

CHAPTER I

Plath and the American Poetry Scene

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In her first journal, begun in July 1950 in the summer before she left home for Smith College, Sylvia Plath cites three Irish writers: Louis MacNeice, W. B. Yeats and James Joyce. ‘Hold to the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past’ (*J* 7) she notes, quoting Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In the pages of the journal itself, she rephrases Joyce in her own register: ‘Nothing is real except the present, and already, I feel the weight of centuries smothering me. Some girl a hundred years ago lived as I do. And she is dead. I am the present, but I know I, too, will pass’ (*J* 10). How did Plath understand ‘the here’ and ‘the now’ of the American poetry scene in the 1950s and early 1960s and which writers did she draw inspiration from and imitate? As a seventeen-, soon to be eighteen-year-old college student, Plath aspired not just to live in the present, but also to *be* the present. That double sense of ‘passing’ is always alive in her writing. Plath knows that, like the girl a hundred years ago, her body will pass away but not *this*, not her writing self. The repetition of ‘I’ three times in a sentence of just eleven words still astonishes with its audacious self-confidence. What does it say? It says: ‘I know I’ and that ‘I, too, will pass.’

Mid-twentieth century American poetry was dominated by what we now call the modernists. When Plath was at Smith, Yeats had only been dead a decade. T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound were very much alive and still publishing poetry, even if their best work had already been written. As an apprentice poet, Plath warned herself against ‘blind worship of modern poets and not enough analysis and practice’ (*J* 88). In her journals she kept to her word, favouring the modernist tradition not of Eliot and Pound but of female modernists like Amy Lowell and Elinor Wylie who have only recently entered the poetic canon. Plath was addicted to ranking poets, particularly in her journals. In a March 1957 entry, we find competitive comparisons of her poetry to various dead and living poets, all female. Edith Sitwell and Marianne Moore are identified as two ‘ageing giantesses & poetic godmothers’ (*J* 360). Of living poets she saw May Swenson, Isabella

Gardner and Adrienne Rich as her closest rivals. In a later journal entry, she writes of Elizabeth Bishop, 'Her fine originality, always surprising, never rigid, flowing, juicier than Marianne Moore, who is her godmother' (*J* 516).

This chapter focuses on Plath's poetry in relation to the work of these mainly American poetic godfathers and godmothers, looking in particular at questions of gender and nationality. Yet when we speak of an American poetry scene in the 1950s, it is important to remember that scene's international, transatlantic dimension, a fact Tracy Brain draws attention to in writing of Plath's 'perpetual displacement, a mid-atlanticism that is neither American nor English'.¹ In 1958 Plath was ambitious to become 'The Poetess of America' (*J* 360). Indeed, she 'arrogant[ly]' believed she had already written lines that qualified her for that title. Yet just a year later, she considered her 'tempo [to be] British' (*J* 521). Did Plath leave American poetry behind when she made the decision to move to England for good in 1959? Was she ever fully part of an American scene or just a sceptical observer? What actually is the American scene? Might it be more accurate to speak of it in the plural?

A short answer to this flurry of questions would be to state that Plath was always an Anglophile even as she remained an American citizen. Like W. H. Auden who was born and educated in England but spent most of his adult life elsewhere, or, travelling in the other direction, T. S. Eliot who was born and educated in the US but took on British citizenship, Plath's affinities and interests were of a hyphenated Anglo-American nature. She often divided poets, as we have seen, along gender lines, not national ones. It didn't matter to Plath where poets were born, but what they ended up writing about.

Steven Gould Axelrod believes that 'Plath's poetry evolved through four stages':²

The first is the period of her juvenilia, culminating in the poetry she wrote at Smith College in 1950–55. . . . Plath's second stage, a period of growth and experiment, lasted from when she married Ted Hughes in 1956 to their permanent settlement in England in 1959. . . . The poetry of Plath's third stage, a dynamic period of passion and self-discovery, lasted from 1960 through the dissolution of her marriage in 1962. This period produced the texts that made her name and by which she is known today. . . . Plath's final stage, a brief time of depression and withdrawal, occurred in the last weeks of her life in early 1963.³

Axelrod's periodisation roughly follows Ted Hughes's division of Plath's work into 'three phrases' in his introduction to the 1981 *Collected Poems*. It is worth revisiting it here.

‘The first phase might be called her juvenilia’, Hughes begins. ‘A logical division occurs, conveniently, at the end of 1955, just after the end of her twenty-third year. The 220 or more poems written before this are of interest mainly to specialists’ (CP 15).⁴ From this pre-1956 period, Hughes selected what seemed to him the fifty best ‘pieces’ (note he does not call them ‘poems’) and printed them ‘at the back of the book, as an appendix’ (CP 16). Hughes extends the second phase of Plath’s development a little further than Axelrod, suggesting that it falls ‘between early 1956 and late 1960’ (Axelrod ends this second phase a year earlier, in late 1959). According to Hughes, ‘early 1956 presents itself as a watershed, because from later this year come the earliest poems of her collection, *The Colossus*. And from this time I worked closely with her and watched the poems being written, so I am reasonably sure everything is here’ (CP 16). The logic of presenting 1956 as a ‘watershed’, at least partly because you were there to watch the poems ‘being written’, is convenient but not especially convincing. It is difficult to test its accuracy when less than a quarter of the poems have been made available to readers. I will come back to the status of the juvenilia in a moment. For Hughes, ‘The third and final phase of her work, from the editorial point of view, dates from about September 1962. Around that time, she started the habit of dating the final typescript of each poem’ (CP 17). The information Hughes gives us about Plath’s habit of dating typescripts is helpful, but does this change in composition practice coincide with a change in form and subject matter as Axelrod’s four-stage narrative contends? Putting aside the detail of dates and publication history, can Plath’s career be divided into early/middle/late periods in this manner? Is it possible to speak of ‘watershed’ moments so neatly?

My own sense is that Plath’s poetic development was less smooth and less summarisable than both of these accounts suggest. To go back to the juvenilia, and we have to go literally to the back of the *Collected Poems* to find them, I think Plath’s early poems are worthy of study and not just by ‘specialists’. The love poems, in particular, are stunningly sharp and witty examinations of courtship and rejection and of the discourse of the love poem itself. In ‘Female Author’, ‘Cinderella’, ‘Bluebeard’ and ‘The Princess and the Goblins’, Plath rejects the ‘gilded fable’ (CP 335) of traditional stories she had been taught as a child. The influence of the Victorian poet Christina Rossetti is clear. We know from Plath’s letters to Aurelia Plath that she was reading Rossetti as early as December 1951 (LVI 406).

I suspect I am in the minority of Plath critics in finding time for this work.⁵ For Tim Kendall, ‘These poems are, with very few exceptions, unexceptional . . . the juvenilia reflect a poet learning her art by imitating others: Auden, Stevens, Moore, Eliot, Dickinson and Dylan Thomas seem to have been among the more influential models. What appears most interesting now about Plath’s early poems is her formal experimentation.’⁶ While I disagree with Kendall about his estimation of the poems, I think he is right about Plath’s models and her overall concern with fixed form at this point. Plath heard Auden read at Smith when she was a student and in an ecstatic letter to her brother dated 21 March 1953 she describes him as ‘my conception of the perfect poet: tall, with a big leonine head and a sandy mane of hair, and lyrically gigantic stride . . . I adore him with a big Hero Worship’ (*LV* 589).

A journal entry from the same period recalls being invited to meet him with other students in a teacher’s living room:

Auden tossing his big head back with a twist of wide ugly grinning lips, his sandy hair, his coarse tweedy brown jacket, his burlap-textured voice and the crackling brilliant utterances—the naughty mischievous boy genius, and the inconsistent white hairless skin of his legs, and the short puffy stubbed fingers—and the carpet slippers—beer he drank, and smoked Lucky Strikes in a black holder, gesticulating with a white new cigarette in his hands, holding matches, talking in a gravelly incisive tone about how Caliban is the natural bestial projection, Ariel the creative imaginative . . . (*J* 180).

The journal entry brings Auden’s physical presence vividly to life. Like the letter, it is another breathless and very funny example of a young poet’s self-conscious and perhaps self-parodying ‘Hero Worship’ of one of her idols. Alongside the gushing prose, Plath’s reference to Auden talking about Caliban and Ariel suggests an intertext for Plath’s own poem, ‘Ariel’, and her decision to name her second collection after this poem. Auden, in other words, wasn’t just a model she learnt and outgrew, but a poet whose public work and private words she remembered.

The same is true of the other poets Kendall mentions: Stevens, Moore, Eliot, Dickinson and Dylan Thomas. In the early letters and Smith-period journals, they are among the poets Plath mentions most frequently. And, as with Auden, we can listen to echoes of their writing in all of Plath’s work, even if it is not immediately obvious. There have been many astute analyses of Plath’s literary heritage. Jahan Ramazani has drawn attention to the elegiac tradition in the work of Stevens and Plath, among others. We can certainly hear one of Stevens’s most famous lines, ‘Let be be finale of seem’,

from ‘The Emperor of Ice-Cream’, in Plath’s ‘Pheasant’: ‘I trespass stupidly. Let be, let be’ (*CP* 191). Vivian Pollak has written about Marianne Moore being an ‘important friend to Plath, then to Hughes, then to Plath’s dismay, not to the two of them together’.⁷ One of Ted Hughes’s poems from *Birthday Letters*, ‘The Literary Life’, also comments on this relationship. Although Plath was dismissive of the achievements of Eliot in a 1958 journal entry – ‘let the Wasteland run how it may’ (*J* 376) – her letters and poems are full of allusions to his work, including his plays. Jo Gill lists half a dozen poems that cite or rework lines from Eliot’s poetry directly.⁸

Emily Dickinson’s influence is less easy to trace but perhaps even more pervasive than that of Stevens, Moore or Eliot. Plath made a reference to Dickinson’s influence on her poetry in a 30 April 1953 letter to her mother in which she included three poems: ‘Tell me what you think of the poems . . . any resemblance to Emily Dickinson is purely intentional’ (*LH* 110). Angela Leighton links Dickinson and Plath’s ‘lifelong interest in effigies, dummies, casts, and heads’.⁹ Their poems about ‘dead women’, she writes, ‘are not forms of elegy, especially not forms of self-elegy, but elegies, rather, of perfect form’.¹⁰ For Leighton, Dickinson and Plath are haunted by the aestheticist legacy of art for art’s sake. They see poetic form ‘not just as a matter of technique or pattern, though that is part of it, but also as a matter of resistance. It is the thing that cuts the poem off, from meaningful duties, civic or ethical, in order to be a thing in itself . . . in the end it is what it is, and that is only a poem.’¹¹ Plath wrote frequently about the attractions (and limits) of poetic self-sufficiency. My own favourite poem of this type is ‘Stillborn’ in which the speaker grapples with the reality of the poem’s not-quite-living life, so that the poems do little more than ‘stupidly stare, and do not speak of her’ (*CP* 142).

Plath’s influences were not just American poets at this point. She didn’t suddenly switch to reading British poets when she lived in Devon and London though perhaps they became more prominent in her mind (Stevie Smith is the best example of this happening). In a letter to Gordon Lameyer on 25 January 1954, for example, she casually namedrops the following five poets: ‘we afterdinnercoffeed while listening to recordings of Eliot, eecummings, Nash, Marianne Moore . . . and the lyric Welshman I’ve been mourning for these past months, Dylan Thomas’ (*LVI* 670). Plath heard Thomas read from *Under Milk Wood* at Amherst College the year before and admitted to getting ‘drunk just on the sound of the words’ (*LVI* 671). At first glance, as the only non-American poet on Kendall’s list of influences, Thomas might seem to stand out. Thomas was a key presence on American campuses and American reading lists in

the early 1950s. For Plath, as for other American poets, he was one of the poetic voices they knew best, both in person and in print.

Stephen Burt's opening essay to *Close Calls With Nonsense*, a fantastic introduction to contemporary American poetry, includes a short history of American poetry in the mid-1950s, the period in which Plath was reading poetry and attempting to make her own name as a writer:

By the mid-1950s most American poetry seemed predictable, passé; its elaborate stanzas reflected the safety of professors' lives. (Kenneth Koch epitomized and parodied their output in one line: 'This Connecticut landscape would have pleased Vermeer.') Rebels in San Francisco, in New York City, and in North Carolina translated poetry from French and Spanish, wrote tiny song-like poems or enormous ambitious ones rather than midsize, controlled, formal work, and published in obscure magazines they ran themselves (such as Cid Corman's *Origin*) rather than in well-established ones tied to academia. Some of these more adventurous poets, like Frank O'Hara and John Ashbery, hung out with abstract painters; others, like Allen Ginsberg and Gary Snyder, hung out with, or were, the Beats. In 1959 Robert Lowell, once deemed an academic formalist, published *Life Studies*, whose poems (and prose) described in painful, self-inculcating detail Lowell's eventful life. Its broken, apparently rambling forms looked shockingly new (they were) and easy to imitate (they weren't though many so-called confessional poets tried).¹²

How does Plath fit in here? What did she make of Lowell's *Life Studies* or what came to be known as the War of the Anthologies between Donald Hall, Robert Pack and Louis Simpson's anthology of formal verse in *New Poets of England and America* (1957) and Donald Allen's anthology of so-called rebels in *The New American Poetry 1945–1960* (1960)? Was she a formalist or a rebel or something in between?

Among living poets, Robert Lowell was clearly an important mentor figure, as was Anne Sexton with whom Plath attended Lowell's poetry writing workshop in Boston in 1959 (Plath and Sexton famously bonded over martinis after class at the Boston Ritz-Carlton). Plath spoke several times about the significance of *Life Studies* for her own writing. 'I've been very excited by what I feel is the new breakthrough that came with, say, Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*',¹³ she explained to Peter Orr in 1962. Significantly, she went on to discuss the work of her friend Anne Sexton: 'I think particularly of the poetess Anne Sexton, who writes about her experiences as a mother; as a mother who's had a nervous breakdown, as an extremely emotional and feeling young woman.'¹⁴ The 'breakthrough'

myth still has traction among Plath critics. Like Susan Rosenbaum, I am not convinced of ‘an explosive transformation’ in Plath’s style.¹⁵ If there were, I certainly don’t think it would be traceable simply to reading Lowell or Sexton. As Rosenbaum observes: ‘The narration of Plath’s “break-through” ignores her continuing sense that to sell her work successfully, she had to style it, to negotiate generic conventions and audience expectations.’¹⁶ There is a change in poetic style, then, but not a sudden one, and not a change that ignored the demands or tastes of poetry readers, much as it pushed at what was formerly considered acceptable subject material for women writers.

As Deryn Rees-Jones points out in a wide-ranging essay on Plath and the gendered self, Plath’s relationship to women poets was ‘largely rivalrous or dismissive’.¹⁷ While, as we have seen, Plath frequently prefers women poets to men or at least spends more time talking about them, she repeatedly falls back on a narrow and very traditional association of prose as feminine and poetry as masculine. She isn’t always as subversive as we want her to be. In ‘A Comparison’, published in 1962, Plath explicitly genders the novelist as a woman:

I imagine him—better say her, for it is the woman I look to for a parallel—I imagine her, then, pruning a rosebush with a large pair of shears, adjusting her spectacles, shuffling about among the teacups, humming, arranging ashtrays or babies, absorbing a slant of light, a fresh edge to the weather and piercing, with a kind of modest, beautiful X-ray vision, the psychic interiors of her neighbors—her neighbors on trains, in the dentist’s waiting room, in the corner teashop (*JP* 56).

Poems, by contrast, are objects that aren’t necessarily tied to a particular person. She compares them to ‘round glass Victorian paperweights’ (*JP* 56). As Rees-Jones states, ‘this description of the poem sounds very much in line with imagist aesthetics’.¹⁸ Plath even cites Pound’s ‘In a Station of the Metro’ in the essay. Plath is not often seen as an Imagist, or even a Post-Imagist. We have known for years about her interest in the visual arts, however, and her own proficiency as a collagist, illustrator and painter. Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley’s book, *Eye Rhymes: Sylvia Plath’s Art of the Visual* (2007), and Frieda Hughes’s edition of *Sylvia Plath: Drawings* (2013) both show Plath’s debt to an international art scene that Plath was able to experience first-hand in both America and England. She wrote two poems inspired by Giorgio de Chirico, two by Henri Rousseau and four by Paul Klee. In a 1958 interview, she spoke of having ‘a visual imagination. . . my inspiration is paintings and not music’ (*SPD* viii). Any appreciation of

her artistic development must engage with this visual world as well, a world that encompasses advertising, cinema, painting and sculpture.

As an American poet living in England, a relatively rare occurrence in the 1960s (young artists like David Hockney went the other way, relocating from London to Los Angeles), Plath was often commissioned to speak and write about American culture. ‘America! America!’ (1963) and ‘Ocean 1212-W’ (1962), non-fiction pieces about her American childhood, were both written in England. One of her most important commissions was to edit *American Poetry Now*, a pamphlet anthology of American poetry published by the Welsh journal *Critical Quarterly*. Plath worked on the anthology in the first half of 1961. Her final selection included twenty-six poems by seventeen poets. Plath didn’t believe anthology editors should include their own work. She also considered but later omitted three out of four members of what Thomas Travisano’s book, *Midcentury Quartet* (1999), identifies as a loose group of some of the most influential American poets of the 1950s. Travisano’s four poets are Bishop, Lowell, Randall Jarrell and John Berryman.

On the verso of the first page of the first draft of Plath’s own poem, ‘Mirror’, she made three columns of possible poets, some with poems next to their name. Bishop and Lowell are the first names in the first column. Perhaps Plath was acknowledging their centrality to mid-century American poetry before dismissing their inclusion as too obvious and not sufficiently ‘now’? For Bishop, Plath had three poems in mind, ‘Wading at Wellfleet’ and ‘Large Bad Picture’ from her first collection, *North & South* (1946), and ‘The Prodigal’ from her second collection, *A Cold Spring* (1955). Lowell was represented by ‘Skunk Hour’ and ‘Inauguration Day: January 1953’, both from *Life Studies* (1959). John Berryman had no poems next to his name. Randall Jarrell wasn’t even mentioned. Delmore Schwartz, Karl Shapiro and May Swenson were also named in the first column, only for Plath to cut them from her final selection. A second column on the page added Theodore Roethke, Richard Eberhart and Stanley Kunitz. A third column listed names only, including Gregory Corso and James Merrill. None of these poets were eventually selected.

Who did Plath choose? Here are the seventeen poets she anthologised in the order in which they appear: Daniel Hoffman, Howard Nemerov, George Starbuck, William Stafford, Denise Levertov, Louis Simpson, Barbara Guest, Richard Wilbur, E. Lucas Myers, Adrienne Rich, Anthony Hecht, Hyam Plutzik, W. S. Merwin, Edgar Bowers, Robert Creeley, Anne Sexton and W. D. Snodgrass. Peter K. Steinberg discusses these choices in a fascinating chapter on Plath’s work as an editor and

reviewer. He speculates, rightly in my opinion, that ‘the poems in *American Poetry Now* were chosen subconsciously to illustrate Plath’s current poetry’, in particular her shift from ‘formal rhyming in favor of free verse’.¹⁹ Steinberg also draws out several compelling comparisons between individual Plath poems and work included in the anthology, demonstrating a far wider circle of influences than has sometimes been acknowledged. Often it feels as if critical analysis of influence in Plath’s poetry begins and ends with Ted Hughes, with occasional reference to Boston-based poets that Plath knew like Lowell and Sexton. By looking at Plath’s journal entries and letters, not to mention her other creative projects, including her editing and reviewing, we discover a more complex and contradictory intellectual history.

Plath’s anthology, like any selection, is a snapshot of one person’s perspective on American poetry; it is not a history of American poetry per se, whatever that might be. Although it gives us a taste of American poetry at the beginning of the 1960s, in particular what was already becoming known as the Confessional School after M. L. Rosenthal’s influential 1959 review of *Life Studies*, I can’t help being struck by Plath’s omissions, some accidental, others deliberate. The New York School poets are represented not by John Ashbery or Frank O’Hara but by Barbara Guest, another example of Plath’s tendency to champion female members of poetic movements over their louder, often more celebrated male peers. There are no Beat poets, just one Black Mountain poet (Creeley) and not a single Objectivist. African American poetry is completely ignored. If she had been able to include British poets, it is difficult to see how she could have omitted two of her favourite women poets, Edith Sitwell and Stevie Smith, and of course her husband, Ted Hughes.

Plath read widely and voraciously but had blind spots and prejudices like all of us. Her American scene was by and large a Smith College student’s idea of mid-century American poetry, augmented and challenged by her own bold and idiosyncratic reading of modernist and contemporary writing, particularly by women poets she considered rivals. In a journal entry written on 1 May 1958, on one of her last days as a Smith College instructor, she admitted to feeling impatient at having to read and presumably teach Marianne Moore and Wallace Stevens. ‘I am already in another world—or between two worlds, one dead, the other dying to be born’ (*J* 376). As she prepared to become a full-time writer, the poets she admired were already ‘dead to her’ but she needed them to help her own poems come to life, even if they were not quite ready ‘to be born’. Becoming the present – what Joyce described as

‘the now, the here, through which all future plunges to the past’ – was a much more difficult process than her journal self could have predicted.

Notes

1. Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, 46.
2. Axelrod, ‘The Poetry of Sylvia Plath’, 75.
3. Axelrod, ‘The Poetry of Sylvia Plath’, 75, 76, 80, 87.
4. References throughout are to the UK edition of *The Collected Poems* (1981) published by Faber and Faber.
5. See also Brain, *The Other Sylvia Plath*, 36–8, and Gill, *The Cambridge Introduction to Sylvia Plath*, 30–3.
6. Kendall, *Sylvia Plath*, 1–2.
7. Pollak, ‘Moore, Plath, Hughes’, 95.
8. Gill, *The Colossus and Crossing the Water*, 92.
9. Leighton, *On Form*, 254.
10. Leighton, *On Form*, 254.
11. Leighton, *On Form*, 257.
12. Burt, *Close Calls with Nonsense*, 6–7.
13. Quoted in Cox and Jones, ‘After the Tranquillized Fifties’, 107.
14. Quoted in Cox and Jones, ‘After the Tranquillized Fifties’, 107.
15. Rosenbaum, *Professing Sincerity*, 144.
16. Rosenbaum, *Professing Sincerity*, 144.
17. Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels*, 121.
18. Rees-Jones, *Consorting with Angels*, 125.
19. Steinberg, ‘What’s been happening in a lot of American poetry’, 137.