

Plath continued

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Alvarez suggests that Sylvia's abandoning this formal academic limitation on her poetry is bound up in her decision to quit the path she had been so brilliantly advancing on, namely her career in the university:

"The decision to abandon teaching was the first critical step toward achieving her identity as a poet, just as the birth of her children seemed, as she described it, to vindicate her as a woman."

Secondly, the example of her old professor, Robert Lowell, in his *Life Studies*, gave Sylvia courage to investigate and deliver her magic, her naked often destructive truths of inner self. It is at this point that her life and her art converge.

In the Autumn of 1962, Sylvia and her kids left Devon and Ted Hughs and returned to London, renting a flat which had once been the home of Yeats. There, tending house and kids during the day and too exhausted to write at night, Sylvia would wake in the crisp, gray mornings around four and write until stopped by the "glassy music of milk bottles and children's cries."

Alvarez, to whom Sylvia frequently read such poems as "Lady Lazarus," "Daddy," "Death & Co." as she progressed, has written that out of her sudden breakthrough where she as poet became practically indistinguishable from her poems "her private horrors steadily and without looking aside (were faced), but the effort and risk involved in doing so acted on her like a stimulant; the worse things got the more directly she wrote about them, the more fertile her imagination became . . . she now wrote almost with relief, swiftly as though to forestall further horrors . . . Her poetry acted as a strange, powerful lens through which her ordinary life was filtered and refigured with extraordinary intensity."

Her themes began to focalize.

I do not stir.
The frost makes a flower,
The dew makes a star,
The dead bell,
The dead bell.

Somebody's done for.
(Death & Co.)

The winter of 1963 was one of the most brutal in years in London. The ice and cold bit persistently. There was no escaping its raw nag. Sylvia had just finished with the details of *The Bell Jar* and had seen it published. And while the events of that first serious suicide attempt were surely fresh in her mind, she was writing more feverishly than ever. No event in her life was too small to let go by:

What a thrill—
My thumb instead of an onion.
The top quite gone
Except for a sort of a hinge

Of skin,
A flap like a hat,
Dead white.
Then that red plush.

(Cut)

The flat was always cold, the plumbing never worked, kids pestered. An easy depression set in. In spite of the hard times Sylvia moved closer and closer into the arena she had been so long cultivating. Her life and her imagination were precisely identical. Her opposing themes of childbirth (life) and death were merging. The boundaries were breaking down. Far from being therapy, how her art acted as a dredge, making the material of her imagination so accessible to

her life that she began living out her creations.

The details of her last few days are significant. Balking initially at psychiatric help which had been recommended to her, Sylvia finally sent a letter to a therapist arranging a consultation. The letter was somehow lost in the mail.

On Monday morning, Feb. 11, a newly hired au pair girl was supposed to arrive. Sylvia got up early or perhaps never went to bed, too feverishly pounding out her poetry. In any case she left food for her children in their room in case they woke before the au pair girl arrived. Then she went into the kitchen, sealed the door with towels and turned on the gas jets of the oven.

When the au pair girl arrived and did not have her knocks answered, she went away. The man in the flat below who would have responded to the knocks and probably investigated for the au pair girl was drugged himself by the gas. When the girl came back she was finally let in by some workmen and they found Sylvia dead.

It is important to recognize the distinction between this suicide attempt and the first serious one at 18. At that time a deliberately misleading note was left, a well disguised place was found for the act and a huge quantity of sleeping pills was taken. Sylvia was found by her mother when Mrs. Plath was doing laundry—a somnolent groan from the wood pile.

So death at 18 was averted by sheer accident. Sylvia must surely have been aware of the necessity to attend to masking the trivia if her last attempt was at all serious. The events above suggest quite the opposite. She had every reason to believe she would be rescued. Near her body was a note telling which doctor to notify, a sure sign of hesitation.

Alvarez is convinced this final attempt was not a serious one, but merely a risk she took and lost. That being true, Sylvia Plath does not fit the myth of the poet as sacrificial victim of her art:

"In these terms, her suicide becomes the whole point of the story, the act which validates her poems, gives them their interest, and proves her seriousness. So people are drawn to her work in much the same spirit as Time featured her at length: not for the poetry but for the gossipy, extraliterary 'human interest.' Yet just as the suicide adds nothing at all to the poetry, so the myth of Sylvia as a passive victim is a total perversion of the woman she was. It misses altogether her liveliness, her intellectual appetite and harsh wit, her great imaginative resourcefulness and vehemence of feeling, her control."

I have quoted Alvarez at length because he was probably closer to Sylvia at the end of her life than anyone else and he undoubtedly knew her best. His conclusion is important because it suggests that this was going to be the last suicidal ritual or initiation rite that had to be endured. Death and life having begun as separate and opposite, having slowly converged throughout her life until their individual identities were inseparable, were now going to part again, cleansed, and a new life begun.

In the Zen anecdote, before Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains; during Zen, men and mountains are confused; after Zen, men are men and mountains are mountains. One need only substitute life and

death in those comparisons to grasp the thrust of Sylvia Plath's imaginative and real journey.

We may very well wonder then what to make of all the vehemence, the disgust, the violence of Sylvia's poetry. If, as Alvarez has convincingly argued, the facts of Sylvia's life bring little to bear on, indeed often obscure the real importance of her art, what can be made of it? What lessons or applications or signs appear?

Looking over the reviews that appeared soon after the publication of *Ariel*, I consistently found the same lines of the same poems quoted by reviewers. These lines were presented either out of a real belief that they succinctly embodied what was central to the whole collection of poems, or just for their thrilling, attractable extremism. Whatever the motivation, it points to something about the alluring nature of Sylvia Plath's poetry. The extreme language is so brutal that it is irresistible to our egregious appetites. The words are so upfront, so smashing that we glance off. If there is any real weakness in the poetry it is in its illusiveness. Its superficial accessibility to our senses tends to constrict our access to its interiors. Getting a grasp on certain poems is difficult because of the grotesque, exposed language. Yet, it is not impossible to break through the language and indeed we must if we are to go beyond the rather limited artistic returns of the form of the poetry itself. What we find, I think, is the poet dredging up the roots of her own inner violence (*Daddy*, for example) and projecting that personal, violent stock into something culturally symbolic. The vision of Sylvia Plath is apocalyptic.

In *London Magazine* in 1962, there appeared an interview with Sylvia in which she made the following comment:

The issues of our time which preoccupy me at the moment are the incalculable genetic effects of fallout and . . . the terrifying, mad, omnipotent marriage of big business and the military in America . . . Does this influence the kind of poetry I write? Yes, but in a side-long fashion. I am not gifted with the tongue of Jeremiah, though I may be sleepless enough before my vision of the apocalypse. My poems do not turn out to be about Hiroshima, but about a child forming itself finger by finger in the dark. They are not about the terrors of mass extinction, but about the bleakness of the moon over a yew tree in a neighboring graveyard.

A great deal of Sylvia's poetry is preoccupied with physical pain. Nerve endings and blood are real enough concerns for female sensitivities. There is evidence suggesting that she had to endure more than the usual female hurts which might only make more understandable the "new Woman" image she was trying to project in the male world. But, as has been pointed out, the persona of the last poems is not "new woman," instead it is androgynous and transcendent. In her last months when the bitter cold of London magnified every pain, Sylvia projected her own inner violence and physical torture of the menstrual cycle into a symbolic life-death cycle. The once a month ritual embodying the prior feelings of endurance and sacrifice, together with the later emotions of "new life" and "cleansing," is projected to a periodic death rite.

I have done it again.
One year in every ten
I manage it—

Dying
Is an art, like everything
else.
I do it exceptionally well.
(Lady Lazarus)

In the *Ariel* poems the images of Hiroshima, and Auschwitz and blood and vomit are used to capture the transcendence of her theme. The poet has taken her death-in-life perceptions of middle class America and in her drive inward to examine the details of that violent and brutal life, has brought herself face to face with the precariously thin boundary between life and death. Just as victim and torturer become indistinguishable in the poetry so does death and life.

The haunting voice in Sylvia's last poems comes from the grave. It is as if she has tried to imitate the journey to the grave that Shakespeare's Juliet makes, to imitate it imaginatively since

the awful paradox of examining life from the point of view of death is that there is no return.

At twenty I tried to die
And get back, back, back to
you.
I thought even the bones
would do.
(Daddy)

More than any other poem, "Daddy" embodies the thrust of Sylvia Plath's vision. With its battering cadence, its love and violence, its psychic transcendence, "Daddy" is a poem of life caught between the forces of brutality and love. And in the end the poem only resolves itself in images of violence, in image of our age:

There's a stake in your fat
black heart
And the villagers never
liked you.
They are dancing and
stamping on you.
They always knew it was
you.
Daddy, daddy, you
bastard, I'm through.

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