

The Confessing Tongue: Religious Allusions in Sylvia Plath's "Tulips"

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Though it employs the characteristically sincere and intimate confessional genre, Sylvia Plath's poem "Tulips" reveals a speaker deeply uncomfortable with the self-expressions, relationships, and spiritual discourses typical of confessional poetry. In the religious context, a confession manifests itself in three ways: in the words the penitent delivers to the priest, in the dialogue between the priest and the penitent, and in the prayers for spiritual renewal. The confession demands a connection with the self, another person, and the divine. It demands a commitment to community that Plath's speaker refuses to make. She shrinks from the tulip's spores, their "upsetting... tongues" (41), those "fleshy, muscular organ[s] in the mouth used for tasting, swallowing, and (in humans) articulating speech" ("Tongue," def. 1). Without the tongue's "fleshy" manifestation of the immaterial speech that prays, converses, and relates, Plath's speaker can make no confession. Nevertheless, the religious imagery in "Tulips," when joined with the definition of "tongue," develops a speaker who—just as the tongue links immaterial speech to the concrete body—incarnates the spiritual and returns from isolation to communication.

At the beginning of Plath's poem, the speaker maintains her distance from herself and any connections to the world outside the hospital. She asserts, "I am nobody; I have nothing to do with explosions" (5). The tulips' tongues represent these "explosions" for the speaker; they upset her "with their sudden tongues and their colour" (41). Materially, she finds the tulips "too red in the first place" and "too excitable" as they explode their colour into the speaker's "winter" in the hospital (36, 1), where she praises "how white everything is, how quiet, how snowed-in" (1–2). Symbolically, the tulips' tongues also explode with language. The speaker calls their tongues "sudden" in the same way a person might make a sudden, explosive comment. "Their redness" not only bleeds into the white room but also "talks to" the speaker's wound (39). The connection between physi-

cality and immateriality—tongue and speech, explosions of colour and explosions of language—upset the speaker and ironically explode her into her own confession, even if she initially only aims to confess her absence.

In the face of the tulips' physical and linguistic presence, the speaker fervently rejects the flesh of her tongue and the speech that could give her confession spiritual weight. She says, "I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses / And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to the surgeons" (6–7). In surrendering her "name" and "history," the speaker relinquishes the language that shapes her spiritual and intellectual identity. More radically, in giving her "body to the surgeons," the speaker also refutes ownership of the vehicle through which her rejected thoughts, feelings, and communications might have been realized. The speaker sells her body, tongue, and mind for absence and silence. She glorifies imagined dead who silently "[shut] their mouths" on peacefulness and says she enjoys allowing her "attention" the luxury of "playing and resting without committing itself" (35, 56). The speaker's idealization of disembodiment and silence builds a troubling paradox: in the very act of confessing, she undermines the confession's essential qualities of speech and spiritual participation. The tulips push the speaker to participate in the human connections within confession though she cannot, or will not, witness the implications of such a confession. She speaks only to announce her intention of falling silent; she participates only to declare she has been "swabbed clear of all" her "loving associations" (24), which would have formed an audience for the social implications of a confession in the religious tradition.

The speaker most adamantly rejects the association between herself and motherhood. Her "husband and child smiling out of the family photo" trap the speaker in a familial position (20). The "smiles catch onto" the speaker's skin like "little smiling hooks" (21), physically and emotionally attaching her to others. The speaker views her role as wife and mother as a violent assault against the "nobody" she wants to become (5). She compares the tulips to "an awful baby" breathing "lightly through

their white swaddlings” (38). While her statements could read as a refutation of gender roles, the speaker’s obsession with isolation indicates that her refusal of motherhood has more to do with the social responsibilities motherhood creates. The tulip baby demands care and commitment that the speaker longs to avoid. And yet, the poem’s diction juxtaposes this absentee mother with the most present female figure in Christian consciousness.

The speaker receives the tulips in “white swaddlings” the same way Mary, Mother of God, wrapped the infant Christ in “swaddling clothes” (Plath 38; Luke 2:7). The speaker self-defines as Mary’s converse: unable to act as the participatory, brave figure that Mary represents. Roman Catholics laud Mary as the physical vessel that held the divinity of Christ, the same way the tongue incarnates language. Just as the tulips explode their colour and speech into the speaker’s environment, so does Christ explode into the world through Mary’s willingness to accept an important social role. Mary calls herself the “handmaid of the Lord” who will serve God with her body (Luke 1:38), but she also professes spiritual commitment as her “soul doth magnify the Lord” (Luke 1:46). The speaker, however, feels unable to undertake the complex societal relationships that Mary accepts. The speaker says that the tulips “are subtle: they seem to float, though they weigh me down” (Plath 40). Indeed, Mary’s role as intermediary entails bearing such weight, not only in carrying the “awful baby” as the simple, awe-filled Christ Child but also in holding the adult weight of the “red” and bloodied Christ “wrapped in... linen” (Plath 36; Luke 23:53) for burial. The speaker’s assertion that the tulips are “too red” and that they “hurt” her suggests that she most fears addressing this pain in her confession (36), the “redness” that “talks to her wound” and “corresponds” with the pain of others (39). Whether that pain is Mary’s, Christ’s, or—more literally—the pain of tulips’ sender, the flowers remind the speaker that her “wound” connects to other wounds. Despite her desire for isolation, the speaker continues to define herself in terms of these religious figures that symbolize a strong communal connection. She cannot swab

away her “loving associations” (24); the network of such associations is woven into the very fabric of her language and, even when she falls silent, it remains woven into her consciousness.

The poem’s very existence indicates a flaw in the speaker’s attempts at silence, passivity, and isolation. In her insistence that she is “no-body” (5), the speaker does, in fact, express herself. Her very proclamation of intellectual absence reveals her current presence. In the same way, the speaker’s self-comparison to communal religious figures—even as she denies her need for community—actually reveals what a crucial position the collective metaphors of religious discourse occupy in the speaker’s conception of herself. While asserting her desire to “be utterly empty” the speaker briefly owns her “turned up hands” (30), if only to contain emptiness within them. In her discussion of absence, her reference to her body indicates she may be aware of her need for physical presence as well as her need for transcendent symbols like Christ and Mary. She turns her hands upward the same way Christ’s palms open on the cross. As the tulips’ redness “talks to” her “wound” and “corresponds” (39), words directly enter her flesh in the same way Christ, the “Word” of God, “became flesh” and received a wound in that flesh (John 1:14). The speaker cannot dispose of her “history to the anaesthetist,” her “body to the surgeons,” or the pain of the “wound,” because they are not hers alone to dispense with (7, 39). Rather, the speaker “corresponds” with a communal spirituality that requires a dialogue with the exterior world (39). She employs this dialogue even when declaring that she does not belong to such a society. Despite herself, the speaker always belongs to a social context riddled with communication through speech and symbol. She cannot elude her responsibility to participate in it.

The word “tongue” once again unlocks a transition in the speaker’s confession as she more explicitly recognizes her social reality and her social obligation. The tulips, brought into the speaker’s hospital room from the outside, speak to her with “sudden tongues.” The second entry for “tongue” in *The Oxford English Dictionary* reads “a style or manner of

speaking,” bringing to mind the kind of explosive language that repels the speaker at the beginning of the poem. Later in the text, the speaker emphasizes the tulips’ tongues not only as explosive language but also as sharp rebukes issuing from personified faces. The speaker’s announcement that “now I am watched / The tulips turn to me” characterizes the tongues as representative of this social force imposing itself onto the speaker’s indifference (43). The speaker lies not only “between the blanket and the sheet cuff” but also “between” the human features of the “eye of the sun and the eye of the tulips” (8, 47). Though the speaker had “wanted to efface” herself (48), the personification of the tulips’ tongues reminds her that she belongs to a larger society that continues to exist in relation to her. The tulips and the community they represent “watch” and “turn to” the speaker with recognizably human features that demand a response.

This imposition of relationship also occurs at the level of religious imagery in the poem. The “sudden tongues” of the “vivid tulips” that, like flames, “eat” the speaker’s “oxygen” (41, 49) indirectly allude to the biblical descent of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles in the “tongues, like as of fire” (Acts 2:3). This miracle solidifies the Apostles’ commitment to Christianity and enable them “to speak with other tongues,” other languages (2:4). Christ charges them to “be witnesses” for him in “the uttermost part of the earth” (Acts 1:8). The descent of the tongues of flame represents the moment of conversion. The word “conversion” originates in the Latin verb “convertere” meaning “to turn about” (“Conversion”). The Psalms employ the same kind of language of conversion found in Acts: “All the ends of the world shall remember and TURN unto the LORD: and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before thee” (Psalms 22:27). The tulips “turn” to the speaker just as the apostles turn—not only to their personal spiritual commitment but also to the wider global communities where God calls them. Similarly, the tulips’ tongues dissolve the speaker’s “winter” and challenge her to break from her own internal landscape and consider society, that “country far away as health” (1, 63). The speaker, so intent on not committing, must join the tradition of commitment, community, and

speech in which her own body can associatively hold divinity.

While the speaker previously glorified the seemingly passive dead who “shut their mouths,” these dead fall silent so that they can taste the “Communion tablet” (35), which is, for Catholics, the extreme unction between the individual and the physical presence of Christ. The tongue—that “fleshy, muscular organ in the mouth”—is, after all, the part of the body that enables one of the most corporeal human experiences: tasting and eating. While the tongue articulates spiritual and intellectual concepts in speech, it also allows for the meal, one of the most primitive and yet most intimate expressions of love. This meal of the “Communion tablet” demands a physical response from the speaker. She returns to the body that she had rejected and, in accepting her body, acknowledges the symbolic associations imprinted in her physicality—the same way that the abstract concept of love manifests in the physical consumption of bread and wine. In the final lines of the poem, the speaker becomes the Communion vessel. “And I am aware of my heart,” the speaker says, “it opens and closes / Its bowl of red blooms out of sheer love of me” (60–61). The “water” the speaker tastes is “warm and salt, like the sea,” perhaps from her own tears (62). The “bowl” of the speaker’s heart that “blooms” blood resembles the Eucharistic chalice full of Christ’s blood, which he poured out for love of humanity in the same way that the speaker’s bowl “blooms” and pours for her own “love.” She addresses the “wound” she once avoided (39), and her own body combines blood and water in a mirror image of wine mixing with water in the Eucharistic chalice. This union symbolizes the union of divinity and humanity in Christ. The same mix of spirit and body, immaterial and physical exists in the tongue and in the speaker herself. Only when the speaker becomes “aware of” her body through her pumping “heart” can she accept herself as the Mary figure: the sacred “bowl” for the “sheer love” of the divine and the mortal (60, 61). She then accepts her presence within the physical, social, and spiritual aspects of the confessional genre.

Throughout the poem Sylvia Plath’s speaker avoids and rejects the physical, communal, and spiritual participation the confession demands

of her. She finds the tulips' tongues, symbolic of the connection between material and immaterial, "upsetting" and tries to maintain disembodiment as well as spiritual and social absence (41). She refuses her connection with Mary, Mother of God, fearful of joining the community that acknowledges the creation and sacrifice that Mary represents. Yet, the speaker inevitably defines her absence in terms of these symbols. She compares her hands and her "wound" with those of Christ and, despite her insistence on lying "quietly" (39, 3), speaks a poem. The presence of Communion on the tongue physically grounds the speaker and promotes her participation as the chalice that receives, contains, and distributes both the substantial and the intangible. While the speaker's adamant inactivity and silence barred her from delivering a true confession, she does make one in the last few lines of the poem. The speaker declares that while the water and the "warm and salt" of her own tears belong to her, they also come from a greater "country" called "health" (63). She finally recognizes her inherent needs for association, her inability to isolate. She confesses her humanity.

I am a third-year student in the English Honours Program at the University of Victoria. This paper started as a "one word" analysis for my English 310 class with Dr. Alison Chapman. I revised it several times, each time digging deeper and deeper into the religious imagery of the poem. Though "Tulips" is not an overtly religious poem, I believe that the shadowy undercurrents of Christian scripture and culture add to our understanding of the tension between isolation and community that pulls and pushes within Plath's work. Aside from Plath, I enjoy Blake, Tennyson, the Rossettis, and, of course, Shakespeare. The Honours program has taught me to always look for mysteries within poems and to be comfortable with not always fully solving that problem in the work. Sometimes the problematic contains the most beauty of all.

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