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THE DARK IS MELTING: NARRATIVE PERSONA, TRAUMA &  
COMMUNICATION IN SYLVIA PLATH'S POETRY

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JESSICA J. FEUERSTEIN

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the poetry of Sylvia Plath to identify a new perspective that looks at the function of narrative voice in her poetry. This perspective identifies the ways Plath's narrator is given a distinct voice, separate from that of the poet herself. The narrative voice interacts with a listener, the audience, to express a traumatic experience and explores how Plath's narrators share their horrific internal worlds with the audience to make a direct connection to the audience. In past scholarship, Plath is figured as a confessional poet, and the speaker in her poems are treated as the personal confessions and experiences of Plath herself. By examining the strengths and weaknesses of how Plath's work has often been represented by previous scholars, including Jon Rosenblatt, Margaret Dickie and others, this thesis offers alternative methods of considering Plath's poetry. Taking into close consideration Robert Phillips' definition of confessional poetry, this work also identifies the ways in which Plath's work varies from this confessional genre in important and significant ways. To explore how traumatic experiences are presented, this paper takes into consideration Cathy Caruth's theories of trauma. Close readings of a selection of poems from Plath's transitional and later works are offered to demonstrate how the speakers of the poems utilize narrative voice and present traumatic experiences as well as connect to the audience. Taking these elements into consideration provides a way of understanding Plath's poetry in a way that goes beyond viewing them

as personal confessions or expressions of psychological disturbances, and seeks to establish a new understanding of Plath's work that expands from mere confession to communication.

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CHAPTER I  
INTRODUCTION

*Then the sky and I are in open conversation,  
And I shall be useful when I lie down, finally:  
Then the trees may touch me for once, and the flowers have time for me.*

-I Am Vertical, March 1961

Sylvia Plath became one of the most iconic female American poets following her early death, having left behind a dynamic, powerful body of work that continues to offer much material to be explored. Plath's works present the difficult task of separating her very public personal life from her literary work, something scholars have continually struggled with when considering her poetry and fiction. In many ways, the personal content of Plath's writing seems to make this virtually impossible, and her work has primarily been read as a look into her own life, biography and experience. As a result, her biography, along with her relationship to Ted Hughes, guides and dominates much of the criticism of her poetry. A wide variety of critical perspectives have offered insight into Plath's poetic

works, exploring the symbolism of the reoccurring images and themes, looking at her work psychoanalytically, and also looking at the ways her works challenge the stability of language as a means of communication. Her works are often placed in relation to her biography and its effect on her work, while other critics have proclaimed Plath's work to be simply confessional poetry- introspective poems that offer a personal look at her life and little more, such as Robert Phillips, whose exploration of confessional poetry will be later explored. Phillips begins his consideration of Plath by stating, "When Otto Plath died of natural causes... he might have just as well been a lover jilting his beloved. Indeed, in all of her poems Plath makes of this separation a deliberate desertion...Plath's is a terrible, unforgiving nature, in feeling victimized by her father's early death, and later by an unsatisfactory compensatory marriage..." (128). Hughes Kenner, in his essay "Sincerity Kills," writes "She [Plath] was somewhere on the far side of sanity, teasing herself with the thrill or courting extinction...Such spectacles gather crowds and win plaudits for 'honesty' from critics who should know better" and that "The death poems- say a third of *Ariel*- are bad for anyone's soul. They give a look of literary respectability to voyeuristic passions: no gain for poetry, nor for her" (43). Viewing her work from this perspective limits interpretation to its relationship to Plath's personal life and psychology, making minimal if any effort to identify or investigate broader connections made or craft in Plath's poetry. A few critics have taken the time to address the level of poetic technique and craft behind each of Plath's poems and investigate the technical workings of each poem; however, their insights often are limited to these technical aspects of the poems, identifying the developments and changes Plath made throughout her career. Plath's



works demonstrate clear poetic control, and can certainly be viewed as more than unstable or self-indulgent personal confessions or manic-inspired creations.

Looking closely at the narrative perspective and narrative structures in Plath's later poems, it is evident that her work demonstrates immense technical skill and attention to craft. Taking into consideration the traumatic experiences of Plath's narrators provides important insight into the experiences presented, and what each narrator communicates to the listener or audience. These works present a poet turning from the internal, personal experience outward to generate connections on a societal level. In many instances, the poems establish distinct perspectives and narrative personas, separate from that of the poet, diminishing the individual speaker and expand from the particular moment or experience into a universal one, leaving not a private experience or solely narcissistic reflection of the poet but an experience that can be- and must be- shared with the community for the individual to gain closure and understanding. Ultimately, Plath's meticulously crafted works depict worlds of fantasy and imagination as well as reality experienced by the narrative persona which distinguish the poems from a strict confessional mode, defined only by the poet's own experiences, and offer a clear, deliberate attempt to both communicate and comprehend these experiences to the audience through immersive and powerful literary pieces.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CONFESSIONAL MODE

In one of the primary discussions of confessional poetry, Robert Phillips identifies the characteristics of confessional poetry, and the ways it developed in the 1950's and 1960's in particular. He notes that, "It is writing that is highly subjective, which is in direct opposition to that other school of which Auden and Eliot are modern members- writers who consciously strove all but to obliterate their own concrete personalities in their poems" (4). When considering Plath's own work, considering how she develops the "self" within the poem is of great importance, since it determines how we view the poet's life and personality in relation to her work. While the persona in Plath's work has primarily been read as her own self, identifying how these distinct personas are in many ways creations by Plath *separate* from her own self is of great importance. Phillips identifies Robert Lowell as one of the primary figures leading the movement surrounding confessional poetry, stating:

...it must be conceded that it was not prevalent and imitated until the end of the

1950's, when he broke from the Catholic themes and constipated language of his early work to parade forth the adulteries, arrests, divorces, and breakdowns which constitute his Life Studies. (5)

Confessional poetry may be ultimately seen as a rejection of the premises that poetry must be purely artistic and therefore avoid overly emotional sentiments or divulge personal experiences. The focus of the works is presenting the highly personal moments of the poets life rather than working to create any sort of fiction or artifice about these moments and experiences. According to Phillips, confessional poetry may be characterized as “Generally...consist[ing] of a balanced narrative poems with unbalanced or afflicted protagonists. These are poems which ask rather than answer answer questions. They employ irony and understatement as a means of attaining artistic detachment” (7). He goes on to state that, “The confessional poets chiefly employ the Self as sole poetic symbol. They are artists whose total mythology is the lost self” and that “A true confessional poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove” (8). Further, he observes that “The language of the confessional poem is that of ordinary speech, whether in blank verse or free, rhymed or no” and “Openness of language leads to an openness of emotion. For decades American poets seems afraid of emotion. Now their work is suffused with it” (9-10). While the role and importance of emotion in Plath's work is complex, it is important also to differentiate between Plath's own emotion and her narrator's emotion. Phillips also claims that “A toning-down, a holding-back, as if there mere recitation of the horrors of modern life were strong amplification” is another aspect

of the confessional poem; it is not “wild” or “unchecked,” and is not simply outpouring of experience and emotion (11). It remains controlled despite its personal and overly-revealing nature; in this sense, though it may not be ultimately the primary focus of the poet or a definitive controlling factor, craft and technique are not ignored in confessional poetry. He also notes that “At one time or other nearly every poet writing in the confessional genre has taken pains to disavow the literal truth of his poems” and “Antistructural and antielegant in mode, the confessional poem is also antiestablishment in content. Alienation is a recurring theme” (11-12). Confessional poets thus both create a sense of fictitiousness about their works, and an important theme is often one of separateness and isolation; the poet stands outside of the community rather than within it. Phillips states “Closely related to the current poems of personal dissociation are poems of personal failure: failure in marriage, in bed, in love, in career, even in coping” and that “Their intention is rarely to shock, as some have alleged, even for didactic purposes” (14-15). Subject matters are bound in the real, focusing on personal human experiences, and these are presented in a primarily straightforward manner; confessional poets often do not necessarily seek to present extremes or shockingly disturbing experiences meant to create discomfort for the reader. Finally, on the issue of “universality” in confessional poetry, Phillips explains that “In the best confessional writing, transcendence of the personal arises from the human particulars recounted by the poet, rather than by design” (16). The confessional poet perhaps does not intentionally or consciously create a sense of universality in their works but instead this arises naturally through the creation of a specific, particular experience that is shared by the poet in a completely open,

unembellished and honest manner.

It is important to consider this in detail in order to examine the ways Plath's work does and does not fit into this mode. Certainly, the subjects addressed in many of her poems may fit issue and themes commonly addressed by confessional poets. However, her poems certainly do not rely on understatement- if anything, poems such as "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus", a few of her best known works, employ a great deal of hyperbole and heightened sensation. Her poetry is also known for its great reliance on mythological imagery and allusion- certainly Ariel, the river Lethe, Lazarus, and numerous other references to the mystical and magical. These elements of her poetry are important aspects of her work, and indicate a different type of poetic vision other than the confessional style outlined by Phillips. Another telling aspect is the representation of the self- often in her works, Plath takes on the persona of a Jew (i.e "Daddy", "Lady Lazarus", and "Getting There"), or "God's Lioness," and creates simultaneously fantastic and terrifying landscapes, ones of imagination rather than merely bound by the real. If the confessional poet is not meant to put up any barriers between themselves and their experience/emotion, Plath does not appear to fall into this category. Though Phillips himself states "she [Plath] makes no distinction between her tragedy and those of Auschwitz or Nagasaki," it is in fact the worlds of fantasy presented by imagining Auschwitz or Nagasaki which are used to create representations of their horrific experience through their imagination and do not necessarily correlate these real tragedies to that of the real experience present behind the poem (128). After heavily exploring the psychology behind a number of Plath's work, and attributing a hatred of the male and

sense of rejection, Phillips ultimately concludes that:

The full revelation of her agony comes in *Ariel*, her most famous book, and the one which contains her most striking poems. What one must realize, however, is that the poems of all four books were written between 1959 and her death in February 1963. As the shapes of the poems grow sparer and sparer, the tones darker and darker, she follows her father into the small end of the funnel. The poems are all part of one great confession. (145)

Rather than considering the changes in Plath's work from a progression as a developing writer, the changes in her poems are instead attributed to her psychological progression into suicide- the downward spiral that has commonly been identified in her work- which creates a reading of the work that continues to perceive the "I" in the poem as the poet herself and eliminates the poetic mind controlling and guiding the voice and narrative structure present in the poetry. Charles Molesworth states that:

Plath built her language almost exclusively out of various forms of intensification. Condensation, catachresis, metonymy, and the strategies of riddles and allusive jokes: all of these devices to record and yet ward off the numbing of ordinary consciousness by an overwhelmingly fragmented object-world, a flood of facticity that simply will not submit to tenderness or mercy. (166)

Molesworth ignores not only the craft behind this language, and its effectiveness within the poetry, but also fails to consider the ways in which these intensifications actually serve to distance the poems from reality, thus creating an experience entirely different than that of a confessional poem that is meant to provide a private look into the personal

life of the poet. The devices and language used in Plath's work ultimately serve to create the worlds of fantasy of the narrator, rather than, as David Yezzi harshly states in his article for the *New Criterion*, "a sense of worn-on-the-sleeve self-revelation and [their] artful simulation of sincerity..mak[ing] an artifice of honesty." Plath's poems often do not attempt to present themselves as purely bound in the real, or as "self-revelation." The narrators of Plath's work certainly present moments of tragedy and trauma, and openly communicate this to the audience, but do not inherently claim utter truthfulness and reality. They instead offer their experiences in the way in which they understand and imagine them, however fantastical this may be, so that their audience may share and comprehend the event as well.

While Plath's poems do relate to and recount personal experiences, they do so in a way that is infused with metaphor, allusion, and artistry- not one entirely unaffected, unstylized, and brutally open. Her poems are ones which force the reader to engage in leap from the real to the imagination, and the struggle to merge the two. They neither deny their illusions and fantasy, nor do they attempt to plainly present truth and reality. They do not need to purposefully state their lack of truth, as Phillips states nearly all confessional poets do, yet they intentionally create a sense of an alternate reality that is the narrator's own perception and imagination to communicate their experience. Phillips, in his introduction, quotes the definition of confessional poetry provided by Allen Ginsburg, stating that "the difference as that which one would tell one's friends and what one would tell one's Muse" (xv). Phillips goes on to say that "The problem of the confessional poet, Ginsburg says, is to break down that distinction, to approach the

Muse as frankly as one talks with one's friends: 'It's the ability to commit to writing, to *write*, the same way that you... are.'" Phillips concludes by saying "The aesthetic process must transform motifs without demolishing their bearing" (xv). The confessional poet speaks both candidly, conversationally, and intimately, as though to a close friend, rather than to a wide audience. This distinction is a highly important one; Plath's work certainly provides personal insight and personal experiences, but do not present them in such a way that they are free from a certain level of artifice or manipulation. They present experiences filtered through poetic craft and a determined level of detachment or separation from the poet herself through the personas created within each work. They also create a sense of speaking perhaps not to a specific individual or friend, but to a perceived audience or community that is meant to share and understand the experience presented.

A number of Plath's poems, particularly the later ones, do rely on ordinary spoken language, one of the notable shifts from her earlier works. While on the surface this may seem to indicate a shift towards a more confessional mode, this distinct choice of Plath has a number of other implications besides confession; this more aural diction provides her works with their notable driving, intense force, and additionally allows Plath's narrator to be engaged in a conversation with the audience. While Plath's poems in some cases seem to present a sense of "alienation" as Phillips notes, they are far from "antistructural." Considering the aspect of alienation, however, it is also crucial to consider the ways in which the narrators place and present themselves in relation to others, and the audience, one of the central concerns of this work. Each poem



demonstrates a high awareness and attention to form and control; in her presentation of events and emotions experienced in her works, Plath demonstrates (and, arguably, achieves) a great deal of artistic and technical mastery, rather than a complete “openness” that dominates the confessional mode.

It is crucial to reconsider the issue of the level of confession in Plath's work, as it primarily relates to both the content of her poems and the way the narrative and speaker are perceived. When considering her poetry, even from a perspective not necessarily bound by the definition of confessional poetry, critical perspectives have too often limited themselves to viewing the speaker as Plath herself, and as the speaker revealing personal events and emotions. Breaking away from this viewpoint and examining the speaker as a separate entity from Plath herself offers the possibility of not only understanding the artistic effort involved in each poem, but additionally a means to understand the ways Plath's poems do not limit themselves to a narcissistic view, only concerned with the Self, but attempt to communicate with the audience.

### CHAPTER III

#### A CONSIDERATION OF PAST CRITICISM

The focus of much criticism regarding Plath's work is primarily on the role of death and Plath's dramatic representations of death. Jon Rosenblatt, in his work "Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Initiation", offers an analysis of Plath's work in terms of "initiation", or the process of rebirth through death. Rosenblatt offers some insightful comments relating to the speaker and perspective in Plath's poetry in his introduction, appropriately titled "Misconceptions." He identifies that "The actions, characters, setting, and images...combine to form more than simply a portrait of the poet. Plath organizes them into a coherent dramatic plot" (16). The conscious attention to plot in Plath's works is important for considering the deviation from the confessional mode; rather than rely purely on personal experiences and events, Plath's works contain carefully constructed and purposeful plots, driving by craft rather than only personal experience. Poems such as "Zoo Keeper's Wife," "Magi," and "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." among many others are

bound not by Plath's own life, but instead are highly constructed plots which create powerful experiences for the reader. Later in his analysis, he goes on to identify and explore the nature of the plots created in Plath's work, claiming:

She often takes the reader into a vortex of energies that produces either survival and new life or destruction and death, depending on the forces that gain control of consciousness. Her poems dramatize a personality's struggle for continuing existence as it survives repeated encounters with death. (25)

Rather than viewing the poems as pieces that drive the narrator into death as a means of escape, instead the propulsion towards death instead becomes a positive, regenerative force. Considering both how death and rebirth are ultimately portrayed in Plath's work may provide important insight into the psychology of the narrator; however, it is important not to limit any reading to the role of death, which may not only inscribe Plath's own death on the work but may limit other considerations and themes presented in these works. Rosenblatt also notes that:

The personae in her poems speak to a wide variety of listeners, thus dramatizing a struggle with both human and natural forces. They speak to other people, often a child or family member; to quasi-mythological figures, often invented by the poet...Whatever to poetic form, the intention is clearly to find a voice and a situation that will externalize the internal, conflicting agencies of her personality. (24)

Though Rosenblatt identifies that the speakers in Plath's work do, in fact, speak to an audience, to simply attribute this to an internal "split" of the narrator confines the reading of these poems again to personal confession of the poet. It again finds an internal

psychology of the poet rather than the speaker of the poem itself. The central argument made by Rosenblatt is that:

Plath's poetry can thus be seen as a ritual action that defines the roles the poet and her personae may play...The initiatory character of the work emerges most clearly when we realize how closely Plath follows the structural pattern and imagery of initiatory practices of archaic societies. (25-26)

While Rosenblatt presents a strong argument for this reading, his presentation of a singular dramatic structure seems to unproductively restrict the full possibilities available in Plath's work. He also falls into the type of reading that identifies the poetry as a representation of Plath's own struggle- "Her poems reveal again and again her tremendous violent struggle to gain control of her psyche" (46). The poems do present a narrator attempting to gain control of a traumatic situation, in many instances, but to attribute these to Plath's own self may miss the larger scope offered in many of her works.

Plath's work is also often viewed for its often cyclic structure, with a repeated sense of death and rebirth, destruction and regeneration, and link this to Plath's own personal sense of her experiences, related either to her relationship with her father or Hughes. Ted Kendall argues that the *Ariel* poems present a desire for rebirth through death, something the poems written in the weeks leading up to her death seem to cease aspiring to (154). Kendall points to the narrative theme of these later poems to be one of "fall and recovery", and that "Plath portrays her fall into division not as a single, irreparable moment, but as a recurring process, as her life vacillates between blissful unity...and

terrifying isolation” (153). The later poems demonstrate an attempt to gain an understanding of the individual’s relation to society, with the narrator actively seeking to gain a stronger, more stable relationship rather than a position which keeps the individual (the narrator) separate, isolated, and the outside “Other.” Kendall’s focus offers an understanding of the stylistic progression of Plath’s work, from the more traditional style of *The Colossus* poems to the poems of *Ariel* and, ultimately, the poems written leading up to her death. This change for him presents a “heightened detachment and resignation in the face of an intracable destiny” (163). The change in style most importantly, however, demonstrates Plath's deliberate control of her poems, and her ability to create powerful experiences through these works. To view this change as "detachment" and "resignation" is not only narrowing, but also does not fully take the effect of this style on the works into consideration.

This view presents the narrator both as a manifestation of Plath herself and one who is ultimately solitary, placing themselves against the community rather than a part of it. It also significantly tracks this parallel to Plath's own life, as her marriage begins to lapse and dissolve. While Kendall argues that these poems challenge the reader with their complex nature, viewing the style change as only resulting in a greater detachment seems to limit the reading to the arch of her own life, with the final moments being consumed by this inability to connect and hopelessness. In considering the poems surrounding and including the *Ariel* collection, it is important to identify the ways the narrator achieves the renewal Kendall discusses, what this offers the narrator, and also the ways in which the narrator works to establish a dialogue with the audience, an aspect of these poems

Kendall does not seem to recognize or attribute to these works.

An area that often seems to be neglected in investigating Plath's poetry is the role of technical control and attention throughout her work. It is, however, important in any analysis of her work to consider the ways in which Plath demonstrates significant control and literary craft to create specific effects through her poetry. In *Sylvia Plath, Revised*, Caroline King Barnard brings a more technical focus in examining Plath's poetry, which perhaps attempts to present a more unbiased perspective. She notes of the "transitional" poetry- the poems between *The Colossus* and *Ariel*- that:

...the stepping-stone quality of these transitional poems is revealed in their structure; the mutation in Plath's use of rhymes, rhythms, sounds, and stanza forms from the early to the late poems is a process instructive to follow in tracing her gradual achievement of economical expression... the kinds of stanza structures Plath progressively employs reveals the tendency of her poetry toward greater structural freedom and verbal elasticity" (68).

As Plath's work progresses, Barnard finds that "the trend is toward a simpler, more direct, and more emphatic verse" (69). What this more direct style ultimately achieves, by reducing the more formal poetic elements of the early work, is a personal connection, a more conversational tone that provides the audience with the sense that the speaker is speaking to them rather than a poet composing a poem with specific intentions. The later poems are certainly more personal, and therefore generally seen as more "confessional," yet this directness creates a connection to the audience, providing the sense that what the story the speaker is telling is one that is one of importance to them, as well, not merely an

individual reflection of the speaker.

Concerning the perspective of the speaker, Barnard notes that “In both the earlier and later poetry, the speaker assumes an identifiable voice, an individual identity, so that the poems themselves present a clear dramatic situation” (74). This creation of a specific voice and dramatic situation are key to understanding the aspect of Plath’s work which remove it from an individualized confession to a more universal understanding. Barnard goes on to say that: “Generally one has the impression that the ‘I’ and ‘you’ and the surrounding landscape exist to express an idea the poet has- an idea that, struggling for expression, renders the specifics of the poem subordinate and lifeless” (74). Certainly, the creation of a specific voice and specific setting arise from whatever concern the poet has in mind during the creation of the work, but when considering these dramatic creations it is important to identify not only their purpose but also the way the speaker created interacts with their audience and what message they attempt to convey to the audience. Examples may include the speaker of “Getting There” brings the audience along, as does the speaker of “Crossing the Water,” the speaker of “The Detective” shares the mystery with the audience, and so forth. These interactions do not remain on the personal level, but instead create a sense of communication, opening up dialogues rather than existing simply as closed monologues.

Barnard describes the later poems in *Ariel* as “the world of a nightmare, though there are constant objects and places in it that define its boundaries, allowing the visitor to recognize its outlines and affording the poetry much of its control” and goes on to explain that “once this link between the inner and outer world is established, analogy can become

metaphor... the ultimate result of this linking...is that the distinctions between the external and internal reality are virtually removed” (87-88). By eliminating the distinction between fantasy and reality, then, Plath’s poetry invites readers to enter and become immersed into both worlds of the speaker. The reader is thus not necessarily entering Plath's own personal world and experience, but one bound in the imagination of the persona controlling the poem.

This “fusion,” as Barnard describes it, is primarily the result of the trauma being expressed by the speaker. It is not simply the internal and external worlds of Plath herself that are being merged, however; instead it is the worlds experienced and portrayed by her narrators. Barnard explores the poem “Getting There” as an example of this fusion, claiming that: “The common ground on which external and internal meet and merge in this poem is the notion of rushing- of rushing towards an established, anticipated goal” and determines that the goal the train and speaker are rushing toward is “death” (89). Though the fusion Barnard identifies provides a powerful means of considering Plath's works, Barnard connects it to Plath’s own psychology rather than looking for any distinction between the narrator of the poem and the poet herself. While the poem may speak to a sense of “rushing” toward death, any reading of the poem focused on suicidal and death obsessed themes eliminates other possibilities. Barnard goes on to explain that “the ordering and juxtaposing of images in this poem richly create a new kind of reality” (94). It is this new reality that is created in “Getting There” and many other poems that seems to aspire to create a new world removed from the pain of existing reality to something new and if not hopeful, certainly regenerative. At the conclusion of “Getting



There,” for example, the narrator is left “Pure as a baby.” The new reality that is created in these poems provides great insight into the narrators Plath has created, and what the speaker is communicating to the audience.

Barnard notes of the formal control in the poems that “There is no letting up in these poems, no release whatever. The poet is indeed inhabited by her cry; her nightmare is real, and reality is the nightmare” (101). She goes on to say:

in informing it, much of the power derives from the controlling, but not taming, influence the poetic structure exerts upon the poet’s set outpourings. Not only do the breakdown of exterior-interior boundaries, the highly symbolic landscapes, and the particularized set of images require special control... as the define the limits of a nightmarish world... well established boundaries guide the turbulent scream and cause it to flow faster. Economy relates directly to intensity. (101)

Through this "economy" Plath provides her poems with a powerful sense of urgency and tension, which is controlled through the strict attention to the poetics in each work. The primary focus of many of Plath’s later poems is often the attempt to control the recounting of a nightmarish experience and world, imposing some sort of boundary and structure upon a horrific experience, in order to perhaps make sense of it but also share and purge oneself of it. This control is what allows for the narrative persona Plath generates to present its trauma to the audience. Placing such control over the work makes the poetry formally and technically “good” poetry, certainly, but ultimately also allows the speaker to recount their narrative for their audience. These poems are not frantic outpourings of emotion or experience, but highly controlled pieces conveying powerful

narratives, carefully crafted to recreate the event for both the narrator and audience.

Another critical perspective often imposed on Plath's work is the presentation of the "self" and the ways in which Plath figures herself in relation to both those around her and her world, often focusing on the transformation into a God-like figure or vilifying her enemies, i.e "Lady Lazarus," "Daddy," "Ariel," "Stopped Dead," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," etc. In her discussion of Plath's later poems, Pamela Annas identifies the ways these poems attempt to understand the relationship between the self and the world. Annas argues that "the self can change and develop, transform and be reborn, only if the world in which it exists does; the possibilities of the self are intimately and inextricably tied to those of the world" (95). She claims that the struggle to overcome the limited possibilities of the "real" world is the primary concern of Plath's later works. Annas focus is primarily on the "self's" relationship to the world, and not directly to the people encountered and interacted with in the poems themselves. According to Annas, "What her poetry questions, given her perception of the limited possibilities open to her, is where there is to get to. Is one actually moving, or is one on a treadmill, watching the same scenery go past repeatedly?" (103). The importance of movement in Plath's poetry is not limited to "where there is to get to," however. The repetition in Plath's poetry may present a fear of stasis, but it is primarily employed as a powerful poetic technique, and the speakers are more often concerned with the present moment and attempting to understand their relationship to the society surrounding them. Concerning the narrative perspective of the poetry, however, Annas explains:

This [Robert Lowell's] conception of Plath's poetic self-image as a character and the

Ariel poems as a narrative, connected by a consistency of language, is, I think, accurate. She builds up a picture of a world for us and of herself in various guises moving through it, worrying at it, trying to find in the chaos a comfortable balance, some ground on which to stand. (101)

She goes on to claim:

Both Plath and Hughes characterize the world as a chaotic, brutal, and dehumanizing place. Plath often sees the conditions of her world to be so overpowering that she cannot hope to change them and must struggle merely to retain herself and to attempt to grow within conditions so inimical to growth that she feels she must continually start over again. (102)

This treatment of the perspective continues to place Plath's work in relation to the autobiography of the poet, it seems, determined to read the narrative as the voice of Plath herself. The persona of the poems are again merely mirrors of Plath herself rather than creations of the poet. Reconsidering the later poems, looking at the narrative perspective and narrative structure in terms of how they function within the poem itself and not primarily as a personal expression or confession of the poet, provides a way to understand these poems for the way they position the speaker and viewer in relation to society rather than "the world" as Annas does.

Critics have often viewed Plath's work in relation to their representation of relationships- both male and female, father and daughter, wife and husband, mother and child, and the ways in which these demonstrate Plath's own troubled relationships throughout her life. In *Sylvia Plath's Narrative*, Margaret Dickie's primary concern is the

ways Plath's works depict interactions between women, stating "Plath wrote a number of poems about women confronting each other, and the stories they tell involve affronts, disappointments, hurts, all stemming from the emotional inadequacies of the presumed stronger partner" (5). Dickie views many of Plath's poems as portraying invasions of privacy, and that "The insistent form, the incessantly repeated phrases, sounds, and rhymes, serve to distance the actual situation, to control verbally what seems like an invasion over which the speaker has no control" (6). This, however, ascribes the poetic control not to a conscious attempt of the poet to create a particular situation and effect rather than exercising control over her own experiences. The repeated phrases and metaphorical language create a distance between the speaker and the event of the poem, and perhaps show an attempt to control the event which seems outside of the narrators control; however these devices seem to be used primarily as a means to both process the trauma and communicate the event to the audience. While Plath's poems do display the anxiety of the personal life being exposed in some moments, as demonstrated in the poems explored by Dickie, looking at other selections of poems can provide a perspective that looks beyond this focus of interactions between women. The poems Dickie draws from ("The Tour," "Eavesdropper," "Medusa," and "Lesbos"), if anything, also show an awareness of the impossibility of having an complete insight into another individual's life, and the dangers of making quick judgments of others. Dickie does note, however, that "Plath's speakers can turn every contingency into a discrete image, and that image into one another, until a pattern forms" (9). However Dickie does not fully explore the effect and power of these patterns, and their critical importance to the poems. Instead, she

ultimately determines that Plath's speakers as defensive and to "have suffered some private disaster, some violent emotional upheaval", and that they display a "tone of self-righteousness," with narrative strategies to support and "justify [her] rage against those who are wrong" (12,13). Dickie claims "Although the speaker in all four poems feels estranged from the people around her, she sees herself as part of a community or family and even more she presents herself as a housewife or mother," yet she goes on to conclude that "the speaker in Plath's poetry is forthright in her attacks on the community which she images as itself predatory" (12). This perspective seems to re-inscribe the traditional view of Plath as one who is isolated, defensive, traumatized, and unwilling to conform to societal conventions. The position Dickie sees in the narratives is, as most Plath critics do, one of the outsider looking in, spiteful, and marking themselves off against the community and its values. Reconsidering the position of the speaker, however, offers an understanding of the ways that the speaker does not merely attempt to pass judgment on the community but instead establish open communication and understanding with the community. Limiting the speakers to a position of self-righteousness creates a minimal reading that does not fully consider the narrator's position or the narrative structure created within each poem, thus preventing a more complex understanding of Plath's works.

Concerning the narrative structure of the poems, Dickie identifies the ways Plath's fiction writing influenced her poetic works as well. She argues that Plath "expanded the lyric poem" in her development of narrative within her poetry. Dickie writes that "Plath's narrating lyrics are tightly packed structures in which rapid shifts in points of view,

highly selective characterizing gestures or external details, and compressed time sequences obscure the realistic basis” (2). Certainly Plath’s narratives are often not presented in a traditional or straight-forward manner, and ultimately lie somewhere between realism and fantasy. The reader is then challenged to discover the realism and the speaker's connection to the “real” beneath the often semi-fantastical nature of the poems - “Cut” comes to mind, where the image of a cut thumb escapes into a fantasy of a catalogue of images without any direct connection to the real moment of the cut itself. The significance of this "obscuring" of the real lies in the way that it allows the narrator to present their experience to the audience; the experiences offered in many of the poems are filtered through the narrator's own perception and imagination for the audience so that they may participate and comprehend the experience as well.

Plath’s work may present a disillusionment with twentieth century society in various moments, yet they also present attempts to express and communicate experiences and emotions, to share these moments with an audience. A number of Plath’s poems do address challenges of womanhood and domesticity, but is the tone and perspective of all Plath’s poems as distanced and scornful as Dickie presents them to be? Plath’s works often are initially from a disillusioned position, yet not one that is entirely devoid of hope, and not exclusively from the “self-righteous” perspective which Dickie presents. By looking at the poems “Getting There,” “The Detective,” “A Birthday Present,” "Love Letter," "Crossing the Water", and "Event," poems which are not tightly linked to either the bee poems or the Nazi-themed poems, and paying particular attention to both the narrative structure and the way the the speaker establishes a relationship with the

audience, it is possible to understand Plath's work from a new perspective beyond one which simply identifies and establishes parallels to Plath's own life. These poems demonstrate attempts to establish genuine communication between the speaker and the audience, and attempt to do so use in order to understand and process a traumatic event experienced by the speaker.

CHAPTER IV  
CONCERNING THE TRAUMATIC EXPERIENCE: AWAKENING FROM THE  
NIGHTMARE

One of the notable features of Plath's work is the way in which her narrators are often faced with trauma and horrific events. From Lady Lazarus who must rise from the ashes, to the narrator of "Tulips" who lies recovering in a hospital bed, to the riders on the train of "Getting There," and many others, the situations and experiences presented are often disturbing and distressing both for the narrator as well as the reader, creating a strong sense of unease, dread, and apprehension. These traumas are one of the primary concerns of the poetry, providing both its subject as well as its energy, emotion, and ultimate significance. Considering the way the event affects the narrator and the way in which it is presented through the poetry offers a way of viewing the poems are more than death-obsessed narratives. Cathy Caruth, in her work *Unclaimed Experience*, establishes an understanding of trauma that is highly beneficial when considering Plath's work. Caruth



explores and expands Freud's concept of repetition compulsion, and comes to conclusions which hope to provide further insight than Freud. By applying the idea of the repetition compulsion to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, Caruth establishes a new understanding of traumatic experience and its effects by removing the repetition compulsion from the context of the pleasure principle. She explains:

For it is not just any event that creates a traumatic neurosis, Freud indicates, but specifically 'severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life' (12). What Freud encounters in the traumatic neurosis is not the reaction to any horrible event but rather, the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival. (60)

Caruth focuses on traumas involving a life threatening experience, and finds that what is traumatizing is not the event itself but the inability to process one's survival. For Caruth, the psyche is in a constant battle to overcome the "threat" to one's life, and attempt to grasp the fact of survival. The constant repetition and return to the event, then, is the psyche's need to fully "claim" the experience of survival. In relation to dreams, it is possible that it is not the "fright" which occurs in the dream that is traumatizing, but rather it is the waking from the dream that creates the real trauma. The attempt to achieve consciousness in waking and "shaking" the fright of the dream is the true struggle rather than escaping the experience itself. Caruth then relates this to the "death drive," stating:

The origin of the drive is thus precisely the experience of having passed beyond death without knowing it. And it is an attempt to master this awakening to life that the drive ultimately defines its historical structure: failing to return to to the moment of its own

act of living, the drive departs into the future of human history. (65)

From this perspective, all our experiences are defined by this attempt to become fully aware of one's awakening from the experience of near death (i.e trauma), and an inability to fully grasp this awareness that creates the cycle of repetition. While Freud did not see the relationship between the trauma and the repetition, Caruth comes to identify it as being a part of attempt to gain awareness of one's survival.

Taking Caruth's understanding of trauma into consideration when investigating Plath's poems provides a powerful method for understanding the narrator's traumatic experience. A number of Plath's narrators present their traumatic experiences, and are extensively attempting to "wake" from them. The conjoined experience with the audience demonstrates an attempt to move from a world of dream or fantasy that is the result of the trauma to awaken and accept their continued existence. The poems bear witness to the narrator's "awakening" from the traumatic experience and their continued survival. Plath's narrators, having survived, must become aware of and accept their continued existence and do so through the retelling of the traumatic experience to the audience. Exploring these poems by examining the narrator's presentation of their experience and their attempt to awaken from this experience- and therefore process it- allows for an understanding of the narrators and the poems as more than death-obsessed, suicidal, or representative of Plath's own psychology. Looking closely at a number of her poems and the narratives they develop, it is possible to identify the ways Plath presents the trauma experienced by her narrators in a highly controlled way that is closely aligned with Caruth's understanding of the traumatic experience.

## CHAPTER V

### READING PLATH'S WORK: A SELECTION OF POEMS

While each of Plath's poems offer unique narratives and demonstrates complex poetic craft, it is important to also examine some of her less explored works in order to identify the ways Plath utilizes narrative elements and personas in ways that do not inherently relate to her own experiences. The poem "Getting There" is an example of the abstract narrative used by Plath in much of her poetry. The poem provides the speaker's experience of "getting there," yet opens from a distanced perspective. The unknown speaker simply asks "How far is it?/ How far is it now?" in a childlike voice (1-2). It is not immediately apparent who the speaker is or where they are. The narrative develops fairly quickly into a horrific journey through a war-torn landscape; the speaker tells us "It is Russia I have to get across, it is some war or other," creating a sense of not only oppression, but also of cold, freezing desperation (9). These short, fragmented lines both establish the rhythm and sound of the poem, and contribute the more intimate,

conversational tone of the narrator. Deliberately and carefully carried throughout the poem, Plath uses these short, fragmented and unaffected lines to establish communication with the audience on behalf of the speaker and provide a clear, unified structure and tone to the piece. The reader is taken on the journey- real or imagined- on the train with the narrator, going “Quietly through the straw of the boxcars” (11). The wheels of the train are “Fixed to their arcs like gods,” becoming an indomitable force that can’t be altered, out of the control of either the narrator or the audience (14). The speaker tells the audience that “All the gods know is destinations,” implying the only concern left to either the narrator or the audience is the destination itself (17). Plath then allows her narrator to speak metaphorically, claiming “I am a letter in this slot- / I fly to a name, two eyes.” (18-19). This movement takes the perspective away from a sharp focus on the uncontrolled moment in the train and provides an escape, however uncertain it may be. This type of escape through the imagination is one which occurs frequently throughout many of Plath’s works; it serves as the primary way for her speakers to gain relief from the horror or trauma of a given situation. What is also important about this movement is that the narrator seems to take the audience along with them, including them and providing the same relief.

Readers then enter the “trainstop,” with nurses attending wounded soldiers. Together the narrator and audience bear witness to “The tent of unending cries- / A hospital of dolls” (27-28). Again, the narrator must rely on metaphor to convey the image to the audience. The narrator posits the question “what is left of men,” and answers that only a “Dynasty of broken arrows!” remains (32-33).

The next stanza repeats the question of “How far is it?” (34), but rather than the imagined “gigantic gorilla interior” (3), the speaker points out the small detail of mud on their feet, “Thick, red, and slipping” (36). It is one of the few concrete details and images provided, something real and tangible both the reader and narrator can cling to as they struggle to make sense of the event. As the narrative progresses, the line between the fantastical and real becomes less and less distinct; the speaker moves quickly from describing themselves as rising from “[This earth], Adam’s side” (36) and the train becoming a hellish animal, “Steaming and breathing, its teeth/ Ready to roll, like a devil’s” (39-40) back to the actual moment with:

It is so small

The place I am getting to, why are there these obstacles --

The body of this woman,

Charred skirts and deathmask. (44-47)

With each digression and recovery, the reader becomes more immersed in the narrator’s perspective, accepting the narrator’s perspective and experiencing the journey just as the narrator does. With each repetition of “How far is it?” the audience attempts to gain an answer like the narrator and becomes anxious to discover when the journey will end. As the narrator navigates through the war-torn landscape, they eventually seem to bring the audience literally into the scene, stating that “The fire’s between us,” though it only becomes clear in the final lines of the poem that the narrator is directly addressing the audience (51).

The narrator remains in the moment of intensity, aware of the train “dragging itself, [it

is] screaming-/ An animal/ Insane for the destination,” again reverting to metaphorical language to process the trauma, and also reinforcing the importance of the destination, though neither the narrator or audience is clear on what the destination holds (55-57). The narrator then tells us that “I shall bury the wounded like pupas, / I shall count and bury the dead,” demonstrating a concern for the dead in the midst of a chaotic and violent environment that appears devoid of emotion and to disregard the value of the individual (60-61). Only the narrator seems personally concerned with those who have died and feels the need to acknowledge the traumatic experience with the telling of the event. The audience participates in this telling, and the narrator relies on this shared experience to provide his retelling with purpose.

Finally, the speaker tells the audience that:

I, stepping from this skin  
Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces  
Step to you from the black car of Lethe,  
Pure as a baby. (65-68)

This final image is one of regeneration- the narrator comes out and the end of the journey clean and purified, seemingly rid of the old damages and difficulties. As Kendall identifies, the destructive experience leads not to oblivion but to a renewal, possible not because of the experience itself, but because of the ability to retell and express it to someone. Though the narrator has experienced the "fall," the "recovery" comes from a connection to society rather than any internal drive. It is also significant that the narrator informs the audience that they are stepping out of the river of Lethe, the river of

forgetfulness, entering the world again with the ability to move forward not with an absence of knowledge and memory but with the ability to remember, to take the traumatic experiences and gain understanding from them. If Caruth's understanding of "waking from" the trauma as being most significant act in the processing of a traumatic experience, then certainly the conclusion of "Getting There" points to an awakening that, though it may not be painless, is necessary, purifying, and critical for any possibility of moving forward. The narrator also steps to the audience; they are not alone but instead beginning anew *with* the audience. Having experienced the trauma together, they are able to share the remembrance of it and move forward from it together. This becomes possible because of the shared knowledge, and the ability of the narrator to express the memory to the audience rather than repressing it. The poem serves as a means for the narrator of establishing communication with the audience, and to strengthen their relationship to the audience, as the poem concludes with their coming together rather than separation, presenting not an isolated perspective but an inclusive one.

"The Detective" seems to follow a more easily perceived narrative- that of a mystery plot. Like "Getting There," however, the poem blurs the lines between imagination and reality as it develops. It's structure presents the audience with questions as though they are the assistant to the narrator in solving the mystery of a disappearance or death. The narrator, i.e the detective, attempts to reconstruct the event, asking "What was she doing when it blew in/ Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?" (1-3). He imagines "the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong," and the audience participates in the recreation of the crime (8). Yet in the third stanza, the audience is told

“The death weapon? No one is dead. / There is no body in the house at all.” (15-16) It then becomes clear that the detective is not look at a murder but instead at “the deceits, tacked up like family photographs” (13). The audience then understands that they are investigating and witnessing the destruction of a family. They are shown the empty, desolate house:

There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.

There is sunlight, playing its blades,

Bored hoodlum in a red room.

Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative. (17-20)

Just as the train in “Getting There” is giving life, the house is personified to express the trauma the narrator needs to convey. In the absence of the subjects of the mystery, the detective must look to the house to tell the story. The question/answer format is maintained as the narrator continues to reconstruct and retell the event, with the narrator providing the answers for the audience. Though the narrator addresses the audience and seems to ask their participation in the investigation, the narrator has already come to the conclusion. He reveals that “It is a case of vaporization,” sharing his knowledge with the audience rather than continuing to withhold it and continue the sense of mystery (26).

The poem then continues in metaphorical language, turning a mouth into something punished for its “insatiability,” “hung out like” and breasts into “two white stones” (28-32). Again, the detective can only retell the story through metaphor and personification, using these tools to express the experience so the audience can understand, visualize, and participate in the experience in the same way that he does. Also similar to “Getting



There,” the narrator does not attempt to repress the moment but rather acknowledges it and emphasizes the importance of it to the community. Though the speaker presents a dejected world, one that is full of “hard breasts” producing “yellow milk” and children whose “bones showed,” the speaker shares these details with the audience rather than ignoring them or trying to make them disappear, perhaps providing a cautionary tale for the audience (33-35).

The speaker tells his audience- addressed in the final stanza at “Watson,” implying the detective to be Sherlock Holmes- to simply “Make notes” (38,40). The event must be recorded by the speaker, and also transmitted by the audience. Without the audience to participate in the recording, the detective’s work will disappear into the air.

While “The Detective” does not offer the same sense of renewal that “Getting There” provides, the same emphasis is placed on the sharing of the experience with the audience. Rather than simply telling the facts to the assistant (the audience), however, he establishes a dialogue with the audience, inviting them to participate in the revealing and understanding of the mystery with him. While this poem presents the “chaotic” and destructive world Annas perceives, this narrator is not overcome by it, does not seem to attempt to escape it or self-destruct in order to survive. Instead, both the narrator and the community are able to process the event and come to an understanding of it through this sharing, through the making of notes. The detective and the listener are attempting to awaken from the experience to the reality they must face with the uncovering of the mystery, acknowledging their own survival in the face of the destruction they bear witness to.

In “A Birthday Present,” the narrator also engages in a dialogue with the audience, opening with questions about the birthday gift. The narrator reassures the audience that “I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is just what I want,” conforming to a sense of etiquette and politeness (3-4). The present is then given a voice by the narrator, letting the narrator share their perception of the gift with the audience. The present is given a mocking tone, saying “My god, what a laugh!” at the sight of the narrator (10). Yet the narrator sees the present as one that “shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me” (11). From the metaphorical imaginings of the present, the narrator returns to reality by reminding the audience that “I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year. / After all I am alive only by accident” (13-14). Rather than hiding the suicidal desires in metaphor, the narrator openly acknowledges them to the audience, and this expression provides the narrator with the ability to acknowledge it personally as well. It also establishes an intimate, open relationship between the narrator and the audience which continues throughout the poem.

Like the narrator in “Getting There,” the narrator of “A Birthday Present” wavers back and forth between the metaphorical and the real; after imagining the present as “a tusk there, a ghost-column,” (19) the narrator directly addresses the audience again, insisting again:

Can you not see I do not mind what it is.

Can you not give it to me?

Do not be ashamed- I do not mind if it is small.

The narrator then asks the audience to participate in the fantasy with them, inviting:

Let us sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam,  
The glaze, the mirrory variety of it.

Let us eat our last supper at it, like a hospital plate. (20-26)

The narrator does not enter this moment alone but wishes to include the audience.

Seeming to recognize an expressed fear or anxiety, the narrator then attempts to soothe the audience by acknowledging:

I know why you will not give it to me,

You are terrified

The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it,

Bossed, brazen, an antique shield (27-30)

While this destructive moment does not occur, the narrator recognizes it as part of the fear of the audience. The narrator explains that there is nothing to fear, that “I will only take it and go aside quietly. / You will not even hear me opening it” (33-34). This reassurance hopes to pacify the audience and reduce the tension between them. Yet the narrator also importantly expresses an awareness of the audience’s perception of them, confessing “I do not think you credit me with this discretion” (36). It seems that the narrator is attempting to overcome the lack of trust between the audience and themselves, hoping to establish a relationship free of the fear of the “scream at the end” (35). The narrator then opens up their perspective of the house for the audience, telling them:

If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.

To you they are only transparencies, clear air.

But my god, the clouds are like cotton.

Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide. (37-40)

This dismal view separates the narrator and the audience, establishing their distinct perspectives. The first line seems pleading, lamenting, “if only,” desperate for the audience to understand their perspective. Rather than merely state that the audience can not understand their perspective, the narrator attempts to convey it to them so they might come to an understanding of it. This seems to be another attempt to overcome existing barriers in the relationship to and the communication with the audience, rather unlike the “self-righteous” narrator described by Dickie.

Again, the poem then begins to move back and forth between fantasy and reality again, as a means to express anxieties. The narrator imagines an oppressive adding machine, addressing it directly and asking it “Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go whole?”, further reflecting the narrator sense of incompleteness and oppression. In the next line, the narrator returns to directly addressing the audience and explains “There is this one thing I want today, and only you can give it to me,” establishing that only the audience can provide the speaker with any completeness or relief (48). The narrator then describes what the audience can give it, saying “It stands at my window, big as the sky. It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center” (50). The “gift” seems overwhelming, alive and domineering, but it remains the only gift desired. The audience is then told:

Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger.

Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty

By the time the whole if it was delivered, and too numb to use it. (52-54)

A sense of urgency is created, and the narrator seems to imagine a more direct, immediate, and honest type of communication between themselves and the audience. Plath's short, fragmented lines and the repetition of "Let it not come..." both establishes a less formal tone, as typical of *Ariel*, and demonstrates the highly conscious poetic control so crucial to Plath's work. This control not only contributes to the effect and power of the poem, but it indicates the intention of presenting the experience not purely from a personal perspective, but reconstructing it to be shared with others. This type of complete, swift communication without an interfering medium seems to be what the narrator most desires. They beg the audience to "Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil," insisting that this would allow the narrator to "know you were serious" (55, 58). This openness allows for a full, complete view of the audience, and visa-versa. It creates a relationship without false expression or presentations, and the narrator explains "There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday" (59).

The conclusion of "A Birthday Present" seems to offer a similar type of cleansing and purity that "Getting There" creates, if not the same sense of renewal. With the creation of a more genuine, open relationship to the audience the narrator experiences a sense of relief and return to reality, allowing the narrator to let "the universe slide from my side" (62). The poem acknowledges the inability of the audience to completely understand the speaker's perspective, yet it challenges the audience to take their perspective into consideration with their own, rather than simply dismissing this other perspective the way Dickie presents Plath's speakers. The narrator's tone is one that seeks understanding rather than the judgmental tone Dickie and other critics have presented. This experience

is not one without pain, for the narrator still imagines a knife entering their side, yet the knife can enter “Pure and clean,” and does not “carve” (61, 60). This new relationship to the audience, freed of the veil, offering honest and direct communication, may not be completely painless, yet it provides some sense of freedom for the narrator, and remains the only “gift” the narrator desires. With the removal of the veil, the narrator can "awaken" to a sense of connection and sense of peace provided by the "gift." As with "Getting There," the final lines of "A Birthday Present" point to an awakening and new awareness that opens up the possibility for progress and the ability to move past the traumatic occasion rather than a continued denial or suicidal drive so often attributed to Plath's work.

"Love Letter" presents an experience that is not directly traumatic, as indicated by the title, though it follows a similar narrative structure leading again to a sense of awakening. The poem opens with the observation that it is "Not easy to state the change you made. / If I'm alive not, then I was dead" (1-2). The tone opens immediately with a sense of hopefulness, with a sense of revitalization brought about by the "You." This also creates a strong sense of intimacy between the narrator and whoever the poem is addressing, though it does not make who is being address immediately recognizable. It goes on to say that :

You didn't just toe me an inch, no-  
Nor leave me to set my small bald eye  
Skyward again, without hope, of course,  
Of apprehending blueness, or stars. (5-8)

The narrator creates the image of a lovely blue sky and bright stars that have become visible through the interaction with the "you." However, then the poem begins to present the dangers faced despite the new and hopeful possibilities: "I slept, say: a snake / Masked among black rocks as a black rock / In the white hiatus of winter- " (9-11). The narrator provides the audience with the frightening dream fantasy they've experienced, filled with "Angels weeping over dull natures," frozen tears, a cheek of "basalt," and "Each dead head [that] had a visor of ice" (16-18). The travel through this disturbing landscape, however, eventually leads to where the narrator has awakened, and tells the audience that she "shone, mica-scaled, and unfolded/ To pour myself out like a fluid/ Among bird feet and the stems of plants" (25-27). As with many of Plath's other works, the experience is not presented in terms of the "real" but instead creates a dreamlike fantasy. Yet the narrator confirms that "I wasn't fooled. I knew you at once," returning the moment to present reality that is a relief and recovery from the internal imaginings.

The persona then paints a much brighter picture in the final stanza, fitting the notion of a "Love Letter":

Tree and stone glittered, without shadows.

My finger-length grew lucent as glass.

I started to bud like a March twig.

An arm and a leg, an arm, a leg.

From stone to cloud, so I ascended. (29-33)

Here the imagination begins to move toward reality, and the narrator must render the experience in metaphorical terms rather than real. Rather than expressing the sensation of

newly falling in love- one nearly every individual has experienced- the poem takes the audience along on the journey through dark uncertainty, carefully portrayed and developed through metaphor and separated from the real world through the narrator's imagination and fantasy. The final lines of the poem offer the transition from the imaginary to the real: "Now I resemble a sort of god/ Floating through the air in my soul-shift/ Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift" (34-36). The narrator compares herself to a deity with the sense of rebirth offered by the "you" of the poem, and is presented as "floating" and rising through the air with new power and confidence offered through the love newly shared. This is declared to be a "soul-shift," identifying what seems to be a radically new perspective and new possibilities, and the narrator is again left "Pure as a pane of ice," once again focusing on a sense of cleansing and renewal, though the experience here is not immediately as traumatic or horrific as ones presented in poems such as "Getting There" or "Event." The "you" presented in "Love Letter" ultimately has given the narrator "a gift," having provided the narrator with the ability to bud and grow after having passed through the imagined dangers of winter and disturbing landscape. The "you" is taken through this experience of the narrator as the narrator imagines it, and concludes with the sense of both hopefulness and gratitude, moving beyond the terror of the imagination to come to the "gift" of a reality that is not dead and cold but instead "pure" and limitless rather than restrictive and lethal, made possible through the love and connection to the "you" addressed. From the terrifying dream, Plath's narrator awakens to a Spring-like reality that is filled with growth and new potential. This awakening is generated through this acknowledgment of having passed through the nightmare and a continued existence



in the new bright and hopeful world. This early poem shows the emphasis placed not only on the development of the imaginary world of the narrator, but also the sense of renewal and regeneration that is created through the interaction with the audience- be in a specific individual or a broader community. While "Love Letter" perhaps presents a highly personal experience, it is certainly a universal one, and it presents the experience in a way that invites the reader into the narrator's world and imagination, separating it from the real and carefully crafting the experience for the audience rather than merely confessing it for the sake of confession.

"Crossing the Water" is one of Plath's more obviously narrative poems, and is a prime example of the transitional poems Barnard discusses prior to the frenzy of *Ariel*. The tone is more closely aligned with that of her earlier works, with longer lines expressed more formally than conversationally, though it lacks a strict rhyme scheme present in many of the earlier poems. The speaker imagines the shadows of the black trees to be large enough to "cover Canada," and the water flowers "do not wish us to hurry" and are "full of dark advice" (3,5-6). These observations invite the reader into the water with the speaker, and establish a sense of connection between the speaker and the audience- the leaves speak to "us" and do not wish for "us" to hurry, immediately implicating the reader along with the speaker, indicating a shared experience rather than a singular one.

The next stanza pushes further into the speaker's imagination:

Cold worlds shake form the oar.

The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.

A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand. (7-9)

These lines turn the dark water and fishes into menacing, frightening entities for the speaker, and the “valedictory, pale hand” threatens “us” during the crossing of the water. Here also, the speaker also identifies the “blackness” as having invaded the audience as well, further eliminating the separation between speaker and listener. These lines have a similar style to those found in *Ariel*, more fragmentary and lending themselves to an aural performance. The final stanza of the poem, for example, seems disconnected from the previous imagery, presenting a calm moment after the darkness that dominates the rest of the poem.

Stars among the lilies,

Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?

This is the silence of astounded souls. (10-12)

These lines take on a more conversational tone and directly address the reader, asking them if they have been “blinded;” this is yet another moment where the narrator intentionally and immediately engages with the reader. The “expressionless sirens” are part of the narrator’s dark experience they are sharing with the audience, and they beg the reader to participate in it with them, and acknowledge the experience as being real and significant. Even this “transitional poem” has a similar effect and structure of the later poems, with a narrator presenting a traumatic event and presenting it to the audience for recognition, response, and understanding. This communication aims to engage the reader, and to provide meaning and understanding to the experience being recounted and presented. These poems, often read as speaking only to death and/or a death wish, instead can be seen to reach out to the listener and aim to provide meaning for and a way of

processing the experience of the narrator. Plath's speaker does not attempt to separate itself from the audience, but sees itself as unquestionably connected to it.

"Event" is another transitional poem that offers a tone more similar to that of the *Ariel* poems; it is much more conversational and fragmented than the formal poems of her earlier work. It opens addressing the audience with an exclamation- "How the elements solidify!" (1). Rather than speaking purely from the "I" perspective, the narrator presents a "we," placing the reader along side the narrator rather than distanced from her. It is the conversational tone that not only establishes communication between the speaker and audience, but also provides the unique, driving, forceful yet poetically controlled tone that makes Plath's work engaging and carefully constructed. The narrator and the audience are lying "Back to back" in moonlight, as the narrator "hear[s] an owl cry/ From its cold indigo" (4-5). The audience is offered a view of the narrator's experience of the events, though they have presumably been witness to them already, with visions are haunting:

Intolerable vowels enter my heart

...The child...

Opens its mouth now, demanding.

His little face is carved in pained, red wood. (6-9)

Rather than a calm, peaceful child resting in the night, the child seen by the narrator is one who is "demanding" and has a "pained, red wood" face, quite unlike the expected innocent and angelic child. Even the stars are harsh in the narrator's perceptions:

Then there are these stars- ineradicable, hard.

One touch: it burns and sickens.

I cannot see your eyes. (10-12)

Here the vision becomes even darker, and the speaker is separated from the listener: "I cannot see your eyes." Fully trapped in the traumatic experience, the speaker struggles to break from this and back into reality. Rather than further the separation from the audience, instead the speaker attempts to reestablish this broken connection. The narrator tells us that they "walk in a ring, / A groove of old faults, deep and bitter" that they can not seem to escape, and that "Love cannot come here" (14-16). The narrator's experience is one completely devoid of hope, dominated by the "black gap" (17). The lines here are also short, fragments, and informal compared to much of the earlier poetry, creating the uncertain, frantic tone Plath is perhaps known best for. Next the speaker declares that "My limbs, also, have left me. / Who has dismembered us?"(20-21). Here the listener is once again placed next to and in the same state as the narrator; they are both helpless and "dismembered" in the face of the traumatic experience from which they must recover. The speaker is not isolated from but instead directly connected to the listener, and they must both "awaken" from the terror of the shared traumatic "event." The final line of the poem, is the most telling: "The dark is melting. We touch like cripples" (22). In these final statements, the horror of the event/experience that the narrator has been trapped in is beginning to loosen, "melting," allowing for both the possibility for the narrator to begin to "awaken" and also to rediscover a connection to those listening, even if it is "like cripples." While the speaker and listener are forever changed by the "event," disfigured and impaired, they are able to escape the blackness and find their connection again, the

connection that will allow them to fully come to terms with their experience. Rather than submit to defeat and death, the speaker and audience have survived, and together can regain a sense of connection and self with the “melting” of the darkness. This escape from the darkness- an awakening- offers the possibility for the narrator and the audience to find their way beyond the traumatic event and begin to move past it; they are able to do this together and share the experience of both the trauma and the awakening to survival, and must move forward from the darkness together rather than alone.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

Cate Marvin, in her essay entitled "Tell All the Truth but tell it slant": First-Person Usage in Poetry," offers an insightful perspective on the use of the first person in poetry, writing that:

A good poem is like the space shuttle. It enters the reader's mind and heart like a rocket. On leaving the atmosphere, it drops the launching gear of experience that served as impetus for its creation. Who wrote the poem, the life the person lived or is living, will not matter once the poem takes on a life of its own. We are familiar with the poem that has failed to rid itself of the person who wrote it. Sentiment, cloying love of the self, and damages done to the self cling to the poem like the lingering smell of body odor one sometimes encounters when entering an elevator. The doors close, and while we are inside the poem, reading it to the end (if one does not get off and take the stairs instead) is a claustrophobic experience, a forced cohabitation with a

stench that is mortal. Good poems live long after their authors died. Good poems by the living make the lives of their authors cease to matter.

The ability of the poet to create a piece that speaks of the human experience rather than a purely personal one is, perhaps, the primary goal of any work of literature. Taking the individual experience and crafting it into a work that captures a powerful emotion or particular moment while eliminating a sense of the "selfish," confessional poet that is only concerned with their own personal moment of tragedy or triumph is an achievement all artists aspire to. Yet drawing a neat, clear line between Plath's biography and her work is, perhaps, nearly inescapable. It may be impossible to make such a distinction for any literary figure. While a number of Plath's works certainly can not be entirely separated from her own experiences, creating a sense of divulgence or confession—presenting highly personal moments such as in "Words Heard By Accident Over the Phone" and "Burning the Letters"—and are portraits of an individual's experience of facing disappointment, rage, hatred, etc., it is also crucial to consider her works in a broader sense for the ways in which they deviate from the confessional mode. What is most important, then, is to not limit any interpretation only to a focus on the relationship between the personal life of the writer and their works. Though these poems present highly personal experiences, and are heavily immersed in the perspective of the narrative persona, and therefore may be identified as personal confessions to some degree, viewing them only in this light is dangerous, and fails to take many other elements of the work into consideration. Each poem may present an example of confession, yet offers much more to the audience as well and may not be a personal confession of the poet herself in a

strict sense. Investigating Plath's poetry with a focus on narrative structure and perspective provides a way to understand how her narrators are positioned to the audience, and the narrators' attempts to communicate with the audience. This perspective creates an important alternative reading to the dominant analysis of Plath's work, primarily centered around a more biographical and psychoanalytic reading. Importantly, it also affords a way to consider the careful craft involved in each poem; each poem develops a tightly controlled perspective that works to include the audience into the perceptions and experiences of the narrator. These poems rely on a natural, conversational and short, fragmented lines to create structure for the pieces, as well as establishing a sense of communication between the narrator and the reader/audience. By creating this perspective, many of Plath's poems works to strengthen the relationship between the narrator and the audience, and place emphasis on the importance of a communal understanding and knowledge. The individual experience can only gain value and meaning when shared with an audience. How these narrators present their traumatic experience is also crucial to gaining further insight into these poetic works; considering Caruth's theory of awakening offers a way to understand the ways in which the narrators are not, in fact, debilitated by their trauma, but are ultimately at a point of survival and moving forward from the event. Plath presents complex relationships, such as the one in "A Birthday Present," that are often inhibited by barriers of honesty and openness, which the poems seem to attempt to overcome, or at least challenge. Plath's narrators also skillfully intertwine fantasy and reality, using this as a means to provide the audience with an understanding of their perceptions and experiences. The creation of the imagined



world's of fantasy bring the reader to an understanding of the narrator's personal experience, providing insight into powerful moments. Though these poems may not offer an explicitly optimistic view, it is possible to see more than the "self-righteous," bitter, and hopeless narrators that Dickie and many other critics have presented. This can be evidenced in a selection of her poems such as the ones presented in this work, as well as ones such as "The Arrival of the Bee Box" which concludes with the memorable lines "Tomorrow I will be a sweet God, I will set them free./ The box is only temporary" (35-36) and "Mystic" which comes to a close with the image: "The children leap in their cots./ The sun blooms, it is a geranium. / The heart has not stopped" (29-31).

Deliberately and carefully crafted, Plath's poems open up a dialogue with the reader through a controlled narrative perspective, reaching out to create a genuine connection through language and the written word. It is ultimately important to investigate not only the ways in which a poetic work mirrors the poet and their own experiences, but to also consider how the work is able to present the experience for the reader in a way that is not determined purely by personal emotion and self-indulgence. Rather, it becomes possible to see the ways these works offer both significant meaning and insight for both the narrator and the audience, creating not simply a reflection but a powerful shared moment of awakening created through technique and control. Through these narratives and retellings, Plath's narrators are able to not only acknowledge their trauma, but begin to move beyond it through their awakening and communication with others instead of simply presenting only a personal confession which fails to look beyond the individual experience.

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## APPENDICIES

Appendix A "Getting There" By Sylvia Plath

How far is it?

How far is it now?

The gigantic gorilla interior

Of the wheels move, they appall me ---

The terrible brains

Of Krupp, black muzzles

Revolving, the sound

Punching out Absence! Like cannon.

It is Russia I have to get across, it is some was or other.

I am dragging my body

Quietly through the straw of the boxcars.

Now is the time for bribery.

What do wheels eat, these wheels

Fixed to their arcs like gods,

The silver leash of the will ----

Inexorable. And their pride!

All the gods know destinations.

I am a letter in this slot---

I fly to a name, two eyes.

Will there be fire, will there be bread?

Here there is such mud.  
It is a trainstop, the nurses  
Undergoing the faucet water, its veils, veils in a nunnery,  
Touching their wounded,  
The men the blood still pumps forward,  
Legs, arms piled outside  
The tent of unending cries ----  
A hospital of dolls.  
And the men, what is left of the men  
Pumped ahead by these pistons, this blood  
Into the next mile,  
The next hour ----  
Dynasty of broken arrows!

How far is it?  
There is mud on my feet,  
Thick, red and slipping. It is Adam's side,  
This earth I rise from, and I in agony.  
I cannot undo myself, and the train is steaming.  
Steaming and breathing, its teeth  
Ready to roll, like a devil's.  
There is a minute at the end of it

A minute, a dewdrop.  
How far is it?  
It is so small  
The place I am getting to, why are there these obstacles ----  
The body of this woman,  
Charred skirts and deathmask  
Mourned by religious figures, by garlanded children.  
And now detonations ----  
Thunder and guns.  
The fire's between us.  
Is there no place  
Turning and turning in the middle air,  
Untouchable and untouchable.  
The train is dragging itself, it is screaming ----  
An animal  
Insane for the destination,  
The bloodspot,  
The face at the end of the flare.  
I shall bury the wounded like pupas,  
I shall count and bury the dead.  
Let their souls writhe in like dew,  
Incense in my track.

The carriages rock, they are cradles.

And I, stepping from this skin

Of old bandages, boredoms, old faces

Step up to you from the black car of Lethe,

Pure as a baby.



Appendix B "The Detective" By Sylvia Plath

What was she doing when it blew in  
Over the seven hills, the red furrow, the blue mountain?  
Was she arranging cups? It is important.  
Was she at the window, listening?  
In that valley the train shrieks echo like souls on hooks.

That is the valley of death, though the cows thrive.  
In her garden the lies were shaking out their moist silks  
And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong,  
Unable to face the fingers, those egotists.  
The fingers were tamping a woman into a wall,

A body into a pipe, and the smoke rising.  
This is the smell of years burning, here in the kitchen,  
These are the deceits, tacked up like family photographs,  
And this is a man, look at his smile,  
The death weapon? No one is dead.

There is no body in the house at all.  
There is the smell of polish, there are plush carpets.

There is the sunlight, playing its blades,  
Bored hoodlum in a red room  
Where the wireless talks to itself like an elderly relative.

Did it come like an arrow, did it come like a knife?  
Which of the poisons is it?  
Which of the nerve-curlers, the convulsors? Did it electrify?  
This is a case without a body.  
The body does not come into it at all.

It is a case of vaporization.  
The mouth first, its absence reported  
In the second year. It had been insatiable  
And in punishment was hung out like brown fruit  
To wrinkle and dry.

The breasts next.  
These were harder, two white stones.  
The milk came yellow, then blue and sweet as water.  
There was no absence of lips, there were two children,  
But their bones showed, and the moon smiled.

Then the dry wood, the gates,

The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate.

We walk on air, Watson.

There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.

There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes.

Appendix C "A Birthday Present" By Sylvia Plath

What is this, behind this veil, is it ugly, is it beautiful?

It is shimmering, has it breasts, has it edges?

I am sure it is unique, I am sure it is what I want.

When I am quiet at my cooking I feel it looking, I feel it thinking

'Is this the one I am too appear for,

Is this the elect one, the one with black eye-pits and a scar?

Measuring the flour, cutting off the surplus,

Adhering to rules, to rules, to rules.

Is this the one for the annunciation?

My god, what a laugh!

But it shimmers, it does not stop, and I think it wants me.

I would not mind if it were bones, or a pearl button.

I do not want much of a present, anyway, this year.

After all I am alive only by accident.

I would have killed myself gladly that time any possible way.

Now there are these veils, shimmering like curtains,

The diaphanous satins of a January window

White as babies' bedding and glittering with dead breath. O ivory!

It must be a tusk there, a ghost column.

Can you not see I do not mind what it is.

Can you not give it to me?

Do not be ashamed- I do not mind if it is small.

Do not be mean, I am ready for enormity.

Let us sit down to it, one on either side, admiring the gleam,

The glaze, the mirrory variety of it.

Let us eat our last supper at it, like a hospital plate.

I know why you will not give it to me,

You are terrified

The world will go up in a shriek, and your head with it,  
Bossed, brazen, an antique shield,

A marvel to your great-grandchildren.

Do not be afraid, it is not so.

I will only take it and go aside quietly.

You will not even hear me opening it, no paper crackle,

No falling ribbons, no scream at the end.

I do not think you credit me with this discretion.

If you only knew how the veils were killing my days.

To you they are only transparencies, clear air.

But my god, the clouds are like cotton.

Armies of them. They are carbon monoxide.

Sweetly, sweetly I breathe in,

Filling my veins with invisibles, with the million

Probable notes that tick the years off my life.

You are silver-suited for the occasion. O adding machine-----

Is it impossible for you to let something go and have it go whole?

Must you stamp each piece in purple,

Must you kill what you can?

There is one thing I want today, and only you can give it to me.

It stands at my window, big as the sky.

It breathes from my sheets, the cold dead center

Where split lives congeal and stiffen to history.

Let it not come by the mail, finger by finger.

Let it not come by word of mouth, I should be sixty

By the time the whole of it was delivered, and to numb to use it.

Only let down the veil, the veil, the veil.

If it were death

I would admire the deep gravity of it, its timeless eyes.

I would know you were serious.

There would be a nobility then, there would be a birthday.

And the knife not carve, but enter

Pure and clean as the cry of a baby,

And the universe slide from my side.



Appendix D "Love Letter" By Sylvia Plath

Not easy to state the change you made.

If I'm alive now, then I was dead,

Though, like a stone, unbothered by it,

Staying put according to habit.

You didn't just tow me an inch, no-

Nor leave me to set my small bald eye

Skyward again, without hope, of course,

Of apprehending blueness, or stars.

That wasn't it. I slept, say: a snake

Masked among black rocks as a black rock

In the white hiatus of winter--

Like my neighbors, taking no pleasure

In the million perfectly-chiseled

Cheeks alighting each moment to melt

My cheeks of basalt. They turned to tears,

Angels weeping over dull natures,

But didn't convince me. Those tears froze.

Each dead head had a visor of ice.

And I slept on like a bent finger.

The first thing I saw was sheer air

And the locked drops rising in dew

Limpid as spirits. Many stones lay

Dense and expressionless round about.

I didn't know what to make of it.

I shone, mice-scaled, and unfolded

To pour myself out like a fluid

Among bird feet and the stems of plants.

I wasn't fooled. I knew you at once.

Tree and stone glittered, without shadows.

My finger-length grew lucent as glass.

I started to bud like a March twig:

An arm and a leg, and arm, a leg.

From stone to cloud, so I ascended.

Now I resemble a sort of god

Floating through the air in my soul-shift

Pure as a pane of ice. It's a gift.

Appendix E "Crossing the Water" By Sylvia Plath

Black lake, black boat, two black, cut-paper people.

Where do the black trees go that drink here?

Their shadows must cover Canada.

A little light is filtering from the water flowers.

Their leaves do not wish us to hurry:

They are round and flat and full of dark advice.

Cold worlds shake from the oar.

The spirit of blackness is in us, it is in the fishes.

A snag is lifting a valedictory, pale hand;

Stars open among the lilies.

Are you not blinded by such expressionless sirens?

This is the silence of astounded souls.

Appendix F "Event" By Sylvia Plath

How the elements solidify!—

The moonlight, that chalk cliff

In whose rift we lie

Back to back. I hear an awl cry

From its cold indigo.

Intolerable vowels enter my heart.

The child in the white crib revolves and sighs,

Opens its mouth now, demanding.

His little face is carved in painted, red wood.

Then there are the stars—ineradicable, hard.

One touch: it burns and sickens.

I cannot see your eyes.

Where apple bloom ices the night

I walk in a ring,

A groove of old faults, deep and bitter.

Love cannot come here.

A black gap discloses itself.

On the opposite lip

A small white soul is waving, a small white maggot.

My limbs, also, have left me.

Who was dismembered us?

The dark is melting. We touch like cripples.