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Radical Affects and Political Consciousness in the Ariel Poems**

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Revulsion, Restlessness, and Rage Through the Body in Pain: Radical Affects and Political

Consciousness in the *Ariel* Poems

by

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Although Sylvia Plath's literary career pre-dates the second-wave feminist movement's acknowledgement and use of poetry as a means to effect political change, *Ariel* makes a prescient cry for the dismantling of the patriarchy by creating agency and resistance through presentation of grotesquely bloodied and injured female bodies that have historically been on view only as eroticized objects of desire. Plath embeds *Ariel* with motifs of hospitals, medicine, disfigured anatomy, or the body otherwise in crisis, creating an affective field for the grotesque that makes female trauma a collective – and politically activating – experience. In writing about these topics in plain, vivid language and without euphemism, Plath reclaims a sphere of society typically attributed to men by deploying her speakers as radical insurgents. Their always composed, often coyly insubordinate voices allow these speakers to supersede archetypal representations of the female patient; the acuity each speaker wields in calculated attacks on other poetic subjects as well as more abstract, oppressive forces emerges to supplant any hysteria that would have been otherwise expected under women's conditions of physical crisis. Plath bestows this intellectual agency upon her speakers to foil their weakened physical states and further establishes it through an array of semiotic effects that transcend the poetic space. Whether Plath is taunting her audience through disjointed diction or maintaining clarity through even-tempered prose poetry, she lends her speakers the vehicles to combat oppression and transfers bodily distress onto the reader. The “affect of the grotesque” in the *Ariel* poems activates a political consciousness in a space shared among bodies -- the poet's historically appropriated one, the speakers' bloodied and ailing bodies, and the reader's reactive body. The resultant political consciousness that leads to a solidarity are the products of a palpable rage that

manifests in visceral, physical symptoms that undermine patriarchal restrictions on the female body, including how it is treated, how it suffers, and how it resists.

The confessional nature of Plath's poetry in *Ariel* serves as a neutralizing force that tempers her graphic imagery to enable the woman writer's participation in tradition without conforming, to revolutionize without separating. Reflecting on dilemmas similar to Plath's, Nina Baym finds these twin pressures irreconcilable: if a woman writer is "open, nonlinear, exploded, fragmented, [and] polysemic," she is subscribing to the "idea of the hopelessly irrational, disorganized, 'weaker sex' desired by the masculine other" (46, 50). But Baym also notes that even with this warning considered, women writers' efforts to rewrite the canon during the 20th century coincided with "the dramatic entry of women into hitherto all-male preserves of public activity" (46). Plath's curiously comfortable handling of the grotesque suggests such an audacious entry into masculine biomedical terrain from an unapologetically female perspective in that her speakers are women troubled by the macabre aspects of maternity: there is distrust in the prenatal pharmaceutical community in "Thalidomide," a morgue-like nursery in "Death & Co.," and a perverse maternal affection for a butchered thumb in "Cut." Plath similarly retains the female perspective in "Lady Lazarus" by undermining the doctors' "heroism," a thread she continues by juxtaposing their distance with the nurses' intimacy in "Tulips" and "Getting There." Moreover, in "Fever 103," Plath marks the isolation of the female body as its defining moment for self-affirmation. In all of the poems just named, Plath uses affective language to restore vulnerable bodies, and thus rewrites narratives of oppression.

Plath's candor on social issues and corresponding personal feelings unique to the oppressed female body provides her speakers the power to thwart their marginalization; the speakers exercise control over their identities despite broken bodies because of Plath's

linguistically and formally accessible – yet imagistically destabilizing – poetics. She writes women’s issues into the male canon, not accommodating patriarchal traditions but rather navigating a space where the medical male’s ethos would fall short of the injured woman’s. Plath’s work in discussing the physically vulnerable body navigates this labyrinth of language, gender, and theory. Her poems are set in hospitals, deal with gaping wounds, subvert professional authority, and behold highly stigmatized subjects. These efforts alone invade masculine territory in a sharp assertion of Plath’s immutable stomach and pen. Her clinical and scientific ventures meet Baym’s call for a “dramatic entry,” but her poetry does not lose the affective intimacy that other feminist theorists would term “natural” (46). Plath’s speakers “speak the body,” the power of their voice competing with the way masculinity – as evidenced by Plath’s exclusively male doctor subjects – pervades medical discourse and the intimacy of their injured bodies connoting the feminine impulse to rebirth: a process that healing and nursing wounds resembles on a microcosmic level (Makward, as qtd. in Baym 49).

“Speaking the body” and animating pain posits the woman patient not as a madwoman but rather a radical; Baym argues that such an intuitive relationship between the body and mind suggests madness and isolation can be “redemptive” (48). To communicate subjective pain and abstract madness, however, Plath must map the spectrum of associated discomfort into a communal, tangible locus. It follows that the affect of each poem becomes the epicenter for the feminine collective to engage with trauma and understand the degree of oppression each speaker faces. Without affect, there is no solidarity; thus affect serves as a vector for communicating a sense of urgency through transmission of feelings that herald an impending sense of death or, conversely, a survival instinct. The *Ariel* poems evoke both, confirming the reality of patriarchal violence through the former and encouraging resistance through the latter.

From the *Ariel* poems comes an affective current that mirrors political motion and all the ways that progress requires friction, or what Sianne Ngai terms “ugly feelings.” Ngai argues that there is apolitical and artistic significance in pursuing such feelings in literature: when poetry imposes the less desirable aspects of human nature the individual is empowered through discomfort. The body becomes a microcosmic site of oppression, igniting personal investment in change when the environment feels noticeably unstable. The feeling, however, is the catalyst that mobilizes change. In her own work, Ngai analyzes the role language plays in evoking this underlying instability. She finds that envy, paranoia, and stuplimity – “a strange amalgamation of boredom and shock” – are affects that, among other negative feelings, link “the aesthetic and the political,” always in the fleeting moment of the reader’s experience. When the this transmission of affect is successful, real change can take place – but only so long as the affect is remembered, transferred, and sustained through the next turn of language (Ngai 2-3).

Some of Ngai’s focus affects like paranoia and irritation are ubiquitous in *Ariel*. But Plath’s most dynamic affects are cousins to the ones Ngai identifies. Plath’s speakers verge on the stuplimity Ngai examines, but the ailing women of *Ariel* better convey a sense of restlessness than the “astonishment paradoxically linked with boredom” that concerns Ngai (257). Like Ngai’s stuplimity, the restlessness in the *Ariel* poems is paradoxical. It is paralyzing as bleak, sterile hospital settings envelop the bodies in numbing austerity across several poems. At the same time, it also energizing through a frustrating agitation that only restlessness – often unexplained, seemingly triggered by an amorphous stimulus – can stir through both actual fatigue and a perceived need for motion, progress, or innovation. In communicating restlessness, Plath relies on strategic syntax that manipulates the pace at which the reader can consume the content and react to the associated feelings. Ngai makes compelling arguments for the way

“constative exhaustions” both reflect the speaker’s stuplidity and refract it to the reader; Plath’s fast-and-slow sense of restlessness develops similarly (255).

Ngai’s investigation into “the split between disgust and desire” and the reader’s consequent “centripetal pull” is, perhaps, the anchor of the negative affects she figures as political agents in *Ugly Feelings* (333). In discussing such affects, Ngai articulates the ironic allure that Plath establishes in her poetic subjects. Metallic blood, severed stumps and pallid skin flaps bear obvious impressions of the trauma that produced them. While most poetic witnesses cannot stomach them as unflappably as Plath can write about them, the initial aversion the reader experiences – facilitated by Plath’s choppy language that punctuates her most grotesque imagery – transforms into a sense of morbid curiosity that makes Plath’s poetic objects so compelling.

Ngai reads a connection between this sort of allure and a language-based “demand for repetition” that quick, harsh, or even interrogative diction invites (252). In the *Ariel* poems, the marriage of grisly images and consonant-driven, frequently interrupted language constitutes the next politically important affect: revulsion. Like the storied “revulsion” treatments of biomedical history that activated intentional, secondary inflammations to fight a primary infection, the feeling of revulsion irritates in order to cure. Experience of revulsion engages the reader in a battle of body and mind, forcing a conflict marked by reliving pain cyclically, even voluntarily, all without abandoning the notion that such feelings are antithetical to the survival instinct. The affective exchange that follows brings a reader to reconcile disgust for the images with sympathy for the speaker, and, in turn, a sense of opposition toward the antagonistic party. In this case, because “Cut” is rife with allusions to men in power, the revulsion that the poem evokes encourages resistance against the force that has necessitated such compulsion.

Plath's "Cut" and "Thalidomide" in particular test the threshold for revulsion, but the political import of the *Ariel* poems is not limited to the passive experience of enduring and submitting to the sequence of fascination, awe, and disgust. The final and most tangible affect that Plath establishes, rage, is one that Ngai's theory would prioritize due to its highly physical manifestations and direct translation to political activity and overall disruption. Ngai understands "how central and perversely *functional* such affective attitudes and dispositions" are, and rage, as a conduit for long-term resistance, lends a considerable affective power to the poems that communicate it on a bodily level (5). "Fever 103" and "Lady Lazarus" demonstrate the way rage builds exponentially through formal structures that create a feeling of mounting suspense until explosive climaxes subvert all authority. The same feminist paranoia that Ngai theorizes in *Ugly Feelings* fuels much of the rage that Plath's speakers express in these poems, which speaks directly to Ngai's theory that "paranoia ... will enable [women] to resist" (332). In other words, rage in these poems is the ultimate "dysphoric affect," or a negative feeling overwhelming enough to encourage rebellion (Ngai 3). Indeed, throughout *Ariel*, affective rage relies on the perceptibility of the other "ugly feelings" Plath evokes. Such rage is an ending point that gives purpose to the restlessness and revulsion that precede it, proof or confirmation that a body need not suffer in vain.

In "Cut," Plath succeeds in infiltrating the biomedical sector while still cultivating her uniquely feminine genre of confession and catharsis. Her speaker surely "speak[s] the body"; from start to finish she narrates the brief moment in time of a jarring injury and her (somewhat) pragmatic response to it (Makward, as qtd. in Bayn 49). The poem immediately employs the irony of a repugnant but unserious accident. The opening line, "What a thrill," establishes an atmosphere that will be subverted immediately after: the speaker has missed her target, an onion,

and cut her thumb with a kitchen knife. The sanguinary imagery Plath creates is a contented handling of the ensuing gore. The speaker's severed skin – “a flap like a hat” – is likened to a common household object in a nonchalant inspection of the initial wound (line 6). She calls the blood “that red plush,” using the more specific definitive article of “that” to imply familiarity or recurrence (line 8). In addressing the thumb as “Little pilgrim,” the speaker takes a nearly affectionate stance on the event (line 9). Ian McMechan maintains that “Cut” is the ultimate testament to “Plath’s gift for the vivid and striking” (21). Such images contribute to the spectacle of revulsion, namely the inexplicable attractiveness of it. Her use of color throughout the poem certainly corroborates McMechan’s claim, as Plath pairs each color reference with a descriptor or vehicle to make it louder and often synesthetic. The skin is “dead white”; the blood is textured as “red plush”; and “pink” appears in tandem with “fizz.” Plath establishes the imagery not to make the injury seem more palatable, but rather the opposite – to provoke a visceral response that extends what would be only a brief moment of bleeding for several stanzas.

A key component of establishing “Cut”’s affect of revulsion lies in the pacing of the poem, characterized by abrupt, often discordant, yet alliterative language. Ngai theorizes a relationship between the syntax of trauma and literary pacing of the poetic moment:

The theme of survival and endurance in the wake of a traumatic loss is conveyed [...] through a drastic slowdown of language, a rhetorical enactment of its fatigue – in which the duration of relatively simple actions is uncomfortably prolonged through a proliferation of precise inexactitudes. (255-6)

The mundane nature of the speaker’s injury provides Plath the opportunity to establish revulsion as the resultant affect. Were the object of the poem a vital organ or the injury a more life-threatening one, a sense of real urgency would pervade the text. A sliced thumb in the kitchen,

however, can be represented in both ordinary and hyperbolic ways; in these discrepancies, Plath's language develops into affective revulsion as opposed to the frank fear that a more intensive injury would elicit. Using playful and allusive poetic language to offset any urgency – the affect that ordinarily attends an open wound – is a testament to how syntactical and structural variety can overwrite the body via reader experience.

The language responsible for replacing the expected affect in "Cut" marks a "change in temporal organization that slows down the interpreter" (Ngai 256-7). In the protracted moment of the injury, the reader encounters two caesuras that, in both cases, redirect attention to the thumb as a small and highly concentrated pain center: "What a thrill –" precedes "My thumb" and "Kamikaze man –" as the poem transitions away from a loaded sociocultural allusion and back to the milder "stain" once more, returning the reader to the immediacy of this relatively minor and short-term crisis. The reader is effectively prohibited from remaining in the speaker's analytical headspace that briefly diverted attention to geopolitical crises that are far more traumatizing; in this move, Plath's speaker briefly trades centralized suffering for diffused suffering among "a million soldiers" (line 19). As a poetic device, the caesuras speak to such interruptions in consciousness and transmit a sense of fatigue that calls for an empathetic response to the laceration. Thus it becomes possible not only to share in the speaker's pain, but also, at her behest, to relive a shared intellectual experience of the pain. In this way, Plath juxtaposes macrocosmic suffering with an ephemeral surface wound makes the affective space one for torment and conflict. Feelings associated with global conflict are experienced in brief; those associated with the title cut are experienced at length. Consequently, the two sets of suffering are conflated so that the societal uproar associated with the former pervades the latter.

“Cut” exhibits the “drastic slowdown” Ngai describes through “the absence of casual connectives that would propel the work forward” (257). In addition to its separation from other stanzas that serve to shock and contextualize, the imagery of the thumb in the aftermath of the gash works with verbs omitted: “Of skin / A flap like a hat, / Dead white. / Then that red plush” (lines 4-8). This stanza’s lack of both active and linking verbs, in conjunction with an erratic meter and monosyllabic, guttural sounds, creates a sense of inescapable trauma. The revulsion that may distance the reader from the first set of images is addressed, suspended, and revisited so that this affect is fully felt in spite of the obvious rejection that “ugly feelings” incite. Disgust and allure – the two features of revulsion – are therefore indivisible from the poem’s pace, and the oscillating movement between the two is a testament to the reader’s susceptibility to complex or even competing affects. The tension between a centripetal pull toward the visual images and an inherent distaste for them is reminiscent of the helplessness women experience as they are subjected against their will to the male gaze. Plath subverts the power of a gaze by creating a speaker who imposes her body on another in such a way that the image itself – and not the possessive viewing of it -- creates “ugly feelings.” This process calls to mind the controlling male gaze theorized by Laura Mulvey in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”; the “ugly feeling” here is one that usurps the viewer’s autonomy by linking the revulsion to a sense of attraction that prohibits escape.

Plath’s focus on the body in “Cut” is a smart perversion of the typical lens through which we see injury. As Deborah Nelson observes, Plath refuses to settle for “merely stripping and exposing the body. Instead ... [she opens] the body up to expose its inside, troubling the notion of private internal bodily space” (279). Nelson’s reading implies that by mutilating even a small part of the body, Plath blends public and private. Plath even calls the moment a “celebration”

(line 17) as if to suggest communal participation in the strange amalgam of euphoria and suffering evinced by the speaker's initial "thrill" but later onset of "ill[ness]" (lines 1, 23). A step toward political motion proceeds in the aftermath of revealed private space. Fleshy, bloody tributaries "Straight from the heart" are made vulnerable to the public in such a way that an objectively petty injury is now directly associated with the more vital circulatory system and shared with the reader in anticipation of poetic gazing (line13). Here, Plath relies on the palpability of the irritation to translate affect among parties. Irritation, according to Ngai, coaxes "the blur between psychic and corporeal ... or ... internal and external" by stipulating a response, which, of course, the speaker demands of the audience to her thumb (185). Repeatedly drawing attention to the site of the injury in alternating stanzas – the speaker vacillates between narrating the scene and personifying it into projected antagonists – prioritizes the affective applications of irritation:

Whether 'irritation' is defined as an emotional or physical experience, synonyms for it tend to apply equally to psychic life *and* life at the level of the body – and particularly to its surfaces or skin. In addition to "inflammation," "rawness," and "chafing," for example, "irritation" qua "soreness" also signifies "hypersensitivity," "susceptibility," and "tenderness," words with explicitly affective dimensions. (Ngai 184)

The wound in "Cut" fits all forms of irritation, particularly "inflammation," "rawness," and "soreness." These feelings are familiar, and they connote immune response, vulnerability and openness, and consistency, respectively. When voicing her suffering, the speaker does in fact mention the "red plush" (inflammation), "the top [of the finger] quite gone," (rawness), and "The thin / papery feeling" (soreness). While none such feelings are conventionally desirable, they are all lively, even active: inflammation indicates health, rawness signifies newness, or young skin, and soreness engenders a lingering feeling. These become affective sub-categories under revulsion in that they embody key features of radicalism: inflammation is a microcosm for public

reaction to oppression, rawness for youth, and soreness for persistence. In this regard, the speaker's unrelenting solicitation for the reader to view the injury serves as preparation for unprecedented political engagement.

The poem is thereby a daring act that disrupts patriarchal norms by reclaiming the injured body as a site of strength, denying the vulnerability presumed and longed for by male physicians. The abrupt sentences with short, simple, vowel-driven words display a comfort with the grotesque while adding a layer of shock value that shows a mastery over the body. She deploys her language like ammunition; her form takes a cyclical pattern of abrupt revelations and then withdrawals, creating space for the reader to recover briefly before the next onslaught of lurid imagery. This sense of starting and stopping is achieved through consistent enjambment and isolation of the most provocative aspects of the poem: "Gauze Ku Klux Klan," for example, occupies its own line, as does "Dirty girl". Ian McMechan also senses this pattern in the explanation of the cut itself. He finds the ambush and retreat in the first two lines, noting, "after the first line, the almost objective, distanced description which follows it seems to recreate [a] sense of detachment" (21). These waves of cheeky, graphic images and narrative pauses suggest supreme control over both body and language. Plath's uncensored delivery turns the personal experience of pain and the internal, natural composition of the body intensely public on her own terms that transcend gender norms.

From a feminist perspective, "Cut" is also emblematic of the way in which the body doubles as a political battleground. Susan K. Mitchell draws parallels between Plath's use of pain and greater social commentary, theorizing that the *Ariel* poems "all involve differing degrees and kinds of pain, but ... emphasize similarities between the effects of physical discomfort and societal discord" (16). Plath makes allusions to war in the latter part of "Cut" and ultimately

figures the dressed wound as a Ku Klux Klansman. The thumb, inherently phallic, is personified in male iterations of a pilgrim, a soldier, a Kamikaze fighter, and, of course, the aforementioned Klansman. McMechan concurs that “the personal and political are astutely combined,” but he does not consider the implications of a “masculine” body part presumably attached to a feminine speaker (21). While it is reasonable to read the thumb’s masculine assignment as a nod to male control over the speaker’s body – perhaps even indicative of Hughes’ control over Plath – it is important to note that the thumb is mutilated. The speaker herself brings the knife down on the “pilgrim” and renders it a bloodied mess (line 9). Injuring the thumb thereby emerges as a restorative act to reclaim a part of the speaker’s body that was denoted as a masculine presence, and treating the wound independently usurps agency typically granted to a doctor – an undoubtedly politicized profession.

Similarly, Plath’s “Thalidomide” also impugns the medical male’s authority by displaying the casualties of commonplace treatments. The poem manipulates affective revulsion to incite distrust but also to force acknowledgement, mirroring the hybrid of aversion and allure that revulsion provokes. “Thalidomide” gives an onlooker’s perspective on not only corporeal pain, but also societal rejection. The speaker beholds images of “Thalidomide babies,” a name given to the children born deformed from their mothers’ use of the drug before its dangers became evident. The squeamish content is fitting for Plath, whose semi-autobiographical persona in *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood, ventriloquizes her creator’s affection for all things broken or nauseating. Esther admits, “I liked looking at other people in crucial situations. If there was a road accident or a street fight or a baby pickled in a laboratory jar for me to look at, I’d stop and look so hard I never forgot it” (13). Esther, as an avatar for Plath, feels the paradoxical revulsion Ngai terms more broadly as “disgust.” Ngai notes how “objects created by social taboos and

prohibitions” simultaneously “include[] attack[] the very opposition between itself and desire,” soliciting engagement and driving the gaze both to and away from the object (333-5).

When Plath writes about the tragic, the macabre, or the bizarre, she does so with language that mirrors her own lack of apprehension toward the subject matter. “Thalidomide” utilizes such language to manage a caustic remark on the pharmaceutical industry, a close cousin to the patriarchal world of medical-surgical care. Plath reveals the dark irony of medicinal side effects and establishes suspicion of the scientific community at large. The lyric speaker in this poem is not the martyr, but rather just an observer. “Thalidomide” has an interesting relationship to the other poems in *Ariel* in that while most speakers are on the receiving end of an infinite gaze, this one is recycling the oppression by beholding each mangled body with fascination.

“Thalidomide” reads like an ironic ode as the speaker admires “Knuckles at the shoulder blades” and points to other instances of partial development with “O half moon” and “What glove / What leatheriness” (lines 1, 7-8). Ngai finds the anaphoric “what” to be, in similar circumstances, “a demand for repetition, or an expletive conveying a negative emotion such as disbelief, stupefaction, or incomprehension” (252). In “Thalidomide,” phrases such as “O” and “What” communicate a degree of reverence. In line with Ngai’s reading of these phrases that, in isolation, “demand” shock effects for the reader, the speaker’s awe layers the reader’s “stupefaction” to turn Ngai’s standard “disgust” into the more contradictory revulsion. Where the reader recoils, the speaker worships. Through her diction, Plath establishes an irresistible allure; through the content, she drives the reader away. An affective struggle to engage with the morbid gaze or reject it ensues. Revulsion, here, feels deeply like a labor – an organized response to grapple with the failings of a corrupt medical community that disenfranchised gynecologic and obstetric patients for generations.

Fueling a sense of labor, of warfare, is reminiscent of an incipient radical uprising. Toiling with the affect forces images of suffering bodies into literary perpetuity in that long after “Thalidomide” has been removed from practice, its victims remain on display as lasting testaments to the immediate need for action that the drug’s controversial use inspired. Ngai clarifies how “unlike revolt, which acts, revoltedness merely tries to speak” (338). In “Thalidomide’s” syntax, there is a concerted effort and labor to speak, and, ultimately, success in doing so. But revulsion differs from revolt – though it might inspire it – and revoltedness, primarily because the other two are consequences of revulsion as an affect that mediates the space between poem and reader.

While the reader may be inclined to revolt or suffer revoltedness, it is revulsion that the poem can harbor indefinitely. The revulsion and consequent internal warfare relives the maternal pain of reconciling bringing new life, or rather “shov[ing] [it] into being,” with “The image / [that] Flees and aborts” as the revulsion vacillates (“Thalidomide” 14, 25-26). Just as the speaker realizes an obligation to “carpenter / A space for the thing [she is] given” in a society that denigrates and confines motherhood to domesticity and powerlessness, the secondary poetic object – the photograph – reminds her of a collective enemy: the patriarchal medical institution that so dismissively prescribed Thalidomide. And the reader, too, experiences tension through revulsion. There is an obligation to persist in the narrative as much as there is a sense of reviling: structurally, short stanzas track downward with unfinished, enjambed syntax leading from one to the next in a pattern comparable to that in “Cut.” Daring to observe the speaker observing the photographs against the growing revulsion is a conflict in itself – one that, when resolved through completion of the poem, is a strike against the industry that would rather ostracize bodies that compromise its reputation and integrity, an exclusion to which Plath alludes as the

“glass cracks across” the images of the children in a final act of violence against already vulnerable bodies (“Thalidomide” 24).

Victims of Thalidomide complications satisfy Plath’s poetic interests on three fronts: they embody the grotesque, raise questions about the relationship between mother and child, and shift the power dynamic so that able-bodied, fully grown female speakers command the power in the poetry. Instead of reviling the malformed children depicted in the poem, the speaker begins her ode with “O half moon.” The admiration establishes reverence for the grotesque and romanticizes the child’s stumped limb with a soothing lunar metaphor. While the speaker does admit that the “Amputations crawl and appall,” they do not necessarily have that effect on her – just on others (line 5). The speaker shares Esther Greenwood’s need to indulge a desire for revolting images, this time as if to challenge her love for her own children. She describes motherhood as “carpenter[ing] / A space for the thing I am given, / a Love / Of two wet eyes and a screech” (lines 17-20). The speaker dares herself to look at the photographs and also to entertain shameful thoughts about her shortcomings as a mother. What others push away and bury in the recesses of society, the speaker seeks to disinter and acknowledge mindfully. There is a kinship that exists between the Thalidomide children and Plath that forces the speaker to insert herself for a moment into the victimization: both are damaged at the hands of the state, and both are born with bodies that determine how others look upon them.

It was bold to even title the poem “Thalidomide,” because naming the drug removed all reasonable doubt that Thalidomide was the source of conflict. Plath immediately implicates the governments that endorsed its usage in treating nausea during pregnancy. Robin Peel credits the title of the poem with igniting its highly political subtext, finding that the title “marks a shift away from the resonance of myth to a recognition of the specificity of contemporary politics”

(92). Moreover, Peel's reading supports the notion of likeness between Plath and the disfigured children. "The expository theme," Peel claims, "is the violation of the body, and most specifically the violation of the female body" with an added layer of "consequence" instead of "the moment of violation" (84). In support of Peel's link between Plath and the children, the purpose of the drug is thematically similar to the content of the poem in that the speaker's expected reaction (revulsion) is quelled – not by drugs but by her own composition of character. Instead, it is relayed to the reader – perhaps the reader may feel revulsion if not for the "Amputations" then for the speaker's "indifference" (lines 5, 22). The speaker seems to identify with the mothers of the children in the photographs in being forced to find affection and energy to confront hardships not only for oneself but also for a child. Her use of the word "abort" in the final line of the poem commands significant connotations about the mother's stake in parenthood, agency over her own mutilated body throughout the pregnancy, and the limitations of maternal love (line 26).

"Thalidomide" is direct in its delivery of social criticism, just as it is direct in its bald depiction of the amputations. The children are hardly portrayed as humans; Plath focuses exclusively on the sites of "spidery" mutilation (line 6). Similarly, she does not attack the patriarchy in the abstract. Rather, she chooses a topic with a specific focus group and an unambiguous antagonist, as the Thalidomide was a clear example of the medical community's negligence. Peel sees two potential motives at work:

The question we have to ask is whether in confronting this appalling image the speaker is primarily addressing the contemporary issue of the terrible threats from toxicity in the environment or whether she is also confronting and performing the dehumanization rhetoric of an incipient body fascism. (89)

There is a strong argument for the latter. Plath links the outcast bodies to race, but her lack of sympathy toward the subjects does make the poem read less like a call to action and more

like a general indictment of governmental and medical malpractice. She may very well be performing the issues Peel outlines in her harsh, strictly visual treatment of the subjects, but the performance does not necessarily translate to confrontation. The most conspicuous moment of empathy seems more directed to the children's mothers; Plath describes the children as "shove[d] into being," alluding to a lack of willingness on their mothers' behalves in addition to the children's physical appearance (line 14). The mothers are forced into caring for the children, and the children are forced into wearing their broken bodies. The ironies that each generation experiences are traced back to what was meant to be a healing power in medicine, so the state's failure to provide comfort and safety is refracted through the speaker's perceived failures as a mother who struggles with "indifference" toward her offspring (line 22).

An added political charge to the revulsion in "Thalidomide" is the two-sided oppressive forces of the pharmaceutical sphere. Aside from its metonymic connection to the violent patriarchy, thalidomide is also an icon for capitalism: an institution particularly sensitive to the power of affect. The drug was marketed and sold in response to pregnant women's complaints of nausea. To address it in poetic subjects is to launch an attack not only on the pharmaceutical industry, but also on a capitalist economy. It bears noting that the marketing used in the pharmaceutical industry relies on separate affective categories from other goods. Drug marketing relies on, to paraphrase Ngai, our "ugl[iest] feelings" of nausea, pain, or discomfort rather than desire. Ngai argues,

The striking asymmetry between the careers of disgust and desire in literary and cultural theory raises the broader question of why repulsion has such a long history of being overshadowed by attraction as a theoretical concern, even as we can plausibly assert that the late capitalist lifeworld is one in which there are at least many things to turn away from – the strong centripetal pull of consumer culture notwithstanding – as things to be drawn toward. (333)

The way poems like “Cut” and “Thalidomide” condition a reader for hyperawareness of both the attractive and repugnant features of revulsion and other disquieting affects, then, presents a unique opportunity for literature to transcend written space and translate into mobilization. If “Cut,” “Thalidomide,” and literary productions can cultivate feelings that, when controlled through encounters with the texts, disrupt cycles of desire and disgust, they erode the economy’s strength in its reliance on the capricious nature of such impulses. More specifically, the longer a reader admires the “thalidomide children’s” bodies the same way the speaker does, the longer she resists the expected aversion. If she feels only the attractive quality of the affective revulsion, then she resists as greater antagonist: the “capitalist lifeworld” that seeks to designate certain feelings, images, and sounds as “desirable” or “undesirable” for consumers (Ngai 233). This control of desire and monopoly on beauty was directly responsible for the “Blood-caul of absences” in the wake of thalidomide casualties (line 16). Such radical affects change the reading of the speaker’s “indifference”; it is, from this lens, not a numbing but a practical hardening to achieve a radical vision (line 22).

The potential for sharp disgust would not be possible without tension established through alternating periods of shock and desensitization. Plath’s prose-style poetry in *Ariel* communicates the glassier affect of restlessness within backdrops that connote numbness, as in the tedious hospital stay in “Tulips” and the dissociative slips in and out of consciousness in “Lady Lazarus.” In these poems, the speakers’ encounters with restlessness are conveyed through language that brings the reader to an agitated state between inaction and action, on the cusp of the latter. Syntactically, the poems mirror radicalization and the way it marks a clear transition from a static socio-cultural climate to a progressive one – not in the steadfast incremental change of classical liberalism, but in the markedly dynamic nature of a society

awakening to unrest. According to Mary Rogers, radical feminism is distinct from liberal feminism in its efforts to “overhaul social structure” (619). Rogers defines radicalism as a “strand of feminist ideas and practices [that] has as its hallmarks a disdain for, if not rejection of, hierarchy and a commitment to cultural as well as political transformation” (619). “Tulips” participates in such radicalism and leaves the reader with affective restlessness to follow the speaker’s precedent set from a hospital bed, subverting the medical male authority and therefore qualifying as what Rogers would call “radical” in its upending of hierarchies.

Replete with ironies, “Tulips” engenders a setting in which a hospital room is an escape, suicide an ideal destination, and compassion a suffocating burden. Contrary to the turbulent language and form in “Cut,” the syntax in “Tulips” reads like prose to offer a critical take on the dissonance between patient and doctor. The measured, narrative style in this poem suggests that “these white walls” of the hospital room provide relief enough for the speaker to sustain complete and calculated thoughts (line 4). Except for the troubling presence of recently-arrived tulips, the speaker believes she “has never been so pure” (line 28). She has surrendered her “history to the anesthetist and [her] body to surgeons,” who have, along with her family, clearly misunderstood her desires (line 7). It becomes clear that the speaker seeks death when she laments, “I only wanted / To lie with my hands turned up and be utterly empty” (lines 29-30). Much to her chagrin, she is held captive, alive in the hospital – an institution that surely flirts with death but is explicitly dedicated to preserving life. Close enough to death to fantasize about “how free it is” but far enough from it that the lively presence of tulips “weighs [her] down,” the speaker is caught between her own bodily autonomy and generally accepted bioethics in society (lines 31, 40).

“Tulips” is punctuated by repeated references to the corporate dimensions of healthcare that create systemic barriers to equity in such spaces. The pervasive sterility and aloofness of “these white walls,” unconcerned nurses who “pass and pass,” and an overall absence of interpersonal interaction in the poem make the dispassionate surroundings seem a crucial part of the dehumanization the speaker faces as she imagines herself a “thirty-year-old cargo boat” (lines 4, 11, 22). With such markers of unfeeling playing an antagonistic role, the “ugly feelings” the poem produces become a radical act against the hospital’s efforts to “swab [the speaker] clear of [her] loving associations” (line 28). While the speaker does not wish to feel the affects that the “too excitable” tulips bring to her sickroom, she instead speaks of her “wound[s],” her hyperawareness of being “watched” and an honest admission of her own desire to “efface [her]self” (lines 39, 43, 48). The affects the speaker acknowledges range from suffering to paranoia to self-deprecation – none of which are conventionally desirable, but all of which demonstrate autonomy and ownership in her proclamation.

Ngai traces similar feelings of paranoia to a masculine origin responsible for conspiracy theories. This history corresponds with distrust of outsiders or marginalized persons who, from a paranoid male perspective, threaten the rigid hierarchies that serve masculine norms (302). In medicine, this distrust manifests in the male doctor’s dismissal of the hysterical female patient. Thus, when Plath’s speaker in “Tulips” affirms such feelings of stigmatization while held captive in the hospital, she turns patriarchal distrust of the hysterical woman inward against the “monolithic yet amorphously delimited and fundamentally abstract [system]” that the hospital represents (Ngai 302). The speaker does not concede to the quiet suppression of the hospital’s atmosphere or the pitiful condescension of the taunting red tulips, but rather remains “aware of [her] heart” and all the ways her suffering body copes with pain (line 46).

The speaker in “Tulips” may very well fear wellness and regard a return to health and her family life with apprehension. Her family members, the ones smiling out of the photo, have not responded to her needs properly. They have brought picture frames and flowers that irritate her and disturb the sterile environment despite her wishes to wallow in emptiness. Plath gives a voice to the type of patient whose needs are simply not met in the modern healthcare model. Her speaker is a mouthpiece for all women who have felt their autonomy seized either by their doctors or their families, those who often speak on behalf of the afflicted.

Studying the language of the poem provides a lens to identify the speaker’s coping mechanisms in “Tulips.” The poem’s structure provides latitude for feelings of restlessness to transfer onto the reader as Plath alternates between shedding light on the speaker’s dynamic spectrum of discomfort and contentedness and selects language that carries the reader through similar vicissitudes. Restlessness is defined here by the tension between tranquility and irritating energy, and Plath manages to stretch the syntax to establish a sense of ennui while also disrupting the reading through periods of discord. The “peacefulness” of solitude in the sickroom, for example, is described as process: the speaker is “learning” it (line 3). Through such phrasing, Plath makes peacefulness a goal from the inception of the poem. The reader, then, expects the poem to work toward that peacefulness, but that is hardly the case as the speaker soon introduces the abrasive tulips that taunt her recovery and her disobedient body with a “stupid pupil” that “has to take everything in” (line 10). The assonance accompanying this first antagonist – the “stupid pupil” – does not lend itself to the conventionally calming symmetry of an echo, but rather works in conjunction with more cacophonous trochee as if dismissing her own in sequential waves of disgust akin to two scoffs.

In its straightforward lyric address, “Tulips” reads with continuity and ease. The free-verse septets are neatly divided according to theme with smooth transitions and complete sentences. Functional, organized, and nondescript, the poem mirrors the speaker’s hospital environment and falls in line with the speaker’s observation that the “numbness” issued from presumably anesthetic needles feels like “pebbles” in “smoothing” water (lines 13-15). But like how the water can quickly turn to a menacing force that “[goes] over the speaker’s head” as she “stubbornly hangs on to [her] name and address,” the placid surface of the poem suffers under the affective weight of “snags” and “eddies” as the speaker recounts realization after realization of unrest from her family’s photographed smiles that “catch onto [her] skin, [like] little smiling hooks” to the flowers that “eat [her] oxygen (lines 40, 20, 35). Plath’s broken affective cycles of restfulness and disturbance and all the ironies of restlessness in a sedentary state are reminiscent of Ngai’s explanation of stuplimity, with its “simultaneously astonishing and deliberately fatiguing” hallmarks (261). The capacity for language to both calm and excite, when contained within the neat, systematic syntax on the macro level, forces the reader to reconcile short-term unease with long-term languor.

When Plath writes, “The peacefulness is so big it dazes you,” she encapsulates exactly the trouble that restlessness brings to light when conditions are toxically static, when fleeting attention to injustice incites a radical response from the oppressed. The patient in “Tulips” fades in and out of attentiveness to her oppressors – perhaps because there are so many and they are so ubiquitous. All causes for her restlessness in some way symbolize a greater institution that has taken a toll on her body, and, based on her notable fatigue as communicated by the restlessness, her mind. Assuming the “stupid pupil” can be read as her consciousness as well as her eye (in the line prior, Plath uses the metaphor of the eye to provide imagery of just how carelessly the

doctors “propped” up the speaker’s “head between the pillow and the sheet-cuff” (line 8), then its incessant need to “take everything in” can be read either as imitating the gaze that presumably objectified the body, or as a mind that cannot be quelled despite a considerable absence of activity in the “quiet,” “snowed-in” room (lines 9, 2). The speaker must resist, to the best of her ability, the doctors’ dehumanization and the nurses collective obedience to the said doctors as they “pass and pass” as they obey the chain of command within the patriarchal hospital sphere (line 11). As her attention turns to the picture frame, the speaker is forced to confront domesticity in the form of her family’s disturbing smiles, and throughout the poem she must reckon with the flowers, a storied symbol of fertility, even though she craves the exact opposite – “to lie with [her] hands turned up and be utterly empty” (line 30). Perhaps death can grant her a reprieve from the restlessness at hand and all the related patriarchal institutions that await her upon her return to health, such as the homemaking that haunts her in the photographs.

The drastic measures to which the speaker turns and the nonchalant regularity with which Plath conveys such measures elevate the affective restlessness from unsettling to radical. As if to evade the “anesthetist” who claims her “history” in the beginning of the poem, the speaker demands to feel wherever possible: her wound “corresponds” with the tulips by flaring up in irritation, and her heart “opens and closes” (lines 7, 39, 47) Even metaphorized feelings turn physical when the smiles from the photograph “catch onto [her] skin” (line 21). Restlessness is transmitted into an affective sphere because these images have such recognizable correlations that welcome solidarity among a responsive reader, suffering speaker, and empathetic poet. “Tulips,” along with most of the *Ariel* poems, provides foci in the form of body parts and types of pain that carve a third-party space for radical response. With restlessness as the affect at work in “Tulips,” the reader endures the long stretches “what ‘deadens’” with “hyperactivity,” as Ngai

puts it; the irony culminates in Plath's fleeting allusions to suicide in unremarkable terms, buried and padded in syntactically predictable poetics (261). Ngai's theory confirms the power of restlessness and other tension-based affects to test our responses to a text, particularly how they measure our own vulnerability to secondhand suffering:

Abrupt and fleeting excitation of shock, and the prolonged lack of excitement we associate with boredom, would seem to give rise to mutually exclusive aesthetics ... Yet even as the temporalities of shock and boredom are inarguably antithetical, both are responses that confront us with the limitations of our capacity for responding in general. (Ngai 261-2)

In other words, by juxtaposing isolated examples of shocking, graphic, or painful content with the otherwise smooth, chronological syntax in "Tulips," Plath can intermittently provoke and pacify readers, altering their sensitivity to material and conditioning them to react to infrequent stimuli in spite of normalized and consistent oppression. Affect emerges as a critical tool in keeping the masses sensitive to the plights of marginalized communities; if the poetry can stir radical faculties in episodes by activating the body first and the mind second, the body politic is, in theory, better suited to respond to more imminent threats to injustice.

Furthermore, the way "Tulips" reads as a first-person meditation augments its radical affects in that it rewrites the paranoia in the hospital space. The speaker may have lost agency over her body in her subjugation to the doctors, but her insight and articulation seem to thrive in spite of that loss. On the one hand, her body acts in discord with her mind; health feels an abstraction, as it "comes from a country far away" (line 49). On the other hand, the bedridden speaker is highly attuned to her own senses and to heavy subject matters such as mortality and consciousness in the face of death. Even if this patient is physically weakened to the point where she must lie in the hospital lifelessly under the male gaze, she defies misogynistic expectations

by cultivating genius out of her madness – which, at this point, may be the result of her stay in the hospital rather than her impetus for admittance into it.

The archetypal hysterical woman is a trope heavily responsible for the male domination of medicine, but Plath's ailing speaker in "Tulips" proves that madness can be a tool that equips sufferers with the heightened sensitivity necessary to explore truths typically too morbid or lofty for the healthy to confront. She is in an enlightened state, capable of articulating what a dying person's final moments must feel like. While health remains distant and unattainable, she is within reach of profound end-of-life wisdom and has a rich artistic vision of the dead "Shuttering their mouths on [a peacefulness], like a Communion tablet" (lines 63, 35). Plath's speaker is what French feminism describes as "redemptive" (Baym 48). Madness need not be read as a symptom of oppression, but rather as a badge of surviving that oppression. The madwoman has resisted; she should be interpreted as

[n]ot what women have regrettably been made by a contemptuous and oppressive culture, but what women either essentially are, or have fortunately been allowed to remain, in a society that brackets but cannot obliterate the innate disruptive, revolutionary force of the female. (Baym 48-9)

"Tulips" demonstrates this phenomenon quite perfectly. The female patient is in a highly compromised state, and yet she will not remain passive. She uses her condition to grapple with the abstract and engage with intimidating topics as an act of resistance against her captors, the doctors. William Freedman claims that the voice has "accepted her depersonalization," but his claim needs qualification. The acceptance is not as "passive" as it seems given her fecund intellectual musings (152). She does not submit to her expected role of thankful gift recipient or helpless survivor. Instead, she observes, reflects, and produces – a marked difference from the type of (re)productivity that the flowers call to mind and that her photographs present in effigy.

Paranoia in “Tulips” can be read as a side effect to the more comprehensive restlessness. Ngai, however, studies it as its own affect and qualifies just how such feelings – which are relayed to the reader when the speaker discusses the unrelenting feeling of being “watched,” being reduced to a “shadow” upon which she and the reader can gaze to reproduce the cycle of watching – can be imagined as a feminist victory (lines 29, 32). It is important that paranoia is considered “not as a mental illness but as a species of fear based on the dysphoric apprehension of a holistic and all-encompassing system” (Ngai 299). Fittingly, the speaker’s targets with her resentment the hospital network and associated workers, the domestic sphere, and reproductive impulses. And, just as Ngai insists paranoia cannot help the feminist cause if it simply reaches for “the prestigious intellectual (hyper)activity associated with the male model” (Schor, as qtd. in Ngai 302), her speaker does not adopt the conspiratorial paranoia that historically refined pseudo-intellectual circles. Instead, her speaker facilitates a sense of paranoia toward the insidious team of doctors, the persistent tulips, and the ethereal husband and child by linking them directly with undeniable physical pain. She does not mimic a long history of male paranoia in conspiracy by engaging with an abstract force; she identifies clear figures worthy of distrust and gives tangible proof of their effects on her – the “ugly feelings” she shares with the reader through bodily correlatives.

“Lady Lazarus” relies on a similarly justified paranoia and distrust of the medical male to establish two affects of mounting political import across the progression of the poem: first the same restlessness that heralds an awakening, and second, rage that marks a complete transition to active engagement with the oppressor. The madwoman outsmarts the doctors once more in “Lady Lazarus.” The speaker’s self-proclaimed proclivity toward death works in direct opposition to her doctor’s – or, rather, “Herr Doktor’s” – presumed mission to keep her alive

(line 66). If “Dying / is an art, like everything else” and the speaker “do[es] it exceptionally well,” she has circumvented the medical community as well as most instincts to live (43-5). The speaker wields an incredible power, but this power is problematic in that she is never truly successful in achieving death. Jeffrey Meyers reconciles this problem by pointing out the cyclical nature of it: the more the speaker survives, the more chances she gets to experience the sensation of dying again. “The paradox of the poem,” he argues, “is that for Plath life itself is a kind of death, and she returns from near death in order to get dead once again” (). It is therefore important to distinguish “death” from “dying,” as “dying” indicates the experience of approaching dangerously close to death, regardless of outcome.

The speaker’s suspension between life and death is reflected in language that suspends the reader between doubt and certainty, evoking the affective restlessness from a new angle that fosters solidarity with the speaker’s periods of paralysis as she awaits each of her “nine times to die” (line 21). Initially, a reader has little proof that the endeavors described are suicide attempts. Plath withholds an antecedent for “it” until line 42 when she reveals that the mysterious “it” is, in fact, “dying.” Until the language confirms the radical extent of the speaker’s oppression, the text engenders palpable anxiety regarding what “it” is that the speaker has “done ... again,” “managed,” and “meant” (line 1, 3, 37). In this restless waiting period, Plath makes the body the focal point of the dying process rather than the speaker’s consciousness when she names “the big strip tease” as a euphemism for the “art” that is dying (line 29, 42). Several axes of the speaker’s enduring “ugly feelings” are named in lists of concrete pain centers: there is her “right foot,” “features” “face,” “the nose, the eye pits, the full set of teeth,” “hands,” “knees,” “skin and bone” (lines 6, 8, 13, 31-3). Plath effectively “builds” a body in pain by calling each axis to mind, using the “seriality” of the lists to achieve an “aesthetic of tedium,” which, when drawn out like the

“big strip tease,” protracts the time and space between life and death before the speaker explicitly addresses it later in the poem (Ngai 263, “Lady Lazarus” line 29). Referring to Stein’s work, Ngai links this style – particularly when the items in the series are commonplace and unexceptional – with her comparable study of stuplimity that verges on the restlessness in *Ariel*.

Ngai finds that

[i]nstallation functions as an information-processing system – a way of classifying and ordering seemingly banal bits of stuff: newspaper clippings, snapshots, teeth, words and phrases, repetition. To encounter the vastness of [a] system is to encounter the vast combinatoriality of language, where particulars “thicken” to produce new individualities. (Ngai 264)

Plath grows a space between reader and speaker by allowing multiple entry points for a reader to achieve empathy with the dying woman. She draws attention to the list of corporeal sites and how they contribute to a broken whole; the poem reads slower as the language “thickens” and mimics a gradual departure from consciousness one might experience when living the dying process. For Ngai, this is “the tedium of the ordinary: the monotony of routines . . . organized by calendar headings, the movements of a body not doing anything in particular” (258). This pattern allows death to be re-imagined as an escape from the arduous dying process like it is for the speaker – a place that provides relief from the restlessness that “feels like hell” (line 46).

The speaker’s second and purposeful incident, admittedly a suicide attempt that she meant “to last out,” results in a vague “they” arriving to “call and call / And pick the worms off [her] like sticky pearls” (lines 38, 41-2). “They” stands to be interpreted as a family member, a responder, or a medical team. Regardless, the rescuer is assuming the role of doctor, if not by degree then by action. The revival is not romanticized as a miracle the way that Biblical Lazarus’s was. Instead, words like “sticky” and “pick” give a harsh, guttural sound of repulsion. Blame for the restlessness now falls on the doctors and the institutions they represent. A reader

grows to anticipate their touch not as a healing one, but as a grotesque one that “pick the worms off [the body] like sticky pearls” (line 42). In the doctor’s presence, the restless is at its affective peak: the speaker’s romanticized recounts of isolation and paralysis – she “[does] it in a cell,” wishes to “stay put” – competes with a “shriek” or a “turn and burn” as two equally desirable states (lines 49, 50, 70, 71). As is the paradox with restlessness, it becomes unclear whether the excited state or the inert state will bring satisfaction, only that both are preferable to the menacing presence of “Herr Doktor...Herr Enemy” and, of course, that neither state is currently attainable (line 66).

Such repulsion is best explained by the interruption the rescuers cause. Approaching death, for the speaker, brings her to the pinnacle of her artistry, intellect, and humanity. Kathleen Margaret Lant confirms the speaker’s “transcendence,” noting that for many of Plath’s voices, “death is figured as a way of achieving rebirth” (664). Any doctor’s savior complex is rendered irrelevant due to the invasive nature of the resuscitation. For the speaker, dying offers more life than an existence in the flesh, especially considering that her female body is put through patronizing manhandling in every revival. Meyers names the doctors explicitly in his list of the speaker’s adversaries, and cites “Herr Doctor” as an example of Plath blurring the lines of good and evil. There is antagonistic interplay between the connotations of “Herr Doctor, who conducted ghastly medical experiments in the extermination camps, with Herr Enemy, who saved her life when she wanted to die” (Meyers). Given Plath’s perspective on life and death, the doctors are no heroes; they rob the speaker of her richest life.

The doctors’ roles in “Lady Lazarus” as secondary characters create friction necessary to advance the affective restlessness from a feeling to a political instrument. The exchanges

between them and the speaker fit Ngai's observations on how interactions between poetic subjects are inherently political when one party experiences compromised autonomy:

The negative affects that read the predicaments posed by a general state of obstructed agency with respect to other human actors or to the social as such – a dilemma I take as charged with political meaning regardless of whether the obstruction is actual or fantasized, or whether the agency obstructed is individual or collective. (Ngai 3)

Plath makes the doctors a collective enemy for all who share in the text. As the author, they are her brainchildren – she controls their stage time in the poem in such a way that they are the ones who “vanish” under the more captivating spectacle that is the speaker. The speaker regards them irreverently; it is her philosophical framework that keeps her from indulging a savior complex. And the reader joins this force in the restlessness of the body. While anyone who engages with the text cannot necessarily achieve solidarity with pain in the abstract suffering of a troubled consciousness, the body revealed in the “strip tease” is accessible as an epicenter for shared restlessness, resentment, and ultimate revolt.

In “Lady Lazarus,” unlike in “Tulips,” the speaker is well aware of her victory over her oppressors. Lant finds it “telling, too, that the speaker’s audience in “Lady Lazarus” is made up entirely of men” (654). She speaks simultaneously to them and about them regarding their many transgressions – from saving her life to defaming her body – and ends with the penultimate threat: “Out of the ash / I rise with my red hair / And I eat men like air” (lines 82-4). As Remus Bejan points out, the “dramatic aggressiveness of [Plath’s] imagery” compensates for the speaker’s vulnerability, but the speaker herself even makes up for her oppression by having the final word over her enemies (107). She is creative and reproductive, living new lives several times over with new attempts at death. The feminine impulse for reproduction, however, clashes with Plath’s language and the omnipresent death instinct that she repurposes.

By the end of the poem, it becomes clear that when the speaker was passively enduring the doctors' poking and prodding and the onlookers' gazes, she was simply biding her time until a final act of denunciation through unprecedented and memorable language in the final line. She will assert her authority, but on her own terms. Deborah Nelson believes Plath's poetry is highly conscious of the "confessional relationship of women to their doctors," and that when the speaker in "Lady Lazarus" accrues the clout to end on such a poignant note, Plath "demonstrate[s] ... [that her] ability to be private lay not in [her speakers'] bodies, which could not be withdrawn from the scrutiny of the doctor, but in their language, which could alternately mask and make known" (279). Through Plath's own struggle with mental illness, and, clearly, her speakers', the women prevail by using their alienation and repression to brew feelings of rage as well as carefully constructed attacks in language. Her heroines play to their feminine strength as the archetypal madwoman with unexpected capacities for resistance. "The big strip tease" in which the patient's body is "unwrapped" is thereby not the only "tease" in "Lady Lazarus;" the speaker is cultivating her own surprise through patiently rising tension waiting to be unleashed on the doctors and men in general (line 29).

Restlessness gives way to rage by the end of "Lady Lazarus" to leave a politically charged wake in the aftermath of the speaker's "rise" "out of the ash." In the final six stanzas, Plath introduces a second person "you" that had been omitted earlier. "Do I terrify? –" in the third stanza marks an opportunity to address a particular audience, but Plath does not incorporate such language until the speaker is ascending into her final stage to "eat men like air" (lines 12, 84). Here, Plath moves from speaking the body to speaking the body *to* those who attempt to seize it; "you poke and stir," she writes, clearly condemning the doctors who have done the manhandling throughout the poem (line 74). Unlike the revulsion and restlessness – which are

best characterized as responses to stimuli and an amorphous sense of holistic anxiety, respectively – rage has a recipient. Noting that in Silvan Tomkins’ theory, rage is one of eight or nine “innate” affects, Adam Frank studies what the interpersonal nature of such affects means for the body (Frank 11). He argues that rage, among other affective bases, is “at once individual and shared; individual in that [it takes] place primarily on the skin and musculature of the face and in the tones of the voice and [is] communicated both to the self and to others, or sometimes to the self as an other (11). Plath relies on the communicative nature of rage to inform the speaker’s “shriek” and the direct ultimatum she gives in “Beware / Beware” (lines 70, 80-1).

To further compound the physicality of rage and bring it to actionable fruition, this affect is highly physical, connoted by warm, feverish images and incendiary diction and sounds to match. The first part of the poem figures death as cold, isolating; “eye pits,” a “grave cave,” a “seashell” simile and “sticky” imagery supplement talk of nakedness and unraveling, of exposure to the bone (lines 13, 17, 40, 42). But after the affective shift as the speaker becomes more combative and enraged, the language serves explicitly to incite tangible, living sensations of heat that encourage a reader to quite literally rise with the speaker for grand wave of death and rebirth. Fiery images and hues mark the poem’s finale, with warm, metallic allusions to gold and alchemy (The pure gold baby / That melts) and “red hair” (lines 69-70, 83). “Ash, ash . . . out of the ash” serves as visual, tactile, and olfactory imagery and evokes the classical history of death as not final but cyclical, as something not to be feared even if it can be felt (lines 73, 82). This affective framework is critical in immortalizing the speaker as the invincible protagonist to spite the recipients of her rage; it justifies both her pain and suffering and, on a microcosmic level, the reader’s. These feelings, while “ugly,” are understood to be cyclical and, in the circumstances of the poem, the result of a clearly identified antagonist. Feeling the doctors’ vile effects on the

body forges an alliance in a space that cannot exist without physical conduits that relay the “stir” that leads to a radical rise (line 74). The speaker’s “suspended agency” is important here; Plath’s language and its ability to stimulate productive emotions undermine the doctors’ efforts to capitulate the speaker into a body on display instead of a body in action (Ngai 2).

“Fever 103” actively undercuts the erotic nature of the female body by showing its capacity for heat and excitement in a blatantly non-sexual way. The female body, expected to burn with desire or passion, can also burn sans erotica. Plath incites a commentary about sexuality or the lack thereof at the inception of “Fever 103.” It begins with a rhetorical question: “Pure?” A fevered body can be exploited for two divergent literary purposes – as a site sterilized through heat or as a victim battling an invasion such as an infection. In other words, a fever can be either a baptism or a damning. Rage facilitates both. In *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant reads exceptional political important in “precarious bodies” that are both the objects and the origin of desires (2). Being desired and harboring desires, both of which incite rage for the speaker in “Fever 103°,” stir political action because contentedness cannot be found without action to break the ensuing tension. Berlant writes:

The paradox remains that the conditions of the lush submerging of one consciousness into another require a double negation: of the speaker’s boundaries, so she or he can grow bigger in rhetorical proximity to the object of desire; and of the spoken of, who is more or less a powerful mute placeholder providing an opportunity for the speaker’s imagination of his, or their flourishing. (96)

Rage as a reaction to desires is the catalyst that radicalizes the speaker in “Fever.” There is implied resentment to a “lecher,” and Plath links the speaker’s fever with her rage in response to someone for whom the speaker is now “too pure” (lines 30, 34). Her rejection of him is best communicated through her “retch,” a physical manifestation of a lifesaving revulsion (line 33). While this “retching” and “flickering” are conventionally symptomatic of victimhood, Plath uses

them to show a body in revolt. Similarly, Berlant's theory justifies negative affects such as rage as politically productive; negative emotions need not be read as regressive when they actually intensify emotional power in a space that oppressors – in this case, “adulterers” cannot touch (line 25).

The speaker occupies a space between sin and purity throughout “Fever 103°.” There is clearly a demonic side to the speaker, as even the powerful “tongues of hell” are “Incapable of licking clean / The aguey tendon, the sin” (2, 5-7). Plath repeatedly makes reference to “The sin,” a seemingly indelible mark that the body cannot erase (line 27). Despite the sinister imagery, the speaker still asserts that she is “too pure” even for water (line 31). Her body is empty after “three days” of rejecting food and she even names herself a “virgin” by the end of the poem (lines 24, 47). What Plath accomplishes here is an upheaval of expectations for the female body – an utter rejection of conventional notions of purity. Even if the feverish woman is plagued by sin, she defines herself as pure and is thus reborn as such. The fever seems to give way to the height of Plath's powers as a poet; her speaker asks, “Does not my heat astound you” in a burst of self-awareness of her own capacity to “glow” and “flush” (lines 40-41). There is an obvious arousal here, not of overt sexuality – though the speaker does make fleeting reference to sheets, kisses, and use the provocative term “flickering” in a brief tease – but of control over the self, an awakening of body, mind, and abilities.

What the voices in “Tulips” and “Lady Lazarus” reached through incarceration and suicide attempts, respectively, the speaker in “Fever 103” achieves through her rising body heat. Lant argues “this heat moves the speaker to a state beyond the normal,” and, in turn, elevates the power of the poem so that the reader vicariously experiences the rush: “The tactile sensation of the poem is almost painful, for we can feel the “Radiation” (641). The pain Lant identifies is

both the ache of the fever and the heavy weight of regret as the speaker wishes for past sins to be purged. As the subject of the poem, the body functions “not as a shimmering emblem of the soul’s glory but . . . rather [as] an embarrassing reminder of the self’s failures, an icon of the poet’s vulnerability” (Lant 625). In Bundtzen’s reading, the body here has a “retaliatory strategem,” as does the feminist consciousness (415). Whatever societal pressures have engraved remorse on the speaker may rest in the body, but it produces a counterattack in response. Much like the scientific end of an immune response, the inflammatory fever is a revenge tactic, an instinctual one at that. “Fever 103” thus reveals a defense mechanism innate to the body, which is never entirely defenseless despite the vulnerability connoted with it in confessional poetry.

“Fever 103” and its nearly romanticized depiction of an ailing body as a weapon of feminist resistance qualifies the conventional notion of the sublime. If the sublime is a peak of arousal measured entirely by the intensity of affect (here, rage), “Fever 103” gives reason for the speaker’s “glowing and coming and going, flush on flush” to be interpreted as the vehicle to “Paradise” (lines 43, 55). Elsewhere reconciling the sublime with an array of negative affects, Ngai argues:

...the sublime might be thought of as the first ‘ugly feelings,’ in the sense of being explicitly contrasted with the feelings or qualities associated with the beautiful. It thus comes as no surprise that the sublime, conscripted to theorize an observer’s response to things in nature of great or infinite magnitude . . . involve an initial experience of being overwhelmed in confrontation with totality that makes the observer painfully aware of her limitations – or at least at first. (265)

Ngai’s description of the workings of the sublime on the individual, such that an initial feeling of being overwhelmed subsides as the individual acclimates, in fact describes the epiphany which the speaker has in “Fever 103.” Initially overcome by the magnitude of her fever and how it surpasses the intensity of hell’s storied “tongues,” the speaker grows increasingly comfortable,

even empowered, by her “astounding” heat: “I am a lantern,” she asserts (40, 36). A similar activation process follows in the reader’s body through the contagious rage. As the rage removes the speaker from her connection to the adulterer (she ends dismissing his existence with “nor him / nor him, nor him”), the reader reorganizes the affective rage; instead of figuring an isolated antagonist and a specific channel for that rage, the reader begins to understand rage as self-serving and preparatory, a means of achieving a highest end without reliance on another for anger or for validation (lines 52-53). It is a liberating affect that disentangles the speaker from the oppressor and purifies by purging “the sin” as well as the sinner (line 27). Rage thereby marks a radical separation, not only from the oppressors themselves but also from social norms – a separation denoted in the speaker’s pursuit of the sublime as a different “place,” or “Paradise,” suggestive of the fact that environments, too, can be oppressive (line 55).

The affective path to radicalism unfolds in *Ariel* in three stages. Revulsion identifies a shared source of conflict with a clear patriarchal enemy. Restlessness mimics the context and pace of rebellion, including the acute crises that give way to a societal awakening. Rage connotes incipient action and a commitment to upheaval as an act of restorative justice. The associated “ugly feelings” that facilitate such affects are a reflection of how, historically, progress has come at the cost of suffering. Plath’s language and its capacity for commanding this perverse sense of the sublime – particularly its ability to control the reader’s emotional and physical experience of vicarious suffering – culminates in radical cabal across three affected bodies at any given time. From Plath’s syntax to the speakers’ narratives to the readers’ resultant perspectives on time, pain, and desire, political consciousness becomes inseparable from the poetics of the body.

Textual affect and reader experience thereof is the most participatory literary phenomenon, constituting a space that transcends time and, in a sense, immediate literary context

– a space where poet, lyric speaker, and reader meet in a fulcrum of political ideation.

Encountered today, the same conflicts that may have been dismissed, misinterpreted, or eclipsed during the early stages of development of feminist theory in Plath's era are subject to revival via felt experience of the text; readers can relive suffering and trauma quite viscerally and interpret the socio-political causes and ramifications of female pain, which now can be read as socially caused. Revulsive, restless, and enraging, literary pain emerges as the primary narrative of women's bodies and all they have endured. Though Plath's counterintuitive language opens and even aggravates "wounds" inflicted by patriarchal oppression, her work also stimulates the discourse that leads to their recognition, understanding, and tending.

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