

The Drama of Confession: Orchestration of Emotion and Self-Disclosure in *Ariel* Suzanne Richter

Since Sylvia Plath's death, a popular mythology has sprung up. Many readers feel they know who she was and what she was about, and their responses to what they think they know have often been quite extreme. But we cannot know Plath. From the poems alone, we cannot make assumptions as to the nature of Plath's personality, simply because her poems may show us a speaker who is, in turn, hysterical, manipulative, melodramatic, cool, and angry. It does not mean the poet was necessarily this way, in either her private or public life. Regarding the polarized response Plath often calls up, Ernest Hilbert in his essay "The Voice of the Poet" (2005) writes:

The first holds that her death was a necessary final act in the literary passion play of a woman's escape from a world of persecution and limits... The other camp is one of dismissive chauvinism, endeavoring half-heartedly to corrupt her reputation with imputations that she was marginally-talented, conceited, pampered, and would have been profoundly unhappy whatever her circumstances. (cprw.com)

Yet a careful reading of Plath's poems reveals that they are neither the cathartic outpourings of a spoiled, upper-class housewife nor the wild, deranged writings of a narcissistic lunatic. Plath's poems are deliberately stylized and carefully crafted. Many theatrical devices are, in fact, employed in these poems. Two of the primary devices are narrative masks and heightened use of language. Rhetorical gestures are frequently delivered as questions, imperatives, and exclamations. Readers will also find in these poems other types of dramatic language, including the use of soliloquy, declaratives, and direct address, as well as elements of spectacle.

The dramatic devices used in these poems have the effect of disguising and obfuscating taboo and disturbing subject matter, distancing and insulating both the poet and reader from the charged material and its emotional content. They submerge wider implications and antagonisms found here— patriarchal oppression, existential nihilism, suicide— while at the same time elevating the tone in such a way as to set the poems up as broadcasts. Plath's imagery tends to be highly ambiguous and the poems also tend to both convey and diffuse meaning by delivering information via clusters of connotations, symbols, and surrealism.

Plath's devices are not extraordinary. All poems, for example, have a narrative mask, the "I" of the speaker that cannot be assumed to be the "I" of the poet. The narrative masks found in *Ariel* vary widely and include a range of personas and voices. These masks run the gamete from thick, non-human personas, such as a sheep or an elm, to the most thinly-veiled poetic makeup, a speaker who seems to be not wholly dissimilar from the poet herself.

While Plath's poems can seem at times spectacular and theatrical to the point of being out of control, the "poet as poet" consistently announces herself in the craft of her work, in the very ways that these poems assert themselves as highly-stylized creations. Many of the poems in *Ariel* are written in tercets or couplets. The formal, parceled structure of the stanzas serve to remind the reader that these poems are not transcribed events or conversations, nor are they the random, unpremeditated scribbles of a disturbed personality. Both tercets and couplets create a slow data feed that gives information to the reader in a deliberate, controlled manner. The white space they create provides a breathing space in which the reader can recover from the emotional heat and dramatic intensity of the poem. Conversely, the slow pacing also requires that the reader dwells in a discomfiting set of images and allusions longer.

"Lady Lazarus" is one of Plath's most anthologized poems, rivaled in this regard only by "Daddy." The two poems are closely tied thematically. In "Lady Lazarus," the speaker is experimenting with disclosure and vulnerability. But all she can do is expose the skin of herself, the surface. We never really find out who the enemy is in this poem. The speaker will not or cannot identify the specific object of her distress, and thus her anger becomes directed at all male figures, including God and Lucifer. By contrast, the speaker in "Daddy" finally focuses in on the titular object. Whereas Lady Lazarus performs an impromptu strip tease for a large, impersonal audience, the speaker in "Daddy" is within point-blank range of one particular figure, baring her rage and indignation, not as an actor, but person to person, with no masks, impersonations, or other distancing theatrics. Although both poems were authored within roughly a two-week period, and "Lady Lazarus" was written subsequent to "Daddy," it is interesting to note that Plath put the Lazarus poem early in the *Ariel* manuscript with the Daddy poem very near the end. "Lady Lazarus" could be viewed as a dress rehearsal for "Daddy." For while "Daddy" is still hyperbolic in its imagery, many of the other defensive measures so richly cultivated and applied in "Lady Lazarus" are absent. Or perhaps "Lady Lazarus" represents an attempt by the author to

regroup, to pull back from such a raw and intimate encounter, resulting in the constant vacillation we find in that poem between disclosure and affectation.

The title of "Lady Lazarus" establishes a persona from the outset. It sets up a play, an illusion, before the poem even starts. The persona is one way Plath signals to the reader that the poem is a poem, a made-thing, carefully crafted, and that the speaker is a character separate from herself. The persona also helps to distance both the poet and the reader from the frightening thematic material it contains. "Lady Lazarus" is, in fact, rather highly staged. It contains actual costuming—a prop, in the form of tape-like strips of burial linen still wrapped around the speaker's body. The story and the imagery are highly dramatic and exaggerated—the speaker's skin is the skin of a Nazi lampshade and she is walking around with a burial napkin still on her face, dragging her foot like a paperweight. The speaker enacts the part of a Jewish woman who has been murdered in the Nazi concentration camps, although, as is characteristic of Plath's poems, we do not know why.

"Lady Lazarus" is showy—a carnival scene, a burlesque act. The narrative action itself is theatrical, i.e., the slow, stripping off of the linen. The poem employs a few heightened verbal gestures, by which I am referring to imperatives, questions, and exclamations. But it relies heavily on a near-frenzy of direct address, much of which we might associate more with the oratorical language of a circus or of vaudeville rather than with classical drama. The speaker appropriates the voice of an announcer. She calls out in a mannered, sardonic voice to the audience, to an unidentified enemy, to the doctor, God, Lucifer. She makes many actorly declarations in the first person singular. Pronouncements mid-way through the poem ring out like staged speech, especially the metaphoric "Dying / Is an art, like everything else" (15). The combination of dramatic narrative action, costuming, performative language, and a larger-than-life persona lift this poem to the level of spectacle. All aspects of spectacle are found here: public display on a large scale, a remarkable and impressive performance, and a striking visual. The poem relies on lavish theatrical effects to convey its story and is based on "an organization of appearances that are simultaneously enticing, deceptive, distracting and superficial" (Crary 335).

A spectacle is a grandiose show, full of sound, music, props, characters, elaborate movements and lighting, intent on a fantastic delivery that will enthrall the audience and ignite strong emotion. The element of spectacle is important in "Lady Lazarus" because the poem is about strong emotions, a desire to reveal oneself, and also the desperate attempt to recover,

protect, obscure and hide what is being revealed. The spectacular nature of the poem acts as a defense, a shield, a large, intact winding sheet, if you will, for the speaker. It also acts to both convey and disperse the speaker's emotions, in effect transferring them to the audience. Allusion and illusion, horror show, burlesque, cool slang, slapstick parody—the sheer number of devices and "acts" in this poem feed the dizzying, conspicuously-orchestrated and public nature of it, serving to refract the disturbing truth of the poem while it blankets the exposure of the speaker.

The speaker in this poem wants to engage and communicate. She starts out speaking in a conversational tone about her suicides, saying simply that she has tried it again and that it happens about once every ten years. Yet she quickly recoils from honest disclosure and takes on the role of the victimized Jew. She launches into hyperbolic metaphors about a Nazi lampshade and a paperweight foot. She peels the remaining linen from her face, or convinces someone else to do so, exposing her skull. Terrified from the moment she begins to speak, the speaker quickly turns the table to become the person who terrifies others.

At this point, most readers want to run for the hills. The poem is a nightmare. The speaker is putting on a horror show, exhibiting the most graphic aspects of death. The direct address and questions put to the reader act on us in two ways. They show us that the speaker is engaged and wants to communicate with us, which is positive, but on the other hand, the speaker is confrontational, parading fearsome images and venting terrible emotions without grounding them to any particular object or cause. Why is she dead? Why is she back from the dead? Who killed her? Did she kill herself? Who restored her? This is a highly-threatening situation. It is terror without context.

As if aware of what she is doing, the speaker attempts to rescue the situation by returning immediately to the composed, conversational tone with which the poem began. Next, she tries to connect to the audience with more authenticity and the iambic pentameter found in the subsequent stanza is truly lyrical. These lines have a rhythmical, musical feeling: "What a million filaments. / The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see" (15). This is neither the confrontational, terror-wielding inquisitor we heard earlier nor the self-restrained, ironic confidante. This is the voice of a singer—modulated, emotive, beautiful. This voice releases fearful emotions in a gentler, less strident way.

If the speaker is vulnerable, her lyricism has invited even more vulnerability. In any case, she is not whole. Parts of her body are missing, her grave cloth is in bits. Someone is beginning

to unwrap her. She feels violated by the prying crowd. To defend herself, she starts to put on a show, becomes clownish and self-deprecating, decides to do a strip tease. Acting her terrible part, she affects the voice of a strip-joint barker. And yet she has a certain stateliness about her, an almost ceremonial coolness when she says matter-of-factly: "These are my hands / My knees" (15).

Next, the speaker again returns to a conversational tone in order to describe her suicides in more detail. This is another attempt at clear and direct communication, as well as an attempt to re-establish her credibility which has likely not been bolstered by her display of flamboyance. Even though Lady Lazarus has performed spectacularly, even melodramatically, as a speaker she remains quite credible. Like the historical Lazarus, she truly knows what it is like to be called back from the dead. She describes how the first time she died she was ten and it was an accident, but the second time it was deliberate and she consciously tried not to be brought back. "They had to call and call / And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls (15). Having now established her authority on the subject, the speaker in this poem grows larger, more confident. She truly is more and more Lady Lazarus, not just a risen corpse.

Spectacle relies on a credible, trustworthy master of ceremonies in order to not fall to the level of mere showmanship. A serious actor now, the speaker can step forward and deliver a proper speech, a soliloquy of sorts. "Dying / Is an art, like everything else," she says, "I do it exceptionally well. / I do it so it feels like hell," and so forth, pounding out a long, urgent string of declaratives (15). The strong, dramatic language here is powerful, assertive, and forthright. It is honest, open, and straightforward. The speaker is trying to tell us something about herself. Although she cannot show us her pain or give us the intimate details of her life, she is telling us how she experiences and manages it. And yet the anaphora in these lines suggests a continuing lack of resolve to speak plainly. A self-mocking tone quickly follows, "I guess you could say I've a call" (15). The speaker is covering up again emotionally, using the self-mocking tone to re-disguise her vulnerability.

Repetition and rhyme play an important part in this poem. There is a chant-like quality to the repetition, most notably the frequent use of anaphora in stanzas 15 through 18, as well as the haunting "Ash, ash—" "Beware / Beware" at the end of the poem (17). Mid-way through the poem, repetition begins to supplant the other rhetorical gestures found earlier and becomes the key vehicle for expressing and heightening emotion. Repetition acts as a subtler, more musical,

less confrontational way of expressing emotion. With its lulling and drumming quality, repetition can create a state of mind or bodily sensation that transfers feeling directly. It is also a way to self-hypnotize and therefore may serve, at the same time, to move both the speaker and the reader away from, not toward, the emotional content.

Close rhyme occurs in many places in this poem. The poem starts with close rhyme: "I have done it again. / One year in every ten," and rhyme is interwoven, subtly or plainly, throughout the rest of the poem (*Ariel: Restored* 14). When the speaker is trying to talk candidly about her suicides, as in the early stanzas, the tone is plainly conversational and there is no repetition or rhyming. Like repetition, rhyming appears to have been applied to further disguise emotion and meaning. It becomes another cloth the speaker can wrap around herself to insulate herself from others. While rhyme is, of course, removed from every day speech, it is also that which makes the poem a poem, plainly differentiating it from any kind of personal epistle.

Stanzas 19 through 21 are interesting in how they employ rhythm and repetition to seduce the reader and foster intimacy, and also in how they layer connotation in such a way as to deliver information in subtext while simultaneously using assertive declaratives to increase the personal power of the speaker.

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. (16)

The word "charge" is repeated four times in these three stanzas, effectively highlighting it as a focal point. The striking of this word over and over conveys to the reader the speaker's heightened emotion. On the surface "charge" means a monetary fee, although we understand this to refer to a different form of payment. It also means a jolt as well as an accusation. All three of these connotations contribute to the emotional voltage here. In addition, the anaphora in the middle of this passage, the recurrent phrase "for the," creates a driving rhythm that serves to intensify the emotion in the poem. The rhythm in this passage, mostly anapest, has a soft, light quality to it. The softened rhythm combined with the terse, confessional phrase "it really goes" lends the passage an air of intimacy. Anapest also has a tripping quality which conveys a sense

of excitement. The emotion is intensifying, but it is not threatening. It is the emotion of vulnerability and self-revelation. Lastly, the anapestic beat is exactly opposite to the atrial rhythm of the heart, which is interesting in light of the fact that this passage talks about the heart continuing to beat. The anapest adds a subtle impression that the heart is skipping beats, that things are, in this case, irregular. The weakened heartbeat adds to the intimate and emotional nature of this passage. Balancing out the intimacy and vulnerability, providing some distance for both reader and speaker, is the repeated assertion "there is a charge."

Repetition also acts in this poem as a clue, a lens, focusing the reader's awareness on key ideas and images. It is a clarifying element, pointing toward a source of trouble. An enemy is mentioned twice within this poem, with the second reference linked, via a repeating formal address, to a doctor, God, and Lucifer. This implies that male authority figures are the issue here, the reason the speaker is acting the part of the Jew and aligning herself with powerless victims. Could the interlinking of a place, a face, and a brute also be a clue?

The repetition of the formal address, in German, clearly points to the heart of this poem. This is where the speaker begins to zero in on the originating impetus for this poem. She is baiting authority figures: "So, so Herr Doktor / So, Herr Enemy" (16). She is appropriating the language of the enemy, ruthlessly imitating and mocking him. Impudent and disrespectful, this is like saying "Sir, yes, Sir," to your father while he is giving you a lecture.

Burlesque has turned to parody. The speaker has attempted to affect a shift in power. She knows she cannot win. She is destined to be destroyed, yet she does not whine or cry, but continues to harangue her enemy, with perhaps a bit of bargaining as well, using crisp, empowered declaratives— "I am your opus, / I am your valuable" (16).

The speaker is now dead, exterminated. She catalogues her own remains, as the remains of the Jews were catalogued under the Nazi regime. She speaks in clipped sentence fragments, listing the items that persist— a soap cake, a wedding ring, a gold filling. Fragments used in this poem have a tendency to create syntactical puzzles that act as clues for the reader. On the surface these particular fragments have the effect of demonstrating how the speaker has been reduced to bits and pieces. The words used here are interesting. If you flip them around, a different meaning emerges: cake, soap, ring, wedding: filling—the idea that domesticity is a cold, hard filling in a person's life and that these domestic things are all that is left when a woman dies.

Going back to a prior passage in this poem, we find a syntactical puzzle that also works to overlay several meanings.

What a million filaments.
The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see

Them upwrap me hand and foot. (15)

The fragment "what a million filaments" can be taken as a commentary on the speaker's state of mind. It gives us the impression that the speaker herself is awed, as well as a bit disoriented, by her situation. It also implies that her burial shroud is now in threads, which puts her in an extremely vulnerable position. What I find most interesting about this passage is the awkward way the subsequent sentence is cleaved across the stanza break. "Shoves in to see" is not a fragment, but when enjambed across the stanza break, it suggests a different reading of this passage, as in "What a million filaments. / The peanut-crunching crowd / Shoves in to see." Similarly the phrase "Them unwrap me hand and foot" is not technically a fragment, but the enjambment across the stanza break make it look and sound like a fragment. If you hear it as a fragment, it sounds as if the speaker is stuttering or regressing.

Plath's poems are not, however, always so thick with the kind of insulating gestures one finds in "Lady Lazarus." In "The Couriers" the speaker assumes no persona and talks directly to the reader. When this is the case in a poem, the speaker is often assumed to be either the poet or a person very like the poet. Because the lack of persona suggests that the speaker has no mask behind which to hide, the potential for exposure here seems great. Hence, "The Couriers" comes straight at us, which makes it difficult to maintain separation from the speaker and the thematic material. Some distance is clearly orchestrated for us, however, in the form of highly-rhetorical questions, imperatives, and assertive declaratives.

The speaker goes on the offensive much sooner here than in "Lady Lazarus." The poem begins with a question, followed immediately by a declarative and an imperative. The next stanza has more of the same— a question, a statement, and an imperative. The third stanza likewise begins with a question.

Piled up as they are, these linguistic gestures exert force and emotive energy. They get our attention and seem aimed at eliciting, even coercing, reaction. You could say that the theatrical stanzas in this poem are akin to the speaker hurling a chair at the reader or breaking

some dishes in the poetic kitchen. They demonstrate several things, first of all, the sincere engagement of the speaker. This is an almost desperate attempt to communicate. But, while these gestures demonstrate engagement, they also demonstrate a very strong resistance to intimacy. They sound a warning, evoke arm-waving. The thin persona of this poem seems to be forcing the speaker to immediately employ dramatic devices that will help distance and disguise the themes and emotions explored here. The dramatic gestures clearly present to the reader a cynical, angry, and somewhat frantic speaker, and yet at the same time they deflect participation by the reader and further investigation into the emotional issues. Furthermore, the emotions conveyed by these dramatic gestures are ambiguous. They are on the surface, disconnected from deeper meaning. They are theatrics, emotional outbursts without vulnerability, venting and releasing of emotion without deeply feeling it or clearly understanding it.

Unlike the graphic and instantly-recognizable imagery in "Lady Lazarus," the imagery we find in this poem is merely suggestive. The couriers that come in the form of a snail, a tin, and a ring could be images that represent the speaker. Or they could represent another person, such as a husband or a doctor. They might refer to all three persons at the same time. The imagery Plath uses is not clearly connected to any one subject; the referent of the image is obscured and left open to interpretation. This poem is rife with non-referential, dissociative imagery: the frost, a leaf, an immaculate person or object, a talking cauldron in the Alps, mirrors that capture a disturbance, a sea that is shattering, something that is grey, as well as a final line that may be a direct address, an exclamation, or an imperative.

Does the ambiguity created by the imagery and the semantics help maintain a thick, protective opacity which serves to balance out the vulnerability of the nearly unmasked speaker? Who or what does the frost or the leaf signify? Who or what is immaculate— the frost, the leaf or the cauldron? Who or what is the cauldron? What is a "disturbance in mirrors" and what or who is it shattering (6)? Even the phrasing in this poem is syntactically odd. The meaning of the last line, "Love, love, my season" is elusive (6). Is the speaker saying she loves this season of her life? Or is she saying she loves the autumn, the frost and fire in the leaves? Is the speaker addressing another person, using "love" as an endearment, and repeating the endearment, as if to say "My love, my love (you are) my season"? Or is she saying this is the season of love? Clearly, this line is deliberate and is meant both to suggest all the possible readings and to hide any one

particular meaning. The speaker seems reluctant to secure the images and the phrasing to one particular object as if to do so would make the meaning obvious and irrefutable.

Still, this is not to say one cannot find substantial meaning in this poem. One way to make sense of this poem is to unpack its symbolism. The symbols found throughout *Ariel* have referential integrity; they appear to mean the same thing across all the poems, representing the same objects or ideas throughout the entire collection. Whereas Plath's imagery is disconnected from particular, singular objects, the symbols within the images retain their volume-specific intentions while still remaining consistent with cultural archetypes. For example, as found in other *Ariel* poems, it makes sense to read broken arrows as representative of failure and defeat, the eye as representative of seeing and knowing. The mirror in "The Couriers" calls up notions of the self and identity.

In "The Couriers," as we saw in a limited way in "Lady Lazarus," the use of the fragment can multiply meaning. How, for instance, do we read "A disturbance in mirrors, / The sea shattering its grey one—" (6)? One can interpret the phrase "a disturbance in mirrors" as being a metaphor for the psychic disturbance within the speaker herself, but also at the same time a self-referential metaphor for the disturbing ideas we are finding in the poems themselves. By this I mean that the poems act as mirrors, reflections of both the poet and the speaker. And *Ariel* as a whole can be read as a mirror whose aim is to reflect, not just personal feelings, but disturbances that are widespread in our culture, universal experiences and emotions which may not be socially acceptable to simply lay out on the table. On the surface "the sea shattering its grey one" seems to refer to the cracking of the mirrored surface of the sea. And yet it may also refer to the shattering of the speaker's composure or her emotional stability. It could refer to an attempt by the speaker to shatter the reader's preconception. Once again, the possibility of multiple meanings adds ambiguity to this poem, but also adds complexity and richness.

In many ways, Plath's poems act as the mirror through which we can come to see a reflection of a self, a refracted speaker. We cannot look directly at this speaker. She will not allow it. She hides her meanings and her experiences in personas, obscure imagery, raw emotional outbursts, performance, and spectacle. But by delving into these poems, studying the tone, the drama, the levels of connotation, the indirect implications, we can start to discern a broader significance.

In "The Couriers," Plath's words and images appear to carry a great deal of subtext due to the layers of connotation they embody. For example, the acetic acid mentioned here has many connotations. It is a solvent used for re-crystallization. It is used to treat infections. It is a reagent used in alchemy. "Tin acetate gradually forms when the acetic acid attacks the tin oxide. In alchemy the acetate of tin is known as Acetum of Jupiter" (Colette). Acetic acid was used in older forms of photography where it remained as part of the final tin type. Or this could refer to an old tin box of aspirin due to the fact that aspirin in sealed containers degenerates spontaneously into salicylic acid and acetic acid (Enns 257). All of these connotations work together in the poem, to deepen the theme and perhaps subconsciously convey many different ideas and emotions.

Delivery of information via subtext is an indirect, veiled method of communication that serves the speaker's need to simultaneously announce and disguise her thoughts and feelings. The layered meanings here convey a host of themes and referents. On the surface, perhaps the speaker is a photographer or lives with a photographer. Perhaps she is a housewife frequently doling out aspirin to ill children. The speaker may be wounded, physically or emotionally and therefore requires healing, or she may be longing to reinvent herself. She may want to immortalize herself by fixing an image of herself in time. Perhaps she feels she is physically or psychically being eaten away by something in her life. Perhaps *all* of these things are elements of her struggle.

It is not inaccurate to call Plath's imagery in this poem surreal, if we understand surreal to mean primarily dreamlike and phantasmagoric. An immaculate cauldron is talking and cracking all by itself on the top of nine black Alps. A cauldron is not normally associated with the top of a mountain except perhaps in the folklore of witchcraft or as a metaphor for volcanic activity. This image is even stranger when put side by side with plates, tins, and rings which are domestic images. And yet it is not such a stretch to understand this, as all of these images reside within a culturally-gendered domain. We might, for instance, correlate women to witches and see their domestic activities as a sort of sorcery. In this way, we begin to see how a system of individually opaque images may, like a form of poetic alchemy, begin to coalesce into something more, a wider archetypal suggestion, in this case one which points to feminine power as a potentially dangerous force.

If "The Couriers" has a witchiness about its images, the incantatory repetitions only add to its tonal heat. An imperative is repeated verbatim in two adjacent stanzas. Two particular words, liar and love, are repeated immediately within their respective lines. The close repetition here adds emotional intensity and tension. I cannot help but think of the children's song "Liar, liar, pants on fire," which returns us again to the idea of the crackling cauldron, to the witch up on the mountain boiling things. These close, singular, and alliterative repetitions become linked in our mind. They seem perhaps meant to reference, or reflect, each other. Love is a lie? Or the liar is her lover?

It is interesting to contrast both "Lady Lazarus" and "The Couriers" with a poem that is much quieter and far from dramatic, showy, or confrontational. In "Sheep in Fog," included in the 1965/1966 edition of *Ariel*, the speaker could be said to have assumed a non-human persona. This would allow the poet, the speaker, and the reader to maintain a high degree of separation from the thematic material. Perhaps this is why "Sheep in Fog" seems to invite or require almost no theatrical gestures or other dramatic devices. Adequate self-protection and obscurity is provided by the thick mask itself. We find in this poem only one small instance of elevated language in the form of a direct address. But while a non-human mask affords protection, it also seems to reduce the speaker to passivity and resignation. Overall, this poem has a tone of doom and hopelessness.

The non-human persona of the sheep provides the experience of a dramatic voice, although not necessarily dramatic action. We hear the sheep's inner thoughts as it stands alone in a field. Because the poem is not spoken by a human being, we have little problem accepting the narrator as a gentle creature, and even as this poem begins to communicate a disturbed psychic state, it presents deep emotional drives in a non-threatening way. In fact, this poem contains no dramatic action, no gestures, and almost no other theatrical effects at all.

Many poems in *Ariel*, including "Sheep in Fog," employ soft sounds and rhyme that have a lulling effect on the reader. As Plath brings the reader into her fantastic, nightmarish world, she sometime also attempts to soothe. The soft sounds make it seem as if the reality of the text is not so frightening, and it is not a stretch to interpret this sonic strategy as another means of masking the disturbing themes in the poems.

Many words in this poem start with soft consonants, e.g., "whiteness," "steps," "stars," "sadly," "colour," "flower," "far," "fields," "fatherless," "morning," and "melt." Many are

mutes— "breath," "bells," "blackening" (*Ariel* 3) Soft, round vowels dominate the poem: "father," "far," "star," "morning," "flower," "hoove," "dark," "water" (3). "Dolorous" means expressing great sorrow or distress, yet the word has a drawn out sound and does not feel distressing because of the mute 'd,' liquid 'l', and round vowels (3). These soft, round sounds are quieting and non-confrontational.

Once again, the images found in this poem are, like so many of Plath's images, ambiguous; they have the effect of obfuscation. Although the poem is about a desire for dissolution, there are few references to dissolution. We read about rust, bones, and blackening, but there is no mention, for example, of the more direct imagery found in some her other poems, such as death, rot, graves, and worms. Further blunting the sting of the poem's message are images which have unclear objects and multiple connotations, leaving them open to interpretation. Is the sheep a speaker or an object? Is the rust horse a horse with a red coat or a train? To whom do the hooves and bells belong— the sheep, a horse, or the train moving slowly along a stretch of track perhaps blowing its mournful whistle? What is behind the phrase "the far / Fields melt my heart?" (3). Does the speaker long for other fields, meaning a new home, or is the speaker longing for the lost flock? Is the speaker merely sad for itself or showing empathy for all living things and, therefore, commenting on the human condition?

If there is anxiety in this poem, it is disguised, until we get to the word "threaten," which introduces the notion of fear. The speaker says of the far fields: "They threaten / To let me through to a heaven" (3). The meaning of threaten is clear, but the sound of the word is soft. "Threaten" and "heaven" are linked by both vowel rhyme and end rhyme; they sound similar. The relationship of these two words is complex: "heaven" can balance and calm "threaten" or "heaven" can be seen as coinciding with "threaten" in the sense that it refers to death.

The imagery in "Sheep in Fog" moves from whiteness to darkness. The final line of the poem may be disturbing: "Starless and fatherless, a dark water" (3). But the words are not harsh. They do not snap shut upon utterance. We hear the soft consonants, the liquid 'l' sounds, and the confluence of the short 'a' vowels. These soften the delivery and the effect of the imagery on the reader. The final image in this poem is ultimately ambiguous in its connotation and interpretation. It seems likely that the speaker is referring to death, a type of heaven, when speaking about the starless place, the dark water. Is this necessarily a negative, undesirable place or might it suggest a positive form of dissolution, a mystical merging into everything, some type

of Buddhist nirvana? This poem contains frankly incongruous imagery, a correlation of ideas that do not mesh. Heaven is not normally thought of as fatherless and dark. The Christian vision of heaven is exactly opposite such a description. The image of heaven presented here by Plath is jarring to our sense of normalcy and our cultural expectations.

In his treatise on drama, Aristotle said "the purest form of poetic imitation is the dramatic mode," and Plath clearly employs a multitude of dramatic devices in *Ariel*. In his book "The Poetry of Initiation," Jon Rosenblatt claims that Plath was looking for an aural medium for her poetry (41). While this seems likely, at the same time Plath was still a young woman seeking to solidify her poetic voice. It makes sense to read Plath's poems as caught between the confessional and the dramatic. Confessional poetry was new at the time and Plath, in fact, said that she was interested in this mode. In the interview with Peter Orr, Plath states: "I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo" (Orr 167-168). Since confessional poetry was so new, Plath needed to find a way to work with it, and she likely coupled it with the dramatic mode as a balancing element. Drama, unlike the muddled personal realm, has that Aristotelian purity to it. Drama also contrasts with the nature of confession, by being inherently impersonal, i.e., staged and role-driven, conscious of audience, and deliberately grandiose, almost theoretical in action and speech. Plath may well have seen the devices of drama and poetic form, especially rhyme, as a way to undercut what might otherwise have seemed self-pitying, hysterical, or hyperbolic, and she may have felt that the use of form and persona signaled to her audience her command of the tone and composition. The kind of heightened speech one encounters in many of Plath's poems would not be out of place in the climactic moment of a tragic play.

Many of the themes in Plath's poems, such as negative attitudes toward motherhood and marriage, are unlikely to please readers. As a result, there are obvious reasons to hide and subvert the themes and to try to dampen the emotional intensity in her poetry. But politics of gender and gender roles aside, any poet may seek to disguise the implications of what he or she is coming to understand about themselves, simply for their own self-preservation. We may at times seek to mask not only our politics, but also the ferocity and brute force of our own emotions.

One of the things I originally liked about Plath, as a young woman, was the raw emotion in her work. But it is this disorganized, untethered, often brutal emotion that may be one of the most polarizing aspects of her work. If we can understand this aspect of her work to be deliberate, or at least compelling and elucidating, it allows us to evaluate the work from a calmer perspective. Much of Plath's emotive communication in *Ariel* remains either on the surface or disguised and subverted. Emotions are "acted out" in the poems and are not well connected to meaning or originating impetus. We encounter a speaker here who is struggling not only to understand the world, and to locate and reveal herself within it, but a speaker for whom such struggles are also the means to greater self-knowledge. Reading the poems in this context, as enactments or re-enactments of an intrapersonal evolution, perhaps we can better make sense of them and more fully appreciate their shifts in tone and strategy.

It is understandable why some readers find Plath unacceptable. She challenges cultural roles and assumptions about women and motherhood, territory that will always remain sacred, and rightly so. She vents extremely strong emotions, yet does not connect these emotions to any particular person or event, which then in some ways makes every reader the target of her emotions. Her poems diffuse emotion, but they do not calm it. Her poems take on the deepest of human fears and blatantly terrify the reader without offering an explanation or a method for managing the horror.

This is the show that never ends. There is no remedy for the human condition. One either wrestles with this knowledge directly, like Jacob through his long night arguing with God, or one continually turns from it in a doomed effort to obliterate it from consciousness. Plath is not for everyone. The poems are deeply disturbing. But *Ariel* has a lot to teach us, not only about ourselves— the psychic twists in the torturous process of self-awareness, self-knowledge, self-revelation, and interpersonal communication— but also how a poet might strive to embody such processes in his or her work.

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