

## The Right Mind of Sylvia Plath: Magic, Myth and Metamorphosis

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In a sense, we are all "wired for weird," ready to believe in ghosts or see facial images where there are none, using our natural pattern recognition, agency-detection and facial recognition abilities (Wiseman 53). However, people with a highly active right hemisphere are more likely to claim clairvoyance, telepathy, dream precognition or see faces in unlikely places. One would think left-handers would be more prone to believe in magic; but, in fact, people with mixed-dominance claim more anomalous experiences and are prone to psychosis of the schizophrenic or bipolar variety. Iris E. C. Sommer and René S. Kahn theorized that "bilateral language representation facilitates magical and delusional ideas by means of the more diffuse semantic activation to the right hemisphere compared to the left" (121-2).

Certain features of Sylvia Plath's creative life point to atypical lateralization with either right or bilateral dominance.<sup>1</sup> Many available photographs confirm her right-handedness. Yet, in one, we see her arms crossed, with both hands facing upwards; in many, we see both arms extended, with neither preferred. She always parted her hair on the right, like a left-hander (as did her mother). She attempted sounding out speech very early (6 to 8 weeks according to her mother); she acquired the prosody of foreign languages easily (French and, to a lesser extent, German). Fiction and poetry became equally important to her; both were crafted from her own experiences, theoretical readings, as well as the influences of her admired writers and poets. Her jarring metaphors were not confined to her poetry; her prose was highly metaphoric as well. She was an artist too, whose fine-detailed, linearly oriented drawing style accented concrete objects and places in her physical environment, whether at home or traveling abroad.

Plath's written creations drew on her extreme emotional states, her traumatic experiences and unresolved losses, especially, and ultimately, in times of great stress. Her artistic creations, on the other hand, reflected calm and order, for the most part, suggesting the role of our

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<sup>1</sup> Research has shown that women in general have greater bilateral representation for language than men, who, as a group, are more left dominant for language (Vikingstad et al.)

hypothesized less dominant left-hemisphere. She claimed herself that drawing calmed her down. If we compare her art to another great poet with considerable artistic ability, Victor Hugo, her style depicts reality as it is in upright broad strokes. Hugo's style relies much more heavily on dream-like, non-realistic, pen and ink washes often with his name or initials intertwined within the picture. Hugo *shows* his turbulent emotions, as manifested in the outer world, emanating from an overactive right hemisphere; Plath controlled her emotions by drawing the external world as separate from her sense of self.

### **Genetic Predisposition and Childhood**

It is no secret that Plath learned dissociative techniques from her husband, Ted Hughes. Yet, as Christodoulides made clear, her early interests show a fascination with the kinds of activities and associated theoretical readings, especially Jungian, that I suggest are right-hemisphere inspired. Nor is it surprising that once married she would fall prey to the bizarre atmosphere in the Hughes's family home, sensing "feelings of jealousy and forces of witchcraft and black magic" (Alexander 197). For that matter, Hughes likely possessed a measure of genetic mixed dominance as well, judging by his mother's dissociative proclivities and his own cultivation of the paranormal in hypnotic processes and precognitive dream claims.

There was no myth or magic in Plath's family *per se*, only hard-working, highly literate parents, pushing an academic agenda. Yet her brilliant father was less fit emotionally. A recently discovered FBI file on Otto Plath described his "morbid disposition" and possible Nazi leanings (Alberge).<sup>2</sup> Plath's mother, a sister and a niece were all depressives. Sylvia Plath's son, Nicholas Hughes, also committed suicide, implicating again the genetic connection and/or early trauma from losing his own mother and a subsequent mother figure. Aurelia Plath was also bright and a tireless reader of literature. Whereas Otto was reportedly selfish, domineering and anti-social, Aurelia was both driven for success and highly nurturing, perhaps overbearingly so. She dedicated herself to enabling her children's creative tendencies and aiding in her husband's

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<sup>2</sup> Nancy Hunter Steiner reported a conversation with her former roommate, Sylvia Plath, regarding her father: "'He was an autocrat,' [Plath] recalled. 'I adored and despised him, and I probably wished many times that he were dead. When he obliged me and died, I imagined that I had killed him'" (in Alexander 138).

publishing efforts, similarly to her daughter's efforts on behalf of Ted Hughes. She accentuated the importance of literature, reading her young children nursery rhymes, fairy tales and poetry.

### **Early Poetic Inclinations**

Plath developed a passion for poetry at an uncommonly early age. Prior to Otto Plath's death on November 5, 1940, Sylvia and her brother had lived upstairs so as not to disturb him, descending nightly for a brief ritual of singing a song, listing names of insects, or reciting a poem (Alexander 28). On August 11, 1941, the precocious Sylvia,<sup>3</sup> now eight, had her first short poem published in the *Boston Herald*. On the beach at ten years old, Sylvia listened to her mother read Matthew Arnold's highly rhythmic poem, "The Forsaken Mermaid." This sad tale of a mermaid, whose earth-bound wife abandons him, as he and their children return to the sea, struck Sylvia hard, perhaps linking to the loss of her father. The fact that she could spontaneously compose her own poem on a subsequent night shows enhanced right-hemispheric functioning. The young Sylvia had deft ears for the stress, melody and meter of poetry, which poet and professor Julie Kane has convincingly categorized as right-hemispheric features of emotional prosody. I should add that the very trauma of losing a parent so young, especially the father for a girl, would cause emotional dysregulation in the right hemisphere and predispose her to subsequent mental disorders (Schore; Platt 2007).

### **Summer Trauma and Verbal Loss**

As is well known, Plath plunged into depression following her 1953 summer internship at *Mademoiselle* magazine after learning that she had not been accepted into a summer short story writing class at Harvard. She had lost the ability to read or concentrate.<sup>4</sup> Seeking medical advice, Aurelia Plath agreed to a series of electroconvulsive treatments (ECT) for her daughter as an outpatient. The treatments were badly administered, leaving Sylvia fearful that they would be

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<sup>3</sup> Aurelia Plath claimed in Sylvia's baby book that her daughter had tried to speak when she was only six or eight weeks old (Alexander 21). Certainly, the highly motivated mother encouraged her newborn baby in her attempts at speech.

<sup>4</sup> Plath detailed her verbal loss in a letter addressed to "E.," probably Eddie Cohen, a friend and correspondent at the time (see *Letters Home* 130). She further confessed her "hatred toward the people who would not let me die, but insisted rather in dragging me back into the hell of sordid and meaningless existence" (131).

repeated and that she would never be able to write creatively again (see Ferretter). She would attempt suicide using sleeping pills her mother had locked up; but, taking too many, she vomited and survived.

Plath's first shock treatments are significant, not only for the traumatic and enduring effect they had on her, but also for what they say about her brain organization. At Guy's Hospital in London, researchers interested in cerebral dominance in left- versus right-handers first analyzed a preexisting study on the effect of *one-sided* placement of ECT on verbal memory (Fleminger and Bunce). These results had shown impaired verbal memory after left-sided placement, but not after right-hemispheric treatment. Their new study examined left-, right- and mixed-handers and showed that mixed-handers were more likely than strong left-handers to be right dominant, emphasizing the need to test right-handed patients for language dominance in order to treat the appropriate side of the brain.

If, as described in her semi-autobiographical novel *The Bell Jar*, Plath had been treated on both sides simultaneously, she could have suffered even more verbal loss if her language dominance was bilateral. From the emotional vantage, the results would have been even more severe. Recent research shows that anxiety breaks down into two types: anxiety about the future expressed as verbal rumination in left frontal regions, versus panic disorder emanating from high arousal in the temporo-parietal region of the right hemisphere (Heller et al.; Smeets et al.). If a person's language dominance were atypical, it stands to reason that their anxiety would be doubly pronounced. Plath experienced not only verbal loss, but also insomnia, fear about her future and fear of abandonment—a lethal and recurring combination (Alexander 120). It would be over a month before Plath could read and write again (131). Her high school English teacher painstakingly retaught her the alphabet and spelling. Aurelia Plath also noticed that her daughter's mood swings were more, not less, pronounced after ECT.

With unreserved faith in her new psychiatrist, Dr. Ruth Beuscher, Plath underwent a few "properly" administered electroshock treatments for her depression. The doctor attributed this speedy recovery to her patient's trust in her *and* to a need to be punished (Ferretter).<sup>5</sup> Further,

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, new research also shows that "brain scans of depressed patients receiving placebo treatment showed neurological improvements in certain parts of the brain that were identical to those seen in depressed patients

Plath's psychiatrist gave her permission to hate her mother, displacing the pain and shame of her own self-loathing and/or misplaced guilt over her father's death.

In therapy, Plath used Jungian theory to explain her mother's failures in raising her. She told her psychiatrist that her mother had "too much plain living and high thinking." She "raised [her] with this intense focus on the thinking function, on intellectual performance, which was not her nature; she was an intuitive, feeling type; she just had an extremely high IQ, that's all"; she had not encouraged her to "use a more affective part" of herself (in Alexander 130). Using a theoretical underpinning that accentuated the neglected "intuitive," "feeling," "affective," i.e. right-hemispheric functions, both intensified her anger toward her mother and gave her personal solace. A journal entry written at this time resounds with Plath's maternal hatred, an anomaly in her otherwise loving "Dear Mummy" letters.

Returning prematurely to school in the spring semester of 1954, Plath resumed dating, but seemed unstable and cynical towards others, according to her mother. She had not really "recovered." An experience on a trip to New York to be with a date provides more evidence of Plath's right-hemispheric imbalance. As described to her mother in a letter, she sees a silent French film at the Museum of Modern Art identified as the "Temptation of Saint Joan."<sup>6</sup> The accent on black and white faces, wordlessly portrayed except for written subtitles, facilitated a synchronous connection with Plath's own plight. Reading faces, especially with sad expressions, is in the domain of the right hemisphere. The film concluded, she cried, purging herself of "the buildup of unbelievable tension, then the release, as of the soul of Joan at the stake" (*Letters Home* 135). This emotional linkage with an important female predecessor empowered her, even as it overwhelmed her. She will make a similar linkage in her last poem, "Edge," where she extols the noble Cleopatra's asp-inflicted suicide a few days before her own suicide.<sup>7</sup>

In both cases, the first occurring after her 1953 suicide attempt and the second before her completed suicide, show how severe stress generated these personally meaningful connections with mythic dimensions. Attribution of a self-referential connection between an external event

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receiving cognitive therapy or antidepressants. The mere thought of receiving proper treatment triggered a clear objective change in brain function among the depressed patients in the placebo effect group" (van Lommel 199).

<sup>6</sup> Possibly "La Passion de Jeanne d'Arc," 1925.

<sup>7</sup> Kroll (151-154) uncovered the Cleopatra connection and also pointed out the tightly perceived connection between Plath's life and Graves's White Goddess myth.

and personal stress also occurs in an overactive right hemisphere (Beitman and Shaw). Plath's extremely empathic powers manifested physically when her arms blistered with welts at the exact time she thought Ethel and Julian Rosenberg were being executed (Alexander 113). Delusions about the body and a confusion of self and other are created in the right temporo-parietal junction (Decety and Lamm).

### **Destiny, Dream Precognition and the Occult**

On February 25, 1956, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath famously met at a party in Cambridge. In a poem written many years later, Hughes affirmed their destiny: "That day the solar system married us / Whether we knew it or not" (*Birthday Letters* 14) Their astrological charts conjoined them, as surely as the "ring-moat of tooth-marks" she branded on his face that night (15). The bite had been her response to his pillaging her earrings and headband. But perhaps Plath too felt lured by destiny, and precognizant that "one day I'll have my death of him," as she wrote in the fiercely violent and erotic "Pursuit," a poem she submitted to a magazine and sent to her mother (*Collected Poems* 22).

Similarly, Hughes claimed an early dream in which an angel had shown him a small square of satin, which he will later believe was the same material lying under his dead wife's head in her casket. This dream seemed an obvious holdover from his mother's dream protocols that announced a coming death in the family. During their marriage, the couple will use Tarot cards to read the future and successfully work a homemade Ouija board with an overturned glass to access "spirits," hoping to equal the Yeatses in paranormal prowess. As with James Merrill and David Jackson or Victor Hugo's wife and son, it takes two to make that happen, suggesting an unconscious, right-hemisphere to right-hemisphere melding of minds to direct the glass (Platt 2009). In fact, during the BBC radio program "Two of a Kind," Hughes claimed he and his wife had a "sympathetic," "telepathic union" in a "single shared psyche" (Alexander 255).<sup>8</sup>

### **Different Neural Underpinnings**

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<sup>8</sup> The radio interview was released in 2010 on the British Library's *The Spoken Word: Sylvia Plath* CD.

While mind melding and collaboration, sometimes fraught, were parts of their creative repertoire, Hughes and Plath had basically different types of minds from the perspective of their gender: a marriage of opposites. According to F. H. Previc, the male mind tends towards left-hemispheric dominance with its abundant dopaminergic connections and a "detached," "exploitative," "linear" orientation towards future time and distant space. The female mind, on the other hand, is more right-hemisphere dominant and serotonergic, interested in maintaining a close circle with communal, empathetic ties. In a nutshell, one could evoke the Paleolithic hunter versus the nurturing mother model. Of course, there can be different gradations in both sexes. In a further caveat, Previc's theory does not address the particular case of poets who, as we theorize, may be atypically lateralized.

Nonetheless, Hughes possessed many traits of Previc's highly dopaminergic male. He was a hunter, with disheveled, unwashed ways. He was both highly intelligent and hypersexual, seemingly more interested in sexual conquest than in maintaining close bonds.<sup>9</sup> Plath was highly intelligent, ambitious and sexually motivated as well, her dopaminergic side. But, living in a time when women were considered "sluts" if they acquiesced to male sexual overtures, she was conflicted. She labeled her first experience a rape and went to the hospital for hemorrhaging, yet kept dating him. She consented to more men, sometimes involving violent sex, whether as repetition compulsion or for titillation. In her journals, Plath regularly mentions their "good" love-making sessions and had told her mother when she met Hughes that he was "the strongest man in the world . . . with a voice like the thunder of God" (*Letters Home* 233).

Clearly, Plath was attracted to Hughes for his brute strength as much as for his poetry, having long avowed her need to be dominated by a strong male who would not be jealous of her ambitions. At the same time, she was aware that the need might be an over-compensation for her father's loss. Despite her own poetic ambitions, Plath maintained a tidy home, cooking delicious meals and nurturing the children, while remaining deeply bound to her husband—her serotonergic side. In fact, during her marriage, as her serotonergic self waxed, her dopaminergic creativity waned.

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<sup>9</sup> Judging by Hughes's relationship patterns and the violence of his sexual interactions with Plath (Alexander), he was definitely a highly dopaminergic male.

### Mythic Underpinnings

Of course, one cannot reduce the story of Plath and Hughes to their biochemistry. As I have been intimating, the fatherless daughter who suffered from fragile, vacillating emotional states, adopted external theoretical constructs that would support her shaky sense of self. In her book, *Chapters in a Mythology*, Judith Kroll brilliantly linked her prior research on Yeats with her present scholarship on Plath, intuitively spotting the matriarchal mythic underpinnings of Plath's poetry. Hughes had great respect for Kroll whom he termed "clairvoyant." Not only intuitive, she had also worked hard to uncover Plath's deep admiration for and use of the theories of Robert Graves, Sir James Frazer, William James and Carl Jung, along with the poetic language of W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf. Kroll had an insider's access to Plath's creative process through her papers, her library of annotated books and Hughes's personal recollections. She also understood and shared Plath's interest in "the Tarot, séances, spirits" and "Moon mythology" since she had already worked on a study of Yeats's *A Vision* (Kroll xiii).

Reading Kroll, we see how Plath had integrated the admired writers' theories and language into her psyche almost as though they were her own.<sup>10</sup> Kroll says Plath's fiery *Ariel* poems exploited a deep identification with Robert Graves's poetic formula where the White Goddess, an incarnation of the moon, mediates between the dying and reviving gods who were her inspired poetic lovers. Hughes confirmed that his wife had known the work well and the importance of Graves's work on her, including his notion that domesticity was antithetical to the Goddess. Of course, no one followed Graves more closely than Hughes himself in eschewing the domestic for new love and inspiration.

In Graves's *Oxford Addresses on Poetry*, which Hughes owned and Plath had read, the elder poet had distinguished between Apollonian and Dionysian poetry, the former being "composed in the "forepart" of the poet's mind and the latter Muse-inspired poetry *in trance* "at the back of the mind" (Kroll 229). Kroll recognized that Plath's style had changed from an Apollonian, "mannered, cerebral" style to an opening to the Dionysian, or, I would say, a

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<sup>10</sup> This is not an uncommon practice in gifted writers. It is a feature of memory to incorporate the words and images of others without always distinguishing their provenance from one's own (Sacks).

dominant right- hemispheric style.<sup>11</sup> If she were bilaterally organized, she could have consciously chosen an altered style; but, incorporating Graves's theory *along with* Hughes's tutelage in meditative and hypnotic exercises described below, she could more easily have attained the "possessed," semi-autonomous style of her final year. Kroll says:

A common procedure, according to Ted Hughes in a conversation of June 1974, was to concentrate on a chosen topic, exploring its associations for a fixed length of time, to 'hand it over' to a speaker or persona, and then to put it out of mind until some predetermined time, usually the next day, when she would sit down to write on the subject. This technique combined a deliberate preliminary elaboration of detail with spontaneity in the actual writing of the poem, relying on the unconscious to select and organize the material. The procedure was, in effect, a deliberate stoking of the unconscious. It would also train her in *letting another personality take over*. In the late poems that personality might be said to be her true self, reigning supralogically. [Kroll xxxix, *emphasis added*]

In hemispheric terms, Hughes is describing a conscious method of left-hemispheric elaboration, then an incubation period followed by dissociatively produced language freed from left-hemispheric logic or ordered by a right-hemispheric takeover as in a dictation. Later, he will go so far as to suggest that a poet's future self could dictate to him in the present, making automatic writing a reality. Hughes will come to understand the significant role of the right hemisphere in myth and poetry, most likely based on the burgeoning brain research of the 1970's and 1980's. Graves had intuited this hemispheric connection but not identified it as such. Coincidentally, Kroll's *Chapters in a Mythology* will come out in 1976, the same year as Julian Jaynes's right-hemispheric treatise, *The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Neither Jaynes nor Hughes took into account the existence of right or mixed-dominance for language; neither saw the connection between poetry and bipolar disorder as Kay Redfield Jamison did.

Not coincidentally, gender and familial relations play a central role in consciousness as well as in mythic stories. In my own doctoral dissertation on three women authors writing in French who used mythic underpinnings, I found that their characters were caught between the patriarchal version of their lives and the recognition of their own true matriarchal selves, which

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<sup>11</sup> The Clark Lectures, Trinity College, Cambridge, 1954-5 were published in Graves, *The Crowning Privilege*.

veered toward witch-like, vampiric powers<sup>12</sup> or became internalized as a homosexual or androgynous creative vision. Likewise, Plath had overlong mourned the dying god, now conflated with the husband who had abandoned her. In seeking to recover and be done with him/them in her poetry at 30, she overturned the myth, becoming her own self, now portrayed as a death-wielding witch figure: "Lady Lazarus, the lioness, the queen-bee" (Kroll 11).

Most critics agree that Plath's emotional traumas and losses recalled the eight-year-old's loss of her father. The adoption of the Gravesian myth in her poetry was a bulwark against her emotional storms. However, losing the mythic underpinning may have also dissolved the precarious glue of her right-hemispheric sense of self. Raised a Unitarian, Plath had not been particularly religious. Yet, in the weeks before her death she was saying, "'I am full of God,' and 'I have seen God. He keeps picking me up'" (xxxix).<sup>13</sup> Rather than rejoining her wild "Mother," the Moon-Muse, or defeating her rival, she experiences a sensed merger with the divine masculine, the Father god of her youth. In "Mystic," written ten days before her death, she says, "Once one has seen God, what is the remedy?" (*Collected Poems* 268). "[M]eaning" is everywhere, it "leaks from the molecules" and Christ can be seen "in the faces of rodents" (269). This heightened significance in the smallest things and the sense of being in direct communion with God are classic signs of over-charged temporal lobes in epileptic seizures or mania in bipolars.

Neuropsychologist Michael Persinger (1992) showed in a large study that high increases in verbal significance could synchronize the hemispheres, producing an anomalous sense of presence in people who are interested in or create poetry and fiction, *especially in women*. As he described the phenomenon more generally in a previous book (1987), these types of transient religious experiences unleash memories stored in the temporal lobe since earliest infancy so that:

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<sup>12</sup> See Anne Hébert, *Kamouraska*. The Gravesian theme seemed so evident in this work that I wrote to Hébert in France, asking if she had ever read *The White Goddess*. She responded that she was unaware of Graves's theory, but that she had always believed in the extraordinary vitality of women and that there were always "*femmes fortes*" [strong women] around her in childhood [personal communication]. The myth, then, would seem to be an archetype. Kroll goes on to equate Assia Wevill with the Jungian archetype of the anima rival who replaces the too domesticated wife. Hughes called Assia a "witch's daughter" in *Birthday Letters* (157).

<sup>13</sup> Hughes told Kroll this during her 1974 visit to England and showed her a copy of Plath's *Varieties of Religious Experience* (James).

...old images of parental power blend with contemporary concepts of abstract gods in time and space. The potent affect of the child converges with the intellect of the adult thinker. The limits of infantile perceptions expand to the universe's edge and the God-parent waits, somewhere, to bring intellectual warmth and to remove the anxiety of existence. (112)

Persinger believes that people with increased right-hemispheric dominance are more prone to these events in times of personal crisis or biological stress. Plath's history and present predicament, which now included panic attacks, would seem to fit perfectly into Persinger's scenario.

Kroll postulates that Plath's last nine poems resolved the mythic drama. Suicide was a way of leaving behind her earthly body and a prelude to rebirth through self-transcendence. This egoless, "absolute" transcendence *beyond* a merely reincarnated self—a kind of epiphanic oneness experience—was based on Plath's annotations in James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* and the evidence of her late poetry. Actual states of self-transcendence are fleeting, lasting mere seconds, as one stands still in an awed state of ineffable bliss, feeling no differentiation between the inner self and the outer environment. Rather than being reborn, I would say, Plath had tipped over into mania, entraining a euphoric feeling in the here and now, perhaps poetically identifying her own flesh with the freshness and innocence of her children's bodies, held as a defense against the chaos of her dissolving self.

Dr. Allan Schore has said that dissociation occurs with the loss of vertical connectivity between the frontal cortical and the subcortical (emotional) limbic areas in the right hemisphere. The dissociative loss of her right-hemispheric sense of self may have brought forth an alter personality who felt that death trumped motherhood and the successful endeavors that lay in Plath's immediate future. Schooled in dissociation and suffering from unbearable stress, she sensed a divine masculine presence, restoring lost father and husband and redeeming her in the here and now. The suicide, fueled by a manic-induced confusion with the phantom embrace, left two small, needy children in her wake, with all the baggage, both psychological and physical, that their abandonment entailed.

Plath's words and behavior on the night of the suicide, as recounted by her downstairs neighbor, Trevor Thomas, indeed suggest a dopaminergic surge where religious ideation prevailed. Wanting to pay for stamps he had given her that night, she tells him "Oh! But I must

pay you or I won't be right with my conscience before God, will I?" Ten minutes later, when Thomas finds her still in the hallway, he says he will call Dr. Horder. Plath replies, "Oh, no please, don't do that. I'm just having a marvelous dream, a most wonderful vision" (Alexander 329). Despite the urgency and publishing potential of her aggressive *Ariel* poems (likely another manifestation of unopposed dopamine), as well as an upcoming assignment for the BBC and a slated meeting with her British editor that day, she committed suicide in the early hours of the morning.

Plath had begun smoking around this time, another risk factor for suicidal behavior (Mann). A life-time history of impulsive-aggressive behaviors also indicates a predisposition to suicide (Turecki). Plath had her share of anger management issues. Some research puts bipolar disorder and borderline personality disorder on the same spectrum (Cooper). In a rare personal interview with Eilat Negev, Hughes said rather dismissively: Plath "tended to focus on the pain and to scratch at the wound. If she had been able to free herself from that one wound that wracked her, she might have changed, led a normal life, even perhaps have felt healthy enough to stop writing" (in Koren and Negev 166). Plath alive, but not writing, is impossible to imagine.

Hughes blamed Plath's father. The husband's own loving efforts to contribute to his wife's poetry had backfired. Making a "solid writing-table / that would last a lifetime," he had created:

a perfect landing pad

For your inspiration. I did not

Know I had made and fitted a door

Opening downwards into your Daddy's grave

and resurrecting him (*Birthday Letters* 138). On the one hand, Hughes is saying Plath wrote because she was obsessed with her wound; but, on the other, he grandly extolled the mythical, archetypal quality of her poetry as "one of emblematic visionary events, mathematical symmetries, and clairvoyance, metamorphoses..." (qtd. in Kroll 6). He also claimed "she had free and controlled access to depths formerly reserved to the primitive ecstatic priests, shamans and Holy men..." (4).

We can blame neither the dead father nor the philandering husband for Plath's ultimate act. In addition to being bipolar, she had just suffered too much: a badly administered ECT; incarceration in a mental hospital; Fifties' era psychotherapy that overplayed the bad mother; a

miscarriage; an appendectomy; post-partum-depression; an upper-respiratory illness; some negative reviews of *The Bell Jar*. Her British doctor called her "pathologically depressed" and "abnormally sensitive," both classifications suggest an overactive right hemisphere (Alexander 325). Parnate, a newly developed antidepressant that she had begun taking only days before her death, is, to this day, considered a drug of last resort because it may increase suicidal thoughts. Hughes blamed the drug as well.

As cited many times, Plath was also coping with the coldest winter in London since the early 19th century, intermittent loss of light, heat and no telephone. The loss of her *au pair* further diminished her ability to cope. Dark winter weather alone can cause seasonal affective disorder (SAD). The resultant serotonin deficiency would produce depression, disruption of the sleep-wake cycle, pathological crying, and the inability to inhibit strong emotional reactions to either external or internal stimuli (Hesse). Ultimately, since the serotonin and dopamine systems interact, as her serotonin plunged, her dopamine would have surged uninhibited, manifesting as impulsive aggression toward the self or others (she had also attacked her *au pair*) in the presence of a significant life stressor (Dongiu and Patrick).

Fortunately, enough of her serotonergic self remained to protect her children from asphyxiation in her self-aggressive or, Kroll would say, self-transcendent act. The combination of serotonin hypofunction and impulsive acts of aggression is said to be heritable. Otto Plath's misdiagnosis and refusal to treat his diabetes could be considered a precedent for his daughter's suicidal tendencies. Research shows that widespread serotonergic abnormalities may account for depression *generally*; but serotonergic deficits *specifically* localized in the ventral prefrontal cortex, which controls impulsive activity, are associated with suicide when there are major precipitating factors such as failure, or loss of a job or a relationship partner (Dongiu and Patrick). As we saw, Plath's first major suicide attempt followed a difficult summer in New York and failure to be accepted into a Harvard writing class. The completed suicide followed the loss of her husband and the other highly stressful environmental factors listed above.

Plath's mother wrote these poignant words regarding her daughter at the end of *Letters Home*: "Her physical energies had been depleted by illness, anxiety and overwork, and although she had for so long managed to be gallant and equal to the life-experience, some darker day than usual had temporarily made it seem impossible to pursue" (500).

Graves (1966) said that "True poetic practice implies a mind so miraculously attuned and illuminated that it can form words, by a chain of more-than-coincidences, into a living entity—a poem that goes about on its own (for centuries after the author's death, perhaps) affecting readers with its stored magic" (490). Sylvia Plath lived a life seemingly ruled by "more-than-coincidences," as though destiny itself had brought her to poetry, to Cambridge, to Hughes, to Graves, to Yeats's house to live and to die. Her poetry lives on not because of devotion to a muse, as a Muse-poet in Graves's scheme can only be a man, but because of her intelligence, linguistic erudition and superior poetic prowess, whether cerebral or nearly autonomous. Her words are magical because they reflect the adored predecessors and are infused with the pain of her own wounds. They embody powerful mythic imagery with a rhythmic flow wholly her own. Her beauty and maternal devotion played no small part elevating her in the poetic pantheon. Her suffering and sacrifice leave us yearning and mournful as for any dying god. She was caught in the maw of a myth, but the youthful goddess was not supposed to die. Her death left us, her readers, spellbound in her relentless grip.

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