

PERPETUAL REWRITING: SYLVIA PLATH'S BIOGRAPHIES

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For almost four decades after she died, Sylvia Plath's executors (The Sylvia Plath Estate) carefully guarded biographical details concerning the circumstances of the writer's final months of life. As generations passed and archives opened, Plath scholarship was enriched with new perspectives feeding on new materials and documents. I shall explore the impact of archival elements on the constant revising and rewriting of Sylvia Plath's biography, while also discussing the relevance of the unpublished manuscripts of some biographers. Despite their long and thorough documentation, they abandoned their projects, leaving, in sealed archives now open, massive amounts of research materials that can now be reevaluated.

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The biographical genre has been widely invoked in connection to Sylvia Plath's brief and intense career as a writer. Part of the confessional generation of American writers, alongside poets such as Anne Sexton and Robert Lowell, her work was significantly influenced by the complex and complicated contexts of her life. However, reading Plath almost exclusively through the lens of her biographical background can become problematic and limitative. The biographical element, although fundamental and revelatory, is one pillar in the edifice of Plath's oeuvre, not its complete determinant. Moreover, the biographical often became, in its turn, unidimensionally

shaped by a single event in Plath's life story, her tragic suicide at age 30, in the dire circumstances of material precarity, mental illness and single parenthood. In light of a recent reinforcement of the biographical in Plath scholarship, due to the opening of a major archive holding essential documents and manuscripts, the Harriet Rosenstein Archive at Emory University, in the United States, I shall explore the ways in which the biographical dimension concerning Sylvia Plath has been impacted by the archives containing relevant materials about her life and work.

Literary biographies have a long history of being considered secondary to the actual literary work, approaching the author in a manner that contradicts many of the directives coming from recent critical schools of thought. Despite its popularity, biography created a sort of parallel line to literary criticism and academic analysis, delimiting its own reading audience, separated from concept-based commentary. Yet biographical writing has strong theoretical anchors, with consistent approaches by writers and critics such as Roland Barthes, Philippe Lejeune, Michael Benton or Paul John Eakin. Literary biography, a sub-genre that implicitly questions Barthes' well-known formulation "the death of the author", reflects a rich intellectual tradition preoccupied with the process of individualization and affirmation of the individual self in writing. Plath's ever-growing number of biographies secured her a posthumous life that far exceeds the dimensions of her actual life. Where, in the multitude of narratives constantly reframing and revealing what others believe was her life, is the real life of Sylvia Plath? What role did her biography play in the canonization of her work? These are just the most evident questions surrounding the solid tradition of Plath biographical scholarship, and the present exploration aims to approximate some viable answers.

In his interrogation concerning the adaptability of literary biography to a critical form, Philip Holden notes that "we read literary biography both in the quest to attain authorial presence, and in recognition that such presence is ultimately impossible" (Holden 2014:932). Such projections are easily expected in connection with the dramatic life story of Sylvia Plath, whose brief existence was placed under the doomed sign of her premature death. The extreme psychological environment of her suicide caused an evident imbalance between what was her life and the closely dissected, romanticized circumstances of her death. Biographies have long been the repositories of her death story, much more than they were those of her life story. The biographer's effort has been, on many occasions, that of

conjuring an authorial presence that hadn't been present long enough and, even more gravely, died in violent emotional circumstances. The mythology emerging from this background suggested that, by ending her own life, Plath ultimately fulfilled the dark calling that unifies, like a paradoxical undercurrent that enlivens language only to predict death, her poetic vision.

The tensions in Plath's autobiographical writing cover a large spectrum of works, involving more than one creative voice: there's the poet's voice, rising violently in the fiery verses of *Ariel*; there's a private voice, that of Plath's journals; and then there's the multi-faceted voice of her correspondence, adapted and tuned to each of the relationships that formed her familial and social life. Langdon Hammer's assumption that Plath's "writing doesn't record the truth of her life, but her struggle, and continuing inability, to arrive at it" (Hammer 2002:68) is accurate and significant. I also find Jacqueline Rose's *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* relevant to the question of the biographical influence on Plath's work, as she proposes a reading in which this element circumscribes an artificially created cultural space that proposes a competition of fantasies, of imaginary projections that merely try to capture glimpses of what may have been the truth of Plath's actual existence. Rose also discusses important issues concerning authorship and raises important questions concerning the "surrounding voices" (Rose 1992:2) that create the biographical context involved in the greater narrative of her life and oeuvre. Needless to say, the biographical context of Plath's life has been thoroughly investigated by an impressive number of scholars and commentators. The interest in Plath's life and death is resuscitated with each new release of biographical material – when the archives start speaking, Plath researchers are more than eager to listen. There is an impressive string of publications concerning Sylvia Plath's biography, resembling an uncanny phenomenon described by Rose: "Plath biographies tend to answer each other, shouting like opponents across a legal gulf, each one insisting that she or he has a greater claim to the truth than the one who went before" (Rose 2003:51). In her overview of the ways in which Plath's biographies have shaped the reading practices of Plath's work, Jo Gill suggests that we read these biographies "with a hermeneutics of suspicion" (Gill 2006: 49). She explores some of the more impactful writings of the genre in order to outline the reading practices and subtexts they involve, while also suggesting that they leave their mark on the successive readings of Plath, affirmed by each generation of readers and critics. Moreover, she observes how Ted Hughes, arguably the central

character of the story of Plath's posthumous biographical narrative, was, in fact, one of her biographers, despite his staunch refusal to give interviews or to collaborate with his former wife's biographers. The researchers he agreed to speak with, who engaged in writing consistent Plath biographies in the 1970s, ultimately abandoned their projects. Although he sold the Plath archive to Smith College in 1981 and later gave his sister, Olwyn, full control over the Plath Estate, Ted Hughes had long established himself as the central authority over Plath's writing stages and her biography. Over the years, despite his cultivated privacy and silence regarding his marriage and shared professional life with Plath, Ted Hughes did not hesitate to respond ironically or to protest vehemently against a diverse array of facts and events related to the public's interest in his dead wife. He had labelled Plath's early writings "Juvenilia" in the 1982 edition of Plath's *Collected Poems*, carefully curated her *Journals*, leaving out significant parts of text, considered sensitive or problematic for himself and others, and famously declared he had destroyed her last journal containing notes dated three days before her death. It is doubtless that, despite his refusal to detail his life with Plath beyond the poetic expression of his final published volume, *Birthday Letters*, Hughes had unmatched insight into Plath's creative life, although he was absent for the final part, when she wrote *Ariel*, in the autumn of 1962.

The gradual opening of some important archives containing documents and recordings greatly influenced recent biographies – for example, Heather Clark's comprehensive *Red Comet: The Short Life and Blazing Art of Sylvia Plath* (2020) contains a significant amount of information from the Harriet Rosenstein archive. In fact, the revelatory content of this archive marked a shift in the biographical approach to Plath, as essential details concerning her final year of life, impacting her work on her last writings, came to light. Her correspondence with her American psychiatrist, Ruth Beuscher, who had treated her during her stay at Mclean hospital in 1953 and the numerous interviews with those who had known her form a consistent background supporting a new approach to her life and work. Indeed, Clark proposes a rereading of the biographical in order to highlight Plath's role as an established intellectual of her time, proposing a clear demarcation between her literary accomplishments and the context that may have impacted them. In a dense exploration of the new documents available at Emory University since early 2020, Clark reads Plath in a manner that prioritizes her work, her dialogue with fellow literary figures and her constant effort to excel in an intellectual historical interval that less than favored women to accomplish

professional recognition and success. The rich fabric of the biographical acts like a necessary framework that illuminates and highlights significant details reflected in Plath's work, but it does not encourage the perpetuation of the parasitic mythologies surrounding her marriage to English poet Ted Hughes or her untimely death by suicide at age 30. Clark's approach carefully balances the biographical and the undisputable weight of Plath's contribution to the literary canon by avoiding the challenges faced by scholars who had been placed in difficult positions by the Plath Estate - either by being denied the right to quote from her works or by being discouraged to publish under legal threat. One can only wonder if the massive tome that resurrects the notion of Plath as intellectual, Anne Stevenson's biography, *Bitter Fame: A Life of Sylvia Plath* (1989) is an eloquent example of the unfortunate interference of the Plath Estate in the actual writing of the book. Written under the direct supervision of the Estate, benefitting from the full support and approval of its director, Olwyn Hughes, Stevenson's book was prefaced by an *Author's Note* that was not, in fact, written by the author, but by Olwyn Hughes herself: "In writing this biography, I have received a great deal of help from Olwyn Hughes, literary agent to the Estate of Sylvia Plath. Ms. Hughes's contributions to the text have made it almost a work of dual authorship" (Stevenson 1989:vi). A different variant of the same note appeared in the version sent to the reviewers, and some subtle rephrasing conveyed the real meaning Stevenson tried to make heard: "This biography of Sylvia Plath is the result of a three-year dialogue between the author and Olwyn Hughes, agent to the Plath Estate. Ms. Hughes has contributed so liberally to the text that this is in effect a work of joint authorship" (Stevenson qtd. in Malcolm 2011: 13). Later, Stevenson detailed her experience, revealing the fact that Olwyn Hughes threatened to withdraw her approval for quoting from Plath unless she agreed with the publication of that note.

The published biographies of Sylvia Plath have an invisible counterpart in the unpublished biographies and in the manuscripts and various texts that were once intended to become a coherent narrative, that is another biography of Sylvia Plath. Elizabeth Hinchliffe wanted to write such a biography of in the 1970s, but, despite a thorough documentation and important access to documents that have been, in the meantime, lost or destroyed, Hinchliffe abandoned her work with little to no explanation regarding her reason to have done so. The 124-page manuscript she managed to complete has been included in the Al Alvarez archive at The British Library, in London, and another copy exists in the Frances McCullough papers at the University of

Maryland, in the United States of America. Frances McCullough has been a poetry editor for some major writers of the twentieth century, and also writer and editor of cookbooks. She did editorial work at Harper Row for roughly two decades, from the beginning of the 1960s to the late 1970s. The collection of documents included in her archive at Maryland University contains her work as a poetry editor, her correspondence with various authors, but also manuscripts and proofs, all part of her usual contribution to the laborious editing process. Her manuscript, titled *The Descent of Ariel* consists of two parts – the first part was given the subtitle “The Death of Sylvia Plath”, while the second – “The Life of Sylvia Plath”. Hinchliffe aimed to write a clean, revealing, close-to-the facts account of the writer’s life and death, having the major advantage of writing at a stage in Plath’s posthumous “existence” when she had available people close to the writer who gave her important details and shared significant documents with her. A copy of Plath’s suicide note is inserted in the typed manuscript, this being the only surviving photograph of this significant yet highly sensitive document. As Heather Clark noticed in her commentary on its form and contents (Clark 2020:1158), it is clearly visible that her pen had run dry, as the letters of Dr. Horder’s name appear somewhat faded, and Plath might have stopped to find another one or looked up her doctor’s number. It was a short interval, a break that hadn’t changed the stream of dark thoughts that clearly had engulfed her. This final piece of writing has become a cultural emblem, with music songs (by Tristan Puig) and paintings (Parimah Avani) borrowing its fateful words. Widely discussed and commented upon, the note was best clarified by the actual person it pointed to – Dr. Horder. In a commentary included in a letter to Harriet Rosenstein – she had asked him in another letter to give his opinion on Al Alvarez’s claim that Plath had gambled dangerously but did not intend to kill herself – Dr. Horder was firm and clear: Plath had, in fact, wanted to die. He believed that someone who was able to carry out such an act, with two infants in the house, was either psychotic or criminal. Although she had not appeared psychotic to him previously, he had no doubt that his former patient was in full-blown psychotic crisis at the time of her death. Hinchliffe’s writing is predominantly descriptive, favoring a factual account that leaves little room for literary commentary or analysis. Her strategy was to attach her voice to a “resurrected” form of her protagonist’s voice, amplifying the illusion of an actual knowledge of Plath’s thoughts and feelings. Hinchliffe’s effort is clearly romanticizing and mythologizing, insisting on describing Plath’s

physical appearance, everyday gestures and circumstances, invoking the impressions of people who knew her closely or remotely. The illusion of the protagonist's voice speaking its own truth is created from the many sources Hinchliffe relied upon in developing Plath's biographical narrative. One of these voices is Thomas Trevor's, Plath's downstairs neighbor at 23, Fitzroy Road in London, whose knowledge of Plath's final months of life has been the subject of his own account of that period. Although it was briefly published privately and most copies of the manuscript were destroyed by court order (Thomas Trevor was sued by Ted Hughes for what he considered to be libelous in Trevor's description of his interaction with Plath in the final weeks of her life), a few copies survived and can be accessed as archival material at Smith College's library. Trevor's account, deeply romanticizing Plath's persona and the impact she seems to have had on him, also contains information that Hughes vehemently denied – that he and Plath had actually signed divorce papers in the months leading up to her death. According to Trevor, Plath had confessed to him about this during one of her exacerbated visits, when she came to her neighbor's door crying and, as he invited her in, she told him about her marital turbulence. Although the information that the Hugheses had signed divorce papers resurfaced on other occasions over the years, archival documents can only validate that Plath's former psychiatrist and confidante, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, had, in fact, mentioned this option to her in a letter from autumn 1962, and she had, even before that, mentioned it to her mother in late August. Although Trevor and Hinchliffe mention that Plath had signed divorce papers (Trevor as a witness to Plath's confession, Hinchliffe as a biographer), there are, in fact, no actual documents to prove this act. Moreover, the legal procedures following Plath's death established Hughes' succession rights based on their still valid marital union. The detail concerning Plath's signing is not meant, however, to question the legal validity of their marriage, as, in effect, the procedure of marriage dissolution tends to unfold over a rather long period of time, but the writer's willingness to exit the marriage and move on by herself.

If Hinchliffe's manuscript reflects some characteristics of Plath biographical studies in the first decades following her death, Harriet Rosenstein's plan never came to fruition, despite the ample archive she gathered as she documented her work. These materials never had the chance to coagulate into a biographical narrative, as, for many years, her correspondence with the Plath Estate was ambivalent and contradictory. To this day, the reasons behind Rosenstein's decision not to pursue her

intention to write a Plath biography remain unclear. Her massive archive, now owned by Emory University and Smith College, helped recent biographers unearth important information about Plath's creative climate and intellectual drive. No less relevantly, it opened some paths to clarifying the medical environment of her final months, when her interactions with Dr. Ruth Beuscher (via mail) and Dr. John Horder (in person), as described in their recorded interviews and letters, could shed some light on the mental challenges Plath was facing. However, questions concerning confidentiality and the right to privacy of living family members need to be raised and discussed.

In what could be considered one of the most inflammatory commentaries on the manner and purpose of the biographical genre, Janet Malcolm refers to biographers as "burglars" breaking and entering private spaces, searching for the much-desired prize of new details and information that could make their work (of little or, more often, no aesthetic value) significant and worthy of critical attention. Malcolm writes, from the position of the critic who unavoidably relies on biographical information, that biography is a lesser genre whose most remarkable aspect is its popular success. She even goes as far as to cast doubt upon the criticism Ted Hughes received for the way he handled Plath's legacy. In Malcolm's view, the Hughes' efforts to suppress any form of deviation from the official version of the Plath shaped a form of narrative that was valuable in itself: it was created by the man who had had a privileged place in the writer's life, even if it was manipulated to conform to his version of the truth. Biography, in itself, was, in Malcolm's view, a flawed genre, as few biographers managed to write artistically valid works and respect the truth of the life they're trying to uncover. Malcolm refers to the ultimate value of "knowledge" about the life retold, even if the resulting story is distorted and rather divergent from its ultimately "real" version. The critic tends to overlook the damaging effect manipulation has on any narrative attempting to recreate the truth of a life, regardless of the reasons behind such a decision. There is little doubt that the Plath Estate's politics concerning biographers and any attempt at articulating an "official" biographical account was, at core, a defensive one, trying to conceal not only the dramatic circumstances of Plath's mental deterioration and death, but also poems, correspondence and personal texts that might have negatively affected the Hughes family's image. Ted Hughes' cardinal role in posthumously affirming Plath as a major poet is undeniable, but his role

in discouraging biographers from accessing sensitive Plath materials is also notorious. Janet Malcolm brings forth an argument that echoes in Frieda Hughes' commentary on her reaction to her mother's last letters to Ruth Beuscher – Plath's biography enclosed Plath in an endless moment of crisis, one that, had she survived her attempted suicide (or had not done it at all), she might have overcome and continued her life into full maturity, leaving behind her the broken marriage with Hughes, the anger at his infidelity and the turmoil surrounding the loss of a great love. Since he was directly involved in this biographical framework, Ted Hughes may also have felt haunted by a tragic past he could not outgrow. It is an inescapable captivity, a burden that changes one's outlook on their entire biography. He, too, was "forever fixed in the mess" (Malcolm 1994:12). Frieda Hughes, in her turn, tries to relativize the most dramatic revelations in Plath's recently published letters to Beuscher – Hughes' physical beating of Plath, his mental cruelty, the actual causes of the breakdown of their marriage (Hughes 2018:12).

Unfortunately, the clauses that have kept many archives closed for research proved to make their own sense in Plath's case, too. Only once the majority of the involved parties are no longer alive in-depth biographical research is possible. Context is essential to validating the cultural environment in which literary works are written, rerouting artistic elements towards ideological and political revelators and facilitating the exploration of literary discourse from new angles with potentially innovative instruments. Despite the Estate's discouraging front, Plath is one of Western literature's most discussed authors, eliciting constant interest from researchers and biographers. Each time new material becomes available or new archives are open to the public, a new wave of interest rises and produces countless studies, biographical reflections and rereadings of Plath's literature. It is not a unique phenomenon, but it certainly is one of the most dynamic and unpredictable.

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