The Language of Rebirth in Sylvia Plath's Ariel Poems

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Sylvia Plath’s final book of poetry, *Ariel*, was first edited and published by her husband Ted Hughes, two years after her death in 1963. At the time Plath wrote much of this collection, she and Hughes had separated; Plath was living alone with her two small children in England during one of the coldest winters on record. Under great pressure to support herself and her children, she nevertheless entered her most productive period as a poet. After her death and during his heavy-handed redactive process, Hughes removed several poems in the collection he deemed personally hurtful or that he believed did not contribute to the work as a whole, replacing them with some of Plath’s earlier pieces. Subsequent to Hughes’s death in 1998, *Ariel: The Restored Edition* was published in 2004 as Plath had intended, an arrangement of forty poems in a black binder on her desk. This publication also includes facsimiles of Plath’s working drafts as well as notes the author made for the BBC about the manuscript. Plath’s daughter, Frieda Hughes, writes an insightful “Foreword,” including a personal explanation for the differences in the first release, edited by her father, Ted Hughes, and the restored version of Plath’s manuscript. With controlled, disciplined energy, Plath channeled volatile inner conflicts through her own obsessions, artistry, and a love of language. She poured these into these last poems, which, despite their conflicted thoughts and paradoxical images, represent a poet fully alive, at the height of her powers, investing herself in the act of creation and calling for rebirth. It is from this important restored edition that Plath’s legacy and vision will be based.

From the outset, Plath scholarship has been focused on the autobiographical correspondences in her poetry and especially on images and themes related to death. These interpretations follow not only her suicide and subsequent popularity in America,
but also such interpretations often rely heavily upon *The Bell Jar*, first published only a month before her death, and afterwards deemed autobiographical by critics. The problem of sorting through the Plath scholarship is twofold: 1) scholars and critics move back and forth between explaining her works in light of life and explicating her works with close, often “New Critical” readings; 2) the scholarly/literary response to both her work and her life is confused by, and sometimes conflicted with, her popularity as a symbol of the oppressed wife, single mother, and tortured female artist. To understand both how a reassessment of *Ariel* is necessary and how an appreciation for Plath’s late work can be found in relevant critical conversations, it is important to first review the past four decades of Plath scholarship beginning as early as 1973.

In Wendy Martin’s essay, “‘God’s Lioness’—Sylvia Plath, Her Prose and Poetry,” Martin supports Plath as a writer who effectively articulates “her aggression, hostility, and despair in her art” while challenging the “traditional literary prioritization of female experience,” going against the social conventions that women often follow which conceal or dismiss their true feelings (160). According to Martin, Plath echoed these sentiments in both *The Bell Jar* and her poetry which Martin claims are autobiographical in nature. Martin challenges literary critics Elizabeth Harwick and Irving Howe who both complain of Plath’s self-centered “fascination with hurt and damage and fury,” accusing Plath of not being “aware of anyone but herself,” Howe going so far as to dismiss Plath’s work altogether, claiming that there is “no coherent statement as to the nature, let alone the value, of her vision” (157). Martin disputes their assessments by saying that it is vital that Plath’s work be viewed through a lens which is “unbiased by sentimentality or authoritarianism,” so readers understand Plath’s writing as the embodiment of the “profound interrelationship of destruction and creation (157, 160). Martin is not alone in
supporting the biographical stance of the female experience in Plath’s work. Jeannine Dobbs’s essay written in 1977, “Viciousness in the Kitchen: Sylvia Plath’s Domestic Poetry,” maintains a strictly biographical path of interpretation. Dobbs views the hostile and often violent imagery in Plath’s poems from *The Colossus* and *Ariel* as Plath’s own resistance, not only to the entrapment of being a wife and mother, but also to the negative effects that such gendered demands have on her writing. Dobbs’s central argument is that Plath’s creative energy was fueled by the experiences and emotions of her domestic life and that her best work came at the end, after separating from Hughes, when she “felt poetically released” from the confines of “domesticity” that she documented in her personal letters (169). Mary Lynn Broe adopted a similar argument in 1980. In the essay, “The Colossus: In Sign Language of a Lost Other World,” Broe discusses Plath’s poetic vision during the writing of her first published work of poetry, *The Colossus* (1960), and its significance after her suicide. Many scholars view *The Colossus* as evidence of the “doubleness of things” and the “tumult beneath the calm,” thereby regarding it as a foreshadowing of Plath’s death, and perpetuating the biographical stance of many other critics (176). Citing Alfred Alvarez’s suggestion that *The Colossus* represented a “fence to keep psychological disturbance at bay,” Broe adds that Plath was unable to “psychologically integrate” her own creative perceptions, thus fueling the interest in connecting Plath’s writing with her suicide (176-7). Many critics and readers fell in line with such subjective readings of Plath’s work during this time. Broe’s psychological lens provides a more tinted viewpoint than Pamela Annas who turns her attention to Plath’s stylistic devices within social themes in a paper she also published in 1980.
Pamela Annas's essay, "The Self in the World: The Social Context of Sylvia Plath's Late Poems," evaluates the depersonalization in Plath's poetry as a way Plath responds to a marginalizing and oppressing modern society that promotes a "dual consciousness of self as both subject and object" (182). Annas also supports a biographical reading of Plath, suggesting that Plath's depersonalized style resulted from her personal circumstances and isolation from a world wherein she was "isolated from a past tradition and a present community" (186). Annas's focus is on Plath's intentionality within a social and broadening economic context rather than on Plath's personal development as a poet. For almost twenty years after Plath's death, most of the literary criticism centered on the biographical perspective, but by the next decade, critical analysis began to shift to a combination of biographical and creative artistry. One of the first proponents of this stance was Brita Lindberg-Seyersted.

Lindberg-Seyersted's 1990 essay entitled "Sylvia Plath's Psychic Landscapes," features Plath's strong connections between the physical and psychic landscapes of her everyday activities and in their development within themes, images, scenes, and settings (landscapes and seascapes). The interconnection between the physical and psychic perspective, Lindberg-Seyersted claims, functions as "mirrors for a self in search of identity and truth" (206). While such focus amplifies the biographical attention of other Plath critics, Lindberg-Seyersted also supports the divergent prosodic criticism that Linda Wagner began in the late 1970's and which was re-surfacing in the 1990's. In fact, within six years of this essay, Lindberg-Seyersted would publish another article that focuses on Plath's use of language, her imagery, and poetic tonality, but in the meantime, the early 1990's critics maintained their focus on the confessional aspects of Plath's poetry.
In “Sylvia Plath and the Poetry of Confession,” Bruce Bawer joins other Plath devotees in clinging to the claim that Plath’s popularity in the 1960’s is attributable to her reputation as an oppressed and victimized woman rather than on the literary merits of her work. Bawer’s 1991 essay highlights Plath as a dedicated student who thrived in a structured environment that carried over into her marriage with Ted Hughes who was also her mentor and writing partner. Plath’s greatest fear, Bawer claims, was that she would somehow be mediocre without this kind of framework and Hughes provided that until he left the marriage. Bawer points to the contrast between *The Colossus* and *Ariel* collections, the later poems he considers “colloquial, muscular, unafraid of repeated words or odd line lengths or the first person singular pronoun,” signifying a new energy in her descriptive skill (196). Yet Bawer maintains that the *Ariel* poems are not representative of “self-knowledge” but rather “self-display” and become less interesting after a first reading. He goes on to say that readers of Plath’s poetry will be able to clearly distinguish the difference in the artistic significance and the “political serviceability or personal idolatry” that pervades her work (198). Such juxtapositions indicate a shifting interest as the biographical label offers fewer new insights. Two years later William Freedman joins the conversation (like Lindberg-Seyersted) that begins to measure Plath’s work from a modified biographical viewpoint, one that introduces attention to imagery and structural components within a social context.

In his 1993 essay, “The Monster in Plath’s Mirror,” Freedman defines Plath’s use of the mirror image as a symbol of a conflicted individual resulting from social pressures, at odds with the competing obligations of a professional artist and mother. Freedman views “Morning Song” and “Medusa” from the *Ariel* collection as extensions of Plath’s self-image, each questioning and/or rejecting the maternal role. The poems
end on contrasting notes—"Morning Song" ends with positive changing images of both mother and child, while "Medusa" concludes as it began, with a rejection of the mother figure. Freedman points to the mirror image as a "physically restricted, passive, depersonalized reflector of the external world"—yet it is a forceful image that emerges in the Ariel compilation which also demonstrates Plath's skillfulness with imagery technique (210). This hint of structural attention to Plath's work prompted additional critical review towards the technical and artistic aspects of her work. It had taken twenty years for most scholars to move in this direction.

In his 1994 essay, "Reading the Poetry of Sylvia Plath," Anthony Easthope focuses his analysis singularly on the physical form and structural properties of Plath's poetry. Easthope suggests that readers redirect their efforts away from Plath's psychology and intent, towards understanding the meanings of the words by their "phonetic, syntactic, [and] semantic" properties; he concurs with Roland Barthes' contention that "it is language which speaks, not the author" even though meaning will always "spill beyond the text, beyond any known intention, beyond any context of interpretation" (225). Easthope claims this template of "formal effects" becomes apparent when tracing Plath's creative development of language use in the Ariel collection (229). As a result, the way that Plath shapes simple word choices to evoke complex images triggers additional critical interest and scrutiny. Earlier scholarship had already mentioned Plath's skillful manipulation of language, while other scholars insisted on labeling her as a confessional poet. One critic who recognized Plath's poetic artistry early on was the eminent Plath scholar, Linda Wagner (now Linda Wagner-Martin). As early as 1977, Wagner contributed to the discussion about Plath's technical skill with language. In "Plath's 'Ariel': 'Auspicious Gales,'" Wagner examines the structural qualities of Plath's poetry,
drawing attention to the concept of movement in “Ariel,” calling it an “ambiguous poem, rich in its image patterns of movement-stasis, light-dark, earth-fire” (175). In effect, the poem directs “the eye of the reader, like that of the poet” to “what is coming, and the scene that appears is always couched in imagery that includes motion words or impressions” (175). Wagner also references critics who rely on Plath’s “color systems” when reading “Ariel,” to show movement in time, noting the transition from “‘darkness’ to the weightless blue of morning to an absence of color,” then shifting to physical descriptions as in the horse’s brown neck, “black of the sweet blood berries” and “the woman’s body as evanescent (sparkling, silver/gold, glinting, in ‘wheat,’ ‘glitter of seas,’ and ‘dew’)” (176). Plath’s “drive to motion,” Wagner claims, “that sheer impact of energy and force, beyond the ‘Dead hands, dead stringencies,’ is the power” behind several of Plath’s poems, including the last one in the Ariel collection, “Wintering” (177). In the context of such energetic, forceful language, Wagner directs us to evaluate Plath’s poetry—reading that should occur with insights “closer to Plath’s own emphasis, and to her equally personal thematic direction” (177). Other critics immediately followed Wagner’s lead, even though the majority of scholarship remained persistent in perpetuating the biographical viewpoint.

In another 1977 essay, “Sylvia Plath and Confessional Poetry: A Reconsideration,” M.D. Uroff contrasts the poetic voices of Plath and Robert Lowell, pointing out that what distinguishes Plath from Lowell is the “kind of person in the poem,” insisting that Lowell uses “real-life people” while Plath incorporates “generalized figures” that she “manipulates in order to expose their limitations” (170). Uroff claims that Plath’s characters begin to “speak for themselves in caricature, parody, and hyperbole” as methods of performance rather than as a way to convey judgment, a divergent point of
view from the sociological analysis Pamela Annas would take in 1980 (171). Uroff sees the manipulator in “The Applicant” as a “comic figure, reveling in her machinations,” speaking for others rather than for herself (172). Such attention to Plath’s speakers brought other critics into the discussion, prompting them to look even closer at Plath’s language use and tonal qualities. Two years later Eileen Aird navigates a middle-of-the-road approach to Plath’s work, using a historical/biographical lens, often analyzing the poems from an intertextual perspective, and also focusing on Plath’s artistry.

In her 1979 essay, “‘Poem for a Birthday’ to ‘Three Women’: Development in the Poetry of Sylvia Plath,” Aird argues that Plath initially relies upon personal experiences and then shifts into a deepening awareness of the intellectual complexities and tonal qualities of the language itself, as in the vicious humor captured in the tonal qualities in “The Applicant.” Aird’s central argument effectively points to the validity of Plath’s work in crafting language to bring into focus or to deliberately obscure obvious meanings. Departing from other early biographical criticism, Aird continues to chart unexplored territory begun by Linda Wagner two years earlier— the sort of close attention to language and craft that can be seen by looking at the Ariel poems. By this time, scholars had shifted their investigation away from the biographical standpoint to the technical aspects of Plath’s poetry. In doing so, critics tended to feature the same poems from Ariel, especially in discussions about tonal qualities. Brita Lindberg-Seyersted published an essay in 1997 entitled, “Bad Language Can Be Good: Slang and Other Expressions of Extreme Informality in Sylvia Plath’s Poetry,” tracing Plath’s use of slang and the ways it influences tonal quality. Lindberg-Seyersted theorizes that readers are able to hear Plath’s “speech-like language” with its punctuated “insistent, often loud voice,” qualities that make her work accessible to general readers as well as scholars (253). Lindberg-
Seyersted also cites the tonal qualities that resonate in “The Applicant” with its matchmaker’s informal “urgent tone and fast pace,” supported by short, leading questions and answers (255). This kind of everyday language supports the sarcastic voice that effectively reduces marriage to a deplorable “buying and selling operation” while “Medusa” sounds more serious and strained as it probes the tension between a mother and daughter (255). Lindberg-Seyersted makes reference to Plath’s short, “flat, declarative sentences” that mimic everyday speech and build upon ambiguities, thus demonstrating her skill as a “verbal artist” in manipulating such “simple language tools” (256). As scholars continued to evaluate Plath in this new technical and artistic light, scholarly books about Plath’s creativity and artistry began to surface in literary academia. In 2001, *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* by Tim Kendall traces the development of recurring themes woven throughout Plath’s earlier works and into the innovative techniques she employs in *Ariel*, specifically in the distinctive technique of repetition in “The Applicant” and “Purdah.” Critics dispute the effectiveness of such techniques, some claiming that Plath abuses the device by using it too often, while others insist that Plath employs it deliberately as a stylistic technique to heighten tonal intensity. Kendall maintains that repetition can work two ways—to heighten intensity or express exhaustion. It can be argued, however, that Plath’s use of repetition not only enhances the tonal quality and effectively maintains a high level of tension, but also displays intense energy and stamina. These kinds of craftsmanship components continue to attract critics who are drawn to Plath’s artistry.

One notable scholar, Peter Steinberg, navigates both the biographical and the technical approaches to Plath’s work in 2004. In *Great Writers—Sylvia Plath*, Steinberg concludes that Plath’s personal life and her writing are inseparable. In the “Foreword,”
Linda Wagner-Martin states that Steinberg "emphasizes the way [Plath's] writing was the motivating force of Plath's life," and credits Steinberg's text as a valuable reference for any reader (xii). In Chapter seven entitled "The Triumphant Fulfillment," Steinberg chronicles Plath's poems written between 1961 and her death in 1963, focusing on their context within Plath's personal circumstances, maintaining that Plath was, in fact, more concerned with life than with death. Moreover, he asserts that being a woman, a writer, and a mother brings an intimacy to life that drives Plath's highly charged literary works in addition to breaking down traditional structural barriers in striking ways such as simple word choices, syntax and vivid imagery evoking memorable images. Steinberg credits Hughes with helping Plath achieve her potential as a poet, a deserved recognition for Hughes, but also acknowledges Plath herself for reaching that potential in the fall of 1962 when, on her own, she wrote at the pinnacle of her poetic capabilities. Continued interest in Plath's work becomes evident as other critics follow Steinberg's lead.

Amongst the most recent scholarship is The Cambridge Guide to Sylvia Plath edited by Jo Gill, which gives special attention to Plath's artistic capabilities. This 2006 collection of critical essays speaks to the diversity of Plath's work, her craftsmanship and technical complexity as well as the development of her poetic form. Well-known Plath critic Steven Gould Axelrod summarizes the last several months of her life as "a dynamic period of passion and self discovery," referencing the poem, "Ariel," as a distinctive example of Plath's technique (80). Axelrod cites Plath's use of irregular slant rhymes, "flies/ drive/ eye (all suggesting but not naming the near-homophone die) where nature "has become synonymous with the death-drive, suffused with a supernatural aura of excitement and grief (81). Axelrod also credits Plath's creativity in repeating "overdetermined, multiplicitous images of 'eye,' 'cauldron' and morning" which are
hallmarks in the *Ariel* collection (81). Critics Jo Gill, Christina Britzolakis, and Diane Middlebrook agree that Plath's poetic language is "marked by a new rhythmic and colloquial freedom," and that the changing stylistic adaptations speak to a maturing voice and persona (107). This recent attention confirms a redirected critical look at defining Plath solely as a confessional poet as opposed to a technically gifted artist. The later conversations represent a renewed interest in Plath's work, whereby scholars are looking more closely at tracing Plath's poetry from a structural standpoint, and paying more attention to less familiar poems from *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. As we move farther away from Plath's death, we may find that the scholarship shifts its emphasis more closely aligned with her technical and artistic gifts. In this last collection of Plath's work, we can begin to see both Plath's obsessions and her artistry: the love for language she poured into these last poems, which despite their conflicted thoughts and paradoxical images, represent a poet fully alive, at the height of her powers. In reading Plath's final collection, we witness a gifted poet investing herself in the act of creation and calling for rebirth.

In "Morning Song," the first poem in the collection, the speaker describes childbirth and a newborn. It is not the first time Plath has focused on birth or gestation; her novel, *The Bell Jar*, contains many maternal and birth images, which, to the reader who finds in Plath only the maudlin and the morose, may come as a surprise—an image of new life that stands against many Plath critiques, which focus on her mental instability and obsession with death. Written ten months after the birth of Plath and Hughes's first child, Frieda, "Morning Song" conveys emotional complexities using

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concise, unexaggerated diction. There are six stanzas made up of three relatively short, mostly enjamed, fluid lines of verse. The strength of the opening word, “love,” evokes powerful emotions that would take pages of prose to explain. And yet, this one word frames everything else that follows. Here, in Ariel’s first utterance, the speaker links birth with an artistic creation; the self-reflexive aspects of the text that indicate Plath’s heightened awareness of language and the many possibilities for interpretation poetry affords. The “fat gold watch” is both a metaphor for love and is the personification of the baby herself complete with the precious metal quality of a newborn’s skin and her steady heartbeat (1). Past tense verbs support the historical event of the baby’s birth when the “midwife slapped your footsoles,” then the baby announces her arrival with a “bald cry” (2). The historical perspective then shifts to present tense responses and communication. For example, “our voices echo” suggests a resonating reaction by those who look intently at the infant as though viewing a “[n]ew statue / In a drafty museum”—where a museum quality “nakedness” envelops the observers’ attention (4, 5). Gazing “blankly as walls” the onlookers are mute with wonder (6). However, the mood shifts abruptly, disrupted by a negating claim and an ambiguous and complex floating image that reflects drifting, transitional contemplation.

There is a quiet, self-reflective quality in the third stanza when the speaker shares a private moment with her baby. It begins, however, with a disturbing declaration that “I’m no more your mother,” but is softened by the second element of comparison— “[t]han a cloud that distils a mirror to reflect its own slow / Effacement at the wind’s hand” (7-9). The notion of motherhood seems at this moment to be as improbable as a cloud that sees itself disappearing into nothingness. Such an admission hints at the shape of the mother/child relationship that appears to be elusive and indefinable.
Whatever the intent, it is a fleeting thought as the baby’s activities demand the speaker’s attention in the last three stanzas.

In simple and highly delicate locution, Plath uses alliteration to describe the baby’s barely audible breathing as “moth breath” that “[f]lickers among the flat pink roses,” (10,11). The alliteration extends just enough to serve as a connector between anticipation and response. The speaker hears the peacefulness of the “far sea” before the “one cry” jars her into full wakefulness and she suddenly becomes aware, not only of her baby, but of herself (12, 13). Awkward and unsteady, the speaker “stumble[s] from the bed, “cow heavy and floral / In my Victorian nightgown,” answering her baby’s hunger command (13-14). Plath’s contrast between the bovine reference and the feminine nightgown heightens the speaker’s sense of her own physical changes. The mammalian reference continues in the image of the baby’s open mouth being as “clean as a cat’s” when she turns to the speaker’s breast to nurse, while the speaker also notices the bedroom window that “[w]hitens and swallows its dull stars” as dawn approaches (15-16). Here Plath demonstrates her craft using personification as a deliberate device to connect opposing images. Finally, the sweet sounds of the baby’s cooing signal wakefulness and mark the beginnings of communication between baby and speaker. The poem ends with an uplifting tone and offers a hope-filled promise the same way it began. Both speaker and child are soothed by “[y]our handful of notes; / The clear vowels rise like balloons” (17-18). These pure, airy utterances, the prerequisites of language, give voice to a new infant and signal a new beginning for a poet directing her craft while she navigates the uncharted territory of motherhood. This theme and its variations recur in later poems such as “Ariel” and “Medusa.” The maturation process
that develops within the *Ariel* sequence becomes evident as each subsequent poem becomes more complex.

In “The Applicant,” characterizations fuse with everyday events, producing tension and ambiguity. An interview reshapes itself into a probing question/answer session dominated by the speaker. The plural pronoun “our” complicates the meaning of the interchange, opening up the question of whether or not the interviewer represents a single person or a group. Sharp images and curt language direct the eight questions posed in the poem with the final line inverted and punctuated as a sentence. The tone is immediately condescending, judging the candidate’s physical appearance. The images are negative—a “glass eye, false teeth or a crutch, / A brace or a hook, / Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch” (3-5). Deformities, handicaps, and sexuality become qualifiers while the gender of the speaker and “applicant” remains unclear. A series of pointed questions and abrupt answers follows in the ensuing stanzas. An agitated speaker questions whether or not “stitches” reveal “something missing,” immediately followed by two short blasts, “No, no?” (6). Continuing with the plural pronoun, the speaker asks, “How can we give you a thing?’ and not waiting for an answer, demands, “Stop crying. / Open your hand” (7-9). Immediately another question ensues, to which the interrogator responds, “Empty? Empty” (10). To convolute the possibilities even further, Plath broadens the intentionality of the exchange to include her own qualifications and merits as a poet, one who must face the scrutiny of literary critics and weather storms of criticism. Plath also opens the possibility that she is addressing issues in her private life, especially Ted Hughes’ infidelity with his lover, Assia Wevill.

At the height of the poem’s tension a hand is offered, a seemingly kind gesture that is short-lived. Described as one that brings tea and treats headaches, the hand
performs the socially constructed female gender role of caregiver. Yet, “Will you marry it?” demeans any reference to a person thereby upending any clarity and flipping it to ambiguity (14). The fourth stanza catalogs tasks and responsibilities of the nurturer, who must comfort and bear children, “mak[ing] new stock from the salt,” and finally at the moment of death, “[t]o thumb shut your eyes” (16). The dialogue abruptly reverts to the physical appearance, “notic[ing] you are stark naked” and offering a suit, thus implying the applicant is a man (20). The clothing is guaranteed to be “waterproof, shatterproof, proof / against fire and bombs through the roof,” of a quality to last long enough to be buried in (23,4). We are lulled into categorizing in an attempt to clarify this ephemeral exchange.

The speaker surges ahead, declaring that “your head, excuse me, is empty” but there is a solution—“sweetie” who is coaxed “out of the closet” and another reference is made to a non-gendered “that” once again de-personifying the image (26, 8, 9). Referring to sweetie as “[n]aked as paper to start” transmits the image of a blank screen or a person without essence. Then without warning, the speaker turns to the future in increments of twenty-five and fifty years, the former silver and the latter gold corresponding to anniversary descriptors. The pronoun “it” is then repeated again and again, the speaker declaring, “it can sew, it can cook. / It can talk, talk, talk” in contentious personification (35). Finally, there is a direct corresponding solution between the applicant and this third-person singular thing that Plath forces us to regard as a person: “You have a hole, it’s a poultice / You have an eye, it’s an image” the interviewer proclaims (37-8). In the end, the last question is bent into a declarative statement—“Will you marry it, marry it, marry it”—deliberately ending with a full stop instead of a question mark.
Plath hones her skills, developing a sharp-edged, dominate speaker who wastes no time in engaging in a derisive give-and-take game. It is not clear whether this is an internal dialogue where Plath references her personal difficulties with Hughes, alludes to her development as a poet, or functions to express the heightened tension between genders. Whichever the case, the voice shifts to a hardened, ironic tone, laced with biting inferences about skill, acceptability, and capability—a deliberate device that thrusts the language into an independent path of expression, thereby becoming a cornerstone in the foundation of independence that supports Plath’s maturation and recurs in subsequent poems in the *Ariel* compilation.

Like “The Applicant,” “The Couriers” takes a defensive stance, as though the unconscious is instructing the conscious—one self informs the “other” on how to respond and what not to trust. While the title implies a messenger, the very first line explodes the normative meaning as it begins, “[t]he word of a snail on the plate of a leaf?” while the answer follows, “[i]t is not mine. Do not accept it” (1,2). We are immediately put off-guard by phrases that conjure such impossible images. Personification abounds in this compact poem of six, crisp, two-line stanzas and one final one-line. The first three stanzas are made up of questions with forceful, negative responses while the extra space between stanzas visually marks the separation from one image to another. The retorts have a deliberate, dissenting tone to them—“not mine,” “not genuine,” “Lies. Lies and a grief,” as they shift from the physical to the intuitive (2, 4, 6). The list of questions jump from “[t]he word of a snail” to “[a]cetic acid” and “[a] ring of gold,” becoming so abstruse that it is unclear at first glance what the intent actually is (1, 3, 5). Initially we recognize Plath’s repetitious images of “gold,” “cauldron,” and “mirrors,” as they also appear in “Morning Song,” “Ariel,” and “Purdah,”
yet we are caught off-guard and confused when Plath abruptly launches the image of a kettle or pot that talks to itself on the top of “nine black Alps,” a mysterious allusion with witchcraft connotations (10).

The first three stanzas are subsequently fractured by the active verbs in the following three stanzas; “[T]alking and crackling” and “shattering” imply a noisy destructive force that responds to the initial images (8,12). Reusing the mirror image, Plath twists it from an object that is “distil[led]” or changed by a cloud in “Morning Song” to a reflective object in which a “disturbance” is observed in “The Couriers” (11). In both cases, the mirror and its reflective qualities have transformative powers that parallel the way Plath transforms syntax. The final line of the poem turns everything that preceded it on its head in the comforting notion of “[l]ove, love, my season,” an ironic statement that seals the sadness and disappointment in a dark compartment. This is a pivotal poem in the collection—it is the poem about the death of love. From this point on, Plath systematically breaks away from the familiar and comes to a recognition of replacement and a freedom that opens up a new passion and exploration with language that symbolize rebirth in all of its magic and majesty. What better way to celebrate such self-determination than on one’s birthday—the day that Plath wrote “Ariel?”

“Ariel” has special significance as one of the most recognized of Plath’s poems and the one for whom the collection is named. There are ten three-line stanzas and one final line used as a connector to the theme of opposition between inactivity and movement. The poem begins from the point of inertia, “[s]tasis in darkness” then moves in time to true dawn when the “substanceless blue” lightens the sky before the sun is actually visible. Plath jumps from one allusion to another creating density out of simple,
short lines and stanzas in describing the frenzied activity of daylight. We do not yet know the title’s significance—it could be an allusion to Shakespeare’s mischievous character in *The Tempest*, or connected in some way to the Hebrew definition as “the lioness of God.” The second stanza begins with “God’s lioness,” but we need the clues that Plath provides—the “furrow” that they “[s]plit and pass[],” “[t]he brown arc,” and “the neck I cannot catch” before it becomes evident that the speaker is referring to a horse in motion (4,6,7-9). In fact, Ariel is the name of Plath’s favorite horse. Galloping through a shrubby field, blackberry thorns “cast dark hooks” in the rider’s legs, yet the pain is companioned with the “[b]lack sweet blood mouthfuls,” a familiar image when a thorn punctures skin, which is also a recurring element that Plath devises to juxtapose pain with pleasure (13).

The sixth stanza transitions with an air of uncertainty held together with rhyming end words to the naked image alluded to in the seventh stanza—it is Lady “Godiva” riding down the streets of Coventry in protest of her husband’s taxation of the local townspeople (20). The speaker strips herself of “dead hands, dead stringencies”—removing the old and welcoming a new beginning without specified conditions (21). The eighth stanza transitions from one element to another—dream-state to reality and mother to speaker at the point she hears “[t]he child’s cry” (24). At this turn, the poem resonates in the binary reality of the speaker, whose creativity is suddenly interrupted. It is she, the mother, who is “the arrow” while the speaker is “dew that flies” or evaporates into nothingness, giving over to the duties that motherhood requires (27-8). Finally “Ariel” concludes with the image of beginning—“the red / Eye, the cauldron of morning,” while figuratively insisting on tension resulting from instability and strong emotion (30-1). Plath allows for flexing “morning” into “mourning,” an intriguing
interpretative possibility indicating loss while also unveiling a dynamic self—a developing, ever-reaching imagination in motion. If such freedom reveals a spirited self, a developing, ever-reaching imagination in motion, then “Nick and the Candlestick” represents a positive voice in the recognition of recovery from loss.

Unlike “Morning Song” which has six three-line stanzas and written after the birth of Frieda, “Nick and the Candlestick” is expanded to 14 stanzas of three lines each. With confidence, we surmise that this poem is biographical for by now Plath and Hughes have separated, and she is alone with her two children. Yet the parallel focus is on the use of word choices, imagery and tonal effect. The first half of the poem focuses on physical surroundings—a cold, dark sitting room whose only light is a single candle that “burns blue” (1). Initially identified as a “miner,” we join the speaker in uncharted, dark territory as the candle melts with “[w]axy stalacmites” that “drip and thicken” in the cold room where they look like “tears”—melancholy symbols of aloneness that are encased within darkened spaces (1-3).

Stanzas three through five tap our attention with imaginative descriptors, even though they are ambiguous in their function. The image is claustrophobic and foul—the “earthen womb/ Exudes from its dead boredom,” while “[b]lack bat airs” surround, “weld[ed] to me like plums” (4-6,8). Void of light and color, sensual references focus on smell and touch while the cave-like setting is followed by images of “newts,” that morph from mammals to amphibians forcing the imagination to sharpen with possibilities (12). The images reshape inexplicably with religious connotations that are overlaid by an angry tone defined by “[t]hose holy Joes” and “the fish” become a “vice of knives” and a “piranha”(13,4,6,7). Even the nursing ritual is juxtaposed with religious images, “[r]eligion, drinking / Its first communion out of my live toes,” clues to the direction the
poem is proceeding (18,9). By the eighth stanza the tonal rage has subsided and the warm, yellow glow of the candle's flame redirects the speaker's attention back to the baby. Nostalgically, she asks, "O love, how did you get here?" looking back on a time when love was the catalyst for conception (23). It is a bittersweet question. The shift to a happier, reflective mood continues throughout the remainder of the poem, each stanza punctuated by a catalogue of memories that defines the speaker's connection with her baby. Recollections of in utero movement resurface as "[y]our crossed position" followed by the heartbeat defined as "[t]he blood blooms clean / In you, ruby" (26-8). The stanza breaks function as a pause in remembering and moves back to reality to explain that the speaker has done her best to make their "cave" a home, hung with "roses / With soft rugs—/ The last of Victoriana" (34). One final reference is made to the husband and father who has abandoned the family as the "mercuric / Atoms that cripple drip / Into the terrible well," but who is now replaced by a new male, the heir apparent, an infant—a Christ-like figure, untainted and unscarred and in whom all reason for hope now exists (37,9).

In tracing Plath's development in this series of poems, we can observe her growth as a poet, an empowered woman freed from the ritualistic editing process that she and Hughes once shared. The poems become longer in length as Plath spends more time investing herself in the process of writing, becoming more self-sufficient and confident. As Plath's confidence grows, she systematically unlinks herself from familial grips. Nowhere is this more evident than in "Purdah" where she "unveils" herself as a poet. This poem is Plath's debut as an artist who has broken free and clear from a mentor's influence, power and strength. First, the speaker must declare that she is her own
woman, separate and independent from motherly attachment. Plath’s exploration of this theme is highlighted in “Medusa” with its strong mythological references.

In “Medusa,” the speaker effectively cuts maternal ties and influences in order to achieve self-realization. The title is a metaphorical and mythological reference to Medusa, most often associated with Greek mythology and petrifying power, whose hair was transformed into writhing snakes. In Christian symbolism, Medusa is associated with drowning waters, characterized by power, death and terror of the unknown. One of Plath’s obsessions is mythology; she often uses mythological references as allegories for both her personal and professional struggles with independence. Both tone and tension in “Medusa” emerge from accusatory language and pointed questions as Plath sharpens her poetic skills for effect. The speaker dominates the narration assuming the position of both confessor and judge in defense of an independent self.

Plath immediately uses personification to signal that this poem is about a relationship by suggesting images referenced by “that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,” complex physical/nautical visions of “[c]ars cupping the sea’s incoherences,” and the “[l]ens of mercies” that point to perspective and causality (1, 3, 5). The tone in the second stanza intensifies as the speaker continues to challenge Medusa’s forces referred to as “[y]our stooges / Plying their wild cells in my keel’s shadow” (5, 6). The speaker recognizes that Medusa is not working alone, but employs minions to aid in the mission. Plath interplays between Greek and Christian allusions, but more pointedly suggests a Christian ideology when Medusa’s tresses are referred to as “Jesus hair” (11). The question that follows then becomes more poignant. “Did I escape, I wonder?” and we speculate from whom (12). Such forthrightness represents a freedom that Plath works with more and more in this collection. As the stanzas build upon themselves and the
images hint at a maternal persona, it becomes evident that Plath is likely referring to her mother, Aurelia Plath. The question prompts the speaker to refocus on the maternal relationship with deliberate phrases like the “[o]ld barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable / Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair,” which indicate the raw strength of the ties that bind the mother/daughter relationship (14, 15). The fourth stanza concedes that “[i]n any case, you are always there,” an unconscious mantra that powers a mysterious intuition that the speaker acknowledges must be the reason for Medusa’s trip (16). The one-sided argument continues when, “I didn’t call you at all / Nevertheless, nevertheless / You steamed to me over the sea,” attacking the resolute spirit that is traveling to neutralize conflict by “[p]aralyzing the kicking lovers” (22-4, 26). The tenacious tone pushes back again and again against the unrelenting force that drives forward.

The speaker lashes out with suffocating images emerging from “[c]obra light / Squeezing the breath from the blood cells / Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath” (27-8). A final series of biting questions punctuated by Christian motifs shatters the Medusa figure as the speaker demands, “Who do you think you are? / A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?’ and in a closing argument declares, “I shall take no bite of your body,” dismissing the Medusa while declaring an independent identity and strength (22-4). The poem ends with a macabre image of a “[g]hastly Vatican,” and “wishes” that are as ineffectual as “eunuchs” while the speaker cries, “[o]ff, off, eely tentacle!” to a grasping appendage (36, 8-9). Finally, the speaker declares that “[t]here is nothing between us,” a haunting image of the void resulting from the severed relationship (41). It is only in the release from the Medusa’s grasp that the speaker is revived. Plath is now wielding her artistry with great effect using language, tone, and imagery that gives voice to her own
transformation as an independent and autonomous writer. With the strong tonal qualities of "Medusa," Plath ushers in a new approach bathed in confidence and hopefulness in the face of uncertainty.

Continuing in this focused transition, Plath writes "Purdah," which represents the progress from dependency to self-sufficiency. Now she expands her references to multiple traditions of Christian, Islamic and Hindu ideologies, anchoring the transformation in strong, intentional, and archetypical images. Naming the poem with a single-word title emphasizes a powerful metamorphosis from being held at bay, separate, and veiled from the eyes of others. In certain Muslim and Hindu societies, Purdah is the practice among women to live in a separate room or behind a curtain, segregated from men. Its alternate meaning is derived from clothing itself, covering women completely to shield themselves from the eyes of others, especially men, while figuratively speaking it represents isolation. Such references are punctuated by deliberate images that cement the poem's foundation while supporting the process of moving from solitude to action. Again Plath uses the three-line stanza structure for the nineteen stanzas. The first stanza begins with the single word, "Jade —" The extended dash is an ambiguous appendage that effectively skewers its obvious meaning into one that is nebulous. Its reference is unclear as to whether or not it is the green "[s]tone of the side / The agonized / Side of green Adam," or whether it is an indirect, cut-off version of the word, "jaded" defined as sated or tired (1-4). Unlike previous poems, there is a new positive energy as the speaker confides, "I / Smile, cross-legged / Enigmatical / Shifting my clarities / So valuable," declaring that she has emerged from the protective clothing and recognizes with a celebratory exclamation "[h]ow the sun polishes this shoulder!" feeling buoyant about this new sensual experience (4-8, 9).
Personification of the favored moon motif recurs in “Purdah” as the “[i]ndefatigable cousin,” and the mirror image reappears as a positive self-referential metaphor that “gleam[s]” (12, 18). Self-assured and on a strong footing, the action of “the bridegroom” arriving is introduced and the reaction to him is symbolic of a new sense of purpose and strength (19). The “Lord of the mirrors,” works his way through “these silk [s]creens, these rustling appurtenances,” while the speaker remains out of sight but on the verge of appearing herself (23). Even though “I am his / Even in his / Absence, I / Revolve in my / Sheath of impossibles” she declares that she will “unloose / One note / Shattering / The chandelier,” a rage that fuels the energy within (29-33). This same rage has effectively unleashed a newly defined design—a unique blueprint and representation to be delivered to the literary world, effectively removing any self-doubt about Plath’s own capabilities. The poem rises to its crescendo over subsequent stanzas, as the speaker declares over and over in a powerful refrain, “I shall unloose” a “feather,” a “note” loud enough to shatter a “chandelier,” and finally gaining momentum, repeats the refrain twice more before the final “shriek” of the “lioness,” irrevocably breaking through “[t]he cloak of holes” (38-9, 42, 44, 54-7). In this courageous declaration of a personal inner strength and recognition of the speaker’s validity on her own terms and standards, Plath expresses a belief in herself and in her abilities as a poet—a transformational metamorphosis that is extended through the metaphor of bees in “Wintering”.

Plath’s final choice for the Ariel collection, “Wintering” is a strong, yet peaceful resolution to change, where she employs the bee metaphor to explore new beginnings set in motion by a speaker who is at equilibrium, in control, and confident in the future. “I have whirled the midwife’s extractor,” declares independence in no uncertain terms
(2). Contrasting new and old, traditional and experimental, the speaker claims the “six jars” of honey in the “wine cellar” will sit “[n]ext to the last tenant’s rancid jam” and old, empty bottles of “Sir So-and-so’s gin” (4, 5, 8, 10). Plath defines the uncertain future as “the room I have never been in” and the past as one that “I could never breathe in,” evoking a sense of hesitant anticipation veiled in tension and ambiguity (11, 12). Nevertheless, the speaker remains hopeful.

The bee analogy is enhanced by the speaker’s admission that “[i]t is they who own me / Neither cruel nor indifferent / Only ignorant,” thereby surrendering to the mysteries of nature, and acknowledging with optimism that “[t]his is the time of hanging on for the bees” as though intending to follow their lead (19, 20-2). The following stanzas explain the bees’ survival tactics through winter and the cyclical pattern of life and death. The speaker suddenly declares, “[t]he bees are all women” and that “[t]hey have got rid of the men / The blunt, clumsy stumblers, the boors,” a strong statement of independence and resilience, concluding that “[w]inter is for women” (38, 40-1). The language is simple and accessible now, uncluttered by mythological or literary allusions. The lines of verse, like “Medusa,” are longer in length and have a fuller, richer shape on the page. The final stanza asks two important questions—“Will the hive survive, will the gladiolas / Succeed in banking their fires / To enter another year?” The questions expand, spiraling out to the themes of survival, dependence, and the possibilities for the future. The final question contains both literal and figurative significance—“What will they taste of, the Christmas roses?” (49). Literally, it refers to the Christmas rose’s ability to bloom during late winter months while all other flowering plants remain dormant. The other indication is a sense of expectation, and the final line
states with assurance that “[t]he bees are flying. They taste the spring” (50). At this moment in time, the questions are answered and hopeful possibility becomes reality.

Bookended by poems of love and hope, the Ariel collection traces Plath’s development as an independent and extraordinarily gifted writer despite the personal difficulties and tragedies in her life. Ariel is worthy of attention on its own merits, more than just as a symbol of her final work. Now that we have access to her original manuscripts and design without the Hughes influence, we can celebrate her unique passions and gifts as a poet. We can celebrate the creativity and the paradoxes of a woman who was very much alive in the moment and at the pinnacle of her artistry.

Works Cited


Appendix

Morning Song

Love set you going like a fat gold watch.  
The midwife slapped your footsoles, and 
your bald cry  
Took its place among the elements.

Our voices echo, magnifying your 
arrival. New statue  
In a drafty museum, your nakedness  
Shadows our safety. We stand round 
blankly as walls.

I’m no more your mother  
Than the cloud that distils a mirror to 
reflect its own slow  
Effacement at the wind’s hand.

All nigh your moth-breath  
Flickers among the flat pink roses. I 
wake to listen:  
A far sea moves in my ear.

One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-
heavy and floral  
In my Victorian nightgown.  
Your mouth opens clean as a cat’s. The 
window square

Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And 
now you try  
Your handful of notes;  
The clear vowels rise like balloons.

The Applicant

First, are you our sort of person?  
Do you wear  
A glass eye, false teeth or a crutch,  
A brace or a hook,  
Rubber breasts or a rubber crotch,

Stitches to show something’s missing?  
No, no? Then  
How can we give you a thing?

Stop crying.  
Open your hand.  
Empty? Empty. Here is a hand

To fill it and willing  
To bring teacups and roll away headaches  
And do whatever you tell it.  
Will you marry it?  
It is guaranteed

To thumb shut your eyes at the end  
And dissolve of sorrow.  
We make new stock from the salt.  
I notice you are stark naked.  
How about this suit —

Black and stiff, but not a bad fit.  
Will you marry it:  
It is waterproof, shatterproof, proof 
Against fire and bombs through the roof.  
Believe me, they’ll bury you in it.

Now your head, excuse me, is empty.  
I have the ticket for that.  
Come here, sweetie, out of the closet.  
Well what do you think of that?  
Naked as paper to start

But in twenty-five years she’ll be silver,  
In fifty, gold.  
A living doll, everywhere you look.  
It can sew, it can cook,  
It can talk, talk, talk.

It works, there is nothing wrong with it.  
You have a hole, it’s a poultice.  
You have an eye, it’s an image.  
My boy, it’s your last resort.  
Will you marry it, marry it, marry it.

The Couriers

The word of a snail on the plate of a 
leaf?  
It is not mine. Do not accept it.
Acetic acid in a sealed tin?
Do not accept it. It is not genuine.
A ring of gold with the sun in it?
Lies. Lies and a grief.
Frost on a leaf, the immaculate
Cauldron, talking and crackling
All to itself on the top of each
Of nine black Alps.
A disturbance in mirrors,
The sea shattering its grey one —
Love, love, my season.

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-eye2
Berries cast dark
Hooks—

Black sweet blood mouthfuls,
Shadows.
Something else

Hauls me through air —
Thighs, hair;
Flakes from my heels.

2 For the purposes of my argument, I interpret this word as a poetic synonym for darkness and not a racial epithet. Thus, the word is employed according to the Oxford English Dictionary's 1.a entry: "Used by whites or other non-blacks as a relatively neutral (or occas. positive) term, with no specifically hostile intent."
Nick and the Candlestick

I am a miner. The light burns blue.
Waxy stalacmites
Drip and thicken, tears

The earthen womb
Exudes from its dead boredom.
Black bat airs

Wrap me, raggy shawls,
Cold homicides.
They weld to me like plums.

Old cave of calcium
Icicles, old echoer.
Even the newts are white,

Those holy Joes.
And the fish, the fish —
Christ! they are panes of ice,

A vice of knives,
A piranha
Religion, drinking

Its first communion out of my live toes.
The candle
Gulps and recovers its small altitude,

Its yellows hearten.
O love, how did you get here?
O embryo

Remembering, even in sleep,
Your crossed position.
The blood blooms clean

In you, ruby.
The pain
You wake to is not yours.

Love, love,
I have hung our cave with roses,
With soft rugs—

The last of Victoriana.

Let the stars
Plummet to their dark address,

Let the mercuric
Atoms that cripple drip
Into the terrible well,

You are the one
Solid the spaces lean on, envious.
You are the baby in the barn.
Medusa

Off that landspit of stony mouth-plugs,
Eyes rolled by white sticks,
Ears cupping the sea's incoherences,
You house your unnerving head — God-ball,
Lens of mercies.

Your stooges
Plying their wild cells in my keel's shadow,
Pushing by like hearts,
Red stigmata at the very center,
Riding the rip tide to the nearest point of departure,

Dragging their Jesus hair.
Did I escape, I wonder?
My mind winds to you,
Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable,
Keeping itself, it seems, in a state of miraculous repair.

In any case, you are always there,
Tremulous breath at the end of my line,
Curve of water upleaping
To my water rod, dazzling and grateful,
Touching and sucking.

I didn't call you.
I didn't call you at all.
Nevertheless, nevertheless
You steamed to me over the sea,
Fat and red, a placenta

Paralyzing the kicking lovers.
Cobra light
Squeezing the breath from the blood bells
Of the fuchsia. I could draw no breath,
Dead and moneyless,

Overexposed, like an X ray.
Who do you think you are?
A Communion wafer? Blubbery Mary?
I shall take no bite of your body,

Bottle in which I live,
Ghastly Vatican.
I am sick to death of hot salt.
Green as eunuchs, your wishes
Hiss at my sins.
Off, off, eely tentacle!

There is nothing between us.
Purdah

Jade —
Stone of the side,
The agonized

Side of green Adam, I
Smile, cross-legged,
Enigmatical,

Shifting my clarities.
So valuable.
How the sun polishes this shoulder!

And should
The moon, my
Indefatigable cousin

Rise, with her cancerous pallors,
Dragging trees —
Little bushy polyps,

Little nets,
My visibilities hide.
I gleam like a mirror.

At this facet the bridegroom arrives,
Lord of the mirrors.
It is himself he guides

In among these silk
 Screens, these rustling appurtenances.
I breathe, and the mouth

Veil stirs its curtain.
My eye
Veil is

A concatenation of rainbows.
I am his.
Even in his

Absence, I
Revolve in my
Sheath of impossibles,

Priceless and quiet

Among these parakeets, macaws.
O chatterers

Attendants of the eyelash!
I shall unloose
One feather, like the peacock.

Attendants of the lip!
I shall unloose
One note

Shattering
The chandelier
Of air that all day plies

Its crystals,
A million ignorants.
Attendants!

Attendants!
And at his next step
I shall unloose

I shall unloose
From the small jeweled
Doll he guards like a heart —

The lioness,
The shriek in the bath,
The cloak of holes.
Wintering

This is the easy time, there is nothing doing.
I have whirled the midwife’s extractor,
I have my honey,
Six jars of it,
Six cat’s eyes in the wine cellar,

Wintering in a dark without window
At the heart of the house
Next to the last tenant’s rancid jam
And the bottles of empty glitters —
Sir So-and-so’s gin.

This is the room I have never been in.
This is the room I could never breathe in.
The black bunched in there like a bat,
No light
But the torch and its faint

Chinese yellow on appalling objects —
Black asininity. Decay.
Possession.
It is they who own me.
Neither cruel nor indifferent,

Only ignorant.
This is the time of hanging on for the bees — the bees
So slow I hardly know them,
Filing like soldiers
To the syrup tin

To make up for the honey I’ve taken.
Tate and Lyle keeps them going,
The refined show.
It is Tate and Lyle they live on, instead of flowers.
They take it. The cold sets in.

Now they ball in a mass,
Black
Mind against all that white.
The smile of the snow is white.
It spreads itself out, a mile-long body of Meissen,

Into which, on warm days,
They can only carry their dead.
The bees are all women,
Maids and the long royal lady.
They have got rid of the men,

The blunt, clumsy stumpers, the boors.
Winter is for women —
The woman, still at her knitting,
At the cradle of Spanish walnut,
Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think.

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.