

# Never Forgetful Witnesses:

## David Holbrook on Sylvia Plath

Stan Smith

I've married a cupboard of rubbish.  
I bed in a fish puddle.  
Down here the sky is always falling....  
I housekeep in Time's gut-end  
Among emmets and molluscs,  
Duchess of Nothing,  
Hairtusk's bride.

Sylvia Plath's 'Poem for a Birthday' (*The Colossus*) is a complex dramatic monologue, a seven-part narrative in which a psyche struggles towards birth, in 'the city of spare parts' which is the world. It draws for its imagery on that teenage suicide attempt fictionalised in *The Bell Jar* and on the experience of actual childbirth, so that at times the speaker is mother, at times child, and frequently both. Its main literary sources are the Brothers Grimm and Theodore Roethke's early poetry, particularly *Praise to the End* (1951). Its heroine is a Cinderella or Snow-White princess in nightmare exile among incomprehensible and uncomprehending powers. The second chapter of David Holbrook's *Sylvia Plath: Poetry and Existence*<sup>1</sup> offers an extended commentary on this poem, 'trying to foster the reader's possession of poetic meaning, while endeavouring to discuss universal truths about the dynamics of human personality as seen by "philosophical anthropology".' For this enterprise he asks the reader's patience, 'ignoring for the moment certain problems of the concepts and theories I shall be using'.

In fostering our possession of poetic meaning he glosses the above lines (from section 4, 'The Beast') as follows: 'For "marry" here, I believe, we may read "identify". Her concept of marrying belongs to the infant's primitive belief that Mummy and Daddy virtually eat one another in marriage'; 'a cupboard full of fragments of impingement—memories of her father and fragments of the mother's "male element";' 'Hairtusk is maleness, again, her father's penis.' Likewise, the lines from 3, 'Maenad', 'The mother of mouths didn't love me. The old man shrank to a doll', are explained (ignoring the ironic literary allusion to Swinburne's 'mother of months', from *Atalanta in Calydon*, which goes some way to

<sup>1</sup> *Athlone Press*. London, 1976. pp. 308 £7.00

elucidate the section title and much incidental imagery, including the boar's tusk) in the same unrelenting manner:

When I was an infant, my intense oral needs, my hunger for survival, were not met by the mother who should have provided creative reflection for my mouth-ego. I had to build my identity on maleness, so I stole my father's 'old man'. But my father died and my memories of his image faded—so I found myself with no inward possession of him, based on secure identification, but with a stolen penis that became a little doll in my hands....

And then, hardly pausing for breath, he is off on Winnicott on 'transitional objects' and the difference between boys and girls.

Holbrook has got hold of a great truth: that Sylvia Plath's language is radically *overdetermined*, that the same image can be charged with quite contradictory associations, conflicting emotional resonances. The bee, for example, a recurring motif, stirs complex feelings. It is female, a source of honey and creativity; but it has a male sting; it is associated with the father (Otto Plath even wrote a treatise called *Bumblebees and Their Ways*, New York, 1934), but also with that dark, leonine queen at the core of the hive; in 'The Swarm' and 'The Arrival of the Bee Box, bees are on the one hand the collective 'black, intractable mind' of a genocidal Europe, on the other the 'swarmy', 'angrily clambering' impulses of the individual unconscious (but this too is then seen in collective terms, as 'a Roman mob').

Plath's narratives fork and proliferate in unexpected directions precisely because, in unfolding the implications of a sequence of images, she uncovers the complex and contradictory possibilities condensed in them. This in turn expresses her sense of the self, not as a hierarchically organized structure, but as *an ensemble of possibilities*, in which none takes precedence for more than a moment, and to which only a provisional coherence can be given, in the specifying of a name and an image—an amorphous, uncongealed identity, undergoing an endless metamorphosis of roles, continually dying and being reborn in the transformations of its imagery. Often, Holbrook's subliminal undertow is clearly there, and the intricate cross-referencing he detects in the poems does establish hitherto uncharted depths of feeling, or primitive infantile traumas lying treacherously beneath the surface of experience; at times, his analysis of particular poems can be illuminating and precise. In fact, his study is too important, and too nearly right, to be treated lightly. It is because it is nearly right that it is dangerously, crazily wrong. For, in his elaborate decoding of the poems, he reduces them to cryptograms whose prime function is as ciphers from which to reconstruct the diseased personality of the author, symptoms for a psychoanalytic prognosis. In plumbing full-fathom-five for her father's eyes, Holbrook has evaded, as it were wilfully, a

painful and obvious truth. I have emphasised some of the literary sources of 'Poem for a Birthday': for Plath's poems are, first and foremost, carefully constructed *texts*. If their meaning cannot be reduced to the conscious intentions of their author, equally, it cannot be reduced to spirit-messages from the unconscious, over which the literary talent has no control. The full meaning of the text lies in the interplay of *all* its levels, *on the terrain of language*. These levels are not only personal (conscious and unconscious) but cultural and social, deriving from both a literary and linguistic tradition and a public and collective history. Too frequently, however, Holbrook's reductionist approach substitutes the connotations for the denotation, or even imports associations totally inappropriate to the overall mood, which may destroy the autonomy of the text as a unique formulation of experience, by converting it into one more emanation of the same unchanged psychic essence. That delicate, fragile poem, 'Candles' (*Crossing the Water*) stands in hushed reverence in the cathedral of the past, contemplating the transitory generations of men who shift from continent to continent, vulnerable, easily extinguished beings in a century which has snuffed out so many private points of view. Plath's sense of the obsolete old-world piety and charm (but also the self-deception) of her dead grandparents recalls her to her own child, object of love and symbol of supersession, in a movement which enacts the permanent renewal of life from an already *passé* present, and ends

Tonight, like a shawl, the mild light enfolds her,  
The shadows stoop over like guests at a christening.

Only quotation can show the discrepancy between the poem and Holbrook's 'reading' of it:

They are the last romantics, these candles:  
Upside down hearts of light tipping wax fingers,  
And the fingers, taken in by their own haloes,  
Grown milky, almost clear, like the bodies of saints.  
It is touching, the way they'll ignore

A whole family of prominent objects  
Simply to plumb the deeps of an eye  
In its hollow of shadows, its fringe of reeds,  
And the owner past thirty, no beauty at all.  
Daylight would be more judicious,

Giving everybody a fair hearing.  
They should have gone out with balloon flights and  
the stereopticon.

This is no time for the private point of view.  
When I light them, my nostrils prickle.  
Their pale, tentative yellows

Drag up false, Edwardian sentiments,  
And I remember my maternal grandmother from Vienna.  
As a schoolgirl she gave roses to Franz Josef....  
I watch their spilt tears cloud and dull to pearls....

The unequivocal interpretation lacks not only the tentativeness but also the ironic subtlety of the poem:

Of course the candles suggest a phallic interpretation.... But perhaps we can reach beyond Freudian interpretations.... Here the milky candles are the love-and meaning-dispensing tears she takes in from the father (in lieu of the mother's breast).... These candles *plumb the deeps of her eye*: so, their love-light enters her eyes as if entering a sexual organ.... 'the private point of view' ... is a strange phrase.... What does make sense is to read the poem as meaning 'It is *touching* ... and the exertion of a *private point of view* for Daddy to pick me out ... and pay me *sexual* attention.' The word 'private' has an undercurrent (as in 'hairy as privates' in *Berck-Plage*) and *point* has a phallic emphasis, while 'view' means looking at in a sexual way, the thrusting of the phallic light into the eye as a sexual organ.... What dulls in the candles are the [father's] eyes, or pools of semen, in which she hoped to see herself.

Of one of her persecutors, 'The Beast', in 'Poem for a Birthday', Plath says,

He was bullman earlier,  
King of the dish, my lucky animal,

but now he has turned into an obsessive and self-regarding brute and 'He won't be got rid of.' Indeed he won't: he blunders slobbering into 'Candles', to ejaculate sacrilegious oodles of sperm over all sensitivity and refinement; 'Fido Littlesoul, .../A dustbin's enough for him./The dark's his bone,' and, like any dog, he will worry it and worry it.

There is something ironically over-literary about Holbrook's approach. His mentors, spelt out at length in his introductory chapter, and interminably thereafter, are a heterogeneous bunch of phenomenologists drawing variously on the scattering inheritance of nineteenth century Idealism represented by Freud, Jung, Heidegger, Sartre etc. In a sense he repeats the meddling amateurism of Esther Greenwood, described with deadpan irony in *The Bell Jar*:

I had bought a few paperbacks on abnormal psychology at the drug store and compared my symptoms with the symptoms in the books, and sure enough, my symptoms tallied with the most hopeless cases.

His wrong-headed reading of 'Death & Co' relies upon *his* interpretation of Roland Kuhn's 'astonishing interpretation' of the 'astonishing case-history' of Rudolph ('a butcher's boy who shot at a

prostitute in 1939' and who was also 'a shoe-and stocking fetishist, as well as being attached to glittering objects'—'facts' which are used to explain Plath's phrase 'masturbating a glitter' and 'one of the central symbols in [her] poetry, ... the shiny black shoe'). Kuhn's analysis in turn seems to rely on a rather literary frame of reference, citing an enigmatic poem of Rilke's, for example, as if it were scientific authority which could explain Rudolph's behaviour. The whole procedure is a circular exercise in which initial premises are confirmed by a selective use of 'evidence' (Holbrook glosses over the discrepancies and plays up the accidental analogies of word and incident) and the repeated use of false connectives which give the semblance of an impeccable causal logic:

So, Sylvia Plath's 'glitter' can be related to death. *Because* Rudolph has suicidal fantasies we can also relate it to suicide. [emphasis added].

As Sebastiano Timpanaro has shown in his devastating study *The Freudian Slip*, anything *can* be related to anything else, given determination and time. Whether the relation is a valid, testable one is harder to demonstrate. And Holbrook himself is clearly not quite secure about his reading, since he has to indulge in a compensatory bravado:

In order to understand it, as arising from this inward fantasy rather than any outward incident, we need to allow ourselves to go mad, and to make a mad response to a mad poem.

Holbrook repeatedly inveighs against a 'punitive psychiatry' and, in an account of *The Bell Jar* which is convincing and unexceptionable, speaks of that 'American psychiatry ... blandly convinced of its own truth, built as it is into a system, with textbooks, machines, institutions and training programmes'; but there is a sense in which he practises, at times, a punitive criticism. On the one hand, he expresses sympathy and concern for Sylvia Plath as a person, as well as admiration for her art; on the other, he at times indicts her, as if she were personally culpable, for 'offering falsifications or forms of moral inversion which are absurd, or even deranged, and may even do harm to the sensitive and responsive young person.' Again and again he tells us that Plath's works 'seriously falsify experience', that they express 'the atmosphere of the contemporary arts, which displays at this moment a dangerous rejection of life, moving towards nihilism and an abandonment to hate'. What seems to vibrate with a peculiarly personal resonance is the fact that Plath—

is the object of a fashionable cult, not least because of her suicide and her schizoid tendencies, and is also a heroine of women's liberation movements. Her rejection of certain kinds of femininity (and, as I would put it, her hatred of certain aspects of woman), for example, have been presented at certain poetry festivals as important human truths. My view ...

is that very often what she says about male and female ... is grossly distorted and false.

Holbrook's purpose is, then, primarily didactic. He is concerned that 'in schools today, students are often obliged to apply themselves for examination purposes to essentially nihilistic works ... in an atmosphere in which they are not urged to examine these works from their own lights, because that might annoy the examiner, but must simply absorb them and submit to the implication that these works are offering profound human truths.' We are, in fact, back on familiar terrain: the Mary Whitehouse conspiracy-theory of culture, in which 'the nihilistic avant-garde' use their place in the establishment to propagate a 'fanatical immoralism' 'that could mean the end of civilisation itself'. But whose experience, one must ask, does Plath's work 'seriously falsify'? Her own? Who says so? With what authority? ... Well, R.D. Laing, D.W. Winnicott, Roland Kuhn, etc. etc.

Holbrook persistently assumes a normative definition of experience, which he then, often with a startling, unbalanced vehemence, attacks Plath for diverging from. Thus 'Her hatred of man is a hatred of "serving man", and thus of those impulses in woman to be complement to man—to respond to man in a womanly way'—which is a speciously circular logic. 'Renouncing the mother's role is renouncing the female element in oneself'; Esther Greenwood sees the fitting of a contraceptive cap as 'freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person ... just because of sex'. Holbrook's comment sours such freedom with the charge of life-denying selfishness:

But she is in part delighting not only in freedom from being feminine but ultimately in freedom from being human ... a search for a certain black purity.

Esther doesn't see this as a denial of femininity, rather as a release into being 'my own woman'. No man, including Holbrook, would accept a definition of himself as no more than a supplier of semen. Plath for Holbrook is a kind of rogue dyke, who has to be domesticated, brought back to her proper status as a womanly woman, whose prime function, of course, is 'serving man'. Such a preoccupation leads him brusquely to reject Plath's own interpretation of the poem 'Daddy' ('spoken by a girl with an Electra complex') as 'surely merely a thin disguise over her own obsessive and hostile attachment to the "internalised bad object",' and also seriously to underestimate the ironic complexity of *The Bell Jar*. Noticing what he regards as a 'slip' in the novel—a reference to 'the baby'—he says:

But whose baby? At the end of the novel there is no question of 'Esther' being married, or having a baby.... when she speaks of 'being all right again' she is speaking of [Plath's] breakdown and recovery: the baby was Mrs. Ted Hughes's.

But there are other casual insertions of this kind which suggest that, after all the teenage rebellion against domesticity and motherhood, poor old Esther has gone the way of all flesh, thus adding a savage and bitter twist to the novel's conclusion (for example, at the beginning of Chapter III, where Esther notes, in passing, 'No matter how much I eat, I never put on weight. With one exception I've been the same weight for ten years'). Holbrook's brutal appropriation of Plath to her husband here, as if in some primitive assertion of patriarchal solidarity, unwittingly recalls the male chauvinism of Esther's boy-friend's marriage proposal: 'How would you like to be Mrs. Buddy Willard?' Refuting a feminist interpretation of Plath as uncoverer of 'that central core and cause of dissatisfaction that can exist particularly in marriage', Holbrook is equally vindictive, pointedly referring to the critic as 'Mrs. Connie Richmond'; while his hatred of the virago leads him to misremember basic Shakespeare, speaking of Plath crying out 'like Lady Macbeth at Banquo's ghost'. Noticeably, when he is particularly down on her, he tends to quote Ted Hughes's poetry in evidence against her.

Holbrook's ontology is based on an essentialist description of gender roles which is almost mystical in its intensity. Thus drawing on Guntrip and Winnicott, he posits 'two ways of "knowing"': The 'male' way of knowing reaches its highest development perhaps in objective scientific investigation. The 'female' way of knowing is, in the completest sense, the mother's intuitive knowledge of her baby, but it is also manifest in art.... The very vulnerability of this female area of being is also something of which we are all afraid, and so there is a good deal of hostility to it—a tendency which itself is rationalised in the mechanisation of childbirth.

That last sideswipe against 'mechanisation' should give us the clue. For we are back here with the old familiar Leavisian bogey of the 'Two Cultures', that anathema which nevertheless surfaces everywhere within the Leavisian problematic, setting art and intuition 'for Life' against a deathly science—a contempt for 'technologico-Benthamite civilisation' which has given a sentimental radical gloss to innumerable reactionary nostalgias, from the Liberal Party's 'community politics' to the 'Campaign for Real Ale'. The same emphasis is apparent in his reading of 'The Bee Meeting', where 'living in a Devon village and ... trying to enter into a normal relationship with the community and the natural world', Plath turns 'a procedure for manipulating bees, a quite commonplace event in rural life' into 'a nightmare ritual, an atrocity.' He protests too much: 'her experience of natural living patterns is full of dread.' 'This is a quite normal rural event ... but to Sylvia Plath it is an exhausting trial of the identity, involving deep threats of death'; 'The poem opens with an ordinary rustic scene.... By con-

trast with normal people she feels exposed'. It is clear that, for Holbrook, criteria of normality are derived from such atypical 'organic' communities, which allow for 'I/Thou' relationships, as opposed to 'the dark heart of megalopolis' where 'there is no provision for encounter' and we think of ourselves as 'mechanical entities' in 'a dehumanised urban environment'.

In her defection from the side of 'Life' Plath has paradoxically written a poetry of amazing richness and resonance: but this is disposed of by saying that it 'falsifies experience'. Sometimes, as in 'Nick and the Candlestick', she redeems herself, writing a poem which is 'a triumph of love, pursued with great courage' against the pressures of 'the nihilistic avant-garde', which urge her:

As a modern woman, [to] feel ... that all that Victorian emphasis on the family, on good feeling, on love, is out-of-date.... [in] the universe ... of modern science—mere unintelligible matter in motion doomed by the laws of entropy....

Women's Liberation, that recurrent butt of Holbrook's invective, is also not 'for Life', a metropolitan perversion of true feminine instincts, full of 'fear and hatred of female creativity':

This is why women's liberationists applaud her, because what they want to be liberated from is being female and being human.

Plath, he tells us, 'is sadly pseudo-male, like many of her cultists'. Holbrook takes for granted throughout his book the legitimacy of Winnicott's distinction between 'true' and 'false' selves. But it is not at all clear on what grounds this distinction is constituted, who dictates the criteria for its assessment. Certainly, Holbrook knows his own right to judge:

Being 'normal', we are 'aware of the risks' as the schizoid person often is not. That is, we shall suffer pain and deep disturbance, because of our capacity for concern, which she sometimes lacks.

Having established his credentials of 'feeling' and 'concern' Holbrook feels free to pontificate on what Plath should have felt, on what her 'true' self required; and there is at times in his analysis a hectoring, bullying tone, as if he were remonstrating with a naughty child for not doing what she has been told on good authority is best for her. The elitism endemic to Leavisism inevitably gets called in to substantiate his more perverse readings (this time his authority is Robert Daly):

Only those with special experience of schizoid expression can 'guess at the specific connections that obtain among the words, gestures and moods that characterise the plight: and even they have difficulty in decoding the troubled language of the body which is often the major vehicle for communication'.

There is no way out for the victim of such a diagnosis, for, as Holbrook says, 'her very integrity in her quest is schizoid too': to



be concerned to discover the truth is itself a symptom of one's illness—only the analyst can make disinterested interpretations. Daly is the source of this convenient belief:

'The ideationally schizoid individual quests for the *truth* in the language of ideas. He is always in the process of searching for, engaging in, or disengaging from, a doctrine, a concept, a set of terms, or a final life-giving (and occasionally life-taking) principle.'

Even the reader is suspect, and, should he demur from Holbrook's diagnosis, can be incorporated into it, in an extension of the Catch 22:

In *The Applicant* ... Plath sets out (consciously) as if to write an ironic poem, caricaturing the expectations of a conventional man, who regards woman as a thing, in a society which puts a premium on human functions rather than personal value. But while readers try to take it in this vein of satire they are, I believe, clinging to this notion of its 'social content' to prevent themselves seeing how psychotic the poem is.

For all his deep concern, Holbrook's remedies in the end are proscriptive and authoritarian; against the 'sick logic' which is 'not true to "agreed reality"', however consistent it may be within itself,' he sets an ideology of strength through joy, of *Kinder, Kuche, Kirche*, which derives from 'the capacity to believe in a benign world'. Art has a propaganda function in such an ideology, the carrier of 'healing' and of 'redemptive and meaning-seeking qualities'. In the end, Plath herself is alone to blame for this personal failure 'to hold her world together' and the consequent artistic failure to "change interpersonal relations and improve community". In fact, it is the rigour and insistence of Plath's vision that terrifies Holbrook, transcending that shallow reformism which urges that, if we would only connect, the depersonalising monstrosity of modern civilisation might be overcome, and 'true' community restored. The patients of Laing, Esterson, *et al.* on whom Holbrook relies for evidence all pay for their 'cures', for their re-adaptation to that civilisation which, he frequently asserts, is hostile to the need 'to feel whole, and human, and able to exert ... freedom and autonomy'. Esther Greenwood's perennial fear in *The Bell Jar* is of being consigned to the charity wards, 'with hundreds of people like me, in a big cage in the basement. The more hopeless you were, the farther away they hid you.' What Plath sees, and what is finally a scandal—to be dismissed as 'schizoid'. 'psychotic', 'pathological'—is the *generic* nature of her condition, in a 'civilisation' which has shut millions away in hospitals, camps, graveyards; in which the self, 'true' or 'false', in all its spurious 'uniqueness' and 'authenticity', can so easily be 'wiped ... out like chalk on a blackboard'. In his barely suppressed desire to doctor Plath, to deny her texts to 'the sensitive and responsive young person' in the name of

'psychic health', Holbrook reveals a similar impulse to hide away the unpalatable. Censorship is always finally an act of self-protection, on the pretext of protecting others, a wish to evade the unsavoury reality in which one is implicated. Plath herself knew of this kind of treatment, this kind of compassion, and spoke of it sardonically enough in 'Lady Lazarus':

So, so, Herr Doktor.  
So, Herr Enemy.

I am your opus,  
I am your valuable,  
The pure gold baby

That melts to a shriek.  
I turn and burn,  
Do not think I underestimate your great concern.

But her vision is of an order of repression that will not be transformed by individual conversions or 'cures'—a world which requires total rejection. Refusing to be the good daughter, wife, mother that her benefactors require of her, Plath inevitably has earned the rebuke of nihilism. But if her poetry insists on the fabricated, fictitious nature of the self, as no more than a nexus of donated being, accomplished roles, 'Duchess of Nothing', these are not 'psychotic delusions', but bitter truths, that we must come to terms with, not evade with anodyne moralisms that speak of 'the voice of the essence of one's being'. In the end, what Holbrook lacks is humility—humility to recognise that we are all provisional and momentary creatures, that 'The box is only temporary' ('Arrival of the Bee Box'). Plath has looked farther than most into this grave truth. If she could not survive what she saw, we should respect her anguish, not trample on its grave. What she has to say, in its totality, is relevant to all of us. We cannot pick and choose, among the ashes, only the 'cake of soap', 'wedding ring' or 'gold filling' ('Lady Lazarus') that we would prefer. For, in the words of Louis Althusser:

That this small biological being survives, and not as a 'wolf-child' ... but as a *human child* (having escaped all childhood deaths, many of which are human deaths, deaths punishing the failure of humanisation), that is the test all adult men have passed: they are the *never forgetful* witnesses, very often the victims, of this victory, bearing in their most hidden, i.e. in their most clamorous parts, the wounds, weaknesses and stiffnesses that result from this struggle for human life or death. Some, the majority, have emerged more or less unscathed—or at least, give this out to be the case; many of these veterans bear the marks throughout their lives; some will die from their fight, though at some remove, the old wounds suddenly opening again in psychotic explosion, in madness, the ultimate

compulsion of a 'negative therapeutic reaction'; others, more numerous, as 'normally' as you like, in the guise of an 'organic' decay. Humanity only inscribes its official deaths on its war memorials: those who were able to die on time, i.e. late, as men, in human wars in which only *human* wolves and gods tear and sacrifice one another. In its sole survivors, psychoanalysis is concerned with another struggle, with the only war without memoirs or memorials, the war humanity pretends it has never declared, the war it always thinks it has won in advance, simply because humanity is nothing but surviving this war, living and bearing children as culture in human culture: a war which is continually declared in each of its sons, who, projected, deformed and rejected, are required, each by himself and in solitude and against death, to take the long forced march which makes mammiferous larvae into human children, *masculine* or *feminine subjects*. (Freud and Lacan, in *New Left Review*, No 55 1969)

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