

Kate Moses: On Ariel

Ariel as edited by Ted Hughes has a particular trajectory. It seems to be a narrative of a woman who is intentionally moving toward her self-destruction. Robert Lowell's foreword claimed "these poems are playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder" they tell that life, even when disciplined, is simply not worth it. And that became the way people saw Plath: defiantly suicidal, a lost cause from the start. Years later, with the publication of *The Birthday Letters* shortly before his own death in 1998, Hughes reiterated this idea that he was helpless to protect Plath against her own determined martyrdom.

So when I read Hughes' comments about Plath's manuscript of *Ariel*, I was dumbfounded. She started with "love" and ended with "spring"? Clearly Plath had another idea for the shape of the narrative of *Ariel*, and that narrative was largely unknown. Out of the countless writings on Plath, there was only one scholarly article about her version of *Ariel*, written by Marjorie Perloff, and no one had ever done a complete study of the *Ariel* manuscript and what it suggested about Plath as an artist and a human being. As a long time Plath reader, but without any desire to write about her?I thought everything of value had already been written?I went back to the *Ariel* poems in Plath's arrangement, based on the order appended in *Collected Poems*, and it was clear that the story she had created in her version of *Ariel* was entirely different from the published *Ariel*. Like the *Ariel* we all know, it too was mythic and archetypal and fierce, but it was very much a narrative about a persona, a woman, who was remaking her life after having it burned down to the ground, and she was rising to another place of survival and optimism. This stands in stark contrast to the published *Ariel*, which ended with the poem "Edge" in which a woman is perfected by her own death, her lifeless face smiling with accomplishment, and there's an image of her two dead babies curled on either side of her. "Edge" wasn't even in the original *Ariel* manuscript. Plath's *Ariel* ended with one of her cycle of bee poems, set in winter and asking the question, "Will the hive survive? to enter another year"? The poem, and so the book, ends with an image of rejuvenation, a declaration of optimism and survival: "The bees are flying. They taste the spring."

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