

A Poem, A Friend

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with Elizabeth Sigmund

In mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish, everything is somehow preserved and in suitable circumstances it can once more be brought to light. (Freud quoted in Thurschwell 4)

Introduction: "The painted wooden face was known to me...."

A poem can hold many meanings; meanings for both the writer and the reader. For who can say with any certainty what forces may be at work when a poet puts pen to paper and a reader then consumes what is written. There is so much space, so much room for interpretation, unconscious resonances, instinctual needs and desires. If, as Freud states above, nothing which has once been formed in our mental life can ever perish, then it becomes almost unimaginable to consider the storehouse of memories we must bring to the writing and reading of any text.

In this paper we aim to explore the unconscious processes that may be at play in a poem. "Shep-en-Mut" written by Elizabeth Sigmund is, on the surface, a beautiful poem about an Egyptian Songstress, Priestess of Thebes and Bearer of the Little Milk Jar. It is about encountering the ornately decorated and mummified body of Shep-en-Mut in a museum exhibition and being struck by something uncannily familiar in the unfamiliar. Yet it could also easily be a poem about Elizabeth's friend, Sylvia Plath, who perhaps acts as a silent, ghostly presence informing the poem. By analysing the lines of verse and exploring how Elizabeth's memories and stories may have informed the poem, we are able to offer one possible reading of both a poem and a friend.

However, we offer you a warning. *This is not a conventional paper.* Neither is it literary criticism nor a traditional memoir. Rather, we invite you to join us as we explore words, memories and stories; as we follow the labyrinthine path of poems, people and play.

For Robert Young (1987), the very act of writing becomes limitless in its own playfulness. In other words, when we encounter a text we do not necessarily have to search for an essential "truth," but rather we can drift and disentangle; writing is to be "ranged" over. A text, then, is something which is woven together from ideas, memories and (un)conscious instincts and desires. As a reader we encounter this text, involve ourselves in some playful textual analysis and may well become "undone, like a spider that comes to dissolve itself in its own web" (Young 39).



Roland Barthes (1977), too, claimed encountering a text can result in a multiplicity of meanings, it is the language that speaks, not the author, and if we follow a text it can be "run (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level" (147). In this sense, faced with a poem, any poem, we can allow ourselves to range over the possibility of interpretations and not prescribe ourselves to some mythical unity of meaning. This does not mean of course that a poem cannot be sparked by a particular event, but simply that once written, to give the text a singular meaning is to close the writing and limit its readings.

Therefore as we consider the poem "Shep-en-Mut," it is worth bearing in mind that the poem was inspired by a particular visit to a museum. Elizabeth recalls:

In the 1970s I took my children to the museum in Exeter to find information about hut circles on Dartmoor. While we were looking at exhibits I noticed a painted wooden mummy case, standing in the sunlight of a window. I have never been particularly interested in Egyptology, and was amazed to feel something deep inside me responding to this image: I said "Hello," as if suddenly meeting an old friend.

I went to the information desk and found a leaflet about the mummy. She was Shep-en-Mut, a priestess in Thebes, and she was described as a "songstress of Amun Re."

I borrowed a friend's ticket for the library at Exeter University and made copious notes of Egyptian funerary rites.

It seems there was something about the backlit figure of Shep-en-Mut standing in the sun that drew Elizabeth's attention. A resonance perhaps, or the unearthing of a buried memory? Elizabeth describes it as like "meeting an old friend" despite prior to this visit never having had a particular interest in Egyptology. This feeling of the familiar in the unfamiliar is an example of Freud's idea of *unheimlich* ("the uncanny"): "the uncanny is that class of the

frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."¹ Often the uncanny is connected to the return of the dead or the fear of spirits and ghosts. In this case we could argue that the uncanny is connected to the preserved body of the Egyptian Songstress, both somehow dead and strange while at the same time, not-dead and, in some indefinable form, striking a note of familiarity. Quite where this resonance and feeling of 'knowingness' came from occurred to Elizabeth when she showed the poem to her husband:

I wrote the poem and put it away in a drawer for some months, without giving it a further thought. When I showed my husband William the poem he said: "What a sad and beautiful poem about Sylvia." I protested at once; however, on rereading it I saw what he meant, and was amazed that I could not have known this myself.



¹ "The Uncanny," an essay by Sigmund Freud, was first published in 1919. The full text can be accessed at <http://people.emich.edu/acoykenda/uncanny1.html>



Shep-en-Mut

The painted wooden face was known to me.
She stood in the dusty museum sun,
Painted eyes lengthened with kohl.
Azure, terra-cotta, white,
Emblazoned cartonnage.

The Isis wings, spread in care and love.
Curving protective Neckbet and Nephtys.
Beneath, the corticated skin,
Black bitumen. Eyeless, cracked and black,
Dessicated viscera, wrapped apart.

Leaving child and husband, moving through satin bands of shadow,
Singing in the ecstatic sun.
Feet hissing through the silken sand
She carried the Milk Jar and a Palm frond,
Worshipping and serving each day.

This lady was the songstress of Amun-Re,
Her songs curved upward in the great Temple of Thebes.
The stone beauty of the face of the God above her frailty
Gave her voice a scope of praise denied to our dessicated senses

When death stooped on her, claws and beak ripped.
Then feathers lay outstretched in love.
Horus wings, Night Heron beak,
Having slain, now standing guard in fearful phalanx.
Leaving the echo between the roof trees.

Her flesh must be pickled, cured with cinnamon and myrrh.
The skull, frail as a blown egg,
Emptied of its convolute majesty,
Stuffed with delicate resinous rags.
When the sucking natron has had its meal
Her shell will taste the shriving sun and wind once more.
Blow gently, shine kindly down, Amun-Re, on thy slave.

She shall be wrapped in fine linen
Layer on layer, and laced like a shoe.
The last we shall see in linen and plaster and paint.
May her journey be safe through the dark tunnels
May her soul sing in light before her God,
In soft peace. The holding wings enfold my friend.

Priestess of Thebes. Singer of Amun-Re
Bearer of the little Milk Jar.

Elizabeth Sigmund

We see here one possible reading of this poem by William Sigmund. A reading of which the writer, Elizabeth, was unaware. Pamela Thurschwell (2000) questions whether it is ever possible to approach a text and avoid examining the psychic motivations of the author. Not only is the act of reading unstable, but she argues that the author's intentions are never fully retrievable *not even to themselves*. If this is truly the case, then it is by extension possible that an author's unconscious motives remain inaccessible *especially* to themselves. Elizabeth is certain when she wrote this poem that it was not about her friend, Sylvia Plath. Yet the more she read the verse and considered the associations, the more she began to feel that unconsciously her thoughts and memories of Plath in some way may well have informed her writing of the poem. It is this *play* of hidden intentions and possibilities that encourage us in this paper to see what may be retrievable in the writing of a poem.

"This lady was the songstress of Amun-Re...."



Throughout "Shep-en-Mut," there are echoes of Plath's own work, such as the painted sarcophagus of "Last Words"² and the little milk pitchers of "Edge."³ But there are also resonances for Elizabeth of her memories of Sylvia as a woman and as a mother. When Elizabeth writes of Shep-en-Mut's "emblazoned cartonnage" she describes the depiction of Isis with her wings spread in love and care. This brings to mind the importance for Plath of the Isis engraving which she had hanging on her wall (left) and which she was photographed in front of holding her infant Frieda (see *Letters Home* 357). Isis is the Egyptian Goddess of Motherhood and Children from whom all beginnings originate. Often she is depicted nursing her infant son, Horus, with her wings outstretched to protect him. It is this depiction of the loving mother that Elizabeth recalls about Plath and the fact that upon their first meeting they were both mothers and wives of writers:

² See "Last Words" in *Collected Poems* (172).

³ See "Edge" in *Collected Poems* (272).



When I first met Sylvia Plath in March 1962, she was 29 and I was 33, married to a writer, David Compton. It was almost a year before she died. Her daughter Frieda and my son James were both three years old, and Sylvia's son Nicholas was a month old. Sylvia and Ted had bought Court Green, a beautiful seventeenth century thatched house in North Tawton, a tiny mill town near Okehampton on the edge of Dartmoor.

It was this setting in Devon at both their homes where the friendship between Elizabeth and Sylvia developed as they discovered a mutual interest in politics, industry, gardening and motherhood:

She and I discussed the military and industrial links between Britain and the U.S., and she was very pleased that we agreed on so many political points. I introduced her to Mark Bonham Carter, the prospective Liberal parliamentary candidate for mid-Devon, and they became close friends. We also had other interests in common – the teachings of Carl Jung and the paediatric specialist, Dr Spock. Over the spring and summer we visited each other regularly, each delighting in having found a friend in Devon with so many things in common.

Elizabeth recalls Plath as being an affectionate mother and one who took parenthood seriously. She remembers one particular visit from Sylvia when sitting at the dinner table, with Nicholas on her knee, Sylvia laughed about how greedy Nicholas could be. As Elizabeth served up the food, Nicholas followed the dishes with his eyes and Sylvia exclaimed: "Look at him! Look at his greedy eyes!" and gave him a tight hug. It is this notion of the playful, loving mother that brings to mind the "Isis wings spread in love and care." The depiction of Shep-en-Mut as a protective woman and mother made Elizabeth retrospectively wonder to what extent her memories of Sylvia and her children informed this second stanza of the poem.

However, it is not only Plath as mother who is evoked in Elizabeth's poem, but also Plath as poet and writer. Shep-en-Mut is a "songstress" whose voice has "a scope of praise" singing songs which "curved upwards" in the Temple of Thebes. There is something ethereal about her gift which is "denied to our dessicated senses." This powerful voice and mastery of words echoes the fierce, lyrical beauty of Plath's own poems. Despite Plath being curiously

modest about her own writing (Elizabeth recalls Sylvia never spoke to her about her writing), at all stages of her career when she was living in Boston, London and Devon, Plath recorded her own poems. Recordings can be heard ranging from the early poems of *The Colossus* to those staggering, late *Ariel* poems. The "voice" of the poems, and the poem as a song, became increasingly important to Plath. In a BBC interview with Peter Orr in October 1962, she expressed her excitement at the new move to record poets reading their own work:

ORR: Do you think this is an essential ingredient of a good poem, that it should be able to be read aloud effectively?

PLATH: Well, I do feel that now and I feel that this development of recording poems, of speaking poems at readings, of having records of poets, I think this is a wonderful thing. I'm very excited by it. In a sense, there's a return, isn't there, to the old role of the poet, which was to speak to a group of people, to come across.

ORR: Or to sing to a group?

PLATH: To sing to a group of people, exactly, exactly.⁴

Plath's reference to the ancient role of the bard as a singer is reflected in Shep-en-Mut's role as songstress with poems and songs as public performances; as voices with "scope of praise." But there were other readings too, less formal than the BBC, in which Plath exercised her voice. Elizabeth remembers:

She gave poetry readings for an arts group in Okehampton, a market town on the edge of the moor. She helped them to raise the money to buy an old building for an arts centre for the district, and they told me how fond they had become of her.

During their friendship, Elizabeth was not aware of the type of poems Plath was writing.⁵ Nevertheless, she appeared to express her emotions openly to Elizabeth during her regular visits:

⁴ A full transcription of this interview can be accessed at <http://www.sylviaplath.de/plath/orrinterview.html> where this citation is found.

⁵ In fact, Elizabeth did not even know that *The Bell Jar* was to be dedicated to her until after its publication. Plath wrote the news in her final letter to Elizabeth in February 1963. Elizabeth recalls that this letter was the



Ted went to stay with friends in London, and during the sad autumn, when Sylvia was living at Court Green without Ted, she came to visit more often.⁶ She brought fruit, vegetables and honey from her garden. We had long discussions about her sense of loss and anger, but I had no idea of the amazing poetry that she was writing early every morning.

It was not until after her death and the publication of *Ariel* that Elizabeth was able to truly appreciate the "scope" of her friend's voice. It is the strength of this voice, the idea of the poet as songstress, which seems to echo in the fourth stanza of "Shep-en-Mut."

When death "stoops" on Shep-en-Mut, she leaves behind her husband and child and we see how "her flesh must be pickled" and her body stuffed with "delicate resinous rags." The "sucking natron" mummifies and preserves the body as she is wrapped in "fine linen" beneath plaster and paint. Again, we can see echoes of Plath's own poem "Last Words" in which her speaker describes how she will be rolled up in bandages with her heart stored beneath her feet, wrapped in a neat parcel (*Collected Poems* 172). Yet there is also something here about loss and death. The preservation of the lost loved one in some ways can be seen as an attempt to hold onto one who has gone; a reluctance to give up the body to the inevitable cycle of decay and disintegration.

Death rituals exist in many cultures and these rituals are often an attempt to ward off the physical process of death whether by preservation of the body, removal of locks of hair from the corpse to plait into jewellery or photographs taken post mortem as *momentum mori*. Hallam and Hockey (2001) discuss the material nature of death, the ways in which the living negotiate their loss. Objects can become relics of the dead and used as tools of mourning. Thus, attempting to preserve the dead in "things" could be seen as an attempt to reanimate the one who is lost and gone in order to stabilize a sense of self suffering from loss. As Hallam and Hockey state:

only time Plath actually mentioned what she was writing: "*She said that we appeared in her new novel about life in North Tawton in which we appeared as plaster saints. Not flattering, I fear.*"

⁶ Some, but not all, of these visits between Elizabeth and Sylvia were captured on Plath's 1962 Letts Calendar. The ones listed are 17 April, 7 May, 28 June, 16 July, 23 July, 22 August, 29 August and 22 September. There were other visits and Elizabeth remembers that they organised outings too: "*We tried to cheer Sylvia with various outings, one was to a concert of early baroque music; she was amazed at the raw rich sound, but most of all by the strange names of the instruments - viola da gamba, rebeq, bowed psaltery, etc.*"

Material culture mediates our relationship with death and the dead; objects, images and practices, as well as places and spaces, call to mind or are made to remind us of the deaths of others. Material objects invoke the dead. (2)

It could, of course, be argued that nothing invokes the dead more than a preserved body, a body which has been lovingly pickled with "cinnamon and myrrh" and carefully wrapped "layer on layer." After her death, Plath's body was taken to University College Hospital and then removed to Leverton & Son Funeral Director's in Mornington Crescent where her body was embalmed and placed in an Oxford Coffin.⁷ Retrospectively Elizabeth wonders to what extent her description of Shep-en-Mut is informed by her knowledge of Plath's own embalmed body:

Some weeks after Sylvia's death, Ted asked us if we would consider going to live at Court Green, his house in Devon. He said that he could not go back to live there: "The house is full of ghosts." He decided to sell to it, and he needed people he trusted to look after it and show potential buyers around.

He also talked to me about his horror at the thought of Sylvia's hair rotting, and said that he had had her body embalmed. I found all this deeply disturbing, and felt great sadness. We decided that we must try to help him, and went to live at Court Green, until he eventually felt able to move back there with his children and sister Olwyn. We bought a cottage in the village and saw Ted and his family regularly.

Insomuch as Shep-en-Mut is preserved, however, there is also a feeling of letting go: "May her journey be safe through these dark tunnels." It is this letting go which becomes a crucial part of the process, or the "work" of mourning. Freud argues that "in mourning, time is needed for the command of reality-testing to be carried out" ([1917] 1995: 589) and after this passing of time, the mourner will eventually let go of the one who is lost. Upon moving

⁷ On 15th February after Plath's inquest at St Pancras Coroner's Court, her body was transported by rail from King's Cross, London up to Hebden Bridge in West Yorkshire for her funeral on the 16th. It is worth noting that the date of her funeral appears to be contested. While most sources state 16th February, notices in various U.S. newspapers (see Steinberg's paper in this journal) do give 18th February as a possible date. It is argued that this would allow time for her brother and sister-in-law to travel from the States to England.



into Court Green in the months after Plath's death, the loss appears to Elizabeth in small and curious ways:

One of the most painful things about moving into Court Green was to discover a line of Sylvia's shoes in the bathroom. Shoes are so personal, and there was something horribly final about their presence.

As Elizabeth wishes Shep-en-Mut a safe journey, this could well be a hope she directs towards Sylvia. Ten days before her death, Plath wrote to Elizabeth. Her final letter from London was full of plans. She had been asked to give a reading at the Round House in Camden; she was to appear on *The Critics*, a radio programme on the BBC; Frieda had been enrolled into a nearby nursery school and Nicholas was to have an operation on his eye. Moreover, stating her plans to journey back to Devon in March in time for her daffodils, Sylvia exclaimed to Elizabeth: "Thank God you will be there!" Yet here we see Elizabeth saying goodbye to her friend who left on a very different sort of journey.

After receiving Sylvia's last letter to me, I felt much more confident that she had begun to recover from the breakup of her marriage. It was therefore a terrible shock to read the article by Al Alvarez in the Observer (17 February 1963) "A Poet's Epitaph," with poems and a photograph of Sylvia and Frieda in front of the Isis poster. The poems, which were later published in Ariel, were terrible in the depth of suffering they revealed. In particular the line from Edge: "The moon has nothing to be sad about, / Staring from her hood of bone" stuck in my mind as a horrible image of something which I had always regarded as a powerful symbol of female power and maternal strength.

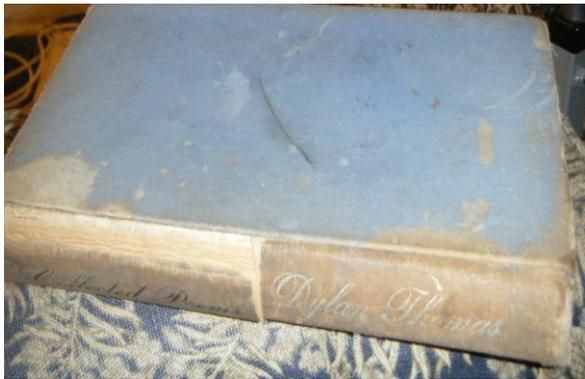
I felt, somewhat ambiguously, that here was a voice speaking from the depths for the anguish and terrors experienced by many women.

Shep-en-Mut the Songstress was preserved to startle and astound with a voice which held an unusual "scope of praise." Even after death, "singing in the ecstatic sun" she emblazons her way in the dusty museum room where she has stood since 1897. Plath's words, too, were preserved to pierce and astonish the reader. Speaking "from the depths," with her

bold and unique voice, she knew that she was "writing the best poems of my life; they will make my name" (*Letters Home* 468); poems that will ensure her voice continues to be heard.

Conclusion: "The holding wings enfold my friend...."

In this paper we have attempted to explore some of the ways in which memories and experiences may inform the writing of a poem, sometimes unconsciously. Given this, the claim to any "truth" seems spurious; only rather as Barthes states, we can follow a text like "a run in the thread of a stocking" (147). Surely after all, that is the beauty of writing, the infinite number of possibilities that it can offer to us as both a reader and a writer. Perhaps thoughts of Sylvia did, in some indefinable way, inform the writing of Elizabeth's poem. Perhaps equally, they did not. The point being that poems are there to be ranged over; that is part of their power.



In the years after Plath's death, Elizabeth was given, as a gift from Ted Hughes, Sylvia's copy of Dylan Thomas's *Collected Poems*. In her annotations to this book Sylvia highlighted both her belief of what poems should "do" and her desire for their longevity.

Elizabeth recalls:

Sylvia had marked many passages, including the "Note" in which he [Thomas] wrote "... These poems, with all their crudities, doubts and confusions, are written for the love of Man and in praise of God, and I'd be a damn' fool if they weren't." The message she marked most strongly were the last lines of "Poem in October":

*Oh may my heart's truth still be sung
On this high hill in a year's turning.*

We can never say with any certainty to what extent Plath informed the enigmatic figure of Shep-en-Mut in Elizabeth's poem, yet there are undoubted parallels, intentional or not, between the two songstresses speaking their bold and fierce words.



For Elizabeth, reflecting years afterwards, she sees resonances in her last wishes for Shep-en-Mut in her final wishes for Sylvia:

*May her journey be safe through the dark tunnels
May her soul sing in light before her God,
In soft peace. The holding wings enfold my friend.*

It is in these closing lines that we see the possible merging of a poem, a friend.

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Illustrations

- (1) Shep-en-Mut, Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Exeter.
- (2) Isis print 'Oedipus Aegyptiacus, Isis' from a book illustration in *Oedipus Aegyptiacus* by Athanasius Kircher published between 1652 and 1654, now out of copyright.
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