



Sylvia Plath and Material Culture

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The following articles consider Sylvia Plath's poetry and prose in light of materials in her archives, the periodicals in which her poems were published, and forms of visual media.¹ Incorporating a range of approaches and types of materials, the essays in this segment of *Plath Profiles* broaden existing critical conversations regarding Plath's archives, composition practices, and relationship to visual art.² In their range of methods and the types of sources they analyze, the contributions below also continue what has become a turn toward historical modes of inquiry in modernist studies.³ As a result, the section presents new material histories that engage Plath's writing in cultural, visual, and psychological contexts. The attention to detail that the scholars bring to their considerations of published and unpublished texts also suggests further possibilities for understanding not only Plath's *oeuvre*, but also the publications of her contemporaries.

In their second contribution to *Plath Profiles*, Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg continue their Trans-Atlantic dialogue addressing Plath's primary source materials. "Those Ghostly Archives, Redux" includes Crowther and Steinberg's discussion of one of Plath's titles for the poetry manuscript that would become "Ariel and Other Poems." Following her composition of "Tulips" in 1961, as Steinberg and Crowther note, Plath gave her manuscript the title, "Tulips and Other Poems." Their finding sheds light on not only the development of her poetry volume, but may also

¹ I would like to thank Peter K. Steinberg, Karen V. Kukil, Brian M. Reed, Anita Helle, Terry Kidner, the Fox Center for Humanistic Inquiry at Emory University, and the University of Washington's Special Collections.

² See, for instance, Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, Robin Peel, *Writing Back: Sylvia Plath and Cold War Politics*, Anita Helle, ed., *The Unraveling Archive: Essays on Sylvia Plath*, and Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley, eds., *Sylvia Plath's Arts of the Visual*.

³ Regarding the new modernist studies, see Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, "The New Modernist Studies," 744 and with regard to history, see Ann Ardis, "The Feminist Avant-Garde: Transatlantic Encounters of Early Twentieth Century," 628. For treatment of material culture in nineteenth and twentieth century literature see, Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* and Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature*.

indicate her sense of the strength of the poem after she composed it. On April 13, 1961, for instance, she enclosed the poem with a letter she sent to Theodore Roethke, following his visit to London.⁴ The new information in Crowther and Steinberg's piece adds to critics' understanding of Plath's composition strategies in the early sixties and her approaches to arranging poetry manuscripts throughout her career.

In addition to Plath's manuscripts, the materials that her parents composed are historical and literary resources. For instance, in addition to his publications on bees, Otto Plath completed a master's thesis for a degree in German at the University of Washington in Seattle.⁵ He composed the body of the thesis, entitled *Irvings Einfluss Auf Wilhelm Hauff Eine Quellenstudie* (1912), in German, but also included a preface in English.⁶ In the preface he clarifies that his thesis addresses the resemblances between the German writer Wilhelm Hauff and the American fiction writer Washington Irving. Otto Plath's thesis records his own contribution to literary criticism over forty years before his daughter's scholarship at Smith.

As Plath was writing her senior thesis "The Magic Mirror: The Double in Two of Dostoevsky's Novels" in the fall of 1955, she corresponded with her mother, Aurelia Plath, who was herself the author of a thesis.⁷ Nephie J. Christodoulides analyzes both Plath's and her mother's theses and their relationship to Plath's late poem "Medusa" (1962) in "Medusa/Meulsina: The Magic Mirror of Sylvia Plath's 'Medusa.'" Christodoulides broadens our understanding of not only Aurelia and Plath's literary relationship, but also Carl Jung's presence in psychological and psychoanalytical critiques of Plath's *oeuvre*.

⁴ Regarding Theodore Roethke's visit to London see also Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness*.

⁵ Anita Helle clarified Otto Plath's graduate degrees. See also Butscher, *Sylvia Plath* and Connie Ann Kirk, *Sylvia Plath: A Biography*, xvi. Butscher's papers in the Mortimer Rare Book Room at Smith College brought to my attention Otto Plath's degree from the University of Washington.

⁶ Microsoft Word's translator provides the title, "Washington Irving's Influence on Wilhelm Hauff a Source Study." 2010.

⁷ See *Letters Home*.



Periodical culture has provided a source of recent critical interest in both Plath scholarship and twentieth century studies.⁸ In "Early Public Representations of Sylvia Plath: An Analysis of the Sylvia Plath issue of *The Review*," Gina Hodnik assesses the posthumous publication of Plath's poetry and initial critical responses to it. Hodnik takes into account the layout of the journal and its relationship readers' and critics' encounters with Plath's work. Hodnik's essay underscores the vast resources that remain for critical exploration and the significance of a text's construction and appearance.

Two final contributions consider Plath's poetry in relation to different types of media. While Plath's readers are familiar with her interest in such painters as Paul Klee and Giorgio de Chirico, Hong Zeng in "Sylvia Plath and Edvard Munch: Mindscape of Chagrin" makes new connections between Plath's poetry and Munch's paintings.⁹ Shifting from painting to film, Vidhu Aggarwal, in "Talking Body Parts and Missing Commodities: Cinematic Complexes and Sylvia Plath," collects and assesses Plath's presentation of material objects.

From interpretations of Plath's manuscripts to mid-century film, the five articles below underscore the different roles that primary sources can have in Plath scholarship. The essays in this segment also treat materials that are housed in disparate locations. Crowther and Steinberg's exchange, for instance, incorporates the process of finding documents. In its third issue, *Plath Profiles* continues to invite readers' participation in conversations engaging Plath's writing in material, cultural, and historical contexts.

⁸ See Marsha Bryant, "Ariel's Kitchen: Plath, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and the Domestic Surreal," "Plath, Domesticity, and the Art of Advertising," *The Modernist Journals Project* <<http://dl.lib.brown.edu/mjp/>> Accessed 2 August, 2010, and *The Journal of Modern Periodical Studies* 1.1 (2010).

⁹ See Sherry Lutz Zively, "Sylvia Plath's Transformations of Modernist Paintings."

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