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The Ever-Echoing Poetic Voice of Sylvia Plath through Her Works

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Abstract:

Sylvia Plath stands as a cult figure of the modern American poetry with the identity of the captions as the Poetess, the Myth and the American. In this paper I would like to discuss her voice --the voice of Plath reading her own poetry--that can only be described as frightening. It is not just the eeriness of hearing a voice from beyond the grave; of listening to a woman expose her obsession with the subject of death three months before she takes her own life. The really scary, chilling thing about this voice is its profound bitterness--a sort of challenge to all comers that commands sympathy at the same time that it defies it, that attracts as it repels, that bores directly at some common core of human experience with a drill of inhuman strength.

Keywords: Agnes, Feminism, Fine-tune, Flux, Voice, Cry-for-help

It was the pitiable morning of February 11, 1963, when Sylvia Plath, at the age of 30, was found dead. But she had left her voice on desk, in a plain black-bound journal. *The journal* contained the unbounded eternal voice of Plath. It reveals the rebirth of Plath as an artist and the resurrection of her freedom from the chains which had held her captive before her departure. As her death resounded and her final collection of poems was published, it became clear that although Plath was dead, her voice was very much alive. In her own journal, Plath expresses, "My health is making stories, poems, and novels, of experience: that is why, or, rather, that is why it is good, that I have suffered & been to hell, although not to all hells. I cannot live for life itself: but for the words which stay the flux" (Journals, p. 286).

As a scrupulous journal writer, Plath recorded her everyday happenings from her early youth to the days leading to her death. These journals reveal the poet's daily literary activity, happenings, emotions, and struggles to become the poet which she used to desire. The main key to understanding the mind of Plath, these journals serve as the real document of the progression of the voice that emerged as specifically Plath. The journals which brought out the voice of the young woman writing through her journey of certain stages of life that is 'adulthood', marriage', and 'motherhood'. Written with such attentiveness and attention to detail, the journal entries reveal the poet's search for its *Ariel voice*.

Plath, as an intellectual woman, often expresses amazement in her journals at the simplicity and success of her normal female friends those who have married doctors or businessmen and settled into steady but empty lives as wives and mothers. How externals seem to fill worlds of people like Shirley. . . . "Her baby, its walks and talks, her making of rugs and her skating and swimming" (Plath, 2000, p. 465). From her earliest journals, Plath expresses how she wants more than this from life. Her desire to have both a career and a family life—and the feeling that wanting both of these things together might be greedy, or impossible—leads to her expressing feelings of jealousy towards the traditional 1950s male gender role. In September 1951, while at university, she writes: "My greatest trouble . . . is

jealousy. I am jealous of men — a dangerous and subtle envy which can corrode . . . any relationship. . . I envy the man his physical freedom to lead a double life—his career, and his sexual and family life” (Plath, 2000, p. 98).

Plath started revealing her budding feelings in 1951 which later formed itself into her distinct voice in her so vividly, “The wind has blown a warm yellow moon up over the sea; a bulbous moon, which sprouts in the soiled indigo sky, and spills bright winking petals of light on the quivering black water” (Journals, p.87). Moreover, we find her examination of that excerpt in the next journal entry that Plath goes on to reveal, “I am at my best in illogical, sensuous description” (Journals, p.87). Her self-critical eye then analyzes her specific metaphorical implications of the moon, which later becomes a common metaphor in her *Ariel poems*, the “soiled indigo sky”, and its “bright winking petals of light” which spill on the “quivering black water”. After writing she analyzes each word and how the words collectively create movement and build a scene through their images. However, as Plath continues to fine-tune the passage written above, she then reveals one of the many latent hindrances hushing her Ariel voice: “My trouble? Not enough free thinking, fresh imagery. Too much subconscious clinging to clichés and downtrodden combinations. Not enough originality. Too much blind worship of modern poets and not enough analysis and practice” (Journals, p.88).

Anita Helle states that the journals as a key source instead of her early poems, the journals thus offer, writings and states “that startle with exacting powers of observation, passion, visual memory, there is something edgy and sophisticated in Plath’s awareness of the possibilities of her written-ness, of the eye of the reader upon her” (Helle, p.636). This acute awareness of the “eye upon her” hindered the revelation of a true poetic voice as timidity and suspicion betrayed her gift. Plath was too fearful of rejection, too plagued by self-doubt to acknowledge the voice emerging in bubbles throughout her journals, thus she took on the masks of the poets who inspired her and the structures of the poems that haunted her. As the pressures of her desired artistic success weighed upon her, Plath knew her continued writing was “as necessary for the survival of my haughty sanity as bread is to my flesh” (Journals, p.157). Going on to say in the same 1951 journal entry: “I must be lean & write & make worlds beside this to live in...” (p.157).

As Plath’s poetic mastery tightens its grip on the creative experience, her journal vanishes as another source of understanding Plath’s motives. Despite that loss, however, the bulk of entries found in late 1959 echo the obvious creative resurrection at work within Plath where she vigorously expresses: “I will write mad stories, but honest. I know the horror of primal feelings, obsessions. (. . .) All experience becomes usable to me. . . Start with self and extend outwards: then my life will be fascinating, not a glassed-in cage” (Journals, p. 509-512).

In the foreword to Plath’s Journals, Ted Hughes writes, “When a real self finds language, and manages to speak, it is surely a dazzling event” (qtd. in Malcolm, p, 4). The examination of Plath’s earliest writings—journal entries, letters, poems, short powerful and so controlled, is not, as many critics contend, a sudden burst that exploded from the poet; rather, the emergence of Plath’s true voice is the result of years of meticulous study throughout the course of Plath’s maturation as an artist. Through this development of her unique voice, Plath further sought to explore the other voices and roles contained in her poetry, and the final resolution of self that is achieved within the Ariel poems. A meticulous journal writer, the entries dating from her youth into her adulthood record the poet’s struggle with the latent agents hindering her poetic progress. Being saddened by writer’s block and the styles of other

poets, Plath first sought to create poems in the forms of the poets she admired. These attempts, while often unremarkable except for flashes of language, image, tone, discern Plath's remarkable eye for detail, producing poems tangled in, as Pamela A. Smith records, "a crossword puzzle challenge of sound and poetic structure" (p, 328). Plath's talent was clearly seen from the earliest days of her writing, germinating through the course of her writing career with her experimentations with the casts of other poets and styles of those she admired. Her journals thus became the key source for Plath's creative energy, garnering strength and confidence until finally emerging as a poet fully at home within her own writing.

As the 1960s dawned and the timeline of Plath's final collection begins, the journals vanish as a second voice. Hughes, in the aftermath of her suicide, destroyed the journal entries from the last months of her life, further feeding into the mystery of the mythology of Plath. Hughes' foreword to Plath's Journals explains that he destroyed the manuscript to protect his children from reading it and because "in those days I regarded forgetfulness as an essential part of survival" (qtd. in Bassnett, p. 18).

While Plath created *The Shrike*, she like-wise created *The Wishing Box* in short story form. They were written the same year, *The Wishing Box* reveals a mirroring freedom in the final lines of *The Shrike*. *The Wishing Box* thus takes on the same plot structure of the preceding poem: the characters, still assuming third person narratives, are named Agnes and Harold, and the husband still achieves a dream-world of grandeur that the envious wife cannot create for herself. Placing this plot in a short story form allows Plath to develop beyond the poetic confines. The dramatic imagery of the startling twenty-three line poem spreads itself out in the pages of the story as Plath's meticulously detailed eye develops the tension of the couple's relationship and the growing resentment at the root of the night time dreams. The emotions are the same: Agnes is a jealous earth-bound wife that will not experience her husband's dream world. Yet the short story expands itself, revealing Plath's poignant imaginative voice as Harold's dreams include images of "a beautiful desert, all reds and purples, with each grain of sand like a ruby or sapphire shooting light" and "a white leopard with gold spots (. . .) standing over a bright blue stream" (Plath, p.205). Echoing the "illogical, sensuous descriptions" of Plath's journal writings, Harold's dreams are throbbing with rich techno-colour and the poets of his wife's admiration—William Blake, Robert Frost, and Williams Carlos Williams. Agnes cannot even compare to this world: her dreams "appalled her: dark glowering landscapes peopled with ominous unrecognizable figures" (p, 205).

The short story makes room for the tension to build and build as Agnes fears revealing the dull shame of her "fragmented scenes of horror" to her husband, dwelling in his "royal baroque splendour" (p.206). The plot again mirrors Plath's creative struggle as her protagonist has lost her imaginative voice and recalls in desperation the easeful days of wonderful creation of her youth. The story continues with Agnes maddened and driven to insomnia, consumed by the overwhelming need to reach her husband's creative world. As in *The Shrike* Plath's heroine lies in bed "twisting her fingers like nervous talons in the sheets" as her husband obliviously drifts into a blissful sleep beside her (p.210). The talons of the shrike persona are revealed, yet the final fate is much different than its poetic counterpart. Reflective of Plath's later works, the final freedom for the protagonist is internal: it is through herself that she finds her own redemption. Swallowing a bottle of sleeping pills, Agnes dies with a "slight, secret smile of triumph" as her dream world finally becomes her reality, and she 'at last' finds herself "waltzing with the dark, red-caped prince of her early dreams" (p.210). Plath triumphs ultimately over her husband where death makes the final departure.

As such, Plath's voice is evolving to the plane separate from Hughes and her earthly status as wife and homemaker. Writing in the introduction of the collected *Johnny Panic and the Bible of Dreams: Short Stories, Prose, and Diary Excerpts*, Hughes declared her short stories and essays 'all are the circling flames which the poetry (. . .) eventually jumped into'. (p.5). These stories never reach the emotional intensity of the poems: the Ariel voice is immediate, harshly declarative, and unapologetic. While clearly surfacing the themes and plots that will haunt the triumphant poems of her genius, these stories lack the structure that truly gives life to the voice. Of *The Wishing Box*, Plath reflects in her journal that "the real world in it isn't real enough. It is too much fable" (Journals, p.497). *The Wishing Box*, while written in the third person and focused on the creative inferiority of the wife, is a story of a woman who only attains freedom through her own death, laid out as a spectacle for her husband to witness as her final triumph. The triumph is clear, but Plath's critical eye notes while it is 'a good idea', the sacrifice must be viscerally felt—not made into fable as overt fiction. Plath is constructing and perfecting her voice. This story is, as Hughes alludes, circling the dancing flames of the Agnes cannot even compare to this world: her dreams "appalled her: dark glowering landscapes peopled with ominous unrecognizable figure, feeding into its strength and shunning the reader's eye upon its creator. *The Fifty-ninth Bear* is another such story that creates itself in the glow of the Ariel fire. Written in 1959, *The Fifty-ninth Bear* pairs another husband and wife in a scene of counting bears as they travel through campsites the consuming mind of the writing process and the art continued to gather its intensity in Plath's journals.

Her passion for literature and her ambition to share it with the world her educational expertise and literary potential, her appreciation for her favourite character like Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, her joy and flighty spontaneity that enticed her recite old English to a group of cows. Sylvia Plath challenges us in ways that we have never been challenged by a writer before, not only through her gut-wrenching images, but through the contrast between the harsh expressions in her poetry and the woman that Ted Hughes fell in love with.

Poetry creates deeper connections between people. But in the age of technology in which communication and entertainment have been sped up, the phone call has been replaced with the text message and the letter has been transformed into an e-mail, cable TV gives us hundreds of channels at a time and movies on demand, and the Internet provides unlimited and unregulated information at the click of a button. In this high-tech and fast-paced world where we are inundated with choice, few of us take time to slow down and sit down to absorb a piece of literature without relying on shallow, inflectionless communication and reads mostly for short bursts of information. Plath's unfortunate suicide on February 11, 1963, shocked the literary world, and her confessional and accusatory writing became a primary platform from which to dissect her life. Plath's depiction of a bold, victimized persona compelled critics to consider how the details of her personal life explained the subject matter of her poems; and, rightfully so, since it's undeniable that Plath herself embraced the idea of divulging the details of her personal life and feelings through her work. At the root of the struggles described in Plath's poetry is the fact that she suffered from an underlying mental illness and had a history of depression, suicidal tendencies and mental therapy, which included electro-shock treatments. Her published poetry and journals publicly expose how she expressed what it felt like to be her. For instance, in a journal entry dated October 3, 1959, Plath opens the entry with: "Very depressed today. Unable to write a thing. Menacing Gods. I feel outcast on a cold star, unable to feel anything but an awful helpless numbness" (p.517).

The sentiment of this entry rings familiar and presents the foundation from which Plath builds her idea of suicide. Specifically, in the poems those were composed near the end of her life, she describes a self that is preparing for suicide. But my contention is that it is not just the failure of an individual to cope up with the trials and traumas of life. Her death indeed typifies the anger and frustration of a whole generation of Americans who were disillusioned by the betrayal of the promises made by their country and by the cruel and rigid atmosphere of life then prevalent.

In the case of Plath, the themes such as the isolation, rejection, death and rebirth, whether by shedding a figurative skin or through death, that shows a final perceived self shaped by suicidal thoughts, the consequence of her disillusionment with her life and times. Perhaps Plath didn't intentionally commit the final act but only meant to test her expanding boundaries. The breakdown of her family placed Plath under tremendous stress. After her husband, Ted Hughes, left her to be with his lover, Assia Wevill, Plath was left on her own to care for two small Children, because Hughes's departure fuelled Plath's depression, she began taking medications to help her cope and function on a daily basis, which her mother, Aurelia Schober Plath, blames for encouraging rather than suppressing her suicidal thoughts, especially since such medications contain side-effects that increase suicidal thoughts. Since Plath's first suicide attempt (via an overdose of sleeping pills) was thwarted, it's reasonable to assume that Plath might have more readily entertained suicidal thoughts because she thought someone would save her again. Additionally, perhaps Plath thought that this dramatic act might bring her family back together or simply punish her husband for his careless actions. Alvarez asserted that she orchestrated a dangerous, risky cry-for-help based on the clues left behind: "Had everything worked out as it should – had the gas not drugged the man downstairs, preventing him from opening the front door to the au pair girl – there is little doubt she would have been saved. I think she wanted to be; why else leave her doctor's telephone number?" (p.36).

In many cases, Plath's poetic voice resembles the tone of her journal. Steven Gould Axelrod provides a definition of what is known as 'confessional poetry', which is commonly used to describe Plath's work and links her Words to her ultimate intentions: "The Confessional poem is the autobiography of crisis – a crisis which characteristically has two dimensions. One dimension is psychological....The other dimension of the crisis embodied by the Confessional poem is social" (p.5).

It's really a matter of great significance to recognize the potential creative genius of a person like Sylvia Plath considering suicide through her an ever-echoing poetic voice which finds a niche in the heart of the literati as the magnum opus in order to understand her plight and the failure of the dreams and possibilities of the life held so dear to her.

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