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AL STRANGWAYS

“The Boot in the Face”: The Problem of the Holocaust in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath's poetry is generally judged on the contents of the posthumously published *Ariel* (1965), and often on a minority of poems within that volume, such as "Daddy" (1962) and "Lady Lazarus" (1962), which are most striking because of their inclusion of references to the Holocaust. Plath's whole oeuvre is frequently and superficially viewed as somehow "tainted" by the perceived egoism of her deployment of the Holocaust in these poems. Such straightforward condemnation, however, disguises the difficulties surrounding any judgment of Plath's treatment of this material—difficulties which are clearly exhibited by the respected critic George Steiner, who in 1965 applauded "Daddy" as "The 'Guernica' of modern poetry" ("Dying" 330), yet later, in 1969, declared that the extreme nature of Plath's late poems left him "uneasy": "Does any writer, does any human being other than an actual survivor, have the right to put on this death-rig?" ("In Extremis" 305). It is important to study both why and how the Holocaust appears in Plath's poetry, because our reaction to it as readers and the strategies Plath uses to approach it are tied to a wider problem relating to the place of the Holocaust in our culture. If we understand this, it is possible to place the disturbing appearance of the Holocaust in Plath's poems in its proper context, and to see this effect as symptomatic of a more general problem she recognizes, a conflict about

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the very uses of poetry itself. The problem of Plath's utilization of the Holocaust can be broadly divided into two parts: the motives behind her use of such material, and the actual appearance of it in her poetry. I will show that her motives were responsible, and that the often unsettling appearance of the Holocaust in her later poems stems from a complex of reasons concerning her divided view about the uses of poetry and the related conflict she explores between history and myth—a conflict which finds its ultimate focus in her consciousness of the importance of remembering such an event, but also of the voyeurism implicit in attempts at remembrance.

Although critics such as Jacqueline Rose and Margaret Dickie Uroff have gone some way toward arguing that Plath was genuinely and consistently interested in political issues, little attention has been given to the link between such political concerns and the Holocaust.¹ In Plath's academic life (the influence of which is neglected at cost by many critics and biographers), the Holocaust was a topic in both high school and college. A schoolmate recalls how Plath's history teacher at Wellesley High School, Raymond Chapman, confronted his class: "[W]eary of our affluent, teenaged complacency, [he] had photographic blow-ups made of the inmates of Bergen-Belsen and Buchenwald, Dachau and Auschwitz. These tragic, skeletal inmates looking out from their packed bunk beds in their ragged striped pyjamas stared down upon our crisply shampooed heads, giving us the shudders" (Inglis iv). Both Chapman's desire to disturb his students' complacency and the strategy he used foreshadow Plath's similar treatment of the Holocaust in her later poetry.²

In contrast to the emotional impact of this introduction, Plath's college professors encouraged the reasoned linking of Nazism with current political concerns. Erich Fromm's *The Fear of Freedom* (1941), a set text in one history course Plath took at Smith College, is characteristic of other texts she studied at the time in its discussion of the

1. Other critics—including Linda Wagner-Martin, Pamela J. Annas, and Steven Gould Axelrod—offer interesting comments on various aspects of Plath's political concerns and commitments.

2. This strategy works to reverse the gaze, so that observers/readers become conscious of the voyeurism of their gaze, as the object of the gaze returns it. I explore later how Plath effects a similar reversal in "Lady Lazarus."

staple American interest in individualism with reference to the problem of Nazism.³ Fromm argues that America's conformism stems from the same "fear of freedom" as the more extreme authoritarian horrors of Nazism. The book seems to have made a central, lasting impression on Plath—she heavily underlined and annotated her copy, and referred to Fromm's theories in essays written both at Smith and later at Cambridge ("The Age of Anxiety," "Some Preliminary Notes on Plato and Popper").

The impact of Fromm's book on Plath lies in its combination of psychology and history in a way that appears to have influenced her combination of the two in her later poetry. While accepting that Nazism's rise was "molded by socio-economic factors," Fromm saw it as rooted in a "psychological problem" (208) that also affected (albeit in a lesser way) American society. His exploration of Nazism concentrates on how "the Nazi system express[es] an extreme form of the character structure which we have called 'authoritarian' " (221), and he examines in detail examples of neurotic symptoms that are evident, in an extreme form, in Nazism. In Plath's poem "Daddy," the controversial lines "Every woman adores a Fascist, / The boot in the face, the brute / Brute heart of a brute like you" (*Collected Poems* 223) are trying to make a similar, though gendered, point. Throughout the poem, the speaker and "daddy," masochistic and sadistic figures respectively, appear dependent upon each other, and both figures' connections to Nazism (as Jew and Fascist) link their dependence on each other (lack of individuation) to Fromm's theorization. In the speaker's consciously disturbing overstatement that "Every woman adores a Fascist," Plath asserts that, while the archetypal male figure appearing in the rest of the poem (as father and lover) connotes the escape from freedom through sadism, the female figure's adoration of the Fascist is an extreme result of a stereotypically feminine escape from the feelings of aloneness associated with freedom, through masochistic strivings. Freedom, for the archetypal "feminine" figure in "Daddy," is freedom

3. The set text from Plath's politics course shares with Fromm's book similar concerns and a similar approach, in its discussion of the American tradition of individualism in relation to the Nazi and Communist regimes, and in its interest in individual freedom "not . . . [as] an absolute . . . rather [as] a means to the liberation of personality" (Corry 28).

from the authoritarian father figure. Political realities (in the form of Nazism) and psychological difficulties (in the form of neurosis) are inescapably linked for Fromm and for Plath. Thus Plath's lines in "Daddy" are both psychological and political. They are psychological not because "Daddy" is about Plath's relationship with her father, but in the sense that Plath uses the situation depicted in the poem to explore the dynamics of her attitude toward individualism. Her intellectual and moral approval of individualism is set against a consciously explored ambivalence in her desire for such freedom, an ambivalence which is summed up in the final line, so that "Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through" may mean either that the speaker is "through with daddy" or free from him, or that she is (in relation to the imagery of the black telephone in stanza 14) through *to* him, having made a final and inescapable connection with him—having, in short, given up her freedom.

As well as this staple American interest in individualism, Plath's other central political concern, as for most of her generation, was the prospect of nuclear war. With the cold war at its height in the late 1950s, the potential for a different, nuclear genocide made concerns about the Holocaust immediately relevant. The literary critic A. Alvarez (who was also a friend of Plath) notes that he "suggested (in a piece for the *Atlantic Monthly*, December 1962) that one of the reasons why the camps continue to keep such a tight hold on our imaginations is that we see in them a small-scale trial run for a nuclear war. . . . Then there are those other curious, upside-down similarities: the use of modern industrial processes for the mass production of corpses, with all the attendant paraphernalia of efficiency, meticulous paperwork, and bureaucratic organization; the deliberate annihilation not merely of lives but of identities, as in some paranoid vision of mass culture" (65–66). Elie Wiesel, a respected commentator on and survivor of the Holocaust, writing in the 1980s, also connects the genocide carried out by the Nazis and the more universal potential genocide of nuclear war: "Once upon a time it happened to my people, and now it happens to all people. And suddenly I said to myself, maybe the whole world, strangely, has turned Jewish. Everybody lives now facing the unknown. We are all, in a way, helpless" (qtd. in Lifton and Markusen 1). Other, later writers go further in their linking of anti-Semitic and poten-

tially nuclear holocausts, such as Robert Jay Lifton and Eric Markusen, whose study *The Genocidal Mentality: Nazi Holocaust and Nuclear Threat* explores detailed similarities between the way the Nazi system of the Holocaust and the nuclear narrative work.⁴ Plath, in “Mary’s Song” (1962), also connects the past atrocity of the Holocaust and the future threat of nuclear destruction, exploring the double-edged nature of technological “progress” that allows both space flight and efficient genocide—historically of the Jewish people, potentially of the whole world:

On the high

Precipice
That emptied one man into space
The ovens glowed like heavens, incandescent.

It is a heart,
This holocaust I walk in. . . .

(*Collected Poems* 257)

For Plath, the main link between the Holocaust and a potential nuclear war was the mind-numbing rhetoric that both “final solution” and cold war discourses employed.⁵ The widely publicized trial of Adolf Eichmann (1961–62) showed the importance of such a use of language in the smooth running of the Nazi genocide machinery. Hannah Arendt notes, in her report on the Eichmann trial: “all correspondence referring to the matter was subject to rigid ‘language rules.’ . . . the prescribed code names for killing were ‘final solution,’ ‘evacuation’ . . . and ‘special treatment.’ . . . for what-

4. Lifton and Markusen write: “Both Nazi and nuclear narratives are crucially sustained by certain psychological mechanisms that protect individual people from inwardly experiencing the harmful effects . . . of their own actions on others. . . . Various bureaucratic procedures, by divesting the individual of a sense of responsibility for destructive collective behavior, could greatly enhance numbing and doubling as well as brutalization. In the nuclear case, the domination of technology makes the numbing all the easier” (13).

5. More recently, critics such as Christopher Norris and Ian Whitehouse have explored in depth the particular rhetoric associated with the cold war. They write that it is “a language of entirely suasive, rhetorical or—in speech-act terms—performative character which achieves its purpose by evading the requirements of rational discourse” (293). The similarity between such modern theorizing and Hannah Arendt’s description of Nazi Germany’s “language rules” is clear.

ever other reasons the language rules may have been devised, they proved of enormous help in the maintenance of order and sanity in the various widely diversified services whose co-operation was essential in this matter" (85). As a student at Smith, Plath marked Fromm's general comments on this subject of rhetoric and aggression in *Escape from Freedom* with a determined "yes!": "Never have words been more misused in order to conceal the truth than today. Betrayal of allies is called appeasement, *military aggression is camouflaged as defense against attack* [Plath's emphasis]" (274). Plath's concern resurfaced in the period just before she wrote her Holocaust poems, during the Khrushchev-Kennedy stand-off, when she writes, both in her letters to her mother and in "Context," a piece published in *London Magazine* in 1962, about her fear of such a dissembling and dangerous "doubletalk."⁶

Yet Plath's concerns with the Holocaust were not purely disinterested, academic connections between past and present threats. Her awareness of the interconnection between the private and the political in her interest in the Holocaust is evident in a BBC radio interview she gave in 1962. When asked why she treats the Holocaust in her poetry, she declares, "In particular, my background is, may I say, German and Austrian. . . . and so my concern with concentration camps and so on is uniquely intense. And then, again, I'm rather a political person as well, so I suppose that's what part of it comes from" ("Sylvia Plath" 169). One might add, as James Young argues, that she also felt "she shared the era of victimhood, victimized by modern life at large as the Jews and Japanese had been victimized by specific events in modern life" (132). Plath's personalized treatment of the Holocaust stems, then, from a combination of two motives: her very "real" sense of connection (for whatever reasons) with the events, and her desire to combine the public and the personal in order to shock and cut

6. To her mother Plath writes, "I simply couldn't sleep for nights with all the warlike talk in the papers, such as Kennedy saying Khrushchev would 'have no place to hide,' and the armed forces manuals indoctrinating soldiers about the 'inevitable' war with our 'implacable foe' " (*Letters Home* 438). In the published article, she declares her belief in "the conservation of life of all people in all places, the jeopardizing of which no abstract doubletalk of 'peace' and 'implacable foes' can excuse" ("Context" 92).

through the distancing “doubletalk” she saw in contemporary conformist, cold war America.

Edward Alexander expresses a common concern when he writes of his unease at the sort of connections made not only by Plath but also by other writers who talk of an “era of victimhood” or who specifically connect Jewish and potential nuclear holocausts: “stealing the Holocaust . . . [is the process of] reduc[ing] Jews from the status of human beings to that of metaphors for other people’s sufferings. . . . we must keep steadily before our mind’s eye the truth that, as Cynthia Ozick once wrote, ‘Jews are not metaphors—not for poets, not for novelists, not for theologians, not for murderers, and never for anti-semites’ ” (48, 50). Alexander’s fear is that once the Holocaust and its Jewish victims become mythical metaphors for suffering, it is easy to extend such metaphoric treatment into the very anti-Semitic stereotyping that resulted in the Holocaust itself. This very genuine concern does not, however, take into account the impossibility of regulating the relationship between history and subjectivity. As Young declares, “To question whether or not the suffering of the Holocaust should be cast as a type implies that we have some sort of legislative control over which events figure others, which events enter consciousness” (140). Yet to accept the impossibility of legislating against the metaphORIZING of the Holocaust does not mean that all judgment about the deployment of such material should be suspended. In relation to Plath’s poetry, then, it is important to evaluate how effectively or appropriately Plath treats the Holocaust, and whether, indeed, she actually confronts the problem of metaphORIZING in her deployment of such material.

While I have shown that Plath’s motives for including Holocaust material in her poetry were responsible, the Holocaust appears only briefly in her work. Not only does Plath use such material within a short space of time, but in the poems in which the Holocaust does appear, it is treated almost tersely. Such dual brevity lends credence to the widespread view, noted by Rose, “that politics appears only opportunistically, as a form of self-aggrandizement” in her poetry (79). Apart from Plath’s oblique treatment of the subject in the earlier poem “The Thin People” (1957), Holocaust imagery appears only in the poems she wrote between October and November 1962, just after her separation from Ted Hughes and her return from

Devon to London.⁷ This timing can make it difficult not to feel that she distastefully used the persecution of the Jews to express her own feelings of being victimized by Hughes. Examination of wider circumstances, however, shows a number of other significant reasons for the suddenness of Plath's poetic treatment of the Holocaust. In general terms, this period saw, in addition to the "real-life" drama of the Eichmann trial, a number of star-studded Hollywood films—often adapted from successful books, plays, or television presentations—that brought the Holocaust to the forefront of the popular imagination, including *Judgment at Nuremberg* (1961), starring Spencer Tracey; *Exodus* (1960), starring Paul Newman and Sal Mineo; and *The Diary of Anne Frank* (1959). In relation to the particular two months in question, it is widely accepted that, for whatever reasons, Hughes's departure released for Plath a new sense of poetic freedom and led to the composition of poems on which her reputation largely rests. More specifically, Plath is adamant in her letters to her mother at this time that "I need no literary help from him. I am going to make my own way" ("Letters Home" ts., 16 Oct. 1962). Hughes was undeniably a powerful literary influence on Plath, and his departure may well have enabled her to use the sorts of topical imagery which he generally felt were better avoided.⁸ In addition, Plath was influenced by her new friendship with a South African Jewish couple, Gerry and Jillian Becker. She became close

7. Janice Markey argues that "The Thin People" is about the ever present memory of the victims of the Holocaust (94, 188). Clearly, this reading supports my contention about Plath's concern with remembrance of the event, yet the poem is quite different from her later treatments of the Holocaust. In the earlier poem, the Holocaust, while not directly referred to, appears positioned as the subject of the piece; in her late poems, Holocaust imagery is unmistakable, yet such imagery appears to be used to represent other, linked concerns. I explore Plath's consciousness of her use of the Holocaust as image below.

8. Plath's divergence from Hughes on this matter can be seen, for example, in her interpretation of his work. She writes to her mother about his interpretation of his play *The Harvesting*: "Don't take his elaborate metaphysical explanations too seriously. . . . I think [it] reads perfectly as a symbolic invasion of private lives and dreams by the mechanical war-law and inhumanity such as behind the germ-warfare laboratory in Maryland" (*Letters Home* 401–2, c. 17 Dec. 1960). It is also interesting to contrast Hughes's and Plath's responses to *London Magazine's* request for contemporary poets to write about the "context" of their poems. While Plath, as I explore, writes about the relation of her poetry to contemporary issues, Hughes mentions the social context of poetry only in general relation to all poets of all times, and then only to emphasize his point about the necessity of poets being true to their gift ("Context" 44–45).

friends with the Beckers, to the extent of sharing their meal on Christmas Day that year. Both Jillian and Gerry were keenly interested in the events of the Second World War and the Holocaust (Jillian later wrote a study of terrorism, *Hitler's Children*, and Gerry had read much about and visited a number of the concentration camps), and, as Ronald Hayman reports, their conversations often returned to the subject (3).

While it is relatively straightforward to chart the complex of reasons behind the abrupt chronological appearance of the Holocaust in Plath's poems, the briefness of the appearance of such material within individual poems poses more complicated problems. Certainly, as Young notes, Plath's poems are not strictly about the Holocaust (in the way the poems of survivors such as Primo Levi are), although, as I argued earlier with reference to the influence of Erich Fromm, neither are they as resolutely private as they often appear. Accepting this, however, and notwithstanding her genuine sense of connection to the cultural impact of its horrors, the Holocaust appears in Plath's poems in references that are often emblematic, seemingly untransformed by poetic craft. In "Daddy," for instance, it is not so much the style of "light verse" and the connection of the very personal to the very extreme horrors of, in Seamus Heaney's terms, "the history of other people's sorrows" (168) that causes unease. Rather, Plath combines myth and history (Electra, vampirism, and voodoo rub shoulders with the Holocaust) in such a way that the history of Nazi persecution of the Jews appears almost one-dimensional in comparison to the flexibility of her treatment of the poem's mythic and psychoanalytic aspects.

In "Fever 103°" (1962), this uneasy combination of history (here, in the form of Hiroshima) and myth is more readily apparent. The speaker's journey in the poem toward some sort of cathartic transformation works through mythic references to Cerberus and a myth-making account of the death of Isadora Duncan to a historical-political image of the effects of atomic destruction and Hiroshima. Images of "smokes," used to describe both Isadora's fatal scarves and nuclear holocaust, are pivotal in effecting the transition from the mythic to the historical imagery. This transitional imagery of fire and smoke is strongly reminiscent of the central image of the more successful "Mary's Song" (written one month later), where fire is

transformed into “thick palls” of smoke that link the poem’s movement from Christian myth to the Holocaust. In “Fever 103°,” however, the connection between myth and history is more tenuous. The mythic material frames the poem. It begins:

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.

(Collected Poems 231)

The conclusion of the poem, even taking into account its destabilizing ironic overtones, is one of mythic transcendence:

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

 Not him, nor him
 (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)—
 To Paradise.

In contrast to these sustained and vivid images, the historical-political image transitions in the center of the poem appear violently swift and lack the resonance of the mythic imagery. Concerns about modern science are explored when the “Hothouse baby in its crib” becomes “The ghastly orchid / . . . // Devilish leopard,” of which the reader is told (in relation to the drawbacks of such scientific wonders), “Radiation turned it white / And killed it in an hour.” These startlingly swift metaphoric transitions, while working in complete contrast to the more sustained progression of the frame of the poem, nevertheless appear to cohere, both together and to the rest of the poem. The lurching transition to “Greasing the bodies of adulterers / Like Hiroshima ash and eating in. / The sin. The sin,” is not, however, as well sustained. (In “Mary’s Song,” the transition from smoke to ash is also a lurch but is better supported by the more

integrated nature of the mythic framework.) The connections between radiation and Hiroshima, grease, ash, and human relations (in the form of “adulterers”) in this section of “Fever 103°” are too many, too contrived, and ultimately too weak to support the transition from the extended image play of scientific advances and drawbacks to the return to “the sin, the sin” of the mythic opening. Arguably, such apparently arbitrary swiftness represents the surreally illogical thought processes of the fevered subject; yet such an interpretation still leaves unexplained the very specific, unsettling contrast Plath sets up between the resonant nature of myth and the emblematic appearance of history.

The contrast between the resonance and diversity of Plath’s use of myth and the single dimensions of her use of history in the form of the Holocaust and Hiroshima is not simply due to Plath’s greater experience and confidence in handling the former, learned from using mythic material throughout her poetic career. Robert Graves, in *The White Goddess* (an influential book for Plath and for many mythmaking poets of the 1950s), separates history and myth in their relation to poetry. He writes of “the tendency of history to taint the purity of myth” (101) and is disdainful of “originality” in the poet who “take[s] his themes from anywhere he please[s]” (443), by which Graves appears to mean “occasional” rather than “mythic” themes. Yet while Plath agrees with Graves about the importance of a deep personal knowledge of and feeling for myth, she not only dissents from Graves’s view of the poetic dominance of myth, but extends his exhortation about the importance of a personal feeling for and connection to myth to reverse the dichotomy he sets up between myth as pure, history as impure.⁹ In her poetry, it is myth

9. Comparing Plath’s and Graves’s interest in myth shows clear similarities. Graves bewails the fact that “The myths too are wearing thin” because “Only a severe Classical education can impress them on a child’s mind strongly enough to give them emotional relevance, and the Classics no longer dominate the school curriculum either in Britain or the United States” (459). Hughes is adamant about the “emotional relevance” myth held for Plath: “The mention of Oedipus and the Greek Tragedians’ figures . . . may seem literary, but if one can take her dream life as evidence, these personalities were deeply involved in her affairs” (“Notes” 190). A notebook Plath kept in the period 1958–59, in which she made detailed notes on the mythological significance of subjects such as water, stones, and bulls, gives evidence of her intellectual interest in myth (Notebook).

that Plath appropriates (more and less successfully) for more idiosyncratic and personal ends (for instance, in her connection of myth with psychoanalytic themes in poems such as "Electra on Azalea Path" [1959]). Notwithstanding her sense of involvement with political and historical themes, it is history that stands as somehow unchanging and "pure," emblematic and suprapersonal in her poetry. It is this impersonal "purity" of emblem applied to such real horrors of history as the twentieth-century Holocaust that makes poems such as "Fever 103" and "Daddy" so discomfiting.

If, then, this is the root of the dilemma about Plath's treatment of the Holocaust, what were the reasons behind Plath's reversal of Graves's dichotomy? A statement Plath makes in 1962, in a BBC radio interview that accompanied a reading of her late poems, throws some light on this question. Peter Orr asked Plath where such socially and historically aware poems came from: "Do your poems tend now to come out of books rather than out of your own life?" Plath replied, famously, "No, no: I would not say that at all. I think my poems immediately come out of the sensuous and emotional experiences I have, but I must say I cannot sympathize with these cries from the heart that are informed by nothing except a needle or a knife, or whatever it is. . . . personal experience. . . . should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" ("Sylvia Plath" 169–70). Plath's characterization of "Hiroshima and Dachau and so on" as "the larger things" is significant in two ways. First, by declaring that personal experience should be relevant to such historical events, she apparently contradicts a statement she made in the same period, where she describes the "bigger things," more traditionally, as the timeless universals of loving and creating.¹⁰ This highlights a central conflict for Plath about the uses of poetry, rooted in the watershed period in which she wrote, where the movement was from seeing poetry as mythic and timelessly universal (as Graves did) to its being a more personal and didactic communica-

10. Plath writes: "My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. . . . For me, the real issues of our time are the issues of every time—the hurt and wonder of loving; making in all its forms—children, loaves of bread, paintings, buildings; and the conservation of life of all people in all places" ("Context" 92).

tion that comments upon the issues of the day.¹¹ Indeed, Plath even expresses her ambivalence within the same piece, when she writes, on the one hand, that the importance of poetry does not lie in its ability to communicate with or influence people—"Surely the great use of poetry is its pleasure—not its influence as religious or political propaganda. . . . I am not worried that poems reach relatively few people" ("Context" 92)—yet several lines later declares that she sees poetry as communicating something good, teaching or healing, by comparing poems' "distance" as reaching "farther than the words of a classroom teacher or the prescriptions of a doctor" (92). It is Plath's own ambivalence about these two uses of poetry that is reflected in the divergent critical reception her use of the Holocaust has generated: whether her poetry is mythic, and thus open to the charge that (notwithstanding the impossibility of legislating history and subjectivity) her figurings are either inappropriate or irresponsible, or whether her poetry is inescapably concerned with contemporary issues, directly confronting the problems surrounding the use of topical material as tropes.¹²

Secondly, in describing the Holocaust and nuclear bomb as the "larger things," Plath appears to perceive such historical events in expressly mythic terms. Jon Harris, in trying to determine why, in

11. Richard Gray notes this general movement in American poetry, away from the idea of poetry as (to quote Richard Wilbur, a strong influence on Plath's early poetry) "a conflict with disorder, not a message from one person to another" (221), and toward "more occasional subjects, whether political or private" (223).

12. In addition to the critics mentioned in the body of this work, other examples of the critical divide include, on the one hand, Brian Murdoch, who declares that "Plath's use of this imagery . . . cannot perhaps be justified" (124), and David Holbrook, who views Plath's references to the Holocaust as "a phantasy of being a concentration camp inmate," purely the result of her psychological illness and a way of "fostering . . . one's own sickness" (39). On the other hand, Allen Guttman describes Plath's use of the Holocaust as similar to that of many of her contemporaries (such as Robert Creeley and Anne Halley): "it is through autobiography that [she] move[s] from private to public . . . attempt[ing] to state [her] relation to the six million murdered Jews and to the eighty million Germans who murdered them or acquiesced in their murder" (109). A. R. Jones concludes his reading of "Daddy" by briefly noting its public sphere as successful, in that "the tortured mind of the heroine reflects the tortured mind of our age" (236). Many other critics, such as Leonard Sanzaro (67) and Stan Smith (218), view Plath's references to the Holocaust as successful in broad terms because of their connection of private to public, yet they fail to explore the specific tension Plath sets up between the private and the public, subject and metaphor.

the decades following World War II, very little poetry was written about the Holocaust in Britain, sees the reasons bound up in the mythic nature of the historical event. He writes, "the horrors were so extreme that they seem to belong to another world entirely" (213). In other words, the Holocaust assumed a mythic dimension because of its extremity and the difficulty of understanding it in human terms, due to the mechanical efficiency with which it was carried out, and the inconceivably large number of victims. In addition to this problem of conceptualization, Harris declares that traditional myth, through which poetry works, was devalued, as it was unable to enclose or make sense of the subject.

This problem of the relationship between myth and recent history is central to the difficulties surrounding literature and the Holocaust. Aharon Appelfeld writes:

By its nature, when it comes to describing reality, art always demands a certain intensification, for many and various reasons. However, that is not the case with the Holocaust. Everything in it already seems so thoroughly unreal, as if it no longer belongs to the experience of our generation, but to mythology. Thence comes the need to bring it down to the human realm. This is not a mechanical problem, but an essential one. . . . I do not mean to simplify, to attenuate, or to sweeten the horror, but to attempt to make the events speak through the individual and in his language.

(92)

Many critics who explore the "literature of atrocity" recognize this conflict, between the "naturally" mythic nature of the events, and the need, difficult in practice, to remove them from such an easily assimilated mythology. Irving Howe, for instance, writes, "it is a grave error to make, or 'elevate,' the Holocaust into an occurrence outside of history, a sort of diabolic visitation, for then we tacitly absolve its human agents of their responsibility" (175). Yet, as Harris recognizes, there are equal dangers in trying to "de-elevate" the Holocaust:

The problem, in fact, is twofold; first we must accept that the horrors were so extreme that they seem to belong to another world entirely, not the one we regularly write poetry about. . . . Secondly, in claiming that we can conceive of the horror of the Holocaust, we lay ourselves open to the

accusation that by imposing a critical form and structure on it we are *ipso facto* justifying it: by attributing a rationale of any sort to it, we admit that the Holocaust could be seen as a rational act.

(213)

This problem which Plath's treatment of the Holocaust exhibits, of exploring or representing the inconceivable (the mythic horror of the Holocaust) with the conceivable (be it a conceivable subject, such as personal difficulties, or a conceivable form), is also apparent in the Hollywood films produced at the time (as well as many similar cinematic treatments from then on, with the notable exception of *Shoah* [1983]). Annette Insdorf describes the difficulties inherent in cinematic treatments of the Holocaust, citing John J. O'Connor (a *New York Times* television critic), who writes: "*The Diary of Anne Frank* and *Judgment at Nuremberg* . . . depend on a confined theatrical setting, superfluous dialogue, star turns, classical editing (mainly with close-ups), and musical scores whose violins swell at dramatic moments. These studio productions essentially fit the bristling raw material of the Holocaust into an old narrative form, thus allowing the viewer to leave the theater feeling complacent instead of concerned or disturbed" (6–7). The act of trying to bring such horrific events to a popular audience involves a rationalizing and conventionalizing of the material, which ultimately runs the risk of trivializing the very events it is trying to commemorate. In Plath's case, the "old narrative form" is that of a lyrical expression through personalized mythmaking, within which the Holocaust fits uncomfortably. In addition to these wider difficulties of using traditional conventions to represent the horrors of the Holocaust, the expressly symbolic approach of poetry appears tainted by the abuse of metaphor in the Nazi regime's employment of the "language rules" cited above, an abuse of language that Plath herself feared in the less extreme cold war "doubletalk" discourse.¹³

It is these problems surrounding the conventionalization and

13. In relation to the "language rules," noted earlier, Lawrence Langer quotes José Ortega y Gasset on the symbolic approach to naming that which is too awful to name: "name it 'vicariously and surreptitiously.'" Langer writes, "The rulers of the Third Reich, especially the framers of the 'final solution,' put this principle to viciously cynical use (explaining in part why critics like George Steiner felt so strongly that language had been corrupted for an artistic expression of the theme)" (172).

metaphorizing of the Holocaust that not only inform Plath's late poems but are enacted by them. Lawrence Langer's tentative answer to the way out of the impasse between the impact of the Holocaust and the ethical problems associated with its depiction is through a creativity which works to collapse the distinction between history and the present, metaphor and subject. Langer writes of an episode in Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird*: "Episodes like the gouging out of the eyes seek to induce a sense of complicity with the extremity of cruelty and suffering in modern experience, from which history (with its customary distinctions between "then" and "now"), conspiring with the reader's reluctance to acknowledge such possibilities, unconsciously insulates us. The art of atrocity is the incarnation of such possibilities through language and metaphor" (175–76). Plath's late poems try to work in a similar way, "inducing a sense of complicity" by combining the events with an intimate tone and material. Yet instead of trying directly to present the cruelty of the Holocaust itself, the feeling Plath's poems generate is one of complicity in the easy assimilation of such past cruelties. Her poems try to avoid the anonymity and the amnesia contingent on the "them and us" and "then and now" distinctions that characterize the perception of history by highlighting her use of the Holocaust as metaphor. In such poems, readers are *meant* to feel uncomfortable with the suprapersonal, mythical depiction of Jewish suffering, feeling somehow implicated (because of their traditional identification with the lyric persona) in the voyeurism such an assimilation of the Holocaust implies. This feeling of implication that Plath's poems generate may be viewed in broad terms as their success. Such poems are culturally valuable *because* the appearance of the Holocaust in them is like a "boot in the face"—certainly, few readers leave them feeling "complacent instead of concerned or disturbed."

While the ultimately inconceivable nature of the horror of the Holocaust means that Plath cannot mobilize the kinds of overt reflexivity apparent in her treatment of traditional myth in, for example, "Electra on Azalea Path," her poems that deal with the Holocaust also work to comment on metapoetic concerns. In "Lady Lazarus," for example, Plath collapses the "them and us" distinction by confronting readers with their voyeurism in looking at the

subject of the poem. To apply Teresa De Lauretis's theorizing of the cinematic positioning of women to Plath's poem, in "Lady Lazarus," the speaker's consciousness of her performance for the readers (who are implicitly part of the "peanut-crunching crowd") works to reverse the gaze of the readers so that they become "overlooked in the act of overlooking" (206). By extension, in her parodic overstatement (Lady Lazarus as archetypal victim, archetypal object of the gaze) Plath highlights the performative (that is, constructed rather than essential) nature of the speaker's positioning as object of the gaze, and so (to extend Judith Butler's terms), Lady Lazarus enacts a performance that attempts to "compel a reconsideration of the *place* and stability" of her positioning, and to "enact and reveal the performativity" of her representation (139). This sense of performativity and the reversal of gaze likewise extends, in "Lady Lazarus," to compel reconsideration not only of the conventional positioning of the woman as object, and of the voyeurism implicit in all lyric poetry, but also of the historical metaphors as objects of the gaze. Readers feel implicated in the poem's straightforward assignment and metaphorizing of the speaker in her role as object and performer, and contingently are made to feel uncomfortable about their similar easy assimilation of the imagery (of the suffering of the Jews) that the speaker uses.¹⁴ In "Daddy," a similar relationship between reader, speaker, and metaphor is at work. Like "Lady Lazarus," "Daddy" does not attempt to depict the suffering directly for our view (an impossible task, for the reasons given above) but works by confronting readers with, and compounding the problematic distinctions and connections between, the private and the historical (our lives and their suffering). In other words, readers' reactions of unease, discomfort, and outrage are necessarily a response to the surface, the poem itself, rather than to the events the poem uses as metaphors for its subject (be it about individualism, freedom, or memory), because the events themselves are not graspable. The poem is effective because it

14. Saul Friedlander's recent work—*Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution* (1992) and *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (1993)—offers some fascinating angles on similar questions about the difficulties and strategies of representing the horrors of Nazism and the Holocaust.

leaves readers in no clear or easy position in relation to the voyeuristic gazes operating within it (of reader at speaker, reader at poet, poet at speaker, and all at the events which are metaphorized) and able to take no unproblematic stance regarding the uses of metaphor involved.

Ultimately, then, George Steiner's divided attitude toward Plath's treatment of such material most adequately and accurately represents the effect and effectiveness of Plath's project—a project meant to confront readers with their implication in the viewing and metaphorizing of others' lives and suffering, and aimed at foregrounding the complex instability of the boundaries between myth and reality that forms the root of the problematic placement of the Holocaust in our society. The reason such reflexivity, and its resulting complexity, is so often missed is because Plath's conflict between the idea of poetry as timeless mythic object or as political and/or personal communication remains unresolved, or, indeed, unresolvable, due to the modern relation between history and myth. Her critics often fail to see Plath's balanced ambivalence and appear trapped in one of two extremes of judgment about the meanings of, and motives behind, her poetry. Two interpretations of "Getting There" (1962) sum up this divide. Judith Kroll reads the poem "as the enactment of a willingly undertaken purgatorial ritual, in which the true self, purified by Lethe of all false encumbrances [of the past] finally emerges. . . . [d]iscarding the 'old bandages' . . . [in] a symbol[ic] resurrection" (160–61). In this interpretation, indeed, the Holocaust has been abused for its immediate value as a metaphor for the past. Margaret Dickie Uroff, however, perceives the poem as expressing a view opposed to that read by Kroll. She writes: "the train that drags itself through the battlefields of history ultimately becomes the 'black car of Lethe,' a symbol of the forgetfulness of the past. It becomes a cradle, nurturing a new generation of killers: the pure baby who steps from it will perpetuate murder because she has forgotten the world's past history of murderousness"(54). These two readings reflect Plath's own foregrounding of her culturally situated conflict about the uses of poetry, between the mythic desire that poetry transcend history and the "committed" purpose that it name history and thus remember it. An understanding of the

“boot in the face” effect of Plath’s treatment of the Holocaust, then, enables the recognition that the dissonances between history and myth in her poetry are not an aesthetic problem but work to prohibit complaisance about the definitions of—and the relationship between—myth, history, and poetry in the post-Holocaust world.

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