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A Textual Perspective on the Mythology of Sylvia Plath: The History and Interpretations of *Ariel*

Tekstowa perspektywa mitologii Sylvii Plath: historia i interpretacje *Ariela*

Abstract

Sylvia Plath's posthumous publication of *Ariel* in 1965 sparked the formation of the Plath mythos, intertwining her tragic death with the reception of her work. While many critics, particularly feminist scholars, attempted to move away from the biography-driven mad woman/genius dichotomy, they often inadvertently perpetuated the mythos by continuing to focus on biographical contexts rather than Plath's creative output. This article examines Marjorie Perloff's seminal 1984 essay, *The Two Ariels*, which critiques Ted Hughes's editorial influence on *Ariel* by arguing that his rearrangements distorted Plath's intended narrative of female rage and hope, emphasizing death and despair instead. While Perloff reclaims Plath's original narrative structure, the article contends that her work still operates within Hughes's framing, centering on the poems he excluded. The article thus calls for a more rigorous textual critique of *Ariel* and its paratexts, advocating for a philological approach to offer a more balanced understanding of Plath's work, free from the constraints of mythologization.

Keywords

Ariel, biography, literary mythology, textual criticism, Plath mythos, Sylvia Plath

Abstrakt

Pośmiertna publikacja tomu *Ariel* Sylvii Plath w 1965 roku zapoczątkowała powstanie mitu Plath, splatając jej tragiczną śmierć z odbiorem jej twórczości. Podczas gdy wielu krytyków, zwłaszcza o feministycznych poglądach, próbowało odejść od napędzanej biografią dychotomii szalonej kobiety/geniusza, często nieświadomie utrwalali mit, ciągle skupiając

się na kontekstach biograficznych, a nie na twórczości Plath. W niniejszym artykule przeanalizowano przełomowy esej Marjorie Perloff z 1984 roku, zatytułowany *The Two Ariels*, w którym autorka krytykuje wpływ redaktorski Teda Hughesa na tom *Ariel*, argumentując, że jego zmiany zniekształciły zamierzoną przez Plath narrację o kobiecej wściekłości i nadziei, kładąc nacisk na śmierć i rozpacz. Choć Perloff przywraca oryginalną strukturę narracyjną Plath, autorka artykułu twierdzi, że twórczość Plath nadal funkcjonuje w ramach wyznaczonych przez Hughesa, koncentrując się na wierszach, które pominął. W związku z tym artykuł apeluje o bardziej rygorystyczną krytykę tekstu *Ariela* i jego paratekstów, opowiadając się za podejściem filologicznym, które pozwoliłoby na bardziej wyważone zrozumienie twórczości Plath, wolne od ograniczeń mitologizacji.

Słowa kluczowe:

Ariel, biografia, mitologia literacka, krytyka tekstu, mity Plath, Sylvia Plath

Introduction: The Problematic Mythos of Sylvia Plath

A spectre haunts the study of Sylvia Plath—the spectre of biography. She still is habitually cast in a multitude of roles: the Freudian daughter par excellence, a "modern Electra" (Phillips 131); a naïve American woman desperate to be a housewife; a housewife yearning to be recognized as a poet; a confessional poet, a poetess, *the* poet; the thesaurus-clutching craftswoman; the betrayed wife, "silent" and silenced (Malcolm 1993/1995); the "Marilyn Monroe of modern literature" (Rollyson 2), a stellar yet tragic figure; a "forever icon" (Arnold 2000), a feminist cult figure (Papenfuss 2017); and ultimately, a suicide victim. There can be little doubt that, since her suicide, numerous myths have been created around Plath, each swelling into a mythos that is as intricate and convoluted as the numerous mythologies, historical contexts and cultural symbols such mythos rather uncritically draws upon. This troublesomely multifaceted Plath mythos has been predominantly shaped by the posthumous framing of her creative output, which has been intensely intertwined with her personal life. The public's fascination with the morbid, coupled with the pervasive spread of what can only be described as literary gossip, has only further reified and scandalized Plath's biography over time.

Despite some significant recent progress in Plath scholarship,[1] it remains, to a certain degree, dominated by this ever-expanding biography-inspired mythology.[2] Plath's widely accepted categorization as a confessional poet appears to have ossified the field, with her life-history oftentimes treated as authoritative for many scholarly interpretations. In

1 For a notable collection of examples illustrating the demystification of Plath's creative output through its recontextualization within socio-political realities, see Brain 2019.

2 For an example of self-awareness in the construction of Plath's mythos, see Gilbert 1989. For a remarkably prescient critical overview, see Kroll 1976/2008.

this respect, M.L. Rosenthal's notorious categorisation of Plath as a "skilled suicide-artist" still appears to be conventionally accepted as the rarely questioned baseline for approaching her poetic oeuvre (69). This, in turn, has imbued her biography with an almost forensic, if not hagiographical, quality that remains largely unexamined. While the mechanisms behind this mythologization—the reciprocal relationship between reader and text, in which Plath haunts the reader/scholar and the reader/scholar haunts Plath—have been well-studied (cf. Rose 1997; Crowther 2017), most (re) interpretations still rely heavily on rather untethered speculation about Plath's own texts to support biographical conjectures and vice versa.[3] This reliance perpetuates the mythos rather than dismantling it, and it often fails to critically engage with the rich biography-driven paratext that surrounds the figure of Plath and plays a key role in the formation of this mythology.

This bio/bibliographical discrepancy is itself noteworthy. It underscores that, despite the thorough theorization of biography's role in Plath studies, the spectre of biography continues to haunt scholars. Their interpretative frameworks often fail to account for their complicity in perpetuating the Plath mythos, and they struggle to differentiate between the paratextual (biographical), contextual (socio-cultural), and the truly textual elements of her work. This raises a central question for this article's inquiry: what might happen if the convention in Plath studies shifted from a biography-oriented approach to a more text-oriented one? Following Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg's refreshingly enthusiastic assertation that there is "the whole undiscovered world" of Plath's archives awaiting to be studied (2), the article intends to indicate how adopting the perspective of textual studies may help to challenge and disprove the platitude that, when it comes to both her life and work, nothing new can be said about Plath—both a fairly common criticism that aims at contemporary Plath scholars and a not-so-unpopular belief among these scholars themselves.

Bridging the Bio/Bibliographical Divide: The Promise of Textual Criticism

Somewhat iconoclastic by the standards of conventional Plath scholarship, the new perspective proposed here suggests a a methodology grounded in the underexplored potential of textual studies. Unlike theory-heavy interpretative criticism, textual criticism prioritizes the evidentiary and

[3] For a brief yet comprehensive critical overview of such (re)interpretations of Plath's oeuvre, see Gill 2008.

material dimensions of the text, curbing speculative mythologization and offering tools to identify it when it arises. This approach enables a dual focus: on Plath's oeuvre as a collection of texts and on her biography as a form of writing itself—life-as-text. Rather than insisting on a strict division between creative texts and biographical context—a view often met with scepticism—this methodology encourages a nuanced integration. Textual criticism, as Christina Shuttleworth Kraus notes, can bridge the supposed divide between "philological/textual" work and "discursive studies," revealing their interdependence. In Plath studies, where interpretative criticism already thrives, this article emphasizes the need for equally rigorous textual analysis to harmonize the factual, fictional, and fabulative threads that define Plath's mythos.

The semantic choices used throughout this article—such as "mythology," "hagiography," and "iconoclasm"—may seem rhetorically excessive. However, these terms are not of my own invention; they are rather common metaphors used to conceptualize the cultural figure of Plath, sometimes critically, sometimes not.[4] My intent is not to employ them for rhetorical flourish alone but to treat them literally—that is, textually. Why attempt to dissect the Plath myth through psychoanalysis (or any other theoretical approach), which may risk further obfuscation, when the well-established methods of textual studies exist and are specifically designed to address mythologies and hagiographies—intricate narratives (histories, or perhaps *her*stories) constructed over centuries of collective interpretative work?

Textual criticism is by no means a panacea for unravelling the complexities of Plath scholarship (if such a remedy even exists). Nonetheless, it may help balance the inescapable critical complicity in the mythologization of Plath by providing a dimension that has been largely overlooked in her studies: the grounded, philological approach that complements, rather than negates, highly theoretical speculations. Without denying the importance of theory, textual studies can shift the focus from tentative biographical assumptions to a more rigorous bibliography of Plath's work—a bibliography that productively merges history, life, and literature. In what follows, the article provides a sketch study of Plath's seminal poetry collection *Ariel* in order to outline how textual criticism can be applied to the bio/bibliographical study of the poet, offering a possible new lens for understanding her life and work.

[4] For a critique of such metaphorization, see Egeland 2013. For a recent example of the opposite, see Clark 2020. It should be noted that Clark's biography, despite not problematizing the mythologization of Plath, still makes an important contribution to the reversal of its general tone: from the negative, somewhat death-obsessed to the positive, life-celebrating one.

Where It All Started: The Posthumous Ariel

As with all discussions of Plath, whether academic or popular, one biographical fact remains central—her suicide. This fact must be addressed before delving into textual criticism within Plath studies, as her suicide continues to serve as the foundational point for much of the mythologization surrounding her life and creative output. During her lifetime, Plath was not considered a central figure in post-war Anglophone literature. It was only after her suicide in 1963 and the subsequent posthumous publication of *Ariel* in 1965 that the formation of the Plath mythos began in earnest.[5] The myth-making process, rooted in the public's fascination with the morbid, was primarily fuelled by the connection between the poetry collection and Plath's tragic death that was initially emphasized by fellow poets and literary critics.[6] In this context, *Ariel*, itself deeply imbued with rich symbolism, became virtually synonymous with the mythical figure of Plath (cf. Steiner 1973; Alexander 1985).

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, these initial readings were denounced for being patronizing, victimizing, and voyeuristic, particularly by the emerging feminist critique which redefined the trajectory of Plath scholarship.[7] Although feminist critics made significant strides in liberating Plath from the damaging label of the "mad woman/genius" dichotomy that had been imposed by earlier receptions (cf. Gilbert and Guber 1979/2000), they inadvertently participated in the further entrenchment of the Plath myth. While their

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5 The initial critical reception of *Ariel*, fundamental for the creation of Plath myth, was accompanied by the preceding publication of Plath's only novel—*The Bell Jar*—a month before her suicide in the February of 1963. Even though it was originally published under the pseudonym "Victoria Lucas," the novel was largely perceived to be a *roman à clef* to Plath's tragic death. For an exhaustive overview of the initial critical reception of the novel, see Smith 2011.

6 For example, American poet Robert Lowell, a leading figure of the confessional poetry movement and Plath's mentor, authored the introduction to the first edition of *Ariel*. In this introduction, Lowell describes Plath as "hardly a person at all, or a woman, certainly not another 'poetess,'" yet possessing a "dangerous" power, "more powerful than man, machinelike in her training," with her poems described as "playing Russian roulette with six cartridges in the cylinder" (Lowell x). Mary Kinzie (1970) argues that Lowell's characterization had a profound impact on early critical responses, which overwhelmingly depicted Plath as a "literary dragon," an "infirm prophet" with "madness within," a "risk-taking," "demonic," "feverish" figure. Another example of this patronizing mythologization can be found in the portrayal of Plath by her close friend and fellow poet, A. Alvarez. Alvarez's initial description of Plath as an "extremist poet" (1970) was further expanded in his influential work *The Savage God: A Study in Suicide* (1972), a text that played a pivotal role in shaping the mythology surrounding Plath.

7 For an illustrative example of such feminist critique, see Gilbert 1979. Note especially the telling conjugation of "Life/Work" into a seemingly inextricable whole in the works title "A Fine White Flying Myth: The Life/Work of Sylvia Plath." For an instance of later development of such critical paradigm, see Bundtzen 1983.

work dramatically shifted the direction of Plath scholarship, it did not dislodge the mythologized "life/work" totality that had been largely created by the male reviewers they critiqued. The original logical fallacy of the 1960s—*Ariel* explains Plath's tragic biography because Plath's tragic biography explains *Ariel*—thus persisted. In the paratactic interpretations of the 1970s and 1980s, the cause-and-effect relationship between text, context, and paratext became distorted. Rather than adhering to a traditional, hypotactic approach where the text is central, it was the paratextual mythologization of Plath's biography—not *Ariel* or any other primary source—that was consulted, interpreted, debated, challenged, and ultimately, reshaped.

A peculiar blurring of boundaries between actual context and commentative paratext occurred, with the latter overwhelming the former. A clear example of this phenomenon can be found in the extensive critical attention directed at Ted Hughes's commentaries on his wife's work.[8] Hughes's insights continue to be treated as authoritative in the ongoing critical discourse surrounding Plath—either as a reading to be embraced or a manipulation to be deconstructed—yet in either case, they remain indispensable. Given Hughes's status as both Plath's husband and a highly regarded poet, his paratext has become largely accepted as the context (cultural, historical, and textual) for interpreting Plath's poetry. Consequently, it has been subject to substantial critique.

To explore these interpretative complexities in Plath scholarship during the 1970s and 1980s, I will examine the seminal critical text of the period—Marjorie Perloff's "The Two Ariels: The (Re)Making of the Sylvia Plath Canon" (1984). In this article, Perloff revises the feminist critique of Plath and focuses on the impact that Hughes's posthumous editing and the reception of Plath's work had on the shaping of her literary legacy. By doing so, Perloff combines the powerful toolkit of textual criticism with her otherwise discursive approach, marking what the article sees as a significant shift in Plath scholarship. The analysis of Perloff's quasi-philological approach—its potentialities and limitations—will serve as a critical focal point for this article and will underpin my final argument.

"The Two Ariels" of Marjorie Perloff: Potentials and Problems

In 1981, the eagerly anticipated *Collected Poems* of Sylvia Plath were finally published under the editorial guidance of Hughes.[9] This was followed

[8] A classic example of this can be found in Hughes 1966, where he argues that Plath's pre-Colossus poems (i.e. those written before 1956) do not warrant closer critical attention. This view has contributed to the continued absence of a comprehensive edition of her juvenilia, despite the existence of significant scholarly work on various segments of Plath's pre-1956 oeuvre.

[9] It should be noted that, in fact, it was Judith Kroll who played the pivotal role in collecting, comparing, and restoring most of Plath's poems. Hughes, however, was responsible for the

in 1982 by the abridged edition of *The Journals of Sylvia Plath*, for which Hughes also served as a consulting editor. As Marjorie Perloff observes, the initial reception of these works was "polite and dutiful rather than partisan and polemic" (10). In the aftermath of the earlier controversies surrounding the framing of Plath's posthumous *Ariel*, the critical field had stabilized, with feminist readings of the 1970s coming to be widely accepted as conventional. Nevertheless, reviewers of *The Journals* expressed concern regarding Hughes's confession in the foreword that he had destroyed the notebook covering the final months of Plath's life (xiii). The most significant controversy was ignited by Perloff herself, who became arguably the first critic to directly address Hughes's introduction to the *Collected Poems*. In it, Hughes admits to having altered Plath's original manuscript of Ariel, providing a reconstruction of its original structure in the notes (14–15, 295). Perloff critiques the absence of any mention of Hughes as editor or contributor in the framing of Ariel—the whole collection had been previously perceived to be part and parcel Plath's own and was studied, interpreted, and commented upon as such. For this reason, Perloff amplifies the vaguely critical questions of reviewers of *The Journals*—"who is doing the cutting? and why?" (Milford 31)—and refocuses these concerns away from archival paraphernalia and towards the artistic text itself—to *Ariel* and its dual origin.

Before delving into Perloff's partly critical, partly philological analysis of the revisions made by Hughes, it is useful to present the two versions of the Ariel content for clarity. Table 1 outlines Hughes's version (as originally published in 1965), and Table 2 lists Plath's manuscript version (published in the notes to the *Collected Poems* in 1981). In parentheses, Hughes's provided composition dates are included. Bold black is used to highlight 1962, the year central to Perloff's reading; bold green highlights poems exclusive to Hughes's version, while bold red indicates those unique to Plath's manuscript.

1. "Morning Song" (19 Feb. 1961)
2. "The Couriers" (4 Nov. **1962**)
3. "Sheep in Fog (2 Dec./28 Jan. 1963)
4. "The Applicant" (11 Nov. **1962**)
5. "Lady Lazarus" (23–29 Oct. **1962**)
6. "Tulips" (18 March 1961)
7. "Cut" (29 Oct. **1962**)
8. "Elm" (19 April **1962**)
9. "The Night Dances" (6 Nov. **1962**)
10. "Poppies in October" (27 Oct. **1962**)

selection of previously unpublished poems.

11. “Berck-Plage” (30 June **1962**)
12. “Ariel” (27 Oct. **1962**)
13. “Death & Co.” (14 Nov. **1962**)
14. “Lesbos” (18 Oct. **1962**)
15. “Nick and the Candlestick” (29 Oct. **1962**)
16. “Gulliver” (6 Nov. **1962**)
17. “Getting There” (6 Nov. **1962**)
18. “Medusa” (16 Oct. **1962**)
19. “The Moon and the Yew Tree” (22 Oct. 1961)
20. “A Birthday Present” (2 Oct. **1962**)
21. “Mary’s Song” (19 Nov. **1962**)
22. “Letter in November” (11 Nov. **1962**)
23. “The Rival” (July 1961)
24. “Daddy” (12 Oct. **1962**)
25. “You’re” (Jan./Feb. 1960)
26. “Fever 103°” (20 Oct. **1962**)
27. “The Bee Meeting” (3 Oct. **1962**)
28. “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (4 Oct. **1962**)
29. “Stings” (6 Oct. **1962**)
30. “The Swarm” (7 Oct. 1962)[10]
31. “Wintering” (9 Oct. 1962)
32. “The Hanging Man” (27 June 1960)
33. “Little Figure” (2 April 1962)
34. “Years” (16 Nov. 1962)
35. “The Munich Mannequins” (28 Jan. 1963)
36. “Totem” (28 Jan. 1963)
37. “Paralytic” (29 Jan. 1963)
38. “Balloons” (5 Feb. 1963)
39. “Poppies in July” (20 July 1962)
40. “Kindness” (1 Feb. 1963)
41. “Contusion” (4 Feb. 1963)
42. “Edge” (5 Feb. 1963)
43. “Words” (1 Feb. 1963)

1. “Morning Song” (19 Feb. 1961)
2. “The Couriers” (4 Nov. **1962**)
3. “The Rabbit Catcher” (21 May 1962)
4. “Thalidomide” (8 Nov. 1962)
5. “The Applicant” (11 Nov. **1962**)
6. “Barren Woman” (21 Feb. 1961)

[10] Curiously, Plath’s “The Swarm” did not appear in the first edition issued in the UK (See Plath 1965) but was added to the first edition issued in the USA (See Plath 1966) which was the revised reprint of the UK original. The omission of the poem in the 1965 UK edition was most likely an editorial oversight.

7. “Lay Lazarus” (23-29 Oct. **1962**)
8. “Tulips” (18 March 1961)
9. “A Secret” (10 Oct. 1962)
10. “The Jailer” (17 Oct. 1962)
11. “Cut” (29 Oct. **1962**)
12. “Elm” (19 April **1962**)
13. “The Night Dances” (6 Nov. **1962**)
14. “The Detective” (1 Oct. 1962)
15. “Ariel” (27 Oct. **1962**)
16. “Death & Co.” (14 Nov. **1962**)
17. “Magi” (1960)
18. “Lesbos” (18 Oct. **1962**)
19. “The Other” (2 July 1962)
20. “Stopped Dead” (19 Oct. 1962)
21. “Poppies in October” (27 Oct. **1962**)
22. “The Courage of Shutting-Up” (2 Oct. 1962)
23. “Nick and the Candlestick” (29 Oct. **1962**)
24. “Berck-Plage” (30 June **1962**)
25. “Gulliver” (6 Nov. **1962**)
26. “Getting There” (6 Nov. **1962**)
27. “Medusa” (16 Oct. **1962**)
28. “Purdah” (29 Oct. 1962)
29. “The Moon and the Yew Tree” (22 Oct. 1961)
30. “A Birthday Present” (2 Oct. **1962**)
31. “Letter in November” (11 Nov. **1962**)
32. “Amnesiac” (21 Oct. 1962)
33. “The Rival” (July 1961)
34. “Daddy” (12 Oct. **1962**)
35. “You’re” (Jan./Feb. 1960)
36. “Fever 103°” (20 Oct. **1962**)
37. “The Bee Meeting” (3 Oct. **1962**)
38. “The Arrival of the Bee Box” (4 Oct. **1962**)
39. “Stings” (6 Oct. 1962)“The Swarm” (7 Oct. **1962**)
40. “Wintering” (9 Oct. **1962**)s noted, Hughes’s version contains 43 poems, 14 of which were added, while Plath’s manuscript includes 41 poems, 12 of which were omitted by Hughes due to, in his words, their “more personally aggressive” tone (15). The omission of these poems creates a temporal discrepancy: in Plath’s manuscript, 34 out of 41 poems were composed in 1962, with a clear focus on the so-called “October poems,”[11] while Hughes’s

[11] In contemporary scholarship, the October poems, written in the intense period of October 1962, are widely regarded as the pinnacle of Sylvia Plath’s poetic output, embodying the essence of her late artistic vision. These poems are often considered the most representative of her entire oeuvre. Traditionally, the works included in this category, in chronological or-

version disproportionately emphasizes poems composed in the weeks leading up to Plath's suicide on February 11, 1963. This imbalance not only introduces a temporal gap but also generates a thematic or "narrative" discrepancy—an aspect at the forefront of Perloff's critique.

Rather than revisiting Perloff's investigation in its entirety, I aim to highlight the hybrid nature of her approach, summarizing her argument in broad strokes, which will inevitably simplify her more nuanced observations. Perloff's central thesis is unambiguously accusatory: she argues that Hughes's interference with Plath's manuscript was deliberate and calculated.[12] Far from the "compromise between publishing a large bulk of [Plath's pre- and *Ariel*] work" that Hughes himself claims (15), Perloff asserts that Hughes intentionally disrupted the coherence of the manuscript, diminishing its rhythm, tone, and, crucially, its "narrative structure" (11). To support this claim, she draws on Hughes's own account of Plath's creative process. According to him:

> [For Plath] a poem was always 'a book poem' or 'not a book poem.' [...] Sometime around Christmas 1962, she gathered most of what are now known as Ariel poems in a black spring binder, and arranged them in a careful sequence. (At the time, she pointed out that it began with the word 'Love' and ended with the word 'Spring'[13] [...]) (1981 14–15, emphasis mine).

This sequence as well as its decoding and restoration are, according to Perloff, foundational for her argument that Hughes's editing disrupted Plath's original design. Perloff's analysis therefore juxtaposes two sequences: that of Hughes and that of Plath. By closely reading the poems selected or omitted by Hughes, Perloff also examines the broader context of the Ariel collection, which is especially influential when it comes to the formation of the Plath mythos.

Hughes's sequence, Perloff argues, is framed as an explanation for Plath's suicide, virtually entirely centered around themes of death and despair. Such framing starts with the insertion of "Sheep in Fog", Plath's quite late poem, in the very beginning of the collection. The stupefyingly

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der, are: the bee sequence ("The Bee Meeting," "The Arrival of the Bee Box," "Stings," "The Swarm," "Wintering"), "Daddy," "Lesbos," "Fever 103°," "Lady Lazarus," "Ariel," "Poppies in October," and "Cut."

12 It should be noted that, in the recent years, some scholars have been trying to re-evaluate Hughes's role in the creation of *Ariel* and in the creation of Plath myth. See, for instance, Enniss 2007.

13 In his previous writings, Hughes also notes Plath's careful attention to words. He describes Plath writing "as if she were working out a mathematical problem, chewing her lips, putting a thick dark ring of ink around each word that stirred for her on the page of the Thesaurus" (1966 82). This description of Plath's initial approach to poetry led to a plethora of pejorative readings that treat her early work as mere craftsmanship. For an exhaustive overview of the phenomenon, see Axelrod and Dorsey 1997.

dehumanized yet strangely affirmative opening of "Morning Song" that describes the complexities of motherhood—"Love set you going like a fat gold watch [...] The clear vowels rise like balloons" (156–157)[14] —is abruptly counterbalanced by the anxious, alienated tone of the lines such as: "They threaten / To let me through to a heaven / Starless and fatherless, a dark water" (262). Such singular insertion serves as foreshadowing of the cavalcade of Plath's similarly toned poems that close the collection. There, the tragic culmination comes with the two last poems: "Edge" ("The woman is perfected. / Her dead // Body wear the smile of accomplishment" [272]) and "Words" ("From the bottom of the pool, fixed stars / Govern a life" [270]). This arrangement, according to Perloff, contributed to the initial reception of *Ariel* as a deeply tragic and thanatophilic work, a reading later rightfully critiqued by feminist scholars.

In her contrastive reconstruction of Plath's original manuscript sequence, Perloff somewhat reverses the previous feminist presumptions about Plath. As she points out, "Plath's stated desire to have 'millions of babies' and her scorn for 'spinster blue-stockings' of Cambridge and Smith is not likely to strike a sympathetic chord in young women today" (10). This may provide a glimpse into the reason why the feminist critique was fiercely debunking the posthumous framing of Plath by male critics while being fairly tacit about her actual creative output. Perloff attempts to amend this preterition by reading Plath's *Ariel* sequence as the unfolding of female rage. In this reading, the omitted poems govern the whole narrative. From "The Rabbit Catcher" ("And we, too, had a relationship— / Tight wires between us..." [194]) to "Amnesiac" ("The little toy wife— / Erased... [...] O sister, mother, wife / Sweet Lethe is my life" [234]), the collection tells the poetical story of the vengeance of a betrayed wife. The story which may indeed be, as Hughes aptly put it, "personally aggressive". Unlike his version, however, Plath's manuscript ends with the bee sequence, the hopeful poem "Wintering": "The bees are all women / [...] / They have got rid of the men // [...] / The bees are flying. They taste the spring" (218-219). According to Perloff, the rediscovering of original Ariel, rageful yet hopeful, is paramount in reclaiming Plath from the procrustean, paralyzing, and patronizing framework that was put onto her after the publication of Hughes's version.[15]

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14 I refer to the reprint edition of Plath's *Collected Poems* (1981) rather than an edition of Ariel when citing individual poems. Consequently, to understand the sequencing of the poems and their interrelationships, the two tables provided earlier should be consulted.

15 Crucially, Perloff's seminal intervention initiated the ongoing redefinition of Plath's imagery that emphasizes themes of survival and resilience in the face of adversity. As Susan Bassnett observes in relation to Plath's overall oeuvre: "Far from foregrounding death there is a conscious effort to foreground life, even when the poems speak of the greatest pain, and it is this characteristic of her poetry which marks Sylvia Plath as a survivor poet, a writer with a message of hope" (2005, 129).

Perloff's interpretation is important in reclaiming Plath from the constraining male frameworks imposed upon her work after Hughes's version of Ariel. Her analysis, however, still falls within the trap of mythologizing Plath, even as it seeks to subvert the male-dominated critical reception of her work. While Perloff succeeds in shifting the focus back to Plath's text, the central problem of mythologization persists. Rather than dismantling the mythologizing tendencies entirely, Perloff's study redirects them, continuing to emphasize the poems that Hughes chose to exclude, thereby establishing a kind of critical paratext that influences the reading of the entire collection.

A crucial issue in Perloff's reading emerges in her interpretation of why Hughes chose to include "Mary's Song" in his version of Ariel. Positioned between the foreboding poem "Sheep in Fog" and the ominously climactic poems written in 1963, "Mary's Song" seems out of place. Why is this particular poem there? Perloff's speculation is the following:

> In reinstating ['Mary's Song'], Hughes, so to speak, gives Lady Lazarus a motive and disguises the fact that Lady Lazarus is really destructive-creative lioness of 'Purdah.' Again, he uses the poem to set the stage for 'Daddy,' a poem which is read quite differently in the context of 'The Jailor' and 'Purdah' than it is in the war-holocaust context of 'Getting There' and 'Mary's Song'" (14).

Most of the poems mentioned ("Mary's Song", "Lady Lazarus", "Daddy," and "Getting There") belong to the so-called "Holocaust poems" of Plath which even today, decades later, cause controversy and cleavage among critics.[16] Many of them, including Perloff, treat them as appropriative of the great tragedy and thus unethical—as "cheap shots" or "camouflage," in her formulation, to conceal the deeply personal qualities of Plath's poetry (15). Therefore, Hughes's inclusion of "Mary's Song" is interpreted as another cheap shot, used this time to conceal the rage of his betrayed wife from the reading public. Putting aside the personal drama of Hughes and Plath, such reading is rather weak in its exaggerated suspicion as it does not explain why Plath chose to implement exactly the Holocaust (or the Hiroshima bombing and the Ku Klux Klan)[17] into her poems. Or, worse, it simply ignores possible reasons for such imagery. While considerably succeeding in generally reclaiming Plath from the misogynistic framing, Perloff, in the case of "Mary's Song," appears to play into the restriction of confessionalism and alleged death-obsession propagated by

[16] For a concise overview, refer to Strangeways 1996, where the author argues for the importance of interpreting the Holocaust poems as works directly addressing the Holocaust. He draws on extensive research in the Plath archives at the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, to support this perspective.

[17] For Plath's references to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings, see her poem "Fever 103°" (231–232). For her allusions to the Ku Klux Klan, refer to the poem "Cut" (235–236).

this very same framing.[18] What if Plath's lines such as "This holocaust I walk in" are not purely metaphorical (257)? This will not make them less controversial or even tone-deaf, nor will this suddenly mitigate their fairly awkward bathos. Still, at the very least, this will allow some room for the much-needed critical discussion, archival search, and philological inquiry. In this instance, Perloff's analysis, while valuable in redirecting attention to the text itself, also risks perpetuating a restrictive reading of Plath's work, one that might limit the potential for a more thorough and nuanced understanding of her creative choices. Ultimately, it seems that while Perloff's study has yielded significant insights while selectively adopting the textual-studies toolkit, it has not fully liberated the work from the interpretive constraints of earlier generations.

What is particularly revealing here is that problems arise when interpretative practices must resist the gravitational pull of the long-established Plath mythos. Fortunately, as we approach the third millennium, numerous studies have emerged that challenge this pull—for example, Al Strangeways (1998), who refreshingly marries the psychoanalytical with the political in his study of Plath and offers a useful selected list of her archives at the Lilly Library (previously uncompiled); Tracy Brain (2001), who traces environmental and transatlantic dimensions in Plath's life and work while extensively drawing on archival materials, some analyzed for the first time; Lynda K. Bundtzen (2001), who continues Perloff's project from a more philological perspective by comparing early archival drafts of *Ariel*, though unfortunately without facsimiles; Robin Peel (2002), who explores Plath's political context and engagement through both her oeuvre and archival materials; and Kathleen Connors and Sally Bayley (2007), whose pioneering essay collection highlights Plath's visual art—particularly her work in collage—revealing her as an artist in her own right. These scholars share two key features in common: the extensive excavation of Plath's archives and the application of philological methods. Both have proven highly effective in overcoming the allure of mythologization. Perhaps this is due to the historical distance— back into 1981, when the *Collected Poems* were first published, the Plath controversy was still the zeitgeist, still alive. Or perhaps it is thanks to Perloff's pioneering efforts in the field. One thing is certain: the philological approach to Plath yields fruitful insights while also facilitating a break from the 20th-century interpretative imbroglio.

In this regard, textual criticism offers an unexpected but promising solution. Its methodological toolkit is especially adept at untangling the paratactic complexities of text, context, and paratext that have accumulated

[18] In her *Pursuing Privacy in Cold War America* (2002), Deborah Nelson shows how the seemingly self-interested confessional poetry was not only deeply engaged with the outer world and its context but was also the reaction to this very context, personal as well as political.

over centuries of blurred boundaries. Primarily, it achieves this by (re) establishing the hypotactic relationships between the text and its various copies, the text and its historical context, and the text and its commentaries—the paratext. However, strictly adhering to philological hypotaxis is not the only possible outcome. As Shuttleworth Kraus observes, the "synthetic essay" is not only feasible but also effective within the seemingly rigid confines of philology (3). This synthesis of philological text-orientation and interpretative rhetoric could provide a balanced path for Plath studies, helping scholars navigate the new possibilities offered by textual criticism while addressing some of the persistent issues from a more discursive approach. To borrow a somewhat trite yet evocative metaphor from earlier in this essay, one might conclude that the complex palimpsest of a text—such as Plath's *corpus*—is best explored when treated both figuratively, as Genette's famous metaphor suggests, and literally, as a physical entity requiring philological attention.

Where It Is Going: The "Whole Undiscovered World" of Sylvia Plath

It was not until 2004—more than forty years after her death—that the original version of Sylvia Plath's *Ariel* was finally published.[19] The trajectory from Perloff's foundational inquiry in 1984 to this publication was notably protracted, and even then, the edition was quasi-philological, lacking the necessary annotations. This, however, constitutes only one version of Plath's work—two editions of *Ariel* in total. But why limit the scholarly engagement to just two? A comprehensive variorum of Plath's corpus is not only feasible but also necessary—*Ariel* being but one example.[20] The list of her still-unpublished works remains regrettably extensive: a complete edition of her juvenilia, a full collection of her prose, the original manuscript of *The Bell Jar*, annotated editions of her poetry collections (*The Colossus*, *Ariel*, *Crossing the Water*, *Winter Trees*), as well as editions of rediscovered poems. Circling back to Gail Crowther and Peter K. Steinberg's optimistic assertion, there exists "the whole undiscovered world" of Sylvia Plath (2), scattered across a multitude of archives, awaiting systematic exploration and organization. Their work exemplifies only one such scholarly effort to uncover, catalogue, and disseminate these invaluable materials.

[19] This edition of Ariel was edited by Plath's daughter Frieda Hughes and includes, apart from her foreword, a facsimile of Plath's complete typescript, and a copy of working drafts of the eponymous poem.

[20] This line of thinking is much indebted to Sullivan's 2016 article "Why Do Authors Produce Textual Variation on Purpose? Or, Why Publish a Text That Is Still Unfolding?" in which she offers an insight into how the contemporary editorship of Plath can develop in the future.

In recent years, a resurgence of scholarly interest in Sylvia Plath has emerged, with Crowther and Steinberg (2017) as well as Heather Clark (2020) serving as key figures in this renewed focus. Unlike the critics of the late 1990s and early 2000s, these scholars do not shy away from the biographical complexities that have long been central to Plath's legacy; rather, they confront them head-on. Both Crowther and Clark make extensive use of Plath's archives—both well-known and previously unexplored—as they engage in a re-evaluation of Plath's mythology within the context of 21st-century scholarship. In this regard, they follow the trailblazing work of Perloff, who was the first to navigate the intricate intersection of socio-cultural, biographical, and textual factors in Plath studies. While building on Perloff's insights, they also acknowledge and learn from the limitations of her approach. Indeed, any effort to popularize Plath's textual studies—whether through the publication of her work or the editing of her expansive archive—must inevitably contend with the thorny issue of her biography, a subject that continues to haunt both public perception and scholarly inquiry. Ultimately, it is the philological approach that may offer a much-needed resolution to the bio/bibliographical conundrum within Plath scholarship—instead of the "Death of Myth-Making,"[21] it may result in the generative dissection of such myths.

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[21] I am referencing Plath's poem "The Death of Myth-Making" (104) that is oftentimes treated as an elegy for the mythologization of life and is thus used as an argument to support or justify the further mythologization of Plath and her creative output.

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