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‘Black Phones’: Postmodern Poetics in the Holocaust Poetry of Sylvia Plath

Sylvia Plath’s Holocaust poetry and the frequently impassioned critical responses to it illustrate why Sue Vice characterises Holocaust fictions as ‘scandalous’, in the sense that ‘they invariably provoke controversy by inspiring repulsion and acclaim in equal measure’ - the only qualification being that this critical divide was not split particularly evenly when Plath’s best-known Holocaust writing was first published in the mid-1960s.¹ In fact, it took the scales of critical opinion several decades to reach any kind of equilibrium, with the ‘repulsed’ response tending to prevail for the quarter century following its initial publication, but with the critical temper noticeably softening in the 1990s: a shift in critical attitudes that reflects the way that notoriously scandalous texts (here one might include some of Plath’s favourites, such as *Ulysses* and *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*) often end up normalising once controversial subject matter.²

The early infamy of poems such as ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Daddy’ derived for the most part from what a generation of critics and cultural commentators regarded as their representative transgressions – transgressions which were perceived to violate or distort the legitimate memory of the Holocaust – and from the received idea that Plath’s work was somehow ‘confessional’ in character. Writing to the editor of *Commentary* in 1974, Irving Howe asked:

Is it possible that the condition of the Jews in the camps can be duplicated? Yes.... But it is decidedly unlikely that it was duplicated in a middle-class family living in Wellesley, Massachusetts, even if it had a very bad daddy indeed.

To condone such a confusion is to delude ourselves as to the nature of our personal miseries and their relationship to - or relative magnitude when placed against - the most dreadful event in the history of mankind.³

Even a fellow poet, Seamus Heaney, noted as late as 1986 that ‘a poem like “Daddy” [...], however its violence and vindictiveness can be understood or excused in light of the poet’s parental and marital relations, remains, nevertheless, so entangled in biographical circumstances and rampages so permissively in the history of other people’s sorrows that it simply overdraws its rights to our sympathy’.⁴ For these critics, there was an absence of any ‘objective correlative’ - to continue the Eliotian thread of Heaney’s thought – between the ‘personal miseries’ of a girl from Massachusetts and ‘the most dreadful event in the history of mankind’. As a result, Plath was widely accused of indulging in a form of emotional plagiarism that revealed much about her own pathology, but very little about the condition of those who actually lived in the camps.

This basic presupposition - that Plath’s speakers are representations of herself designed to win her the kind of sympathy one might feel for a Holocaust victim - has since been challenged by a more theoretically-driven generation of Plath criticism which has argued that straightforward biographical readings tend to iron out the complexity of Plath’s representation of, among other things, psychology, history and femininity, while also devaluing her skill as a writer. Such critics argue that the narratives of important

dramatic monologues such as ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’ are sufficiently eccentric to problematise the assumption that the speakers are thinly disguised representations of Plath herself. As Christina Britzolakis notes, ‘the elements of caricature, parody, and hyperbole in “Daddy” are so blatant that only a very determined misreading could identify the speaker with the biographical Sylvia Plath’.⁵ Similarly, to borrow a refrain from the poem itself, there is nothing particularly ‘real’ about the speaker of ‘Lady Lazarus’: a suicidal strip artist who performs a kind of Holocaust-themed cabaret.

Like the hero of Kafka’s story ‘A Fasting-artist’ (on which, as Judith Kroll observes, ‘Lady Lazarus’ seems to have been loosely based), the poem’s narrator prides herself on a self-destructive theatrical act which she believes she has elevated to an art form:⁶

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.⁷

If, for Lady Lazarus, dying is an ‘art’, then it is at once a cultured form of expression and also a task that requires a particular knack. Her suicide-show is thus a slightly tricky activity, and when claiming that it ‘feels like hell’ and that it ‘feels real’ (my emphasis)

she is implicitly conceding that in reality it is neither of these things, as is also the case when the narrator of 'Daddy' states that she 'may well be a Jew' (CP, p. 223). In a self-reflexive gesture typical of Plath's best Holocaust writing, 'Lady Lazarus' seems to be saying something similar about itself and its dramatic monologue form, drawing attention to its constructedness, and to the way that it not only represents, but also performs its subject matter. Lady Lazarus is brazen in her exploitation of the tropes and iconography associated with the Holocaust; but in creating this speaker, the poet does not exhibit her own weird extroversion. Rather, she conveys a clear sense of the distinction between art and reality, and with it the sort of self-awareness and accompanying concern with artistic exploitation and representative ethics that were to become defining features of postmodernism, with postmodernism here understood not only in terms of its tendency towards pastiche and irony – both of which abound in Plath's work - but also in terms of what Robert Eaglestone calls 'its central and consistent commitment to ethics and its rigorous, rational side'.⁸ The poem operates knowingly as an example of, and a warning against, poetry after Auschwitz, in particular by highlighting the threat posed to memory by the incipient 'Holocaust industry' of the early 1960s.

Lady Lazarus's particular performance involves her draping herself in the material remnants of the murdered European Jews:

[...] my skin

Bright as a Nazi lampshade,

My right foot

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

Later, unifying the language of art and that of show business, her ‘theatrical// Comeback in broad day’ suggests both her return from the dead and also the revival of her career, indicating that her performance is both an art form for which she has a ‘call’ and a commercial enterprise. Indeed, the ‘charge’ for her show - and presumably also the sexual ‘charge’ generated by it - is mentioned four times, suggesting that she and her audience (‘the peanut-crunching crowd’) each profit from a performance that is figured as a tawdry kind of entertainment that borders on prostitution.

‘Lady Lazarus’ concludes with an allusive stanza in which the speaker’s acquisitiveness extends not only to ‘other peoples’ sorrows’, but also to the way that she expresses them:

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

Susan Gubar and others have noted the ‘ironic echo’ of Coleridge’s ‘Kubla Khan’: ‘Beware! Beware!/ His flashing eyes, his floating hair!’.⁹ Given that Britzolakis sees ‘Lady Lazarus’ as a parody of ‘The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock’ (SPTM, p. 152), whilst also detecting allusions to *The Waste Land* (SPTM, pp. 154-55), it is unsurprising

that these final lines reference another of Plath's favourite works by Eliot: *Four Quartets*. This time the allusion is to the first stanza of the second part of 'Little Gidding', which ends with the couplet: 'The death of hope and despair,/ This is the death of air.'¹⁰ In Plath's poem, as in Eliot's, the 'death of air' comes about when the dialectical framework of a Christian moral universe collapses; in 'Lady Lazarus', this is sketched in three short breathless lines.

The stanza also seems to allude to Paul Celan's 'Todesfuge', in which the 'golden hair' of Margarete - namesake of Goethe's apotheosised representative of the 'eternal feminine' in *Faust* - contrasts with the 'ashen hair' of Shulamith, who is named after the princess in 'The Song of Songs' who traditionally symbolises the tribe of Israel.¹¹ Nelly Sachs's 'O the Chimneys' - a poem which considers the impact of the death camps on traditional forms of religious belief - concludes with a tercet which might also have left its imprint on Plath's final stanza:

O you chimneys,

O you fingers

And Israel's body as smoke through the air!¹²

These references add a specifically Holocaust-related dimension to Britzolakis's perception that 'Lady Lazarus is an allegorical figure constructed from past and present images of femininity [...] She is a pastiche of the numerous deathly or demonic women of poetic tradition' (SPTM, p. 154).

While Celan wrote that ‘No one/ witnesses for the/ witness’, Lady Lazarus’s hubris is precisely that she leaves the ‘grave cave’ once a decade to transplant historical victims, graphically displaying what is left of them on her own body.¹³ In addition, as if this weren’t already sufficiently egregious, she literally takes the words from out of their mouths. Harold Bloom has described how ‘every poet is a being caught up in a dialectical relationship (transference, repetition, error, communication) with other poets’, with the ‘strong, authentic poets’ creating an imaginative space for themselves through

a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, wilful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.¹⁴

‘Lady Lazarus’ makes a ‘perverse, wilful revisionism’ its working mode; however, the poem challenges Bloom’s positive assessment of the development of poetic tradition through misreading (especially when applied to testimony) by way of its speaker’s cynical belief that art is simply a form of prostitution - a way of making money - and by the fatuousness of her apparent turn in attention away from the Jewish victims of the Holocaust (the subject of the poems she ‘misinterprets’) and towards the many men who have wronged her.

In some senses, the aggressive feminist position that Lady Lazarus assumes in the final stanzas is not a total distortion of the concerns of Holocaust verse, and could be

justified by the insight that the Holocaust was an event which was, for the most part, conceived and perpetrated by men. Here the poem perhaps develops a refrain from 'Todesfuge', where 'death is a master from Germany'. However, a pointed critique of the narrator's hypothesised identity as historical victim (and a self-conscious undermining of her rhetoric) occurs in the concluding stanza, through the double entendre of the last line. For, as Gubar points out, to 'eat men like air' is an ambiguous simile, which could mean that Lady Lazarus eats men as easily as if they were air (perhaps the German Herren or 'masters from Germany' who ordered the deaths of Jewish women such as Shulamith) or that she eats men who are themselves already like air: namely the murdered men who, in 'Todesfuge', dug their 'graves in the air', and whose deaths Sachs laments when describing 'Israel's body as smoke through the air' (Poetry, p. 200). Here wordplay and allusion unmask the speaker: as the prostitute-poet rises from the ashes in the guise of what Kroll calls a 'triumphant resurrecting goddess', we are actually left with a far less palatable taste of what her opportunistic imagination really feeds off (Chapters, p. 118). Just as her earlier assault on God and Lucifer ('Herr God, Herr Lucifer/ Beware/ Beware') parodies identifiably Nazi aspirations, in her overreaching Lady Lazarus is positioned as the victimiser, not the victimised. Through the suggestion that her strip show is an act of historical cannibalism - both at the level of its performance and its language - Plath offers a critique of her speaker that recalls Jean Baudrillard's claim, made with reference to the American TV mini-series Holocaust (1978), that turning the Holocaust into a spectacle produces a forgetting that 'is part of the extermination'.¹⁵

In arguing, then, that poems such as 'Lady Lazarus' reflect critically on the way that art can distort or commodify public memory, it is important to retain a distinction

between Plath's postmodern conception of historical representation and her more modernistic (even pre-modernistic) understanding of events. Plath was writing at the cusp of an era that would increasingly come to focus on Hitler's regime as a social and bureaucratic phenomenon. This philosophical turn is often dated to the Eichmann trial in 1961 and, in particular, to Hannah Arendt's account of it in *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (1963). In contrast, Plath's first person speakers tend, on the whole, to endorse the more standard postwar (but pre-Eichmann) interpretation of the Holocaust as an event perpetrated by a nation of psychopaths. This is succinctly put in 'Little Fugue', where the narrator describes her father's voice as 'Gothic and barbarous, pure German'. Similarly, in 'Daddy' the speaker describes how the German tongue 'stuck in my jaw// It stuck in a barb wire snare', and her father is a fantasised amalgam of every available Nazi stereotype: at once a Hitler (with a 'neat moustache'), the epitome of German volk ('your Aryan eye, bright blue'), a Luftwaffe member and a 'Panzer-man'. Germany clearly holds a particularly maligned place in the personal mythologies of Plath's speakers; but the stereotyping in 'Daddy' suggests that the contempt for the Germans and their language expressed in Plath's verse is at least tempered by her interest in representation in its historical, linguistic and psychological forms. Throughout 'Daddy' the father is represented by symbols such as an ocean-straddling statue, a sky-filling swastika, a devil-schoolteacher and a voodoo model, which are not literal or even directly metaphorical, in that there is little sense that the father is (or is being compared with) anything that pertains to the historically real.

This relativistic focus on representation as something that both intersects with and constructs our conception of reality is figured in 'Daddy' through the trope of a telephone

conversation - a popular motif in Plath's work as a whole, and in her Holocaust writing in particular. In the fifth stanza the speaker admits:

I never could tell where you
Put your foot, your root,
I never could talk to you.

Here the elusiveness of the father's 'root' offers a critique of the representational logic of the poem itself, describing the unavailability of 'routes' to the past through the metrical 'foot' of verse. This idea is revisited at the climax of the monologue:

So daddy, I'm finally through.
The black telephone's off at the root,
The voices just can't worm through.

Simultaneously suggesting connection (she is 'through') and disconnection (being 'through' also suggests that one is finished with something), the metaphorical 'black telephone' represents the fundamental dividedness of both the narrator's relationship with her father and poetry's relationship with the past.

The image of a black telephone opens up poetic 'connections' with earlier images in 'Daddy' itself, and with other of Plath's late poems. 'Little Fugue', for example, foreshadows 'Daddy' in both its imagery and its Freudian psychodrama:¹⁶

Deafness is something else.
Such a dark funnel, my father!
I see your voice,
Black and leafy, as in my childhood,

A yew hedge of orders,
Gothic and barbarous, pure German.
Dead men cry from it.
I am guilty of nothing. (CP, p. 188.)

The speaker's father is again a Nazi, and she conceives of a muffled connection to his and Germany's past through a 'deafness' that is, in a distortion or parody of an instrumental understanding of memory, a 'dark funnel'. Language, on the other hand, distorts and destroys, with the 'yew hedge of orders' being linked to 'dead men' and prefiguring 'Daddy', in which the 'German tongue' is an 'engine' that transports the speaker 'like a Jew/ [...] to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen'.

A yew tree also features in another late period poem about modern German history, 'The Munich Mannequins', this time as part of a morbid reference to childless German women and their sterile wombs, in which 'the yew trees blow like hydras' (CP, p 262). The poem derides the high society of postwar Germany, and its location is particularly significant: Munich was the birthplace of the Nazi party, and it was in Munich that Adolf Hitler began his political career, making anti-Semitic speeches in taverns and beer-cellars. It was also in this city that the British Prime Minister, Neville

Chamberlain, along with other European leaders, signed the Munich Agreement, handing over the Sudetenland area of Czechoslovakia to the Nazis. The poem describes postwar Munich as the ‘morgue between Paris and Rome’.

The poem’s subject is not, however, simply the crimes of Nazism, but rather the postwar (non)memory of them in an officially ‘denazified’ Germany. Plath describes the childless, mannequin-like nulliparas of the city who are ‘naked and bald in their furs’, recalling those victims who were literally ‘naked and bald’, but placing them, grotesquely, in fashionable ‘furs’. The poem never makes explicit reference to the dead Jews: in avoiding direct representation of the memory that the German glitterati depicted in the poem itself fails to confront, Plath becomes dependent on a strategic manipulation of the poem’s internal aesthetic - above all its black and white colour symbolism - to make it clear that the city is implicated in a moral catastrophe far more serious than a low birth-rate. The poem thus intimates its own, and Germany’s, absent history through images such as the snow dropping its ‘pieces of darkness’ – a phrase which recalls the ash created by the burning of human bodies in extermination camps, and which, in turn, brings to mind Celan’s ‘Schwarze Flocken’ (‘Black Flakes’) and ‘Todesfuge’ (‘Death Fugue’), the latter with its images of ‘black milk’, ‘smoke’, and ‘graves in the sky’.¹⁷ However, rather than reproducing the musical ironies of Celan’s poem - an aesthetic that Celan himself would later reject, replacing it with a more contained ‘hermetic’ form of writing - ‘The Munich Mannequins’ operates through a logic of suggestion and indirect intimation. Through this allusive technique, even the poem’s cooler, more observational moments become doubly sinister:

Nobody's about. In the hotels
Hands will be opening doors and setting

Down shoes for a polish of carbon
Into which broad toes will go tomorrow.

The poem's vocabulary is made to work hard, but readers conversant with poems such as 'Daddy' will be startled into a disturbing series of inferences by phrases such as 'Nobody's about' (no bodies about), and a line that contains the words 'shoes', 'polish' (Polish), and 'carbon'. As Stan Smith observes: 'Plath's language is always radically overdetermined, so that the same image can be charged with quite contradictory associations, conflicting emotional resonances.'¹⁸

The poem concludes with another dig at the Germans and a repetition of a favourite image:

The thick Germans slumbering in their bottomless Stolz.
And the black phones on hooks

Glittering
Glittering and digesting

Voicelessness. The snow has no voice.

The 'black phones' again represent a mode of communication with the past that can only transmit incommunicability. As an image within the German poems, and as a meta-commentary on these poems, the 'black phones' again register poetry's inability to put the living in touch with the dead. The tension the particular image in 'The Munich Mannequins' creates between connection and disconnection is dramatised by the single-line break that occurs between the penultimate stanza and the last line, which makes the phrase 'glittering and digesting' syntactically ambiguous. The *mise-en-page* indicates that 'glittering and digesting' can be read independently of the word 'voicelessness' - describing the way the black phones eat and digest some unnamed and unknown object - yet the enjambment means the verb 'digesting' can take 'voicelessness' as its object. The latter suggests an extreme annihilation, through the doubly-negative consumption of something which is not even there; although at the same time, like all double-negatives, the logical outcome of this action is positive, as the black phones digest - and in doing so, they contain - voicelessness, making them (and thus poetry) a kind of repository for voices which are, paradoxically, not there.

The significance of this act is amplified in the final sentence: 'The snow has no voice'. The snow was earlier dropping 'pieces of darkness' that recalled the ashes of Holocaust victims burnt in the crematoria of the death camps. The fact that the snow now has 'no voice' might suggest that the poem, the 'black phone', is a useless instrument; yet the oxymoronic, Celan-like imagery and the irony of using a lexicon of purity to symbolise the victims of the Holocaust remind us that it was the Nazis who wished to erase both the ethnically 'impure' and also the memory of that crime. The stark lineation, which renders 'voicelessness' eminently visible, therefore describes an ethical imperative

(one which is totally at odds with the perception that Plath's poetry threatens the integrity of the public memory of the Holocaust through outlandish metaphors and illegitimate imagistic appropriations), whereby it is the obligation of the non-victims to testify to the silence of the true witnesses. Plath's Holocaust poetry offers many diagnoses of this silence: it is variously that which cannot be said, that created by 'artistic' performances which can never equate to historical reality, or that which results from the willed deafness of bystanders. In relation to all of these, the motif of the black phone constitutes an ensuing argument about the condition of poetry after Auschwitz, and this is articulated almost diagrammatically in 'the Munich Mannequins': a postmodern poem which does not overwrite historical silence, but rather writes round it, lending structure to the unsaid through its form.

¹ Sue Vice, *Holocaust Fiction* (London: Routledge, 2000), p.1.

² For a detailed discussion of this change in the tenor of Plath criticism in the 1990s, see Antony Rowland, *Holocaust Poetry: Awkward Poetics in the Work of Sylvia Plath*, Geoffrey Hill, Tony Harrison and Ted Hughes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), p. 34. For Plath on Joyce and Lawrence see, for example, *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, ed. Karen V. Kukil (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 168 and p. 337.

³ Sidra DeKoven Ezrahi, *By Words Alone: The Holocaust in Literature* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1980), p. 214.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, *The Government of the Tongue: The 1986 T.S. Eliot Memorial Lectures and Other Critical Writings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 165.

⁵ Christina Britzolakis, *Sylvia Plath and the Theatre of Mourning* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), p. 123.

⁶ Judith Kroll, *Chapters in a Mythology: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath* (New York: Harper and Row, 1976), pp. 154-55. 'A Fasting-artist' begins: 'Interest in fasting as an art has declined very considerably in recent decades' (Franz Kafka, 'A Fasting-artist', *Stories 1904-1924*, trans. J. A. Underwood (London and Sydney: Futura, 1983), p. 242).

⁷ Plath, 'Lady Lazarus', *Collected Poems* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), pp. 244-47 (p. 245).

⁸ Robert Eaglestone, *The Holocaust and the Postmodern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 3. The contention that Plath is a kind of postmodern poet relates to her poetics, linking her work with concerns shared by some of postmodernism's leading theorists; it does not attempt to align Plath with the more extreme linguistic and formal experimentation that characterised the American poetic avant-garde of this period (which is not to say, however, that such links do not exist).

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- ⁹ Susan Gubar, *Poetry after Auschwitz: Remembering What One Never Knew* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2003), p. 201.
- ¹⁰ T. S. Eliot, 'Little Gidding', *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), pp. 214-23 (p. 216).
- ¹¹ John Felstiner, *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 38. On possible allusions to Celan (and especially 'Todesfuge') in this poem, see Rowland, *Holocaust*, pp. 47-49.
- ¹² Nelly Sachs, 'O the Chimneys', *Abba Kovner and Nelly Sachs: Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Roloff (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1971), p. 79.
- ¹³ Celan, 'Aschenglorie' ('Ashglory'), trans. John Felstiner, in Felstiner, *Celan*, p. 223.
- ¹⁴ Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 91 and p. 30.
- ¹⁵ Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg, 'General Introduction: Theory and the Holocaust', in *The Holocaust: Theoretical Readings*, eds. Neil Levi and Michael Rothberg (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 13.
- ¹⁶ Jacqueline Rose also describes and critiques 'Little Fugue' as a 'forerunner of "Daddy"' (Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991), p. 219).
- ¹⁷ Paul Celan, 'Todesfuge' ('Death Fugue'), *Selected Poems*, trans. Michael Hamburger (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), pp. 62-65.
- ¹⁸ Stan Smith, *Inviolable Voice: History and Twentieth-Century Poetry* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan Humanities Press, 1982), p. 217.