"O love, how did you get here?": The Presence of Questions in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*

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In his 1965 review of *Ariel* in *The Reporter*, George Steiner called the poems "a bitter triumph … [Sylvia Plath] could not return from them" (54). As with much canonical Plath scholarship, Steiner foregrounds the speaker's drive toward suicide, conflating that drive with Plath's own death.[1] In reality, however, the overarching voice of the *Ariel* poems is much more fraught than doomed—a voice torn between hope and doubt, regeneration and exhaustion. The speaker contemplates death, but she has not made up her mind, so to speak, to die. More than any other formal element in the collection, Plath's use of questions conveys the speaker's ambivalence toward death. Of the forty-three poems in *Ariel*, twenty-four contain at least one question, amounting to eighty-one questions in the collection. To question is to wonder; it is to ward off isolation and reach out for help in understanding. Questions resist finality—they belong to life. Plath's use of questions creates a vital intimacy with the reader and breathes life into a book that is also closely tied to death.

While current critical discourse largely diffuses the myth that the speaker of *Ariel* is a self-destructive prophetess, popular discourse still upholds it. In her essay, "Fictionalizing Sylvia Plath," Tracy Brain calls the idea that *Ariel* prefigured and contributed to Plath's suicide "perhaps the most oft-repeated and fallacious link between Plath and her work" (190). Among other examples, Brain discusses the way the 2003 film *Sylvia* perpetuates this misconception, particularly during a scene in which "the snowy white manuscript of *Ariel*…blends into the whiteness of Plath's dead face, as if the first caused the second" (190).[2] Exploring Plath's use of questions is a new way to undermine the popular myth. I do not mean to reject the notion that the speaker of *Ariel* is at times

[1] As another example, see Eleanor Ross Taylor's 1967 review of *Ariel* in *Poetry*, which begins, "The tragic facts are repeated in poem after poem" (260). See also Robert Lowell's "Foreword" to the HarperPerennial edition of *Ariel*, in which he asserts, "[Plath's] art's immortality is life's disintegration" (xiv).

[2] For further discussion of the formation and persistence of the "Plath myth," see Anna Jackson's essay "Sylvia Plath's 'Exaggerated American Grin,'" as well as Stephanie Tsank's essay "Re-living Sylvia Plath: the Poetess, the Myth, the American."

despairing. Indeed, part of the intensity and allure of the poems is that they reveal the intimate thoughts of a speaker in peril. It is important, though, to examine *how* the speaker reveals her thoughts—to consider the form of the poems. Key poems such as "A Birthday Present," "Lady Lazarus," "The Bee Meeting," "Stings," and "Wintering" all rely on questions to convey the speaker's uncertainty. The speaker's indecision, which leaves room for hope, is ingrained in the form of the poems and cannot be separated from the content.

In "A Birthday Present," questions offset the speaker's preoccupation with death. The speaker of the poem obsesses over a gift she has yet to receive. She is simultaneously intimate with the gift's imagined contents and uncertain of its nature. The poem, which occurs mid-way through the collection, begins: "What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful? / It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?"(48) Here, the speaker expresses interest and wonder. She knows the present is behind the veil, and while she is uncertain of its form—beautiful or ugly, female or amorphous—she is "sure it is unique" and "just what I want" (48). The speaker's open-minded eagerness diffuses the despairing tone that many readers associate with Plath's work. She is ready to accept the birthday present and all its implications; whether it pulls her toward life or death, she wishes to assume ownership of it.

The speaker's wonder counters the morbidity in the poem. One could say that the birthday present, with its "mirrory variety," (49) symbolizes death, and that the speaker longs to cross over to the mystery beyond life. She does not mind if the gift is small, but she is also "ready for enormity" (49). Further, the speaker refers to a past suicide attempt, telling the reader she is "alive only by accident" (48). The speaker addresses the possibility: "If it were death / / I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes." (51). She is open to the gift being death, and even welcomes the idea: "There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday" (51). The word "if," however, is important. "*If* it were death," (my italics) the speaker says, indicating that she is speculating; she does not require or wish the gift to be death. In fact, the speaker shows little investment in what the birthday present actually is. More than the gift itself, she desires the veil, the thing separating her from an unknown force or entity, to be removed. She pleads, "Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil" (51). She wishes to possess the birthday present; its

content and meaning is secondary. Above all, then, the speaker is curious and open to possibility. Her curiosity leads her to reach out for insight through questions, which in turn strengthens her engagement with life.

To ask a question is itself a kind of faith; it requires a willingness to be vulnerable, to look outside one's self for guidance. Throughout "A Birthday Present," the speaker urges an unknown other to give her the present: "Can you not see I do not mind what it is? Can you not give it to me?" (49) Here, the speaker shows faith that she is not alone, for she addresses an other, a "you." The identity of the "you" is unclear. Even if the "you" is another version of the speaker herself, there is hope there; there is possibility. Through evoking a listening presence to turn to, the speaker wards off isolation and keeps despair at bay. At the end of the poem, the speaker imagines what the departure from life might be like: "And the knife not carve, but enter / / Pure and clean as the cry of a baby, / And the universe slide from my side" (51). Although the poem closes with this deathly image, one must not discount the speaker's uncertainty and openness to possibility.[3] The speaker of "A Birthday Present" seeks great change, but she is receptive to the mysteries of life as well as death.

Throughout *Ariel*, the speaker is torn between her will to live and her wish to die. At times, the two forces intertwine. The word "pure," which occurs twelve times in the collection, one in the form of a question, encapsulates this fusion. The speaker of *Ariel* associates "pure" with both the entry into and the departure from life. In "A Birthday Present," the speaker imagines a knife that enters "Pure and clean as the cry of a baby" (51). The final lines of the poem "Getting There" employ similar imagery and diction:

> And I, stepping from this skin
> Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces
>
> Step to you from the black car of Lethe,
> Pure as a baby. (43)

Babies represent life and purity, yet Plath complicates this purity with symbols of death: a knife, and the waters of oblivion. Thus, "pure" takes on a fresh and elusive meaning. The speaker herself is conflicted as to what the word means. In "Fever 103," she extends

[3] In her essay "Poetry and Uncertainty," Jane Hirshfield discusses the way uncertainty "signals the entrance of human individuality into the consciousness of the commons" (27). Hirshfield finds inspiration in poems that use uncertainty to ward off "isolation and meaningless, even while seeming to offer no replacement." (29).

the question to the reader: "Pure? What does it mean?" (61). Her uncertainty conveys hope, for the answer has room in it for both darkness and light, life and death.

The speaker of "Lady Lazarus" displays a clear leaning toward death, but she is also a performer playing to an audience, which causes her to wonder and look outside herself.[4] Somewhat begrudgingly and somewhat proudly, she becomes a source of fascination for "The peanut-crunching crowd"(7) who has gathered to witness her return to life from her most recent suicide attempt. In the fourth stanza, she asks: "Do I terrify?— / / The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?" (6) What response does she desire? At times, the speaker seems to *want* to terrify. She uses macabre imagery: "Soon, soon the flesh / The grave cave ate will be / At home on me" (6). At other times, the question does not seem to be an understated prodding, but a genuine wondering about how her illness is perceived by others:

> The second time I meant
> To last it out and not come back at all.
> I rocked shut
>
> As a seashell.
> They had to call and call
> And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls. (7)

Here, the speaker looks beyond herself and imagines what it was like for those who found and revived her. She is not focused solely on her own experience. Rather, she looks outward at how close she came to dying and the actions that were taken to save her. This act of looking outward widens the speaker's scope, and shifts her focus away from her inner turmoil.

The presence of an audience in "Lady Lazarus" creates a life-affirming bond between the speaker and reader. The speaker addresses the imagined audience: "Gentleman, ladies, / / These are my hands, / My knees" (7). This address extends to the reader, for he or she is the true audience, the one who in reality waits to see what the speaker will say next. Through asking questions and directly addressing the reader, the speaker involves the reader in the unfolding of the poem. In the following lines, the speaker considers the reader's position:

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[4] In her 1967 review of *Ariel* in *Poetry*, Eleanor Ross Taylor asserts, "*Lady Lazarus* celebrates a suicide history" (260). I do not see the poem as a celebration, but rather as a theatrical reframing. In my view, this reframing allows the speaker to speak brazenly about her suicide attempts and further her understanding of her history.

> There is a charge
>
> For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge
> For the hearing of my heart—
> It really goes.
>
> And there is a charge, a very large charge,
> For a word or a touch
> Or a bit of blood (8).

Here, the relationship builds in complexity: the speaker acknowledges that her words tax the reader. Nevertheless, she describes a situation in which the audience/reader can still be relied upon to actively bear witness. This dynamic creates an unburdening for the speaker, which in turn gives her the energy to reemerge. The poem ends: "Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air" (9). The speaker has once again almost died and now—with help from the imagined reader, without whom the poem would not exist—she reemerges with vigor. In this way, the reader becomes a lifeline, for his or her presence galvanizes the speaker into action.

The theme of reemergence expressed through questions continues in Plath's five poems about bees and beekeeping. The bee poems are dream-like narratives in which the speaker engages with her fears and desires. In the first poem in the sequence, "The Bee Meeting," the speaker expresses confusion as to what is happening around her and asks many questions in her search for clarity. Despite her bewildering surroundings, she is aware and resourceful. In many instances, she quickly discerns the answers to her questions. For example, the poem begins with a question followed by its answer: "Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? They are the villagers—" (64). The villagers are "gloved and covered" (64) in beekeeper outfits, while the speaker is "nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?" (64) Rather than letting the question settle into self-pity, the speaker answers it in the following line: "Yes, here is the secretary of bees… / Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees." (64). The form—questions followed by answers—keeps the speaker's mind alert. Further, her plethora of questions shows an active interest in the mysteriousness of life.

The speaker identifies with the queen bee: both are vulnerable, struggling to stay alive, hopeful to emerge. About the queen bee, the speaker asks: "Is she hiding, is she eating honey? She is very clever. / She is old, old, old, she must live another year, and

she knows it" (66). Through wondering about the queen bee, whom the villagers are hunting, the speaker also wonders about her own psychological state. She observes: "The old queen does not show herself, is she so ungrateful?" (66). Her speculation borders on accusation. Beneath the question of why the queen bee remains hidden lies the question of why the speaker cannot break free from despair. Is a lack of gratitude to blame? The question is resonant. It posits that the queen bee, and by extension the speaker, play a role in the creation of their dire circumstances.

Like the queen bee, the speaker possesses immense inner power, if only she can recover it. In "Stings," she meditates on the challenge before her:

> … I
> Have a self to recover, a queen.
> Is she dead, is she sleeping?
> Where has she been,
> With her lion-red body, her wings of glass? (71)

The queen's "lion-red body" brings to mind the triumphant end of "Lady Lazarus." [5] In questioning whether the queen is dead or sleeping, the speaker weighs the difficulty of her own recovery, and considers her course of action. Must she simply wake her missing self, whom she refers to as a queen, or revive her? In the queen bee, the speaker recognizes both the danger of her situation and her inner strength—her own potential to live and thrive.

In the final stanza of "Wintering," the last of the bee poems, the speaker focuses on the possibility of regeneration:

> Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas
> Succeed in banking their fires
> To enter another year?
> What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?
> The bees are flying. They taste the spring. (76)

Here, the speaker's questions reveal her cautious outlook. She does not take the hive's survival for granted. Rather, she believes that all living things must actively try to stay alive. The gladiolas cannot assume they will return next season; instead, they must

[5] In her essay, "Coming to Terms with Colour: Plath's Visual Aesthetic," Laure de Nervaux Gavoty explores the way "Red features prominently in the formidable personae of *Ariel*, encoding as it does both vulnerability and indomitable strength" (122).

"Succeed in banking their fires" (76). In the final two lines, the speaker moves from cautious optimism to hope. She looks forward in time to wonder about the Christmas roses. The precision of her question—not just whether the Christmas roses will bloom, but what they will taste of—demonstrates a keen engagement with and curiosity about the future. Her wondering becomes an incentive, a reason to endure the difficulty of survival. Suitably then, the final image of the bees represents freedom, a flowing forward toward life. Spring, the season of renewal, is near, and the speaker's questions convey hope that the hive—and by extension her own mind and spirit—will survive and be free.

Throughout *Ariel*, the speaker's references to her children alleviate her despair.[6] In "Nick and the Candlestick," the speaker asks her baby boy perhaps the most tender and heart-wrenching question in the book: "O love, how did you get here?" (38). The poem begins with the description of a space in which "Black bat airs / / Wrap me, raggy shawls, / Cold homicides" (37). As the poem progresses, the reader realizes that the setting is a nursery. The candle's "yellows hearten" (38) as the speaker gazes at her sleeping infant. Here, her question both startles and conveys hope—that love can exist in such a chilling environment is a testament to its power. Likewise, that the speaker can acknowledge love's presence demonstrates the openness of her mind. The rest of the poem enacts the speaker's struggle; even while "Atoms that cripple drip / Into the terrible well," (38) the baby pulls her toward life. In the final lines, the speaker stands in awe of her son: "You are the one / Solid the spaces lean on, envious. / You are the baby in the barn" (38). By addressing her son, the speaker sheds despair and steps into a space of reverence for the life she brought into the world. Further, the image of "the baby in the barn" evokes the birth of Christ, suggesting that the speaker's son symbolizes not only innocence but also salvation.

The speaker views children as embodiments of hope. In contrast, she presents death as theatrical or unreal.[7] For example, mid-way through "Kindness," the fourth to

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[6] In her essay, "Unstable Manuscripts: The Indeterminacy of the Plath Canon," Tracy Brain argues that many poems in *Ariel* "are preoccupied with motherhood and children…children are what draw the speaker away from death and sadness" (22-23).

[7] In her essay "The Holocaust Again: Sylvia Plath, Belatedness, and The Limits of Lyric Figure," Ann Keniston discusses Plath's handling of death. About "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," Keniston says, "What is most fundamentally disrupted in both poems is the notion that death is final. In 'Daddy,' the speaker

last poem in the collection, the speaker asks: "What is so real as the cry of a child?" (91) Here, the speaker expresses a philosophy that values the realness and tangibility of children above all else. She explains that "A rabbit's cry may be wilder / But it has no soul" (91). Death is not even brought up for consideration as possessing anything so real. The speaker's question shows the depth of her curiosity. If there exists something more real than "the cry of a child" (91) she wishes to know it. Throughout the book, the speaker acknowledges the dangers inherent in being so drawn to mystery. "Nick and the Candlestick" begins "I am a miner. The light burns blue" (37). In calling herself a miner, the speaker illuminates her role as explorer. Through questions, she journeys deeply into mystery, aware that her findings may strengthen or weaken her hold on life. Her mission may be hazardous, but her motivation is life-affirming: to extract value from experience.

Many Plath readers conflate the voice of *Ariel* with Plath's death, thus viewing the collection as a kind of long suicide note. Looking at the use of questions in the poems is a new and innovative way to dispel this misconception. Throughout *Ariel*, the speaker is torn between hope and doubt, regeneration and exhaustion, life and death. Caught in these currents, questions become the way for the speaker to keep herself open to new possibilities. No matter how bleak the content, one must only look at the form, namely the use of interrogatives, within key poems to see that the speaker is open and undecided. As long as she is wondering, reaching out, and seeking insight, despair cannot enclose her. In the dark waters of the book, the speaker's questions serve as buoyant lights. The intimacy created through questions is integral to the collection. Indeed, the relationship formed between speaker and reader is itself life-sustaining. The reader comes to know a speaker who is facing peril but who has not given up on life. Her questions live on in the consciousness of her readers. Brilliant, powerful, and troubled, the speaker guides the reader through an exquisitely rendered journey of despair, yes; but a despair that is bejeweled with wonder and hope.

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struggles to kill a father who is already dead; 'Lady Lazarus' asserts a roughly corresponding (although also inverse) ability repeatedly to revive its dead speaker" (141).

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