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"A Self to Recover, A Queen": The Subjects of Poesis in Sylvia Plath's *Ariel*

by

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Introduction:
"The Girl Who Wanted to be God"

> I want, I think to be omniscient…I think I would like to call myself "The girl who wanted to be God." Yet if I were not in this body, where *would* I be—perhaps I am destined to be classified and qualified. But, oh, I cry out against it. I am I—I am powerful—but to what extent? I am I. (Plath, *Letters Home* 40)

When Sylvia Plath wrote these words in her high school diary, she articulated perhaps for the first time of her conception of the subjected self that I see as central to the project of *Ariel*, the book of poems widely regarded as her best work. *Ariel* can be read as Plath's final outcry against the ways in which selves are "classified and qualified," inevitably cast as subjects to the forces of difference, desire, and death. If Plath at seventeen feared that such subjection was "destined," in *Ariel* she seeks literally to rewrite that destiny and ascribe to her poems' speakers the power to voice themselves in their smallness before those dwarfing forces. Plath identifies poesis—that "creation" through word—as the prospective means of the (re)figuration of the subject and its relationship to language, through which Plath might grant her speakers the omniscience and omnipotence originally denied them in subjection ("Poem"). Thus in *Ariel*, Plath attributes to poetry the powers of a god to create, control, and destroy the subject and its literal reality.

But if Plath understands the word as the ultimate means of re-creation of the self and the bounds of its powers, she also paradoxically knows that her speakers are fundamentally made as subjects to and in language—the very medium she posits as

the potential instrument of their liberation. While in *Ariel* Plath pursues a repossession of voice that might allow its subjects to speak their own being, she posits that to speak at all demands submission to a system of language that traumatically wrenches the speaker from unity with its surrounding reality and limits its voice and vision. For all the faith it places in the making power of poetry, Plath's *Ariel* is nevertheless haunted by her anxiety that her literal reality would replicate rather than undo the subjections of her extra-textual one, and that the project of (re)figuring subjection through language would prove to be not a paradox, but a contradiction.

Ironically, the text of *Ariel* itself has a history as beset by suppressions as the voices of its poems' speakers. The original version of *Ariel* was published posthumously in 1965 in the U.K. under the governance of Ted Hughes, Plath's estranged husband. Plath wrote the 41 poems she planned to include in *Ariel* primarily during the fall and winter of 1962 "at about four in the morning—that still, blue almost eternal hour before the cockcrow, before the baby's cry" (*A: R* 208-209, 195). Before her suicide in February 1963, she left the completed manuscript on her desk, arranged neatly in a black binder to be discovered later by Hughes (Hughes xi). But as Plath and Hughes' daughter relates, *Ariel* was originally published as "a somewhat different collection from the manuscript [her] mother left behind" (Hughes xii). From both the U.K. and subsequent U.S. editions of *Ariel*, Hughes omitted around a dozen of the poems Plath had placed on the table of contents included in the binder. Among these omissions were "The Rabbit Catcher" and "The Detective," two poems I see as pivotal to Plath's project. In place of the omitted poems, Hughes

chose ten and twelve other poems to include in the U.K. and U.S. editions respectively. As a result, the two editions of *Ariel* originally published differed in both sequence and selection from the manuscript Plath appears to have intended to send forth into the world.

In 2004, HarperCollins released a "restored" edition of the volume that reproduces the actual typescript of *Ariel*, including all the poems in the order that Plath is said to have left them (Hughes xi). Out of fidelity both to Plath's arrangement of the manuscript and to her project's concern with ownership of voice, in my work here I have considered *Ariel: The Restored Edition* as my primary text. When I refer to *Ariel* throughout my discussion, unless otherwise explicitly stated, I refer to the text Plath intended for publication, of which *Ariel: The Restored Edition* is the best approximation possible in Plath's absence.

My inquiry into *Ariel* is informed by work I did in the Plath archives held by Smith College's Mortimer Rare Books Room. Given that not only *Ariel* but so many of Plath's writings have again and again been subject to censure, if not outright destruction, in the hands of her late husband's family during the management of her estate, I visited the archives to study Plath's manuscripts firsthand. This allowed me not only to access the most unadulterated Plath materials available, but to witness through subsequent drafts of the *Ariel* poems a procession towards her desired representation of a particular feeling or concept. The typescripts of the *Ariel* poems testify to how much Plath committed to each and every element of a work—each colon, each dash, each article. Frequently, Plath would spend seven or eight drafts changing exclamation marks to periods, then back to exclamation marks, then back

again, coaxing the poem towards some elusive vision. But for all this labor over minute details, I also witnessed how well-honed her words and how precise her vision were from each poem's inception. If Plath wavered on issues of punctuation, she rarely seemed to abandon entire stanzas or radically change themes. Plath's manuscripts suggest she wrote with certainty to match the tremendous fury of her most arresting poems.

While at the archives, I also was able to examine Plath's marginalia in her personal copy of Augustine's *Confessions*, a work whose conception of "confession" I see as parallel to Plath's "confession" in *Ariel*. Before my arrival at the archives, I had posited this parallel without knowing if Plath had read *Confessions*; it was powerful confirmation of my early thinking about this project to learn not only that she had, but to read the notes she made in her copy of the book. Plath's marginalia indicates a particular interest in Augustine's themes of the significance of suffering, the understanding of the self in relationship to God, and the idea of living death. Also of particular interest in the archives was the transcript for a BBC radio segment in which Plath read and commented on some of her *Ariel* poems, which is now included in the appendix to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. In these notes, Plath introduces each poem first and foremost by describing its "speaker." Plath appears to have thought about the individuals whose stories the poems told on the same terms that I had long conjectured, but to an extreme I had not fathomed prior to reading these notes. In them, Plath goes to great lengths to present casually and remotely poems which seem to be the most easily contested as personal. Plath describes the feelings of speaker of

"Daddy," for example, with glib understatement as "a poem spoken by a girl with an Electra complex" ("Notes for *Ariel: New Poems*").

Finally, I was invited by Dawn Thistle of Assumption College's Emmanuel d'Alzon Library to view a series of as-of-yet unpublished letters written by Plath to a former priest in residence at the college. In the letters written around the time she was working on *Ariel*, the adult Plath speaks again of God, but as an atheist whose faith is vested now in poesis. Yet, thirteen years later, the problems that vexed Plath in that old diary entry remain the same, seemingly inescapable ones she confronts in *Ariel*. While Plath believes the "I"s of her poems to be powerful in their repossession of voice, the question in *Ariel* remains, "to what extent"? As in *Ariel* Plath tests these powers, the verdict she ultimately returns is a troubled one; Plath knows her speakers inevitably to be "I's," subjects of language inescapably bound to the word and to the extra-textual subjections it figures. Ultimately, in the poems of *Ariel*, as Plath's speakers fail to be reborn through resurrections or creative self (re)productions that replicate old subjections, they seek rebirth instead through transcendent deaths that might erase all subjections, if at the expense of the self. In these destructions, Plath's speakers claim the ultimate power to destroy and make themselves anew through poesis—and leave behind the poems of *Ariel* as their final assertions of voice and confessions to the terrific power of the word.

Chapter 1
"A Self to Recover, A Queen":
Plath's Vision of Subjection and the Possibility of (Re)figuration

From the earliest days of her childhood, Sylvia Plath was captivated by bees. The curious world of the beehive inspired poems and stories throughout her career; as an adult, she kept a hive of her own at her house in the English countryside. Plath's affinity for bees and beekeeping was originally fostered by her father, an expert on bumblebees and the author of what was long considered the definitive book on the subject. But where Otto Plath's interest in bee behavior was primarily scientific, his daughter's interest was rooted in the simultaneous sophistication of the bees and their powerlessness before their keeper. While Plath admired bees as they set about the seemingly miraculous work of producing honey, she was equally enthralled by the role of the beekeeper whose control over them was so complete. In one of Plath's earliest stories, "Among the Bumblebees," she wrote of the thrill of watching the insects as they were caught and then released, made subject to the will of their captor:

> Her father caught a special kind of bumblebee that he recognized by its shape and held it in his closed fist, putting his hand to his ear. Alice liked to hear the angry, stifled buzzing of the bee, captured in the dark trap of her father's hand, but not stinging, not daring to sting. Then, with a laugh, her father would spread his fingers wide, and the bee would fly out, free, up into the air and away. (325)

In the final pages of *Ariel*, Plath returned to the trope of beekeeping, this time not as the reverent daughter of a beekeeping father, but as the beekeeper herself—one who empathized more with the part of the captive than of the captor. Between

October 4th and October 9th, 1962 Plath wrote a series of five poems known as the "bee poems," of which three were placed as the conclusion for the original manuscript of *Ariel* (Van Dyne 3; Plath, *A: R* 209, 189). In each of these poems, Plath's speaker plays the part of "sweet God" to the hive she has recently acquired, their survival dependent solely upon her benevolence ("The Arrival of the Bee Box" 85). Her subjects speak again and again of the heady rush of ordering, owning, and controlling the bees. Yet, over the course of the poems, the "furious Latin" of the swarm trapped within the box becomes too horrible for the bees to remain her captives ("The Arrival of the Bee Box" 84). At the height of the frenzy of the swarm, it becomes impossible to distinguish the speakers from the bees as both engage in a struggle for voice through which they might attain their freedom. And so at last, the bee poems and *Ariel* both end with release: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring" ("Wintering" 90).

If in her work Plath so frequently takes bees as her subject, she does so first and foremost to speak about paradoxical ways in which one might be bee and beekeeper simultaneously. Plath understands the individual, be it insect or human, as the intersection of the trivial and the grand, possessed of incredible generative powers in body and language, but dwarfed by the powers of the natural world and the infinite, Godless cosmos. For Plath, the subject thus constructed is set into perpetual struggle to assert itself against those powers which limit its autonomy and agency. Thus, even when Plath's subject in *Ariel* is not literally the power struggle between hive and keeper, Plath acts in her poems as the "secretary of bees" as she writes of subjects similarly subjected and the power they might possess to overcome that subjection

("The Bee Meeting" 81). Again and again in *Ariel*, Plath presents subjects bound to submit to the wills of others, to their own desire, and to death; they are tamped into the walls of their own houses in "The Detective," chased down one-way paths in "The Rabbit Catcher," burned whole as Jews by fathers, husbands, and Gods in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." But Plath understands her speakers to be submitted most powerfully to the terrific naming, making, and destroying power of words. For Plath, to speak at all is to offer up oneself to a system of language that operates on a conception of difference that wrenches one from unity with one's surrounding reality, and casts one into abjection, otherness, and isolation. In the poems of *Ariel*, as the subjections of Plath's lived reality are reassembled as textual ones, language not only represents but plays the part of repressive husband and the pursuing hunter.

Yet paradoxically, language also provides Plath with the possible capacity to catch, control, and perhaps even grant release from subjection itself as her father had once caught bumblebees. Plath's poetics pursues a restoration of the power of voice that would allow her subjects to literally speak for themselves, and in that process, possess the ability to create and control their own being. That the swarm of "The Arrival of the Bee Box" at last claims its freedom by verbalizing its rage is no coincidence; the poems of *Ariel* can be read as the "angry, stifled buzzing" of speakers caught in the grasps of others, their voiced fury their only means of attaining release, so that the poems become not merely accounts but potential means of escape. When read as a whole, the poems of *Ariel* act like the bees of the hive in "The Arrival of the Bee Box"—"Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!" (84).

Thus, in the desperate buzz of *Ariel*, Plath fights for a voice with which to speak about the struggle for voice, where voice might mean the ability of the subject to speak of, despite, and because of its subjection, in hope to at last "recover a self, a queen" ("Stings" 88). Yet what results this project yields Plath knows to be inherently vexed, for the project itself is a paradoxical search for an escape of subjectivity through a medium that insists upon subjection as requisite to speech. Ultimately in *Ariel*, that queen bee, the self of Plath's poems, is set the impossible task of speaking adequately with the voice of an insect of the most real dangers of living life submitted to the entangled forces of death, desire and language. If Plath as poet is a queen, most powerful in her vision and most productive in her work, she is still but a queen bee—futilely small, one whose outrage and despair must be screamed if it is to be heard above the drone, one who is not likely to live the season.

Across the many registers in which it is used, the concept of the "subject" is a tool of division used as a marker and a maker of difference. The designation of this difference then orders the relationship between the subject and that force to which it is subjected, whether this relationship be one of word to word, citizen to state, or analyst to patient. The result of this differentiation is both a division of bodies and delegation of powers; the "subject" is not only separated from that which subjects it, but subservient to it, one whose will must necessarily be secondary. To exist as a "subject," then, is first and foremost a sacrifice of individual power; the subject is bound to have actions performed up it, to serve a state before itself, and to have its most intimate thoughts interpreted and its psychic maladies identified by another.

In language, the subject can be thought of as the voice that fills language within a given discourse and that thereby makes and ascribes meaning to and through language. The relationship between language and the subject that occupies and deploys it is twofold. At the most basic level, the ability of language to hold meaning depends upon the work of its speaker to make the connection between the signified and the arbitrarily assigned word signifier that represents it. Without the subject who speaks (and then the reader or listener who receives that speech) to perform the mental work of attaching signifier to signified, language holds no meaning. But the concept of the subject transcends the idea merely of the speaker who uses language and thus makes it useful; rather, the subject is that speaker who has been subjected to language, and in that process has come to understand him or herself as a distinct, self-conscious "I" differentiated from the surrounding world. According to linguistics scholar Emile Benveniste, subjectivity and the state of subjection that result from it are the "fundamental property of language," not simply reflected in the mechanics of language, but invented by it (224).

In Benveniste's theory of linguistics, subjectivity means not merely "the feeling which everyone experiences of being himself [sic]…but…the psychic unity that transcends the totality of the actual experiences it assembles and that makes the permanence of consciousness" (224). Benveniste explains that "[c]onsciousness of self is only possible if it is experienced by contrast," and that this consciousness occurs when an "I," implicit or explicit, engages in discourse with a "you," again, implicit or explicit (224). It is through this identification of the self as an "I" and in the creation of an I-you, internal-external polarity that the subject arrives at that

"consciousness of self." Benveniste characterizes this "consciousness of self" as the unique marker of subjectivity. Rightfully, he then asks whether this recognition of difference that forms the root of subjectivity must occur for the subject necessarily and originally through language (225). When Benveniste observes that personal pronouns, those most obvious indicators of subjectivity, exist in every known language ancient or modern, he provides a sort of reverse proof for the basis of subjectivity in language; subjectivity is so essential to language that it seemingly cannot exist without it. But more substantially, Benveniste asserts that the very notion of a subject is only created in language (Silverman 43). He explains that there is "no concept 'I' that incorporates all the *I*'s that are uttered at every moment in the mouths of all speakers" (226). For Benveniste, "I" is a concept that exists solely within and because of language systems based on differentiation (226).

According to Benveniste, all meaning in language is made relative to that subject whose occupation of language allows it to refer to a time, to a perspective, and to an "I" through which it is focalized (Silverman 44). Implicit in this focalization is the omission of other perspectives and the differentiation of this experience from all others. Thus, as subjectivity and language simultaneously make each other possible, they inscribe the subject in a system of discourse dependent upon the recognition of difference, not merely of the difference between phonemes, but the potentially traumatic difference between "you" and "I." For Benveniste, the recognition of difference that underpins language transforms Lacan's "l'hommelette"—that undifferentiated, pre-verbal being who draws no boundaries

between himself and his surrounding reality—into the self-conscious subject.[1] For Benveniste, then, to speak at all is to be made subject to difference and to the resulting separation and loss as that subject is parsed from unity with the rest of its world.

Plath arrived at a startlingly similar idea of the process by which she understood herself to have been made a subject, and specifically made a subject to and through an awareness of difference. In her 1962 story "Ocean 1212-W," Plath identifies the moment when difference became apparent to her and the way in which this awareness led to what Plath scholar Steven Gould Axelrod calls a "compulsive orality" and need to write (*Wound* 5). Axelrod understands "Ocean 1212-W" as Plath's "memory of childhood," a description which leaves the story in some ambiguous category between memoir and fiction (*Wound* 5). The memories of "Ocean 1212-W" might better be called (re)collections, assemblages of incidents from her childhood brought together with fiction for the purpose of constructing a particular, useful story of the beginnings of what Steven Gould Axelrod describes as her sense of "contingency, marginality and loss" (*Wound* 5). Whether the incident of "Ocean 1212-W" really occurred as Plath describes it or whether, knowing Freud as she did, the story is a remarkable fabrication, the story demonstrates a powerful need in Plath to identify the "awful birthday of [her sense of] otherness" (24). Thus "Ocean 1212-W" acts as a sort of self-mythology; out of fragments of her memories, Plath constructs the myth of her origins, and specifically, of the origins of a sense of difference that directly leads to her obsession with words. Here, Plath chronicles the

[1] For my understanding of Lacan's "l'hommelette", I wish to acknowledge conversations I had with Prof. Christina Crosby in the context of my work on this project during the fall of 2007.

ways she has been made subject, and in that telling, becomes both master and affirmer of that subjection.

The very title "Ocean 1212-W"—the telephone number of the beach house where her blissful childhood is disrupted by the knowledge of difference—marks Plath's story an attempt to "re-call" and return to a time before differentiation. But unlike Benveniste, in "Ocean 1212-W" Plath does not understand herself as *originally* delivered into subjection through inscription into the "I" of language. Rather, even more elegant and simple is the source of difference that Plath here names—the arrival of a baby brother that pulls her from her place at "the center of a tender universe" (24). In the wake of the news, Plath recalls herself retreating to the beach that had been the symbol of her unity with her mother, aware now of "coldly and soberly, the *separateness* of everything" (24). She goes on: "I felt the wall of my skin: I am I. That stone is a stone. My beautiful fusion with the things of this world was over" (24). This devastating conception of "the *separateness* of everything" corresponds almost alarmingly with Benveniste's "consciousness of self… only possible…if experienced by contrast" that becomes the root of subjectivity (224). Thus, the incident of "Ocean 1212-W" becomes for Plath the foundation of a "mythology of estrangement" that casts her subjects thereafter in a struggle to return to unity, inclusion, and wholeness (Britzolakis 109).

But where Benveniste understands this traumatic creation of the subject and of difference as occurring within language, for Plath subjectivity became the impetus to use language itself (Axelrod, *Wound* 5). In the aftermath of her brother's arrival in "Ocean 1212-W", Plath discovers poetry as "a new way of being happy" (22). She

recalls being read by her mother a fantastical poem of mermaids that begins what Axelrod calls "Plath's lifelong feast of words," and implicitly, a lifelong fascination with the making and transforming power of language (*Wound* 7). When Plath writes in Ocean "1212-W" that "for a time [she] believed not in God… but in mermaids," she confesses the origins of her faith in poetry as the performer of magic and transformer of boundaries and possibilities (21-22). Most immediately, in "Ocean 1212-W" poetry returns Plath to the privileged place of her mother's lap during story time. But ultimately, poetry is for Plath the means to create her own mermaids, to defy separateness and difference much as it hybridizes fish and human in the fairy tales she was read that traumatic summer. On that "awful birthday of otherness," Plath understands herself as being drawn to language ultimately not simply as a repairer of division, but as a limitless means of creation and recreation ("Ocean 1212-W" 24). Thus Plath posits poetry as the greatest recourse against subjectivity, at the same time that poetry can inherently exist only through and because of it.

Ariel can be taken as Plath's final effort to "make mermaids"—to rewrite the possibilities of being by allowing the subject to create itself in language, that most powerful formulator of subjectivity. As part of this project in *Ariel*, Plath dissolves the boundaries of the subject to arrive at simultaneous recognition of the self in multiple bodies. She returns her speakers to a "beautiful fusion" with the things of this world as they shapeshift from form to form while maintaining a single voice. In *Ariel*'s "Tulips," an ailing patient becomes "aware of [her] heart" in the tulip on her bedside that "opens and closes/ Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me" (20). Here, Plath's speaker has so "let things slip" and fallen out of prescribed notions of

self as to see elements of herself as essential as organs in the objects of room around her (18). This speaker describes herself not like but *as* "a nun now, I have never been so pure," "swabbed clear" by the hospital to the extent that old "loving associations" and recognitions of the self are replaced by the possible recognition of the self beyond all previous boundaries (18).

Similarly, in *Ariel*'s "Stings," when Plath's beekeeper recognizes herself as a battered queen bee working to distinguish herself from the ranks of the "honey drudgers," poetry provides the means of a liberating shape shifting (86). When Plath's speaker announces, "It is almost over./ I am in control./ Here is my honey-machine," she refers to the speech act of the poem itself as agent of self-transformation (87). The "honey-machine" of poetry generates the making of a self from a slave into a queen—that is, into a self that might governed by will but her own. The result of this transformation is arrival into the form of one who can at last fly "over the engine that killed her---/ The mausoleum, the wax house" of the beehive that had trapped her as drone (88). Thus in "Stings," as release from suffering is attained through a death of one self that yields another, Plath suggests that the remaking of subjection might occur through rebirth. Thus in *Ariel*, Plath pursues the delivery of her subjects to that blissful state of babyhood described in "Ocean 1212-W," in which one is pure of all worldly impositions, and to voice is not necessarily to be made subject. In *Ariel*'s first poem, "Morning Song," Plath attempts to rebirth her subject by birthing a new relationship to language—if one that ultimately proves to replicate rather than undo subjectivity.

"Morning Song" offers tribute to new beginnings in the form of a waking infant and the break of a new day (*A: R* 5). More specifically, the poem (re)presents two moments in which new associations to language might be made. The first such opportunity is presented to the pre-verbal infant of the poem who has not been subjected to the strictures of language, so naked that even his cries are "bald." But the second such opportunity for a new relationship and control of words is the "song" of the poem itself, as sung by the mother and as penned by Plath. Here, Plath twins the generative projects of motherhood and poetic composition. The baby of the poem behaves much like the poem itself as it opens *Ariel* and begins a new grappling with the powers of language. By placing "Morning Song" as the first poem in the collection, Plath sets up the entire book as the elaboration of this morning song and a revelation of what can be made from such a new start.

The poem and the baby of "Morning Song" both begin with "love" and evidence an accompanying sense of hope in Plath and in the poem's subject for these new creations:

> Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
>
> The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
>
> Took its place among the elements. (*A: R* 5)

While the baby certainly has a pair of human parents—they greet his or her arrival in the next stanza—he or she is described as having been conceived and "set going" by love alone. Rather than being born of a relationship between disparate parties, the baby of "Morning Song" is created by a relationship of unity so complete and so positive to be known purely as "love." The baby thus literally embodies the sort of

euphoric wholeness Plath longs for in "Ocean 1212-W." The baby is equally pure to the relationship that produces it, defined over the course of the poem not merely as "new," but as "gold," "naked, "clean," and "clear." Throughout *Ariel*, babies will signal this sort of fresh beginning—existence as a "clean slate, with your own face on," with total control of the self ("You're" 77).

But tellingly, what particularly is described as pure about the baby of "Morning Song" is its voice. As the baby's "bald cry" delivers it to its "place among the elements," Plath recognizes voicing as the original marker of an individual self, as both the means by which the baby declares its existence to the world, and as what is most elemental to arrival into full personhood. Plath hopes to reclaim this sort of speech for the subjects of *Ariel*, and here specifically for a mother so awestruck by the possibility of such speech and such a life that she can only "stand round blankly as walls" in its presence:

> Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue
> In a drafty museum, your nakedness
> Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls. (*A: R* 5)

Here Plath literally sets on a pedestal this idea of bold baby nakedness in speech and in being as the gold standard for "unadulterated" self-possession and assertion. Where the baby enjoys the potent "nakedness" of the beginning of a creation, its parents are revealed in comparison to be statically "blank," empty canvases on museum walls that have failed to say anything through themselves. Instead, their baby is their most remarkable creation—a delivery to the possibility of the rebirth of their voice as it might "echo" that of their child.

But immediately, Plath posits this remaking of the subject through reproduction—and through the production of the poems which the baby might represent—as vexed. If the voices of the parents in the wake of the birth of the baby are amplified as "echoes," this accretion in power is essentially false, an imitation of another's voice rather than an own original voicing. Where in the first stanza Plath's speaker exists in total unity with her child, measuring her own time against its "fat gold watch," here space has begun to separate her from her baby; the baby is something remote, to be marveled at, now not merely untouched, but untouchable. The subject thus intuits that in some way the fresh start she has created is not entirely her own. What's more, Plath's speaker doubts her own motives for birthing the baby; she suggests that the baby was in fact perhaps born not only of love but of a selfish desire for self-preservation through an offspring:

> I'm no more your mother
>
> Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
>
> Effacement at the wind's hand. (*A:R* 5)

Given the devotion and tenderness of Plath's speaker to the baby in the rest of the poem, the worries of the speaker suggest more her own faltering sense of self than genuinely dubious motivations for motherhood. But in any case, the baby and implicitly the poem as the means of rebirth of the subject here have failed. Instead of renewing the powers of the subject, they only "mirror" her effacement by forces against which she has no agency.

Axelrod has argued that Plath recurrently uses the figure of the self reflected in the mirror as a representation of the potential means of accessing a "deep self"

through the doubling of reality in poetry (qtd. in “Mirror” 286). But in “Morning Song,” Plath’s mirror only offers a negative self-reflection that evidences the failure of external change to create internal ones (Axelrod, “Mirror” 286). If the poem and baby here function as mirrors, they both reveal the “slow/Effacement” of their mothers—a return to blankness that constitutes a death rather than a rebirth. Ideally, the baby and the poem as baby offer Plath the possibility of “distilling” herself and her speaker into a new form, a new subjectivity; here, they only reflect her subjectivity to death as a mortal self who cannot live in poetry, and as a subject of language who cannot write of an end to subjectivity without participating in that oppressive system.

Yet more than the mother of this stanza implies that her baby and the promise of “fat gold” babyhood have somehow become inaccessible to her, she suggests the possibility that they never were accessible to begin with, that her creation of a new beginning in reproduction was in fact always an illusion. In fact, the “baby” of the poem is itself an illusion, a trick played with pronouns that can only speak in relation to one another. Never once in the poem does Plath speak directly of a baby, who is known only as a genderless, bodiless “you” to the “I” of the subject identified as a mother. Meaning, it seems, can only be made relationally; the very baby, the very poem, that embodies the possibility that this could be otherwise ceases to exist. The rebirth “Morning Song” was meant to deliver to its subject and for Plath is ultimately no more than a “trick done with mirrors” (Axelrod, “Mirror” 292). As the sun at last rises in the poem and new life stirs, the baby, not the mother, is revealed as the morning song’s true singer

And now you try

Your handful of notes;

The clear vowels rise like balloons. (*A:R* 5)

If the poem ends with tenderness for the baby so miraculously fresh in the world, whose cries "rise" rather than "echo," it does so out of Plath and the subject's profound longing for a perfect babyhood which they understand in opposition to their own position of subjection. As the baby's vowels float on, the subject lingers lines back weighed down "cow-heavy" with the burden this motherhood (*A: R* 5). Here, Plath's subject is bound, out of both love and hope, to the mothering of new voices, to generation of "morning songs," at the same time she knows "clear vowels," like balloons, belong only to babyhood—a babyhood Plath's speaker (re)produces but cannot regain.

If "Morning Song" is a paean for lost babyhood, the poems that follow in *Ariel* reveal Plath's conception of the subjections of adulthood into which all individuals are born(e). As the rest of the poems of *Ariel* play out Plath's paradoxical conception of language as both obstacle to complete self expression and the fundamental means of self-assertion, they speak also more generally of subjections intrinsic to human life. Already, the chief among these subjections surface in "Morning Song" as the signs of what that "fat gold watch" of baby time might be seen as counting towards—the "effacement" of a death so complete that no portion of an individual's meaning survives it. But for Plath, this erasure of the self through submission to the force of another occurs not only in death, but in desire. For Plath, as sexual and emotional need binds one "I" to the will of another, one dangerously,

even fatally, comes to helplessly desire subjection itself. Nowhere does Plath speak so powerfully of the terrible entwining of death and desire as in "The Rabbit Catcher." Here, Plath posits the impossibility of fulfilling desire without submitting to individual powerlessness, if not outright destruction.

The title of "The Rabbit Catcher" immediately suggests that the poem addresses a struggle to capture and control a body, an attempt by one party to entrap another (*A:R* 7-8). The name of this poem, however, refuses to say what precisely is at stake in this "catching," so that from its start the "rabbit catcher" avoids being directly implicated as a killer or even a hunter. But the first lines of the poem reveal that it describes not merely a story of domestication, but of brutalization—and of a brutalization that begins long before the rabbit catcher even enters the scene:

> It was a place of force---
>
> The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
>
> Tearing off my voice, and the sea
>
> Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
>
> Unreeling in it, spreading like oil. (*A: R* 7)

"The Rabbit Catcher" thus begins with a nature scene that is also a crime scene, and in which nature is the first violator of the subject. Plath critic Jacqueline Rose observes that description of the setting as a "place of force" might refer as much to the forces of nature that here assault the subject as to the violation that eventually occurs in this location at the hands of the rabbit catcher (Rose 136). Long before she is rendered mute by human hands in the poem, the subject is "blinded," "gagged" and silenced by nature; her subjection, it seems, is in some way terrifyingly natural, if no

less appalling. Plath's natural world is here at best merciless and murderous, and at worst prepares the speaker for a subjection that eventually is revealed to take the form of rape. Perhaps even more terrifyingly, it is the subject's own hair that gags her. Plath thus already implies the speaker's simultaneous helplessness and complicity with her subjection, as her body is raised mutinously against her by those forces that have already killed the dead, now left to "unreel" in the dark ocean. Death, then, is suggested as the only release, the only "unreeling," from subjection to these forces—if a "release" more haunting than liberating.

In the next stanza, as the subject performs her own final rites, the desire for death becomes sensual, then sexual. Plath tells that "the plant that is deadly also contains its own blessing or cure," and the hunger for it in the context of the stanza assumes a sexual nature compounded by the description of its consumption as at once a "great beauty" and a "torture" (Rose 137). As death itself becomes an object of desire, desire becomes dangerous, treacherous, and lethal:

> I tasted the malignity of the gorse,
>
> Its black spikes,
>
> The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers.
>
> They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
>
> And were extravagant, like torture. (*A: R* 7)

The entrapment of "The Rabbit Catcher" thus begins not only with the assault of the natural world that strips the subject of agency, but with the positing of desire as a perverse hunger for the most extreme sort of subjection. With terrible definitiveness,

Plath's subject realizes she has been caught before the pursuit of the hunter even begins:

> There was only one place to get to.
>
> Simmering, perfumed,
>
> The paths narrowed into the hollow.
>
> And the snares almost effaced themselves---
>
> Zeroes, shutting on nothing,
>
>
> Set close, like birth pangs. (*A: R* 7)

Even here, Plath does not speak directly of the subject's pursuer; he materializes just twice as "him" two stanzas later. Instead, the poem itself becomes the only evidence of the speaker's entrapment, so that language stands in some ambiguous category between performing and replicating the "catching" of the subject.

But ultimately, the language of the poem suggests not only the most abstract sort of power struggle between a subject and the forces of her story, but between embodied beings for whom the stakes of being "caught" are equally and entirely real. Rose argues that Plath's description of the passageway taken by the subject "can only be described as a symbolic geography of (the female) sex" (138). As the subject leads its pursuer here, the "only place to get to," she brings herself to the rabbit catcher's waiting traps. In this instant, Plath names death and sex become one and the same. In "Morning Song" sex leads to at least a potential birth; here, it leads only to a contraction of those "zeroes" that might be read as the birth canal that produces

"nothing." Here sex replicates and reminds the speaker of her "effacement" without bringing her any closer to a means to remedy it.

In the moment in which the subject is caught, the "absence of shrieks" that reveals not only the failure to produce a baby who might cry out as in "Morning Song," but the terrible and terrifying voicelessness of the subject that comes with what is effectively her rape. The speaker is trapped in silence, "the glassy light…a clear wall,/ The thickets quiet," the inability to speak is posited as the ultimate marker of subjection. The poem and rabbit catcher both attempt to kill the subject through strangulation, that most literal cutting off of voice:

> I felt a still busyness, an intent.
>
> I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
>
> Ringing the white china.
>
> How they awaited him, those little deaths!
>
> They waited like sweethearts. They excited him. (*A: R* 7)

Plath implies that for both the rabbit catcher and language, the constriction of the voice of the subject serves as a source of perverse, supreme pleasure; they are "excited" by "those little deaths!" both sexual and literal that wait for "like sweethearts" in their snares. Since these snares are plural, the subject of "The Rabbit Catcher," then, is not alone in her rape—she is but one of a series of female targets of a system of victimization that works on much the same principles as language.

But even as Plath names the rabbit catcher as a most monstrous aggressor, the ultimate cause of her subject's death, she understands that the ensnarement of that subject begins in the inescapable nature of her desire; to be bound to this hunter by

desire is to be staked as his prey. With its "Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring," the snare is natural, psychological, inevitable—and fatal:

> And we, too, had a relationship---
>
> Tight wires between us,
>
> Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
>
> Sliding shut on some quick thing,
>
> The constriction killing me also. (*A: R* 7-8)

The cataclysmic intertwining of subjectivity to death and to desire—for sex, for love, and for "being caught"—that "The Rabbit Catcher" identifies wends its way through the rest of *Ariel*, culminating in the famous lines of "Daddy," "Every woman adores a Fascist,/The boot in the face, the brute/ Brute heart of a brute like you" (75). But perhaps even more critically if more subtly, in "The Rabbit Catcher" Plath powerfully names the "tearing off of voice" and a relationship that produces a silence and silencing of the speaker as the ultimate violation of the subject, the moment in which the subject becomes truly powerless to undo her own subjection. As in "Morning Song," in "The Rabbit Catcher" Plath names the possession of voice as the fundamental means of self-determination and of resistance to and release from subjection.

The possibility of this release is made literal in the bee poems that culminate *Ariel* and particularly in "The Arrival of the Bee Box" (*A:R* 84-85). In "The Arrival of the Bee Box," the third to last poem of *Ariel*, Plath's subject at last assumes the role of the beekeeper, the "sweet God" to a hive of bees that has been delivered to her at her request (84-85). If Plath's subjects in the other poems of *Ariel* are trapped,

strangled, and silenced by others, here her speaker assumes complete control of others' fates. Yet from the first stanzas, the subject's allegiance to her own dictatorship is undermined by the "appalling" thought of those made her subjects:

> I ordered this, this clean wood box
>
> Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift
>
> I would say it was the coffin of a midget
>
> Or a square baby
>
> Were there not such a din in it.
>
>
> The box is locked, it is dangerous.
>
> I have to live with it overnight
>
> And I can't keep away from it.
>
> There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.
>
> There is only a little grid, no exit. (*A: R* 84)

When Plath's subject describes the bee box as " the coffin of a midget/ Or a square baby," she suggests her immediate understanding of it as a prison that mangles the beings confined within it. If this baby accrues the symbolic resonances of the babies of the earlier poem, here Plath suggests that the possibility of rebirth through the forms of poetry would seem to be dead—"[w]ere there not such a din" in its coffin. Despite their abuse and the seeming hopelessness of their situation, these subjects, like those of the other poems of *Ariel*, persist in asserting themselves desperately, feverishly, and madly through voice. If the bees have been delivered in a coffin, in the strictures of language, they have also refused to die. They now terrifyingly

threaten mutiny and escape, and do so vocally, in “unintelligible syllables” and “furious Latin” that keep Plath’s anxious speaker fixated on their box.

When Plath’s subject claims that she is “not a Caesar,” superficially she seems to say she cannot comprehend the meaning of the bees’ drone (84). But of course, she has already revealed that she understands their message all too well. In the other poems of *Ariel*, Plath’s subjects have played the part of the bees; now, this subject feels the anger of the bees to be entirely righteous, parallel to that of slaves taken to the Americas alluded to with “the swarmy feeling of African hands/ Minute and shrunk for export” (84). The bees’ subjection amounts to nothing short of the most nefarious sort of slavery—and would justify the most extreme means that might abolish it. If Plath’s speaker fears to let the bees out, she feels so because she knows her final question of the poem to be rhetorical: “So why should they turn on me?” (85). Plath’s subject dreads the release of the bees only because she knows the power of her own outrage and the strength of those “unintelligible syllables” that together make up a “Roman mob”—because that angry clambering has been her own.
And so with their terrible voicing, the bees earn their liberation; at the end of the poem, Plath’s speaker pledges that she will “set them free” (85).

But the freedom of the last lines of “The Arrival of the Bee Box” is no longer the baby-gold start of a rebirth; it is instead a liberation that may come at the most extreme cost. If a life of subjection has been a life in a coffin, a life of living death, submission to death itself promises release at last. When Plath declares at last that “[t]he box is only temporary” she demands a liberation for the bees, for her subject, and for herself, even if it must such rebirth can only be achieved through complete

removal of the self from all those forces that aggress against self-determination. While the cost of such freedom is extreme, Plath definitively deems it possible. In the last line of the poem, she testifies that ultimately death and the subjections that amount to it are only fleeting states for her subjects: “The box is only temporary.” (85). If language has been Plath’s “box,” the poems of *Ariel* represent her chance to remake its divisions and closures, and in that remaking, set free the bees at last.

Chapter 2
"The Black Amnesias of Heaven":
The God-Obsessed Atheist and the Subject of Confession

During the last fall and winter of her life, Plath responded to a series of letters from Father Michael C.J. Carey, an aspiring poet, ardent Plath fan, and Catholic priest living at Assumption College in Massachusetts. When not offering advice on the amateur poems which he had sent to her, Plath's correspondence with Father Carey turned to the subject of religion. When evidently asked whether or not she believed in God, Plath admitted to being "ironically, an atheist" who wrote "God-obsessed" poems (Letter to Fr. Carey, 21 Nov. 1962). In her letters, Plath cheerfully describes her disbelief by explaining that her poems "[f]ull of Marys, Christs and nuns" treated on a theology that "fascinated" rather than convinced her (Letter to Fr. Carey, 21 Nov. 1962). Yet despite her stated skepticism about religion and the possibility of a divine power, Plath closes at least three letters out of her brief correspondence with the father with a request for prayers on her behalf. In each letter, Plath makes this entreaty entirely aware of the contradiction intrinsic in an atheist seeking God's blessing. Plath readily concedes to desiring that there might indeed be a god that had the faith in her that she did not have in him, and that there might be some power beyond her own to which to appeal for aid, particularly during this most trying period of her life. In a combined show of desperation for extraordinary means and of hope that her own skepticism might be unfounded, Plath again and again asks Father Carey to "[d]o say God bless. I need it, God knows!" (Letter to Fr. Carey, 21 Nov. 1962).

If Plath's requests for blessings are vexed by her own disbelief, similarly vexed is her relationship to confession. The term "confession," of course, is typically

used in regards to Plath not in its religious sense, but rather in reference to the "confessional" literary genre spoken of as being developed in the late 1950s and 1960s. The confessional genre is generally characterized—with varying degrees of favor—by some combination of the attributes of directness of discourse, revelation of personal trauma for cathartic or socially subversive purposes, and the necessary origins of the poem's subject matter in biography ("Confessional Poetry" 49-49; Phillips 1-17). But to apply this definition to Plath's work is to misapprehend her project and the subjects of her poems. If Plath confesses, it is not in this conventional self-helping sense, for Plath's poems draw selectively at most from biography for the purposes of creating the subject anew, offer ambiguities rather than certainties, and aggravate rather than assuage wounds. Confession is for Plath an act of self-making in which the subjects of her poems act not only as the subjected seeking a rebirth, as we have seen in Chapter 1, but make themselves as the subjects of poesis.

Plath confesses first in the sense that Augustine did, in which confession is an examination of the location of God within the individual and the relationship between the mortal and the divine. As she performs this confession, Plath testifies to her conception of the individual's smallness before a vast and indifferent universe and the ambiguous God that might rule over it. In this confession, she asserts the inextricability of the self and knowledge of the self from the context of the sublime. But where Augustine confesses a faith in God, Plath confesses a faith in poetry and the self-making of poesis. For Plath, poetry possesses the power to make a new, literal reality that undoes the subjections of her lived one, chief among these that

subjection to language and the traumatic conception of difference upon which it operates.

Yet even this confession of faith is vexed. Plath's terror of the possibility of eternal subjection to those "illegitimate" powers was only increased by her fear that her artistry and her will would not suffice to overcome them (Axelrod, "Mirror" 286-301). If Plath doubts God, she also doubts her own abilities to play God's part as creator. But more greatly, as in "Morning Song" and "The Rabbit Catcher," Plath's poems evidence a fear that her attempt to escape the subjection of language through language—to use the terms that subject her to end her subjection—is fundamentally impossible, and that the literal realities of her poems might replicate rather than undo subjection to death, difference, and language. Thus ultimately, Plath "confesses" in a way that draws upon confession in Augustine's sense of it as investigation of the relationship between God and the self, and perhaps in an entirely new sense of a confession of faith in poetry and its power as a self-making, revelatory act—but one underpinned by profound doubts about whether she or language is master over the other.

From its earliest conception, the idea of the literary "confessional mode" has proven to have problematic consequences for the poetry it is taken to describe. Literary critic M. L. Rosenthal made one of the first uses of the term when he applied it to Robert Lowell's book *Life Studies*; shortly thereafter, Rosenthal admitted that he regretted using the term, writing, "Whoever invented it, it was a term both helpful and too limited, and very possibly the conception of a confessional school has by now

done a certain amount of damage" (qtd. in Phillips 1). An examination of literary theory's working definition of "confession" reveals why any damage done by the term would come to be done particularly to Plath. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms* offers the following definition (italics mine):

> Confessional poetry: an *autobiographical* mode of verse that reveals the poet's *personal problems* with *unusual frankness*. The term is usually applied to certain poets of the United States from the late 1950s to the late 1960s, notably Robert Lowell, whose [works] deal with his divorce and mental breakdowns… Other important examples of confessional poetry are… *Sylvia Plath's poems on suicide in* Ariel (1965). The term is sometimes used more loosely to refer to any personal or autobiographical poetry, but its distinctive sense depends on the *candid* examination of what at the time of writing were virtually *unmentionable kinds of private distress*… ("Confessional Poetry" 48-49).

The definition ends with a comment on these poets' high suicide rates which then "encouraged in the reading public a romantic confusion between poetic excellence and inner torment"—and if a poet has ever been posthumously romanticized, that poet of course is Plath ("Confessional Poetry" 49).

The most immediately troubling of element of conventional definitions of confessional poetry such as this as they are applied to Plath's work is the implication that this poetry is *simply* autobiographical, that the subjects of Plath's poems are unadulterated self-representations who refer directly in their speech to the incidences of her non-textual life. Rose has identified this conception of Plath's work as the

means by which generations of Plath scholarship have used the "evidence" of Plath's poems for the dubious projects of either "pathologising" Plath or pathologising the culture that created the need for such confession (3). Yet the notion of Plath's poems as in some way directly autobiographical foundational to both of these critical projects is one Plath actively fought to avoid. When asked to talk about her work, Plath religiously referred to the subjects of her poems as "speakers," thus distancing herself from the subjects of even the poems which most obviously might have referred to the events of her lived life ("Notes for *Ariel: New Poems*").

One might argue as Plath's daughter does that Plath did not refer to herself as her poems' subject because simply "she did not need to point it out" (Hughes xv). Indeed, at times the correspondences between the events in Plath's poetry and those of her biography are striking; both undeniably share a cast of haunting fathers, treacherous lovers, and "I"s who judge themselves with severity and anxiety. But in fact the project of delineating the "real" from "fiction" in her work is not merely undesirable or counterproductive but impossible, for Plath conceived of no such distinction. If Plath can be said to have pursue a project of "making mermaids," perhaps her greatest act of hybridization is that of the textual and the living self. Just as Plath once believed religiously in the fantasy of mermaids, she believed that division itself was a fantasy to be paradoxically undone through language. As Axelrod has so rightly observed, when Plath in her poems blurs the distinction between "empirical and textual 'I,'" "between self and text, she [does] so not in an effort to reproduce the 'literal truth'" but because her project is "*inherently figurative*" (*Wound* 8). When Plath writes in her journal, "I am what I am, and have

written," she speaks most literally of her conception of the real and powerful making possible through poetry; writing for Plath was not simply a means of replicating a reality, but of creating it (qtd. in Axelrod, "Mirror" 291). Thus when Plath refers to the "speakers" of her poems, she draws attention not so much to the issue of the poems as possible representations of her "reality," but the reality of subjects bound by and to language. Plath's emphasis on the idea of "speakers" only recapitulates what her poems already demonstrate—that in *Ariel*, Plath did not seek to relate or "re-create" reality as it was, but create it anew.

Yet even when Plath's "confession" avoids being reduced in criticism to florid journal entry, her work at times has alternately been dangerously cast as representing individual experience solely as symptomatic evidence of the ailments of entire society. Paradoxically, instead of being fundamentally concerned with individuality, in such interpretations Plath's outcry is said to be raised generically at that critical favorite of repressive sources—the social demand for homogeneity in America and Britain during the1950s (Altieri 27). This conception of Plath's "confession" is problematized by Foucault's understanding of the repression which is supposed to have produced the need for such subversive speech. In his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that modern scientific and psychoanalytic discourse about sex has evolved to replace the sexually-centered speech of Christian confession. But if Foucault is correct that rather than repressing speech about sex, Western society has spoken more and more about sex by speaking of the invented idea of its sexual repressiveness, Plath is no genuine transgressor at all but one complicit with a system where "speaking about [sex] has the appearance of a deliberate transgression…

something that smacks of revolt, of promised freedom" (Foucault 6-8). In fact, Plath's relationship to repression—if she is repressed at all—is more complicated than a simple allegiance to victimhood. Rather, Plath's subjects *simultaneously* occupy the parts the observer and the observed, the one who is judged and the one who does the judging, subject and that which subjects, such that there is no clear way to delineate victimizer and victim for Plath.

Ultimately, Plath's poems play out these dual roles of their subjects through confession, not as the term has been understood in literary criticism, but partially as it was understood by Augustine. While at Cambridge, Plath wrote at least one essay on Augustine (Axelrod, *Wound* 35). The annotations in her copy of *Confessions* suggest a particular interest in Augustine's understanding of the location of the self relative to the divine, evil as a privation of good, and especially the idea of rebirth through death (Annotation in *Confessions*). Like Augustine, Plath's poems take the subject as their subject through confession and confess as they perform a reckoning between an individual subject and the forces of the universe that threaten to trivialize her.

In order to understand how Augustine's confession might provide a model for how to read Plath's, it is first necessary to understand why, how, and to whom Augustine confesses. Tellingly, Augustine's *Confessions* opens not with a mention of "I" but with reference to the divine "You" through which that "I" must be understood (3). This gesture reveals that Augustine's confession is first and foremost a confession of faith, the story of a life lived in praise of and search for connection to

the divine.[2] Accordingly, Augustine's "confession" begins not with a revelation of Christian misdeed, but with the two questions about his relationship to God which his subsequent autobiography then traces the lifelong attempt to answer. The first of these questions is:

> How shall I call upon my God, my God and Lord? Surely when I call on him, I am calling on him to come into me…Where may he come to me? Lord my God, is there any room in me which can contain you? (3).

Secondly, as a product of this inquiry, Augustine asks the following string of questions, the first of which Plath underlined in her copy of *Confessions*:

> Who then are you, my God?... Most high, utterly good, utterly powerful, most omnipotent,… deeply hidden yet most intimately present,…stable and incomprehensible, immutable and yet changing all things, never new, never old, making everything new…(4-5).

Confessions then chronicles Augustine's self-professed lifetime of sin. Augustine characterizes these sins as a series of false attempts to locate God in the physical world around him. Augustine's ultimate conversion occurs literally as he "turns inward" to locate God in that last possible recess of memory.[3] Because Augustine intuits the presence of God but cannot locate him in his external reality, he identifies in memory the only traces of God accessible to him, and thus begins "climbing up through my mind towards you who are constant above me" (194). Ultimately, Augustine confesses not merely to express faith or sinfulness, but to engage in the

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[2] I wish here to acknowledge the influence Prof. Mary-Jane Rubenstein's lectures on Augustine's *Confessions* have had on my understanding of Augustine's project. These lectures were part of her Modern Christian Thought class conducted at Wesleyan University in the fall of 2006.
[3] Again, I here wish to credit Prof. Rubenstein for her formulation of Augustine's "conversion."

discourse by which his relationship to God and the significance of his life as created by that relationship can be comprehended. If Augustine's modes of confession provide a generic model by which Plath's "confessions" might be understood, Plath's poems can be read as making a similar, reverent approach towards that which is "constant above"—but as Plath reveals in "The Night Dances," all that her subjects find above is the cosmos.

Where Augustine's story is structured around a turn towards God, the movement of "The Night Dances" is performed by the motions of heavenly and human bodies across space (*A:R* 29-30). The structure of Plath's poem replicates Augustine's idea of two related parts of cosmically different scales, each of whose full import can nevertheless only be realized in a comprehension of the other. For Plath, these two intertwined elements are the smallness of a human life on earth, and the infinite, absolute heavens above and whatever it is that they might hold. Meaning in the poem accordingly is made through pairings and scale shifts, and accrues at the level of the fragmentary gestures of the couplets, then the course of movement of the two poem sections, and finally, as the two halves move relative to each other. Plath focuses on human and then celestial bodies first and second halves of the poem respectively, so that the two sorts of bodies are set in motion as dancing partners responding to the movements of the other. The motions of the first half of the poem—falling into grass, dancing across the earth, breathing and smelling of grass—and the mortals that perform them are distinctly earth-bound rather than celestial:

> A smile fell in the grass.
>
> Irretrievable!

And how will your night dances

Lose themselves. In mathematics?

Such pure leaps and spirals---

Surely they travel

The world forever, I shall not entirely

Sit emptied of beauties, the gift

Of your small breath, the drenched grass

Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies.

Their flesh bears no relation.

Cold folds of ego, the calla,

And the tiger, embellishing itself---

Spots, and a spread of hot petals. (*A: R* 29)

As with Augustine's, Plath's piece begins with a statement of human smallness—the anonymous human fragment of the "smile," in the measureless expanse of the grass. But here there is no trace of a divine "You" in which to understand the self in relationship. For Plath, the only apparent relationship around which to begin to make meaning is the strange, beautiful one between a transitory

human life and the natural world which bears only the vaguest and most fleeting evidence of that presence. In Plath's confession, grass assumes the place of Augustine's omnipotent God, an eternally present backdrop before which human dramas unfold and dissipate.

The first half of the poem focuses on human gestures that threaten to get similarly "lost"—not only the smile "irretrievable" in the grass, but also the "pure leaps and spirals" of the "night dances," the small breath, and "[s]mell of your sleeps" of which the speaker fears to be emptied. In the case of the smile, the loss has occurred definitely—the "fall" is past tense, and the smile cannot be retrieved. But a profound difference exists between the smile and the other human gestures. The abandoned "smile" cannot bear witness to a particular human life because it carries no traces of its former ownership; for the poem's speaker, the identity of the person who dropped the smile is as "irretrievable" as the smile itself. The smile is in fact "*a* smile," unattached to any human referent who might be able to remember what happened on the grass; the smile says that a moment of brief happiness once existed, but it is meaningless when detached from a person. By counterexample, the smile suggests that for this subject, a being's meaning is made not only in relation to an omnipotent God or universe, but deeply, powerfully, if fleetingly, in relationship to other people.

The examples to this counterexample play out in the following six couplets, in which the poem's gestures transpire between "you" and "I." Linguistic theory explains that at the same time the distinction between "I" and "you" creates a polarity between two bodies, it insists that this polarity can be reversed—"you" can become

"I", and vice versa (Benveniste 225). It is through this mutual habitation of experience that the human gestures that in total compose a life might hope to be retrieved; the subject that speaks "I" holds the memory of the most fragile, passing movements that testify to "your" life. Both "you" and "I" are dwarfed by where they stand—the omnipresent grass, the natural time it represents, and a world so vast and eternal that a dance might travel forever across its surface. The "I" of the poem knows all too well its insubstantiality; the dances may "travel/ The world forever" but the subsequent enjambment of "I shall not entirely" suggests otherwise of the subject. But where the smile was rendered meaningless when its owner went missing, here, such beauties will not be "entirely" lost as they are witnessed and contained in the memory of the subject who speaks "I." "I" can hold onto the smallest breath, the faintest smell of "you"—and will not drop it until her own body is lost beneath the grass of the grave.

As "you" and "I" stand witness to each other's smallness in the "drenched grass," they render the gestures that transpire between them the true stuff of life. The relationship between "you" and "I" is more than the means by which some fragment of "you" might endure; it is also what fills and fulfills the subject, providing her with "beauties" beyond mathematics, "flesh" whose warmth surpasses any even of nature at its most magisterial, most "embellished." Since Plath knows human loss to definite—"And how will your night dances/Lose themselves." is a statement, not a question—her first couplet becomes a directive to wildness, the imperative to choose "how" that transitory, bodily life will be spent. For Plath's subject, the correct outlet for sensuous human impulse is not the cold, static gestures of "mathematics" but the

living “leaps and spirals” of life in movement. Like Augustine, Plath’s subject confesses to the beauty of existence in a smallness that “fills” the subject’s life until she is subsumed, her constructed self erased by reintegration with the larger narrative of the universe’s time.

The second half of the poem traces this dance of erasure, the course of the construction of a human life being undone before the eternal universe. An additional line of space between the stanzas of the two halves creates the space of the distance between the two scales of motion, the swath of sky between “your night dances” across the earth at the beginning of the poem and the heavens traversed by the comets at its end. The second half begins:

> The comets
> Have such a space to cross,
>
> Such coldness, forgetfulness
> So your gestures flake off---
>
> Warm and human, then their pink light
> Bleeding and peeling
>
> Through the black amnesias of heaven. (*A: R* 29-30)

Plath offers no immediate transition between the human motions of the poem’s first half, and the celestial arc of the second. Instead, the connection is revealed as the progress of the comets leads to the “so” that “flakes off” the gestures that accrued in the first half of the poem; the remote movement of the comets, the churnings of the cosmos, is what will undo the human lives below it. The process is splendid but painful, one of “bleeding” that turns the bodies into their own raw comets. As they

burn in the night sky, they are rendered a source of beauty both eternal and anonymous, as with the smile in the grass. Before the scale and power of the universe, "your" substance is so immaterial that it effortlessly, elegantly "flakes" away to be forgotten. Thus, Plath's subject and Augustine both share in their confession of wonderment in what Augustine calls the "[m]ost high, utterly good, utterly powerful" forces of God and the sublime natural world, and find beauty in their powerless before both (4).

But where Augustine is connected to God through memory, Plath's heavens offer only "black amnesias" with no trace of God at all. The question of the conclusion of the poem has no one besides these black amnesias to direct itself to:

> Why am I given
>
> These lamps, these planets
> Falling like blessings, like flakes
>
> Six-sided, white
> On my eyes, my lips, my hair
>
> Touching and melting.
> Nowhere. (*A: R* 30)

In this Godless universe, these "flakes"—the beauty of that which cannot endure—are the "blessings" equally resplendent to anything Augustine finds in God. Here, the subject reveals her "gifts" to be both the "lamp" of that fleeting human-life-turned-comet, and the beauty of a universe where it might be such. But it is a gift of which she, a "nowhere" before the ultimate "black amnesias," feels herself too trivial to deserve. Since the supposed question of "why" Plath's subject is given the world

before here ends with a period, Plath renders personal nothingness definite, and makes God a question that cannot be answered.

But if Augustine's confession provides a model upon which to read Plath's, her confessed doubts about her worthiness also reveal her awe for those transitory, sensuous "beauties" of embodied life and the universe that affords them. And so, Plath presents a vision of a universe that renders the speaker as small and ephemeral, and in that smallness and ephemerality ascribes her with beauty and a place first in the constellations of human relations, and finally within the black amnesias. The final "nowhere" of the poem expresses a combination of melancholy and gratitude. Plath portrays earthly pursuits as transitory and feeble when viewed next to the "black amnesias of heaven" so unaffected by them. Yet, humanity's frivolous pursuit of happiness is not ridiculed, but embraced; life is not meant for "mathematics," but for giddy submission to wild "night dances." Though the poem's subject's "gestures flake off" and get lost within the depths of space and time, the poem's subject and the universe seem to have a mutual respect for one another. All the universe asks in return for one's right to live within it is not deep contemplation or understanding, but a sense of wonderment.

"The Night Dances," then, ultimately becomes a confession of the Augustinian power relations that make the subject and ascribe meaning to its life. The entire poem is a response to the issue of subjection to the forces that exceed those of the individual. Here this subjection, if fatal, also is beautiful, natural, and seemingly inescapable—the question is not if the person fallen to fragments in the grass can be remade, but rather *how* to "lose" oneself to the "black amnesias."

Plath's speaker holds the power to act within her subjection and to shape it, at least until she too "falls;" she is never entirely subject, and even acts as subjector as she selects and holds onto "your" fragments, and becomes the all-absorbing and making universe to that "you." And of, course the poem's subject possesses what for Plath is the ultimate power—the power to speak, and subject the universe to her gaze. According to critic Charles Altieri, Plath's speakers' *simultaneous* occupancy of these dual roles is precisely the source of her poem's incredible, threatening power.

Altieri's argument begins by establishing the assumption that the culture of America 1950s demanded homogeneity within social communities at the expense of individuality (27). For society at large, the cultural response to individual difference was to explain and then "cure" this difference either through professionally-administered therapy or self-help manuals. Ironically, the individual, "desperate for terms that [would] allow a sense of individuality and a rhetoric of control" then internalized therapeutic discourses that "have just the opposite effect" and once again attempted to "normalize" the individual (Altieri 28). But for the 1950s poet, the response to this demand for homogeneity was resistance through the assertion of individuality made in writing of "contingent personal situations" (Altieri 27). Yet according to Altieri, the "lesser" confessional poets—namely for him Lowell, Sexton, and Snodgrass—never fully escape from normalizing therapies even as they make their project the subjective individual; they depend on the "priestly authority" of the poet allied with normative society to draw comparisons that explain the position of the subjective individual (31). Altieri gives at length an example of the "failure" of these other poets as he describes the "figural mode of self-objectification" Lowell

uses in *Life Studies*, and particularly in one poem in which Lowell compares himself to a skunk; Altieri's implication is that if Plath had written the poem, her subject would have shape-shifted through metaphor into the skunk itself (30-31).

Indeed, throughout her poems, Plath's use of metaphor, myth, and the unstable occupancy of pronouns renders her subjects simultaneously the observer and the observed, the judge and the judged, the hearer of confessions and the confessing. In poems like "Tulips," "Elm," and "Ariel," Plath's subjects shapeshift in a refusal to separate observer and observed—a hospital patient's heart and her get-well flowers open and close in synchronicity, becoming each other; trees speak through the owls that inhabit its branches; a rider "grows one" with the horse she rides (*A: R* 20, 28, 33). Plath's refusal to separate her subject from that which subjects creates a disruption of hierarchy of power based who judges and who is judged, both within the poem and in its interpretation. Plath's confession is always ambiguous, always incomplete, so that Plath creates in her poems what Rose has described as a "crisis of address" that leaves Plath's readers asking who occupies the poems' pronouns, why this is information is being withheld, and to whom are Plath's subjects speaking that they withhold this information (12). The inability to definitively answer these questions confounds the possibility that Plath confesses to her readers. Plath offers no stable point of entrance into her poems in her external reality. Not only is there no subject who can simply be identified as the same as (or as different from) the author, there is also no way to delineate the boundaries between this subject and world that surrounds and subjects her. And as the boundaries between Plath's textual and biographical "I," between the subject and the reality offered through and inseparable

from her subjective gaze break down, so too does the idea of Plath's confession as an invitation for judgment.

As a result, it can be said that the subjects of Plath's poems do not "self-help" through the "redeeming honesty" or opportunity for diagnosis and treatment that confession might afford" (Rose 67). Instead, Plath's subjects "self-make" as they create a new literal reality through poesis in which it may be possible for these subjects to undo the subjections Plath as human herself cannot escape. What has been called, with all that it implies about the (gendered) power of the subject, the "striptease" of Plath's confession—a "staged self-exposure" in a "theatre of subjectivity"—can also be taken as an attempt to return to the nakedness of pre-subjected state at whatever the cost (Britzolakis 84, 73). And because for Plath the most terrifying and incredible power is the naming, describing, and making power of words, Plath's true confession, then, is a confession of faith in the Godlike, generative power of poetry. Because language wields the ultimate power to make, remake, and destroy, for Plath as for Wallace Stevens, "God and the imagination are one" (qtd. in Axelrod, "Mirror" 290).

"Lady Lazarus" is perhaps Plath's ultimate testament to the possibility of playing God through poesis (*A:R* 14-17*)*. The very title of the poem sets up Plath's poetic re-vision of the Biblical Lazarus story as an alternative mythology, an incredible redistribution of power. Here, poetry possesses the Christ-like ability to rebirth the dead—a power nothing short of producing "a walking miracle" (14). Driven forward by ebbing and flowing end rhyme, the poem works as a sort of ritual incantation, simultaneously saying and creating the magical death and resurrection of

Lady Lazarus "[o]ne year in every ten" (14). Even more explicitly, Lady Lazarus names her self-makings and the makings of poesis as parallel acts:

> Dying
>
> Is an art, like everything else.
>
> I do it exceptionally well.
>
>
> I do it so it feels like hell.
>
> I do it so it feels real.
>
> I guess you could say I've a call.(*A: R* 15)

Here, in the hands of the death-poet who might replace God, poetic making is so strong, so complete that it "feels real," "feels like hell." But if dying is an art and the two acts are parallel, Lady Lazarus also implies that to participate in the art of poetry is itself a death, to speak only as a subject subjected. The desire to create poetry and the submission to that death are part of the same "call" to the possibility of rebirth. Where Jesus' miracle was resurrection, Lady Lazarus's art is an unmaking through death that might offer the chance for a total rebirth.

Lady Lazarus is unmade in the poem explicitly through "the big strip tease" in which she becomes body exposed before a "peanut-crunching crowd." The exposure is exploitative—Lady Lazarus does not even unwrap herself, but is instead unwrapped by "them" (15). Her subjectors demand the confession of this self-exposure, this submission to objectification and appraisal. And who are these subjectors? The makers of "Jew linens": "Herr Doktor," "Herr Enemy," "Herr God," "Herr Lucifer, " those whose diagnosis of social "malady" resulted in the ultimate

evil of the "treatment" of the Holocaust (16-17). These pairings (Herr Doktor/Herr Enemy, Herr God/Herr Lucifer) make explicit the false Godhood, the false treatment each proffers, and the sickness of subjection to their judging—then destroying—powers. Lady Lazarus plays the part of their Jew, but one who refuses to be burned by them and in resistance burns herself.[4] As she thus undoes the supreme evil of the Nazi subjection, Lady Lazarus seems to say there is no subjection too great that a remaking through poesis cannot combat it. The ash left by her burning offers Lady Lazarus's Nazi-figured oppressors nothing for them to profit by:

> Ash, ash---
>
> You poke and stir.
>
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there---
>
>
> A cake of soap,
>
> A wedding ring,
>
> A gold filling. (*A: R* 17)

The unmaking of this burning promises to be just as complete for Plath's subject. As the "pure gold baby/ That melts to a shriek," she returns to that ideal of "golden" baby nakedness introduced in "Morning Song" of a being that does not yet know subjections. Particularly, she is reduced to a "shriek," a pre-verbal voicing of

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[4] Much has been written about Plath's references to the Holocaust, which occur not only here but throughout *Ariel*, and more generally to Plath's allegiance of her speakers with victimized racial and social groups of which Plath was not a member. These references have both been attacked references as unjustified, opportunistic, and self-indulgent, and revered as profoundly felt resistance to repression of cultural nightmare. My concern here and in my discussion of "Fever 103,°" which alludes to the atomic bombings of Japan, is with how Plath uses these figurations of subjection within her larger project, rather than the full scope of the trope itself. For a more detailed examination of these issues, see Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* and Amy Hungerford's *The Holocaust of Texts*, details listed in Other Works Consulted.

assertion unencumbered by the strictures of language. Air becomes Plath's medium of assertion, rather than the conveyor of the suppressive speech of men. Out of her burning, Plath's subject rises omnipotent to consume that which had subjected her:

> Out of the ash
>
> I rise with my red hair
>
> And I eat men like air. (*A: R* 17)

But how Plath's subject endures her own death is more deeply and troublingly ambiguous. Her death brings her back as a "Nazi lampshade" with the "sour breath" and the "pit eyes" of the grave, sustained only by her own drive for vengeance. The subject's question "Do I terrify?" has no clear addressee, and might as easily be leveled at herself as at any Herr (14). Plath's subject has brought herself back from death, but her remaking has left her "featureless" and monstrously distorted, as controlled by her relationship to subjection as ever in a paradox of power and powerlessness (14). Even after the "big strip tease" of confession, after her whole burning as Jew, Plath's subject emerges unchanged: "Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman" (15). Plath's subject's rebirth has failed; she has only resurrected herself to walk as the living dead.

Plath's poems chronicle the struggle for a voice from which to speak about the struggle for voice, where voice might mean the ability of the subject to speak of, despite, and because of its subjection—yet the emergence of Plath's subjects as victors is this struggle is deeply uncertain (Axelrod, *Wound* 3). And if Plath and her poetry obsess over giving birth to a "creative or 'deep' self hidden within," they equally obsess over the possibility of the failure of this rebirth (Axelrod, "Mirror"

286). During her life, Plath saw two potential sources of this failure to paradoxically escape from subjectivity through poetry. She lived with a deep, pervasive fear that even if poesis held the supreme powers she ascribed it, her own particular words would prove insufficient to her project of liberation—that *her* poetry would never be good enough to do what she prayed it would. Plath feared herself a barren poet like the subject of "Barren Woman," who imagines herself capable of birthing gods but for whom "nothing can happen" (*A: R* 13). When Plath's subjects do (re)produce and remake themselves most literally, they create only liquid mirrors that reveal their own "effacement," babies mangled by thalidomide so that the "glass cracks" that is meant to hold the image of the double ("Morning Song" *A: R* 5, "Thalidomide"*A: R* 10). Plath feared her own work to be as defective as any such baby, her poems evidence of her feebleness as a writer rather than instruments of self-assertion. While Plath's journals chronicle her relentless ambition to join the ranks of the great (always male) writers, they also relate her ceaseless anxiety over the quality of her own work and anxiety over always "mouthing others" rather than being "mouthed" and imitated (Plath qtd. in Axelrod, *Wound* 8).

Tellingly, in one of her letters to Father Carey, Plath asks not if he will pray for her, but for the apartment she would move into shortly thereafter—the former residence of William Butler Yeats. Plath was convinced that the power of the house and the haunting of Yeats would be enough to help her produce great work—the work that might, at last, be great enough to achieve her project of liberation through language. And so Plath wrote to Father Carey, "Please could you bless Yeats' house as well! I think it is coming through & Lord knows I need it!" (Letter to Fr. Carey,

29 Nov. 1962). If Plath was an atheist, she was as skeptical of her own ability to wield the godlike powers of poesis as she was of any religious divinity. But even more than she feared that she would never be a good enough artist to undo her own subjectivity, Plath's greatest anxiety remained that liberation through language would prove to be a contradiction rather than a paradox, and that her "literary reality" and its subjects would necessarily replicate her subjectivity rather than free her from it. While Plath may not have believed in any God including herself as poet, when faced with subjections that even rising from the dead might not undo, she found herself praying for deliverance—if not through God's word, then through her own.

Chapter 3
"I'll Drown My Book":
Allusion and Plath's Subject as the Stuff of Myth

When Plath requested Father Carey bless the house she would occupy in Yeat's wake, she demonstrated not only an ironic desire for a blessing from a Christian God in which she had little faith, but a complex relationship to those poets that had come before her. Plath's reverence for the word extended beyond that simply for its affecting power to the specific writers she saw as that power's master wielders. Yet in *Ariel*, Plath demands that old subjections be cast off and that new stories and new relationships made in and to language. But paradoxically, while Plath offers new myths of the origins of subjection and the struggle for liberation from the constrictions that underpin language, she frequently constructs those subjects in *Ariel* through allusions that might tether the subject's voice to existing stories. *Ariel*'s poems are populated by Medusas and Gullivers, detectives and vampires, Jews out of Belsen and thalidomide babies whose voices assume their full meanings only in relationship to the stories of literature, myth, and history. Plath's subjects in *Ariel* invoke the very stories her project would seem to demand them to refute.

Of course, the myth looming largest over *Ariel* now is the myth of Plath herself, a specter Rose has argued is as much the fantasy of her readers and critics as any representation of Plath's lived reality (2). But in fact, even during her lifetime, Plath hoped to make not merely her subjects but herself the stuff of myth. Plath was relentlessly preoccupied with the possibility of so mastering poetry as to write herself into the canon, at last to be "mouthed" and imitated by others writers rather than

"mouthing" them (Rose 169). In the forward to the original edition of *Ariel*, Robert Lowell's description of Plath's poetic voice as that of "a Dido, Phaedra, or Medea" with the "strident rasp of the vampire" reflects the extent of her transformation through poetry into a voice of myth (Lowell xiii). Even aside from her desires for her writing and her self as poet to assume a legendary place in culture, Plath understood her life as one directly entangled in and driven by stories of myth and literature. In "Ocean 1212-W," the myth Plath develops to explain her origins as a writer roots itself in her being read of tales of mermen (21-22). Several critics and biographers have argued that Plath's marriage to Ted Hughes was founded upon Hughes' conception of Plath as his personal "white Goddess," an archetypal mythic figure of great generative power but dangerous frailty (Middlebrook 30-35; Kroll 40-79).

But if Plath understood her own life as alluding to other's stories, the work she most frequently and powerfully felt it to reference was Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Shortly after her father's death, Plath trekked with her mother and brother through a blizzard to attend a production of *The Tempest*—the first professional theatre show to which Plath had ever been. The play captivated Plath, and years later she would be able to recall details of the specific performance (Alexander 44). Long before she began work on *Ariel*, Plath wrote in her journal of plans to title a book *Full Fathom Five*, explaining *The Tempest*'s perpetual resonance with her own life story:

> It seems to me dozens of books must have this title, but I can't offhand remember any. It relates more richly to my life and imagery than anything else I've dreamed up: has the background of *The Tempest*, the associations of the sea, which is a central metaphor for my childhood, my poems and the

> artist's subconscious, to the father image- relating to my own father, the buried male muse & god-creator risen to be my mate in Ted, to the sea-father neptune – and the pearls and coral highly-wrought to art: pearls sea-changed from the ubiquitous grit of sorrow and dull routine. (*Unabridged Journals* 381)

In *The Tempest*, Plath was fascinated most of all with character of Ariel, the ethereal sprite whose father like her own now lay "full fathom five," and the story of his liberation from the sorcerer Prospero. While at Smith College, Plath attended a lecture by W. H. Auden in which he discussed *The Sea and the Mirror*, a poem he had written in response to *The Tempest* (Enniss and Kukil 3). Afterwards, Plath wrote raptly in her journals of Auden's figuration of Ariel as the "creative imaginative," the very spirit of poetry (Plath, *Unabridged Journals* 180).

In the same glib commentary in which she described "Daddy" as a poem "spoken by a girl with an Electra complex," Plath remarked that she titled "Ariel," and ostensibly *Ariel* as a whole "after a horse [she was] especially fond of" ("Notes for *Ariel: New Poems"*). But Plath's evasive remarks hardly suggest the significance Plath attached to the name she had given her horse. If Plath's mare took her name from Shakespeare, the horse might be seen as the embodiment of the "creative imaginative," and the book and poem named for her the literal vehicle for the end of subjection through poetry with Plath and her subjects as rider. In *Ariel*, Plath paradoxically uses the tales of others to liberate the voice of her own subjects—to gain their freedom as *The Tempest*'s Ariel does, specifically through the end of

subjection to the "rough magic" of words and a new ascription of personal power. Much as Ariel is released when Prospero proclaims:

> I'll break my staff,
> Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
> And deeper than did ever plummet sound
> I'll drown my book. (Shakespeare, *The Tempest* Act V, Scene i)

Plath seeks to secure a voice for her subjects by destroying their existing relationship to language to allow them to tell their own myths of liberation. In her collision of contingent, historical and canonical narratives, Plath explodes the boundaries between the body of text and the body of the extra-textual subject. Through the use of allusion, Plath's subjects perform a most powerful "self-mythologizing" that transforms the personal into the legendary and the individual into the epic, telling the mythic stories that explain not some natural phenomena but a human self.

At the most basic level, in these references Plath asserts that individual subjects and subjections are as significant as any ancient epic or Biblical parable. Within *Ariel*'s project of the release of the subject, allusion offers Plath a means to control her and her subjects' inscription into literature, myth, and history. But even more importantly, through allusion Plath hybridizes reality and fantasy to produce the myths that might address subjection and simultaneously grant release from it. Ultimately, Plath pursues this paradoxical project of empowerment of individual voice through allusion at any cost. If *Ariel* refers to the spirit of poetry set free from the strictures of subjecting language, it also invoked the Ariel of the Bible, a city prophesized to be beset "with storm and tempest, and the flame of devouring fire"

(*Holy Bible, King James Version* Isa. 29-6). Ultimately, as Plath discovers that her subjects' rebirths demands their deaths, she willingly binds them to this burning in order to also "drown the book" that subjects them, and thus frees *Ariel* at last.

Most immediately, allusion to myth offered Plath a means of returning to a time when the boundaries between the subject and the surrounding world, the self of fantasy and the self of reality, had yet to be felt. Edith Hamilton describes how "when the stories [of myth] were being shaped… little real distinction had as yet been made between the real and the unreal"(3); it is precisely this moment of the possibility of ambiguity that Plath seeks to access through her fabrication of and allusion to myth. Myth provides Plath with access to a reality in which the immortal and the mortal mingle, and lends a unique cultural ascription of revelatory power to her creation tales. Plath engages with classical and Christian myth most directly as their characters are cast in her poems. In *Ariel*, Plath most famously invokes Lady Lazarus and Medusa in those poems of the same name, but refers also to Cerberus in "Fever 103," Apollo in "Barren Woman," Nike in "The Other," Adam in "Getting There" and "Purdah," Mary in "The Moon and the Yew Tree," for a start.

Judith Kroll argues that the entirety of *Ariel* can be read as the "articulation of a mythic system" whose chief narrative is that of "the return of the repressed" that Plath works out not only through such blatant allusions as the resurrection of Lazarus from the dead, but also through more cryptic references to the archetypes of myth and religion (Kroll 2, 108). While Kroll accurately perceives Plath's repeated invocation of certain images and symbols, she neglects Plath's relentless demand that her poems

be read as individual and specific. Rather than abstracting and individuals into archetypes, Plath sees the figures of myth as and in individual speakers—speakers bound to a specific, complex cultural space that is not so much timeless as produced by layers of stories and histories.

The mythology stirred by *Ariel* expands beyond references to classical Gods or ancient rites. The stories invoked by Plath include those of literature, history, and even popular culture so that her subject might only be understood through a constellation of other narratives that defined them through the word. The personal, the contingent, and the trivial become the true stuff of myth, as these larger narratives simultaneously trivialize and aggrandize the subjects whose lives must be understood through and before them. In *Ariel*, Nazis are not merely compared to tyrannical Gods; they become them through the figurations of metaphor, the invocation of a mythic register, and the staging of their dramas in literal reality unbound from the separation of the real and the fantastic. In the process of such transformation, Plath creates a new mythology of the oppression and liberation of the subject, where language both binds and subjects *Ariel* and at expresses a release.

"The Detective" provides an anatomy of how Plath deploys allusion towards these paradoxical ends. But more subtly, "The Detective" describes what kind of violation is perpetrated against the subject of language (*A: R* 31-32). Plath writes "The Detective" following the conventions of the murder mystery genre. As in the Sherlock Holmes novels which are alluded to directly at the end of the poem, "The Detective" is structured around answering a string of questions which might allow the poem's speaker to reconstruct the events of the crime. The poem's speaking subject

plays the role of Holmes himself—that is, of the detective, rather than the victim of the crime being investigated. One reading the poem is cast into the part of Watson, who assists in collecting clues but relies on Holmes to lead the investigation and ultimately to assemble the narrative of the crime. In following these generic conventions, Plath ascribes all agency in the poem to the detective as storyteller and denies it to the brutalized woman of the poem whose reality can only be partially reassembled through the work of the detective. Not only does this woman already exist only in the past tense when the poem begins, but she exists solely as an anonymous "her" who lacks the ability to offer an account of her own victimization.

In "The Detective," the speaker as detective attempts to understand the crime that has happened not simply by searching for clues, but by constructing a narrative. Immediately, the ability to recognize that a crime that has been committed is bound up in storytelling; before he will identify the "it" of the first line, the detective needs to understand how it is that the victim's story became the stuff of a murder mystery. Thus Plath implies that the work of poetry is in part similarly to tell the stories of injustices that would otherwise remain unspoken, perhaps even unspeakable. Plath begins:

> What was she doing when it blew in
>
> Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain
>
> Was she arranging cups? It is important.
>
> Was she at the window, listening?
>
> In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks. (*A: R* 31)

Plath's detective identifies the "importance" of telling the story correctly, but can here offer little more than speculation without some sort of contact with the victim. Instead, tellingly, the only solid fact of the first stanza is the sound of those horrific "shrieks" that "echo" from unseen murder victims. Here, what is solidly knowable, what is real, is the direct voicing of the subjected—a voicing that now suggests the poem might find not only the perpetrator of a single crime, but the origins of a series of the most extreme sorts of personal attacks. As the sounds of those murders rise out of the valley, the "it" of the first line becomes suddenly ominous; the scale of its horror magnified, and its detachment from any known human aggressor a sign of the power of its force.

Another allusion begins next stanza and frames that "it" as a crime so large it must be situated not only within recent history, but grappled with on a Biblical scale:

> That is the valley of death, though the cows thrive.
>
> In her garden the lies were shaking out their moist silks
>
> And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong,
>
> Unable to face the fingers, those egotists.
>
> The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall,…(*A: R* 31)

The crime that has been committed at first seems to be confirmed to be a murder; the valley of death and the killer taken together say immediately what fate the woman of the poem met before she is even revealed to have been "tamped into a wall." But a closer reading of the story being assembled by the detective shows that little, in fact, has been resolved. At the same time that through allusion the crime becomes epically significant, it also has become personally directed, for the "cows thrive" where she

has not, and the crime transpires in "*her* garden." Eden has given way to a landscape of death. More terrifyingly, the nature of killer remains ambiguous, evasive and slug-slippery, assigned no gender and given a face obscured except for its eyes. Its figures seem to work autonomously, their disconnection a sign of the perverse emotionless of the killing. The killer becomes simply an instrument of death, unattached to his victim and to his crime. And while the combination of "the killer," "the valley of death," and that woman "tamped into a wall" and her absence from the moment of the poem all invariably suggest murder, the detective refuses in his or her narration to directly name her death as such. In relating her story, the detective determines whether or not, in fact, a murder occurred at all. Whatever happened to the woman is unspeakable, both in its horror and as it escapes through the language like the sidelong-moving killer itself.

The "tamping" of the woman suggests her murder is a not merely a killing, but a suppression, reduction, and concealment of her being. The walls of her house share in her murder as they imprison and silence her. The third stanza and first line of the fourth elaborate:

> A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising.
>
> This is the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen,
>
> These are the deceits, tacked up like family photographs,
>
> And this is a man, look at his smile,
>
> The death weapon? No-one is dead.
>
> There is no body in the house at all. (*A: R* 31)

What Plath describes is effectively a domestic holocaust, a torture and murder of a woman so complete as to reduce her to air. The remains of the woman reduced to a nameless, voiceless body now waft up through a "pipe" that works like the smokestacks of an incinerator, leaving "no body in the house at all." The house itself is complicit if not responsible for the woman's death; where first it became the instrument of her suffocation and mutilation, her "burning" distinctly transpires here. Now as it refuses to bear evidence of the death, the house helps to exonerate "a man" who once again cannot be directly or perhaps even correctly be named as the killer. As language once again conceals who bears the guilt for the woman's death, it also suggests that what brought her to this death was a sort of seemingly innocuous but in fact torturous imprisonment, one that "blew in" as easily as she now blows away.

The speaker-as-detective continues to ask the questions which might reassemble the woman's story if not the woman herself, but which are met with the same repeated response:

> …This is a case without a body.
>
> The body does not come into it at all.
>
> It is a case of vaporization.
>
> The mouth first…(*A: R* 31)

The first of these lines implies that the inability to ascribe guilt and identify a murderer is a product of a lack of evidence, or possibly of the lack of a crime at all—if "no-one is dead" and there is "no body," who has been killed? But the twist of the second of these lines reveals that this crime has been perpetrated first not against an

entire body, but against a "mouth." If voicing is, as it is in the first stanza of the poem with those "shrieks," a terrifyingly powerful means of protestation against subjection, here murder begins with the elimination of that voice. The connection between this mouth and those of the "hooked" murder victims is confirmed by Plath's further description of it:

> …It had been insatiable
>
> And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit
>
> To wrinkle and dry. (*A: R* 32)

The significance of the removal of the mouth is confirmed by what the woman is stripped of next:

> The breasts next.
>
> These were harder, two white stones.
>
> The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet as water.
>
> There was no absence of lips, there were two children,
>
> But their bones showed, and the moon smiled. (*A: R* 32)

If the mouth represented a means of voicing, the breasts here serve as a means of generating through mothering—a means of creating a new voice as in "Morning Song." When these breasts are vaporized, they leave behind only "two children" whose "bones show." And so, the woman's attempt at a creation that might speak in the absence of her own mouth fails. These two essential elements gone, the woman is reduced to "dry wood" and "motherly brown furrows," to "the whole estate" that was in some way her torture and which ultimately dematerializes entirely:

What is left as the body of evidence—the only evidence—by which the crime might be remembered and understood is the poem itself. While the house and the hazy figure of the man controlling it might allow the poem to be read as warnings against a most lethal sort of "domestication," the final lines of the poem are tellingly concerned not with a woman's subjection to a man or a 1950s ideas of proper place of a wife, but with a voice's subjection to language. After all of the poem's struggle to assemble a narrative or explanation for the murder, to speak of the necessity of speech, the detective himself fails to be able to offer any account of the crime:

> …We walk on air, Watson.
>
> There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.
>
> There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes. (*A: R* 32)

At last, all the detective of the poem can do is to induce one to "make notes" of one's own, to suspect that some crime has gone down in and through language—but that its perpetrator has also escaped prosecution through that same medium. The killer having slipped through the language of the poem early on and the murdered woman denied a direct or indirect means of voicing, the crime of "The Detective" seems destined to be filed away unsolved and forgotten, its clues a series of signs its detective cannot assemble. Without the speech of the victim, the detective cannot complete explain her story. Plath reveals the inhibition of voice to be both the first maker of subjection and the inhibitor of its reversal.

Denied the ability to use language, that fundamental means of assertion and recognition which constitutes a self, the murder victim depends upon others to perform the telling of her reality. But as the ability to right this crime—if not to undo

the murder itself—depends upon a restoration of the victim's speech, the attempt to remedy the crime through the detective's narrative is inherently futile. All that can ever be performed without her voice is the taking of notes on bodiless, dismissible, and perhaps in fact imagined crime. While Plath cannot in "The Detectives" reverse a murder, she provides the body of evidence for a crime that might otherwise go bodiless. If Plath's poems can be said to reveal the "unconscious and normally covered-over conditions or substrata of speech," the evidence here unburied becomes the clues to the nature of the crime of language (Rose 34). Ultimately, what Plath then asks in "The Detective" is whether the attempt to prosecute the subjections of language through the medium of language is similarly inherently futile; the answer is ambiguous at best.

But Plath's indictment of language in "The Detective" is also leveled more specifically at how an individual voice might assume a place within a genre and a canon. Plath posits that the most fundamental problem faced by the victim in and of the murder mystery genre is that the murder has already occurred *before* the story even begins—and perhaps allegorically, that the individual that inherits the strictures of language and genre then enters a system where violation and subjection is prerequisite. Here, as Plath fits the body of text of "The Detective" into the generic conventions of the murder mystery, what necessarily gets lost is the voice of the victim. Before Plath can even begin to demand the right of this murdered woman to speak freely of the crime done to her, she must fight for her ability to speak at all in a system of storytelling that demands her silence. To tell the story of the crime while obeying the existing rules of the genre, then, is to perpetrate an additional violation of

the victim by denying her a voice a second time. Of course, "The Detective" differs significantly from the conventions of the murder mystery in one regard—no killer is accused, and no justice served. Here, Plath deals her ultimate blow against her detective and the genre he represents as she asserts that his work nothing to solve the crimes of language, and in fact only reproduces them to the further degradation of their subjects.

Plath's concerns about what gets lost not merely in the fitting of a voice to language but to genre echoes her broader concerns about her ability to assume a place in the ranks of respected writers. Plath felt profoundly affronted when her work failed to meet with the same success as the poets she saw as her competition (Alexander 214). After not being selected to contribute to *New Poets of England and America*, Plath wrote in her journal:

> Jealous one I am, green-eyed, spite-seething. Read the six women poets in the "new poets of england and america." Dull, turgid. Except for Swenson & Adrienne Rich, not one better or more-published than me. I have the quiet righteous malice of one with better poems than other women's reputations have been made. (*Unabridged Journals* 315)

But more than Plath resented the success of other poets, particularly those female poets who she perceived as her most direct competition, she worried that such successes were confirmations of her suspicions of her inadequacies as a writer. Her journals chronicle her relentless anxiety over the insufficiencies she feared in herself as a writer—and particularly as a female writer who she feared would never reach the heights of her male counterparts. When Plath did meet with success—and Plath did

have remarkable success in getting published from an extremely early age—Plath was often unnerved by it. For Plath, possibility of the inscription of her texts into the canons of literature and her own identity of that of the writer became a driving preoccupation of her creative life.

At a most practical means, then, allusions like the ones of "The Detective" offered Plath a direct means of reckoning with the canon, of carving out a space for herself on the crammed shelves of great literature. As "The Detective" exemplifies, however, the allusions of Plath's poems testify to a need to extricate the individual voice from generic and lingual conventions that limited individual ability to speak. Allusion meant for Plath a means not simply of retelling a story, but of examining the system which produced that story and using language to then expand rather than restrict what that subject might do, say, and be. For Plath, such liberation did not producing revisionist poems that might reverse sympathies, but rather writing poems that reverse agency and what it means to be subject. Plath understands this liberating remaking of the subject through poesis to possibly occur in three ways—in a rebirth through the creation of an entirely new subject, in an involuntarily inflicted and endured holocaust from which the subject might rise, or in a total self-burning which afford at last a new start. When the re-births like those of "Morning Song" and resurrections like those of "Lady Lazarus" fail to entirely remake their subjects, Plath offers as a final, desperate solution the internal self-destruction of poems like "Fever 103°." In this poem, as allusions to myth and history represent symptoms of illness and failed cures, Plath's speaker uses the fever produced in response to generate a self-destruction that also functions as a self-release.

In “Fever 103°,” Plath’s subject is a woman whose extreme fever spirals into the production of a series of horrific hallucinatory visions of hell (*A: R* 78-80). The body of the text takes the place of the fevered woman’s body as the site for these visions. Over the course of the poem, however, these visions move from images of some fantastic mythological hell to the atrocities of history and finally to the hell of the particular subject driven fever-mad by not only these atrocities but the atrocities of her daily life. Ultimately, the fever produces a purity of vision that also instructs the subject in how to escape these hells. Through a paradoxical submission to her own burning, she returns to the paradise of purity from the atrocities of her personal and cultural history. From its opening lines, “Fever 103°” obsesses over the possibilities of such purification through burning:

> Pure? What does it mean?
> The tongues of hell
> Are dull, dull as the triple
>
> Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus
> Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
> Of licking clean
>
> The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.
> The tinder cries.
> The indelible smell

Of a snuffed candle!... (*A: R* 78-80)

This first hell that the poem describes is that of Greek mythology, with the three-headed guard dog Cerberus at its gates ("Cerberus" 193). But hell, apparently, is not what it used to be. In myth, Cerberus's job is to ensure that only the dead enter hell and that none that enter leave. Here, Cerberus fails at his duties as he lolls "wheezing" and "dull" where he is meant to be ferocious. Anyone, it seems, might be admitted to this hell should they so desire. Hades itself has become as "dull" as Cerberus; the "tongues" of its fires which once condemned and cleaned one of "the sin, the sin" are now as inadequate as their guard dog. Both Cerberus and the hell it guards are now "incapable" of executing an adequate torture through which those sins might be literally burned. Sin here lies so deep in being as to lie next to bone, its nature the secret of the speaker who painfully bears it. While what this sin is and who has committed it remain ambiguous, Plath's speaker longs for the hell that would simultaneously punish and grant release from it. But with the ancient hell of myth no longer horrific enough to torture it from the speaker, Plath in her opening line calls for a new meaning of purity, and implicitly, a new hell to affect it.

The fires of hell alluded to in the first stanzas of "Fever 103°" dissipate and rise into the smokes of hell of the next stanzas:

…Love, love, the low smokes roll

From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.

Such yellow sullen smokes

Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe

Choking the aged and the meek,

The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,

The ghastly orchid

Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!

Radiation turned it white

And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers

Like Hiroshima ash eating in.

The sin. The sin. (*A: R* 78-79)

Here, Plath posits a second sort of hell that results from love—from relationships that strangle like Isadora Duncan's scarves, from affections that suffocate and "choke" the "hothouse baby" with a fatal intensity of motherly heat, from adulterous affairs that produce a most real, lived hell. But suddenly, as these final two hells are described in the terms of the ravishing of nuclear warfare, the scale of sin referred to by the subject and the incredible need for atonement become historically large and

terrifying. Hell can no longer be abstracted off as a concept for forgotten mythologies, but is shown as appalling fact with infinitely toxic consequences for Plath and her contemporaries. The waves and ash of this hell work most insidiously, hollowing living bodies with "eating in" and leaving them "hanging," "white," "ghastly" ghosts. This hell is the most vast and most real sin of which Plath's subject hopes to purify herself—one which might entirely warrant a self-annihilation if necessary for absolution.

As Plath's subject's fever climaxes and breaks in these lines, she is delivered from both myth and history into the contingent reality of a domestic life. But when she is found here sweating and "retching" in bed, she has hardly been delivered from the fever that rises from what she has seen. The greased "adulterers" of the speaker's vision transform into the particulars of a "darling" with whom it is diseasing to share a bed; the body that is the site of hell now belongs to the speaker:

> Darling, all night
> I have been flickering off, on, off, on.
> The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.
>
> Three days. Three nights.
> Lemon water, chicken
> Water, makes me retch.
>
> I am too pure for you or for anyone
> Your body

Hurts me as the world hurts God... (*A: R* 79)

If sin in the poem has been performed in and against bodies—in "aguey tendon," in "greased bodies of adulterers"—here the speaker performs a violent, corporeal rejection of sin's incursion on her own body. The subject enacts her sickness as a ritual of purification, enacted at prescribed intervals with the appropriate libations and purgations. But in this fever and ritual, the subject arrives not at a verdict and repentance of her own sinfulness, but at a recognition of herself as "pure beyond anyone," as a God for whom the sins of the world are a personal assault. Here, Plath's subject is a paradoxical God subjected, whose infinite powers and goodness have been betrayed by the objects of her universe and her love—not only the hurting "darling," but by inadequate mythologies and histories of violence. But if the assault of such a reality has "beaten" down the subject as God, it is also that which renders her so magnificent:

…I am a lantern---

My head a moon

Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin

Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive. (*A: R* 79)

The "flickering, off, on, off, on" of the subject grows into a flickering between conceptions of the self, each moving towards a purer self-incarnation. The flames that rise into smoke in the final portions of the poem become finally an internal heat knowingly being stoked towards combustion. With each ratcheting up of the fever

within the speaker, she attains and abandons a new sort of purity, only to push onwards for the ultimate one of Paradise:

> Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
>
> All by myself I am a huge camellia
>
> Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.
>
>
> I think I am going up,
>
> I think I may rise---
>
> The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I
>
>
> Am a pure acetylene
>
> Virgin
>
> Attended by roses,
>
>
> By kisses, by cherubim,
>
> By whatever these pink things mean.
>
> Not you, nor him
>
>
> Nor him, nor him
>
> (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)
>
> To Paradise. (*A: R* 79-80)

Plath's subject is borne through increasingly direct figurations of female purity, from moon to flower to virgin. The description of this virginity as "acetylene," a chemical

that “burns with a flame hot enough to cut steel,” makes Plath’s speaker the exactor of her own purification through burning (Joesten, Johnston, Netterville, and Wood 352). In this burning, the taint of unworthy lovers and horrific histories reduce and dissolve into distant “hims,” along with the very selves that knew them. She retains no connection to those old subjections and the self that “whorishly” submitted to them. Her ascent to “Paradise” leaves the subject at last naked, possessed of her own body, independent of “him,” myth, and history—if at the cost of her life. Thus, the “magic” of the words of “Fever 103°” is “rough” indeed. Here, to achieve a remaking of the self that transcends faulty doubling of the baby in “Morning Song” or the staggering, vampirical “Lady Lazarus,” Plath’s speaker submits to an all-consuming incineration that does not even leave ash behind. Existing creation is so tainting that the only way to gain total rebirth and claim total self-possession is in asserting the power to subject oneself to death. Nowhere does Plath make this claim as powerfully as in “Ariel” (*A:R* 33-34).

Plath wrote “Ariel” on her 30th birthday, October 27th, 1962 (*A: R* 208). At the center of “Ariel” is the secret of the title’s reference to Plath’s horse of that same name, a reference that would be lost without Plath’s commentary on the poem for the BBC. This description provides an idea of what “God’s lioness” might literally represent that otherwise could only be ambiguously constructed from the poem alone. But the cheeky simplicity of Plath’s BBC commentary also sets up “Ariel” as an invitation to inclusion in some unspeakable secret that nevertheless drives the poem. The poem’s confession is delivered by a subject who, like her secret’s meaning, only slowly emerges from the “substanceless blue” to take form, so that both subject and

the poem's direction literally compose themselves in and through the poem (*A: R* 33). In fact, the process of the telling of "Ariel" not only creates this subject, but animates it. "Ariel" begins with "[s]tasis in darkness" and accelerates into "the cauldron of morning," transporting its subject not only from the darkness of the absence of (self-) knowledge to an awareness of the "red Eye" (I), but from motionlessness to motion (*A: R*, 33-34). Plath here suggests poetry not merely the way in which one can know one self, or even form oneself, but the way in which one is moved and can move oneself towards a particular fate. Since "Ariel" is the name of both the poem and the horse, as the speaker mounts the horse, she identifies poetry itself as the vehicle of her deliverance to some yet unseen end. The question then becomes where this speaker is destined to ride, and how much she controls the reigns.

"Ariel" opens in a space beyond time or place—the unmoving, unaffected "[s]tasis in darkness" of a morning still un-peopled, but also of a moment before creation, in a state of complete nothingness:

> Stasis in darkness.
>
> Then the substanceless blue
>
> Pour of tor and distances. (*A: R* 33)

The poem sets itself up as a creation myth, one with the speaker as the animating cause and god at its center. The speaker's arrival into this scene sets time and space into motion around her as she begins to describe it. By witnessing this nothingness, the poem's subject also negates it, and subjugates it to her gaze; a new world begins to unfold because of and through her discourse. In a sort of poetic "big bang," the living presence of the subject whose own time is mortally limited and whose words

can create, becomes the focal point from which distances recede and time is measured, creating the "then" of the next line and the horizons of the line after. The world exists as it is subjected to the poem's subject, and in making this world, she herself begins to take form—first as voice and a vision, then as a body, then as body with direction, then as body with a directed will.

As the subject activates the landscape, she stirs also "God's lioness":

God's lioness,

How one we grow,

Pivot of heels and knees!—The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to

The brown arc

Of neck I cannot catch,… (*A: R* 33)

While this "lioness" can be taken to be a horse given Plath's commentary, the strange metaphor of horse to lioness, animal to animal, creates shapeshifting rather than comparison. The horse becomes some nobler, more terrifying vessel of deliverance to the god that owns it. Only as she mounts lion/horse/poem vehicle does the subject first acknowledge herself, if only as part of this amorphous we. Although the remark acknowledging "how one" the horse and rider "grow" implies a recognition of each first as distinct units, in this fusion of speaker to poem and rider to horse their path is now one. As they are bound together into "Ariel," the separation between textual and human bodies dissolves; Plath's speaker is inseparable from her speech, and that speech her dependent subject and vehicle. With a "pivot of heels and knees," "Ariel"

tests its new fused body and begins a frantic acceleration towards some unnamed or unnamable destination.

As horse and rider pick up speed, the landscape "splits" around them, both as it parts on either side of their vision as they traverse it, and as they cut their own determined, unstoppable course. A subtle, constantly shifting end rhyme pattern moves the poem onward moves the poem as restlessly as the horse. But Plath's subject "cannot catch" the neck of her steed; the horse and the poem are paradoxically no longer fully controlled by their masters, but driven by a will of her own. Plath and her speaker, it seems, have bound themselves to a vehicle of deliverance that they can never fully reign in. Plath as poet ironically suggests she has no will to stop her writing or alter its course, for the final realization it must reach is non-negotiable; she writes to try to harness this vehicle, but is subject to its will rather than her own. And as the landscape of the "literal reality" that "Ariel" traverses takes form out of the brown hills, its details both horrify and enthrall. The landscape assembling before the speaker's gaze begins to suggest "Ariel's" destination as one forced upon horse and rider as much as chosen by either element:

> Nigger-eye
> Berries cast dark
> Hooks---
>
> Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
> Shadows (*A: R* 33)

In the play of "eye" and "I," Plath allies her subject with victims of a most extraordinary racial degradation and subjection to otherness. If the combination of "nigger," "hooks," and "blood" dance around implications of lynching, the berries threaten to ensnare and subject Plath's speaker to a similar fate, if not with their hooks, then with their specious sweetness. The berries figure a perverse savoring of subjection that both is and produces death, much akin to the "malignity of the gorse" in "The Rabbit Catcher" (*A: R* 7). Their "blood" marks the hunger for their flavor not only as violent, but as transgressive, that which makes that which should be internal instead external. As the berries stand as "shadows" for something still remote, or for absence itself, they suggest that Plath's subject craves the ultimate, as-yet unspeakable destination of the poem—death.

These shadows of death turn into the terrible "Something else" that now "hauls [the subject] through air" that begins to destruct her:

Something else

Hauls me through air---
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White Godiva, I unpeel---
Dead hands, dead stringencies. (*A: R* 33)

The subject is being moved by time and by God towards a destruction she cannot control, that she both craves like those "blood mouthfuls" and which she wishes to

reign in but can no longer. But if Plath's subject is cataclysmically losing control, "stringencies" have also lost their control on her; her wild riding is entirely unstoppable, by herself or anyone else. Whatever rules might have bound her before her ride now "unpeel" along with her self, so that she is simultaneously unmade as a subject and as a being at all; the two conditions seem demand the other, so that the only way to gain complete release is to be totally unmade. Horse and rider dissolve to more elemental wheat, then water. Speech itself, even the most primal cry of the child, "melts" (34). Nothing, it seems, can withstand this horse's journey towards that total dissolution and conclusion of the self that is "Ariel."

In unpeeling, then foaming to seas, then melting, and condensing as the dew, "Ariel" rides through the water cycle in a most elemental and inevitable (re)figuration. The final step is evaporation, a hurling of the self at the sun to start the cycle anew:

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (*A: R* 33-34)

As this self "flies/ Suicidal, at one with the drive," she no longer wishes to control "Ariel" but affirms the madness of its fatal acceleration. The "suicidal" drive paradoxically, finally, allows her to control her own subjection to death and to the others deaths that happen in subjection—the relinquishment of the self in the subjection to desire in "Rabbit Catcher," the powerlessness of the self in subjection to the godless cosmos in "The Night Dances," the mutilation of the voice in the subjection to genre in "The Detective" and to language more generally in "Lady Lazarus." The speaker's mad acceleration towards self-destruction becomes her ultimate act of self-determination. If Plath's mortal subject is an arrow shot towards inevitably, inescapably towards death, here she is "at one" with her course, for death casts the self into "the red Eye/ the cauldron of morning." Plath's speaker yields herself to that ultimate burning, and in fact, to a total remaking through poesis itself. That "red Eye," the merciless and omniscient sight of the sun, sees as Plath has seen in *Ariel*. In this sight, the "Eye" offers rebirth, for it is also the "cauldron of morning" where poesis might work its magic to dawn a new beginning. In "Ariel," and *Ariel*, Plath finally thus casts her subject as the "I" that is also the "Eye" of the red cauldron of poetry; as the "I" of Plath's poems relinquishes itself entirely to that vital source of generation and destruction, poetry becomes the ultimate embodiment and performance of these dual feats.

Conclusion:
"The Box Is Only Temporary"

Ultimately in *Ariel*, as the voices of Plath's speakers are dwarfed again and again in and before the larger narratives of myth, history, and the cosmos, poems like "Ariel" and "Fever 103°" suggest that the only way for an "I" to fully extricate itself from subjection is to write itself out of existence. But, troublingly, the speakers who rise out of the ash of "Fever 103°" and "Lady Lazarus" are not ones who have remedied their suffered atrocities, but rather who have attempted to escape them through death. On these grounds, Jacqueline Rose argues that Plath's speakers' strategy of rebirth is ultimately problematic for the world they leave behind. Rose suggests that while Plath's speakers' "drive to undo [themselves]…is more than legitimated by the horrors of the world, [it] is self-defeating, for it can only work by the means of forgetfulness which allows—which ensures—that those same horrors will be repeated" (148). Rose reads "Getting There" as Plath's denunciation of this forgetting; when the poem's passenger is raced across a landscape showing the violence of human history only to arrive "[p]ure as a baby," she is unable to deliver the stories which might prevent their re-enactment (*A: R* 59).

But what Rose neglects to acknowledge in her indictment of such rebirth is what Plath has intuited from the beginning--that "I am I" and that Plath's speakers are inescapably tethered to language even in writing their erasing. If Plath's speakers perform in poetry their own annihilations for the sake of their remaking, they leave behind their poems as testament to what *Ariel*'s "red Eye" has seen. The inextricability of the subject from language that Plath pushes against in all of *Ariel*

proves at last to be the way her speakers' voices might endure their deaths. While Plath in *Ariel* works to return her subjects to a wholeness and omnipotence that subjection to language seems to refute, ultimately, as subjection to language is inescapable, so too are the voices that testify to its power. The poems that make Plath's speakers' subjection eternal stand as Plath's final proof of the Godlike making of poetry as it brings the futile, the mortal, and the subject into the realm of the infinite.

And so for all the fury, even the fatality, of *Ariel*, Plath concludes her book at last with hope. In *Ariel*'s final poem, "Wintering," Plath speaks of bees as akin to the speakers of the book as a whole, suspended in a "time of hanging on" before the anticipated but distant spring (89). At best in this winter, these bees and these speakers, "can only carry their dead" and bear the burden of that dark season (*A: R* 90). "Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas/ Succeed in banking their fires/ To enter another year?" Plath's speaker asks, uncertain still of the answer (*A: R* 90). After all, Plath sees the attempted "rebirths" of the subject of poesis in "Morning Song" and "Lady Lazarus" as woefully deficient; in both cases, language reanimates and replicates the speaker's original subjections rather than granting release. Yet more than "Morning Song" or "Lady Lazarus" reveal a fundamental insufficiency in poetry's capacity to remake, they reveal the insufficiency of a remaking that replicates or even resurrects rather than makes anew. If the ultimate subject of these two poems is Plath's anxiety that her own abilities as a poet mothering rebirth would prove similarly deficient, her confession of her faith in poetry itself and the terrific power of the word persists.

And while Plath finds the speakers of her poetry inextricably subject to language and all those extra-textual subjections it figures, in poesis at last they are granted the power not only to speak paradoxically out against that subjection, but to write their own fates within language's terms. Out of the "cauldron of morning" that is *Ariel* and its poetics rides at last speakers who in mastering their deaths defy them, and bring with them an end to that time of merely "hanging on" (89). In the last lines of "Wintering" and of *Ariel*, Plath's subjects prove her assertion that "the box is only temporary" as they gain their release: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring." ("The Arrival of the Bee Box" 85, "Wintering" 90).

Ultimately, then, what Plath demands and performs in *Ariel* is a radical poesis of liberation that "makes mermaids" rather than reproduces a reality of subjections. She expands the possibility of what poetry can make, and in that making, do for those who write and are written into it. As Plath wrote in her journal:

> 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. (*Unabridged Journals* 210)

If poetry is "worthless" to Plath as used to reiterate those truths of lived reality, to voice its fury at those horrors without remedying them, it is nothing short of divine as it makes that world anew.

Appendix of Analyzed Poems

Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your arrival. New statue
In a drafty museum, your nakedness
Shadows our safety. We stand round blankly as walls.

I'm no more your mother
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow
Effacement at the wind's hand.

All night your moth-breath
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
In my Victorian nightgown.
Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
Your handful of notes;
The clear vowels rise like balloons. (*A: R* 5)

The Rabbit Catcher

It was a place of force---
The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,
Tearing off my voice, and the sea
Blinding me with its lights, the lives of the dead
Unreeling in it, spreading like oil.

I tasted the black malignity of the gorse,
Its black spikes,
The extreme unction of its yellow candle-flowers.
They had an efficiency, a great beauty,
And were extravagant, like torture.

There was only one place to get to.
Simmering, perfumed,
The paths narrowed into the hollow.
And the snares almost effaced themselves---
Zeroes, shutting on nothing,

Set close like birth pangs.
The absence of shrieks
Made a hole in the hot day, a vacancy.
The glassy light was a clear wall,
The thickets quiet.

I felt a still busyness, an intent.
I felt hands round a tea mug, dull, blunt,
Ringing the white china.
How they awaited him, those little deaths!
They waited like sweethearts. They excited him.

And we, too, had a relationship---
Tight wires between us,
Pegs too deep to uproot, and a mind like a ring
Sliding shut on some quick thing,
The constriction killing me also. (*A: R* 7-8)

The Arrival of the Bee Box

I ordered this, this clean wood box
Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift.
I would say it was the coffin of a midget
Or a square baby
Were there not such a din in it.

The box is locked, it is dangerous.
I have to live with it overnight
And I can't keep away from it.
There are no windows, so I can't see what is in there.
There is only a little grid, no exit.

I put my eye to the grid.
It is dark, dark,
With the swarmy feeling of African hands
Minute and shrunk for export,
Black on black, angrily clambering.

How can I let them out?
It is the noise that appals me most of all,
The unintelligible syllables.
It is like a Roman mob,
Small, taken one by one, but my god, together!

I lay my ear to furious Latin.
I am not a Caesar.
I have simply ordered a box of maniacs.
They can be sent back.
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner.
I wonder if they would forget me
If I just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree.
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry.

They might ignore me immediately
In my moon suit and funeral veil.
I am no source of honey
So why should they turn on me?
Tomorrow I will be sweet God, I will set them free.

The box is only temporary. (*A: R* 84-85)

The Night Dances

A smile fell in the grass.
Irretrievable!

And how will your night dances
Lose themselves. In mathematics?

Such pure leaps and spirals---
Surely they travel

The world forever, I shall not entirely
Sit emptied of beauties, the gift

Of your small breath, the drenched grass
Smell of your sleeps, lilies, lilies.

Their flesh bears no relation.
Cold folds of ego, the calla,

And the tiger, embellishing itself---
Spots, and a spread of hot petals.

The comets
Have such a space to cross,

Such coldness, forgetfulness
So your gestures flake off---

Warm and human, then their pink light
Bleeding and peeling

Through the black amnesias of heaven.
Why am I given

These lamps, these planets
Falling like blessings, like flakes

Six sided, white
On my eyes, my lips, my hair

Touching and melting.
Nowhere. (*A: R* 29-30)

Lady Lazarus

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it---

A sort of walking miracle, my skin
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
My right foot

A paperweight,
My face a featureless, fine
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify?---

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?
The sour breath
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh
The grace cave ate will be
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.
I am only thirty
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.
What a trash
To annihilate each decade.

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

Them unwrap me hand and foot---
The big strip tease.
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.
The first tie it happened I was ten.
It was an accident.

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.

Dying
Is an art, like everything else.
I do it exceptionally well.

I do it so it feels like hell.
I do it so it feels real.
I guess you could say I've a call.

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day
To the same place, the same face, the same brute
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'
That knocks me out.
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

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
So, so, Herr Doktor.
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,
I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.
I turn and burn.
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash---
You poke and stir.
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there---

A cake of soap,
A wedding ring,
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer
Beware
Beware.

Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair
And I eat men like air. (*A: R* 14-17)

The Detective

What was she doing when it blew in
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?
Was she arranging cups? It is important.
Was she at the window, listening?
In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks.

That is the valley of death, though the cows thrive.
In her garden the lies were shaking out their moist silks
And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong,
Unable to face the fingers, those egotists.
The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall,

A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising.
This is the smell of years burning here in the kitchen,
There are the deceits, tacked up like family photographs,
And this is a man, look at his smile,
The death weapon? No-one is dead.

There is no body in the house at all.
There is the smell of polish, there are the plush carpets.
There is the sunlight, playing its blades,
Bored hoodlum in a red room
Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative.

Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?
Whish of the poisons is it?
Which of the nerve-curlers, the convulsors? Did it electrify?
This is a case without a body.
The body does not come into it at all.

It is a case of vaporization.
The mouth first, its absence reported
In the second year. It had been insatiable
And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit
To wrinkle and dry.

The breasts next.
These were harder, two white stones.
The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet as water.
There was no absence of lips, there were two children,
But their bones showed, and the moon smiled.

Then the dry wood, the gates,
The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate.

We walk on air, Watson.
There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.
There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes. (*A: R* 31-32)

Fever 103°

Pure? What does it mean?
The tongues of hell
Are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus
Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable
Of licking clean

The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.
The tinder cries.
The indelible smell

Of a snuffed candle!
Love, love, the low smokes roll
From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.
Such yellow sullen smokes
Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe
Choking the aged and the meek,
The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,
The ghastly orchid
Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!
Radiation turned it white
And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.
The sin. The sin.

Darling, all night
I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.
The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.

Three days. Three nights.
Lemon water, chicken
Water, water make me retch.

I am too pure for you or anyone.
Your body
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern---

My head a moon
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin
Infinitely delicate and infinitely expensive.

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.
All by myself I am a huge camellia
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise---
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,
By whatever these pink things mean.
Not you, nor him
(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)---
To Paradise. (*A: R* 78-80)

Ariel

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels and knees!—The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
The brown arc
Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks---

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else

Hauls me through air---
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

White
Godiva, I unpeel---
Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (*A: R* 33-34)

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