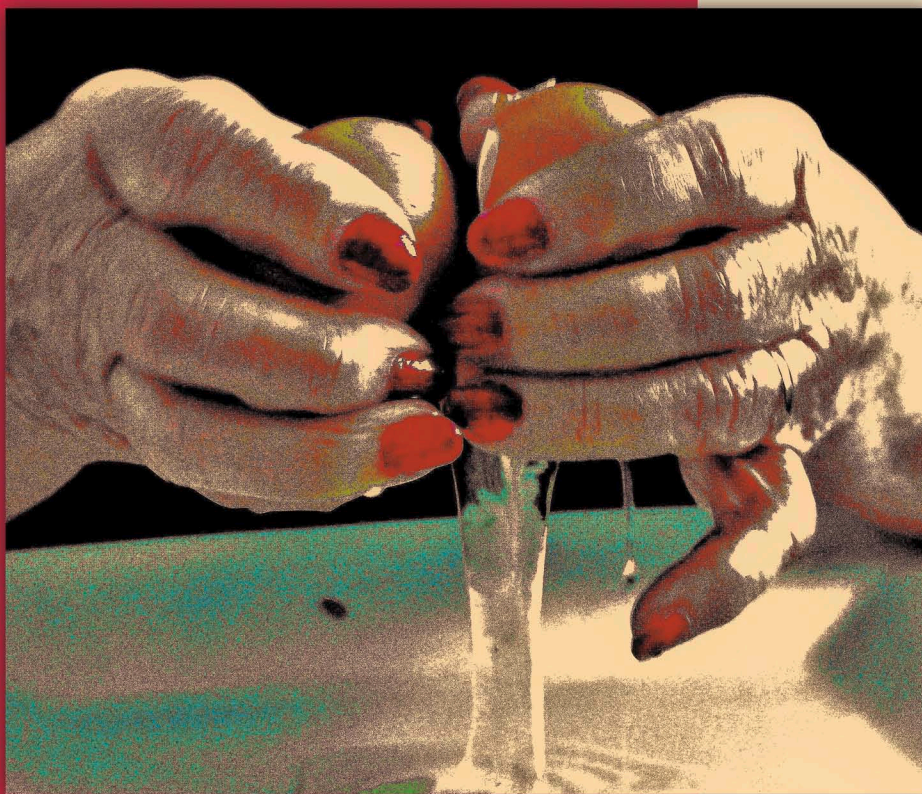


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SYLVIA PLATH THE POETRY OF NEGATIVITY

PAUL MITCHELL



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Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Negativity

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1ª edición de 2011

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ISBN: 978-84-370-8397-1

Imagen de la portada: Sophia de Vera Hóltz

Diseño de la cubierta: Celso Hernández de la Figuera

Publicacions de la Universitat de València

<http://puv.uv.es>

publicacions@uv.es

To Geoff and Margaret

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to many people who have given their support and advice during the long gestation of this book. Christine Bousfield, Sue Watkins and Tom Herron have provided both guidance and knowledge which have been invaluable throughout the project. The support of my family and friends has also been hugely appreciated. In particular, Paul Cooke and Alison Fell have been involved from the beginning, generously giving their time, support and intellectual input in equal measure. To Lola Lopez I am also (forever) indebted. Without her, this would not have been possible. Finally, thanks to Carme Manuel whose unfailing encouragement and kind assistance have been essential to the completion of the manuscript.

*One cannot help wishing to master absence
and yet we must always let go.*

Jacques Derrida 1998 142

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Introduction

The ‘Sylvia Plath effect’

It is now almost fifty years since Sylvia Plath began working on the poems that would later become known to the readers of *Ariel*, the controversial collection that has propelled her to an unprecedented level of posthumous fame; and as Plath’s star will no doubt continue to rise with 2013 being the year in which previously suppressed material from her Archive will be released, it is an opportune moment to evaluate the particular nature of her most unusual celebrity. Poets rarely achieve a significant level of commercial success; even less do they transgress the standard categorization of their work as elitist or high-brow to become popular cultural icons. Yet Sylvia Plath has managed both. Indeed, in 1998, *Time* magazine (Volume 151 Number 22) identified Sylvia Plath as one of the twentieth century’s most influential artists, ranking her among the six most important poets of the last hundred years, along with T.S. Eliot, W.B. Yeats, Robert Frost, W.H. Auden and Allen Ginsberg. (Gray 1998) Such an accolade is perhaps even more significant when one considers that, at the time of her death in February 1963, Plath had published only one volume of poetry, *The Colossus* (1960), and the novel, *The Bell Jar* (1963 UK). As the latter had only become available in the weeks before her suicide, the work of the pseudonymous Victoria Lucas, it is true to say that Plath died in relative obscurity. In fact, despite Al Alvarez describing Plath in her obituary as ‘the most gifted woman poet of her time,’ (Quoted in Alexander 1999 334) less than half a dozen tributes appeared in the weeks following her death. As Ronald Hayman suggests, ‘When Sylvia Plath died, she wasn’t yet Sylvia Plath: the name had none of the reverberations it has today.’ (1992 184)

It is important to ask therefore how a writer with only modest successes during her lifetime can have achieved such iconic status. Within a generation, Plath has become a literary ‘patron saint’ (Patterson 2001) and, as one of the best-selling woman poets of all time, ‘literary culture’s ultimate commodity.’ (Bryant 2007)

Plath's work has already been widely translated into a number of languages and her name is now so firmly inscribed into the cultural consciousness that she even has a psychological concept named after her. The 'Sylvia Plath effect,' a term coined by James Kaufman (2001) in his study of female writers and mental illness, is just one telling illustration of how Plath's name has become intrinsically linked with creative/destructive pathology. (See also: Smith-Bailey 2003; Glaister 2004; and Bryant 2007)

Plath's celebrity is particularly extraordinary when evaluated against the two other important female writers with whom she is often compared. Like Plath, both Virginia Woolf and Anne Sexton suffered from mental illnesses throughout their lives and ultimately committed suicide (the former at the age of 59 in 1941, the latter in 1974 aged 45). Yet it is only Plath who has achieved the somewhat dubious honour of becoming 'St. Sylvia, the high priestess of suffering.' (Sachs 1994) Although Woolf and Sexton have of course achieved a significant level of recognition – the former having been played by Nicole Kidman in the commercially successful partial-biopic *The Hours* (2003) – only Plath has managed to transcend the trappings of high art usually reserved for critically acclaimed writers, achieving instead a surprisingly populist currency. Thus, her influence can be seen on the work of a diverse group of popular and classical musicians, artists, theatre directors and film-makers.¹ Furthermore Plath's name and work have unusually become cultural reference points in several major Hollywood productions, such as *Reality Bites* (1994), *10 Things I Hate About You* (1999) and *Fight Club* (1999) – the latter, a particularly pertinent example as the novel on which the film is based contains no mention of Plath. (Palahniuk 2003) In *Heathers* (1989), the malicious and unhappy Heather Chandler (Kim Walker) dies after

¹ See, for example, alternative UK rock group Johnny Panic, featuring Alain Whyte; UK punk rock band Johnny Panic; Ryan Adam's 'SYLVIA PLATH' (*Gold Lost Highway* 2001); 'The Applicant' by The Blue Aeroplanes (*Swagger* Capitol 1990); Tears for Fears' 'Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams' (*Advice for the Young at Heart* Fontana Records 1990); 'The Girl Who Wanted To Be God' by Manic Street Preachers (*Everything Must Go* Sony Music 1996); 'Sylvia' by The Antlers (*Hospice* Frenchkiss Records 2009); Paul Barker's *Three Songs for Sylvia Plath* (*Turquoise Swans* Sargasso 2001); *Ariel, cycle of five poems of Sylvia Plath for soprano, clarinet and piano* ('Words,' 'Poppies July,' 'Hanging Man,' 'Poppies in October,' 'Lady Lazarus') by Ned Rorem (Phoenix USA 1991); John Mitchell's *Four poems by Sylvia Plath* ('Morning Song,' 'The Couriers,' 'Sheep in Fog' and 'The Applicant') (ABM Enterprises 2000); the work of artist Stella Vine; Paul Alexander's off-Broadway production, *Edge* (2003); Edward Anthony's *Wish I Had a Sylvia Plath* (2007) which premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe in 2008; Robert Shaw's London staging of *Three Women* (2009); and Sandra Lahire's 'Edge' and her *Living on Air* trilogy, comprising 'Lady Lazarus,' 'Night Dances' and 'Johnny Panic.'

falling through a glass table on which is a copy of the Cliffs Notes for *The Bell Jar*, the novel which Oliver Stone also includes in the *mise-en-scène* of Mallory's bedroom, the emotionally disturbed female lead in *Natural Born Killers* (1994). Indeed, it is just such a sensationalist association between Plath and teenage angst that causes Alvy Singer to comment in *Annie Hall* (1977) that she was 'an interesting poetess whose tragic suicide was misrepresented as romantic by the college-girl mentality.'

Most recently, of course, Plath's life story has been the subject of the BBC's £7 million biopic *Sylvia* (2003), a clear indication of her unprecedented commercial appeal. Starring Hollywood A-list actor Gwyneth Paltrow in the title role, Christine Jeff's film conveys the idea that Plath's poetry is of only marginal interest to her 'story' as it contains very little of her work, dwelling instead on the details of her courtship with Ted Hughes and their eventual, turbulent separation. This is partly the responsibility of Plath's daughter (Frieda Hughes) who, as executor of the Plath Estate, refused to allow the film-makers to quote from her mother's work. In actuality, she reacted angrily to the news of *Sylvia*, penning the acerbic 'My Mother' as a poetic response to the film's production:

Now they want to make a film
For anyone lacking the ability
To imagine the body, head in oven
Orphaning children. (Hughes 2009)

Ironically, it could be argued that Frieda Hughes' refusal to permit the use of Plath's poems limits the film's ability to celebrate her literary achievements and, thereby, creates a greater focus on the more sensationalist aspects of her life. However, it is also probable that the film's narrative focus was always intended to be on Plath's domestic relationship with Hughes rather than on her literary achievements, as it is her cultural iconicity that commands particular commercial weight. *Sylvia* was originally titled *Ted and Sylvia* and, as scriptwriter John Brownlow explains, '...the story was blindingly clear. This wasn't a story about two poets, or more precisely, it was only incidentally a story about two poets. It was a love story between two giants.' (2003) Despite Paltrow's strong performance in the film and the grandiose claim of the theatrical trailer to tell the 'untold story of the astonishing life behind the century's most powerful voice,' there is little innovation in the portrayal of Plath, defining her in terms of mental disturbance, jealousy and frustrated ambition. A notable way this is achieved is by manipulating

the chronology of Plath's work, with one particularly pertinent example being a shot of Plath writing at her desk towards the end of the film. In voice over, Paltrow speaks the line from 'The Moon and the Yew Tree,' 'the message of the yew tree is blackness – blackness and silence,' (2004a 64) despite the fact that the poem had been composed in October 1961, over a year before the events that the film purportedly depicts. As the camera then cuts to a shot of Ted Hughes (Daniel Craig), the meaning of the montage is clear: to suggest Plath's gathering depression in the weeks following her husband's adultery. Stark tableau shots throughout the film create an ambience of gloom that ultimately lead to Plath's suicide at the film's denouement, the aftermath of which is played out to an emotive score of swelling orchestral strings.

The notion that Plath's popularity might simply reflects the fact she was a better writer than Sexton (Pollitt 1998) clearly ignores the fact that Plath's particularly iconic status seems to owe more to her troubled marriage to Hughes, the nature of her premature death and her attractive looks than it does to the relative merits of her literary talent, so that she has become famous for being the 'beautiful young poet who loved and lost and died.' (Patterson 2004 2) Such is clearly the rationale for Emma Tennant's 2003 work, *Ted and Sylvia*, which states that Plath's relationship with Hughes is 'the twentieth century's most famous – and most tragic – literary love affair.' (Author's Note)

Two photographs in particular have become central to the construction of Plath's iconography as a gloomy and doomed heroine. The first, a photograph taken by Olwyn Hughes in 1957, shows Plath sitting in front of a bookcase, her hair loose about her shoulders, an image that has been used to date for the dust-jacket of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* (2000) and on the covers of biographies by Linda W. Wagner-Martin (1988), Paul Alexander (1999) and Carol Ann Kirk (2004) as well as for Jacqueline Rose's influential study, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (1991). The second, a photograph by Rollie McKenna from 1959, depicts Plath and Hughes sitting together in their Boston apartment at 9 Willow Street – although it is most often cropped to show only Plath, as on the covers of Nancy Hunter Steiner's *A Closer Look at Ariel* (1973), Anne Stevenson's *Bitter Fame* (1989), Janice Markey's *A Journey into the Red Eye* (1993), Elaine Connell's *Killing the Angel in the House* (1998), Tim Kendall's *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study* (2001), as well as on an inner page of Steven Gould Axelrod's *Sylvia Plath: The Wound and the Cure of Words* (1992). What characterises these black and white

images is their *chiaroscuro* effect which creates, through the dramatic interplay between high and low-key lighting, an iconic association between Plath and melancholia, a notion reinforced by the particular expression (hostile in one, vacant in the other) that she adopts. So it is no doubt this, the sensationalist portraiture of Plath as a literary ‘Marilyn Monroe’ (Gilbert 1983; Rose 1991 26; Glanville 2003; Connell 2004; James 2005) that has ensured a level of posthumous fame for her well in excess of that achieved by Woolf or Sexton and which continues to fascinate those who come to discover her work.

An extraordinary amount has already been written about Plath. In 2000, Martin Arnold calculated that there were 104 books in print at that time which were either entirely devoted to Plath or in which her life was prominently discussed – as opposed to the 93 titles available for W.H. Auden, 50 for Robert Lowell and 17 for Anne Sexton. Furthermore, despite having died in only 1963, Plath’s life has come under intense scrutiny, despite (or perhaps because of) the Plath Estate’s hostility to such research being undertaken. She has already been the focus of numerous memoirs – such as the first chapter of Al Alvarez’s *The Savage God* (1971), Nancy Hunter Steiner’s *A Closer Look at Ariel* (1973) and Jillian Becker’s *Giving Up: The Last Days of Sylvia Plath* (2002)² – seven book-length biographical studies – by Edward Butscher (1976), Linda W. Wagner-Martin (1988), Anne Stevenson (1989), Ronald Hayman (1992), Paul Alexander (1999), Diane Middlebrook (2004) and Connie Ann Kirk (2004) – and the meta-biography *The Silent Woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1994) by Janet Malcolm. No doubt much of this interest reflects how each new biography attempts to build upon previous scholarship: for example, Linda W. Wagner-Martin’s 1988 study utilises Plath’s then unpublished letters, journals and poetry drafts available from the Lilly Library at Indiana University and the Smith College Rare Book Room to enhance the work of Butscher; Paul Alexander is the first to have access to Plath’s mother, Aurelia, as a source for his text; while Diane Middlebrook provides a new understanding of Plath’s life with her husband following the publication of Ted Hughes’ *Birthday Letters* and *Howls and Whispers* in 1998. However, although no biographical text

² See also: the three memoirs in Newman’s *The Art of Sylvia Plath* (1970) by Lois Amis (150-173), Anne Sexton (174-181) and Wendy Campbell (182-186); Dorothea Krook’s ‘Recollections of Sylvia Plath’ (1976 5-14); the four brief memoirs collected under the title ‘Meeting Sylvia Plath’ in *Sylvia Plath: The Critical Heritage* (Wagner 1988) by Elinor Klein (27), Jane Baltzell Kopp (28), Irene V. Morris (28-29) and Christopher Levenson (29-30); and the three memoirs published as an appendix to Stevenson’s *Bitter Fame* (1989) by Lucas Myers (307-321), Dido Merwin (322-347) and Richard Murphy (348-358).

can ever be said to be neutral, there is, as Jacqueline Rose suggests, a surprising amount of hostile partiality in the biographical work on Plath: 'In the case of Plath, the subjective component of all biography therefore takes on a special edge. Someone has to be guilty. Someone is to blame. [...] 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 truth than all who went before.' (2003 51) Most often, this has manifested itself in texts which are unapologetically pro- or anti-Plath (and, by extension, a perceived necessity to be therefore inversely anti- or pro-Hughes). Thus, Wagner-Martin's 'crucial reappraisal' (1988 dust-jacket) of Butscher's negative view of Plath in *Method and Madness* prompted Anne Stevenson to write *Bitter Fame*, 'the first authoritative biography [...] complete, balanced and objectively written' (1989 dust-jacket), a text which, in its apparent sympathy for Hughes, then provoked Ronald Hayman's attempt to 'correct some of the unbalance created by writers who have been unfair to [Plath].' (Hayman 1992 xix) In turn, Janet Malcolm responded to Hayman's 'sport of tearing off Hughes's wings' (Malcolm 1994 165) with *The Silent Woman*, a book that unequivocally states its allegiance: 'As the reader knows, I, too, have taken a side – that of the Hugheses and Anne Stevenson.' (Malcolm 1994 177)

It is precisely the extraordinary level of intense and often hostile scrutiny about Plath's life that differentiates her posthumous celebrity from many others. Historically, one of the main culprits for creating this atmosphere of conflict has been the Plath Estate itself which, in the years since Plath's death, (and whether under the agency of Ted, Olwyn or Frieda Hughes) has maintained a defensive and uncooperative attitude towards those who would seek to write about Plath's work. Accounts of the difficulties faced by critics are numerous, one of the most notorious being Linda Wagner-Martin whose comments on the 'assistance' provided by the Plath Estate are particularly revealing. She writes: 'As Olwyn read the later chapters of the book [...] and particularly after she read a draft of the manuscript in 1986, her cooperation diminished substantially. Olwyn wrote me at great length, usually in argument with my views about the life and development of Plath.' (1988 14) Ted Hughes' equal hostility to potential biographers is made apparent with Wagner-Martin's further comment that he responded to her draft manuscript 'with suggestions for changes that filled fifteen pages and would have meant a deletion of more than 15,000 words.' (1988 14) Furthermore, in a letter to Andrew Motion, Hughes makes the startling comment that: '[Wagner-Martin is] so

insensitive that she's evidently escaped the usual effects of undertaking this particular job – i.e. mental breakdown, neurotic collapse, domestic catastrophe – which in the past have saved us from several travesties of this kind being completed.' (Quoted in Malcolm 1994 40) In a letter to Janet Malcolm, Olwyn Hughes also explained her own attitude to Wagner-Martin's book: '... [it] was much improved, though much thinned down, by my requiring her to substantiate the unbelievable [...] rubbish she had in earlier drafts. Because she finally published when I was still awaiting a "final draft" there are new gobbets, as well as shadows from this earlier nonsense, still in her book.' (Malcolm 1994 30) From the above, it is clear that the Plath Estate are unwilling to endorse the work of anyone whose version of Plath's life and work differs from their own, wielding and withdrawing the power to grant copyright at will. Equally infamous is the experience of Jacqueline Rose. Despite Rose's assertion that, in her study *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath*, her 'focus is on [Plath's] writing' and that she is 'never claiming to speak about the life,' (1991 xi) Hughes reacted angrily to the book on the basis that she was misrepresenting the nature of Plath's sexual identity in her reading of 'The Rabbit Catcher'. As Rose explains, 'In correspondence with the Hughes's (*sic*), this book was called 'evil' [...] I was asked to remove my reading of 'The Rabbit Catcher,' and when I refused, I was told by Ted Hughes that my analysis would be damaging for Plath's (now adult) children and that speculation of the kind I was seen as engaging in about Sylvia Plath's sexual identity would in some countries be "grounds for homicide".' (1991 xiii) This striking claim by Hughes suggests an acute defensiveness on his part, an unwillingness to accept innovative and challenging (textual) readings of Plath so that, when he feels his authority to control how Plath is interpreted might be undermined, he resorts to extraordinary emotional blackmail.

Perhaps even more surprising in this context is the experience of Anne Stevenson, the biographer employed by the Plath Estate to write an 'official' account of Plath's life. Though ostensibly gracious, Stevenson's precise delineation of the assistance that she received in writing *Bitter Fame* also subtly suggests her dissatisfaction at the extent of the influence placed upon her: '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*. (1989 'Author's Note') [Emphasis added] In fact, the 'Author's Note' that was published at the beginning of *Bitter Fame* is

different from the earlier, less guarded version sent in the galleys to reviewers: ‘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.*’ (Quoted in Malcolm 12) [Emphasis added] In turn, Olwyn Hughes has stated that the decision to employ Stevenson was ‘a mistake’ and that she regrets she ‘didn’t get somebody brighter,’ (Malcolm 45) an unnecessarily petty insult which encapsulates the disrespectful and dismissive attitude that Olwyn Hughes, in particular, has adopted towards Plath scholars. Even Judith Kroll, whose mythological reading of Plath’s work was endorsed and approved by Ted Hughes, also suggests that she too was placed under significant pressure to edit *Chapters in a Mythology* in accordance with the wishes of the Plath Estate. Speaking of her analysis of ‘Medusa’ and, in particular, the fact that a subgenus of the Medusa jellyfish shares the name ‘Aurelia’ with Plath’s mother, Kroll reveals that: ‘Ted restated, with Olwyn echoing him, that if I published what I’d written about “Medusa,” it would probably “kill” Aurelia. In fact, I should not even speak to anyone about this “exegesis” (he called it) of mine [...] Then Olwyn asked me: “Do you want to be a murderer?”’ (2007 xxx-xxxi)

What this hostile dialogue between the Plath Estate and the critics of her work reveals is the particular challenge that writing about Plath seems to represent, a circumstance described by Malcolm as ‘a kind of allegory for the problem of biography in general.’ (1994 28) If Plath’s suicide has created a situation in which biographies try to search for and to allocate blame then the sheer volume of (ever increasing) voices who contribute to the quarrel suggests more immediately than for many other biographical subjects that ‘truth’ is inevitably elusive (even impossible); and it is ironically this lack of certainty that continues to stimulate the prolongation of the debate, a compulsion to repeat that can be interpreted in Lacanian terms as associated with the irrecoverably lost object (Plath, whose suicide necessarily creates a lacuna of/for interpretation). Interestingly, into this critical space an unusual recent phenomenon has emerged, a new type of genre which is best termed a ‘fictionalised biography’ and which has been recently analysed by Annika J. Hagström. Through this, a succession of authors have sought to represent Plath’s life either in novelistic or poetic form despite stressing the imaginary nature of their texts – the most significant examples of which are *The Ballad of Sylvia and Ted* (2001) by Emma Tennant – retitled *Ted and Sylvia* for the