

Review of Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain, eds. *Representing Sylvia Plath*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011. £50/\$85.

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Over the last half-century, Sylvia Plath has drawn and sustained the attention of some of the most respected literary critics in the field of English literature—so why is she often regarded, in the popular imagination, as a neurotic depressive rather than one of the undisputed literary geniuses of the twentieth century? As Hermione Lee notes, "Women writers whose lives involved abuse, mental-illness, self-harm, suicide, have often been treated, biographically, as victims or psychological case-histories first and as professional writers second" (128-29). This is especially true in Plath's case. Caught in the limbo between icon and cliché, she has been mythologized in movies, television and even biographies as a 'high priestess' of poetry, obsessed with death. These distortions gained momentum in the 1960s when Plath's *Ariel* was published. Most reviewers did not know what to make of the burning, pulsating metaphors in poems like "Lady Lazarus," or the chilly imagery of "Edge," so they resorted to sexist clichés. *Time* called the book a "jet of flame from a literary dragon," while the *Washington Post* dubbed Plath a "snake lady of misery" (118, 3). Robert Lowell, in his introduction to *Ariel*, characterized Plath as hurtling toward her own destruction; Ted Hughes often portrayed her as a passive vessel through which a dangerous muse spoke. These caricatures have calcified over time into the popular, reductive version of Sylvia Plath we all know: the suicidal writer of *The Bell Jar* whose supposedly cultish devotees are young women clad in black and full of angst.

Janet Badia's *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers* (2011) traced the roots of this phenomenon back to the sixties and seventies, and showed how the women's movement amplified a deep cultural anxiety about women readers themselves, who were often framed within tropes of "consumption and addiction" (3). Caught in the crossfire between women's liberation and its backlash, Plath's work (and her "fans") became politicized, and invited extreme reactions of adoration and disgust. Surprisingly, Badia shows that much of the debate surrounding Plath hinged on one word: "confessional."

Many well-meaning literary critics, she argues, inadvertently marginalized Plath when they insisted that she was not a confessional poet. These critics were uncomfortable with the term because it linked Plath back to an allegedly unsophisticated (female) readership who cared only about her dramatic life story. Badia claims that in fact these women were the very readers who made Plath a best-selling poet and helped propel her work to the forefront of the American canon.

Representing Sylvia Plath, a collection of essays edited by Sally Bayley and Tracy Brain, shows that the debate about Plath's status as a confessional writer continues to animate Plath studies. The book comprises eleven excellent essays that consider Plath's work, and work about Plath, through a diverse range of literary strategies (close reading, psychoanalysis, cultural history, artistic responses to Plath, etc.). Despite their differing approaches, most of the essays add, as the editors write, "to a growing movement in Plath studies that is suspicious of an older but still lingering school of Plath criticism that sees her as a 'confessional' writer" (1). Indeed, the collection's ideological affiliation with Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* is evident in the introductory essay's first paragraph, which quotes an excised sentence from *The Bell Jar*, spoken by Esther Greenwood, to show "the unreliability of representation, even when it appears to arise from first-hand testimony": "I never told anybody my life story, though, or if I did, I made up a whopper" (1). The editors use this statement to warn against "any easy acceptance of truthfulness" on the part of Plath or her characters: "It is a caution that readers of all kinds of supposed representations of Plath would do well to heed." While the urge to diversify readings of Plath is admirable and necessary, the methodological complications of an approach that cautions against "all kinds of supposed representations of Plath" are clear when the editors decide to invoke the "real" Plath with a sentence that is uttered by a fictional character and not included in the published novel. When Esther says that she would falsify the details of her life story, does that mean Plath would too? If Plath cut the sentence from her novel, did she endorse its sentiment? Here the editors run the risk of reading Plath in exactly the way that they warn against.

Badia is troubled by the critical urge to dismiss autobiographical readings of Plath's work in favor of a postmodern approach which seeks to discover "what Plath's many poetic speakers hide, veil, and leave out" (1). Badia writes in her recent book:

Plath studies has become bogged down in its preoccupation, even obsession, with repairing the damage that has allegedly resulted from the author's association with the label 'confessional poetry,' with (auto)biographical criticism and reading practices, and with young women readers. . . . efforts to distance Plath from the label 'confessional poetry' and from (auto)biographical modes of interpretation are closely, even inextricably, linked to assumptions—indeed, anxieties—about her audience. (10)

To be fair, Bayley and Brain are criticizing a school of 'confessional' criticism (Rosenthal et al) rather than readers; and few would dispute that studies which have interrogated the stability of "truth" in Plath's work and life have encouraged important new interpretive practices. We now understand that Plath was a master of disguise and irony. But it is interesting to consider the extent to which the anti-confessional thrust of *Representing Sylvia Plath* has been influenced by the kinds of critical anxieties Badia explores: for example, that those who read Plath autobiographically "have failed as readers" and that critics must distance Plath from the confessional label to "begin the process of rehabilitating Plath's reputation as a so-called serious poet" (12).

The individual essays in *Representing Sylvia Plath*, however, show there is a wide middle ground between Rosenthal and Rose. In Part 1, "Contexts," Jonathan Ellis provides a re-evaluation of Plath's letter writing practices, which he claims are much more subversive than previously thought. Anita Helle gives us a new understanding of how the famous photograph of Otto Plath at the lectern, and the German words on his blackboard, relate directly to themes in "Daddy." Steven Gould Axelrod provides helpful historical contexts for Plath's Holocaust imagery, and reads her use of the torture trope as "transgressive horror" that foreshadowed recent practices at Guantanamo Bay (81). Lynda Bundtzen's article, "Fantasies of Incest and the 'Daddy' Narrative in Ariel" is the most controversial and provocative of the group. Bundtzen rather surprisingly agrees with Ted Hughes's "case against Otto Plath's domination of [Plath's] emotional life and his importance to her in accessing an unconscious fantasy life for her poetry" in *Birthday Letters* (56). Drawing on drafts of "Daddy," journal entries, and studies by child abuse experts, she claims that embedded in the poem is a fantasy of incest which Plath "needed to conjure and then violently exorcize" (64). Bundtzen repeatedly emphasizes that she is

not accusing Otto Plath of sexually abusing his daughter; after all, she is merely taking her cue from Plath, who excised the word "incestuous" from a draft of "Daddy." Still, it is hard not to consider the question after reading how "a description of the abused child" by an expert "seems almost perfectly in concert with descriptions of Plath by biographers, and with the personality who emerges from her *Journals* and letters" (64). Yet Bundtzen ultimately argues that "its pertinence is not in how well it accords with what we know of Plath's 'real' life, but in its persuasive power as a description of her fantasy life while in psychoanalysis" (65).¹

The second part of the book focuses on Plath's "Poetics and Composition," though several of these articles also provide important contexts for Plath's work. Sally Bayley's article on Plath's "tree poems" offers previously overlooked sources—such as the work of Caspar David Friedrich—for poems such as "The Moon and the Yew Tree," "Elm" and "Little Fugue" (95). Laure de Nervaux-Gavoty explores Plath's "subversive" use of color and her "painterly sensibility" (110). Nervaux-Gavoty argues that it was partially color which provided the "explosion" that enabled Plath to move away from tight, New Critical modes of writing, and that her use of "the primitive" "is integral to her attempt to break out of the confined space of the museum of tradition in which she has locked herself" (115, 118). Kathleen Connors does a careful reading of several drafts of "The Babysitters," though she veers slightly from the collection's anti-confessional bearings by privileging biographical information upon which "the poem is undoubtedly based" in her reading (129). She finds, within the drafts, a moving commentary on the vicissitudes of female friendship—an important observation, especially, Connors notes, since Plath has so often been (mis)represented as "intensely jealous and competitive with other women—no true friend to any" (142). Luke Ferreter's article about Plath's engagement with women's magazine fiction caps off the section; he discusses several short stories Plath wrote in the late fifties and early sixties, and argues that this fiction needs to be considered in its cultural context. Ferreter helpfully points out that women's magazines could be critical of the repressive feminine codes that they otherwise upheld; alternatively, they could subvert the idea of professional accomplishment they elsewhere

¹At the article's end, Bundtzen quotes a line from Plath's journals in which she writes that her father "heiled Hitler in the privacy of his home." Several biographical sources confirm that Otto Plath was a pacifist who was deeply troubled by the developments in Germany in the 1930s. He would never have saluted Hitler.

encouraged. (He singles out *Mademoiselle* as a magazine which "quickly and firmly reinforces precisely the feminine mystique from which it claims to offer a way out" (151).) He argues that Plath's stories were rejected with such frequency because they contained strong female heroines, and points out that, like the magazines themselves, her stories are more "ideologically complex" than we may realize (148).

The collection ends with a section on "Representation," in which Bundzten's layered article on Hughes's *Howls and Whispers* seems slightly out of place. The other two articles discuss artistic representations of Plath in dance, film, sculpture and painting. Tracy Brain provides a survey of several recent works about Plath, such as the film *Sylvia*, Kate Moses's *Wintering*, and Elisabeth Gray's play/film *Wish I Had a Sylvia Plath*. Brain criticizes *Sylvia* and Emma Tennant's *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* for indulging in soap opera theatrics and failing "to say anything serious or important about the poetry," but applauds Kate Moses for dispensing with melodrama (188). She also examines "ethically compromised" Plath biographies by Paul Alexander and Ronald Hayman, who tend to write in novelistic rather than factual terms (193).

Brain frequently returns to questions of ethical responsibility in portrayals of Plath, and asks, "who, if anyone, has the right to represent Sylvia Plath": "However much we talk about the slippery nature of representation or of the complexity of the mimetic, in Plath's own work and in work that tries to fictionalize her, people do still get hurt" (185, 199). Ultimately, she writes, "as much care as possible should be taken when engaging in it, and the admission of possible damage made" (199). While Brain is right to explore the ethics of representation, she effectively rehearses the same grievances Ted Hughes aired for decades, and even uses the same language, especially when she admits to hoping Plath's children (both still alive then) would never see *Wish I Had a Sylvia Plath*. Many Plath critics have questioned Hughes's belief that only he and other family members had the right to represent Plath, but Brain seems sympathetic towards Hughes's viewpoint; it is as if Plath criticism has come full circle. Yet we are entering problematic territory when we begin to ask, however tentatively, who may represent Plath—Moses but not Tennant? Performance artists but not Hollywood? Badia's observations about critical anxiety over Plath's readers again comes to mind, only here that anxiety surrounds Plath's 'representers' and their intended audience. There is sometimes a sense in Plath studies that

the more popular the representation of Plath, the less it ought to be valued. Yet the dichotomy is not always so clear. Suzie Hanna's *The Girl Who Would Be God* has a postmodern sensibility that pleases the collection's editors, but it had an extremely limited viewing. Bayley and Connors commissioned it for the Sylvia Plath 75th Year Symposium at Oxford, where, one presumes, it was seen mainly by academics. *Sylvia*, though flawed in the predictable ways of the Hollywood biopic, had a vastly wider and more diverse audience, and surely led to more sales of Plath's books. Which representation of Plath is the more important?

In the collection's final essay, Bayley extols Stella Vine's portraits of Plath as ironic renderings of a tabloid culture that distorts Plath's image. Yet one might also suggest that some of Vine's paintings of Plath, which show Plath crying or posed next to the caption "hold me," unduly emphasize Plath's vulnerability and tragedy. *Are* they ironic or do they simply perpetuate the worst aspects of the Plath myth? Vine's piece *sylvia cooker* features a real oven decorated with five lines from Lady Lazarus—"Dying is an art," etc.—and shows scenes from Plath's life around the sides (on one side she appears in a short-sleeved sweater crying bloody tears). The piece—which walks a very fine line between irony and bad taste—brings up exactly the kinds of ethical questions that trouble Brain ("What are the ethics in portraying this death?" (196)). Brain admits, in her essay, to wanting to protect Plath's children from hurtful representations of their mother. Surely *sylvia cooker*, despite its high art pedigree, would qualify as such. Bayley, however, celebrates it with theoretical flourish: "and so we enter the sticky realm of what Jean Baudrillard called 'the hyperreal'—that wavering place between fantasy and reality—with a queasy sense that any semblance of reality has been written over, if there ever was one" (226).

Thus the messages from these final articles about 'representing Plath' seem slightly contradictory. Yet Brain and Bayley should be applauded for confronting such difficult and important questions, and for putting together an ambitious collection that encourages readers to move beyond the ethics of Plath's own representations to those surrounding representations of Plath herself.

Works Cited

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