

A Fine White Flying Myth of One's Own: Sylvia Plath in Fiction – A Review Essay

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Emma Tennant, Sylvia and Ted: A Novel (New York: Henry Holt, 2001). 177 pp. \$22.00 (cloth). ISBN 0-7567-9474-9.

Kate Moses, Wintering: A Novel of Sylvia Plath (New York: Anchor, 2003). 313 pp. \$14.00 (paper). ISBN 1-4000-3500-7.

Robert Anderson, Little Fugue (New York: Ballantine, 2005). x + 367 pp. \$14.95 (paper). ISBN 0-345-45411-1.

Susan Fromberg Schaeffer, Poison: A Novel (New York and London: Norton, 2006). 606 pp. \$15.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-393-32979-7

Grace Medlar, The Lost Papers of Sylvia Plath (CreateSpace, 2009). 214 pp. \$14.95 (paper). ISBN 1-4414-6480-8.

From just a few years after the publication of Ariel, artists in many media have produced a vast array of aesthetic responses to the work of Sylvia Plath. Music, songs, poetry, plays and short films based on Plath's poetry have been written, and continue to be written, in great profusion.¹ This last decade has seen the response of novelists.² It is

¹ The complete bibliography, and indeed the complete study, of cultural representations of Plath's life and work remain to be written. I will give just two or three example of each genre here: for musical settings of Plath's works, see Rorem, Burton, and Knussen; for songs, see The Bangles, Adams, and Etheridge; for poetry, see Ackerman, Hurdle, and Bowman; for plays, see Kyle, Goldemberg, and Anthony; for films, see Sylvia, The Girl Who Would Be God, and Lady Lazarus. The longest bibliography of cultural representations of Plath's life and work, which makes no claim to be complete, can be found in Hagström 54-6. For studies of the reception history of Plath's work, see Badia, "The 'Priestess' and Her 'Cult';" Badia, "Dissatisfied, Family-Hating Shrews;" Banita, "No More Idols But Me;" Banita, "The Same, Identical Woman;" and Hagström.

² Fay Weldon's Down Among the Women, in which two of the characters are based on Plath and Hughes, was published in 1971. In addition to the five novels considered here, three others have been published in the last decade in which Plath features as one of the simulacra of postmodern hyper-reality. See Johnston;



the structure of Kate Moses' novel, Wintering, that makes the meaning of Plath's life and work to these novelists, and to the culture in which they write, most clear. The forty-one chapters of her novel are named for the forty-one poems which Plath had intended to collect in her Ariel volume. The fictional narrative of Plath's life in each chapter corresponds in some way to the poem for which the chapter is named. It is impossible to read a novel with this structure without thinking of Ulysses, a text that Plath herself studied in detail at Smith College, as her heavily annotated copy of the book and her correspondence with Gordon Lameyer show.³ Moses even refers to Homer in her novel, describing the character of Ted Hughes when he reads Plath's Ariel poems for the first time as "Homer's soldier, mortally wounded, his head bowing like a poppy under the weight of his helmet" (179). She quotes at length from Ovid's Metamorphoses, interspersing a narrative of Plath attending Ingmar Bergman's Through a Glass Darkly in 1962 with Ovid's account of the metamorphosis of Arachne into a spider, hanging from her own thread as the speaker of Plath's "Stopped Dead" hangs over a cliff.⁴ What the structure of Moses' novel says is that Plath's work, in particular her work as it is set in the context of her life, has become one of our society's myths. As T.S. Eliot said of Ulysses, it has become "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to...contemporary history" (177). Jacqueline Rose has argued that Plath's life and work constitute a space in which literary criticism articulates our culture's fantasies (11-28). As the expression of these fantasies continues unabated into the twenty-first century, the concept of myth – not simply in the sense of a fictional or sensational story, but in the sense of a story in whose terms communities construct their identities – is necessary in order to understand cultural products like this series of novels. Anita Helle has argued that aesthetic representations of Plath's life are cultural symptoms of postmodernity – "they respond obliquely to the attack on traditional biography and open up a space for dialogue between canonical and noncanonical readings" (646). Annika Hagström adds, "Instead of revealing the truth about Plath, it is my belief that

Fforde; Altschul. In September 2009, Joanne Rendell's novel, Crossing Washington Square, in which one of the protagonists is a Sylvia Plath scholar, will also be published.

³ Plath's copy of Ulysses is held at the Mortimer Rare Book Room, Smith College. Her correspondence with Gordon Lameyer is held at the Lilly Library, University of Indiana at Bloomington, Lameyer MSS.

⁴ As Diane Middlebrook points out, Tennant's novel also uses Ovid's Metamorphoses as a structural device (46, 48).

they tell us something about ourselves – our culture and our time – and about contemporary methods of constructing meaning” (35). In the postmodern iconosphere, the story of Sylvia Plath’s life and work, as it is told and re-told in these novels, functions like the myths Ovid collected in the Metamorphoses, as a story in whose terms contemporary readers and writers make sense of their lives.

These five novels respond to Plath’s life and work in different ways. Emma Tennant’s Sylvia and Ted and Kate Moses’ Wintering are imaginative re-narrations of Plath’s life, both focusing most heavily on the last ten months of her life. Each novel is, in Tennant’s words, “based on fact,” but nevertheless a “work of the imagination” (Author’s Note). Susan Fromberg Schaeffer’s Poison tells its readers that it is fiction alone, and the characters in the book do not have the names or all the characteristics of Plath’s family members, but it is clearly inspired by the story of the Hughes family. It constitutes something like a fictional meditation upon this story. Grace Medlar’s The Lost Papers of Sylvia Plath, the most successful novel of the five, achieves its success partly because it makes no attempt to re-tell Plath’s life story. Rather, it is entirely about readers of Plath’s texts, and the meaning of those texts in their lives. In Little Fugue, Robert Anderson attempts both modes. Interspersed between an imaginative recreation of Plath’s life story is the story of a fictional character, called Robert like the author himself, whose encounters with Plath’s work lead him to become a writer. As with Medlar’s novel, it is the latter narrative in particular, the story of the effect of Plath’s texts in the life of a fictional character, that succeeds as fiction.

Emma Tennant enjoys the process of literary mythography. She has written sequels to Jane Austen’s Emma and Sense and Sensibility, and two sequels to Pride and Prejudice. She has written novels telling Adèle’s story from Jane Eyre, the story of Emily Brontë’s creation of Wuthering Heights, and the story of Henry James’ creation of The Aspern Papers. She has written feminist revisions of Tess of the d’Urbervilles and The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Sandra Gilbert argues these works show that Tennant’s “chief interest is in plot: not just what’s the sequel but what was the prequel and what might be the seamy or scandalous subplot.” Peter Kemp, in the Sunday Times



review of Sylvia and Ted, described them as “parasitic.” I see no reason in principle to judge this genre of work negatively. Tennant frequently chooses to write in the margins of the literary canon, and so it is no surprise that she should turn to the story of Sylvia Plath. As her 1998 memoir Burnt Diaries chronicles, she was marginally involved in this story herself, as she conducted an on-and-off love-affair with Ted Hughes during the late 1970s. In the author’s note that prefaces the novel, Tennant describes the marriage of Plath and Hughes as “the twentieth century’s most famous – and most tragic – love affair.” The novel thus takes up a dialectical relationship to the myth of Sylvia Plath’s life and work. Finding it a story already of mythical proportions, Tennant retells it, thereby perpetuating and developing its status as a contemporary myth.

Sylvia and Ted has been strongly criticized by Plath scholars. Sandra Gilbert and Tracy Brain describe it as mere sensationalism – for Brain, “it fails as fiction; it fails as information” (23) – and Diane Middlebrook argues that it is based on “a personal ethical failure” (49). Both claims are true: the book descends irredeemably into scandalous sensationalism. Nevertheless, it does have some positive aspects. By what criteria should a novel based on the life of a historical person be judged? Perhaps this question ought to be answered with a further question: what do we gain from reading novels like Tennant’s and Moses’ that we do not from reading the best-researched biography of that person? Setting aside for the time being the question of the possibility of rigorously distinguishing history from fiction, perhaps we can say this. The value of these novels consists in what they add to biographical narratives that claim only and entirely to describe real events. By that criterion, Tennant’s novel is sometimes successful. It contains factual errors, such as describing Plath’s Wellesley address as “34 Elwood Street” (25), calling her Devon village “North Taunton” (99), and giving her childhood name for her grandfather as “Gramper” (8). Nevertheless, there are passages in the book in which she portrays the character of Sylvia Plath in ways that are entirely imaginative but still biographically plausible. For example, she describes the behavior of the character of Sylvia at age two-and-a-half, when her brother is born:

The child’s attention wanders now when she’s read a story. And the arrangements she makes from odds and ends Grammy finds her cupboards and jars – string, buttons, paper clips, little fragments of wool from a long out-worn pullover – are

straight and symmetrical, showing none of the flowery inventiveness of her earlier “patterns.” It’s time the child went home. (11)

There are also some aesthetically successful devices in the novel. The first two sections of the first chapter juxtapose the childhoods of the characters of Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill. The first section is entitled “April 27, 1935,” when Plath’s brother is born; the second “Berlin, 1935,” in which the character of Assia witnesses her uncle being attacked and arrested by a Nazi mob. Tennant twists the facts for aesthetic ends – in fact the Gutmanns left Germany for Palestine in 1933, when Plath was just one year old, and Wevill’s biographers make no mention of her witnessing an attack on her uncle (Koren and Negev 5-9). Nevertheless, the linked sections work well as fiction. In the first sentence of the second section, before Assia’s name is even mentioned, both Sylvia and Assia are referred to with the same words, “the little girl”:

Across the ocean the little girl [i.e. Sylvia] has never even seen, in a country to which her mother belongs and her father decidedly does not, the little girl [i.e. Assia] is listening to a story before being put to bed. (15)

The story the little girl is listening to is the tale of Little Red Riding Hood, linking her again to Plath, who also loved the Grimms’ fairy tales as a child. “The wolf dressed up as dear old Granny” in the story picks up on the character of “Grammy” from the story of Sylvia’s childhood. Assia is described as “the apple of Dr. Gutman’s [sic] eye,” just as Sylvia had watched her own father, a “kindly giant of a man,” catching bumblebees in his hands, “safe in the warm, male prison of her father’s hands” (14). There could be no justification for linking the characters of Sylvia Plath and Assia Wevill in this way in a biographical narrative, but it is an effective fictional device, opening the novel with the suggestion that the rival women of the story in fact have more in common than their rivalry would immediately suggest.

I have attempted to fill in one or two gaps in the negative reviews of Tennant’s novel. Ultimately, though, the critics are right: the novel’s flaws are insurmountable. Tennant’s imaginative re-creations of events whose details are unknown to biographers are often poorly researched. For example, when the character of Ted Hughes begins an affair with the character of Assia Wevill, Tennant portrays Plath as fatalistic concerning her husband’s coming infidelity:



Fallen – Sylvia sees his dizzy descent, down the steep spiral of the Tower of Love – fallen, there's no other word for the abject state she saw him in this morning when...he walked...down the hall to the long journey away from her. She knows the fall is fatal, this time. (117)

Plath never thought in this fatalistic manner, and would certainly not have done so about something that concerned her so closely as her own marriage. She regarded fatalism as a form of escapism, one of the many ways in which people avoid facing up to the difficult moral responsibility of creating one's own life (*Journals* 99-100; 435). To portray Plath regarding the possibility of her husband's beginning an affair as a kind of destiny, which she could do nothing about but watch unfold, is simply to portray a different character than the one we know from her journals and letters. It is the final episodes of the novel that have caused most offense. They are marred by the narration of very dramatic events which almost certainly did not occur in reality. In the section entitled "February 8, 1963," Tennant has the character of Plath visiting Hughes at his apartment in Soho, meeting Assia Wevill there, and realizing that Assia is pregnant. Tennant indicates that she is departing from known biographical facts, as she writes of the character of Ted Hughes, "I was there in Fitzroy Road for a short time,' he will say later" (144), which is the statement that can be found in biographies (Alexander 327; Stevenson 294; Feinstein 142; Middlebrook 209). She portrays events as having occurred differently, however. In the novel, Hughes is delayed in leaving for Fitzroy Road by his discussion with Assia and meets Plath in Soho, where Plath sees Assia and realizes that she is pregnant. The novel implies that it is this realization that prompts its heroine's death. There is no aesthetic value to these dramatic events of the plot of Tennant's novel. When compared to the facts as we know them from the biographies of Plath and Hughes, they are merely melodramatic. The aesthetic potential of a true story gets lost in sensationalism. The same is true of Tennant's creation of a fictional lover, who may be homosexual, for Plath, and of her account of a sexual encounter between Hughes and an under-age school-girl.

Wintering is Kate Moses' first novel, but it is the most stylistically accomplished of all five of the novels considered here. It has been as widely praised by scholars as Sylvia and Ted has been condemned, for the meticulous research upon which it is based,

for its self-consciousness of the constructed nature of biographical fiction, and for its detailed observations (Brain 23-4; Helle 645-6; Gilbert). Moses has a gift for intricate naturalistic observation that is often enhanced by an understated poetic imagery. Her descriptions of Plath's garden, for example, or of the London streets and shops through which she walks, or of the details of Plath's homemaking, both in Devon and London, are beautiful in their rich accretion of sensory details.

Wintering stands out among cultural representations of Plath in its clear insight that neither her life nor her work can be understood in any way as progressing towards her suicide. It is the only one of the novels about Plath that does not narrate the event of her death. The action ends on December 29, 1962. Indeed, if it were not for a short postscript listing the poems Plath wrote after that date and the date of her death, the reader of Moses' novel would not know that its heroine had died. This is because the novel is committed to the value of the Ariel volume as Plath herself conceived it, rather than the different volume published under that name in 1965. Plath's collection, as is often pointed out, began with the word "Love" and ended with the word "Spring" (Hughes 165). It begins with "Morning Song," about the birth of a child, and ends with her bee poems. The final poem is "Wintering," ending with its image of a woman in winter, "her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think," and her bees, who "taste the spring" (Collected Poems 218). At first glance at least, the volume begins with new life, and ends, after all the pain it explores, with the hope of new life.⁵ This impression is unavailable from the 1965 Ariel or the Collected Poems. Plath's intended volume is now easily accessible as Ariel: The Restored Edition. A year before this edition was published, however, Moses' novel is based on a clear understanding of and commitment to the volume that Plath intended to publish, with its emphasis on the hope of new life after the winter of emotional agony described in its great poems. Plath's metaphor of wintering, thus understood, is the fundamental metaphor of Moses' novel. Moses describes 23 Fitzroy Road, when Plath moved there on December 10, 1962, as "a wintering place, perhaps somewhat dormant as it is, but alive to all she has planned" (7-8). The penultimate chapter of the novel is set on December 28, the day of the Holy Innocents, which Moses describes as "a day for reflection on ungovernable violence, and

⁵ See Bundtzen 196-200 for a different interpretation.



hope springing forth regardless” (275). She describes the growth of faith in her heroine – “not her faith in [her husband], not an exterior faith, but her faith, newborn and tender still, in herself” (278). In the final chapter, “Wintering,” the character of Plath reflects in her London house upon the honey she has stored back in Court Green, as “the tangible promise of her return to springtime” (281). The winter snow, with the image of which the novel ends, and which is for biographers no more than a contributing factor to Plath’s death, is for Moses a “moment of truth” and “grace” in her heroine’s life (283). There is nothing necessary or inevitable about Plath’s death, according to this novel; rather, it was a tragic blow from without into a life that, although caught in the depths of winter, was always directed towards the coming spring.

Moses is a founder of Salon.com’s Mothers Who Think website and has edited two collections of essays on motherhood. Her own relationship with Plath’s work was cemented while she was pregnant and nursing (Moses, “I Write”). Her novel emphasizes that its heroine is a mother who thinks. It abounds with detailed imaginative accounts of Plath’s interactions with her children in her daily life, from diaper changing to feeding to dressing to toilet training. Moses has a mother’s imagination, describing in realistic detail Plath’s small children’s language, interactions with her, with each other and with their surroundings. The reader is always aware, as the reader of Plath’s biographies is not, that most of Plath’s daily life is spent in the company of her children. “She stops just inside the door to untie her rain cap and stamp her boots on the mat. Frieda stamps, too” (100). Moses’ heroine compares the writing of her Ariel poems, in the “Cut” chapter, to giving birth to her children. Of her October 1962 poems, the character of Plath thinks:

It was both – sex and birth. Sex – not the shared experience but the private one.

The pleading desperation, the sweaty fury, the greed, the full heat of surrender.

But it was birth most of all. (105)

She remembers the pain, the “thrill,” and “the only true thing” of birth. “With Nick, the midwife’s portable tank of gas had run out. Then she was pushing. This, too, was how she felt the poems: the brutality, wave after wave of it” (106). Moses dedicates the book to her own children, her “roses,” in the words of Plath’s poem “Kindness,” and she mentions in a long author’s note that “details of daily life with babies and small children were gleaned from my own family documents” (287). Moses closely identifies her own

experience as a mother and a writer with that of Plath, and this identification translates into a powerful imaginative account of Plath's daily life as both a mother and a poet.

There is a break in Moses' flawless realism in the chapter "Death and Co.," when she attempts a surrealistic dream narrative, in which traumatic events and people in Plath's unconscious merge in and out of one another. This is done badly. Despite the dream context, the narration of grotesque events, such as Plath giving birth to a telephone (a condensation of all those on which Plath has received distressing calls throughout her life), or bloody hybrid animals crawling across her bathroom floor, fails in the midst of the sensitive observations of people and events which characterize the book as a whole. Perhaps the main aesthetic flaw, however, in this otherwise well-crafted novel is its Joycean structure. There is surely a novel to be written in which the story of a fictional character is told in chapters each of which is entitled with one of Plath's Ariel poems. But little is produced by telling Plath's own story in this way.⁶ Each Ariel poem itself is already rich in multiple meanings, so it is a demanding task in principle for a novelist to open up another meaning by comparing the poem to events in a chapter of which it is the title. In practice, in the novel, this rarely happens. For example, in the chapter entitled "Gulliver," the character of Ted Hughes, sleeping on Berck-Plage is described as "Swiftian in his repose" (192). "Even on his back he appears a man-mountain," the narrator says, linking him to Swift's Gulliver (193). In Plath's poem of this title, the speaker bids a character "with no strings attached" to simply "step off," as he is able to do, from the world of "spider-men" who would pin him down with their "petty fetters" (Collected Poems 251). Moses connects her narrative to this motif with the words, "Another moment free of her, just another moment," a free-floating line in roman type in a paragraph of italic type, which seems to represent the thoughts that Sylvia imagines Ted having as she remembers watching him sleep. These are the connections between the poem and the chapter "Gulliver." It is hard to know, however, what is produced by them. We do not learn anything new about the poem, nor do the events narrated in the chapter gain a new dimension from their explicit connection to the poem, which is surely what this structure could in principle do. There is simply a thematic link between the two. Sometimes this link is done cleverly, as in the chapter "Letter in November," in which it

⁶ See Gilbert for the criticisms that this structure results in "intellectual somersaults" and "stilted dialogue."



is the Ariel volume itself which constitutes Plath's letter in November. Sometimes, as in the "Gulliver" chapter, it is rather forced. In every case, however, the narrative gains little or nothing from its structural link to the poem.

Most of the reviews of Robert Anderson's Little Fugue were positive (Vidimos; Marler; Behe; Demanski). Nevertheless, it is the least successful of the novels on Plath. Like *Moses*, it is Anderson's first novel. It is told from the points of view of four characters, "Sylvia," "Ted," "Assia," and "Robert." Each chapter of the book is entitled with the name of one of these characters. Robert is the fictional writer of the entire book. He has the same name as the author, and certain characteristics in common with him. In particular, he works as a cook in Times Square residential hotels, which, in both the "About the Author" section and the acknowledgements, Anderson tells us was his own experience "for many years." These sections also make it clear, however, that Robert is not the same character as the author – he is some fifteen years older, since he went to college in the late 1960s, and, unlike the author, who "came to New York City in 1985," is a New Yorker born and bred.

It is fairly simple to judge this novel. The sections about Sylvia Plath, Ted Hughes and Assia Wevill are, on the whole, written badly, and the sections about Robert are, on the whole, written well. There are two problems with the sections of biographical fiction. First, they seem to be based only on sketchy research into the lives of Plath, Hughes and Wevill. Since this a work of fiction, close fidelity to biographical accounts of the characters need not be a problem. But in practice, little purpose is served by the novel's frequent divergences from biographical fact. For example, Anderson writes, "Sylvia seems to have left detailed instructions to posterity regarding the way in which she would like to be unremittingly psychoanalyzed in the echo chamber of Ted's conscience and also in the dominion of Western literary studies" (6). This is not true, and it is difficult to see what Anderson achieves by saying it of his fictional character. It simply calls into question his understanding of the person on whom the novel is based. In the same way, we hear that the character of Sylvia "disdained feminine friendship, for the most part" (28), and felt a "letdown with motherhood" (42). Again, neither of these statements is biographically true, and again I cannot see that any aesthetic value is produced by their

inclusion in the novel. Without a sense that the author of biographical fiction has understood all the available facts about the people he writes about, the possibility that his fiction will open up some new aesthetic knowledge in portraying characters based upon them is lost. The discipline of biographical fiction surely requires that the novelist first acquire all the facts a biographer would, and *then* use them in a way that produces an aesthetic effect unavailable from biography. In passing on to this second stage without seeming adequately to have passed through the first, Anderson's novel fails to achieve the effects of which it is in principle capable.

The second problem with the sections of biographical fiction in the novel is related to this one. It is that the narrator makes little attempt to respect the dignity of the persons involved in his narrative. Existentially significant events such as love, marriage, birth, death, making a home, and raising children are all treated without the respect that, from a humanist perspective at least, they deserve. As Michael Schaub put it in The Washington Post, in one of the few negative reviews the novel received, Anderson has "no affection" for his characters. This is partly a function of the narrator's style. He has a tough, world-weary, seen-it-all New Yorker's voice, and allows no-one to demand reverence from him, whether he discusses the Holocaust (118), September 11th (316), or even the '60s counter-culture which he himself holds so dear (193). This is a successful device of characterization. But when Robert turns his attention as a writer to the story of Sylvia Plath, he lacks the emotional sensitivity necessary to do justice to that story. He says, for example, in describing the beginning of his work on Plath, "She seemed like a whiner when I got down to researching her life" (286). Robert has some of the ultra-worldly hyper-education of a Salinger character, but his assumption of knowledge about everything in advance fails to allow the emotional nuances of the story of Plath's life to register. A potentially valuable character of biographical fiction disappears under a torrent of wit and pre-judgment.

Anderson is very much at home, however, with the sixties counter-culture in which Robert, the narrator, lives and begins to read Sylvia Plath's work. The narrative of Robert's life is by far the most successful part of the book, and the most successful parts of this narrative are Anderson's accounts of the underside of New York life, from the 1960s through to the present day. His detailed and loving observation of the people,



places and events of New York counter-culture is brilliant, at his best reminding the reader of Thomas Pynchon or Michael Herr:

We dropped into the kitchen of Evalene “Missy” Arias – she is still alive and living in a motorized love-seat in a home in Loisaída – who fed addicts oxtail stew from twin kettles on the back of her stove in order to mitigate the judgement upon the soul of her son Rafael, the drug-dealing bread-winner. (146)

Anderson keeps up these rich and detailed descriptions at length, with the fluency of a travel writer. It is when he is at home in the counter-culture, furthermore, that he succeeds in being funny. For example, in his account of the Stonewall riots, the gay bar clients initially mistake the policemen, in their padded leather uniforms, for fellow clients, since many of them are wearing similar outfits:

Upon sight of the policemen in their honcho wear, the gay revelers, in their accessorized leather suits, Harley signets, sequins and swastika tattoos...assumed that their sister speakeasy, The Gaiety, had sent over reinforcements to replenish the Friday-night hothouse frolics. (206)

Indeed, Anderson writes, this is the reason the uniform of the Tactical Unit of the NYPD was “abruptly discontinued” after that night.

I have said that departure from biographical fact can in principle be productive of aesthetic value in a novel. This is the case in Susan Fromberg Schaeffer’s Poison. This is the only novel of the five whose characters do not have the names of Sylvia Plath and her family members. Indeed the novel claims not to be based on real people or events, although the relationships between the characters are clearly those of Sylvia Plath’s family. The action of the novel takes place in the immediate aftermath of the death of Peter Grosvenor, a famous poet whose life and relationships are loosely based on those of Ted Hughes. Peter has made a will leaving his estate to his third wife, and a wish list asking her to divide that estate equally between herself, his sister, who manages his literary estate, and his two children from his first marriage to Evelyn Graves, a poet and novelist who became a literary celebrity after her death. Partly because she has spent her life in the shadow of her husband, who was repeatedly unfaithful to her, Meena, Peter’s

widow, decides to disregard the wish list, and goes to court to have it revoked, causing outrage in the rest of Peter's family.

The novel is in effect a fictional meditation on human life which takes the biographical facts available about Ted Hughes as a point of departure. It is a meditation, as its title suggests, on the theme of poison, which is how Schaeffer sees human relationships, with all but a very few fragile exceptions, to be characterized. In a dramatic opening, in which Peter tells his children a story about a giant who is under a curse, which caused his wives to "breathe in gas" and "go to sleep" (12), just as his own wives have done, his daughter Sophie says, "Everyone says you're poison to women. What do they mean?" (13). Peter's friends understand, his wife Meena thinks, but their wives "poison them against him" (30). His sister Sigrid is his business manager, who sees her job to be protecting him against "those who approached with vials of poison" (32). After Meena disregards the wish list, she is told that Sophie is planning to write an autobiography, that will "skewer" her. Its title is "*Poison*," at least until she can think of a "more venomous name" (365-6). Meals (110), medicine (126), and human relationships of all kinds in the book are described in these terms. Schaeffer creates a fictional world in which all that could be good, nourishing or sacred in human life has turned to poison.

There is no answer in the novel as to why this is the case. The book is not a feminist critique of a man who behaves irresponsibly towards women. It is true that the key to Peter's character is weakness. In allowing his third wife to send his children from his first marriage away to boarding school, which she does only to be rid of them, he thinks, "I am not a brave man. Giving in to her on this score was the decision of a coward" (203). His sister Sigrid, who gives her life up to protect him, also reflects, as she thinks of his marriages to three women who were "completely inflexible" to him, that "he is weak," although this is "not something she wanted to admit, not even to herself" (203), since she loves and admires him. Peter has always been this way. In a letter from the time of his first marriage, to the character based on Plath, he reflects that he is "too timid" to say aloud the things that she says, although he feels them too (567). In part, then, the system of human relationships portrayed in the novel collapses because of the moral weakness of the man at the center of them.



This is only a part of the story, however. The entire world of this six-hundred page novel is most reminiscent of that of Samuel Beckett, in its sheer meaninglessness and cruelty. Meena overhears Peter, whilst he is alive, talking about her in a way that makes her angry, but she reflects that, “in truth, Peter rarely did speak of her, not out of loyalty, oh, no, but out of boredom, out of disgust” (131). Their marriage is one in which there is simply no love – just need and desire on Meena’s part, and boredom and disgust on Peter’s. Peter’s friend Penelope, loosely based on Dido Merwin, is dying of cancer at the time of the book’s narration. She reflects upon the death of her husband, “In the end, he had done her a favor by dying,” since the love they shared was always doomed to sour during the process of marriage. When the tragic event of illness or death befell either one of them, Penelope reflects, “there would not be pity enough, not enough sympathy between them, only irritation covered over by wifeliness or husbandliness” (176). In the world of this novel, people simply are not good or loving enough to respond to or fulfill the needs of others. Other people are just not worth the feelings one has for them.

Schaeffer raises this pessimism to the level of a metaphysics:

Years spent together, and the two who spend them together coming more and more to resemble two potatoes, because in fact they *are* potatoes, and why should they aspire to anything else? (167)

People in this novel are no more than mindless clods of matter, cursed (poisoned) by their hopeless desire for love and fulfillment. Penelope will soon reflect that the love that leads to marriage is no more than a “disease.” Peter writes a letter to his brother in the days of his first marriage, in which he suggests the two of them start an avocado farm in England. He concludes, “Avocados. Surely they are no more troublesome things in this world than wives” (568). Human life is neither sacred nor lovely, for Schaeffer. As Peter tells his brother that Evelyn, his first wife, is pregnant, he reflects with grim sarcasm, “You can imagine how happy I was to hear that” (563). There is even a passage in which Evelyn’s spirit, after her body has died in her gas oven, reflects, “It was a mistake to have come in the first place, to this jigsaw world where no amount of pushing and pressing would let her fit in” (213). Life itself is the curse, in this novel, poisoned at the source, a cause for neither joy nor celebration.

The most recent novel on Sylvia Plath is Grace Medlar's The Lost Papers of Sylvia Plath, which was published in June 2009. It is, in my view, the best of the five. It is perhaps the truest novel about Plath, because it makes no assumption that a realistic narrative of her life can be told. Rather, it is entirely about reading her texts; indeed it is about being lost in the plethora of readings of her texts to which the words "Sylvia Plath," to those who did not know her personally, ultimately refer. The book is about a Midwestern college administrator, Diane Richmond, a self-described "aging hippie" who has a belief in, and considerable knowledge of, the occult. She advises Sandra Kohl, a student who is writing a thesis on Sylvia Plath and who believes she has seen her ghost. The two of them develop several increasingly complex diagrams, akin to horoscopes (indeed the final chart contains Plath's horoscope), that map out the structures of Plath's life, her poetry, and criticism of her work. Diane takes the diagrams her student has drawn and combines them into a three-dimensional mandala:

First I doubled them up, like layers of a cake, a wheel-cake, the wheels of her life that also encompassed her afterlife in Ariel...I created a House of Yeats for the cake to sit on, a platter of literary mentors, adding her astrological birth chart in the middle, upon which her life events chart sat, topped by the critical circle. (75)

The resemblance of this structure to "the eight spoked wheel of the Buddhist path" leads her to reflect that "the two-year space between Plath's physical death and rebirth via Ariel could indeed be her *bardo* realm," the "corridor occupied by the disembodied spirit before rebirth into a new life" (75). Diane thinks that she will be able to use this mandala as a "torma," a Buddhist food-offering that can placate the kind of spirits by which she and Sandra seem to be plagued, spirits that "bothered people when they got close to the Truth" (98). The plot climaxes in an occult fantasia as Diane takes these charts to an eccentric collector who has offered to sell the lost papers of Sylvia Plath in his possession – including her last letters and portions of Double Exposure, the lost sequel to The Bell Jar – to the university, provided that the right person can be found to read them with him, since he believes that Plath is "a power source, a portal to some ancient stage" (33).

Medlar's style is literary and learned, full of detailed references to religion, mythology, science and the occult, as well as to literature and cinema. At the same time,



it is down-to-earth and slangy, full of wit, linguistic play and a Shakespearean love of dirty jokes. She can fill long paragraphs with erudition:

By chance it was Candlemas eve, the harbinger of Lent, the Celtic pagan holiday *Imbolc* – meaning *in the belly of the mother*...It came a half-moon cycle before Lupercalia, the festival connected to the sacred cave of the she-wolf...where the legend of Saint Valentine originated. Candlemas was also the day of Saint Brigid, she of the sacred oak, a fire goddess who breathed life into the dead mouth of winter. (105)

She is fluent on subjects from Julian of Norwich to quantum physics. A line like this perhaps exemplifies the mixture of learning and irreverence that characterizes Medlar's prose at its best: "For high-end mysticism and sexual melancholy in lovely quatrains, I suggested she read the love poems of the sixth Dalai Lama" (10-11). The slangy tone which informs the novel is sometimes overdone in comparison to the learned language, but this is Medlar's style and it works well. To give an example of her combination of both registers, Diane describes the project of introducing her student to the occultist collector as "a distraction from the new state of acute aloneness and its general state of blah" (35).

One of the ways in which this novel represents Plath most faithfully is in its mix of the supernatural beliefs and events which govern the plot with a love of the details of bodily, earthly life. The story of spirits, ghosts and goddesses is brilliantly punctuated with descriptive accounts of the seasons of the year through which the story passes. Medlar describes the autumn foliage (15) and the college scenery of the story (64) in loving realistic detail, as she does Diane's regular meals in the campus pub. Especially effective are her accounts of the meals Diane cooks to celebrate Thanksgiving, Christmas and Valentine's Day. At Thanksgiving, for example:

I barely had time to locate lingonberries for my Bavarian crème...I tempered them with raspberry Chambord and threw tangerines and Grand Marnier in with the cranberries for our little gathering...Out of necessity I made pumpkin pie and lime jello with apricots stuffed with cream cheese and walnuts..., the 50s dish Mother made only on Thanksgiving. (75-6).

There is even a page which gives in full the recipe for Diane's Saint Valentine's Day Rose Cake (197-8). The novel's combination of occult spirituality and cooking, described in the loving detail of the practitioner of both arts, is reminiscent of nothing more than Plath's own journals and letters. Medlar links these discourses in the concept of the "wheel-cake," by which Diane describes the Plath mandalas at the center of the novel's plot. The rose also features both as an ingredient in Diane's Valentine's Day cake and as the name, with its mystical significance, of the critic Jacqueline Rose in the mandala.

Medlar's novel is the most openly feminist of the five. Diane describes herself as one of the baby-boom generation, for whom there is "nothing funny about second-wave feminists losing ground to the Me-generation" (56). She is what her Plath student calls a "real feminist," "from way back." She mocks the pontifications of early critics of Plath as a suicidal poet, speaking of the introduction to *Ariel* by "Robert the Real Poet Lowell," and commenting, "Real poets are real obscure" (61). Al Alvarez fares no better as "old Double A battery" (63): Diane comments on his judgment of *Ariel*, "'Poetry of this order is a murderous art' (*yaawwwnn*)" (61). In a similar way, Diane narrates the eccentric collector's sympathy with Ted Hughes over against Sylvia Plath simply as, "Martinson went on about lover boy" (182).

In his recent introduction to the study of myth, Lawrence Coupe points out that some of our most powerful contemporary myths have come from the women's movement (175). None is more powerful than that of Sylvia Plath. Quite apart from any intention of her own, her life and work have acquired a significance transcending biographical fact as the basis of one of the stories in whose terms many people come to understand the meaning of their own lives. As Borges puts it, in his reflection on the difference between his lived life and his public reception as a writer: "What is good [in what the writer 'Borges' has written] belongs to no one, not even to him, but rather to the language and to tradition" (246). These five novels are part of the process of telling and re-telling that constitutes the life of a myth. It is always possible to criticize such myths in the name of reason. Sometimes, one wants to do so with these novels, in particular at the points where they betray inadequate research or cross the line from imaginative re-creation into sensationalism. It is also possible, however, with scholars such as Mircea Eliade or Paul



Ricoeur, to reason that myth is an essential part of human society. As Ricoeur puts it, “Modern man can neither get rid of myth nor take it at its face value” (485). In that case, these novels can be understood, at least in part, in a more positive light, as by Georgiana Banita, when she describes images of Plath in the popular media as “an embalming, an homage, and a gift” (“The Same, Identical Woman” 57). What these five novels make clear is that the myth of Sylvia Plath, for good or ill, is very much a living one in the first decade of the twentieth-first century. Whether in Moses’ loving detail, in Schaeffer’s grim nihilism, or in Medlar’s postmodern fantasia, these novels bear witness to the continued process in contemporary culture of making sense of our lives in terms of the story of the life and work of Sylvia Plath.

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