

## Excerpt from the 2007 Foreword to *Chapters in a Mythology*

Judith Kroll

I first heard the name Sylvia Plath shortly after entering Smith College as a sophomore transfer student in 1961. Less than a year earlier, I had not even known of Smith; my ambition had been to attend a state teachers' college. Somehow I wound up at Ithaca College for my freshman year and there, for the first time, I became excited about studying. I also learned about the Seven Sisters (the women's Ivy League schools) from a classmate who, when she heard I was thinking of transferring, told me I should apply to those colleges and to Smith in particular. So I came to Smith in a way very different from Sylvia Plath's. Chance, not ambition, led me to attend Smith, and some of my initial responses to the reputation of Plath - who had graduated just six years earlier, in 1955, and was still remembered as a star of the English department - may have arisen from this difference in background. My feelings were a mixture of resistance, fascination, envy, and curiosity.

I knew several faculty members who spoke of Sylvia Plath glowingly, but I heard the most about her from Professor Alfred Young Fisher, who taught two of my honors seminars. He had been Sylvia Plath's instructor for independent studies in poetry writing. Professor Fisher may first have mentioned Plath because he had seen poetry of mine in the campus literary magazine.<sup>1</sup> He invited me to bring some of my poems to his office. I made an appointment with him, expecting that he would read the poems to himself and then offer comments or suggest revisions.

Instead, he stood up and — in something like a performance, holding the few pages I had brought with me — he paced around his office, a good-looking man with a beautiful style of reading, sometimes pausing emphatically, as he recited my poems in a polished, theatrical voice.

I was embarrassed, and although he asked me to bring more poems to him, I never did. It also crossed my mind that this might have been his routine with Sylvia Plath. I imagined that she would have loved watching Professor Fisher perform her work; that probably anyone else would. My embarrassment was the main reason that I never pursued his offer of mentorship, but possibly also I was a little suspicious of him because I'd heard the rumors of his affairs with

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<sup>1</sup> Fisher had been one of the faculty advisors for *The Greccourt Review* when it was founded in 1957. Prior to that, the campus magazine was *The Smith Review*. Plath published in that magazine and also served on its editorial board during her junior and senior years.

students.

One day, when I arrived at his office for a conference about a seminar paper, Fisher said, 'Remember that girl I told you about, Sylvia Plath? She's published a book'. He was referring to *The Colossus*, the American edition that Knopf had brought out in 1962. (The UK edition had appeared in 1960.) He asked me to read *The Colossus* and discuss it with him. I ordered a copy from the local bookstore, and, when I received it, I read the poem on the dust jacket, 'Watercolor of Grantchester Meadows'. Somehow, given Fisher's enthusiasm (and even though I was not a particularly sophisticated reader of poetry at the time) I had expected more.

Then I read the book from cover to cover. I liked the rhythms and melancholy of 'The Eye-Mote' (particularly its Audenesque ending); I admired 'The Colossus' and sections of 'Poem for a Birthday', especially 'The Stones' sequence. But many of the poems did not hold my interest; a number seemed like exercises, and far too well-mannered. I did not have the perspective to describe what left me unsatisfied, but too often there were poems that, in their excessive restraint and self-conscious ironies, were uncomfortably close to, if far more accomplished than, what my classmate-poets and I tended to write — and what I, therefore, wanted to get away from. I remember thinking: 'She's like us, only better'.

The discussion Fisher and I had about *The Colossus* was lackluster. I had not been bowled over by the book, and he intuited and seemed disappointed by that. I don't know whether his disappointment arose entirely from my lack of response to work he thought extremely good; maybe also there was my reluctance to be recruited as his protegee. (He had said to me, 'You're exactly like her, a neurotic genius, except she's tall and blonde'. *That* put me off. I did not want to be 'exactly like' anyone, especially someone as 'rulesy' as Plath was said to have been.)

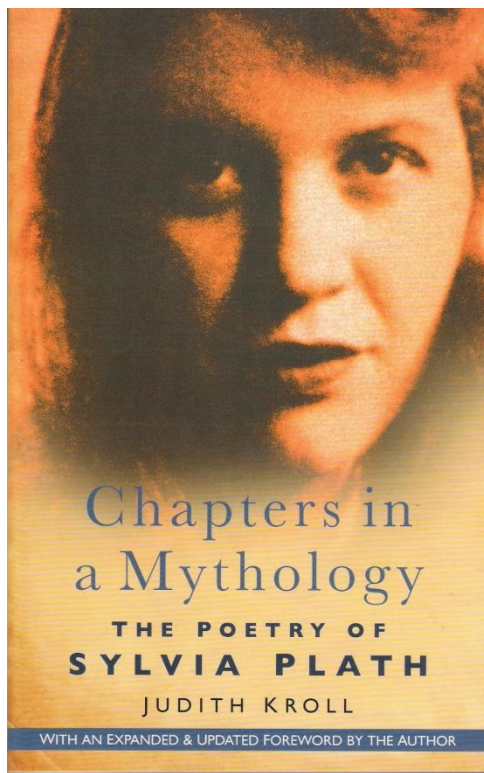
Not long after, in the spring of 1962, I mentioned to Fisher my plans to visit England and Ireland that summer. I would stop over in London, travel to Housman country, and attend the Yeats International Summer School in Sligo; I intended to write my senior honors thesis on Yeats. Again, Professor Fisher brought up Sylvia Plath, mentioning that she had been distressed about a case of writer's block and had asked him to send her some pink Smith College memorandum paper, for which she had a 'fetish'.<sup>2</sup> He urged me to contact her when I was in

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<sup>2</sup> A copy of *The Colossus* that Plath sent to Fisher and which included a sample of the pink Smith College memo paper (most of the *Ariel* poems are written on such paper) was acquired in 2005 by the University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill).

England - 'You must meet her', he said. I did not consciously decide not to meet her. I took the contact information that Professor Fisher offered. Yet somehow, once in England, I never made the attempt.<sup>3</sup>

Six months after my return from that summer trip, Sylvia Plath was dead. The story that I recall hearing initially was the one first told to and taken up by her mother, Aurelia Plath: that Sylvia had died of pneumonia. Later, perhaps from my Smith friends, I heard rumors that she had committed suicide.



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<sup>3</sup> Though I did not discover it for a few years, there were by now a number of Plath's interests I shared – the Tarot, seances, spirits, a Moon mythology. All these figured in my study of *A Vision*, Yeats's quasi-theosophical prose work. Spirits had communicated to Yeats, through his wife: 'We have come to give you metaphors for poetry'. The mythology, or system, elaborated in *A Vision* to a large extent involved symbols of gyres and of 'the phases of the moon'.