

“The Blood Jet Is Poetry”: Sylvia Plath’s Practical Poetics

Annika J. Lindskog (Lund University)

Abstract: This essay discusses the nature and function of poetry and poetic inspiration as central themes in the poetry of Sylvia Plath, an aspect of her poetry that has elicited surprisingly little critical attention over the years. Here, I trace the poetological strand in Plath’s poetry through four poems: the early ‘Black Rook in Rainy Weather’ (1956), ‘The Moon and the Yew Tree’ (1961), and, finally, ‘Ariel’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’ (both October, 1962). These poems all engage with and raise issues that relate to poetics in different ways. Read together, these four poems demonstrate the centrality of poetological themes in Plath’s poetry—how they in different ways represent and debate the genesis, nature, form, and function of poetry.

“The blood jet is poetry,” the American poet Sylvia Plath (1932-63) writes in “Kindness” (1963), causing the reader to pause before the line’s ambiguity (l. 18).¹ Is the “blood jet” meant to be read metaphorically or literally? Is poetry the drive, the “blood jet,” or does the “blood jet” constitute a form of poetry to the speaker? Moreover, are the “two children, two roses” (l. 20) in the poem’s last line the speaker’s own children or are they a poet’s creations: poems? The answer to all of these questions is that they are both. The blood jet can be understood as both metaphorical and literal; it is both a kind of poetry in itself and expresses the necessity of actual poetry. Plath’s characteristic ambiguity lets us uncover several different poems within the one. By implying similarities between the poet’s creativity and childbearing, she invites us to simultaneously read “Kindness” as a comment on poetic inspiration and on motherhood. Moreover, she connects the two. As the poem posits that children’s cries are more “real,” more full of ‘soul,’ than those of rabbits, it implicitly suggests that motherhood offers a better foundation for writing poetry than does nature, or at least a more authentic subject about which to write (ll. 6, 8).

The implicit comment on poetry and creativity in “Kindness” is far from a sole occurrence in Plath’s *oeuvre*, in which the nature and function of poetry and poetic inspiration appear as central themes. This aspect of her poetry has elicited surprisingly little critical

¹ All references to Plath’s poems will be given directly in the text, and come from *The Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York Harper & Row, 1981; Harper Perennial, 1992).

attention over the years, beyond brief comments that often—but not always—treat these themes as Plath’s feelings about her own writing.² The poetological aspects of her work—that is, how her poetry can be read as a form of poetics: a comment on poetry itself—complicate its generic status as confessional, however, asking us to consider its speakers not as despairing women but as poets, and to read it not as biography but as a form of practical poetics. Doing so reveals a very different narrative than the all-too familiar one: it uncovers her poems’ deep engagement with the nature of poetry and the role of the poet. In fact, in its more jubilant forms—that is, when the creative process reaches its apotheosis, as in “Ariel”—the poetological strand stands in stark contrast to the darker streaks in Plath’s work, including the recurrent theme of self-destructiveness with which she has become associated. Against death and silence, Plath posits poetic expression and creativity.

This essay traces the poetological strand in Plath’s poetry through four poems: the early “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” (1956), “The Moon and the Yew Tree” (1961), and, finally, “Ariel” and “Lady Lazarus” (both October, 1962). These poems all engage with and raise issues that relate to poetics in different ways. “Black Rook” is an early example of Plath’s practical poetics and is “polite” in the way that is typical of her early work; here, the speaker calmly contemplates the difficulties of achieving creation. “The Moon and the Yew Tree” describes writer’s block in terms of exile and stasis, while “Ariel” instead manages to move out of that “stasis in darkness,” representing poetic inspiration as a triumphant gallop on a horse (l. 1). Finally, “Lady Lazarus” breaks down the barriers between poet and poetry: it is possible to see the rebirth alluded to in the poem as achieved through poetic expression.

Read together, these four poems demonstrate the centrality of poetological themes in Plath’s poetry—that is, how they in different ways represent and debate the genesis, nature, form, and function of poetry. Often, the poems’ self-reflecting comments offer instructions for how they should be read. They openly ask their readers to work with the texts, instructing us to “unpeel” their meaning, while simultaneously commenting on implicit power structures that are not only relevant for the poems’ speakers’ position in society, but also for the writer-reader relationship (“Ariel,” l. 20). The poems discussed here also illustrate how Plath’s practical

² For example, to Lynda K. Bundtzen, the early poem “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” explicates Plath’s attitude to her writing in 1962 and especially her motive “for saving every scrap of her genius”; *The Other Ariel* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001; Phoenix Mill: Sutton Publishing, 2005), 15. Commentary on the poetological aspects of Plath’s work has largely focused on individual poems or group of poems. Jo Gill notes, however, that creativity is an important theme in *The Colossus* (1960), a theme that she links to self-creation; *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 40-3. Christina Britzolakis investigates what she calls Plath’s “theatre of mourning”: how her work is “inherently rhetorical and self-reflexive, a structure of exacerbated theatricalism,” which she connects to Plath’s “interrogation” of psychoanalysis; *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 7.

poetics develop throughout her short career, revealing considerable changes in her attitude to poetry. While both “Black Rook” and “The Moon and the Yew Tree” can be said to describe a will-to-poetry, albeit in very different ways, Plath’s last work—that is, the poems written in the fall of 1962 and early 1963—shows no such hesitance when it comes to poetic expression, instead often presenting the poem as an act of resistance: a cry in the face of oppression, and, moreover, a cry that keeps on echoing even after the poet cannot speak any more. Notably, in all the poems examined here, the idea that creativity is a form of liberation reappears, linking writing to flight and purposeful movement.

“Black Rook in Rainy Weather”

“Black Rook in Rainy Weather” is part of a group of early poems that engage with issues pertaining to creativity and writing; besides “Black Rook,” “November Graveyard,” “On the Plethora of Dryads,” and “On the Difficulty of Conjuring Up a Dryad”—all written in 1956 or early in 1957—openly address similar topics. These poems describe related scenarios: the speakers are watching some object or some scene, willing them to come alive in their minds so that they can write about them. The objects resist doing so, however; the scene in “November Graveyard” “stands stubborn” (l. 1), the tree in “On the Difficulty” “stays tree” (l. 24), in “On the Plethora of Dryads,” “[n]o visionary lightnings/ Pierced” the speaker’s “dense lid” (ll. 23-4), and “Black Rook” leaves the speaker waiting for “that rare, random descent” (l. 40). These poems thus describe the struggle to create—a will-to-poetry—rather than any actual accomplishment; the speakers never arrive at the creative achievements for which they strive. “Black Rook in Rainy Weather” is thus not so much a poem about a black rook in rainy weather as about a poet wishing to write a poem about a black rook in rainy weather. It is described as a rather painful experience.

The poetological commentary in the poem is quite straightforward: the speaker seeks and/or waits for inspiration. This inspiration is described in two ways; first, the speaker appears to wait for illumination from the rook—that is, he or she expects to suddenly see something in the rook that is not always there to see—and second, the speaker is waiting for some form of divine stimulus, a “miracle” or an epiphany, that will “set the sight on fire” (l. 6). There is a clear blurring between the two kinds of inspiration.

The speaker’s attempt to uncover meaning is invariably connected to her eyes: it is her vision that will locate meaning by uncovering the rook’s essence. It is not only “Black Rook”

that places such emphasis on vision; in several of the Cambridge poems, eyes play a similar role. In “Tale of a Tub” (1956), for example, “The photographic chamber of the eye” can find “no cracks that can be decoded” on the ceiling in the bathroom (ll. 1, 10). In “soliloquy of the Solipsist” (1956), the “dreaming houses all snuff out” when the speaker shuts her eyes (ll. 5-6). In “The Shrike” (1956)—another poem about birds—the speaker is locked into her “skull’s cage” when “night comes black,” while her mate “lifts” to amazing dreams she jealously covets; when morning comes she “peck[s] open those locked lids” of her mate so that she can “eat” the visions of his “royal dreams” (ll. 12, 1, 3, 18, 2). In these poems, eyes not only function as recorders of sight, but as vehicles for accessing (poetic) truth. It is a truth that is persistently difficult to claim.

In a journal entry from February, 1956, Plath discusses the poet’s role in uncovering truth and distinguishes between different kinds of seeing:

What I fear most, I think, is the death of the imagination. When the sky outside is merely pink, and the rooftops merely black: that photographic mind which paradoxically tells the truth, but the worthless truth, about the world. It is that synthesizing spirit, that ‘shaping’ force, which prolifically sprouts and makes up its own worlds with more inventiveness than God which I desire. If I sit still and don’t do anything, the world goes on beating like a slack drum, without meaning. We must be moving, working, making dreams to run toward; the poeverty [*sic*] of life without dreams is too horrible to imagine: it is that kind of madness which is worst [...].³

Here, Plath seemingly debates the same dilemma that she depicts in “Tale of a Tub,” which was written only a couple of days before this passage. What she describes is a difference between “merely seeing”—which is the job of the “photographic mind”—and seeing into things, for which is required an imaginative mind that can “shape” the world, and thus give it “meaning.” Such eyes, which are able to uncover a deeper truth about the world merely by looking at it, belong to the poet, Plath suggests. Interestingly, there are religious undertones here, too, as she likens the poet’s vision to God’s inventiveness.

It is through such inventive eyes that the speaker in “Black Rook” wishes to see the world. To Adam Kirsch, both this poem and others from the period, “record a perpetual struggle between the claims of truth and the desire of imagination”; it is with “an uneasy conscience,”

³ Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 210,

he writes, that their speakers project their inventiveness onto the world.⁴ It is hard to locate any such “uneasy conscience” in the Cambridge poetry, however. On the contrary, Plath’s poet speakers consistently lament their inability to see the world with the poet’s visionary (in)sight, beyond the “merely” photographic. In fact, in “Black Rook,” the speaker is careful not to interfere with what she sees:

I do not [...] seek
Any more in the desultory weather some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,
Without ceremony, or portent. (ll. 4-10)

Somewhat paradoxically, the response she is waiting for from the rook and the scene she is contemplating must come from something outside of herself, while the ability to apprehend this response is her own. Truth thus seems to arrive through the establishment of a connection between poet and object.

“Black Rook” suggests that such poetic vision is one the speaker has accessed previously, since she is convinced that “it could happen/ Even in this dull, ruinous landscape” (ll. 23-4). It also appears that the rook has caused at least an inkling of the inspiration she seeks, since it is described as shining in a way that has caught her attention. What the speaker appears to recognize in her experience of the rook is at least a version of the all-consuming light that she knows can take “[p]ossession of the most obtuse objects now and then” (l. 18), and which apparently causes a parallel possession of the poet’s mind.

Several critics have downplayed the significance of the religious imagery in the poem. Tim Kendall, for example, finds transcendentalist undertones in “Black Rook,” which attribute moments of radiance and illumination to nature—that is, the rook—rather than a traditional divine presence, thus “bypassing the need for formal religion to attain its intuitive spiritual communion.”⁵ Nancy Hargrove reads this poem as Plath’s version of Stevens’s “Sunday Morning” (1915), “in that the speaker rejects the possibility that religion or the gods exist and thus must find significance in earthly things.”⁶ Interestingly, in Stevens’s poem, it is specifically

⁴ Adam Kirsch, *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2005), 240.

⁵ Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (London: Faber and Faber, 2001), 27.

⁶ Nancy Hargrove, *The Journey Toward Ariel: Sylvia Plath’s Poems of 1956-1959* (Lund: Lund University Press, 1994), 90.

birds that the speaker is drawn to, as he watches “casual flocks of pigeons make/ Ambiguous undulations as they sink.”⁷

The suggestion of divine inspiration in “Black Rook” does not seem so easily dismissible, however. While the “miracles” that the speaker repeatedly mentions (ll. 4, 36, 38) seemingly refer to the brief epiphanies afforded her by the objects she contemplates, the poem’s ending strongly suggests that what she wishes to create will or cannot be completed until “the angel” has descended (l. 39). She will only, “[w]ith luck” and hard work, “[p]atch together a content/Of sorts” (ll. 32, 35). Without that “rare, random descent” of the angel—the divine inspiration—it appears the poem will not be completed (l. 40).

The image of the angel suggests that there is something holy about the speaker’s creativity, but also brings a decidedly romantic strand into the poem. While struggling with her own perception of the rook, the speaker needs divine inspiration to actually be able to achieve something. The muse figure is central to the poem, and introduces a pattern that reappears throughout Plath’s *oeuvre*, where writing and creativity are often connected to religious imagery and to divine presences. Creativity is brought about through external forces that enable the speaker to express herself and to arrive at the finished product. While the angel that the speaker in “Black Rook” waits for is a benevolent muse, external forces are not always helpful in Plath’s work. In “The Disquieting Muses” (1957), for example, the inability to create is explained through the presence of ill-willing muses, apparently brought on by the speaker’s mother’s neglect. In “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” discussed below, the moon is another mother figure, who is no muse but instead thwarts the speaker’s ability to create, or even move.

Muse figures in Plath’s poetry are often flying creatures. When the speaker in “Black Rook” turns to the “mute sky,” waiting for the angel’s “descent,” she implicitly connects creativity to height and air. The rook itself is interesting to consider from this perspective. Also a creature of flight, there is a connection between the bird and the absent angel, as though the rook serves as an earthly substitute for divine vision. In comparison with the radiant “miracle” the speaker awaits from the sky, the “certain minor light” that “may” appear in earthly matter does not appear as bright a prospect (l. 14). Notable, too, is the fact that the rook never soars: it sits tranquil, “arranging and re-arranging its feathers in the rain” (l. 3). Still, the rook is situated above the speaker, “up there” (l. 1), while the speaker’s position on the ground, beneath both rook and sky, presents her as helplessly bound to the matter from which she must be lifted in

⁷ Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems* (New York: Knopf, 1954; New York: Vintage Books, 1990), VIII.13-14.

order to be able to create. The poem implies that the alleviation must come from a power outside herself.

Ultimately, however, no such help is offered the speaker of “Black Rook,” who remains distant from her surroundings and, significantly, from the rook. While she speaks from a perspective of despondency—“Trekking stubborn through this season/Of fatigue” (ll. 33-34)—that mood is not projected onto the rook. The bird remains distant, offering no decisive meaning. The flicker of insight awarded the poet speaker is thus not enough to arrive at any moment of truth. It seems that the ‘spasmodic/Tricks of radiance’ that the rook causes is no more than a glimmer and clearly not the kind of “celestial burning” for which she longs (ll. 37-8, 17). The poetic result of her encounter with the rook, then, will be an inferior work. She understands that without any epiphany, she will have to “Patch together a content/Of sorts” herself. Heather Clark argues that the poem moves from “self-doubt to self-confidence,” but it is difficult to read the last lines as expressing more than vague hope.⁸ At the end of the poem, it seems as if the speaker’s focus shifts from the rook, as she begins to wait again “For that rare, random descent” she craves (l. 40).

“The Moon and the Yew Tree”

The religious undertones in “Black Rook” are also prevalent in the later poem “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” which is set in a churchyard, a metaphorical setting for the speaker’s mind. If the speaker in “Black Rook” is waiting for divine inspiration, the speaker in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” is seemingly confused with a deity herself, an identity she does not appear to recognize: “The grasses unload their griefs on my feet as if I were God” (l. 3). The romantic idea of the poet as a genius, inspired and enlightened by God, runs between the lines of this poem, implying that this might once have been the speaker’s identity but is so no longer, for she has “fallen a long way” and she does not know what to do with messages conveyed to her by the grasses. In the earlier poem, the speaker waited to hear the surrounding world communicate a message to her, but in “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” when the grasses readily convey their messages—unloading their griefs—this speaker cannot fathom what to do with their despair, nor her own: “I simply cannot see where there is to get to” (l. 7). What the grasses

⁸ Heather Clark, *The Grief of Influence: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 115.

have to convey is no “radiance,” no “miracle,” and the speaker’s inability to move forward is here emblematic of the writer’s inability to write (“Black Rook,” l. 38).⁹

Unlike the somewhat later poem “Ariel,” which begins in immobile darkness (“Stasis in darkness”) but then quickly starts moving—the stasis-movement dichotomy being one of its central tensions (“Ariel,” l. 1)—“The Moon and the Yew Tree” describes what appears to be a permanent state of stasis; it represents the despair of someone unable to move, who has fallen and who is possibly harmed. If—as I will argue below—“Ariel” describes the creative process as a wild gallop towards accomplishment, the despair in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” instead represents the inability to accomplish anything at all, suggested both by the fact that the speaker cannot see how to loosen from her paralysis and by her location, “[s]eparated from my house” (ll. 2, 28). Moreover, while the poem begins with the “blue” light of the mind, it ends with “the message of the yew tree”: “blackness and silence” (ll. 2, 28). No one will speak—nothing will be accomplished—and whatever light there was seems to have disappeared.

“The Moon and the Yew Tree” is largely focused on space and immobility. The speaker describes the night-sky from the perspective of the ground, where she has “fallen,” and from where she looks up at the moon. While the poem appears to position the speaker in a graveyard, outside a church, the scene is also presented as enacted in her very own mind, making the claustrophobic atmosphere even more pressing. It is the “light of the mind” that opens the poem, and it goes on to describe how the “trees of the mind are black” (ll. 1-2). As discussed above, the speaker in “Black Rook” is also situated on the ground, looking up at both the bird and the sky, filled with hope of an imminent inspiration from above. In “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” however, the speaker appears to be lying down, and is thus positioned as far down as she can get. There is nothing reassuring or hopeful about what she sees above her. There is also a suggestion of disgrace or exile in the poem’s first paragraph, in which the fact that the speaker is “[s]eparated” from her “house” (l. 6)—presumably the church—suggests that even if she once were some sort of divinity, she has now left the place she once belonged to, cast out into the churchyard.

While the grasses weigh the speaker down with their grief, the yew tree’s message—“blackness and silence”—strongly implies that no “random descent” can be expected here (“Black Rook,” l. 40). Instead of a muse figure, there is the moon (“my mother”), distant and unreachable, offering no kind of escape: “The moon is no door” (ll. 17, 8). The moon is

⁹ “The Moon and the Yew Tree” was begun as an exercise suggested by Plath’s husband Ted Hughes, to break a “writing block”; it appears the exercise – begun and completed within a couple of hours – both broke the writer’s block and took the block itself for its subject. See Kendall, *Sylvia Plath*, 46

presented as a threatening mother figure, whose “garments unloose small bats and owls,” and who leaves the speaker unable to “believe in tenderness” (ll. 18, 19). Judith Kroll suggests that Plath’s moons are muse figures, and that in the late poetry, the moon symbol “underlies all aspects of female identity.”¹⁰ While the latter may be true, the moon mother in “The Moon and the Yew Tree” is surely no muse, but—like the “Disquieting muses” in the earlier poem, which there harmed the speaker’s creativity—by contrast someone who thwarts the creative impulse. This is no tender mother to run to for comfort, but a distant and “terribly upset” figure, suggesting a hierarchical relationship with destructive effects on the speaker (l. 9). To Christina Britzolakis—who similarly reads this poem as “an allegory of creative impossibility”—the moon is a “negative inscription of maternity.”¹¹ Here, as in so many of Plath’s other poems, the mother figure is a destructive presence who obstructs even from a far distance, leaving her daughter not only paralyzed, but without any hope of rescue.

The intimidating divine presences referred to in the poem—the moon, the saints—belong to a system which at once appears to reject the speaker while it simultaneously detains her. If we read “The Moon and the Yew Tree” as an allegory of creative stasis, then this system comes across as a haunting presence of recognition, of accomplishment, which is denied the speaker. She is outside, while

Inside the church, the saints will be all blue,
Floating on their delicate feet over the cold pews,
Their hands and faces stiff with holiness. (ll. 24-26)

While the position of these ‘saints’ does not seem envious—they also appear trapped and immobile, sclerotic in their “holiness”—their situation “[i]nside the church” evidently exalts them above the speaker. She clearly yearns for recognition within this system, “to believe in tenderness” and to experience

The face of the effigy, gentled by candles,
Bending, on me in particular, its mild eyes. (ll. 20-21)

¹⁰ Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976; Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2007), 36. Kroll bases her argument on Plath’s reading of Robert Graves’s *The White Goddess: A Historical Grammar of Poetic Myth* (1948), in which the White Goddess appears a sort of witch muse, similar to Plath’s moon mothers (41-7).

¹¹ Christina Britzolakis, “Gothic Subjectivity,” in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Views: Sylvia Plath*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Infobase Publishing, 2007), 126.

But the warm light of the candles is denied the speaker, forced to “live here,” where the only message for her is “blackness and silence” (l. 28). Unlike “Black Rook” and other earlier poems that explore poetological question, this poet speaker is not primarily longing for divine inspiration, expressing a will-to-poetry. She appears familiar with the temple but is now in exile; there is no place for her in the church: no tenderness, no recognition. In “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” then, poetic achievement is an impossible feat.

“Ariel”

In sharp contrast to “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” “Ariel” (1962) is Plath’s most triumphant expression of poetic achievement. Sometimes this poem has been read as depicting death and rebirth, but it has also frequently been read as representing an intense moment of creative inspiration, which is also how I read it here.¹² Ostensibly charting a journey on a horse, “Ariel” again depicts the creative process in terms of flight, presenting poetic achievement as the result of unity with an external force with which the poet merges:

And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive (ll. 26-9)

Here, the poet is no longer only touched by divine inspiration, but actually merges with the muse figure— “the drive”—and thus herself comes to embody intent, by becoming an “arrow.” I have more to say about these lines below, but first I want to examine the figure of the muse further, who in this poem is represented as a horse.

The title is essential for how we understand the poem, and its dual function as the title-poem of the collection in which “Ariel” appears emphasizes its importance not only for this individual poem, but for Plath’s last book in its entirety. It is an ambiguous title, which invites us to read the poem in many different ways. At the same time, the various meanings also connect to one another. On one level, “Ariel” refers to an actual horse: Plath’s husband, Ted Hughes,

¹² Axelrod asserts that “Ariel” is one of Plath’s “central suicide poems”; Steven Gould Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of the Words* (London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 66. Britzolakis suggests that “the experience of riding a horse becomes a metaphor for the process of writing a poem”; *Theatre of Mourning*, 184. Clark suggests that “Ariel” is “a record of those inspired hours when [Plath] was suddenly able to write the poems that, as she told her mother, would make her name”; *Grief of Influence*, 155.

reports that Ariel was the name of the horse on which Plath used to go horseback riding at the time when the poem was written.¹³ This information invites us to search the poem for possible references to horses and riding, of which there are plenty, such as, for example, “[p]ivot of heels and knees,” which refers to body parts that are used when riding (l. 6). This line signals an urge to movement, and emphasizes the importance of speed in the poem. Moreover, “[t]he brown arc/ Of the neck I cannot catch” appears to refer to the horse’s neck in front of the rider, out of the speaker’s reach, while “God’s lioness” can be read as a reference to the horse itself, with whom the rider is experiencing a sense of unity: “How one we grow” (ll. 8-9, 4, 5). Furthermore, the reference to Lady Godiva (ll. 19-20)—the eleventh-century noblewoman who rode naked through the streets of Coventry as a protest, it is claimed, against her own husband’s despotic treatment of the poor—highlights riding even further, as well as raising questions of power and oppression.

Recently, references to Judaism have been discussed in relation to “Ariel” (and to Plath’s poetry at large); several critics have pointed out that Ariel is the symbolical name for Jerusalem, and that the word translates to “lion of God” in Hebrew.¹⁴ “Ariel” thus seems connected to those of Plath’s poems which draw on the Holocaust for imagery, such as “The Thin People” (1957), “Daddy” (1962) and “Lady Lazarus” (1962). It is also possible that Plath has John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667) in mind, which includes a “vengeful spirit” called Ariel.¹⁵ The source for Milton’s rebel angel was possibly inspired by *The Book of Enoch*, an ancient Hebrew apocalyptic text, which mentions the angel Ariel.

In the context of my own reading of “Ariel,” which is focused on the poem’s celebration of poetic achievement, it is more tempting to connect the title to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*.¹⁶ Ariel, the spirit who serves the magician-ruler Prospero, is on one level a captive, which connects Plath’s poem to questions of power and liberation, discussed further below.¹⁷ Ariel

¹³ Hughes’s notes in the *Collected Poems* inform us that Ariel is the “name of a horse which [Plath] rode, at a riding school on Dartmoor, in Devonshire”; 294, n194.

¹⁴ William V. Davis was the first to point out this connection; ‘Sylvia Plath’s “Ariel”,’ *Modern Poetry Studies* 3 (1972), 177.

¹⁵ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, in *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Orgel and Jonathan Goldberg (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), VI.371. For the discussion of Ariel as a “vengeful spirit,” see 891n477.371. See also Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath*, 66.

¹⁶ Which many critics have done before me, of course. See, for example, Davis, ‘Sylvia Plath’s “Ariel”,’ 176-7 and Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath*, 66-7. Bundtzen also discusses the relevance of *The Tempest* to Plath’s work at large, but focuses more on its importance for the bee poems; *The Other Ariel*, 167-72.

¹⁷ Axelrod lists a number of other candidates as possible referents, such as T. S. Eliot’s “Ariel Poems,” and Wallace Stevens’s “The Planet on the Table”; *Sylvia Plath*, 66.

has also been understood as a spirit of creative force, and thus, when brought in to connection with Plath's poem, implicitly emphasizing the theme of creativity.¹⁸

If we accept the horse in "Ariel" as an embodiment of a creative spirit, then the poem in its entirety can be read as representing an euphoric version of the poetic process: the speaker, the rider of the horse, is striving to achieve unity of separate items in an act of creativity. To be able to create, the poet has to become one with the creative drive and to shed everything unnecessary to the finished text to uncover and achieve the finished poem (l. 21). "Ariel" thus depicts a moment of ecstatic inspiration during which creation is achieved, represented by how the speaker fuses with the horse, the poetic drive.

Such moments cannot last forever, and once they pass, the poet will fall off the horse, as it were. The strong notion of movement in the poem—linked to the idea of riding a horse, of galloping—becomes emblematic of creation. Moreover, movement is contrasted with a threatening immobility throughout the poem, suggesting an inner struggle on the part of the speaker. There is a striking disparity between the poem's first line—"stasis in darkness"—and its last paragraph, in which the speaker has become an "arrow." The unity the speaker achieves with the horse appears to occur suddenly and violently—"Pour and tor of distances"; "The furrow/ Splits and passes"; "Black sweet blood mouthfuls"—but there is also a price to pay for the ride (ll. 3, 6-7, 13). "Ariel" ends with the imminent threat of stasis, or even annihilation, as the arrow, which is described as "suicidal," is likened to flying dew, quickly moving into the "red/ Eye, the cauldron of morning," suggesting the sun rising (ll. 30-1). On the one hand, the presence of the sun obliterates the darkness the poem begins with, but on the other hand, it would also vaporize the dew. While the speaker might be focused as an arrow moving towards its target, she also knows that with the fulfillment of her intent, she will be annihilated.¹⁹

The idea of things wanting to unite is prevalent in "Ariel." This unity not only encompasses the merging of the speaker and the horse, but also attempts to bring together things that are far apart and to cover distances, as in "Pour of tor and distances," or in "The brown arc/ Of the neck I cannot catch," referring to something out of the speaker's reach (ll. 3, 8-9). As

¹⁸ According to Marjorie Garber, reading *The Tempest* as a fable of "art and creation" is one of the two most important approaches to the play (the other being reading it as a "colonialist allegory"). In such readings, Garber states, Ariel is often made to represent Prospero's ethereal self; *Shakespeare After All* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), 852.

¹⁹ "Ariel"—like "Lady Lazarus" before it—has been read as depicting the self dying only to be reborn again, recreated. Understood thus, the peeling off of unwanted layers supposes the emergence of a new woman beneath, similar to a snake shedding its skin because it has grown a new one. There is also a feeling of someone obliterating herself, of becoming united with her surroundings at some cost, for while the speaker gains something, she also loses herself. In one sense, she rides into nothingness at the end of the poem; the ending might feel triumphant, but perhaps it is not.

the speed accelerates, disparate objects appear to merge. Throughout the poem, there are references to shedding, to things falling off, to just leaving the essential: “Thighs, hair;/ Flakes from my heels”; “I unpeel, dead hands, dead stringencies”; “now I/ Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas” (ll. 17-18,20-1, 22-3). At the end of the poem, everything else has fallen off, to leave only a bare core. Here, separate sets of images and contrasts are connected to each other: it is at high speed, in light, that unity is reached. By contrast, stasis is associated with darkness and separateness just as it is in “The Moon and the Yew Tree.”

“Ariel,” like much of Plath’s later poetry, is not structured around a conspicuous rhyme scheme. Far from every line in the poem has a rhyme partner, but many words connect to others in an irregular pattern, thus suggesting implicit connections. For example, “darkness” from the poem’s first line rhymes with “substanceless” (l. 2), “distances” (l. 3), and “lioness” (l. 4). There are also plenty of half-rhymes and alliterations; for example, “knees” in the middle of line six connects loosely to “darkness,” implying movement—it is through pressing the knees that the horse, the lioness, is made to go forward. Plath uses these half-rhymes to make similar implicit connections between words, linking, for example, “flies”—as in “The dew that flies” (l. 28)—with “I” (ll. 22, 26), “cry” (l. 24), and “[n]igger-eye” (l. 10). These words are far apart in the poem, but the rhymes unify them, inviting us to see a connection between them.

In “Ariel,” the notion of oppression hovers between the lines—and is present also in the reference to Lady Godiva—suggesting that the oppression alluded to has to do with gender. The “[n]igger-eye/ berries” in “Ariel” “cast dark/ Hooks,” hooks that attach to the speaker as the speed increases, giving her “mouthfuls” of blood (ll. 10-13).²⁰ While these berries are apparently attempting to hold her back, “[s]omething else// Hauls” her through air, suggesting two powers, one pulling her forward, the other attempting to prevent her flight. These images describe not only how the speaker feels about the world, but also how she feels that the world acts towards her. It suddenly becomes significant that “Nigger-eye” rhymes with “I” and “cry.” The rhyme connects these words, associating them with one another, and with the “[e]ye” in the poem’s very last line.

²⁰ The word “nigger-eye” has attracted some attention and sits somewhat uneasily in the poem. In Plath’s poetry, such uncomfortable and charged words are at times made to represent emotional or imaginative states of mind. By using this word, Plath introduces the word’s connotations of oppression and harassment without having to specifically name these. The use of the word “nigger-eye” in this poem can be compared, for example, with Plath’s use of holocaust imagery in “Lady Lazarus” and “Daddy.” For a discussion of Plath’s use of uncomfortable words, see, for example, Ann Keniston, “The Holocaust Again: Sylvia Plath, Belatedness, and the Limits of Lyric Figure,” in *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*, ed. by Anita Helle (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2007), 139-58.

When read in connection to the theme of creativity and poetic achievement, the idea of being in control becomes a question of power, of struggling for the right to speak. The “cry” is both a protest and an expression. Significantly, it is a “child’s cry” (l. 24). Heather Clark has suggested that the child in question is one of Plath’s own, waking up on the other side of the wall from the room where Plath sat writing early in the mornings during the fall of 1962, thus making “Ariel” not necessarily a poem about poetic genesis, but of its own genesis: in the moment of her own inspiration, Plath could ignore her child’s cry, letting it melt “in the wall” so that she could continue writing.²¹ It is also possible to see the poem’s child as an aspect of the speaker herself. Empowered by the unity she experiences with the poetic drive, her expression becomes something much more commanding than a mere “child’s cry.” Like the speaker in “Lady Lazarus,” she arises as an imperious, triumphant figure, ready to fight back at who- and whatever attempt to hold her back. In Susan Van Dyne’s words, “Ariel” is “reckless in enacting [Plath’s] poetics through the fiery transubstantiation of the female subject.”²² What is noticeable about this transformation, I suggest, is first and foremost that the poem presents the speaker as a female creator, breaking out of molds and expectations, galloping away from the threat of oppression.

“Lady Lazarus”

Unlike “Ariel,” “Lady Lazarus” (1962) is not as apparently about poetry and/or the creative process at all, but about death and resurrection, and revenge. To Kroll, the poem expresses the speaker’s liberation of the “fiery true self” and her realization as “a triumphant resurrecting goddess.”²³ To Gill, the poem constitutes Plath’s best-known poem of rebirth, presenting a “resurgent subject, rising, renewed.”²⁴ To Van Dyne, the speaker is “a taunting, bitchy phoenix who appears to loathe her earlier incarnations [...] almost as much as she does her present audience” (55). While not necessarily disagreeing with any of these takes, my own reading of the poem focuses on the implications of a central allusion towards the end of the text: the implicit reference to Samuel Coleridge’s “Kubla Khan” (1797-8).²⁵ My brief examination of “Lady Lazarus” considers how the Coleridge reference might affect how we read Plath’s poem.

²¹ Clark, *Grief of Influence*, 155.

²² Susan Van Dyne, *Revising Life: Sylvia Plath’s Ariel Poems* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 119.

²³ Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology*, 123.

²⁴ Gill, *Sylvia Plath*, 59.

²⁵ This reference was first noted by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (albeit not thoroughly discussed), in *No Man’s Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. 3: *Letters from the Front* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 290.

Coleridge's "Kubla Khan" is not only a poem about the poem he never wrote, but also an examination of creative inspiration and the act of writing poetry itself. In this poem, the speaker remembers a vision, in which he saw "A damsel with a dulcimer," whose "symphony and song" made him feel as though he could erect a dome of ice in air, visible for "all who heard."²⁶ "Beware! Beware!" the speaker exclaims, commending his audience to protect his moment of inspiration, noticeable through "[h]is flashing eyes, his floating hair!"²⁷

While "Lady Lazarus" is not ostensibly a poem about poetry, the echoes from "Kubla Khan" suggest that the rebirths in Plath's poem might have more to do with the speaker's poetic legacy than with surviving yet another suicide attempt. To Axelrod, "Lady Lazarus" suggests "the way art might double and supplant death-in-life, might defeat death."²⁸ Seen in this light, the speaker's threat at the end of "Lady Lazarus" announces the ferocity of the poems that will continue to live even after the speaker's death, echoing the faint "[a]ncestral voices" that prophesy war in "Kubla Khan" (l. 30):

Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (ll. 80-4)

The "Beware" of Plath's poem is not necessarily directed at a general audience, as is Coleridge's, but appears aimed at the various men the speaker addresses (or are they all one and the same?): Herr Doktor, Herr Enemy, Herr God, and Herr Lucifer. Presumably, these are the men that will be eaten "like air." Plath's poem thus evokes some of the circumstances of "Kubla Khan" but changes the perspective; instead of the male speaker who imagines a "woman wailing for her demon-lover" in a "savage place" and who is inspired by the "damsel with a dulcimer," the voice of Plath's poem is no mere muse ("Kubla Khan," ll. 16, 37). She speaks of her own accord—or wails, if you will.

What the speaker evokes in "Lady Lazarus" is no "sunny pleasure-dome with caves of ice," however, but her own body ("Kubla Khan," l. 36). Plath's poem depicts not only a death

²⁶ Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, vol. 2, eighth edition (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 446-8, ll. 37, 43, 48.

²⁷ Coleridge, "Kubla Khan," ll. 49-50.

²⁸ Axelrod, *Sylvia Plath*, 158.

and a subsequent re-birth, but a metamorphosis from woman to poem. Her “theatrical/[c]omeback” is a “melt[ing] of herself to the “shriek” that is the poem. Ultimately, it is that shriek—the power of the poem itself—that threatens to annihilate her opponents. Here, too, the notion of an audience is evoked; the “peanut-crunching crowd” that “[s]hoves in to see” the speaker’s “big strip tease” can be understood as the readers of the poem itself (ll. 26-8):

Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands

My knees.

I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman. (ll. 30-4)

The body parts that the speaker subsequently exposes thus refer to the anatomy of the poem, which is being unbarred, word by word. The poem repeatedly turns attention to itself, playing with the ambiguities between poem and dead woman: “Do I terrify? —”; “there is a charge, a very large charge/ For a word or a touch”; “You poke and stir./ Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—” (ll. 12, 61-2, 74-5). Is it the woman or the poem that terrifies? Who is being charged with what? And who is poking, the reader or the men alluded to in the poem? The threat in the very last lines implies that the poem will suddenly come alive—will erupt with a hidden meaning, much like the fountain in “Kubla Khan” “momently was forced” (l. 19)—and that the poem will then crush its (male) readers, drawing them with it “to a lifeless ocean” (“Kubla Khan,” l. 28).

Like so many of Plath’s other poems, “Lady Lazarus” tells several stories at once, urging its readers to unwrap and to poke it. The implicit meta-poetic comments add yet another dimension to the text, presenting poetry and expression as weapons against oppression, similarly to how the speaker in “Ariel” becomes an unstoppable arrow. In Plath’s last work, the creative act becomes forceful and serves to protect the speaker. These poems often depict battles and bloody scenarios (cf. “Brasilia” [1962], “The Rabbit Catcher” [1962], “Totem” [1963], “Words” [1963], and “Contusion” [1963]). If there is a longing-to-belong in Plath’s earlier poetry—skillfully dramatized in “The Moon and the Yew Tree”—her last work instead frequently attacks a tradition from which her speakers consider themselves excluded. As in “Lady Lazarus,” Plath has here moved towards a form of appropriation of earlier writers (predominantly male, such as Coleridge), in order to form a poetics of resistance, in which any

ghostly remnant of the canon is only present as “Dead hands, dead stringencies” which can be “unpeel[ed]” (“Ariel,” ll. 20, 21).

In a sense, Plath’s last poetry can be read as a form of “writing back” to an indifferent male canon, or what Adrienne Rich has called an act of “re-vision”: “challenging the sacredness of the gentlemanly canon.”²⁹ But Plath’s poetry does not primarily ask that we re-consider women’s position in relation to an established tradition; it forcefully demands to be read as “transcend[ing] and transform[ing]” the “structures of thought” that have held her imagination back (174, 176). As she suggests herself in “Words” (1963), one of her last poems, language can be a powerful tool for such transcendence, functioning as “Axes/After whose stroke the wood rings,/ And the echoes!” (ll. 1-2).

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In her poetry, Plath often examines, allegorizes, and problematizes ideas about creativity and poetry, an aspect of her work that has often been overlooked in readings focused on either her biography or her status as a confessional poet. While I have only discussed four poems in some detail here, these texts fit into a larger framework, illustrating both how central these poetological themes are to her writing and how her practical poetics developed over time.

Three distinctive stages are discernible. The first is characterized by a will-to-poetry, as I have discussed above: a longing to belong and a longing to create. This can be clearly seen in “Black Rook in Rainy Weather,” but also in other poems from the same period. The second stage is marked by images of alienation and stasis, signifying the impossibility of poetic achievement. These are significant images in “The Moon and the Yew Tree,” which I discussed above, but also in many other poems from the period 1959 to early -62, such as “The Colossus” (1959), “Wuthering Heights” (1961), and “Elm” (1962). Finally, the last stage, stretching roughly from mid-1962 until Plath’s death in February, 1963, is marked by forceful expression, at times jubilant, at times raging. In poems such as “Ariel” and “Lady Lazarus,” Plath offers a powerful response to a tradition from which her speakers have been excluded. No longer “outside the church,” these poems’ speakers define their own parameters.

When these four poems are read together, it is clear that the poetological aspects of Plath’s work merit more attention—not necessarily to question her status as a confessional

²⁹ Adrienne Rich, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” in *Adrienne Rich’s Poetry and Prose*, ed. Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi and Albert Gelpi (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 166.

writer but to challenge what we understand confessionalism in poetry to mean. Often, the term “confessional” is defined in terms of the personal only, forgetting that this poetry is a literary construction much like any other subgenre. As Melanie Waters suggests, part of “the ‘trick’ of confessional poetry is [...] to evoke the perspective of an imagined speaker in terms so intimate, candid and persuasive that the reader falls into the trap of believing that the words of the poem are a direct translation of the poet’s own grief.”³⁰ Plath was very attuned to such “tricks,” and was learning to push them to extremes in her last work, allowing for the ambiguities in her word choices to create razor thin borders between the personal and the poetical.

I began this essay with a discussion of “Kindness” and the ambiguity in the line “The blood jet is poetry” (l. 18), suggesting that the line can be read both metaphorically and literally. A third way of reading the line blends the two, suggesting that blood—at once representing the life force and the most intimate aspect of a life—is what makes a text poetry. Conversely, when the speaker asks “What is so real as the cry of a child?” (l. 6), she is at once conjuring up the image of a crying baby—presumably her own—and asking a question about what makes poetry “real,” a question highly relevant to the idea of the confessional. At times, then, Plath’s poetry cannot only be described as confessional, but chooses confessionalism as its topic, allowing its speakers to probe their children’s cries and their own blood, while simultaneously reflecting on that very probing. One thing an examination of Plath’s practical poetics can bring, then, is a deeper understanding of how she herself defined and positioned her work in the context of twentieth-century poetry. Her poetry clearly has something to say about itself and how it should be read.

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³⁰ Melanie Waters, “Anne Sexton, Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry,” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Poets*, ed. Mark Richardson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 379.

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