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"DYING IS AN ART": CATHARSIS AND THE PURIFYING MAKING OF THE SELF IN SYLVIA PLATH'S "FEVER 103º", "LADY LAZARUS", AND "ARIEL"

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When asked about the possible autobiographical origin of her poems during an interview a year prior to her death, Sylvia Plath answered that they emerged from a kind of non-narcissistic emotional experience purposely manipulated to come as "relevant to the larger things" (Orr 1966, 170). In the decades after Plath's passing, her poems came to acquire several new, quite narcissistic interpretations that enhanced her status as a poet of death and suicide. As a result, the true nature of her writings was greatly misread and the emphasis on these "larger things" has been since then chiefly obliterated. This note aims at the revalorization of the intensely philosophical depth that her poetry entails, and thus focuses on Plath's initiatory process of the making of the self in her poems "Fever 103º", "Lady Lazarus", and "Ariel". Following Kroll (1976), Rosenblatt (1979) and Patea's (1989, 2007) theorizations on Plath's philosophy of cathartic death and rebirth, the aim of this paper is to analyze such mythic process of initiation in said three poems. Written in 1962 amid a creativity burst, these poems follow a similar structure regarding mythic rebirth, and Plath masterfully evokes in them the self's emotional experience against a deeply oppressive background. The making of the poetic self in these texts

serves Plath to explore her metaphysical concerns on the larger things of life and death. Therefore, this note concludes that, in a progression that is highly influenced by archaic rites of initiation as well as historical, literary, mythological, and biblical texts, the poetic persona faces her enemies and is made anew after purgation as she overcomes the oppressive hindrances caused by earthly life.

Keywords: death, rebirth, catharsis, Plath, initiation

1. Introduction

Through the years, many critics and scholars have dismissed Sylvia Plath's interest and emphasis on the "larger things" (Orr 1966, 170) in life—motherhood, technology, the nuclearization of society, marriage, death, nature, among others—as a direct result of her polemic suicide in 1963. [1] Plath inevitably became a poet of suicide and death, and the complexities of her work were largely obliterated. The emergence of new sociopolitical movements regarding civil and human rights in the following years—mainly second-wave feminism—accentuated Plath's figure as a victim of oppressive domesticity and reduced her poems to a series of connotations different, or less diverse, than those intended by the poet (Rosenblatt 1979, 4; Patea 1989a, 21; Patea 2007b 59-61).

Consequently, the interpretation of her poetry often falls short of analytical depth regarding her philosophy, as a result not only of Plath's biography but also of the ideological and cultural context of the time. During a rush of creativity in the autumn of 1962—and soon after her separation from Ted Hugues, which arguably added to her final depressive episode—, Plath wrote a series of poems involving mythic rebirth that would later be published posthumously in the 1965 *Ariel* collection. In these poems, among

[1] See Phyllis Chesler's *Women and Madness* (1972) and Otto Friedrich's *Going Crazy* (1976). Jon Rosenblatt explains in *The Poetry of Initiation* that these works, along with popular magazines such as *Time* and *Literature and Psychology*, have largely contributed to Plath's suicidal image (1979, x).

which are found "Fever 103º", "Lady Lazarus", and "Ariel", Plath skillfully illustrates the self's emotional experience. In a strong urge to be reborn, the self in these poems must undergo an initiatory process of purgation in order to overcome the limitations imposed by her oppressors and be transmuted into a superior liberated identity.

2. Death and Rebirth

Plath dramatized death and rebirth in her poems through a mythic rite of initiation. As previously explained, such archaic process can easily be appreciated in "Ariel", "Fever 103", and arguably in less degree, in "Lady Lazarus". Although written in 1962, these poems receive the influence of 1959, a crucial year in her career, when Plath began dramatizing initiatory death. By using this form, the poet was able to "explore interpersonal relationships and tabooed, morbid experiences", hence being "objective and subjective at the same time" (Govindan 1997, 153) and thus honoring her views on poetry writing. In these monologues, the poetic persona encounters both human and natural listeners and dramatizes the self's need for transformation:

> Plath employs numerous personae; she establishes objective settings within which the speakers of her poems dramatize themselves; and she consistently employs imagery in a nonrealistic manner. Rather than using the personal image or autobiographical reference to reflect back upon herself, Plath uses personal allusions as the foundation for dramas of transformation and psychological process. (Rosenblatt 1979, 17)

Therefore, the dramatic monologue plays an essential role in the self's externalization of her inner conflict, as the poetic voice tends to address the very destructive forces that hinder the way towards rebirth. Paradoxically, death is the only plausible way towards liberation. Replicating archaic rites of initiation, [2] dying in Plath's poems implies the end of "chaos", hence providing "the clean slate

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[2] See Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) and Victor Turner's *The Ritual Process* (1969).

on which will be written the successive revelations whose end is the formation of a new man" (Eliade 1958, xiii). The lived experience must be shredded to achieve the essence of the self; death is staged as a rebirth.

Ritualistic death is a purifying, regenerating force; it does away with the deteriorating agents affecting the self and opens the gate towards transcendence. As explained by Patea,"the annihilating aspect of death gives way to a cathartic and purifying function of union with the universal and the eternal" (1989a, 216). Customary experience is unable to induce substantial rupture. In order to regain control and become one with the cosmos, the self must enter darkness and die fighting her oppressors: e.g., the husband, father, and doctor in "Lady Lazarus", "Fever 103º", or the even in the renowned "Daddy"; and death and darkness in "Ariel". Plath's poems "depict the encounter with otherness and represent a threatened self, oppressed by a coercive society that violates the intimacy of being" (Patea 2007b, 62). The self and the destructive other return to darkness, which according to Rosenblatt is often equated to the return to the mother's uterus. Rosenblatt links this merging to the unity present in the infant mind before the acquisition of consciousness (1979, 24) and thus, the journey towards the center of life often equates the journey towards the center of death (1979, 25). The defeat of the self over the oppressive force is often symbolized in the shape of a newborn, which embodies the transformation of the poetic persona into a pure, clean, renovated being thanks to the purging powers of death. In the end, the old, false self, who lived a kind of "death-in-life", is vanquished by the true self, who finally finds a "life in death" (Kroll 1976, 13). Through a nuanced dramatization of a ritualistic process of initiatory death, Plath manages to carefully describe the oppression of the poetic voice and the making of a renovated self.

3. Burning into Paradise: "Fever 103º"

In "Fever 103º", the reader attends to the decomposition of a body as a result of the high temperatures instigated by a strong fever. All the old selves dissolve in the fiery ascension into Heaven, as the

heroine resurrects into a luminous "glowing" virgin after suffering the heat of "sin" and "sickness" (Lant 1993, 641). Uneasily moving between history and myth, the poetic voice describes the self's cathartic journey into "Paradise" using an extremely sensorial language: "wheezes", "licking", "cries", "the indelible smell", "smokes", "flickering" (Plath 2018, 231-232). The poem is framed by a mythical pattern. Whereas in the first lines the reader is located within the gates of "hell", guarded by "dull, fat Cerberus" (lines 2-3), the final stanza testifies to the self's cathartic transformation as it transcends life: "(My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)- / To Paradise" (lines 52-54). Distinctively, the rest of the poem is filled with allusions concerning current affairs of her time, such as the threatening technologization of society— "Hothouse baby in its crib" (line 19), "Radiation turned it white / and killed it in an hour" (lines 23-24)—and historical events— "Greasing the bodies of adulterers / Like Hiroshima ash and eating in / The sin. The sin" (lines 25-27). In contrast to the sustained and vivid mystical images framing the poem, Strangeways argues that "the historical—political image transitions in the center of the poem appear violently swift and lack the resonance of the mythic imagery" (1996, 379). In fact, leaving the old self behind implies a detachment from the past. Kroll explains that in several of Plath's poems—such as "Lady Lazarus", "Ariel", and "Getting There"—the poet "associated the risk of death with the shedding of the past and the achievement of a state of transcendence (or rebirth)" (1976, 171). Once again, through this contrast between past and present, Plath constructs her poetry in relation to the "larger things" (Orr 1966, 170).

The sins of humanity permeate the self in "Fever 103º", and transfiguration against them is necessary to conquer renovation. In the midst of the fire, the poet fears death as she compares the smoke with the death of American dancer Isadora Duncan, caused by the entanglement of her scarf in the wheel of the car she was riding: "Love, love, the low smokes roll / From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright // One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel" (Plath 2018, 231, lines 12-13). The self struggles in the "yellow sullen" smoke (line 14), "and because it is the product of man's inhumanity, it not only threatens the speaker but pervades and poisons the entire atmosphere" (Sanazaro 1983, 70). The fire is not yet cathartic, but

rather the opposite: it oppresses the self. Plath herself explained in a note to the BBC that "this poem is about two kinds of fire—the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify" (qtd. in Kroll 1976, 179). Fire cleanses the self into death; and death establishes the boundary between torment and rejuvenation, as it "does not imply a total annihilation but the source of new life, capable of abolishing the part of the being stained by time and of promoting an initiatory resurrection" (Patea 2007b, 74). The self flickers "off, on, off on" (Plath 2018, 231, line 29) as the first fire "suffers itself into the second" (qtd. in Kroll 1976, 179); and for "Three days. Three nights" (line 31) suffers a kind of metamorphoses that turns her body too pure "for anyone" and allows for the ascension onto a superior reality: "I think I am going up / I think I may rise" (Plath 2018, 232, lines 43-44). In the fashion of the dramatic monologue, the victorious self addresses her oppressor, which, in this case is the "disintegrated state" of human existence (Patea 1989a, 239): "I am too pure for you" (Plat 2018, 232, line 34), "Does not my heat astound you. And my light." (line 40). Finally, the self, like syntax, crumbles: "Not you, nor him / Not him, nor him / (My selves dissolving, old whore petticoats)/—to Paradise" (lines 52-54). The poem ends with the self's total awareness as it sheds the past and cathartically ascends anew into the sublime.

4. The Big Strip Tease of Lady Lazarus

Following a similar pattern to that of "Fever 103º", the exhibitionist self in "Lady Lazarus" dramatizes the destruction of her old body and personality in an urge to achieve final re-definition in transcendence. The poem is written as a "big strip tease" (Plath 2018, 245, line 28) in which the poetic persona revengefully stands in front of a "peanut-crunching crowd" (line 26) composed of her enemies, flaunting about how she has "nine times to die" (244, line 21); this is her third. Like Lazarus of Bethany in the Bible, the poetic self comes back to life in a kind of miraculous event. "Lady Lazarus" has been linked to Plath's own suicidal nature—she tried to overdose on her mother's pills in 1953 and attempted to die by crashing her car into a river in 1962 (Lachman 2008). The poetic

voice describes herself as a "walking miracle", with skin "bright as a Nazi lampshade" and a "featureless" face, "fine Jew linen" (lines 4-9): through death, she has peeled off "the napkin / O [her] enemy" (lines 10-11) and transformed into a "smiling woman" (line 19). Death acquires a double meaning: it puts an end to existence, but it also enables a new life as it facilitates the transcendence onto a superior realm. Despite the associations with Plath's mental condition, Rosenblatt contends that similarly to "Fever 103º" and "Ariel", "Lady Lazarus" replicates a rite of initiatory drama. The poem obeys to "the three-part structure that most students of myth see as basic to initiation: entry into darkness, ritual death, and rebirth" (1979, 27). The poetic persona of "Lady Lazarus", like in "Fever 103º" is composed of many selves that fight against the decadence: "What a trash / To annihilate each decade" (Plath 2018, 245, lines 23-24). The entry into darkness of this third attempt at dying takes place as Lady Lazarus offers herself to her enemy, the Nazi doctor:

> And there is a charge, a very large charge
>
> For a word or a touch
>
> Or a bit of blood
>
> Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.
>
> So, so, Herr Doktor.
>
> So, Herr Enemy.
>
> I am your opus,
>
> I am your valuable. (lines 61-68)

The ritual death takes place as "the pure gold baby"—the oppressor's creation, the result of their coercion—"melts to a shriek" (lines 69-70). She turns and burns until she is finally reborn as a demon "with red hair" (line 83), and like the Phoenix, rises "out of the ash" (247, line 82). The final line "And I eat men like air" (line 84) signals her cathartic revenge against the oppressive forces

destructing her: the deteriorating passing of time and the Nazi physician.

The oppressor in "Lady Lazarus" might signal, on the one hand, Plath's own struggles with the inclemencies of 1950s psychoanalysis, which she also portrayed in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar* (1963). As Deborah Nelson (2006) argues:

> Adjusting to the ambivalence of the role of woman, housewife and mother was aided by the (usually) male doctor. Plath need not be speaking just of her own experience, but more generally of an institution that demands secrets and hands them back in a new form, one which the patient has not given them.

In fact, the audience is composed by males in its entirety: "Herr Doktor", "Herr Enemy", "Herr God, Herr Lucifer" (lines 65-66, 79), which highlights the female quality of the self and hints at the coercive power dynamics of society affecting women at the time. As she memorably does in "Daddy", Plath strikingly uses the German language as well as the metaphor of the Holocaust to refer to her emotionally oppressive experience. The self is a "Jew" who disintegrates, cremated into "ash" and "bone"; she is a victim of Nazi experiments—"my skin / Bright as a Nazi lampshade" (Plath 2018, 244-246)—and concentration camps (Patea 1989a, 241; Bagg 1969, 35) who is similarly imprisoned by existence on earth. In fact, many critics accused her of banalizing the implications of Nazism (Leon Wieseltier, Joyce Carol Oates, Seamus Heaney, among others). As Rose explains, "the key concept appears to be metaphor — either Plath trivialises the Holocaust through that essentially personal [it is argued] reference, or she aggrandises her experience by stealing the historical event." (1991, 206). Leaving aside this dilemma regarding whether Plath had the right to appropriate such events for her poetry, Young argues: "Her metaphors are built upon the absorption of public experience by language itself, experience which is then internalized and made private by the poet, used to order her private world, and then re-externalized in public verse" (1987, 132). It is undeniable that by including the issue of the Holocaust, Plath draws on human public experience to proficiently highlight the extremity of the self's private oppression. Although

Lady Lazarus' final purgation might be less obvious than that of the self in "Fever 103º", the oppression in the environment allows the reader to still get a final sense of liberation, of the cleansing of an old identity.

5. Horse-Back Riding into Transcendence: "Ariel"

Comparably to Lady Lazarus, the self in "Ariel" triumphantly describes her journey towards transcendence, this time, while horse-back riding through the bushes from dusk till dawn. In fact, Plath's husband Ted Hugues, as well as poet Robert Lowell, who wrote the foreword for the first edition of posthumous collection *Ariel* (1966), confirmed that "Ariel" was the name of Plath's horse. Smith points out:

> What she sought at the end was more than the artist's wish to break down divisions between imagination and reality, more than the neurotic's need to span fantasy life and actual, habitual life. She wanted, at last, unity which can spiritualize, consecrate, and transubstantiate, the most earth-rooted, foul things. (1972, 338)

Plath impregnates the mundane experience of horse-back riding with a mythical quality, merging reality and spirituality through dramatization. The poetic persona of "Ariel" is "God's lioness" (Plath 2018, 239, line 4)—the Hebrew translation of Ariel—, who ecstatically travels from "the stasis in darkness" (line 1) into "the red // Eye, the cauldron of morning" (lines 30-31). The title of the poem—which also stands as the self's own name—not only alludes to Jerusalem ("the city destined to be destroyed by fire" [Britzolakis 2006]), but also to the spirit in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Like she more explicitly does in her other poem "Full Fathom Five", Plath might be hinting at "the theme of transformation and specifically transformation wrought in language" (Gill 2006) also present in the 17th-century Shakespearean play.

Hurriedly, the initial calm of nightfall is interrupted by a loss of control as the rider cannot catch the horse's neck. She is hooked and torn by the wild berry bushes in a kind of sacrificial rite that gives way to the decomposition of the self. The I turns into "White / Godiva" and loses the "dead stringencies" (lines 19-21), that is, the

old selves that burdened her (Kroll 1976, 174). For Sanazaro, Godiva, the devout wife of Earl of Leofric who rode naked through Coventry to save its inhabitants from excessive taxation, stands as a religious allusion (1983, 74). Nonetheless, in the poem, Godiva unpeels to spiritually save herself. Through a metamorphosis of consciousness similar to that of "Fever 103º", the self is now "foam to wheat, a glitter of seas" (Plath 2018, 239, line 23) and enters the final initiatory stage of immortality as a rejuvenated persona: "The child's cry // Melts in the wall" (lines 24-25). The wheat stands for "the epiphany of eternal life" and belongs to both "the natural and absolute order", as it is a divine emblem which marks "the fainting and rebirth of universal life" (Patea 1989a, 238). Nature acts not only as the main stage for the rite of initiation, but also as another component of the whole mythic process. It mirrors the emotional experience of the self. She transmutes into suicidal "dew", ready to merge into the red flames of the morning sun (Plath 2018, 240, lines 28-31). Unlike in the previous two poetic works, the imagery in "Ariel" does not give way to distraction: the poem "draws the attention into the sense of this central experience, which the images unify and from which they do not detract. Godiva, the split furrow, the hooks of the berries, the cauldron of morning all directly evoke the sense of ecstatic transcendence" (Kroll 1976, 180). The result is a compact description of the self's journey towards the eternal center of life, the promise of absolute reality, which achieves the desired regeneration by means of once again shedding all impurities. As Britzolakis puts it, "the trope of the horse and rider unfolds an ambiguous celebration of embodied movement ('at one with the drive') as intensely pleasurable, yet self-immolating" (2006). Such effect is achieved also through the enjambment, which provides a sense of immediacy and adds to the rush of transmutation. As the poetic I rides into the red light of daybreak, she joins a superior reality in the shape of a new, pure self.

6. Conclusions

The making of a new self is arguably the driving force beneath the 1962 poems "Fever 103º", "Lady Lazarus", and "Ariel". Plath's metaphysical concerns come to life in the shape of a mythical rite of

initiation clearly marked in the development of these poems. Each in their own way, the three poems follow the three-stage structure of archaic initiatory processes which sets in motion the cathartic renovation of the self. In "Fever 103º" the access to darkness is symbolized by the Cerberus-guarded gates of Hell, where the self will begin burning in a fire of purgation. This stage takes place in "Lady Lazarus" when the self poses herself in front of an audience of her male enemies in a big strip show. In her riding journey, the poetic persona of "Ariel" also parts from darkness, more specifically, that of the night. The three selves then undergo the dying stage: the self in "Fever 103º" burns as she does away with all the impurities in her past, Lady Lazarus sheds the remains of her old self as she perishes for the third time, and in "Ariel" the self similarly starts unpeeling the impurities in the ritual sacrificing of her horse.

Similarities can be appreciated in the initiatory rites of the three poems: in "Fever 103º" and "Lady Lazarus" Plath resorts to historical events as a metaphor of the constricted state of the self previously to transmutation. Likewise, the self faces her enemy in the three works: Lady Lazarus confronts her audience, rebels against the passing of time, and teases the Nazi doctor; Ariel defies death and its deteriorating effects in a riding accident, and the self in "Fever 103º" lets the fires of hell consume her in order to experience those of Heaven. The presence of the newborn child to signify rebirth is also present in all poems. The self is finally made anew: by resorting to a rite similar to those of archaic societies, Plath is able to cathartically initiate a new identity into a superior, absolute dimension through her writing.

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