History, Politics, and Progress: Sylvia Plath’s Hidden Narrative  
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Even in Sylvia Plath’s most distinctly personal poems there is a sense of alienation and anger with modern patterns of industrialism, capitalism, nuclear armament, and an oppressive social structure in the United States and Britain – all of which seemed to discount human individuality as a necessary aspect of progress. Plath believed that the forces of modernization had given world leaders “power for destruction” that was “real and universal.” As she brought children into the world, she began to wonder “if there was any point in trying” to create life in a world so set on self-annihilation.¹

One of the most publicized (and criticized) aspects of Plath’s references to global events has been her use of Holocaust imagery. While numerous critics attack the appropriateness of Plath’s Holocaust references, such criticisms have often failed to connect those metaphors to the poet’s greater worldview. The Holocaust became a powerful metaphor for her not only because of its immediate emotional significance, but because of the powerful connection Plath saw between its victims and her view of the future as it was being determined by world leaders.

Before 1962, Plath had referenced the Holocaust only once in poetry, in her 1957 poem “The Thin People.” In the poem, the Holocaust remains a distant aspect of history – “always with us,” but only in “bad dreams” and film (which makes the images seem, as the poem’s narrator says, “unreal”).² “The Thin People” is spoken from the point of view of a character who is distant to the reality of the Holocaust, yet haunted by the seemingly inhuman images that “do not obliterate/Themselves.”

In Ariel, however, Plath takes on an intense familiarity with the Holocaust – no longer a remote American bystander, she becomes a direct witness and, at times, a victim. It is this familiarity that critics have taken issue with: Irving Howe believes that Plath was “seemingly aware that the merely clinical can’t provide the materials for a satisfying poem.” He asserts that she enlarged the personal struggles she depicts “by fancying

herself as a victim of a Nazi father [as in “Daddy”].”³ It has also been said that Plath “did not earn [the right to use the events], that she did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place.”⁴

The *Ariel* poem “Getting There” anticipates many of those criticisms. The speaker, traveling by train across the bloody record of history, across “some war or other,” witnesses “Legs, arms piled outside/The tent of unending cries…. This brutality is faceless – it does not relate to any specific battle or war, but rather to all human instigated destruction. The witness brings a sense of futility to what she encounters as she attempts to bury a never-ending stream of bodies. That futility is compounded in the poem’s final lines: “[I] Step to you from the black car of Lethe,/Pure as a baby.”⁵ The black car of Lethe, a symbol of forgetfulness, implies that this baby will grow to blindly continue the process of destruction that has defined the narrator’s existence. Therefore, the pure baby that emerges at the end of the poem should not be taken as a symbol of hope, but rather as a reminder of the evils of the certainty of violence. Jacqueline Rose sees “Getting There” as self-defeating to Plath’s “drive to undo herself.”⁶ While the horrors of the world make the speaker wish to shed her humanity (and her history), such an action “can only work by means of the very forgetfulness which… ensures… that those horrors will be repeated.”⁷

“Getting There” is a fitting testament to Cold War tension and industrialization. The world, having torn itself apart in each of the previous generations, seemed prepared to do it once more in 1962. However, there is another aspect of inhumanity in the poem that seems to mark Plath’s late work. The train is “Insane for destination,” focused only on a victory in destruction. The men aboard who are not left to die are merely “Pumped ahead by these pistons, this blood/Into the next mile,/The next hour….” Just as the speaker emerges “Pure as a baby,” blind to what has happened, these men come back repeatedly, as if the purpose for birth is the contribution of blood to the mission of some “terrible brains/of Krupp.” The image of Krupp steel – cold, rigid, and industrial – reinforces the dehumanization of the landscape. In “Daddy,” the line “An engine, an

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⁷ Ibid., 148
engine/Chuffing me off like a Jew,” has a similar effect – the engines are unstoppable industrial forces aimed at enhancing the efficiency of mass-death. The daddy character terrifies because he is a product of his environment, his “neat mustache” a symbol of inhuman perfection. Characters defined by this soulless efficiency appear in a number of poems Plath composed during the final months of her life. Shortly before that time, the explicit details surrounding the indoctrination of Hitler’s army, and the efficiency with which it ran, became known following the trial of Holocaust architect Adolf Eichmann. Eichmann’s responses during the trial revealed his inability for independent thought, for which “he apologized, saying ‘Officialese is my only language.’” Such indoctrination was crucial for the “smooth running of the Nazi genocide machine” – killing was no longer the act of ending a life, but a “‘final solution,’ ‘evacuation’…and ‘special treatment.’” It served to maintain “order and sanity in the various widely diversified” branches of the Nazi regime, whose “co-operation was essential in this matter.”

Plath saw the “official” language of the authorities that governed her life - the British and (especially) American governments – as similarly dehumanizing. As Al Strangeways has illustrated, Plath emphasized the following passage in her copy of Erich Fromm’s *Escape from Freedom*: “Never have words been more misused in order to conceal truth than today. Betrayal of allies is called appeasement, military aggression is camouflaged as defense against attack.” In her 1962 essay “Context,” Plath asserts that such language – “abstract doubletalk of ‘peace’ or ‘implacable foes,’” was a weak disguise for policies that she believed threatened global security in a quest for hegemony.

Even as a high school student, Plath was aware of the self-destructive powers of militaristic policies within her own government. A 1950 article by Plath and classmate Perry Norton for the *Christian Science Monitor* expresses outrage at the American government and the Atomic Energy Commission over the continued production of the

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hydrogen bomb. The article questions the “paradox” of building weapons to enforce peace and decries the arms race as “futile.” The young writers suggest that instead of focusing on a race toward mutual assured destruction, leaders should redirect their energy towards “young men and women who are essentially idealistic” and believe “firmly in world peace.” Plath’s letters from 1960-61 express similar frustrations and fears. In a December 1961 letter to her mother, Plath discusses her reaction to an article in The Nation entitled “Juggernaut: The Warfare State,” which frightened her so much that she “couldn’t sleep for nights.” The article was one of many on the self-destructive nature of the arms race, and was part of the growing pool of information serving to expand Western consciousness on the dangers of nuclear war in the early 1960s.

Days before that consciousness exploded into worldwide terror with the Cuban Missile Crisis, Plath wrote “Fever 103,” her only poem that specifically mentions the bombing of Hiroshima. Here, radiation and the “yellow sullen smokes” of a hellish post-fallout landscape choke “the aged and the meek,/The weak/Hothouse baby in its crib,” and attach themselves, like “Hiroshima ash” to sinners. Similar to “Getting There,” Plath explores the idea of attaining purity through annihilation. The fever does not cease once its original function has been completed. It rolls across the landscape, choking with heat not only the “aged and the meek” and infants in cribs, but the hope of the next generation (if one is to exist), which has been left no record of the past. It is only reasonable, therefore, to predict that the process of fever and self-destruction will “trundle around the globe” to envelop the landscape again in future generations.

By referencing events as immediate and relevant as Hiroshima or the Holocaust, one could assert that Plath was violating her claim in “Context” that her poems were “not about the terrors of mass extinction,” or headlines, but rather relevant for all times. However, Plath succeeds in achieving the delicate balance an artist must maintain when alluding to world events. The Ariel poems do, as Plath says, grow “out of something closer to the bone than a general, shifting philanthropy,” and certainly could not be considered “religious or political propaganda.” Were it not for the artfulness and power

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16 Ibid., 231
of the work, surely whatever statement Plath intended for her readers would have been
lost. Plath was a poet and not a journalist, something she demands the reader understand
of all poets in “Context.” However, the statements made in Ariel on the male-dominated,
autocratic authorities who controlled the fate of society have come to be seen as one of
the critical aspects of the collection.\(^\text{17}\)

Throughout Ariel, Plath channels her anger over the extreme concentration and
paternalistic nature of world power. “Daddy” could be read as an invective against not
just a father figure, but the entire male-dominated system of power, while “Lady
Lazarus” is Plath’s warning against these pillars of authority: no longer will she suffer
their injustices. She will rise out of whatever remains are left in their destructive wake
and “eat men like air.”\(^\text{18}\)

Plath uses the same sense of fury through the Second Voice of the radio play
“Three Women.”\(^\text{19}\) The Second Voice is that of a woman who has suffered a miscarriage
and lashes out against not just a small fraternity that conspires against women, but all
men. Men surround the Second Voice constantly and exhibit the inhuman characteristics
that Plath observed in world leaders. They patronize her - the woman’s boss, seeing her
distraught appearance, laughs and asks, “Have you seen something awful?/You are so
white, suddenly.” The boss’ question is an example of the same doubletalk Plath had
decried in high school and in “Context.” It is meaningless – the boss expects no answer
besides affirmation that the woman is, indeed, fine. She describes her boss and the
swarming packs of disengaged men who surround her as “flat.” From their flatness,
“destructions,/ Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed.” They are
“jealous gods,” who “would have the whole world flat because they are.”

Flatness becomes every overpowering, omnipresent force of modernization that
compromises humanity. It becomes the wasted corpses outside of the train in “Getting
There,” and the “yellow sullen smokes” of “Fever 103.” The bulldozers roll out emotions
and passions until the world exists to serve the needs of these careless men. The Second
Voice struggles to resist the power of the “jealous gods.” While she does not quite
understand where their flatness comes from, she recognizes it as “something...like

cardboard.” Cardboard, a relatively new innovation during Plath’s lifetime, acts both as a symbol of modernity and the source of male power.

As the Second Voice wonders why her natural body cannot “conceive a face, a mouth,” as it has been made to, she sits dazed, ordering “Parts, bits, cogs, the shining multiples” – components symbolic of modernity. Her body is transitioning from its original intent, the production of life, into its new purpose, the production of technology, to feed industry and to satisfy her cardboard bosses. While “Leaves and petals attend” the First Voice of “Three Women,” who has successfully given birth, the Second Voice hears “Trains roar in [her] ears,” and she watches as the “silver track of time empties into the distance.” She is “found wanting,” as the sound of her feet now resembles “mechanical echoes” and the “Tap, tap, tap” of “steel pegs.” The Second Voice is a metaphor for humanity’s destination in a society that focuses so strongly on industrial progress and loses touch with its fundamental nature. She is the predecessor of the voice in “Getting There.” They stand on opposite ends of the track of time – one suffering the slow transition from humanity to mechanization, the other staring back at the wasteland left in the wake of “progress.”

Because so much of the Western world, especially the United States, believed total destruction not only assured but imminent, many began planning for survival in a post-apocalyptic world. In the U.S, an industry of protection for families in the event of nuclear attack played on the fears of the population. In the same 1961 letter she wrote discussing “Juggernaut: The Warfare State,” she mentions that “one of the most distressing features…is the public announcements of Americans arming against each other – the citizens of Nevada announcing they will turn out bombed and ill people from Los Angeles into the desert…and ministers and priests preaching that it is all right to shoot neighbors who try to come into one’s bomb shelters.”

It seemed that in America, citizens were not waiting for a disaster to turn on one another.

Plath was aware of the restrictive forces surrounding society at the time of her writing and understood the possibility that events as, or likely more, devastating than those of World War II could occur during her lifetime. Her poetic references to suicide, therefore, can often be seen as declarations of freedom from modernity and restrictive

cultural forces. Death, for Plath, is a right, a choice of the body, a symbol of 
independence. “Lady Lazarus” is the most overt example of this: the narrator’s “enemy” 
believes that he holds her identity, her “nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth” the scars 
of his power. She rebukes his pride – those parts of her body that show the suffering 
“Will vanish in a day,” and with them his power, his influence, and she will be “a smiling 
woman.” Although the “peanut-crunching crowd” gazes at the devastation of her identity 
for their entertainment, she remains “Nevertheless...the same, identical woman.” Her 
source of strength is the knowledge that for her, “Dying/Is an art, like everything else.” It 
is an art for the natural woman who repels the mechanized death of warfare, the utter 
facelessness of genocide, and who proves to a Nazi that dying is not a process of 
industrialization.

Plath presents self-destruction as the result of continual submission. “Lady 
Lazarus” has presumably suffered through each of her three lives and plotted endlessly 
on how best to rob back the humanity that was stolen from her. If “Lady Lazarus” is this 
woman’s final statement of defiance, then “Cut” is the initiation of her catharsis.\footnote{21} The 
speaker suffers a partially severed thumb, attached only by “a sort of hinge/Of skin,” after 
slipping while chopping onions. In the midst of an activity that could be considered a 
symbolic act of female servitude, she is stunned by the vision of blood flowing from her 
wound, awakened to her body’s sensitivity and the realization that she is alive. It is the 
woman in “Cut” who, after dwelling on how, “Out of a gap” in her flesh “A million 
soldiers run./Redcoats, every one,” begins to see the power she wields in claiming the 
right to destroy her own body out of passion and not methodic extermination.

As a political statement, however, suicide is certainly a dubious option. “Edge,”\footnote{22} 
perhaps the last poem Plath wrote, declares that “The woman is perfected” only once her 
body has died. Perfection, however, remains a toxic goal – in “The Munich 
Mannequins,” perfection “is terrible” because “it cannot have children.” The dead 
woman of “Edge,” who “wears the smile of accomplishment,” likewise can no longer 
reproduce. She coils her dead children into her, “One at each little/Pitcher of milk, now 
empty.” The children have avoided faceless death, have maintained their identity, and

\footnote{22} Sylvia Plath, “Edge,” The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath, 272.
have not died alone, but they also have failed to develop their own identities and exist apart from their mother.

Therefore, it is necessary to remember that Plath does not proclaim her natural independence from the mechanized world only in her poems dealing with self-destruction. In fact, it is her poems dealing with birth and children that provide Plath’s clearest voice against the patterns of 20th century history and politics. The language of the “baby” poems demonstrates that Plath believed, as she wrote in “Context” that “making in all its forms,” and especially the “making” of life, was the real issue of “every time.”

In a 1960 letter, Plath states: “The whole experience of birth and baby seem much deeper, much closer to the bone, than love and marriage…Frieda is my answer to the H-bomb.” Robin Peel believes that “[c]hildren are the catalyst in Plath’s politicization. Through looking at their world, she experienced the need to look beyond her own.”

“Nick and the Candlestick,” which Plath began during the midst of the Cuban Missile Crisis on October 24, 1962 and finished five days later, is her poetic answer to not only the H-bomb, but to the forces that brought the world to the brink of Armageddon. The poem’s speaker marvels at the appearance of a child – Nick – whom she refers to as “love,” in a frozen sub-terra world of “icicles,” “Black bat airs,” and “Waxy stalactites.” The narrator tells Nick “The pain/You wake to is not yours.” With his appearance, he brings the novelty of innocence into the world. He remains a clean slate, just as the child in “Getting There,” but Plath separates the two, stating that Nick is “the one/Solid the spaces lean on, envious.” He is not a product of the “black car of Lethe,” but a savior, a “baby in the barn,” who will bear the burden of suffering so future generations will not forget it.

Two poems from 1963 – “Child” and “Kindness” reinforce Plath’s belief in the power of new life. In “Child,” she marvels at the “clear eye” of an infant, “the one absolutely beautiful thing.” She does not call it “perfect” because even in its beauty,
there is room within it to be filled “with color and ducks,/The zoo of the new…”27 Plath wonders in “Kindness” what could be “so real as the cry of a child?/A rabbit’s cry may be wilder/But it has no soul.”28 These poems reinforce Plath’s belief that perfection is a dubious title and that progress can never achieve the power of natural life. The prospect of hope in an infant – the clean slate child, who waits to be filled with both the horrors of history and the “zoo of the new,” is a reminder of possibilities beyond perfection, beyond our material accomplishments, and beyond the horrors of history.

Works Cited


