

## The Confessional Aspect in Sylvia Plath's Late Poetry

### صفة الاعتراف في شعر سلفيا بلات المتأخر

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#### Abstract:

Severed from her own racial/cultural roots by the alien presence in the West, she was German-American, Sylvia Plath was searching desperately to find those roots and finally she gave up in despair. Together with the awesome forces flowing through and around her life like her father's death, the infidelity of her husband and her bad health, she made of her poetry a naked confession dealing with themes of blockage showing her inability to get where she wants to go, except through death. Her works never discussed outside the context of her life for her poems were intensely personal and tied up to redeem her meaningless life through art. In fact, the confessional aspect of her poetry made her a martyr to the recurrent psychodrama that staged itself within her tragically wounded personality.

In the quarter-century following her suicide Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) has become a heroine and a martyr of the feminist movement. In fact, she was a martyr mainly to the recurrent psychodrama that staged itself within her tragically wounded personality. Twelve final poems, written shortly before her death, define a nihilistic metaphysic from which death provided the only dignified escape for there were awesome forces flowing through and around Sylvia Plath. Her German ancestry made her doubly vulnerable, she was indeed sick and she made, if her riveting and fascinating verse, telling thrusts toward health, toward a true understanding of her condition, but they were insufficient. Living in a collapsing horror she" created rhythms more

compelling and compulsive than any contemporary poetry has known"<sup>1</sup>

Sylvia fall victim, not merely to the sense of desertion caused by her father's death and to the infidelities of her husband, but to the campaign of deception and distortion that has been waged fanatically for more than a century against the integral soul of the west. The health of a Culture will unfailingly reflect itself in the arts of the culture. When the deriving force behind a cultural organism becomes power behind its natural unfolding is reshaped and used by those who have no comprehension of its inner meaning or necessities, then a kind of death ensues flailing about plays counterpoint to a sense of blank deadness, of nothingness. And according to Sylvia "poetry is the most ingrown and intense of the creative arts."<sup>2</sup>

Sylvia Plath's early poetry, already drenched in typical imagery of glass, moon, blood, hospitals, fetuses, and skulls, was mainly exercises or pastiches of work by poets she admired like Dylan Thomas, W. B. Yeats and Marianne Moore. After 1960 her poems increasingly explored the sorrel landscape of her imprisoned psyche under the looming shadow of a dead father and a mother on whom she was resentfully dependant.<sup>3</sup>

Plath's nature poetry, too exalted to be merely confessional, and frequently treats of this theme, together with a related one attempts to redeem meaningless life through art. "Daddy" is one of the most nakedly confessional poems ever written. On the other hand A. R. Jones believes that this and her other last poems achieves a "compulsive intensity not so much from their element of naked confession but from this assumption that in a deranged world, a deranged response is the only possible reaction of the sensitive mind."<sup>4</sup>

In this poem a child (or a women with a child's mind) speaks to her dead father. Appropriately, the poem is cast into a nursery- rhyme cadence, with the jaunty and simple rhythm of the sing-song lines contrasting sharply with the complex horror of the subject matter. Plath in this poem, like her other poems, contrasts colors, assigning the bright and light shades to herself and her innocent dependence, and the blacks and grays to father and husband.

There are ,of course, numerous personal references in the poem. The foot and toe in the first two stanzas refer to the gangrenous parts of her father's leg, both amputated separately. The " Polish Town " is Grabow, where Otto Plath , her father was born:-

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.

Daddy, I have had to kill you  
You died before I had time—  
Marble-heavy, a bag full of God,  
Ghastly statue with one gray toe  
Big as a Frisco seal.<sup>5</sup>

Also in the eleventh stanza, there is a reference to a "picture" Sylvia has which is literally a photograph of her father- a nonsense , professorial Prussian gentleman staring out at the world before his blackboard:-

You stand at the blackboard, daddy,  
In the picture I have of you,  
A cleft in your chin instead of your foot

But no less the devil for that, no not  
Any less the black man who

Bit my bratty red heart in two.<sup>6</sup>

"At twenty I tried to die/ And get back, back, back to you./I thought even the bones would do." is ,of course, a reference to her first suicide attempt . The "man in black with a Meinkampf look" is Ted Hughes, her husband; his "love of the rack and the screw" is a humorous Plathian double entendre, not uncommon in her work. The telephone "off at the root" refers to an incident in August 1962 when Ted Hughes' paramour called their home in Devon. When Ted get on the line an enraged Sylvia ripped the phone cord out of the wall. Combined with the next line: "The voices just can't worm through" , it also become a doubly significant metaphor , both of her frustration over her inability to find her

own roots and for her agonizing sense of guilt for being German: she has finally silenced both the barely audible voices of her ancestors in her blood, when never did come true as clearly as she wanted, and at the same time quenched the guilt which the sound of these voices always seemed to evoke.

In the penultimate stanza seven years is the length of Sylvia's marriage:

If I've killed one man, I've killed two  
The vampire who said he was you  
And drank my blood for a year—  
Seven years, if you want to know.  
Daddy, you can lie back now.<sup>7</sup>

In reality, Otto Plath was an anti-Nazi, with little apparent interest in politics; he was, however, something of a stern, old-country paterfamilias, a "marble-heavy" colossus worshipped by his daughter. He was strong, he was German, and then he died and abandoned her, leaving her to walk alone through the gauntlet of anti-German hate. "And in her fantasies her father was pure German, pure Aryan, pure anti-Semite," writes Alvarez. "The truth, I think, is that Sylvia, absorbing the propaganda, casts him as guilty because German, and herself likewise, both with a sin to expiate". She prays to recover him, she tries to find his (and her own) "root" but fails because there is no communication between the dead father and the girl, nor any longer, in the 1940s' communication between the good Americans and the monstrous Germans, very well; abandoned, she will take revenge: she will become "a Jew," or at least "a bit of a Jew."

Most critics assume that because Plath takes a Jewish persona he, she wishes to cast herself as victim. But in the poem she also is

a persecutor and a killer. Further, she never says that she is a Jew; she says she may be one. In fact, the whole poem is evidence that Sylvia had no good idea as to who she was. She also construes (mistakenly) National Socialism as being coldly technical and scientific ("gobbledygook"), and she opposes it with her irrational artistic temperament.

Finally the one way the poet to achieve relief, to become an independent self, was to kill her father's memory, and in this poem, she does by a metaphorical murder. Making him a Nazi and herself a Jew, she dramatizes the war in her soul. The poem is full of blackness and confession for from its opening image on ward, that of the father as an "old shoe" in which the daughter has lived for thirty years to manifest the degree of Plath's mental sufferings, Plath confesses that, after failing to escape her predicament, through attempted suicide, she married a surrogate father, "a man in black with a Meinkampf look" who obligingly was just as much a vampire of her spirit—one who "drank my blood for a year, / Seven years, if you want to know." When she derives the stake through her father's heart, she not only is exorcising the demon of her father's memory but metaphorically is killing her husband and all men.

"Daddy" is a poem of total rejection. When she writes that "the black telephone's off at the root," she is turning her back on the modern world as well. Such rejection of family and society leads to that final rejection, that, of the Self. In "Edge" to be dead is to be perfected! Her earlier terror at death, thus, becomes a romance with it, and her poems themselves are what M. R. Rosenthal calls "yearnings toward that condition," Freud believes that the aim of all life is death, and for Plath life was poetry. So by extension, poetry for her now

becomes death , both conditions inseparable. She as much as says so : " The blood jet is poetry,/ There is no stooping it."<sup>9</sup>

The process of doing away with daddy in the poem represents the persona's attempts at psychic purgation of the image, " the model" of a father she has constructed . Her methods , however, are more akin to magic than murder, since it is through a combination of exorcism and sympathetic magic that she works to dispossess herself of her own fantasies.

The first twelve stanzas of the poem reveals the extent of the speaker's possession by what, in psychoanalytic terms, is the imago of the father—a childhood version of the father which persists into adulthood. This imago is out of real experience and archetypal memories wherein the speaker's own physic oppression is represented in the more general symbol of the Nazi oppression of the Jews. For example, the man at the blackboard in the picture of the actual father is transformed symbolically into the "man in black with a Meinkampflook." The connecting link, of course, between each of these associations is the word "black," which also relates t to the shoe in which the speaker has lived and the swastika "so black no sky could squeak through." Thus the specific and personal recollections ignite powerful associations with culturally significant symbols. The fact that the girl is herself " a bit of Jew" and a bit of German intensifies her emotional paralysis before the imago of an A ryan father with whom she is both connected and at enmity.<sup>10</sup>

A companion piece to "Daddy" in which the poet again fuses the worlds of personal pain and cooperate suffering , is "Lady Lazarus". In this poem a disturbing tension is established between the seriousness of the experience described and the misleadingly light form of the poem. The

vocabulary and rhythms which approximate to the colloquial simplicity of conversational speech, the frequently end-stopped lines, the repetitions which have the effect of mockingly counteracting the violence of the meaning , all establish the deliberately flippant note which this poem strives to achieve. There is a shifting tone of "Lady Lazarus" :

The peanut-crunching crowd  
Shoves in to see

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

These are my hands  
My knees.<sup>11</sup>

Then it modulates into a calmer irony as the persona mocks herself for her pretensions to tragedy: "Dying / is an art, like everything else./ I do it exceptionally well." As in "Daddy" Sylvia Plath has used a limited amountof autobiographical detail in this poem; the references to suicide in "Lady Lazarus" reflect her own experience . as in "Daddy" ,however, the personal element is subordinate to a much more inclusive dramatic structure, and one answer to those critics who have seen her work as merely confessional is that she used her personal and painful material as a way of entering into and illustrating much wider themes and subjects. In "Lady Lazarus" the poet again equates her suffering with the experiences of the tortured Jews, she becomes , as a result of the suicide she inflicts on herself, a Jew:

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

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless , fine  
Jew linen.<sup>12</sup>

The reaction of the crowd who push in with morbid interest to see the saved suicide mimics the attitude of many to the revelations of the concentration camps; there is a brutal insistence on the pain which many apparently manage to see with scientific detachment. "Lady Lazarus" represents an extreme use of the "light verse" technique. It is also a supreme example of Plath's skill as an artist. She takes very personal, painful material and controls and forms it with the utmost rigour into a highly wrought poem, which is partly effective because of the polar opposition between the terrible gaiety of its form and the fiercely uncompromising seriousness of its subject.

Plath's late poems are full of speakers whose rigid identities and violent methods not only parody their torment but also permit them to control it. For the peculiar nature of the speaker in "Lady Lazarus" defies ordinary notions of the suicide. Suicide is not the joyous act she claims it to be in her triumphant assertion that she has done it again. Her confidence, at the moment of recovery, that her soul breath will vanish in a day and that she will soon be a smiling women is a perverse acceptance of her rescuers' hopes, although she calls her rescuers enemies. The impulse of the speaker is the overwhelming desire to control the situation. She is above all a performer, chiefly remarkable for her manipulation of herself as well as of the effects she wishes to have on those who surround her. She speaks of herself in hyperboles, calling herself a "walking miracle," boasting that she has " nine times

to do," exclaiming that dying is an art she does "exceptionally well," asserting that "the theatrical/ Comeback in broad day" knocks her out. Her treatment of suicide in such buoyant terms amounts to a parody of her own act. When she compares her suicide to the victimization of the Jews, and when she later claims there is a charge for a piece of her hair or cloths and thus compares her rescued self to the crucified Christ or martyred saint, she is engaging in self-parody. She employs These techniques partly to defy the crowd , with its "brute/Amused shout:/ A miracle! " and partly to taunt her rescuers, "Her Doktor," "Her Enemy"," who regard her as their "opus." She is neither a miracle nor an opus, and she fends off those who would regard her in this way.<sup>13</sup>

The techniques have another function as well: They display the extent to which she can objectify herself, ritualize her fears, manipulate her own terror. Her extreme control is initially entwined with her suicide tendencies. If she is not to succumb to her desire to kill herself and thus control her own fate, she must engage in the elaborate ritual which goes on all the time in the mind of the would-be suicide by which she allays her persistent wish to destroy herself. Her control is not sane but hysterical. When the speaker assures the crowd that she is " the same, identical women" after her rescue , she is in fact telling them her inmost fear that she could( and probably will) do it again. What the crowd takes for a return to health , the speaker sees as a return to the perilous conditions that have driven her three times to suicide. By making a spectacle out of herself and by locating the victimizer in the doctor and the crowd, rather than in herself, she is casting out her terrors so that she can control them. When she boasts at the end that she will rise and eat men , she is projecting

her destruction outward. That last stanza of defiance is really a mental effort to triumph over terror , to rise and not to succumb to her own victimization. The poet behind the poem allows Lady Lazarus to caricature herself and thus to demonstrate the way in which the mind turns ritualistic against horror. Although "Lady Lazarus" drawson Plath's own suicide attempt, the poem tells us little of the way the suicidal person thinks.<sup>14</sup>

The poem reflects Plath's recognition at the end of her life that the struggle between self and others and between birth and death must govern every aspect of the poetic structure.

The Lady of the poem is a quasi-mythological figure , a parodic version of the biblical Lazarus whom Christ raised from the dead. The speaker undergoes a series of transformations that are registered through image sequences. The result is the total alteration of the physical body. In the poem, however, the transformations are violent and various. Four basic sequences of images define the Lady's identity. At the beginning of the poem, she is cloth or material: lampshade, linen, napkin; in the middle, she is only body: knees, skin and bone, hair ; toward the end, she becomes a physical object : gold, ash, a cake of soap; finally, she is resurrected as a red-haired demon. Each of these states is dramatically connected to an observer or observers through direct address: first, to her unnamed "enemy" ; then to the " gentlemen and ladies"; next, to the Herr Doktor; and, finally, to Herr God and Herr Lucifer. The address to these "audiences " allows Plath to characterize Lady Lazarus with great precision . For example , a passage toward the end of the poem incorporates the transition from a sequence of body images (scares-heart-hair) to a series of physical

images(opus-valuable-gold baby) as it shifts its address from the voyeuristic crowd to the Nazi Doktor:

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 cloths.

So, so, Herr Doktor.

So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,

I am your valuable,

The pure gold baby

That melt to a shriek.<sup>15</sup>

The inventiveness of the language demonstrates Plath's ability to create an appropriate oral medium for the distorted mental states of the speaker. The sexual pun on "charge" in the first line above; the bastardization of German ("Herr enemy") ; the combination of Latinate diction ("opus," "valuable") and colloquial phrasing ("charge," "So, so...") – all these linguistic elements reveal a character who has been grotesquely split into warring selves. Lady Lazarus is a different person for each of her audiences, and yet none of her identities is bearable for her. For the Nazi Doktor, she is a Jew, whose body must be burned ; for the " peanut-crunching crowd," she is a stripteaser; for the medical audience, she is wonder, whose scars and heartbeat are astonishing; for the religious audience , she is a miraculous figure, whose hair and cloths are as valuable as saints' relics. And when she turns to her audience in the middle of the poem to describe her career in suicide, she becomes a self-conscious performer. Each of her deaths , she says, is done

"exceptionally well./ I do it so it feels like hell."<sup>16</sup>

The entire symbolic procedure of death and rebirth in "Lady Lazarus" has been deliberately chosen by the speaker. She enacts her death repeatedly in order to cleans herself of the "million filaments" of guilt and anguish that torment her. After she has returned to the womblike state off being trapped in her cave, like the biblical Lazarus, or of being rocked "shut as a seashell," she expects to emerge reborn in a new form. These attempts at rebirth are unsuccessful until the end of the poem. Only when the lady undergoes total immolation of self and body does she truly emerge in a demonic form. The doctor burns her down to ash , and then she achieves her rebirth:

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air.

Using the phoenix myth of resurrection as a basis, Plath imagines a women who has become pure spirit rising against the imprisoned others around her : gods, doctor, men, and Nazis. This translation of the self into spirit, after an ordeal of mutilation, torture, and immolation, stamps the poem as the dramatization of the basic initiatory process.

"Lady Lazarus" defines the central aesthetic principles of Plath's poetry. First, the poem derives its dominant effects from the colloquial language. From the conversational opening("I have done it again") to the clipped warnings of the ending("Beware/ Beware") , "Lady Lazarus" appears as the monologue of a women speakingspontaneously out of her pain and psyche disintegration. The Latinate terms (" annihilate," "filaments," "opus," "valuable") are introduced as sudden contrasts to the essentially simple language of the speaker. The obsessive repetition of key words and phrases gives

enormous power to the plain style used throughout . As she speaks, Lady Lazarus seems to gather up her energies for an assault on her enemies, and the staccato repetitions of phrases build up the intensity of feelings:

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

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.  
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.<sup>17</sup>

This is alanguage poured out of some burning inner fire, though it retains the rhythmical precision that we expect from a much less intensity felt expression. It is also a language made up almost entirely of monosyllables. Plath has managed to adapt a heightened conversational stance and a colloquial idiom to the dramatic monologue form.

The colloquial language of the poem relates to its second major aspect: its aural quality. "Lady Lazarus" is meant to be read aloud. To heighten the aural effects, the speaker's voice modulates across varying levels of rhetorical intensity. At one moment she reports on her suicide attempt with no observable emotion:

I am only thirty.  
And like the cat I have nine times to die.  
This is Number three.

The next moment she becomes a barker at a striptease show:

Gentlemen, ladies ,  
These are my hands.<sup>18</sup>

Then she may break into a kind of incantatory chant that sweeps reality in front of it, as at the very end of the poem. The deliberate rhetoric of the poem makes it as a set-piece , a dramatic tour de force, that must be heard to be truly appreciated.

Certainly it answers Plath's desire to create an aural medium for her poetry.

Third "Lady Lazarus" transforms a traditional stanzaic pattern to obtain its rhetorical and aural effects. One of the striking aspects of Plath's late poetry is its simultaneous dependence on and abandonment of traditional forms. The three-line stanza of "Lady Lazarus" refers to the terza rima of the Italian tradition and to the terza rima experiments of Plath's earlier work.

Finally, "Lady Lazarus," like "Daddy" incorporates historical material into the initiatory and majestic pattern. This element of Plath's method has generated much misunderstanding, including the charge that her use of references to Nazism and to Jewishness is inauthentic. Yet these allusions to historical events form part of the speaker's fragmented identity and allow Plath to portray a kind of eternal victim. The very title of the poem lays the groundwork for a semicomical historical and cultural allusiveness. The lady is a legendary figure, a sufferer, who has endured almost every variety of torture. Plath can thus include among Lady Lazarus's characteristic the greatest contemporary examples of brutality and persecution: the sadistic medical experiments on the Jew's by Nazi doctors and the Nazis' use of their victims' bodies in the production of lampshades and other objects. These allusions, however, are no more meant to establish a realistic heroic norm in the poem than the allusions to the striptease are intended to establish a realistic social context. The references in the poem--- biblical, historical, political, personal--- draw the reader into the center of personality and its characteristic mental processes. The reality of the poem lies in the convulsions of the narrating consciousness. The drama of external persecution, self destructiveness, and renewal, with both its horror and its grotesque comedy, is played

out through social and historical contexts that symbolize the inner struggle of Lady Lazarus.<sup>19</sup>

Then the claim that Plath misuses a particular historical experience is thus incorrect. She shows how a contemporary consciousness is obsessed with historical and personal demons and how that consciousness deals with these figures. The demonic characters of the Nazi Doktor and of the risen Lady Lazarus are surely more central to the poem's tone and intent than is the historicity of these figures. By imagining the initiatory drama against the backdrop of Nazism, Plath is universalizing a personal conflict. The fact that Plath herself was not Jewish has no bearing on the legitimacy of her employment of the Jewish persona: the holocaust serves her as a metaphor for the death-and-life battle between the self and a deadly enemy. Whether Plath embodies the enemy as a personal friend, a demonic entity, a historical figure, or a cosmic force, she consistently sees warfare in the structural terms of the initiatory scenario. "Lady Lazarus" is simply the most powerful and successful of the dramas in which that enemy appears as the sadistic masculine force of Nazism.<sup>20</sup>

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Arthur Oberg, "Sylvia Plath and the New Decadence," as quoted in Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness, Edward Butscher, ed (Continuum, 1976), p.179.
- <sup>2</sup> -Alfred Alvarez, The Savage God: A Study of suicide (Random House, 1972), p. 237.
- <sup>3</sup> Anne Stevenson, The Oxford Companion to Twentieth-Century Poetry in English(Oxford: Oxford University press, 1994), p. 4.
- <sup>4</sup> Edward Butscher, Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness(Continuum: 1976), p. 338.
- <sup>5</sup> Vic Oliver, "National Vanguard" no. 97, October 1983, Pp.8-9. Internet Source.



- <sup>6</sup> Ibid. Pp.9-10.  
<sup>7</sup> Ibid. , p.10.  
<sup>8</sup> Robert Phillips, " The Dark Tunnel: A Reading of Sylvia Plath," Modern Poetry Studies (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1972) ,Pp.43.  
<sup>9</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>10</sup> Ibid. , p.3.  
<sup>11</sup> Ellien M. Aird, " On Lady Lazarus" Internet Source, p. 16.  
<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p. 12.  
<sup>13</sup> -Margaret Dickie, Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes ( Illinois: Illinois University press, 1979) , p. 130.  
<sup>14</sup> Ibid.  
<sup>15</sup> "On Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath, p. 1 . Internet Source.  
<sup>16</sup> -John Rosenblatt, Sylvia Plath : The Poetry of Initiation ( North Carolina: University of North Carolina press, 1974) , p. 140.  
<sup>17</sup> "On Lady Lazarus" by Sylvia Plath, p. 1. Internet Source  
<sup>18</sup> Rosenblatt, p.140.  
<sup>19</sup> Ibid. ,p.150.  
<sup>20</sup> Ibid. , p. 151.

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Internet Source.

#### خلاصة البحث

بسبب معاناتها من جذورها العرقية الحضارية نتيجة للوجود المغاير في الغرب ، حيث إنها أمريكية-ألمانية، فان سلفيا بلات كانت تبحث و بشكل يائس من اجل إيجاد هذه الجذور، ثم تركت البحث وانتهت باليأس وهو آخر ما توصلت إليه. إضافة إلى بعض الأمور المريبة الأخرى في حياتها مثل وفاة والدها وخيانة زوجها وكذلك سوء حالتها الصحية، هذه الأمور التي كانت تدور في و خلال حياتها فقد جعلت من شعرها اعترافا مجردا يتناول مواضيع مثل الحصار الذي يوضح عدم قدرتها على الولوج إلى حيث تريد باستثناء الموت. لم تناقش أعمالها خارج إطار حياتها وذلك لان قصائدها كانت شخصية بشكل عميق و مرتبطة كثيرا بحياتها و مماتها كذلك ، ويعتبر ذلك وسيلة لإصلاح حياتها التي كانت بلا معنى من خلال الفن. وفي الحقيقة فان صفة الاعتراف في شعرها جعلت منها شهيدة للدراما النفسية المتكررة التي استقرت عميقا داخل شخصيتها المجروحة بشكل تراجمي.