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Lisa Narbeshuber

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The Poetics of Torture: The Spectacle of Sylvia Plath's Poetry

Lisa Narbeshuber

Sylvia Plath, in her most ambitious poems, tackles the problem of female selfhood. What is it? Within a world where women are contained by rigid scripts and relegated to silence, how can they revolt? On the one hand, she gives us poems like "The Applicant" and "The Munich Mannequins," where women, reduced to nothing more than commodities, appear robbed of their humanity. On the other hand, in poems such as "Lady Lazarus," she presents selves in revolt, resisting assimilation to patriarchal ideals. In both cases, Plath's poetry reacts against the absence, especially for women, of a public space, indeed a language for debate, wherein one might make visible and deconstruct the given order of things. In the following, I argue that Plath deliberately blurs the borders between the public and the private in two of the most celebrated, controversial, and critiqued of her poems: "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." Transforming the conventional female body of the 1950s into a kind of transgressive dialect, Plath makes her personae speak in and to a public realm dominated by male desires. Giving the female construct voice, so to speak, Plath prefigures recent trends in feminist criticism that read the female body as text. Susan Bordo, for example, sees in the emergence of agoraphobia in the 1950s and anorexia in the 1980s rebellious performances: The public wants to see the woman in the home, so the woman responds by fearing to go out (agoraphobia); the public wants to see the woman thin, so the woman starves herself (anorexia). Bordo summarizes her argument in a language that echoes Plath's poetic desires:

In hysteria, agoraphobia, and anorexia, then, the woman's body may be viewed as a surface on which conventional constructions of femininity are exposed starkly to view, through their inscription in extreme or hyperliteral form. They are written, of course,

in language of horrible suffering. It is as though these bodies are speaking to us of the pathology and violence that lurks just around the corner, waiting at the horizon of "normal" femininity. It is no wonder that a steady motif in the feminist literature on female disorder is that of pathology as embodied ~~protest~~ unconscious, inchoate, and counterproductive protest without an effective language, voice, or politics, but protest nonetheless. (175)

As we will see, in order to bring their private selves into the public realm, the speakers in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" become public performers and rebellious exaggerators, very much like Bordo's agoraphobic and anorexic. They, too, may have trouble communicating (as we will see most obviously in "Daddy"), but this serves to reveal their public voicelessness. Plath's speakers should not be read as pathological case studies; rather it is the culture, written on their bodies, which is exposed as pathological. Likewise, their acts of rebellion almost necessarily contain an unacceptable, self-destructive side. In various ways, Plath brashly pairs the private with the public, to the point where the personal all but dissolves into a ludicrous public performance or event, with the body as displayed object.

This desire in Plath's poetry to trace the connection between the private and the public has not been explored in any depth in Plath criticism.¹ Instead, most criticism reads "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" around the psychology of Plath's life, if not exclusively as biography, then as the feminist struggles of a victorious woman over a man or men. For example, critics regard the irrepressible "Lady Lazarus" as "a triumph of vitality" (Broe 175); a journey "from a life of abuse and nightmare to one of liberation" (Markey 122); a wonderful, "searingly self-confident" (Van Dyne 55) exhibition of the speaker's "true identity as a triumphant resurrecting goddess, the fully liberated, fiery true self ..." (Kroll 118-9); an expression of the struggling woman artist's "independent creative powers ... She is neither mad nor 'ugly and hairy,' but a phoenix, a flame of released bodily energy" (Bundtzen 33-4). But such statements are an expression of the commentators' need to find wholeness and steady thought in Plath's poetry, defending her against charges of psychosis, and of a need to identify the emergence of some mighty "Ur-Woman."² By focusing on the ~~conclusion~~ of such poems as "Lady Lazarus" and limiting their commentary in this way, Plath commentators echo each other's desires to recover some imaginary totality, despite imagery to the contrary. The poems do not bear out the critics' assumptions. When Plath evokes images of wholeness in

"Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus," she inevitably undercuts them, emphasizing the systematic play of elements and the constructedness of meanings. She moves out of the skin of the *individual* and sketches out the social game, the *intersubjective* complexes rather than the *inner strife* that Judith Kroll and other Plath critics focus on. Plath de-emphasizes identity and emphasizes the roles of various systems. Plath's poetry, then, does not so much demonstrate the crushing of the authentic or "real" self by the patriarchal, as show the role of (social) fantasy in the construction of the subject. More than an attack on the male (or in particular her husband or father), her poetry confronts the mentality of the status quo that accepts the ideology of the individual and notions of the natural, or even the personal, self. She unveils and critiques the private, the hidden, and the normalized by parodying various public discourses of power (gendered male), while portraying her personae as objects of those discourses and, thereby, both the agents and the spectacles of punishment.

Plath creates an arena for public debate in her poetry by relentlessly placing everyday discursive forms (and objects) in quotation marks. She parodies, not just literary form, but everything from machinery to the mythology of the *individual*. But for Plath, ideally, parody does not reform; it destroys. For some critics, Plath's later poetry attempts only an "imitative recasting" (Linda Hutcheon's description of parody). Hutcheon writes how Plath's work "has been seen as a feminist reworking (or parody) of the modes of male modernism which she inherited" (54). But Plath's parodic subversions are not primarily concerned with minor literary debates, such as between the modernist and the romantic. Frederick Buell, for example, writes that, in poems such as "Lady Lazarus," Plath mocks romantic ideas of poetic "incarnation" as "self-destructive unity" (149). Similarly, Toni Saldivar writes how Plath mocks the American literary tradition, perpetuated by Harold Bloom, "of the highly individualistic gnostic imagination that tries to see through the given world in order to see itself in some reassuring self-generated formal identity" (112), while Mary Lynn Broe reads "Daddy" as "pure self-parody," in which "the metaphorical murder of the father dwindles into Hollywood spectacle" (172). These writers are not wrong in their assessments, but, as Hutcheon warns, parody may be limited, in that it often remains conservatively locked within the terms of the discourse it ridicules. Plath sets her sights beyond literary battles or Oedipal struggles.

Not restricting herself to "pure" parody, she attempts to reinvent her world and her place in it. "Daddy," for example, does not so much "dwindle" as explode into Hollywood spectacle, careful to itemize the debris. "Daddy" makes the invisible visible, the private public, cracking open the interior spaces traditionally designated for women. Plath stages a public trial, turning the commonplace into spectacle, revealing form as deformity, the natural as commodity, domestic life as torture.

It is not surprising, then, that Plath has been lambasted so often for transgressing "good taste." Nevertheless, her "bad form," including her spectacles of abuse, provides a key to understanding her later work. Jacqueline Rose, in her analysis of "Daddy," devotes the entire chapter to the debate over Plath's "inappropriate" use of metaphor. Rose begins, "For a writer who has so consistently produced outrage in her critics, nothing has produced the outrage generated by Sylvia Plath's allusions to the Holocaust in her poetry, and nothing the outrage occasioned by 'Daddy,' which is just one of the poems in which those allusions appear" (205). In defence of Plath's outrageous comparisons, Rose, noting how Plath moves backwards and forwards between the German "Ich" and the English "I," argues that "Daddy" represents, in part, "a crisis of language and identity" (228); after all, Plath was second-generation German: "What the poem presents us with, therefore, is precisely the problem of trying to claim a relationship to an event in which—the poem makes it quite clear—the speaker did not participate" (228). Rose asks in conclusion, "Who can say that these were not difficulties which [Sylvia Plath] experienced in her very person?" (229). In her struggle to show that Plath has "earned" the right to represent the Holocaust ("Whatever her father did to her, it could not have been what the Germans did to the Jews," believes Leon Wieseltier [20]), Rose feels it necessary to turn her into a persecuted German. Her persecution for being a woman (daughter, wife), as the poem would have it, is simply not enough.

James Fenton, although agreeing with Rose, throws out the suggestion that Plath may have believed she actually was Jewish:

Fear of persecution for being a German, whether her own fear or her mother's, would certainly be part of her heritage. And if she thought of her father as a persecuting figure (rightly or wrongly is not an issue), and she knew her father to be Prussian, then it is by no means far-fetched for her to have wondered whether she might not be a Jew (either from her mother's side or through sim-

ply not knowing quite what a Jew was, but knowing they were persecuted). (14)

Interestingly, these critics' rationalizations of her Nazi/Jewish imagery return her poems to autobiography, to the private and the individual, even while Plath's metaphors cry out for a broader historical and political context. By radically redefining herself in terms of historically grounded, collective worlds, Plath (whether justified or not) successfully displaces the solitary, private individual. When identifying herself with the concentration camp Jew, she compares herself to a community, just as she identifies her father and husband, who play the tormenting Nazis, as a part of an historical political organization. In all of this, Plath suggests that her own contemporary experience—everyday conceptions of femininity, individualism, and the privacy of the family—conforms to collective patterns. She fights the disappearance of the public, its retreat to the privacy of the home, and "seriality" in general.³ One cannot see the whole from these little pockets of private perception. Stressing, then, the collective engineering of so-called "private experience," Plath charts a metaphorical map, linking invisible worlds to the cultural processes that inform them.

"Daddy," notoriously, re-stages secret family conflicts between parents and children, husbands and wives. It lifts a veil covering shameful social relations. And just as significantly, Plath "talks back." The opening lines vividly picture a claustrophobic domestic space:

You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo. (1-5) ⁴

This (cultural) space allows for little movement or even speech—she can't "breathe or Achoo." For Plath, the domestic realm stands out in the open, but unnoticed, hidden, or—as the poem suggests—underfoot. Plath wants to dismantle the interiority of the "shoe"-house, revealing its contents. As the progression of "Daddy" underscores, her new theatre is external, a decidedly worldly place, full of worldly struggles and a worldly language: "Atlantic" (11), "Polish town[s]" (16), "wars" (13), "Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen" (33), "[t]he snows of the Tyrol, the clear beer of Vienna" (36), "swastika[s]" (43), "Fascist[s]" (48), and so forth.

In "Daddy," private "family matters" link up with large historical struggles, social organizations, and linguistic systems. Moving from the private, "shoe"-world to the just as stifling political world, consciousness can grasp the machinery that produces and oppresses it. The German language acts like a repressive, mechanical power, bearing down on the collective body:

And the language obscene
 An engine, an engine
 Chuffing me off like a Jew.
 A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
 I began to talk like a Jew.
 I think I may well be a Jew. (30-5)

In general, Plath suggests the power of language ("an engine") to subject the self. But more specifically, she implies that certain styles of discourse violate body and soul more than others. She emphasizes the word "obscene" by placing it at the end of the stanza. To her, German is "the language obscene," but the word "obscene," falling where it does, also introduces her own words: as if to suggest her situation and her metaphors are indecent. Through such audacious, dramatic comparisons, Plath pictures human relationships as violent and grotesque *spectacles*, giving individual, private relationships public currency. At the same time, by having to ~~force~~ the domestic into the public arena, she highlights how these relationships normally remain serialized and closed off from social life.

Within this world of conflict, Plath, as I suggested earlier, "talks back," fantasizing possible alternatives to the pact of silence common among families. She occupies the position of speechlessness, but she struggles to respond:

I never could talk to you.
 The tongue stuck in my jaw.
 It stuck in a barb wire snare.
 Ich, ich, ich, ich,
 I could hardly speak. (24-8)

Even though she may stutter—a shameful defect?—the persona does not hide her deficiency but gives voice to her fear and anger. Her fixed "ich" may also be seen to mirror the stuttering repetition of the oppressor's language ("An engine, an engine"), which "chuffs" out the same sound over and over again, revealing itself as a homogenizing, mechanical force. She responds in kind, with her

similarly aggressive “obscene” language: She speaks crudely, and in a most unladylike way, of her “Polack friend” (20) and says to her father, “Daddy, daddy, you bastard” (80). By speaking not only “the language obscene” but also the actual German language (“Ich, ich, ich, ich”), the persona demonstrates that, even as she attempts to escape her oppressor’s (male) language, it makes heavy claims on her. It may even suggest her complicity.⁵ Her underlying desire to be desired by her father (“[e]very woman adores a fascist” [48]) has caused her, at times, to play along with the terms of his game, living within the rigid configurations of his language. “Daddy” embodies tremendous socio-psychological tension: for Plath utilizes a language of mastery⁶ (clarity, directness, multiple worldly allusions) that she simultaneously subverts with her startling array of marginal voices (with nursery rhymes, baby talk, speech defects, “hysteria”). But Plath’s parody, while revealing submission to cultural paradigms, transcends ridicule. Plath dramatizes both her imprisonment in the oppressor’s script – doing the important work of laying out dominant discursive codes – and the important points of resistance, on the margins.

Within these boundaries, her persona fantasizes herself as powerful, overpowering her tormentors, as when she imagines killing them (“If I’ve killed one man, I’ve killed two –” [71]), even driving a stake into her father’s heart. Significantly, in the final act, she desires a collective judgement of this drama:

And the villagers never liked you.
They are dancing and stamping on you.
They always ~~knew~~ it was you. (77–9)

She does not want to be alone in her condemnation of the Other. For Plath, this collective problem deserves a collective response, and she aims to give it one.

It should be noted, especially in the case of Plath, whose biography attracts so much attention, how she moves from the literary universe to the “real world.” Jacqueline Rose tells how an “old friend wrote Plath’s mother on publication of the poem in the review of *Ariel* in *Time* in 1966 to insist that Plath’s father had been nothing like the image in the poem” (229). As this quotation demonstrates, Plath’s poems, intentionally or not, perform a sort of “talk back” or “back talk,” a rudely public, counter-discourse that rejects the family code of silence. By making feelings and ideas public, Plath risks a great

deal. She risks banishment by her family and by a public anxious to preserve the status quo of middle-class family life.

In "Daddy," Plath reframes the private in terms of a public discourse, framing personal, family conflicts within larger cultural processes (language, homogenization, technology, politics). Making abstract processes concrete, she gives human faces to collective activities, forcing them into a dramatic, conflictual dialogue. In much of her late poetry, Plath repeatedly imagines a fragile self (very often ~~fen~~ inized), subject to inhuman, and specifically modern, processes of rationalization (i.e., where the self is "paved over" by logic, statistics, uniformity, etc., processes that are most often viewed, by her, as patriarchal). For example, in "Face Lift" and "In Plaster," the uniqueness of the old self is literally erased or transformed, while in "Tulips," "The Surgeon at 2 a.m.," and ~~Three Women: A Poem for Three Voices~~, the female patient blends into the sterilized, white, homogenous, flat (and patriarchal) surroundings of the hospital, effectively losing her identity or uniqueness. As Renée Curry writes with respect to "In Plaster": "The wintry whiteness of the white walls presses in on the speaker ... The pressure results in eradication of herself and obliteration of the volatility of life" (156). Some critics, including Linda Wagner-Martin (64-5), read the white room in "In Plaster" as representing a place of peace, a haven from social obligations, which is disturbed by the emergence of the blood-red tulips. For me, the persona's desire to melt into the white surroundings suggests the seductive nature of the institution, encouraging her to abandon her difference and become "uniform," like the passing nurses. I argue that, for Plath, rationalized worlds eliminate any form of public stage. In ~~Three Women~~, conversation retreats underground in the face of the hospital's overarching discourse. The three never speak to each other or, for that matter, anyone else. The poem's sharp stanzaic divisions structurally divide one voice from the next. Against this absence of public forum, Plath, in some of her late poems, exposes and challenges the deep rift between non-public and public types of discourse, between individual and collective experiences and responses.

In "Lady Lazarus," Plath puts her persona on display, in theatrical and carnivalesque fashion, before the "peanut-crunching crowd" (26). The elements of a reified social matrix come alive, transformed into visible actors capable of disrupting the commodified world through dialogue, gesture, and sheer physical presence: through a "theatrical/ Comeback in broad day" (51-2). As in "Daddy," the

death she transcends is the commodification of her body. First, she again identifies with persecuted Jews, the marginalized and hidden. Secondly, her body has been stolen from her and divided into diverse, saleable objects. These body parts/objects belong to the Nazis, who do with them as they like. Her skin, like an electric light source, shines "[b]right as a Nazi lampshade" (5). The "masters" convert her foot⁷ into a lifeless "paperweight" (7) and her face into "a featureless, fine/ Jew linen" (8-9). The poem's frequently enjambed lines, which appear to sharply break, and yet link, each stanza of three, reflect these images of broken body parts.

Although Lady Lazarus bears witness to her own perverse commodification (is there any other kind?), her theatrics somehow resurrect a powerful self-possession. She raises the commodity to a sort of blinding "nakedness," so that her story no longer belongs to the master. The word "nakedness," here, reflects John Berger's use of it; he writes, "To be naked is to be oneself" (54). Lady Lazarus tries to assume herself. She wants to subvert a metaphorical "nudity" that Plath describes in poems like "The Applicant" and "The Munich Mannequins." Berger opposes the terms "nudity" and "nakedness": "To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude. (The site of it as an object stimulates the use of it as an object.)" (54). Both "The Applicant" and "The Munich Mannequins" powerfully dramatize their female figures' obscene "nudity." They become pure, voiceless surfaces. In "The Applicant," the wife, literally a piece of property (a "living doll" [33], "that" [29], or "it" [34-40]), a "guaranteed" (15), completely obedient slave, awaits purchase by the male customer:

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.
You have a hole, it's a poultice.
You have an eye, it's an image. (36-8)

The parallelism of these lines sets up the male as consumer to her object. The potential wife does not control her own body or actions. In "The Munich Mannequins," Plath takes the image of socially "tailored" woman to its extreme conclusion. The metaphorical mannequins experience no pleasure; they appear only for the pleasure of others—for the tailor who takes apart, dresses, and assembles "her," and for the consumer who watches "her." Not even "living doll[s]" (emphasis added) that "can sew" (34) or "cook" (34) or "talk" (35) as they do in "The Applicant," these manufactured women appear only for show.

These poems practically explode from the stress imposed on the female selves. Their strangling objectification makes their silence that much more painful: Plath says the mannequins are "[i]ntolerable, without mind" (15). The wife-product and the mannequins are, in a way, invisible spectacles. "To be on display," writes Berger, "is to have the surface of one's own skin, the hairs of one's own body, turned into a disguise which, in that situation, can never be discarded" (54). By removing mind so absolutely, though, Plath puts on display the women's "naked" and twisted corpses,

So, in their sulfur loveliness, in their smiles
These mannequins lean tonight
In Munich, morgue between Paris and Rome, (10-2)

which have been hidden, in part, by the fantasy that she wants it, that she desires the consuming male gaze. Plath leaves the women only "their" bodies, without the pretence of voice or free will, and, by doing so, makes them speak their grotesqueness. The mannequins are "[o]range lollies" (14) (Lolita-like, innocently sexually seductive) on "silver sticks" (14) for men to consume. For Plath, the lack of mind ("Voicelessness" 27, the wifely script) is obscene. How can this object recover itself? Or, as Luce Irigaray puts it, "How can such objects of use and transaction claim the right to speak and to participate in exchange in general?" (84). Plath answers with "Lady Lazarus."

As Susan Van Dyne observes with respect to "Lady Lazarus," "Lazarus is simultaneously the performer who suffers and the director who calculates suffering's effect" (57). Unlike the wife-product or the Munich mannequins, Lady Lazarus plays both subject and object of her own torture, a frighteningly animated (humanized) lampshade, material witness of its own production. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler posits that the social construction of gender can be subverted through theatrical or parodic acts. Certainly, in "Lady Lazarus," the emergence of the human face, to face the inhuman, creates an air of instability and scandal. Consistent with Susan Bordo's understanding of the woman who becomes anorexic, a dramatic conflict emerges when the desires of the (female) object arise and revolt against what she is, a sort of envelope of death. Lady Lazarus demands her own exposure, to have the skin-like napkin covering her peeled off:

Peel off the napkin
O my enemy.
Do I terrify? – (10–2)

This public torture both titillates and threatens. Lady Lazarus seductively conflates the prison camp with a pornographic world of male desire:

The peanut-crunching crowd
Shoves in to see
Them unwrap me hand and foot –
The big strip tease. (26–9)

The crowd has come to witness the effects of her suicide/attempted suicide, “an art, like everything else” (44) that she does “exceptionally well” (45). But far from just watching, they also act upon her, complicit in dissecting her body. Perhaps her sacrifice entails conveying to the disenfranchised crowd (the lower classes in the proverbial peanut gallery) her body as a body of knowledge, their history held up to them.

Plath’s drama superimposes a public world over a world that keeps pain and death silent and secret. In this respect, “Lady Lazarus” echoes Foucault’s strategic idealization, in *Discipline and Punish*, of pre-modern communal discourse. In light of Foucault’s work, one can see “Lady Lazarus” as an attempt to recover the ritual (found in pre-modern models of punishment) displaced by what Foucault describes as the contemporary, “coercive, corporal, solitary, secret model of the power to punish” (131). Plath’s poetic arena echoes a return to the earlier, “representative, scenic, signifying, public, collective model” (131). Foucault’s extended description and documentation of Damians, the condemned, details the intense symbolism invested in the prisoner’s body. In effect, the condemned man acted out a theatrical battle between the king he had offended and himself. Power displayed itself before the community. According to Foucault, this life-and-death struggle was highly unstable, so that the condemned man, by addressing the crowd, might even persuade them into taking his side and attacking the judges. Similarly, Plath introduces a symbolic ritual wherein she can present the body as evidence, and wherein she can directly address the crowd. Each piece of *Lady Lazarus* is flagrantly on show, in much the same way as the earliest condemned criminals were on display during public tortures and executions. Rather than being kept quietly contained and hidden, as in modern methods of imprisonment, her torture plays in full view of the public:

Gentlemen, ladies
These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bones,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman. (30–4)

Executions traditionally allow for the convict's "last words"; and the idea of "last words" has a unique potency here. Like a convict before his execution,⁸ Lady Lazarus, under the protection of her own death, can say anything. She has nothing left to lose, since nothing remains of her to punish or prohibit. In this respect, she occupies a position of strength, power, and privilege, which makes her all the more fascinating and attractive to her witnesses. Hence, as Foucault argues, the public execution condemns, while it glorifies, the criminal. The person we watch facing his or her death fascinates on the face of it, while the crime that got him or her there, especially if considered monstrous, suggests the work of an exceptional nature. Foucault clearly prefers the dramatic public nature of the event, the visibility of the players (crowd, judges, criminal, king), and the revolutionary potential of the ritualistic dialogue to the removed, rational procedures of modernity. The witnesses are participants in the execution. They are even "the possible and indirect victim[s] of this execution" (68), as they may admire or identify with the criminal. So just as a whole aspect of the carnival played within the public execution, "which ought to show only the terrorizing power of the prince" (61), the status quo here is put at risk: Authority may be mocked and the criminal transformed into a hero. In the case of Lady Lazarus, she actually orchestrates the public performance of her own death.

Plath's position also bears striking resemblance to the situations of self-flagellating female mystics in the late middle ages. According to Laurie Finke in *Feminist Theory, Women's Writing*, female orthodox mystics would ritualistically inflict excessive pain on themselves, and, in doing so, appropriate cultural representations of their bodies: "She assumes for herself the power to define the authority that represses her sexuality: not man, but God" (96). Just as these mystics claimed divine authority ("My me is God," wrote Catherine of Genoa; Hadewijch of Brabant wished 'to be God with God'; Angela of Foligno wrote that 'the Word was made flesh to make me God'" [Finke 94]), so Plath wrote in her diary on 13 November 1949: "I want, I think, to be omniscient ... I think I would like to call myself 'The girl who wanted to be God'" (qtd. in Introduction, *Letters Home* 40). This position also resembles Sartre's view that, above all, man

desires to be God (69–73). Sartre argues that man’s impulse to possess a particular woman is a transference of his desire to lay hold of a world in its entirety. Could Plath’s desire, then, to possess herself as “woman” reflect her desire to be God? Like the self-flagellating mystic, she becomes in her poetry both object and subject, both the one scarred and the one who scars. As we saw in “Daddy,” for example, she both stutters or speaks the language of the oppressed (“talks like a Jew”) and speaks masterfully. Ultimately, like the female mystic, she achieves representational power at the point that she seems ready (at least metaphorically) to annihilate herself. Just as the mystic poached upon the authority of church and state in her self-inflicted torture, so Plath usurps the technologies that control, construct, and harm her represented bodies. Within the context of the poem, it is she who inflicts pain and mythologizes her self, not the larger institutions of, say, marriage or the church. A bit pathologically (and understandably), she resembles the neurotic who identifies with death—either as abject victim or as sadistic destroyer—in order to understand and master it.

Lady Lazarus’s potency comes, in part, from her having risked death and, therefore, becoming impervious to the threats of male power; ironically, death is one of her theatrical tricks. It shocks and encourages an audience to read the writing on her body (which one assumes will later be the writing of her poetry). Death is for her “an art” (44), a “call[ing]” (48), which she does “exceptionally well” (45). It brings her body into the “broad day” (52) as spectacle, “the theatrical” (51). In part, Plath achieves this poetically by delivering parallel constructions that encourage each short, quick, condensed line to stumble into the next, mimicking both the hectic intensity of this spectacular event and the power of the persona’s thoughts:

“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. (55–64)

This “miracle” of death and rebirth obviously echoes the story of Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection. The persona’s assertion that

These are my hands
My knees.
I may be skin and bones,
Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman (31–4)

echoes Christ’s words in the *New Testament*: “Behold my hands and my feet, that it is I myself: handle me, and see; for a spirit hath not flesh and bones, as ye see me have” (AV, Luke 24.39). Drawing such parallels, Plath transforms this already spectacular event into the most dramatic, communal, and historical of all public executions. Comparing herself to Christ at the Cross (just as she identified herself with the Jews), she loudly and irreverently forces her personal, private self into the public realm. She is not one person being executed, but a collective, in much the same way that Christ was crucified for the sins of all. Not just one person, but everyone, must take responsibility, especially in this case. Moreover, the story she echoes, like the story of Lazarus, belongs to a patriarchal text, which again emphasizes a certain entrapment (and complicity) in the language and thoughts of her oppressor.

At the same time, Plath gathers power by inverting the Cartesian “I” of traditional poetics. Just as she parodies the Christ story, so she parodies the fully, self-conscious, “male” poet.⁹ Instead of thinking in terms of internalized reflections or meditations, Plath begins with the production of her body, its textualization. She first appears as a collection of body parts: “The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth” (13). Thereafter, she explores what that body means to her as a thinking person; or more accurately, she lets the body parts speak their meanings (“I have a body, therefore I am”). She plays the actress, the freak, the criminal, the rebel (“Out of the ash/ I rise with my red hair/ And I eat men like air” [81–3]), and the saint (with her sought-after bodily artefacts). But she also represents the body reduced to statistic, quantity, or elements, as in the following, chilling lines:

Ash, ash—
 You poke and stir.
 Flesh, bone, there is nothing there—
 A cake of soap,
 A wedding ring,
 A gold filling. (73–8)

Plath's death-camp metaphor (the cake of soap made from the body; the gold taken from the teeth) shows the persona's body as violently disembodied, lacking self-possession or unity. Her body, here, belongs to an exterior power that values it best when dead, whether as fragmented and refashioned into useful commodities (soap, a lampshade, ...), or as, according to another script, resurrected into martyrdom for the salvation of others. And yet, behind the violent commodification, Plath hints at postmodern, non-serialized social relations: the self-possessed body (behind the "cake of soap"), displays of wealth and status ("[a] gold filling"), and a symbol of community and ceremony ("[a] wedding ring"). She puts on display both commodification and the traces of human community that commodification still allows—that which resists complete assimilation, a counter-memory. Lady Lazarus plays a double role. As a victim, she dramatizes the torture of a woman who has lost her body to an anti-communal, serialized society. But at the same time, she dramatizes the repossession of her body, which partly represents a body of knowledge. This sacrificial body of knowledge offers itself as a gift, a form of recovered memory for the crowds of disenfranchised.

The discourses of both "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus" attempt to give shape to and make ~~present~~ the order of controls, constructed scripts, and stereotypes. The personae expose both the contemporary social organization and themselves as constructed, rather than simply given or natural. Their identities, therefore, have the potential to be countered and reconfigured. The shape and meaning of human being is open for debate and change. Like Susan Bordo's agoraphobics and anorexics, "Lady Lazarus" puts a human face on collective and dehumanizing processes, as well as aggressively addressing them. This is not just subject and object coming together, but the silent objectified-oppressed becoming subject and addressing the centres of power. Her body is a collection of social artefacts; her body contains history and addresses history, but not piecemeal. Plath shows that the evidence is there to be dredged up and condensed into a sensible shape. In "Lady Lazarus" that means a human form. Both "Lady Lazarus" and "Daddy" work out where

power can be located, as well as pointing out how this society has become a "serial" one, within which the self cannot gain a view of the whole. Plath stands outside, views, and addresses the very community she silently, passively inhabited. The poems confront the community by staging dramas of punishment. These spectacles of torture, although educational, are simultaneously self-destructive, as the speakers in both poems desire their own deaths. And yet, through these self-flagellating, suicidal personae, we may see diverse aspects of constructed female identity.

Notes

- 1 Plath criticism still contains her within the private framework of the individual: looking at her as confessional poet, reading her poetry as biography or psychological case study. Recent criticism has explored the exceptional fascination readers have with her life. Elisabeth Bronfen, for one, believes that Plath's "life and her poetry are so inextricably implicated that we can do nothing but read her poetry within the biographical appraisal that has reworked her life for us" (7). Some critics (including Bronfen) despair over this reductive approach to reading Plath's poetry. Bruce Bawer concludes that "the real interest lies not in Plath's art but in her life" (19). See Jacqueline Rose, *Al Strangeways*, and Linda Wagner-Martin for a few book-length discussions on the subject.
- 2 Throughout feminist critical readings of Plath's poems, there persists a pressing desire to write the narrative of a mighty "Ur-Woman." Toril Moi argues, in *Sexual/Textual Politics*, that for Anglo-American feminist critics (in particular Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar), "ideology becomes a monolithic unified totality that knows no contradictions; against this a miraculously intact 'femaleness' may pit its strength" (63). Judith Kroll and others (for example, Pamela Annas, Linda Bundtzen, Mary Lynn Broe), in their analyses of Plath's work, may be mirroring what Moi describes as the American feminists' belief that "women's writing can only come into existence as a structural and objective whole. Parallel to the wholeness of the text is the wholeness of the woman's self; the integrated humanist individual is the essence of all creativity" (66). For this reason, perhaps, these Plath critics, hoping to sustain the mythic unity of the poet, doggedly read her texts as organic unities.
- 3 "Seriality," a term Sartre develops in *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, describes a mode of social interaction in which members of a group cannot see their profound connection to one another. Sartre gives the example of a grouping of people waiting for a bus at a bus stop: "[W]e are concerned here with a plurality of isolations: these people do not care about or speak to each other and, in general, they do not look at one another; they exist side by side alongside a bus stop" (256). The

individual "constitutes himself in the gathering as an objective element of a series" (266).

- 4 All line references to Plath's poetry are to *The Collected Poems*
- 5 Various critics have made similar observations. Janice Markey, for one, writes, "Plath makes it clear in this poem that the exploitation of women in a patriarchal society is in part due to women's compliance in the sado-masochism involved" (16). In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler offers a psychological justification for the woman's willingness and desire to be oppressed, arguing that we all discover sexual pleasure within the power structures that dominate us.
- 6 According to Alicia Suskin Ostriker, "[c]ontrol, impersonality, and dispassionateness are supposedly normative, masculine virtues" (88-9) and what characterize "the oppressor's language" (168), along with Plath's poetic style here.
- 7 The persona's identification with persecuted Jews, coupled with the foot imagery here (also seen in "Daddy," where she feels like a foot inside a shoe), is especially apt, given the historical anti-Semitic representations of the Jewish body and, in particular, the Jewish foot. According to Sander Gilman, the flat or "weak" feet of Jews were seen as a sign of their badly formed, "weak" characters. Gilman elaborates: "The foot became the hallmark of difference, of the Jewish body being separate from the real 'body politic.' These images aimed at a depiction of the Jew as unable to function within the social institutions, such as the armed forces, which determined the quality of social acceptance" (359).
- 8 In an earlier draft of the poem, Plath refers to the suicide attempts as executions ("Lady Lazarus").
- 9 More specifically, Christine Britzolaskis, in her reading of the poem, observes that "The title alludes, of course, not only to the biblical story of Lazarus, but also to Prufrock's lines: 'I am Lazarus, come from the dead,/ Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all'" (152). My point is that, in echoing Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," Plath parodies a specific canonical poem by an established male poet.

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