

The Bee Poems : Plath's Desire to Recover a Self

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Abstract:

Plath wrote five Bee poems which were titled "Bees" and conceived of as a sequence in October 1962. They are unified by their subject matter, bees and beekeeping, and by their five line stanza pattern, though each poem works in its own unique variation of the general theme and form. They reveal a concern with self-assessment and redefinition, both personally and poetically and proceed by scrutinizing relationship between the speaker and her world. The sequence moves from community to solitude as the speaker settles her relations with others and with her own former selves. This research article aims to read the Bee poems as a parable of female self-assertion or narrative rite of rebirth, affirming the integrity of the creative self, and thus furnishing an alternative, more hopeful ending for Plath's career.

In Plato's *Ion*, great Greek philosopher Socrates suggests an account of poetic inspiration that establishes a strong relationship between bees and poets. Immortal poets according to Socrates "Recite all that splendid poetry not by virtue of a skill, but in a state of inspiration and possession."² If we take this statement for granted, and try to examine the poets from this point of view, we find that they are "not in control of their sense."³ They collect their poetry "from honey- spring"⁴ as if flying in air like bees. In order to support his idea Socrates goes on to say, "A poet is a light thing, and winged and holy, and cannot compose before he gets inspiration and loses control of his sense and his reason has deserted him. No man, so long as he keeps that, can prophesy or compose"⁵. If we turn towards history to justify his statement, we find that this notion in the honey bee as something holy is very common. Honey having the idealistic qualities, is food for gods, but at the same time eaten by poets as well as prophets. As a result of it, holiness is expressed by itself in the work of poets. So, the finest poems according to Socrates are composed due to "divine dispensation" being the result of "divine power".⁶ A poet duly encouraged becomes a channel, writing poems unconsciously as a bee produces honey.

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²² T. Saunders (Ed. & trans.), "Plato *Ion*", in *Early Socratic Dialogues* London: Penguin, 1987, p 53.

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ *ibid*

²⁵ *ibid*

²⁶ *ibid*

Plath would have known about this comparison either through her discourse with her Cambridge teacher Mr. Krook who himself in later time did declare "Plato was indeed the central figure in our discussions; we seemed to linger on and on over Plato, doubtless at the expense of the other moralists"²⁷, or from her father Mr Otto, who in his professional life was an entomologist and the author of "Bumblebees and Their Ways". But from whatever source she got the idea, she was greatly influenced by it and in her five poems about the way of bee keeping in "Ariel", Plath tried to recover a self by surveying the different functions of power within the apiary. The tremendously organized, self-activating hive acts as her dummy for imagining mortal experience by re-scrutinizing power in its many expressions as in seller, keeper or worker- drudge, or in its surprising absence.

Plath expresses her most ultimate and aspiring declaration about passivity, in her five poems about the art of bee keeping. She puts forward the idea that the absence of authorized power is a shape of power and rule, not simply a socially alleged characteristic. She does keep her discussion restricted in only few relationships and realities as the beekeeper's incompetent authority over apiary, the cheated workers and virgins and the regal imprisoned, that naked aged queen in hiding whose fruitful reign over the hive has come to an end, but in spite of it, she is still able to remain the centre of activity in and outside the colony. Plath's centre of attention always remains on the ambiguity of the queen; while she goes on to survey the idea of power. Through this contradictory sign of power Plath queries the incredible position of the heroine in the remarkable class of queen bee, and therefore the difficulties of a female artist because the queen's being stands for a kind of feminicide, a two- edged homage to individuality best narrated by the workings of apiculture.

It is very much clear to the beekeeper that the world of the queen is a single minute of extreme magnificence encircled by sacrifice- she has sacrificed daylight, a voice in main hive decisions, as, swarming, freedom of flying, collecting the nectar from the flowers, even signifying unspecified amount of strength in the matter of her personal life or death --everything only for her desired prison of sexual reproduction. Her position is misleading, the actual mind strength and the professional unity of the hive dwell in the cooperation of thousands of short- lived workers who shrink away in fear in their camouflage of ordinariness. The queen, a sign of equivocal attainment, comes to be the main means through which Plath explores the contrary working of power and the proportions of the poetic self that might be won back in the artistic operation.

From the point of view of the speaker the five bee poems present a bend of growth in their dramatic movement from robust investigation of denials inborn in power ("The Arrival of the Bee Box, The Bee Meeting", and "Stings") and at last to a hold of a new approach of power ("Wintering", and "The Swarm").

²⁷ D. Krook, "Recollection of Sylvia Plath ; in E Butscher" (ed) *Sylvia Plath : The Woman and the Work* (Dodd : Mead and Co., 1977).

“The Bee Meeting”, the first of the October bee poems is a long monologue presenting an enigmatic ritual of passage. Though the actual reason is never clearly expressed, we come to know from the description of the speech-maker that it is an assembly of the village people who drive out the bees into the open by filling its hive with smoke and then collect the honey. They make the maiden bees to move to another hive in order to stop them from murdering the aged queen and they also become successful in this way to establish a new hive colony. A young girl is escorted by the village people through different stages of an inauguration rite where the speech-maker’s unawareness and the ambivalent imagery are considered to propose and maintain the life-death ambivalence occasion happening.

What is more significant than either the true situation or our step by step finding of it is the poem’s centre of attention, which is on the speaker’s passionate scope and her implicit recognition with the queen, both central to the poem’s meaning. The actual power of the poem lies in the speaker’s impotent unawareness about location, time, direction and occasion, all the corporeal and abstract actualities of the rite: “Who are these people at the bridge to meet me? (1).....why did nobody tell me?”(4). Her disingenuousness: “I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?”(6) and her fright of equability: “a black veil moulds to my face, they are making me one of them”(22) -- swift recurrent queries that makes the heart of the poem. Since she feels bound and directed by the village professionals, her security is to reduce herself in a deed of intellectual importance, willing her own personal activity in the equivocal occasion: “I cannot run, I am rooted, and the gorse hurts me(31)..... If I stand very still, they will think I am cow parsley”(39). Her desire for inertia acts as her only response to the rector, sexton and the midwife – who simply observe the occasion and applause, one another in ceremonial signs of acceptance.

In the whole poem, the emphatic quarries of the innocent maiden acts in different ways. They point out at first that someone is moving through and taking part in an occasion. They change the centre of interest from the end to the action of exposing. Coming across the form of the total occasion unexplained, the maiden feels rising fear as the heaviness of each item join sentimentally with her. “Is it some operation that is taking place”(26) she enquires, or are all these plateaus preliminary to becoming involved in bee manners? Does the progress make a connection to the bean field to the “shorn grove” the circle of hives, and at last to the vacant chambers – an enforced social rite of conventionality or are we facing the unhurried eradication of the final operation?

The queries of the girl also bear a very effective tension in imagery, placing in front of us at the same time the ambivalence between life and death, between technical functioning and magnificent life. The natural images along with the surgical imagery become more ambivalent. They are funny yet fatal. Midwife, rector and sexton gather into a group, “nodding a square black head” (13). The rector, who officiates at dying as well as delight, makes friendship with the midwife and the sexton at the time of the conventional

function, the three of them covered as ominous, depersonalized look alike. Colourful nature mixes with all that is disinfectant infertile:

Strips tinfoil winking like people,
Feather dusters fanning their hands in a sea of bean flowers,
Creamy bean flowers with black eyes and leaves like bored hearts. (16--18)

Delicate white cheesecloth is put forward opposite the black face coverings. The “milkweed silk” of white clothing suggests a hospital shift or a garment cut menacingly from neck to knee.

To keep the life – death ambivalence going, even the technical description of beekeeping acts contradictorically. To prevent the death of the queen, the virgins are moved to another hive by the village people. A natural calamity namely “smoking out” is initiated in order to keep the future of the hive free from danger. As the smoke bounds the bees to come out from hiding, finding their death knocking at the door, it appears to the workers to be “the end of everything”. Yet, for the queen, the smoking out is a totally new, if complicated, personal liberty: “she is very clever/ She is old, old, old, she must live another year and she knows it” (43--44).

In the poem, the conventional idea of power is contradictory, correlative and at best, dubious. The professionally qualified person to perform the act of this enigmatic performance is presented as a science – fiction character, a funny, “apparition in a green helmet/ Shining gloves and white suit” (28--29). Not only that, the noble minded village people are totally incompetent and awkward. The speaker, who has no gloves and at the same time is bare, is hailed by the chief priest of conduct. Their apparels struggle violently against their identities and allow them to remain looking as worn out knights with no lilt in sight: “Everybody is nodding a square black head, they are knights in visors, / Breastplates of cheesecloth knotted under the armpits”(13--14). Corporeal strength is weakened. Their baffling loss of identity is miserable proof of the necessity for united disguise. In complete agreement in their lack of success to make the most rudimentary discriminations between life and death, these people do a witch hunt through the deluded idea of their self achievement.

The dominant strength of the poem lies in the cunning queen bee, strong in her tendency to escape. She provides evidence in favour of her cunning nature by turning down to make her visible, either to keep away from a duel with the young virgins or to manage to avoid some haphazard destiny from the villagers. To the queen, power is an outlook, a medium of understanding life and death, the well – known and the terrible at the same time. She uses the visible clearly for her own advantage from her view point of detachment. Her destiny lies in the hands of other people corporeally. Mentally she is left untouched, her mind and at the same time her body “sealed in wax”. In the same way, the speaker, worn out from the boredom of unawareness, fright and unanswered queries- decides on inertia. In spite of her outward conventionality, she is left as “a gullible head untouched by their (bees) animosity” (40).

The poem's strange fear is that the relationships between the queen in her sexuality and the maiden never comes to be more open than the final questions "Whose is that long white box in the grove, what have they accomplished, why am I cold?"(55). In spite of that, the two – edged imagery and the speaker's incapability heightens the identification. The queen as well as the speaker are mentally revolutionists , yet corporeally puppets, the queen at the leniency of adventurous young virgins and the village people; the speaker surrounded by workers on their "hysterical elastics" as a well as by village elders. The queen avoids all strength of visible power by her cleverness. In the same way, the speaker is bodily inactive, but awake at every moment of the dramatic stakes of life and death:

I am exhausted, I am exhausted--
Pillar of white in a blackout of knives.
I am the magician's girl who does not flinch. (51--53)

In contrast to the innocence of the first poem, "The Arrival of the Bee Box", the second poem of this sequence, can be described as a dull study of reasonable control, of the boastful statement of possession of the vulgar corporeal force that can turn down, slay or simply unlock "I ordered this, clean wood box / Square as a chair and almost too heavy to lift"(1--2). Presuming the power of the bee beekeeper – maestro, the speaker has ordered a full box of immature workers and discovered her lined with liability for their living. "Tomorrow I will be sweet god, I will set them free" (35), she declares. Nevertheless, she is deluded because of her unstable allegorical god like position that displays her autocratic power. The speaker is totally in control of the bees. As she becomes more and more bewitched with their liveliness and incomprehensible noise, she deserts her alleged pose of the power. She is enticed to visualize different ways to get rid of the fundamental yet fatal threat:

I have simply ordered a box of maniacs
They can be sent back
They can die, I need feed them nothing, I am the owner. (23--25)

Once more, a fatal liveliness appears to cast shadow over any effort to comically reduce the components of the risky bee box: the box is too full of "maniacs" yet they are satisfied for the time being, they scramble strongly with a "swarmy feeling", but still puts forward decomposition "African hands / Minute and shrunk for export" (13--14); decreased to a Roman crowd babbling Latin, they are alarmingly foreign.

Whatever affirmation of authority has been set in the tone, the imagery cut away the underside of it. As her boldness expands, her real power becomes gradually less certain. Terror really causes her step by step inertia and obliteration. She madly clambers the boundaries between nature and herself in a whole resistance of the maestro's authority:

I wonder if they forget me
If just undid the locks and stood back and turned into a tree
There is the laburnum, its blond colonnades,
And the petticoats of the cherry. (27--30)

At last, her magnificent determination to play God is weakened by the liveliness of the female workers. Probably it is this idea of the bees' united spirit that causes the understated inquisitive promise: "The box is only temporary" (36).

After she identifies the queen's detachment, a young lass dramatically finds herself in relation with this contradictory sign of apathy. Small scale, unseen life satirically ridicules the power of possession. The speaker sums up her development in "Stings", a poem that heart to the potential drama of the bee sequence.

A scapegoat god whose existence in the poem served only voyeurism has escaped from the poem. He is even less competent than the "maestro" father, the "imaginary god" who is the possessor of the bee box, or the death / life professionals who carry out the "Bee Meeting" rite. Here the speech – maker gradually puts on the character of the beekeeper, honey – labours and the queen in a dramatic investigation of their duties. "It is almost over / I am in control" (31--32), she asserts midway through the system of taking in and then turning down many slaves. The remark is critical and unites the aesthetic and scientific levels of acquaintance in the poem as well as in the bee sequence: the speech – maker communicates us from the literal level of "sweet" bargaining for honey, through the same automated accumulation of it by labourers and in the end, to the queen's dominant inertia, her last conquest.

"Stings" the next poem of the sequence starts with the speech – maker employed in that easy bargaining system of interchanging honey for clean combs. But all on a sudden brood cells are found "grey as fossils of shells" by her. This short conflict with quietness causes her painful queries about the metaphysics of being: "Is there any queen at all in it? (15)" As soon as this question ends, she moves rapidly to the fictitious character of workers standing in a "column of unmiraculous woman". Their "scurry", their happy automated being, pays no attention to a life of the mind. The speaker's relation to these "industrious virgins" is her own honey – machine, the remover:

It will work without thinking
.....
To scour creaming crests
As the moon, for its ivory powders, scours the sea. (34--37)

Unlike collecting honey from the "open cherry, the open clover", obtaining honey from the cells is a dull, derived system. The speaker's "strangeness" can be slight and most likely to disappear, but it is true without any doubt, she is not a worker. Worker bees are deluded without difficulty in their unaware activity of looking for honey. Only too late they come to realize their own deceit as occurred with the poem's intruder:

The bees found him out
Moulding onto his lips like lies
Complicating his features. (48--50)

Though the bees use their stings to hide their identity, the cost they are to pay is their life itself, as honey bees face ultimate death after they sting.

The speaker understands – from the confusing third person and from the easily influenced workers – that no one, nothing is worth giving up one's life for:

They thought death was worth it, but I
Have a self to recover, a queen.
Is she dead, is she sleeping?
Where has she been,
With her lion – red body, her wings of glass? (51--55)

The closing image of the recovered queen forms the centre of the bee sequence. The long time hiding self, now apparent, is an astonishing victory of denials, while almost all the critics identify the significance of Plath's relationship with this exposed, "plushless" queen, they yet demand that it is apparent only in death if ever, that the queen, the public face will regain her unparalleled self.

However, it cannot be said that death is the saviour of her unparalleled character. It is a peculiar networking of that fundamental denial and the rite, visualized deaths. Such denials have been at the very centre of the life – death imagery in all parts of all the bee poems and come to be a climax here in this retrieval. Does she have any excellence? A resurrection leading to death? A political exorcising of husband or father or home life or a victory over the male "to whom the false self has been servile?" The movement through different characters forms the centre of the sequence, now acted within the microcosm. "Stings" has paved the way for the self styled queen of denials. The official approach, found in easy exchange and in the voyeur god of "Stings" has been deserted.

Similar to many of Plath's subsequent high spirited poems, "Stings" shows an ambiguity that presents the resurrected queen image in a more practical, more believable way. The feminicide of the queen is implied in not only in her activities but also in her constant double edged imagery. Queen-ship is a dilemma where the exceptional class bears with it the warning of fossilization. The hive murdered the queen by burying her power in its closed brood cells. As a result of it she turns to be a barely defined fertile sign and endured a kind of death-in-life, the feminicide danger of "specialness". Now, however, the queen is,

Flying
More terrible than she ever was, red
Scar in the sky, red comet
Over the engine that killed her –
The mausoleum, the wax house. (56--60)

It can be said without any hesitation that, she is, no antiquarian replica coming out from “wormy mahogany”. Imagery of excellence amalgamates with indications of illness, insecurity with cruelty, to mould a surprisingly flexible and energetic queen. She defeats and at the same time identifies restrictions.

After the queen’s successful flight over “the mausoleum” in “Stings”, the workers are greatly applauded for their minimum existence in “Wintering”. “It is they who own me” (19), the keeper declares about the workers who scarcely cling to, so slow that they are scarcely recognizable. They own the beekeeper by means of their utter power of knowing how to exist, and how to scale survival down in relation to wintry restrictions. They live on natural factors, the practice of sponging hums and not only that; they even change the deceits of conventional control into life nourishment. The sugar indication of the blend of life and death, that feeds the bees at the time of the long winter seems to be white snow in which they entomb their dead.

A misleadingly deep capability works as a ruling power in the dark hibernaculum “At the heart of the house” (7). The cursory toil of taking out honey from the hive has not made the beekeeper ready for the affairs within the repression room. After beginning brag “this is the easy time, there is nothing doing. / I have whirled the midwife’s extractor, / I have my honey” (1--3), the speaker comes across a increasing terror that her power is neither profound nor inclusive enough to clutch so much sweetness with so much deadly decomposition. The bee keeper is no longer a suitable partner for this inactivity that she was for the perplexing liveliness entombed in the box in “The Arrival of the Bee Box”:

This is the room I have never been in.
This is the room I could never breathe in.
The black bunched in there like a bat,
No light
But the torch and its faint
Chinese yellow on appalling objects –
Black asininity. Decay.

Possession. (11--18)

Unafraid so “rid of the man now”, these bees, all of whom are female, create a life for themselves, “Wintering in a dark without window / At the heart of the house” (6--7). What is the reason behind it? Because unlike the self sacrificed keeper, whose capability is externally directed, these female bees are independent. Their competence to understand, receive, and express the actuality of the interior conditions is without any doubt as determined as that “woman, still at her knitting, / At the cradle of Spanish walnut, / Her body a bulb in the cold and too dumb to think”(43--45). Implied in the poem’s concluding seasonal renewal is reasonable analysis of the keeper’s dead power that misapprehends inwardness.

The beekeeper is obsessed neither by brutality nor disregard, but by those who unitedly survive death, fraud, cold and magnificent anticipation. At last these hardworking labours “are flying”. It is they who “taste the spring” (50).

From applaud for minimum activity in “Wintering”; Plath goes on to think about the historical predicaments of imaginative against corporeal power in “The Swarm”. She mockingly states that “how instructive this is” (46), as she comes to see the prank of the human being with shooter who tries to knock a lively hive. Corporeal, self protective desire and idealistic, united dreams remove the effect of each other within the poem. By reciprocal deceit and false impression, both are diminished to “The white busts of marshals, admirals, generals / Worming themselves into niches” (44--45) as white larva growing in hive cells.

It would come into view that because the efficient man with the shooter and “asbestos receptacles” for hands has the ability to tumble dream to simple realities, or shoot down fancy hive into “cocked straw hats”, his power is winning “Pom! Pom! They fall / Dismembered, to a tod of ivy” (37--38). Though he can have corporeal strength and safe guard grasp, his gluttony for honey, his scorns for bees and at the same time his fright of the stings causes a weak self – defence: “They would have killed me”(55). In this misapprehension of the bees crowded designs, he is aware that “seventy feet up” is beyond his control and of course he exercises remedial force:

The dumb, banded bodies
Walking the plank draped with Mother France's upholstery
Into a new mausoleum
An ivory palace, a crotch pine. (47--50)

“The Swarm” is deluded in different ways also. Escaping to their “black pine tree”, they misunderstand a shooter for a thunder. As a result of it they become the sufferer of their own misapprehension. The united mind is a victim to the desire of a Napoleon with his strategy for the “charioteers, the outsiders, the Grand Army” (39). Their utter “notion of horror” makes them to sting the person with the shooter as he becomes a menace to their projects. This kind of action costs the bees not only their lives but also overemphasizes their lack of success to receive actual bounds.

The background of Napoleonic history becomes the centre of attraction to the poem that acts as a to deduce both the gunman's sole will to power and the swarm's united false impression of magnificence. The bee itself, a civil figure of harmony in the sixteenth century and a personal symbol for Napoleon, is utterly scorned by this imagery. Both of these two sorts of power are derived; both of them are depending on some other person or force for meaning. Of the so called informative features of the poem, it can be said that from Plath's personal great demand to feel real, to be mortal, she can see the Napoleonic power to be great through hate with irony. These cultural allusions act to bring about a spiritualistic gap in the poem. They deflate conquests, dreams, envies that can “open the blood”, gluttony, power and even expels, turning them in to no more than a

net of united frauds. It can be said that there is something mock – epic about Napoleon’s victories that diminished arguing bees, “a flying hedgehog, all prickles,” or to a “man with asbestos gloves” practicing his shooter on bees in a tree. “Elba, Elba, elb on the sea”, the speaker choruses in anagrammatic fun and games emphasizing the collapse of all magnificent aims “knocked into a cocked straw hat” of a hive. This jeering contains the practical gunman who believes he is more genuine than the bees:

Shh! These are cheese people you play with,
Still figures of ivory.
The mud squirms with throats,
Stepping stones for French bootsoles.
The gilt and pink domes of Russia melt and float off
In the furnace of greed. Clouds, clouds. (11--16)

Depending on the role of the power within the ranking of the apiary, Plath has expressed a new appraisal for inertia in every part of her poetic exploration, and most distinctly on the reciprocal relationship of the aged queen, the beekeepers and the workers who are experts in minimum existence. Plath has come to realize that the power of passivity is contradictorily, one of the best potential for modern women. Such desertion of influence as an elegant model, is an idea that can be described in this way that, in modern time the authorised approach is no longer the approach of primal, which is more than skilful assertion. Simultaneously, the exercise of the sensitivity is not prominent in the most appealing writing by female now. The temperament of the age is such that demands of right are now probable to appear absurd.

Inertia re-evaluated as a shape of power in the bee sequence, is strikingly different from the female nature described by Cynthia Ozick⁸. According to her, the modern feminist approach of setting apart a woman characteristic – a sort of volitional caution – is truly directed to the same absolutist end as the old antagonistic, biologically based self – inspiration. She also goes on to say that, Thurber once upon a time composed a story that dealt with a bear who leaned so far towards the back that he ended up by dropping down on his face. Presently we are bearing patiently a feminism so far forward into new truths that it has appeared at the end at a set of ideas inseparable from the most age – encrusted, benighted and putting in prison antifeminist ideas.

Again we come to see Plath turning down the socially resolute truth of apathy as feebleness. Instead of it, in the bee sequence she dispenses to apathy a convinced value of choice, not of a set of social circumstances. The most unforgivable deceit according to Plath -- in the queen bee – is the action of only contributing to one’s nature. Plath always keeps her strong control over the multi – coloured slaves that she surveys in the action of attempting to comprehend the boundaries of conventional power and the task of apathy.

²⁸ Cynthia Ozick, *Plath and Her Woman*. (Faber and Faber Limited, 1974)

For her, apathy comes to be an analytical means of solving problems, never, so completely yet briefly expressed in her bee sequence.

As she curves out a contemporary value for denial, she declares “I have a self to recover”.⁹ From a child’s identification of the contradictory detachment and “dark parings” of the queen bee, Plath’s youthful speech – maker dramatically recognises with her in The Bee Meeting. The utter liveliness of those concealed but commanding female power in The Arrival of the Bee Box overwhelms corporeal control while the image of the furious cherry queen stands for a new toleration for denials in Stings. Corporeal control is owned in Wintering by the obvious inert and reconciled worker bees and queen. And at last in The Swarm both corporeal as well as creative commands remove the effect of each other by Plath’s ridicules.

The blend of life and death has made strong the power of inaction in its numerous instances within the sequence: the “disconsolate” queen in her den; the two – edged subsistence of the workers in winter; the ambiguity of the red queen in Stings. The multi changes in tone – innocent nature, straightforward announcement, mock – epic directness – prove Plath’s inquiring artistic possibilities as well as expanding her tonal control.

Plath’s investigation in the apiary has evolved in the first place, dramatically, in a gradual increase that narrate the system of constructing significance, not the accuracy of an immovable body of critical realities about apiculture, strength of the modern feminism. Within the microcosm of the bee universe and this five poem sequence, Plath’s newly discovered area carved for denials, puts forward, once more, opponent strengths present greatly in her late poems. The late poems threw a challenge to the poet. As she comes to understand clearly the advantage of being small, inactive and escorting to the miniature life, she also understands that she is denounced to a condition of complication and constant change. In spite of her knowledge that she had in fact a lot of situations to enter, Plath is up to the present time drawn to the hard distended vision where impartiality and corporeal simpleness coincide with “some things of the world that are indigestible”.¹⁰

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²⁹ Peter Orr (Ed.)(1996), *The Poet Speaks; Interviews with Contemporary Poets*. (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London) 12.

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³⁰ Ibid.,14