A NOTE ON SYLVIA PLATH'S BIOGRAPHICAL MYTHOLOGIES

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Sylvia Plath's death by suicide at age 30, on February 11, 1963, has become a pivotal point in modern literature, a particular mythology reflecting the paradoxical divide between literature and biography – simultaneously unifying and separating the realm of creation and that of life. In Plath's case, the two worlds are difficult to separate, and a particular type of mythology stems from this complex ground. I shall explore Plath's post-1960 correspondence with her psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, to reveal some significant characteristics of this captivating biographical narrative.

Keywords: *biography*; *correspondence*; *suicide*; *depression*; *literature and medicine*; *medical humanities*.

The complex mythology surrounding the life and death of Sylvia Plath are well known, as it bears striking similarities with the Romantic myth of premature death and to a particular aesthetics of death and dying. However symbolic and disturbing her end, Sylvia Plath's final year was heavier with significance and meaning: she wrote and finalized her defining volume of poetry, *Ariel*; she published her only novel, *The Bell Jar*, now part of the canon of modern literature, using the pseudonym Victoria Lucas; she continued to maintain an active correspondence with family and friends during her turbulent separation from husband Ted Hughes, the celebrated English poet laureate. I intend to explore a representative part of Plath's post-1960 correspondence in order to analyze two aspects of her biographical narrative, which I consider cardinal to the mythologies surrounding her life story and literary persona: her idyllic projections of family life and the dramatic

demise of her marriage to Ted Hughes. I shall rely on the two volumes of correspondence published in 2018, *The Letters of Sylvia Plath*, containing a previously unpublished set of fourteen letters from Plath to her American psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher.

I propose a brief contrastive reading of some of Plath's most notable letters, which allows for articulating a coherent argument in favor of the notion that, through her correspondence, Plath contributed to her own biographical mythology. By reading some of her letters to Ruth Beuscher, we may discern between Plath's carefully curated social presence and her intimate, rawer, and sincere one. My interest in Sylvia Plath's correspondence stems from the belief that this part of an author's oeuvre is equally challenging and relevant to investigate. The methodological paradoxes of reading a writer's correspondence lie in the problematic issue of the private/public divide. Writing for a vast or a minimal audience involves radically different strategies, mannerisms, and intellectual frameworks. Moreover, correspondence offers context and depth to particular moments in a writer's career and the relationships that influenced their creativity and productivity within a specific interval. Harold Fromm (1990: 251) considered correspondence an essential revelator of Plath's mental struggle, specifically the lack of strength "to forge a coherent self from the multiple and warring fragments of her psyche" as "her journals and letters home are blatant documents of this phenomenon, which is the most pervasive characteristic of all her writings." For Jonathan Ellis (2011: 16), the different "selves" of the writer become visible in her correspondence; therefore, "Plath's letter-writing self is equally in control and just as staged" as her literary self.

Private literature raises essential questions about the limits of biography and the relevance of such writing in the larger context of an author's oeuvre. Moreover, one might question this relevance in the particular case of Sylvia Plath, as the impact of biography on her works is explicitly remarkable. The publication of *Letters Home* in 1975 generates similar questions, as it is well-known that Aurelia Plath and Ted Hughes edited the volume in such a manner as to counteract the "damage" done by the 1971 publication of *The Bell Jar* in the United States (Gill 2008: 93). Plath's novel was a transparently autobiographical account of her first mental breakdown at age 20, and most characters were easy to recognize.

Plath chose to publish *The Bell Jar* under a pseudonym due to the novel's massive autobiographical dimension. She hoped hiding her real identity would spare her mother from a certain level of public scrutiny. Yet Plath's

relationship with her mother was problematic on many levels, as her letters to Aurelia Plath prove. Considered Plath's defining work, the poetry volume *Ariel* is significantly influenced by her personal struggle. Written in the autumn of 1962, during the cataclysmic months of Plath's separation from Hughes and his simultaneous affair with Assia Wevill, *Ariel* stands proof of the poet's need to channel her emotional turmoil into a creative process that involved working from four o'clock in the morning to eight o'clock, when her two small children used to wake up. Mirroring the difficulties of the period, her correspondence to her psychiatrist reveals the extent of her trauma, loneliness, and fear of an imminent mental collapse.

Sylvia Plath's state of mind in the years preceding her death indicates severe episodes of mental issues that have been placed by scholars under the umbrella of "recurrent severe disorders of mood (depressive and/or manic)" (Cooper 2003: 296). Brian Cooper is a professional in the field of mental illness and a researcher interested in Plath's complex pathology. By gathering biographical data and information concerning Plath's medical history, Cooper (2003: 296) believed that Plath was a manic depressive whose illness was "apparently spontaneous in onset, the depressive phase being accompanied by psychomotor retardation, feelings of guilt and unworthiness, early-morning waking and somatic changes". In London, the American poet saw her general practitioner, Dr. John Horder, shortly before her death. He firmly recommended her specialized psychiatric care, and referred her to a woman doctor, as she had asked. Plath committed suicide a few days before her appointment was due. Dr. Horder, whose name was mentioned on the writer's suicide note, later confessed in interviews: "I believe, indeed it was repeatedly obvious to me, that she was deeply depressed, "ill", "out of her mind", and that "any explanations of a psychological sort are inadequate..." (Horder, qtd. in Cooper 2003: 297).

Plath's suicide in the early hours of February 11, 1963, was the last chapter in a long history of self-destructive gestures – a decade earlier, she had almost succeeded in taking her own life by ingesting a vast amount of sleeping pills and hiding in a small, barely accessible enclosure under the porch of her family home. Her brother accidentally heard her groaning and called for help barely in time to save her life. Other smaller incidents, such as a car accident in 1962, could be considered incomplete suicidal gestures. Until 1971, when Al Alvarez, a London critic and friend to Plath and Hughes, published his essay on suicide, *The Savage God,* the writer's dramatic exit from life was shrouded in a mystery that was amplified by

Plath's family, especially her literary executor, Ted Hughes, who managed the writer's published oeuvre and her manuscripts. Besides his consistent evocations of Plath, Alvarez reminisces about the poet's final months in a somewhat romanticized manner, detailing his encounters with a visibly deteriorating psychiatric patient who threw herself into writing her most comprehensive oeuvre. In Alvarez's view, Plath wrote with certain despair, as if to save her mind from the "madness" she so terribly feared in the days preceding her definitive suicidal act. Yet Alvarez's essay became referential for another reason – it put forth the idea that Plath had died unintentionally, as she had, in fact, intended to draw attention upon herself at a moment when she felt deserted and overwhelmed. The note she left behind, pinned on the children's cot, read "Call Dr. Horder", followed by the doctor's phone number, as if she had hoped to be, once again, saved at the very last moment. Plath was convinced, according to Alvarez (1971: 22), that "to be an adult meant to be a survivor", which means to survive her own near collision with death; once every decade, she had to challenge death, confront it directly and overcome it. It is possible, the critic suggests, that she had attempted suicide on multiple occasions, and each time she was saved or failed in her attempt. On February 11, 1963, "she gambled for the last time, having worked out that the odds were in her favour, but perhaps, in her depression, not much caring whether she won or lost. Her calculations went wrong and she lost" (Alvarez 1971: 37).

However, Alvarez's interpretation of the facts and events preceding Plath's death border on speculation, as further scholarship on her mental issues confirm suicidal behavior as a symptom of the manic depression she had been suffering from. Recently, this chapter of Plath's biography gained new perspectives with the publication of the Beuscher letters, as this new body of documents proved highly significant for a rereading of Plath's biographical mythologies, primarily because they document in painful detail the writer's marital crisis and separation from her husband, the subsequent mental decline and ultimately her state of mind before taking her own life. Lucid and almost surgically precise in outlining psychological details, these letters are the tip of a massive iceberg – the Plath/Beuscher correspondence was far vaster than the fourteen letters included in the second volume of Plath's correspondence, published in 2018. However, they may remain the only vestiges documenting the complex relationship between the poet and the medical professional who managed her illness in the aftermath of her 1953 suicide attempt. Although Plath scholars and biographers have signaled the fact that there is possibly a significant number of texts that are

either lost or owned by private collectors who reject their publication, the Plath/Beuscher letters are, at the moment, an essential chapter of the Plath story, offering crucial insight into the poet's final years, both from a creative and a biographical perspective.

The publication of the Plath/Beuscher correspondence was far from an easy journey. Following Plath's death, Hughes imposed a highly cautious attitude towards biographers by discouraging many potential writers from taking on such a task. One such "unofficial" biographer was Harriet Rosenstein, a feminist scholar who had serious intentions to write a more or less impartial life story of Plath. After a few meetings with her, Beuscher gave her fourteen letters she had received from Plath. Although Rosenstein later abandoned her project, she refused to give back the letters to Beuscher. After decades of remaining virtually untraceable, the letters surfaced in 2017, when a book dealer put them up for sale. The subsequent controversy only ceased when Smith College, Plath's Alma Mater, bought the letters. Frieda Hughes, the daughter of Plath and Hughes, her mother's literary executor, gave her consent to publish them. In 2018, when a new edition of Plath's correspondence was published, she agreed to include the letters in the second volume. After reading them for the first time, Frieda Hughes (2018: 8) noted: "I decided to let people make up their own minds and, hopefully, find the kind of understanding that my mother was working towards near the end, despite the return of the 'madness' that took her anyway".

Ruth Tiffany Barnhouse (married Beuscher), M.D., an ordained Episcopal priest since 1980, was a cardinal presence in Sylvia Plath's life. She met Plath in September 1953, when the writer was a patient at McLean Hospital, a reputed mental institution near Boston, after her first suicide attempt. At the time, Barnhouse was 30, and Plath, aged 20, was one of her first patients. She had attempted suicide in August, and she was immediately put on medication, doubled by psychotherapy. They connected in a rather unique manner, and their professional relationship evolved into a friendship that lasted until the last weeks of Plath's life. In the winter of 1962-1963, in a desperate state, Plath asked Beuscher to take her and the children into her home in America. It appears that Beuscher didn't reply to Plath's letter, immensely hurting her feelings. This resulted in a guilt Beuscher carried with her for decades, until death. In a letter to Plath biographer Linda Wagner-Martin dated December 3, 1985, the psychiatrist remembers her difficult position towards Plath during those turbulent days:

> "I was very alarmed and had an intuition that I should tell her to get on the next plane and come to see me, in fact she may have mentioned something about flying over in her own letter. I knew, however, that she could not stay with her mother and that she had no money to stay elsewhere. At that time the general protocol for practitioners of psychiatry was such that I could not offer her my own guest room. I thought of breaking that rule, but my own circumstances at the time were such that … it would be impossible" (Beuscher, qtd. in Rollyson 2020: 163).

Yet, until 2018, when the Plath/ Beuscher letters were published, the depth of the writer's relationship with her doctor seemed rather underestimated. It resurfaced in no uncertain terms – as Plath firmly declared in a letter dated September 22, 1962:

> "I turn to you again, because you are the one person I know who will not advise me to numb or degrade or give up or diminish myself. I am really asking your help as a woman, the wisest woman emotionally and intellectually, that I know. You are not my mother, but you have been the midwife to my spirit" (Plath 2018: 762).

With increasing despair, under the enormous pressure to write, publish, manage the house and raise two children, Plath sought the help of the doctor who had successfully helped her before. Therapy, though, is a complex process requiring certain rules and boundaries, and since the patient and the doctor lived on different continents, letters were the only means to substitute it. In an effort to professionalize their interaction, Plath insisted on paying for Beuscher's time and effort to help her:

> "I'd be awfully grateful just to have a postcard from you saying you think any paid letter sessions between us are impractical or unhelpful or whatever, but something final. Believe me, that would be a relief. It is the feeling of writing into a void that never answers, or may at any moment answer, that is difficult (Plath 2018: 753).

She seemed convinced that payment transformed a friendly, more casual interaction, into serious treatment she could effectively benefit from: "Nobody else is any good to me, I'm sick of preamble. That's why I thought if I paid for a couple of letters I might start going ahead instead of in circles" (Plath 2018: 754).

Although it spans the last three years of her life, the letters to Beuscher are mainly domestic and serene until the summer of 1962, when Hughes started the affair that would end his marriage to Plath. There are, though,

a few notable exceptions worth mentioning. During the winter holidays in 1960, a certain tension arose between the Hugheses; this time, it was not sparked by his now legendary flirting, but by some unfortunate comments his sister, Olwyn, addressed to Plath. In a letter dated January 4, 1961, Plath told her psychiatrist about a Christmas incident that would later prove relevant for her family dynamic: "… this Christmas some small spark touched off the powderkeg & she made obvious to Ted & his mother what I've known all along: that her resentment is a pure and sweeping and peculiarly desperate hatred" (Plath 2018: 540). Olwyn's loyalty to her brother and her brutal dislike of his wife would echo until much later in her life, when she became Plath's literary executor and a primary agent in the endless war of biographers, narratives, and alternative accounts of the facts and circumstances around Plath's marriage and death. From this perspective, these fourteen letters establish a new territory, one in which Plath's voice speaks painful truths about her struggle in her final years. 1960 was the year Plath settled into a frame of mind that later proved harmful to her mental health, one that idealized domesticity and the idyllic lifestyle: "We want a town house, a Cornwall seaside house, a car & piles of children & books & have saved about $8 thousand simply out of our writing in the past five years toward these dreams & feel in the next five years we may nearly approximate them" (Plath 2018: 541). England felt like home, and London, with its cultural life, good schools, and reliable medical system, offered her a sense of security and fulfillment: "I can't think of anywhere else in the world I'd rather live & have no desire to return to America at all" (Plath 2018: 412). In the summer of 1961, the family bought Court Green, a large old property surrounded by an impressive natural landscape. They worked hard to renovate it, and Plath created a lifestyle in which closeness to nature and a certain degree of sustainable home management become central.

Plath resumed writing to Beuscher in March 1962 and informed her that she had given birth to another child, her son, Nicholas, in January 1962, and that she had lost a pregnancy in the spring of 1961. Her tone oscillates between joy and the barely perceptible premonition that her marriage had entered a period of turmoil. As she had done in her correspondence with Aurelia Schober Plath, her mother, she learned to manage the complicated dialect of dissimulation – the blissful domestic narrative becomes Plath's trademark strategy to cover up her real troubles – her mental state and her marital issues. On March 27, she emphatically declared: "I have never felt the power of land before. I love owning bulbs & trees & all the happiness

of my 17th summer on a farm comes back when I dig & prune & potter, very amateur" (Plath 2018: 695). Then, in a swift change of tone, she wrote: "I had lost the baby that was supposed to be born on Ted's birthday this summer at 4 months, which would have been more traumatic than it was if I hadn't had Frieda to console & reassure me. No apparent reason to miscarry, but I had my appendix out 3 weeks after, so tend to relate the two" (Plath 2018: 695). Later that year, she blamed Hughes' physical violence as the reason for the loss. Defending her father, in her preface to the second volume of Frieda Hughes questions "what […] would qualify as a physical beating? A push? A shove? A swipe?" (Hughes 2018: 13). The detail didn't go unnoticed in the press or among Plath scholars, thus reigniting the historical dispute around Hughes' treatment of Plath during their marriage and especially during the months he was absent from the family home.

Frieda Hughes offers a comprehensive description of the contents of the letters, offering a personal understanding of her parents' relationship:

> "Those fourteen letters were snapshots of my parents' passionate relationship and subsequent marriage; the finding of a city home, the birth of children, their move to the country and the adoption of what would be an unsustainable idyll, followed by my mother's suspicion of my father's affair, the confirmation of that suspicion, her decision to separate, the strengthening of that resolution, the apparent realization that they had been living in what I think of as a hermetically sealed bubble in which they ran out of oxygen, then the decision (following Ruth Beuscher's written advice) that divorce was the best option, and finally, the letter I feared most, the letter in which my mother's madness returns just before she kills herself" (Hughes 2018: 7).

After Assia and David Wevill visited Court Green in Devon, early in the summer of 1962, Plath gradually became aware that Hughes might have started an affair with the mysterious German refugee. In her fourth letter to Beuscher, Plath's distress and inner turmoil became evident. She plainly confessed to her psychiatrist that divorce was not an option, although Hughes claimed his right and desire to "experience everybody & everything" (Hughes 2018: 731). His remarks, as told by Plath in the confidential contract of her correspondence, border on mental cruelty. A pervasive sense of abandonment and betrayal permeates her tone, as she didn't hesitate to evaluate herself negatively – "I have been a jinx, a chain" (Plath 2018: 731). She even naively asked, "How could a true-love ever want to leave his truly-beloved for one second? We would experience Everything together"

(Plath 2018: 736), unable to accept the inevitability of separation. Collateral narratives later confirmed that Beuscher advised Plath to divorce Hughes and focus on her literary career. Unable to accept the split, she immersed herself in work, writing each day in the early morning hours, before the children woke up. She is aware of the transparent psychoanalytic trap she fell into while believing she protected her marriage: "For fear he would desert me forever, like my father, if I didn't watch him closely enough" (Plath 2018: 738). Bitter comments targeting Wevill's infertility and lack of maternal instinct prove the expansion of her anger and resentment at the illicit couple: "What has this Weavy Asshole got that I haven't, I thought: she can't make a baby (and really isn't so sorry), can't make a book or a poem, just ads about bad bakery bread, wants to die before she gets old & loses her beauty, and is bored" (Plath 2018: 738).

Plath uses a dramatic array of strategies to mentally survive the shock of her separation. Both in her letters to Beuscher and in real life, she tried to articulate an imposed positive outlook on her situation: "this great shock purged me of a lot of old fears. It was very like the old shock treatments I used to fear so: it broke a tight circuit wide open, a destructive circuit, a deadening circuit, & let in a lot of pain, air and real elation. I feel very elated" (Plath 2018: 738) She does not shy away from mentioning sexual details to Beuscher, suggesting that Hughes' affair had, at one point, the strange effect of an impulse to promiscuity: "I have in me a good tart, as distinct from a bad tart" (Plath 2018: 738). On a larger perspective, his confession of the liaison, his "truth about the femme fatale, which freed my knowledge to sit about in the light of day, like an object, to be coped with, not hid like some hairy monster" had devastating effects on her fragile inner balance, reigniting old fears and the permanent threat of abandonment. When reminiscing about the moment he admitted the affair, Plath wrote a bitter conclusion – "And I didn't die". A few months into her new life, anguish and resentment prevail: "a legal separation may just set Ted whirling into this wonderful world where there are only tarts and no wives and only abortions and no babies and only hotels and no homes" (Plath 2018: 757).

The therapeutic role of letter writing becomes visible once her effort to regain focus and confidence reignites the permanent threat of self-harm. She projected her wish for stability and coherence into a self-assuring argument:

> "I don't think I'm a suicidal type any more, because I was really fascinated to see how, in the midst of genuine agony, it would all turn out & kept going. I really did believe it was the Worst Thing that could happen, Ted

being unfaithful; or next worst to his dying. Now I am actually grateful it happened, I feel new" (Plath 2018: 737).

Plath's long-debated last letter to Beuscher is the final note of an exhausting odyssey. She confirmed what many witnesses have said, over the years, about her severely degraded mental state in the December 1962 – January 1963 period, as she seemed increasingly depressed, overworked, and defeated in her maternal and professional roles. "What appalls me is the return of my madness, my paralysis, my fear & vision of the worst---cowardly withdrawal, a mental hospital, lobotomies" (Plath 2018: 883). In a tragic twist of fate, the answer from the London psychiatrist she had been referred to arrived three days after she had died.

Sylvia Plath's letters are an integral part of her oeuvre, fully reflecting her style, metaphors, and particularities. Yet they add the ingredient of biographical inaccessibility and, in a certain sense, of an incomprehensible quality that fueled a protean life story that continues to be intriguing and mysterious. This space of fluid meaning, forbidden entrance, and opaque surfaces is the space that shaped Plath's biographical mythologies. Her letters to Ruth Beuscher are part of their defining substance.

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