

"Empty Benches of Memory": Sylvia Plath, A Sketch

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"Most of the time I meditate on the opposite wall.
It is pink, with speckles. I have looked at it so long
I think it is a part of my heart. But it flickers."

from "Mirror" 23 October 1961

The most memorable of all Sylvia Plath's poems to me:

Course: English Poetry, Fall 2003.

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This was the first time I ever heard about Sylvia Plath. I became so fascinated by her delicate dealing with the notions of time and aging in this poem that something moved inside me at the time which I could not name. I needed years to pass by.

But I did not know anything about Plath except that she had committed suicide! I had two classmates, Samira and Hamed, who had been absorbed in her suicide, and it was they who aroused the interest in me toward this mysterious woman beyond the above poem. But I was too young, inexperienced and almost naïve about the ways of the world. Years should have passed by before I began to consider her seriously on more academic grounds.

Then I started my M.A. in the second semester of 2007 at University of Tehran, Tehran, Iran. Once again, for another course of poetry, Contemporary Poetry, I chose Plath's "Ennui," the Petrarchan sonnet which she had written during her undergraduate years at Smith College and was first published in November 2006 in the online literary journal *Blackbird*, for presentation in the class. I do remember that my professor was pretty excited by this poem of hers which was rather unknown among her other poems: by then I had decided to write my thesis on Plath. When I went back to my two previous professors at Shahid Beheshti University to consult with them about my project, they almost castigated me for choosing such a "mad and depressed woman" as

the subject of my thesis, the one who might have well driven me to depression and madness in their eyes! I deeply regretted their woeful ignorance. But I did not stop there. I was determined to conduct a comprehensive research on her, one that would make her known objectively and far from personal presumptions. Because I knew, maybe more intuitively than logically, that there was something more to her life and writing career. I could not just consider her husband's betrayal as the sole reason for her suicide. So I turned to the best professor of my M.A. course and asked him for guidance. And my grateful thanks will be always due to him since his words and instructions reassured me about the rightness of my decision. He had conducted his M.A. research on the American fiction writers of the 50s and 60s, encompassing different ones such as Ralph Ellison, Saul Bellow, John Barth and Thomas Pynchon. He introduced me to the notion of captivity or enclosure largely felt during the years after the Second World War in American society and its reflection in the works of many writers back then. The motif was pretty exciting because it would take me deep into the heart of American culture and society and would open up new doors to the unknown facts about Plath's agitation both as a woman and a poet. Taking his advice seriously, I equipped myself with the necessary outfit to start my intensive search. Finally, I started my research on my thesis on 11 August 2008, Monday. I ordered *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* edited by Karen V. Kukil, *Letters Home* edited by Aurelia Schober Plath, *Lover of Unreason* by Y. Koren and E. Negev, *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* by Sylvia Plath, *Birthday Letters* by Ted Hughes and *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* by Elaine Feinstein. I used many other related books in the libraries of the university and also borrowed many from my kind and supportive professor.

There were too many hovering questions in regard to Plath's life and works in my mind. I knew that there had never been only that single moment, her suicide, which had made up her whole life. There was something more voluminous upon which so busy a life had been based, and I should have known about it.

And yes, the woman I got to know between the lines was never the woman described to me by different people: a hysterical weirdo. She was unbelievably similar to me in her thoughts, attitudes and some of the difficulties of her life, no matter if she had lived half-a-century before me and miles away from me. I am sure this has not been only the case for me, since many other women all over the world have identified with her. Nevertheless, this similarity is surprising and saddening altogether: it is sad because the hardships in women's lives have not drastically

changed since then, especially the hardships in the lives of women in third world countries. In fact, not only are women in third world countries experiencing what American women were experiencing during the 50s, 60s and 70s, but also they are passing through these phases at a snail's pace, and this is truly tragic.

I cannot say that Plath has had an extraordinary effect on my life after knowing her. In fact, I have never tried to use neither her nor anybody else as a model. I have just tried my best to understand her and her plight as a woman. However, the one idea that I absolutely formed after knowing her was that committing suicide needs courage! Absolute courage! This does not mean that I encourage suicide; I just say that leaving behind everything you have fought for so hard during all the years of your life and ignoring them as paltry and nugatory is not something that everybody can take. What had she wanted the most throughout her life? A "wonderful husband . . . adorable children, a lovely home," and her writing (Plath, *Letters Home* 458). And in a single glance one can say that she almost had it all, no matter how contrasting the reality was, and yet she gave it up. But on the other hand, I cannot help considering her as a very calculating woman in her apparent revenge: by killing only herself, and not folding her children "back into her body as petals/ Of a rose close. . .," unlike Assia Wevill, Hughes's mistress, who killed herself together with her daughter, Plath made a wheel move that does not seem to stop (Plath, *The Collected Poems* 273). It is very obvious that she could not outdo Hughes in his liaison even if she did exactly what he had done to her. There should have been some other way, something everlasting, burdensome, intense, downcast and gloomy. By leaving her children motherless to the hands of a FATHER who was already burdened by notable responsibilities of an aspiring writing career, and making them look into his eyes day after day, for many years, seeing her there, remembering her all and his own "insane decisions," Plath had already cast black netting over a large clan, shadowing all their past, present and future, leaving them a little space to breathe (Koren & Negev 215). She changed herself to an omnipresent and loud image in the minds, eyes and hearts of the people around her who saw her predicament, but did nothing to alleviate it, above all, her so-called husband and his devouring mistress. Plath had to leave an ever-going fire in posterity to glow. She could just not leave without leaving a long path behind, the path which at best would only take them to her memories, not to HER.

But once cast, the dice of death could never stop there: thereafter it took Assia Wevill, her daughter Shura, Hughes's mother, Assia's father, and finally poor Nicholas Farrar Hughes,

the most similar to Plath in appearance and perhaps in demeanor among her two children. What would have Plath said of his death? How does Frieda Rebecca Hughes go on with all this agony, being the only spared person of Plath-Hughes's saga?

The tragedy of human follies which in the twinkle of an eye accelerates the normal paces of simple events into a chain of uncontrolled cataclysms is just draining. And I have always asked myself what Plath thought exactly at the moment of her death? What lives did she live in those seconds that she was choking with the thick gas fumes? What places did she travel to/from? What did she say to all the people whom she knew? What did they tell her? And why didn't she sway away from her decision in the lap of strangling dioxide particles? And what about Ted Hughes, Assia Wevill and Nicholas Farrar Hughes in their last moments and seconds?

In fact, the silent death Plath chose to die is more than telling: not leaving any notes behind for anybody, not willing anything to anybody and not destroying her unfinished works, making them an utmost apposite prey to acquisitive hands, shows the pitch of her revulsion. It is usually the case with people who have actually a lot to say, so much that they are almost throttled, but they choose other way round instead: muteness. And it is their speechlessness that makes their congested words louder than what they might be.

Nevertheless, one may say that the last poems she left behind are more than disclosing. But the pique and disenchantment expressed in her poems are so veiled, so indirect, so symbolic, so implicit and so covered that they can never be a substitute for her otherwise ear-splitting cries of wrath and disappointment she could have expressed in person had she chosen to talk.

And God knows what gruesome infernos Hughes and his "true wife and the best friend" he ever had, namely Assia Wevill, had been through after Plath's suicide, despite their attempts in wearing their dignified stance (214). Yet "[g]ilt is the ever-smoldering ember plucked from the suicide pyre and hastily passed from hand to hand, its scorch too agonizing to bear" (117). And this is exactly the case for Ted Hughes, who declared in his London interview on 8 October 1996 to Yehuda Koren & Eilat Negev that Plath's "death was complicated and inevitable, she had been on that track most of her life" (215). But this is so unfair. Linking her death only to "a troubled background, a death wish, and emotional instability" or the unfortunate prescription of anti-depressants in the winter of 1963 that made her suicidal or the publication of *The Bell Jar* and the worries over its possible libel against different people is only a sign of great irresponsibility of Hughes toward people (217). It seems as if Hughes here is reflecting Plath's own words in her

journals that when "an act recedes into the past and becomes imbedded in the network of one's individuality it seems more and more a product of fate- - inevitable . . . Is it not that a particular act becomes inevitable, while obviously so, since completed" (91). As I have said earlier, though I could not just consider Hughes's unfaithfulness as the sole reason for Plath's suicide at the time I began to know her, but I cannot overlook this very contributing factor either as what Hughes does plainly in his reasoning above.

All this is not to say that Hughes should have not left her (apparently there were strains in the marriage), or why they could not make it a happy and everlasting marriage, it is just to say that Hughes should have not abandoned her LIKE THAT: leaving her so high and dry as if running from a jailer. His treachery with a married woman who had already double-crossed her three husbands should have been his last choice for estranging a wife, mother and blooming writer who strived to make it all in her small world. I even do not mention all his advertent or inadvertent flippancy in dealing with Plath's legacy immediately after her death and depriving scholars and readers from her publicly unknown works and literary endeavors.

Therefore, I do believe that Plath's death could have been avoided if she had tasted a drip of hope in that cold and dim winter of 1963. There are instances both in her journals and letters home that show her love of life and hopefulness, despite all those lonely days after Hughes had left her: on November 7, 1962 she wrote to her mother "I am so happy and full of fun and ideas and love. I shall be a marvelous mother and regret nothing. I have two beautiful children and the chance, after this hard, tight year, of a fine career—schools and London in winter, [*the house in Devon*], daffodils, horse riding and the beautiful beaches for the children in summer" (*Letters Home* 478). She could have been spared her life only if after visiting Hughes in his flat at 110 Cleveland Street on Thursday, 7 February 1963 and declaring that "the whole crazy divorce business was a bluff," she had not spotted the restored red Oxford volume of Shakespeare's plays that she had slashed in a jealous rage a year and a half earlier, inscribed by Assia Wevill as a consoling gift to Hughes, and only if she had not learned about Assia Wevill's pregnancy if she ever did (Koren & Negev 114). By then she knew there would be no way back, no hopes for keeping her small family unified as it used to be only a few years earlier, and that all of Hughes's seemingly mollifying words about starting everything anew in Devon in the following summer was the real bluff (114).

So she was far from being a mere neurotic or freak. People like Plath always need a

motivation to keep them going. They are more than great to be self-sufficient, and when they are deprived of such a magical touch they fall into the kind of abyss Plath fell into once in the summer of 1953 and then in the winter of 1963, but this time irretrievably. Though they always bear the *Unbearable Lightness of Being* despite that huge and abysmal existential loneliness of mankind, they manage somehow, God knows how exhaustingly, to go on. But they are still very brittle in mood and mind, and even the slightest adverse breath of wind can cause their annihilation. It is not incontrovertibly out of a weak soul or mind, but because they have well understood that life at best is simply not worth it. What they can do at best is to be content rather than happy, as Plath puts it in her journals on May 14, most probably 1953: "[i]s anyone anywhere happy? No, not unless they are living in a dream or in an artifice that they or someone else has made. For a time I was lulled in the arms of a blind optimism with breasts full of champagne and nipples made of caviar. I thought she was true, and that the true was the beautiful. But the true is the ugly mixed up everywhere, like a peck of dirt scattered through your life. The true is that there is no security, no artifice to stop the unsavory changes, the rat race, the death unwish - the winged chariot, the horns and motors, the Devil in the clock" (Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* 184). Such people's sense of happiness is always blurred with a tint of grief, tiredness of fighting on many mental fronts, and being trapped in the rat-race of daily life. I really cannot say what they exactly want. Maybe the whole problem is that they really want nothing. They just cannot understand the way the world is, the way their puny existence is. Living and then dying, as if you have never been, is just a meaningful absurdity in their eyes. So *it is not through joyless poverty of soul that they never laugh, but through an enormous apprehension and realization of the gravity of things that seems more fun to other men.*

And yet why are we trying so hard to solve this puzzle of Plath's life? To glue the pieces? To make a whole and sound picture? To gain what? Are we just feeding our own prying or are we really sympathizing with a deserted wife, like many others, and a person who was labeled manic-depressed only because she did not have "a gentleman's agreement to grin and paint" her face gay (37)? Maybe we are just consuming her to keep the wheels of our trade and profit of selling her life and works going on. I really cannot know.

And yet, why are we trying so hard to spot a guilty person in this slippery slope? How about if all of it has been only a mere sleight of fate's hand? That all the three miserable people

got only "caught up in an inevitability" that none could escape (Koren & Negev 88)? But then one cannot help thinking of Hughes's later conduct with Assia Wevill too: banishing her to London, and having affairs with two other women at the same time in Devon. In this context, to what extent can the lot be really blamed?

Whatever the answer, the fact is that all is gone now, even the chief culprit in her death, namely Hughes, and her victory seems something of a pyrrhic one. But maybe we should never call hers a death, because her mind continues living on paper and her flesh lives in her offspring as she has asserted in her journals. And though she had damned "immortality and permanence" because "they are nonexistent, and won't matter when I rot underground," "the fruits of the choice" and her "attended action" proved to be more than imperishable (Plath, *The Unabridged journals of Sylvia Plath* 149, 123).

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