

Subject Sylvia

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In the June 18, 1966 issue of the *New Republic*, Stephen Spender reviewed Sylvia Plath's posthumous collection, *Ariel*, upon its publication in the United States. He admired the book. What he most admired was its preoccupation with the unconscious and its scarcity of autobiographical detail though he observed that, on re-reading, "the dark outlines of a mythology of people and places... among which the poetry is moving" began to take shape. He went on:

Probably at some later stage, critics will chart this autobiographic territory. One will be grateful when they do, but one can be grateful also that they have not done so already. Part of the impressiveness of these poems is the feeling they give the reader of finding his way darkly through a dark and ominous landscape. (71)¹

Spender's hope was already forlorn. A week earlier, *Time* had published its review of *Ariel*, accompanied by a spread of photographs, including a cheesecake shot of the young poet in a two-piece bathing suit, her blond hair striped by the sun. It opened:

On a dank day in February 1963, a pretty young mother of two children was found in a London flat with her head in the oven and the gas jets wide open. The dead woman was Sylvia Plath, 30, an American poet whose marriage to Ted Hughes, a British poet, had gone on the rocks not long before. Her published verses... had displayed accents of refinement, but had not yet achieved authority of tone. (118)

But within a week of her death, intellectual London was hunched over copies of a strange and terrible poem she had written during her last sick slide toward suicide. "Daddy" was its title: its subject was her morbid love-hatred of her father; its style was as brutal as a truncheon.

"A pretty young mother," a marriage "on the rocks," the "last sick slide" to suicide — the details were yet to be filled in, but the biographical relish with which Plath's story would be told

¹ Editor's Note: References to cited sources have been added to this essay and small modifications have been made to the text.

and retold (and the poems read) was firmly in place. In England, *Ariel* sold 15,000 copies in its first ten months — nearly as many as a bestselling novel. The allure wasn't just the poems; it was the story behind the poems.

Fifty years after Plath's death, the allure of that story has not diminished. Plath criticism has evolved from more to less strident, but for the most part it has remained resolutely focused on her life. Indeed, the last couple of years alone saw the publication of two novels about Plath — Emma Tennant's *Sylvia and Ted* and Kate Moses's *Wintering*, a far more affecting book. This fall, Diane Middlebrook, a Stanford professor, published *Her Husband*, an account of the poets' marriage as a "resonant myth" (xx). And finally, of course, there was Christine Jeff's glossy biopic, *Sylvia*, in which Plath, played by Gwyneth Paltrow, achieved an enduring place in Hollywood. The film, a stylish, morbid melodrama, positively luxuriates in its ability to reproduce every fetishized detail of Plath's persona, from the pink twinsets and dark red lipstick of her Cambridge days to the cowl-necks and dowdy braids she wore near the end of her marriage to Hughes.

This isn't tabloid sensationalism, exactly. Plath's life is interesting in its own right: as a literary match, Plath and Hughes are unparalleled, and together they knew nearly every interesting person in literary London. From the beginning Plath invested her story with a kind of mythic aura — think of the way she bit Hughes on the cheek when they first met. And it's undeniable that in Western culture the poet suicide has held a strange glamour, dating back to the age of Romanticism.

The fascination with Plath's life also had a political component. She killed herself the same year that Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* was published, and with the publication of her own copious journals and letters — detailing every injury to her psyche — immediately became feminism's poster girl. One of the key legacies of second-wave feminism, which was born almost simultaneously with Plath's death, is the idea that the personal is political. So naturally her earliest readers concerned themselves with her life. Hughes was made out to be a domineering brute who'd oppressed her delicate genius and her literary talents. ("Murderer," read the placards demonstrators carried at his readings.) Six years into their marriage, after all, he had left Plath (and their two children) for the translator Assia Wevill. Soon afterward, Plath killed herself. She was 30; he was 32. It didn't help that Hughes had destroyed Plath's final journal — to protect her children, he said — or that he and Plath's mother later edited Plath's journals before

their publication. All this made him an irresistible target; in indicting Hughes, feminist literary critics made much of the rack-and-screw imagery.

This much, at least, has changed: few in the cultural mainstream today would accuse Hughes of being a domestic torturer. In 1994, Janet Malcolm's *The Silent Woman* helped restore his profile (and belatedly gave some validity to Anne Stevenson's defense of Hughes in her Plath biography, *Bitter Fame*), revealing just how volatile and difficult Plath herself could be. And in 1998 Hughes, after a long, defensive silence, published an affecting, poignant final collection, *Birthday Letters*, addressed to Plath — redressing many of the wrongs she endured (or was thought to) at his hands. *Her Husband*, the first account of their marriage to incorporate *Birthday Letters* and the unedited journals of Plath that appeared in 2000, avoids assigning blame, briskly arguing instead that "Depression killed Sylvia Plath" (211). Diane Middlebrook tells the story of Plath and Hughes in the breezy, slapdash tones of a tour guide, aiming to make the poets' relationship over as a simple story of men failing in marriage.

Indeed, we're in what you could call a second age of Plath criticism. Where the first was characterized by stridency, anger, and the impulse to build Plath up, this one is characterized by the impulse to cut down to size and humanize an over-mythified icon. Moses's novel, *Wintering*, depicts Plath as a hopeful but sensitive woman struggling to find internal peace at a time when it was hard for a woman to make sense of her life as an artist and wife — let alone for an American estranged from her husband with two small children in postwar London. Moses has argued elsewhere that Plath's depression wasn't mania but an extreme version of PMS — a rethinking that makes Plath into an everywoman with bad luck. In *Her Husband*, Middlebrook suggests that Plath's death may have resulted from an allergic reaction to the anti-depressant her doctor gave her, which made her only more depressed.

Given the historical circumstances of Plath's death, it was perhaps inevitable that the poetry would end up being shortchanged. What's stranger is that the fascination with the life has not led to the benign neglect of the work, but has actually resulted in its being actively misread (even by people who have never really read it). A particularly striking example of this was the reaction critics had to *Sylvia*. A reviewer for *Salon* blithely asserted that Plath's work was "carping" (Zacharek). Writing in the *New Yorker*, Anthony Lane — generally a sensitive reader of poetry — bemoaned the poems' "self-absorption" and encouraged the film's viewers not to read Plath afterward; instead, he hoped they would find "better and saner things to do" (Lane). At

the time, when I told one colleague, a well-read journalist, that I liked Plath's work, he responded, "You mean you liked her when you were eighteen?"

This is unfortunate. Plath's work shouldn't be cavalierly dismissed, because she is one of the most original American poets of the second half of the century. The fascination with the grisly bits of her biography has caused emphasis to fall on the poetry's most heated, personal aspects — and indeed it's easy to imagine how lines like "Every woman adores a Fascist," repeated out of context, quickly come to seem more attitudinal than insightful (*Collected Poems* 223). But Plath was among the most publicly ambitious, disciplined, hard-working poets of the century. ("Left to myself, what a poet I shall flay myself into," she wrote (*Unabridged Journals* 381).) And her work is for the most part anything but adolescent and baldly confessional; rather, it's a mythic excavation of the unconscious. Her subject is the crucible of post-religious sentiment, the struggle of a self with the elemental forces around it — what Emerson called "the Not Me." At one point during *Sylvia*, Hughes (played by Daniel Craig) tells Plath that she herself is her own true subject, after she has recited some bit of nonsense about losing her father and wanting to die. What the real Hughes meant, though the film doesn't exactly know it, was that *Sylvia*'s experience of selfhood — not her daily catalogue of personal woes — is her subject.

Plath is often associated with confessional poets, a misreading partly caused by a series of historical accidents — among them the fact that Plath studied with Robert Lowell in Boston, in a class that included Anne Sexton, and that Lowell wrote the introduction to *Ariel*, in which he emphasizes her death-obsession. But as the expertly formal poems from her first book, *The Colossus*, suggest, the tides of the unconscious, rather than the impulse toward disclosure, dominated her poetics — see "Electra on the Azalea Path" or "Full Fathom Five." Plath did not, as many assume, write *Ariel* to be the kind of strip-tease personal revelation she describes — ironically — in "Lady Lazarus." In fact, we know from Plath's drafts that she systematically revised personal details out of her poems. Take the evolution of "Ariel," the title poem of her posthumous collection, as a textbook example of her poetic process. At its most basic level, the level of plot, it tells the story of a runaway horse. One would be hard-pressed to discern this from the poem, which opens:

Stasis in darkness.
Then the substanceless blue
Pour of tor and distances.

God's lioness,
 How one we grow,
 Pivot of heels and knees! — The furrow

Splits and passes, sister to
 The brown arc
 Of the neck I cannot catch. (*Collected Poems* 239)

These lines don't exactly spill over with self-disclosure. The speaker's sense of a thrilling self-imperilment is compressed to the point of abstraction. We are invited to pay more attention to the brush strokes, the paint on Plath's brush, than to the painting itself; during her drafting of the poem, Plath stripped away key details about the horse until it was rendered as a surrealist might render it.

Plath took pains to invest her poems with a mythic severity. But she understood the risks of relying on myth (and other great works of art) as bases for poems; in a 1957 book review, she admired a poem by C.A. Trypanis in which "the metaphor-moral" became "intrinsic to the poem, working back and forth on itself, not expressed prosaically at the close, like the moral of a fable" (Plath, qtd. in Wagner-Martin *Critical Essays* 18). For her, this achievement was hard-won, as a swift comparison to a precursor version of "Ariel," called "Whiteness I Remember," shows. It was completed in July of 1958, and is based on the same incident that "Ariel" was. The poem begins:

Whiteness being what I remember
 About Sam: whiteness and the great run
 He gave me. I've gone nowhere since but
 Going's been tame deviation. White,
 Not of heraldic stallions: off-white
 Of the stable horse whose history's
 Humdrum, unexceptionable, his
 Tried sobriety hiring him out
 To novices and to the timid. (*Collected Poems* 102)

The stylistic difference between the two poems is striking. "Whiteness I Remember" begins with an act of memory — a Wordsworthian recovery. The poet's relationship to the material is overt and controlled — so controlled as to seem tame. Playful, descriptive, the poem decorously tries

out poetic strategies, from the Frostian "I've gone nowhere since but / Going's been tame deviation" to "White / Not of heraldic stallions: off-white / Of the stable horse." Plath assiduously attempts to describe the horse, yet in pointing at Sam, she keeps pointing back to herself. The word "me" appears four times, at crucial moments ("Resoluteness / Simplified me"), where it appears once in "Ariel." In "Ariel" the poet becomes actor, not acted upon. "I" takes center stage — an elemental, almost impersonal "I," not Plath, exactly, but a force, a feeling:

And now I
Foam to wheat, a glitter of seas.
The child's cry

Melts in the wall.
And I
Am the arrow,

The dew that flies
Suicidal, at one with the drive
Into the red

Eye, the cauldron of morning. (239-240)

The only words that overlap in the two poems are "at one" — the elemental confusion of the self with the world around it being the poem's true subject, rather than the decoy word, "suicidal," which has stood out in readings of "Ariel." When one understands that the subject of the poem is, indeed, this notion of being "at one," the word "suicidal" is cast in a different light — as the shedding of the self, the "sui" that is no longer of paramount importance.

Of course, one of the most compelling aspects of Plath's story is the aesthetic transfiguration evident in the difference between these two poems. It's rare to witness a poet discover her voice as swiftly as Plath supposedly did, writing *Ariel* in some six months. The idea has dramatic appeal. But the formal transformation that occurred in Plath's work was years in the making. It's foreshadowed in the most quietly interesting line in "Whiteness I Remember": "Stirrups undone, and decorum." *Ariel* is a throwing off of decorum — thematically and formally. Gone are the studious applications of poetic practice; in their place is a new voice, one that was willing to be rude, ironic, sexual, and aggressive — all things that Plath's 1950s girlhood in Wellesley had encouraged her to avoid.

Ariel charts a series of spiritual attenuations, finding voice for the anger of waste, the anger of having been mistaken in one's sense of the parameters of the sublime. Hate and love are, as Spender noted in his prescient review, bound up in one; the poems spin through a dizzying set of self-corrections, of wry parries and attacks, until they begin to seem a kind of talking cure, at once light and witty if also aggrieved. The best poems in the book invent an entirely new music for the speaker's *weltschmerz*, a "diction that is galvanized against inertia" (to quote Marianne Moore on another subject), and they reveal a fabulously complicated sense of how to construct a poem as a series of tonal turns (500). Bolstering the brassy declarations of "Lady Lazarus" are quieter statements, such as the line "Oh my God, what am I" from "Poppies in October" (*Collected Poems* 240). Reminiscent of Hopkins and Hardy in its music, the line is so perfect in its simplicity and placement you think that surely someone has written it before.

Ariel has its weaknesses: there's a tiresome "I will survive" quality manifested in the poet's disdain for her readers and for the love object (Hughes, if you want to read literally). The word "moon" shows up more times than is excusable, even for someone under the influence of Robert Graves's *The White Goddess*. But to read *Ariel* and to focus on its most strident moments is to miss the breadth of Plath's achievement. Among its best poems are those like "Poppies in October" and "Tulips" and "Edge," which lack the grisliness of "Daddy" — not to mention "Morning Song," full of complicated tenderness toward the poet's children. Unsurprisingly, *Sylvia*, caught up in the poet's glooms, fails to consider the fact that Plath was among the first really good American poets to take motherhood as her subject.

What was more of a surprise was the critics' negativity about Plath. Where does this distaste for Plath's poetry originate? Oversaturation is partly to blame, but it doesn't fully explain the deeper ambivalence to Plath's work. An enduring question about her poetry — and one that's now almost impossible to answer — is to what degree the poems' illuminations truly are bound up in a personal sense of plight. The question endures because the poems themselves beg it, in a complicated way, by self-consciously flouting poetic and social "manners" at every turn. Early on in *Sylvia*, one of the St. Botolph's crowd Hughes ran with (and possibly Hughes himself) accuses her in print of writing "essentially commercial...bourgeois poetics...nakedly ambitious" poems (Jeffs). By the end of her life, one might have accused her of writing "essentially provocative, anti-bourgeois, nakedly ambitious poems." In both cases, it seems to be something about the poems' naked ambition — their willingness to flout boundaries and to hold up a new

set of preoccupations (motherhood; the crucible of an unstable self) as valid — that displeases. The critical anti-"Daddy" platoon — Irving Howe, Leon Wieseltier, and to some degree George Steiner — accused Plath of brazenly appropriating the Holocaust as a symbol for her own unhappiness. Cumulatively, theirs is an almost willful misreading of *Ariel*, exacerbated by the ubiquity of the biography, as a book simply about a woman's marital unhappiness. *Ariel* is no such thing; ironically enough, it was the combination of a subset of stodgy male critics and a contingent of angry feminists who conspired to have it read that way. To be fair, Plath left herself open to criticism: her handling of the Holocaust material, and her Hiroshima citations, still bear the crude marks of an apprentice at the operating table.

But it's the grotesquerie of Plath's imagination that may be responsible for the continuing ambivalence about her. Morbidity is an un-American quality. The great morbid writers — Poe, Baudelaire, even Rimbaud — wreath themselves in a baroqueness that is far more Old World than New. There is no American equivalent of "*mal du siècle*" or "spleen." The major American poets tend toward the exuberant — Whitman, Williams, Ginsberg — or the coolly lyrical (think of writers as different as Frost and Ashbery). Even Plath's fellow poet-suicide Hart Crane was a Romantic — and his tortured *jouissance* seems quintessentially American, whereas Plath's cold disdain makes her seem foreign. In some sense, Plath may not be a very American writer: beneath a surface of chirpy, aspirational hopes for the life codified by magazines like *Mademoiselle* (she hated England's small refrigerators), Plath was always somewhat detached from the world in which she was raised. And she spent much of her adulthood in England, coming deeply under the influence of Hughes's Celtic ruggedness, his love for the tracks of the fox. She read widely among Eastern European poets then emerging — Georg Trakl, Pasternak — as well as poets like Montale and Neruda. Our literature of disaffection tends to be the literature of melancholia: when that melancholia verges on anger (as in J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*, to which *The Bell Jar* bears comparison), that anger is usually rooted in a critique of the social status quo. Plath's anger, you feel, is like the "blood jet" she wrote about: "there is no stopping it" (*Collected Poems* 270). And though to read Plath's journals is to have American names and American slang assault the eyes, more often than not one feels as though Plath is trying the language out as a consumer might test a chair on a showroom floor, to see how much weight a phrase can bear, how much satiric torque it could take.

But Plath's grotesquerie goes hand in hand with a sense of sublimity that's easily

overlooked. As Linda Wagner-Martin pointed out in her recent book on Plath, *Sylvia Plath: A Literary Life*, "The temptation to do little but re-create Plath's biography through readings of her work — and implicitly, to try to unearth the complex reasons for her tragic suicide — overtakes the most focused reader" (133). And indeed Plath's poems, elliptical and plangent as they are, can be hard to enter without the aid of a master narrative. But Spender was right when he wrote in the *New Republic* that "Part of the impressiveness of these poems is the feeling they give the reader of finding his way darkly through a dark and ominous landscape" (71). It's too bad that recovering what he felt on reading *Ariel* isn't as simple as closing our eyes and listening to the poet's voice.

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