

Plath, Sylvia
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Article Text:

Sylvia Plath (1932-1963), poet and novelist, was born in Boston, Massachusetts, on 27 October 1932, the first child of Otto and Aurelia Schober Plath. Forty-seven at the time of her birth, Otto Plath had emigrated from his native Prussia in 1901, receiving a doctorate from Harvard in 1928 (published as *Bumblebees and Their Ways* in 1934) before lecturing at Boston University, where he met Aurelia, a second generation Austrian-American student. Plath spent her infancy in the seaside town of Winthrop, Massachusetts, during which she developed a profound attachment to her reticent and distant father. In 1940, following an emergency amputation of a leg (the result of an untreated diabetic condition), Otto died, and the family moved inland to Wellesley. Plath would never recover from this loss, whose presence can be felt throughout her work.

A precocious pupil from infancy, Plath immersed herself in an obsessive pursuit of academic distinction, and the maternal praise it elicited. Having excelled at Wellesley's Bradford High School, she won scholarship to Smith College. Here she engaged in a wide range of extracurricular activities, editing the *Smith Review* and publishing short pieces of fiction in various national periodicals, such as *Seventeen*, *Christian Science Review* and *Mademoiselle*. The latter, impressed by her contributions, offered her a coveted guest editorship on its annual student issue and as a result Plath spent the summer of 1953 in New York -- a profoundly alienating experience that, combined with a rejection from a Harvard writing class, precipitated a profound depressive episode. Initial attempts at treatment (in the form of a traumatic course of electroshock therapy) exacerbated her condition, and she attempted suicide. Placed in Belmont's McLean Hospital (where she entered analysis and received a further course of EST), Plath recovered her equilibrium and in early 1954 returned to Smith. Despite this apparent recovery (in 1954 she graduated *summa cum laude* and gained a Fulbright Scholarship to study at Cambridge), Plath was fundamentally altered by the events of 1953 -- the subject of her sole novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963).

Enrolled at Newnham College, Cambridge, Plath began contributing verse to student magazines and as a result met Ted Hughes, whom she married on 16 June ('Bloomsday'), 1956. Upon the completion of her MA, the couple relocated to America -- Plath having secured a post at her alma mater. While Hughes's *The Hawk in the Rain* (1957) had established him as a major new voice in English poetry -- thanks in part to his wife's tireless promotion of his work -- Plath still struggled to find her own, and during her year at Smith became convinced that the vocations of academic and writer were irreconcilable. Emboldened by the *New Yorker*'s acceptance of two poems ('*Mussel Hunter at Rock Harbour*' and '*Nocturne*') she quit Smith, settling with Hughes in Boston. Here Plath attended Robert Lowell's poetry workshop, where she met Anne Sexton. Both encounters were crucial, Lowell introducing her to the possibilities of the recent 'confessional' turn in American verse, and Sexton to poetry's potential for articulating the specificity of female experience. Plath also voluntarily resumed Freudian analysis with Dr Ruth Beuscher -- who had treated her at McLean (an institution that also featured in Lowell and Sexton's personal crises).

After a summer spent touring America, Plath spent three months at Yaddo (an artists' retreat in Saratoga Springs, New York). The poems written during her stay (which include 'The Manor Garden', 'Mushrooms', 'The Colossus' and 'Poem for a Birthday') saw Plath, whose verse had hitherto struggled under the weight of its influences (notably Gerard Manley Hopkins, Dylan Thomas and Roethke) and rigid prosody, move towards the lucid, measured immediacy of her greatest work. Plath was now ready to issue her first collection and on her return to Britain in late 1959 the volume was accepted by Heinemann. *The Colossus* and other poems (1960), was well, if not widely, reviewed, notably by A. Alvarez, who sagaciously observed that the verse left an impression of a poet 'continually menaced by something she could see only out of the corner of her eye'.

In April 1960 Plath gave birth to her first child, and for the rest of the year the role of young mother temporarily eclipsed that of poet. Plath suffered a miscarriage early in 1961, together with a spell in hospital for an appendectomy (the occasion of one of her most accomplished poems, 'Tulips'), misfortunes that appear to have galvanised her creativity, so that by the summer she had completed a draft of *The Bell Jar*. In August the Hugheses left London for Court Green, a former rectory in North Tawton, Devon, where, in January 1962, Plath gave birth to her second child. Plath now began to incorporate various elements of her new environment into her verse; nevertheless, the powerful tropism towards the inner world held sway. In March 1962 she drew on her various experiences of pregnancy to produce 'Three Women', a verse play for the BBC broadcast later that year, and in April she wrote 'Elm' -- whose direct address, compounded imagery, and taut three-line stanza form can be seen as inaugurating the Ariel Poems.

In the autumn of 1962, Hughes' marital infidelity resulted in the couple's separation. Plath remained in Devon with her children, and entered a period of extraordinary creativity whose intensity and concentration is comparable to those that crowned the work of Keats and Rilke.

Thus, in the space of three months, writing at 'four in the morning -- that still, blue, almost eternal hour before [. . .] the baby's cry [. . .] the glassy music of the milkman', Plath composed some forty lyric poems of startling originality and force. Distinguished by their telegraphic urgency and concentration, the Ariel Poems can be seen as recording a descent into the (individual and collective) unconscious. For instance, the earliest of these poems, which ostensibly recounts Plath's experiments with bee keeping, bristles with barely constrained irrational forces (the bees resemble 'a box of maniacs [. . .] with the swamy feeling of African hands / Minute and shrunk for export [. . .] angrily clambering'), whose symbolic relation to Otto Plath (known to his colleagues as the 'Bienen-König' or 'bee king') is implicit. In the poems that follow, these forces are confronted in a ritual of symbolic death and rebirth (the latter recorded in 'Lady Lazarus' and 'Fever 103'). The intensity of this process, with its auto-da-fé of parental imagos, enabled Plath to uncover and articulate the deeper patterns and archetypes implicit in her own experience. Thus, 'Daddy' passes from biographical commemoration -- Otto as 'marble statue with one gray toe' (an allusion to the amputation that led to his death) -- to father substitutes -- 'the vampire who said he was you, and drank my blood for [. . .] seven years' (a reference to her relationship with Hughes) -- to invoke a history of patriarchal power: 'Every woman adores a Fascist'. 'Medusa', in its rejection of the biographical mother ('Old barnacled umbilicus, Atlantic cable / [. . .] Tremulous breath at the end of my line'), invokes a primordial world of suffocating and treacherous maternal relations (underscored in the title's play on Plath's mother's name; Aurelia Medusa being the name of particular species of jellyfish). As Stevenson notes (1989),

'though plainly a poet of her "self"', Plath was 'a surrealist of internals, seeking [. . .] the archetypes and patterns working within them'.

Confident that these poems 'would make my name' and suffering from the strain of caring for two young children, Plath returned to London in December 1962, renting rooms in 23 Fitzroy Road (a former residence of W.B. Yeats). The following month saw the publication of *The Bell Jar* by 'Victoria Lucas' -- issued pseudonymously to spare the feelings of those (not least Aurelia) unflatteringly portrayed therein. In the last fortnight of her life Plath, who had written nothing since returning to London, produced a series of poems that, in retrospect, provide a perfect coda. In contrast to the 'egotistical sublime' of the previous months' poems, the final poems are eerily dispassionate, employing much of Plath's signature imagery with such concentration that they give the impression of a final summation. Thus 'Daddy's' exaltation that 'The black telephone's off at the root / The voices just can't worm through' returns as 'the black phones on hooks [. . .] Voicelessness. The snow has no voice' ('The Munich Mannequins'), installing a radical ambivalence in its declaration, 'daddy, you bastard, I'm through'. Given this terminal ellipsis, it is difficult not to see her final poem 'Edge' as a threnody: 'The woman is perfected [. . .] Her bare / Feet seem to be saying / We have come so far, it is over', over which presides the moon (frequently associated with the maternal and feminine in Plath's verse) who has 'nothing to be sad about / [. . .] She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag'.

On 11 February 1963, with a deliberation that left little doubt as to the finality of her decision, Plath, having placed bread and milk by her sleeping children, sealed her kitchen and leaving the gas oven on, ended her life.

Having died intestate, the control of Plath's estate passed to her husband, whose first act in this capacity was to revise the manuscript of her projected second volume, excluding a number of poems and inserting a selection of those written in 1963 (the original manuscript was eventually published as *Ariel: The Restored Edition* in 2004). On its publication in 1965, *Ariel* was immediately recognised as significant and (being preceded by articles in the British press that recounted the circumstances of its composition) attracted a large readership. The 1966 American edition (introduced by Lowell) was likewise embraced by reviewers and readers. In 1971 Hughes issued two further volumes (*Crossing the Water* and *Winter Trees*) of her unpublished verse, and sanctioned the American publication (under Plath's own name) of *The Bell Jar* . Its account of a young woman enucleated by the impossibility of reconciling self-determination within the restrictive gender roles offered by society resonated with a generation engaged in the struggle for women's liberation, and the novel became a bestseller; thus the work realised Plath's ambition to create a female *The Catcher in the Rye* . *The Bell Jar* 's cult status was a source of additional pain for Aurelia Plath, who attempted to block its publication, and in the hope of demonstrating its vision 'was not the basis of Sylvia's personality', published a selection of her daughter's correspondence, *Letters Home* (1975), and a volume of verses for children, *The Bed Book* (1976). In 1977, Plath's estate published her short fiction as *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* , while in 1981 the Pulitzer prize-winning *Collected Poems* was published (edited and annotated by Hughes). The first edition of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (1982) was effectively redacted by Hughes , and has been supplanted by the unexpurgated edition, published in 2000.

Even in the context of post-war American confessional poetry, the centrality of Plath's life to the themes and development of her art is unprecedented, and the apparent necessity of

establishing their relation have made both the subject of disparate and often contentious readings. Generally Plath's writing has been seen in terms of symptomatology. Thus, initial responses to *Ariel* found in it evidence of individual pathology ('in her vision [. . .] the myopic eye of anguish not only distorts the observed world but threatens to obliterate it'; John Malcolm Brinnen, 'Plath, Jarrell , Kinnell , Smith ', *Partisan Review* , Winter 1967) or as adducing a wider cultural malaise. In this light the propriety of her most celebrated poems' allusions to the Holocaust became a source of controversy, some feeling that it 'did not respect the real incommensurability to her own experience of what took place' (Leon Wieseltier, 'In a Universe of Ghosts', *New York Review of Books* , 1976, cited by Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* , 1991), others regarding it as a 'more than a personal statement [. . . which] by extending itself through historical images, defines the age as schizophrenic' (C.B. Cox and A.R. Jones, 'After the Tranquilized Fifties, Notes on Sylvia Plath and James Baldwin ', *Critical Quarterly* , 1964, cited by Linda Wagner-Martin, ed., *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage* , 1988).

The status of Plath's work was transformed by feminism, whose its insistence on the primacy of gendered experience problematised any easy distinction between the personal and the cultural. From this perspective, Plath's invocation of Nazism in poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' bore witness to a pervasive phallogocentric violence at whose extremity lay the atrocity of the concentration camps:

I watched the men walk about me in the office. They were so flat!

[. . .]

That..flatness from which ideas, destructions,
Bulldozers, guillotines, white chambers of shrieks proceed
(*'Three Women'*)

Hughes 's relation to Plath and his control of her corpus came under scrutiny in this context -- for example, his destruction of Plath's final journal (to spare his children later trauma) and his modification of *Ariel* , which originally opened with the word 'love' and concluded with 'spring'. Such acts were seen as attempts to mutilate a body of work which traced Plath's liberation from the 'old whore petticoats' of various false personae, allowing her at last to 'out of the ashes [. . .] rise with my red hair'. Jacqueline Rose's ground-breaking analysis (*The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* , 1991) identifies a hidden congruence between this account and Hughes 's own analysis -- in which Plath's canon traces a quasi-Jungian process of individuation, whose goal is the 'Ariel voice' -- the incandescent rage and purity of image that characterises her best-known poems.

For Rose (see Christina Britzolakis's *Sylvia Plath and the Work of Mourning* , 1999) such readings project 'retrospective teleologies' with the aim of establishing a psycho-biographical narrative. This tendency finds its clearest expression in the multiple biographies that Plath's life has occasioned, and that augmented the aura of disreputation that has marked her critical reception. For example, Edward Butscher 's *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (1976) cast Plath as the victim of an obsessive 'Electra search', Linda Wagner-Martin's *Sylvia Plath: A Biography* (1988) as that of Hughes 's cruelty, while Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Flame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989) attempted to exonerate Hughes by stressing her fatalism (as does Ronald Hayman 's *The Death and Life of Sylvia Plath* , 1991). In opposition to these unilinear narratives, recent criticism has stressed the plural and incommensurable 'voices' of Plath's corpus; thus, for example, the perpetually bright, solicitous tone of *Letters Home* , the self-lacerating often vindictive personality of the *Journals* , and Esther Greenwood's colloquial, laconic narration in *The Bell Jar* combine to enrich and destabilise the putative self-presence

of the 'Ariel' voice. Moreover, from this perspective, a range of associated texts (and by extension their respective histories) become legitimate elements of the canon. This polyvocality bequeaths a far richer image of Plath, but the refusal of the 'fiction' of authorial identity risks sacrificing those facets powerfully foregrounded in Hughes 's maligned readings -- notably Plath's construction of a 'genetic code of symbolic signs that has few equals for consistency and precision' -- and the remarkable technical accomplishment (see also Tim Kendall, *Sylvia Plath; A Critical Study* , 2001).

Other books on Plath include Susan Bassnett, *Sylvia Plath* (1987), Robyn Marsack, *Sylvia Plath* (1992), and *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties* (1992) by Linda Wagner-Martin, who also edited *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage* (1988). Another source of biographical information is Ted Hughes 's *Birthday Letters* (1998), a volume of poems written over a long period of time, which record his relationship with Plath. The volume had an extraordinary impact; Hughes appeared to be setting the record straight, finally giving his version of events after years of reticence. Hughes makes several direct responses to individual poems of Plath's, such as 'The Rabbit Catcher', 'Wuthering Heights', and the reference to the 'panther' image of Plath's 'Pursuit' in 'Trophies'. The book also contains memorable images of the young Plath -- 'Your exaggerated American / Grin for the cameras, the judges, the strangers, the frighteners' ('Fulbright Scholars'); 'your face / A rubbery ball of joy' ('St Botolph's') -- and of the famous kiss/bite of their first meeting: 'the swelling ring-moat of tooth-marks / That was to brand my face for the next month. / The me beneath it for good.' ('St Botolph's').

The poems will clearly continue to provoke fresh interpretation of their relationship, with its elements of self-pity ('Nor did I know I was being auditioned / For the male role in your drama [. . .] As if a puppet were being tried on its strings, / Or a dead frog's legs touched by electrodes') and its combination of implicit and explicit judgments on her work. 'The Minotaur' is an interesting comment on Plath's creative process, with its description of Plath smashing a table in a fit of rage:

'Marvellous!' I shouted, 'Go on,
Smash it into kindling.

That's the stuff you're keeping out of your poems.

For good and ill, *Birthday Letters* is bound to ensure that interpretation of this major poet's work is dominated by discussions of the almost inescapable biographical aspects of her work.

JH , 2008