no special care, freely drawing on Christian iconography of all kinds in the poem’s most ironic moments. Not only does the speaker pay visits to both heaven and hell in the course of the poem, in between she momentarily takes on the role of Jesus (“Three days. Three nights”) and even compares herself directly with God. Though it makes for a striking line, this comparison is not otherwise a point of special interest in the poem—it is only one of many figures, replaced by the image of the lantern even before the end of a line. Furthermore, it connects the speaker with God at the moment of her greatest narcissism and selfishness. If the speaker’s pursuit of transcendence is an effort to sever all ties—not only to her lover but to the “meek” of the poem’s first half—and thus to abdicate her responsibility in history, then the comparison of herself to God in this action is an allegation that the divine authority can be guilty of the same kind of abdication. Just as in “Daddy,” the God-figure is drawn inside the network of history and made subject to all its apparent ethical demands. He is denied the privileged position of moral arbiter that normally accounts for his exemption from moral evaluation; in effect, he is denied the privilege of internally validating his own purity.

The comparison conversely suggests, as Rose observes, that the “pure, self-generating ego” of the transcendental self can “rediscover itself...only in the place of God” (145). In fact, the poem goes on to depict the speaker’s ascension to Paradise as simultaneously her transformation into an image of divinity—an icon of the Virgin complete with vaguely angelic attendants. Thus, the God-figure so important to the validation of power can be seen as doubly important to the concept of transcendence.

First of all, just as his internally validated authority can be cited as the ground for all contingent human authority, his inherent purity can be used to naturalize constructed distinctions between “pure” and “impure.” As subjective evaluations these categories become almost meaningless; if transcendence is to be a supernatural reality and not merely a private psychological phenomenon, there must be an objective basis for distinguishing between that which is to be transcended and that which is to transcend. Secondly, the God-figure serves as the final target of transcendence—both in that he validates the belief in an alternative plane of existence purified of historical contingencies and in that the achievement of transcendence equals the usurpation of the self-validating properties of divinity. It is his presence there that invest the term “Paradise” with metaphysical weight, and it is by drawing him out of this ascendant position into one parallel with that of the speaker that Plath leaves the word so hollow.

Thus the very act of usurpation implied in transcendence undermines the metaphysical authority upon which it is itself founded, suggesting that this authority is no more than a function, open to substitutions and so as contingent as anything else. If the purity of the God-figure rests only on his own position as arbiter of the pure—if, in effect, God becomes pure only by his own fiat—then that purity is neither transcendental nor inherent at all but merely an extension of his authority. Conversely, if God’s purity is not self-validating *a priori* but contingent upon his authority, it can not be available to validate that authority in turn. Thus, both the purity and the authority of the God-figure are revealed as not self-demonstrating properties but privileges of power, and the act of transcendence of “Fever 103°” reverts to the identification with power of “Daddy.” As a result, there is no goal point left for the “true” transcendence that would free the subject

from implication in history as a record of inequality. What has traditionally been seen as the one position free of any such implication becomes, by virtue of that very privilege, the most implicated point of all, even the nexus of all implicated forms of power.

Just as critically, the purity of the divine is lost as a standard by which to extract the pure essence of the self from the historically contingent debris. In fact, if even the God-figure himself is implicated in the same history, there seems to be no reason to expect that the self will have any such essence. If it is to have any value for the project of transcendence, the attribution of purity cannot be humanly subjective; it must receive a divine approval that in effect substitutes for objective provability. If the God-figure loses the right to give that approval or is found not to exist, then evaluations of purity and even the notion of a distinction between “pure” and “impure” must be recognized as human constructions, like all such constructions historically determined. And since, in this context, the very definition of “pure” is “free of historical implication and contingency,” the category collapses altogether. What has been seen as the object for which Plath’s poetry searches—the purified, transcendently unified ego—can only be reabsorbed into the mass of accidental, historical circumstances that compose the “impure” self to which it had been opposed.⁸ The very process of transcendence, meant to escape historical determination into a realm that is not constructed but “real,” is revealed as a historically determined construction in all its terms except perhaps one—the historically molded self can no longer be shuffled off as a mass of “impurities,” but it remains problematically implicated in a history shaped by the injustices of power.

⁸ Plath’s journals again indicate that she was concerned with such an understanding of identity even in her late teens: “How much of my brain is wilfully [*sic*] my own? How much is not a rubber stamp of what I have read and heard and lived? Sure, I make a sort of synthesis of what I come across, but is that all that differentiates me from another person?—That I have banged into and assimilated various things?” (47).

Though the traditional model of transcendence is discredited, the apparent need for such a process is not. Yet, given the dissolution of any concept of the purified self that ascends or of the pure sublime to which it reaches, given the reabsorption of any such concepts into the realm of history, the continued representation of transcendence can only reflect the movement of nothing to nowhere. This explains the strange absence of the subject at the beginning and end of “Fever 103°.” If there is no element of the self that transcends the historical, in effect no soul, then the speaker’s artificial constructions of hell and heaven can only remain unoccupied stage sets, and the “I” of the poem can never press past the ungrammatical full stop that intervenes between herself and “Paradise.” It also explains the apparent drive towards self-annihilation in so much of Plath’s later poetry—if the entirety of the self is historically determined, then the effort to transcend history can take on no other aspect. If, as Smith observes in discussing the poem “Tulips,” the self is only the incidental accumulations of “name and dayclothes and history and body,” then to relinquish this “baggage” is not to find the true self beneath but to “lose the residual consciousness they constitute” (204), finally to disappear completely.

A poem such as “Ariel”—which has often been contended over as a representation either of the moment of transcendence or of the urge to suicide—may thus be seen as an uncovering of the deep resemblance between the two. This does not suggest that Plath, at the moment of writing such a poem, or ever, uncritically endorsed either. Rather, I would suggest that the blurring of the two is yet another instance of Plath’s undermining of boundaries and an extension of her critique of transcendence. Plath’s depictions of transcendence are always entangled in a violence that turns both

inward and outward, a violence that is not only the ineradicable trace of history but also produced by the act of transcendence itself as a historical process. This is readily apparent in “Ariel,” in which the “I” of the poem—heavily emphasized in the last lines by lineation, rhyme and the conspicuous “I”/“Eye” pun—merges with language such as “arrow” and “drive” to create an unmistakable image of transcendence as an act of phallic aggression, even of rape. The “drive / Into the red / Eye” is an act of violation that, rather than rendering the speaker transcendently impersonal and androgynous, masculinizes her in the worst possible way. At the same moment, it is also “Suicidal,” a drowning in the “cauldron of morning.” Even the most apparently pure representation of transcendence implies an identification with violent power like that in “Daddy,” yet that identification also becomes an act of self-destruction, an Icarian flight into the sun.⁹

The reason for this double violence is in the very structure of transcendence itself. As an effort to isolate the self from history transcendence necessarily entails a denial of the other—in the form both of the violent overthrow of “Daddy” and of the abdication of historical responsibility in “Fever 103°.” Yet because the self is entirely contingent upon the history of its relations with this other, because at no point can it be said to be purely self and not a product of the other, this rejection turns on the self and finally results in complete annihilation. Plath’s poems tend to press doggedly toward a point of transcendence at the same time as they press with equal energy toward this realization of the project’s danger. It is from these intense, contradictory pressures—the result of a complex poetic awareness—that the poems derive their frequent sense of fatality, much more than from any literal impulse to suicide in the poet.

⁹ See Rose pgs. 143-150 for a related critique of the link between “phallogocentrism” and transcendent selfhood in Plath’s poems.

SECTION 4

“AN ENGINE, AN ENGINE”: LANGUAGE AND HISTORY IN PLATH’S POEMS

To a great extent this complex awareness in Plath’s case might be described as a love affair with the language gone partly sour—and once again it is this figurative falling out that has bearing on the poetry more so than the literal collapse of the poet’s marriage. Perhaps no poet has been more obviously in love with the language than Plath, who famously wrote poems with her thesaurus open on her lap and underlined words in her dictionary apparently for future use. Her early work shows a thorough apprenticeship to the poetic tradition, a passion for form and a sometimes even detrimental appetite for vocabulary. Even in the pared down diction of her later poetry she deploys showpieces like “cicatrix,” “malignity” and “verdigris” with loving precision. Yet the most fundamental element in the change Plath’s style undergoes through the course of her career is the erosion of that careful respect for the tradition with which she begins. If she becomes “a mocker of the vernacular” whose “mature mastery of colloquial idiom illustrates her contempt for the vulgar and cruel social relations which generate such idiom” (Ostriker 101), she equally becomes a mocker of the formalized language of high poetry by interpenetrating it with such so-called crudities. All language is in fact implicated in the violence of “vulgar and cruel social relations,” and a revenging violence is wreaked in Plath’s poetry as much on the language itself as on any biographical father or husband. Language is Plath’s own greatest source of power; yet it is also the historical sediment of the power that oppresses her. As such, her poems become the battlefield in

which these contradictory faces of language war it out, in a struggle from which the only escape appears to be a nostalgic turn towards a preverbal Eden.

The oppressive face of language reveals itself in the movement from metaphor to history we have already observed in both “Daddy” and “Fever 103°.” In both those poems, the recognition of the speaker’s implication in a larger history of violence begins as a figurative relation; but in both cases once this connection is drawn it quickly takes on a weight beyond the figurative. Pursuing a comparison between a language and a train, the speaker of “Daddy” soon finds herself threatened with genocide; figuring her subjective state as a cloud of smoke, the speaker of “Fever 103°” inadvertently involves herself in an image of nuclear fallout. As Smith writes, “Plath’s narratives fork and proliferate in unexpected directions because, in unfolding the implications of a sequence of images, she uncovers the complex and contradictory possibilities condensed in them” (217). This process of condensation is, at least partly, the encoding of history into language or, conversely, the secretion of language by history—it is the process by which language becomes “necessarily informed by atrocity” (Young 122). Thus in undoing the process, in pursuing with a poet’s enthusiasm the deepest resonances of a particular image, Plath inevitably uncovers the trace of historical violence. To call on even the simplest resources of language is unavoidably to make capital of history itself, to become implicated in history’s violence and also to be threatened with it. It cannot be done without submitting to a certain extent to the powers that have shaped language, insofar as language cannot be used without drawing on shared, overdetermined definitions—even those that may be imposed detrimentally on the user. The language imposes a devil’s

bargain with the unpredictable specter of Daddy—a particularly disturbing realization for a poet.

Nonetheless, the language remains a source of illimitable energy that can be turned against such confining definitions, even as it is also their vehicle. If transcendence of language itself is impossible, the plasticity and reach of language at least allows for a certain amount of transgression. As we have already seen, through the blurrings and substitutions of her poetry Plath is able to undermine the compartmentalizing rationalism of the logos, able to puncture the limiting categories in which the forces represented by Daddy contain her and to violate the codes by which they validate their own holding of power. If power seeks to control the other by defining it, Plath's language reveals the ultimate impossibility of definition where objects constantly defy figuration and figurations take on objective statuses of their own. The language defies control and usage—pressing Plath's speakers in undesired directions and retaining meanings they would eliminate—and so becomes itself a model of resistance. Meanwhile it also provides a medium for fantasy, in which Plath creates patricidal scenarios that overturn existing distributions of power and flaunt taboos against opposing socially approved centers of power. If the violence of power is ultimately directed toward a limiting of possibilities, the untamable interpretability of language refuses any type of limitation or boundary, constantly multiplying rather than foreclosing possibilities.

A perfect example of this double-edged nature of language is in poems such as "Purdah" and "Lady Lazarus," in which Plath exploits the "fetishistic attachments to women as part-objects" so common in masculine discourse as a source of feminine power (Yorke 86). In the latter she actually combines the sexist tradition of the blazon with

Holocaust imagery to create the remarkable opening description of Lady Lazarus as “a sort of walking miracle” composed of inanimate, disconnected remains—a description that culminates in Lady Lazarus’s assertion of her power to “terrify.” By entering into and seizing control of the definitions imposed on her, Lady Lazarus is able to gain advantage over those that impose them, to extract “a very large charge” for her degradation. Yet at the same time as these poems subvert the history of objectification with which they toy, that history returns the subversion on their speakers’ claims of transcendence—turning Lady Lazarus’s uprising into a “big strip tease” and forcing the speaker of “Purdah” into the part of Clytemnestra whose actions will occasion the original Elektra complex. Just as with the Holocaust imagery of “Daddy,” the historical presence in the language of these poems cannot be contained and held to their speakers’ rhetorical purposes. The language itself refuses to be a mere implement, to be put to use and set down freely—to pick it up at all is to become irrevocably defined by it and involved in the history from which it forms.

Furthermore, to the extent that the transgressive power of language is itself power, it turns on the person who uses it by implicating her in that which she attacks. Every effort to undermine the structure of power that defines and contains the self also undermines the apparent integrity of that self, making it impossible to isolate a justified subject from the tainting influences of the historical other. The more powerfully a speaker in one of Plath’s poems employs this property of language the further that speaker reveals his or her own implication in the history that language encodes. For this reason the speakers of poems such as “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” often become the objects of critiques similar to the ones they themselves launch against their enemies.

Such speakers tap the deconstructive potential of language in order to invalidate an oppressive power and facilitate a triumph over history that will constitute their own transcendence; but the actual result is that the possibility of transcendence is itself deconstructed and the speakers are left in the now invalidated position of power. The transgressive potentialities of language lead in a circular path deeper into its role as an instrument of oppression—we are once again returned to the identification with power that seems the only escape from victimization in both “Daddy” and “Fever 103°.” Ultimately, the language proves to be a center rather than a source of power, an intractable genie that, once released, carries out its own agenda.

In this aspect, language is a double traitor: its transgressive properties suggest a possible route toward transcendence, but once tapped they quickly reveal the impossibility of transcendence as well as the extent to which the language itself is composed of that which was to be transcended. Perhaps for this reason Plath’s poetry often turns the corrosive power of language against language itself, particularly against the conventions of poetic language. The crude metrics and blaring rhymes of poems like “Daddy” and “Lady Lazarus” travesty the politely controlled forms that Plath in her early career worked dutifully to master. Her unabashed use of cliché, vernacular, and direct statement disregards taboos of poetic discourse, just as her subject matter disregards taboos of public speech and even private feeling. Her blending of obviously biographical details with equally obvious fictions “displaces familiar distinctions between poet and persona” (Britzolakis 6) and thus reveals the modernist imperative toward impersonality as something of a self-serving defense mechanism, designed to protect the poet from implication in his own enunciation. All the violence directed toward the ostensible

targets of Plath's poems falls first across the face of poetry itself, revealing the "blood-hot and personal" underside of the cool, apolitical surface of academic verse ("Totem"). If Plath cannot transcend the implication in history that comes with language, she can at least compel her own language to confess its implication.

This, of course, is only a means of coping, not a method of escape—when the love affair with language goes bad there can be no divorce. This troubled relationship with language and history may also help to explain what Alvarez describes as Plath's "queer conception of the adult as a survivor, an imaginary Jew from the concentration camp of the mind" (197). If language brings with it inevitable implication in the guilty history of power, and if transcendence of that history is impossible, then the only true innocence is that of the preverbal infant—an Edenic innocence foredoomed to be irrevocably lost before it can even be recognized. The infant, then, is the only absolute victim of history, free from any taint of the aggressor. It is cast unwittingly, almost as a sort of sacrifice, into an order that will ultimately consume and trap it: "O golden child the world will kill and eat" ("Mary's Song"). It is perhaps only this innocence that allows for any moral polarity in the universe of Plath's poetry. Without it the contests of history might appear as purely amoral, simply a matter of dog-eat-dog; but this "one absolutely beautiful thing" ("Child") provides a standard against which the guilt of the adult world can be measured.

This accounts for the profoundly apologetic tone of nearly all Plath's poems about her children. Though the speaker of "Nick and the Candlestick" can decorate the family's cave "with roses, with soft rugs," she cannot really atone for placing her son in the frightening environment described before his appearance in the poem. To introduce a

child into the process of history is to create an innocence that will inevitably be destroyed. At the same time, there is a kind of nostalgia in these poems: this loss of innocence is also the history of every adult. The fall into history is experienced as a kind of wounding, so that every adult does become a sort of survivor in the same process by which she becomes implicated with the aggressor—the same dichotomy that shapes the speaker of “Daddy.” Oates has dismissed these poems as a dangerous expression of decadent Romanticism—an “honoring of mute nature above man’s ability to make and use language” that will “naturally result in muteness” (32). Yet, despite the obviously Romantic quality of their nostalgia for a prelapsarian existence, they also reflect Plath’s almost anti-Romantic understanding of the self as a product of history. They are concerned not with “man’s ability to make and use language” but with the extent to which the individual “man” has no such ability—the extent to which language is already made in advance by history and makes the individual in its turn.

SECTION 5

CONCLUSION: ALTERNATIVES

Still, the infant is only innocent because, in its unformed state, it remains a kind of nothing—employed as a model of transcendence, as in the last line of “Getting There,” it differs little from the annihilating flight of “Ariel.” The only way it can move beyond a dead-end stasis, even to be able to understand the notions of innocence and guilt, is to accept the implication in language and history. Even if the infant offers a potential position of purity in history, there is no question of a choice between purity and implication—in order for such a choice to be understood it must already be irrevocably made. The quest for a transcendently pure, self-identical ego remains as futile as the nostalgia for an imagined past. The only prospect for a more positive relation to being lies in abandoning the ultimately narcissistic absolutism of such a goal—to accept the status of the self as historical secretion along with the fragmentation that implies. This means turning away from the effort to consolidate the self that inevitably becomes a violent effort to consolidate power, toward an image of the self as community, as product of a community and as member of a community. I would like to conclude by considering some of the ways in which certain of Plath’s poems suggest her own progress toward this possibility.

The most obvious example is in the bee poems, with which Plath originally intended to end *Ariel* on a note of optimism markedly different from the funereal chill with which “Edge” concludes the published volume. The most commonly quoted

passage in these poems, perhaps in all Plath's poems, comes from end of "Stings," in which the speaker declares, "I / Have a self to recover, a queen." This is Plath's most explicit statement of her interest in the search for a transcendent selfhood—but "Stings" is not the last poem of the bee sequence, nor is this declaration the last note of the poem itself. The last line of the poem—usually included in quotations but rarely attended to directly—returns the poem's attention from the queen to the "engine that killed her— / The mausoleum, the wax house," suggesting that the flight of the queen is in reality only another self-defeating effort at transcendence along the lines of "Daddy" or "Fever 103°." The rest of the sequence searches for a path that might circumvent the dead-end reached in these poems.

What may be more important to that search than the uprising of the queen is the speaker's repudiation of the kind of vengeful aggression that drives a poem like "Daddy." The bees who choose to attack the "great scapegoat" die in the process, and the speaker of "Stings" explicitly rejects such a choice. The poem that follows in the published *Ariel*, though Plath herself planned to exclude it, is "The Swarm," one of Plath's most fierce indictments of the lust for individual power and its role in history. Both Napoleon and the "man with gray hands" are Daddy-like figures of authority—the one who treats others like "chess people" and turns his victims' throats into "Stepping stones for French bootsoles," the other who weakly and narcissistically claims self-defense to justify his violence ("They would've killed *me*"). This poem may be read as a rejection of potential for similar violence in the self-assertion of "Stings," preparing for the alternative vision of "Wintering" in which the queen has only a brief cameo.

Instead, “Wintering” focuses on the collective fate of the hive—it is no longer a question of whether the queen is dead or sleeping but of whether the hive will survive the winter. Unlike the concluding lines of poems like “Ariel” or “Fever 103°,” the last line of this poem projects a realizable future. While the appearance of spring at the end of the poem is certainly a kind of epiphany, it is not an apocalyptic apotheosis that freezes the possibilities for further movement. In fact, it is part of a continuing natural cycle, not annihilating the opposing force of winter but actually guaranteeing its eventual return. This is not a transcendence that eradicates the other and delivers the purified self into a position of isolated godhood; rather, it is a diligent living *in* the world, in cooperation with others. As Lynda K. Bundtzen notes, these poems distribute “cites of power and activity” beyond the speaker amongst the various constituents of the hive—queen, workers, princesses, and “finally...the collective mind of the hive” (108). As a result, the unified yet divisible entity of the hive becomes a perfect metaphor for the multiplicity of the individual, while also remaining a community of which the speaker is finally a concerned if uneasy part. Because of this acknowledgement of the other and of the otherness within the self, these poems avoid the trap of identification with Daddy and find a prospect of hope outside the futile pursuit of transcendence.

Though the bee poems were written before many of the other poems in *Ariel*, Plath’s original placement of them at the book’s conclusion suggests that she saw this vision as superseding the other positions explored and ultimately dismantled in those poems. Unlike the dubious victories of “Daddy” and “Fever 103°,” it is more a beginning than an ending—tentatively explored and still emergent but also still open and growing. The bee poems do not provide a ready-made *telos* like “Edge”—a remarkable poem that

has unfortunately become the poetic double of Plath's suicide. For precisely this reason they are a perfect antidote to the stultifying mythologization that has plagued Plath's reception in the long wake of her suicide. They remind us that, had Plath continued living, she would have continued changing. The dead-end quality of many of her later poems is a suggestion that she was approaching the vanishing point of a particular way of understanding the world, not that she was constructing a poetic argument for the desirability of suicide. The accident of their having been a particular poet's last works should not confer any special sense of stability or authority on the *Ariel* poems—in fact, one of the great virtues of these poems is the imagination and skill with which they undermine precisely such concepts.

This is not to argue that biography has no bearing on these poems, or to support a New Critical divorcing of text and context. The influence that Plath's personal relationships—not only with her father and husband but also with her mother and children—exert over her later poems is undeniable. It is, however, to assert that a biography reduced to a few melodramatic incidents or shaped into a mythic story line is necessarily a distortion within itself, and can only bring further distortion when it is applied as an interpretive framework. Plath's particular historical moment suggests a number of factors that are just as relevant to her poetry as are her marriage and suicide, yet that do not fit neatly into the ahistorical myth of transcendent selfhood or into the pathologizing narratives of psychiatry. To view Plath as an American child of Germanic parents shortly after World War II, as a woman and wife in the fifties, as a female poet in the immediate wake of Modernism, finally as a single mother outside her native

country—are all interpretive frames that ultimately offer a far greater range of possibilities than exclusively to define her by the events of her last few months.

These are all positions that are at once personal and political, and Plath is a poet uniquely suited to show us the ways in which these categories blend and merge into the broader categories of the philosophical and the poetic. Around the same time as she was writing poems like “Daddy,” Plath expressed concern over an article in *The Nation* on the emerging military-industrial complex, which she described as “the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military” (*Johnny Panic* 65). That article began its conclusion as follows: “This has been a study of power—of the kind of power that has come to dominate the nation and rob the nation’s people both of understanding and of choice in the fashioning of their destiny” (Cook 335). That this could almost be a gloss on the poem written more than two weeks before the article’s publication should show us how deeply Plath had integrated her understanding of the personal, the political and the philosophical. In “Daddy” and throughout Plath’s poetry, the personal relationship to father and husband, the political relationship to government and country, and the philosophical relationship to God and existence can all be understood on the same model and are all part of the same inescapable history of power.

James E. Young writes that in Plath’s poems “personal experiences and domestic objects accrue the weight of historical significance” (119). I would argue, however, that what Plath’s writing does is reveal the ways in which “personal experiences and domestic objects” *already* carry the weight of history. This is not because any individual’s suffering can rival the mass horrors of the Holocaust, but because the sphere of the personal and the domestic—the “woman’s” sphere—is also a part of history, a serious

place where real suffering can occur that is contiguous with the suffering experienced throughout the world. It is, in fact, ultimately the point on which the full weight of history falls—victims of the worst political oppression do not experience that oppression politically but *personally*, as individuals. To recognize this, as Plath's poems do, is to recognize the self as a historical product, nonexistent outside a historical context and thus incapable of transcending to any purified sphere. It is also, however, to undermine the hierarchical model of existence that allows for the privileging of public over private as well as male over female or even Aryan over Jew, and to move toward a less rigidly structured understanding of self and world that might minimize the violence of power and alleviate the need for transcendence.

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