New Biography of Sylvia Plath Rehabilitates the Martyr--Minus the Mania

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While Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* has been much dissected in the media recently, due to the 50th anniversary of its publication, no notice has been paid to the same milestone for the printing of Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*, which first appeared in a British edition, under the pseudonym Victoria Lucas, just one month before she killed herself on February 11, 1963.

The conventional feminist wisdom is that Plath was a victim of her misogynist husband, the British poet Ted Hughes, who left her for another woman six months before her suicide. However, in a new biography, *An American Isis: The Life and Art of Sylvia Plath* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), Carl Rollyson contends that Plath was the forerunner of today's modern woman who wants it all; she tried to free herself from the shackles of 1950's (white) suburban mores condemned by Friedan in her classic.

Through close examination of previously overlooked journals and letters, in addition to crucial stories and poems, Rollyson concludes Plath was so intent on being a great daughter, writer, friend, lover, wife, and mother, she created a myth for herself as the primordial Egyptian goddess Isis, who was all things to all people. In a later incarnation, Isis put back together the pieces of her consort, Osiris, after his jealous brother chopped him up.

Unfortunately, in the case of Hughes, the glue didn't stick. His sister Olwyn was notoriously envious of Plath, and collaborated with her brother, as executor of Plath’s estate, in trying to block, usually successfully, any biographies they didn't authorize. Hence, Rollyson relied on other sources to achieve what is a sympathetic, yet balanced, chronicle of Sylvia Plath's brief, turbulent life.

Nonetheless, in his zeal to present these new findings, Rollyson overlooks an important piece of the psychological puzzle that was Sylvia Plath. He readily admits that Plath was depressed many times, and often in psychiatric treatment. This was the case not just before she ended her life, but also before her only other suicide attempt, at age 20, on which the fictional *Bell Jar* is closely based. Although he repeatedly notes Plath's moodiness, and even angry outbursts, as inexplicable for someone always on the make to please a potential audience, he never uses the word "manic" to identify what is outsized about her personality even though irritability can be one symptom of mania.

Writing not as a clinician, but as someone living with bipolar disorder, I recognize mania, at least in part, as the energy that fueled her ambition. In my opinion, Plath was cycling rapidly through elation and dejection during the last months of her life, when she wrote her best poems, yet was plagued by the doubts of a single mother of two. She was also a stranger in a strange land--an American in England, no matter how friendly she initially thought the place.

I base this interpretation on my own humble experience as a writer, whose moods lurched like a subway train, before being thrown on the track to my worst depression in 2006. I wish I could claim the poems I wrote that year were the equivalent of those collected in her final work, the ground-breaking "Ariel," but I'm glad I didn't pay with my life to produce them.
More typically for Plath, a letdown would follow a period of achievement, as the pressure for continued success overwhelmed her. For example, she was at the top of her form as a Smith College student, and Mademoiselle guest editor, but then plunged into an unexpected depression that sapped her creative energy, leading to her suicide attempt. It would take almost a decade for her to "exorcise" this experience by writing The Bell Jar, whose heroine Esther Greenwood has a mordant wit that Rollyson rightly identifies as one of Plath's chief literary mechanisms for "exercising" control, throughout her writing career, over her largely autobiographical material.

Am I newly pathologizing Plath at a time when many people, who feel misdiagnosed, or even wrongly labeled as mentally ill, would like to bust out of the straightjacket of such interpretations?

Find out in the next issue of RECOVERe-works. Two wrongs don't make a right, but Rollyson ingeniously upsets the myth of Plath solely as a victim, and with it the claims that she was thoroughly traumatized not only by Hughes (whom she actually threw out of the house as soon as she learned of his affair), but also by her overbearing German father. The biographer asserts that "Daddy," her most famous poem, in which she compares the subject’s "atrocities" to those of the Nazis, was another successful exorcism.

Instead, Rollyson substitutes a new legend, that Plath was paradoxically as agile as she was fragile (notice her balancing her lithe 5' 9" frame on a tree limb in the book's cover photo), that her dreams for herself were huge ("The Colossus" is the title of her first poetry collection), and that, in her 30 years, she gained much of what she craved. Or, as Rollyson relates in the introduction, the poet Anne Sexton, Plath’s comrade in confessional arms, crassly called Plath's suicide "a good career move."

Rollyson demonstrates that, steeped as Plath was in the high (for example, Shakespeare) and low (for example, Superman) culture of her time, she naturally saw herself in mythic terms. My analysis reinforces his. Such expectations can drive a person to great heights, from which it is frightening to look down. As far as I can tell from An American Isis, Plath reached such peaks through disciplined effort; she was never manic enough to be literally delusional, nor did she engage in the classic behaviors of buying sprees and hyper-sexuality. But in her own terms, she fell down enough times to believe in the end she would never get up again.

Furthermore, this combination of hypomania and depression enabled Plath to make her way in the male-dominated literary world of the 1950's and early 60's because she fit the Romantic mold of the mad poet, which did not carry the general stigma against "the insane." (She published The Bell Jar pseudonymously because of the way she berated her "mother" in the novel; her psychological problems were well-known in artistic circles.)

It also accounts for why Sylvia Plath continues to be a touchstone for memoir writers who want to turn their mental illness (particularly mania or depression) into personal mythology. Beginning with Elizabeth Wurtzel's Prozac Nation (1994), this trend has reached such a sensational pitch that the general reading public has little idea what the daily grind of recovery is like. Therapy and medication may be part of these autobiographies, but the overall impression is of one misunderstood, creative person against a bureaucratic, often cruel world.
What this latest generation of confessional writers doesn’t seem to recognize is that their flamboyance (and publishing success) depends on the more tolerant social environment created by the successful political movement, of the last 30 years, to secure the rights of mental health care consumers, sometimes aided by their families and psychiatric rehabilitation professionals.

Certainly, the “mental illness system” can still be nightmarish. And reformers need individual, inspirational tales to motivate their continued transformation of prevention and care. Thus, perhaps the best way we can memorialize Sylvia Plath is by embracing her efforts to be a whole human being, beyond the myth and the mania which can cloud our judgment of the persons we want to be-come.

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