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“I think I am going up,  
I think I may rise — ”

Death and rebirth in the poetry of Sylvia Plath

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# 1 Introduction

Reading about the poetry of Sylvia Plath, I stumbled across certain issues. Towards the end of his book *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*, Tim Kendall writes: “We are still learning how to read Plath’s later work. Poetry offers few more challenging and unsettling experiences.”<sup>1</sup> Elena Ciobanu voices a similar concern in her study *Sylvia Plath’s Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self* saying that all research points to the same revelation: “[...] that the essence of her poetic being has remained fundamentally unapprehended, that the necessary aesthetics we need in order to understand Plath’s poetics has not yet been invented.”<sup>2</sup> To me this suggests that much of Plath’s poetry remains an enigma waiting to be unlocked, and that further research is warranted. The second issue, which I believe is somewhat interrelated with the first, is stated by Jacqueline Rose, author of *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. Rose writes that it is “[...] impossible to read Plath independently of the frame, the surrounding discourses, through which her writing is presented.”<sup>3</sup> I think the concern expressed by Kendall and Ciobanu is partly caused by the fixation stated by Rose. Research has put a tremendous amount of focus on “the frame”, that is the biographical data concerning Plath’s life and death, and keeps on doing so although it doesn’t seem to herald any epiphanies. I argue that it is possible to read Plath’s poetry without this biographical framework. I argue that while it is impossible to un-know what we know, the information about Plath’s life and death casts unnecessary shadows on how we read her poetry, at times making it difficult to do so with fresh eyes.

## 1.1 Purpose of Study

With the aforementioned issues in mind, I decided to look at two major themes in Plath’s poetry without the heavy luggage of her biography. There is no denying that one of Sylvia Plath’s main lyrical preoccupations was death. However, the flip side of death

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<sup>1</sup> Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*, London 2001, p. 208

<sup>2</sup> Elena Ciobanu, *Sylvia Plath’s Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self*, Iasi 2009, pp.11-12

<sup>3</sup> Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, London 1991, p.69

is life and life, or rather rebirth, is just as important an ingredient in her poetry. The purpose of my paper is to explore these themes – death and rebirth – in Plath's poems and to look at them in as much detail as possible given the limitations of this thesis. I set out with a string of questions: How is death presented? How is it brought about? What does rebirth look like? Colors, words, and movements pool and form patterns. What do these patterns mean? What do the poems really tell us about the nature of death and rebirth? The themes of death and rebirth can be found in a great number of Plath's poems, I have selected a few based on personal preference, and I've used a thematic analysis as my theoretical framework.

## 1.2 Previous Research

Much has been written about the poetry of Sylvia Plath and just as much continues to be written. The limited scope of my thesis doesn't allow me to partake, present, or review more than a fragment of it all. I've been helped by a number of books and papers, I will here just mention some. First and foremost, I've consulted Tim Kendall's *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*. Kendall uses a detailed close reading to reveal what's characteristic about Plath's poetry and looks at her production through a Freudian perspective. Elena Ciobanu's study *Sylvia Plath's Poetry: The Metamorphoses of the Poetic Self*, has been helpful in that she makes rich textual analyses and traces patterns, tropes, and attitudes. Another useful source was Ingrid Melander's *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes*<sup>4</sup> since it neatly presents the theme of death. Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*<sup>5</sup> has given me with a feminist view. And *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*<sup>6</sup> provided me with a comprehensive overview of some of the Plath research.

To my aid I have also had Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*<sup>7</sup> to shed light on issues of feminist and mythological nature, Erika Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance*<sup>8</sup> helped me highlight performativity in Plath's poetry, while

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<sup>4</sup> Ingrid Melander, *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes*, Stockholm 1972

<sup>5</sup> Linda Wagner-Martin, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*, New York 2003

<sup>6</sup> Jo Gill (editor), *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, Cambridge 2006

<sup>7</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, London 1953

<sup>8</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, New York 2008

Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*<sup>9</sup> allowed me to look at the meaning of the female body.

### 1.3 Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath was born in Boston in 1932 and died in London in 1963. She published her first book of poetry, *The Colossus and Other Poems* in 1960. Her second book of poetry, *Ariel*, came out posthumously in 1965. At the time of her death, Plath had left on her desk a spring binder containing 40 poems, arranged in such a way that the collection began with the word "Love" (from the poem "Morning Song") and ended with the word "spring" (from "Wintering"). However this is not what the 1965 edition of *Ariel* looked like. It wasn't until 2005, when *Ariel: The Restored Edition* was published, that the book was organized the way Plath had intended it to be. In the meantime, Sylvia Plath's *Collected Poems*<sup>10</sup> was published in 1981, it contains all of Plath's poetry and is the book I refer to throughout my paper when I refer to her poems.

### 1.4 Disposition

I begin by looking at death as perfection, from here I go on to explore how Plath presents the act of dying, building on Elena Ciobanu's idea of separating the passive "death" from the active "dying". In chapter 4, I analyze the theme of rebirth. Using Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance*, I look at the connection between performativity and rebirth. In chapter 5 I introduce my theory of silence as a starting-point for the entire life-to-death-to-rebirth trajectory, the ascent to rebirth, and the importance of the color red, I focus on each trope – silence, ascent, red – individually. Lastly, I present my conclusion. Plath's poetry is dense and the images are tightly intertwined, making it a difficult operation to isolate them. At times I veer slightly off course, but only because I believe there is something off course that pertains to the course I am on, and can further inform it. To get an easier understanding of the material I present, I suggest reading the poems, they can be found in their entirety in the Appendix, at the end of the paper. I frequently quote from these poems in my text as

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Bloomington 1994

<sup>10</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, London 1981

well, and whenever I do, I use a parenthetical in-text note to ease the burden on the footnote apparatus. In each case these notes refer to *The Collected Poems* by Sylvia Plath, from here on shortened to CP.

## 2 Death as Perfection

In *The Colossus* poem “Medallion”, Plath contemplates a dead snake. She opens by placing it in the life-giving sun but by the “gate with star and moon”, the word “gate” indicating a point of access or entry, a state of liminality<sup>11</sup>, i.e. the transitional state between life and death.

By the gate with star and moon  
Worked into the peeled orange wood  
The bronze snake lay in the sun (CP p.124)

In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes the following about the moon and the serpent: “The moon is a source of fertility; it appears as ‘master of women’; it is often believed that in the form of man or serpent it couples with women. The serpent is an epiphany of the moon; it sheds its skin and renews itself, it is immortal, it is an influence promoting fecundity and knowledge. It is the serpent that guards [...] the tree of life [...]”<sup>12</sup> The proposed immortality of the snake, as well as its shedding of the skin can also be affixed to its position by the gate, as if some renewal process is already under way. I want to focus on the vivid colors used in the poem. Plath’s lyrical color palette is typically dominated by whites, blues, reds, and blacks. “Medallion” is an exception, here the snake is bronze rather than brown, its tongue rose not pink – juxtaposed with “arrow” – the eye not red but vermilion, the back ochre not yellow. The eye has a glassed flame to it, as if death had the ability to grant it spark. In spite of death, the belly has kept its fire. When the snake is held up in the sun by the speaker, it is almost like she’s holding up a jewel to admire. In *The Journey Toward Ariel*, Nancy D. Hargrove suggests the use of the exotic colors evokes not only the beauty of the dead

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<sup>11</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/liminal> May 25 2014

<sup>12</sup> de Beauvoir, p.181

snake, but also its value,<sup>13</sup> and I agree, especially since Plath rarely uses colors like these elsewhere. A yardman has killed it, and in killing it, its laugh has been “perfected”. The only thing marring the snake is something that has occurred postmortem: the maggots that are eating away at the flesh. Ergo: Death is something beautiful to behold, something to admire, and death can, by securing an object in a fixed position, perfect it in a way life cannot. However, death also carries with it the possibility of life or rebirth in some form.

This fixed perfection returns in “Edge”, one of Plath’s last elliptical poems, included in the 1965 version of *Ariel*. Here the abundance of colors is gone. Kendall writes that “‘Edge’ portrays a world drained of colour, leaving the moon as the bone-white, black-clad illuminator of the scene she impassively observes.”<sup>14</sup> Not only the moon, but also the children, coiled like serpents, are white, Plath’s most used color, and often a signal for annihilation. We saw the words “coil” as well as the color “white” also in “Medallion”, where “the white maggots coil” in the bruise. But it is the body of the dead woman, and her “smile of accomplishment”, an echo of the perfected laugh in “Medallion”, that’s in focus. The word “accomplishment” suggests death has been actively sought out. But what about the children?

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,  
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.  
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals (CP, p.272)

I read “folded” as synonymous with “killed”, the woman has killed the children also. Death is made beautiful with wordings such as “petals of a rose”. There are more substitutes for “dying”: “stiffens”, “close”, and “coil” (as in retreating or roping something in) words supposed to soften the impact of the image of the dead woman and her children. “[T]his sort of thing”, another word for death, comes with the scents seeping out of the “sweet, deep throats of the night flower” “when the garden stiffens”

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy D. Hargrove, *The Journey Toward Ariel Sylvia Plath’s Poems of 1956-1959*, Lund 1994, p. 36

<sup>14</sup> Kendall p.207

that is when day turns into night (a common trope for life coming to an end). By juxtaposing death with a closing rose in a perfumed garden, Plath is raising our awareness of it. In line with Viktor Shklovsky's theory of art as technique<sup>15</sup>, she defamiliarizes death, and our perception of death is thereby enhanced.

Many scholars have argued for a reference to Medea in "Edge". Susan Bassnett, for instance, writes in *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry* that she finds it hard to approach the poem without the Medea legend in her mind.<sup>16</sup> Medea is the female character in Greek mythology who marries Jason, with whom she has two children. She later avenges Jason's betrayal of her by slaying their children. Appearing in a chariot drawn by dragons, she shows up with the bodies of the dead children, mocking Jason. Though the poem certainly points at mythology, the dead woman's toga and the "Greek necessity", the latter, however, Plath amends by calling an "illusion". I don't necessarily see the reference to Medea, as there's nothing in the poem that indicates the jealous anger or revenge present in the Medea myth. There's in fact not even an implicit presence of a man in "Edge". Furthermore, Medea the mythical character does not kill herself. Even though there's certainly a finality in the poem, intensified by the description of the woman's bare feet and her empty breasts; she has nowhere else to go and nothing to offer her children, the very title leaves the option open for a way out, as if the woman was just balancing on the precipice of death. Like I stated earlier, "Edge" is one of Plath's last poem and she herself did not include it in her *Ariel* binder. It was written at a time when she had either lost or discarded the sharper tone of the poems written in the fall of 1962. That tone has transitioned into one of indifference, echoed in the apathy of the moon, which Plath anthropomorphizes as a woman, overseeing the scene, just as she was in "Medallion". The moon's presence may even indicate some sort of female Charon<sup>17</sup> character, if not ferrying the subject over to Hades per se, then at least witnessing the transition.

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<sup>15</sup> Viktor Shklovskij, "Konsten som grepp", *Modern litteraturteori 1*, Lund 1992/1993

<sup>16</sup> Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath: An Introduction to the Poetry*, New York 2005, p.21

<sup>17</sup> In Greek mythology, Charon's duty was to ferry over the souls of the deceased over the rivers Styx and Acheron. "Charon." *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/107610/Charon>, 22 May 2014



Kendall speaks of the finality that “Edge” presents, and the “inevitability of death”.<sup>18</sup> But can it be read differently? Ciobanu suggests that the perfected dead body can be viewed as a mummified body<sup>19</sup>, and points to several references not only in the poem itself, but in other texts by Plath. For instance, the accomplished smile as a product of the efforts to cosmetically improve the dead body. She points to the whiteness as the color of the natron used in the mummification process. Ciobanu proposes “toga” to indicate “the shroud/gauze with which the corpse is covered”<sup>20</sup>. She sees the white moon in its funereal attire as the white veils covering the empty black openings of the mummy. The mummy-idea may of course also open up for the idea of an after life, or a rebirth. And though death is presented as perfection, the title is “Edge”, alluding to a brink, or verge, something that can be traversed, rather than the finality implied by Kendall. Frieda Hughes writes in her foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition* of Plath being poised “between her volatile emotional state and the edge of the precipice. The art was not to fall.”<sup>21</sup>

### 3 The Act of Dying

I want to stick for a while with Ciobanu. In her study, she discusses the transference of death as perfection in dead bodies in *The Colossus* to human corpses in Plath’s later poetry: “The continuous experimentation with various forms of artistic expression helps the poet to enact a circular journey from the stasis of dead animal bodies to the dynamism of her visions and rituals of dying and, finally, to the eerie aesthetics of immobile human bodies, be they dead or paralysed, present in the poems written during the last weeks of her life.”<sup>22</sup> Ciobanu connects the dots to the bee theme in which she believes Plath found the idea of death as stasis or hibernation. Not all bees hibernate, some “winter” meaning they actively keep their nest warm during the colder season. Among the bumble bees, only the queen bee hibernates.<sup>23</sup> Ciobanu writes:

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<sup>18</sup> Kendall, p. 207

<sup>19</sup> Ciobanu, p. 205

<sup>20</sup> Ciobanu, p. 206

<sup>21</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, New York 2004, p.xx

<sup>22</sup> Ciobanu, p.197

<sup>23</sup> Retrieved from [www.honeybeesuite.com](http://www.honeybeesuite.com), May 23 2014

If death is a stasis, then it does not mean total extinction of the body, therefore resurrection (or, at least, some kind of post-existence) is always possible. [---] The idea of death as perfection is encrypted in Plath's poetry in two different modes: a static mode (represented by the image of the perfected body) and a dynamic one, represented as a suicidal process through which the self reaches a final illusory ecstasis, followed by another stasis.<sup>24</sup>

Thus Ciobanu differentiates "death" and "dying"; with on the one hand the active verb "dying" and on the other the passive "death" or "dead". She suggests that Plath's later poems do not manifest a preference for the process, but rather for the outcome, emphasizing the static sad resignation. Ciobanu writes that Plath's poems about death as perfection do not include a sense of rebirth. But as I've pointed out, there is in both "Medallion" and "Edge" – poems where death is presented as perfection – an indication, however implicit and slight, of a possible transition. In "Medallion" it is the place of liminality, the snake's potential immortality, and its molting, in "Edge" the possibility rests in the double meaning of the title. With the starting point in Ciobanu's idea of the division between the static and the dynamic, I want to explore the act of dying in a few of Plath's poems, beginning with the poem "Suicide off Egg Rock" from *The Colossus*. The subject here is a man at a beach, watching what is being described as a "landscape of imperfections", of which he is a part.

Behind him, the hotdogs split and drizzled  
On the public grills, and the ochreous salt flats,  
Gas tanks, factory stacks – that landscape  
Of imperfections his bowels were part of – (CP p.115)

The poem illustrates the flip side of death as perfection, i.e. life as imperfection. As the hotdogs split on the grills, so the man is "split", that is torn between two opposites: Life and death. "Split" is also an informal verb meaning "to leave". The man's "bowels", his intestines, perhaps his core, are part of the imperfections of life that are inescapable:

Sun struck the water like a damnation.  
No pit of shadow to crawl into, (ibid)

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<sup>24</sup> Ciobanu, pp.199-200

These imperfections are experienced through his senses: He *sees* the gas tanks and factory stacks, he *feels* the oppressive sun, and he *hears* the squealing children. Yet, in the second stanza the man is described as if “stone-deaf” and “blindfold”. I suggest this is the “split” between the physical body he inhabits and the mind, which he perceives as deaf and blind. In fact his mind is likened to the eyes of a dead fish, through which flies are filing. His life has no meaning, it has no story to tell: “The words in his book wormed off the pages” (ibid). The poem is riddled with words like “assailed”, “vaulted”, “wormed”, and “blank”, which stand in harsh contrasts to the words of “Edge” where death as perfection is described with “smile”, “folded”, “petals”, “rose”, “sweet”, and “night flower”. The words in the former reveal the torment, whereas the words of the latter reveal the serenity one experiences after an act accomplished. Later in the poem the man’s actual suicide is described as something so peaceful that it goes unnoticed by the world at large, he simply walks into the water.

A far more dynamic suicide, or string of suicides, takes place in “Lady Lazarus” from *Ariel*. Already in this poem’s first stanza *action* is confirmed:

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it – (CP p.244)

“Done” and “manage” are action-oriented verbs. The poem is, in fact, full of verbs that suggest action: “walking”, “smiling”, “die”, “annihilate”, and “rise” just to name a few. This is indeed a poem focused on the activity of dying/rebirth rather than the passive beauty of death, as presented in “Medallion” and “Edge”. What’s more, the action of suicide has become a sort of performance art, something I will discuss later.

So, focusing on dying, what does this “action” consist of? The speaker calls dying an art:

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.  
  
I do it so it feels like hell.  
I do it so it feels real. (CP p.245)

The poem points to death either by gas with the references from the Holocaust – gas also is reminiscent of the night flower’s odors in “Edge” – or by fire with the “I turn and burn” and the final image of the speaker as a Phoenix, the mythological bird that died by fire and rose from its own ashes.

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air. (CP p.247)

According to Robert Graves’ book on myths, *The White Goddess*, the Phoenix legend has it that the Egyptians kept a sacred eagle at Heliopolis, and when it died it was embalmed in a round egg of myrrh, which would preserve it indefinitely, then another eagle was consecrated.<sup>25</sup> This Phoenix legend, as well as the “fine Jew linen”, the “napkin”, and the “unwrapping” that appear in the poem, point beyond the Lazarus story as told in the New Testament’s John 11:1-46, where Lazarus is restored to life by Jesus after having been dead for four days, to the burial of Jesus himself in John 19:38-40, in which the body of Jesus is wrapped in spices and strips of linen according to the Jewish traditions of that time. According to Christian beliefs, Jesus rose from his grave on the third day.

[...]  
I turn and burn.  
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash —  
You poke and stir.  
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there — (CP p.246)

The fire also hints at self-immolation, which in some traditions is an age-old form of protest. In modern times the most famous case of self-immolation is the one of Quang Duc, the Vietnamese monk who set himself on fire on a busy Saigon intersection in the summer of 1963. Since political self-immolations often are executed in public, they

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Graves *The White Goddess*, New York 1988, pp.412-413

make dramatic, newsworthy statements – not unlike the dramatic public rebirth in “Lady Lazarus”.

## 4 Rebirth - Public and Private

In an introductory note, Plath describes the speaker in “Lady Lazarus” as someone “who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman.”<sup>26</sup> Dying is a private affair that can be executed in a cell, it’s the comeback (rebirth) that matters, and it takes place in public view, pictured like a circus act. The speaker addresses her audience with “Gentlemen, ladies”, equating her public rebirth act with a strip tease performance, an act reminiscent of the tricks performed on old fairgrounds, where one could, for a penny, watch the bearded lady or the strongest dwarf.

[---]  
The peanut-crunching crowd  
Shoves in to see

[...]  
The big strip tease.  
Gentlemen, ladies

These are my hands  
My knees.  
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman. (CP p.245)

Kendall notes the performativity, and connects it to the repetitiveness.<sup>27</sup> And of course the word *répétition* is French for rehearsal, a word tied to the theater and performance art. Erika Fischer-Lichte sheds further light on this aspect in *The Transformative Power of Performance* where she talks about bodily acts as “non-referential”: “[...] because they do not refer to pre-existing conditions, such as an inner essence, substance, or being supposedly expressed in these acts [...] Bodily, performative acts do not express a

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<sup>26</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems*, p.294

<sup>27</sup> Kendall, p. 151

pre-existing identity but engender identity through these very acts. Moreover, the term ‘dramatic’ refers to this process of generating identities”.<sup>28</sup> If the bodily performative act engenders identity, then what happens to that identity in “Lady Lazarus”? Could it be, that the identity engendered is fed into the death-to-rebirth cycle, producing more identity at each performance? What is clear is that with “Lady Lazarus”, the case is not that of a *new* identity, but rather the *same* identity: “Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.” (CP p.245). Kendall sees no escape in this sort of recycling pattern: “Lady Lazarus announces that ‘like the cat I have nine times to die’ [...] she presents herself as fatalistically locked in this cycle (until, presumably, the end of her ninth decade of life, although this possibility of eventual escape is never seriously considered).”<sup>29</sup>

Annihilating each decade may be a gift but it is a chore also – “the trouble” Plath refers to in her introduction – like taking out the trash. This “trash” is miraculously recycled into the self-same woman, over and over. Here, I also want to pick up the line with garbage from “Suicide Off Egg Rock”: “His body beached with the sea’s garbage” (CP p.115) where the man envisions his body as part of the garbage of the world. Garbage that in “Lady Lazarus” is recycled again and again. The performance part of rebirth is one technique used to enhance our perception of life and death, as advocated by Viktor Shklovsky. But Plath goes for shock value also by her much-criticized appropriation of the Jewish Holocaust experience.<sup>30</sup>

[---] my skin  
Bright as a Nazi lampshade,  
My right foot

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen. (CP p.244)

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<sup>28</sup> Fischer-Lichte, p.27

<sup>29</sup> Kendall, p.158

<sup>30</sup> Steven Gould Axelrod in “The Poetry of Sylvia Plath” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, p. 85, and Christina Britzolakis, in “Ariel and other poems” in *The Cambridge Companion to Sylvia Plath*, p. 117

By aligning the speaker with the victims of the horrendous Nazi crimes (the lampshades the Nazis made from the skin of the Jews, and the cloth made from their hair at Auschwitz), Plath stretches the shock value of the poem even further. In a 1962 BBC interview with Peter Orr, she discussed the issue of writing about the illicit:

I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, this intense breakthrough into very serious, very personal, emotional experience which I feel has been partly taboo. [---] I believe that one should be able to control and manipulate experiences, even the most terrific, like madness, being tortured, this sort of experience, and one should be able to manipulate these experiences with an informed and an intelligent mind I think that personal experience is very important, but certainly it shouldn't be a kind of shut-box and mirror looking, narcissistic experience. I believe it should be *relevant*, and relevant to the larger things, the bigger things such as Hiroshima and Dachau and so on.<sup>31</sup>

Towards the end of the poem Plath shifts gears and lets Lady Lazarus address only men as in Herr Doktor and Herr Enemy. She has been their opus, she says, their creation. This evokes the Victorian women turned into objets d'art, as discussed in Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*: "[...] women to 'kill' themselves [...] into art objects: slim, pale, passive beings whose 'charms' eerily recalled the snowy, porcelain immobility of the dead."<sup>32</sup> Lady Lazarus' motive of the repeated killing of herself can hence be read as a refusal to remain the "pure gold baby" in relation to these men. Dying, melting to a shriek, may be the speaker's way of invalidating their power. In her book *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* Elizabeth Grosz discusses how women's bodies have been regarded as limitations on their capacity for equality: "As a consequence, in the negative view, feminists have sought to move beyond the constraints of the body. The female body limits women's capacity for equality and transcendence; it is a hindrance to be overcome, an obstacle to be surmounted if equality is to be attained."<sup>33</sup> The speaker's way to move beyond the bodily constraint is

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<sup>31</sup> from *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets Conducted by Hilary Morrish, Peter Orr, John Press, and Ian Scott-Kilvery*. London: Routledge (1966) Retrieved from: [www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m\\_r/plath/orrinterview.htm](http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/poets/m_r/plath/orrinterview.htm) May 23, 2014

<sup>32</sup> Sandra Gilbert & Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, New Haven 2000, p.25

<sup>33</sup> Grosz, p.15

by killing and rebuilding it, her terrible gift. It is terrible because it poses a threat to the Patriarch. Again from Grosz: "Patriarchal oppression, in other words, justifies itself, at least in part, by connecting women much more closely than men to the body and, through this identification, restricting women's social and economic roles to (pseudo) biological terms."<sup>34</sup> Lady Lazarus' disdain toward the patriarchal system is also showcased by a denouncement, in one line, one breath, of both God and Satan. Though the invitation to watch the spectacle also include women, the warning to stay away from the speaker's terrible power is aimed at men only.

I now want to turn to a less theatrical rebirth, found in "The Stones" from *The Colossus*, the last sequence in the longer "Poem for a Birthday". Dying is presented like this:

The flat blue sky-circle

Flew off like the hat of a doll

When I fell out of the light. I entered

The stomach of indifference, the wordless cupboard. (CP p.136)

But what the poem details, is the road to rebirth. Plath quarried her material from a story she had found in a collection of African folk tales. The story, "The City Where Men Are Mended", is about a good mother who takes the bones of her dead daughter to the City Where Men Are Mended<sup>35</sup>, and there, because the mother is good, the daughter is mended and made whole and pretty again. But when a bad mother tries to get her daughter mended by first crushing her in a pestle, her wish is not granted in the City. Her daughter is not mended well, but comes out with one leg, one buttock, and one hand. "The Stones" strikes a melancholic note with words like "indifferent", "wordless", "still", "nothing", and "silences". The muscle of the poem is that of rebirth as a thing forced on to the speaker by others. The speaker enters the "stomach of indifference", the place of liminality I described in the beginning discussion of "Medallion". This place is peaceful, however the mother is difficult:

The mother of pestles diminished me.

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<sup>34</sup> Grosz p.14

<sup>35</sup> Retrieved from: [http://www.talesunlimited.com/fulltext\\_test2.aspx?taleid=1004](http://www.talesunlimited.com/fulltext_test2.aspx?taleid=1004) May 24, 2014



I became a still pebble. (Ibid)

Plath continues to describe rebirth:

The head-stone quiet, jostled by nothing.  
Only the mouth-hole piped out,  
[...]  
The people of the city heard it. (Ibid)

After the cry from the mouth-hole has been heard, the mending process or road to rebirth can begin.

This process is at first a soft pulling: “The food tubes embrace me. Sponges kiss my lichens away.” (Ibid.) Then it is conducted forcefully with a prying chisel. The speaker sees light as “after hell”, suggesting she might not want to be mended.

This is the after-hell: I see the light.  
A wind unstoppers the chamber  
Of the ear, old worrier. (CP Ibid.)

Rebirth is violent as hammers and voltage are used, and the speaker is being stitched up. The hands, knees, scars, and heart put on display in “Lady Lazarus”, are here described as “swaddled” rubber-scented limbs not meant for show and tell.

While Lady Lazarus addressed her audience and enemies, the speaker in “The Stones” addresses no one in particular.

Love is the bone and sinew of my curse.  
The vase, reconstructed, houses  
The elusive rose.

Ten fingers shape a bowl for shadows.  
My mendings itch. There is nothing to do.  
I shall be good as new. (CP p.137)

Her body (the reconstructed vase) might have been mended, but the will to live remains an elusive rose. Rebirth is a painful and long procedure, nothing like the easy unpeeling and unwrapping in “Lady Lazarus”. And though the speaker is “as good as new” there are still shadows that are threatening to unbalance her.

## 5 From Silence to Ascent

In *The Poetry of Sylvia Plath: A Study of Themes*, Ingrid Melander identifies the color red with a movement towards “the triumph of death”<sup>36</sup>, quoting the last stanza of the *Ariel* poem “Stings”, one of Plath’s bee poems.

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her —  
The mausoleum, the wax house. (CP p.215)

She places this stanza next to the last stanza of “Lady Lazarus”, explaining that here, however, “the impetuous movement is reversed – from death back to life”.<sup>37</sup>

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair  
And I eat men like air. (CP p.247)

I don’t agree. I see the upward movement of the flying bee just as much a symbol of rebirth as Lady Lazarus’ ascent from her ashes. This upward movement, to me, signals the triumph of rebirth, not death. Kendall writes: “Motion in Plath’s poetry is almost always positive. Moments of transcendence [...] often occur at high velocity, while ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Fever 103°’ ‘rise’ from immobility to achieve their terrifying transformation.”<sup>38</sup> In the following chapter, I want to explore this further by examining three tropes that recur with some frequency in Plath’s *Ariel* poems: First silence, then the upward movement, which I will call ascent, and the red color. The last two tropes often occur together and often at the end of the poems. I will separate the stanzas where they can be found and not analyze the poems in their entirety, unless I believe it pertains to my discussion.

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<sup>36</sup> Melander, p.102

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Kendall, p.181

## 5.1 The Silenced Speaker

During a chronological reading of Plath's later poems, I became aware of the presence of a curious silence in the poems immediately preceding those that I had chosen to focus on for the sake of rebirth. This silence seemed to precipitate the upward movement, acting almost like a trampoline to get the greater activity in motion. I started to wonder what the cause of this silence was, and whether it was the very trigger to the act of rebirth. I'd like to begin by looking at silence in the first stanza of "The Rabbit Catcher" from *Ariel*, in which an outside element is silencing the speaker:

It was a place of force –  
The wind gagging my mouth with my own blown hair,  
Tearing off my voice, (CP p.193)

The word "force" evokes the instruments of force (pliers, hammers) used to pull the speaker in "The Stones" out of stasis/death back to life. Here it is the wind that prevents the speaker from talking, using her own hair as means to shut her up. That is, the speaker is a participant in the silencing of herself.

Silence continues to a greater degree in "The Detective", a whodunit pastiche. Here the subject is a woman who has been silenced and who has disappeared. Plath opens the case by letting the speaker, a Sherlock Holmes character, ask:

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. (CP p.208)

The female spoken of, is likely a countryside housewife (the references that bespeak this are the arranging of cups, the scent of furniture polish, and the cows). The case is described as one of "vaporization" (CP p.209), that is a phase transition from liquid to gas *upwards* into the atmosphere. Thus here is the movement pointing upwards; the female voice has "vaporized". The countryside where the woman lived, is depicted as the "valley of death". The starting point then is a place of death, followed by silence, but the silenced female voice dissolves and ascends into a new element, the transition I read as a potential rebirth.

The detective asks: “Was she at the window, listening?” (CP p.208). If the woman was positioned by the window, was she then listening to the train, with its echoing shrieks? Or was it something else out there to which the woman cupped hand to ear? The next lines give us the clue:

In her garden the lies were shaking out their moist silks  
And the eyes of the killer moving sluglike and sidelong, (CP p.208)

She was listening to the lies. The killer mentioned has packed the woman into the wall, he has reduced her by tempering her voice, i.e. killed her voice. Later, the same woman’s body has been put into a pipe, and smoked (again reference to the Holocaust), with the smoke rising. For years, the poem says, the woman has been standing in her countryside home, surrounded by “deceits” and “lies”. The detective picks up a family photograph of a smiling man, though there is no death weapon and “No one is dead” (Ibid.) there is nevertheless a killer and a crime has been committed. The silencing, or “killing”, of the woman’s voice is the crime, the great violation. How was the crime executed? The smiling man did it by deceiving her through lies, his “sidelong” glance evidence thereof, and by tamping her into the wall.

Plath wonders what it is like to lose one’s voice:

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. (CP p.209)

Yet the body *does* come into it, because it too has been silenced, silenced through a gradual dismemberment.

[...]  
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 die.

The breasts next.  
[---]

Then the dry wood, the gates,  
The brown motherly furrows, the whole estate. (Ibid.)

The mouth thus was punished for its insatiability, its habit of speaking up. Then the breasts disappeared, loosing their feminine charms once the woman became a mother. The woman's private parts, "the gates", have been turned into dry wood, and with them the entire "estate", which I read as family or home, has disappeared. But it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what the case is. A case of abuse? Of deception? Was the purpose to silence something more elusive than a voice — perhaps a mind? The detective, exhausted by the lack of proof, turns to Watson:

[...]  
There is only the moon, embalmed in phosphorus.  
There is only a crow in a tree. Make notes. (Ibid.)

Here, the moon is immortalized or perhaps mummified but equally silent - a witness not only to the transgression that has taken place but also to the ascent. "Make notes" can be read as a warning to others, so their voices don't disappear also. In her paper "Talking body parts and missing commodities: cinematic complexes and Sylvia Plath", Vidhu Aggarwal describes "The Detective" as a poem "[...] where ordinary objects and actions are infused with characteristics of clues, and the body of a woman goes missing, albeit part by part, year by year – the very negative of acquiring fine China."<sup>39</sup> This "dismemberment" is also the very negative of the "mending", or "forced" rebirth, that was done to the speaker in "The Stones", where one body part after the other was put together.

I believe, the poem "The Courage of Shutting-Up" can be read in direct response to "The Detective". The silenced voice continues to be the topic. But here silence is at first a choice. Plath lets the speaker riff on the amount of damage a flicking female tongue can do. At first, the speaker seemingly contemplates her own closed mouth in a mirror:

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<sup>39</sup> Vidhu Aggarwal "Talking body parts and missing commodities: cinematic complexes and Sylvia Plath" part of the Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Common and the Literature in English, North America Commons, Rollins College, Rollins Scholarship Online, published 7-1-2010, p.288 Retrieved May 23, 2014

The courage of the shut mouth, in spite of artillery!  
The line pink and quiet, a worm, basking.  
There are black disks behind it, the disks of outrage, (CP p.209)

Kendall reads the disks to mean “vinyl records, ‘loaded’, in this case, with accounts of ‘Bastardies, usages, desertions, and doubleness’. Behind this metaphor is a hidden cliché, voiced in reproof of a nagging wife: her record has its needle stuck.”<sup>40</sup> This reading satisfies, but I believe it can be taken further; one can put the color “black” as a binary opposite to the earlier “pink”, and view the disks as something masculine, compressed, and precise (maybe the intellect) as opposed to the feminine, pink, silent mouth, indicating that the woman believes herself to hide behind her exterior an intellect that matches the caliber of that of the men she encounters, be they detectives or doctors (the Sherlock character and Watson in “The Detective” and Herr Doktor in “Lady Lazarus”). Plath segues into “The needle journeying in its groove” (CP p.210), as if the woman’s needle (her tongue) can scratch the man’s intellect. So what’s to be done? The female tongue has to be silenced. In “The Detective” it was insatiable, but here it has become dangerous:

[...]  
Indefatigable, purple. Must it be cut out?  
It has nine tails, it is dangerous. (Ibid.)

It is taken out and hung up, like a trophy, in the library among the other collector’s items.

## 5.2 “I think I may rise”

I now want to focus on the second trope, the ascent, and will begin by looking at “Stings”, from *Ariel*. The speaker, a female beekeeper, is peeking into her bee box, looking for the queen:

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<sup>40</sup> Kendall, p.106

[---]

Is there any queen at all in it?

If there is, she is old,

Her wings torn shawls, her long body

Rubbed of its plush —

Poor and bare and unqueenly and even shameful. (CP p.214)

Just like the missing woman in “The Detective”, here is a torn female, described as “poor and bare and unqueenly”, an echo of Plath’s description of “Lady Lazarus” as a “plain” woman. In the next stanza the speaker positions herself among the honey-drudgers, the “unmiraculous women”:

[---]

I stand in a column

Of winged, unmiraculous women,

Honey-drudgers.

I am no drudge

Though for years I have eaten dust

And dried plates with my dense hair.

And seen my strangeness evaporate, (CP p.214)

But she does not fit in. Although she too has “dried plates” with her hair, in a repeat act of reverence of the sinful woman’s drying Jesus’ feet (Luke 7:36-50), she, as Melander points out, “does not belong to their kind”.<sup>41</sup> In her slavery, her “strangeness” evaporated. Melander identifies this “strangeness”, I think correctly, as “identity”<sup>42</sup>. Now she needs to recover that identity, that self, through the cycle of rebirth. In the next to last stanza, the speaker identifies instead with the queen bee:

[...] but I

Have a self to recover, a queen.

Is she dead, is she sleeping?

Where has she been,

With her lion-red body, her wings of glass?

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<sup>41</sup> Melander, p.94

<sup>42</sup> Melander, p.95

Now she is flying  
More terrible than she ever was, red  
Scar in the sky, red comet  
Over the engine that killed her —  
The mausoleum, the wax house. (CP p.215)

The queen is not dead, she has been wintering, and now she is getting ready for rebirth. She flies over the mausoleum, the wax house, or the valley of death, this is her ascent to rebirth. Her “lion-red” body suggestive of the power of a lion along with the color red for rebirth. Red is also the color of one chosen, such as the people who display a stigmata: “Marks or wounds appearing on the human body, similar to those of the crucified Jesus. They may be temporary (related to ecstasy or revelation) or permanent, and are alleged to be a sign or miraculous participation in Christ’s passion.”<sup>43</sup> The red color might also signify the speaker’s strangeness/identity. Linda Wagner-Martin starts by addressing the redness of Lady Lazarus’ hair: “That the woman persona has red hair as she rises, or as she is reborn or transformed from ash, may also indicate she has attained the stage of ‘the rubedo’. Whitening is the first goal of an alchemical process, and white is the color most people connect with being redeemed. After it comes silver and gold, and finally red”.<sup>44</sup>

As I stated earlier, I read this flight as a trajectory from death to life, not the other way around. To me, the wings of glass allude to Cinderella’s glass slippers, the item that helps transform the girl in the fairy tale from “ashes” (death) to a rich new life. I believe the flight up on wings of glass also points to Nike, the winged goddess of victory. According to *The Oxford Thesaurus*<sup>45</sup>, the word “terrible” does not only suggest something negative, but also has a positive meanings such as “great”, “monumental”, and “awesome”, which is worth taking into account also when Plath mentions Lady Lazarus’ “terrible” gift of rebirth.

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<sup>43</sup> “stigmata” The Cambridge Encyclopedia, editor David Crystal, Cambridge, 1990

<sup>44</sup> Wagner-Martin, p.144

<sup>45</sup> “terrible” *The Oxford Thesaurus An A-Z Dictionary of Synonyms*, Laurence Urdang (editor), Oxford 1991



I want to move on to the last stanza of yet another bee poem from *Ariel*: “Wintering”. Here the speaker again ponders life and death, and wonders will the fire again lead to rebirth? The answer is yes.

Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas  
Succeed in banking their fires  
To enter another year?  
What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?  
The bees are flying. They taste the spring. (CP p.219)

It is worth reiterating that the binder with poems Plath left behind ended with this poem. Her version of *Ariel* begins with “Love” and ends with the word “spring”. And spring is the season that signifies a time of rebirth.

When preparing an introduction to the poem “Fever 103°” for a BBC radio reading, Plath wrote: “[It] is about two kinds of fire – the fires of hell, which merely agonize, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second.”<sup>46</sup> “Fever 103°” comes closer than any other to the heart of the purification process of rebirth. The speaker asks what the meaning of “pure” is, and describes the fires from hell as incapable of licking clean the sin, incapable of rising, just killing. Susan Bassnett reads “Fever 103°” as “a poem about a descent into hell and is full of images of hell.”<sup>47</sup>

[...] dull, fat Cerberus  
[---]  
Such yellow sullen smokes  
Make their own element. They will not rise,  
[---]  
Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.  
The sin. The sin. (CP p.231)

Cerberus is a mythical hellhound and the yellow smokes may be those from the concentration camps. But Plath’s own note indicates the opposite: The fires of hell give way to the fires of heaven, which have purifying properties and carry the permit to transcendence. The speaker’s fever burns off her sins, and water purifies the body.

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<sup>46</sup> Plath, *Collected Poems* p.293

<sup>47</sup> Bassnett, p.122

Three days. Three nights.  
Lemon water, chicken  
Water, water make me retch.

I am too pure for you or anyone. (CP p.232)

She becomes a female Christ-like image: “[---] a pure acetylene / Virgin” (Ibid.). With such emphasis on “Virgin” (she is given a capital V and her own a separate line) I see a link to a Marian tradition. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir writes the following about Virgin Mary:

[...] she makes what was hidden in the earth spring forth into the light of day. She is the deep reality hidden under the appearance of things: the Kernel, the Marrow. [...] she is intermediary between humanity and God. Tertullian called her ‘the devil’s doorway’; but, transfigured, she is the doorway to heaven. In paintings we see her opening a door or a window upon paradise, or placing a ladder between the earth and the firmament.<sup>48</sup>

I find it difficult to bring up “Fever 103°” and not present the idea of purgatory. In the Catholic tradition, there are three elements of purgatory: Prayer for the dead, an active in between phase between death and resurrection, and lastly the purifying fire after death. According to the encyclopedia, some Christian writers “speak of an ‘intelligent’ fire that tortures the damned, tests and purifies the mixed (e.g. 1 Corinthians 3:11-15).”<sup>49</sup>

In Plath’s rebirth poems, the female speaker takes on miraculous roles: She is the queen, the plain woman with the gift, she is purer than anyone else, she is the Virgin, in “Ariel” she is the Godiva and an arrow propelling herself forward in union with a horse. The trancelike state in “Fever 103°” is not unlike the state of some religious mystics. Returning to Fischer-Lichte here makes sense, as she writes of some cultural domains in which people hurt themselves in order to achieve transformation: “Many religions bestow a special saintliness on ascetics, hermits, fakirs, or yogis, not only because they suffer unimaginable privations and put their own bodies at great risk but also because

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<sup>48</sup> de Beauvoir, pp.212-213

<sup>49</sup> “purgatory.” Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/483923/purgatory> May 24 2014

they injure their bodies in the most tremendous ways.”<sup>50</sup> She continues to discuss the ritual of self-flagellation among nuns, as a way for them to raise above their monastic routine and as an offer of a promise of transformation: “The violence inflicted on their bodies together with the physical transformation evident after the torture brought about a process of spiritual transformation.”<sup>51</sup> According to Fischer-Lichte’s source Ancelet-Hustache, approaching God this way meant a person was granted enlightenment of the heart and purified thoughts. By mortifying the flesh, like the speaker in “Fever 103°” is doing by fasting on water and “burning”, albeit in fever, the nuns’ spirits ascended towards God.<sup>52</sup>

As I pointed out earlier, red can be read as the mark of the chosen one, whether it is the color of the bee flying or the hair color of the risen Lady Lazarus or, as in “Ariel”, the very heart of rebirth. Even though Bassnett primarily sees a descent to hell in the poem, she comes to a conclusion I share; that the speaker of “Fever 103°” is a survivor.<sup>53</sup> In a chapter titled “Plath’s Triumphant Women Poems” in the book *Plath: A Literary Life*, Linda Wagner-Martin finds sexual innuendoes and reads the speaker’s “old whore petticoats” as a recognition of a life spent whoring.<sup>54</sup> My opinion is still that the poem focuses on the purification of the ascent to rebirth, not the ashes (the whore petticoats) of the old life left behind. Like the statues of saints are visited and kissed by the faithful and hung with flowers, so is the speaker in “Fever 103°” revered by an attendance of roses, kisses, and pink (i.e. feminine) things.

Darling, all night  
 I have been flickering off, on, off, on  
 [---]  
 All by myself I am a huge camellia  
 Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush. (CP pp.231-232)

The lines above have sometimes been read as auto-eroticism<sup>55</sup>, however the flickering, followed by the ascent and the flying beads of hot metal, is also evocative of the

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<sup>50</sup> Fischer-Lichte, p.13

<sup>51</sup> Fischer-Lichte, p.14

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Bassnett, p.124

<sup>54</sup> Wagner-Martin, p.118

<sup>55</sup> Kendall, p. 164

instrument board in a cockpit of an airplane ready for take off. I want to close my discussion on “Fever 103°” by picking up again on Kendall’s issue with Plath’s repetitions, which he believes fail to come to a conclusion, or “eventual escape”<sup>56</sup>. Kendall is not alone, Ciobanu also sees a problem herein, arguing that Plath’s ecstatic movements do not herald “any definite visions of transcendence”.<sup>57</sup> Ciobanu wants a description of a task completed: “[...] but the assumption to paradise is never described in the poem as a successfully completed journey; what we can be certain of is only that it begins and that it is tentatively (and ironically) directed towards an ambiguous upward paradise.”<sup>58</sup> Ingenuous as it may sound, I believe the success or conclusion lies in the repetitive cycle itself.

In “Ariel” the ascent is replaced by a ride on a horse. Though Ariel is the name of that horse<sup>59</sup>, it is also the name of the spirit in Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, a name for Jerusalem (Isaiah 29:1-7), and the meaning of the name is “lion of God”. As Melander points out, unity is a major thematic aspect of this poem.<sup>60</sup> The obvious unity is that of the speaker and the horse, but I believe there’s also a unity between the speaker and the ride as such, which is the purification process. As in many of the poems I’ve looked at, the poem begins in stasis:

Stasis in darkness.  
Then the substanceless blue  
Pour of tor and distances. (CP p.239)

But out of the stasis, a vista of possibilities opens up. Already in the second stanza the rider and the horse become one:

God’s lioness,  
How one we grow,  
Pivot of heels and knees! — (Ibid.)

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<sup>56</sup> Kendall, p.158

<sup>57</sup> Ciobanu, p.189

<sup>58</sup> Ciobanu, pp.189-190

<sup>59</sup> Plath, *Ariel, the Restored Edition*, p.xv

<sup>60</sup> Melander, p. 101

There's no stopping this union; not the thorns or the shadows of the berries, nor the guilt over a child left behind: "The child's cry / Melts in the wall." (CP p.239). In "Ariel and other poems"<sup>61</sup>, Britzolakis writes: "In 'Ariel' the trope of the horse and rider unfolds an ambiguous celebration of embodied movement ('at one with the drive'), as intensely pleasurable, yet self-immolating. In the poem's dual register, images of darkness, earth, blood, orality and the female body give way to those of light, transcendence and disembodiment." This disembodiment, which Aggarwal referred to as the opposite of collecting China, is the speaker throwing off her "old whore petticoats" and her dissolving selves in exchange of turning into an arrow and the "Pure death's-metal" of the dead snake in "Medallion". Britzolakis sees the red eye in the last lines of the poem as "[...] an emblem of specularity and surveillance, while the 'cauldron' of morning/mourning invokes an extreme religious imagery of martyrdom and purification".<sup>62</sup> However, in my opinion the ride itself is the purification process, during which the speaker unpeels

Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I  
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas. (CP p.239)

The White Godiva<sup>63</sup> is the speaker *in the process*, naked of all the trappings of the old life, turning into an efficient arrow. In Plath's novel *The Bell Jar*, the character of Mrs. Willard says: "What a man is is an arrow into the future and what a woman is is the place the arrow shoots off from"<sup>64</sup> The stasis in "Ariel" is that place, that launching-pad from where the arrow shoots off, and the red eye, the sun, is the future. It is easy, I think, to get arrested by the word "suicide", and let that suppress the life that actually is celebrated in the poem. I believe the line "Something else hauls me" is the salient antithesis to "suicide". "Something else" is a clue to what hauls the rider forward with

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<sup>61</sup> Britzolakis, "Ariel and other poems" *The Cambridge Companion*, p.115

<sup>62</sup> Britzolakis, p.116

<sup>63</sup> Lady Godiva was an English woman in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, famous for her legendary nude ride, which she performed in order to get her husband to reduce the taxes.

"Lady Godiva." *Encyclopaedia Britannica. Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*. Retrieved 24 May, 2014, from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/236855/Lady-Godiva>

<sup>64</sup> Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar*, New York 1971, p. 58

such force. In Egypt, the rising sun was an amulet in the shape of a sun disk rising on the horizon, a symbol of Harmakhis, another name for Horus, the god of the horizon. These amulets were often found with or on the mummy, and provided the dead person with the assurance of the resurrection in the afterlife.<sup>65</sup> With this in mind, and if we are to read movement as a positive, as Kendall's does as well as Melander ("The piston in motion' an expression which probably stands for an ideal form of life that is superior to most others because of its pulsating rhythm."<sup>66</sup>) then why not follow suit with the rest of the poem as pointing to a positive rebirth? It is, after all, not a coffin that awaits the rider at the horizon, it is a cauldron, a utensil used for the preparation of food, food needed for life. I see the cauldron and the image of the red eye, the sun, as that "something else", the dawning of a new day that together forge a clear metaphor for life.

## 6 Conclusion

The purpose of my thesis was to explore death and rebirth in selected poems by Sylvia Plath by focusing mainly on thematic aspects. I approached these poems independently of Plath's biographical data.

I have investigated details such as colors, movements, and words, and I have forged a unified interpretation of the aforementioned themes. I found that despite a focus on death, Plath's poetry often celebrates and chooses life, albeit through a death-to-rebirth trajectory. The ascent (in "Ariel", the ride) is the purifying process in Plath's later poetry. If we read her poetry without eyeing her life, it is possible to get a more open, positive read.

I began by looking at death as perfection in two poems, noting the vivid colors in one and the lack of colors in the other. I discovered that the moon may signify a state of liminality, as may the molting of the snake and the ambiguity of the title "Edge".

I went on to examine the dynamic of death, comparing two different suicides.

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<sup>65</sup> "rising sun." Retrieved 24 May, 2014, from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/504464/rising-sun>

<sup>66</sup> Melander, p.99

With the help of Erika Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance* I focused on the performative facet of "Lady Lazarus". I showed how Plath used performativity as a way to defamiliarize death and rebirth, in line with the ideas of Viktor Shklovsky. I noted how the physical body of the subject about to die is presented as akin to garbage, as opposed to the perfection of the physical body in death. With the help of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* and Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies* I stressed a feminist angle of "Lady Lazarus". I contrasted the performative rebirth in this poem with the more private one in "The Stones".

In my last chapter, I studied the entire trajectory from a silent opening to the ascent, pinpointing the meaning of silence, ascent, and the color red. I briefly investigated silence in three poems showing how it serves as a starting block to the upward movement. I noted the place of violence and/or death these poems seemed to spring from, and how silence triggers the upward movement. Here also I highlighted a feminist angle.

I demonstrated the miraculous in the ascent, with the color red indicating the subject as chosen, pure, or equipped with some special gift. I took note of a Marian association and presented Simone de Beauvoir's view of the Virgin. I investigated the idea of purgatory in conjunction with the speaker's fever in "Fever 103°", and again turned to Fischer-Lichte to explore a possible connection with self-flagellants and the burning fever and spiritual transcendence in "Fever 103°". Finally, I looked at the ride in "Ariel" as the rebirth process, and pointed out how the last lines may well testify not so much to death but rather to life.

If one were to make a composite out of the speakers in the *Ariel* poems, that speaker would be a torn, plain female who has experienced some sort of crisis, or against whom a crime has been committed. Apart from possessing the "terrible", miraculous gift of rebirth, this female is by all indications ordinary. Her first response to the crime or crisis is silence, which occurs in a place described as a "valley of death" or a place of wintering/hibernation. From here, she exits through a purification process, during which her past is sloughed off like a snake's skin. The speaker's gift is displayed in her triumphant ascent. In some poems rebirth is performative, and at times the process is an implicit accusation seemingly aimed at men.

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## 8 Appendix

### "Medallion"

By the gate with star and moon

Worked into the peeled orange wood

The bronze snake lay in the sun

Inert as a shoelace; dead

But pliable still, his jaw

Unhinged and his grin crooked,

Tongue a rose-colored arrow.

Over my hand I hung him.

His little vermilion eye

Ignited with a glassed flame

As I turned him in the light;

When I split a rock one time

The garnet bits burned like that.

Dust dulled his back to ochre

The way sun ruins a trout.

Yet his belly kept its fire

Going under the chainmail,  
The old jewels smoldering there

In each opaque belly-scale:  
Sunset looked at through milk glass.  
And I saw white maggots coil

Thin as pins in the dark bruise  
Where his innards bulged as if  
He were digesting a mouse.

Knifelike, he was chaste enough  
Pure death's-metal. The yardman's  
Flung brick perfected his laugh.

“Edge”

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:  
We have come so far, it is over.

Each dead child coiled, a white serpent,  
One at each little

Pitcher of milk, now empty.  
She has folded

Them back into her body as petals  
Of a rose close when the garden

Stiffens and odors bleed  
From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower.

The moon has nothing to be sad about,  
Staring from her hood of bone.

She is used to this sort of thing.  
Her blacks crackle and drag.

### “Suicide off Egg Rock”

Behind him the hotdogs split and drizzled  
On the public grills, and the ochreous salt flats,  
Gas tanks, factory stacks — that landscape  
Of imperfections his bowels were part of —  
Rippled and pulsed in the glassy updraught.  
Sun struck the water like a damnation.  
No pit of shadow to crawl into,  
And his blood beating the old tattoo  
I am, I am, I am. Children  
Were squealing where combers broke and the spindrift  
Raveled wind-ripped from the crest of the wave.  
A mongrel working his legs to a gallop  
Hustled a gull flock to flap off the sandspit.

He smoldered, as if stone-deaf, blindfold,

His body beached with the sea's garbage,  
A machine to breathe and beat forever.  
Flies filing in through a dead skate's eyehole  
Buzzed and assailed the vaulted brainchamber.  
The words in his book wormed off the pages.  
Everything glittered like blank paper.

Everything shrank in the sun's corrosive  
Ray but Egg Rock on the blue wastage.  
He heard when he walked into the water

The forgetful surf creaming on those ledges.

### "Lady Lazarus"

I have done it again.  
One year in every ten  
I manage it —

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

A paperweight,  
My face a featureless, fine  
Jew linen.

Peel off the napkin  
O my enemy.  
Do I terrify? —

The nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth?

The sour breath  
Will vanish in a day.

Soon, soon the flesh  
The grave cave ate will be  
At home on me

And I a smiling woman.  
I am only thirty.  
And like the cat I have nine times to die.

This is Number Three.  
What a trash  
To annihilate each decade.

What a million filaments.  
The peanut-crunching crowd  
Shoves in to see

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

These are my hands  
My knees.  
I may be skin and bone,

Nevertheless, I am the same, identical woman.  
The first time it happened I was ten.  
It was an accident.

The second time I meant  
To last it out and not come back at all.  
I rocked shut

As a seashell.  
They had to call and call  
And pick the worms off me like sticky pearls.

Dying  
Is an art, like everything else.  
I do it exceptionally well.

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

It's easy enough to do it in a cell.  
It's easy enough to do it and stay put.  
It's the theatrical

Comeback in broad day  
To the same place, the same face, the same brute  
Amused shout:

'A miracle!'  
that knocks me out.  
There is a charge

For the eyeing of my scars, there is a charge  
For the hearing of my heart —  
It really goes.

And there is a charge, a very large charge  
For a word or a touch  
Or a bit of blood

Or a piece of my hair or my clothes.  
So, so, Herr Doktor.  
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.  
I turn and burn.  
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

Ash, ash —  
You poke and stir.  
Flesh, bone, there is nothing there —

A cake of soap,  
A wedding ring,  
A gold filling.

Herr God, Herr Lucifer  
Beware  
Beware.

Out of the ash  
I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.

## “The Detective”

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 if 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.

“Fever 103°”

Pure? What does it mean?

The tongues of hell

Are dull, dull as the triple

Tongues of dull, fat Cerberus

Who wheezes at the gate. Incapable

Of licking clean

The aguey tendon, the sin, the sin.

The tinder cries.

The indelible smell

of a snuffed candle!

Love, love, the low smokes roll

From me like Isadora's scarves, I'm in a fright

One scarf will catch and anchor in the wheel.

Such yellow sullen smokes

Make their own element. They will not rise,

But trundle round the globe

Choking the aged and the meek,

The weak

Hothouse baby in its crib,

The ghastly orchid

Hanging its hanging garden in the air,

Devilish leopard!

Radiation turned it white

And killed it in an hour.

Greasing the bodies of adulterers

Like Hiroshima ash and eating in.

The sin. The sin.

Darling, all night

I have been flickering, off, on, off, on.

The sheets grow heavy as a lecher's kiss.

Three days. Three nights.

Lemon water, chicken  
Water, water make me retch.

I am too pure for you or anyone.  
Your body  
Hurts me as the world hurts God. I am a lantern —

My head a moon  
Of Japanese paper, my gold beaten skin  
Infinitely delicate, infinitely expensive.

Does not my heat astound you. And my light.  
All by myself I am a huge camellia  
Glowing and coming and going, flush on flush.

I think I am going up,  
I think I may rise ——  
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene  
Virgin  
Attended by roses,

By kisses, by cherubim,  
By whatever these pink things mean.  
Not you, nor him

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

“Ariel”

Stasis in darkness.

Then the substanceless blue

Pour of tor and distances.

God’s lioness,

How one we grow,

Pivot of heels and knees! — The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to

The brown arc

Of the neck I cannot catch,

Nigger-eye

Berries cast dark

Hooks —

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,

Shadows.

Something else

Hauls me through air —

Thighs, hair;

Flakes from my heels.

White

Godiva, I unpeel

Dead hands, dead stringencies.

And now I

Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.

The child's cry

Melts in the wall.

And I

Am the arrow,

The dew that flies

Suicidal, at one with the drive

Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning.