CHAPTER IV

A NOTE ON SYLVIA PLATH'S STYLE
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STYLE

Tzvetan Todorov speaks of “style as coherence and style as deviation style as coherence implies form, structure, totality, a unique and harmonious assemblage of more general categories within the particular work and style as deviation implies “Infraction” or “transgression of a norm”. He believes that style is neither coherence nor deviation. “Nor a tracing made of this or that social stratum”. In other words, “style” defies any such simplistic definition. According to Todorov, there are three aspects in an utterance-verbal, syntactic and semantic. The verbal aspect is important as it includes everything that concerns the writer’s “Point of view” (or vision). At the level of syntax (including phonetics) one can study rhythm, melody and the pattern of logic. And on the semantic level words may be studied from three angles: the representative ness of words is fathomed through their emotive content: their “figuredness” through the history of sentences: their connotative value can also be studied.¹ The style of a writer explores states of consciousness through external means. Words, sentences, intonation, punctuation, images and metaphors all serve as a barometer of the writer’s mind.
Thus, style includes not only the language and technique of a writer but also his mind and heart: the style of the writer accommodates a personal response to life.

In the work of a conscious artist there is no stagnation and the style keeps on evolving. In the poems of Plath we see a marked difference in the earlier and the later style. However, the change is not sudden: underlying the four volumes of poems by Sylvia Plath is a continuity not only in the thematic patterns but also in the stylistic development. Beginning with the highly self-conscious, deliberately worded and rimed poems of The Colossus the poet gradually found a voice and medium of her own which may be seen in the most perfect form in the poems of Ariel. The transition between the earlier and later style may be studied in Crossing the Water and Winter Trees.

Ted Hughes, in his “Notes on the Chronological Order of Sylvia Plath’s Poems”, says:

“She wrote her early poems very slowly, Thesaurus open on her knee, in her large, strange handwriting, like a mosaic, where every letter stands separate within the work, a hieroglyph to itself. If she did not like a poem, she scrapped it entire. She rescued nothing of it. Every poem grew complete from its own root, in that laborious inching way, as if she were working out mathematical problem, chewing her lips,
putting a thick, dark ring around each word that stirred for her on the page of the Thesaurus.”

But the later poems were not written so painstakingly. She wrote “Tulips” (Ariel)

“Without her usual studies over the Thesaurus, and at top speed, as one might write an urgent letter. From then on, all her poems were written in this way.”

What is obvious from ‘Ted Hughes’ observation is that for the larger part of her poetic career, Sylvia Plath’s poems were written laboriously and special attention was paid to each word. Every letter spoke for itself and had an indispensable function in the finished poem. The poems written in the earlier style have often been called school girlish technical exercises or mere juvenilia, not in the least foreshadowing the acclaimed later poetry. However, one may venture to establish a link running through the entire body of work by referring to Peter Davison who feels that the last poems.

“Would never have come into being without the long, deliberate, technical training that preceded them. We can only perform with true spontaneity what we have first learned to do by habit.”

J. F. Nims feels the same when he says, without the drudgery of The Colossus, the triumph of Ariel is unthinkable.
While studying the poetic style of Sylvia Plath, if would not be practical to divide her work into poems written in the earlier style and those written in the later style. The work may be taken as a whole and the highly individualized use of vocabulary, verse techniques, images and other devices could be studied in order to determine the manner in which the poet has endeavored to manipulate external symbols so as to portray inner stated of consciousness.

According to W. E. Baker, the twentieth century poets markedly prefer the use of fragments, usually noun phrases or clauses, not clearly related to any one sentence. He feels that poets writing in English have altered the normal pattern of sentences in one of the following ways: be elaboration-arranging the fundamental units of a sentence in unusual sequences or by fragmentation, as in the case of modern poets. In the light of this opinion it would be interesting to study the syntactical devices employed by Sylvia Plath, even though her work falls outside the period covered by Baker.

It would be interesting to compare the opening stanzas of two poems written by Plath- “Faun” (also entntled “Metamorphosis”) Written in April 1956 and “Daddy” written more than six years later, in November 1962. The first stanza of “Faun” (The Colossus) runs as follows:

“Haunched like a faun, he hooed
From grove of moon-glint and fen-frost
Until all owls in the twigged forest
Flapped black to look and brood
On the call this man made."

While the first stanza of “Daddy” (Ariel) is as follows:
“You do not do, you do not do
Any more, black shoe
In which I have lived like a foot
For thirty years, poor and white,
Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.”

There is a marked difference in the style of these two stanzas. In the first example, the alterative sounds in every line seem contrived and the many words ending in d/. . t/ and / k / sounds create forced pauses that tend to slow down the rhythmic tempo. So do the repetitions of the / i/ and the /m/ sounds in fourth and the fifth line respectively. However, rhythmically rising and falling, mainly because of the incidence of vowel sounds in preference to the hard sounding consonants of “Faun”. The lines build up into a euphonious rhythm. Thus the rhythmic effect of the two stanzas is markedly different.

However, this is not the case with the syntactic constructions which are more or less on the same pattern. Contrary to the contention of Marjorie Parloff who feels that poets like Sylvia Plath and Roethke prefer to use fragments instead of sentences.6 We note that in neither of the above
examples is theme any "fragmentation". The first stanza of "Faun" could easily be read as a complete sentence by rewriting it thus:

"Haunched like a faun he hooed from grove of (moon-glint and fen-frost) until all owls in the twigged forest flapped black to look and brood on the call this man made."

It stands as a sentence complete in itself. Wherein lies the fragmentation? Similarly, the address to the "black shoe" in the stanza quoted from "Daddy" would also read like a complete sentence. There is no "fragmentation", even though there is "elaboration" as Baker describes it-Sylvia Plath lengthens her sentences by adding modifying clauses.

Similarly, the first stanza of "Daddy" is built around "you do not do, black shoe" (The meaning implied is the opposite of "How do you do?"), the black shoe being symbolic of a person-namely, the poet’s dead father. The rest of the words and phrases are mere modifiers.

No doubt, there are a few examples of "fragmentation" using noun phrases and clauses not clearly related to anyone sentence. The best example could be "You’re (Ariel). A poem of eighteen lines:

"Clown like, happiest on your hands.

Feet to the stars, and moon-skulled.

Gilled like a fish.................
Vague as fog and looked for like mail.
Farther off than Australia.
Sung as a bud and at home
Like a sprat in a pickle jug.
A creel of eels, all ripples.
Jumpy as a Mexican bean.
Right, like a well-done sum.
A clean slate with your own face on.

In a rare Plath poem like this one we see that instead of complete sentences, fragments have been used. The poem, addressed to an unborn child, is more of an exercise or a riddle. However, the title helps us understand the poem. “You’re” added to each of the sentences will complete the sentence structures and clarify all doubts regarding the meaning. Another such example is “Ariel”. The first three lines are:

“Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of for and distances.”

Noun phrases have been used instead of sentences. The meaning may elude us unless we read on further:

“God’s lioness.
How one we grow,
Pivot of heels knees! The furrow
Splits and passes, sister to
The brown are
Of the neck I cannot eatch.
Nigger-eye
Berries cast dark
Hooks.
Black sweet blood mouthfuls.
Shadows."

The poem does not seem to follow any logical syntactic development. The sentences are not easily comprehended because of the seemingly random juxtaposition of images. But once we realise that the object of the poet is to depict a horse that has run wild with the rider hanging on to its neck, it is clear that these lines convey the unrestrained speed of the horse. Ariel, and the poet is here making an attempt to describe the flashing images seen by the rider as the horse gallops along over bushes and furrows. Thus, the purpose behind the senseless conglomeration of images is made clear and the two fragmented sentences with which the poem begins also fit in accordingly. The fragmentation does not hamper our understanding of the poem. However, even though there are incidences of garmented sentences in Plath’s work, they are rate. Sylvia Plath prefers using elongated sentences.
"Ariel" would remain a bafflingly obscure poem had it not been for Ted Hughes illuminating remark:

"Ariel was the name of the horse on which she when riding weekly. Long before, while she was a student at Cambridge (England), she went riding with an American friend out towards Grantchester. Her horse bolted, the stirrups fell off, and she came all the way home to the stables, about two miles, at full gallop, hanging around the horse's neck."

The reader would have to keep guessing the intention of the poet. In the poem the speed of the horse is indicated not only by the conglomeration of flashing images but also by using fragmented instead of complete sentence structures. With the help of run-on lines what the rider sees in a split second is described in nine lines—the furrow, the are of the horse's neck, the berries, and so on.

In most of the poems the syntax is remarkable straightforward, almost prosaic. Examples from Ariel are:

"If the moon smiled, she would resemble you."

("The Rival")

"What is this, behind this well, is it ugly,
Is it beautiful?" ("A Birthday Present")

"Will the hive survive, will the gladiolus
Succeed in banking their fires
To enter another year?" ("Wintering")
"I am flushed and warm.
I think I may be enormous.
I am so happy.

My Wellingtons

Squelching and squelching through the beautiful red."

("Letter in November")

In the last two examples we note that just as in "Ariel" Sylvia Plath uses run-on lines for a particular effect, similarly here, with the use of enjambment instead of caesura, she succeeds in forming simple sentences without losing any poetic depth.

Whatever obscurity there exists in the poems of Sylvia Plath arises not from complicated sentence structures but from oblique references to private history. Just as the meaning of "Ariel" is clear only after reading Ted Hughes’ explanatory note, similarly other private references which are included in the poetry have to be known before the meaning can be fully understood. This is how one would understand the "cleft in your chin instead of your foot "of "Daddy" which is a reference to Otto Plath whose leg had to be amputated. Again, we have Alvarez’s note on the raison de etre of "Kindness" (Ariel):

*Her husband produced a strange radio play in which the hero, driving to town, runs over a hare, sells the dead animal for five shillings and with the blood*
money buys his girl two roses. Sylvia pounced on this isolating its core, interpreting and adjusting it according to her own needs. The result was the poem 'Kindness'.

This note explains the poem with his “rabbit’s cry” and its concluding line: “You hand me two children, two roses.” Such tendency towards private references is common in confessional poetry and often obscures the work. However, once the reader is made aware of the background and the private implication, the veil of obscurity is automatically lifted.

The opening sentences of the poems are forceful and boldly state the subject and mood of the poem, paving the way for what follows. Take, for example, the opening sentence of “The Eye-mote” (The Colossus):

Here the very first word, “Blameless,” prepares the reader for what is to follow. The speaker, innocent, blameless, is to be involved in a happening which he/she will we wronged (blamed) and will have to suffer. Other examples from The Colossus are:

“Flint like, her feet struck
Such a racket of echoes from the steely stree..”

(“Hardcastle crags”)

Here the note of desolation is sounded by the echo of the persona’s footsteps and we are mentally prepared for the
“stone-built town” and the inhospitable countryside through which the girl walks, feeling a pervading sense of doom in the air. In the title poem of the same volume, the first sentence.

“I shall never get you put together entirely”

Announces the sense of failure and despair that runs through the poem. And “aftermath” begins with

“Compelled by calamity’s magnet
They loiter and stare.....”

The poem speaks of the morbid interest people (the “peanut crunching crowd” of “Lady Lazarus”) take in the disasters that befall others. The calamity, in this poem a fire, draws a large crowd that edges in with a voyeur-like interest. The theme is introduced by the opening line appropriately.

Just as the opening line of a poem announces the subject boldly, similarly, the closing line winds up the theme, thus forming an organic whole. “the Eye-mote” that introduced the persona as “blameless”, concludes with the undeserved suffering that she faces and her yearning for an end to the same.
REFERENCES


3. Ibid. p. 193.


