Bee-Stung In October

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Among the most recent attempts to define the canon, Rita Dove's *The Penguin Anthology of Twentieth Century Poetry*, published just two days before Plath's birthday in 2011, created enormous . . . well, buzz. Though Plath's absence, perhaps the most significant in Dove's book, was partly explained by permissions fees,[1] some essayists and reviewers interpreted Plath's omission as a deliberate *j'accuse.* The most startling agreement came from Robert Archambeau, who suggested, among other things, that Dove was specifically offended by "nigger-eye / berries"—i.e., a racist slur in what he calls one of Plath's "better-known poems," "Ariel" ("What's the Matter with American Poetry?"). Few would declare themselves free of all prejudice—Dove herself has been taken to task for neglecting "disability poetics"[2]—but my purpose here is to prove Archambeau's particular charge baseless, examine the theme of race, and then expand on these issues within the larger context within Plath's poetic *oeuvre,* especially the great bee poems.

First, it seems unlikely that Dove would have deleted Plath on the grounds of the hypothetically offensive phrase in "Ariel," given her inclusion of Hart Crane's "The River," in which a "tideless spell" becomes "A liquid theme that floating niggers swell" (69). Yes, Crane's passage is an admission of historical complicity; but is not it possible that Plath is being satirical in "Ariel," which Archambeau seems not to recognize as the same work which gave its title to one of the twentieth-century's "better-known" collections of poetry?

A critic, teacher, and practitioner of "creative writing," Archambeau fails as a reader in several primal ways. For starters, in addition to ignoring Plath's grounding in Shakespeare, which fanned an already present flair for self-dramatization, Archambeau seems oblivious to those aforementioned satirical gifts, and also to her insistence, in the British Council interview with Peter Orr, that the *Ariel* poems were to be read aloud—i.e., drawn into the body as aural music

[1] In James Fenton's brief essay on the subject of Dove's anthology and Helen Vendler's highly critical piece in the *New York Review of Books*, he states that Vendler is "known to bear, like the Turk, no rival near the throne." The phrasing makes it difficult to tell if Fenton shares what he implies is a widely held assessment, but Vendler's long-time championing of Dove's work, among many others; her catholicity of taste; and her obvious delight in discovering younger talent make 'territoriality' seem an unfair charge.

[2] See Jennifer Bartlett, "Dissing Disability Poetics": http://newpagesblog.blogspot.com/2012/01/dissing-disability-poetics.html.

(Plath, "An Interview.") "Nigger-eye / berries"—*say* the words to feel the tongue-palpable pleasure in those gutturals, harsh "r"s, and plosives, and also to *feel* the upper lip forced into an inadvertent snarl then shaped as though ready to spit. Here Plath is chewing, if only in her mind, berries fat to bursting then spewing the black venom back into the face of her native country's racism, which Archambeau fails too to recognize as a way of condemning our national stain.

In the Orr conversation and reading, released shortly after Plath's death, quoted frequently in the voluminous studies about her life and work, and now even available on YouTube, Plath describes herself as "rather a political person" ("An Interview"). A devout reader of the *Nation* and other American current affairs periodicals, she warned her mother stringently about the dangers of voting for Eisenhower (*Letters Home* 283)—remember "with all deliberate speed," a clause he inserted to appease segregationists? Apparently Archambeau does not, nor the publication of Lowell's "For the Union Dead" in the *Atlantic* in 1960, with its "drained faces of Negro school-children," though perhaps Archambeau's stated preference for Berryman makes him certain as well that lack of knowledge of yet another of the twentieth century's "better-known poems" is unnecessary (55). But while admitting that *The Dream Songs* is rife with "culturally insensitive, wince-inducing language," Archambeau accuses neither male poet of appropriating, respectively, the young victims of desegregation, nor those derogated by minstrelsy ("What's the Matter with American Poetry?").

It is puzzling that when he thinks of an African-American poet better suited to write about Dove's anthology, neither Elizabeth Alexander or Major Jackson, both directly linked to Plath, come to mind. The latter's decision to read "Daddy" at the induction of Plath into St. John the Divine's Poets' Cornerin November 2010 makes perfect sense, Jackson having felt—paradoxically but not coincidentally—the black boot of oppression.[3] As for Alexander, one of our most recent inaugural poets and also renowned for various pieces about women's hair, she conjures Plath in "The Female Seer Will Burn Upon This Pyre" as a witch-like, oracular presence as well as a benevolent older guide into what remains a great mystery: how to combine "feminine" / domestic rituals with *poesis*. In the latter capacity, Plath is not seen as "Other" but complimented for the "adept" fashion in which she rolls Alexander's "improbably long" but "unruly" hair on orange juice cans, a technique used by white teenage girls in the 1960s for that

[3] The program for the ceremony is available at http://www.stjohndivine.org/Plath.html> .

stick-straight look, which was sometimes accomplished by ironing, hence the word "singe," leading us back to the title.

There is no sense, however, that Plath is attempting to make Alexander "white" in a line like "She knows how to pull it tight" especially since, in a dropped kind of tag—or uncompliant strand—Alexander's phrase "Few words" makes it clear the reference is poetry and what an older sister might teach, especially since the poems in *Antebellum Dream Book* allude so frequently to Alexander's marriage and two pregnancies. Indeed, the younger poet seems to be observing every detail of the "rented kitchen" where an initiation seems underway into the dual ancient lore of womanhood and poetry.

> She speaks a word,
>
> "immolate," then a single sentence
> of prophecy. The hairdo done,
> the nursery tidy, the floor swept clean
>
> of burnt hair and bumblebee husks. (34)

Race forms part of a key to Plath's thematics and imagery, which may be stated in one word: "colony." What was Puritan New England, after all? Plath would have learned this in grade school, not to mention how her native region immediately reacted to the Native Americans and dense woods, as well as continuing the Mother Country's tradition of persecuting women usually deemed "eccentric" or "rebellious" as witches; then she would have been taught about Abolitionism and its hub of activity in Boston. Perhaps it was then she discovered that just as English cities centered around cotton mills feared starvation without a ready supply of Southern cotton in the Civil War era, they had cousins in various Massachusetts towns supported by the same industry, and thus great numbers who took the South's side.

"The same industry"—as soon as I typed the phrase, I thought of another bee poem, "Stings," and "like an industrious virgin" (*Collected Poems* 215). Why should a woman who has never had sex be described in terms of machinery? Though there are pistons and engines that huff, puff, and drive through Plath's poems, in my own native South, of course, the equivalent was "manpower," specifically black and commodified, as well as conveniently acting, as if in parallel fashion, the entity onto which whites, especially white men, could project evil.

The bee poems become vastly richer—and, incidentally, the accusation of racism more ludicrous—when understood not simply as analogues of the dissolution of the Plath-Hughes marriage but in terms of Plath's internalization of historical colonialism: as England had done to New England and New England had done to the South, Plath, too, had been stripped, so to speak, of her raw materials for others' use since childhood.

Yet "The Arrival of the Bee Box" places Plath in the position to wreak vengeance: having placed a command for a white wooden container whose contents the poet cannot see, only envision in lightning-flash changes of metaphor and tone, it is surely significant, contextually, that these begin "With the swarmy feeling of African hands / Minute and shrunk for export, / Black on black, angrily clambering" (213). Plath recognizes her ultimate power to let the bees starve or send them back, but she wonders "how hungry they are," and in the end, she refuses the imperial role, wondering again, this time in almost child-like fashion—with Aurelia Plath or Ted Hughes in mind (213)?—that "I am no source of honey / So why should they turn on me?" (213). Good question, one born of experience; nevertheless, the poem ends with a declaration of independence, at least for the bees: if she is "sweet God," she "will set them free" (213).

The accusation of Plath as racist is finally as false a charge as bee-thievery. They were her birthright as much as her belief in original sin, which, South or North, is predicated on hatred of Otherness. Since biblical times, blacks and women have been stigmatized in various ways—"the mark of Cain," "the curse"—and used as currency. I do not know if a similar relationship exists between black men and women, but the race and the gender were generally believed to be lacking in what we term "reason." It is less of a stretch as bees fly "on their hysterical elastics" to travel from the accusation that Plath was racist to another, culturally related one of downright insanity; but I remember my shock at reading in Diane Middlebrook's *Her Husband* that Hughes returned to Court Green "during the second week in October" 1962, in the midst of the great bee sequence, "to pack his clothes and books and papers, and move out," and, when not humming, provided details about his affair "with leer after leer," as she wrote her mother (212, Middlebrook 183). Any such situation would *drive* most women crazy, not fail to interrupt states of focus so intense that they continue to produce great art. (As for "colony" and madness, see Foucault.)

Plath knew she was no "plaster saint," but why is Hughes never accused of sociopathy, or at least narcissistic personality disorder?[4] Plath's anxiety that her fate would ultimately resemble her mother's—giving up writing to support her children, Frieda and Nicholas Hughes—made her crave protection, as she writes in "The Bee Meeting," one of her most plangent expressions of vulnerability and probably written just prior to Hughes's arrival at Court Green:

> I am nude as a chicken neck, does nobody love me?
> Yes, here is the secretary of bees with her white shop smock,
> Buttoning the cuffs at my wrists and the slit from my neck to my knees.
> Now I am milkweed silk, the bees will not notice.
> They will not smell my fear, my fear, my fear. (*Collected Poems* 211)

Yes, in her last weeks, she "fear"[ed] her mind giving way, but what about the final poems she wrote, each an exercise in technical mastery, not to mention being among her best, though in even a worse state of mind? Hughes realized, of course, that these were not works of derangement but genius, and he added them to the *Ariel* manuscript while deleting other and more repetitive work he deemed inferior. If the omissions and re-ordering of *Ariel* as we know and celebrate it here left behind a basic problem—Plath's suicide is made to seem inevitable, though her careful protection of her children certainly was not—then what I wish to emphasize here is that mental illness remains yet another myth surrounding the act of self-slaughter.[5]

Assia Guttmann Wevill—Slavic, Russian, Jewish, a "lover of unreason," as her biographers characterize her[6]—is often blamed for Plath's death, but who leaves his wife for a lover, then spends a weekend with yet another woman, Susan Alliston, whose poems and journals, exercises in channelling Plath, he also edited?[7] "Ted has become a *little* man," Plath told Elizabeth Sigmund, her friend in Devon and one of *The Bell Jar*'s dedicatees, describing the

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[4] A vast canon on narcissistic personality disorder—and the havoc it wreaks—abounds, but the classic study is Alice Miller's *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self* (New York: Basic Books, 2008). Closely related, if not a necessary component, of borderline personality disorder are three books accessible to a general audience: *The Sociopath Next Door* by Martha Stout, Ph.D. (New York: Broadway Books, 2005); *The Essential Family Guide to Borderline Personality Disorder* by Randi Kreger (Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 2008); and *Stop Walking on Eggshells* by Kreger and Paul Mason, MS (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2010.
[5] See Jill Bialosky, *History of a Suicide* (New York: Atria Books, 2011). And just when you thought it was safe to unlock the attic door, see also Gary Nunn's essay "The feminisation of madness is crazy": http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/mind-your-language/2012/mar/08/mind-your-language-feminisation-madness> .
[6] Yehuda Koren and Eliat Negev, *Lover of Unreason: Assia Wevill, Sylvia Plath's Rival and Ted Hughes' Doomed Love* (New York: DaCapo Press, 2008).
[7] Susan Alliston, *Poems and Journals: 1960-1968* (London: Five Leaves Publications, 2010).

diminution he suffered in her eyes through his lies and deceit (Sigmund 104). Comparing him to Napoleon in "The Swarm," she writes "These are chess people you play with, / Still figures of ivory" (*Collected Poems* 216). Human beings are not to be treated like pawns, but Hughes continued in this pattern lifelong: Carol Orchard was able to put up with his need to have both a wife and a mistress, and if Plath was not, some people can tolerate infidelity—and what goes with the game—while others cannot. Thus to dismiss Plath's "sexual jealousy" in terms of madness belongs to another mindless swarm of accusations; she was no more Medea than she was M. Bonaparte.

"It seems bees have a notion of honor," Plath writes in the same poem (217). Long live those bees! But let them be turned on the miniature Napoleons of this world, not a woman driven to the "edge," yes, but by having been convinced that she was unlovable, a pattern that began with her mother, a metaphoric slave-driver who refused her daughter to have her own life. Plath's one genuine breakdown occurred when she fled New York City, as all readers of *The Bell Jar* will remember; her mother's welcome consisted of the news that she had been turned down for a short-story class with Frank O'Connor at Harvard. Plath was not even allowed her own failures, for, like her successes they were immediately "appropriated"—another *j'accuse* often leveled at Plath, in particular with regard to the *Shoah*[8]—by the equally narcissistic Aurelia Plath . Might those same bees be said to have stung Plath's mother senseless? She died of Alzheimer's, after all.

[8] See Blakely, "James Fenton, An Anthology, and Anniversaries": http://diannblakely.wordpress.com/2013/02/25

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