

Review of *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath's Art of the Visual*

ed. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007).

x + 269 pp. \$45.00 (cloth). ISBN 978-0-19-923387-8.

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The first decade of the twenty-first century will mark a watershed in the history of the publication of Sylvia Plath's work. The *Collected Children's Stories* appeared in 2001, the restored *Ariel* volume in 2004. Now we have this book, a monumental event in the publication of Plath's multi-generic creative work, which brings to the scholarly and reading public for the first time her most important paintings, sketches and collages.

There are really three parts to this book. First, and perhaps most important, there is the publication of Plath's visual art-works. There are 40 color plates and 34 black-and-white "in-text illustrations," with those by Plath ranging in date from an illustrated letter to her mother in 1940 to the anti-Cold War collage of 1960. Most of the plates date from Plath's high school years and her first two years at Smith College. These images are well-selected and well-produced, and they constitute a beautiful and illuminating insight into Plath's abilities and achievements in many genres of creative work.

Kathleen Connors' long essay, the first of seven in the book, constitutes the kind of exhaustive survey of Plath's visual art usually provided by a monograph. Working chronologically through Plath's creative life, from the age of seven to the last week of her life, Connors analyses Plath's thinking about, writing about and production of visual art. Since a large proportion of Plath's art work was produced during her high school years and during her first two years at Smith, Connors' essay also constitutes the most detailed and thorough account available of Plath's juvenilia.

Much of the best Plath criticism at present is devoted to the "other Sylvia Plath," the multi-media creator of thousands of pages of diverse unpublished materials as well as the great writer of *Ariel* and *The Bell Jar*. Connors works in detail with these materials, and

this is the great strength of her essay. Her analysis of two pencil sketches of mermaids from 1945-6 sheds new light on the role of “The Forsaken Merman” in “Ocean 1212-W.” Her analysis of the young Plath’s “Dream Book,” to which she refers in a high school essay and in her 1946 diary, is essential information in interpreting the story “Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams.” Whilst it tends to be earlier works that Connors illuminates in this way, this is not exclusively the case. Her account of Plath’s stay at Yaddo allows her to re-read the images of dead children and roses in “Edge” as “related not so much to Plath’s own story of loss and death but to that of Yaddo’s founders – notably Mrs Katrina Trask,”¹ with whose story of lost children and rose imagery she shows Plath’s familiarity.

Connors’ critical interpretations are also illuminating. An especially persuasive thesis is her account of Plath’s paintings of women as a series of alternative visions to Cold War militarism and anti-Communism:

If the painting of female entrapment represents the future that Plath fears will overtake her, the two women reading [and] the woman with a halo...might be seen as a future she would choose for herself, with thoughts focused on a just and peaceful society, the beauty of nature, the realm of knowledge, as well as the interior spaces of divine thought.²

Connors is also interested in neglected aspects of Plath studies that do not fit entirely into the logic of her survey of Plath’s visual art. An example of this is the section on Virginia Woolf. Whilst she mentions Woolf’s “visually driven” style and her close relationships to painters, her analysis of Plath’s relationship to Woolf deals mainly with textual influence. Her account of this influence, however, is so illuminating as to constitute a valuable part of the essay. Especially welcome is her raising the question of why Plath neither mentions nor marks her own copy of *A Room of One’s Own*.

¹ Kathleen Connors, “Living Color: The Interactive Arts of Sylvia Plath,” *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath’s Art of the Visual*, ed. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 135.

² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

The third part of the book consists of six shorter essays which analyze Plath's relationship to the visual arts. Plath's complex relationships to contemporary discourses on femininity have been thoroughly discussed, but Sally Bayley's account of Plath's art-works in relation to the visual images produced by these discourses is an important new contribution to the debate. Her essay contains detailed analyses of the many collages of dream homes and kitchens in Plath's college scrapbooks, "a testimony to her interest in the cultural commodification of the female,"³ and of the sketches of glamorous women Plath drew across authoritative texts like high school history assignments and college English essays. A detailed examination of Plath's relation to glamour has been long overdue, and Bayley's account of Plath's "feminization of the 'facts'"⁴ with these sketches is a significant contribution to this debate.

Diane Middlebrook's essay analyzes a poem unpublished in the *Complete Poems*, "'Three Caryatids Without a Portico', by Hugo Robus. A Study in Sculptural Dimension." This poem is significant in the story of Plath and Hughes, since it drew a negative review from Hughes' friend Daniel Huws in a Cambridge student publication. When Hughes, Huws and his friends threw the party to launch the *St. Botolph's Review*, at which Plath and Hughes met, it was partly her experience of this negative review that motivated Plath to attend. Middlebrook's essay analyzes the role of Robert Graves' theories of creativity in *The White Goddess* in Huws' review of Plath's poem, and in Hughes' two poems in *Birthday Letters* about it. This kind of analysis of Plath's ekphrastic poetry is also done thoroughly and authoritatively in Christina Britzolakis' essay in *Eye Rhymes*. Here she gives a detailed reading, both historically and psychoanalytically learned, of Plath's poems about paintings by Giorgio de Chirico.

If I have any criticisms of the book, they pertain almost entirely to its production. One or two visual works referred to in the text are not reproduced, such as the collages of dream kitchens and homes from Plath's art scrapbooks. Sally Bayley analyses these collages very pertinently, and I would have liked to have seen more color images of them.

³ Sally Bayley, "Sylvia Plath and the Costume of Femininity," *Eye Rhymes*, p. 196.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 194.

Bayley's essay also includes an analysis of Plath's painting "Woman in Green at Table," which is not reproduced. Perhaps it would also have been appropriate to have discussed the meaning of the title phrase "Eye Rhymes," taken from an essay by Helen Vendler, in the body of the text.

This is the most significant publication on Plath since the restored *Ariel*, and will be the standard reference work in the field for many years to come. It is essential reading for Plath scholars and critics, as well as being accessible for students and educated readers in general. I have already found students responding with interest to Plath's mermaid sketches in discussions of "Ocean 1212-W." If there remains more work to be done on Plath's visual art and her juvenilia, it will be done with this book as its point of departure. This is a beautiful reference work of Plath's paintings and sketches, and it contains the most illuminating and authoritative interpretations of them yet written. You cannot afford not to read this book.