

Notes on Dying is an Art by George Steiner:

Born in Boston in 1932 of German and Austrian parents, Sylvia Plath had no personal, immediate contact with the world of the concentration camps. I may be mistaken, but so far as I know there was nothing Jewish in her background. But her last, greatest poems culminate in an act of identification, of total communion with those tortured and massacred. The poet sees herself on

An engine, an engine

Chuffing me off like a Jew. . . .

Distance is no help; nor the fact that one is 'guilty of nothing'. The dead men cry out of the yew hedges. The poet becomes the loud cry of their choked silence:

Herr God, Herr Lucifer

Beware

Beware.

Out of the ash

I rise with my red hair

And I eat men like air.

'Lady Lazarus'

Here the almost surrealistic wildness of the gesture is kept in place by the insistent obviousness of the language and beat; a kind of Hieronymus Bosch nursery rhyme.

Sylvia Plath is only one of a number of young contemporary poets, novelists, and playwrights, themselves in no way implicates in the actual holocaust, who have done most to counter the general inclination to forget the death camps. Perhaps it is only those who had no part in the events who can focus on them rationally and imaginatively; to those who experienced the thing, it has lost the hard edge of possibility, it has stepped outside the real

Committing the whole of her poetic and formal authority to the metaphor, to the mask of language, Sylvia Plath became a woman being transported to Auschwitz on the death trains. The notorious shards of massacre seemed to enter into her own being:

A cake of soap,

A wedding ring,

A gold filling.

'Lady Lazarus'

In 'Daddy' she wrote one of the very few poems I know of in any language to come near the last horror. It achieves the classic act of generalization, translating a private, obviously intolerable hurt into a code of plain statement, of instantaneously public images which concern us all. It is the 'Guernica' of modern poetry. And it is both histrionic and, in some ways, 'arty', as is Picasso's outcry.

Are these final poems entirely legitimate? In what sense does anyone, himself uninvolved and long after the event, commit a larceny when he invokes the echoes and trappings of Auschwitz and appropriates an enormity of ready emotion to his own private design? Was there latent in Sylvia Plath's sensibility, as in that of many of us who remember only by fiat of imagination, a fearful envy, a dim resentment at not having been there, of having missed the rendezvous with hell? In and 'Daddy' the realization seems to me so complete. The sheer rawness and control so great, that only irresistible need could have brought it off. These poems take tremendous risks, extending Sylvia Plath's essentially austere manner to the very limit. They are a bitter triumph, proof of the capacity of poetry to give to reality the greater permanence of the imagined. She could not return from them.

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