Sylvia Plath

by William Woodrow



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Scope of Topic

Sylvia Plath is remembered for her life (with Ted Hughes) and her tragic suicide as much as for her talent. She has become something of a feminist icon. In spite of the "tabloid excesses" that have chronicled her private life, she has every right to be considered a major poet: possibly America's most distinguished woman poet since Emily Dickinson. The purpose of the following notes is to show that Sylvia Plath is not the" angry voice crying in literary isolation" that she is sometimes represented as being. Her work has connections that are both contemporary and historic.

Books to read

ARIEL Faber and Faber

Notes

By virtue of a mere handful of poems from her later years, Sylvia Plath is known to a far wider readership than poets normally expect. Her reputation was enhanced by the BBC radio who gave her the opportunity during 1963, to read her poems. *Daddy, Fever 103* and Lady Lazarus (all in the volume *ARIEL*) are examples of poems which she not only read but introduced with brief explanations. Such public readings not only confirmed her status as a poet; it also succeeded in getting her talked about and quoted.

These introductions to her readings show that she attempted to distance herself from her poetry in spite of the intensely personal nature of much that she wrote. She may have had a particular reason for this. For example, she introduced *Lady Lazarus* with this comment: "The speaker is a woman who has the great and terrible gift of being reborn. The only trouble is, she has to die first. She is the Phoenix, the libertarian spirit, what you will. She is also just a good, plain, very resourceful woman."

When a student in America she was influenced by Robert Lowell and became associated with the Confessional Movement. These poets, Theodore Roethke, John Berryman, Anne Sexton and Adrienne Rich and others, focused upon especially painful moments in their lives. By the end of the 1950s, Sylvia Plath, possibly under the influence of Ted Hughes and possibly because she was anxious to Anglicise herself seemed to cut adrift from those 1950's contemporaries. This was in spite of the intensity of such lines as those which begin,and end, *Lady Lazarus*

> I have done it again
> One year in every ten
> I manage it----
>
> A sort of walking miracle, my skin Bright as a Nazi lampshade,
> My right foot
>
> A paperweight,
> My face a featureless, fine
> Jew linen.
>
> ******

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Out of the ash
I rise with my red hair And I eat men like air

This displays an intimacy that is physical, psychological and almost tactile. Sylvia Plath is being clearly autobiographical if only in the sense that she did, in fact, attempt suicide, and failed twice before the determined success in 1963 - for which an entire generation of hysterical feminists blamed Ted Hughes without evidence or justification.

The intensity of pain and anger in much of her mature poetry - the ARIEL period - is not a sudden burst of anger brought about by the problems in her marriage. Arguably her most impassioned poem is directed away from herself totally and is directed at no particular target. Thalidomide (November 1962) sears the mind with its imagery. The poem is too long to quote in full here (12 couplets with a single line to begin and to end). With its "snapshot images" separated by dashes, in the manner of Emily Dickinson, it creates a shared nightmare. It is as if the poet deliberately (and successfully) sets out to speak for all humanity.

.....Your dark
Amputations crawl and appall -

Spidery, unsafe.

****
Of love
Of two wet eyes and a screech.
White spit!

Of indifference!
The dark fruits revolve and fall.

This imagery shocks, even from these snippets. The entire poem is a sustained and unrelenting attack on the senses and sensibilities; explicit but leaving just enough to the imagination to fuel nightmares.

As I suggested above there is an acknowledged debt to Emily Dickinson. They share, amongst other things, an abundant use of simile as well as metaphor, ending lines with conditional verbs (to express surprise or doubt after a quest for knowledge or wisdom) - or dashes - and the scalpel-like use of concrete and physical imagery.

Here is Dickinson:
She dealt her pretty words like Blades-
How Glittering they shone-
And every One unbared a Nerve

Or wantoned with a Bone-

And Plath: (writing about *Poppies in July*)

And it exhausts me to watch you
Flickering like that, wrinkly and clear red, like the skin of a mouth.

A mouth just bloodied.
Little bloody skirts!

The controlled savagery is similar: there are many other parallels.

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This is the Sylvia Plath that we all know; from her own readings on the radio and the frenzied reviews that her posthumous ARIEL received on first publication. And it is true that there is more than a touch of feverishness in most of what she wrote from 1960 on. Sometimes, as in *Lady Lazarus* or *Daddy* or *Cut* her diction is terse, muscular and tactile. This is especially true (paradoxically so) of the poem *Paralytic* which she wrote less than a month before the date that she took her own life.

It is a meditation by one who lies in an iron lung divorced entirely from the processes of the body: remote yet there, in the centre of everything going and coming to the bedside.

….My god the iron lung
That loves me, pumps
My two
Dust bags in and out
and again
Dead egg, I lie
Whole
On a whole world I cannot touch,

and, the final, enigmatic, stanza:
The claw
Of the magnolia,
Drunk on its own scents,
Asks nothing of life.

Stanzas such as these, plucked out and used in isolation, do nothing to convey the totality of the vision. And the use of the word "vision" is appropriate here because much of her work shows imaginative insight. She has the ability to transmute physical experiences and sensations into words that trigger responses in those who could not possibly have had such experiences themselves, or who, having such experiences, cannot articulate them for the benefit of others. This is true of all great poetry and the quality that distinguishes poetry proper from mere verse.

This is exemplified by *Fever 103* We have all at some time (especially when children) experienced illness and "running a temperature". We can all respond to and accept the simple physicality of the experience of reading such lines as:

I think I am going up,
I think I may rise --
The beads of hot metal fly, and I, love, I

Am a pure acetylene
Virgin
Attended by roses,

In her BBC reading of this poem the poet introduced the work as follows "(It) is about two kinds of fire- the fires of hell, which merely agonise, and the fires of heaven, which purify. During the poem, the first sort of fire suffers itself into the second." Ted Hughes, in his commentary upon her work (Notes to the Complete Poems) demonstrates that she had serious struggles to come to terms with the substance of this poem. He provides some hitherto unpublished fragments. These are seemingly remote from the final version but have echoes and overtones of other writings that were contemporary and were eventually collected into ARIEL.

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Many poets base their work upon personal or domestic experiences which they then use as metaphors for (or even allegories of) more universal thoughts. It is common practice. However, there have been very few who can retain the physical and tactile level of understanding and keep it going whilst promoting thoughts at a much higher intellectual level. The precursor who comes most readily to mind is John Donne, who was a contemporary of Shakespeare. He was a major and innovative poet who was also Dean of St Paul's Cathedral. The thought that connects many of the ARIEL poems with SONGS AND SONNETS is an exciting one and to read such poems as *A Feaver* in conjunction with *Fever 103* is to appreciate an almost metaphysical dimension in the poetry of Sylvia Plath. Perhaps cerebral is a better word since "metaphysical" does carry overtones that might mislead. Other parallels between Plath and Donne will be drawn later in a totally different context.

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So far we have considered those elements of Sylvia Plath's poetry that made her famous; one might almost say notorious. The senses of anger and outrage; the expression of the psychological torment through implicit or explicit images of physical suffering.

There is, however, a different side entirely to her work. Throughout Sylvia Plath's entire working life - even in the Juvenilia that she never published - we get glimpses of an almost pastoral preoccupation with the natural world. Sometimes whole poems are devoted to perceptive re-creations of places; at other times there are cameos or even throwaway references in her more cerebral writings. These display a close affinity with another American poet who, coincidentally, died in the same year. This was Robert Frost.

Both poets suffered trauma and depression; both contemplated suicide and both came to live in England and found publication there. Robert Frost returned to the United States and became a farmer in New Hampshire. There he remained, nurturing his verse and absorbing the natural speech patterns of the rural New Englander. His work was pastoral but not in the romantic sense of the word, which conjures up shepherds and shepherdesses cavorting in a "romantic" classical landscape. His writing was purposeful and sinewy; a beautiful balance between form and content. He wrote of life as he experienced it and his enduring theme was the "quest of the solitary person to make sense of the world". This is also true of the way in which Sylvia Plath approached such subjects as Hardcastle Crags. To those who know the Pennine gritstone country this will evoke memories. It is significant also that Hardcastle Crags are very close to what is called Bronte Country. And there are affinities here also; especially with the poems of Emily.

The diction in these poems is more laconic, more conversational and shot through with expressions that sound spontaneous exclamations rather than contrived emotions. For example:

> God knows how our neighbor managed to breed
> His great sow:

Which compares with many of Robert Frost's almost vernacular beginnings and endings: and is not too far removed from Donne's declamatory beginning to *The Good Morrow*:

> I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I
> Did, till we lov'd? were we not wean'd till then ?
> But suck'd on country pleasures, childishly?

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There is, of course, a great deal of word play and innuendo in the Donne. The expression "country pleasures" has a sexual connotation for example, which Shakespeare was quick to exploit in *Hamlet*. In the same way, there is a great deal of sexual (and quasi-sexual) imagery to be derived from even the most innocuous seeming modern verse. I am quite sure that an intense half-hour will not fail to tease out similar intimations from Sylvia Plath's *Sow*.

More seriously, and more systematically, I want us to look at Sylvia Plath's "Bee poems". The poet was fascinated by bees for much of her adult life and she wrote about them at a certain stage in her poetic development. She did so in both a literal and also a symbolic sense. It was at this time that she had a hive of her own and attended lectures on beekeeping.

The year is 1962: the month October. The poems are dated in the COLLECTED POEMS from the 3rd of the month to the 9th. The dates represent the completion of the final draft. We do not know the duration of the gestation period and we do not have access to the interim drafts. From internal evidence and knowledge of the seasons in which bees work, we may infer a fairly lengthy process. It is likely that the poems were conceived as a sequence and Ted Hughes suggests the beginning of August as a likely date..

The poems are: *The Bee Meeting, The Arrival of the Bee Box, Stings, The Swarm* and *Wintering*.

The titles are both revealing and misleading. At the purely narrative level they tell the story of an initiation into bee keeping, a season of observation and, in the end, six jars of honey. With some poets it would be possible to read such poems at this simplest level and enjoy them simply as the story of an enterprise. But with Sylvia Plath nothing is ever that simple.

It must be realised that the "Bee poems" are almost contemporary with the tormented *Daddy*, *Lady Lazarus*, and less than a month later the final draft of *Thalidomide* appeared. What is equally significant, when discussing the poems, is that October was the month in which Plath and Ted Hughes separated and she moved to London with the children.

The Bee Meeting is the most accessible of the sequence and it is almost entirely narrative. The beginning is conventional, almost cosy. We meet stock village characters all of whom know what is going to happen. They have brought with them the conventional protective clothing that bee keepers wear. The poet is clad in a simple summer dress. She feels distanced from the group and apprehensive. Then everyone puts on their masks and gowns and she is provided for by the visiting "secretary of bees". From being a group of familiar acquaintances the villagers are now altered and anonymous; distanced from the poet and each other by what they have just put on. Overtones are generated by the thought that when we combine to perform a common task we deliberately conceal our true selves beneath a covering and a mask. The poem soon takes on a nightmarish dimension with oblique references to unnamed rites and sacrifices. As always with Sylvia Plath terror is never far from the surface of things.

The Arrival of the Bee Box carries on the narrative and we are made aware of the arrival of a box of particularly aggressive-sounding bees. It is the start of the hive which will yield six jars of honey at the end of it all. With wonderfully tactile imagery and sensuous detail we are made aware of the bees and their effect upon the poet; which is part revulsion and part obsession.

Stings, although carrying on the story of the keeping of bees, is really a meditation upon the role of the queen. Her domination of the entire colony is set against her vulnerability. This, of course, provokes a meditation upon womankind and contrasts the drudgery of simply living with the soaring nuptial flight of creativity. In this sequence the focus is already moving towards introspection and away from simple narrative.

The Swarm is only ostensibly about a swarm of bees. It was published in WINTER TREES (1971). Sylvia Plath included it in her original listing for ARIEL, but it did not make the final published version.

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With Napoleonic imagery we are given a lesson in the history of aggression and the massed ball of the bee swarm, high up in a tree, represents the mindless masses that have no individual voice but can only think collectively. More here than anywhere else in this sequence we have the manic overtones of the poetry of terror that was being crafted at the same time with the other half of the schizophrenic consciousness.

Wintering is an enigmatic poem. It has a clear narrative line but it also carries ominous overtones of the black fear that infects her mind. It also stresses a theme that has been hinted at before: the overwhelming femaleness of the closed society that is the bee colony and the early redundancy of the male elements. The overlying message is that in winter, drained of their honey, the bees sit out the fruitless period on a diet of synthetic sweetness until the summer brings purposeful activity once more.

The question must be asked yet again. How could this tormented woman, whose poetry is so often nightmares made articulate, how could she ever be seen as having a "normal" human existence? There are poems that hint at this from all periods of her creative life. But one stands out, and furthermore, it is from the ARIEL collection. *Morning Song* is glorious. A celebration of maternity that is passionate, concerned, admiring and, above all, loving. The first stanza sets the tone

> Love set you going like a fat gold watch.
> The midwife slapped your footsoles, and your bald cry
> Took its place among the elements.

The wonderment continues with the natural concern that a mother feels for a newborn child:

> All night your moth-breath
> Flickers among the flat pink roses. I wake to listen:
> A far sea moves in my ear.
>
> One cry, and I stumble from bed, cow-heavy and floral
> In my Victorian nightgown.
> Your mouth opens clean as a cat's. The window square
>
> Whitens and swallows its dull stars. And now you try
> Your handful of notes;
> The clear vowels rise like balloons.

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This short study does not aim at completeness. There are many loose ends but the intention throughout has been for the reader to read and resolve. It has not been written from any point of view except the author's. No sides are taken and no blame apportioned.The poetry stands or falls as poetry and not polemic. The poetry is everything.

Further reading

COLLECTED POEMS (ed. Ted Hughes) Faber & Faber

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THE BELL JAR by Sylvia Plath. An autobiographical novel. It is somewhat at variance with the contents of her JOURNALS (1950-1952) edited by Karen V. Kulick.

ARIEL'S GIFT by Erica Wagner (both published by Faber and both very expensive.)

BIRTHDAY LETTERS by Ted Hughes is required reading for the serious student.

EVERYMAN POETRY is a series from Dent of cheaper, accessible selections of eminent poets. The following are recommended:

John Donne

Emily Dickinson

The Brontes.

Oxford University Press and Penguin both do selected Poems of Robert Frost

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