

‘Sylvia Plath: An Iconic Life’

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This is an edited transcript of the Hilary Term Weinrebe Lecture, which I delivered remotely on March 2, 2021 at the Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, Wolfson College, Oxford. The lecture offers a personal and scholarly account of the reasons I decided to write a new biography of Sylvia Plath. I review Plath’s popular and academic status as a feminist, confessional, ‘mad’ poet, and offer an alternative way of interpreting her life and work that rejects the pathological approaches of previous biographies. I also recount some of the challenges I encountered over the course of eight years while researching and writing this 1,117-page biography.

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Sylvia Plath (1932-1963) **[PUT IN BIRTH AND DEATH DATES]** is perhaps the best known American woman poet of the twentieth century. Her poems and fiction, especially her 1963 novel *The Bell Jar*, are widely taught in high schools and universities across the English-

speaking world, while her *Journals* and *Letters* constitute one of the most important *Künstlerromane* of a woman writer in any era. Her name is regularly invoked in popular culture, often as shorthand for feminism, confessionalism, or depression, and sometimes all three. Tragically, Plath is also well-known for her death: she died by suicide when she was 30, shortly after the publication of *The Bell Jar* and just a few months after she and her husband, the British poet Ted Hughes, had separated. Plath had suffered from depression since her teenage years, and had attempted suicide once before in 1953. She left behind two small children and a body of work whose legal ownership passed to Hughes, who published much of Plath's most important work after she died.

During her lifetime, Plath was well-known in elite British and American literary circles as a talented writer of poetry and prose, but she never saw the mass success she had always hoped for. The first and only poetry collection she saw published, *The Colossus*, had a print run of just 500 copies. Though it received excellent reviews, it did not win any literary prizes. Plath's novel *The Bell Jar* also received good reviews in the major British papers, but none of them were strong enough to propel the book onto the bestseller list. She had hoped the novel would earn her enough money to finance her newly independent life as a single mother and writer, but in January of 1963 nothing indicated that the novel would go on to sell over three million copies; that her posthumously published poetry collection *Ariel* **[IS THIS OF POEMS? PLEASE STATE WHAT IT IS]** would become one of the most influential of the twentieth century; or that Plath herself would become an international icon.

Indeed, Plath's contemporary iconic status as a feminist, confessional, 'mad' poet probably would have surprised her. These familiar categories need to be questioned, and revised. They do not capture what Tracy Brain has called 'the other Sylvia Plath.'¹ **[WHAT I SHALL DO HERE**

IT TO TRY – DELETE TODAY/] As Jaqueline Rose has pointed out, Plath’s work transcends any monolithic category, as does Plath herself.² Though her poetry and prose hew closely to her own life, she is a master of irony and performance who plays deftly with concepts of biographical truth. Often, her work reflects political, rather than personal, concerns. She is a cerebral, formalist, surrealist writer whose work nods backward to modernism and forward to postmodernism, yet that work is often interpreted as straightforward autobiography—or ‘confession’—in ways that gloss over or ignore its ambiguities. For Plath, craft is as important as truth.

Many times as I was writing this biography, I wondered if I was on a grand fool’s errand. I had read Janet Malcolm’s *The Silent Woman*, which cast a cold eye on Plath’s biographers, and so I was aware that many who had attempted to write Plath’s biography either abandoned the project or had minor breakdowns themselves. This situation was partly a result of practical difficulties working with the Plath estate, which was effectively controlled by Ted Hughes’s sister Olwyn for many years. Both Ted and Olwyn had little regard for aspiring Plath biographers throughout the second half of the twentieth century. Even those who obtained permission to cross the moat, like the late Anne Stevenson, found that they were not necessarily given the keys to the castle. Stevenson had the blessing of the Plath Estate, but she lost authorial control of her 1989 biography, *Bitter Fame*, to Olwyn Hughes, who insisted on portraying Plath in a harsh light **[PUT REFERENCE TO THIS BOOK IN ENDNOTE]**.³ Other aspiring Plath biographers such as Harriet Rosenstein, Lois Ames, and Elizabeth Hinchcliffe abandoned their projects altogether, even after making substantial headway.

I was aware of these failed attempts and the emotional toll they had taken. And then there was my own scepticism, honed over twenty years as an academic working in the field of English

literature, a discipline that eschewed biographical interpretations of a literary work. I was trained, like Plath herself, to look for the meaning of a text in its images, rhythms, and themes—certainly not in the details of an author’s life. If I dared to write this iconic life, how would my own biases affect the telling? Wouldn’t my interpretation be subject to a sort of Heisenberg principle of biography, in which the act of taking the measurement of the life affects the measurement itself? Wouldn’t Plath’s readers be better off perusing her surviving letters and journals rather than reading a literary critic’s interpretation of her life? How would I distill thousands of pages of archival material into one book? How could I convey Plath’s experience of depression and suicide to readers with the necessary intimacy and compassion? And how much space would Ted Hughes take up in Plath’s narrative? I wondered if Janet Malcolm had been right all along—that biography, particularly Plath biography, was simply too full of methodological minefields.

And yet I continued to feel that the drama of Plath’s death had distracted us from the power of her art. It seemed to me that male writers who died by suicide, such as Ernest Hemingway or David Foster Wallace [**NOTE OF INFORMATION ON THESE TWO**], were not as pathologized by their death as Sylvia Plath.⁴ Hermione Lee, Virginia Woolf’s biographer, has made the point that women writers who suffer from mental illness and suicide are often regarded as a ‘psychological case histories first and professional writers second.’⁵ These words are especially true for Sylvia Plath, who has often been pathologized in biographies, television, movies, and magazines. Plath’s suicide provides her critics with an excuse not to take her art seriously—to equate her fame with her death—and, as the critic Janet Badia points out, to label her readers a ‘cult.’⁶ Early reviews set the tone for such reductive characterizations: after Plath’s poetry collection *Ariel* was published in 1965, *Time* magazine called it ‘a jet of flame from a literary dragon who in the last months of her life breathed a burning river of bale across the

literary landscape.’⁷ The *Washington Post* called Plath a ‘snake lady of misery’ in an article entitled ‘The Cult of Plath.’⁸ **[THE POET]** The poet Robert Lowell wrote an introduction to *Ariel* in which he connected Plath’s suicidal tendencies to her poems, while the poetry critic Al Alvarez called her a ‘priestess emptied out by the rites of her cult.’⁹ Ted Hughes, too, sometimes wrote melodramatically about Plath’s dangerous muse, that she was ‘only the flimsy, brittle husk of what was going heavily and fierily on, somewhere out of reach inside her.’¹⁰

I wasn’t surprised by these oracular, supernatural descriptions. We have long regarded male poets as secular prophets touched by fire: think of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, and even William Butler Yeats **[PUT NAMES IN FULL]**. But women poets who tried to claim this lofty mantle, especially in the era before second-wave feminism, often found that their attempts were likened to witchcraft or quasi-occult practices by the male critical establishment. Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton understood the reductive power of this stereotype, and both played with the idea of black magic in their poetry. Sexton even famously compared her speaker to a witch in her best-known poem, ‘Her Kind.’ (Sexton writes, ‘I have gone out, a possessed witch, / haunting the black air, braver at night’, and concludes, ‘A woman like that is not a woman, quite. / I have been her kind.’)¹¹ **[REFERENCE]** Plath had been intrigued by the figure of the Egyptian goddess Isis, and both she and Hughes were fascinated by Robert Graves’s book *The White Goddess*. But the posthumous identification of Plath herself with priestly rites, possession, and witchcraft is at worst sexist and at best patronizing. Plath wrote to a friend in 1954, ‘I am a damn good high priestess of the intellect.’¹² Well before *Ariel*, Plath was already playing with this idea of the woman poet as priestess, and redefining it. Her ironic command of this witchy trope was very clear to me in poems like ‘Lady Lazarus’ and ‘Daddy,’ whose speakers believe that they possess the power to kill men. But not everyone saw the irony. The romantic

characterization of Plath as ‘a priestess emptied out by the rites of her cult,’ combined with her story of depression and suicide, stalled biographical attempts to consider her, in Hermione Lee’s words, a ‘professional writer’ first.¹³ [REFERENCE]

Lee’s words finally galvanized me, and provided the necessary inspiration to believe that writing a new biography of Sylvia Plath—one that would read her life forward as an aspiring writer, rather than backward as a life set on a course for suicide—was a necessary and worthwhile project. I would try to write a book that explored, and hopefully exploded, some of the clichés attached to Plath and her work. I wanted to show how Plath’s writing and life existed in a complex dialogue that made ethical, political, and intellectual demands upon Plath’s readers. And I wanted to remedy the damage done to Plath’s artistic legacy by early critical and biographical portraits that sensationalized her death at the expense of her art. This would be, ideally and paradoxically, a book that helped Plath escape her biography.

I wasn’t necessarily trying to unsettle Plath’s iconic status in my biography because I understood that place was hard-won and cherished by many of her readers. But I also felt that Plath had become a cipher. To some, she was a warrior saint, to others, a fallen angel. I felt her iconic, almost mythic status did not help us get any closer to an understanding of her everyday, lived experience as a writer, daughter, student, wife, and mother. This was the biographer’s more quotidian terrain—closer to archaeology than psychoanalysis. Plath was not, after all, Lady Lazarus, who rises like a phoenix to eat men like air. She was not the daughter who declares ritual murder against her father in ‘Daddy,’ nor the dead woman who is ‘perfected’ in ‘Edge.’¹⁴ Maybe Plath would have been pleased by such identifications. In her poem ‘Ariel,’ the speaker seems to want to become her art, as Yeats desires in ‘Sailing to Byzantium.’¹⁵ But I wanted to tell the story of how Plath created her art, not the story of how she became it.

We are familiar with Plath the bereaved daughter; the asylum patient; the wronged, vengeful wife; the suicide. It is a tale colored by darkness and trauma. When we emphasize this trajectory as the defining story of Plath's life, we miss the other story that hides in plain sight: that of a writer finding and fulfilling her vocation. This is the story of Plath's life I wanted to tell because it is the one she tells so clearly about herself. In her journals and letters, her near constant theme is not depression, but the holy quest to become a writer. Plath's ambition and determination to write eclipses, for me, almost everything else in her life. She never veered from this goal; her literary vocation was her true north. But keeping my focus on Plath's literary trajectory as an artist was not always easy. Sometimes even I found myself falling into what my editor called 'the Plath trap'—that is, reading her work too autobiographically, or using language that subtly pathologized her. I made a mental note to avoid using words like 'obsessed,' 'neurotic,' 'helpless,' 'tragic,' 'fragile,' and 'doomed.' I realized that even the word 'recover,' which was part of my book's original title, was fraught for the way it lionized the biographer at the expense of her subject. It made Plath seem too passive, and ceded control of her narrative to me. I wanted to center Plath's voice and let her tell her own story, in her own words, as much as I could.

I had planned to write a biography of about 500 pages, but I ended up publishing a book double that length. One of the aspects of Plath's personality that I came to appreciate was her ambition to take up space, both physically and intellectually, in a male-dominated world that encouraged women to make themselves small. So I felt it was appropriate that her biography take up space with its three inch spine. We're used to biographies of great men taking up space on the bookshelf. We take for granted that they have earned that space. I see nothing but praise, and rightfully so, for Robert Caro's slow, methodical, five-volume biography of Lyndon Johnson.¹⁶[REFERENCE] Each volume ranges between 500 and 1,000 pages. Surely one of the

greatest and most influential poets of the twentieth-century, male or female, deserves a thorough single volume. But the standards seem higher, somehow, for women. The Pulitzer Prize-winning biographer Caroline Fraser has commented upon the biographical double-standard in which men are praised for their ambition while ambitious women tend to be pathologized, or even shamed.[REFERENCE] Fraser says that writing about ambitious women is especially tricky because their ambition is hidden or, more often, crushed. Indeed, she frames Plath's death itself as a crude shorthand for the limits of female ambition: 'Writing about women who have achieved a modicum of influence can often feel like watching someone on a precipice: One foot wrong, and it's the block, the pillory, or the head in the oven.'¹⁷ Her comments rang true to me. Biographers have been particularly guilty of pathologizing Plath and her desire to write. As Anne Stevenson wrote of Plath in *Bitter Fame*, 'Her gift was for romantic self-aggrandizing . . . Sylvia was trapped in her own story, condemned to telling it again and again to whoever would listen. She was indeed cursed.'¹⁸ Here, one of the most talented, innovative poets of the twentieth century is reduced to a self-aggrandizer, 'trapped' and 'condemned' by her own story. Stevenson's Plath writes out of desperation rather than fulfillment. A more recent biographer wrote that Plath was 'addicted to achievement in the same way an alcoholic is hooked on booze,' while her 'competitive drive' was 'pathological' and stemmed from 'interior hollowness.'¹⁹

I was aware of the potential pitfalls. Helen Lewis recently reviewed the exhibition by the Renaissance painter Artemisia Gentileschi, who is the first woman in the National Gallery's nearly 200-year history to have her own show. Lewis asks, 'When does feminist celebration become patronizing, an implicit silver medal? ... As rarities and exceptions, women are often defined by their biography. Never mind the talent—how do we feel about *her*? Is she good—for a woman? Or good enough to deserve a place in the canon, regardless of her sex?'²⁰ Elizabeth

Bishop, for one, was wary of the silver medal, and once told Robert Lowell that she would ‘rather be called “*the 16th poet*” with no reference to my sex than one of 4 women—even if the other three are pretty good.’²¹ Lewis worries that we demand women artists be ‘good’ in a way that we do not demand of men: ‘inspirations, role models, trailblazers—people worth rescuing—something that is not asked of the lecherous Picasso.’²² But Plath *was* a trailblazer, as both a woman and an artist who helped change the direction of modern poetry. Ignoring that fact seemed worse than calling attention to it. Still, I understand Lewis’s point about feminist recovery’s good intentions, and its limitations. Plath cherished what she called her ‘weirdnesses,’ and I did not want to present her as an airbrushed, feminist saint.²³ It’s that kind of characterization that presumably led an audience member to ask, at my Harvard Book Store reading last fall, ‘Why should men read Sylvia Plath?’

I believe Plath would have been surprised, but pleased, to find herself a feminist icon. She was no stranger to women’s achievement: her mother had a college degree and worked in academic positions at Boston University, while Plath herself was educated at two renowned women’s colleges—Smith College, in the USA **IN THE USA** and Newnham College, Cambridge, in the UK **IN THE UK**—where she was nurtured by prominent female professors. She had read and admired the work of female writers like Virginia Woolf, Sara Teasdale, H.D., Edna St. Vincent Millay, Edith Sitwell, and others. She wrote in her journal that she wanted to write about women’s themes, and to sing a female song. She believed her experience of childbirth and motherhood was important to her creative work. But the culture was against her. Plath came of age in a sexist era when women were legally discriminated against. Meaningful educational and professional opportunities for women were scant, and they were at the mercy of a financial system that made it difficult to obtain loans and other forms of credit. Plath received

mixed messages from her undergraduate alma mater, Smith College, about how ambitious a woman was allowed to be in the age before second-wave feminism. Academic achievement was lauded and encouraged, but the goal of many Smith graduates in the early 1950s, it seemed, was to marry and have children. The American Democratic presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson **[SAY WHO HE WAS – WAS HE AMERICAN PRESIDENT???** **CANNOT REMEMBER]** codified this unspoken mandate when he told Plath's graduating class in 1955 that they should embrace the 'humble role of the housewife' and focus their energies on their husbands' goals. With can openers in one hand and a baby in the other, they were to create a peaceful, disciplined home. 'Once they wrote poetry,' he mused. 'Now it's the laundry list.'²⁴ Stevenson was a liberal Democrat, and his belittlement of women's professional ambitions suggests the larger cultural disregard in which these women's hopes and dreams were held. Indeed, a popular tune at Smith made light of the dilemma: 'You're sharp as a pen point / Your marks are really 10-point, / You are Dean's List, Sophia Smith, / But a man wants a kiss, kid, / He doesn't want a Quiz Kid, / Oh, you can't get a man with your brains.'²⁵

Plath managed to scale some of **OF** the gendered barriers of her time through talent and determination. She won a Fulbright Fellowship to Cambridge University, traveled through Europe, published widely, and embarked upon a creative marriage with a fellow poet, Ted Hughes. She put off having children until she had achieved at least some of her professional goals. After Hughes left her, she wrote poems of fury that accused both her husband and an entire sexist culture of mistreating women. When Lady Lazarus vows to 'eat men like air,' or when Plath ends her famous 1962 poem 'Daddy,' 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through,' her words signaled to a generation of women that she had triumphed over 'the Father' and all that

patriarchy stood for.²⁶ In ‘Stings,’ from which the title of my biography *Red Comet* comes, Plath’s speaker says she has ‘a self to recover, a queen.’²⁷

There is no denying that Plath’s work helped buttress second-wave feminism, one of the great political movements of the twentieth century. After Plath’s death, and in the wake of Betty Friedan’s 1963 *The Feminist Mystique*, Plath’s work—increasingly published in women’s magazines such as *Ms.*, *Redbook*, *McCall’s*, and *Cosmopolitan*—became a feminist rallying cry. Poems like ‘Daddy,’ ‘Lady Lazarus,’ ‘Fever 103°,’ ‘Purdah,’ ‘Three Women,’ and ‘The Applicant’ speak powerfully to issues of gender and power, to say nothing of their stylistic innovations. Whether Plath intended for poems like ‘Daddy’ and ‘Lady Lazarus’ to become veritable anthems of the women’s movement is beside the point. By the time these poems reached a popular, mainstream audience, the personal had become the political.

Yet Plath does not fit neatly into the modern definition of a feminist. Ted Hughes always maintained that she was ‘Laurentian, not women’s lib’—that is, a disciple of D. H. Lawrence’s philosophy of sexual liberation for both men and women.²⁸ He felt she was used as a pawn by feminists for causes she herself would not have supported. Hughes had a point: Plath often remarked to others that she had no intention of becoming what she sourly called a ‘career woman.’²⁹ She was repulsed by the culture of spinsterhood amongst the dons at Newnham, and vowed not to follow the same path. She could be cruel in her letters and poems towards ‘barren’ women, or to those who had made the decision to have an abortion, and she was fiercely competitive with women whose literary achievements mirrored her own. She put her husband’s literary work before hers, and willingly took on the bulk of housekeeping and childrearing. But these behaviors were not so unusual for a white, educated, middle-class American woman in the 1950s. The feminist poet Adrienne Rich had taken on a similar role during her marriage to the

Harvard economist Alfred Conrad before she experienced a rebirth as a feminist activist and lesbian in the 1960s. Later, Rich would think of her years as a housewife and mother as years spent sleepwalking. The impact of second-wave feminism had awakened her. One wonders whether Plath would have reached a similar point had she lived to see the changes wrought by the women's movement. Because for all her outward conservatism, Plath *was* an iconoclast; she refused to abide by the sexist mores of the 1950s dictating that women must choose between a family or a literary life. She wanted it all before the idea of having it all became a feminist catchphrase. She believed in equality of opportunity for women—a basic feminist principle—and was enraged by the sexual double standard of her day. Her poems are some of the first, and finest, in the English language to tackle women's experience, especially motherhood, postpartum anxiety, miscarriage, and childbirth. Indeed, Anne Stevenson called Plath the first great poet 'of childbirth in the language.'³⁰ Plath's poems about motherhood still feel radical to me in an American culture that regularly sanitizes and sentimentalizes the experience.

But Plath's work was not solely limited to women's concerns or a feminist agenda. Her representations of gender and power were groundbreaking and influential, but she is also master of her craft, a true poet's poet. Plath had poetic ambitions from the time she was young, and published her first poem in a Boston newspaper when she was just eight. From then on, she was unstoppable, publishing regularly in her schools' literary magazines and newspapers. She sent out dozens of stories and poems to national magazines during high school, and was finally published in *Seventeen* and the *Christian Science Monitor* before she began college. Eventually she cracked *Harper's*, *The Atlantic*, and, in 1958, *The New Yorker*, which she called her 'Annapurna.'³¹ During these years Plath developed the habits of a professional writer: she kept meticulous track of her work, and when a rejection arrived, she simply sent the piece out to the

next publication on her list. She was a marvel of efficiency and productivity, and generally stoic about her rejections.

Plath had written many poems in a bold, bracing voice as a child and adolescent, but she had tempered **[IS TAMPED A WORD? DO YOU MEAN DAMPED DOWN???**] this voice at Smith, where she became a diligent practitioner of the well-made poem then in vogue. She wrote villanelles and often consulted a rhyming dictionary and a thesaurus as she wrote. Her verses were exquisitely crafted in the style of her poet heroes **[POETS???**] Wallace Stevens and W. H. Auden. But her aesthetic direction began to shift at Cambridge University in 1956 when she met Ted Hughes and his friends, a band of rebel poets tired of the prevailing safe verse of ‘the Movement’ and eager to shock British poetry out of submission. Plath was starting to feel similarly about her own poetry—that it was too timid, too precious. She wrote in her journal in 1956, ‘until I make something tight and riding over the limits of sweet sestinas and sonnets ... they can ignore me.’ She was ready to abandon what she called poems of ‘glib, little smugness.’³² Plath would rediscover her earlier, ‘other’ voice at Cambridge, where she began to embrace a more direct, less genteel style—more W. B. Yeats than Wallace Stevens. Even then she wanted to break out of what she called, in a February 1959 journal entry, her ‘glass caul.’³³

In the spring semester of 1959, when Plath and Hughes were living as freelance writers in Boston, Plath audited Robert Lowell’s creative writing class at Boston University. It was here that Plath met Anne Sexton. In this class, often cited as the birthplace of ‘confessional’ poetry, Plath began to loosen her lines and tackle riskier subjects which she had considered taboo, such as mental illness and suicide. Lowell workshopped parts of his groundbreaking 1959 collection *Life Studies* in this class, and Sexton workshopped some of the poems in her 1960 collection *To Bedlam and Part Way Back*. Lowell and Sexton were important influences, to be sure, but

Plath's work veered in a different direction. Her early poetic successes like 'The Disquieting Muses,' 'The Colossus,' the 'Poem for a Birthday' sequence and 'Electra on Azalea Path' are autobiographical, but 'confess' little. Later poems such as 'Daddy' and 'Lady Lazarus' seem, in W. B. Yeats's memorable phrase, to 'walk naked.'³⁴ [REFERENCE??] But even in these poems, Plath's technique is not so much confessional but modernist; she hints obliquely at personal struggles and vulnerabilities through Classical or mythic scaffolds in the manner of her modernist heroes T. S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, and James Joyce [HAVE YOU REFERRED TO T.S. ELIOT AND JAMES JOYCE BEFORE??? PLEASE PUT NAMES IN FULL.] Plath uses speakers like Lady Lazarus, the murderous Clytemnestra-figure of 'Purdah,' or the Medea-figure of 'Edge' to *distance* herself from her poems. These poems' aesthetic power rest not upon the force of Plath's personal revelations, but her arresting and singular use of myth, irony, allegory, and surrealism. These 'weirdnesses' (as she called them), along with her unforgettable rhymes and meters, are part of what makes Plath's poetry so singular and compelling.

I understand that Plath's life makes a tempting case study for psychoanalytically minded biographers and literary critics. *The Bell Jar* was based on Plath's own breakdown, suicide attempt, and recovery at McLean Hospital, while she drew deeply upon her own psychodrama in poems like 'Daddy' and 'The Colossus.' Indeed, Plath blurred the borders between her life and her work in innovative ways that complicate her biographers' task. Confessionalism is a convenient label, and this movement toward more direct, honest, and personal speech had enormous repercussions for postwar Anglo-American poetry. Plath herself seemed happy to be grouped with Robert Lowell and Anne Sexton [HAVE BOTH BEEN REFERRED TO BEFORE???] in a 1962 interview, where she discussed her admiration for both poets and her embrace of this new 'taboo' aesthetic.³⁵ But reading Plath's poems and novel as straightforward,

autobiographical ‘confession’ trivializes Plath’s artistry because it assumes no ironic separation between Plath and her art.

Plath herself was always suspicious of the confessional impulse. When the poet George Abbe read his work at Smith in 1958, she complained in her journal about his reliance on personal revelations for effect: his poems were ‘about his boyhood, sob. [. . .] As if poetry were some kind of therapeutic public purge or excretion. Ted & I left, disgusted, to go home to our private & exacting demons who demand every conscious and deep-rooted discipline, and work, and rewriting & knowledge.’ She called Abbe a ‘huckster’ and mocked his suggestion that ‘anyone can write.’³⁶ Later, at a dinner party in London in 1961, she discussed confessionalism with the man who coined the term, the critic M. L. Rosenthal. He remembered:

What she was interested in and what she talked about quite a lot was the question of putting yourself right into the poem. And the problem of aestheticizing it, of transcending the material, of getting beyond the personal. We agreed about that: it could be done, it had to be done, it wasn’t worth it unless you get past the personal.³⁷

To eavesdrop on a conversation between Plath and Rosenthal nearly sixty years later, was, for me, an extraordinary experience. Rosenthal’s memory suggests that Plath was well aware of confessionalism’s temptations and dangers. Indeed, the confessional label is particularly dangerous for women who suffered from mental illness, like Plath and Sexton, because it ties their art to pathology and reduces their work to a straightforward or impulsive cry from the heart. Focusing too much on the life, particularly when that life ended in suicide, distracts ‘readerly and critical attention from the poetry’s artfulness’ as Elizabeth Gregory points out.³⁸ When we read

Plath's poems as autobiographical 'confessions,' we miss an opportunity to engage with her ironic self-awareness, her literary sophistication, and her bookishness. As Plath wrote to her friend Phil McCurdy in 1954, 'My bookcases are overflowing—shelves of novels, poetry, plays, with lots of philosophy, sociology & psych. I am a bibliomaniac.'³⁹ Plath, one of the most brilliant students of her generation, was able to draw upon her vast knowledge of Western literature as she composed her own work. Like the modernists before her, Plath's traditional poetic training allowed her to break from a tradition that had—for her—run dry and, as [**THE POET?**] the poet Ezra Pound exhorted his contemporaries, 'make it new.'⁴⁰ [**REFERENCE**].

Let me give you a brief example of what we miss when view Plath's art solely through the lens of her biography. Plath's late poem 'Edge,' dated February 5, 1963, was probably the last poem she wrote. It famously begins:

The woman is perfected.

Her dead

Body wears the smile of accomplishment.

The illusion of a Greek necessity

Flows in the scrolls of her toga.

Her bare

Feet seem to be saying:

We have come so far, it is over.⁴¹

I understand why 'Edge' is often interpreted as a kind of posthumous suicide note, a poem that pushes the confessional genre to the extreme. There is no denying the bleakness, horror, and resignation that underscores this tableau of a dead mother and her children, embodied by the indifferent moon who stares down, sinister and regal, 'from her hood of bone.' And yet this poem is intensely allusive: Plath draws upon Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, the poetry of W. B. Yeats ('He Wishes His Beloved Were Dead'), Sara Teasdale ('I Shall Not Care'), Robert Graves, and D. H. Lawrence. She also draws upon the surrealist art of Giorgio de Chirico, the Italian painter whose work had inspired Plath's earlier poetic triumph 'The Disquieting Muses.' De Chirico had created several paintings of women in togas lying down on slabs in abandoned spaces as trains move in the distance. Plath wrote in her journal about seeing one of these paintings, 'Ariadne,' at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in 1958, and she had written about Ariadne in her adolescent poetry.⁴² Now Plath was revisiting that theme again, speaking through two abandoned Classical heroines, Medea and Ariadne, giving them a voice and making, I think, a devastating point about women, power, and silence.

Elizabeth Hardwick interpreted 'Edge' as extremist performance art: 'when the curtain goes down,' Hardwick once wrote, 'it is her own dead body there on the stage, sacrificed to her own plot.'⁴³ I find Hardwick's statement a grievous mischaracterization of 'Edge,' and all the more puzzling given that Hardwick, as the second wife of Robert Lowell, had a front row seat to the ravages of depression. (Maxine Kumin remembered furiously that Hardwick made a similar remark to her about Anne Sexton: 'Well, of course, she was *so* stagey, she had to kill herself, there was nothing else left for her to do.')⁴⁴ Anne Stevenson chose to end her controversial Plath biography with Hardwick's quote, followed by 'Edge' itself, cementing the notion of the poem as a suicide note. Plath's first biographer Edward Butscher wrote that 'Edge' was Plath's

‘extended suicide note,’ full of ‘narcissistic self-absorption, and ultimate failure.’⁴⁵ Joyce Carol Oates evinced a similar frustration with Plath in her influential 1973 essay, ‘The Death Throes of Romanticism’ in which she made little effort to separate Plath from her speakers, and accused Plath, in certain poems, of reveling in victimhood and spite. Oates mentioned nothing about Plath’s craft in her essay—her use of rhyme, meter, and overall formal technique. She wrote that Plath could not escape her separate, unhappy ‘self,’ an inability that led her to ‘dehumanize people’ in her work.⁴⁶

When we read Plath as merely a confessional poet, without further considering her irony and her allusiveness, we not only trivialize her artistry, we trivialize her political awareness and involvement. The idea that Plath was not a politically engaged person was taken for granted, even by feminist critics, for too long. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar wrote that Plath ‘did not have an explicitly political imagination,’⁴⁷ while Hardwick wrote that Plath had ‘nothing of the social revolutionary in her.’⁴⁸ In the same essay cited above, Oates claimed that ‘Plath exhibits only the most remote (and rhetorical) sympathy with other people’ and that she only wants to ‘define herself, her sorrows.’⁴⁹ This became a common lens with which to view Plath in the 1970s, 80s, and even 90s. Such admonishments are tied, in my opinion, to Plath’s status as a confessional poet because they do not assume a split between the art and the artist. This mischaracterization allowed critics to effectively write Plath off as uninterested in the crises of her day—she is, instead, a navel gazer interested only in herself and her *own* crises.

Recent criticism, particularly Robin Peel’s groundbreaking book *Writing Back: Plath and Cold War Politics*, has shown that Plath *did* engage with the politics of her day. She was raised in a family that taught pacifism, an ideology she embraced all her life. Although her mother was a Republican, Plath herself was a Democrat who was disgusted by hawkish Cold War rhetoric

and McCarthyism. Middle school and high school papers, along with letters to her German pen-pal, reveal her disdain for war and the bomb. In 1950 she published an article, 'Youth's Plea for World Peace,' which she co-authored with a friend, in the *Christian Science Monitor*. The two took a pacifist position, rejecting the logic of the Cold War arms race and arguing for the 'basic brotherhood of all human beings.' They called nationalism a 'dilemma.'⁵⁰ These were radical positions to adopt publicly during the McCarthy era. Plath's public embrace of pacifism was courageous, for in the early 1950s pacifism was a suspect ideology that could earn one a place on an FBI blacklist. Even as Plath outwardly conformed to the norms of the 1950s, she nursed a private scepticism about the direction in which America was heading. In 1951, as a college student, she wrote her most political poem yet, called 'I Am an American,' which mocked her nation's materialist, consumer culture. Americans, she wrote, were 'baptized with Chanel Number Five / In the name of the Bendix, the Buick, and the Batting Average.' She called attention to American hypocrisy and xenophobia: 'We all know that certain truths are self-evident: / That we believe in liberty and justice for all / Like the great green lady with the bronze torch / Lifted beside the door marked 'Members Only.'⁵¹ Plath would become an increasingly passionate Democrat who was crushed when Eisenhower defeated Adlai Stevenson in the 1952 presidential election.

At Smith College, Plath wrote letters and diary entries about her disdain for the 'Red Hunt' and booed Senator Joseph McCarthy when he came to speak on campus. She embedded these political stances into *The Bell Jar*, which she wrote in 1961 but which looked back to her breakdown, suicide attempt, and institutionalization in 1953. Plath is one of the great literary chroniclers of mental illness, but she is also an astute critic of the mental health practices of her era. 'Madness' was a condition Plath explored as well as endured. She wrote scathingly in *The*

Bell Jar about the practices to which she was subjected in the 1950s, from condescending therapy sessions to her botched electroshock therapy. Indeed, the political themes of *The Bell Jar* are hiding in plain sight: Plath begins her novel with a sentence about the looming execution by electric shock of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, who were put to death in 1953 for passing atomic secrets to the Soviets.⁵² [COULD YOU PUT AN ENDNOTE TO SAY WHO THEY WERE ETC.] As Elaine Showalter first suggested, Plath's protagonist, Esther Greenwood, will also suffer electric shock, in the form of electroshock therapy, for her own 'dissidence.'⁵³ Plath weaves these two stories together and connects Esther's 'madness' to the sickness of her warmongering, sexist, racist, and homophobic society. The book is a criticism of the repressions of the Eisenhower era and their particularly stultifying effect upon women as much as it is the chronicle of a breakdown.

Plath was committed to the anti-bomb movement and attended the CND march in London in 1960. She wrote to others in the early 1960s about her anxieties regarding nuclear fallout and her disgust for the American military industrial complex. Some of her best known poems, such as 'Ariel' and 'Lady Lazarus,' were written during the tense days of the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962 and reflect this unrest. Her close friend Elizabeth Sigmund, who eventually became an environmental activist, told me about Plath's passionate interest in politics. After their first conversation in Devon, Plath told her how excited she was to have found what she called a 'committed' woman. Sigmund thought Plath, had she lived, would have joined her on marches and environmental political campaigns.⁵⁴ Sigmund's feeling echoes what another close friend from Plath's childhood and adolescence, Perry Norton, told me about her strong commitment to liberalism and pacifism.⁵⁵ We will never know what might have been. Still, if we bother to look beyond the confessional label, much of Plath's work cries out against injustice. Plath may not

have been running political committees like Adrienne Rich, but that does not mean she was apolitical. Plath was busy raising two young children, running a household, and acting as Hughes's agent and secretary. She spent nearly all of her precious free time writing. As Linda Wagner-Martin has written, 'To have written both *The Bell Jar* and her later poems surely speaks of a kind of outright defiance of societal norms.'⁵⁶ In the face of immense societal pressure to make herself small, and to sacrifice her literary ambitions to her children and husband, writing poetry and fiction was itself a political act.

In *The Bell Jar*, Esther Greenwood manages to write her own story despite her troubled history. She has made herself the subject in a world that prefers to see women as objects; her pain and struggle are buoyed by humor and wit. Plath suggests, in the end, that Esther's ability to control her narrative, and her destiny, is a triumph. When I think about the novel's ending now, I wonder how Plath would feel about the way I've told her story. Would she think I've hit the mark, or that I've overshot by a mile? The best I can hope for, I think, is to land somewhere between. As T. S. Eliot writes in *Four Quartets*, 'There is only the trying.'

¹ See Tracy Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath* (Harlow, UK: Longman/Routledge, 2001).

² See Jacqueline Rose, *The Haunting of Sylvia Plath* (London: Virago, 1991).

³ See Anne Stevenson, *Bitter Fame: A Biography of Sylvia Plath* (London: Penguin, 1989; 1998).

⁴ Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) and David Foster Wallace (1962-2008) were both prominent American writers at the time of their suicides.

⁵ Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 128-29.

⁶ See Janet Badia, *Sylvia Plath and the Mythology of Women Readers* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011).

⁷ ‘The Blood Jet Is Poetry’, *Time*, June 10, 1966, 118-20. 118.

⁸ Webster Schott, ‘The Cult of Plath’, *Washington Post Book World*, Oct. 1 1972, 3.

⁹ A. Alvarez, *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1971; New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 46.

¹⁰ Ted Hughes, ‘Sylvia Plath and Her Journals’ in *Winter Pollen: Occasional Prose* (New York: Picador, 1995), 177-190. 181.

¹¹ Anne Sexton, *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1960), 21.

¹² Peter K. Steinberg and Karen Kukil, eds., *The Collected Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 1* (New York: HarperCollins, 2018), 781.

¹³ Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*, 128-29.

¹⁴ Sylvia Plath, *Collected Poems*, ed. Ted Hughes (New York: HarperPerennial, 1981; 1992), 272.

¹⁵ In ‘Sailing to Byzantium’, Yeats writes, ‘Once out of nature I shall never take / My bodily form from any natural thing, / But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make / Of hammered gold and gold enamelling.’ *The Collected Poems of W. B. Yeats*, Richard J. Finneran, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 194.

¹⁶ See Robert Caro’s four-volume series, *The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (*The Path to Power* (1982); *Means of Ascent* (1990); *Master of the Senate* (2002); and *The Passage of Power* (2012)), (New York: Alfred A. Knopf). The fifth volume has not yet been published.

¹⁷ Caroline Fraser, ‘On Robert Caro, Great Men, and the Problem of Powerful Women in Biography’, *Lit Hub* (16 May 2019), <https://lithub.com/on-robert-caro-great-men-and-the-problem-of-powerful-women-in-biography/>

¹⁸ Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, 22.

¹⁹ Andrew Wilson, *Mad Girl’s Love Song: Sylvia Plath and Life Before Ted* (New York: Scribner, 2013), 39; 89.

²⁰ Helen Lewis, ‘Isn’t She Good—For a Woman?: How the feminist passion for Artemisia Gentileschi’s life story risks overwhelming her artistic talent’, *The Atlantic* (10 January 2021), <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2021/01/feminist-rediscovery-artemisia-gentileschi-uk-national-gallery/617327/>

²¹ Thomas Travisano and Saskia Hamilton, eds., *Words in Air: The Complete Correspondence Between Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2010), 702.

²² Lewis, ‘Isn’t She Good—For a Woman?’

²³ Karen Kukil, ed. *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath, 1950-1962* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 520-21.

²⁴ Adlai Stevenson, ‘A Purpose for Modern Women’, *Women’s Home Companion* (Sept. 1955): 29-31. Also available at https://wnorton.com/college/history/archive22sources/documents/ch32_04.htm

²⁵ Quoted in Margaret Shook, 'Sylvia Plath: The Poet and the College', *Smith College Alumnae Quarterly* 63.3 (April 1972): 4-9; 7.

²⁶ Plath, *Collected Poems*, 247; 224.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 215.

²⁸ Ted Hughes to Aurelia Plath, 12 Jan. 1975, MSS 644, Rose Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

²⁹ Steinberg and Kukil, eds., *The Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 1*, 1084.

³⁰ Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, 234.

³¹ Plath often used this phrase to describe *The New Yorker* in her letters to others.

³² Kukil, ed., *Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 207-08.

³³ *Ibid.*, 470.

³⁴ Yeats ends his poem, 'A Coat,' with the lines 'For there's more enterprise / In walking naked.' Yeats, *Collected Poems*, 127.

³⁵ Sylvia Plath interview with Peter Orr in Peter Orr, ed., *The Poet Speaks: Interviews with Contemporary Poets* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1966), 168.

³⁶ Kukil, *Journals of Sylvia Plath*, 335.

³⁷ Harriet Rosenstein, interview with M. L. Rosenthal, 1971-73, MSS 1489, Rose Library, Emory University, Atlanta, GA.

³⁸ Elizabeth Gregory, 'Confessing the body: gendered poetics' in *Modern Confessional Writing: New Critical Essays*, Jo Gill, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 33-49. 41.

³⁹ Steinberg and Kukil, eds., *Letters of Sylvia Plath, Vol. 1*, 726-27.

⁴⁰ Ezra Pound first uses this phrase in his translation of *Da Xue*, which he titled *Ta Hio: The Great Learning, Newly Rendered into the American Language*, published as a University of Washington Bookstore chapbook in 1928. He later chose the phrase *Make It New* for a book of essays published by Faber & Faber in 1934. For more on the history of this phrase, see Michael North, 'The Making of "Make It New" in *Guernica* (15 Aug. 2013), <https://www.guernicamag.com/the-making-of-making-it-new/>

⁴¹ Plath, *Collected Poems*, 272.

⁴² See 'To Ariadne, Deserted by Theseus', *Letters Home*, Aurelia Plath, ed. (London: Faber & Faber, 1976; 1000), 36.

⁴³ Elizabeth Hardwick, quoted in Stevenson, *Bitter Fame*, 298.

⁴⁴ Nancy K. Miller, ed., 'Remembering Anne Sexton: Maxine Kumin in Conversation with Diane Middlebrook', *PMLA* 127.2 (2012): 292-300. 299.

⁴⁵ Edward Butscher, *Sylvia Plath: Method and Madness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976), 360.

⁴⁶ See Joyce Carol Oates, 'The Death Throes of Romanticism: The Poetry of Sylvia Plath', *Southern Review* IX (July 1973), 501-522, <https://celestialtimepiece.com/2015/11/24/the-death-throes-of-romanticism-the-poetry-of-sylvia-plath/>

⁴⁷ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, Vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 297.

⁴⁸ Elizabeth Hardwick, 'On Sylvia Plath', *New York Review of Books*, Aug. 12, 1971, 3-5.

⁴⁹ Oates, 'The Death Throes of Romanticism', <https://celestialtimepiece.com/2015/11/24/the-death-throes-of-romanticism-the-poetry-of-sylvia-plath/>

⁵⁰ Sylvia Plath and Perry Norton, 'Youth's Plea for World Peace', *Christian Science Monitor* (16 Mar. 1950).

⁵¹ Sylvia Plath, 'I Am An American', Plath MSS II, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

⁵² Julius (1918-1953) and Ethel (née Greenglass) Rosenberg (1915-1953) were American citizens who were convicted of passing details about America's nuclear program to the Soviet Union in an act of espionage. After a trial in March 1951, they were sentenced to death. Despite outcry by international artists and intellectuals including Pablo Picasso, Albert Einstein, and Jean-Paul Sartre, they were both electrocuted on July 19, 1953 at Sing Sing Correctional Facility in New York City.

⁵³ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987), 218.

⁵⁴ Interview with author, Cornwall, UK, 2016.

⁵⁵ Interview with author, Auburndale, Massachusetts, 2012.

⁵⁶ Linda Wagner-Martin, *The Bell Jar: A Novel of the Fifties* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1992), 6.