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'I Have Always Been Scared of *You*': Sylvia Plath, perpetrator trauma and threatening victims

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Abstract

Evil does not exist in isolation. For it to occur, one person must commit an act which is experienced by another person. This would suggest two distinct categories of person in relation to evil: perpetrator and victim. Sylvia Plath's poetry has often been interpreted in terms of accusations against the biographical figures in the poet's life or as a denunciation of patriarchal culture. What these readings have in common is that they situate Plath's speakers in the 'victim' position. However, the boundaries between victim and perpetrator are frequently blurred. In 'Daddy', Plath's most (in)famous poem the speaker is both second-generation victim and perpetrator. The shame of the relationship to a Nazi perpetrator forms part of the speaker's definition of herself as a victim. In an earlier poem, 'The Thin People', Plath's portrayal of Nazism's victims is not unambiguous: far from feeling sympathy and pity for concentration camp survivors, her speaker reacts with a mixture of fear and disgust.

Keywords

Plath
victim
perpetrator
'Daddy'
'The Thin People'

In an introductory text, Plath wrote to present some of her new poems for a BBC radio broadcast; she described 'Daddy' (Plath 1981: 222–224) as

> spoken by a girl with an Electra complex. Her father died while she thought he was God. Her case is complicated by the fact that her father was also a Nazi and her mother very possibly part Jewish. In the daughter the two strains marry and paralyse each other – she has to act out the awful little allegory once over before she is free of it.
>
> (Plath 1981: 293, 83n)

As Plath indicates, the speaker of the poem embodies a history of persecution, in which she is both a second generation victim and perpetrator. Not knowing either position at first hand, her 'experience' of them comes through an implied connection to her parents' histories. It hardly seems necessary to note here that the speaker's experience is *not* Plath's. Her father, though born in Grabow, in the Polish corridor, had emigrated to the United States in 1901 at the age of 16 (Stevenson 1989: 4; Wagner-Martin 1987: 17). Aurelia, Plath's mother, was born in America to

Austrian parents and grew up speaking German as a first language until the first world war when the victimization of 'patriotic' Americans brought this to an end (Stevenson 1989: 5; Wagner-Martin 1987: 18). Both Plath's parents, therefore, spent their adult lives, including the rise of Nazism and the war, in the States. The perspectives that Plath attributes to her speakers are not as straightforward as a biographical interpretation would assume. In 'Daddy', written in 1962, the speaker, descended from a victim and perpetrator, must take on the role of victimizer in order to overthrow (or succumb to) her oppressor. By contrast, the speaker in 'The Thin People' (1957) does not identify or sympathize with victims of oppression. Instead, she resents being confronted with images of suffering and fears the contamination of her world by the horror of the past.

The speaker of 'Daddy' internalizes the inheritance of victimhood, but the poem is addressed to the externalization of her heritage of perpetration. There is no mention of the speaker's mother in the poem, but the speaker assumes a Jewish identity in opposition to the father's explicitly Nazi position. If the speaker *is* 'a bit of a Jew', as she thinks she may be, it would traditionally be through matrilineal transmission (though, of course, the Nazis defined a Jew as anyone with a Jewish grandparent) and her mother is present as a trace in this assumption. The speaker resists straightforward equivalence between herself as victim and the possibility that she is Jewish (she is 'like a Jew' or 'a bit of a Jew'; her mother is '*very possibly* part Jewish'). The speaker has, however, assimilated the victim position and she represents this by putting herself in opposition to images and tropes which are strongly associated with the Holocaust: the swastika, the trains, the camps.

The speaker adopts her mother's subject position while obscuring her presence, but the opposite is true of her portrayal of her father. He is physically huge, sprawled from the Atlantic to the San Francisco bay. His influence looms monstrous in his daughter's imagination. The poem is spoken to him; the 'you' returns persistently and echoes through the poem's rhyme scheme. By repeatedly addressing Daddy, the speaker is calling to him, while voicing their separateness. The poem deals only in 'you' and 'I'; there is no 'we'.

The poem's references to National Socialism and to the apparatus of the Final Solution situate both actors (Daddy and the speaker) as perpetrator and victim in a historically specific moral framework. If, as it has often been claimed, the Holocaust is the nadir of man's inhumanity to man and is a unique atrocity incomparable to any other, then by extension, the perpetrators of that horror are monsters beyond description. Jeffrey C. Alexander has argued that

> the category of "evil" must be seen not as something that naturally exists but as an arbitrary construction, the product of cultural and sociological work. This contrived binary, which simplifies empirical complexity to two antagonistic forms and reduces every shade of gray between, has been an essential feature of all human societies.
>
> (Alexander 2003: 32)

Plath draws on the uncertainty of this binary opposition. In 'Daddy' what should be an impermeable separation between victim and victimizer becomes blurred: the legacy of both is inherited by the speaker at the same time as the association is revived by the relationship with Daddy. The use of Holocaust imagery makes this particularly striking because, in the traditions of representation of this event, the distinction between good and evil has proved particularly rigid. Primo Levi, however, while warning strongly against conflating victim and perpetrator, argues that

> it would seem the time has come to explore the space which separates (and not only in Nazi Lagers) the victims from the persecutors [. . .] Only a schematic rhetoric can claim that the space is empty: it never is; it is studded with obscene or pathetic figures (sometimes they possess both qualities simultaneously), whom it is indispensible to know if we want to know the human species . . .
>
> (Levi 1989: 25, 26)

Levi's description of the 'Grey Zone' of privileged prisoners considers the various acts of complicity or collaboration that camp inmates submitted to in order to ensure their survival. It is the seepage between victim and persecutor in terms of the relationship to National Socialism as represented *in Plath's poem* that will be the focus of this article. There is no attempt here to draw parallels between or to compare different levels of suffering.

The speaker in 'Daddy' considers herself to be her father's victim as well as inheriting a generalized status as a victim through her mother. Identifying as a victim does not appear to trouble the speaker, although it is this aspect which has most shocked the opponents of the poem, who believe that the work is

> so entangled in biographical circumstances and rampages so permissively in the history of other people's sorrows that it simply overdraws its rights to our sympathy.
>
> (Heaney 1988: 165)

Conversely, even though the speaker repeatedly represents Daddy in explicitly Nazi-related terms, she steers clear of implying any transferral of guilt to herself. It has been argued that after the fall of the Nazi Reich the 'postwar generations have . . . inherited not guilt so much as the denial of guilt, not losses so much as lost opportunities to mourn losses' (Santner 1990: 34). Peel argues that, because of her father's death in 1940, Plath

> had been denied (because he had not lived) the direct experience of his non-complicity, of his difference. She has not seen her father rejecting the tyranny that came out of Germany. What survives is the photograph of man (sic) with a postage-stamp moustache, and the memory of a man who delegated the care of his children to his wife. His image becomes confused with

> the ideology that his nation has spawned. Consequently, Plath indentifies (sic) with his/their victims.
>
> (Peel 2002: 185–186)

More than merely aligning herself with the victims of Nazism, the speaker violently rejects the connection to Nazi perpetrators. The speaker has had to disavow the very memory of her father by exorcising it. She figures this as a form of parricide (ll. 6–7). When the speaker does take on the mantle of victimizer she does not reference the violence in terms of historical atrocity.

The speaker of 'Daddy' is striving to successfully mourn her father. In the terms of Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), mourning is a healthy reaction to come to terms with the world after the loss of a loved object; in melancholia, however, the loss is felt as an injury to the ego. The speaker's attempts to accept her bereavement have been acted out as self-harm (ll. 58–60).

In 1958, Plath resumed therapy with the psychiatrist who treated her at McLean's after her breakdown in 1953. Plath was relieved when Dr Beuscher gave her 'permission' to hate her mother and she explored the complexities of her feelings in her journal. In these notes, she describes her reading of Freud's 'Mourning and Melancholia':

> An almost exact description of my feelings and reasons for suicide: a transferred murderous impulse from my mother onto myself: the "vampire" metaphor Freud uses, "draining the ego": that is exactly the feeling I have getting in the way of my writing: mother's clutch. I mask my self-abasement (a transferred hate of her) and weave it with my own real dissatisfactions in myself until it becomes very difficult to distinguish what is really bogus criticism from what is really a *changeable liability.*
>
> (Plath 2000: 444, emphasis added)

Plath's use of the phrase 'changeable liability' suggests that her self-perception is figured in terms of guilt and innocence, and that there is no fixed sense of who is victim or victimizer. Though in 'Daddy' it is the father figure who is figured as a monstrous vampire, in her journals it is of her mother that Plath says:

> I don't imagine time will make me love her. I can pity her: she's had a lousy life; she doesn't know she's a walking vampire. But that is only pity. Not love.
>
> (Plath 2000: 429)

In the years after the Second World War, the German people were unable to mourn the many losses occasioned by that conflict:

> The shame connected with the German name from then on was a matter of collective identity. The trauma of 1945 did not only result from ruin and

> rape, death and defeat, but also from the sudden loss of self-respect and moral integrity.
>
> (Giesen 2004: 115)

In 'The Trauma of the Perpetrators', Bernhard Giesen describes the collective trauma of the German people, who in defeat were cast as a nation of perpetrators. It is undeniably problematic to discuss the effect of brutality on those committing the actions in similar terms to their effect on their victims. However, at its core, trauma is the psychic reaction to an event or series of events which destabilizes an individual's sense of self. Committing acts which are known (or later accepted) to be reprehensible can deeply damage a subject's sense of identity as a moral being:

> Perpetrators are human subjects who, by their own decision, dehumanized other subjects and, in doing so, did not only pervert the sovereign subjectivity of the victims but challenged also their own sacredness.
>
> (Giesen 2004: 114)

The loss of the perpetrator's moral authority has a trickle down effect to the second generation, which finds itself in the position of having to identify with someone who must at the same time be rejected, in order to re-affirm one's own moral integrity (Santner 1990: 45), thus

> Psychologically, it was a difficult task for most of the young people to detach themselves from parents who had been robbed in this way of their moral value, since internalization of these parents – the identification with them which usually results from the painful parting with these figures from childhood – brought no reinforcement of self-respect.
>
> (Mitscherlich and Mitscherlich 1967: 220, 221)

German society was touched by an *inability to mourn* that prevented a working through of the national trauma:

> All those who had devoted years of their lives to a movement whose members had to consider themselves as collaborators in a mass murder could not repair their ruined moral identity even if they had been ready to confess their guilt. There would be no second chance; life is spoilt. The trauma is insurmountable. As a moral subject the person is dead. He or she can only remain mute.
>
> (Giesen 2004: 116)

After the war, a common reaction was to retreat into a tacitly agreed mutual silence about one's involvement with the Nazis (Giesen 2004: 116). The speaker of 'Daddy' is unable to fully define herself as she cannot fully 'recover' her father. She can neither trace her father's origins as 'the name of the town is common' and she cannot rehabilitate his memory

because of the shame of his Nazism. As a result, she cannot identify with him and it prevents her from knowing her own identity:

> I never could talk to you.
> The tongue stuck in my jaw.
> It stuck in a barb wire snare.
> Ich, ich, ich, ich.
> I could hardly speak.
> I thought every German was you.
> And the language obscene

It is at this point in the poem that the speaker begins to align herself with specifically Jewish victims. Her father cannot (be) recover(ed) from the contamination of Nazism and therefore any identification with him is suspect and must be repudiated by establishing herself as his absolute opposite.

> The conditions under which stable cultural identities may be consolidated have indeed with and since the Holocaust become radically different; the symbolic order to which a German is subjected, that is, that social space in which he or she first learns to say "ich" and "wir", now contains the traces of a horrific violence.
>
> (Santner 1990: 51)

The speaker repeatedly addresses the 'you' of her father. When she speaks of herself, her statements frequently suggest uncertainty in forming her identity (ll. 22, 28, 35). Her attempts to define herself as a German 'I' can barely be articulated and splutters out until the 'ich, ich, ich, ich' is rendered meaningless through repetition. The first and second persons remain singular and the speaker is never able to form part of a 'we' (even less a 'wir').

The speaker's need to detach herself from her father led her to demonize him (ll. 51–54). By representing Daddy as a succession of mythological monsters, the speaker succumbs to the common temptation of portraying evil as something extraordinary and exceptional. This makes it 'less a problem for humanity than a mysterious aberration. The evil doer who is a monster is removed from us, placed in a category outside of the human; for if evildoers are demonic monsters, they can be accounted for by jettisoning them from the category of "human beings", from the "we"' (Geddes 2003: 106).

In the postwar period, Hitler was recast from the saviour of the German nation to 'a devil, a crazy epileptic, a monster'. The speaker, also, emphasizes her difference from her father by representing him as monstrous and unnatural, as either demon or vampire. However,

> in a way the demonization of Hitler continued his previous position as a fascinating superhuman individual beyond the ordinary rules, powerful and

> dangerous, mad and seductive – but the hero was converted into a sorcerer, a devilish monster.
>
> (Giesen 2004: 120)

While the speaker tries to absolve herself from the taint of her father's Nazi connections by representing him as a monster, Plath uses the figure of the Nazi as an emblem of monstrousness in its own right. The Nazi has become a modern-day icon of the monstrous extremes of human barbarity: the distancing of the perpetrator from 'normal' human provides a veneer of reassurance that such behaviour is an aberration from the norm and not within the range of 'natural' actions. The use of the vampire myth is telling, not only as the image which struck Plath most forcefully in Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia,* but because, as Brain argues 'vampires make their victims what they themselves are' (Brain 2001: 62). As Plath's introduction stresses, the speaker obtains the 'two strains' of victimizer and victimized through her bloodlines; guilt and suffering seemingly inherited genetically, only to be actualized by her relationship with Daddy. In the speaker's struggle between the roles of victim and aggressor, she attempts to cast away the association with perpetration, while maintaining her victimhood. When she wreaks her revenge on Daddy she maintains her distance from the mob she has raised (ll. 77–79). The speaker has become a perpetrator of violence in her revolt against the tyrant from whom she previously sought to separate herself. However, she is 'merely a witness, not a participant, recusing herself at the last moment from driving in the stake' (Keniston 2006: 32).

The speaker denounces her father, reinstating his status as a perpetrator by directly connecting him with the Nazi regime (ll. 41–45) He is no bystander. The emphasis on the possessive pronoun stresses that he is fully implicated. The speaker (dis)ingenuously dismisses her father's ideology as 'gobbledygoo', disavowing so much as her ability to comprehend that which she condemns in her father. She does, however, admit, perhaps sardonically, to the seductive appeal of both the man and the idea (ll. 48–50). For many, after the war, the claim that they had 'fallen for' the seductive allure of National Socialism was a way of denying their personal responsibility, while maintaining the idea of Nazism as an evil outside other which brought Germany low. In the poem however, this reinforces the speaker's apparent complicity in her brutalization, further disintegrating the already blurred distinction between victim and perpetrator.

'The Thin People' and threatening victims

In one of her first uses of Holocaust material, 'The Thin People' (Plath 1981: 64), written 5 years before 'Daddy', Plath describes victims of a war of which the speaker was only dimly aware, thanks to the shocking headlines of her childhood. Concentration camp detainees are suggested without being precisely referenced. This follows the public perception of the prisoners as disparate groups of political opponents to the Nazi regime,

rather than systematically targeted ethnic or social groups. It also shows that the events are kept at an imaginative distance by the speaker, as they are seen through the intermediary of the movie screen and from a distant past.

Until the Eichmann trial in 1961, the Jewish victim of the Holocaust was not a prominent figure in public discourse. Immediately after the war, the liberation of the camps was reported on the radio and in cinema news reels. The horrors which were uncovered provided retroactive justification for a war which America had been reluctant to join. This was fairly short lived though as major political realignments were underway, as the United States shifted from being allied to the Soviet Union against Nazi Germany, to being locked in the Cold War, with the USSR represented as the polar opposite to all American values. In this situation, it became obstructive politically for discussion of the Holocaust to be too prevalent; it was more helpful to generalize discussions of the evils of totalitarianism so that they could be used against Russian Communism (Novick 2001: 85). This changed with the abduction, trial and execution of Eichmann in Israel in 1961–1962. 'Daddy' was written in the wake of the Eichmann trial and reflects a changing awareness of the *Jewish* victims of Nazism, whereas 'The Thin People' (written in 1957) portrays victims defined only by their emaciation, not their race or creed.

In 'The Thin People', Plath takes concentration camp survivors as the poem's central focus, rather than using images which have become archetypal through association, as she does in *Ariel*. The speaker's position in relation to her subject is far from conventional: where the reader might expect pity or sympathy there is hostility and distrust. This however, is a modern expectation. As Atina Grossmann explains

> Given our own inflationary romance with the language and theory of trauma and memory and its corollary valorization, one might even say sacralisation, of Holocaust survivors, it is salutary to recall how very unromantic, unappealing, and alien the DP survivors appeared, even to those who meant to aid them.
>
> (Grossmann 2002: 298)

In the years immediately following the end of the war, Germany found herself 'home' to hundreds of thousand of Displaced Persons (DPs), including survivors of the liberated concentration camps. With no choice but to live in often insalubrious conditions in refugee camps, the DPs were often viewed with suspicion by the Allies in occupied Germany, who were faced with the repatriation of people with no homes left to go to.

Plath reflects some of this mood in her emphasis on the thin people's physical appearance. The speaker is preoccupied with their thinness and greyness. These are inevitably the features retained from photographs of the liberation of the camps such as those of Buchenwald by *LIFE* photojournalist Margaret Bourke-White in 1945. The speaker cannot see past the thin people's emaciation, just as many others were unable to when

describing the first time they were confronted with images of the camps. In mid-century America, the first images most people saw of the Holocaust would have been in the black and white cinema newsreels (implied, in part, by the speaker's reiteration of the thin people's greyness). In his memoir *Starting Out in the Thirties*, writer Alfred Kazin describes the first time he saw newsreels of the newly liberated Belsen:

> On the screen, sticks in black and white prison garb leaned on a wire, staring dreamily at the camera; other sticks shuffled about, or sat vaguely on the ground, next to an enormous pile of bodies, piled up like cordwood, from which protruded legs, arms, heads. A few guards were collected sullenly in a corner, and for a moment a British Army bulldozer was shown digging an enormous hole in the ground. Then the sticks would come back on the screen, hanging on the wire, looking at us.
>
> It was unbearable. People coughed in embarrassment, and in embarrassment many laughed.
>
> (Kazin 1965)

Plath knew and was fond of Kazin: as a student at Smith, she participated in his courses on short story writing and the American Novel. When she returned to her alma mater as a teacher in 1957–1958, she renewed her acquaintance with him and invited him and his wife, the writer Ann Birstein, to dinner on the 10 March 1958 (Plath 2000: 347). 'The Thin People' is estimated to have been written between September 1957 (when Plath and Hughes moved into an apartment wallpapered with pink flowers) and 13 June 1958, when Plath made a recording of the poem (Hargrove 1994: 127).

The cinema goers depicted by Plath react with the same incredulity and embarrassment as those described by Kazin. Unlike Kazin, Plath includes herself in those who do not want to believe what they see: 'They are unreal, we say'. For both writers the survivors' suffering is represented by their emaciation and they use similar metaphoric fields to describe it: Kazin figuring the survivors as 'sticks' and Plath's use of 'stalky limbs'. This is not to suggest that either writer influenced the other, rather that there was a certain commonality to such experiences. Kazin refers to the bodies 'piled like cordwood'. CBS reporter Ed Murrow, reporting from Buchenwald, uses exactly the same image in his radio broadcast: 'There were two rows of bodies stacked up like cordwood'. The image of corpses arranged like firewood is all the more disquieting for the knowledge of the crematoria.

This dehumanization is problematic: while it illustrates the degradation that the victims have been subjected to, it also perpetuates it. In the years immediately after the Second World War and before the term Holocaust took on its present meaning, camp survivors were commonly characterized as 'walking corpses', 'living dead' and even 'human wreckage'(Novick 2001: 68). Plath seizes upon this dehumanizing tendency and takes it to a further extreme, by creating a speaker unique in her barely repressed hostility.

The speaker's first utterance establishes a tension between 'us' and 'them'. 'They are always with us' but they will never be like us (nor we like them). The speaker's resentment of the thin people appears to stem from her perception that they wilfully maintain their emaciation (ll. 13, 14). Similarly to the way that the anorexic body has been read as a form of rebellion against patriarchal society's evaluation of female worth solely on criteria of beauty (Bordo 1993), so the speaker reads the thin people's continued emaciation as an act of aggression, willed and deliberate. Their pallor and thinness is an affront to the images of health, vitality and 'wholesomeness' which abound in the popular media of the time. In spite of post-war plenteousness, they:

> would not round
> Out their stalky limbs again though peace
> Plumped the bellies of the mice
> Under the leanest table.

The extravagance of post-war opulence is highlighted by the emphasis that the surplus waste is enough to fatten those who survive by scavenging upon it. The thin people's continued emaciation is disturbing as it keeps visible the knowledge of the Shoah. Maud Ellmann argues that

> . . . if eating is the route to knowledge, as the story of Genesis implies, is it possible that anorexia bespeaks a *flight from knowledge* masquerading as a flight from food? If so, the labor of starvation intimates a yearning to the ignorance before the Fall and to accede into the realm of the unnameable.
>
> (Ellmann 1993: 30)

As opposed to fleeing knowledge, the thin people are affirming their suffering by forcing others to acknowledge it. The Holocaust has been represented as an apocalyptic split; humanity can never return to its former 'innocence'. George Steiner has written:

> We are a post-Auschwitz homo sapiens because the evidence, the photographs of the sea of bones and gold fillings, of children's shoes and hands leaving a black claw mark on oven walls, have altered our sense of possible enactments. Hearing whisperings out of hell again we would know how to interpret the code, the skin of our hopes has *grown thinner.*
>
> (Quoted in Parmet 2001: 27, emphasis added)

Plath's speaker expresses socially 'unacceptable' feelings towards survivors of what would later become known as the Holocaust. Rather than pity or sympathy, she considers them with hostility as a threat. The danger they pose appears to be their effect upon consciousness and perceptions of the world. Even long after the end of the war they come 'Into our bad dreams, their menace/ Not guns, not abuses,// but a thin silence'.

The Allies had a policy of making civilians who lived near to liberated camps visit them so that they would be forced to confront the atrocities committed there. Video at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum shows civilians from Weimar being escorted around Buchenwald, in front of tables containing examples of 'scientific' specimens discovered in the camp and past a pile of naked corpses. This policy later extended to requiring German citizens to view films about the camps. This policy had two purposes. One was to document the atrocities and to make it as difficult as possible for the German population to deny their (passive and active) involvement in and responsibility for the crimes committed (Gladstone: 2005). There was also a punitive dimension to this practice. This can be felt in the sneering outrage in the caption *LIFE* photojournalist, Margaret Bourke-White, gave to her photograph of a young woman unable to look at a pile of bodies: 'Fräulein, you who cannot bear to look, did you agree about the Jews? Will you tell your children that the Führer was good at heart?'(Bourke-White 1946). In this way, the thin people's silence had already been used as a weapon by the Psychological Warfare Division of the Allied forces.

In 'The Thin People', the newly released survivors were 'wrapped in flea-ridden donkey skins,/[. . .] they wore// The insufferable nimbus of the lot-drawn/Scapegoat'. The speaker recognizes that they have been made into scapegoats and thus are being 'punished' for faults which are not theirs. However, 'lot-drawn' suggests both that they are victims taken at random, like a lot drawn from a tombola, and that this fate is somehow a destiny which is their 'lot'. Both ideas are problematic: considering the thin people as fated victims disguises the human agency which visited destruction upon millions of victims and considering them as random victims overlooks the highly organized, industrial-scale mechanisms put in place for the persecution of specific social or racial groups. 'Lot' also recalls the story of Lot's wife, destroyed for looking back at where she came, suggesting the speaker's dislike of being forced to consider the past. The use of the word 'insufferable' not only suggests the unbearable suffering caused by the Holocaust but also, and more disturbingly, betrays the speaker's impatience with the victims.

In 1958, Plath recorded an earlier draft of the poem, then called 'The Moon was a Fat Woman Once'. It contained lines that were omitted from the poem when it was published in *The Colossus* in 1960. In this draft, the people are wrapped in donkey pelts

> Or bits of burlap squatting together on granite
> Steps where the mica glinted at
> Noonday like broken glass
>
> (Plath 1999)

Mica was used for furnace and oven windows before heat-proof glass became readily available. The reference could be intended to suggest the

concentration camp crematoria, which jars with the 'prettiness' of the mineral sparkling in the sun. It also foreshadows Plath's 'Mary's Song' where Holocaust imagery is used to describe meat roasting as seen through an oven window. The speaker looking into the oven hints at an impossible act of witness. It calls to mind Lyotard's description of the Holocaust-denier's bad faith argument:

> In order for a place to be identified as a gas chamber, the only eyewitness I will accept would be a victim of this gas chamber; now, according to my opponent, there is no victim that is not dead; otherwise, this gas chamber would not be what he or she claims it to be. There is, therefore, no gas chamber.
>
> (Lyotard 1988: 4)

In the version published as 'The Thin People' the speaker claims that

> so thin,
> So weedy a race could not remain in dreams,
> Could not remain outlandish victims
> In the contracted country of the head.

By following this statement immediately with a highly individual folklore-inspired comparison with an old woman controlling the waning of the moon by carving it with a knife, suggest that it is in the speaker's imagination that the thin people cannot continue to be seen as victims. That they cannot remain *outlandish* victims suggests that they are no longer seen as victims or that one becomes acclimatized to the extremity of their suffering until it no longer appears more extraordinary than any other form.

The thin people first invaded the speaker's nightmares but could not be contained therein; they begin to contaminate her waking hours (ll. 32–35). The speaker's memories of having seen the thin people in the past have become an embodied presence in her present-day life. The thin people remain grey; however, they continue to live in the monochrome world of the news reel while the world around them turns to Technicolor. The image of the world filling with colour does not only suggest the speaker waking up, but also that after the 'night-time' of the war years the prosperity of the 1950s is reanimating the world, making life seem more vibrant. The continued presence of the thin people in the speaker's consciousness casts a shadow over this sense of optimism as the suffering of the past cannot be erased.

Two of Plath's short stories depict a child's first encounter with the atrocities of the camps; 'Superman and Paula Brown's New Snowsuit' and 'The Shadow'. In both cases, this involves 'accidentally' watching a film about a Japanese prisoner of war camp as part of a double bill. Also in both stories, the child is affected by what she sees, which causes her to have nightmares that destabilize her understanding of the world,

> The trouble was, in this dream, my sure sense of eventual justice deserted me: the dream incident had lost its original happy ending – the troops of the good side breaking into the camp, victorious, to the cheers of the movie audience and the near-dead prisoners. If a familiar color – the blue of Winthrop Bay, and the sky over it, or the green of grass, trees- suddenly vanished from the world and left a pitch-black gap in its place. I could not have been more bewildered or appalled. The old, soothing remedy 'It's not true, it's only a dream' didn't seem to work any more, either. The hostile, brooding aura of the nightmare seeped out, somehow, to become a part of my waking landscape.
>
> (Plath 1979: 335–336)

The loss of innocence provoked by the war film is compared to the loss of colour from the world, in 'The Thin People' the speaker pushes the metaphor further, blaming the victims personally for draining the world of colour by spreading their greyness like an infectious disease.

The speaker's overt hostility to the thin people arises both from resentment for the knowledge of their suffering and a feeling of being threatened by them. Renée R. Curry, in a study which reads poetic uses of 'black' or 'white' in racial terms, argues that the recurrence of the colour grey in this poem enacts a fear of miscegenation. Curry's argument rests on her contention that Plath often 'describes people in service to a masterful elite, but in this poem, she explores more deeply the threat posed to a white elite' (Curry 2000: 136). It does not appear self-evident from Plath's text that the distinction between 'us' and 'them' (non-thin and thin) equates to racial difference. However, in concentration camp slang, the prisoners who were in the final stages of starvation and were too weak to live were known as Musselmänner (Muslims). This suggests that extreme emaciation was already associated in the European imagination with ideas of race, culture and otherness.

The speaker of Plath's poem undoubtedly positions the thin people as 'other', resenting and fearing their simple presence, and their defining features of greyness and thinness are represented as contagious, in particular in the final three stanzas. In this respect, the speaker's attitudes could be read in terms of racist or segregationist discourse. A similar fear for the integrity of self-identity operates in 'The Thin People'. However, the pairing and opposing is between colour and grey, rather than black and white or even 'pure' colour and mixed colour. Grey is used mainly to denote *lack* of colour, but colours are not used in an unambiguously positive manner either. As discussed earlier, the opposition represented is between 'colourful' contemporary optimism and the sombre horrors of the past. However, the things described in terms of colour are either transient or artificial. As the speaker wakes from her nightmare, 'the dawn/ Grayness blues, reddens' and although colour overwhelms greyness the thin people themselves continue into the waking world. Also, the morning victory of colour over monochrome is temporary as at dusk night will fall and darkness will reign over colour. All the colourful trappings of the

post-war ideals of the perfectly kept modern family home are undermined (ll. 36–38). In 1950s, public discourse, the use of colour was far from ideologically innocent. During this time, there was also a sense that American freedoms and values were under threat from *Reds* and *Pinks*; in certain sectors, due to the McCarthyite witch-hunts, the fear of being put on a *blacklist* reached considerable proportions.

If the speaker initially felt that the thin people's silence was their greatest weapon, she later figures their threat in more traditionally martial terms. The thin people are considered in terms of an invading force against which 'we' have no defence:

> We own no wildernesses rich and deep enough
> For stronghold against their stiff
> Battalions.

The protection needed to halt the advance of the thin people is 'wilderness' as their threat is the spread of knowledge of their suffering. This knowledge is transmitted through modern 'civilized' technologies such as news reportage and radio broadcasts. The knowledge of the past that encroaches on the modern world is being disseminated via advanced media. If we accept that the thin people are Holocaust survivors, it is also worth noting that the Final Solution set in place a highly organized, industrialized murder operation based on highly evolved (civilized) business models (centralization, mass production).

In the earlier draft, this section begins 'they outnumber us in the towns, in the cities' (Plath 1999) which emphasizes the speaker's incredibly skewed perception of the threat and presence posed by the Holocaust survivors, if they are considered as 'actual' people. However, as it is more the knowledge of suffering which is in question, the speaker's perception of the menace stems from an impression that the representation of distress is ever-present. The language of this section also carries echoes of xenophobic propaganda about being 'invaded' by foreign aliens and having the current culture diluted then replaced by the incoming one. It would thus appear to strengthen Curry's argument that 'Plath situates the presence of the thin people as the deliverers of a miscegenetic grayness and singularity to the world' (Curry 2001: 136).

The thin people are figured as simultaneously an invasion and an infection. This recalls the Nazi regime's insistence that 'International Jewry' were manipulating the Allies into declaring war on Germany and the use in films such as *The Eternal Jew* (dir. Hippler, 1940), of images of swarms of rats to equate Jewish migration with the spread of vermin. In his diary, Goebbels associated assimilated Jews with sickness, writing that to remove them from Western Europe would be 'surgical' and the 'cut' must be 'a very radical one' or 'Europe will perish with the Jewish disease' (Tegel 2005: 82). To a far less malevolent degree, the idea of a threat being posed from within and without also arose in Cold War discourse.

Communism was imagined as both an invisible malignancy weakening society from the inside and as an external assault on American values.

The poem ends with the speaker apostrophizing the reader to observe the extent of the thin people's power:

> See, how the tree boles flatten
> And lose their good browns
> If the thin people simply stand in the forest,
> Making the world go thin as a wasp's nest
> And grayer; not even moving their bones.

The power of the thin people lies in their being able to affect the world without deliberately acting upon it. This final passivity jars with the previous image of the battalions, easily imagined marching. It reinforces the idea of the past as a disease which insidiously infects the present by the knowledge that one has of it.

The speaker is fearful of the survivors and resentful of knowing their suffering. It is only at the very end of the poem that she lets herself allude to those who did not appear in the newsreels of allied liberations of the camps because they did not survive. It is as though the ones she hardly dares to consider are those not captured by the camera; the millions of dead in unmarked graves in forest clearings or scattered to the winds, who are 'not even moving their bones'.

Both 'Daddy' and 'The Thin People' portray a fear of the contagion of violence. In 'Daddy' the speaker fears that she may have inherited her father's brutality and she figures herself as his victim. The use of the vampire myth emphasizes the idea of violence being transmitted and of the victim being turned into a victimizer. The speaker of 'The Thin People' feels threatened by her knowledge of the suffering of others. Her fear is that this will colour her own experiences and will insidiously contaminate the whole world. 'The Thin People' belies Plath's apparent willingness to align the speakers of her poems with the victims of the Holocaust, and, read alongside 'Daddy', demonstrates the highly ambivalent nature of her portrayal of victims.

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