



JACQUELINE ROSE

THE HAUNTING OF
SYLVIA PLATH

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*for Jen White
and in memory of Allon*

ABBREVIATIONS

LH *Letters Home: Correspondence 1950–1963*, selected and edited with a commentary by Aurelia Schober Plath, London: Faber & Faber, 1975.

Johnny Panic *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams and Other Prose Writings*, introduction by Ted Hughes, London: Faber & Faber, 1977; revised edition, 1979.

CP *Collected Poems*, edited by Ted Hughes, London: Faber & Faber, 1981.

J *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, Frances McCullough, Editor, Ted Hughes, Consulting Editor, New York: Random House (Ballantine), 1982.

Smith The Sylvia Plath Collection, Smith College Library, Rare Book Room, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.

Lilly The Sylvia Plath Collection, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Note: Whenever reference is made to extracts from the Smith and Lilly Collections which have been omitted from published texts, the page of the published version where the omission occurs is given in parentheses after the full reference.

PREFACE

Interpretation of a literary work is endless. There is no one true place where it can be halted. It cannot be arrested at the point where it comes into conflict with how a writer sees their own depiction of others or of themselves. Once a piece of writing has been put into circulation, it ceases – except in the most material sense – to be the property of its author. Nor can it be controlled and limited by the views of any one individual, no matter how close to the subject they may have been, or still feel themselves to be. In writing this book, I have faced what I believe to be an attempt to exercise such control and to impose limits on what may be said about the writings of Sylvia Plath. This attempt has been made in the name of protection of privacy, of ‘factual’ accuracy and of the ethics of scholarship. It has been reinforced by the threat, overt and implied, of legal action. The publication of this book therefore represents an assertion of the diversity of literary interpretation and of the right of every reader of Sylvia Plath to form her or his own view of the meanings and significance of her work.

Throughout this book, my focus is on writing – its own process, the way it has been edited, presented and read. This is not a biography. I am never claiming to speak about the life, never attempting to establish the facts about the lived existence of Sylvia Plath. First, because what I am interested in is writing, in what – independently of a writer’s more concretely lived reality – it can *do*; secondly, because accounts of the life – and nowhere has this been demonstrated more clearly than in relation to Plath – have to base themselves on a spurious claim to knowledge, they have to arbitrate between competing and often incompatible versions of what took place.

Working on Plath, the thing that has seized my interest

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most strongly is the circulation of fantasy in her texts, how she writes of psychic processes, the way she lets us – with what strikes me as extraordinary generosity – into her mind. These things are private and intimate, although Plath also demonstrates the importance of fantasy for the widest sweep of our cultural and historical life. Fantasy should not be confused with reality – it is, like literature, one way that individuals work with and transform what their inner and outer reality can be. But given Plath's endless return to the world of the psyche, to suggest, as it has been put to me, that one should not discuss fantasy in relation to Plath's writing, because it impinges too closely on reality (hers but not only hers), is tantamount to saying that one cannot write about Sylvia Plath.

To write about Sylvia Plath is, inevitably, to raise and confront difficult ethical issues – about the legitimate scope of interpretation; about the rights of literary interpretation to discuss living as well as dead writers; about the difficulty involved in analysing textual figures when these appear to refer to real persons, both living and dead; about how or whether to use material that has been omitted from Plath's published writings, given that to do so can involve an infringement of privacy, but not to do so is to accept uncritically a version of Plath's writing that is not complete, not her own. It is a problem for a writer on Sylvia Plath that she encounters the living as figures or images in Plath's writing, as the writer whom she worked with most closely, and again as the holders of copyright in her work.

As will be seen from Chapter 3, 'The Archive', the literary estate of Sylvia Plath is under the control of Ted Hughes, who has been represented in recent years by his sister, Olwyn Hughes. As a necessary part of the process of publishing this book, they both saw a late draft of the text and made copious and detailed comments. Many of these were both useful and illuminating and have been incorporated into the text. I was happy to make a number of changes where the previously known details of an incident were incomplete, where it was a question of more fully representing their views on the editing of Plath's work, or

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in order to indicate where there was a disagreement between themselves and other people about the history and processes of editing involved. But my overall reading of this editing and of passages omitted from Plath's published writing, and my interpretation of one poem in particular, 'The Rabbit Catcher' in Chapter 4, have been the object of heated and unresolved dispute.

In correspondence with the Hughes's, this book was called 'evil'. Its publisher was told it would not appear. At one point an attempt was made to revoke previously granted permissions to quote from Plath's work. 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'.

It is one of the paradoxes of my interaction with the Sylvia Plath estate that, as the demands on me have become more and more restrictive and impossible to meet, so it has become more evident how distressing the situation is for all those who were, and who become, involved in Plath's work. It is understandable that people who were as close as they to Sylvia Plath should find themselves in strong disagreement with the interpretations of those who comment on her writing. This is perhaps the inevitable result of the way literary analysis can seem, to those who had a lived relation to the writer, to have a purely personal significance or biographical reference that was not intended by the critic and which will not be understood as such by the reader who is not linked to the writer's life in the same way.

It is one thing, however, to acknowledge that difficulty, quite another to acquiesce to requests, or rather demands, to mould my own readings to fit Olwyn or Ted Hughes's gloss on what Plath has to say about her life, or to fit their understanding of the meanings of her literary works. To block literary interpretation on the grounds of special, privileged, involvement or interest is to sever the link between the work and the wider meanings through which

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a culture responds to it and keeps it alive. In this context, what matters is not the boundary between living and dead writers, but the distinction between those writers who live through the responses they give rise to, and those who – for want of such attention – fall into oblivion or merely die.

On the points over which we have failed to agree, it appears that for Ted and Olwyn Hughes there is only one version of reality, one version – their version – of the truth. But how should one respond when one is told that a remark has been lifted out of Plath's journals on the grounds that it is not only 'damaging' but 'untrue'? In fact, I do not suggest that we can, with any certainty, believe either Plath's statement or its repudiation, but that together they confront us with a moment of indecision which in turn generates anxiety – an anxiety that can be productive if we allow it to indicate how uncertain truth can be. My suggestion throughout this book is that we should try, as I believe Plath did constantly in her writing, to stay with that anxiety and not resolve it. Nothing demonstrates more to me the futility of the too hasty resolution than the demand for singular truth which, throughout these negotiations, has been directed to me by the estate of Sylvia Plath.

In one of Ted Hughes's strongest statements about Plath, he wrote that she went straight for the 'central, unacceptable things'. In my reading, Plath regularly unsettles certainties of language, identity and sexuality, troubling the forms of cohesion on which 'civilised' culture systematically and often oppressively relies. My suggestion that this might be the case, specifically in the field of sexuality, has provoked the strongest reactions from the estate. The question then arises – who is to decide the limits of the unacceptable? Who is to decide what it is acceptable for the unacceptable to be?

What follows is one reading of the work of Sylvia Plath, one part of a story that has clearly not come to an end.

March 1991

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Quotations of 'Poem for a Birthday', 'The Rabbit Catcher', 'Little Fugue', and 'Daddy' are from *The Collected Poems of Sylvia Plath*, London, Faber & Faber, copyright Ted Hughes 1965, 1967, 1971 and 1981 by permission of Olwyn Hughes.

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INTRODUCTION

Sylvia Plath haunts our culture. She is – for many – a shadowy figure whose presence draws on and compels. What she may be asking for is never clear, although it seems highly unlikely that she is asking for what she gets. Execrated and idolised, Plath hovers between the furthest poles of positive and negative appraisal; she hovers in the space of what is most extreme, most violent, about appraisal, valuation, about moral and literary assessment as such. Above all she stirs things up. More than any other writer, perhaps, she lays bare the forms of psychic investment which lie, barely concealed, behind the processes through which a culture – Western literary culture – evaluates and perpetuates itself.

Plath wrote a great deal about haunting and ghosts. ‘All the long gone darlings,’ she called them; ‘they get back, though, soon, soon.’ Mostly by means of festive occasions and symbolic events – wakes, weddings, childbirths or a family barbecue – but in fact ‘any touch, taste, tang’s fit for these outlaws to ride home on’. The traffic is two-way: the ghosts ride home, the living are hauled in: ‘How they grip us through thin and thick’. Plath called this poem ‘All the Dead Dears’, and then wrote a short story with the same title, the only title that repeats itself in her work. Mrs Nellie Meehan sees ghosts: ‘Not ghosts, exactly, Dora, but *presences*’, ‘They’re waiting’, ‘They come back’, she says: ‘And so they gossiped gently on, calling up the names of the quick and the dead, reliving each past event as if it had no beginning and no end, but existed, vivid and irrevocable, from the beginning of time, and would continue to exist long after their own voices were stilled.’

At the end of ‘All the Dead Dears’, Nellie is called away by the dead Maisie Edwards, who greets her ‘like a glad hostess who has waited long for a tardy guest’. In Fay Weldon’s novel *Down Among the Women*, there are two characters, X and Y, who are never named. Husband and wife, they are both artists. X leaves Y for Helen. Y dies and then comes to get Helen. ‘Will you join me?’ Y asks. ‘Wait,’ Helen replies, ‘I will be with you soon.’ Calling her

characters Y and X, Weldon both resists and invites the association with Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes. She thereby makes her characters formulaic, the abstract emblems of something about men and women artists and the power struggles between them, of something about the shared destiny of women, of something about repetition and death. More crucially, perhaps, she makes them representative of something about the constraints surrounding the story of Sylvia Plath. She may be endlessly present within the culture, but her presence also seems to open up a rent or gap in the world. The injunction to go on talking about her is matched by an equal injunction not to say too much.

The image of Plath as a ghost requires some qualification. In another of her early poems, 'The Lady and the Earthenware Head', the speaker decides to rid herself of a clay model of her head, but cannot find a place where it will be free of the molestations of birds and boys. She contemplates the ash-heap, but it could be stolen; then she drops it in a mountain lake, but it surfaces, 'lewdly beckoning', out of the water. Finally she resolves to lodge it ceremoniously in the crotch of a willow tree, from where it can survey the world beneath. But this gesture, which saves it, produces a greater crisis than would have followed had it been ill-treated or destroyed. Despite her wrung hands, tears and prayers, the head steadfastly refuses to vanish, refuses to diminish 'by one jot its basilisk look of love'. There is no getting rid of this head. The more she tries to be free of it, the more it returns. The effigy haunts the original. It loves and terrifies the very being it was intended to represent.

This poem adds a crucial dimension to the difficulty of writing about Plath – or rather, it issues a warning. What we are dealing with is, obviously enough, not Plath herself but her representations, her own writing, together with all the other utterances which have come to crowd it – joining in the conversation, as one might say. Often, as we will see, it is technically impossible to separate Plath's voice from those who speak for her (a large part of her writing was published and, more importantly, edited after her death). Plath's writings and the surrounding voices stand in effigy for her, they speak in her name. It is this effigy that haunts the culture. This is of course true of any writer who is no longer living – in fact of any writer, whether living or not. It takes on an added significance in relation to Plath, because the editorial control and intervention

have been so visible, but also because of the intensity with which writing on Plath seems to invest itself in the idea of her person. So bitter have been the quarrels about Plath, it is hardly surprising that at moments it seems as if the effigy, like the earthenware head of her poem, haunts her.

Above all things, Sylvia Plath desired fame. As she put it at one point in her *Journals*: 'it is sad only to be able to mouth other poets; I want someone to mouth me'. There is a well-known fairy story in which a man is granted three wishes, and tormented by the too literal fulfilment of casually expressed desires, he has to use his third wish to undo the baneful effects of the first two. At moments, it feels as if Plath might be in something of the same position. Certainly, with hindsight, she seems to have bitten off more than she could (be expected to) chew. As she put it herself, reviewing a biography of Byron's wife in the *New Statesman* in December 1962: 'a sudden muzz of camp followers and rhetoric had swallowed Annabella'.

It is one of the ironies of Plath's story that she should have so coveted fame, and then received it, come to represent it, so dramatically at its most deadly and perverse. For one of the things Plath surely demonstrates about our general culture is the perverse component (voyeurism and sadism) of public acclaim. If, too, this process can be called deadly, it is because Plath herself has also become a figure for death. Death in the shape of a woman, femininity as deadly – we will see how these two come together in one significant strand of critical appraisal of her work.

It has often been remarked that commentary on Plath tends to split into two antagonistic camps. There are those who pathologise Plath, freely diagnose her as schizophrenic or psychotic, read her writings as symptom or warning, something we should both admire and avoid. Diagnosis of Plath tends to make her culpable – guilt by association with the troubles of the unconscious mind. The spectre of psychic life rises up in her person as a monumental affront for which she is punished. Feminism has rightly responded to this form of criticism by stressing the representative nature of Plath's inner drama, the extent to which it focuses the inequities (the pathology) of a patriarchal world. But in so doing, it has tended to inherit the framework of the critical language it seeks to reject. Plath becomes innocent – man and patriarchy are to blame. More important, psychic life is stripped of its own logic; it becomes the pure effect of social injustice, wholly subservient to the outside world which it

unfailing reflects. Anything negative or violent in her writing is then read as a stage in a myth of self-emergence, something which Plath achieved in her poetry, if not in her life – an allegory of selfhood which settles the unconscious and ideally leaves its troubles behind.

It is, however, hardly surprising that the unconscious and its difficulty has had to be jettisoned by feminist criticism, when we see, in relation to Plath, the extent to which it has been abused. In fact, despite first appearances, those diagnoses of Plath remove the problem of the unconscious even more than the criticism that has come in reply. There is nothing like the concept of a purely individual pathology for allowing us, with immense comfort, to conjure it all away (her problem, not mine; or, talking about danger as a way of feeling safe). For me one of the central challenges presented by Plath's writing has been to find a way of looking at the most unsettling and irreducible dimensions of psychic processes which she figures in her writing without turning them against her – without, therefore, turning her into a case.

But if I do not, at any point in this book, pass judgement on the issue of Plath's pathology, it is also because I do not believe we can take writing as unproblematic evidence for the psychological condition or attributes of the one who writes. Commentaries on Plath give us the measure of this difficulty, precisely in so far as they treat the texts as the person and then disagree so strongly as to what these texts reveal. What we can do, however, is locate the mechanisms of the writing (its process), but the question remains of the relationship which holds between the writing and the life (expression, denial, compensation, to suggest just three). Writing may be a revelation of character, it may even be a form of madness, but for the one who writes, it can equally be a way of staying sane. Daniel Schreber whose memoirs were the subject of a famous case-study by Freud, had a whole delusional system going at the same time as he was a high court judge. It is a truism to say that writing something very nasty can be a way of keeping nice.

Even from inside the space of her writing, Plath offers no singular form or vision on which such a diagnosis could safely alight. From the poems to the stories, to the letters, to the journals, to the novel, what is most striking is the differences between these various utterances, each one contradicting as much as completing the others, each one no less true for the disparity which relates them

and sets them apart. Plath's relentless return in so many different forms to the question of her own subjectivity appears to illustrate first of all that relationship of indirect representation which Freud set at the heart of our attempts to figure ourselves in language or speech. For Freud, the utterance can only ever be partial, scarred as it is by the division between conscious and unconscious – by the gap, but also the mutual interference, between what we choose to say and what is repeatedly excluded from the bounds of our speech.

It is that provisional, precarious nature of self-representation which appears so strikingly from the multiple forms in which Plath writes. What she presents us with, therefore is not only the difference of writing from the person who produces it, but also the division internal to language, the difference of writing from itself. It is then all the more striking that so many critics have felt it incumbent upon themselves to produce a unified version of Plath as writer and as woman, as if that particular form of fragmentation or indirect representation were something which, through the completion of their own analysis of her, they could somehow repair. The frequent diagnoses of Plath seem to me to have as at least one of their effects, if not purposes, that they have transposed into a fact of her individual pathology the no less difficult problem of the contradictory, divided and incomplete nature of representation itself.

Inside her writing, Plath confronts us with the limits of our (and her) knowledge. In this context it becomes more than a commonplace of recent literary analysis to insist in advance that there is no direct access to the writer, that the only thing available for commentary and analysis is the text. We do not know Plath (nor indeed Hughes). What we do know is what they give us in writing, and what they give us in writing is there to be read. In this book, in the analysis of those writings, I am never talking of real people, but of textual entities (Y and X) whose more than real reality, I will be arguing, goes beyond them to encircle us all. It has been objected that writing on Plath is a fantasia with no purchase on, or even interest in, the truth. This book starts from the assumption that Plath is a fantasy. But, rather than seeing this as a problem, it asks what her writing, and responses to it, might reveal about fantasy as such. Far from being an obstacle, fantasy will appear in what follows as one of the key terms through which Plath's writing, and responses to her writing, can be thought.

One of the most striking things about the story of Plath is the way that, despite all of this, it seems so effortlessly to transmute itself into soap opera. On the one hand Plath's writing vanishes into the conditions of its own utterance; on the other she, and those associated with her, seem to come out on the other side with all the compelling reality of the most familiar of family scenes. As Plath put it in relation to a saga not dissimilar to one renowned version of her own: 'Liz Taylor is getting Eddie Fisher away from Debbie Reynolds, who appears cherubic, round-faced, wronged, in pin curls and house robe – Mike Todd hardly cold. How odd these events affect one so. Why?'

The answer to her question may be hidden inside her own description – in those symmetrical images of woman as seductress and as wronged. Soap operas are one of the means of negotiating the stereotypes of the culture. They offer vicarious pleasure and invite moral judgement: sexual narrative as gossip ('so they gossiped gently on . . . as if [each event] had no beginning and no end'), morality as a form of licensed pleasure in itself. The pull of the Plath story is that it calls up a language of victimisation and blame with such force. Pathology, as I have already said, makes her guilty – her tragedy the inevitable outcome of the troubles of her mind. Patriarchy means that man, meaning Hughes or the male sex he stands for, is to blame – the woman internalises, turns against herself, the violence of the world outside. Above all, someone or something has to be responsible for those aspects of negativity and violence that Plath articulated with such stunning clarity in her work. As we watch this pattern unfold, it is clear that the question of guilt, in relation to Plath, is carrying the question of what we can bear to think about ourselves. For in neither of these readings is it acceptable that there might be a component of psychic negativity with no singular origin, which no one will take away for us, for which no one can be blamed. Thus Plath becomes a symptom – or rather, responses to her writing become a symptom – of one part of the cultural repressed (it is not her problem, it is ours).

If Plath is a ghost of our culture, therefore, it is above all because of what she leads that culture to reveal about itself. We say 'he did it'. The proposition doesn't work. But nor does the proposition that she did it all – only – to herself. And the failure of both of these propositions turns them into a question that we have to address to ourselves. Why do we want or try to make them? What form of