

## After *Ariel*: An Argument for Sylvia Plath's Phantom Third Poetry Collection

Anna Journey, University of Southern California

Phantoms abound in the Sylvia Plath canon. Plath burned her second novel, meant as a gift for her husband, the British poet Ted Hughes, on his birthday in August 1962. *Doubletake*, Plath's unfinished third novel, "disappeared somewhere around 1970"—long after Plath's suicide in February 1963—Hughes suggests in his introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1). According to Diane Middlebrook's biography of the Hughes/Plath marriage, *Her Husband*, Plath wrote her patroness, Olive Higgins Prouty, that "[*Doubletake*'s] plot was 'semiautobiographical about a wife whose husband turns out to be a deserter and philanderer'" (198). Hughes's mistress, Assia Wevill, after reading the nascent novel, grew offended by the manner in which Plath caricatured the Wevills, as "a 'detestable and contemptible' couple called 'The Goos-Hoppers'"; Wevill openly hoped Hughes would destroy the unfinished novel (Middlebrook 220). More disturbingly, Wevill absconded with some of Plath's valuable manuscripts, which she sent to her sister, intending the stolen literary relics as a "nest egg" for Shura (the daughter Wevill had with Hughes; the daughter she later murdered during her own suicide via a gas oven) (Middlebrook 232). One is left wondering, "What happened to *Doubletake*?"

Even *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000), edited by Karen Kukil, remain incomplete, as a total of two bound journals that Plath used during the last three years of her life are missing from the *oeuvre*. Hughes, in his foreword to Frances McCullough's 1982 abridged edition of Plath's journals, claims that one of the journals simply "disappeared," much like the draft of *Doubletake*, while he deliberately destroyed his wife's other "maroon-backed ledger," in order to spare their children from reading about the darkness of their mother's final days (xiv). "[I]n those days," Hughes adds, "I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival" (xiv).

"What was in those manuscripts, the one destroyed like a Jew in Nazi Germany, the other, lost like a *desaparecido*?" wonders Steven Gould Axelrod in "The Second Destruction of Sylvia Plath" (313). Even if Axelrod's figuring the beleaguered Hughes as

some book-burning fascist sprung from the Third Reich, or as an Argentine junta-come-lately, seems a hyperbolic tick, then we are nonetheless left facing the still rampant curiosity about phantom texts that continues to haunt Plath's readership. The indeterminacy of the mercurial Plath canon—its ghost-novels, its lost or destroyed journals—often asks readers to become surgeons attempting to unclench a tantalizing phantom limb. Might it be that, after all this time, our poetry detectives have been looking in the wrong places for these phantom texts?

There may well be a case to argue for the existence of the beginnings of Plath's third poetry collection. Although nary a vanished poem may lie in wait to be discovered for this third book, we might consider the poems Plath wrote during the final two months of her life—all of her 1963 poems—as tangible fodder for a post-*Ariel* poetry collection. After all, Plath excluded every single 1963 poem—without exception—from her own version of the *Ariel* manuscript. Viewing these twelve poems from 1963 as Plath's nascent third book of poetry—instead of diluting their impressive heterogeneity amid the flames of *Ariel*'s consumptive rage and rollicking, self-mocking burlesques—both honors Plath's original artistic intentions as well as appreciates the full trajectory of her complexly evolving poetic style.

Although Plath lived to see the publication of *The Bell Jar* (1963), her novel about madness and suicide, and sequenced the poems for two of her published collections of verse, *The Colossus and Other Poems* (the original 1960 version and the reshuffled 1962 edition published by Knopf which has a different table of contents), and *Ariel* (first published posthumously in 1965—with Ted Hughes's controversial additions and omissions—and then much later in 2004, when their daughter Frieda Hughes published *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, reinstating Plath's original plans for the manuscript), the majority of her poems appear in the following posthumous collections, all edited by Ted Hughes: *Crossing the Water* (1971), *Winter Trees* (1972), and her Pulitzer Prize-winning *Collected Poems* (1981). Hughes also saw to the publication of *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams* (1977), a collection of Plath's prose writings, short stories, and diary excerpts. Three of Plath's children's books also appear in print: *The Bed Book* (whose fanciful "Bounceable beds" and "springier springs" appear weirdly placid next to Plath's poems, fiction, and journal entries) (1976), *The It-Doesn't-Matter Suit* (1996), and *Mrs.*

*Cherry's Kitchen* (2001), the latter of which was part of *Collected Children's Stories*. Furthermore, so as to avoid going down in history as one of the numerous familial villains eviscerated in *The Bell Jar*, the poet's mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, published (with Hughes's permission) *Letters Home* (1975), a collection of her daughter's letters in which Plath projects a breezy, pretty-pleasing-daughter persona: quite a counterpoint to the often darkly acerbic voice of the journals.

Amid the avalanche of her posthumously published work, Plath rises from her pages paradoxically an increasingly familiar yet deeply enigmatic figure. "Which version of *Ariel* is the 'better' one?" we ask, though the adjective seems inadequate. "How to reconcile 'Sivvy,' the gushing letter-writer, with the filicidal and suicidal speaker in 'Edge'?" we ask, while Plath scholarship—that hall of mirrors—goes on refracting. Not surprisingly, then, in the discourse of Plath studies, as Anita Helle observes in her introduction to the collection of essays *The Unraveling Archive* (2007), Plath is often figured as "a woman buried in her manuscripts" (4). Thus, the peculiar representation "perpetually crosses corpse and corpus, the body of the woman and the body of the writing" (4). What is especially problematic in such figuration is that the representation acts as a kind of rigid, hermetic sealant on the archive of Plath materials, denying what Helle refers to as the work's "complexity, variability, heterogeneity, and playfulness" (4).

Helle's notion of flexibility in the richly varied structure of the Plath archive, while not a novel one, does raise important critical stakes in twenty-first century Plath criticism. Who, in fact, has not suffered a dizzying brain freeze *à la* a too-cold frozen mango bar from the Plath canon's sheer mercuriality? Even in the land of iPods and Kindles, the Plath archive keeps growing and spinning its wily, poetical helix. Just when we are comfortable with the way death has always seemed inevitable in the Ted Hughes-edited version of *Ariel* (how, in the fatalistic closing poem, "Words," "fixed stars / Govern a life"), we must reckon with a veritable quartet<sup>1</sup> of hopeful Bee Poems that, in accordance with Plath's own intentions, closes the newly "restored" edition of *Ariel* on a markedly different note: one of brave anticipation, seasonal regeneration, and—most importantly—survival, however tenuous (95). In the last lines of Plath's closing poem, "Wintering," for instance, "The bees are flying. They taste the spring." Thus, the

---

<sup>1</sup> "The Swarm" is the fifth poem in Plath's Bee sequence. She excluded the piece from her version of *Ariel*.

notorious "doubling" of Plath's *Ariel*, into two books—hardly twins—under the auspices of HarperCollins, has been a problematic feat of literary multiplication (or addition and subtraction?), to say the least.

Marjorie Perloff has a troublesome bone to pick with Ted Hughes regarding his role in the *Ariel* controversy in her essay, "The Two *Ariels*: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon." Perloff, writing in 1990, nearly fifteen years before the public saw the "restoration" of Plath's intended sequencing of *Ariel: The Restored Edition* in 2004, argues that Hughes perverts, with a revisionist's trigger finger, the once hopeful "plot" of Plath's *Ariel* (what Perloff calls "*Ariel* 1") in order to present his own version ("*Ariel* 2"), edited to reinforce the inevitability of Plath's suicide. According to Perloff (who, out of all the people who wonder, "On a scale of one to ten, how nefarious is Ted Hughes?," no doubt posits some number soaring in the double-digits), Hughes's inclusion of nine of Plath's twelve poems from 1963, "in which the inevitability of death is everywhere foregrounded," is fueled by dubious intentions: his desire to publicly absolve himself of his potential part in the despair that drove Plath to end her life (196). Hughes is reduced, via Perloff's bird's-eye scan, to the unfaithful husband, the iniquitous editor, "the Censor" (197).

Contrary to Perloff's skeptical take on Ted Hughes's editorial decisions regarding *Ariel*'s initial publication, Frieda Hughes offers, in her foreword to *Ariel: The Restored Edition*, a clarifying, if understandably defensive, two-cents on the matter. She emphasizes how her father included in the *Collected Poems* the contents list of Plath's intended sequencing for *Ariel*, and that he had:

profound respect for my mother's work in spite of being one of the subjects of its fury. For him the work was *the* thing, and he saw the care of it as a means of tribute and a responsibility. (xvii)

Frieda Hughes also concisely describes her father's editing of *Ariel*, juxtaposing lists of the poems he excluded from and added to Plath's second collection:

The poems of the original manuscript my father left out were: "The Rabbit Catcher," "Thalidomide," "Barren Woman," "A Secret," "The Jailor," "The Detective," "Magi," "The Other," "Stopped Dead," "The Courage of Shutting-Up," "Purdah," "Amnesiac." (Though included in the 1966 U.S. version, "Lesbos" was kept out of the 1965 U.K. edition.)

The poems he put into the edited manuscript for publication were: "The Swarm" and "Mary's Song" (only in the U.S. edition), "Sheep in Fog," "The Hanging Man," "Little Fugue," "Years," "The Munich Mannequins," "Totem," "Paralytic," "Balloons," "Poppies in July," "Kindness," "Contusion," "Edge," and "Words." "The Swarm" was included in the original contents list, but not in the manuscript." (xvi-xvii)

There is room, of course, for endless speculation as to Ted Hughes's editorial motives. "The Rabbit Catcher" makes the husband figure (so clearly Hughes) seem downright malevolent: a gleesome bunny-slayer and housewife-strangler ("How they awaited him, those little deaths! / They waited like sweethearts. They excited him") (7). In "The Jailer," Plath evokes Hughes in similarly vitriolic caricature, this time as an oppressor with a penchant for torture: "I have been drugged and raped"; "He has been burning me with cigarettes"; "I wish him dead or away" (23-24). Additionally, Hughes makes a cameo appearance in "Amnesiac" as a pillow-clutching pervert: "Hugging his pillow // Like the red-headed sister he never dared to touch, / He dreams of a new one—" (71).

While Hughes may have plausibly cut poems from Plath's intended sequence in order to save himself some degree of public embarrassment and personal despair, there are poems that may have gotten the axe for their devilish depictions of the couple's family members and friends. An unflattering portrait of Hughes's uncle Walter, for instance, shows up in "Stopped Dead": "Uncle, pants factory Fatso, millionaire"; "You are sunk in your seven chins, still as a ham. / Who do you think I am, / Uncle, uncle? / Sad Hamlet, with a knife? / Where do you stash your life?" (43). The poem, "Lesbos" (excluded from the 1965 U.K. edition), venomously depicts friends of Plath and Hughes, a married couple from Cornwall: the so-named "Sad hag" and her "impotent husband" (39-40).

If we segue from Hughes's potential motives that involve protecting himself, family, and friends, toward other possible reasons for his exclusions, there are poems of Plath's, such as "Barren Woman" and "Magi," that may well be objectively weaker than many other poems in the manuscript. "Magi," a tender yet rather remote about Plath's infant daughter, lacks the fraught ambivalence and complexity of "Morning Song" and the rapidity of development and characteristically *Ariel*-like feverish imagery of, say, "Nick and the Candlestick." Who is to say whether poems such as these would have made

the final cut, had Plath lived to continue her ongoing, diligent shuffling of *Ariel*'s final sequence?

Hughes's editorial chop-chopping aside: we must reckon with the two *Ariel* collections' different endings, a controversy which centers around the fatalistic character of some of Plath's final poems. Why might have Hughes added nine of Plath's poems from 1963 to *Ariel*? The differences between each version's ending (the four Bee Poems versus "Kindness," "Contusion," "Edge," and "Words": hope versus fatalism, life versus death) are highly problematic. On one hand, Plath's poems from 1963 are not numerous enough to warrant a third posthumous collection, and so Hughes's decision to add most of the powerful late poems to *Ariel* seems a practical one. On the other hand, as Perloff might say, Hughes may have seen a way to alter the overarching implied narrative of the collection so as to assert to the public that Plath's suicide was pre-ordained by fate, an inevitable tragedy.

Since Hughes's publication of his poetry collection that explores his relationship with Plath, *Birthday Letters* (when he broke his long silence and responded to accusations that he was responsible for his first wife's death), just prior to his death from cancer in 1998, many critics with a commitment to Ted Hughes-bashing seem to have lost their *raison d'être*. Let us face it: vilifying Hughes for his complicated relationship with Plath's posthumous works does nothing to help our esteemed poetess from beyond the grave. Thus, a proposition: let us stop bumping around the labyrinthine arguments of the *Ariel* controversy and look to the 1963 poems as a distinct body of work; let us examine Plath's clear decision to deliberately exclude from *Ariel* all work written in 1963; let us consider the late poems in the light that Plath ostensibly did: as poems meant for a collection other than *Ariel*: her third book of poetry.

The twelve poems Plath composed during January and February 1963, the last six weeks of her life, are as follows, listed in chronological order: "Sheep in Fog" (initially dated December 2, 1962, then completed and dated January 28), "The Munich Mannequins" (January 28), "Totem" (January 28), "Child" (January 28), "Paralytic" (January 29), "Gigolo" (January 29), "Mystic" (February 1), "Kindness" (February 1), "Words" (February 1), "Contusion" (February 4), "Balloons" (February 5), and "Edge" (February 5). While twelve poems does not make a full-length collection, setting these

late poems apart from *Ariel* enriches our understanding of Plath's dynamic and unstable evolution as a poet while reinstating her apparent vision for a third manuscript. This essay will focus primarily on "Child," "Paralytic," "Gigolo," "Balloons," and "Edge," with a particular emphasis on those poems often neglected in critical discourse, such as "Paralytic" and "Gigolo," or, in the case of "Edge," misinterpreted due to an overinvestment in the details of Plath's biography.

Ted Hughes, in his introduction to *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*, divides Plath's *oeuvre* into three distinct phrases; phase one marks the pre-1956 period (juvenilia such as "Bitter Strawberries" and "Two Lovers and a Beachcomber by the Real Sea"); phase two encompasses early 1956 to late 1960 (poems like "Black Rook in Rainy Weather," "The Colossus," and "Poem for a Birthday"); and phase three, which Hughes names, mistakenly, the "third and final phase of her work," which dates from about September 1960 until the end of her life in 1963 (including poems like "The Moon and the Yew Tree," "Daddy," "Lady Lazarus," "Ariel," and "Edge") (17). The problem, however, with viewing *all* of the work Plath produced between September 1960 and February 1963 as part of the same so-called third "phase" is that these poems are wildly different from each other: it is reductive to lump them together in such a manner. "[W]e must not indulge in over-simplification," M.L. Rosenthal writes in the *Spectator*, presciently, just after *Ariel*'s first appearance in 1965 (60). Plath's "Leaving Early" (September 25, 1960) and "Paralytic" (January 29, 1963), for example, seem ill-suited to reside in the same arbitrary stable. Furthermore, as Adam Kirsch suggests in *The Wounded Surgeon*:

Plath's writing life was so brief that it lacks the usual milestones....Most of her lasting poems were written in an incredibly short period of time—roughly the five months before her suicide in February 1963, to which they inevitably seem connected. As a result, her artistic growth seems to take place not in stages, as with most poets, but in a few violent convulsions. (237)

Plath's twelve poems from 1963, all written within nine days of each other, belong to a post-*Ariel* collection. Surprisingly, though, these late poems are not all as despairing and death-mongering as perhaps Perloff suggests. "Certainly the work of her last months," Kirsch adds:

does not record an uninterrupted downward spiral, as though tracing a graph of suicidal despair. In fact, several of the poems written in January 1963, Plath's last month, mark a definite step back from the brink she seemed to approach the previous fall.<sup>2</sup> (270)

Indeed, "Plath is not consistent," writes Jaqueline Rose in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (10). "It has been the persistent attempt," Rose continues, "to impose a consistency on her which has been so damaging—whether as diagnosis or celebration of her work" (10). The late poems of Plath's from the last two months of her life perfectly embody Rose's estimation as well as the "complexity, variability, heterogeneity, and playfulness" of which Anita Helle speaks in *The Unraveling Archive* (4). Just look to the varied nature of Plath's poems from 1963: Kirsch observes that:

"Mystic," "Paralytic," and "Gigolo" attempt to channel her voice into dramatic monologues or character studies, as though to shield the poet herself from exposure. And poems like "Child" and "Balloons" are lovingly addressed to her children, who offer a respite from the surrounding desolation. (270)

"Your clear eye is the one absolutely beautiful thing," writes Plath in "Child," a tender poem addressed to one of her children (*Collected Poems* 265). In the poem the subject is evoked as pure, as an essential, comforting center to a universe darkened by anxiety and unnamed troubles, that "dark / Ceiling without a star" (265).

The child's "clear eye" amid the surrounding starless darkness evokes the calm at the center of a hurricane: the brief eye of the storm. Unlike the vigorous, pointedly murderous image of the husband's hands "Ringing the white china" in "The Rabbit Catcher," the "Wringing of hands" in "Child" seems of a different sort: the action is disembodied; the fault surrounding the hinted-at trouble is left ambiguous (*Collected Poems* 194, 265). Plath's attention is focused not on indicting an oppressor, but on her feelings of maternal love, her wish for "grand and classical" images for her child (265). In "Child," love is the poem's primary force, and it is a force that may enable the speaker's survival.

"Balloons" is another tender poem from 1963 about Plath's children. Oddly enough, Plath wrote "Balloons" on February 5<sup>th</sup>, the same day she composed "Edge," the latter poem infamous for its alleged status as the last poem Plath created before her

---

<sup>2</sup> February was Plath's last month, though a partial one.

suicide on February 11<sup>th</sup> (we do not know for sure, of course, the order in which the poems were written that day) as well as for its disturbingly calm evocation of suicide and infanticide with a kind of statuesque, graceful resolve. For the most part, "Balloons" seems innocent enough: the poem appears a tender portrait of Plath's children as they play with balloons in their sparsely furnished apartment. Read with the unavoidable knowledge of Plath's impending death, however, "Balloons" takes a swerve towards the ominous, much like Van Gogh's "Wheatfield with Crows," a painting completed shortly before his suicide and often interpreted as foreshadowing the artist's inner torment and despair. If Plath's initial descriptions of the balloons as "Oval soul-animals" and as "Yellow cathead, blue fish" that are part of "A funny pink world" seem like fanciful phrases plucked from *The Bed Book*, then her final image of the child biting and popping a balloon winds up feeling vaguely menacing, a toddler-loosed *deus ex machina*:

He bites,

Then sits  
Back, fat jug  
Contemplating a world clear as water.  
A red  
Shred in his little fist. (272)

As Axelrod notices, in *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and Cure of Words*, the little boy attempts to discover a "pink world he might eat" in the balloon, but instead, "bites it and discovers its emptiness" (21). Additionally, the image of "red shreds" resembles a bloody wound, though the child's "fist" may be, more ambiguously, some primal violent gesture as well as the charged central metaphor of Plath's essay contrasting the genres of poetry and fiction, "A Comparison" (1962), in which "a poem is concentrated, a closed fist" that "excludes and stuns" (62). There lies in "Balloons" an edgy power beneath Plath's whimsical turns of phrase.

What is particularly unusual about Plath's use of the dramatic monologue in several of her late poems is that her speakers in "Paralytic" and "Gigolo" are both male. Before these two dramatic monologues from 1963, Plath assumes a male persona in only five other poems, including "Suicide Off Egg Rock" (1959), "The Hanging Man" (1960), "Leaving Early" (1960), "Insomniac" (1961), and "The Surgeon at 2 a.m." (1961). These male personae, including Plath's speakers in "Paralytic" and "Gigolo," as Rose notices,

"are hardly ever talked about" (134), though Hughes saw fit to include both "The Hanging Man" and "Paralytic" in his version of *Ariel*. Interestingly, Plath did not write any poems in the voices of male personae during the entirety of 1962, the same year in which she composed most of the work she intended for inclusion in *Ariel*. Why, then, might have Plath chosen to explore male personae during her final two weeks (and two male-voiced personae poems in the same day, at that)?

In "Paralytic," Plath speaks through the voice of a hospitalized man in a vegetative state. Although hospital scenes are not novel in Plath's work (see "Tulips," from 1961, for example, the precursor and feminine counterpoint to "Paralytic"), there is an element of subtle critique in "Paralytic" that enriches the persona and the sense of dramatic irony. Such a mode makes a reasonable case against critics, such as Helen Vendler, who find fault in Plath's poetry for its lack of maturity, or her "scrupulous refusal to generalize, in her best poems beyond her own case"<sup>3</sup> (*Ariel Ascending* 5). A portrait of a kind of artificial existence, "Paralytic" shows how the paralyzed man further isolates himself through distancing his mind—the only part of himself that remains under his own jurisdiction—from his worldly and familial attachments:

Dead egg, I lie  
Whole  
On a whole world I cannot touch,  
At the white, tight

Drum of my sleeping couch  
Photographs visit me—  
My wife, dead and flat, in 1920 furs,  
Mouth full of pearls,

Two girls  
As flat as she, who whisper "We're your daughters."  
The still waters  
Wrap my lips...(266)

Vendler describes, in her essay, "An Intractable Metal," the unevenness of Plath's late poems, a quality she cites as an aesthetic failure:

---

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Plath has taken a lot of heat for her easy conflation of her own pain with that of the millions of Jews murdered during the Holocaust at Dachau, Auschwitz, and Belsen.

There is more outrage and satire and hysteria in some of the last poems than there is steady thought evinced in style. Plath, for whatever reason, could not rise to the large concerns of tragedy in a Keatsian way. Her unevenness recalls Hart Crane, but she did not have Crane's open generosity of vision. (12)

One might ask what the nebulously phrased "steady thought evinced in style" (homogeneity?) means to Vendler, or why she pegs the varied subject matter, style, and voices of Plath's late poems as vices rather than virtues. Vendler is, perhaps, a more perceptive reader of Keats's great Odes than of Plath's late poetry. At the end of "Paralytic," for example, Vendler sees "despair":

I smile, a Buddha, all  
Wants, desire  
Falling from me like rings  
Hugging their lights.

The claw of the magnolia,  
Drunk on its own scents,  
Asks nothing of life. (267)

According to Vendler, Plath rails against perfection in her last poems, admitting "the irreconcilables in her psychic constitution: 'Perfection is terrible, it cannot have children'" (11). In these late poems, Vendler suggests, Plath "alternated, pitifully, between a deathly resignation and a despair that envied the narcissistically appetitive flowers" (11). While "despairing" may be one way to describe the speaker's tone by the end of "Paralytic," we might also notice the way Plath slyly critiques her speaker's spiritual fantasies. Even after the paralytic has eschewed the importance of maintaining connections with his family (his two daughters "flat"—mere images in the remote photographs—and his wife appears similarly "dead and flat"—her "Mouth full of pearls," recalling those grotesque "sticky pearls" in "Lady Lazarus" as well as the words of Shakespeare's mischievous spirit, Ariel, who sings of a watery grave, "Those are pearls that were his eyes," in *The Tempest*), his identification with the smiling Buddha seems a false one (1617). In fact, we find the speaker's testimonial to enlightenment is that of an unreliable narrator, as Plath ironizes his illumination by introducing a *deus ex machina*, by way of the magnolia image, in the last stanza: "The claw / Of the magnolia, / Drunk on its own scents / Asks nothing of life" (*Collected Poems* 267). The sharply feral

magnolia, a lascivious image, speaks against the speaker's identification with the Buddha: the magnolia is self-sustaining, requiring nothing of others, and its very intoxicated lushness—a kind of soloist's bacchanal—shows up the poor paralytic's faux Buddhist epiphany. The magnolia, even in its "vegetative" state, shows how life, in its crudest forms, exacts its revenge upon him. Whereas Plath's helpless speaker is a marginalized observer—a "Dead egg"—the magnolia is a singular hothouse, defiant and supremely powerful.

Another way Plath's undercuts or ironizes her speaker's spiritual declaration in "Paralytic" is through her allusion to the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm ("He leadeth me beside the still waters / He restoreth my soul"), in which god is figured as a benevolent protector, a comforting shepherd (553). Unfortunately for Plath's speaker, however, who observes, "The still waters / Wrap my lips," the once peaceful biblical waters become not only barbarously artificial matter but a lethal gag: "A clear / Cellophane I cannot crack" (266).<sup>4</sup>

Regarding Plath's forays into exploring male personae, Jacqueline Rose writes, in *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, that:

The point of drawing attention to these poems is not, however, to suggest that Plath lives the drama she describes any the less intensely as a woman, but that, in a gesture which can be variously described as empathy, pleasure, diagnosis and revenge, she can see, represent—she *cannot avoid* representing—its other (sexual) side. Another way of putting this would be to say that it is because she becomes it (the male 'part') in fantasy that she knows it and can diagnosis it so well. (135)

What Vendler fails to recognize is that Plath's experimentations with personae—specifically, male personae—in her late work may be the kind of generosity of vision (what Rose might call "empathy" or self-interrogatory "diagnosis"), or negatively capable moments, that one observes in Keats or Crane. Plath's use of male personae may suggest her deliberate effort to escape writing poems that are "paralyzed by fact," as Robert Lowell describes the trappings of confessional verse in his poem, "Epilogue" (838). One reading of the shifts in Plath's poetics, according to Rose, concern the poles of passive

---

<sup>4</sup> Also, in "Mystic," a female-voice persona poem, Plath's speaker asks, "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?," and later wonders, with a marked skepticism of perfunctory Christian rituals, "The pill of the Communion tablet, / The walking beside still water? Memory?" (268)

femininity and then "a singular and transcendent female selfhood," where "[v]ictimisation and transcendence, accusation and apotheosis, are the reverse sides of the same coin" (135). But, as Rose, points out, "Plath works over—goes over—the boundaries" of "sexual difference" and "poetic language," which problematizes her figurations of selfhood, sexuality, and power (135).

In "Gigolo" (a poem almost uniformly ignored by critics), Plath's male persona appears a punchy, satirical character study in pimp noir. Reptilian, gold-strewn, and Christlike by turns, Plath's street-cruising gigolo delivers his dramatic monologue to masculinity with a sleazy, narcissistic bravura:

Pocket watch, I tick well.  
The streets are lizardy crevices  
Sheer-sized, with holes where to hide.  
It is best to meet in a cul-de-sac,

A palace of velvet  
With windows of mirrors.  
There one is safe,  
There are no family photographs...(267)

Is this seedy cul-de-sac a sort of secular "still waters" that provides safety and comfort to the gigolo? Although love may have "set [him] going" like the "fat gold watch" (156) in "Morning Song," the gigolo, a grown man, apparently needs no sustenance from family to give meaning to his life: his emotional capacities are snapped shut and concealed, like a "Pocket watch." His persona seems the inverse of the patient's hapless, incapacitated figuration in "Paralytic." In "Gigolo" (written on January 29, 1963, the same day as "Paralytic"), we find "no family photographs" like the pictures of the wife and daughters that we see in "Paralytic," so awfully remote from the man's attachments. Here, in "Gigolo," we find a man similarly distancing himself from family and emotional attachments. Like the self-sustaining magnolia "drunk on its own scents" in "Paralytic," the gigolo is his own power source: he is happy in his seductively baroque bordello, his "palace of velvet / with windows of mirrors," which reflect a multiplicity of his singular image. The gigolo even aggrandizes his own ageing mouth with blasphemous panache: "My mouth sags, / The mouth of Christ..." (267).

Throughout "Gigolo," Plath evokes femininity as a threatening presence. Her speaker claims, in a guttural, gong-swing of assonance, "Bright fish hooks, the smiles of women / Gulp at my bulk" (267). Sexuality—both female and male in fact—becomes a downright queasy presence as the poem progresses: the gigolo "Mill[s] a litter of breasts like jellyfish" and eats the discomfiting "aphrodisiac squid" (267). Slippery and carnivorous, sexuality in "Gigolo" remains a ubiquitously oceanic menace. Increasingly crass and hyperbolic, Plath's gigolo snarls about his violent power over women, whose jellyfish-breasts would sting him: "The tattle of my / Gold joints, my way of turning / Bitches to ripples of silver / Rolls out a carpet, a hush" (268). The "gold joints" are the brass knuckles he finds so effective and natural a tool for dominating and silencing victims that he does not bother to differentiate between the weapon and the bones of his own body.

By the end of "Gigolo," we find our tough-talking pimp transformed into a seedy Narcissus, a malevolent *Pépé Le Pew*, who says, unlike the self-effacing *Prufrock*:

I shall never grow old. New oysters  
Shriek in the sea and I  
Glitter like Fontainebleau

Gratified,  
All the fall of water an eye  
Over whose pool I tenderly  
Lean and see me. (268)

Plath's manic, forceful satire in "Gigolo" crescendos with a blend of direct, earthy punning on object and pronoun (the "eye" and "I" juxtaposition) and a more erudite, baroquely fussy allusion to the Palace of Fontainebleau, one of the largest royal *châteaux* in France, decorated lavishly in the mannerist style. The gigolo, through all his ceaseless chest-puffing and self-deception, is driven to transform himself into a sparkling, mannerist object: he attempts to raise his velvety, disreputable bordello to a grander, more palatial, mythic status. By the poem's end, however, Plath makes us keenly aware of her speaker's superficiality and deadly narcissism.

If we remember that Plath wrote both "Gigolo" and "Paralytic" during the same day in 1963, the poems' relationship becomes quite clear: the two poems form a kind of symbiotic study in power dynamics utilizing a central male persona. Plath's two personae,

while both males afflicted with unstable notions of self and delusory aspirations (whether spiritual or sensual), form the opposite poles of personal agency: the paralytic is a hapless vegetable shown up by the lasciviousness of even a flower, while the gigolo is an absolute assertion of self, a bounding, maniacal caricature doomed by his own narcissistic obsessions. With the unique experimentations in personae that contribute a rich heterogeneity to Plath's late poems, one wonders why such work is almost always pushed aside in favor of discussing her most heavily anthologized poems: the gothic *tour de force* of "Daddy," the self-mocking, theatrical burlesque of "Lady Lazarus," the self-possessed yet giddily suicidal "Godiva" of "Ariel," and the lethal polish of "Edge."

While Plath's possibly final poem, "Edge"—written on February 5, 1963, only six days before her death—remains one of the most talked about poems in the Plath canon, the poem is often misunderstood, or worse: radically oversimplified as a kind of "suicide note." Perloff, for example, as she describes how, in Plath's 1963 poems, "the inevitability of death is everywhere foregrounded," misses both the poem's fragile yet loving maternal tenderness and overlooks the possibility that, through the poem's range of dissonances, Plath hints at her speaker's desire to live (196).

First, observe the dissonance between Plath's title, "Edge" (which suggests the speaker is not in fact a posthumous one, as she is in Vendler's estimation in her 2003 *Coming of Age as a Poet*), and the rest of the poem which features a woman contemplating suicide and the murder of her children as a mode of protection from life's cruelties and disappointments. Like "Sheep in Fog," a tonally similar poem, "Edge" is a poem about the possibility of going from one place to another—about crossing a threshold, from life into death—and it is a poem, too, about an eerie resolve rather than rage that dominates so many of Plath's poems from 1962. In "Edge," we find a rather inverted narrative structure: the woman's imagined suicide and infanticide has already happened, although the poem's title implies that the deadly actions have yet to transpire, that the woman is still on the "edge" of life and death:

The woman is perfected.  
Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment,  
The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga,  
Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:  
We have come so far, it is over. (272)

Contrary to Vendler's belief that "Edge" endorses suicide as a "Sophoclean truth," that "the most rational reaction to 'the human condition' is suicide," and to those critics who consider the poem's vision entirely anti-redemptive, there are many dissonances between what Plath's speaker *says* and what her speaker may *mean* in "Edge" (144). In addition to the problematic juxtaposition of the title that suggests the murderous events exist only in the speaker's mind and her dubious insistence that "it is over," Plath's use of the words "illusion" and "seem" subtly bedevils the notion of the fixedness of her would-be Medean tragedy. Maybe, Plath seems to suggest, things are not as "over" as her speaker claims they are. After all, the "Greek necessity" (i.e. tragedy), here, is a false one, an "illusion."

Additionally, Axelrod, in *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and Cure of Words*, interprets the "scrolls" of the speaker's toga as a life-affirming, though misread, textual metaphor (the "scrolls" of Plath's writing), suggesting that:

The words "illusion" and "seem" imply the possibility that the unfortunate woman has fatally misread her own texts, just as the poet has miswritten her poem to the degree that it evades her intentions. The texts may actually be telling the woman to *live*, though she interprets them contrarily. (219)

While Axelrod's attenuated notion of "Edge" as a kind of "poetic epitaph" seems rather reductive, Vendler's understanding of the poem as a pity-free "self-elegy," with a vision of "maternal and sensuous and aesthetic joy of a high order," is a more sensitive estimation of the complexities of what is perhaps Plath's final poetic effort (218; 148). Axelrod, though, perhaps better recognizes the implications of the text's cryptic hints that doubt the "perfection" of the dead woman's "smile of accomplishment."

In his book on modern elegy, *Poetry of Mourning*, Jahan Ramazani, too, sees "Edge" as a self-elegy or a poem that "aspires to the condition of epitaph" (288). Similarly to Axelrod, Ramazani writes of the textual metaphors in "Edge":

[T]he disturbing self-estrangement of the poet becomes a poet correlative for the ultimate estrangement of the poems from a life. The speaker of the poem

repeatedly textualizes herself, viewing her body as if it were already vanishing into the poems that will survive it...As if dressed in texts, her body begins to seem a literary corpus. (289)

Unlike Medea, who murders her two children as an act of revenge upon her husband Jason, Plath's speaker in "Edge" has tenderly "folded / Them back into her body as petals / Of a rose close when the garden / Stiffens and odours bleed / From the sweet, deep throats of the night flower" (272-273). We find that the woman in "Edge" needs and wants to protect her children, whereas the paralytic and the gigolo both reject familial attachments with either a remote detachedness or a narcissistic jeer. Perhaps, then, the tenderness that emerges toward the middle of "Edge" responds to Plath's portrait of the playful child who uncovers an empty world in "Balloons."

While Ramazani describes Plath's speaker in "Edge" as having reached a state of completion ("Her life," he writes, "like her work takes on the appearance of a finished narrative"), quite possibly the "backward" structure of the poem contradicts his notion of finality (289). The numerous inversions throughout the poem make for an instability in which the "narrative" of "Edge" is increasingly difficult to pin down: the poem begins with the woman's death, moves back to the bizarrely loving scene of infanticide and suicide, and ends with the opposing images of a sexualized night garden (as it "Stiffens and odours bleed"; where flowers have "sweet, deep throats") and the harrowing image of the moon "Staring from her hood of bone" like a disaffected angel of death (273). Even Plath's image of the "petals of a rose" closing seems inverted (roses do not in fact "close" at night; rather the rose appears to turn back into a bud: a purer state, nearer to nothingness), perhaps recalling one of Rainer Maria Rilke's French lyrics about roses: "Rose who, being born, in reverse imitates / the slow ways of those who've died" (19).

Never too shy with her ready gallows humor, Plath ends "Edge" as she writes of the moon, a kind of stoic, other self: "She is used to this sort of thing. / Her blacks crackle and drag" (273). Thus, the ending of "Edge," problematizes our reading of the poem. Clearly, the image of the moon, whose "blacks crackle and drag" in a trifecta of crisp gutturals, is a roughly funereal one, though the moon appears an ironic figure, who is "used to this sort of thing" (implying, then, that the speaker does indeed have something "to be sad about": she is neither "used to" the cruelties of human life nor wholly

committed to death). The structure of "Edge" is oddly inverted: perfection comes at the beginning and dissolves at the end in a cascade of cool indifference from nature that so contrasts with the loving urges the speaker has toward her children.

"Edge," which generates quite a lot of critical interest, and poems like "Paralytic" and "Gigolo," which mostly receive little to no space in essays, deserve attention not only in the context of whether or not they "belong" in a given version of *Ariel* (as Plath made her intentions quite clear by excluding *all* of the 1963 poems from her second manuscript), but for the way these late poems help us appreciate and see with clarity the full trajectory of Plath's *oeuvre*. The heterogeneity we find in Plath's work from 1963 should be celebrated as a virtue rather than a vice. Her forays into exploring male personae, for example, seem an inventive departure into ventriloquizing the obsessive shadows of her father and her philandering husband rather than railing against them as she does in "Daddy" and "Lady Lazarus." In Plath's late personae poems, we find an artful distance between poet and speaker emerging as she worked on the poems meant for a third collection. By considering Plath's twelve poems from 1963 as the core of this third poetry collection, not only will we fully respect her artistic vision, we will help give shape to a phantom in the Plath canon that deserves a place distinct from the pages of *Ariel*.

## Works Cited

- Axelrod, Steven Gould. *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and Cure of Words*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990. Print.
- . "The Second Destruction of Sylvia Plath." *The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Linda W. Wagner. London: Routledge, 1988. 313-319. Print.
- Helle, Anita. "Introduction." *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Anita Helle. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007. 1-13. Print.
- Hughes, Frieda. "Foreword." *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. Ed. Frieda Hughes. New York: HarperCollins, 2004. xi-xxi. Print.
- Hughes, Ted. "Introduction." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1977. 1-9. Print.
- . "Foreword." *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Eds. Ted Hughes and Frances McCullough. New York: Dial, 1982. xiv. Print.
- The Holy Bible*. King James Ver. New York: Collins' Clear Type, 1957. Print.
- Kirsch, Adam. *The Wounded Surgeon: Confession and Transformation in Six American Poets*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2005. Print.
- Kukil, Karen. "Preface." *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Karen V. Kukil. New York: Anchor Books, 2000. ix-x. Print.
- Lowell, Robert. *Collected Poems*. Eds. Frank Bidart and David Gewanter. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003. Print.
- Middlebrook, Diane. *Her Husband: Ted Hughes & Sylvia Plath, a Marriage*. New York: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Perloff, Marjorie. "The Two Ariels: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon." *Poetic License: Essays on Modernist and Postmodernist Lyric*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1990. 175-197. Print.
- Plath, Sylvia. "A Comparison." *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1977. 61-63. Print.
- . *Ariel*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: HarperPerennial, 1999. Print.
- . *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. Ed. Frieda Hughes. New York: HarperCollins, 2004. Print.
- . *The Bed Book*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: Harper & Row, 1976. Print.

- . *Collected Poems*. Ed. Ted Hughes. New York: HarperPerennial, 1992. Print.
- Ramazani, Jahan. *Poetry of Mourning: The Modern Elegy from Hardy to Heaney*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994. Print.
- Rilke, Rainer Maria. *The Complete French Poems*. Trans. A. Poulin, Jr. Saint Paul: Graywolf Press, 2002. Print.
- Rose, Jacqueline. *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991. Print.
- Rosenthal, M.L. "Poets of the Dangerous Way." *The Critical Heritage*. Ed. Linda W. Wagner. London: Routledge, 1988. 60-62. Print.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans, et al. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1974. 1606-1638. Print.
- Vendler, Helen. "An Intractable Metal." *Ariel Ascending: Writings About Sylvia Plath*. Ed. Paul Alexander. New York: Harper & Row, 1985. 1-12. Print.
- . *Coming of Age as a Poet: Milton, Keats, Eliot, Plath*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003. Print.

**Credit Line**

Excerpts from "Paralytic" (21), "Gigolo" (25), "Edge" (17) from *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, edited by Ted Hughes.

© 1960, 65, 71, 81 by the Estate of Sylvia Plath. Editorial mat'l © 1981 by Ted Hughes.

Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers and Faber and Faber Limited.