

"Lady Lazarus" and *Lady Chatterley*

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I.

I remember my first reading of Plath, in college, at San Diego State University. We read, of course, all her famous poems from *Ariel*, as well as "The Jailer" ("I am myself. That is enough"[23]), "The Night Dances" ("So your gestures flake off" [29]).

In my youth, on the beaches of Southern California, around a campfire, a group of us read to each other one night the poems of Plath, Ginsberg, Wilfred Owen, and D.H. Lawrence—seeing ourselves as prophets against war, despite that a few of us had been drafted to another oil adventure, including me. (Some of our friends had returned with no eyes or feet). We thought such famous poets could change America. They did not. (Despite Shelley's famous proclamation). Plath said in "Getting There": "Legs, arms, piled outside/The tent of unending cries—" (*Ariel* 57). Same old, same old historical mistakes: America, our 20th Century Roman Empire, we thought then.

On the homefront, sexual activity in public places was then, as is now, monitored by our police, given our rape, murder, and "missing women" statistics, first or second in the world for such.

Yet on that night, on that particular night, there was something "warmer" in the air on La Jolla Shores, as if we thought the world had calmed down for a moment.

When the police arrived at our campfire, we all invited them to take it easy, since we saw ourselves as ordinary people, having ordinary activities in our ordinary bodies.

¹ Obviously, even though Plath's *Unabridged Journals* and the *Ariel: The Restored Edition* were not available to us, I am taking liberties here to give quotes from both books for the sake of reference. When the following event took place, we had the old edition of *Ariel*, ed. By Ted Hughes (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), as well as her *Crossing the Water*, ed. By Ted Hughes (New York: Harper Perennial, 1971). But today these editions may be difficult to find for our current readers of *Plath Profiles*. My memoir here is not exactly the correct "academic" thing to do, but I'm not interested in being academic. I want to give to the reader a "moment in time" that reflects the impact of Plath on American youth.

They relented, and we read to them Alan Ginsberg's poem about Walt Whitman in a grocery store,² Plath's "Lady Lazarus," and Gregory Corso's humorous poems on marriage,³ and then with our girlfriends, we ran through Plath air to swim naked in Pacific waters, while the police watched, laughing. ("I notice you are stark naked/How about this suit/...now your head, excuse me, is empty/I have the ticket for that." Plath said in "The Applicant" (*Ariel* 11).

One cop said to his partner: "Hey Mike O'Brien! I think our wives would like this!"

"Oh you think so, Tim! And what would your wife Kate say?" said Mike.

"She'd tell me to go to church first, and then go to hell," said Tim.

They were friendly guys, that night, on the last leg of their night-shift. It was as if Freud's "Civilization and its Discontents" had suspended itself for awhile.

II.

Yet what I remember most were my youthful thoughts about the similarities between the words of "Lady Lazarus" and Connie's in D.H. Lawrence's novel *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. Both were rebels, tired of conventional love and conventional religious beliefs. Connie says: "a man was like a child with his appetites." (*LCL* 4) ... "if she gave herself to the man it was real. But if she kept herself for herself, it was nothing" (*LCL* 124).

Mellors argued in keeping our selves for ourselves (*LCL* 125). Plath says in "Lady Lazarus": "and there is a charge, a very large charge/For a word or a touch or a bit of blood" (Plath 16). Connie concludes: "Perhaps only people who are capable of real togetherness have that look of being alone in the universe" (*LCL* 294). In my twenties, as a scientific atheist, I believe and still concur with this statement, as I think Plath did with Hughes, who said, in his *Birthday Letters* to Plath: "your father/was your God and there was no other" (Hughes 153).

Plath also said in "The Moon and Yew Tree" (along with her critique of conventional religion in this poem): "How I would I like to believe in tenderness" (Plath

² Allen Ginsberg, *Collected Poems*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.

³ Gregory Corso, *The Happy Birthday of Death*. New York: New Direction, 1960.

65), fully aware as she was that Lawrence's original title of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* was "Tenderness," steeped as she and Ted Hughes were in almost all of Lawrence's novels and essays [archival research at Smith College, IU Bloomington's Lilly Library, and others verify their deep reading of Lawrence].

Even more amazing, is Plath's youthful essay "My Religious Beliefs," written at Smith College but now held by the Lilly Library, Indiana University, where she says she felt no need for faith or a belief in God, and that as compared to the real – such as school or the playground – church and its lessons were less visceral (Plath mss II, Box 10, folder 8).

In her 1952 essay written at Smith but also held by the Lilly Library, "Religion As I See It," she said that she was not a very optimistic agnostic humanist (Plath mss II, Box 10, folder 8). In her *Journals*, she said: "I choose a mate with a career demanding less of a wife in the way of a town and social responsibility... You God, whom I invoke without belief, only I can choose, and only I am responsible. (Oh, the grimness of atheism!)" (*Journals* 102) She also said: "the risen Christ meaning only a parable of human renewal," similar to Lawrence's belief in his *The Man Who Died*, which she had read, but more to the point, similar to Wilhelm Reich's *The Murder of Christ* (475).⁴

Plath says in "Amnesiac": a little toy wife/Erased... (Plath 71). Connie feels the same way in Chapter 1X of *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (101-115). Both Connie and Plath "ate men like air" (*Ariel* 17), before they met their "true" lovers. Yet there was a difference: Mellors remained faithful. Hughes did not.

And so we all sat around that campfire on the beaches of the Pacific, in our 20's, eight of us heterosexuals with our girlfriends, and argued the merits of Plath with Hughes, Connie with Mellors, middle-class women with working-class boys.

I should tell you that two lesbians were with us that night, reading to us Plath's "Lesbos," and one of them said to her lover:

"Gracey, thank the gods we don't have to put up with heterosexual bullcrap!"

⁴ See also: Diane Middlebrook, *Her Husband: Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), especially pages 39-44 where she discusses Plath's readings of D.H. Lawrence. "Sexual union," Plath tells herself, "need not endanger her independence...paraphrasing a passages from ...Lawrence's novel *Women in Love*" (41).

The police had no interest in them at all, before both of them went down to swim in the waves. Plath said in "Lesbos": "we should meet in another life, we should meet in air/me and you.../He is dragging his ball and chain down by the gate (Plath 40).

I went home that night, in Southern California, and watched my sisters either on the phone with their boyfriends or writing letters to their lovers. My mother rolling her eyes. My happy-go-lucky Irish father giving them support, steeped in Frank O'Connor as he was, and famous in San Diego political circles for being able to sing from memory 19 love and political folk songs from Ireland as he tried to run for mayor, with me at the piano. I remember giving him Plath poems. He responded: "She should have stayed in Boston."

Today, I see Sylvia Plath as our American Sancho Panza in skirts, undermining our ideals of love and marriage, in *Ariel*, despite her remark in her *Journals*, after reading D.H. Lawrence's novels: "This is the stuff of my life" (*Journals* 337). And in a college paper she had commented that perhaps Lawrence had it right after all. However, his views on love didn't quite work for him, given the independence of his wife, Frieda, nor did they work out for Plath and Hughes, who patterned their lives on Lawrence's ideas of marriage in his novels and essays.

Cervantes was right in *Don Quixote*: ideals always collapse under the pressure of everyday realities (see Wayne Burns, *A Panzaic Theory of the Novel* (Seattle: Howe Street Press, 2009). "No God but the sun," Plath said in her *Journals* (269).

A medical student said at our campfire: "This earth on the arm of the Milky Way, has its own plans, just as our bodies have their own, too." Lawrence said in an essay on Herman Melville:

Melville was, at the core, a mystic and an idealist. Perhaps so am I. and he stuck to his ideal guns. I abandon mine. He was a mystic who raved because the old guns shot havoc. The guns of the "noble spirit" of 'ideal love'. I say let the old guns rot. Get new ones, and shoot straight. (*Studies in American Literature* 152)

Sylvia Plath got one. And she shot straight in "Lady Lazarus," and in her *Journals* with: "...it is impossible for me to be...the universal woman-and-man—or anything much. I am what I feel and think and do" (*Journals* 45).

And so we all stomped on those ideal flames of our beach fire, before going home: singles, heteros, lesbians, the police, and the ghosts of Plath, Sancho, and Lawrence. Even Emily Dickinson joined in and Freud, while Darwin and Walt Whitman watched us in humor, from the cliffs above, as the cold waves on the ancient Pacific rolled up to our ankles, before the flames went out, in that mysterious, sea-salt air—our bodies slowly swallowed up by the night, as Plath said in "The Night Dances": "Through the black amnesias of heaven (*Ariel* 30). Nor can I forget her words about the sea in her *Journals*: "on a relatively unfrequented, stony beach...A serene sense of the slow inevitability of the gradual sense of the earth's crust comes over me; a consuming love, not of god, but of the clean unbroken sense that the rocks which are nameless, the waves which are nameless, are all defined momentarily through the consciousness of the being who observes them" (75). Or, how about this quote, as a near female Sancho Panza in a bathing suit, to a man:

Over to where the blue of the Atlantic blinding straight ahead. Towels on sand, picnic opened, they gorge young and hungry on cheese and ham and mustard and coleslaw and tomatoes and peaches and ginger ale, filling their stomachs, lying and eating the savory good food in the sun, lying warm and curled after, drowsy. Head on her stomach he lies back, she running long tenderly moving fingers through his hair, cut short, soft. Carefully rapacious and hungry her fingers move along his cheek. They read aloud then from "Science and Health" about marriage and spirit, she wondering inside at the paradox of delusions: how he can deny matters and flesh as real when one can make such healthful beauty out of them—how he can be inconsistent and admire beauty of flesh, calling her cream and honey because of her skin and white bathing suit. She cannot, she has decided, undermine or take away his faith. She must somehow cultivate and work through this which means so much to him. (*Journals* 134)

To use Wayne Burns' term, just how close to the "Panzaic" can we get? Despite, in her kindness, as a youth, to not completely undermine his ideals. This is not to say that Plath is "heroic," thereby denying her "Panzaic" behavior. Nor is she a "spiritual Sancho Panza" (Burns 10). She is too conscious of her body, if not others, and thereby like Connie, in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*: "...whatever God there is has at last wakened up in my guts ...and is rippling so happily there" (298).

Today, after founding *Plath Profiles* at Oxford University, in England, 2007, and after editing five volumes of essays, notes, art, poetry, book reviews, archival research,

student essays, teacher-responses, memoirs, and photography about Plath, an after teaching at IUN 40 miles south of Chicago, near Lake Michigan, with its steel mills that "eat men like air," and with its waves breaking slipped and sudden on its shores and wind-swept dunes, where my students and working-class lovers, who have never read Plath or Lawrence, flee for a brief moment of love-making among the dunes in a mill town, I have to wonder: which vision of our life is true for them and for us: Lawrence's with his "well, well, so her ladyship has fallen for him...a Tevershall lad born and bred...a slap back at the high-and-mighty Chatterleys!" or Mellor's response to Connie: "It's not good trying to get rid of your own aloness. You've got to stick to it all your life (*LCL* 155). Or Freud, in his "Mourning and Melancholia": an object-loss was transformed into an ego-loss and the conflict between the ego and the loved person into a cleavage between critical activity of the ego and the ego as altered by identification" (586). (Plath read this essay in 1958 and said: "an almost exact description of my feelings..." [*Journals* 447]). In her poem "Getting There," Plath says: "I cannot undo myself...The body of this woman,/chard skirts and deathmask" (*Ariel* 58).

Ted Hughes said in his "Foreward" to the 1982 edition of Plath's *Journals*: "I never saw her reveal her true self to anybody—except, perhaps, in the last three months of her life" (xiv). Just what exactly does he mean here? Plath's journals reveal herself in detail. He didn't get it. Or, perhaps, he did. He admitted in his poem "The Tender Place," from his *Birthday Letters* (1998): "...your voice dived inwards" (12).

I believe Sylvia Plath became, first, an angry Lady Chatterley. Her Mellors was a fraud, and so in *Ariel*, and in her *Journals*, she became, sometimes, a Sancho Panza in charred skirts, undermining romantic love and sexual ideals in her own, melancholic way.

And so when we all stomped out that fire on the beach of California that night, in our 20's, we saw Sylvia Plath rise "out of the ash" (*Ariel* 17), with her red hair.

Tina said: "Okay, I'm sure Freud and Plath were smart and all, but what am I to do with four kids and a philandering husband, who keeps getting fired from his jobs? I need money to support what Plath called in her poem "Stopped Dead": a goddamn baby screaming off somewhere" (*Ariel* 43).

Lesbian Shirley responded: "Please. Listen to this," as she read from Plath's "Fever 103°": I think I may rise--/...am a pure acetylene/virgin/attended by roses.../nor

him/nor him, nor him/my selves dissolving..." (*Ariel* 79-80). "Who are these people," as she read from "The Bee Meeting," villagers looking for Frankenstein, "The rector, the midwife, the sexton, the agent for bees./In my sleeveless summery dress I have no protection" (*Ariel* 81). Psychology major Jennifer quoted Freud, from his "Beyond The Pleasure Principle": "Under the ego's instincts for self-preservation, the pleasure principle is replaced by the reality principle" (Freud 596). Tim, the medical student, said: "Ha! What else is new! Have you read her acid comments on bodily love in American movies [*Journals* 109-111]? And what about this: "...the dirt is too deep for Halo shampoo [and] lux soap, the raggedness to far frayed for the neat nips of trimming sheers...oh I see the frogs on the mud bed. And the corruption of warts on their slick and unctuous black hides. So now what" (*Journals* 392).

"Or this," he said: "...good-bye. You felt no reality, nor knife of sorrow cut your intestines to bits" (*Journals* 67).

I gave my two-cents worth: quoting Plath from "The Detective": "There is no body in the house at all.../The body does not come in to it all" (*Ariel* 31).

From "Magi":

And love the mother of milk, no theory.
They mistake their star, these papery godfolk.

They want the crib of some lamp-headed Plato
Let them astound his heart with their merit.
What girl ever flourished in such company? (*Ariel* 37).

From "Stings":

Here is my honey machine/it will work without thinking/Opening in spring like an industrious virgin. (*Ariel*, 87).

Good grief, you academic critics. How much more evidence do you need to see Plath as, to use Wayne Burns' term, "Panzaic." Our American Sancho Panza in skirts, despite her conflicted use of the word "machine," giving the lie to the ideals of her own marriage to Hughes, as well as to idealistic men—our "Panzaic" woman of American poetry, with her

"mushroom's black underpleats." (*Journals* 583). Of course I am implying what she consciously means underneath the lines of the poem, what she means by "industrious virgin," given her reading of Lawrence and Freud, and her sometimes "Panzaic" statements in her *Journals* (see especially her entries from her days at Smith, and her entries from 1958-1959).

I disagree with Arthur Efron's claim in his essay "Wayne Burns and the Invention of Panzaic Contextualization" that "the human body is in the novel in a way that it is not necessarily in poetry." It is there, of course, in her novel *The Bell Jar* [see Andru Lugo, "The Female Predicament in *The Bell Jar* and *St. Mawr*" *Plath Profiles* 3 (2010) <http://www.iun.edu/~nwadmin/plath/vol3/Lugo.pdf>.]

Yet all you have to do is read some of her poems from *Ariel* to see how powerful the undermining body is in either her conscious words or unconscious intentions, as such intentions can be found in Thomas Hardy's poetry, and Alan Ginsberg's. [Hardy's "Channel Firing" and Ginsberg's *Howl*, for example. In *Ariel*: perhaps "The Applicant," "Elm," "The Detective," "Lesbos," "Nick and the Candlesticks" may apply.

And so the fires went out. The cops started to leave, and as we all walked back to our cars, I yelled out to Tim, the cop with his wife Kate:

"Hey Tim!" I said. "Would Kate still object to swimming naked with you in the ocean?"

"Bill," he said "Kate's not a book reader, but she recognizes silly idealists when she sees them!"

"But Tim," I said. "what about Plath poems and Lawrence?"

"Go home Bill," he laughed "Take care of your own. Samuel Becket had it right! And by the way, Kate did read "The Jailer" and "The Night Dances," and she told me: "I am enough, so flake off!"

And so the waves of the Pacific rolled in again, as they have for thousands of years.

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